

## IX. THE DOCTRINE OF THE CHURCH

### Introduction

There are three major dispensations (economies): Israel, Church, and Millennium (or Kingdom). Since we are living in the Church economy, it is only proper to attempt a thorough examination of this important doctrine. As Israel was the Lord's vessel for a testimony of God's love and grace to the world, now the church is that instrument.

### Definition

The English word "church" is a translation of the Greek word **ἐκκλησία** (ekklesia). This word is a composition of the preposition **ἐκ**, meaning *from, out of*, and the verb **κλέσσεια**, meaning *to call*. **Ἐκκλησία** literally means the "called-out-ones", a smaller group called out from the larger. It is a congregation or assembly. This word was used for the citizens of a Roman city who were called to a town meeting, as in Acts 19:32, 39, and 41.

Jesus and the apostles knew this word through its common usage and from the Septuagint<sup>1</sup> (LXX), the Greek translation of the Old Testament Scriptures in common use in their day. In the LXX, **ἐκκλησία** (ekklesia) was employed in the translation of the Hebrew word **קהל**<sup>2</sup> (qahal), a word that signifies a gathering together of people. In Psalm 22:22 **קהל** is translated with **ἐκκλησία** in the LXX, with "assembly" in the NASB, and with "congregation" in the KJV. This Psalm is quoted in Hebrews 2:12 where **ἐκκλησία** is employed. In Deuteronomy 9:10 **קהל** refers to the Israelites camped in the desert and is translated "assembly." When Stephen spoke of that camp, as recorded in Acts 7:38, he used **ἐκκλησία**, which is translated "church" in the KJV and "congregation" in the NASB.

In its various forms, **ἐκκλησία** (ekklesia) appears 115 times in the Greek New Testament.<sup>3</sup> In the English New Testament, it is translated with the word "church" more than 100 times, to indicate an assembly or gathering of the followers of the Lord Jesus Christ. In the English by using the word "church," the translators were allowing tradition

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<sup>1</sup> The Septuagint is a translation of the Old Testament Scriptures into Greek, completed during the inter-testament period. Tradition teaches that this was done by seventy men in the city of Alexandria in Africa; thus, the Roman numeral LXX is employed to symbolize this translation. This was the commonly used translation in the days of Jesus and His Apostles.

<sup>2</sup> Hebrew is read from right to left.

<sup>3</sup> **Ἐκκλησία** (ekklesia, dat. sing.) 33 times: Mt. 18:17; At 2:47; 7:38; 11:26; 15:22; 19:32; 19:39; 1 Cor. 1:2; 4:17; 6:4; 10:32; 11:18; 12:28; 14:5; 14:19; 14:23; 14:28; 14:35; 16:12; 2 Cor. 1:1; Ef. 1:22; 3:21; 5:24; Php. 4:15; Col. 1:24; 4:16; 1 Thes. 1:1; 2; Thes. 1:1; 1 Tim. 3:15; 5:16; Phm. 2; Heb. 12:23; 3 Jn. 9;

**Ἐκκλησῖαι** (ekklesiai nom. pl.) 8 times: Acts 9:31; 16:5; Rom. 16:4 & 16; 1 Cor. 11:16; 16:19; Rev. 1:20; 2:23;

**Ἐκκλησῖαις** (ekklesias dat. pl.) 18 times: 1 Cor 7:17; 14:33 & 34; 16:1; 2 Cor. 8:1; Gal. 1:2 & 22; 2 Thes. 1:4; Rev. 1:4 & 11; 2:17; 11 & 29; 3:6, 13; & 22; 22:16;

**Ἐκκλησίαν** (ekklesian acc. sing.) 20 times: Mt. 16:18; At. 5:11; 8:1 & 3; 13:1; 14:23 & 27; 18:22; 19:41; 20:28; Rom. 16:5; 1 Cor. 14:4; 15:9; Gal. 1:13; Ef. 5:25, 27, 29 & 32; Php. 3:6; Col. 4:15

**Ἐκκλησιῶν** (ekklesias gen. sing., e acc. pl.) 29 times: Mt. 18:17; At. 11:22; 12:1; 12:5; 15:3, 4 & 41; 20:17; Rom. 16:1 & 23; 1 Cor. 11:22; 14:12; 2 Cor. 11:8; 12:13; Eph. 3:10; 5:23; Col. 1:18; 1 Tim. 3:5; Heb. 2:12; Jm. 5:14; 3 Jn. 6 & 10; Rev. 2:1, 8, 12, 18; 3:1, 7 & 14;

**Ἐκκλησιῶν** (ekklesion gen. pl.) 7 times: 2 Cor. 8:18, 19, 23 & 24; 11:28; 1 Ths. 2:14; Rev. 1:20

and their interpretation to influence their translation work. Though most of the time that translation might be acceptable, more justice would have been rendered to the original text had the words “assembly” or “congregation” been employed in our English translations.

Of the 23 times that **ἐκκλησία** (ekklesia) appears in the book of Acts, it is translated “church” 19 times in the NASB. In Acts chapter 19 <sup>4</sup> it is translated “assembly” two times and “gathering” once in the NASB. Twice in the New Testament **ἐκκλησία** was used in reference to the assembly or congregation of Israel.<sup>5</sup>

Acts chapter 19 illustrates the meaning of this Greek word in the Greco-Roman world. **Ἐκκλησία** (ekklesia) is an assembly of called-out-ones, a gathering of the citizens of the city, in this case for a town meeting. In the New Testament, when the Apostles used **ἐκκλησία** to indicate an assembly of believers <sup>6</sup> in the Lord Jesus Christ, 88 times it refers to a local church or churches and 22 times to the universal church,<sup>7</sup> the Body of Christ.<sup>8</sup>

### **Matthew 16:18 and 18:17**

In these two passages **ἐκκλησία** (ekklesia) appears three times and is commonly translated “church.” As pointed out above, a more accurate translation of this Greek word would be “assembly.” The word “church” in our culture signifies a religious building or a group of Christians who have a habit of gathering together in that building. By using that English word, the translators are allowing their interpretation to cloud the true meaning of these verses. The Catholic <sup>9</sup> Church uses these texts as support for its teaching that it is the Universal Church and that the Pope is the Vicar <sup>10</sup> of Christ with supreme authority over the church.

Following the standards of conservative hermeneutics as outlined by the author in the first chapter, the careful interpreter will search the context, consider the cultural background of a passage, and analyze the original language as he interprets. He will avoid applying his preconceived ideas and allowing them, tradition, his background, and his culture to influence his work.

The teachings of Jesus registered in Matthew 16 and 18 are not recorded in the other Gospels. Jesus said these words before the cross and Pentecost (Acts 2). The Apostle Matthew wrote his Gospel as a witness to the Jews in an effort to convince them that Jesus is the Messiah-King. We must answer the question: “What was the understanding of the hearers of these teachings when Jesus spoke and later of those who were the recipients of the Gospel of Matthew?” The phrase, “I will build My church,” should be,

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<sup>4</sup> Verses 32, 39, & 41

<sup>5</sup> Acts 7:38 & Hebrews 2:12 (This OT quote used in Hebrews is applied to the NT Church.)

<sup>6</sup> A gathering of the called-out-ones.

<sup>7</sup> Verses that clearly speak of the universal church: 1 Cor. 10:32; 12:27-28; 15:9; Gal. 1:13; Eph. 1:22-23; 3:10 & 21; 5:23, 24, 25, 27, 29 & 32; Phil. 3:6; Col. 1:18 & 24; Heb. 2:12; 12:23; and verses that seem to refer to the universal church: At. 20:28; 1 Cor. 14:5 & 12; 1 Tim. 3:15.

<sup>8</sup> It is my understanding of the New Testament that this Body is composed of the followers of Jesus during the Church Dispensation (from Pentecost to the Rapture), those who have appropriated salvation and been baptized by the Spirit into Christ’s body (1 Cor. 12:13; Eph. 2:11 to 3:13).

<sup>9</sup> Catholic means *universal*.

<sup>10</sup> A vicar is a substitute. In this context he is a substitute for Jesus as the head of the Church on earth.

“I will build My assembly,” because “assembly” better communicates what the hearers and readers understood, fits the time frame, and is linguistically and theologically accurate. The church is a spiritual organism that was unknown during the Old Testament and during the Lord’s earthly ministry. After Pentecost, the New Testament progressively reveals the Church as a spiritual assembly composed of those who are the followers of Jesus. Upon hearing **ἐκκλησία** (ekklesia) in these teachings of Jesus in Matthew chapters 16 and 18, the disciples would have thought of the congregation of Jews, not the New Testament Church. It appears that they were ignorant of the fact that God loves all and wants the Gentiles saved as well as the Jews. In fact, during the early years of the church the Apostles witnessed to Jews.<sup>11</sup> Because the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ bought redemption for all men in all dispensations, not just those of the church age, I believe that in Matthew 16 Jesus speaks of building an assembly of saved persons from all ages, not just the church age, contrary to what most modern translations imply.<sup>12</sup> Matthew 16:18 is not a proof text for the Universal Church. The **ἐκκλησία** (assembly) in this passage includes both Old and New Testament saints.<sup>13</sup>

### **Matthew 18:17**

This verse is within the context of the procedure for disciplining a brother/sister in the faith who has fallen into sin. To *apply* the teaching of this passage to the local church would be appropriate. But, was local church discipline in the minds of the disciples when they heard these words? The logical answer is “no,” since they knew nothing about our Lord’s “church” until after the coming of the Spirit during Pentecost. The synagogue was very much a part of their daily lives, and that is what was in their minds as Jesus spoke. They were quite well acquainted with the abuses of authority that often happened there.<sup>14</sup> What Jesus said, as recorded in Matthew 18, if properly applied, would have corrected some of those abuses. In this passage, the proper translation of **ἐκκλησία** in Matthew 18:17 would be “assembly” or “congregation,” not “church.”

### **Conclusion**

In this doctrinal study, “church” is an *assembly of called out ones*. In the following pages, it will be shown that this assembly began after our Lord’s resurrection, on the day of Pentecost, and is composed of those who have responded to the Gospel of Jesus Christ by appropriating the salvation-offer through personal faith in the Word of God and the work of the triune God on the behalf of the believer. The Doctrine of the Church develops the biblical teaching of the universal church,<sup>15</sup> the spiritual body made up of all races from all the varying peoples of the world, beginning with the coming of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost and continuing until the day our Lord comes to take her to Glory, and the manifestation of that Body through local churches. The Church is a work of the Holy Spirit,

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<sup>11</sup> In Acts 10, God helps Peter to understand that the Gentiles are part of His program too. The ministry of the Apostle Paul and the meeting recorded in Acts 15 were eye-openers for many of the believing Jews.

<sup>12</sup> John 10:16 “I have other sheep, which are not of this fold; I must bring them also, and they will hear My voice; and they will become one flock *with* one shepherd.”

<sup>13</sup> Those holding to the traditional Reformed belief that substitutes the New Testament Church for the Old Testament Israel, making the saved of the Old Testament members of the Church, may disagree here. We believe that the Bible makes a strong distinction between Israel and the Church. God’s programs for each and His promises to each are different. See the sections on Things to Come and dispensations.

<sup>14</sup> John 9:22-34

<sup>15</sup> When referring to the universal church without the adjective, the word will be capitalized.

who unites all of the true believers of this dispensation into one Body.<sup>16</sup> The New Testament also calls this Body the Lord's bride. Jesus began a work on earth in His physical body.<sup>17</sup> That work continues through His spiritual Body, the Church. It is through her that God the Holy Spirit makes our Lord known to the world today.<sup>18</sup> This Church is revealed to the world through local churches.

## The Universal Church

A small portion of those who call themselves "Baptists" do not believe in a universal church. They would prefer to say that believers in Jesus are members of the family of God and that each local church is a body of Christ. Most of those who hold to this position believe that the church started with the ministry of John the Baptizer or when Jesus said, "I will build my church,"<sup>19</sup> after the declaration of Peter that Jesus was the Messiah. Some of these Baptists believe that those believers who have been properly baptized<sup>20</sup> into membership in local Baptist churches are members of the Bride of Christ and that only the Bride will be taken at the Rapture of the Church. All other believers are the "friends of the Bride" and the family of God. They teach that the friends will not be taken with the Bride in the Rapture.<sup>21</sup>

Most Baptists believe in the universal church, and this belief is held by a majority of the Christian denominations. With few exceptions, Baptists and conservative theologians believe that the New Testament teaches that the Holy Spirit came on the day of Pentecost, as promised by the Lord<sup>22</sup> and recorded in Acts chapter 2, to indwell and unite all of the followers of Jesus, and that at that time the Holy Spirit created the Body of Christ, the universal church (1 Corinthians 12:13 & 27; Ephesians 4:4, 12; 5:23-24). That universal church is composed of all those in this dispensation who have appropriated salvation in Jesus Christ—those who are sealed,<sup>23</sup> indwelt,<sup>24</sup> and baptized<sup>25</sup> by the Holy Spirit.

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<sup>16</sup> 1 Corinthians 12:13; this doctrine will be developed.

<sup>17</sup> John 14:12

<sup>18</sup> The Church is God's major tool but not His only one.

<sup>19</sup> These misguided brethren have been deceived by the poor translation of Matthew 16:18, discussed above.

<sup>20</sup> They are referred to as "Landmark Baptists." Like the Catholic church that has its doctrine of apostolic succession, these Baptists believe that to be scripturally baptized one must be immersed in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and that this baptism must be administered by an ordained Baptist pastor who was baptized by an ordained Baptist pastor, going all the way back to John the Baptist. For them baptism is the "ticket" so to speak that makes one a member of the local Baptist church, a body of Christ. Some of them will accept baptism done by an ordained Baptist pastor without checking into his credentials of authentication. They will not accept baptisms by non-Baptists even though scripturally administered.

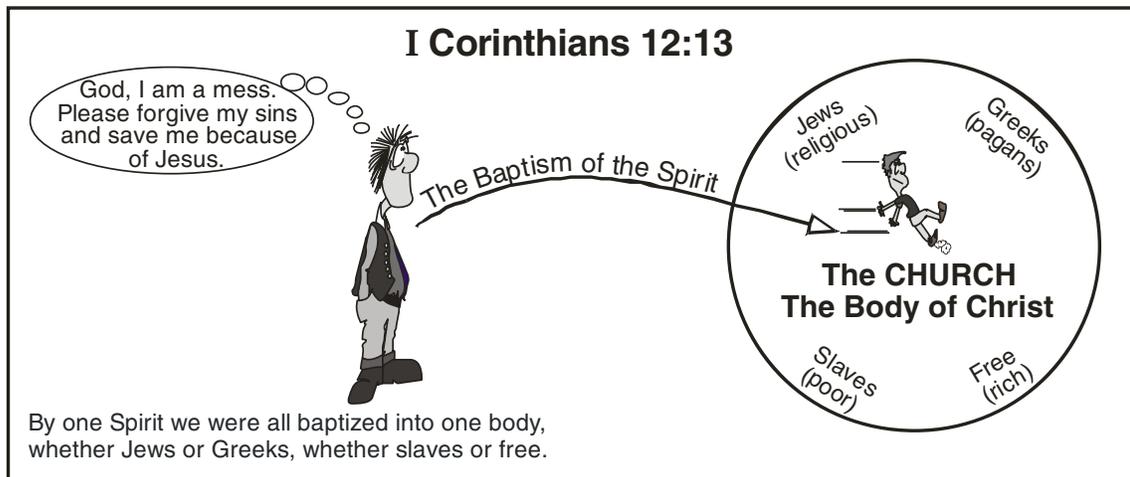
<sup>21</sup> I learned these things in Brazil from personal discussions with Landmark Baptists who were missionaries. Though one of them lent me a book to read, I have no materials in my library to reference.

<sup>22</sup> John 14:17 & 26; 15:26

<sup>23</sup> Ephesians 1:13; 4:30; 2 Corinthians 1:22

<sup>24</sup> Romans 8:9, 11; 1 Corinthians 3:16; 2 Corinthians 6:16; Ephesians 3:17; 2 Timothy 1:14

<sup>25</sup> 1 Corinthians 12:13



Just as the Son of God was physically present on this earth in a human body for some 33 years, today He is present through His Church.<sup>26</sup> It is through that Body that our Lord continues His work in the world until He comes to receive her unto Himself at the Rapture (time when He snatches her away). The Spirit of God is one, and when He takes up residence in believers, He unites them in one body (1 Corinthians 12:13, and Ephesians 4:4-5). This is the universal church over which Christ is the head (Colossians 1:18).

Ephesians 2:11 through 3:13 speaks of the Church as a mystery, a truth that was not made known by God to men in past ages but was revealed after the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, primarily through the Apostle Paul. This Body is distinctively different from anything revealed in the Old Testament. Though the nation of Israel was called to be God's people for the purpose of revealing God to the world, the Jews were not united by God's Spirit into one body. Israelites were united by parentage (blood), the covenants, the rite of circumcision,<sup>27</sup> and the law, but not by the indwelling of the Spirit of God. In this dispensation, the people of God come from all nations, are purchased by Christ's blood, saved through faith, and united by the Spirit who dwells in them (1 Corinthians 12:13<sup>28</sup>). We believe that when Jesus said to His disciples: "He [the Spirit] abides with you and will be in you"<sup>29</sup> (John 14:16-17), that the "in you" was what the Holy Spirit did on the day of Pentecost, 50 days after our Lord's resurrection, by indwelling every one of His followers and continuing to do so throughout this age by indwelling each new believer's heart. From that time, and throughout this dispensation, the Spirit comes to indwell the saved and to unite them into a spiritual Body.<sup>30</sup> This Body of the called-out-ones is the assembly of God and is called the "Church" at least 18 times in the English

<sup>26</sup> John 14:16-18 & Romans 8:9b

<sup>27</sup> John 8:39a & Romans 9:3-5

<sup>28</sup> See also: Mt. 3:11; Mk. 1:8; Lk. 3:16; Jn 1:33; 7:38-39; 14:16-17; 15:28; 1 Cor. 6:19-20; Eph. 4:4-6

<sup>29</sup> The NASV translates παράκλητος [*parakletos*], with "Helper," the KJV uses "comforter." This is one of those words that is difficult to translate with one English word. Jesus promised the *parakletos*, the One called to be alongside and help. He is also the One who comforts, intercedes, and represents us; the Spirit of Christ being our advocate (attorney).

<sup>30</sup> Acts 2:1-41; Ephesians 1:22-23; 2:22; 3:2-6

New Testament.<sup>31</sup> Theologically it is referred to as the universal church,<sup>32</sup> and the New Testament refers to it as the Body and Bride of the Christ.<sup>33</sup>

The universal church is comprised of all persons in Christ since that historic experience during the Feast of Pentecost, recorded in Acts chapter 2, until Jesus comes for His Bride at the end of this dispensation in the Rapture.<sup>34</sup> By “in Christ,” we mean all in this dispensation who have recognized their sin, have repented from it and turned to God for forgiveness, and have appropriated through simple faith the salvation made available by God through His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. Their entrance into this Body<sup>35</sup> is a work of the Holy Spirit, described as the “baptism of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>36</sup> He places the repentant sinner who believes in Jesus into the Church, the “Body of Christ”<sup>37</sup> and the “Bride of Christ.”<sup>38</sup> Jesus Christ is the foundation<sup>39</sup> and head<sup>40</sup> of the Church.

## The Local Church

The New Testament speaks about the local church four times more often than it does the universal church. Each local church<sup>41</sup> is the *outward manifestation of the universal church*. Through local assemblies and their participants, the world is reminded of Jesus and the truths of God. Since local churches are the outward manifestation of the universal, passages that speak of the universal church apply to local churches.

The Great Commission was given to the disciples of our Lord before His ascension. On five different occasions they were told that they would be “witnesses,” that they were sent as Jesus was, that “repentance and the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed,” that they were to “preach the Gospel,” and that they were to “make disciples”—everywhere they went and to all persons on Planet Earth.

Shortly before His death, Jesus had told the disciples:

I have many more things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. But when He, the Spirit of truth, comes, He will guide you into all the truth; for He will not speak on His own initiative, but whatever He hears, He will speak; and He will disclose to you what is to come. (John 16:12-13)

Had Jesus at that time introduced the coming Church and the responsibility of His disciples to be actively establishing local churches, the disciples would have been totally confused. After the promised Spirit came to indwell them, and guide and teach them, more truths were made clear to them, as promised. The revelation of the Church was progressive and became clear through the teachings and writings of the Apostle Paul.

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<sup>31</sup> See footnote # 7 above.

<sup>32</sup> In this work, “Church” starting with a capital “C” is used to indicate the body of Christ, the universal Church.

<sup>33</sup> Eph. 1:22-23 & 5:30; Rev. 18:23; 19:7; 21:9 & 22:17

<sup>34</sup> Developed under the Doctrine of Last Things

<sup>35</sup> Capitalized because it is used here as a synonym for Church.

<sup>36</sup> 1 Corinthians 12:13 & Ephesians 3:2-6; 4:4-6

<sup>37</sup> Ephesians 1:22-23; 3:6; 4:12; 5:30

<sup>38</sup> 1 Corinthians 3:11; Ephesians 3:7-13; 5:23-27; Colossians 1:18 & 24; 1 Peter 1:22-23

<sup>39</sup> Ephesians 2:20, the corner stone is the principle part of the foundation.

<sup>40</sup> Ephesians 5:23; Colossians 1:18; 2:19

<sup>41</sup> For examples: Acts 8:1; 13:1; 16:5; Romans 16:1; Revelation 1:4; & chapters 2 & 3

As we read the book of Acts and the Epistles, we observe how the Lord's disciples, through the guidance and power of the Holy Spirit, obeyed the Great Commission of their Lord. They gathered the new converts together into local churches. They worked in and through those local assemblies. This is why the New Testament speaks so extensively of local churches and minimally of the universal church. So much so that my Landmark friends have trouble seeing the truth of the universal church and believe that each local church is a body of Christ. In their obedience to the Lord and through the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the Apostles planted local churches. Their example teaches us that the central focus of missionary outreach must be the establishment of local congregations. When the writer of Hebrews wrote in 10:25: "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," he was addressing the importance of the participation of every follower of Jesus in a local group of believers. Missions that do not emphasize the local church are missing a very important truth. Humanitarian works are good, preaching the truths of Christ have much merit and are important, but planting local churches is essential in properly performing the God-given assignment. Preaching the gospel is the first step in our responsibility, but that is just the beginning. Making disciples through baptizing and teaching, as commanded in Matthew 28:18-20, involves a support structure that requires the planting of local churches. It is my firm conviction that without the establishing of local churches, the missionary has not completed the task.<sup>42</sup>

### **The purpose of the local church**

The local church is the outward manifestation of the universal church. It is through that local gathering of believers that the world sees the Lord Jesus.<sup>43</sup> The local church is a family, a gathering of God's children in a specific location this side of heaven. This is a family of sinners saved by grace, each member with needs that only the environment of a church family can meet. Every person who has committed his life to the Lord Jesus Christ should unite with a scripturally sound, local group of believers (Hebrews 10:25). Oh, if only Christians would understand and practice this truth. The biblical local church is:

- 1) A body that reveals Jesus Christ to the local community and to the ends of the world (Matthew 28:18-20; Mark 16:15; Luke 24:46-49; Acts 1:7-8; Romans 15:20; 2 Corinthians 10:14-16; 1 Peter 2:12).
- 2) A group of God's people who together observe the ordinances (Luke 22:19-20; Acts 2:41-42).
- 3) A place of refuge where the believer can find acceptance, comfort, encouragement, and inner strength (Acts 4:23-31).
- 4) A group that worships the Lord, prays together, and seeks God's help and guidance (Acts 12:5, 13:1-3; Ephesians 3:21).
- 5) A gathering where the Bible is studied and put into practice in an effort to be a God honoring testimony to the world (Acts 11:26, 15:41; 1 Corinthians 4:17).

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<sup>42</sup> From my observations as a missionary for 32 years in Brazil's interior, I have not seen a Baptist mission organization that did not have the planting of local churches central in its objectives. In fact most denominational missions do. Some of the unaffiliated, para-church missions were violators of this principle. Though those non-denominational missions often do noble deeds, the local church was not one of them. I have had missionaries tell me, "You can use what we do to establish a church," or "we're helping you."

<sup>43</sup> There are plenty of non-biblical churches that are poor revealers of the truth and of the Lord.

- 6) A body of saved sinners that function like a family that loves and cares for its own in all circumstances (Matthew 18:15-20; 1 Corinthians 6:4; 1 Timothy 5:3-16).

Below see the section entitled “The Distinctives of Baptist Churches,” for the development of some of these points.

A person who neglects fellowshiping with a local gathering of believers will drift away from the Lord and will eventually doubt his salvation and the fundamental truths of the Word, as was the case with those who received the Epistle to the Hebrews. Some act as though they are self-sufficient, thinking they can exist without a commitment to a local church that would make them accountable. Using the Lord’s Day for self-gratification or for church tramping is not the scriptural behavior of a humble, obedient child of God who loves his spiritual brother and sister.

As a family, the local church will nurture its members. If a member errs, it will correct that person. Just as discipline is part of family life, so should it be in the church. We all need the love, training, and disciplines of a local church.

### **Local Church Discipline**

Discipline<sup>44</sup> is a process of training through teaching, example, and correction with the goal of producing self-control and maturity in the individual child of God.

A local church is a gathering of God’s children, a family of brothers and sisters in Christ. As can be observed in any family, no two persons are alike. Temperaments, likes and dislikes, talents and abilities vary. Some possess very strong traits while others tend to be submissive. This is the makeup of every local assembly. God instituted the local church, not just to have a testimony of His Son and His grace, but for the edifying power that that body of believers can have on each other.<sup>45</sup> The will of God is that each one of His children progresses to spiritual maturity.<sup>46</sup> He desires that every Christian be transformed into the image of His Son—no longer conformed to this world.<sup>47</sup>

### **A. God uses four elements to create the image of Jesus Christ in His children.**

- 1) **The Local Church:** In our homes as children we had mothers and fathers who cared for us, taught us, and labored to prepare us for adulthood. Grandparents, brothers and sisters, friends, etc., all had an influence in the disciplines that brought us to physical maturity. The local church environment is supposed to have the same function upon our spiritual lives. Without a spiritual family, the child of God lacks a very important element in his spiritual development (1 Corinthians 12:7; Hebrews 10:25).
- 2) **The Holy Scriptures:** It is important to study the Bible at home and together with our brothers and sisters in the local church environment (John 17:17; Hebrews

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<sup>44</sup> True discipline is training. A disciple is one who has submitted himself to the disciplines of learning from a teacher. Though discipline includes correction, it is only a part of the meaning.

<sup>45</sup> 1 Corinthians 12:7 explains that the Spirit gives gifts (spiritual abilities) to each member of Christ’s Body for the “common good” of the membership, and Ephesians 4:11-16 says that God gives gifted men to the Church for the “building up of the Body.”

<sup>46</sup> Ephesians 4:13; 1 Thessalonians 4:3 “for this is the will of God, your sanctification”.

<sup>47</sup> Romans 12:1-2; 2 Corinthians 6:14-16; Colossians 3:1-6; 1 John 2:15-17; 3:1-3

4:12). One might find a good Bible teacher on the radio, or one might read a good book; but nothing will replace the nourishment received in personal and group Bible study and the sharing of experiences and of things learned with a local church family. For those desiring to be in ministry leadership roles, there are Bible colleges and seminaries that have time proven programs of disciplined studies in the Bible and related courses that will prepare one for ministry roles.

**3) Prayer:** Prayer brings a person into God's presence and shows one's complete dependence upon the Lord. Sharing our needs with our brothers and sisters and praying together for the Father's guidance, strength, and protection is a discipline that produces humility and godliness (1 Thessalonians 5:17; 1 Timothy 2:1-3).

**4) The Experiences and Disciplines of Life:** Spiritual growth is a lifetime process. The experiences of life are where the above three elements are tested. Through them wisdom and maturity are gained. God tests His people, stretching their faith to make them grow stronger spiritually (Romans 12:2; 1 Corinthians 10:3, 13; and 15:10; Colossians 1:10; 1 Thessalonians 4:3-7).

Knowing that we are sinners and that there are personality differences, variations in habits, customs and cultures, it is obvious that we are bound to have conflicts within the family of God. While a child, I never got along well with one brother. Our temperaments, likes, and abilities were miles apart. In the local church, this happens too. God has left us with principles to guide our lives and to assist us in avoiding conflicts, which Satan will use to destroy the Lord's church and its testimony. Those guidelines when followed are designed to produce the harmony and the spiritual growth that God desires in the church.

## **B. There are three basic elements that are essential in the life of a local church.**

### **1) The teaching of God's Word**

In 1 Timothy 4:13, Paul exhorted Timothy: "[G]ive attention to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation and teaching." In Nehemiah 9:3, we read: "While they stood in their place, they read from the book of the law of the LORD their God for a fourth of the day." From Nehemiah 8, we learn that Ezra, together with the other priests, read the Word of God for approximately half a day while the people stood listening, and Ezra explained the reading so that the people would understand. From chapter 10 of Ezra we learn that Ezra the priest made applications of the Word to the lives of the people and that they made confessions of sins and changes in their practices. Ezra spent many hours in private and public prayer for the people. These habits are an essential part of local church life as well, if the people of God desire to know Him, walk with Him, and please Him.

Paul, in 1 Corinthians chapters 12 through 14, placed the spiritual gift of prophecy—the proclamation of God's Word—first in importance in the life of the church. Since we believe that the Bible is our only rule for faith and practice, it stands to reason that it should be read, explained, and proclaimed during all church programs. It is the Scriptures that produce spiritual growth<sup>48</sup> and the mind of Christ in His children.<sup>49</sup> Together with reading, teaching, and exhortation, we

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<sup>48</sup> John 17:17; 1 Peter 2:2; 1 Peter 3:17-18

<sup>49</sup> Romans 12:1-2; 2 Corinthians 5:17; 7:1; Ephesians 4:17-23; Philippians 2:5

learn that God's people prayed and confessed their sins.<sup>50</sup> These are all essential activities in the life of the local assembly. When there are persons who will not submit to the authority of God's Word, the New Testament teaches us to practice church discipline to correct the erring member so that a true testimony is presented to the world and so that there is order in God's family.

## 2) The correction of error

In the Corinthian church there were several problems, and Paul's first letter was written for the purpose of correcting those things that were not pleasing to the Lord. In that letter Paul applies the teaching of our Lord and exhorts the church with the hope of producing change. Chapter 5 deals with a situation that is in violation of the Old Testament Law and the human conscience. A man is living with his stepmother.<sup>51</sup> Having a church member who is living in habitual sin is dishonoring to God and a disgrace to the church and to all who call upon His name. By his behavior, this man was degrading the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Paul recommended immediate expulsion from the local body.<sup>52</sup> However, once that man repented of his sin, putting his life in order before God and man, Paul accepted him and recommended that the local assembly return him to fellowship,<sup>53</sup> which was done.<sup>54</sup> We conclude that the gravity of the sin demanded immediate action. In similar cases today, we should promptly remove the sinner from the camp. The church bylaws should clearly spell out the sins that demand instant exclusion, like adultery, incest, dealing in illegal substances, murder, acts of felony, etc. The legal system today requires it. Besides the Bible, the church membership must know the church legal documents that bind us together and govern the membership. In all situations, sin must be dealt with.

The goal of church discipline is **restoration**. Galatians 6:1 states: “. . . if anyone is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; each one looking to yourself, so that you too will not be tempted.” Perhaps there is no single area that the church of Jesus Christ has overlooked more than the discipline of her members. Some have gone to the other extreme and have been so harsh and unloving that if there is a desire for true repentance it is not seen, and rather than win a brother or sister they have driven people away from the church and the Lord. Love is compassionate, understands, and seeks the good of the person who has sinned.<sup>55</sup>

In **Matthew 18:15-20** Jesus defines a procedure to be followed in the discipline of the erring member. To correct the sinning member there are three steps to follow. Each has the goal of repentance, forgiveness, and restoration to fellowship of the erring person with God and the church:

### a. Privately, one on one

“If your brother sins, go and show him his fault in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother” (Matthew 18:15). There is to be no

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<sup>50</sup> Acts 4:23-31

<sup>51</sup> Leviticus 18:6 & 8

<sup>52</sup> 1 Corinthians 5:3-7

<sup>53</sup> 2 Corinthians 2:5-11

<sup>54</sup> 2 Corinthians 7:2-16

<sup>55</sup> Proverbs 17:17; 1 John 3:14-19

gossiping. The person has done something that is apparently wrong and is to be confronted by the one who witnessed the sin. As Galatians admonishes, this is done in humility, prayer, and with a remembrance of our own weaknesses.<sup>56</sup> The objective of the confrontation is repentance and restoration.

**b. Privately, one plus one or more**

“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” (Matthew 18:16). If step one is not successful, that is when others become involved, but still privacy is observed. There is no going public or gossiping. A fellow believer and member, or maybe two, are taken as witnesses; and the person in error is again admonished to repent. The fact that others will stand against evil adds force in the confrontation. Again the goal is repentance and restoration; but in case of failure, ample witnesses have been present as testimonies for when the cause is carried to the next level.

**c. Publicly, before the church**

“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 18:17). Before taking this public step, at least two efforts have been made to restore the sinner. Others have been involved and can serve as witnesses. It is good to remember Proverbs 18:19, “A brother offended is harder to be won than a strong city, and contentions are like the bars of a citadel.” The motive is always to bring the sinner to repentance and restoration, not to cause a scandal. When possible, as part of this step, I recommend taking the case to the spiritual leaders of the church, like the board of elders (in some Baptist churches these leaders are called “deacons”). If there is still no repentance, then the case should be taken to the church membership. This is the first time this situation is made public, and even here it is only made public to the church membership, not the world. If the person will not acknowledge his sin and repent, after all that has been done, it becomes evident that the person in error is not a saved person and should be treated as such. He loses his membership. Now the goal has been changed from the bringing of this person to repentance to that of evangelism in hopes that he/she will come to faith in Jesus Christ as Savior.

Paul said to deliver the person to Satan.<sup>57</sup> The church is a refuge for the Christian where he/she is protected from the enemy. When one is in the world, he is walking in the domain of Satan.<sup>58</sup> Sometimes a child will not listen and the school of hard knocks must become the teacher.

Matthew 18:18 to 20 is a promise that God is with the church when it follows His prescribed pattern for dealing with sin. The sinning person who passes through this process and refuses to recognize his/her error has given all evidence of being unsaved and should be treated as an unbeliever. These

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<sup>56</sup> Galatians 6:1-4

<sup>57</sup> 1 Corinthians 5:5; 1 Timothy 1:20

<sup>58</sup> John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11; Ephesians 2:2

verses are saying that what the church does, when acting biblically, is the carrying out on earth of what has already been established in heaven.

### **3) Forgiveness**

After our Lord gave His instructions about the discipline of an erring brother, Peter asked, “Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times?” (Matthew 18:21-22). Jesus’ response was 490 times (70 X 7), and he proceeded to tell a parable about a servant who owed ten thousand talents.<sup>59</sup> The debt of this servant was forgiven. However, though his debt was pardoned, he would not pardon the 100 denarii<sup>60</sup> owed to him by a co-servant. The point of the parable is obvious. There is no one who can sin against us the way we have sinned against God who is ready to forgive us in Jesus Christ. Through this parable Jesus is teaching that we should make every effort to forgive those who wrong us. The servant who would not forgive his fellow servant suffered severely for his stubborn arrogance and unforgiving attitude. Jesus concluded by saying, “My heavenly Father will also do the same to you, if each of you does not forgive his brother from your heart.” (Matthew 18:35).

## **C. The Government and Officers of the Local Church**

### **Fundamental Truths**

#### **1) Jesus is the Head of the Church.**

Passages like Ephesians 5:23 and Colossians 1:18 teach that Jesus Christ is the head of His church. The New Testament clearly reveals that Jesus has supreme authority over His Church. For this reason, we cannot accept the Catholic doctrine that makes the Pope Christ’s vicar<sup>61</sup> on earth and that declares the Pope to be infallible in his edicts, decisions, and teachings. Nor do we believe that a man or a group of men should be given such a position. Jesus alone has that authority.

We believe that God the Spirit brings able men to places of leadership and that they deserve our sincere respect (Ephesians 4:11-13; Hebrews 13:7 & 17); but all persons in the church are sinners. To err is human. Man cannot assume what God has given to His Son, the headship of His Church.

#### **2) Jesus guides His Church through the Holy Scriptures.**

We believe that the Bible is our only rule for faith and practice and that through His Word we learn the will of our Lord.<sup>62</sup> God’s Word contains direct commands and principles that guide the Church and every child of God. For guidance in matters that are not clearly covered in Scripture, the local church should seek unity.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> The talent was approximately 75 pounds of either gold or silver. This servant owned millions of dollars. (In silver approx \$6,750,000, in gold approx \$396,000,000 at the 2004 market value)

<sup>60</sup> A denarius was 3.8 grams of silver, usually a day’s wages for a common laborer. This servant owed 380 grams or 13.38 ounces of silver (approx \$100.35 in 2004 market value)

<sup>61</sup> See footnote 10 above.

<sup>62</sup> 2 Timothy 3:16-17

<sup>63</sup> Romans 15:5; Ephesians 4:3; Philippians 1:27; & 2:2-3

### 3) There should be both leadership and accountability.

The Bible teaches that God gives gifted men to the Church,<sup>64</sup> and that the offices of the church are elder (or overseer) and deacon.<sup>65</sup> Those men with the gifts of teaching and leadership, who are recognized by the church and placed in positions of leadership, such as pastors and elders, have a responsibility before God and the church to be true to the Scriptures.<sup>66</sup> The Bible teaches us to respect and honor those in authority over us;<sup>67</sup> but on the other hand it also makes it clear that these men are in their positions to serve the church, not to dominate it or use it for self fulfillment, and that there should always be harmony and agreement among all of the membership.<sup>68</sup>

All men and women are self-centered sinners. We believe that no man in this life reaches a state of sinlessness.<sup>69</sup> All are capable of error. By nature, man desires to be in control and to dominate. Because of this, all must be accountable, not just to God, but to those who appointed them to a position of leadership. Churches must have the capacity to discipline the erring one and to correct their mistakes. Churches must have the power to remove those who abuse authority and disobey God.<sup>70</sup>

### 4) Congregationalism is in the New Testament.

Early in the book of Acts and the life of the Church, an urgent need developed in the church in Jerusalem. The Apostles,<sup>71</sup> Christ's appointed leaders, discussed the problem with the local church body, gave guidance, and left the membership with the responsibility to choose the first deacons.<sup>72</sup> Very early the local church membership was taught by the Apostles to follow the governing principle of congregationalism—the governmental system of the synagogues.

Acts, chapter 15, relates the story of a local church meeting in Jerusalem. We first see the leadership, what one might call the "board of elders,"<sup>73</sup> united and discussing a problem. However, after that initial committee meeting, it is recorded that: "it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, **with the whole church**, to choose men from among them to send to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas . . ." (Acts 15:22, emphasis added). All of the church was involved in the final decision and action. Congregationalism is biblical.

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<sup>64</sup> Ephesians 4:11-13

<sup>65</sup> 1 Timothy 3:1 & 8

<sup>66</sup> James 3:1

<sup>67</sup> Romans 13:1-2; Hebrews 13:7 and 17; 1 Peter 2:13-14

<sup>68</sup> Matthew 20:25-28; John 13:12-17; Ephesians 4:1-3; Philippians 2:3-8 & 14-16; 1 Peter 3:8-11

<sup>69</sup> Philippians 3:12

<sup>70</sup> Psalm 90:11-12; Matthew 18:6-9, 20:25-28; 1 Timothy 5:1 & 19-20; Philippians 2:14-16

<sup>71</sup> The office of Apostle was a special office instituted by our Lord. With the death of those Apostles, that office died. The uniqueness of that office should not be used to assume that today a pastor or elder has equal authority.

<sup>72</sup> Acts 6:1-6

<sup>73</sup> Committees are a very important element in congregational government. The larger the church, the more committees it will need. The Bible does not teach pure democracy. It does teach that leadership is responsible to those persons who appointed them, the congregation.

Except for the seven letters to the “messengers” in the book of Revelation,<sup>74</sup> there is not one New Testament book written to the elders of a local church. First Corinthians is a very harsh letter written to correct errors and abuses in that local assembly of believers. Why did Paul write to the whole church rather than the board of elders? If the elders had the authority that some churches have given to them throughout many centuries of church history and as some today are teaching, why did not Paul just write to the elders? Except for a few personal letters, like Philemon, every epistle is written to all in the church with no reference to an authority structure. Every one of those New Testament books support congregationalism. If the other forms of church government in vogue today were biblical, why are they not addressed in the New Testament? I find no biblical or extra-biblical support for Prelatism and Presbyterianism; but there is for Congregationalism.

Because the New Testament does not directly treat the subject of church government, it seems that some flexibility is in order. The New Testament teaches that some have the gifts of teaching and administration. God gifts men for leadership. However, the Bible also teaches that there needs to be accountability, that no one should be a law unto himself. God does not appoint and did not call anyone to be a dictator but for all to be servants.<sup>75</sup> Though a church officer is accountable to his Lord, he is also responsible to those who appoint him and sustain him.<sup>76</sup>

## Church Government

First century Christians first gathered together in the local synagogues.<sup>77</sup> During the early stages of church history, the local churches were composed of Jews and Gentiles who had been regular worshipers in the synagogues and had converted to become followers of Jesus Christ.<sup>78</sup> Within a brief passing of time, it was essential for these believers in the gospel to separate themselves from the Jews who controlled the synagogues, would not believe, and opposed the truth.<sup>79</sup> Because of this history, and without apostolic instructions to adopt something else, it was only logical that those Christians should continue with the governmental system of the synagogues. We believe that this is authenticated by the New Testament.

The New Testament does not make a direct statement on church government, as it does on many other doctrines. The entire book of Romans is dedicated to justification by faith. Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John were written to present the Gospel of Jesus Christ. John and Hebrews make strong arguments for the Deity of Jesus Christ. The Revelation is dedicated to our Lord’s return. However, on the subject of local church government, there are no books dedicated to that subject, not even a chapter or paragraph. One has to search and analyze the New Testament to gather information on how local churches were governed. I propose that the reason for this is that there was no necessity to address the

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<sup>74</sup> We believe that Revelation chapters 2 and 3 were initially directed to the leaders of those seven churches, but the messages are to the membership of those seven churches.

<sup>75</sup> Matthew 20:25-28; 23:11; Mark 9:35; 10:43; Luke 22:26; John 15:20

<sup>76</sup> Luke 12:42; 1 Thessalonians 5:12; 1 Timothy 5:17-22

<sup>77</sup> Acts 22:19; James 2:2 (assembly in this verse is synagogue in the original)

<sup>78</sup> Acts 13:42-45; 14:1

<sup>79</sup> Acts 18:5-11; 19:8-10

subject, because it was not an issue. Everyone already knew what to do—follow what they were already accustomed to doing in the synagogues.

As stated, New Testament teaching on local church government is almost nonexistent. Though it gives us the offices of the church and the qualifications for those filling them, the New Testament makes no concrete statements teaching us the form of government that should be used and how to manage the business needs of the local church. There is no book like *Robert's Rules of Order*. However, there are ways to discover how the primitive church was governed. Congregationalism was discussed above, and the focus of this section is to show the background of events that gave us this form of church government. What forms are in vogue today?

### **1) There are three types of church government in vogue today.**

#### **a. Prelatism (prel'-a-tism) <sup>80</sup>**

The governing power of the church is in the hands of one man (the pope or head bishop) or a small group of men (cardinals and/or bishops). Compared to a government of secular organizations, these churches are governed by a self-perpetuating <sup>81</sup> board of directors. This form of government creates a division between the peoples making a strong distinction between the piety (clergy) and laity — the “spiritual” and the “common.” Examples of churches practicing Prelatism are the Catholic, Greek Orthodox, Episcopalian (Anglican), and Methodist. Those attending the local churches of these denominations have no vote in the choice of the leadership, the dogma, and the practices of their churches. This form of church government slowly developed and eventually became church dogma through the strong influence of Augustine in the fifth century AD.

Today a form of Prelatism has been promoted by some famous Bible teachers and seminaries as biblical and is finding acceptance in some local churches. In this movement, the autonomy of the local church is upheld, but the governing authority lies in the hands of a small group of “spiritual” men called “elders.” The self-perpetuating board with full authority did not come from the Bible.

#### **b. Presbyterianism**

The major governing powers are in the hands of the Synod, an assembly or counsel of pastors and elders from churches in a local area. Comparing this to the government of a secular organization, it is similar to that of the United States of America, where the governing authority is vested in representatives. The church dogma, practices, and important decisions, like the appointment of pastors to local churches, are decided by the Synod. Minor decisions, like local church programs, the election of elders, etc., are the responsibility of the local congregation. The Reformers developed this form of church government. Examples of churches governed by Presbyterianism are Presbyterian, Dutch Reformed, and Lutheran.

#### **c. Congregationalism**

The power to govern is in the hands of the local church membership. This has been the traditional form of church government of Baptist churches for over 1,900 years. Baptists have maintained that the New Testament teaches that the local

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<sup>80</sup> Some divide the first into two, making four.

<sup>81</sup> Having the power to preserve or renew itself indefinitely.

church is autonomous and has no head over her except the Lord and that His will is revealed in the Bible and through the unity of the church membership. Among Baptists, church members are all brothers. There is no system of piety and laity. The membership of each local church has authority over dogma, practices, and assets. There are no external human controls over traditional Baptist churches. Baptists, Mennonites, and other local, nonaffiliated churches practice this form of government. They may appoint pastors as their spiritual leaders and have committees with powers, but the final voice is with the church membership. Each local church has authority over dogma and practices. All real estate and assets belong to the local church. Though an autonomous local church may be a member of a specific denomination, which association is for cooperation in ministries and for fellowship, the denomination has no authority over the member churches.

## 2) The background history and the Bible shed light.

### a) Jewish customs before and during the New Testament period impacted the church.

Ben M. Edidin, a twentieth-century Jewish writer made the following observation: "During these centuries, the church and mosque came into existence as outgrowths of the synagogue. Jesus and the other first Christians were Jews and worshiped in synagogues. Subsequent to their breaking away from Judaism, they did not invent a new way of religious worship but continued the Jewish type of service."<sup>82</sup>

Dr. Alfred Edersheim has done much to help us understand the synagogue. In his book *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, he wrote that "the synagogue became the cradle of the Church. Without it, as indeed without Israel's dispersion, the Church Universal would, humanely speaking, have been impossible, and the conversation<sup>83</sup> of the Gentiles have required a succession of millennial miracles."<sup>84</sup> *The Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* states that the "synagogues were one of the most important factors in the history of the primitive Christian missions."<sup>85</sup> Because of this, it behooves us to come to an understanding of the synagogues in the days of Jesus and the Apostles.

The word "synagogue" is a transliteration of the Greek συναγωγή (sunagoge) which means a gathering of people, an assembly.<sup>86</sup> Sometimes the Hebrew word for "congregation" (300 times for קהל) and the Hebrew word for "assembly" (35 times for עדה) are translated with συναγωγή (sunagoge) in the Greek Septuagint (LXX).<sup>87</sup> Proverbs 5:14 serves as a good example of this

<sup>82</sup> Edidin, Ben M., *Jewish Customs and Ceremonies*, © 1941, Hebrew Publishing Company, NY

<sup>83</sup> Old English: It appears that humanely is humanly and conversation is conversion.

<sup>84</sup> *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, Alfred Edersheim, Eerdmans, vol. 1, p. 431. Dr. Henry Sell, in his book, *Studies in Early Church History*, © 1906, says the same.

<sup>85</sup> *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Eerdmans, © 1971, vol. 7, p. 835

<sup>86</sup> Mt. 12:9; 13:54; Mk. 1:21, 23, 29; 3:1; 6:2; Lk. 4:16, 20, 28, 33, 38; 6:6; 7:5; 8:41; Jn 6:59; Act. 6:9; 13:14; 42-43; 14:1; 17:1, 10, 17; 18:4, 7, 19, 26; 19:8; Rev. 2:9; 3:9; Heb. 10:29, and in 2 Thes. 2:1 "ἐπισυναγωγή" is used for the gathering of believers.

<sup>87</sup> *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, Abingdon, © 1962, vol. 4, p. 477; and *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Vol. 7, p. 802

because in the LXX, *ἐκκλησία* (ekklesia)<sup>88</sup> and *συναγωγή* (sunagoge) are used as synonyms. The synagogue was the place where the Jews congregated. In the days of Jesus, almost every village and city with Jewish residents had a synagogue.<sup>89</sup>

After the exile of the ten tribes of Israel and later the two of Judah, between the years 721 and 586 B.C., when the temple was destroyed by the Babylonians and the Jews were scattered throughout the world, the Jews built synagogues as community centers for schooling their children in the Jewish customs and faith. These synagogues also became a place for prayer, Bible reading, and worship.<sup>90</sup> A synagogue could be in a dedicated room in someone's home<sup>91</sup> or an especially constructed building. Before the birth of the Lord Jesus, the synagogue had become the center of Jewish life,<sup>92</sup> as it continues to be today. As a child, Jesus learned in the synagogue of Nazareth. On Sabbath days it was His custom to attend the Bible readings, lectures, prayer, and worship in the synagogue.<sup>93</sup> The elders were not the only ones who taught and applied the Scriptures. Sometimes guests or a local member was given that opportunity.<sup>94</sup> During his missionary journeys throughout Asia and Europe, the Apostle Paul took advantage of this practice and used the opportunities as a visiting, well educated Jew to share the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.<sup>95</sup> Paul established local churches with the converts from local synagogues.

To establish a synagogue, it was necessary to have ten spiritually mature, older, semi-retired or retired men who could dedicate time to the synagogue and its membership.<sup>96</sup> The synagogue was constructed by the local people from donations and belonged to the community.<sup>97</sup> It was autonomous.<sup>98</sup> There was no way Jerusalem could be in control of them, because the temple and Old Testament worship system had been destroyed and the Jews were scattered. The synagogue was a sacred place made by and for the local people for the education

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<sup>88</sup> In the LXX *ἐκκλησία* (ekklesia) is used to translate *הַקָּהָל* (assembly) and *συναγωγή* (sunagogê) is used to translate *הַקָּהָל* (community). See the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 7, p. 828ff

<sup>89</sup> Examples: Matthew 4:23; 9:35. Edidin states that, "At the time the Second Temple was destroyed . . . there were synagogues in every city and town in Palestine. In Jerusalem alone they counted close to five hundred." Ibid page 108

<sup>90</sup> *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 7, p. 810ff, and *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, Alfred Edersheim, Eerdmans, vol. 1, p. 431, and James I. Parker, Merrill C. Tenny, and William White, Jr., *Vida Cotidiana nos Tempos Bíblicos*, pages 54 to 56, reference from a Brazilian book in Portuguese.

<sup>91</sup> Perhaps this was the case in Acts 18:7, in that his house and the synagogue were one building.  
<sup>92</sup> Latourette, Kenneth Scott, *A History of Christianity*, Harper & Row, © 1953, p. 13

<sup>93</sup> Luke 4:16

<sup>94</sup> *A History of the Jewish People in the Time of Jesus Christ*, Emil Schürer, Hendrickson Pub. vol. 2, div. 2 p. 81-83

<sup>95</sup> Acts 13:14-16; 14:1; 17:1-2, 10, 17; 18:4-8, 26; 19:8; and *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 7, p. 835

<sup>96</sup> *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, Alfred Edersheim, Eerdmans, vol. 1, p. 433-434; and *A History of the Jewish People in the Time of Jesus Christ*, Emil Schürer, vol. II, second division, p. 52-89

<sup>97</sup> *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 7, p. 813

<sup>98</sup> *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, Alfred Edersheim, Eerdmans, vol. 1, p. 431ff

of their children, for Sabbath worship, Bible reading and prayer, and for remembering the feasts.<sup>99</sup> This was the case at their birth, and it has continued until today.

At the front of the worship center was a platform with places for the principal leaders and some symbols of things that had existed in the Temple, like an Ark, the tablets of the Ten Commandments, scrolls of the Torah, a menorah, etc. In the center of the room was a platform called the “bima.” On this platform was a pulpit for the reading of the Scriptures. One stood while reading and sat to explain the reading and to give a sermon.<sup>100</sup> It was common to separate the men and women of the congregation.

### **b) In the synagogue there were two offices.**

- 1. Elders:** These were older men with spiritual maturity in the faith, of high reputation, and with a sincere dedication to the things of God. These men were elected by the people, could be reelected, and could serve for life.<sup>101</sup> Out of their midst was chosen a man as president or moderator, called the “archisynagogos” (ἀρχισυναγωγος *archisunágōgos*, see Mark 5:22, 35, 36, 38; Luke 8:49; 13:14; Acts 13:15; 18:8, 17, and in Luke 8:41 where ἄρχων τῆς συναγωγῆς is used), who gave overall leadership and had the responsibility of directing the Sabbath worship.<sup>102</sup> There were times when this group of elders had much power, and they served as the judges of local civil disputes, basing their decisions on their interpretation of the laws in Moses.<sup>103</sup>
- 2. Deacons (servants):** Throughout the week, the deacons were responsible for teaching the children, caring for the facilities, cleaning, construction, works of charity, etc. They also enforced the penalties given during the judicial proceedings of the elders.<sup>104</sup>

Rooted in the fact that the synagogue was the birth place of the local church, we can come to a better understanding of the New Testament where we read about the Apostles giving the local church the same officers and an autonomous government. The synagogue and the local church were governed by the membership and functioned for the benefit of that congregation. Elders and deacons were not an empowered hierarchy but servants of the membership.

### **3) The New Testament designates two offices for the local church.**

#### **a. Elders and Overseers**

The New Testament uses two words interchangeably for this office.<sup>105</sup> “Elders” is πρεσβύτερος from which “presbyter” was derived. “Overseer” is “ἐπισκοπος” from which “Episcopal” originated. When referring to this office, the Greek is always in

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<sup>99</sup> *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, vol. 4, p. 487

<sup>100</sup> Luke 4:16-21

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid* vol. 4, p. 489; and Mark 5:22 (verse illustrates point)

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid* vol. 4, p. 489; and Mark 5:35; Luke 8:41; Acts 13:15; 18:7-8 (verses illustrate the point), and 1 Timothy 5:17 tells us that this man deserves a special pay package.

<sup>103</sup> John 9:22; 12:42 (verses illustrate the point)

<sup>104</sup> *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, Vol. 5, p. 2878; and *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, vol. 4, p. 489; and Matthew 10:17

<sup>105</sup> 1 Timothy 3:1-7 uses “ἐπισκοπος” and Titus 1:5-9 uses “πρεσβυτερος” and “ἐπισκοπος” for the same office.

the plural. In the New Testament, there were always multiple spiritual leaders overseeing the church. The term “elders” (πρεσβυτερος) suggests that these men were usually older, godly men with maturity and experience in the faith.<sup>106</sup> “Overseers” (επισκοπος) signifies their responsibilities to guard, shepherd, and feed the members of the local assembly. Elders are the spiritual leaders of the local church. They were to dedicate their time to prayer, Bible study, and caring for the spiritual needs of the people.

Reinforcing what has been pointed out above, in the synagogue there was an elder who was president, called the “archisynagogos.” I quote from Justin Martyr, an early church father (105 to 165 A.D.):

And on the day called Sunday all who live in the city or in the country gather together to one place and the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, as long as time permits; then, when the reader has ceased, the president verbally instructs and exhorts to the imitation of these good things. Then we all rise together and pray, and as we before said when our prayer is ended, bread and wine and water are brought, and the president in like manner offers prayers and thanksgivings according to his ability and the people assent saying Amen.<sup>107</sup>

In the synagogue there was an elder who was president. Though the New Testament does not list “pastor” as an office of the church, there is ample evidence that the early churches had a head elder who functioned as president; and because the New Testament teaches local church autonomy, I see no problem in calling that man “pastor.” But, nowhere in the New Testament or early church history is an elder presented as the CEO of a local church. There was always a plurality of spiritual leaders in the local church. A hierarchy with power, and a man at the top who has been empowered with much authority is not a New Testament doctrine but the product of men who forget our Lord’s teaching in servant-hood.

#### **b. Deacons**

“Deacon” is a transliteration of the Greek word “διακονος” and means the “one who executes the commands of another, a servant, attendant, minister.”<sup>108</sup>

Deacons could be men or women.<sup>109</sup> The deacons were responsible for teaching the children, for the care of the facilities, cleaning, construction, for assisting the needs of the poor, for managing the finances, etc.

#### **The Ordination of Spiritual Leaders**

In 1 Timothy 5:17-19 Paul wrote:

The elders<sup>110</sup> & <sup>111</sup> who rule<sup>112</sup> well are to be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who work hard at preaching and teaching. For the

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<sup>106</sup> In 1 Timothy 2:14, Paul told Timothy, though he was young, to not let his age or critics discourage him. It is important to have a spiritually mature man.

<sup>107</sup> Sell, Henry T. (1998, c1906). Studies in early church history. Willow Grove, PA: Woodlawn Electronic edition, quoted from section titled “Form, Gifts, Ordinances”

<sup>108</sup> From Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance, electronic edition, Greek # 1249.

<sup>109</sup> Romans 16:1-2; Phoebe is a “servant of the church,” deaconess in the Greek.

<sup>110</sup> πρεσβύτεροι “. . . in the Jewish and Christian usage, a title of dignity, an elder, pl. elders, meaning persons of ripe age and experience who were called to take part in the management of public affairs. . . . The elders of Christian churches, presbyters, to whom were committed the

Scripture says, “You shall not muzzle the ox while he is threshing,” and “The laborer is worthy of his wages.” Do not receive an accusation against an elder<sup>113</sup> except on the basis of two or three witnesses.

Edersheim has said: “All rulers of the Synagogue were duly examined as to their knowledge, and ordained to the office. . . . But their election depended on the choice of the congregation.”<sup>114</sup> In that section of his book, Edersheim points out that not all elders were always ordained. Our conclusion after reading several sources is that at least the chief elder (archisynagogos) was, referred to in Luke 12:11. This “head of the assembly . . . was responsible for maintaining order during the meetings and removing disturbances . . .; he was authorized to distribute honors, such as the reading of the Torah, reading from the Prophets, and preaching (Acts 13:15).”<sup>115</sup> This man was the chief leader in the synagogue with several responsibilities. Again we point out that the elders were elected by and responsible to the congregation. This was not a self-perpetuating board like some teach and practice today.

Ordination to ministry goes back to the days of Moses when he ordained Aaron and his sons (Exodus 28:41; 29:9 & 29), setting them aside for ministry by the laying on of hands. In Acts 13 we see the elders in the local church of Antioch, after fasting and praying, laying their hands on Barnabas and Saul (Paul). This was a special service where these men were set apart for the gospel ministry as missionaries, a ministry to which God had called them and the local church recognized. Today this procedure is commonly referred to as “ordination to the Gospel Ministry.”

In Acts 14:23, we are told that in every church Barnabas and Paul “*appointed*” elders. That word means:

To elect to an office by lifting up the hand; to choose, vote (2 Cor. 8:19); to appoint to an office (Acts 14:23). In the appointment of the elders in Acts 14:23 *χειροτονέω* is used, which in later days often meant “to ordain.” However, it does not necessarily imply the actual laying on of hands. It means to elect through a show of hands by an assembly, as in 2 Corinthians 8:19, or to appoint, as by God (Acts 10:41) or man (Acts 14:23).<sup>116</sup>

In Titus 1:5, Paul wrote to Titus and instructed him to “appoint” (KJV “ordain”) elders. In 1 Timothy 2:7, Paul wrote about appointing (KJV “ordain”) Timothy to preach the

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direction and government of individual churches, equal to *episkopos* (1985), overseer, bishop (Acts 11:30; 14:23; 15:2, 4, 6, 22, 23; 16:4; 20:17 [cf. 20:28]; 21:18; 1 Tim. 5:17; Titus 1:5; James 5:14; 1 Pet. 5:1)” 4245 Zodiates, S. (2000, c1992, c1993). *The Complete Word Study Dictionary : New Testament* (electronic ed.). Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers

<sup>111</sup> The ruling elders “archisynagogos” (*αρχισυναγωγος*), *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, vol. 4, p. 489

<sup>112</sup> *προεστῶτες* G4291 “1A to set over. 1B to be over, to superintend, preside over. 1C to be a protector or guardian. 1C1 to give aid. 1D to care for, give attention to. 1D1 profess honest occupations.” Strong, J. (1996). *The Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible* (electronic ed.) Ontario: Woodside Bible Fellowship.

<sup>113</sup> *πρεσβυτέρου* sing. of *πρεσβύτεροι* defined above

<sup>114</sup> *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, Alfred Edersheim, Eerdmans, vol. 1, p. 488

<sup>115</sup> *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, Abingdon Press, © 1962, vol. 4, p. 489

<sup>116</sup> Strong, J. (1996). *The Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*, electronic edition, Woodside Bible Fellowship, Ontario, Canada.

gospel. By citing these verses I am not saying that Paul's instruction to Titus and that what was done to Timothy was equivalent to an ordination to the gospel ministry as we know it to be today. However, these men were appointed as church leaders and this was done after certain standards, qualifications were met, and some sort of local church ceremony where prayers with the placing of hands on the man were done as important, spiritual duties.

There is an historical and Scriptural background that has led the church over the centuries to formally ordain gifted men to the gospel ministry.<sup>117</sup> The New Testament teaches a plurality of spiritual leadership in the church, which are the men holding the office of elder or overseer (1 Timothy 3:1; and 5:17; Titus 1:5). Too often local congregations are giving one man, usually called the "pastor," the position of CEO with most, if not all, of the management and ministry responsibilities of the church and often with little or no accountability. This is biblically wrong, because the New Testament teaches a plurality of elders in the church. However, I believe there is support for having an especially trained and qualified man as the head elder or teaching elder of the local church, and I believe it is proper to ordain that man to the gospel ministry.<sup>118</sup>

Steven J. Lawson observes:

Paul encouraged Timothy to persevere in his ministry because he had been given a 'spiritual gift' by God. This spiritual gift was 'his teaching ministry, together with the authority and power to exercise it.' MacArthur comments, 'Each believer's gift is a God-designed blend of spiritual capacities, which acts as a channel through which the Spirit of God ministers to others. Timothy's gift included evangelism, preaching, teaching, and leadership (cf. 4:6, 11, 13, 16; 6:2; 2 Timothy 2:24–25; 4:2, 5).' As Pink notes, 'Every man who is divinely called to the ministry is divinely equipped.' If one is to persevere in biblical preaching, he must know he has been sovereignly gifted by God. He must preach with a sense of destiny in his life.

Paul added that Timothy's spiritual gift 'was bestowed upon you through prophetic utterance with the laying on of hands by the presbytery' (1 Timothy 4:14). In a public ordination elders laid hands on him, confirming that they recognized that he was called and gifted by God to preach. Hughes writes, 'Paul charges Timothy to remember that electric moment in the past, . . . Paul and the local elders fixed their hands on him, intoning prophecies and prayers about his giftedness and future ministry.' Thus Paul was reminding Timothy that God had given him a spiritual gift to preach and other spiritual leaders had confirmed this. For Timothy to bail out of the ministry now, or to waiver in his preaching, would negate his own ordination. Glover has rightly noted, 'None is a Christian minister who has not been ordained by the sovereign laying on of unseen hands.' If not fully persuaded of God's call and gifting, a pastor may easily become discouraged when tough times come.<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> Not only in the church, but Jews ordain their leaders too, Edidin Ibid.

<sup>118</sup> Alexander Strauch, in his book *Biblical Eldership*, Publisher Lewis and Roth, © 1988, has brought to the churches' attention that the spiritual leadership of a biblical church is elders, a plural body, not one man. However, he does not believe in the ordination of elders.

<sup>119</sup> Lawson, Steven J., *The Passion of Biblical Preaching: An Expository Study of 1 Timothy 4:13-16*, *Bibliotheca Sacra*, Vol. 159, Page 89 (2002; 2003), Dallas Theological Seminary, electronic edition

From historical data and the Bible it has been shown that the synagogue had a leading elder often called "president" (*archisynagogos*). This was an especially gifted man upon whom the congregation bestowed extra responsibilities. After proof of his abilities and the passing of a thorough examination on his knowledge of the Scriptures, that man was ordained. Today most churches have pastors. These are men who have pursued special training because they believed the Lord called them to "full time" ministry. Usually these men receive remuneration for their services as employees of the church for their leadership roles in ministry, or as missionaries, or as roving evangelists, or Bible teachers either in colleges or in a roving ministry. "I believe ordination signals that a person has been called by the Lord through the church to minister to and through the church. . . . Some positions require that the person function as an ordained person, one who can marry and bury, who represents the church."<sup>120</sup>

In our culture we have established standards. Nurses, doctors, teachers, architects, police officers, lawyers, roofers, plumbers, etc., must fulfill a prescribed program of studies, and in some fields a period of supervised apprenticeship, before qualifying as professionals. The people entering these professions are required to pass exams in order to obtain licenses that authenticate their professional ability and status. Except for those persons who want to throw off the standards and be something they are not, I do not believe society would want to abolish these time proven practices. These procedures have developed over time to protect citizens from those who would deceive, possibly take unfair advantage, and cause harm. Even if I could not prove that a form of ordination to ministry existed in the synagogues around the time of Christ and the Apostles, and if I could not find support for ordination to the ministry in the Scriptures, I still would not abandon ordination because of those who have abused it to their personal advantage or because some denominations place ordained persons on a higher plane than others in the church. Ordination to the ministry is Scriptural and is culturally acceptable, sometimes required.

As recorded in the New Testament, Barnabas, Paul, and Timothy had all displayed to their brothers in Christ that God had gifted them and that His hand was upon them for ministry. Perhaps all three had pursued training that strengthened their abilities. Their ministries in the church had proven their divine gifting and calling. In the local church, during a special service, the elders prayed and laid hands on those men, symbolizing that the local church recognized the hand of God was upon them for ministry.

Ordination is the church's recognition of God's call and gifting of men for leadership ministries. Each church has different requirements, but ordination is the church's way of saying "this man is qualified." Most governments recognize ordained men as qualified religious leaders. Some require it for performing marriages, etc.

When I was the field leader in Brazil and initiated the visa processes for new missionaries, the Brazilian government wanted proof of biblical and anthropological or cross-cultural studies and proof that the person had been ordained or commissioned<sup>121</sup> by a local church or denomination.

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<sup>120</sup> Anderson, L., Cousins, D., & DeKruyter, A. H., © 1990, *Mastering Church Management*,

"Mastering ministry," Portland, OR, Multnomah; Christianity Today, electronic edition

<sup>121</sup> Commissioning certificates were usually used for single women.

Alexander Strauch<sup>122</sup> has sided with those who would throw out old proven traditions in favor of looser standards. In chapter 16, “The Laying on of Hands and Ordination,” he writes:

Ever since the fourth century, however, the vast majority of churchmen have not questioned ordination as the assumed requirement for all clergy. Indeed, ordination has become the very lifeblood of clerical authority, power, and position. The principal problem with the modern concept of ordination is that it falsely divides the Lord’s people into secular and sacred categories.<sup>123</sup>

## Comments

Just because some denominations have made a distinction in their government between laity and clergy (or piety), placing ordained persons on a higher spiritual plane, this does not mean that all have done so and that the ordination of leaders is entirely bad. I once knew a pastor who believed in elder rule with a self-perpetuating board, who said to me, “Those new Christians are immature. They have no knowledge of the Scriptures and the Spirit does not control their lives. It would be wrong to give them a vote in local church matters.” Both Prelatism and Presbyterianism communicate and promote such an attitude. Congregationalism, though recognizing gifts and abilities, levels the field, indicating that we are all sinners, saved by grace, brothers and sisters in Christ, and gifted by God for service.

The very fact that the Bible teaches us that a New Testament church has elders and deacons implies that there are differences in abilities and ministries. God gifts some with administrative and teaching skills and others with the gift of “helps.” In all societies and organizations some are natural leaders while others are followers. We are all brothers in Christ, working together for the “common good”<sup>124</sup> and the overall growth of the church. The recognition of spiritual gifts and abilities<sup>125</sup> is not a system that divides people into groups indicating that one is more spiritual (piety) and the other is more carnal (laity). This was what the church in Corinth was doing, and Paul condemned it. A wife may be an excellent homemaker and mother and her husband may be an exceptional handyman and provider. Though their abilities are different, they still stand as equals before God. Together they make a good team. That is what the biblical local church is—a team, a family—each working humbly and harmoniously for the whole without jealousies, envies, or pride.

As sinners we tend to want to dictate, to be proud, and to seek self-glorification. Jesus set the example and taught that a biblical leader is one who humbly serves.<sup>126</sup> The church is a body of believers with varying gifts provided by the Holy Spirit at the time of spiritual birth<sup>127</sup> and talents from the gene chain at physical birth. Ordination is the local church’s recognition of God’s hand on a man for special ministry involving leadership and teaching, whether it be in the local church or in outreach ministries. When a congregation, either completely or through representatives, lays its hands on a man in prayer and dedication, they are simply saying, “We see God’s hand upon this man for special ministry.” Ordination is good, though some have abused it.

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<sup>122</sup> Alexander Strauch, *Biblical Eldership*, Publisher Lewis and Roth, © 1988

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid*, page 235

<sup>124</sup> 1 Corinthians 12:7

<sup>125</sup> Romans 12:3-5

<sup>126</sup> Matthew 20:25-28

<sup>127</sup> Romans 12:3-13; and 1 Corinthians 12:4-7 & 11

## Recap

- 1) The Israelite culture and primarily the synagogues were the major contributors to the government of the New Testament local church.<sup>128</sup>
- 2) Jesus had prepared His disciples to spread the Gospel and establish local assemblies of believers. He never taught them anything different from what they already knew—the governmental system of the synagogue.
- 3) Before His ascension to His current position with the Father, the Lord gave the Great Commission to the disciples.<sup>129</sup>
- 4) Starting with Acts chapter 2, when the Holy Spirit came to indwell and unite the saved into one body, the Body of Christ, Acts records the primitive history of the church, approximately thirty years, where the Great Commission is far more than reaching the lost. Its fulfillment is realized through the establishing of local churches.
- 5) The universal Body of Christ is manifest to the world through the gathering of God's people in local assemblies, traditionally called "churches." These churches are a visible testimony to the lost world of the Lord's love, concern, and goodness.
- 6) The New Testament churches assumed the government and offices that originated in the synagogue.<sup>130</sup>
- 7) The Apostles appointed elders in every church. This was always a plural leadership. Usually some form of spiritual dedication of these leaders was performed, which today is called the "Ordination to the Gospel Ministry."

## Local Church Officers

Though "pastor" is commonly used today, the New Testament does not mention this as a church office. Some might point to Ephesians 4:7-16, which states that the Lord gives gifted men to the church, one of those being men who are gifted as "pastors and teachers" (one person). Verse 7 ties in with the teachings of 1 Corinthians 12:4-11 and Romans 12:3-7, where we learn that God equips His children for ministry. Ephesians 4:1-6 speaks of the unity of Christ's Body—the Church Universal. Ephesians 4:11 changes from speaking about grace gifts given to individual believers to gifted men given to the Church, the body of Christ. The first group of gifted men, apostles and prophets, did not fill any official offices in the local churches but were assigned to a broader task of world evangelistic outreach, the founding of local churches, and the strengthening of those churches, for the overall growth of the Body of Christ. Those were ministry functions that were filled by men with exceptional God-given abilities and authority, and we believe that apostles and prophets do not exist today. However, God still gives men with special abilities to the Church as evangelists (those gifted with outreach abilities like missionaries) and pastor-teachers (those gifted with building-up and caretaking abilities).<sup>131</sup> We do not

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<sup>128</sup> Acts 26:11

<sup>129</sup> Matthew 28:18-20; Marcos 16:15-16; Luke 24:46-49; John 20:21; Acts 1:8

<sup>130</sup> Titus 1:5 and following

<sup>131</sup> George Peters, in *A Biblical Theology of Missions*, publisher Moody, © 1972, on page 247 states: ". . . the evangelist continues the function of being the *sent one* for the same purpose the apostles were sent – to preach the gospel, preach the Word, evangelize communities and establish churches – but he does not possess the original apostolic office, authority and rank." And ". . . the prophet and pastor-teacher seem to merge, with the pastor-teacher becoming the functional successor of the prophet minus the special gift for being 'preachers and expounders under the immediate influence of the Spirit.'"

believe that this text is naming local church offices but that the focus is on the men who have been enabled by God to serve in and through the church. Titus and 1 Timothy, books that list the offices, do not name “pastor” as an office. The word “pastor” is really shepherd. Paul said to the elders in the Ephesian Church, “Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers (ἐπισκοπος), to **shepherd** the church of God which He purchased with His own blood” (Acts 20:28, emphasis added). The elders of the church were to shepherd God’s redeemed children; and in the church, shepherding would include protecting, nurturing, and teaching. Though the office of “pastor”<sup>132</sup> is commonly used today, the New Testament does not mention this as a church office. The elders were to shepherd God’s redeemed children.

## 1) Elders or Overseers

### a. Definition

The English words “elders” and “presbyters” represent one Greek word (πρεσβυτερος) that means an older person of maturity, in this case, maturity in the faith. Though the office of “elder” is for a man, this word is also used for women.<sup>133</sup> It is used in the New Testament to indicate:

- i) A person of authority among the Jews<sup>134</sup> (Elders, the high priest, scribes, (Matthew 16:21 and 26:47; Luke 7:3).
- ii) The twenty-four representatives of the Church around the throne of the Lamb (Revelation 4:4, 10; 5:5-14; 7:11 and 13; 11:16; 14:3; and 19:4).
- iii) In the local church, humble men of spiritual maturity that were appointed first by the Apostles and later by the church membership to give spiritual leadership to the flock (Acts 14:23; 20:17 and 28; and Titus 1:5 & 7). In these passages the terms “elder” or “presbyter” are used as synonyms with “bishop,” indicating that both words in the original speak of the same office.

For the local church, it is not necessarily that elders be old men, though spiritual maturity does take time.<sup>135</sup> An elder is a man especially gifted by God for church leadership. An elder is a man of integrity. He is one with maturity and experience in the Word and in ministry. An elder is a man who has been recognized by the local church as a qualified, gifted, spiritual leader.<sup>136</sup>

### b. Responsibilities

- i) Shepherd God’s people: (Acts 20:28) In Acts 20:17-38 are recorded the Apostle Paul’s last words to the elders in Ephesus. The verb “shepherd” in verse 28 gathers together in one word all of the responsibilities Paul admonished those elders in Ephesus to do in their oversight of the people

<sup>132</sup> Biblically the pastor of a local church is an elder. Today some are calling the man filling this church office the “teaching elder.” The synagogues had presidents, an elder who gave overall leadership. One could possibly fit our modern day office of “pastor” there. In the New Testament there was never a church with just one elder or overseer functioning as the CEO of the local church. A pastor who is the CEO of a local church has been placed in an unbiblical position.

<sup>133</sup> Matthew 15:2; Mark 7:3 & 5; John 8:9; Acts 2:17; I Timothy 5:2; and Hebrews 11:2

<sup>134</sup> To start a synagogue, the Jewish community had to find ten elders.

<sup>135</sup> 1 Timothy 3:6, & 4:12

<sup>136</sup> Acts 11:30; 13:1-3; 14:23; 15:2; 20:17; 1 Timothy 3:1-7; Titus 1:5; James 5:14; 1 Peter 5:1

of God. As the missionary who had founded that church, Paul served, “with all humility and with tears and with trials.” Publicly and from house to house, the Apostle taught repentance toward God and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Paul did not value his life but lived to complete God’s will for his life. He did not love money and material possessions, but he spent his life for others. These are the responsibilities of the elders (presbyter and bishop). Paul admonished those spiritual leaders to guard God’s flock, to watch over and protect them, to teach them, and not to love worldly wealth but to serve God. A good elder is not lazy.<sup>137</sup>

- ii) The Elder is to read, teach, explain, and apply the Word of God. He is to exhort the people of God to live godly lives in Christ Jesus. He is to protect the flock from dangers. (Matthew 28:20; 1 Timothy 4:6-16; and 2 Timothy 2:1-6)

### c. Qualification

To bring the local churches in Crete into a good, functioning “order,” the Apostle Paul left Titus with specific instructions, recorded for us in Titus 1:5-9. From the members of the church, Titus was to locate and appoint men who were spiritually mature in the faith, of good reputation in their communities, and of sound Christian testimony.

In 1 Timothy 3:1, Paul wrote, “The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task.”<sup>138</sup> It is “trustworthy” or very true that when a man sets his heart on being an elder,<sup>139</sup> his aspiration is indeed noble. We note here that the will of the person is involved in the decision. Though gifted and appointed by God, the man must express his will by choosing to be an elder. God has gifted many, but experience has taught us that few follow through.

Stated briefly: 1) He is to be an honest man. There are to be no just accusations of dishonesty, deception, failure to pay bills, etc. 2) He is to be a moderate. There are no findings of violence, use of abusive substances, etc. 3) He is to be faithful to his family. He loves and honors his wife and is faithful to her.<sup>140</sup> His children are well disciplined. 4) He is not to be a new Christian but a mature, experienced believer who is able to explain his faith to others. These qualifications are what this man is now, not what he was before he became a Christian or when he was a babe in Christ. God is in the business of making successes out of failures. This man is to be one of God’s matured products.

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<sup>137</sup> Proverbs 6:6-11; 2 Thessalonians 3:8 & 10-12

<sup>138</sup> *English Standard Version*. 2001 (electronic ed.). Wheaton: Good News Publishers.

<sup>139</sup> In this verse Paul used the word for bishop, a synonym for elder.

<sup>140</sup> The phrase “husband of one wife” literally says that he is a one-woman-man. The laws governing the Old Testament priests specified that he should marry a Levite virgin or the widow of a priest. The New Testament teaches that Christians should marry in the faith (2 Corinthians 6:14), but it does not require that elders marry virgins. God demands purity among His people (1 Corinthians 3:16-17 & 6:19-20). Again the translators have done us a disservice by translating this qualification as “husband of one wife.” As with all the other qualifications, Paul is pointing to a character trait.

#### **d. Selection**

The first elders were appointed by the Apostles in each local church (this apostolic authority was unique to that office which no longer exists). Our only rule for faith and practice explains:

- i) The Holy Spirit gives gifts to each believer, enabling them for service.<sup>141</sup> God directs in the lives of His children and leads them, and He also leads the local believers in appointing those men to spiritual leadership roles.<sup>142</sup> The Lord gives these men to the churches.
- ii) The local church observes the gifts that the Spirit has given the man, and it recognizes the hand of God upon him for ministry.<sup>143</sup> Though others in leadership can point out men for leadership, biblically it is the local church that makes the final decision and commends them to the ministry by prayer and the laying on of hands.<sup>144</sup> Ordination or dedication to ministry is the act of the local church's recognition of God's hand on a man for ministry.

### **2) Deacons**

#### **a. Definition**

Our word "deacon" is a transliteration of the Greek διάκονος (diakonos). This word means servant. It should not be confused with δούλος (doulos), the word Paul use to define his relationship with Jesus Christ, his Lord, in Romans 1:1. Δούλος (doulos) is a slave. Διάκονος (diakonos) is used of a household servant,<sup>145</sup> of civil authorities,<sup>146</sup> of Jesus Christ,<sup>147</sup> of the followers of Jesus,<sup>148</sup> to designate the relationship between the follower of Jesus<sup>149</sup> and those who followed Jesus and did things like preaching and teaching;<sup>150</sup> of those who serve in the local church;<sup>151</sup> and of those who serve Satan.<sup>152</sup>

#### **b. Responsibilities**

Even though the seven appointed to serve the widows in Acts 6:1-6 were not called deacons, what they were commissioned to perform was in the job description for deacon. They were assigned that ministry so that the Apostles could dedicate their time to Bible study, prayer, and the spiritual leadership of the flock. It would be an injustice to say that the deacons' only ministry was the serving of tables, maintenance of the facilities, bookkeeping, etc. In Acts chapters 6 and 8 we see Stephen and Philip, two of the seven, preaching the Gospel, evangelizing, and baptizing, all ministries associated with the office of spiritual leadership such as elder. However, the New Testament is clear that deacons, though dedicated,

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<sup>141</sup> 1 Corinthians 12:4-30; Romans 12:3-8

<sup>142</sup> Acts 13:2

<sup>143</sup> Acts 13:1-3

<sup>144</sup> Acts 13:3

<sup>145</sup> John 2:5 & 9

<sup>146</sup> Romans 13:4

<sup>147</sup> Romans 15:8 and Gal. 2:17

<sup>148</sup> John 12:26; Ephesians. 6:21; Col. 1:7 and 4:7

<sup>149</sup> Matthew 20:26; 23:11; Mark 9:35; &10:43

<sup>150</sup> I Cor. 3:5; 2 Cor. 3:6; 6:4; 11:23; Eph. 3:7; Col. 1:23, 25; 1 Thes. 3:2; and 1 Tim. 4:6

<sup>151</sup> Phil. 1:1; and 1 Tim. 3:8 & 12. Romans 16:1 is the only place that διάκονος (diakonos) is used in the New Testament for a woman.

<sup>152</sup> 2 Cor. 11:14-15

growing believers, care for the menial tasks in order to free the overseers so they can dedicate more time to the spiritual side of the ministry. Deacons are necessary and very important for the smooth operation of a church.

### **c. Qualifications**

To guide the church, in 1 Timothy 3:8-13, Paul gives a list of nine standards for a deacon. Acts 6:1-6 records the first election of deacons in the local church giving three general qualifications. The stories of Stephen in Acts 7 and Philip in Acts 8 show us how these two deacons were able to teach and use the Word of God and how they were yielded vessels for the Holy Spirit's use. The first deacons were spiritual men; and though the office and responsibility may be different, the spiritual qualifications are very much the same as those for elder. God only has one standard for all of His children. The New Testament is saying that for believers to be elders or deacons they must meet the universal standard.

### **d. Selection and Appointment**

In Acts 6:1-7 the Apostles taught the local church how to recognize qualified persons to serve as deacons. The church found the men and presented them to the Apostles. The congregation made the selection and recognized the leadership role of the Apostles (elders and pastors today). The deacons were approved and dedicated to the task by the church. The Apostles did not abuse their God-given position and spiritual authority, but they gave counsel, leadership, and respect to the membership of the church.

## **3) Women in the Church**

There is much confusion today regarding the place of women in the church. Some denominations are ordaining women as ministers of the gospel. In fact, some are even sanctioning same-sex marriages and the ordination of those who are gay. On the television we can see women preaching the Gospel and doing a fairly good job. Today is the day of the liberated woman, and some believe the churches that hold to traditional values are living in the dark ages when it comes to the role of women in the church. Some theologians, even some in the Catholic Church, are saying that Paul was a chauvinist when it came to the place of men and that this had an overriding impact on his letters. Could it be that all they are saying is right and that we are antiques?<sup>153</sup> Did not Peter state that the epistles of Paul were Scripture, recognizing their Divine inspiration and authority? Are we wrong in believing that the Holy Spirit guided the Apostles as they wrote?

It is quite evident that the Scriptures give the woman a place of submission to the authority of a man. God created man first, making him the head of the home.<sup>154</sup> God ordained that men be the leaders in the home and society.<sup>155</sup> Paul's instructions were that a woman was to be quiet in the church, to ask her husband at home. From the context, it is apparent that women could speak in church (1 Corinthians 11:5). However, they were not to do so when such would place them over men. Paul restricted women to not having leadership roles over men in the churches.<sup>156</sup> Interpreting 1 Corinthians 14:33b-35 within its context and its historical setting, women were not permitted to use

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<sup>153</sup> Proverbs 28:9:1; 2 Peter 1:20-21

<sup>154</sup> Genesis 2:18 & 21-24; 1 Timothy 2:13

<sup>155</sup> Genesis 3:16; Ephesians 5:22-24; Colossians 3:18

<sup>156</sup> 1 Corinthians 14:33-38; 1 Timothy 2:11-12

the gifts of prophecy and tongues during church activities when men were present. In 1 Timothy 2:13-14 Paul said that the biblical reasons for this placement of women in the church, home, and society are the *Order of Creation*, and the *Woman's Act of Disobedience in the Garden*.

In 1 Timothy 2:15<sup>157</sup> Paul explains that the only exception to this rule of order is in the home where the male children must be submissive to their mother while she is raising them. Paul stressed his God-given authority as an Apostle of Jesus Christ in 1 Corinthians 14:36-38. His writings are God's Word, Holy Spirit inspired, and divinely authoritative for faith and practice.

Because of this place of submission for woman that is ordained by God, He gave laws to protect them from being abused and taken advantage of by men: Exodus 21:7-11; 2:20-22; 22:16-17 and 22-24; Deuteronomy 14:28-29; 21:10-14; 22:13-30; 24:1-5 and 17-21; 27:19; and 1 Peter 3:7.

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<sup>157</sup> 1 Timothy 2:15 is a verse with various interpretations. One is that the salvation of the woman is through her having children. The problem: Not all women are able to bear children. Another is that the salvation of women is through the birth of Jesus Christ, the seed of the woman (Gen. 3:15) and the Savior of all. The verb here is a form of the Greek σωζω (sozo), a verb that means save, deliver, keep from harm, preserve, rescue. In this chapter Paul is discussing worship and holy behavior. Women are encouraged to dress modestly and to be in submission to men in the home and in the church. Paul cites the order of creation and the deception of the woman in that original sin as the reason for woman's place of submission. The only exception to this divine order of submission is presented in verse 15, where it states that women are delivered from the law of submission to men in their bearing and raising of sons. Boys are to obey both parents (Col. 3:20).

# The Distinctives of Baptist Churches

## Definition and Introduction

A distinctive is a unique characteristic that makes a person or thing different. In this section we will cover what distinguishes Baptists from other churches.

A careful study of church history reveals that autonomous local churches have existed since the birth of the Church.<sup>158</sup> During the fourth and fifth centuries, when the Roman government began to accept Christianity as another approved religion, the Catholic Church was born and grew to such power that popes had the authority to appoint and bless kings. During this time, there were Christian leaders and local congregations that did not agree nor cooperate with the Catholic Church. The Catholic leadership called those Christians and churches “Ana-Baptists,”<sup>159</sup> a name that indicates that these followers of Christ were *re-baptizers* who did not accept infant baptism or the baptism of unbelievers as practiced in the Catholic Church. True converts to Jesus Christ who had experienced baptism as children were re-baptized as a testimony of their faith in Christ. Ana-Baptists (means re-baptizers) were persecuted by the Catholic Church for their beliefs and practices, and this forced them to live in hiding or on the outskirts of the Roman Empire. During the Reformation, some of the Reformers persecuted the Baptists because of their beliefs about baptism, local church government, and separation of church and state. Today there are churches who use the name “Baptist” that do not hold to these historical distinctives.

Baptists did not cooperate with those who were for a hierarchy and a uniting of local churches under one central leadership. These distinctives are the Baptists’ reaction to Catholic beliefs and practices. Later, their firm commitment to these truths brought them into conflict with the Reformers.

The foundational principle of Baptist distinctives is a belief in “soul liberty.” Though there were differences among Baptists, historians have discovered the following distinctives were commonly held by these followers of Jesus Christ.

## Baptist Distinctives

### 1) The Scriptures are Final in Authority

The Word of God is the only means by which man can know of the saving grace of Jesus Christ and of the will of God (John 20:31; Hebrews 1:1-2; Psalm 119:9,105). The Bible is the Christian's *only* rule for faith and practice and is, therefore, his only and final authority (2 Timothy 2:15-16; 3:16-17).

### 2) Local Church Membership Must Be Comprised of Regenerated People

The local church is the outward manifestation of the universal church (Acts 8:1; Revelation 1:4). To be a member of the universal church, which is the bride and body of Christ (Ephesians 5:21-32; Colossians 1:24), one must believe (trust in) the Lord Jesus Christ (Acts 2.41, 44, 47b; Romans 10:9-13). Therefore, for the

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<sup>158</sup> *A History of Christianity*, by Kenneth Scott Latourette, pub. Harper & Row, Publishers, Inc., © 1953

<sup>159</sup> Bishop Stephen of Rome used this title in 253 AD, from *A Manual of Church History* by Albert Hebray Newman, p 270

local church to be a faithful representation of the universal church, it should receive only those people into its membership who give testimony of their faith in the Lord Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord (those who are true members of the universal church).

As a condition for local church membership, Baptists require baptism by immersion as a testimony of one's salvation experience (Acts 2:41, 44, 47b).

### **3. The Ordinances of a Local Church**

Baptist churches do not use the word "sacrament" because it originally meant something one does to merit grace from God. An ordinance is an act done in obedience to a command of our Lord. Baptists believe that there are two and only two ordinances to be observed by the local church until Christ comes for His Bride.

**a. Baptism:** When one repents of his/her sins and believes in Jesus Christ as Savior, that person should, in obedience to our Lord's command (Matthew 28:19-20), give testimony of his/her faith to the world through the ordinance of baptism. This baptism is by immersion. The Greek word βαπτίζω [baptidzo] means to wash, dip, or to cover wholly with a fluid. Historically New Testament baptism comes from the Jewish purification rites, which were a cleansing by immersion in water. Historical church documents and archaeological findings testify that the early church immersed. Sprinkling and pouring came later. Paul said that Christian baptism is a picture of the believer's association with Jesus Christ's death, burial, and resurrection (Romans 6:1-5), and a testimony to the fact that the person has new life in Christ.<sup>160</sup>

**b. The Lord's Supper:** Believers in Christ are to observe the Lord's Supper until He comes to take them to Glory. This memorial service is done in obedience to the Lord's command (Luke 22:19 with 1 Corinthians 11:23-34). The unleavened bread is a symbol of Christ's sinless body (the incarnation) that was given for us. The wine is a symbol of His blood that was shed for the remission of our sins. By partaking of the Lord's Table, the believer is remembering the Lord's death and giving testimony that he/she has committed his/her life to the Savior.

### **4. The Priesthood of the Believer**

Every believer is a priest unto God and has a right to come boldly to God's throne to confess his/her sins, make his/her petitions and give praise to God through Jesus Christ, the Christian's High Priest and Advocate (1 Timothy 2:5; Hebrews 4:14-16; 1 John 2:1-2; 1 Peter 2:9; and Revelation 1:6).

### **5. Separation of Church and State**<sup>161</sup>

The Church has a definite job to do: Evangelize the whole world, instruct people in the Word of God, and teach people to obey it (Matthew 28:19-20). Government has a different responsibility, which is to maintain law and order in society (Romans 13:1-7). A Christian is admonished to show respect for and pay tribute to

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<sup>160</sup> An excellent work on baptism was produced by Johannas Warns, and translated by G. H. Lang in 1957, *Baptism, Studies in the Original Christian Baptism*. Those with any doubts about the biblical and historical foundation of the Baptists on this subject need to read this book.

<sup>161</sup> Not to be confused with the First Amendment of the Constitution of the United States, which does not set forth a separation but a respect and a limitation upon government, not the church.

his government as a citizen of the state and to minister unto God as a citizen of heaven (Matthew 22:21; Romans 13:1-7; 1 Peter 2:13). Never is the church to assume the God-given role of the state, nor is government to assume or interfere with the role of the Church. When government oversteps God's limits, Baptists believe their first responsibility is to obey God and that we must be ready to suffer persecution (2 Chronicles 22:10 – 23:15; Daniel 3 & 6; Acts 4:19-20).

## **6. The Autonomy of the Local Church**

The local church is to be self-governed and is to have no head over her except her true Head, the Lord Jesus Christ (Ephesians 4:15-16; Colossians 1:18). The government of the primitive church was "very simple."<sup>162</sup> History shows that Baptist churches have been congregational in government, though some have experienced strong leadership. We believe that God's will is revealed through His Word and the unity of His people, not through an ecclesiastical body or an individual such as an overseeing bishop.

## **The Autonomy of the Local Church and Christian Liberty**

The autonomy of the local church has already been addressed as a Baptist Distinctive. This autonomy is revealed throughout the New Testament and is a fundamental belief of the Baptists. The practice of this doctrine can cause misunderstandings and conflicts between churches. Those churches that are part of a large denomination such as Methodist, Presbyterian, Catholic, have established beliefs, practices, and values that are part of a historical past or that come from a hierarchy.<sup>163</sup> However, a church that truly believes in and practices autonomy does not have this background influence over their faith and practice.

Though we believe that the Holy Scriptures are our only rule for faith and practice and that Jesus is the head of the church, we must be honest and admit that not all the issues we face today are clearly covered in the Bible. For this very reason the Jews had their Talmud and other commentaries on the Law. For example the law required the Jews to circumcise their baby boys on the eighth day, but it also required that they do no work on the Sabbath. The religious leaders placed these two requirements in balance and concluded that a boy should be circumcised even if the eighth day was a Sabbath.<sup>164</sup> Our heavenly Father knew these two laws could cause a conflict, but He did not choose to clarify the matter.

There exist several subjects that are not addressed in the Bible, like music, dress codes,<sup>165</sup> order of services in the church, Bible translations, etc. There is no God-ordained hierarchy to dictate a solution. God left this in the hands of His people within the context of the autonomous local church. The local church has the divine right to establish standards in areas that are not clearly addressed in the Bible.

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<sup>162</sup> Sell, H. T. (1998, c1906). *Studies in Early Church History*, Willow Grove, PA: Woodlawn Electronic Publishing, from the chapter on "the Church in the Catacombs"

<sup>163</sup> As is shown in the chapter on Calvinism, many of these traditions have their roots in the teachings of Augustine.

<sup>164</sup> John 7:22-23

<sup>165</sup> The Word of God does give us two principles to follow: 1) Modesty; 1 Timothy 3:9, and 2) A distinction in dress that defines sex; Deuteronomy 22:5. Beyond these how we dress is an open subject.

The problem comes when a local church tries to export their views, as though they were inspired by the Holy Spirit and were equal to the Scriptures, and to apply them to all of Christianity or other autonomous local churches similar to itself. The Apostle Paul dealt with this in Romans 14:1 to 15:13 and 1 Corinthians 8; 9:19-27; and 10:23-33. In these passages, Paul addressed Christian liberties setting forth the following principles:

- 1) We should respect the beliefs and practices of others and should not judge or condemn them (beliefs and practices that are not clearly covered in the Bible). Romans 14:1-18
- 2) We should not practice our liberties when doing so will weaken or destroy other Christians. Romans 14:13-22
- 3) We should not allow the practice of our liberties to destroy our testimony for the Lord Jesus before a lost world. Romans 14:13-22, and 1 Corinthians 8 and 9:19-27
- 4) We should accept and respect our brother (sister) in Christ and his practices, showing love. Romans 15:1-13
- 5) Our goal should always be what is good for others and the glory of God, not allowing secondary issues to destroy the work of the Lord. 1 Corinthians 10:23-33

To illustrate, let us imagine a church that to facilitate the public reading of the Scriptures decides to use a specific translation of the Bible in its services, placing copies in the pews and recommending that its regular attendees bring that translation. An error and offense occurs when that local church starts to find fault with other churches because they are using a different translation.<sup>166</sup>

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<sup>166</sup> Here I am not getting into the “King James Only” debate, which I believe is wrong and actually illustrates this point.





The background for this chart on church history comes from:  
*A Chart of Church History – With Special Reference to the Baptist Movement*, designed by Dr. LeRoy D. Thomas and Alvin B. Barber, Jr.

For his church history course Dr. Thomas used the book by Kenneth Scott Lateourette, *A History of Christianity*, © 1953, Pub. Harper & Row, an excellent work.

In 1972 Dr. Thomas gave me, Phillip D. Mosher, permission to use his chart in my ministries. Over the years I have modified and added to it.