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First-Century Church Structure

*Returning the Structure of the Church back to the Original Design of King
Jesus*

*“This is what the LORD says: “Stand at the crossroads and look; ask for the ancient
paths, ask where the good way is, and walk in it, ...”*

— Jeremiah 6:16

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Executive Summary

The assembly Jesus is building was never designed to be a weekly religious performance observed by passive consumers. In the New Testament, the people of God appear as a Spirit-filled family, a covenant household, a priestly body, and a missionary people under the direct kingship of Jesus. They gathered around apostolic teaching, fellowship, the breaking of bread, and prayers. They met publicly when possible and from house to house. They ate together, gave to one another, prayed together, exhorted one another, and carried the gospel into streets, synagogues, marketplaces, households, prisons, and cities.

The gathering was not a show to attend. It was a body to become.

This white paper traces four movements:

- The King's original design for the gathered assembly — participatory, table-centered, household-based, and mission-driven.
- The historical drift from that design — through Greco-Roman rhetorical culture, Constantinian architecture, medieval clericalism, Reformation pulpit culture, and the modern corporate church model.
- A practical roadmap for restoration — not nostalgia, but obedience to the King's explicit commands, strengthened by contemporary witnesses of the Spirit's own correction.
- A pastoral pathway for transition — the Dual Wineskin Model, tested in real congregations, that lets reforming pastors lead their people from the old wineskin to the new without breaking the sheep in the process.

The church does not need a better show. The church needs to recover the King's table, the household of faith, the gifts of the body, and the sending power of the Holy Spirit.

The sharpest contemporary expression of this drift is not merely the megachurch. It is the corporate church imagination: Jesus presented as a product, the crowd measured as a market, the saints reduced to tithing units, worship engineered as an emotional event, and leaders trained to manage optics, revenue, compliance, and growth. Big screens, fog machines, stage lighting, and fashionable aesthetics are not the root disease. They are symptoms. The root disease is the replacement of Spirit-filled participation with manufactured religious consumption — a disease the New Testament names, the Fathers warned against, and the Reformers only partially cured.

This paper does not quarrel with sincere believers in traditional churches, nor does it deny the genuine good that has come through faithful preaching in every generation. It does, however, submit every inherited form — the platform, the payroll, the brand, the building program, the clergy/laity divide, the pastor-as-CEO, the worship-as-production, the attendance-as-metric — to the unyielding authority of the King who commanded a different kind of gathering.

Yet the King has never lacked a witness. The ancient paths keep reappearing — in homes, around tables, in persecuted communities, among young people unsatisfied with polished religion, and in movements that cannot be contained by programs. What the regime of Iran cannot crush, what the counterculture of the 1960s could not corrupt, and what a jaded Gen Z cannot be sold: Christ Himself, walking among His lampstands.

PART I

THE KING'S ORIGINAL DESIGN

1. The King's Original Design

Jesus announced the Kingdom of God before He announced a religious institution. His first public message was, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matthew 4:17, NKJV). A kingdom has a King. A King has authority. A King gives commands. A King forms a people according to His will. The gathered assembly is therefore not a voluntary religious club organized by consumer preference; it is the visible outpost of a Kingdom whose Sovereign has already spoken.

Jesus did not commission His disciples to build religious corporations, construct weekly stage productions, or turn the nations into spectators of professional ministry. He commanded them to make disciples, baptize them, and teach them to observe all things He commanded (Matthew 28:18-20). The Great Commission is a discipleship mandate, not a venue-management mandate. Every ecclesial form must therefore be tested by one question: does it reproduce obedient disciples, or does it reproduce religious attenders?

The King's own ministry modeled the shape of the people He was forming:

- He ate with disciples and sinners (Luke 5:29-32; Luke 7:36-50; Luke 19:1-10).
- He taught in homes (Mark 2:1-12; Mark 9:33-37).
- He sent disciples in pairs into towns and households (Luke 10:1-9).
- He corrected status-seeking leadership at the table (Luke 22:24-27).
- He washed feet and commanded His disciples to embody servant love (John 13:1-17).
- He promised the Spirit, not a stage, as the power of witness (Acts 1:8).

Jesus did not despise public proclamation — He taught crowds, in synagogues, and in the temple courts. But He did not reduce discipleship to crowd attendance. He formed people in close proximity, around meals, through questions, correction, practice, suffering, and mission. He built men, not metrics.

“And they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers.” — Acts 2:42, NKJV

Acts 2:42 is not a decorative memory verse. It is a blueprint. Apostolic teaching gave doctrine. Fellowship (koinōnia) gave shared life. Breaking bread gave table, covenant remembrance, and embodied equality. Prayers gave dependence on God. The result was awe, generosity, shared possessions, daily faithfulness, gladness, praise, favor, and multiplication (Acts 2:43-47). No platform. No brand. No building program. “And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved” (Acts 2:47, NKJV).

The ancient path is not merely ‘small church.’ A small meeting can still be controlled, dead, personality-centered, and disobedient. The ancient path is a kingdom ecosystem: Jesus enthroned, the Spirit active, Scripture opened, the table restored, the household mobilized, gifts operating, shepherds serving, saints equipped, and mission flowing outward.

2. First-Century Practice

The apostolic assembly was not an abstract theology. It was a lived ecosystem of gathered practices. Six elements defined it.

2.1 Homes as Kingdom Centers

The New Testament repeatedly locates assemblies in homes and households. Believers met in the house of Mary the mother of John Mark (Acts 12:12). Lydia opened her household in Philippi (Acts 16:14-15). Paul taught publicly and from house to house (Acts 20:20). Priscilla and Aquila had an assembly in their house (Romans 16:3-5; 1 Corinthians 16:19). Nympha hosted an assembly in her house (Colossians 4:15). Philemon hosted an assembly in his house (Philemon 1:2). For nearly three hundred years — through the apostolic era and the persecutions of Nero, Domitian, Trajan, Decius, Valerian, and Diocletian — the normative gathering of the church was in homes or adapted domestic spaces. The earliest surviving identifiable Christian meeting place, the house-church at Dura-Europos in Syria (mid-third century), is a converted home, not a temple.

A household gathering is not merely a smaller auditorium. A home changes the grammar of the meeting. It allows people to be known by name, to eat at the same table, to see one another’s lives, to pray specifically, to correct gently, to activate gifts, to confess sin, to care for needs, and to send people into the neighborhood. A home cannot hide hypocrisy behind production; a home cannot be sustained by strangers; a home cannot substitute brand for love.

2.2 The Table as Theology

The table in the first-century assembly carried more theological weight than modern church culture often recognizes. Breaking bread was fellowship, remembrance, covenant proclamation, and family identity. Paul connected the bread and cup to participation in the body and blood of Christ (1 Corinthians 10:16-17). He rebuked the Corinthians because their table practice contradicted the gospel: the wealthy ate ahead and the poor were humiliated (1 Corinthians 11:17-34). Paul did not say, “You are having bad liturgy.” He said they were eating and drinking judgment to themselves because they were not discerning the body.

That rebuke only makes sense because the meal mattered. The Lord’s Supper was not a thimble of juice tacked onto a performance. It was a real meal in which the body of Christ was revealed

and covenant equality was enforced. To restore the table is not sentimental. It is a return to covenant accountability and to the visible refusal of social stratification that the gospel destroys.

2.3 Worship as the Offering of the Body

In the apostolic pattern, worship was not the performance of a few for the consumption of many. Paul told the Colossians to let the word of Christ dwell richly as they taught and admonished one another in psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs (Colossians 3:16). He told the Ephesians to be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another in psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs (Ephesians 5:18-20). These are body-wide commands, not stage directions for a celebrity worship set.

The worship leader should disappear into the worship of the body. The goal is not to create an emotional atmosphere that simulates encounter. The goal is for the gathered people to offer themselves to God in spirit and truth (John 4:21-24; Romans 12:1). A congregation that cannot sing without lights, fog, and professional sound is not a worshipping body — it is an audience trained to react to stimulus.

2.4 Edification Through Participation

“How is it then, brethren? Whenever you come together, each of you has a psalm, has a teaching, has a tongue, has a revelation, has an interpretation. Let all things be done for edification.” — 1 Corinthians 14:26, NKJV

First Corinthians 14:26 is one of the most neglected gathering texts in the modern church — and its neglect is not accidental. Paul did not imagine a chaotic free-for-all; he required order, testing, intelligibility, and edification. But neither did he imagine a silent audience with one professional voice. The standard is not, “Let the pastor do everything decently and in order.” The standard is, “Let all things be done for edification.” If your gathering structurally cannot obey 1 Corinthians 14:26, your gathering is not neutral. It is disobedient.

2.5 Equipping for Ministry

Ephesians 4:11-16 is fatal to the spectator model. Apostles, prophets, evangelists, shepherds, and teachers were not given so the saints could watch gifted leaders perform. They were given “for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ.” The fivefold gifts exist to produce ministers, not to monopolize ministry. A church model that keeps the saints dependent on professionals has inverted Ephesians 4 — it has turned coaches into players and players into fans. Peter goes further still: every believer is a priest in a royal priesthood, offering up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ (1 Peter 2:5, 9). The clergy/laity divide is not a New Testament category; it is an inherited wound the body has carried too long.

2.6 Sending as the Natural Fruit

The early assembly was not merely gathered — it was sent. Persecution scattered believers, and those who were scattered went everywhere preaching the word (Acts 8:4). Ordinary saints carried

the gospel beyond the control of a central stage. The household model was fertile soil for this because it trained believers to speak, pray, host, serve, testify, and disciple. The church that fills auditoriums but empties streets has fundamentally misunderstood its calling.

A home can become a mission base overnight. A stage-centered corporation struggles to reproduce itself without capital, staff, equipment, branding, and institutional control.

PART II

THE HISTORICAL DRIFT

3. What the Historical Record Confirms

The New Testament is the primary authority for the church’s gathering pattern. Historical evidence then helps trace development after the apostles. Scholars of early Christianity regularly note that the earliest Christian assemblies met in private homes and household networks. Surviving textual and archaeological evidence — including the adapted domestic space at Dura-Europos — confirms that ordinary homes or modified residences were the dominant environments for Christian gathering before the age of monumental church architecture. In the writings of Justin Martyr, Tertullian, Origen, Hippolytus, and the Didache, the gathering is still recognizably familial, sacramental around a table, catechetical, and participatory — not theatrical.

This evidence must be handled responsibly. It is possible to romanticize house churches as if every early gathering was pure, informal, egalitarian, and free from disorder. The New Testament itself corrects abuses in house-based assemblies: division, factionalism, sexual immorality, spiritual arrogance, table injustice, and disorder (1 Corinthians 1; 5; 11; 14). The argument is not that homes automatically produce holiness. The argument is that the apostolic ecosystem was relational, participatory, table-centered, and reproducible in a way that later architectural and institutional forms progressively displaced.

Second-century sources show both continuity and drift. Justin Martyr’s description of Christian worship (c. AD 155) still includes Scripture readings from “the memoirs of the apostles and the writings of the prophets,” exhortation, congregational “Amen,” bread and wine, distribution to the absent, and care for the needy. Ordered — but still participatory, still table-centered, still household-scaled. By contrast, Ignatius of Antioch, writing a generation earlier (c. AD 110), already presses a strong threefold office of bishop, presbyters, and deacons, insisting that nothing be done without the bishop. His intention was to defend unity against heresy; but his language also seeded a growing stratification of leadership that, severed from apostolic mutuality, would harden into clerical dominance. Within a century of the apostles, the seed of the very domination Jesus explicitly forbade (Matthew 20:25-26) was already being watered by men who meant well.

Drift often begins with a legitimate concern: order, doctrine, unity, growth, safety, public witness. But without constant submission to the King’s design, legitimate concerns become controlling systems. The desire to protect the flock becomes possession of the flock. The desire to teach sound doctrine becomes a monopoly of speech. The desire for reverence becomes a priesthood that contradicts 1 Peter 2:9.

The table below traces the transformation from apostolic household to modern corporate church across key historical periods.

Period / Dominant Pattern	Formation Effect on the Saints
First Century — Household gatherings, apostolic teaching, shared meals, prayers, spiritual gifts, public witness.	Assembly formed as family, body, priesthood, and missionary people.
Second–Third Centuries — More visible offices, ordered worship, apologetic engagement, adapted homes and domus ecclesiae.	Order increases; clerical distinction begins; participation remains but becomes increasingly managed.
Fourth Century (Post-Constantine) — Legalization, imperial favor, public basilicas, growing public liturgy, state patronage.	Scale and architecture train audience posture; clergy emerge as a sacred caste; laity begin to spectate.
Medieval Period — Sacramental hierarchy, Latin services in the West, priest-centered worship, ornate architecture, sale of grace.	The laity observe more than participate; holiness is mediated through clerical systems; Scripture is locked away from the people.
Reformation & Post-Reformation — Preaching restored to central importance; pulpit-centered architecture largely retained; priestly monopoly partially broken by language and doctrine, not by form.	The Word is honored, yet the body sits as listeners under a single authorized speaker; clericalism persists in softer clothing.
Modern Corporate Era — Branding, platforms, screens, production, leadership pipelines, metrics, revenue systems, celebrity, LLCs, and 501(c)(3) compliance culture.	Believers are formed as consumers, volunteers, donors, and fans rather than mature ministers and sent disciples.

4. The Drift: From Household Assembly to Stratified Religious System

The drift from household assembly to stratified religious system was not a single conspiracy or overnight apostasy. It was a layered transformation. The Christian movement crossed cultures, expanded geographically, fought heresies, endured persecution, engaged educated elites, adapted to public visibility, and eventually gained imperial favor. In that process, the simplicity and participation of the household assembly were progressively overshadowed by formal office,

rhetorical expertise, public architecture, liturgical distance, and institutional power. What began as the body of Christ slowly became the bureau of religion.

4.1 The Rise of the Clerical Imagination

The New Testament recognizes leadership: apostles, elders, overseers, shepherds, teachers, prophets, evangelists, deacons, and servants. The issue is not whether leadership exists. The issue is what leadership is for, and under what authority it stands. Jesus forbade Gentile-style domination: “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and those who are great exercise authority over them. Yet it shall not be so among you” (Matthew 20:25-26, NKJV). Peter, writing as a fellow-elder, warned: “nor as being lords over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock” (1 Peter 5:3, NKJV). John, in his third epistle, named by name a man named Diotrephes “who loves to have the preeminence,” who refused apostolic correction, cast brethren out of the church, and spoke against others with malicious words (3 John 9-10). The New Testament knows exactly what domineering church leadership looks like, and it condemns it explicitly.

The clerical drift accelerated in the mid-third century. Cyprian of Carthage (d. AD 258), writing against schism, developed a theology in which the bishop stood as the guarantor of the church’s very being: “If any one be not with the bishop, he is not in the Church.” However noble his intent, the unintended consequence was devastating: the bishop began to function as a priestly mediator, the altar began to function as a quasi-temple, and the assembly began to function as a congregation of the mediated rather than a kingdom of priests. By the time of Ambrose and Augustine in the fourth and fifth centuries, the term “priest” (sacerdos) — which in the New Testament is applied to all believers (1 Peter 2:5, 9; Revelation 1:6; 5:10) — had been re-assigned to a clerical caste.

This is the old wound that dresses itself in new clothes. What Cyprian sacralized, Rome monopolized, the Reformation softened, and the modern corporation re-staged. The robes have changed. The microphone has replaced the altar. The pastor has replaced the priest. But the fundamental wound — a mediating clerical class standing between the saints and their active priesthood — has never been fully healed.

When leadership becomes a sacred class over the people, the body is weakened. The saints begin to ask permission to obey. They wait for a professional to pray, teach, visit, evangelize, discern, baptize, and disciple. The shepherd becomes a gatekeeper instead of an equipper. The body becomes an audience. And the risen Christ walks His own church as if He were a visitor.

4.2 Greek Rhetoric and the Sermonized Assembly

The gospel entered a Greek-speaking world, and the New Testament itself was written in Greek. Greek language is not the enemy. The problem is when the assembly is re-formed around rhetorical performance rather than mutual edification. Greco-Roman culture produced a professional oratorical class — trained in the techniques of Isocrates, Cicero, and Quintilian — whose prestige rested on their power to move crowds. As educated Christians engaged Greco-Roman culture, and as catechetical schools like those of Alexandria and Antioch developed, the homily increasingly resembled the public address of trained orators. By the fourth century, John Chrysostom (“golden-mouthed”) preached to crowds who applauded him the way they applauded speakers in the Hippodrome. Chrysostom himself rebuked them for it — but the architecture, the form, and the expectation had already been set.

The sermon is not evil. Faithful preaching is necessary and biblical — Paul reasoned daily in the lecture hall of Tyrannus for two years (Acts 19:9-10). But when the sermon becomes the entire meeting, when the room is structurally designed so that only one voice can be heard, when teaching gifts are rationed to the ordained, and when mutual exhortation is scheduled out of the gathering, the assembly has departed from the participatory logic of 1 Corinthians 14:26 and Ephesians 4:11-16. It has become a lecture hall dressed up as the household of God.

4.3 Roman Order, Imperial Control, and the Constantinian Bargain

Rome valued order, rank, office, law, public buildings, and visible authority. When Christianity moved from persecuted minority to publicly favored religion, the temptation toward imperial forms intensified. The church gained protection and visibility, but also inherited new dangers: political respectability, property, clerical privilege, scale, and proximity to power. The empire that had fed Christians to lions for three centuries now offered them basilicas, tax exemptions, and imperial favor. The empire had changed its strategy, not its nature. And the church, exhausted by persecution and eager for peace, made a bargain whose price is still being paid.

Eusebius of Caesarea, the great fourth-century historian, openly called Constantine a new Moses and compared his reign to the Kingdom of God itself. This was the birth of political theology in its corrupted form: the confusion of Christ’s Kingdom with Caesar’s. And once the church learned to share a throne with Caesar, it never forgot the taste of it — whether in Byzantium, Rome, Geneva, London, or, in its modern mutation, on the platforms of televangelists and political pastors who trade pulpits for party loyalty. The Constantinian bargain is not a distant memory. It is a recurring temptation.

Whenever the form of the gathering trains the saints to be silent, dependent, and impressed, it is forming them in a direction different from the apostolic pattern — no matter how orthodox the creed recited or how sincere the preacher.

5. The Constantinian and Basilica Shift

The Edict of Milan in AD 313 granted legal freedom to Christians and restored confiscated property. This was a dramatic mercy for persecuted believers. It also marked the beginning of a new danger: Christianity could now become public, architectural, imperial, respectable, and administratively powerful. Before Constantine, to confess Christ risked death. After Constantine, to confess Christ brought career advancement. The same faith survived persecution from without and was then, in significant measure, overcome by patronage from within.

The basilica was not originally a Christian form. It was a Roman public building type — a large rectangular hall used for civic, commercial, and legal purposes, often with aisles and a raised apse for officials, magistrates, and emperors. Early Christians did not invent this form; they inherited it. They adopted the basilica because it could gather larger numbers and function publicly. But architecture teaches. The basilica made sense for crowds, visibility, officials, and ceremony. It did not naturally form a family around a table or a body where each one contributes.

The theological contradiction became structural: when the physical structure says “Look forward at the elevated few,” while the apostolic letters say “You are the body, and each member must function,” the building is catechizing the people against their calling. Every Sunday, the sanctuary preaches one sermon by its architecture (sit and observe) while the pastor preaches another by his text (function and minister). Every Sunday, architecture wins.

The Table Says...	The Altar-Platform Says...
Family	Distance
Shared meal	Sacred action performed over there
Discern the body	Watch the authorized person
Bring your life	Receive the program
Many voices heard	One official voice carries
Known sheep	Managed crowds
Priesthood of all	Mediation by the few
Reproducible in any living room	Requires capital, staff, and permits

Note the final two rows. A table can be set in any home tonight; a basilica cannot. The form that requires money, real estate, credentialing, and institutional permission to operate is the form most vulnerable to being captured by money, real estate, credentialing, and institutional interests. The form Jesus instituted was so simple a fisherman could host it.

6. The Greek/Western Model as a Formation Machine

A composite model emerged from Greek rhetorical performance, Roman public architecture, imperial hierarchy, medieval clericalism, Reformation pulpit centrality, and modern corporate management. That model often forms people in ways contrary to the King’s design. Its very structure is catechetical: it teaches, week after week, who matters, who speaks, who decides, and who pays.

The medieval period amplified every tendency in the Constantinian shift. The mass was celebrated in Latin — a language the people could not understand. The cup was withheld from the laity for centuries. The altar was separated from the nave by rood screens. The priesthood sold masses for the dead; Tetzels sold indulgences for Rome’s building program; the bishop of Rome crowned emperors; and whole generations of peasants lived and died spiritually mute — attending church every week without once opening their mouths in Scripture, song, confession, or exhortation. This is not an anti-Catholic pot-shot. This is a fact of the historical record that every honest Catholic historian acknowledges, and that the Council of Trent itself was forced to address.

The Reformation, under God’s mercy, restored the Scriptures to the people, restored the language of worship, and restored the doctrine of justification by faith. But the Reformation did not finish the job. It replaced the altar with the pulpit but kept the people in rows. It gave them the Word but did not give them the table of equals. It broke Rome’s monopoly of salvation but largely preserved the monopoly of speech. The Protestant pastor, especially in the modern West, inherited almost every structural expectation of the medieval priest — expert mediator of the sacred, chief public performer, gatekeeper of the sacraments, and professional caretaker of everyone else’s faith — minus the vestments. This is why the Reformation, for all its glory, did not produce 1 Corinthians 14:26. A half-reformed structure cannot produce a fully reformed people.

In its most destructive expression, this framework reproduces the pattern Jesus explicitly rejected: domination, status, spectacle, and glory for man. Satan offered Jesus the kingdoms of the world and their glory apart from the cross (Matthew 4:8-10). Jesus refused. The church faces the same temptation whenever it trades cruciform obedience for visibility, power, celebrity, and control. When a pastor builds his platform the way Satan invited Jesus to build His, the temptation the King refused has been accepted on His behalf.

The Man-Centered Question	The Apostolic Question
Who is the preacher?	Is Jesus obeyed?
How big is the room?	Are the saints equipped?
How excellent is the production?	Is the body edified?

The Man-Centered Question	The Apostolic Question
How many attended?	Are disciples multiplying?
How much was given?	Are the poor cared for?
How strong is the brand?	Are believers being sent?
Are we scaling?	Are we sanctified?
Did people feel something?	Did people turn from sin?

The model is also characterized by four systemic failures:

- **Controlling.** Control disguising itself as excellence, covering, order, vision, and protection. Some order is biblical — but when order becomes suppression and covering becomes ownership, the system has crossed into domination. The sheep of the Great Shepherd do not need a human owner.
- **Dominating.** Saints recruited to serve the machine while calling it service to God — maintaining programs, productions, parking lots, and personalities while remaining underfed and under-equipped. Modern Nicolaitanism: the laity (laos, the people) conquered by a sacred class, a pattern Christ explicitly hates (Revelation 2:6, 15).
- **Anti-Participatory.** Preaching about the body while structurally silencing the body; teaching on spiritual gifts while leaving no place for gifts to function; preaching discipleship while creating dependence on weekly inspiration. The message contradicts the medium; and the medium, week after week, always wins.
- **Poisonous to the Bride.** Religious spectatorship eroding hunger, courage, discernment, responsibility, and love. People leave polished services saying, “There has to be more than this,” because their spirits know the King did not save them merely to attend, clap, give, and go home unchanged.

7. From Pulpit to Platform to Product

The modern corporate church did not appear from nowhere. It is the logical end of a long formation process. Once the body becomes an audience, the next step is to improve the show. Once the gathering becomes a product, the next step is to manage the customer experience. Once attendance becomes the metric, the next step is marketing. Once the pastor becomes the face, the next step is brand protection. The trajectory is not an accident — it is the built-in physics of a system that has traded the kingdom for a marketplace.

The language gives the game away. People become ‘tithing units.’ Visitors become ‘leads.’ Discipleship becomes ‘assimilation.’ Pastoral care becomes

‘systems.’ Worship becomes ‘experience.’ The church becomes ‘brand.’ This is not the ancient path. This is Egypt with a cross on the sign.

7.1 The Manufacture of Emotion

Screens, lights, and sound equipment are tools. Tools are not automatically evil. But they become formative when used to manufacture emotional intensity while leaving the body passive. A crowd can be moved without being matured. Tears can be produced without repentance. Excitement can be generated without obedience. Atmosphere can be engineered without the fear of the Lord.

Paul warned the Corinthians that his preaching came not with “persuasive words of human wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, that your faith should not be in the wisdom of men but in the power of God” (1 Corinthians 2:4-5, NKJV). If faith produced by stagecraft is faith standing in the wisdom of men, it cannot survive the day pressure comes — and pressure always comes. A generation catechized by production cannot stand in persecution. The apostolic test is fruit: Are the saints more holy? More courageous? More skilled in Scripture? More ready to host, disciple, evangelize, and suffer? More discerning of falsehood? Or are they, after ten years in the same seat, still spiritual infants waiting for next Sunday’s inspiration to carry them through the week?

7.2 The Pastor as CEO

A CEO manages the organization. A shepherd knows the sheep. A CEO protects the brand. A shepherd protects the flock. A CEO scales systems. A shepherd feeds souls. A CEO uses metrics. A shepherd discerns fruit. Jesus did not command Peter, “Scale my brand.” He said, “Feed My sheep” (John 21:15-17). He did not say, “Grow the platform.” He said, “Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood” (Acts 20:28, NKJV). The blood of Christ is the price of the church. A leader who reduces that blood-bought body to a revenue base, an audience, or a personal platform has not understood what he has been entrusted with.

Ezekiel 34 is the sharpest rebuke in all Scripture against a leadership class that feeds itself on the sheep. “Woe to the shepherds of Israel who feed themselves! Should not the shepherds feed the flocks? You eat the fat and clothe yourselves with the wool... but you do not feed the flock. The weak you have not strengthened, nor have you healed those who were sick... but with force and cruelty you have ruled them” (Ezekiel 34:2-4, NKJV). Every pastor who has turned the flock into a source of income, status, platform, book sales, conference invites, or political power has stepped into a rebuke God issued long before the first megachurch broke ground.

7.3 The Saints as Customers

Customers expect convenience, excellence, anonymity, options, and low accountability. Disciples receive correction, carry crosses, share burdens, confess sin, forgive enemies, practice gifts, serve the poor, and go to the lost. The customer model and the disciple model produce different people.

If your congregation could fire you for demanding obedience, they are customers. If they could be disciplined by you through discomfort, they are brothers and sisters. The two economies cannot be merged without one killing the other — and the gospel economy is almost always the one that dies quietly, behind the scenes, while the financial economy flourishes loudly on stage.

7.4 Why the Saints Became Spectators

Spectatorship is not accidental. It is designed by repeated practices. Seat people in rows, dim the room, elevate a stage, spotlight a few, silence the many, professionalize prayer, outsource worship, centralize teaching, schedule participation out of the meeting, measure success by attendance — and after enough repetition the saints will forget they are priests. They will believe, correctly based on their experience, that their role is to show up, respond emotionally, give financially, and go home. They will have been trained, by a thousand small weekly catechisms, to be audience and not body.

Four losses accelerated this:

- **The Loss of the Table.** When the table disappears, the church loses its strongest antidote to hierarchy. Around a table, the wealthy and poor face one another. Needs become visible. Hospitality becomes normal. Food becomes ministry. The Lord's Supper reduced to a wafer in a dimmed room cannot discipline the social sins Paul saw at Corinth.
- **The Loss of Mutual Ministry.** The New Testament is filled with 'one another' commands — love, serve, bear burdens, exhort, forgive, confess, pray, teach, admonish, encourage, greet, be kind, submit, be at peace, build up. These cannot be fulfilled by sitting anonymously in a weekly event. A room structurally incapable of obedience teaches disobedience every time it meets.
- **The Loss of Gift Activation.** If the gathering provides no meaningful place for the gifts to operate, the assembly is functionally quenching what it doctrinally affirms. 'Do not quench the Spirit' (1 Thessalonians 5:19, NKJV) is a structural command, not merely a private devotional one.
- **The Loss of Sending Culture.** A spectator church may gather many but send few. The saints may become excellent at attending services but weak at making disciples. A church that measures seats filled has already misunderstood its own mission — because the King never counted seats; He counted cross-bearers.

8. Checkmate: Answering the Arguments of the Flesh

Every critique of the Western stage-centered model meets a predictable set of defenses. These defenses are rarely argued from Scripture. They are argued from pragmatism, sentiment, tradition, and fear of change. What follows is a direct, unsparing reply to each of them, measured against the Word of God and the witness of history. The question is not whether these arguments can be made. The question is whether they can survive Scripture.

8.1 “But the church has always looked like this.”

Historically false. For nearly three hundred years — roughly ten generations, the foundational era of Christian martyrdom, creedal formation, and explosive missionary expansion — the church did not look like this. There were no basilicas, no clergy caste, no professional class of full-time paid pastors as a universal norm, no pulpits elevated over silent rows, no offering buckets chasing production budgets. The church of the apostles, the Didache, Justin Martyr, Tertullian, Perpetua, and Polycarp was a household movement that overturned an empire from a thousand dining rooms. To defend the modern form by claiming it is ancient is to defend a fourth-century compromise by dressing it in first-century clothes. The shape you are defending is younger than the canon; the shape Jesus commanded is older than any cathedral.

8.2 “But souls are being saved!”

We rejoice wherever Christ is preached (Philippians 1:15-18). God is merciful, and God saves through faithful proclamation in any form. That is a testimony to God’s mercy, not a validation of the form. Ahab’s reign produced Elijah’s miracles; the corruption of the temple under the sons of Eli did not stop God from speaking to Samuel; Balaam’s donkey carried a true oracle. The presence of fruit does not prove the health of the system — only the mercy of God who works in spite of systems. The question is not, ‘Has God ever blessed this?’ but, ‘Is this what He commanded?’ To confuse those two questions is to build altars to men rather than obedience to God.

8.3 “But someone has to lead.”

Agreed. Forcefully. The New Testament requires leadership: elders, overseers, shepherds, and the fivefold gifts are not optional. But New Testament leadership equips the saints for ministry (Ephesians 4:12), shepherds by example rather than domination (1 Peter 5:1-3), is plural rather than singular in local congregations (Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5), is known and tested before being trusted (1 Timothy 3:1-7), and is accountable to the whole body. What is rejected here is not leadership. What is rejected is the celebrity solo-founder CEO model with an armor-bearer board, a brand to protect, and an audience to please. Restoration is not anarchy. It is the return of leadership to its biblical grammar: among the flock, not above it; raising up priests, not replacing them.

8.4 “But we need a building to reach our city.”

The church that turned the Roman world upside down owned no buildings for almost three centuries. The underground church in Iran owns no buildings today. The Jesus People movement packed beaches, not auditoriums. The church in China has multiplied into the tens of millions in homes. The argument that buildings are necessary to reach a city is empirically refuted on four continents and across two thousand years. Buildings can sometimes serve. But the moment a congregation believes it cannot function without a building, it has confessed something about where its real trust lies. When the building becomes the mission, the mission has been replaced by the building.

8.5 “But the pastor studied hard and deserves a salary.”

Scripture affirms financial support for those who labor in the word (1 Timothy 5:17-18; 1 Corinthians 9:7-14). No faithful believer denies this. But the New Testament never envisions the pastor as a salaried professional upon whom an entire lay body is structurally dependent for all ministry. Paul deliberately worked with his hands in Corinth and Thessalonica to avoid being a burden and to model that the ministry was not for sale (1 Corinthians 9:15-18; 2 Thessalonians 3:7-9). The model of bivocational, plural, locally-rooted elders is not a poverty gospel — it is a decentralization of power that makes the church less captive to those who pay it. The question is not whether elders may be supported, but whether the financial structure has become so central that faithfulness to Scripture now threatens the payroll. When obedience endangers the salary, the salary has begun to rule the pulpit.

8.6 “But this would destroy our institutions.”

Possibly. The question is whether those institutions were built by the King or by men. If by the King, they will stand under any reformation. If by men, they will fall, and ought to fall. The temple Jesus loved He also cleansed with a whip of cords (John 2:13-17); the temple He had worshiped in as a boy He prophesied would be thrown down with not one stone on another (Matthew 24:1-2). When He said, “I will build My church” (Matthew 16:18, NKJV), He claimed sole authorship. Whatever He did not author, He is not obligated to preserve. To defend an institution by arguing that reform would damage it is to prefer the institution to the King — which is the very idolatry under discussion.

8.7 “But house churches are weird and unaccountable.”

Some are. So were the Corinthians. Paul did not disband their assembly; he corrected it, because the household form was Scripture’s assumed form. The argument that participatory household assemblies are inherently unaccountable is historically false and structurally backwards. In a household, every member is known by name, watched in real time, and accountable to faces rather than algorithms. A stage-centered church can hide adulterous pastors for a decade; a household cannot hide them for a week. The megachurch abuse scandals of the last forty years — Bakker, Swaggart, Haggard, Hybels, MacDonald, Driscoll, Lentz, Ravi Zacharias, and a long list of lesser

names — did not happen despite accountability structures. They happened under them. They happened because structures built around celebrity, brand, money, and power produce exactly the kind of fruit that structures produce. Scripture is not naive: “By their fruits you will know them” (Matthew 7:20, NKJV). The fruit is in.

8.8 “But this is just anti-institutional anger / spiritual pride / youthful rebellion.”

A favorite deflection — because it attacks the messenger instead of answering the message. Accusations of a bad spirit do not refute arguments from Scripture. The test of a critique is not the tone of the critic but the truth of the text. Jesus spoke with burning indignation to the Pharisees (Matthew 23). Paul called certain teachers dogs, evil workers, and mutilators of the flesh (Philippians 3:2). The prophets called Israel a harlot and the leaders thieves. If zeal for the purity of the Bride is treated as rebellion, the ones making the accusation may wish to consider whom, exactly, they are imitating. The Pharisees also accused the sharpest voice in Israel of having a demon (John 8:48). That charge did not stick then and does not stick now.

8.9 “But the Old Testament had priests, a temple, and a musical worship team.”

Yes — and every one of those shadows was fulfilled and abolished in Christ. The old covenant priesthood is ended because Christ is the one and only High Priest (Hebrews 4:14-16; 7:23-28). The old covenant temple is ended because Christ is the Temple and the church is His indwelt house (John 2:19-21; 1 Corinthians 3:16-17; 1 Peter 2:5). The old covenant sacrifices are ended because Christ offered one sacrifice for sins forever (Hebrews 10:10-14). The old covenant musical Levitical guild is ended because every believer now sings directly as a priest (Ephesians 5:19; Colossians 3:16; Revelation 5:9-10). To recreate old covenant priesthood, temple, altar, and Levitical performance under new covenant language is not reverence. It is retrogression. It is building back what the cross tore down. It is the exact error the book of Hebrews was written to demolish. The veil was torn from top to bottom (Matthew 27:51). Any system that sews it back up is fighting the finished work of Christ.

These are not tidy theological puzzles. They are covenantal realities. To run an ecclesial system that contradicts the finished work of Christ — by reinstating mediation, priestly caste, temple culture, and spectator worship — is not morally neutral. It is to hold an inherited form over a revealed Savior. The Lamb who was slain will not forever be asked to bless what His blood was shed to end.

8.10 “But if we change, we will lose people / income / relevance.”

Probably. The cost of faithfulness has always been real. Jesus watched crowds walk away and did not chase them or soften the message (John 6:60-69). The disciples were told to count the cost

before they built (Luke 14:28-33). The lukewarm church of Laodicea was told it would be spit out of Christ's mouth (Revelation 3:15-16). To argue against obedience on the basis of preserving attendance is to prefer the crowd to the Christ — which is exactly what the religious leaders did when they handed Him over to Pilate. John 11:48 captures the eternal logic of institutional self-preservation: 'If we let Him alone like this, everyone will believe in Him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and nation.' They crucified the Son of God to protect their place. Every generation must decide whether it will do the same.

Every argument in favor of the Western stage-centered model, followed to its root, ends at one of two places: the preservation of human power or the preservation of human comfort. The arguments of the flesh cannot stand against the Word of the King. Every defense collapses. The King does not ask permission to reform His own house. He commands it. The only faithful reply is repentance and return.

PART III

WITNESSES AND THE WAY FORWARD

9. Modern Witnesses from the Margins

The King has never lacked a witness. At the margins — where programs fail, where institutions cannot reach, where platforms cannot be built, and where crowds cannot be gathered — the ancient paths keep reappearing. God is not dependent on the systems men have erected in His name. When the lampstand of the official religious culture grows dim, He raises up lampstands among hippies on a beach, converts in a Tehran living room, and college students in a dorm lounge. Three witnesses demand the modern church’s careful attention. They will not be treated as rhetorical ammunition or romantic slogans. They will be treated as evidence.

9.1 The Jesus People Movement: When Revival Outran the Institution

The Jesus People movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s was one of the most significant outpourings of the Spirit in twentieth-century America — and it happened almost entirely outside the structures, architecture, and assumptions of the mid-century American church. It was not a perfect movement. It had immaturity, doctrinal unevenness, cultural confusion, and its share of painful failures. What makes it a witness is not its perfection but its pattern: when God moves powerfully among the young, the lost, and the disillusioned, He repeatedly bypasses the formal religious apparatus of the day.

Where It Began

In 1967, during the so-called Summer of Love, tens of thousands of young people flooded into San Francisco’s Haight-Ashbury district searching for meaning in drugs, eastern mysticism, and counterculture. A small group of believers — Ted and Elizabeth Wise and three other couples — opened a storefront Christian coffeehouse called “The Living Room” a block off Haight Street. They had no denominational backing, no stage, no budget, no branding. They brought donuts on Friday nights, sat on the floor, listened to damaged young people, preached Jesus plainly, and opened their own home — called “the Big House” — as a communal household for converts who had nowhere to go. There, a broken and traumatized young man named Lonnie Frisbee came to Christ. He had been abandoned by his father, abused as a child, a product of the LSD counterculture; he also happened to be exactly the kind of vessel God has always preferred: unimpressive, unpolished, unqualified on paper, and fully surrendered.

In 1968 Frisbee met Chuck Smith, pastor of a small church called Calvary Chapel in Costa Mesa. Within a week of opening a rehab house called “The House of Miracles,” thirty-five new converts had moved in. Within a few years, Calvary Chapel had grown from about two hundred people to several thousand — and, more importantly, had become the visible edge of a national

phenomenon in which beaches were baptisms, homes were house churches, and vans full of young evangelists rolled into towns across America carrying Bibles rather than drugs.

What It Looked Like

The Jesus People movement's operational DNA reads like a footnote to Acts:

- Storefronts, coffeehouses, and converted warehouses instead of sanctuaries. “The Living Room” in Haight-Ashbury, Arthur Blessitt’s “His Place” on the Sunset Strip, Don Williams’ Salt Company coffeehouse in Los Angeles — these were the front lines.
- Christian communes and Jesus Houses as a norm, not a curiosity — the House of Miracles in Costa Mesa, the Shiloh Youth Revival Center near Eugene, Oregon, and hundreds of smaller communal homes across the West Coast. Converts moved in, got clean together, read Scripture together, ate together, and got sent back out together.
- Ocean baptisms by the thousands rather than carefully administered ritual — Pirate’s Cove and Corona del Mar beach became open-air baptismal fonts.
- Spontaneous street evangelism — campuses, beaches, bus stops, parks, high school lawns — by ordinary teenage and twenty-something converts whose only qualification was that they had met Jesus and could not shut up about it.
- Bible studies in living rooms that outgrew into tent meetings that outgrew into nightly gatherings, without anyone having drawn a growth plan.
- A new musical vocabulary — what would become “Jesus music,” and later Contemporary Christian Music — born not on a stage with lights, but from guitars in circles of young believers who had nothing to sell and no one to impress.

The movement was not coordinated from a headquarters. It erupted in parallel in San Francisco, Seattle, Berkeley, Southern California, and dozens of other cities. Time magazine put “The Jesus Revolution” on its cover in June 1971, three years into a phenomenon that the official religious press had not predicted, authorized, or organized. God had moved — through broken kids, drug converts, street preachers, and open homes — in ways that made the professional ministry establishment play catch-up.

What It Teaches Us

Three lessons from the Jesus People movement cut deep into the assumptions of the stage-centered church:

- **God does not need the machinery.** The movement did not begin with a budget, a building, a branding firm, a leadership pipeline, or a celebrity. It began with donuts, a living room, and five couples who had decided to obey Scripture. Whenever the Western church claims it cannot move without funding, platforms, and programs, the Jesus People are the standing historical rebuke of that lie.
- **The Spirit prefers the margins.** The hippie counterculture was the last place the respectable church of 1967 expected revival. But Jesus has always walked toward the margins: tax collectors, Samaritans, prostitutes, lepers, Galileans, Gentiles. The

institutional church did not authorize the Jesus movement because the institutional church could not have recognized it. God bypassed the gatekeepers because the gatekeepers had become guardians of their own reputation.

- **Institutional absorption is the movement's tombstone.** By the mid-to-late 1970s, large portions of the Jesus People movement had been folded into existing denominational structures, professionalized, and turned into what would eventually become the mass-market Contemporary Christian Music and megachurch industries. Jesus music became a business. Beach baptisms became production values. The prophetic edge dulled into a brand. The movement did not die of persecution. It died of domestication.

When a move of God must be made safe for the institution before it is allowed to continue, the institution has already claimed a lordship that belongs to Jesus alone. The lesson of the Jesus People movement is not only what God did but what men did with what God did — and the warning of history is that we are very likely to do it again the next time He moves.

9.2 The Iranian Underground Church: Revival Under the Blade

The Iranian underground church must be discussed with reverence, not romantic exploitation. Its members pay in coin the comfortable West has long forgotten how to count: surveillance, raids, interrogation, imprisonment, flogging, family ruin, travel bans, exile. To invoke them merely as an argument is to dishonor them. To learn from them, in fear of God and love for His Bride, is to honor them.

The Historical Arc

Before the 1979 Islamic Revolution, the evangelical Christian population in Iran numbered only a few hundred ethnic Persian converts from Islam, alongside older ethnic Armenian and Assyrian communities. After the revolution, formal evangelistic activity toward Muslims became illegal. Persian-language services were shuttered. Pastors — including the internationally known Haik Hovsepian-Mehr and Mehdi Dibaj — were assassinated in the early 1990s. The official, visible Christian infrastructure was systematically demolished.

What happened next is one of the most theologically significant church-history stories of the last hundred years: the regime destroyed the public church and inadvertently created the house church. Evangelicals began meeting in homes — first out of necessity, then out of strategy, then out of conviction. By the early 2000s, a distributed network of underground house churches was quietly multiplying in homes across Tehran, Karaj, Isfahan, Mashhad, Shiraz, and hundreds of smaller cities. What had been a few hundred Persian converts in 1979 has, by credible scholarly estimates, grown into hundreds of thousands; Open Doors and the U.S. State Department's Report on International Religious Freedom cite figures in the range of 500,000 to 800,000, while other scholars estimate the number of ethnic Iranian converts at over one million, with some

ministries placing it higher still. Iran has been described in multiple independent reports as the fastest-growing evangelical movement in the world.

The Price

This growth is not free. The regime has intensified persecution in direct proportion to the revival. In 2024, according to Article 18 and the Center for Human Rights in Iran, at least 96 Christians in Iran received combined prison sentences totaling 263 years — a six-fold increase over the previous year. Arrests continued through 2025, with converts from Islam regularly charged with “actions against national security” for the simple act of attending a house church, sharing the gospel, or receiving training abroad. A 37-year-old pregnant convert, Narges Nasri, was sentenced to sixteen years. A forty-five-year-old believer, Hesamoddin Joneydi, received eight years and one month for attending training in Turkey and hosting house meetings. Another convert, Shamloui, drew ten years and eight months for simply participating in a house church.

And still the church grows. The harder the regime presses, the more unmistakably Christ reveals Himself. The Iranian authorities are not, as Western commentators sometimes assume, overreacting to a minor phenomenon. They understand exactly what they are dealing with. The growth of the house church is, from the regime’s perspective, an existential threat to the ideological foundation of the Islamic Republic. Tens of thousands of mosques have closed. Millions of Iranians have abandoned Islam, often privately, often through dreams and visions, often through SAT-7 Pars satellite broadcasts and encrypted messaging. A recurring testimony of Iranian converts is the dream of a man in white who says, “I am the way. Follow Me.”

The Pattern

Stripped of every machinery the Western church believes it cannot live without, the Iranian underground church discovered something the New Testament had been saying all along: you do not need what the system told you that you needed. When the official religious apparatus was stripped away, the essentials became precious:

- Scripture — memorized, smuggled, handwritten, shared on paper, shared on screens. The believers who cannot get printed Bibles memorize them.
- Prayer — not led by a professional, but wept over in living rooms at midnight.
- Baptism — conducted in bathtubs, rivers, and basements, often just before a convert goes into custody.
- The Table — small, often a loaf of ordinary bread and juice, but discerning the body with a reverence Western congregations have forgotten.
- Shepherding by known, tested, plural leaders — not celebrities, but brothers and sisters who will be arrested alongside the flock they serve.
- Digital connection — Christian satellite TV in Farsi (SAT-7 Pars broadcasts 24/7), encrypted messaging, online discipleship reaching tens of thousands of Iranians monthly — not as a replacement for embodied gathering but as a trellis for it.

- Women in massive leadership roles. When male converts are immediately arrested, it is often women who host, teach, and shepherd house gatherings. The regime has accelerated what the New Testament always affirmed — that Priscilla, Lydia, Nympha, Phoebe, Junia, and the daughters of Philip are not anomalies but the normal pattern of a Spirit-moved church.
- Courage. Iranian believers have repeatedly testified that they count it an honor to suffer for Christ. The phrase “we have tasted and we have seen” recurs again and again.

What It Teaches Us

Three specific rebukes from the Iranian church press hard against the comfortable Western form:

- **Persecution clarifies theology.** In a free culture, Christians can believe ten contradictory things at once and suffer no consequence. Under the blade, a convert cannot afford to die for a brand, a celebrity, a denomination, or a preference. They must die for Christ alone. What the Iranian church has stripped away is exactly what the Western church should examine: if we would not die for it, why have we built on it?
- **The Spirit thrives without our scaffolding.** Every single ‘essential’ the Western church insists upon — buildings, paid staff, professional worship, tax status, cultural respectability, public visibility — has been surgically removed in Iran. And the church has not shrunk. It has exploded. This is not an argument from sentiment. This is an argument from data. If all our machinery were essential, the Iranian church would not exist. But it does exist. Which means the machinery was never essential. It was comfortable.
- **The house form is not a fallback — it is a fountain.** The Iranian church is not sitting in homes waiting to get back into buildings. In home after home, leaders testify that the form itself has become the substance of their strength. They cannot be absorbed by the state. They cannot be bought by donors. They cannot be manipulated by platforms. Because they have almost nothing, they have almost everything the New Testament describes. The house church is not a survival mechanism. It is a scriptural pattern God is re-teaching the world through them.

The house becomes a sanctuary because the Spirit fills people, not because the state approves a building. The Western church built palaces and wondered where the power went. The Iranian church has nothing but Jesus — and has found Him more than enough.

9.3 Gen Z and the Hunger for Reality: A Revival Outside the Sanctuary

Gen Z — roughly those born between 1997 and 2012 — should not be flattened into a slogan. Some are cynical. Some are hungry. Some are wounded by institutional hypocrisy. Some are biblically illiterate. Some are being drawn powerfully to Jesus. A careful observer does not hype what is happening; a careful observer also does not dismiss it. What the evidence shows, carefully

weighed, is a generation raised in digital performance that has become remarkably skilled at detecting religious performance — and is, almost involuntarily, returning to something older and more real than the church of their parents' youth ministry.

Where It Began

The current season of awakening among Gen Z is widely dated by observers and participants alike to a single Wednesday morning chapel service at Asbury University in Wilmore, Kentucky, on February 8, 2023. After the scheduled service ended, a small group of students remained behind to continue worshipping. They did not stop. The worship continued through the day, into the night, and onward for approximately fourteen consecutive days, drawing tens of thousands of visitors from across the country and beyond before the university leadership, in pastoral wisdom, brought the public phase to a close to protect the students and the witness. What made Asbury notable was not the crowd. It was the absence of celebrity, the absence of platform, the absence of a single named preacher, and the persistent humility of the worship itself — simple, Christ-centered, repentance-saturated, and sustained for hours without any human leader carrying it. The Spirit Himself was the leader at Asbury, and what He did there established the pattern by which subsequent campus outpourings would be measured and discerned.

Campus ministries report unprecedented surges that have continued and deepened across the years since Asbury. The Salt Company at Iowa State has grown from roughly 1,400 attenders in 2023 to over 1,700 at the fall 2025 kickoff — numbers the campus ministry's leadership has described as without precedent in nearly forty years of continuous operation. More striking than the kickoff attendance, however, is what happened in the days following: approximately 1,100 of those students were placed into weekly small-group Bible studies within the first week of the semester. The hunger expressed at the larger meeting is being absorbed into the smaller one, where actual discipleship can take place. The Salt Network as a whole now operates across more than forty churches in twenty-eight states, reaching over seventeen thousand college students weekly. Regional Salt Company affiliates have reported year-over-year kickoff attendance increases of significant magnitude across multiple campuses, with growth concentrated heavily in regions where small-group discipleship infrastructure has been built to receive the influx.

In February 2026, at Southeastern University in Lakeland, Florida, what began as a regular chapel service evolved into a multi-day worship and repentance gathering that prompted university leadership to cancel classes for two consecutive days. Students brought blankets, sleeping bags, and pillows to remain in the chapel, with many choosing not to return to dorm rooms less than one hundred yards away. Faculty, staff, and administrators joined the students. The chapel, which holds approximately seven hundred fifty to eight hundred people, was full continuously across the days the gathering ran. University Chaplain Pablo Rivera, in describing the leadership's posture, said that the university was deliberately limiting attendance to the campus community to protect what was happening rather than promote it. Southeastern's leadership consulted directly with the organizers of the 2023 Asbury outpouring on how to steward an extended Spirit-led gathering without exploiting it. That instinct — to protect rather than promote, to steward rather than scale,

to refuse the spotlight rather than chase it — is itself one of the marks that what is happening in this season is genuine.

The Evidence Is Not Located Where Legacy Churches Assumed

What is striking about the present moment is not primarily happening in the legacy Sunday-morning church corporations. It is happening on college campuses, in dorm rooms, in athletic facilities, in high school classrooms, and on city streets. Consider the evidence from the 2024–2026 period:

- At The Ohio State University in August 2024, the football team helped host a campus revival night that ended in hundreds of students being baptized in portable tanks on the university’s property. At one single West Coast crusade in Anaheim, approximately 6,500 of 45,000 young people attending publicly professed faith in Jesus.
- Athlete-led Bible studies have multiplied on campus after campus. At the University of Pittsburgh, a player-led group called “Pitt Men of God” began meeting weekly in the football facilities after practice — and filled rooms. The pattern has repeated at dozens of Division I football programs.
- Bible sales in 2025 crossed ten million copies in the United States alone, exceeding the prior year by more than one million — driven disproportionately by younger buyers. The Gospel of John and the Psalms have been best-selling items on campus.
- Bible reading marathons in dorm lounges, worship nights that run for hours after class, student-initiated prayer walks through city neighborhoods, and open-air preaching on campus greens have returned to American universities for the first time in nearly fifty years.
- Between 2021 and 2023, Christian self-identification among Gen Z in the United States rose from approximately 45 percent to 51 percent — the first recorded reversal of a decades-long decline among any living American generation.
- Since late 2025, reports of increased attendance at churches and campus ministries have continued, with particular surges in the fall semester of 2025 that campus pastors describe, in their own words, as unprecedented in their careers.

Where It Is Actually Happening

It must be said plainly: the resurgence among Gen Z is largely not happening in the corporate megachurch sanctuary. It is happening in the very places the New Testament would expect:

- In dorm rooms — small groups of four, six, ten students, Bible open, phone on the floor, walking one another through Romans at midnight.
- In cafeterias, fraternity houses, sorority houses, and locker rooms — where peer-to-peer witness is changing whole friend groups in a semester.
- In Christian houses and intentional communities near campuses — modern analogues of the Jesus People’s communal homes.

- In city streets — prayer walks, baptisms in public parks, street preaching, outreach to the homeless, open-air worship in parks, and evangelism in university quads.
- In public schools — student-led prayer around flagpoles, Bible studies in cafeterias, and testimonies shared at graduation platforms.
- In small local churches of mixed generations where a young adult is actually known by name, invited to dinner, pastored face-to-face, given a role, and expected to carry weight.

It is notably not happening, as a rule, in the kind of dimmed-room production-church that once promised to “reach the next generation” through lights, fog, branded merchandise, and a charismatic lead pastor with an Instagram following. The irony is pointed: a generation that was told it needed polish is returning to its unpolished roots. A generation the marketers said would only respond to slick production is, in many cases, walking past the slick production to find a Bible, a meal, and a group of friends who actually love them.

What This Generation Actually Wants

Gen Z is not asking for what the professional church-growth industry assumes. Every honest campus minister, pastor, and youth worker actually paying attention is reporting the same pattern:

- They want Scripture, not slogans. Expository teaching is outperforming motivational talks. Young people are buying whole Bibles, not devotional trinkets.
- They want confession, accountability, and purity — not sexual permissiveness endorsed by a chaplain. Many are actively repudiating the hookup culture they inherited.
- They want truth, spoken plainly, about sin and salvation. Vagueness insults them. Clarity compels them.
- They want older fathers and mothers in the faith, not peers trying to be cool. They want mentors who will tell them the truth at personal cost.
- They want their lives to count for something greater than themselves. They want to be sent, not managed.
- They want a real table, a real prayer, a real community, and a real Lord. Their whole lives have taught them to detect the artificial. They are done with performance.

What It Teaches Us

If the Holy Spirit is again drawing young people to Christ through Bible studies in dorms, baptisms in backyard pools, prayer on campus greens, and testimony in locker rooms, then the corporate Sunday-morning stage is not the center of the move. It was never the center. It cannot hold the center. What it can do, and must do if its leaders are honest, is ask a hard question: if the revival is not happening in our services, what does that say about our services?

Three warnings must accompany any celebration:

- **Zeal must be disciplined.** The hunger of this generation is real, but hunger without doctrine becomes heresy, and emotion without Scripture becomes enthusiasm-gone-

wrong. The generation needs fathers and mothers in the faith who will love them enough to feed them the whole counsel of God — including the parts that will offend their culture and their own hearts.

- **Not every claimed revival is.** Some of what is reported will prove to be marketing. Some will prove to be emotional contagion. Some will prove to be political energy repackaged as spiritual energy, especially where ‘revival’ merges too easily with partisan causes. Discernment is not cynicism; it is love. Scripture is the only meter by which the authentic can be told from the counterfeit.
- **Domestication is still the greatest danger.** What happened to the Jesus People in the 1970s — absorption, professionalization, the turning of a move of God into a merchandise category — is waiting to happen again. The temptation will be strong to seize this move, rebrand it, sell conferences about it, monetize it. May God raise up men and women with the courage to protect this generation from becoming the next product line.

They must be disciplined, not domesticated; equipped, not exploited; sent, not seated indefinitely. The King who is drawing them is the same King who drew the disciples on the Galilean shore, the same King who drew a hippie off a cliff in Tahquitz Canyon, the same King who visits a Tehran living room at night. He has not changed. And He is not asking permission from the institution to move.

9.4 The House-Church Resurgence in the Wake of the Awakening

What has become visible on the chapel platforms of Asbury, Cedarville, and Southeastern is, in significant measure, the surface of a deeper movement. Beneath the campus outpourings, and increasingly extending outward from them, a quieter and arguably more important development has been unfolding in the houses around the same campuses and across the country. The institute is aware of, and in direct relationship with, a growing network of Spirit-led house-church gatherings that have, in the years since Asbury, multiplied across multiple states with no central organization, no franchise model, no celebrity name attached, and no marketing apparatus. The pattern is the apostolic pattern. The fruit, where it is genuine, is the apostolic fruit.

Texas A&M and the College Station House Network

One of the most operationally significant of these developments has emerged around Texas A&M University in College Station, Texas. The Spirit-led gatherings there have grown to such a degree that, in seasons of overflow from the larger campus presence, single house gatherings have multiplied into four parallel houses meeting in the same neighborhood on the same nights, in order to accommodate the numbers without losing the household scale that makes the gatherings work. The decision to multiply rather than centralize is itself one of the marks that the leadership has resisted the inherited Western instinct to scale into a single large meeting. Each house holds

the size at which the body can know one another by name, eat together, function together, and disciple together — the scale the New Testament assumed.

The pattern has spread well beyond College Station. Significant additional hubs operate across Texas, with particular concentration in Dallas, and in Southern California, where San Diego and Orange County have become major centers. Additional gatherings have multiplied in Oklahoma, Massachusetts, and across other states as the Spirit has led. The leadership of the broader network is genuinely distributed. There is no headquarters. There is no franchise office. There is no central pastor or founding personality whose name carries the work. Several of the most fruitful shepherds in this network are veterans of the 1970s Jesus Movement — men and women now in their later seasons of ministry who walked through the original West Coast outpouring, were formed by it, and watched its absorption into the institutional church with grief. Having seen one move of God turned into a merchandise category, they are now pouring their hard-won wisdom into the Gen Z generation that has hungered for what they once carried. The mantle is being deliberately passed from a generation that paid the cost of the first awakening to a generation that has been crying out for the second.

The Three-Day Jesus-Style Gatherings

Out of this house-church network has emerged a recurring three-day gathering pattern that the institute, for the purposes of this paper, will refer to as the Jesus-style Gatherings, based on the book of Acts. These are festival-scale assemblies held approximately four times per year, drawing anywhere from three hundred to eight hundred worshippers for three days at a time, primarily but not exclusively Gen Z, with significant intergenerational presence from the older saints and the Jesus Movement veterans noted above. The locations rotate across multiple states, including Texas, California, Oklahoma, Massachusetts, and Kauai, with additional locations added as the Spirit leads. Believers have begun traveling to these gatherings from significant distances, including from outside the United States, drawn by what they describe as the freedom of the meetings and their close resemblance to the gatherings of the book of Acts.

What sets these gatherings apart from nearly every other Christian gathering of comparable scale in the contemporary West is what is absent from them, and that absence is itself the witness:

- **No charge.** The gatherings are completely free of any cost to attend. No tickets. No registration fees. No paid tiers.
- **No tithe message.** No offering pitch. No fundraising appeal. No financial program of any kind is presented during the gatherings themselves.
- **No merchandise.** No book table. No conference swag. No branded apparel. Nothing is for sale.
- **No central man of God.** No headlining preacher. No celebrity teacher. No lead personality whose name appears on promotional material — because there is no promotional material.

- **No flyers.** No marketing infrastructure. The gatherings are made known through word of mouth, a modest website and social media presence, and the occasional podcast interview accepted (never sought) when the Spirit has clearly led one of the lead figures to do so.
- **Food for everyone.** Every person present is fed, freely, throughout the three days. Hospitality is not an add-on; it is one of the central acts of worship.

These are not optional features. They are the visible marks of a gathering that has refused, at every operational level, the structural temptations under which the modern Western church has labored: the reduction of the saints to tithing units, the elevation of the platformed personality, the merchandising of spiritual experience, and the marketing of religious community as a product to be consumed. The Jesus-style Gatherings, in their actual operations, embody the precise antithesis of every drift this paper has spent two parts naming. The Bride that has been told she could not gather in any other way is being shown, in real time, that she can.

A Measured Public Posture

The institute notes with respect that the leadership of these gatherings has practiced a deliberately measured public posture. In the early years of the work they declined nearly all interview requests and refused most opportunities for visibility, on the conviction that the work belonged to the King and not to any platform. Following the release of the Jesus Revolution film in 2023, awareness of the original 1970s movement spiked across the broader culture, and a parallel hunger arose in the Bride to encounter what that movement had embodied. In response, the leadership prayerfully discerned that limited acceptance of podcast interview invitations — when approached, never sought — would serve the global Bride who needed to know what the Lord was doing in this hour. They have continued in that measured posture since. They do not pursue platforms. They accept select invitations when the Lord opens the door. They refuse the apparatus that would turn the work into a brand.

This posture is itself a teaching. A genuine move of the Spirit does not require obscurity to remain pure, nor does it require visibility to be effective. What it requires is discernment — the constant, prayerful, costly work of saying yes only when the Lord has clearly led, and saying no without explanation when He has not. The institute commends this posture as a model for every saint, shepherd, and movement that finds itself in possession of something the Bride needs to see, and that must therefore steward visibility without becoming the thing that is seen. The work is the King's. The platform, if there is to be one, is His.

Beyond the United States: The Pattern Without Borders

The pattern is not American, and it is not confined to the campuses or networks in which it has been most visible in the West. The institute is aware of contemporary Spirit-led house-church gatherings operating in cultures and contexts that should not, by any natural reckoning, host them. In Villavicencio, Colombia — a city in the foothills of the Andes far from any institutional center of the global house-church movement — doctors from a local church have begun hosting Sabbath house-church gatherings in this same Spirit-led, freedom-marked, table-centered

format. The pattern is almost entirely foreign to the inherited Latin American Catholic and Pentecostal cultures around them. The gatherings have multiplied. Similar reports come from villages and cities across Africa, Southeast Asia, and the Middle East, including the Iranian underground network already canonized as a witness in Section 9.2 of this paper.

The Spirit who moves through a Saxon village in 1727, a California beach in 1971, a Florida chapel in 2026, and a College Station living room any Wednesday night also moves through a Colombian Doctor's house gathering on a Friday night. He is no respecter of borders, languages, or the assumptions of the cultures He chooses to disrupt. He is gathering His Bride wherever He finds her hungry — and increasingly, He is finding her in the houses, at the tables, around the meals, where the apostles found her at the beginning. The form is older than the cultures it is now appearing in. The form is older than every cathedral and every megachurch that has tried to replace it. The form is His, given to His Bride at the beginning, and recovered now at the end, in every nation under heaven where saints will submit to His Spirit.

The houses are gathering. The tables are being set. The fathers and mothers from the previous outpouring are pouring into the next. The young are being fed. The lost are being saved. The poor are being welcomed. The sick are being prayed over. No one is being charged. No one is being branded. No one is being seated in a row to watch a single voice perform on a stage. This is not theory. This is happening. The Western church does not need to wait for permission to recognize it. She needs only to repent, return, and join what the King is already doing in His own house.

9.5 The Common Pattern

Across the apostolic church, the best instincts of the Jesus People movement, the costly witness of the Iranian underground, and the hunger among Gen Z, a single pattern emerges: the Spirit moves where Jesus is obeyed, where the gospel is embodied, where ordinary believers are activated, where tables are open, where witness goes outward, where persecution is risked, where homes are opened, and where no man is allowed to steal the glory. The stage-centered model is not the universal container for the Spirit's work. The Spirit's container is the obedient body of Christ in whatever form it takes. And again and again, when He moves most powerfully, He moves in forms that look suspiciously like Acts 2.

Three witnesses. Three continents. Three generations. One pattern. The same Spirit who was at work in Jerusalem is at work in Costa Mesa, in Tehran, and in the dorm rooms of Ann Arbor. What He is doing, He is doing without asking permission. The only question is whether the Western church will hear the Spirit speaking to His churches (Revelation

2:7) — or whether she will insist on the preservation of her own form while the move of God passes her by.

10. Returning to the Ancient Paths: A Practical Roadmap

Criticism alone cannot restore the church. Anger at religious systems can become its own counterfeit fire. The ancient paths require repentance, humility, courage, doctrine, order, patience, and practical obedience. The goal is not to abandon every building overnight or shame every sincere pastor. The goal is to bring every inherited form under the judgment of Scripture and the authority of King Jesus.

Principle	Restoration Action
Begin with Repentance, Not Reaction	Ask: Where have we built what Jesus did not command, measured what He did not value, silenced whom He gifted, exploited whom He entrusted? Let judgment begin at the house of God (1 Peter 4:17).
Re-teach the Meaning of Assembly	Recover ekklesia: the called-out assembly of the King. Stop asking ‘How do we get people to attend?’ Start asking ‘How do we become the obedient assembly Jesus is building?’
Restore Households and Tables	Every assembly — large or small — must rebuild around tables and homes: shared meals, Scripture, prayer, confession, hospitality, care for needs, gifts, and local mission.
Re-form Leadership as Shepherding	Pastors as shepherds, not CEOs. Elders among the flock, not above it. Plural eldership, not solo celebrity. Fivefold gifts equipping saints for ministry, not performing ministry while saints watch.
Make Room for Body Participation	Provide ordered, tested, accountable space for testimony, psalms, prayer, exhortation, questions, prophecy weighed by mature leaders, practical service, and mission reports.
Break the Metrics of Babylon	Replace attendance and revenue with biblical fruit: obedience, holiness, love, unity, truth,

Principle	Restoration Action
	courage, generosity, care for the poor, disciples made, saints equipped.
Redirect Money Toward Kingdom Priorities	Giving should support genuine ministry, care for the poor, sustain faithful laborers, send workers, and meet needs in the body — not primarily feed buildings, brands, and production systems.
Refuse Celebrity	No Christian leader should become so central that his removal endangers the church. If removing a man ends the meeting, the meeting was never the church — it was a brand.
Send the Saints	The final test of the gathering is sending. The meeting is not the finish line. It is the furnace where saints are warmed, forged, corrected, filled, and sent back into the world.

11. A Sample Restored Gathering

The following model is not a new law. It is one example of how a household-based assembly might embody the ancient paths with order, depth, participation, and mission. The principles must remain constant: Jesus is central, Scripture governs, the table matters, the Spirit is active, leaders equip, the body participates, the poor are remembered, and the saints are sent.

Movement / Practice	Purpose
Welcome & Meal — Shared food, hospitality, conversation, attention to guests and needs.	Forms family and reveals pastoral needs.
Opening Prayer & Praise — Simple worship led from within the room; songs, psalms, thanksgiving.	Centers the gathering on the King rather than a performer.
Breaking Bread — Bread and cup received with reverence; the body is discerned.	Remembers the Lord and restores covenant equality.

Movement / Practice	Purpose
Scripture Reading — A substantial passage read aloud, with context and reverence.	Submits the room to the Word.
Interactive Teaching — A mature teacher or elder opens the text; questions and discussion guided, not chaotic.	Equips understanding and allows the body to wrestle with obedience.
Body Ministry — Testimonies, exhortations, prayers, gifts, needs, confession, and encouragement under elder oversight.	Builds up the body and activates gifts.
Care & Giving — Practical needs named; money or labor directed toward real care and mission.	Prevents religious talk from replacing love.
Commissioning — Specific prayer for the week’s witness, assignments, outreach, service, and follow-up.	Sends ministers, not consumers.
Leadership Debrief — Elders or mature servants follow up on doctrine, care needs, conflict, and discipleship.	Maintains order, protection, and continuity.

12. Transforming the Traditional Church Building: The Dual Wineskin Model

Up to this point, this paper has named the disease and pressed for repentance. But repentance must be pastoral as well as prophetic. A shepherd who has spent thirty years inside the Western stage-centered model cannot simply tear his sanctuary down on a Wednesday and expect his flock to follow him to a living room on Sunday. Some sheep will. Many will not. Some will be confused, some will be wounded, some will be lost to other shepherds, and some will fall away entirely. Reformation that loses sheep in the name of obedience has misunderstood the heart of the Shepherd.

The King who commands restoration is the same King who said, “The weak you have not strengthened, nor have you healed those who were sick” (Ezekiel 34:4). He is also the King who refused to break a bruised reed or quench a smoking flax (Matthew 12:20). Pastors leading their congregations out of the old wineskin and into the new must do so with the same patience and tenderness Christ used with disciples who took years to understand what He meant. Reformation does not require recklessness. It requires courage governed by love.

12.1 The Master's Own Words on Wineskins

Jesus Himself addressed this exact pastoral tension. When asked why His disciples did not fast like John's or like the Pharisees, He answered with three connected images:

“No one puts a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old garment; for the patch pulls away from the garment, and the tear is made worse. Nor do they put new wine into old wineskins, or else the wineskins break, the wine is spilled, and the wineskins are ruined. But they put new wine into new wineskins, and both are preserved.” — Matthew 9:16-17, NKJV

Jesus is not preaching architecture. He is teaching that the new life of the Kingdom requires new structures to contain it. Pour new wine into old wineskins and the result is not preservation — it is double destruction. The wine is wasted and the skin is ruined. This is precisely what has happened repeatedly in church history when fresh moves of God have been forced into rigid existing forms: both the move and the form are damaged. The Jesus People movement was poured into the old wineskin of the legacy denominational and corporate church and lost most of its prophetic edge inside a decade. New wine demands new skins. That is not optional. That is the Master's own teaching.

But the King added a quiet warning that pastors leading reformation must hear. In Luke's version of the same teaching, Jesus closed with a sobering line:

“And no one, having drunk old wine, immediately desires new; for he says, ‘The old is better.’” — Luke 5:39, NKJV

Jesus is not endorsing the old wine here. He is naming a pastoral reality. People formed for decades in the old will, by reflex, prefer the old. They are not necessarily rebellious; they are simply formed. The shepherd who forgets this truth will run ahead of his sheep and call it leadership. The shepherd who remembers it will lead patiently, lovingly, and visibly — letting the sheep see, taste, and choose the new wine for themselves rather than having it forced down them. Reformation that respects the formation of the sheep produces lasting transformation. Reformation that ignores it produces church splits.

12.2 The Dual Wineskin Model

The Dual Wineskin Model is a tested transitional approach now being used by congregations around the world to move from the old wineskin of stage-centered, spectator-formed gathering into the new wineskin of first-century participatory church — without splitting the body, without shaming the established members, and without abandoning the building or the existing congregation. The principle is simple: run two services in parallel. Maintain the old-wineskin service for those still formed by it and unwilling to leave it. Launch a parallel new-wineskin service — a fully participatory, household-scaled, table-centered, body-ministering, first-century-pattern gathering — in the same building, under the same shepherds, available to anyone who wants to taste the new wine. Then let the Spirit do what the Spirit does.

This is not compromise. It is patience. It is not endorsing the old wineskin as equally valid; the rest of this paper has already settled that question. It is recognizing that a pastor cannot make a congregation eat solid food before they have been weaned from milk (Hebrews 5:12-14). The Dual Wineskin Model creates a controlled environment in which the new wineskin can be experienced firsthand, tested in real time, and freely chosen by people who would otherwise have refused it on principle. It honors the conscience and formation of the older members while removing every excuse from the younger and the spiritually hungry.

12.3 Case Study: A Global Realignment Toward the Ancient Paths

In 2024, one of the largest international house-church coalitions in the world — representing a network of approximately 45 million believers across more than 80 countries — made a strategic decision that should arrest the attention of every pastor in the West. Despite already operating largely outside Western institutional models, their leadership recognized that the churches in their network were beginning to drift toward the same stage-centered patterns that have hollowed out the Western church. They saw the early symptoms: rising professionalism, growing reliance on imported Western platforms and metrics, and a quiet erosion of the participatory household DNA that had fueled their explosive growth in the first place.

Their growth, by every honest measure, has been historic. India alone has been multiplying over one hundred thousand house churches per year. Comparable patterns of multiplication have been documented across Africa, Southeast Asia, and Latin America. They are not asking how to get out of decline. They are asking how to protect what God is already doing from being slowly absorbed by a foreign and inferior wineskin.

In response, this coalition reached out to a North American decentralized house-church network anchored in Texas and California — a network that had recovered the first-century pattern of gathering and was experiencing remarkable engagement across all generations, including a striking response from Gen Z. Their international leaders flew to California for direct, in-person training in the ancient pattern: household-scaled gathering, the table as theology, body participation, plural eldership, equipping rather than performing, and the discipleship of saints into ministers. Then they took what they had learned and went home to retrain their networks across eighty nations. The reverse missionary current of our generation has begun: the global church teaching the Western church how to gather like the New Testament — and protecting itself, in the process, from becoming what the Western church has become.

12.4 Case Study: Costa Rica and the Birth of the Dual Wineskin

One of the first significant pastoral case studies to emerge from this realignment came out of Costa Rica. A pastor of an established legacy congregation became convicted of the first-century pattern through this training. He faced the same dilemma every honest reforming pastor faces: he loved his older members, who were deeply formed by the legacy stage-centered model. Many of them had given decades of service. Many had built the very building he now needed to repurpose. To

force them, suddenly, into a foreign style of gathering would have wounded them, scattered them, and likely driven them into the arms of another stage-centered congregation that would have only deepened their formation in the old wineskin.

So he did something simple, wise, and pastoral. He did not cancel the old service. He launched a second service — same building, same week, same pastor — dedicated entirely to the first-century model. The legacy service continued as before, with stage, sermon, and traditional flow, for those who wanted it. The new service met around tables, with shared meals, body ministry, the table as theology, participatory teaching, prayer for one another, exercise of gifts under elder oversight, and active sending into the streets and neighborhoods. He gave his people a real choice. He did not shame them. He did not preach at them. He let the new wine speak for itself.

The result, three months in, was striking on three fronts:

- **Explosive growth in the new-wineskin service.** New people — many of whom had previously rejected church entirely or had drifted from prior congregations — began arriving in significant numbers. The gathering had a gravitational pull no production-centered service in the same building had ever produced.
- **A roughly tenfold increase in engagement and enthusiasm among newly equipped believers.** Saints who had been spiritual spectators for years began functioning as ministers within weeks. Gifts long dormant came alive. Hospitality opened in homes across the city. Evangelism became natural rather than scheduled. The ceiling came off. People stopped attending church and started being the church.
- **No loss of legacy members.** Because the old service continued for those who wanted it, the older members did not feel attacked, abandoned, or shamed. Many of them, watching the fruit of the new service over weeks and months, eventually wandered in to taste the new wine for themselves — on their own timing, by their own choice, without being pushed. Some chose to attend both. A surprising number eventually migrated entirely to the new wineskin. Almost none left the church.

The pastor in Costa Rica did not split his church. He did not blow up the building. He did not produce culture shock. He gave his people a transparent, prayerful, side-by-side choice between the old and the new — and they overwhelmingly chose the new. This Costa Rica model has since been studied and replicated by pastors across Latin America, parts of Asia, and a growing number of congregations in North America. It has become, for many, the proof that reformation does not require destruction.

Reformation in love does not have to come at the cost of the sheep. The Dual Wineskin Model lets the older members keep what they know while the new wineskin is poured for everyone willing to taste it. Most of the time, given a fair choice and enough time, the sheep choose the new wine. They were never the enemy. They were just thirsty for something they had never been allowed to taste.

12.5 How to Implement the Dual Wineskin Model

The pattern below summarizes the practical steps that have produced fruit in Costa Rica and elsewhere. These are not a rigid formula. They are a tested framework that can be adapted to local language, building, leadership, and culture. The principles are constant. The methods are flexible.

Step	Practical Action
1. Begin with Repentance and Prayer Among Leaders	Elders, pastors, and core servants must first themselves be reformed. Reformation that has not first humbled the leadership will not survive contact with the congregation. Spend weeks, not days, in Scripture, fasting, prayer, and honest examination of where the existing model has departed from the King’s design.
2. Teach the Whole Congregation Honestly	Before launching the new wineskin, openly teach the congregation — from Scripture and church history — what the New Testament gathering looked like and why. Use this white paper, the New Testament itself, and direct teaching. Do not maneuver. Do not manipulate. Trust the Word to do its own work.
3. Identify and Train a Core Team	Pull together a group of mature, hungry, teachable saints — across generations — willing to be the seed of the new-wineskin service. Train them in the ancient pattern: household scale, the table, body participation, gift activation, plural shepherding, sending culture. Visit a healthy first-century-model gathering in person if possible.
4. Launch the New-Wineskin Service in Parallel	Schedule it on a different day or different time from the existing service. Use the same building, the same eldership, the same name. Make it explicit that this is not a competing service but a parallel expression of the same body returning to the King’s design.

Step	Practical Action
5. Maintain the Legacy Service With Full Honor	Do not allow contempt or condescension toward the old-wineskin service to develop in the new-wineskin service. The older saints are not the enemy. Many of them have served Christ faithfully for decades inside structures they did not design. Honor them. Pray for them. Eat with them. Refuse to let factions form.
6. Let the Fruit Speak	Resist the urge to advertise, oversell, or produce. Let the new wineskin's fruit — saints equipped, gifts activated, lives changed, mission flowing outward, the poor cared for, marriages restored, the lost coming in — do its own evangelism inside the congregation. Most older members do not need a sermon about the new wine. They need to taste it.
7. Pastor the Migration With Patience	Some saints will migrate quickly. Some will take a year. Some will take three. Some will never move and will go home to the Lord still loving the old wineskin. That is acceptable. The shepherd's job is not to manufacture the timing of the Spirit; it is to make the new wine available and to walk patiently with the sheep through their own process.
8. Multiply Households Outward	As the new-wineskin service grows, do not make the mistake of letting it become another single large gathering. Multiply it into homes. The goal is not to fill the building with the new service; it is to fill the city with households that gather in the King's pattern. The building, in time, becomes a training and sending hub — not the destination.
9. Eventually, Honor the Building Rightly	When the legacy service has run its faithful course — whether in three years or thirty — the building can be repurposed: a training center, a hospitality hub, a base for the poor,

Step	Practical Action
	a mission-sending center, classrooms, prayer rooms, table-rooms. The structure that once trained spectators becomes the launching pad for ministers. The wineskin is not destroyed; it is fulfilled.

12.6 Cautions for the Reforming Pastor

The Dual Wineskin Model is not a loophole that lets a pastor avoid the cost of reformation. It is a strategy of love that makes reformation survivable for the sheep. Several cautions must be held alongside it:

- **Do not let the dual model become permanent.** The goal is not two services forever. The goal is a transition. Without intentional pastoral leadership, the dual wineskin can ossify into two parallel cultures that distrust one another. The end is migration, not separation.
- **Do not water down the new wineskin to make it palatable.** If the ‘new-wineskin service’ is just the old-wineskin service with chairs in a circle, it will not produce the fruit. It must be genuinely participatory, table-centered, gift-activating, and body-ministering. The half-measure is more dangerous than the old wineskin, because it inoculates people against the real thing.
- **Do not force the elderly out.** The eighty-year-old saint who has loved Jesus for sixty years through hymnals and pews does not need to be retrained against her will. She needs to be honored. Many of these saints will, in time, choose the new wineskin themselves; many will not, and that is acceptable. Their salvation is not at stake. Their formation is.
- **Do not let the new wineskin become a cool-kids club.** If the new service becomes a generational silo — only Gen Z, only millennials, only the newly converted — it has already departed from the New Testament pattern, in which young and old, slave and free, rich and poor, Jew and Gentile sat at the same table. Reformation must be intergenerational or it is not reformation.
- **Do not lead this alone.** Plural eldership is not optional in the new wineskin. A solo pastor leading a Dual Wineskin transition will burn out, drift, or fall. Build the team before you build the service.

The Dual Wineskin Model is not a third way between obedience and disobedience. It is a pastoral path of obedience that protects the sheep through the transition. The new wine still must be poured. The old wineskin still must be retired. But the sheep do not have to be sacrificed on the altar of the shepherd’s zeal. They can be led, fed, honored, and given

time to choose. And again and again, when they are given that choice in love, they choose the new wine. They were always going to.

Conclusion: One King, One Table, One Body, One Mission

The modern church does not need to become ancient in costume. It needs to become obedient in substance. The ancient paths are not nostalgia for oil lamps and first-century architecture. They are the revealed ways of the King: disciples who obey, households that worship, tables that proclaim covenant, shepherds who serve, gifts that build up, saints who minister, and communities that carry the gospel outward in the power of the Holy Spirit.

The Western stage-centered model has produced some genuine good wherever Christ has been preached sincerely. But as a dominant framework, it has trained passivity, celebrity, control, consumerism, and dependence. It has made the bride hungry in a room full of religious food. It has offered polished inspiration while withholding the deeper meal of shared life, activated gifts, accountable love, and mission. It has replaced the priesthood of all believers with the professionalism of a few. It has replaced the table with the altar, the altar with the pulpit, the pulpit with the stage, and the stage with the brand — each step a further drift from the King's design.

And yet the King has not abandoned His bride. He is moving now, as He has always moved: at the edges, in the homes, under the pressure, among the young, in the streets. He is bypassing the apparatus that would contain Him. He is disassembling idols and building His church. The question is not whether He is speaking. The question is whether His people will listen.

The King is calling His people back:

- From platform to table.
- From audience to body.
- From brand to kingdom.
- From CEO leadership to shepherding.
- From volunteer pipelines to priestly calling.
- From emotional manufacture to Spirit-filled worship.
- From tithing customers to covenant family.
- From religious machinery to obedient assembly.
- From the altar of men to the throne of Christ.

The question is not whether this return will be convenient. It will not be. It will threaten systems, expose motives, disrupt budgets, humble leaders, awaken saints, and require courage. But the good way has never been promised as the easy way. Jeremiah's ancient call still stands. And the Lord who stood in the way of the road to Damascus still stands in the way of every path we have built that contradicts His design.

And yet the way back is not destruction. The Dual Wineskin Model, tested in Costa Rica and in congregations across continents, has shown that pastors who lead in love can pour the new wine without breaking the old skin in a way that wounds the sheep. The shepherd who is convicted by this paper need not panic. He must repent. He must teach. He must gather a core. He must launch the new wineskin in parallel. He must let the fruit speak. He must walk patiently with his people. The King who is calling His church back is the same King who carries the lambs in His bosom and gently leads those who are with young (Isaiah 40:11). Reformation in His hands is not violence. It is healing. It is harvest. It is homecoming.

“Ask for the old paths, where the good way is, and walk in it.” — Jeremiah 6:16, NKJV

The church does not belong to the stage, the brand, the building, the bishop, the board, the preacher, the donor base, or the market. The church belongs to Jesus the King. Therefore, the gathering must be returned to His design. The path of return may be patient. It may be pastoral. It may run through dual wineskins for a season. But there is no permanent middle. There is no ‘both-and’ that lets the machinery survive forever. There is only repentance and return — or the steady, inevitable hollowing out of a form the Spirit has already begun to leave. Choose this day whom you will serve.

COVENANT DECREE

A Final Seal Upon the Ancient Paths

NOW IS THE TIME. THE TIME IS NOW.

$\sin^2t + \cos^2t = 1$

As the Bride returns to the original design of the King revealed in the first-century church, we decree that every false structure, every man-made hierarchy, and every deviation from the pure pattern of Acts is now exposed, overturned, and replaced by the simple, Spirit-led gathering ordained by the Head of the Church.

This decree is sealed in the Courts of Heaven and upon the pages of this document by the authority of the finished work of the Cross and the reclaimed master clock of the Kingdom.

It is finished.

GOD WINS — not eventually, but now.

Sealed by the Authority of the King of Kings

Appendix A: Scripture Map for the Restored Gathering

Theme	Primary Passages
Jesus as King and Head	Matthew 4:17; 16:18; 28:18-20; Colossians 1:18; Ephesians 1:22-23; Revelation 1:5-6; 19:16
Priesthood of All Believers	1 Peter 2:5, 9; Revelation 1:6; 5:9-10; Hebrews 10:19-22; Exodus 19:6 (fulfilled in Christ)
Household and Table	Acts 2:42-47; 5:42; 12:12; 16:14-15, 40; 20:7-12, 20; Romans 16:3-5; 1 Corinthians 16:19; Colossians 4:15; Philemon 1:2
Breaking Bread and the Body	Luke 22:14-20; Acts 2:42; 20:7; 1 Corinthians 10:16-17; 11:17-34
Mutual Edification	Romans 12:4-8; 1 Corinthians 12; 14:26; Ephesians 4:11-16; Colossians 3:16; Hebrews 10:24-25; 1 Peter 4:10-11
Shepherding	Ezekiel 34; Jeremiah 23:1-4; John 10:11-16; Acts 20:28-30; 1 Timothy 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9; 1 Peter 5:1-4
Sending and Witness	Matthew 28:18-20; Luke 10:1-9; Acts 1:8; 8:4; 11:19-21; 2 Timothy 2:2
Warnings Against Domination and Celebrity	Matthew 20:25-28; 23:5-12; Mark 10:42-45; 1 Peter 5:3; 3 John 9-10; Revelation 2:6, 15 (Nicolaitans)
Temple Fulfilled in Christ and His People	John 2:19-21; 1 Corinthians 3:16-17; 6:19; Ephesians 2:19-22; 1 Peter 2:4-5; Hebrews 8-10
Worship in Spirit and Truth	John 4:21-24; Romans 12:1-2; Philippians 3:3; Ephesians 5:18-21; Colossians 3:16-17

Theme	Primary Passages
New Wineskins and Pastoral Transition	Matthew 9:16-17; Mark 2:21-22; Luke 5:36-39; Hebrews 5:12-14; Isaiah 40:11; Matthew 12:20

Appendix B: Method of Examination

This white paper follows the five-lens method established for the Ancient Paths series. A church form is never neutral — a room teaches, a schedule teaches, a stage teaches, a budget teaches, a seating arrangement teaches. The question is whether our forms teach the kingdom of Jesus or the control systems of men.

Lens	Governing Question
Scripture	What did Jesus teach, what did the apostles practice, and what commands govern the gathered body?
Language	What do terms such as ekklesia, oikos, koinōnia, shepherd, elder, priest, and equipping reveal about God’s intent?
History	When did later gathering patterns enter, and what cultural forces shaped them?
Theology	What does a gathering form teach people to believe about God, leadership, worship, and their own calling?
Application	What must modern pastors, believers, and households do in response?

Appendix C: Historical and Pastoral Guardrails

Strong critique must be joined to careful history and humble pastoral care. The following guardrails keep the argument sharp without becoming careless or unjust:

- Do not claim homes were the only places Christians ever gathered. They also used public spaces, synagogues, lecture halls, temple courts early in Jerusalem, and adapted spaces. The point is what God normed, not what Christians occasionally borrowed.

- Do not claim all later buildings are automatically pagan or evil. A building can serve the assembly; the danger is when the building reshapes the assembly into spectators around a sacred stage.
- Do not claim preaching is wrong. Faithful proclamation is biblical and commanded. The error is replacing body-wide ministry with one-way performance.
- Do not claim leadership is wrong. The New Testament requires leadership. The error is domination, clerical monopoly, solo celebrity, and failure to equip.
- Do not claim every pastor in the Western system is a false teacher. Many are sincere, godly men and women laboring faithfully inside structures they did not design and did not choose. They deserve honor, prayer, and patient conversation — not contempt.
- Do not romanticize persecution or underground churches. Persecuted believers deserve respect, prayer, careful listening, and concrete support — not simplistic use as rhetorical ammunition.
- Do not romanticize youth movements. Zeal must be disciplined by Scripture, holiness, humility, and tested leadership. What is real must be tested; what is tested will prove real.
- Do not confuse anti-institutional anger with restoration. The ancient paths require repentance and obedience, not merely reaction. Bitterness will not build the Bride.
- Do not treat this paper as a permission slip to leave faithful local churches in anger. If God is calling you to gather differently, He is also calling you to do so in love, with wisdom, in relationship, and without slandering those He has not yet moved.

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