

ASSAILING THE GROUND OF ONENESS (1): THE GENUINE GROUND OF THE CHURCH ACCORDING TO THE TEACHING AND PRACTICE OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

Much confusion and debate exist among Christians surrounding the definition, formation, purpose, and function of the church. In fact, the pattern of Christians meeting together in local churches is entirely consistent throughout the New Testament. Some critics admit that while the New Testament does portray local churches, this portrayal should be understood only as descriptive rather than prescriptive, thereby allowing room for alternative church models (articles 3 and 4 in this series address these claims). We believe, however, that we must follow the teaching of the Lord Jesus and the apostles and the New Testament pattern of establishing local churches.

Two Aspects of the Church

The Greek word *ekklesia*, translated “church,” appears two times in the Gospels. In both instances the speaker was the Lord Jesus, and through these instances the two aspects of the church are revealed. In Matthew 16:18 the Lord said, “I will build My church,” thus unveiling the universal church, which is built upon Christ and the revelation from the Father concerning Christ (vv. 16-17) and comprises all regenerated believers throughout the centuries. The universal aspect of the church is further revealed in Ephesians 1:22-23, where Christ is presented as the Head and the church is identified as the Body of the Head. Through regeneration the many believers are made “one Body in Christ, and individually members one of another” (Rom. 12:5), an organic composition of the regenerated believers and Christ, who is their life (Col. 3:4). The Body is the reality, the content, of the church, and the church as the unique Body of Christ is the universal expression of Christ, His manifestation and testimony.

In Matthew 18:17 the Lord unveiled the local aspect of the church, using an offense arising between two believers as an illustration. When the offending brother would not hear the offended brother or the witnesses he brought with him (v. 16), the offended brother was to “tell it to the church” (v. 17a). Of course, the offense could not be told to the universal church; it had to be told to the local church existing at the particular place and time in which the offense occurred. Moreover, it was not the universal church that the offending brother refused to hear; it was the local church whose fellowship was refused (v. 17b).

The New Testament Pattern of Locality

In speaking of the universal church, Paul refers to “the church of God” (1 Cor. 10:32), but when he refers to the universal church with its local expression, he speaks of “the church of God, which is in Corinth” (1:2). Universally, the church is “of God,” not of Cephas, Apollos, or Paul (vv. 12-13). The church is not only the possession of God; it also has its source in God and is constituted with God as its element. Thus, whether from a universal or local perspective, the content of the church is God Himself. That the “church of God” is “in Corinth” indicates that locality is the basis for the expression and practice of the church of God on the earth. Localities such as Corinth, Jerusalem, Antioch, and Colossae, among others, constituted the local ground of the local expressions of the universal church. When the one universal church is manifested in time and space, it is composed of the various local churches, which form a corporate testimony of the one Body of Christ. To have two or more “churches” in a given locality brings confusion to the church’s testimony of oneness and transgresses the church’s own nature as the one Body of Christ.

The New Testament is consistent in its use of *church* in the singular when referring to a local church, a church in a certain city. Examples include the *church* in Jerusalem (Acts 8:1), the *church* in Antioch (Acts 13:1), the *church* in Cenchrea (Rom. 16:1), the *church* in Corinth (1 Cor. 1:2), and the one *church* in each of seven cities in Asia (Rev. 2:1, 8, 12, 18; 3:1, 7, 14). As the city is the unit of people’s gathering and living together, the church manifested in that city is a single unit, that is, a single church. But when the Bible speaks of the church in a province or a region where there are many cities, it speaks of the *churches* of Asia (1 Cor. 16:19), the *churches* of Macedonia (2 Cor. 8:1), the *churches* of Galatia (Gal. 1:2), and the *churches* which are in Asia (Rev. 1:4). Universally, the church is uniquely one, but when the one church is expressed in time and space, it is manifested as many churches because of the many localities, the many cities, in which the believers live.

The practice of the church recorded in the New Testament was the practice of having one church for one city, one city with only one church. In no city was there more than one church. The church takes the city, not the street or area, as its boundary. The jurisdiction of a local church encompasses the whole city in which the church is located and is not greater or lesser than the boundary of the city. Furthermore, the church in a locality was under the oversight of one eldership (Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5). The footnote concerning *eldership* in Titus 1:5 reads, in part:

The eldership of a local church should cover the entire city in which that church is located. Such a unique presbytery in a city preserves the unique oneness of the Body of Christ from damage. One city should have only one church with one presbytery. This practice is illustrated, beyond any question or doubt, by the clear pattern in the New Testament (Acts 8:1; 13:1; Rom. 16:1; 1 Cor. 1:2; Rev. 1:11) and is an absolute prerequisite for the maintaining of proper order in a local church. Because of this, the first thing the apostle charged Titus to do in setting things in order was to appoint elders in every city. (*Holy Bible Recovery Version*, Titus 1:5, footnote 1)

While there were many gatherings of believers in Jerusalem (Acts 2:46; 5:42), a city in which there were tens of thousands of believers (21:20), there was only one church with one eldership in Jerusalem (Acts 8:1; 15:2, 4, 6; 21:18). According to this pattern, all the believers within the administrative boundary of a city constitute the one unique local church within that city, which is overseen by one corporate eldership (cf. 20:17). The unique ground of locality preserves the church in its testimony of the oneness of the Body of Christ from sectarianism and division (1 Cor. 1:10). This is the clear pattern set forth in the Scriptures.

The church of God is one and cannot be divided (v. 13a), but the members of the Body of Christ are spread across the earth and cannot physically gather in one place. The problem of geography is the reason that there are many churches in time and space. The New Testament basis for the existence of many churches is that believers live and gather in different cities. Therefore, the only permissible ground of "division" in the New Testament is that of locality. Any dividing of the church on a basis other than locality is man-made, contrary to God's ordination, and must be firmly rejected (Rom. 16:17; Titus 3:10).

Upon examination, the unique teaching and pattern in the New Testament is that of a local church, a church whose ground is the locality, or the city, in which it is located. No other pattern is presented for the ground of a local church, whether smaller than a city (see article 3 in this series) or greater than a city (see article 4 in this series). The New Testament is consistent in its depiction of local churches and in the apostles' teaching concerning the establishing of local churches. Ultimately, the biblical record consummates in the book of Revelation, where the churches are enumerated according to their respective cities. The written record of the revelation that John saw was to be sent to seven churches, that is, to seven cities (Rev. 1:11). According to the Lord's own word to John, there was one church for one city and one city for one church, each church being designated according to its city.

Conclusion

Either the Bible is the ultimate authority for the teaching and practice of the church, or it is not. Those who argue that the New Testament's depiction of local churches is descriptive and not prescriptive are seeking a pretext for promoting their brand of Christian sect. If we affirm, as we surely do, that the Word of God is the ultimate authority and yet do not accept the New Testament as the governing pattern for the church today, we must confront our motive behind the denial of the clear testimony of the Scriptures. Regardless of the reason, the introduction of extra-biblical bases for establishing churches and the rejection of the New Testament ground of local churches recalls the Old Testament practice of doing what seems right in one's own eyes (Judg. 17:6). Surely this practice describes the situation among the innumerable denominations and independent groups of Christians today. In standing for the authority of God's Word, we must also stand for the New Testament teaching and pattern concerning the genuine ground of the church, the ground of oneness in each locality, to uphold the testimony of the one Body and to afford the Lord a way to build His church.