



Part Three in the series: *“Towards a Christocentric Ecclesiology, or A Christ Centered Church”*

Is Small/Simple Gathering Mandated by the New Testament? **A study in Paul’s Foundations and Traditions** *The Blueprint of God*

Many ask us, “Why is it that you emphasize the small and simple gathering as though the larger building oriented gatherings were wrong?”

I’d like to address that in this article.

For Nineteen Hundred years the Church has manifested one detour after another from the original blueprint the apostles worked from. Is this justified, or does this represent a manifestation of dishonor, both towards the original scripture writing apostles and the Lord Jesus?

There are many today who maintain much of what we see in the book of Acts and the Epistles, as relates to Ecclesiology, represents little more than "Description" rather than "Prescription." In other words, just because the New Testament describes the manner in which Paul established the churches he formed doesn’t mean he is mandating that manner throughout time. Is this a valid conclusion, or does it dishonor the Head of the Church, Who gave Paul the revelation he received, and leave too much room for the Traditions and ideas of man to enter and detour the church from Jesus' plan and intention for it?

In this article we will present a variety of approaches that work towards maintaining the premise that Paul was working from a divine blueprint rather than arbitrary personal preference of design.

God is a God with a plan, a blueprint, a pattern. Notice, when He spoke with Moses about building the Tabernacle, the terminology He spoke from was blueprint in nature:

Exo 25:9 Exactly as I show you **concerning the pattern** of the tabernacle, and of all its furniture, so you shall make it.

God does not operate randomly. He has a plan.

Exo 25:40 *And see that you make them after **the pattern for them**, which is being shown you on the mountain.*

Act 7:44 *"Our fathers had the tent of witness in the wilderness, just as he who spoke to Moses directed him to make it, **according to the pattern that he had seen.**"*

Heb 8:1 *Now the point in what we are saying is this: we have such a high priest, one who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven, 2 a minister in the holy places, in the true*

tent that the Lord set up, not man. 3 For every high priest is appointed to offer gifts and sacrifices; thus it is necessary for this priest also to have something to offer. 4 Now if he were on earth, he would not be a priest at all, since there are priests who offer gifts according to the law. 5 They serve a copy and shadow of the heavenly things. For when Moses was about to erect the tent, he was instructed by God, saying, "See that you make everything according to the pattern that was shown you on the mountain." 6 But as it is, Christ has obtained a ministry that is as much more excellent than the old as the covenant he mediates is better, since it is enacted on better promises.

Keil & Delitzsch, in their commentary of Exodus, have the following to say on Exodus 25:9 :

The Hebrew for "pattern" - Tabniyth "may be rendered 'plan,' it does not signify an original, but simply means a model or drawing, founded upon an idea, or taken from some existing object, according to which a building was to be constructed."

Sounds pretty much like our description for a blueprint doesn't it?

To assume, when it came time for the most significant building of all time - THE CHURCH - that He did not have a pattern, a plan, a blueprint for how it was to look, is to completely miss or ignore the very nature and manner of God's outworked purposes. Of course He had a blueprint, and of course He revealed that print to His "Architecton" Paul the apostle of Jesus Christ.

One of His descriptive titles, according to the book of Hebrews is "Architect."

*Heb 11:8 By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going. 9 By faith he went to live in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise. 10 For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose **designer (Technites - an ancient form from which Architect was formed)** and builder is God.*

In a nut shell it comes down to this, throughout the ancient world in the apostolic period, practically all religions, other than the early believers in Christ, gathered in religious buildings, built to house the believers of the various ancient religious cults. Jews, throughout the Roman empire, were allowed to build synagogues, and every other religious group had their temples and places of formal meeting. Until 200 AD, persecution of early believers was minimal, more so from Jews, than from Roman citizens. Believers in Christ were seen as a subset of the Jewish faith, and as such, if they had desired to build their own synagogues, they could easily have done so, without much, if any, opposition by the Roman government or citizenry, but they never did it.

Therefore, we see in this an initial indication of the "Foundational Principles" the apostles were working with. While they could have encouraged building religious structures they didn't. And, everything about what they did encourage appears to be done with a strong sense of purposed pattern, towards something "other" than religious buildings.

What was that "other," they seemed to be pursuing? It appears the Lord Jesus had impressed upon them a concept of relational community, over religious organization. They were families, joined together to know and love each other and the Lord Jesus. They were not another religious group or business placed alongside all other organizations and businesses, but they were an entirely "New Creation" in the earth. They were "The Family of God" gathered, not religious organizations or businesses with the types of agendas that characterize them. They were called to know the Lord Jesus in a "Strongly Relational" community environment. I like to refer to them as "Bonded Covenantal Communities."

Their gatherings were formed to express their knowing Him, and their desire to know one another “In Him.” Everything about their gatherings seemed to point away from religious organizations, and toward intimacy, care, love, and knowing Christ in one another. Where better to express that than in the home. Families meet in homes. We are the family of God, therefore we meet in homes. Not just homes, but certainly home is the logical epicenter for families to gather. This creates a very different emphasis and purpose, than forming religious organizations.

Not until around 300 AD, and interaction with the Emperor Constantine, did anything develop by way of buildings for believer’s in Christ. At his direction, the pagan temples were converted into Christian Cathedrals, and he authorized the building of many others as well. Leadership shifted from simply being about older and wiser brethren overseeing in a caring way, for the needs natural and spiritual, among the body of Christ, and moved towards strong hierarchical leadership, deeply connected to the agenda of the State, and towards a heavy control orientation of the local fellowships of believers. Church made a very radical detour from the original foundation and traditions of the apostles.

When Paul spoke the following three passages, I think we must pay far greater attention to them than Church history has:

2 Thessalonians 2:15 Therefore, brethren, stand fast and hold the traditions which you were taught, whether by word or our epistle.

1 Corinthians 11:2 Now I praise you, brethren, that you remember me in all things and keep the traditions just as I delivered them to you.

1 Corinthians 3:10 According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder (Grk. Architecton / Architect) I laid a foundation, and someone else is building upon it. Let each one take care how he builds upon it. 11 For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ.

These verses tell us at least 4 very important things:

1. Jesus Christ, through direct revelation (per 2 Timothy 3:16), gave the apostolic traditions the early Church walked in, and when we consider how radical a departure from the religious organizational norm of the day (see Robert Banks “Paul’s Idea of Community”), that the house churches were, we simply cannot ignore the reality that, of all the traditions they established, the house gathering had to have been a direct tradition given by the Lord Himself, and one of the most significant of all of them. It was the prevailing pattern during the entire time of apostolic writing.
2. They were taught to “stand fast, hold, and keep” the traditions, not let them drift away over time. These seem to be strong admonitions, not to be ignored or changed.
3. Each epistle describes the gathering of saints, in ways that simply function best in a relational and participatory open environment, where all the believers are encouraged to contribute to the gathering, in song, testimony, prophecy, teaching, exhortation, encouragement, admonishment, conviction, and love.
4. These things form the very “Foundation of Christ,” among the early believers. Everything Paul wrote, intimately connected with the small simple gathering approach, works together to maintain the headship of Christ in leadership and practice. As Frank Viola says it, “*What*

Lordship is to the individual believer, Headship is to the gathered body.”If these principles had been maintained, Jesus would have remained the functional and true Head of His body, with all the members joined to Him, to listen to and follow His every direction. As it turned out, because these simple foundations were abandoned, men usurped His authority, developed a concept of Church, leadership, and authority, entirely foreign to the clear teaching of the New Testament, and caused the Church to lose much of the direct connection to its Head - The Lord Jesus.

When we consider the idea that the way the Church met, in connection with the headship of Christ, and all of it describing the Foundation which is Christ, this can seem confusing to the reader, because we are prone to think of the Foundation as one thing - I.e. Christ, and the Church as that which is built on the Foundation, but which is not also the Foundation, but in Paul’s theology he so identifies the Foundation in Christ with the Church, that it is evident that as the Head is to a Body, so the Foundation is to the Church, I.e. they are inseparable. His point is not the separation or distinction between the two, but rather that if the Church is to be what it was called to be it must never forget its intimate connection with the Foundation stone that Christ is.

Paul tells us, in 1Cor 3:11 *For no one can lay a foundation **other than** that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ.*

The phrase “other than,” in the Greek, tells us something very enlightening. The Greeks generally used one of two words to communicate “other.” If they desired to say “other of the same kind” they used “allos.” If they wished to communicate “other of a different kind,” they used “heteros.” In the case of this verse, Paul uses “allos.” This tells us something very important. If anyone ever lays another foundation it cannot be another of the same kind. In other words if it is another foundation it will be another of a different kind than what Paul laid, and as such it will have a completely different nature and character to it. He tells us it won’t support the building placed on it. It won’t stand the tests of time, in terms of fully honoring its Head, the Lord Jesus.

Certainly this is the case with the modern Church. Just shortly after the last apostle died men began to disregard the foundation laid by Paul and the other apostles, and began to lay, alongside of it, an entirely new foundation of a different kind to the one the apostles laid. It may look similar but it is very different. Hierarchy, Church as a business, Church as a political entity, professional clergy, Church defined by buildings, etc., represents no small changes, and are ones that have changed the approach to Church so radically that it hardly compares to the Church the apostles established in the first century.

What is so amazing to me, as I travel around the world attempting to alert the Church to the errant foundational pattern it is built upon, that hardly resembles any of the elements of the first churches Paul established, is the tenacity with which they will defend the current model, as if it is based upon clear biblical teaching. It isn’t...not even close! Of course I understand why they do. You’d think I was asking them to abandon biblical truth and the deity of Christ. It is a combination of careful conditioning and the connections this system of religion has to their sense of security and significance that they derive from it. When one’s ministerial status, the power to control, and the right to consistent income all come from the model of Church they have been given it is pretty challenging to get them to even take a close look at what will take all those things away from them. It is not a commitment to biblical truth that stands in the way, but rather, a commitment to the preservation of self. I know that sounds harsh, and I don’t believe they do what they do in a conscious rebellious way, but when the veneer of conditioning is removed this is what remains beneath the surface, whether we are aware of it or not.

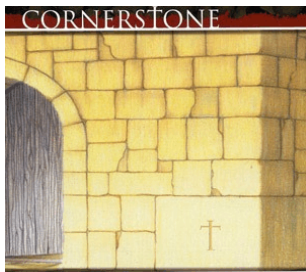
Peter reiterates the importance of honoring the foundation Jesus laid in 1 Pet 2:6 *Wherefore also*

it is contained in the scripture, Behold, I lay in Zion a chief corner stone, elect, precious: and he that believes on him will not be confounded.

So, the foundation is Christ, nothing more and nothing less. But, because the whole Christ/Church connection is such a mystical thing, the Church (His very body) is also the foundation. In other words, in Paul's theology, you really can't effectively separate Christ from His body/Church. They are one and the same. Thus 1 Cor 3 addresses just this mystery. This is why it is so dangerous to tamper with the apostolic foundations, because any tampering done here disturbs the intimacy of the connection between the Church and Christ.

Look at verse 9 - 1Cor 3:9 *For we are God's fellow workers. You are God's field, God's building.* And verse 10 - 1Cor 3:10 *According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder (Greek - Architecton, I.e. one who builds from a specific pattern given to him.) I laid a foundation, and someone else is building upon it. **Let each one take care how he builds upon it.*** What is the Christ foundation? It is people intimately connected to Christ. It isn't Jesus separate from His people. Somehow, the foundation is people connected by the Spirit of Jesus to Jesus Himself. For the Church to be the Church, in the way it functions, it must always be completely clear that its coming together is not to man's agenda but to a deeply spiritual interaction with Jesus Christ throughout the gathering. We gather to connect to Him, not just perform religious rituals.

It is a temple foundation, of which we, His people, are the temple – 1Cor 3:16 *Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you? 17 If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him. For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple.*



Then Paul, in Ephesians, goes on to say that it is a household type temple, and all of it is built on the foundation of the apostles and the prophets. Now wait a minute. I thought Jesus was the foundation??? Now Paul says he and the other apostles are the foundation. As Church planters and Church builders, they are the foundation? Yes, absolutely, because once again he unfolds the mysterious connection between Jesus and His people...they are One in Him. And this time, rather than emphasize Christ as being the actual foundation, He is defined as an element of the foundation – I.e. the cornerstone.

The cornerstone is the block you lay, after digging down to the bedrock. It is one very carefully chiseled flat and square stone, placed in exactly the right angle to the property, and then you add all the other foundation blocks next to that first and pivotal stone, and if you maintain a right relationship to that one foundation stone, the whole building will be both level and square. Paul understood the significance of this one element in ways that much of Church history failed to recognize.

Here's how Paul describes it - Eph 2:19 *So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, 20 built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, 21 in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord.*

Then consider Hebrews 6:1, and recognize that the foundation is a very important system of interconnecting truths "In Christ," that form the Church and its belief system.

In 1 Peter 2:6 he first refers to the cornerstone (akrogoniaion stone = foundation stone)

In 1 Peter 2:7 he then refers to the cap stone (kephalen stone = cap stone). It is an unfortunate or inaccurate translation of the Greek of this verse, to translate it as “cornerstone.” It would have been far better to have translated it as “cap stone.” It is clear that Peter has two very important concepts in mind. Jesus is both that which squares and levels the building, and He is that which makes it safe to enter the building.

The cap stone is a very important stone, here are a couple of pictures of them, from the ancient world:



It was set at the top of an arched doorway, and held the entire doorway together and made it safe to enter.



When it comes to the building metaphor, in relationship to the Church, the New Testament has much to say.

Listen to Hebrew 3:1-6

Hebrews 3:1 *Therefore, holy brothers, you who share in a heavenly calling, **consider Jesus**, the apostle and high priest of our confession, 2 who **was faithful to him who appointed him**, just as Moses also was faithful in all God's house. 3 For Jesus has been counted worthy of **more glory than Moses--as much more glory as the builder of a house has more honor than the house itself.** 4 (For every house is built by someone, but **the builder of all things is God.**) 5 Now Moses was faithful **in** all God's house as a servant, to testify to the things that were to be spoken later, 6 but Christ is faithful **over** God's house as a son. And **we are his house** if indeed we hold fast our confidence and our boasting in our hope.*

He begins, in verse 1 right where we must begin - “**Consider Jesus!**” If this is where we begin in our understanding and practice of Jesus and this is where we remain then we stand a good chance of the Church being built by Him, but unfortunately the story of Church history is that while this is where the building began it quickly detoured and jumped to another Architect’s drawing.

This is our calling, and as long as we remain tightly connected to Christ our calling will progress and flourish.

Jesus remained faithful to the Father, Who appointed him to His charge of building the Father a house to dwell in. Once again, unfortunately much of Church history reveals a dissimilar faithfulness in those who took over after the apostles.

Moses was a good builder, and God placed a measure of His glory on Moses the builder of the house of God/Church in the wilderness, but Jesus’ glory, as a Builder, far exceeds anything Moses built. Moses built an earthly tabernacle for the Father to dwell in. Jesus built, by the Spirit, a

house/temple/church in the hearts of God's people. This is the only House God is interested in now.

It is clear that the writer here recognized Jesus as being God, and as such the house He builds is in complete alignment with God's perfect plan. To detour from that building plan is to violate the integrity and genius of the structure God was building.

Moses, along with all human leaders, are leaders "**in or among**" God's house, but Jesus alone is "**over**" God's house. If just this principle had been honored by the subsequent builders, but it wasn't and because it wasn't the building has taken on a misshaped expression.

The writer concludes with two things that we must never forget:

1. We are **HIS** house. Ownership is clear here. When leaders think of the house of God/church as being "theirs" they show their dishonor for Christ.
2. We, **people**, are His house, not some building, not some concept, not some human design or philosophy. His house is no longer constructed of animal skins and timber, nor even gold and stone. It is composed of human tissue, bone and blood. It is a living house, built on the foundations of Christ that the apostles laid down. Personhood is now attached to the house. It is one thing to tear down and remodel a brick and mortar house, but when that house is a living organism such remodeling can only be engaged and commissioned by The Builder Himself. We are living in just such a day, because the builders subsequent to the apostles took it upon themselves to change the design plan and build according to their preferences. What happens if we don't "hold fast our confidence and boldness firm until the end"? We end up with the Church of our day...nothing compared to what the designer had in mind. It reminds me of homes here in the Portland area, where somebody got an idea in their head of what a neat remodel would do for them, and they obviously had no idea what it would end up looking like...an ugly moniker in the neighborhood that drops everyone else's home value, to say nothing of how unfunctional that home is for its inhabitants.

So, if the Church is a human home for a divine being what things function far better in the small home setting than the larger building orientation?

Here are 7 things:

1. The centrality of Christ. Eph. 1:17,18

Ephesians 1:17 that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, 18 having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, ...

An emphasis on Jesus, not entertainment, not programs, not a single individual's plan for the service, not by professional Christians, etc.

2. Open Participation. 1 Cor. 14

Where every believer comes to the gathering knowing and believing that Jesus may well call upon them to communicate His heart and mind to those gathered, and that there will be an opportunity for that to take place, because that is a clearly stated priority of the gathering.

3. Knowing intimately, those who lead. 1 Thess. 5:12

1Thessalonians 5:12 We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you.

Whereas in the larger and mega Church, where the flock rarely get to know the one leading them very well, the smaller house gathering encourages a depth of relational knowing, personalized care, and genuine transparency in those who lead.

4. Development of family connections. 1 Tim. 5:1,2; 1 Pet. 5:5

1Timothy 5:1 Do not rebuke an older man but encourage him as you would a father. Treat younger men like brothers, 2 older women like mothers, younger women like sisters, in all purity.

1Peter 5:5 Likewise, you who are younger, be subject to the elders. Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another, for "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble."

We are brothers, and sisters, with mothers and fathers, as sons and daughters of the Lord. Through the process of getting to know one another, after the Spirit, in small and intimate settings, our familial relationships are strengthened.

5. A Leadership that functions more like fathers in a family, than CEOs of a corporation. 1 Thess. 2:11,12; 1 Cor. 4:15

1Thessalonians 2:11 For you know how, like a father with his children, 12 we exhorted each one of you and encouraged you and charged you to walk in a manner worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory.

1Corinthians 4:15 For though you have countless guides in Christ, you do not have many fathers. For I became your father in Christ Jesus through the gospel.

Paul's approach to leadership has no indications of a developing "Boss over a company, CEO over a corporation, Despot over a controlled region, or Manager of a business." Leaders are older brothers and sisters in Christ, with proven godly character, wisdom, servant's hearts, and spiritual graces.

6. Multiple expressions of the Holy Spirit in the Gathering. Eph. 5:19, 1 Cor. 14

Ephesians 5:19 addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with all your heart,

Each believer is encouraged to see their part in gathering as essential, rather than as passive pew sitters who listen to the primary or exclusive communicator.

7. Interconnectivity of the entire body, with the ministry of the Spirit in Gathering. Eph. 4:16

Ephesians 4:16 from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.

There is to be a clear sense of connectedness. However we gather there must be certain sense of the importance of each member, all contributing to the increase of the whole. Everyone is needed, far beyond their tithe check or Sunday school teaching.

Therefore, while we certainly recognize the legacy of the “Church in a Building,” approach to Church, has not been all bad, we very much believe the Lord Jesus is transitioning His Church back towards the Traditions of the apostles, which He Himself gave them, and the Foundations of life in Christ.

Will the “Church in a Building,” approach prevail? I suspect it will continue, perhaps even until the return of the Lord, and for those who do not see the New Testament pattern, their involvement in the approach they have always known is certainly preferable to no involvement with the Church. But, will it “Prevail?” I don’t think so. If prevail means dominate the Church scene, then “No,” I don’t think this will happen. I believe it will continue to lose its membership, in some cases dramatically, (Frank Viola and George Barna tell us that in America alone 1 million Christians leave the traditional Church each year...looking for something better in Christ), and in other places slowly but surely. It seems very obvious that God is speaking to the hearts of millions of believers, worldwide, about coming into small and simple environments, where Jesus’ Headship is more fully expressed, and gathering “Unto Him,” is their focus.