

In Vain Do They Worship Me

A Scriptural Study of Mark 7:6-9

Tracing the tradition of men from the Pharisees back to Eden, and forward into the church

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Preface

Before you read what follows — and parts of it will use plain, sometimes pointed, language, because that is how scripture itself puts it — we want you to know the heart behind it, because that matters more than anything else we could say.

We love our brothers and sisters in Christ. All of them. This study is not written to tear down, to declare one church superior and another beneath it, or to point a judgmental finger at any congregation, minister, or believer sincerely serving the Lord. If anything in these pages ever reads that way, we have failed to say what we actually mean.

God's own heart, as scripture reveals it, is larger than any one fellowship. Paul writes of the body of Christ:

"From whom the whole body fitly joined together and compacted by that which every joint supplieth, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part, maketh increase of the body unto the edifying of itself in love." — Ephesians 4:16

One body, many joints, many parts — each supplying something the others do not. We believe that is exactly what we see across the many Christian ministries and congregations in the world today: different languages, cultures, generations, and callings, each reaching people that no single church, however faithful, could reach alone. We do not doubt that God is present and active in that work, drawing every one of those congregations toward the day Jesus himself prayed for — "that they all may be one" (John 17:21).

When Jesus's own disciples once tried to stop a man from ministering in his name simply because "he followeth not with us," Jesus corrected them plainly:

"Forbid him not: for he that is not against us is for us." — Luke 9:50

And when his disciples wanted to pull up what looked to them like weeds growing among the wheat, he told them to wait:

"Let both grow together until the harvest." — Matthew 13:30

We take that as instruction for us as much as for them. Paul asks the very question we want to ask of ourselves before we ask it of anyone else: "Who art thou that judgest another man's servant? to his own master he standeth or falleth" (Romans 14:4). And when a different ministry, under different leadership, was raised up to reach people he himself was not reaching, Paul did not compete with it — he shook hands with it: "they gave to me and Barnabas the right hands of fellowship" (Galatians 2:9). He warns us plainly, too, against comparing ourselves, ministry to ministry, ours against another's — "they measuring themselves by themselves, and comparing themselves among themselves, are not wise" (2 Corinthians 10:12).

So this is how we mean to go forward: within our own household, in the closeness of "the spirit of meekness" (Galatians 6:1), holding one another to the fullest light we have together. And with brothers and sisters in other congregations, in the wider patience of Romans 14 — receiving, not disputing (Romans 14:1) — sharing what we have found in scripture, "it is written," without ever placing "a stumblingblock or an occasion to fall in his brother's way" (Romans 14:13).

What follows in this study is offered in exactly that spirit: sharing, not judging; warning, where scripture itself warns, but always toward edifying rather than dividing.

Anchor Passage

Mark 7:6 *He answered and said unto them, Well hath Esaias prophesied of you hypocrites, as it is written, This people honoureth me with their lips, but their heart is far from me. 7:7 Howbeit in vain do they worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men. 7:8 For laying aside the commandment of God, ye hold the tradition of men, as the washing of pots and cups: and many other such like things ye do. 7:9 And he said unto them, Full well ye reject the commandment of God, that ye may keep your own tradition.*

Chapter 1: Main Theme

A. The Whole Encounter — Mark 7:1-23

This study takes its title from four verses, but those four verses are Jesus's *verdict*, not the whole case. To hear the verdict rightly, the whole encounter has to be read first — what triggered it, what Jesus said in answer, and what he then went on to teach the crowd once the leaders had been dealt with.

Mark 7:1 *Then came together unto him the Pharisees, and certain of the scribes, which came from Jerusalem. 7:2 And when they saw some of his disciples eat bread with defiled, that is to say, with unwashen, hands, they found fault. 7:3 For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, except they wash their hands oft, eat not, holding the tradition of the elders. 7:4 And when they come from the market, except they wash, they eat not. And many other things there be, which they have received to hold, as the washing of cups, and pots, brasen vessels, and of tables. 7:5 Then the Pharisees and scribes asked him, Why walk not thy disciples according to the tradition of the elders, but eat bread with unwashen hands?*

Notice first who is asking, and from where. This is not a stray objection from a hostile crowd — it is “the Pharisees, and certain of the scribes, which came from Jerusalem” (v.1), a delegation from the nation’s own recognized religious center, sent to inspect. Jesus himself elsewhere concedes their seat of authority plainly: “The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses’ seat: all therefore whatsoever they bid you observe, that observe and do” (Matthew 23:2-3). These are not outsiders attacking God’s people from beyond the fold. They are God’s own appointed teachers, the recognized custodians of the Law, confronting Jesus on their own home ground of expertise. That is exactly what makes what follows so serious. This is not a study about paganism corrupting Israel from without; it is a study about God’s own appointed leadership leading God’s own people into vain worship from within — the pattern this whole study exists to trace.

The complaint itself is worth being precise about, because it is easy to misread as a hygiene objection. It was not. Verses 3-4 tell us plainly that this washing was “the tradition of the elders” — a body of practice, additional to and distinct from the written Law of Moses, that had come to bind Israel’s daily

life as though it carried the same weight as scripture itself. Jesus answers accordingly — not by defending his disciples' hygiene, but by naming exactly what kind of authority that tradition was actually claiming for itself:

Mark 7:6 He answered and said unto them, Well hath Esaias prophesied of you hypocrites, as it is written, This people honoureth me with their lips, but their heart is far from me. **7:7** Howbeit in vain do they worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men. **7:8** For laying aside the commandment of God, ye hold the tradition of men, as the washing of pots and cups: and many other such like things ye do. **7:9** And he said unto them, Full well ye reject the commandment of God, that ye may keep your own tradition.

This is the study's anchor text, but notice that Jesus does not leave it as a general accusation. He reaches immediately for a specific, concrete case — not a hypothetical, but a real practice his hearers would have recognized at once:

Mark 7:10 For Moses said, Honour thy father and thy mother; and, Whoso curseth father or mother, let him die the death: **7:11** But ye say, If a man shall say to his father or mother, It is Corban, that is to say, a gift, by whatsoever thou mightest be profited by me; he shall be free. **7:12** And ye suffer him no more to do ought for his father or his mother; **7:13** Making the word of God of none effect through your tradition, which ye have delivered: and many such like things do ye.

Corban meant a vow dedicating something to God's use. The tradition Jesus names had turned that vow into a legal loophole: a son could declare his resources "Corban" and be released, by the tradition's own ruling, from the plain, direct commandment to honor and support his parents — one of the Ten Commandments themselves. This is the mechanism this whole study will keep coming back to. The danger of the tradition of men is not merely that it adds extra rules alongside scripture. It is that, left unchecked, it can be used to *cancel* scripture outright, while still wearing the appearance of scrupulous devotion. Verse 13 states the result as plainly as it can be stated: "making the word of God of none effect."

Having answered the leaders, Jesus turns from the private exchange to the crowd, and widens the lesson into something that applies far beyond hand-washing:

Mark 7:14 And when he had called all the people unto him, he said unto them, Hearken unto me every one of you, and understand: **7:15** There is nothing from without a man, that entering into him can defile him: but the things which come out of him, those are they that defile the man.

And then, in private, to his own disciples, plainer still:

Mark 7:17 And when he was entered into the house from the people, his disciples asked him concerning the parable. **7:18** And he saith unto them, Are ye so without understanding also? Do ye not perceive, that whatsoever thing from without entereth into the man, it cannot defile him; **7:19** Because it entereth not into his heart, but into the belly, and goeth out into the draught, purging all meats? **7:20** And he said, That which cometh out of the man, that defileth the man. **7:21** For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders, **7:22** Thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, lasciviousness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness: **7:23** All these evil things come from within, and defile the man.

This is the full shape of the encounter, and it matters that this study reads it whole rather than stopping at the verdict in vv.6-9. The tradition of the elders had built an entire system of purity around what touches a man from the outside — unwashed hands, market goods, cups, pots, tables. Jesus does not merely say that system is unauthorized; he relocates the entire question of defilement to a place that system cannot reach at all: the heart. That is the real diagnosis behind the verdict, and it is the same diagnosis the next section will show Jesus was sent, from the very start of his ministry, to address.

B. Jesus's Mission Statement — Luke 4:17-21

If Mark 7 is the diagnosis, Luke 4 is the mission statement — given not in the heat of confrontation, but at the very outset of Jesus's public ministry, in his own hometown synagogue, in his own chosen words.

Luke 4:17 *And there was delivered unto him the book of the prophet Esaias. And when he had opened the book, he found the place where it was written, 4:18 The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; he hath sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised, 4:19 To preach the acceptable year of the Lord. 4:20 And he closed the book, and he gave it again to the minister, and sat down. And the eyes of all them that were in the synagogue were fastened on him. 4:21 And he began to say unto them, This day is this scripture fulfilled in your ears.*

Jesus is quoting Isaiah 61:1-2 — and reading it, in that moment, as his own job description. It is worth taking each phrase on its own terms rather than passing over it as a single block, because each one turns out to answer directly to what Mark 7 has just diagnosed.

“To preach the gospel to the poor.” Certainly the materially poor are not excluded — scripture never treats poverty as unimportant to God. But this study's particular interest is the poverty a religious system produces: a people taught that acceptance depends on a performance they can never quite complete. That is a poverty no amount of money relieves.

“To heal the brokenhearted.” Broken by what, if not only by ordinary grief? A system that measures a person by compliance with an ever-expanding fence of added rules — and always finds them short — breaks hearts as surely as any other loss.

“To preach deliverance to the captives.” Captive to what? Certainly to sin, in the plain sense scripture uses elsewhere — “whosoever committeth sin is the servant of sin” (John 8:34). But read next to Mark 7, there is a second, more particular captivity in view: bondage to a system of tradition that had wrapped itself around the whole of daily life — hands, cups, pots, tables — until scripture's own actual commandments were the thing being pushed aside to make room for it.

“And recovering of sight to the blind.” Blind to what? This is not a rhetorical stretch — it is the exact word Jesus's own parallel account of the Mark 7 encounter uses for these same leaders. In Matthew's record of this same confrontation, Jesus says of the Pharisees plainly: “Let them alone: they be blind leaders of the blind. And if the blind lead the blind, both shall fall into the ditch” (Matthew 15:14). The blindness Luke 4 promises to cure is precisely the blindness Matthew 15 diagnoses in Israel's own teachers — a leadership that could not see past its own tradition to the actual heart of God's law, and so could not lead anyone else to see it either.

“To set at liberty them that are bruised.” Bruised how? Jesus names the mechanism himself, later, of these same leaders: “For they bind heavy burdens and grievous to be borne, and lay them on men's

shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with one of their fingers” (Matthew 23:4). A system of added rules, enforced as though it carried God’s own authority, does not merely inconvenience people — it bruises them, the way any weight too heavy to carry bruises the shoulder made to bear it. When Jesus later heals a woman bowed together for eighteen years, and is challenged for doing it on the sabbath, the full account shows exactly what “loosed” means in his own mouth:

Luke 13:11 *And, behold, there was a woman which had a spirit of infirmity eighteen years, and was bowed together, and could in no wise lift up herself. 13:12* *And when Jesus saw her, he called her to him, and said unto her, Woman, thou art loosed from thine infirmity. 13:13* *And he laid his hands on her: and immediately she was made straight, and glorified God. 13:14* *And the ruler of the synagogue answered with indignation, because that Jesus had healed on the sabbath day, and said unto the people, There are six days in which men ought to work: in them therefore come and be healed, and not on the sabbath day. 13:15* *The Lord then answered him, and said, Thou hypocrite, doth not each one of you on the sabbath loose his ox or his ass from the stall, and lead him away to watering? 13:16* *And ought not this woman, being a daughter of Abraham, whom Satan hath bound, lo, these eighteen years, be loosed from this bond on the sabbath day?*

Notice, too, that when the ruler of the synagogue objects, Jesus’s answer to him reaches for the very word this study’s anchor text opened with — “hypocrite” (v.15) — the same charge Mark 7:6 levels at the scribes and Pharisees, now aimed at a leader defending tradition over an actual bound and suffering woman. Loosed. Set at liberty. The same word, the same mission, acted out in a single body.

“To preach the acceptable year of the Lord.” This phrase reaches back to Leviticus 25 — the Year of Jubilee, the appointed year of release, when debts were cancelled, land restored, and captives freed. It is also worth noticing what Jesus does *not* read. Isaiah 61:2 continues, in its full original context, into “the day of vengeance of our God” — but Jesus closes the book mid-verse, before that clause. He announces the year of release. The day of reckoning is not what this moment, at the start of his ministry, was sent to proclaim.

Read together, Luke 4:17-21 is not a general statement of compassion. Set directly against Mark 7, it reads as a point-by-point answer to exactly what the tradition of men had done to God’s people: it had impoverished them, broken them, held them captive, blinded them, and bruised them — and Jesus’s own stated mission, from his very first sermon, was to undo precisely that. This is the thesis this whole study is going to trace out in full: Jesus’s ministry is not simply *against* the scribes and Pharisees as individuals. It is *for* the very people their tradition had worn down, and everything he does moves in the opposite direction from what that tradition had produced.

The Sermon on the Mount — A Brief Word

One passage deserves at least a brief mention here, even though it gets the full treatment in Chapter 2 rather than here. Where Mark 7 diagnoses the problem and Luke 4 announces the remedy, the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7) is where Jesus lays out, positively and at length, what God’s actual heart and desire for his people looks like in practice — repeatedly taking the scribal handling of the Law (“Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time...”) and driving past it to the heart-level righteousness that was there all along (Matthew 5:21-48). Jesus states the stakes of this contrast in a single verse near the sermon’s opening: “For I say unto you, That except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:20). That verse alone is worth an entire chapter on its own, and it gets one, next. For now, it

is enough to note that the Sermon on the Mount belongs in the same frame as Mark 7 and Luke 4 — diagnosis, remedy, and now the positive pattern of life those first two make room for. This is the tension this chapter has been building: a people worn down by tradition, a mission announced to undo it. The Sermon on the Mount is where Jesus actually does it.

Defining “the Tradition of Men”

Before going further, this study needs a working definition of its own central term, because “tradition” is not, by itself, a dirty word in scripture. Paul uses the same Greek word (*paradosis*, “that which is handed down”) approvingly of his own teaching: “hold the traditions which ye have been taught, whether by word, or our epistle” (2 Thessalonians 2:15); “keep the ordinances, as I delivered them to you” (1 Corinthians 11:2, the same word again). So the problem this study is naming is not tradition as such — every community, including the earliest church, hands things down. The problem is a specific kind of tradition, and Mark 7 itself supplies the test, in the leaders’ own words and Jesus’s own answer.

Two conditions, both present in the passage itself, mark the difference:

First, it is tradition “taught for doctrines” (v.7) — that is, human custom presented and enforced with the same binding authority as God’s own command, rather than held for what it actually is. The tradition of the elders was not offered to Israel as good advice from wise teachers; it was imposed as though refusing it were itself sin.

Second, and more seriously, it is tradition that ends up *displacing* the commandment it claims only to supplement. Jesus’s own language for this, three times in six verses, only grows more direct: “laying aside the commandment of God” (v.8), “reject the commandment of God, that ye may keep your own tradition” (v.9), “making the word of God of none effect through your tradition” (v.13). The Corban example is the proof case: a tradition that began, presumably, as a way of honoring vows to God had grown, by Jesus’s day, into a mechanism for legally escaping one of the Ten Commandments.

That two-part test — bound with God’s own authority, and capable of overriding God’s own word — is the working definition this study will carry forward. It is also, as later chapters will trace, a pattern that did not begin with the Pharisees and did not end with them either.

Chapter 2: The Sermon on the Mount — God’s Heart, Not Man’s Tradition

Chapter 1 ended on a tension: a people worn down by the tradition of men — impoverished, brokenhearted, captive, blind, bruised (Luke 4:18) — and a Man who stood up in his own hometown synagogue and announced that undoing exactly that was what he had been sent to do. This chapter is where that announcement stops being a statement of intent and becomes an act. The Sermon on the Mount is Jesus doing, in public, at length, and in his own words, precisely what Luke 4 said he came to do — and doing it, point for point, as the corrective to what Mark 7 diagnosed.

Setting: A Teacher Doing What He Was Sent to Do

Matthew places the sermon immediately after summarizing the pattern of Jesus's early ministry: "teaching in their synagogues, and preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing all manner of sickness" (Matthew 4:23) — the same threefold description, in miniature, as the Luke 4 mission statement already examined. Then:

Matthew 5:1 *And seeing the multitudes, he went up into a mountain: and when he was set, his disciples came unto him: 5:2 And he opened his mouth, and taught them, saying,*

The posture matters. "When he was set" — sitting — was the recognized posture of a teacher delivering authoritative instruction, not a casual remark in passing. Jesus takes exactly the posture Israel's own recognized teachers took. What he says from that seat is where this chapter's real interest lies, because it is not a new law bolted onto the old one. It is God's own heart for his people, restated after generations of having been buried under the tradition of men.

The Beatitudes: Preaching Good News to the Very People Named in the Mission

The sermon does not open with commands. It opens with blessing — and the people it blesses are, almost point for point, the people Luke 4:18 already named:

Matthew 5:3 *Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. 5:4 Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted. 5:5 Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth. 5:6 Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled. 5:7 Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy. 5:8 Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God. 5:9 Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God. 5:10 Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness' sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

"Poor in spirit" answers directly to "preach the gospel to the poor." "They that mourn" answers directly to "heal the brokenhearted." This is not a loose thematic echo; it is Jesus opening his own signature sermon by pronouncing blessing on the very categories of person his own mission statement named — the poor, the mourning, the meek, those hungering for a righteousness the existing system had never actually delivered. Where the tradition of men had produced people bowed down and worn out, Jesus's first recorded word to them is not a new demand. It is a blessing.

Not to Destroy, but to Fulfil: The Standard Restated

Jesus is careful, early, to head off a misunderstanding. What follows is not a rejection of God's law — it is a recovery of it from what tradition had made of it:

Matthew 5:17 *Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil.*

And then the verse already flagged in Chapter 1, now given its full weight:

Matthew 5:20 *For I say unto you, That except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven.*

This is not Jesus setting a harder bar than the Law required. It is Jesus naming exactly what Mark 7 already diagnosed: the scribes and Pharisees had a righteousness, but it was a righteousness of hand-washing, cups, and pots — external, tradition-bound, and, in the Corban case, capable of overriding God's own commandment. Exceeding that righteousness does not mean adding more rules on top of theirs. As the rest of the sermon shows, it means something else entirely.

“Ye Have Heard... But I Say Unto You”: Bringing Them Back to Right Doctrine

Six times in the rest of Matthew 5, Jesus takes something “said by them of old time” — the received, traditional handling of the Law — and drives past its external boundary to what God actually intended by it. Two examples carry the pattern clearly enough for the rest to be summarized:

Matthew 5:21 *Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not kill; and whosoever shall kill shall be in danger of the judgment: 5:22 But I say unto you, That whosoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment...*

Matthew 5:43 *Ye have heard that it hath been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbour, and hate thine enemy. 5:44 But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you;*

The traditional handling of “thou shalt not kill” had narrowed the commandment to the physical act alone — satisfied so long as no blow was struck. Jesus relocates it to the heart, where the killing actually begins. The traditional handling of “love thy neighbour” had narrowed itself even further, adding a clause scripture never gave it — “hate thine enemy” — and Jesus removes the addition outright. This is the same mechanism named in Mark 7:13, “making the word of God of none effect through your tradition,” now being reversed in real time, commandment by commandment. The same pattern runs through the sermon's treatment of adultery (5:27-28), divorce, oaths, and retaliation (5:31-42). Each case follows the same shape: not a stricter law, but the same law's actual, original intent, recovered from what generations of tradition had worn it down to. The section closes on a standard no tradition could ever produce:

Matthew 5:48 *Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect.*

Not Like the Hypocrites: The Same Word, Turned Around

Matthew 6 opens with a direct echo of the study's own anchor text. Mark 7:6 named the scribes and Pharisees “hypocrites.” Jesus now uses the identical word to warn his own hearers away from the same disease, whoever practices it:

Matthew 6:1 *Take heed that ye do not your alms before men, to be seen of them: otherwise ye have no reward of your Father which is in heaven. 6:2 Therefore when thou doest thine alms, do not sound a trumpet before thee, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may have glory of men. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward.*

The same charge is repeated for prayer (6:5-6) and fasting (6:16-18): outward religious performance, calculated for an audience, is precisely the disease Mark 7 diagnosed in Israel's own leadership — worship that honors God “with the lips” while the heart is elsewhere. Jesus's remedy in each case is the same: take the act out of public view entirely, and address it instead to someone who cannot be performed for:

Matthew 6:6 But thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret; and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly.

Our Father: The Positive Alternative to Vain Worship

This is the turn this chapter has been building to. The tradition of men had turned worship into a transaction — the right external performance, delivered on schedule, in front of the right witnesses. Jesus does not counter that system with a better performance. He replaces the whole framework with a relationship, and gives his hearers the words for it directly:

Matthew 6:9 After this manner therefore pray ye: Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name. **6:10** Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven. **6:11** Give us this day our daily bread. **6:12** And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. **6:13** And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil: For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen.

Count how many times “Father” has already appeared by this point in the sermon — 5:16, 5:45, 5:48, 6:1, 6:4, 6:6, and now the model prayer itself opens with it. This is not incidental vocabulary. Mark 7:6-7’s verdict was that the tradition of men had produced worship that honored God “with the lips” while the heart stayed distant — worship offered to a distant authority to be appeased through correct procedure. Jesus’s own teaching offers the opposite picture entirely: God addressed as Father, approached directly, without a system of intermediary tradition standing in between. This is the resolution Chapter 1 was pointing toward. In vain do they worship me, Jesus had said of the old pattern. Here is what worship looks like when it is not in vain.

Trusting the Father, Not Anxious Performance

The Father-theme continues directly into practical anxiety about provision:

Matthew 6:31 Therefore take no thought, saying, What shall we eat? or, What shall we drink? or, Wherewithal shall we be clothed? **6:32** (For after all these things do the Gentiles seek:) for your heavenly Father knoweth that ye have need of all these things.

A system built on rule-compliance produces anxious scrupulosity — never quite certain the requirement has been met. A relationship with a Father who already knows what is needed produces something else: trust. This is not a minor pastoral aside; it is the practical outworking of everything the chapter has traced so far.

Ask, and It Shall Be Given: A Father Who Does Not Withhold

Near the sermon’s close, Jesus returns to the Father-picture once more, and the contrast with the Corban tradition from Mark 7 is difficult to miss:

Matthew 7:9 Or what man is there of you, whom if his son ask bread, will he give him a stone? **7:10** Or if he ask a fish, will he give him a serpent? **7:11** If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children, how much more shall your Father which is in heaven give good things to them that ask him?

Recall the Corban tradition (Mark 7:11-12): a son declaring his resources off-limits to his own parents, in the name of religious devotion, and being upheld by tradition for doing it. Matthew 7:11 pictures the exact opposite kind of father — one who does not withhold, who gives good gifts freely to his own children when they ask. Whether or not this contrast was consciously intended, it lands as a direct answer to the very mechanism Mark 7 exposed: a human tradition that let a son withhold from his father, set against a Father who would never withhold from his own children.

Closing: Taught with Authority, Not as the Scribes

Matthew closes the sermon with the crowd's own verdict, and it is the exact antithesis of where this study began:

Matthew 7:28 *And it came to pass, when Jesus had ended these sayings, the people were astonished at his doctrine: 7:29 For he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.*

Mark 7 opened this study with scribes who “sit in Moses’ seat” (Matthew 23:2), teaching tradition as though it carried God’s own authority, and in the Corban case using that borrowed authority to nullify God’s actual word. Matthew 7:29 closes this chapter with a Teacher who needed no borrowed authority at all — and whose hearers could tell the difference. That is the resolution this chapter set out to show: not a rival system of rules, but God’s own heart for his people, restated plainly, and delivered by the one Voice with the actual authority to give it.

Chapter 3: Old Testament History — Where the Tradition of Men Crept In

Mark 7 might read as though the tradition of men was a purely Second Temple problem — something the scribes and Pharisees invented in the few centuries before Jesus. Scripture’s own record says otherwise. The same basic pattern — God gives a clear word, that word is neglected or added to, and man-made religion fills the space it leaves — runs through the Old Testament long before it reaches the Pharisees. This chapter traces that pattern from the patriarchs forward, to see where it actually starts and how it develops.

Even in the Patriarchs’ Own House

The pattern is visible before there is even a written Law to violate. When Jacob’s household leaves Laban, Rachel takes something with her that has no place in the family of promise:

Genesis 31:19 *And Laban went to shear his sheep: and Rachel had stolen the images that were her father’s.*

Those “images” were *teraphim* — household gods, a piece of ordinary Mesopotamian religious custom carried along inside the covenant family without comment or correction, until Jacob himself finally deals with it years later:

Genesis 35:2 *Then Jacob said unto his household, and to all that were with him, Put away the strange gods that are among you, and be clean, and change your garments: 35:4 And they gave unto Jacob all the strange gods which were in their hand, and all their earrings which were in their ears; and Jacob hid them under the oak which was by Shechem.*

Notice what this means: foreign religious custom had already worked its way into the household of Abraham's own grandson, quietly enough that it took a direct command from Jacob to surface and remove it. This is the same basic shape the rest of this chapter is going to keep finding — inherited human custom, sitting alongside true worship of God, until someone finally names it and puts it away. The patriarchs are not exempt from the pattern. If anything, they are where the study finds it first.

The Mosaic Law: God's Own Cure

At Sinai, God does not merely add commandments. He builds a specific safeguard against exactly what had already happened in Jacob's household — a fixed, written standard, with an explicit prohibition against tampering with it in either direction:

Deuteronomy 4:2 *Ye shall not add unto the word which I command you, neither shall ye diminish ought from it, that ye may keep the commandments of the LORD your God which I command you.*

Deuteronomy 12:32 *What thing soever I command you, observe to do it: thou shalt not add thereto, nor diminish from it.*

This is worth pausing on, because it names the disease this whole study is tracing before the disease has fully developed. Adding to God's word and taking away from it are treated here as the same offense, and both are forbidden in the same breath the Law itself is given. The Mosaic Law was not only a code of conduct; it was God's own cure for the drift Genesis had already shown was possible. The tragedy the rest of this chapter traces is how quickly that cure stopped being applied.

The Cure Doesn't Hold: Judges

The book of Judges opens with a warning about exactly how fast this can happen:

Judges 2:10 *And also all that generation were gathered unto their fathers: and there arose another generation after them, which knew not the LORD, nor yet the works which he had done for Israel.*

One generation. That is all it took for the direct knowledge of God's own acts and God's own word to fail to transmit — and the text says plainly what filled the vacuum: "And the children of Israel did evil in the sight of the LORD, and served Baalim" (Judges 2:11). The book's own refrain, repeated at its beginning and its end, names the underlying condition directly:

Judges 17:6 *In those days there was no king in Israel, but every man did that which was right in his own eyes.*

The story that refrain introduces is worth knowing in some detail, because it is a small, complete portrait of religion made up as it goes:

Judges 17:5 *And the man Micah had an house of gods, and made an ephod, and teraphim, and consecrated one of his sons, who became his priest.*

Micah later hires a traveling Levite to be his personal priest instead, and says of the arrangement: “Now know I that the LORD will do me good, seeing I have a Levite to my priest” (Judges 17:13). Notice the shape of that confidence — an entirely self-styled system of worship, invented rather than commanded, and its own inventor is nonetheless certain it will secure God’s blessing. That is not cynicism. It is sincere religion built on human custom instead of God’s actual word, which is precisely the danger Deuteronomy 4:2 had tried to fence off in advance.

Kings Who Devised Their Own Worship

The pattern reaches its clearest and most deliberate form once Israel has kings, and one case in particular reads almost like a rehearsal for Mark 7. After the kingdom splits, Jeroboam faces a political problem: if the northern tribes keep going up to Jerusalem to worship, as the Law required, their loyalty may drift back to the house of David. His solution is worship, engineered on purpose:

1 Kings 12:28 *Whereupon the king took counsel, and made two calves of gold, and said unto them, It is too much for you to go up to Jerusalem: behold thy gods, O Israel, which brought thee up out of the land of Egypt. 12:31 And he made an house of high places, and made priests of the lowest of the people, which were not of the sons of Levi. 12:33 ...in the month which he had devised of his own heart; and ordained a feast unto the children of Israel: and he offered upon the altar...*

“In the month which he had devised of his own heart.” Scripture could not be more explicit that this religious calendar, this priesthood, this whole system of worship, came from a man’s own invention rather than God’s command — done for a stated political reason, and yet presented to the nation as legitimate worship of the God who brought them out of Egypt. This is Mark 7’s disease in an earlier, cruder form: the commandments of men, taught as though they carried God’s own authority.

Scripture’s own later verdict on where this led is worth reading directly, because it does not treat this as a minor lapse:

2 Kings 17:7 *For so it was, that the children of Israel had sinned against the LORD their God... 17:8 And walked in the statutes of the heathen, whom the LORD cast out from before the children of Israel, and of the kings of Israel, which they had made. 17:19 Also Judah kept not the commandments of the LORD their God, but walked in the statutes of Israel which they made.*

“The statutes of Israel which they made.” Not statutes God gave and Israel broke — statutes Israel itself manufactured, and then followed as though they were binding. 2 Kings names this, not idolatry alone, as the reason the northern kingdom fell to Assyria — and notes that Judah followed the same pattern. Man-made religious tradition is not treated here as a lesser sin than idol worship. It is named as the mechanism of the nation’s own destruction.

Even faithful reform could not undo how far this had gone. Generations later, a king actually loyal to God discovers just how completely the written Law itself had been lost from view:

2 Kings 22:8 *And Hilkiyah the high priest said unto Shaphan the scribe, I have found the book of the law in the house of the LORD. 22:11 And it came to pass, when the king had heard the words of the book of the law, that he rent his clothes.*

Moses himself had commanded that the Law be read publicly, on a fixed schedule, precisely so it could never simply be forgotten:

Deuteronomy 31:10 *And Moses commanded them, saying, At the end of every seven years, in the solemnity of the year of release, in the feast of tabernacles, 31:11 When all Israel is come to appear before the LORD thy God in the place which he shall choose, thou shalt read this law before all Israel in their hearing. 31:12 Gather the people together, men, and women, and children, and thy stranger that is within thy gates, that they may hear, and that they may learn, and fear the LORD your God, and observe to do all the words of this law: 31:13 And that their children, which have not known any thing, may hear, and learn to fear the LORD your God, as long as ye live in the land whither ye go over Jordan to possess it.*

Josiah's own grief at hearing those very words, generations later, is its own kind of testimony: by his day, the temple's own copy of God's actual word had gone missing long enough, amid generations of substitute religion, that hearing it read felt like discovering something entirely new. The written Word had not been contradicted so much as quietly buried under everything that had grown up around it.

Isaiah's Diagnosis — The Same Verdict, Centuries Early

This chapter's whole point converges in a single verse this study has already met, though not yet in its own original setting. Centuries before Mark 7, Isaiah delivers the exact diagnosis Jesus will later quote word for word:

Isaiah 29:13 *Wherefore the Lord said, Forasmuch as this people draw near me with their mouth, and with their lips do honour me, but have removed their heart far from me, and their fear toward me is taught by the precept of men:*

This is not a minor detail. It means the confrontation in Mark 7 is not Jesus discovering a new problem in Israel's religion. It is Jesus naming an old one, using the very words of a prophet Israel had already been given, for a disease that had already been fully diagnosed hundreds of years earlier and never actually cured. Everything this chapter has traced — the teraphim in Jacob's household, Micah's self-styled priesthood, Jeroboam's invented feast, the statutes "which they made," the lost book of the Law — is the case history behind Isaiah's one-sentence verdict, which Jesus simply reads back to the generation that inherited it.

From Exile to the Tradition of the Elders

What happens between Isaiah and Jesus moves partly outside scripture's own direct narrative, so it is worth being clear about what is being claimed here and on what basis, per this study's own method: scripture itself records the return from exile under Ezra and Nehemiah as another attempt at the same cure Deuteronomy 4:2 had originally supplied — the Law read aloud, publicly, to a returned people (Nehemiah 8:1-3, 8), with the whole assembly weeping to hear it (Nehemiah 8:9). That much is scripture's own record. What happened over the centuries after that — the Second Temple period's gradual development of an oral body of interpretation and application around the written Law, eventually formalized long after Jesus's own lifetime as the Mishnah — is historical background, not scriptural narrative, and this study holds it at that lower evidentiary weight accordingly. But it is well-attested background, and it is exactly what Mark 7:3 is describing when it names "the tradition of the elders" as an already-established, binding body of practice by Jesus's day. The specific historical path is outside scripture's own witness; the pattern that produced it is not. It is the same pattern this chapter

has traced from Jacob's household onward: a clear word from God, followed by generations of addition, until the addition itself is taught "for doctrines" (Mark 7:7) in the original word's place.

Closing: A Pattern, Not an Incident

Read straight through, the Old Testament's own record is not a single lapse this study can treat as unfortunate but isolated. It is a repeating cycle: a clear word from God, a generation that fails to keep it central, man-made religious custom rising to fill the space, and — sooner or later — a corrective voice naming what has happened. Jacob names it in his own household. Deuteronomy fences against it in advance. Judges shows how fast it returns once the fence is unattended. Jeroboam institutionalizes it. Kings and Chronicles name it as the cause of national judgment. Isaiah diagnoses it in a single verse. And Jesus, in Mark 7, delivers the same diagnosis one final time, to the generation that had built the most elaborate version of it yet. This is not a study of one bad century. It is a study of what happens, repeatedly, whenever God's people stop treating God's own word as sufficient on its own — and it is the same pattern this chapter will now show did not stop with the Pharisees either.

Chapter 4: The Same Pattern After Pentecost

Pentecost does not end the cycle Chapter 3 traced. It moves it indoors. Within a generation of the resurrection, the same dynamic Mark 7 diagnosed — human tradition, taught with binding authority, laid alongside or over God's actual word — resurfaces inside the church itself, and the rest of the New Testament spends real energy naming and resisting it. This chapter traces that recurrence through Acts and the epistles, then — at a lower evidentiary weight, as background rather than scripture — through the centuries of church history since.

The Judaizers: The Pattern's First Appearance Inside the Church

The first real crisis the young church faces is not persecution from outside but a demand for compliance from within:

Acts 15:1 *And certain men which came down from Judaea taught the brethren, and said, Except ye be circumcised after the manner of Moses, ye cannot be saved. 15:5* *But there rose up certain of the sect of the Pharisees which believed, saying, That it was needful to circumcise them, and to command them to keep the law of Moses.*

Notice who is named in verse 5. Pharisees — the very group Mark 7 diagnosed — do not vanish from this study once they believe on Christ. Some of them bring the same instinct with them into the church: take something God did not require as a condition of salvation, and teach it as though he had. Peter's own response at the Jerusalem council reaches for exactly the imagery this study has already used:

Acts 15:10 *Now therefore why tempt ye God, to put a yoke upon the neck of the disciples, which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear?*

A yoke neither generation could bear — the same weight Matthew 23:4 already named as what the scribes and Pharisees "bind... and lay... on men's shoulders" (Chapter 2). The council's own resolution is deliberately, carefully restrained:

Acts 15:28 *For it seemed good to the Holy Ghost, and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things;*

“No greater burden than these necessary things.” This is the apostolic church consciously refusing to do what Israel’s own leadership had done — refusing to let a human requirement, however sincerely meant, become a binding addition to what God had actually commanded.

Paul’s Own Testimony and Warnings

Paul is uniquely positioned to speak to this danger, because he names himself as a former case study of it:

Galatians 1:14 *And profited in the Jews’ religion above many my equals in mine own nation, being more exceedingly zealous of the traditions of my fathers.*

Traditions of my fathers — the same word, *paradosis*, this study has already traced back to “the tradition of the elders” in Mark 7:3. Paul does not describe his former zeal for it as a virtue he later refined; he describes it as something his conversion moved him away from. And when he sees the same pattern threatening a church he planted, his language echoes this study’s own anchor text directly:

Galatians 4:10 *Ye observe days, and months, and times, and years.* **4:11** *I am afraid of you, lest I have bestowed upon you labour in vain.*

Labour... in vain. The same word Jesus used of the scribes and Pharisees’ own worship (Mark 7:7) is now the word Paul fears for a Gentile church being pulled toward the same kind of externally-regulated religion. And to the Colossians, Paul does not merely echo Mark 7’s concept — he uses its exact phrase:

Colossians 2:8 *Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ.*

The tradition of men. Word for word, the same phrase Jesus used in Mark 7:8. This is not a loose thematic parallel this study is constructing after the fact; Paul reaches for the identical language, decades later, warning a different church about the same danger. A few verses later he names the specific shape it was taking among the Colossians:

Colossians 2:20 *Wherefore if ye be dead with Christ from the rudiments of the world, why, as though living in the world, are ye subject to ordinances,* **2:21** *(Touch not; taste not; handle not; 2:22 Which all are to perish with the using;) after the commandments and doctrines of men? 2:23 Which things have indeed a shew of wisdom in will worship, and humility, and neglecting of the body: not in any honour to the satisfying of the flesh.*

The commandments and doctrines of men — again, Mark 7:7’s own vocabulary, almost word for word. “Will worship” is worth sitting with too: worship devised by human will, the same basic move as Jeroboam “in the month which he had devised of his own heart” (1 Kings 12:33, Chapter 3). The same phrase turns up once more, in Paul’s instruction to Titus:

Titus 1:14 *Not giving heed to Jewish fables, and commandments of men, that turn from the truth.*

Three times — Galatians, Colossians, Titus — Paul reaches for language that either quotes or closely echoes Mark 7:7-8’s own wording. This is not incidental. The apostle most responsible for defending the

gospel to the Gentile church treats “the tradition/commandments of men” as a live, recurring danger, not a problem that ended with the Pharisees. Paul gives one more warning worth including here, because it reaches for the same word Mark 7:6 used of the scribes and Pharisees at the very start of this study:

1 Timothy 4:1 *Now the Spirit speaketh expressly, that in the latter times some shall depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits, and doctrines of devils; 4:2 Speaking lies in hypocrisy; having their conscience seared with a hot iron; 4:3 Forbidding to marry, and commanding to abstain from meats, which God hath created to be received with thanksgiving of them which believe and know the truth.*

Hypocrisy — Mark 7:6’s own word — now applied to a future form of the same disease: rules about marriage and food, invented and imposed as though they carried God’s own authority, with no more scriptural basis than the washing of pots and cups had.

After the Apostles: The Same Cycle, at Lower Evidentiary Weight

What follows the apostolic period moves outside scripture’s own direct record, so this study holds it at a different evidentiary weight than everything above — real, well-documented history, but history and not scripture, consulted as background corroboration rather than as the basis of doctrine (per this project’s own stated method).

Within a few decades of the apostles, church leadership structure had already begun shifting from the New Testament’s own pattern of a plurality of elders in each place — a pattern Chapter 5 documents in full, visible already in Paul’s own greeting to a single congregation:

Philippians 1:1 *Paul and Timotheus, the servants of Jesus Christ, to all the saints in Christ Jesus which are at Philippi, with the bishops and deacons:*

— toward a single ruling bishop per city instead — visible already in the letters of Ignatius of Antioch, writing around A.D. 107-110, who repeatedly urges churches to do nothing without their bishop’s approval. That shift deserves its own fuller treatment elsewhere in this study rather than a full digression here, but it marks the same basic move this whole chapter has been tracing: a structure not directly specified by the apostles, gradually taking on a settled authority of its own.

Over the centuries that followed, a large and genuinely complex body of church tradition — councils, canon law, accumulated custom — grew up alongside scripture, and in large parts of historic Christendom came to be treated as carrying authority alongside it rather than strictly under it. The Council of Trent, convened in the 1540s in response to the Protestant Reformation, formally affirmed this position: that authoritative truth is found in “written books and unwritten traditions,” both to be received “with equal affection of piety and reverence.” Whatever else is said about that position, it is worth naming plainly for what it is by this study’s own working definition from Chapter 1: tradition, formally granted the same binding weight as God’s own written word.

The Reformation itself belongs in the same lineage as every corrective voice this study has already traced — Jacob putting away the strange gods, Josiah rediscovering the book of the Law, Isaiah’s rebuke, Jesus’s own confrontation in Mark 7. Martin Luther’s central principle, *sola scriptura* — scripture alone as the final authority, over and against accumulated tradition — is, in substance, the same diagnosis this whole study has been making, applied once more to a sixteenth-century church.

But the story does not end there, and honesty requires saying so. The Reformation did not produce one restored church; it produced, over time, many denominations, each in due course developing its own confession of faith, its own governing tradition, its own settled way of reading scripture treated, in practice if not always in formal doctrine, as close to unquestionable within its own walls. This is not this study's verdict on any one denomination in particular — it is a plain observation that the same cycle this chapter has traced from the Judaizers onward did not stop at the Reformation either. Whether that outcome was avoidable, and what it says about organized religious structure as such, is the question the next chapters take up directly.

Closing: Not a Medieval Problem, a Recurring One

This chapter set out to test whether Mark 7's diagnosis was a one-time confrontation with a vanished religious system, or something scripture itself expected to recur. The evidence says the latter, plainly. Acts 15 shows it recurring within the church's first generation. Paul names it three times over, in three different letters, using Mark 7's own vocabulary. Timothy is warned it will recur again, "in the latter times." And church history since, at whatever evidentiary weight that history deserves, shows the same basic cycle continuing long after the apostles were gone. This is the case this study has been building since Chapter 1: the tradition of men is not a Pharisee-specific disease. It is a standing danger to God's people in every age, including this one — which is exactly why a study like this one is still worth doing.

Chapter 5: God's Original Intent

Every chapter so far has diagnosed a departure. This one steps back and asks what was being departed from. Before there was a tradition of men to lay alongside God's word, there was God's own pattern for how his people were to be led — and that pattern, traced from Moses through the apostles, is remarkably consistent. It is worth setting out plainly, because Chapter 4 already flagged where the first serious departure from it began, and Chapter 6 to come will ask why departures like it keep happening. This chapter answers a narrower, prior question: what was the original design itself?

The Old Testament Pattern: Called Directly by God

The briefest way to state it is this: in the Old Testament's own record, the leaders God actually used were not self-appointed, and their authority was not inherited the way a throne or a trade normally passes from father to son. It came by a direct call.

Moses is the clearest case. God does not select him through Israel's own elders or through any human process; he calls him directly, out of a burning bush, with the office and the sending both stated in the same breath:

Exodus 3:10 *Come now therefore, and I will send thee unto Pharaoh, that thou mayest bring forth my people the children of Israel out of Egypt.*

Everything Moses becomes to Israel starts there, before Israel itself has any say in the matter.

Joshua's succession is just as direct, and it is worth noticing that it does not simply pass to him because he is next in line or next in rank. God names him:

Numbers 27:18 And the LORD said unto Moses, Take thee Joshua the son of Nun, a man in whom is the spirit, and lay thine hand upon him; **27:19** And set him before Eleazar the priest, and before all the congregation; and give him a charge in their sight. **27:20** And thou shalt put some of thine honour upon him, that all the congregation of the children of Israel may be obedient.

The commissioning is public — done “before all the congregation” — but its source is not the congregation. It is God’s own choice, publicly confirmed rather than publicly generated. And when Moses dies, it is God, not the elders of Israel, who speaks first to install his successor:

Joshua 1:1 Now after the death of Moses the servant of the LORD it came to pass, that the LORD spake unto Joshua the son of Nun, Moses’ minister, saying, **1:2** Moses my servant is dead; now therefore arise, go over this Jordan, thou, and all this people, unto the land which I do give to them, even to the children of Israel.

The same pattern holds, in a rougher form, through the period Chapter 3 already covered in Judges:

Judges 2:16 Nevertheless the LORD raised up judges, which delivered them out of the hand of those that spoiled them.

No dynasty, no fixed office passed by inheritance — each deliverer raised up individually, by God, as the need arose. It is only later that Israel asks for exactly the kind of leadership this pattern had deliberately not been — an office secured by birth and human process rather than by a fresh call from God:

1 Samuel 8:5 And said unto him, Behold, thou art old, and thy sons walk not in thy ways: now make us a king to judge us like all the nations.

That request, and what came of it, is already part of the record Chapter 3 traced.

The point to carry forward is simple: God’s own pattern of leadership, from the beginning, ran through direct calling, not human appointment, inheritance, or self-selection. That is the seed the New Testament pattern grows from.

The New Testament Pattern: The Ekklesia

Step one: what the word itself means. The English word “church” is not really a translation of the Greek word it renders; it comes from a different root entirely (Greek *kyriakon*, “belonging to the Lord,” by way of a long detour through Germanic languages, originally used of a building — “the Lord’s house”) and by long habit now conjures exactly that: a building, a denomination, an institution, a place one goes. The word the New Testament actually uses is *ekklesia* (ἐκκλησία), built from *ek* (“out of”) and a form of *kaleo* (“to call”). Literally, it means the called-out ones, or, more functionally, an assembly — people summoned out of their homes and daily business to gather. Not a building. Not a place to go. A group of people, gathered for a particular purpose.

The word was not invented by the New Testament, and this matters more than it first appears. In classical Greek civic life, the *ekklesia* was the assembly of citizens, called together (often by a herald) to deliberate and decide the city’s affairs — a gathering of people, not a place or a permanent institution. And in the Greek Old Testament (the Septuagint), *ekklesia* is the standing translation for the Hebrew *qahal* (קָהָל), Israel’s own word for the assembly or congregation of God’s people gathered together —

for instance, “the day of the assembly” at Horeb (Deuteronomy 4:10, 9:10, 18:16), when the whole nation stood gathered to hear God’s voice.

Step two: the word is neutral — it takes no side on who is gathered, or why. Because this point is easy to assert and easy to miss, it is worth showing rather than simply stating. The clearest demonstration in the whole New Testament comes from Ephesus, where the same Greek word, *ekklesia*, is used three times in a single chapter for a gathering that has nothing whatever to do with God’s people — an angry, confused, half-riotous crowd of pagan silversmiths, furious that Paul’s preaching is cutting into their trade in idols of Diana:

Acts 19:32 *Some therefore cried one thing, and some another: for the assembly was confused; and the more part knew not wherefore they were come together. 19:39 But if ye enquire any thing concerning other matters, it shall be determined in a lawful assembly. 19:41 And when he had thus spoken, he dismissed the assembly.*

“Assembly” in all three verses translates *ekklesia* — the identical word rendered “church” everywhere else in the New Testament. Luke does not reach for a different word to describe this pagan mob-turned-civic-meeting; he uses the ordinary Greek word for any gathering of people convened for a purpose, because that is all the word itself ever meant. It carries no built-in sanctity, no reference to God, no reference to a building — the town clerk “dismisses the assembly” the way any moderator dismisses any meeting. What makes a gathering God’s *ekklesia* is never the word. It is who has done the calling, and who has been called.

Step three: God’s own gatherings, called by his own word, shown the same way. Set against that secular case, scripture’s own usage for God’s people is unmistakable — and it reaches back before the New Testament even opens. Stephen, recounting Israel’s history before the same council that will stone him, calls Israel gathered at Sinai by this same word:

Acts 7:38 *This is he, that was in the church in the wilderness with the angel which spake to him in the mount Sina, and with our fathers: who received the lively oracles to give unto us.*

The King James translators render *ekklesia* here as “church” — the same English word used everywhere in the New Testament — applied to Israel encamped in a wilderness, with no temple, no synagogue, no building of any kind, gathered around nothing but God’s own presence and voice. If “church” already meant a building or an institution, this verse would be nonsense. It is not nonsense; it is the same pattern Chapter 3 already traced back to Horeb, named here with the very word this chapter is studying.

That same word then carries straight into the New Testament’s own record of the assembly Jesus said he would build:

Matthew 16:18 *And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. Matthew 18:17* *And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church: but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican. Acts 8:1* *...there was a great persecution against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered abroad throughout the regions of Judaea and Samaria, except the apostles. Acts 8:3* *As for Saul, he made havock of the church, entering into every house, and haling men and women committed them to prison. 1 Corinthians 1:2* *Unto the church of God which is at Corinth, to them that are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints...*

Notice Acts 8:3 in particular: Saul does not raid a building. He lays waste to “the church” by going house to house — “entering into every house” — because the church he was persecuting had no other address. Destroying it meant going where the people actually were.

Step four: the New Testament’s own definition of the moment something becomes “church.” Paul states the underlying logic as plainly as scripture ever states anything, in the one letter that spends the most space describing an actual gathering in progress:

1 Corinthians 11:18 *For first of all, when ye come together in the church, I hear that there be divisions among you...* **1 Corinthians 14:23** *If therefore the whole church be come together into one place, and all speak with tongues, and there come in those that are unlearned, or unbelievers, will they not say that ye are mad?* **1 Corinthians 14:26** *How is it then, brethren? when ye come together, every one of you hath a psalm, hath a doctrine, hath a tongue, hath a revelation, hath an interpretation. Let all things be done unto edifying.*

“The whole church be come together” (14:23) is the clause worth sitting with. Paul does not say “when the church arrives at its building,” or “when the members attend the service.” The church *is* what comes together. Gathering is not something the church does in a particular location; gathering is what constitutes the church, in that moment, wherever it happens. Take away the coming-together and, by this verse’s own grammar, there is no “whole church... come together” left to describe.

Step five: where this leaves “going to church.” Put the last four steps together and the conclusion is not subtle. *Ekklesia* is a neutral word for a gathering of people, used in scripture for a pagan riot in Ephesus, for Israel encamped at Sinai with no building at all, and for the New Testament assembly — the deciding factor never being a location but always who called the gathering and why. The New Testament never once describes anyone “going to church” the way a person today goes to a building at an address. It describes a people, scattered through their houses, streets, and cities, being *called out* of that scattering and *gathered* — and it is that gathering itself, wherever it happens, that scripture calls the church.

This is exactly the kind of quiet substitution this whole study has been tracing since Mark 7:6-9: not an outright denial of God’s word, but a form of words and a settled custom growing up alongside it until the custom is treated as though it were the thing itself. Nothing in scripture commands, describes, or even anticipates a dedicated building called “the church.” That development belongs to history rather than to the text — a specific and traceable one, at the same lower evidentiary weight this study has consistently given such background (Research-Method.md item 8): the earliest identified Christian building adapted for worship (at Dura-Europos) dates from the mid-third century, and public church buildings proper multiply only after Christianity’s legalization in the early fourth century. That is roughly two hundred years, on the most generous reading, of Christian history with no “going to church” in the modern sense at all — only Acts 8:3’s pattern of “entering into every house.” Yet today the phrase “go to church” sounds more natural, more obviously godly, to most ears than “be the church” or “gather as the church” ever would. That is not a neutral outcome. It is “teaching for doctrines the commandments of men” (Mark 7:7) in one of its quietest and most successful forms — quiet enough that most who use the phrase have never been taught to question it, and would be surprised to learn scripture never uses it at all.

Meeting in homes. Once the word itself is untangled from the building it never meant, the New Testament’s own record of where the *ekklesia* actually gathered falls into place exactly where Acts 8:3 already pointed: it is consistent, and it is consistently domestic.

Acts 2:46 *And they, continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart,*

Acts 5:42 *And daily in the temple, and in every house, they ceased not to teach and preach Jesus Christ.*

Acts 12:12 *And when he had considered the thing, he came to the house of Mary the mother of John, whose surname was Mark; where many were gathered together praying.*

That last verse is worth pausing on: when Peter is miraculously released from prison, he does not go to a temple, a synagogue, or any public building to find the church. He goes directly to a specific, known home, because that is where the church already was.

By the time of Paul's letters, the pattern has a settled name of its own, repeated across four separate letters to four separate cities:

Romans 16:5 *Likewise greet the church that is in their house. Salute my wellbeloved Epaphroditus, who is the firstfruits of Achaia unto Christ.*

1 Corinthians 16:19 *The churches of Asia salute you. Aquila and Priscilla salute you much in the Lord, with the church that is in their house.*

Colossians 4:15 *Salute the brethren which are in Laodicea, and Nymphas, and the church which is in his house.*

Philemon 1:2 *And to our beloved Apphia, and Archippus our fellowsoldier, and to the church in thy house:*

Four letters, four cities, one settled phrase — “the church... in [someone's] house.” This is not scattered evidence of occasional informal meetings alongside a central institutional structure. It is the pattern itself — the only pattern of gathering the New Testament actually records for the first-century ekklesia. There is no dedicated church building anywhere in its pages.

Elders raised up within local assemblies. Each local ekklesia had its own leadership, and that leadership was drawn from within the assembly, not imported from outside it. Paul and Barnabas's practice on their first missionary journey states the pattern directly:

Acts 14:23 *And when they had ordained them elders in every church, and had prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord, on whom they believed.*

Elders, plural, in every congregation — each body governed by more than one. Paul's instruction to Titus follows the identical shape:

Titus 1:5 *For this cause left I thee in Crete, that thou shouldest set in order the things that are wanting, and ordain elders in every city, as I had appointed thee:*

Again plural elders, and again local to each city rather than a single figure set over several.

That these elders, plural, and “bishops” (overseers) are the same office describing the same men — not a hierarchy of one over the other — is stated as plainly as the New Testament states anything. Paul sends for one group in Ephesus, and in a single conversation names them both ways:

Acts 20:17 *And from Miletus he sent to Ephesus, and called the elders of the church. 20:28* *Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood.*

Elder (v.17) and overseer — “bishop,” *episkopos* — (v.28) are two English words for one Greek reality, applied in a single breath to the same plural group of local men.

And what these local elders were for is stated with unusual force by Peter, who calls himself “also an elder” rather than writing from above the office:

1 Peter 5:1 *The elders which are among you I exhort, who am also an elder, and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that shall be revealed: 5:2 Feed the flock of God which is among you, taking the oversight thereof, not by constraint, but willingly; not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind; 5:3 Neither as being lords over God’s heritage, but being ensamples to the flock.*

“Not... lords over God’s heritage” is as direct a warning against exactly the kind of authoritarian drift this study has already begun tracing (Chapter 4’s brief note on the later shift toward a single ruling bishop) as anything in the New Testament offers.

The qualification for the office, correspondingly, was never institutional credentialing but character already visible within the local body:

1 Timothy 3:1 *This is a true saying, If a man desire the office of a bishop, he desireth a good work. 3:2 A bishop then must be blameless, the husband of one wife, vigilant, sober, of good behaviour, given to hospitality, apt to teach; 3:3 Not given to wine, no striker, not greedy of filthy lucre; but patient, not a brawler, not covetous; 3:4 One that ruleth well his own house, having his children in subjection with all gravity; 3:5 (For if a man know not how to rule his own house, how shall he take care of the church of God?) 3:6 Not a novice, lest being lifted up with pride he fall into the condemnation of the devil. 3:7 Moreover he must have a good report of them which are without; lest he fall into reproach and the snare of the devil.*

Paul’s parallel list to Titus adds the same emphasis:

Titus 1:6 *If any be blameless, the husband of one wife, having faithful children not accused of riot or unruly. 1:7 For a bishop must be blameless, as the steward of God; not selfwilled, not soon angry, not given to wine, no striker, not given to filthy lucre; 1:8 But a lover of hospitality, a lover of good men, sober, just, holy, temperate; 1:9 Holding fast the faithful word as he hath been taught, that he may be able by sound doctrine both to exhort and to convince the gainsayers.*

“Not a novice” (1 Timothy 3:6) makes the underlying point as directly as scripture ever makes it: whatever else an elder needed, he needed to be someone already known, already tested, already part of that specific assembly long enough for his own household and character to be visible to it. The office was raised up from within, not sent in from outside.

Traveling leadership that established rather than governed. Alongside this local, plural eldership, the New Testament also records a second and different kind of leadership — traveling, apostolic, itinerant — and it is important to see precisely what that leadership’s job was and was not. Paul and Barnabas’s pattern in Acts states the sequence directly:

Acts 14:21 *And when they had preached the gospel to that city, and had taught many, they returned again to Lystra, and to Iconium, and Antioch, 14:22 Confirming the souls of the disciples, and exhorting them to continue in the faith, and that we must through much*

tribulation enter into the kingdom of God. 14:23 And when they had ordained them elders in every church, and had prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord, on whom they believed.

The sequence matters: preach, make disciples, strengthen them, raise up local elders from within the assembly itself, commend them to the Lord — and then leave. Ephesians names this traveling, equipping function as its own distinct gift, alongside but not replacing local pastoral leadership:

Ephesians 4:11 *And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; 4:12 For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ:*

Titus is left in Crete for that same purpose (Titus 1:5, quoted above) — a task with a completion point built into its own description, not a permanent governorship. Even Paul's own relationship to the churches he founded, sustained across long absences by letter rather than by residence, reflects the same shape: real authority exercised at a distance to establish and correct, but local, resident, plural authority exercised in person, day to day, by elders who were already part of the flock they fed.

Closing: A Pattern Never Meant to Change

Put together, the New Testament's own pattern is a single, coherent design, not an improvised arrangement waiting for later refinement: a called-out people (the *ekklesia*, not a building or institution) gathering in homes; led locally by a plurality of elders raised up from within each assembly, not appointed from outside it, and explicitly warned against becoming "lords" over the people they served; visited and established, but not permanently governed, by traveling apostolic leadership whose stated purpose was to equip and then commend each assembly to the Lord and move on. Nothing in this record presents itself as temporary or as a first draft awaiting institutional maturity. It is simply given, repeatedly, as the pattern — the same way Moses' and Joshua's direct calling was simply given, without argument, as the pattern before it.

This is why Chapter 4's brief, deliberately unfinished note deserves to be named again here, now that the standard it departed from has been set out in full. The early move from a plurality of local elders toward a single bishop ruling each city (associated by name with Ignatius of Antioch, in the early second century) was not a further development of this pattern. Measured against Acts 20:17,28 and 1 Peter 5:2-3, it was already a departure from it — the very "lording it over" Peter had warned against, arriving within a lifetime or two of his own warning. Nothing in the New Testament predicts, authorizes, or makes room for that shift. The pattern is simply given, and then, historically, not kept.

That is this chapter's whole claim, stated plainly: this pattern — locally led, locally accountable, established rather than governed from outside — was never meant to change. Whatever comes next, whether the church as an institution tends to drift from its own founding design the way Israel's kings drifted from the Law that founded their kingdom, is the question Chapter 6 takes up next.

Chapter 6: Do Churches Devolve as Organizations?

Chapter 4 handed this question forward. Chapter 5 closed by pointing straight at it. It is time to answer it directly: does the pattern God gave — a living, called-out people, locally led, never permanently

governed from outside — tend, in practice, to devolve into something else, an institution more concerned with its own survival than with the people it exists to serve? Scripture's own record says yes, and says so earlier and more plainly than most readers expect. But scripture also supplies its own answer to what was lost, because before it is ever a warning, this is a picture — and the picture is worth setting out first.

Scripture's Own Picture: A Living Body, Not an Institution

Every metaphor scripture reaches for to describe the church is a living one. None of them is institutional. That is worth pausing on before a single warning is examined, because it means the alternative to institutional devolution was never left undefined — it was given, positively, from the start.

Paul's fullest picture is the human body itself:

1 Corinthians 12:12 *For as the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body: so also is Christ. 12:13 For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free; and have been all made to drink into one Spirit. 12:14 For the body is not one member, but many. 12:15 If the foot shall say, Because I am not the hand, I am not of the body; is it therefore not of the body? 12:16 And if the ear shall say, Because I am not the eye, I am not of the body; is it therefore not of the body? 12:17 If the whole body were an eye, where were the hearing? If the whole were hearing, where were the smelling? 12:18 But now hath God set the members every one of them in the body, as it hath pleased him. 12:19 And if they were all one member, where were the body? 12:20 But now are they many members, yet but one body. 12:21 And the eye cannot say unto the hand, I have no need of thee: nor again the head to the feet, I have no need of you. 12:22 Nay, much more those members of the body, which seem to be more feeble, are necessary: 12:23 And those members of the body, which we think to be less honourable, upon these we bestow more abundant honour; and our uncomely parts have more abundant comeliness. 12:24 For our comely parts have no need: but God hath tempered the body together, having given more abundant honour to that part which lacked: 12:25 That there should be no schism in the body; but that the members should have the same care one for another. 12:26 And whether one member suffer, all the members suffer with it; or one member be honoured, all the members rejoice with it. 12:27 Now ye are the body of Christ, and members in particular.*

A body is not administered from outside itself. It has no separate management layer standing over its own cells, deciding on their behalf what the body's interests require. It grows, heals, and coordinates itself, member caring for member, because it is alive — which is precisely Paul's point in Ephesians:

Ephesians 4:15 *But speaking the truth in love, may grow up into him in all things, which is the head, even Christ: 4:16 From whom the whole body fitly joined together and compacted by that which every joint supplieth, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part, maketh increase of the body unto the edifying of itself in love.*

"The edifying of itself" — an organization is built by someone; a body edifies *itself*, from within, through its own joints and members, because life is already present in it. Peter reaches for a different living image with the same implication:

1 Peter 2:4 *To whom coming, as unto a living stone, disallowed indeed of men, but chosen of God, and precious, 2:5 Ye also, as lively stones, are built up a spiritual house, an holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God by Jesus Christ.*

Even “built up” here is built from *living* stones — an image scripture nowhere pairs with cut, dead, quarried material shaped and stacked by an external contractor. And Jesus’s own image for exactly this relationship removes any doubt about where the life comes from and where it does not:

John 15:1 *I am the true vine, and my Father is the husbandman. 15:2 Every branch in me that beareth not fruit he taketh away: and every branch that beareth fruit, he purgeth it, that it may bring forth more fruit. 15:4 Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine; no more can ye, except ye abide in me. 15:5 I am the vine, ye are the branches: He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit: for without me ye can do nothing.*

Body, living stones, vine and branches — three different pictures, and not one of them is a corporation, a bureaucracy, or a chain of offices. This is scripture’s own answer to the question this chapter is named for, given before the question is ever asked: the church God designed was never, at its root, an institution to begin with. Whatever devolves into one has already moved away from the picture it was given.

The Warning Built Into the Old Testament: A King “Like All the Nations”

Scripture does not leave the danger of institutional structure to inference. It stages the whole problem once, in full, centuries before there is a church to devolve at all — and it is worth reading in its own right, because the request itself already carries this chapter’s central concern in its own wording:

1 Samuel 8:5 *And said unto him, Behold, thou art old, and thy sons walk not in thy ways: now make us a king to judge us like all the nations.*

Like all the nations. Israel does not ask God for a leader after his own pattern — the pattern Chapter 5 already traced, direct calling, raised up as needed, accountable to God rather than to dynasty. It asks for a leader modeled on the surrounding nations’ own institutions. God’s own verdict on the request, given directly to Samuel, is unambiguous about what is actually being rejected:

1 Samuel 8:7 *And the LORD said unto Samuel, Hearken unto the voice of the people in all that they say unto thee: for they have not rejected thee, but they have rejected me, that I should not reign over them.*

This is worth naming plainly: the danger is not only that a good institution can decay over time. Sometimes the institutional impulse itself, at its very root, is already imported from a pattern God did not give — already, in this study’s own working definition from Chapter 1, a form of “the tradition of men” (Mark 7:8) before it has produced a single bad outcome. Israel’s king does not need to misgovern for the request itself to already be a departure. The departure is in the asking.

God does not simply grant the request without comment. He has Samuel spell out, in advance, exactly what this institution — once formed — will do, and the answer is a study in how an organization sustains itself at the expense of the very people who built it to serve them:

1 Samuel 8:11 And he said, This will be the manner of the king that shall reign over you: He will take your sons, and appoint them for himself, for his chariots, and to be his horsemen; and some shall run before his chariots. **8:12** And he will appoint him captains over thousands, and captains over fifties; and will set them to ear his ground, and to reap his harvest, and to make his instruments of war, and instruments of his chariots. **8:13** And he will take your daughters to be confectionaries, and to be cooks, and to be bakers. **8:14** And he will take your fields, and your vineyards, and your oliveyards, even the best of them, and give them to his servants. **8:15** And he will take the tenth of your seed, and of your vineyards, and give to his officers, and to his servants. **8:16** And he will take your menservants, and your maidservants, and your goodliest young men, and your asses, and put them to his work. **8:17** He will take the tenth of your sheep: and ye shall be his servants. **8:18** And ye shall cry out in that day because of your king which ye shall have chosen you; and the LORD will not hear you in that day.

Sons, daughters, fields, a tenth of everything, servants — the institution does not merely fail to serve the people eventually. Its very design, laid out here before it exists, is to convert the people's own resources into its own apparatus: chariots, captains, officers, a court. Verse 18 is the chapter's whole thesis in a single line: the people will cry out under the weight of the very structure they asked for, and God — because this was their own choice, made against his counsel — will not answer that particular cry. And the people, having heard all of this in advance, ask for it anyway:

1 Samuel 8:19 Nevertheless the people refused to obey the voice of Samuel; and they said, Nay; but we will have a king over us; **8:20** That we may be also like all the nations; and that our king may judge us, and go out before us, and fight our battles.

Like all the nations, twice now in the same account. This is not a story about one bad king who happened to abuse his office later. It is scripture's own staged demonstration that the institutional pattern itself, chosen in preference to God's own pattern and modeled on the world's own way of organizing power, carries this cost built into its very design — known in advance, warned against in advance, and chosen anyway.

Jesus's Own Standard: Not Dominion, But Service

Centuries later, Jesus's own disciples reach for exactly the kind of structure 1 Samuel 8 described — an argument over rank, over who will hold the greater office in his kingdom — and his answer draws the line as sharply as it is drawn anywhere in scripture:

Matthew 20:25 But Jesus called them unto him, and said, Ye know that the princes of the Gentiles exercise dominion over them, and they that are great exercise authority upon them. **20:26** But it shall not be so among you: but whosoever will be great among you, let him be your minister; **20:27** And whosoever will be chief among you, let him be your servant: **20:28** Even as the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many.

"The princes of the Gentiles exercise dominion" — this is 1 Samuel 8's king, generalized into a standing description of how worldly institutions organize power: top-down, by dominion, by office over subject. Jesus's word for his own people is not a milder version of that same structure. It is a different structure altogether — greatness measured by service rendered, not authority held. This is the same standard Chapter 5 already found in Peter's own mouth ("not... lords over God's heritage," 1 Peter 5:3) and in the

qualification lists that require an elder to be tested and known from within his own household rather than installed from without. Institutional dominion and the pattern Jesus actually gave are not two ends of the same spectrum. They are opposites.

The Drift Inside Scripture Itself: Diotrephes

Chapter 4 already traced the shift toward a single ruling bishop to Ignatius of Antioch, writing roughly seventy to eighty years after Pentecost — and flagged that history at a lower evidentiary weight, since it falls outside scripture's own direct record. But the pattern Ignatius later formalizes did not wait for history to begin. Scripture itself already names one man exhibiting it, inside a functioning first-century congregation, while at least one apostle was demonstrably still living to write about it:

3 John 1:9 *I wrote unto the church: but Diotrephes, who loveth to have the preeminence among them, receiveth us not. 1:10 Wherefore, if I come, I will remember his deeds which he doeth, prating against us with malicious words: and not content therewith, neither doth he himself receive the brethren, and forbiddeth them that would, and casteth them out of the church.*

“Who loveth to have the preeminence” — a man who has made himself, in effect, the single controlling authority of his own local assembly, refusing even the apostle John's own letter, and expelling members for the crime of welcoming traveling brothers he had not personally authorized. This is exactly the shape of the institutional self-preservation this whole chapter has been tracing — the office beginning to matter more than the flock, and the officeholder's own preeminence beginning to matter more than either — and it did not need sixty years, or a council, or a formal doctrine of episcopal succession to appear. One man, in one congregation, in the lifetime of the apostles themselves, was already living out the pattern 1 Samuel 8 predicted and 1 Peter 5:3 had already warned against by name.

Snapshots of Already-Organized Assemblies

The letters to the seven churches in Revelation, addressed to congregations that were by every indication already meeting, already led, already functioning as organized bodies, catch two of them in exactly the kind of self-assessment an institution produces when its own comfort has quietly replaced its original purpose:

Revelation 2:4 *Nevertheless I have somewhat against thee, because thou hast left thy first love.*

Revelation 3:17 *Because thou sayest, I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing; and knowest not that thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked:*

Laodicea's own verdict on itself — rich, increased, in need of nothing — is the verdict of an institution that has learned to measure its own health by its own metrics, and has stopped checking those metrics against Christ's actual assessment, which turns out to be the exact opposite. An organization tends to become very good at judging itself successful by the standards it sets for itself. Christ's letters to these two congregations are a direct correction of that tendency, addressed to real assemblies, within scripture's own text.

Extremely Cautionary: The Pattern Outside Scripture

Everything in this section falls outside scripture's own direct witness, so — per this study's own stated method (Research-Method.md item 8) — it is held at a lower evidentiary weight than everything above: real, and worth taking with real seriousness, but background corroboration, not the basis of doctrine. It is included here because the pattern scripture itself already establishes turns out to be so well documented independently, by observers with no interest in Mark 7 at all, that it deserves to be named plainly rather than passed over.

Chapter 4 already noted the shift from a plurality of local elders toward a single ruling bishop, visible in Ignatius of Antioch's letters within decades of the apostles, and the Council of Trent's later formal decision to grant church tradition authority "equal" to scripture's own. Both are historical instances of the same mechanism 1 Samuel 8 describes in miniature: a structure adopted, for what were surely sincere and even practical-sounding reasons at the time, that ends by consuming the authority of the very word it was meant to serve. The sociologist Max Weber, writing in the early twentieth century with no theological interest in this question at all, gave this mechanism a name — the "routinization of charisma": a movement built on a founder's own direct, personal authority cannot sustain that authority once the founder is gone, and is driven, by the plain need to survive, toward either a fixed tradition or a formal bureaucracy of offices. Applied without alteration to what Chapter 4 already documented, this is a description, from entirely outside scripture, of the apostles-to-Ignatius shift as an all but predictable outcome of forming a lasting human institution at all — not a scandal unique to the early church, but the ordinary fate of organizations as such.

Robert Michels, studying early twentieth-century political parties with no interest in Christianity whatsoever, reached a strikingly similar conclusion he called the "iron law of oligarchy": that organizations, even ones founded on explicitly democratic and idealistic principles, tend inevitably toward rule by a small, self-perpetuating group whose own position, once secured, becomes something that group has a standing interest in protecting — often at the direct expense of the wider membership's original goals. And more recent research into nonprofit and charitable organizations has documented the same drift under a gentler name, "mission drift": organizations under the ordinary pressures of funding, growth, and survival gradually reorient around preserving the institution itself, even when — especially when — that reorientation happens quietly enough that the organization's own leadership continues to describe its work in terms of the original mission the whole time.

None of this is scripture, and none of it is offered here as though it were. But taken together with 1 Samuel 8's own prediction, Diotrephes' own conduct within the lifetime of the apostles, and Christ's own letters to Ephesus and Laodicea, the pattern is no longer a scriptural claim standing alone against silence from every other field that has studied organizations. It is a scriptural diagnosis that a wholly separate, secular body of study — with no stake in the argument this whole book is making — keeps arriving at independently. That convergence is exactly why this section is worth taking as seriously as it is being taken here, cautionary weight and all.

A direct word about denominational Christianity. This study has already traced, in Chapter 4, how the Reformation's return to *sola scriptura* did not produce one restored assembly but many denominations, each in time developing its own confession, its own governing structure, its own settled reading of scripture treated, in practice, as close to unquestionable within its own walls — and named that outcome as the same cycle continuing rather than resolving. This chapter's own argument gives that observation its sharper edge. The concern is not only that a denomination, having started well, can devolve over time into an institution more concerned with its own continuation than with the people in

its care — though 1 Samuel 8, Diotrephes, Ephesus, and Laodicea all show that this can and does happen. It is that the very act of organizing a movement around a fixed, humanly governed structure — a denomination, a headquarters, a chain of offices, a body that must fund and staff and perpetuate itself in order to continue existing — is frequently, from its very first hour, already patterned more after “like all the nations” than after the ekklesia Chapter 5 described: locally led, locally accountable, visited but never permanently governed from outside. This is not this study’s verdict on any believer within any particular denomination, nor a claim that every denominational structure is equally compromised. It is the same caution scripture itself keeps sounding, from Samuel’s own warning to Peter’s own words to Diotrephes’ own church: the structure a group of God’s people settles into is never a neutral, merely practical question. It is a decision with scripture’s own warnings attached, and this study’s own argument is that those warnings deserve to be heard as such — clearly, and in advance, the way Samuel gave them.

Closing: Do Churches Devolve as Organizations?

The question this chapter is named for now has its answer, and it is not a comfortable one. Yes — not as an unfortunate accident that befalls some churches and not others, but as the ordinary, well-attested tendency of organized human structure as such, scripturally predicted in 1 Samuel 8 before Israel’s first king was even chosen, scripturally documented within the apostles’ own lifetime in Diotrephes’ own church, scripturally addressed by Christ himself to already-organized first-century congregations in Revelation 2 and 3, and independently confirmed by every secular field that has studied organizations since. And the devolution is not always a later corruption of a good beginning. Often enough, the original intent behind a given structure was already patterned after “all the nations” rather than after God’s own design — already, by this study’s own working definition, a form of the tradition of men, however sincerely intended, however long before any visible harm appears.

But this chapter did not open with the warning. It opened with the picture, and the picture is the answer scripture actually gives to the question its own title asks. The church God designed was never an institution in the first place — never a chain of offices, never a headquarters, never a structure requiring its own perpetuation. It was a body, alive and self-edifying from within. It was living stones, not quarried ones. It was branches abiding in a vine, bearing fruit only because the life was never their own to begin with. Devolving into an institution is not the church’s fate. It is the church’s departure from what it actually is — the same departure this whole study has been tracing since Mark 7:6-9, in one form after another, from hand-washing to Corban to a golden calf “devised of his own heart” to a tradition of the elders to a tradition of men to a single bishop to a council’s formal doctrine to a denomination’s own confession. The remedy this study has offered at every turn is the same remedy Chapter 5 already gave in full: not a better institution, but a return to what was actually given — a people, called out, gathered, alive, and never, at any point, meant to become anything else.

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Sources Consulted

This study is built directly from scripture; the sources below were consulted only for background and historical corroboration, at the lower evidentiary weight this library's method reserves for extra-biblical material (Research-Method.md, principle 8), and none carries scriptural weight in the argument. Historical background on the shift from local plural eldership toward a single ruling bishop draws on the letters of Ignatius of Antioch (c. A.D. 107-110) and standard patristic-era reference summaries. The Council of Trent's formal position on written and unwritten tradition reflects standard historical accounts of its sixteenth-century decrees. The dating of the earliest identified Christian building adapted for worship draws on the published archaeology of the Dura-Europos house church. Max Weber's concept of the "routinization of charisma" is drawn from his own early-twentieth-century sociological writing on authority. Robert Michels's "iron law of oligarchy" is drawn from his own early-twentieth-century study of political organizations. Background on "mission drift" reflects published research on nonprofit and charitable organizations. Every doctrinal claim in this study has been tested directly against the text of scripture itself, in the King James Version.