

PRACTICAL APPLICATION

A Biblically Rooted Community

What a Faithful Ekklesia Looks Like in Practice Today

This document draws on the research of the seven-phase study — now extended by Phase 8's examination of legal structure and contemporary sociology — to answer the most practical question the study raises: if we set aside institutional tradition, cultural accommodation, and modern invention, and ask only what Scripture actually shows and what the earliest Christian communities actually practiced, what does a faithful ekklesia look like today?

The framework that follows assumes no denominational ties, no inherited institutional structure, and no obligation to cultural norms. It assumes only the desire to live out the New Testament as faithfully as possible — not as a romantic reconstruction of the first century, but as a genuine reformation: a return to the source that the tradition was always meant to serve. **This edition incorporates revisions arising directly from Phase 8's research** — a rewritten economic model (Section 9), an explicit child-safety standard (Section 12), and a new section on legal and civil standing (Section 15).

How to Read This Document

Each section is organized around three categories, color-coded throughout:

MANDATORY —

- Directly commanded or clearly established by NT text. These are non-negotiable anchors.

WORTH RETAINING —

- Early church tradition or legitimate development that serves the NT purpose well. Held with open hands.

NOT RECOMMENDED —

- Modern inventions or medieval developments that lack biblical warrant or actively undermine the NT purpose.

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Section 1

The Governing Principle — Every Member a Minister

“When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Let all things be done for building up.” — 1 Corinthians 14:26

Before any structure is described, one principle must govern everything that follows. The New Testament does not describe a gathering where professionals perform and the congregation receives. It describes a community where every member carries gifts for the building up of the body — and the structure of the gathered community exists to release those gifts, not to replace them.

“He gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ.” — Ephesians 4:11–12

Ephesians 4 defines the role of leadership with precision: teachers, pastors, and evangelists are given to the community not to do the ministry but to equip the saints to do the ministry. The leaders are not the ministers. They are the trainers of ministers. Every structural decision in this framework flows from that distinction.

The community exists not to produce a service for people to attend but to equip a people who minister to one another and to the world. A gathering where one person does everything while everyone else watches is not the New Testament pattern — regardless of how gifted the one person is.

This principle will feel unfamiliar. The modern church has trained people to be consumers of spiritual content rather than contributors to a living body. Recovering the participatory community of the NT requires patient formation — not a program change but a cultural transformation. It will take longer than expected. It will produce something more durable than anything a program can build.

Section 2

Identity — Who This Community Is

Before any practice is established, the community must know what it is. Not what it does on Sunday mornings. What it is. The answer the NT gives is specific, countercultural, and demanding — and it is the foundation on which every practice described in this framework rests.

MANDATORY — What This Community Is

- The ekklesia — a gathered assembly of people who belong to Christ, not a building, institution, brand, or program
- A covenant community — people who have made explicit commitments to one another, not merely attendees of a weekly event
- A body of ministers — every member carries gifts for the common good; there is no passive membership
- A self-selecting community — membership costs something real, counts the cost publicly, and is entered through baptism
- A distinct culture — not shaped by consumer preference, entertainment values, or cultural norms but by the character of Christ embodied in shared community life

The Cost-Counting Community

Jesus's interaction with the rich young ruler (Mark 10:17–22) is the clearest picture of what genuine community membership looks like. Jesus did not soften the cost to retain him. He named it clearly, loved him genuinely, and let him leave when he was unwilling to pay it. The young man's departure was not a failure of the community — it was the community working as designed. A community that asks nothing of its members gives nothing to them either.

Those who leave us were not of us (1 John 2:19) — understood as a statement of conviction about ultimate perseverance, not a claim this document treats as empirically verifiable of any particular person's departure. This is not harshness — it is the honesty that protects both the community and the individual.

NOT RECOMMENDED — What This Community Is Not

These things feel harsh only if you assume the purpose of the community is to make people feel welcomed without cost. The NT community welcomed people into genuine belonging — which is something entirely different from comfortable anonymity.

- A Sunday morning program, a spiritual service provider, or a social club with religious content
- An outreach event designed to attract the unchurched
- A place where you can receive spiritual content without giving anything of yourself
- A community you can belong to anonymously

Section 3

Leadership — Structure, Qualifications, and Function

“This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained into order, and appoint elders in every town as I directed you.” — Titus 1:5

The NT presents a consistent and specific leadership structure that differs from virtually every model dominant in modern American evangelicalism. It is worth examining carefully before replicating what has been inherited.

Elders (Overseers/Bishops)

MANDATORY — Elder Structure and Qualifications

- Plural — a team of elders, never a single monarchical pastor (Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5; Phil 1:1; Acts 20:17,28)
- Equal in authority — elders may differ in gifting and function but not in standing; no senior pastor above the team
- Character-qualified — 1 Timothy 3:1–7 and Titus 1:6–9: above reproach, husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, hospitable, able to teach, not a recent convert
- Genuinely known — elders must be people the community has observed over time
- Accountable — elders are accountable to one another and to the community
- Supported if needed — the community may financially support elders who give significant time to teaching and leadership (1 Tim 5:17–18), but this is a practical decision, not a mandatory structure

Deacons

MANDATORY — Deacon Structure and Qualifications

- Servants of practical and mercy needs — freeing elders for prayer and teaching (Acts 6:1–7; 1 Tim 3:8–13)
- Character-qualified — dignified, not double-tongued, not greedy
- Tested before appointment — 'let them be tested first' (1 Tim 3:10)
- May be men or women — the NT evidence for female deacons includes Phoebe (Romans 16:1) and Pliny's female *ministrae* (~AD 112); acknowledged as contested but genuinely attested

NOT RECOMMENDED — Leadership Models Without NT Warrant

- The solo senior pastor as the public face and primary minister — no NT precedent
- The celebrity pastor whose personal brand is the community's identity
- Professional ministry staff hierarchy replicating corporate organizational structure

WORTH RETAINING — Intentional Elder Formation

- Formed through apprenticeship and community observation, not primarily academic credential
- The community has a voice in elder recognition — Acts 6
- Existing elders mentor and apprentice the next generation — Paul's pattern with Timothy and Titus

Section 4

Daily Community Life — The Primary Unit

“Day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts.” — Acts 2:46

The most significant structural recovery in this framework is also the most countercultural. The primary unit of the NT ekklesia was not the Sunday gathering — it was the household community of people genuinely embedded in each other's daily lives.

MANDATORY — The Household as Primary Community Unit

- Small groups of 8–20 people who are genuinely embedded in each other's lives
- Regular shared meals — food is not incidental; eating together is the primary form of koinonia in the NT
- Mutual knowledge of real circumstances — financial needs, family struggles, spiritual states are known within the group
- Economic mutual care — needs within the household community are met by the household community directly, person to person, as Section 9 now details
- Prayer by name for specific known needs
- Scripture engagement in both directions — genuine dialogue, not a mini-sermon
- Accountability — real, specific, mutual; elders participate as members of a household community, not as leaders above it

The household community meets as often as the community can sustain — ideally 2–3 times per week, at minimum weekly outside the Sunday gathering. The goal is genuine shared life, not a program slot.

The household community will surface the thing most modern church attenders are most afraid of: being genuinely known. This is precisely why it works. A community you can hide in is not a community that can form you.

Hospitality as Structural

The home is not merely a convenient meeting space. It is a theological statement. The early church's house-to-house pattern was not a provisional arrangement until they could afford a building. It was the form that embodied the theology.

Section 5

The Weekly Gathering — What It Is and What It Is Not

The weekly gathering of the whole community on the first day of the week has apostolic precedent and serves essential functions the household community cannot. But it must be understood correctly — as the larger expression of the community, not as the community's primary identity or primary site of formation.

MANDATORY — What the Weekly Gathering Is For

- The apostles' teaching (didache) — serious, formational, expository instruction
- The Lord's Supper — the shared meal at the center of the gathering (Section 6)
- Participatory worship — multiple voices, multiple gifts (1 Cor 14:26)
- Communal prayer — together, specific, named
- The community's Amen — the congregation actively affirms and participates

The teaching in the weekly gathering is serious, expository, and formational. It works through books of Scripture systematically and assumes a community being formed over years, not visitors needing introductory content.

The community sings together — every voice, not a performance for passive observers. Those with musical gifting lead the community in singing; they are servants of the community's voice, not performers on a stage. The congregation is the choir.

NOT RECOMMENDED — What the Weekly Gathering Is Not

The gathering designed for outsiders produces a community that never matures past the entry point — as Willow Creek's own internal research confirmed.

- A performance for spiritual consumers
- An outreach event designed to attract and retain the unchurched
- A program with a running order optimized for emotional impact

Section 6

The Lord's Supper — The Full Recovery

“When you come together, it is not the Lord's Supper that you eat. For in eating, each one goes ahead with his own meal, and one is hungry and another is drunk... Do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing?” — 1 Corinthians 11:20–22

Of all the recoveries in this framework, this is the most theologically significant and the most practically demanding. The Lord's Supper in the NT is a full shared meal in which the reconciliatory and redemptive work of God through Christ is enacted in human community.

MANDATORY — The Lord's Supper as the NT Describes It

- A real shared meal — not a symbolic token
- Bread and cup with the words of institution, spoken at the meal's beginning and end
- All participants receive both bread and wine
- The meal enacts equality — rich and poor at the same table
- Weekly frequency — the early church broke bread every time they gathered
- Preceded by self-examination and mutual reconciliation (1 Cor 11:28)

When Paul corrects the Corinthians, his concern is not ritual incorrectness but that they are not discerning the body — failing to recognize that every person at that table is the body of Christ. Reducing the meal to a cracker and a thimble solves the Corinthian problem by eliminating the meal entirely, and in doing so eliminates the enacted theology the meal was designed to embody. Paul's solution: wait for one another. Eat together. Let the table be what it is.

Section 7

Prayer — Communal Rhythms and Fixed Hours

“Peter and John were going up to the temple at the hour of prayer, the ninth hour.” — Acts 3:1

The NT's prayer pattern is both structured and spontaneous — and the structured dimension has stronger early church attestation than the spontaneous.

MANDATORY — Prayer in Community

- Communal prayer in the weekly gathering — specific, named, responsive
- Prayer in the household community — regular, specific, mutual
- Prayer as the context for significant decisions (Acts 13:2–3)

WORTH RETAINING — Fixed Daily Prayer Rhythms

- Morning and evening prayer as daily communal anchors (Acts 3:1; Psalm 55:17; Daniel 6:10)
- The Lord's Prayer said together daily
- Wednesday and Friday midday prayer, connected to the fasting discipline
- A simple daily office shared by the community

NOT RECOMMENDED — The Exclusive Individual Model

- The individual 'quiet time' as the exclusive model of Christian devotion — the Puritan model replaced communal fixed-hour prayer with a privatized individual devotional practice

Section 8

Fasting — The Abandoned Discipline Recovered

*“And when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites.” — **Matthew 6:16***

Of all the apostolic practices examined in this study, communal fasting has the clearest NT roots and has been most completely abandoned by the modern American church without theological justification. Jesus assumes his disciples will fast — 'when,' not 'if.'

MANDATORY — Communal Fasting

- Regular fasting as a communal discipline — the whole community together, not individual private choice
- Wednesday and Friday fasting — the Didache's prescription; Wednesday commemorates the betrayal, Friday the crucifixion
- Fasting at significant moments of decision and transition (Acts 13:2–3; 14:23)

WORTH RETAINING — Fasting Seasons

- A pre-Resurrection fasting season (analogous to Lent)
- Fasting before the Lord's Supper — the Didache requires pre-baptismal fasting

Section 9

Economics — Personal Stewardship in Communal Love

“Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.” — 2 Corinthians 9:7

The NT's economic pattern is radically different from any institutional church funding model. It is voluntary, personal, needs-based, and oriented primarily toward the poor. **This section has been substantially revised** from its original form, which listed a “common fund maintained transparently” among its mandatory elements — a structural claim in quiet tension with this same section's own rejection of anonymous benevolence funds, and in greater tension with the fuller legal and sociological analysis in Phase 8. The revision below resolves that tension in favor of personal stewardship, gathered communally only at the point of specific need.

MANDATORY — Personal Financial Stewardship, Exercised in Communal Love

- Each person stewards what God has entrusted to them directly — giving flows person-to-person as needs become known, not through a maintained institutional account (2 Corinthians 9:7)
- Regular, prayerful setting-aside — “On the first day of every week, each of you is to put something aside and store it up, as he may prosper, so that there will be no collecting when I come” (1 Corinthians 16:2). In practice: a family sets aside money — mentally designated or physically kept in their own account, taxed and owned as their own until given — as God prospers and leads them, so they are prepared the moment a need arises. This is not communal property in the interim; like Ananias's field, it “remained at your disposal” until the moment of an actual gift (Acts 5:4)
- Sacrificial giving, not merely surplus giving — the Macedonian churches gave “according to their means, and beyond their means, of their own accord” despite “severe affliction” and “deep poverty” (2 Corinthians 8:1–5), the same principle Jesus commended in the widow who gave “out of her poverty... all she had to live on” (Mark 12:41–44; Luke 21:1–4). Giving is measured by sacrifice, not amount
- Collective response, gathered at the time of need, not warehoused between occasions — where a need exceeds one household's capacity, two or more trusted members jointly gather and personally deliver the gift (2 Corinthians 8:20–21), avoiding both the appearance and the structure of an institutional fund
- Relational, not anonymous, knowledge of need — the household community genuinely knows one another's material circumstances (Section 4). The community's known, relational giving is not merely a tolerable byproduct of small scale; it is itself commended as a visible proof of love and unity within the body, the same function the Jerusalem collection served between Gentile and Jewish believers who had never met (2 Corinthians 9:12–13; Romans 15:27)
- First priority: believers in genuine need — “as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith” (Galatians 6:10; also Acts 2:44–45, 4:32–35, 1 Timothy 5:3–16)
- Second priority: the poor outside the community (James 1:27; Matthew 25:31–46)
- Third priority: support for those who give significant time to teaching and leadership — worker support, not salary structure (1 Corinthians 9:14; 1 Timothy 5:17–18)

On the Matthew 6 Question

Jesus's instruction to give “in secret,” without “your left hand” knowing what “your right hand” is doing (Matthew 6:1–4), governs the *giver's posture toward public recognition* — not the community's shared, accountable knowledge of who is in need. Paul's own ministry supplies the reconciling example: the Philippians' support of him was “open and commendable” and “churches collected offerings in an organized, accountable way” (Philippians 4:14–18). The sin Jesus names is theatrical righteousness — giving to be seen and praised — not mere visibility within a body that already, structurally, cannot hide need from itself.

NOT RECOMMENDED — The Institutional Tithe Model and the Maintained Common Fund

- The mandatory 10% tithe directed primarily toward institutional maintenance — building, staff, program — has no NT mandate and entered Western Christianity as civil law under Charlemagne in 779 AD. The Eastern church never adopted it
- A persistent, institutionally maintained common fund or benevolence account — even one described as “transparent” — substitutes a maintained treasury for the personal, need-triggered stewardship the NT actually describes, and creates exactly the structural profile (a joint account, an organizational identity) examined at length in this study's companion research on the legal and corporate captivity of the American church

Section 10

The Conversion and Membership Pathway

“Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.” — Acts 2:38

The NT conversion pathway is public, communal, witnessed, and involves water. The modern sinner's prayer model — private, individual, unbaptized, uncommunal — was formalized by Bill Bright in the 1950s and has no NT precedent.

MANDATORY — The NT Conversion and Entry Pathway

- Repentance and faith — genuine, personal, counted cost
- Baptism — public, witnessed, by immersion, administered promptly (Acts 2:41; 8:36–38; 16:33)
- Reception at the Table — the new believer's first Lord's Supper following baptism
- Integration into a household community — an elder or mature member takes responsibility for their integration

The person who comes to faith does not arrive through a visitor-friendly service. They arrive through relationship with a community member. From there: observation, engagement, genuine faith, baptism, the Table, and formation — a slower, communal, publicly costly pathway.

NOT RECOMMENDED — The Modern Conversion Mechanism

- The altar call (Finney, 1825), the sinner's prayer (Bright, 1950s), and the decision card have no NT precedent at any point in the sequence, and produce a high rate of apparent conversions that do not last, by Finney's own admission

Section 11

The Calendar — What to Observe and Why

“Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath.” — Colossians 2:16

The NT explicitly refuses to mandate any particular holy day or liturgical calendar (Romans 14:5; Colossians 2:16–17). This is itself the instruction — no calendar is mandatory.

MANDATORY — Sunday as the Weekly Gathering Day

- The first day of the week has apostolic precedent (Acts 20:7; 1 Cor 16:2; Revelation 1:10)
- Sunday as the weekly mini-Resurrection — the Table taken weekly

WORTH RETAINING — The Annual Resurrection Celebration

- Pascha / Resurrection Sunday — the oldest and most theologically central observance
- Holy Week, a pre-Resurrection fasting season, Advent, and the Nativity — held clearly as secondary to the Resurrection

NOT RECOMMENDED — The Modern Christmas Complex

- Six-week programming push and cultural machinery of December dominating the community's calendar, inverting the theological priority of Christian tradition for 1,900 years

Section 12

Children and Families — Formation from the Beginning

“Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.” — Ephesians 6:4

The NT locates the primary formation of children not in a children's program but in the family embedded in the community. The household community is intergenerational by design.

MANDATORY — Children in the Community

- Children belong to the community's life — they eat at the table, observe the Lord's Supper, hear the prayers
- Parents bear primary responsibility for their children's formation (Deuteronomy 6:4–9; Ephesians 6:4) — the community supports and resources this, not substitutes for it
- Children are baptized upon genuine personal faith, as public and celebrated as any adult's

WORTH RETAINING — Intentional Formation for Children

- Intergenerational gathering — children present for the whole community gathering
- Age-appropriate instruction within the household community
- Elder and community investment in the children of the community — every child knows every elder; every elder knows every child

One of the unintended consequences of a church constantly focused more on outreach than spiritual formation is that this model all but ensures that every generation has to be re-evangelized, since adults raised in such a church do not have the spiritual training to raise their own children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord.

Child Safety — Non-Negotiable Regardless of Relational Trust

Jesus's warning is the most severe language he uses about any sin: “whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened round his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea” (Matthew 18:6). A community that integrates children fully into its life, as this framework requires, bears a correspondingly serious obligation to protect them structurally — not merely relationally.

MANDATORY — Structural Child Protection

Sources: Safeguard From Abuse (safeguardfromabuse.com); American Baptist Home Mission Societies child-protection training (abhms.org); the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints' official two-adult policy guidance (churchofjesuschrist.org), cited here as cross-denominational confirmation that this rule holds even inside family- and home-centered ministry structures; the Reformed Free Publishing Association's Standard Bearer (sb.rfpa.org), which states plainly that applying Matthew 18 to require private confrontation before reporting abuse “was shown to be incorrect and harmful”; and Church Law & Tax's summary of state reporting statutes (churchlawandtax.com).

- The two-adult rule, without exception for trusted or long-known individuals. No child is ever alone with a single adult who is not their own parent, regardless of how well that adult is known to the community. Abuse-prevention research finds 93% of offenders are already known and trusted by their victim, and 95% have no prior criminal record — trust is not a substitute for structure
- Immediate report to civil authorities — never processed through Section 14's Matthew 18 framework first. Matthew 18:15–17 governs interpersonal grievances between believers; it does not govern crimes. The state, not the church, “bears the power of the sword” to punish criminals (Romans 13:4); church elders are not equipped, authorized, or commanded to investigate crimes. All 50 states have mandatory child-abuse-reporting statutes, and the obligation applies regardless of whether the suspected abuse occurred on church property or involved anyone in any church role
- This applies with equal force to elders, family members, and founding members — the people a household community is most likely to trust without question are, by the same data, the people most commonly responsible for abuse. No one's standing in the community exempts them from the two-adult rule or delays a report

Section 13

Witness — How the Community Reaches the World

“But in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you.” — 1 Peter 3:15

The NT model of witness is not an outreach program. It is a community whose quality of life is so visibly different that it generates questions.

MANDATORY — The NT Witness Pattern

- Every member is a witness in their ordinary life (1 Pet 3:15; Col 4:5–6)
- The community's economic generosity is its most visible witness
- Hospitality as evangelism — the community's table is the primary site of witness
- Every member prepared to give an account (1 Peter 3:15 is addressed to the whole community)

WORTH RETAINING — Intentional Evangelistic Engagement

- Evangelists as a recognized gift within the community (Ephesians 4:11)
- Regular communal prayer for specific named people outside the community
- Hospitality gatherings that intentionally include neighbors, friends, and colleagues

NOT RECOMMENDED — Program-Based Outreach as Primary Evangelism

- The seeker-sensitive service designed to attract and retain the unchurched — failed to form disciples by its own architect's admission

Section 14

Discipline and Accountability — The Community That Costs Something

*“If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother.” — **Matthew 18:15***

Genuine community requires genuine accountability. Jesus's instructions in Matthew 18:15–17 govern **interpersonal grievances and sin between believers** — a scope this document now states explicitly does not extend to crimes, and above all not to child abuse, which Section 12 requires be reported to civil authorities immediately and without this process.

MANDATORY — Mutual Accountability and Church Discipline

- Every member accountable to every member — not just to leaders
- The Matthew 18 process — go first privately, then with witnesses, then to the community
- Restoration as the goal — never punitive but always restorative
- Removal from the Table as a last resort (1 Corinthians 5)
- Elders bear special accountability (1 Timothy 5:19–20)

The community that practices genuine accountability will lose some people. This is not a failure. It is the community's immune system functioning.

Section 15

Legal and Civil Standing — Render Unto Caesar, Not Legal Personhood to the State

“Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's.” — Matthew 22:21

The NT distinguishes clearly between what individual believers owe civil government and what the ekklesia itself owes it. This distinction has largely collapsed in modern American church practice, where legal incorporation and tax-exempt recognition are treated as a prerequisite for a church's legitimate existence. Neither Scripture nor the earliest church supports this assumption — a case developed fully in this study's companion research, Phase 8: *The Corporate Captivity of the American Church*.

MANDATORY — Individual Civic Obedience

- Every member fully renders to Caesar as an individual citizen — income tax, property tax, all civil obligations — regardless of the community's own legal status (Romans 13:6–7; 1 Peter 2:13–17). This is not a tax-avoidance framework
- Any suspected crime, above all against a child (Section 12), is reported to civil authorities immediately. Government's authority to punish wrongdoing is itself part of God's ordained order (Romans 13:4)

WORTH RETAINING — Personal Legal Protections Legitimately Available

- Individual members may use legitimate legal protections available to them personally — homeowner's or renter's insurance for those hosting the household community, personal liability coverage, ordinary civil recourse. Paul's own use of his Roman citizenship to avoid unlawful punishment (Acts 22:25; 25:11) shows that using an available personal legal protection is not a failure of faith, provided it is personal, not an institutional legal status sought on behalf of the ekklesia itself
- Hosting families should confirm with their insurer, in writing, that a regular gathering of the community's size is covered under their existing policy, since standard homeowner's policies contain business-use exclusions and some cap covered guest counts. This is ordinary prudence (Proverbs 22:3), not a lack of trust in God's provision

NOT RECOMMENDED — Seeking Corporate Legal Personhood for the Church Itself

- Incorporation, 501(c)(3) status, or any other government-recognized legal identity for the church itself. The corporate legal category the modern church inhabits traces to Roman civil law (the collegium/corporatio), a category the apostolic church was legally barred from until Constantine's 313–321 grant
- Churches are automatically tax-exempt under IRC §508(c)(1)(A) without filing — but courts have rejected the idea that this offers a loophole around 501(c)(3)'s substantive restrictions once a group holds itself out as a church (*Branch Ministries v. Rossotti*; *Steeves v. IRS*). The point of declining recognition is not to exploit a technicality; it is to decline the category altogether
- No joint bank account, no filed organizational name, no incorporated entity — consistent with Section 9. This reflects the conviction that the ekklesia's existence and legitimacy come from Christ alone and require no recognition from the state to be real (Matthew 16:18)

This is not a claim that legal risk is absent. Contemporary unregistered church movements — most visibly in China, where a major house-church network was raided and its leaders detained in October 2025, with new laws criminalizing unregistered religious activity taking effect January 1, 2026 — demonstrate real and current legal exposure attaches to operating outside state recognition, even where the underlying community is thriving spiritually. The honest position is not that declining corporate status is risk-free; it is that the corporate and legal benefits available in exchange are not worth their cost, and that the church accepts whatever legal consequence follows from operating as Scripture describes — the way Jesus accepted the legal consequence of his own faithfulness rather than seeking available legal standing to establish his ministry (Matthew 27:12–14).

Section 16

The Master Summary — Mandatory, Optional, Not Recommended

Mandatory from Scripture

Practice	Biblical Basis
Plural eldership with deacons	Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5; Phil 1:1; 1 Tim 3; Acts 6
Character-based elder qualification	1 Timothy 3:1–7; Titus 1:6–9
Household community as primary formation unit	Acts 2:46; Romans 16:5; Col 4:15; Philemon 2
Weekly gathering on the first day	Acts 20:7; 1 Cor 16:2; Revelation 1:10
Teaching as equipping, not performance	Ephesians 4:11–12; Acts 2:42
Participatory worship — multiple voices	1 Corinthians 14:26
The Lord's Supper as a real shared meal	1 Corinthians 11:17–34; Acts 2:42, 46
Bread and cup for all communicants	1 Corinthians 11:25–26; Matthew 26:27
Communal prayer with fixed rhythms	Acts 3:1; Didache 8; Matthew 6:9–13
Regular communal fasting	Matthew 6:16–18; Acts 13:2–3; 14:23
Baptism by immersion on genuine faith	Matthew 28:19; Acts 2:38; 8:36–38; Romans 6:3–4
Personal financial stewardship, gathered communally only as needs arise	2 Cor 9:7; 1 Cor 16:2; Acts 5:4; 2 Cor 8:1–5, 20–21; Gal 6:10
Mutual accountability and Matthew 18 discipline (excluding crimes)	Matthew 18:15–17; 1 Corinthians 5; Galatians 6:1
Structural child protection: two-adult rule, mandatory civil reporting	Matthew 18:6; Romans 13:4; state reporting statutes
Every member a minister	1 Corinthians 12; Ephesians 4:12; Romans 12:4–8
No pursuit of corporate/legal recognition for the church; full individual civic compliance	Matthew 22:21; Romans 13:6–7; 1 Peter 2:13–17; Acts 22:25, 25:11

Worth Retaining from Early Tradition

Practice	Basis
Annual Resurrection celebration (Pascha)	Oldest Christian observance; 1 Cor 15:17
Holy Week observance	Early church universal
Daily morning and evening prayer	Jewish inheritance; Acts 3:1; Psalm 55:17
Intentional elder apprenticeship	Paul's pattern with Timothy and Titus

Practice	Basis
Personal legal protections (insurance, etc.)	Acts 22:25, 25:11; Proverbs 22:3

Not Recommended

Practice	Why Not
Solo senior pastor model	No NT precedent; contradicts plural elder pattern
Mandatory 10% tithe to institution	Medieval civil law (Charlemagne, 779 AD); no NT mandate
Maintained institutional common fund	Substitutes treasury for personal, need-triggered stewardship
Altar call / sinner's prayer as conversion mechanism	Finney ~1825; Bright 1950s; no NT precedent
Seeker-sensitive service format	Willow Creek 1975; confessed failure at making disciples
Corporate legal personhood (501(c)(3)/incorporation)	Roman/medieval legal category; no NT mandate

A Final Word

This framework is not a blueprint for perfection. No community will implement every element correctly from the beginning. What this framework offers is not a guarantee of success but an honest starting point. A community that gathers around a real table, breaks real bread, cares for the genuinely poor through personal stewardship rather than institutional apparatus, protects its children structurally and not merely relationally, practices genuine accountability, is led by qualified elders who equip every member for ministry, and asks nothing of the state to be legitimate — that community, however imperfect, is doing what the ekklesia of the New Testament was actually designed to do.