

Letter 9 – Are we the Church or His Ecclesia?

At this point, does it really matter whether we call ourselves the church or the ecclesia? Is this merely a debate over words, or has a subtle shift in language produced a profound shift in identity?

In Matthew 16:18, Jesus says, "*And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church (ecclesia), and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.*"

Was Jesus referring to church or ecclesia? The Greek word is *ecclesia*, and "church" became the traditional English rendering. Historically, the English word "church" did not come directly from *ecclesia* but through a different linguistic path (Old English *cirice*, ultimately related to "belonging to the Lord").

While "church" became the accepted translation, it does not fully communicate the richness of what Jesus and the apostles meant by *ecclesia*.

Why this matters in today's world- **because words matter**. They define and shape understanding and understanding shapes identity. Identity shapes our mission. I am going to unpack this scripture to make the case, how the ecclesia has been drawn to a wrong identity and weakened the mission to make disciples of all nations, to be world changers.

Although the language of building comes from construction imagery, the object being built is not a physical structure. It is Christ's ecclesia—a people, a community, a spiritual house made up of living stones.

The object in this passage is the ecclesia not a "house or building". So what Jesus is saying "I will build a people, a community; an assembly; a spiritual temple (living stones being built together- 1 Peter 2:5).

In the New Testament, *oikodomeō* is frequently used metaphorically: building faith, building believers, building up the body of Christ or building a spiritual house. Ephesians 4:12 emphasizes the role of church leaders in equipping believers for the work of the ministry and *oikodomeō* (building) up the body of Christ; all attaining to the unity of the faith and the knowledge of the Son of God.

What if the greatest deception was not merely what we believe about the future, but **who we believe ourselves to be?**

Are we the church or are we His ecclesia? If Jesus promised to build His ecclesia, then we must ask an important question: Have we come to identify with something different from what He intended? Have we become known more by our buildings, denominations, and

institutions than by our calling as God's ecclesia? Before we discuss mission, authority, or Kingdom responsibility, we must first answer a more fundamental question:

Who are we?

The first-century believers did not identify themselves by buildings, campuses, or denominations. They gathered in homes, courtyards, public spaces, and wherever opportunity allowed. Their identity was not found in a location but in their relationship to Christ and one another. At some point, however, a subtle shift occurred. Language often reveals how we think. We commonly hear and say:

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

What happens when our understanding of church becomes centered on a building? Our discussions revolve around Sunday services, classrooms, ministry programs, capital campaigns, organizational structures, etc.

None of these things are inherently wrong. In fact, many can serve useful purposes. The question is whether they have gradually become the focus rather than the tools.

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

- When church becomes a place, ministry often becomes the responsibility of professionals.
- When church becomes an event, discipleship becomes optional.
- When church becomes an institution, participation can easily give way to observation

The issue is not whether buildings, programs, or organizations are useful. The issue is identity. If we primarily see ourselves as attendees of a church, we will live one way. If we understand ourselves as Christ's ecclesia, His called-out people commissioned to disciple nations and advance His Kingdom, we will live another.

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

When Pastors Became Professionals

In the 1980s, I joined a movement that sought to recover what we believed was a first-century expression of church life. We met in schools, rented facilities, and homes. We

spoke often about restoring New Testament Christianity, freedom of worship, spiritual gifts, small group ministry, discipleship, building strong families, Biblical teaching, etc.

Yet over time, something unexpected happened. Without intending to, we became professionalized.

We dressed alike. We carried the same briefcases, Bibles, notebooks, and teaching materials. We attended conferences, developed programs, and built ministries. One day I realized that we had become professional pastors—and something about that realization deeply troubled me.

“Gradually, the focus shifted. Instead of equipping believers for ministry, much of our energy was spent creating ministry experiences for them. We advertised ourselves as restoring first-century Christianity, yet much of our growth came from attracting believers who were dissatisfied with other churches rather than reaching those who had never encountered Christ.

We managed to set the bar so high the chasm between clergy and laity was staggering. Ironically, our desire to equip the saints often produced the opposite result. We elevated leadership to such a degree that many believers concluded ministry belonged to the professionals.

The pattern became simple: The pastor ministers. The people attend.

From Ecclesia to Institution

Under the Old Covenant, God's presence was associated with sacred places. Under the New Covenant, God chose to dwell within His people. The ecclesia became the temple of the Holy Spirit, a living spiritual house built of living stones. If we continue to think primarily in terms of buildings, institutions, and organizations, we may miss the very mystery Paul proclaimed: Christ in you, the hope of glory.

Over time, many expressions of Christianity began to resemble patterns that emphasized place, organization, and structure more than participation and shared ministry.

The focus slowly shifted from a people filled with God's presence to institutions designed to serve them.

Old Wineskins and New Wine

Jesus frequently used parables to communicate spiritual truths. One of the most intriguing is His teaching concerning old an wineskin and new wine.

"Neither is new wine put into old wineskins. If it is, the skins burst and the wine is spilled and the skins are destroyed. But new wine is put into fresh wineskins, and so both are preserved." (Matthew 9:17)

The illustration is simple.

New wine ferments. As it ferments, gases are released that create pressure within the container. A new wineskin remains flexible and can stretch as the wine expands. An old wineskin, however, has become rigid and brittle. It can no longer expand. The result is predictable—the skin bursts and both the wine and the wineskin are ruined.

Jesus also spoke of sewing a new patch onto an old garment. An unshrunk piece of cloth sewn onto an old garment would eventually pull away, making the tear even worse.

The point is not that the old garment or old wineskin was evil. They simply were not designed to contain what was coming.

In much the same way, the New Covenant introduced something radically different. The dwelling place of God would no longer be found primarily in sacred locations, buildings, or institutions. God would dwell within His people through the Holy Spirit.

The ecclesia became the temple. The people became the dwelling place of God. The mystery became:

"Christ in you, the hope of glory."

The purpose of this observation is not to criticize buildings, local congregations, or organizational structures. Such things can serve useful purposes. The question is one of identity.

If believers primarily identify with a building, a denomination, or an institution, they may unintentionally reduce the ecclesia to a place rather than a people.

The New Covenant calls us to something greater. The ecclesia is not the building where believers gather. The ecclesia is the people in whom God dwells. **The wineskin was never the point. The wine was.**

Body Ministry

The ecclesia was intended to be a participating, Spirit-filled, Kingdom community. Over time, many believers came to view themselves primarily as attendees of religious institutions. Too illustrate: **What then, brothers? When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Let all things be done for building up. 1 Corinthians 14:26.**

Notice what Paul assumes: participation, contribution, mutual edification, not passive observation. Over time, many believers have come to view themselves primarily as attendees of religious institutions.

**Christ did not say He would build an audience. He said He would build His ecclesia
Matthew 16:18**

The Radical Shift

The New Covenant was not merely a modification of the synagogue system. It introduced a radical shift in how God's people understood His presence, His dwelling place, and their own identity.

The New Covenant broke from the synagogue model and the language changes dramatically:

- **"Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up."** (John 2)
- **"You are God's temple."** (1 Corinthians 3:16)
- **"Your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit."** (1 Corinthians 6:19)
- **"You also, as living stones, are being built up a spiritual house."** (1 Peter 2:5)

Under the Old Covenant, people went to a place where God had chosen to manifest His presence. Under the New Covenant, God chose to make His people the place of His presence. The temple became people. The dwelling place became the ecclesia. The mystery was no longer, "Come to the temple and find God." The mystery became, "Christ in you, the hope of glory."

Totally revolutionary!

Identity Determines Mission

If one's primary identity is church member, then one attends services, supports programs, invites people to church, and serves within church structures and outreaches.

If one's primary identity is ecclesia, **one represents the King, advances the Kingdom, disciples nations, engages culture, serves communities, and occupies until He comes.**

A church member attends a ministry, and ministry can easily become something performed by professionals. An ecclesia member understands that he or she is a minister—a royal priest in the household of God.

This distinction is important.

When ministry becomes concentrated in the hands of a few, the temptation exists to view ministry as a profession rather than a calling. Like any profession, there can be pressures toward job security, organizational growth, status, recognition, and influence.

This is not a criticism of pastors or church leaders. Many faithfully serve Christ and His people with humility and sacrifice. Rather, it is an observation about human nature and institutions.

Whenever responsibility becomes concentrated in a small group, the larger body can gradually begin to view ministry as someone else's assignment.

The New Testament presents a different picture. Every believer is a minister. Every believer is a priest. Every believer has been entrusted with gifts, responsibilities, and a calling within the Kingdom of God.

The role of leadership is not to replace the ministry of the saints, but to equip the saints for the work of ministry. When the ecclesia recovers this understanding, ministry moves beyond the pulpit and into homes, neighborhoods, workplaces, schools, businesses, and communities.

The Kingdom advances not because a few ministers are active, but because the entire ecclesia recognizes who they are. The issue is not whether leaders are sincere. The issue is whether the ecclesia has forgotten that every believer is a minister.

This distinction helps us understand Paul's words in Ephesians 4 concerning the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry. The purpose of leadership was never to perform ministry on behalf of the saints. The purpose of leadership was to equip the saints for ministry.

What Exactly Constitutes the "Work of the Ministry"?

The New Testament vision was not ministry confined to church gatherings, programs, or membership rolls. It was believers equipped to minister wherever God had placed them—in homes, businesses, neighborhoods, schools, government, and communities.

Several years ago, after moving to Phoenix, Arizona, I met with approximately twenty pastors over a six-month period. I asked each of them the same question:

"Why are you here?"

The answers were remarkably similar. "God called me to pastor this church." "God called me to care for these people." "God called me to build this ministry." While there is certainly truth in those answers, in light of Ephesians 4 and Matthew 28, it seems to me that God's call would be a city or community and the role of the leaders would be to equip the

members to pastor, care and minister to the community. When Paul addressed the elders in his letters, he addressed the elders of the city not elders of a particular church or congregation.

What if the members of the congregation were being equipped to minister throughout the city rather than primarily within the church? Would it make a difference in their community?

Years later, a pastor friend in Santa Cruz asked me what advice I would give pastors today. My answer came quickly:

"Make yourself indispensable to your community."

Equip the saints to serve beyond the walls of the church. Become known for meeting needs in your community, not for just holding meetings. Partner with schools, local governments, hospitals, civic organizations, community groups, and local businesses.

Encourage believers to become salt and light wherever God has placed them.

When I moved into a new community, one of the first things I did was join the local Chamber of Commerce. It provided an opportunity to meet community leaders, learn about the needs and challenges of the area, and discover meaningful ways to serve.

Serving the community in this manner creates a platform for building relationships, earning trust, and demonstrating the love of Christ in practical ways. It also establishes a foundation from which the Gospel of Jesus Christ can be shared naturally and effectively.

The ecclesia was never intended to be isolated from the community. Rather, it was called to be present within the community, serving, influencing, and reflecting the character of Christ wherever God has placed His people.

Jesus set the example, He did not come to be served. He came to serve. Serving was not merely something He did; it was the platform from which He ministered. As Jesus Himself said:

"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." (Matthew 20:28)

Perhaps the question before us is not whether our churches are growing, but whether our communities are being transformed by a people who understand themselves to be Christ's ecclesia.

The Potential Cost of Misidentification

If identity shapes mission, then misidentification carries a cost. When believers primarily identify with an institution, the vision can gradually shift from the Kingdom of God to the success of the institution. Responsibility is often transferred to professional leadership. Participation gives way to observation. Ministry becomes something performed by a few rather than lived by many.

In Letter 5, I argued that dispensational theology can encourage a posture of abdication regarding the future. Here I am suggesting a related concern. When believers identify primarily as church attendees rather than Christ's ecclesia, they may unknowingly abdicate their present responsibility as ambassadors of the Kingdom.

The gates of hades will not prevail against her (Matthew 16:18)

One final observation from Matthew 16:18 deserves consideration. Most English translations render the passage: "I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it (her)." However, the Greek text uses the word αὐτῆς (*autēs*), a feminine singular pronoun that may be translated "her," "of her," or "against her." The pronoun refers directly back to the ecclesia, which is a feminine noun in Greek.

Grammatically, the passage reads: **"I will build My ecclesia, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against her."**

This observation may seem small, but words matter. The promise was not made to a building. The promise was not made to an institution. The promise was not made to a denomination. The promise was made to Christ's ecclesia—the called-out people He Himself would build.

Even more significant is the imagery Jesus chose. Gates are not offensive weapons. Gates do not attack. Gates defend. In the ancient world, gates represented authority, government, power, and the strength of a city. Jesus did not say the armies of Hades would attack His ecclesia. He said the gates of Hades would not prevail against her.

The picture is not one of a frightened people hiding behind walls awaiting rescue. The picture is of a people advancing under the authority of their King against the strongholds of darkness, and those gates are unable to withstand their advance.

This is the promise given to the ecclesia.

- Not survival.
- Not retreat.
- Not escape.
- Victory.

- Advancement.
- Kingdom authority.
- Occupation until He comes.

The greatest loss may not have been doctrinal. It may have been vocational. We forgot who we are. We forgot that the ecclesia is not merely gathered people. The ecclesia are a commissioned people.

The promise was not made to a building. The promise was not made to an institution. The promise was not made to a denomination. **The promise was made to Christ's ecclesia."**

Recovering the Ecclesia

The solution is not to abandon local congregations. The solution is recovering our biblical identity.

The ecclesia is:

- Christ's body
- A royal priesthood
- A holy nation
- A chosen people
- Ambassadors of the Kingdom
- Salt and light in the earth

For generations we have asked: "Which church do you attend?" Perhaps the more important question is: **"Are we living as the ecclesia Jesus said He would build?"**

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

Conclusion - The Question I Pose

Perhaps the most important question is not what we believe about the future, but who we believe ourselves to be.

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

If that is true, then perhaps one of the greatest challenges facing believers today is not a misunderstanding of prophecy, but a misunderstanding of our identity.

For generations, we have identified ourselves with churches, denominations, organizations, and institutions. Yet Jesus said: **"I will build My ecclesia."**

The New Testament presents the ecclesia as a called-out people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a spiritual house built of living stones, and the dwelling place of God through the Holy Spirit.

The challenge before us is not merely theological.

- It is personal.
- It is practical.
- It is transformational.

Paul wrote:

"Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect." (Romans 12:2)

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 primarily supporting institutions, or are we advancing His Kingdom?

Are we spectators, or are we participants? Are we waiting to escape, or are we occupying until He comes? The hour may be late, but the call remains clear. Christ is still building His ecclesia. Lord, may we have the courage to rediscover who we are!

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

Who are we as the people of God?

Additional Scriptures affirming our identity in Him.

Ephesians 1: Chosen & Blessed in Christ

- **Every spiritual blessing:** God has already lavished these on us in heavenly places—redemption, forgiveness, wisdom—not earned, but ours through Christ (Eph 1:3, 7–8).
- **Kingdom of priests:** "And He has made us to be a kingdom, priests to His God and Father." (Revelation 1:6)

- **Chosen before creation:** Holy, blameless in His sight; predestined for adoption as sons/daughters by His pleasure (Eph 1:4–5).
- **Redeemed & forgiven:** Freedom bought by Christ's blood, according to His grace riches (Eph 1:7).
- **Inheritance sealed:** God's possession, marked by the Holy Spirit as a down payment until full redemption (Eph 1:13–14).
- **Wisdom & insight:** To know His will, mystery of unity in Christ (Eph 1:9, 17–18).

Ephesians 2: Transformed & Seated in Christ

- **Made alive together with Christ:** Dead in sin? Now raised and **seated with Him in heavenly places** by grace through faith—not works (Eph 2:1–6, 8–9).
- **God's workmanship:** Created anew in Christ for good works He prepared beforehand (Eph 2:10).
- **Brought near:** Gentiles once far off, now fellow citizens, household members, built into God's temple (Eph 2:13, 19–22).
- **One new humanity:** Christ abolishes hostility, reconciling both to God in one body (Eph 2:14–16).

A Chosen People

- **A chosen people, royal priesthood, holy nation:** "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light." (1 Peter 2:9)
- **Ambassadors for Christ:** "Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were making an appeal through us; we beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God." (2 Corinthians 5:20)
- **Righteousness of God in Christ:** "He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him." (2 Corinthians 5:21)

Relational & Inherited Identities

- **Saints (holy ones) of God:** "To the saints who are in Ephesus and who are faithful in Christ Jesus." (Ephesians 1:1); "Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus... to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi." (Philippians 1:1)

- **Adopted sons/daughters of God:** "He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will." (Ephesians 1:5); "See how great a love the Father has bestowed on us, that we would be called children of God." (1 John 3:1)
- **Children/heirs of God:** "You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus... And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's descendants, heirs according to promise." (Galatians 3:26, 29)

Victorious & Empowered Realities

- **More than conquerors:** "But in all these things we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us." (Romans 8:37)
- **Seated with Christ in heavenly places:** "He raised us up with Him, and seated us with Him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus." (Ephesians 2:6)
- **Light of the world:** "You are the light of the world... Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven." (Matthew 5:14, 16)

Relational Union with God

- **Children of God:** "See how great a love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called children of God." (1 John 3:1); "Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called children of God!"
- **Friends of Jesus:** "No longer do I call you slaves, for the slave does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends." (John 15:15)
- **Abraham's seed, heirs:** "And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's descendants, heirs according to promise." (Galatians 3:29)

Victorious & Empowered Status

- **More than conquerors:** "But in all these things we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us." (Romans 8:37)
- **Free from condemnation:** "Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." (Romans 8:1)
- **Light of the world:** "You are the light of the world... Let your light shine before men." (Matthew 5:14,16)

- **Salt of the earth:** "You are the salt of the earth." (Matthew 5:13)

Transformed Inner Reality

- **Crucified & alive in Christ:** "I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me." (Galatians 2:20)
- **Hidden with Christ in God:** "For you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God." (Colossians 3:3)
- **Temple of the Holy Spirit:** "Do you not know that you are a temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?" (1 Corinthians 3:16); "Your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you." (1 Corinthians 6:19)

Christ Living Within Us

- **Galatians 2:20:** "I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God..." Christ's very life animates believers.
- **Romans 8:10:** "If Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, yet the spirit is alive because of righteousness." His presence quickens our human spirit.
- **2 Corinthians 13:5:** "Test yourselves to see if you are in the faith; examine yourselves! Or do you not recognize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you...?" A reality to realize daily.
- **Colossians 1:27:** "Christ in you, the hope of glory." He dwells as our eternal treasure and future manifestation.

One with Christ as He is One with the Father

- **John 17:21-23:** "That they may all be one; even as You, Father, are in Me and I in You, that they also may be in Us... I in them and You in Me, that they may be perfected in unity." Believers share the Father-Son oneness.
- **John 15:4-5:** "Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself unless it abides in the vine, so neither can you unless you abide in Me." Organic, life-sustaining union.
- **1 John 4:13:** "By this we know that we abide in Him and He in us, because He has given us of His Spirit." The Spirit confirms this intimate indwelling.

Triune Agreement Expressed in Us

- **John 14:20,23:** "In that day you will know that I am in My Father, and you in Me, and I in you... 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." Father, Son, and Spirit make home in believers.
- **1 Corinthians 6:17:** "But the one who joins himself to the Lord is one spirit with Him." Singular spirit-union with the risen Christ.