

Exorcising The Organizational Demon

We all have enjoyed his movies. Countless boys had toy guns and holsters to imitate this hero of the Westerns. Older people loved him also, especially because of his patriotism and belief in traditional values. His films are still popular as reruns. In the Western movies, no actor will ever sit taller in the saddle than Marion Morrison.

Marion who?

It does not matter whether we identify him as Marion Morrison or John Wayne if we understand that we are identifying the same person. His name was Marion Morrison, not John Wayne. However, the pseudonym, or fictitious name, does not change his identity or character.

In this essay I intend to deal with the character of the church. With the mention of the word *church*, a red flag pops up in the minds of many Bible students. They are quick to remind us that such a word should not be in the Bible. Yes, it is a misnomer to translate *ekklesia* as *church*, for it should be the *called out*, *the congregation*, or *the assembly*.

I am aware of that. (Learned that from reading *Free In Christ!*) *Church* is as much as pseudonym as *John Wayne*! It is not so important, however, what we call it as it is to understand its identity and nature. For example, one might think Marion Morrison was the star of *Gunsmoke*, or he may identify the alias, John Wayne, with the real Western hero. One may rightly speak of the congregation and not understand the significance of that term. Another may use the common designation of church with a clearer understanding of its nature. With time and usage words change their meanings. So, *ekklesia* has evolved into the acceptable word *church* whose meaning, like that of any word, can be either comprehended or misunderstood.

In the Spanish language, *ekklesia* is not really translated, but it is latinized into *iglesia*, of similar sound, like *baptizo* is anglicized into *baptize* and *diakonos* is anglicized into *deacon*. Since *ekklesia* is not mistranslated in Spanish, do you think Spanish-speaking people have a better understanding of *ekklesia/iglesia*? I doubt it.

Some lay such stress on this mistranslation that they assert that Jesus did not establish a "church" but that, after the English language developed centuries later and that word was put in the Bible, the "church" concept was begun by men. However a hierarchal organization of believers developed centuries before the Scriptures were translated into English.

There is a reason for the abhorrence of the term *church* by sincere people. It is blamed for the mistaking of God's assembly as an organization or institution. When congregations began voluntarily cooperating in promoting projects in the middle of the century, a cry was raised against it.

That was no new cry, however. Our Movement was begun by Stone and the Campbells who found no freedom of conscience within the organized system of their church. The ruling structure within their church protected its system. After our Movement began, there was much debate about the propriety of a missionary society through which churches might voluntarily work together. Even though our congregations remained independent and autonomous (except for *editor-bishop* rule!), we developed the concept of elder authority. By demanding conformity, these men of authority could protect the sectarian boundaries of their independent congregations.

When some congregations began to cooperate voluntarily in projects too large for one church about mid-century, there was protest against it. Efforts to bind convictions resulted in another division among those of our heritage. In exorcising organization, we excised ourselves from others in Christ. Continued study led others to insist that the church can have no organized or institutional nature whatever, either universally or locally.

Correction of course is commendable. My writings have been aimed in that direction. I am aware, however, of the tendency of reformers, in fleeing from Rome, to overshoot Jerusalem and land in Babylon. If, in exorcising the organizational demon, we strangle

the church, we have not helped God's people.

Paul's corrective instructions concerning abuse of the love feast in Corinthian assemblies have led devout disciples to forbid the meal in a place of worship. Paul's censure of the abusive manner in which women were speaking in the Corinthian church has led us generally to deny them the privilege of praying or prophesying, which Paul conceded in Chapter 11. Corrective prohibitions in specific cases should not be interpreted as universal disfavor. It is sort of like getting the pole-cat out of the chicken house. If we are too zealous in making the needed correction, we may cause him to spray all the chickens with his repulsive perfume, thus bringing all the chickens into malodorous disfavor.

But here I come, like John Wayne to the rescue, addressing this matter again. No doubt, you are overjoyed that I am giving the final correction to this course so that you will have to worry about it no more! Laden with this tough assignment, I bemoan like Hamlet, "The time is out of joint; O cursed spite, that I was ever born to set it right!"

Now, back to the *ekklesia*. What is the *ekklesia* of God? Laying aside all descriptive metaphors like *body*, *household*, *assembly*, *flock*, or *temple*, what is its essence? **It is those saved in Christ.** They are the *ekklesia*, *those called out into Christ*. God's "church in the wilderness" was those called out of Egypt through Moses. (By the way, it was a highly organized group.) All those called out in Christ comprise the one, indivisible, catholic, universal, congregation, or church, of the Lord (redundancies for emphasis). In your vernacular, whatever word conveys that concept is acceptable, whether it may be *ekklesia*, *assembly*, *congregation*, or *church*. I will throw them all together as the *EACC* in the rest of this essay. Each time I mention *EACC*, just use the word you like.

Jesus Did It!

Jesus promised, "I will build my *EACC*," and he did it. To originate and get established is to institute. That which is originated and established is an institution, an established society. (Sorry about that! Check your dictionary.)

To organize is to arrange or form into a coherent unity or functioning whole. Didn't Jesus do that? Just one passage will make the point: "Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. And God has appointed in the *EACC* first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then workers of miracles, then healers, helpers, administrators, speakers in various kinds of tongues" (1 Cor. 12:27f). God made some assignments for coherent unity and function as a whole. That was the act or process of organizing or being organized. Those appointments were in the universal *EACC*, but they could function only locally.

Organization may be either for authority or function, or both. There is no pyramid of governmental organization in the *EACC* either universally or locally. No one has authority over others. However, forbidding any functional organization would limit the activity of the body, or *EACC*. In exorcising the structural hierarchical demon, we must not strangle the body. There can be no totally unorganized corporate function. Assemblies are bodily activities. Planning when and where to meet, who will prepare the Lord's Supper, and who will teach a lesson is organization. It is not structural, but functional. Paul's illustration of the body in 1 Corinthians 12 emphasizes the corporate work of individuals.

Emphasis on organization at the expense of other factors, like loss of individual initiative or freedom is *institutionalism*. Neither Jesus nor the apostles fostered institutionalism. To me it seems that the converse would be true also: the emphasis on lack of organization at the expense of other factors, like the right to cooperate in projects, would be a sort of reverse institutionalism. Neither Jesus nor the apostles denounced all forms of organization.

Since the *EACC* is indivisible, can there be a plurality of them? Can there be an *EACC* which is less than the whole? Yes, there is ample mention of them in the Scriptures. The seven *EACCs* of Asia were individual lampstands. Our favorite, "the *EACCs* of

Christ salute you" (Rom. 16:16), indicates that the saved in local groups were parts in the whole. They could be identified in cities and houses. While the singular word is used referring to the EACC in a city like Rome, the contextual plural usage identifies separate groups (16:5, 10, 11, 14, 15). These EACCs who sent their greetings comprised the EACC in Rome.

The particular disciples in local groups were identifiable so that they could know "when the whole EACC assembles" and whom to expect in their "wait for one another" (1 Cor. 14:23; 11:33). Diotrophes was putting people out of the local group, not the universal EACC (3 John 9f).

Elders were appointed, not as universal bishops, but to serve the specific EACC that appointed them. A small group may have a minimum of organization, but any planning of activity is organization. The larger the group meeting together, the more expedient overseers and planning of activities become.

Elders are not authority figures. They do not stand between the disciple and God. You may leave their flock of oversight in favor of another group, or you may form a new group.

In an effort to eliminate the organizational aspect of elders, some all but deny that bishops may be appointed. While it is true that appointment did not give a man pastoral qualities, those qualified to shepherd the flock were selected and appointed. In a small, intimate group, no elders may be needed. However, they are expedient in larger groups to help facilitate decent and orderly interactions. Lack of organization can evolve into disorganization like that in the Corinthian gatherings. Public appointment of men identifies them as capable teachers and spiritual counselors to whom others may go for help. Oversight by approved men is a safeguard against dominant personalities who may misdirect or divide the group. In a unorganized situation, an aggressive loud-mouth or two can be harder to deal with.

Deacons are chosen to serve the EACC in its corporate activities. Specific men were commissioned to serve tables in Jerusalem in an organized corporate ministry. All disciples are servants of Christ, but not all are servants of the EACC. These are selected with care, for they have the public approval of the group, shown in Biblical times by the laying on of hands in public ceremony.

Although there is no organizational pyramid of authority in EACCs, the local groups could and did commission men for specific functions. Paul and Barnabas were sent to Jerusalem by the EACC in Antioch, and the whole Jerusalem EACC sent men back with them (Acts 15). To the Philippians Paul wrote, "no EACC entered into partnership with me in giving and receiving except you only" (Phil. 4:15). This was corporate, rather than individual, action. If it had been individual action, Paul would have had to specify some way, like saying "except for some of you."

Jesus did not build an organization to add us to, but he saved people, thus adding them together as his EACC. Functioning groups in the EACC sometimes did organized work. They were components of Christ's institution to promote his cause.

A Surprise Ending

Now we have come to a surprise ending. For many years we have been trying to exorcise the wrong demon! Organization is not the problem except as we have made it one.

The triune demon of legalism, patternism, and restorationism is the real culprit. We have tried to define "Scriptural organization" by law through "command, example, and inference" so as to restore the "New Testament pattern." To this point in this discourse, I have been arguing from our traditional approach. I have used precedent to establish *law* where no law is given. No precedent is enjoined in Scripture on each and every EACC, but any organization of function is left to the judgment of expediency in each group and circumstance. Even though we have tried to read a lawful pattern into the Scriptures, there is no universal pattern or non-pattern. It has been a "disputing about words, which does no good,

but only ruins the hearers" (2 Tim. 2:14).

Where in Scripture is stress laid on an organizational pattern? If it were a life-and-death matter, don't you think a paragraph or two would have been written to describe and explain the necessary lawful pattern? All of our associations with other disciples are voluntary and free. Our relationship is pictured as a family, household, body, flock, temple, kingdom, assembly, or congregation. These all point to functioning together. The extent to which our activities are individual or corporate is nowhere specified. Nor can we ascertain any necessary and exclusive pattern. In searching for that lawful pattern so long, it seems that we would have long ago discovered that there is none. Forms and patterns were Mosaic, not Christian.

While debating what the "law" specifies, what the "pattern" is, and when it is violated and restored, our divisions have multiplied. We have never agreed on what is *lawful*, what the *pattern* is, or when it has been *restored*. So legalism, patternism, and restorationism are the divisive demons to be cast out.

"For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is of any avail, but faith working through love" (Gal. 5:6). Forms are not what counts. I believe that Paul would also agree, "For in Christ Jesus neither organization or lack of organization is of any avail, but faith working through love." We work both in private ministries and in bodily functions.

We are free to choose whether to let our "faith working through love" be in association with a simple house EACC or in one with thousands of others whose functions are highly organized, even with some vocational evangelists and pastors being financially supported (1 Tim. 5:17f; 1 Cor. 9). All such associations are voluntary.

With the understanding that the EACC is the saved people, there is no cause to think of it as an organized system of religion which becomes the route to heaven. People are not saved by proper organization or lack of it. The EACC is not the route, but the people on the journey. It is not a hierarchical system, but functioning disciples. []