

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

by Jean-Luc Krieg





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Article Summary

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 where half the population is under the age of 25—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 challenges and opportunities: it is the most urbanized region in the world, with approximately 82% of its population living in urban areas, and also the most violent, concentrating the highest homicide rate and 42 of the 50 most violent cities on the planet. At the same time, nearly 50% of its population is under the age of 25, although this proportion has gradually declined in recent decades. This demographic reality presents both a unique opportunity and an urgent need to effectively reach the cities and connect with younger generations. Since the majority of the population lives in urban areas, it is crucial to develop church-planting paradigms and urban ministries that address the specific challenges and opportunities of urban settings. At the same time, focusing on engaging younger generations is essential, as they represent a significant portion of the population. It is critical that church-planting movements find new ways to invest in their growth, empowerment, and active participation, as this is key to forging a more hopeful future for Latin America.

More Churches, More Impact?

However, simply planting more churches is not a solution to the major challenges facing Latin America, unless we closely examine how to effectively reach the cities and connect with younger generations. While Evangelical Christianity is currently the fastest-growing religion in the region, with about one-fifth of Latin Americans identifying as Evangelical—up from one-tenth in 2002—it is clear that this growth has not led to significant change in the face of persistently high levels of violence, poverty, inequality, and migration. 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 challenges that contribute to violence, poverty, and migration remain significant.

Many argue that the church, as a community chosen by God, has the responsibility to generate real and transformative impact in its surroundings. Then-prominent Evangelical leader and author Bill Hybels repeatedly expressed this conviction, stating that “The local church is the hope of the world”, and that “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.”² Yet, despite the strength of these declarations, many churches and leaders today seem focused solely on what happens within their own four walls. They settle for maintaining the status quo, lacking the vision, resolve, and sense of responsibility needed to actively engage in the transformation of their communities.

There is a significant gap between love for God and love for neighbor, and a lack of alignment between the Great Commandment and the Great Commission. In fact, within the contemporary ecclesial landscape of Latin America, we observe a concerning proliferation of distorted church models. The “Show Church”, focused on sensationalism and charisma, seeks to entertain rather than transform, reducing 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 responding to current challenges with creative faithfulness. And the “Fortress Church”, marked by exclusive fundamentalism, builds walls of doctrinal purity that expel the different, prioritizing form over substance, rules over compassion, and controversy over discipleship. Rather than fostering an embodied, deep, and transformative faith, these models tend to perpetuate structures and discourses disconnected from people’s daily realities, distorting or neutralizing the church’s holistic calling.

Roots of the Problem: Theologies and Practices That Deviate from the Original Purpose

Below are some of the deeper roots that help explain why many churches fail to live out their original purpose or generate the impact the Gospel intends:

- *An escapist theology* that emphasizes Christ's second coming and our vertical relationship with God while minimizing our horizontal relationship with our neighbors. In this view, the church's role is simply to rescue souls from the jaws of hell and remain separate from the harmful influence of "the world."
- *An unbalanced framework of what many consider a healthy church*, where church health is primarily measured by attendance, church buildings, and the number of tithes and financial offerings. This leads to an event-driven ecclesiology focused mainly on providing a great worship experience rather than aligning with the Great Commandment and the Great Commission.
- *A lack of transformative discipleship*, with many churches prioritizing knowledge over character, emphasizing information rather than formation, and failing to develop faith communities focused on making disciples who live out their Christian faith in every aspect of life, including the active pursuit of addressing community and social challenges.
- *A lack of serious theological training*, where biblical teaching remains shallow. This deficiency fosters the prevalence of a "junk theology" centered on prosperity and emotional experiences rather than solid, Christ-centered theological formation that equips believers to live out their faith holistically.
- *The influence of prosperity theology*, a radical reinterpretation of the Bible that claims material wealth is the primary sign of divine blessing. This perspective focuses on individual economic growth but neglects the transformation of surrounding communities.
- *A consumerist and temple-centered model*, where churches have turned congregants into consumers, prioritizing attractive events and experiences over a holistic mission and community service. As a result, worship becomes superficial and does not promote a living, active faith that impacts the surrounding environment.
- *A conceptualization of the church focused primarily on liturgical aspects and Sunday worship services*, which relegates its missional role. This leads congregations to center on internal activities and worship rather than mobilizing as an active community seeking the holistic well-being of their surroundings and contributing to the social, economic, and spiritual transformation of their communities.
- *A hierarchical and personalistic leadership style*, where pyramidal structures elevate leaders to nearly unquestionable figures, fostering personality cults. Instead of promoting humble and servant-hearted leadership, many churches fall into narcissistic leadership styles that seek admiration rather than reflecting the servant-leadership model that Jesus taught.
- *A disconnection from the living presence of God*, where many believers are no longer led into spaces where they can be filled, empowered, and transformed by the Spirit of the living God. The experience of encountering God has been replaced by religious routines, emotional spectacles, or intellectual content, rather than cultivating a community that longs for and experiences the real presence of God—being deeply impacted by His glory and power to live a transformed and missional life.
- *The normalization of abusive patterns within church life*, such as spiritual abuse, emotional manipulation, and the use of fear to control people, deeply limits the freedom and development of believers. Although these practices are sometimes justified with language about obedience or spiritual authority, they stifle the calling and dignity God has given to each person. Instead of forming communities where people can grow and fully live out their vocation, many churches end up reproducing controlling environments that contradict the liberating message of the Gospel.

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

The fruits of this reality reveal a profound *disconnection from God's holistic mission*. Many churches have turned inward, prioritizing rituals, structures, and internal agendas over a genuine commitment to their vocation of service and the transformation of their communities. This disconnection also reflects a loss of confidence in the power of the Gospel to bring about real change, both in individuals and in communities. Instead of being an embodied force of Shalom, the church has often become a closed space, where the message of the Good News is reduced to spiritual formulas with no impact on concrete reality.

As a result, a scarcity mindset and an *inferiority complex* have emerged, producing servile churches that are dependent on political powers or rigid denominational structures. This posture is 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. Consequently, the spiritual fruit is scarce: there is an abundance of activities, numbers, and events, but little evidence of authentic transformation. The phrase "much foliage and little fruit" accurately describes the reality of many congregations that, despite their apparent external vitality, are not producing a tangible impact in the lives of their members or in the communities where they are located.

The Urgency of Rethinking Our Missiology, Ecclesiology, and Liturgy

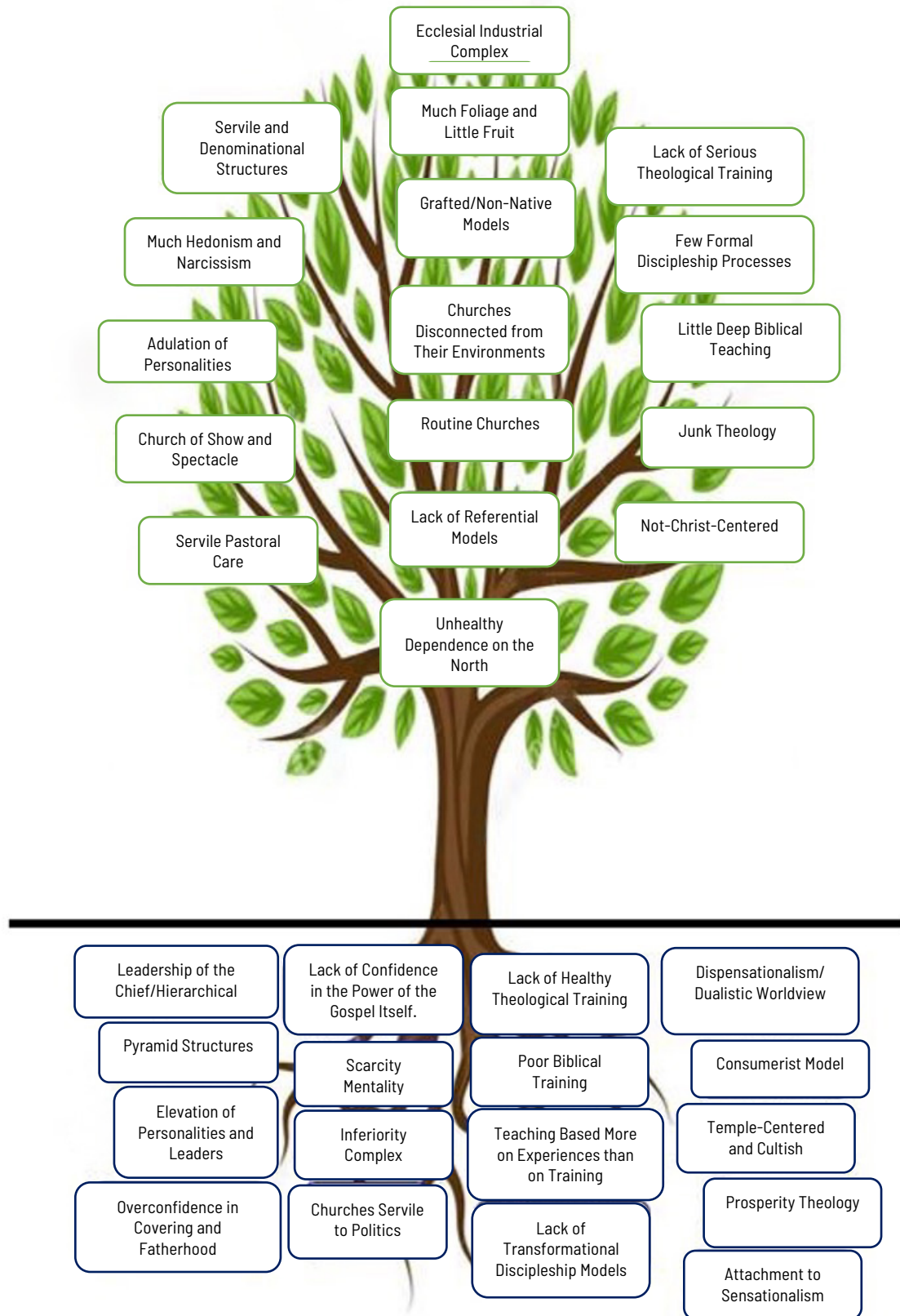
All of this should lead us to deep reflection: *What kind of church are we becoming? What kind of discipleship are we forming? What Gospel are we embodying? What impact are we making in our context?* The key to answering these questions—and to transforming the reality faced by the Latin American church—lies largely in leadership and a renewed understanding of what it means to be a healthy church and to cultivate truly transformative discipleship. This requires the courage to rethink current paradigms of leadership, theology, missiology, and ecclesiology in order to respond with honesty, hope, and clarity to today's major challenges.

In fact, the article argues that the current conceptualization and design of most churches will rarely generate truly transformative fruit, because their very self-definition and institutional purpose limit such a radical vocation. While the article agrees with Bill Hybels's statement that the church is the best hope for the world, it also points out that the way many churches operate, organize, and understand themselves today prevents that potential from being realized. By their own design, they cannot achieve it—because nothing can produce what it was not designed to produce.

In that sense, although more than 50 years have passed since the vision of holistic mission was articulated in Latin America, many churches have yet to embrace it. This is not due to a lack of information or access to theological frameworks, but rather because their ecclesiological self-understanding and organizational structure are not aligned with that mission. In other words, you cannot live out or embody what has not been integrated into the church's very identity and vocation.

In the following pages, we will explore the roots of this disconnection and crisis, and propose a broader biblical definition of the *ekklesia*, rediscovering its purpose and mission in order to become again the kind of community Jesus envisioned: a church that restores, disciples, transforms, and worships—a church sent into the world to embody the Kingdom of God with power, compassion, and truth.

The Following Problem Tree Illustrates the Challenges Previously Described:



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

Introduction: Different Ecclesiastical Models

Many Christians today think of the church as the building where we gather—a place where we sing worship songs, listen to preaching, and spend some time with fellow believers. In fact, in today's world, most church structures are organized around three different models that define their focus and practice:

1. *The Worship Experience and Charismatic Leadership Model:* This model, which originated in the United States, revolves around a dynamic worship experience and charismatic leadership. It centers on an influential preacher, a visually appealing stage, a vibrant worship band, and a service enhanced with lights, sound, and media designed to attract and motivate people to attend. It also includes programs and events intended to strengthen 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 around the world.³
2. *The Liturgical and Sacramental Model:* This ancient model is characteristic of Catholic, Orthodox, and Anglican churches. It centers on the celebration of the Eucharist or Communion, with the altar as the focal point. Worship follows an established liturgy, including rituals and prayers that connect believers to the historical tradition of the Christian faith. This approach is based on the belief that sacramental participation in the body and blood of Christ is the central axis of church life, emphasizing continuity with the teachings and practices of the early church.
3. *The Preaching and Biblical Teaching Model:* This model, typical of many Reformed and Evangelical Protestant churches, places the pulpit and the proclamation of the Word at the center. Expository preaching and in-depth study of the Scriptures occupy the central place in the Sunday service, with biblical teaching being the main means to guide the congregation and strengthen their spiritual life. In this approach, the proclamation of the Word of God is seen as the core of the ecclesial experience, with an emphasis on clear teaching, doctrine, and the practical application of the Scriptures in the daily lives of believers.

These models have undoubtedly blessed millions over the centuries and contain many valuable elements. However, they share a common trait: they tend to center the church experience on the Saturday or Sunday service, pushing the local mission to the background. They focus more on what happens inside a building or liturgical space, rather than embodying God's mission and equipping an active, missional community committed to holistic transformation and tangible impact in their local contexts.

As a result, many congregations have adopted a mindset of “going to church” instead of “being the Church.” The danger of this approach is that the church can become, instead of a living and transformative body, a mere “Administrative Unit of Liturgical Services”—an organization centered on religious programs and events, but disconnected from its calling to be salt and light in the city. This leads us to a fundamental question: *Is this the Church that Jesus envisioned and dreamed of?*

The Essence of the Ekklesia

Unfortunately, many Christians today conceive of the church simply as an innocuous, worshiping, evangelizing, and serving community. However, if the church had only been that it is unlikely that it would have provoked the persecution it suffered. When Jesus used the word “*ekklesia*” to describe the community of disciples He wanted to form, He had a vision of the church quite distinct from the modern connotations associated with the word “church.” But how could we really define the word “church”? To answer these questions, it is necessary to first explore what Jesus had in mind when establishing the *ekklesia*. Let's begin with a brief recap of His purpose and mission:

The Purpose and Mission of Jesus

Jesus came to proclaim the Gospel of the Kingdom of God, to heal the sick, to forgive sins, to teach us God's dream, to die and rise again, and in doing so, to rescue us from the power of sin and death that prevent us from experiencing God's Shalom in our lives. His death and resurrection marked a definitive turning point, as Jesus defeated once and for all the most powerful weapon Satan had over creation: death itself. As Scripture says, "Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?" (1 Corinthians 15:55–57). With Christ's resurrection, life, and life in abundance, would have the final word, and would be established as the ultimate reality of our universe (John 10:10). Even death has lost its power.

Apart from proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom, Jesus formed a group of disciples and instructed them to be a community grounded in faith and trust in God. He Himself called *ekklesia* (Matt. 16:18; Matt. 18:17). But what was the *ekklesia* during Jesus' time—a term that had been part of Greek and Roman political vocabulary for centuries?⁴

The Historical Context: Temple, Synagogue, Sanhedrin, and Ekklesia

Before defining the term, it is important to note that during the time of Jesus' birth and throughout His life on earth, four major institutions existed in Israel:

1. *The Temple* was the center of worship in Israel, the place where the people encountered the presence of God through sacrifices and the mediation of the priests. It was the only location where the rituals prescribed in the Law were carried out, and therefore, it was considered the sacred space par excellence—the heart of the nation's religious life.
2. *The Synagogue* was a gathering and teaching space where God's people assembled in various locations to study the Scriptures, pray, and strengthen their communal identity. Unlike the Temple, which centered on sacrifices, the synagogue offered an accessible place for spiritual formation and learning, allowing local communities to be nurtured by the teaching of the Law and the Prophets.
3. *The Sanhedrin* (or council of 70 elders) oversaw the legal and judicial aspects of Jewish life, playing a key role in the institutional cohesion of Israel. In addition, in major cities, there were local councils or courts—known as "small Sanhedrins" or *batei din*—responsible for resolving legal matters and ensuring the application of the Law at regional or municipal levels, complementing the authority of the Great Sanhedrin in Jerusalem.
4. *The Ekklesia* referred to an assembly of citizens "called out" of their homes by a city herald to meet in a public space. In Greco-Roman cities, this assembly had the responsibility of meeting regularly to deliberate civic and political matters, debate laws, elect magistrates, and make decisions on public affairs affecting the city.⁵

While in Galilee or Judea during Jesus' time the *ekklesia* did not function exactly like those in classical Greek *polis*(cities), some urban centers with stronger Hellenistic influence—for example, certain cities of the Decapolis, Tiberias in Galilee, or Sepphoris (located about 6–7 km from Nazareth, where Jesus grew up)—retained assembly-based structures inspired by that tradition. There, local elites would discuss matters of municipal governance, although they were subject to the directives of Roman authorities (or the tetrarch, in the case of Galilee) and had to respect Jewish law in matters concerning the local population. Nevertheless, the concept of *ekklesia* was known in the region, and as the disciples expanded into Samaria and other parts of the Greco-Roman world, they encountered it more frequently. In fact, the term appears 114 times in the New Testament, which reflects its importance for the emerging community of Jesus' followers.

This is why it is essential to understand Jesus' intent in choosing the word *ekklesia* to describe His community of disciples. Unlike *temple* and *synagogue*, which carried clear religious connotations, *ekklesia* in Jesus' time had civic and political overtones. Its origin lies in Greek democracy, where it functioned as the governing or legislative assembly of citizens responsible for the administration of the city-state. It was composed of men eighteen years or older who had completed at least two years of military service, meaning they were individuals deeply committed 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 merely mean "gathering," but rather referred to an official assembly with the authority to make decisions, implement policies, and shape the public life of the community⁶. This system of citizen participation—known as democracy or rule by the people—was especially characteristic of ancient Greece and had no precedent in other civilizations of Asia, Africa, or Europe.⁷ In the current Mexican context, a concept that bears some resemblance to the Greek *ekklesia* would be the *COPACI* (Citizen Participation Council), whose purpose is to involve 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 heritage to preserve their local institutions, including the *ekklesiai*, as long as these did not conflict with imperial interests.⁸ In this way, Rome gradually integrated Hellenistic cities into its imperial framework, delegating key administrative functions to local elites. These elites, organized in 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 bodies, Rome ensured the implementation of its laws, the promotion of its culture, and the fulfillment of its imperial priorities.⁹ Their responsibilities included tax collection, administration of local justice, military recruitment, and the execution of public works.¹⁰ Although these bodies—including the *ekklesiai*—retained certain traditional elements of civic autonomy, their most important decisions—especially concerning political, military, or fiscal matters—required the approval of the provincial governor or magistrates appointed by the emperor. Thus, Rome maintained control over its conquered territories through strategic collaboration with local elites, thereby securing stability and the expansion of its power across the provinces.

In this imperial context, Jesus' use of the term *ekklesia* takes on a much deeper and more subversive significance.¹¹ Even under Roman control and called to represent imperial interests, the *ekklesia* still evoked in Jesus' time the idea of an assembly of citizens with the authority to deliberate and make decisions for the welfare of their city.

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*—instead of 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," the two religious pillars of Judaism in His time. But He didn't. By choosing *ekklesia*, He intentionally distanced Himself from a model centered on traditional religious structures. His vision went far beyond internal reform within Judaism: it relocated the spiritual center from a sacred building to a living community gathered in His name, present across the world.

In this sense, Jesus' vision of the *ekklesia* can be understood as a continuation and expansion of the Old Testament concept of *qahal* (קהל), which describes Israel as an assembly called by God to be "a kingdom of priests" (Exodus 19:6), summoned to reflect and mediate God's presence in the world.¹² This priestly dimension, in turn, harks back to the creation story, where Adam and Eve are given the mandate to rule and exercise stewardship over the earth on God's behalf (Genesis 1:26–28). The Spirit, "hovering over" the chaotic waters (Genesis 1:2), symbolizes the divine impulse to transform disorder into an ordered and life-filled world. Thus, all creation is understood as a cosmic temple, where the first humans—and later Israel as *qahal*—are called to function as priestly stewards who embody God's presence and promote order, wholeness, and justice on the earth.¹³

Jesus takes up and redefines this 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 one place, but to spread it like yeast throughout society. Just as the Spirit moved over chaos to bring about order and life, the *ekklesia*, empowered by that same Spirit, is sent to confront the forces of disorder—such as violence, injustice, and alienation—creating spaces of worship, reconciliation, and justice, and saturating its surroundings with the presence of the God of *Shalom*. This continuity—between the vocation of Adam and Eve, the calling of Israel as *qahal*, and Jesus' commission to His *ekklesia*—reveals a single divine project: to restore creation and form a people who radiate God's presence and *Shalom* amid the world's chaos.

In light of this, Jesus' choice of the word *ekklesia* was not accidental but deliberate. By adopting a term with civic and political—not religious—roots, Jesus was radically redefining the concept of 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, to embody His reign in the midst of broken human systems, to confront evil in all its forms—spiritual, social, cultural, and structural—and to sow signs of the Kingdom in every corner of life.

Infused with the DNA of the Kingdom and empowered by the Holy Spirit, the *ekklesia* was conceived as a living, dynamic, and transformative community that represents the interests of heaven in the midst of the earth—a

restored community that acts as an ambassador of the Kingdom of God (2 Corinthians 5:17–21 and Ephesians 3:10)¹⁴. For this reason, its identity is not limited to a Sunday gathering, but unfolds throughout the entire week, in every sphere of life. Thus, Jesus' use of the term *ekklesia* reveals how He defines the new identity, purpose, and mission of His disciples as a sent community, commissioned to disciple individuals, cities, and nations, proclaiming with word and deed the *Shalom* of the Kingdom.¹⁵

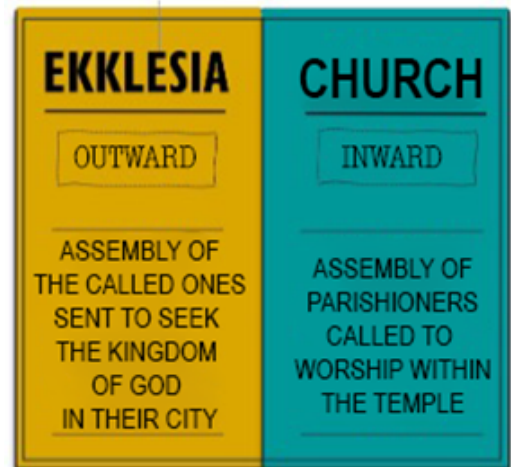
How Did We Get from *Ekklesia* to “Church”?

If *ekklesia*, for Jesus and His apostles, meant the assembly of the citizens of God's Kingdom, empowered by the Spirit to represent that Kingdom on earth, then how did we arrive at today's understanding of the word “church”? How did a term originally referring to a missional and active community come to be associated primarily with a place of worship, an ecclesiastical building, or a religious institution, rather than a people committed to seeking the *shalom* of their 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*. Over time, as the *ecclesia* adapted to its new role as the official religion of the Empire following the Edict of Milan (issued by Constantine in the year 313), the term *ecclesia* began to be used not only to describe the assembly of believers but also to refer to the place of worship and adoration, as well as to the institutional structure of the Church, including its buildings, hierarchy, and organization.

In the Romance languages, this linguistic evolution gave rise to our word *iglesia*. Today, many of us use the term *church* interchangeably with *ekklesia*. However, despite their common etymological roots, both words have acquired distinct conceptual meanings. In fact, the word *iglesia* came to bear a meaning closer to that of *church* in English and *Kirche* in German—terms used in these languages to refer to the Christian community. These words derive from the Greek term *kuriakē* or *kuriakon*, meaning “belonging to the Lord.” Starting in the 4th and 5th centuries, *kuriakē* became popular among Greek-speaking Christian communities to refer to “the house of the Lord” or the “place of worship” where the “Lord's Supper” was celebrated, thereby reinforcing the perception of the church as a physical space focused on liturgical worship and ecclesiastical organization.



It is interesting to note that the word *kuriakon* is mentioned only twice in the entire New Testament: once in reference to the “Lord's Supper” in 1 Corinthians 11:20, and once in reference to the “Lord's Day” in Revelation 1:10. Over time, this term began to be associated with Christian gatherings, especially those in which the Lord's Supper was celebrated. Eventually, it came to be used to refer to places of worship. Later, 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 house of the Lord”) as *ciric*, a term that, through the evolution of the language, became *kerk* in Old English, then *church* in modern English, and *Kirche* in German¹⁶.

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

However, when translators replaced *ekklesia* in the Greek text with contemporary terms such as *church* in English, *Kirche* in German, or the reinterpreted *iglesia* in Spanish, its original meaning was lost. Although Martin Luther preferred to use the word *Gemeinde* (congregation) instead of *Kirche* to refer to the *ekklesia*—intending to highlight a living and active community of believers in contrast to the established ecclesiastical institution—the focus continued to center on the gathering of believers for worship and teaching in a weekly religious event. As a result, the concept of *ekklesia*—which originally described a dynamic assembly, empowered by the Holy Spirit,

with a vibrant spirituality and active commitment to the well-being of its city, as Jesus envisioned it—was reduced to a mere religious gathering centered around a building attended occasionally.

It is no surprise, then, that 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. For this reason, in many Christian traditions—such as Catholic, Orthodox, and Anglican—the liturgy is centered on the Eucharist, while in Protestant, Evangelical, and Charismatic churches, the emphasis is on the pulpit or stage, focused on a weekly spiritual event. Consequently, the church experience has become primarily associated with "attending church," "going to mass," or "participating in Sunday service," reducing its meaning to a periodic meeting rather than an active and transformative community.

When the Religious Gathering Replaces the Missional Community

As a result of this evolution, many—including Christians from the Anabaptist tradition, who rejected clerical hierarchy and emphasized community leadership—interpret *ekklesia* today as the assembly of the saints, a group set apart from worldly structures to be part of God's people. From this perspective, the *ekklesia* is conceived as a community separated from its surroundings, gathered mainly for prayer, sacraments, and teaching, with the purpose of living in holiness, consecration, and distance from worldly influences.¹⁷

We could say, then, that most churches today operate more like *kuriakē* than like *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 context. While the *kuriakē*—with its emphasis on worship, preaching, and fellowship—is a fundamental part of Christian life, it does not represent the entirety of the church Jesus envisioned. The *kuriakē* fits within the *ekklesia*, but the *ekklesia* has a much broader purpose than the *kuriakē*. It is essential, without a doubt, that believers gather in Jesus' name to worship and share in communion, but mistaking the *ekklesia* for a simple religious gathering (or worse, for a building) deprives us of its true purpose as established by Jesus. The original *ekklesia* was not limited to a temple or weekly meetings—it was a missional movement, set apart to participate in God's mission. It was a community sent into the world to bear witness to the Kingdom of God amidst 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 manifesting, in word and deed, God's story in the world.

Precisely for this reason, Jesus chose a non-religious term to describe His community of disciples. He did not want to simply form a spiritual congregation gathered around a platform, a pulpit, or an altar. His vision was of a community committed to the holistic well-being—*shalom*—of its surroundings. Just as the *ekklesia* of a Greco-Roman city had the responsibility to watch over the common good of its *polis*, the *ekklesia* of Jesus—moved by the Holy Spirit—was called to be an instrument of the Kingdom of God: set apart from the world in its ethics, values, and purpose, yet deeply involved in the transformation of people, communities, and nations. Its mission included discipling, creating spaces of belonging and connection with God, healing and restoring, and bringing peace and justice to every corner of society.

In light of this, let us reflect on four essential aspects of the *ekklesia* that will help us refocus our mission and recover the vision Jesus dreamed of¹⁸:

1. The *Ekklesia* as a healing and missional community.
2. The *Ekklesia* as a discipling movement, led by the Spirit.
3. The *Ekklesia* as a transformative force.
4. The *Ekklesia* as a worshiping community in communion with God.

The Ekklesia: A Healing and Missional Community

Sent as Christ: The Integral Mission of the Ekklesia

In John 20:21, Jesus said, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." With these words, Jesus makes it clear that the church is a community sent to continue His integral mission. It is called to be an ambassador of the Kingdom, proclaiming and embodying the Gospel in all areas of society. Jesus did not come merely to save individual souls, but to redeem people, restore entire communities, and reconcile the whole



cosmos under God's lordship. As expressed in one of the best-known biblical texts, John 3:16–17: "For God so loved the world (referring to the entirety of humanity, the universe, all created order, and even the worldly system with its values and practices) that He gave His only begotten Son, so that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life. God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save it through Him." Furthermore, in Colossians 1:19–20 Paul states, "For it pleased the Father that in Him all fullness should dwell, and by Him to reconcile ALL THINGS to Himself, whether things on earth or things in heaven, making peace through the blood of His cross." These passages emphasize the breadth of Jesus' mission and, consequently, of His *ekklesia*: to be agents of reconciliation and transformation throughout all created order.

In other words, the *ekklesia* does not exist to serve itself but as an instrument through which God acts in the world.¹⁹ Here is where the original meaning of *ekklesia* gains profound significance: if we understand it as "an assembly of Jesus' followers, set apart to participate in God's mission, reflect His Kingdom, and seek the Shalom of the city," then our mission is not limited to gathering for worship and edification but to fully live and embody the Gospel beyond the four walls of our ecclesial spaces. We have been sent into the world with the collective responsibility to guide our communities and cities toward a better future, bringing God's Shalom into every sphere of human life²⁰. In summary, the idea that life is a pilgrimage from a lost paradise toward a new and restored home is a metaphor that runs throughout the Bible and deeply reflects the call of the *ekklesia*: to be a people on the way, anticipating and actively participating in the restoration of all things.

The Table as a Place of Mission

It is important to highlight that the growth of the *ekklesia* during the first three centuries was possible, in part, because Jesus developed His movement around existing social practices, especially shared meals. This reality is reflected in the first description of the community after Pentecost: "They continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread and in prayers" (Acts 2:42). These were not occasional events but a constant way of life. One of the most frequent images of early church gatherings is believers sharing meals. These meals were not mere social encounters but became true sacred assemblies. The tables were transformed into inclusive spaces, unlike the temple or synagogue, and allowed the *ekklesia* to fully insert itself into daily life without isolating from the world. Jesus turned tables into pulpits and homes into assembly halls where strangers were welcomed and often became disciples. The *ekklesia* did not merely talk about belonging: it lived it. It did so with bread, wine, word, and presence, creating communities where every person found a place, a purpose, and a family.

Koinonia as a Way of Life

Indeed, in the early *ekklesia*, the Greek term *koinonía*—commonly translated as "communion" or "fellowship"—did not merely express spiritual closeness or emotional bonds but described a deeply committed shared way of life. For the first Christians, it implied active and concrete participation in the lives of others: in their material needs (Acts 2:44–45), in the proclamation of the gospel (Philippians 1:5), in discipling the nations (Matthew 28:18–20), in the sufferings of Christ (Philippians 3:10), and in obedience to God's call (1 John 1:6–7). All of this had the ultimate purpose of glorifying God.²¹

As Paul himself affirmed, when the *ekklesia* lives this form of *koinonía*—a community that loves, serves, and walks united—it reveals to the world a deeply countercultural reality. By living the Gospel in community, God manifests His wisdom and eternal plan not only to people but also to the authorities and invisible powers of the universe (Ephesians 3:10).

The *ekklesia*, then, is not simply a harmless religious community but a living sign of God's transforming Kingdom. Just as the Kingdom was present in the person of Christ, it is now present in His body: the *ekklesia*. That is why Paul urged believers to "put on Christ" (Romans 13:14), that is, to live in such a way that Christ becomes visible in the world through them. This identity involves assuming and embodying Jesus' integral mission: the *ekklesia*, having been reconciled to God, is called to be an ambassador of that reconciliation. Its task is not limited to proclaiming with words but also embodying in deeds the love that restores, the grace that forgives, and the hope that renews. Where there is brokenness, it is called to build bridges; where there are wounds, to heal; where there is injustice, to sow justice. As Christ's visible body in the world, the *ekklesia* announces with its life that all things can be made new (2 Corinthians 5:17–20).

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

From this perspective, the Kingdom of God is inseparably linked to a concrete people: the people of God. Jesus did not come merely to deliver a set of written or propositional truths—as if His mission was to leave behind a book—but called and gathered a living community of men and women to be witnesses to what He was, said, and did. The new reality He introduced into history was to continue over time not as a text but as a living, embodied, sent community²². Thus, the *ekklesia*, as the visible body of Christ in the world, proclaims with its life that all things can be made new, anticipating and participating in the coming Kingdom. As historian Rodney Stark notes, “To cities torn by violent ethnic conflicts, Christianity offered a new basis for social solidarity.”²³

The *Epistle to Diognetus*, written around 130 AD, beautifully expresses the early church’s vision of its role in society: “What the soul is to the body, Christians are to the world.”²⁴ This statement reflects how the early Christians conceived themselves—not as a mere appendix but as the soul of the city: essential to its moral, spiritual, and social well-being. They were not concerned with political power since they lacked it. Rather, their stance was shaped by the cross: a life of compassion, sacrificial service, and spiritual power at the service of their city. As a result, they sought to imitate Christ by practically showing God’s love to those in need, including the poor, slaves, widows, and the sick, especially during times of crisis. This attitude distinctly set them apart in the Greco-Roman world, where they were both admired and ridiculed for their righteousness, compassion, mercy, and practical love toward neighbors. It was precisely this concrete way of embodying the Gospel that allowed the early *ekklesias* to grow exponentially during the third century, as they understood their mission was not simply to gather but to be communities that generate Shalom.²⁵

This integral vision of mission is echoed by South African missiologist David Bosch, who states: “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 consists of proclaiming and teaching but also healing and liberating, showing compassion to the poor and oppressed. The mission of the church, like Jesus’, involves being sent into the world: to love, serve, preach, teach, heal, save, liberate, intercede for others, incarnate, be servants, and be open even to the possibility of suffering or death, worshiping and being attentive to the guidance of the Spirit.”²⁶ That 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, proclaim, and extend the Kingdom of God.

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, and deeply afraid. Their world had collapsed. The one they had followed as the Messiah, 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 did not recognize Him immediately. They thought He was a ghost. Jesus gently but clearly confronted them: “*Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts?*” (Luke 24:38).

To prove He was truly alive, He ate with them. He showed them His hands and feet. He invited them to touch Him, to be convinced He was not a vision or an illusion. “*Why are you troubled?*” He asked again. “*Don’t you know that I have conquered death? Don’t you know I send you with power from on high?*” (Luke 24:39). In the following days, He opened their minds to understand the Scriptures in light of His Kingdom (Acts 1:3), and reminded them that the message of the Kingdom and its vision of Shalom was to be proclaimed to all nations and all creation. Jesus did not just calm their fears. He commissioned them. He gave them a global mission: to disciple—that is, to transform, influence, and model—the nations with a new paradigm that, from a human perspective, seemed impossible. He sent them to announce that a new Kingdom had begun, a new reality under His lordship, as the way toward the integral Shalom that God had dreamed of since creation.

Discipling Nations: Jesus’ Master Plan

In Matthew 28:19–20, Jesus made His *ekklesia*’s mission clear: “*Go and make disciples of all nations, teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.*” And what had He commanded? “*Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and mind; and love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.*” (Matthew 22:37–40). This is the essence of the discipling mission: to form communities where people

learn to live out love for God, neighbor, and self in every sphere of life; the starting point to embody and extend the Kingdom, which manifests in transformed lives, restored relationships, and healed communities.

The theologian and author Brian McLaren, in *The Secret Message of Jesus*, summarizes the various versions of the Great Commission (Matthew 28:18–20; Mark 16:15; Luke 24:49 / Acts 1:8; John 20:21) with this paragraph: *“You cannot keep the good news of the Kingdom secret. Therefore, I send you, just as the Father sent me, to share the good news of the Kingdom of God with the world. Help all who receive and embrace this message to form communities where they can learn together, putting into practice what they have heard. Thus, gradually, they will learn to live by my teaching, just as you continue to learn each day. But don’t try to do it alone. Don’t rely solely on your own strength, but on 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 all cultures, languages, and nations. What you have discovered walking with me—the way, the truth, and the life—is for everyone.”*²⁷

In one of His last conversations with the disciples before ascending to heaven, Jesus gave them a clear strategy for the expansion of the Kingdom: *“You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth”* (Acts 1:8). The mission would begin in Jerusalem—the religious, political, and economic center of Israel—then extend to Judea, reach Samaria (challenging cultural barriers and historical prejudices as it was a region hostile to the Jews), and cross borders to reach the Gentile nations of the vast Roman Empire. This expansion carried a radical message: that Jesus, not Caesar, is the true Lord; that His Kingdom of Shalom confronts all forms of idolatry, oppression, and violence of the kingdoms and empires of this world.

It was not easy for the disciples to receive this mission, because none of the places they were sent to promised to be easy. But Jesus did not only 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 warned 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

It is important to emphasize that the power of the Holy Spirit was not given as an end in itself, but as the force that would drive the disciples to witness and expand the Kingdom of God among the nations, forming disciples and raising ekklesias that seek the Shalom of their surroundings. Unfortunately, in many contexts today, the primary purpose of the Holy Spirit is misunderstood, reducing it to signs, miracles, gifts, or supernatural and charismatic manifestations. However, its central purpose is to mobilize the ekklesia to become a community characterized by justice, peace, and joy in the Spirit (Romans 14:17). Miracles and experiences are not ends in themselves but “signs” pointing to the Kingdom; the true content of the Kingdom is lives and communities transformed by righteousness, justice, reconciliation, and the fullness of Shalom.²⁸

The Missional Ekklesia: Communities that Disciple with Life

Jesus’ plan, then, consisted of founding and strengthening missional ekklesias, moved by the Spirit, that lived 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 task: raising discipling ekklesias that embodied the good news of the Kingdom worldwide. Their *raison d’être* was summarized in the following:

- They proclaimed the Kingdom of God and the lordship of Christ.
- They formed disciples who grew in their trust and obedience to Christ.
- They taught Jesus’ way and nurtured the character of Christ.
- They sought to live the values of the Kingdom in every area of life.
- They loved and served their neighbors with tangible acts.
- They trained leaders who took the Gospel to new cultures.
- They confronted structures of sin and injustice and ideologies opposed to the Kingdom of God.

Unfortunately, today many churches have reduced discipleship to religious activities: attending prayer services, listening to sermons, or participating in Bible studies. But true discipleship is much more. It is not enough to know the Bible; we must learn to live like Jesus in every sphere—in the home, work, culture, community, economy, and

politics. Therefore, any theology that presents the Gospel merely as a “spiritual escape” is incomplete: it ignores the mandate to disciple nations and to transform fragile cities with the Kingdom of God.

Ambassadors of the Kingdom: Multiplying Communities of Shalom

The big question remains: Do we trust the One who says He has all authority in heaven and on earth? Are we willing to be the ekklesia He dreamed of? The same Spirit who filled the first disciples continues to work today. He desires to raise up men, women, youth, and children filled with passion, ready to be part of God’s answer to the wounds of our cities and nations. We are called to multiply as ambassadors of the Kingdom, proclaiming with words and deeds that God’s Shalom is real and within reach. This is the true vocation of the ekklesia: to be a discipling movement, led by the Spirit, that transforms the world.

The Ekklesia – A Transformative Community

The Gates of Hades: The Mission of the Ekklesia to Confront the Powers of Death

Jesus declared in Matthew 16:18: “I will build my ekklesia, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.” For many modern readers, these words are mostly interpreted in a spiritual sense. However, a deeper reading reveals that Jesus conceived His ekklesia as an active force of transformation, called to confront the “powers of death” represented by the “gates of Hades.” In this passage, Jesus affirms that not even the forces of Hades—whether visible or invisible—will be able to resist the advance of His ekklesia. This powerful declaration not only highlights the spiritual strength of Jesus’ community but also redefines its purpose and mission: the ekklesia is not a passive institution confined within four walls but a living, active structure 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 and sent to restore what is broken and manifest the Kingdom of God amid history.

It is important to emphasize that in the ancient world, the “gates of Hades” were not simply a symbolic image of death or the demonic. In that historical context, city gates represented nerve centers of public life: they were where economic, political, judicial, and social activities converged. These were the places where governmental decisions were made, military strategies devised, alliances signed, and legal disputes resolved. Essentially, they functioned as the “command centers” of the city. Therefore, when Jesus speaks of the “gates of Hades,” He does not refer solely to spiritual or demonic forces but also to human systems and structures of power that perpetuate injustice, oppression, and dehumanization.²⁹ When these “gates” are associated with the realm of Hades, they represent that set of authorities and structures—visible and invisible—that, from the control center of the realm of death, extend their destructive influence with the purpose of suppressing or annihilating the abundant life God desires for His creation. Against this, Jesus declares that such forces—both in their spiritual dimension and in their concrete expressions as corrupt structures, systemic injustices, and exclusionary mechanisms—will not prevail against the ekklesia He will build. In other words, He implies that the Kingdom of God, manifested and channeled through the ekklesia, will confront and overcome those structures, freeing captives and exposing corruption in all its forms.

It is truly remarkable that Jesus does not call His ekklesia to withdraw before the powers of evil but to advance boldly. The ekklesia, as He conceived it, is not a passive or defensive community that takes refuge from the world to protect itself from its influences but an active and offensive force that breaks into places of darkness with the light of the Kingdom. It is not the forces of evil attacking the “gates of the church”; rather, it is the ekklesia that takes the initiative to storm the gates of Hades, determined—in the power of the Spirit—to bring freedom, healing, and justice where death once reigned. In the words of Luke 4:18-19, its mission is “to proclaim good news to the poor, to set the captives free, to give sight to the blind, to release the oppressed, and to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor,” even in contexts of imperial oppression.

Delegated Authority: A Force for Restoration, Not Domination

We must not forget that, in Jesus' time, Rome imposed its political and cultural domination on a vast scale, establishing its so-called "peace"—the famous Pax Romana—through violence, control, and oppression. Just as the Empire asserted its presence, power, and culture in every corner of the known world, Jesus calls forth an ekklesia destined to extend the presence, power, and culture of the Kingdom of God, but with a profoundly revolutionary character: His Kingdom is founded on justice, mercy, and truth—not on force or imposition. More than that, Jesus grants His ekklesia an authority that transcends the visible. As He states 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, or domination, but to liberate, heal, and restore. It is an authority to break chains, open paths, and establish signs of the Kingdom amid broken realities. The ekklesia is, thus, the visible instrument of an invisible Kingdom that breaks forth powerfully where it is most needed.

How do we understand this authority in its practical dimension? Just as Rome had its own senate and government structures issuing decrees and shaping the life of cities and nations under its dominion, Jesus' ekklesia is vested with spiritual authority delegated by the King Himself—Christ—to establish on earth the principles and values of His Kingdom. The metaphor of receiving *"the keys of the Kingdom"* (Matthew 16:19) represents the capacity to "bind and loose," that is, to release God's governance on earth, discern His will in each situation, and declare His lordship in a way that transforms and serves people, always promoting the common good. In this sense, the church becomes "the King's executive body": a living and active community that confronts the structures of evil and the powers of death in all their forms, bringing light where darkness reigns and sowing Shalom where chaos abounds.

Nevertheless, it is essential to emphasize that this "authority" is not exercised under the oppressive frameworks the world often knows. Jesus was clear in warning His disciples that they should neither "lord it over" nor "dominate" as the rulers of this world do, but rather learn to serve. In fact, He Himself washed the feet of His followers, leaving a practical example of how Kingdom authority is exercised from the bottom up, through love, humility, and service to others. In other words, the ekklesia is not called to impose a theocratic regime or control from positions of power, but to be a community that, by its example of life, testimony, and dedication, reveals a new way of being, thinking, and acting. Its call is not only to confront the oppressive structures of empire or authoritarian religion but to embody and model an alternative path toward freedom, justice, and restoration³⁰. This vision is rooted in the ancient prophecy of Isaiah: *"The government will be on his shoulders... and his Shalom will have no end"* (Isaiah 9:6–7). The ekklesia, then, is the living body of Christ through which God extends that government of Shalom.

The Power of Embodied Testimony: Transformation from Below

It is important to clarify that this does not mean members of the ekklesia should reject holding political power positions to promote a more humane, ethical, and just vision. There is nothing wrong with believers, guided by a genuine calling, aspiring to serve in public office and influence legislation at the national, state, or municipal levels. However, it is also important to note that the early ekklesia did not challenge the Roman Empire from the senate but from homes, neighborhoods, and streets. It did not transform culture through legislative decrees but by forming disciples who lived a new form of humanity. Its power did not lie in political influence but in its embodied testimony: in its ability to live a distinct life amid a world worn down by oppression, violence, and idolatry.

The first disciples understood this mission clearly. That is why they founded missional ekklesias, boldly proclaimed the Gospel of the Kingdom, and, most importantly, embodied it with their lives. In that process, the structures, values, and customs of the Empire were questioned and confronted. As narrated in the book of Acts, they "turned the world upside down" (Acts 17:6):

- They cared for the poor, orphans, and widows, breaking the prevailing indifference and elitism.
- They united Jews and Gentiles, breaking racial barriers and establishing a new way of living together.
- They denied the absolute supremacy of Caesar by proclaiming that "Jesus is Lord," a subversive act against imperial ideology.
- They practiced nonviolence and forgiveness, counter to a culture that justified revenge and imposition.

- They created networks of solidarity that contrasted with the patronage hierarchy typical of the Roman system.
- They did not participate in the Roman army, as their loyalty was to Christ the King.³¹

These actions directly challenged the political, economic, and social status quo—first of the Sanhedrin in Judea, and then of the Roman Empire. The persecution suffered by the early church was not due solely to “religious” reasons; it was, above all, because they proposed a radically different way to organize life. By proclaiming Jesus as the only Savior and King, they contradicted Caesar’s supreme authority and questioned the imperial structure. This generated suspicion among the authorities, who saw these “subversive” communities as a direct threat to their power and control.³²

The Ekklesia Does Not Exist for Itself: Its Public and Local Responsibility

Unfortunately, throughout history, the ekklesia has at times strayed from its mission by allying with political powers to impose the faith, leading to abuses and the establishment of theocracies and a misguided Christian nationalism.³³ However, at its best expression, the church has been a deeply transformative force: it has founded hospitals, cared for the marginalized, defended social justice, promoted education, and contributed to the rule of law that improved access to welfare and justice for all.³⁴ This vision of a church embodied in social reality — one that does not evade the problems of its time but confronts them with the love and truth of Christ — aligns fully with the image of “ambassadors” that Paul refers to in 2 Corinthians 5:20. An ambassador represents their nation — in this case, the Kingdom of God — and acts in defense of its values and interests. Likewise, the ekklesia is not an enclosed people but a sent community. It is not an office of liturgical goods and services, but an active assembly that represents, legislates, and advances the interests of the Kingdom amid society.

In conclusion, the ekklesia does not exist for itself but for the world. In fact, a church that lives solely for itself and its own growth ends up being a testimony against the gospel.³⁵ As the German theologian and martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, “The Church is the Church only when it exists for others... not to dominate but to serve.”³⁶ At the local level, this means that each community of disciples is called to embody God’s Shalom precisely where it dwells, with concrete commitment to its immediate environment. According to missiologist and Anglican bishop Lesslie Newbigin, “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.”³⁷ This involves immersing oneself in the reality of one’s neighborhood, district, or municipality, discerning needs and challenges, and responding with the compassion and justice of the Kingdom.

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

At the same time, this vocation is not limited to the congregational realm. As Belgian-Brazilian historian and theologian Eduardo Hoornaert rightly points out, in early Christianity there was no talk of “the churches of Ephesus” or “the churches of Corinth,” but of the church of Ephesus/of the Ephesians or the church of Corinth/of the Corinthians. That is, even though there were several assemblies or communities, all understood themselves as part of one body with a shared mission for the entire city.³⁸ Today, that spirit of unity and collaboration is equally or even more urgent. No congregation should operate in isolation if it truly desires to see its city transformed by the light of the Kingdom of God. Joint action among various ekklesias not only strengthens the Christian testimony but embodies a credible alternative of unity and reconciliation amid a society marked by fragmentation. By living this way, each local church not only impacts its immediate environment but, by weaving networks and collaborating with other faith communities, can contribute to transforming the city as a whole, promoting God’s Shalom in all spheres of public and social life. As Swiss theologian Karl Barth said: “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.”³⁹ From this it follows that the church must be a visible manifestation of Christ’s existence; its faith cannot be confined to the personal and individual realm but must be publicly expressed. Only then will the gates of Hades truly not prevail against the ekklesia.

The Ekklesia — A Worshiping Community in Communion with God

Worship as the Source of Identity and Mission

The early Christians not only understood themselves as a healing, discipling, and transforming community, but they knew their very reason for being stemmed from an intimate and constant relationship with God. Without that connection with God in worship, mission lost its meaning and power. Therefore, throughout the history of God's people, worship has held a central place in the life of those who follow Jesus. Nevertheless, as previously mentioned, in many contemporary contexts both the concepts of "worship" and "ekklesia" have unfortunately been reduced to the Sunday experience or liturgical practices limited to the ecclesial domain.⁴⁰ However, by examining Scripture and the life of the early ekklesia, we discover that worship was much deeper: it meant the total surrender of life to the God of Shalom, with the desire to reflect His character and participate in His mission in the world. As theologian and writer Marva Dawn noted, "We cannot respond to God as the object of our praise unless we first see Him, know Him, and allow Him to be God in our life."⁴¹ From that communion with God, they sustained their communal life and were driven to live fully committed to the *Missio Dei*. Therefore, worship was not merely another ritual for them but the heart of their identity and mission. Next, we will examine more closely how the early church understood and lived out its calling as a worshiping community.

We All Worship Something: Worship as a Universal Human Practice

It is important to recognize that worship is a universal human practice and constitutes an essential part of what it means to be truly human. Worship means, essentially, recognizing the value or dignity of someone or something; it proclaims that what we face deserves our attention, devotion, and praise. It is not limited to religious rituals or gatherings in temples but includes the devotion, admiration, and energy we direct toward what we consider truly valuable. We all worship something: power, wealth, pleasure, social acceptance, personal security, or personal success. Whatever occupies the center of our life inevitably shapes our character and actions. As some have said: We become like what we worship! — whether to our ruin or our restoration!⁴²

Those who center their lives on money tend to become calculating and transactional; those who worship beauty or performance easily fall into anxiety and insecurity; those who pursue power with devotion may become cruel⁴³. When we worship part of creation as if it were the Creator, though we may experience a brief "high," that feeling is illusory. Like a hallucinogenic drug, it can give the impression of vitality but progressively dehumanizes us. That is the price of idolatry.⁴⁴ In contrast, within the Christian vision, worship finds its legitimate recipient: God. Christian worship reorients our hearts toward the living God, who created, sustains, and is renewing all things. It humanizes us by reconnecting us with the very source of life and restoring in us our true identity as bearers of His image.

That is why worship was never an optional practice for the ekklesia; it is its source of identity, vocation, and transformation. While from the world's perspective genuine worship seems "a waste" — because it does not produce economic profit or satisfy ambitions of power — it is precisely this apparent material "uselessness" that reveals its true value from the Kingdom perspective. It is an act of total surrender, recognition of God's sovereignty, and intimate communion with Him. And it is this communion, paradoxically, that becomes a transforming force. It frees us from the utilitarian and selfish logics of the world and roots us in the love, truth, and holiness of God.⁴⁵ That is why Jesus dreamed of a community that would worship the Father "in spirit and truth" (John 4:23–24): a community whose way of life would reflect deep and authentic devotion; a community connected to God's presence, guided by His mission, and continually reminded of who He is, who we are, and what kind of God we serve.⁴⁶

Presenting Ourselves as Living Sacrifices: Comprehensive and Transforming Worship

One of the most revealing passages about the kind of worship lived by the early church is Romans 12:1–2. In this text, the apostle Paul exhorts believers to offer their bodies as "*living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God*," which he describes as an act of "spiritual worship" (λατρεία – *latreia*), a term implying constant and dedicated service to God beyond a simple rite or ceremony. In the Jewish context, sacrifice was primarily understood as the presentation of offerings in the Temple. However, Paul radically redefines this practice: now, the believer themselves — with their entire life — becomes the offering. Worship is no longer confined to a specific time or place but encompasses every aspect of existence: the use of time, resources, talents, relationships, and daily decisions. Being a "living sacrifice" means living each day with total orientation toward God and His purposes.

Indeed, the various biblical terms describing worship reinforce this comprehensive vision, showing that authentic worship is both vertical and horizontal: a total surrender to God expressed in service to others, self-giving, and submission to divine lordship.⁴⁷ It is not simply liturgical acts or emotional moments but a life that reflects Christ's character. Moreover, Paul emphasizes that this worship involves deep transformation: "*Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.*" Worship is allowing God's grace to reshape our thoughts, desires, and values, turning us away from cultural idols that deform our humanity. This transformation is not merely theoretical but practical: it translates into a new way of living. Thus, according to Paul's vision, an *ekklesia* that worships integrally does not withdraw into itself but goes out into the world as a transformed community, ready to heal, serve, and reflect God's love in every corner of society.

The Priesthood of All Believers: Worship as a Communal Vocation

If Romans 12 highlights the personal dimension of worship as total surrender to God, 1 Peter 2:4–5 emphasizes its communal dimension, placing worship at the very center of the *ekklesia*'s identity and vocation. In this passage, Peter recalls and deepens the original call God gave Israel in Exodus 19:4–6: "*You will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.*" That ancient vocation, given in the context of the Exodus and the formation of the people in the wilderness, was an invitation not to privilege but to service: to be mediators of God's presence to the world, to speak on His behalf, and represent Him before humanity. Peter, writing centuries later, asserts that this mission remains valid and finds its fulfillment in the community of Jesus' disciples. By joining with Christ — the "living Stone" rejected by men but chosen by God — believers also become "*living stones,*" built into a spiritual house and constituted as a "*holy priesthood,*" called to offer "*spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ*" (1 Peter 2:5).

This powerful image reminds us that the *ekklesia* is not simply a religious institution nor a physical building but a living community, built on Christ and inhabited by God's presence. Each believer, as a "living stone," has an essential place in this spiritual construction. With their gifts and life, each person contributes to the common work that glorifies God and blesses the world. Worship is, in that sense, the vocation of all God's people: a collective priesthood called to intercede for the world, reflect Christ's character, and witness to His Kingdom.⁴⁸ Liturgy — from the Greek *leitourgia*, literally meaning "work of the people" — expresses this reality. It is not a set of religious rituals led by specialist ministers but the active participation of the entire community in the *Missio Dei*.⁴⁹ As Peter states 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 wonderful light."⁵⁰

This priestly and missionary vocation of every believer resonates deeply with the famous statement from the Westminster Shorter Catechism (1647): "The chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever."⁵¹ Worship, then, is the very purpose of our existence: to live for God's glory and delight in His presence in every aspect of life. But what exactly does it mean to glorify God? Irenaeus of Lyons, one of the second-century Church Fathers of the second century, expressed this profoundly when he said: "*The glory of God is the human person fully alive*" (*Gloria Dei est vivens homo*).⁵² In other words, God is glorified when human beings live in fullness, in accordance with God's purpose. Understood this way, worship is not about withdrawing from the world, but is instead lived out through service and daily witness. Every act that reflects God's love, truth, and justice—and that promotes the fullness and dignity of others—becomes an act of praise.⁵³ This is affirmed in Isaiah 58:6–9, where authentic worship is expressed in concrete service to one's neighbor: setting the oppressed free, sharing bread with the hungry, clothing the naked... so that they too may live in fullness.⁵⁴

The Heart of Worship: Intimacy, Community, and Mission

Romans 12 and 1 Peter 2, along with the broader witness of Scripture, emphasize that worship is not a secondary activity—it is the heartbeat of the *ekklesia*. Just as the human body depends on blood to live, the *ekklesia* depends on worship to remain centered in God and to fulfill its healing, discipling, and transforming vocation. Worship reaffirms our identity as creatures deeply loved by God.⁵⁵ It shapes us into God's image, distancing us from idols that dehumanize; it nourishes hope, strengthening our commitment to the justice of the Kingdom; and it transforms us into agents of reconciliation who work to advance God's *Shalom* in the world.⁵⁶

In their worship of God, the early Christians found hope and renewed their expectation of the full coming of the Kingdom, whose presence they had already begun to experience in their close and caring community life. This

horizontal dimension of the *ekklesia* was also reflected in their *koinonia*, where they not only glorified God but also built each other up through gifts, psalms, and spiritual songs (Ephesians 5:19). Each member was an active part of the body, and worship was not limited to personal transformation—it included contributing their gifts to the growth and edification of others. In this sense, the *ekklesia* shared not only prayer, praise, and moments of worship, but also the table and everyday life, which were lived as continuous 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 even 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, structural injustice, and deep 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 faith, turning even the most passionate change-makers into bitter prophets or resigned unbelievers, in whose eyes the light has gone out.⁵⁷ In this reality, worship becomes a stronghold for the soul. By exalting the goodness of God, proclaiming his promises, and singing 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 has overcome evil through his death and resurrection, that the God who sends us also walks beside us, and that with Him the impossible becomes possible.⁵⁸ These practices—praying, singing, giving thanks—are not forms of escapism, but profoundly subversive acts that root us in hope, protect us from cynicism, and prevent us from succumbing to the very evil we seek to confront. Moreover, they unite us as a community in the midst of the struggle. As occurred in many liberation movements around the world, singing in Christian worship does not only encourage—it strengthens, unites, and propels. Worship protects our inner life from the enemy's whispers that try to sow despair and reminds us that our primary responsibility is not merely to resist, but to proclaim with our lives and worship that light prevails over darkness.⁵⁹

In fact, the biblical story culminates in a scene of cosmic worship. In Revelation 4, John sees God's throne surrounded by living creatures, elders, and angels proclaiming: "*You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power!*" This heavenly chorus reminds us that every act of worship on earth—whether great or small, public or intimate—is part of the universal liturgy that acknowledges God as King of kings and Lord of lords. Thus, when the *ekklesia* worships, it joins 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 holistic and dynamic. It is not limited to certain days or specific musical styles; it consists of offering our whole life to God's purposes. This 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 filled with rival powers and claims of allegiance, Jesus Christ is the true King. Worship is a profoundly political, cultural, and spiritual act that confronts every idol and affirms the sovereignty of God's Kingdom above any government, system, or ideology. Moreover, worship leads us toward a holistic way of life. In worship, we cease to live as if everything depends on our own strength, and we 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 truly human, reflecting the image of Christ and manifesting in advance the new creation God is forming within us. This encounter with God in worship also reorients us toward the world with the eyes and heart of Christ. As we contemplate the Father's love, we are transformed by the Spirit to carry that same love to our neighbor and to proclaim the good news of the Kingdom.

All of this translates into an identity that is deeply healing, discipling, and transformative, where mission flows organically from a life of worship. As the Westminster Shorter Catechism affirms, "Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy Him forever." But this genuine worship is not limited to a vertical dimension: it shapes men and

women who become “true neighbors,” living reflections of divine compassion, and part of an assembly of disciples who seek the Shalom of their city. Thus, when the *ekklesia* responds to 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. It is in this coherence between worship and mission that we find the beauty and strength of the *ekklesia* Jesus dreamed of.

Part 3: Becoming the Ekklesia Jesus Dreamed Of

In the face of the great challenges Latin America is facing—structural violence, social fragmentation, economic inequality, forced migration, systemic corruption, and the spiritual disillusionment of younger generations—the church cannot remain indifferent, nor can it respond with worn-out religious formulas, decontextualized rhetoric, or ecclesial structures focused on self-preservation. This moment calls for something deeper: a radical return to the identity and mission Jesus dreamed for his *ekklesia*. What we need is not more buildings or more events, but living communities that serve as visible signs of the Kingdom of God in the midst of a wounded continent hungry for hope. When the church resigns itself to injustice, poverty, or violence, it betrays its vocation and strays from the Gospel of the Kingdom. But when it embraces its calling with love and dependence on the Spirit, it becomes a prophetic sign of hope amid chaos. This is the *ekklesia* Latin America needs today.

A Living Church for a Wounded Continent

This return requires 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*—focused on worship, proclamation, and communion—is an essential dimension of Christian life, it does not exhaust the church’s identity or vocation. The *ekklesia* Jesus proclaimed is far more than the *kuriakē*; it is not merely a gathering place for worship and edification of the faithful. It is a living community of Kingdom citizens, called to be “the salt of the earth” and “the light of the world” (Matthew 5:13–14). This implies leaving behind obsolete 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 agendas, but in communities that love in action, live the Gospel with integrity, and dare to go where no one else will go, bringing light, healing, and justice.

At this moment in history, Latin America urgently needs an *ekklesia* that rises as a restoring, discipling, transformative, and worshiping community. A community that does not flee from the world but enters its wounds with compassion. A community that does not settle for multiplying believers but forms disciples capable of living like Jesus at home, at work, in politics, in academia, in the marketplace, in culture, and in the economy.⁶⁰ A community that confronts the idolatry of power, money, and religious spectacle with the humble and powerful testimony of a life surrendered to Christ. A community that actively participates in the *Missio Dei*, not living for itself, but embracing its public and local vocation—being the soul of its cities, the visible face of the Kingdom, and the embodied hope for those who no longer believe in words.⁶¹

Renewed Leadership and Embodied Theology

This calling requires renewed leaders. Not charismatic figures focused on building their own platforms, but men and women formed in character—humble and courageous—willing to die to their own agendas in order to serve their generation. Leaders who live what they preach, who lead from a place of vulnerability, who listen to the cry of their people and are able to discern their wounds in order to respond with wisdom, compassion, and courage. Leaders who invite others to walk toward the Kingdom through concrete steps of faith, justice, and reconciliation. Leaders who form others not through control or prestige, but through service and self-giving, with an embodied pedagogy that makes disciples, not consumers.

This also requires a new theological imagination. We must break away from dualisms and recover a Kingdom theology that sees salvation not merely as an escape from hell, but as the restoration of the cosmos; that understands mission not as institutional expansion, but as participation in the redemption of the world; that

affirms God's desire not only to "win souls," but to transform cultures, heal relationships, regenerate economies, liberate captives, and restore human dignity in every sphere of existence. This theology must be embodied, contextualized, and prophetic—deeply biblical, passionately missional, and socially relevant. It must prioritize both the Great Commandment and the Great Commission.

Latin America also needs an *ekklesia* deeply connected to the new generations. Young people who are not satisfied with superficial Christianity or with the repetition of meaningless religious formulas. Young people who seek authenticity, justice, community, and purpose. Young people who long to belong to something bigger than themselves, yet are not willing to submit to rigid, authoritarian, or incoherent structures. These young people are not rejecting faith—they are rejecting distorted versions of the gospel they have encountered. They need to be disciplined, yes, but they also need spaces where they can contribute, question, create, lead, and dream of a different church—one that looks like Jesus.

In this sense, the future of the church in Latin America will not be decided in temples, but in the streets. It will not be defined by attendance numbers, but by community impact. It will not be measured by the size of our structures, but by the quality of our discipleship. The church that will flourish is the one that dares to go out, to take risks, to accompany, to heal, to denounce, and to restore. It will be the church that walks in step with the Spirit, that listens to the cry of its city, that lives as a united body, and that worships God with its entire life.

For all these reasons, it is time to once again become the *ekklesia* Jesus dreamed of. Not a self-sufficient institution, but a sent community. Not a spiritual club, but a living body. Not a Sunday show, but a restoring family. Not a religious hierarchy, but a priestly people. Not a walled fortress, but an embassy of the Kingdom. Not an event-driven church, but a church on the move. A church that does not strive to be relevant to the world, but to be faithful to the Kingdom. A church that not only speaks of the gospel, but embodies it, lives it, and extends it with power, compassion, and truth.

The Time to Go: A Church on the Move

Undoubtedly, proclaiming a new Kingdom amid already established ones and embracing a worldview that challenges dominant systems—including religious and denominational ones—aimed at transforming cities and nations, is no easy task. It involves sacrifice: leaving comfort zones, facing opposition, and paying a price. That's why, when the disciples stood gazing into the sky after Jesus' ascension, the angels said: "*Men of Galilee... 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 stand still. Don't wait for the solution to fall from the sky. There is a mission to fulfill!*"

That same exhortation echoes strongly today: "*Do you think my mission is impossible in your fragile cities and nations? Stop waiting. Go. Get involved. Disciple. Transform. Go with my authority, for my yoke is easy and my burden is light. And remember: I am with you always, to the very end of the age*" (Matthew 11:30; 28:20). As Karl Barth—and many others after him—have said, the *Missio Dei* is God's initiative to redeem the fallen universe. We are invited to be part of that story. True, Jesus' first coming did not solve all the world's problems. But it revealed a vision of the Kingdom meant to break the spell of false earthly promises. While only at His return will the Kingdom be fully realized, we are called to anticipate it today: to work for a new future grounded in God's *Shalom* revealed in Jesus. In this mission, Christ calls us to trust without fear and to give ourselves fully to His cause. Let us not limit the reach of His Kingdom or underestimate the power of His calling. He will open the way, multiply what we offer, and transform lives—including our own.

May this vision not remain mere theoretical inspiration, but a concrete invitation to change. May every pastor, every leader, every community, and every disciple who reads these words ask themselves: What kind of church are we being? What kind of discipleship are we forming? What kind of gospel are we embodying? Will we dare to imagine, pray, live, and build an *ekklesia* that shakes the gates of Hades and embodies the Kingdom of God in our generation? The road 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 in His work.

Endnotes

¹ Bill Hybels, Kevin Harney, and Sherry Harney, *Colossians: Discover the New You* (Grand Rapids, MI: HarperCollins, 2009), 15

² Bill Hybels, *Courageous Leadership* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 23.

³ J. R. Woodward, *The Church as Movement: Starting and Sustaining Missional-Incarnational Communities* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2016), 159

⁴ In its original Greek usage, the word *ekklesia* comes from *ek* (ἐκ), meaning “out of,” and *kaleō* (καλέω), meaning “to call”; thus, it is 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* was the civic assembly of citizens summoned by a herald to leave their private homes and gather in a public space where important matters of the city were deliberated. It was a call to active participation in public life, not a call to withdraw from it.

When the New Testament adopts this term to refer to the community of Jesus’ disciples, it does so with that civic and communal background in mind, now enriched by its meaning in the Old Testament, where *ekklesia* translates the Hebrew *qahal*—the assembly of God’s people gathered to worship, to hear His Word, to renew the covenant, and to embrace their calling as a priestly people and a light to the nations. Thus, the Christian *ekklesia* is not a community that isolates itself from the world, but a people publicly summoned to discern, act, and embody the Kingdom of God in the midst of society.

Some Christian interpretations—especially of a pietistic or sectarian nature—have spiritualized the term *ekklesia*, understanding it to mean “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 usage of the term. The New Testament church was in the world, though not of the world, but it was never conceived as outside the world. It was a public and visible community, an embodied witness of the Kingdom of God; an assembly of the Kingdom, not withdrawn from the world, but sent into the world. (Thayer, J. H. 1968. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*. Edinburgh, Scotland: T. & T. Clark., 195–196)

⁵ J. C. Lambert, “Church,” in *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, vol. 1, ed. James Orr (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1929), 651

⁶ *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 3, s.v. “ἐκκλησία,” 501–508; ver también *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary*, s.v. “Church.”

⁷ Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Christianity*, 28–29. Penguin Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

Only about one-fifth of the adult inhabitants of democratic classical Athens could be described as active citizens—those considered the best to represent the community of the polis (city). Furthermore, only male citizens over the age of thirty had a voice in policymaking during *ekklesia* meetings. However, despite all these limitations, a significant number of ordinary people, who were not privileged by birth or divine favor, were made responsible for their own future and the future of their community and city.

⁸ It is important to emphasize that the integration of cities into the Roman imperial system was neither uniform nor indicative of absolute, monolithic control. The relationships between Rome and each city were structured through treaties, municipal charters, and specific agreements that ultimately aimed to secure each polis’s loyalty and effective contribution to the Empire. As a result, various models of local governance emerged: in some cities, the *ekklesia* retained a significant role in public life, while in others it was gradually subordinated or even relegated to merely symbolic functions, always under the supervision of imperial authority. This gave rise to a mixed model: cities maintained the appearance of self-government but were in fact subordinated to *ius Romanum* (Roman law) and a centralized structure of imperial control.

⁹ The Greek and Roman versions of the *ekklesia* manifested in various forms and sizes. However, one particularly notable format was the *Conventus Civium Romanorum*, or simply *conventus*. According to historian Sir William Ramsay, when a group of Roman citizens—as few as two or three individuals—gathered anywhere in the world, they constituted a *conventus* as a local expression of Rome’s power. Even if they were geographically distant from the capital of the empire and from the emperor himself, their gathering as fellow citizens automatically carried the presence and authority 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 granted to his representatives—the *ekklesia*—to bind and loose according to God’s will on earth, Jesus declares that this is possible “for where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them” (Matthew 18:20). That is precisely what the *conventus* represented for the Roman emperor.

¹⁰ The Roman government often incorporated existing Greek civic structures—such as the *ekklesia*—and adapted them to serve imperial objectives, such as tax collection, military recruitment, public works, and cultural assimilation. Gerhard Kittel explains it this way: “With the subjugation of the Hellenistic states by Rome, the term *ἐκκλησία* did not completely disappear. Rather, it was adapted to new contexts of municipal governance. The local assembly could still be called *ἐκκλησία*, although it now operated under Roman authority and often had to ratify or implement decrees aligned 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, *ἐκκλησία* primarily referred to the assembly of full citizens within a city-state (polis). By the time of the Roman Empire, local assemblies continued to meet, though their autonomy had been significantly reduced... As municipal life became integrated into the imperial structure, the assembly came to function, in practice, as a local administrative forum, subordinated 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 adds: “Often, the existing civic assembly was recognized by the Romans, who superimposed upon it a hierarchy of imperial officials... The local citizen community continued to gather, but now with the task of implementing Roman edicts or local matters aligned with imperial interests” (*Roman Citizenship* [Oxford: Clarendon, 1973], chs. 4–5)

¹¹ *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, s.v. “Ecclesia (ancient Greek assembly),” accessed March 7, 2025, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Ecclesia-ancient-Greek-assembly>.

¹² 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. From the perspective of French theologian and biblical scholar Lucien Legrand, “God’s call culminates in the formation of a people. It is not merely a call to serve the true God, but an invitation to incorporate human beings into the people of that God” (*Unity and Plurality: Mission in the Bible*, New York: Orbis Books, Maryknoll, 1990, p. 31). This vision resonates with the famous words of French philosopher Blaise Pascal: “Not the God of the philosophers and scholars, but the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob!”—not a God of truth that can be ‘learned’ or attained in isolation, but a God bound to a human family, and one who can only be encountered within that family.

The goal of Israel’s mission, then, is to create a community—not only to awaken individual faith but to cultivate a shared faith. Far from being a radical innovation, the *ekklesia* as Jesus envisioned it is the organic continuation of a long history 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* (קהל). This term, which appears repeatedly in the Old Testament, refers to the community of Israel gathered 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 its purpose was always tied to mission: to live as a holy people for the blessing of the nations.

Jesus, formed within this tradition, did not invent the idea of a people gathered under the lordship of God. Rather, as Joachim Jeremias observed, “the sole purpose of all Jesus’ activity is the gathering of the eschatological people of God” (Gerhard Lohfink, *Jesus and Community*, Fortress Press, 1984, p. 26). Jesus’ use of the term *ekklesia* (Matthew 16:18) does not represent a rupture with the Old Testament, but its fulfillment. In choosing this word, Jesus affirms a continuity in the calling: the Kingdom of God requires a people, a concrete community shaped by his reign and bearers of his shalom. This *ekklesia*—the messianic community Jesus called into being—is built on the foundations of the *qahal*. Just as the *qahal* was established as a sign to the nations, the *ekklesia* is the living testimony of the arrival of the Kingdom of God.

In Acts 7:38, Stephen refers to the people of Israel in the wilderness as “the ekklesia in the wilderness,” explicitly linking the New Testament church to the Old Testament assembly. The first believers did not see themselves as a new religion, but as the faithful remnant of God’s ancient people, now gathered around the crucified and risen Messiah. Therefore, 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 peace, justice, and holistic restoration. As the prophets proclaimed (e.g., Jeremiah 29), the qahal was called to seek the shalom of the city. This same mandate continues with the ekklesia. Whether gathered in homes, under persecution, or embedded in complex urban contexts, the church is called not to isolation but to incarnational presence. It is not simply a spiritual gathering, but a people defined by the Kingdom, existing for the sake of others.

In Jesus’ vision, the church is not a static institution nor a voluntary association of pious individuals. It is the eschatological people of God—formed by grace, united by love, and sent on mission. The reign of God is not an abstract ideal but a visible reality in this community of disciples who bear witness to a new way of being human—marked by compassion, reconciliation, and sacrificial service. Thus, 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—he 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.

¹³ John H. Walton, *The Lost World of Genesis One: Ancient Cosmology and the Origins Debate* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 29–50

¹⁴ Ed Silvano, *Ekklesia: Rediscovering God’s Instrument for Global Transformation* (Shippensburg, PA: Destiny Image Publishers, 2017), 23

¹⁵ Paul J. Achtemeier (ed.), *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary*, vol. 2 (New York: Doubleday, 1992), pp. 403–406, artículo “Ekklesia.”

¹⁶ Brandon Scott, “Should ‘Ekklesia’ Really Be Translated as ‘Church’ in the Bible?” *Early Christian Texts*, March 16, 2022, <https://earlychristiantexts.com/should-ekklesia-really-be-translated-as-church/>

¹⁷ Adolf Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient East* (New York: George Doran Co., 1927), 112.

¹⁸ A deeper study also leads us to consider three fundamental dimensions of the ekklesia according to the writings of Paul:

A) The Universal Church: The term ekklesia is used to describe the body of Christ as a whole worldwide, over which the Lord acts as head. (Matthew 16:18; Ephesians 1:22–23; 3:10–11; 1 Timothy 3:15).

B) The Geographic Church: Ekklesia is also employed in a territorial sense, referring to all believers in a specific city, town, or region. (Acts 9:31; 1 Corinthians 1:2; Galatians 1:1–2; Revelation 1:1).

C) The Community Church: Finally, the word ekklesia is used to designate a specific group of believers who live a shared life in community and gather for worship. (Romans 16:5; 1 Corinthians 14:34–35; Colossians 4:15; 1 Timothy 3:15).

¹⁹ Gerhard Lohfink affirms this idea in *Jesus and Community* (Fortress Press, 1984, pp. 50–52): “The idea of the church as a society in contrast does not imply a contradiction with the rest of society merely for the sake of opposition. Far less does it mean despising society out of elitist thinking. What is meant is that the church exists in contrast for the good of others and on behalf of others—a contrasting function that is expressed unsurpassingly in the images of ‘salt of the earth,’ ‘light of the world,’ and ‘city on a hill’... Precisely because the church does not exist for itself, but completely and exclusively for the world, it is necessary that it does not dissolve into the world, but retains its own identity.”

²⁰ MacCulloch, *Christianity*, 26

²¹ Carl C. Beck, “Partakers of Glory: The Idea of Koinonia in the New Testament”, Th.M. diss., Eastern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1962, 68

²² Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, Revised Edition, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1995, 128.

²³ 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.

²⁴ Epístola a Diogineto, en *Padres de la Iglesia Primitiva*, ed. y trad. Cyril C. Richardson (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1953), cap. 6, sec. 1

²⁵ From its earliest days, Christianity was recognized as a deeply compassionate movement, characterized by its care for the most vulnerable. This identity was rooted in the Gospels and the letters of John, James, and Paul, which in turn were grounded in the Hebrew Scriptures that reveal God’s impartial love for the widow, the stranger, and the marginalized. The early ekklesia understood its mission to be a community that generates Shalom.

A clear example of how Christians lived out this vocation is found in the letter from the governor Pliny the Younger to Emperor Trajan in 112 A.D. There he describes Christians as people who, although accused for their faith, lived morally upright lives: “They asserted, however, that the sum and substance of their fault or error was that they were accustomed to meet on a certain fixed day before dawn and sing responsively a hymn to Christ as to a god, and bind themselves by oath not to commit fraud, theft, or adultery, not to break their word, nor deny a trust when called upon to deliver it.” (Letters 10.96–97).

Tertullian of Carthage, one of the early Church Fathers, also testified to this reputation in his work *Apology*: “It is chiefly the works of such noble love that lead many to nickname us. ‘Look at them,’ they say, ‘how they love one another!’ ... They are even willing to die for each other. ... We do not hesitate to share our material goods among ourselves. ... This practice of such special love marks us before the eyes of some. ‘Look at them,’ they say, ‘how they love one another!’” (*Apologeticus* 39.5–7).

During a devastating plague in Alexandria (ca. 249–262 A.D.), Bishop Dionysius recounted the heroic testimony of many Christians: “Most of our brothers spared no effort in their love and brotherly kindness. They stood firm with one another and visited the sick without fear, continuously caring for them, serving them in Christ; and they joyfully died with them, taking on the illness of others and attracting the suffering of their neighbors to themselves. They voluntarily accepted their pains and, with great joy, departed this life, truly becoming martyrs of the faith. ... Thus, even death itself, with all its terror, became a means of discipline and exercise of faith.” (Eusebius’s *Ecclesiastical History*, Book 7, Chapter 22).

The martyr bishop Cyprian of Carthage also urged his communities to extend mercy beyond their own faith circles: “Let us not limit our goodness and love only to those of the household of faith. Let us also have compassion on pagans, so that, by our kindness toward them, they too may be drawn to share in our spiritual fellowship... Therefore, good must be done to all, whether strangers or members of our own household; with the same act of kindness, let us love our neighbor as ourselves.” (*Ante-Nicene Fathers* 5: Treatises of Cyprian, Treatise VIII, ch. 25–26).

This spirit of compassion was institutionalized in the life of the Church. According to Eusebius (*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, in his *Homilies on Matthew* (66 or 67), noted that the Great Church in Antioch cared for about 3,000 widows and single women, as well as the sick and travelers, reflecting a deep commitment to social welfare.

Even the pagan Emperor Julian (361–363 A.D.), who attempted to revive the traditional Roman religion, grudgingly acknowledged the impact of Christian charity. In his letter to Arsacius (Epistle 22, ca. 362 A.D.), he wrote: “These impious Galileans [Christians] not only feed their own poor but ours as well; they receive them into their agape feasts... While pagan priests neglect the poor, the detestable Galileans devote themselves to acts of charity... Look at their love feasts and their tables set for the needy. Such practice is common among them, and it brings contempt upon our gods... They support not only their poor but ours as well; all see that our people receive no help from us.”

In summary, from its beginnings, the ekklesia understood itself as a community deeply committed to compassion. Inspired by the example of Jesus and led by the Spirit, its members dedicated themselves to caring without distinction of class, religion, or social status, recognizing in every human being the image of God. This love—costly, impartial, and other-oriented—not only shaped the identity of the Church but was also key to its expansion and social impact. In fact, Christianity lies at the origin of the development of hospitals and the idea that every person, made in God’s image, deserves to be cared for and loved.

²⁶ 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.

²⁷ Brian McLaren, *The Secret Message of Jesus: Uncovering the Truth That Could Change Everything* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2006), 73

²⁸ Vishal Mangalwadi, *Truth and Social Reform* (Nashville: Integrity Publishers, 2004), 94; see also Psalms 45:6-7

²⁹ In the biblical world, the gates of the city were not merely points of entry or exit. They were key spaces for governance, justice, political and military strategy. They functioned as true public squares of deliberation, where crucial decisions for the life of the community were made. This multifaceted function is consistently reflected throughout Scripture.

First, the Gates were a Place of Justice and Governance. In Ruth 4:1-2, we see how Boaz went up to the city gate and sat down. He then called ten elders and asked them to sit with him as witnesses in the legal process of redeeming Naomi's inheritance and marrying Ruth. This passage shows that the gates were the official place for settling disputes and validating legal transactions: "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)

The Mosaic law reinforces this practice. In Deuteronomy 21:19, for instance, parents are instructed to bring their rebellious son "to the town gate where the elders hold court." Similarly, in Deut. 22:15 and 25:7, the gate is mentioned as the designated place to present evidence, settle disputes, and carry out public judgments. Likewise, in Proverbs 31:23, the husband of the virtuous woman is described as someone who "is well known at the city gates, where he sits with the other civic leaders." This suggests that the gate was the seat of leadership and community respect, a place where moral and civic authority was recognized.

Second, the Gates were Centers of Political Strategy and Persuasion. In 2 Samuel 15:2-6, Absalom would rise early and station himself by the road leading to the city gate. There, he intercepted people coming to seek justice from the king and told them, "It's obvious that there's no one from the king to hear you." In this way, he "stole the hearts of the people of Israel": "Absalom would say, 'You've really got a strong case. It's too bad the king doesn't have anyone to hear it. [...]' By doing this, Absalom stole the hearts of all the people of Israel." (2 Samuel 15:3, 6, NLT)

This shows how the city gate was also a space of political influence, where public opinion could be shaped and legitimacy gained. In Daniel 2:49, although the "city gate" is not mentioned directly, the same principle is reflected: when Daniel intercedes for his friends, the king places them "in charge of the affairs of the province of Babylon," and many translations suggest they sat at the "king's gate," a place symbolically linked to the exercise of royal authority.

Third, the Gates were Points of Defense and Military Watch. The military and defensive dimension of the gates is evident in texts such as Judges 5:8, 11, which alludes to the people's vulnerability when they abandoned God, and there were no shields or spears "among forty thousand in Israel," suggesting a defense crisis beginning at the gates themselves. In Nehemiah 3-4, much of the reconstruction of Jerusalem focuses precisely on repairing the gates as key points for the city's security. Nehemiah assigns each group the responsibility of restoring a section, emphasizing that the protection and integrity of the community largely depended on the condition of its gates. There is also Extra-Biblical Confirmation and Historical-Archaeological Evidence of this: The biblical texts align with other documents from the ancient world. The Code of Hammurabi (18th century BCE) repeatedly mentions the "city gate" as the place where legal disputes were resolved. For example, Law 5 states that in conflicts between creditor and debtor, "the case must be brought to the gate." This was the public courtroom. Assyrian and Babylonian royal inscriptions also highlight the importance of city gates. King Sennacherib proudly narrates how he adorned the gates of Nineveh and stationed guards and officials there to supervise trade and collect tribute, emphasizing their political-administrative function. The Jewish historian Flavius Josephus (1st century CE) confirms this pattern, describing the gates of Jerusalem as key gathering places for elders, where matters of state were discussed and military and commercial access was controlled. In Antiquities 5.202, for example, he mentions how during the time of the judges, assemblies were held at the city gate.

In conclusion, both biblical and extra-biblical evidence present the city gate as a place of deliberation, justice, political strategy, and collective defense. It was not a mere architectural threshold but the nerve center of public life.

In this light, when Jesus declares in Matthew 16:18 that "the gates of Hades will not prevail against his ekklesia," he is evoking not only a spiritual image but also a confrontation with structures of authority and power that seek to control, oppress, and divide communities. The ekklesia is called to be an active assembly that, empowered by the Spirit, resists evil, defends justice, and promotes Shalom in all areas of public life.

³⁰ Throughout history, interpretations have arisen that read Jesus' reference to the ekklesia as a call to "rule" the world in a theocratic sense, even with militaristic overtones. According to this view, Christians are called to "take power" in governmental spheres and impose a theocratic or Christian nationalist vision on society as a whole. However, both the testimony of Scripture and the experience of the early church reveal a different dynamic:

- a) The ekklesia certainly transformed entire societies, but not by conquering Roman power or imposing faith by force.
- b) Its influence spread through deep discipleship, allowing Kingdom values to permeate culture "from below."
- c) The strategy of the church was the witness of radical love and genuine service, which won hearts and impacted public life.

This does not mean the ekklesia should retreat from the public sphere. On the contrary, as believers we are called to influence, to be light and salt within social systems and to engage in public witness. A Christian with a public vocation can—and should—consider serving in political, academic, economic, or cultural roles as part of their mission. Participation in these spheres is part of the call to be witnesses of the Kingdom in every place.

However, the ekklesia is not called to establish a theocratic regime or to govern by imposition. Its essential mission is to be a missional people that announces and embodies 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 exert influence, may we do so with the spirit of the Kingdom: humility, truth, and love.

³¹ The early Christians did not merely proclaim a spiritual message; they lived a radically different way of life that disrupted the social order of the Empire. In Acts 17:6, opponents exclaimed with alarm, "These men who have turned the world upside down have now come here too!" The Greek word used, *anastatoō*, suggests a total upheaval of the status quo. The testimony 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 testimony 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 were together and had everything in common... They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need." There were no needy persons among them. This was not an occasional practice, but an integral part of their communal life. Paul also exhorted the community to care for widows, showing clear structures of communal support (1 Timothy 5:3-16).
- B) Beyond internal solidarity, the ekklesia tore down deep social barriers. When Peter enters Cornelius's house and declares, "Now I realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism" (Acts 10:34), an ethnic and cultural boundary is broken. The Jerusalem Council (Acts 15) affirms this radical inclusion. Paul sums up this reality in Galatians 3:28: "There is neither Jew nor Gentile... for you are all one in Christ Jesus." And in Ephesians 2:14-16, he explains that Christ "has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility... creating in himself one new humanity out of the two." It is no wonder that the early Christian community caused such surprise in the Roman Empire and beyond. What Christians were and did simply fell outside the framework of many philosophers of the time (Pedrito U. Maynard-Reid, *Complete Evangelism*, 90-91).
- C) The proclamation "Jesus is Lord" (Romans 10:9; Philippians 2:11) was not a mere doctrinal affirmation but 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—an act that placed 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 was also expressed in their ethics. Jesus taught, "Love your enemies... pray for those who persecute you" (Matthew 5:44, NLT), and Paul wrote, "Do not repay anyone evil for evil... Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good" (Romans 12:17-21, NLT). Tertullian testified, "We who formerly delighted in slaughter now refuse even to witness shows where blood is shed" (*Apology* 37).

- E) The *ekklesia* also formed networks of support and solidarity that challenged the hierarchical structure of Roman patronage. Instead of relying on powerful benefactors, believers collected offerings to help orphans, widows, shipwreck victims, and prisoners, according to Justin Martyr and Tertullian (Justin Martyr, *First Apology* 67; Tertullian, *Apology* 39.5–6). This solidarity economy broke with the logic of imperial clientelism and embodied a new model of community.
- F) There were even Christians who rejected military service, considering it incompatible with Christ's call. Tertullian asked, "Can a soldier of Christ serve also under the banner of Caesar?" (*De Corona* 11), and Origen explained that instead of fighting with weapons, Christians interceded spiritually for the peace of the empire (Origen, *Against Celsus* 8.73). Hippolytus of Rome also stipulated that no believer should kill or swear allegiance to pagan gods (*Apostolic Tradition* 16).

All of this shows that the *ekklesia* was not merely a devotional community but a living, countercultural body. Their lifestyle proclaimed that a new reality had broken into history. As Ephesians 3:10 states, "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 the chosen instrument to reveal God's wisdom to the world and to the powers that oppress it. Taken together, these practices and convictions gave rise to a community that truly "turned the world upside down" (Acts 17:6)—not with violence, but with sacrificial love, restorative justice, and a solidarity that bore witness to another Kingdom: the Kingdom of God.

³² From its beginnings, the church was perceived not only as a spiritual community but as a threat to the established order—by both 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 warns them, "Didn't we tell you never again to teach in this man's name?" (Acts 5:28). The concern was not only theological but also social: they were disrupting public order.

This perception becomes even more evident in Acts 17:6–7, where the Christian message is understood as a direct act of subversion against Caesar's authority. Even in Jesus's trial, the political aspect is clear. John 19:12 recounts, "If you release this man, you are no 'friend of Caesar.' Anyone who declares himself a king is a rebel against Caesar." To acknowledge Jesus as King was, for Rome, an act of treason.

Several Roman writers confirm this perception of threat:

- a) Pliny the Younger (c. A.D. 112), in his famous letter to Emperor Trajan (Letters 10.96–97), explains: "These Christians meet before dawn to sing hymns to Christ as to a god and bind themselves by oath not to steal, commit adultery, or betray others. Yet when they are required to curse Christ and worship the emperor's image, they refuse." Their refusal to worship Caesar was seen as dangerous obstinacy and disloyalty to the Empire.
- b) Tacitus, in *Annals* 15.44 (c. A.D. 115–117), describes Christians as victims of Nero's persecution: "Nero fastened the guilt and inflicted the most exquisite tortures on a class hated for their abominations, called Christians. This pernicious superstition, temporarily checked, was breaking out again." Here, Christianity is seen as a persistent cultural threat.
- c) Suetonius, in *The Life of Claudius* 25.4 and *The Life of Nero* 16, states that Claudius expelled the Jews from Rome due to disturbances instigated by "Chrestus" (Christ), and that Nero punished Christians for their "new and malevolent superstition."
- d) Tertullian, in his *Apology* (chapters 17 and 34), defends Christians: "We pay our taxes, respect the laws, and pray for the emperors. The only thing we do not do is worship them as gods."
- e) Justin Martyr, in his *First Apology* (chapters 17 and 46), declares before the emperor: "We submit to your just laws and contribute our taxes, but we cannot offer sacrifices to your images or call the emperor 'lord.'"

This subversion was not only theological, but sociopolitical as well, as explored in other parts of this article. Thus, both biblical and extrabiblical evidence reveals that the early church was seen as subversive not only because of its faith but because of the radical way it proposed an alternative society. It was a community that proclaimed another King, lived a countercultural lifestyle, and challenged both imperial worship and social hierarchies. Its "subversion" was the fruit of its faithfulness to a different Kingdom—one whose center was neither Rome nor the Temple, but Jesus Christ as Lord.

³³ The history of the Church offers numerous examples in which the Christian faith became entangled with the interests of rulers and state powers, resulting in "marriages" between throne and altar that led to abuses and the imposition of religion by force. While each historical context differs, a common pattern has been the use of Christian symbols to legitimize political power and coercion, distorting the truly transformative nature of the Gospel. The following are a few illustrative examples:

- A) The Imperial Church and Medieval Theocracies: Alvin J. Schmidt, in *Under the Influence: How Christianity Transformed Civilization* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), describes how, throughout the Middle Ages and into the early modern period, various theocratic experiments emerged in which the Church merged with state power (chapters 4 and 5). While these models sometimes favored a certain social order and protection, they also curtailed individual freedoms and persecuted dissenters. Rodney Stark, in *For the Glory of God* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), explores the period of the "Imperial Church" that arose after Constantine's conversion (especially chapter 2). While he highlights accomplishments such as the end of persecution against Christians, he also notes how this union with the state led to the persecution of heretics and the coercive enforcement of orthodoxy.
- B) Medieval Christendom and the Rise of Nationalism: Tom Holland, in *Dominion: How the Christian Revolution Remade the World* (New York: Basic Books, 2019), analyzes the development of Christianity in Europe and shows how, at various stages, nationalist Christian identity was used to justify violence against "infidels" or dissenters (see the section on medieval Christendom and the final chapters). While Christian ethics uphold human dignity, the temptation to use secular power to impose the faith led to confessional wars and religious persecutions.
- C) The Conquest of Latin America: This is a clear example of how faith and power were fused during colonial expansion. The Spanish Crown, with papal approval (e.g., the 1493 "Inter Caetera" bulls), justified the conquest of the Americas under the pretext of evangelization, resulting in abuses and the subjugation of Indigenous populations. Classic works and testimonies, such as those of Bartolomé de las Casas (*A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies*, 1552), reveal how religious arguments were used to legitimize domination and exploitation.
- D) Christian Nationalism and the Political Use of Faith: A striking case in the 20th century was that of the *Deutsche Christen* (German Christians), a movement that emerged under the Nazi regime and sought to fully align Christianity with the ideology of the Third Reich. Rather than challenging the abuses of the state, *Deutsche Christen* adopted elements of National Socialism, adapting the faith to racial ideals and German supremacy. This historical episode illustrates how religion can be instrumentalized for political and xenophobic ends, distorting the Christian message of universal love. Glenn Sunshine, in *Why You Think the Way You Do: The Story of Western Worldviews from Rome to Home* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), shows how certain nationalist movements "baptize" political interests with religious language, drifting far from the essence of the Gospel. In fact, the term "Christian nationalism" is currently used to refer to movements that merge the Christian faith with ethnocentric or extreme patriotic ideologies, often justifying discrimination or violence against minorities. As these historical examples show—from the Constantinian era to the 21st century—this approach subordinates the mandate to love one's neighbor and the justice of God's Kingdom to the political exaltation of a nation or ethnicity. These cases—the "Imperial Church," medieval Christendom, the conquest of Latin America, and the Nazi alignment with sectors of the German Church—demonstrate how Christianity, when inappropriately allied with the State to impose or legitimize doctrine, has engaged in abuses and abandoned its prophetic calling. The problem does not lie in Christian participation in public life per se—something both legitimate and often necessary—but in the subordination of faith to temporal power, which gives rise to exclusionary nationalism or theocratic regimes that contradict the teachings of Christ.

³⁴ Despite these aforementioned deviations, various studies emphasize that when the Church remains aligned with its original mission of service, love, and justice, it can have a profoundly transformative impact on society. This impact is evident in multiple spheres: from the creation of hospitals and access to education to the advancement of social justice movements and the rise of democratic systems.

- a) Founding of Hospitals and Charitable Networks: The early Christians developed communal practices that included care for orphans, widows, and the sick, laying the groundwork for what would later become formal institutions of care. Alvin J. Schmidt, in *Under the Influence* (2001), details how Christian compassion drove the creation of hospitals, hospices, and orphanages, especially from the Middle Ages onward (chapters 2 and 7). Rodney Stark, in *The Rise of Christianity* (Princeton University Press, 1996), emphasizes that during the great plagues of the 2nd and 3rd centuries, while many pagans fled, Christians stayed behind to care for the sick and dying. This tangible testimony of love and sacrifice was crucial to the growth of Christianity (chapters 4 and 5), demonstrating a deeply embodied spirituality.
- b) Education and Protection of the Marginalized: The Judeo-Christian worldview also 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 foundational to the development of inclusive educational systems, especially benefiting women and the poor (chapters 6, 8, and 9). Similarly, Glenn Sunshine, in *Why You Think the Way You Do* (Zondervan, 2009), explains how the idea of a universe ordered by a rational God inspired the birth of universities and modern science, promoting intellectual development as a way of loving God with one's mind (chapters 5–6).
- c) Social Justice and the Rule of Law: Christianity has also influenced the abolition of inhumane practices such as slavery and torture, due to its emphasis on the dignity of every person. Tom Holland, in *Dominion* (Basic Books, 2019), shows how Christian values of compassion and equality gradually revolutionized Europe's legal and social structures, shaping Enlightenment thought and abolitionist movements. Robert D. Woodberry, in his influential article "The Missionary Roots of Liberal Democracy" (*American Political Science Review* 106, no. 2 [2012], pp. 244–274), presents empirical evidence linking Protestant missionary work with the expansion of democratic institutions, educational advancement, and the promotion of civil liberties. As he notes:
- "Areas where Protestant missionaries had a significant presence in the past are, on average, more economically developed today, with better health outcomes, lower infant mortality, lower levels of corruption, higher literacy, greater educational attainment (especially among women), and more robust participation in non-governmental associations." (Woodberry, p. 244)
- This demonstrates how Christian mission, when lived out through witness and social commitment, can lead to deep systemic transformation.
- d) The Church as Embassy of the Kingdom (2 Corinthians 5:20): This metaphor reinforces the representative role of the *ekklesia* in the world: it is not called 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 decisive factors in Christianity's expansion and its social influence within the Roman Empire. Far from being a private faith, early Christianity modeled new forms of community, public ethics, and care for the most vulnerable. Consequently, authors such as Alvin J. Schmidt, Rodney Stark, Tom Holland, Vishal Mangalwadi, Glenn Sunshine, and Robert Woodberry agree that when the Church remains faithful to Christ's example—compassionate, just, transformative—it can leave an indelible mark on history. However, they also warn that when faith becomes crystallized into coercive structures or allies with oppressive powers, it loses its prophetic vocation and becomes a tool of control. The history of the Church is marked by this ongoing tension between the use of power and the call to humble service. Whenever the Church has strayed into religious imposition, exclusion, or political domination, it has betrayed the spirit of the Kingdom. In contrast, when it acts as the "salt of the earth" and "light of the world" (Matthew 5:13–16), its witness illuminates society and plants God's Shalom in the world.

³⁵ 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).

³⁶ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Works*, vol. 8, ed. Wayne Whitson Floyd, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010, 503.

³⁷ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1989), 232.

³⁸ Eduardo Hoornaert, *Memoria del Pueblo Cristiano* (Bogotá: Ediciones Paulinas, 1986), 124–128.

³⁹ Karl Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline*, New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1959, 142. 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..."

⁴⁰ How did this happen? The holistic vision of worship upheld by the early Church—deeply rooted in a vertical reverence toward God, yet also conscious of the horizontal, communal, and eschatological dimensions of the coming Kingdom—gradually gave way to a form of worship centered more on an individual and vertical relationship with God. Two main historical developments contributed to this shift.

First, as ecclesial 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. Although these changes were partly motivated by the Church's need to confront heresies that distorted apostolic teaching, they also undermined the original emphasis on the Kingdom of God as a fundamentally communal reality, diverse in its expressions of worship. A particularly influential factor was the adoption of the principle of territoriality, established under Roman governance in the 2nd century, particularly during the era of Emperor Diocletian (Ralph P. Martin, *Worship in the Early Church* [Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1974], 148). As the Church assimilated this principle, local assemblies once identified as "the church of the Corinthians" (i.e., the community of Christian pilgrims in Corinth) were gradually replaced by more institutional references such as "the churches of Corinth." The acceptance of this territorial principle had significant pastoral consequences, especially as congregational leadership began aligning with the administrative patterns of the Empire. This shift was further reinforced by the cautious but sustained adoption of Platonic and Neoplatonic philosophy, which valued order and hierarchical structure over charismatic and pneumatic expressions, often perceived as disorderly.

An illustrative example is found in the *Didache*, where prophets and teachers were still recognized as primary authorities within the Christian assembly, reflecting a broader distribution of leadership in the community. However, approximately a century later, the Apostolic Tradition, composed in Rome around 215 CE, relegated teachers to a lower ministerial level and omitted all mention of prophets. Catholic theologian Eduardo Hoornaert, in *The Memory of the Christian People*, describes this shift by stating that the Apostolic Tradition reveals "a fundamental change of mentality regarding ministries, which are now no longer articulated in terms of 'service,' but in terms of 'government' and power in the communities. As a result, the concept of a charismatic church now gives way to the concept of a hierarchical church. The community becomes divided between clergy and laity... The power to officiate the liturgy now passes into the hands of the clergy." (Eduardo Hoornaert, *The Memory of the Christian People* [Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988], 160)

This transformation in the model of ecclesial governance profoundly altered the practice of worship and fractured the structure of Christian assemblies, affecting the very core of *koinonia*. Tertullian, writing in 197 CE, could still affirm: "Where there are three [Christians], there is the church, even if they are laypersons." (Henry Bettenson, ed., *Documents of the Christian Church* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967], 71) Yet, one generation later, with Cyprian, the principle of hierarchical communion prevailed: "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], 180)

This development weakened the "fellowship of communion" and shifted worship toward a more priestly and vertical ritual, centered on the notion of liturgical "sacrifice" (Hoornaert, 160). Over the centuries, in the Mass liturgy, the priest would literally turn his back to the congregation to celebrate the "Eucharistic sacrifice" facing the altar—an expression of reverence toward God that nonetheless tended to minimize the active participation of the laity in the name of liturgical purity. New Testament scholar James D.G. Dunn summarizes this shift starkly: "Perhaps, then, the tragedy of early Catholicism was its failure to grasp that the greatest heresy of all is to insist that there is only one ecclesiastical obedience, only one orthodoxy." (James D.G. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament: An Inquiry into the Character of Earliest Christianity* [London: SCM Press, 1990], 373)

Second, there was a widespread trend across various Christian traditions to shift the center of divine presence from the gathered community to a single focal element of worship. The early Christian conviction that "the divine presence was made most powerfully real in and through the empirical gathering of Christians assembled to worship

'in the name of Jesus' (see Matthew 18:20) was progressively abandoned. The assembly itself functioned as the sacrament. (New Testament Abstracts, vol. 21, no. 1 [1977]: 173)

This shift manifested in various ways within the broader Christian family, shaping different liturgical and ecclesiological expressions according to particular historical and theological contexts (David E. Aune, "The Presence of God in the Community: The Eucharist in Its Early Christian Context," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 29, no. 5 [1976]: 451-459, 454):

- a) In the Roman Catholic Church, the Eucharist became the primary locus of the real presence of Christ 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 traditions and evangelical congregations, the proclamation of the Word of God acquired such centrality that it became almost sacramental: "God's presence is most powerfully experienced in the kerygmatic unfolding of the biblical text."
- c) In Pentecostal and charismatic churches, the most evident manifestation of God's presence is perceived in the exercise of spiritual gifts, especially healing and speaking in tongues.
- d) In many neo-Pentecostal and non-denominational congregations, powerful "worship services"—characterized by emotional praise music, modern technology (lights and sound), and dynamic preaching—convey the sense that God's presence is most fully experienced in an intense personal moment of worship.

However, according to Baptist scholar David Aune, neither the Eucharist, nor the proclamation of the Word, nor the manifestation of certain spiritual gifts, nor a highly choreographed emotional worship experience held in the early Church the structurally central role they do in many churches today (Aune, 453-454). Even so, over time, in each tradition a predominantly vertical emphasis emerged that began to eclipse the communal dimension of worship.

Though worshipers may still recognize that they are gathered with others and share a collective moment—whether in the Eucharist, in hearing the Word, in exercising charisms, or in a time of emotional praise—the primary emphasis often remains "my personal encounter with God the Father, with Christ, or with His Spirit." This internal focus on the individual believer's experience, while certainly valuable, tends to weaken the integral, communal, and missional aspects that characterized the worship of the earliest *ekklesiai*.

A clear result of these developments is that our modern understanding of worship is often limited to emotional expressions (such as singing or praise) or to a formal Sunday liturgical context, rather than encompassing the broader biblical vision expressed in terms such as *shachah*, *proskuneo*, *latreuo*, and *leitourgia*, which imply bowing, serving, ministering, and revering God with all of life.

Language inevitably shapes our theology and our practice; when our modern term "worship" fails to reflect the richness of biblical meaning, it can gradually shift the Church's focus away from the integrated vision held by the early Church of the *ekklesia* as a gathered people living the Kingdom of God in all spheres of existence.

As a result, worship in the modern era has often come to be defined by personal devotion and a vertical orientation toward God, to the detriment of the deeper communal and missional dimensions that early Christian communities took for granted. The biblical call to serve one another, to embody God's justice and compassion, and to live as a sign of His in-breaking Kingdom is often overshadowed when worship is conceived almost exclusively as a private, vertical communion with God.

This historical shift—originating in the consolidation of hierarchical ecclesial structures, the concentration of authority, and the elevation of certain worship elements above the gathered community—helps explain how contemporary worship has deviated from the understanding held by the early *ekklesia*.

Rather than an integral vision, more reductive conceptions of worship have been adopted, understood as liturgical ritual, individual spiritual experience, or a portion of the Sunday service centered on music. As a result, contemporary discourse on worship rarely captures the full breadth of the early Church's vision, in which bowing before God was intimately connected to loving service, mutual edification, and communal participation in the advance of God's Kingdom.

⁴¹ Marva J. Dawn, *Reaching Out Without Dumbing Down* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1995), 87.

⁴² G. K. Beale, *We Become What We Worship: A Biblical Theology of Idolatry* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), 16.

⁴³ N.T. Wright, *Simply Christian: Why Christianity Makes Sense* (New York: HarperOne, 2006), 148. N.T. Wright emphasizes that Christian worship has a holistic and deeply subversive dimension in the face of the powers of this world. To worship God with all our heart is to proclaim with our lives that He—not the idols of the age (money, status, power, violence)—is the true Lord. From this flows a distinct ethic, an inner and outer posture that challenges the culture of exploitation and injustice. In his work on the resurrection and the life of the Church, Wright highlights that the whole of Christian existence—including its public and social dimensions—is framed as a continuous act of worship to the risen King.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 148.

⁴⁵ Marva J. Dawn, *A Royal "Waste" of Time: The Splendor of Worshiping God and Being Church for the World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999)

⁴⁶ 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).

⁴⁷ The word "worship," as we use it today, is a translation that encompasses various Hebrew and Greek terms in the Bible, each carrying distinct nuances and meanings depending on the context. Understanding these original terms helps us broaden and deepen our comprehension of what it truly means to worship God according to Scripture:

- a) Service: One of the most common Greek terms translated as "worship" is *leitourgia* (leitourgia), from which we get the word liturgy. In the New Testament, *leitourgia* at times refers to practical acts of service, such as the monetary collection for the believers in Jerusalem (2 Corinthians 9:12), or the help Paul received from others (Philippians 2:30). The related term *leitourgós* (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 linked to priestly work in the Temple: a holy labor of continuous service before God. In this sense, to worship includes serving God and others with a sacrificial and merciful attitude, as a reflection of Christ.
- b) Sacrifice: In Hebrew, words like *עֲבֹדָה* ('*abōdāh*) and its root *עָבַד* ('*abad*) are translated as "service" or "work," especially in contexts of ritual or priestly service in the Temple. In Greek, *λατρεία* (*latreia*) and its associated verb *λατρεύω* (*latreúō*) also refer to ritual service—the labor of Levites and priests in the Temple. In addition, the Greek term *θυσία* (*thysia*), which literally means "sacrifice," appears frequently in the Septuagint and the New Testament to refer to thanksgiving and consecration offerings in the Old Testament. Interestingly, in the New Testament epistles, *thysia* often refers to personal sacrifice on behalf of others (Romans 12:1, Philippians 2:17), showing that Christian worship has a deeply relational and ethical character.
- c) Submission: Another key term is the Greek *προσκυνέω* (*proskynéō*), which literally means "to bow down" or "to prostrate oneself," and has as its Hebrew equivalent *שָׁחָה* (*shāchāh*). Both words describe a physical posture of reverence and submission before a superior being, and are frequently used to describe worship directed toward God. This form of worship acknowledges God's sovereignty and majesty, expressed not only in outward gestures but also in an inner attitude of humility and obedience.

Taken together, terms like *latreia*, *leitourgia*, *thysia*, *proskynéō*, and *shāchāh* show us that biblical worship is deeply connected to service, sacrifice, and submission. Rather than being limited to liturgical acts or emotional moments, true worship is expressed throughout all of life: in how we serve, in what we are willing to sacrifice, and in how we surrender to God's will. For this reason, words like service, ministry, or offering might even more faithfully reflect the original meaning of "worship" found in Scripture.

⁴⁸ The Bible shows us that worship is expressed in many ways—all valid and complementary—which transcend formal rituals and encompass the whole of life. Serving our neighbor—especially the most vulnerable—with compassion and justice reflects the heart of God and constitutes an act of worship, just as Christ did. Similarly, generosity in offerings expresses our gratitude and trust in God as our provider. Music and singing—from the Psalms to the hymns of the early Church—have been powerful means to exalt God, express lament, or proclaim victory, uniting the community and strengthening its faith. Prayer—both personal and communal—along with the public proclamation of God's goodness, honors the Lord and edifies listeners. The creative arts also play an important role: dance, painting, poetry, theater, and other artistic forms, when born

of a living faith, proclaim the beauty of the Creator. Finally, worship finds its deepest expression in sacrifice and surrender: when, following Christ's example, we lay aside our personal ambitions to embrace the divine will, we embody true spiritual worship.

⁴⁹ From this perspective, the *ekklesia* understands that all its activities—in family, work, economy, culture, and politics—can become a spiritual offering to God. There are no "secular spaces" where His presence cannot be acknowledged. Each daily act becomes an opportunity to express gratitude, practice justice, serve with generosity, and honor the King who reigns over all creation. In this way, the original sense of liturgy as "the work of the people" is reclaimed. It is not simply a "religious program," but a life transformed and offered to the Lord by the whole community, with its gifts, roles, vocations, and potential. In this framework, a true worshiper is someone who is humble and willing to:

- a) Subordinate their own goals to God's purposes, prioritizing service to the Kingdom;
- b) Express gratitude and praise to the Lord; and
- c) Bear witness to God, to His truth, and to the love they have received as His child.

⁵⁰ 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.

⁵¹ 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

⁵² 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).

⁵³ The Bible is full of examples that illustrate how God's people have offered worship in very different contexts. Some of these expressions clearly show 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 very expensive perfume. This act, which many considered a waste, symbolizes a form of worship that is both deeply personal and costly.
- b) Matthew 14:33: After Jesus walks on water and calms the storm, the disciples exclaim, "Truly you are the Son of God!" This verbal confession is an act of worship that recognizes Jesus' divine identity.
- c) Matthew 2:11 and Deuteronomy 26:10: The Magi from the East 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, while imprisoned, praise God by singing hymns, and God intervenes supernaturally. Likewise, in Colossians, the community is urged that "whatever you do, in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus," accompanied by thanksgiving.

These examples confirm that worship includes acts of personal devotion, acts of mercy and justice, material offerings, songs of praise, confession of faith, and practical obedience to God's will. In this way, worship becomes a living testimony that invites those who witness it to experience the grace and love of the Lord.

⁵⁴ Robert C. Linthicum, *City of God, City of Satan: A Biblical Theology of the Urban City* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1991), 172.

⁵⁵ Henri Nouwen, a Catholic priest, psychologist, and prolific spiritual author of the 20th century, wrote extensively about the importance of the interior life as the foundation for community life and Christian mission. In his reflections, he emphasized that authentic communion with God does not isolate the believer but leads to greater compassion, sensitivity, and responsibility toward others. For Nouwen, silence before God, prayer, and worship are not refuges of escape, but spaces where the disciple's heart is shaped, enabling them to love, serve, and heal with the tenderness of Christ, bringing God's healing presence to the wounded heart of the world. As he himself expressed: "Precisely because prayer is so personal and arises from the center of our life, 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 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/>.)

⁵⁶ Linthicum, *City of God, City of Satan*, 172.

⁵⁷ Melba Padilla Maggay, *Transforming Society* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2011), 130.

⁵⁸ Myles Munroe, *Understanding the Purpose and Power of Prayer: How to Call Heaven to Earth* (New Kensington, PA: Whitaker House, 2002), 104.

⁵⁹ N.T. Wright, *Simply Christian: Why Christianity Makes Sense* (New York: HarperOne, 2006), 143.

⁶⁰ Padilla Maggay, *Transforming Society*, 27–28.

⁶¹ The true power of the church is not found in its number of attendees, its financial resources, or its media presence. It lies in its capacity to love radically, to live consistently, to serve generously, and to resist with hope. It is in its ability to disciple nations with the truth of the gospel, to heal communities with the compassion of the Kingdom, to confront structures with the justice of heaven, and to worship God with a life offered as a living sacrifice. Such an *ekklesia* does not need to defend itself with arguments: its very existence is already a prophetic proclamation that unsettles, transforms, and attracts.