

In Vain Do They Worship Me

A Scriptural Study of Mark 7:6-9

Tracing the tradition of men through Israel's history to the Pharisees, and forward into the church

Copyright 2026

Distribution of this study as is in its entirety is permitted & encouraged.

Author: John Lobota

Research Assistant: Claude Cowork

papertiq@bellsouth.net

Table of Contents

Preface.....	3
---------------------	----------

A pastoral word on unity before the study begins — sharing, not judging, always toward edifying rather than dividing.

Chapter 1: Main Theme.....	5
-----------------------------------	----------

The whole Mark 7 encounter and Luke 4's mission statement read together, the tradition of men defined as this study's working test, the case against this study stated at full strength, and how to read its weighing notes.

Chapter 2: The Sermon on the Mount — God's Heart, Not Man's Tradition.....	14
---	-----------

The Sermon on the Mount as Jesus's own positive answer to Mark 7 — God's heart, not man's tradition.

Chapter 3: Old Testament History — Where the Tradition of Men Crept In.....	19
--	-----------

The tradition of men traced through Old Testament history, from Jacob's household to Isaiah's diagnosis.

Chapter 4: The Same Pattern After Pentecost.....	24
---	-----------

The same pattern resurfacing after Pentecost, inside the church itself, through Acts and the epistles.

Chapter 5: God's Original Intent.....	28
--	-----------

God's original design for the ekklesia: called by God, gathered chiefly in homes, led by local elders.

Chapter 6: Do Churches Devolve as Organizations?.....	37
--	-----------

Whether churches devolve into institutions as organizations, what scripture's own pattern offers instead, and what would change this study's mind.

Appendix A — Weight of Each Argument.....	46
--	-----------

Every argument in this study, where it is made, how much weight it carries, and what the opposing reading fairly answers — including the claims this version corrected or withdrew.

Scripture Index.....	50
-----------------------------	-----------

Every scripture quoted in full across this study, in canonical order, with the chapter and section where it appears.

Preface

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

And in one of his parables, when the householder's servants asked whether they should go and pull up the tares growing among the wheat, the householder told them to wait:

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

We take that as instruction for us as much as for them. Paul asks the very question we want to ask of ourselves before we ask it of anyone else: **"Who art thou that judgest another man's servant? to his own master he standeth or falleth" (Romans 14:4)**. And when Paul came to Jerusalem with a ministry to the Gentiles that differed from theirs, the leaders there — James, Cephas, and John — did not compete with it; they shook hands with it: **"they gave to me and Barnabas the right hands of fellowship; that we should go unto the heathen, and they unto the circumcision" (Galatians 2:9)**. Two ministries, two fields, one fellowship. Paul warns us plainly, too, against comparing ourselves, ministry to ministry, ours against another's — **"they measuring themselves by themselves, and comparing themselves among themselves, are not wise" (2 Corinthians 10:12)**.

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

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

Weighing it: A pastoral word, not an argument — bears no weight on any of this study's claims.

Anchor Passage

Mark 7:6 *He answered and said unto them, Well hath Esaias prophesied of you hypocrites, as it is written, This people honoureth me with their lips, but their heart is far from me.*

7:7 *Howbeit in vain do they worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men.*

7:8 *For laying aside the commandment of God, ye hold the tradition of men, as the washing of pots and cups: and many other such like things ye do.*

7:9 *And he said unto them, Full well ye reject the commandment of God, that ye may keep your own tradition.*

Chapter 1: Main Theme

A. The Whole Encounter — Mark 7:1-23

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

Mark 7:1 *Then came together unto him the Pharisees, and certain of the scribes, which came from Jerusalem.*

7:2 *And when they saw some of his disciples eat bread with defiled, that is to say, with unwashen, hands, they found fault.*

7:3 *For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, except they wash their hands oft, eat not, holding the tradition of the elders.*

7:4 *And when they come from the market, except they wash, they eat not. And many other things there be, which they have received to hold, as the washing of cups, and pots, brasen vessels, and of tables.*

7:5 *Then the Pharisees and scribes asked him, Why walk not thy disciples according to the tradition of the elders, but eat bread with unwashen hands?*

Notice first who is asking, and from where. This is not a stray objection from a hostile crowd — it is **"the Pharisees, and certain of the scribes, which came from Jerusalem"** (Mark 7:1), men from the nation's own recognized religious center. Jesus himself elsewhere acknowledges the teaching position such men held: **"The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat: all therefore whatsoever they bid you observe, that observe and do"** (Matthew 23:2-3). These are not outsiders attacking God's people from beyond the fold. They are the recognized teachers of the Law, the men Israel looked to for its meaning, confronting Jesus on their own home ground of expertise. That is exactly what makes what follows so serious. This is not a study about paganism corrupting Israel from without; it is a study about the recognized leadership of God's own people leading them into vain worship from within — the pattern this whole study exists to trace.

The complaint itself is worth being precise about, because it is easy to misread as a hygiene objection. It was not. Verses 3-4 tell us plainly that this washing was "the tradition of the elders" — a body of practice, additional to and distinct from the written Law of Moses, that had come to bind Israel's daily life as though it carried the same weight as scripture itself. Verse 5 shows how binding it was: the question is not "why do your disciples neglect a good custom?" but "why walk not thy disciples according to" it — as though it were the path God's people were required to walk. Jesus answers accordingly — not by defending his disciples' hygiene, but by naming exactly what kind of authority that tradition was claiming for itself:

Mark 7:6 *He answered and said unto them, Well hath Esaias prophesied of you hypocrites, as it is written, This people honoureth me with their lips, but their heart is far from me.*

7:7 *Howbeit in vain do they worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men.*

7:8 *For laying aside the commandment of God, ye hold the tradition of men, as the washing of pots and cups: and many other such like things ye do.*

7:9 *And he said unto them, Full well ye reject the commandment of God, that ye may keep your own tradition.*

Jesus is quoting Isaiah 29:13, and it is worth knowing exactly how. The Hebrew of Isaiah, which the King James translators followed, reads "their fear toward me is taught by the precept of men." Jesus's words as Mark records them follow the Greek translation of the Old Testament in use in his day (the Septuagint): "in vain do they worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men." The two say the same thing — worship emptied of its heart because its content comes from men — but the phrase this study takes as its title, "in vain," comes from the Greek form of the verse. Chapter 3 §E returns to Isaiah's own setting.

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

Mark 7:10 *For Moses said, Honour thy father and thy mother; and, Whoso curseth father or mother, let him die the death:*

7:11 *But ye say, If a man shall say to his father or mother, It is Corban, that is to say, a gift, by whatsoever thou mightest be profited by me; he shall be free.*

7:12 *And ye suffer him no more to do ought for his father or his mother;*

7:13 *Making the word of God of none effect through your tradition, which ye have delivered: and many such like things do ye.*

Corban meant a vow dedicating something to God's use. The tradition Jesus names had turned that vow into a legal loophole: a son could declare his resources "Corban" and be released, by the tradition's own ruling, from the plain, direct commandment to honor and support his parents — the fifth of the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:12). This is the mechanism this whole study will keep coming back to. The danger of the tradition of men is not merely that it adds extra rules alongside scripture. It is that, left unchecked, it can be used to *cancel* scripture outright, while still wearing the appearance of scrupulous devotion. Verse 13 states the result as plainly as it can be stated: "making the word of God of none effect."

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

Mark 7:14 *And when he had called all the people unto him, he said unto them, Hearken unto me every one of you, and understand:*

7:15 *There is nothing from without a man, that entering into him can defile him: but the things which come out of him, those are they that defile the man.*

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

Mark 7:17 *And when he was entered into the house from the people, his disciples asked him concerning the parable.*

7:18 *And he saith unto them, Are ye so without understanding also? Do ye not perceive, that whatsoever thing from without entereth into the man, it cannot defile him;*

7:19 *Because it entereth not into his heart, but into the belly, and goeth out into the draught, purging all meats?*

7:20 *And he said, That which cometh out of the man, that defileth the man.*

7:21 *For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders,*

7:22 *Thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, lasciviousness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness:*

7:23 *All these evil things come from within, and defile the man.*

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

Weighing it: Direct statement — for claim T (the test): Mark 7 itself names tradition taught as doctrine and used to set aside God's commandment. The opposing reading can fairly answer that Jesus condemns *this* tradition, not tradition as such — and this study agrees; §D below builds its definition on exactly that distinction.

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

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

Luke 4:17 *And there was delivered unto him the book of the prophet Esaias. And when he had opened the book, he found the place where it was written,*

4:18 *The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; he hath sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised,*

4:19 *To preach the acceptable year of the Lord.*

4:20 *And he closed the book, and he gave it again to the minister, and sat down. And the eyes of all them that were in the synagogue were fastened on him.*

4:21 *And he began to say unto them, This day is this scripture fulfilled in your ears.*

Jesus is reading Isaiah 61:1-2 — and reading it, in that moment, as his own job description. It is worth taking each phrase on its own terms rather than passing over it as a single block, because each one can be read directly against what Mark 7 diagnosed. This study should say plainly what kind of reading that

is: the words of Luke 4 are broad, and they certainly include literal poverty, grief, imprisonment, blindness, and sickness. What follows asks what they also mean when set beside Mark 7 — a real application, but an application.

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

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

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

"And recovering of sight to the blind." Jesus opened literal blind eyes, and the Gospels record it again and again. But blindness is also the exact word Jesus uses for these same leaders in Matthew's record of this same confrontation: **"Let them alone: they be blind leaders of the blind. And if the blind lead the blind, both shall fall into the ditch" (Matthew 15:14)**. The blindness Luke 4 promises to cure includes the blindness Matthew 15 diagnoses in Israel's own teachers — a leadership that could not see past its own tradition to the actual heart of God's law, and so could not lead anyone else to see it either.

"To set at liberty them that are bruised." Bruised how? Jesus names the mechanism himself, later, of these same leaders: **"For they bind heavy burdens and grievous to be borne, and lay them on men's shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with one of their fingers" (Matthew 23:4)**. A system of added rules, enforced as though it carried God's own authority, does not merely inconvenience people — it bruises them, the way any weight too heavy to carry bruises the shoulder made to bear it. When Jesus later heals a woman bowed together for eighteen years, and is challenged for doing it on the sabbath, the full account shows exactly what "loosed" means in his own mouth:

Luke 13:11 *And, behold, there was a woman which had a spirit of infirmity eighteen years, and was bowed together, and could in no wise lift up herself.*

13:12 *And when Jesus saw her, he called her to him, and said unto her, Woman, thou art loosed from thine infirmity.*

13:13 *And he laid his hands on her: and immediately she was made straight, and glorified God.*

13:14 *And the ruler of the synagogue answered with indignation, because that Jesus had healed on the sabbath day, and said unto the people, There are six days in which men ought to work: in them therefore come and be healed, and not on the sabbath day.*

13:15 *The Lord then answered him, and said, Thou hypocrite, doth not each one of you on the sabbath loose his ox or his ass from the stall, and lead him away to watering?*

13:16 *And ought not this woman, being a daughter of Abraham, whom Satan hath bound, lo, these eighteen years, be loosed from this bond on the sabbath day?*

Notice, too, that when the ruler of the synagogue objects, Jesus's answer reaches for the very word this study's anchor text opened with — **"hypocrite" (Luke 13:15)** — the same charge Mark 7:6 levels at the scribes and Pharisees, now aimed at a leader defending his rule about the sabbath over an actual bound and suffering woman. Loosed. Set at liberty. The same mission, acted out in a single body.

"To preach the acceptable year of the Lord." This phrase is widely read as reaching back to Leviticus 25 — the Year of Jubilee, the appointed year of release, when debts were cancelled, land restored, and "liberty" proclaimed **"throughout all the land" (Leviticus 25:10)**. It is also worth noticing what Jesus does *not* read. Isaiah 61:2 continues into "the day of vengeance of our God" — but Jesus closes the book mid-verse, before that clause. He announces the year of release. The day of reckoning is not what this moment, at the start of his ministry, was sent to proclaim.

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

Weighing it: Reasonable inference — for claim M (the mission): reading Luke 4 as an answer to Mark 7 is a real application of the text, not the only thing it says. The opposing reading can fairly answer that Isaiah 61's poor, captive, and blind are first of all literal, and that Jesus's healings bear that out; this study grants it and claims only that the religious captivity is included, which Matthew 15:14 and 23:4 support in Jesus's own words.

C. The Sermon on the Mount — A Brief Word

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

Weighing it: Framing only — introduces Chapter 2 and argues nothing yet.

D. Defining "the Tradition of Men"

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

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

First, it is tradition **"taught for doctrines" (Mark 7:7)** — that is, human custom presented and enforced with the same binding authority as God's own command, rather than held for what it actually is. The tradition of the elders was not offered to Israel as good advice from wise teachers; it was imposed as though refusing it were itself sin — the leaders **"found fault" (Mark 7:2)** with men who had broken no commandment of God.

Second, and more seriously, it is tradition that ends up *displacing* the commandment it claims only to supplement. Jesus's own language for this, three times in six verses, only grows more direct: **"laying aside the commandment of God" (Mark 7:8), "reject the commandment of God, that ye may keep your own tradition" (Mark 7:9), "making the word of God of none effect through your tradition" (Mark 7:13)**. The Corban example is the proof case: a tradition that began, presumably, as a way of honoring vows to God had grown, by Jesus's day, into a mechanism for escaping one of the Ten Commandments.

That two-part test — bound with God's own authority, and capable of overriding God's own word — is the working definition this study will carry forward. It has a consequence worth stating now, because later chapters depend on it: a practice is not the tradition of men merely because men began it. Jesus himself went to the synagogue on the sabbath **"as his custom was" (Luke 4:16)** — and the synagogue is nowhere commanded in the Law of Moses. What makes a custom the tradition of men, in Mark 7's sense, is what it is taught to be and what it is allowed to do to God's word. That test is also, as later chapters will trace, a pattern that did not begin with the Pharisees and did not end with them either.

Weighing it: Strong inference — for claim T (the test): both marks are stated in Mark 7:7-13; calling them the definition is this study's own summary. The opposing reading can fairly answer that other passages add further marks (Colossians 2:8 adds "philosophy and vain deceit"); this study does not claim its two marks are the only way scripture describes the problem, only that they are the ones Mark 7 itself supplies.

E. The Case Against This Study, Stated at Full Strength

Everything in the diagnosis so far is on firm ground. The later chapters go further — to the pattern of the New Testament church, to church buildings, and to organized denominations — and on that ground there are thoughtful believers who read scripture differently. Their case deserves to be stated before any of it is answered, in its own emphases and with its own best verses.

1. **Scripture itself commands holding tradition.** "Hold the traditions which ye have been taught" (2 Thessalonians 2:15); "withdraw yourselves from every brother that walketh disorderly, and not after the tradition which he received of us" (2 Thessalonians 3:6). Handing things down is a biblical duty, not a symptom.

2. **God himself instituted structure, office, and inheritance.** The Levitical priesthood passed from father to son by God's own command (Exodus 29:9; Numbers 3:10). God gave Israel a tabernacle and then a temple — buildings — for his worship. And Deuteronomy 17:14-20 anticipates Israel asking for a king "like as all the nations," and regulates the office rather than forbidding it.

3. **Jesus took part in Israel's institutions.** He attended the synagogue "as his custom was" (Luke 4:16), taught daily in the temple, and told the people to "observe and do" what the scribes in Moses' seat bade them (Matthew 23:3).

4. **The New Testament church was organized from the start.** The apostles appointed seven men to a defined task (Acts 6:3-6). The Jerusalem council issued decisions binding on Gentile churches, which Paul and Silas delivered "for to keep" (Acts 15:28-29; 16:4). Timothy and Titus exercised authority over elders in more than one congregation (1 Timothy 5:17-22; Titus 1:5). Paul carried "the care of all the churches" (2 Corinthians 11:28), and asked that "all things be done decently and in order" (1 Corinthians 14:40).

5. **Scripture uses building and household language for the church itself.** The church is "the house of God... the pillar and ground of the truth" (1 Timothy 3:15), "God's building" (1 Corinthians 3:9), a "holy temple" (Ephesians 2:21). A place set aside for the church's gathering is at worst neutral: nothing forbids it, and "not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together" (Hebrews 10:25) requires somewhere to assemble.

6. **Organization is inevitable and not itself sinful.** Any group that meets regularly, teaches, cares for its poor, and sends out workers will develop settled ways of doing so. To call that the tradition of men proves too much — it would condemn the Jerusalem council and the appointment of the seven.

Points 1, 2, 3, and 6 are conceded by this study in substance, and they shape its conclusions: the test in §D above does not condemn a custom merely for being human in origin, and Chapter 6 argues a tendency, not a verdict on every structure. Point 4 is answered in Chapter 5 §§F-G: the leaders named were apostolic, traveling, or delegated for a defined task, and the resident leadership was still plural and local. Point 5 is answered in Chapter 5 §D and Chapter 6 §A: the building language in scripture describes the people themselves, never a structure they meet in. A reader who finds those answers unpersuasive should know the arguments are rated accordingly where they are made, rather than asserted past.

Weighing it: Opposing case, stated — this section argues neither side; it sets out the strongest case against this study's later claims. Four of its six points are conceded in substance; the other two are answered, and every answer is rated where it is given.

F. How This Study Handles Its Evidence, and How to Read Its Weighing Notes

This study uses the King James Version as its base text, lets scripture interpret scripture — in the verse, in its context, and by the word's use elsewhere — and keeps three kinds of evidence apart. What scripture states directly carries the most weight. What follows from scripture by reasoning carries less, and is labeled as reasoning. What comes from outside scripture — history, archaeology, sociology — is held lowest of all: it can corroborate what scripture teaches, but it never becomes the basis of doctrine. Where this study leans on history, it says so.

Every section ends with a short note in bold, headed **Weighing it**. It exists because a study that states a strong argument and a weak one in the same confident tone has not been honest with its reader. Each note says two things.

First, how strong the section's argument is, on a five-step scale. **Direct statement** means scripture says it in so many words, and the only question is what the words mean. **Strong inference** means it follows closely from what scripture says, and the alternative has to strain against the text. **Reasonable inference** means it is the more natural reading, but an honest reader working carefully can take it otherwise. **Corroboration only** means it is consistent with this study's position and roughly as consistent with the opposite one — it may be stated, but it will not be leaned on. **Neutral** means it is commonly cited but settles nothing. Sections that argue nothing — straight narrative, method, or a concession — say so plainly rather than being given a manufactured rating.

Second, each note says *which way the section points*, and on which question — because a rating alone tells a reader how confident to be without telling them what to be confident about. This study argues six claims, and they are worth having in one place before the second chapter begins:

	The claim	Argued in
T	Mark 7 defines the tradition of men by two marks: human teaching bound with God's own authority, and able to set aside his commandment	Ch. 1 §§A, D; Ch. 4 §B
M	Jesus's ministry — announced in Luke 4 and taught in the Sermon on the Mount — is aimed at undoing what that tradition did to people	Ch. 1 §B; Ch. 2
R	The same pattern runs through Israel's history and resurfaces in the church after Pentecost	Ch. 3; Ch. 4
D	The New Testament gives one consistent design: a called-out people gathering chiefly in homes, led by plural local elders, established by traveling ministry	Ch. 5
B	Treating a building as "the church," and attendance there as what God asks, is a quiet instance of the tradition of men	Ch. 5 §§C-E
O	Organized religious structures tend to drift from that design, and sometimes the structure itself is the first departure	Ch. 6

Appendix A collects every argument in one table, with its weight and what the opposing reading can fairly answer — including the claims this version of the study corrected or withdrew. Chapter 6 §I names the findings that would change this study's mind.

Weighing it: Method, not argument — bears no weight either way.

In Short

Mark 7 is Jesus's verdict on worship emptied of its heart by human teaching dressed as God's command — teaching strong enough, in the Corban case, to cancel one of the Ten Commandments. Luke 4 is his mission to undo what that teaching did to people, and the Sermon on the Mount is that mission taught out loud. The test this study carries forward has two marks — bound with God's authority, and able to override God's word — and it does not condemn a custom merely because men began it.

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

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

A. Setting: A Teacher Doing What He Was Sent to Do

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

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

5:2 *And he opened his mouth, and taught them, saying,*

The posture matters. "When he was set" — sitting — was the posture of a teacher giving settled instruction, the same posture Jesus took in the Nazareth synagogue when he "sat down" to speak (Luke 4:20), and the same image behind **"Moses' seat" (Matthew 23:2)**. Jesus takes exactly the posture Israel's own recognized teachers took. What he says from that seat is where this chapter's real interest lies, because it is not a new law bolted onto the old one. It is God's own heart for his people, restated after generations of having been buried under the tradition of men.

Weighing it: Narrative — sets the scene and argues nothing contested.

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

The sermon does not open with commands. It opens with blessing — and the people it blesses are, strikingly, the people of the very passage Jesus read at Nazareth:

Matthew 5:3 *Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

5:4 *Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted.*

5:5 *Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth.*

5:6 *Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled.*

5:7 *Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy.*

5:8 *Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God.*

5:9 *Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God.*

5:10 *Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness' sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

"Poor in spirit" answers to **"preach the gospel to the poor" (Luke 4:18)**. The rest of the echo becomes plain when Isaiah 61 is read in full rather than only as far as Jesus read it aloud. Isaiah 61:1 sends the anointed one "to preach good tidings unto the meek"; Isaiah 61:2-3 sends him "to comfort all that mourn." The poor, the meek, and the mourning, promised good news and comfort — Matthew 5:3-5 opens with the same three, blessed. Jesus opens his own signature sermon by pronouncing blessing on the very categories of person the prophecy he claimed as his own had named, and on those hungering for a righteousness the existing system had never actually delivered. Where the tradition of men had produced people bowed down and worn out, Jesus's first recorded word to them in this sermon is not a new demand. It is a blessing.

Weighing it: Strong inference — for claim M (the mission): the Beatitudes share their key words with Isaiah 61, the passage Jesus read as his own. The opposing reading can fairly answer that the Beatitudes stand on their own and that shared vocabulary need not be a deliberate echo; this study leans on the fact that three categories appear in the same order of thought in both passages, and claims no more than that.

C. Not to Destroy, but to Fulfil: The Standard Restated

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

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

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

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

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

Weighing it: Reasonable inference — for claim M (the mission): reading "exceed the righteousness of the scribes" as a different kind of righteousness rather than more of the same is supported by what follows in the sermon. The opposing reading can fairly answer that the verse by itself does not say which; this study rests the reading on Matthew 5:21-48, below, not on the verse alone.

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

Six times in the rest of Matthew 5 (verses 21, 27, 31, 33, 38, and 43), Jesus takes something his hearers had "heard" — the received handling of the Law — and drives past its external boundary to what God actually intended by it. Two examples carry the pattern clearly enough for the rest to be summarized:

Matthew 5:21 *Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not kill; and whosoever shall kill shall be in danger of the judgment:*

5:22 *But I say unto you, That whosoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment...*

Matthew 5:43 *Ye have heard that it hath been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbour, and hate thine enemy.*

5:44 *But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you;*

The received handling of "thou shalt not kill" had narrowed the commandment to the physical act alone — satisfied so long as no blow was struck. Jesus relocates it to the heart, where the killing actually begins. The received handling of "love thy neighbour" had narrowed itself further, attaching a clause the commandment itself never carried: Leviticus 19:18 says "thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself" and stops there; nowhere does the Law say "hate thine enemy." Jesus removes the addition outright. This is the same mechanism named in Mark 7:13, "making the word of God of none effect through your tradition," now being reversed in real time, commandment by commandment. The same pattern runs through the sermon's treatment of adultery (Matthew 5:27-28), divorce, oaths, and retaliation (Matthew 5:31-42). Each case follows the same shape: not a stricter law, but the same law's original intent, recovered from what had been made of it. The section closes on a standard no tradition could ever produce:

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

Weighing it: Strong inference — for claims M and T: in at least one case, "hate thine enemy," Jesus removes a clause the Law does not contain. The opposing reading can fairly answer that some of the six cases correct misreadings rather than additions, and that "hate thine enemy" may have been drawn by inference from passages such as Deuteronomy 23:6 or Psalm 139:21-22; even so, the Law nowhere commands it, which is the point.

E. Not Like the Hypocrites: The Same Word, Turned Around

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

Matthew 6:1 *Take heed that ye do not your alms before men, to be seen of them: otherwise ye have no reward of your Father which is in heaven.*

6:2 *Therefore when thou doest thine alms, do not sound a trumpet before thee, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may have glory of men. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward.*

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

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

Weighing it: Direct statement — for claim M (the mission): Jesus uses the same word, hypocrite, for the same fault of lip-worship performed for men. The opposing reading has little to answer here; it can fairly note only that Matthew 6 is aimed at Jesus's own hearers, not at the scribes, which this study agrees is the point — the disease is not confined to one group.

F. Our Father: The Positive Alternative to Vain Worship

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

Matthew 6:9 *After this manner therefore pray ye: Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name.*

6:10 *Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven.*

6:11 *Give us this day our daily bread.*

6:12 *And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.*

6:13 *And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil: For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen.*

Count how many times "Father" has already appeared by this point in the sermon — Matthew 5:16, 5:45, 5:48, 6:1, 6:4, twice in 6:6, and 6:8 — and now the model prayer itself opens with it. This is not incidental vocabulary. Mark 7:6-7's verdict was that the tradition of men had produced worship that honored God "with the lips" while the heart stayed distant — worship offered to a distant authority to be satisfied through correct procedure. Jesus's teaching offers the opposite picture: God addressed as Father, approached directly, without a system of intermediary tradition standing in between. In vain do they worship me, Jesus had said of the old pattern. Here is what worship looks like when it is not in vain.

Weighing it: Reasonable inference — for claim M (the mission): the sermon's repeated "Father" sets relationship against procedure. The opposing reading can fairly answer that God is called Father in the

Old Testament too (Isaiah 63:16; Malachi 2:10), so the idea is not new; this study claims only that Jesus makes it the centre of worship in a sermon set against the scribes' righteousness.

G. Trusting the Father, Not Anxious Performance

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

Matthew 6:31 *Therefore take no thought, saying, What shall we eat? or, What shall we drink? or, Wherewithal shall we be clothed?*

6:32 *(For after all these things do the Gentiles seek:) for your heavenly Father knoweth that ye have need of all these things.*

A system built on rule-compliance produces anxious scrupulosity — never quite certain the requirement has been met. A relationship with a Father who already knows what is needed produces something else: trust. This is the practical outworking of everything the chapter has traced so far.

Weighing it: Corroboration only — for claim M: the passage is about provision, and its bearing on religious anxiety is this study's application. It fits the chapter's picture; it does not prove it.

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

Near the sermon's close, Jesus returns to the Father-picture once more:

Matthew 7:9 *Or what man is there of you, whom if his son ask bread, will he give him a stone?*

7:10 *Or if he ask a fish, will he give him a serpent?*

7:11 *If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children, how much more shall your Father which is in heaven give good things to them that ask him?*

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

Weighing it: Corroboration only — for claim M: the contrast with Corban is this study's observation, not the passage's stated point. The opposing reading can fairly answer that Matthew 7:9-11 is about prayer, and says nothing about Corban; this study says so above and does not lean on it.

I. Closing: Taught with Authority, Not as the Scribes

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

Matthew 7:28 *And it came to pass, when Jesus had ended these sayings, the people were astonished at his doctrine:*

7:29 *For he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.*

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

Weighing it: Direct statement — for claim M (the mission): the crowd's own verdict contrasts Jesus's authority with the scribes'.

In Short

The Sermon on the Mount is Jesus's positive answer to Mark 7. It opens by blessing the poor, the mourning, and the meek that Isaiah 61 named; it recovers the Law's intent from the received handling of it, in one case removing a clause the Law never contained; it turns the word "hypocrite" on lip-worship wherever it is found; and it puts the Father at the centre of worship. The crowd saw the difference at once: he taught with authority, not as the scribes.

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

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

A. Even in the Patriarchs' Own House

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

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

Those "images" were *teraphim* — household gods, a piece of ordinary Mesopotamian religious custom carried along inside the covenant family, unknown to Jacob (Genesis 31:32) and never corrected, until years later, when God sends Jacob back to Bethel and Jacob deals with it:

Genesis 35:2 *Then Jacob said unto his household, and to all that were with him, Put away the strange gods that are among you, and be clean, and change your garments:*

35:4 *And they gave unto Jacob all the strange gods which were in their hand, and all their earrings which were in their ears; and Jacob hid them under the oak which was by Shechem.*

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

Weighing it: Reasonable inference — for claim R (the recurrence): foreign gods in Jacob's house show human religious custom sitting alongside true worship. The opposing reading can fairly answer that teraphim are idolatry, not "tradition of men" in Mark 7's sense, since no one taught them as God's command; this study grants the difference and treats this as the pattern's earliest seed, not its developed form.

B. The Mosaic Law: God's Own Safeguard

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

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

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

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

Weighing it: Direct statement — for claim T (the test): the Law itself forbids adding to God's word as firmly as taking from it.

C. The Safeguard Doesn't Hold: Judges

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

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

One generation. That is all it took for the direct knowledge of God's own acts and God's own word to fail to transmit — and the text says plainly what filled the vacuum: **"And the children of Israel did evil in the sight of the LORD, and served Baalim" (Judges 2:11).** The book's closing chapters name the underlying

condition in a refrain — **"In those days there was no king in Israel"** (Judges 17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25), twice completed with the same words:

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

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

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

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

Weighing it: Strong inference — for claim R (the recurrence): Micah's shrine is worship invented by a man and trusted to secure the LORD's favour, a direct forerunner of Mark 7's pattern. The opposing reading can fairly answer that Micah's shrine is also plain idolatry (an ephod and teraphim); this study agrees the two are mixed together, and that the mixture is itself the point.

D. Kings Who Devised Their Own Worship

The pattern reaches its clearest and most deliberate form once Israel has kings, and one case in particular reads almost like a rehearsal for Mark 7. After the kingdom splits, Jeroboam faces a political problem: if the northern tribes keep going up to Jerusalem to worship, as the Law required, their loyalty may drift back to the house of David (1 Kings 12:26-27). His solution is worship, engineered on purpose:

1 Kings 12:28 *Whereupon the king took counsel, and made two calves of gold, and said unto them, It is too much for you to go up to Jerusalem: behold thy gods, O Israel, which brought thee up out of the land of Egypt.*

12:31 *And he made an house of high places, and made priests of the lowest of the people, which were not of the sons of Levi.*

12:33 *...in the month which he had devised of his own heart; and ordained a feast unto the children of Israel: and he offered upon the altar...*

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

Scripture's own later verdict on where this led is worth reading directly:

2 Kings 17:7 *For so it was, that the children of Israel had sinned against the LORD their God...*

17:8 *And walked in the statutes of the heathen, whom the LORD cast out from before the children of Israel, and of the kings of Israel, which they had made.*

17:19 *Also Judah kept not the commandments of the LORD their God, but walked in the statutes of Israel which they made.*

"The statutes of Israel which they made." Not statutes God gave and Israel broke — statutes Israel's own kings manufactured, and the people then followed as though they were binding. 2 Kings 17 names these made-up statutes alongside outright idolatry — the images, the groves, and the worship of Baal it lists in the same chapter (2 Kings 17:10-17) — as the reason the northern kingdom fell to Assyria, and names Jeroboam's system by name as where it began: **"Jeroboam drave Israel from following the LORD... For the children of Israel walked in all the sins of Jeroboam which he did; they departed not from them; Until the LORD removed Israel out of his sight"** (2 Kings 17:21-23). It notes that Judah followed the same pattern. Man-made religious statutes are not set off here as a lesser matter than idol worship; the two stand together in the charge.

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

2 Kings 22:8 *And Hilkiah the high priest said unto Shaphan the scribe, I have found the book of the law in the house of the LORD.*

22:11 *And it came to pass, when the king had heard the words of the book of the law, that he rent his clothes.*

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

Deuteronomy 31:10 *And Moses commanded them, saying, At the end of every seven years, in the solemnity of the year of release, in the feast of tabernacles,*

31:11 *When all Israel is come to appear before the LORD thy God in the place which he shall choose, thou shalt read this law before all Israel in their hearing.*

31:12 *Gather the people together, men, and women, and children, and thy stranger that is within thy gates, that they may hear, and that they may learn, and fear the LORD your God, and observe to do all the words of this law:*

31:13 *And that their children, which have not known any thing, may hear, and learn to fear the LORD your God, as long as ye live in the land whither ye go over Jordan to possess it.*

Josiah's grief at hearing those very words, generations later, is its own kind of testimony: by his day, the book of the law in the temple had been out of sight long enough, amid generations of substitute religion, that hearing it read struck the king as something unheard. The written Word had not been contradicted so much as quietly buried under everything that had grown up around it.

Weighing it: Direct statement — for claim R (the recurrence): scripture itself names worship "devised of his own heart" and "statutes... which they made" among the causes of Israel's fall. The opposing

reading can fairly answer that 2 Kings 17 gives idolatry at least equal place in the charge; this study now says so, and claims only that the made-up statutes stand in the indictment beside it.

E. Isaiah's Diagnosis — The Same Verdict, Centuries Early

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

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

As Chapter 1 §A noted, Jesus's wording in Mark 7:7 follows the Greek form of this verse — "in vain do they worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men" — where the Hebrew, and so the King James, reads "their fear toward me is taught by the precept of men." The sense is the same in both: worship with the lips, a heart far away, and its content supplied by men. This is not a minor detail. It means the confrontation in Mark 7 is not Jesus discovering a new problem in Israel's religion. It is Jesus naming an old one, using the words of a prophet Israel had already been given, for a disease that had been diagnosed centuries earlier and never cured. Everything this chapter has traced — the teraphim in Jacob's household, Micah's self-styled priesthood, Jeroboam's invented feast, the statutes "which they made," the lost book of the Law — is the case history behind Isaiah's one-sentence verdict, which Jesus reads back to the generation that inherited it.

Weighing it: Direct statement — for claims T and R: Jesus applies Isaiah's verdict to his own generation, so the disease is old.

F. From Exile to the Tradition of the Elders

What happens between Isaiah and Jesus moves partly outside scripture's own narrative, so it is worth being clear about what is being claimed here and on what basis. Scripture itself records the return from exile under Ezra and Nehemiah as a return to the very safeguard Moses had commanded: the Law read aloud, publicly, to the whole gathered people (Nehemiah 8:1-3, 8), with the assembly weeping to hear it (Nehemiah 8:9) — and then, as Deuteronomy 31:10-13 required, read again day by day through the feast of tabernacles (Nehemiah 8:14-18). That much is scripture's own record. What happened over the centuries after that — the Second Temple period's gradual growth of an oral body of interpretation and application around the written Law, eventually written down about A.D. 200 as the Mishnah (the first written collection of the rabbis' oral law) — is historical background, not scriptural narrative, and this study holds it at that lower weight accordingly. But it is well-attested background, and it is what Mark 7:3 names as "the tradition of the elders," already established and binding by Jesus's day. The specific historical path is outside scripture's witness; the pattern that produced it is not. It is the pattern this chapter has traced from Jacob's household onward: a clear word from God, followed by generations of addition, until the addition itself is taught **"for doctrines" (Mark 7:7)** in the original word's place.

Weighing it: Mixed, stated per point — the reading of the Law in Nehemiah 8 is direct statement; the growth of the oral tradition is history, corroboration only, for claim R.

G. Closing: A Pattern, Not an Incident

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

Weighing it: Strong inference — for claim R (the recurrence): the cycle is visible in scripture's own narrative from the patriarchs to Jesus. The opposing reading can fairly answer that grouping these episodes as one pattern is an interpretive choice; this study grants it is a synthesis, and rests it on Isaiah 29:13, which Jesus himself treats as still applying.

In Short

The tradition of men did not begin with the Pharisees. Human custom sat beside true worship in Jacob's house; the Law forbade adding to God's word; within a generation of Joshua, Israel was making its religion up as it went; Jeroboam built a calendar and a priesthood "devised of his own heart"; and Second Kings names the statutes "which they made" beside outright idolatry when Israel fell. Isaiah gave the verdict centuries before Jesus quoted it.

Chapter 4: The Same Pattern After Pentecost

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

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

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

Acts 15:1 *And certain men which came down from Judaea taught the brethren, and said, Except ye be circumcised after the manner of Moses, ye cannot be saved.*

15:5 *But there rose up certain of the sect of the Pharisees which believed, saying, That it was needful to circumcise them, and to command them to keep the law of Moses.*

Notice who is named in verse 5. Pharisees — the very group Mark 7 addressed — do not vanish from this story once they believe on Christ. Some of them bring the same instinct with them into the church. It is worth being exact about what that instinct was here, because it is not identical to Mark 7. What they demanded was not a custom of the elders but the Law of Moses itself — God's own former commandment. The error was to teach, as a condition of salvation for Gentile believers, what God was not requiring of them: **"ye cannot be saved" (Acts 15:1)**. That is the first mark of this study's test — teaching as God's doctrine what God has not commanded — applied to a commandment God had once given in another setting. Peter's response at the Jerusalem council reaches for the imagery this study has already met:

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

A yoke neither generation could bear — the same picture of weight as Matthew 23:4's "heavy burdens and grievous to be borne," which the scribes and Pharisees "lay... on men's shoulders" (Chapter 1 §B). The council's resolution is deliberately restrained:

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

"No greater burden than these necessary things." The council did lay four things on the Gentile churches (Acts 15:29), and it did so explicitly under the Holy Ghost's own direction, not on its own authority. What it refused was the larger yoke. This is the apostolic church consciously declining to do what Israel's leadership had done — declining to let a requirement God was not making become a condition laid on God's people.

Weighing it: Reasonable inference — for claim R (the recurrence): the Judaizers bound on the church what God was not requiring, which fits the first mark of the test. The opposing reading can fairly answer that the Law of Moses is God's commandment, not a tradition of men, so this is a different error; this study grants the difference and now says so above, claiming only that the shape — binding what God does not bind — is shared.

B. Paul's Own Testimony and Warnings

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

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

Traditions of my fathers — the same Greek word, *paradosis*, that Mark 7:3 uses for "the tradition of the elders." Paul does not describe his former zeal for it as a virtue he later refined; he describes it as the life his conversion moved him away from. And when he sees a similar pull threatening a church he planted, he fears for its labour:

Galatians 4:10 *Ye observe days, and months, and times, and years.*

4:11 *I am afraid of you, lest I have bestowed upon you labour in vain.*

An honest reader should know two things about these verses. The "in vain" of Galatians 4:11 is a different Greek word from the "in vain" of Mark 7:7, so the echo is in English only; and the days and seasons the Galatians were taking up were most likely the Law's own calendar, not a human invention. What links this passage to Mark 7 is not a shared word but a shared shape: religious observance being made a measure of standing before God, where God had not made it one. To the Colossians, though, Paul does use Mark 7's own phrase:

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

The tradition of men. Word for word in Greek, the same phrase Jesus used in Mark 7:8. Paul reaches for the identical language, decades later, warning a different church about the same danger. A few verses later he names the shape it was taking among the Colossians:

Colossians 2:20 *Wherefore if ye be dead with Christ from the rudiments of the world, why, as though living in the world, are ye subject to ordinances,*

2:21 *(Touch not; taste not; handle not;*

2:22 *Which all are to perish with the using;) after the commandments and doctrines of men?*

2:23 *Which things have indeed a shew of wisdom in will worship, and humility, and neglecting of the body: not in any honour to the satisfying of the flesh.*

The commandments and doctrines of men — in Greek, the same two nouns Mark 7:7 uses, both drawn from the Greek form of Isaiah 29:13. "Will worship" is worth sitting with too: worship devised by human will, the same basic move as Jeroboam's feast "**in the month which he had devised of his own heart**" (**1 Kings 12:33; Chapter 3 §D**). A closely related phrase turns up once more, in Paul's instruction to Titus:

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

Here the Greek word for "commandments" is the ordinary one rather than Mark 7:7's, but the sense is the same, and the warning is tied to men "that turn from the truth." Three letters — Galatians, Colossians, Titus — carry either Mark 7's own words or its plain sense: Galatians its word for tradition, Colossians its exact phrases, Titus its idea. The apostle most responsible for the gospel to the Gentiles treats "the tradition of men" as a live, recurring danger, not a problem that ended with the Pharisees. Paul gives one more warning worth including, because it reaches for the root of the word Mark 7:6 used of the scribes and Pharisees:

1 Timothy 4:1 *Now the Spirit speaketh expressly, that in the latter times some shall depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits, and doctrines of devils;*

4:2 *Speaking lies in hypocrisy; having their conscience seared with a hot iron;*

4:3 *Forbidding to marry, and commanding to abstain from meats, which God hath created to be received with thanksgiving of them which believe and know the truth.*

Hypocrisy — the noun from the same root as Mark 7:6's "hypocrites" — now applied to a future form of the same disease: rules about marriage and food, invented and imposed as though they carried God's

authority, with no more scriptural basis than the washing of pots and cups had. Paul traces this one further back than men — to "seducing spirits, and doctrines of devils" — which is worth noting: scripture does not treat the commandments of men as a merely human mistake.

Weighing it: Direct statement — for claims T and R: Colossians 2:8 and 2:22 repeat Mark 7's own phrases, word for word in Greek, as a warning to a church. The opposing reading can fairly answer that Galatians 4:11 and Titus 1:14 share only English wording or general sense with Mark 7; this study now says so, and the claim stands on Colossians and Galatians 1:14, not on them.

C. After the Apostles: The Same Cycle, at Lower Weight

What follows the apostolic period moves outside scripture's own record, so this study holds it at a different weight from everything above — real, well-documented history, but history and not scripture, consulted as background corroboration rather than as the basis of doctrine.

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

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

— toward a single presiding bishop in each city, visible in the letters of Ignatius of Antioch, written around A.D. 107-110, which repeatedly urge churches to do nothing without their bishop. That shift is taken up again in Chapter 5 §H, but it marks the same basic move this chapter has been tracing: a structure not specified by the apostles gradually taking on a settled authority of its own.

Over the centuries that followed, a large and complex body of church tradition — councils, canon law, accumulated custom — grew up alongside scripture, and in large parts of historic Christendom came to be treated as carrying authority alongside it rather than strictly under it. The Council of Trent, which opened in 1545 in response to the Protestant Reformation, formally stated this position in 1546: that saving truth is contained "in the written books and the unwritten traditions," both to be received "with an equal affection of piety and reverence." Whatever else is said about that position, it is worth naming plainly by this study's working definition from Chapter 1 §D: tradition, formally granted the same binding weight as God's own written word — the first mark of the test, stated as doctrine.

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

But the story does not end there, and honesty requires saying so. The Reformation did not produce one restored church; it produced, over time, many denominations, each developing its own confession of faith, its own governing tradition, its own settled way of reading scripture, treated in practice if not in

formal doctrine as close to unquestionable within its own walls. This is not a verdict on any one denomination — it is a plain observation that the cycle this chapter has traced did not stop at the Reformation either. Whether that outcome was avoidable, and what it says about organized religious structure as such, is the question Chapters 5 and 6 take up.

Weighing it: Corroboration only — for claim R (the recurrence): church history after the apostles is consistent with the pattern but is not scripture. The opposing reading can fairly answer that the growth of a single bishop and of church tradition had practical and defensive reasons, such as resisting false teachers; this study grants the reasons and holds the history at the weight history deserves.

D. Closing: Not a Medieval Problem, a Recurring One

This chapter set out to test whether Mark 7's diagnosis was a one-time confrontation with a vanished religious system, or something scripture itself expected to recur. The evidence says the latter. Acts 15 shows the same shape within the church's first generation. Paul names the danger in Mark 7's own words to the Colossians, and warns the Galatians and Titus of its shape. Timothy is told it will come again, "in the latter times." And church history since, at whatever weight that history deserves, shows the cycle continuing long after the apostles were gone. The tradition of men is not a Pharisee-specific disease. It is a standing danger to God's people in every age, including this one — which is why a study like this one is still worth doing.

Weighing it: Strong inference — for claim R (the recurrence): scripture itself shows the pattern inside the church and warns that it will recur.

In Short

The pattern moved indoors after Pentecost. Believing Pharisees tried to bind the Law on Gentile believers as a condition of salvation, and the apostles refused the yoke. Paul warned the Colossians against "the tradition of men" and "the commandments and doctrines of men" in Mark 7's own words, and told Timothy the same danger would return. History since — held at history's weight — shows it did.

Chapter 5: God's Original Intent

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

A. The Old Testament Pattern: Called by God

The briefest way to state it is this: in the Old Testament's record, the leaders God raised up to lead and correct his people were not self-appointed. Their authority came by God's own call.

One distinction has to be drawn at once, in fairness. God did establish offices that passed by inheritance: the priesthood belonged to Aaron and his sons "**for a perpetual statute**" (**Exodus 29:9**), with the Levites given to serve alongside them by birth (Numbers 3:9-10). So this study's point is not that inherited office is wrong in itself — God himself commanded one. The point is that every structure Israel had came *from God's own command*, and that when God raised up someone to lead his people through a crisis, he called that person directly. The contrast that matters in this study is not calling against inheritance. It is God's design against man's.

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

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

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

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

Numbers 27:18 *And the LORD said unto Moses, Take thee Joshua the son of Nun, a man in whom is the spirit, and lay thine hand upon him;*

27:19 *And set him before Eleazar the priest, and before all the congregation; and give him a charge in their sight.*

27:20 *And thou shalt put some of thine honour upon him, that all the congregation of the children of Israel may be obedient.*

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

Joshua 1:1 *Now after the death of Moses the servant of the LORD it came to pass, that the LORD spake unto Joshua the son of Nun, Moses' minister, saying,*

1:2 *Moses my servant is dead; now therefore arise, go over this Jordan, thou, and all this people, unto the land which I do give to them, even to the children of Israel.*

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

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

No dynasty — each deliverer raised up individually, by God, as the need arose. It is only later that Israel asks for leadership of another kind, modeled not on God's pattern but on the nations around them:

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

Even then, it is worth noticing, God himself chose the first two kings (1 Samuel 9:16-17; 10:24; 16:1, 12). What the people asked for was the *shape* of the nations' kingship. That request, and what scripture says of it, is the subject of Chapter 6 §B.

The point to carry forward is simple: the structures of Israel's life came from God's own design, and the leaders he raised up to lead and correct his people came by his own call, not by self-selection. That is the seed the New Testament pattern grows from.

Weighing it: Reasonable inference — for claim D (the design): God's pattern for leaders who led and corrected his people was a direct call; this version no longer claims the Old Testament never passed office by inheritance. The opposing reading can fairly answer that the priesthood and later the Davidic throne were hereditary by God's own will; this study grants it above and rests its point on God's design against man's, not on calling against inheritance.

B. The Ekklesia: What the Word Means

The English word "church" is not a translation of the Greek word it renders. It comes from a different Greek word, *kyriakon*, "belonging to the Lord," which reached English by way of the Germanic languages and was used of the Lord's house, the building. By long habit it now conjures exactly that: a building, a denomination, an institution, a place one goes. The word the New Testament uses is *ekklesia* (ἐκκλησία). It is built from *ek* ("out of") and a form of *kaleo* ("to call"), and preachers often render it "the called-out ones." That picture is true to the gospel, but it should not be pressed from the word's parts alone: in actual first-century use, *ekklesia* simply meant an assembly — people summoned from their homes and daily business to gather. Not a building. Not a place to go. A group of people, gathered for a purpose.

The word was not invented by the New Testament, and that matters more than it first appears. In Greek civic life, the *ekklesia* was the assembly of citizens, called together to deliberate and decide the city's affairs — a gathering of people, not a place. And in the Greek Old Testament (the Septuagint, the translation Jesus's own quotation in Mark 7 followed), *ekklesia* is one of the two regular translations of the Hebrew *qahal* (קָהָל), Israel's word for the assembly of God's people gathered together; the other is *synagoge*, the word that gives us "synagogue." The King James speaks of "the day of the assembly" when the whole nation stood at Horeb to hear God's voice (Deuteronomy 9:10; 10:4; 18:16), and the Greek translation of Deuteronomy 4:10 calls that same day by the same phrase.

The word is also neutral — it takes no side on who is gathered, or why. The clearest demonstration in the New Testament comes from Ephesus, where the same Greek word, *ekklesia*, is used three times in a single chapter for a gathering that has nothing to do with God's people — an angry, confused crowd stirred up by the silversmiths, whose trade in shrines of Diana Paul's preaching was hurting:

Acts 19:32 *Some therefore cried one thing, and some another: for the assembly was confused; and the more part knew not wherefore they were come together.*

19:39 *But if ye enquire any thing concerning other matters, it shall be determined in a lawful assembly.*

19:41 *And when he had thus spoken, he dismissed the assembly.*

"Assembly" in all three verses translates *ekklesia* — the word rendered "church" almost everywhere else in the New Testament. Luke does not reach for a different word for this crowd-turned-town-meeting; he uses the ordinary Greek word for a gathering of people, because that is what the word meant. It carries no built-in sanctity, no reference to God, no reference to a building — the town clerk "dismissed the assembly" the way any moderator dismisses any meeting. What makes a gathering God's *ekklesia* is never the word. It is who has done the calling, and who has been called.

Weighing it: Direct statement — for claim D (the design): the New Testament's word for the church means an assembly of people, and Acts 19 uses it of a town crowd. The opposing reading can fairly answer that a word's meaning is set by its use, so the "called-out" etymology proves nothing by itself; this study now agrees, and rests on the word's use, not its parts.

C. The Ekklesia: God's Own Gatherings

Set against that civic case, scripture's usage for God's people reaches back before the New Testament even opens. Stephen, recounting Israel's history before the council that will stone him, calls Israel gathered at Sinai by this same word:

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

The King James translators render *ekklesia* here as "church" — applied to Israel encamped in a wilderness, gathered around God's own presence and voice, with no temple and no synagogue. If "church" meant a building or an institution, this verse would make no sense. It is the same assembly at Horeb that §B has just met, named here with the very word this chapter is studying.

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

Matthew 16:18 *And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.*

Matthew 18:17 *And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church: but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican.*

Acts 8:1 *...there was a great persecution against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered abroad throughout the regions of Judaea and Samaria, except the apostles.*

Acts 8:3 *As for Saul, he made havock of the church, entering into every house, and haling men and women committed them to prison.*

1 Corinthians 1:2 *Unto the church of God which is at Corinth, to them that are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints...*

Notice Acts 8:3 in particular: Saul does not raid a building. He lays waste to "the church" by going house to house — "entering into every house" — because the church was its people, and the people were in their homes. Destroying it meant going where the people were.

Paul states the underlying logic plainly, in the one letter that spends the most space describing a gathering in progress:

1 Corinthians 11:18 *For first of all, when ye come together in the church, I hear that there be divisions among you...*

1 Corinthians 14:23 *If therefore the whole church be come together into one place, and all speak with tongues, and there come in those that are unlearned, or unbelievers, will they not say that ye are mad?*

1 Corinthians 14:26 *How is it then, brethren? when ye come together, every one of you hath a psalm, hath a doctrine, hath a tongue, hath a revelation, hath an interpretation. Let all things be done unto edifying.*

"**The whole church be come together into one place**" (1 Corinthians 14:23) is the clause worth sitting with. Paul does not say "when the members attend the church." The church is what comes together; the place is simply where. Even "**come together in the church**" (1 Corinthians 11:18) means "come together as the assembly" — Paul goes on four verses later to ask, "**have ye not houses to eat and to drink in?**" (1 Corinthians 11:22), setting their own houses against the gathering of the church, not against a church building.

Weighing it: Strong inference — for claims D and B: every New Testament use of the word names people, never a structure. The opposing reading can fairly answer that people who gather regularly need a place, and that nothing here forbids one; this study agrees, and draws its conclusion about buildings in §D below, not here.

D. Where This Leaves "Going to Church"

Put the last two sections together and the conclusion is not subtle. *Ekklesia* is a word for a gathering of people, used in scripture for a crowd at Ephesus, for Israel encamped at Sinai, and for the New Testament assembly — the deciding factor never a location but always who called the gathering and why. The New Testament never once describes anyone "going to church" the way a person today goes to a building at an address. It describes a people, living in their houses, streets, and cities, being called together and gathered — and it is that gathering itself, wherever it happens, that scripture calls the church.

The history is worth stating, at the lower weight this study gives all history: the earliest known Christian building set apart for worship, a converted house at Dura-Europos in Syria, dates from about A.D. 240, and public church buildings multiply only after Christianity was legalized in A.D. 313. That is roughly two centuries of Christian history with no church buildings in the modern sense at all.

Here this study has to be careful, because Chapter 1 §D set the test, and the test does not condemn a thing merely for being of human origin. A building is not the tradition of men. Neither is a regular time

and place to meet; Jesus himself went to the synagogue **"as his custom was" (Luke 4:16)**, and nothing in the Law commanded synagogues. A building becomes an instance of the tradition of men when the test's two marks appear: when attending it is taught as though it were what God requires — as though a believer who gathers with others in a home has not really "been to church" — and when the building is allowed to stand in for the thing itself, so that the church is thought of as the place rather than the people. Where that has happened, and it is common, it is **"teaching for doctrines the commandments of men" (Mark 7:7)** in one of its quietest forms — quiet enough that most who use the phrase have never been taught to question it. Where it has not happened, a building is only a roof.

Weighing it: Reasonable inference — for claim B (the building): treating a building as the church meets the test's marks where attendance there is taught as God's requirement; this version no longer calls the phrase "going to church" itself the tradition of men. The opposing reading can fairly answer that most believers who say "going to church" mean the gathering, not the building, and that Hebrews 10:25 commands assembling somewhere; this study grants both, and the claim is now limited accordingly.

E. Meeting in Homes

Once the word is untangled from the building it never meant, the New Testament's record of where the ekklesia gathered falls into place where Acts 8:3 already pointed.

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

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

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

Two things are true together in these verses, and both should be said. The first believers did gather in public places: the temple courts daily (Acts 2:46; 5:42), Solomon's porch (Acts 5:12), the synagogues while they were welcome, and at Ephesus **"the school of one Tyrannus" (Acts 19:9)** — mostly places for preaching to those outside. But the church's own gathering — breaking bread, prayer, fellowship — happened "from house to house." When Peter is miraculously released from prison, he does not go to the temple or a synagogue to find the church. He goes to a known home, because that is where the church was gathered.

By the time of Paul's letters, the pattern has a settled name, repeated in four separate letters and naming households in four cities:

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

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

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

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

Four letters, four cities, one settled phrase — "the church... in [someone's] house." This is not scattered evidence of occasional informal meetings alongside a central structure. It is the settled pattern of the first-century assembly's own gathering, and there is no dedicated church building anywhere in the New Testament's pages.

Weighing it: Direct statement — for claim D (the design): the New Testament records the church gathering in homes and names "the church in their house" four times; this version no longer says homes were the only place believers ever met. The opposing reading can fairly answer that believers also met in the temple, in Solomon's porch, and in a hired hall, so the house was a circumstance rather than a design; this study answers that the public places served preaching to outsiders, while the church's own gathering is consistently domestic — a reasonable inference, not a command.

F. Elders Raised Up Within Local Assemblies

Each local ekklesia had its own leadership, and scripture shows that leadership recognized within each assembly. Paul and Barnabas's practice on their first missionary journey states the pattern:

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

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

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

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

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

Acts 20:17 *And from Miletus he sent to Ephesus, and called the elders of the church.*

20:28 *Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood.*

"Elders" (*presbyteroi*, verse 17) and "overseers" (*episkopoi*, verse 28, the word elsewhere rendered "bishops") are two Greek words for one office, applied in a single breath to the same plural group of local men. Titus 1:5-7 does the same: Titus is to "ordain elders in every city," and the qualifications that follow are given for "a bishop."

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

1 Peter 5:1 *The elders which are among you I exhort, who am also an elder, and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that shall be revealed:*

5:2 *Feed the flock of God which is among you, taking the oversight thereof, not by constraint, but willingly; not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind;*

5:3 *Neither as being lords over God's heritage, but being ensamples to the flock.*

"Neither as being lords over God's heritage" is as direct a warning against authoritarian drift as anything in the New Testament offers.

The qualification for the office, correspondingly, was never institutional credentialing but character visible to those who knew the man:

1 Timothy 3:1 *This is a true saying, If a man desire the office of a bishop, he desireth a good work.*

3:2 *A bishop then must be blameless, the husband of one wife, vigilant, sober, of good behaviour, given to hospitality, apt to teach;*

3:3 *Not given to wine, no striker, not greedy of filthy lucre; but patient, not a brawler, not covetous;*

3:4 *One that ruleth well his own house, having his children in subjection with all gravity;*

3:5 *(For if a man know not how to rule his own house, how shall he take care of the church of God?)*

3:6 *Not a novice, lest being lifted up with pride he fall into the condemnation of the devil.*

3:7 *Moreover he must have a good report of them which are without; lest he fall into reproach and the snare of the devil.*

Paul's parallel list to Titus carries the same emphasis:

Titus 1:6 *If any be blameless, the husband of one wife, having faithful children not accused of riot or unruly.*

1:7 *For a bishop must be blameless, as the steward of God; not selfwilled, not soon angry, not given to wine, no striker, not given to filthy lucre;*

1:8 *But a lover of hospitality, a lover of good men, sober, just, holy, temperate;*

1:9 *Holding fast the faithful word as he hath been taught, that he may be able by sound doctrine both to exhort and to convince the gainsayers.*

"**Not a novice**" (**1 Timothy 3:6**) translates a word meaning "newly planted" — a recent convert. Together with a household that can be seen to be well ruled and "a good report of them which are without," it describes a man already proven over time, whose life others can see. That is character tested where he lives, not a credential brought from elsewhere.

Weighing it: Direct statement — for claim D (the design): elders were plural in each church, and elder and overseer name one office. The opposing reading can fairly answer that Timothy and Titus themselves exercised authority over elders in more than one place (1 Timothy 5:19-22; Titus 1:5); this study answers in §G that they were apostolic delegates on a defined task, which is a reasonable inference from their own letters.

G. Traveling Leadership That Established Rather Than Governed

Alongside this local, plural eldership, the New Testament records a second and different kind of leadership — traveling, apostolic — and it is important to see what that leadership's work was and was not. Paul and Barnabas's pattern in Acts states the sequence:

Acts 14:21 *And when they had preached the gospel to that city, and had taught many, they returned again to Lystra, and to Iconium, and Antioch,*

14:22 *Confirming the souls of the disciples, and exhorting them to continue in the faith, and that we must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God.*

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

The sequence matters: preach, make disciples, strengthen them, ordain local elders, commend them to the Lord — and then move on. Ephesians names this traveling, equipping work as its own gift, alongside local pastoral leadership rather than in place of it:

Ephesians 4:11 *And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers;*

4:12 *For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ:*

Titus is left in Crete for that same purpose (Titus 1:5, quoted above) — "that thou shouldest set in order the things that are wanting," a task with a completion point in its own description, and Paul later asks him to come on to Nicopolis (Titus 3:12). Timothy is likewise asked to stay at Ephesus for a purpose (1 Timothy 1:3) and later called to come to Paul (2 Timothy 4:9). Even Paul's own relationship to the churches he founded, sustained across long absences by letter rather than by residence, reflects the same shape: real authority exercised at a distance to establish and correct, and local, resident, plural leadership exercised day to day by elders who were part of the flock they fed.

Weighing it: Reasonable inference — for claim D (the design): traveling leaders established and corrected churches, and did not become their permanent resident rulers. The opposing reading can fairly answer that apostolic authority over many churches (2 Corinthians 11:28) is itself a structure above the local assembly; this study grants it, and notes that it was exercised by men called directly, as the Old Testament's leaders were, not by an office that passed to successors.

H. Closing: A Pattern Never Meant to Change

Put together, the New Testament's own pattern is a single, coherent design, not an improvised arrangement waiting for later refinement: a called-out people — the *ekklesia*, not a building or institution — gathering in homes; led locally by a plurality of elders recognized within each assembly, and explicitly warned against becoming "lords" over the people they served; visited and established, but not permanently governed, by traveling apostolic leadership whose purpose was to equip and then commend each assembly to the Lord and move on. Nothing in this record presents itself as temporary or as a first draft awaiting institutional maturity. It is simply given, repeatedly, as the pattern.

This is why Chapter 4 §C's note on the early move toward a single presiding bishop in each city (associated by name with Ignatius of Antioch, early in the second century) deserves to be named again here. Measured against Acts 20:17 and 28, Titus 1:5-7, and 1 Peter 5:1-3, that shift was not a further development of this pattern but a departure from it — one office where scripture had made elders and overseers the same plural men. Whether any particular bishop then "lorded it over" the flock is a separate question that the history answers differently case by case. The structural point stands on its own: nothing in the New Testament predicts, authorizes, or makes room for that shift.

That is this chapter's whole claim: this pattern — locally led, locally accountable, established rather than governed from outside — is the one scripture gives. Whether the church as an institution tends to drift from it, the way Israel's kings drifted from the Law that founded their kingdom, is the question Chapter 6 takes up.

Weighing it: Strong inference — for claim D (the design): the pattern is consistent everywhere the New Testament describes it; this version no longer equates the single-bishop shift with Peter's "lords over God's heritage." The opposing reading can fairly answer that a pattern described is not a pattern commanded, and that the apostles nowhere forbid a single presiding elder; this study grants that no text forbids it, and rests on the fact that every text describing church leadership describes it as plural.

In Short

The Old Testament's structures came from God's own design, and the leaders he raised to lead and correct his people came by his own call. In the New Testament, the word "church" always means people, never a place; the church's own gathering was in homes; its leaders were plural elders in each assembly, "overseers" being another name for the same men; and traveling leaders established churches and moved on. A building is not the tradition of men — but treating the building as the church, and attendance there as what God asks, meets the test.

Chapter 6: Do Churches Devolve as Organizations?

Chapter 4 handed this question forward. Chapter 5 closed by pointing straight at it. It is time to answer it directly: does the pattern God gave — a living, called-out people, locally led, never permanently governed from outside — tend, in practice, to devolve into something else, an institution more concerned with its own survival than with the people it exists to serve? Scripture's own record says it does, and says so earlier and more plainly than most readers expect. But scripture also supplies its own answer to what was lost, because before it is ever a warning, this is a picture — and the picture is worth setting out first.

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

Scripture's images for the church are of two kinds, and both need to be heard. Some are living: a body, a vine and its branches, a flock. Others are built: a house, a building, a temple — "God's building" (1 Corinthians 3:9), "the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the

truth" (1 Timothy 3:15). What is striking is that even the built images are made of people, and even they grow. That is worth pausing on before a single warning is examined, because it means the alternative to institutional devolution was never left undefined — it was given, positively, from the start.

Paul's fullest picture is the human body itself:

1 Corinthians 12:12 *For as the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body: so also is Christ.*

12:13 *For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free; and have been all made to drink into one Spirit.*

12:14 *For the body is not one member, but many.*

12:15 *If the foot shall say, Because I am not the hand, I am not of the body; is it therefore not of the body?*

12:16 *And if the ear shall say, Because I am not the eye, I am not of the body; is it therefore not of the body?*

12:17 *If the whole body were an eye, where were the hearing? If the whole were hearing, where were the smelling?*

12:18 *But now hath God set the members every one of them in the body, as it hath pleased him.*

12:19 *And if they were all one member, where were the body?*

12:20 *But now are they many members, yet but one body.*

12:21 *And the eye cannot say unto the hand, I have no need of thee: nor again the head to the feet, I have no need of you.*

12:22 *Nay, much more those members of the body, which seem to be more feeble, are necessary:*

12:23 *And those members of the body, which we think to be less honourable, upon these we bestow more abundant honour; and our uncomely parts have more abundant comeliness.*

12:24 *For our comely parts have no need: but God hath tempered the body together, having given more abundant honour to that part which lacked:*

12:25 *That there should be no schism in the body; but that the members should have the same care one for another.*

12:26 *And whether one member suffer, all the members suffer with it; or one member be honoured, all the members rejoice with it.*

12:27 *Now ye are the body of Christ, and members in particular.*

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

Ephesians 4:15 *But speaking the truth in love, may grow up into him in all things, which is the head, even Christ:*

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

"The edifying of itself" — the body builds itself up from within, through its own joints and members, because life is already present in it. The gifted ministers of Ephesians 4:11-12 serve that growth; they do not replace it. Peter reaches for a building image with the same implication:

1 Peter 2:4 *To whom coming, as unto a living stone, disallowed indeed of men, but chosen of God, and precious,*

2:5 *Ye also, as lively stones, are built up a spiritual house, an holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God by Jesus Christ.*

The house is built — but of *living* stones, and the stones are the believers themselves. Paul can call himself "**a wise masterbuilder**" (**1 Corinthians 3:10**), and in the same breath the building he is raising is the Corinthians; and Ephesians 2:21 says the building "groweth unto an holy temple in the Lord," which no building of stone has ever done. Jesus's own image removes any doubt about where the life comes from:

John 15:1 *I am the true vine, and my Father is the husbandman.*

15:2 *Every branch in me that beareth not fruit he taketh away: and every branch that beareth fruit, he purgeth it, that it may bring forth more fruit.*

15:4 *Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine; no more can ye, except ye abide in me.*

15:5 *I am the vine, ye are the branches: He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit: for without me ye can do nothing.*

Body, living stones, vine and branches — and not one of scripture's pictures, living or built, is a corporation, a bureaucracy, or a chain of offices. This is scripture's own answer to the question this chapter is named for, given before the question is asked: the church God designed was a people, alive, before it was anything else. Whatever turns it into an institution first has already moved away from the picture it was given.

Weighing it: Strong inference — for claim O (the organization): every image scripture uses for the church, living or built, is made of people; this version no longer says scripture has no building images for the church. The opposing reading can fairly answer that "house," "building," "temple," and "pillar" do imply order and structure; this study agrees they imply order, and answers only that the structure in every one of them is the people themselves.

B. The Warning Built Into the Old Testament: A King "Like All the Nations"

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

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

Like all the nations. Israel does not ask God for a leader after his own pattern — the pattern Chapter 5 §A traced, leaders raised up by God as the need arose. It asks for a leader modeled on the surrounding nations' institutions. God's verdict on the request, given directly to Samuel, is unambiguous about what is being rejected:

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

This needs to be weighed carefully, because scripture itself makes it more than one-sided. Long before, God had told Israel that the day would come when they would say "I will set a king over me, like as all the nations that are about me" — and he did not forbid it. He regulated it: **"Thou shalt in any wise set him king over thee, whom the LORD thy God shall choose" (Deuteronomy 17:14-15)**, and then limited what the king might gather to himself (Deuteronomy 17:16-20). A king as such was not the sin. So why is this request a rejection of God? Scripture answers in its own words, after the fact, in Samuel's farewell: "your wickedness is great, which ye have done in the sight of the LORD, in asking you a king" — and the people themselves confess, **"we have added unto all our sins this evil, to ask us a king" (1 Samuel 12:17, 19)**. The sin was in the motive and the model: wanting God's rule replaced by the nations' kind of rule, "that I should not reign over them."

That is this chapter's sharper point, and it now rests on scripture's own verdict rather than on inference alone: the danger is not only that a good institution can decay over time. Sometimes the impulse behind a structure is already imported from a pattern God did not give — already, by the test from Chapter 1 §D, putting a human model in the place of God's own — before it has produced a single bad outcome. Israel's king does not need to misgovern for the request to be a departure. The departure was in the asking, and scripture says so.

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

1 Samuel 8:11 *And he said, This will be the manner of the king that shall reign over you: He will take your sons, and appoint them for himself, for his chariots, and to be his horsemen; and some shall run before his chariots.*

8:12 *And he will appoint him captains over thousands, and captains over fifties; and will set them to ear his ground, and to reap his harvest, and to make his instruments of war, and instruments of his chariots.*

8:13 *And he will take your daughters to be confectionaries, and to be cooks, and to be bakers.*

8:14 *And he will take your fields, and your vineyards, and your oliveyards, even the best of them, and give them to his servants.*

8:15 *And he will take the tenth of your seed, and of your vineyards, and give to his officers, and to his servants.*

8:16 *And he will take your menservants, and your maidservants, and your goodliest young men, and your asses, and put them to his work.*

8:17 *He will take the tenth of your sheep: and ye shall be his servants.*

8:18 *And ye shall cry out in that day because of your king which ye shall have chosen you; and the LORD will not hear you in that day.*

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

1 Samuel 8:19 *Nevertheless the people refused to obey the voice of Samuel; and they said, Nay; but we will have a king over us;*

8:20 *That we may be also like all the nations; and that our king may judge us, and go out before us, and fight our battles.*

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

Weighing it: Direct statement — for claim O (the organization): scripture itself calls the request for a king "like all the nations" a rejection of God and a great wickedness. The opposing reading can fairly answer that Deuteronomy 17 permits a king, and that God later established David's throne and promised the Messiah as king; this study grants both, and places the fault where 1 Samuel 8:7 and 12:17-19 place it — in the motive and the model, not in kingship itself.

C. Jesus's Own Standard: Not Dominion, But Service

Centuries later, Jesus's own disciples reach for exactly the kind of rank 1 Samuel 8 described — James and John, through their mother, asking for the seats at his right hand and his left, and the other ten **"moved with indignation"** (Matthew 20:20-24) — and his answer draws the line as sharply as it is drawn anywhere in scripture:

Matthew 20:25 *But Jesus called them unto him, and said, Ye know that the princes of the Gentiles exercise dominion over them, and they that are great exercise authority upon them.*

20:26 *But it shall not be so among you: but whosoever will be great among you, let him be your minister;*

20:27 *And whosoever will be chief among you, let him be your servant:*

20:28 *Even as the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many.*

"The princes of the Gentiles exercise dominion" — this is 1 Samuel 8's king, generalized into a standing description of how the world organizes power: top-down, by dominion, by office over subject. Jesus's word for his own people is not a milder version of that structure. It is a different structure altogether — greatness measured by service rendered, not authority held. It is the same standard Chapter 5 §F found in Peter's own mouth ("neither as being lords over God's heritage," 1 Peter 5:3). Worldly dominion and the pattern Jesus gave are not two ends of one spectrum. "It shall not be so among you."

Weighing it: Direct statement — for claim O (the organization): Jesus forbids his followers the Gentiles' kind of dominion. The opposing reading can fairly answer that Jesus forbids a *spirit* of leadership, not leadership or order as such; this study agrees, and applies the verse to the spirit of dominion wherever it appears, not to every structure.

D. The Drift Inside Scripture Itself: Diotrephes

Chapter 4 §C traced the shift toward a single presiding bishop to Ignatius of Antioch, writing roughly seventy-five years after Pentecost — and held that history at a lower weight, since it falls outside scripture. But the drift toward one man over the assembly did not wait for history to begin. Scripture itself names one man exhibiting it, inside a functioning first-century congregation, within the apostolic generation:

3 John 1:9 *I wrote unto the church: but Diotrephes, who loveth to have the preeminence among them, receiveth us not.*

1:10 *Wherefore, if I come, I will remember his deeds which he doeth, prating against us with malicious words: and not content therewith, neither doth he himself receive the brethren, and forbiddeth them that would, and casteth them out of the church.*

"Who loveth to have the preeminence" — a man who has made himself, in effect, the controlling authority of his own local assembly, refusing the letter of "the elder" who wrote it (3 John 1:1, by long tradition the apostle John), and casting out members who wanted to welcome the traveling brethren he himself refused. This is the shape of what this chapter has been tracing — the office beginning to matter more than the flock, and the officeholder's preeminence beginning to matter more than either — and it did not need seventy-five years, or a council, or a doctrine of episcopal succession to appear. One man, in one congregation, in the apostles' own generation, was already living out the pattern 1 Samuel 8 foretold, doing exactly what 1 Peter 5:3 had warned elders against.

Weighing it: Direct statement — for claim O (the organization): scripture records one man seizing preeminence over an assembly within the apostolic generation. The opposing reading can fairly answer that Diotrephes is one man's sin, not evidence about organization as such; this study agrees it is a single case, and uses it only to show the drift is found inside scripture, not only after it.

E. Snapshots of Already-Organized Assemblies

The letters to the seven churches in Revelation are addressed to congregations that were, by every indication, already meeting, already led, already functioning bodies. Two of them are caught in a condition this chapter has been describing:

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

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

Ephesus is commended at length first — for its labour, its patience, and its refusal to bear false apostles (Revelation 2:2-3) — and still found to have left its first love: faithful activity continuing after the love that began it had gone. Laodicea is different. Its fault is in its own self-assessment — rich, increased, in need of nothing — the verdict of a body that has learned to measure its health by its own measures and has stopped checking them against Christ's, which turns out to be the opposite. An organization tends to become very good at judging itself successful by the standards it sets for itself. Christ's letters to these two congregations are a correction of that tendency, addressed to real assemblies, within scripture's own text.

Weighing it: Reasonable inference — for claim O (the organization): two already-established churches are rebuked for drift from their first love and for self-approval. The opposing reading can fairly answer that the letters say nothing about structure or organization at all; this study grants that, and uses them only for the drift they do name.

F. Extremely Cautionary: The Pattern Outside Scripture

Everything in this section falls outside scripture, so it is held at a lower weight than everything above: real, and worth taking seriously, but background corroboration, not the basis of doctrine. It is included because the pattern scripture establishes has also been described independently, by observers with no interest in Mark 7 at all, and that deserves to be named rather than passed over.

Chapter 4 §C noted the shift from a plurality of local elders toward a single presiding bishop, and the Council of Trent's later formal decision to receive church tradition with "equal" reverence to scripture. Both are historical instances of the mechanism 1 Samuel 8 describes in miniature: a structure adopted, for what were surely sincere and practical-sounding reasons, that ends by weighing down the very word it was meant to serve. The sociologist Max Weber, writing early in the twentieth century with no theological interest in the question, gave one form of this mechanism a name — the "routinization of charisma": a movement built on a founder's direct, personal authority cannot carry that authority on once the founder is gone, and is driven, by the plain need to survive, toward either a fixed tradition or a formal system of offices. Applied to what Chapter 4 documented, this describes the shift from the apostles to Ignatius as close to what sociologists would expect of any lasting human movement — not a scandal unique to the early church, but a common course of organizations as such.

Robert Michels, studying early twentieth-century political parties, reached a similar conclusion he called the "iron law of oligarchy": that organizations, even ones founded on democratic and idealistic

principles, tend toward rule by a small, self-perpetuating group whose own position, once secured, becomes something that group has a standing interest in protecting. More recent research into nonprofit and charitable organizations describes a gentler version under the name "mission drift": organizations under the pressures of funding, growth, and survival gradually reorient around preserving the institution, often while still describing their work in terms of the original mission.

None of this is scripture, and none of it is offered as though it were. These are theories, and each has its critics; Michels's "iron law" in particular has been argued against as too absolute. But taken together with 1 Samuel 8, Diotrephes, and Christ's letters to Ephesus and Laodicea, they mean the scriptural pattern does not stand alone against silence from every other field. Observers with no stake in this study's argument have described something very like it. That is corroboration, and it is held here at corroboration's weight.

Weighing it: Corroboration only — for claim O (the organization): secular study of organizations describes a similar drift, but it is not scripture and its theories are contested.

G. A Direct Word About Denominational Christianity

This study has already traced, in Chapter 4 §C, how the Reformation's return to *sola scriptura* did not produce one restored assembly but many denominations, each in time developing its own confession, its own governing structure, its own settled reading of scripture treated, in practice, as close to unquestionable within its own walls. This chapter's argument gives that observation a sharper edge, and it is offered in the spirit of the Preface — sharing, not judging.

The concern is not only that a denomination, having started well, can devolve over time into an institution more concerned with its own continuation than with the people in its care — though 1 Samuel 8, Diotrephes, Ephesus, and Laodicea all show that this can happen. It is that the act of organizing a movement around a fixed, humanly governed structure — a headquarters, a chain of offices, a body that must fund and staff and perpetuate itself in order to continue existing — can, from its very first hour, be patterned more after "like all the nations" than after the ekklesia Chapter 5 described: locally led, locally accountable, visited but never permanently governed from outside. This is not a verdict on any believer within any denomination, nor a claim that every denominational structure is equally compromised; many serve the Lord faithfully within them, and the Preface meant what it said. It is the caution scripture itself keeps sounding, from Samuel's warning to Peter's words to Diotrephes' church: the structure a group of God's people settles into is never a neutral, merely practical question. It is a decision with scripture's own warnings attached, and those warnings deserve to be heard clearly, and in advance, the way Samuel gave them.

Weighing it: Reasonable inference — for claim O (the organization): a structure modeled on the world's pattern of rule can be a departure from its first hour. The opposing reading can fairly answer that denominations also arose to protect sound doctrine and to organize missions and care, and that the New Testament churches themselves cooperated across cities (2 Corinthians 8:19); this study grants the good such structures do, and claims a risk to be weighed, not a verdict.

H. Closing: Do Churches Devolve as Organizations?

The question this chapter is named for now has its answer, and it is not a comfortable one. Yes — not as an accident that befalls some churches and not others, but as a tendency of organized human structure that scripture itself foretold in 1 Samuel 8 before Israel's first king was chosen, recorded within the apostles' own generation in Diotrephes' church, and addressed through Christ's own letters to established first-century congregations in Revelation 2 and 3 — and that observers of organizations outside scripture have described independently since. And the devolution is not always a later corruption of a good beginning. Sometimes the intent behind a structure was already patterned after "all the nations" rather than after God's own design — already, by this study's working definition, putting a human model in the place of God's, however sincerely, and however long before any visible harm appears.

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

Weighing it: Reasonable inference — for claim O (the organization): scripture shows the tendency and foretells it; that it is general rather than occasional is this study's conclusion. The opposing reading can fairly answer that scripture's examples are few, and that many organized churches have stayed faithful for generations; this study grants that a tendency is not a fate, and says so above.

I. What Would Change This Study's Mind

A study that claims to follow scripture should be able to say what scripture would have to show to overturn it. These are the findings that would change this study's position, and none of them, as far as this study has found, is in the text. A reader is invited to go looking.

1. A New Testament text that calls a building "the church," or directs believers to set apart a building as the church's proper or required place of gathering. That would overturn claim B outright, and weaken claim D.

2. A New Testament text that makes a single overseer over a city's elders a standing office — not an apostle, and not a delegate sent for a task and then recalled, as Timothy and Titus were — and passes that office to a successor. That would overturn the single-bishop argument of Chapter 5 §H and weaken claim D.

3. A passage in which a structure of God's people, adopted on the pattern of "all the nations," is approved by God as that kind of choice — rather than permitted and regulated (Deuteronomy 17) or, as in 1 Samuel 12:17-19, named after the fact as wickedness. That would take away the centre of claim O.

4. Evidence within Mark 7 or its parallel in Matthew 15 that the tradition of the elders was held out as advice rather than as binding. That would weaken the first mark of claim T. As it stands, the leaders "found fault" (Mark 7:2) with men who had broken no commandment of God, and asked why they did not "walk" according to it (Mark 7:5).

Weighing it: Method, not argument — names what would overturn this study's position.

In Short

Scripture's pictures of the church are all made of people, even its buildings. Israel's request for a king "like all the nations" was, in scripture's own words, a rejection of God and a great wickedness — not because a king was forbidden, but because of the model and the motive. Jesus forbade his followers the world's kind of dominion. Diotrephes showed the drift inside the apostles' own generation, and Revelation shows established churches losing their first love and approving themselves. Churches can devolve as organizations; the remedy is not a better institution but a return to a people called out, gathered, and alive.

Appendix A — Weight of Each Argument

This table collects every argument this study makes, with the claim it bears on (the letters are defined in Chapter 1 §F), where it is made, how much weight it carries, and what the opposing reading can fairly answer. The last rows record the claims this version of the study corrected or withdrew, so that a returning reader can see what changed and a later version does not quietly reinstate them.

#	Argument	Where	Weight	What the other reading fairly answers
1	T — Mark 7 names tradition taught as doctrine and used to set aside God's commandment	Ch. 1 §A	Direct statement	Jesus condemns this tradition, not tradition as such (conceded; built into the test)
2	T — The test has two marks: bound with God's authority, and able to override his word	Ch. 1 §D	Strong inference	Other passages add further marks (Col. 2:8)
3	T — A custom is not the tradition of men merely because men began it (Luke 4:16)	Ch. 1 §D	Strong inference	— (a limit this study places on itself)
4	M — Luke 4's mission answers what the tradition did to people	Ch. 1 §B	Reasonable inference	Isaiah 61's poor and blind are first of all literal
5	M — The Beatitudes share their key words with Isaiah 61	Ch. 2 §B	Strong inference	Shared vocabulary need not be a deliberate echo

#	Argument	Where	Weight	What the other reading fairly answers
6	M — "Exceed the righteousness of the scribes" means a different kind, not more	Ch. 2 §C	Reasonable inference	The verse alone does not say which
7	M, T — "Hate thine enemy" is a clause the Law never contained	Ch. 2 §D	Strong inference	It may have been inferred from Deut. 23:6 or Ps. 139:21-22
8	M — "Hypocrite" is turned on lip-worship wherever found	Ch. 2 §E	Direct statement	Aimed at Jesus's hearers, not the scribes (agreed)
9	M — "Father" sets relationship against procedure	Ch. 2 §F	Reasonable inference	God is called Father in the Old Testament too
10	M — Trust, not anxious performance	Ch. 2 §G	Corroboration only	The passage is about provision
11	M — The giving Father answers Corban	Ch. 2 §H	Corroboration only	Matt. 7:9-11 is about prayer, not Corban
12	R — Foreign gods in Jacob's house are the pattern's seed	Ch. 3 §A	Reasonable inference	Teraphim are idolatry, not doctrine taught as God's
13	T — The Law forbids adding to God's word as firmly as taking from it	Ch. 3 §B	Direct statement	—
14	R — Micah's shrine is worship invented and trusted to win God's favour	Ch. 3 §C	Strong inference	It is also plain idolatry (agreed: the mixture is the point)
15	R — Worship "devised of his own heart" and statutes "which they made" are among the causes of Israel's fall	Ch. 3 §D	Direct statement	Idolatry has at least equal place in the charge (agreed)
16	T, R — Jesus applies Isaiah 29:13 to his own generation	Ch. 3 §E	Direct statement	—
17	R — The oral tradition grew between the exile and Jesus	Ch. 3 §F	Corroboration only	History, not scripture
18	R — The cycle runs from the patriarchs to Jesus	Ch. 3 §G	Strong inference	Grouping the episodes is an interpretive synthesis
19	R — The Judaizers bound what God was not requiring	Ch. 4 §A	Reasonable inference	The Law of Moses is God's commandment, not men's
20	T, R — Colossians 2:8 and 2:22 repeat Mark 7's own Greek phrases	Ch. 4 §B	Direct statement	—
21	R — Galatians 1:14 uses the same word for tradition	Ch. 4 §B	Direct statement	Paul's former tradition was Judaism, not the church's
22	R — Church history after the apostles continues the cycle	Ch. 4 §C	Corroboration only	The changes had practical and defensive reasons
23	D — Old Testament leaders who led and corrected God's people came by God's call	Ch. 5 §A	Reasonable inference	Priesthood and throne were hereditary by God's will (granted)

#	Argument	Where	Weight	What the other reading fairly answers
24	D — <i>Ekklesia</i> means an assembly of people; Acts 19 uses it of a town crowd	Ch. 5 §B	Direct statement	Etymology proves nothing by itself (agreed)
25	D, B — Every New Testament use of the word names people, never a structure	Ch. 5 §C	Strong inference	People who gather need a place (agreed)
26	B — Treating the building as the church meets the test where attendance is taught as God's requirement	Ch. 5 §D	Reasonable inference	Most who say "going to church" mean the gathering; Heb. 10:25 requires assembling
27	D — The church's own gathering was in homes; "the church in their house" four times	Ch. 5 §E	Direct statement	Believers also met in public places, so the house may be circumstance
28	D — Elders were plural, and elder and overseer are one office	Ch. 5 §F	Direct statement	Timothy and Titus had authority over elders in more than one place
29	D — Traveling leaders established and moved on	Ch. 5 §G	Reasonable inference	Apostolic authority over many churches is itself a structure
30	D — The single-bishop shift departs from the plural pattern	Ch. 5 §H	Strong inference	A pattern described is not a pattern commanded
31	O — Every image for the church, living or built, is made of people	Ch. 6 §A	Strong inference	Building images imply order and structure (agreed)
32	O — Scripture calls the request for a king "like all the nations" a rejection of God	Ch. 6 §B	Direct statement	Deut. 17 permits a king; God established David's throne
33	O — Jesus forbids the Gentiles' kind of dominion	Ch. 6 §C	Direct statement	He forbids a spirit, not order as such (agreed)
34	O — Diotrephes shows the drift inside scripture	Ch. 6 §D	Direct statement	One man's sin, not evidence about organization
35	O — Ephesus and Laodicea show drift and self-approval	Ch. 6 §E	Reasonable inference	The letters say nothing about structure
36	O — Weber, Michels, and mission-drift research describe a similar drift	Ch. 6 §F	Corroboration only	Not scripture; the theories are contested
37	O — A structure on the world's pattern can be a departure from its first hour	Ch. 6 §G	Reasonable inference	Denominations also guard doctrine and organize care
38	O — The tendency is general, not occasional	Ch. 6 §H	Reasonable inference	Scripture's examples are few; many churches stay faithful
39	Corrected — "Jesus quotes Isaiah word for word"	Ch. 1 §A; Ch. 3 §E	Withdrawn	His wording follows the Greek form of Isaiah 29:13; "in vain" comes from it

#	Argument	Where	Weight	What the other reading fairly answers
40	Corrected — The Beatitudes echo "the people Luke 4:18 named"	Ch. 2 §B	Restated	"Meek" and "mourn" come from Isaiah 61, not from the verses Jesus read aloud
41	Corrected — Galatians 4:11's "in vain" is "the same word" as Mark 7:7	Ch. 4 §B	Withdrawn	Different Greek word; the link is shape, not vocabulary
42	Corrected — Titus 1:14 is "the same phrase" as Mark 7:7	Ch. 4 §B	Demoted	Same sense, different Greek word for "commandments"
43	Corrected — 2 Kings 17 names man-made statutes "not idolatry alone" as the cause of the fall	Ch. 3 §D	Demoted	The chapter charges both together
44	Corrected — Old Testament authority "was not inherited"	Ch. 5 §A	Withdrawn	The priesthood was hereditary by God's own command
45	Corrected — Homes were "the only pattern of gathering the New Testament records"	Ch. 5 §E	Withdrawn	Temple courts, Solomon's porch, synagogues, a hired hall
46	Corrected — "Going to church" is itself the tradition of men	Ch. 5 §D	Demoted	Only where the building is treated as the church and attendance as God's requirement
47	Corrected — "Not a novice" means already part of that specific assembly	Ch. 5 §F	Withdrawn	The word means a recent convert
48	Corrected — The single-bishop shift was "the very 'lording it over' Peter warned against"	Ch. 5 §H	Withdrawn	The structural departure stands; the charge of lording does not follow
49	Corrected — "None of scripture's metaphors for the church is institutional"	Ch. 6 §A	Restated	Scripture has building images; all are made of people
50	Corrected — The Mark 7 leaders were "God's own appointed teachers," "sent to inspect"	Ch. 1 §A	Restated	The text says they came from Jerusalem and sat in Moses' seat
51	Corrected — The secular pattern is "confirmed by every secular field"	Ch. 6 §F, H	Withdrawn	Described by some observers; contested by others

Weighing it: Summary only — collects the weights stated where each argument is made.

Copyright

Copyright © 2026. Distribution of this study as is, in its entirety, is permitted and encouraged. Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations are from the King James Version of the Holy Bible, which is in the public domain.

Sources Consulted

This study is built directly from scripture; the sources below were consulted only for background and historical corroboration, at the lower weight this study reserves for material outside scripture (Chapter 1 §F), and none carries scriptural weight in the argument. Historical background on the shift from local plural eldership toward a single presiding bishop draws on the letters of Ignatius of Antioch (c. A.D. 107-110) and standard reference summaries of the period. The Council of Trent's position on written and unwritten tradition is quoted from its decree of the fourth session (1546). The dating of the earliest identified Christian building set apart for worship draws on the published archaeology of the Dura-Europos house church. The Septuagint's renderings of Isaiah 29:13 and Deuteronomy 4:10, and its use of *ekklesia* and *synagoge* for the Hebrew *qahal*, were checked against the Greek text. Max Weber's concept of the "routinization of charisma" is drawn from his early-twentieth-century sociological writing on authority. Robert Michels's "iron law of oligarchy" is drawn from his 1911 study of political parties. Background on "mission drift" reflects published research on nonprofit and charitable organizations. Every doctrinal claim in this study has been tested directly against the text of scripture itself, in the King James Version.

Scripture Index

Genesis 31:19 Chapter 3 §A	Luke 4:17-21 Chapter 1 §B
Genesis 35:2, 4 Chapter 3 §A	Luke 9:50 Preface
Exodus 3:10 Chapter 5 §A	Luke 13:11-16 Chapter 1 §B
Numbers 27:18-20 Chapter 5 §A	John 15:1-2, 4-5 Chapter 6 §A
Deuteronomy 4:2 Chapter 3 §B	Acts 2:46 Chapter 5 §E
Deuteronomy 12:32 Chapter 3 §B	Acts 5:42 Chapter 5 §E
Deuteronomy 31:10-13 Chapter 3 §D	Acts 7:38 Chapter 5 §C
Joshua 1:1-2 Chapter 5 §A	Acts 8:1, 3 Chapter 5 §C
Judges 2:10 Chapter 3 §C	Acts 12:12 Chapter 5 §E
Judges 2:16 Chapter 5 §A	Acts 14:21-23 Chapter 5 §G
Judges 17:5 Chapter 3 §C	Acts 14:23 Chapter 5 §F
Judges 17:6 Chapter 3 §C	Acts 15:1, 5 Chapter 4 §A
1 Samuel 8:5 Chapter 5 §A; Chapter 6 §B	Acts 15:10 Chapter 4 §A
1 Samuel 8:7 Chapter 6 §B	Acts 15:28 Chapter 4 §A
1 Samuel 8:11-18 Chapter 6 §B	Acts 19:32, 39, 41 Chapter 5 §B
1 Samuel 8:19-20 Chapter 6 §B	Acts 20:17, 28 Chapter 5 §F
1 Kings 12:28, 31, 33 Chapter 3 §D	Romans 16:5 Chapter 5 §E
2 Kings 17:7-8, 19 Chapter 3 §D	1 Corinthians 1:2 Chapter 5 §C

2 Kings 22:8, 11 Chapter 3 §D
Isaiah 29:13 Chapter 3 §E
Matthew 5:1-2 Chapter 2 §A
Matthew 5:3-10 Chapter 2 §B
Matthew 5:17 Chapter 2 §C
Matthew 5:20 Chapter 2 §C
Matthew 5:21-22 Chapter 2 §D
Matthew 5:43-44 Chapter 2 §D
Matthew 5:48 Chapter 2 §D
Matthew 6:1-2 Chapter 2 §E
Matthew 6:6 Chapter 2 §E
Matthew 6:9-13 Chapter 2 §F
Matthew 6:31-32 Chapter 2 §G
Matthew 7:9-11 Chapter 2 §H
Matthew 7:28-29 Chapter 2 §I
Matthew 13:30 Preface
Matthew 16:18 Chapter 5 §C
Matthew 18:17 Chapter 5 §C
Matthew 20:25-28 Chapter 6 §C
Mark 7:1-5 Chapter 1 §A
Mark 7:6-9 Anchor Passage; Chapter 1 §A
Mark 7:10-13 Chapter 1 §A
Mark 7:14-15 Chapter 1 §A
Mark 7:17-23 Chapter 1 §A

1 Corinthians 11:18 Chapter 5 §C
1 Corinthians 12:12-27 Chapter 6 §A
1 Corinthians 14:23, 26 Chapter 5 §C
1 Corinthians 16:19 Chapter 5 §E
Galatians 1:14 Chapter 4 §B
Galatians 4:10-11 Chapter 4 §B
Ephesians 4:11-12 Chapter 5 §G
Ephesians 4:15-16 Chapter 6 §A
Ephesians 4:16 Preface
Philippians 1:1 Chapter 4 §C
Colossians 2:8 Chapter 4 §B
Colossians 2:20-23 Chapter 4 §B
Colossians 4:15 Chapter 5 §E
1 Timothy 3:1-7 Chapter 5 §F
1 Timothy 4:1-3 Chapter 4 §B
Titus 1:5 Chapter 5 §F
Titus 1:6-9 Chapter 5 §F
Titus 1:14 Chapter 4 §B
Philemon 1:2 Chapter 5 §E
1 Peter 2:4-5 Chapter 6 §A
1 Peter 5:1-3 Chapter 5 §F
3 John 1:9-10 Chapter 6 §D
Revelation 2:4 Chapter 6 §E
Revelation 3:17 Chapter 6 §E