

THE New Testament Church



David A. DeWitt

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Notes

Introduction

This book defines, describes, and discusses what the apostles understood when they talked about the church. My purpose is observation and interpretation but not application. Forgive me if I slip from time-to-time, but it is not my goal to tell you how to organize your church. I leave that up to you. This book is about what was going on in the first-century church, not an attempt to tell anyone how to do that today. There will be many contrasts made with today's practices for the purpose of clarifying what the apostles did and did not see as the church. But the purpose of those is strictly to make clear what the apostles taught on the church, not to produce a formula for today.

However.

Having said that, all of the Bible needs to be applied (2 Timothy 3:16-17). We cannot simply ignore what the apostles taught. The teaching of the apostles, as recorded in the words of the New Testament, is true Christianity. Anything contrary to that is false teaching. So if you conclude: "that was for then, not now" or "the apostles did not leave us with a clear definition of the church," or "the apostles left us with examples not commands, and we never have to follow their examples," beware!

The apostles wrote under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, and they did not just put things in their letters to take up space. There is a reason why they defined, described, and illustrated the church the way they did. Examples are not commands, but neither are they irrelevant. And the apostles left us with many commands, which cannot be carried out in just-any-old-way. My suggestion is to first understand the mentality of the apostles about the church (that's why I wrote this book). Then carry that with you as you go about growing and maturing in Christ. As you have opportunity, apply the mentality of the apostles whenever you can, to whomever you can, in any way you can.

Chapter 1

Defining the Church

The Church Is Believers

For the apostles, it was just that simple. In the New Testament, the church is true believers in the Lord Jesus Christ from the coming of the Holy Spirit in Acts 2 until the Rapture of 1 Thessalonians 4. It is those who have made the decision, and taken their stand among others who made the decision, to receive Jesus Christ as their God and Savior (John 1:12). They are those who have trusted the blood of Christ shed on the cross as sufficient payment for their sins.

*Assembling ourselves together, appointing leaders,
taking Communion, baptizing, teaching, and evangelizing
are things the apostles would say the church does,
not what the church is.*

If you have a Bible program in your computer or phone, just search the word “church” and read the verses. There are 77 references in the New Testament. You will find the word “church” refers to everything from the universal body of Christ, to a house gathering of believers, to the believers in a city, to those in a large geographic region, to a network of believers across the world. The only definition for the church, which fits all those contexts, is that the church is true believers in Jesus Christ.

Usually, the word “believers” can simply be substituted for the word “church.” The **church** throughout all Judea (Acts 9:1) is the **believers** throughout all Judea, the **church** of God which is at Corinth (1 Corinthians 1:2) is the **believers** in God who are at Corinth, the **church** that is in their house (Romans 16:5) is the **believers** who gather in a house, etc. [The bold emphases throughout this book are mine.] But the church is never the region, the city, or the house. It’s the believers in those regions, cities, and houses.

The church did not exist in the Old Testament. Jesus said, *I will* [future active indicative] *build My church* (Matthew 16:18). So it did not yet exist at the time of Christ. The Old Testament writers knew nothing about the church. Paul called the church the *mystery of Christ, which in other generations was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed to His holy apostles and prophets in the Spirit* (Ephesians 3:3-9).

The word ἐκκλησία (*ecclesia*) is the only word ever translated “church.” It is a Greek, not a Hebrew, word. Since the Old Testament is written in He-

brew, the word for “church” obviously does not occur in the Old Testament. No reference in the Old Testament describes the church. The tabernacle, the temple, and the priesthood of the Mosaic Law are not to be found in the church. Speaking metaphorically, the New Testament says the believers in this church age are the house of God (Hebrews 10:21), the temple (1 Corinthians 3:16; 6:19), and the priests (Revelation 1:6).

The Church Is an ἐκκλησία (ecclesia)

Like any word, ἐκκλησία (*ecclesia*) must be defined from the author’s intended meaning. Let me give you an every-day American example. If an American says, “that’s a cool car,” or “that’s a hot car,” or “that’s a bad car,” or “that’s a sharp car,” they most likely mean that’s a good car. But if you look up “cool,” “hot,” “bad,” or “sharp” in the dictionary, you will not find our American’s definition of those words in American’s description of the car.

If we went to the Greek lexicon to define the word σωτήριος (*soterios*) for “salvation,” we would find that it means “to deliver from trouble.” We can only define the word “salvation” eternally if we use the apostle’s (author-intended) meaning of the word in the text of the New Testament (as, for example, in Ephesians 6:17). The point is, the word has to be understood as the apostles used it.

Another example is the word ἀγάπη (*agape*) for “love.” This word was rarely used in the Greek culture. When it was, it meant “to have...sincere appreciation and high regard, ...to regard with affection” (*Louw and Nida Lexicon*). But the apostles took this rarely used-word and made it the basis for Christian fellowship and defined it as “giving that does the best good for the other person.” For example, Paul’s description of ἀγάπη (*agape*) love in 1 Corinthians 13:4-7 would never be found in the Greek lexicon.

The same is true for ἐκκλησία (*ecclesia*), the Greek word translated “church.” If you look it up in a lexicon, you will usually find it defined as “an assembly.” That’s because the secular Greek culture used the word for an assembly of people. But the apostles did not use it that way. According to Charles Ryrie,

The Greek word ἐκκλησία meant an assembly and was used in a political, not religious, sense. It did not refer to the people but to the meeting; in other words, when the people were not assembled formally, they were not referred to as an ἐκκλησία. The word is used in the same secular Greek way in two places in the New Testament (Acts 19:32, 41). When the Greek word is used in the New Testament, it takes on much richer and fuller aspects to the basic secular meaning. For example, the people themselves, whether assembled or not, are the ἐκκλησία (*Basic Theology*, 69).

The word itself means “those which are called out” [ἐκ (*ek*) “out of” or “from” and κλησία (*klesia*) “called”]. Although in the New Testament it usually describes the “church” (77 times), it is used (4 times) of other assemblies of people.

- In Acts 7:38, ἐκκλησία (*ecclesia*) is used of *the congregation in the wilderness*.
- In Acts 19:32 and 41, ἐκκλησία (*ecclesia*) refers to the mob that gathered to get rid of Paul because he destroyed their idol making.
 - In Acts 19:39, it means the participants in a court of law.

In all these secular cases, ἐκκλησία (*ecclesia*) refers to an assembly of people, not the assembly as an entity or organization. It did not refer to unassembled people, but nether did it refer to any organization that assembled them. In Acts 7, it is not Israel as a nation but the Israelite people who wandered in the wilderness with Moses. In the case of the mob of Acts 19, there was no organization at all. They were not members of any group that gathered regularly in some place. In the case of the law court, it was people who gathered for a particular trial and dispersed when the trial was over. These usages of ἐκκλησία (*ecclesia*) were of people who were called out, or called themselves out, for some specific purpose.

Today, the ancient Greeks might use ἐκκλησία (*ecclesia*) for football fans that come to watch their team play. They are assembled or “called out of” or “apart from” people in general because they are identified as football fans of a particular team. These fans are not members of something, nor are they necessarily regular attenders of something. They are people (not the stadium or the football league, or the alumni association) who assemble together to watch their team play. They are an ἐκκλησία (*ecclesia*).

An Assembly Is a συναγωγή (sunagoge)

There is a different Greek word used in the New Testament for “assembly.” It’s the word συναγωγή (*sunagoge*), from which we get the word “synagogue.” For example, Hebrews 10:25 has the phrase *not forsaking our own assembling together*. The translation *assembling together* is from the word ἐπισυναγωγήν (*epi-sunagogen*), literally *upon assembling*. So when the apostles used the word ἐκκλησία (*ecclesia*) in reference to Christianity, they meant believers, people who were called out or distinguished from the rest of the world. So when the ἐκκλησία (*ecclesia*) “church” has a συναγωγή (*sunagoge*) an “assembly,” it is “called out ones” who are assembling together. But the ἐκκλησία (*ecclesia*) is not the συναγωγή (*sunagoge*).

So the apostles did not define the church as an assembly. But now we know something else about these believers. They are ἐκκλησία (*ecclesia*) “called out ones.” They are those who are called out of the world because they belong to Jesus Christ. They are **His** “called out ones.”

Chapter 2

The Church Is a Fellowship, Not a Community

First John 1:7 says, ...*if we walk in the Light as He Himself is in the Light, we have **fellowship** [κοινωνία (koinonia)] with one another, and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin.*

Acts 2:42 says, *They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to **fellowship** [κοινωνία (koinonia)], to the breaking of bread and to prayer.*

First Corinthians 1:9 says, *God is faithful, through whom you were called into **fellowship** [κοινωνία (koinonia)] with His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.*

The New Testament church is repeatedly called a **fellowship of believers**.

The apostles never called the church a community

The apostles saw themselves as bond-servants of Christ (Romans 1:1; Titus 1:1; 2 Peter 1:1; James 1:1; Jude 1:1; Revelation 1:1) not organized into an organization, not institutionalized in an institution, and not committed to a community. Literally, a community is “a group of people living together in one place.” Metaphorically, a community is people “considered collectively” (*MacBook Pro Dictionary*). It might be appropriate to call a monastery or a convent a community, but the apostles never described the church that way.

The word “community” does not occur in the New Testament. The apostles always saw the church as a **body**, not a community.

*For even as the **body** is one and yet has many members, and **all the members of the body**, though they are many, are one **body**, so also is Christ. For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one **body**, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. For the **body** is not one member, but many. If the foot says, “Because I am not a hand, I am not a part of the **body**,” it is not for this reason any the less a part of the **body**...**and those members of the body which we deem less honorable, on these we bestow more abundant honor**...so that **there may be no division in the body**, but that the members may have the same care for one another. And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it. **Now you are Christ's body, and individually members of it** (1 Corinthians 12:12-27).*

*In a body, every part is crucial and cannot be replaced by another part.
In a community, anyone can be replaced by someone else.*

In a community, people are seen as filling positions, so when a position is vacated, it is simply a matter of finding someone else to fill that position.

The church is like a body, and all the parts of a body are significant. Your kidneys, bowels, liver, and stomach may seem less honorable but try living without them. But if a pastor, priest, elder, deacon, chairman, usher, greeter, or parking attendant are gone, we simply select someone to replace them.

And don't leave this passage without noticing that Paul concluded saying: *Now you are Christ's body, and individually members of it.* You believers are members of the body of Christ, not some organization or assembly. And it is you *individually*, not some collective sense of a community.

The operative word the apostles used for the relationships within the body of Christ was the word *fellowship*. According to *Strong's*, *κοινωνία* (*koinonia*) "fellowship" is the "contribution, participation" and "sharing" of individuals. Community is a union of individuals, as in a commune or Communism.

Here are some differences between a fellowship a community:

Fellowship	Community
The concept of the apostles	The common term today
An affection for one another	A sense of belonging to the group
A source of personal development	A source of identity
Points toward individualism	Points toward Communism
Serves people with high motivation	Serves people with low motivation
Highly motivated people are served	Highly motivated people are used
Is only available to a few people at a time	Is available to the masses
Increases the impact of one's giving	Increases the impact of one's spending
Defines giving as individuals to individuals	Defines giving as redistributing wealth
Individual core values hold it together	Individual core values tear it apart

Fellowship	Community
Everybody has a similar “flag”	Everybody salutes a common “flag”
Everybody owns something valuable	Everybody owns everything
Illustrated by parts of a body	Illustrated by a corporation
A single leader is hard to identify	A single leader is easy to identify
Leaders have personal insight	Leaders are superstars or heroes
Leaders provide wisdom	Leaders provide direction
Leadership encourages original thinking	Leadership encourages group thinking
Humility is attractive and encouraged	Pride is attractive and encouraged
Boasting sounds foolish	Boasting sounds successful
Emphasizes individual gifts and abilities	Ignores individual gifts and abilities
Discipline is for people hurting themselves	Discipline is for the group’s reputation
Programs are replaced by events	Events are made into programs
Speaks in terms of maturity	Speaks in terms of success
A network of intimate individuals	A grouping of casual acquaintances
Is managed like a sandlot ball team	Is managed like a corporation
Focuses on “love one another”	Focuses on “tolerate” one another
Love is defined with discernment	Love is defined ignoring discernment
Spiritual gifts are for people	Spiritual gifts are for positions
Success cannot be measured or controlled	Success is measured and controlled
It’s like salad—mixing individuals together	It’s like soup—blending individuals together

Chapter 3

The Church and the Holy Spirit

What makes the church different from the work of God in all other ages is the special presence of the Holy Spirit in each believer. In the Old Testament, worship was often connected to places (the patriarchs built altars to God, Moses built the tabernacle, Solomon built the temple). That's because the Holy Spirit was not indwelling every believer. But the apostles never built any of those things.

The reason the apostles did not define the church as an assembly or a congregation or an organization or an institution is because the Holy Spirit does not indwell any of those things. What the Holy Spirit indwells today is the body of each and every believer in Jesus Christ. The church is believers indwelled by the Holy Spirit. There is no way to assure that any organization, congregation, institution, or assembly is made up of all true believers. Therefore, the apostles would never call any of these a church.

Old Testament Believers Were Not the Church

In the Old Testament times, the Holy Spirit came upon certain people to prophesy certain things or perform certain things. But that was not true of the vast majority of believers, the vast majority of the time. Concerning Old Testament believers **in general**, we need to understand:

- They were not indwelled by the Holy Spirit.
- There were no gifts of the Holy Spirit.
- There was no filling of the Holy Spirit.
- There was no baptism of the Holy Spirit.
- Their bodies were not a temple of the Holy Spirit.

So the Old Testament people of God required a structure, a tabernacle, a temple, a sanctuary, a specific place of worship. The apostles would consider that inappropriate for the church.

The apostles saw the church as every believer having the Holy Spirit in a new, different, and significant way. That's why we can network together with believers from across town or around the world. We can fellowship with them, having just met them on an airplane or in a social or business context. Anytime two or more of us are together, we are the ἐκκλησία (*ecclesia*) because all believers have this special presence of God in the form of the indwelling Holy Spirit. For the apostles, that was the most defining factor for understanding the church.

At the end of His ministry, Jesus told the apostles there was a change coming. He said:

*I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may be with you forever; that is **the Spirit of truth**, whom the world cannot receive, because it does not see Him or know Him, but you know Him because He abides with you and **will be in you** (John 14:16-17).*

The Spirit came upon the apostles in a special way to start the church (John 20:22; Acts 1:8; 2:1-4). Peter was uniquely used to bring the Holy Spirit to the Jews in Jerusalem (Acts 2-4), the new believers in Samaria (Acts 8:14-17), and the Gentile believers in Caesarea (Acts 10:44). After that, the apostles understood **all believers** to be:

- Regenerated by the Holy Spirit (Titus 3:5)
- Indwelt by the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:19)
- Baptized in the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:13)
- Sealed with the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 4:30)
- Gifted by the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:4ff; Romans 12:6ff)
- Able to be filled by the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 5:18)

The Indwelling Spirit Determines the Location of the Church

In 1 Corinthians 3:16-17, we read:

*Do you not know that **you** are a **temple** of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in **you**? If any man destroys **the temple of God**, God will destroy him, for **the temple of God is holy, and that is what you are**.*

Also in 1 Corinthians 6:19 it says:

*Or do you not know that **your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit** who is in **you**, whom you have from God, and that **you** are not your own?*

The words for *you* in these passages are a second person plural. So it's like "ya'll" or "you guys" (plural) are the temple. The last *you* ὑμεῖς (*humeis*) of 3:16 and the *your* ὑμῶν (*humin*) of 6:19 mean *you, you people, or you yourselves*. The point is that the believers, the people themselves, are the temple of God. We are living carriers of the Holy Spirit. So the apostles did not prescribe a central sanctuary for the church to meet in, as Moses did for Israel (Leviticus 19:30; Deuteronomy 12:5-26; 14:23-25).

In the Old Testament, certain locations were specifically designated as holy places—the burning bush, Mount Sinai, the Holy of Holies, the city of Jerusalem. But, for the church age, God never designated any place as holy. Even the places where God spoke, at Christ's baptism and the Mount of Transfiguration, were not designated as holy places. In the New Testament, there is no place where God said: *remove your sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground* (Exodus 3:5).

The very idea of the need for a central place of worship for the church,

denies the unique works of the Holy Spirit (John 4:23-24). For the apostles, the church could meet any place because the Holy Spirit was in the believer, not the place. To designate a special place would diminish the essential truth that the Holy Spirit dwells in each believer.

The Gifting of the Holy Spirit Defines the Church

Paul wrote:

*Now there are varieties of gifts, but **the same Spirit**...But to each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the **common good**. For to one is given the word of wisdom **through the Spirit**, and to another the word of knowledge according to the **same Spirit**; to another faith by the **same Spirit**, and to another gifts of healing **by the one Spirit**, and to another the effecting of miracles, and to another prophecy, and to another the distinguishing of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, and to another the interpretation of tongues. But **one and the same Spirit** works all these things, **distributing to each one individually just as He wills** (1 Corinthians 12:4, 6-10).*

According to the apostles, the gifts of the Holy Spirit come through the Spirit to the individual believer, the Holy Spirit *distributing to each one individually just as He wills*. The apostles saw no “local church” or clergy of pastors or priests distributing the gifts of the Spirit to the believers. The purpose of the gifts of the Spirit was the unity of the believers, not to subdivide them up into independent organizations.

The Baptism of the Holy Spirit Defines Church Membership

*For even as **the body is one and yet has many members**, and **all the members of the body**, though they are many, **are one body**, so also is Christ. For **by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body**, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. For the body is not one member, but many (1 Corinthians 12:12-14).*

According to the apostles, membership in the church was nothing like what we have conjured up in our “local church” 501c(3) corporations. Membership was the result of being baptized by the Holy Spirit. Although the apostles practiced water baptism, being *baptized into one body* was not water baptism but a metaphor describing the immersion of the believer in the Holy Spirit, at salvation. In the Old Testament, salvation did not result in the Spirit baptism of the believer. This unique figure of speech was used to show that the believer in Christ of this age was part of a unique ἐκκλησία (*ecclesia*), the called out ones which were the *members of the body* of Christ, the church.

Spirit baptism at salvation is the only church membership taught by the apostles

Chapter 4

The Responsibility of the Church

For the apostles in the New Testament, there is no such thing as church responsibility. The church of the New Testament, whether it be universal, regional, city, network, or in a house, had no responsibility before God. Consider the following very significant statement:

“No responsibility or service is imposed on the church per se. Service, like the gifts of the Spirit by whom service is wrought, is individual. It could not be otherwise. The common phrase, ‘the church’s task’ is, therefore, without biblical foundation.”

The above quote is from Lewis Sperry Chafer, the founder of Dallas Theological Seminary. It is to be found in Volume 3 of his *Systematic Theology*, 1954, page 149. He goes on to give the full quote from Dr. C. I. Scofield, the author of the study notes in *The Scofield Reference Bible*. *The Scofield Reference Bible* was the standard reference Bible for nearly every Bible-believing Christian of the 1900s, except those holding to Roman Catholic and Covenant theology. Here is the entire quote as it occurs in Chafer’s *Systematic Theology*:

THE CHURCH AND HER SERVICE No responsibility or service is imposed on the church per se. Service, like the gifts of the Spirit by whom service is wrought, is individual. It could not be otherwise. The common phrase, ‘the church’s task,’ is, therefore, without Biblical foundation. It is only when individuals sense their personal responsibility and claim personal divine enablement that Christian work is done. On the other hand, there is no word written which by implication would hinder believers from being associated in a common cause which may be for convenience considered in the light of a combined result. Relative to the mission of the visible church, Dr. C. I. Scofield writes: “Much is said concerning the mission of the church. The church which is His body has for its mission to build itself up until the body is complete (Eph. 4:11-16; Col. 2:19), but the visible church, as such, is charged with no mission. The commission to evangelize the world is personal, and not corporate (Matt. 28:16-20; Mark 16:14-16; Luke 24:47, 48; Acts 1:8).”

Chafer and Scofield were exactly right because they understood what the apostles taught, that *church* is a collective term for the believers of this age. The question is, “Are believers accountable before God in any collective way?” The answer from the New Testament is a resounding, NO! All of us will stand before the Judgment Seat of Christ—alone. Paul wrote,

For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad (2 Corinthians 5:10).

This is individual, not corporate. No “local church,” or denomination, or parish, or any other organization or assembly or institution will go to heaven or stand before God. Only individual believers will do that, and they will not do so in any collective manner. There is no group rate and no group trophy.

But that is not to say the apostles thought the associations of believers together was unimportant. Quite the contrary! Much of the judgment of individual believers at the Judgment Seat of Christ is based on how we relate to one another. That’s why, in the New Testament, the various aspects of the church were so important. The church includes the network of relationships we have with one another, our nurturing of one another, our gathering to remember the Lord’s Supper, and so on. And we will be held accountable for that—individually.

Chapter 5

The Church Throughout the New Testament

The Universal Church

Consider Colossians 1:24-25:

*Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I do my share on behalf of His body (which is the **church**) in filling up that which is lacking in Christ's afflictions. Of this **church** I was made a minister according to the stewardship from God bestowed on me for your benefit, that I might fully carry out the preaching of the word of God.*

In his letter to the Colossian church, Paul defined the church as the body of Christ, *His body (which is the church)*. So the church, the ἐκκλησία (*ecclesia*), is the body of Christ. In other words, it is the body of all believers for about 2,000 years, which began at the Day of Pentecost in Acts 2 and will remain until the Rapture described in John 14:1-3 and 1 Thessalonians 4:16-18. [And by the way, notice that Paul was *made a minister* of the universal body of Christ, not some independent “local church.” For the apostles, there was no such thing as a *minister* of a “local church.”]

The Regional Church

The word “church” is also used to describe believers in a large geographic region (Acts 8:3; 9:31). We shall discuss “The Church of Judea and Samaria” later. But for now simply notice the regional reference to the church.

In Acts 9:31-32 we read:

*So the **church** [singular] **throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria** enjoyed peace, being built up; and, going on in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it continued to increase. Now it came about that as Peter was traveling through all those parts, he came down also to **the saints** who lived at Lydda.*

Here the *church* is the believers *throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria*. These people obviously did not assemble together at any time, nor were they members of any organization or institution. They were simply the believers in those geographic regions. Notice *that as Peter was traveling through all those parts, he came down also to the saints who lived at Lydda*. So the church, *through all those parts*, was the *saints* (a common synonym for believers), and the church at Lydda (a city near today's Tel Aviv) was all the saints in that city.

The City Church

The most common use of the word “church” is for believers living in a city. Although it might be supposed that in the early days, in some cities, all these believers gathered together in one assembly, this is not likely in the larger cities. But by the end of the New Testament, this would not be the case in Jerusalem, Antioch, Corinth, Rome or Ephesus because they were large cities and the church was there for years.

For example, the New Testament book of Romans is obviously written to the church in Rome. Yet Romans 16 describes, what appears to be, five different house churches. The five (or more) churches (one of which is called *the church that is in their house*—Romans 16:5) were told to receive Phoebe from the church of Cenchrea (a city near Corinth). So “church” refers to believers in the city of Cenchrea, believers in the city of Rome, and believers who are part of one of the groups who met in someone’s house in Rome. The only thing all these usages have in common is that they are all believers.

The House Church

The only place the New Testament church ever met regularly was in someone’s house (Acts 20:8; Romans 16:5; 1 Corinthians 16:19; Colossians 4:15-16; Philemon 2). This could be because when Jesus sent the 12 out to proclaim the kingdom of God, He sent them to houses, not synagogues (Luke 9:4). Perhaps, if Jesus had sent them to synagogues, they would have thought of ministry connected to religious buildings, but they never did. Ernest Loosley, writing in 1935, said:

The apostles had no thought of acquiring or erecting ‘Christian’ buildings. There is no sign of the existence of any Christian building during New Testament times or long after. There was practically nothing in the way of a church building until the third century, and nothing with any pretension to architecture until after the conversion of Constantine early in the fourth century. During all this time the church carried on her mission without buildings of her own, without property, and without the burdens and responsibilities that the holding of property implies.

The reason the apostles did not build buildings to meet in was not because of persecution. The apostles never stopped doing what Christ commanded them to do because of persecution. Nor was it because the church was not yet big enough, or because it did not have enough funding. In many cities, the church was very big in terms of numbers, and money was always given to individual needs. The reason they didn’t build buildings is because Jesus never led them to do that. Buildings were simply not conducive to what the apostles wanted to do. The church was to assemble (Hebrews 10:25), but the regular assemblies were in someone’s house.

The Mention of the Assembly of the Church in the New Testament

Some of the clergy discussing the assembling of the church today give us the impression that the assembling of the church was a major element of the New Testament. Most of the epistles of the New Testament were written to the church, yet most of those epistles never mention an assembly. Of the 27 New Testament books, 21 of them are epistles, written to or about the church. There is an assembly mentioned in 6 of them (1 Corinthians 11 & 14; Romans 16:5; Colossians 4:15; Philemon 2; Hebrews 10:25 and 3 John 9). There is no mention of an assembly of any kind in 15 of them (2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, 1 or 2 Thessalonians, 1 or 2 Peter, James, Jude, 1 or 2 John, 1 or 2 Timothy, or Titus). So less than 29% of them mention something about assembling.

Also, of those letters which mention an assembly, the reference is a small part of those books. For example, in nearly every discussion I have ever had on the subject, someone will mention Hebrews 10:25, *not forsaking our own assembling together*. It's true that Hebrews talks about the church assembling together. But there are 322 verses in Hebrews and only one of them is about assembling together. So 1/322 (0.31%) of the book of Hebrews is about the church gathering together. Or we can look at it in terms of chapters. Romans has 16 chapters, and one of them mentions the gathering of the church. So 1/16 (6.25%) of Romans discusses the assembly of the church. The point is, the church is not just about assembling. The church is about many things—one of them is assembling.

A Musical Note

The music of the church throughout history tells a great story about the beliefs of the church. Church music has embraced and enhanced the doctrines of salvation, the Trinity, the sovereignty of God, the necessity of faith, the fellowship of the believers, the love of God, the fear of God, the Second Coming of Christ, and even many details of prophecy, sanctification, angels, and the body of Christ. But I don't know of a single song, all through history, that embraces, "celebrates," or even suggests that God ordained an institutional "local church." The idea of an institutional "local church" is very recent.

The Scattered Church

Almost all of today's evangelical clergy teach that the church gathers and scatters. But how could the church scatter if it is defined as a gathered assembly? For example, let's suppose a local church decides to bring gifts to the poor or shut-ins. If these believers are only defined as a church when they are assembled, then who are those believers who are bringing gifts to the poor? If the church is defined as an assembly, then we have to play silly

games as to what constitutes a church. Is a Bible study a church? How about a Sunday school class, a board meeting, or a midweek accountability group? Or is it where 2 or 3 are gathered together in Christ's name (Matthew 18:20)? Do we need to gather with a certain number or type of leaders to be a church? If we do, who are those people bringing gifts to the poor?

If we resort to membership in our institutions and say they are members of "our church," then we have abandoned "assembly" as a definition of the church and created another definition totally foreign to the New Testament, namely, "organizational membership." If we say they must both assemble and be members, then we need to know how often those "members" must "assemble" to be a church. All this is silly. The church is believers. Assembling is one of many things they do. Bringing gifts to the poor is something else they do. Obviously, the word "church" is simply plural for believers.

The Network Church

The church in the New Testament was a network of believers in fellowship with one another, which resulted in them loving one another. That love included everything from nurturing to accountability. They networked with believers across the Roman Empire or wherever believers went. But the apostles did not set up local stained-glass command posts that compete with other stained-glass command posts (and para-stained-glass command posts) for people, money, influence, and the exclusive right to do ministry with a confined congregation of believers.

In addition to not being competitive, the apostles were careful to not think of the church as a bunch of closed systems that discourage believers from interacting with other believers in their own city, across the country, and around the world. When we do that, our assembly becomes a stagnant pond, limiting the interaction of believers with those outside. Stagnant ponds are not a good place to go swimming. Every believer should be involved in several Christian organizations, as many as they have time for. As a friend of mine likes to point out:

*The people who drank the poison cool aid in the Jim Jones cult
might have been spared if they had belonged to at least
one other organization.*

Chapter 6

The Ministry of John the Baptist

Jesus said, ... *upon this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades will not overpower it* (Matthew 16:18). But before we look at just exactly what kind of church Christ built, we should first back up one step to His predecessor, John the Baptist. John is generally known for his ministry of baptism unto repentance (Matthew 3:2). But John's impact was not just because of his baptisms. John's ministry was also one of discipleship. Twenty years later, the Apostle Paul ran into 12 of John's disciples over in Ephesus (Acts 19:3). We also read about Apollos who was from North Africa and had a tremendous impact in the early church, but his first mentor was John the Baptist (Acts 18:25). John dealt with his disciples personally, directly, and in the midst of life situations. (See John 3:22-36 and Luke 11:1.)

John never formed an institution or an organization, nor was he ever part of one. Because John did not see ministry in institutional terms, he did not see other ministries in competition with his own. Apparently, a few of John's disciples did see ministry that way, and, therefore, they had a concern about the potential competition raised by the ministry of Christ's disciples. *And they came to John and said to him, He who was with you beyond the Jordan, to whom you have borne witness, behold, He is baptizing, and all are coming to Him* (John 3:26).

John saw ministry not as exclusive groups but as the eternal work of God. John told his disciples that it was earthly and worldly to see ministry in terms of distinct, and inevitably, therefore, competitive groups. He said, *He who comes from above is above all, he who is of the earth is from the earth and speaks of the earth* (John 3:31). John taught his disciples the difference between them and Jesus. They come from the earth, and He comes from heaven. We who come from the earth tend to see ministry as something we do for God. We want to institutionalize it, protect it, build walls around it, and view others as a threat to it. But the heavenly perspective is different. It's not our ministry, it's God's ministry. John saw ministry as an interaction of people in the lives of people, not as one group distinct from another group.

Jesus' first two disciples (Andrew and John) came from John the Baptist. *Again the next day John was standing with two of his disciples, and he looked upon Jesus as He walked, and said, 'Behold, the Lamb of God!' And the two disciples heard him speak, and they followed Jesus* (John 1:35-37). John the Baptist did not see ministry as his men in his group versus other men in other groups. John saw ministry as building into the lives of people and allowing them to flow into the lives of others.

Chapter 7

The Church Established by Jesus Christ

Let's review Jesus' use of the word "church." He used ἐκκλησία (*ecclesia*) three times on two different occasions:

- Matthew 16:18—...upon this rock I will build My **church**; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it.
- Matthew 18:17—If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the **church**; and if he refuses to listen even to the **church**, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.
- Matthew 16:18 is a prediction of what Christ said He would do. He would build His church. Three things should be noticed:
 1. He is going to build His *church*, a people who are ἐκκλησία (*ecclesia*) called out from the world. He did not say He would build a συναγωγή (*synagoge*), an assembly of people.
 2. He *will*, in the future, build His church. So the church did not exist in the Old Testament or during the earthly life of Christ.
 3. This *church* is something He will build Himself. He never asked the apostles or anyone else to build His church. The apostle's assignment was never to build the church or plant churches. Their job was to *Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you* (Matthew 28:19-20).

Matthew 18:17 is in the context of disciplining a sinful brother. After we go to him individually and with two or three witnesses and he still does not repent, we are to tell it to the church. This often puzzles us, because the church age did not begin until after Christ ascended into heaven. So what would He expect the disciples to understand by having them tell it to the ἐκκλησία (*ecclesia*)? Is it the organized church? Some specific local church? The elders of a local church? The clergy? Well, none of those things existed. But the problem is solved very easily if we look at the way the word "church" is used throughout the New Testament. It's simply a collective term for those who believe in Jesus Christ. Jesus is telling them to take it to a group of believers.

The church age (believers of this age) began in Acts 2. Before that, Jesus died for us, became our Savior, and then sent the Holy Spirit. And before that, He spent 3½ years preparing 12 disciples to launch the church. So what kind of example did He set for the church?

First notice what He did not do:

- Jesus Christ did not form an organization or an institution.

- He was not a president, a chairman, a pastor, bishop, cardinal, metropolitan, pope, or director.
 - He chaired no committee, formed no corporation, and held no position.
- Add to that the consternation of the Pharisees, who point out that He was not approved by the organized leadership of the day (John 7:48).

He said:

You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. It is not so among you, but whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be your slave (Matthew 20:25-27).

Jesus saw the church as a co-equal band of brothers and sisters, serving one another, as a servant would wash a guest's feet, with the more mature serving the less mature.

People repeatedly wanted Jesus to take an official job of some sort, but He continually refused. In Capernaum, they wanted Him to stay and be the head of something local, available exclusively for them (Luke 4:31, 42). In Jerusalem, they wanted Him to be a king (Luke 19:38). But that was not why Jesus came (the first time), nor was it the model of ministry He wanted to illustrate.

Instead, He lived with His disciples for 3 ½ years, then asked them to become fishers of His men (Luke 5:1-11), gatherers of His harvest (Matthew 9:37-38), and feeders of His sheep (John 21:15-17). The whole demeanor of Jesus did not lend itself to institutional leadership.

[By the way, a pyramid structure of leadership runs contrary to what was modeled by Christ and the apostles in the New Testament. And an inverted pyramid is still a pyramid.]

Consider this about Christ's leadership:

- He broke religious traditions (John 9; Matthew 15).
- He offended the religious leaders (John 5).
- He used some of the roughest language in all of literature (Matthew 23).
- He confused people (John 6:60-65).
- He intentionally spoke in such a way that people would not understand (Matthew 13:10-17).
- He said things that caused most of His followers to leave Him (John 6:66).
- He said He came to bring war, not peace (Luke 12:49ff).

- He said the world would get worse, not better (Matthew 24:4-22).
- He never did anything to better society, improve the government, or preserve the earth.
- He developed no programs (world, national, or local) to resolve global or local issues.
- He was so hated by both liberals and conservatives that they killed Him in His mid-30s.

That's hardly the kind of leader we look for to chair institutional boards, pastor institutional churches, or direct institutional corporations. The reality is, if we define the church institutionally, we will have trouble following Christ's example. But if we see institutions as human inventions to be used (as Christ used the synagogues) and not as something sacred, then they can be very helpful.

Jesus considered the temple in Jerusalem to be the only house of God (Luke 2:49; John 2:16). The apostles also considered the temple in Jerusalem to be the house of God until it was torn down in A.D. 70 (Acts 2:46; 3:1; 5:20ff; 21:26ff). But the synagogues were cultural inventions of rabbinic Judaism. Jesus used them as places to do what we call evangelism, but not as places of worship. Paul also used the synagogues as a place for evangelism, along with other public places where it was appropriate to present the gospel message (Acts 16:13; 17:22).

The apostles would look at any organization which believers invented like they looked at the synagogues. They may (or may not) have practical value as a place to do ministry, but they have no special, sacred, innate value at all. Only the temple was the house of God, and today, that's the body of each believer (1 Corinthians 3:16; 6:19).

Jesus did make one other significant comment about having a place of worship. Here is a bit of the discussion He had with the woman at the well:

*The woman said to Him... "Our fathers worshiped in this mountain, [the Samaritan temple on Mt. Gerizim] and you people say that in [the temple at] Jerusalem is the **place** where men ought to worship." Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe Me, an hour is coming when **neither** in this mountain, **nor** in Jerusalem, shall you worship the Father... God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth" (John 4:19-24).*

The woman wanted to reduce the discussion to having different places of worship. But Jesus said worshipping God is not about places. He did not say that what she really needed to do was worship in Jerusalem. Also, it is significant that Jesus did **not** say **either** in this mountain or in Jerusalem shall you worship the Father. He said, **neither** in this mountain, **nor** in Je-

rusalem, shall you worship the Father. Everybody will be some place when they worship God. But worshipping God is not about places, **neither** this one **nor** that one. The apostles would consider it inappropriate for some group to imply that God should be worshipped only in our designated place or your designated place. Jesus said **neither** this place **nor** that place has special worship significance, because *God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth.*

Chapter 8

The Church in Jerusalem

The believers in Jerusalem were the whole church in the city of Jerusalem (Acts 5:11). Their gatherings were functional, not independent “local churches” which subdivided the believers into different groups. Other than honoring the temple, their regular gatherings were small enough to be in someone’s house (Acts 2:46).

Most pastors wishing biblical support for mega-church size meetings go to the first chapters of the book of Acts and point to the large early meetings in Jerusalem because these are the only large gatherings in all of the New Testament. But these large groups were not a gathering of the church. This was a work of the Holy Spirit that reached over 8,000 people for Christ on two different occasions (Acts 2:41 and 4:4). No one organized these events. Nobody even knew they would happen. This is no example of the assembly of the church but evangelism among the crowd that was gathered around the temple because of the Jewish holiday of Pentecost.

Then we read about the church.

And they were continually devoting themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer (Acts 2:42).

And where did they do that?

... day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart, praising God, and having favor with all the people. And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved (Acts 2:46-47).

First of all, notice that the temple was not the church. The temple was the house of God for Israel. God commanded the men of Israel to gather at the temple three times a year. But the apostles never commanded the church to gather at the temple. The early believers were all Jews who were accustomed to praying at the temple. So they went there for prayer. But the people who went to the temple included unbelieving Jews, and they did not go there for an assembly. They went there to present animal sacrifices and to pray. The early Jewish believers went there to pray because, until A.D. 70, it was the house of God. When Peter healed the man at the beautiful gate of the temple, a crowd gathered whom he evangelized, but there is no example of the church ever assembling there.

So the believers gathered daily, at the temple and from house-to-house, especially for those things described in Acts 2:42. There was now a church

in Jerusalem. But, let's suppose we were there and asked Peter or John, "Where is the church? When does it meet? We'd like to go to church. Can you recommend a church we could go to?"

Peter and John might say, "What do you mean, 'Where is the church?' It's all around you. We are here. There are a couple of believers over there by that pillar, some are praying in the temple over there, some are working, some are at home. I don't understand what you mean by, 'Where is the church?' or 'You'd like to go to church.' How does one 'go to church'? We **are** the church. And what do you mean, 'Which church should you go to?' If you want to visit a gathering of the church, pick any one. For example, ask that guy over there, the one just coming out of the temple. Some believers gather in his house. He'll be glad to have you visit that group...if that's what you mean."

Most of those Christians faced persecution which forced the nonresident believers out of Jerusalem and back to their home cities. This meant there were churches (believers) in cities all over the western world. But some lived in Jerusalem, and therefore endured the persecution. When Peter was imprisoned, we read, *So Peter was kept in the prison, but prayer for him was being made frequently by the church to God* (Acts 12:5). Later, we read about a group that had a prayer meeting for him in the home of Mary, the mother of John Mark (Acts 12:12—John Mark later traveled with Paul and Barnabas and still later wrote the gospel of Mark). When Peter was released from prison, he came to this group.

But motioning to them with his hand to be silent, he described to them how the Lord had led him out of the prison. And he said, 'Report these things to James and the brethren.' And he departed and went to another place (Acts 12:17).

Why didn't Peter identify this group as the First, Second, or Third Church of Jerusalem? And why weren't "James and the brethren" there? And what was the other "place" Peter went to? Obviously, the church was not any of these places, and it was all of these people (Acts 12:5). Nobody considered any particular group their church, but all of them were the church of Jerusalem, some gathered here and some there.

We can, therefore, conclude that the church of Jerusalem was not subdivided into separate institutional enclaves. The believers were the church, *the whole church* (Acts 5:11; 11:22; 12:1).

Chapter 9

The Church of Judea and Samaria

The church of Judea and Samaria consisted of a scattered number of believers, formerly called *the church in Jerusalem*, who were not gathered as, affiliated with, controlled by, sent from, answerable to, or under the auspices of any “local church.”

In Acts 8:1, we read: *And on that day a great persecution arose against the church in Jerusalem; and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles.*

Notice, the church was scattered throughout Judea and Samaria, yet they were still considered the church. *The church in Jerusalem were all scattered.* Obviously, their only affiliation was as believers in Christ, and the fact that they no longer gathered in any common way did not keep them from being the church. This was a permanent scattering, which never resulted in any future gathering of all these people together. Yet they were still the church. Obviously, the church was people who had no subdivisions or “local church” distinctions or local exclusive leadership. Later on, they lived in the cities in those regions and became known as the churches of Judea (Galatians 1:22). So the church of Jerusalem became the churches of Judea simply because believers moved from Jerusalem to Judea.

I work in Grand Rapids, Michigan. I am part of what the apostles would call the church of Grand Rapids and the church of Michigan. If I moved to New York or California, I would be part of the church of New York or the church of California and part of the church of whatever city I moved to. And there are actual distinctions. The church of Michigan has some different issues than the church of New York or the church of California.

Two verses later we read: *But Saul began ravaging the church, entering house after house; and dragging off men and women, he would put them in prison* (Acts 8:3).

How can Luke [the author of the book of Acts] possibly write that Saul was ravaging the church? If I used that phrase today, most people would assume some vandals broke into the building owned by our institutional “local church” and were taking things. But that’s not what Luke meant at all. He meant Saul was entering house-after-house and dragging off people—believers in Jesus Christ. So what could Luke possibly mean by the word “church”?

- Local entities being destroyed?

- A building being ravaged?
- A corporation being discontinued?
- An assembly being disrupted?

Not at all!

He meant believers were being imprisoned because they were believers. If the church here was an assembly or a corporation or some entity or group distinct from other distinct entities, Luke might have said, “Saul began destroying ‘local churches’.” Luke didn’t say that because the New Testament knows of no such thing. There was only one church, the believers, wherever they happen to be. All Saul could do was ravage them, and rearrange them, by moving them from their houses to prisons, and all that did was multiply the church (believers). Persecutors of Christians have made that mistake for centuries. For example, Joseph Stalin thought he could get rid of Christianity if he destroyed their buildings (or turn them into museums) and put their leaders in prisons in Siberia. All that succeeded in doing was to spread Christianity all across Siberia.

The next verse says, *Therefore, those who had been **scattered** went about preaching the word* (Acts 8:4). Should we conclude that these scattered believers, who were proclaiming the Word of God wherever they were scattered, were not the church? They were not assembled. They were not an organization. They were not affiliated with, controlled by, sent from, answerable to, or under the auspices of any local assembly. Yet, according to Luke, they were the church.

In the next chapter, we read:

*So **the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria** enjoyed peace, **being built up**; and, going on in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it continued to increase* (Acts 9:31).

The church “being built up” had nothing to do with buildings, budgets, or having more people in their meetings. The church here is all the believers in the three largest geographical areas of Israel. They never all met together, they were not under the authority of any organization, their efforts were not sanctioned by any “local church.” They were being built up as a church in that they were:

1. *Going on in the fear of the Lord*
2. *And [going on] in the comfort of the Holy Spirit*
3. *And they continued to increase [in that they reached more people for Christ]*

Chapter 10

The Church At Antioch

The Beginning of the Church At Antioch

Here is what we know about the beginning of the church at Antioch:

*So then those who were scattered because of the persecution that arose in connection with Stephen made their way to Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to no one except to **Jews alone**. But there were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who came to Antioch and began speaking to the **Greeks also**, preaching the Lord Jesus. And the hand of the Lord was with them, and **a large number who believed** turned to the Lord. And the news about them reached the ears of the church at Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas off to Antioch (Acts 11:19-22).*

Because of the persecution in Jerusalem, believers were scattered all over the Greek/Roman world reaching Jews, including the Jews in Antioch, with the Gospel. Then some believers came to Antioch from the island of Cypress and from Cyrene, reaching Gentiles. So the church at Antioch was *a large number who believed*, both Jews and Gentiles. When the believers (the church) in Jerusalem heard about it, they sent Barnabas to help this large number of new believers in Antioch. Notice, it was not the First Baptist Church of Jerusalem or the Second Presbyterian Church of Jerusalem or the Temple Road Bible Church of Jerusalem but the church of Jerusalem, the believers in the city of Jerusalem, who sent Barnabas to Antioch.

Next, Barnabas went looking for Paul.

*And he left for Tarsus to look for Saul [Paul]; and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. And it came about that for an entire year they met with **the church**, and taught **considerable numbers**; and the **disciples** were first called **Christians** in Antioch (Acts 11:25-26).*

So what is the church in Antioch? It's:

- *Considerable numbers* [of believers]
- *The disciples* [of Christ via other believers]
- [Those] *first called Christians*

Since Paul and Barnabas met with *a large number who believed*, it would be unreasonable to conclude that all of them always met together. It seems that this large number must have met in different groups at different times, undoubtedly all over the city. Yet Luke tells us they met with the church. So we must conclude that the meeting was not the church but the church had meetings.

The Leadership of the Church at Antioch

There is a description of one particular group of leaders who met in Antioch:

*Now there were **at Antioch, in the church that was there, prophets and teachers: Barnabas, and Simeon who was called Niger, and Lucius of Cyrene, and Manaen who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch, and Saul** (Acts 13:1).*

Although we know for certain there were different groups in Antioch, because of the squabble between the Jewish groups and the Gentile groups (discussed below under Galatians 2:11-13), notice:

1. The church was the believers in the whole city of Antioch.
2. These *prophets and teachers* were leaders of the church in the whole city of Antioch.
3. This group of leaders did not consider this an ecumenical meeting of pastors from different churches in Antioch.

Via a directive from the Holy Spirit, this group within the church at Antioch, sent Paul and Barnabas on the first missionary journey to the cities in Cyprus and Galatia (Acts 13:2-3). When they came back, we read:

*And when they had arrived and **gathered the church together**, they began to report all things that God had done with them and how He had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles. And they **spent a long time with the disciples** (Acts 14:27-28).*

This gathering of the church at Antioch may have been a series of home gatherings or some large outdoor gathering to hear the report of Barnabas and Paul, but notice:

- The church...gathered, so the church was already a church before it gathered.
- This was not a gathering of several distinct “local churches,” but it was the church, the believers of the whole city of Antioch.
- The church was the *disciples* of Antioch, and Paul and Barnabas *spent a long time with them*. They did not just speak at an assembly. So the church was the disciples they spent time with.

A Significant Conflict in the Church At Antioch

There is also a revealing incident in the church at Antioch, which Paul recorded in Galatians 2:

But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. For prior to the coming of certain men from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles; but when they came, he began to withdraw and hold himself aloof, fearing the party of the circumci-

sion. And the rest of the Jews joined him in hypocrisy, with the result that even Barnabas was carried away by their hypocrisy (Galatians 2:11-13).

In Galatians, Paul wrote something about his history with the church in Antioch. He was recruited by Barnabas to teach, then went with him on a missionary journey, then to the Jerusalem Council, then they returned to Antioch. Then Peter [Cephas] came to visit them in Antioch. But some men from James also came, which divided the church into a Gentile church and a Jewish church by eating [probably eating the Lord's Supper Communion] with Jews and not with Gentiles. Then Peter and Barnabas started doing the same thing, meeting and eating with the Jews and not the Gentiles. At that point, Paul got in Peter's face about it. The final result was that Peter and Barnabas agreed with Paul.

Paul's point was, there were not going to be two churches in Antioch. There was not going to be a Gentile church and a Jewish church. There was only one church in Antioch, and whatever gatherings it had, those gathering were not to see themselves as exclusive, distinct, or removed from those in other gatherings. Paul insisted that there not be distinct, different, separate "local churches" which considered themselves a different church from other gatherings. And the leaders of the church in Antioch, like Barnabas and Peter, were not to consider themselves as part of one "local church" and not another. Paul objected to the idea that people who go to one gathering of the church should avoid going to another gathering of the church. Actually, Paul expected them to be "church hopping," and reprimanded them for not doing so.

Chapter 11

The Church and the Jerusalem Council

Some believers came north from Jerusalem to Antioch and promoted the doctrine that believers, at least Jewish believers, should keep the Mosaic Law (Galatians 2:11-14). The response of the church at Antioch was first to discuss the subject among themselves. Then the church (the believers) of the city of Antioch sent Paul and Barnabas and some others to Jerusalem to resolve this issue. When they arrived, they were greeted by the church (the believers) of the city of Jerusalem.

*Therefore, being **sent on their way by the church**, they were passing through both Phoenicia and Samaria, describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles, and were bringing great joy to all the brethren. And when they arrived at Jerusalem, **they were received by the church** and the apostles and the elders, and they reported all that God had done with them (Acts 15:3-4).*

Antioch and Jerusalem were the two major cities of Christianity. They were large cities with Christians meeting in different homes in different groups with lots of different leaders. Yet neither of them formed any distinct “local churches” within the city (Acts 15:3, 4, 22). The response to the “keeping the Mosaic Law” issue was dealt with by talking it out, not forming separate churches.

The apostles’ answer to conflict resolution in the New Testament was never to form separate distinct “local churches”

Let’s apply this idea today, using the biblical method for resolving conflicts. The biblical formula was given by Christ in Matthew 18:15-17. He said,

And if your brother sins, go and reprove him in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother. But if he does not listen to you, take one or two more with you, so that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every fact may be confirmed. And if he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax-gatherer.

Suppose one brother in our city is teaching that you can lose your salvation. A second brother, who disagrees with that, attempts to go and reprove him in private. But suppose the first brother is not convinced. Then the second brother should take one or two more with him. Let’s say there is still no resolution, so the matter is taken to the church. Since the church is the believers in our area (in this case, our city), some representation of the

believers involved in the lives of these two brothers in our city would have to be informed (not necessarily gathered, although gathering might also occur). The conclusion would be that there are good godly people on both sides of this issue. For example, historically, Calvin and Whitefield believed in the security of salvation but Wesley and C.S. Lewis did not. So we, as a church, must conclude that this is not an issue for withdrawal of fellowship (sometimes called excommunication). Both brothers can be free to make their case. We should not withdraw from either because of it.

What the apostles would **not** do is say, “You guys who believe in security should join or start a church of people who believe like you do, and you other guys who don’t believe in the security of salvation should start or join a church of people who believe like you do.” The apostles’ response to non-disciplinary issues was an ongoing discussion, not separation into independent churches.

Now let’s take a different case. Suppose the first brother is committing adultery and is challenged by a second brother. Let’s further suppose there is no resolution, so it is eventually taken to the church (some relevant group of believers in our city). The church (and practically, that would boil down to the sinning brother’s network of relationships among believers) would decide that the brother needs to repent and stop the adulterous affair. If he refuses to stop or repent or make any effort to admit his adultery is sinful or that he needs to work on his situation, then the other believers he knows well should eventually remove fellowship from him. That means he would be disassociated from his Christian network until such time that he repents and changes.

If his network of Christian friends withdraw fellowship from him, refused to do business with him, hire him, or even to eat with such a one (1 Corinthians 5:11), then he has an opportunity to look seriously at his sin. With this apostolic model, the sinning brother has a chance to realize that the church (the group of his Christian friends) considers his action to be non-Christian and that their act of withdrawal of fellowship is real love, and his best hope for returning to the path of spiritual maturity.

Next, let’s suppose this is done, not by defining the church the way the apostles did but by defining it as some organizational subdivision of the city, such as a “local church.” Then the removal of fellowship is restricted to a particular group of people, the ones in that particular “local church.” That would mean an unrepentant adulterous brother could divorce and re-marry (or just continue the affair) and join another “local church.” They might welcome him as a “seeker” (or something), get him counseling (if he likes), and put him in a Sunday school class or focus group for others like himself. After all, that’s the tolerant (defined as “loving”) thing to do.

When believers follow the apostles' model and get together to consider removing fellowship from a sinning brother, there is a time of immense soul searching done by all. Sin is taken seriously, discussed thoroughly with everyone thinking, "There, but for the grace of God, go I." It is a humbling, gut-wrenching experience for everyone involved. This is the apostles' idea of church discipline. It is the best possible climate to motivate a sinning brother to look seriously at his sin. And he often does. But this process has a positive moral effect on the church (the believers involved), no matter what the sinning brother does.

When this process is carried on by the "elders" of a "local church," or some committee assigned to this task, it is nearly always ineffective. Actually, if a "local church" does this (and hardly any do anymore), the sinning brother will usually leave the church before they complete the process. The sinning brother excommunicates the church. Then he simply moves on to join some other "local church," or just avoids "churches" altogether, which would not be possible if the church were defined as all his believer friends.

Subdividing the believers up into independent "local churches" tends to negate the possibility of what the apostles considered church discipline.

Chapter 12

The Church at Corinth

This is one of the city churches of the second missionary journey, and its prominence in the New Testament demands that we give it special attention.

Paul came to Corinth about the year A.D. 54. As was his evangelistic strategy, Paul spoke in the synagogue (as any adult Jewish male could do) until the Jews threw him out, as they had done in all the previous cities. So he moved his ministry *to the house of a certain man named Titius Justus, a worshiper of God* (Acts 18:7). Then Paul had a revelation from Jesus Christ, Who told him, *...go on speaking and do not be silent...for I have many people in this city* (Acts 18:9-10).

We know that before His crucifixion and resurrection, Jesus had said, *I will build My church* (Matthew 16:18). So we can assume that's what He was doing in Corinth. But notice, Christ described the Corinthian church not as an institution but as *many people in this city*.

After this, Paul stayed a year and a half ministering with Priscilla and Aquilla, as well as Silas and Timothy when they arrived from Macedonia (Acts 18:1-5). So by the time Paul left Corinth, there was a large number of believers in the city. Luke tells us, *many of the Corinthians when they heard were believing and being baptized* (Acts 18:8). Luke described Paul's ministry not as located in any one place in the city but simply as *teaching the word of God among them* (Acts 18:11). This must have included many places, probably houses like that of Titius Justice.

Sometime (possibly after Paul left) it seems that Peter and Apollos also ministered there awhile (1 Corinthians 1:12). The city had a theater that seated 20,000 people, so it was a good size town. Put all this together, and we can visualize a sizable population of believers in Corinth by the time Paul wrote 1 Corinthians to them. First Corinthians was probably written in Ephesus (1 Corinthians 16:8) during Paul's three-year stay there on his third missionary journey.

Notice Paul began 1 Corinthians by saying:

*To the **church** of God which is at Corinth, to **those** who have been sanctified in Christ Jesus, saints by calling, with all who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, their Lord and ours* (1 Corinthians 1:2).

This entire (by this time, large) number of believers is *the church of God*.

Its location is described as *at Corinth*. The church in the city of Corinth is defined as:

- Those who have been sanctified in Christ Jesus (1:2)
- Saints by calling (1:2)
- Those enriched in Him (1:5)
- Those having the testimony concerning Christ...confirmed in you (1:6)
- Those not lacking any gift (1:7)
- Those awaiting eagerly the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ (1:7)
- Those called into fellowship with His Son (1:9)
- Brethren (1:10)

Once again, we see that the church is the believers, not distinct groups, assemblies, organizations, or buildings with their own individual “local church” elders, deacons, pastors, or priests.

Next, Paul discussed the physical extent of this church. He included the Corinthian *church of God...with all those in every place [who] call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ*. So the church, which the Corinthians are part of, is located in every place where there are believers who call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

But Paul no more than got started, and he wrote about an issue that had him absolutely furious. The Corinthians had formed independent distinct groups, we would call “local churches,” within the city, centered around following some particular leader. Paul is so angry that he even said, *I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, that no man should say you were baptized in my name* (1 Corinthians 1:14-15).

Paul could not imagine anyone so far away from the apostles’ teaching that they would think to form a distinct independent assembly within the church of God. He attributed such thinking to the fleshly, sinful, carnal nature of immature believers. Paul told them they were acting like the rest of the world does when they divide the body of Christ up into independent churches with their own distinct leadership. This sets up an inevitable competitive spirit in the church. Read how Paul put it.

I gave you milk to drink, not solid food; for you were not yet able to receive it. Indeed, even now you are not yet able, for you are still fleshly. For since there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not fleshly, and are you not walking like mere men? For when one says, “I am of Paul,” and another, “I am of Apollos,” are you not mere men? What then is Apollos? And what is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, even as the Lord gave opportunity to each one. I planted, Apollos watered, but God was causing the growth (1 Corinthians 3:2-6).

But what actually happened to bring about this scolding? Let’s read about it.

Paul wrote,

Now I exhort you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all agree, and there be no divisions among you, but you be made complete in the same mind and in the same judgment. For I have been informed concerning you, my brethren, by Chloe's people, that there are quarrels among you. Now I mean this, that each one of you is saying, "I am of Paul," and "I of Apollos," and "I of Cephas," and "I of Christ." Has Christ been divided? Paul was not crucified for you, was he? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? (1 Corinthians 1:10-13).

Paul's desire for them was unity through agreement (1:10), not tolerance or negotiations or compromises or win-win arrangements between independent "churches." This unity Paul desired for them was to come about as they exercised their various gifts throughout the city of Corinth or anywhere else they happened to be. It's the diversity of individuals gifted by the Holy Spirit throughout a city (or wherever) that brings about the dynamic of the church (believers). Notice how Paul spelled this out for the Corinthians:

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit. And there are varieties of ministries, and the same Lord. And there are varieties of effects, but the same God who works all things in all persons. But to each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good (1 Corinthians 12:4-7).

Then Paul listed some specific spiritual gifts, after which he said this:

For even as the body is one and yet has many members, and all the members of the body, though they are many, are one body, so also is Christ. For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:12-13).

So the unity of the church at Corinth meant that everyone in that city was available to everyone else in that city within their sphere of influence, so that every believer's gifts might be used by the Holy Spirit.

Let's make sure we understand the real problem here. The problem was the divisions into separate independent groups, which we would call "local churches." The problem was not one of gathering about a particular leader for preaching, teaching, evangelism, or some other gift. Nor was the problem one of gathering together in certain identifiable groups. Nor was the problem calling any particular group a church if it is a group of believers.

The problem is thinking our organization, our preacher, and our meeting place is **ours** and that one over there is **yours**. So we have a separate ordained-of-God organization we can call some sort of independent "church." That's the problem.

But let's talk more about what was not the problem in Corinth. I will list three things:

1. The problem was **not** gathering about a particular leader. Whenever Paul revisited places where he had been, the church gathered around him for teaching. They also gathered around Apollos, Cephas (Peter), Barnabas, Priscilla and Aquilla, Philemon, John, and numerous others listed at the ends of some of the epistles. The apostle not only had no objection to this but saw it as a valuable function of the church. For example, Paul told the Ephesians:

And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ; until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ (Ephesians 4:11-13).

2. The problem was **not** gathering together as some particular identifiable organized group. The way Paul heard about the divisions in Corinth is interesting. He said:

For I have been informed concerning you, my brethren, by Chloe's people, that there are quarrels among you (1 Corinthians 1:11).

Who on earth (or maybe I should say, in Corinth) are Chloe's people? Well, we don't know. But apparently, they were people who were saved through Chloe or taught by Chloe or gathered in the home of Chloe. Whoever they were, they were enough of an identifiable group that Paul labeled them as *Chloe's people* when they showed up (apparently in Ephesus) to tell Paul about the problem. Notice that Paul had no objection whatsoever to this group identifying themselves with Chloe. Why not? Clearly, from our text, it was because their group was not a division (1:17) of the church of God at Corinth.

Paul's partners in Corinth, and later in Ephesus, were a couple named Priscilla and Aquilla. This couple organized gatherings of the church in their home in Ephesus, Rome, and probably in Corinth (see Acts 18:1-3, 18-22; Romans 16:3-5). Also, at the end of the book of Romans, Paul listed five different groups organized around a person or a group of people (see Romans 16:3-16). Yet he did not address his letter to five different local churches in Rome but *to all who are beloved of God in Rome* (Romans 1:7). He seemed to have no objection to believers gathering together in particular identifiable organized groups. Paul encouraged being organized, but he hit the fan when they set up exclu-

sive organizations that they considered independent “local churches” separate from other ones.

3. The problem was **not** considering any particular group of believers a church. The definition of church is believers. So any gathering of believers is a church by definition, and there is nothing wrong with calling them that. Paul referred to gathered believers as a church in 1 Corinthians 14. He said this:

*Let the women keep silent in the **churches**; for they are not permitted to speak, but let them subject themselves, just as the Law also says. And if they desire to learn anything, let them ask their own husbands at home; for it is improper for a woman to speak in **church** (1 Corinthians 14:34-35).*

Here the *churches* of verse 34 are assemblies of believers and the *church* of verse 35 is an assembly of believers. There is nothing unbiblical about calling any assembly of believers a church, especially believers assembled to take the Lord’s Supper. But they are a church because they are believers, not because they are an assembly or because they call themselves a church, or meet on Sunday, or have a pastor, or build a sanctuary.

Chapter 13

The Church and the Apostle John

John's three epistles are significant in that they are the last ones written in the New Testament. John outlived the other apostles by about 30 years, and he wrote the letters of 1, 2, and 3 John and the Apocalypse to the church very near the end of the first century. He gave us the last apostolic glimpse into the life of the early church.

In **First John**, the elderly apostle wrote:

... what we have seen and heard we proclaim to you also, that you also may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ (1 John 1:3).

Then John said something fascinating, almost shocking, about fellowship:

...if we walk in the light as He Himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin (1:7).

Is that not amazing?!? John gave one criteria for fellowship, and it has nothing to do with a meeting. It has nothing to do with an assembly, a mini-church, a midweek prayer meeting, a Sunday school class, or a board meeting. It doesn't even have anything to do with cookies and coffee between church and Sunday school or greeting one another after the opening prayer and the first song. John said fellowship has one requirement—**walking in the light**. He said, *if we walk in the light*, not just any old concept of light but *as He Himself is in the light*, then we *have* (not might have if we have a meeting) *fellowship with one another*. John saw the church as a fellowship of those who had joined the apostles in walking in the light, that is, living in the truth of Jesus Christ.

John also gave the church (believers) an assignment with respect to one another:

For this is the message which you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another (1 John 3:11) And again, And this is His commandment, that we believe in the name of His Son Jesus Christ, and love one another just as He commanded us (v. 23).

So John said the church is defined by: (1) those who believe in the name of His Son Jesus Christ (see also John 1:12) and (2) those who love one another. The assignment of the church from the beginning (that is, the beginning of the ministry of Jesus Christ) is that we love one another. We see that illustrated in 2 and 3 John.

Second John is written to a chosen lady. The word for “lady” (*Kuria*) is also a lady’s name, so John was probably addressing this lady by name, just as he did with Gaius in 3 John.

[Some have suggested that the lady is a local church. This sounds like trying to force-fit the local church into everything because, as mentioned, (1) *Kuria* is a lady’s name, (2) it’s parallel to Gaius in 3 John, also (3) her sister’s children are mentioned, (4) the instruction is personal, with personal greetings, and related to a person’s house (v. 10), and (5) the church is nowhere else, ever, referred to as a lady with children.]

The purpose for the small letter of 2 John is to warn the lady *Kuria* about giving hospitality to false teachers, that is, cult representatives who came to her door. Apparently, she was known for her hospitality. She may have even hosted a gathering of the church (believers) in her house. But John said she also needed to have some discernment. Being hospitable to believers is one thing. Extending that to false teachers is something else.

John wrote this to both the lady and her children, probably living in a different city than John, and sent greetings from her nieces and nephews, apparently, living in Ephesus near John. For John, the church was simply believers he knew wherever they were located. Loving them in truth meant correcting them when they were making a mistake, while being supportive of them and encouraging them with greetings from their family.

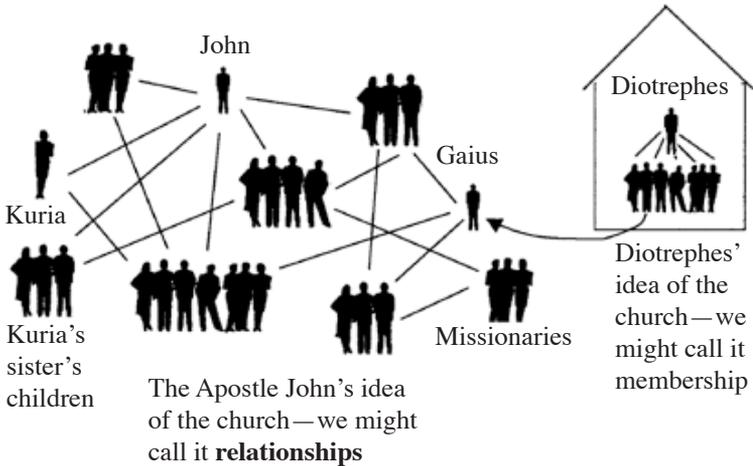
In **Third John**, the lesson is even more graphic. Here John wrote to his friend Gaius. Gaius financially or materially supported some true itinerant missionaries. But the church (the believers) Gaius usually gathered with had allowed a man named Diotrephes to become a single leader in the church. John said Diotrephes *loves to be first among them*. Apparently, Diotrephes [I like to call him REVEREND Diotrephes] did not approve of the church supporting these missionaries, but Gaius supported them anyway. This irritated Diotrephes who had Gaius excommunicated for disobeying Diotrephes’ authority over the church. The Apostle John wrote to Gaius to support him and condemn Diotrephes.

*Beloved, you [Gaius] are acting faithfully in whatever you accomplish for the brethren, and especially when they are strangers; and they bear witness to your love before the church; and you will do well to send them on their way in a manner worthy of God. For they went out for the sake of the Name, accepting nothing from the Gentiles. Therefore we ought to support such men, that we may be fellow workers with the truth. I wrote something to the church; but Diotrephes, **who loves to be first among them**, does not accept what we say. For this reason, if I come, I will call attention to his deeds which he does, unjustly accusing us with wicked words; and not satisfied with this, neither does he*

himself receive the brethren, and he forbids those who desire to do so, and puts them out of the church (3 John 5-10).

Several observations are inescapable concerning how the Apostle John saw the church:

1. The “brethren” should be supported as part of the church (the network of believers), irrespective of any local congregation they are, or are not, a part of.
2. Missionaries need not be underwritten or sponsored by any organizational “local church.”
3. John used the word “church” to describe both a general network of believers who knew the missionaries and a specific gathering of believers who had allowed Diotrephes to become first among them.
4. Individual believers should support godly missionaries apart from, and even possibly over the objection of, the leader of their church assembly.
5. Leaders like Diotrephes who love *to be first among them* should be called out and condemned when their concept of ministry goes counter to the apostles’ teaching.
6. Church leaders should have responsibility, not authority. The Apostle John saw himself as having responsibility for the church (his believer friends). Diotrephes saw himself as having authority **over** the church (where he was *first among them*).



Chapter 14

The Seven Churches of Revelation 2 and 3

Consider the evaluations of the seven churches of Asia Minor given by Christ in Revelation 2 and 3. These are the last comments we have in the New Testament about the church on earth, and they were made by Jesus Christ Himself. As an example, let's read the first one in Revelation 2:1-7. The message was to the church in the city of Ephesus:

*To the angel of the **church** in Ephesus write: "The One who holds the seven stars in His right hand, the One who walks among the seven golden lampstands, says this: I know your deeds and your toil and perseverance, and that you cannot endure evil men, and you put to the test those who call themselves apostles, and they are not, and you found them to be false; and you have perseverance and have endured for My name's sake, and have not grown weary. But I have this against you, that you have left your first love. Remember therefore from where you have fallen, and repent and do the deeds you did at first; or else I am coming to you, and will remove your lampstand out of its place — unless you repent. Yet this you do have, that you hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the **churches**. To him who overcomes, I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the Paradise of God."*

First notice what is **not** mentioned in Jesus' evaluation:

1. There are no pastors mentioned.
2. There are no assemblies mentioned.
3. There are no church governments mentioned.
4. There are no buildings mentioned.
5. There are no subdivisions of the city into independent "local churches."

Now notice what **is** here:

1. The message was to the "angel." The word "angel" is the same word as "messenger," so it probably refers to the one who John used to carry messages to these churches. The messenger had responsibility to bring the message to the church, but he was not a pastor. If he were a pastor, Jesus would have called him a "shepherd," not a "messenger."
2. The church is **always** the church of **the entire city**. Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea are all cities. For example, the church had been in Ephesus, a city of over 250,000 people, for over 40 years, yet it is seen as one church.
3. The **evaluation** Christ made was **corporate**, that is, the believers in the whole city were responsible for this behavior. There was no segregation of responsibility to separate "local churches" within the city.

4. Christ laid the **responsibility** for the evaluation, on each **individual** believer. The evaluation was corporate (citywide), but the responsibility was personal. After each evaluation, Christ said: **He who has an ear to hear let him hear.**
5. The **judgment** for the responsibility was also **individual**. Christ said to the church at Ephesus, **To him who overcomes, I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the Paradise of God** (Revelation 2:7). To the church of Smyrna, He said, **He who overcomes shall not be hurt by the second death** (v. 11). For example, suppose I am a member of a group that evangelizes on the streets every Saturday morning, but I never go with them. Instead, I stay home and watch television. If they reach people for Christ while I watch TV, their reward before the Judgment Seat of Christ will be different than mine, even though I was a member of the group (2 Corinthians 5:10).

Notice, *the churches* and *church* and the obedient [*He who*] individual believers are all the same people. The evaluation is citywide, but the responsibility is always, only, individual. There is never a “local church” standing in between the evaluation and the responsibility. For example, He said things like:

- *Thus you also have some who in the same way hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans* (2:15).
- *And he who overcomes, and he who keeps My deeds until the end, to him I will give authority over the nations* (2:26).
- *But you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their garments; and they will walk with Me in white; for they are worthy* (3:4).
- *Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him, and will dine with him, and he will with Me. He who overcomes I, will grant to him to sit down with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne* (3:20-21).

The responsibility was for *some who, he who, a few people...who, anyone* (who) *hears My voice* and opens the door. It’s all about individuals.

One other thing should be noticed before we leave Revelation 2 and 3. Many of the assemblies in these cities contained unbelievers. Therefore, the assembly cannot define the church. John Walvoord put it this way:

“That these local congregations cannot be equated with the body of Christ is evident from such passages as Revelation 3:14-19 where the church of Laodicea obviously includes those who are not regenerated. Thus in apostolic days arose the early organized church which later developed into the far-flung body of professed believers which constitutes Christendom in its largest dimension” (*The Church in Prophecy*, p. 24)

A common mistake today is one of equating the true church with the professing church. The Apostle John saw the professing church as something the true church had to deal with, not something to be pursued, defended, or justified. And he certainly did not suggest that any assembly, mixed with believers and unbelievers, was a definition of the church.

Chapter 15

Leadership in the New Testament Church

There are three basic concepts that must be understood concerning New Testament church leadership:

- **The first**, and most basic concept is that, other than the apostles, **leaders had responsibility but not authority**. The authority was in Christ and the apostles. The only authority the apostles passed along was the New Testament.
- **The second** basic principle is that **all appointed leaders were for a city or larger geographic area**. So whatever concept we have for the role of a church leader, it is someone who has responsibility for people in a city or larger area. There is no example of the apostles appointing any leaders of any kind over a specific assembly of believers within a city.
- **The third** basic observation is that all leadership was plural, not singular. **There is no one-man ministry** anywhere—not in a region, not in a city, not in a house. Not anywhere.

Christianity is the religion of the apostles. Anything else is false teaching. And there was plenty of that. Every book of the New Testament except Philemon warns about false teachers.

When the apostles died, they left behind the New Testament, written by them and their disciples writing for them and about them. Those 27 books are the authority of the church today.

[And, by the way, there are no other first-century Christian writings. The idea that there are other first-century writings about Jesus which have been left out of the New Testament is a flat-out lie. No such “other writings” exist anywhere in the world. There are only 27 first-century Christian writings, and they are all in the New Testament.]

The apostles had authority, but they did not pass their authority on to anyone else, nor did they set up a mechanism for authority to be passed on to other leaders. The only authority that is passed on to other generations is the New Testament itself.

Authority is: “The power or right to make decisions and enforce obedience” (“MacBook Pro Dictionary”). When we see our church leaders as having authority, we often end up challenging the authority of the apostles. For example, the apostles said that women were not to teach men (1 Timothy 2:12). But if we see our elders as having authority in the church, we might say that some particular woman may teach men because the elders said it

was all right. That means the elders have authority to challenge the authority of the apostles. The apostles condemned homosexuality (1 Corinthians 6:9; 1 Timothy 1:10). But if we submit to a bishop who says it's okay for a priest to be a homosexual, then we are assuming he has authority in the church.

In a secular organization, such as a business or a ball team, it is impossible to have responsibility without authority. It just does not work. If someone is given a position which carries a certain amount of responsibility (make X amount of dollars this year or win a place in the play-offs), it must carry with it the authority to make that happen. And when we do this in the church, the church will also look like a secular organization.

But in the apostles' idea of the church, Christ is the only head, the New Testament writings are the only other authority, and each believer is indwelt by the Holy Spirit to discern the meaning of that authority. The model of leadership Christ gave the church was not of secular corporate success but of washing one another's feet. Servants have responsibility, not authority (1 Peter 5:3; 3 John 9).

The apostles told us to submit to our leaders (Hebrews 13:17; 1 Peter 5:5). But the apostles never told the leaders they had the "the power or right" to force people to be in submission to them. For the apostles, submission was the choice of a follower, not a command from a leader. New Testament leaders had responsibility for those who submit to them, but they did not have authority to force people to be in submission to them.

When Paul sent Timothy and Titus to Ephesus and Crete, they were to appoint elders in those cities. But they did not have authority to do as they pleased, or to choose whatever elders they pleased. They were given specific qualifications for appointing those men. They had responsibility to obey the Apostle Paul but not authority to do whatever they wanted.

Church leadership was always a plurality. Observe:

- Philippians 1:1 — *Paul and Timothy, bond-servants of Christ Jesus, To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, including the **overseers and deacons.***
- 1 Peter 5:1 — *Therefore, I exhort the elders among you, as your fellow elder... nor yet as lording it over those allotted to your charge.*
- Hebrews 13:7 — *Remember **those who** led you, who spoke the word of God to you; and considering the result of their conduct, imitate their faith.*
- Hebrews 13:17 — *Obey your leaders and submit to them.*
- 3 John 9 — *I wrote something to the church; but Diotrephes, who loves to be first among them, does not accept what we say.*

1. There was a plurality of leadership, never anyone with a job description similar to what we call a priest or pastor “father” or “reverend.” Paul mentioned various kinds of leaders at Philippi and never mentioned a pastor or priest or bishop. All the leaders are mentioned in the plural.
2. Leaders were defined as those *who spoke the word of God to you*, not someone voted into or appointed to a position (or someone with enough money to support the organization).
3. Loving to *be first among them* and *lording it over* people was condemned.

Different Words For Leadership

In the New Testament, there are several different terms for leaders. There were:

- The **apostles**, which included the 12 but also others “sent” by Christ, such as Paul, Barnabas, and James the half-brother of Jesus
- The **elders**, who we will discuss more thoroughly in chapter 16
- The **overseers**, the word sometimes translated “bishops”
- The **deacons**, a word which means servants
- The **men of good reputation** in Acts 6
- The **leaders** of Hebrews 13
- And by the way, “youth pastor,” “youth leader,” and “worship leader” are not found in the New Testament.

Does “Overseer” Imply Authority?

Although we have a list of their qualifications, we are not told exactly what an overseer or a deacon was to do. And no one but Paul used these terms for leaders. And he only used them with the missions where he sent Timothy and Titus. For example, he never suggested these leaders be appointed in Corinth or Antioch or Thessalonica or Philippi or Colossi or Rome. Since only Paul used these titles, it may be too much to assume the apostles expected them to be used in every city.

The word ἐπίσκοπος (*episkopos*) has been translated *bishop*, *overseer*, or *guardian*. *Louw and Nida Lexicon* defines the word as: “one who has the **responsibility** of caring for spiritual concerns—one **responsible** for, one who **cares for, guardian, keeper.**”

Here is how it is used in the New Testament:

- Acts 20:28 — *Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you **overseers**, to **shepherd** the church of God which He purchased with His own blood.*
- Philippians 1:1 — *Paul and Timothy, bond-servants of Christ Jesus, To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, including the **overseers** and deacons.*
- 1 Timothy 3:1 and 5 — *It is a trustworthy statement: if any man aspires*

- to the **office of overseer**, it is a fine work he desires to do...how will he **take care of the church of God**?
- Titus 1:7 — For the **overseer** must be above reproach as **God's steward**
- 1 Peter 5:1-2 — Therefore, I exhort the **elders** among you, as your fellow **elder** and witness of the sufferings of Christ, and a partaker also of the glory that is to be revealed, shepherd the flock of God among you, exercising **oversight**...

From this, we can conclude:

- Being an overseer was one of the functions Paul and Peter saw for the elders. The two words seem to be used synonymously in Acts 20, Titus 1, and 1 Peter 5.
- Sometimes, Paul considered an overseer a specific position (*the office of overseer*). Other times, both Peter and Paul considered it a function of the elders (*I exhort the elders among you, as your fellow elder...shepherd the flock of God among you, exercising oversight...*).
- An overseer had responsibility, not authority. Their assignment was to give direction and discernment. The word means *one responsible for, one who cares for*, not one who has institutional power or jurisdictional control.
- Overseers were responsible for the believers of a city, not some local subdivision of it.
- Overseers were always plural. There was never just one overseer.
- Overseers are described as *shepherds, guardians, keepers*, and *one who has the responsibility of caring for spiritual concerns*, not rulers exercising authority over people.

Leadership in Hebrews

The author of Hebrews used a term for Christian leadership which no one else used. The word is ἡγεύομαι (*hegeomai*). It's a general term meaning *to lead, consider or regard*. He told us to *Obey your leaders, and submit to them; for they keep watch over your souls, as those who will give an account* (13:17). Notice, once again, that believers were to submit to their leaders, but leaders were never told they had authority to make people be in submission to them. So they had responsibility for believers, and believers had responsibility to submit to them.

But who are our leaders? Who should we be in submission to? The author of Hebrews answered that using the same word for leader in verse 7. He said:

Remember those who led you, who spoke the word of God to you; and considering the result of their conduct, imitate their faith.

Here we are told how to identify our leaders. They are those *who spoke the word of God to you*. And our submission to them is two-fold:

- To consider *the result of their conduct*, and as we evaluate that,
- To imitate their faith

Chapter 16

Elders

What becomes clear from a study of the Scriptures is that the elders of the church the apostles established were never elected or selected in any way by or for a local assembly. In the New Testament, elders were basically the spiritually mature men of a city (Luke 7:3).

When the believers in a city or other geographic location see themselves as a separate distinct “local church,” they usually create a separate organization that must seek to survive and (they hope) grow. To insure this goal, the group must, like any organization, appoint leaders to make sure that happens. They will often call some of these leaders elders, since that’s the most common term for leadership in the New Testament. But there is a huge difference. The New Testament elders, which the apostles established, were available to serve the believers throughout the city (Acts 6:3), not officers elected by a corporation trying to help their particular group survive and grow.

Elders in the Old Testament

The term “elder” comes from the Old Testament concept, which was still used at the time of Christ, that elders were leaders of the city (Luke 7:3). Therefore, we should start there to see what exactly the elders were elders over. I suggest you get out an exhaustive concordance and look up the word “elders.” Here’s a sample of what you will find:

The elders of his (Pharaoh’s) household	Genesis 50:7
(in other words, the leaders of all of Egypt)	
The elders of Israel	Exodus 3:16
The elders of Israel	Exodus 3:18
...	
The elders of the people	Exodus 19:7
...	
The elders of Israel	Numbers 11:16
The elders of Midian	Numbers 22:4
The elders of Moab	Numbers 22:7
The elders of his city	Deuteronomy 19:12
The elders of that city	Deuteronomy 21:3
The elders of that city	Deuteronomy 21:4
The elders of that city	Deuteronomy 21:6
...	
The elders of that city	Joshua 20:4
The princes of Succoth and its elders	Judges 8:14
The elders of the city	1 Samuel 16:4
The rulers of Jezreel, the elders	2 Kings 10:1
The elders and judges of each city	Ezra 10:14

Of the 137 (according to my count) uses of the word “elders” in the Old Testament, not one single time does the word refer to leadership over anything less than an entire city. Elders were over cities or something larger—like a tribe or a whole country. Since the apostles used the Greek word for the Old Testament Hebrew word for elder, their concept of an elder was most likely a city-wide leader.

Elders in the New Testament

If we continue down the list in our concordance, we will find that the word “elders” in the gospels and the first part of Acts is used the same way as it was in the Old Testament. These elders are Jewish leaders who were over the city of Jerusalem or the nation of Israel.

When we get to the church, the function of the elder changes from authority to responsibility, since the church is a spiritual fellowship, not a governing nation as Israel was. But the jurisdiction of the elder does not change. It’s always city-wide (or larger). The first use of the word “elders” in reference to the church is in Acts 11:30, where it refers to the elders of a city.

The second use is in Acts 14:23, where Paul appointed elders for them in every church. The previous two verses describe the church as the disciples in Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch. What were those places? Cities! In Acts 15; 16; 21; 22; 23; 24; and 25 the word “elders” refers to the leaders in the city of Jerusalem.

In Acts 20:17, we read, *And from Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called to him the elders of the church.* Notice, the elders were elders of the church of the whole city of Ephesus. Ephesus had a population of at least 250,000 people. The church (believers) had been in Ephesus for about 20 years at this point. It had experienced leadership from Paul, Apollos, Priscilla, Aquilla, and disciples from John the Baptist. Certainly, the church was fairly large and spread out over the city and had various house assemblies. But Paul did not call for the elders of Paul’s church or Apollos’ church or Priscilla and Aquilla’s church but the elders of the Ephesus church. The reason Paul didn’t call for the elders of individual “local churches” within Ephesus is because there were no such things.

When Paul sent Titus to the island of Crete, he sent him this instruction:

*For this reason I left you in Crete, that you might set in order what remains, and **appoint elders in every city** as I directed you (Titus 1:5).*

Where was Titus to appoint elders? *In every city.* Why? Because the church was the church of the city. No subdivision of the church or its elders is ever recognized by the apostles as a legitimate endeavor.

James Calls for the Elders

In James 5:14, we have the use of the word “elders” with no jurisdictional reference. James simply says, *call for the elders of the church*. The book of James (chronologically speaking) is the first epistle of the New Testament (written about A.D. 45). James lived in Jerusalem, and he was an elder in the church there. We know (from the list of references I gave above) that those in Jerusalem always referred to the elders as the leaders of the city of Jerusalem or greater geographic area. To presuppose that James is suddenly conjuring up some radically different concept of an elder (such as over a local congregation) is unreasonable and without biblical support.

Peter Exhorts the Elders

Peter referred to elders of the church in 1 Peter 5:1 and 5. Peter gave no territorial designation for elders, but he did give us some significant clues about the apostles’ concept of an elder.

Therefore, I exhort the elders among you, as your fellow elder and witness of the sufferings of Christ, and a partaker also of the glory that is to be revealed, shepherd the flock of God among you, exercising oversight not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to the will of God; and not for sordid gain, but with eagerness; nor yet as lording it over those allotted to your charge, but proving to be examples to the flock (1 Peter 5:1-3).

Notice, first of all, that Peter considered himself a “fellow elder.” Now, what independent “local church” subdivision of the body of Christ would you say Peter was an elder of? None, of course! Peter was an apostle. He led the apostles in the coming of the Holy Spirit to the church in the first twelve chapters of the book of Acts (Acts 1:8). Peter was never exclusively connected with any one local congregation, yet he called himself an elder, a fellow elder. He was an elder in the same sense that all elders were elders—a servant of the church, the body of all believers in Jesus Christ.

Then Peter gave a specific jurisdictional challenge to elders. He told them to *shepherd the flock of God among you*. If you are an elder, who might be the flock of God *among you*? Well, if I were a New Testament type of elder, the first of the flock of God I’d see in the morning might be my wife, then my children, then a believer at work, then another one I might disciple over lunch. I might be involved in a business deal or a decision at work that involved one of God’s flock. I might meet for coffee with one of my children or a son or daughter-in-law after work. I might have a Bible study in my home in the evening or I might have a time of prayer with my children before they go to sleep. What am I doing? *Shepherding the flock of God among me*.

But if my shepherding were defined by a “local church” organization which elected me to a position of elder, I’d define being an elder quite differently. Instead of defining it as who I am, I’d now define it as what I do for the “local church” organizationally. Instead of *shepherding the flock of God among me*, I would shepherd those in my “local church.” My wife and children and the believers at work as well as my son or daughter-in-law and the Bible study group would all be seen as peripheral to my election as an elder.

As an elder in a “local church,” I would not see my ministry as *shepherd the flock of God among me* but as an officer in the religious organization that elected me. Actually, I might tend to neglect my wife, my children, and those around me because I needed to use my time to meet with the board of elders in my local assembly. This mentality was totally foreign to the Apostle Peter.

John the Elder

The last use of the word “elder” for the church is by the Apostle John. Two times John referred to himself as “the elder” (2 John 1; 3 John 1). Like Peter, John was an apostle. John preached alongside Peter in the early church in Jerusalem. Somehow John survived the persecution of Nero (in the A.D. 60s) that killed Peter and Paul. Now, 30 years later, he was the only apostle left alive, and he referred to himself as an elder. As John unfolded his concept of himself as an elder in 2 and 3 John, we see that he dealt with issues and problems in different cities. John clearly did not define an elder as an officer or a board member of a local institutional church but rather an older believer who was to *shepherd the flock of God among you*. And that included a responsibility for, not an authority over, his friends Kuria and Gaius in other cities.

The only other *elders* in the New Testament are those seated around the throne in heaven in the book of Revelation. They are not part of the church on earth. But notice that these are apparently men, not angels, and they are distinct from the four living creatures. They are resurrected human beings, most likely the leaders of the people of God all through the centuries. And they are all called *elders*. So the concept of an elder is a general leader of the people of God throughout history.

Chapter 17

Pastors

The word ποιμένας (*poimenas*), which means “shepherd,” is translated “pastors” only one time in the New Testament. And even there it should be translated “shepherds.” Literally, it means to take care of sheep. Shepherding is used generally as a metaphor for leadership throughout the Bible (Ezekiel 34:2-8; Isaiah 56:11; Matthew 9:36; John 10:11-16; Hebrews 13:20). But none of these are connected to a position in a “local church.” Since there is only one time in the New Testament where the word is translated “pastors,” any attempt to seek for a biblical justification for having an office of a pastor centers on this one verse. The verse says:

And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ (Ephesians 4:11-12).

What we call a “pastor” is not mentioned in the Bible because what we call a “local church” is not mentioned in the Bible. In the context of a “local church,” the word “pastor” describes an occupation. The gifts of the Spirit are not given by the apostles in connection with a person’s career or job slot in an organization. They are given in connection with a person’s salvation. A pastor in one of our “local churches” may or may not have the gift of shepherding, but his position as “pastor” is not synonymous with the gift of shepherding.

Some who hold the position that the “local church” is an ordained institution of God have promoted the idea that the two gifts listed as *pastors and teachers* in Ephesians 4:11-12 should be seen as one office called pastor/teacher. Even though they are completely different words and separated by the word “and,” these people see them as one person because Paul changed to a different word for “and.” This seems unlikely for the following reasons. (1) Both words for “and” are used interchangeably throughout the New Testament. (2) The gift of teaching is given by itself in Romans 12:7, and teaching is listed by itself as a function of the church throughout the New Testament. (3) By observation, we all know people who are gifted in pastoring but not teaching and visa versa. (4) In no other passage of the Bible is a gift or function given as a combination of two gifts separated by the word “and.” Therefore, the joining of those two by omitting the “and” to create the office of pastor/teacher is highly suspect.

However, even if pastor/teacher is meant to be one gift, the idea that this is a pastor/teacher of a “local church” ignores the most basic point Paul is making in the book of Ephesians. Paul is discussing gifts given to the uni-

versal church, the whole body of Christ, not an office in a localized organization. If pastor/teacher is a position in a local organization, then *apostles, and prophets, and evangelists* were also positions in a local organization. But these gifts function throughout the universal body of Christ in the New Testament. Even if we assume there are no *apostles and prophets* today, it would still mean that every “local church” would have, or should have, an office of *evangelist*. None of those holding the pastor/teacher view suggest this.

What they do suggest is that the nature of the pastor, or pastor/teacher, demands a “local church” context. Let’s just briefly scan through the context of the book of Ephesians to see how the book develops the idea of the church.

In **chapter 1** we read, *And He put all things in subjection under His feet, and gave Him as head over all things to **the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all** (1:22-23)*. Here the church is clearly defined universally, *the church, which is His body*

In **chapter 2**, Paul said both Jews and Gentiles have been reconciled in one body to God through the cross (verse 16). Then we read:

*So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God’s household, having been built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole building, being fitted together is growing into **a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are being built together into a dwelling of God in the Spirit** (2:19-22).*

Notice, again, the universal nature of the church being described. All are reconciled into one body, *fellow citizens with the saints, ...God’s household...Jesus Christ being the cornerstone, ...the whole building..., a holy temple, ...a dwelling place of God in the Spirit.*

In **chapter 3**, Paul said God gave him a special stewardship to reveal the mystery

*...which in other generations was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed in His holy apostles and prophets in the Spirit; to be specific, that the Gentiles are fellow heirs and **fellow members of the body**, and fellow partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel (3:5-6).*

The church here is the global membership of both Jews and Gentiles into one body of true believers in Jesus Christ. There is nothing local being described.

Now we come to **chapter 4**. Here he began the application half of his epistle by saying, *I ... implore you to walk worthy of the calling with which*

you have been called (verse 1). In verse 2, he described that walk as showing tolerance for one another in love. In verse 3, he spelled it out by adding, *being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace*. Then he said,

There is one body and one Spirit, just as also you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all (4:4-6).

So there is one body of Christ, one church, in the same sense that there is *one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all*. This church is all the true believers. In the next verse, Paul wrote, *But to each one of us grace was given according to the measure of Christ's gift* (4:7). Notice, Paul went from the universal church, the body of all believers in Christ, to the individual believer in Christ.

There is no local organization, institution, or assembly between the universal church and the individual believer.

Next, Paul told us that when Christ ascended into heaven, He gave each individual believer gifts. In 1 Corinthians 12 and Romans 12, we find that the unity of the body of Christ functions with a diversity of gifts. The word there is *χάρισματα* (*charismata*). It describes the unique special ability of each believer. It's through these (unique as a snowflake and a fingerprint) abilities that we are to serve one another—rather than competing with one another for culturally established jobs or positions. The unity of the universal body depends on the diversity of the gifts of its members.

But here in Ephesians 4:8, the word for “gifts” is *δόματα* (*domata*). It's a derivation of the word *διδωμι* (*didomi*), which means “to give a gift.” The word is used by Christ in Luke 11:13 to refer to giving good gifts to your children. So the gifts of Ephesians 4 are gifts given by God to the universal church. All the gifts are presents from God for the universal church, but in Ephesians, He seemed to have particular individuals in mind.

Notice, as Paul repeated so often in this letter, the purpose is:

- *For the equipping of the saints*, not the survival of an institution
- *For their work of service*, not the growth of the organization
- *For the building up of the body of Christ*, not for getting people to come to our meetings

The goal of these gifts is for believers to:

grow up in all aspects into Him, who is the head, even Christ, from whom the whole body, being fitted and held together by that which every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love (4:15-16).

The goal is the growth of the whole body of Christ. And that's done by the proper working of each individual part, not the successful performance of the "pastor" of a "local church." Pastoring describes someone especially gifted in shepherding—evidenced by, say, a lady showing hospitality (2 John 5-6) or a man helping visiting missionaries (3 John 5-8).

It's interesting that when Christ walked the roads of Palestine, the place was full of religious officials filling positions and offices. There were priests, chief priests, and elders, as well as specific religious organizations such as the Pharisees, the Sadducees, and the scribes. Yet we read, *And seeing the multitudes, He felt compassion for them, because they were distressed and downcast like sheep without a shepherd* (Matthew 9:36). Apparently, having a multitude of religious officials and religious organizations did not provide shepherds for the sheep.

After Jesus rose from the dead and before He formally ascended into heaven (Acts 1), He appeared to His disciples several times (1 Corinthians 15). One time they were on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. On that occasion, Jesus specifically asked Simon Peter three times if he loved Him. Each time Peter responded in the affirmative, and each time Jesus gave him the job of shepherding His (Jesus') sheep: *tend My lambs...shepherd My sheep ...tend My sheep* (John 21:15-17).

There is another danger that must be attended to if you are a "pastor" of a "local church." Jesus said,

But do not be called Rabbi; for One is your Teacher, and you are all brothers. And do not call anyone on earth your father; for One is your Father, He who is in heaven. And do not be called leaders; for One is your leader, that is, Christ (Matthew 23:8-10).

The danger of being called "teacher" or leader" or "father" or "pastor" or "priest" is the problem of communicating to people that they should come to God (or could more easily get to God) through you. For example, the leader of a large men's organization recently said: "We need our pastors to interpret the Bible for us." Hopefully, most "pastors" of "local churches" would not say that, because it obviously denies the priesthood of the believer (1 Peter 2:5-9; Revelation 1:6).

But the question is not do you as a "pastor" believe you are closer to God than other people. The question is, Does grandma Jones think so? Who does she want to call on her when she is sick? Does she feel it's better if the "pastor" prays for her or reads Scripture to her? This one-man ministry mentality limits those gifted in shepherding, and relegates it to a job we have created.

Chapter 18

Establishing Church Leaders

It has been said that the existence of elders presupposes local church organizations. As we have seen, this is not the case. This idea comes about from reading our current “local church” paradigm back into the New Testament, rather than getting our paradigm from the New Testament.

The apostles were given a unique power and authority by the Holy Spirit to start the church (Matthew 16:9; Acts 1:8). The question we will deal with here is, “Did God pass that authority along from the apostles to anyone else?”

The New Testament does not anywhere state that the power and authority of the apostles was to be passed on to anybody or any institution. The authority of the apostles today is only found in the words of the New Testament.

The real challenge comes from the traditions (Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant) that see church leaders as having authority as well as responsibility. The arguments over church leadership would all but vanish, if we saw leaders as the apostles did, having responsibility but not authority. But we can only do that if we see the church as the apostles did, a spiritual fellowship rather than an authoritative organization.

The apostles appointed leaders, but they did not tell those leaders how to appoint other leaders. That’s because the real leaders in the church are givers, servants who recognize needs and see themselves as responsible for using their gifts to meet those needs. There is no basis whatsoever for appointing or selecting people with authority in the true church.

Yet it is clear that we do have spiritual leaders in the church. So how did the apostles intend for those leaders to be recognized? I suggest, since Christ and the apostles gave us no basis or structure for appointing them, that they did not expect us to appoint them. Rather, I suggest the apostles assumed leaders would be identified by the characteristics given throughout their letters (such as 1 Timothy 3; Titus 1; 1 Peter 5; 1 Corinthians 13; Matthew 5–7; Luke 6:20ff; etc.).

The leaders the apostles called *elders* were not chosen by an organization. The proof of that is simple. Just look at the ones we choose in our organizations. Obviously, choosing someone for the position of “elder” does not make him into a biblical elder. We can, however, recognize the ones in

our midst as described by the apostles. Elders just grow into elders as they mature by the work of the Holy Spirit in their lives, conforming them to the Word of God over a long period of time. Elders are elders because they act like elders. They aren't elders because they are appointed, elected, ordained, selected, or called an elder by an organization. They are just there. Of course, some of them might be appointed, elected, ordained, or selected by an organization to do things because we recognize their maturity, gifts, and their heart to serve.

The apostles understood that there are also leaders we select to do specific jobs. These may or may not be elders. For example, the servants of Acts 6 were selected by the people to deal with the administrative challenge of feeding and housing all the Jews who had come to Christ at the time of Pentecost and were remaining in Jerusalem to hear more of the apostles' teaching. The apostles told the believers:

But select from, among you, brethren, seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, who we may put in charge of this task (Acts 6:3).

Then we read,

And the statement found approval with the whole congregation; and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas and Nicolas, a proselyte from Antioch. And these they brought before the apostles; and after praying, they laid their hands on them (Acts 6:5).

Here we see that the apostles turned over to the people the job of selecting leaders who could administer a specific *task*. But this was no permanent assignment, no office of the church, no official position. This job ended when it was no longer needed, namely, when the non-resident Jewish believers were forced to flee Jerusalem because of persecution (Acts 9:1).

The assignments of Timothy and Titus also seem to be like that. They were apostolic messengers sent to set things in order. They were to appoint leaders in the city of Ephesus and the cities on the island of Crete. When those appointments were over, so was their job.

There are also those who were messengers of the apostles carrying their messages and letters to the different cities.

*I commend to you our sister **Phoebe**, who is a servant of the church which is at Cenchrea; that you receive her in the Lord in a manner worthy of the saints, and that you help her in whatever matter she may have need of you; for she herself has also been a helper of many, and of myself as well (Romans 16:1-2).*

Tychicus, the beloved brother and faithful minister in the Lord, will make everything known to you. And I have sent him to you for this very purpose, so that you may know about us, and that he may comfort your hearts (Ephesians 6:21-22).

So, beyond the apostles, there seems to be two kinds of leaders in the New Testament church:

1. There were those who were appointed by the apostles or their messengers because they were recognized as mature men. Peter and John called them “elders” but Paul also called them “overseers” and the author of Hebrews just called them “leaders.” These had no specific job description.
2. There were those selected by the apostles, or other believers, for specific non-permanent jobs (as the servants of Acts 6, the assignments of Timothy and Titus, and those who carried the letters and messages from the apostles). [The overseers and deacons Paul told Timothy and Titus to appoint may also be in this category. Paul is the only one to use these terms and only with these specific assignments.]

Both kinds of leaders in the New Testament church (1) had responsibility, not authority, (2) functioned throughout the city, and (3) were a plurality.

Chapter 19

Church Planting and the Great Commission

Many “local churches” and “church planting” missions operate on the philosophy that the New Testament model of ministry is the reproducing of “local churches.” Once again, this idea is filled with misconceptions incurred by reading our cultural paradigm back into the New Testament rather than modeling the ministry of the apostles.

First of all, our concept of an independent “local church” was not created by the apostles. It’s a cultural development of the last few hundred years. Second, the Great Commission is to go **make disciples** of the *ἔθνος* (*ethnos*) *outsiders, unbelievers, Gentiles*, not to reproduce local churches. There is no command anywhere in the New Testament to go make local churches, or even to go and establish assemblies of believers.

Paul, for example, proclaimed the Gospel (usually in Jewish synagogues but also other places), led people to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ, disciplined those people in Christ, and instructed them to follow Christ. He encouraged them to reach their neighbors with the Gospel, study to show themselves approved to God, and to *entrust these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also* (2 Timothy 2:2). Some of those things required assemblies or were aided by assemblies, so, of course, Paul, among other things, utilized assemblies. But to say Paul went to cities to establish assemblies, is to miss the point.

A farmer may be involved in preparing a new field to plant corn. But his goal is not to plant fields. He is a farmer, not a field planter. A businessman may need to plan a meeting. But he is a businessman, not a meeting planner. A fisherman may use a boat. But his objective is to catch fish, not ride in a boat.

It’s important to have the right objective. Neither Christ nor the apostles ever instructed anybody to go and plant “local churches.” If we make church planting (the establishing of assemblies) our goal, instead of making disciples, then we will likely be content if our new assemblies are filled with people leaving other “local churches” for ours because we have a better program, a better speaker, or a more well-thought-out agenda. But if, like Christ and the apostles, our objective is to go make disciples of outsiders, then there will come a place when those new disciples will need to assemble. Assembling is a function, not a definition. It is something the church does, not what the church is.

The apostles did not think that believers would function on this earth as individual islands disconnected from one another. But their solution to that was not to create independent “local churches” disconnected from one another. What they created was a climate of loving one another through networking together in a fellowship of interactions among believers within one’s own city, and then larger geographic regions.

Believers are individuals, and that individuality is essential to understand. They are individually responsible for studying to show themselves approved unto God. They are individually responsible for evangelism, discipleship, giving to the poor, supporting their teachers, loving their wives, submitting to their husbands, praying, worshipping, loving their brothers and their enemies. They are gifted by the Holy Spirit individually. Believers are autonomous individuals throughout all of eternity. Communities come, go, and change. The individual believer will be the same person, individually responsible, individually judged, individually rewarded, individually somewhere forever.

Chapter 20

Giving and the Church

Giving to Individuals

The apostles saw giving as from individuals to individuals. This might be a temporary project from a group of individuals to an individual or a group of individuals. But the New Testament knows nothing of giving to an institution or from an institution or from one institution to another.

Let's Start Our Research with Jesus

In Luke 8:1-3, we read:

*And it came about soon afterwards, that He began going about from one city and village to another, proclaiming and preaching the kingdom of God; and the twelve were with Him, and also some women who had been healed of evil spirits and sicknesses: Mary who was called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, and Joanna the wife of Chuza, Herod's steward, and Susanna, and **many others who were contributing to their support out of their private means.***

Jesus did not need financial support. Anyone, who can turn water into wine, command a miraculous catch of fish, get coins out of the mouth of a fish, and feed thousands of people from a few loaves and fish, does not need financial support. Yet Jesus was often supported by a group of people who traveled with Him. Sometimes, Jesus just traveled with the apostles. But often, it consisted of the 12 apostles and others, some women He healed, *many others who were contributing to their support out of their private means*, and possibly sometimes the apostles' wives—1 Corinthians 9:5. This may have been for the good of the givers or an example to the apostles. But whatever the reason, the ministry of Christ and the apostles was not supported by any group, organization, or institution. They were supported by individuals who gave to them individually *out of their private means*.

When Jesus sent out the 70, He gave them instructions which included this from Luke 10:5-8:

*And **whatever house you enter**, first say, "Peace be to this house." And if a man of peace is there, your peace will rest upon him; but if not, it will return to you. And stay in that house, eating and drinking what they give you; for **the laborer is worthy of his wages**. Do not keep moving from house to house. And whatever city you enter, and they receive you, eat what is set before you.*

So Jesus said that the 70 should be supported as individuals by individuals.

There were no gifts to or from, or controlled by, or distributed by, institutions or organizations.

How Was Paul Supported?

After a short period of making tents, Paul was supported by other believers. Consider Philippians 4:15-16.

*You yourselves also know, **Philippians**, that at the first preaching of the gospel, after I left Macedonia, no **church** shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving but **you alone**; for even in Thessalonica you sent a gift more than once for my needs.*

Paul was supported as an individual by the individual believers in Philippi. The church is the Philippian believers. The church is further described by the second person plural pronoun ὑμεῖς (*humeis*) translated *you yourselves* in verse 15 and *you* in verse 16. Paul does not say the church “it” supported me, but the church *you yourselves* supported me. From Acts 16, that was the families of Lydia and the Philippian jailor (although there were undoubtedly some others). Verse 40 says,

*And they went out of the prison and entered the **house of Lydia**, and when they saw the **brethren**, they encouraged them and departed.*

So the believers, the church of Philippi, sent several gifts to Paul which allowed him to stop making tents and focus on ministry.

Giving From Individuals

How did Paul expect others to be supported? Consider:

On the first day of every week let each one of you put aside and save, as he may prosper, that no collections be made when I come. And when I arrive, whomever you may approve, I shall send them with letters to carry your gift to Jerusalem; and if it is fitting for me to go also, they will go with me. But I shall come to you after I go through Macedonia, for I am going through Macedonia; and perhaps I shall stay with you, or even spend the winter, that you may send me on my way wherever I may go (1 Corinthians 16:2-6).

At several points in his ministry, Paul became aware of certain needs in Jerusalem. The believers there were in desperate need of financial help. So he initiated a collection from the churches (believers in the cities) of Macedonia to be brought to the believers in the city of Jerusalem. He wanted to also get some money (or some sort of valuables) from the Corinthians for this Jerusalem project. So he told them in this letter to put something away and save it on the first day of every week. The point was for them to set up a personal storehouse, so that the gift would be ready when Paul arrived. Then he would put it together with the other gifts he had collected and send it on to Jerusalem.

This is not about giving to a “local church” organization. There is no example or command in the New Testament about anyone giving anything to their own church. Many pastors illegitimately teach that this passage says we should give to our “local church” on Sunday morning. But none of the collection went to the church at Corinth. It all went to the church at Jerusalem. And none of it was collected by a “local church.” It was saved by individuals and collected by Paul when he arrived.

Paul’s idea of giving into a personal storehouse, and then distributing it to needs, is like the Old Testament idea of giving to the Temple storehouse. The storehouse mentioned in Malachi 3:10 was in Israel’s Temple, and gifts were distributed by Israel’s priests. But remember, today the individual believer is both the priest (1 Peter 2:5, 9; Revelation 1:6) and the temple (1 Corinthians 3:16; 6:19-20). Therefore, today the individual believer is both the collector and the distributor.

Collective Spending

Collective spending is not giving. The apostles would never consider it giving when we collectively spend money to benefit our own situation. For example, to put money into a building, a parking lot, or paying your pastor’s salary, then to sit in that building, park in that lot, and listen to that pastor preach, is collective spending, not giving. Collective spending may indeed be a good idea, as, for example, in paying your teachers (1 Timothy 5:17-18), but it’s not giving.

It is not the purpose of this book to do a complete study on giving, only to relate it to the church. And for the apostles, there was never an organization or an institution collecting or distributing gifts. Many giving efforts were organized. But organizing a giving project does not require an organization. In the New Testament, no organization stood between the needy and the giver.

Chapter 21

The Assembly of Believers

For the apostles, the assembly of the believers was not an institution that needed a doctrinal statement or a mission statement, or its own belief statement. The assembly of the church in the New Testament (except for the size) was like if Billy Graham came to our town and we all went to hear him preach. We would not need to sign the same doctrinal statement to do that. Neither did they have to do so to gather together regularly. We have that problem only because we see the assembly of the church as an entity, an organization, a command post that needs to have a life of its own, defend itself, and grow.

It's not that doctrinal issues were unimportant to the apostles. They were crucially important. But they were addressed in their letters, their teaching, their discipleship, and the discussions during the assemblies, but not by institutional canons, creeds, and statements which serve to divide the church.

Most church gatherings today use either (1) a liturgical form (as with the Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Episcopal, and Anglican churches) or (2) an auditorium form (as with most Protestants), or more recently (3) the form of a rock concert. I can find none of those in the New Testament. So, what can we learn from the New Testament about how the apostles gathered with believers? I will consider several passages, make some observations from those passages, then make some conclusions concerning the assembly of believers in the New Testament.

Remember, although examples are not commands, neither are they irrelevant. They were not included just to take up space. So the teaching of Christ and the apostles on the nature of the assembly of the church are germane to our gatherings.

Matthew 18:20—*For where two or three have gathered together in My name, I am there in their midst.* The context here is discipline by the church (verse 17).

Here are some things we can learn from this passage:

- Apparently, the gathering of believers together, even just two or three, has special significance.
- There seems to be a sense in which truth should be sought by the agreement of mature believers gathered together in Christ's name.
- When even two or three gather together, it is a gathering of the church simply because they are believers. Certainly, we would not consider

that the only example of a church gathering. But suppose two or three believers were deserted on an island. Would we say they should not gather for the Lord's Supper? And if they did, would they not be coming together as a church? I suggest the apostles would say they are an assembly of the church.

Hebrews 10:24-25—*and let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another; and all the more as you see the day drawing near.*

From Hebrews 10, we can see that:

- Assembling together is not optional.
- Assembling together should stimulate love and good deeds.
- Assembling together should encourage one another.
- But this passage gives no form or frequency for assembling together.

Acts 2:42-46—*They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. And everyone kept feeling a sense of awe; and many wonders and signs were taking place through the apostles. And all those who had believed were together, and had all things in common; and they began selling their property and possessions and were sharing them with all, as anyone might have need. Day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart.*

From Acts 2, we can observe several things about the church:

- There was teaching (consistent with the apostles' teaching).
- There was fellowship.
- There was breaking of bread (probably a meal with a time of communion).
- There was prayer.
- There was a voluntary sharing (not a mandatory collection and distribution) of possessions to meet needs.
- The church gathered *day by day...from house to house*.
- The apostles also honored the temple as the Old Testament central sanctuary until it was destroyed in A.D. 70. But they never replaced it with a sanctuary for the church.

1 Corinthians 11:17-22—*But in giving this instruction, I do not praise you, because you come together not for the better but for the worse. For, in the first place, **when you come together as a church**, I hear that divisions exist among you; and in part I believe it. For there must also be factions among*

*you, so that those who are approved may become evident among you. Therefore when you meet together, it is not to **eat the Lord's Supper**, for in your eating each one takes his own supper first; and one is hungry and another is drunk. What! Do you not have houses in which to eat and drink? Or do you despise the church of God...*

From 1 Corinthians 11, we can conclude:

- There was a unique coming together *as a church*, which was to be a Lord's Supper Communion for remembering the body and blood of Christ. It seems this is how the apostles understood Christ's only statement about the gathering of the church: *This is My body which is given for you; **do this in remembrance of Me*** (Luke 22:19).
- The house-church-meal-gathering should not be the same as the regular house meal. The purpose was not to feed people but to remember the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.
- The Lord's Supper Communion was to be done with dignity and reverence, not with gluttony and drunkenness.

Jude 12—*These are the men who are hidden reefs in your love feasts when they feast with you.*

- This was written about A.D. 75, so the communion meal love feasts seems to continue throughout the first century. It wasn't just something they did early on.
- False teachers continued to exist within the gatherings of the church. These were *the men who are hidden reefs* that Jude is writing about. Therefore, the assembly cannot be equated with the church, since the assembly included unbelievers.

Acts 20:6-8—*We sailed from Philippi after the days of Unleavened Bread, and came to them at Troas within five days; and there we stayed seven days. On the first day of the week, when we were gathered together to break bread, Paul began talking to them, intending to leave the next day, and he prolonged his message until midnight. There were many lamps in the upper room where we were gathered together.*

- At least one group of believers, in Troas, met on Sunday, at least one time when Paul visited them. I don't think we can demonstrate from Acts 20 that the church at Troas always met on the first day of the week.
- They *gathered together to break bread*, which was probably a communion meal.
- They had a special speaker, who was not a regular every-week speaker.
- They met in a home. It was a small enough group that they were gathered in the upper room (probably the largest room) of someone's house.

Romans 14:5-6—*One person regards one day above another, another regards every day alike. Each person must be fully convinced in his own mind. He who observes the day, observes it for the Lord, and he who eats, does so for the Lord, for he gives thanks to God.*

- Paul told the Romans that observing a special day was dependent upon the convictions of each person.
- Paul said it is good to observe a special day if it is done for the Lord. So keeping special days (like Sunday, Christmas, and Easter) to gather together is good if it's done for the Lord, but no specific day was mandated.
- [There is no example or statement indicating that the apostles either kept or commanded a Sabbath rest-day.]

Matthew 26:30—*After singing a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.*

Ephesians 5:19—*speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord.*

Colossians 3:16—*Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God.*

- Christ and the apostles used music as part of their gatherings.
- The purpose of the music was threefold:
 1. To *make melody with your heart to the Lord*
 2. To *admonish one another*
 3. To *express thankfulness in your hearts to God*

1 Corinthians 14:26—*What is the outcome then, brethren? When you assemble, each one has a psalm, has a teaching, has a revelation, has a tongue, has an interpretation. Let all things be done for edification.*

1 Corinthians 14:29-33—*Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others pass judgment. But if a revelation is made to another who is seated, the first one must keep silent. For you can all prophesy one by one, so that all may learn and all may be exhorted; and the spirits of prophets are subject to prophets; for God is not a God of confusion but of peace, as in all the churches of the saints.*

These passages deal with the early church prophesying and speaking in tongues. Whatever you believe about that today, let's look past that to observe how they dealt with the message. If we were to apply this to someone reading and commenting on Scripture, we could observe:

- There should be 2 or 3 speakers (not just one speaker), and there should not be chaotic speaking. Several men should share in an orderly manner.
- There was to be a discussion from the other men about that message.

- True or false teaching was determined by the other mature men. They would affirm or deny the message of the speaker during the gathering. *The spirits of prophets are subject to prophets* means what one speaker says is subject to approval by the other knowledgeable men.

Conclusion

Believers gathered for many reasons. Their regular house gatherings centered on a communion meal, with a group small enough to assemble in a room of that house. There was singing, prayer, fellowship, the meeting of needs, and teaching. The teaching was evaluated by a discussion among the other mature adult men. There were special outside speakers (like the apostles and their representatives), but no one prominent pastor or preacher or teacher. A one-man ministry was condemned. The apostles did not dictate a structure but they did give commands.

For example:

- The plurality of leaders
- Stimulating one another to love and good deeds
- The practicing of spiritual gifts
- Discussions to evaluate the content of the teaching
- The sharing of Scripture, music, and prayers by any of the men

These things are hard to apply in a liturgical or an auditorium or rock concert type of meeting. The mentality of separating the “laity” from the “clergy” is inevitable (and the priesthood of the believer is difficult to stimulate) in a liturgical or auditorium or rock concert type of meeting.

Chapter 22

Loyalty To The “Local Church”

There Is No Perfect Church

We are often called to be loyal to our “local church” with all its faults. We hear things like: “If you find the perfect church, don’t join it” (implication—because then it won’t be perfect any more). The point is, no “local church” is perfect, so we must put up with the sin in the church. One pastor put it this way:

“Our natural tendency is to see the immorality, hypocrisy, and incompetence of the [local] church and walk away. But when we walk away from the church because it is not what we want it to be or even all that it can be, we end up proclaiming to the world a false god—a legalistic, judgmental god. By embracing the church as a fallen mess of sinful people, filled with faults and failures we proclaim the true God—one who is full of all grace—to the whole world.” (I am intentionally leaving out the name of this pastor.)

Let me see if I am understanding this pastor’s argument. When I walk away from the church because of its sin, that’s wrong (I am proclaiming a false god). But when I embrace sinful people if they are in a “local church,” that’s good (a proclaiming the true God). So God is being proclaimed to the world through tolerating sinners, as long as they are in my “local church.” Such thinking is foreign to the apostles.

Here is how the apostles saw the church, morally speaking:

- *What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace might increase? May it never be! How shall we who died to sin still live in it? (Romans 6:1-2).*
- *Let love be without hypocrisy. Abhor what is evil; cling to what is good. Be devoted to one another in brotherly love; give preference to one another in honor; not lagging behind in diligence, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord; rejoicing in hope, persevering in tribulation, devoted to prayer, contributing to the needs of the saints, practicing hospitality (Romans 12:9-13).*
- *Flee immorality. Every other sin that a man commits is outside the body, but the immoral man sins against his own body. Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:18-19).*
- *Instructing us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and godly in the present age, looking for the blessed hope and the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus; who gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us from*

every lawless deed and purify for Himself a people for His own possession, zealous for good deeds (Titus 2:12-14).

The apostles did not tell believers to be “embracing the [local] church as a fallen mess of sinful people, filled with faults and failures,” or to embrace the “immorality, hypocrisy, and incompetence of believers if they were members of a [local] church.” That’s because the apostles had no “local church” to embrace. The apostles said to *Flee immorality*, not embrace groups that tolerate it if they call themselves a church. The apostles told us to *Let love be without hypocrisy*, not to embrace hypocritical groups because they call themselves a church. The apostles told us to *deny ungodliness and worldly desires*, not to tolerate them if they are in an organization that calls itself a “local church.”

The Church Meets the Needs of the Family

Somewhere along the line in discussing the church, someone will say, “But only the local church meets the needs of the whole family.” The idea is that the local church is a larger family, where we can bring our family to meet their needs “from the cradle to the grave.” Many people bring their children to church, even if they don’t go themselves. More frequently, though, they put their children in the programs available for them in whatever church they go to. Often, as the children get older, the parents follow their children to church. They go wherever the kids want to go. That’s why churches are so interested in finding the right “youth leader” or “worship leader” that does music the way the young people like it.

I’d like to know something—

Where on earth did we get the idea that the assembly of the church, or some program of the church, should be designed to parent children or attract young people?

In the Bible, parenting comes from parents, not “local churches.” Even in Israel, Moses said:

And these words, which I am commanding you today, shall be on your heart; and you shall teach them diligently to your sons and shall talk of them when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way and when you lie down and when you rise up. And you shall bind them as a sign on your hand and they shall be as frontals on your forehead. And you shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates (Deuteronomy 6:6-9).

Parenting is to be done by parents, *when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way and when you lie down and when you rise up*, in the context of *your house and on your gates*, not the temple or the priests or any organization.

Consider:

- Proverbs 23:22—*Listen to your father who begot you, And do not despise your mother when she is old.*
- Proverbs 22:6—*Train up a child in the way he should go, Even when he is old he will not depart from it.*
- Psalms 127:3-5—*Behold, children are a gift of the LORD,
The fruit of the womb is a reward.
Like arrows in the hand of a warrior,
So are the children of one's youth.
How blessed is the man whose quiver is full of them;
They will not be ashamed
When they speak with their enemies in the gate.*

The apostles said:

- *Children, obey your parents* [not the “youth leader” of your “local church”] *in the Lord, for this is right* (Ephesians 6:1).
- *Children, be obedient to your parents* [not follow the pastor or “worship leader”] *in all things, for this is well-pleasing to the Lord* (Colossians 3:20).

Of course, Hillary Clinton said “it takes a village,” but that’s socialism, not Christianity. The New Testament instruction was to come from fathers and mothers, not youth-oriented leaders hired by the “local church.” Biological parents married to their children’s father and mother are uniquely qualified to instruct their children.

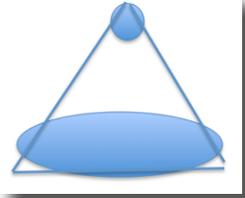
The Church Was There When I Needed Help

Many people have become attached to a traditional “local church” because they were in a crisis, and someone invited them to their “church,” and they were helped, supported, or comforted. But this does not mean they received what the apostles had in mind. AA groups, drug rehab groups, and crisis centers of various sorts have helped people simply because they are there. Many have also been helped by the Mormons, the Jehovah’s Witnesses, other cults, and apostate groups because they were there. That does not mean they provided the direction the apostles had in mind. The same is true of our traditional “local churches.” If help is obtained through a “local church” with true believers in it, the help a person receives will be more truly helpful, even possibly bringing a person to eternal faith in Christ. But that’s because the true believers are the real church, not the organization they have created. The solution to personal problems, like marriage, parenting, finances, and disputes, is not a program of an organization. Personal problems are solved by people becoming more mature.

What the apostles had in mind brought people to repentance and growth toward Christlikeness. When people came to Christ in the first century, it was with the idea of glorifying God and serving Christ, often with only the

promise of persecution in this life. Christianity was not a social program. It sometimes helped suffering people, and sometimes it brought suffering to helpful people, but the goal was to glorify God, not help people to live a better life on earth. It was God-oriented, not people-oriented. So it focused on bringing people to stronger faith, greater obedience, with a focus on Christlikeness (John 15:10).

Suppose we were to graph all of today's professing believers with a triangle as pictured here. Let's say "up" is toward greater maturity, faith, obedience, etc. and "down" is less of those things. Most of the "believers" would be at the bottom of the triangle. The numbers would become fewer as we move up. With that picture, Christ and the apostles ministered to those willing to strive for the small circle at the top. This does not mean they were already mature when they came to Christ, but that they had it as their focus. The lordship of Christ did not save them, but it was their goal, and it kept them in continual repentance and humility (1 John 1:6-10). Most "local churches" today minister to those in the lower, larger oval shape at the bottom of the triangle. And the ceiling it offers toward maturity is the top of that oval area. The church the apostles ministered to was the smaller upper circle, not the larger lower oval.



Ecclesiastical Socialism

I recently received a widely circulated email of an economics' teacher who did an experiment in his class. He had a class of very liberal students who believed in the Communist agenda— **"From each according to his ability, to each according to his need,"** a slogan popularized by Karl Marx in 1875. In other words, the wealth of society should be equally distributed. So the teacher said they would put that idea into practice. Every test score would be averaged, and that grade would be given to everyone so the poorer students could benefit from the better students. The better students would supply grades **"From each according to his ability"** to the poorer students, **"to each according to his need."** As you know, or could guess, each test score average became lower and lower. The average went from B to C to F because the students realized it did not matter how much they studied, they would get the same grade anyway. Bickering, blaming, and name-calling increased as the grades continued to fall. In the end, the teacher made the point that if people are not motivated to succeed individually, rewarded and punished individually, the result will be an entitlement community of unmotivated people looking for handouts.

Many circulating this email are conservative evangelicals who want less government, less socialism, and more individual accountability in their country. They want the government to stimulate the private sector rather

than just grow bigger government. They don't want a tax-and-spend government.

But here is what is interesting to me. Many of those same evangelicals opt for something more like the Marxist/Socialist agenda in their churches. They belong to churches that treat everyone as members or parishioners, not individuals with distinct gifts—individualism is criticized. They believe the church should grow itself and its staff bigger, while it discourages any independent ministry that is not under the auspices of their church. Rather than encourage the mature growing believer, they focus on the weak and needy. But they do use maturing people **“From each according to his ability”** to minister to the weak and needy **“to each according to his need.”**

They are given the feeling that they are all saved and okay with God because they are part of the church. If you don't think so, check out any funeral and find out how many are going to hell or will not receive heavenly rewards. Most are told that whatever rewards they receive, they will be crowns we cast at Christ's feet (a misapplication of a ceremony in Revelation 4:10 where the 24 elders do that), thus negating any motivation for individual virtue. In their churches, personal gifts don't really matter (much), since we have professional pastors who do everything. Actually, the pastors need to do everything because they need to prove they are successful at what they were hired to do. So the members or parishioners are told to give their talent and their tithe to the church, and let the church distribute it. Their church should take **“From each according to his ability”** and distribute **“to each according to his need.”**

But Christ and the apostles described a church of individual believers who were individually gifted, individually called, and individually judged and rewarded. Many things, nearly everything, believers do require them to be involved with one another in giving, loving, serving, and fellowship as parts of a body. But this is voluntary service from each person to any one in the whole body of Christ, not programs controlled by some institution trying to grow itself bigger as they tax (I mean tithe) and spend. Christ and the apostles never taught an **Ecclesiastical Socialism**.

Has the Church Evolved?

There is a prominent view that says the local church has progressively developed from the first century to what it is today by the work of the Holy Spirit. An evangelical pastor recently wrote: “The question is whether when we read those words that Paul wrote to the Corinthian church God is speaking to us today saying, “do not despise today's local church” (pastor's name intentionally omitted). Understand, this pastor is not saying we should apply

what Paul said to the Corinthians to today, he is saying we are to have the same loyalty to today's churches because they are a work of God.

If we are to accept today's local churches as a work of the Holy Spirit, would that be the Eastern Orthodox Churches, the Roman Catholic Churches, the homosexual churches, the apostate churches, the Mormon churches or the Protestant churches? Of course, this pastor would say our loyalty should be to evangelical churches, but how does he know that, since he is no longer applying the Bible but assuming a development beyond the Bible? If we are to accept the churches of today as something which have evolved progressively over the years by the direction of the Holy Spirit, then which ones are the right ones, since much of what today's churches believe and teach is contradictory to what the apostles taught and contradictory to each other?

This new movement is common in seminaries and Bible colleges and is working its way into the "local churches." It includes the view that the church has progressively taken over the institutional place of the nation Israel in the Old Testament. When we read the Bible, it is clear that there is a distinction between Israel and the church (Romans 11; Ephesians 3:3-9). But this view teaches that progressively, slowly, over the 2000 years of history, God has made the church into an institution which replaces (or equals) His institutional commitment to Israel.

This teaching changes the whole idea of observation, interpretation, and application (the way all communication is understood) to a progressive evolutionary development of the work of God, saying that's what God taught then, but it's different now.

If that is the case, then the Bible is no longer a directive for the church.

Political Socialism and the Church Community

Why is it that evangelicals, who oppose socialism in government, promote it in the church?

Government Socialism Is

1. Build the government institution bigger.

Church Community Is

1. Build the church institution bigger.

Government Socialism Is

2. Redistribute wealth. Tax the rich and distribute it to the needy, as determined by the government, rather than encouraging people to give to independent charities individually.
3. Build up an elite class of leaders, especially the president and his staff and appointees (or czars).
4. The Government creates the jobs (bridges to nowhere, electric cars, wind generators, alternative fuels) rather than individuals creating jobs to meet the demands of the market.
5. Create a large dependent group of people that need government handouts to survive. Don't make them productive, manage their problems so they will need you, and re-elect you.

Church Community Is

2. Redistribute wealth. Collect a 10% tithe from the rich and distribute it to the needy, as determined by the church, rather than encouraging people to support independent ministries.
3. Build up an elite class of leaders, especially the pastors, worship leaders and elders.
4. The church creates jobs (like small groups, mission trips, counseling, support groups) rather than individual believers teaching and forming groups to meet needs.
5. Create a large dependent group of people that think they need the church to get to God. Don't take a stand against their sin, manage it with church programs so they will continue to attend the church.

Government Socialism Is

6. Ignore the financial deficit. Make people think we are working on it because we talk about it. But make them think it doesn't matter because they are getting a weekly check.
7. Allow open borders and "illegal immigrants" because they will receive government handouts, and vote for the socialist leaders.
8. The government takes care of you (and controls you) from the cradle to the grave.
9. The government takes precedent over the family because "it takes a village."
10. Create an entitlement society where people think it's the government's job to meet their needs.

Church Community Is

6. Ignore the moral & theological deficit. Make people think we are concerned about sin in general because we talk about it. But make them think it doesn't matter because we do a good weekly "service".
7. Encourage "seekers" because they will receive the program, become dependent on the church and support the church leaders.
8. The church takes care of you (and controls you) from the cradle to the grave.
9. The church takes precedent over the family because "it takes a community."
10. Create an entitlement congregation where church-goers think it's the church's job to meet their needs.