

# A MODEL OF THE PRACTICAL CHURCH LIFE IN 1 CORINTHIANS

BY JAMES FITE

Most Bible readers would perhaps hesitate to consider the recipients of the first Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians as a pattern to be followed. Indeed, it was the many problems in this church that seem to have motivated the apostle Paul to compose and send his correspondence. Nevertheless, we must thankfully acknowledge that, as a result of this extant apostolic response to such a local church, we have key elements of a scriptural template, a model, for the proper church life as the practical local expression of the universal Body of Christ. First Corinthians describes the church in terms of her divine and human constituents, universal inclusivity and local practicality, organic nature and practical expression, unique ground of oneness, and meetings as a model of a corporate human living in the context of the divine economy.

## The Constituents of the Church—God and the Sanctified Believers

The church contains both the divine and human elements. The church is composed of both God and the saints, which saints are believers “who call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” to be saved (1 Cor. 1:2; 14:33; cf. Rom. 10:13-14). Hence, the church has the element and nature of divinity and humanity.

The humanity constituting the church is a justified, sanctified, and redeemed humanity. First Corinthians 1:30 refers to an ongoing process of God’s salvation, which involves the believers’ entire tripartite being. Christ became to us, the believers, our righteousness in our past experience through His justifying death that we might receive the divine life in our spirit (John 3:6; Rom. 5:18). He continues a present sanctification process by which our soul, with its mind, emotion, and will, is renewed and transformed by the divine life (1 Thes. 5:23; Rom. 6:22; 12:2, 10). Furthermore, we await a hopeful future, the redemption of our body (8:23), a resurrected “spiritual body” (1 Cor. 15:42-44) conformed to “the body of His glory” (Phil. 3:21).

The modifier *of God* in 1 Corinthians 1:2 connotes both the ownership and element of the church. In terms of ownership, Paul identifies the declaration “I am of Paul,” or “of Apollos,” or “of Cephas” (v. 12) as the outward manifestation of divisions among the Corinthians (vv. 10-11). To divisively claim, “I belong to or follow a certain person,” is tantamount to declaring, “I don’t belong to Christ.” However, Paul also considers that declaring, “I am of Christ,” in a way that excludes the apostles and their teaching or excludes other genuine believers is similarly divisive. Later, Paul implies that such declarations are expressions of jealousy and strife that issue not from spiritual men; rather, they have their source in fleshly, even fleshy, men (3:1-4). This perspective—that the church is *of God* (1:2)—indicates that the church should not be of any person, any practice, or any doctrine (e.g., Lutheran, Methodist, Baptist), much less any culture, region, or nationality (e.g., African, American, Anglican, Greek, Roman).

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With respect to element, the church is also *of God*, as implied by the phrase *have been sanctified* (v. 2) In both the Old and New Testaments the Triune God is worshipped with the declaration, “Holy, holy, holy” (Isa. 6:3; Rev. 4:8). Only God is holy; *holy* describes an attribute of what He is in His divine nature. In 1 Corinthians 1:2 “those who have been sanctified” are those who have been made holy; hence, they are saints, that is, holy ones. This implies that in the proper church life the believers are being reconstituted with the holy nature of God to be separate, distinct, and unique. By this process they are becoming the expression of God, not only in likeness but also in the constitution of their nature. The believers are not those who are merely outwardly, or physically, separated in position; they are those who are also being dispositionally reconstituted with the unique element and spiritual essence of God’s divine nature. Hence, they are called, designated, “saints” because they actually are, and are in the process of, becoming divinized in their human nature.

In 14:33 Paul refers to the “churches of the saints,” indicating that the saints are the components of the churches. Witness Lee points out that the equivalence of *the church of God* with *those who have been sanctified in Christ Jesus* in 1:2 “strongly indicates that the church is a composition of the saints and that the saints are the constituents of the church” (*Recovery Version*, v. 2, note 3). Thus, the church and the believers, the saints, are not separate from one another. Individually, the believers are saints; corporately, they are the church.

#### The Universal and Local Aspects of the Church

Paul writes to “the church of God which is in Corinth” (v. 2). The term *church* is both universal and local. In *The Directory of New Testament Churches*, John Heading, in defining the vernacular usage of the terms *church* and *churches*, speaks of this biblical distinction between the universal and local church:

On many occasions, the words “church” and the plural form “churches” occur with reference to (i) historical situations when the context usually decides which locality is meant: (ii) activity and practice relating to some or all churches; (iii) doctrinal background pertaining to service, of relevance to all churches. We shall not draw attention to verses that refer to the universal church as the mystical body of Christ, such as when He said, “I will build my church”, Matt. 16:18. But when the Lord spoke of “the church” in Matthew 18:17, He referred to a local church gathered in His name for disciplinary proceedings. (30)

In 1 Corinthians 1:2 *the church of God* may be considered a universal reference. In 1 Corinthians 15:9 Paul considers himself “the least of the apostles” because he “persecuted the church of God.” Before his conversion Paul’s persecution of the church extended from Jerusalem in Judea to Damascus in ancient Syria (Acts 8:1, 3; 9:1-3). Hence, “the church of God” in 1 Corinthians 15:9 may have a universal sense of comprising all the churches at that time. Likewise, in Paul’s categorization of people in New Testament times—Jews, Greeks, and the church of God (10:32)—*the church of God* may also designate the universal church that includes all the regenerated believers in time and space, that is, all the saints everywhere from the time of the apostles to the present day.

Paul also uses *the church of God* to designate the local church. In 11:22 Paul refers to “the church of God” in the context of his rebuking the Corinthians’ disorderly “com[ing] together in the church” (v. 18), hence, referring to the local assembly. Frank Spence, in *Christian Reunion: A Plea for the Restoration of the “Ecclesia of God,”* implies that the universal church is manifested in a city when he asserts that “the truth-thirsting New Testament student will also rightly conclude that an apostolic community is ‘the body of Christ,’ ‘the temple of God,’ ‘the Ecclesia of God,’ in its appointed city sphere” (20). In 1:2 Paul specifically appends the phrase *which is in Corinth*, indicating that the

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church of God can be located in a definite place, in a locality. In *Interpreters of God*, Frank Theodore Woods explains that in the New Testament teaching and practice, physical distance is the only basis for separation between churches:

The modern plan of Christian communities standing distinct and apart from one another, and in many cases existing to emphasise assent to some particular article of the Creed, or dissent from any creed at all, or to emphasise some particular form of polity—I say that this modern form of confessional Church can claim no sanction, whether from the New Testament or the practice of the early Church. There were, indeed, local Churches—many of them founded by St. Paul himself—but the only thing that separated them was distance, not faith or order. (51-52)

Witness Lee points out that “the church is constituted of the universal God, but it exists on earth in many localities, one of which was Corinth. In nature the church is universal in God, but in practice the church is local in a definite place. Hence, the church has two aspects: the universal and the local” (*Recovery Version*, v. 2, note 2). Witness Lee further comments that “without the universal aspect, the church is void of content; without the local aspect, it is impossible for the church to have any expression and practice. Hence, the New Testament stresses the local aspect of the church also (Acts 8:1; 13:1; Rev. 1:11; etc.)” (1 Cor. 1:2, note 2). In 1 Corinthians Paul refers to “the church” sixteen times<sup>1</sup> and to “the churches” six times.<sup>2</sup>

### The Organic Nature and Practical Expression of the Church

The organic nature and practical expression of the church is signified by the term *Body of Christ*: every body is intrinsically organic and an intensively practical expression of that organic reality.

### The Oneness of the Universal Church as the Mystical Body of Christ

Paul’s declaration, “The church, which is His Body, the fullness of the One who fills all in all” (Eph. 1:22-23), unambiguously equates the Body of Christ with the universal church. This concept is reiterated in 1 Corinthians. The “many are one Body” (10:17), and they were all “baptized into one Body” (12:13). Paul declares that the Corinthian believers “are the Body of Christ” collectively and “members” individually (v. 27). Paul uses the physical human body as an analogy for the relationship of the believers with both Christ and one another: on the one hand, “the body is not one member but many” (v. 14); on the other hand, although “the members are many,...the body [is] one” (v. 20). All these members are indispensable, having different strengths and functions, all of which are needed for the one body to function. Furthermore, the members mutually care for one another by honoring, suffering with, and rejoicing with one another (vv. 23-26). As a result of this mutual blending and adjusting of one another, there is “no division in the body” (v. 25).

Paul extends the analogy of the human body as a type of Christ’s mystical Body to include the very person of the Body. The entire body, comprising the head with all the members, is one person. In the same way that the physical “body is one and has many members” and “all the members of the body...are one body, so also is the Christ” (v. 12). Here Paul declares that the Head and the members together are one person with one name—Christ. Not only is the Head Christ; the Body is also Christ. What a union!

### The Physical Body of Christ as a Type of the Church, His Mystical Body, as Seen in the Lord’s Table, the Lord’s Supper

In chapters 10 and 11 Paul speaks respectively of the Lord’s table (10:21) and the Lord’s supper (11:20). To bless the cup is to fellowship, to jointly participate in, to

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partake of, the blood Christ; to break and partake of the one bread is the believers' communion and fellowship of the body of Christ (10:16). The eating of the one bread (v. 17) makes the eaters one, both with the bread and with those who partake of the bread. The bread signifies, on the one hand, the physical body of Christ broken for us on the cross (11:24; cf. Matt. 26:26) and, on the other hand, the mystical Body of Christ. First Corinthians 10:17 states explicitly that "we who are many are one Body."

In chapter 10 Paul contrasts the Lord's table with the demons' table and the Lord's cup with the demons' cup (v. 21). This indicates that behind the elemental symbols there is a spiritual reality. To eat and drink of the elements of the Lord's table is to enjoy the Lord's redemptive work in offering His body and shedding His blood on the cross. The believers' joint partaking of His person and work reconstitutes them to make them one with Him and with one another, that is, to make them all His one Body.

In 11:17-34 Paul returns to the subject of the bread and the cup, referring to the coming together in the same place to "eat the Lord's supper" (v. 20). In the context of reviewing the definition of eating "this bread" and of drinking "the cup" (v. 26), he rebukes the divisions and parties existing among the Corinthian believers (v. 19). To come together in such a divisive way "in the church" is to "despise the church of God" (vv. 18, 22). The proper eating of the bread and drinking of the cup is to remember the Lord (v. 25) and to "declare the Lord's death until He comes" (v. 26). Paul warns each believer to "prove himself," lest this one's eating and drinking in "an unworthy manner" causes him to be "guilty of the body and of the blood of the Lord" (vv. 27-28). Each eater and drinker must properly discern that partaking of the elements of the Lord's supper is different from ordinary eating and drinking, because these are symbols of both the Lord's physical body and His mystical Body. With this discernment the partakers will examine and prove themselves, thereby ensuring that they are right with both the Head and the members of the Body, lest they instead bring upon themselves the Lord's discipline (vv. 30-33).

### *The Union of the Triune God with Man's Entire Tripartite Being for the Body Life, the Practical Church Life*

In chapter 6 Paul juxtaposes two profoundly significant statements. In verse 15 he speaks of the union of a believer's physical body with Christ: "Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ?" Then Paul extends the application of God's original preparation of the woman in Genesis 2 to a contemporary physical scenario where the woman is a prostitute: "Shall I then take the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute? Absolutely not!" Then in 1 Corinthians 6:17 he further extends the application to the spiritual union of Christ with His believers. After God prepared the woman and presented her to the man, the record in Genesis 2 concludes that the two "shall become one flesh" (v. 24). When a man and a woman are joined physically, they become one flesh, that is, one body. According to Paul, this is a fact regardless of the moral status of the woman; thus, he asserts that "he who is joined to a prostitute is one body" (1 Cor. 6:16). Paul then speaks of, in comparison to this physical union, the spiritual union of the believers with the Lord, stating, "But he who is joined to the Lord is one spirit" (v. 17). On the one hand, our bodies are members of Christ (v. 15); on the other hand, we are one spirit with the Lord (v. 17). Paul continues by saying to the believers, "Your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God" (v. 19). Hence, from these verses we may conclude that 1 Corinthians speaks of the Triune God—Christ, the Holy Spirit, and God—joined to the tripartite man (cf. 1 Thes. 5:23)—from his innermost part, his spirit, to his outermost part, his body.

First Corinthians speaks repeatedly of the interrelationship between man's spirit, soul, and body. In chapter 2 Paul speaks of "the spirit of man" (v. 11) and contrasts "the spiritual man" with the "soulish man" (vv. 14-15); in chapter 3 he contrasts "spiritual men" with fleshy "infants in Christ" (v. 1). Witness Lee points out that



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a believer may be one of three kinds of men: (1) a spiritual man, living in his spirit under the anointing of the Holy Spirit (Rom. 8:4; Gal. 5:25); (2) a soulish man, living in his soul under the direction of the soul, the natural life ([1 Cor.] 2:14); or (3) a fleshy and fleshly man, being of the flesh and living in the flesh under the influence of the nature of the flesh. (*Recovery Version*, 3:1, note 2)

Paul is a positive example of a spiritual man. He intended to come to the believers “in love and a spirit of meekness” (4:21). Although he was “absent in the body,” he was “present in the spirit” (5:3). His contact with the believers was not by mere soulish emotions but by his spirit: “I rejoice at the coming of Stephanas and Fortunatus and Achaicus,...for they refreshed my spirit” (16:17-18). Paul also provides a practical example of how to coordinate the functions of the soul with the functions of the spirit: “I will pray with the spirit, and I will pray also with the mind; I will sing with spirit, and I will sing also with the mind” (14:15). As a result of such cooperation, the spirit can become the spirit of our mind (Eph. 4:23). Paul further states that “the spirits of prophets are subject to prophets” (1 Cor. 14:32), indicating that the believers “should learn how to exercise and use their spirits at their discretion” (Lee, *Recovery Version*, v. 32, note 1). This corresponds to his exhortation in Romans 12—which he gives in the context of referring to the believers’ tripartite being (body (v. 1); soul (v. 2); and spirit (v. 11)—to present our body for the Body of Christ (v. 5).

Hence, the church is not merely a human association or a connected group of like-minded individuals; neither is the church an organizational construct. Rather, the church is the issue of an organic union that begins with the believers’ union with the Lord to be one spirit (1 Cor. 6:17) and consummates with a body of resurrection. This is the result of a transforming and transfiguring process through which the sown “soulish body” becomes a raised “spiritual body” (15:44).

### The Church’s Unique Ground of Oneness

Among the believers in Corinth, the matter of division was the first problem and, as such, the source of their many problems. Thus, Witness Lee states that “in dealing with all the problems in the church at Corinth, the apostle’s ax first touches the root, that is, the divisions among them” (*Life-study* 49). What began in the first century as “I am of Paul, and I of Apollos, and I of Cephas, and I of Christ” (1:12) has in the contemporary age morphed into “I am a Wesleyan, I am a Presbyterian, I am a Baptist, I am Pentecostal, etc.” Christians have divided on the basis of allegiances to a person, to a system of church administration, to a practice, or to a way of carrying out meetings. Furthermore, as with the Corinthian believers, some today also declare, “I am of Christ”—in a way to divisively exclude other believers or to exclude the apostles and their teaching.

It seems that there are countless dictionaries, encyclopedias, and websites that have been devoted to the mere cataloguing, explaining, and updating of formal and informal divisions and realignments among Christians. Seeking Christians who desire to counter this downward trend away from God’s original intention and ordination may find that 1 Corinthians contains the antidote to this most fundamental of problems. An enlightened view and acceptance of the scriptural ground of the oneness of the church is crucial in enabling the Lord’s children to return to God’s original intention and pattern. Let us consider some crucial elements of this original biblical pattern.

### The Church Not Being a Physical Building

Despite the vernacular usage of the term *church*, it should go without saying that in the New Testament this designation is never applied to a physical building. As J. N. Darby aptly states in “Churches and the Church”:

THE CHURCH IS NOT A HUMAN ASSOCIATION, A GROUP OF LIKE-MINDED INDIVIDUALS, OR AN ORGANIZATIONAL CONSTRUCT. THE CHURCH IS THE ISSUE OF AN ORGANIC UNION THAT BEGINS WITH THE BELIEVERS’ UNION WITH THE LORD TO BE ONE SPIRIT.

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All scripture clearly [shows] there was one assembly in a place, which was God's assembly.

Churches as buildings, they had none; the Most High dwelleth not in temples made with hands; and hence they met in houses where they could; but all formed one assembly. (320)

First Corinthians in particular explicitly links *the church of God* with peoples and persons (cf. 1:2; 10:32). Apostles, prophets, teachers, and other gifted persons are “in the church” (12:28). Furthermore, these members in the Body (cf. v. 18) should consider that the building of the church is the God-approved aim of their work (14:4-5). The church is personified in that it can “[come] together in one place” (v. 23) and can be persecuted (15:9). Since the churches comprise persons, they can receive and act on apostolic directions (16:1), and they can warmly salute and greet one another (v. 19). The New Testament church is not an edifice. The church is an assembly, the gathering together, of persons, not an architectural structure.

### *One Church in One City—the Local Church Comprising All the Saints in That City*

Both the pattern presented in the New Testament and the confirming utterances of other subsequent faithful witnesses identify the city as the base and ground on which the oneness of the church can be practically carried out. In his early-nineteenth-century *General History of the Christian Religion and Church*, Augustus Neander refers specifically to the “party divisions” in the church in Corinth, which threatened the oneness of the church there:

Everywhere in the epistles of the New Testament, Christians of the same city appear as members associated together to form one ἐκκλησία. This unity never represents itself as something which is yet to take place, but as the original form, having its ground from the beginning in the essence of the Christian consciousness; and the party divisions which threatened to dissolve this unity, appear rather as a morbid affection [feeling] which had crept in later, as in the Corinthian church. (185)

In *History of the Planting and Training of the Christian Church by the Apostles*, Neander reiterates the thought of one church in one city: “The Epistles of the apostle Paul give the clearest evidence that all the Christians of one city originally formed one whole church” (151).

Later in the century, Robert Govett wrote *Are Dissenters from the “Church of England” Guilty of Schism?* While acknowledging the need for believers to separate themselves from worldly systems, he reminds “dissenters” that there is a scriptural template of “one church in a city”:

Let a word now be addressed to believers who dissent from “The Church Establishment.” While our position of separation from that, and every other national and worldly system, is wholly right on Scripture grounds, are we justified, or must we not rather plead wholly guilty, when we look at the divisions which in every city reign among those who are the children of God? Of old there was but one church in a city: it was a united body, assembling in one place (1 Cor. 1:2; 1 Thess. 1:1; Rev. 2:1, & c.). Now we have many Lord’s tables, many party-names, much separation of spirit one from another. The Lord give us that oneness of heart which would be so glorifying to Him.

Darby lists specific New Testament instances that refer to one assembly, that is, one church, in a city:

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seven churches; so John writes to the assembly. So everywhere there was God's assembly in any given place which could be distinctly addressed as such... We have (Acts 11:22) the assembly which was in Jerusalem, though it was exceedingly numerous; in Acts 13:1, the assembly that was at Antioch. (320)

Frank Spence calls specific attention to the definite article that the New Testament writers use with *ekklesia*: "Every Ecclesia or community of believers organised by the apostles, was designed by them to include all the Christians resident in the city or island of population in which it was placed; it being always referred to as 'the' (and therefore the only) Ecclesia in such city" (12).

Other commentators call attention to the fact that neither the geographic size of the city nor the numeric size of the congregation were factors that allowed more than one church in a city. Joseph Agar Beet, in *The Church, the Churches, and the Sacraments*, points out this fact: "The Christians in any one city, even in so large a city as Ephesus, would naturally become one organized community, and were therefore called as in Rev. ii.I, 'the Church in Ephesus'" (28). In his 1872 publication *The Genesis of the Church* Henry Cotterill makes an analogous point concerning the church in Jerusalem:

We have observed that whilst, in the language both of Christ Himself and of the apostles, the whole body of disciples or Christians everywhere is spoken of as "the Church," yet apostolic writers speak of Christians in a particular country as "the Churches" in that country. But whenever they would describe the body of Christians in a single city,—even in Jerusalem where, shortly after the day of Pentecost, there were five thousand disciples—it is always "the Church," never "the Churches," in that city: the use of the singular indicating that common corporate life of Christians dwelling in the same place. (567-568)

Spence similarly implies that neither the large number of believers in Jerusalem nor the broad-minded cultural provinciality of Ephesus nor the narrow-minded factionality in Corinth was ground for more than one church in a city:

Neither in the case of Jerusalem, where thousands were obedient to the faith; of Ephesus, where Paul's three years' work influenced even the provincial Asiarchs; nor of Corinth, where he had occasion to reprove the spirit of faction, is there the smallest indication that there was more than one Ecclesia. (12-13)

Spence later describes how larger churches may have had district meetings while remaining one local church community:

In each city which contained a vigorous apostolic organisation, whilst there would be numerous *district* gatherings for preaching, worship, exhortation, evangelisation, etc., all the Christians associated with them formed one local visible spiritual community or "body of Christ"; and their oneness was manifested and perfected by their coming together for communion and for conducting (either personally or representatively) the spiritual and temporal business of the Ecclesia as a unit or whole. (23)

In *The Historic Church*, J. C. V. Durell offers evidence that the teaching and practice of one church in one locality continued at least into the second century, having traced this historically to the time of Ignatius:

In one place there is one local church. Such an arrangement as a plurality of churches in the same place would be quite foreign to the thought of Ignatius. This is shown by the consistent occurrence of such phrases as "the church which is in Ephesus," "the church which is in Magnesia" [referring to a city during the second century]. There is no such phrase as "the churches in Ephesus." (30)

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Durell further asserts that these local churches maintained a harmonious and interactive relationship and fellowship with other local churches: “So, then, in one place there is one church. The churches of different places preserve harmonious, friendly relations one with another, through mutual intercourse and acts of sympathy, as befits communities that together make up ἡ καθολικὴ ἐκκλησία [the catholic ecclesia], the sum of them all” (31).

### *One Eldership in Each Church in a City*

Those who are both administratively experienced and familiar with human nature may simultaneously express incredulity at the practicality of one church in one city and begrudgingly admire that such an order seems to have historically continued beyond the very initial stages of the church. They may then object by pointing to the current state of Christianity with its denominations and almost countless divisions as proof of the inevitable long-term outcome of any such human aspiration and endeavor. However, we must consider the wisdom of the Holy Spirit in addressing this objection.

Darby calls attention to the apostles’ early practice of appointing elders in every church:

So Paul (Acts 14:21-23) returns to Lystra, Derbe, and Iconium, and chooses for them elders in every assembly.

All formed one assembly, God’s assembly, in that place, the elders being elders in the whole as one body. (320)

It is helpful to particularly review the context of verse 23. Acts 13:1 refers to the local church in Antioch. In that local church five brothers were together fasting, praying, and ministering to the Lord. Witness Lee points out that these five prophets and teachers were “composed of Jews and Gentiles, each having a different background, education, and status”; he concludes that “the church is composed of all races and classes of people regardless of their background” (*Recovery Version*, v. 1, note 9). The Holy Spirit was able to speak to this culturally and racially diverse group, asking them to set apart Barnabas and Saul for a specific work (v. 2). The biblical record meaningfully indicates that they were then sent out both by the others and by the Holy Spirit (vv. 3-4). The subsequent verses (through 14:28) record what Bible students now refer to as Paul’s first ministry, or missionary, journey. In this journey Saul and Barnabas passed through a number of cities, announcing the word of God and the gospel. As a result of their preaching, suffering of persecution, and travels, a number of disciples were raised up in many of these localities. On their return to Antioch they again passed through some of the same cities (cf. 13:51; 14:6, 21) and appointed elders “in every church” (v. 23). Darby points out that these elders were “elders in a given city of God’s assembly there” (321). Neander goes further to indicate the collective role of the church elders in that city or town: “We here go on the supposition, that in each town, from the beginning onward, one single community formed itself under the guidance of a senate of elders” (*General History* 185). In *The Beginnings of Christianity with a View of the State of the Roman World at the Birth of Christ*, George P. Fisher emphasizes the plurality of this eldership: “In towns, where the number of Christians was considerable, the eldership, as we have said, was plural” (554).

*Elders...in every church* in Acts 14:23 should be jointly considered with *elders in every city* in Titus 1:5 to affirm that the jurisdiction of the church is the same as that of the city. In *The Government of the Church in the First Century: An Essay on the Beginnings of the Christian Ministry*, William Moran adds some other verses, which, taken together, demonstrate the practicality of the truth of one church in one city: “St. Paul writes ‘to all the saints who are at Philippi, with the overseers and deacons’; he calls to Miletus the elders of the church of Ephesus; he sends Titus to establish elders in all the cities of

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Crete. The local flock is the city community” (59). The one church eldership in one city is a crucial element in the practical outworking of one church in one city. With such a corporate eldership that is practically and spiritually joined and related, there is a practical way to manage the church in the city, regardless of the congregational size.

### *Many Churches in a Province or Region*

Cotterill generalizes, based on Revelation’s usage of the terms *church* and *churches*, that the singular form refers to a city and the plural to a whole country:

In the Apocalypse we find “the churches in Asia,” and (according to the best MSS.) each of the local churches is the church *in* the city in which it is planted. It appears therefore that when the churches in a country are spoken of as a whole, they are often called the churches *of* that country; otherwise the preposition is generally used which implies local habitation. (565-566)

G. H. Lang in *The Churches of God* identifies four cases—saints in a province, the church in a city, the churches in a territory, and the singular usage of *church* in Acts 9:31—and concludes that other than the universal church, there was never a singular church in a larger geographic area:

There were “the saints in the whole of” a province (II Cor. 1:1), “the church in” a city (I Cor. 1:2), “the churches of Macedonia” (II Cor. 8:1) and “of Galatia” (Gal. 1:2), that is, situated in those territories, and we read of “the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria” (Acts 9:31); but there was no church of Galatia or Judea or Macedonia, no combination of churches in a given area into the church of that area, and thus by organization and locality a body corporate, distinct from the church universal, only a part thereof. (14)

Lang seems to be saying that there can be many saints or many churches in a province or area, but there is only one church universally, and thus, according to the biblical record, there can be only one church in a city.

Heading further clarifies this point by noting that there is no case in the New Testament of local churches in several cities being amalgamated into a regional or national church. The local church was designated by the name of the city where the believers met, but they were never grouped to form a church of a country:

There was no such thing as “the church of Achaia”, since in the New Testament any church was designated only by the name of the city in which the believers met in the Lord’s name. There were “churches” of a region, as “the churches of Galatia”, 1 Cor. 16.1, but local churches in several cities were never grouped to form a church of a district or country. (10)

Heading goes on to say that God’s purpose remains unchanged, regardless of man’s adherence to unscriptural traditions or attempt at innovation:

Note carefully that there was no “church of Asia,” since in God’s purpose local churches in cities never amalgamated to form a church of a province. In 1 Corinthians 16.19 we read of “the churches of Asia”; each individual church sent greetings to Corinth. In this respect, God’s purpose has never changed since New Testament times, whatever may be the traditions and innovations of men. (18)

**I**n his 1910 *Church Unity: Studies of Its Most Important Problems*, Charles Augustus Briggs provides a succinct summary of the truth concerning the one universal church encompassing the local churches and the local church representing the entire

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church in its particular city: “The one Church embraces a number of local churches, in different cities and provinces. The Church is one. Nowhere is there more than one church in one place. The local church is the representative of the whole Church in the particular city” (33).

### *The Church in a House, Not House Churches*

Some counter the evidence of one church in a given city or locality with the New Testament references that seem to justify many so-called house churches in a city (cf. Rom. 16:5; 1 Cor. 16:19). Fisher, however, explains that the church “in the house” refers not to “a separate organization” but to a place in which it is practical to meet:

The church “in the house” of one or another, was not a separate organization, but simply a meeting-place of a fraction of the community of believers, who might, for want of a sufficiently spacious edifice, be compelled to hold their worship in more than one apartment. But the churches in the Apostolic age were municipal in their boundaries. (554-555)

Spence gives the most complete response by looking at the five New Testament references to a local church meeting in a house. He begins by asserting that there is not any inconsistency with having only one church in a city:

There is nothing in any of the five passages referring to an Ecclesia in a given person’s “house,” which is in the least degree inconsistent with the postulate that the New Testament knows only one Christian Ecclesia in a city. In every instance the house mentioned was without doubt the central meeting-place or “headquarters” of the community where its general as well as its official meetings were held. (14)

According to Spence, the first two references to a church in a house are in Romans 16. He asserts that these two instances may be considered together. In the first instance Paul greets Prisca and Aquila and “the church, which is in their house” (vv. 3, 5). The church here must be the church in Rome, since this letter was addressed “to all who are in Rome, beloved of God, the called saints” (1:7). The second instance is in 16:23, where Paul sends greetings from Gaius, the host of Paul and “of the whole church,” implying that Gaius hosted the whole church when the church met together. Spence explains this in more detail:

In Rom. xvi. Paul commends to the Roman Christians the bearer of his letter, “Phoebe our sister, who is a servant” (or deaconess) “of the Ecclesia that is at Cenchreæ”. He next salutes Prisca and Aquila, the hostess and host of the Ecclesia in Rome, next the Ecclesia itself as a whole—“the Ecclesia that is in their house”—and next, numerous individual members and groups of members.

After greeting the last group he enjoins all the Ecclesia members to “salute one another with a holy kiss,” and adds, “all the Ecclesias of Christ” (*i.e.*, the separate city Ecclesias thus far founded) “salute you”...

Farther on (v. 23) the apostle says: “Gaius my host, and of the whole Ecclesia, saluteth you,” *i.e.*, obviously the whole Ecclesia in Corinth, from which city he writes. As both of Paul’s Epistles to the Corinthians are addressed to “the Ecclesia of God which is at Corinth,” and as, in I Cor. xiv. 23, in referring to meetings of *all its members*, he a second time uses the above-cited expression, “the whole Ecclesia,” it is manifestly impossible that there could have been more than one Ecclesia in Corinth. (14-15)

The third mention of the church in a house also involves Aquila and Prisca, who sent their greetings (in this case from Ephesus) along with “the church [in Ephesus], which is in their house” (1 Cor. 16:19). Spence says, “As Eph. ii. 21, 22 and Christ’s

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own words make it clear that there was only one Ecclesia in Ephesus, it follows that the house of this large-hearted Christian pair was its meeting-place” (15).

The fourth mention of the church in a person’s house is in Colossians 4:15, where Paul sends his greetings to “the brothers in Laodicea, as well as Nymphas and the church, which is in his house.” Spence notes that “Christ’s words [in Revelation 3:14] demonstrate that there was only one Christian community in Laodicea and consequently that its meeting-place was in the above-mentioned house” (15-16).

The fifth mention is in Philemon: “Paul...to Philemon...and to the church, which is in your house” (vv. 1-2). Spence says,

It cannot be doubted that they were as much an Ecclesia as the Christians of Laodicea who, being near neighbours, are referred to, with them, in that sense. And if, like them, they constituted *the*, *i.e.*, the only Ecclesia of their city, it follows that their headquarters were Philemon’s house. (16)

Spence further addresses the subject of local church meetings in believers’ homes, referring especially to sectional meetings and gatherings, which most likely were in homes and, in the case of the entire church meeting together, in the “largest room of some richer convert’s house” (37).

#### *The Local Churches Being the Expression of the One Church, the One Body, in Each Locality*

The New Testament provides a beautiful twofoldness of truth in the seeming tension between the local practicality and boundary of the local church and the universal spirituality and unbounded measure of the Body of Christ. In *The Christian Ecclesia: A Course of Lectures on the Early History and Early Conceptions of the Ecclesia and Four Sermons*, Fenton John Anthony Hort says, “St. Paul’s recognition of the individual responsibility and substantial independence of single city Ecclesiae was brought into harmony with his sense of the unity of the body of Christ as a whole” (122).

Darby offers a refrain to the same point: “The apostle could say, ‘To the church of God which is at Corinth.’ It represented the whole unity of the body in that place. ‘Ye are the body of Christ, and members in particular.’ Two bodies of Christ, even in one place representatively there could not be” (320). Darby then goes on to say that “the local assembly represented the whole assembly of God, as I Corinthians shows us plainly” (320). In his study of the Apostles’ Creed, Henry Barclay Swete similarly asserts that each local church represents the one Body:

The Pauline mission planted a church in every city which it visited. Thessalonica and Corinth had each its own ‘church’; and Galatia, being a province, more than one...Each congregation was to be a church in miniature, the representative of the One Body in its own locality; the Church itself in all localities was to remain one and the same, since it had one Head and one Spirit. (8-9)

Woods considers this representation of the whole Body by each local church to be the most important aspect of the church: “What is more important, each local Church was regarded as representing the whole body, not some particular section of it. Each Church, therefore, stood for the one truth and the whole truth” (52).

#### *The Fellowship of the Church, the Churches, and the Apostles*

The local churches are the practical issue of the apostolic ministry. According to Acts 13:4 through 14:28, Paul’s first missionary journey began with announcing the word of

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God as the gospel and concluded with churches in every city that he had traveled to (13:5; 14:23). However, these newly established local churches did not remain as mere isolated communities. Fisher suggests that they stayed in fellowship with both the apostles and one another:

In point of fact, the churches in the Apostolic age, as we have said, were bounded by municipal limits. Apart from their common relation to Apostolic guidance, each of these communities was complete in itself. They were in communion with one another, and a rupture of this communion, through the act of one or more of the churches, except for a very grave cause, would have been considered an unchristian proceeding. (555-556)

This fellowship was not hypothetical but very practical. In 1 Corinthians Paul directs the Corinthians to follow the same instructions that he gave to all “the churches of Galatia” (16:1). He then proceeds to instruct them that “on the first day of the week” they should lay aside some material contributions, which he wanted them to later carry as a “gift to Jerusalem” (vv. 2-3). Paul was also the messenger of greetings from the churches in Asia (v. 19), indicating his expectation that a local church would not remain isolated from the other churches.

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Embedded in these seemingly simple directions are some significant principles. First, the directions indicate that the church should gather together at least once a week (cf. Acts 20:7), not on the Sabbath as the Jews but on the Lord’s Day, the day of resurrection (cf. Rev. 1:10; John 20:1). Second, Paul expected that the local churches should be the same in teaching and practice; he was consistent in what he taught, directed, or set up as a custom “everywhere in every church” (1 Cor. 4:17; cf. 7:17; 11:16; 14:33; 16:1). Third, the local churches should support the extra-local work. In chapter 16 Paul mentions his intention to stay with the Corinthians and then be sent out by them (vv. 6-7). This indicates that the church should also willingly receive the Lord’s workers, including apostles and other workers of the Lord (cf. vv. 1, 16). All these examples demonstrate that although the church’s local standing is as the Lord’s testimony in a particular city, each church should remain in ongoing fellowship and communication both with the other local churches and with the apostles and their teaching.

### *No Scriptural Basis for Denominations*

Paul positively beseeches the Corinthian believers to “speak the same thing” and to be “attuned in the same mind” and even “in the same opinion” (1:10). The Greek word for *attuned*, καταρτίζω [katartizo], has the sense of “to repair, to restore, to adjust, to mend, making a broken thing thoroughly complete, joined perfectly together” (Lee, *Recovery Version*, v. 10, note 4). Since Paul heard that there were strifes among the Corinthians (v. 11), he appeals that “there be no divisions” (v. 10) among them, asking rhetorically, “Is Christ divided?” (v. 13). Later, Paul states that he had heard that there existed divisions and parties among the believers when they came together (11:18-19). Paul recognized these serious symptoms, which, if left unchecked or untreated, would lead to substantial damage to the function and testimony of the church. There are some hints that this Epistle had a positive effect on the Corinthian believers, causing them to be “sorrowful according to God,” a sorrow that worked “repentance unto salvation” (2 Cor. 7:9-10).

Sadly, the state of Christianity today with respect to the church and the churches would be unrecognizable to the apostle Paul. A century ago, in *The Doctrine of the Church and Christian Reunion*, Arthur C. Headlam noted that there is no biblical basis “for our modern divisions”:

It has been suggested that the expression the “churches” might be used in the same manner as has become customary in certain modern circles, for a number of different societies in each place separate from one another, just as there are what are called Anglican, Romanist,

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Wesleyan, Congregational churches in one city. It is difficult to conceive of anything more fundamentally alien to the whole spirit of the New Testament than this. As there could only be one Church of God in the world, so there could only be one Church of God in Corinth, although it might, and probably did, consist of many congregations [meeting places]...No justification can be found in the New Testament for our modern divisions. (78)

Swete observes that denominations were unseen in the early days of Christianity:

Each of the primitive churches thus organized was the sole representative of the Ecclesia in its own locality; such a spectacle as is now presented in every English town and almost in every English village, of dissident denominations and rival places of worship dividing among them a population baptized into the One Christ, was nowhere to be seen in the first days of Christianity. (17)

Concerning the modern associations and societies of Christians, Swete is broad-hearted in thanking God and desiring to follow the faith, love, and admirable work of these baptized brothers in Christ. Swete goes so far as to recognize the work of the Spirit among them; nevertheless, he concludes that these are not the church as described in the New Testament:

For all these signs of the working of His Spirit in non-episcopal bodies we thank God, and we recognize those who manifest them as brethren in Christ, whose faith and love we desire to follow. But the fact remains that the position occupied by these separatist bodies is not that of the churches described in the New Testament, and would not have been recognized as legitimate by the Christian commonwealth of primitive days. They are voluntary associations of baptized Christians, religious societies which have shewn themselves capable of doing much admirable work; but they lack the note of unity which characterizes the historical Church. 'Churches,' in the strict and Scriptural sense, they are not. (18-19)

Spence goes further in dismantling the weak apologies given to defend denominationalism. He identifies the internal and external inconsistencies of the different theories that justify denominations and notes their discrepancy with the New Testament concept:

Whilst admitting that the apostles founded one Ecclesia in each city, and that Christ's seven messages, and the Acts and Epistles know only one community, nevertheless [different theories] variously maintain (a) that there may be many Congregational or Baptist *Ecclesias* in one city; (b) that all the members of a denomination in the world, or in a nation, or in any local church of such denomination are an Ecclesia...The New Testament contains no such conception as that of a visible Congregational or Baptist Ecclesia. (23-24)

He adds emphatically, "As there is abounding evidence that *from the beginning* of the Gospel He inspired His agents to organise His followers in each city into one body, is it not plain that by separating and divorcing ourselves in every city into various communities *acting apart from each other* we are putting asunder what He 'hath joined together'?" (25). Spence further states,

In presence of the many distinct references to the members of an Ecclesia as together constituting Christ's body, and clearly defining it as consisting of the Christians of a city; and, above all, of the fact that Christ Himself in His messages to the seven Ecclesias expressly recognises and thus gives divine sanction to the city community principle planned by His agents; this point [of denominations] need not be further pursued here. (33)

Spence identifies both the error of "inflation" of so-called national churches and that of "fission" in congregational assemblies when compared to the New Testament model of one church in one city:

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As claimants to be New Testament *Ecclesias*, do not the advocates of the *national Churches*, Established and non-Established, in departing from the apostolic principle of one *Ecclesia* in one city, err by inflation, as obviously as do Congregationalist bodies by fission?...

The definition of a Christian *Ecclesia*, which some perplexed but mentally ease-loving minds fall back upon as a satisfactory closure of the whole controversy on the subject, “a congregation of faithful men,” has no support in the New Testament. It would make any unorganised gathering of Christians—even the “two or three” who “are gathered together in” Christ’s “name”—an *Ecclesia*, thereby completely subverting the apostolic principle of one *Ecclesia* in one city. (35n4, 36)

In the spirit of a loving appeal, Norris Jacob Reasoner in *Be One: A Loving Appeal from One Who Loves the Lord to Every Other One Who Loves the Lord That Denominational Ties May Be Lost in the Larger Fellowship of Christ Only* offers a simple biblical solution to avoid denominational alignment:

What shall the church be called, when unity shall have been accomplished?

A number of names are given in the Book, but more than all others, it is simply “the church.” Therefore, to be wholly scriptural, and to avoid alignment with any denomination, why not call it simply and scripturally, “The church in your town.” (376)

#### **The Meetings of the Local Church Being a Model of the Proper Human Living in the Context of the Universal Divine Economy**

The local church is practical. This practicality is particularly manifested in the meetings of the church. First Corinthians speaks of “the whole church” coming “together in one place” (14:23). Based on this verse, Witness Lee identifies the meeting with the church:

The matter of meeting must be absolutely related to the church. If the whole church comes together, then we meet as the church. If it is not possible for the entire church to come together, we must meet in different places, but all the different meetings are just parts of that one church. All the meetings in one city should be constituents of the unique local church in that city. This is the proper way to meet. (*How to Meet* 15)

Lee goes on to identify eight references in 1 Corinthians to the meeting (“assembled” in 5:4 and “come together” in 1:17-18, 20, 33-34; 14:23, 26) and notes that 1 Corinthians “is not just a book which deals with gifts but a book which deals with meetings... Gifts are not the main point; the meetings are. The gifts are for the meetings” (89). Lee also warns that meeting in a divisive way is sinful because of the damage this causes to the Body of Christ: “God’s purpose is to build up a Body for His Son. If we meet in a divisive way, if we meet without keeping the oneness of the church, we are damaging the Body of Christ by our meetings; we are frustrating the building up of the church. So many people are innocently sinful; yet still they are sinful, because they are dividing and damaging the Body of Christ” (18).

The pattern in 1 Corinthians indicates that in addition to coming together for the Lord’s supper (11:20), the believers also came together for the exercise of the spiritual gifts (12:1). In the context of chapter 12 these gifts are distributed to the members of the Body through the varied operation of the Spirit to carry out the Triune God’s purpose to develop and build up the Body of Christ. Lee states that “when Christians meet together, it is time for them to function by using their gifts... Christian meetings are related to the exercise of the gifts” (*How to Meet* 81).

Paul concludes chapter 12 with the encouragement to “desire the greater gifts” and to

take “a most excellent way” (v. 31). After the famous chapter on the excelling love, chapter 14 continues with the charge to “pursue love,” “especially that you may prophesy” (v. 1). Paul wants the believers to earnestly desire the greater and more important gifts, especially the gift of prophesying, rather than the less important ones, such as speaking in tongues. Prophesying and interpretation are more important because they result in the “building up and encouragement and consolation to men”; they build up the church, and they cause the church to “receive building up” (vv. 3-5).

In verse 26 Paul describes five key elements of a Christian meeting—a psalm, teaching, revelation, tongue, and interpretation—for the one primary goal—the building up, the edification, of the saints and the church. The phrase *each one has* indicates that all the attendants are responsible for bringing something to the meeting. Lee explains,

The central matter in the meeting of the church is to prophesy, to speak something for Christ, that the church might be built up, but the first thing in the meetings of the church is to praise. When we come together, everyone has a mouth to praise and a psalm for praising. (*How to Meet* 109-110)

Lee later indicates that psalming, singing, and praising should be “the first thing in our meetings” (113). Lee suggests that this way of meeting, which existed at Paul’s time, needs to be recovered: “Do you see the contrast between God’s way and our present situation? We all must drop our background and linger no longer in the present, degraded situation. We must be brought back to the original way. We have not invented this; we have only discovered what has been here for nearly two thousand years” (109-110).

Darby provides an excellent summary of this biblical model:

Gifts were exercised as set in the whole body, wherever the gifted member was, according to scriptural rules. The result of the examination of Scripture is that there was one assembly of God in each town where there were Christians; that these were members of the body of Christ—the only membership known in Scripture; and gifts were exercised in the whole church, or one assembly of God in the whole world, as members and servants of Christ by the operation of the Spirit, according to rules given in Scripture. (321)

### A Model Local Church of God


Regretfully, in today’s Christianity the church as the Body of Christ has been divided. However, we may draw encouragement from Paul’s declaration in his introduction to 1 Corinthians, as Lee notes:

The church of God! Not the church of Cephas, of Apollos, of Paul, or of any practice or doctrine, but of God. In spite of all the division, sin, confusion, abusing of gifts, and heretical teaching in the church in Corinth, the apostle still called it “the church of God” because the divine and spiritual essence which makes the assembled believers the church of God was actually there. Such a spiritual address by the apostle was based on his spiritual view in looking upon the church in Christ. Such a simple address alone should have eliminated all the division and confusion in both practice and doctrine.” (*Recovery Version*, 1:2, note 1)

The New Testament, and especially 1 Corinthians, provides a practical template of the church life. In this template we see both the goal and the path for returning to God’s initial desire. The first step is recognizing the key elements of this model of the practical church life as presented in 1 Corinthians. We should not be narrow or exclusive. Rather, we should recognize and accept all genuine blood-washed and Spirit-regenerated believers regardless of their background. We would simply believe the Bible without insistence on special terms and conditions, certain elements of a creed, or

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specific doctrines or practices. Instead, we would give the Lord an opportunity to use us as a remnant who loves Him and seeks only Him to recover the proper church life. Many elements and aspects of the pattern of such a church life have been recognized by others who preceded us. Are we willing to pay the price to implement the original New Testament pattern, to cooperate with God's operation, and, in the midst of today's divisions, be a testimony of oneness? 

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Church: 1 Corinthians 1:2; 4:17; 6:4; 10:32; 11:18, 22; 12:28; 14:4-5, 12, 19, 23, 28, 35; 15:9; 16:19.

<sup>2</sup>Churches: 1 Corinthians 7:17; 11:16; 14:33-34; 16:1, 19.

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