# The UBIQUITOUS CHURCH

*A Kingdom People Sent into Every Sphere*



Samuel Alimo

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*A free sample: Chapter 1, The Church in the Building*

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*Chapter 1*

# THE CHURCH IN THE BUILDING

## How a misunderstood word changed everything

Picture a Sunday morning in almost any city in the world. Cars fill the car park. Worship rises through the walls. Announcements are made, offerings are taken, a sermon is preached. And then, as the final song fades, something quietly remarkable happens: thousands of people walk out of a building and into a week that, for most of them, will feel entirely disconnected from everything that just took place inside.

Monday arrives and the building is locked. The microphone is silent. The ushers are engineers and nurses and teachers and traders again. And the question that few dare to ask out loud presses in from the edges of the week:

> "*does any of this, the work, the spreadsheets, the meetings, the classrooms, the wards, does any of this matter to God the way Sunday did?*"

For many believers, the honest answer they carry, even if they have never said it in those words, is *no*. The building is where God is. The building is where ministry happens. Everything else is the world, necessary, perhaps, but not sacred. You leave the holy to enter the ordinary, and you return to the holy when Sunday comes around again.

This is not a fringe belief. It is one of the most deeply embedded assumptions in the life of the global church. And it is built on a misunderstanding so fundamental, so quietly pervasive, that most believers have never thought to question it. We have confused the church with its container.

## What the Word Actually Means

The English word *church*, as we use it today, carries a weight of architecture and institution. It conjures images of steeples and sanctuaries, pulpits and pews, Sunday services and denominational structures. It has become, in the popular imagination, synonymous with a place. But the word Jesus used carried none of that meaning.

When Jesus said, in Matthew 16:18, "I will build my church," he reached for a Greek word already in common circulation: *ecclesia*. In his book *Anointed for Business*, Ed Silvoso observed that when Jesus first spoke of the church, he did not coin a new word but instead borrowed a Greek one that described a well-known institution of the time.[1] In Jesus' day, an *ecclesia* was not a religious gathering. It was a civic one, a gathering of people entrusted by the emperor with authority to apply his decrees in a given territory. It was governance. It was deployment. It was people carrying the will of a sovereign into the world.

The word appears elsewhere in the New Testament in a context that makes this even clearer. In Acts 19, a riot breaks out in the city of Ephesus over the preaching of Paul. The city clerk eventually quiets the crowd and dismisses what the text calls the *assembly*. That word, *assembly*, is the same Greek word translated everywhere else as *church*. The people who had gathered that day were not followers of Christ. They were craftsmen, enraged because the gospel was threatening their trade. And yet the text uses the same word to describe them.

This tells us something decisive. The word *ecclesia*, in its original sense, had nothing to do with a building. It had nothing to do with a religious ceremony. It described people gathered with purpose and authority, people sent, people accountable, people carrying a mandate into the life of a city.

When Jesus said he would build his *ecclesia*, he was not announcing the construction of churches. He was announcing the formation of an authorised people, a company of the sent, bearing the will of their King into every corner of the world he had created and was in the process of reclaiming.

## The People, Not the Place

This distinction is not merely a point of etymology. It is the difference between two entirely different visions of what it means to be the church. If the church is a building, then ministry happens inside it. The pastor is the minister. The congregation is the audience. Success is measured in attendance and programmes. The primary movement of the Christian life is inward, come, gather, receive, return next week. And the people who spend their weeks in engineering firms, farms, operating theatres, and government offices are, at best, supporters of the real work being done by the professionals inside the walls.

But if the church is people, individuals in whom the Spirit of God dwells, each one a mobile temple of His presence, then ministry is not located. It is distributed. It goes wherever the people go. Into the boardroom and the laboratory. Into the classroom and the legislature. Into the workshop and the market stall. Into the fishing boat and the farm. Into the home and the community.

The professional is not supporting the minister. The professional *is* the minister, deployed to spheres the pulpit could never reach. Why? Because sinners do not come to church. They go to schools, hospitals, and marketplaces. They go to work outside the church. They live in homes with Christians.

The Apostle Paul understood this with an almost startling clarity. Writing to a community of believers in the great commercial city of Corinth, he did not say *your church building is the temple of God.* He said *you are the temple of God.* "Know ye not that ye are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwelleth in you?" (1 Corinthians 3:16, KJV). The question is almost incredulous in its tone, as if to say, has this not yet become obvious to you? You are not visitors to a holy place. You *are* the holy place. Wherever you stand, that ground becomes sacred. Wherever you are sent, his presence goes with you.

This is not a peripheral theological insight. It is the architectural principle of the entire New Testament vision of the church. The body of Christ is not a building programme. It is a people programme, and the people are on the move.

## The Individual and the Body

There is a further consequence of mislocating the church in a building that rarely gets named, and it is perhaps the most personally damaging of all.

When the church becomes an institution rather than a people, individual responsibility quietly dissolves into collective anonymity. We speak of what *the church* should do, what *the church* believes, what *the church* stands for, and in the process, the specific, irreplaceable accountability of each member fades into the background. We hide beneath denominations and assemblies. We defer to the professionals. We assume that as long as we are present and giving and volunteering, we are fulfilling our part.

But the New Testament does not speak this way. Jesus did not die for an institution. He died for individuals, for you, specifically, with your particular gifts, your particular placement, your particular sphere of influence. And it will not be an institution that stands before him at the last day. It will be you. The Apostle Paul was unambiguous: "Every one of us shall give account of himself to God" (Romans 14:12, KJV). Not of his denomination. Not of his church attendance record. Of himself.

This is not a word of condemnation. It is a word of liberation. It means your life is not a supporting role in someone else's ministry. You are not a background player waiting for the real minister to take the stage. You are the church, in your office, in your home, in your city, in your sphere. The Spirit of God lives in you. The authority of Christ rests on you. The mandate of heaven has been entrusted to you. The building cannot carry that. Only a person can.

## The Guilt the Building Creates

There is a particular spiritual injury that results from placing the church in the building rather than in the people. It is an injury so common, so widely shared, that most of us have accepted it as simply part of the Christian life. But it is not. It is a wound, and it has a name. It is the wound of believing that the sacred and the secular are two different worlds, and that you live primarily in the wrong one.

Consider the mathematics of it. The average believer spends, at most, a few hours each week inside a church building. The remaining hours, the ninety-eight percent of their waking life, are spent in what has been quietly classified as secular space. Their work. Their commute. Their parenting. Their creative life. Their civic engagement. If ministry happens in the building and the building is where God is most at home, then by implication, the greater part of a believer's life is spiritually marginal. Necessary, perhaps. Tolerated, certainly. But not the real thing.

The results of this belief are visible everywhere. Believers who drag themselves to work each Monday with a low-grade sense of spiritual demotion. Gifted professionals who give their best hours to work they secretly believe God barely cares about, saving their real devotion for Sunday. Men and women who have spent years counting down to the day they can finally leave their careers and enter "full-time ministry", as though the years they gave to their profession were a kind of spiritual waiting room rather than a Kingdom assignment already underway.

In his book *Every Good Endeavor*, Timothy Keller and Katherine Alsdorf identified the theological error beneath this experience with precision. A thin or legalistic view of sin, he argued, leads believers to pursue growth by seeking environments where they are less likely to sin, and less likely to encounter those who have.[2] The church building becomes a refuge from contamination. The world outside becomes inherently suspect. And holiness becomes, functionally, a matter of location rather than a matter of character.

But this is not the gospel.

Bill Johnson put it plainly: "There is no such thing as secular employment for the believer. Once we are born again, everything about us is redeemed for Kingdom purposes."[3] It is all spiritual. The ground does not change beneath your feet when you walk from the church car park to your office. You do not leave the Spirit at the door. You do not cease to be the temple of God because you are sitting at a desk rather than in a pew. The sacred does not end where the building does.

## Built for More Than This

The picture that emerges from a recovered understanding of *ecclesia* is not smaller than the building-centred vision we have inherited. It is vastly larger.

The church was never meant to be a gathered community awaiting extraction from the world. It was meant to be a dispersed community transforming it. The movement of the gospel in the New Testament was always outward, from Jerusalem, to Judea, to Samaria, to the ends of the earth. The early believers did not build sanctuaries and invite the world in. They went into the world, and the world was never the same.

They went as tentmakers and physicians, as government officials and merchants, as slaves who carried the dignity of heaven into the most degrading conditions the ancient world could produce. They were not waiting for a building to validate their ministry. They *were* the ministry, walking, breathing, Spirit-filled, impossible to contain.

We have spent generations narrowing that vision. We have built beautiful buildings and filled them with excellent programmes, and in the process we have quietly taught the people of God that the building is the point, that arrival in the sanctuary is the goal rather than the beginning, that Sunday is the summit rather than the sending.

But Jesus did not say "go into all the world and build churches." He said "go into all the world and make disciples of nations." The church, the *ecclesia*, the people, the sent ones, is the means, not the destination. And the nations are not somewhere out there beyond the reach of the building. They are the places where your people already work and live and study and govern and create. The church is not inside the building waiting for the world to come in.

*The church is the people who left the building this morning. And the world is where they are going.*

This is where we must begin, not with strategy or structure, not with programmes or platforms, but with a recovered understanding of what we actually are. Because if we do not know what the church is, we will never understand what we are supposed to do. We will keep building

more beautiful containers for a people who were never meant to stay inside.

The church is not a location. It is not an event. It is not an institution. It is a people, called out, filled with the Spirit of God, entrusted with the authority of heaven, and sent into the world with a mandate that no building can contain.

*You are that people.*

And the building, for all its beauty and all its importance, is simply the place where the sent ones gather before they go.

*The story continues*

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