

Ecclesia

Equipping the Saints for the Work of Ministry

The Ecclesia is not a building, denomination, organization, or weekly event. It is the assembly of those who have been called by Christ to belong to Him and represent His Kingdom in the earth.

Jesus said, “I will build My church” (Matthew 16:18). The Greek word translated church is *ekklēsia*—an assembly of people called together. Jesus continues that work today, forming a people who live under His authority and faithfully represent Him in every sphere of life.

The purpose of the Ecclesia is not simply to gather for worship. We gather to worship, pray, encourage one another, grow in our understanding of God's Word, mature in Christ, discover and develop our gifts, and be equipped for the work of ministry.

Paul writes that Christ gave apostles, prophets, evangelists, shepherds, and teachers: **“to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ.”** — Ephesians 4:12

Every follower of Christ has been given gifts, abilities, relationships, resources, experiences, and opportunities that can be used for the purposes of His Kingdom.

The Ecclesia should therefore never encourage believers to withdraw from society. Rather, we gather so that we can be strengthened and then sent back into our families, workplaces, schools, businesses, communities, governments, and every other sphere of life as faithful ambassadors of Jesus Christ.

The Ecclesia is both a people who belong to Christ and a people commissioned to represent Him.

- We gather.
- We are equipped.
- And then we go.

When Equipping Became Serving the Institution

Over more than fifty years of walking with the Lord—as a discipler of men, teacher, preacher, church planter, entrepreneur, and businessman—I have observed something almost everywhere I have served:

Believers genuinely want to serve and please the Lord. Most Christians I have known want their lives to matter. They want to know God's will. They want to use the gifts He has given them. They want to make a difference. Looking back, however, I recognize what I now believe was one of my significant mistakes as a pastor.

I took that genuine desire to serve God and primarily directed it into the activities of the local church.

Jesus said, ***“I will build My church.”*** Somewhere along the way, I reasoned that if Jesus was building His Church, then surely I should be helping Him build it.

So, following the traditions I had inherited, I encouraged people:

- *Find your place in the church.*
- *Use your gifts.*
- *Volunteer.*
- *Teach.*
- *Lead.*
- *Serve.*

Help us build what God is doing here.

There is nothing inherently wrong with any of those things. Believers should serve one another. The Body needs every member and every gift. But I eventually realized something: I had confused the place of equipping with the destination of equipping.

Within the gathered Ecclesia, believers should certainly serve one another. But Ephesians 4 says leaders are given to equip the saints for the work of ministry. Leaders were never intended to perform the ministry while God's people merely supported them.

Leaders were given to equip God's people to do the ministry.

And where does that ministry take place? Certainly, within the gathered Ecclesia—but it cannot end there.

Jesus' commission was: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations...” — Matthew 28:19

There is a *go* attached to our calling.

- We go into families.
- We go into education.
- We go into government.
- We go into business and the marketplace.
- We go into medicine and healthcare.
- We go into agriculture.
- We go into technology.
- We go into neighborhoods and communities.
- We go wherever God has positioned His people.

The gathering is not the destination. The gathering equips us for the mission. That changes an important question.

Instead of primarily asking: “How can we get more people involved in our church?”

Perhaps we should also be asking: “How can we equip God's people to fulfill the Kingdom assignments He has already given them?”

A Church Culture—or a Kingdom Culture?

Over generations we have developed a recognizable church culture—buildings, services, programs, professional staffs, denominations, conferences, ministries, and institutional expectations. Many of these things can serve worthwhile purposes.

The danger comes when the structures created to serve the Ecclesia begin defining what the Ecclesia is. Success can gradually become measured by attendance, baptisms, buildings, budgets, programs, and growth. If you will permit me to be somewhat crude, sometimes the practical objective can become simply: Put more people in the seats.

Again, I am not trying to attack pastors or churches. I spent many years as a pastor. I understand the pressures involved in leading a congregation. I am asking us to examine what we have built against what Jesus commissioned us to do. **If our congregations grow while our communities deteriorate around us, should that concern us?**

If believers become increasingly knowledgeable about church activities but remain unequipped to represent Christ in their workplaces, schools, governments, businesses, and neighborhoods, have we completed our assignment?

If pastors perform most of the ministry while God's people primarily attend, support, and observe, have we truly equipped the saints for the work of ministry?

Those are uncomfortable questions. But perhaps this Eleventh Hour requires us to ask them.

When the World Sees Our Divisions

Jesus gave the world a remarkable way of recognizing His disciples: **“By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”** — John 13:35

That raises another uncomfortable question: When the world looks at us, is our love for one another what it sees?

Christianity has become divided among denominations, movements, networks, traditions, doctrines, personalities, and institutions. Even within denominations, disagreements have repeatedly resulted in additional divisions and new organizations.

Certainly, some differences involve sincere and important theological convictions. Biblical unity does not require us to pretend those differences do not exist. But we should ask whether we have sometimes allowed our differences to become greater than our common identity in Christ.

Paul confronted this tendency in the first-century Ecclesia: *“I follow Paul,” “I follow Apollos,” “I follow Cephas...”* — 1 Corinthians 1:12

His response was penetrating: *“Is Christ divided?”* — 1 Corinthians 1:13

Perhaps we need to hear that question again. Our traditions were intended to help us understand and follow God. Yet traditions, institutions, and doctrinal camps can also separate God's people from one another.

The result is that instead of presenting a recognizable people belonging to one King, we present the world with competing voices, competing institutions, and competing claims.

The world asks:

- “Which church?”
- “Which denomination?”
- “Which doctrine?”
- “Which leader?”

When perhaps the greater question should be: “Do I see Jesus among them?”

Who Owns the Ecclesia?

I learned some of these lessons through a very painful experience.

As a young pastor, I became part of an emerging church movement that sought to model itself after the first-century Church. It was an exciting time. There was great emphasis on apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers, and I was eventually sent out under that ministry to plant a church.

Before agreeing to do so, I repeatedly asked whether the leadership of the new congregation would be autonomous—whether we would be free to follow the leading of the Holy Spirit as we believed He directed us.

I was assured that we would. Accountability was important to me. I wanted accountability concerning my own life, my family, and the leadership that would eventually develop within the congregation.

But over time, circumstances changed.

As the Holy Spirit began doing things among us that did not always fit organizational expectations, I also began questioning what I believed had become an unhealthy exercise of authority—including some of my own assumptions about leadership.

Eventually, I was given another title and told that I needed to step down as pastor. It was one of the most difficult periods of my life. We had planted the congregation. I loved those people. I had never imagined myself doing anything else. Believing it would be best for everyone involved, I asked that the congregation simply be released from the organization.

The answer was no.

I was told, in unmistakable terms, that the church belonged to them. That statement struck something deeply within me. I had never believed it was my church. But neither was it their church.

It was His.

For the sake of the congregation and to avoid drawing God's people into an escalating conflict, I resigned. I remained with them for a period because I genuinely loved the people.

What followed became a three-year journey with the Lord that profoundly changed my understanding of the Church, leadership, authority, ministry, and eventually the Ecclesia. Much of what I am writing today grew out of questions that began during those years.

And perhaps the greatest question was remarkably simple: Who owns the Ecclesia?

Peter gives us the answer: **“You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession...”** — 1 Peter 2:9

The Ecclesia belongs to Jesus Christ.

- Not to pastors.
- Not to denominations.
- Not to networks.
- Not to movements.
- Not to organizations.
- And certainly not to me.
- The Ecclesia belongs to Him.

That means those entrusted with leadership are not owners of God's people. We are stewards.

Our responsibility is to love them, shepherd them, teach them, protect them, equip them, and help them mature until they can faithfully fulfill the assignments God has given them.

The people are not there primarily to fulfill the leader's vision. Leaders are there to equip God's people to fulfill God's mission. That distinction changes everything.

Relevant to Ourselves—or Relevant to the Nation?

One of my closest friends is a true warrior for the Kingdom of God and a man whose life has had a tremendous impact on mine. For years he has served as a missionary in the Middle East, including Afghanistan and Northern Iraq—Kurdistan.

His journey began with a simple willingness before God:

“Here am I, Lord. Send me.”

He had no idea where that prayer would eventually take him.

Believing that God had called him not merely to preach sermons but to bring the influence of the Kingdom of God into a nation, he eventually found himself serving in Kurdistan. Rather than remaining outside the culture criticizing what was wrong, he volunteered to serve its leadership.

That service opened extraordinary doors.

As he later recounted to me, he developed a relationship with the president of the Kurdistan Region and found ways to serve that had a profound impact upon the Kurdish people. In time, he was given remarkable freedom and governmental protection to proclaim the Gospel. He told me that land and resources were made available for the establishment of Christian schools. But his influence went even further.

He appealed to the president to issue what he called a **“Cyrus Declaration”**—a declaration allowing people the freedom to worship God according to the dictates of their conscience and to gather with others of like mind and faith.

He later told me that the declaration was granted.

There is much more to his remarkable story, and perhaps someday it deserves to be told more fully. But I introduce him here because of something he said to me during one of our conversations.

One afternoon, after a lengthy conversation about Matthew 28 and the “church,” we began discussing the condition of the Church. It was then that he made this statement:

“The church has become irrelevant.”

His words hit me like a two-by-four. At first, I found myself disagreeing with him. But the more I thought about what he was saying, the more I realized that perhaps he was partly right.

Eventually I responded:

“I don’t think the church has become irrelevant. I think the church has become irrelevant to the nation while remaining very relevant to itself.”

That distinction has stayed with me. We can become very good at doing church.

- Our services matter to us.
- Our programs matter to us.
- Our buildings matter to us.
- Our conferences matter to us.
- Our theological debates matter to us.
- Our denominational distinctions matter to us.
- Our attendance and budgets matter to us.

But the question is:

Do they matter to the people outside our walls?

And even more importantly:

If the Ecclesia disappeared from our community tomorrow, other than the loss of our Sunday services, would the community notice?

That is not intended as an accusation. It is a question I believe deserves serious consideration.

Becoming Indispensable Through Service

Several years ago, a friend who pastored one of the largest congregations in the Santa Cruz area asked me a penetrating question:

“Considering everything you have experienced, what advice would you give pastors today?”

I answered almost immediately:

“Help the Ecclesia become indispensable to the community.”

I did not mean that pastors should pursue prominence, political power, or institutional influence. I meant that they should equip their congregations to serve so faithfully that the community would genuinely feel their absence.

Encourage believers to join civic clubs, chambers of commerce, nonprofit organizations, neighborhood associations, schools, and other places where people are working to strengthen the community. Discover where needs exist—and then equip God's people to help meet them.

Serve families. Strengthen marriages. Mentor young people. Care for widows and the elderly. Help people find employment. Support teachers. Feed the hungry. Assist nonprofit organizations. Bring wisdom, skill, compassion, and practical solutions wherever God opens a door.

He joined the Chamber of Commerce and served on the board of one of the largest food banks in the area. His involvement made a meaningful difference within both organizations, and the influence of Christ and His people became increasingly visible throughout the community. In time, the Chamber of Commerce voted him Man of the Year.

His experience demonstrated that service does more than meet immediate needs. It builds relationships, earns trust, opens doors for influence, and allows people to see the love and wisdom of Christ expressed through His Ecclesia.

I also told him:

“A time may come in our culture when the Church is portrayed as part of the problem and pressure grows to remove it from public life. But it is much more difficult to dismiss a people who have become a trusted and vital part of their community.”

The goal is not to make an institution indispensable. Jesus is the only One who is truly indispensable. The goal is to equip His people to represent Him so faithfully that their neighbors can see the value, love, wisdom, and service of the Kingdom of God.

Perhaps that gives us another way to measure the health of the Ecclesia:

If our buildings closed tomorrow, would the community merely notice that our services had stopped—or would it deeply miss the people who had been serving it?

My missionary friend's life demonstrated the same principle on an international scale. He went into a predominantly Muslim region not demanding that people attend his church, but asking how he could serve.

- Service created relationship.
- Relationship created trust.
- Trust created influence.
- Influence opened doors.

And through those doors came opportunities for the Gospel, education, religious liberty, and Kingdom impact.

That is an equipped saint doing the work of ministry. He did not wait for the people of Kurdistan to come into his building.

He went to them.

What Does the Ecclesia Do Now?

So where do we go from here?

As with everything in this War Room, I believe we begin with prayer.

Not merely: *"Lord, fix the Church."*

But:

- "Lord, show us where we have departed from Your purposes."
- "Show us what we have built that You never asked us to build."
- "Show us what we have neglected that You commanded us to do."
- "Show us how to equip Your people for the hour in which You have placed us."

If we are living in an Eleventh Hour marked by increasing deception, confusion, instability, and spiritual conflict, then gathering more people into buildings without preparing them for what they will encounter outside those buildings is not enough.

We must equip the saints. And when the Lord reveals what needs to change, another question follows:

Are we prepared to obey Him?

The answer may require changes in how we think about ministry, leadership, success, discipleship, resources, buildings, programs, and even our relationships with other believers.

But if Jesus is building His Ecclesia, then surely our desire should be to cooperate with what He is building.

Recovering Our Assignment

Perhaps a simple strategy can help us begin:

PRAY — RECOVER — EQUIP — RELEASE — UNITE — GO — MULTIPLY

PRAY: Seek the Lord concerning where our traditions, institutional preservation, personal ambitions, or simple neglect may have displaced His purposes.

RECOVER: Recover our identity as the Ecclesia—a royal priesthood, a holy nation, the Body of Christ, and ambassadors of His Kingdom.

EQUIP: Teach believers God's Word, help them develop discernment, recognize their gifts, mature in character, and understand the spheres into which God has placed them.

RELEASE: Stop measuring ministry only by how many people serve inside our organizations. Pray over believers, commission them, support them, and release them into the assignments God has given them.

UNITE: Refuse unnecessary competition and division. Learn to work with other believers around the purposes of Christ without requiring everyone to belong to the same institution or agree on every secondary matter.

GO: Carry what we receive when gathered into families, education, business, government, healthcare, agriculture, technology, communities, and every other sphere of society.

MULTIPLY: Make disciples who make disciples. Equip people who will equip others. Raise up leaders who will raise up leaders. The mission was never intended to end with us.

Perhaps this gives pastors and leaders another way of measuring fruitfulness.

Instead of asking only: “How many people came to church this week?”

What if we also asked: “Where did the Ecclesia go this week?”

- Where did they serve?
- Who did they encourage?
- What problems did they help solve?
- Where did they bring wisdom?
- Where did they demonstrate the love of Christ?
- Where did they stand for truth?
- Who did they disciple?
- Where did they bring reconciliation?
- Where did they care for someone who had been forgotten?

And:

Where did the Kingdom of God become visible because the Ecclesia showed up?

We gather because we need one another.

We worship together.

We pray together.

We learn together.

We encourage one another.

We correct and strengthen one another.

We equip one another.

But then—

we go.

The gathering equips the going.

And the going fulfills the commission: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations.” — Matthew 28:19

Questions to Consider

Do we primarily understand the Ecclesia as a building, service, organization, or people called and commissioned by Christ?

Are leaders performing most of the ministry, or are they equipping God's people to fulfill the assignments He has given them?

Do our measures of success emphasize attendance and institutional growth more than maturity, mission, and Kingdom impact?

Are believers being helped to recognize their gifts and represent Christ faithfully within the spheres where God has positioned them?

Have traditions, personalities, doctrines, or institutional loyalties become greater sources of identity than our shared belonging to Jesus Christ?

Would our community notice if the Ecclesia disappeared—and if so, what would it miss besides our weekly gatherings?

Where did the Ecclesia go this week, whom did we serve, and where did the Kingdom of God become visible because God's people showed up?

What might Jesus be asking us to recover, release, change, or build so His people can be equipped and sent?

Biblical Foundation

Matthew 16:18 — Jesus declares that He will build His Ecclesia and that the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.

Matthew 28:18–20 — Jesus sends His disciples to make disciples of all nations under His authority.

John 13:34–35 — The world is to recognize Jesus's disciples by their love for one another.

John 17:20–23 — Jesus prays for the unity of His people so that the world may believe the Father sent Him.

Acts 2:42–47 — The first believers devoted themselves to teaching, fellowship, prayer, generosity, worship, and shared life.

1 Corinthians 1:10–13 — Paul confronts division and asks the penetrating question, “Is Christ divided?”

1 Corinthians 12:12–27 — The Body of Christ has many members, and every member is necessary.

Ephesians 4:11–16 — Christ gives leaders to equip the saints for ministry and build His Body toward maturity.

2 Corinthians 5:18–20 — God entrusts His people with the ministry of reconciliation as ambassadors for Christ.

1 Peter 2:9–12 — The Ecclesia is a chosen people, royal priesthood, holy nation, and God's possession, called to proclaim His excellencies.

Summary — The Ecclesia Equipped and Sent

The Ecclesia belongs to Jesus Christ. It is not a building, denomination, organization, or institution, but a people called by God—a royal priesthood, a holy nation, and ambassadors of His Kingdom. Leaders are not owners of God's people but stewards entrusted to **equip the saints for the work of ministry**.

We gather because we need one another—to worship, pray, learn, mature, encourage, and be equipped. But **the gathering is not the destination; the gathering equips us for the mission**. God's people are then sent into families, education, government, the marketplace, healthcare, agriculture, technology, and every other sphere of society to faithfully represent Christ.

Perhaps one of the great recoveries needed in this Eleventh Hour is a change in how we see the people of God: not merely as members, attendees, or volunteers, but as **Kingdom ambassadors strategically positioned by God**. The question is no longer simply, “*How can we get people involved in the church?*” but “**How can we equip God's people for what God has called them to do?**”

The challenge before us is therefore to:

PRAY — RECOVER — EQUIP — RELEASE — UNITE — GO — MULTIPLY

We pray for the mind of Christ. We recover our identity. We equip the saints. We release them into their assignments. We pursue unity around our King and His mission. We go into the world. And we make disciples who will make disciples.

The Great Commission was never given to a professional class of Christians. **It was entrusted to the people of God.**

So perhaps the measure of a healthy Ecclesia is not only:

“How many people gathered?”

But also:

“Where did the Ecclesia go—and what happened because they showed up?”

**We gather to be equipped. We are equipped to be sent. We are sent to make disciples of nations.
That is our assignment until the King returns.**