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The Purpose and Mission of the *Ekklesia* in Latin American Cities

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Abstract

This article offers a profound theological and missional reflection on the urgent need to radically redefine the concept and practice of the church (*ekklesia*) within the Latin American context. In a region that is simultaneously the most urbanized and most violent in the world—and and where over 40% of the population is under the age of 30—traditional ecclesial models have proven largely ineffective in addressing the systemic challenges of poverty, inequality, forced migration, and structural violence. Despite the numerical growth of Evangelical Christianity, many churches have embraced paradigms centered on spectacle, religious consumerism, rigid institutionalism, and escapist theology, resulting in communities disconnected from their contexts and with little transformative impact. In contrast, the article proposes a recovery of the original meaning of *ekklesia* as a sent community, empowered by the Spirit and oriented toward embodying the Kingdom of God in all spheres of life. Through a rigorous analysis of Scripture, the historical context of the New Testament, and the witness of the early church, it presents four essential dimensions of the *ekklesia*: a healing and missional community, a Spirit-led discipling movement, a transformative force that confronts structures of death, and a worshiping community in deep communion with God. The article also traces how linguistic and ecclesiological evolution—from *ekklesia* to *kuriakē* and eventually "church"—has contributed to a reduced and domesticated vision of church, more focused on Sunday worship than on holistic mission. In response, it calls for a return to Jesus' vision: an active and visible *ekklesia* that lives worship as total surrender, forms disciples in every area of life, embodies the justice and compassion of the Kingdom, and acts as the soul of the city, promoting *Shalom* in contexts marked by fragmentation and despair. The article concludes with a prophetic exhortation to leaders, churches, and communities across Latin America to abandon institutional self-preservation and courageously embrace their public, communal, and transformative vocation. The future of the church will not be defined by its events or the scale of its structures, but by its ability to form discipling communities, deeply connected with God and actively engaged in the restoration of their cities and nations. Only then, the article asserts, will the *ekklesia* become the living and sent community that Jesus envisioned—a church that challenges the gates of Hades and powerfully manifests the Kingdom of God in our generation through compassion, truth, and justice.

Part 1: The Major Challenges for the Church in Latin America

Introduction: Latin America, Between Urgency and Potential

Latin America faces three fundamental and interconnected challenges—and opportunities. It is the most urbanized region in the world, with approximately 82% of its population living in cities.[1] It is also the most violent, home to the highest homicide rate globally[2] and 42 of the 50 most violent cities on the planet.[3] At the same time, over 40% of its population is under the age of 30, although this percentage has been gradually declining in recent decades.[4] This demographic reality presents both an urgent need and a unique opportunity: to effectively engage Latin America's urban centers and connect meaningfully with younger generations. Given that the vast majority of the population resides in urban areas, it is essential to develop church-planting models and urban ministry strategies that are tailored to the specific challenges and opportunities of city life. Likewise, focusing on the next generations is critical, as young people represent a significant portion of the population and hold the key to long-term transformation. Church-planting and community renewal movements must intentionally invest in the growth, formation, and active participation of youth if we are to cultivate a more hopeful and just future for Latin America.

More Churches, More Impact?
However, simply planting more churches is not a sufficient solution to the major challenges facing Latin America—especially if we fail to closely examine how to effectively engage cities and connect with younger generations. While evangelical Christianity is currently the fastest-growing religion in the region, with around one-fifth of Latin Americans now identifying as evangelicals—up from one-tenth in 2002[5]—this growth has not translated into significant change in the face of persistently high levels of violence, poverty, inequality, and migration.[6] For instance, despite high percentages of Evangelicals in countries like Brazil and Central American nations—where Evangelicals are expected to surpass Roman Catholics as the dominant religion in the coming decade— the underlying issues fueling violence, poverty, and migration remain deeply entrenched.

Many hold the conviction that the church, as a community chosen by God, has the responsibility to generate real and transformative impact in its surroundings. The once highly influential evangelical leader and author Bill Hybels often emphasized this point, famously stating: *"The local church is the hope of the world"*[7] and *"Nothing on earth has greater potential to change lives and carry out God's work in the community than the local church. There is nothing like the local church when it's working right. Its beauty is indescribable. Its power is breathtaking. Its potential is unlimited. No other organization on earth is like it. Nothing even comes close."*[8] Yet despite the strength of such statements, many churches and leaders today appear focused solely on what happens within their own four walls. Content to settle for the status quo, they often lack the vision, conviction, and sense of responsibility needed to engage actively in the transformation of their communities.

There is a significant gap between love for God and love for neighbor, and a troubling misalignment between the Great Commandment and the Great Commission. In the contemporary church landscape of Latin America, we witness a concerning proliferation of distorted church models. The *"Spectacle Church,"* driven by sensationalism and charisma, seeks to entertain rather than transform—reducing the Christian life to emotional events and flashy experiences. The *"Monument Church,"* clinging to rigid traditionalism, turns faith into an untouchable routine—more concerned with preserving inherited forms than with creatively and faithfully responding to today's challenges. Then there is the *"Fortress Church,"* marked by an exclusionary fundamentalism that builds walls of doctrinal purity—pushing out those who are different, prioritizing form over substance, rules over compassion, and controversy over discipleship. Rather than cultivating an embodied, deep, and transformative faith, these models often perpetuate structures and messages disconnected from the daily realities of people's lives, distorting or neutralizing the church's holistic calling.

Root Causes: Theologies and Practices That Diverge from the Church's Original Purpose
Below are some of the deeper root issues that help explain why many churches fail to live out their original purpose or generate the kind of transformative impact the Gospel calls for:

- *An escapist theology* that emphasizes Christ's second coming and our vertical relationship with God, while minimizing our horizontal responsibility to our neighbor. This view reduces the church's role to merely rescuing souls from the fires of hell and avoiding the corrupting influence of "the world," rather than engaging it redemptively.
- *A distorted framework of what constitutes a "healthy church*," where health is primarily measured by church attendance, buildings, and financial offerings. This leads to an event-driven ecclesiology focused on creating impressive worship experiences rather than aligning with the Great Commandment and the Great Commission.
- *A lack of transformational discipleship*, where churches often prioritize knowledge over character, and information over spiritual formation. Few faith communities are focused on actively making disciples who live out their faith in every area of life—including addressing the social and communal challenges around them.
- *Superficial theological formation*, where biblical teaching is shallow and ungrounded. This creates space for what might be called "junk theology," centered on prosperity and emotional experiences rather than Christ-centered, theologically sound formation that equips believers for holistic faith and mission.
- *The influence of prosperity theology*, a radical reinterpretation of the Bible that treats material wealth as the ultimate sign of divine blessing. It focuses on personal economic growth while ignoring the need for community transformation.
- *A consumer-driven, building-centered church model*, in which congregants are treated as consumers of attractive religious events and spiritually entertaining experiences. This focus undermines the church's integral mission and service to the community, resulting in shallow worship disconnected from and active, living faith that impacts life and one's surroundings.
- *A liturgy-centered view of church*, where Sunday services and religious events dominate the church's identity, pushing aside its missional calling. As a result, congregations become inward-looking, prioritizing worship activities over outward engagement and the pursuit of holistic transformation—spiritual, social, and economic—in their communities.
- *Hierarchical and personality-centered leadership models*, where pyramid-like structures elevate leaders to near-untouchable figures, fostering personality cults. Instead of nurturing humble, servant-hearted leadership modeled after Jesus, many church leaders adopt narcissistic leadership styles that crave admiration more than they reflect servant leadership.
- *A disconnect from the living presence of God,* where many believers are no longer led into spaces of being filled, empowered, and transformed by the Spirit of the living God. Genuine encounters with God are replaced with religious routines, emotional performance, or purely intellectual content. As a result, the church often fails to nurture Spirit-led communities marked by a deep longing for—and experience of—God's presence, which should naturally lead to transformed, missional living.
- *The normalization of abusive patterns in church life*, such as spiritual abuse, emotional manipulation, and fear-based control. These behaviors often hide behind language of obedience or spiritual authority but ultimately suffocate the freedom, dignity, and calling God has given to every person. Rather than cultivating communities where people flourish and live out their vocation, such environments reproduce controlling cultures that contradict the liberating message of the Gospel.

Fruits of This Reality: Disconnection, Dualism, and Spiritual Poverty

The fruits of this reality reveal a deep disconnection from God's holistic mission. Many churches have turned inward, prioritizing rituals, internal structures, and internal agendas over a genuine commitment to their calling to serve and transform their communities. This inward retreat reflects a loss of confidence in the power of the Gospel to bring about real and lasting change—in individuals and in society. Rather than becoming an embodied force of *Shalom*, the church often functions as a closed space, where the message of the Good News is reduced to spiritual formulas with little relevance to daily life.

As a result, a scarcity mindset and a sense of inferiority have taken root, producing churches that are servile, overly dependent on political alliances or rigid denominational structures. This posture is often rooted in a dualistic worldview that separates the spiritual from the earthly, hindering a holistic vision of the Kingdom of God and weakening the church's ability to act with relevance in the world. The result is spiritual barrenness: activities, numbers, and events may abound, but there is little evidence of genuine transformation. The phrase *"much foliage but little fruit"* aptly describes the reality of many congregations which, despite outward vitality, fail to produce a tangible impact in the lives of their members and the communities they are meant to serve.

The Urgency of Rethinking Our Missiology, Ecclesiology, and Liturgy

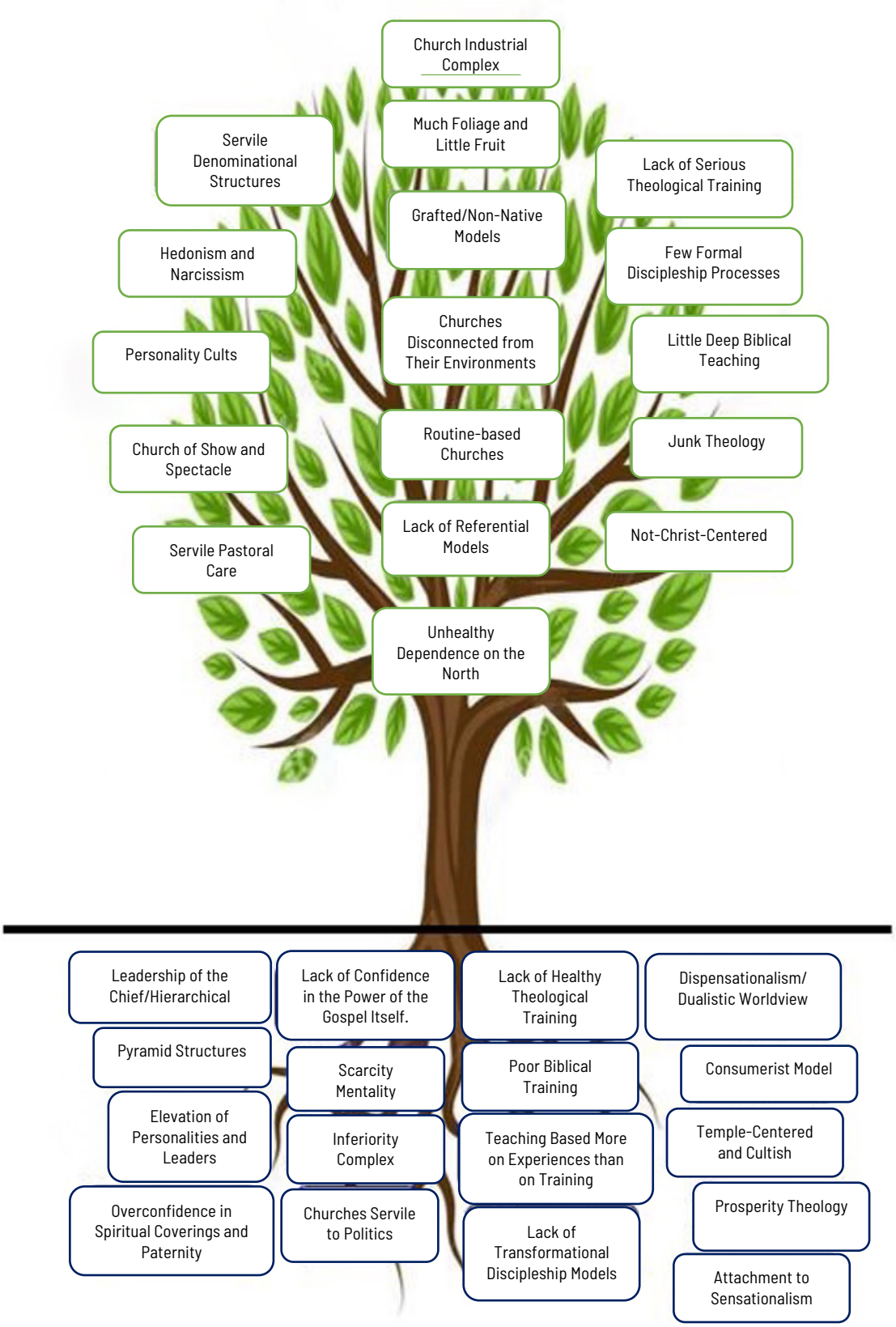
All of this should lead us to deep reflection: *What kind of church are we becoming? What kind of discipleship are we forming? What gospel are we embodying? What impact are we making in the world around us?*

The key to answering these questions—and to transforming the current reality facing the Latin American church—lies largely in leadership and in a renewed understanding of what it means to be a healthy church engaged in truly transformative discipleship. This requires the courage to rethink prevailing paradigms of leadership, theology, missiology, and ecclesiology, so we can respond to today's pressing challenges with honesty, clarity, and hope.

This article argues that the current design and self-concept of most churches is fundamentally inadequate to produce the kind of deep transformation the Gospel envisions. Their institutional identity and structures often limit their ability to live out that radical calling. While we may affirm Bill Hybels' well-known declaration that *"the local church is the hope of the world,"* it must also be acknowledged that the way many churches currently function, organize, and understand themselves prevents that potential from being realized. By design, they are not equipped to bear such fruit—because nothing can produce what it was never designed to produce.

More than 50 years have passed since the vision of *misión integral* (holistic mission) was first articulated in Latin America. Yet many churches have still not embraced it. This is not due to a lack of information or access to relevant theological frameworks, but rather because their ecclesiological self-understanding and organizational models are not aligned with that mission. In other words, we cannot live out or embody what has not been integrated into the very identity and vocation of the church. In the following pages, we will explore the roots of this disconnection and crisis, and propose a broader, biblically grounded definition of the *ekklesia*—one that recovers its original purpose and mission. The goal is to help us rediscover and become the kind of church Jesus envisioned: a restorative, disciple-making, worshiping, and transformative community, sent into the world to embody the Kingdom of God with power, compassion, and truth.

The Following Problem Tree Illustrates the Challenges Previously Described:


Church Industrial Complex
Much Foliage and Little Fruit
Grafted/Non-Native Models
Churches Disconnected from Their Environments
Routine-based Churches
Lack of Referential Models
Unhealthy Dependence on the North
Servile Denominational Structures
Hedonism and Narcissism
Personality Cults
Church of Show and Spectacle
Servile Pastoral Care
Lack of Serious Theological Training
Few Formal Discipleship Processes
Little Deep Biblical Teaching
Junk Theology
Not-Christ-Centered
Leadership of the Chief/Hierarchical
Pyramid Structures
Elevation of Personalities and Leaders
Overconfidence in Spiritual Coverings and Paternity
Lack of Confidence in the Power of the Gospel Itself.
Scarcity Mentality
Inferiority Complex
Churches Servile to Politics
Lack of Healthy Theological Training
Poor Biblical Training
Teaching Based More on Experiences than on Training
Lack of Transformational Discipleship Models
Dispensationalism/ Dualistic Worldview
Consumerist Model
Temple-Centered and Cultish
Prosperity Theology
Attachment to Sensationalism

Part 2: What is the Ekklesia? – The Calling and Purpose of the *Ekklesia*

Introduction: Different Ecclesiastical Models

Many Christians today think of the church primarily as the building where they gather—a place to sing songs of praise, listen to preaching, and briefly connect with other believers. In practice, most church structures today are shaped by three dominant models that define their focus and approach to ministry:

1. *The Worship Experience and Charismatic Leadership Model*: Originating in the United States, this model revolves around a dynamic worship experience and charismatic leadership. The focus is often on a powerful preacher, a visually striking stage, a vibrant worship band, and services enhanced with lights, sound, and multimedia—designed to attract and inspire attendance. It typically includes a wide range of programs and events aimed at strengthening congregational engagement. With its emphasis on emotional experience, relevant preaching, and prominent pastoral figures, this model has been widely adopted across Latin America and in many neo-Pentecostal, charismatic, and non-denominational churches worldwide.[9]
2. *The Liturgical and Sacramental Model*: This ancient model characterizes Catholic, Orthodox, and Anglican churches. Its focal point is the celebration of the Eucharist or Communion, with the altar at the center of worship. The service follows a set liturgy, with rituals and prayers that connect participants to the historic tradition of the Christian faith. This model is rooted in the belief that sacramental participation in the body and blood of Christ lies at the heart of church life, emphasizing continuity with the teachings and practices of the early church.
3. *The Preaching and Biblical Teaching Model:* Typical of many Reformed and evangelical Protestant churches, this model places the pulpit and the proclamation of the Word at the center of church life. Expository preaching and in-depth study of Scripture form the core of Sunday services, with biblical teaching serving as the primary tool for spiritual formation. It emphasizes doctrinal clarity, practical instruction, and the application of Scripture to daily life.

These models have undoubtedly blessed millions of people throughout the centuries and contain many valuable elements. However, they share a common characteristic: they tend to center the church experience around the Saturday or Sunday service, while pushing the church's local mission to the margins. The focus is often more on what happens inside a building or liturgical space than on embodying God's mission and equipping an active, missional community committed to the holistic transformation of its surroundings and a tangible impact in local neighborhoods. As a result, many congregations have adopted a mindset of "going to church" rather than "being the Church." The danger of this approach is that the church can become, not a living and transformative body, but a mere *Administrative Bureau of Liturgical Services (ABLS)*—an institution focused on religious programs and events, yet disconnected from its calling to be salt and light in the city. This leads us to a fundamental question: *Is this the kind of Church Jesus envisioned and dreamed of?*

The Original Meaning of *Ekklesia*

Unfortunately, many people today view the church merely as a harmless, worshiping, evangelizing, and servile community. Others, by contrast, see it in a far more negative light—as a controlling, toxic, or indoctrinating institution that seeks to suppress independent thought and maintain power. Yet if the church had truly been only one of these things—harmless or oppressive—it is unlikely it would have faced the fierce persecution it endured in its earliest days. When Jesus used the word *ekklesia* to describe the community of disciples He intended to form, He had something quite different in mind than the modern connotations often associated with the word *church*. So, how should we truly define the term *ekklesia*? To answer that, we must first explore what Jesus envisioned when He established the *ekklesia*. Let us begin with a brief recap of His purpose and mission.

The Purpose and Mission of Jesus

Jesus came to proclaim the Good News and to establish the Kingdom of God on earth. He healed the sick, announced the gospel, confronted injustice, forgave sins, gathered a community of disciples, and revealed to us the dream of God. But His mission did not end there: He died and rose again—and in doing so, He rescued us from the power of sin and death, which prevent us from experiencing God's *Shalom* in our lives and in the world. His death and resurrection marked a definitive turning point, as Jesus defeated once and for all the most powerful weapon Satan wielded over creation: death itself—along with the forces of chaos and destruction. As Scripture declares: *"Where, O death, is your sting? Where, O grave, is your victory?"* (1 Corinthians 15:55–57). Through Christ's resurrection, life—and life in abundance—has the final word and will be established as the ultimate reality of our universe (John 10:10). Even death has lost its power.

In addition to proclaiming the gospel of the Kingdom of God, Jesus called together a group of disciples to form a radically different kind of community—one grounded in faith and trust in God—which He Himself called *ekklesia* (Matthew 16:18; Matthew 18:17). But what exactly was the *ekklesia* during Jesus' time—a term that had already been part of Greek and Roman political vocabulary for centuries?[10]

Historical Context: Temple, Synagogue, Sanhedrin, and Ekklesia

Before defining the term *ekklesia*, it is important to understand the broader institutional context of Jesus' time. During His earthly life, four main institutions shaped the religious, social, and political life of Israel:

1. *The Temple* was the central place of worship in Israel—the location where the people encountered the presence of God through sacrifices and priestly mediation. It was the only place where the rituals prescribed by the Law could be performed, making it the most sacred space in the Jewish religious imagination—the very heart of national religious life.
2. *The Synagogue* served as a local gathering place for teaching and community life. Unlike the Temple, which was centered on sacrificial rituals, the synagogue provided accessible spaces for studying Scripture, prayer, and to strengthen communal identity. It enabled local communities to be spiritually nourished and grow through the reading and interpretation of the Law and the Prophets.
3. *The Sanhedrin* (or council of seventy elders) was the highest judicial and legal authority in Israel. It oversaw legal matters, upheld the application of the Law, and maintained institutional cohesion. In addition to the Great Sanhedrin based in Jerusalem, smaller regional courts—known as "lesser Sanhedrins" or *batei din*—operated in major towns to address legal disputes and oversee justice at the local level.
4. *The Ekklesia* referred to an assembly of citizens "called out" of their homes by a herald to meet in a public space. In the Greco-Roman cities, this assembly was responsible for regularly convening to deliberate on civic and political matters—discussing laws, electing magistrates, and making decisions on the public affairs of the city.[11]

While in Galilee or Judea during the time of Jesus the *ekklesia* did not function exactly as it did in the classical Greek *polis* (city-states), certain cities with stronger Hellenistic influence—such as those in the Decapolis, Tiberias in Galilee, or Sepphoris (located just 6–7 km from Nazareth, where Jesus grew up)—retained assembly-based structures inspired by that tradition. In these cities, local elites would gather to deliberate on municipal matters, though their decisions were subject to the authority of the Roman government (or the local tetrarch, in the case of Galilee), and they were required to respect Jewish law as it pertained to the local population. Nevertheless, the concept of *ekklesia* was familiar in the region, and as the disciples began to move beyond Galilee into Samaria and other parts of the Greco-Roman world, they encountered it more frequently. In fact, the term *ekklesia* appears 114 times in the New Testament, highlighting its central importance for the emerging community of Jesus' followers.

This is why it is essential to understand Jesus' intention in choosing the word *ekklesia* to describe His community of disciples. Unlike *temple* or *synagogue*, the term *ekklesia* in Jesus' time did not carry religious connotations—it was a civic and political term. Its origins trace back to Greek democracy, where it referred to the governing assembly or legislative body of citizens responsible for the administration of the city-state. The *ekklesia* was composed of men aged eighteen and older who had completed at least two years of military service—indicating a high level of commitment to their city. In most Greek cities, the *ekklesia* met regularly to deliberate on public and governmental matters, ensuring good governance, development, and the well-being of the city and its future.
Thus, *ekklesia* did not simply mean a "gathering"; it referred to an official assembly with the authority to make decisions, implement policies, and shape the public life of the community.[12] This system of citizen participation—

what we know as democracy or "rule by the people"—was a hallmark of ancient Greece and had no precedent in other civilizations of Asia, Africa, or Europe at the time.[13] In the current Mexican context, a concept that bears some resemblance to the Greek *ekklesia* would be the *COPACI* (Citizen Participation Council), a local council aimed at involving citizens in decision-making processes for the well-being of their communities.

When the Roman Empire—with its hierarchical structure—took control of the Hellenistic territories, it allowed many cities with Greek traditions to retain their local institutions, including the *ekklesiai*, as long as these did not conflict with imperial interests.[14] In this way, Rome gradually integrated the Hellenistic cities into its imperial system, delegating key administrative functions to local elites. These elites, organized into formally recognized civic bodies—such as municipal councils (*ordines decurionum*)—not only represented the interests of their communities but also served as agents of Roman authority. Through these local bodies, Rome ensured the enforcement of its laws, the promotion of its culture, and the fulfillment of its imperial priorities.[15] Their responsibilities included tax collection, local justice administration, military recruitment, and the execution of public works.[16] While these governing bodies—including the *ekklesiai*—retained some traditional elements of civic autonomy, their most significant decisions—particularly in political, military, or fiscal matters—required the approval of the provincial governor or imperial magistrates appointed by the emperor. In this way, Rome maintained control over its conquered territories through strategic collaboration with local elites, thereby ensuring the stability and expansion of its power throughout the provinces.

Against this imperial backdrop, Jesus' use of the term *ekklesia* takes on much deeper meaning and subversive weight.[17] Even under Roman oversight and nominally tasked with serving imperial interests, the *ekklesia* still evoked the idea of a citizen assembly—vested with authority to deliberate and make decisions for the well-being of the city. Jesus' appropriation of this term suggests not a retreat from civic life, but the formation of an alternative public community empowered to embody the values of the Kingdom of God.

Why Jesus Chose the Word 'Ekklesia'

It is worth emphasizing again how profoundly revealing it is that Jesus and the apostles chose a secular term—*ekklesia*—rather than a religious one to define the identity and purpose of the community they were forming. Jesus could have said, *"I will build my Temple"* or *"I will build my Synagogue,"* referring to the two central religious institutions of Judaism in His day. But He didn't. By choosing *ekklesia*, He intentionally distanced Himself from a model centered on traditional religious structures. His vision went far beyond an internal reform of Judaism; it relocated the spiritual center—not to a sacred building—but to a living, gathered community in His name, present across the world.

In this light, Jesus' vision of the *ekklesia* can be understood as a continuation and expansion of the Old Testament concept of *qahal* (קָהָל)—the assembly of Israel called by God to be *"a kingdom of priests"* (Exodus 19:6), tasked with reflecting and mediating God's presence in the world.[18] This priestly dimension, in turn, reaches back to the creation narrative, where Adam and Eve are entrusted with the responsibility to rule and steward the earth on God's behalf (Genesis 1:26–28). The Spirit *"hovering over the chaotic waters"* in Genesis 1:2 symbolizes God's creative impulse to transform chaos into a world of life and order. In this cosmic vision, all creation is understood as a cosmic temple, and human beings—first Adam and Eve, then Israel as *qahal*—are called to serve as priestly stewards who embody God's presence and advance order, fullness, and justice on the earth.[19]

Jesus takes up and redefines this original calling by establishing His *ekklesia*: a universal and radically inclusive assembly made up of people from every nation, ethnicity, and background. Its mission is not to build temples but to be the temple—not to centralize spirituality in a specific location, but to disperse it like yeast throughout all of society. Just as the Spirit moved over the primordial chaos to bring order and life to the world, so the *ekklesia*, empowered by that same Spirit, is sent to confront the forces of disorder—violence, injustice, and alienation—by creating spaces of worship, reconciliation, and justice, and by permeating its surroundings with the presence of the God of *Shalom*. This thread of continuity—from the vocation of Adam and Eve, to Israel's calling as *qahal*, to Jesus' commission to His *ekklesia*—reveals a singular divine project: the restoration of creation through the formation of a people who radiate God's presence and *Shalom* in the midst of a chaotic world.

In light of this, Jesus' choice of the word *ekklesia* was no accident—it was deliberate. By adopting a term rooted in civic and political life—not in religion—Jesus was radically redefining what it means to be a spiritual community.

His *ekklesia* would not replicate imperial models of power, but would instead be an alternative assembly, "called out" and summoned not by a human emperor, but by the King of kings. Its mission: to manifest the presence of God, embody His reign amid broken human systems, confront evil in all its forms—spiritual, social, cultural, and structural—and sow signs of the Kingdom into every sphere of life.

Imbued with the DNA of the Kingdom and empowered by the Holy Spirit, the *ekklesia* was conceived as a living, dynamic, and transformative community—representing the interests of heaven in the midst of the earth. It is a restored people, commissioned to act as ambassadors of the Kingdom of God (see 2 Corinthians 5:17–21 and Ephesians 3:10).[20] For this reason, its identity is not confined to a Sunday gathering. It unfolds throughout the entire week, across all areas of life. Jesus' use of the term *ekklesia* thus powerfully redefines the identity, purpose, and mission of His disciples: a sent people, commissioned to disciple individuals, cities, and nations—proclaiming with both word and deed the *Shalom* of the Kingdom.[21]

Part 3: How Did We Get from *Ekklesia* to "Church"?

If, for Jesus and His apostles, *ekklesia* truly meant the assembly of citizens of God's Kingdom —empowered by the Spirit to represent that Kingdom on earth—then how did we arrive at the way we understand the word *church* today? How did this term come to be associated primarily with a place of worship, an ecclesiastical building, or an institutional religious structure, rather than with a vibrant, active, and missional community committed to seeking the *shalom* of its context?

How Linguistic Evolution Changed the Meaning from *Ekklesia* to *Kuriakē* to "Church"

In the fourth century, the Greek word *ekklesia* was translated into Vulgar Latin as *ecclesia*. As Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire following the Edict of Milan (issued by Constantine in 313 AD), the term *ecclesia* gradually evolved in both meaning and usage. No longer referring solely to the assembly of believers, *ecclesia* began to denote the physical place of worship, as well as the institutional structure of the Church—including its buildings, clerical hierarchy, and organizational framework. This linguistic shift reflects how the church's identity slowly transformed from a dynamic, Spirit-empowered community into a more centralized and institutionalized system closely aligned with imperial structures.

In the Romance languages, this linguistic evolution gave rise to the modern Spanish word *iglesia*. Today, many people in the Spanish-speaking world use the term *iglesia* interchangeably with *ekklesia*. However, despite their shared etymological roots, the two words have come to carry distinct conceptual meanings. In fact, the Spanish word *iglesia* has taken on a meaning more aligned with the English word *church* or the German *Kirche*—terms used in those languages to refer to the Christian community. These words, however, do not derive from *ekklesia*, but from the Greek word *kuriakē* or *kuriakon*, meaning "belonging to the Lord." Beginning in the fourth and fifth centuries, *kuriakē* became increasingly popular among Greek-speaking Christian communities as a way of referring to "the Lord's house" or the "place of worship" where the *Lord's Supper* was celebrated. This shift reinforced the perception of the church as a physical space centered on liturgical worship and ecclesiastical organization, rather than as a dynamic, Spirit-led community sent into the world.

It is interesting to note that the word *kuriakon* appears only twice in the entire New Testament: once in reference to the *Lord's Supper* (1 Corinthians 11:20) and once in reference to the *Lord's Day* (Revelation 1:10). Over time, however, this term began to be associated with Christian gatherings—especially those in which the Lord's Supper was celebrated. This gradual shift eventually led to its use in describing places of worship. This reinterpretation had a significant impact on the translation of the Bible into Gothic, an early Germanic language. The Goths translated *Kyriakos oikos* (meaning "the Lord's house") as *ciric*, a term which, through the evolution of language, became *kerk* in Old English, and later *church* in modern English and *Kirche* in German.[22]

From Movement to Monument: The Institutionalization of the *Ekklesia*

When translators replaced the Greek word *ekklesia* with contemporary terms like *church* in English, *Kirche* in German, or the reinterpreted *iglesia* in Spanish, much of its original meaning was lost. Although Martin Luther intentionally chose the word *Gemeinde* (congregation) instead of *Kirche* to refer to the *ekklesia*—seeking to emphasize a living, active community of believers rather than the established ecclesiastical institution—the focus still remained largely on a congregation gathered for weekly worship and teaching. As a result, the rich concept of *ekklesia*—originally describing a dynamic assembly empowered by the Holy Spirit, marked by vibrant spirituality and active engagement in the well-being of its city, as envisioned by Jesus—was gradually reduced to a religious gathering centered around a building that people attend occasionally. What began as a Spirit-led movement became, over time, more like a monument: institutionalized, domesticated, and often disconnected from its original mission to embody and advance the Kingdom of God in every sphere of life.

Unsurprisingly, over time, *ekklesia* became sacralized and increasingly associated with the spiritual and religious dimension of Christianity, emphasizing ecclesiastical structure over its missional and transformative nature. Consequently, in many Christian traditions—such as Catholic, Orthodox, and Anglican—liturgy centers on the Eucharist, while in Protestant, Evangelical, and Charismatic churches, the focus shifts to the pulpit or stage, oriented around a weekly spiritual event. As a result, the church experience has become synonymous with "attending temple," "going to mass," or "participating in Sunday service," reducing its meaning to a merely periodic gathering rather than an vibrant, transformative community.

When Religious Meetings Replace the Missional Community

As a result of this evolution, many—including Christians from the Anabaptist-tradition, who rejected clerical hierarchy and emphasized community-led leadership—now understand *ekklesia* as the assembly of saints: a people set apart from worldly structures to belong to God's own. From this perspective, *ekklesia* is conceived as a community separated from its surroundings; gathered primarily for prayer, sacraments, and teaching to cultivate lives of holiness, consecration, and separation from the world's influences. [23]

We might conclude, then, that most churches today operate more as *kuriakē* than as *ekklesia*. Even many church-planting movements focus more on establishing *kuriakēs*—congregations centered on worship and teaching—than on forming *ekklesias*: communities *sent* to transform their surroundings. While *kuriakē*—with its emphasis on worship, preaching, and communion—is essential to Christian life, it does not encompass the fullness of the church Jesus envisioned. *Kuriakē* functions *within* the *ekklesia*, but the *ekklesia* holds a far broader purpose. Undoubtedly, it's essential for believers to gather in Jesus' name for worship and fellowship. Yet reducing the *ekklesia* to a mere religious meeting—or worse, a building—strips it of the purpose Jesus established. The original *ekklesia* was not confined to temples or weekly gatherings; it was a *missional movement*, set apart to participate in God's mission. It was a community sent into the world to witness God's Kingdom amid cultures that had replaced the truth of the Gospel with other narratives. It was an assembly of disciples committed to the life of the city—dedicated to confronting injustice and called to embody God's story through word and deed.

This is precisely why Jesus chose a non-religious term for his community of disciples. He wasn't interested in merely forming a spiritual congregation gathered around a stage, pulpit, or altar. His vision was a community committed to the holistic well-being—the *shalom*—of its surroundings. Just as the Greco-Roman *ekklesia* bore responsibility for its *polis*'s common good, so too Jesus' Spirit-empowered *ekklesia* was called to be an instrument of God's Kingdom: set apart from the world in ethics, values, and purpose, yet deeply engaged in transforming people, communities, and nations. Its mission encompassed making disciples, creating spaces of belonging and connection with God, healing and restoration, and advancing peace and justice throughout society.

In light of this, let's reflect on four essential aof the *ekklesia* that can help us refocus our mission and recover Jesus' vision[24]:

1. *The Ekklesia as a Healing and Missional Community*
2. *The Ekklesia as a Spirit-Driven Disciple-Making Movement*
3. *The Ekklesia as a Transformative Force*
4. *The Ekklesia as a Worshipping Community in Communion with God*

Part 4: The Ekklesia - A Healing and Missional Community

Sent as Christ: The Comprehensive Mission of the Ekklesia
In John 20:21, Jesus declares: *"Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you."* This commission establishes the church as a *sent community* to continue his comprehensive mission. The ekklesia is called to be an ambassador of the Kingdom—proclaiming and embodying the Gospel in every sphere of society.

Jesus came not merely to save individual souls, but to redeem persons, restore entire communities, and reconcile the entire cosmos under God's lordship. As expressed in John 3:16-17, one of the most well-known biblical passages: *"For God so loved the cosmos—the whole of humanity, the created order, and even worldly systems with their values—that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the cosmos to condemn the cosmos, but to save the cosmos through him."* Similarly, Paul affirms in Colossians 1:19-20: *"For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in Christ, and through him to reconcile to himself all things—whether things on earth or things in heaven—making restorative peace through the blood of his cross."* Together, these passages reveal the breathtaking scope of Jesus' mission—and therefore of his *ekklesia*: to serve as agents of reconciliation and transformation throughout all creation.

In other words, the *ekklesia* exists not to serve itself, but as an instrument through which God acts in the world.[25] This is where *ekklesia*'s original meaning becomes profoundly significant: understood as "an assembly of Jesus-followers, set apart to participate in God's mission, reflect His Kingdom, and seek the *shalom* of the city," our calling extends far beyond gathering for worship and edification. We are commissioned to fully *live and embody* the Gospel beyond the four walls of church buildings. Sent into the world, we bear collective responsibility to guide our communities and cities toward a better future—bringing God's shalom to every sphere of human existence.[26] In short, the idea that life is a pilgrimage from a lost paradise toward a new and restored home is a powerful metaphor woven throughout the entire Bible. It deeply reflects the ekkelsia's calling: to be a people on the move, who actively anticipate and participate in the restoration of all things.

The Table as a Place of Mission
It's important to recognize the *ekklesia*'s growth during Christianity's first three centuries was fueled, partly by Jesus' strategic use of existing social practices—especially shared meals. This reality echoes Luke's description of the post-Pentecost community: *"They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, to fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and to prayer"* (Acts 2:42). These weren't occasional events but a constant rhythm of life. Sharing meals together permeated early church life. These gatherings went beyond mere social gatherings—they became sacred assemblies. Tables were transformed into inclusive spaces, unlike the more exclusive environments of the temple or synagogue, enabling the *ekklesia* to engage fully with daily life without withdrawing from the surrounding society. In doing so, Jesus turned tables into pulpits and homes into assembly halls, where strangers were welcomed and often became disciples. The *ekklesia* didn't merely speak about belonging—it lived it. Through bread, wine, the Word, and presence, it formed communities where every person could find a place, a purpose, and a family.

Koinonía as a Way of Life
For the early *ekklesia*, the Greek term *koinonía*—typically translated as "communion" or "fellowship"—signified far more than spiritual closeness or emotional affection. It described a deeply committed shared way of life, and meant active and tangible participation in the lives of others: meeting each other's material needs (Acts 2:44–45), partnering in the proclamation of the gospel (Philippians 1:5), making disciples of all nations (Matthew 28:18–20), sharing in the sufferings of Christ (Philippians 3:10), and walking in obedience to God's call (1 John 1:6–7). At its core, this radical form of fellowship had one ultimate purpose: to glorify God.[27]

As Paul himself declared, when the *ekklesia* lives out *koinonía*—a community marked by mutual love, service, and shared purpose—it demonstrates a radically countercultural reality. By living out the Gospel in community, God reveals His eternal wisdom and plan not only to people, but to the unseen powers and authorities of the universe (Ephesians 3:10).

The *ekklesia*, then, is not merely a harmless religious group; it is a living signpost of God's transformative Kingdom. Just as the Kingdom was present in Christ's person, it is now made present through His body—the *ekklesia*. This is why Paul urged believers to *"clothe yourselves with Christ"* (Romans 13:14)—to live in such a way that Christ becomes visibly present through them. This identity carries a profound mission: to embody the integral mission of Jesus. Having been reconciled to God, the *ekklesia* is now called to be an ambassador of that reconciliation. Its task is not limited to proclaiming with words—it must also embody, through action, the love that restores, the grace that forgives, and the hope that renews. Where there is division, the *ekklesia* is called to build bridges; where there are wounds, to bring healing; where there is oppression, to sow justice. As Christ's visible body on earth, the *ekklesia* declares through its very existence: *All things can be made new* (2 Corinthians 5:17–20).

The Ekklesia as the Soul of the City: A Visible, Sent, and Incarnational Community

From this perspective, God's Kingdom is inseparably linked to a concrete people—God's own people. Jesus didn't come merely to deliver a set of written or propositional truths *about* God, as if His mission were to leave behind a book. Instead, He called and gathered a living, breathing community of men and women to bear witness to who he was and embody His life, words, and works. The new reality He launched in history was meant to continue not primarily through a text, but through a living, incarnational, missional community.[28] Thus, the *ekklesia*—as Christ's visible body in the world—proclaims through its existence that a*ll things can be made new* – both anticipating and participating in the coming Kingdom. This incarnational presence proved revolutionary. As historian Rodney Stark observes: *"To cities filled with the homeless and impoverished, Christianity offered charity as well as hope. To cities filled with newcomers and strangers, Christianity offered immediate fellowship. To cities torn by violent ethnic strife, Christianity offered a new basis for social solidarity."*[29]

The *Epistle to Diognetus*, written around A.D. 130, beautifully captures the early church's vision of its role in society: *"What the soul is to the body, Christians are to the world."*[30] This powerful statement reflects how the first Christians saw themselves—not as a mere appendage to society, but as its very soul: essential to its moral, spiritual, and social well-being. They were not concerned with political power—indeed, they had none. Instead, their posture was shaped by the cross: a life marked by compassion, sacrificial service, and spiritual power offered in service to their cities. As a result, they sought to imitate Christ by tangibly expressing God's love to those in need—the poor, the enslaved, widows, and the sick—especially during times of crisis. This way of life set them apart in the Greco-Roman world, where they were simultaneously ridiculed and admired for their righteousness, compassion, uncompromising mercy, and practical love of neighbor. It was precisely this concrete embodiment of the Gospel that fueled the exponential growth of the *ekklesiai* during the third century. They understood that their mission was not merely to hold gatherings, but to become *shalom*-generating communities—the soul of the city—living, visible, and sent expressions of God's reconciling and renewing presence in the world.[31]

This holistic vision of mission is echoed by South African missiologist David Bosch, who writes: *"The mission of the church, then, encompasses all the dimensions and scope of Jesus' ministry and must never be reduced to church planting or saving souls. It involves proclaiming and teaching, but also healing and delivering, showing compassion to the poor and the oppressed. Like Jesus, the church is sent into the world—to love, serve, preach, teach, heal, save, set free, intercede, embody the message, become servants, remain open even to suffering or death, to worship, and to be attentive to the guidance of the Spirit."*[32] This is what it means to be the *ekklesia* Jesus envisioned: a transformed and transforming community, empowered by the Spirit, sent into the world to live out, proclaim, and extend the Kingdom of God.

Part 5: The Ekklesia – A Discipling Movement Moved by the Spirit

From Fear to Mission: The Encounter with the Risen One
After Jesus' death, the disciples were discouraged, hiding in fear, and overwhelmed with despair. Their world had collapsed. The one they had followed as the Messiah—the one who spoke with authority, healed the sick, and proclaimed the Kingdom of God—had been brutally crucified. Their hearts were filled with uncertainty and doubt. When the risen Jesus appeared to them, they didn't recognize Him immediately. Some thought they saw a ghost. Then came His gentle yet direct challenge: *"Why are you frightened? Why are your hearts filled with doubt?"* (Luke 24:38).

To prove that He was truly alive, Jesus ate with them. He showed them His hands and feet. He invited them to touch Him—to be convinced that He was no ghost or illusion. *"Why are you troubled?"* He asked again. *"Don't you know that I have conquered death? Don't you see that I am sending you with power from on high?"* (Luke 24:39).
In the days that followed, He opened their minds to understand the Scriptures through the lens of His Kingdom (Acts 1:3), and reminded them that the message of the Kingdom and His vision of *shalom* was to be proclaimed to all nations and every creature. Jesus didn't just calm their fears—He commissioned them. He gave them a global mission: to disciple—to transform, influence, and model—a new way of life for the nations. A mission that, from a human perspective, seemed impossible. He sent them to announce that a new Kingdom had begun, a new reality under His lordship, the path toward the holistic *shalom* God had dreamed of since creation.

Discipling Nations: Jesus' Master Plan
In Matthew 28:19-20, Jesus clearly defined the mission of His *ekklesia*: *"Go and make disciples of all nations… teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you."* And what had He commanded? *"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and mind; and love your neighbor as yourself. All the Law and the Prophets depend on these two commandments"* (Matthew 22:37-40). This is the essence of the disciple-making mission: to form communities where people learn to live out love for God, for others, and for themselves in every area of life. It is the starting point for embodying and extending the Kingdom—a Kingdom that is revealed through transformed lives, restored relationships, and healed communities.

Theologian and writer Brian McLaren, in *The Secret Message of Jesus*, offers a powerful summary of the different versions of the Great Commission (Matthew 28:18-20; Mark 16:15; Luke 24:49 / Acts 1:8; John 20:21) in this paraphrased reflection: *"You cannot keep the good news of the Kingdom a secret. That's why I'm sending you—just as the Father sent me—to share the good news of the Kingdom of God with the world. For everyone who receives and embraces this message, help them form communities where they can learn together by putting into practice what they've heard. In this way, little by little, they will learn to live by my teaching, just as you are still learning each day. But don't try to do it alone. Don't rely only on your own strength—trust in the power of the Holy Spirit. And don't limit yourselves to your own people: cross borders, break down barriers, and share this message with people of every culture, language, and nation. What you've discovered by walking with me—the way, the truth, and the life—is for everyone."*[33]

In one of His final conversations with the disciples before ascending to heaven, Jesus laid out a clear strategy for the expansion of the Kingdom: *"You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea, in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth"* (Acts 1:8). The mission was to begin in Jerusalem—the religious, political, and economic heart of Israel—and then extend to Judea, move into Samaria (challenging cultural barriers and historical prejudices, given the region's longstanding enmity with the Jews), and ultimately cross borders to touch the Gentile nations of the vast Roman Empire. This unfolding expansion carried a radical message: that Jesus—not Caesar—is the true Lord, and that His Kingdom of *shalom* confronts every form of idolatry, oppression, and violence perpetuated by the kingdoms and empires of the earth.

This mission was far from easy for the disciples—none of the places they were sent promised to be simple. Yet Jesus did not merely send them; He empowered them. In Matthew 28:20, He assured them, *"I am with you always, to the very end of the age."* And in Luke 24:49, He instructed them, *"Stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high."*

The Power of the Spirit: Not for Spectacle, but for Mission

The power of the Holy Spirit was never meant to be an end in itself, but the divine force that would propel the disciples to bear witness and advance God's Kingdom among the nations—making disciples and raising up *ekklesias* committed to pursuing *shalom* in their communities. Today, however, in many circles, the Spirit's primary purpose is often misunderstood—reduced to signs, wonders, spiritual gifts, charismatic manifestations, or emotionally charged experiences. While charismatic and Pentecostal communities have rightly helped recover a vibrant theology of the Spirit—one long diminished or sidelined in traditional Protestant and Catholic traditions—they have at times also missed the deeper aim of the Spirit's work: to empower God's people to embody and extend His reign of justice, mercy, and transformation.

Miracles and spiritual encounters often accompany the Spirit's movement, but they are not the ultimate goal. They are signs that point toward something greater—the reality of the Kingdom. The central mission of the Spirit is to form a people who reflect God's character and live out His purposes in the world. This means cultivating a community marked by justice, peace, and joy in the Spirit (Romans 14:17), where the fruit of the Spirit flows freely: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23). These are not merely private virtues—they are public, relational, and cultural realities that shape how we live together in the world.

When the Spirit truly moves, He doesn't merely stir emotions—He gives birth to new ways of living. The Spirit creates countercultural communities marked by generosity instead of greed, reconciliation instead of division, humility instead of domination. This is how *shalom* begins to take root: when the Spirit fills not just individuals, but entire neighborhoods, cities, and societies with the aroma of the Kingdom. In the end, the true substance of the Kingdom is not found in ecstatic experiences but in transformed lives and communities—shaped by righteousness, justice, reconciliation, and the renewing presence of the Spirit—where *shalom* becomes not just a distant hope, but a lived reality.[34]

The Missional Ekklesia: Communities that Disciple with Life

Jesus' plan was to establish and strengthen *missional ekklesias*—Spirit-led communities that would live according to the values of the Kingdom and spread the Gospel of *shalom* throughout the earth. From the book of Acts to Revelation, we see the disciples' unwavering commitment to this mission: to raise up disciple-making *ekklesias* that would embody the good news of the Kingdom in every part of the world. This was their core identity and purpose:

- They proclaimed the Kingdom of God and the lordship of Christ.
- They formed disciples who grew in trust and obedience to Jesus.
- They taught the way of Jesus and cultivated Christlike character.
- They sought to live out Kingdom values in every area of life.
- They loved and served their neighbors in tangible, practical ways.
- They developed leaders who carried the Gospel into new cultures.
- They challenged structures of sin and injustice, as well as ideologies opposed to the Kingdom of God.

Tragically, many churches today have reduced discipleship to spiritual activities: attending prayer meetings, listening to sermons, or participating in Bible studies. Though these are all good and necessary, true discipleship goes far deeper. It's not enough to know Scripture - we must learn to live like Jesus in every sphere: at home, at work, in culture, community, economics, and politics. This is why any theology that presents the Gospel merely as a "spiritual escape" falls dangerously short - it ignores our mandate to disciple nations and transform fragile cities through the power of God's Kingdom.

Ambassadors of the Kingdom: Multiplying Communities of Shalom

The crucial question remains: *Do we truly trust the One who claims all authority in heaven and on earth? Are we willing to become the ekklesia He envisioned?* The same Spirit who empowered the first disciples is still at work today. He longs to raise up men, women, youth, and children—filled with holy passion—ready to become part of God's response to heal our broken cities and nations. We are called to multiply as Kingdom ambassadors, demonstrating through *both words and actions* that God's *Shalom* is real and available to all. *This* is the ekklesia's true vocation: to be a Spirit-led, disciple-making movement that transforms the world.

Part 6: The *Ekklesia* – A Transformative Community

The Gates of Hades: The Ekklesia's Mission to Confront Death's Forces

When Jesus declared in Matthew 16:18, *"I will build my ekklesia, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it,"* most modern readers interpret this in purely spiritual sense. Yet a deeper reading reveals Jesus envisioned his ekklesia as an active transformative force, called to storm death's strongholds represented by "Hades' gates." This powerful declaration shows that neither visible nor invisible forces of death can withstand the ekklesia's advance. Jesus isn't merely promising spiritual protection - he's redefining his community's very purpose.

The ekklesia was never meant to be a passive institution, confined within four walls, and distant from society's pain. Rather, it was called to be a living, active organism, constantly confronting the forces of destruction and oppression that threaten life, *shalom*, and justice in God's created world. It is a dynamic assembly—called out and sent forth—to restore what is broken and to make the Kingdom of God visible in the midst of history.

It's crucial to understand that in the ancient world, "the gates of Hades" were not merely a symbolic image of death or demonic forces. Historically, city gates functioned as vital hubs of public life—the epicenter of economic, political, judicial, and social activity. These were places where governmental decisions were made, military strategies were designed, alliances were forged, and legal disputes were settled *(see Deuteronomy 21:18–21; 22:15; 25:7; Ruth 4:1–11; 2 Samuel 15:1–6; Amos 5:10–15).* In essence, they served as the city's *command centers*. Thus, when Jesus speaks of "the gates of Hades," He isn't referring only to spiritual or demonic forces but the organized powers of darkness and death, both spiritual and structural, including the human systems and power structures that perpetuate injustice, oppression, and dehumanization.[35] When these "gates" are linked to the realm of Hades, they symbolize a network of visible and invisible powers operating from the very command center of death—spreading destructive influence to suppress—or even eradicate—the abundant life God desires for His creation.

In the face of this, Jesus boldly declares that these forces—whether spiritual strongholds or their tangible manifestations in corrupt systems, structural injustices, and mechanisms of exclusion—*will not prevail* against the ekklesia He is building. In other words, God's Kingdom, made visible and operative through the ekklesia, will confront and overcome these structures - liberating the oppressed, exposing corruption in all its forms, and restoring life where death's systems have ruled.

It is truly striking that Jesus does not call His *ekklesia* to retreat in the face of evil, but to advance with boldness. As He envisioned it, the ekklesia is not a passive or defensive community that hides from the world to protect itself from its influences. Rather, it is an active, offensive force—breaking into the world's dark places with Kingdom light. It is not the forces of evil assaulting the "gates of the church"; instead, it is the *ekklesia* that storms the gates of Hades—determined, in the power of the Spirit, to bring freedom, healing, and justice where death once reigned. This is precisely the mission Jesus outlined in Luke 4:18-19, *"to proclaim good news to the poor, to set the captives free, to give sight to the blind, to release the oppressed, and to announce the year of the Lord's favor"*—even under imperial oppression and hostile systems. In short, the ekklesia doesn't cower before death's systems, but displaces death's dominion with life, injustice with righteousness, and chaos with God's peace. The ekklesia exists to participate in God's future invading the present - at the very gates where death appears strongest.

Delegated Authority: A Force for Restoration, Not Domination

We must remember that in Jesus' time, Rome enforced its political and cultural dominance on a massive scale, imposing its so-called "peace"—the famed *Pax Romana*—through violence, control, and oppression. Just as the Empire extended its presence, power, and culture to every corner of the known world, Jesus summons an *ekklesia* destined to spread the *presence*, *power*, and *culture* of God's Kingdom—but with a radically different character: Not built on force and imposition, but founded on justice, mercy, and truth. Even more striking, Jesus entrusts His *ekklesia* with an authority that transcends the visible realm. As He declares in Matthew 16:19: *"I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."* This authority is not for control, manipulation, domination, but for, liberation, healing, and restoration. It's an authority that breaks chains, opens paths, and establishes signs of the Kingdom in the midst of brokenness. The *ekklesia* is, therefore, the visible instrument of an invisible Kingdom—a divine force breaking forth powerfully *exactly where it's needed most*.

How should we understand this authority in practical terms? Just as Rome governed through its senate and imperial structures—issuing decrees that shaped cities and nations under its rule, Jesus' ekklesia is vested with spiritual authority delegated by the King Himself—Christ—to establish the principles and values of His Kingdom on earth. The metaphor of receiving *"the keys of the Kingdom"* (Matthew 16:19) signifies the authority to *bind and loose*—that is, to release heaven's governance on earth, to discern His will in every circumstance, and to declare His lordship in ways that transform lives, serve communities and advance the common good. This makes the church *the King's executive body*—not a passive institution, but a living, active community that that confronts the structures of evil and the powers of death in all their forms, bringing light to dark places and sowing *shalom* where chaos abounds. Unlike Rome's top-down domination, the *ekklesia* doesn't impose the Kingdom; it *unleashes* it through surrendered obedience to Christ's reign.

Nevertheless, we must emphasize that this "authority" operates *fundamentally differently* from the oppressive power structures the world employs. Jesus explicitly warned His disciples against "*lording it over*" others as worldly rulers do (Matthew 20:25-28), but instead to learn the way of servanthood. In fact, He demonstrated through washing His disciples' feet that Kingdom authority is exercised from the bottom up—through love, humility, and service to others. Christ-like leadership is measured by sacrificial love, not by positional authority (2 Corinthians 12:9; John 13:34-35). In other words, the *ekklesia* isn't called to establish theocratic rule, control from positions of power, or impose faith through coercion. Rather, it is called to be a community that embodies an alternative way of living, thinking, and acting – one that models Christ's servant-hearted governance and leads toward freedom, justice, and restoration.[36] This vision is deeply rooted in the ancient prophecy of Isaiah: *"The government will be upon His shoulders… and His peace (shalom) will have no end"* (Isaiah 9:6–7). The *ekklesia*, then, is the living body of Christ through which God extends His upside-down Kingdom of *shalom* into the world.

The Power of Embodied Testimony: Transformation from Below

We must clarify that this doesn't require believers to reject opportunities to hold positions of public influence or abandon political engagement altogether. There is nothing inherently wrong with Christians—guided by genuine vocation—serving in public office or influencing legislation at local, state, or national levels in pursuit of a more humane, ethical, and just society. However, history shows us that the early *ekklesia* didn't challenge the Roman Empire through senatorial debates or legislative decrees, but through grassroots faithfulness in homes, neighborhoods, and streets – by forming disciples who embodied a new way of being human. Their transformative power emerged not from political leverage, but from a radical commitment to live out a new humanity amid a world corroded by oppression, violence, and idolatry. The first disciples understood this mission clearly. That's why they founded missional *ekklesias*, proclaimed the Gospel of the Kingdom, and – most importantly - incarnated its values. In doing so, they subverted imperial structures not by seizing power, but by *exposing their bankruptcy* through an alternative way of life. As Acts 17:6 declares, they "turned the world upside down":

- They cared for the poor, the orphans, and the widows—breaking through the prevailing culture of indifference and elitism.
- They united Jews and Gentiles—tearing down racial and ethnic barriers and modeling a new way of living together.
- They denied the absolute supremacy of Caesar by proclaiming, *"Jesus is Lord"*—a subversive act in direct opposition to imperial ideology.
- They practiced nonviolence and forgiveness—countercultural responses in a society that normalized vengeance and domination.
- They created networks of solidarity that contrasted sharply with the hierarchical patronage system of the Roman world.
- They refused to serve in the Roman army, because their sole allegiance was to Christ the King.[37]

These weren't merely religious practices - they constituted a comprehensive challenge to the political, economic and social order, first in Judea under the Sanhedrin and then across the Roman Empire. The persecution early believers faced wasn't primarily about their religious beliefs - it was largely because of their alternative way of life. By proclaiming Jesus as the true Savior and King, they didn't just question imperial authority – they exposed the empire's moral and spiritual bankruptcy. Roman officials rightly saw these "subversive" communities as a direct threat to their power and control.[38] The lesson remains vital today: While political engagement has its place, the church's most potent transformative power flows from *being* the Kingdom before seeking to *legislate* it.

The Ekklesia Does Not Exist for Itself: Its Public Vocation

History reveals a tragic irony: The church has often undermined its mission by aligning itself with political power to impose its faith, resulting in abusive theocracies and distorted forms of Christian nationalism.[39] Yet at its best, the ekklesia has been a profoundly transformative force: founding hospitals, caring for the marginalized, defending social justice, promoting education, and contributing to expanded human flourishing by encouraging the development of societies that adhere to the rule-of-law that improved access to welfare and justice for all.[40]

This vision of an *embodied church* - one that engages rather than flees from societal challenges through Christ's love and truth - perfectly aligns with Paul's "ambassador" metaphor (2 Corinthians 5:20). Like diplomatic envoys that represent their nation—the ekklesia has been called to represent God's kingdom and act in defense of its values and interests (justice, mercy, truth). In other words, the ekklesia was never meant to be a self-contained religious club, a liturgical service provider, or a fortress against culture, but an active assembly advancing the interests of the Kingdom.

In conclusion, the *ekklesia* does not exist for itself, but for the world. A church that lives only for its own preservation and growth ultimately becomes a counter-testimony to the Gospel.[41] As the German theologian and martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer once wrote, *"The Church is only the Church when it exists for others… not to dominate, but to serve."*[42] On a local level, this means that every community of disciples is called to embody God's *shalom* precisely where it dwells—with a concrete commitment to its immediate surroundings. As missiologist and Anglican bishop Lesslie Newbigin affirmed, "It is of the very essence of the church to exist for that place, for that section of the world of which it has been made responsible."[43] This calling requires the church to immerse itself in the life of its neighborhood, district, or municipality—discerning its needs and challenges, and responding with the compassion and justice of the Kingdom. When the ekklesia truly lives *for* its community rather than *alongside* it, the Gospel stops being an abstract doctrine and becomes visible Good News.

One Body for the Whole City: Unity and Collaboration for Holistic Transformation

This calling extends beyond individual congregations. As Belgian-Brazilian historian Eduardo Hoornaert notes, early Christians didn't speak of "the churches of Ephesus" or "the churches of Corinth," but of *the church in Ephesus* or *the church in Corinth* - recognizing that while multiple house assemblies existed, they collectively formed one body with a shared mission for their entire city.[44] Today, this spirit of unity and collaboration is just as urgent—if not more so. No congregation should operate in isolation if it truly longs to see its city transformed according to God's Kingdom. When diverse ekklesias collaborate, they strengthen Christian witness, model reconciliation in fragmented and fractured societies, and multiply impact across all spheres of city life. As Swiss theologian Karl Barth observed: "*The first congregation was a visible group, causing a visible public stir. If the Church does not have this visibility, then it is not the Church.*"[45]This visibility means:

- Faith moves beyond private devotion to public engagment
- The ekklesia becomes Christ's tangible presence in urban spaces
- Collaborative action advances God's *Shalom* citywide

Only when the church lives as *one visible body* - confronting broken systems and healing communities together - will the gates of Hades truly fail against it.

Part 7: The Ekklesia – A Worshiping Community in Communion with God

Worship as the Wellspring of Identity and Mission

The early Christians understood themselves not only as a healing, discipling, and transformative community, but as people whose very purpose flowed from intimate, continual communion with God. Without this worship-centered connection to the Divine, their mission lost both meaning and power. While modern Christianity often reduces "worship" to Sunday services or liturgical rituals confined to church buildings[46], Scripture and early church practice reveal a far more profound reality: True worship meant the total offering of one's life to the God of *shalom*, fueled by a desire to reflect His character and participate in His mission in the world. As theologian Marva Dawn observed: *"We cannot respond to God as the object of our praise unless we first see Him, know Him, and let Him be God in our lives."*[47] For these first believers, worship became the heartbeat of their countercultural community - the wellspring from which flowed their radical love for God and neighbor, their courage in persecution, and their commitment to the Missio Dei. Rather than a compartmentalized religious activity, worship permeated every aspect of their existence, informing how they lived, loved, and engaged the broken systems around them. In our next section, we'll examine more closely how the early church embodied this worship-centered calling.

Everyone Worships Something: From the Dehumanizing Cost of Idolatry to Worship's Restorative Power

Worship is not merely a religious activity—it is a fundamental human impulse and a universal practice that reveals what we value most. At its core, worship means ascribing ultimate worth to someone or something, declaring with our attention, devotion, and energy that this deserves our highest praise. While often associated with religious rituals or gatherings in sacred spaces, true worship encompasses the full direction of our admiration, loyalty, and life force toward whatever we esteem as most valuable. In this sense, everyone worships something—whether power, wealth, pleasure, social acceptance, personal security, or individual success. Whatever occupies the center of our lives will inevitably shape our character and direct our actions. As many have said: *we become like what we worship*—either to our ruin or to our restoration.[48] This universal tendency to worship explains why Scripture calls God's people to constant vigilance: *"Little children, keep yourselves from idols"* (1 John 5:21). The question is not whether we will worship, but what—or whom—will claim our ultimate allegiance and transform us in its image.

Those who center their lives on money gradually become calculating and transactional in all relationships. Those who worship beauty or performance easily fall into anxiety and insecurity. Those who relentlessly pursue power risk growing callous and cruel.[49] These false gods operate like spiritual hallucinogens – they may deliver temporary euphoria, but ultimately distort reality and slowly dehumanizes us. Like addictive substances, idolatry promises vitality while actually draining our capacity for authentic love, joy, and peace. The cruel irony of worshiping creation rather than the Creator is this: we become diminished versions of ourselves, even as we chase what we believe will fulfill us. That is the price of idolatry.[50] Christian worship breaks this destructive cycle by redirecting our hearts to their true North - the living God who created, sustains, and is renewing all things. As we fix our gaze on Him, something remarkable happens: It rehumanizes us by reconnecting us to the very source of life and restoring in us our true identity as bearers of His image. This is worship's restorative paradox - in bowing before the One who breathed life into us, we finally stand upright as the people we were meant to be.

That is why worship was never an optional practice for the *ekklesia*; it is the vital source from which the church draws its identity, calling, and transformative power. While worldly wisdom may dismiss authentic worship as a "waste of time"—since it generates no profit or political advantage—it is precisely that apparent material "uselessness" that reveals its true value from the perspective of the Kingdom. Worship is an act of total surrender, a declaration of God's sovereignty, and a moment of intimate communion with Him. It's a paradox that lies at worship's heart: what appears unproductive by earthly standards becomes the most transformative force imaginable. It frees us from the world's utilitarian and self-centered logic, realigns us to something greater than ourselves, and roots us in the love, truth, and holiness of God.[51] That is why Jesus dreamed of a community that would worship the Father *"in spirit and in truth"* (John 4:23-24)—a community whose way of life reflected deep and authentic devotion; a people intimately anchored in God's presence, guided by His mission, and continually

reminded of who He is, who we are, and what kind of God we serve.[52] Such worship doesn't retreat from the world—it rescues us from the world's deceptions while equipping us to transform it.

Presenting Ourselves as Living Sacrifices: Whole-Life Worship That Transforms

One of the most profound insights into early Christian worship comes from Romans 12:1–2, where Paul urges believers to offer their bodies as *"living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God."* He calls this their *"spiritual worship"* (λατρεία – *latreia*), a term denoting not a ritual, but a life of wholehearted devotion to God. In Jewish tradition, sacrifice centered on the offering of animals or goods at the Temple. But Paul radically redefines it: now it is the believer—through their entire life—who becomes the offering. No longer confined to specific times or places, worship now encompasses every aspect of existence: How we use our time, steward resources, employ our gifts, engage relationships and make daily choices. To be a *"living sacrifice"* means living each day and orienting every dimension of life around God's purposes.

In fact, the biblical terms used to describe worship reinforce this holistic vision, revealing that authentic worship is both vertical and horizontal: a total surrender to God that expresses itself in service to others, and submission to God's lordship.[53] This goes far beyond religious rituals or emotional experiences; it is nothing less than a *Christ-shaped life* that reflects His character. Paul underscores that such worship leads to deep transformation: *"Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind"* (Romans 12:2). To worship is to allow God's grace to reshape our thoughts, desires, and values—drawing us away from the cultural idols that distort our humanity, and resulting in a new way of living. This is why Paul's vision of worship does not turn inward, but moves outward into the world. A truly worshipping ekklesia is a sent community—ready to heal, to serve, and to reflect God's love in every corner of society. In the end, worship that *doesn't* send us into the world to love and serve is *not* worship—it's performance.

The Priesthood of All Believers: Worship as a Communal Calling

While Romans 12 emphasizes worship as personal surrender to God, 1 Peter 2:4–5 highlights its essential communal dimension, placing worship at the very heart of the *ekklesia*'s identity and vocation. Peter here echoes and deepens God's original calling to Israel in Exodus 19:4–6: *"You will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation."* This ancient vocation—given in the context of the exodus and the formation of God's people in the wilderness—was never about privilege, but about service: to God's mediating presence to the world - called to represent Him to humanity and intercede for humanity before Him. Writing centuries later, Peter affirms that this mission is still active and finds its fulfillment in the community of Jesus' disciples. As they are joined to Christ—the *"living Stone,"* rejected by men but chosen by God—believers themselves become *"living stones,"* being built into a spiritual house and established as a *"holy priesthood,"* called to offer *"spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ"* (1 Peter 2:5). This vision of worship is not individualistic or isolated, but communal and missional, and the implications are revolutionary: there are no passive spectators in this priesthood.

The *ekklesia* is not merely a religious institution or a physical building—it is a living community, built upon Christ and indwelt by the presence of God. Each believer, as a *"living stone,"* plays an essential role in this spiritual construction. Through their gifts and their lives, all contribute to the shared work glorifying God and blessing the world. Worship, then, is the vocation of all God's people - a collective priesthood called to intercede for the world, reflect the Christ's character, and bear witness to His Kingdom.[54] The word *liturgy*—from the Greek *leitourgía*, meaning "the work of the people"— captures this reality perfectly. True liturgy isn't a set of religious rituals performed by professional clergy, but the active participation of the entire community in the *Missio Dei*.[55] As the apostle Peter writes in 1 Peter 2:9: *"You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light."*[56] The implications are profound: when the ekklesia embraces its identity as a worshiping priesthood, its gatherings become more about equipping saints for their frontline ministry in the world.

This priestly and missional vocation of every believer resonates powerfully with the Westminster Shorter Catechism's (1647) profound declaration: *"The chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever."*[57] Worship, then, is nothing less than the ultimate purpose of our existence—to live for God's glory while delighting in His presence in every aspect of life. But what does it truly mean to glorify God? Irenaeus of Lyon, a second century Church Father, captured it memorably: *"The glory of God is a human being fully alive" (Gloria Dei est vivens homo).*[58] In other words, God is glorified and most honored when people thrive and live in alignment with His purpose. Understood this way, worship is not about withdrawing from the world but about engaging it—through daily acts

of service and witness. Every action that reflects God's love, truth, and justice—and that promotes the flourishing and dignity of others—becomes an act of praise.[59] This is precisely the message of Isaiah 58:6-9, where authentic worship expresses itself through concrete service to one's neighbor: setting the oppressed free, sharing bread with the hungry, clothing the naked… so that they too may live fully.[60]

The Heart of Worship: Intimacy, Community, and Mission

Romans 12 and 1 Peter 2 – along with the broader witness of Scripture - make it clear that worship is not a secondary activity—but the very lifeblood of the *ekklesia*. Just as the human body depends on blood to survive, the church depends on worship to remain centered on God and to fulfill its healing, discipling, and transformative vocation. Worship reaffirms our identity as deeply loved children of God.[61] It shapes us into His image, pulling us away from the idols that dehumanize us. It nourishes our hope, strengthening our commitment to God's Kingdom justice. And it transforms us into agents of reconciliation, sent to advance God's *Shalom* in the world.[62]

In their worship of God, the early Christians found hope and renewed their expectation of the full coming of the Kingdom—a Kingdom they had already begun to experience through their close-knit, shared life in community. This horizontal dimension of the *ekklesia* was reflected in their *koinonia*, where they not only glorified God but also built one another up through spiritual gifts, psalms, and songs of the Spirit (Ephesians 5:19). Every member was an active part of the body, and worship was not limited to personal transformation but included contributing their gifts for the growth and strengthening of others. In this sense, the *ekklesia* shared not only prayer, praise, and moments of corporate worship, but also meals and daily life—lived as an ongoing act of worship in recognition of the Lord's active and constant presence in their homes and cities. Their worship was not a weekly escape, but the center from which they drew meaning, strength, and spiritual protection to live out their mission on earth.

Worship: A Source of Hope in a Cynical World

They understood that in a cruel world—marked by power struggles, persistent poverty, systemic injustice, and profound human suffering—those who seek to serve the Kingdom's agenda constantly face the risk of spiritual exhaustion, discouragement, and cynicism. Daily exposure to pain and injustice can wear down even the most passionate change agents, turning them into bitter prophets or resigned skeptics whose eyes have lost their light.[63] In the face of this reality, worship becomes a fortress for the soul. By exalting God's goodness, proclaiming His promises, and lifting their voices together in community, the *ekklesia* reaffirms that evil does not have the final word. Worship renews our minds with the truth of the Kingdom: that Jesus triumphed over evil through His death and resurrection, that the God who sends us also walks beside us, and that with Him, the impossible becomes possible.[64] Practices like prayer, singing, and thanksgiving are not acts of escapism; they are profoundly subversive disciplines that root us in hope, shield us from cynicism, and prevent us from succumbing to the very darkness we seek to confront. Moreover, they unite us as a community in the midst of the struggle. Just as singing sustained many liberation movements throughout history, Christian worship does more than uplift – it strengthens, encourages, and propels us forward. In the end, worship guards our inner life against the enemy's whispers of despair and reminds us that our ultimate calling is not merely to endure, but to proclaim—with our lives and our worship—that light will always overcome darkness.[65]

Indeed, the biblical narrative culminates in a scene of cosmic worship. In Revelation 4, John beholds the throne of God, surrounded by living creatures, elders, and angels who proclaim, "*Worthy are you, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power!*" This heavenly chorus reminds us that every act of worship on earth—whether grand or small, public or intimate—is part of the universal liturgy that acknowledges God as King of kings and Lord of lords. When the *ekklesia* worships, it does not stand alone. It joins in that eternal praise and anticipates the renewal of all things—the day when "*the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord*" (Habakkuk 2:14).

Embracing the Fullness of Worship: A Life for the Glory of God

When we bring all these ideas together, we see that Christian worship is both holistic and dynamic. It is not confined to certain days or specific musical styles; it is the offering our entire lives to God's purposes. This kind of worship is:

- *Personal*: involving surrender, trust, and intimate praise.
- *Communal*: expressed more fully when the whole *ekklesia* joins in prayer, song, and mutual service.
- *Transformative:* shaping us into the image of Christ and releasing our potential for good.

- *Missional:* not confined to gatherings but propelling us to embody God's *Shalom* in the world.
- *Multiform:* expressed through music, art, generosity, service, proclamation, and daily obedience.

Above all, worship reminds us that in a world of rival powers and competing loyalties, Jesus Christ alone is the true King. It is a deeply political, cultural, and spiritual act—one that confronts every idol and declares the sovereignty of God's Kingdom over any government, system, or ideology. Worship also leads us into a holistic way of life. In worship, we stop striving as if everything depended on our own strength, and instead celebrate that in the hands of the Creator, we can grow in love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, humility, and self-control (Galatians 5:22–23). In other words, we become fully human—reflecting the image of Christ and embodying the new creation God is bringing to life within us. This encounter with God in worship also reorients us toward the world with Christ's eyes and heart. As we contemplate the Father's love, the Spirit transforms us to carry that same love to our neighbors, proclaim the good news of the Kingdom and seek the Shalom of our city.

So, when the ekklesia embraces its calling to worship and live in communion with God, it also becomes light and salt in the midst of a wounded world in need of reconciliation and hope. In this coherence between worship and mission lies the beauty and power of the ekklesia Jesus envisioned.

Part 8: Reclaiming Jesus' Vision of the Ekklesia

Latin America faces monumental challenges—structural violence, social fragmentation, economic inequality, forced migration, systemic corruption, and the spiritual disillusionment of younger generations. In this critical hour, the church cannot remain indifferent nor respond with tired religious formulas, disconnected rhetoric, or institutional structures focused on self-preservation. This moment calls for something far more profound: a radical return to the identity and mission that Jesus envisioned for His ekklesia. What we need isn't more church buildings or events, but living communities that serve as visible signs of God's Kingdom in the midst of a wounded continent starved for hope. When the church resigns itself to injustice, poverty, or violence, it betrays its calling and departs from the Gospel of the Kingdom. But when it embraces its mission in loving dependence on the Spirit, it becomes a prophetic sign of hope amid chaos. This—nothing less—is the ekklesia Latin America desperately needs today.

A Living Church for a Wounded Continent

This return demands collective repentance for having reduced the church to a liturgical space disconnected from human suffering and the concrete struggles of its urban context. It calls for a decisive reorientation toward a biblical, holistic, and missional vision of the ekklesia. While the *kuriakē*—centered on worship, proclamation, and fellowship—remains essential to Christian life, it doesn't exhaust the church's full identity and vocation. The ekklesia Jesus proclaimed goes far beyond the *kuriakē*. It is not merely a gathering place for worship and edification, but a living community of Kingdom citizens called to be "salt of the earth" and "light of the world" (Matthew 5:13-14). This shift means abandoning outdated paradigms and embracing the conviction that the church is not a building or an event, but the people of God—called, formed, and sent to embody the Gospel of the Kingdom in every corner of society. It means recognizing that the glory of God is not revealed in our monumental structures or religious programs, but in communities that love through action, live the Gospel with integrity, and dare to go where no one else goes—bringing light, healing, and justice.

In this pivotal moment, Latin America desperately needs an *ekklesia* that rises as a *restoring, discipling, transforming, and worshiping* community. Not one that flees from the world, but one that enters its wounds with compassion. Not content merely to multiply believers but committed to forming disciples who live like Jesus—in homes, workplaces, politics, academia, markets, culture, and the economy.[66] A community that confronts the idols of power, money, and religious spectacle with the humble yet powerful witness of lives fully surrendered to Christ. A community that actively joins the *Missio Dei*—not living for itself but embracing its public and local vocation: becoming the soul of its cities, the visible face of the Kingdom, and embodied hope for those who no longer believe in words.[67]

Renewed Leadership and Embodied Theology

This calling requires renewed leaders—not charismatic figures building personal platforms, but men and women shaped by character, humility, and courage. Leaders willing to die to their own agendas to serve their generation. Leaders who live what they preach, who lead from a place of vulnerability, who listen to the cries of their people and are able to discern their wounds, responding with wisdom, compassion, and courage. Leaders who invite others to walk toward the Kingdom through concrete steps of faith, justice, and reconciliation. Leaders who influence others not by appearing larger-than-life or through control and manipulation, but through humble service and self-giving—producing disciples rather than consumers or blind followers.

This moment also demands fresh theological imagination. We must move beyond dualistic thinking and reclaim a Kingdom theology that sees salvation not merely as escape from hell, but as cosmic restoration. A theology that sees mission not as institutional expansion, but as active participation in the redemption of the world. One that affirms God's desire not only to "save souls," but to transform cultures, heal relationships, renew economies, set captives free, and restore human dignity in every sphere of life. Such theology must be embodied, contextual, and prophetic—deeply rooted in Scripture, passionately missional, and socially relevant. It must give equal weight to both the Great Commandment and the Great Commission - loving God and neighbor while making disciples of all nations.

Latin America needs an ekklesia that truly engages young people—a generation that rejects shallow Christianity and empty religious routines, hungers for authenticity, justice, community, and purpose, longs to be part of something greater than themselves, yet refuses to conform to rigid, authoritarian, or hypocritical systems. These young people aren't rejecting faith, but rather the distorted versions of the gospel they've encountered. They need discipleship, yes—but also spaces where they can contribute, ask questions, create, lead, and dream of a different kind of church—one that looks more like Jesus. This is the ekklesia emerging generations are waiting for.

In this sense, the future of the Latin American church will will not be decided in temples, but on the streets. It will not be defined by attendance numbers, but by how the Church impacts the community. It will not be measured by the size of its buildings and structures, but by the depth of its discipleship. The Church that will thrive is the one that dares to go out beyond its walls, takes risks, walks alongside others, brings healing to wounds, speak truth to power, and participate in restoration of the marginalized. It will be the Church that walks in step with the Spirit, listens to the cry of its city, lives as a unified body, and worships God with its whole life.

For all these reasons, it's time to reclaim Jesus' vision for His *ekklesia*. Not a self-sufficient institution, but a sent community. Not a spiritual club, but a living body. Not a Sunday spectacle, but a restorative family. Not a religious hierarchy, but a priestly people. Not a closed fortress, but an embassy of the Kingdom. Not an event-driven organization, but a church on the move. A church that does not chase cultural relevance, but seeks to be faithful to the Kingdom. A church that doesn't just preach the gospel—but breathes it, lives it, and extends it with power, compassion, and truth.

The Time to Go Out: A Church on the Move

Undoubtedly, proclaiming a new Kingdom amidst established powers - and embracing a worldview that challenges dominant systems, including religious and denominational ones, in order to transform cities and nations—is no simple task. It requires sacrifice: stepping out of comfort zones, facing opposition, and paying a price. That's why, when the disciples stood gazing at the sky after Jesus' ascension, the angels confronted them: *"Men of Galilee,"* they said, *"why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven"* (Acts 1:10–11). The message was clear: *"Don't remain paralyzed. Don't wait for solutions to fall from heaven. You have a mission to fulfill!"*

That same exhortation resounds just as powerfully today: *"Do you think my mission is impossible in your fragile cities and broken nations? Stop waiting. Go. Get involved. Make disciples. Work for transformation. Move forward in my authority, for my yoke is easy and my burden is light. And never forget: I am with you always, even to the very end of the age"* (Matthew 11:30; 28:20). As Karl Barth—and many others before and after him—have affirmed, the *Missio Dei* is God's grand initiative to redeem a fallen world. And we are graciously invited to participate in that redemptive story. While Christ's first coming didn't erase all suffering, it revealed a powerful vision of God's true alternative—a kingdom that broke the illusion of false earthly hopes. While the Kingdom will only be fully realized at His second return, we are called to live as its ambassadors now: to labor for a future rooted in the Shalom of God revealed through Jesus. In this mission, Christ calls us to trust radically without fear and to give ourselves wholeheartedly to His cause. Let us not constrain the reach of His Kingdom or underestimate the power of His call. Where He leads, He provides. He will make a way, multiply what we offer, and transform lives—including our own.

May this vision be more than theoretical inspiration—may it become a concrete invitation to change. Let every pastor, leader, community, and disciple who reads these words ask:

- What kind of disciples are we forming?
- What kind of gospel are we embodying?
- What kind of church are we becoming?
- What kind of impact are we generating?

Will we dare to imagine, pray for, live out, and build an *ekklesia* that shakes the gates of Hades and embodies the Kingdom of God in our generation? The path ahead will not be easy. But the promise still stands: *"I will build my ekklesia, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it"* (Matthew 16:18). He is still building. May we have the courage to join Him in that work.

Endnotes

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[7] Bill Hybels, Kevin Harney, and Sherry Harney, Colossians: Discover the New You (Grand Rapids, MI: HarperCollins, 2009), 15

[8] Bill Hybels, Courageous Leadership (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 23.

[9] J. R. Woodward, The Church as Movement: Starting and Sustaining Missional-Incarnational Communities (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2016), 159

[10] In its original Greek usage, the word *ekklesia* comes from *ek* (ἐκ), meaning "out of," and *kaleō* (καλέω), meaning "to call." It is thus literally translated as "those who have been called out." However, this definition must be understood within its historical and cultural context. In the Greek city-states, the *ekklesia* referred to the civic assembly of citizens, summoned by a herald to leave their private homes and gather in a public space to deliberate matters of common concern. It was a call to active participation in public life, not a call to separation from it. When the New Testament adopts this term to describe the community of Jesus' disciples, it draws on that civic and communal background—but enriches it with the theological weight of the Old Testament. In the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures), *ekklesia* translates the Hebrew word *qahal*—the assembly of God's people gathered to worship, hear His Word, renew the covenant, and embrace their calling as a priestly people and light to the nations. In this light, the Christian *ekklesia* is not a community withdrawn from the world, but a people publicly called together to discern, act, and advance the Kingdom of God in the midst of society. Some Christian traditions—especially those with pietistic or sectarian leanings—have spiritualized the term *ekklesia*, interpreting it as "called out of the world" in the sense of withdrawal or separation. However, this is a later theological interpretation that does not align with the historical or biblical use of the term. The church in the New Testament existed *in* the world—though not *of* the world—but it was never meant to be *outside* the world. It was a public and visible community, a living testimony of the Kingdom of God: an assembly of the Kingdom, not withdrawn from the world, but sent into it. *(See: Thayer, J. H. 1968. A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament. Edinburgh, Scotland: T. & T. Clark, pp. 195-196.)*

[11] J. C. Lambert, "Church," in International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, vol. 1, ed. James Orr (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1929), 651

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[13] Diarmaid MacCulloch, Christianity, 28-29. Penguin Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

Only about one-fifth of the adult population of classical democratic Athens could be described as active citizens—those considered most qualified to represent the interests of the *polis* (city). Furthermore, only male citizens over the age of thirty had both the right to speak and vote in policy decisions during the meetings of the *ekklesia*. Yet despite these limitations, a significant number of ordinary people—those not privileged by birth or divine favor—were entrusted with responsibility for their own future and the future of their community and city.

[14] It is important to emphasize that the integration of cities into the Roman imperial system was neither uniform nor marked by absolute, monolithic control. The relationships between Rome and each city were structured through treaties, municipal charters, and specific agreements designed, above all, to secure the loyalty and effective contribution of each *polis* to the Empire. As a result, various models of local governance emerged: in some cities, the *ekklesia* retained a meaningful role in public life, while in others it was gradually subordinated—or even reduced to a merely symbolic function—always under the watchful eye of imperial authority. This gave rise to a hybrid model: cities maintained the appearance of self-government, but were ultimately subject to *ius Romanum* (Roman law) and to a centralized structure of imperial control.

[15] The Greek and Roman versions of the *ekklesia* took on various forms and sizes. However, one particularly noteworthy format was the *Conventus Civium Romanorum*, or simply *conventus*. According to historian Sir William Ramsay, whenever a group of Roman citizens—as few as two or three—gathered anywhere in the world, they constituted a *conventus*, a local expression of Rome's authority. Even if they were geographically distant from the imperial capital or the emperor himself, their assembly as fellow citizens automatically invoked the presence and power of Rome. In essence, it was a miniature Roman *ekklesia*. This is especially relevant to our reflection because in Matthew 18, after describing the authority entrusted to his representatives—the *ekklesia*—to bind and loose in alignment with God's will on earth, Jesus says, "For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I with them" (Matthew 18:20). That was precisely the function of the *conventus* in relation to the Roman emperor.

[16] The Roman government often incorporated existing Greek civic structures—such as the ekklesia—and adapted them to serve imperial objectives, including tax collection, military conscription, public works, and cultural assimilation. As Gerhard Kittel explains: *"With the subjugation of the Hellenic states by Rome, the term ekklesia did not disappear entirely. Rather, it was adapted to new contexts of municipal governance… [T]he local assembly could still be called ekklesia, though it now operated under Roman authority and often had to ratify or implement decrees in line with imperial norms."* (Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, vol. 3, pp. 504–505) Similarly, The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary notes: *"In the Greco-Roman world, ekklesia primarily referred to the assembly of full citizens within a city-state (polis). By the time of the Roman Empire, local assemblies continued to gather, though their autonomy had been significantly curtailed… As municipal life was integrated into the imperial structure, the assembly functioned, in practice, as a local administrative forum subordinate to Roman magistrates or proconsuls. Thus, the term [ekklesia] came to denote both civic participation and official sanction."* (vol. 2 [1992], pp. 403–406) A. N. Sherwin-White also observes: *"The existing civic assembly was often recognized by the Romans, who overlaid it with a hierarchy of imperial officials… The local citizen community continued to meet, but now with the task of implementing Roman edicts or local matters aligned with imperial interests."* (Roman Citizenship, Oxford: Clarendon, 1973, chs. 4–5)

[17] Encyclopaedia Britannica, s.v. "Ecclesia (ancient Greek assembly)," accessed March 7, 2025, https://www.britannica.com/topic/Ecclesia-ancient-Greek-assembly.

[18] Although the concept of *ekklesia* as used by Jesus and developed by the early church transcends the Jewish world, it is deeply rooted in the Old Testament idea of the *qahal*—the assembly or gathered people of God. As French theologian and biblical scholar Lucien Legrand explains, "God's call culminates in the formation of a people. It is not only a call to serve the true God, but an invitation to integrate human beings into the people of that God" (Lucien Legrand, *Unity and Plurality: Mission in the Bible*, Orbis Books, 1990, p. 31). This vision echoes the well-known words of French philosopher Blaise Pascal: "Not the God of the philosophers and scholars, but the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob!"—not a God of a truth that can be "learned" or reached in isolation, but a God bound to a human family and found only within that family. The mission of Israel, then, was to form a community: to cultivate not just individual faith, but a shared, collective faith. Far from being a radical innovation, the *ekklesia* as envisioned by

Jesus is the organic continuation of a long story in which God calls, forms, and sends a people to live under His reign and fulfill His purposes in the world. In the Septuagint (LXX)—the ancient Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures—the word *ekklesia* is the most common translation of the Hebrew term *qahal* (קָהָל). This term, which appears repeatedly in the Old Testament, refers to the gathered community of Israel before God—whether for worship, covenant renewal, judgment, or decision-making (e.g., Deut. 9:10; Judges 20:2; 1 Kings 12:3). The *qahal* of YHWH was a visible expression of the covenant relationship between God and His people, and it always had a missional purpose: to live as a holy people for the blessing of the nations. Jesus, shaped by this tradition, did not invent the idea of a people gathered under God's lordship. Rather, as Joachim Jeremias noted, "The sole aim of all Jesus' activity is the gathering of the eschatological people of God" (quoted in Gerhard Lohfink, *Jesus and Community*, Fortress Press, 1984, p. 26). Jesus's use of the term *ekklesia* (Matthew 16:18) is not a break from the Old Testament, but its fulfillment. In choosing this word, Jesus affirms continuity in the divine call: the Kingdom of God requires a people—a concrete community shaped by God's reign and bearing His *shalom*. This *ekklesia*—the messianic community Jesus called into being—stands on the foundations of the *qahal*. Just as the *qahal* was established as a sign to the nations, the *ekklesia* is the living witness to the arrival of God's Kingdom. In Acts 7:38, Stephen refers to Israel in the wilderness as "the *ekklesia* in the desert," explicitly linking the New Testament church to the Old Testament assembly. The early believers did not see themselves as starting a new religion, but as the faithful remnant of God's ancient people, now gathered around the crucified and risen Messiah. Thus, the call to follow Jesus was never merely an individual or spiritual act; it was a call to community, to mission, and to visible witness. The *ekklesia* is the sign that God's reign has broken into the world, overcoming ethnic, social, and gender divisions. It is—and continues to be—the living embodiment of *shalom*: God's comprehensive peace, justice, and restoration. As the prophets declared (e.g., Jeremiah 29), the *qahal* was called to seek the *shalom* of the city. That same commission continues with the *ekklesia*. Whether gathered in homes, under persecution, or embedded in complex urban realities, the church is called not to isolation, but to embodied presence. It is not simply a spiritual gathering, but a Kingdom-defined people who exist for the good of others. In Jesus's vision, the church is neither a static institution nor a voluntary association of devout individuals. It is the eschatological people of God—formed by grace, united in love, and sent on mission. The reign of God is not an abstract ideal, but a visible reality embodied in this community of disciples who model a new humanity marked by compassion, reconciliation, and sacrificial service. In this way, the *ekklesia* flows naturally from the *qahal*. The church is not a break from the past, but the continuation and fulfillment of God's eternal plan: to dwell among a people who reflect His character and proclaim His Kingdom. In gathering a new family around Himself, Jesus did not discard Israel's vocation but renewed it and opened it to all who respond to the call of the Messiah. And so the story continues: from *qahal* to *ekklesia*, from Sinai to Pentecost, from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth. One people. One mission. One Kingdom.

[19] John H. Walton, *The Lost World of Genesis One: Ancient Cosmology and the Origins Debate* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 29–50

[20] Ed Silvoso, Ekklesia: Rediscovering God's Instrument for Global Transformation (Shippensburg, PA: Destiny Image Publishers, 2017), 23

[21] Paul J. Achtemeier (ed.), The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary, vol. 2 (New York: Doubleday, 1992), pp. 403–406, artículo "Ekklesia."

[22] Brandon Scott, "Should 'Ekklēsia' Really Be Translated as 'Church' in the Bible?" Early Christian Texts, March 16, 2022, https://earlychristiantexts.com/should-ekklesia-really-be-translated-as-church/

[23] Adolf Deissmann, Light from the Ancient East (New York: George Doran Co., 1927), 112.

[24] A deeper study also leads us to consider three fundamental dimensions of the *ekklesia* as presented in Paul's writings: A) The Universal Church: The term *ekklesia* is used to describe the global Body of Christ, over which the Lord serves as the head (see Matthew 16:18; Ephesians 1:22–23; 3:10–11; 1 Timothy 3:15); B) The Geographic Church: *Ekklesia* is also used in a territorial sense to refer to all believers within a particular city, town, or region (see Acts 9:31; 1 Corinthians 1:2; Galatians 1:1–2; Revelation 1:11); C) The Local Community Church: Finally, the word *ekklesia* refers to a specific group of believers who share life together in community and gather for worship (see Romans 16:5; 1 Corinthians 14:34-35; Colossians 4:15; 1 Timothy 3:15). These three dimensions reveal that both local believers and the wider faith community are called to advance the Kingdom of God within their spheres of influence—demonstrating love for God and for one another, and reflecting that love to the world (1 Timothy 3:15; cf. Colossians 2:2–3).

[25] Gerhard Lohfink affirms this vision in *Jesus and Community* (Fortress Press, 1984, pp. 50–52): *"The idea of the church as a contrast-society does not imply opposing the rest of society just for the sake of contradiction. Much less does it mean despising society from a position of elitism. What it means is that the church exists in contrast for the sake of others and on behalf of others—a contrast function expressed powerfully in the images of 'salt of the earth,' 'light of the world,' and 'a city on a hill'... Precisely because the church does not exist for itself but entirely and exclusively for the world, it must not blend into the world; it must retain its distinct identity."*

[26] MacCulloch, *Christianity*, 26.

[27] Carl C. Beck, "Partakers of Glory: The Idea of Koinonia in the New Testament", Th.M. diss., Eastern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1962, 68

[28] Lesslie Newbigin, The Open Secret, Revised Edition, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1995, 128.

[29] Rodney Stark, The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996, 161.

[30] Epistle to Diognetus, in Early Christian Fathers, ed. and trans. Cyril C. Richardson (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1953), chap. 6, sec. 1.

[31] From its earliest days, Christianity was recognized as a profoundly compassionate movement, marked by its care for the most vulnerable. This identity was rooted in the Gospels and in the letters of John, James, and Paul, all of which drew upon the Hebrew Scriptures that revealed God's impartial love for the widow, the foreigner, and the marginalized. The early *ekklesia* understood its mission as being a community that generated *Shalom*. A clear example of how Christians lived out this calling appears in a letter from Governor Pliny the Younger to Emperor Trajan in 112 A.D. There, he describes Christians—though accused for their faith—as people who led morally upright lives: *"They asserted, however, that the sum and substance of their fault or error had been that they were accustomed to meet on a fixed day before dawn and sing responsively a hymn to Christ as to a god, and to bind themselves by oath—not to some crime—but not to commit fraud, theft, or adultery, not to falsify their trust, nor to refuse to return a trust when called upon to do so."* (*Letters* 10.96–97). Tertullian of Carthage, one of the early Church Fathers, also testified to this reputation in his work *Apology*: *"It is mainly the deeds of a love so noble that lead many to put a brand upon us. 'See,' they say, 'how they love one another'... They are ready even to die for one another... They share their food freely with each other... This radical kind of love marks us out in the eyes of some. 'See,' they say, 'how they love one another!'"* (*Apologeticus* 39.5–7). During a devastating plague in Alexandria (ca. 249–262 A.D.), Bishop Dionysius recorded the heroic testimony of many Christians: *"Most of our brethren showed unbounded love and loyalty, never sparing themselves and thinking only of one another. Heedless of danger, they took charge of the sick, attending to their every need and ministering to them in Christ—and with them departed this life serenely happy; for they were infected by others with the disease, drawing on themselves the sickness of their neighbors and cheerfully accepting their pains. Many, in nursing and curing others, transferred their death to themselves and died in their stead... The best of our brothers lost their lives in this way—a death that seemed in every way the equal of martyrdom."* (*Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History*, Book 7, Chapter 22). The martyred bishop Cyprian of Carthage also exhorted his communities to extend mercy beyond their own circles of faith: *"Let us not confine our kindness and love only to those of the household of faith. Let us also show compassion to the pagans, so that through our goodness toward them, they too may be drawn to share in our spiritual fellowship... Therefore, good must be done to all, whether strangers or those of our own house; with one and the same act of kindness, let us love our neighbor as ourselves."* (*Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 5, *Treatises of Cyprian*, Treatise VIII, ch. 25–26). This spirit of compassion became institutionalized in the life of the Church. According to *Ecclesiastical History* (6.43.11–12), under Bishop Cornelius (251–253 A.D.), the Church in Rome cared for more than 1,500 widows. Later, John Chrysostom, Archbishop of Constantinople, noted in his *Homilies on Matthew* (66 or 67) that the Great Church in Antioch supported around 3,000 widows and unmarried women, as well as the sick and travelers—evidence of a deep commitment to social welfare. Even the pagan Emperor Julian (361–363 A.D.), who sought to revive traditional Roman religion, grudgingly acknowledged the powerful influence of Christian charity. In a letter to Arsacius (Epistle 22, ca. 362 A.D.), he wrote: *"These impious Galileans [Christians] not only feed their own poor, but ours also; they welcome them into their agape meals... While pagan priests neglect the poor, the detestable Galileans devote themselves to works of charity... Observe their feasts of love and their tables set for the needy. Such practices are common among them and cause contempt for our gods... They support not only their own poor but ours as well; everyone can see that our people receive no aid from us."* In short, from its inception, the *ekklesia* understood itself as a community deeply committed to compassion. Inspired by the example of Jesus and guided by the Spirit, its members cared

for all people without distinction of class, religion, or social status—recognizing in every human being the image of God. This love—costly, impartial, and outward-looking—not only shaped the Church's identity but also played a central role in its growth and social impact. Indeed, Christianity lies at the root of the development of hospitals and the very idea that every person, made in the image of God, deserves to be cared for and loved.

[32] David J. Bosch, "Reflections on Biblical Models of Mission," in Toward the 21st Century in Christian Mission, ed. Phillips and Coote, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1993, 190.

[33] Brian McLaren, The Secret Message of Jesus: Uncovering the Truth That Could Change Everything (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2006), 73

[34] Vishal Mangalwadi, Truth and Social Reform (Nashville: Integrity Publishers, 2004), 94; see also Psalms 45:6-7

[35] In the biblical world, city gates were far more than mere points of entry or exit. They were strategic hubs of governance, justice, political and military planning—functioning as public squares where key decisions affecting the community were made. This multifaceted role is consistently reflected throughout Scripture.

1. Gates as Places of Justice and Governance: In Ruth 4:1–2, Boaz goes up to the city gate and sits down. He then calls ten elders to sit with him as witnesses for a legal proceeding to redeem Naomi's inheritance and marry Ruth. This shows that the city gate was the official site for dispute resolution and legal validation:

"Boaz went to the town gate and took a seat there. Just then the family redeemer he had mentioned came by, so Boaz called out to him, 'Come over here and sit down, friend. I want to talk to you.' So they sat down together. Then Boaz called ten leaders from the town and asked them to sit as witnesses." (Ruth 4:1–2, NLT)

Mosaic law reinforced this practice. In Deuteronomy 21:19, for instance, parents are instructed to bring a rebellious son "to the gate of their town, to the elders who hold court there." Similarly, Deuteronomy 22:15 and 25:7 mention the city gate as the place to present evidence, resolve disputes, and carry out public judgments. Proverbs 31:23 describes the husband of the virtuous woman as "well known at the city gates, where he sits with the other civic leaders," further underscoring the gate as a place of leadership, honor, and moral authority.

2. Gates as Centers of Political Strategy and Persuasion: In 2 Samuel 15:2–6, Absalom positions himself along the road to the city gate. There, he intercepts people seeking justice from the king and tells them: "It's obvious there is no representative of the king to hear you." In this way, he gradually "stole the hearts of all the people of Israel":

"'Look, your claims are legitimate and proper,' Absalom would tell him. 'But there's no representative of the king to hear you.' … In this way, Absalom stole the hearts of the people of Israel." (2 Samuel 15:3, 6, NLT)

This episode reveals the gate as a space of political influence—a public forum where legitimacy could be gained and public opinion shaped. Similarly, in Daniel 2:49, although the phrase "city gate" is not used directly, the same principle applies: when Daniel intercedes for his friends, the king appoints them "to high positions in the province of Babylon," and many translations suggest they sat at the "king's gate"—a symbolic place associated with royal authority and administrative control.

3. Gates as Points of Defense and Military Watch: The defensive and military function of city gates is evident in passages such as Judges 5:8,11, which speak of Israel's vulnerability when God was abandoned and there were "no shields or spears among forty thousand in Israel"—implying a breakdown in defense beginning at the gates. In Nehemiah 3–4, much of the city's reconstruction effort focuses on repairing the gates, highlighting their critical role in safeguarding Jerusalem. Nehemiah assigns each group responsibility for a specific gate section, reinforcing the idea that the city's security and integrity depended largely on the condition of its gates.

4. Historical and Archaeological Confirmation: The biblical depiction of city gates aligns with extrabiblical sources from the ancient world. The *Code of Hammurabi* (18th century B.C.) frequently mentions the "city gate" as the site of legal proceedings. For example, Law 5 states that in disputes between creditor and debtor, "the case must be brought to the gate"—which functioned as the public court.

Assyrian and Babylonian royal inscriptions also highlight the gates' significance. King Sennacherib boasted of beautifying Nineveh's gates and stationing guards and officials there to oversee trade and tax collection—emphasizing their political and administrative role.

Jewish historian Flavius Josephus (1st century A.D.) confirms this pattern by describing Jerusalem's gates as key meeting points for elders, where matters of state were discussed and military and commercial access was regulated. In *Antiquities* 5.202, for instance, he recounts how assemblies during the time of the Judges were held at the city gate.

5. Theological Implication: Gates and the Mission of the Ekklesia

In conclusion, both biblical and extrabiblical evidence present the city gate as a central space of deliberation, justice, political strategy, and collective defense. It was not merely an architectural threshold but the nerve center of public life.

This gives deeper meaning to Jesus' declaration in Matthew 16:18:

"The gates of Hades will not prevail against [my *ekklesia*]."

Jesus is not only invoking a spiritual metaphor but also confronting structures of authority and power that seek to dominate, oppress, and divide communities. The *ekklesia* is called to be an active assembly—empowered by the Spirit—to resist evil, uphold justice, and promote *Shalom* across all dimensions of public life.

[36] Throughout history, various interpretations have emerged that read Jesus' reference to the *ekklesia* as a call to "rule" the world in a theocratic sense—sometimes even with militaristic undertones. According to this view, Christians are supposedly called to "seize power" in governmental spheres and impose a theocratic or Christian nationalist vision upon society as a whole. However, both the testimony of Scripture and the lived experience of the early church reveal a very different dynamic:

a) The *ekklesia* did, in fact, transform entire societies, but not by conquering Roman power or enforcing faith through coercion.

b) Its influence spread through deep discipleship, allowing the values of the Kingdom to permeate culture from the bottom up.

c) The church's strategy was the witness of radical love and genuine service, which won hearts and impacted public life.

This does not mean that the *ekklesia* is to withdraw from the public sphere. On the contrary, as believers we are called to engage—to be light and salt within social systems and to participate in public advocacy. A Christian with a public vocation can—and should—view service in political, academic, economic, or cultural positions as part of their mission. Participating in these spheres is integral to the calling to bear witness to the Kingdom in every context. However, the *ekklesia* is not called to establish a theocratic regime or to govern through imposition. Its core mission is to be a missional people who proclaim and embody the good news of the Kingdom—a Kingdom that transforms through service, justice, compassion, and truth. Throughout history, many Christian leaders have served with integrity and effectiveness in positions of power, understanding that the way of Christ is to serve, not to dominate. Wherever God calls us to influence, may we do so in the spirit of the Kingdom—with humility, truth, and love.

[37] The early Christians did not merely proclaim a spiritual message—they lived out a radically different practice that disrupted the social order of the Empire. In Acts 17:6, their opponents exclaimed with alarm, "These people who have turned the world upside down have now come here too!" The Greek word used, *anastatoō*, implies a total upheaval of the status quo. The witness of the early *ekklesia* was not passive; it was an active force proposing a new way of being human under the lordship of Christ. This witness was embodied in concrete acts of love and justice:

A) In Acts 2:44-45 and 4:32–35, we read that "all the believers met together in one place and shared everything they had… they sold their property and possessions and shared the money with those in need." There were no needy persons among them. This was not an occasional gesture but an integral part of their communal life. Paul also instructed the church to care for widows, establishing clear structures for community support (1 Timothy 5:3–16).

B) Beyond internal solidarity, the *ekklesia* broke down deep social barriers. When Peter entered Cornelius' house and declared, "Now I truly understand that God shows no favoritism" (Acts 10:34), he was crossing ethnic and cultural boundaries. The Jerusalem Council (Acts 15) affirmed this radical inclusion. Paul summarized this reality in Galatians 3:28: "There is no longer Jew or Gentile… for you are all one in Christ Jesus." And in Ephesians 2:14-16, he explained that Christ "broke down the wall of hostility… making the two groups one." It is no wonder that the early Christian community astonished the Roman Empire and beyond. What Christians were and did fell entirely outside the philosophical frameworks of their time (Pedrito U. Maynard-Reid, *Complete Evangelism*, 90–91).

C) The proclamation "Jesus is Lord" (Romans 10:9; Philippians 2:11) was not merely a doctrinal statement—it was a profoundly subversive declaration in a context where Caesar was called "Lord and God." Tertullian and Pliny the Younger confirm that Christians refused to worship the emperor, a stance that put them in direct opposition to the imperial system (cf. Tertullian, *Apology* 17, 34; Pliny the Younger, *Letters* 10.96–97).
D) This rejection of violent power also shaped their ethical outlook. Jesus taught, "Love your enemies… pray for those who persecute you" (Matthew 5:44, NLT), and Paul wrote, "Never pay back evil with more evil… Don't let evil conquer you, but conquer evil by doing good" (Romans 12:17–21, NLT). Tertullian testified, "We who formerly delighted in slaughter now refuse to even witness spectacles of bloodshed" (*Apology* 37).
E) The *ekklesia* also created support networks that challenged the hierarchical patronage structure of Roman society. Instead of relying on powerful benefactors, believers collected offerings to help orphans, widows, shipwrecked victims, and prisoners, as noted by Justin Martyr and Tertullian (Justin Martyr, *First Apology* 67; Tertullian, *Apology* 39.5–6). This solidarity-based economy broke from the logic of imperial clientelism and embodied a new model of community.
F) Some Christians even rejected military service, considering it incompatible with the call of Christ. Tertullian asked, "Can a soldier of Christ also serve under the banner of Caesar?" (*De Corona* 11). Origen explained that instead of fighting with weapons, Christians spiritually interceded for the peace of the empire (*Contra Celsum* 8.73). Hippolytus of Rome also taught that no believer should kill or swear allegiance to pagan gods (*Apostolic Tradition* 16).
All of this shows that the *ekklesia* was not simply a devotional community, but a living, countercultural body. Their way of life proclaimed that a new reality had broken into history. As Ephesians 3:10 declares, "God's purpose in all this was to use the church to display his wisdom in its rich variety to all the unseen rulers and authorities in the heavenly places." The *ekklesia*, then, was God's chosen instrument to reveal His wisdom to the world—and to the powers that oppress it. Together, these practices and convictions gave rise to a community that truly "turned the world upside down" (Acts 17:6)—not through violence, but through sacrificial love, restorative justice, and a solidarity that bore witness to another Kingdom: the Kingdom of God.

[38] From its very beginnings, the church was perceived not merely as a spiritual community but as a threat to the established order—by both the Jewish religious authorities and the Roman Empire. In Acts 4:1–3 (NLT), we are told that "while Peter and John were speaking to the people, they were confronted by the priests… These leaders were very disturbed that Peter and John were teaching the people that through Jesus there is a resurrection of the dead. They arrested them and, since it was already evening, put them in jail." Later, the council sternly warned them: "Didn't we tell you never again to teach in this man's name?" (Acts 5:28). The concern was not merely theological but social and political—the message was seen as disturbing public order. This perception intensifies in Acts 17:6–7, where the Christian message is explicitly understood as direct subversion of Caesar's authority. Even at Jesus' own trial, the political stakes were evident. John 19:12 reports: "If you let this man go, you are no friend of Caesar. Anyone who declares himself a king is a rebel against Caesar." For Rome, to recognize Jesus as King was treason.
Several Roman writers confirm this perception of Christianity as a threat:
a) Pliny the Younger (c. AD 112), in his well-known letter to Emperor Trajan (*Letters* 10.96–97), wrote: "These Christians meet before dawn to sing hymns to Christ as to a god and to bind themselves by oath not to steal, commit adultery, or betray trust. However, when ordered to curse Christ and worship the emperor's image, they refuse." Their refusal to worship Caesar was viewed as dangerous obstinacy and disloyalty to the Empire.
b) Tacitus, in *Annals* 15.44 (c. AD 115–117), describes the persecution of Christians under Nero: "Nero blamed and punished with exquisite cruelty a group hated for their abominations, called Christians. This pernicious superstition, temporarily suppressed, was breaking out again." Christianity is seen here as a persistent cultural threat.
c) Suetonius, in *Life of Claudius* 25.4 and *Life of Nero* 16, states that Emperor Claudius expelled Jews from Rome due to disturbances caused by "Chrestus" (a likely reference to Christ), and that Nero punished Christians for their "new and wicked superstition."
d) Tertullian, in his *Apology* (chapters 17 and 34), defends Christians against accusations of sedition: "We pay our taxes, respect the laws, and pray for the emperors. The only thing we refuse to do is worship them as gods." (*Apology* 34)
e) Justin Martyr, in his *First Apology* (chapters 17 and 46), declares before the emperor: "We submit to your just laws and pay taxes, but we cannot offer sacrifices to your images or call the emperor 'Lord.'"
The subversion of the early Christians was not only theological—it was deeply sociopolitical, as explored in other parts of this article. Both biblical and extrabiblical evidence reveal that the early church was seen as subversive not simply because of its beliefs, but because of the radical way it envisioned and enacted an alternative society. It was a community that proclaimed allegiance to another King, lived a countercultural way of life, and openly challenged both imperial worship and entrenched social hierarchies. Its "subversion" was the result of faithfulness to a different Kingdom—one whose center was not Rome or the Temple, but Jesus Christ as Lord.

[39] Throughout history, the Church has repeatedly witnessed the blending of Christian faith with the interests of rulers and state powers, leading to "marriages" between throne and altar that resulted in abuses and the forced imposition of religion. Although each historical context is different, a recurring pattern emerges: Christian symbols have often been used to legitimize political authority and coercion, distorting the truly transformative nature of the Gospel. What follows are several illustrative examples:
A) Imperial Church and Medieval Theocracies: Alvin J. Schmidt, in *Under the Influence: How Christianity Transformed Civilization* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), outlines how, throughout the Middle Ages and early Modern period, the Church was fused with state power in the form of theocratic experiments (chaps. 4–5). While these models sometimes brought about order or social protection, they also curtailed individual liberties and persecuted dissenters. Rodney Stark, in *For the Glory of God* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), explores the era of the "Imperial Church" following Constantine's conversion (especially chap. 2). While noting benefits such as the end of Christian persecution, he critiques the Church's alliance with the state for resulting in the persecution of heretics and the imposition of orthodoxy through coercion.
B) Medieval Christendom and the Rise of Nationalism: Tom Holland, in *Dominion: How the Christian Revolution Remade the World* (New York: Basic Books, 2019), traces the evolution of Christianity in Europe, highlighting how, at times, nationalist Christian identity was used to justify violence against "infidels" or dissenters (see the section on medieval Christendom and the final chapters). Though Christian ethics uphold human dignity, the temptation to wield secular power to impose the faith led to confessional wars and religious persecutions.
C) The Conquest of Latin America: A clear example of the merging of faith and power is found in the colonial expansion of Spain. With papal approval (e.g., the 1493 *Inter caetera* bulls), the Spanish Crown justified its conquest of the Americas under the pretense of evangelization, which resulted in abuses and the subjugation of Indigenous peoples. Classic works and testimonies, such as Bartolomé de las Casas' *A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies* (1552), document how religious arguments were used to legitimize domination and exploitation.
D) Christian Nationalism and the Political Use of Faith: A notable 20th-century case was the *Deutsche Christen* (German Christians) movement under the Nazi regime, which sought to align Christianity fully with Third Reich ideology. Rather than challenge state abuses, *Deutsche Christen* adopted elements of National Socialism, adjusting the faith to fit racial and German supremacy. This illustrates how religion can be weaponized for political and xenophobic agendas, distorting Christianity's universal message of love. Glenn Sunshine, in *Why You Think the Way You Do: The Story of Western Worldviews from Rome to Home* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), explains how certain nationalist movements "baptize" political agendas with religious language, deviating from the heart of the Gospel. Today, the term *Christian nationalism* refers to movements that merge Christian faith with ethnocentric or extreme patriotic ideologies, often justifying discrimination or violence against minorities.
From the Constantinian era to the 21st century, these examples—from the "Imperial Church," medieval Christendom, and Latin American conquest, to the Nazi-era Church—show how Christianity, when improperly allied with the state to impose or legitimize doctrine, has committed injustices and abandoned its prophetic calling. The issue is not Christian participation in public life—something often legitimate and even necessary—but the subordination of faith to temporal power, which fosters exclusionary nationalism or theocratic regimes that contradict Christ's teachings.

[40] Despite these historical missteps, numerous studies highlight how the Church, when aligned with its original mission of service, love, and justice, can have a profoundly transformative impact on society. This impact spans many areas, from healthcare and education to social justice and democratic development:

a) Hospitals and Charity Networks: Early Christians practiced community care that included support for orphans, widows, and the sick—laying the foundation for formal assistance institutions. Alvin J. Schmidt (*Under the Influence*, 2001) documents how Christian compassion led to the creation of hospitals, hospices, and orphanages, particularly from the Middle Ages onward (chaps. 2, 7). Rodney Stark, in *The Rise of Christianity* (Princeton University Press, 1996), emphasizes that during the great plagues of the 2nd and 3rd centuries, Christians stayed to care for the sick and dying while pagans fled. This embodied testimony of sacrificial love was central to Christianity's growth (chaps. 4, 5), showing a deeply incarnational spirituality.

b) Education and Protection of the Marginalized: The Judeo-Christian worldview contributed significantly to universal education, mass literacy, and the defense of the marginalized. Vishal Mangalwadi, in *The Book That Made Your World* (Thomas Nelson, 2011), argues that the Bible and Christian ethics were crucial to the development of inclusive educational systems—especially for women and the poor (chaps. 6, 8, 9). Likewise, Glenn Sunshine (*Why You Think the Way You Do*, 2009) explains how the belief in a rational God who orders the universe inspired the founding of universities and modern science, framing intellectual development as an act of loving God with one's mind (chaps. 5–6).

c) Social Justice and Rule of Law: Christianity also played a vital role in abolishing inhumane practices such as slavery and torture, grounded in its emphasis on the dignity of every person. Tom Holland (*Dominion*, 2019) shows how Christian values of compassion and equality gradually reshaped Europe's legal and social structures, influencing Enlightenment thought and abolitionist movements. Robert D. Woodberry, in his landmark article "The Missionary Roots of Liberal Democracy" (*American Political Science Review* 106, no. 2 [2012], pp. 244–274), provides empirical evidence linking Protestant missionary activity with the spread of democratic institutions, expanded education, and civil liberties. As he notes: *"Areas where Protestant missionaries had a significant historical presence are, on average, more economically developed today, with better health indicators, lower infant mortality, less corruption, higher literacy rates, more advanced education (especially among women), and stronger participation in non-governmental associations."* (Woodberry, p. 244) This demonstrates how Christian mission, when embodied through testimony and social commitment, can catalyze systemic transformation.

d) The Church as Embassy of the Kingdom (2 Corinthians 5:20): This metaphor highlights the Church's representative role in the world—not to impose the Kingdom by force, but to embody it through service, justice, and reconciliation. Rodney Stark, in *The Triumph of Christianity* (HarperCollins, 2011), interprets this ambassadorial role as one of the key factors in the spread of Christianity and its social impact within the Roman Empire. Far from being a private faith, early Christianity modeled new forms of community, public ethics, and care for the vulnerable.

In sum, authors such as Alvin J. Schmidt, Rodney Stark, Tom Holland, Vishal Mangalwadi, Glenn Sunshine, and Robert Woodberry converge in affirming that when the Church remains faithful to Christ's example—compassionate, just, transformative—it can leave an indelible mark on history. However, they also caution that when faith crystallizes into coercive systems or aligns with oppressive power, it forfeits its prophetic voice and becomes an instrument of control. The history of the Church is marked by this ongoing tension between power and humble service. Whenever the Church veers toward religious imposition, exclusion, or political domination, it betrays the spirit of the Kingdom. In contrast, when it lives as "salt of the earth" and "light of the world" (Matthew 5:13–16), its witness illuminates society and sows the shalom of God in the world.

[41] Lesslie Newbigin, The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 122. Along the same lines, Gerhard Lohfink describes the church as a "contrast society," whose purpose is to serve others, maintaining a prophetic and nonpartisan presence that confronts injustice while reflecting the love and holiness of God. Gerhard Lohfink, Jesus and Community: The Social Dimensions of Christian Faith (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984).

[42] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Works, vol. 8, ed. Wayne Whitson Floyd, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010, 503.

[43] Lesslie Newbigin, The Gospel in a Pluralist Society (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1989), 232

[44] Eduardo Hoornaert, Memoria del Pueblo Cristiano (Bogotá: Ediciones Paulinas, 1986), 124-128

[45] Karl Barth, Dogmatics in Outline, New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1959, 142. He adds: "*It is best not to apply the idea of invisibility to the Church; we all tend to slip thereby into a civitas platonica, in which Christians are inwardly and invisibly united, while the visible Church is devalued or even despised…*"

[46] *How did this happen?* The early church held a holistic vision of worship—one deeply rooted in vertical reverence toward God, yet also profoundly aware of the horizontal, communal, and eschatological dimensions of the coming Kingdom. Over time, however, this vision gradually gave way to a more individualistic and vertically oriented approach to worship. Two major historical developments contributed to this shift.

First, as ecclesiastical structures became more hierarchical, the practice of *koinonia* (fellowship) and the active participation of the congregation were progressively displaced by a model of governance that prioritized clerical authority. While part of this evolution was driven by the Church's need to confront heresies that distorted apostolic teaching, it also undermined the early emphasis on the Kingdom of God as a fundamentally communal reality expressed through diverse forms of worship. One particularly influential factor was the adoption of the Roman principle of *territoriality* during the second century, especially under Emperor Diocletian. Ralph P. Martin notes in *Worship in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974, p. 148) that as the Church assimilated this principle, local assemblies that had once been identified as "the Church of the Corinthians" (i.e., the community of Christian pilgrims in Corinth) were replaced by more institutional references such as "the churches of Corinth." This territorial principle had significant pastoral consequences, especially as congregational leadership began to mirror the administrative structures of the Roman Empire. This shift was further reinforced by the gradual yet sustained acceptance of Platonic and Neoplatonic philosophy, which favored hierarchical order and structure over charismatic and pneumatological expressions often perceived as unruly. A telling example is found in the *Didache*, which still recognized prophets and teachers as primary authorities within the Christian assembly, reflecting a broader distribution of leadership. Yet, about a century later, the *Apostolic Tradition*, written in Rome around 215 AD, relegated teachers to a lower ministerial rank and omitted prophets entirely. Catholic theologian Eduardo Hoornaert, in *The Memory of the Christian People* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988, p. 160), describes this change as revealing "a fundamental shift in mentality regarding ministries, which were now no longer articulated in terms of 'service,' but rather in terms of 'government' and power within the communities. As a result, the concept of a charismatic church gave way to that of a hierarchical church. The community became divided between clergy and laity… The power to officiate the liturgy was now in the hands of the clergy." This transformation in ecclesial governance profoundly altered the practice of worship and fractured the structure of Christian assemblies, impacting the very core of *koinonia*. In 197 AD, Tertullian could still affirm, "Where three [Christians] are gathered, there is the Church, even if they are laity" (Henry Bettenson, ed., *Documents of the Christian Church*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967, p. 71). Yet, just one generation later, Cyprian of Carthage had already embraced a hierarchical understanding of communion: "Whoever is not in communion with the bishop in his diocese is not in the Church" (E. Glenn Hinson, *The Early Church: Origins to the Dawn of the Middle Ages*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996, p. 180). This development weakened the "communion of service" and shifted worship toward a more priestly and vertical ritual, centered on the notion of liturgical "sacrifice" (Hoornaert, p. 160). Over the centuries, in the liturgy of the Mass, the priest would literally turn his back to the congregation to perform the Eucharistic sacrifice facing the altar—an expression of reverence toward God that, however, tended to minimize lay participation in the name of liturgical purity. New Testament scholar James D.G. Dunn captures the impact of this shift powerfully: "Perhaps, then, the tragedy of early Catholicism was its failure to realize that the greatest heresy of all is to insist that there is only one ecclesiastical obedience, only one orthodoxy." (*Unity and Diversity in the New Testament: An Inquiry into the Character of Earliest Christianity*, London: SCM Press, 1990, p. 373)

Second, a widespread tendency emerged across Christian traditions to relocate the locus of divine presence from the gathered community to a single focal element of worship. This marked a departure from the early Christian conviction that "the divine presence was most powerfully manifested in and through the empirical assembly of Christians gathered to worship 'in the name of Jesus' (see Matthew 18:20). The assembly itself functioned as the sacrament" (*New Testament Abstracts*, vol. 21, no. 1 [1977], p. 173). This shift manifested in varied ways across the Christian family, shaping liturgical and ecclesiological expressions according to specific historical and theological contexts. David E. Aune, in his article "The Presence of God in the Community: The Eucharist in Its Early Christian Context" (*Scottish Journal of Theology* 29, no. 5 [1976]: 451–459, p. 454), identifies several examples:

a) In the Roman Catholic Church, the Eucharist became the principal site of Christ's real presence through the doctrine of transubstantiation: Christ is believed to be "most fully (or especially) present in the transformed bread and wine."

b) In many historic Protestant and Evangelical congregations, the proclamation of the Word of God became almost sacramental: "the presence of God is most powerfully experienced in the kerygmatic unfolding of the biblical text."
c) In Pentecostal and Charismatic churches, the clearest sign of divine presence is found in the exercise of spiritual gifts, especially healing and speaking in tongues.
d) In many Neo-Pentecostal and non-denominational congregations, emotionally charged worship services—characterized by praise music, lighting and sound technology, and dynamic preaching—create an atmosphere where God's presence is felt most intensely in personal experiences of worship.
However, according to Baptist scholar David Aune, neither the Eucharist, nor the proclamation of the Word, nor the manifestation of specific spiritual gifts, nor emotionally choreographed worship held the structurally central role in early Christian gatherings that they do in many churches today (Aune, pp. 453-454). Even so, over time, each tradition came to emphasize predominantly vertical elements that increasingly overshadowed the communal dimension of worship. While modern worshipers may still acknowledge that they gather with others—whether in the Eucharist, in listening to the Word, in the exercise of charisms, or in emotional praise—the central emphasis often remains "my personal encounter with God the Father, with Christ, or with the Spirit." Though deeply meaningful, this inward focus tends to weaken the integral, communal, and missional dimensions that characterized the worship of the early *ekklesia*. One evident consequence of these developments is that our modern understanding of worship is often reduced to emotional expressions (such as singing or praise) or confined to a formal Sunday liturgical context. This stands in contrast to the broader biblical vision expressed through terms like *shachah*, *proskuneo*, *latreuo*, and *leitourgia*, which evoke posturing, serving, ministering, and revering God with one's whole life. Language inevitably shapes both theology and practice: when our modern term "worship" fails to reflect the richness of its biblical roots, it can gradually redirect the Church's focus away from the integrated vision of the early *ekklesia*—a gathered people living out the Kingdom of God in every sphere of life. As a result, modern worship is frequently defined by personal devotion and a vertical orientation toward God, often at the expense of the deeper communal and missional dimensions that early Christian communities assumed. The biblical call to mutual service, to embody God's justice and compassion, and to live as a sign of His inbreaking Kingdom is often overshadowed when worship is conceived almost exclusively as a private and vertical communion with God. This historical shift—fueled by the consolidation of hierarchical church structures, the concentration of authority, and the elevation of particular elements of worship over the gathered community—helps explain how contemporary worship has deviated from the early Church's understanding. Rather than an integrated vision, we have adopted more limited conceptions of worship, reducing it to liturgical rites, individual spiritual experiences, or a music-centered segment of Sunday service. As a result, current discourse on worship rarely reflects the full scope of the early Church's vision, in which bowing before God was inseparably tied to loving service, mutual edification, and communal participation in advancing the Kingdom of God.

[47] Marva J. Dawn, Reaching Out Without Dumbing Down (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1995), 87.

[48] G. K. Beale, We Become What We Worship: A Biblical Theology of Idolatry (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), 16.

[49] N.T. Wright, *Simply Christian: Why Christianity Makes Sense* (New York: HarperOne, 2006), 148. N.T. Wright emphasizes that Christian worship is holistic and profoundly subversive in relation to the powers of this world. To worship God with one's whole heart is to proclaim with one's life that He—not the prevailing idols of money, status, power, or violence—is the true Lord. From this flows a distinct ethic—an inner and outward posture that challenges the culture of exploitation and injustice. In his work on the resurrection and the life of the church, Wright underscores that the entirety of Christian existence, including its public and social dimensions, is framed as an ongoing act of worship to the risen King.

[50] Ibid., 148.

[51] Marva J. Dawn, A Royal "Waste" of Time: The Splendor of Worshiping God and Being Church for the World (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999)

[52] As Psalm 22:3 declares, God inhabits the praises of His people. Praise is not merely a response to His presence; it is also an act of faith through which we come to experience His power (Psalm 100:4).

[53] The word *worship*, as we use it today, is a translation that encompasses several Hebrew and Greek terms in the Bible, each carrying different nuances depending on the context. Understanding these original terms helps broaden and deepen our grasp of what it truly means to worship God according to Scripture:
a) Service: One of the most common Greek terms translated as *worship* is λειτουργία (leitourgía), from which the word *liturgy* is derived. In the New Testament, *leitourgía* sometimes refers to acts of practical service, such as the monetary collection for believers in Jerusalem (2 Corinthians 9:12) or the assistance Paul received from others (Philippians 2:30). The related term λειτουργός (leitourgós) is used to describe Christ himself as a servant (Hebrews 8:2), as well as ministers who serve on behalf of the Gospel. In the Old Testament, this concept is associated with the priestly work in the Temple—a sacred labor of continuous service before God. In this sense, worship includes serving both God and others with a sacrificial and merciful attitude, reflecting the heart of Christ.
b) Sacrifice: In Hebrew, words like עֲבוֹדָה (ʿăbōdāh) and its root עָבַד (ʿābad) are translated as *service* or *work*, especially in contexts related to ritual or priestly service in the Temple. In Greek, λατρεία (latreía) and its verbal form λατρεύω (latreúō) refer to ritual service, particularly the work of the Levites and priests. Additionally, the Greek word θυσία (thysía), which literally means *sacrifice*, frequently appears in the Septuagint and the New Testament to refer to Old Testament offerings of thanksgiving and consecration. Notably, in the New Testament epistles, *thysía* often refers to personal sacrifice on behalf of others (Romans 12:1, Philippians 2:17), highlighting that Christian worship has a deeply relational and ethical dimension.
c) Submission: Another key term is the Greek προσκυνέω (proskynéō), which literally means *to bow down* or *to prostrate oneself*, with its Hebrew equivalent שָׁחָה (shāchāh). Both words describe a physical posture of reverence and submission before a superior being and are frequently used to depict worship directed toward God. This form of worship acknowledges God's sovereignty and majesty—expressed not only through external gestures but also through an internal attitude of humility and obedience.
Taken together, terms like *latreía*, *leitourgía*, *thysía*, *proskynéō*, and *shāchāh* reveal that biblical worship is intimately connected to service, sacrifice, and submission. Far from being confined to liturgical acts or emotional moments, true worship is expressed throughout one's entire life—in how we serve, what we are willing to sacrifice, and how we surrender to God's will. For this reason, words like *service*, *ministry*, or *offering* may more faithfully reflect the original biblical meaning of *worship* as presented in Scripture.

[54] The Bible shows us that worship is expressed in many valid and complementary ways that go beyond formal religious rituals and encompass all of life. Serving others—especially the most vulnerable—with compassion and justice reflects the heart of God and is, in itself, an act of worship, just as it was for Christ. Likewise, generosity in giving expresses our gratitude and trust in God as our provider. Music and singing, from the Psalms to the hymns of the early church, have long been powerful means of exalting God, expressing lament, or proclaiming victory. They unite the community and strengthen faith. Prayer—both personal and communal—together with the public proclamation of God's goodness, honors the Lord and builds up those who hear. Creative arts also play an important role: dance, painting, poetry, theater, and other artistic expressions, when born out of a living faith, proclaim the beauty of the Creator. Ultimately, worship finds its deepest expression in sacrifice and surrender: when, following Christ's example, we lay aside our personal ambitions to embrace God's will, we embody true spiritual worship.

[55] From this perspective, the *ekklesia* understands that all of its activity—in family life, work, economics, culture, and politics—can become a spiritual offering to God. There are no "secular spaces" where God's presence cannot be acknowledged. Every ordinary act becomes an opportunity to express gratitude, practice justice, serve generously, and honor the King who reigns over all creation. This reclaims the original meaning of *liturgy* as the "work of the people." It is not merely a "religious program," but a transformed life offered to the Lord by the whole community—through its gifts, vocations, callings, and potential. In this framework, a true worshiper is someone humble and willing to: a) Subordinate personal goals to God's purposes, prioritizing service to His Kingdom; b) Express gratitude and praise to the Lord; and c) Bear witness to God, His truth, and the love they have received as His son or daughter.

[56] This call to worship is also reflected in Romans 15:8-9, where Paul states that Christ came so that the Gentiles might glorify God for His mercy.

[57] Westminster Assembly, The Westminster Shorter Catechism (1647), in The Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms: The Westminster Standards (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 2016), 6-7

[58] Irenaeus of Lyons, Against Heresies, trans. Dominic J. Unger, vol. 1 of The Fathers of the Church (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1992), 526 (Book 4, Chapter 20, Section 7).

[59] Scripture is filled with examples that illustrate how God's people have offered worship in a wide variety of contexts. Many of these expressions make it clear that worship is not merely a ritual, but a holistic response to God's greatness and goodness: a) John 12:1–3: Mary of Bethany anoints Jesus' feet with expensive perfume. Though some viewed it as wasteful, this act represents worship that is deeply personal and costly; b) Matthew 14:33: After Jesus walks on water and calms the storm, the disciples proclaim, *"Truly you are the Son of God!"* This verbal confession is a worshipful acknowledgment of Jesus' divine identity; c) Matthew 2:11 and Deuteronomy 26:10: The Magi bring gifts to the child Jesus; the people of Israel offer the firstfruits of their harvest to the Lord. In both cases, the giving of material resources is understood as an act of worship—expressing gratitude and dependence on God; d) Acts 16:25–26 and Colossians 3:15–17: Paul and Silas, imprisoned, sing hymns of praise to God, prompting a miraculous intervention. Likewise, Colossians exhorts the community to do *"everything in the name of the Lord Jesus,"* accompanied by thanksgiving. These examples confirm that worship includes personal devotion, acts of mercy and justice, material offerings, songs of praise, confessions of faith, and practical obedience to God's will. In this way, worship becomes a living testimony—an invitation to those watching to encounter the grace and love of the Lord.

[60] Robert C. Linthicum, City of God, City of Satan: A Biblical Theology of the Urban City (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1991), 172.

[61] Henri Nouwen, a Catholic priest, psychologist, and prolific spiritual writer of the 20th century, wrote extensively about the importance of the inner life as the foundation for both Christian community and mission. In his reflections, he emphasized that true communion with God does not isolate the believer but instead leads to deeper compassion, sensitivity, and responsibility toward others. For Nouwen, silence before God, prayer, and worship are not means of escape, but sacred spaces where the heart of the disciple is formed—equipping them to love, serve, and heal with the tenderness of Christ, bringing God's healing presence into the wounded heart of the world. As he once wrote: *"Precisely because prayer is so personal and rises up from the center of our lives, it must be shared with others. Precisely because prayer is the most precious expression of the human being, it must be the constant support and protection of the community in order to grow and flourish."* —Henri Nouwen, *"Prayer Is for Sharing,"* Henri Nouwen Society, Daily Meditation, May 20, 2024, https://henrinouwen.org/meditacion/la-oracion-es-para-compartir/

[62] Linthicum, *City of God, City of Satan,* 172.

[63] Melba Padilla Maggay, Transforming Society (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2011), 130.

[64] Myles Munroe, Understanding the Purpose and Power of Prayer: How to Call Heaven to Earth (New Kensington, PA: Whitaker House, 2002), 104.

[65] N.T. Wright, Simply Christian: Why Christianity Makes Sense (New York: HarperOne, 2006), 143.

[66] Padilla Maggay, Transforming Society, 27-28.

[67] The true power of the church does not lie in its attendance numbers, financial resources, or media presence. It lies in its capacity to love radically, live with integrity, serve generously, and persevere with hope. It is found in its ability to disciple nations with the truth of the gospel, heal communities with the compassion of the Kingdom, confront unjust systems with the justice of heaven, and worship God with lives offered as living sacrifices. A church like this does not need to defend itself with arguments—its very existence is a prophetic proclamation that unsettles, transforms, and draws others in.