

LETTER NINE

A Place We Attend—or a People We Are?

Recovering the Identity of Christ's Ecclesia

Words shape understanding. Understanding shapes identity. Identity shapes mission.

Does the Word Really Matter?

At this point in our examination, does it really matter whether we call ourselves the church or the Ecclesia? Is this merely a debate about vocabulary, or has the way we use language contributed to a profound shift in identity?

Jesus declared:

“I will build My church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.” —Matthew 16:18

The Greek word translated “church” is *ecclēsia*. Its ordinary meaning is an assembly, gathering, or congregation. It could describe a civic assembly, the gathered people of Israel, an unruly crowd, a local Christian congregation, or the whole community belonging to Christ. Context determines its particular use.

The English word church followed a different linguistic path, through words associated with what belongs to the Lord. It is not an evil or illegitimate word, and generations of faithful Christians have used it to describe both God's people and their gatherings.

The problem is not the word itself. The problem is what the word has come to mean in common usage.

We say:

- “I am going to church.”
- “Our church is on Main Street.”
- “How was church today?”
- “We are looking for a new church.”

Without intending to, we can reduce the people of God to a place, a weekly event, an organization, or a product selected according to preference.

The New Testament ecclesia is never a building. It is a people called together by God, gathered around Jesus Christ, indwelt by the Holy Spirit, and sent into the world.

The issue is not whether Christians may use the word “church.” The issue is whether the word has trained us to think of a place we attend rather than a people we are.

Christ Builds a People

In Matthew 16, Jesus says, “I will build My ecclēsia.” The language of building is architectural, but what He builds is not a physical structure. He builds a covenant community.

The apostles develop this image:

“You also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood.” —1 Peter 2:5

Christ gave leaders “to equip His people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up.” —Ephesians 4:12

The temple is alive. Its stones are people. Its cornerstone is Jesus. Its purpose is not to elevate an institution but to form a mature body capable of representing Christ.

Buildings, legal organizations, denominations, and programs may serve that people. They can provide continuity, accountability, resources, and places to gather. But they are tools; they are not the Ecclesia itself.

When the tool becomes the identity, priorities change. Success is measured by attendance, budgets, campuses, staffing, programs, and institutional growth. Those measurements may reveal something useful, but they cannot tell us whether people are becoming mature disciples or whether a community is being served by the presence of Christ.

Christ did not promise to build our institutions. He promised to build His people.

When Attendance Replaces Identity

What happens when “church” becomes something we attend rather than something we are?

- When church becomes principally a place, ministry belongs to those who operate it.
- When church becomes principally an event, participation can give way to observation.
- When church becomes principally a program, discipleship becomes one option among many.

- When church becomes principally an institution, preserving the institution can eclipse serving the Kingdom.
- When church becomes principally a product, believers become consumers evaluating religious experiences.

None of this means gatherings, sermons, programs, or institutions are unnecessary. The New Testament commands believers not to neglect gathering. Teaching, worship, prayer, fellowship, the Lord's Supper, discipline, and mutual encouragement require embodied community.

The concern is identity. If I see myself mainly as an attendee, I will expect someone else to minister. If I understand myself as a member of Christ's body, I will arrive ready to receive and to contribute.

Before we can recover our mission, we must recover our identity.

When Pastors Became Professionals

In the 1980s, I became part of a movement that sought to recover what we believed was first-century Christian life. We met in homes, schools, and rented facilities. We emphasized freedom of worship, spiritual gifts, small groups, discipleship, strong families, and biblical teaching.

Yet something unexpected happened. Although we thought of ourselves as organic and distinct from established denominations, we gradually developed our own institutional culture.

We dressed alike. We carried similar briefcases, Bibles, notebooks, and teaching materials. We attended the same conferences, adopted similar programs, and learned a recognizable ministry language.

One day it became unmistakably clear: we had become professional pastors in a new and upcoming denomination.

Professional preparation is not inherently wrong. Pastors should study, develop competence, act ethically, and handle their responsibilities with excellence. Congregations may appropriately support those who devote substantial time to teaching and care.

The danger appears when pastoral ministry becomes a profession performed for religious consumers. Leadership becomes elevated, the distance between clergy and laity widens, and ordinary believers conclude that significant ministry belongs to specialists.

Our pattern became simple:

The pastor ministers. The people attend.

We said we were equipping the saints, yet much of our energy went into producing ministry experiences for them. We advertised a restoration of New Testament Christianity, but much of our growth came from

attracting believers dissatisfied with other congregations rather than reaching people who had never encountered Christ.

I do not say this to condemn the people with whom I served. I include myself in the examination. We were sincere, and God genuinely worked among us. But sincerity did not prevent us from recreating the institutional patterns we believed we had escaped.

We did not intend to institutionalize the work of the Holy Spirit. Yet the Spirit could gradually be treated as a welcome visitor to our services rather than the indwelling presence transforming and sending His people.

The New Covenant Dwelling Place

Under the Old Covenant, God's presence was associated uniquely with the tabernacle and Temple. People traveled to a sacred place where God had chosen to make His name dwell.

The New Covenant brings a revolutionary fulfillment. Jesus identifies His own body as the Temple: "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days" (John 2:19–21). Through union with Him, His people also become God's dwelling:

- "You together are that temple" (1 Corinthians 3:16–17).
- The believer's body is a temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:19).
- Living stones are built into a spiritual house (1 Peter 2:5).
- Jew and Gentile are built together into a dwelling for God by the Spirit (Ephesians 2:19–22).

This does not make physical gatherings unimportant. It changes why and how we gather. We do not enter a building to bring God down into an otherwise empty place. The people in whom God dwells assemble to worship, listen, discern, encourage, correct, equip, and send one another.

The mystery is "Christ in you, the hope of glory" (Colossians 1:27).

The building may house the gathering, but the gathered people are God's house.

New Wine and Useful Wineskins

Jesus warned against putting new wine into old wineskins. New wine expands as it ferments; a brittle skin cannot stretch and will burst (Matthew 9:17).

The immediate context concerns the newness of Jesus' Kingdom and the inadequacy of forcing it into inherited religious expectations. We should not turn the parable into a rejection of every structure. Even new wine requires a wineskin.

The lesson is that structures must remain flexible enough to serve the life God gives. An organization becomes dangerous when it exists primarily to preserve itself, suppresses the gifts of the body, or treats the movement of the Spirit as a disruption to the program. If it exists to serve and build itself to the abdication of the mission to disciple nations.

Congregational forms should help people worship, mature, participate, and serve. When they prevent those purposes, they require honest evaluation and, where necessary, change.

The wineskin was never the life. Its purpose was to carry the wine without restraining its work.

Every Member Contributes

Paul gives a revealing picture of Christian gathering:

**“When you come together, each of you has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation. Everything must be done so that the church may be built up.” —
1 Corinthians 14:26**

Paul is correcting disorder, not prescribing that every gathering must follow the same spontaneous format. Yet his assumption is unmistakable: believers contribute to mutual edification.

The New Testament uses the image of a body. The eye cannot dismiss the hand; the head cannot say to the feet, “I do not need you.” The Spirit distributes gifts throughout the body for the common good (1 Corinthians 12:4–27).

Participation does not mean everyone must preach publicly, possess the same gift, or reject leadership. It means no member is unnecessary. Ministry includes prayer, encouragement, hospitality, mercy, generosity, administration, teaching, craftsmanship, leadership, service, discernment, evangelism, and countless acts through which Christ strengthens others.

Christ did not say He would build an audience. He said He would build His Ecclesia.

Leaders Equip the Saints

Ephesians 4 describes apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers as gifts Christ gives to His body. Their assignment is “to equip His people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up.”

Leadership is essential, but its success is not measured by how indispensable leaders become. Healthy leaders help the body mature until each part works properly.

The purpose of leadership is not to perform ministry in place of the saints. It is to help the saints recognize Christ, grow in truth and love, discover their gifts, develop maturity, and minister wherever God has placed them.

This changes the central question from:

“How can we persuade more people to attend our ministry?” VS

How can we equip God's people to minister throughout the community and beyond?”

When leaders equip well, ministry moves beyond the platform into homes, neighborhoods, schools, businesses, hospitals, government, charitable work, and daily relationships.

Called to a Congregation—and Sent to a City

Many years ago, after moving to Phoenix, I met with approximately twenty pastors individually over several months. I asked each one the same question:

“Why are you here?”

Their answers were similar: “God called me to pastor this church,” “God called me to care for these people,” or “God called me to build this ministry.”

There is truth in each answer. Shepherds are entrusted with real people and must care for them faithfully. Yet I began to wonder whether the calling was larger.

What if God had not merely called these leaders to particular congregations, but had placed them—and the people entrusted to them—within a particular city for the good of that city?

The calling of a pastor is not simply to gather people around a ministry. According to Ephesians 4, apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers are given to equip the saints for the work of ministry. The ministry, therefore, does not belong exclusively to the leaders. Their responsibility is to prepare God’s people to serve wherever the Father has placed them—in their homes, neighborhoods, schools, workplaces, businesses, civic institutions, and throughout the community.

The New Testament repeatedly speaks of elders in the plural. Paul and Barnabas appointed elders in the churches they established (Acts 14:23). Paul summoned the elders of the church in Ephesus (Acts 20:17), and he instructed Titus to appoint elders in every town (Titus 1:5). These passages may not provide a complete organizational model for modern cities, but they reveal something important: spiritual leadership was not intended to operate in isolation.

Elders were to serve together under the headship of Christ.

This shared leadership did not erase the responsibility of shepherds toward particular gatherings. It did, however, place those gatherings within something larger than themselves—the one Ecclesia of Jesus Christ.

Paul confronted this issue directly in Corinth. Believers had begun forming competing identities around individual leaders:

Now I mean this, that each one of you is saying, **“I am of Paul,” and “I of Apollos,” and “I of Cephas,” and “I of Christ.”** —1 Corinthians 1:12–13

Christ is not divided. His people may gather in different places and be served by different leaders, but they do not belong to different Christs.

Today, the names may have changed, but the temptation remains. We identify ourselves by congregations, denominations, networks, movements, personalities, and ministry brands. These distinctions can be useful, but they become destructive when they divide Christ’s people, encourage competition, or cause leaders to build separately what could be accomplished more faithfully together.

What might happen if the elders and ministry leaders of a city began to see one another not as competitors, but as fellow servants entrusted with the spiritual well-being of the same community?

What if they prayed together, listened to one another, identified the needs of their city, and equipped the saints to address those needs?

What if success were measured not only by attendance, budgets, buildings, or programs, but by whether the people of God were being prepared to serve and bring Kingdom influence throughout their community?

The New Testament addresses congregations located in cities and regions. Believers gathered in different homes and meeting places, yet they understood themselves to be part of God’s people within that place. Their mission could not be confined to maintaining an internal organization or inviting people to attend a religious service.

The Ecclesia gathers to be equipped—and then scatters to serve.

Pastors and elders are not called merely to build successful congregations. They are called to equip God’s people to fulfill the work of ministry. As leaders cooperate under the headship of Christ, the saints can be prepared to serve the communities, towns, and cities in which the Father has placed them.

Perhaps the question is not merely, “To which church have I been called?”

Perhaps the larger question is:

“Why has God placed us in this city, and how can we equip His people to serve it together?”

Years later, when a pastor friend asked what advice I would offer leaders, my response came quickly:

“Make your congregations indispensable to the community.”

By indispensable, I do not mean politically powerful, controlling, or dependent upon public recognition. I mean becoming such a faithful source of love, wisdom, service, and practical help that the community would deeply feel the congregation's absence.

Ask schools, local governments, hospitals, businesses, charities, neighborhood organizations, and community leaders:

- What needs are not being met?
- Who is being overlooked?
- Where are people falling through the cracks?
- How can we serve?

Jesus did not come to be served but to serve and give His life for others (Matthew 20:28). Service earns no one salvation, but it creates relationships, builds trust, demonstrates love, and opens natural opportunities to share the Gospel.

Perhaps the question is not merely whether our congregations are growing, but whether our communities are being served by a people who understand themselves to be Christ's Ecclesia.

Identity Determines Mission

If my primary identity is church attendee, I attend services, support programs, and invite people to events. Those actions may be good, but they do not encompass my calling.

If I understand myself as a member of Christ's Ecclesia, I remain gathered to His people while also living sent into the world. I represent the King, serve my neighbors, make disciples, practice my vocation under His lordship, and carry His presence into every legitimate sphere of life.

Every believer is not a pastor, and every role within the body is not interchangeable. Scripture recognizes different gifts, callings, and responsibilities. Yet every believer belongs to the royal priesthood, is indwelt by the Holy Spirit, and has been called to participate in Christ's mission.

This is where identity and abdication meet.

When believers think of ministry primarily as the work of religious professionals, they surrender responsibilities Christ distributed throughout His body. The saints gradually come to see themselves—and are often seen by their leaders—as volunteers who support the ministry rather than ministers of Christ who must be equipped for ministry.

The distinction is important.

An institution recruits people to fill positions. The Ecclesia equips disciples who can minister to others and reproduce the life of Christ in them.

Recruitment asks: “How can we find enough people to operate our programs?”

Discipleship asks: “How can we equip these people to recognize their gifts, hear the Father, serve others, and reproduce what Christ is forming within them?”

Paul described this pattern of spiritual reproduction when he instructed Timothy: “The things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable people who will also be qualified to teach others”—2 Timothy 2:2

Paul equipped Timothy. Timothy was to equip reliable people. Those people were then to equip others. This is more than filling positions. It is the continuing reproduction of mature disciples.

Discipleship, however, is costly.

It requires more than delivering information from a platform or teaching a class. Discipleship means walking beside people—praying with them, answering their questions, correcting them when necessary, helping them through failure, modeling obedience, and allowing them to observe how the life of Christ is lived in ordinary circumstances.

Paul described this kind of relationship when he wrote:

“Because we loved you so much, we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well”
—1 Thessalonians 2:8

The Cost of Discipleship

Discipleship costs time, convenience, privacy, emotional energy, and, in many respects, our lives. It is far easier to teach a weekly message, operate a program, or allow Bible colleges and seminaries to prepare future leaders—and then hire those graduates to fill ministry positions.

Bible colleges and seminaries can make an important contribution. They can provide biblical knowledge, theological training, historical understanding, and practical tools. But they cannot replace the responsibility of the Ecclesia to make disciples.

Education can be delegated. Spiritual parenting cannot.

Jesus did not merely teach His disciples in a classroom and send them away with credentials. He called them to be with Him. They watched Him pray, serve, confront hypocrisy, show compassion, respond to opposition, and obey the Father. He taught them not only through His words, but through His life.

The same pattern is seen in Paul's relationship with Timothy. Paul did not simply give Timothy information; he gave him an example to follow. Timothy observed Paul's teaching, conduct, purpose, faith, patience, love, endurance, persecutions, and sufferings (2 Timothy 3:10–11).

This is the costly work of reproduction.

When leaders outsource the formation of disciples to educational institutions and then hire trained professionals to operate their ministries, the congregation can become dependent upon imported expertise. Potential leaders within the body may never be recognized, discipled, tested, trusted, or released.

The result may be educated ministers without spiritual fathers and mothers—and congregations filled with believers who have never been taught how to reproduce the life of Christ in someone else.

The purpose of discipleship is not merely to produce knowledgeable believers. It is to form mature followers of Jesus who can walk beside others and help them become mature followers of Jesus.

When this pattern is lost, leaders can gradually become managers of religious activity rather than shepherds who equip and release God's people. Believers may remain dependent upon professionals instead of growing into mature servants who can disciple others. The organization may become increasingly active while the spiritual capacity of its people remains underdeveloped.

A congregation can have a full calendar, a growing staff, and many successful programs while producing relatively few believers who know how to minister outside the building.

The measure of leadership, therefore, is not merely how many people attend, volunteer, or support the institution. It is whether the saints are growing into maturity, discovering their God-given assignments, ministering to others, and reproducing the life of Christ wherever the Father has placed them.

Healthy ministry does not merely gather followers. It equips disciples who can disciple others.

When leaders measure success primarily by what happens inside the institution, the people may remain dependent and the surrounding community largely untouched. But when leaders equip the saints for the work of ministry, the Ecclesia moves beyond the walls of its gatherings and begins serving, influencing, and discipling the community.

The Kingdom advances as the whole Ecclesia recognizes who they are and faithfully serves where God has placed them.

The Gates of Hades Will Not Prevail

Jesus promised that the gates of Hades would not overcome His Ecclesia (Matthew 16:18). The Greek pronoun referring to *ecclēsia* is grammatically feminine, as the noun itself is feminine. English translations normally use “it,” while “her” can preserve the personal image of the community Christ builds. No doctrinal conclusion depends upon the grammatical gender, but the promise clearly belongs to the people—not a building or denomination.

The “gates of Hades” most naturally represent the power of death and the realm of the dead. Jesus would be killed, yet Hades could not hold Him. Generations of believers die, yet death cannot destroy the people He is building. The resurrection guarantees that even the final enemy will fall.

Some also see the gates as defensive imagery: the stronghold of death cannot withstand the Gospel's advance. That application is consistent with Christ's victory, but we should not build the entire meaning upon the observation that gates do not move.

The central promise is stronger than a slogan of institutional survival. Death itself cannot defeat Christ's people.

Therefore, the Ecclesia need not live in fear:

- It is not called merely to survive.
- It need not retreat from its mission.
- It does not wait helplessly for rescue.
- It bears witness to the risen King.
- It confronts the works of darkness with truth, love, and spiritual authority.
- It lives in the hope of resurrection.

The Ecclesia advances not because it is institutionally powerful, but because the risen Christ is building a people whom death cannot hold.

Who We Are in Christ

The New Testament describes the identity Christ gives His people:

- Chosen and adopted in Christ (Ephesians 1:4–5).
- Redeemed and forgiven through His blood (Ephesians 1:7).
- Sealed with the Holy Spirit and promised an inheritance (Ephesians 1:13–14).
- Made alive, raised, and seated with Christ (Ephesians 2:4–6).
- God's workmanship, created for good works (Ephesians 2:10).
- One new humanity and members of God's household (Ephesians 2:14–22).
- A chosen people, royal priesthood, and holy nation (1 Peter 2:9).
- Ambassadors through whom God makes His appeal (2 Corinthians 5:20).
- Children of God and heirs with Christ (Romans 8:16–17).
- More than conquerors through the One who loves us (Romans 8:37).
- Salt of the earth and light of the world (Matthew 5:13–16).
- Temples of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 3:16; 6:19).
- Branches abiding in Christ, the true Vine (John 15:4–5).
- People in whom Christ dwells—the hope of glory (Colossians 1:27).

These are not religious compliments. They are realities meant to shape how we live.

We do not earn them through activity. They are gifts of grace received in Christ. Yet grace establishes a new identity, and that identity produces a new way of life.

Review and Summary

The argument of this letter is not that Christians must stop using the word church. Nor is it that every congregation should abandon buildings, organizations, programs, trained leaders, or Sunday gatherings.

The argument is that Christ's Ecclesia can never be reduced to those things.

Jesus is building a people. They are living stones, a Spirit-filled temple, a royal priesthood, a functioning body, and an ambassadorial community. They gather for worship, teaching, fellowship, correction, participation, and equipping. Then they live sent into homes, neighborhoods, vocations, institutions, and communities.

Leadership exists to equip the saints, not replace them. Structures exist to carry the life, not control it. Gatherings exist to build up the body, not create an audience. Service exists to reflect the King, not promote an institution.

Perhaps one of the greatest renewals needed in our day is a renewal of identity.

Are we merely attending religious services, or are we functioning as Christ's ambassadors? Are we maintaining institutions, or are our institutions equipping people to advance His mission? Are we spectators, or participants? Are we waiting to escape, or faithfully occupying until He comes?

The hour may be late, but the call remains clear. Christ is still building His Ecclesia.

The question is no longer merely, “Which church do you attend?” The deeper question is, “Are we living as the Ecclesia Jesus said He would build?”



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The letter does not end here. Continue the journey as we learn to think biblically, live courageously, and faithfully represent Christ's Kingdom in every sphere of life.
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