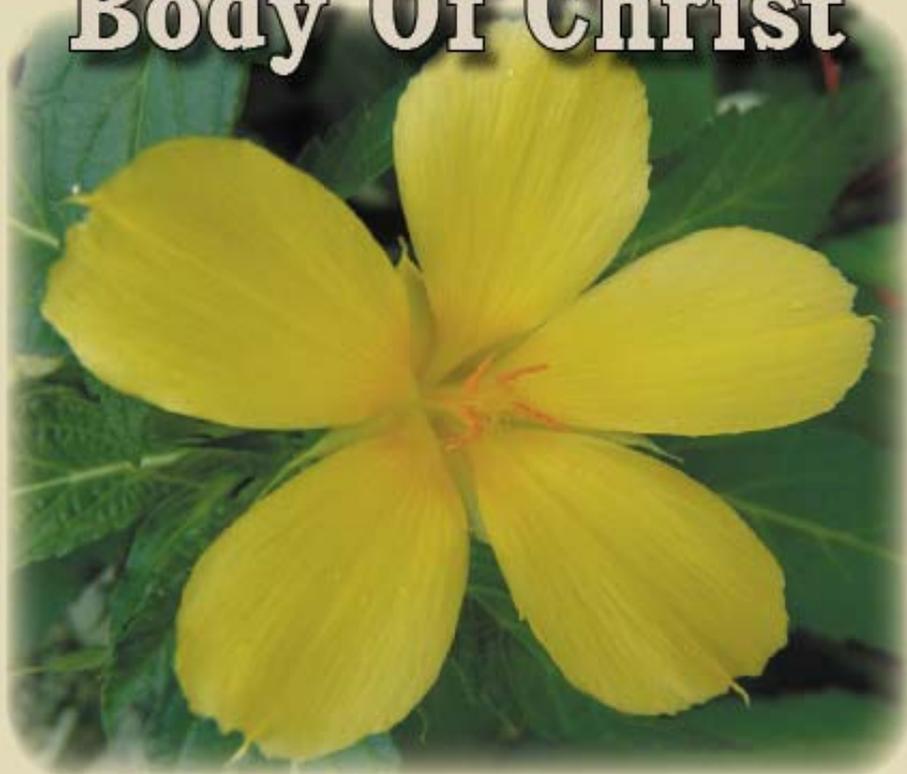


# **Organic Function Of The Body Of Christ**



**The Reflection Of Jesus In Heaven  
Through His Organic Body On Earth**

**DICKSON**

# Organic Function Of The Body Of Christ

Roger E. Dickson

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## Preface

Sometimes in history global events transpire that drive us to rethink our theology, and in particular, our understanding of how we view certain concepts in reference to the church. The axiomatic principle that familiar passages must always be reexamined is especially true in times of social chaos during wars and global pandemics. In the global pandemic days that began in 2020, which days will continue until an effective vaccine is discovered for the Covid-19 virus, it seems that the relentless virus will be with us far into the future, as is the inflictions of AIDS, tuberculosis and influenza. What has already begun on the part of many is to rethink the New Testament teaching concerning the identity and behavior of the church.

What has transpired in these pandemic days has motivated us to rethink our faith, specifically our identity as the children of God. Because health departments around the world have taken aim at what had become the identity of many religious groups—the assembly—we have now been forced into reconsidering what defines our relationship with God, and in particular, our relationships with one another. Because of restrictions that have been placed on Christians in reference to their assemblies, what faithful Christian has not reconsidered his or her relationship with God? Is it possible to feel as close to God in one's closet as we do when in the midst of fellow congregates?

Since many people formerly identified their faith by their assemblies, I thought it very appropriate to republish a revision of this book in order to rethink this subject. The original publication struck at the heart of the theology that Christianity is somehow identified by the assembly of the saints, particularly in reference to what the saints commonly perform on Sunday morning. But this misguided identity of the church produced a dichotomy in Christian behavior that has misled not only ourselves, but also made it difficult for unbelievers to understand the nature of true Christianity.

It seems that the unbelieving world has understood “Christians” according to their performance of religious ceremonies that take place in church buildings around the world, and not according to their behavior throughout the week. This understanding of Christianity has often led the world to harbor a distorted understanding of who Christians are and what “church” means. The pandemic may have helped in correcting this misunderstanding. When assemblies of Christians are greatly restricted, or even shut down completely during lockdowns, Christians begin to reevaluate their own personal identity as Christians. The world has also started viewing Christians from a different perspective. As for Christians, these are certainly the times in which everyone must take another look in their Bibles and come to a different understanding of the Christian faith.

This book is more relevant today because readers are forced into rethinking who they are in their relationship with God. Since we had formerly been misguided to think that our faith depended on whether we were discovered in some assembly on Sunday morning, we are now home alone wondering if the Holy Spirit functions outside a church assembly. Possibly more important is the belief that we had convinced ourselves that unless we meritoriously wandered through a certain criteria of acts of worship with fellow disciples in an assembly, we were not worshiping God. And even worse, we went so far as to convince ourselves that our identity as the church was established by the performance of our acts of worship on Sunday morning during the “hour of worship.”

So now we are home alone, wondering if the church can even exist when all the members are socially distanced from one another and alone in their homes. We must take this opportunity to make sure that we have a Bible-defined understanding of the church. Our worship must be extracted from the confines of performing rites, rituals and ceremonies in public assemblies. It must now be rediscovered in the confines of our homes. For many, closets have been cleaned of cobwebs and dusted in order to restore again silence with God in prayer. Gone are all the orchestras. Guitars lie quietly in cases stacked away in the corner of attics. These are certainly times for reconsideration of what we may have fabricated over time that in itself was drifting us away from a close relationship with our Father. What we defined as “worship” may have been an invention for ourselves with less focus on God, and more on our own emotional needs.

In the midst of our social distancing and isolation from one another, it may be time to again challenge the doctrine of “church autonomy.” For years this misguided teaching separated groups of Christians into independent church-house shelters where the denominations tried to validate themselves with their worship performances on Sunday morning. But the pandemic has driven us to rethink this misguided theology that we could socially distance ourselves as a group, and then think that we would all be together as one in heaven. The irony of the matter lies in the fact that the autonomous are now autonomously home alone, craving to be with any brother or sister who might happen to come their way. Maybe the good that will come out of the Covid pandemic, as in the case of wars, is that we are forced into a social environment wherein we can better understand our inconsistencies in reference to church autonomy. Such beliefs now seem so senseless since we are forced into individual autonomy, or at least greatly limited to house assemblies around the world.

It is in times as these, therefore, that we need to refresh our studies of the nature of the church, particularly our relationship with one another and God.

Sometimes God must move us into extremes in order that we might come to a better knowledge of the truth. At least in the past history of the nation of Israel He did such through their captivity. The Israelites came back from that captivity a changed people, never again to wander off into self-righteous Baal religion that was so common among them before the confinement of captivity. Maybe we too must be moved so far away from one another into the captivity of our own homes before we can restore a craving for God and for one another. But more important, maybe we need to be moved away from one another in order that we might renew our one-on-one relationship with our Father, who in our former religiosity had become only an afterthought during our self-righteous ceremonies we performed on Sunday morning for our own entertainment. Once we rediscover that our salvation is totally dependent on His grace through His Son, then we can find some comfort in the fact that we are saved without all the self-righteous rites, rituals and meritorious ceremonies that we performed in mega-assemblies around the world. It is now that the world has the opportunity to understand us apart from what they observed us doing during a Sunday morning performance.

Isolation always drives us to understand that church is not defined by assemblies. Church is defined by love-driven individuals throughout the world who have been baptized into Christ Jesus in response to the grace of God that was revealed on the cross. When we come to this realization, it is then that we will find confidence in our home alone relationship with Him, regardless of where everyone else is in their homes, who are also alone.

We read in our history books of wars and pandemics that have occurred throughout the centuries. We can even read again John's prophecy of what would happen when government would eventually come crashing down on Christians for a century and a half in the first two centuries of two millennia ago. We must remember that all those Christians survived those chaotic years. We are here today because they did. There were no cellphones, no internet, no television and no newspapers during their years of persecution. And yet, those Christians who emerged from persecution, pandemics and global wars survived. They did so because their faith was not, as ours, centered around Sunday assembly performances, or church function that was centered around church-buildings, organization committees, fancy robes and reversed collars. Christians then were faithful in godly behavior that was born out of their living response to the grace of God. They never ceased to believe that they would survive in the darkness of a catacomb, or huddled in fear in a bombed out building. They simply survived, and the darkness and fear made them better. So much better that their faith transitioned through those harsh times in order to captivate our hearts today when we read about their strength.

It is my prayer, therefore, that this book will motivate readers around the world to rethink their concept of “church.” I send the book forth in order to challenge your thinking on this matter, and in doing so, to possibly restore a faith that will permeate all trials through which we must go in this sin-infested world. In the midst of so many trials we need to remember always what the Holy Spirit said to some who stayed with Jesus about two thousand years ago when they too were to suffer through hard times:

***These will make war with the Lamb and the Lamb will overcome them, for He is Lord of lords and King of kings. And those who are with Him are called and chosen and faithful (Rv 17:14).***

## INTRODUCTION

Have you ever wondered why the document of Acts is connected with the gospel record of Luke? Both documents were written by the same writer and directed to the same person. They were written by Luke and directed to Theophilus. We do not know exactly who Theophilus was, but he was some well-known person in Rome with whom Paul was connected. Since his name had the word “god” (*theos*) in it, we could rightly assume that he was some important person. This is assumed because parents of lower classes did not give such names to their children.

The nature of both Luke and Acts are apologetic, that is, they are a defense to Theophilus on behalf of Paul who was on trial in Rome at the time Acts concludes. In the document of Luke, Luke recorded the cause of the body of Christ. In Acts he gave a record of the organic effect that Christ had on the lives of people as members of the body. Luke explains the source from which the body organically functioned in the early years of its existence. Acts, therefore, is a definition of the function of the organic body of Christ.

Theophilus had only these two books in order to understand the Christ, and thus understand how and why members of the body functioned as they did. He did not have the epistles. We would conclude, therefore, that we can understand Jesus and His body if only we had the documents of Luke and Acts.

The epistles were written to deal with dysfunctional beliefs and behavior of the body. Therefore, if we seek to understand the nature and function of the body, we must first look to Acts before we go to the epistles. The epistles reveal specifics, but Acts reveals function. Since there is one Head and one body, then we seek to understand first the function of the one body as it was directed by the one Head from heaven. We thus see Acts as the commentary as to how the early disciples functioned as the organic body. Once we understand the organic function of the body, then we understand why specific instructions were made in the epistles concerning corrections and directions by the Holy Spirit in reference to specific functions of the body.

The epistles were written in order to make course corrections as the body was influenced by the world in which the early members lived throughout the Roman Empire. We come to this conclusion because the first epistle to be written, possibly Galatians, was not written until after the body had been in existence for about twenty years. There was a great deal of time in the function of the body before there needed to be any corrections in dysfunction.

Because the body functioned for about twenty years before the first “course corrections” were written, we conclude that the epistles were written only when there were elements in the body, that if left uncorrected, would eventually destroy the body by leading it into being just another religion among the many that existed at the time. While the body existed under the “verbal Bibles” of the apostles and prophets, there was no problem. But when the body spread into regions of deep pagan religiosity, it did not have the foundation of the faith of the Jews in Palestine. With the conversion of many Gentiles came also the threat of invading beliefs that would lead to the destruction of the body. And thus, we have the epistles to keep our minds focused on Jesus and the gospel.

We could view the organic function of the disciples as a movie. The theme of the script was conceived and delivered to the apostles by Jesus (See Jn 14:26; 16:13). The gospel theme produced a script that was recorded for our viewing by Luke in the book of Acts. The epistles are individual scenes as the Holy Spirit sought to direct the disciples into behaving according to the gospel theme of the script.

Luke was the film editor in writing Acts as he brought many of the actors together into one functional drama that was played out in the first century. We can thank the Holy Spirit for putting together the final masterpiece of a literary picture of how Jesus watched from heaven as the theme of His script was played out in the lives of His body on earth in its early years. When we understand that we have been baptized into the movie script, then we know that the Producer is watching from heaven, carefully directing our lives through His inspired Scripture in order to bring each member to the final conclusion of the movie. And we promise you, this is a movie that has a very happy ending.

Now before we begin, there is one point that we ask you to remember

as you read through this material. Please keep in mind that it is not wrong for a group of Christians to work together as a group. In the planning, and implementation of their desires, individuals have the freedom to work together as an organized group. In their work together, they must always be inclusive of others to join their ministry. In fact, unless we are diligent to recruit others into our work, we will become exclusive. It is this exclusiveness that is not befitting of the gospel or the universal organic function of the body of Christ. It is this sectarian exclusiveness that we are addressing in the discussions of this book. In fact, the entire theme of this book is against the exclusiveness that often arises out of those groups that become sectarian. The universal organic body of Christ is the opposite to the function of those who would seek to be autonomous sectarian religious bodies. The universal body of Christ functions in a manner that includes all members throughout the world who have believed and obey the gospel.

## Chapter 1

### FOCUSING FROM HEAVEN TO EARTH

The Holy Spirit metaphorically used the word “body” to refer to the collective of individuals who have put on Christ through obedience to the gospel (See Gl 3:26-29). He metaphorically used the word “members” to refer to those who compose the body (1 Co 12:12; Ep 5:30). A body functions in unison to protect itself as it grows and abides under the leadership of the Head. It is organic in function. For this reason, we use the word “organic” to refer to the function of the body of Christ that is composed of many members who are fitted together in Christ throughout the world.

#### **A. The body is the extension of Jesus.**

The body does not exist apart from its members, for its members are the one body. Therefore, when we speak of the organic function of the body, we are speaking of the function of the members with one another, for the members are connected with one another as parts of the body. The members are *“fellow citizens with the saints and members of the house-*

*hold of God*” (Ep 2:19). They “*are members one of another*” (Ep 4:25). The interaction of the members with one another under the control of the Head, constitutes the organic function of the body of Christ in this world.

When we speak of the function of the body, we must begin with the head. And the head is Jesus (Cl 1:18). Jesus looks down from on high and sees the members of His body. The members constitute the existence of His body, and thus, the spiritual incarnation of Himself into the world that He created (Cl 1:16). **We must always see the body through the eyes of Jesus.** There is no other way to correctly understand the nature and function of the body of Christ. In other words, we understand the body of Christ by starting with the head in heaven, and then looking down to the members on earth. We do not start with the members, and then look up to the head. If we do this, we will have a twisted understanding of both the head and the body.

## **B. The body functions under the control of the head.**

In Colossians 2, Paul wrote, “*But the body is of Christ*” (Cl 2:17). In other words, Christ is the origin of the body. He is the spiritual source from which the body continues to exist. In order to understand the nature of the body, therefore, it is imperative to understand its origin. That origin is Jesus. We must understand Jesus Christ before we can have any clear understanding of His body.

Paul continued in Colossians 2 to speak of fleshly minds that do not hold “*fast to the head*” (Cl 2:19). When one becomes narcissistic (self-oriented), he does not seek the headship of Christ. He feels self-sufficient, and thus, arrogant in his own self-reliance. He has forgotten that from the head who is Jesus, “*all the body, being nourished and held together by the joints and ligaments, grows with the increase of God*” (Cl 2:19). The problem comes when we change the focus of our interest from Christ to ourselves.

We often make the mistake of viewing the body through the behavior of the members. If we do this, we will invariably see a twisted and dysfunctional body. We will assume that the body is distorted because of the feeble abilities of fallible people who make up the body. This is particularly true if

we seek to define the one body through the presence of independent groups that are separated from one another, and often, have no connectivity as the one universal body of Christ. Those who view the body from the viewpoint of lumps scattered here and there who are struggling on their own to survive, have a difficult time understanding the universality of the organic function of the body of Christ. They are unfortunately looking from the bottom up.

But if we view the body from the top down, we get a completely different perspective of the church of our Lord Jesus Christ. When we view the body through the eyes of a perfect Head, then we can better understand the imperfections of the members as the body. We better understand the struggles of the Head to correct dysfunctional members. We see the body as one universal body, not a collective of independent groups who have no dealings with one another. We see the body as a universal collective of members, not as a collective of autonomous bodies who supposedly compose the one body. **When we view the body through the eyes of Jesus, we see only one body.** When we see the people of God through our own eyes, we often see individual groups, instead of individual members who are the one body because they are all connected to the one Vine, Jesus Christ (Jn 15:1-8)

The body of Christ is not a collection of disjointed limbs, but **the universal collective of individual members throughout the world who function under the universal authority of the one Head.** Though imperfect in their behavior as members of the body, they are still connected to the Vine, from whom they receive their spiritual direction and connection as one body.

### **C. The body is the “spiritual” incarnation of the Son of God.**

In the historical document of Acts, Luke reveals the heavenly view of this functioning body as it organically grew out of its early beginnings in Jerusalem in A.D. 30. As the newly born body stumbled out of Jerusalem into all the world, it fell over theological stones, and often, into the crevices of Jewish legalism. In its early agony under the guiding hand of the apostles’ teaching, the body eventually struggled to her feet and became such a world influence that she actually turned the existing world at that time upside down (At 17:6).

Luke takes us on a panoramic view from heaven in the early years when the disciples were struggling out of Judaism and idolatry into being the purified body of the Son of God. In order to do so, he wrote from a heavenly point of view in order to give Theophilus an understanding that the early disciples were not a political movement among men. They were the beautiful function of the spiritual incarnation of the Son of God continuing His mission as imperfect people who gave their entire lives to King Jesus. We thus stand back from the document of Acts, stepping out of the confusion that often prevails among members who seek to gather into autonomous groups who seek to disconnect from one another. We sit with Luke who wants us to view the organic function of the body from the throne of God in order that we catch a vision of how our Savior sees His body organically function in this world, and how the Father sees its imperfections through the blood of His Son.

If we view the body from the point of view of the heavenly Head, then we will understand the nature of the body as it is defined by Luke in the historical document of Acts. Luke rarely uses the universal collective definition of the Greek word *ekklēsia* (church), which Jesus said He would establish (Mt 16:18,19). He focuses on the behavior of the members, “the disciples,” as they moved about as functioning members of the body. We thus get the distinct message that when Luke is talking about the organic function of the body, he definitely is not talking about some organic union of independent groups who are seeking to be the one body by working out compromises in order to “work together” with other groups. This is far from his definition of the organic body of Christ. Luke focuses on members, not groups. He drives home the function of members who sought in their lives to be the incarnate Jesus in their communities.

#### **D. The body functions as disciples follow Jesus.**

The primary word that Luke uses in reference to God’s people is the word “disciple.” This reference to the early believers is used at least thirty times in the book of Luke, at least thirty times in Acts, and over 280 times in the New Testament. The reason for this is that the word “Christian” is a noun that is used as a collective term to refer to those who are the people of

Christ as a whole. They were people who were called after Christ.

But when Luke sought to focus on the function of the organic body, then an action word was needed. This is the word “disciple.” One of our reasons for asserting Luke’s purpose to define the function of the organic body is his use of this word. The disciples were the members of the body who were going about doing the work of the organic body. They were disciples of Christ, and thus, they behaved as Christ in their communities. They were doing exactly what Jesus commanded. *“Going, therefore, disciple all nations”* (Mt 28:19).

### **E. The body is identified by the life-style of the members.**

Luke never sought to construct a legal outline to either identify or defend the existence of the disciples as “church.” Their very behavior identified them as members of the body (See Jn 13:34,35). They were identified by what they did, for only those who were called by a Higher Power could accomplish what the early disciples did. And this is his argument to Theophilus. There is no other logical answer for the behavior of the early disciples than the fact that they behaved the way they did because they experienced something that was not of this world. This is the apologetic of Acts.

Contrary to so many today who misuse the book of Acts, Luke seeks to identify the incarnate Christ in the lives of His disciples in their early walk with Him. Once Acts is viewed as the spiritually incarnate Christ in the body of His members, then it becomes a beautiful dynamic document for the defense of the disciples of Jesus. Their behavior is evidence that they were “other world” born, and thus, could never have been the result of the ingenious theologies of the wisdom of men. If the document of Acts is twisted to conform to a legal outline to identify a structured and organized religious institution, then it loses its apologetic power, and subsequently, it becomes a simple outline of “church history” for amateur theologians who seek to debate “applied inferences” and “approved examples.”

We would challenge our readers to step back from this masterpiece of literary apologetics and observe the behavior of those about whom it gives witness. If we could only sit beside Jesus in heaven for a moment, and become excited as He witnessed the early beginnings of His body, then we

would see something wonderful. It would thrill our hearts.

## **F. The body is Spirit driven, as opposed to law driven.**

The body of Christ is organic because of the nature of her Spirit-driven members. In one statement of Jesus He defined the nature by which His body would be identified:

*A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this will all men know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another (Jn 13:34,35).*

Love is organic. There is no such thing as an unresponsive or non-expressive love. John added, “*My little children, let us not love in word or in tongue, **but in deed and in truth***” (1 Jn 3:18). Because the identity of the disciples of Jesus is defined by love, they are defined as an organism of people who are “in love with one another.” They so love one another because Jesus so loved them (1 Jn 4:19).

As we study through the New Testament, the foundation of love explains the relational interaction of the function of the members of the body. There is great emphasis in Scripture on the body members being “one another” related. Because they are in love with one another, the members seek to be together wherever and whenever possible.

The theological tragedy of modern times is that we have digressed in our understanding of the organic function of the body to be a simple meeting of members on Sunday morning. The identity of the church has been relegated to the performance of certain rituals and ceremonies between an opening and closing prayer. We have become content with our ceremonial functions in our assemblies that leave no room for expressions of love during the same “hour of worship.” We have forgotten that the organic church of Christ is not defined by meetings for ceremonial performances, but participatory function of the members with one another every day of the week. Participatory love is the identity of the body of Christ. And without participatory expressions of love, assemblies become only hollow meetings of empty

religionists who come together for themselves, and not as an encounter of loving people.

## **Chapter 2**

### **OBSERVING THE FUNCTIONING BODY**

One of the most exciting studies of all history is a study of people who firmly believed that Jesus was the Christ and Son of God. In the New Testament we find an inspired historical account of how such people behaved this belief. Particularly in the writings of Doctor Luke, we find this history as dedicated individuals were moved by the grace of God that was revealed on the cross (See 2 Co 4:15).

The Holy Spirit moved Luke's hand to inscribe many examples of the early believers in their response to the grace of God that was revealed in Jesus Christ. It is an exhilarating experience to survey through the book of Acts to discover how these early disciples responded in their time to what they believed. Their faith in Jesus, and the continued teaching of the apostles, kept them zealously pointed in the right direction.

#### **A. Example of behavior does not constitute law.**

We have discovered over the years that many people in their study of the Spirit's record of the behavior of the early disciples have made an unfortunate error in understanding the history of the early believers. This unfortunate error of interpretation has led some to be quite inconsistent in their understanding of the Spirit's historical documents concerning the function of the body of Christ. The error is to reason that the example of the early disciples in their response to the grace of God constitutes a divine command from God, and thus, should be imposed on believers today as law.

In other words, it is believed that the recorded response of individuals to the grace of God in the first century constitutes commands of God that were to be forever bound on the church. Such a belief is not only contrary to the freedom we have in Christ, but it also leads interpreters to hopeless inconsistencies as to what examples of obedience should be obeyed. The

practice also leads to many judges rising up among the disciples who have taken it upon themselves to determine which examples are binding and which examples can be ignored.

**An example of the early disciples to the grace of God in and of itself does not constitute a command of God.** If it did, then the example would not be an example. It would be a command. It is quite amusing that some of our greatest theologians among us make this fatal error in understanding what the Spirit wanted to record only for historical posterity. The Spirit's purpose in the historical record was to give a history of how the early disciples responded because of their faith in Jesus. **If every recorded example of their behavior must constitute an example of authority, then we are left with the dilemma of determining which examples are authoritative and which ones are not.**

History books of the Bible were not meant to be books on which we establish theology. To use as a catechism of doctrine the living examples of those about whom history is recorded would certainly lead us into confusion. **The Holy Spirit never meant that the behavior of any person or group of persons in the New Testament should be considered authority in determining doctrinal matters.** Matters of doctrine are made known by imperative command and declarative statements. The response of the individuals to such should not be viewed as commands themselves.

The irony of the matter is that the same students who are quick to establish examples as commands in the New Testament fail to use the same principle of Bible study when approaching the historical records of the Old Testament. Consistency would demand that if examples of the function of the early disciples in the New Testament constitutes commands of authority from God, then this same principle of interpretation should be used in our understanding and application of the examples for the Jews who lived under the Sinai law.

## **B. The Jewish religious leaders bound examples on the people.**

Some of our zealous interpreters seem to be somewhat inconsistent here. They would not think for a moment that any examples of the Old Testament heroes of faith should be added to the Sinai law. They know well

Jesus' condemnation of the scribes and Pharisees who did such (See Mk 7:1-9). In their zeal to guarantee the keeping of the law by the Jews, for example, the Pharisees added a host of "practiced examples" that were made as authoritative as the Sinai law. They even went to the extreme of setting aside what the law required in order to keep their traditional practices.

The Pharisees did some of their best work in this area in reference to the keeping of the Sabbath rest. Throughout the centuries, the Sabbath restrictions became the examples (traditions) of the fathers, and thus, the examples became law. The examples became binding as law to the point that Jesus condemned their hermeneutics in the words, "*All too well you reject the commandment of God so that you may keep your own tradition*" (Mk 7:9). He even judged them for missing the spiritual point of the purpose of the whole law. He said,

*Woe to you scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you pay tithes of mint and anise and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law, judgment, mercy and faith. These you should have done without neglecting the others* (Mt 23:23).

So when we approach the inspired historical documents of the Bible, we must tread lightly in reference to binding the examples of the early disciples, lest we fall victim to the same error as the scribes and Pharisees. Historical statements do not constitute divine commands. They are still historical statements even if they are statements of the history of how the early disciples carried out the commands of God in their own lives. Our focus in obedience is not on the examples of **obedience**, but on the commands themselves. It is encouraging to read about the response of the early Christians to the gospel of grace, but we are not encouraged to establish their examples of response as law to be obeyed.

### C. Examples of behavior provide options for obedience.

The examples of behavior of the early organic body only give us options as to how we too can respond to the word of God. And unless we can

find a command behind an example, it is still only an example. Even if we discover a command behind an example, the example in a historical document could possibly be only one way the early disciples carried out obedience to the command. There may be other ways and means by which the early disciples responded to the command, which examples are not recorded in the Spirit's historical documents. In these areas, the Holy Spirit gives us freedom to respond in a different manner to the grace of God.

Simply because the ways and means of obedience to a command by the early disciples may not be recorded **does not validate their examples of obedience to be the only way a particular command of God can be carried out.** We must remember that we are under the law of liberty (Js 1:25). We are free from what some may consider sin against law, when we actually have determined that a supposed "law" is only a tradition. We would guard ourselves, therefore, against judging others to be in error when actually they are only walking contrary to our traditions, not the law of God (See Rm 14).

It is an unfortunate practice of biblical interpretation to seek to impose on the believers examples in the Spirit's historical documents that were only meant to be records of how the organic body of Jesus functioned in the first century. By so restricting the freedom of the disciples today, we destroy the law of liberty by imposing on the consciences of the disciples those things the Spirit meant to be only examples of how the early disciples functioned as the organic body of Christ. But in an effort to be legally correct in all matters of "law," some, as the Pharisees, are too quick to bind the traditions of the fathers (the early disciples) in order that their additions to the law be obeyed. But they have missed the point of what Jesus said in reference to focussing on mercy and faith. They have bound where God never intended to bind.

As we study through the historical document of Acts concerning how the early disciples functioned in their walk as the organic body of Christ, we must caution ourselves. Simply because the early disciples responded in a certain manner to the will of God, does not mean that their example of response constitutes the law of God. We are studying history, and history can give us a great deal of information on how we can organically function as the disciples of Jesus today. At least, we can discover where we can walk in freedom under the law of freedom. And by doing such, we can guard our-

selves from coming into the bondage of any individual or synod of individuals who would impose on us that which would endanger our freedom in Christ (See Gl 5:1).

#### **D. The church is first identified through Jesus, and then by the historical record of the disciples response to Jesus.**

Our task is to define the function of the organic body of Christ. We do not seek to go first to the epistles and assemble an outline of “proof texts,” and then twist the historical texts of Acts around our outline. We must keep in mind that **Theophilus had in hand only the documents of Luke and Acts**. We thus conclude that the Holy Spirit assumed that we, as Theophilus, can understand the nature of the organic body if we had only these two documents. From these two documents we could reason why the early Christians behaved as they did. Once Theophilus understood the universal function of the organic body, he could then understand the specifics that would later come through the circulation of the epistles that were written to correct dysfunctional behavior among the members.

We would take the same approach to understand the epistles. Once we understand the function of the organic body in Acts, then we can understand and apply the specifics of the epistles. Historically, we have reversed this order of biblical interpretation, and subsequently, we have come to some questionable conclusions in understanding the document of Acts. We must always keep in mind that the epistles were written at least twenty years after the beginning of the body in A.D. 30. The body functioned for over twenty years before any comprehensive instructions were written in reference to belief and behavior. And because the letters were written to specific individuals or groups of disciples in specific cities or regions, then we assume that for many years after the writing of the New Testament documents most disciples did not have written directions to guide their beliefs and behavior. The early disciples only had access to the letters as the letters were copied and circulated. This process took many years to complete.

If we are puzzled about the function of the organic body for so many years without the written instructions from Romans to Revelation, then we must consider what was the central motivation for the early disciples. Maybe

we should rethink what we believe one should know in order to be a functioning member of the body. It seems that those fundamentals in reference to the gospel, and obedience thereof, and those fundamentals concerning the body, were all that the Ethiopian eunuch needed to know as he returned to Ethiopia without even a copy of the New Testament, not one letter of which was written at the time he obeyed the gospel (See At 8:39). It may be that the nature of the body is simpler than we think.

### Chapter 3

## ESTABLISHING A FOUNDATION

As in the study of any historical document, we must establish some foundational principles upon which we understand the recorded history of the New Testament. This is particularly true in reference to this study because we are not studying just any history book. We are studying the inspired record of the early church of our Lord. And in studying the Bible on this subject, we must not confuse examples with commands, which examples some would be quick to bind on the consciences of the disciples. Therefore, we must first establish some fundamental teachings and historical principles by which we would seek to understand the function of the disciples in their daily living, and thus define the universal organic nature of the body of Christ.

In our study of early church history, as previously stated, **we must look from the top down, not from the bottom up**. We have discovered that when people speak concerning the church, their tendency is always to look from the bottom up. They view the church from the perspective of imperfect people on earth, instead of through the eyes of Jesus from His throne in heaven. By looking at the body of Christ from the perspective of this world, we often develop a fractured concept of the family of God. We see a denominated people of independent groups, often being in conflict with one another, if not in competition with one another for members in particular regions where every autonomous group has an assembly. Viewing the body of Christ from the viewpoint of a small group of disciples assembling alone under a tree in Africa will invariably give one a warped understanding of the universal body.

Our understanding of the universal organic body must be that which is portrayed in the book of Acts, from the top down. Though Luke recorded the events that took place in the lives of the early disciples on earth, his point of view was from a heavenly perspective. Our focus, therefore, is first to be on Jesus, and then, we see His body through Him. We do this lest we start doing what Paul said of some in Corinth. *“For we dare not class or compare ourselves with those who commend themselves. But they, measuring themselves by themselves, and comparing themselves among themselves, are not wise”* (2 Co 10:12).

Jesus said, *“I am the way”* (Jn 14:6). If Jesus is the way, then He is the only way, and thus, our focus must be on Him alone in order to find the way. Jesus also said, *“And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to Me”* (Jn 12:32). Jesus draws people to Him because they are focused on Him for the solution of their sins. The church does not exist because people focus on the church, that is, on the people. This is backward thinking. The body exists because people first focus on the Head in heaven. But if one seeks to understand the Head by first focusing on the body on earth, then he or she will have a twisted understanding of both the Head and the body. His understanding will be earthly, fractured, and defined after the behavior of imperfect lives.

Novice Christians often have an shallow understanding of the body. This is revealed in the statement that some say, “The church is full of hypocrites.” Such a statement reveals how some people misunderstand the church. But if we have a heavenly view of the church, then we would say, “The church is composed of imperfect people who are all struggling to be like their Head in heaven.” The church is composed of the imperfect who are struggling to be perfected by their perfect Head. They are struggling to live as the pronouncement of Jesus to His disciples: *“You are to be perfect even as your Father in heaven is perfect”* (Mt 5:48).

It is imperative that we focus on Jesus as we come to the New Testament in order to understand the functionality of His body. If we seek to understand the functionality of the body from the earth up, through the points and subpoints of legal outlines of the religious rites, rituals and ceremonies of each group of disciples, then we will not only come to wrong conclusions concerning the body, but we will also have a distorted view of the reign of

Jesus. Therefore, we must start in heaven, and then come down to earth to the members of the body. We start with understanding who is on the throne, and then understand those who submit to the King. This was what was prophesied in Daniel 7:13,14, and this is what Peter preached in Acts 2:36: *“Therefore, let all the house of Israel know assuredly that God has made this same Jesus whom you have crucified, both Lord and Christ.”*

## A. One Head:

*“Jesus is the head”* of the body (Cl 1:18). He is the perfect head who reigns over all things for the sake of His people (Ep 1:22). He is not the head over all things because of the church. He was the head over all things a week before the church came into existence.

When the Holy Spirit used the metaphor “head” in reference to Jesus being the head of the body, He assumed that we could deduct the correct meaning of the metaphor. Bodies only have **one head**. And so it is with the body of Christ (Ep 4:4-6). If we try to establish a head of the body on earth, then the members will be confused. **Earthly heads always marginalize the headship of Jesus**. If we try to establish individual heads for individual bodies on earth, then people are totally confused. The members think they must first check with their local head of the church on earth (their pastor or pope), before they can believe anything or do anything in reference to the Head in heaven.

As we study through the historical document of Acts, it is very important that we understand the concept of the one universal headship of Jesus over the body. The body simply cannot function if the loyalty of the people is split between the Head in heaven, and individual heads over little Catholic churches on earth.

## B. One organic body:

Since there is only one Head, **then there is only one body**. And since there is only one body, **then that one body must be universal, not parceled out into local independent bodies**. It must be one body, not many. It must be one universal body that functions universally. Though there are

many members, there is one body. Though there are many local assemblies of the parts (members) of the universal body, this does not detour our thinking to first think locally and earthly before we think heavenly and universally. Remember, we must think from the top down and not from the bottom up.

The universality of the body of Christ is clearly revealed in the inspired letters that were written to the members of this body in the first century. Though the members were in different locations throughout the world, we must determine how they maintained their oneness under the authority of the one head, Jesus Christ, and yet functioned freely as the universal body.

The universality of the one body is clearly revealed in the plural pronouns “we” and “us” that were commonly used by the inspired writers when they spoke of the body of Christ. Paul wrote from Rome to Ephesus, “*But speaking the truth in love, we may grow up into Him in all things, who is the head, even Christ*” (Ep 4:15). Paul wrote to the Ephesian members while he and other members were in Rome.

When the Holy Spirit guided the hands of the early scribes of the New Testament documents, He focused on preserving the unity of the universal body in the bond of peace (Ep 4:3). **Though separated from one another by hundreds of kilometers, the Spirit guided Paul to use the plural pronoun “we” in order to emphasize the universal oneness of the body, regardless of where the members were located in reference to the writer.** Paul was in Rome, but the Ephesian members were in the city of Ephesus. Nevertheless, it was still “we.” And the “we” emphasizes the fact that the body is one and universal regardless of where the members live.

### C. One organic function of the body:

When we study the historical function of the organic body, the oneness of the body is striking. It is so obvious that we wonder why so many have missed this point. This one universal body is the foundation upon which we interpret the historical account of how the early members of the body functioned in their relationships with one another and their goal to evangelize the world.

One of the great contexts of Scripture that emphasizes this universal

organic function is 2 Corinthians 8. Paul wrote to the members of the body in Achaia concerning what the members of the body did in the province of Macedonia in reference to the contribution for the saints who were suffering through a famine in Judea (2 Co 8:1-4). In this situation, the disciples in three different areas functioned together as one body. The parts of the body in the province of Achaia had decided to join with the whole body in making a contribution for the parts of the body who were suffering in a famine in Judea (2 Co 8:10). Paul wrote to urge the Achaian parts to complete what they had promised, reminding them of what the Macedonian parts of the body did in the province of Macedonia (2 Co 8:11).

Now notice what he wrote to the members of the one body in Achaia: *“For I do not mean that others [other parts of the body in other places] be relieved and you burdened; but **by an equality**, that now at this time your abundance may be a supply for their need [the need of the parts of the body in Judea], that their abundance also may be a supply for your need, **that there may be equality**”* (2 Co 8:13,14).

Though members of the one universal body resided in the provinces of Judea, Achaia and Macedonia, they were all parts of the one body. And as parts of the one body, when one part suffered, the whole suffered (1 Co 12:26). When one part was in need, other parts supplied what was lacking in order that *“**the whole body being fitted and held together by what every joint supplies**, according to the effective working of each part, causes growth of the body to the edifying of itself in love”* (Ep 4:16). In reference to famine, some parts of the body had sufficient food, while other parts in other regions did not. It was the responsibility of those parts who had abundant supplies to minister to those parts who lacked. In this way, the whole body spiritually grew up in Christ. This was what Paul defined in 2 Corinthians 8:13,14. Though in different regions of the world, the body should function as one body.

**Ephesians 4:15,16 and 2 Corinthians 8:13,14 are verbal pictures of the one universal body caring for itself.** The one universal body functions as one body in all matters of spiritual and physical nourishment. When one part of the body needed continued teaching in certain matters, teachers were sent to teach (See 2 Co 8:16-18,23; 12:18; Gl 2:1,2). When prayers were needed for the suffering of one part of the body, other parts

were asked to pray (CI 4:3). When one part needed food, other parts sacrificed in order to supply what was needed. All this ministry between need and supply was to accomplish what Paul stated in reference to the one universal body of the first century (Ep 4:16). We are still that one body that is today functioning universally. And the one body is still supplying itself in order to cause growth.

## Chapter 4 ORGANIC CONNECTIVITY

Large single-assembly churches have a tendency to be self-reliant, organized and programmed. Unfortunately, with the self-sufficiency of some single-assembly churches they have a tendency to become exclusive. They exclude from their interest other assemblies, if not other members of the body that are not a part of “their” church. The lack of interests and cooperation between different assemblies within a particular city is something that is simply inherent within large and well-organized groups.

### **A. Small groups focus on fellowship.**

Now consider being a part of a small group that meets in a house across town. The psyche of the group is entirely different. The small group seeks the fellowship of other Christians. They want to be included in the whole, not left to be ignored and alone. This helps us understand why the early Christians wanted to have all things in common. It helps us understand that no one is to be neglected. It is difficult for those who are cultured to large single-assembly churches to understand the yearning of those who of necessity must meet in small groups.

One of the most critical principles that is necessary to understand in order to interpret better the historical statements of the organic function of the body in the first century is the fact that the early disciples met in small groups in the homes of the members. Understanding this point is crucial in order to draw the best conclusions from several brief statements that pop up throughout the historical narratives concerning the function of the organic

body. In the historical record, we may be given only a brief statement of function or behavior of the members in a particular city. However, it is necessary to understand the house assembly function of the early disciples in each city in order to truly understand what was going on in the background of the organic body.

## **B. The organic church is defined in the New Testament.**

Another reason for understanding the house assembly function of the early disciples is that we often go to the context of various scriptures, carrying with us our baggage of the institutional, large single-assembly oriented culture of the modern-day church. If we do this as biblical interpreters, then we will come up with some shallow views of the organic nature of the church, if not some false conclusions. It is not necessary to be meeting in small groups throughout a city or region in order to understand the organic function of the body. But doing so does help us better identify with the emotional make up of the disciples in the first century.

If any of the early disciples stepped foot into one of our impersonal assemblies today, they would probably feel quite strange. What transpires during some large assemblies today is often far removed from the small assembly context of the early disciples. For this reason, we are often challenged in our efforts to restore the participatory behavior of the early disciples in our assemblies today. Though modern-day assembly behavior will often prejudice our understanding of the organic function of the New Testament body of Christ, we must at least give our best efforts to understand Luke's description of the early disciples as they moved about from house to house.

## **C. The early disciples met in the homes of the members.**

No knowledgeable church historian disagrees with the fact that the early members of the body met in the homes of the members throughout the Roman controlled world. This is an axiomatic truth that needs no proof outside declarative statements in Scripture. If one would feel that such a historical fact is not true, then it is his burden to prove the contrary. There-

fore, we will not dwell on the historical fact of house assemblies, but focus on the New Testament record that such was a fact of how the disciples regularly met when they went about their function together as the universal body of members.

For the record, there are enough examples of house assemblies in the New Testament to prove the historical point that this was where the early disciples commonly met.

- “*And daily in the temple, **and in every house**, they did not cease teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ*” (At 5:42).
- “*I kept back nothing that was profitable, and teaching you publicly **and from house to house***” (At 20:20).
- “*Greet the church **that meets in their [Priscilla and Aquila’s] house***” (Rm 16:5).
- “*Aquila and Priscilla greet you heartily in the Lord, **with the church that is in their house***” (1 Co 16:19).
- “*Greet the brethren who are in Laodicea, and Nympha and **the church that is in her house***” (Cl 4:15).
- “*To our sister Apphia, Archippus our fellowsoldier, **and to the church in your house***” (Pl 2).

The preceding historical statements reveal the behavior of the early disciples in reference to their coming together in small groups. If one would take the position that all examples of the early disciples constitutes a command of God, then he might have some problems with the disciples meeting in their homes. Those who are of a legal persuasion often do this, and thus they are saddled with a problem, especially if they are making an argument from the air-conditioned office of a magnificent purpose-built church building.

If the example of the meeting of the early disciples in the homes of the members is to be bound on the church today, then we might have to move into an era of selling a large number of church buildings. But the hermeneutic that an example constitutes a command to be obeyed is erroneous. **Since the church has a right to collectively build a building for meeting, then the concept that an example constitutes a command is errone-**

**ous.** If it is not erroneous, then those who are meeting in purpose built church buildings need to call their local real estate agent.

#### **D. Home assemblies do not establish law.**

We might make some theologians more uncomfortable by stating that if there is a statement of command behind the examples of house assemblies, then the example is binding. If any reference of the New Testament in reference to house assemblies is used to defend the house assemblies of the early disciples as law, then we need to sell the church buildings and start meeting in our homes. If the house assemblies of the early disciples establishes an “authoritative example,” then not meeting in houses would be functioning contrary to the word of God. But we need to take some comfort in the fact that we do not need to sell our church buildings and start meeting in homes in order to be the organic church. The New Testament places little emphasis on where we assemble.

Nevertheless, the houses of the members in the first century were historically the common place of meeting of the early disciples. However, if meeting in the homes of members was a law to be obeyed, then the Holy Spirit would have revealed specific commands on the matter and the discussion would have been closed.

When the Bible interpreter comes to historical statements that are made in reference to the function of the early organic body in assembly, **it must be clearly understood that the disciples were meeting in the homes of the members throughout the cities that are mentioned in the New Testament.** Unless we understand this, we will have a difficult time understanding fully the organic function of the universal body of Christ. It is for this reason that we question those books that are written on the organic body that come from the pens of those who are caught in the stalemate of stationary assemblies that are stalled in purpose-built buildings. It is most difficult to write objectively on a matter that one is not first practicing.

#### **E. The church is not defined or identified by assemblies.**

It is crucial to understand that when we see the organic body function-

ing throughout the book of Acts, this function is not defined by either where or how the early disciples assembled. From Luke's record of the organic function of the body, only occasionally does he mention the assemblies of the disciples. His lack of emphasis on the assemblies is almost obvious, since he wanted us to focus on how the early disciples functioned in their communities as individual parts of the body of Christ.

Though Luke places little emphasis on assembly, obsession with assemblies today does obscure our objectivity in reference to this subject. What is unfortunate today is that too many people define the function of the body by what the disciples do on Sunday morning between 10:00 and 12:00. It is doubtful whether one will come to a complete understanding of the function of the organic body of Christ if his definition of such is based on what transpires between the "opening" and "closing" prayer.

We must be careful about our obsession with assemblies. Luke was not. Our obsession with the assembly of the disciples is so acute that we go so far as to identify ourselves as the true church by what transpires on Sunday morning between an "opening" and "closing" prayer. Some have become so obsessed with the assembly of the modern-day church that they have somewhat forgotten the mark of identity that Jesus said would signal His true disciples, that is, love (Jn 13:34,35).

## **F. Love identifies the disciples of Jesus.**

**Love is an organic function of body life**, both among the disciples, as well as the disciples' relationship with their neighbors. Rituals of worship have nothing to do with loving one another, for we often sit as mute spectators in pews while someone leads the assembly through the theatrical performances of what we assert to be the identity of the church. Some have even moved to concert assemblies by which they determine that their faith is lively and their Christianity active. All such obsessions with assembly are only efforts by some to validate their religiosity without manifesting an organic love for one another outside the assembly.

Organic function is about loving one another, and the New Testament is saturated with passages on our relationship with one another. Organic function is about doing that which is good to all men (Gl 6:10). The New

Testament is a book of life-style principles that take place outside assemblies. When the New Testament speaks of an assembly, it is in the context of how we can encourage one another to organically love and do good works outside the assembly (See Hb 10:24, 25).

Since the disciples were organic in their lives outside their assemblies, then we would expect that their organic relationship with one another would be reflected in their assemblies. Since the early assemblies were a reflection of their organic function, then the assemblies were participatory. “Each one” had the opportunity to function in the assembly. But each one must so function as to show respect to others, lest someone think he is more important than the others when the disciples come together in assembly (1 Co 14:26-28).

It was not normal in the early assemblies of the disciples that any one person would function in a dominant or prominent manner. The regular assemblies of the early church were never built around a prominent personality and the ministry of his gift alone. There were no audience-oriented assemblies. If their assemblies were audience oriented, then the organic function of the body could not be reflected in their assemblies.

The entire purpose of context of 1 Corinthians 14 was to bring order to assemblies that were to be participatory, and thus, organically oriented in function. We would conclude, therefore, that members who are not functioning organically in their every day lives, will produce non-organic assemblies when they come together. The fact that some were not functioning organically in their lives in Corinth reveals why they forsook assemblies that were meant to encourage love and good works.

Hebrews 10:24,25 is an organic passage. If one was not functioning organically in his life outside an assembly, then certainly he would not show up at an assembly that would embarrass him concerning the inactivity of his behavior. When love is in action, the serendipity is the coming together of loving people.

## Chapter 5

### ONENESS OF THE SCATTERED

The disciples are defined not only by belief, but also by behavior that is in response to the gospel of Jesus Christ. In fact, if we would first apply Jesus' identity of His disciples, then they would first be identified by their behavior, that is, their loving behavior in their relationships with one another (See Jn 13:34,35). The epistles identify the belief of the disciples, but Luke seeks in Acts to identify the body by its functioning parts of love in response to the grace of God. Acts is thus the "Acts (function) of the body."

If we approach the book of Acts in order to construct a doctrinal outline to identify the church, we will miss the point. Since Acts was written as a historical document on behalf of Paul who was facing a Roman court, Luke wanted Theophilus to conclude that Paul behaved as he did because of what he believed in reference to who Jesus was. And it was not Paul alone who believed and behaved in such a manner, but also a whole host of believers who preceded him. The manner by which the body functioned was evidence of its Divine origin. In fact, the existence and function of Christians could be explained only in the fact that Jesus of Nazareth was truly the incarnate Son of God.

#### A. Birth of the body:

In order to understand the organic function of the body, we need to begin our study at the very beginning when the organism of the body was brought forth in birth. The first context to study in order to better understand the function of the early body of Christ is Acts 2:40-47. This was the birth-day of the body. This historical context becomes the springboard from which we begin to understand the functionality of the members of the body in their relationships with one another and the world in which they lived.

On the day of Pentecost in Jerusalem in A.D. 30, it all started. After the gospel of Jesus' death, resurrection, ascension and present reign on David's throne in heaven was preached by the apostles, Peter called out to the audience, "*Save yourselves from this perverse generation*" (At 2:40).

And then birth began. “*Then those who received his word were baptized*” (At 2:41). Multitudes received Peter’s declaration, and thus, about three thousand people gave birth to the body by being born again on that day in baptism (At 2:41). About three thousand were born again of the Spirit and the water in order to save themselves from the perverse generation in which they lived (See Jn 3:3-5; 1 Co 1:12,13). The response of people to the gospel news of Jesus initiated and continued the church of the Lord Jesus Christ.

## B. Existence of the multiple-assembly church:

Now we wonder where these three thousand born-again people, who were still dripping from the waters of baptism, met the following Sunday. Where did they meet “*in the breaking of bread*” (At 2:42)? The answer to this question is obvious. Out of necessity, they had to meet in their homes. And since there were about three thousand of them, **then the meeting of “the body” was divided into different places of meeting that first Sunday after Pentecost, and every Sunday thereafter.** This system of assembly never changed for about three hundred years. It did not change until Constantine hijacked the church during his reign as Caesar of Rome in the early fourth century. But even then, the disciples considered themselves to be one universal (catholic) church.

The necessity of the disciples’ meeting at different places at the same time **did not** disrupt the unity of the believers. Assembly in different homes never constituted church independence. The disciples were still the one body of Christ, though there were hundreds of assemblies in Jerusalem the following Sunday after the Pentecost Sunday. It is important to understand that **the assembly of the organic body does not affect the function of the body**, nor does the assembly of the members at different places at the same time constitute different independent churches. To think so would be thinking illogically concerning what actually happened the first Sunday after Pentecost, for the baptized believers were meeting in different houses throughout Jerusalem.

Any one member is not determined to be a part of the organism of the body by assembly, but by being added to the body by God upon his or her

birth from the waters of baptism (At 2:47). Therefore, when the first person was added to the already existing group of disciples on the day of Pentecost, then we conclude that the body was born and began to function. The body existed apart from any assembly, for assemblies of the body began the following Sunday. In other words, the church existed before there was the first assembly of the church. **The existence of the body, therefore, is not identified by any structured or ritualistic assembly. It is identified by those who have submitted to the kingdom reign of the Head of the body, and their submission to His gospel kingship by their obedience to the gospel.**

### C. Scattered, but united:

Knowing that the body existed before its first meeting in different places the following Sunday after its birth, helps us understand better the functionality of the organic body as it is recorded in Acts. The body exists and functions apart from its assemblies, though assemblies are a part of its organic function.

In the beginning, the disciples continued to be instructed by the apostles, for the apostles were the only “Bibles” at the time, being the “verbal Bibles” for the body (See Jn 14:26; 16:13). So the apostles continued in the ministry of teaching the disciples (At 2:42). The disciples continued to be in fellowship with one another in their love feasts regardless of the necessity of their meeting in different houses.

**The fact that they had to eat the love feast/Supper at different locations, and possibly at different times, did not mean that they were not one body.** This was nothing new to these early Jewish disciples. There were no theological debates that all the disciples had to be together in the same place in one city in order to be the one body of Christ, or to celebrate the one body by partaking of the one bread (See 1 Co 10:16,17). If we were present and had brought up the argument that all the members had to be in one place in order to celebrate the oneness of the body with the Supper, then the Jewish believers would think that we were somewhat ignorant of the Old Testament on this matter in reference to the Passover.

Exodus 12 is our commentary on the Jewish thinking on being one,

while at the same time being scattered throughout Palestine, and in the case of the early church, throughout the world. Exodus 12 is the Lord's directions concerning the eating of the Passover meal. It is necessary to understand this context in order to understand the organic function of the early Jewish disciples in their observance of the love feast/Lord's Supper as the scattered body of Christ in different assemblies throughout the first century.

In His instructions to Israel, the Lord commanded that *“each man will take a lamb for himself, according to the house of his fathers, a lamb for each house”* (Ex 12:3). If one lamb would provide more food than what was necessary for one family, then *“let him and his neighbor next to his house take it according to the number of the souls”* (Ex 12:4). So two families were brought together into one house in order to eat the Passover feast in the fellowship of one's home. Now we need to read carefully verse 6: *“And you will keep it until the fourteenth day of the same month. And the whole assembly of Israel [throughout Palestine] will kill it in the evening.”* Now keep in mind that **the whole assembly of Israel was scattered throughout all the land of Palestine** when they followed these instructions on keeping the Passover as one nation. And yet, **they ate the Passover lamb together as one nation in the evening as they all killed together and ate the lamb throughout the land of Palestine.** They were being one, and yet being apart from one another in their own homes. Their inability to be together in one assembly did not constitute a divided nation. Their eating as one nation constituted the unity of the twelve tribes.

For those “churchologists” who persist in viewing the function of the organic body from the bottom up, they need to take another look at God's view of Israel from the top down. God viewed His people of twelve separate tribal groups as one nation, which nation celebrated its oneness by observing the Passover as one whole nation at the same time every year while being scattered throughout the land of Palestine. Though they celebrated individually in their homes, **they were still one nation “under God.”** God finalized the instructions concerning the Passover feast with the words, *“So this day will be a memorial to you. And you will keep it as a feast to the Lord throughout your generations. You will keep it as a feast by an ordinance forever”* (Ex 12:14).

Now when we read the concluding instructions of God concerning the Passover feast, we must consider what the early Jewish disciples were thinking and doing in the context of Acts 2. They certainly continued the concept of the Passover feast, **though it changed in meaning according to the instructions of Jesus** (See Mt 26:26-29). It became a love feast during which the early disciples took the bread and fruit of the vine in order to remember and celebrate. At least we know that the love feast and Supper continued together into the middle and end of the 60s, when both Peter and Jude wrote in reference to the love feast (See 2 Pt 2:13; Jd 12).

Now back to Acts 2. In view of what God intended that Israel remember while being scattered throughout Palestine on their farms, we need to read again Acts 2:44: “*Now all who believed were **together** and had all things in **common**.*” Though we might want to say that they were “together in one place of assembly,” this **is not** what the texts says or means. **They were together in spirit**, which meaning is qualified by the statement that they “had all things in common.” Though separated throughout Jerusalem in their assembly in different homes, **they were together as one organic body through their common needs, desires and mission**. And as we will see later, though they were scattered throughout the Roman Empire, they still had all things in common. They still continued to function as the one organic body of Christ. There was no such thing as “independent” groups who had declared their autonomy from the whole body. Such a behavior would have been unheard of among the early disciples at the time of the birth of the body of Christ.

Though the disciples were separated, and of necessity had to sit on Sunday in different homes throughout the early history of the church, did not diminish the fact that they had all things in common and were together in spirit and mission. This is simply the nature of the universal organic body of Christ. In fact, the disciples’ coming together in Jerusalem was exemplified by the fact that resident disciples sold possessions and goods so that the visiting believers who were baptized could stay on after Pentecost in order to be taught continually by the “verbal Bibles,” the apostles (At 2:45).

The organic function of the body began in Acts 2, and would continue wherever the gospel was preached and obeyed throughout the world. The obedient would never split up into independent groups that would be ruled

by chief pastors and popes, or synods of elders. Attempts were made to denominate the disciples, but the teaching of truth on unity in the epistles crushed the theology of all would-be “church popes.”

#### D. Teaching Christ “in the temple”:

The text of Acts 2 states in reference to the historical functionality of the body that the disciples were “*daily with one accord in the temple and breaking bread from house to house*” (At 2:46). Now we would caution some overzealous assemblologist on this point. The text says that they continued with one accord “in the temple.” This function of the organic body has nothing to do with the assembly of the saints for worship. The text simply states that they were with “one accord” at a particular location for the continued function of the body. The location is defined as “in the temple.”

Into the building of the temple structure itself, **only the priests could go**. This was the restriction of the Sinai law. There were temple guards to keep everyone else out. We must not think for a moment that the early disciples were meeting in the temple building itself for their assembled worship. It was simply too small. “In the temple” included the outer courtyard of the temple, which area was considered part of the temple. These were the grounds that surrounded the temple over which there was no roof structure. A stone wall separated the temple proper from the outer courtyard of the temple. Paul defined this wall as the “middle wall of partition (separation),” beyond which no Gentile could go (Ep 2:14). So at the time, if there were any Gentiles among the first 3,000 disciples, then they would have been barred from the assembly if the disciples were meeting inside the temple building for assembled worship, especially the first Sunday after the Pentecost of A.D. 30.

“In the temple,” therefore, does not refer to the assembly of the disciples for worship and fellowship inside the temple building. It does not refer to the temple building itself. The meeting of the disciples for fellowship is in the phrase “breaking bread from house to house” (At 2:46). So what does “one accord in the temple” mean?

Acts 5:42 is the commentary. “*And daily in the temple and in every house, they did not cease teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ.*”

In this historical statement, “in every house” is added as another location with “in the temple.” It is clearly defined in this statement what the disciples were doing with “one accord” in the temple courtyard and from house to house. They were doing just what Jesus did “in the temple.” *“I sat daily with you, teaching in the temple”* (Mt 26:55). After the establishment of the church, the early disciples were daily “teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ” in the temple.

The historical statement of Acts 5:42 is a statement of fact concerning what the apostles, and the rest of the disciples, continued to do from house to house (At 2:46). They were still doing in the temple what they started from the beginning. They preached Jesus to be the fulfillment of all prophecy, that He was the Christ, the Messiah. **This gospel message is preached to unbelievers.** The disciples already believed that Jesus was the Christ. Therefore, “in the temple” in Acts 2:46 and Acts 5:42 **is a statement of location concerning where evangelism was taking place.** These were not statements that referred to church assembly and edification, but to the preaching of the gospel message to the yet unbelieving Jews who came to the temple courtyard.

In Acts 2:46 where it is stated, *“breaking bread from house to house,”* the meaning is on the function of the disciples in their organic interaction with one another. Therefore, when we speak of the function of the organic body, the church, “in the temple” was a place of evangelism. “House to house” refers to the function of the members in their fellowship with one another in the breaking of bread (love feast and Lord’s Supper). “In the temple” was the evangelistic response of those who met together in order to stir up love and good works over the breaking of bread (See Hb 10:24,25).

If one did not want to be in the temple courtyard preaching and teaching Jesus as the Christ, then certainly he or she would not want to be stirred up (provoked) unto doing such in the assembly of disciples in someone’s home. Now maybe we have a better understanding of Hebrews 10:24,25. It was written specifically to Jewish disciples, possibly to those who lived in Jerusalem a short time before the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. The Hebrew writer wanted to give every chance to the Jews to obey the gospel before God brought down judgment on national Israel by the termination of the Jewish state in A.D. 70. If Hebrews was written by Paul, then we can

understand his emphasis that those to whom he wrote should not forsake the assembly wherein they could be stirred up to preach Jesus as the Christ “in the temple.”

The Jewish disciples in Jerusalem had a unique opportunity and responsibility for world evangelism by preaching Jesus as the Christ to those who annually visited Jerusalem for the annual Passover/Pentecost feasts. Now we know why the Ethiopian eunuch was confused about how to understand Isaiah 53, which was a prophecy of the Christ. When he was returning “from the temple,” where certainly he had encountered some Christians who were “in the temple” teaching that Jesus was the fulfillment of Isaiah 53, he was confused. The eunuch at least made contact with disciples in Jerusalem who were teaching “in the temple” that Jesus was the fulfillment of prophecy concerning the Christ. It is as the radio commentator Paul Harvey once regularly concluded his messages, “Now you know the rest of the story.”

## Chapter 6

### ALL THINGS IN COMMON

The historical setting of the events of Acts 4 gives us some idea of the organic function of the disciples throughout the city of Jerusalem. We would correctly assume that these events took place a few years after the inspirational beginnings in A.D. 30 on the day of Pentecost. From those early beginnings, the number of disciples continued to multiply considerably. If Acts 5:42 is any indication of the early evangelistic zeal of those first disciples, then we would assume that what Luke recorded in the following statement continued from the very beginning: “*And daily in the temple and in every house, they did not cease teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ.*”

As earlier stated, Acts 5:42 is an evangelistic passage. The temple courtyard was the mission field, and it was there that the disciples continued to preach Jesus as the Christ. Their message was to the unbelievers, not the believers. It is only natural, therefore, that the organic body as a whole functions in preaching Jesus as the Christ in any region where there are parts (members) of the body.

The disciples were persistent in their function to preach the message of the gospel. They were so persistent that the Sadducees and priests became “*disturbed that they [Peter and John] taught the people and preached in Jesus the resurrection from the dead*” (At 4:2). As a result, “*they laid hands on them, and put them in custody*” (At 4:3). But it was too late. “*Many of those who heard the word [of the gospel] believed. And the number of the men was about five thousand*” (At 4:4). There were now about 5,000 male members of the church who lived in the metropolitan area of Jerusalem. Including the sisters, we could estimate that there were about 10,000 brothers and sisters scattered throughout Jerusalem and the surrounding region by the time Acts 5:42 was written.

### A. Common function in gospel preaching:

An unfortunate mistake that many church historians make at this point in their studies of early church growth is that they do not calculate where these approximately 10,000 Christians were assembling on Sunday just a few years after the events of Acts 2. Because too many have read into the historical text of the Scriptures their present building-oriented prejudices, some have even assumed that there were church buildings scattered throughout the ancient city of Jerusalem. In these buildings it is assumed that the early disciples were meeting autonomously, and thus, denominated from one another. Some have even asserted that the disciples were meeting in the temple courtyard with the permission of the priests and temple guard, **who in this context arrested the preachers and threw them in jail**. If we have any hope of understanding the organic nature of the early church that is revealed in the New Testament, we must always conclude that in the regions surrounding Jerusalem, as well as in all the early cities of the Roman Empire where the message of the gospel was preached, **the disciples met in small groups in their homes**. It is critical to understand the house fellowship culture of the early disciples in order to understand the organic function of the disciples in every city and region.

Our studies of the organic function of the body in Jerusalem are crucial to understand the same function of the body in all regions surrounding Rome, Corinth, Ephesus, Philippi, and the many cities to which the gospel was

preached. If we can use Luke's description of the organic function of the body in Jerusalem and Judea as a commentary of how the body functioned in every region where the gospel was preached, then we are on our way to understanding the organic body as it occurred in the first century. We study Acts, therefore, in order to develop an accurate commentary on the function of the organic body throughout the world.

We have discovered in studies of church history over the last several decades that those church historians who do not recognize the house assembly function of the early disciples in Jerusalem and Judea, have a difficult time correctly understanding the organic function of the body in other regions where the gospel was preached. Almost without exception, those authors who write books on the organic church usually set their writings in the function of the members of a local independent congregational setting that exists today. Instead of viewing the church universally, and thus, from a heavenly point of view, they relegate the organic function of the body to programs and committees of a particular local autonomous group. Such is a narrow view of the universal body of Christ. Also, such a view lends itself to producing groups who take pride in their organization, and thus, they as a local "organic" institution set themselves up as the group to be admired and followed by other groups. The result of such congregational pride is that one's organized church is championed above other groups. But when we come to the organic function of the body that Luke portrays in the book of Acts, we see an entirely different picture. We see a universal body functioning as a collective group throughout the world, not as individual groups struggling to work together. The early disciples functioned universally, not independently from one another.

In the context of Acts 4, the disciples of all the city were meeting throughout all Jerusalem and Judea in the homes of the members. The organic body was not composed of many independent groups who were autonomous from one another. No one group in a house set themselves above or apart from the other house assemblies. Neither did any group organize to be in competition with any other group. The temple courtyard was the local mission field to preach Jesus as the Christ to those unbelieving Jews, as the Ethiopian eunuch, who traveled to Jerusalem, specifically for the day of Pentecost (See At 8:27). Every local disciple participated in this evangelistic

effort as one functioning body.

Since Luke places little emphasis on the Sunday assembly of the disciples, we conclude that his emphasis is on the individual disciples as a whole who were functioning as one body. These disciples never attempted to cluster up into independent groups that were separate from one another, and thus, exclusive of one another. In fact, Luke placed absolutely no emphasis on the identity of the church through some ceremonial acts of worship that were performed on Sunday morning. No disciple was ever validated to be faithful by some Sunday morning performance of a ritualized assembly.

## B. Common function as the whole:

In the historical context of Acts 4, the two preachers, Peter and John, were leading the way by preaching the gospel in the temple courtyard. They were subsequently arrested and put in custody (At 4:3). On the next day, they were brought before Annas, the high priest, Caiaphas, John and Alexander. Even many of the family of the high priest were in the court room (At 4:6). And as usual, Peter could not contain himself because of the Spirit. He thus preached the gospel to everyone in the court room (At 4:8-12). The result of the trial was that *“they called them [Peter and John] in and commanded them not to speak at all nor teach in the name of Jesus”* (At 4:18). Peter and John basically said, “We can’t do that.” *“So when they had further threatened them, they let them go, finding no way that they might punish them **because of the people, for all glorified God for what was done**”* (At 4:21).

Once Peter and John were released, *“they went to their own companions and reported all that the chief priests and elders had said to them”* (At 4:23). So where did they go in order to inform “their companions”? Who were these “companions”? We would assume that these companions could have been the other apostles, or at least a few who had assembled in a house for special prayers for Peter and John. When the release of the apostles was made known, *“they [the companions] lifted up their voices to God **with one accord**”* (At 4:24). After their praise of God, *“**the place was shaken where they were assembled together**”* (At 4:31). We must keep in mind that Peter and John first went to someone’s house

where the “companions” were gathered. The whole body was functioning in prayer for Peter and John in many house assemblies, as the whole body functioned as one in contribution and evangelism.

“Now **the multitude** [the body] of those who believed were of one heart and one soul” (At 4:32). And because they were of one heart and soul, nothing happened among the disciples throughout Jerusalem that was not reported to all the disciples. The disciples functioned as one organic body. They were what some might call extreme in this organic nature. “**No one said that any of the things that he possessed was his own. But they had all things in common**” (At 4:32). If this does not teach the organic nature of the body, then there is no other way to explain such.

When there was a need among any of the disciples in all of Jerusalem, the local “owners of land or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of the things that were sold and laid them at the apostles’ feet. And distribution was made to everyone according as each had need” (At 4:34,35). We can gasp all we want at this, but this is the identity of the organic function of the body. Such seems so strange to those who cherish their individualism and ownership of possessions. But there it is in Holy Spirit-inspired writing.

Now we must give our present house and land owners some relief on this point. Remember what Jesus said in His prophecy of Matthew 24? Specifically, He said in reference to Jerusalem, “Do you not see all these things? Truly I say to you, there will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down.” The Jewish disciples in Jerusalem knew exactly what He meant. They believed the prophets concerning the consummation of national Israel. They knew that Jerusalem would be leveled, which it was in A.D. 70. If one believed in Jesus before this date, therefore, then it was best to disinvest and get out of town, which thing the early Jerusalem disciples did when they were later scattered out of Jerusalem and Judea (See At 8:4).

The Jerusalem disciples also recognized that God was working in the Diaspora of the Jews. Jews from all the Roman Empire were in Jerusalem for the Passover/Pentecost feast of A.D.30 (At 2:5-12). It was an opportunity for world evangelism by preaching to and converting visiting Jews who would return home. The following year during another Passover/Pentecost

feast, these disciples would bring others to hear what the apostles were preaching and doing (See Is 2:2,3). After each Passover/Pentecost feast, the resident Jews thus sold houses and lands in order to keep the visiting Jews a few weeks longer at the feet of the apostles for continued teaching (At 2:42). The apostles remained in Jerusalem for several years after the initial outpouring of the Spirit in Acts 2. By Acts 15, the apostles were still in Jerusalem. Therefore, the evangelistic outreach of the apostles continued for at least fifteen years after the Passover/Pentecost feast of A.D. 30.

## Chapter 7 THE WHOLE MULTITUDE

Acts 6 has always been one of the events in the history of the early disciples that clearly illustrated the early organic function of the body. The event of this chapter took place in Jerusalem a few years after the beginning. What gave rise to the body healing itself on this occasion when a dysfunction arose among some parts of the body, is significant. As we follow Luke's account of this event, we are given a beautiful picture of how God meant for the body to heal itself on the foundation of its definitive character of love (See Jn 13:34,35).

The word "murmuring" sets the background to what transpired in the text of Acts 6:1-7. This problem may seem odd if one comes from a "local independent church" point of view of the organic body. But it must be understood on the background of what James said in reference to the identity of the functioning body. "*Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this, to take care of orphans and widows in their affliction*" (Js 1:27).

James, the Lord's brother who wrote the preceding statement, became a prominent leader among the disciples in Jerusalem (See At 15:13; Gl 1:19). Taking care of widows was a function of the whole body, not just one single autonomous assembly. Since this function became dysfunctional in the early beginnings of the church, then there were problems in the whole body life of the *ekklesia* in Jerusalem. And in the context of the whole body that resided in Jerusalem, there was dysfunction in reference to the widows.

This was not a dysfunction of a particular assembly of the body in

Jerusalem. It was a dysfunction that should never have happened in the function of the organic body as a whole in any particular city. The problem, therefore, had to be sorted out before the parts (members) of the body in Jerusalem could function properly. In order to correct the dysfunction, the body worked as a whole in order to heal the cancer of unconcern in reference to some widows.

The existence of the dysfunction reveals that all the disciples worked as one organic body in Jerusalem. If the dysfunction were typical of only one of the house groups in the city, then it would not have affected the entire body. But the fact was that the dysfunction in one part of the body affected the entire body. No one part of the body, no one house group, could ignore the problem by claiming that they were independent from the rest of the groups of the whole body. In fact, the problem possibly developed as a result of some disciples' efforts to be autonomous from the Greek widows. In their practice to be autonomous from their responsibilities to take care of all Christian widows, they became a sect unto themselves.

This one case of dysfunction clearly reveals that the church should function as one body, not as individual groups working together as one. This is not a picture of independent groups working in cooperation in order to solve a dysfunction. It is a picture of one body of individual members functioning as one in a particular city or region in order to correct a problem among the members as a whole.

### **A. Disciples everywhere in Jerusalem:**

The Acts 6 event took place a few years after the initial beginning of the body in Acts 2. At the time, "*the number of the disciples was multiplying*" (At 6:1). We would assume correctly that the number of disciples in Jerusalem was now in the tens of thousands. They were meeting in homes throughout the city. Because they had all things in common, no one group ever considered declaring their independence from the whole body. No one group had a right to be denominated from any other group, or the responsibilities of every disciple to minister to the whole body. This is brought out in the nature of the problem that developed at the time and the steps that were taken to correct the problem.

What produced the problem was that some disciples possibly ignored other disciples on the basis of race. A certain race of widows was thus being neglected in the daily administration of the food distribution of the whole body because of the withdrawal of some from others. It seems that some sought to overlook parts of the body who were to be included in the whole. Separating any part of the body from the whole was denominating the whole body. And in this situation, the separation led to a dysfunction of the body as a whole. The separation of one group, or groups, from the whole, led to the extreme dysfunction of not carrying out one of the primary functions of the body, that is, taking care of Christian widows. The fact that some would declare their independence from a certain group of the whole, indicates how far some will go to assert their autonomy from their responsibilities of the body as a whole.

## **B. The multitude:**

In view of what the apostles did in order to correct the problem, we wonder what some who promote the separation of disciples, would think in reference to the solution of this dysfunction. The apostles “*called the multitude of the disciples*” (At 6:2). This “multitude” did not consist of one particular group of disciples, but to the whole. We might assume that there were autonomous assemblies of “the multitude” of disciples throughout the city of Jerusalem. But such a conclusion would seem questionable in view of the fact that the problem was generated by some who actually did seek to function independently from the body as a whole. Their desire to function independently was manifested in their willful neglect of certain parts of the body. What does seem to be most evident is that “the multitude of disciples” is a reference to all the members of the body in all of Jerusalem. This call by the apostles certainly demonstrated that all the members of the body in Jerusalem were one church and should function as one body without neglecting any one part of the body.

## **C. From among you:**

“The multitude of the disciples” throughout the whole city was instructed

to consider “the multitude” as one quorum of people from which to make a choice of men to take care of the business at hand. If we view “the multitude of the disciples” to be divided into autonomous groups, then we might have the situation being set up by the apostles where there would be a “church conference” wherein churches might compete with one another for recognition within the city.

If there were independent groups, some might have objected that the seven chosen men could not come from seven autonomous “churches,” lest someone’s autonomy be violated. Some might have objected that the seven chosen men could not work outside the “authority” that prevailed within their “local church.” These particular scenarios all seem quite frivolous in view of what actually transpired in the fellowship of the organic body in Jerusalem as the members functioned to solve a dysfunction.

What we do see is that some parts of the organic body at this time became denominational, and thus dysfunctional in reference to the administration to widows. The disciples were not behaving as one body. Because they were not, the dysfunction occurred. In order to correct the problem, everyone was called together by the apostles in order to start again the organic function of the body in reference to caring for all their widows. The apostles called on all the members to again function as one body as it did in the beginning when no one had unfulfilled needs (At 2:44,45).

“Among-you-seven-men” was the solution to the dysfunction. These men were chosen from the multitude of the brethren, not from specific independent groups. The men were chosen because of spiritual qualities, not on the basis of being politically correct in an environment of groups who were making a plan to “work together.”

Luke clearly wrote concerning this event from the top down. He wrote to reveal how Jesus worked from heaven through the apostles in order to keep the body focused on what it was to be doing. It is interesting to note that throughout all the proceedings that took place to solve the problem, not one word was ever said about church autonomy.

#### **D. The multitude is pleased:**

The result of the apostles’ advice concerning the solution to the dys-

function was that *“the saying pleased the whole multitude”* (At 6:5). Every member of the body in Jerusalem was pleased, not only because the apostles gave some good advice, but because there were no power squabbles as to whose supposed autonomy was compromised. Everyone was simply pleased that the body was returned to its proper functionality in reference to the Christian widows. And because the body returned to normality, *“the word of God increased”* (At 6:7).

When the body functions without internal dysfunction, the gospel is preached to the lost. Dysfunction in living the gospel causes souls to be lost because the parts of the body are not functioning harmoniously in their relationships with one another according to the gospel of God’s grace. Luke wanted to remind us of this point by making the statement of verse 7.

When the organic body functions properly, “the number of the disciples” will multiply. When the whole body in Jerusalem functioned as one united body, people were saved. Growth, because of oneness, happened then, and it will happen today in any city where all the disciples of the whole body function with the common purpose of preaching the gospel. But when certain groups of disciples are marginalized for some reason, as the Grecian widows in Jerusalem, then the body becomes dysfunctional in its evangelistic outreach.

**When any one group of disciples ignores any other group of disciples, then those who are doing the ignoring have become denominational and dysfunctional. They hinder the growth of the whole body.**

## Chapter 8 FROM JERUSALEM AND BEYOND

Paul stated the principle that causes the body to function organically. *“And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it”* (1 Co 12:26). It is love that implements this mutual suffering. We must see this mutual suffering in action in order to identify the organic body. When love goes into action, we start identifying the true body of Christ. This means that the organic function of the body is difficult to understand by those who are caught in the quagmire of institutional religion. The religionist finds it difficult

to see function instead of assembly. He often sees doctrinal heritage first, and then consider what the church of his heritage does in reference to reaching out to the lost. But when our focus is on love, then church simply functions.

This is particularly true with those members who begin to understand the nature of the love of God that was revealed through Jesus. Paul said it right in the following words: “*For the love of Christ compels us, because we judge that if One died for all, then all died [to themselves]*” (2 Co 5:14). We must not misunderstand this statement. This statement is not discussing our love for Christ. It is exemplifying the love of Christ for us. Because He so loved us, we are moved into action. We are moved on account of what John explained: “*We love because He first loved us*” (1 Jn 4:19).

The love of Christ moved the organic body out of Jerusalem into Judea, Samaria, and to “*as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch*” of Syria (At 11:19). In all these regions “*a great number believed and turned to the Lord*” (At 11:21).

This is where the recorded account of Acts 11 becomes quite interesting. Luke recorded in Acts 11:22, “*Then news of these things came to the ears of **the church** that was in Jerusalem.*”

Now if we would read into this context our present independent behavior, then this statement of the Holy Spirit would be somewhat confusing. At the time when these events took place in Antioch, some have estimated that the number of disciples in Jerusalem could have been well over 30,000, since the estimated date of the events in Acts 11 was probably about ten years after the beginning of the church in A.D. 30. We have no reason to doubt this date or these figures. But if the church was this great in members in Jerusalem at the time of the events of Acts 11, then why did the Holy Spirit refer to the church in Jerusalem as “the church,” and not churches? And when we consider this great number of disciples in Jerusalem, where would they be meeting on Sunday? When we view the church through the eyes of Jesus from heaven, then it is “church,” not churches.

If one prejudices his thinking with modern-day traditional independent groups, then he will not be able to answer objectively the preceding questions according to the purpose of Jesus’ body on earth. But for those who

are not prejudiced by a denominated behavior of the church, or the denominational theology of church autonomy, then the answer is easy. **There was only one body in Jerusalem.** There was only one church in Jerusalem because there was only one church in the world. The members of that one church were meeting in different places throughout the region of Jerusalem. **The fact that they met at different locations on Sunday did not divide the members from one another. Neither did it divide the members into autonomous assemblies.** They were one organic body functioning in a manner that spread even to Antioch.

The disciples in Antioch were also a part of the one universal body with one universal Head. **The necessity of the disciples' meeting in different places does not justify their separation from one another as autonomous groups.** We must never forget that in the New Testament the church is never identified by a ceremony of acts of worship that are performed on Sunday morning. It is identified by the members' love of one another (See Jn 13:34,35).

### A. A teacher is sent.

When the news of what was happening in Antioch reached the disciples in Jerusalem, Luke recorded that *“they sent Barnabas off to Antioch”* (At 11:22). Now who was the “they”? It was “the church” in Jerusalem that heard of the body growth in Antioch, and thus, “they” (the body parts in Jerusalem) responded by sending a teacher to Antioch. It was the organic body functioning as one both in Jerusalem and in Antioch.

When a part of the organic body heard that there was a need for teaching in another location where members of the universal organic body existed, then the natural thing for the body to do is nurture itself. Is this not the organic body functioning according to what Paul described in Ephesians 4:11,12?

*And He gave some to be apostles, and some prophets, and some evangelists, and some shepherds and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ.*

Acts 11 is a beautiful example of Ephesians 4:11,12 in action! One of the “teachers” of the body in Jerusalem (Barnabas), was sent by the body to “equip the saints” of the body in Antioch. This is ***“the whole body being fitted and held together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working of each part”*** (Ep 4:16).

The parts of the body that were residing in Jerusalem had no choice in reference to helping the parts of the body in Antioch. Distance did not limit their ministry of teaching. They subsequently sent Barnabas, the teacher, to Antioch because this was the global nature of the functioning body being “held together.” When we consider the function of the organic body, therefore, distance must be overcome in order that each part of the body be used to carry out the ministry of the body.

Some would seek to separate the parts (members) through a spirit of denominational autonomy. But such thinking could not be further from the truth of how the early church functioned as a global organic body seeking to be held together by what every joint supplies. Actually, what took place is a beautiful picture that explains how and why the early church grew so fast, and possibly why we grow so slow today. We struggle to grow as a dysfunctional fellowship because each autonomous group of members try to do their own thing. We seek to work in our dysfunctional separation from one another. If Satan can continue this “divide and conquer” strategy among God’s people, then His people will continue to be handicapped in their evangelization of the world. In our backwardness of working independently from one another, we will never realize the potential of what we can do together as the one body of Christ.

## **B. Teachers went about.**

We are not finished with the text of Acts 11. When Barnabas was overwhelmed with his teaching ministry in Antioch, he went to Tarsus to find another teacher (At 11:25). *“And when he had found him [Paul], he brought him to Antioch”* (At 11:26). The text then reads that for a whole year Paul and Barnabas ***“assembled with the church and taught many people”*** (At 11:26).

Now where they assembled for this seminar of teaching, we do not

know. The text does not say that all the disciples assembled at the same time at the same place. (It is unfortunate that some believe that the disciples must all be together at the same place and at the same time in order to be considered a church. But such is a fictitious fantasy. It has no support in any portion of the New Testament.)

What is significant in this statement is that it was “the church,” (singular) not churches that assembled for the teaching. We would certainly assume that by this time there were more disciples in Antioch than could assemble in one house. At least there were certainly more new Christians than what Barnabas could handle as a single teacher. The disciples met in many houses throughout the city. However, the Holy Spirit still said that they were the one church in the city. There were not many churches, but only one.

How Paul and Barnabas taught the one body in Antioch would probably be explained by how Paul ministered in teaching many years later in Ephesus. Luke later wrote what Paul said concerning His teaching ministry in Ephesus, “...how I [Paul] kept nothing back that was profitable, and teaching you publicly **and from house to house**” (At 20:20).

### C. Many teachers were sent.

This is still not the end of the Antioch story in Acts 11. The function of the organic body was not a one time happening with the sending and teaching of Barnabas. The text continues to read, “*Now at this time prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch*” (At 11:27). Here again the function of Ephesians 4:11,12 is explained. The organic body continued to function as one in the regions around Jerusalem and Antioch. Teachers came to the students. The students did not go to the teachers. The members of the body who were teachers ministered to all the body wherever it existed. The number of disciples had grown far beyond the ability of everyone to assemble in one location. Therefore, many prophets had to go to Antioch in order to move from house to house among the disciples.

If we would consider this practice of the early disciples from a practical point of view in reference to Bible teaching, then we might draw some conclusions that are often contrary to what is typically practiced today. The Antioch need for teaching was answered by the disciples in Jerusalem who

sent the teachers to those who needed teaching in Antioch. They did not recruit “preacher students” from Antioch and bring them to Jerusalem. We need to keep this in mind in an era where it seems that the church in some areas expect students to be sent to them for teaching. This was the case in when the apostles remained in Jerusalem many years after the initial Pentecost of A.D. 30 (See Is 2:3; At 2:41). However, when the need for teaching was necessary among those who had jobs and businesses in a particular location, it was then that the Antioch example became relevant. Teachers were sent to the people who could not dislocate and go for an extended period of time to another location for teaching.

We have found throughout the years that when the church requires the students to dislocate from their region in order to move to another city, the growth of the church is actually hindered rather than encouraged. Full-time students often become full-time professionals with diplomas who intimidate local folks in reference to their knowledge of the Bible.

#### **D. The body ministers to itself.**

To illustrate how the body functions as one, we must look closely at what happened on the occasion of a famine in Judea that took place during the reign of Claudius. Agabus prophesied that a great famine would come, which famine did come in the days of Claudius Caesar (At 11:28). “*Then the disciples, everyone according to his ability, determined to send relief to the brethren who dwelt in Judea*” (At 11:29). The disciples in this text were at least the disciples in Antioch. They were members of the one body, parts of which were in Antioch. We would assume that these parts of the body were in other places than Judea, for the famine was in Judea. The disciples (parts) in Antioch made a contribution for relief, and then sent it by the hands of Barnabas and Saul to the elders of the parts of the body that were suffering in Judea.

Now some have wrongfully assumed that these were the elders of the Jerusalem church only. But that is not what the text states. It simply states that it was sent to the brethren **in Judea**, and given to the elders of the body. We would correctly assume that it was given to the elders of the brethren in all Judea, Jerusalem being only one city of the province of Judea. Through

Luke, the Holy Spirit helps us view the church in Judea from the top down. We now see all the elders of Judea as the elders of the church of all Judea, not just the elders of one city, and certainly not the elders of one group of disciples in Judea.

**This is the universal organic body functioning as one body.** The elders of the body in Judea knew where the relief funds were to be distributed, for they were known by the brethren in all Judea. The obvious means by which to distribute the relief funds was through those who knew where the funds needed to go.

Now we need to go beyond what the Antioch parts of the body did in famine relief to the rest of the parts of the body in the rest of the world. We refer again to what the Macedonian and Achaian disciples did “*concerning the ministry to the saints*” in famine relief for the Judean disciples (2 Co 9:1-5). We must notice carefully how Paul explained this universal organic function in the context of 2 Corinthians 5. As 1 Corinthians, the second letter to the disciples in Achaia was directed to all the saints in all the province of Achaia (See 2 Co 1:1; 11:10). Paul wrote to the Achaia brethren, “*I boast of you to those [brethren] of [the province of] Macedonia, that [province of] Achaia was ready a year ago*” (2 Co 9:2). Paul’s reference is to the organic function of the members as one body, not different assemblies of the members. There were possibly hundreds of assemblies of the disciples throughout the provinces of Macedonia and Achaia. All of the disciples in these two provinces joined together as one united body of believers in order to send aid to other parts of the body who dwelt in the province of Judea.

At the time of writing the Corinthian letter, Paul was headed to Achaia to collect the promised contributions for the famine victims of Judea. He sent brethren ahead in order that the collection was made before his arrival (2 Co 9:3). He had to do this because the contribution came from disciples who were scattered throughout the province of Achaia. If the contribution were coming only from those who were within the city of Corinth, then the collection would not be a problem. But because it came from those who were living throughout the province, advance notice needed to be made in order that all the contribution might be gathered in Corinth before his arrival.

Paul did not want the brethren throughout the province of Achaia mak-

ing any contributions upon his arrival (1 Co 16:2). He exhorted the Achaian brethren to have the contribution ready upon his initial arrival in Corinth. He did this *“lest if any Macedonians come with me and find you unprepared”* (2 Co 9:4). The point is that he referred to the organic function of the disciples throughout the province of Macedonia, working with the disciples throughout the province of Achaia, on behalf of the disciples throughout the province of Judea. There is no mention of any autonomous assemblies functioning in the midst of this organic function of the body in the provinces of Macedonia and Achaia. It is simply **not there**. Individual members are autonomous to freely function together as the one body in order to supply what the body needs to cause growth. But when every part of the body sacrificially supplies for the whole body, then the body spiritually grows *“for the edifying of itself in love”* (Ep 4:16).

What is so encouraging about standing back and seeing this picture being laid out by the Holy Spirit in Acts 11, and the letters to the Achaians, is to see the organic body functioning as one body. When there was a spiritual famine, teachers were sent where the body was weak. When there was physical weakness through famine, the body came alive and nourished those parts who were in hunger. It was the whole body ministering to the whole body. There were no debates over who was in control. There were no power struggles among preachers, no arguments as to who was the boss, or who was in control of the distribution. When the distribution had to be made, it was given to the greatest slaves of the body, the elders (See Mk 10:35-45).

Can we ever restore this beautiful picture of the body when we are coming from such a splintered practice of autonomous denominationality that we experience today? Is our baggage too much on this point to be discarded? Need we remind ourselves of what Paul wrote? *“For as the [universal] body is one and has many members, and all the members of the one body, though they are many, are one body, so also is Christ”* (1 Co 12:12). As Christ is one, so also are the individual members of His body one. There is no need to divide His precious body into denominating groups that are huddled together in a purpose-built building on Sunday morning. If we do such a thing, then we will present to the unbelieving world a picture of hypocrisy. Jesus still says,

*“I do not pray for these alone, but for those also who believe in Me through their word; **that they all may be one**; even as You, Father, are in Me and I in You, that they also may be one in Us, so that the world may believe that You sent Me” (Jn 17:20,21).*

## Chapter 9 GO TELL THE BRETHREN

In Acts 12 Peter was in trouble again. On this occasion he was the victim of a political move on the part of Herod. Herod had killed the apostle James, and then *“he proceeded further to take Peter also”* because it pleased the Jews who wanted to stop the preaching of the apostles in Jerusalem (At 12:2,3).

Acts 12 is a good example of what happened in Jerusalem surrounding Herod’s efforts, sometime between A.D. 41 and 44, *“to harass some of the church”* (At 12:1). What this effort on the part of Herod did for us is that it gave the historian Luke the opportunity to observe the early disciples’ function as the one organic body of Christ in a particular city.

At this time in the city of Jerusalem—about ten to twelve years after the events of Acts 2—the number of members of the church in Jerusalem could have been from 25,000 to 30,000, some historians estimate more. Since there was no place of common assembly for this number of members, the members met in the houses of the members that were scattered throughout the city.

Now notice carefully how Luke detailed Herod’s ambitions. Herod’s goal was not to harass some of the “churches” (plural), but some of the entire body of believers, the church. There were not 1,000 autonomous “churches” assembling throughout the city—assuming about twenty-five members were meeting in each house assembly. There was only one church, but hundreds of assemblies. This is significant in reference to the organic function of the universal body of Christ. In this case, Luke’s account of this matter details that there was always only one church in any particular city that is mentioned in the book of Acts. There was no such thing as individual autonomous “churches” in the cities that are mentioned in the New Testament.

In order to accomplish his sinister deed, Herod arrested Peter. On this occasion, the whole church, that is every member in the city of Jerusalem went into prayer action. “*So Peter was kept in prison, **but prayer was earnestly made to God for him by the church***” (At 12:5). Again, reference was not to autonomous “churches” throughout the city of Jerusalem. Emphasis was on the one body, the one church in Jerusalem, though at the time the members were assembling in an estimated one thousand or more homes throughout the city.

The prayers were made, and God subsequently answered the prayers by sending an angel to fetch Peter out of jail (At 12:6-11). Once out of jail, Peter then went to only one house where there were disciples meeting in prayer for him (At 12:12). After some persistent knocking in order to be allowed to enter, Peter eventually explained all that had happened, and now he was free. But after encouraging the disciples who were meeting in that specific house, the house of Mary, Peter then said, “*Go tell these things to James and **to the brethren***” (At 12:17).

There were other brethren of the church in Jerusalem who were not praying in the house of Mary. “*The brethren*” were scattered to houses throughout the city. Even after meeting in the house of Mary, Luke wanted to emphasize this point by recording, “*Then he [Peter] departed [from the house of Mary] and went to another place [house]*” (At 12:17).

At the time, the members of the church in Jerusalem (singular) were meeting in the homes of members throughout the city. All the members in many houses were offering up prayers as one organic body on behalf of Peter. Not all the members in the city of Jerusalem could assemble in the house of Mary. Nevertheless, it was still the church in the entire city that Herod set himself to harass. In this case, it was the one church functioning as one organic body in prayer. There was no such thing as autonomous church groups assembling throughout the city of Jerusalem. There was only one church in the city, and the members of this one church functioned as one body in offering up prayers for Peter to receive a “get out of jail free card,” which thing the angel became.

## Chapter 10

### SELF-HEALING OF THE BODY

The organic function of the universal body is clearly revealed in the event that is recorded by Luke in Acts 15. The historical setting is that *“certain men who came down from Judea taught the brethren, ‘Except you are circumcised after the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved’”* (At 15:1). These legalistic Jewish brethren were moving about among the members of the body in different regions. They originated out of Judea, but they were going about teaching their legal doctrine of salvation by circumcision. They were spreading this teaching to other cities and regions where parts of the body existed. The Acts 15 meeting, therefore, was a discussion forum on this and other subjects. It was a meeting to reveal the error of the circumcision teaching, and an opportunity for grace-oriented Jewish brethren to reassure the Gentile brethren that they need not submit to circumcision.

The Jerusalem meeting was not a meeting to establish some organizational structure or appoint “popes” that would rule over the disciples. Such meetings are senseless simply because there is only one Head who has all authority. And this Head is sufficient to lead by His word all the members of His body throughout the world. Only those religionists who do not submit to the “all authority” that proceeds from King Jesus through His word alone, must organize under networks of authorities in order to maintain their existence. We must not forget that when authorities are ordained among the members of the body on earth, the “all authority” of Jesus in heaven is attacked (See Mt 28:18).

Meetings that are conducted to appoint individuals who assert authority over the members of the body steal away the authority that Jesus alone has over His body, as well as the initiative that each member must exercise in his or her motivation by grace in the love of God. Meetings to institute authorities on earth are thus “non-organic.” They hinder the function of the members of the organic body as they minimize the initiative of the members to take ownership of preaching and ministering to their communities.

They often hinder the freedom that the members have to function as

parts of the body. This does not discount the fact that the members should work together, or be organized in their ministry. But the body must be careful about establishing power structures that steal the freedom of members to exercise their gifts to minister to others in the realm of their own freedom (See Gl 5:1).

The church was never established on the foundation of networked authorities, “*for no other foundation can man lay than what is laid, which is Jesus Christ*” (1 Co 3:11). The foundation of Jesus can exist only if there is no authority that would compete with His authority. As we survey through the New Testament concerning the organic function of the body, one principle is strikingly clear. **There was never a network of authorities on earth who manipulated the function of the parts of the body.** Any group of churches who would so function today has moved away from the freedom of individual members being connected to the only Vine, Jesus Christ (See Jn 15:1-8). When one allows Jesus to reign in his heart, then he needs no other kings.

Being organized for reporting and connectivity is not organization under authorities. The parts of the body are networked because they want to stay in contact with one another, not in order to show up to guarantee their connectivity to the one Head. Since the body is organized as multiple members being connected to the same Head, then the parts stay in contact with one another in order to work together.

The Acts 15 meeting was about teaching, not organization. Now it is interesting to note first, that in order to counter the practice of the legal Jewish brethren, **the church nowhere resorted to a doctrine of autonomy** to stop these brethren. Neither was a network of authorities established who would determine either the teaching or behavior of the disciples. No teacher who was going about teaching was barred from any assembly by church authorities. On the contrary, the organic body went to work in **dealing with the erroneous teaching.**

The disciples did not use some organizational structure to combat the teaching, but dealt with the teaching itself. The fact that the legal brethren could easily move among the body of members is evidence that there was no such thing as independent churches. Neither were there networked churches who were controlled by a hierarchy of authorities who determined

what churches were accepted in the network and what teachers were allowed to teach in the churches.

Too often we have encountered those who know their Bibles so little that they become defensive against legal brethren by resorting to a supposed doctrine of autonomy instead of dealing with the fallacy of the doctrine itself. On the occasion of Acts 15, the leaders of the whole body dealt with the teaching, not by establishing some organizational structure of the church that they presumed the legal brethren would be violating.

So how would we suppose a universal organic body would deal with a false teaching? In order to answer this question, we must follow closely the events that transpired as the situation in Acts 15 developed and came to a climax.

### A. Deal with the teaching:

The problem of legal circumcision was first debated locally where the teaching originated. *“Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them”* (At 15:2). This debate first took place in Antioch where the circumcision brethren had come to impose circumcision on the Gentile brethren. Now since these circumcision brethren had come from Jerusalem, a decision was made to deal with the problem in Jerusalem. So after the local discussions in Antioch, *“they [the Antioch brethren] determined that Paul and Barnabas, and certain others of them, should go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and elders concerning this question”* (At 15:2). *“Therefore, being sent on their way by the church ... they came to Jerusalem”* (At 15:3,4).

So from the area where the body was affected by the teaching, representatives went to where the problem originated. **It was the organic body sending a cure from the infected parts of the body to where the virus of legal religiosity originated.** It was the body working as one in order to heal itself of this cancer.

### B. Identify the origin of the teaching:

Now when the parts of the body from the region of Antioch arrived in Jerusalem, they found that the cancer was brought into the body secretly

through Pharisees, whom Luke identified as false brethren (Gl 2:4). Now the apostles and elders came together and debated the matter right where the legalistic cancer originated (At 15:6,7). Representative parts of the body—Peter, Paul, Barnabas and James—presented arguments that revealed the fallacy of the doctrine of salvation by circumcision. Now notice carefully how the organic body responded:

*Then it pleased the apostles and elders, **with the whole church**, to send chosen men **of their own company** to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas; namely, Judas named Barsabbas, and Silas, **leading men among the brethren** (At 15:22).*

The whole body functioned together as one. The parts of the body in Jerusalem and Judea sent parts who were “leading men” to make an announcement of the decision to the parts of the body that were in Antioch. This is the organic body functioning as one body in order to cure itself of a cancerous doctrine.

### **C. Announce the triumph of freedom:**

A letter was written in order to announce the solution. Notice those from whom the letter came: “*And they wrote this letter **by them**: ‘**The apostles and elders and brethren . . .**’*” (At 15:23). The letter did not come from a hierarchy of church authorities. **It came from the church, the entire body.** Now notice those to whom the letter was written. “... *greetings to **the brethren** who are of the Gentiles **in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia** ...*” (At 15:23). Thus the letter came from parts of the body in Judea and was sent to parts of the body in Antioch, Syria and Cilicia. This is the universal organic body functioning as one body wherever there were parts of the body whose freedom was being endangered. Again, this is “*the whole body being fitted and held together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working of each part*” (Ep 4:16). When this happens, growth is caused in the body as the whole body functions universally in a spirit of love among the parts in order that the freedom of all parts is guarded (Ep 4:16).

## D. Validated by Christ, not church:

There was an apologetic in the letter that was sent out from Jerusalem. We see this in the following statement: “*Since we have heard that some went out from us, to whom we gave no commandment, have troubled you with their words, unsettling your souls*” (At 15:24). The Jewish circumcision brethren who went out sought to validate that they had some authority by affirming that they were sent out by the Jerusalem disciples. When brethren have no biblical authority for their teaching, they try to establish some fictitious authority by claiming that they are “apostles (Gr. “sent out”) of the church.” Paul identified such false apostles who existed among the brethren of the early church. He wrote, “*For such are false apostles, deceitful workers, masquerading themselves as apostles of Christ*” (2 Co 11:13). Since “*Satan masquerades himself as a messenger of light,*” then it is no wonder, therefore, that “*his ministers also masquerade themselves as ministers of righteousness, whose end will be according to their works*” (2 Co 11:14,15).

When one involves himself in this nonsense, you can know that his motives are questionable. Disciples are validated as such only by Jesus and His word. If one does not base his teaching on the word of Christ, then he is no disciple of Christ. The church is looking for teachers who teach the truth of the gospel of Christ, not for those who teach their personal experiences, or manipulate the members through political maneuvers. Only those who have obeyed the gospel in baptism have the right to go about teaching the gospel.

So the Jerusalem parts of the body wanted the parts of the body in Antioch, Syria and Cilicia to know that though the cancer of “circumcision bondage” (the “other gospel” - Gl 1:6-9) originated from Judea, the church itself was not the origin of this other gospel. Therefore, there was no “church authority” by which the circumcision brethren who masqueraded themselves as apostles of Christ could validate their doctrine by some church council in Jerusalem.

## E. Rejoicing in our freedom:

In order to validate the authenticity of the letter that parts of the body were writing to other parts of the body in Antioch, Syria and Cilicia, local parts were sent with Barnabas and Paul (At 15:25-27). These two (Justas and Silas) would bear witness to the actions of the body that “*assembled with one mind*” in Jerusalem in order to cure the cancer (At 15:25). So when the delegation arrived in Antioch and read the letter, “*they rejoiced over its encouragement*” (At 15:31). They were free from circumcision.

But it did not stop there. “*And Judas and Silas, being prophets also themselves, exhorted and strengthened the brethren with many words*” (At 15:32). Here again is the action of the organic body nourishing itself in the teaching of the word of God. God “*gave some to be ... prophets [teachers] ... for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ*” (Ep 4:11,12). Judas and Silas did not become prophets (teachers) when they arrived in Antioch. They were prophets of the universal organic body, and thus, wherever they went they carried out their gift from the Holy Spirit to teach the word of God to the people. Wherever they went in the world where there were parts of the body, they assumed their responsibility to exercise their spiritual gift of ministering the word of God to the body.

They did not have to ask permission to exercise their gift. Such would have been rude to the Holy Spirit, since God gave “*some to be prophets*” in the universal body (Ep 4:11). Only when people seek to separate unto themselves parts of the body do they feel that their permission must be granted to those who minister the word of God. This was the problem with Diotrephes. He had claimed parts of the body over which he exercised autonomous control. Unfortunately, he would give no permission to any evangelists, including the apostle John, to speak to his autonomous group of denominated disciples over which he maintained control (See 3 Jn 9-11).

Apostasy is often identified in the New Testament when different personalities lead away disciples after themselves to form an independent group. Paul warned that grievous wolves will “*draw away the disciples after themselves*” (At 20:30). Some individuals use appealing words and flattering speech to draw away disciples after themselves (Rm 16:17,18). Some “*creep into houses and lead captive gullible women*” (2 Tm 3:6). Some “*turn away their ears from the truth and will be turned to fables*” (2

Tm 4:4). We move away from the one organic body when we turn to independent groups that have no dealings with one another. Sectarianism among the people of God is division of the church, for sectarianism is division over favorite issues or personalities that have no reference to the eternal salvation of those who follow such issues.

## Chapter 11

### “SEE OUR BRETHREN”

In his desire to revisit disciples that resulted from his first mission journey, Paul suggested to Barnabas that they return and visit the disciples who were now a little over three years in the faith. But there arose a disagreement between Paul and Barnabas concerning who should go with them. Because of the disagreement that arose between Paul and Barnabas concerning the matter of John Mark going on this journey, we often overlook Paul’s view of the body of members that were scattered throughout the world. Therefore, we need to take another look at the context of Acts 15:36-41 with the view that the members constituted the body wherever they were in the world.

#### A. Revisiting the brethren:

On this occasion, Paul suggested to Barnabas, “*Let us go again and visit **our brethren** in every city where we have preached the word of the Lord, and see how they are doing*” (At 15:36). On the first journey, Paul and Barnabas visited several cities in Asia Minor. They visited Iconium, Lystra and Derbe, and possibly many other cities that are not mentioned in Luke’s historical account of the journey in the document of Acts. In Luke’s account, he recorded that “*they had designated elders **in every church***” on that first journey (At 14:23). Though we live with the unfortunate word “church,” where “assembly” should generally be used to translate the word *ekklesia*, the fact is that Luke recorded that at the end of the first journey, Paul and Barnabas went back through the cities where they had baptized a great number of people. Luke used the word “*ekklesia*” to refer to the

many assemblies of the body of all the members in each city.

In Acts 15 when Paul approached Barnabas about returning to these cities on a second trip, he referred to all the disciples in the area as "**our brethren**." He did not separate the brethren from one another into different assemblies in each city. Paul made no mention that there were different groups of brethren who were separated from one another in the cities. He did not refer to them to be different "churches." They were "the brethren" in all the cities.

Also add to this the fact that Paul wanted to see "*how they are doing*." It was not that he wanted to see how each independent church was doing, but how **each brother of the body** was functioning as members of the body of Christ. The pronoun "they" refers to the brethren, not to different independent churches.

## **B. Separating in order to multiply outreach:**

When we continue with Luke's narrative, Paul and Barnabas separated from one another, but each went on to a different area that was covered in the first mission trip. Barnabas and Mark went on to Cyprus, but Paul took Silas and went through Syria and Cilicia (At 15:39,40). When the text says that Paul went through Syria and Cilicia, it reads that he was "*strengthening the churches*" (At 15:41). From this statement we would conclude that he focused on the assemblies of the brothers in these regions, for it was in their common assemblies that he could meet with the disciples in a particular area.

Both Paul and Barnabas, with Mark and Silas, were functioning as the universal body by carrying out their ministry of exhortation and teaching. They left Antioch of Syria and their ministry of teaching with the brethren there. But they went on to other areas where there were other brethren who needed teaching. They were functioning teachers of the universal body, and thus needed no invitations or permission to teach among the brethren throughout Asia Minor. There were disciples in Cyprus, but Barnabas and Mark needed no special letter of invitation, or authorization from some hierarchy of authorities to go and minister to the brethren in Cyprus. As gifted members of the organic body, they used their gifts to minister unto the body

wherever there were members of the body who needed their ministry of the word.

### **C. Stymied by church authorities:**

Unfortunately, things have changed since those early days of the organic body. If there is a weakness in the body in some places today, the Diotrephetic syndrome has been so established that those who have the gift of teaching the word must seek permission to exercise their gift among the brethren. Some authoritative synods over churches have become so exclusive that teachers find it difficult to move among the brethren with their gift of teaching and exhortation. Unless there is some permission from a "higher authority," the teachers are refused entry. We see this nowhere in the New Testament church.

There was no hierarchy of control of the brethren in the first century. But today, men who seek to steal some of the authority of Jesus have established hierarchal synods of authority to which churches must register in order to have "qualified" teachers come their way. If Paul and Barnabas could see what some synods of churches are doing today, they would be quite disheartened.

The apostles of our Lord did not exercise any apostolic authority that is assumed by many in the organized religions we witness in Christendom today. For example, Apollos had the gift of exhortation. With a great knowledge of the Scriptures, and by his own free-will, he traveled to teach others (See At 18:24-28; 19:1). On one occasion Paul requested that he go to Corinth (1 Co 16:12). But Apollos did not want to go at the time Paul requested. Therefore, Paul did not exercise any hierarchal apostolic authority over Apollos as a Christ-sent apostle. Also consider the fact that Paul did not want to take John Mark on his second mission journey. Barnabas did. If Paul had some "apostolic authority" outside the authority of the word of God that was revealed through him, then Barnabas would have sinned by working against the wishes of Paul. The fact was that Paul had no apostolic authority over either Apollos or Barnabas.

There is an erroneous doctrine that often arises among some evangelists who seek to have authority over a denominating group of members of

the body. Diotrephes sought to do such with those over whom he assumed control (3 Jn 10). But John said that **his works were evil** (3 Jn 11). Titus was left by Paul in Crete among some new disciples. He was not left there to rule over the disciples. He was exhorted through letter to set forth those who would function as shepherds according to the inspired record of Paul's letter to him (Ti 1:5-16). This did not give Titus some special authority. He was only given the responsibility to make sure that the designation of shepherds take place among the disciples in Crete.

In a similar way Timothy ministered in the region of Ephesus among all the disciples. It was not that he had authority over one "autonomous assembly" of disciples. Paul exhorted him "to preach the word" to all the disciples, regardless of where the disciples showed up on Sunday (2 Tm 4:1-4). Timothy's responsibility was to the parts of the body in the area of Ephesus, not to one specific assembly of the parts. Paul's exhortation to him was to preach the word, not to maintain some authority among the disciples over a particular assembly of the disciples. Timothy's authority was inherent in the word of God that he was to preach. For this reason, Paul reminded him of the Divine origin of that word (See 2 Tm 3:16,17).

## **Chapter 12**

### **BLUEPRINT FOR AN INDEPENDENT CHURCH**

In our travels throughout the world in the last several decades we have encountered thousands of independent churches. Most of these groups affirm their autonomy from one another, and each is led by either a dynamic preacher or by a group of men who are dedicated to leading people to a closer relationship with God. Unfortunately, many of these groups seek to maintain their denominational status as an independent group of disciples who would remain separate from other independent groups.

Some of these churches are very active and do a great amount of work in their efforts to organize the membership of their churches. Most of the groups that we have encountered are centered around one individual who is often the one who started the group. This individual maintains a center of reference for the group, and thus, all decision making is focused on his de-

sires. In order to maintain his center of reference status in the group, he often keeps his fellowship of followers separated from other groups.

We need to commend those individuals who have worked laboriously for the Lord. Many preachers have struggled alone in efforts to bring people closer to God. They have sacrificed self and family to do the best they can with what they have known. Because some of these sincere leaders have been the product of another's dysfunctional system of leadership, they have simply copied the sectarian spirit of their fathers. As a result, they have minimized the possibilities of their work by keeping their labors independent from others who have the same desires in helping people to grow closer to God and His word. Though we have been somewhat negative in this book in reference to this sectarian behavior on the part of religious leaders, our negativity must be considered in the context of what power can be released if we would learn to work together as one dynamic body of God. We are reminded of what God pronounced that men could do when they are determined to work together. "*Nothing will be impossible for them that they have imagined to do*" (Gn 11:6). It is for this reason that we are searching again the Holy Spirit's record of the early behavior of the church of Christ.

We have searched throughout the New Testament in order to find a scenario where individuals sought to establish their own independent churches, and subsequently found an ideal blueprint of how one can do this. Since the Holy Spirit inscribed the words of this blueprint, we have no question concerning its effectiveness in accomplishing the desired end of establishing an independent church that is exclusive, not inclusive. In the context of the subject of this book, we thought it necessary to go through this description of how to establish an independent church. We have deemed this necessary since there are so many preachers out there who have done such, some doing such with beliefs and behavior that are contrary to the will of God.

The text of this blueprint is 3 John. The historical setting was that evangelists, including the apostle John himself, were going about from disciple to disciple, from group to group, in order to teach and edify the whole body of Christ. However, in accomplishing this circuit teaching ministry there were some groups who hindered God's plan of church edification and evangelism. Some autocratic personalities had established independent groups that followed a typical blueprint for being autonomous. And thus,

they felt no need for the coming of either evangelist or apostle to their group. In fact, they hindered those who had the gift of teaching. They were not allowing that either apostle, evangelist or missionary come to their independent groups.

The disciple in this context who maintained an autonomous group of disciples was named Diotrephes. If one would seek to establish a group of disciples as an independent church, then they should follow the principles that Diotrephes followed in order to establish this independent group. Here are the key points to follow if one desires to establish a group of disciples that is autonomous from all other groups in his area:

### **A. “Love to be first” (3 Jn 9):**

A preacher who wants to start an independent church must love to be first among the disciples. He must see himself as the one around whom all things transpire. If anyone of the group would seek to do anything in the church, then they must have his permission. In this way, his narcissism is reaffirmed and he is confirmed to be the center of reference of the group.

His love for the position of being first is reaffirmed by keeping people ignorant of the word of God. He does this by preaching little Bible or using the Bible as an idol to which allegiance is given, but not a book to be studied by the members in order to establish one’s faith on the truth of the gospel. In this way, if any of the members of “his church” would determine if a teaching were true, then they will first ask him. The members must not be encouraged to study their Bibles for themselves lest they discover that some of his teachings are erroneous. As long as the members must consult him in matters of Bible teaching, then he remains first among the brethren.

We have found that one way in which preachers often intimidate the members into submitting to their direction is that they resort to continually saying, “God told me.” This gives the preacher a way to escape his own personal study of the word of God. At the same time, the members are encouraged to believe that he is indeed a man of God, since God has supposedly spoken to him personally. If they would work against the desires of the preacher, then they feel that they would be working against what God had told the preacher to do.

If the preacher is a leader of an independent experiential group, in his lack of Bible study and knowledge thereof, he will resort to supposed “experiences” and “encounters” with angels or the Holy Spirit in order to solicit the allegiance of the audience. As long as his disciples believe that he has had some personal encounter with the supernatural, then they reaffirm that he is first among them.

Another means by which preachers who love to be first reaffirm their position is to be dynamic from the pulpit. Through their charismatic speaking they are able to bring the people to tears through the power of his persuasive speaking. If he is good, he will bring in an orchestra to chime the emotions of the people in order to produce a theatrical environment wherein the innocent fall victim to his charms. He then proclaims himself to be an apostle or prophet, knowing that the people know so little about the Bible that they have no biblical definition of such ministries. In all this, the charismatic preacher feeds on the attention of the people, and thus, he is firmly established in his love of being first among the people.

### **B. “Do not receive competition” (3 Jn 9):**

If one would keep his position of being first, then he must be suspicious of any other leader, both within and without his autonomous church group. One should allow this suspicion of others to be great enough to reject anyone from coming to his group, even if it would be someone as the apostle John, the apostle of love. Since a good leader of an independent church considers himself first, then he would consider any other leader to be of the same character as himself, that is, one who loves to be first. Therefore, he will not receive other leaders into the fellowship of his group because he seeks to be independent from others. And being independent means that no one else should be allowed to meddle in the affairs of his church. If others were allowed into his body of believers, then his position of being first would be threatened. For this reason, other evangelists must not be allowed in.

### **C. “Slander the competition” (3 Jn 10):**

In order to keep other leaders out of his church, the Diotrephetic leader

must convince the church for which he preaches that other leaders are either liberal or false prophets. He thus preaches paranoia about false teachers going about from church to church. Since he assumes his leadership because of loving to be first, and not preaching the Bible, his only recourse is to keep the competition away by convincing his adherents to also keep them away. He thus builds suspicion in the hearts and minds of the people concerning any other leaders. He generates false accusations against those he would keep out of his group. Since he uses slander to accomplish this, and not Bible, then he has reaffirmed that in order for one to build a big church, one does not have to know the Bible. Political maneuvers are all that is necessary in order to build and maintain a big church group that is based on a single personality.

#### **D. “Maintain one’s independence” (3 Jn 10):**

In order to maintain the independence of the group from other groups, all that is needed is a mandate that no one in the group receive those of other groups. Therefore, in promoting the behavior of not receiving others, one has successfully established himself as the leader of an independent church.

Independent means that one group does not receive another group with open arms. If a group would be independent, therefore, the blueprint is simple at this point. One group of disciples should simply not associate with any other group, lest “sheep be stolen.” If the leaders of independent churches do not receive one another, then each can maintain their autonomy and still exist in the same community.

#### **E. “Intimidate the adherents” (3 Jn 10):**

In order to establish a truly independent church, the members must be intimidated into asking permission for all that they do. In this case, Diotrephes developed an atmosphere of fear by forbidding any member from receiving any evangelists or brother who was not a member of his church. In doing this, he successfully stopped the organic function of the universal body of Christ. And so, his control was complete.

His group is identified as a true independent church because of the last

point in the blueprint to quarantine one group from other groups. When the adherents of one group are intimidated not to fellowship those outside their group, then the full circle of autonomy has been established. The authority of the preacher has been established. This authority is then used successfully to intimidate the adherents to maintain the autonomy of the group at the expense of fellowshipping other groups.

## F. “Disfellowship rebels” (3 Jn 10):

Those who would not submit to the autocratic control of Diotrephes are to be cast out. No rebels are allowed. And by rebel, we would mean anyone who rebels against the authoritative control of the Diotrephetic rule of the preacher, or any power structure that is set up within a particular sect. If loyalty is not manifested through submission to the control of the leader, or synod of leaders, then the Diotrephetic leadership will simply cast out the disloyal members. In this way, the rest of the members are intimidated into following the desires of the leader, and thus, the autonomy of the group from other groups is guaranteed.

The preceding is a perfect blueprint for establishing an independent church that is autonomous from other groups. If one would follow every point, he would be sure to establish and maintain his church’s autonomy from all other churches. Unfortunately when John wrote these words, he identified such behavior on the part of leaders **to be evil** (3 Jn 11). So we would conclude that if one establishes an independent church in this manner, he is doing evil.

## Chapter 13 *EKKLESIA IN THE EPISTLES*

In the world of religious literature we are unfortunately burdened with the word “church.” It is a word that is so loaded with traditional modern-day ecclesiastical baggage that it is quite difficult to determine a correct understanding of the body of Christ as the *ekklesia* as it is defined in the New

Testament. We invariably bring our modern-day baggage of the word into the New Testament, and thus, develop distorted concepts of the organic body of Christ. We define our words by the environment in which we live and the experiences we have with people and things. The word “church” is defined in this manner, and thus, present-day religious practices inevitably find their way into the interpretation of various scriptures. We thus come to some twisted understandings of the *ekklesia* (church) as the Holy Spirit defined such in the Scriptures.

When we seek to define objectively the organic function of the disciples as it is explained by Luke in Acts, and the other writers in the epistles, we come up with a definition that is somewhat different than the common understanding and behavior of many modern-day churches. This is an insurmountable problem in biblical interpretation and application. In many situations, what we would define as “church” according to our present-day beliefs would certainly be strange to the early disciples.

Nevertheless, we are stuck with the word “church.” We thus go to the Scriptures and seek to restore the original meaning with the Divine dictionary in order to develop a biblical understanding of the church. It is challenging to redefine the word “church” according to the New Testament, while at the same time, ignore some of our present-day practices and beliefs. But we must make the effort in order to come to a better understanding of the body of Christ, specifically the organic function of the body. Though this may be a challenging task, we have no option but to submit to biblical definitions in all things concerning the church.

With the concepts that have been previously stated throughout this document, we need to take another look in the epistles wherein the Holy Spirit sought to correct some dysfunctional beliefs and behavior that came into the body life of the early disciples. We must keep in mind, however, that when the Holy Spirit corrected dysfunctions in the body through the epistles, we need to be careful not to develop a concept of the body as a whole according to the dysfunctional groups of disciples who created the problems. We would certainly not want to define the function of the whole body by what was happening in Corinth. It is for this reason that we use the book of Acts to define first the function of the disciples in a particular area, and then, we make our judgments concerning the function of the body as the

*ekklesia* is defined in the epistles. When we follow this approach in order to understand the practical function of the *ekklesia*, we do not come to the conclusion that what the disciples did on Sunday was the defining factor in identifying the organic body.

### A. *Ekklesia*: assembly, not organization:

The Greek word that was unfortunately translated with the loaded English word “church,” simply means an assembly. In Acts 7:38, Steven referred to the assembly (*ekklesia* - “church”) of Israel in the wilderness of Sinai. Throughout the Sinai law, reference was made to the assembly, which Hebrew word was translated “congregation” in the older translations and “assembly” in the later translations. But the assembly of the twelve tribes of Israel was the totality of God’s people that was called out into a unique covenant relationship at the foot of Mount Sinai. In the use of the word “assembly” in reference to Israel, more was meant than just gatherings of Israelites.

The concept of the assembly was theologically important to Jewish thinking. Israel was the church (*ekklesia*) of God that assembled at the foot of Mount Sinai after the people had been called out of Egypt and baptized (immersed) unto Moses in the Red Sea (1 Co 10:1,2). Israel was called out of Egyptian captivity. But more important than being called out of captivity, the nation was called out of the world of nations for the purpose of bringing the Messiah, the Redeemer, into the world.

During Jesus’ ministry, He used the word *ekklesia* on two occasions. In both occasions, His use of the word is found in the book of Matthew, **which book was specifically written to a Jewish audience**. Therefore, when Matthew recorded Jesus’ use of the word, the Jewish audience to whom Jesus was speaking brought into the word their historical definition from the Old Testament.

**1. *Ekklesia and testimony*:** In Matthew 18:17, Jesus was speaking to Jews who, as He, were living under the Sinai law at the time. Therefore, when a Jewish brother sinned against another Jewish brother, then they were to deal with the matter according to the precepts of the Sinai law (See Dt

17:6; 19:15). If the offending Jewish brother did not listen to the one who approached him about a matter of offense, Jesus said to do what the Sinai law commanded: “*Tell it to the ekklesia* [church]” (Mt 18:17). Jesus was simply repeating what the Sinai law required when one person sinned against another (Dt 19:15). This was not a new law for the *ekklesia* that would exist after Acts 2. This was something that had been practiced in the *ekklesia* of Israel for over 1445 years. In the context in which Jesus used the word in Matthew 18:17, therefore, Jesus was not specifically talking about the *ekklesia* that He would establish, but the Jewish *ekklesia* that existed at the time He made the statement. His Jewish audience understood His use of the word *ekklesia* in this context.

What is important to remember is that what Jesus repeated from the Sinai law was a function of the church of Israel throughout its history. In Deuteronomy 19:15, specific instructions were given concerning the organic function of Israel in their interpersonal relationships with one another. Jesus did not use the word *ekklesia* in the context of Matthew 18 to refer to an organizational structure, **but to a relational behavior** that had been practiced among God’s people since the giving of the Sinai law. It was a relational behavior of Israel from the time of the giving of the law on Mount Sinai to the time of the ministry of Jesus when He made reference to the Sinai law. Therefore, His use of the word *ekklesia* (church) in the context of Matthew 18 did not refer specifically to His *ekklesia* (church) that was to come. It was in the context of Matthew 16 that He spoke of His *ekklesia* that was to come, which *ekklesia* would be based on who He was.

**2. Establishment of the ekklesia of Jesus:** Now we go back in Matthew’s record to the Jews to when Jesus first used the word *ekklesia*. Jesus said to Peter, “*And I also say to you, that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church* [ekklesia] *and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it*” (Mt 16:18). In this context, Jesus was using a term with which His Jewish audience was very familiar. The Jews had been the church (*ekklesia*) of God since the days of the wilderness wanderings 1,445 years before.

In the giving of the Sinai law, Moses said to Israel, “*A prophet will the Lord God raise up to you .... This is the one who was in the assembly* [ekklesia] *in the wilderness*” (At 7:37,38). Jesus was previously with the

*ekklesia* of Israel in the wilderness, and now in the historical context of Matthew 16:19, He would build His *ekklesia* that would be based on His sonship. Therefore, when Jesus used the word *ekklesia* in Matthew 16, Peter and the other Jewish disciples at the time understood exactly what He meant in reference to the *ekklesia* being God's people. Jesus was going to establish an *ekklesia* as Israel was established as an *ekklesia* at the foot of Mount Sinai. Though the disciples did not understand all the implications of what Jesus said, they certainly understood what He meant in reference to the use of the word *ekklesia*, for they had their "Jewish dictionary" right there in their minds.

What is also interesting to note in reference to the apostles' understanding of the *ekklesia* at the time Jesus used the term, was that His audience completely understood that the *ekklesia* (assembly, church) was a reference to the people of Israel who were God's people. Though the people were organized by God through Moses, the reference was still to people. The *ekklesia* was a reference to the people of Israel as a collective group that had only one King, God the Father. So when Jesus said He would establish His *ekklesia*, they assumed that He would be the King. He would be the King of His people as God the Father was the King of Israel. This is exactly what Jesus meant in a statement that followed verse 18. In verse 19 Jesus said, "And I will give to you the keys of the kingdom of heaven."

The disciples did not know that Jesus was soon to ascend to heaven in fulfillment of prophecy (See Dn 2:44; 7:13,14). But in the statement of Matthew 16:19 there is a hint. As God the Father reigned from heaven over Israel, Jesus would reign from heaven over His kingdom, of which the *ekklesia* would be the submitted subjects of the kingdom. Therefore, the kingdom reign of Jesus would be revealed from heaven where Jesus is at the right hand of God. It would not be a reign "of this world," or on this earth. Jesus would exercise all kingdom reign "from heaven" over all things (Ep 1:20-23). In this way He is over the assembly (*ekklesia*) of His people on earth, just as it was with Israel during the Old Testament era.

It was only when Israel began to behave earthly and carnally that they rejected the kingship of God the Father, and subsequently called for a king on earth (1 Sm 8:6,7). And so it is with many religious people today. They seek for a King Jesus who will set up some early kingdom on this earth. As

the Jews wanted to see their king reigning on a throne, so there are those today who seek the same. Those who are not satisfied with a King Jesus in heaven as the head of His *ekklesia*, they seek to establish a head on earth. (If one would study the apostasy of Israel, he will have a historical commentary of the apostasy of how religionist theologians again seek to establish some type of earthly kingdom.)

We must bring the preceding definition of *ekklesia* into its fulfillment in the function of the body that is described by Luke in Acts, and referred to throughout the epistles. The *ekklesia* of Jesus is universally one *ekklesia*, and thus, when the epistles were written in order to correct dysfunctions in belief and behavior of the disciples, the Holy Spirit, as the Old Testament prophets with Israel, worked to guard against apostasy and sin among the people of King Jesus. We thus keep in mind that the word “*ekklesia*” was not originally a religious term. It was a common Greek word that was used in Roman society to refer to a common assembly of the citizenship of a city. (See the use of *ekklesia* in At 13:43; 19:30,32,39,41.)

The assembly (*ekklesia*) in the Roman cities did not make the citizens who gathered to be citizens of Rome. **Those who assembled were first citizens, and then they gathered to settle community matters as an *ekklesia*.** So it is with the *ekklesia* of Christ. An assembly on Sunday morning does not make the attendees citizens of the kingdom. **They are first citizens, and then they assemble. Those who define the *ekklesia* by what the *ekklesia* does during the assembly make a fatal error by using the assembly of the *ekklesia* as the definition of God’s people.** But if there is only assembly, and no daily organic function, then the people are not a church (*ekklesia*) of Christ. We sometimes forget that the *ekklesia* existed before the *ekklesia* had its first assembly on the first Sunday after the Sunday of her birth on the Pentecost of Acts 2. God added about 3,000 baptized believers to His people before there ever existed an assembly of the believers on the following Sunday after the day of Pentecost (At 2:47).

## B. Function of the *ekklesia*:

Almost without exception, it would be easier to understand the mul-

multiple house assembly function of the earthly church if the word *ekklesia* were more often translated “assembly.” As stated in the beginning of this book, one cannot arrive at a complete historical understanding of the organic body unless he concludes that the disciples were meeting in the homes of the members throughout any particular region or city. There were no church buildings. There were no large assemblies in civic or school halls.

Because Luke’s purpose in Acts was to explain the organic function of the body, we have a better understanding of the function of the *ekklesia* throughout the book of Acts as we guard ourselves against reading our present-day assembly culture into the text. When the word “church” is used today, everyone wants to focus on locations, assemblies and concerts. But this is not the definition we derive from a definition of the church in the book of Acts, nor is this the picture that is revealed in the epistles. When assembly is mentioned in the epistles, it is usually in the context of correcting some dysfunction of the *ekklesia* in reference to the members’ relationships with one another.

If one does not understand the house meetings of the disciples in their assemblies, then he will usually have a very limited understanding of the size of the church after it was introduced in cities throughout the Roman Empire. Luke wanted us to understand that in the first city where Jesus was introduced as Lord and Christ, the very first Sunday resulted in about 3,000 being baptized (At 2:41). The *ekklesia* then grew to 5,000 men, and beyond (At 6:7). He mentioned numbers of disciples. He did not focus on assemblies, but on the growth of the body in members. Luke’s point was that we must not think that when Jesus was introduced into a city that the number of disciples remained small. We can consider a few examples of this organic growth of the *ekklesia* in key areas throughout the regions of the Roman Empire. When we understand the nature of the growth of the *ekklesia*, we in many ways understand the meaning of the *ekklesia*.

**1. Circulation of Scripture:** At the conclusion of his letter to the disciples in the city of Colosse, Paul wrote, “*And when this letter is read among you, see that it is also read in the church [assembly - ekklesia] of the Laodiceans, and that you likewise read the letter from Laodicea*” (Cl 4:16). In this one statement we discover the function of the organic

body of the first century as the members circulated the inspired documents of the New Testament. We also have a glimpse of why the letters were copied. When the Colossian letter was read in all the house assemblies of the disciples in the city of Colosse, according to Paul's command, someone certainly made copies of the letter before they sent it on to the disciples in Laodicea. And likewise, the letter that was sent to Laodicea was certainly copied before it was sent to the disciples in Colosse. This was the whole church functioning as one body in the circulation of inspired Scripture.

When an inspired letter was sent from the hand of Paul, or any of the New Testament writers, it was to be read to all the disciples who lived everywhere. This practice is brought out in Paul's statement to the Thessalonian disciples: "***I charge you by the Lord that this letter be read to all the brethren***" (1 Th 5:27). Though the letters were originally written to the disciples in one city, all the disciples in that city were to have access to the letter, as well as the disciples who lived in other cities as Colosse and Laodicea. This was the beginning of the production and circulation of the New Testament Scriptures.

Because the body functioned organically and universally in this way, we have the New Testament Scriptures in our hands today. We can only imagine what would have happened if some individuals who ruled over independent groups of disciples, but refused to receive others, would refuse to send on the letters. This may have been what happened when John first wrote to the disciples in the area where Gaius lived. John wrote, "***I wrote to the church, but Diotrephes, who loves to be first among them, does not receive us***" (3 Jn 9). What happened to that letter?

If the early church was set up as independent and sectarian groups with autocratic leaders as Diotrephes, then it could have been that we would not have any New Testament Scripture today. At least the first letter of John to which he referred in 3 John 9 possibly ended up in some trash bin where Diotrephes lived. This would not have been the first time a prophet wrote an inscription that was destroyed by the enemies of the truth (See Jr 36:23).

**2. The plurality of the singular ekklesia:** When the word *ekklesia* is used in the singular, we do not necessarily have to infer that only one assembly of disciples is indicated, which assembly of disciples was meeting at the same time in a particular location on Sunday with other groups in the

same city. This assumption is contrary to the historical fact that the disciples were meeting in several houses throughout a particular city that was addressed in a New Testament letter. A few examples will clarify this.

**a. The *ekklesia* (church) in Judea, Galilee and Samaria:** In Acts 9:31 Luke used the singular form of the word *ekklesia* to refer to the whole body of believers who assembled in houses throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria. *“Then the church [ekklesia] throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and were edified”* (At 9:31). If we understand that Luke’s use of the word *ekklesia* in this statement refers to the collective of individual members of God’s people in these three regions, then there is no difficulty in understanding his use of the term to refer to the whole of the disciples, not to a single assembly of disciples. This is brought out in the last half of the verse. *“And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, they [the ekklesia] were multiplied”* (At 9:31). The plural pronoun “they” finds its antecedent in the word “church” in the first part of verse 31. Therefore, the word “church” (*ekklesia*) is a reference to all the disciples in Judea, Galilee and Samaria, not to multiple independent assemblies of the disciples. It was the people who were comforted by the Holy Spirit, not the assemblies.

**b. The *ekklesia* in Jerusalem:** Consider also Luke’s historical statement concerning the disciples who functioned in Jerusalem. He wrote concerning the news of the disciples in Antioch, *“Then news of these things came to the ears of the church [ekklesia] that was in Jerusalem”* (At 11:22). People have ears. There was more than one assembly of “ears” in the entire city of Jerusalem. Therefore, the news of the events in Antioch was delivered to all the disciples in Jerusalem, regardless of where they were on Sunday morning. The news of the body was spread throughout the members who constituted the one body. The word *ekklesia* in the context of the news report of Acts 11 referred to the disciples throughout the entire city of Jerusalem.

**3. All the saints in all the city:** As previously stated, what many Bible interpreters have failed to understand or believe is the dynamic growth of the early church in every city and region where the gospel was preached

that Jesus was King of kings and Lord of lords. Somehow, we read into the early growth of the body our stagnant growth that we experience in our own cities today. But this is an unfortunate prejudice in understanding the phenomenal growth in the number of disciples throughout the Roman Empire.

Paul, Silas, Timothy and Luke went to the city of Philippi on Paul's second mission trip (At 16). A traveling expatriate salesperson named Lydia and her household first obeyed the gospel (At 16:11-15). A jailor and his household also obeyed the gospel (At 16:25-34). Paul, Timothy and Silas then went on to Thessalonica. Luke stayed behind (See At 17:1). So the early beginnings of the body of Christ in Philippi was composed of a jailer, Lydia, with their households, and Luke who stayed behind to minister to the small group.

From five to six years later we see another picture of the Philippian *ekklesia*. From prison Paul wrote, "*Paul and Timothy, the bondservants of Jesus Christ, to **all the saints** in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the **overseers and menservants***" (Ph 1:1). Something had certainly changed from that small group of disciples that was composed of a government employee (the jailor), and a passing expatriate salesperson (Lydia), in whose house the first disciples probably met. A few years later when the letter of Philippians was written, there were designated leaders among "all the saints."

We must keep in mind that there were no church buildings, schools or civic centers in which the early disciples were allowed to meet. Therefore, in Philippi "all the saints" in the city had surely far outgrown the ability to meet in the house of Lydia. They were meeting everywhere in as many homes as was necessary. And yet, Paul addressed the overseers and menservants who were meeting among all the saints in Philippi.

So how did the overseers service "all the saints" in Philippi? Your guess is as good as ours. But the fact is that they did. And the fact that the Holy Spirit did not define the organic function of the overseers among the disciples says that He expects us to decide how to do the same in our case. Paul addressed the overseers of the city, just as he called the overseers of the entire city of Ephesus together when he passed that way (See At 20:17).

Nowhere in the New Testament do we see a synod group of elders designated over independent sects of disciples that are denominated through-

out the cities in which the organic body of Christ was established. The *ekklesia* is always viewed as the whole of all parts of the body in the city. Shepherds functioned among the parts in order to nurture the whole body of believers. The body far outgrew the ability of the members to meet at the same place at the same time on Sunday, and thus, there were city elders who worked among all the members of the body in the cities. Such promoted the unity of the body, and thus, the body grew in unity. It was not stymied by denominationality.

It has always been correctly stated, “United we stand. Divided we fall.” Nothing could be more true in reference to the growth of the organic body of Christ. A dismembered body is dead, or at least incapacitated to the point it can do little to fulfill the mission of Jesus. And such is the case in many places of the world where the growth of the body is stymied because of a lack of cooperation among disciples. Because members disjoint themselves from one another into small isolated groups that have nothing to do with one another, they remain small and dysfunctional until their last breath of life. But when the members remain connected to Christ, they of necessity must remain connected to every member of the body in their region. And when the body is connected, it grows. Is this not what Paul said in the following statement, which thing we are not ashamed to repeat?

*But speaking the truth in love, we may grow up into Him in all things, who is the head, even Christ, from whom the whole body being fitted and held together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working of each part, causes growth of the body to the edifying of itself in love (Ep 4:15,16).*

If we work contrary to the above plan, **we will not grow**. When joints cannot supply the whole, then the whole hurts. **The condition upon which the whole body organically grows is when every part is allowed to do its share in supplying its help to the whole.**

When there are many parts of the body within one city, but those parts are huddled up in groups that have nothing to do with one another, **then the body will not grow**. This is exactly what Paul infers in Ephesians 4:15,16.

There is something wrong when two elders or members live across the street from one another, but on Sunday morning drive off to two different independent groups that have little or nothing do with one another. How can one ever teach that there is one body when he practices such divisive behavior?

We have always been amused with those writers and preachers who have used the context of Ephesians 4:11-16 to apply to their exclusive sect within a city. They assume that there must be an organization of the parts within their independent group in order for their group to grow. It is believed that they can have growth on their own, apart from all the other parts of the body in the city. When all the other groups of disciples within a city do the same, then we have this monstrosity of a body and deformed picture of a crippled union of denominated bodies trying to do their own thing apart from one another. This is not what we see in the New Testament. This is not the function of the organic body of Christ that exists universally with all parts supplying with their gifts that which causes growth of the body. It is actually the picture of a backward and dysfunctional body, claiming to be united in Christ.

If one feels that the statement of the Holy Spirit in the preceding quote of Ephesians 4:15,16 refers to the organization of local autonomous and denominated groups of disciples, then he has seriously misinterpreted what the Spirit says in reference to the organic function of the universal body of Christ.

The individual parts (members) of the body must remember that they are joined to Christ. Assembly of the parts is a serendipity of being jointly united under the same Head. The parts must be cautious about being captivated by a single authority or group of authorities and lords in an exclusive group. Paul warned of this in Galatians 5:1: “*Stand fast therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free.*”

## **Chapter 14**

### **DEALING WITH LORDS**

The history of how an apostasy happens among God’s people can never be used as the authority to answer the teaching of the apostasy itself.

History only identifies the problem. History is not our source of authority when discussing matters of faith. Our source of authority is the word of God. **That which we use to correct apostasy is the word of God.**

When theologians use history, or their religious heritage, as the authority to counter false doctrine, then they have set themselves up for endless debates over tradition. They have betrayed their lack of emphasis on the authority of the word of God. The scribes and Pharisees went after Jesus because He in so many ways lived contrary to the authority of their heritage. On more than one occasion they argued with Jesus for breaking their imposed Sabbath law traditions by healing people on the Sabbath (See Mt 12:1-8, 9-14). This is usually the mistake theologians make when their “heritage doctrine” is contravened. But “heritage authority” is useless unless it is the heritage of the word of God.

We say this because of an error the church historians have often promoted in order to argue against the universality of the body of Christ. By using a Catholic interpretation of history, they have formulated arguments for group autonomy that are foreign to the universal body of Christ. Now that the doctrine of autonomy has become a part of the heritage of some, they use autonomy as an argument against the universal and organic function of the body of Christ. Such is unfortunate, but does lay the foundation upon which we must again look to the New Testament in order to see how the Holy Spirit directs us to prevent power structures among groups of disciples, and unbiblical Catholic structures of organization in the universal body.

Since there were no earthly hierarchical power structures on earth in the early church, then we wonder why some groups are so organized in their church structures today in order to center their organization around a prominent power figure on the local level.

From our study of Luke’s record of the first twenty years of the organic function of the disciples in the first century, there was no problem with any one group or one man becoming the center of reference, and thus, the controlling figure among the disciples. There were some local problems in Achaia and in the area where Gaius lived. But autocratic leadership did not affect the global church for over twenty years after Acts 2. However, the Holy Spirit knew that apostasy around power figures was coming, for He gave the disciples numerous warnings about this apostasy. As we study through

these warnings, please note how the Holy Spirit prepared the disciples to work against regional and universal hierarchy apostasy. Also note carefully that He never directed the disciples to resort to a supposed doctrine of church autonomy to counter the threat. This teaching is never mentioned in the New Testament.

As Jesus did during His personal ministry with the twelve disciples, so we deal with autocratic personalities who would be a problem today. Since it would be individuals who would cause the apostasy to a hierarchical control of the universal body, then Jesus established a mandate upon which all leadership must be established among His *ekklesia*. If this mandate is broken, then there will be those who will take advantage of the sheep of God in order to establish themselves as power figures in their own kingdoms.

## A. Leading slaves:

**Mark 10:35-45 (Mt 20:20-28) should always be the guiding principle upon which the leadership of the organic body of Christ rests.** In this context, there is one striking principle that must be used to be the guiding principle of how we interpret every passage in the New Testament that deals with leadership among the disciples. Jesus clearly stated His foundation principle of leadership in verses 42 & 43:

*You know that those who are recognized as rulers over the Gentiles exercise lordship over them. And their great ones exercise authority over them. **But it will not be so among you.** But whoever desires to be great among you will be your servant.*

How can something that is stated so clearly be completely ignored by so many leaders who claim authority over the flock, or a group who claims authority over an independent fellowship of disciples?

Autocratic leaders are not wise. **It is an axiomatic truth that the more a leader exercises authority over the members and lordship over parts of the body, the less the body grows.** When considering this principle, we must not confuse the organization of the parts (members) as growth of the church. The New Testament never speaks of growth as growth

in organization and programs. The only time we see a program in the New Testament was when there was a dysfunction in the body. Seven men were chosen by the body in order to correct the dysfunction (See At 6:1-7). But when the dysfunction was corrected, the committee was terminated. God took out Stephen, one of the seven, and Philip and his family went on to Caesarea to do evangelistic work (At 21:8,9). So contrary to some who are eager to organize themselves with committees and programs in order to cause growth, it seems that the first committee that was organized in the organic body was terminated as soon as the dysfunction was corrected.

Programs and organization help parts to connect in ministry, but the organization of the program must never become an authority that steals the lordship of Jesus away from the individual member to respond personally to the grace of God in his or her ministry. We serve Jesus, not programs. Organization can give the individual parts direction, but the individual parts must be moved by the grace of God, not by some authority that is invested in an organization (See 2 Co 4:15).

If any person or group of people assume authority and lordship over the body, then they are contravening what Jesus mandated in Mark 10:42,43. **Jesus simply stated that there will be no lords and authorities among His disciples.** He seeks to remain the only Lord (Ep 4:4-6). He seeks to maintain all authority (Mt 28:18). In view of His knowledge that there would arise those among His people who would lord over His flock, Jesus made the following statement: ***“All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth”*** (Mt 28:18).

Many men have a problem on this point. We seek to have people under us. We want to be over others and in control of some organization. But such rule and control should not exist among God’s people. One might be the boss of his own company, but when he is with the saints, no one is to be intimidated into thinking that he or she might be fired from God’s family if he or she does not submit to the control of a lord.

This caution about becoming lords of authority in the organic body began twenty years after the organic body was born in Jerusalem. It continued among some parts of the body until the foundation was laid for what eventually became the Roman Catholic Church. The problem for the development of such a worldwide structured organization was not the result of a

flaw in teaching concerning the function of the organic body. The problem was with men who sought to lord over the flock of God. When a group of lords gathered, they eventually appointed one lord for themselves, and then finally referred to him as the pope. But because this apostasy happened in history does not mean that Jesus made a mistake in organizing the organic body. Jesus' organized body was perfect. It was man who was not perfect. And when we put a few Diotrephetic lords among the sheep, freedom is lost, and the body becomes dysfunctional in leadership.

## **B. Prophecy of coming dysfunctions:**

There were some Pharisaical “circumcision brethren” in Jerusalem in the early days of the body. These brethren brought a dysfunctional teaching into the body life of the Judean disciples that worked against the principle of the gospel itself. In fact, the principle by which circumcision was enforced by some constituted “another gospel” (See At 15; Gl 1:6-9).

The autocratic leadership of Diotrephes likewise brought into the fellowship of the church an evangelism dysfunction to the point that gospel preaching was compromised (See 3 Jn). The same dysfunction in leadership arose in Achaia when some brought into question the apostleship of Paul (See 1 & 2 Co). So in the context of Acts 20 on his last trip through the regions of Ephesus, Paul issued warnings to the leadership of the church of Ephesus. They should be on the lookout for those among them who would seek to be lords and authorities over the flock of Jesus which was contrary to the mandate of servanthood leadership that Jesus set forth as the behavior of leaders among His sheep (See Mk 10:35-45). In order to impress this mandate of leadership on the minds of the Ephesian elders, Paul “*sent to Ephesus and called the presbyters of the church*” (At 20:17).

These were the elders among all the disciples who lived in the region of Ephesus. They were disciples who were meeting in houses throughout the area. We are not told how the elders functioned as servants among the flock of God. The Holy Spirit simply wanted them to understand that they were there as shepherds, not lords of the flock.

Among many things that Paul discussed with them, there was one particular warning concerning what was coming: “*Also from your own selves*

***will men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves***” (At 20:30). From this warning, we are informed concerning the origin of those who would arise as lords over the body. They would come from among the shepherds themselves. We are told what certain shepherds would do in order to lead the sheep to themselves. They would speak perverse things as did Diotrephes. And we are told why they would speak these things. They would seek to draw away disciples after themselves by slandering others. Therefore, whenever a leader either speaks or behaves in a manner to draw away disciples after himself, then he is “speaking perverse things.”

It must be noted that Paul used the plural “men” in reference to those who would arise in order to establish autonomous groups after themselves. He could have meant that from a collective these individuals would arise. Or, it could be that a group within the elders would arise from among the elders in order to lord over a group of the sheep whom they would separate from the whole as an independent church of followers. Was he speaking of the rise of a group of elders as an authoritative synod among all the elders of Ephesus? When just one elder, or even a group of elders, violate the principle of Mark 10:42,43, they will seek to be lords over the flock, exercising their assumed authority in order to gain control of a portion of the flock, and thus declare their autonomy from the universal body.

Paul’s argument to prevent the apostasy of hierarchal control over independent groups of the body was first to give a warning that such was coming. In giving the warning, the disciples could be on guard for anyone among the elders who might manifest autocratic behavior over any group of the universal body. If there came a time when any leader, or group of leaders, functioned in a sectarian manner over any groups of the whole body, then that leader, or group of leaders, was dysfunctional.

The fact that Paul made the prophecy that autocratic leadership would come and draw away disciples meant that the apostasy would happen. And since it would happen, we then must consider what would be the response of those who refused to be drawn away. Historically, their response was that they carried on as the organic body. Historical records were written about those who drew away disciples after themselves. The Catholic library is full of these records. However, in their quiet life of organic function, the

disciples simply carried on quietly in history, refusing to be a part of those who were drawn away into apostasy by lordship leaders and heads of the body on earth.

### C. The lordship problem:

What Paul said was coming, Peter warned his fellow elders that they should not involve themselves in, that is, lordship leadership. He exhorted that the shepherds not lead “*under compulsion, but voluntarily according to God ... not as being lords over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock*” (1 Pt 5:2,3). It seems that there were some elders in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia, those to whom Peter wrote, who were rising up to be lords over the flock.

**When shepherds cease leading organically through the example of a servant, they will seek to lead autocratically through the commands of a lord.** When one digresses to lordship, then he has stolen some of the lordship of Jesus and a percentage of His “all” authority. It is then that such a one, or group, must remember that the Chief Shepherd is coming for His sheep. If one has stolen some sheep through lordship leadership, then he will answer to the one Lord who rules over His sheep from heaven.

It is again interesting that when Peter deals with the problem of lords who would rise up through autocratic control, and separate to themselves a group of sheep, he does not seek to prevent the apostasy by teaching a doctrine of supposed autonomy among independent groups of sheep. He deals with the lords, not by referring to some supposed organizational structure of the body. **A supposed doctrine of autonomy is not an argument against those who seek to lead groups away to be autonomous after their own perverse lordship over an independent group of disciples.** Peter’s only reference to the organization of the body is simply that there is one Chief Shepherd. One Chief Shepherd with all authority is all the body needs to function organically in all the world.

As Paul dealt with the “men” who would arise to establish autonomous groups after themselves, Peter deals with the “lords” who would seek to lead such groups. Neither Paul nor Peter used “church organization” to prevent the problem of hierarchical organizational structures that would seek

to establish lords and authorities among the disciples. They dealt with the individuals who would cause the problem. They dealt with individuals because it was individual members who dysfunctionally led the sheep. Therefore, whenever there is a dysfunction in leadership, the problem is with the function of leading members. It is a problem of people, not doctrine in reference to church organization.

#### **D. The autocratic problem:**

The warning about which both Paul and Peter spoke was illustrated by the rise of an autocratic leader among some disciples in the region where Gaius and Demetrius lived. The problem was an individual who rose up among the disciples because he loved to be first, and subsequently, was seeking to establish an autonomous group under his control. Once he had arisen among the disciples, he took control. His control over the disciples was to the extent that he threatened to kick people out of the fellowship of his group if they did not conform to his dictates (See 3 Jn). Some Diotrephetic lords do not make a public announcement of kicking out their opposition. For example, in this case they simply refrained from associating with John and Gaius.

When the apostle John wrote to correct the problem that faced Gaius and the body, he dealt with the individual who was causing the problem. He did not resort to organizational structures in order to help Gaius deal with the problem of autocratic leadership. When all the members of the body submit to the lordship of King Jesus, there is no need for any organizational authority to be constructed to which the members must conform. When all members submit to the one Lord who is head over all things, then the body is organized to function.

The seriousness of the Diotrephetic situation was that the organic function of the body in evangelism was disrupted by autocratic control. We do not know the location where Gaius lived, or whether Diotrophes had taken control over one group of disciples or several groups in the region where he lived. What we do know is that he disrupted the discipleship of Gaius and those Diotrophes threatened to excommunicate from the body.

Gaius was functioning well as a body member. He was financially re-

ceiving and sending out evangelists (3 Jn 5,6). These evangelists were moving among the churches, preaching the gospel to the unbelieving Gentiles (3 Jn 6). Gaius, as all Christians, was obligated to support these evangelists because they went forth for the name of Jesus (3 Jn 7). The evangelists who went forth did not take contributions from the unbelievers, and thus, to be fellow workers for the truth, these evangelists were to be supported by the senders (3 Jn 6-8; see Rm 10:15). This was God's system of organic function of the body in order to preach the gospel to the world.

Diotrephes hindered the organic function of the body to evangelize the world. He did not receive and support the evangelists himself. He did not stop at this. He also threatened others not to receive and support them (3 Jn 10). When such people disrupted the organic function of the body to evangelize the world, then they are in serious trouble. And such was Diotrephes, for a Christ-sent apostle was coming his way (See At 5:1-11; 13:8-11).

### **E. The puffed up problem:**

When dealing with problems of dysfunctional leadership in the organic body, our task is to deal with those individuals who are causing the problem. Individuals cause problems of autocratic leadership, and it is individuals with whom the body must deal to correct the dysfunction.

We do not correct autocratic individuals by resorting to some self-imposed system of organization among ourselves. Autocratic individuals **are not** contravening church organization. They are stealing from the lordship of the Chief Shepherd. The body functioned just fine in Judea for two decades after its beginning in A.D. 30. From there, the body grew into areas where there were particular problems in reference to leadership. For example, in Corinth, after the first five years of existence of the body, certain individuals became puffed up and took advantage of the innocence of the sheep of God. It was in situations as this that the Holy Spirit moved the hand of men as Paul to write corrections.

The personality problem that set the stage for the arrogant leaders in Corinth who set themselves against Paul, was that they suffered from pride. They were arrogant and puffed up. Paul wrote, "*Now some are arrogant, as though I would not come to you*" (1 Co 4:18). In this situation, a

Christ-sent apostle was coming to them with judgment from God. “*But I will come to you shortly, if the Lord wills. And I will know, not the speech of those who are arrogant, but the power*” (1 Co 4:19). And when it came to power from God, these puffed up leaders had no power. However, they would suffer the power of God through a Christ-sent apostle, for Paul said that he was coming with the rod. “*I write to those who have sinned before, and to all the rest, that if I come again, I will not spare*” (2 Co 13:2). He would be bringing the “rod” (1 Co 4:21).

Paul was coming with more than a hard sermon. He meant the same as his dealings with Hymenaeus and Alexander, “*whom I [Paul] have delivered to Satan so that they might learn not to blaspheme*” (1 Tm 1:20). Ungodly people died before a Christ-sent apostle (See At 5:1-11). Others were struck blind (At 13:10,11). In correcting dysfunctions in leadership, Paul went right to the problem. He dealt with the individuals who were causing the problem in Corinth. The New Testament does not beat up on the church for the problem of dysfunctional leaders. Fear is struck in the hearts of those who would infringe on the lordship of Jesus.

Some who have zeal to lead often have difficulty leading with a spirit of servanthood. We have found that this is a common problem with young Christians who seek to be leaders. Diotrephes was possibly an older person, but probably young in the faith. It may have been that the disciples laid hands on him too hastily (See 1 Tm 5:22). Whatever the case, he played a dominant role among the disciples, and thus, was doing that which was evil (3 Jn 11). When individuals dominate the sheep of God as lords, they are wrong. They are doing evil.

It is interesting to note the behavior of two leading men among the disciples in the early days of the body life in Jerusalem. Luke wrote of Barsabbas and Silas, that they were “*leading men among the brethren*” (At 15:22). Though they were leading men among the disciples in Jerusalem, they did not assert their leadership in a dominant and arrogant manner. This was brought out during the meeting of the disciples in Jerusalem that Luke recorded in Acts 15. During the meeting, only Paul, Peter, Barnabas and James spoke. Barsabbas and Silas simply played a submissive role as good servant leaders. They did not crave to be seated in the “chief seats” (See Mt 23:6).

## **F. The dysfunctional fellowship problem:**

Whenever there is a dysfunction in leadership in the fellowship of the organic body that is caused by either erroneous behavior or beliefs that are contrary to fundamental teachings, then those who participate in the dysfunction are in trouble. Peter would know this.

When Peter went to the Gentile church in Antioch of Syria, he functioned well with the Gentile brothers by joining with them in fellowship and food (Gl 2:12). We could understand why he participated in the organic function of the body in the love feasts because he was the first apostle that God led into a Gentile house (At 10,11). But in Antioch, his participation in the organic fellowship of the one body became dysfunctional. It became dysfunctional to the point that Paul stated that “*he stood condemned*” (Gl 2:11). He stood condemned because he allowed visiting Jewish brethren from Jerusalem to intimidate him into behaving dysfunctionally in reference to fellowshipping the Gentile brothers. He “*withdrew and separated himself*” (Gl 2:12).

Whenever brethren withdraw and separate themselves from other faithful brethren, then they stand condemned. Peter’s withdrawal and separation was based on an unjustified fear of “*those who were of the circumcision*” (Gl 2:12). The other Jews and Barnabas were also drawn away into this dysfunctional relationship with the Gentile brothers. They thus failed to be “*straightforward about the truth of the gospel*” (Gl 2:14).

We have witnessed that when people are driven by their appreciation for the grace of God, they work more abundantly (See 1 Co 15:10; 2 Co 4:15). They are not tied up in complex organizations and programs of men. They simply seek to serve out of a spirit appreciation for the grace of God. Therefore, what does work in the lives of thankful disciples is a grace-driven person who seeks to organize for work. There are no chiefs among grace-driven disciples. The organic body is the “team” and the team leader is Jesus.

No person in the New Testament brings out this point better than Paul. When he was a strict Jew working under the organization of law, he performed well. No one could argue with his performance under law (See Ph 3:1-11). But this all changed when he was freed from the structure of legal

religiosity. Legal performance under organization will produce results. But freedom under grace will produce everlasting results. This was Paul's conclusion:

*But by the grace of God I am what I am. And His grace toward me was not in vain, but **I labored more abundantly than they all, yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me** (1 Co 15:10).*

Grace-driven leaders have a difficult time being lords over the sheep. They understand so well that grace was revealed to them by a humble Servant on the cross (Ph 2:5-11). They understand grace to the point that they feel no desire to stand between the sheep and the Chief Shepherd. Grace-driven leaders seek to serve, not to lord.

## **Chapter 15**

### **ALL AS ONE IN ROME**

The Holy Spirit's letters to the disciples in Rome and Achaia dealt with the oneness of the body in any city or region in which disciples lived. We are careful about using the word "city," for in the Roman times there were no "city limits" that marked whether one was in an urban or rural zoning, as is typical of cities today. For example, Cenchrea was the harbor city of Corinth (Rm 16:1), but it was about seven kilometers south of the center of the populated area of the city. So when the word "city" is used in the New Testament, one must always include the regions around the primary population centers.

#### **A. One body of many assemblies in Rome:**

Paul addressed the letter of Romans "*to all who are beloved of God in Rome*" (Rm 1:7). Now who were these "beloved"? Were they those who were of one assembly in Rome, or were they all the saints in all the region of Rome who were meeting on Sunday in different house assemblies throughout Rome? To answer this questions, we go first to chapter 16.

In Romans 16 Paul sent his greetings to many people and groups in the area of Rome, and evidently, to those in the regions around Rome. He began by sending greetings to Priscilla and Aquila (Rm 16:3). There was an assembly of disciples (church) that was meeting in their house in Rome (Rm 16:5). He then moved on in his greetings to other individuals and house assemblies in Rome who were not of the house assembly of Priscilla and Aquila. These were those who were of the households of other disciples. *“Greet those who are of Aristobulus’ household”* (Rm 16:10). *“Greet those who are of the household of Narcissus”* (Rm 16:11). *“Greet Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermas, Patrobas, Hermes, and **the brethren who are with them**”* (Rm 16:14). There were other brethren who were fellowshipping in assembly with these five brethren.

Paul then moved on to mention other individuals *“and all the saints **who are with them**”* (Rm 16:15). In other words, the whole church in the area of Rome was composed of many members of the body who were assembling in several homes of the saints throughout the region. This multiple-assembly understanding of the church was brought out by Paul in verse 23 in reference to Gaius, with whom he was staying at the time he wrote the letter. *“Gaius my host, and host of **the whole church**, greets you.”* We must not assume that all the saints in the area of Gaius met in the house of Gaius. Our understanding of John’s statement must rest in the fact that Gaius was hospitable to every saint that came his way (See 3 Jn).

So when we speak of the whole church in Rome, we are not speaking of independent assemblies, but all the members of the organic body in the area of Rome (Rm 1:7). It is in this context that Paul cautions us about starting our own group to the exclusion of others.

*Now I urge you, brethren, mark those who cause divisions and offenses contrary to the teaching you have learned, and turn away from them. For they who are such serve not our Lord Christ but their own belly, **and by appealing words and flattering speech deceive the hearts of the innocent** (Rm 16:17,18).*

In the context of Romans 16, it is clear that Paul is specifically teaching against groups that would declare their autonomy from other groups of dis-

ciples, which groups would be based on favorite opinions or legal systems of belief and behavior. These groups would often be led by those who serve their “own belly.” (It may be that in the metaphor “belly” Paul wanted his readers to reflect on what he had previously written in chapter 14.)

We have found it somewhat amusing that those who accuse others of dividing the church because they do not conform to the traditions of the fathers, quote Romans 16:17,18 with the reverse meaning than what Paul was emphasizing in the context. **Paul was arguing against forming autonomous groups of disciples** that were led by individuals, who with smooth and fair speech, beguiled the hearts of the innocent.

Those who teach the theology of autonomy need to remember this. We must be careful not to be hypocritical when leading an autonomous group of disciples that we at the same time condemn those who supposedly lead the church in a restoration of unity among all those who live in the same region. Nevertheless, we have found that those who are secluded into autonomous groups have a difficult time understanding the universal fellowship of the one body of Christ.

Sometimes our independent thinking is revealed in our terminology and use of the Scriptures. When one is independent in thinking, he will often seek to steal away the freedom of the disciples who are free in Christ as members of the universal body of Christ. In the context of Romans 16, Paul was warning against being tethered to any specific independent group, lest in being so aligned one would be distanced from other brothers and sisters who were living in the same city. There is more in the commonly heard statement, “place membership,” than simply letting the other disciples in town know that you are there.

If there were a statement that taught against groups of disciples declaring their independence from one another, it would be Romans 14:7: **“For none of us lives to himself and none of us dies to himself.”** As brothers and sisters in Christ, we are our brother’s keeper. If our brother across the street falls victim to ill fortune, but on Sunday sits in an assembly at a different location than we do, we are still responsible to help this brother. Simply because disciples sit on benches at different locations on Sunday morning does not give them the right to ignore one another in times of need. We wonder what Paul would have written of the Gentile brethren who were

meeting in different places when there was a famine among the Jewish brethren in Judea, but did nothing about giving to the famine victims?

Paul's statement in Romans 14 was made in reference to individuals, not groups. In the context of Romans 14, there was a division between individual disciples who associated the eating of meats with idol worship, and those who had long grown out of such associations, knowing that God created all meats to be eaten. So there could have existed among all the disciples of Rome the "Vegetarian Church" and the "Meat Church." In both cases, brethren were thinking about their "own belly." They had forgotten that "*the kingdom of God is not meat and drink*" (Rm 14:17).

The "vegetarian" and "meat" brethren were causing the division over their differences. Particularly, the vegetarians were legally binding where God had not bound. They taught that all disciples should abstain from eating all meats. Paul's exhortation to the mature brethren, who knew that all things could be eaten, was that they must walk in love until the vegetarian brethren grew out of their scruples concerning the eating of meat. Lest there be a division, everyone needed to remember that they were all one body. "*For he who in this thing serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men*" (Rm 14:18). "*Therefore,*" Paul wrote, "*let us follow after the things that make for peace*" (Rm 14:19).

This brings us to Paul's final statements to all the members of the one body that were scattered through the city of Rome. He was not addressing any specific independent group, but all the saints who were meeting in homes through Rome (Rm 1:7).

*Now the God of patience and encouragement grant you to be of the same mind toward one another according to Christ Jesus, so that you may with one mind and one mouth glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ* (Rm 15:5,6).

Paul did not address this statement to a single assembly of disciples. **The statement was addressed to all the disciples in Rome who were meeting at many different locations for their Sunday assemblies.** Paul's focus was not on some organized group of disciples on main street in Rome. His address was to individual saints. Therefore, the individual mem-

bers of the body in the city must never behave in a way that they are divided from one another because they could not sit together on Sunday morning. “Therefore, accept one another as Christ also accepted you to the glory of God” (Rm 15:7).

(As with the book of Romans, one should read the other New Testament letters with the understanding that the letters were addressed to saints as individuals, and not to autonomous groups that were independent from one another.)

## B. The one body of many assemblies in Corinth:

In their independent denominationalism it seems that some Achaia disciples had progressed to the point of having little consideration for one another. Paul began the 1 Corinthian letter by identifying the saints in the region: “to the **church** of God that is at Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be **saints**” (1 Co 1:2). It was still the church, singular, but saints, plural.

But in the second letter Paul identified the totality of all those to whom he was addressing in the first letter. In the second letter to the Corinthians he was more specific concerning those he was correcting in the first letter. Both letters are tied together to be to the same people because the second letter is a follow-up exhortation concerning what was written in the first letter. The second letter, however, was “to the church of God that is at Corinth, with all the saints who are **in all** [the province of] **Achaia**” (2 Co 1:1).

In 2 Corinthians it is also indicated that he had personally preached throughout all the province of Achaia. “As the truth of Christ is in me, no one will stop me from this boasting **in the regions of Achaia**” (2 Co 11:10). There were members in Corinth, but from what Paul states in the second letter, we come to the conclusion that the first letter was also directed to “all the saints” who were in “all Achaia.” Since this is true, then the love-feast/Supper problems in 1 Corinthians 11 could have been the periodic gatherings of all the saints in all Achaia who came together for the fellowship event, where they were to be reminded that the eating of the one bread “was the fellowship of the body of Christ” (1 Co 10:16). This better explains Paul’s statement in 1 Corinthians 11:18: “When you come

together in assembly, I hear that there are divisions among you.” The partisan dysfunction was manifested when everyone of Achaia came together for the periodic and regional love feast/Supper meeting. Their coming together in one place for the love feast/Supper was the occasion where their organic dysfunction was manifested. In an environment of dysfunctional fellowship, it was not possible for them to eat the Supper that was to promote unity of the one body in Achaia (1 Co 11:19,20).

In both letters Paul was not addressing any particular autonomous assembly of “all the saints” in all Achaia. This must be clearly understood in order to understand both the context of the assemblies of the early saints, and also the message of the letters written to them. There were many members of the body around Corinth and Rome, but only one universal body of which all disciples were members. We must never assume that all the saints of the one body had to be assembled on Sunday morning at the same place in order that the singular term “church” be used. If we do this, then we are reading our present-day scenario of denominational division into the one body of Christ.

In the Corinthian letter Paul went straight to the point. Some of the saints in Achaia had already divided. Contrary to the impending division that threatened the disciples in Rome who would be tempted to be divided by those who spoke with smooth and fair speech, the saints “in all Achaia” divided over personalities. “*Now I say this, that each one of you says, ‘I am of Paul,’ and ‘I am of Apollos,’ and ‘I am of Cephas,’ and ‘I am of Christ.’*” (1 Co 1:12). So among some of the saints of Achaia there was a sectarian behavior of disciples according to the particular personality they were inclined to follow.

It may have been that Apollos and Cephas (Peter) went to surrounding towns of Achaia when they preached in the area. When different groups arose from their preaching, the members of those groups naturally gravitated to their “father in the faith” (See 1 Co 4:15). They thus called themselves after their favorite preacher, which carnal nature manifested itself when they came together for their periodic celebrations of the love feast/Lord’s Supper assembly.

Paul’s answer to their declaration of independence from one another that was based on personalities was simple: “*Is Christ divided?*” (1 Co 1:13). Everyone would have certainly responded to this question by declar-

ing that Christ is not divided. If we would answer this question in this way, then there can be no divisions among the members of the one body in any region that is caused by loyalty to different personalities. In fact, there can be no divisions of the body though they must meet at different places at the same time. All the disciples are still the one organic body of Christ regardless of where they meet.

Before he addressed the problem of denominational division among those of the one body, Paul made the well-known statement of 1 Corinthians 1:10:

*Now I urge you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment.*

In knowing that the disciples in Corinth met throughout the region of Corinth in different houses, what would we conclude he meant in the above statement? The answer is obvious. Though out of necessity the members of the one organic body had to meet at different places, **where they met was no excuse for not being of the same mind and speaking the same thing, and thus being perfectly joined together by what each part of the body supplied.** Where the disciples had to meet did not automatically divide them into different autonomous groups. If it did, then they might be inclined to prohibit teachers from coming to minister the word of God to every group, which was the case in the group that was dominated by Diotrefes (3 Jn). All the saints in all Achaia were one body. There were a great deal of dysfunctions among them, but they were still the one body *“being fitted and held together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working of each part”* (Ep 4:16).

It would be historically out of context to think that the letter of 1 Corinthians was written to a specific independent group of disciples who were meeting together at the same location. This is not what we conclude from reading these two correctional letters (1 & 2 Co), for the letters applied to every saint in Achaia who needed correction concerning the organic dysfunctions that they were experiencing and about which Paul wrote.

## Chapter 16

### ORGANIC FUNCTION OF GIFTED PARTS

Those who have read well the New Testament letters that were written to the saints throughout the Roman Empire come to some common conclusions. The letters were not directed to the elders of the church as if they were a synod of ruling authorities over individual autonomous groups. The letters were not addressed to independent groups, but the saints of an entire region. And most important, the letters were written to address dysfunctions in the relationships that individual members of the universal body of Christ had with one another and Christ as they encountered one another on a daily basis. We have the documents of the New Testament, therefore, because the early disciples were struggling out of the religious environment of the day into the light of the gospel of Jesus Christ. This was not an easy journey. It was fraught with struggle, as the letters of the New Testament reveal.

#### A. Romans 12:

Of many contexts of Scripture that could be sited on this point, Romans 12 is probably one of the easiest to see the organic function of the members of the body in Rome as they struggled to live as Christ. We know that the disciples were meeting in small groups throughout the region of the city of Rome. But where the members sat on Sunday did not inherently divide them into autonomous groups that were independent from one another. They were all members of the one universal body of Christ. We must see if this is not the case as we work through Romans 12.

**1. Different functions of the many:** “*For as we have many members in one body, and all members do not have the same function ...*” (Rm 12:4). This reminds us of Paul’s revelation in Ephesians 4:16. All the members of the one universal body, many of whom were in Rome, did not have the same gifts. But “*the whole body being fitted and held together by what every joint supplies*” functions to cause growth (Ep 4:16). Paul is

not talking about one group in Rome that was dysfunctional. He addressed all the saints in Rome (Rm 1:7).

**2. Many members, but one body:** “*So we, being many, are one body in Christ, and everyone members one of another*” (Rm 12:5). What constitutes the body are the members, who are many. “*For as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the one body, though they are many, are one body, so also is Christ*” (1 Co 12:12). We cannot continually read passages as this that speak of one body, and yet come up with the teaching that the members have the right to huddle up into autonomous groups that are independent of one another. When we read the New Testament of our Lord Jesus, the fact that He is the one Head of the one body is very clear.

**3. Gifts for everyone:** “*Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us ...*” (Rm 12:6). “*And He gave some to be apostles, and some prophets, and some evangelists, and some shepherds and teachers for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ*” (Ep 4:11,12). Paul mentions other gifts in the Romans 12 context. But all the gifts are for ministry, specifically for the ministry of the word of God. Therefore, this assumes that when one who had the gift of teaching went to another group of disciples across town, he had the responsibility to exercise his gift for the “*edifying of the body of Christ.*” Therefore, this does not mean that each of these gifts must be exercised only within each supposedly autonomous assembly. We assume that in every region where there were disciples there were those who had some of the gifts that Paul mentioned in both Romans 12 and 1 Corinthians 12.

Later in his life, the apostle Peter was designated a shepherd of the body because he was gifted by God to be a shepherd/teacher (See 1 Pt 5:1). He wrote to the “*sojourners of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia*” (1 Pt 1:1). He said that he was a “fellow elder” with those elders in these regions (1 Pt 5:1). Does this mean that if he were traveling through either of the preceding regions that he ceased having his gift of shepherd/teaching?

Now those who would claim that the elders can steal some of the authority of Jesus (see Mt 28:18), would also assert that Peter would have no “authority” in the regions to which he wrote. However, these folks have

missed the point of shepherding being a gift given, not authority that is assumed. Is this not what Paul wrote in Ephesians 4:11, “*He gave some to be ... shepherds and teachers*”? God was not parcelling out authority when He gave some to be apostles, prophets, evangelists and shepherd/teachers. He was giving gifts of ministry of the word for the “*edifying of the body of Christ*” (Ep 4:12). If one thinks that the giving of the gifts come with authority, then he is in trouble (See Mk 10:35-45). Gifts refer to responsibility given, not authority assumed.

The gifts were given for body function, not to claim formal positions. Notice how Paul continues in Romans 12:

*Let love be without hypocrisy ... be kindly affectionate to one another with brotherly love, in honor preferring one another ... contributing to the needs of the saints, given to hospitality ... rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep.* (Rm 12:10-15).

These statements refer to the function of the organic body as members use their gifts of ministry for the edifying of the body of Christ.

## **B. 1 Corinthians 12:**

We have the context of 1 Corinthians 12 because of the dysfunction of the body in Achaia. Therefore, we must keep in mind that when we are studying through this text that Paul is writing to all the disciples in Achaia who are having some struggles among themselves in reference to their behavior (See 1 Co 1:2; 2 Co 1:1). The dysfunction of the body in Achaia was manifested in the efforts of some to move toward being independent from one another as the whole body of Christ in the region of Achaia. Specifically, some were denominating themselves by being loyal to different personalities (See 1 Co 1:12).

This classic correction of 1 Corinthians 12 of the one organic body in a region of multiple assemblies is one of the greatest arguments against groups of disciples declaring their independence from one another. It is a picture of the universal function of the organic body as each gifted part plays its part in building up the body in any region of the world.

**1. Many members, but one body:** “For as the body [throughout the world] is one and has many members, and all the members of the one body, though they are many, are one body” (1 Co 12:12). All who have obeyed the gospel in baptism, have been baptized into the one universal body of Christ. We are not baptized into the membership of a local church, but into the one universal body. God adds us to His people throughout the world (See At 2:47). And because we have been baptized into the body (Gl 3:26,27), we have the responsibility to function with and for the growth of the body. The fact that the body is one means that no one member has a right to function autonomously from any other member (part) of the body.

**2. Organic function:** “If the foot says, ‘Because I am not the hand, I am not of the body,’ is it therefore not of the body?” (1 Co 12:15). The answer to the question is “no.” No one member of the body has the right to disconnect from the whole body. **Since this is true of each part of the body, then certainly no group of members can declare their separation from the whole body.** Simply because there are a number of “feet” meeting at the same place on Sunday does not give these “feet” the right to declare their independence from the rest of the body. The reason this cannot happen is that an assembly of only “feet” would be a monstrosity. Paul’s argument is that the connectivity of all the parts is necessary in order for the body to function organically as a normal body. “If the whole body were an eye, where would be the hearing?” (1 Co 12:17).

Organic function is based on all the parts of the body, wherever they are and whatever they are gifted to be. They must function as connected parts of the body throughout the world. For example, there was the need for teachers in the body in Antioch when the members were new in the faith (At 11:19-22). “Then news of these things [in Antioch] came to the ears of the church that was in Jerusalem. And they sent Barnabas off to Antioch” (At 11:22). This was the body in both Antioch and Jerusalem functioning as one body. There was a teacher in Jerusalem, which teacher needed to be sent to Antioch.

Assemblies of the body do not assume that each assembly has all the parts that are required for a functioning body. Our erroneous understanding that assemblies constitute all the functioning parts of the body is revealed in

the fact that those who are gifted with being shepherd/teachers (Ep 4:11) are often not found in most of the independent assemblies of the body throughout the world. But the fact that there were gifted shepherds who were fellow shepherds throughout the region of Achaia (See 1 Pt 5:1,2), means that all the parts of the body could be *“fitted and held together by what every joint supplies”* throughout all Achaia or wherever the shepherd/teachers visited the sheep (Ep 4:16).

Where the shepherd/teachers regularly sat on a pew on Sunday did not validate them to be shepherd/teachers for the whole church. If a shepherd decided to teach across town in another assembly, where he did not regularly sit on a pew, would this mean that he ceased to have the responsibility of teacher during that “assembly hour” when he was not at his “home church”? We must understand that shepherding does not take place on Sunday only with the shepherd teaching a Bible class. The New Testament does not speak of any spectator shepherds. These are 24-7 servants who teach and counsel wherever they are. They are shepherds for everyone with whom they come into contact.

We must remember that *“God has set the members, each one of them in the body, just as He has desired”* (1 Co 12:18). God diversified the body by gifting the members differently. *“He gave some to be apostles, and some prophets, and some evangelists and some shepherds and teachers”* (Ep 4:11). We must remember Romans 12:4: *“For as we have many members in one body, and all members do not have the same function.”* The members of the body have been gifted differently *“according to the grace that is given to us”* (Rm 12:6). Those who assume that Paul is here talking about a local single assembly of the body, will have some difficulty with what he says. They will have difficulty in explaining why a group of two or three who are gathered together in the name of the Lord do not have all the gifts about which he speaks in 1 Corinthians 12 and Romans 12. If the two or three meet in a home across the street from a shepherd who drives to the “downtown church” in order to sit on a pew, then the two or three disciples are without the function of a shepherd.

In 1 Corinthians 12 Paul is discussing the whole universal body of Christ. In the first century, he is explaining how the universal body functioned in order to nurture the needs of the whole body. When teachers were needed

to correct a lack of teaching in one area of the body, teachers were sent. When the body needed the ministry of shepherds, shepherds did their work of shepherding. The belief that the body is broken up into autonomous groups that are independent from one another just does not fit the Holy Spirit's description of the organic function of the body in 1 Corinthians 12 and Romans 12.

**3. Harmonious functionality:** If there is an “eye” in one assembly in a region where the body exists, that “eye” cannot say to the “hand” in another assembly of the body in the same region, *“I have no need of you”* (1 Co 12:21). If this would happen, then those parts of the body that needed help from the “eye” would be neglected.

The “feeble members” are necessary for body function because they offer the opportunity for the ministry of the strong. What happened in Jerusalem with the neglected widows was that the parts of the body that had the supplies to minister to the Greek widows held back their supplies because some parts of the body separated themselves from their responsibility to take care of the Grecian widows. The gift of administration was stifled because some had separated themselves from other parts of the body.

In the following words Paul explained the organic function of the body: *“And those members of the body whom we think to be less honorable, on these we bestow more abundant honor, and our less presentable parts have more abundant presentation”* (1 Co 12:23). What a beautiful picture! Therefore, *“if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it”* (1 Co 12:26). Organic means that no part of the body is neglected. Ministry is stifled when a group of disciples declare their independence from any of the members.

**4. Mutual ministry:** Though the body is one and universal, it is composed of individuals whom God gifted with ministry (1 Co 12:27,28). There are numerous gifts, but we would not for a moment assume that all these gifted individuals would be held up at the same place. If the organic behavior of the body in Judea is any commentary on 1 Corinthians 12, then at least we know how the organic body functioned with the gifted teachers. When there was a need for teaching in Antioch, parts of the body in Judea sent Barnabas to teach the new disciples. Barnabas then realized that the need was too great for him alone, so he went into Cilicia and found Paul.

These two taught for a whole year in Antioch, but they too realized that the opportunity was too great for them. The members of the body in Judea, therefore, sent a team of teaching prophets to Syria in order to continue the spiritual nurturing of the parts of the body in the region of Antioch. This is the organic body functioning universally with all those who have special gifts that bring nurturing to the whole body.

### C. 1 Corinthians 14:

Since the body is organic as the individual members function daily as living sacrifices (Rm 12:1), then we would certainly be correct to conclude that the members should reflect their organic behavior when they came together in assembly. However, when the Achaian disciples came together, they created a dysfunctional assembly because of pride and disrespect. Their assembly was so dysfunctional that it was not possible for them to partake of the Lord's Supper. They could not because they harbored ungodly sectarian attitudes, some even being drunken on the occasion of their coming together (1 Co 11:17-20).

In 1 Corinthians 11, Paul corrected the Achaians' dysfunction specifically around the Lord's Supper. In 1 Corinthians 14, he corrected their organic dysfunction in their assembly for the love feast/Lord's Supper. His statements of correction reveal the organic function that should be characteristic of all members when they come together in assembly.

**1. Pursue love: Love is an organic word, and thus, when love is expressed among disciples in assembly, then there must be organic function in the assembly** (1 Co 14:1). According to John's definition of love, the participatory assemblies of the disciples must manifest a loving behavior in the assembly as all members relationally function with one another. "*Let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth*" (1 Jn 3:18).

**2. Edification ... exhortation ... comfort:** In the context of 1 Corinthians 14, there was a particular dysfunction in reference to their use of the gifts of languages and prophecy. The gifts of languages and interpretation were functional gifts in that everyone in the assembly could have the oppor-

tunity to understand what was being said by those who were gifted with either languages or interpretation. However, love for everyone was expressed only when everyone in the assembly understood what was being taught through either languages or prophecy (1 Co 14:4,5). If there were no interpreter present, then the one who spoke in a language could not be understood by everyone present. He must therefore be silent. If the one speaking in an unknown language functioned with an interpreter, then he was functioning out of love for all the people. If the one who was speaking in a language did not cease to speak in the absence of an interpreter, then he was functioning selfishly and arrogantly, and not in love for those who could not understand.

**3. For everyone:** Paul wrote, “*I wish that you all spoke in languages*” (1 Co 14:5). The assumption is that not everyone in the assembly could speak in languages. But, the assembly was of a nature that would provide each member with the opportunity to use the gift of languages if he was so gifted. Their assemblies were not one-man bands. They were not one-man audience oriented. They were participatory. However, Paul’s correction was that only one speak at a time in a language, and then, only if an interpreter were present (1 Co 14:13-17). If no interpreter were present, then Paul instructed that the one speaking in a language could not function organically in the assembly (1 Co 14:19). To speak a language without an interpreter present would not be walking in love (1 Co 14:17).

**4. Be mature:** The assembly of the organic body must manifest spiritual maturity (1 Co 14:20). Children behave disorderly, but mature Christians behave themselves with sobriety. In their dysfunction in assembly, the Corinthians were behaving as children.

**5. Every one:** Paul’s correction of their dysfunctional assemblies began by assuming that every attending member could come to the assembly with a gift that would edify, exhort or comfort (1 Co 14:26). “*If anyone speaks in a language, let it be by two, or at the most by three, and each in turn, and let one interpret*” (1 Co 14:27). If no interpreters were present, then those who would be speaking languages must be quiet (1 Co 14:27-29). If one receives a revelation while sitting, then he must be given the opportunity to speak (1 Co 14:30). Each one must present their teaching in an orderly manner by speaking one by one (1 Co 14:31). This orderly

conduct must manifest the nature of an orderly body life among the members (1 Co 14:33).

In order to correct the dysfunction that was happening in their area wide assemblies, the women must remain in silence in reference to speaking in either teaching or prophecy (1 Co 14:34). They were not allowed to speak in prophecy or languages in a manner where they would assume a dominant role in expressing their gifts. Only the men were to be in such a position in the area wide assembly in Achaia when using their gifts of either languages or prophecy (1 Co 14:34; see 1 Tm 2:12). In everything that transpired during the assembly, the final correction would be, “*Let all things be done properly and in order*” (1 Co 14:40).

(In order to understand the nature of the unique Corinthian assembly about which Paul spoke in 1 Corinthians 12, please download Book 39 of the Biblical Research Library, *Fellowship At The Table*, chapters 8 & 9. Go to [www.africainternational.org](http://www.africainternational.org), in order to download the book. These two chapters deal specifically with the fact that the assembly about which Paul addressed corrections was an occasional meeting that was held during the Isthmian Games that were conducted in the city of Corinth. This was an opportunity for the disciples of the province of Achaia to come together in one place in order to evangelistically reach out to those athletes who attended the games. In other words, Paul’s corrections in the context of 1 Corinthians 12 were not directed to the weekly assemblies of the members who met in the small groups of their homes.)

The early disciples functioned as the body in their relationships as they encountered one another every day. But this was also a universal function, for when parts of the body were suffering famine somewhere in the world, those who had supplies sent to their brothers who were suffering from the famine. When teaching was needed among new converts, teachers were sent to teach. The instructions in reference to the function of the body of members in the New Testament were directed to the whole body that ministers to itself. When Paul said “*be of the same mind toward one another,*” his instructions were not limited to a particular group of disciples. They were instructions to all the saints in all the world in order that the global church organically function as one body.

## Chapter 17

### THE GUARANTEE OF FREEDOM

The key biblical teaching that keeps the organic body free from autocratic leaders and synods that would bring the sheep of God into bondage is the freedom by which Christ has set us free. When discussing the concept of freedom in Christ, we have often failed to teach that there is more to freedom than freedom from sin. When one is set free in Christ, he is also set free from anything that would bring him into a bondage that would in any way hinder his relationship with Christ. When the body is brought into bondage by either human religious traditions or autocratic leadership, whether local or international, then the true organic function of the body is hindered. The life of Paul is a testimony to this truth when he compared his former life under the restrictive legal religiosity under Judaism with his freedom he enjoyed in Christ. When he compared his former religious behavior under law with this life under grace, he simply wrote, *“By the grace of God I am what I am. And His grace toward me was not in vain, but I labored more abundantly”* (1 Co 15:10; see 2 Co 4:15).

Particularly in the writings of Paul we discover that our freedom involves freedom from the bondage of legal religiosity. In Paul’s discussions of freedom from legal religiosity, he goes beyond the practice of making the law a legal code by which one would seek to self-justify himself before God. He speaks of any law or tradition that we might impose on ourselves in order to bring ourselves and others into the bondage of religion. Specifically, he spoke of anyone who might dictate laws or traditions that must be followed, and by doing such, create a sect of all those who would conform to the wishes of a dominant leader or synod of leaders.

#### **A. Guarded freedom:**

It is the responsibility of leaders to guard the freedom of the sheep. Embedded in Paul’s final words to the Ephesian elders is this responsibility. *“For I know this, that after my departure grievous wolves will enter in among you, not sparing the flock”* (At 20:29). Grievous wolves were

coming. It was the responsibility of the shepherd/teachers of the flock to guard the sheep so that they not be brought into bondage of the wolves.

The men who would arise as grievous wolves would be self-oriented, and often self-ordained. Paul continued to explain in Acts 20:30: “*Also from your own selves will men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves.*” Paul’s exhortation to the Ephesian elders was based on the nature of what some of the sheep would eventually do in reference to false teaching. Timothy worked in the area of Ephesus, and to him Paul wrote,

*For the time will come when they will not endure sound teaching. But to suit their itching ears, they will surround themselves with teachers who will agree with their own desires. And they will turn away their ears from the truth and will be turned to fables (2 Tm 4:3,4).*

The sheep are of the nature to follow. And if the sheep lose their love of the word of God, then they become the opportunity for autocratic teachers to lead them away after themselves. We live in a world where few religious people have any love for the truth of the gospel (See 2 Th 2:10-12). These are those who are ripe for the delusion of “pastors” who would rise up in order to draw away those who have itching ears to hear the music of misguided religiosity.

God knew the fickleness of people. He knew that this desire to investigate some new thing was in the nature of a free-moral person who would seek to venture into philosophies and theologies that would lead them from the truth of the gospel. For this reason, He embedded within the leaders of the disciples checks and balances. With evangelists, there was the check and balance of preaching only the gospel message (Rm 1:16) and the word of God (2 Tm 4:2). With teachers of the word of God, they were given the mandate to speak the oracles of God (1 Pt 4:11). With those shepherds who would remain in one area, God set a plurality of men to oversee the flock in reference to teaching the word of God. There should be a plurality of shepherds (pastors) in the church of every city for the purpose that the elders can check one another in reference to their teaching (At 14:23; Ti 1:5).

Shepherds are given the responsibility to oversee. They are men who are gifted with leadership ability (See Ep 4:11). Now suppose there was only one shepherd (pastor) among a group of disciples. Would not the scenario of Diotrephetic leadership arise if there were no checks and balances of the plurality of elders in place to guard against such?

Lording over the flock happens when the plurality of men do not keep one another in the position of servants to the flock of God (See 1 Pt 5:1-5). If leaders who are gifted to lead are not guarded by a plurality of fellow leaders, then it would only be natural for one person to rise up and take control of the sheep. The lack of accountability to a plurality of leaders may have been the opportunity to take control of the church in the vicinity of Gaius (See 3 Jn).

## **B. Free to grow:**

Legal religiosity, either in reference to God's law or the laws of religious people, always hinders the organic function of the body. On the other hand, free men always "labor more abundantly" than those who labor under law (1 Co 15:10). They always allow the grace of God to cause growth beyond their imagination (2 Co 4:15).

Cults produce growth. But there is no freedom while living under the strict organizational structure of a cult. Some in Colosse had evidently been involved in the bondage of cultic religiosity. They may have brought their former behavior in idolatrous cults into their behavior as members of the body of Christ. At least this was the setting for what Paul wrote in Colossians 2:14: "***Wiping out the handwriting of ordinances that was against us, which was contrary to us. And He took it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross.***" The "handwriting of ordinances" about which Paul wrote was more than the Sinai law. His statement was also in reference to any system of ordinances that people might impose on other people in order to lead someone captive into the bondage of religious behavior.

Men bring men into bondage through dictates that are bound on the minds of the innocent. Sometimes the dictates are written, and subsequently, they become a legal code of "handwritten ordinances." When such ordinances are imposed on the free, it is then that the organic function of the

body is hindered. It is hindered by those who have imposed on others their codes of belief and behavior. The group that follows the “handwritten ordinances” may grow, but it is not growing as the *ekklesia* of Christ. It is growing as a religious group of cloned people, for the adherents to the code of ordinances are promoting codes of religion, not Christ. Churches that are started and controlled by an autocratic leader do not grow beyond the control of the autocratic leader’s realm of control.

In order to build an independent church that is identified by “handwritten ordinances,” autocratic leaders recruit others to submit to their religious codes. This is exactly that about which Paul warned the Galatian brethren in Galatians 4:17: “***They zealously recruit you, but not for good. Yes, they want to exclude you so that you might be zealous for them.***” When enough people have been zealously recruited by a leader to follow a certain system of religious rites, rituals and ceremonies, then the recruiter forms an autonomous religious group that is independent from other groups who are following other creeds. He has now started his own church, which church remains autonomous from other churches because all the members have been recruited to follow the dictates of the autocratic leader. Though other groups may believe in Jesus, the autocratic leader maintains the independence of his group by marshalling everyone to the code of his beliefs and behavior. Once the group adopts the behavior of the leaders, then he has a church of recruiters. In their recruiting of more members, they ask potential members to leave other groups in order that they might “place membership” with their group.

But we must not forget what Paul said in Galatians 4:17. If an individual allows himself to be recruited to a particular code of legal doctrine that defines a unique religion, then **he has excluded himself from the fellowship of the true body of Christ that lives in freedom.** One cannot follow after the legal codes of any man and still be a functioning part of the universal body of Christ. In other words, huddling up as an autonomous group that can be identified by a unique code of doctrine that denominates oneself from the universal body. It is amazing that we unknowingly become that from which we have historically argued against for so many years. We become denominational ourselves in our behavior against denominationalism.

### C. Cry freedom:

The argument against becoming a hierarchical organization of authorities is in the very words of Paul in Galatians 5:1: “***Stand fast therefore in the freedom by which Christ has made us free, and do not be entangled again with a yoke of bondage.***”

When we maintain our freedom in Christ from the “handwritten ordinances” of men, there is no temptation to fall victim to the bondage of autocratic leaders. Freedom is not guaranteed by bringing all the parts of a body into the bondage of some organization that is controlled and maintained by the “handwritten ordinances of men.” Freedom is guaranteed when the parts claim and maintain their freedom in Christ from the bondage of man’s “handwritten ordinances.” However, those who are tempted to fall victim to the bondage of organized religion have not yet understood the freedom that they have in Christ. It is the responsibility of the whole body, therefore, to help every member to guard himself or herself from the temptation of being drawn away by the theatrical presentations of religion. We must never forget what Paul wrote in the following statement: “*These things [of religion] have indeed a show of wisdom in self-made religion and self-abasement and neglect of the body, but not in any value in restraining the indulgence of the flesh*” (Cl 2:23).

It is the responsibility of all the parts of the organic body to maintain their freedom from any part that would dictatorially impose opinions on any part of the body. It is also the responsibility of all the parts of the body to help one another to maintain their freedom in Christ. When the organic body functions in the realm of freedom, then there is no need to formulate organizational structures in order to prevent apostasy to hierarchical authorities. For freedom did Christ set us free. We are set forth to be free for the purpose of freedom. Therefore, a functioning organic body will flourish in the realm of freedom that each member enjoys in Christ. **When free men maintain their freedom, they guard themselves from lords who would lead them into captivity.**

## Chapter 18

### UNIVERSAL, NOT ECUMENICAL

We are subservient to the definitions of the words we use in normal communication. This leaves the Bible student at a disadvantage when discussing Bible subjects with those who do not know the Bible, or are simply religious. Religious people who are not familiar with the word of God can never really get on the same page in communicating Bible truths with those who know their Bibles. This is a prevailing problem when discussing restoration to Bible authority in matters of faith. Nevertheless, being on the same page of definition is crucial if we are to work ourselves out of the quagmire of the religion that is so prevalent throughout the world today.

When speaking of the universal organic body of Christ, there is invariably a great misunderstanding in the use of our terms that we use to discuss religious matters on this subject. The misunderstanding comes from a twisted concept of “Christianity” that is harbored by those who profess to be followers of Christ, but have little or no knowledge of the Bible. For example, the word “ecumenical” means universal. The body of Christ is ecumenical, **but it is not ecumenical in the sense of fostering political compromises of faith in order to promote union, instead of unity.**

Ecumenism is defined as “the practice of promoting cooperation or better understanding among **differing religious faiths**” (Webster). But this is not the ecumenical body of Christ. **We must not think for a moment that the universal body of Christ is a political agreement of “differing religious groups” that have worked out some agreement to be a union, or counsel of world religions.** On the contrary, we must keep in mind that “differing religious groups” have gone out from the universal body of Christ. They are faiths of apostasy, not faiths that are based on the word of Christ (Rm 10:17). They are as John wrote: *“They went out from us, but they were not of us, for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out so that they might be made manifest that they were not all of us”* (1 Jn 2:19).

The very fact that the word “faiths” is used in the plural reveals the truth that the adherents of each faith differs religiously. But there is no difference

in the fundamentals that establish the one faith of those who are members of the ecumenical body of Christ. Those of the universal body of Christ have believed and obeyed in baptism the same gospel.

If we seek to restore the body of Christ, but bypass the word of God as our final authority in matters of faith, then we will never realize our dream to be united. The result of men who have left the word of God in order to validate their religiosity on either feelings or traditions, has led to what we now see as a divided religious world today. And what we see in the religious world today is not one organic body, but a monstrosity of denominated bodies who are disjointed from one another, and often, in competition with one another. Only when we desire to return to the authority of the word of God will we ever have a chance of coming to a unity of the faith that is based on the one gospel (Ep 4:3). Bringing different faiths together under the umbrella of an ecumenical hierarchy of authorities is not unity. It is union.

The word of God only must establish the road back to unity that manifests the bond of peace by which the organic body is identified. We can follow the word of God back to the ecumenical body by discovering the road that leads to apostasy that many took away from the faith in the first century. Once we discover these roads to apostasy, then we can make every effort not to go down those roads, lest we end up being part of one of the many different religious groups that we see today. The following is a guide as to how one can maintain focus on the gospel, and the direction of the word of God:

- If a Christian would seek to return to and walk in darkness, then he walks away from the one organic body (1 Jn 1:5-7).
- If a Christian sins, but refuses to repent, then he moves out of the universal body of Christ (Hb 10:26; 1 Jn 5:16).
- If a Christian does not hold fast to the word of God, but moves away to a faith that is experientially based instead of based on the word of Christ, then he has forsaken Christ (1 Co 15:2).
- If a Christian does not continue in the faith, then he establishes his own faith (Cl 1:21,23; Hb 10:38).
- If a Christian does not give heed to the word of God, then he will give heed to other things in order to validate his or her faith (1 Tm 4:16).

- If a Christian seeks to live an immoral life, then he or she is going down a road to destruction (1 Co 5:1-5).
- If a Christian does not continually discipline himself or herself in moral matters, then he or she will be disqualified (1 Co 9:27; 2 Co 13:5).
- Christians who have departed from the faith by following deceiving spirits and teachings of demons, have left the faith (1 Tm 4:1).
- Christians must be cautious not to be led away with the error of the wicked (2 Pt 3:17).
- Christians who are deceived into following those who would lead them away after themselves, have moved away from the fellowship of the body of Christ (At 20:28-30).
- Those who are hardened by the deceitfulness of sin have fallen away from the body (Hb 3:13).

Apostasy from the one organic body of Christ has always been a reality throughout history. There are warnings throughout the New Testament to which Christians must take heed in order not to be led away from the one organic body of Christ (See Mt 24:4,5, 11-13; Rm 8:12-14; 1 Tm 1:19,20; 3:6; 4:1,16; 6:10-12).

The universal organic body of Christ is not a union of “differing faiths” who have made compromises in order to be a world council of churches. The body is composed of disciples who have obeyed the one gospel, and thus seek to do the commandments of Jesus. Jesus established this as the foundation upon which we would prove our love for Him. *“If you love Me you will keep My commandments”* (Jn 14:15). *“He who has My commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves Me”* (Jn 14:21). *“If you continue in My word, then you are truly My disciples”* (Jn 8:31). Therefore, it is as Jesus said, *“Not every one who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter into the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven”* (Mt 7:21).

We know the members of the organic body are because they have obeyed the gospel. They thus have their Bibles open and are searching the commandments of the One of whom they claim to be a disciple (At 17:11). They are willing to forsake all religious traditions, all divisive names, and the religious heritage of their fathers if necessary, in order to make their way

back to the word of Jesus. On the part of many, this will be a tremendous sacrifice. But if we love Jesus, we will love what He says. And when we love what He says, His commandments are not burdensome (1 Jn 5:3). Those who are of the Way of Jesus, therefore, are identified by their desire to speak where Jesus has spoken to us through His word, and are cautious to guard the freedom that Jesus promised and in which we stand in His word. In matters of faith, they seek the authority of the word of Christ.

For continued study on this subject, download and read the following:

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## ABBREVIATIONS

### OLD TESTAMENT

Genesis - **Gn**, Exodus - **Ex**, Leviticus - **Lv**, Numbers - **Nm**, Deuteronomy - **Dt**, Joshua - **Ja**, Judges - **Jg**, Ruth - **Rt**, 1 Samuel - **1 Sm**, 2 Samuel - **2 Sm**, 1 Kings - **1 Kg**, 2 Kings - **2 Kg**, 1 Chronicles - **1 Ch**, 2 Chronicles - **2 Ch**, Ezra - **Er**, Nehemiah - **Ne**, Esther - **Et**, Job - **Jb**, Psalms - **Ps**, Proverbs - **Pv**, Ecclesiastes - **Ec**, Song of Solomon - **Ss**, Isaiah - **Is**, Jeremiah - **Jr**, Lamentations - **Lm**, Ezekiel - **Ez**, Daniel - **Dn**, Hosea - **Hs**, Joel - **Jl**, Amos - **Am**, Obadiah - **Ob**, Jonah - **Jh**, Micah - **Mc**, Nahum - **Nh**, Habakkuk - **Hk**, Zephaniah - **Zp**, Haggai - **Hg**, Zechariah - **Zc**, Malachi - **Ml**

### NEW TESTAMENT

Matthew - **Mt**, Mark - **Mk**, Luke - **Lk**, John - **Jn**, Acts - **At**, Romans - **Rm**, 1 Corinthians - **1 Co**, 2 Corinthians - **2 Co**, Galatians - **Gl**, Ephesians - **Ep**, Philippians - **Ph**, Colossians - **Cl**, 1 Thessalonians - **1 Th**, 2 Thessalonians - **2 Th**, 1 Timothy - **1 Tm**, 2 Timothy - **2 Tm**, Titus - **Ti**, Philemon - **Pl**, Hebrews - **Hb**, James - **Js**, 1 Peter - **1 Pt**, 2 Peter - **2 Pt**, 1 John - **1 Jn**, 2 John - **2 Jn**, 3 John - **3 Jn**, Jude - **Jd**, Revelation - **Rv**