

## Unveiling The Bride The New Covenant Church

*“And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully adorned for her husband.” Revelation 21:2*

In God’s divine order, everything reproduces after its own kind. Plants reproduce plants, animals reproduce animals and humans reproduce humans. In the same way, just as earthly seed reproduces the image of the earthly, only heavenly seed can reproduce the image of the heavenly. According to God’s plan of redemption, Christ is the heavenly seed that reproduces His church. Jesus said, “Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains only a single seed; but if it dies, it produces much fruit (John 12:24).” Jesus spoke here of His death on the cross by which He would birth His church and bring many sons and daughters into His glory (Hebrews 2:10). The Bible says, “Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for her to make her holy... and present to Himself a glorious church (Ephesians 5:25-27).” This divine union between Christ and the church is the eternal purpose of God the Father (Ephesians 3:10-11). For it was always in God’s heart from before time to obtain a holy bride and companion for His Son. Just as a husband loves his wife, Christ loved the church and gave His life for her. Just as Eve was created from Adam’s body to be his bride and glory, God created the church from Christ’s body to be His bride and glory. And as Eve was created as Adam’s companion and helpmate to reign over the earth, God created the church as Christ’s companion and co-regent to reign with Him in the age to come (Genesis 2:18-24; Revelation 19:6-7; 20:6). As Paul revealed to the church, “I betrothed you to one husband, so that to Christ I might present you as a pure virgin... and the two will become one flesh. This mystery is great; but I am speaking about Christ and the church (2 Corinthians 11:2; Ephesians 5:31-32). Just as there was a betrothal period in Biblical times between the bride and the bridegroom until their wedding ceremony, so the church is now betrothed to Jesus Christ. Through water baptism, new believers declare their betrothal to their bridegroom, Jesus Christ, and their union with His death, burial and resurrection. According to Biblical custom, this betrothal is a binding commitment or covenant that can only be broken by infidelity. And by Biblical tradition, the bride remains veiled until her marriage. At the right time, at the end of the age, the bride will be revealed, the wedding feast will take place and the eternal union of the Lamb of God and His bride will be consummated (Revelation 21:1-2, 9-10). Thus God’s plan of redemption is the unfolding love story of this divine romance between Christ and the church.

However, we see two kinds of church today – the false church, which bears the image of the earthly (man) and the true church, which bears the image of the heavenly (Christ). The Bible says, “You have come to... the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem... the church of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven (Hebrews 12:22-23).”

We see from the Scriptures that the true church is the city of the living God, the new Jerusalem - the bride of Christ. The Bible says, "God placed all things under Christ's feet and appointed Him to be head over everything for the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all... just as the husband is head of the wife, Christ is also the head of the church... you are Christ's body and individually members of it (Ephesians 1:22-23; 5:23; 1 Corinthians 12:27)." The primary difference that separates the true church, the body of Christ, from the false church is the kind of life it has. In this regard, the New Testament describes two different kinds of life. First, there is *psychē* or *soul-life*, from which we get the English word psychology. This is the life Jesus described when He said, "Whoever finds his *soul-life* will lose it, but whoever loses his *soul-life* for My sake will find it (Matthew 10:39)." What is our *soul-life*? This is the life which springs from our natural personality (and its inherent attitudes, affections and abilities). In other words, the person who fulfills his natural *soul-life* in this world will lose eternal life, but the person who loses (lays down) fulfilling his natural *soul-life* for the sake of Christ will find eternal life in Him. The New Testament Greek word used for eternal life is *zoē*. Of the two kinds of life, *psychē* or *soul-life* originates from man, but only *zoē-life* originates from God and is divine. This is the divine life Jesus described when He said, "I have come that they may have *zoē-life*, and have it more abundantly (John 10:10)." This is the life the apostle John referred to when he wrote, "He who has the Son has the *zoē-life*; he who does not have the Son of God does not have the *zoē-life* (1 John 5:12)." Before Jesus saved us, we did not have *zoē-life*. Jesus said, "I tell you the truth, unless you eat of the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no *zoē-life* within yourselves (John 6:53)." Consequently, our life before Christ consisted of our *soul-life*, which we inherited from our natural parents, and our inward sinful nature, which we spiritually inherited from Adam, the first man. However, when we are born again of God's Spirit, we receive Christ's resurrection *zoē-life* to indwell our spirit. As Jesus said, "That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit (John 3:6)." This resurrection *zoē-life* that inhabits and sets apart the true church is the free gift of the New Covenant that was purchased for us by Jesus' sacrifice on the cross (Romans 6:23). Thus the true New Covenant church is a divine organism - a spiritual body - filled with Christ's resurrection *zoē-life*.

In the natural realm, when any of the body's major organic systems (such as the cardiovascular or respiratory systems) become blocked or obstructed, the body quickly loses its vitality. Its immune system becomes compromised; its members stop functioning; and the body itself can die. In the same manner, if the members of Christ's body continue to live and function by relying on their own natural *soulish* (*psychikos*) ability instead of staying spiritually connected to their head Jesus Christ, they block the power of Christ's *zoē-life* from vitally nourishing and strengthening them. The outcome is spiritual degeneration and death. How does the body stay connected to its head Jesus Christ? The Bible says the true church - the bride - responds to Christ's headship by hearing and obeying His voice. This is God's love language. Jesus said, "If you love Me, you will obey My commands... whoever has My commands and obeys them, he is the one who loves Me (John 14:15, 21). Jesus further emphasized this vital aspect of

fellowship and connection to Him when He said, “My sheep hear My voice, and they know Me, and follow Me... he who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches (John 10:27; Revelation 2:7).” Because the New Covenant church’s source of life is the head of the body - Jesus Christ; it follows that its membership, unity, growth and direction originate and are sustained by the Spirit of God. “For all who are being led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God (Romans 8:14).” This is the New Covenant church - a spiritual body - born, grown and governed by Jesus Christ Himself.

However, the false church is not submitted to Christ’s headship; therefore, it does not hear and obey His voice. This is the counterfeit church - an earthly organization - born, grown and governed by men who do not know Jesus Christ. As a result, worldly-minded men plan, direct and coordinate the affairs of the false church by their natural ability and wisdom. The counterfeit church’s membership, unity, growth and direction are soulish (*psychikos*) and function just like any other institution controlled by man. Without the resurrection *zoē*-life of Jesus Christ as its source and direction, the counterfeit church is only a “Christian” culture club with conforming customs and dues (a ten percent church tax on its members’ gross income called tithes). Some false churches may have originally started in the heavenly power of the Spirit, but lost their “first love” for Jesus and end up religiously functioning in man’s earthly soul-power (Revelation 2:1-5). History records that when the church fails to hear and obey Christ’s voice, its connection and fellowship with Him is broken and lost. Just as the body without the spirit is dead, when Jesus removes His Spirit from the carnal church, it is spiritually dead. However, since the counterfeit church can continue to run on its corporate soul-power and natural resources without relying on Christ’s Spirit, it can keep functioning as a lifeless institution without missing an earthly step. There are many churches that appear to be alive to those lacking spiritual discernment. They may even be physically growing in terms of people, property and programs. They may seem to have charismatic ministers, dynamic preaching and inspiring worship. However, there is a distinct absence of Christ’s *zoē*-life in these false churches. As Jesus said, “You have a reputation of being alive but you are dead (Revelation 3:1).” Tragically, this has occurred countless times in church history as well as in our day.

Before we go on, let us go back to the very beginning of the church’s birth, growth and subsequent spiritual decline. One of the more dramatic moments in Jesus’ ministry occurred when He asked His disciples who they thought He was. Peter boldly responded that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of the living God (Matthew 16:13-19). Jesus said Peter had received this divine revelation from God, and proclaimed that His church would be built on this foundational bedrock - God’s revelation of Jesus Christ. Jesus then promised to give Peter (and the other apostles) the keys to His kingdom and declared the powers of hell would not prevail against His church. The fulfillment of Jesus’ two promises - receiving the keys to the kingdom of God and overcoming Satan - are coupled together. Without the Christ’s keys to the kingdom, the church lacks

Christ's power to overcome Satan and sin. And unless the church overcomes sin, she cannot know Christ or abide in Him (1 John 3:6). What are the keys to the kingdom of God? They are the keys to understanding the mystery of Christ's Atonement. The Bible says the message of the cross contains the power of God to redeem us from sin (1 Corinthians 1:18). The Bible also says that if the spiritual forces of darkness had known the mystery of the cross, they never would have crucified the Son of God (1 Corinthians 2:6-8). Therefore, spiritually understanding the purpose and power of Christ's crucifixion is the key to unlocking the power of Christ's resurrection life in His church.

Following His resurrection, Jesus gave the apostles more divine understanding concerning the meaning of His crucifixion and the divine provisions of His New Covenant. He showed them how His death on the cross as the Lamb of God provided them with forgiveness from the penalty of sin. He also showed them how His death on the cross provided them with freedom from the power of sin. How did God accomplish this? Since we were born into sin, God freed us from sin's captivity by including us in His Son's death, so that we could be born again into His Son's resurrection life. Therefore, when we received Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior, God spiritually immersed us into Christ's death in order to perform what we might call a "divine heart transplant." God used His Son's sacrificial death on the cross to spiritually remove our terminally sin-sick heart and replace it with His Son's divine heart (Romans 6:3-6; 1 Corinthians 5:21; 2 Corinthians 13:5). This New Covenant divine heart transplant was foretold by the prophet Ezekiel six centuries before Christ's birth when Ezekiel declared that God would remove our sin-hardened heart and replace it with His new spiritual heart when He put His Spirit within us (Ezekiel 36:26-27; see also Jeremiah 31:31-34). Therefore, by the divine operation of the cross of Christ, God delivered us from indwelling sin by removing our sin nature, so that His Son could dwell in us by His Spirit (Romans 8:9; Galatians 2:20; Colossians 2:11-12). The Bible says, "God has sent the Spirit of His Son into our hearts (Galatians 4:6)." Thus God included us in His Son's death so that His resurrected Son might live in us (Colossians 1:27). This divine heart transplant is the miracle of our new birth - the promise of the New Covenant, the purpose of Christ's Atonement and the power of Christ's gospel. We see that God's way to permanently deal with our chronic sinning was to remove the sinner from within us and substitute Christ in his place. Whereas we were once sinners by nature, God now calls us His saints or "holy ones" who are His Son's holy bride. This is the spiritual lesson that God wants every new believer to learn when they are baptized (buried) into a watery "grave" and emerge as a new person in Christ (Romans 6:4; 2 Corinthians 5:17). Thus from His Son's death and resurrection, God has created a people for His own possession - the body of Christ, His church - who are destined to become conformed to His Son's glorious image and be eternally united with Him as His devoted bride (Romans 8:29; Revelation 19:6-7). This is why the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, the Son of the living God, is the greatest game changer in human history; indeed, in all eternity.

Therefore salvation is only the beginning and not the end of God's divine purpose for His elect. But now that God has saved us and called us to be Christ's holy bride, how can we keep ourselves undefiled from sin while living in this sin-sick world, so that we can fulfill God's eternal purpose? Although we now have God's Spirit indwelling us, our soul-life (our natural personality with its inherent attitudes, affections and abilities) was not instantly transformed into Christ's image when we were saved (Ephesians 4:22-24). Therefore, we do not have to repeatedly crucify our old *Adam sinful nature* (since God has already put it to death and removed it), but we still have to contend with our old *Adam way of thinking* (the sinful thoughts of our natural and *unconverted* soul-life). There is, however, a great difference between our old sinful nature (now dead and gone) and our *unconverted* soul-life. Our *unconverted* soul-life (*the unrenewed mind*) does not have the power of the old sinful nature, which was like a sin factory within us, continually producing sinful attitudes and actions and enslaving us to its power (Ephesians 2:1-3). Since God has freed us from captivity to sin by destroying and removing our sin nature/the sin factory, we are now capable of living a sanctified or holy life. Our co-crucifixion with Christ when we were saved is not merely positional, conceptual or symbolic. When we were saved, God actually removed our sin nature, which was at the very core of our inner being and the root of our self-identity and rebellion toward God. Since sin is no longer our master, we are now able to bring our thought-life into submission to Christ by renewing our mind according to the truth of God's Word (Romans 12:2; 2 Corinthians 10:5). Now that Satan no longer has a foothold within us through our old sin nature, and our new nature has the power of the Holy Spirit living in us, we are able by faith (in Christ's triumph on the cross) to put off our old soulish way of thinking and acting, and put on Christ's way of thinking and acting (1 Corinthians 2:16; Ephesians 4:22-24; Colossians 3:9-10). Thus the gospel of the cross contains the power of God to not only save the elect, but to also sanctify His elect - the New Covenant church - to be the devoted and virgin bride of Christ.

Once Jesus had given the apostles this divine understanding on how His death on the cross had freed them from slavery to sin, the gospel of "Christ crucified" became the apostles' triumphant proclamation and foundational teaching for the New Testament church (1 Corinthians 1:23; 2:2). Paul summed up the apostles' gospel with this personal testimony: "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me; and the life that I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave Himself up for me (Galatians 2:20)." It is by believing and acting daily on this truth of the gospel (*our old self no longer lives, but Christ now lives in us*) that we are able to lose our old soulish identity in Adam and find our new spiritual identity in Christ; and it is our divine union with Christ that gives us a deep inward security and eternal sense of belonging to His body, which neither heaven nor earth can shake and neither Satan nor sin can steal and destroy (Romans 8:31-39; Hebrews 12:26-29). Jesus said, "The glory that you have given to Me I have given to them, that they may be one just as We are one; I in them and You in Me, that they may be in perfect union, so that the world may know that You sent Me, and loved them even as You have loved Me

(John 17:22-23).” However, the apostles had to constantly be on guard to ensure this glorious truth of Christ’s completed work on the cross was not subverted and compromised (Galatians 1:6-9). For if Satan could not extinguish Christianity, He would certainly try to distort and corrupt it.

Consequently, at the end of the first century with the death of the last of the original twelve apostles, the truth of the gospel came under relentless attack from Satan to nullify the power of the cross. Tragically, as a result of this devilish onslaught, the spiritual meaning of Christ’s crucifixion (the keys to the kingdom of God) began to be obscured within just a few generations. The key that was lost first was the divine truth that God freed us from the power of sin by replacing our sinful nature with Christ’s divine nature when we were saved. Once the church no longer believed and acted on this Biblical truth that it had died in Christ, its spiritual life and identity and devotion were no longer rooted in Christ. Instead of submitting to God’s righteousness that comes solely through faith in Christ and His completed work on the cross, the church sought to establish its own righteousness and religious identity by relying on its own corporate soul strength. The church began to depend on its organizational power and natural resources to do Christ’s work. When Christians begin to trust in their soulish (*psychikos*) ability instead of Christ’s completed work on the cross to be holy and serve God, it produces a counterfeit version of Christianity (that we might call “Churchianity”), which appears outwardly righteous but is inwardly lawless, hypocritical and deceived (Matthew 23:28). Church leaders then increasingly relied on their own earthly religious authority to ensure obedience, unity and doctrinal purity in the ranks of their church members. As this downward spiral continued for the next few centuries, the church became preoccupied with its clerical hierarchy, temple-like building programs, and growing wealth and political influence rather than the indwelling Lordship and Life of Jesus Christ. The church lowered God’s standard of holiness in order to increase church attendance and membership rolls, and church leaders became carnally focused on their clergy status to protect, promote and profit from their religious positions. They nullified the Scriptures and wrongly interpreted and divided the Biblical role of elders into three separate, tiered offices – bishops, pastors and elders. The Catholic church later added two more layers – cardinals and the pope – to this pyramidal hierarchy. By the fifth century, this religious monarchy had completely destroyed the New Covenant’s priesthood of all believers and replaced it with a special caste of paid professional priests (now called “pastors” in the Protestant church). This self-serving false priesthood then reinstated the obsolete Old Covenant practice of tithing to support themselves and their “temple” cathedrals.

Note: the tithe (“a tenth” in Hebrew) was the Old Covenant Mosaic Law that required giving a tenth of your profit (crops or animals) to support the Levitical priesthood. However, with the New Covenant, God fundamentally changed His divine priesthood. The Old Covenant had a separate and distinct priesthood – the Levites who were in charge of temple worship and were supported with tithes by the rest of God’s people.

With the New Covenant, however, the temple worship ceased because the body of Christ, His church, is now the temple of God (Ephesians 2:19-22). The specialized, full-time priesthood that performed the temple service also ceased since all believers now constitute God's holy priesthood who have direct access to know God and serve Him (Hebrews 4:16; 8:11; 10:19; 1 Peter 2:5; Revelation 1:6). And the practice of the Old Covenant Mosaic Law of tithing ceased because there was no longer a need for God's people to give ten percent of their income to support the temple and its priesthood (Romans 7:4; Hebrews 7:5, 12). For these reasons, the New Covenant church never practiced tithing nor ever taught tithing.

This protracted decline into unbelief and spiritual darkness continued until the sixth century when the State-sanctioned, institutional church (also known as the Catholic church by this time) eventually lost even the first key to enter the kingdom of heaven - the basic truth of saving faith in Christ's Atonement. The monarchical and monolithic Catholic church had become a spiritually empty cathedral of pomp and ceremony guarded by unsaved, self-ambitious, self-profiting, corrupt clergy who gave lip service to God but whose deeds denied the reality and power of Christ's crucifixion and resurrection (2 Timothy 3:5). In the case of these false shepherds, Jesus' rebuke is fitting: "Woe to you... for you have taken away the key to knowledge; you yourselves did not enter, and you have hindered those who were entering (Luke 11:52)." However, throughout these centuries of church apostasy, God continued to reveal His Son and the fullness of His completed work on the cross to any believer who earnestly sought to know Him and obey Him. While the false church was steeped in darkness, this faithful remnant of Christ's bride served as God's lamplight in the world and "suffered reproach with Christ outside the camp," and often endured severe persecution since the false church born of the flesh always persecutes the true church born of the Spirit (Hebrews 13:12; Galatians 4:29). It is no wonder that historians have called much of this era "the Dark Ages."

Then, in the early 1500s, a momentous event occurred. God's divine sunrise dawned once again as the Holy Spirit began to restore the liberating truth of Christ's gospel and the keys of the kingdom to the church at large. This major breakthrough came when God mercifully gave a Catholic monk named Martin Luther divine revelation on Romans 1:17: "The righteous will live by faith." The movement that arose from this divinely restored truth of the gospel of Christ became historically known as the Protestant Reformation. The Reformation restored the authority of the Scriptures and illuminated man's need to be saved by faith in Jesus Christ alone. This brought into focus once again Christ's Atonement for the forgiveness of sins and the need to be born again of the Spirit. Thus, by God's grace, this key to the kingdom, which had been largely lost for nearly a millennium, was miraculously recovered. This key to entering the kingdom of heaven - salvation by faith in Christ alone - became the torch that spread the fires of evangelism to the whole world. Yet the Protestant Reformation only partially restored the mystery of the cross to the church. For the past five hundred

years, the church has only acted on half of the gospel. In practice, the Protestant Reformation restored the gospel of how “the righteous are *saved by faith*,” but never restored the whole gospel of how “the righteous will *live by faith*.” As a result of the work of the Reformation, the church knows Christ’s Atonement has provided believers with forgiveness from the penalty of their sins. Yet because of the Reformation’s critical shortfall, most Christians do not know that Christ’s death has also provided believers with freedom from the power of sin by removing their sinful nature. Note: In Biblical terms, “knowing” God’s truth does not mean merely mentally assenting to it. It means believing and acting on it and wholeheartedly obeying it (Romans 6:17).

The result is most Christians believe their sins are forgiven, but they do not know how to stop practicing sin and live by faith in Jesus Christ who indwells them by His Spirit. Yet this is the central purpose of Christ’s Atonement and the cornerstone of His New Covenant church. Without possessing this crucial key to God’s kingdom, many Christians are compromised by sin and are spiritually weak and sick to the point of perishing. Because of their spiritual ignorance, most Christians mistakenly believe they still have a debilitating sinful nature even after they have been born again of the Holy Spirit. Consequently, they trust Jesus as their Savior and hope one day to go to heaven but, in their daily lives, they inwardly struggle in frustration and resigned discouragement beset with entangling sins. And yet what sort of salvation would we have if God only saved us from the penalty of our sins, and then left us on our own to deal with the demonic power and deception of sin? This would be a pitiful and incomplete redemption that would not fulfill God’s eternal purpose to have a pure and uncompromised bride who wholeheartedly loves Son. Yet most Christians are defeated by sin and the devil because they think this is as far as God went when, in actuality, this is as far as their faith and knowledge of the truth of the gospel has gone.

Since the Protestant Reformation did not recover the whole gospel of Christ, its followers did not know (and believe and act on) the truth that they had died in Christ to the world, including religious worldliness (Galatians 6:14). Therefore, they did not know how to lose (or lay down) their *psychē* soul-life daily by faith in order to find their spiritual identity and resurrection *zoē*-life in Christ. As a result, the Protestant church carried forward many of the carnal religious traditions and practices identified with the Catholic church. Consequently, many Protestant churches today still practice a form of cathedral or temple worship. When most Christians say they are going to church, they mean they are going to a special building (or temple) to worship. However, under the New Covenant, God’s people do not go to church; they *are* the church – they *are* God’s building and God’s temple (1 Corinthians 3:4; Ephesians 2:19-22). This is not just semantics; it reveals a certain mindset and the way people think about church. Much of the church today also practices a separate and distinct paid priesthood (or professional clergy). And many churches also practice tithing (the ten percent income tax for membership). All of these practices are throwbacks to the Old Covenant and the Mosaic Law. Even the single pastor (and senior pastor) system is a reversion to the Old



Covenant high priest system when a single “anointed” man was needed to intervene and interpret God for the rest of the congregation. But under the New Covenant, the church has only one High Priest, Jesus Christ, who effectively intercedes for us and teaches us all things by His Spirit who lives in us (Romans 8:26-27; Hebrews 3:1; 4:14-15; 7:23-28; 10:21; 1 John 2:27). In effect, many churches today say they preach a New Covenant salvation but, in actuality, they practice a form of Old Covenant religion. Whenever a church practices a form of temple worship; supports a salaried professional clergy separate and distinct from the laity; practices the law of tithing; and suppresses the supernatural gifts of the Holy Spirit from being freely expressed by the priesthood of believers, it is a sure sign that church does not love God and is not submitted to Christ’s headship. It is also a sure sign that church is not walking by faith in Christ’s completed work on the cross and its spiritual life and identity are not found in Christ. In other words, based on the clear instructions of Scripture, that church is not a legitimate New Covenant church. Why would God ever pour the precious new wine of His Spirit into that old, brittle, unyielding and corrupted wineskin? (Matthew 9:17)

The Old Covenant religious practices of the false church may seem harmless to the undiscerning because they have now become “institutionalized,” “traditional” and “normative.” However, being immersed week after week in religious practices that are rooted in Old Covenant Mosaic Law is spiritually harmful, and can even be spiritually deadly to those who continually participate in them. This is why the Bible calls practicing the Old Covenant Law the “ministry of death and condemnation (2 Corinthians 3:6-9).” This is why Peter called practicing the Mosaic Law “a yoke which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear (Acts 15:10).” This is why Paul wrote concerning the Mosaic Law: “It was for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not be burdened again by a yoke of bondage (Galatians 5:1).” This is also why Paul warned others that they must never allow themselves to come under the yoke of the Law, not even a part of the Law: “You have been severed from Christ, you who are seeking to be justified by the Law; you have fallen from grace (Galatians 5:4).” The Bible goes as far as to say that anyone who practices even a part of the Old Covenant Mosaic Law is under a curse and subject to God’s wrath (James 2:10; Romans 4:15; Galatians 3:10). The Bible further states, “‘The righteous will live by faith,’ however, the Law is not based on faith; on the contrary, ‘He who practices these things will live by them’ (Galatians 3:11-12).” In other words, those who practice even parts of the Old Covenant Law will be judged by the Law and not by grace. For a professing Christian to practice even parts of the Old Covenant Law (whether it is the false church’s version of the Levitical priesthood; or the law of tithing; or a form of temple worship that takes the place of the true New Covenant church) in order to be righteous is to “nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness comes through the Law, then Christ died for nothing (Galatians 2:21).” Note: even if those in the false church say they consider their religious practices to be based on principle rather than law, it has the same effect as the law in their lives since their church practices are unchangeable (because of their own misguided religious conviction and self-determination). Many false churches today

stubbornly hold on to their rigid and harmful religious traditions and practices as zealously as the Pharisees in Jesus' day held on to their inflexible and inhumane rules of the Sabbath. Not only are these false brethren outwardly practicing a form of Judaism, they are inwardly practicing a form of Judaism by trying to be righteous and holy by the best of their natural ability and self-discipline. As Paul admonished: "Are you so foolish? After beginning by the Spirit, are you now trying to perfect yourselves by your human effort? (Galatians 3:3)." These false brethren in our day are similar to the Judaizers in the first century who tried to lead new believers astray from Christ by telling them they must follow aspects of the Mosaic Law and practice certain Old Covenant traditions in order to be Christians. Paul's exhortation to the naïve Christians who were being deceived by the false brethren is still appropriate: "I am amazed that you are so quickly deserting Him who called you by the grace of Christ for a different gospel, which really is no gospel at all. Some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to distort the gospel of Christ. But if even we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to what we have preached to you, he is to be eternally condemned!" (Galatians 1:6-8) The false brethren who promote and practice a different gospel in our day will be judged because they have hardened their heart to hearing and obeying the New Covenant truth that Jesus Christ died to set His people free from obsolete religious practices, so that all the members of His body would be a royal priesthood who have direct access to know God and serve Him (1 Peter 2:9; Revelation 6:9-10). For under the New Covenant, everyone who is in Christ (whether Jew or Gentile) has been freed from the Old Covenant Law so they can serve God by the Spirit as His holy priesthood (Romans 7:4, 6; 2 Corinthians 3:5-6; Ephesians 4:12-16; 1 Peter 2:5). How were we freed from the Old Covenant Law? When we were saved, we not only died to sin, we also died to the Law. "Therefore, my brethren, you have also died to the Law through the body of Christ, so that you might be joined to another, to Him who was raised from the dead, in order that we might bear fruit for God (Romans 7:4)." Practicing Old Covenant religion is spiritual death, whereas living by the Spirit in the New Covenant is life and peace. There is so much more we could say about how spiritually deceptive and deadly it is for anyone to profess they believe in a New Covenant salvation, but then practice a form of Old Covenant religion that is both hostile and heretical to the New Covenant, and a gross misrepresentation of the resurrection *zoē*-life that Christ died to freely give His church.

Thus many of the Old Covenant-based religious traditions and practices that have developed over the centuries in the false church are the result of men not knowing (and believing and acting on) the grace and truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ and His New Covenant. Jesus said, "You nullify the Word of God by your tradition that you have handed down (Mark 7:13)." When you do not believe and act on the gospel that you were crucified with Christ and have died to the world (since you no longer have a sinful nature), your "Christian" identity and "church" identity will, by the natural course of events, be based on worldly religious principles that are contrary to the resurrection *zoē*-life of Christ. In the beginning, this may only seem like a little of the world's way of

doing things; however, if not spiritually dealt with, it eventually compromises the whole church. As Paul said, "Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump of dough? (1 Corinthians 5:6)." Thus the counterfeit church's clerical aristocracy; its programmed and tightly controlled order-of-service; its ever-expanding building programs; and its constant appetite for more and more money are soulishly inspired and driven. The "fully-matured" false church is like a diseased and cancerous body, and many of its religious practices are the malignant symptoms of a deeper soul-sickness caused by not having its identity rooted in Christ, which is a direct consequence of not being submitted to Christ's sovereignty. In the first century, the foundation or ABCs of the church was simply, but powerfully, the gospel of "Christ crucified." There was no other foundation. However, as someone has aptly said, the ABCs of the false church are **A**ttendance, **B**uildings and **C**ash.

To sum up, if the church is to have Christ's resurrection life, it must "stay connected to the head (*Christ*), from whom the whole body, being supported and held together by its joints and ligaments, grows with a growth which is from God (Colossians 2:19)." From this Scripture, we can conclude that when a church truly loves God and is properly submitted to Christ's sovereignty, it will have Christ's resurrection life that enables it to be spiritually held together by its joints and ligaments, and God will cause the whole body to grow and produce spiritual fruit. What are these spiritual joints and ligaments that hold the true church together? The New Testament Greek word for joints in this verse is *haphē*, which are the points at which parts of the body are connected together. As members of the body of Christ, we are joined and connected together by our Christian fellowship (the New Testament Greek word is *koinonia*, which also means communion with one another). The New Testament Greek word for ligaments in this verse is *syndesmos*, which are the connecting bands that hold our joints together. Without these strong bonding ligaments, our joints would separate under stress. These ligaments are a picture of the spiritual bonds of love and peace which hold our Christian fellowship (*koinonia*) together. The Bible says, "Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond (*syndesmos*) of peace... beyond all things, put on love, which is the perfect bond (*syndesmos*) of unity (Ephesians 4:3; Colossians 3:14)." Therefore, when the New Covenant church stays connected to its head Jesus Christ, the members of His body will have the spiritual bonds of love and peace needed to hold their Christian fellowship together in unity even during difficult times, and God will cause their church to spiritually grow and multiply. If, however, a church does not love God and does not stay connected to Christ, it will not have the spiritual bonds of love and peace needed to keep its fellowship spiritually together and alive. Does this sound unworkable and impractical? Based on the world's way of doing business, it is impossible. However, in God's kingdom, this spiritual dynamic is profoundly wise. Jesus said, "What is highly esteemed by men is detestable in the sight of God (Luke 16:16)." In the eyes of men, relying on the bonds of love and peace to hold the church together is weak and fragile; however, in the eyes of God, this guarantees His New Covenant church - the bride of Christ - will always be dependent on the headship of

Jesus Christ to be nourished by His *zoē*-life, and be able to produce the spiritual fruit of love and peace that binds the church together in true *koinonia* fellowship.

Once again, this does not necessarily mean that a spiritually dead church that is not submitted to Christ will cease to function, since the nature of the false church is such that it can operate without Christ's *zoē*-life and without the spiritual bonds of love and peace. As long as the false church maintains a physical building, a paid pastor and is financed by weekly tithes (religious taxes), it will continue to appeal to less than sincere, so-called "Christians" that are attracted to an outward form of Christianity and the false security of a "religion" and "community" that does not demand them to surrender their lives daily to Christ's sovereignty. The spiritual bankruptcy of these false churches would become very apparent if they ceased collecting the tithe taxes. As soon as this unBiblical cash flow stopped, almost all of these churches would cease doing business and close their doors.

Now let us take a closer look at the true church. According to the Scriptures, the New Covenant church has the following features:

- The New Covenant church normally meets in the saints' homes and whenever the church grows too large to meet in one member's home, it simply multiplies from house to house throughout its geographic locality (Acts 2:46; 5:42; 20:20; Romans 16:5; 1 Corinthians 16:19; Colossians 4:15; Philemon 1:2). This eliminates the need to raise large amounts of money to buy, build and maintain church facilities. This helps ensure that God (not men and their money) will cause the growth of the church (1 Corinthians 3:6-7). This informal, home setting also encourages open participatory meetings; helps the church function in a more personal and loving way as God's family; and enables the saints to practice hospitality toward other believers and visitors (Romans 12:13; Hebrews 13:2; 1 Peter 4:9). An exception to weekly home meetings would be to occasionally rent a building, hall or auditorium for a city-wide meeting of house churches and/or facilitate the outreach ministry of a visiting apostle, prophet, evangelist or teacher (Acts 19:9).
- The New Covenant church experiences rich spiritual fellowship with the Father and His Son and experiences close-knit community life among the saints who are committed to laying down their self-will and giving up their natural *unconverted* soul-lives in *agape* love for one another (Acts 2:42-47; 4:32-33; 1 Corinthians 12:12-27; Ephesians 4:15-16; Philippians 2:1-5; 1 John 1:3; 3:16). As members of God's household, the saints' lives are intimately intertwined with one another as brothers and sisters and mothers and fathers in Christ. This encourages mentoring and discipleship relationships to naturally develop (1 Timothy 5:1-2; Titus 2:3-4). On the Lord's Day (Sunday), the local believers often meet together in homes to share "the Lord's Supper" as a full fellowship meal (Acts 20:7; 1

Corinthians 11:20). The primary purpose of eating this communal meal together is to remember (with thanksgiving and rejoicing) the New Covenant provisions of the Lord's death by sharing "the bread and the cup" together, and to reaffirm the believers' bonds of love and peace with one another as God's family (1 Corinthians 11:23-26). This is why this fellowship meal is also called a "love feast" (Jude 1:12).

- The New Covenant church does not practice Old Covenant tithing to subsidize a special, paid priesthood (Hebrews 7:5, 12); instead its members practice voluntary giving (according to their means as God has blessed them) to further the outreach of the gospel and help those members of the body who are financially suffering and in need (Acts 4:34-35; 11:29; Romans 12:13; 1 Corinthians 16:1-2; 1 John 3:17). This eliminates the mandatory Mosaic religious tax placed upon God's people to finance a professional clergy who are separate from the laity. It also helps ensure the basic material needs of each member of God's family are not lacking while others are experiencing abundance (2 Corinthians 8:1-15; 9:6-7). This fulfills the divine command: "Bear one another's burdens, and thereby fulfill the law of Christ... when one members suffers, all members suffer together (Galatians 6:2; 1 Corinthians 12:26; see also 1 John 3:17)."
- The New Covenant church has a vibrant, functioning priesthood of all believers (men and women) who passionately love our Lord Jesus Christ and are gifted and equipped by the Holy Spirit to do the work of the ministry together and build up the body of Christ in love. Every member of this royal priesthood personally knows and serves Jesus Christ, our High Priest, and has a vital and unique ministry role in His body (Romans 12:3-8; 1 Corinthians 12:1-12; Ephesians 4:11-13, 15-16; Colossians 2:19; 1 Peter 2:9; 4:10-11; Revelation 1:6; 5:10). Consequently, when the church meets together under Christ's headship, one member might be led by the Holy Spirit to share a prayer or a song; another member a word of knowledge or wisdom or prophecy; another member an exhortation or a teaching; another member the gift of healing or miracles; and another member might share a message in tongues and its interpretation - all done in an orderly, peaceful and loving manner for the benefit of the whole church (1 Corinthians 14:26-33). This dynamic priesthood of all the believers is one of the fundamental building stones ("living stones") of the New Covenant church (1 Peter 2:4-5). This spiritual freedom and responsibility in the New Covenant church enables every member to grow into fully knowing God, and also helps each member learn how to exercise their individual spiritual and natural gifts to effectively serve and care for God's family. It also enables Christ, as the head of the church, to lead His body through a variety of members with a variety of gifts as all the saints learn to fix their eyes on Jesus and hear and obey His voice.

- The New Covenant church has a compassionate and creative commission to reach others with the gospel of Christ (Matthew 8:28; Mark 16:15; Acts 4:20; 11:20-21; Philippians 1:5). This reflects the heart of God for the lost and enables Jesus Christ to employ the multi-gifted members of His church as coworkers to advance His gospel and bring His elect into the kingdom, and this also helps keep the church from becoming insular and isolated.
- The New Covenant church is normally shepherded in each locality by spiritually mature and humble brothers called elders, who as servant-leaders are unpaid and accountable to the church and to Jesus Christ, the head of the church, to be godly examples of faithfulness; provide wise oversight (not micromanagement); help train and equip the priesthood of believers to do their God-given ministries; and provide loving pastoral care for members of God's local flock (Acts 20:17, 28; Ephesians 4:11-13; 2 Timothy 3:1-7; James 5:14; 1 Peter 5:1-4). Since Jesus is the Chief Shepherd, He personally calls, trains and, at the right time, appoints these shepherds within the local church. When a church reaches a certain size and spiritual maturity, these elder brothers will emerge and be recognized by the saints, and may sometimes be confirmed by the "laying on of hands" of visiting apostles and prophets (Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5-9). This plurality of shared leadership helps prevent carnal authoritarian rule; stifles a "personality cult" from developing around a sole or senior pastor; and helps keep the church singularly focused on Jesus Christ as the Chief Shepherd who personally leads His body by His Spirit. This New Covenant form of local church leadership only works if the elders are truly submitted to Christ their head and to one another in the humility of the Holy Spirit (Philippians 2:1-5). This law of the Spirit ensures these elders (shepherds) in the New Covenant church must stay vitally connected to Christ to have His resurrection life, so they can stay united in Spirit to properly care for God's flock with His wisdom, power and love; and be spiritually sensitive to discern and follow (not interfere with) the Holy Spirit's prompting and leading of the saints.

Note: many Christians have been "burned" by the false church and are now wary of having any kind of spiritual leaders. Because of past wrongs they have experienced, they have a natural mistrust of authority. Consequently, they would prefer to have no elders at all, or else to "emasculate" the Biblical role of elders and relegate these elder brothers to a passive, and preferably invisible role. Others maintain the only leadership oversight the local church needs can simply be met by the occasional visit of an itinerant apostle. However, this way of thinking is reactionary and not spiritually healthy and goes against the clear instruction of Scripture and God's design for the New Covenant church. The Bible says that Jesus, the Chief Shepherd, has given elders (shepherds) to the New Covenant church as His "gifts" to feed, train, equip and protect the saints

(John 21:15-17; Acts 20:28; Ephesians 4:11-12). The elders are to lead, not lord; serve, not dominate; and persuade, not force. It could be said that, ultimately, the goal of an elder is to work himself out of the ministry by training and equipping the saints to do the work of the ministry until the whole body spiritually matures into the fullness of Christ (Ephesians 4:13; see also Galatians 4:19). For this reason, Paul wrote that the work of an elder is a noble undertaking for brothers in Christ to aspire to (1 Timothy 3:1; see also 5:17). Jesus Christ, the head of the church, hates the teachings and practices of Nicolaitans (*“those who lord it over the laity – the people”*) even more than we do (Revelation 2:6, 15). With this in mind, Peter exhorted the elders who shepherd God’s flock to never lord it over the saints (1 Peter 5:4; see also 2 Corinthians 1:24). This is why Jesus expressly forbids ministers from being called by formal “honorific” titles, (Matthew 23:6-12; see also Mark 10:42-45). And yet the false church violates Jesus’ command and insists on using formal titles such as Pastor, Reverend, Father, or Bishop that set the clergy apart as the “chosen few” who are above the priesthood of believers. In the first century New Covenant church, the believers simply called each other by their first names, such as Peter, Paul, John, Barnabas, Aquila, Pricilla, Mary, Elizabeth and Lydia. Jesus is well aware that no man, even an elder, is infallible; therefore, He has instituted checks and balances in the New Covenant church to protect His body if an elder soulishly abuses his leadership role and tries to religiously lord it over others. Consequently, the Bible instructs us that no one should ever be appointed as an elder unless he is above reproach and first meets all the rigorous qualifications of an elder, and his faith and character have been tested and proven (1 Timothy 3:1-7; 4:6; 5:21; Titus 1:5-9). Paul also warns that a new or spiritually immature Christian should never be appointed as an elder. Furthermore, if the local church at any time finds an elder guilty of abusing his leadership role, our Lord Jesus has established a somber but simple way for the church to counsel the elder; and, if he is unrepentant, to “fire” him (1 Timothy 5:19-21; Matthew 18:15-17). We completely emphasize with and pray for every Christian who has been spiritually and emotionally hurt by ungodly pastors and ministers; however, at the same time, we cannot throw out “the baby with the bathwater.” Jesus Christ wants His body to come into spiritual health and freedom from all past hurts and injustices, and this is one of the reasons why He gives the New Covenant church godly shepherds to protect His flock from “wolves in sheep’s clothing” and lead them into “green pastures and quiet waters.” Another safeguard the Lord has installed to protect His church from the abuse of authority is the New Covenant leadership system of plurality of elders. There is no religious rank in the New Covenant church; however, there is a divine order based on differences in ministry roles and levels of spiritual maturity. Within the New Covenant church, mutual submission for Christ’s sake is the general rule. All members of Christ’s body are to “submit to one another in the fear of Christ (Ephesians 5:21).” Within that framework of mutual submission, the younger members are

to honor and respect the older members, and all the saints are to submit to their spiritual leaders in the church. The Bible exhorts us to “obey your leaders and submit to their authority, for they keep watch over your souls as men who will give an account (Hebrews 13:17).” This divine order within the context and balance of mutual submission among all the saints is well-stated by Peter: “You younger men, in the same way, be submissive to your elders; and all of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another (1 Peter 5:5).” In the New Covenant church, true spiritual authority is derived from each member’s personal relationship with Jesus Christ. The degree to which a member intimately knows our Lord Jesus is the degree to which Jesus can speak with authority and power through that member to the rest of His body, whether through that believer’s life example or their words. Of course, this vital spiritual dynamic is conditional upon each member’s ability to hear Jesus’ voice in other members. And so just as the elders themselves are members of the priesthood of believers and not above them in religious rank, the New Covenant church does not have any “head elder” or “senior pastor” who is above the other elders in rank. All the elders are co-equal with each other in their shared leadership function. They may have different spiritual gifts and roles, such as teaching, prophecy, counseling or administration, but no single elder has positional authority over the other elders. Christ has wisely designed this checks and balance system in the New Covenant church to safeguard His flock and prevent anyone with a charismatic or manipulative personality (no matter how spiritually gifted they are) from gaining a position of carnal power and influence over the priesthood of believers. Once again, if any elder abuses and exceeds their authority with the other elders and the priesthood of believers, Christ has established a mechanism for the other elders and the local church to effectively discipline, and, if necessary, remove that dominating and overbearing elder from the congregation – the same mechanism that can be used to discipline or remove any member who is unsubmitive, rebellious and lawless. Some Christians think a co-equal plurality of elders who share collegial leadership in the church is unworkable. As a comparison, they argue that Moses was the head of the elders of Israel under the Old Covenant. However, the Old Covenant was only a shadow and copy of the spiritual pattern of things to come in the New Covenant where the reality is fulfilled in Jesus Christ (Colossians 2:17). Under the Old Covenant, Moses was appointed a prophet in God’s house and his brother Aaron was appointed as high priest. However, Jesus is far greater than Moses or Aaron; therefore God has appointed Jesus as the Apostle, Prophet, and High Priest over His house, the church (Hebrews 3:1-6). Consequently, under the New Covenant, no man can stand in the place of Christ as the Chief Shepherd and Head of God’s church (Colossians 1:18; 1 Peter 5:4). Some Christians also argue that the business world could never work without a head boss so how could Christ’s church ever function this way. That is precisely the problem with the false church; it is modeled after the world’s example and it is run like a business,



instead of a spiritual body with a spiritual head boss, Jesus Christ, whom every saint freely submits to. Others contend that the institution of marriage (where the husband is the head of the wife) shows how the church should function with a senior pastor who is the head of the elders and head of the church. Once again, this is not a proper analogy. The only comparison the Bible makes to the marriage covenant (where the two become one flesh) is to Jesus Christ and His church (where Jesus is the head of the church and the two become spiritually joined into one). Using the precious and holy example of the marriage covenant to justify having a senior pastor or head elder who spiritually rules over the church is illogical and unBiblical. It is just plain wrong to compare the sacred relationship between husband and wife with the relationship between a pastor and the members of Christ's body - Christ's bride. The Bible declares that Jesus Christ is the only head of the church (Colossians 1:18). Once again, this is why no man can ever stand in the place of Christ as the spiritual head of the priesthood of believers. The Bible also says that every fact is to be confirmed by the testimony of at least two witnesses (Deuteronomy 19:15; 2 Corinthians 13:1). There are two holy witnesses that confirm the truth of co-equal plurality of elders. One witness is God's Word which records the New Covenant pattern of plurality of elders in the Book of Acts as well as in the Epistles (Scripture citations have already been given). From these Scriptural accounts, two facts are established whenever elders are mentioned: 1) Each local church had a plurality of elders; and 2) There is never a head elder or senior pastor in any local church. The other witness is the heavenly pattern revealed by the Spirit in the Book of Revelation. The Holy Spirit revealed to the apostle John that a plurality of elders (twenty-four to be exact) are seated around God's throne (Revelation 4:4). The Holy Spirit showed John this plurality of elders a dozen times, and there is not a head elder or senior pastor among them. In fact, the only Chief Shepherd ever mentioned in John's spiritual vision is Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God, who is in the center of God's throne (Revelation 5:6-14). These two witnesses (the Word and the Spirit) confirm the New Covenant pattern of co-equal plurality of elders. However, let me repeat my earlier exhortation: although this is God's design and was the practice of the first century church, this New Covenant form of local church leadership only works if the elders (indeed all the saints) are truly submitted to Christ their head and to one another in the humility of the Holy Spirit (1 Peter 5:5). A final word: the New Covenant church is not a democracy in which every member has a vote; it is a spiritual body sovereignly governed by its head, Jesus Christ, to whom every member freely submits their self-will and soul-life. If the priesthood of believers stays connected to their head Jesus Christ and hears and obeys His voice, they will have resurrection life and spiritual unity, and the kingdom of God will be advanced through them. However, if the priesthood of believers does not stay connected to their head Jesus Christ, there will be selfish ambition, strife and disorder and their church will fail.

These are the basic features that form the New Covenant church. We believe the Holy Spirit led the first century apostles to establish the New Covenant church on these few basic principles to protect the simplicity and purity of the gospel of Christ, and safeguard the church from worldliness as much as possible (2 Corinthians 11:3). However, just following a New Covenant church pattern is not enough. A church that looks like it has the form and features of the New Covenant church may still not have Christ's *zoē*-life. No, there is far more required than just New Covenant form: as we have said earlier, the church - the bride - must steadfastly abide in union with Christ, her bridegroom. In the Scriptures, Jesus Christ inseparably links abiding (staying rooted) in Him with carrying our own cross. Jesus said, "Whoever does not carry his own cross and follow Me, cannot be My disciple (Luke 14:27)." What does it mean to carry our own cross? The cross of Christ, which was the implement of His death, must now become the implement of our *own* death (the death of our self-willed, self-governed soul-life). Therefore, the cross is not just His; it must by faith become ours as we turn away from fulfilling our *psychē* soul-life daily. Jesus said, "The man who loves his soul-life in this world will lose it, while the man who hates (*turns away from*) his soul-life in this world will find eternal *zoē*-life (John 12:25)." Let us be clear: God does not want to destroy our soul; He wants to restore our soul to His original divine purpose. God wants our soul to be governed by His Spirit and transformed by His Word as each day we put off any sinful thoughts that originate from our unrenewed mind, and instead put on the mind of Jesus Christ who lives in us (1 Corinthians 2:16).

The issue is simply one of ownership: will we continue to be enslaved to our unconverted soul's natural desires, or will we be enslaved to God in sanctification? This means that when we are faced with a choice of doing God's will or our will, we will obey (if we have the heart of the bride) the Holy Spirit within us instead of following our natural soulish (*psychikos*) temperament, preferences and inclinations (Romans 6:13-19). Allowing God's Word (His Sword of the Spirit) to have this decisive authority and transforming power in our life has a far-reaching, penetrating and pruning impact over all our natural affections, associations and activities. As Paul taught, "So then, brethren, we are under obligation, not to the flesh (*our unconverted soul-life*), to live according to the flesh. For if you are living according to the flesh (*your unconverted soul-life*), you will die; but if by the Spirit you are putting to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live. For all who are being led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God (Romans 8:12-14)." This is the only way the church can fulfill God's eternal purpose to be Christ's overcoming bride (Revelation 21:7). The Bible says "They overcame him (Satan) by the blood of the Lamb (Revelation 12:11)." The blood speaks of Christ's triumph on the cross, by which He completely destroyed Satan's power over God's elect. For by His death, Christ disarmed Satan's power to not only accuse us of sin, but to even arouse us to sin (Colossians 2:15; Hebrews 2:14; 1 John 3:8). Indeed, the only way we can obey Jesus' command to lose our unconverted soul-life is to believe and act on the New Covenant truth that sin has no power over us because our sin nature died when we were indwelt by the Holy Spirit (Romans 6:6-7; Galatians 4:6;

Colossian 1:27; 2:11). Once we know that we have died with Christ, we are capable of truly loving Him and submitting to His authority so that God can transform and restore our soul. My brothers and sisters, the Son of God died instead of us, and He now wants to sovereignly live in us and through us! Therefore, it is our obligation, privilege and devoted service as Christ's bride to triumphantly take up our own cross and "put to death" our unconverted soul-life, so that by the sanctifying work of the Spirit within us, we might be transformed into Christ's image and adorn ourselves as His pure bride (2 Corinthians 3:18; Revelation 21:2). And this we do - for Christ's sake and His body's sake!

Jesus said, "Every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot produce bad fruit, nor can a bad tree produce good fruit (Matthew 7:17-18)." When the church is planted and stays rooted in the whole truth of the gospel, it is like a healthy branch growing on the tree of life (Jesus Christ), and that branch will produce good fruit (John 15:1-8). As the Bible says, "If the root (*Christ*) be holy, so also are the branches (Romans 11:16)." The New Covenant church will then experience community (*koinonia*) resurrection life together as the living body of Christ instead of organizational or institutional life, which is really no life at all. However, if a church has not been planted in the true gospel of Christ, it cannot produce good fruit. For if the members of a church do not know (and believe and act on) the divine fact that they died in Christ, they cannot expect to live in Christ nor can Christ be expected to sovereignly live in them. They then have no alternative than to try to live and function together as a church by the best of their soulish (*psychikos*) ability and understanding. They will tragically mistake their soulish enthusiasm for faith and their soulish energy for Christ's *zoē*-life. As the Bible says, "Only the Spirit gives *zoē*-life; our soulish energy has no spiritual value (John 6:63)." Until we know that we have died in Christ and have found our life in Christ (Colossians 3:3), our soul's irresistible need is for self-identity and self-fulfillment instead of walking in obedience to God and His Word by faith. Tragically, much of what the false church has done in Jesus' name has been to satisfy this driving soulish need for identity since its spiritual life and identity are not in Jesus Christ.

Consequently, the false church has failed to fulfill God's divine purpose because it has tried to do in the power of its soul what it could only do in the power of Christ's death and resurrection. Once again, this is not harmless; the Bible says that whatever is not done from faith is sin, and whoever practices sin is under control of the devil (Romans 14:23; John 8:34 & 44; 1 John 3:8). The natural *psychē* soul-life that is not submitted to the Holy Spirit is a gateway leading to demonic deception (James 3:5). If we do not live daily by faith in the grace and truth of the cross (by putting off our unconverted soul-life and putting on the Lord Jesus Christ who lives in us), we will not have God's discernment to recognize the difference between what is soulish and what is spiritual (Romans 13:12-14; Hebrews 4:12; 5:14). In the beginning, this deception may seem harmless because the deception is subtle. But over time, this deception leads to greater darkness and even greater deception and eventual enslavement to Satan. This is the

way deception works: well-meaning new Christians who zealously want to serve God do not envision they will end up serving the false church of Satan. For the true church is the bride of Christ and belongs to the kingdom of God whereas the false church is, by its very nature and functioning, the harlot of Satan and belongs to the kingdom of Babylon. Some might ask: how can the errant, unbelieving false church be the church of Satan when it seems to be filled with so many “good” people doing “good” deeds? However, remember the road to hell is paved with “good” intentions, and the Bible says an unbelieving heart is an evil heart (Hebrews 3:12). The Bible also says that the face of evil is often masked with a false “goodness,” since Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light and his agents masquerade as ministers of morality (2 Corinthians 11:14-15). True goodness is demonstrated by faithfully obeying the whole truth of Christ’s gospel and walking in the freedom and power of the New Covenant.

Therefore, if you are in a false church that is practicing an Old Covenant religion (even remnants of it), get out and find a New Covenant church! We pray that every true child of God would heed the Holy Spirit’s warning and come out of the false church and its curse before they are overcome by deception and perish with it (Revelation 18:4). We fully recognize that finding a true New Covenant church these days is as difficult as finding a treasure hidden in a field. However, it would be far better to meet with just two or three other Christians who sincerely want to obey the whole gospel of Christ and live in the spiritual blessings of the New Covenant than to be part of the false church and its practices. Jesus said, “Wherever two or three gather together in My name, I am there with them (Matthew 18:20).” And if you cannot find another Christian of true faith, it would even be better to be alone with the Lord than to participate in the sins and deception of the false church and eventually experience God’s wrath against it. The Bible says that in the last days difficult times will come: men will be lovers of self, lovers of money and lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God - “having a form of godliness, but denying its power. From such men **turn away** (2 Timothy 3:1-5).”

In closing, building the church is just like building a marriage and a family. It might sound daunting, but God has fully enabled each one of us to participate in such a family and “be fruitful and multiply” (Genesis 1:28). Just as the marriage covenant can only survive and thrive when both husband and wife are properly submitted to their spiritual head, Jesus Christ; in the same way, the New Covenant church can only survive and thrive when she is properly submitted to her bridegroom, Jesus Christ (Ephesians 5:23). Thank God that we are now able, by the Spirit of our Bridegroom who lives in us, to lay down our unconverted natural soul-life (with its self-will and selfish desires) in love for the sake of building the New Covenant church, which is God’s family and Christ’s bride. For as someone has insightfully remarked, “In God’s service, what matters most is the man; not the methods. Unless the man is right, right methods will be of no use to him or his work; for carnal men to use spiritual methods will only result in failure... the real danger to the work of God is our soul-life and natural energy,

untamed and uncontrolled by the Holy Spirit.” For ultimately, it is not New Covenant principles and methods that matter; it is whether the work of the cross has accomplished its divine purpose within us. Therefore, everyone who aspires to build the Lord’s house, His church, should ask themselves: “By faith in the power of cross (knowing that I am a new creation in Christ and no longer enslaved to sin), am I putting to death daily the sinful attitudes and actions of my unsubmitted soul-life, so that I might love Christ Jesus and serve His church by the Spirit and not by the flesh?” Otherwise, we will only produce soulish converts and soulish churches and, in doing so, render the cross of Christ void of its power. As the Bible says, “Unless the Lord builds the house, its builders labor in vain (Psalm 127:1).”

What then is a New Covenant church? Is it a church that applies New Covenant principles to how it meets together? Yes, but much more. Above all, a New Covenant church exalts the Lord Jesus Christ by believing and acting on the divine provisions of the New Covenant that Christ purchased for us by His death, so that the saints can fellowship and function in the freedom and power of Christ’s resurrection life. For Christ not only died to set us free from the penalty of sin, He also died to set us free from the power of our sin nature (by removing it), so that He might sovereignly live in us - His church and bride. This is the gospel of Christ that empowered the New Covenant church in the first century, and this should be the normal Christian church life in our day. My brothers and sisters, let me be very direct and clear: it is not enough to change our church system from an Old Covenant style of meeting to a New Covenant style of meeting. No, much more than just changing the way we do church is needed. If you have the heart of the bride, you will not be satisfied with just joining a church that has a New Covenant style of meeting. Your heart’s desire will only be fulfilled when you are joined together with other passionate, like-minded saints who have been entrusted with the true gospel of Christ and are committed to carrying their own cross and laying down their soul-lives daily for Jesus Christ, our bridegroom, and for one another, His precious bride. For it does not matter whether a church tries to meet together according to a New Covenant pattern: if that church is not planted and rooted in the true gospel of Christ and has Christ’s resurrection life, it will not bear good fruit, even if New Covenant principles seem to be present. As Jesus warned, “Every plant that My heavenly Father did not plant will be uprooted... if anyone does not abide (*stay rooted*) in Me, he is thrown away like a branch that dries up; such branches are gathered up, thrown into the fire and burned (Matthew 15:13; John 15:6).” However, to those believers who stay rooted in union with Him, Jesus said, “My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit, and so prove yourselves to be My disciples... I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit - fruit that will last (John 15:8 & 16).”

The Protestant church was founded in an attempt to reform the Catholic church. However, what is required is far more than mere reformation. What is needed is a complete restoration of the gospel of Jesus Christ. For as long as the gospel that is

preached is distorted, anemic and corrupted, it has no power to transform the church into Christ's glorious image. How can we possibly restore the church to its God-ordained place of purity and power if we ourselves are still practicing sin? Even if we attempt to restore the church to its New Covenant pattern and principles, how can we possibly restore the church to its right place with God if our own souls are not right with God? How can we claim to be the virgin bride of Jesus Christ when our own spiritual garments are stained by the sin of the world? How can we be wholeheartedly devoted in love to Jesus Christ, our bridegroom and our "magnificent obsession," if we are double-minded in the affections of our heart? How can Christ sovereignly live in us if we do not believe and act on the truth of the gospel that through Christ we have died to sin and the world? Five hundred years have now passed since the Holy Spirit began to restore the power of the cross of Christ and the keys of the kingdom to Christ's church. The first key - the righteous are *saved by faith* in Christ's completed work on the cross - has been restored. We believe God, in His great mercy and eternal wisdom, will soon restore the last key - the righteous will *live by faith* in Christ's completed work on the cross - so that His church might walk in the power of His Son's resurrection life during the dark and turbulent days that lie ahead (Revelation 7:9-14). For the restoration of Christ's gospel and the restoration of Christ's church go hand in hand. To this end we pray that God would open the eyes of everyone who fears Him, so they might find the divine key to truth and knowledge of the cross that opens the door to the fullness of their glorious inheritance in the New Covenant as the bride of Christ. This God has promised: "The secret of the Lord is for those who fear Him, and He will reveal His covenant to them (Psalm 25:14)." Until that time, let those who are faithful and forerunners in Christ's church continue to be faithful and devoted to their divine Bridegroom, their true Love and Lord, the Lamb of God, Jesus Christ. Once the gospel of Christ and the keys to God's kingdom are fully recovered, the New Covenant church will be wholly restored in all her power and glory, and the gates of hell will not be able to stop the church from fulfilling God's divine purpose (Revelation 11:15; 12:10-11). The Holy Spirit will then write the final triumphant chapter of church history. And heaven and earth will see the new Jerusalem - the consummation of God's eternal purpose through the ages - the full expression of Jesus Christ revealed in His church, His bride (Revelation 19:7-8; 21:2-3). "To Him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever. Amen! (Ephesians 3:21)."

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