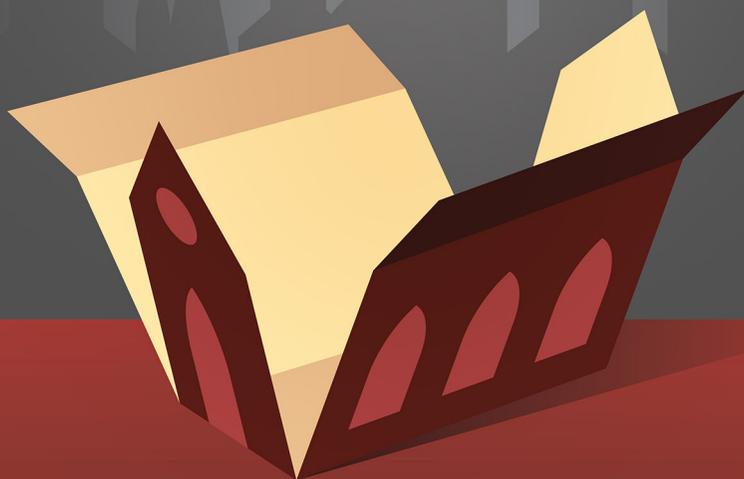


unchurching



Christianity Without Churchianity

Richard Jacobson

Foreword by Jon Zens

unchurching

Christianity Without Churchianity

Richard Jacobson

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used, reproduced or transmitted in any form by any means, electronic, mechanical, scanned, copied, recorded or otherwise, without written permission from the author except in the case of brief quotations for articles and reviews. Permission for other uses may be obtained by emailing: richard@unchurching.com.

Copyright © 2016 by Richard Jacobson

First Edition

Cover design, layout and illustrations by Richard Jacobson

ISBN: 978-0692749951

Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from the ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

THE HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION®, NIV® Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.® Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.



Published by Unchurching Books

About This eBook

This free eBook contains sample chapters from *Unchurching: Christianity Without Churchianity*. The complete book is currently available on Amazon, in both print and Kindle format. The full table of contents is included at the end of this sample. For more information, please visit unchurching.com. And please check out *The Unchurching Podcast*, available online and on iTunes.

Excerpts from Unchurching

Introduction

A crisis of faith

Part One: Spiritual Community

A peculiar people

The community of God

The image of God

Sin

Redemption

Part Two: Spiritual Parents

One set of parents

Imaginary positions

Part Three: Church Incorporated

Church corporations

Counting the cost

Command and control

Complete table of contents

Spread The Word!

Introduction

“In the beginning the church was a fellowship of men and women centering on the living Christ. Then the church moved to Greece, where it became a philosophy. Then it moved to Rome, where it became an institution. Next, it moved to Europe, where it became a culture. And, finally, it moved to America, where it became an enterprise.”

~ Richard Halverson

A Crisis of Faith

In 2003, I quit my full-time job as a pastor because I was having a crisis of faith. I wasn't having doubts about God or even doubts about the church. I was having doubts about the way we were doing church. I began to see a huge disconnect between the early churches described in the Bible and today's churches. The first churches were simple Christian communities; legally speaking, most of today's churches are corporations.

My first church experiences were on the opposite end of the spectrum from the church corporation. My childhood took place during the Jesus Movement. Depending on how you look at it, the Jesus Movement was either a Christian movement that was an offshoot of 70's hippie culture or a hippie movement that was an offshoot of 70's Christian culture. Either way, it was a far cry from today's church culture.

My earliest memories of church life happened in living rooms, coffee shops, bookstores, restaurants and, for a brief time, a Christian commune. I wasn't even aware that most Christians dressed up on Sundays and piled into cars to drive to special buildings to worship God. Nor could I imagine church gatherings in which believers just sat, passively listening to sermons. For me, church life was completely different.

Whenever we gathered, believers brought Bibles, guitars and tambourines. We ate together, sang together, prayed and laughed with one another, and read passages of scripture to each other. Believers shared stories about the things God was saying and doing in their lives. People gave their lives to Christ, gave up addictions, and were miraculously healed at every turn. Miracles became so commonplace in our gatherings, they were simply expected.

It wasn't until I was almost a teenager that I first set foot in a church building. It was then that I encountered questions like, "What church do you go to?" Prior to that, I didn't even know church could be a separate thing I could "go to." As far as I knew, church was simply something you were, like a family; such questions made as much sense as asking, "What family do you go to?" But over time I learned to speak the same language and learned to do church just like everybody else.

Actually, I probably did church a little more-so than everybody else. By the time I was in my early twenties, I was singing on the worship team, teaching Sunday School, volunteering in the youth ministry, performing in church plays, and doing lots of free graphic design and video editing for my church. Plus, I used my vacation days from work to help with week-long church events like short-term mission trips and Vacation Bible School. Basically, I invested all my energy, talent, and time into my church. And I can honestly say I loved every minute of it.

Though it was a completely different form of church, God seemed every bit as present in the midst of all the pre-planned services and expensive programs as he had been during the impromptu gatherings in living rooms and coffee shops I had known as a kid. Since I already spent most of my time at church, I guess it was inevitable I would eventually end up on staff. Becoming a full-time pastor was wonderful. I was fortunate enough to work in a healthy church with very little dysfunction or politics. I was surrounded by people I really loved, doing work I really loved. It was my dream job.

But then God began leading me down a different path. Slowly, he began to reveal things through his Word that seemed to point toward a disconnect between the churches described in the Bible and the kind of church model we employ today. At first I tried to fight it.

I told myself the dilemma was all in my head; God wasn't really speaking to me. I sought counsel from fellow pastors and church elders, asking them to help me find biblical answers to my growing list of troubling questions. But every time they patiently walked me through the Scriptures, it would only lead to more questions.

For a long while, I feared I was becoming a heretic. Eventually, I had to trust it was the Lord's leading. So I quit pastoring, quit attending the institutional church, and started searching for a church community that looked more like the churches described in the Bible. My search was very long and very painful. Many friends seemed to think I was falling away from the faith instead of actively pursuing it.

The fact that I couldn't really articulate what was going on only made matters worse. Whenever I ran into a former fellow church member, they would ask why I no longer attended. But I could only provide half-formed, unsatisfactory explanations. Often, they would remind me, "There's no such thing as a perfect church." Sadly, I didn't know how to explain I wasn't looking for a perfect church; I was looking for an authentic one. Clearly, I needed to sort out my views on church and learn how to articulate them.

For a long time, I had been writing down all the things I thought the Lord was speaking to me about the church. Those personal study notes eventually grew into a huge pile, more than enough material for a single book. So I tried writing a book. But the task proved far too daunting at the time. However, I knew I needed to do something to get my thoughts in order and get them out into the world.

For years, I had made a living as a graphic designer and illustrator. Plus, I had always dabbled in animation. So I decided to start an animated video and cartoon blog about church. Because the blog was mostly for me, I half-jokingly titled it *Church Anarchist*. This

was not only a nod to my seemingly anti-authoritarian church views, but it was a nice tribute to my 80's upbringing. (It seemed like every cool kid in the 80's imagined he was some kind of teenage anarchist.) It also sounded way cooler than *Church Egalitarian*. But because the name always required a bit more explanation than it was worth, it eventually became the *Unchurching* blog.

Most of my posts took the form of short, animated talks that tackled various aspects of today's institutional church. In order to limit the videos to about four minutes each, I could only touch on certain topics but by-and-large, they turned out pretty well. Almost immediately, I began receiving emails and comments from viewers who told me the videos really impacted them. Some said the videos helped them work up the courage to leave abusive church situations. Others gathered like-minded friends and began pursuing genuine church community together.

In just a matter of months, the videos started racking up thousands of views and getting noticed by several Christian authors. Some of these authors have become long-distance friends and I've been able to meet a few of them in person. The whole experience has been really exciting.

Even more exciting were the messages I received from pastors. In hindsight, I think I sold my fellow pastors short. I assumed they would all denounce me and my blog. Instead, I received several private messages from pastors who secretly agreed with the blog and wanted advice on what to do about it. For reasons that will hopefully become clear in the latter part of this book, I encouraged a lot of them to keep their positions in the institutional church. I think having an "anti-institutional-church guy" encourage them in their calling was just as shocking to them as their support was to me.

Best of all, the blog became the catalyst for me to find genuine church community again. Thanks to those animations and cartoons, I connected with people all around the world who were on a similar journey. As it turns out, a few of them were right here in my own back yard. A follower of the blog invited me to lunch and introduced me to a brother who connected me to a local community of believers. Currently, we are learning what it means to become a genuine church community, instead of a church corporation. Sharing life with this group has been great and it's part of what gave me the resolve to finally finish this book.

I don't think God spoke to me all those years about church just to motivate me personally. If the goal was to simply call me away from the institutional church, all my memories of non-institutional church life could have been enough to make me homesick and motivate me to leave. Instead, he chose to lead me through a long and arduous deconstruction of the institutional church model. I would like to believe this was so I could encourage other believers who are struggling with church-as-usual—those who have a nagging feeling that something just isn't right with today's church model, yet can't quite put their finger on the problem or how to articulate it.

If that's you, I hope the very existence of this book testifies to the fact that you are not alone. But even more than that, I hope it illuminates what the Bible really has to say about church, without distorting it through the lens of man-made tradition. I hope it gives you a glimpse God's true vision for his church. And I hope you realize his vision is so much more compelling than what you were previously taught. His vision is the spiritual community you were created for.

Part One: Spiritual Community

“The aim of God in history is the creation of an all-inclusive community of loving persons with God himself at the very heart of this community as its prime Sustainer and most glorious Inhabitant.”

~ Dallas Willard

A Peculiar People

Before the birth of the church, believers had limited access to God. They had to go to a special place (known as a temple) and enlist the aid of a special person (known as a priest) in order to worship their God. And even then, they couldn't actually get close to him. The priest had to serve as a mediator between the people and their God. However, God had something better in mind. One day, everything would change, especially the way God's followers would relate to him. In Jeremiah 31:34 he promised:

And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, "Know the Lord," for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the Lord.

Likewise, in Joel 2:28, 29, he said:

And it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions. Even on the male and female servants in those days I will pour out my Spirit.

But exactly how did God plan to accomplish this? By sending his Son Jesus Christ to save us from the sin that separated us from our God. In Matthew 1:21–23 we are told:

"She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." All this

took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: “Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel” (which means, God with us).

Whereas other people only imagined a god somewhere above us, Christians boasted of a God who left his heavenly realm to be right here with us. Whereas other religions required people to make sacrifices to their gods, Christians told the story of a God who sacrificed himself for his people. That sacrifice not only atoned for our sins, it opened the door for God to come and dwell in the midst of the spiritual community, known as the *church*.

The word church can apply to either the church universal or to a local church fellowship. The church universal includes all believers around the world, past, present and future. A local church fellowship is a small group of family, friends, and neighbors who comprise a Christian community, somewhat like an extended spiritual family. The single most defining characteristic of the early church was that God was clearly present in their communities.

Early Christianity was radically different from the religion of both the Jews and the Gentiles (meaning the non-Jews). Christianity probably didn't even look like a religion to many people; it seemed more like a movement. The people who were swept up in this movement didn't follow religious practices as much as live a particular lifestyle. This lifestyle not only went against the grain of secular culture, it was completely contradictory to many people's religious sensibilities at the time. It was even different from what many would recognize as Christianity today.

Instead of worshiping God in special, sacred buildings, church members worshiped God in their own ordinary homes.¹ Not only that, they went so far as to claim they themselves were the real temple of God.² And instead of employing special priests, they viewed every believer as a fellow priest.³ Consequently, average church members were expected to carry out all the priestly duties in the church, such as confessing their sins to one another and praying for healing.⁴



-
- 1 **Romans 16:5** Greet also the church in their house.
1 Corinthians 16:19 Aquila and Prisca, together with the church in their house, send you hearty greetings in the Lord.
Colossians 4:15 Give my greetings to the brothers at Laodicea, and to Nympha and the church in her house.
Philemon 2 And Apphia our sister and Archippus our fellow soldier, and the church in your house ...
 - 2 **1 Corinthians 3:16, 17** Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him. For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple.
 - 3 **1 Peter 2:9** But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood ...
 - 4 **James 5:16** Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working.

Rather than somber religious ceremonies, they frequently held feasts at each other's houses (where some of the members occasionally got a little out of control).⁵ And instead of ritualistic sacrifices, they believed the only real sacrifice God wanted was their day-to-day devotion.⁶ In addition, the early church ignored most of the racial, political, economic and gender prejudices of the day. Jews fellowshiped with Greeks, slaves with masters, rich with poor, and men with women.⁷ It was downright scandalous. As the King James Version of the Bible says, the first Christians were a "peculiar people."⁸ Or to put it another way, the early church was the counter-culture of their day.

But how did the church come about? Why did God create it and what is its purpose? This book will try to answer those questions and more. The book is divided into four parts. The first two parts will attempt to paint a picture of the church without filtering the text through the lens of man-made tradition. After all, our understanding of the Bible should be the basis of our traditions, not the other way around. In the third part of the book, I will contrast this picture with the church model we employ today, and, together, we will examine whether it complements or contradicts what the

5 **1 Corinthians 11:20, 21** For in eating, each one goes ahead with his own meal. One goes hungry, another gets drunk.

6 **Romans 12:1** I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.

7 **Galatians 3:28** There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

James 1:9, 10 Let the lowly brother boast in his exaltation, and the rich in his humiliation ...

8 **1 Peter 2:9** But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people ... (KJV).

Bible says about church. And finally, in the fourth part of the book, we will take a brief look at church outside the box and discuss how to make the transition. Since the church is a spiritual community, we should probably start by looking at that first and most perfect spiritual community: God.

The Community of God

Our God is a mystery. He is three persons: the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. And those three persons compose one God. Our God is three-in-one. That means the persons of the Godhead are one in essence, substance, and nature; the Father is God, his Son Jesus Christ is God and the Holy Spirit is God. Yet they are also distinct from one another. We know they are distinct persons because the Bible makes this clear. For instance, when Jesus was baptized, all three members of the Godhead were present at one time, yet separate. Matthew 3:16, 17 tells us:

And when Jesus was baptized, immediately he went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him; and behold, a voice from heaven said, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.”

In these verses, we see Jesus here on earth, the Holy Spirit descending from heaven, and we hear God speaking from heaven, all at the same time. If God were simply a single being, how could he descend upon himself? And how could he be in heaven at the same time he was being baptized here on earth? Also, why would he talk to himself or call himself “son”?

Furthermore, Jesus made a clear distinction between himself and the Father, telling his disciples there was something only the Father knew.¹ Likewise, he made a distinction between himself and the Holy Spirit, saying people could be forgiven for speaking against the Son,

1 Matthew 24:36 But concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only.

but they could not be forgiven for speaking against the Holy Spirit.² Plus, he instructed his disciples to baptize new believers in the name of all three persons: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.³

Because the Godhead is three persons, we can rightly say our God is a spiritual community. And because God is perfect, we know the Godhead is the first and most perfect spiritual community. This means we can learn a lot about the way spiritual community functions based on the way the Godhead functions.

Perhaps the first thing we should examine is spiritual authority within the community of God. Man-made authority is often built on titles, positions, and hierarchy. A hierarchy is a system of persons or things ranked one above the other. Corporations and other organizations are hierarchies. But is that the way the Godhead is ordered? Is it like a chain-of-command where one member is in charge of the others? Are superiors and subordinates part of the natural order of spiritual community?

Jesus told his disciples he would send us the Holy Spirit.⁴ We are also told gifts of the Holy Spirit are distributed according to God's will.⁵ Based on verses like these, one could easily assume the Holy Spirit simply does the will of the Father and the Son and is, therefore, the lowest ranking member of the Godhead.

2 **Matthew 12:32** And whoever speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come.

3 **Matthew 28:19** Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit ...

4 **John 15:26** But when the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, he will bear witness about me.

5 **Hebrews 2:4** God also bore witness by signs and wonders and various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will.

But we also established that people can be forgiven for speaking against the Son, but not for speaking against the Holy Spirit. That certainly makes it seem like the Holy Spirit has special significance in the Godhead. We also know Jesus was anointed with power that came from the Holy Spirit.⁶ It was the Holy Spirit who sent Jesus into the desert to be tempted.⁷ In verses such as these, the Holy Spirit is clearly not portrayed as a mere subordinate.

There are also plenty of verses that speak of Christ's obedience to the Father. Jesus said he came to do what the Father commanded him.⁸ He said he could do nothing by himself, but only that which he saw the Father do.⁹ He also told the disciples the Father was greater than he.¹⁰ And before going to his death, Jesus surrendered his will to the Father and prayed, "Not my will, but yours, be done."¹¹ These verses definitely make it sound as if Jesus was subordinate to the Father.

But we are told plainly that Jesus was equal with his Father, yet chose to lay aside his divinity and become a servant for our sakes. Philippians 2:5–7 says:

6 **Acts 10:38** God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power.

7 **Mark 1:12, 13** The Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness.

8 **John 14:31** But I do as the Father has commanded me ...

9 **John 5:19** So Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing. For whatever the Father does, that the Son does likewise."

10 **John 14:28** If you loved me, you would have rejoiced, because I am going to the Father, for the Father is greater than I.

11 **Luke 22:42** Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me. Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done.

Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men.

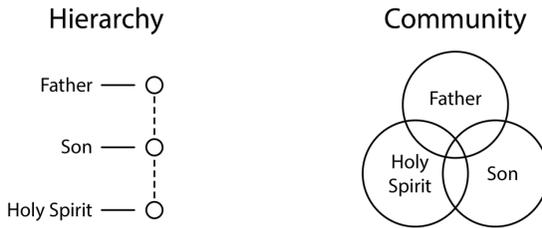
Jesus chose to set aside his equality with God to become his servant here on earth. Similarly, he chose to become subject to Mary and Joseph when he was a child,¹² even though he was their Lord. Because of Christ's humility and obedience, he was later exalted to the place of preeminence. Philippians 2:9–11 tells us:

Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

As much as we might like to imagine the Godhead as a clearcut chain-of-command in which the Father gives the orders while the Son and Holy Spirit dutifully follow them, such a picture of the Godhead only holds up if we overemphasize certain scriptures and ignore others. The reality is: at times we see the Father or the Son dispatching the Holy Spirit to do certain works; at other times, we see the Holy Spirit empowering and directing the Son. We also know Christ laid aside his equality with God in order to become his servant here on earth; and we know God exalted him to the highest place for doing so.

12 **Luke 2:51** And he went down with them and came to Nazareth and was submissive to them.

That’s not to say all members of the Godhead are equal in every way. But it seems careless to impose our man-made model of hierarchy onto the Godhead, since each of these three persons is solely focused on serving one another rather than ruling over one another. Moreover, such an oversimplification of the Godhead doesn’t seem to take into account the fact that these three persons are also one.



Jesus said plainly he and the Father are one.¹³ He also said anyone who had seen him had seen the Father.¹⁴ Additionally, Jesus is called *Immanuel*, which literally means “God with us.” Likewise, Paul not only refers to Jesus as God,¹⁵ but as the Spirit as well.¹⁶ That certainly seems to blur the line between Christ and the Holy Spirit. Plus, we know Jesus was conceived of the Holy Spirit; yet he is known as the Son of God.¹⁷ This infers that the Spirit and God are also one-and-the-same.

13 **John 10:30** I and the Father are one.

14 **John 14:9** Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.

15 **Titus 2:13** Waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ ...

16 **2 Corinthians 3:17** Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.

17 **Luke 1:35** And the angel answered her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God.”

This oneness somewhat complicates our overly-simplistic picture of chain-of-command within the Godhead. Since the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are one, any member of the Godhead who serves any other member is also serving himself. It is very reminiscent of how Paul told husbands to view their wives in Ephesians 5:28:

In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself.

Later we will explore how the oneness experienced by a husband and wife is the perfect illustration of Christ and his church. But before we can do that, we need to finish examining the example of oneness we see expressed in the community of God. This oneness is so absolute, that it often blurs the lines between the individual members of the Godhead. The persons of the Godhead are so indivisible, that they sometimes appear to function collectively as a single person (or at least a group of persons with a single will). As an example, see how the Godhead expresses itself, referring to itself in the plural in Genesis 1:26:

Then God said, “Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness ...” (NIV).

This indivisible oneness is echoed in other Bible verses, such as when Paul calls Christ the visible image of the invisible God.¹⁸ Or when he says Christ contains all the fullness of the Godhead in bodily form.¹⁹ Jesus used a particular term to describe the type of

18 **Colossians 1:15** He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation.

19 **Colossians 2:9** For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily ...

oneness he has with God. He called it *complete unity*.²⁰ Although we can never fully comprehend complete unity, we can still learn from it. And, as we shall see later, we can actually experience it within the spiritual community known as the church. That's because the church is an extension of the community of God. But before we can discuss that, we need to look at God's original plan to extend the community of God.

20 **John 17:22, 23** I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one— I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to complete unity (NIV).

The Image of God

As discussed in the previous section, the desire to create mankind was shared among all the members of the Godhead; they had complete unity in this decision. Notice again how they speak in the plural in Genesis 1:26:

Then God said, “Let us make mankind in our image,
in our likeness ...” (NIV).

God desired objects of affection. The decision to make mankind was born out of the entire community of God in order to extend the community of God. We know we were created for community because we were created in the image of God, who is the first and most perfect spiritual community.

The story of the creation account begins with Genesis 1. On the first day, God created the heavens and the earth, the day and the night. At the end of the day, God saw that everything he created was good. This pattern repeats for days two, three, and so on. God creates the sky, the waters, the ground, the plants, and more. At the end of each day, he reflects on what he has made and declares it good. The creation account culminates with the sixth day and the creation of man. And for the first time, God realizes something in his creation is not good. Genesis 2:18 says:

Then the Lord God said, “It is not good that the man
should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him.”

In the perfect community of God, neither the Father, nor the Son, nor the Holy Spirit had ever been alone. Well, except for that moment when Jesus was separated from God during his redemptive

work on the cross.¹ (Perhaps God, who exists outside of time, was actually remembering that moment when he said, “It is not good for the man to be alone.”) Genesis 2:19–23 goes on to tell us:

Now out of the ground the Lord God had formed every beast of the field and every bird of the heavens and brought them to the man to see what he would call them. And whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name. The man gave names to all livestock and to the birds of the heavens and to every beast of the field. But for Adam there was not found a helper fit for him. So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and while he slept took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. And the rib that the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. Then the man said, “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man.”

So God created a partner for Adam. Yet he did not form her the same way he formed Adam—directly from the clay. Possibly this was because he did not want to make Adam’s partner a totally separate being. He did not want two distinct people that were merely alone together. He wanted them to truly be part of one another. Therefore, he formed woman from man. But how did God originally create men and women to function together? When God said he would make a *helper* for man, was he talking about a subordinate or an equal partner?

1 **Matthew 27:46** And about the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, “Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?” that is, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

I am sure many will be quick to point out there are a handful of verses in the New Testament that seem to indicate men have authority over women. Rather than use our understanding of those verses as our lens to interpret the story of Adam and Eve, I would like to first examine the story of Adam and Eve to see if it can provide a better context for interpreting those other verses, which we can discuss later. After all, the creation story illustrates God's original intentions for men and women. Without a good grasp on God's original intentions, how can we ever hope to understand his ultimate intentions?

We might assume men are superior to women simply because the man was created first. But this doesn't seem consistent with the order of creation. God created the land before the plants in order to sustain the plants; God created the plants before the animals in order to sustain the animals; only after everything else was created did God create man. So it seems God created everything in order of least to greatest. Therefore, if men and women were not created equal, it would be more consistent with the order of creation to conclude women are superior to men since the woman came last, making her the pinnacle of creation.

Or we might assume men are superior to women because the man named the woman. We know that man was created to have authority over the animals; as a sign of his authority, he was allowed to name the animals. Therefore, isn't it a sign of men's headship over women that the man was the one who named his wife "woman?" There are a couple of problems with this theory. For one thing, Adam and Eve were both given authority over creation, including the animals. Genesis 1:28 explains this clearly:

And God blessed them. And God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.”

Adam didn't name the animals by himself because he had more authority than his wife. His wife simply had not yet been created. Once woman was created, God charged the man and the woman to rule over the rest of creation together. This seems to imply men and women were created as partners. Further evidence of their equality is found in the verse in which God himself names the man and the woman, even though English translations of the Bible don't really reflect this. Genesis 5:2 says:

He created them male and female and blessed them. And he named them “mankind” when they were created (NIV).

The word we translate as “mankind” in this passage is actually the Hebrew word *adam*. Among its other uses, *adam* can mean “man,” “men,” “person,” or “people.” However, translators often choose to render it as a proper noun, giving us the name *Adam*. But in God's eyes, the man and woman were both *Adam*. Like the community of God, the original man and woman were distinct persons who were also one person. They were both created in the image of God; they were both created to rule over creation; and they could never be truly separated from one another. At least not until sin entered the world.

The Fall

Love isn't really love unless it is willingly given. This is one reason Adam and Eve were given the choice whether or not to love and obey God. As explained in Genesis 2:9 and 2:16, 17, their choice was symbolized in the form of two trees that stood in the heart of the Garden of Eden:

And out of the ground the Lord God made to spring up every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food. The tree of life was in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. ... And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, "You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die."

Knowledge



Life



Unfortunately, they were deceived and chose to eat from the tree of knowledge, allowing sin to enter the world. Because of sin, Adam and Eve were cast out of the garden—the place where they had previously walked and talked face-to-face with God.¹ Their sin

1 Genesis 3:23 Therefore the Lord God sent him out from the garden of Eden to work the ground from which he was taken.

separated them from the community of God. This was the ultimate punishment for a people who were literally created to live in community with their Creator.

Not only did sin separate mankind from God, it separated mankind from one another. Because of sin, a curse was pronounced upon mankind. Several specifics are mentioned about the curse, but let's focus on one in particular. Genesis 3:16 says:

To the woman he said ... "Your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you."

Before the Fall, mankind was given dominion over every living thing on the earth. But it was not until the Fall—until sin entered the world—that one person started ruling over another. Because of sin, Adam and Eve's relationship changed. Until this point in the story, the first husband and wife had simply been known as *man* and *woman*. Immediately after the curse is pronounced, Genesis 3:20 tells us:

The man called his wife's name Eve, because she was the mother of all living.

For whatever reason, right after God pronounced the curse on mankind and right before they were banished from the garden, Adam chose to rename his wife. Sometimes, this verse is pulled out of context. It is presented as a beautiful moment where Adam honors his wife by declaring her the *Mother of All Living*. And if that is what Adam intended, we should not diminish such a beautiful act. Similarly, we cannot deny the honor that is rightfully Eve's as the mother of all.

However, we probably miss something when we take this verse out of context. From beginning to end, the entire chapter is about the fall of mankind. So we need to recognize that Adam renaming his wife was one of the very first acts of fallen man. Nowhere does the Bible say Adam made this decision as a result of the Fall. Perhaps Adam only did it to comfort and encourage his wife. Even though they had fallen from grace, he might have wanted to remind her she was still worthy of honor as the Mother of All Living.

Or perhaps Adam's view of his wife had become corrupted and he was now seeing her through the eyes of fallen man for the first time. It is quite possible he could only see her as the mother of his children now. That's not to say the Mother of All Living isn't a title of great esteem or that motherhood itself isn't an incredible honor. But this honor already belonged to Eve. God had already commanded the man and woman to be fruitful and multiply. The first woman was already destined to become the Mother of All Living, even before Adam recognized her as Eve.

The story of the Fall tells us a few things. First, since Adam began ruling over Eve as a direct result of sin, we can be confident this is not the way God originally created men and women to relate to one another. It was only because of sin that they became two truly separate people, alone together with conflicting ideas and competing agendas.² That meant one person would inevitably end up exerting his will over the other.

Second, if Adam actually diminished his wife's role in Genesis 3:20, it is possible he did so under the guise of honoring her. That doesn't

2 Although most translations of **Genesis 3:16** say something like, "Your desire shall be *for* your husband, and he shall rule over you," if you check the footnotes, some Bibles (such as the ESV) admit an equally valid interpretation of this verse is, "Your desire shall be *against* your husband, and he shall rule over you."

mean he was aware of this. It is very possible he did so under the self-deception of sin. Maybe he legitimately thought he was honoring her while at the same time he was actually diminishing her role from equal partner and fellow ruler. If so, we need to be wary so that we do not follow in his footsteps. As we shall see later, it is very important to recover how men and women were originally created to function together because it carries huge implications for the church.

Third, since Adam and Eve were created in the image of God, the way they originally related to each other must have been a direct reflection of the way the members of the Godhead relate to one another. And now that we know Adam and Eve didn't originally rule over one another, this further supports our original thesis that the members of the Godhead do not rule over one another either.

But why exactly did Adam and Eve's relationship change? Did sin simply corrupt their desire to mutually defer to each other? Or was it actually impossible for them to relate as equals since they could no longer experience spiritual unity? Is true unity with others no longer achievable once we become disconnected from God? If so, can mankind ever experience unity with their Creator and each other again?

Redemption

Undoubtedly, the most famous verse in all of Scripture is John 3:16:

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

This verse is truly beautiful, especially when you consider it is a direct quote from Jesus; he was talking about himself and foreshadowing the incredible sacrifice he was about to make for all of us. Mankind had its chance through Adam and Eve, but blew it. So Jesus came and willingly laid down his life to fix everything we messed up. That is why 1 Corinthians 15:45 and 15:47 refer to Jesus as “the last Adam”:

Thus it is written, “The first man Adam became a living being”; the last Adam became a life-giving spirit. ... The first man was from the earth, a man of dust; the second man is from heaven.

The Bible tells us the “first Adam” was a pattern for the Christ who would come later.¹ That is why it is so easy to see parallels between Adam and Eve and Christ and his church. For instance, no suitable mate could be found for Adam until God created one from the very substance of Adam himself. The same could be said of Christ and his Bride, the church.

In order to create Eve, God first placed Adam into a deep sleep.² Similarly, before the church was born, Christ was buried “asleep” in

1 **Romans 5:14** Adam, who was a type of the one who was to come.

2 **Genesis 2:21** So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and while he slept took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh.

the ground for three days.³ God “wounded” Adam by taking part of his side and Christ was wounded for our transgressions.⁴ On the cross, Christ was pierced in his side, out of which flowed both blood (atonement) and water (life).⁵

But perhaps the most important similarity can be found in Paul’s letter to the church in Ephesus. The book of Ephesians opens by describing the church as the Body of Christ⁶ and ends by describing the church as the Bride of Christ.⁷ This is because the church is both the incarnation of Christ as well as his Bride. In this way, much like Adam and Eve were one, Jesus and his Bride are one. Paul even talks about this parallel in Ephesians 5:31, 32:

“Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.” This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church.

Much the way a groom longs to be one with his bride, we can hear how intensely Christ longed to be one with his own Bride, the church, while he was here on earth. In the Gospel of John,

3 **Matthew 12:40** For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.

4 **1 Peter 2:24** He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed.

5 **John 19:34** But one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once there came out blood and water.

6 **Ephesians 1:22, 23** And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, which is his body ...

7 **Ephesians 5:25** Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her ...

Jesus predicts his betrayal, foresees Peter's denial, and forewarns his disciples about his crucifixion. And right before his arrest, Jesus prays to the Father. It is a long, heartfelt prayer; it is the prayer of a man who knows this is the last time he will pray with his friends before going to his death. Therefore, it is very likely the request Jesus made during this prayer reflects the deepest desire of his heart.

And what was his heart's desire? *Oneness*. He prayed that we have oneness with each other and oneness with him. He prayed this for his own disciples and for every believer who would follow. This means oneness was Christ's heartfelt desire for his entire church. Three times he prayed for it: John 17:11, John 17:20, 21 and John 17:22, 23:

Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name, the name you gave me, so that they may be one as we are one ... My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you ... I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one—I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to complete unity (NIV).

When Christ prayed for oneness a third time, he said the ultimate goal of our oneness should be *complete unity*. This type of oneness seems far beyond mere mortal cooperation and compromise. It sounds remarkably like the oneness shared among the members of the Godhead; the type of oneness shared by Adam and Eve before the Fall. Even though this specific prayer was about unity between believers (meaning the church), God's ultimate assignment

for Christ was even more ambitious: to bring all creation back into unity with its Creator. As Ephesians 1:8–10 explains:

With all wisdom and understanding, he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times reach their fulfillment—to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ.

The “last Adam” wasn’t only sent to save souls. He came to restore everything that was corrupted when the “first Adam” allowed sin to enter the world. Not only did Christ die to save us from our sins, he died to undo the curse of sin entirely, as explained in Colossians 1:19, 20:

For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.

Christ sacrificed himself to reconcile all of creation to its Creator. And we are called to join him in this ministry of reconciliation.⁸ Depending upon how big your view of God’s grace is, this calling could take many forms. Obviously, there is the root of sin which must be confronted. But perhaps any good work that alleviates some portion of the effects of the curse could be considered a step toward the reconciliation of all things.

8 2 Corinthians 5:18, 19 All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation.

We know toil, the pains of childbirth, and the subjugation of women were some of the consequences of the Fall.⁹ Maybe anything we can do to alleviate these burdens could be considered a practical way of partnering with God in his larger work of reconciliation. That might include the invention of labor-saving technology, medical breakthroughs that alleviate the pains of childbirth, political and social initiatives for the advancement of women, and more.

However, as beautiful as these things are, the ultimate goal is the restoration of the unity we once had with each other and the unity we had with our Creator before the Fall. Incredibly, this unity is already available to us right now, through the church. But what does it look like for believers to have complete unity? Let's look at some examples from the early church. Specifically, let's look at the way the first church members shared their possessions, shared their spiritual gifts, and shared their faith.

9 **Genesis 3:16–19** To the woman he said, “I will surely multiply your pain in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children. Your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you.” And to Adam he said, “Because you have listened to the voice of your wife and have eaten of the tree of which I commanded you, ‘You shall not eat of it,’ cursed is the ground because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”

In the Full version

In the full version of *Unchurching*, Part One continues by analyzing biblical examples of the way the early church functioned. And we quickly discover why they handled their money and possessions so much differently than today's churches. We also examine how dramatically different the original "priesthood of all believers" was, especially compared to the "priesthood of *one* believer" we employ today. And we uncover a profound truth. Though we often overlook it whenever we read the scriptures, the Bible clearly explains why God seemed to be so more active in the early church. But for now, let's look at a few more selections from some other parts of *Unchurching*.

Part Two: Spiritual Parents

“There is nothing I like better than conversing with aged men. For I regard them as travelers who have gone a journey which I too may have to go, and of whom I ought to inquire whether the way is smooth and easy or rugged and difficult.”

~ Socrates

One Set of Parents

Most of today's churches seem to operate as religious organizations run by people in various positions such as deacons, elders and pastors. These different church offices are ranked one above the other in an organizational hierarchy. We have been taught these positions come from Scripture. And indeed you can find words such as "deacon," "elder," and "pastor" in many of the biblical descriptions of the early church.

But because today's churches operate more as organizations, we tend to read the Bible through an organizational lens. This is why we do not notice the disconnect between the early church and today's churches, especially when it comes to titles and positions. Much like the community of God, each member of the early church willingly served the other members.¹ Yes, there were spiritual leaders, but there was absolutely no organizational hierarchy.

To prove this, we need to dispel a common myth about church leadership. Specifically, we need to do away with the idea that bishops, presbyters, overseers, elders, and pastors were separate persons. These were not separate people; they were different terms for a single group of people. These terms denote the spiritual parents we read about in the previous section. Most of the time, these leaders were simply called *elders*. And they were eventually appointed in all of the churches, as seen in Acts 14:23:

And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed.

1 **Philippians 2:3, 4** Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.

To get a better understanding of elders, let's start with the word "elder" itself, which is a translation of the Greek word *presbyteros*. This word was used over 60 times in the original Greek version of the New Testament. *Presbyteros* means "one who is mature, having seasoned judgment and experience." The word was used to describe both mature men and mature women. The only way to determine the intended gender of a specific use is through context. For instance, many English translations of 1 Timothy 5:1, 2 say:

Do not rebuke an older man but encourage him as you would a father, younger men as brothers, older women as mothers, younger women as sisters, in all purity.

The original Greek text of this verse used the word *presbyteros* twice: once for *older man* and once for *older women*. Yet translators are able to differentiate the genders because of context. Paul tells us to treat one *presbyteros* as a "father" and the other as "mothers."

However, translators also added a certain degree of confusion by translating *presbyteros* as "older man" and "older women" in this verse, yet translating the word as "elder" or "elders" nearly everywhere else. By doing this, they separated this particular verse about men and women elders from all the other verses about elders, supporting the assumption there were no women elders in the early church. But let's forge ahead and see what else we can uncover about elders.

The Greek word for shepherd is *poimén* and the Greek word for overseer is *episkopos*. In the New Testament, these terms illustrate different functions but they do not connote separate persons. Jesus

was referred to as both our “Shepherd” and “Overseer.”² Likewise, in Acts 20:28, Paul instructs the elders of the church to be both shepherds and overseers, saying:

Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood (NIV).

Furthermore, the word “bishop” is simply the English translation of the Greek word *episkopos*. Therefore, elders, presbyters, shepherds, overseers, and bishops all refer to the same group of people. In the early church, there would have been no such thing as a bishop that was somehow separate from an elder.

However, things get even more interesting with the Greek word for “shepherd” we saw just a moment ago, *poimén*. As we noted above, Paul instructed the elders to be both overseers and shepherds. Likewise, Peter refers to elders as shepherds in 1 Peter 5:1, 2:

To the elders among you ... Be shepherds of God’s flock that is under your care, watching over them—not because you must, but because you are willing ... (NIV).

Whenever the Bible talks about spiritual shepherds in the early church, it is always talking about elders. And the only time the word *poimén* is translated as anything other than “shepherd” is in Ephesians 4:11, where it is translated as “pastor” instead:

2 1 Peter 2:25 For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.

So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the *pastors* and teachers ... (NIV). (Italics added.)

This single aberrant translation of the word *poimén* has caused a whirlwind of confusion in the church. This is the one and only time the English word “pastor” appears in most popular translations of the Bible. And there is no good reason to translate the word any differently in this instance. (Plus, the English word “pastor” actually means “shepherd”, anyway. So nothing is gained by using a different word.) It is abundantly clear the elders were the only shepherds in the early church. Yet this one bizarre translation of the word *poimén* has disconnected it from all other uses of the exact same word, setting the imaginary “pastor” apart from (and often higher than) the other elders.

The big takeaway from realizing bishops, presbyters, overseers, elders, and pastors were one-in-the-same isn't that there was one single position in the early church; it's that there were *no positions* in the early church! As we shall see, functioning as an elder is relational, not positional. The early church did not have titles and positions; they simply had spiritual parents.

The early church's spiritual parents were known as:

Elders	Also called presbyters
Shepherds	Also called pastors
Overseers	Also called bishops

That only strengthens the case for female elders since it is highly unlikely the church was meant to function with only spiritual fathers

and no spiritual mothers. Remember, God had already declared he would one day pour out his Spirit in a profoundly new way on both men and women. Joel 2:28, 29 says:

And it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions. Even on the male and female servants in those days I will pour out my Spirit.

Peter said this prophecy was fulfilled with the birth of the church.³ Prior to this, only men could be priests. But the church was to become the fulfillment of God's desire to have a nation of priests, a priesthood of all believers.⁴ How can today's churches rightly call themselves a priesthood of all believers if the priesthood is only available to half their people? But let's get back to the discussion about leadership positions in the church.

If you read through the book of Acts with fresh eyes rather than filtering the text through the lens of tradition, you will quickly discover the elders (also called presbyters) were the sole shepherds (also called pastors) and overseers (also called bishops) of the early church. These elders were a reflection of the Father, meaning they were more like spiritual parents than administrators.

Therefore, claiming our present organizational hierarchy comes from the Bible simply doesn't hold water. Yes, today's churches use

3 Acts 2:16, 17 But this is what was uttered through the prophet Joel ...

4 Exodus 19:6 And you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.

1 Peter 2:9 But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood ...

Revelation 1:6 And made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father ...

many of the same words we find in Scripture such as “deacon,” “elder,” and “pastor.” But we have completely redefined these words to fit our man-made, church model.

However, we haven’t talked specifically about deacons yet. Aren’t there scriptures that substantiate deacons are subordinate to elders? And if so, doesn’t the relationship between elders and deacons prove there is actually some degree of spiritual hierarchy in the church?

Imaginary Positions

We have already dispelled most of the myths about church positions and titles, as well as the myth of the stand-alone senior pastor. But what about deacons? As we read through the history of the early church in the book of Acts, we come across a story in chapter 6 in which the church was having a problem with the distribution of food. In Acts 6:2–4, the apostles came up with this solution:

And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, “It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty. But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.”

Some readers seem to believe the apostles had more important things to do than wait on tables. According to this interpretation, they needed subordinates to take care of the less spiritual tasks while they focused on more spiritual duties, like praying and preaching. Considering Jesus had recently washed their feet like a common house servant and told them to follow his example,¹ that interpretation is extremely unlikely.

Tradition tells us the seven men that were selected were the first church deacons, even though that word is never actually used in this particular passage. Most of what we know about deacons comes from Paul’s first letter to Timothy. Right after Paul lays out the requirements for overseers, 1 Timothy 3:8–13 goes on to say:

1 John 13:15 For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you.

In the same way, deacons are to be worthy of respect, sincere, not indulging in much wine, and not pursuing dishonest gain. They must keep hold of the deep truths of the faith with a clear conscience. They must first be tested; and then if there is nothing against them, let them serve as deacons. In the same way, the women are to be worthy of respect, not malicious talkers but temperate and trustworthy in everything. A deacon must be faithful to his wife and must manage his children and his household well. Those who have served well gain an excellent standing and great assurance in their faith in Christ Jesus (NIV).

This list follows the same pattern as the previous list about overseers: no masculine pronouns were used in the original Greek to describe deacons, yet there is a requirement for deacons to be faithful to their wives, just like overseers. But whereas that single requirement has often been used to assert the entire passage about overseers was directed toward men, it is much more problematic to say the same for this passage.

For one thing, many translators believe Paul's comment, "In the same way, the women ..." could also be translated, "In the same way, female deacons ..." But even more problematic is the fact that Paul, the same person who wrote both these lists of requirements, blatantly mentions a female deacon in Romans 16:1:

I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon of the church in Cenchræe (NIV).

But how could Phoebe be a deacon in the early church if deacons were required to be faithful to their wives and therefore, must have

been married men? She couldn't, unless it was understood the requirement about deacons' wives was directed to the male deacons and all the other requirements were directed toward both men and women. But once we admit this, it leaves a gaping hole in the argument against women overseers.

How can we concede the list of requirements for deacons was directed at both men and women without admitting the same for the list of requirements for overseers? Plus, we already established overseers are elders. And we also established the original Greek word for "elder" was used for both older men and older women.

Furthermore, the whole debate over whether women can hold positions of leadership stems from the false assumption that there actually *are* leadership positions in the church. We saw how church tradition separated the terms elder, bishop, shepherd, presbyter, overseer, and pastor into distinct, imaginary positions. So, should we be surprised to discover there was no such thing as a "deacon" in the early church?

Our word "deacon" comes from the Greek word *diakonos* which appears 29 times in the New Testament. However, it is only translated as "deacon" about 5 times, just enough to give this imaginary position some legitimacy. But the word *diakonos* actually means "servant." It is the word Jesus used in regard to the apostles in Mark 10:42–44:

And Jesus called them to him and said to them, "You know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your *servant*, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. (Italics added.)

And it is the same word the apostle Paul often used to describe himself. As an example, take Ephesians 3:7:

I became a *servant* of this gospel by the gift of God's grace given me through the working of his power (NIV). (Italics added.)

And it is the exact same word used to describe Christ in Romans 15:8:

For I tell you that Christ has become a *servant* of the Jews on behalf of God's truth ... (NIV). (Italics added.)

The word *diakonos* was simply used to describe anyone who serves, not reserved for a select group of people who held some kind of official position in the church. However, the church had already become an institution by the time the Bible was translated. Therefore, the organizational perspective of the translators colored their interpretation of the texts to help them justify man-made positions such as pastors, bishops, and deacons. Not to mention the insertion of decidedly male pronouns ensured these positions could only be occupied by men. Yet this does raise an interesting question: if the church is not an organization and the servants described in 1 Timothy do not hold actual positions in the church, then why is there a list of requirements to be met in order to be recognized as servants in the church?

Because these members assume certain responsibilities for the church, they must be trustworthy and responsible. Therefore they must meet a certain standard. Put simply, a *diakonos* is any reliable, mature member, other than an elder, who agrees to take on certain responsibilities for the church. It is not unlike the way

older children take on household chores in order to lift some of the burden off mom and dad.

We know one of the spiritual gifts Paul talked about was the gift of administration. But that doesn't mean the early church itself was an administration. There is always a certain amount of business to be done within a family. But doing business doesn't automatically make you a business. And organizing doesn't have to turn you into an organization.

When the apostles said, "It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables," they were not saying, "This task is beneath us; give this menial labor to someone less important." They were saying, "We know what we're good at; we'll stick to that. Find a few other people who can do this other task well." And seven responsible church members stepped up to serve.

But they did not become "deacons," having positions of authority somewhere above the average church member, but still lower than an elder (like some kind of spiritual middle-managers). That model comes from corporate America; it has nothing to do with genuine church community. In the first churches, there were simply seniors and juniors, shepherds and sheep, parents and children, a simple reflection of the Father and Son.

So now we have reconciled bishops, presbyters, overseers, and pastors into a single mature group of men and women, having seasoned judgment and experience, known as "elders." We also know there were servants (who were not elders) who took on certain responsibilities for the church. But how should we understand apostles, prophets, evangelists, and teachers?

In the Full version

In the full version of *Unchurching*, we continue to go deeper into the biblical understanding of spiritual authority until all our current church traditions are turned on their heads. Myths about church positions, titles, and organizational hierarchy are completely blown out of the water. What we are left with is a simpler, more scriptural picture of genuine church community.

Part Three: Church Incorporated

“The evangelical movement has become just a bit victimized by a success-oriented culture, wanting the church—like the corporation—to be successful.”

~ Henri Nouwen

Church Corporations

Although corporations were not always a dominant force in society, as they are today, the concept of the corporation is surprisingly old. The first corporations were created by the ancient Romans. In fact, our word “corporation” is derived from their Latin word *corpus*, meaning body. This is quite fitting because, in the eyes of the law, a corporation is considered an artificial person.

The legal term for such a corporate individual is *persona ficta*, meaning “fictitious person.” This person is an abstraction, a legal entity that exists solely on paper as an individual “being.” Though corporate “persons” are fictitious persons, they can still enjoy many of the same rights as real persons. For example, they have the right to buy and sell property, the right to enter into contracts, and the right to take someone to court.

Community



A group of persons

Corporation



An artificial person

The main incentive for forming a corporation is to provide legal protection for its members; this is known as limited liability. This means, if a corporation commits a wrongdoing, the fictitious person can be held responsible while its real members may not be liable. This raises some interesting questions for the believer.

For instance, how can today’s churches claim to be based on the teachings of Christ while simultaneously incorporating in order to

avoid liability? How is the concept of limited liability consistent with the words of Jesus in Matthew 5:39, 40?

But I say to you, do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well.

I am not suggesting institutional churches should fail to legally protect themselves. In fact, it is probably a foregone conclusion for a church to incorporate once the decision has been made to institutionalize. But this does raise even deeper questions. Were churches actually meant to become institutions in the first place? Also, is there any contradiction between being a genuine church community and becoming a corporation?

Legally, a corporation is a separate person; it has its own distinct legal identity. This allows a corporation to continue to exist long after its founding members have moved on. That means, at least in theory, a corporation can exist in perpetuity, having an endless duration. Whenever a church becomes a corporation, it ensures the fictitious person can “live” forever. Basically, it is the legal form of eternal life. This probably warrants a bit more discussion, so we will touch on the idea of perpetual existence again later.

Though there are obvious advantages to becoming a corporation, we must be clear that, when we incorporate, it is the organization, not the congregation, that legally becomes the “church.” In a very real sense, whenever a church community incorporates, the congregation hands over its identity to a corporation. But are we making a huge compromise by giving up our identity as the church? And if so, why does God allow it?

Counting the Cost

For the first 300 years, Christianity was more of a movement than a religion. The first believers were known for their way of life rather than a long list of religious practices. They were an informal church community that functioned much like a family. God was in their midst; the reality of his Presence and the life that poured out of his people drew unbelievers in droves.

Assuming it was God's plan for the church to continue along this trajectory, why did he eventually allow us to institutionalize the church? Why does he let us add all these imaginary titles and positions? Maybe we can find some answers in the story of Israel's kingship.

When the prophet Samuel grew old, the elders of Israel came to him saying they wanted to install a king to rule over them; they wanted to be like the other nations.¹ This made Samuel very upset but God consoled him. 1 Samuel 8:7 says:

And the Lord said to Samuel, "Obey the voice of the people in all that they say to you, for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them."

Installing an earthly king was a rejection of God's kingship. However, God still allowed Israel to follow this course. In fact, after he took the crown away from Saul, God actually appointed David to be king and blessed his kingship.² Though the kingship itself was

1 **1 Samuel 8:5** Behold, you are old and your sons do not walk in your ways. Now appoint for us a king to judge us like all the nations.

2 **2 Samuel 7:16** And your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me. Your throne shall be established forever.

a rejection, God still blessed David as king. Similarly, God placed Daniel under Nebuchadnezzar as ruler over Babylon.³ And he appointed Joseph under Pharaoh as head over all of Egypt.⁴ In each instance, God placed his people in positions of authority in ungodly, man-made systems.

Why? Perhaps he cares more about his people than he cares about their programs. Considering he allowed Israel to institute a kingship, why would he not allow us to institutionalize our churches? But just because God allows something does not mean he approves of it. Like Paul says in 1 Corinthians 10:23:

“All things are lawful,” but not all things are helpful.

“All things are lawful,” but not all things build up.

The question isn't whether or not we are allowed to do church this way; the question is: what does it cost us? God warned Israel that installing a king would cost them dearly. In 1 Samuel 8:10–22, he told them the king would take the best of their land, the best of their livestock, and the best of their people to serve the kingship itself.

Similarly, how much of our church budget is devoured by sheer overhead costs? How much time and energy is consumed on marketing our various church programs? How many of our people's talents are spent simply entertaining our congregations (thereby creating a low-commitment church culture)? How much time, energy, and money does our current church model require us to spend on the church itself?

3 **Daniel 2:48** Then the king gave Daniel high honors and many great gifts, and made him ruler over the whole province of Babylon and chief prefect over all the wise men of Babylon.

4 **Genesis 41:41** And Pharaoh said to Joseph, “See, I have set you over all the land of Egypt.”

That's not to say today's churches are completely ineffective; but are they efficient? Is this truly the best way to make disciples or even a biblical way to make disciples? What is the spiritual cost of depriving most of our church members the opportunity to exercise their calling as fellow priests and to fully grow in their spiritual gifts?

Also, if installing a man as king was a rejection of God's kingship, is installing a man as the head of the church a rejection of Christ's headship? After all, why would Christ even need an organizational hierarchy to lead his church?

Command and Control

Centuries before the Romans institutionalized the church, Jesus gave his disciples a command. In Mark 10:42, 43, he said:

And Jesus called them to him and said to them,
“You know that those who are considered rulers of
the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones
exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so
among you.”

In that day, one particular group of Gentiles had subjugated all of Israel: the Romans. Jesus told his disciples the Gentiles did two things they should never do. They “lorded it over” others and they exercised authority over others. Though these two things are related, they are not one-and-the-same. To lord it over means “to act in a superior, domineering, or controlling manner.” Obviously, Jesus did not want his disciples to adopt this attitude.

But what about the practice of exercising authority over others? As long as we maintain a humble attitude, is there anything wrong with holding a position of authority over others in the church? If Jesus was indeed condemning this practice, then his words take on a much deeper meaning. In fact, it might mean Jesus was speaking prophetically since the Romans would one day introduce positions, titles, and hierarchy into the church.

As we discussed in the beginning of this book, the very concept of one person ruling over another wasn't even considered until sin entered the world. Also, think about the revelation Paul shared about the church in Galatians 3:28:

There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

It is clear that everyone in the church had equal worth in Paul's eyes. But was he also cautioning us not to hold unequal positions? Or was he cautioning us against holding positions altogether? Are the examples in this verse only about personal prejudice, or are they also about one person ruling over another? Remember, when Paul penned these words, the Gentiles ruled the Jews, slaves were subject to masters, and men dominated women.

So, what exactly is Paul getting at when he says there is no Jew, Greek, free, slave, male or female in the church? At the very least, isn't he saying there are no distinctions between members of the church? Isn't he saying there should be genuine equality in the church? If so, how does that leave room for positions, titles, and hierarchy? Do such things complement or contradict Paul's vision of the church, as described in 1 Corinthians 12:24, 25?

But God has put the body together, giving greater honor to the parts that lacked it, so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other (NIV).

Is it even possible to have equal concern for each member when some members hold more important positions than others? After all, in a retail store, the manager is obviously more indispensable than a cashier. Likewise, in a church corporation, the senior pastor is more indispensable than an usher. If an usher suddenly had to miss church on Sunday morning, the service could go on as planned. Not so, if the senior pastor didn't show.

In any organization, a person's worth is directly connected to his position. To claim otherwise is like trying to contend a pawn is worth just as much as a king on the chessboard. Maybe that is another reason why Jesus told his disciples not to accept titles in Matthew 23:8–10:

But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all brothers. And call no man your father on earth, for you have one Father, who is in heaven. Neither be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Christ.

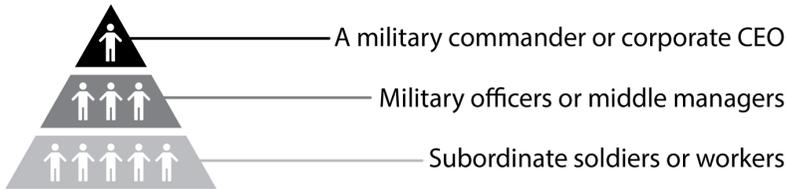
Every organizational hierarchy culminates in a single person who holds more authority than everyone else. This model is known as the command and control (or C2) model because it allows a leader to efficiently direct the efforts of countless others under his command. That is the purpose of an organizational pyramid: to bring an entire organization under the control of a single person. The 1988 NATO definition of the command and control model is as follows:

“Command and control is the exercise of authority and direction by a properly designated [individual] over assigned [resources] in the accomplishment of a [common goal].”

Even though an organization is often referred to as a “body” and its leader is known as the “head” of the organization, a human leader has limitations that prevent him from functioning like a real head. Namely, the leader of a large organization cannot communicate individually with each member in the way a real head communicates

directly with each part of the body. Instead, he must work through intermediaries who can communicate his instructions to the other members.

Command and control



Though the word “hierarchy” did not come about until hundreds of years later, the Roman concept of authority as described in the Bible was clearly based on organizational hierarchy. While speaking to Jesus about authority, a Roman centurion actually referenced the command and control model in Matthew 8:8, 9:

But the centurion replied, “Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof, but only say the word, and my servant will be healed. For I too am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. And I say to one, ‘Go,’ and he goes, and to another, ‘Come,’ and he comes, and to my servant, ‘Do this,’ and he does it.”

The centurion said he was a man under someone’s authority with others under his own authority. He was part of a very clear military chain-of-command, a hierarchical pyramid model. Because this was the only kind of authority he knew, he used this same concept to

describe Christ's spiritual authority. And, in Matthew 8:10, Jesus commended the centurion for his faith:

When Jesus heard this, he marveled and said to those who followed him, "Truly, I tell you, with no one in Israel have I found such faith."

Even though he commended the centurion's faith, Jesus never commented on his concept of authority. This doesn't mean the centurion was wrong for saying Jesus had spiritual authority. That is beside the point. At present, we are simply discussing the filter through which the Roman centurion viewed authority—organizational hierarchy, a concept the Romans would eventually introduce to the church.

However, the Head of the church is Christ. Since he can speak directly to each member, he does not require a human hierarchy to help him lead his church. This is why he provided us with something far superior. Let's look at an example of organizational hierarchy in the Old Testament, then look at the alternative Jesus suggested.

In the Full version

In the full version of *Unchurching*, we thoroughly deconstruct today's church model. Scripture by scripture, verse by verse, we challenge deeply entrenched ideas about what it means to be the church. In the final part of the book, we discuss the increasing number of people leaving the organized church, and look at suggestions for pursuing genuine church community, outside the box.

Complete Table of Contents

Here is the complete table of contents from the full version of *Unchurching: Christianity Without Churchianity*. The sections included in this sample eBook appear as black, and omitted sections appear as light gray.

Foreword by Jon Zens

Introduction

A crisis of faith

Part One: Spiritual Community

A peculiar people

The community of God

The image of God

Sin

Redemption

Sharing their possessions

Sharing their gifts

Sharing their faith

Part Two: Spiritual Parents

Parents and children

Fathers and mothers

One set of parents

Imaginary positions

Ephesians 4

Maturing

Spiritual authority

Putting it all together

Part Three: Church Incorporated

Moving backwards

Church family

Church corporations

Counting the cost

Command and control

An Old Testament example

A New Testament alternative

Gender inequality

Crowds versus congregations

The Jesus store

The least of these

Raising veal

Measuring success

Identity theft

Part Four: Church Outside the Box

Pursuing community

Experiencing worship

Receiving power

The priesthood of all believers

Christ alone

In my defense

The church exodus

Your own exodus

Spread The Word!

If you enjoyed this sample of *Unchurching*, I hope you'll check out the full version, now available on Amazon. And don't forget to listen to *The Unchurching Podcast*, available both online and on iTunes.

