

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)

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ASSEMBLING TOGETHER

[PART 2 – LOVE]

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

Part one of this series dealt with the unscriptural term *unchurched* and the concept of manmade institutions and organizations. The point is that what many call *the church* is more man's invention than God's. The *ecclesia* is the body of Christ, a living organism joined with its living Head, the Lord Jesus. However, man has gotten hold of what is meant to be spiritual in nature and made it into something of man. Instead of seeing the *ecclesia* as a spirit-led people joined together *in* Christ and Christ *in* them, many have taken the *ecclesia*, called it *the Church*, and fashioned it after the institutions and organizations of the world, resulting in it looking very much like the things of this world. Such a thing goes totally against how Paul exhorts us: Seek above where Christ is. Be disposed to above not to that on the earth, for your life is hid together with Christ in God (see Colossians 3.1-3). If we are disposed to above where Christ is, then how can we build something on earth that looks like an earthly institution? We cannot and should not, and yet, many have done such a thing.

Now, an *institution* can be defined as an organization founded and united for a specific purpose, especially for a social, educational, or religious purpose. Given this definition, we need to ask ourselves if the *ecclesia* is an organization for religious purposes. This leads to the question: What is religion? *Religion* refers mostly to outward forms of piety, ritual, worship, and tradition. Strong's Concordance defines it as "ceremonial observance." Probably, the best example of this is Judaism; however, there are some so-called Christian denominations close on its heels as well. Is this what the *ecclesia*, which is the body of Christ, is all about? Did Christ die and send forth the spirit of truth to form a religion? Have His people been joined to Him as the Head because He desired an institution of outward piety, ritual, worship, and tradition? I don't think so! He did not come to form a religion; He came to form a relationship, a love relationship specifically with His body and, eventually, with all mankind at the consummation of the eons. Consider the heart of Jesus' words.

"My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me...." (John 10.27 NASB)

"A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another." (John 13.34 NASB)

"If you love Me, you will keep My commandments." (John 14.15 NASB)

"If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our abode with him." (John 14.23 NASB)

"Just as the Father has loved Me, I have also loved you; abide in My love." (John 15.9 NASB)

The common link between each of these verses is love, and love speaks volumes of relationship, not organization, not an institution, and definitely not religion. In addition, how can one hear the voice of the Shepherd unless one is related to the Shepherd? **I know them, and they hear Me, and they follow Me!** This is relationship, not religion.

When I was about 7 years old, my grandfather died. I remember going to his funeral service and observing this rather overweight priest wearing a white robe, walking up the aisle with this huge ball of

burning incense; at least to a 7 year old, it all looked big. There were big puffs of smoke billowing out of this thing he wafted in the air that looked like a big tea ball, and this odor filled the whole building. This is what I call religion. Do you know what it did to me? It made me sick to my stomach, and I had to leave the building. I always thought it was the incense, but after all these years, I wonder if it had something to do with my aversion to religion, at least as the world sees it.

I also recall when I took a business trip to Turkey. The company that hosted the meeting took us on a day trip to the ruins of Ephesus on the Aegean Sea. It was remarkable to see the ruins of this once grand city of marble buildings and idol worship. However, what struck me was another attraction in the area. I don't recall the so-called historical details surrounding this place, but it supposedly had something to do with John, or perhaps even Mary. What I do recall quite vividly was walking into this structure (cave or building?) that was purported to be some sort of holy shrine. It was a very dark and dank place, both physically and spiritually, with all these candles burning, which had darkened the walls with wax and soot. The people that tended this shrine looked like they were from a dark and dank place as well. It was like the dead tending to the dead. This is religion, and it made me sick as well; but only this time, it was a spiritual sickness. I left that place groaning in my spirit.

By the way, according to James, there is a pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father: **to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world** (James 1.27 NASB). Somehow, what most people call religion in our day doesn't even match up to this definition. On the other hand, there are many who see religion as decrees that say do not handle, do not taste, and do not touch. Paul had an answer for this type of religion: **These are matters which have, to be sure, the appearance of wisdom in self-made religion and self-abasement and severe treatment of the body, but are of no value against fleshly indulgence** (Colossians 2.23 NASB).

Religious institutions take on a life of their own that defends itself when challenged. But this life is not spiritual life and often leads to death. It becomes like a museum of dusty things that have no life. People walk by them and look at them, but they have no life or love to offer. In other words, the institution overtakes true life and love, and replaces it with creeds, positions, titles, committees, and a host of things patterned after the organizations of the world. Religious institutions are sectarian.

The religious institutional mindset says, either by word or by action: "tithes to me or you are a thief," "sit in the pew every Sunday or the devil is going to get you," "there is a mediator between you and Christ the Head, and it is the pastor (or whatever title is given to the leader)," "sign your name to our creed so that we know that you are with us, or else you are not part of us," "don't challenge what comes from the pulpit, for touch not the anointed," "walk the aisle and become a member of our church," "we have a name and it means we are different from the other Christian groups out there," and "we don't need to be related to any brothers and sisters outside our church."

What is the heart of the matter of our assembling together? It is love! It is to express love and to be loved. Love is what builds up. Love is what matures us to be like Christ, to be full of Christ.

And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ; until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ. As a result, ... speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all aspects into Him who is the head, even Christ, from whom the whole body, being fitted and held together by what every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love. (Ephesians 4.11-16 NASB)