

Section 3

Biblical Aspects
of Church Ministry, or
The Main Thing Is that the
Main Thing Always Remains
the Main Thing

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Organization and Meetings of the Church

In the film *Camelot*, the good King Arthur faced many dilemmas in the rule of his kingdom. But he had a secret weapon. When, in a battle scene, he wanted to survey the whole of the battlefield, he would, by the magic of Merlin, be turned into an owl, who could then soar over field and forest. This would give Arthur a view of the whole problem at hand, from which he could make wise decisions for his kingdom.

We have been attempting the same. Before we became lost in the trees of exegesis and proof texting on matters of the church and Christian ministry, we surveyed the forest. From the patterns of the lives of Jesus and His disciples to the principles recorded in Acts and the epistles we have looked at the large picture.

We are now ready to examine a few very significant trees. In this section we want to look at some fundamental aspects of the New Testament ministry, including the form of the church and the function of its leadership and body parts.

ORGANIZATION OF THE CHURCH

Ideally there ought to be only one Christian Church throughout

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the whole world, the Church of Christ, one in doctrine, one in worship, one in government, one in discipline. Romanists and Episcopalians have no monopoly of the formula “one holy catholic, and apostolic church.” Division within the church arose from unfaithfulness to Christ and declension from the apostolic pattern. Everyone imbued with zeal for the honour of Christ must deplore the fragmentation which has marred the body of Christ and to a large extent dissipated its witness.¹

God has given function and honor to each member of the body “so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other” (1 Cor. 12:25). The precedent and concern for this is forcefully presented in the prayer of our Lord:

My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me (John 17:20-21).

As we have seen earlier, our unity in the body is grounded in the unity of the Godhead. The ability of believers to abide in this truth has a direct bearing on the message the world understands about the gospel of Christ.

The church is you who pray, not where you pray. It is an assembly of true believers. It is a gathering of Christians who have, as a common confession, the justification that comes by faith in Christ. The church is not where we go to worship; it is we who worship. It is not a building of brick and mortar. It is saints who, “like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ” (1 Pet. 2:5). The only true church building is a living building of flesh and blood, the Body of Christ.

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In recognizing these facts, the New Testament identifies three historic expressions of the church: the universal church, the city church, and the house church.

THE UNIVERSAL CHURCH

And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it (Matt. 16:18).

Inscribed in huge Roman letters from the Vulgate around the interior of the dome of Saint Peter's Cathedral in Rome are the words of Matthew 16:18. Yet, as is seen above from the word of John Murray, no papal system or ecclesiastical institution has prior claim on what is the prediction and promise of the coming church.

The universal church is the Body of Christ and is bound together by the grace of the Lord Jesus. It is one even as Christ and the Father are one. There is not distinction or favoritism or special status given to some over others. Our foundation is Christ, and we are all "living stones, being built up into a spiritual house." In any community there is to be an affinity or recognition of a common brotherhood which goes beyond local church affiliation.

THE CITY CHURCH

This is the often-overlooked, more silent partner of the New Testament church. The Scriptures identify major population areas. The two most visible churches in the book of Acts are the church at Jerusalem and the church at Antioch.

Jerusalem was the focal hub of the early church. From there, and based on the instructions of Acts 1:8, the gospel began to spread through increasingly larger Jewish regions of the Roman Empire. The leadership of the Jerusalem church, the apostles, were responsible for the proclamation of the gospel and oversight of the newly-born flock.

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The church at Antioch would become for the Gentile churches what Jerusalem was to the Jewish churches. The ministries and leadership of Barnabas and Saul were seen here, and from that city and surrounding churches relief for the Jerusalem saints was sent back to Jerusalem for the famine conditions that occurred during the reign of Claudius.

Although the churches of Jerusalem and Antioch were revealed in the New Testament writings as also meeting in house churches, it is instructive to observe that there was a city-identity to the church in those areas. The church reached out beyond the local houses and assemblies.

THE HOUSE CHURCH

The house churches of the New Testament formed the individual cells that made up the Body of Christ. Various house churches are acknowledged in the New Testament. A flock met in the home of Titus Justus (Acts 18:7); another met in the home of Aquila and Priscilla (Rom. 16:5; 1 Cor. 16:19). There were also assemblies that met in Nympha's and Philemon's homes (Col. 4:15; Philem. 2). Keeping in mind that the church is people and not a building, these homes served as buildings that housed the assembly during their meetings on the first day of the week, as well as during other occasions of worship, ministry, and prayer. As the believers in one area grew in numbers, they began to associate in a centralized location. This is seen at Corinth where they were coming together, from their homes, for a meal and the Lord's Table (1 Cor. 11:17-22). Thus, these house churches developed into local assemblies that met in public facilities.

Two important passages illustrate the relationship between different church types in the book of Acts. In Acts 2:42-47 we see the newly converted believers meeting together "in the temple courts" and breaking bread "in their homes" (Acts 2:46). There is, in that reference, a preview of the enthusiastic and joyful expressions of

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worship and fellowship that many New Testament communities would soon enjoy. The meetings in the Temple courts enabled this large and growing church to gather for times of corporate celebration. It revisited the place of the miracle of Pentecost and the exposition of the Scriptures by Peter concerning the Christ who was delivered up to the cross not only by them but ultimately by God on their behalf (Acts 2:22-24, 36).

The meetings in the homes were the local and geographic expressions of the effects of these believers' conversions being worked out in the neighborhoods of family and friends. Not only did they fellowship and share meals but, distinguished from their eating together, they "broke bread in their homes" (Acts 2:46). Following the instructions of the Lord, they were remembering Him through the Table—accompanied by the worship and praise of a church meeting.

The second passage that illustrates the interrelationships between the city and house churches is Acts 15. Here two city churches are in view: the church in Jerusalem and the church of Antioch. The problem was a severe threat—similar to the one addressed in the epistle to Galatia—and endangered the heart of the message of the gospel: "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved" (Acts 15:1).

Again false teachers were trying to add to the work of Christ by insisting upon the requirements of the law, namely circumcision, for the Gentile believers in Antioch. The danger was recognized by both Paul and Barnabas and the church in Antioch, and the two apostles were sent as a ministry team to Jerusalem to reach a consensus on the matter. The church of Antioch (Acts 15:3) is seen cooperating with the church of Jerusalem (Acts 15:4) in this important matter. Later, in reciprocal fashion, the church of Jerusalem sent the ministry team of Barnabas and Silas to Antioch, along with Paul and Barnabas, to deliver the judgment of the council (Acts 15:22). There was a strong sense of cooperation in the ministry by these two city churches.

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The message was sent “to the Gentile believers in Antioch, Syria and Cilicia” (Acts 15:23). Later, Paul and Silas, with the commendation of other believers, took the findings of the council “through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches” (Acts 15:40-41). This, then, pictures the cooperative efforts of churches, both identified by city locations and beyond (possibly to house churches), as believers joined together in ministry and worship (cf. Acts 5:42).

So, when did we begin seeing churches as buildings rather than people? One of the most remarkable departures was the exodus of house groups as a unit of Christianity. The first recorded evidence of adopting a church building is between A.D. 240 and 245. In Dura Europos, a Roman garrison city on the Euphrates, archaeologists have discovered evidence of a house renovated for this purpose.

The owner moved out, and a dividing wall was demolished, allowing space for sixty to seventy participants. Benches were built in the courtyard. In a smaller room the congregants even built a baptistry with biblical motifs painted on the walls. Porphyry, a pagan critic of Christianity during this time, records some painfully insightful observations: “But even the Christians mimic temple architecture and build vast buildings in which they come together to pray, which they could indeed do unhindered in their houses, since it is very well known that the Lord hears from everywhere.”

Nothing is intrinsically wrong with buildings or the programs that go on in them. But we must remember that we do not need a major orientation to physical plants to accomplish spiritual goals. Our American communities look to buildings as credentials for a ministry effort; our Lord does not.

BODY MINISTRIES: INDEPENDENT OR INTERDEPENDENT

The only problem with the above conclusions is that to the majority of believers today they would sound like conclusions found on the *Twilight Zone*! To actually consider that there is to be

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an enthusiastic and open willingness for cooperation and ministry between local assemblies and believers from different cities and geographic locations is foreign to most modern efforts of Christian ministry. We act more like marbles than grapes. When squeezed together we produce glass shards rather than sweet wine.

If we resist a spirit of cooperation and interdependence within the Body of Christ, then we are denying the reality of the Body of Christ. If we are single-minded in intent that all ministry meetings, efforts, and resources are to be used exclusively for one local church, or at least to point believers toward membership and participation in only one church, then we are denying the reality of the Body of Christ. If we do not join hands in our communities in matters of doctrine and discipline of believers, and cooperate energetically toward that end, then we are denying the reality of the Body of Christ.

Our failure to think clearly and act maturely has created a universal phenomenon in the Western church. We are divided according to social, economic, or racial lines, with gender paps sprinkled liberally throughout. Such homogeneity should not exist in local churches. Entertaining these distinctions is like promoting theological racism. We forget that in the first-century church members of Caesar's house worshiped beside bondslaves; slave and slave owner called each other "brother"; the Jerusalem church cared for Greek widows.

A local church should not be known for economic, professional, or racial distinctions. To examine another brother and think, *Well, yes, we are one in Christ, and yes, we are neighbors, but you really need to worship with your kind*, is nothing less than partiality. It denies our very unity in Christ. Far too many believers think they can embrace God's kingdom yet practice partiality; regeneration in Christ makes little difference in their lives. It is time for Christians to abolish that sin.

Historically, the orthodox and fundamental churches in America have their roots in the struggles and schisms associated with the fundamentalist-liberal debates of the late nineteenth and early

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twentieth centuries. Our spiritual forefathers were fighters, and they needed to be. From their efforts, in major part, we have preserved the orthodox and biblical precedents that contribute to the strength of our assemblies today.

But it is also time to stop shooting our wounded. There is an identity and affiliation of believers in Christ that reaches beyond the memberships of local assemblies. In the New Testament, believers from house churches who lived in different cities cooperated in the ministry as a body. A hungry high schooler understands body cooperation—the stomach sends the signal to the brain, the eyes spot the targeted fast-food restaurant, the feet move, and the hands stuff the hamburger into the mouth. Believers, being convinced of the need for cooperation of the foot, the eye, and the hand, must also join in the labor of the ministry. Our roots may have developed in the soil of independence, but our growth must come through a recognition of the cooperative efforts of assemblies and believers.

NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH MEETING

Any survey of the New Testament church meeting must first take into account the roots of the Old Testament, the nurturings of the gospels, the growth to maturity in the epistles, and finally the historic consideration of the church after the first century.

JEWISH ROOTS FOR THE NEW TESTAMENT MEETING— BEFORE THE DEATH OF CHRIST

The roots of faith and the backdrop for the development of the New Testament meeting are found in the Old Testament itself. In some senses, the beginning of the scriptural account in the Garden looks at God's desire to meet with Adam and Eve. Because of the breach of fellowship caused by the sin of our first parents, and in its spread throughout the early peoples of the world, there developed within the plan of God the design and ministry of the Tabernacle.

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From Moses to David the Jews met in the Tabernacle, or tent of meeting. This became the place for the offering of sacrifices for sins, for worship together during Israel's festival days, and the physical residence for occasional glimpses of the glory of the Lord. It was during this time, in Exodus 12, that Israel was commanded to institute the permanent memorial of the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread. This not only reminded Israel of the deliverance of the nation but also prefigured Christ, who would be the final sacrifice and Passover (cf. 1 Cor. 5:7-8). These activities carried over similarly to the Temple from Solomon's reign until the dispersion of 586 B.C.

If the activities of Jewish believers at the Tabernacle and Temple form one major contribution to understanding the New Testament meeting, the existence of and activities surrounding the synagogue form the other. The synagogue, probably beginning during the captivity and further development during the rule of the Greeks, was the standard expression of religious activity during New Testament times. The worship patterns, the officers, and the precedent of the synagogue left their mark from Matthew through Revelation.

There were three main elements to the synagogue service: praise, prayer, and proclamation of the Word of God. Praise in the Old Testament Psalms included both rejoicing in Yahweh for who He was (descriptive psalms) and reclaiming His faithfulness to Israel in the past (declarative psalms). This was done with joy and great congregational involvement. Synagogue prayers were recited from memory. They may have included portions of Old Testament passages or credal affirmations of the Jewish faith. And, of course, the declaring of the Word of God was a central part of these meetings. The message was often given by any man who could deal with the text adequately and was not limited to select rabbis of that given synagogue. It was within this context that Christ spoke to those in Nazareth from Isaiah 61:1-2 concerning the prediction and fulfillment of the blessings of the Lord (Luke 4:16-21).

The institution of the Lord's Table, or Supper, in the gospels

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also would become central to the later outworking of the New Testament meeting. As was said earlier, the festivals of Passover and Unleavened Bread form the backdrop for this ordinance, and Christ's instructions were clear. First, the bread, representing His body, was to be taken and eaten. Second, the cup as given represented His blood, which was shed for many. Third, Christ vowed not to drink again of the cup, after the final Passover, until "I can drink it anew with you in my Father's kingdom" (Matt. 26:26-30; Mark 14:22-26). This Table is later referred to in the book of Acts as the "breaking of bread."

HERITAGE OF THE NEW TESTAMENT MEETING— AFTER THE CROSS

It seems that, with good justification, any study on the church finds itself regularly back in Acts 2. Here we see the institution of the meeting of the church after the death of Christ and the events of Pentecost. Just as praise, prayer, and proclamation of the Word were characteristic of the synagogue service, so public praise, prayer, and the Word, as given in the doctrine of the apostles were central to the early church. The first church meeting was to join in one heart and prayer to the Lord as they encountered the resistant religious leaders (Acts 4:23-31). Later church meetings in the book of Acts handled the matters of fair distribution to the widows (Acts 6), the imprisonment of Peter (Acts 12), the doctrinal challenges of the false teachers (Acts 15), and the instructions and final guidelines from Paul (Acts 20:7-12; 17-38).

In the epistles, Paul expands on the principles laid down in Acts. Matters of doctrine and discipline—praise and prayer—are seen regularly in his writings. In addition, guidelines are given for the selection of leadership for the churches and the ministries of gifted men and women in the assembly (chaps. 8-9).

The heritage of the regular gathering was established (cf. Heb. 3:13; 10:24-25). The New Testament meeting was to offer congre-

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gational praise and worship to the Lord. It consisted of the teaching of the Word, prayer, and elements of fellowship. The Lord's Table was regularly observed. The believers, meeting as the family of God in different geographic locations, exalted Christ. With teaching and admonishment, they functioned as a Body for the building up of the saints in love (Eph. 4:12-16; Col. 1:28).

HISTORY OF THE CHURCH MEETING— AFTER THE FIRST CENTURY

The study of the history of the church from the beginning of the second century yields a mixed bag. On the one hand, there remained the clear strains of doctrine and practice instituted in the Scriptures by Christ and the apostles. Yet, there also was developing some tendencies that were to have a detrimental effect on the church meeting.

On the positive side, the meetings continued on the first day of the week. There are indications that time was early in the morning (Pliny, A.D. 111-112). This followed the pattern of the New Testament and was in remembrance of the Lord's resurrection on the first day (Ignatius, A.D. 100-105). There were regular references to the Table of the Lord (*The Didache*, A.D. 100-130), the inclusion of the ordinance of baptism, and the regular care of the needy (Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, A.D. 151).

But where there is doctrine, there is also decay. Where there is liberty, there is also license or legalism. The history of the second century also brought into the church inclusions that were beyond the teachings of Scripture. Pliny cites the need for verbal oaths to the Lord; Ignatius begins a one-man crusade for the single head pastor, called the bishop; and Martyr suggests an atoning element to baptism.

Thus, the study of the church brings both confirmation and caution. It confirms what we have already seen, that is, the New Testament church meeting is a gathering of the saints for the purposes

of teaching and fellowship. But it also cautions us not to exceed the Scriptures in matters of doctrine and life.

**THE MEETING: BUILDING UP ONE CHURCH,
OR ONE ANOTHER**

In our day the church meeting has taken on some distinctive characteristics. We stand at the end of centuries of traditions, reactions, and overreactions to problems that have faced the church. Yet there are some emphases we should avoid.

First, the church is people, not programs. The Body of Christ is an organism that is designed to grow and develop as people minister to people. This is a difficult thing to program. The lifeblood of the body is relationships. If programs facilitate relationships, then they are justified. All too often, the opposite is true. The New Testament church meeting was orderly though unstructured; it encouraged involvement in the body, rather than the performance of the few (1 Cor. 14:26-33a). If the meeting agenda is largely restrictive and does not allow the regular interaction of the body in terms of fellowship, prayer, and the Table, as well as the Scriptures, then the church meeting is going in the wrong direction.

Second, the church is participation, not professionalism. The body is to minister to the body. Members are not to be entertained. If the church specializes in hiring the best preacher, the best music director, and so on, then the body will never develop. Each part of the body is to say to the next: “I need you. I can’t just hire someone to replace you. You are a valued part of this body.” Nothing matures during dormancy.

Third, the church is to proclaim Christ, not promote itself. Try an experiment. Ask a close friend, “What is your church known for?” You will get a variety of responses. “Well, we have the finest pastor in our area! You should hear our choir. We have a staff of professionals and an expanding missions program. And finally, we have a fine church building, though we will have to start a new

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building program for our Christian school!” I think we have begun to turn the corner in Christian ministry when the saint says, “Our regular desire is to proclaim Him!” That cannot happen unless the doctrines of the church, as set forth in the Scriptures, become primary guidelines for the church.

There is to be a careful awareness among believers in our day of the realities of both the local assemblies and the Body of Christ. It is worthy and good to pursue ministry diligently in the fellowship of believers that is your church. It is detrimental to look at all Christian ministry and effort through this church lens alone. In the New Testament the Body of Christ met in separate congregations, yet at times joined together in matters that directly threatened the gospel message. We should do no less.

CONCLUSIONS

As Arthur the owl, we have had our flyover. We have also begun to look at some strategic trees in this ministry forest. But there are still some gaps left to be filled. These questions remain: How does the church view its leadership? How does the church view itself? How does the church view its families and the educational process?

These trees make up the next three chapters. And if we do our jobs well, then we are ready for the last, important question: Where do we go from here?

