

Starting a Local Congregation

by Norman Edwards
September 2001

Come, let us sing for joy to the LORD; let us shout aloud to the Rock of our salvation. Let us come before him with thanksgiving and extol him with music and song (Psalm 95:1-2).

Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks (John 4:23).

Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching (Heb 10:25).

What can brethren do when they want to fellowship with others, but cannot find a congregation Biblically acceptable to them? Can you establish one with no “credentials” or previous experience?

This booklet is a practical guide for a group of people who want to establish a **new congregation**—with a **weekly service** as its focal point. A **congregation** is a group of believers that worship and work together to serve God—a part of the greater body of Christ. This is primarily a “how to set it up” paper for people who want to form a congregation—from two or three people (Matt 18:20) to several hundred. Methods for evangelizing new members are covered, but not as the primary focus.

This booklet is written from biblical research, legal research, prayer and practical experience—with a fervent desire to find the truth. It frequently departs from “traditional church practice” and may be rather amazing, even shocking. This is not an effort to deny the good done by traditional Christianity, but an effort “to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints” (Jude 1:3).

The author asks that you separately consider the various topics presented here and accept those you can prove to yourself as true. Believers do not learn everything at once (John 16:12; 1Cor 3:2). God has not assured me that this writing is perfect, but I can honestly say it was a best effort to be true to the Scripture and history. For more information on Biblical and historical aspects of congregations, please ask for the following booklets by the same author: *How Does the Eternal Govern Through Humans?* and *Assembling on the Sabbath*.

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*Bible quotations are from the **New International Version** (NIV) unless otherwise noted.*

Other Bible abbreviations: *KJV (King James Version), NKJV (New King James Version), NLT (New Living Translation), and NRSV (New Revised Standard Version)*

Within quotations, **boldfacing**, underscoring and words enclosed in brackets [...], have been added by this author.

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This is the first version of this paper. I would appreciate serious suggestions for improvement. Please use the contact information on page 2.

Why Is a New Congregation Needed?

Before we begin the details of how to establish a congregation, it is essential to think about why anyone would consider doing it. After all, there are millions of congregations and services of all types throughout the world. Does not the creation of each new one divide the Body of Christ a little more?

It does not have to! As long as those who create the congregation do not automatically classify those in other groups as “unbelievers”, there does not need to be division. We can see from Paul’s letters to different churches—or the letters of Christ to the seven churches (Rev 2–3)—that Christ does not work with each group in the same way. Groups and individuals often have different problems and need to learn different things at different times.

Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father **in spirit and truth**, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks (John 4:23).

In order to worship the Father, the spirit—the non-physical part of our being—has to be involved. We also have to do it “in truth”—our congregation has to be based on the principles of Bible truth that we understand. In other words, both our hearts and our minds have to be fully committed. There are times when one might attend a congregation with substantially different biblical understanding in order to share with them one’s own understanding. But when one needs personal strength, or when one needs to help others learn (including their own family), they need a congregation with teaching that they understand to be mostly correct.

Below, we list six reasons why you might not be able to work with an existing congregation and need to help start a new one:

1) Existing congregations seem spiritually dead. Most people simply come to the service to fulfill their perceived obligation of going to a service. Little love, togetherness or enthusiasm is present. If you are a well-respected member of that group, pray about whether you should remain there to stir them up or move on. Also, consider looking for other services that are spiritually alive, before starting a new one.

2) Existing congregations do not effectively involve the brethren and their spiritual gifts (1Cor 12-14; Eph 4:11-15; Rom 12:6-8; 1Pet 4:8–

11). Unfortunately, the average congregation consists of people simply attending service and listening and watching “the professionals” do everything. This is not helpful for individual growth. A congregation should give everyone opportunity to be involved, ask questions and participate as they are able. A congregation should be active and actively serving in some way.

3) Existing congregations are “alive”, but denomination-ism, corporation-ism or local “politics” are greatly decreasing their effectiveness. The Spirit of God is often resisted by church leaders who are more concerned about their position, doctrinal statements and programs. They may actually try to **stop** effective, spirit-led worship, teaching, local evangelism or service. Technical reasons for stopping them are usually given: “it is not approved by headquarters”, “we may not have the budget to handle it”, “that idea could endanger our tax-exempt status”, “somebody might sue us” etc. But the spirit-led believer may simply see these as excuses for resisting God.

4) Members or leaders in a group are openly sinful and therefore the environment is not a fitting example for new “little ones” just learning the truth. Paul instructed that people should be removed until they change, so that a bad name is not brought upon God’s people (1Cor 5:1–7). The principles of Matthew 18:15–17 (see page 20) should be used to take care of these problems, but the leaders or people in some groups will not make the needed changes. (This point does not refer to people in a group who have sinned, repented and stopped sinning, or people who see some doctrines differently. It refers to habitual liars, adulterers, perverts, thieves, etc.)

5) Existing services include significant doctrinal teaching that you believe to be unbiblical and you see little chance of change. No two serious Bible students will probably ever agree on everything that the Bible teaches, but it is difficult to worship in spirit and truth when the teaching of a congregation is limited to a doctrinal statement written by men thousands of miles away or hundreds of years ago. Other groups may teach more psychology than the Bible. Some may teach that all or part of the Bible is a fable. Doctrinal disagreement is easier to work with if a service allows discussion or the expression of multiple points of view. It is much more difficult for a believer to keep attending a service when its leadership allows only one point of view to be expressed and the believer thinks that point of view is wrong.

This is an even greater problem for those who have children who are learning and for those who are bringing new people to the service. How can one recommend a service to friends and family if one must continually tell them about corrections to the messages given?

6) Existing services are too far away for you to regularly attend every week. This author has known people to drive over two hours each way to a service every week. The service may be wonderful, but much of the good can be undone by the exhausting drive and the near impossibility of fellowship opportunities during the rest of the week.

7) You believe that Christ has specifically shown you that you need to serve people in a way that no one else is doing now. This does not mean that you have a personal feeling that you attribute to Christ, but that you have asked Him to show you in a clear unmistakable way that is what He wants you to do.

If one or more of the above applies to you, and if you have seriously looked for other existing congregations and found none that will work, then there may be reasons for starting a new one in your area. But before you get started, please think about whether you, or anyone wanting to start a service with you, is doing it for any of these five **wrong reasons**:

1) Someone believes that he has *the whole truth* (nearly all of his doctrines are right). Recognizing major, continually-taught error in other congregations is a reason to leave them. This is much different than someone making the presumptuous assumption that he knows nearly everything important in the Bible—especially in areas he has not thoroughly studied. Never create a congregation that is essentially a collection point for people to follow one person. That will lead to idolatry and division in the body of Christ.

2) Someone believes his understanding of prophecy is “inspired by God”. This problem is similar to the above, but can appear quite differently—the prophecy student may not claim to be right in other areas of doctrine, only in prophecy. A person who has spent many hours studying prophecy (either someone else’s conclusions or his own) can sound like he has an impressive amount of knowledge about the future. People are often concerned about the future and would love to follow someone who “knows it”. However, you can-

not know if a prophecy teacher is inspired of God until several things he has predicted come to pass as he said it would. It is good to teach prophecy, but it is **not** a reason to start a new congregation. If God really does grant someone great prophetic understanding, should not that person travel around and teach many congregations?

3) Someone thinks he can “do a better job” than the current leaders of a local group. If someone believes the current leaders of his group are making mistakes, he should go to them about it. If he is not heard, but others feel the same way, then he should take other witnesses with him (Matt 18:15-17—see page 20). If it is possible to take the problems to the congregation, do it (some congregations may allow such a procedure—they may even allow the election of new leaders). But until a person has exhausted the possible parts of the above procedure—asking current leaders to change—he should not divide a congregation just so he can be a leader.

4) Someone is tired of serving so much and never getting recognized. People should be serving because the Holy Spirit in them motivates them to a life of service. Our Savior gave His life for people who did not even understand that they needed a Savior. We must learn to serve without human rewards. Never start a congregation for recognition. Most who start a new congregation will probably be doing more work and receiving more complaints than they did in their previous congregation.

5) Someone has doctrinal disagreements that have minimal effect on group practice. As an example, consider “prayer position”. Some scriptures mention people praying with their head bowed, others with their eyes lifted to heaven, and others with their hands held up. Some brethren may prefer one particular way—even believe it is *the only* right way. But a group can stay together with each person praying in the way they believe is best. Areas of belief that do not affect practice are even less of a reason to divide. For example, some people believe Christ was the One who spoke with Abraham and Moses in the Old Testament. Others believe it was the Father. Both sides can find scriptures to support their teaching—which usually make the other side uncomfortable. Some will go as far as to say that those who do not understand this point correctly are “worshiping the wrong God”. Nevertheless, a Roman jailer with only one night’s teaching came to believe in God for the first time and was baptized—became a

member of the Church (Acts 16:20–40). There was not time to teach an in-depth understanding of God. Furthermore, the Bible clearly shows that we will be judged more by how we treat our neighbors than by how well we can explain complex doctrine. Brethren can have different understandings of some theological ideas, and still worship and serve together.

Hopefully, anyone starting a new congregation will have some of the “right reasons” above and none of the wrong ones. It might be good to discuss these points with others who are thinking of starting a new congregation—and maybe with others who think you *should not* start one. If you cannot answer their truthful objections, then you might not want to start it.

Whatever you do, please realize that starting a congregation is not a “popularity contest”. Do not start a new group by attempting to recruit everyone that you think might possibly want to come. **Start small.** Start by talking to the people that you know share your spiritual desire for a new congregation—probably because of issues mentioned above. If your study, prayer, fasting and conversations with brethren lead you to start a congregation, then start a small one. If the Holy Spirit is working in your new group, then others will hear about it and it will grow. If God is not blessing your congregation and working in it, then it is better if no one comes and it quietly ends.

Nobody needs to convince any human that your motives for beginning a new congregation are right—it is the Perfect Judge in heaven who will righteously judge what you do. If your work is of “gold, silver and precious stones,” God will recognize it and reward you (1Cor 3:11–15). Other brethren will recognize your work by the fruit it bears (Mat 7:16). If your work is not of God, you would be better off not to do it (Jms 3:1).

Who Should Establish a Congregation?

Should the person with the most knowledge of the Bible establish a congregation? Must it be established by an “ordained minister” or “deacon”? Should it be a person who is a good speaker? Should it be a wealthy person or a person who knows a lot of people? Should it be the person who is most successful in planning other events?

Most of the above qualifications would probably be helpful in starting a congregation, but none of them are necessary. Today, people expect church denominations to build formal seminaries

to grant degrees and ordain ministers to give long sermons and help build church buildings. Actually, none of the concepts behind the underlined words can be found in the Bible. Paul instructed the Corinthians not to form denominations—groups following a particular Bible teacher (1Cor 1:11–16; 1Cor 3:1–10). While Paul did teach in a “school of Tyrannus” (Acts 19:9), it must have been a temporary arrangement—it was not named “St. Paul’s Seminary” and there is no indication that anyone else ever taught there. There is no mention of degrees or “graduates”. Except for this school, the New Testament mentions believers meeting primarily in homes (though sometimes synagogues or the temple). The typical concept of “ordination” is not in the Bible. Most people think of something like this: a person goes through a ceremony and switches from a “layman” to a “clergyman” and now has extra spiritual capability until he dies or it is taken away, including the ability to “ordain” others. Bible translations have no agreement on where the word “ordain” should be found in the New Testament—because there is no Greek word that has the meaning described above. Several Bibles have only one or zero occurrences of the word “ordain” in the New Testament. (For much detail on this, ask for our paper, *How Does the Eternal Govern Through Humans?*) The word “sermon” is not found in most Bibles and the Bible records no half-hour long discourses—but many questions and answers between Jesus, His apostles and the people. Finally, there is no mention of building a church building, but frequent mentions of meetings in homes. Notice these verses:

Jesus called them together and said, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Matt 20:25–28)

A desire to serve God, honesty, truthfulness, love for the brethren and willingness to work hard are much more important qualities needed to start a congregation. Bible knowledge and the ability to teach are important, but secondarily so. A charismatic personality, **without the above qualities**, can be a detriment—the congregation might grow because of a leader’s charisma, but lack spiritual substance.

The individuals involved should pray and ask if

it is the Father's will. He will likely answer in a quiet but discernible way. They should ask for Christ's leadership, and ask Him to supply the necessary physical and spiritual gifts. People do not have to be spotless, spiritual giants to begin a local congregation. (The Bible records sins of the prophets and apostles—yet God used them.) On the other hand, each person serving must meet certain qualifications (1Tim 3, Titus 1). He must be humble enough to recognize and repent when he makes mistakes so that the whole congregation can continue to grow (1Tim 5:20). A person who desires to oversee a congregation desires a good thing (1Tim 3:1–7). But he must not think that he is going to be “someone important” and **rule** his brethren (Matt 20:25–28). **Starting a congregation is a commitment to serving, not a “higher spiritual status”.**

It is easier to start a congregation when several like-minded individuals and/or families help do it. When Christ sent out disciples and apostles, he sent them out in pairs (Mark 6:7; Luke 10:1; Acts 13:2; 15:39–40). On the other hand, it appears that some congregations in the Bible were established by one person—both approaches have certainly worked throughout history.

Starting or Splitting?

New congregations usually begin from one of three situations:

1) New congregations frequently form as the result of the preaching of someone (or a few people) who are “on fire” for God.

2) People with differing “church” backgrounds come together because God is showing them many of the same things—no single one of them may be an outstanding teacher.

3) People who presently attend a larger group desire to split off and meet separately.

Situation 1 usually works quite harmoniously because people are learning the same things at the same time. Situation 2 requires more effort for brethren to get to know each other and be tolerant of beliefs that they do not share in common. Nevertheless, both of these are “completely new congregations” and the major influence upon them is the people who attend and what they allow God to do through them.

However, in situation 3, when a group splits from a previous group, the previous group's history will still have quite a bit of influence on the new group. There are often a lot of expectations on the part of people. (If your new service does not

involve the splitting off from a previous group, you might wish to skip the rest of this section.)

The desire to split off usually comes from perceived doctrinal, moral, or financial error on the part of the previous group. There are often hard feelings that occur when a church group breaks up. People who have worshipped together for years suddenly find themselves apart. It often is a test to see if people have Christian love or group affiliation. It is a time to show much patience and love—and a time for each person to realize that they may not receive similar love in return. (Christ went through the same thing—when He was about to give his life for the world, His disciples were debating which of them was the greatest—Luke 22:24.)

In some ways church splits resemble family disagreements. There is a tendency for some people to choose a side and then to refuse to talk about the issue. Another extreme is to judge, attack and name-call people in the other group. Neither is good. Each person should make an effort to calmly talk about what the Bible says about the issues that are causing the split. Everyone must be patient and realize that not everyone sees everything at the same time—we learn differently. It is a mistake to make enemies of people with whom you might again work in the next few years—or for all eternity!

The major goal of a split-off congregation will be to avoid the problems that caused the split. Decisions for the new group will often **not** be made from the perspective of “what should we do?” but from the perspective of “what should we do differently from what we were doing previously?” People often want “the same kind of congregation” with “the old problem” fixed.

However, when problems arise and a new start is made, believers frequently pray and study the Bible with a new zeal. They may see new things in the scriptures that they previously had not. Some of what they “discover” may be a mistake. On the other hand, they may discover new truth that other members of the new group are not ready to accept. There is a limit to how many things can be changed at once. Even after three years of training, Christ's Apostles still did not understand all they needed to know (John 16:12). **Many times, a new group will have to start with an agreement to “solve the problems that caused the split”, and to consider other issues later.**

Congregation splits can be particularly difficult when they are from well-established organizations

that claim to be “the One True Church”. These groups may not tolerate any open criticism of their leaders and teachings. They may have policies of casting out members (excommunication, disfellowshipment) who do such things, and forbidding all other members to talk to them. Splitting from groups like these can mean the severing of life-long friendships. That is difficult, but sometimes necessary: “If you want to be my follower you must love me more than your own father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters—yes, more than your own life. Otherwise, you cannot be my disciple” (Luke 14:26, NLT). These difficult situations are also opportunities for great service.

There is a tendency for members of these controlling church organizations to just “go away quietly” when they see a scriptural problem that causes them to realize that they must worship elsewhere. Even local pastors in such groups may feel like “quietly leaving”. However, it is important to realize that **people in these organizations are the only ones who can reach other people in the same organization**. When a group considers itself “the One True Church”, why should its members listen to others “outside the Church”? So when people in these groups see the errors of the group, they are the ideal people to help reach others in the group—because they still have credibility in that group.

But helping others is usually not easy. One should not make accusations against leaders, but simply start by sharing Bible scriptures that do not fit the organization’s teaching and asking other brethren what they mean. In some cases, you may receive a good explanation, but in others you may be told that a verse “does not mean what it appears to say, but that you must trust that God has inspired our leaders to understand it.” Keeping a list of verses that people cannot explain or for which they must trust their organization’s unnatural explanation is sometimes a helpful tool in showing people that they are “following a man”.

Pastors or other leaders who are thinking of leaving a hierarchical church organization should read the section entitled *Help for Pastors Who Want to Leave Large Church Organizations* beginning on page 60.

Start It Simple

When a large group splits, they may have major financial and physical issues to deal with right away. It may be essential to start with formal

documents, bank account, etc. But small new groups do not need to start this way at all.

You can start a new congregation with a prayer of faith, a temporary location, a time to meet, songs to sing, Scripture to read and people willing to discuss them. **Do not let anyone convince you that you must have more than that**. You can let the spending of money and the development of more complex plans and policies wait until you know what you need. Do **not** start a new group by collecting money, writing a “doctrinal statement”, printing stationery, instituting various programs or by designating people for various “offices”. If the heart and core of your congregation is not spiritual group worship, praise, prayer, fellowship and study, no amount of documentation will produce the fruit of the spirit. If you start by setting up a board and officers, you may create something that will be hard to undo. Even if you start by recognizing biblical spiritual gifts, appointing elders and other biblical concepts, you may have an “establishment of religion”, but not a group of people sharing the love of Christ. Let everyone get to know each other and recognize each other’s gifts before committing everything to paper.

“Again, I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them” (Matt 18:19–20).

The USA and most other countries do not require a name, registration or incorporation in order for a religious group to meet. (A minority of countries may attempt to require some form of registration or licensing before any meetings take place. Believers should prayerfully consider the Biblical and historical examples of where men of God cooperated with human governments and when they defied them. It is beyond the scope of this paper to cover the specifics of countries outside the USA.)

You can start a weekly service simply by having a meeting with most of the people and deciding where and when services will be and what will be done there. Sometimes, there is great unity in the spirit and everything just falls into place. In other such meetings, there may be one or more strong personalities who want to do almost everything “their way”. These people are well-meaning and should be a part of the group, but they are sometimes just difficult to work with. One solution for this is to ask an elder from another established non-denominational congregation to come help the group get started. This guest leader must under-

stand that he is just helping the new group get started—not expanding his congregation. Asking for help can be a difficult thing to do, but it is the right thing to do if it is obviously needed.

As meetings continue, many physical and procedural questions will be raised and they can be dealt with as necessary. Most people who have started congregations in this manner are amazed at how many things that they thought would need much attention at the beginning simply never became problems. As an example, it is easy to spend a lot of time looking for a meeting place, but many groups meet effectively in a member's home. Similarly, it is easy to spend a lot of time scheduling and structuring all the functions of a group, but some have worked effectively for years with volunteers for each task.

Developing Gifts

Many large congregations are like attending professional sporting events. The professionals get all of the action and the people pay and watch. There is no doubt that in the first century the Apostles played a major role in the expansion of the Church. But today, we do not have apostles—men who were with Christ during his physical ministry (Acts 1:21-26). However we have the Apostles' writings. It is a very interesting study to read through the New Testament and write down all of the points about the operation of the church. It is interesting to see that there will be almost nothing about minister's salaries, church buildings, doctrinal statements and many other things that typically dominate the founding of churches today. There are no verses giving the name of a "pastor" of any church or explaining what one did.

Yet nearly all of the activity of a modern day congregation centers on the "pastor". He preaches, teaches, studies, prays, counsels, visits, baptizes, makes the plans, etc., etc. Was there a "pastor" of every congregation in the first century biblical church? The apostles mention the names of lots of brethren in their letters, but never give a single "pastor's" name. The word "pastor" only occurs once in most Bible translations (Eph 4:11). "Pastor" in Greek is the same word as "shepherd". It clearly refers to a person who guides younger believers. The terms "minister", "elder" and "overseer" (sometimes "bishop") are used more frequently, but no verse says that these were the same as a "pastor"—congregations seemed to have multiple elders and ministers.

The Bible teaches that spiritual gifts are

spread out among the believers—not that one man is paid to have nearly all of the spiritual gifts. When brethren believe that pastors or ministers have a higher "spiritual status" and have too much respect for them, two bad things usually happen: 1) The brethren accept the pastor's words when they should be looking to the Bible and Holy Spirit; 2) The brethren do not believe that God could carry on a major ministry through them.

Nevertheless, if people are accustomed to a church pastor doing most of the work, it usually takes some time to get away from that method of operation and to develop individual spiritual gifts. If there is a pastor in the congregation, **he should not suddenly stop preaching, teaching, studying, praying, counseling, visiting, baptizing and planning before other brethren assume those responsibilities—otherwise nobody will be doing them.** A person who carries the title of "pastor" usually has certain spiritual gifts, but not others. (Ask anyone who has attended a church that has had several different pastors—the pastors' gifts vary.) The "pastor" should continue in the areas where he is gifted, but the rest of the brethren should be encouraged to develop their gifts as well—sharing the work with the pastor as much as possible.

The Bible contains several lists of spiritual gifts (Rom 12:6-8; 1Cor 12:7-11,28-31; Eph 4:11-15, 1Pet 4:8-11). There is a lot of overlap between them, but no two lists are the same. Sometimes, different words are used for what appears to be the same gift. Since no one list contains all of the gifts, and since no statement in the Bible says that "these are all of the gifts", it is likely that Christ also gives other gifts as they are needed. Here is a summary of the gifts, followed by the number of times they are mentioned:

- Administrator (1)
- Apostle (2)
- Discerner of spirits (1)
- Evangelist—Gospel preacher (1)
- Exhorter (1)
- Faith-filled person (1)
- Giver (of money) (1)
- Healer (2)
- Helping person (1)
- Hospitable person (1)
- Knowledgeable person (1)
- Leader—one who leads (1)
- Loving person (2)
- Merciful person (1)

Minister—one who serves others (2)
 Miracle worker (2)
 Pastor (1)
 Prophet (4)
 Teacher or speaker (3)

The immediate question that usually occurs is: “Which gifts do I have?” Also, “Which gifts do others have?” There is a tendency to take the “spiritual gift list” and try to write one or more person’s names from one’s congregation after each gift. If you can do that and most of your congregation agrees on it, thank God for the blessing!

But in most congregations, that will not be the case. There will be many people who will wonder if they have any of the gifts. There will be some who think they have certain gifts and others who disagree. While spiritual gifts are for edification of the brethren, they are also a training tool so God can see what each person does with the abilities he or she has been given. This is explained in detail by the parable of the talents (Matt 25:14-29) and can be easily summarized by Luke 16:10:

Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much, and whoever is dishonest with very little will also be dishonest with much.

A person may start by inviting another believer to their home for a meal or an activity—maybe from simple boredom and lack of money to do anything else. When he sees that the other was encouraged by it, he begins inviting more and larger groups. Others in the congregation begin to take note of his gift and ask him to plan activities for the entire congregation. Later still, he may be asked to organize a several-day outing for multiple congregations. People want him to do it because he does it in a loving, caring manner—looking out for the best interests of all. As long as the person continues in a track record of service and success, there is no need to send him to a school, certify him, or have a committee “recognize” his spiritual gift. What started as a simple sharing act became a gift of hospitality, then grew into a gift of one kind of administration.

Brethren with some gift of hospitality are the ideal people to host a service in their homes (providing their homes are suitable and not too far from most of those who come). Kind and loving people that are not afraid to speak in public usually make good announcers for larger services—introducing the speakers and musicians, giving announcements, etc.

When you seek the advice or counsel of another believer, you know when you have dealt with someone full of faith, love and mercy. It can be positive and uplifting. Other counselors may have a gift of knowledge: they seem to know the right thing to do. You may have spoken with other counselors and later concluded that they did not have any gifts. Being honest with ourselves and honest with others is the best way for everyone to learn to recognize their gifts. If you believe someone is gifted in a certain area, let him or her know. A humble person is often more concerned with overcoming their faults and needs to be told of their capabilities. If you believe that someone else is trying to work with a gift that they do not have, let them know, in love.

Some gifts are easy to recognize. Most congregations will instantly recognize a person who is gifted at giving money. A person who helps—either through his own hard work or by praying for a miracle—is welcome anywhere. One with the gift of healing is also easy to recognize: he or she prays, and people miraculously recover. Prophecy is also similar if we are patient enough to wait to see if some of the prophet’s statements have come to pass. (Do not be confused by someone who claims to be a prophet, prophesies extensively supporting himself with many scriptures, but then fails to have even small specific prophecies come true in the present. A prophet with no fulfillments yet is like a healer with no healings yet.)

Most people can recognize someone who is a good teacher—skilled at conveying the information they have in mind. Most people know when they are exhorted—stirred by a powerful message. But there are people who claim no belief in God who can do both of these things. The important issue is: are teachers, evangelists and exhorters preaching things inspired of God, or are they preaching their own words? (Remember, even Satan’s ministers pretend to be ministers of righteousness—2Cor 11:15.)

Each person in a congregation should be like the Bereans who “searched the Scriptures daily to *find out* whether these things were so” (Acts 17:11, NKJV). But it is not easy for a student to detect a teacher who is not inspired of God when the student knows a lot less about the subject than the teacher. False teachers may be exposed through Bible study, through prayer, through mistakes on their part revealing their true intent and through someone with the gift of “discernment of spirits”.

God has gifted some with the ability to determine the motivation and “spirit” of another person simply by listening to them talk and observing the way they act. This author knew of a woman who claimed to have that gift. She visited the local congregation I attended once and asked after a few minutes: “Who is that man speaking and who chose him to speak?” I had told her nothing about this man. Most of his words sounded good, but during two years of listening to him, I had concluded that he had a hidden agenda and was a false teacher. He later introduced a lot of heresy that caused most of his congregation to depart. (That congregation did not allow open discussion, nor did its members have any input into speaker selection.)

The point is that my friend, with the gift of “discernment of spirits”, was able to discern the man’s intent almost instantly. She had also been effective in discernment at other times. This is a wonderful gift to have in a congregation—but one of the more difficult gifts to recognize. If a person has a **gift** of discernment, it means that they can discern things that others cannot—so how will others know if the discerner is discerning properly? Believers have to watch the fruit of someone who claims to have the gift of discernment over a period of time to see if it bears fruit. I have met other people who **claimed** to have the gift of discernment, and later facts proved them to be wrong—they claimed people were false teachers when years of teaching showed they were not, and they endorsed teachers who later were shown to be false.

It is Christ who assigns the gifts. It is not the pastor who hands them out like church work assignments. If we desire a gift in a certain area, we should ask God for it (Psalm 37:4). However, we should never pretend to have a gift that we do not have, or use unbiblical methods to try to “work up” spiritual gifts. (Some teach the continual repeating of certain words, “meditation” or various other procedures for obtaining gifts. But these methods are not taught in the Bible.)

Each person needs to feel accountable for making the congregation successful—in whatever big or small way they can do that. The Apostle Paul wrote:

How is it then, brethren? Whenever you come together, each of you has a psalm, has a teaching, has a tongue, has a revelation, has an interpretation. Let all things be done for edification (1Cor 14:26, NKJV).

If the services you have attended do not operate this way, it does not mean that God was not there, but it means that we all have much more to learn in returning to the “faith once delivered to the saints” (Jude 1:3). Many spiritual gifts, such as love, helping and faith can be used every day of our Christian life—for the benefit of those in our congregation, and for all people. Others gifts, such as teaching, exhorting and administration may be used primarily in connection with a service. Later sections will cover those topics in greater detail.

Music and Praise

The Bible contains hundreds of references to the use of music to praise God. Angels sang at the creation (Job 38:4–7) and Christ and His Apostles sang just before He suffered (Matt 26:30).

And let the peace of God rule in your hearts, to which also you were called in one body; and be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and **admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord** (Col 3:15–16, NKJV).

The book of Psalms is full of praise to God, as well as commands that we praise God. The last chapter of the book is a good summary, telling us much about what it should be like:

Praise the Lord! Praise God in His sanctuary; Praise Him in His mighty firmament! Praise Him for His mighty acts; praise Him according to His excellent greatness! Praise Him with the sound of the trumpet; praise Him with the lute and harp! Praise Him with the timbrel and dance; praise Him with stringed instruments and flutes! Praise Him with loud cymbals; praise Him with clashing cymbals! Let everything that has breath praise the Lord. Praise the Lord! (Psalm 150, NKJV).

Many believers understand the need for music and praise and have a good idea as to how they will implement it in their new congregation. They may not learn too much new from the rest of this section. But this author knows of congregations that were started for important doctrinal reasons, and music and praise were simply considered an “extra”—possibly something that might give some people a good feeling, attract a few visitors, or give musicians a place to perform. Any plan to start a new service should make music an integral part of service.

There are more commands in the Bible to praise God than there are to observe many of the

doctrines that Christians dispute among themselves. Praise can take on many forms: shouts, singing, clapping, playing musical instruments and even dancing.

It is clear that God did not want His praise to become old and boring; He wanted it to stay new and exciting. Five times we are commanded to “sing a new song” to God (Psalm 33:3; 96:1; 98:1; 149:1; Isa 42:10). People can become much more excited about newly-written music than songs that are hundreds of years old. The age-old idea that religion should be a solemn, emotionless experience is simply not in Scripture. The Bible speaks of loud sounds and shouts of joy:

Sing to Him a new song; Play skillfully with a **shout of joy** (Ps 3:3).

Oh, **clap your hands**, all you peoples! **Shout** to God with the **voice of triumph!** (Ps 47:1).

I will **greatly** praise the Lord with my mouth; Yes, I will praise Him among the multitude (Ps 109:30).

I will also clothe her priests with salvation, And her saints shall **shout aloud for joy** (Ps 132:16).

The Apostles continued to participate in temple services, even after the Resurrection (Acts 3:1). When the praise of some of Jesus’ followers disturbed the Pharisees, look at our Savior’s answer:

Then, as He was now drawing near the descent of the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to rejoice and **praise God with a loud voice** for all the mighty works they had seen, saying: “Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!” And some of the Pharisees called to Him from the crowd, “Teacher, rebuke Your disciples.” But He answered and said to them, “**I tell you that if these should keep silent, the stones would immediately cry out**” (Luke 19:37–40, NKJV).

But when the chief priests and scribes saw the wonderful things that He did, and the children crying out in the temple and saying, “Hosanna to the Son of David!” they were indignant and said to Him, “Do You hear what these are saying?” And Jesus said to them, “Yes. Have you never read, ‘**Out of the mouth of babes and nursing infants You have perfected praise**’?” (Matt 21:15–16, NKJV).

Notice in the above verse that young people were involved in praise—it is not something just for the older, mature, “converted”. Young people

like new energetic music—and so does God! Praise does not have to be written by someone who believes every doctrine that you do. God accepted praise from a Samaritan even though he said those people “worship what they do not know” (John 4:22):

Luke 17:15–16 And one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, and **with a loud voice glorified God**, and fell down on his face at his feet, giving him thanks. And he was a Samaritan.

Obviously, a service must utilize the kind of music and praise that those who attend are capable of producing. You must start with what is available.

Many congregations prefer to use overhead projectors or computer projection to provide song words to their congregation. Others prefer hymnals—or may have to use them until they are able to obtain the projection equipment. Even with projection equipment, a certain number of copies of hymnals are usually needed for choirs and/or musicians.

New congregations have an important decision: what source(s) will be used for congregational music? If most of the people forming a new congregation are from a previous group, the simplest thing is to keep using the same music. However, it can be quite a problem. When an independent group splits from a major denomination, how are they really independent and separate if they go on to use the old group’s hymnal? Furthermore, the old denomination may refuse to sell hymnals to independent groups. In other cases, the brethren forming a new congregation have no common musical background.

Musicians and leaders of the congregation will simply have to make a decision to procure the most appropriate music available to begin praising God at the new services. Hymnals and overhead transparencies of all kinds can be obtained at a discount from Christian Book Distributors: 800-CHRISTIAN (800-247-4784), 978-977-5000 for International callers; Internet orders: www.christianbook.com. Hymnals with modern praise and worship music can be mail-ordered from Maranatha Music (800-245-7664) or Hosanna! Music (800-533-6912).

Some new congregations simply make their own hymnal or music collection for projection. This may be done to include songs that fit their theology or even to save money. Unfortunately, most modern Christian music has copyright issues

attached—its publishers have an elaborate means for collecting fees for making copies, whether printed or projected. Nevertheless, many of the “old standard” hymns of the 1800’s have expired copyrights, so they may be freely copied. Some modern composers do place their songs clearly in the public domain, so they may be freely shared and copied. A few entire hymnals permit copying (One example: *Songs for the Family of God*, by Mark Graham, PO Box 770261, Lakewood, OH 44107-0019; 216-529-1380; e-mail: magraham@bw.edu). Also, some hymnals, such as Maranatha’s 4th edition (green), provide a modest extra cost option granting the right to make as many copies of words as necessary for one congregation.

What kinds of musical configurations are possible? **Please realize it is possible to praise God whether your congregation has a lot of musical talent or a little.** Thanks to inexpensive electronics, a number of affordable options are available. This author believes that live music is preferable to recorded since it is produced by men and women with the Holy Spirit in them and can capture and express the inspiration of what God is doing at the moment. Recorded music can be inspiring, but it will always be predictably the same, every time. The Bible commands us to continually praise God, not to offer Him re-runs of old praises.

- 1) A worship team with a choir and musical instruments is the best. Large scale musical productions are staged to honor all manner of individuals and groups in this world; we should give our best to honor God. Make the most of whatever talent you have—do not try to imitate some other group. Accept imperfect musicians as long as the overall effect is enjoyable for most people—musicians get better by doing it.
- 2) Lacking a choir or band, a piano accompanist is probably the most flexible. Finding a piano is not the problem it once was. Electronic pianos that sound and feel much like the real thing are in music stores for well less than \$1000. This author has used electronic keyboards from discount stores costing in the \$100 to \$300 range and all attending have had a meaningful praise experience. The smaller keyboards may need an external amplifier—a portable home stereo can work. If your congregation does not have a piano player, most praise and worship music can be played by someone with a guitar, accordion or auto-harp.

- 3) Lacking live musicians, many hymnals have matching CDs and tapes—featuring either piano, small group or full orchestra accompaniment. Tapes specifically designed for accompaniment do not have the main melody voices recorded, which is good. The most important part, the singing words of praise, must be supplied by the congregation. There are some massive DVD-based systems for church accompaniment that have 5000+ songs, options for projection of words, transposition into any key and a host of other features for about \$1000. Christian stores and music stores usually sell them.
- 4) If accompaniment CDs and tapes are not obtained, the congregation singing along with any hymn or praise and worship tape will work.
- 5) Putting all technology aside, a strong singer who will stay on key and in rhythm can lead inspiring music. This method has a many-thousand-year track record of success.
- 6) Any group can **read** Bible Psalms or other words of praise in unison. Responsive readings hold attention and can be inspiring: a leader reads a line or two, followed by a response from the rest of the congregation. Sometimes the response may be an echo of what the leader said, sometimes it may be the same thing every time (Psalm 136 is an example). You can use existing Bible passages or write your own “responsive readings”.

Encourage everyone to get involved in music and praise. Those who can play instruments should be encouraged to do so. Since no instruments are specifically condemned in the Bible, we conclude that we may use any of them. If someone sings or plays an instrument poorly, do not shut them out, but every few months or so encourage them to do something that they have learned well (do not let services become a burden to others by often forcing them to listen to poor music).

Those properly gifted should perform “special music” on a regular basis—bringing in new songs to inspire and possibly sing as a group in the future. Those participating in special music should always be thought of as worship leaders or helpers, not as performers. With some special music, it may be appropriate to invite the whole congregation to sing along; other songs’ erratic rhythms or

melody simply do not work well for congregational singing. Some singers who are accompanied by a piano or other instrument will need a sound system to be adequately heard. You can write to *Shelter in the Word* for our free article *Sound Systems for Services* (see address at the end of this article).

Anyone can buy or borrow pre-recorded music, listen to it, and bring the best to services to play as “special music”—expanding the horizons of the group. Part of the listening job is to listen for words that have an acceptable message. Accept a wide variety of styles. While some styles (e.g. “punk” and “heavy metal”) may be too devoted to destruction and negativism to be useful in a service, most popular music styles can be used for positive, uplifting praise. Parents’ and children’s musical tastes can often be united around an energetic praise song with a good message.

Hand-clapping, foot stomping and rhythm instruments are great ways to involve almost everyone (even 2-year olds). It is biblical, relaxing and fun (Ps 47:1; 98:8; Is 55:12).

Use wisdom in trying not to offend others with music that they are not used to. (Some people might have been offended by the previous paragraphs.) Music should be a force for unity, not for division. If you have visitors that like only older hymns, that is not the day to bring out your most energetic praise music. Furthermore, Paul clearly instructs that services should be conducted “decently and in order” (1Cor 14:40). People should never be wild and “out of control” no matter how excited they are to praise God. Also, no one should be forced or “talked into” participating in music that they do not feel comfortable with. Praise should come from the “heart”. Praise is not to earn salvation, to gain religious “brownie points”, to attract more members or to “do something different”. It is to give our Creator the praise that He asks for and deserves, and to teach His Truth to people in ways that will stay with them for a long time.

Bible Reading and Discussion

Scripture reading was a part of Synagogue worship when Jesus attended (Luke 4:16–17; Acts 15:21) and it still is today. Synagogues have a system in place whereby the entire first five books, plus parts of other books are read every year. On any given week, the same scriptures will be read everywhere throughout the world. However, if you use this system, you will never cover large parts of

the Old Testament or any of the New Testament. Some people augment this system with other readings, but most Christian congregations simply set up another system of Bible reading that makes sense for them.

It is the belief of this writer that there are not any apostles (which means “one sent”) of Christ alive at this time. That being the case, it is much more important that we read the words of Christ and the Apostles in our services.

Scripture reading can be the main part of a new service if there are few people with the gift of teaching. People who are used to “being preached to in church” may find some difficulty in going to church without a sermon, but this usually wears off after a few weeks.

If the topic is published beforehand, brethren can read the scriptures ahead of time and will usually be ready with questions and comments. Some groups have people stand to read, others remain seated. Some use a microphone, some do not. Some have only adults read, others see it as an important activity for children to participate in. Most importantly, the scriptures need to be read so that they can be heard. Some allow questions and comments after a few verses, others wait until an entire chapter or section is complete.

No matter what format is used, the congregation will learn truth—because they are reading God’s words. Certainly, there will be some incorrect comments made, but this is a chance for the experienced person to gently correct errors, and a chance for everyone to exercise discernment.

There is no need to have everyone read from the same translation. It is an advantage for people to silently read along from different translations. That way, it is easy to notice and discuss places where translations are significantly different.

Teaching

Most people are used to extensive teaching in services—usually called a sermon. If groups do not have someone to give a sermon, they may play an audio or video taped-sermon. A large number of ministries produce tapes for this very purpose. However, taped sermons or completely planned presentations do not allow for the questions and answers so frequently found in the Bible. A speaker can sound like he knows so much and cause many new believers to trust in his words—until someone asks good biblical questions about his teaching—questions that he may not be able to answer. Christ and the Apostles were able to an-

swer the hardest of questions that were asked of them. That is the sign of a good teacher.

Obviously, there are few teachers who are as gifted as Christ and the Apostles. However, it is better to have a teacher who is truthful and willing to admit what he does not know, than it is to have a teacher who is powerful, eloquent or charismatic.

The goal of teaching is to ask God to use people to teach what He wants taught at each service. Even poorer live speakers are often better than tapes. People clearly pay more attention to live presentations. Also, there is no possibility of asking the speaker questions when a tape is played.

If your congregation progresses to the point where you are teaching many new people, experienced teachers who can expound a topic at length are sometimes needed. One way for brethren to learn to deliver quality live messages is to give “book reports” or “article reports” on truthful, inspiring literature. This approach maximizes speaking opportunity and reduces the amount of research work (only one source is used). Another approach is for teachers to take lessons from their own experience and explain them in the light of Scripture.

Services should be edifying and encouraging to all. They are probably not the best place for detailed discussions of complex doctrines (such as the exact nature of Jesus Christ before His human birth, the Hebrew calendar, etc.). Such teachings are important, however, and can be held after services or as a separate Bible study.

Exhortation

Exhortation is different than teaching—a person who exhorts says little that his listeners do not already know, but encourages and motivates them to do a better job of what they already know they should do. (“Preaching” often encompasses both “teaching” and “exhortation”.) Some people clearly have the gift for exhortation, and some do not. A person who encourages others must be able to do so in love—without making himself appear better than others.

There is no reason why a speaker has to be introduced as either a “teacher” or an “exhorter”. They can simply give their message. However, they should know what they are hoping God to accomplish through them. Someone who does have the gift of encouraging and motivating others should be very careful not to introduce new teachings while he is doing it. (Aaron and his golden calf comes to mind—he was a powerful leader, but

he led Israel into sin.) Exhortation should be to solid, well-understood Bible principles.

Prophecy and Speaking in Tongues

There are numerous references to prophets, prophesying and “speaking in tongues” in the New Testament. Generally, if people followed only the instruction there, they would not have much difficulty. It is various other teachings in addition to the Bible—no matter how well meaning—that cause trouble.

Some people believe that everyone should either prophecy or “speak in tongues” at a worship service. To them, it is a vital part of the spiritual experience of the service. To an outsider (and sometimes to an insider), it can appear to be just so much nonsense or even the manifestation of an evil spirit. At the opposite extreme, some groups do not make any allowance for speaking in tongues or for members sharing a revelation from God. Notice these verses:

¹ Follow the way of love and eagerly desire spiritual gifts, especially the gift of **prophecy**. ² For anyone who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men but to God. Indeed, no one understands him; he utters mysteries with his spirit. ³ But everyone who **prophesies** speaks to men for their strengthening, encouragement and comfort. ⁴ He who speaks in a tongue edifies himself, but he who **prophesies edifies the church**. ⁵ I would like every one of you to speak in tongues, but I would **rather have you prophesy**. He who **prophesies is greater** than one who speaks in tongues, unless he interprets, so that the church may be edified.

⁶ Now, brothers, if I come to you and speak in tongues, what good will I be to you, unless I bring you some revelation or knowledge or **prophecy** or word of instruction? ⁷ Even in the case of lifeless things that make sounds, such as the flute or harp, how will anyone know what tune is being played unless there is a distinction in the notes? ⁸ Again, if the trumpet does not sound a clear call, who will get ready for battle? ⁹ So it is with you. Unless you speak intelligible words with your tongue, how will anyone know what you are saying? You will just be speaking into the air. ¹⁰ Undoubtedly there are all sorts of languages in the world, yet none of them is without meaning. ¹¹ If then I do not grasp the meaning of what someone is saying, I am a foreigner to the speaker, and he is a foreigner to me. ¹² So it is with you. Since you are eager to

have spiritual gifts, try to excel in gifts that build up the church.

¹³ For this reason anyone who speaks in a tongue should pray that he may interpret what he says. ¹⁴ For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my mind is unfruitful. ¹⁵ So what shall I do? I will pray with my spirit, but I will also pray with my mind; I will sing with my spirit, but I will also sing with my mind. ¹⁶ If you are praising God with your spirit, how can one who finds himself among those who do not understand say “Amen” to your thanksgiving, since he does not know what you are saying? ¹⁷ You may be giving thanks well enough, but the other man is not edified.

¹⁸ I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you. ¹⁹ But in the church I would rather speak five intelligible words to instruct others than ten thousand words in a tongue.

²⁰ Brothers, stop thinking like children. In regard to evil be infants, but in your thinking be adults. ²¹ In the Law it is written: “Through men of strange tongues and through the lips of foreigners I will speak to this people, but even then they will not listen to me,” says the Lord.

²² Tongues, then, are a sign, not for believers but for unbelievers; prophecy, however, is for believers, not for unbelievers. ²³ So if the whole church comes together and everyone speaks in tongues, and some who do not understand or some unbelievers come in, will they not say that you are out of your mind? ²⁴ But if an unbeliever or someone who does not understand comes in while **everybody is prophesying**, he will be convinced by all that he is a sinner and will be judged by all, ²⁵ and the secrets of his heart will be laid bare. So he will fall down and worship God, exclaiming, “God is really among you!”

²⁶ What then shall we say, brothers? When you come together, everyone has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation. All of these must be done for the strengthening of the church. ²⁷ If anyone speaks in a tongue, two—or at the most three—should speak, one at a time, and someone must interpret. ²⁸ If there is no interpreter, the speaker should keep quiet in the church and speak to himself and God.

²⁹ **Two or three prophets should speak, and the others should weigh carefully what is said.** ³⁰ And if a **revelation** comes to someone who is sitting down, **the first speaker**

should stop. ³¹ For you can all **prophecy** in turn so that everyone may be instructed and encouraged. ³² The **spirits of prophets** are subject to the **control of prophets.** ³³ For God is not a God of disorder but of peace.

As in all the congregations of the saints... ³⁷ If anybody thinks he is a **prophet** or spiritually gifted, let him acknowledge that what I am writing to you is the Lord’s command. ³⁸ If he ignores this, he himself will be ignored.

³⁹ Therefore, my brothers, be eager to **prophecy**, and do not forbid speaking in tongues. ⁴⁰ But everything should be done in a **fitting and orderly way.** (1 Corinthians 14).

From the above verses, it is easy to see a few points very clearly:

- 1) Prophesying and speaking in tongues are both appropriate parts of a service (though not mandatory).
- 2) Prophesying and speaking in tongues should not monopolize a service—only two or three of each.
- 3) Prophesying is greater than speaking in tongues.
- 4) Speaking in tongues should not be done unless somebody can interpret.
- 5) Everything should be done for edification—in a fitting and orderly way.

Role of Women in Services

For some congregations, this is a non-issue—both men and women are content with whatever functions they have. Other congregations argue and split over this issue. This author’s caution is that **church groups should deal with this issue only as it is a real problem for them.** One local congregation in Texas spent months debating whether or not the Bible permits women to teach in services. They could not agree, so they split. After the dust settled, it turned out that there were no women in either group that wanted to teach in their services—some just disagreed about whether it was Biblical. The split was needless.

The advice to “leave the subject alone” if possible does not come from a fear of knowing the mind of Christ on the matter, but from an understanding of the difficulty in determining what the original Bible manuscripts said. Indeed, some manuscripts differ in important areas. The Bible was copied and translated for hundreds of years by men who lived in societies where women were not educated and were not perceived as being capable of doing anything more than housework, farm

work and raising children. With this thinking rampant, it is easy to understand how some men might have attempted to “clarify” the manuscripts—making them more restrictive of women.

An example of the difficulty can be found in the book of 1 Corinthians where the NIV reads: “women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the Law says” (1Cor 14:34), yet only three chapters earlier he said: “And every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head—it is just as though her head were shaved” (1Cor 11:5). This verse is obviously referring to praying and prophesying in a service, as 1 Corinthians 11:1 starts by encouraging the brethren to keep the traditions that Paul gave to them—these traditions continue all the way through chapter 14. Referring to praying and prophesying, “If anyone wants to be contentious about this, we have no other practice—nor do the churches of God” (1Cor 11:16). How could anyone be contentious about the head coverings used by people who were praying or prophesying in their own home? They could contend with others only if it was being done in their presence.

This is the nature of the study involved with determining exactly what the Bible says about the role of women in services. How can women be told to pray and prophesy in services in one chapter, then be told to be “silent” only three chapters later? There are additional scriptures that seem to support both views. It requires much digging into original manuscripts and trying to understand the precise context in which the scriptures were written.

Many books and articles are available on both sides of the issue. One book is *What Paul Really Said About Women* by John Temple Bristow. The following web site has discussion on both sides: www.yoyomaster.com/ministry.file/Womenpreach.html.

If this is a major question of some people in the fellowship, then encourage everyone to study it. But if it is not a question, it might be better left alone.

Acceptable Dress for Services

Fortunately, the Scriptures clearly indicate how to handle the issue of dress at services:

For if there should come into your assembly a man with gold rings, in fine apparel, and there should also come in a poor man **in filthy clothes**, and you pay attention to the one wear-

ing the fine clothes and say to him, “You sit here in a good place,” and say to the poor man, “You stand there,” or, “Sit here at my footstool,” have you not **shown partiality** among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts? (Jms 2:2-4, NKJV).

Some people will be quick to point out that priests, Levites and others who came before God were told to wear special clothes that were to be clean and in good repair. Cleanliness and neatness are goals for us to individually strive for, but James makes clear that a “dress code” should not be enforced. God looks at the heart more than the clothes. Even though many Christian groups have their ministry or choirs wear special robes, there is no New Testament example of this. Indeed, the design of such robes is often **not** like the garments described for Old Testament priests, but like clothes worn by other religions. People in the New Testament always perceived that Christ and the Apostles were servants of God by what they said or the miracles they did, not by what they wore. The principles of cleanliness, neatness, and modesty can be taught without invoking a dress code or judging people who attend.

It is also important to realize that the Bible does not command us to dress according to “the upper class style of the day”. Would services be better if all men wore tuxedos and women wore formal dresses? Should men always wear suits and ties? Should women always wear dresses and high heels? Should people buy clothes for services that they would otherwise never wear? There does not seem to be any biblical precedent for any of these things. Paul teaches that services should **not** be a “style show” of impressive clothing (1Tim 2:9).

Some people take the opposite approach. They study the history of clothes and may conclude that neckties are patterned after ancient phallic symbols and therefore cannot wear them in good conscience to a worship service. Other people believe that prostitutes invented high heels and that wearing them is physically harmful to the body. Still other people believe the Bible teaches that they should wear fringes, hats, beards or other things. This author has seen long papers written on all of the above subjects. We should not be offended at people for following any dress custom they believe is Biblically based. We might learn something if we ask them why they do it. We might not agree with what we hear, but at least we will understand. Those who believe they have knowledge about the history of certain clothing should not be offended

by those who do not. Nevertheless, if someone becomes offended, Matthew 18:15–17 (see page 20) is there.

Using the Gift of Administration

Financial items, foundational documents and legal status are discussed in later sections. This section addresses the most fundamental issue, “How does a group get started?”

- 1) Where will the first service be?
- 2) What time will the service be?
- 3) What will take place at the service?
- 4) When will other meetings be held to further plan the church congregation?
- 5) Who will do which things?

The entire Bible makes frequent mention of the leadership of Elders (older, mature, capable men recognized by the people they serve). The Bible mentions elders governing in the Church very similar to the way it mentions them governing the physical Israelite nation. Exceptional people, such as John the Baptist and Jesus, could be accepted as elders at age 30. Age 40 was probably more common. An irresponsible person, no matter how old, would never be considered an elder.

This author highly recommends that new groups start as simply and as naturally as possible. People should begin meeting, praising and studying together, and work out the details as they go (not ignore them forever). If a group’s beginning is centered primarily on positions, functions and documents, Christ and the Bible can be pushed aside.

If one family invites three other families to their home for dinner, hymn singing and a Bible study, they usually do not need a set of documents explaining how they will eat and study together. There frequently will be no difficult issues, and if there are, most people will defer to a recognized leader or the host of the house where they are meeting.

The Bible contains references to Church decisions being made in a variety of ways: sometimes by an apostle or other single leader, sometimes by a group of leaders, sometimes by everyone. The size of a group **does** make a major difference when meeting to form a congregation:

- 1) Groups of 20 and under can almost always meet and discuss issues with everyone present. In any group, there are usually some elderly, young adults, women with children or others who prefer not to take part in such

meetings. If they exclude themselves, there will be no complaints. A problem to avoid, for small groups, is selecting a number of people to attend the initial meetings that is **almost as big** as the entire group. For example, if a new congregation of 16 people somehow selects 12 people to do their initial planning—that effectively means the whole congregation minus four people. Unless those four specifically do not want to be involved in planning, it would be better to include everyone, lest they feel left out. This writer has seen small, like-minded groups accomplish a lot with little formal plans.

- 2) Groups of 40 and larger will probably want a smaller body to meet for initial planning. The entire congregation can vote on alternatives proposed by the smaller group. Plans for a formal structure must eventually be made.
- 3) Groups with 200 or more will certainly want a smaller body for initial discussion and decisions. A formal means of structuring the group so everything can be done “decently and in order” (1Cor 14:40) will be needed very soon.
- 4) Sometimes, there are already natural leaders (an outstanding teacher, or maybe pastors or elders from previous groups) that nearly everyone trusts to start the new group. If they have a real love for God and the congregation, they can frequently do the necessary work very efficiently. This is one effective way to get started. But unless these leaders have a firm commitment to developing a “shared ministry”, with all of the brethren developing their spiritual gifts, it is easy to end up with another pastor-centered congregation.

In other instances, brethren attempting to establish a new congregation may find major disagreement with leaders or issues. Adjourning the meeting to pray and consult the Scripture can often produce results. If the items of difficulty appear to be dividing the group in the initial informal setting, then the establishment of a fair formal structure of elders, voting and whatever else is necessary should be the highest priority.

The whole emphasis in leadership is to find people with the gifts of administration and service and to let them serve. The Bible does not support

either the idea of elders ruling between Christ and believers (2Cor 1:24) or the modern idea that every little interest group should “have a voice in decision-making”. For example, if a congregation has several left-handed people, you do not have to have a left-handed elder. If left-handed brethren have special needs, they should be able to go to the elders and show them what they are. The same would be true for racial and ethnic groups. Elders should be chosen based on their gifts to serve as elders, not for their ethnic representation. Ask God to help choose people who are gifted at administration and who will serve others.

Establishing a Schedule for Services

Some groups operate quite successfully with little more than a starting time and place for their meetings. Other groups print a timed schedule each week and largely stick to it. In general, more scheduling is needed for larger groups and less for smaller ones. Long-time friends are comfortable with each other even if the service is delayed and they end up waiting for half an hour talking. People just beginning to attend for the first time may be uncomfortable if they do not know what to expect or if there is nothing to do. Nevertheless, no schedule should be so strict that it cannot be changed when the Holy Spirit provides direction.

The items that will go into a plan for services will depend largely upon the people and the spiritual gifts available. Most schedules will include opening and closing prayers, congregational singing, special music, prayers for those in need, announcements and some either Scripture reading or a message with comments and questions. Some include a time for people to prophesy or speak in tongues and interpret. Some hold a communion service (bread and wine—1Cor 10:16; 11:17–33) every week, others only occasionally. There should always be a time reserved for any member who believes he or she has something God wants them to say to the congregation.

Activities and teachings directed at younger people are necessary if they are a part of the congregation. Find the brethren that are most gifted at teaching young people. This author has seen much debate about whether young people should be separated from their parents during a service. Obviously, if young people are separate, teaching can be tailored directly to their level of understanding. On the other hand, it is vital for children to see their parents participate in the main service and for them to understand as much as possible of what

actually takes place there. Lessons directed toward children can be presented with adults present—the children can learn and the adults can frequently learn something from the children.

The overall schedule of your services should be based upon the congregations and its needs. Breaking the service up into sections with a short break in between allows people to come and go for the parts of the service most applicable to them. Some groups have youth lessons before the main service. Others have a praise service of all singing for 30 to 60 minutes. Still others have a prayer service. People can then attend those sections that are important to them. When this kind of format exists, it is important for brethren to encourage each other not to “hide” from things that they might actually need. If God wants someone to learn to sing or pray for others, that person may need to be encouraged to attend the praise or prayer service, even though they may feel like they do not want to.

When people begin a new service, especially if they are participating as they never have before, they often want to stay much longer than when they just “went to hear a message”. This is a very good thing, but it also makes serving food important—either a snack or a full meal. People simply stay at any event longer when there is food—especially if it is good food. Groups that have several different segments to their services, or a service followed by a Bible study may want to serve the food between events. If all of the events run one after another, it is best to serve the food at the end—more people will stay and talk. Serving at the beginning is better than not at all—this may be required if the meeting facilities do not have refrigeration.

As with everything else, there will probably be people in your congregation who are gifted with preparing, organizing and serving food. Let them serve in this way, and thank God for them.

Differences of Opinion Are Biblical

When a congregation is not controlled by a denomination or local pastor, some people are concerned that there will be too many “unpleasant differences of opinion”. There is good reason for these concerns. “Unpleasant differences” can take away the joy that God wants for us. But differences of opinion do not have to be unpleasant—that is an important lesson to learn.

Numbers 14:11–20 contains a difference of opinion between God and Moses. God wanted to

destroy the nation of Israel, but Moses wanted Him to keep them alive. Moses did not curse God and God did not strike Moses with lightning. Nobody became unpleasant and God listened to Moses.

Micaiah’s vision of God’s throne shows us that God sometimes seeks multiple opinions of ways to accomplish his plans:

Micaiah continued, “Therefore hear the word of the LORD: I saw the LORD sitting on his throne with all the host of heaven standing around him on his right and on his left. And the LORD said, ‘Who will entice Ahab into attacking Ramoth Gilead and going to his death there?’ **One suggested this, and another that.** Finally, a spirit came forward, stood before the

Why Matthew 18 Method Is so Effective in Settling Disagreements

Hopefully, all Christians would like to resolve all disagreements in the way that God would resolve them. Indeed, many times Christians will pray together and when they feel that they have received an answer from God, they abide by it. But when God does not give an answer (sometimes He lets us decide), then we need a godly method to solve the issue. How can a “method” produce a right decision? Do not one or both people have to make the right decision? The answer to that is “yes”, but a right method can increase the chances of making a “right decision” and provide peace to the individuals involved—even when a wrong decision is made. This method works for personal problems, other’s misbehaved children, doctrinal problems, church organization issues and even some serious crimes.

This is a fictional example of what might happen if Paul went to Peter about an offense:

Verse from Matthew 18	Result if <u>Paul Is Right</u>	Result if <u>Peter is Right</u>
¹⁵ If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over.	Paul must take he first step and go to Peter if he expects any kind of resolution. If Peter listens and agrees to change, the problem is solved. Otherwise, they will proceed to the next step.	A great many problems are solved by communication. If Peter listens to Paul, but then shows Paul how his complaint was wrong, then the problem is over. Otherwise, they will go on to the next step
	<i>The prospect of other people becoming involved in a disagreement often causes people to think again about whether they are right or not.</i>	
¹⁶ But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that ‘every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.’	Hopefully, the “others” will see the truth of the issue and be able to convince Peter to change. If Peter does not listen, or if the “others” cannot see that Paul is right, even though they should, then they will go to the next step.	Since Paul chose the “others”, it is more likely that they will agree with him. But if they are believers, they should hear both sides and try to be just. If Peter can show the “others” that he is right, the disagreement will be ended.
	<i>The possibility of an entire congregation becoming involved and the embarrassment of many seeing one’s mistakes makes everyone think.</i>	
¹⁷ If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church ; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector.	This is the third time that Peter has been shown his fault. If he finally understands it, he can confess it to the congregation, be forgiven and continue in peace. If he still disagrees, he will have to leave the congregation and will hopefully not cause trouble any more. If necessary, Paul can treat him like an unbeliever and take him to a civil court.	Hopefully, the congregation will be able to see that Peter is right. They might also decide that the issue is not worth dividing over and advise both Paul and Peter to let it rest. If they erroneously decide that Peter must either give in to Paul’s demands or leave, then, even though it is unjust, it may be best that Peter does leave this group that so poorly judged him.
<i>Even if this process is misused by unrighteous people, a person who goes through with it all can feel confident that he has done what God has commanded and that God will reward him for his works.</i>		

LORD and said, ‘I will entice him.’ ‘By what means?’ the LORD asked. ‘I will go out and be a lying spirit in the mouths of all his prophets,’ he said. ‘You will succeed in enticing him,’ said the LORD. “Go and do it” (1Kings 22:19–22).

Acts 15 gives the story of a great difference of opinion: Was it necessary to circumcise Gentiles who were becoming believers in Jesus? “After **much discussion**, Peter got up and addressed them...” (Acts 15:7). Later in the same chapter, Paul and Barnabas were planning to make another trip together, but they could not agree on whether or not to take Mark with them, so they agreed to go on completely separate trips. (Acts 15:36–41).

Romans 14 is another great chapter showing that brethren have different opinions. “Accept him whose faith is weak, without passing judgment on disputable matters. One man’s faith allows him to eat everything, but another man, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables...” (Rom 14:2–3). Paul certainly knew whether or not it was permissible to eat meat, but he took this opportunity to teach the bigger lesson that people do not all have the same understanding and are accountable for what they personally know, not the complete facts that may be understood by somebody else. “But the man who has doubts is condemned if he eats, because his eating is not from faith; **and everything that does not come from faith is sin**” (Rom 14:23).

As mentioned previously in this writing, the Bible gives a very effective procedure for peacefully resolving disagreements—even if the people making the decisions do not always make the right decisions. This procedure is found in Matthew 18:15–17 (see section below). Many people do not want to confront others with whom they disagree—even when they should. Others have a tendency to confront nearly everyone, whether they are right or wrong. But part of becoming like Christ (Rom 8:29) is learning to peacefully help people when they are wrong. Christ was bold and fearless, yet humble and loving at the same time.

“Pastoral Functions” — Who Does Them?

When people hear of the concept of a congregation without a pastor, they frequently ask, “But who would do...?” and go on to name some function that only pastors typically do. We will cover those functions one at a time below with separate sections for the major issues of marriage and baptism.

Anointing and prayer for the sick: James 5:14–16 states that “the elders of the Church” should pray for the sick and anoint them with oil. Who are these elders? How does a person become one? The Bible does not spell out a specific procedure, but the historical meaning of the word is simply older, wiser, people who helped to govern the affairs of a civil or religious group. The Bible never mentions a ceremony whereby someone “becomes an elder”. While there are examples of laying on of hands to give people special responsibilities within a congregation, no scripture says “an elder must have ‘hands laid upon him’”. Also notice that James writes, “The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.” The older, mature, righteous brethren in a congregation, whom-ever they are, can pray for the sick and anoint them.

Appointing other leaders: A vital function of “ordained” church leaders is “ordaining” other church leaders so that the cycle may continue. However, when one realizes that the Bible does not teach a chain of human ordination, then the need “to have an ordained person to ordain more people” goes away. God continues to give spiritual gifts and congregations choose people to become their leaders (Acts 1:23; 6:3; 11:22; 15:2, 22, 25, 40; 16:1–2; 1Cor 16:3; 2Cor 8:19; 1Tim 3; Titus 1). A system where God or the people choose each leader often is not “stable”, but it is far better than systems where bad church leaders pick future leaders and the bad system continues for hundreds of years, as happened during the Dark Ages.

Counseling: There are no scriptures which say that brethren must go to a “pastor” or “elder” for counsel. There are none that say the advice of church leaders is God’s advice. There are numerous scriptures that promise answer to humble prayers seeking God’s will. The Bible also says: “Without counsel, plans go awry, but in the multitude of counselors they are established” (Prv 15:22). People need to listen to a variety of wise advice and pray to make a wise choice. It can be dangerous if someone believes that all they need to do is counsel with any one “minister” and they will “receive God’s will”. They will tend to look around for a “minister” who will agree with what they want to do.

Many bad marriages have begun because one “minister” approved them and the couple did not make themselves responsible to obtain a multitude of advice. Rather than blindly following one counselor, people must realize that they are responsible for finding multiple good counselors and then making the best decision from their advice.

Funerals: The Bible does not record anyone preaching a funeral message. It mentions burial customs, people mourning for the dead, and people gathering together after a death, but does not mention a specific “funeral message” or who must preach it. The Bible contains many verses on the resurrection of the dead, the rewards given to believers and God’s great love and mercy. Mature believers should be able to read these scriptures to comfort those gathering after a death. In the USA, an “ordained minister” does not perform any legal function in connection with a death or a funeral.

Removal of sinful or disruptive members: There are times when the congregation must ask a member to leave (1Cor 5:1-5). Paul makes it clear that this should be done when the congregation is assembled (1Cor 5:4). The whole procedure for doing this is described in Matt 18:15-17 (see page 20). A pastor is not required for this, only a concerned believer empowered by the Holy Spirit to start the process and a congregation willing to carry out their duty.

Representing the congregation to others: When a congregation works with other groups on a joint evangelistic project, or when it negotiates a lease for a building in which to meet, its pastor usually represents it. He also usually writes on behalf of members who may want to home school their children, avoid vaccines, miss school or work for religious reasons, and other issues. What happens when a congregation does not have a pastor? Either the whole congregation, or the elders can authorize someone on behalf of the church to act in whatever way is needed. One person may be good at negotiating leases, another may be good at evangelizing, and another may be good at dealing with state laws. Most governments and individuals will accept the written or oral representation of an individual who has a document signed by

the church members or elders authorizing him or her to represent the church congregation.

Baptizing New Believers

This is another function typically performed by church pastors. Since it is very important to an active congregation—no matter how small—it is covered here in a little more detail.

It is important to realize that baptism was not a new thing introduced by John the Baptist. Immersion in water for cleansing one’s sin is a practice among Jews today and was apparently used well before John. Our Savior’s disciples baptized people long before His death and resurrection (John 3:22; 4:1–2).

Three thousand people were baptized on the Pentecost after Jesus’ resurrection. If only the 12 Apostles did the baptizing and laying on of hands, each one would have had to baptize and lay hands on 250 people. That would give them less than 2 minutes for each person if they did it for eight hours. If all 120 disciples (Acts 1:15) participated in the baptism and laying on of hands, they could devote 15 minutes to each person and finish in 6¼ hours.

There is no command in the Scripture that requires people to be of a certain status or “rank” to baptize others or lay on hands. God commanded Ananias to baptize Paul, and even though we have much description about Ananias, he is not called a prophet, minister, elder, or any such thing (Acts 9:10–18; 22:12–16). Paul clearly explains that **who** baptizes a person is not very important—even though he preached in many places, he rarely ever baptized anyone, and he could not remember for certain how many people he baptized! (1Cor 1:13–17).

Some have taught that a certain “rank” is required to lay on hands based on Acts 8. Philip baptized some people in Samaria (v 12), but they did not receive the Holy Spirit until Peter and John came (vv 14–17). The chapter says nothing about why they did not receive the Holy Spirit. However, it is unlikely that it was due to a “lack of spiritual power” on the part of Philip—great miracles were performed through him (vv 6–7) and he made a 70-mile evangelistic trip (v 40). This author believes that God withheld His spirit so Peter and John could refute Simon the Sorcerer (vv 18–23), a false leader credited with much evil by third century church historians.

Finally, there is no mention of baptizing or lay-

ing on of hands in any of the Biblical lists of spiritual gifts (Rom 12:6–8; 1Cor 12:7–11, 28–31; Eph 4:11–15, 1Pet 4:8–11). Rather, they are listed as basic doctrines that mature believers should have mastered (Heb 6:1–2).

A new believer must understand that baptism is an outward action signifying an individual's desire to repent and follow Christ. It is not a "sacrament" or benefit of belonging to a church group. The fact that a mature believer agrees to baptize a new believer does not guarantee that the new believer has repented. A mature believer laying hands on a new believer does not guarantee that the Holy Spirit will be given. **Christ** guarantees that a *repentant* person will be forgiven and receive the Holy Spirit. One should not baptize people who appear obviously insincere or unrepentant; but it is possible that someone may pretend to be repenting when they really are not (especially if they need to "be baptized" to marry, qualify for a church position, etc.). Christ looks on the heart of the individual—He is not bound by the possibly erroneous decisions of those who baptize or lay on hands.

The Bible does not spell out rules for the place of baptism, but the examples seem to be lakes and rivers, places with a lot of water. The Jewish teaching of the times was that it needed to be done in "living water"—water that was flowing. Lacking a river or lake, the Jews frequently constructed a Mikveh—a large stone tub with at least a small source of water coming in and a place for it to flow out. Many of these have been discovered by archeologists—dating back to the time of Christ. A bath tub with water flowing in and the drain partly open would be similar to this. We should try to follow the Bible example as closely as possible, but adjustments may be necessary when all outside water is frozen—or for a disabled person who cannot get under the water at all.

All of the examples in the Bible and even the Greek words used for baptism indicate that it was a total immersion. History indicates that the person being baptized went under the water themselves—the baptizer watched to be sure that he or she went completely under water. If they left a part out, the baptizer would tell them to do it again. (The baptizer might also assist a person who needed help getting in and out of the water.) A more common method today is for a "minister" to physically push the person under the water and then to pull them up. This seems to symbolize that a minister "controls a believer's spiritual life." Whereas, self-

immersion symbolizes a person laying down their own life to Christ, rising up by the power of Christ in them and relying on other brethren to point out mistakes that they cannot see for themselves. This symbolism seems much better.

Since no baptism method is described in detail in the Bible, but much is said about the need to understand the nature of sin and to repent of it, we must conclude that the repenting is the most important part. The family of Cornelius received the Holy Spirit before they were baptized (Acts 10:47).

The laying on of hands normally occurs immediately after baptism. Several scriptures mention "elders" or multiple people laying on hands, so the baptizer(s) as well as other elders (mature brethren) can participate. Obviously, it is God who gives the Holy Spirit, not the elders. If he wants to do it, He can, even through the prayer of unconverted elders. On the other hand, He can withhold it even though the elders may be righteous men with the best of intentions. But in any case, we should endeavor to do what the Bible teaches.

A person should not live a life of fear wondering if God counts them as a believer because they were not sure that their baptism or laying on of hands was done "correctly". The Bible emphasizes ongoing **self**-examination (1Cor 11:27–28), not examination of one's baptism method. A person in doubt should pray and ask God to restore their faith and confidence in what He has done, or else to redo their baptism and laying on of hands. Obviously, if a person comes to realize that they had not personally repented before their first baptism, but were just doing it because others did, and wish to really repent, they should be baptized and receive the laying on of hands again.

Marriage without Ministers or Magistrates

Without marriages, there is no future to human existence. Social systems of raising children outside of families are not supported by Scripture and have consistently failed throughout history. Marriages are the major remaining place where church and state still work together in a significant way in western societies. The state has its own administrative network to process births, deaths, illnesses, child custody, etc. If a church representative becomes involved in any of the above events, it is irrelevant to the state. Baptism, church membership and other church positions are also irrelevant to the state. **But in marriages, ministers fre-**

quently act on behalf of civil governments when they “perform weddings”. Civil governments will accept almost any “minister” who has “ordination papers” or even a written statement from his congregation that he is their minister.

But what does the Bible say about who should perform a wedding? Actually, there is no mention of any minister performing any wedding or marriage in the Bible. Weddings were a public affair and there were certainly wedding feasts with many guests invited. But histories of weddings show that the practice of ministers officiating at weddings is only about 600 years old. Before that, weddings were handled by a contract between the married couple’s parents (or the couple themselves if they were older). A marriage was seen as a contract between the husband, wife and God; neither the “Church” nor the “State” had a part in it. It has only been during the past 150 years that governments in the USA have issued marriage licenses. Marriage contracts and common law marriages are still recognized by most states. The high divorce rate over the past 50 years should not be surprising since both the “State” and most church groups—the entities that “authorize” marriages—have also begun “authorizing” divorces, assuring couples that their divorce is “approved”. If couples were utterly convinced that they were responsible to God for their marriages, they might work harder to keep them together.

This paper cannot go into all the reasons why a couple getting married should or should not obtain a state marriage license. As with any life-affecting undertaking, people should find out as much as they can before making a decision that cannot be easily undone. This author has read several sources that indicate there is no procedure for rescinding a marriage license once it has been obtained (a divorce still leaves the state as a party to the arrangement). A state-licensed marriage is an agreement between husband, wife and the state. Whereas, a contract-marriage is between husband, wife and God. (One source of information on marriages without license is Mercy Seat Christian Church: 10240 National Ave Ste 129, West Allis, Wisconsin 53227.) On the other hand, marrying without a license and without detailed legal knowledge of how that will affect you is a big mistake. Property ownership, child custody, inheritance, and many day-to-day financial agreements will be affected greatly by the presence or absence of a license. If someone thinks about foregoing a

marriage license because it will be easier to split up if “it doesn’t work out,” they are foolish and should not marry.

What constitutes a marriage in the sight of God? All that is necessary is the clear intent to marry (Gen 24:51) and sexual intercourse consummating the marriage. “Isaac brought her into the tent of his mother Sarah, and he married Rebekah. So she became his wife, and he loved her; and Isaac was comforted after his mother’s death” (Gen 24:67). A couple that has sexual intercourse, but no intent to marry has committed fornication, not marriage. A person who intends to marry, but has not consummated the marriage, could potentially have any ceremony or contract annulled. “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh” (Gen 2:24).

God is flexible. If a single man and woman are the only two survivors of a shipwreck, and they beach upon some deserted tropical island, they can write a marriage agreement on a piece of bark, read it to God in prayer and “make love” in the sunshine. That marriage is just as valid as the biggest ceremony, planned for years, with thousands of witnesses.

But most marriages should be shared with families, extended families and the entire community. Marriages are not secrets! **How does one conduct a marriage without either the Church or State pronouncing the couple man and wife? What ceremony does a couple use?** The idea of following traditions for marriages is good in that those who marry are continuing the process of their parents, bringing forth a new generation into the world just as they were brought forth into the world. However, when traditions stray from the teaching of the Bible, then some generation must recognize that and make a new tradition in keeping with the Scriptures.

The reciting of vows in front of witnesses (or the reading of the marriage contract) is an ancient practice and biblically sound. The Bible mentions feasts and ceremonies following a marriage—seven days long sometimes (probably not practical in our day). Jesus turned water into wine at a wedding feast. Yet the Scriptures never state that any of these things are required for marriages. The following **are suggestions** that a couple might want to use in their own plan for a wedding ceremony—suggestions that this writer hopes to make to his sons someday.

Set a date and place, and invite all the relatives and friends—as is common in our day. A “church building” is a possibility, but not at all a necessity. With all of the thousands of dollars and hundreds of hours that typically go into preparing a wedding, a much higher priority ought to be placed on the purpose of the celebration. If couples are going to face the many decisions of property ownership, health, and child-rearing together, they need to be able to write down their commitment and goals for marriage. If they need help in writing, then they can get it, but just like all of the other marriage decisions, by the grace and inspiration of God, they need to make the final decisions themselves. The purpose of the wedding guests is to encourage the couple and help them get a good start. Practical presents are a good part of this. But the guests should be able to verbally express a positive message to the two who are about to wed—whether these be in the form of speeches or prayers.

A person should be chosen to announce the ceremony planned by the groom and bride. This could possibly be a parent of one of the two, a relative, a close friend, or just someone who speaks well and will do what is requested. He can introduce the music, introduce parents, relatives and guests, introduce any short speeches or prayers, ask the guests if anyone knows why this marriage should not take place, and ask the parents if they agree to this marriage. The couple can be standing in front or seated for this part.

Then the announcer would draw attention to the focal point of the ceremony. The couple should read their marriage agreement (or give speeches if they desire) and affirm them in front of the entire group. (Repeating a token “I do” does not well represent the kind of conviction that is required to keep a marriage together through the storms of life.) The couple may then sign the copy of the marriage agreement that they have written. Various symbolic things could also be done: exchange rings or other items, jointly light a large candle from their individual candles and then blow their individual candles out, etc. The ceremony should culminate with a very brief prayer to God—kneeling if they desire. “God in Heaven, Creator of the Universe, we ask you at this moment, in the presence of these witnesses, to bind the marriage of John Jones and Susan Smith as husband and wife for the rest of their lives, in the name of Jesus Christ, Amen.” This can be recited or read by the couple, the couple and their families, or printed for

the entire group to read. Then the announcer can say: “I now present to you, John and Susan Jones.” A kiss, another song, or a receiving line, and many of the usual wedding festivities may follow.

If the couple desires to obtain a state marriage license, they can simply obtain one from a court in just a few minutes sometime before or after the ceremony. This way, they can remember the speaking of their vows before friends, relatives and fellow-believers as their marriage before God and by the authority of God. They can view their trip to the court as the bureaucratic procedure that it is.

A Name for the New Congregation

All believers must first and foremost recognize that we are part of the one Church (from the Greek *Ekklesia*, meaning “assembly”) made up of all people with the Holy Spirit. Church congregations should **not** try to give themselves a name that describes the entire Church (Universal, Worldwide, Global, International, All-Inclusive, Transcontinental, Intercontinental, Intergalactic, etc). One humanly devised group does not represent the entire Church—they do not even know exactly who the entire Church is. Churches that use such names often get **mixed up** and begin thinking that they **are** the “one true Church”.

The opposite reaction is to say “God knows His Church and our human congregation is nothing, so we will not take any name.” Invariably, outsiders will make up a name for a group that does not name itself, even if it is something like “John Smith’s Church”, “that former-Baptist Group”, “the Town Hall Congregation”, or “those heretics”. It is probably better to choose a name for a group than it is to let others choose a name. Furthermore you will need a name if you want to place a phone book or newspaper add, write any correspondence or literature in the name of your congregation, establish a bank account, etc.

While the word “church” in the Bible sometimes refers to all believers everywhere, it also sometimes refers to a single, local congregation. The names used for congregations occur many places in the Bible. These local names start with the word “Church”, frequently add “of God” or in one case “of Christ” (Rom 16:16), and usually conclude with a preposition and place name (“at Corinth” or “of the Thessalonians”). This formula can still be used today. “The Church of God in Seattle”, “The Vermont Church of Christ” or “The

Southwestern Dallas Assembly” are some examples. (The Greek word for “church”, *ekklesia*, is actually translated “assembly” three times in Acts 19:32, 39, 41.) Unfortunately, there are two reasons why this naming method does not work as well today:

- 1) The names “Church of God”, “Church of Christ”, “Assemblies of God” and “Assemblies of Christ” are used by existing denominations. An independent group may wish to avoid those names simply to avoid being confused with those denominations.
- 2) Believers are much less unified than they were in the first century. One independent congregation usually does not represent the entire Church in a particular geographic area. There are many other believers in Seattle who do not attend “The Church of God in Seattle”.

These problems can be avoided by calling the group a “Fellowship”, “Congregation” or “Meeting” rather than “the Church”. Greatly limiting the geographic area can also help. The Market Street Seattle Fellowship” is more accurate. It does not claim to define who is in the Church at all—it just declares that certain people get together to fellowship at that place. This kind of name may sound too local or too humble, but that may be exactly what you want: a local, humble group through which God can do great things.

You want to avoid using the same name as another group both to avoid confusion and prevent legal problems. If you include a place-name in your title, it is much easier to be sure you are not duplicating someone else’s name—you need only look in your local phonebooks and newspaper church listings to be sure that you are not duplicating another group’s name. (If you do not include a place name, e.g. “Congregation of the Almighty God”, you would have to search your entire state or country to avoid a name conflict.) To be very diligent in verifying that you are not using another group’s name, you can check (in the USA) with your state’s Secretary of State to find if you are duplicating a corporate name. Also, counties, cities and states keep records of DBA (“Doing Business As”) names.

This author highly recommends that congregations not be named after leaders, dead or alive (1Cor 1:11–17; 3:1–10). Also, do not name a congregation after a particular doctrine or practice (baptism, form of government, speaking in

tongues, etc.). While many groups do this, it tends to serve as a point of division. By placing a doctrine in the name, it may attract people who already believe the doctrine, but it will discourage those who do not believe it. Yet, if the doctrine is true, the very ones who need to hear it are those who do not yet believe it. For example, a person who does not believe in baptism might avoid the Hill Street Baptist Church, but be willing to attend the Hill Street Congregation and learn about baptism when someone there simply decides to teach about it.

Statement of Beliefs & Practices

It is a mistake to try to write an all-inclusive statement of beliefs. Such statements do not have the space to explain exactly how such doctrines were derived from the Bible. But no one should believe any doctrine without such an explanation. Doctrinal statements have a tendency to leave members complacent, reasoning that their congregation has all of the important doctrines “worked out.” It would be far better if each member would write for themselves a summary of what **they** believe and why on each important issue.

Also, it is important to realize that people do not have to believe exactly the same thing in order to fellowship and serve Christ together. The section titled **Differences of Opinion Are Biblical** beginning on page 19 shows this happened in the early church.

On the other hand, there is a need to have some agreement on the practices that will be used in your congregation. You will not be very effective if you cannot agree on the day to worship or what constitutes Scripture. A person who intends to become a member of a congregation should have a written idea of what the group is about. Any governments or businesses that deal with the congregation should be able to see that it really does have a religious purpose and is not a sham. The following is the body of a sample statement of beliefs and practices similar to one used by one independent congregation:

Beliefs: The Eternal, the Creator of the universe, gave us the Old and New Testament Scriptures, the Bible, as His instruction book for mankind. Each person is responsible for living by the Bible as he or she understands it. The Father sent His Son as a sacrifice for the justification and salvation of mankind. The church is the body of Christ and that Christ is the active,

living head of the Church. He works through a diversity of believers and groups of believers according to His will. No man or group of men has jurisdiction over another's eternal salvation.

Each person is responsible for studying the Bible, living by it and working out his or her own salvation with his or her Maker. Christ gave the church the job of helping in this process in a great many ways. This congregation is but one of many local assemblies of believers that comprise the Church of which Christ is the Head.

Practices: The writing of extensive doctrinal statements encourages people to study statements, rather than study the Bible. In order to make fellowship easier, we list the following practices which are held by most of those attending our congregation, but we do not insist that these practices are essential for salvation:

- 1) We meet on the Sabbath at 12:00 noon for singing and 1:00 p.m. for our main service.
- 2) Church meetings are private, but all men, women and children—whether they are believers or not—are welcome to attend our services as long as they are willing to conform to these practices.
- 3) When a person repents and dedicates their life to Christ, we baptize him/her by immersion and have the hands of the brethren laid on that person to ask for the imparting of the Holy Spirit. When a person attending believes they have a valid conversion experience by some other method or sequence, we acknowledge that the Bible does record some exceptions to this, and that issue must be worked out between the believer and God.
- 4) Food described as unclean in Leviticus 11 should not be brought to any congregational meal nor served to other members without their approval.
- 5) Drunkenness, theft, fighting, inappropriate sexual contact, smoking or the use of mind-altering drugs at any congregation meeting or other event are not permitted because they are a danger to those attending and a bad example to everyone.
- 6) People attending services and activities of the congregation agree not to attempt to sue the congregation or any member of it in a government court but will use

the procedure found in Matthew 18:15-17 and the congregation's membership covenant.

- 7) Membership in the local congregation is available to those who regularly attend more than 25 times per year and who will publicly acknowledge that they have committed their lives to God. Such membership is **not** a "recognition of conversion", but a commitment to serve in the local congregation.
- 8) People who are disruptive to church meetings, who continually attempt to teach false doctrine or who openly practice sin may be removed as members and/or barred from attending according to the procedure given in Matt 18:15-17 and the membership covenant.

This statement should contain the congregation's name, the date it was accepted and the people who accepted it.

Handling Offerings and Expenses

Many men who help to start congregations will say something like: "I am interested in preaching Christ, praising God and spiritually serving the brethren. I would rather leave the finances to paid professionals—or to someone in the congregation who likes money." Unfortunately, this does not always work out well. Judas liked money and kept charge of it for the Apostles, but he also stole from it (John 12:4-6). Jesus let this happen, because He needed to keep one corrupt apostle who would betray Him (John 6:70-71). Responsibility for collecting offerings and paying for expenses belongs to all in a congregation. When Paul was transporting an offering for the poor, the congregations chose a person to accompany him just to make sure that the offerings were correctly spent (2Cor 8:18-21).

The approach to handling a congregation's expenses can vary greatly based upon the size of the group. With small groups, and groups that are just starting out, a very informal approach is possible. Large groups, and those that will serve for a long time definitely need a formal plan. That will be covered in the next sections.

Helps for everyone: *Avoid using the worship service as a place to deal with monetary issues.* Even though it may seem convenient because everyone is there, Jesus was quite upset by those who were buying and selling in His temple (Matt

21:13). Meetings can be scheduled for other times.

Do not pass a collection vessel at services. This may sound odd to some, but there is no Biblical example of passing a collection plate or box in a service. (1 Corinthians 16:2 talks about “storing up” things, not putting them in a collection on that day.) While a congregation may receive more money by confronting people with a collection plate, the Bible teaches that giving is not to be “of necessity” (2Cor 9:7). When people brought money to God’s temple, Jehoiada instructed the priests to put it in a box with a hole in the top (2Kings 12:9). A box or some other container with a hole on top is a good way to collect offerings. Other people may prefer to mail them in.

People have the right to give without others knowing when or how much. “But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing” (Matt 6:3). Records should be kept in the strictest confidence—known only to the people who maintain the records, and shared only with those who gave, in case there is a question. Records should not be used by church leaders to “check up on people”. People have the right to give anonymously if they desire—so nobody looking at records can ever be sure how much somebody gives.

The congregation has a right to know the total of what is received and the details of how the money is spent. Members whose spiritual gift is “giving” need to know if their giving is bearing fruit. If they are giving to a ministry of wood, hay and stubble, they need to realize it so they may change and build something with eternal value (1Cor 3:12-15). They cannot know if they do not have any way to see how the money is being spent.

The simplest way to handle expenses: Very small and/or very new congregations can sometimes be run without collection money. Members simply divide up the physical responsibilities—much like spiritual responsibilities are divided among the various spiritual gifts. For example, one member will pay for the music equipment, one for the hymnals and telephone bill, one for the refreshments, etc. Others might serve by letting the congregation use their home, vehicles or other resources. If a rental hall is used, two or three families might agree to alternate months paying the rent on the hall. Sometimes, one or more individuals can buy a church building, sound system or other assets and then lease them to the church or its members. The rental terms should be made

known to any members—no member should be “getting rich” by renting to a congregation.

Still other members might agree to pay for evangelism and other church efforts. Each member is free to handle the tax aspects of their work in whatever manner they choose. The church can stay out of it completely, or if necessary, write letters to members at the end of the year acknowledging the money spent on behalf of the church. This author has seen this approach work well for years in some groups. If one person leaves the group and takes his or her resources with them, the congregation asks God to provide a replacement or show them how to get along with out it—and it usually works.

Cash-only operation: Sometimes, the above method covers most needs, but there is a need for some cash to pay for books, youth class supplies, evangelism needs, and other expenses. The people who have the time to do the work may simply not have the money to do it. If the brethren are willing to give offerings in cash, then the church money can simply be kept in a box in some safe place and expended by people who are authorized to do so. While this method may sound primitive, it has worked for thousands of years—even by our Messiah and His Apostles (John 13:29). Bills that must be paid by check or credit card can be paid by a member and then reimbursed with cash. While paper records of all transactions should be kept so that members can know what their church is doing, the current assets of the congregation can be known by simply counting the money in the box. This method avoids bank service charges, check purchases, accidental overdrafts and associated fees, etc.

The above two methods probably will **not** work for cases where the church needs to own property, pay a large variety of bills or pay church workers for their time. They work excellently for groups that are going through a certain amount of turmoil and may end up splitting into several more groups. If a congregation breaks up and the congregation owns the assets, it may take some time to decide how to divide the assets. Whereas, when individuals own the assets, they will usually take them to whatever new group they join and use them. (This author knows of cases where assets sat unused for months while a re-split church group decided how to divide them.) Sometimes, in a church “re-split”, an individual can find himself owning assets that are not needed by his group. He can sell them to a group that needs them, or to anyone—this is better

than trying to work with a defunct church whose governing body does not agree with its members.

Even though these methods can work for several years, it is still usually best in the long term for a sizeable congregation to develop a way to collect and spend money in its own name.

Keeping Records of Expenses: Records can be kept manually or by computer. Record-keeping will be easier for someone with accounting experience, but anyone with a good sense for math can do it. A simple journal listing the date, purchaser, the items purchased, the amount and how it was paid (cash, check, credit card) will work. More complex systems will classify each expense into categories or accounts: hall rental, sound system, music, utilities, office supplies, food, janitorial supplies, evangelism, etc. These more complex systems are much easier to do by computer. Numerous home accounting or church accounting software packages are available for \$70 or less. Whatever kind of system you have should be balanced every month: the amount on hand at the beginning of the month, plus all offerings received that month, minus the amount on hand at the end of the month should be equal to the amount spent that month. If multiple people have access to the money, without some kind of method of balancing, there is no good way to tell if someone is stealing it.

Keeping Records of Offerings Received: If no record is kept of the total amount of offerings received, it will not be possible to tell if any of it is lost or stolen. Churches should be good stewards of what they are given. While money is safer with an honest man who keeps no records than it is with a room full of dishonest accountants with piles of records, most people today expect honest churches to keep some kind of accurate records “For we are taking pains to do what is right, not only in the eyes of the Lord but also in the eyes of men” (2Cor 8:21).

Groups that emphasize anonymous offerings may choose not to keep records of each individual’s giving. This increases privacy, but it can also produce some difficulties: it will not be possible to give people a year-end total of their offerings; if a person asks to be sure that a certain offering they gave was received, there will be no way to confirm it; dealing with checks lost by the bank or the church will also be much more difficult. All of these problems can be overcome. People should be able to keep their own records of their offerings,

but many are simply used to congregations doing it—or they occasionally lose their records to fires, computer failures, etc. Pray for wisdom to know what is best for you.

For congregations that **do** keep records of each individual’s giving, a few points are in order: 1) Assign the job to only two or three people. This helps keep the records confidential, yet provides a way to continue if one person is incapacitated; 2) Keep the records in a safe place; 3) create a page (or computerized account) for each person who might be giving. Be careful to get whatever identifying information is necessary for people with similar names—especially if there is a John Jones, Sr. and a John Jones, Jr. in the same congregation; 4) Make a fictitious person named “anonymous” for offerings that come from unknown sources; 5) Write down each offering on a separate page for each person—including the date, amount, method of payment and check or transaction number; 6) Also, record each offering on another page where all offerings are recorded—include the name, date and amount; 7) Balance the total offerings page for each month with the totals for all the individual’s offerings for each month; 8) If anyone is ever suspicious that these records are not being kept properly, the congregation can appoint individuals to verify that the individual records match what the member actually gave, and then verify that the total offerings match the amount of money available for church purposes.

Operating as a Church: Larger and long-standing congregations often need to own property, establish bank accounts and deal with other institutions. The best way to do this is by operating with the legal status of a **church**. This has been done since the USA was founded—without the use of corporations, associations or trusts. We will use the term **free church** to distinguish it from churches that are corporations, associations, etc. (Please realize that our use of the term “free church” is not a reference to denominations or groups that use the term “free church” in their title—many of those groups are now incorporated.) A **free church** needs a legal existence so that its members can collect offerings, spend them, own property and take other actions on behalf of Jesus Christ, rather than themselves. In order for a free church to have a legal existence, it should have documents that answer the basic questions of: who, what, when, where, why and how? To answer:

Who are the members? The names of the initial members are frequently listed in the foundational document. These documents also contain either a procedure for becoming a member or a reference to another document describing membership.

What are they creating? A local congregation of the one spiritual Church headed by Jesus Christ. The church is private, not public (“public” implies “government”), though all are invited to attend the congregation’s meetings for their stated purposes.

When are they creating it? The date that the documents were approved by the members will probably be considered the starting point of the church for any legal purposes. The documents can state that the congregation actually began at a previous date on which people began to meet together, but establishing a legal existence prior to the date the documents were written can be more difficult.

Where is it being created? It is best to name the country, state and county in which the church is domiciled. Without a specific location, jurisdictional problems arise. If the church is to hold property, the county stated should be one in which the property exists. Otherwise, the church can be domiciled in a county where most members live or where the records are kept. A provision to amend the location should be added.

Why is it being created? A clear, Biblical purpose should be stated. There is no difficulty in quoting Scripture in the foundational documents of a real free church. Its purposes should be both spiritual and physical.

How is it being created? The foundational document must explain how people acquire the authority to act on behalf of the church. This could be as simple as naming a pastor as having authority over all church matters (this author does not recommend that). Or it could describe a detailed process of church functions and how to fill them (appointment or election). Individuals need to be authorized to collect offerings, to open a bank account, to buy things for the church, to make agreements and other things on behalf of the church. The foundational document can spell this out in detail or it can refer to other documents that contain the details. Sometimes the foundational document gives a lot of authority to a few current members to act on behalf of the church—and then refers to other documents that will replace this initial plan.

There is no standard government form or laws explaining how to create a free church because governments and courts do not have authority or jurisdiction over them. There is not even a standard title for the document that creates one, but names such as Declaration of Establishment, Church Covenant, Establishment of Congregation, etc. can be used. The name is not as important as the need to clearly and truthfully write what is being done in church and biblical terms (not business or government terms).

Other documents might include procedures for fulfilling church service positions, a statement of beliefs and practices (see page 26), accounting procedures, a description of the worship service, and procedures for handling complaints by members. (Matthew 18:15–17 should be used, but a written plan of how to “tell it to the church” helps define who will attend such a meeting, who will moderate, when it will be held, how a decision will be reached, etc.)

The details of all that could be done to establish a free church would take many more pages. See the section titled *Resources for Operating as a Free Church* beginning on page 47 for much more information.

Operating as a Corporation or Association: When I began the research for this paper, I intended to include this as an option. After studying the issue much more thoroughly, I have concluded that this is such a significant mistake that I cannot recommend it at all. There is no doubt that a lot of good works have been done and a lot of people have turned their lives to God because of the work of incorporated churches. But the same can be said for religious cults and groups led by evangelists who taught some false doctrines or who were addicted to various sins. The solutions to all these problems is for all people to keep seeking God and keep doing their good works—but to also learn to stop the sins, disband the cults, correct the false doctrines **and terminate the corporations**. These struggles sometimes take years. But then, it took centuries for churches to break free of the church-state system; we cannot expect to instantly undo the slide back toward state-churches that incorporation has brought for about the past hundred years. It will take time, but if each new church begins without incorporation, and existing churches began to disband their corporations a few at a time, the progress will be steady and sure. Please do not ignore the following sections if you are beginning

a new church: **It is much easier to begin a church without incorporation than it is to try to undo incorporation later.**

Reminder: While the operational foundation of a congregation is important, the entire congregation must never forget that we are the representatives of Christ on earth and that we are to live as he lived and walk as he walked. If our lives do not reflect Christ, the perfect procedures and methods of operation will not make up for it. Brethren, start by letting His light shine through you, begin doing His work, set a good operational foundation, and then add procedures and documents that are necessary or helpful along the way.

Corporations and Tax-exempt Status

The most common approach to forming almost any sizeable congregation is to consult a lawyer to incorporate and obtain “IRS tax-exempt status”. A small congregation might use an inexpensive service or even do it themselves. Why?

Before going any further, let us make sure we understand the exact nature of a “corporation” and “tax-exempt status”.

A **corporation** is an artificial person that can do many of the things that an individual can do (own property, own copyrights, enter into contracts, enter into lawsuits, etc.). Nearly all corporations are chartered by state governments—they come into existence by the approval of the government, they are regulated by the government and they can only be terminated by the government. Corporations are controlled by one or more directors and officers (real people) who act on behalf of the corporation—in manners authorized by the corporate documents.

To illustrate in practical terms, if John Doe crashes into you while driving to the store to buy a light bulb for his home, he is responsible as an individual and you could sue him for injuring you. If he was driving to buy a light bulb on behalf of his corporation (maybe filling a corporate purchase order), then you would probably be unable to sue John Doe, and would have to sue the corporation—because he was acting on behalf of the corporation at the time. If John Doe were acting in violation of his corporation’s rules (they might have a rule against using a cell phone while driving), then his corporation might be able to convince a judge or jury that this rule violation is his fault and that the corporation is not liable—so then

you could sue John again. You might be able to sue both, John because he violated the corporate rules, and the corporation for not doing a better job of enforcing its rules. Yes, we can conclude that John may have been acting partly on behalf of the corporation and partly on behalf of himself. These kinds of cases keep courts busy, but please realize that they are very relevant for deciding how a church should operate.

The issue of corporations and who acts for whom can become very confusing when applied to churches. Is a church minister acting on behalf of Jesus Christ? Or is he acting on behalf of a Michigan Corporation (or some other state) created and regulated by the State of Michigan? When a church is incorporated, all of the acts done in the name of the corporation or with corporate funds or property are presumed by law to be acts of the corporation—unless the church members are acting contrary to the corporation’s bylaws or government laws. Furthermore, are church members responsible to those laws or to the Bible? What happens when they conflict? Who decides what is the right course of action, the church or the state? We will go into more detail later, but in a few words, the state creates the corporation, so the state is the ultimate arbiter of any decisions or judgments that must be made.

As an example, suppose the pastor of a corporate church gives a member marriage counsel from the Bible, but the member’s spouse does not like it and hires an attorney to sue the pastor. The attorney might cite a state law that requires corporations to employ only state-approved counselors. While courts once were slow to enforce corporate laws upon church corporations, they have always had the right to do so and the practice is becoming more common all of the time. The suing spouse might well prevail in the lawsuit against both the corporation and the pastor because the pastor “failed” to follow corporate law and hire a state-approved counselor.

English law recognized special rights for “ecclesiastical corporations” as compared to “lay corporations”, but in the USA, all corporations are considered “lay corporations” (see Black’s Law Dictionary, article *Corporation*). The reason is that American colonists wanted to get away from “state churches” and virtually no churches were incorporated in the 1700s and 1800s. They were recognized as responsible directly to God—a higher status than the English, state-chartered, ecclesiasti-

cal corporation.

IRS tax-exempt status is something completely separate from a corporation. It is possible to obtain either one of these, both of them or neither. The Internal Revenue Service (IRS) allows corporations, associations, trusts, and other entities to apply for “tax-exempt” status by filling out IRS form 1023, regulated by the Internal Revenue Code section 501(c)3. Hence, the term 501(c)3-organization is often used. Individuals are **not** eligible for 501(c)3 status. If 501(c)3 status were available in the first century, Christ could receive it only by forming some kind of state-recognized group. To let our imagination run wild a moment, suppose that Christ decided to do what some churches do today and create the most minimal organization that the state would accept for a 501(c)3: an Association with himself as president and maybe Judas as the secretary-treasurer. Then, when Christ died, Judas might not have decided to kill himself, realizing that the Association Bylaws now made him president. He would need to choose a new secretary-treasurer—perhaps a charismatic and wealthy man like Simon the sorcerer (Acts 8:9–10, 18). (I hope this sounds ridiculous to you, but a similar scene is played out in many church associations and corporations throughout the world—they continue on, but with a completely different character than that of the one who founded them.)

Back to 501(c)3 status, there are a number of *often-repeated* “economic benefits” to obtaining it: federal and state income taxes are eliminated, tax deductibility of members’ contributions is less likely to be challenged, various Federal taxes and fees are reduced, and many states will grant a sales tax exemption to 501(c)3 groups. There are also a number of major problems created by 501(c)3 status—which are **not** *often-repeated*.

It was while I was in the process of filling out form 1023 and applying for 501(c)3 status that I personally discovered some of those problems and realized how significant they were. I could not find much information summarizing both sides at the time, so I made the time to read and learn about it myself. But I remember the feeling I had at the time, “Can’t I just leave the physical and legal part of our ministry to professionals who will work with government and business? Will not I still have complete control over the spiritual part?” Nevertheless, I found that the IRS insisted on a statement in the corporate certificate saying:

...the corporation shall not carry on any other activities not permitted to be carried on (a) by a corporation exempt from Federal Income Tax under Section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code of 1954 (or corresponding provision of any future United States Internal Revenue Law)...

Not only would completing my application for a 501(c)3 require me to promise to obey the current complex IRS code which I did not understand, it would be a promise to obey all future IRS code sections, which I cannot possibly predict. Furthermore, the required dissolution clause says that remaining assets must be given to another 501(c)3 organization. At the time, I did not know how to transfer assets out, so I thought that once something was acquired by a 501(c)3 organization, that it would have to remain under IRS control forever. This was further complicated by the IRS’s request that copyrights to my writings be held in the name of the corporation, not in my personal name. It became clear that I could easily lose control of my writings, mailing lists, etc.—as I have seen happen to other groups.

Incorporation can cause “big problems”: I still have copies of many of the legal documents of a court case beginning January 2, 1979 where the Attorney General of the State of California took over the Worldwide Church of God, placing their own receiver in charge of all that church’s money. While most Christians might rightly object to the expensive life-style and autocratic rule of that church’s leaders, **no criminal charges were ever filed** and much of the information in the complaint used to install the receiver was later found to be false. But all it took for the Attorney General to obtain a court order placing all assets of the church corporation under his control was the testimony of former members of the church who claimed that this church was not following its corporate bylaws and that money was being spent inappropriately. While the receiver was in charge, he paid the bills that he wanted to pay—including those of attorneys and advisers whom he hired at nearly \$200 per hour. Evangelism, legal defense of the church and other activities he considered non-essential were not funded.

A few days later, the church organization began to hold “round the clock” services in its administration building to prevent the receiver from entering. The Attorney General assembled hundreds of police with the intent of forcibly removing the

church members. The church struck a compromise to avoid a fight, but all the claims of “unconstitutional” were rightly ignored by the courts. That church was a California non-profit corporation and section 9505 of the California Corporation Code gave the Attorney General the right to investigate and “institute proceedings” against non-profit corporations that strayed from their bylaws. The receivership went on for months and the only way that the church survived was by moving its donation-processing to Arizona. Had the Arizona Attorney General honored the California Attorney General’s request for cooperation, the church corporation might have been destroyed by the state. The receivership ended only when the California Legislature passed a bill limiting investigations of church corporations. The California Attorney General never paid back the millions of church money that they wasted.

I hope this got your attention. The California law protecting church corporations could be repealed by the legislature at any time. There is nothing stopping most state attorney generals from taking control of any church *corporation* about which they have received a complaint.

This is not the only case where this has happened. Notice this Florida judge’s opinion when an incorporated church tried to challenge the jurisdiction of the court:

Appellants [the church] appeal on the basis that the circuit court had no authority over them because they are a recognized religious organization, a church. On first reflection they appeared to be correct but upon a closer study of the complaint and the judgment we [the court] are of the opinion that this is not an improper interference by the government into a church, or ecclesiastical, matter. **When the members of the church decided to incorporate their body under the laws of the state of Florida they submitted themselves to the jurisdiction of the state courts** in all matters of a corporate nature, such as accounting for funds (Matthews v. Adams, 520 So. 2d 334) (1988).

In 1991, the Texas Attorney General began investigating Word of Faith Ministries, a Texas non-profit corporation, based upon information from ABC’s TV program *Prime Time Live*. The Attorney General was defeated in court only because he did not have any substantive complaints or evidence—the judge of the case agreed that he had authority to investigate non-profit corporations.

Later, the Attorney General started another investigation based upon the Texas Corporations Act. He was unsuccessful this time **because the Word of Faith Ministries corporations had wisely been dissolved, and the group began legally operating simply as a free church.**

There are more cases, but it is probably better to answer a few basic questions first. Please realize that this section is written for the USA. Readers in other countries will need to investigate their own country’s laws. Nearly all countries have corporations—some recognize free churches, some do not. (For example, Canada has a specific *Religious Organization Lands Act* that applies only to free churches.) Here are the five common questions:

Question 1: “Our congregation never plans to do anything that would upset the government, so why might incorporation cause trouble for us?” A reading of the New Testament will show that the preaching of the true Gospel *did* upset the government—both Jewish and Roman—on many occasions. We also see that Paul used his legal status to avoid punishment (Acts 22:25). We have also seen federal and state governments pass or attempt to pass legislation that would prevent non-profit corporations from firing employees because they are practicing homosexuals, because they have had abortions, committed adultery, etc. Churches have a duty to officially support their members in doctrinal matters that sometimes involve the state.

Such matters might include: supporting the rights of the pre-born, home schooling, refusing unjust military service, refusing vaccines, loving corporal punishment of children, scheduled absences from work or public school to attend church events, prisoner’s religious rights, teaching against interracial marriage, barring a contentious member from services, etc. This paper is not trying to determine your doctrine; churches should teach the doctrines God reveals through His Spirit and Scriptures. This paper is trying to tell you that your doctrines should not simply be determined by the state.

However, when the state considers an issue to be a “political issue”, then they consider their rules to take precedence over any church corporation’s “doctrine”. Government intrusion into non-profit corporations, including churches, has been steadily increasing. Churches have been penalized for speaking out on political issues.

Hitting closer to your wallet, incorporated

churches are becoming more frequently viewed as a place for lawyers and governments to pick up money: “But both the IRS and lawyers are looking at churches and seeing a gold mine because of their careless lack of compliance to rules and regulations” (Rex Frieze, former chief business and financial officer for the First Baptist Church, Orlando, Florida, now a tax law specialist and church management consultant—for the full article, see www.wtp.net/MSBF/irs.htm). Congregations whose plan is to avoid controversy with the government need to realize that the government and lawyers may not be planning to avoid controversy with them.

Question 2: “If it is a mistake for churches to incorporate and obtain tax-exempt status, then why do nearly all lawyers recommend that churches do?” The simplest answer is probably that incorporation of churches is all that has been taught in law schools and seminaries for decades. This is compounded by the overall trend of nearly all education which teaches that people should be represented by a lawyer, rather than the constitutional right for which our forefathers fought: to represent themselves. Lawyers make lots of money doing corporate paperwork for churches, then suing them and/or defending them in court. Corporations, by law, must be represented by licensed attorneys. A free church can be represented by any authorized representative. Furthermore, courts do not have jurisdiction over free churches, whereas they automatically have jurisdiction over corporations. A free church may never spend a dime on lawyers, whereas an incorporated church may spend thousands or even millions (especially if it has a court battle). As the mass of legislation affecting church corporations grows ever larger (many congressmen are lawyers), church corporations must either retain expensive extensive legal services to comply with them, or run the risk of expensive lawsuits or government investigations. Either way, the churches lose and the lawyers win.

Question 3: “Why can’t we form a tax-exempt non-profit corporation now, and then just dissolve it if a major issue comes up where it clearly prevents us from following Christ?” This is a very good question, but unfortunately, it has very bad answers. Once a corporation is sued or under investigation, laws governing corporations prevent its dissolution and sometimes the transferring out of assets. Some laws prevent resignation of directors and officers in these cases. A

501(c)3 organization has particular trouble. The corporate papers of all such organizations must include the language right out of IRC 501(c)3 where the corporation promises to abide by all IRS rules both **past and future**. There are already a number of restrictions on what 501(c)3 churches can do and every such church has already agreed to abide by all of the new ones that will be coming. When the IRS investigates a church and decides to remove its tax-exempt status, they usually revoke it retroactive to some date in the past—making the organization responsible for years of back taxes that they may not have money to pay. If the organization is dissolved or goes bankrupt, it must pass all of its assets on to another 501(c)3 organization. This includes physical assets as well as intellectual property such as copyrights and mailing lists. A church may have to “start over from scratch”. There is no doubt that any church that loses its tax-exempt status would have been better off to have never applied to begin with.

Question 4: “How can a church function if it is not a tax-exempt corporation or association?” As already mentioned on page 29, it can function as a *church*—the way most churches functioned for the first 150 years of the USA’s existence. Thousands of churches have never been incorporated and as of this writing, hundreds of others are in the process of terminating their corporations and 501(c)3 status. This is not an illegal action, anti-government radicalism, tax protesting or anything of that nature. It is simply relying on the Constitution of the USA, existing national and state laws, and long-established legal precedent. Some common practices, such as owning property and avoiding certain taxes may work differently and may vary from state to state. Churches that function this way will certainly meet people—even government and business officials—that are unfamiliar with free churches. The reason is that the old churches that have never been incorporated over the last 50 to 200 years have worked out all of their operational methods (whether they are legal, biblical or not) so long ago that virtually nobody questions them any more. The new churches that are terminating their corporations and 501(c)3 status are few enough that they have not yet made a major impact on business and government—but that is changing.

Question 5: “If a church can form without any government scrutiny, what will stop criminals and tax cheats from claiming to be

churches and avoiding prosecution?” First of all, realize that people in churches of any kind are not immune from prosecution for crimes. If a minister standing in a building owned by a free church throws a rock out the window and injures a passerby on a public road, the County Sheriff can come onto that church property, charge the minister with a crime and arrest him. Similarly, if a taxing entity believes a person is violating tax laws by pretending to be a church when they are not, they can accuse them of the relevant crime, take them to court, and let a jury decide whether or not they are really a church. The government does not have the right to set up rules determining what is and is not a church any more than it has a right to set up rules determining who is guilty of a crime. For example, the FBI cannot decide: if a package of drugs is found in a car, then the car owner is guilty of drug possession and is sentenced to five years in jail. This would cause innocent people to go to jail when someone else plants drugs in their car. The police must charge the person with a crime. The accused does not have to answer a set of bureaucratic questions to prove their innocence, but may present to a jury any applicable witnesses and evidence that may be available to them. Similarly, individuals claiming to be a church should not

have to prove the church’s right to exist by answering a set of IRS bureaucratic questions, but prove the existence of their church by whatever evidence it has of its functioning, and then let a jury weigh the evidence. Juries are not perfect, but they tend to do much better than government agencies.

Summary: When planning to start a local congregation, the legal status used will make a big difference in what the congregation can do and how it will operate. While the future is not completely predictable, very few of the people who help start churches have much knowledge at all about the history of church incorporation, why it was not done in the past and how it affects churches today. The table on the following pages should answer most of the questions about these issues. Some effort was made to document sources of this information, but this paper only scratches the surface of what is available. Please consult the additional information sources listed in the section *Resources for Operating as a Free Church* beginning on page 47. This author would appreciate hearing from people who have additional questions or input that would be appropriate to add to the table below.

Comparison of Two Methods of Operating Local Congregations

The Issue	Tax-exempt Corporations	Free Churches
<p>What does the Bible say about establishing a church? (This author hopes that the reader is not surprised to find this topic first.)</p>	<p>Most people who establish churches profess Christ as their Master, but they see no difficulty in deferring to the state for economic and legal issues—especially if they believe there is a major economic advantage through reduced taxes by doing so. Most do not think to apply this scripture: No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money (Matt 6:24).</p>	<p>“Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s” (Matt 22:21, NKJV). Jesus was answering whether individuals should pay tribute money or not. People have responsibilities both to God and the state. The church is not responsible to the state—the Apostles never incorporated the church (which was legally possible at that time), nor did they ask the state for permission to preach or hold meetings. “...Christ is the head of the church...” (Eph 5:23). “Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers” (2Cor 6:14, NKJV).</p>
<p>What kinds of leaders will a church have?</p>	<p>Corporation rules vary throughout the 50 states, but most must have a president, secretary, treasurer and a board of directors. One person can hold multiple offices. These are the offices that have power in the corporation. Biblically recognized leaders do not have any decision-making power in an incorporated church unless they also hold a corporate office.</p>	<p>“It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up” (Eph 4:11–12). “The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honor, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching” (1Tim 5:17).</p>

The Issue	Tax-exempt Corporations	Free Churches
Can the state tell a church what to teach?	<p>Internal Revenue Code sec. 501(c)3 says: List of exempt organizations—(3) Corporations... organized and operated exclusively for religious, charitable, scientific, testing for public safety, literary, or educational purposes... <u>no</u> substantial part of the activities of which is <u>carrying on propaganda</u>, or otherwise attempting to influence legislation... and which does not participate in, or intervene in (including the publishing or distributing of statements), any political campaign on behalf of (or in opposition to) any candidate for public office.</p> <p>Nearly all church corporations include these very words in their corporate documents—they have agreed not to be involved in anything that the IRS decides is political. They also agree not to “carry on propaganda”. See meaning at right:</p>	<p>Many Old Testament prophets spoke against the political leaders of their day. So did John the Baptist (Matt 14:3-4), Jesus (Matt 23; Mark 8:5) and the Apostle Paul (Acts 24:25). When the state told the Church what to teach, this happened:</p> <p>“We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name,’ he said. ‘Yet you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and are determined to make us guilty of this man’s blood.’ Peter and the other apostles replied: ‘We must obey God rather than men!’” (Acts 5:27-28).</p> <p>The New Testament Church followed Christ, not the state. Today, if we do not promise obedience to the state in corporate documents, we can still follow Christ. It is possible that the state may someday persecute free churches, but it will be persecution for righteousness’ sake, not persecution for making corporate promises to the state that we do not intend to keep.</p>
<p><i>Much more information showing exactly what control The IRS has over what a 501(c)3-church teaches is in the section beginning on page 41.</i></p>		
Can the state tell a church what to do?	<p>When a church is incorporated, it must follow thousands of regulations for corporations—even if they bankrupt the church. For example, a zoning ordinance may require buildings to have one parking spot for every four chairs inside. They may try to enforce this even if a church has three sets of chairs for everyone who attends (worship hall, fellowship hall and classrooms) or if most of its members are brought in by bus. Does God want a church to buy land for unneeded parking spaces and not have enough to support its missionaries?</p>	<p>While most free churches try to co-operate with reasonable requests of governments and neighbors, they have been quite successful at avoiding regulations like the one described at left. One city attempted to get a church to add a \$20,000 handicapped elevator to reach its balcony—even though all of its handicapped members were perfectly happy sitting in their reserved section on the main floor. These things can cripple the operation of a church for years. Most government agencies may still ask free churches to do these things, but they realize that courts do not have jurisdiction over them and do not try to enforce these rules upon them.</p>
Is a church exempt from paying taxes on the money it receives?	<p>Church organizations that receive an IRS 501(c)3 exemption do not need to pay taxes on money received (except for the cases where the IRS withdraws their tax-exempt status retroactively—then they might have to pay years of back taxes).</p>	<p>A church does not need to ask the IRS for tax-exemption because the IRS does not have authority over it in the first place. The IRS recognizes that it does not have authority to tax churches that are not incorporated. The Internal Revenue Code, Sec. 508 <i>Special Rules with Respect to Section 501(c)3 Organizations</i> states in 508(c)1: “Mandatory exceptions.—subsections (a) and (b) shall not apply to (A) churches, their integrated auxiliaries, and conventions or associations of churches...”</p>

The Issue	Tax-exempt Corporations	Free Churches
<p>Are tithes and offerings deductible from the income tax of the people who give them to the church?</p>	<p>In the vast majority of cases, a tax deduction to an organization with 501(c)3 status will not be challenged. IRS Publication 78 lists all of the 501(c)3 organizations, and most IRS auditors would have the ability to check it if they wanted to. However, in practice, many auditors do not check. Church deductions are frequently disallowed by the IRS because the giver does not have cancelled checks or if the amount is much larger than previous years. Getting the deduction reinstated is nearly always possible, but requires the individual to pay the tax, file an amended return, and then sue the IRS (which will probably not contest this kind of suit).</p>	<p>Church offerings are tax deductible without 501(c)3 status. IRS publication 526, <i>Charitable Contributions</i>, page 2 says: “Organizations That Qualify To Receive Deductible Contributions: You can deduct your contributions only if you make them to a qualified organization. To become a qualified organization, most organizations <u>other than churches and governments</u>, as described below, must apply to the IRS.” Notice that churches are treated like governments. Your public school or city hall probably does not have a 501(c)3, but the IRS would not challenge deductions for them. Reminding an IRS examiner of the above facts will frequently (but not always) cause them to accept free church deductions.</p>
<p>Can a church receive postal discounts of 5% for Periodicals (regularly published, delivered in 2–7 days) and about 40% on Standard Mail? (bulk mail—can be sent at any time, delivered in 2–3 weeks.)</p>	<p>The Post Office offers mail rate discounts to “nonprofit organizations”. It has its own qualification standards for such discounts, but readily accepts a copy of the IRS 501(c)3 letter as proof of being nonprofit. <i>It is important to realize that the Post office can change these discounts at any time. This paper is accurate only as of the date of this writing. The nonprofit periodical discount used to be much greater.</i></p>	<p>Post Office Publication 417 says: “Alternatively, you may use a complete financial statement from an independent auditor—such as a certified public accountant—substantiating that your organization is a nonprofit organization.” It is questionable if the legal definition of “organization” would include a free church. This author wonders what would happen if a CPA wrote a letter to the post office assuring them that a free church did not operate for profit, but that its finances were confidential and would not be shared with the Post Office. If the Post Office refused to grant the lower rates, the church must simply accept it.</p>
<p>Is a church exempt from state and local sales taxes? Note: Sales tax is a tax on the seller, not the buyer (it is not “buyer’s tax”). If the tax is not collected, the seller will be held liable for it and possibly penalized for deliberately not collecting it.</p>	<p>Becoming incorporated or obtaining 501(c)3 status does not automatically make a church exempt from sales tax in any state. However, most states grant a sales tax exemption—complete with a state ID number—to organizations based upon their own internal forms. IRS 501(c)3 status is the primary means they use as proof that an exemption should be granted. In practical fact, churches with 501(c)3 status routinely receive sales tax-exempt numbers from the 50 states.</p>	<p>When a church voluntarily purchases an item and pays sales tax, the state gains no authority over it. A church is free to buy taxed items or to mail-order from states without sales tax. Some people believe that asking the state to be exempt from sales tax makes the church indebted to the state. Others take the approach that a church should be able to ask the state not to tax stores for selling to it. If the state agrees without asking for authority or favors in return, Christ is not displaced as head of that church. When Paul discovered a plot to kill him, he did not place himself under the state by asking a centurion to tell his plight to the Roman commander (Acts 23:18). Another approach: some churches have submitted their own forms to retailers asserting that their purchases are not taxable and the retailers have agreed not to collect tax on items they sell them. Churches using this approach usually promise to reimburse the retailer if the state tries to collect the tax from them.</p>

The Issue	Tax-exempt Corporations	Free Churches
Are the rights of a church protected by the Constitution?	<p>The Declaration of Independence states: All men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights.</p> <p>The Constitution is similar. It recognizes rights, but does not claim to grant them. God, our Creator, grants people rights. The state is the corporation’s creator and grants it rights.</p> <p>A corporation is not deemed a person within the clause of the Constitution of the United States protecting the privileges and immunities of citizens of the United States from being abridged or impaired by the law of a State...” (Bouvier’s Law Dictionary, 8th ed., <i>Corporations Not a Person</i>).</p> <p>Courts sometimes apply constitutional protections to church corporations even though they do not have to. The application is inconsistent and more likely to happen when an individual or business sues a church. Church corporations have a very difficult time asserting any rights against the federal or state government that created them.</p>	<p>The First Amendment of the Constitution states: Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.</p> <p>This is not a group of unrelated rights thrown together, but related items requested by many of the free churches in the 1700s. Free churches have all of these rights.</p> <p>IRS Code section 501(c)3, quoted in the foundational documents of most churches, says: <u>no</u> substantial part of the activities of which is <u>carrying on propaganda</u>, or otherwise attempting to influence legislation.</p> <p>If a church were to exercise its right to “petition the Government for redress of grievances”, a remedy in the form of legislation is a likely possibility. Yet corporate churches, when they are formed, agree not to “influence legislation”. They clearly do not have the same rights that a free church has.</p>
Can a church sue in court?	A corporation can sue, but it must use licensed attorneys. Even ministries whose primary function is filing lawsuits may find that corporation restrictions do not help them serve Christ any better.	A free church cannot sue in its own name. If there is some righteous need to sue in court, a member of the congregation can sue—representing himself if desirable, with assistance from other members if necessary.
Can a church be sued in court? How can it defend itself?	<p>A church can be sued in its corporate name. About 80% of suits against church organizations are from disgruntled members or former members of the group. Courts will often reject a case if the plaintiff has not used a church’s own written internal dispute-resolution process, but they do not have to do so. Corporations must have a licensed attorney appear in court for any suit, no matter how frivolous. If the officers of a corporation fail to send an attorney, the state government can respond for it.</p> <p>This is a definite disadvantage. Nevertheless, it is easy to see why attorneys like corporations—they provide much income.</p>	When a free church has a written internal dispute resolution process, courts virtually always decline jurisdiction in favor of that process. Attempted suits against free churches must either try to assert that the church actually is an unincorporated association (hard to do when it has documents declaring otherwise) or name individual church members. A free church does not have to turn over its membership list. Individuals (as opposed to corporations) can avoid being served to appear in frivolous suits by refusing to sign for registered letters or accept papers in person. Named members can decline to represent the church in court, explaining that the court has no jurisdiction or they can specifically state they are making a “special appearance” on behalf of the church. (A “special appearance” means that they volunteered to be there—that they are not required to be.) If an individual in a church is accused of a crime or tort (a civil wrong against someone), he should defend himself and leave the church out of it.

The Issue	Tax-exempt Corporations	Free Churches
<p>Is liability protection available for church members? <i>(Note: These answers are about frivolous claims. If a church really hurts someone or accumulates debts, its liability should not be limited—it should “fix what it broke”!)</i></p>	<p>Some protection is offered. If a person had an accident at a church service that was not the fault of any specific people there, he would most certainly sue the corporation rather than individual church members. Even if one church member caused the problem, the offended might sue just the corporation—but he could sue both. Some personal protection comes from the fact that corporations are better targets for lawsuits. Juries and judges frequently award money to plaintiffs for questionable complaints because corporations “have money to pay”. They are less likely to take away the life savings of an individual because someone “slipped on their sidewalk”.</p>	<p>Suits against entire church memberships for an action by the church are almost non-existent. The plaintiff would have to serve every member individually—which can be very difficult to do if the church refuses to provide a membership list. They would have to prove that all the members are at fault. Juries and even some judges are much less likely to make individuals pay for some trivial complaint. If a complaint is against individual church members, they can be sued in the same manner as if they were not church members.</p>
<p>Is liability protection available for church leaders? <i>(Note: These answers assume that claims are frivolous. If a church leader hurts someone, liability should not be limited.)</i></p>	<p>The personal assets of leaders will be protected in certain cases against a church corporation. However, becoming a corporate officer or board member makes each one personally liable for following tens of thousands of corporate laws and government regulations. Indeed, there are numerous laws that assess penalties directly against the officers of corporations. About 40% of lawsuits against corporations “pierce the corporate veil”—obtain judgments against people as well as the corporation. All that is usually necessary is to prove a man negligent in one of his vast number of legal corporate duties.</p>	<p>Since courts have no jurisdiction over free churches, there are no laws regarding responsibilities of pastors, elders, teachers or any other church leaders. They cannot be sued for “failure to carry out their duties”, whereas corporate officers can be. They must be sued as individuals under laws that apply to individuals—no different than suits against church members. They cannot be held liable for breaking the massive body of code sections that govern corporations and their officers. Stories of people being injured at a church social and suing the church member who planned it or who signed the check to lease the facility are greatly exaggerated. These stories are told mainly by lawyers and insurance salesmen. Who should the Church look to as its protector? God or the state?</p>
<p>Can a church obtain liability insurance for accidents during church services and activities?</p>	<p>Most insurance companies are very happy to provide policies to cover the corporation. These policies are not cheap because so many people sue corporations—many over frivolous issues—hoping to get some money even if they just “settle out of court”.</p>	<p>An insurance policy or documented wealth are two main things for which lawyers look for before they consider filing a suit. An uninsured free church is a poor target for litigation. Many insurance companies do not know how to work with free churches, and a free church could not sue the company if it failed to pay an insurance claim. However, leaders and individuals who work on behalf of a church can obtain personal or some kind of group insurance policies.</p>
<p>Can the church have a bank account?</p>	<p>Yes, almost every bank will offer a corporation an account. The corporation must use a federal government issued EIN (employer identifier number—the corporate equivalent of an SSN, Social Security Number).</p>	<p>With patience, a free church can establish a non-interest-bearing account without a government EIN (Employer Identification Number)—without the need to file any kind of tax return. Church documents will need to be drafted authorizing certain members to sign checks. Bank laws require banks to ask customers for an EIN or SSN to open an account, but they can open it without one if they keep special records of such accounts. The internal procedures of some banks—especially branch banks will prevent this. Presidents of small banks are often willing to do it.</p>

The Issue	Tax-exempt Corporations	Free Churches
Can a church own real estate?	Corporations can own real estate in their own name. Judgments against a corporation can force the sale of that property much easier than those against individuals or free churches.	Free churches have owned real estate for hundreds of years, but the methods vary among the 50 states. Some permit title to be held in the name of Jesus Christ with church members acting on His behalf. Other states will accept property held as a trust . Other methods are also possible.
Can a church lease real estate?	Corporations can lease real estate in their own name. All of the standard landlord-tenant laws apply.	Property owners will often lease to a free church. If a dispute arises, going to court will be difficult. But, much goodwill often exists on both sides of such leases. The congregation wants to represent God well and keep the building they use, so they take care of it and pay their rent. Owners usually do not want to “gouge God”. They realize that church leaders talk to each other—if a congregation stops renting because of high rent or poor repairs, finding another renter will be difficult.
Can a church borrow money from a bank to buy real estate (or for other purposes)?	Corporations can do this easily. Also, if they find themselves unable to pay off their loans, they can file for bankruptcy and the church membership or leaders will not have to pay the bad loans. What kind of way is this to represent God?	A free church cannot do this. What a blessing! Banks would have no good way to enforce collection of the loan or repossess the building if the church did not pay. If a church cannot afford to buy its property, it should lease it until it can accumulate money.
Can a church continue to exist perpetually—beyond the life of individual members?	With corporations, the state reminds the corporation of its existence by collecting fees every year. Unfortunately, members almost always accept the legal continuance of the corporation as equivalent to the spiritual continuation of the congregation—which is often not true. In spite of efforts to solidify a church’s mission and doctrines in its corporate documents, incorporated churches frequently undergo major changes in purpose over decades. Groups founded by Bible-believing, spirit-filled men can end up supporting secular humanism.	Free Churches also can continue to exist as long as there are members continuing to abide by its documents. However, if the members stop meeting and acting in the name of the congregation, it dies a natural death. When churches or ministries are primarily the work of one man or a few men, it is probably better that the group ends when its leaders die. There is little point in continuing to use the name, teachings and techniques of former leader when the successors do not have the same spiritual gifts or calling from God.
Does a church need to use DBA (Doing Business As) names?	If a corporate church uses multiple names (its congregation name, name of an evangelistic project, name of a publication, name of a youth ministry, etc), some laws may require the corporation to have a DBA for each name registered with the county or state. Banks and other businesses may justifiably refuse to do business with a corporation that does not follow the applicable laws.	Free churches do not need to register DBA names because they are not businesses. Some banks or other businesses may insist that a church must have a registered DBA name, but when asked what law requires a church to use a DBA name, they will readily admit that there is no such law. A free church does not need a registered DBA name for the name of the church or any of its ministries.
Can people feel comfortable with a stable, ongoing structure?	People feel comfortable with a stable corporate structure supported by the state (Num 11:4-5, Heb 11:24-25, Mark 13:1-2).	The history of God’s people is often not stable. They were persecuted, moved about and sometimes led by the Spirit of God on a moment’s notice (Matt 8:20; Acts 8:1; 16:7; Heb 11:37).

The Issue	Tax-exempt Corporations	Free Churches
<p>Will one method make a church look “respectable” and the other like a “fraud”?</p>	<p>While many people consider a 501(c)3 corporation “respectable”, the vast majority of phony churches created for a tax benefit only are 501(c)3 corporations—because they want to “look respectable”, too. Keeping this status is just a matter of satisfying the paperwork-mill, at which many “frauds” are skilled. The Church of Satan, witches groups, occultists, homosexual churches, abortion groups and other unbiblical groups all form 501(c)3 corporations with the blessing of the state. The existence of evil examples does not mean that all other 501(c)3 churches are evil, but one should never think that the state is a good judge of God-approved religion.</p>	<p>A few groups that claim to be free churches are frauds—not engaged in a significant ministry, but using church constitutional protection to avoid taxes. Such instances are less common and usually much smaller in scope than corporate frauds, because a free church has less business capability than a corporation.</p> <p>A few free churches teach false anti-government ideas or teach that some races are not eligible for salvation. Free churches should clearly state that they do not agree with all other free churches, but it is not possible to avoid all “bad associations” in people’s minds. Christ’s Apostles included Matthew, a former tax collector (Matt 10:3), and Simon, a former Zealot (Acts 1:13). Zealots were an anti-government group of that time.</p>
<p>Which method of operation is more likely to attract “undeserved trouble” from the government? .</p>	<p>This is a relevant question, but accurate information on it is difficult to get. The government keeps no statistics on how much “undeserved trouble” it causes. Governments keep records to show that their causes are just and right—indeed, many actually are. Yet many times over the years, state government and IRS employees have testified that they launched extensive investigations that nearly or completely ruined certain groups, essentially for political purposes.</p> <p>When a minor complaint is received against an incorporated 501(c)3 church, a government agency may simply check that its paperwork is in order and if so, let the complaint go. But for major complaints, government agencies do not automatically assume that a group is legitimate just because they are a 501(c)3 corporation. They realize that the state corporation departments and the IRS do not have time to check the truth of most statements made to them and criminal groups have been 501(c)3 corporations for years. Once a major investigation begins (whether just or unjust), incorporation and 501(c)3 status give the government a lot of power over the group.</p>	<p>The Indianapolis Baptist Temple, which had some of its property seized by the IRS, is sometimes cited as an example of what happens to unincorporated churches. What is seldom explained is that the Indianapolis Baptist Temple formed several corporations years ago and then one day simply stopped responding to all of its corporate paperwork. They did not use established methods to terminate their corporations so the state still had clear jurisdiction. They did not terminate their employer agreements with the IRS, so it continued trying to enforce them. God teaches that we should keep our agreements, even when they are to our disadvantage (Ps 15:4, Josh 9:3–19). Any group that has corporations or 501(c)3 status should use the proper procedure to end them—see the sources on page 47 for help.</p>
<p>How much time is required to get the church started?</p>	<p>Ten hours to 200 hours. The more professionals used, the less time for the church. The IRS estimate just to keep records and file form 1023 for 501(c)3 status is 76 hours (page 7, form 1023).</p>	<p>About 150 to 300 hours, depending upon how much one spends. Much of what one learns will be useful for the rest of one’s life. Learning to restore freedom to churches is far more uplifting than following a complex, changing bureaucracy.</p>
<p>What is the cost to get the church started?</p>	<p>A few hundred dollars to a few thousand dollars—the more professionals used, the more expensive.</p>	<p>One to several hundred dollars for educational materials (which you might be able to borrow from a friend) and a few dollars for documents.</p>
<p>What method will provide the most standardization of operation?</p>	<p>Corporations are clearly more standardized because the state imposes thousands of operation regulations on corporations. This is more of an advantage to the state in supervising them than to the churches—unless church workers are changing churches frequently.</p>	<p>The Scriptures do not teach standardization of methods, but following God’s direction for each situation. Christ told His disciples to take nothing with them at times, and later told them to make preparations (Luke 22:35–36). Paul accepted money from some churches, and not from others (2Cor 11:7–8). Ezekiel was a captive of Babylon (Ezk 1:1) at the same time Daniel served in the palace of the king of Babylon (Dan 1:19).</p>

The Issue	Tax-exempt Corporations	Free Churches
Which method provides the greatest ease of long-term operation?	Governments continue to add regulations and paperwork to corporations of all types—setting their own timetables and deadlines. About 75% of small businesses choose not to be incorporated for this reason.	A free church must maintain its own internal documents authorizing members to act on its behalf when Christ so directs. It must look to the needs of its members. It must make time to hear a member who goes through the Matthew 18:15-17 process (see page 20). These are the very things that Christ commanded.
Which method is best for a hierarchical church denomination?	<p>This author believes that hierarchical, denominational church organizations are contrary to Scripture, but included this question to help show why incorporated churches are now common.</p> <p>A centralized denominational “headquarters” can efficiently control local congregations throughout the world using the same corporate structures and laws as multi-national corporations. A central “legal department” can keep up with government paperwork much better than individual congregations. When international standardization, control and budget are important considerations, the advantages of incorporation may outweigh the disadvantages.</p>	The free church is not well suited to hierarchical control. Anything that happens in a local congregation must be approved by the members or by someone they have authorized. While it is possible for local members to give authority to a denominational headquarters, the members could take it away at any time. The headquarters has no legal way to enforce anything against a local free church. All the headquarters could do is threaten to remove them from the denomination. (One would have simply a system of voluntary co-operation—exactly what Christ wants in His church!)
Which method is best for local congregations directly responsible to Christ?	This method creates numerous burdens of responsibility to the state, which God clearly instructs us to avoid. Even the highly touted economic benefits do not outweigh the risks involved with incorporation and 501(c)3 status.	A free church seems to be what Christ had in mind, from the original churches of the first century, to the free churches during the Protestant Reformation, to those that worked for American independence and religious freedom, to the free churches we desperately need today—to call people to repent and turn, not to incorporate religion, but to God and His Word!

IRS Documents Showing Powers Over 501(c)3 Church Groups

When people read papers like this that advocate something different from mainstream thought, there is a tendency to say, “How do we know it is true?” Or, “If it is true, why doesn’t everyone else know about it and do it?” These questions are good. People need to study and think about uncommon ideas before implementing them. They need to see proof. But they must also ask, whose job is it to make positive changes that go against the mainstream of society?

Let us think about an example. For almost 1,200 years, it was considered dangerous to let the common man read the Bible. Should not such a large, complex and holy book be taught only by the trained, professional priests? That was the thinking of that time. So how did the idea that everyone should read the Bible become common today? Existing heads of state and churches rarely

ever implement changes of this magnitude on their own. These changes usually take someone to start them, then many more others to realize their importance and diligently pursue them. John Wycliffe translated the Bible from Latin to English in the 1300s. The idea stayed alive for 200 years and finally burst out all over with the invention of printing and the many Bible translations in the 1500s. The preface of Wycliffe’s 1388 Bible said: “Scripture must become the common property of all; **a government of the people, by the people, and for the people.**” This latter idea took about 400 hundred years to catch on—in the USA!

Free churches are a good idea that has worked before and needs to be widely implemented again. But big government, big business, big religion or big education will not promote them. A few individuals and independent church congregations are promoting free churches. Someday there may be hundreds of books, websites and services helping local congregations form this way.

But for now, individuals forming congregations will have to make their decisions based upon the evidence that they acquire from those who research the issue and their own studies and experience. Some of this evidence comes right out of government publications. Notice the following quotes from the IRS *Handbook 7.8.2 Exempt Organizations Technical Guidelines Handbook*. Please do not be “scared off” by the legal case citations (consisting of a name, followed by “v.”, then followed by another name, then followed by a bunch of letters). These provide a way for people to actually look up the court case in a law library and know that they are dealing with a real decision and not just someone’s idea.

[7.8.2] 3.6.2 (02-23-1999) Compliance with Statutory Requirements

1. Any **religious organization**, including a church, must satisfy the statutory requirements to be exempt under IRC 501(c)(3). As explained by the court in *Christian Echoes National Ministry, Inc. v. United States*, 470 F.2d 849 (10th Cir. 1972), cert. den., 414 U.S. 864 (1973), in which the court upheld denial of tax exemption to a religious organization engaged in substantial legislative activity, “[i]n light of the fact that **tax exemption is a matter of grace rather than right**, we hold that the limitations contained in Section 501(c)(3) withholding exemption **from nonprofit corporations** [that engage in substantial lobbying] do not deprive Christian Echoes of its constitutionally guaranteed right of free speech. The taxpayer may engage in all such activities without restraint, subject, however, to withholding of the exemption, or, in the alternative, the taxpayer may refrain from such activities and obtain **the privilege of exemption.**”

Notice that for **religious organizations** (which would include non-profit corporations and associations), 501(c)3 tax exemption is not considered a right; it is a privilege.

[7.8.2] 3.6.6 (02-23-1999) Actions Distinguished from Beliefs

1. The constitutional protections afforded religious beliefs do not prevent government from regulating conduct or actions when it has a compelling interest to do so. Thus, the First Amendment does not prevent the government

from requiring compliance with general laws designed to effectuate **an important governmental policy or objective** even though compliance may be contrary to an individual’s sincerely-held religious beliefs.

4. A notable recent application of this doctrine is *Bob Jones University v. United States*, and *Goldsboro Christian Schools v. United States*, 461 U.S. 574 (1983), in which the Supreme Court upheld revocation of the exemption under IRC 501(c)(3) of religious and educational institutions on the grounds that its religiously motivated policy forbidding interracial dating violated a fundamental public policy against racial discrimination. **The Court concluded that educational institutions that practice racial discrimination based on religious beliefs are not charitable in the generally accepted legal sense and thus do not qualify for federal tax exemption.**

Please note the IRS removed tax-exempt status from this church school organized as a non-profit corporation **not** because it **broke a law that people are required to follow**, but **because it acted against “an important governmental policy or objective”**. There is no law against parents teaching their children not to date interracially—there are only laws against public corporations forbidding it. Bob Jones University accepted students of all races, but had a policy against interracial dating. Whether you or I agree that this is the teaching of the Bible is not the issue. The issue is that the IRS can remove tax-exempt status because a church has a doctrine that is not illegal, but contrary to “public policy”. It should be obvious that a tax-exempt church organization is being treated like an extension of the government, not like an extension of the family and as a work of Christ.

There is no official definition or legal limit to “public policy”. Black’s Law Dictionary (6th ed.) defines it like this:

Public Policy. Community common sense and common conscience, extended and applied throughout the state to matters of public morals, health, safety, welfare, and the like; it is that general and well-settled public opinion relating to man’s plain, palpable duty to his fellowmen, having due regard to all circumstances of each particular relation and situation.

Governments should act according to law. Christians should act according to the Scriptures.

But “public policy” seems to be “situation ethics”—doing whatever seems right to the government at the moment. Church organizations that teach against homosexuality or even against sex between any two consenting individuals could someday find themselves losing their tax-exempt status for violating “public policy”—without the passing of any new laws. To demonstrate how far public policy is from law, consider this: The IRS removed the tax-exempt status of the Landmark Church, in Binghamton, N.Y. on May 12, 2000 because they took out full page ads stating that presidential candidate Bill Clinton’s views on abortion, homosexuality and condom distribution in schools were unbiblical (a concept similar to John the Baptist’s message to Herod—Mark 16:18). The Landmark Church had solicited and received many tax-deductible donations from that ad. But during the same political campaign, Bill Clinton and many other liberal candidates made announced appearances in churches, which caused many additional people to attend and place tax-deductible contributions in the churches’ collection plates. It is completely up to the IRS to decide upon which churches they will enforce their public policy and upon which they will not. Appeals courts frequently reverse all convictions when a law is being “selectively enforced”. (For example, if a city requires a fire escape for 3-story houses, but only enforces the law against a few “enemies” of the mayor, a court is likely to reject convictions as “selective enforcement”.) The Landmark Church raised the “selective enforcement” issue in court and was essentially told that it does not apply to bureaucracies like the IRS.

Before concluding, it would be good to expose one more “bomb waiting to go off” that is in the foundational documents of nearly every 501(c)3 organization. The wording from IRC section 501(c)3 which is included in the founding documents of most tax-exempt churches says:

“no substantial part of the activities of which is carrying on propaganda, or otherwise attempting to influence legislation...”

What does “carrying on propaganda” mean? “Propaganda” is a word not typically used in law. Black’s Law Dictionary does not have any definition of this term. It appears only five times in Title 26, the Internal Revenue Code, none of which define it. Each time, it is used in a clause almost identical to the above with the phrase “or otherwise attempting to influence legislation”. These

words are used to define the term “lobbying expenditures” in section 4912(d). From this, we can deduce that “carrying on propaganda” is something that would influence legislation or the thinking of people in general, but we still do not know exactly what it means. The term “communist propaganda” was typically used in the 1960s and it meant essentially the publishing of lies to achieve communist political ends. But this is not the point of the 501(c)3 wording, since the cross reference at the end of section 501 (currently 501(p)) specifically says that communist organizations are not tax-exempt:

For nonexemption of Communist-controlled organizations, see section 11(b) of the Internal Security Act of 1950 (64 Stat. 997; 50 U.S.C. 790(b)).

The word “propaganda” is a noun form of the verb “propagate”, which means “to cause something to be distributed”. Here are all four definitions of “propaganda” from the 1966 edition of *Webster’s New Twentieth Century Dictionary Unabridged*:

1. Propaganda in the Roman Catholic Church, a committee of cardinals, the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith, in charge of the foreign missions.
2. any organization or movement working for the propagation of particular ideas, doctrines, practices, etc.
3. the ideas, doctrines, practices, etc. spread in this way.
4. any systematic, widespread, deliberate indoctrination or plan for such indoctrination: now often used in a derogatory sense, connoting deception or distortion.

The above definitions were very close to those that were in effect when the IRS code was written. Until researching this, I had never thought that the preaching of the Gospel could be considered “propaganda”. But would not most churches like to have a “systematic, widespread, deliberate” plan for propagating biblical “ideas, doctrines, practices”? The first definition usage by the Catholic Church shows that the word has a long history of usage for religious evangelizing. Only definition four has a negative connotation. Unfortunately, many government employees and judges *would* consider a Bible-based Gospel that puts God above the state “in a derogatory sense, connoting deception or distortion”.

If the IRS has ever challenged an organization

for “carrying on propaganda”, it is not known to this writer. There are not a huge number of organizations that have lost their tax-exempt status for “attempting to influence legislation”, but the frequency of such events is increasing. Numerous complaints have been sent to the IRS (some published on the Internet) against all kinds of 501(c)3 organizations for attempting to influence legislation contrary to IRS rules. Pro-abortionists turn in pro-lifers and vice versa, liberals turn in conservatives, conservatives turn in liberals, etc. It seems that many are trying to use the IRS as a weapon against “enemy” 501(c)3 groups. Most of these complaints, if pursued, would probably result in the denial of an exemption. It is up to the IRS which exemptions they will deny. Almost no organizations that have challenged the IRS removal of their tax-exempt status have had the decision reversed by a court.

The potential of the IRS to raise money by denying the tax-exempt status of numerous organizations, including churches, is vast. Not only can they take away tax-exemption retroactively for years, making organizations liable for back income tax, they can also charge **both** the organization **and** its management each a 5% excise tax on all “lobbying expenditures” for those tax years (IRC section 4912). (This is one of many examples where corporate laws do not protect the people—the IRS can assess penalties directly to corporate management.) “Lobbying expenditures”, for purposes of this 5% excise tax, are defined as “carrying on propaganda, or otherwise attempting to influence legislation”.

Christians should be preaching that the solution to national and global problems will come when people have the Bible in their heads and Christ in their hearts—not from more and more massive national and global human governments. **Will the IRS classify the preaching of that message as “propaganda” at some time in the future?** Everything they need is ready for them to do it. In other areas, decades sometimes pass between the addition of a code section and the first time the IRS enforces it. The only thing that would seem to stop them is a public outcry. If history is a clue, the IRS would likely move against the most despicable cults and church organizations first. That will not upset many people. Once they have precedents established for defining Bible preaching as propaganda, they can move against more “normal” church organizations. All 501(c)3 church organiza-

tions have already agreed to it in their foundational documents.

Do any church organizations ever ask the IRS what they mean by “carrying on propaganda” when they include that phrase in their foundational documents? The ones I helped start did not, and I do not know of any that ever have. (The IRS usually will **not** give a legally binding answer to questions like this, anyway.) Do the attorneys that incorporate churches advise churches of all the liabilities of agreeing to follow all present and future IRS rules when their meaning is not clearly known?

The whole issue boils down to this: **Why should the Church, under Jesus Christ, entangle itself with an incredible mass of rules which are not based on the Bible and can be interpreted by a human bureaucracy almost any way they want?** This is doubly true when a country, such as the USA, still allows churches to operate in one of the freest environments possible. Even if the IRS never threatens one church for “carrying on propaganda”, the cases where they have removed tax-exempt status from sincere church organizations that went against “public policy” or attempted to “influence legislation” show that 501(c)3 churches are serving “two masters”.

One-Page History of Church Incorporation

Christians who made a difference in history are **not** those who obeyed God as much as possible within the confines of the state—but those who obeyed God even when that obedience was in conflict with the state. The chief Jewish priests of Jesus’ day said: “we have no king but Caesar” (John 19:15), whereas the Christians claimed that Jesus was King (John 18:37; Acts 17:7). Christians were imprisoned and had their property confiscated (Heb 10:34)—this would not have happened if they incorporated their churches. The Romans allowed great religious freedom—as long as subjects would recognize the lordship of the Emperor. The apostle Paul would not acknowledge Caesar as superior to Christ. After Paul stood in Caesar’s court, he expected to die (2Tim 4:6–8, 16). The many Roman persecutions of Christians in the first and second centuries did **not** occur because Romans were trying to convert Christians to paganism, but because Christians would not acknowledge the Roman gods or emperor as superior to Christ.

As Constantine established Christianity as the

“state religion” of Rome in the fourth century, he was largely intolerant of independent believers who rejected the state church and served Christ directly. Over the centuries, millions of Christians were persecuted because they were not content to practice just the Christianity allowed by the Roman Catholic Church—they wanted to follow God in every way possible. During the 14th through 16th centuries, many were not content just to hear the Latin Bible read by priests. They wanted to translate it into common languages so all could read and obey it in spite of what the Catholic Church allowed. Massive splits from the Catholic Church occurred in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but official “state churches” in various countries still abounded. People migrated—many to North America—to start new lives so they could do all that they believed was right before God—not just some of it.

I spent a day searching *The Ultimate Christian Library* for the word “corporation” (from Ages software, 800-297-4307). This computerized library is 1000 times the size of the Bible and contained nearly all of the major Christian writings from the 1st century to 17th century. Corporations existed all throughout those times, most often used by cities and large businesses. In religion, they were used by Hellenistic Jewish groups, the Roman Catholic Church, and some Protestant state-churches. I could not find one example of an independent, “live by every word of God” type of church that was incorporated.

A great many people suffered, fought and died in this struggle for religious freedom. And we have religious freedom today because of it.

Some scriptures indicate that believers ought to resist bad civil government (Acts 5:9, etc.). On the other hand, Romans 13:1–9 is frequently used to say that all civil authority is established by God and should be obeyed. Many of those who struggled for religious freedom seized upon this verse:

For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and he will commend you (Rom 13:3).

The rulers, to whom we are to submit, should “hold no terror to those who do right”—but our forefathers saw people being punished for doing right. They used the Matthew 18:15–17 process to go to those rulers and show them where they were disobeying God. When they were not heard, they

concluded that their rulers were not established by God and they rejected them as “heathens and publicans”. During these times, many books were written about man’s responsibility to God versus his responsibility to the state. Whatever one’s opinion of this subject may be, the facts of history show that nearly all improvements in the distribution of the Bible, translation of the Bible into native languages and freedom of worship **came to us through independent believers who followed God, often in opposition to civil governments and their related state churches.**

What has happened during the last 100 years? Are we continuing to make progress, or are things getting worse? It is evident that the state incorporation of churches and the rules governing such churches are reducing the amount of religious freedom that we have. Clear concepts of right and wrong are generally missing from education, government and many churches. The Bible (not a church denomination) had been a centerpiece of western education for three centuries, but is now removed from public education. Public prayer is now a rare thing. Have these losses occurred by merciless and violent attacks on the church? No. The churches have largely given away the ground on which they once stood—for the fluffy lure of tax exemption and other promised financial benefits.

Some “prophecy teachers” say that we should expect a godless society now because we are in the end time when “there will be great distress, unequaled from the beginning of the world” (Matt 24:21). That may be true in the future, but we are not at that point today. The amount of tribulation experienced by believers throughout most of the last 2,000 years was greater than it is for Western societies today. Most people had to either go along with an oppressive church-state system or flee their lives. Life expectancies were 30 to 40 years. Today, Western life expectancies are close to 70 years and most people have a lot of freedom. Most countries do not have official “state-churches” and even the Catholic Church no longer openly exerts control over any territory other than Vatican City. Most Westerners today have so much freedom that they do not spend any time thinking about how to maintain it, let alone how to improve it.

Our job to reclaim lost religious freedom is much easier than the plight of those early Christian martyrs, of those who died translating the Bible and of those who died for religious freedom. We

can do it largely in peace, with what might otherwise be “leisure time”. Our blood and sweat is not even being demanded now. The question is: “**do we care enough to do it when it is easy?**” Or will we be unconcerned until our freedoms are lost?

If the number of free churches continues to decline, the day may come when big-government proponents will be able to gather political support to try to “make these few ‘renegade’ churches obey the law like everyone else”—which would mean “become incorporated and accept government control”. If more and more churches operate as free churches, the difference between the two methods will become more and more apparent. This will force the state to either greatly reduce the control it exerts over incorporated churches (hoping they will stay incorporated) or to accept the wholesale movement of churches away from incorporation back to the freedom they were granted under the Bill of Rights.

Your congregation does not have to take up the ministry of helping other groups avoid incorporation—there are many worthwhile ministries, but each group can only do a few. **But your congregation does need to establish its own existence that is free of government control though corporations and 501(c)3 status.** No one else can “do it for you”.

How can parents teach their children the stories of “David and Goliath”, “Daniel in the Lions’ Den” and other biblical stories of courage—and then go establish their church subordinate to the state so they can blend into the safety of the crowd? Do we think our children will not see the hypocrisy?

Resources for Operating as a Free Church

Most of the churches that are **not** presently incorporated never have been. They have simply existed since before incorporation was common. In some cases, church leaders do not even know whether they are incorporated or have 501(c)3 status. Some have such long-standing relationships with governments and local vendors that nobody ever asks about them. Someone from a church may have applied for various tax-exempt numbers years ago, the government and the church’s vendors may have them, but the church has long forgotten them. Or, everyone may simply be making an exception for these well-known, well-loved churches. A long-time church may be able to effectively operate this way, but they will not be helpful to breth-

ren starting a new free church. Other long-time free churches do have members who can explain their operating methods quite well and who would be very helpful to new congregations.

If you are starting a new congregation, try to get help from someone experienced with starting new congregations—especially someone from your state.

If you have an existing congregation, but would like to begin operating as a free church, it is vital that you properly terminate the previous corporations and tax exemptions. The basic sequence is to start the new free church, transfer all of the assets from the corporate church to it in some way, then terminate the old organizations. Talk to someone who has done it before.

1. **Heal Our Land Ministries**
208 E College Street, Suit 262,
Branson, Missouri 65616
417-337-7533;
website: www.hushmoney.org

This is the most thorough, though the most expensive source I found. This laborer is definitely worth his hire. Some of the quotes and ideas for this paper came from their writings and from notes of their conference that I attended (now available on video tape). Peter Kershaw and his family are the driving force behind Heal Our Land Ministries. They have an excellent 150-page full-size book entitled *In Caesar’s Grip* for \$20.00. I have studied it from cover to cover and agree with nearly all of it. I found only a dozen statements with which I had some disagreement—none of which negate the overall message of the book. It contains much information on the history of religious freedom and free churches and why we need them today. The forward was written by three knowledgeable people: George Hansen, a USA senator from Idaho (1965–1969, 1975–1985), Howard Philips, the Constitution Party presidential candidate, and Steve Nestor, a retired IRS Senior Review Officer. The Heal Our Land Ministries website is quite small. The best information is the set of videotapes and conference syllabus, which cost \$250.00. This is expensive but very reasonable compared with the cost of an attorney setting up a corporate church. The syllabus has many sample documents for establishing a church, obtaining sales tax exemptions, how to terminate a corporate church, etc. It explains why such documents should use Biblical terms, **not** corporate legal jargon.

2. Ecclesiastical Law Center

**4867 Firestone
Dearborn, MI 48126
313-581-0086; fax: 313-581-3018
e-mail: lawcenter@excite.com
website: www.elcweb.com**

This group claims to use a “Biblical Legal Defense” rather than a “Christian Legal Defense”. According to their book, *A Treatise on Church Incorporation*, their “Biblical Legal Defense” approaches a court action from the stand point of: “this is my scriptural belief, God compels me to do it no matter what the state does, so you have no right to command me not to, and by the way, here is a law or legal precedent that says I have a right to do this action this way.” They state the “Christian Legal Defense” as this is my legal position, the constitution, other laws and legal precedent support it, and it is also commanded by the Scripture. Heal Our Land Ministries and most of the other sources tend to use the latter approach. I believe that both methods have been used in the Scriptures and that there is a time and place for each. The Ecclesiastical Law Center has a 57-page book with a lot of information that can be downloaded from their website for \$10, and they seem to be willing to help other groups set up what they call “Lordship churches”—churches directly under the Lordship of Christ.

3. Linden Baptist Church

**PO Box 6
Linden, Indiana 47955
website: www.biblicalexaminer.org**

This group offers a 16-page article, *Church, Inc.*, by Ovid Need free on their website. It contains a lot of worthwhile background information on incorporation from the Bible and legal sources.

4. New Testament Baptist Church

**2806 NE Pine Island Rd.
Cape Coral, FL 33909
website: www.ntbconline.com**

Two good articles (in the Pastor Notes section of this website) include *Church Incorporation* and *Religious Freedom Issues that Affect Churches* by Jim Ellis, ThG., ThD., PhD.

5. The Rutherford Institute

**P.O. Box 7482
Charlottesville, VA 22906-7482
804-978-3888, fax: 804-978-1789**

**e-mail: rutherford@fni.com
website: www.eaglecross.net/Ruther.html**

This short article was written by an independent legal help group that assists people who have suffered discrimination. It is not oriented toward starting free churches, but it discovers, from a legal perspective, the great disadvantages of incorporated churches.

Note for those without Internet access:

Printed copies of the articles mentioned in references 3, 4 and 5, above, can be obtained from *Shelter in the Word* by asking for “Free Church Article Reprints”. Contact *Shelter in the Word*, PO Box 107, Perry, Michigan 48872-0107; 517-625-7480, e-mail: info@shelterintheword.com.

6. Lawton Church of God

**2615 NW 78th Street
Lawton, Oklahoma 73505-1112
580-536-4007
website: www.lcoggt.org/
Pastor%20Articles/state_church.htm**

The article for the above URL is entitled *The Emergence of a State Church* by Douglas F. Bayless. It demonstrates the control the state is trying to exert over churches.

7. Startchurch.com

**Rt. 1 Box 31-A
Clewiston, FL 33440
877-494-4655
website: www.startchurch.com**

This is one of the many companies that promotes church incorporation, 501(c)3 and other government processes for churches. For about \$140 they claim to send all the necessary information to start an incorporated church recognized by the state. What are *their reasons* for so doing? 1) State recognition makes an organization “believable”, so people will believe in it, 2) Some churches miss out on million-dollar donations because they can’t prove they are 501(c)3 to the donor, 3) Incorporating early will save many thousands later (though they did not say how), 4) “every possible measure needs to be taken to ensure that the Constitution and Bylaws agree with the corporate documents”, 5) Sales Tax exemption saves money. The many important biblical and legal issues raised by this paper are rarely ever mentioned in this site or ones like it.

**8. Legal Information Institute
Cornell Law School
website: www4.law.cornell.edu/uscode/26**

This website has the entire Internal Revenue Code (Title 26) online with search capabilities. Many other laws and cases can be found through www.findlaw.com. Obviously, not everyone is going to become an expert in finding and understanding laws. But if you ever read other literature and wonder, “Does the law really say that?” this is one easy way to read the law for yourself.

Reaching Out to Others

Church groups can sometimes become consumed with internal issues: teaching the right doctrine, planning the best services and programs, expounding prophecy, perfecting their music, deciding who will be in charge of what, improving their facilities, etc. All of these things are important and must be done, but they should not consume all the energies of the group. If services are consumed by continual debate on these issues, visitors will find the services difficult and not come back; some current members may grow tired and leave. Christ gave some great advice about this both in His Sermon on the Mount and just before He ascended to the Father:

Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven (Matt 5:16, NKJV).

So when they met together, they asked him, “Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?” He said to them: “It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in **Jerusalem**, and in **all Judea** and **Samaria**, and to the **ends of the earth**” (Acts 1:6–9).

Christ told the Apostles to let their “light shine”, to not to be overly concerned with prophetic timing, and to be “My witnesses”. Who should hear our witness? Christ gives a lot of detail as to who we should serve and teach. By analogy, the four places he mentioned still apply today.

Those in **Jerusalem** were **local people whom they knew**. They had similar religious backgrounds, but still needed teaching about Jesus. This corresponds to our local congregation today.

Those in **all Judea** were **people with similar backgrounds, but more distant**. Today there are many people with a biblical understanding similar

to ours, but living elsewhere. We may be able to help them through our written or spoken word, or in some other way.

The people of **Samaria** had some knowledge of God and the Bible, but mostly relied upon their own tradition which was in error (John 4:22). Today, there are many **people who call themselves Christian, but base many of their doctrines on traditions rather than on the Bible**.

The **ends of the earth** today are still the **ends of the earth—they include everybody**. God has set his believers in a world with more people who need our help than we can possibly reach in our lifetime. He wants to see what we will do.

A small congregation cannot do everything listed above, but it should endeavor to do some of it. What it does will depend upon the spiritual gifts of those in the congregation and what God shows through prayer. **Every congregation, no matter how small, can obtain an entry in their local yellow pages**. They have a large list of categories of churches and will let a church chose whatever they want: Free Church, Bible Church, Non-denominational, etc. This author has known several small congregations that have obtained most of their new members this way.

Obtaining a “business number” will include a single-line yellow page listing. [Using a “business number” does not make a church a business (in the USA) any more than using a “personal number” would make a church a person. Phone companies only work with these two kinds of numbers. Using a “business number” may cause Dun & Bradstreet, other credit firms and even local taxing authorities to attempt to treat a church like a business, but a clear explanation to them that a church is not a business will usually cause them to stop calling.]

You do not need a “church building” to do this. Most telephone companies can add a second line in someone’s home as a “business number”. A “call forwarding” option would then allow incoming calls to ring anywhere. Some telephone companies do not even need to add a line, but can route your congregation’s calls to an existing phone line that will have a “distinctive ring” so that one can tell whether each call is a home call or a congregation call. Also, “distinctive ring” answering machines are available so a different message can be played to congregation callers when the phone is not answered. A workable arrangement can cost anywhere from \$2 to \$40 per month.

This paper cannot begin to cover everything

that could be done to reach out to others, but here are some ideas. Many of these ideas can be implemented as a group, by an individual, or by a group of individuals sharing their experience.

Methods of Reaching Out

Some congregations are born out of the need to fulfill a certain kind of outreach and their mission is clearly cut out for them from the moment they begin. Others gradually grow in their outreach efforts. If your congregation is already pressing members to their limits with various kinds of service, may God bless and guide you, but please do not let this section cause you to start a lot of new projects that nobody has time to complete. On the other hand, if your congregation is not doing much to help others, its members ought to realize that they will be judged by what they do (1Cor 3:11-15; 4:5; 2Cor 5:10), and encourage each other to take action in their lives.

This author has heard of many people who said they felt foolish when they first started trying to teach others about God, Jesus or the Bible. They realized that they made a lot of mistakes. But it is that way when we start most jobs in life—and as we do them we get better at them. Believers who have gone through years of their life teaching others about God whenever practical often wonder about how they could live their life any other way.

Reaching Out to Other Congregations

Much can be gained when brethren visit other congregations, whether that is done in a formal or informal manner. Your entire congregation can plan joint activities with other congregations or visit some of their Bible studies or activities. Or, one or more brethren can simply show up at their service. There is a tendency for people who have attended only one group to think that they have all the right doctrines and that the Holy Spirit is working powerfully in their group, and not so powerfully (or not at all) in other groups. Visiting other groups helps both the visitor and those who are visited to see that spiritual gifts seem to work very similarly in different groups. It is often beneficial to attend a group with which you may have significant doctrinal differences. When they see your Christ-like love toward them, they are much more likely to be willing to listen to and learn from your group's doctrinal teaching. Your group might possibly learn something from them. Remember that God loves the people like you, and He loves the

Samaritans—those with some truth, but a lot of error. One point to keep in mind when visiting other groups: someone should be at your congregation at the usual time and place—in case you have visitors.

Mail Ministry

Businesses and even some religious groups spend millions of dollars on direct mail advertising to mailing lists—hoping that a third of the people who receive their mailings will open and read at least some part of them. Individuals can achieve a much higher “opened and read” ratio by writing people who are expecting them to respond. How? By responding to advertisements with a very short tract or hand-written note. Businesses that send out advertisements will certainly have someone open all the responses they receive and at least begin to read them. Mail-reading workers are generally required to work quickly, so what you send must be short. A simple message like:

The Bible has helped me greatly in my life and I would like to help you. I will send you a free Bible and will help find answers to any questions you might have. I will never ask you for money or to join anything. Contact me at: [phone number, address, e-mail]

An encouraging scripture or a helpful biblical teaching afterwards might be appropriate. These letters and tracts can be mailed free of charge in the business reply envelopes that come with junk mail. The purpose should be to encourage and to generate some other more effective communication. Longer tracts can be mailed to people who are expecting responses but do not open mail as a job. Such places might include chain letters sent to you, letters from small businesses or addresses from magazine or newspaper classified ads. Some mail ministries send specific tracts to people based upon the type of ad they answer: send relationship tracts to person-to-person ads, send morality tracts to people advertising illicit material, etc. When responses come, you do not have to be able to answer every possible question, but simply be willing to work with the people and try to help find answers for any who respond. (Obviously, do not mail to lists that do not belong to you or to addresses found in places that specifically request no unrelated mail.)

Internet Ministry

Creating a Bible-oriented web site is just one of

the ways to establish an Internet ministry. If you have the skills, and a Godly motivation, you can reach thousands. But even without those skills, there are an endless number of Internet forums, chat rooms, mailing lists, etc. that one can join and help teach the Bible to others. One can often read messages for a while to learn something about the people before beginning to serve. A ministry can be as simple as sending an appropriate scripture and a personal note to someone in need, or to sending whole articles (which you can also find on the Internet) that appear to be in someone's area of interest. If you receive questions that you cannot answer, find people who can. It does not seem to be a good example to teach the Bible on forums where rules specifically forbid religious discussion—you will probably be removed for doing so. Many forums allow it, so use those.

The spiritually strong might consider venturing into groups that practice witchcraft, homosexuality, abortion, adultery, gambling, etc. Christ was not afraid to be among known sinners (Mark 2:15–17, Luke 7:39), but Paul warns us not to help people if we will hurt ourselves doing it: “Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted” (Gal 6:1). Prayers for Godly wisdom are obviously necessary to do this. Some brethren have started by simply asking others why they do what they do—becoming their friends, then asking them if what they do is causing problems in their lives, then showing them the biblical solution. Leaving sinful environments is usually very difficult even when people are committed to do it. Former friends and employers may threaten, even harm, those who try to leave. Finding a new job and friends can be a great challenge. The power of God can overcome all these things, but it may take as much love and kindness as a Christian can give to help those involved. Like any ministry, everyone involved will gain in skill the more they serve.

Telephone Ministry

Another ministry for the fearless and spiritually mature: Call “900” numbers, pay the fee to talk to them, but tell them that there is hope for them and that God can deliver them from what must be a fairly disgusting job. These 900 numbers are usually intended for talking about sex, psychics or some other sin, but the advertisements often say that they will talk about whatever the caller wants

as long as they pay. This may not be a cheap ministry, but the message certainly will be heard. If the person contacted really wants help, you can give them contact information where they can reach you in off-hours. Company regulations frequently forbid these phone people from giving out any private numbers. Do not become tempted to sin! (Gal 6:1).

This author has heard of other phone ministries that have met with varying degrees of success. Some try to teach the Bible to all of the telemarketers who call them. (One person said they never got much teaching done, but it did greatly reduce the telemarketing calls he received. Apparently, some telemarketers require their employees to press a certain button if the person called changes the subject.) Others set up an organized plan to begin dialing every number in their local phone book—or every possible number in their local telephone exchanges. They may say something simple like: “I am Jane Jones from Hometown calling to find out if there is anyone in your home who would be interested in attending a local Tuesday-night Bible study that is not connected with any church denomination.” Most people hang up, say “no”, or explain that they have a church, but a few usually ask questions and a very few come. The caller needs to be ready with dates, times, study topics, directions, etc.

Speaking Ministry

Plan a Bible study that is open to everyone. The material can be as simple as reading through books of the Bible and commenting on them, or specific subjects can be studied. It is best to both have a subject prepared in case those attending do not wish to talk, but it is also good to spend as much time answering questions or talking about whatever those who attend want to talk about.

This can be done in a church building or a rented hall—in which case it would need to be advertised. Advertising methods frequently include newspapers, radio announcements, flyers posted on bulletin boards, and sometimes word-of-mouth. One way to both advertise and reach small towns with a message is saturation mailing. A local post office will tell you the number of addresses and post office boxes to which they deliver. For \$.18 each, they will deliver a letter to every one of them—you do not even need to address them. (A \$125 setup and \$125 annual permit fee is also required, though a business with a standard mail

permit can mail for you, saving that fee.)

It is cheaper and frequently easier to encourage a few people to attend an in-home Bible study. Some people feel more comfortable in a home—they will not be asked to join anything. Other people conduct a lunchtime Bible study at their place of work or school. It is much easier to feel comfortable with people whom they already know to some degree. Bible studies can also be started in other business places as long as they are wanted by the customers and acceptable to the management. Examples are mobile home parks, large apartment complexes, retirement homes, country clubs, hotels, campgrounds, large truck stops, parks, airports and restaurants. Some of these places will develop a regular attendance. Many of the latter ones will have mostly travelers, but travelers frequently seek out a Bible study or service when they are traveling and missing the one that they normally attend.

It helps to have members from your congregation attend each study so as to greet the new people and provide interaction to the study. But if visitors are asking questions, the congregation should be quiet, letting the visitors ask and say as much as possible.

Another modern speaking opportunity occurs on radio talk programs. There are hundreds of them throughout the country—some religious, some not. A person with time to listen to the programs can call in and express a Biblical point of view to many. The guidance of God and some experience will be required to develop skill at delivering the message without offending and being “cut off”.

Personal Teaching and Encouragement

Many people have become believers because of the personal contact with another believer. Most Christians know that they should be ready to explain their belief if someone asks: “But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect” (1Pet 3:15). But this can be taken a bit further. One can make an effort to gently ask friends about their spiritual beliefs. This is easy to do when one is not a member of a denomination—others will have less fear of being coerced to join a group. When the believer meets people who have faint religious beliefs, or who are not satisfied with their present

spiritual life, he or she can make an effort to spend more time with the people whom he or she may be able to help some day.

Some people go through this process of seeking people to help in their normal daily work and recreation, others make special trips to places just to find people they can befriend and help. Places they might go to include economically poor areas, hospitals, nursing homes, parks, college campuses, vacation spots, prisons, etc.

Physical Help

Christ healed people and fed thousands of people—before they became believers. Many of them did not even seem to understand His message. If someone is given a miraculous gift to do this today, it would certainly be a great ministry. But Christ was only one and today believers are many. There is much they can do by using their natural physical resources to help the needy. There are many people in need of food, clothing, health-care, tools to obtain work, and other economic necessities.

It is important to remember Matthew 5:16, quoted at the beginning of this section. Good works should be done so that people receiving them will glorify God. Christ did His works “in my Father’s name” (John 10:25). Matthew 6:1–4 warns that we should not do good works so that people will praise us. But the ones receiving the benefit of a believer’s good works ought to know they were done in God’s name and credit God for them. They should know that it is because people obey God that they have been helped, not just their “good luck” or getting their share of the country’s wealth.

Jesus taught people to repent and turn to God when He did good works for them (John 5:14; 8:1; Luke 5:32; 13:3). **The best way to be sure that people receive physical help in the name of God along with a message of repentance and forgiveness through Christ, is to do it oneself.** It takes a while to develop discernment as to who is really needy and who is simply skilled at asking for a handout. But that is a valuable skill to learn. It is wonderful when physical help to someone can be combined with the personal teaching and encouragement mentioned above.

There are many Christian charities that promise to provide help in the name of God, but one ought to check and be sure that they are really doing it. The Bible warns of false brethren—“tares among

the wheat” (Matt 13:24–30) and that “the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil” (1Tim 6:10). We should not be surprised when some people who handle a lot of other’s money become corrupt, that they give it to the needy in a less than Christ-like manner, or that they keep too much of it for themselves.

The exact methods of helping people in need vary so much that we will not try to cover them here. They can range from one person helping another needy person to a congregation that pays the expenses of one of their members to go feed the poor and preach the gospel in another country. Wading through government bureaucracy can be the most difficult part of this operation—but thousands of people may get their only view of what God and the Bible is like from such missionaries.

Helping Those Who Are Oppressed

This subject may not seem like a Christian activity to some, but it is found throughout the Bible. Some scriptures are included here:

Speak up and judge fairly; **defend the rights of the poor and needy** (Prv 31:9).

Learn to do good; Seek justice, **Rebuke the oppressor; Defend the fatherless**, Plead for the widow.... Your princes *are* rebellious, And companions of thieves; Everyone loves bribes, And follows after rewards. They do not defend the fatherless, Nor does the cause of the widow come before them (Isaiah 1:17,23, NKJV).

This is what the LORD says: Do what is just and right. **Rescue from the hand of his oppressor** the one who has been robbed (Jer 22:3).

For I know how many are your offenses and how great your sins. You oppress the righteous and take bribes and you deprive the poor of justice in the courts (Amos 5:12).

I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, **I was in prison and you came to visit me** (Matt 25:36).

Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some people have entertained angels without knowing it. **Remember those in prison as if you were their fellow prisoners**, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering (Heb 13:2-3).

May the Lord show mercy to the household of Onesiphorus, because he often refreshed me and was **not ashamed of my chains**. On the contrary, when he was in Rome, he searched

hard for me until he found me (1Tim 1:16-17).

In some countries, especially in dictatorships, there may be little that individuals can peacefully do to help the oppressed. But the United States of America was founded on the basis of the citizen being the highest level of government. Much of the Declaration of Independence is a complaint about injustice by the English King. While many freedoms in the United States have been lost, most citizens still have the right to “petition the government for redress of grievances”, to vote, to be juries, to write letters to publications, to gather information for the oppressed and to visit and encourage them.

The most common thing believers will say is, “I cannot get involved with the government, it does not accept the Bible and it is corrupt.” This is exactly why the USA has its current problems: people who believed the Bible gradually got out of government, and have been replaced, in many cases, by the greedy and the corrupt.

The other common thing people will say is, “What can one person or one little group do?” That question has been answered by what many “one persons” and “little groups” have done. Those who are evil do not like the light shown on them and sometimes one or a few letters to them—or to the press—will cause them to change. People boycotting businesses have caused them to change. Local elections, in some places, have such a poor voter turnout that one local congregation, convicted that they should act together, can change the outcome.

Examples of people who need help abound. Here are a few: pre-born babies (over a million killed every year), abused children of bad parents, abused children in government programs (sometimes taken away from bad parents, sometimes taken away from good ones), mistreated prisoners (private studies indicate half probably should not be there to begin with), people unnecessarily in mental institutions against their will (they frequently have no legal way to get out by themselves), victims of crimes of all types, etc.

This is not everyone’s ministry, but it should not be no one’s ministry. Obviously, those with legal and government expertise can probably help in the biggest way. But many of us could do a lot more to help individuals whom we know. We can pray for them. We can befriend them and talk to them rather than ignore them, as is usually most convenient. We can help them do simple things.

We can spend a few hours to find out something about elected officials to determine which is the most just—according to the Bible. Our discernment might not be perfect, but years of Bible instruction and the Holy Spirit should allow a believer to do a better job than the “average voter” of finding the most righteous candidate. God did command His people to appoint just officials in all their localities (Deut 16:18–20).

The principle of Galatians 6:1 should certainly apply to this service. If someone is becoming like the corrupt politicians, prisoners or others that they encounter in their efforts to help the oppressed, they should stop their efforts to help in order to get their own life in order.

Summary of Reaching Out to Others

There are many other ways to reach out to serve others. The ones listed here do not represent an extensive study of the best ways, but simply methods that most individuals or groups could do if they so decided. **Group projects have a way of brining joy and a feeling of oneness to a group—to work together for a righteous goal and to achieve it.** But if a group’s outreach consists primarily of individual ministries, it is still very important that the members share what happens in those ministries and encourage each other. Encouragement is the main reason stated for assembling together in the book of Hebrews:

Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another— and all the more as you see the Day approaching (Heb 10:25).

Do Not Get Side-Tracked

Once your presence is known in your community or you have an ad in your paper’s church pages or phone book, some people will contact you. There may be invitations to speak, to take part in community programs, etc.—some of which may be very beneficial.

On the other hand, there will always be a certain number of people wanting you to assist their mission. Unfortunately, there will almost certainly be con artists who write or call every church in the paper or phone book trying to raise money. They may claim to be a poor woman with small children deserted by her husband and kicked out of her apartment—or a foreign evangelist who is ready to bring thousands to Christ, but needs a few hundred dollars to keep going. The stories usually sound

good, but unless you have the time to verify that the causes are worthy, it is better not to give to them. No one benefits when a church group gives money to a con artist: the church loses an opportunity to do some real good, and the con artist continues living by his or her evil way.

Gospel preaching in the Third World has an unfortunately high amount of fraud. Dishonest people realize that small American churches like to believe that they have “international missions” and are very happy to send money in exchange for letters, pictures and other apparent evidence of people being fed, helped and converted to Christ. So some make an extravagant living preying on the willingness of others to give and their gullibility in not asking questions. Some of these con artists are actually citizens of Third World countries; others live in wealthy Western countries and simply use low-paid help to answer mail in the “mission” countries.

Some con artists will request money right away: “a few cents per day can feed a hungry person or give them a Bible tract in their native language”. Others will be much more subtle. They will not ask for any money to start with, but ask for you to come to their country to preach the gospel (which you probably cannot do) or to send some free literature, or a few Bibles or Bible-help books. Then they will write and tell you how much good those things did, and ask for other books. In areas with superstition-type religion, religious books have a market value as “charms to ward off evil spirits”—the person who buys them may not be able to read them, but just hope to benefit from whatever “spiritual power” is in them. Even so, the con artists may send handwritten letters of individuals who “have come to know Jesus because of your help”. They may read your literature and tell you how much they agree with your doctrines. Only after a relationship has been built up will they ask you for money for some specific purpose.

Not all requests for assistance are fraudulent. There are people with much work before them and few resources to do it. (I feel that way a lot!) Some ministries asking for help need to at least be encouraged, if not helped. Further complicating the issue are “ministries in the middle”. They really are doing some good work, but they receive a lot more money than they need and spend a lot of it on themselves. Giving to a ministry is a wonderful thing to do, but along with the commitment of money, one must make the commitment of time to

determine if the ministry really is doing a good work for God. The work of a ministry is best verified by going to visit it to see what individuals do there. If one cannot go, it is sometimes possible to talk to an unbiased individual who did. Lacking this, the work of ministries can sometimes be verified by paper documentation.

Many times, it is easy to say, “this looks good, but I have no time to investigate it.” This writer suggests that one simply assist a few ministries that one has time to investigate, and simply write to those others and explain the situation. This is an example of a letter that this author has used:

Dear Friend,

Thank you for your letter. We receive many requests for monetary help for various kinds of ministries and projects—both large and small. We believe that God is working in many places through many people. If you are doing God’s work, we pray that He will bless you and provide the means necessary for you to accomplish His will.

The ministries we are involved in receive essentially enough support to continue their existing work. We do not believe that we have been given the job of evaluating other ministries and projects or to help raise funds for them. The Biblical record and our experience show that most worthwhile ministries start small—God tests people to see what they will do. If the people are serving, the project will grow. When people try to collect a large amount of money first so that they can begin a “big work” later, the work often never seems to be accomplished.

We encourage people to support the work of God with their lives and with their material possessions. We encourage them to give to individuals and groups that they know are doing worthwhile work—it is best if they are geographically close enough so that the “givers” can actually see and be a part of the operation they are helping. Sometimes, that is not possible. When “givers” cannot personally visit the operation they are giving to, we recommend that they either send someone or else obtain a lot of written information about the actual work of the group, how their finances are handled, etc.

Unfortunately, there are too many unscrupulous collectors of money for religious purposes—money that is never used for the purpose intended. International ministries tend to

be the most misrepresented as givers often do not speak the language or understand the culture of the people whom they think they are serving. If you hope to receive help for your project or ministry, we recommend that you distribute a detailed operating plan (including offerings received and how the money was used) to those whom you hope will help you. If possible, provide ways that potential “givers” can independently verify the work you are doing.

If you are striving to serve God with your whole heart, we know that He will bless your efforts and show you His will (Deut 4:9). If you are trying to make yourself important or wealthy, your sin will find you out (Num 32:23).

Sincerely,
[your name]

Again, we need more ministries—especially international ones and good ones. But no one is served by helping fraudulent ministries.

Conclusion

Starting a new congregation is an act of service to others, so that they may worship, have fellowship and teach others. It is not for personal gain or aggrandizement. If we personally still hold the concepts of denominations, “ordained” ministry and corporate churches, we need to study the Bible and history for the truth on the matter, and begin to operate like the first-century church.

There is no “magic formula” for a successful congregation, but people should do what Christ shows them to do through prayer. None of us are doing all that we can do—we are not yet perfect in Christ. The purpose of a local congregation is to encourage the brethren there and to provide a base for “going to the world” in the way God has gifted us.

May God teach and bless you in your plans for a congregation.

This author would appreciate corrections to this work. Such corrections would be best if made in the form of concise information that shows specific problems with this paper. Sometimes I receive large articles or books with a note attached that essentially says “this book shows that some of what you wrote is wrong”. I simply do not have the many hours to figure out these “puzzles”. However, quotes of Bible verses, historical studies or legal cases that show errors in this paper are

very helpful. I will use them in correcting errors for possible future editions. It is my purpose to convey truth, not to win people to my point of

view. I expect to be judged for what I do (2Cor 5:10), and it would be much better to teach truth than error (Jms 3:1).

Extra Items for Specific Situations

Places for Services for Larger Groups

Finding a place to worship is an important decision, but it is not critical in the sense that any mistakes made can be corrected—provided you do not over-commit yourself. A congregation should never think about buying a building until they have successfully met together for a number of months or even years. Do not even sign a long-term rental contract until your congregation is stable. A new congregation's needs may change quickly, or you might not know exactly what they are, yet. You may be offered a cheaper rate for a long-term commitment, but the savings is not worth it if there is any chance that a poor hall choice will divide your group. Even a facility that normally only works with long-term contracts should let you meet there once to “try it out” or give you a short lease the first time.

The type of meeting place you will need depends greatly on the nature of your congregation. Small congregations composed primarily of a small group of brethren can meet in a variety of houses or other facilities and easily inform each other of changes in location. However, others want to visit your congregation without much notice, or if your congregation has begun evangelism, then a stable meeting time and place is important. Also, a building that is centrally located, easy to find and easy to give directions to is important (for example, the *Jamestown Community Center* may have a nice sign and parking lot, whereas room 217 of a large office building may be difficult to find). If possible, avoid meeting in areas that are known for lack of parking, crime, racial animosity, or other kinds of trouble.

Obviously, the meeting room needs to be large enough to comfortably seat all of the brethren with a little space left over for unexpected guests. If someone has to sit on the floor once in a while, do not worry, our Savior taught people while they were sitting on the ground. Seating should be arranged so that people may enter or exit during the meeting with a minimum of disruption. If small children are present, a separate room should be

available for parents to take crying or fussing children that would otherwise disrupt the service. (If you feel that such a room is unnecessary, talk to someone who currently has a child under 2 years old.) Bathrooms should be located where people of all ages can easily get to them.

The facility should be cheerful—both inside and out. It is very hard to be excited about going to a dreary building. Ideally, the meeting room should contain a piano, sound system, speaking stand, and chairs already set in place. These factors should enter into your decision, but not make it since there are ways to work around each of them. If members of your congregation have trouble hearing the speaker, you can write to *Shelter in the Word* for our free article, *Sound Systems for Services* (see address at the end of this booklet).

The following paragraphs list possible meeting places, and the pros and cons of each. When a congregation is looking for a new meeting place, the first thing to do is ask each potential member to check the availability and cost of facilities that they already know about. If a suitable place is not found, next try asking the local chamber of commerce in each city where you might meet. Finally, go to the yellow pages (under halls, churches, clubs, etc.) and begin making some calls.

Homes. These are the obvious choice to get started. They are private, there is little cost, and bathroom, kitchen and “mother’s room” facilities are always there. Nevertheless, these facilities should not be taken for granted: it is a lot of work to clean a house, before and after a service. The host’s cost for water, telephone, heat, air-conditioning, paper towels, tissues, etc. will all probably increase. If one person’s home is continually used for services, the congregation should at least offer to help clean it or to compensate them in some way. (If the host clearly wants to *contribute* his home for services, let him do it.)

Some cities may have zoning ordinances against church meetings in residential areas, though the government usually cannot take any action unless one or more neighbors complain. Obviously, brethren should be careful not to of-

find the neighbors of the host—not using street parking that neighbors normally use and not making excessive noise. **If you live your beliefs, you will want to be a good neighbor.** If your services are creating a hardship for the host’s neighbors, find a solution to the problems you are causing or move somewhere else. On the other hand, if neighbors are complaining primarily to persecute you, you probably do not need to stop. If you state that your meetings are private (not public), but that people who want to worship according to your church covenant are invited, then zoning rules for public meetings probably do not apply. See the section on *Comparison of Two Methods of Operating Local Congregations* beginning on page 34 for more information.

Existing Church Buildings. These buildings are usually designed to do exactly what you want to do and are available in all sizes. Congregations that are short on money are often happy to rent their facilities when they are not using them. The major difficulty with securing the use of an existing church building is religious animosity: people may not want to rent to believers with different beliefs because that would “legitimize them”.

If you approach the issue like this: “We are all trying to do our best to live as we understand the Scriptures and we will not judge each other,” the chances of sharing a building will be greater. When groups actually work together and get to know each other, it is much easier to see how much they have in common—that they are each attempting to follow the Bible, even though they may not agree exactly how.

It is often difficult to know which church groups would be willing to rent their facilities for weekly services. Some groups may simply have too much trouble getting approval from their governing bodies. Others may have too many activities to make room for another group. When one group observes a Sunday Sabbath and the other a Saturday Sabbath, it can be easy to share the same space. Also, this author has heard of a few cases where one group will have morning services, another group will have afternoon services on the same day, and the two share a time in the middle—either for food and fellowship or for singing praise.

Many church buildings have a “fellowship hall” or “classroom” separate from their main “sanctuary”. These rooms are frequently much better for setting up tables and chairs and studying

the Bible in an interactive way. Many congregations are much more willing to rent these rooms than they are to rent their “sanctuary”.

Businesses. Numerous businesses have meeting rooms, classrooms or open-air office space that could be used for a congregation’s services. Most of these businesses are not using this space at all on weekends. Their biggest concern is the security of their business: will everything in the same place each Monday morning that it was Friday at closing? Most businesses will not let a group use their facilities unless someone who works at the business also attends the meetings to make sure that nothing “goes wrong”. Nevertheless, the people who attend your services should think about the businesses where they or their close relatives might find a meeting room. Sometimes, these facilities are made available without charge. Whether charged or not, you will certainly want to make sure that you leave the facility in the same condition that you found it.

Residential Meeting Rooms. Larger apartments, condominiums, trailer parks and retirement homes may have a meeting room that could be used for services. These facilities usually have parking, rest rooms and other essentials quite nearby. They are inexpensive, but usually someone from your group must live there. Before using, be sure that the sounds from any adjacent laundry, game rooms, pools, etc. will not bother the services. Brethren need to be sensitive to the needs and rights of other tenants. If too much parking space is consumed or if adjacent game rooms are monopolized by “children from church” after services, the tenants will rightfully complain.

Community Centers, Schools and Libraries. From 20-person conference rooms to 1000-seat auditoriums, public facilities are often very good and can be inexpensive. Unfortunately, the people who schedule such rooms may have regulations forbidding their use by church groups. The regulations vary greatly from one place to the other, and are often not based upon any law, or on constitutionally questionable laws. If one is denied use of a facility for a Church service, it may help to ask if it is available for Native American, Muslim or Oriental religious use. Supreme court decisions over the last several years have upheld the right for Christians to have equal access to government facilities available to other religions.

On the other hand, it may not be possible to have a “private” meeting in a “public” facility—

which can open up potential problems. Also, consider that some public facilities are hard to reserve on a continuing basis. Civic and school special events take priority over even a regular “renter”. If a science fair, a sports tournament or some other local event occurs when you normally rent the facility, it may not be available.

Clubs and Societies. There are numerous social, partly-political, and partly religious organizations that build halls and may be willing to rent them every week. American Legion, Eagles, Elks, Kiwanis, Knights of Columbus, Lions, Masons, Moose, Odd-fellows, Rotary, and Veterans are examples. Most of them rent their hall as a sideline to defray expenses, and will always put the needs of their own group first (weddings or even parties). Some may have a few annual events that will prevent usage some weeks. Some will have non-biblical symbols and paintings that you may wish to cover up during meetings. Some of these groups have connections with occult and demonism; if brethren in your congregation are offended by them, it would be better to meet somewhere else. Not all of these clubs will be listed in the phone book, but the local chamber of commerce will usually know about them. They frequently have good kitchens, mother’s rooms, and other extras. Make sure several people see the facilities before agreeing to rent them—some have a permanent odor of cigarettes; some are poorly maintained.

Halls for Rent. These facilities are usually more expensive, but dealing with them is straightforward since their owners are in business to make a profit. If you agree to their price and make reservations before other customers, they will usually agree to rent their facility years in advance. There may be extra charges around holidays when hall demand is higher. It is generally better to pay a higher price than to go through the confusion of changing to a different building. Realize, though, that if someone else wants to book the facility for a solid week or more, the owner would not like to refuse them just because a congregation has booked the facility for part of a day. It is important to keep friendly communication open and even ask if there are any fairs or other local events where the facility has been booked solid in the past. The last thing you would want is to show up to your service location, find a convention in progress and a manager who “forgot” that this 2-week convention and your weekly contract have a “point of col-

lision”. A good facility, available 51 weeks of the year, is usually better than a poor one available 52 weeks. But the larger a congregation, the more important is a consistent meeting place.

Hotel and Restaurant Meeting Rooms. These kinds of meeting rooms are easy to find, but relatively difficult to book on a consistent basis. Hotels and restaurants build meeting rooms to attract customers to their main business, not to specifically make money from rentals. A hotel may rent a meeting room for \$100 for one day, but they would much rather give it away free to a convention that uses 50 rooms at \$50 per night. A restaurant would rather have a room full of people ordering food and drinks, than just a room full of people studying. Other difficulties with these types of rooms include noise from other customers, lack of privacy, no “mother’s room” and often a complete prohibition from snacks or pot-luck meals (hotel/restaurant food only). The environment just frequently oriented toward worldliness rather than worship. These rooms may provide a place of meeting in an emergency, but usually do not work well on a long-term basis.

Perceived Problems of Shared-Ministry Congregations

1) **When untrained, unprofessional people are allowed to say whatever they want in a service, false doctrine will be taught.** False doctrine is taught by trained, professional theologians, too. Their training just enables them to make the false doctrine sound a lot more “true”. Learning to discern between false and true teaching is a very important part in the growth of every believer. We all have had practice in doing this—watching television. Many things presented on television are true; but many other things, especially commercials are deceptive or complete lies. Some things we are not sure about. Hopefully, we have learned to extract the good, and ignore the bad. It should be the same way with religious teachers—we should not blindly trust a man, believing that everything he teaches is from God, but listen and test and prove each thing that he says.

2) **Small congregations are “fish-bowls”—everyone knows what everyone else is doing.** Paul instructed: “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. Your attitude should be the same

as that of Christ Jesus” (Phil 2:3). The environment of a local congregation should be such that when one goes astray, another sees it and helps him out (Gal 6:1). Confessing sin to others helps in the process of healing (James 5:16). Christians must know that their Father in Heaven knows everything they do. If they are going to dwell with Him and other believers for all eternity, they must value a close relationship with other believers as a help, not as a hindrance.

3) **People want to identify with something that is greater and bigger than themselves.** This is a good desire, but the answer is that we can identify with the spiritual church of God! The middle verse of the Bible is: “It is better to take refuge in the LORD than to trust in man” (Pslm 118:8). People should be able to identify with the larger body of believers who have obeyed God rather than followed men throughout history. Some of those who obeyed God had less knowledge than we do (they taught doctrines we know are wrong); some probably had more (the Apostles taught by Christ certainly did). It has not been human organizations that God has worked with throughout history, but individuals. We can identify the New Testament church, with the many early Christians who were persecuted by the Romans, with those who fled a state church to maintain their faith, with those who translated the Bible into English and other languages and with those who fought to establish nations where people were free to worship as they best understood.

4) **Local, unaffiliated congregations are unstable and frequently break up.** This is sometimes true. In other cases, they remain stable and grow—sometimes for many decades. Even congregation divisions occur, the long-term effect of a congregation breakup is almost always positive spiritually. People are forced to examine exactly what they believe and why. The stakes are real—they are going to lose some friends. They need to be able to say why they are doing what they are doing. If they make the right decision, they can be joyful that they are suffering for righteousness (Matt 5:10–12; Acts 5:41, 1Pet 4:13–16). When people make the wrong decision and later realize it, it is a great opportunity to learn repentance and to seek the forgiveness of those whom they have wronged.

5) **Young people see small groups as a dead end—with no prospects of finding a spouse within their own local congregation, parents**

fear that they will eventually marry outside the group and leave it. This problem only occurs when people treat their small fellowship like it is the “one true church”. Young people should be encouraged to visit a variety of groups and to seek a prospective spouse with a desire to follow God and the Bible, not one who is committed to an organization of men or a doctrinal statement written by them. This approach opens up the possibility of a great many more prospective spouses compared to joining one of the many denominations. Local congregations should take part in larger, non-denominational Christian activities.

Actual Problems of Shared-Ministry Congregations

1) **Some people come and want to teach, but they have little to say that edifies anyone.** It may take a number of meetings to clearly recognize this problem, but it certainly occurs. Some people will try to dogmatically teach a different doctrine every week. Others will want to talk too much about themselves or largely irrelevant ideas. This is an opportunity to make Christ’s instructions in Matthew 18:15–17 (see page 20) and Galatians 6:1 work. Anyone noticing the problem can solve it. If it cannot be solved privately, it can eventually be brought up in the congregation. Very few people will continue to take up time in a congregation where they are being openly, but lovingly rebuked for doing it.

2) **A person continually tries to teach a doctrine to the congregation which most have studied and rejected.** This is worse than the previous case because he is on a “mission” to teach his doctrine and may continue trying to teach it even when everyone else is obviously opposed to it. “If someone disputes what you teach, then after a first and a second warning, have no more to do with him” (Titus 3:10, NJB). The congregation may simply have to get together and tell the person that if they are going to continue to try to teach their doctrine, that they are not welcome. (I know of an opposite example where a group failed to do this and one by one all of the members dropped out, leaving only the objectionable teacher. They later got back together to form a new group. It would have been much better if they had restrained the unwanted teacher from the first group.)

3) **Services turn into doctrinal arguments, and the unpleasantness outweighs the value of the teaching.** Paul taught: “How is it then, breth-

ren? Whenever you come together, each of you has a psalm, has a teaching, has a tongue, has a revelation, has an interpretation. Let all things be done for edification” (1Cor 14:26). Teaching edifies. Questions and “reading scriptures that appear to disagree with the teaching” edify. But if people are simply repeating the same words over and over—just louder and more emphatically, then it is an argument. Arguments do not edify much. If necessary, they should be continued outside of services. Learning how to gracefully do this is an important part of being a part of a local congregation.

4) **A congregation drifts into eccentricity.** This danger is the opposite of the previous one. It occurs when people agree too much! This is a congregation that has been together for a long time and comes to draw a lot of very precise conclusions about exactly what the Bible says on numerous topics and becomes intolerant to others who understand anything differently. These conclusions may be erroneous or true, but the danger is an emphasis on knowledge rather than bearing fruit. A common cause is a congregation with a few teachers who are largely in agreement and other members who accept almost anything those teachers teach. This is usually coupled with the lack of visitors and new believers attending. A congregation in this state needs a wake-up message to begin concentrating on serving others, rather than their own personal knowledge.

5) **A congregation becomes lukewarm.** This problem occurs when people are getting along well and agreeing. They feel good about their service and enjoy the teaching, music and fellowship there. But they are also tolerant of other’s beliefs. Unfortunately, they are not stirred to share what they have. There are many scriptures about this issue. Anyone who recognizes this condition in their congregation can search them out and read them—or use a short article on the subject, such as our *Wake Up to God!* (See contact information at the end of this article.)

Help for Pastors Who Want to Leave Large Church Organizations

Most pastors who work for big church organizations are very loyal to those organizations. They rely on them for both their paychecks and various support services for their congregation. They may also rely on them for new members who come either as a result of their denominational affiliation

or through their denomination’s evangelism efforts. Pastors usually do not look for doctrinal errors or flagrant sins in their headquarters leadership—and often do not know what to do about them if they do find them.

Nevertheless, there are “corporate pastors” who decide to follow God rather than continue reaping the benefits of being a paid pastor in a large church organization. They realize that Paul taught it was wrong to align oneself with a particular religious teacher (1Cor 1:11-15; 3:1-11). In nearly all cases, these denominational pastors are the most effective people to help their congregations out of denominational groups. People in those groups frequently will not listen to anyone outside their denomination unless their pastor approves. An outsider trying to help the membership would have little chance of being heard.

When a pastor realizes that he has been pointing people too much to an organization rather than to Christ for many years, **I believe the best thing he can do is to restore that which he has taken from Christ—just as a repentant thief would restore what he has taken** (Luke 19:8). He is the ideal person to show those in the congregation where *he* and *they* have been wrong. He can bring up examples from the past with which they are all familiar. A few members in the congregation may be unwilling to change, but any outsider’s efforts to change the congregation are even more likely to produce division.

In church organizations that forbid any open criticism of their leaders and policies, even the church pastor may have a difficult time helping his congregation. He is not free to speak in services about the problems of denominations or teach the biblical solutions. If he does, his organization’s leaders will probably remove him from his congregation and replace him with someone “loyal”—in only a few days.

When a pastor first begins to see the need for a new congregation, he usually privately shares his understanding with a few trusted friends in his group to help determine the best course of action. There are usually other members whom he knows cannot accept his new understanding, so he cannot talk to them. Some people may have a personal disagreement with the pastor and are looking for an excuse to “get him”, or they may be staunch believers in their church’s hierarchy and headquarters. If they see clear evidence that their pastor is disloyal, they will probably call their headquarters

and ask them to investigate. A congregation can quickly become polarized between those who know about the pastor's plans to become independent, and those who do not.

Most pastors would like to avoid this and keep their congregation intact as much as possible when they depart from an organization. The motivation for such can be threefold: (1) so that all can understand the truth of why a change is necessary, (2) so long-time friends will not be separated, and (3) to maintain a large number of contributors so there will be money for needed expenses, including his salary. The first reason is good, the second and third can have elements of good and bad. Christ said that we should not offend "little ones" (Matt 18:6), but also that His teaching would cause division—even in families (Matt 10:34–38). Similarly, Paul said that people can obtain their living by preaching the Gospel (1Cor 9:14), but condemned people who simply saw ministry as a way to make a living (Titus 1:11; 6:5). Church splits frequently produce accusations of bad motives from both sides—whether they are correct or not. It can be difficult for an individual to determine which is true—but can rest assured that God looks on the hearts.

A leader must realize that it may not be possible to **honestly** keep **all** of a congregation together. People should leave an organization because they understand the problems with it and are seeking to give Christ a more active role in their spiritual growth. One should never threaten people with loss of God's blessing or loss of their friends if they do not attend a certain congregation. Possible steps that a pastor might take to remove himself and most of his congregation from a centrally controlled church organization include:

- 1) Privately write a paper or make a tape explaining why a separation is necessary. If a leader cannot logically explain it to himself, he probably cannot explain it to others—and probably should not be doing it. Share this paper/tape only with a few trusted friends who already think in the same way. It may need to be refined based on these brethren's counsel. Pray, fast and ask God if it is His will that they separate from the others.
- 2) Begin teaching from the Bible in your services about the relevant issues. Do not draw conclusions that will clearly contradict the denomination's "headquarters

teaching", but let the Bible speak for itself.


- 3) After this teaching has gone on a few weeks, the church leader must realize that he could be fired by his denomination at any time. Some "loyalists" will complain about anti-headquarters teaching even if it is from the Bible. The leader needs the faith in God or a plan to physically take care of his family if he should lose his job.
- 4) The leader can then begin privately teaching why a split appears necessary to as many in his congregation as he thinks will listen. This must be done in a discerning manner, so as not to stir up those who will not listen to the reasons for splitting, but simply call their headquarters.
- 5) If the leader is not dismissed first, he must eventually plan to leave. This should be done as soon as he realizes that little additional progress is being made in teaching anyone else about the need for a new congregation. The leader should plan a "last day" where he will pass out the paper (or tape) mentioned in point #1 and give a message explaining the issues. Some denominations may take a few weeks to remove a pastor, so he may have several weeks to explain it—but he must be ready to go at any time. There is a great need to pray for love and compassion for others, even though some will probably be angry at this time.
- 6) Mail the paper (or tape) mentioned in point #1 to other members and leaders in your denomination who might be interested. This is not to "attract a following" and create a new denomination, but to properly state your reasons, which are **not** likely to be explained accurately by your former denomination. Members of denominations often will only listen to one of their own ministers—so there is a narrow window of opportunity. Most people will probably discard the paper, but if you are able to help even one, it is probably worth it.
- 7) Start your new congregation in the most peaceable and humble manner possible. Immediately begin to get more of the membership involved in all aspects of ministry so that they will not slip back into the trap of "letting the denomination do it". May God bless your honest efforts.

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