

WHAT LIES BENEATH

By Paul Vieira

“YOU ARE JUST REACTING”

People at times may feel that someone with a message like this one is only reacting to the painful experiences with the church in their own lives. I know that individuals have thought this about me. Even friends and family of mine don't quite understand why I'm not "going to church." They still believe that I am hurt in some way, or that it was because I was burned by the politics within church leadership. I freely admit that in the beginning it was a reaction. If you put your hand on a hot stove, it is a very natural and instant reflex to pull away. The role of reaction is useful if you are in immediate danger. Reaction is also a very necessary part of adaptation, which is a characteristic of living things. We learn from pain and we adjust ourselves accordingly. There would be no change or growth if we didn't respond to our environment. However, once appropriate changes have been made there is no need to keep the wound open.

A negative reaction to a bad experience with church is understandable for a short season, but can be fatal if resentment is coddled. You cannot stay in that place of hurt and anger. It will destroy you and spread to others like a contagious disease. Bono, front man of the band U2, wrote in their song *Peace on Earth*, "They say what you mock will surely overtake you, and you become a monster so the monster doesn't break you." If you hold on to bitterness, your heart hardens and you become the very thing you hate. There comes a point when one has to let it all go and forgive. A friend once told me that "unforgiveness is like drinking poison, but expecting the other person to die." Truly there are too many individuals consumed with anger towards the institutional church. This kind of attitude is not helping anyone, especially those who have it.

I'm also equally misunderstood by people thinking that I just don't like structure. The organization of the church is only a peripheral issue. The real problem lies beneath. It is an evil that exists in the depths of humanity itself and no one is outside its grasp. I am not attacking externals like "Sunday services," "Pastors," "church budgets," "Sunday

school,” “church buildings,” “mega-churches,” or anything to do with size or how congregations typically organize themselves.

Also, I am certainly not preaching that house churches are *the* answer, and that all other forms are unbiblical. It goes much deeper than this. I’m referring to a way of thinking about church that is rooted in carnality and the worst of human tradition. You can still have these in house churches. Changing the structure in and of itself is not the magic cure. If you still think in an old way, meeting in homes is worse than going to church on Sunday. At least in “church” there is a crowd and some live music to keep you awake. Meeting in a house yet still having a “bricks and mortar” mentality is the worst of both worlds.

I learned this the hard way. Years later, since leaving institutional forms of church, I still found that the system was inside of me. The very things I hated lurked within. Getting out of the “organized church” was only half the battle. Getting the “organism” out of me has been nearly impossible to do. This was much the case with the Hebrew slaves that were delivered under the ministry of Moses in Egypt. By the hand of God, Moses was able to lead the people out of Egypt, but was helpless to extract Egypt out of the people. Egypt was more than a place with roads and buildings; it was a system that permeated the hearts of those who had grown up within its walls. I found that even though I was out, the ideas that were engraved upon my mind by religion were very difficult to undo. Fortunately, being free is more than just a possibility. Paul, the apostle, is a perfect example of a man who was once bound by religiosity, but found release by knowing God’s grace.

I too feel liberated. It is truly wonderful. The voices in my head have been silenced. They once ruled my mind, telling me that nothing was ever right. I no longer see others as a means to attaining my secret ambitions. I’ve learned just to love without strings attached. There is no one to please. I don’t really care about what others think of me. I don’t care if I succeed or fail. It doesn’t change how God feels about me. I don’t need to control others and others don’t have a hold on me. I don’t need to perform to be accepted. I can be who I am and be loved as I am. I’m not expecting someone else to draw me into God. I know Him for myself and I tell others around me that they can know Him directly as well. I don’t feel guilty anymore. I trust Jesus’ leadership in my

life even more than I trust myself. He is making me what I always wanted to be. I can rest. I am free.

There are very powerful realities that lie underneath the machinery of “church.” The externals are only the fruit, but the true source of the problem is at the root. It is a spiritual condition that has plagued mankind since the Garden of Eden. It’s the same old thing we find in the world, but masked under the guise of Christianity and religion. The apostle John called it “*the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life.*” (1 John 2:16) In chapter four we spoke of this in the context of the spirit of the world. However, that same spirit lives in the carnality of man, and has its own manifestation in the environment we call “church.” In fact, institutions are all too often the creation of this base nature, giving men an outlet for seclusion and domination.

A pastor once told me that he knew that institutions had a propensity to swing toward evil, but that it could be managed and used for good if we had the character and strength to keep it in check. It reminded me of J.R.R. Tolkien’s *ring of power* from his beloved trilogy. The ring represented something deep inside the hearts of men, the lust for power. No one can resist its pull, for though some would seek to use the ring for good, it would yield its power through that person to inflict great destruction. I believe that all religious systems or institutions bring out the worst in the people who are responsible to maintain them. We are handling something that is out of our control.

PRIDE OF LIFE

First, let us consider how the “pride of life” is reflected in our modern definitions of church. Pride is very difficult to detect for the prideful person. Your pride can be more obvious to others. However, the fact that others notice your pride may only be because your pride is hurting their own pride. Pride runs deep and the best way to recognize it is by isolating the false identities that we hold onto. What do we want to be known for? What are the labels we willingly choose to wear? Quite often, these identities are created to make us feel special and superior to others, which nourishes our pride.

It is also very common to fashion our false identities after people we admire and want to emulate. We tend to idolize successful or powerful people and associate

ourselves with these individuals so that we can feel better about who we are. Although elevating leaders to “god-like” status comes quite naturally to humans, it has been the cause of many downfalls. When this happens in the context of church, things really get messy.

The church in Corinth, of the first century, experienced this firsthand. Paul had to write to this group to address many problematic issues, not the least being division that was caused by idolizing church leaders. This is the main theme in the first four chapters of Paul’s letter to the church. Some were saying, “I’m of Paul;” others said, “I’m of Apollos;” still others said, “I’m of Peter.” There was also an equally divisive group that boasted by insisting, “I’m of Christ.” Here we have believers drawing lines that shouldn’t have ever been drawn. They created artificial identities by associating themselves with their most beloved man of God. In the case of the fourth camp, they took pride in the fact that they didn’t need any human leader at all. The words coming out of their mouth seemed right in saying, “we are of Christ,” and yet the spirit behind it was prideful and sectarian. Believers who have left organized church may fall into this trap and add to the polarizing that is already at work among Christians.

How does all this play out within the church? Church affiliations can also create identities that are completely unnecessary. Why do we feel a need to add to the only identity that really matters? We belong to Christ. We are the sons and daughters of God. We are the body of Jesus, His bride on the earth. Why can’t we allow God to define who we really are, without holding onto these secondary identities? With over thirty-thousand denominations in the world, and the many theological persuasions, the labels are numerous: Calvinists, Armenians, Pentecostals, Baptists, Charismatics, Dispensationalists, are among the limitless number of names we bear as Christians. There are simply too many to list. What kind of Christian are you?

Why do we blur the image of Jesus by subscribing to a particular aspect of the Christian faith, then owning it as though we came up with the idea? Is it because we are “Evangelicals” that we seek to be witnesses for Christ or is it simply because we are followers of Jesus? Is it a “Vineyard” thing to worship using contemporary music, or love the poor, or strive for a balance between word and spirit, or is this all plain biblical Christianity? Are speaking in tongues, prophesying, and healing the sick a “charismatic”

idea, or is this Jesus? These secondary associations are the product of pride that makes us feel important because we are “in” the right group. We’ve got it! We often unconsciously feel superior to other less enlightened Christians, further dividing the body of Christ.

I’ve heard people defend the idea of denominationalism as being God-ordained diversity. I’m all for diversity, but we don’t have to create artificial designations that present a message to the world that Jesus is divided. Unbelievers blame the disunity they see among Christians on the Bible’s apparent contradictions. The world doesn’t understand why we can’t all agree. So, because we can’t agree on its meaning, those outside of church don’t even try to read it. Our disunity is causing people to stumble over the relevance of the written word of God and discrediting Christ.

This goes further than the denominations of Christianity. We also name our individual churches to create distinction from other “churches.” We must draw clear lines. “What church do you go to?” The answer to that question may tell me what kind of believer you are and how we are different from each other. These divisions are artificial. Jesus doesn’t see them when He looks at His bride. They are man-made barriers.

There is no evidence that Jesus or the first apostles named the Christian communities that were started in the early days of the church. They were referred to as “disciples,” or “those who believed,” or “those who followed the Way,” or simply “Christians.” The apostles, in their New Testament letters to believers in specific cities, would simply address them according to where they lived. (For example, “to the church in Ephesus,” or “Corinth,” or to the “church that meets in Philemon’s house.”)

Jesus also rebuked the Scribes and Pharisees for their desire to be seen and honored by men. These religious elite were consumed by spiritual pride and self-righteousness. They wore their labels like a badge and, when in public, loved to be called “Rabbi.” In their case, using this title made them feel elevated above others. They belonged to a higher class made up of religious “guru-like” specialists. These leaders focused on public presence, enjoyed the luxury of the best places at feasts, and occupied the best seats in the synagogue. Their identity was rooted in status and prestige, which manifested itself in the titles they embraced.

But you, do not be called Rabbi; for One is your Teacher, the Christ, and you are all brethren. Do not call anyone on earth your father; for One is your Father, He who is in heaven. And do not be called teachers, for One is your Teacher, the Christ. But he who is greatest among you shall be your servant. And whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted. (Matthew 23:8-12)

Jesus saw through this cultural custom into what lay beneath the surface. Using titles religiously is also common in the church we have today. The concept of a two-class system made up of the higher class clergy and lower class laity is a foundational reality in the organized church. Jesus turned the whole thing upside down when He taught that the greatest is the servant. Humility and servant-hearted devotion to God and others, is the way of the kingdom of God. If pride, which is reinforced through maintaining labels and titles, leads to division, then humility is the source of unity.

I, therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you to walk worthy of the calling with which you were called, with all lowliness and gentleness, with longsuffering, bearing with one another in love, endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all. (Ephesians 4:1-6)

Besides creating disunity, Jesus gave us another significant reason to refrain from the use of titles in the church. In the Matthew passage above, He forbids that we call any other human being “teacher” or “father.” Jesus is addressing our tendency to look to men rather than to God. We already have a heavenly Father, and Christ is our teacher. Why do we seek these things in others, when God is sufficient? Two is company, but three is a crowd. There isn’t room for another when it comes to our own personal relationship with God. He is everything we need, being completely adequate in every way.

Often, the titles we give to leaders are aspects of God Himself, which should not be shared with men. *Reverence* belongs to God alone. Jesus is the Shepherd (or *Pastor*) of the flock of God. Jesus is the *Apostle* and High *Priest* of our confession. (Hebrews 3:1) Individuals, as part of the body of Christ, will flow in these functions to carry on Christ’s ministry on earth. However, Jesus did not endorse taking a ministry gift, which is only an extension of Christ’s own ministry, and use that function as an “honor” title for men to wear. There is a difference between saying that one is a priest, pastor, or apostle,

and actually implementing these ministry descriptions as titles, such as Pastor Tom or Apostle Dan. The “Apostle Paul” never actually referred to himself with this title. Instead, he would open a letter by saying, “*Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God.*” (Ephesians 1:1a)

Some may feel that I am making a mountain out of a molehill. Please know that I’m not trying to be difficult, but only true to what Jesus taught. He instructed that we not cling to titles, especially since Jesus is all in all. There is no need to segregate leadership from the people they lead by carnal methods. We often do this without thinking, in the spirit of religious tradition. These are not harmless traditions but intentional methodology that continues to promote the elevation of leaders, oppression of lay people, and division in Christ’s body. I do not question the motives of those who have the task of leading and maintaining churches. I have good friends, who wear the title of “pastor,” who probably just haven’t really thought about this issue. I’m only asking you to stop and consider what the use of labels may be doing to further separate believers from one another. Let us not be afraid to question what we have known to be “normal” church practice.

As said previously, leaving the institutional church doesn’t ensure that one is free from the pride of life. This evil resides within us, in the recesses of human carnality, even though it is now considered to be crucified with Christ. My pride can be asserted through an “anti-label” or “leaders-shouldn’t-have-titles” stand against others, which would contribute to the growing disunity among believers. If I know anything about this topic, it is only because I speak from personal experience. I have all too often choked on this pride myself. It went with me even after leaving organized Christianity. However, I found that I had a fighting chance to lessen its hold over me when God led me out of the building. As human beings, we often take cues from our environment. We get stuck in a rut and it usually takes a radical shift to cause us to change. With the external reinforcements of the church system now behind me, I had the space to face what was lurking within me.

LUST OF THE EYES

Pride is the backbone of defiance towards God and, in a sense, the source of all sin. The “lust of the eyes” is a natural extension of pride. Jesus was tempted in the

wilderness by the devil with an opportunity to satisfy this base desire. He offered Jesus all the kingdoms of this world, but it would come with a high price. The devil was attempting to lure Jesus into a counterfeit destiny. In fact, Jesus would be given all authority over the kingdoms of the world, but it would come from His Father and the process of suffering and the humility of the Cross would be the pathway. Satan was only seeking to trap Jesus with the same lust that he fell into as the archangel Lucifer. Lucifer was consumed with the notion that he could overthrow God and rule heaven. He wanted to sit upon the throne and have the glory that came with it. Satan was unsuccessful in drawing Jesus into this lust; however, the rest of mankind has always been a much easier target.

The church has its own share of problems in the area of leaders ruling over people as a manifestation of the “lust of the eyes.” Often, groups of people welcome the dominance of a strong leader. This was the case in Israel during the days of the prophet Samuel. As recorded in the eighth chapter of 1 Samuel, the people demanded that Samuel anoint for them a king to rule over them. When Samuel prayed about this, the Lord said, *“Heed the voice of the people in all that they say to you; for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected Me, that I should not reign over them.”*

Until this point, God had led the nation by His own hand. God Himself delivered Israel out of Egypt by ten powerful signs and wonders. The Lord God split the Red Sea open before them, gave them a covenant to define their relationship with Him, and led them faithfully, providing supernaturally for them through the wilderness. He fought their battles for them as they conquered the land that God had promised to them. Israel had a reputation around the whole world that God lived with them as a people and that He was their King. In spite of all this, they forsook God and worshipped the gods of other nations. In time, they came to a point where they no longer wanted God’s personal leadership. *“Now make us a king to judge us like all the nations.”*

The people of Israel wanted to be like the rest of the world. They saw how surrounding countries were led by human kings. As a rejection of God’s leadership, they felt it would be better to borrow the political structure of pagan nations. In the story of David’s first attempt in restoring the ark to Jerusalem, we saw how devastating it could be when believers follow the practices of the world. They placed the ark on a cart, like

the Philistines once did, instead of having it carried by priests. Here too, God's people were looking for a model of how they should be governed by using methods and systems they saw in societies that were alienated from God.

Jesus warned His disciples not to use the Gentile political model as a basis for leadership within the church. In Matthew 20:25-28, the mother of James and John asked Jesus to give her sons a place of greatness in His kingdom. As a part of His response, Jesus pointed to the authority structure of the Gentiles and said, *“You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and those who are great exercise authority over them. Yet, it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to be great among you, let him be your servant.”*

Jesus was not merely addressing certain oppressive leaders, but the entire system of leadership. He generalizes all Gentile lords by this statement. Something broader than the individual is at work here. There is a philosophy of leadership that produces tyrants. This system is built upon the “lust of the eyes.” It is a hierarchical, top-heavy, chain of command that is based upon position and ruled by manipulation. Greatness is measured by political influence, external power, visibility, and prominence. Based on what Jesus has said and what we learn from Israel's request for a human king, I don't believe it is valid to use this type of leadership structure to rule over God's people. *“It should not be so among you!”*

The Lord instructed Samuel to heed to the people's demand, but solemnly warned them. Samuel then carefully described the behavior of the king who would reign over them. As I read his warning in 1 Samuel 8, I can't help but notice how often Samuel in this description used the words “take” and “his.” A king would “take” their sons for “his” army and to plow “his” fields. He would “take” their daughters to be perfumers, cooks, and bakers. A king would “take” the best of their fields and vineyards to give to “his” servants. He would also “take” a tenth of all their resources for his purposes. You see, if there is a man who has a kingdom to build and is consumed by the “lust of the eyes,” then people become the means to his end.

A king needs two things in order to implement and expand his rule: manpower and money. In the church, this same system exists under the shell of ministry and leadership. There is a tremendous amount of pressure to grow your church. Other

pastors would often ask me, “So, how many are you running on a Sunday morning?” In my quest to be successful in ministry, “the lust of the eyes” used this opportunity to cast its spell on me. The people in my church represented the means to which I could accomplish my goals. I needed their service and most of all their tithes. Growing your church means that you can do more. With each new member comes the possibility of increasing the work of ministry and sphere of success. It is a very dark place to live. Most of it lurks in your mind. You would not dare tell anyone that you have plans for them in your overall scheme to rule and conquer.

Once again, my emphasis is on what drives the activity, not criticism of the activity itself. Although I believe that a system of church that requires budgets, board meetings, hierarchical leadership structure, departments, committees, and other methods of governance is rooted in the quest to control people and resources, it is only a by-product of something sinister within human beings. The root of the tree is what determines the fruit. The lust for power and money is innate. I took this same mentality with me into our house church. I wanted to grow a massive house church network. However, it was the same “lust of the eyes” that polluted my relationship with other believers walking with me. I needed to get out of the organized church to see that this evil resided in me. I had no hope of dealing with it in the context that I was once in.

“Lust of the eyes” can be more subtle than what I am describing. It simply wants something that others have because of a lack of trust in God’s provision. Most pastors are not looking to be rich or famous. They often struggle to pay the bills and support their family. The temptation is to look to the people to provide. Control and manipulation tactics are implemented to ensure that people behave in a manner that makes leaders successful. This is why institutions are created: control. In the church, we may even back these tactics up with Scripture to legitimize our actions. It is very dark, and like me, some may be led out to face that darkness within.

LUST OF THE FLESH

The “lust of the flesh” is the other side of the coin. It is a form of control that “lay people” can have over their leaders. “If it is my money and service you require, then you will have to meet my needs.” “Lust of the flesh” is self-centered and focused on self-

gratification. What will I get out of this? What are you doing for me? The first priority of most churchgoers is to find a place where they can be fed. Does church feel good? Does the worship leader do the songs that I like? People are looking for the church that makes them happy. Unfortunately, staying happy doesn't usually last very long.

As a pastor of a church, I could feel the pull of this lust coming from people in the congregation. I felt that if I didn't perform right, they could withdraw what I needed from them. Leaders fear their people leaving and taking with them the resources they possess. As a result, pastors are jumping through hoops to please and satisfy their congregations. It is a horrible cycle of lust on both sides.

Israel wanted a king to replace God. This was a problem they faced from the beginning. Even in the days of Moses, the people remained at a distance while Moses talked to God as a friend. They were happy to have a man bring them God's word, instead of hearing God for themselves. Not much has changed today. Many church attendees are quite satisfied to have someone else study the Scriptures for them. They are happy to listen to a man or woman reduce Christianity to a set of life principles and values.

What would happen if all the props were removed and each believer had only their own personal relationship with God to stand on? What if believers were forced to search the Scriptures for themselves because otherwise, they would starve? Is "church" meeting a need in you that God wants to meet directly? Have you ever considered fasting from "going to church" just to see who or what it is you depend on? Do you think it is viable to leave "organized church" to find God?

"WHO IS YOUR COVERING?"

The notion of a person leaving church altogether instantly conjures a fear that this person will fall away from God. How will they manage without a proper "covering?" This is a question that is often posed to anyone gathering outside the limits of an institutional or organized body. What do people really mean when they ask this question? Does this question have biblical merit? How do believers, assembling together outside the organized church, keep from falling into error?

Where does this idea of “covering” come from? Even if the use of the word itself is unfamiliar, there seems to be an almost universal understanding of this concept found with most churchgoers. This notion of “covering” maintains that Christians are protected from doctrinal error and moral failure when they submit themselves to the authority of another believer or Christian organization. If this is true, how do we explain the moral failure and doctrinal error that continues to run rampant in our religious institutional structures?

People trust and depend on the system to a fault. Many do not know the Scriptures for themselves, but simply believe every word spoken by the man behind the pulpit. We give our responsibility, to discern and know truth, over to others in authority over us, who are there to “cover” us. The blind continue to lead the blind.

First, let’s look at the word “covering” itself. Surprisingly, the word appears once in the entire New Testament, and it is used in connection with a woman’s head covering in 1 Corinthians 11:15. Paul encourages the women to keep this cultural norm that distinguishes them from men. This physical head covering **seemed** to symbolize a healthy relationship to her husband. When we come to the Old Testament, the word “covering” is used sparingly, and always in reference to a piece of natural clothing or an overlay of some sort. However, we use this word more extensively and in ways beyond the scope of Scripture. “Who is your covering?” is simply not a very biblical expression.

So then, what do people really mean when they ask this? If questioned, most Christians would rephrase it by asking, “To whom are you accountable?” I think every believer would agree that we all should be accountable to someone and that this is a primary litmus test in measuring the authenticity of a church or ministry. However, we still have to ask ourselves, is this idea also biblical? This leads us to another shocking discovery: the Bible never remands “accountability” to human beings. It consigns it exclusively to God alone. (Matthew 12:36; 18:23; Luke 16:2; Romans 3:19; 14:12; 1 Corinthians 4:5; Hebrews 4:13; 13:17; 1 Peter 4:5) How would one react if you were to answer this question biblically: “I am accountable to the same person you are - God!”

I believe in the accountability that can happen as believers walk together in relationship, but not because a person or organization is in a position over me. In addition, let us not be too overly confident in the process of accountability between

brother and brother. This is how it usually goes: One person has the task of watching how the other behaves in a certain area of life. Their responsibility is to hold that person accountable, ask the awkward questions, and talk to them when they mess up. This is very flawed, in my opinion. It is an attempt at changing behavior from the outside.

The Old Covenant tried to overcome sin externally. Those under the Law had to work hard at trying to observe what it commanded. They failed miserably. The Law was outside them. The New Covenant is better because God writes His law on the inside of us. Jesus comes to us from within and empowers our hearts to change. He lives His life through us. The idea of accountability to another person is trying to deal with temptation and sin externally. It can't change the heart.

I may, for example, ask you to hold me accountable in my tendency to use profanity. My intentions are good, but the method is faulty. Will I stop swearing because you are going to ask me about it? How does this deal with the root of the problem? All we are doing is exerting our combined efforts of willpower to remove the bad fruit in me, but as long as the root is there, the fruit will grow back. Inevitably, I will be tempted to make sure that you never see me stumble, but in my heart nothing has changed. This incites hypocrisy and guilt. It is based on a fear of man and not a fear of God. Are we more likely to stop this behavior because a man is watching? There has to be an inward change that comes from the power of God's grace. Real transformation comes from within. The axe must be laid to the root of this tree.

Having said all this, the Scripture *does* instruct us to live with one another in such a way that we change and overcome evil together. We will explore this soon.

What are we really talking about here? I have a suspicion that this question of "covering" goes deeper than "accountability." What I believe people are really asking (probably not consciously) is, "Who controls you?" As I've already pointed out, the religious system is based on control. These "higher" authorities can say, "Hey, you can't do that!" or, "Don't proceed without passing it by us."

It's like this: everyone must answer to someone higher in the chain of command. The lay people are "covered" by the pastor, the pastor is "covered" by a denominational headquarter, mother church or some prominent Christian leader (who appears to be on a

higher plane). Tracing your accountability to a higher authority means you are being protected by that authority.

Now if you follow the logic through to its end, then who “covers” the mother church, denominational headquarter, or Christian worker? At this point, some would say it is God who “covers” them. My question is, “If God ‘covers’ these higher authorities, then couldn’t God directly ‘cover’ the lay people?” Even more than being faulty logic, this God-Denomination-Clergy-Laity model violates the teaching and spirit of the New Testament.

PLEASE DON'T HEAR WHAT I'M NOT SAYING

I'm not saying that there should be no leaders in the church. I believe that we need leaders, but not just any kind. Those passages that speak of elders, overseers and pastors do tell us some very crucial and defining characteristics of godly leadership. Elders are the more mature ones in our company that have gained the trust of the rest. They model “kingdom” living and walk in the fruit of Jesus. They care about others like a parent would care for a child. The Holy Spirit Himself has made them to watch over the rest and they live life *among* the brethren, not over them.

Because of this great responsibility of watching, protecting, and caring for people in loving relationships, they will give account before God. We are to respond to these ones by recognizing and esteeming them, receiving and respecting them, and being open to their admonishment. We are not to resist them or bring sharp accusations against them without solid evidence. It is wise for us to not make their responsibility any heavier than it already is. (Acts 20:28; Titus 1:5-7; 1 Peter 5:1-4; 1 Corinthians 16:13-18; 1 Thessalonians 5:12, 13; Hebrews 13:7, 17; Philippians 2:25-30; 1 Timothy 5:1, 19)

Also, I am not encouraging believers to live isolated from other believers. Hebrews 10:24, 25 says, “*And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching.*” What is the “*assembling of ourselves together*”? Is it church on Sunday? Well, it can be. However, church is where two or three are gathered together in Christ. Church is not an organization. In fact, Jesus did not start an organization, institution, denomination, or

even a religion for that matter. He began a movement that hinged on the idea of a community of His followers in fellowship and doing His ministry together.

The writer of Hebrews spoke of believers “*exhorting one another,*” especially as the Second Coming approaches. The need to meet together will increase as we get closer to the end. The author of Hebrews also wrote, “*But exhort one another daily, while it is called ‘Today,’ lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin.*” (Hebrews 3:13) All it takes is one day or moment for sin to harden my heart. The encouragement that comes from fellowship with other believers can help keep our hearts tender and free from the entrapment of sin. We need each other daily as the early church knew so well. “*So continuing daily with one accord...*” (Acts 2:46a) This is describing a community of friends, literally gathering every day, and not just merely for a once a week service.

The word *adelphoi*, translated “brethren,” appears over 300 times in the New Testament and 134 instances in Paul’s writings alone. By contrast, “elders” appears in Paul’s letters five times, “overseers” four times, and “pastors” only once. Although leadership is there, it seems to me that the bulk of responsibility for pastoral care, teaching, and ministry rests on the shoulders of all the brethren. The Scriptures paint a beautiful picture of people living with such love and devotion to one another, that the need for any forced systems of accountability becomes obsolete. Loving relationships are the organic substitute for institutional structures. In the context of love, we are told to confess our faults to one another and bear with one another. There is no judgment in this place. There is understanding, grace, and believing the best about each other.

SO HOW DO WE KEEP FROM ERROR?

As previously stated, we can feel a false sense of security being under the "authority" of an organized body. Certainly, this does not make us exempt from falling into error. Are believers safer because of a connection to an organized body? Often there exists this idea that assembling outside the walls of organized religion exposes us to the danger of becoming a cult. Cults tend to idolize men and seclude themselves, thinking that they are the only ones with the truth. I see degrees of these same characteristics in evangelical denominations and churches. Being under the authority of the organized

church does not necessarily keep you safe from error. In fact, I believe it can be even more dangerous at times.

Historically, it has been the organized church that has persecuted genuine moves of God in any given generation. Jesus was considered dangerous and a heretic. So were Martin Luther and the many other reformers throughout our Christian history. What about cults such as the Mormons or the Jehovah's Witnesses? They are definitely under authority and accountability, yet grossly deceived in their distorted theology of Christ.

Jesus said that the religious leaders of His day were in error for two reasons: (1) they did not know the Scriptures, or (2) the power of God. (Matthew 22:29) The Scriptures are able to make us wise for salvation through faith in Christ. The Scriptures are useful for doctrine, reproof, correction, and instruction in righteousness. (2 Timothy 3:15-17) Each believer must study the Scriptures for themselves. We must learn not to just take someone else's word on it. Often, verses can be taken out of context and the Bible can be made to say whatever the preacher wants it to say. We must take responsibility in learning the truth for ourselves. I truly believe that anyone with an authentic relationship with Jesus can know what the Scriptures are saying and how to apply them. Jesus will open up our understanding that we might comprehend the Scriptures. (Luke 24:27)

We also should not ignore the fact that there are equipping ministries and gifts among us. These are men and women who can teach and instruct in the word of God, who are called of God. They are gifts to Christ's body. They are here to help the rest and prepare every believer to be a student and teacher of the word themselves. As in the early church, all these ministries can freely flourish outside the walls of institutional Christianity, in the context of authentic faith communities (i.e. groupings of Christians with meaningful relationships).

Also, the Pharisees fell into error because they did not know the power of God. Do we underestimate the ability of the Holy Spirit to be able to keep us on track? Look at the church in Thessalonica. Paul probably spent only three months establishing this new group of believers. This means that the oldest believer in the church was only three months old. Paul was sure that his labor was in vain, until he sent Timothy there to

investigate what was left of the church. Surprisingly, Timothy found the church strong in faith and love and thriving. (1 Thessalonians chapters 1 & 2)

We have received the Spirit of God, who makes us know “...*the things that have been freely given to us by God.*” (1 Corinthians 2:12) He is capable of this and much more proficient than we could ever be. Why do we feel that we are safer in the hands of men than in the hands of God? There must be a fundamental belief that the clergy has an ability to know the truth more than the average person does. This is reminiscent of the Dark Ages, when it was believed that only the priests could read and really understand the mysterious message of the Bible.

In the first chapter of the book of Ephesians, Paul prays for the believers to be given “*the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Him.*” He goes on in verses 18 to 23 to say:

“...*the eyes of your understanding being enlightened; that you may know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints, and what is the exceeding greatness of His power toward us who believe, according to the working of His mighty power which He worked in Christ... He put all things under His feet, and gave Him to be head over all things to the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all.*” (emphasis mine)

The Spirit of God desires to open our understanding to the fact that there is great power working on our behalf. It is equal to the power that raised Jesus from the dead. The Holy Spirit has taken residence in those who have put their trust in Christ. The Spirit also lies beneath the surface of our skin, in direct opposition to the wayward urges of our carnality. I trust in the Spirit’s ability to keep me on track, even with all my weaknesses. Remember, Jesus promised that the Father would send the Holy Spirit and that He would lead us into all truth. (See John 14:16-18, 25, 26; 15:26; 16:5-15) We were not left as orphans.

Jesus occupies the highest authority. From that elevated position, Jesus, as Head, determines the activity of His body. You and I are directly connected to that Head. Jesus' sheep know His voice. He exercises the power to guide us in the journey. We fall into error only when we don’t recognize and submit to His leadership. However, He is committed to taking us through to finish the course. God has something invested in us.

You can be sure that God is able to keep you in truth. With confidence, Paul wrote, “*I am persuaded that He is able to keep what I have committed to Him until that Day*” (2 Timothy 1:12) and, “*Being confident of this very thing, that He who had begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ.*” (Philippians 1:6)