

THE UPWARD CALL

*Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet;
but one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead,
I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God*

IN CHRIST JESUS.

(Philippians 3.13-14 NASB)

#02-0810

FEBRUARY 8, 2008

ASSEMBLING TOGETHER

[PART 1 — LIFE]

Not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some.... (Hebrews 10.25 NASB)

This verse is often used to preach to the so-called *unchurched* that they must “go to church,” that is, they must go to some organized meeting. The first time I heard this word, I wondered: What in the world do they mean by *unchurched*? I had been led by the Lord for over a decade and never heard such a term. Did I miss something in my reading of Scripture? After all, aren't we, as the Lord's people, the *ecclesia* (church), which is His body? Isn't the *ecclesia* about people, not about meetings? When we believe, don't we become part of the living body of Christ, which, according to Paul, is the *ecclesia* (church)? Doesn't the *ecclesia* refer to people who are called-out and who simply gather together? It took me only a matter of minutes to realize that the word *unchurched*, and for that matter, what many call “going to church,” deals with what I would call the *institutional* Church, with a capital “C,” because this word has taken on a meaning foreign to the word from which it is translated, *ekklesia* (*ecclesia*).

Thinking about the term *unchurched* prompted me to write this series on assembling or gathering together *in* Christ.

I am particularly burdened over what I sense has happened to Christianity in our day. As I listen to what is being preached, which I readily admit is limited since no man can truly know all that is being preached in our day, I am not only struck by what is preached and taught but also by what is not.

However, very recently, I was encouraged to hear a well-known pastor in our area preach that the church is not an institution or an organization but a living organism. Its purpose is not to have many programs and activities but to have life. When the Lord's people come together, it must be for life and not for the purpose of merely doing things. After all, Christ is *in* us, and we are *in* Christ. Interestingly, I had just completed this series, as well as addressing some other issues on this very topic. So all I could say was “amen” to this brother's preaching.

Personally, I cringe when I hear the term *unchurched*, for it is unscriptural, not to be found in Scripture. It has been created based on what I would call an *institutional mindset* by those who unwittingly have made the Church an institution not much different from the institutions of man.

As I did some research, I discovered several definitions for the word *institution*. Putting them together yields a three-part definition. It is 1) an organization founded and united for a specific purpose, especially for a social, educational, or religious purpose; 2) a custom that for a long time has been an important feature of some group or society; 3) an establishment consisting of a building or complex of buildings where an organization for the purpose of some cause is situated. The Smithsonian Institute, which houses old relics, is probably the best example of an institution. In my mind, it is an institution that specializes in things that gather dust and have no life. MIT or the Massachusetts Institute of Technology obviously considers itself an institution of higher learning. If one checked a directory of national organizations, without doubt, there would be many organizations listed that call themselves institutions. Many call marriage an institution. The Romans Catholics call their Holy Eucharist an

institution. The Vatican is definitely an institution. Some denominations consider themselves an institution. After all, they consider themselves part of a religion (so-called Christian religion); they have established customs or traditions that they have done for centuries without any questioning of the source or the reason (traditions of the fathers); and they occupy a building that they call the church, some of which are filled with icons to the dead and some of which are similar to a shopping mall with coffee shops and, in one case, even a McDonalds.

I believe with my whole heart that the ecclesia, which is the body of Christ (or what many call the church), is not an institution; it is a living organism of many members that is being conformed to the image of its Head and is the Head's representation on earth to reveal His life and love through their relationship with their Head, as well as with each and every member of His body.

Now, technically, a living organism is an organization, for it is made up of many parts that are highly systematized. For a time, I used to say that the ecclesia is not an organization; it is an organism. I have since seen that this is not correct, for an organism is very organized and, as such, could be called an organization. However, this does not mean that it must look like an organization created by man; one with officers, members, charters, committees, programs, buildings, and the list goes on. No one would call the human body an organization structured like man's organization, so why should we model the ecclesia, which is a spiritual body, after man's concept of an organization? We should not and yet many do. There are churches that have a president and trustees that are like a board of directors. Some form committees to screen potential candidates to lead them. There are even Christian how-to-books on organizing and managing the church. What happened to holding fast the Head and being led by the Spirit?

Now, I imagine some would argue that this is much ado about nothing and that there is nothing wrong with the church being an institution or being organized like organizations of the world. If life and love, and being led by the Spirit are the hallmarks of the church, then I would whole heartedly agree. However, it seems that the institution hinders and, in fact, replaces the very life and love that is to be manifested through the members of the body of Christ. The institution overtakes the real meaning of the ecclesia, which is the body of Christ. After a while, although it probably does not take all that long, the pastors or elders are institutionalized in their thinking, and they find themselves defenders of the institution, which they represent and which, often, gives them their livelihood.

In other words, they think institutionally rather than spiritually, according to the mind of Christ. For me, the proof that one is part of a religious institution rather than part of a living relationship with a living Head is seen in how the members of the organization respond to difficulties that might arise within or without the organization. When trouble comes, do they seek the Lord with a heart's desire to hold fast to the Head, which is Christ, or do they seek to defend the institution? When challenges come up against the thing that supports them, they defend it rather than holding to Christ the Head and allowing the spirit of God to direct them in word and action. Again, Christ is the Head of His body, and, as Paul exhorted, we are to hold fast to the Head (Ephesians 1.22-23; Colossians 2.19).

The institution also takes on a corporate mindset. It takes on an emphasis rather than laying hold of Christ alone. By this I mean that those who are very much a part of the institution think mostly on the lines of the institution, which in many cases is what is spoken from the pulpit or from those who lead it, or what is written in creeds or charters. The danger is that if there is something off (e.g., error) in the corporate mindset, then the whole company of believers will be off as well and few will see the error. Those who have some spiritual discernment and see what is happening and try to offer some insight to others will, most likely, find themselves on the outside looking in, for few will be willing to consider what they have to say. If this is what being *churched* is all about, then it would be better to be *unchurched* because it squeezes the very life out of people. As for me, I prefer life!

I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly (John 10.10 NASB).