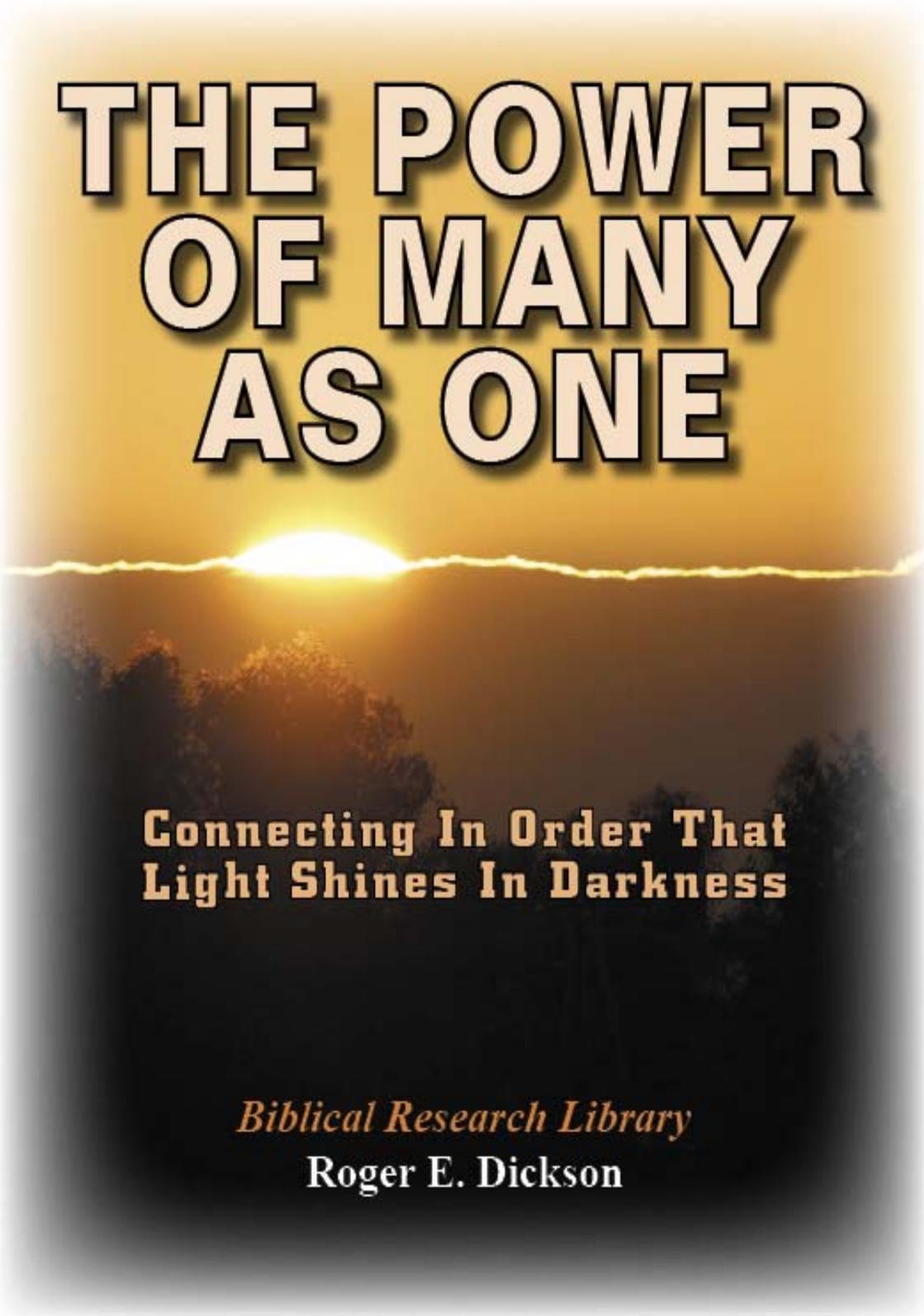


# THE POWER OF MANY AS ONE



**Connecting In Order That  
Light Shines In Darkness**

*Biblical Research Library*

**Roger E. Dickson**

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## Preface

This book was not written to a specific fellowship of churches. It is addressed to the thousands of independent churches and their leaders throughout the world with whom I have been working for several years through electronic media and the distribution of the *Teacher's Bible* and *Biblical Research Library*. Because of the thousands of preachers/pastors with whom I have been working, I thought it necessary to write these words in order to encourage unity in Christ that is based on the authority of His word.

In the writing of this book, I was not interested in any specific fellowship who identified themselves either by a unique name, or special liturgy of assembly. My purpose in writing this book was to go directly to the text of the New Testament in order to discover the behavior of the early disciples as they organically functioned in taking the gospel to the world. I am sure that some will be offended with some of my conclusions. But keep in mind that in my search of the Scriptures, I have tried to lay aside personal prejudices concerning present day churchianity, and especially the names and ceremonies of assembly that are often used to identify a particular fellowship of churches. The objective student of the word of God must not concern himself with present religiosity in his efforts to discover the nature of the faith that is revealed in the Scriptures. After he has made his investigation of the Scriptures, it is the responsibility of the interpreter to make applications as he or she deems necessary to carry out the will of God in one's life. The standard of our beliefs and behavior must always be the word of God, not what we presently deem contemporary in our own expressions of faith.

As leaders of God's people, we are always doing the best we can with what we know. Therefore, of necessity we must continue to learn from God's word. Some leaders have simply functioned according to that which they learned from former mentors who were doing the best they could with what they knew. However, if all of us have a Bible in our hands, it is incumbent on us to search the Scriptures. In our continual search of the Scriptures, it is the task of every leader to lead the flock of God into unity with others who are doing the same. Our unity is a blessing from God upon our obedience to the gospel. But maintaining unity is not easy since all of us are creatures of habit. And in reference to our faith, we have the tendency over time to form habits that divide, rather than unite. It is my prayer that this book will help in some way to identify those things that often divide us, and then implement what is necessary to unite us. By identifying our differences, it is also my prayer that we can better work together in the unity of the Spirit in order that the world believes that Jesus came from the Father.

Throughout the years, I have conducted hundreds of seminars with preachers throughout the world. These seminars have been primarily a gathering of church leaders who want to work together. In reference to independent churches, I have found that the leaders of these churches have wearied themselves with being alone. Many now seek to connect with others who likewise have given themselves to minister to the spiritual needs of people in their communities. In some way, therefore, I pray that this book will help us on our journey toward one another in order to restore our unity in Christ that we have as a blessing from God.

## THE POWER OF MANY AS ONE

When all humanity at one time in history spoke the same language and had a common goal, all men began to do something that was awesome. They supposed that they would build a tower whose top might, in their thinking, reach even into heaven (Gn 11:4). Their ambition was wrong, but their unity was strong. God made a proclamation concerning their ability. Our inherent ability to be united and strong was the way He made us. The proclamation was that “... *nothing will be impossible for them that they have imagined to do*” (Gn 11:6). When we get together, we get strong. This is our gift from our Creator. When we speak the same language and have the same goal, nothing will be impossible for us.

Satan’s greatest weapon against us, therefore, is to orchestrate us into biting and devouring one another in senseless debates over nonsense. The Holy Spirit cautioned some brethren who involved themselves in such: “*But if you bite and devour one another, take heed that you not be consumed by one another*” (Gl 5:15). We will thus give no place to Satan in these matters. We will construct no theological boxes that enshrine opinions. At all costs, we will seek to defend our unity with all those who have obeyed the gospel. However, we will not give way to those who would infringe on our precious freedom that we have in Christ. We will allow no box makers to draw us into controversies that lead to more confusion. We will build no theological boxes ourselves into which we would steal away the freedom of others. This is necessary in order to be the one organic and universal body of Christ.

The end result of box-making theologies is the establishment of an assortment of denominations composed of adherents who defend their boxes by conforming to common theologies or traditions. Because this cocooning behavior is so prevalent in the religious world, we need to take another look at some of those key statements of Scripture that reveal mandates concerning the organic unity of the body of Christ. As disciples of Jesus, it is our task to be unified in our diverse opinions. Our obsession for unity should be so strong that we should be willing to forgo all contentious attitudes in the midst of our differences. We must remember that a contentious spirit will always lead to the formation of a new denomination in Christendom, which thing we struggle to abolish for the sake of reaching the world for Jesus. When we maintain the unity of the faith in the bond of peace, we are powerful. And since God works in those who are unified, then we have the privilege of experiencing the awesome power of the Spirit in our lives.

## INTRODUCTION

The foundation and introduction upon which any study concerning the subject of this book is made is John 17:20,21. The mandate of Jesus' statement must permeate all our discussions. Unity must be the obsession of all those who believe in Jesus as the Christ and Son of God. Jesus' prayer in John 17:20,21 establishes the foundation upon which our relationships with one another must exist and continued, even in times of disagreement concerning our differences of opinion. In other words, when discussing our differences, John 17:20,21 must be the first rule for orderly discussion.

*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.***

Jesus' prayer for oneness was first in reference to "these" for whom He prayed on this occasion. It is imperative to understand those to whom the pronoun "these" refers. "These" would set the example for the rest of us, since the original mandate of Jesus' statement was directed to "these." Their oneness in Christ would teach us that Jesus' prayer was answered in their lives, and thus, can be answered in our lives as we follow the example of what "these" who believed and taught in unison with one another.

Jesus was talking to **individuals**, not to groups. His prayer, therefore, was for

the individuals to whom He spoke to be one. In this context, the individuals were His immediate disciples, the apostles. His prayer was that they as individuals remain united as one. "These" were to be given through the Holy Spirit, a unifying message upon which they would be one (See Jn 14:26; 16:13). The foundation for their unity, therefore, would be the unifying message with which they would go forth and evangelize the world. The gospel message of the believers would be tested by the desire of those who believed in Christ to be one as the apostles remained one. John later wrote the following concerning the unifying message that he and the other apostles spoke:

*That which we have seen and heard we declare to you so that you also may have fellowship with us [the apostles], and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ (1 Jn 1:3).*

After Jesus made the initial plea in His prayer for the oneness of the apostles, He then took the subject of His request for unity beyond the apostles. He prayed for those who would believe on Him "through their [the apostles'] word." Again, He was speaking in reference to **individuals** who would believe the unifying message of the apostles. In believing the unifying message of the gospel, people would subsequently obey the gospel and be added to the one universal body of Christ.

Those who would believe as a re-

sult of the preaching of the gospel, would be individuals. They would believe as individuals, and as a result of their belief, be added to the group of those who believed and were baptized (At 2:47).

Groups of individuals would be united because the individuals of the groups would be one in Christ through their obedience to the gospel. We see in the prayer of Jesus that there should never exist among His disciples any such thing as autonomous groups of believers who would function separate from one another either as individuals or groups. In fact, in reading between the lines of Jesus' prayer, He makes a prophecy against anyone who would separate groups of believers from the whole of His household of believers. In the prayer, Jesus' point is very clear: **One cannot seek to fulfill the answer to Jesus' prayer for unity if he in anyway constructs or seeks to maintain any ecclesiastical organization that functions in a manner by which the disciples of Jesus are separated from one another.**

Jesus prayed that His immediate disciples be one in spirit and purpose as He and the Father were one in their spirit and purpose at the cross. When His immediate disciples went forth with the united message of the gospel, those individuals who believed came into the fellowship of the one body (See 1 Jn 1:1-3). The obedient were inherently one because of the one gospel that they obeyed. Their unity, therefore, was a blessing as a result of their obedience to the gospel. It would be the task of the obedient, therefore, to maintain the unity with which they were

blessed when they obeyed the gospel.

There was an apologetic in the prayer of Jesus that His disciples be one. The apologetic was "*that the world may believe that You sent Me*" (Jn 17:21). If the oneness of the body is evidence that the Father sent the Son, then the opposite would signal to the world the fact that the Son did not originate from the Father. The unbelieving world would conclude that if the Father and Son were supposedly one, then certainly this oneness must be reflected in those who would believe on Jesus as the Son of the Father.

One of the reasons why we believe that Islam is not a true religion from God is because of the division that exists between the Muslim Sunnis and Sh'ites. Their mortal and endless conflict with one another is evidence that Islam is a religion of man, for no message from the one true and living God would cause such a mortal conflict. However, we must remember that the Muslim makes the same argument against a divided Christianity.

The Muslim points out our embarrassment, and probably our theological hypocrisy. He concludes that since Christianity is so denominationally split into countless sects, then certainly Jesus could never have been deity revealed from God. Jesus would be a prophet, but never God in the flesh.

The Muslim also accuses Christians of having a polytheistic faith. He asserts that the Christian has deified Jesus, and thus, he concludes that the Christ has constructed a theology of at least two gods, god the Father, and Jesus, whom Christians have deified to also be a god. Those

who believe in Jesus, therefore, have a difficult time explaining to the monotheistic Muslim that God the Father and God the Son are one. Christians have a difficult time defending their claim of one God when at the same time, they practice a divided Christendom.

Of course Muslims, and followers of other non-Christian religions, pronounce their judgments with the prejudice of their own uniqueness. Since all Muslims hypocritically look past their own diversity within Islam, they assume that they can judge Christians to believe in a Jesus who was only a good prophet, but not the Son of God. They do not understand the nature of the church amidst the diversity of so many false religious groups that pose to be “Christian,” and yet function divisively throughout Christendom.

Christendom is only a word that represents a collective of diverse religious groups that believe in Jesus. All these groups claim to have a stake in Jesus, but most do not do the will of the Father in heaven (Mt 7:24-27). We would not, therefore, allow the Buddhist or Muslim, or whoever, to deny the Sonship of Jesus because of the nonsense of every religious group who poses to be “Christian” simply because they cry out “Lord, Lord.” It is obedience to the truth of the gospel that the united apostles preached that produces unity. And when there are those who do not submit to the truth of the gospel, then they have no right to claim the name “Christian.” This name is reserved only for those who have done that which qualifies one to be “of Christ” (See 1 Co 1:12,13).

So Jesus’ prayer is still valid. Not everyone in Christendom who cries out “Lord, Lord” is conforming to the unifying message of the gospel. Being Christian is validated by doing the will of the One after whom we call ourselves (See Mt 7:15-23). And thus, we search throughout Christendom for individuals who have obeyed the gospel. We seek for those who have obeyed the gospel, and thus, are deserving to be “of Christ” because of their obedience to the gospel. These are the individuals who would be one in Christ because they have done the will of the Father upon their obedience to the gospel.

We must delve deeper into the mire of denominational sectarianism as we make our journey past division and into the unity that brings power to the house of God. But in all of our mental meanderings, we must not lose sight of Jesus’ mandate that individuals who would call themselves after Him must be one. We must force ourselves to look past church house signs and temples, and the pompous pretense of those who have called a group of disciples after themselves. We must even look past legalized assemblies that are presumptuously set forth as the identity of the church.

In order to discover the unity about which Jesus prayed, it is indeed helpful to study closely those texts of Scripture where the Holy Spirit has alerted us to watch out for certain signs that would lead to division among the disciples. While we are immersing ourselves in these chosen texts, we must never lose sight of the fact that Jesus calls on individual Christians to

be one as He and the Father are one. Our motive for doing this study is not only for our own salvation, but also for the salvation of unbelievers to whom we would preach a unifying gospel. And while we preach, we must strive to manifest in our oneness the oneness of the Father and Son after whom we call ourselves.

## Chapter 1

### The Birth Of Hierarchy

Any study of the universal unity of the body of Christ must consider the development of universal hierarchies as the Roman Catholic Church. It is necessary to consider such hierarchies in view of the universality of the church. There is certainly a difference between the earthly hierarchy of the Catholic Church and the heavenly hierarchy of the church of the New Testament. Therefore, in order that we not end up with a Catholic hierarchy, we must carefully consider the New Testament texts that explain the universality of the church that exists without all the authorities on earth that are characteristic of the Catholic Church, and other networks of authority that are maintained by religious groups around the world.

In order to construct a worldwide network as the Roman Catholic Church, a foundation must first be laid that is conducive to the birth and development of such a network. Once the foundation is laid, then only time is needed for the hierarchy of authority to develop. Over time, men who seek authority for themselves, move their movement from freedom in unity to an institutional network of authorities.

In the case of developing a worldwide network of control as the Catholic Church, it takes decades to develop such

a hierarchal system. The progress is slow in development. The origins of such church networks are first embedded in what is considered harmless leadership behavior among the adherents of the movement. When those who seek to bring the style and system of world lordship leadership into the body of freed disciples, a foundation of behavior is laid that eventually leads to the bondage of the disciples under the authority of the designated leadership.

There is a natural sense of security in lordship-led movements, and thus, as believers seek to be reassured by their autocratic leaders, hierarchal networks of authority are easy to develop. It is simply appealing to the vast majority of potential adherents to have a “king” on earth whom they can see. In our worldly thinking, we can relate better with a “king” on this earth than one who is supposedly a long way off on the throne of David at the right hand of God in heaven.

Once the foundation for a structure of authority is laid, then an historical trigger is all that is necessary to set the digression on its way to a networked authority that is not reversible because it is led by those who enjoy their positions of authority in the organized structure.

In this initial chapter we must focus on the universal unity of the body for which Jesus prayed. It is necessary that we step back for a moment in order to suggest some thoughts in church history that are usually not discussed in the context of how networks of authority originate in their early stages of development.

The challenge of any book written on the subject of unity is that we must first view the worldwide body of Christ from the top down, and not from the bottom up. We must view the function of the disciples as the organic body from the throne where the King is seated with all authority (Mt 28:18). Once we fully understand the universal kingship and headship of Jesus over His one body, then we can better guard ourselves from forming any hierarchal network of authority that would take the place of Jesus' reign in our hearts (See Rm 5:17).

(For more study on this subject, download Book 55, *The Organic Function of the Body of Christ*, Biblical Research Library, [africainternational.org](http://africainternational.org).)

### **A. Understanding history from an institutional perspective:**

Because of our present institutional view of the church, our inclination is initially to view the function and organization of the church from the bottom up. In doing this, we have often formed a distorted view of the worldwide organic function of the members of the body. We want to center leadership around local authorities we have designed to be our leaders and decision-makers. But if we look from

heaven down, we see the church from the viewpoint of Jesus and the authority of His reign. We then view godly leaders assuming responsibility of the sheep because they have submitted to Jesus' authority. And this is exactly what the Holy Spirit wanted us to see when He directed Luke to write the document of Acts. We see the disciples functioning universally as they were controlled by King Jesus in heaven through His word.

When we view the church from the throne of Jesus, we will better understand the connection of individual members to the one Vine (See Jn 15:1-4). We can better understand how individuals are united in Christ because of their common connection with Jesus and one another through their obedience to the gospel. But if we view the church from what exists in the religious world today, then we will always end up with a distorted understanding of His kingdom and reign.

### **B. Understanding history from a Catholic Church perspective:**

Another mistake that church historians have often made is to interpret history from a Catholic Church point of view. Even protestant historians have used too many Catholic documents to construct the early development of the Roman Catholic Church. Researching material on this subject that is footnoted with Catholic Church resources must always be questioned.

The Catholic Church has always assumed that the Catholic Church can historically trace its beginnings back to Christ

through Peter, who is supposed to have been the first Pope. With this historical prejudice, it is assumed that all historical documents that were written in the first and second centuries should be interpreted with the pretext that the Catholic Church hierarchy of authority on earth existed back to Peter. We would confess that different networks of hierarchy were developed during the second and third centuries. But these developments were diverse. Not all eventually led to what is the Roman Catholic Church that we see today.

By formulating our view of church history from the school of Catholic history taught by Catholic theologians, we certainly have come to some erroneous conclusions of the universal body of disciples as explained in the New Testament. In particular, we have often assumed that the entire body of members throughout the world followed a direct line of Catholic apostasy from the very beginning of the church that was first established in Jerusalem in A.D. 30. In our study of the events of history, therefore, we must make every effort to refrain from interpreting history from the bias of those who would have us understand history from the perspective of the Roman Catholic apostasy. Though we can find no hierarchy of authority embedded in the teaching of the New Testament church, the church must always arm itself against such apostasies.

### **C. Understanding history from a biblical perspective of apostasy:**

In our research to understand the historical changes that took place in the church after its initial beginning, we must always assume that the apostasy from the original function of the body of Christ from its early beginning to the formation of the hierarchal authority of the Catholic Church, was constantly in motion. And thus, we must not assume that the Catholic Church apostasy, as well as any other apostasy to hierarchal authority, was a surprise to the Holy Spirit. If we always assume that some apostasy is in progress at any time among Christians somewhere in the world, then we too will not be surprised when we wake up one day and find that we are in the midst of such. We must never assume that the Catholic network of authority was a unique happening in church history. On the contrary, we must always assume that such networks of authority are in some stage of development, if not fully developed, simply because there are always those among us who would draw away the disciples after themselves.

God knows the future, and thus, through the inspired historical statements made in the New Testament we would assume that He would give us some indication of what would lead to that which actually happened in the historical development and establishment of networked authorities.

We would also assume that the Spirit would give us some indication of how apostasy to hierarchal authority would begin, as well as instructions on how to prevent such. We would assume, therefore, that we can discover in our studies

of the New Testament that the Holy Spirit would forewarn the early disciples concerning what would eventually take place, and thus give the early church instructions on how to prevent apostasies of hierarchal networks of authority. **That which laid the foundation for apostasies as the Roman Catholic Church, that came centuries later after the establishment of the church, can be found in the warnings of the Holy Spirit in the New Testament.**

The Catholic Church was not specifically in the mind of the Holy Spirit when He gave warnings concerning hierarchal apostasy. If the Catholic apostasy was specifically in the warnings, then other hierarchal networks of authority that exist throughout the world today might excuse themselves from violating some of the warnings in the New Testament. We must keep in mind that there are numerous hierarchal networks of authority throughout Christendom today that fall under the condemnations of the Holy Spirit that are recorded in the New Testament. The hierarchy of the Catholic church is not unique among the religions of the world.

It is not, therefore, that the Spirit had the Catholic Church specifically in mind when He gave His warnings in the New Testament. He simply gave instructions on how such hierarchal apostasy develops, as well as instructions on how to prevent and correct such in the initial stages of development. This is the theme of all warnings surrounding the rise of individuals and groups at any time in history who would lead disciples away after themselves in order to establish networks of

authority among the disciples.

In the following chapter, we base our premise for hierarchal apostasy on that which laid the foundation for such apostasy in the first century. Similar apostasies are in development today among religious groups in different places of the world. It is always present in those who seek to steal some of the “all” authority that rests with our King in heaven.

During the Protestant Reformation five hundred years ago, many protestant churches that were given birth out of those years of protest against Roman Catholicism, often copied the same network of authority of the Catholic Church. They have since become that from which they fled. These hierarchies of authority continue today in the protestant world. When the Independent Church Movement started in the middle of the twentieth century, it was initially a protest against foreign networks of authority that were propagated around the world through missionary societies. But the independents who ran from the authority of the mission societies seem to in some places be circling around to become that from which they fled. They too are laying the foundation in some places upon which a universal hierarchy of authority could develop, especially in some areas of Africa.

We must keep in mind that the development of a worldwide hierarchy of authority occurs over decades, if not centuries. It is our task to assume that the Holy Spirit knew such hierarchies of authority would develop throughout history, and thus, we search in the New Testament for His instructions on how to recognize the early

beginnings of such apostasies. Recognition aids in preventing such from taking place among ourselves.

Hierarchal apostasy should not come as a surprise to those who are knowl-

edgable of history. Hierarchies of authority are simply the outcome of those who seek to have authority over others, and subsequently, bring this desire in among the members of the body.

## Chapter 2

### Staying Close To One Authority

In order to understand clearly that from which we often are tempted to stray, it is necessary to know some basic Bible teachings that are often ignored. After all, apostasy means leaving sound teaching and going after that which is not true. We must, therefore, first understand the true model of how God intended that we as members of the body be freely networked with one another throughout the world in a spirit of unity. Since the body of Christ is globally one, then there are necessary teachings in the New Testament that identify its oneness. At the same time there is a foundation of teaching that will always keep sincere members from constructing either a national or international network of hierarchal authority in which men are placed as rulers over the body.

#### A. One head, one universal body:

Jesus is the only head of the body (Cl 1:18). He has all authority over all things (Mt 28:18). In order for the body to be one and universal, these two truths must never be compromised. As Luke wrote the historical document of Acts, therefore, he wrote by the inspiration of

the Holy Spirit in order to record an historical account of how the King of kings worked in the lives of individuals. He recorded how the Spirit worked to produce an internationally united army of believers. Luke portrayed the organic function of the body as it spread as one body into all the world.

In focusing on the function of the one organic body, the Holy Spirit wants us to understand that the success of the disciples in evangelizing their generation was in the fact that the members of the body remained one universal body. The many members, regardless of where they lived, never viewed themselves to be separated from one another. When reading through the book of Acts, therefore, one principle is clear: **The disciples always functioned individually in a united organic manner in order to accomplish the mission of Jesus. The disciples functioned as each one was personally committed to the function of the one universal body.**

The early disciples accomplished all that we read in the New Testament without any hierarchal authorities on earth who regulated their function. There is a great lesson here for those who feel that we

cannot effectively do the work of our personal ministries unless we fall under some authority on earth to tell us what we must do. Even the disciples in Jerusalem were functioning in reference to their ministry to the widows for several years before some racial prejudices led to the neglect of some Grecian widows (At 6:1-7). A group was chosen to sort out the problem, but when the problem was sorted out, the organized group was disbanded. One member of the group, Stephen, went on to heaven (At 7:59,60), and another, Philip, went on as an evangelist to Caesarea (At 21:8).

The point is that the early disciples needed no organizing authorities to muster them into doing that which each disciple was personally to do in his own life in order to be a disciple of Jesus. This may be a strange thing to highly organized institutional churches today. All we would ask is that those of the corporate church today take another look in the book of Acts concerning the organic function of the body of Christ.

The disciples of the first century simply went about doing their personal ministries without establishing any church organizations with some earthly hierarchy of authority that controlled and manipulated the disciples on earth. They went about preaching the gospel in order to generate individual and voluntary commitment to the King of kings. When any one individual obeyed the gospel, he was added by God to this functioning body of disciples (At 2:47; see Ep 4:11-16).

New converts were not added to any particular group of disciples. They

were added to the one universal church of disciples who functioned as disciples wherever they were scattered (At 8:4). The power of the body, therefore, remained strong as individuals were discipled to the one Lord of all things. As the body grew, it exerted so much influence in the societies to which Christians went that the world was turned upside down as a result of the impact of their ministries (At 17:6).

## **B. Apostasy to error:**

In Peter's quotation of Joel 2:28, he historically positioned the beginning of the church in Jerusalem in A.D. 30 (At 2:17-21). He quoted Joel's introduction to his prophecy, "*And it will come to pass in the last days ...*" (At 2:17). The events that transpired on the A.D. 30 Pentecost took place "in the last days." These were the last days of national Israel and God's unique Sinai covenant relationship with Israel. According to Jesus' prophecy of the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, there would arise before the destruction "false christs and false prophets" among the people (Mt 24:24). Between A.D. 30 and A.D. 70, therefore, the beginning of apostasy would arise. Apostasies would certainly arise throughout the history of the church, but there would be a great apostasy before the close of the first century.

We assume that Timothy was in the region of Ephesus when Paul wrote the following warning: "*Now the Spirit clearly says that in the latter times some will depart from the faith ...*" (1 Tm 4:1). Both Paul and Timothy were in

the latter times, the last days of national Israel. In these times there were false christ and prophets who were “*giving heed to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons*” (1 Tm 4:1). In his second letter to Timothy, Paul mentioned two such false teachers in the church. Paul warned Timothy in reference to his relationship with such men:

*But avoid profane and empty babblings, for they will increase to more ungodliness. And their word will spread like gangrene. Among them are Hymenaeus and Philetus, who concerning the truth have strayed ...* (2 Tm 2:16-18).

That about which Paul warned Timothy was already happening. The error of the two false teachers was already spreading when Paul wrote the preceding statement to Timothy in the middle 60s. Peter also was not unaware of what was transpiring among those to whom he wrote.

*But there were also false prophets among the people [of Israel], just as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Lord who bought them, bringing on themselves swift destruction. And many will follow their shameful ways. And because of them, the way of truth will be blasphemed* (2 Pt 2:1,2).

Specifically in reference to our subject of hierarchal authority, Paul identified the nature of hierarchal leadership in the context of 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12. No-

tice carefully the autocratic behavior of the “man of lawlessness” who would set himself up as a center of reference in religious matters:

*Let no one deceive you by any means, for that day will not come unless there first come a falling away, and that the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction, who opposes and exalts himself above all that is called God or that is worshiped, so he sits as God in the temple of God, showing himself that he is God* (2 Th 2:3,4).

This apostasy states that the one who would set himself up, would do so with religious authority. He is one who would go as far as demand worship. Peter’s statements identify the nature of the apostasy that was coming in the lifetime of his immediate readers, as well as any apostasy throughout history that is always lurking somewhere in the leadership of the church. Though Jesus taught that lordship leadership should not be among His disciples, such happened in the church in the first century. Therefore, we must always be cautious about setting ourselves up as authorities among the disciples (See Mk 10: 35-45).

Paul warned the Ephesian elders about those who would set themselves up as rulers over groups of disciples that they had drawn away from the sole lordship of Jesus (At 20:29,30). Peter wrote that such apostasy was already happening at the time he wrote 1 Peter in the middle 60s (See 1 Pt 5:1-4). When John wrote 1 John, the agents of apostasy were already

at work. John warned, “*Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits ... because many false prophets have gone out into the world*” (1 Jn 4:1). If we date 1 John the middle or end of the 60s, then there was apostasy among the disciples at the time John wrote. The prophecies of apostasy had already started to be fulfilled by the middle and end of the first century. John reminded his readers,

*Little children, it is the last hour. And as you have heard that the antichrist is coming, even now there are many antichrists. By this we know that it is the last hour. They went out from us, but they were not of us ...* (1 Jn 2:18,19).

It was the last hour of national Israel. The church had been warned by Jesus that this hour would come. The New Testament prophets verbally explained the nature of the apostasy that would come, and thus in their warnings identified the nature of different apostasies to error.

One of the primary apostasies would be an apostasy to hierarchal authority among the disciples. As students of the

Bible who must be on guard against any apostasy, we must be prepared to define a true apostasy, and then take measures to arm the church with the truth of God’s word.

If division in the church must happen in reference to guarding the church against apostasy, then those who would preach another gospel must be cut off as Paul encouraged those legalistic teachers in Galatia to do themselves in reference to their relationship with the body of Christ. “*I could wish that those who are troubling you would cut themselves off from you*” (Gl 5:12).

It was certainly a sad day in the history of the function of the organic body of Christ when a Christ-sent apostle would wish that those who preached a legalistic gospel (Gl 1:6-9), would cut themselves off from the universal body of Christ. But unless their deception should continue to injure the family of God, it was best that those who bind where God has not bound should leave. John said they would go out from among the disciples, but in the beginning, “*they were not of us*” (1 Jn 2:19).

### Chapter 3

## Dependence On One Another

In studies of church history, we have found that few church historians consider the New Testament beginnings of any apostasy that eventually leads to a global network of authority. Most historians usually study the documents that were writ-

ten by the apostate church once the apostasy had advanced to the point of being recognized as something different to what is recorded in the New Testament.

When we study church history in reference to Christianity, our study must al-

ways begin with the warnings of apostasy that are recorded in the New Testament. We then proceed to any historical documents that explain the development of the apostasy that is defined by specifics in the warnings of the New Testament. We seek to identify those characteristics of apostasy that lead to international networks of authority that infringe on the authority of Jesus over His body. When we study hierarchal apostasy in the New Testament, we discover the first indications that eventually lead to a slow transition from the original into worldwide networks of churches that are exclusive in their belief and behavior, and are controlled by a hierarchal network of authorities. The New Testament, therefore, is our only standard by which we can define a any apostasy, whether doctrinal or organizational.

The case history of the church of Ephesus is a good example of how a transition from a Bible-oriented system of leadership is made to independent groups that are led by lordship leaders. By the time Paul revisited the church in Ephesus on his last mission journey, he warned that there would arise from among the leaders in Ephesus those who would separate disciples into autonomous groups that they could control. When he made the statement, *“from your own selves will men arise”* (At 20:30), he was personally and specifically warning the Ephesian elders who would lead groups of disciples into autonomous churches that were controlled by some of them.

The authoritarians that would arise from among them would certainly arise

from future elders in Ephesus. But Paul’s immediate concern was that from the elders he was personally addressing in the Acts 20 meeting there would arise some who would draw away disciples to establish autonomous groups. In other words, the apostasy was immediate, and in the lifetime of these elders. By the time Peter wrote his first letter a few years later in the middle of the 60s, lords had already arisen among some elders (See 1 Pt 5:1-4). Paul prophesied that such was coming, and Peter said that it had already arrived by the time he wrote 1 Peter 5. The apostasy in Ephesus could have happened within a period of about ten years after Paul’s Acts 20 meeting with the Ephesian elders.

What happened was that men with leadership ability failed to implement in their lives Jesus’ mandate that there would be no lords with authority in the church (See Mk 10:35-45). Those who would be great would be the servants of all. The gradual change came in the leadership in some places in the church when men started to assume a percentage of the “all” authority Jesus has over the universal membership of His body. When leaders start assuming some authority, the ground work is being laid for a worldwide hierarchy.

The heart of the problem always centers around authority. The New Testament teaches no such thing as apostolic succession, that is, one person of supposed authority transferring the same authority on to others. In the Roman Catholic Church, apostolic succession is a primary teaching in reference to the organization

of the church. It is a teaching that authorizes the continued authority of a pope to succeeding popes. It is believed that Jesus passed authority first to Peter, and then Peter passed his apostolic authority on to a successor who followed him as the pope of the church. But there is no evidence of such a teaching as apostolic authority that is passed from one generation of leaders to another.

The prophecy of Paul in reference to the Ephesian elders was that it would be individuals who would draw away disciples after themselves by assuming authority over the groups. Paul viewed this denominating of the body as an apostasy, not as a natural course of church growth. His prophecy was a warning, not the establishment of apostolic authority that was supposedly invested in those who would draw away the disciples into groups over which each would exercise authority. It may have been the case that these elders (bishops) passed on authority to their successors of the denominating groups that they had initially drawn away after themselves. Or, it may have been that succeeding elders simply followed the lordship example of the first generation of lords. Whatever the case, Paul certainly did not pass on to the Ephesian elders any apostolic authority that they in turn should pass on to those who would follow them. He actually warned them against such.

The foundation for a separated group with authoritative leaders was contrary to the universal unity of the body of Christ. It was apostate succession, not apostolic succession, since it was an apostle who condemned the drawing away as a de-

parture from the organic function of the body under the sole authority of Christ. It is a contradiction within the doctrine of apostolic succession that the very people after whom the doctrine is called (the apostles), are the very people, as Peter, Paul and John, who condemned any supposed succession of “apostolic” authority.

Nevertheless, independent groups were beginning to be formed in the middle and latter part of the first century when leaders drew away disciples after themselves. Once these disciples were separated into independent churches by leaders as Diotrephes, and some as those among the Ephesian elders, then the foundation was laid for the union of groups through the cooperation of authoritarian leaders. This would fully develop in the second and third centuries.

In order to maintain the separation of these groups who called themselves after either individuals or groups of leaders, the leaders maintained the independence of their respective groups, though the leading authorities sought in some way to function with one another. It was at this time in history when the one universal church began to be dysfunctional in reference to being a united fellowship of members. The fellowship of independent members had turned into a fellowship of independent church groups who were led by authoritarian leaders. These leaders sought to connect the groups with one another through councils and synods. The stage was thus set for the eventual rise of a chief bishop to be appointed. This primary leader would eventually in history

become the pope of all the denominated groups.

The initial development of independent groups was first witnessed by Paul among the disciples in Achaia, who during his lifetime, denominated themselves after different personalities. Each group was calling itself after a particular leader, and thus taking pride in a selected personality as Paul, Apollos or Cephas. In this case, however, none of these men assumed any authority over any group of disciples (See 1 Co 1:12,13), neither did they work among the new converts in Achaia in any manner to encourage any groups to function autonomously from one another. Regardless of the sincere efforts of godly leaders, however, it seems that unless each member struggles to maintain the unity of the faith in the bond of peace, autonomous groups will arise among the disciples. Such seems to happen even if good leaders teach and work against the denominating of the church (See At 20:29,30).

Because of the early sectarian spirit among some of those of Achaia, we should be alerted to the fact that when disciples regularly meet as groups, they must be cautioned that as individual groups they should not consider themselves to be a unique fellowship in their relationship with other groups. Being regularly with familiar faces must not move us to ignore other brothers and sisters who do not have the opportunity to be with one's fellowship. Our growth in love with one another must not separate us from those with whom we cannot regularly fellowship. The fact that the body is one universally means that each

member is in fellowship with all the members of the body throughout the world.

In the letters that were written to the early first century church in different cities or regions, there are many exhortations to maintain unity among believers. These exhortations were given because of the inability of all the members to regularly see one another's face every time the saints in a particular city or region came together. The fact that the Holy Spirit exhorted the disciples to maintain unity was based on the house assembly function of the disciples. Since all the Christians in a particular area could not meet together regularly at the same time and in the same place, encouragement was needed from the Spirit that they work at preserving their unity in Christ, regardless of where and with whom they regularly assembled (See 1 Co 1:10; Ep 4:1-6; Ph 1:27).

The fact that these exhortations are in the letters that were directed to the church in particular cities or regions is evidence that a sectarian spirit was coming into the church at the time the letters were written. Some house fellowships were being drawn away from the whole of the church in the cities by dominant leaders who sought to lord over their house groups.

Because it is natural for a group of Christians who regularly meet with one another on a weekly basis to lose contact with other groups who also regularly meet together, we might have an indication of how to better approach the context of 1 Corinthians 11. Since both 1 & 2 Corinthians were actually directed to the saints in all Achaia who were meeting in homes throughout the province (2 Co 1:1), then

the event of the love feast/Lord's Supper that is discussed in 1 Corinthians 11 may have been an occasional and provincial meeting of all the Christians in all Achaia. At least this is something to consider in view of the problem that prevailed and Paul's instructions to correct the problems in 1 Corinthians 11. It was an occasional opportunity for everyone to reconnect and to celebrate together as one body in order that each member be reminded that they were one body, though they were many members meeting in many different locations. The regional eating of the love feast/Lord's Supper would encourage everyone to be reminded of what Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 10:16:

*The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not the **fellowship** of the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not the **fellowship** of the [universal] body of Christ?*

Paul continued, "*For though we are many [members scattered throughout Achaia], we are one bread and **one body**, for we are all partakers of that one bread*" (1 Co 10:17). Unfortunately, that which was to bring them together to

be of the same mind and judgment, the love feast with the Lord's Supper, became an occasion for some to manifest their sectarian spirit.

We must also keep in mind that the Christians in Achaia received instructions from somewhere to have a regular love feast and Supper together. We assume that the Holy Spirit directed them to do such in order to promote the unity of the disciples throughout all the region of Achaia. Their eating together of a meal, with the celebration of the Supper, was an opportunity for all of them to remember that they were "one bread, one body," and in fellowship with one another regardless of their inability to meet together as one group at the same place and the same time on any Sunday. But when a sectarian spirit entered in among them, they were calling themselves after different personalities, and thus, groups became independent from one another according to their assemblies. By the time Paul wrote 1 Corinthians, the event that was to call them together as one body in fellowship with Christ, became the occasion to manifest that some were behaving independently of one another, even at this early date in the history of the church.

## Chapter 4

### Setting The Stage For Hierarchy

When groups of disciples remain independent from one another over a long period of time, they crystallize with an independent spirit. If they have one man as their leader (preacher/pastor), then they

naturally crystallize around that one personality. Once a group has crystallized, it has become a denominated group that is functioning autonomously from all other groups in the area who may also be func-

tioning in the same manner. A denomination is a group of disciples who are usually led by a single personality, or group of leaders, who are indigenous in their function, and often self-reliant on their mutual fellowship. In order to maintain their identity, they often adopt a unique name, maintain a certain behavior or liturgy in assembly, and sometimes dress themselves with a unique style of clothing.

The independent group's interpretation of those passages that deal with unity often becomes twisted. The group interprets the "unity passages" of the New Testament with an almost cultic application. They interpret the unity passages in a manner that makes these passages refer to unity within their particular group, and not to all the members of the one universal body of Christ. Their interpretation of passages as 1 Corinthians 1:10, therefore, is almost cultic in that they seek that everyone within their denominated group should "speak the same thing and have the same judgment" according to what the preacher or leaders dictate.

Once autonomous groups were established in the early church, and maintained by key leaders, then the stage was set for a hierarchy of leaders among many churches to develop in the years to come. The independence (autonomy) of some groups continued on for about a century until a sociological trigger moved the leaders of these groups to form a universal association in order to restore some sense of unity among the churches. Separated groups who would call themselves after either a particular fellowship, tradition or

personality carried on, though the nature of their relationship with one another was based more on an agreement for union rather than a spirit that the members were one body in Christ. The "northside" church on the north side of town did its own programs and the "southside" church on the south side did theirs. All went well as each group independently functioned in their own ministries while they continued on in their own unique fellowships.

We assume the preceding history because of what Paul personally warned the Ephesian elders was coming among the disciples in Ephesus (See At 20:29,30). We also base our conclusions on a specific written exhortation that he made a few years later to the same disciples in the same city (See Ep 4:1-6). His personal warning to the leaders was that some among them would draw away groups of disciples after themselves. In the written exhortation a few years later, he encouraged all the members that they should be "*eager to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace*" (Ep 4:3). Because the division did come, we conclude that they did not heed the personal warning, nor the written exhortation. Some did draw away disciples after themselves, and thus, did not keep the unity of the Spirit.

The problem developed, therefore, when each fellowship of disciples became so separated from one another that they did not consider themselves as one church, but several churches in a single city. Their spirit of autonomy had moved them to be independent groups within the same region. At least, they were not

working together in the unity of the Spirit according to Paul's exhortation in Ephesians 4:3.

We work with a great number of independent churches throughout the world. Many of these groups are doing the best they can with what they know. They have for years functioned under the authority of their own name or leader in order to identify themselves to be either "Paulites," "Cephites," or "Apollosites." We know of one town in South Africa with a population of about 8,000. There are 28 independent churches in this one town, all doing their own thing, while maintaining their separation from one another by the members' identity with any one of the particular groups. Their pastors/preachers keep them separated from one another because members of their respective groups understand that increments in their pay checks depend on the attendance of Sunday morning assemblies. The church situation of this small town may be extreme, but it does illustrate the common church environment of many cities of the world.

Independent churches work with people in order to focus their lives on God, but they usually do not consider themselves in fellowship with one another as the one universal church. Their belief in group autonomy keeps them away from one another. Their interpretation of Jesus' statement, "*I am the vine. You are the branches,*" is interpreted to mean that they as independent church groups are the branches. In the context of this statement, however, Jesus was speaking to the twelve individuals in His presence at that

time who were His apostles (See Jn 15:5). He was the vine, and they as individuals were the branches. The branches were not groups connected to Jesus, but individuals.

By the close of the first century, many groups declared their independence from one another. The declaration came from the leaders, not the members, as certain leaders began to draw away disciples after themselves (See At 20:29,30; 3 Jn). And for this reason, the division into autonomous groups was contrary to the spirit of maintaining the organic function of the one universal body of Christ.

All went well until the great persecution by the state of Rome. It was this persecution that drove the Christians together, but it was also out of this persecution that a universal hierarchial apostasy eventually arose, which apostasy is known today as the Roman Catholic Church.

As independent churches today throughout Africa become weary of being on their own for so long, they are starting to come together. They are coming together through regional "pastors' forums," "pastor fellowships," or common missions or organizations, the very thing that many broke away from over a century ago. Those who have caused the problem of division are those who seek to contrive a corporate merger where the authorities of each independent group remain intact while an effort is made to bring more union among the churches in the community or nation. In these efforts to promote more union, the authorities of each group remain in control over "their churches." Nevertheless, we see this as

a positive move to encourage some level of unity. However, we believe that as long as each independent church retains its own authorities over each group, only union, not unity, will result.

In the early church apostasy, the bishops (elders) of independent groups were driven together by the state persecution of Rome. But according to what Paul said was coming during his ministry, it was the bishops of these autonomous groups who had drawn away disciples after themselves. They eventually started to form unions of the groups of disciples over which they assumed control. When the autonomous groups, with their bishops, chose at the regional meetings one bishop to represent each independent group, then you know the rest of the story. From the regional meetings there came international meetings, over which a “chairman” (pope) was eventually declared.

The book of Revelation explains the trigger that drove the disciples together. However, when John recorded the visions of Revelation, he did not picture the coming together of the persecuted as churches forming “unions” with one another as independent groups. He pictured the saints as individuals who gave their allegiance to Jesus, not to any particular church group. This was the message of the key verse of the book:

*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 [individual Christians] who are with Him are called and chosen and faithful (Rv 17:14).*

By the time of the visions of Revelation, some of the leaders of the churches had already gone too far. Paul’s prophecy of leaders drawing away disciples after themselves in Acts 20, Peter’s pronouncement in 1 Peter 5 that the lords had already arisen among the disciples, and John’s identity of the denominating behavior of Diotrefes had already progressed to the point of dividing the church. When the disciples of all the divided groups struggled through about 150 years of persecution by the Roman Empire, it was the key leaders who encouraged Christians to remain faithful, regardless of the particular sect of the church to which they belonged.

Defense documents came into existence in the second century as men whom we call “Apostolic Fathers” wrote defenses of Christianity to the state of Rome. Second century apologists as Clement of Rome, Ignatius, Hermas, Polycarp and Papias wrote defenses for the entire church. The *Didache* (130 - 150) was written in order to define and defend the teaching of the early church. If men stood up today, which some do, to represent the church before existing governments, then in their writings we would have a distorted view of the church, for they would write an all-inclusive definition of Christendom. We will see this happening even during the time of Paul’s imprisonment in A.D. 61,62. (More later in chapter 16.)

By the end of the third century, and into the beginning of the fourth, the leaders of churches were well on their way to forming a worldwide network of au-

thorities who would speak to the government of Rome on behalf of the church. By the time the Roman Emperor Constantine came along, the organized bishops started to pattern themselves after the organization of the Roman Empire. When Constantine incorporated the church into the political environment of the Roman Empire, the stage was set for the development of the worldwide network of what became the Roman Catholic Church.

The definition of the one universal body of Christ then took on a different definition. Unity was defined by every authority of each church group falling under the control of the central government of the universal church. In actuality, autonomous groups about whom Paul, Peter and John warned, were brought into union with one another under the authority of a common authority. By the middle of the third century, the church had organized into the order of networked authorities.

In some contexts today, we see the meeting of the “authorities” of the independent churches moving in a similar direction. A chairman is designated for a year, which chairman is given the authority to organize the meetings and establish the agendas of the meetings. We keep in mind that we are only in the early beginning of what takes several decades to develop. The meeting of the leaders is a beginning to promote unity, but the leaders who often meet must be cautious about

establishing any one person or committee as a central authority for all the churches that are represented. If a state persecution would come along within any particular nation where the preachers of the independent churches have their regional meetings, we wonder if regional preachers’ forum would be organized in a manner that would politically give the church a voice before the government.

It is for this reason that we often misunderstand the early beginnings of hierarchical authorities that began in the church before the close of the first century. All that is needed to form a union among corporate autonomous groups is a sociological trigger. In our context in South Africa, we are not at the stage of state persecution. However, political ambitions on the part of some church leaders have historically presented them with the problem of not being able to separate the affairs of the church from the politics of the state. Many pastors would like to have a seat in parliament, and thus, the independent churches for which they preach are viewed as a voting constituency. We have attended meetings of preachers where the reason for the meeting was to call everyone together to be represented before the government. Such meetings are not for the purpose of getting ourselves into the word of God for serious unity, but for exalting personalities to create unions. And so, in all of this jostling for either power or influence we do not forget Rome.

## Chapter 5

### Identity Of One Body

We seek to encourage Bible students to gather in order to discuss the work of the body of Christ. As long as “authorities” are not gathering together to establish a common authority among them, then meetings for mutual study move us in the right direction to reconnect as the body of Christ. In order to reconnect, we encourage members of the body to gather in order to discuss the word of God as the authority for our common unity.

When Bible lovers gather to study the word of God, then nothing but good can happen. After all, God delivered His word to us in a written manner that would promote unity and the breaking down of theological walls that would separate the members of the body from one another. As long as everyone agrees that the word of God is the authority upon which we base our unity, then we will succeed. But if we base our unity upon the common agreement of men of authority, then we will accomplish only union, and thus remain with unions when God asks for unity.

Rare is the Bible interpreter who does not read into the text of Scriptures his current patterns and policies of religious thinking and behavior. Those who do not realize this challenge have a difficult time being objective interpreters of the Scriptures. They are often the first to fall victim to organizational structures of authority and practices that fall far short of the unity with which God has blessed His people.

We have found that those who are cultic in their legalistic answers for the unity of a local body of believers are the first to encourage division of the universal body of Christ. Inherent in their legal doctrine for unity is the cause for denominating their body of disciples from all other denominations who believe in different outlines of legal doctrine. In their efforts to clone their flock into a legal community, where unity is based on total conformity to forms and norms, they have led themselves away from those who have slightly different codes of forms and norms that define their unique groups.

Injecting our commonly accepted traits of religious behavior into the Bible is a subtle mistake in hermeneutics, and one that lends the interpreter to developing eschewed understandings of various Bible texts that speak of unity. We would be the first to confess that we too wear glasses that are scratched with our traditions, and thus, often give us a distorted view of Bible texts. Therefore, we are very cautious to put a smile on our face and finger on the passage, in order to guard ourselves against binding where God has not bound.

It is for the preceding reason that we continually read and study the Bible text in order that our thinking be totally molded around what the text actually says. This is our only concern. Nevertheless, this is still no guarantee that what we purport to be the correct interpretation is

sometimes flavored with our habitual and traditional practices and beliefs. And thus, we seek to extend a great amount of mercy toward those with whom we differ in view of the fact that we too will one day stand before One from whom we will plead for mercy (Js 2:13). We would rather err on the side of being too merciful, than on the side of legally excluding those whom God may have accepted through grace.

### **A. The influence of assembly behavior.**

When discussing the subject under consideration in this book, it is almost without exception that we seek to read into the text of Scripture something that transpires during the ceremony of our regular assemblies on Sunday morning. We have unfortunately allowed our corporate assembly obsessions, that have been exported throughout the world, to define our faith, or worse, to validate a group of disciples to be “the true church,” and thus a church that can be accepted into our fellowship.

We would name this obsession with legal assembly rituals or liturgy as “assembliology.” This is the study of rituals and liturgy that we use to define our faith. Those who seek to identify the existence of the church by a certain legal ceremony of assembly behavior, have actually established the first signs of cultic behavior.

We have invented the term “assembliology” for lack of a word in our dictionary that would identify our obses-

sion with legally designated liturgies that take place during the “hour of worship” on Sunday morning. Assemblologists are those who define who they are by how they legally perform certain Sunday morning ceremonies. Because we all become accustomed to the formalities of our assembly, we often unknowingly allow the ceremonies of our assemblies to define both our Christianity and our relationship with others. In doing this, we often denominate ourselves from one another because of the differences that define our unique assemblies.

We do this because we do not allow freedom of worshipful expressions to be different from one worshiper to another. We thus clone the ceremonies of our own assemblies with others in order to construct a pretense of unity, then appoint ourselves as judges of those who do things differently. One single reading from Acts to Revelation manifests the dubious validity of this “doctrinal” identity. Nevertheless, this is where most of us are, and thus the challenge that faces anyone who would discuss the subject of unity among members of the body.

Because we are obsessed about defining who we are by the liturgy of our assemblies, we conclude that any differences in assembly “style” assumes that those who do things differently are of different faiths. The liturgy of our assemblies, not individual discipleship, becomes the standard by which we determine if we are the “true church.” We use the legal “pattern” of our assemblies to define who we are, and to some, the standard by which we determine those with

whom we will have fellowship. The end result is that we unfortunately determine an individual's salvation by the assembly in which he sits on Sunday morning. We have thus forgotten the individual's personal relationship with the Lord Jesus, by assuming that his being added to the body by God is endangered by the location of the stump on which he sits on Sunday.

Have you ever heard the statement, "He has left the church!"? Some make this statement in the sense that they have the right to subtract from the church the one whom God has added simply because someone has determined to sit somewhere else in another assembly (See At 2:47). Sometimes what is actually meant in the statement is that the judge who has made the statement is saying that one's salvation is dependent on what assembly one attends.

Have we become so judgmental and legal that we can assume that we are in the position to determine one's personal relationship with God by where he sits on Sunday morning? In the above declaration of someone "leaving the church," what is actually meant is that one has left one liturgy of assembly for another liturgy of assembly, and thus has left the liturgy of the "approved" assembly. We link our identity of the church so close to our liturgies of assembly that we have concluded that our assembly is the identity of the true church. This is a preposterous conclusion and theology.

The problem is that our adherence to common codes of assembly become so strong that we judge our own relationship with God by what we do on Sunday

morning. Because we define our faith by the codes or liturgy of our assembly, some will even sacrifice a personal relationship with someone who sits on a pew or bench in another assembly. We make judgments on relationships according to what each person customarily does during the "church assembly."

Consider also our presence in an assembly with another person who behaves "differently." If we might feel uncomfortable about someone sitting beside us who is raising their hands during the assembly, then we know we have a problem. The one raising his hands may be judging the person beside him to lack somewhat in spirituality because he does not raise his hands. It has come to the point in some situations that our body movements in assembly are used to determine if one's worship is acceptable to God, or in some situations, whether one is truly spiritual in his or her worship.

When there is no passage to judge something to be wrong in our assemblies, but we still feel uncomfortable, then we must conclude that we are allowing our feelings to determine doctrine, and worse, our salvation or the salvation of others. This is the practice of binding where God has not bound. Because of our feelings, we have made ourselves judges and lawgivers of others.

When we devise our own standards or behavioral practices that lie in the realm of freedom, then we have gone too far. We have made ourselves expert judges of others by using our own personal "assembly traditions" as the standard by which to determine what should or should

not happen during the “hour of worship” on Sunday morning. We then wonder if we would be comfortable sitting with Paul Saturday after Saturday as he went from synagogue to synagogue (See At 17:2). And then Aquila and Priscilla were every Saturday in the synagogue when Apollos eventually came by with exhortations from the Scriptures (See At 18:24-26). We would conclude that if one cannot find a text of scripture that is violated by some behavior or ceremony of liturgy, then we have no right to judge another.

## **B. In search of liturgy:**

We have combed through the New Testament scriptures several times in hope of discovering some legal and formal liturgy that would define a “scriptural” assembly. But our searches have always ended in vain. We have even looked at the disorderly assembly of 1 Corinthians 11 to find some liturgy of how the Holy Spirit corrected the Corinthians’ confusion in assembly. But still we find no established legal ritual that would constitute a “biblical” assembly. We have, however, discovered that in assembly Christians should never become involved in behavior that Paul said the unbelievers would consider “madness” (1 Co 14:23). Nevertheless, the desire of some to have a legal identity of the church by an assortment of prooftexts on assembly rites is very strong among us.

The desire to identify the church by its assembly is so strong that we will often seek to piece together some sort of legal outline that will bring comfort to our-

selves that we are the true church. As long as the “assembly outline” is performed on a regular basis on Sunday, then we can even neglect our sinful relational attitudes toward one another outside the assembly and throughout the week. We have made our legal assemblies the “atoning sacrifice” for ungodly behavior that follows the “closing prayer.”

What we have discovered among “outline-oriented” assemblologists is an unfortunate selectivity of liturgies that would supposedly define a legal assembly. In establishing these theological legalities for assembly, some have used functions that Christians are to do daily, and thus, confined these functions to an “hour of worship.” After the outline of legalities are performed on Sunday morning, then it is assumed that one can walk away after the “closing prayer” with the feeling that he or she is justified before God until the next “appointed hour of worship.”

In establishing our outline for “true worship,” we have selected singing, the proof texts of which actually define the life-style of Christians in their daily walk of life (See Ep 5:19; Cl 3:16). We have also selected prayer, though prayer too should constitute the nature of our daily discipleship (1 Th 5:19). And then there are our contributions, from which we would deprive and delay the needy on our doorstep until we can be satisfied the following Sunday to have performed our giving as a legal ritual of assembly.

Some are so eager to find a Sunday morning liturgy for assembly that they twist 1 Corinthians 16:1,2 out of its historical

context. The historical context was that Paul asked the disciples to gather their special contribution for the famine victims in Judea when they gathered together, which was on the first day of the week (1 Co 16:3). However, our eager assemblologists seem to forget the last part of verse 2: “... **so that there be no collections when I come.**” In other words, during all those Sundays when Paul was present with them, **they were to have no contributions.**

We must not forget that we often confine the preaching of the preacher to scholastic presentations on Sunday in order to make him the “pulpit preacher.” By assigning him the title and position, we limit his desire to truly preach the gospel to the lost who usually never show up at our assemblies.

But on one point we might score. The love feast/Lord’s Supper is and should be celebrated with regularity. And this the Ephesians seemly picked up on in celebrating the feast/Supper on the first day of the week (At 20:7). Other than the example of the feast/Supper on the first day of the week—and it is only an example—we find no function of the body confined to Sunday that should not be continued throughout the week. We must question how that which is to be the daily function of discipleship can become a legal definition of what would constitute a legally sanctioned assembly? If we answer that what we are to do daily cannot be used to define a legal assembly, **then certainly there can be no legal outline of assembly, that if conducted, would constitute what we would call**

**the identity of the “true church.”**

Nevertheless, we have led ourselves to believe that as long as our legal liturgies are performed on Sunday morning, then we can go on our way after the “closing prayer,” often continuing our dysfunctional relationships with one another and others. For six days after the “closing prayer” there is often a famine in preaching, singing, praying and giving until the next appointed hour when these functions are to be legally performed in order that we can say than an “official” assembly has been conducted.

**The intensity by which we identify the church with a legal performance of ceremonies on Sunday will determine the intensity by which we will determine if we are the people of God by our assemblies, and not by our love for one another.**

When we search in the New Testament for a “true” form of assembly, or “scriptural identity of assembly,” we discover few details of how the early church actually functioned in their assemblies. Because we cannot find an outline to define a supposedly “scriptural” assembly, we become somewhat uneasy. Our failure to discover an “assembly outline” leads some to question their faith. But we would remind ourselves that the lack of any directives as to how an assembly should be conducted should help us understand that the Holy Spirit is saying that there is a great deal of freedom in the area of how we meet together. And since there is freedom in this area of the function of the organic body, then we would caution ourselves not to bind where God

has loosed. If we bind a certain liturgy of assembly where God has not bound, then we are the ones who divide the church, not those who would seek freedom where God has not bound.

We must state the preceding because of what James said: “*There is one lawgiver who is able to save and to destroy. Who are you to judge another?*” (Js 4:12). When it comes to “styles” of worship or ceremonies of assembly, every disciple must ask himself, “Who are we to judge another?” When we establish any liturgy of assembly that we assert to be “scriptural,” then we know that we have become divisive. We have become divisive in separating ourselves from others who simply do things differently.

In the area of missions, we have found it quite amusing how some report back to supporters “their successes.” They will hand an outline of assembly ceremonies to a group of people, print out a name on a sign that identifies the particular group for which they have claimed to be an “established” church, and then write to supporters with the terminology, “church established.”

If a unique sign is hung over the heads of those who are performing a canned ceremony of assembly identifies the body of Christ, then whatever happened to the atoning sacrifice of Jesus? A supposed correct order of assembly does not atone for our sins and keep us “faithful.” A presumed “name of the church” hanging around our necks offers no atonement. We are children of God by faith, not by assembly ceremonies and

signs. The children of God are identified by their daily walk in the light of God’s word, not by what they momentarily do on Sunday morning. The church exists when repentant believers obey the gospel in order to wash away their sins (At 2:38,47; 22:16).

### C. Division based on different liturgies of assembly:

If we are so confident to piece together certain ceremonies by which our faith should be defined by our assemblies, then we may have no scruples about reading into the text of Scriptures our customary behavior in assembly. Once we have convinced ourselves that the traditions of our assembly are “scriptural,” then it is easy to lay “*aside the commandment of God*” in order to hold our assembly traditions (See Mk 7:1-9). The next step is only theologically natural. “*All too well you reject the commandment of God so that you may keep your own traditions*” (Mk 7:9).

One might conclude that we are making frivolous statements in reference to the oneness of the body of Christ in the context of assembly behavior. If one comes to such a conclusion at this point in our study, then it is possible that the deed has already been done. The behavior of our assemblies may be so traditional that there is no hope for any objective investigation of the oneness of the disciples since our differences in assembly will continually govern how we relate to one another. If the points on our assembly outline are confidently affirmed, then we

have gone too far to investigate objectively these matters in the Scriptures, for there are often no scriptures in the New Testament to investigate in reference to that which divides churches over assembly behavior. We are left with the dilemma, therefore, of dividing over those things about which the Scriptures say nothing.

We need to make something clear. **If one does not come to the conclusion in his study concerning the assembly of the saints that there is no New Testament established liturgy or ceremony of what would constitute a “scriptural assembly,” then the remainder of this study is useless.**

If a group of disciples are so confident that what they do in their assembly is the only way an assembly should be conducted, then that group has separated itself from others who conduct their assemblies in a different manner. In fact, if such a group were transported to the first century, they would probably have a difficult time fellowshiping the first century Christians. They would because they have led themselves to be the judges and lawgivers of “scriptural assemblies” by the standard of what they do in their assembly. **There can never be any unity among those who have a legalistic form of assembly if their definition of assembly lies within the silence of the Scriptures, and thus within the area of freedom.** Legalistic codes of liturgy can never be a basis for unity simply because we have our different rules for ceremonial liturgy. Assembly experts can only work for unions of churches, not unity.

Nevertheless, because we are of-

ten so prone to be traditionalists in reference to our religious behavior, especially in our view of the function of our assemblies with one another, we must always reinvestigate our source of validation as Christians. The pages of our Bibles must be worn with use and marked with inscriptions that indicate that we are continually searching God’s word for direction in the matter of our assemblies. We must guard ourselves against making any legal rules of assembly that are not written in the word of God.

We must, however, caution ourselves about using some New Testament texts in order to establish rules for assembly. For example, we do not want to restore the assembly of the Achaians as such was described by Paul in 1 & 2 Corinthians. We must keep in mind that these texts were written to correct dysfunctional assemblies, and thus, should be interpreted and applied with caution. There are some behavior characteristics of the first century Christians we do not want to restore. But in rightly dividing the word of truth, we seek to see past the dysfunctions of the early disciples in order to discover and apply those truths that God desires that we implement in our lives.

(Now for those who would feel quite uncomfortable at this point of study concerning liturgies of assembly, we would suggest that you download Book 5, *The Cross and The Church*, chapters 22-27, BRL, from [africainternational.org](http://africainternational.org). Also download Book 24, *Authentic Church*, and read chapter 13. The study of these books and chapters give a reasonable definition of the assemblies of the early church.)

## Chapter 6

### The One-Member Church

One of the first things to remember in order to understand the oneness of the disciples is, as stated previously, to always view the body of Christ from the point of view of Jesus from heaven. And since Jesus is reigning in heaven with all authority on earth through His word, then it is only logical that we should always view His body from how He sees the members organically functioning on earth in obedience to His word. We know this is difficult, since we are earthly bound and confined to space, time and location. But this is not the case with Jesus who looks down on His people as they work through the struggles of this world in order to spread His aroma to those who are seeking hope.

We must never forget that Jesus now has authority over all things (Mt 28:18). He is the head of all things for the sake of His body (Ep 1:22,23). We must, therefore, always view His body to be worldwide (universal) for His reign is universal. Since the body is composed of individual members throughout the world, then the body of Christ is universal. We must always view the function of the body first to be universal before we can understand the local organic function of parts of the body in any particular region of the world. This is how Jesus from heaven looks over the function of the members of His body on earth.

The body of Christ exists wherever there is a member of the body, not an as-

sembly of the body. An assembly of the body does not constitute the existence of the church in any particular location. Members, not assemblies, validate the presence of the body of Christ. Assembly is not the evidence of the existence of the body, because the body was in existence in its very beginning on the day of Pentecost before there was the first assembly the following Sunday. When the first person came forth from the waters of baptism in Jerusalem on the Pentecost in A.D. 30, and was added to the church of disciples by God, the church was in existence. The first assembly was not until a week later.

The church existed, therefore, before there was an assembly of the members of the body who had been added to the body of God's people (At 2:47). **This is why we must conclude that the church is not identified by its assemblies**, but by individual members who have been born again and added by God to the body. When we understand this one point, we have accomplished a quantum leap in understanding the oneness of the universal body of Christ.

When we approach our Textbook, therefore, it is God who adds individuals to the spiritual body that exists throughout the world (At 2:47). Wherever there are individuals who have obeyed the gospel, the church exists. We seek to expand the kingdom reign of Jesus throughout the world by preaching the gospel in

order that people have the opportunity to be added to the body of disciples. And where one person has been added to the body, the church exists.

We do not establish the church in any particular area by baptizing people. The church has already been established. Establishment of the church took place in A.D. 30 in Jerusalem. Church establishment, therefore, can never happen again. We may establish assemblies, but we can never establish the church. Wherever the gospel was preached after the Pentecost of A.D. 30, the church grew, but it was not established again.

We need to be careful, therefore, when we use the terminology “establish the church.” If we use this terminology, we may be revealing our assembliology theology. In other words, we may be seeking to validate the existence of the church in a particular location by establishing an assembly. If we think this way, then keep in mind that the church was first “established” in Jerusalem in A.D. 30 on the day of Pentecost before there was any “official” assembly of the disciples.

It might help to consider this in the following manner: If we go into a city and preach the gospel, and only one per-

son obeys the gospel by the time of our departure from that city, then we must ask ourselves, “Does the church now exist within the city?” If we say that it does, then we are on our way to focusing on individuals, not assemblies, as the identity of the church throughout the world.

The next time we ask someone, “How many churches are there in Nairobi,” we will caution ourselves. When we view Jesus looking down on individuals from heaven, then we are beginning to understand that Jesus is with us everyday of our lives, not just on Sunday morning. If we happen to be walking alone through the valley of the shadow of death some place in the world, we can find comfort in the fact that Jesus is there because we are a member of His body, the church. We do not have to be sitting in an assembly in the valley of the shadow of death to believe that we are “church,” and Jesus is there with us.

It may be that sometime in the future we will have to kneel down outside Jerusalem as Stephen and be stoned for our faith. If we do, then we can be assured that Jesus is standing at the right hand of the Father, looking down on us as we breathe our last breath of life as a member of His body.

## Chapter 7

### The Many As One Body

Jesus knew how His disciples would of necessity have to organically function after He sent the Holy Spirit upon the apostles on the day of Pentecost. He knew how they would have to function

during years of persecution. Because the disciples would first be targeted by their Jewish persecutors, and then by the state persecutors of Rome, they would of necessity have to feel good about meeting

in small groups from house to house. And thus, in His own ministry, Jesus set the example of teaching from house to house (See Mt 8:14; 9:10,23; Lk 5:29-32; 14:1; 15:1-32; 19:5).

During His earthly ministry, Jesus went from house to house ministering the word of God to the people and speaking of the change in kingdom reign that was soon to come in the lifetime of His disciples (Mk 9:1). In order to prepare His Jewish disciples for a change in kingship in heaven, He taught many concepts concerning His kingdom reign that were soon to come (Download Book 9, *The Reign of Christ*, BRL, [africainternational.org](http://africainternational.org)). Because His coming kingdom reign was such a dramatic paradigm shift in the heavenly realm, it is interesting to note how Jesus at first subtly taught on the subject, and the location where He taught these important subjects.

### **A. The disciples ministered from house to house.**

Jesus' house to house ministry seems to have established a pattern for the early disciples. They too ate their food in fellowship with one another from house to house (At 2:46). They ministered the word of God from house to house (At 5:42; 20:20). And when Saul wanted to find Christians during his campaign of terror, he went from house to house in order to search for them (At 8:3). The expansion of the body of Christ into all the world from its very beginning was from house to house. This was not a pattern of ministry to establish a precedent for either

evangelism or assembly, but simply the natural process by which the early church organically grew. It is our task to discover how the early disciples remained one organic body as they numerically grew from house to house throughout the world.

What is interesting about the early house to house function of the body was the unity that was maintained among the Christians regardless of whose house in which they assembled. Though the fellowship meetings were of necessity in the homes of the members, the members in any particular city continued to function as one united body. They never viewed themselves as autonomous from one another simply because they had to meet in their homes.

If there were many Christians in a particular city or region, then the common place of exhortation and teaching was in the homes of the members. For example, Aquila and Priscilla had a meeting of the saints in their home when they lived in Asia (1 Co 16:19). Paul found twelve disciples in Ephesus who were undoubtedly meeting in the homes of the disciples for many years before he encountered them (At 19:1-5). Nympha had a fellowship of disciples meeting in her home (Cl 4:15). When Aquila and Priscilla moved on to Rome, they continued to use their home for the assembly of the disciples (Rm 16:5). When reading the context of Romans 16, it is interesting to note the numerous household fellowships of the disciples that were taking place throughout the city of Rome, and yet, Paul did not consider any of the household fellowships to be autonomous from one another.

The kingdom reign of Jesus comes into existence in a particular region through the addition of members to the body by God after people obey the gospel. Added members then enjoy the serendipity of fellowship with other Christians who have likewise been baptized into Christ (At 2:41,47). Their unity as part of the body is a blessing that comes with their common obedience to the gospel, not because of a union of independent groups who have cloned their assemblies after one another in order to conform to one another. Unity among individual members is simply inherent in the members' common obedience to the gospel.

Since we are given no information in the New Testament on any organizational mechanism as to how all the disciples in a particular city remained united as one church, we must assume that in view of the fact that the church is always one, whether locally or internationally, then the Holy Spirit assumed that we needed no instruction on how the Christians in any region should orchestrate unity on their own accord. It was simply understood that everyone who believed in Jesus, and was obedient to the gospel, would be a part of the one body of Christ. There needed to be no instructions on how to be that which was only natural to be when added to the universal body of Christ. The early disciples simply did not allow their necessity of meeting in different homes throughout a city to separate them into independent groups that had no fellowship with one another.

Church buildings came into existence at the beginning of the fourth cen-

tury. It was Emperor Constantine who orchestrated a political move to bring Christianity into harmony with pagan religions throughout the Roman Empire. Throughout the centuries before the appearance of the first church buildings, however, it was the custom of the disciples to meet in numerous homes wherever they had the opportunity to assemble. But with the coming of larger assemblies in church buildings, the disciples in any particular city had a tendency to separate themselves from one another as members of different assembled groups naturally grew closer together in their weekly assemblies. What was natural in human relationships seemed to move the groups further away from one another as groups.

Before the large assemblies, there were small assemblies in several homes throughout a particular city. The small assemblies seemed to encourage all the members of a region to function as one body.

It was not that the initial Christians established a "doctrine" that the church should meet in homes. Meeting in the homes of the members for almost three hundred years was simply the necessity of the day, which necessity after three centuries of the existence of the church, must have been the established custom of the disciples. But it was only a custom.

The mention of house assemblies in Scripture precludes no necessity that we today must do likewise. Therefore, we must assume that when studying through passages in the New Testament that deal with the unity of the church, we must un-

derstand that the disciples were meeting in the homes of the members. But because they were meeting in small groups, they were not denominated into different autonomous groups because of their necessity to meet in their homes. We emphasize the house assembly function of the early Christians in order to better understand the New Testament statements that are made in reference to unity.

The problem comes when one reads his church building culture of today into the text of New Testament statements that refer to the assembly function of the saints. And in doing so, one usually has the tendency to assume that the early disciples in their house-assemblies functioned autonomously from one another in their assemblies as large church-building-oriented assemblies function today. But if we make this assumption, we are reading into the text of Scriptures something that is contrary to the facts of history and certainly alien to the unity of the body of members in the first century. What usually happens is that the preacher teaches on a New Testament text in reference to unity, but assumes that the passage is speaking only to those who are seated before him.

It is important to keep reminding ourselves of this point because when the subject of church unity is under consideration, those who are accustomed to assemblies in church buildings often assume that purpose-built church buildings must be read into New Testament contexts that deal with the unity of the saints. In doing this, some often force themselves to imagine how supposedly large independent assem-

blies within each city worked together as one church in the city. In many ways, our building culture of today actually hinders our objectivity in interpreting passages that deal with the unity of the body.

The unity of the church in the first century was not based on how large assemblies of disciples organized some system by which they could work together as one assembly of disciples. On the contrary, the historical context of small house assemblies did not present an obstacle for the early Christians to remain one body. The necessity of their being small drove them to associate with others in the city who were also disciples of Jesus. Their focus on unity was on individuals enjoying their common blessing of unity, regardless of where any individual member was located on Sunday.

The New Testament was not written in the context of identifying the church by its meeting in assemblies. The existence of the church was determined by individually baptized believers wherever they were located. The statements of unity in the New Testament were directed to individuals, which individuals regularly assembled with other baptized disciples wherever possible. The exhortation of New Testament passages were written to correct dysfunctional relationships between individuals, not dysfunctional relationships between different independent assemblies of Christians.

The problem of assemblies functioning independent from one another was corrected by exhortations to individuals. **The assembly of the disciples in the early church in any particular city was**

**never allowed to be an opportunity for division between any Christians.** Division only came when certain groups of elders, or individuals, separated assemblies of disciples under their own control, much like what exists today in different cities throughout the world.

For the preceding reasons, there was never any case where one assembly of disciples in the first century disfellowshipped another assembly of disciples. Since membership of the body is individual with God, it would be senseless to believe that one assembly of disciples could collectively disfellowship any individual in another assembly by disfellowshipping the entire group of disciples. The fact that some today have done such is proof of their denominational behavior in reference to assemblies being the identity of the church.

Now reverse the preceding in reference to baptized individuals as Aquila and Priscilla who were regularly sitting in an assembly of unbaptized Jews (At 18:24-26). Would their sitting among the unbelievers be justification to disfellowship Aquila and Priscilla because they met with unbelievers every Sabbath in the synagogue? We assume that they met with other disciples on Sunday, if indeed there were other disciples in Ephesus at the time. But what if there is an assembly of people who believe in Jesus and are meeting in a community where there is no assembly of the disciples? What if they are the only assembly in a pagan or idolatrous community where there are those who believe in Jesus? Could a Christian sit in their midst? We wonder if

Paul separated himself on Sunday from the twelve disciples he found until they obeyed the gospel in the name of Jesus (At 19:1-7)? We pose these questions to those among us who are quick with all the answers to condemn an individual disciple because he or she does not have the opportunity to sit in a legally sanctioned assembly, if indeed one existed in the area where he lives.

The answer to the above scenarios is that the Christian should simply start an assembly in his own house. And that is exactly what happened in the first century. This is what Aquila and Priscilla did, though for evangelistic purposes, they took every opportunity to meet with other religious people as long as they were allowed. The early Christians started their assemblies in their own houses, and stayed there for several centuries.

## **B. The many remained one.**

In every city of the first century wherein Christians resided, the Christians were meeting throughout the city at different locations. Each member was functioning as part of the one organic body of Christ. In a city as Jerusalem, with an estimated 30,000 members, plus children, there were meetings in hundreds of homes throughout the city. In fact, if we were to make a conservative estimate, we might assume that there was an average of 25 members, plus children, meeting in every house. If this estimate is anywhere near the average assembly, then there would have been about **1,200 house assemblies in Jerusalem by the time of the**

**events of Acts 15.** And yet, when the events of Acts 15 were recorded by Luke, he made the statement, “*Now when they [Paul and Barnabas] came to Jerusalem, they were received by **the church** [ekklesia]...*” (At 15:4).

When we read accounts of the activities of the disciples in Jerusalem, Luke always referred to the church as a single body of disciples. We must take Luke’s use of the word *ekklesia* into the rest of the contexts of Acts where he records the presence of Christians in different cities. For example, when Paul went throughout Syria and Cilicia, he strengthened the “churches” (At 15:41). The better translation of the word *ekklesia* in this context would be that he went to and strengthened the assemblies of the disciples in the cities that he visited. When he went throughout Galatia, the “*churches [assemblies] were strengthened in the faith and increased in number daily*” (At 16:5). The number of disciples increased in all the regions that he visited, and therefore, there was an increase in house assemblies. These are the only two cases where Luke uses the plural of *ekklesia* in reference to the disciples. We would conclude that he does so in order to reaffirm to Theophilus, the one to whom the document of Acts was directed, should understand that the disciples were meeting throughout cities and regions of the Roman Empire in different assemblies, though they were the one *ekklesia* of Christians.

Luke did not determine the existence of the church in any city by the number of assemblies in a particular city, but by

the individual disciples in the city. When he discusses the growth of the church in Acts, it is growth in members, not assemblies (See At 1:15; 2:41,47; 4:4; 6:7). He emphasized the oneness of the disciples in any city by using the singular term “church” that referred to all the disciples who were numbered as members of the body. But when a teacher came through town, Luke used the plural of *ekklesia* in order to emphasize the method by which the disciples assembled to be taught and encouraged.

We find it quite interesting when biblical interpreters do not figure into their historical studies of the church the fact of the numerous assemblies (“churches”) of the saints in the cities to whom the epistles were written. Invariably, some interpreters come to a particular epistle that is addressed to the saints in a city that is named, and yet, they assume that there was only one single assembly of the saints on Main Street and Central Avenue in the city. Such an historical prejudice does no justice to our understanding of the organic function of the body. In fact, such an interpretive prejudice twists the meaning of those texts that deal with the organic unity of the members of the body. Instead of understanding the “unity passages” of the New Testament in the context of multiple-assemblies of the church in any particular city, some unnecessarily force themselves into wondering how large single-assembly churches supposedly worked together as one church in a city. We believe that the real picture is that the disciples were all one church **as individual members**. This fact was understood by

the first readers, regardless of where any individual member was located on Sunday morning. The word “church” (*ekklesia*) did not refer to literal assemblies of the members, but to the members as God’s called out assembly of people.

With some interpreters, the single-assembly prejudice is so ingrained in their interpretations that they lead us to deny the rapid growth of the early church. For example, after at least three decades of the existence of the church in Ephesus, it is assumed by some interpreters that there was still only one single-assembly of the disciples in the city of Ephesus when John recorded the following statement in the book of Revelation, “*To the angel of the church of Ephesus ...*” (Rv 2:1). To believe that this statement assumes that there was still only one assembly of the disciples in Ephesus after such a long period of growth is certainly a denial of the early growth of the church in Ephesus.

It is not that there was only one single-assembly of disciples in Ephesus at the time Jesus addressed “the church” in Ephesus in Revelation 2, **but the singularity of the word “church” teaches the unity of the individual disciples who were meeting in many house assemblies throughout the city, and yet, they were united as one church.** The assumption that there was only one single-assembly of the church in Ephesus, and other cities of the New Testament, is a subtle denial of the unity of the disciples within these cities.

Some might argue that the multiple assemblies of the church in a particular city or region is not relevant to our discussion on the unity of the organic body. But we would certainly argue to the contrary. Without going into the novice nature of such reasoning, **we would contend that we cannot understand the nature of the unity of the universal body of Christ unless we first understand the house-assembly function of the disciples when the epistles were written and addressed to the early disciples in any particular city or region.** The epistles were directed to the members of God’s family who were all working together as a single unit, though there were corrections made in the letters in order to correct their relational dysfunctions.

The discussions in the following chapters of this book will validate the necessity of this conclusion. One will also come to the conclusion that the present assembly behavior of the church makes it difficult to understand how the disciples in a particular city as a whole in the first century could be united as one in Christ while meeting at different locations throughout a city or region. But if we could set aside our modern-day single-autonomous-assembly prejudices, we can better understand that we are united as individuals in Christ, regardless of where, when or with whom we sit on Sunday morning.

## Chapter 8

### Discipleship Beyond Assemblies

When we step down from a “high church” assembly identity of the church to a multiple assembly of the church of Christians meeting in small groups, we actually need to move down one more level. Most of New Testament letters were written to correct dysfunctional behavior, whether this behavior was manifested in a dysfunctional assembly or when one was ordinarily going about his personal life in the world around him. About half of the New Testament is a record of the life and ministry of Jesus. The remainder of the letters of instruction, and a final note of prophetic encouragement (Revelation), were addressed to individuals as members of the body. When we understand that the Bible was written to teach us the science of life, then we are on our way to understand better all the work that God put into giving us His instructions for life.

The main objective of the New Testament letters was not to identify the church by a performance of legal codes. We understand the epistles as instructions on living, not as a doctrinal constitution on church and assembly. It was not the purpose of the Holy Spirit to establish a legal code to identify the disciples in any particular community by a doctrinal code of assembly. It was His purpose to correct individuals in their individual relationships with one another in order that they be known for their love of one another (See Jn 13:34,35). The New Testament is a textbook on how God wants us to love

Him above all, our neighbors of the world among whom we must live, and one another as His children (Mt 22:34-40).

In some contexts of Scripture, the assembly of the saints became the opportunity for the carnality of some members to reveal itself. But we must not be diverted in our understanding of these texts by thinking that a pattern of assembly had been violated, and thus, a correct pattern was subsequently revealed. The problem in Achaia, for example, was not in the violation of a pattern of assembly, but in the dysfunctional relationships that some disciples fostered toward one another long before they arrived at the assembly. What corrupted their coming together in assembly was the unholy attitudes of some who were inconsiderate of others, not some doctrinal code of liturgy they violated.

As previously stated, there are few statements in the Scriptures that deal with the coming together in assembly of the disciples. The vast majority of inspired New Testament Scripture deals with the spiritual conduct of disciples outside assembly, and their struggles to survive in this world. We would, therefore, view the text of Scripture primarily as a road map on how to live our daily lives with one another in our struggles to live in a world that is hostile to faith.

Christians assemble with one another because of their one another relationships that are built on love (Jn

13:34,35). If there are those who need a commandment to be with their brothers and sisters in Christ, then they are struggling with loving their brothers and sisters in Christ. The solution to this lack of love is not legal commands on correct assemblies, but teaching on how to love one another, which is exactly what is contained in the New Testament letters.

If we come to the New Testament in order to discover instructions that will help us make it through every day, then we will get over our obsession of trying to find a legal code of conduct for an “hour of worship” once a week on Sunday morning. We will cease trying to identify ourselves by a brief encounter with one another on Sunday.

Almost all the disputes that occur among Christians come from those who have obsessed over some violation of liturgy on Sunday morning. Such disputes over supposed violations that take place during the “hour of worship” too often divert our attention away from correcting unloving attitudes that occur outside our assemblies. We are saddened when we consider how many conflicts have resulted over the supposed “biblical” ceremonies by which the Lord’s Supper is supposedly to be carried out during an assembly. It is in controversies over subjects as the Lord’s Supper that reveal our character outside the assembly. In fact, this would be the context of Paul’s statement of 1 Corinthians 11:19: *“For there must also be factions among you so that those who are approved may be made known among you.”*

Our unloving and contentious spirits

in matters of opinion make us no better than the Achaians who were drunken with the wine of the Supper, which wine some had consumed totally before the arrival of all the saints for the Supper (1 Co 11:17-34). We must continually remind ourselves that the epistles were written to correct dysfunctions in our personal lives. Once the dysfunctions are corrected, then there is no difficulty in our coming together in love. And in reference to the Achaians, there was a great deal of relational dysfunction among the members before they showed up at an assembly with one another.

The interpretive foundation upon which we base our understanding of unity is that the Holy Spirit seeks to reveal the will of God to those who believe in Jesus. Because we are less than perfect, the Holy Spirit had His holy hands full when He directed the early writers to give us direction concerning our behavior. When we read the Spirit’s epistles to correct social dysfunctions among the body of members, we keep in mind that He was focusing first on each member individually. If the individuals sorted out their lives, then the assembly of the individuals would be a joyous occasion for spiritual renewal.

In reference to unity, the Holy Spirit moved through inspired writings to correct relational functions that individual disciples are to have with one another. The early house assemblies were the opportunity for individual members to discover their spiritual and personal dysfunctions. It is easy to hide in the crowd of a large assembly and allow oneself to have his personality dysfunctions to go unchecked.

But in the close fellowships of the early house assemblies, dysfunctional relationships revealed themselves. These dysfunctions then had the opportunity to be corrected in a spirit of love.

In the weekly assemblies of the Achaia members in their respective towns, there seems to have been little problem when the “Cephites,” “Apollosites,” and “Paulites” met in their own assemblies. But when all the members of all Achaia came together to celebrate around the love feast/Supper, then their sectarian attitudes and behavior were manifested. They had no problem as long as they met in their own small groups. But when all the members came together into one assembly, it was manifested that they were dysfunctional in their personal relationships with one another. It was this dysfunction that was reported to Paul, who subsequently wrote that it was not possible for them to come together to celebrate their unity around the love feast/Supper. On the contrary, their coming together in the assembly of all the saints manifested their disunity (1 Co 11:17-19). It was during this area wide assembly where the factions among them were manifested (1 Co 11:19).

What seems to have transpired was that some house assemblies assumed a certain “personality,” or at least surrounded themselves around a certain personality. In reference to the Achaian situation, for example, the “Cephites” were fine when they met together with one another. One group even harbored a certain member who was living immorally with his father’s wife (1 Co 5:1-5).

Regardless of how different groups dysfunctionally condoned immorality or sectarian behavior in their assemblies, corrections had to be made. The sectarians could not hide in their own groups. The immoral person could not hide among those who condoned his sin. Neither could Jews or Gentiles separate themselves from one another into either Gentile or Jewish groups (See Gl 2:11-16). The behavior of every member, regardless of where he or she assembled, affected the entire church.

We might conclude that if one can maintain a dysfunctional spirit or immoral behavior while assembling with the saints in a particular group, **then the assembly is too impersonal, or the group has compromised the moral teaching of the word of God.** A participatory and interactive assembly of the saints is an opportunity for each disciple to correct dysfunctional personality characteristics in a spirit of love. If immorality is involved, then the immoral can be rebuked.

When we correct our personality dysfunctions in a spirit of love, then the assembly of the saints becomes an adventure in personality discovery. When we live in a relational environment where our morally can be checked, then we are kept safe from falling if we repent. When we are in an assembly of brothers and sisters where relationships are functional to “*confess your sins to one another and pray for one another*” (Js 5:16), then our assemblies are conducive to spiritual support and character building. It is then that our coming together is for the better, and not for the worse.

What the Holy Spirit did do through the instructions of the written word of God is to correct the dysfunction of individuals in order that the individuals have an opportunity to rejoice in assembly. When we meet together in love, our spirit of worship is enhanced. Assembly becomes the sweet opportunity to taste the essence of what God intended should occur in a relational gathering of all the parts of the body. It is for this reason that every assembly of the saints should be an oppor-

tunity for edification.

It is through edification that the power of the unified body is released. When the many are edified through assembly, the power of each member is released. It is our conclusion that every assembly of the saints should be for edification, for when each member of the body is edified, the power of the Spirit that works in every member is released on the world through the energized witness of each member of the body.

## Chapter 9

### Oneness In All Achaia

The history of the church in Achaia initially originated from the Thessalonian disciples in the province of Macedonia. When Paul, Silas and Timothy left Philippi, they passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, and then came to the city of Thessalonica (At 17:1). There was great receptivity of the gospel in Thessalonica, and thus, the newly converted disciples evidently said to the two evangelists, Paul and Silas, that they would take ownership of Macedonia. They said to the evangelists that they should go on to the city of Berea, and then to the province of Achaia. So they sent Paul and Silas on to Berea, while Timothy stayed in Macedonia (At 17:10).

Paul was then accompanied by some of the Berean brethren on his way to Athens where he again preached Jesus as the Christ and Son of the one true and living God (At 17:15). After Athens, Paul ended up in the city of Corinth that was located in the province of Achaia (At

18:1). If Aquila and Priscilla were already Christians when Paul arrived, we could assume that the church already existed in Achaia upon Paul's arrival.

The Thessalonian disciples truly took ownership of their responsibility as disciples of Jesus to reach out from Thessalonica in order to preach the good news of Jesus. It was only about six months after Paul left Thessalonica when he wrote back to the Thessalonians the following words:

*And you became imitators of us and of the Lord ... so that you were examples to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place ... (1 Th 1:6-8).*

By the time Paul arrived in the province of Achaia, the "word of the Lord" had already spread throughout the prov-

ince through the mission efforts of the disciples in Thessalonica. Upon his arrival in Achaia, the word of God had gone into all the province because of the efforts of some very zealous disciples who wanted to share the opportunity to unbelievers to come out of idolatrous religiosity and into the fellowship of the Son of the one true and living God.

We might assume that since Paul found Aquila and Priscilla in Corinth, these two may have been contacted first by the Thessalonians in their evangelistic outreach to Achaia (At 18:1-3). For some reason, it was easy for Paul to find these two Jewish disciples when he arrived. Some have assumed that he connected with them because they too were in the tentmaking business. This may be true. But the most probable reason why Paul and the tentmaking couple connected was because Aquila and Priscilla were already disciples at the time Paul arrived, possibly being the result of the evangelistic efforts of the disciples in Thessalonica. Stephanas and his household, whom Paul personally baptized (1 Co 1:16), were the firstfruits of Achaia that Paul baptized (1 Co 16:15). But since Aquila and Priscilla were from Pontos and Rome, they were not considered the “firstfruits” of Achaia. We might assume, therefore, that they were already Christians by the time Paul met them in Corinth.

With the help of Aquila and Priscilla, Paul’s personal preaching to all Achaia originated first from the city of Corinth (At 18:1-3). In order to understand the organic unity of the body of Christ throughout all Achaia, we must under-

stand that Paul was not the only evangelist who preached throughout the many cities and towns of the province. We must come to some justified conclusions concerning his ministry in Achaia in order to develop a better understanding of what actually transpired throughout Achaia in reference to the preaching of the gospel and the organic unity of the body. Our conclusions concerning the existence of the church in Achaia lead us to a better understanding of the nature of the unity of the body of Christ as the members reached into all the world with the preaching of the gospel.

#### **A. Peter and Apollos preached in Achaia.**

The division among some of the disciples that prevailed throughout Achaia manifested itself when the whole community of believers came together for the love feast/Lord’s Supper that was probably held in the city of Corinth (1 Co 11:17,18). The context of the 1 Corinthians 11 love feast/Lord’s Supper assembly is better understood with the view that this was an occasional meeting of all the Achaian disciples, not just those who resided in the city of Corinth. In the context of this assembly for the regional love feast/Lord’s Supper, the opportunity presented itself for some disciples to manifest their inconsiderate attitudes and divisive behavior that were contrary to the nature of the unity of the body. Some disciples who had to come from great distances to the occasion were marginalized by the behavior of those who were quite

inconsiderate and sectarian. The situation was so grave that some were even left hungry after they had journeyed a great distance to be at the meeting. Because of the ungodly situation that prevailed, we must determine what was happening during the assembled fellowship in order to understand the exhortations that Paul wrote to correct the situation.

**1. Exhortation for unity:** Paul began the Corinthian exhortations on unity with the general admonition 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**.*

This is the foundational statement that helps us understand the nature of the organic function of all the saints in Achaia, not just those of the municipality of Corinth. We need to determine if the preceding statement of Paul was an impossible mandate that was bound on the individuals of any particular group of disciples, or if it is a reference to all the members to maintain their fellowship with one another throughout all Achaia.

Taken literally, the statement might seem to enjoin on the disciples an almost cultic principle of unity if the mandate is to the members of any group of saints who were meeting in someone's house. A dominant leader could certainly use this passage to bind what he considered the

“same thing” on those over whom he dictatorially reigned in a particular house assembly. But we feel that this is far from the truth of the passage, and thus, we need to go further in our investigation of what Paul meant in order to understand what he was mandating in reference to the unity of the body of Christ.

**2. The Achaian ministry of three preachers:** Consider the fact that the personalities around which some of the division was occurring were the three evangelists, Paul, Apollos and Cephas (Peter). The fact that some of the Christians in Achaia were dividing over personalities was not the fault of any of the three evangelists. The fault of division was with those who sought an opportunity to call themselves after those they highly respected. This is something that is human nature, but can become the opportunity for those who have a sectarian spirit to divide the body of Christ. However, we must not ignore the fact that Apollos was a Gentile and Peter was a Jew. Those who claimed to be of Apollos were possibly the Gentile converts in Achaia and those who claimed to be of Peter were possibly the Jewish converts. This is only an assumption concerning the nature of the division, but one that should not be ignored.

The disciples were calling themselves after these three personalities, whom, we could correctly assume, **preached in all or portions of Achaia by the time Paul wrote the letter of 1 Corinthians from Ephesus**. We know Apollos preached in some places of Achaia (At 19:1). Notice carefully

Apollos' initial desires in his contact with Aquila and Priscilla in Ephesus: "*And when he [Apollos] desired to go to Achaia ...*" (At 18:27).

It was Apollos' initial desire to go to the province of Achaia. He did initially go to all of Achaia, but first went to the principle city of the province, which was Corinth (At 19:1). However, we cannot assume that while he was in Achaia that he limited his preaching only to the city of Corinth. Since his original desire was to go to Achaia, we would assume that he ministered the word of God far beyond the city of Corinth. This seemed to be the nature of Apollos, for he was an adventurous evangelist, and true evangelists by nature continually seek to go to new places in order to preach the gospel.

We are not told when Peter (Cephas) was in Achaia. The only evidence that we have of him preaching in the region is Paul's mention of his name when he, Paul, rebuked the Corinthian disciples for using him as an occasion for division over personalities. We would not assume that the Gentiles of Achaia would have used his name as an occasion for division simply because Peter's reputation had spread to the region by the time Paul wrote the 1 Corinthian letter. The only valid conclusion would be that Peter was personally in the province sometime after Paul left Achaia, but before he wrote 1 Corinthians.

The ministry of the three preachers not only produced fruit through the preaching of the gospel, but those who were converted were naturally attracted to the personality who initially preached the gospel

to them. The Achaian disciples had their favorite preachers, which favoritism eventually became one of opportunities to manifest a divisive spirit among them.

We would not assume that all three preachers (Paul, Apollos and Peter) restricted their preaching to the "city limits" of Corinth. This would have been most unnatural in reference to the work of an evangelist. We do not know how long either evangelist stayed in the province. But one thing would certainly be true if their preaching began in Corinth. **Visitors from all Achaia who came to Corinth and heard the message of the gospel, would have asked them continually to come to their areas throughout all Achaia and also preach the gospel.** We would correctly assume that Paul, Peter and Apollos would certainly have answered these pleas. If they did not have the time to answer these "Macedonian calls," then the visitors themselves would have returned to their towns and villages throughout all Achaia with the message of the gospel.

## **B. The correction letter to all the disciples of Achaia:**

In order to understand the unity about which the Holy Spirit wrote in 1 Corinthians 1:10, we need to determine exactly those to whom the exhortation was written. Once this is determined, then some surprising light is shed on our understanding of the meaning of the passage.

We must remind ourselves of a very important historical fact concerning the

early assemblies of the church in the first century. Because we are often so prejudiced by our belief in autonomous assemblies, we must continually remind ourselves that such a belief and practice was foreign to the organic function of the early disciples. They never considered separating themselves from one another because of their necessity to meet at different locations. They never considered functioning independently of one another.

We must keep in mind that autonomous function is a modern-day behavior and theology that is read into the function of the early church. It is a theology, unfortunately, that is so strong among some today that it is considered almost heresy to even submit the possibility that the early Christians had no concept of behaving independently from one another because they met at different locations in assembly. **The early Christians did not consider their assembly locations to be an opportunity by which they would denominate from one another in the organic function of the body.** Therefore, we must guard ourselves from reading into the earthly organic function of the early church something that is unique to us today, but is foreign to the Scriptures. We must simply keep in mind that it was the church that was in the cities, not churches. Focus in the New Testament was on people as the church, not assemblies as the identity of the people as the church.

The assertion of the “autonomous” theology is so common today among religious groups that many have led themselves to believe that when a particular

group of disciples is mentioned in the New Testament, then there must have been only one single assembly of the disciples of the church in the mentioned city. In other words, when in Revelation Jesus addressed the seven churches in seven cities of Asia, it is assumed that there was only one assembly (“one church”) in each of the seven cities that are mentioned in Revelation 2 & 3. We feel that such is not only an erroneous historical conclusion, but as previously stated, an attack against the organic unity and early growth of the church in the first century.

If we assume the late date of the writing of Revelation to be around A.D. 96, then the autonomy doctrine would assert that from the time of the massive conversion in Ephesus of Acts 19 in the middle 50s, to the date of writing of Revelation in A.D. 96, the church in Ephesus grew to only one single assembly in the city, and that assembly was meeting in the home of some disciple. We believe that such a conclusion is essentially preposterous, if not a denial of the early organic function of the body of members, not only in Ephesus, but also in all the major cities of the first century. We find it quite erroneous to believe that by the time the New Testament letters were written, that there was only one single assembly of disciples in Rome, Corinth, Thessalonica, Philippi, Ephesus, Antioch, Jerusalem, and Colosse. Such a conclusion seems to be the opposite of the Holy Spirit’s historical statement that the early Christians turned the world upside down for Jesus (See At 17:6).

We must also reconsider the auto-

mous single-assembly theology in reference to the early meetings of the disciples in the homes of the members. Again, there was no such thing in the first century as church buildings, school halls or civic centers in which the early Christians could meet. During times of Jewish persecution, which later moved into the state persecution of the Roman Empire, it would have been counter productive for the disciples to advertise the location of their assemblies by meeting in public places (compare At 8:3).

When the church went underground and met in caves (the catacombs) under the city of Rome during the heat of the state persecution of Rome, we think it would have been quite unreasonable for groups of disciples to function autonomously from one another in reference to their assemblies. The Christians were struggling together for survival, not to survive in order to be denominated from one another. While enduring the heat of persecution, the early Christians were drawn together, not separated from one another into independent groups.

With the understanding that the one church consisted of multiple-assemblies within the regions or cities of the first century, we approach mandates for unity that are expressed in statements as 1 Corinthians 1:10. We understand these statements with the view that the text is teaching that the disciples remained united. 1 Corinthians 1:10 was written in the historical context of some disciples denominating over personalities. Paul wrote the exhortation in order to encourage the fact

that Christ is not divided, and thus, they could not, as the body of Christ, be divided into independent groups (1 Co 1:13).

We consider exhortations as 1 Corinthians 1:10 to be exhortations that the disciples not allow their regular assemblies to become the opportunity to draw away from one another as independent groups. Our understanding of the organic unity of the disciples who regularly met at different places, and possibly different times on Sunday, does not canonize for us any theology on assembly. The early Christians' multiple-house assemblies were simply out of necessity. However, sometimes their meetings in different houses became the opportunity for them to manifest a sectarian spirit on the part of some. Meeting in only one place was not Paul's answer to the problem. His answer was to correct their relationships with one another because they were all "of Christ." They were all "of Christ" because they had all been baptized in the name of Christ (1 Co 1:12,13).

We do not, therefore, argue against the sin of division by offering a divisive doctrine of either legal union or cloning within or among autonomous assemblies. We do not argue for autonomy in order to promote a superfluous unity that is actually a union. We seek to deal with the sectarian attitudes that often prevails among disciples, regardless of where the disciples sit on Sunday morning. And in order to do this, there are some very interesting facts concerning those to whom the letters of 1 & 2 Corinthians were directed.

**1. Stephanas and his household were the firstfruits of Achaia.** In 1 Corinthians 16:15, Paul wrote, “... *brethren, you know the household of Stephanas, that it is the firstfruits of Achaia ....*” Stephanas, Fortunatus and Achaicus had come to Paul in Ephesus to minister to Paul “*what was lacking on your [the Achaians’] part*” (1 Co 16:17). As they brought support from Achaia to Paul, they also reported to Paul what was happening among the disciples in Achaia.

In considering this statement in reference to the conversion of Stephanas and his household as the first ones to be converted in Achaia, why would we assume that Stephanas, Fortunatus and Achaicus were only from the city of Corinth? Paul certainly addressed his first letter to the disciples in the area “*to the church of God that is at Corinth*” (1 Co 1:2). But we make a wrong assumption by not considering the second letter **that was written to the same people**. Because of the preceding statement, we wrongly assume that 1 Corinthians was directed only to the disciples who lived in the city of Corinth. But in the passage quoted above in reference to Stephanas (1 Co 16:15), Paul did not say that he was the firstfruits of the city of Corinth. **Stephanas and his household were the firstfruits of Achaia**, though they may have lived in the city of Corinth. It seems more logical to conclude that Paul was writing to all the disciples in all of the province of Achaia, not just to those in the city of Corinth. In other words, his letters were not exclusively to the disciples in Corinth simply because he mentions this city in

the introduction of the first letter. When we get to the follow-up letter (2 Co), this point is made very clear.

The occasion for much of the division was when all the disciples of Achaia came together in the city of Corinth to celebrate the love feast/Lord’s Supper. This would be particularly true in reference to their provincial and occasional assemblies in one city for the Lord’s Supper. But the division among all the disciples throughout the province was not simply in Corinth. It was a provincial problem. The problem only manifested itself during the periodic regional assembly of all the members when they came together in Corinth for the love feast/Lord’s Supper. (More on this in chapter 11.)

So in Paul’s reference to Stephanas as a representative of Achaia in 1 Corinthians 16:15, we could assume that Stephanas was not from Corinth, but from some other town in Achaia. In fact, Paul commended those who sent the representatives of Stephanas, Fortunatus and Achaicus to him with their support. The uniqueness of Stephanas and his household was that they had “*dedicated themselves to the ministry of the saints*” (1 Co 16:15). This was to the ministry of the saints in all Achaia.

In 1 Corinthians 16:15 Paul said, “*You know the household of Stephanas ....*” Paul’s mention of the household of Stephanas was not an introduction to this household. It was simply a statement concerning a household that they already knew. The knowledge of this household throughout Achaia, therefore, assumes that the three men,

Stephanus, Fortunatus, and Achaicus, were representatives to Paul from all the saints of Achaia, not just Corinth.

Stephanas and his household were known throughout Achaia because they had dedicated themselves to serve the saints throughout the province. When we investigate this matter in the second letter, the ministry of this household was certainly far beyond the city of Corinth. The division among the disciples was provincial, and thus, the one who was familiar with all the divided parts within the body was a household of dedicated servants who moved among the disciples throughout the province.

**2. Those to whom 2 Corinthians was directed clarifies those to whom 1 Corinthians was directed.** With the comments of the previous point in mind, consider Paul’s introduction in the second letter:

*Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, to the church of God that is at Corinth, with all the saints who are in all Achaia (2Co 1:1).*

Paul specifically addressed the second letter to the saints in the city of Corinth, but he tied these saints to all the saints in Achaia with the word “with.” **This is one of the strongest statements in the New Testament that teaches the organic unity of the body of Christ in any particular region where there are Christians.**

We deduct from Paul’s introductory statements in both letters that he was addressing all the saints in Achaia representatively through the saints who were in Corinth. The problem of disunity that Paul

discussed was not exclusively with the saints in the city of Corinth. Those who claimed to be “of Apollos” or “of Cephas” or “of Paul” were scattered throughout the province of Achaia. They were scattered throughout the province because the former ministry of Paul, Peter and Apollos extended throughout the province.

**3. All Achaia was ready to contribute to the famine in Judea.** When Paul moved on in 2 Corinthians to his discussion of the special famine contribution for Judea, his commendation concerning contributions about which he wrote to the Macedonian Christians was not simply in reference to the saints in Corinth.

*Concerning the ministry of the saints, it is not needful to me to write to you, for I know the willingness of your mind, of which I boast of you to those of Macedonia, that Achaia was ready a year ago. And your zeal has stirred up the majority (2Co 9:1,2).*

Paul boasted that the saints in all Achaia had prepared for the contribution. His boast was not in reference to the saints in the city of Corinth alone. The commendation was concerning all the saints in all Achaia. We conclude, therefore, that this statement ties the recipients of both 1 & 2 Corinthians together to be addressed to all the saints in Achaia. For this reason, **Paul’s encouragement through the boast had to go to all the saints in all Achaia**, the saints whom he addressed in both letters.

The pronoun “you” in 2 Corinthians 9:1,2 referred to **all the Christians in Achaia**, and thus, the letter of 2 Corin-

thians was written to **all the Christians in Achaia**. Therefore—and please note this—when Paul uses the pronoun “you” throughout the letter of 2 Corinthians, we must conclude that he was addressing all the saints in all Achaia. And we would go one step further in our conclusion. **The problems that Paul addressed in 2 Corinthians reflected on the problems with which he dealt in the first letter.** Since this would be a logical conclusion, we would assert that 1 Corinthians was also directed to all the saints in Achaia who were dealing with some problems in reference to the unity of the saints.

It was in the context of his address to all the saints in all Achaia that the plea of 1 Corinthians 1:10 was made. Paul’s exhortation in reference to unity in both letters, therefore, **was that the individual saints of Achaia not denominate themselves from one another, regardless of where they lived, with whom they assembled, or who they favored as their leader.** Paul’s mandates for unity were not written to autonomous groups to be united as a network of churches. His instructions were directed to individual members to be united with one another as the one universal body of Christ. If the members maintained their unity with one another, then the members of all their assemblies would be united.

**4. Paul supported himself while preaching in all Achaia.** One thing is certain concerning Paul’s preaching when he went to Corinth. **He preached in all the province of Achaia**, not just in the city of Corinth. Notice carefully the word-

ing of his statements in 2 Corinthians 11:9 in reference to his support. He made the statements, “*present with you*” and, “*I was not a burden to anyone ... I have kept myself from being burdensome to you.*” In 2 Corinthians 11:10 he concluded these remarks with the statement, “*As the truth of Christ is in me, no one will stop me from this boasting in the regions of Achaia.*” It is evident that he was addressing in 2 Corinthians **all the disciples in all Achaia**, not just those in the city of Corinth. As he traveled about preaching the gospel in all Achaia, he supported himself in order not to be a burden to any of the new converts.

Paul’s ministry was to the province of Achaia when he was personally in the province. The problems of the church of Achaia with which he dealt in the second letter, were problems he mentioned in 1 Corinthians. And since the second letter was directed to all the disciples in Achaia, then we must conclude that the first letter was also directed to all the disciples in Achaia.

In the context of the problem that he addressed in 2 Corinthians 11 concerning divisions surrounding the Lord’s Supper, we must assume that when he wrote both letters, they were addressed to all the Christians in the province of Achaia. The purpose for which the members of the church in Achaia came together for the love feast/Supper was actually lost in their independent behavior of being exclusive in some of their home assemblies. In order to correct their disconnected assemblies, Paul sought to correct their relationships with one another.

## Chapter 10

### The Achaian Example

We need to draw some conclusions from the fact that there were Christians meeting in small groups throughout all the province of Achaia. These saints were addressed in the letters of 1 & 2 Corinthians. In drawing our conclusions, we must not forget the fact that both 1 & 2 Corinthians were addressed to “*all the saints who are in all Achaia*” (2 Co 1:1). With this in mind, we consider all the exhortations of 1 & 2 Corinthians in view of the fact that the two letters were written to individual Christians throughout the province, encouraging them to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

Since the message of 1 & 2 Corinthians was directed to all the saints in all of Achaia, which saints were meeting in numerous houses in the many towns, cities, villages, and farms throughout the province, then we must consider the exhortation of 1 Corinthians 1:10 in this context. If 1 Corinthians 1:10 teaches anything, **it teaches that there was to be no such thing as an independent and exclusive function of any group of disciples among all the Christians of Achaia.**

When Paul exhorted that all the disciples in Achaia be united, his exhortation far exceeded the limits of some autonomous single group of disciples. His exhortation was to be heeded by the “church of the Paulites,” “church of the Cephites,” and “church of the Apollosites.” In fact, it would be quite preposterous to conclude

that either 1 or 2 Corinthians was directed to one specific assembly of disciples. The fact that the Christians in Corinth alone were meeting in many different homes throughout the city, would validate the conclusion that the letters could not have been written to any one group, but to all the saints.

Paul wrote “*that there be no divisions among you [as individuals], but that you be perfectly joined together [as one body] in the same mind and in the same judgment*” (1 Co 1:10). What exactly would this statement mean when understood in view of the fact that the church throughout Achaia was multiple in the assembly of the disciples?

Since it would be natural for those who met together on a regular and weekly basis to draw closer to one another with the possible neglect of others, then we would understand that Paul’s exhortation would be directly against forming cliques of disciples who would call themselves after different personalities as Paul, Cephas or Apollos. It is not wrong to call a particular group after a specific location. But churches need to be careful in identifying their assemblies with unique names in order to separate themselves from one another.

Some of the problems of division in Achaia rose from individual disciples calling themselves after at least three different personalities. The novice disciples in Achaia evidently suffered from

“preacheritis.” Their denominating after personalities seemed to be only natural since all the saints in Achaia lived in a very idolatrous society. They needed to connect with someone as their leader, and thus, they naturally connected to the only person who initially delivered the gospel to them. The disciples possibly took pride in the one who baptized them (See 1 Co 1:14-16). They had forgotten that the more one follows a favorite personality on earth, the less his faith is dependent on the personality of Jesus in heaven. The more one seeks on earth a mediator between himself and God, the less he depends on Jesus Christ as his only mediator (1 Tm 2:5). This is the emotional background upon which Jesus made the statement, “*And call no one your father on the earth, for One is your Father, He who is in heaven*” (Mt 23:9).

In the case of Apollos and Cephas, these two may have personally baptized some of those who had divisively given allegiance to them. In order to correct this denominating among the saints, Paul said, “*I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius ... also the household of Stephanas*” (1 Co 1:14,16). The occasion for some of the division, therefore, was that allegiance was being given to different preachers who baptized them. And because of this, Paul was thankful that he had baptized only a few, lest a group follow him to the exclusion of others (1 Co 1:12).

The problem was that those who were calling themselves after men denominated the church over their favorite preacher, which preacher, had no inten-

tion of ever drawing away disciples after himself (1 Co 1:12). So when Paul exhorted that they be perfectly joined together, and that there be no divisions among them, he was speaking in the context of different groups forming their own sects after their allegiance to a favorite preacher, and subsequently, forming independent groups that were identified by a specific personality. **1 Corinthians 1:10 must be understood in reference to the individuals being united, and thus, correcting the dividing into independent groups.** If the individuals corrected their relationships with one another, then the groups would naturally be united. Since this is a contextual understanding of the statement of 1 Corinthians 1:10, then certainly it is a statement against anyone establishing himself as the preacher around which a church of disciples is formed or ruled. This is the very problem Paul addressed in the context of 1 Corinthians 1.

Though neither Paul, Apollos nor Cephas had any intention of starting their own independent party of adherents that was separated and identified to be independent from other groups, it was a simple fact that disciples often like to do this type of thing regardless of the wishes of their leader. We like our favorite “kings,” and thus, we have a tendency to call ourselves after our favorite preacher. But if we understand 1 Corinthians 1:10 correctly, then calling ourselves after different leaders on earth is divisive among the disciples. It is carnal behavior in that our focus is turned from our total allegiance to Christ alone as our King to some fallible man on earth.

1 Corinthians 1:10 is a passage that is directed specifically to any group (church) of disciples who would form their own autonomous group that would separate individual members of the one body from one another. Paul's mandate in the exhortation of 1 Corinthians 1:10 was to correct the dysfunctional fellowship that individual members had with one another. In order to discourage the division that persisted through their establishment of unique groups, he corrected the relational behavior of the individual members with one another. If individuals ceased denominating themselves into groups by calling themselves after different personalities, then there would be no common basis for any group of disciples to cluster around one another to the exclusion of others.

Paul's argument is that we not individually propose either a personality, tradition, unique name, or race by which we would assemble ourselves together as an exclusive group. We can understand why the only name used in the New Testament in reference to disciples is "Christian" (1 Pt 4:16). If there were any other name, then different groups of disciples would select different names in the New Testament as the banner under which they would establish their unique identity. And by identifying their group to be unique because they had chosen a unique name, they would isolate themselves from others whom God had added to His body throughout the world. Churches are not identified by printing up common sign boards and hanging them around the necks of those we would seek to huddle together into their favorite denomination.

Since the exhortation of 1 Corinthians 1 is to cease using unique names by which we would denominate ourselves from one another, then certainly individual members must never do such. They must not call themselves after any name than Christ, lest they denominate themselves from one another by calling themselves after a different name. If everyone claims to be "of Christ," then we are Christians only. And being Christians only means that we must accept anyone whom God has added to His family upon their obedience to the gospel.

Those groups who would declare their independence from other groups in a region because they called themselves after a unique personality, doctrine or name need to take another look at the exhortation of 1 Corinthians 1:10. We see many efforts of different churches throughout the world who have called themselves after different preachers or pastors, and subsequently, assigned a unique name to their groups. We would exhort every saint, therefore, to review 1 Corinthians 1:10 in view of the fact that we must be one body of Christ. Every individual disciple is a brother or sister to every individual disciple throughout the world. We must never allow ourselves to be called after any name than Christ. Our first step toward unity, therefore, is to banish the denominating names from among ourselves and be Christians only. God expects unity among all those who would be Christians only. Since we are baptized in the name of Christ, then we are blessed with unity by the One who gave Himself for us (1 Co 1:13).

This point might be easier to understand if we viewed it practically. What if a storm came through and blew down the church house on Monday that was the common place of meeting of the Christians? If out of necessity the saints met in many homes of the members the following Sunday, would there now be many autonomous “churches” in the city, the number of which would be determined by the number of homes in which all the saints had to meet? Would we then need to erect a common name on every house in order to determine those of the common fellowship who were before the storm assembled under the same roof? Or, would the church in the city simply be one church as it was before in meeting under the same roof, regardless of the number of assemblies that were conducted the first Sunday after the storm? If after the storm we hung a different name over the disciples who were

meeting under different roofs, then we are on our way to being denominated as the Achaians. We must remember that the Holy Spirit moved the hand of Paul to tear down any name of man that would denominate the sheep of God from one another. Christ is not divided.

The church was one in Acts 2 on the first day when the first person was added to the body of obedient believers. The advantage that the Jerusalem disciples had was that there were no constructed walls within which disciples could separate themselves and no unique names that separated them from one another. They were the one church in the city of Jerusalem the following Sunday when the 3,000 began to meet under different roofs throughout Jerusalem. They did not move into being autonomous from one another the first Sunday after Pentecost, and neither did they when they moved into all the world.

## Chapter 11

### Unity Around A Meal

From the very beginning of the church in Jerusalem, the early disciples understood the key to maintaining the unity of the saints in the bond of peace. Since the first converts were Jews, they understood the bonding nature of a fellowship meal, which meal they ate annually in the Passover feast. When Jesus was at His last Passover meal with His disciples, He changed the significance of the Jewish Passover meal (See Mt 26:26-29). The Passover meal became His Supper, and thus, the occasion for the disciples to come together in order to remember their spiri-

tual nationhood and covenant as a result of Jesus’ atoning sacrifice. Instead of an annual observance of the “Passover meal” as in the Old Testament, the early Christians had their love feast/Lord’s Supper on a weekly basis (At 20:7). They needed no commands to do this. It was simply natural to do that which gave them purpose for being one covenanted nation with God because of the cross.

#### A. The Passover feast of unity:

Under the Sinai law recorded in the

Old Testament, God commanded Israel to come together annually for the Passover meal (Ex 12). This was a meal during which the Jewish families would come together with the priests and eat the food that came from their sacrificed animals. The purpose of the meal was both to remember their covenant that God had established with them as a nation at Mount Sinai, and to celebrate their oneness as a nation. All the tribes of Israel were to eat as one nation in order to remember that they were one united and covenanted nation under God (Ex 12).

The spiritual significance of the Passover meal was brought into the new covenant relationship that Christians have with God through Jesus. Jesus changed the significance of the Passover meal. In partaking of the meal, Christians are to remember Him as their Passover offering. In partaking of the bread and cup during or after the meal, Christians are to remind Jesus to come again for them (Download Book 39, *The Lord's Supper*, chapter 3, BRL, [africainternational.org](http://africainternational.org)).

Through the eating of the meal and partaking of the bread and fruit of the vine, Christians preach the Lord's death until He comes again (1 Co 11:26). The church is the new spiritual Israel that is in a new covenant relationship with God. Therefore, when Jesus stood with His disciples at His last Passover supper with them, He changed the meaning of the bread and wine of which the disciples partook when they continued to eat their "Passover meal."

*And as they were eating* [the Passover

meal], *Jesus took bread and blessed it. And He broke it and gave it to the disciples and said, "Take, eat. This is My body"* (Mt 26:26).

Jesus gave a new meaning to the bread of the Passover meal. When the disciples would eat the bread during His kingdom reign, it would be in reference to His sacrificed body, **as well as His one spiritual body of obedient disciples**. The disciples did not understand either of these concepts at the time Jesus ate the bread with them during His last Passover with them.

*And He took the cup and gave thanks and gave it to them, saying, 'All of you drink of it. For this is My blood of the covenant that is shed for many for the remission of sins''* (Mt 26:27,28).

All the Jewish disciples knew the significance of the Passover meal. It was a meal of remembrance and a celebration of the one nation of Israel that was established by God and brought into a covenant relationship with Him at Mount Sinai. But at the time Jesus took the bread and cup during His last Passover, the disciples did not understand the significance of the unity they were to promote among themselves by eating what they would later consider to be the Lord's Supper.

## **B. The one bread and one body:**

The unity factor of the Lord's Supper in the context of the Corinthian letters was brought out by Paul in 1 Corin-

thians 10:16,17. Notice how Paul brings the teaching of Jewish unity that surrounded the Jewish Passover into the fellowship meal of the Lord's meal.

*The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not the fellowship of the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not the fellowship of the body of Christ?* (1 Co 10:16).

The eating of the meal was to bring fellowship and unity between members of the body. This event in the lives of the disciples was the foundation upon which the Lord's Supper was eaten. The eating of the one bread and drinking of the cup was to signal their common fellowship they had with one another in Christ. The partaking of the love feast and Supper was an event that brought together the many into one.

Paul continued to explain, "***For though we are many, we are one bread and one body, for we are all partakers of the one bread***" (1 Co 10:17). Unfortunately, what was to symbolize their oneness in Christ, the Achaians corrupted to be an occasion to manifest their lack of unity. They thus came together for the worse, and not for the better (1 Co 11:17).

Paul rebuked, "... *when you come together in assembly, I hear that there are divisions among you, and in part I believe it*" (1 Co 11:18). "*Therefore,*" Paul challenged them, "*when you come together, it is not to eat the Lord's Supper*" (1 Co 11:20). They did not come together to remember that the many members throughout Achaia were one body.

On the contrary, when they came together they manifested their divisive attitudes and behavior. The disciples throughout Achaia came together into one assembly for the love feast and Supper, but their coming together revealed their divisions, not their unity. Therefore, their coming together was not for the purpose of remembering that they were one body by eating the one bread. They had corrupted the purpose that the many members were to come together in fellowship by partaking of the one bread. Their coming together, therefore, was not to accomplish the purpose of the love feast/Supper.

Paul explained how their division was manifested in their coming together. "*For in eating, each one takes before others his own supper*" (1 Co 11:21). It was no longer a sharing meal to promote unity. What was happening was that they were eating as individual groups wherein the different cliques, or groups, sat by themselves independent of others while they ate and drank. The occasion was so contrary to the oneness of the body that Paul revealed that "*one is hungry and another is drunken*" (1 Co 11:21). Instead of making sure that everyone present was able to share in the food and drink, some groups selfishly consumed their own food while others were allowed to go without food and drink. Each group who had plenty, ate all their own food and drank all their own wine in having their own supper. Others were left to go hungry. That which was instituted to encourage unity became the occasion to manifest divisive behavior.

It was the classical case of sectari-

anism in the church. When all the denominated sects of the church came together, they could not break down the walls that divided them from one another. Therefore, the meal that was to bring them together in unity, and then climax with the Lord’s Supper to celebrate their common covenant with God, was a clear manifestation of their sectarian behavior. By their divisive behavior during the love feast/Supper, they despised the assembly for the Supper that was to encourage fellowship (1 Co 11:22).

From the context of 1 Corinthians 11, therefore, we see the eating of the fellowship meal and Lord’s Supper as an occasion to manifest that we are one body under the cleansing blood of Jesus. If we do not eat in order to promote our oneness in Christ, then we eat and drink judgment unto ourselves (1 Co 11:29). This was what the eating of the love feast/Supper became in the gathering of the Achaians.

If the occasion explained in 1 Corinthians 11 is a fellowship meal that we eat in order to celebrate our oneness in Christ, then it is unfortunate that many groups today fail to see any significance in having such a meal at all in order to promote unity. In fact, if we understand that this fellowship meal was an opportunity for all the saints of Achaia to come together in fellowship with one another, then we might consider that we unknowingly violate the principles that Paul gives by having our own meal within our own group, and thus, we eat our own supper to the exclusion of others. It would certainly not be wrong for each group to have their

own fellowship meal on a weekly basis to celebrate their unity with every other Christian throughout the world. If the occasion herein discussed by Paul was an area wide fellowship meal and Lord’s Supper to create a bond of unity among all the disciples in a particular region, then we might want to reconsider doing the same occasionally in order to bring the disciples of a particular region together in order to encourage the organic function of the body in a particular region. Unfortunately, it is usually the case that independent groups have their “own supper,” but never invite other Christians in the area to the feast in order to celebrate unity.

Paul concluded the exhortation of 1 Corinthians 11 with some very practical instructions. “*When you come together to eat [the fellowship meal],*” he wrote, “*wait for one another*” (1 Co 11:33). Waiting for one another is an indication that we are one body in Christ. Eating before everyone arrives from distant areas is an indication that parts of the body are not being considerate of all the parts of all the body.

If any member could not wait to eat before all the members in Achaia had arrived, then Paul instructed that the local members “*eat at home so that you do not come together for judgment*” (1 Co 11:34). What Paul was saying was that everyone must wait until everyone arrives before the eating of the Supper begins. Doing so accomplishes the purpose of the love feast and Lord’s Supper. Waiting for one another promotes unity. Not waiting on one another brings judgment upon ourselves because we are not eating the “one

bread” of the Supper in order to celebrate the oneness of the body.

The fellowship meal with the Lord’s Supper is more than a meal to satisfy hunger. If one cannot wait to satisfy his hunger at the area wide fellowship meal, then he must eat before he comes. If anyone

starts eating before everyone has arrived, then his actions manifest his lack of understanding of the purpose of the fellowship meal and Supper. He is thinking of his own belly, and not the unity that was to be signalled to the whole body by the whole body eating together as one.

## Chapter 12

### Rise Of Wolves And Sheep Thieves

The exhortation of 1 Corinthians 1:10 is illustrated by its application to the Christians who lived in the area of Ephesus. As we journey through the recorded meeting that Paul called in Miletus with the Ephesian elders (bishops, shepherds), we are encouraged by the fact that by the time of the meeting, the disciples, with their shepherds throughout the region of Ephesus, were behaving according to the Spirit’s mandate of 1 Corinthians 1:10. There was unity among the members of the body, which members, unfortunately, would within a few years after the meeting be moving into an era of great persecution by the Roman state. In fact, we would conclude that the reason Paul called this unique meeting with the church leaders was to specifically address the “wolf and lordship problems” that were soon to come among the Ephesian disciples before the state persecution of Rome. Before the persecution would reach its zenith, there would be a denominating effect taking place among the disciples in the area in the immediate future.

At the time Paul visited the elders of Ephesus on his last mission journey, there were elders (shepherds) through-

out the region who were moving among the many house groups. “*So from Miletus he [Paul] sent to Ephesus and called the presbyters of the church*” (At 20:17).

There was more than one single-assembly of the disciples in Ephesus at the time this meeting was called. The growth of the church in Ephesus had gone far beyond the privilege of all the members of the region to meet in one location, and thus, they were meeting in the homes of the members throughout the area. However, in the context of Acts 20 all the disciples are referred to as “the church.” It was not the churches of Ephesus, but the church. And it was not a single presbyter ruling over the flock, or any specific group. It was a plurality of presbyters who worked among all the disciples of the area.

We thus caution ourselves about reading into the background of the meeting our present independent church behavior. All the disciples in all of Ephesus were one church, though they were all meeting at different places. And among all the disciples of Ephesus there was a plurality of shepherds (presbyters) looking after the spiritual needs of all the sheep.

(Though it is not in the context of

this discussion to clarify the use of nouns that refer to the “presbyters,” we must keep in mind that there are several Greek words used in the New Testament that identify those who were the elders. English words as “presbyter,” “shepherds,” “pastors,” and “bishops” are all used in reference to the leaders for which Paul gave spiritual qualities and physical qualifications in 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9. For further study of this subject, download Book 24, chapter 24, BRL, [africainternational.org](http://africainternational.org).)

When the meeting of elders transpired in Miletus, Paul reminded those present of his past ministry in the region. In those years of ministry, he taught them “*publicly and from house to house*” (At 20:20). Verse 21 defines the word “publicly.” He used the word referred to the evangelistic work of his ministry in Ephesus to the unbelievers. The phrase “house to house” referred to his edification of the disciples in their homes. Because the disciples remained connected as the one church, regardless of their diverse assemblies in homes throughout the region, it was easy for Paul to move from house to house. It was in the homes of the members where Paul said that he did not shun to declare to them “*all the counsel of God*” (At 20:27).

When house groups become independent and begin to draw themselves away from the family of disciples, it is then that sectarian division starts to hinder the organic function of the body in reference to teachers moving among the people. This was the problem that was introduced by Diotrephes. (More on this in chapter 15.)

During the meeting in Miletus, Paul moved into another singular use of words in reference to the multiple-assembly function of the body in Ephesus. He said,

*Therefore, take heed to yourselves and to **all the flock**, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd **the church** of God that **He has purchased** with His own blood (At 20:28).*

It is very important to read this statement and let it speak for itself. In view of the saints being scattered throughout the metropolitan area of Ephesus, which was at this time at least 250,000 in population, Paul exhorted these shepherds to take heed to “all the flock.” This was not all the flock of their respective single-assembly groups. **It was a statement that reflected on their ministry to see over the spiritual needs of each individual sheep of the flock in all the city of Ephesus.**

No one group of shepherds was encouraged to restrict their care of the flock to just one group of disciples. Since the members were scattered throughout the city, and meeting in several homes, then the shepherds had the responsibility of shepherding the sheep throughout the city. Nothing is said in the context of Acts 20 that the shepherding of the flock should be confined to one specific assembly of the sheep who were meeting at a specific location in someone’s house. On the contrary, since the sheep were everywhere throughout the city, **then the function of the elders was everywhere throughout the city.** And since the flock

is encouraged to know the shepherds, then each group must be sure to invite the shepherds to visit their group (1 Th 5:12,13). Again, we must be careful about reading our present autonomous behavior into the reality of the function of the body of Christ within a particular city, as well as throughout a region where there were disciples. The shepherds were moving among the sheep in order that the sheep know their shepherds, and for the purpose of the shepherds knowing the needs of the sheep. It was the perfect arrangement for the sheep to remain united.

The fact that there is only one universal flock of God is brought out in the statement of Acts 20:28: “*Therefore, take heed to yourselves and to **all the flock ... to shepherd the church of God that He purchased with His own blood.***” There is still one church (one fold) of God throughout the world, whether there are members living in Ephesus or any other city throughout the world. Jesus purchased with His blood only one church of God, not just a single group meeting in someone’s house in the city of Ephesus.

Paul’s statement that the blood sacrifice of Jesus was for the universal body means that all the members of the body in Ephesus were included. The blood sacrifice was for “the body,” not bodies. And since it was for the global body of Christ, then every member of the body is continually cleansed by the blood regardless of where he or she is located in this world (See 1 Jn 1:7). The blood is not divided, and thus, those on whom it is poured must not be divided. No assembly of the saints

has a right to judge whether the blood is poured out on another assembly of saints just down the street. Blood pouring is God’s job.

The shepherds were among the sheep in Ephesus. They ministered to the spiritual needs of the sheep wherever the sheep were in the city. Now when these shepherds traveled to the city of Miletus just south of Ephesus in order to meet with Paul, **did they cease being shepherds of the flock of God?** Were they shepherds in Ephesus, as well as shepherds when they arrived in the city of Miletus? If a spiritual need arose among some Christians in Miletus, would the Ephesian elders be barred from ministering to those needs? If one would think that shepherds had been invested with some sort of authority, then he will not be able to answer these questions correctly. If one believes that there is a geographical restriction on elders ministering to the spiritual needs of the sheep, then he too will have some difficulty answering these questions. We would conclude as Peter, who judged some elders for being lording authorities, that they were fellow shepherds in the universal body of Christ. But they had no authority as lords, and thus, were to cease functioning as lords (See 1 Pt 5:1-4)

From wherever he was in the world, Peter wrote to other elders, wherever they were. He wrote the following statement: “*I exhort the elders who are among you, as a fellow elder ...*” (1 Pt 5:1). Would Peter need to travel to where the elders were to whom he wrote before he could be a “fellow elder” with them? If he wrote a letter, then certainly he was in

some other location than those to whom he wrote. If one of the elders of those to whom he wrote traveled to meet Peter wherever he was, then would that elder cease being an elder and just be a member? It is sometimes difficult to interpret the practicality of Peter's statements when we are behaving contrary to the very thing that Peter judged the lording authoritarians to whom he wrote. They were in the process of establishing themselves as lording elders with authority, which thing Jesus said would not be so among His disciples (Mk 10:35-45).

Simply because those who are designated shepherds (bishops, pastors, elders, presbyters), by those members who know them, does not mean that they cannot function as such to those who do not know them personally. Elders are such because of who they are, not by some officially invested authority that was given to them, and certainly not because they are in some office-bearing potentate position.

When shepherds start assuming some authority, then there is a problem. If they assume some of the authority of Christ, then they start assuming some of the lordship of Jesus, for with authority must also come lordship. Authority and lordship cannot be separated. And because authority and lordship cannot be separated, neither can one separate lordship from the denominating of the body. Lords must have bodies of people over whom they can exercise their lordship. Now we know why Paul reminded the Ephesian elders where there would be a problem with lordship elders. A few years

later, he wrote a letter to these same elders. In the letter, **he reminded them that we have only one Lord** (Ep 4:4-6). But because there would arise lords from among them after the Miletus meeting, there would also arise denominated groups who would declare their autonomy under the lordship of their lording elders.

We do not see lordship leadership in the teaching of the New Testament concerning leadership. Jesus barred such leadership from among His sheep (See Mk 10:35-45). Nevertheless, lordship leaders were soon to come. Shepherds can easily take their spiritual ministry to others. However, we must not assume that when a traveling elder comes into our city that he has come with some authority over the disciples of that city. Historically, **the apostasy to hierarchal authority developed when elders assumed authority they did not have**, and then brought their assumed authority together and eventually manifested it through what we now call the pope.

We never see in the New Testament some type of networked authority among the shepherds that was exercised over the church. When Paul called the elders to Miletus, he was not calling authorities together. He was calling only the greatest slaves of Ephesus who had dedicated themselves to the spiritual needs of the sheep in Ephesus. At the time, these slaves had not started to lord with authority over those they would draw away after themselves.

When problems did develop among the disciples in the first century, meetings were held to deal with the doctrinal prob-

lems, or arrogant lords (At 15: G12). The church never resorted to some chain of authority among men on earth to solve either doctrinal or organizational problems. This point was certainly brought out during the Acts 15 meeting when the church gathered to sort out some problems with some legalistic brethren who were binding where God had not bound (See At 15:1,2). When dealing with doctrinal problems, the disciples always resorted to the authority of the Scriptures, not the supposed authority of some hierarchy of men

who claimed to have authority to pronounce judgments.

In the context of the Acts 20 meeting at Miletus, Paul did not call the shepherds together in order to designate a “chairman” of the elders. He was not establishing some network of authorities that would eventually lead to a network of authorities among the disciples. On the contrary, in his meeting with the shepherds he specifically warned them against any efforts to draw away any group of disciples by lording over them.

## Chapter 13

### Remaining With One Lord

The Christians in Ephesus were functioning as an organic body throughout the city before Paul arrived at the neighboring city, Miletus, on his last mission journey. Where the Christians of Ephesus assembled on Sunday did not determine their ministry to the whole body throughout the region of Ephesus, neither did their assemblies in the homes of the members separate any disciples from one another. At the time Paul visited the shepherds of Ephesus, they were carrying out their function in the body as described in the mandate of 1 Corinthians 1:10. Though members of the body met in many different locations for their common assemblies on Sunday, they were functioning as one united body.

But something was coming in their future. There was division coming, division similar to what we witness today in some areas where the body of Christ is

located. What is interesting to note is that the divisive behavior today that some seem to think is the ordinary function of the body in a city or region **is actually the denominating of the body about which Paul warned the Ephesian shepherds.**

Paul warned the Ephesian shepherds of two problems that would soon denominate the sheep of God:

*For I know this, that after my departure grievous wolves will enter in among you, not sparing the flock. Also from your own selves will men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves (At 20:29,30).*

#### A. Wolves that scatter sheep.

Paul was warning that the shepherds must be on the lookout for wolves. When

wolves enter in among a flock of sheep, the sheep scatter. The sheep lose contact with one another as they flee in different directions for their own safety. The unity of the flock is lost as sheep scatter.

**1. *Entrance of the wolves:*** Since Paul made the statement, “*after my departure,*” then the entrance of the scattering wolves would soon come after his departure from their presence, and carry on in the centuries to come. The beginning of the scattering was not something that would happen in the centuries to come. The apostasy about which Paul spoke was in its primal beginnings by the middle of the first century. By the second and third centuries, many erroneous beliefs would eventually develop into a mass apostasy.

The second century was not good for the flock of God. Wolves brought in an assortment of heresies that devastated the unity of the church, which heresies led many of the church into beliefs that were contrary to the fundamental teachings of New Testament. For example, Tertullian (160-220) introduced the teaching that every newborn babe was tainted with sin that was supposedly passed down from Adam’s sin in the Garden of Eden. He was the first to mention the concept of original sin.

Other teachings also came into the body of believers. Teachers as Ammonius Saccas of Alexandria, Egypt, taught a compromise between Christianity and paganism, which teaching was adopted by Emperor Constantine of Rome to amalgamate church, paganism and state. This

teaching would eventually result in the Edict of Milan in 315 when Constantine made a distorted view of Christianity the state religion. Saccas sought to harmonize pagan philosophies with Christianity, and thus, develop a religious philosophy by which Christians and non-Christians could live in peace under the control of the state.

Other religious and philosophical teachings had a great impact on Christianity. Mani of Mesopotamia (216-276) syncretized the Zoroastrian mystery religions of the East with the teachings of the New Testament. The Ebonites denied the deity of Jesus by teaching that Moses had the same authority as Christ, and thus was equal with Christ. Monarchism was another denial of the eternity of Jesus. The Monarchians taught that Jesus lived so perfectly under the law that God adopted Him to be His Son. By affirming the total human origin of Jesus, they denied that Jesus was one with God before the incarnation.

Through the adoption of many mystic beliefs of non-Christian religions, gnosticism became the greatest attack against the Christian faith in the second century. The core teaching of gnosticism was that Jesus was only the final emanation of a series of digressions from God who dwells in total light. The last emanation, Jesus, was so digressed from the light, that He created the material world. Some gnostics believed that Jesus was simply a phantom who only appeared to the disciples. He was not the incarnation of the eternal God.

The primary theme of all teaching

that identified the thinking of the wolves about whom Paul warned the Ephesian elders centered around an attack against the central faith of the Christian. And the center to the Christian faith is Jesus as the Son of God. The wolves would focus on devouring the foundation of the faith of Christians. The lord leaders would focus on denying the authority of Jesus to which Christians have submitted.

**2. Entrance of the lordship leaders:** The entrance of the lordship leaders among the flock of God meant that the lords had little consideration for the unity of the flock. They cared for their own selves rather than sparing the unity of the flock. They would sacrifice the unity of the flock for the sake of their selfish ambitions to have a group of sheep who would seek their leadership. In forming their own groups, their groups would inherently exclude other groups of sheep who were also huddling around their chosen lords.

In reference to those who would rise up as authorities, Paul's exhortation to the Ephesian elders, and to us, is that we must understand the rise of hierarchal apostasy. We must understand the early beginnings of such apostasies in order to check those who would lord over the flock of God.

Once hierarchal apostasy is full grown in a particular religious group, then it is difficult to correct. It is difficult to correct because the churches who are drawn away into a network of authorities are supportive of those authorities who lead each particular group. After a departure to church lords, the church group grows up knowing nothing different than

to approach Jesus through the network of authorities of their particular church organization. If finances are involved in the support of the authorities of hierarchal apostasies, then it is difficult to restore such movements to the lordship of Jesus.

What Paul envisioned as lords coming in among the flock, Peter wrote a few years later that it was already happening at the time he wrote in the early 60s. In his first letter, Peter called on the shepherds to whom he wrote to "*shepherd the flock of God that is among you ... not under compulsion ... not as being lords over those entrusted to you ...*" (1 Pt 5:2,3).

Paul warned that some of the Ephesian shepherds would rise to be lords over their independent churches. They would make the sheep to be subservient to their authoritarian or influential leadership. This was the dividing of the flock into different independent churches that had little to do with one another once the lords drew away their sheep. The different groups would be subservient to the lords who led them, for the lords would assume authority over each of their groups.

## **B. Lords that steal sheep.**

While wolves devour the sheep by devouring the foundation of faith upon which the flock exists, lords take control of the sheep, and in so doing, denominate the sheep into their own flocks. Wolves scatter by devouring, but lords gather up their own sheep and separate them from other shepherds who have likewise gath-

ered together their own groups of sheep.

When Paul introduced verse 30 of Acts 20, he turned specifically to the shepherds who would seek to recruit sheep for their own autonomous groups. The phrase, “*also from your own selves ...*” indicates that Paul turned from the elders in general to those potential lords among them who were going to recruit members in Ephesus in order to establish their own congregations of sheep. In order to remain drawn away, these sheep would be independent from the other independent churches in town who had also been denominated as autonomous groups. This was the behavior of Diotrefes as John explained in 3 John. (More on this in chapter 15.)

Those who had been entrusted by the flock to shepherd their spiritual needs would turn from being servants of the flock to being lords over the flock. The apostasy would be in those who would assume authority over the flock. Jesus said that all authority belonged to Him (Mt 28:18). Lordship leaders seek to assume some of Jesus’ authority over His sheep. By doing such, lord leaders seek to claim that which does not belong to them. They partially assume some of the lordship of Jesus over His sheep in order to lord over their own flocks. They do as Peter said, “lord over the flock” so that they may draw away disciples after themselves. Any shepherd or group of shepherds, therefore, who draws away sheep in order to lord over them, falls under the warning of both Paul and Peter.

“Lording over” means that one has claimed authority. If one assumes no au-

thority, then he cannot be a lord. Lordship exists only in the fact that one has either been assigned authority, or out of his own autocratic behavior, assumed authority over others. Whatever the situation, the lord exists for the purpose of calling away a group of sheep into an independent fellowship that in some way functions to the exclusion of those who do not submit to the lordship of the leader.

Lordship is contrary to the nature of the leadership that Jesus determined would be among His body. He explained this in the following statement:

*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** (Mk 10:42-44).*

Jesus made the preceding statement to the disciples during His ministry. But even on the night of His betrayal when He washed their feet, He perceived that there was a dispute among them “*as to which one of them should be considered the greatest*” (Lk 22:24). So Jesus again admonished them on that occasion with the following words:

*The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them. And those who exercise authority over them are called benefactors. **But you will not be this way. But he who is greatest among you, let him be as the youngest. And he who leads, as he who serves** (Lk 22:25,26).*

What was about to transpire in Ephesus was an apostasy to lordship leadership by those shepherds who would violate Jesus' mandate that He made in reference to leadership among His disciples. In order to draw away disciples after one's self, one must use his influence as an occasion for denominating a group of disciples under his control. Once the sheep have submitted to the influence of their lord, then the denomination is established.

This apostasy is initially slow and unnoticed. This is why the Holy Spirit delivered the exhortation of Acts 20 specifically to the elders of the flock. Elders, or shepherds (pastors), are first designated by the flock to continue their function as servants of the flock. Because shepherds have dedicated themselves to the ministry of the saints, it is easy for some to move into the realm of lording over the flock. Those people who have their own ambitions and agenda can easily move

from being servants to being lords. For this reason, no new Christ is to be designated a shepherd (1 Tm 3:2,6). The flock must first learn his ambition, whether it is for the Lord to serve, or for himself to be served.

Once the flock designates leaders, some leaders often use their designated ministry of leadership to start giving orders. They subsequently turn from leading by example (1 Pt 5:2) to lording by command. Once they have progressed to lording through assumed authority, then the flock is locked into being an autonomous denomination that is separated from those who refuse to be lorded over by any lord other than Jesus. Once the lorded group builds a temple for itself, it is often locked into a behavior of separation from all other groups who have likewise built the same. The four walls they have built around themselves signal to other walled in sheep more than is realized.

## Chapter 14

### Christ-Centered Fellowships

When groups of disciples are considered "drawn away," their identity is in the fact that they establish a fellowship that is often centered around a person, which person is usually the preacher. Their assembly before their preacher establishes the uniqueness of the group and becomes the means by which the adherents maintain their identity as a unique group in the community. We have often engaged others by asking, "Who is your preacher?" The response varies, but is

often something as, "We go to brother John's church." Assemblies are thus the opportunity for the "brother Johns" of the community to weekly assemble the sheep around their preaching, and thus, retain their faithfulness. Attendance at the assembly is the indication that one is faithful to the preacher to whom he has given allegiance and the group with which he has placed his membership.

Before the Reformation Movement five hundred years ago, the Eucharist

(Lord's Supper) of the Roman Catholic Church was the center of the Mass. Regardless of all the distorted views of the Eucharist, Catholics were rightly assembled together for the Mass that was provided over by the Catholic priest. The historian, Will Durant, wrote that the Roman Catholic Mass was ...

... based partly on the Judaic Temple service, partly on Greek mystery rituals of purification, vicarious sacrifice, and participation (*Caesar and Christ*, NY, Simon & Schuster, 1950, p.599).

Once the Mass was established as the center of Catholic assemblies, it remained such for over a thousand years. All was well until Martin Luther (1483 - 1546) rose up to reform Catholic liturgy during the Mass. In 1520, Luther launched his attack against what he considered pagan concepts in the Eucharist during the Catholic Mass. In 1523, Luther published his reforms of the Catholic Mass. In his published reforms, he made preaching, not the Eucharist, the center of the assembly. He wrote,

A Christian congregation should never gather together without the preaching of God's Word and prayer, no matter how briefly .... ... the preaching and teaching of God's Word is the most important part of Divine service (*Luther's Works*, LIII,11).

Almost the entire Protestant world after the Reformation followed the teaching of Luther on the assembly by instituting preaching as the primary function in

the assembly of the church. In doing this, the very thing about which Paul warned the Ephesian elders became so ingrained in religious liturgies that church groups go scrambling when their preacher leaves or dies. Search committees are established just to reestablish the center of reference of the assembly, for most churches today center their assemblies around the preacher and preaching.

The tendency to center assemblies around a prominent leader (the preacher) played itself out well during the Industrial Revolution that started the latter part of the eighteenth century. As industry flourished in Europe and the West in the eighteenth century, it was easy to bring the behavior of the boss at the local factory into the function of the local group of disciples. We erroneously viewed the successful boss in industry to be a candidate for leadership in the church. Many churches, therefore, sought first for someone around whom they could be organized, rather than someone who knew their Bible.

The irony of the progression into sectarian denominationalism among the disciples of our Lord is that those who have historically sought to prevent such, have assumed an embedded divisive theology that created the very same sectarian denominationalism they were fighting against. These warriors against hierarchical authority actually developed a foreign concept to the New Testament. They taught group independence in order to prevent a universal hierarchy of ruling lords on earth. In other words, lording was tolerated over independent groups of disciples that were led by the preacher, or

“eldership,” in order to prevent lording over many groups of disciples.

In order to prevent an apostasy to a worldwide Catholic apostasy, some have created a theology that developed “autonomous churches” that they believed would guard against becoming a universal denominational hierarchy. Instead of moving into a worldwide Catholic hierarchy, some developed autonomous hierarchies within each denominating group of disciples. We have since drifted to interpret passages that discuss unity in the New Testament with the prejudice of our behavior of being independent churches who are struggling to work together in union.

In order to prevent a Catholic heresy of a worldwide network of authorities, **we must simply obey the mandate of Jesus in Mark 10:43,44.** Rather than creating an erroneous doctrine of division that would inherently create that from which we flee, it is better to challenge those who would leave their ministry of servanthood to become lords of independent flocks. The prevention of networks of authority is not in creating doctrines that inherently produce division. We must deal with lording leaders and erroneous teachings. We must not do so by establishing any teaching or function that is inherently divisive. It is not difficult to resort to the word of God to rebuke those who would seek to lord over the flock of God. Wolves who need rebuking are not hard to identify by their teaching that is contrary to truth. Lords are identified by their hierarchal commands. Wolves are identified by their heretical teachings.

We have found that those who are

obsessed with the word of God usually have little difficulty in not becoming obsessed with becoming lords. When one feels controlled by the direction of the word of God, he has little desire to control others by his own word. He does not seek to control by his own word because he is so full of the word of God. He cannot help himself but speak the oracles of God (1 Pt 4:11).

On the other hand, we have found that those leaders who have little knowledge of the word of God are the ones who are quick to lord over the flock. Because of their lack of knowledge of the word of God, they have nothing by which to lead than the intimidating pronouncement of a command. Lordship leaders, therefore, usually depend on their position to command, not on their pronouncement of the word of God.

In the case of the apostasy that was coming the way of the Ephesian disciples, men who sought to be the center of reference of a group of disciples would be doing the drawing away. These men would use their influence among the sheep to assume authority over the sheep. In order to prevent such a scenario from developing today, the sheep need to take action when either a wolf or sheep stealer arises among them. Assembling the sheep into independent denominations is no prevention against the establishment of a worldwide network of authorities. Denominationalism is the problem. A theology of denominationalism is not the cure for sectarian division among the sheep.

Denominationalism among the sheep is the indication that lords exist over dif-

ferent groups of sheep. But when all the leadership of all the sheep meet together, as was the case in Acts 15 in Jerusalem, the leaders stopped those who would seek to rise up and be the chairman of the board of church leaders. The “circumci-

sion brethren,” who brought fear among the Gentile brethren with legalistic knives in their pockets, were thwarted by the freedom that we have in Christ (See Gl 5:1). We must never forget that lords always bring bondage.

## Chapter 15

### Interrupted Organic Discipleship

We understand the statements of what John wrote to Gaius in 3 John in the historical context that there were house fellowships throughout the region of where Gaius, Demetrius and Diotrefes lived. The theme of the letter to Gaius deals with a dysfunctional organic function of some disciples in the region, which dysfunction was promoted by one who sought to denominate some of the disciples into independent groups that were submissive to his leadership, and thus, outside the organic function of the church to preach the gospel to the world.

Paul’s meeting with the Ephesian elders in Miletus dealt with elders who would lead sheep away after their own independent groups (At 20:30). John’s letter to Gaius is in reference to an individual doing the very thing about which Paul warned. Though we are not told exactly who Diotrefes was, he could have been any self-proclaimed pastor, priest, or prophet who sought to have his own autonomous group of disciples.

This is one of the revelations in the New Testament where church autonomy is specifically targeted and judged divisive. In fact, the Holy Spirit is so specific in

what He says through John that the practice of drawing away disciples into independent groups that are based on the lordship of any individual, or group of individuals, is evil. Such is a strong statement in view of the present practice of forming one’s own group, and then declaring the group’s independence from the rest of the disciples in any particular city or region. Such behavior is an organic dysfunction of the body.

We must keep in mind that this move to establish an independent group was based on lordship leadership. It was not a doctrinal matter other than the fact that Diotrefes violated the principle of servanthood leadership that Jesus taught should be among His disciples (See Mk 10:35-45). If the case were a situation where disciples were being drawn away to restore the truth of the gospel, then this would not be the text to use. In some cases, people must be called out of apostasy in order to restore a Bible-based faith. In other words, if we were to approach some who had been drawn away into the apostasy of a Diotrefetic apostasy, or the lordship leadership of some Ephesian elders, in an effort to bring them back un-

der the lordship of Jesus, then we would be following Paul and John's advice to restore, not to denominate. Calling people out of hierarchal apostasies does not fall under the judgment of either Paul, John or Peter. In the work of the Holy Spirit to have recorded for us principles by which to judge an apostasy to be hierarchal lordship, He has given to us a road map back to the lordship of Jesus.

The occasion of the letter of 3 John is in the context that Gaius was discouraged concerning the lordship leadership of Diotrephes who was autocratically taking control of some of the disciples in the area where Gaius lived, and subsequently, destroying the organic function of disciples as Gaius. Because Gaius was certainly discouraged by these efforts to disconnect brethren from one another by one who sought to be independent from the church as a whole, John wanted to encourage Gaius that he was doing well by receiving and sending out the evangelists. In fact, in the context of 3 John, **one way to identify the church leader who is evil is that he is not mission minded, nor does he lead the group over which he lords to either receive or send forth evangelists.** Diotrephes was actually working against the mission of the church to support those evangelists who were going forth to preach the gospel. This was the evil result of his actions.

In John's commendation of Gaius in his financial support of traveling evangelists, we can assume that one of the evils in which Diotrephes had involved himself was in reference to money. Gaius was doing a worthy work in financially sup-

porting missions through his reception of and sending forth the traveling evangelists. John used the Greek word *propempe* in reference to his sending forth of evangelists. It is a word that means to financially set forth one on his journey. Diotrephes, however, was barring any of the members of the group over which he lorded from financially supporting the traveling evangelists. It may have been that Diotrephes did not want any of the support that was coming his way as the preacher of his independent group to be sent to any evangelist who was going about preaching the gospel to the lost. We could make this deduction because such thinking is not uncommon among some local preachers of independent churches. Such preachers need to be reminded that if they are thinking in such a manner, they, as Diotrephes, have involved themselves in doing that which the Holy Spirit defined as evil (3 Jn 11).

In contrast to Diotrephes, Gaius was doing well in his efforts to promote unity through his open arms to include everyone who was going about preaching the gospel. John encouraged Gaius by stating,

*Beloved, you do faithfully whatever you do for the brethren and especially for strangers, who have borne witness of your love before the church. You will do well to support them on their journey in a manner worthy of God (vss 5,6).*

Gaius was doing that which was right in reference to functioning as an organic member of the body. He was obe-

dient to God's system of getting those who heralded the good news into all the world (See Mt 28:19,20; Mk 16:15,16). He was instructed according to what Paul had written concerning world evangelism:

*How then will they call on Him in whom they have not believed? And how will they believe in Him of whom they have not heard? And how will they hear without a preacher? **And how will they preach unless they are sent?** (Rm 10:14,15).*

All was going well until one individual among the disciples in the area of Gaius decided to do that about which Paul had warned the shepherds in Ephesus. Diotrephes started to draw away disciples into his own exclusive fellowship. He started to restrict the group that he controlled from cooperating with others in reference to receiving and sending forth the evangelists.

One of the contexts in Scripture that specifically identifies the denominating of the organic body into independent groups is 3 John 9,10. Because we live in a world wherein most churches behave independently from one another, this is the text that should be clearly understood lest we be behaving after the manner of Diotrephes. John explains how independent church groups separate themselves from one another, and then how they declare their autonomy from one another in order to protect their own fellowship. By identifying the behavior of Diotrephes we can identify the nature of both himself, and the practice of how independent

groups function in order to maintain their independence from one another.

*I wrote to the church, but Diotrephes, who loves [A] **to be first among them, [B] does not receive us.** Therefore, if I come I will remember his deeds that he does, [C] **unjustly accusing us with malicious words.** And not content with that, he himself [D] **does not receive the brethren,** and [E] **forbids those who would.** And he [F] **casts them out of the church** (vss 9,10).*

## A. Be first:

Most independent church groups with which we have worked throughout the years were started by a very zealous individual. In this person's zeal, and willingness to be a good servant of the Lord, either he or the church sometimes moved him into being the center around which the members functioned. Such is only natural simply because of the dedication of those preachers who want to help the people of the community.

Over a period of time, however, this center-of-reference function by the leader often moves the initiator of the group into a change in his character and relationship with the group that he has initiated. He begins to believe that the church continues to exist because he exists. If he has not focused the church on Christ, then the church does focus on him as the one who continues the existence of the church he started. The preacher subsequently leads himself to believe that if he went away, the church would go away. In believing

such about himself, he assumes that the members are connected to Christ through him. Since he initiated the church, he started to believe that the members should depend on him for almost everything that happens in the group.

We do not necessarily conclude that the preacher who has initiated a group seeks to be dominant over a group. It is simply human nature that in one's zeal to serve, the new converts have gravitated toward his enthusiasm, personality and leadership. We have found that the vast majority of the preachers of independent churches on whom the members depend for so much, are almost exhausted because of the pleas for help from the people. They are simply in a situation that often damages their families, and sometimes emotionally exhausts them. It is not a situation in which they would like to be.

This may or may not have been the case with Diotrephes in the early stages of his work with the disciples over whom he exercised control at the time John wrote. He may have innocently started out in his ministry with all good intentions. But things went wrong. All we know about him is that by the time John wrote 3 John, he was spiritually in trouble because he loved to be first. That which he was doing was considered evil by the Holy Spirit. His narcissism had subsequently led him into evil behavior.

It may have been that Diotrephes had a narcissistic personality before the development of the scenario that John explained. At least his name indicates that he was probably from an aristocratic family, for his name includes the Greek word

for God. In the society in which he lived, such names were given only to children in aristocratic families. The scenario may have been that when he became a disciple all was well. But as his influence grew among the disciples, the disciples moved him into the position that he held among the house fellowships at the time John wrote.

John does not tell us how Diotrephes became what he practiced at the time he was denominating those disciples over whom he exercised lordship. Such was inconsequential in reference to what he was doing in disturbing the organic function of the one universal body of Christ. The problem was in his drawing away disciples into an autonomous function as an independent group, and by doing such, shutting down the mission outreach of those over whom he lored.

When preachers stay for a long time with one particular group of disciples, the Diotrephes syndrome almost always happens. It is only natural for people to call themselves after those personalities who stand before them on a weekly basis. And when one who is an evangelist going among the unbelievers stays with a specific group of believers for a long period of time, he ceases to be an evangelist because of the tremendous load of shepherding a large group of people. The members of the group become so dependent on the preacher that they often cease doing anything without his approval. The preacher thus becomes the center of reference for the fellowship of the group, as he has become the center of reference for the assemblies of the disciples.

The autocratic leader makes all the decisions for his group, and in making the decisions, he has separated his group from others in the area who are also making all the decisions for their groups. Everyone declares their autonomy from one another because everyone seeks to make their own decisions over their own work. In the case of Diotrephes, he simply declared the autonomy of his group from all other groups. In this case, he had declared his independence from the group with whom Demetrius was associated, for John, before he came, advised Gaius to associate with Demetrius. Of Demetrius, John stated, “*Demetrius has a good report from all, and of the truth itself. And we also bear testimony ...*” (3 Jn 12).

## **B. Shun competition.**

When a particular individual as Diotrephes seeks to establish or lead an autonomous church, he often declares the independence of his “church” from every other church in the region. Even if independence is not verbally declared, it is determined by not receiving anyone into the fellowship of one’s exclusive group that would preach against the independent behavior of the local preacher.

However, John warned that any group of disciples must not feel obligated to receive just any teacher without first knowing whether the teacher is preaching the truth of the gospel. We are to test the spirits with the word of God (1 Jn 4:1). The case of Diotrephes is not a case of determining whether a traveling evangelist is coming by to teach something that

is false. 3 John is about a dominant leader who excludes those who are teaching the truth. John writes to deal with autocratic leadership, not doctrinal error.

John uses the plural pronoun “us” in his statement of judgment in order to indicate that neither he nor any of those who were traveling from group to group teaching the word of God were received by Diotrephes. We have witnessed this very thing which naturally happens among some fellowships. The leaders of some churches have moved into this scenario of independence that hinders the movement of teachers among the disciples in order that they build up the body through the teaching of the word of God. Those churches that have sought to work under a leadership that lords over them, are the churches that would be under consideration by John in 3 John. They are blocking the organic function of the body to build itself up through the ministry of those who teach the word of God.

Christians must certainly be independent from the world in their teaching in order to survive in the midst of a worldly environment. However, there is a difference between being independent from the world in reference to morals and teaching, and being independent from one another in an effort to survive the onslaught of error in the world. If a group of disciples does not declare its independence from the world, and specifically the world of false teaching, then that group will lose its identity as a church of our Lord (See Hs 4:6). If a church of disciples declares its independence from the ministry of other teachers who seek to build up the body

through the teaching of the word of God, then they open themselves up to being led astray by a Diotrephetic teacher who does not know the word of God. At least their knowledge of the word of God will be limited only to what the leader knows about his Bible.

When church groups practice independence from one another, they are actually falling into the hands of the world. By separating themselves from the fellowship of other disciples, they often lead themselves to shun those who seek their fellowship. We have witnessed this in house fellowships that are led by a strong leader. The group is encouraged to separate itself from other groups in the area much like the group that was controlled by Diotrephes. Diotrephes' behavior manifested leadership that was not conducive to the unity of all the groups in the area, and thus in their isolation they presented to the world a divided church. The isolationist leadership behavior of the small group of disciples moved the group to shun any outsiders from coming by with teaching for their group. The group or groups led by Diotrephes became dysfunctional in reference to fellowship because they refused teachers and shepherds from coming by in order to build up the body with the word of God.

Diotrephes was the classic example of a leader who leads disciples into division by his own function of lording over an isolated group of the flock of God. He declared the autonomy of his group by his sectarian behavior to draw away disciples after himself. He entrenched his influence over the members of the group to

the point that he personally determined who would teach in his group. At the time John wrote to Gaius, Diotrephes would not even receive the apostle John, the apostle of love.

We must keep in mind that John deals directly with Diotrephes, not with those over whom he was dominant. There were arrogant leaders in Achaia who drew away house fellowships from one another throughout Achaia. But Paul did not personally name these leaders as John personally named Diotrephes. The reason Paul did not name the individuals in Achaia was because the members were the ones who were behaving divisively. Under the influence of some leaders who even denied the apostleship of Paul, they were allowing themselves to be sectarian (See 2 Co 11:12-15).

In the case of Diotrephes as an individual, he was behaving divisively. Among the members in the area where Diotrephes had his influence, Gaius and Demetrius represented the normal organic function of a fellowshiping brotherhood. They were the ones who were being threatened with excommunication if they did not adhere to the demands of Diotrephes to shun any other leaders who might want to come by with teaching.

### **C. Slandereous competition.**

In order to solidify the independence of the autonomous group, the Diotrephetic leader must go beyond his personal rejection of anyone coming to his group. He must progress to the point of convincing everyone in the group that the apostle John

of love was possibly a false teacher. Or, he was too liberal in his teaching because he had too much mercy on others we would consider to be false teachers. We are not told what the specific slander was that Diotrephes made against the traveling John and the evangelists. We can only assume that what he said through slander was meant to discredit John and other traveling teachers. His purpose was to bar evangelists from coming to teach in his autonomous group.

When John used the phrase “unjustly accusing,” he was speaking of some false accusations that Diotrephes generated in order to convince those of his group that John and the other evangelists must not be permitted to come to “their” group.

Slander is used to recruit others to one’s favor. It is a typical scheme by which independent church leaders bar teachers from approaching “their” church. All that Diotrephes and his group were doing was considered evil by John. John exhorted Gaius, “*Beloved, do not follow what is evil*” (3 Jn 11). Therefore, **when one knowingly speaks that which is false against another in order to lead a group of disciples to reject one from the whole of the body, he is doing evil.** He has involved himself in slander, and thus, condemned himself by his own speech. Diotrephes was practicing this evil in order to bar John and the other evangelists from coming to his group.

We must not ignore the fact that those who would come by with teaching were not local leaders in reference to the function of the group, or groups, over

which Diotrephes exercised dominance. Diotrephes would be the local leader, and thus, in his slander of John and the traveling evangelists was evil. Through slander he sought to bar the traveling teachers from speaking to those over whom he exercised control. However, we must keep in mind that Gaius and Demetrius were also local leaders. The evil work of Diotrephes was to bar both the traveling evangelists and the local leadership of other groups. Through his slander, he was establishing a truly autonomous church that was separated, both from the universal and the local body of believers.

The foundation upon which Diotrephes was establishing the autonomy of His group was authority, not teaching. If Diotrephes’ problem were in reference to teaching, then surely John would have dealt with such in 3 John. But since the problem was one of lordship leadership, then John was coming as Paul was going to Corinth after the writing of the 2 Corinthian letter. If some in Achaia did not repent of their arrogant leadership, Paul warned,

*I have told you before, and foretell you as if I were present the second time. And being absent now, 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).

Paul was headed to Achaia with the “rod” of discipline (1 Co 4:21). Some dominant and arrogant leaders were going to be delivered unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh (1 Co 5:5). Paul

concluded his warning by stating:

*Therefore, I write these things being absent, lest being present I should use sharpness according to the authority that the Lord has given me for edification and not to destruction* (2 Co 13:10).

#### **D. Do not receive others.**

An independent group is formed under the direction of a leadership that seeks to be the dominant influence over the members of a particular group. Once the leadership restricts others from the group, then the members of the group usually follow the exclusive behavior of the leadership by being intimidated not to receive outside teachers. The preacher who withdraws himself into his own kingdom of disciples is fearful of receiving other leaders, lest they correct him for the evil sectarianism that he is practicing.

We must not confuse Diotrephetic leadership with those godly leaders who stand by the word of God in order to guard the flock from erroneous teaching and “wolves” who seek to come in among the flock. It is the responsibility of the shepherds of the flock to protect the flock from false teaching. The Holy Spirit wrote to Titus that “*an elder must ... be able by sound teaching both to exhort and refute those who contradict*” (Ti 1:9). Elders must be able with the word of God to test those who come to the flock seeking to be teachers (1 Jn 4:1). However, there is a difference between a shepherd who is trying to guard the flock from false teaching and a shepherd who, because of

selfish ambition, seeks to draw away disciples after himself. In this context of discussion, we are talking about the latter.

Diotrephes was a lordship leader among the sheep. He had withdrawn himself and his group from the fellowship of the universal body of Christ by his sectarian actions. Some in Achaia sought to do the same in reference to Paul’s coming. They first slandered Paul before the church. They then accused him of being weak and fearful about actually coming to approach his accusers (2 Co 10:10; see 12:10). Nevertheless, Paul was coming, and he was coming with the rod of discipline if some in Achaia did not repent of their arrogance (1 Co 4:21).

As in the case of Paul going to Achaia, John first wrote a letter of correction lest he be put in a situation where he would have to deliver Diotrephes unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh (See 2 Co 1:23; 13:2; see 1 Tm 1:20). John was expecting to go to Gaius, and thus did not write a lengthy letter (3 Jn 13,14). Because of the evil behavior of Diotrephes, John planned to deal with him personally.

Those who withdraw themselves from the body of Christ, often take their independent group of disciples with them. In this way, autonomy first lays the foundation for the division of the universal body of Christ that is eventually divided into many independent groups. When preachers remain with a group of disciples year after year, it is only natural that the people are drawn to their favorite leadership. With this great influence over the people, the leader becomes the icon of his followers, and thus the leader is sometimes

emboldened to declare the group of disciples to be “his church.”

Sincere leaders who understand and teach the universality of the organic function of the body of Christ are not tempted to follow Diotrephes. Such leaders focus the flock on Christ. If any leader of the church in all history could have easily started his own movement of churches that would be called after himself, it would have been the apostle Paul. But such did not happen. No such churches are known because Paul focused people on Christ, not on himself.

Unfortunately, some of the greatest reformers of past years were not so successful as Paul. Martin Luther cautioned his disciples about calling themselves “Lutherans.” Luther wrote,

I pray you leave my name alone and not to call yourselves Lutherans, but Christians. Who is Luther? My doctrine is not mine: I have not been crucified for anyone .... How does it then benefit me, a miserable bag of dust and ashes, to give my name to the children of God? Cease, my dear friends, to cling to these party names and distinctions; away with all of them; and let us call ourselves only Christians, after Him from whom our doctrine comes (*Michelet, Life of Luther*, p. 262).

Nevertheless, after Luther’s death, those who followed his teaching could not resist calling themselves Lutherans against Luther’s will. We were once in a gathering of preachers of different religious faiths. One preacher stood up and stated confidently concerning his particular de-

nomination, “We are true Calvinists in our teaching,” indicating that they as a group had drawn themselves away after the teaching of John Calvin. When groups become sectarian by crystallizing themselves around a particular individual or particular code of traditions, or doctrine, then they can no longer state that they are “Christians only.” They are either Calvinistic Christians, Lutheran Christians, or whatever. But being Christian only is often too much for those who are fearful of losing their identity with a particular religious heritage.

### **E. Crystallize the group.**

At this stage of development in the denominated group, the leadership has assumed control by focusing on a particular individual who controls the group. In order to crystallize a group in separating it from other groups that are likewise following the same course of sectarianism, the leaders through intimidation enforce allegiance. If one would be a member of the sect, then he is forbidden to consider himself a part of any other group. In other words, one’s membership with a particular group is the signing of an allegiance with one group to the exclusion of working with or fellowshiping any other group. This is accomplished through a spirit of allegiance that is instilled within those who have agreed to identify with a selected party.

Diotrephes denominated his group of disciples from all other groups by violating one of the most important functions of the universal body of Christ. He de-

nominated those over whom he exercised control by drawing them away under his own control. **A denomination is defined by its refusal to fellowship those who are not a member of the denominated group.**

In the historical environment of the function of the body in the first century, evangelists were traveling from city to city preaching the gospel to the lost. In any particular region where there were many Christians, shepherd/teachers were building up the body by going from house to house (See At 2:46; 20:20). Diotrephes, however, barred the members of his group from receiving these evangelists and shepherds. Diotrephes was thus working against the organic function of the body to evangelize the world, as well as the body growing itself spiritually through the teaching ministry of the shepherds. What Diotrephes was doing was not simply forming his own denominated group of disciples, but hindering the preaching of the gospel to the world and the organic function of the body. Souls would be lost as a result of his sectarian behavior. It is for this reason that the Holy Spirit was calling his actions evil (3 Jn 11).

### **G. Instill cult fear.**

The unity of the body of Christ is destroyed when the members of each denominated group of disciples are made to fear social expulsion from the fellowship of the group with which they have their membership. Diotrephes had made a sect out of the group over which he maintained control. He did so by intimidating any

member of his group from participating in the fellowship activities of any other members of the body in his area.

What he did was to generate loyalty through fear of expulsion. He threatened to disfellowship those who would financially partner with others by supporting the traveling evangelists. He also instilled a sense of loyalty that always drew the members and their support to his group. He thus sought to stand between the members and Christ by socially intimidating the members into following his work and him as the leader of his independent church.

We do not miss the fact that John did not reproach the members of the church in Diotrephes' move to create and maintain an autonomous group of disciples. The reason John did not is that he understood that sheep are sheep. Sheep naturally follow those who would be their shepherd, regardless of the motives of the shepherd they follow. The shepherd can lead the sheep to the slaughter house, and still they will be content to allow their shepherd to pronounce any dictate that would lead them to doom.

We have seen this behavior numerous times. For example, when the church in any area would have an area wide meeting, we have seen sheep pack up before the meeting is over in order to make sure that they returned to the regular meeting of their own group. This may have been what was happening in Achaia with some who were calling themselves after different personalities (1 Co 1:12).

What is manifested in such behavior is that good-hearted sheep have a

greater loyalty to their sect than they do to all other sheep in the area. They are more concerned about attending their own fellowship than enjoying an opportunity to fellowship the extended family of God. In their innocence, they have revealed that they are more loyal to their leader and their group than the extended church family in the area. We might call this “innocent denominationalism.” Whatever we would call such behavior, however, it is still calling oneself after a particular group or individual.

In reference to the character of Diotrephes, and such leaders who demand loyalty, they have forgotten Jesus’ mandate that there should never be authoritative leaders among the flock of God. Jesus reminded the disciples that there are “*rulers over the Gentiles*” who exercise authority (Mk 10:42). “*And their great ones exercise authority over them*” (Mk 10:42). However, Jesus clearly mandated, “***But it will not be so among you***” (Mk 10:43). What all leaders should do when there is an opportunity for all the sheep to manifest their solidarity is to encourage all the sheep to be present.

We have always found it quite interesting that **a mandate of Jesus that was so clearly stated in reference to the leadership of the church is one of the first directives disobeyed by some who are leaders of the body of Christ.** One must keep in mind that he may not think that he is lording over the flock. However, the behavior of the flock over which he is unknowingly lording will manifest his lordship.

The reason Jesus gave the mandate

that there should be no authorities among His disciples is revealed in the behavior of Diotrephes. When leaders rise up and claim authority, they are dividing the church of our Lord as Diotrephes denominated his group from all other groups. Diotrephetic leadership always leads to the denominating of the body of Christ. The division promoted by Diotrephes was based on him, not on a specific doctrine. And in this case, Diotrephes personally claimed authority over the group, and thus, denominated the group from other groups.

**We must never forget that when someone claims authority among the disciples, it is always inherently divisive.** Once a leader behaves autocratically, then he demands that the members of the group over which he has claimed authority must sign allegiance to him and his group. Some leaders may be somewhat naive in their leadership style. They may assume that the controlling nature of their leadership does not denominate the flock over which they innocently assume leadership. But we must not misunderstand what John was writing concerning the results of Diotrephes’ controlling behavior. His controlling behavior denominated the disciples over whom he exercised control from other disciples.

In very subtle ways, some leaders denominate their particular groups from all other groups. Their behavior is as Diotrephes who demanded allegiance to his group. If one would be a member of his group, then they could not be a part of any other group in the area. Diotrephes lorded over his group by intimidating the members into stating their exclusive mem-

bership (allegiance) with his group, which membership affirmed that they were a part of his group.

Leaders must understand that every time they require a member of the universal body of Christ to give allegiance solely to a particular group of the body, then they have in a very subtle way denominated that member from all other disciples of Christ who might be meeting with other groups in the same city or region. We must remember that our membership was registered in heaven when God added us to His people (At 2:47). It should never change from the time we signed up with Jesus when we were obedient to the gospel to the time we complete our journey of life. The New Testament nowhere teaches such a thing as a dual membership, one on earth and another in heaven.

When we give our allegiance to Christ, we have disconnected from any

group or man who would stand between us and Christ. When we obeyed the gospel, we did not sign up with any exclusive group within the one universal church. Diotrophes demanded allegiance to himself because he loved to be first. But by demanding such allegiance, he was asking for the members of his group to exclude other members from his congregation who did not give total allegiance to those over whom he assumed leadership.

We must never forget that the organic unity of the universal body of Christ can never exist if we set up a network of authorities either locally or universally who demand allegiance to the internationally organized network of authorities. When we walk freely in Christ, our walk in freedom is not only from sin, but also from anyone who would bring us into the bondage of their favorite group of disciples, or their Catholic order of hierarchal authorities.

## Chapter 16

### Preaching Christ

The Judean Jews wanted to present Paul before Roman authorities as a political prisoner who was antagonistic against Rome. If they could succeed in this effort, then they would have eliminated him from the religious scene of Judaism. Therefore, before the Roman governor of Caesarea, the lawyer for the Jews, Tertullus, accused Paul:

*For we have found this man [Paul] a pestilent fellow and a creator of dissension among all the Jews throughout the world, and a ringleader of the sect of the*

*Nazarenes (At 24:5).*

Tertullus used all the right political words before the Roman authority that would picture Paul as one who was a threat to Rome. But the Roman officials knew enough about Judaism and the Jewish religious leaders to understand that this “pestilent fellow” was not against Rome, but against the Jews’ religion (At 25:19). Nevertheless, during this trial Paul appealed to be judged in Rome. As a Roman citizen, he had the right to be judged before a Roman court in Rome (At 25:11).

So the historical context of Paul's statements in the first chapter of Philippians was written while he was in the custody of a Roman guard in Rome.

Rome was the center of politics for the entire Roman Empire. We would correctly assume, therefore, that almost everyone in Rome had some political agenda, or whose behavior was cautiously guarded by the political environment. This would certainly be true in the case of the religious leaders. If one were out of favor with the powers of the Roman State, then this would certainly not put one in a comfortable social position.

The tension between Roman state religion and Christianity would eventually play itself out in the great persecution that would eventually arise throughout the Empire and would last for 150 years. So what was coming in the lives of Christians was Roman state religion that was against Christianity. The entire book of Revelation was written to prepare the early Christians for this onslaught against their faith.

At the time Paul was in Rome, the wicked and narcissistic Nero was emperor. Because of his personal claims to be deity, Nero launched a personal vendetta against Christians in Rome during the middle 60s. Nero's personal vendetta against Christians would eventually turn into state persecution in the years to come. But at the time Paul was in Rome, he was there representing the Christian faith in the midst of Nero's antagonism against Christianity. We would assume, therefore, that the political preachers in Rome were greatly influenced by the political environ-

ment in which they lived and preached.

The disciples in the Roman colony of Philippi knew the predicament that Paul was in as he sat in custody in a Roman prison. In answer to their concerns for his personal safety, Paul wanted the Philippian Christians to know one very important point in reference to his trials: "*But I want you to know, brethren, that the things that happened to me **have turned out for the furtherance of the gospel***" (Ph 1:12). Whatever transpired as a result of his imprisonment, therefore, had resulted in the furtherance of the gospel. That which seemed to be a tragic turn in his life, was actually turning out for the preaching of the gospel. God had led Paul to a Roman prison in order to have Christianity put on trial before a secular court (At 23:11). All the evidence that Luke transcribed in the documents of Luke and Acts would be in Paul's defense, which defense eventually led to Paul's release in A.D. 62. (Download Book 28, *Luke's Historical Defense Of Christianity*, BRL, [africainternational.org](http://africainternational.org)).

Paul's presence in a Roman prison was a mistake on the part of the Jews who sought to silence his preaching. While Paul was in prison, he wrote that the gospel "*has become manifest throughout the whole [Roman] Praetorian guard, and to all the rest, that my chains are in Christ ...*" (Ph 1:13). Because of his bold stand for Jesus, "*many of the brethren in the Lord, being confident by my chains, **are more courageous to speak the word without fear***" (Ph 1:14).

Before Paul arrived in Rome, the brethren in Rome had previously been ap-

prehensive about speaking the word publicly. But the fact that he was bold in his chains encouraged some of them to be the same. After he was falsely imprisoned in Philippi on a previous journey, Paul simply carried on as his bold character necessitated. So he wrote to the Thessalonian disciples:

*But after we have suffered before and were shamefully treated in Philippi, as you know, we were bold in our God to speak to you [in Thessalonica] the gospel of God with much opposition (1 Th 2:2).*

We would conclude that Paul's request for prayer from the Colossians was answered by God while he sat in a Roman prison. At the same time he wrote the Philippian letter, he also sent a letter to the disciples in Colosse. In that letter (Colossians) he asked them to "*continue in prayer ... that I make it [the mystery of Christ] manifest as I ought to speak*" (Cl 4:2,4). The fact that some even of Caesar's household had obeyed the gospel, and were now brothers and sisters in Christ, was a testimony of Paul's boldness to speak in prison in Rome. His bold speaking is evidence that God gave Him a portion of boldness in answer to the prayers of the brethren in Colosse (See Ph 4:22).

But the situation in Rome was not all a rosy picture of boldness and successes. There were some brethren in Rome who did not defend the jailhouse preacher. In fact, Paul continued in his letter to the Philippians, "*Some indeed*

*preach Christ even from envy and strife ...*" (Ph 1:15).

Paul was known throughout the religious world for stirring up religious animosity among both Jews and Gentiles by his preaching that Jesus was the only way to God (See At 4:12; 21:20,21). If Paul were in prison on behalf of the defense of Christianity, then the political preachers in Rome would have been preaching the cross and Christ in a way that would bring more opposition to Paul. Since they sought to be politically correct, then they could not have preached in a manner that defended Paul. It seems that the preaching of the political preachers was thus ineffective in producing the results that came from Paul's preaching. It was ineffective because they did not want to preach Christ in a way that would stir up animosity against themselves, as did the preaching of Paul.

These ambitious, and possibly envious preachers, sought to compromise the faith because they did not want to suffer from the hostility of Nero. They did not want to involve themselves in being hated for Jesus as did Paul (Jn 15:18-27; Rm 1:16). Therefore, their political preaching produced division within the family of disciples in Rome, for some Roman Christians were encouraged to be bold, but the political preachers sought to preach a message of compromise.

Paul wrote that the "envy and strife" preachers preached "*Christ out of selfish ambition, not with pure motives, supposing to add distress to my chains*" (Ph 1:17). These ambitious preachers were political in that they sought to pro-

mote themselves at the cost of stirring up antagonism against Paul. These were the ones who would seek to sit in the chief seats, wear robes and clothes that distinguished them from others in public, and then parade themselves before others that they were accepted religious leaders and approved by the government. They possibly paraded themselves in positions of political prominence that would separate themselves from the jailhouse preacher down at the local prison. We have found that whenever a preacher seeks to be politically correct and in favor with hostile governments, he compromises his message in order to remain in the company of government officials.

One certainly cannot set himself forth to be someone if he associates with jailhouse preachers. Such associations would not bring one in favor with the government powers of the day. One cannot be politically correct if he defends those who are accused of being “... *a pestilent fellow and a creator of dissension among all the Jews throughout the world, and a ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes* (At 24:5). Who would want to be associated with a religious political prisoner in Rome who was accused of such things?

These political preachers were intentional. They were specifically speaking in a derogatory manner against Paul in order to disassociate themselves from Paul. Paul stated frankly that they supposed “*to add distress to my chains*” (Ph 1:17). Can you imagine that? Here are preachers who were so political in their behavior and preaching that they would

seek to cause preachers as the apostle Paul to have more distress in their chains by how they represented Christ to the public.

One might think that he would never be guilty of such behavioral shenanigans. But such things did Diotrephes in reference to the apostle of love by speaking all sorts of slanderous accusations in order that John not be accepted by the brethren over whom Diotrephes had claimed authority (See 3 Jn 10). The next time some preacher would slanderously speak against another preacher, he should probably bite his own tongue, lest he fall into the evil of Diotrephes and into the company of the slanderous political preachers of Rome.

When one is filled with selfish ambition, and thus becomes envious of those he would like to replace, in his evil motives he will often seek to bring another down through slander in an effort to exalt himself.

So what would we expect as an answer to these political preachers by a true man of God who suffered from ungodly behavior? What would we reply to “title holding” presumptuous and self-proclaimed apostles and prophets who seek positions and fame among the disciples by slanderously speaking against other preachers? Paul simply replied, “*What then?*” (Ph 1:18). Or, if we would paraphrase his meaning in modern-day thinking, “Whatever, as long as Christ is preached.”

We might expect Paul to come forth in the power of the Spirit with some profound denunciation to lambast such self-

righteous and slanderous personalities who spewed forth their political garbage from pulpits throughout Rome. We might even expect him to show up at the meetings that generated strife, meetings that he told both Timothy and Titus to refuse to attend (See 2 Tm 2:23; Ti 3:9-11). We might even expect our own feelings to be played out in Paul's reaction to the ambitious promoters. But Paul did none of these things. He simply wrote,

*What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretence or in truth, Christ is preached. And in this I rejoice, yes, and will rejoice* (Ph 1:18).

When there are those brethren who stand up out of envy and selfish ambition, and bring a railing accusation against other brethren, they condemn themselves through their evil motives and behavior. If they are preaching Christ, then at least they are accomplishing the mission of

keeping the name of Jesus Christ before the world.

We will ignore the competitive motives of self promotionalists. We will praise God that the name of the Lord Jesus Christ is being proclaimed. What Paul was saying was that he was willing to suffer the reproach of others in order that the name of Christ be preached. He was willing to continue the unity of the body regardless of the motives of some who were driven by selfish ambition. It was simply not worth causing division among the disciples to become involved in debates with those who were motivated by envy and selfish ambition. There would be a lot less division among the disciples if the bigger men would simply ignore the self-promoters and refuse to attend those meetings that lead to more controversy. Unity is promoted by refusing to meet with contentious people whose motive it is to intimidate others into giving way to their opinions, demands, or lordship.

## Chapter 17

### An Identity Crisis

Romans is a document of freedom. By the grace of God, Paul argues, we are set free from having to keep law perfectly in order to be justified before God. Unfortunately, when Paul concluded Romans with the statement of Romans 16:17, some had still missed the argument of the letter. Some today have also involved themselves in an ironic twist of the precious truth that we are saved by grace. Instead, some are still saying that we are saved by perfect obedience to law. This

theology is specifically revealed by those who have established what they consider to be a legal liturgy of assembly by which one is supposedly justified if kept precisely every Sunday morning.

The twisting of Paul's statement in Romans 16:17 is so misused that it is almost impossible for many to identify the divisive person about whom Paul speaks. And because the passage is often reversed in its contextual meaning, some slanderously accuse their opponents of dividing

the church over issues in which Christians actually have freedom. They use the passage in a manner that is opposite from Paul's original defense of those who sought to function organically in the freedom of Christ. Thus those who twist the statements of Paul actually replace grace for law that they have bound as a legal doctrine of self-justification.

We must study carefully what Paul stated in the context of the entire book of Romans before coming to the following statement of Romans 16:17,18:

*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.*

In the context of Paul's series of arguments in the book of Romans against the legalistic brethren to whom he was directing this letter, we must understand "the teaching" that Paul taught the Roman disciples in his letter. And to understand this teaching, we must consider the entire argument of Paul's thesis in Romans. In order to bring us to the above concluding statement, Paul introduces us to a profound truth in reference to our justification: "*Therefore, we conclude that a man is justified by faith **apart from the works of law***" (Rm 3:28). What he meant was that we are made right before God by our trust (faith) in God's grace, not by our trust in our meritorious obedi-

ence of law, or our efforts to atone for sins through good works.

Because Abraham was not under the Sinai law, he could not be justified by obedience to that law. Paul even argued that Abraham could not establish his own righteousness by keeping any codified law of work that he might establish for himself. "*For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something about which to boast, **but not before God***" (Rm 4:2). Neither Abraham, nor ourselves, can devise any law of works by which we can atone for our sins, and thus boast before God concerning our righteousness. Both Abraham and ourselves have only one recourse: "*Abraham believed God and it was credited to him for righteousness*" (Rm 4:3).

If we would devise a system of law by which we might seek to justify ourselves before God, **then we would be putting God in debt to save us.** "*Now to him who works [to justify himself],*" Paul stated, "*the reward is not credited according to grace, but according to debt*" (Rm 4:4). Therefore, the one who would bind law-keeping as the foundation upon which our salvation depends **is seeking to obligate God to save us on the basis of our law-keeping.**

Since the legalistic Jewish Christians to whom Paul was writing the letter of Romans were seeking to bind certain precepts of the Sinai law on the Gentiles, Paul asked the brethren, "*How then was it [Abraham's righteousness] credited? When he was in circumcision or in uncircumcision? Not in circumcision, but in uncircumcision*" (Rm 4:10). Cir-

cumcision was commanded for Abraham as a sign of God's covenant with Him, but he was not circumcised in order that God establish a covenant with him (Rm 4:11). The covenant was first established, and then the circumcision came as a sign of the covenant (See Gn 17:9-11).

At the time Paul wrote, one could be circumcised if he so chose. But to bind such in order to be declared justified (saved) before God was contrary to salvation by God's grace. The Jewish Christians, therefore, **were dividing the church by binding where God had not bound. They were the problem, not those who wanted to live free from the law of circumcision.**

The problem with the theology of the legalistic Jews was that they sought to establish their own righteousness before God through their strict obedience of law. In this way, they were seeking to be self-justified before God.

*For they being ignorant of God's righteousness and seeking to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted themselves to the righteousness of God (Rm 10:3).*

If we use the law of Christ as a legal system by which we would seek to justify ourselves before Christ, then we too would have the same problem as the Jews who sought to use the Sinai law as a legal system of self-justification. We would be establishing our own righteousness by a law which we would presume to keep perfectly in order to put God in debt to save us. But such can never hap-

pen simply because all have sinned, and thus, no one can live perfectly before God (Rm 3:9,10,23).

Paul wrote that he wanted to be found in Christ, "***not having my own righteousness that is from law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness that is from God by faith***" (Ph 3:9). This did not mean that he was declaring his freedom from law, but that he was declaring his freedom from having to obey law perfectly in order to be justified before God. Once he had assured himself of being just before God through faith, then through trust (faith) in God he established law in his behavior (Rm 3:30,31).

No one can keep law to any degree by which he can boast before God that he deserves to be saved. Since the first sin entered into the world through Adam, salvation has always been by faith in the grace of God. This conclusion must be true since we all sin (Rm 3:9,10). Since we cannot keep any law perfectly in order to save ourselves, then it is superfluous for us to exalt ourselves as judges to demand perfect keeping of law by others. It is for this reason that some need to be cautioned about establishing a law of liturgy for assembly, and by doing such, consider themselves self-justified before God when they supposedly keep perfectly their self-imposed liturgy of law for assembly.

In the historical context of the writing of the letter of Romans, the Sinai law had been terminated (Rm 7:1-4). This termination meant the end of the rite of circumcision. However, there were Jewish

brethren “*who sneaked in to spy out our freedom that we have in Christ Jesus, that they might bring us into bondage*” (Gl 2:4). These were the “church dividers.” These brethren taught, “*Except you are circumcised after the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved*” (At 15:1). **The one who would divide the church, therefore, is the one who would bind where God has not bound.** He is the one who would impose that which God has not bound in order to be justified before God. This was the entire case of Paul in the book of Romans. If we would bind perfect keeping of any law as a means of salvation, then we have traded grace for law. And in the trade, we have made a bad deal. If one would impose upon the church any tradition as law, then he has become a church divider.

Our salvation is by grace, and not by perfect keeping of law, or the perfect keeping of a liturgy of assembly that cannot be defended by the word of God. “*For by grace you are saved through faith, and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God*” (Ep 2:8). It is by grace, and not by some system of self-imposed law that we would consider ourselves justified before God. **The church dividers in the context of Paul’s arguments throughout the book of Romans were those who were binding law in a manner by which they would claim to be righteous before God.**

At the time Paul wrote both Romans and Galatians, circumcision was a tradition among the Jews. It was a law under the Sinai covenant, but that covenant and law had been nailed to the cross (Cl 2:14).

To bind the tradition of circumcision on the Gentiles would be binding where God had not bound.

Paul concluded Romans by encouraging those who sought to walk in the freedom they had in Christ. They must be on the lookout for those church dividers who would bind where God had not bound. These are those Paul had in mind when he wrote, “... *mark those who cause divisions [by binding where God has not bound] and offenses contrary to the teaching [of the grace] you have learned ...*” (Rm 16:17). These are those who have denied the grace of God. When Paul instructed, “*turn away from them,*” he meant what he stated 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.*”

One must be cautious not to be recruited by others who would legally bring one into the bondage of self-imposed ceremonies of assembly by which they would seek to be justified before God. If one binds in our assemblies those things about which the New Testament is silent, then he is the church divider who walks contrary to the liberty that we have in Christ. Paul warned that legalistically oriented brethren “*zealously recruit you, but not for good. Yes, they want to exclude you so that you might be zealous for them*” (Gl 4:17). **But if one is recruited to a gospel of legal obedience, then he is excluded from the grace of God.**

If we recruit groups to perform our prescribed law of liturgy in assembly, we have not “established a church.” We have

simply made those whom we have recruited to our “form of liturgy” to be twice condemned as the scribes and Pharisees who made those whom they recruited to their legalistic forms to be twofold sons of hell. Evangelists must be careful not to “travel sea and land” and do what Jesus said in the following statement:

*Woe to you scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you travel sea and land to make one proselyte. And when he is made, you make him twice as much the son of hell as yourselves (Mt 23:15).*

Both Romans and Galatians were written concerning the same problem of some who were binding where God had not bound. If one seeks to be free in Christ, then he must not submit to those who would bind a system of law, and perfect obedience thereof, as a means of justification. We seek to obey the law of God, for in failing to walk in the light of His word, we cannot be saved. But to devise a system of traditional interpretations, or system of worship that one must keep in order to be justified before God, is to destroy the freedom we have in Christ. Before we would accuse one of being a “church divider,” we need to search the Scriptures to determine if he is actually violating Scripture, or simply doing something that is not according to our traditions, or how we personally feel. If we cry out “church divider,” we may be the church divider for making the cry.

An example that sometimes reveals how easy it is to become somewhat hypocritical in our judgment of others illustrates

this point. We once **as a group** made a decision as to how many assemblies each member of our group must attend before one was considered “faithful.” The decision was made by the entire group, written in our minds, and thus, we considered ourselves as rightful judges to pronounce judgment on those who did not attend our group-appointed times of assembly.

At the same time we were judging one another concerning faithfulness in attendees. We judged our neighbors for being denominational because they **as a group** had determined certain liturgies of assembly that must be recognized and obeyed. As a group, they even went as far as to chose a name for their group. We judged them denominational for selecting a particular name for their group, which we considered divisive. We made all these judgments at the same time we were being church dividers by binding on ourselves our own tradition as to how many assemblies one must attend in order to be “faithful.” We need not go into our established liturgy of assembly by which we also judged ourselves the “true” church. We justified ourselves because our decision was made by the group, while at the same time hypocritically judged our religious neighbors denominational, for binding their traditions on themselves as a group. We could not see our own theological hypocrisy.

It has been our experience that those who are quick to accuse others of dividing the church are the ones who are often coveting their own traditions that have denominated themselves as a unique group from all other groups. Their unique-

ness is determined by their own “group decisions,” and thus they, as we, have all denominated ourselves from one another, while at the same time claiming that we all claim that we are the “true” church. We have often become judgmental humbugs with fingers pointing everywhere but at ourselves.

The church divider is not the one who stands in the liberty by which he was made free in Christ. The church divider is the one who binds his opinions, traditions, or liturgies of assembly that he presumes are legal forms of service and worship, and thus, must be kept as legal codes to justify oneself before God.

We must remember that we “*have been called to freedom ...*” (Gal 5:13). Paul added a definition that explains the motives of the church divider:

*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 16:18).*

The motive of the church dividers is selfish ambition. They are not seeking to bring the innocent into unity in Christ, but into conformity to their own strictures. These are the Diotrophes brethren who love to be first, and thus through intimidation, they seek a following from those who are deceived into thinking that obedience to their opinions will present a facade of unity. This may possibly be those who seek to be considered important and prominent in the church. So by enforcing traditional behavior on the church, they are actually leading the church into the apostasy of traditionalism.

Chief-seat sitters have a hard time bringing people directly to Jesus and into unity with one another. Through appealing words and flattering speech they seek to woo and awe the innocent into submission to their own personality and pronouncements. These are they who divide the church of our Lord, for they seek to draw the sheep away after themselves by binding where God has not bound (At 20:30).

## Chapter 18

### The Oneness Attitude

The relational function of each member of the body is first with God, and then with one another. Our relationship with one another is based on our relationship with God. The weaker our relationship is with God, the weaker it is with one another. One cannot say he has a relationship with God if he has little or no relationship with his brothers and sisters in

Christ. Our coming together in assembly, therefore, is actually a renewal of our relationship with God because we seek to relate lovingly with one another.

The New Testament is not a manual on assembly techniques or a code of liturgy for assembly-oriented religiosity. It is a compilation of Spirit-inspired instructions to encourage us to relate with one

another because of how God related to us through the cross. We are called to come into an obedient relationship with God by His call to us through the cross. We are driven to connect with one another, therefore, because God connected with us through Jesus. The fellowship of the saints is no more complicated than that. Christians want to be connected with one another as much as possible because they have an endearing connection with God.

Now when we visit any region or city where there is at least one person who has connected with God through the cross, then it is only natural that we as disciples of Jesus should seek to connect with that person in order to worship and praise the “Divine Connector” of all members of the body. We must never allow our connecting with any group of disciples to exclude us from fellowshiping with other disciples who are also our brethren. If we do so, then we are manifesting a sectarian manner.

When Paul went into any city, he searched for disciples in that city. The first place he searched was the synagogue. We must forget that by the time Paul went on his first and second mission journeys (A.D. 46–49 and A.D. 49–52), it was 15 to 25 years **after** the Pentecost of A.D. 30 when the church was established in Jerusalem. In other words, 15 to 25 Pentecosts had occurred every year by the time he arrived in the synagogues he visited on his first two journeys (See At 17:1).

During this time, there were Jews annually going to Jerusalem for Pentecosts throughout these years. While

in Jerusalem, they had heard the preaching of the apostles who stayed in Jerusalem after the A.D. 30 Pentecost (See At 2:42). To a great extent, therefore, Paul’s regular visits to the synagogues on his mission journeys were actually follow-up studies with Jews who had visited Jerusalem during at least one of the Pentecosts after A.D. 30. This is why Paul went from synagogue to synagogue, searching for those Jews who may have already heard the gospel, as the Ethiopian eunuch who was confused on his way back home after encountering Christians who taught daily in the temple of Jerusalem (At 5:42; 8:26–40).

When Paul came into Corinth, he looked for others in the city who were disciples. Acts 18:2 says that he “*found a certain Jew named Aquila ... with his wife Priscilla ..*” When he once came into Ephesus he again **found** “*certain disciples*” (At 19:1). Paul was in the “finding business” because he searched for those, who had in an idolatrous world in some way connected with God. He searched for those who had either obeyed the gospel, or those who had visited Judea during one of the Passover/Pentecost feasts that occurred during the ministry of either John the Baptist or Jesus. The disciples he found in Ephesus may have earlier made contact with John during his ministry.

Paul’s “finding ministry” assumes that one of his responsibilities as a disciple was to connect people with one another in Christ. It is interesting that Aquila and Priscilla had been in Ephesus for at least one year, but they had not found the

“certain disciples” that Paul found when he came back to the city after a year in Judea, Syria and Galatia (At 18:22,23). It may have been that Aquila and Priscilla, being Jews, regularly met with other Jews in the synagogue, waiting for an opportunity to find someone as Apollos who was a visiting teacher (See At 18:24-28). But it could also be that the “certain disciples” were Gentiles, and thus they did not meet with the Jews in the synagogue. Or they may have been Jews who believed the message of John the Baptist, and were subsequently kicked out of the synagogue by opposing Jews before the arrival in the city of Aquila and Priscilla. Whatever the case, we must keep in mind that the city of Ephesus at the time was over 250,000 in population. We certainly could not expect Aquila and Priscilla to find all the disciples in the city in the year or so before Paul arrived.

Because of the size of the city of Ephesus, we would naturally assume that a problem of connectivity would develop among all the members of the body in the region of Ephesus. One fact in reference to connectivity between disciples in such a large area would almost be natural. **It would be difficult for disciples in a large geographical city area to remain connected.** In fact, because local resident disciples can become lost in large metropolitan areas, it was almost impossible for them to stay in contact with one another.

Paul envisioned a separation of disciples within Ephesus that would come after his final visit to the city (See At 20:30). Because of the difficulty of disciples remaining in contact with one an-

other within such large metropolitan areas, we can understand why a letter that was written to the disciples in such an area as Ephesus would include an exhortation that every member in some way strive to stay connected. This is the context of the letter of Ephesians. Paul wrote to the disciples within a large city who had no automobiles, no telephones, no emails, no facebook, no twitter, etc.

How would we ever expect the disciples in large cities as Ephesus to remain one organic body of Christ when everyone was meeting in homes throughout the city? Even disciples today who are privileged with a vast means of transportation and communication devices often find it difficult to remain in contact with one another within large metropolitan areas. We can only imagine how difficult it was for thousands of Christians to remain in contact with one another in cities as Jerusalem, Corinth or Ephesus. Since they were all meeting in homes throughout these cities, we can assume that they struggled to keep the unity of the faith in the bond of peace.

This brings us to the context of the exhortations of **Ephesians 4:1-6**. This is an exhortation of only two sentences, both sentences imparting to all of us two simple mandates upon which we can remain the one organic body of Christ, though we may of necessity be scattered throughout hundreds of thousands, if not millions of people in a large metropolitan city or area. It is a context that reminds us that we are working with one another, though we are not in physical contact with one another.

In the first sentence of Ephesus 4:1-6, Paul focused on the personal relationships that Christians are to have with one another in order to maintain unity. He gives the personality skills that enable people to be with one another in a common fellowship regardless of their regular presence in the same assembly.

*Therefore I, the prisoner of the Lord, urge you that you walk worthy of the calling with which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, forbearing one another in love, being eager to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace (Ep 4:1-3).*

If we have been called through the gospel of peace, then our common obedience to the gospel is the foundation for our fellowship with one another. Our unity is the serendipity of our obedience to the gospel. Paul also wrote, “... **that you would walk worthy of God, who has called you unto His kingdom and glory**” (1 Th 2:12). Paul had preached the gospel to the Thessalonians (1 Th 2:8). They had obeyed the gospel in order to escape the impending judgment that was coming (2 Th 1:8,9). In his second letter, he was expressing urgency in his call for the Thessalonians to remain faithful to their calling. He reminded them, “... *He called you by our gospel, to the obtaining of the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ*” (2 Th 2:14).

The common obedience to the gospel of people throughout the world is the foundation upon which unity in Christ is initiated (See 1 Jn 1:3). If one would be

found worthy in his obedience of the gospel, therefore, he should be seeking to maintain the unity of all those who have obeyed the gospel. Those who would cause dissension in the body, therefore, are those who are unworthy. They are not worthy because it is the nature of the body to be one, and thus manifest to the world that the Father and Son are one. Those who “*walk worthy of the calling*” of the gospel, therefore, are walking in a manner that is explained and noted in the following points:

### **A. Humility:**

True relationships in Christ can happen only when we humbly submit to one another (See Mk 10:35-45; 1 Co 16:15,16; Ep 5:21). If we seek to bring the arrogant or dominant way of world leadership principles into the body of Christ, then there will never be any true unity. Corporate leadership is based on what the owner of the business decides is best for his company. If he is the owner of a successful company, then the owner can be quite dominant and forceful concerning what he would impose on this employees concerning the operation of the company. This is the way of world leadership.

If we designate authorities among us other than Christ, then we subject ourselves to being called after someone as Diotrephes who sets himself up as the owner of the “church company” (See 1 Co 1:12-14). Whenever there are designated “sheep owners” among the people of God, then the sheep are divided by their allegiance to “owners” of each group of

sheep. The result is that each sheep must determine the respective “owner” to which he must submit.

If the disciples designate different groups of authority over different groups of sheep, then the sheep are divided as to which group of authorities they must submit. But if all the sheep walk in submission to the “all authority” of the Chief Shepherd (1 Pt 5:4), then all the sheep are globally united in their common submission to the Chief Shepherd to whom they have all submitted. Our common submission to the authority of Christ, therefore, brings all of us together into a common submission to one another (Ep 5:21).

Unity among all disciples can exist only when there is no competition as to who will warm the chief seats. In fact, among disciples, **there are no chief seats** (See Mt 23:1-12). We are often amused when visiting numerous assemblies wherein is positioned “chief seats” in front of the assembly. Everyone knows that these seats represent places to which authority is given, and from which authority is manifested by those who occupy them, either on a temporary basis or permanent position among the disciples. We must not forget that among the disciples of Jesus we are all sitting on the same seats. There are no “chief seats” designated for higher authorities among God’s people.

Unity is promoted when we do not approach one another with arrogance, or thinking that we know all the answers. We come to one another with humility in order to study God’s word on the foundation of our love for one another, not with

the ambition of proving we are right. A humble person simply states that he does not have all the answers.

## B. Gentleness:

Humility is manifested through gentleness. A harsh person is not humble in his relationships with others, and thus, he is not one who encourages unity. It is interesting to note how Paul addressed the Corinthians, among whom were some very arrogant people: “*Now I, Paul, personally appeal to you by the meekness and gentleness of Christ ...*” (2 Co 10:1).

Would a harsh person presume to be in the presence of a gentle Jesus for eternity? The fruit that is produced by those who have relinquished themselves to the guiding of the Spirit, is gentleness (Gl 5:22,23). When we seek to be unified, we will seek to be gentle toward those with whom we may disagree.

If one would be gentle toward his fellow brother in Christ, then harsh retaliation is never justified. “*Bondservants, be submissive to your masters with all fear, not only to the good and gentle, but also to the harsh*” (1 Pt 2:18). When one responds to harshness with a gentle spirit, then we know that the wisdom of God is within that person (Js 3:17). Therefore, “*the servant of the Lord must not quarrel, but be gentle to all ...*” (2 Tm 2:24).

Paul explained how he and the other apostles behaved in their relationships with others: “*... we were gentle among you, even as a nurse tenderly cares for her own children*” (1 Th 2:7). They came to

the people as Jesus came to us: “*Behold, your King comes to you, gentle, and sitting upon a donkey ...*” (Mt 21:5). Gentleness allows unity to continue among brethren. In order to develop humble gentleness, it might be necessary to take some time to ride around town on a donkey.

### C. Patience:

No impatient person can be gentle. Impatient people are not gentle toward others in reference to differences. Patience is based on a gentle spirit, and a gentle spirit is based on our humility toward one another. The Holy Spirit gave a blanket command to the Thessalonian Christians: “*Be patient toward all men*” (1 Th 5:14). This would certainly include our brethren with whom we have a common fellowship in Christ. As disciples in Christ wherever we are, we should be known for our patience with one another as was the reputation of the disciples in the city of Thyatira: “*I know your works and love and service and faith and your patience*” (Rv 2:19).

### D. Forbearing:

Paul exhorted Titus in his leadership among the brethren, “*to be peaceable, forbearing, showing all meekness to all men*” (Ti 3:2). Impatient people are usually not gentle toward those with whom they disagree. In fact, impatient people are often arrogant, revealing that they come short in humility. When we seek to maintain the unity of the faith, everyone

must be forbearing with the differences we have with one another. Through patience we learn how to forbear one another’s growth in the grace and knowledge of Jesus (2 Pt 3:18).

### E. Love:

As the fruit of the Spirit that is revealed in Galatians 5:22,23 is based on love, love is the binding cord that holds all our mental attributes together as we forbear one another in our process of growth. When we speak of the church of our Lord, we are speaking of people who love one another (Jn 13:34,35). The people of God cannot be held together as the church without love. They certainly cannot be held together by what everyone pronounces as the correct legal requirements of our assortment of opinions.

Unity is not based on the opinions of one person whose opinions may be cherished and obeyed. Doing such is to denominate the body. One’s opinion on a matter may be right. But when two people disagree on a matter of opinion, one person’s opinion is incorrect. We must be cautious that we do not base our fellowship, or determine the existence of our group, on the opinion of the person who is wrong. In a spirit of humility, therefore, we must be patient with one another while we forbear one another’s opinions. Love is what continues our fellowship with one another as we forbear our differences in opinions.

The foundation for unity must always be our mutual love for one another. It is for this reason that Peter exhorted, “*Love*

*the brotherhood*” (1 Pt 2:17). In other words, every member must love the brotherhood of members ...

*... until we all come to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a complete man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ* (Ep 4:13).

If we love the church, then we will seek to be with the church. We will seek to forbear our differences. We will seek to continue with one another, even in times of conflict (See Ph 4:2,3). We will seek to approach one another in humility with all gentleness. Thus with patience, we

will forbear the differences we have with one another in the bond of peace. It is for this that we must earnestly struggle.

Paul’s exhortation to develop Christ-like personality characteristics establishes the foundation upon which all unity among Christians is based. Since Ephesians 4:1,2 reveals the characteristics of those who are in Christ, then it is only natural that those who possess these characteristics would be united in their fellowship with one another. If we are not united as one fellowship in Christ, then we must personally examine ourselves, for in one of the preceding areas of personality we may be lacking.

## Chapter 19

### Fellow Workers

In the context of Ephesians 4:1-6, and with the following exhortation, Paul continued his encouragement that the Ephesians to be “... *eager to keep the unity of the Spirit* ...” (Ep 4:3). Depending on one’s translation, “eager” is a word that would well convey the meaning of Paul’s injunction. We must strive for unity. It is not something that just happens. The organic body functions when all its members are working “with” one another in their common effort to think with the same mind and judgment in carrying out the mission of Jesus.

#### **A. Fellow workers function under the authority of their King.**

When discussing the unity of the body, we often use the word “with” in reference to our fellowship of working together. But we must be careful with the use of this preposition, lest we be inferring something that is contrary to the word of God, a meaning that is actually worldly and divisive.

When some people use the word “with,” they mean that we must be working “with” one another in a corporate sense of the business world. In other words, in order to work with one another, everyone must fall under some network of association that is governed by the authority of management. In order to work with one another in this corporate sense,

it is assumed that everyone must be directed by the management within the organization, and that the “employees” are in the physical presence of one another. But we know that this is a corporate concept of networking in function because of what Jesus said in Mark 10:

*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*** (Mk 10:42,43).

It is not difficult to understand this statement. Jesus has all authority (Mt 28:18). And to our knowledge, He did not distribute any of His authority to any person on earth in order to control a corporate network of those who are to supposedly work “with” one another under the umbrella of a corporate authority. In fact, listen to what Paul said to the Corinthians: “**Not that we rule over your faith, but are fellow workers for your joy**” (2 Co 1:24). In other words, if Paul, or any other person exercised authority over the Corinthian disciples, **then they would not be fellow workers**. The network of fellow workers in the faith is correctly understood when no one has authority over another, but everyone **is working with one another under the authority of Christ**.

The fellowship of the saints is defined as individuals working with one another without anyone having authority over anyone. This is what Paul was explaining to the Corinthians. He wanted them to know that they were fellow

workers with him, not because he exercised some apostolic authority over them, but that they voluntarily surrendered to Christ, as did he, and thus all of them were working together in the Lord.

Christians are responsible for one another. “*Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ*” (Gl 6:2). “*We then who are strong ought to bear the weaknesses of the weak and not to please ourselves*” (Rm 15:1). Responsibility means that we can look out for one another without any one person being in authority over others. This is our relationship with one another as fellow workers, both in spiritual responsibilities, as well as in our working relationship to fulfill our personal ministries.

At one time during his ministry, Paul had strongly urged Apollos to go to Corinth. But notice carefully the text where we are informed of this situation. “**But it was not his** [Apollos’] **desire to come at this time, but he will come when he has an opportune time**” (1 Co 16:12). Now if Paul had some apostolic authority over Apollos in their relationship with one another in order that Apollos be working “with” Paul, then Apollos would not have been submissive in this request of Paul. He would have been rebellious.

The relationship between Paul and Apollos illustrates that both were fellow workers in the kingdom, and thus, responsible for one another. Paul had no apostolic authority over Apollos, and neither did Apollos have authority over others. There was no network of apostolic authority by which the two would be in a unity that was based on a chain of com-

mand. Without a chain of command, they worked with one another in kingdom business. And if Paul exercised no authority over Apollos as an apostle, then we should be very careful about setting ourselves over one another in order that we can say we are working “with” one another.

The fact that Jesus exercises all authority in the lives of every member of His body totally defeats the teaching that there is some “apostolic authority” on earth with a few individuals among whom a network of authority exists within the church. It is believed by some that there was apostolic authority in the early church that constituted a supposed apostolic succession of authority that has been passed down throughout history. There are those today who assume such in order to validate a hierarchical establishment of control over those of their church organization. But such a teaching and behavior was never believed or practiced by the early leaders of the church. And if it was not practiced by the early church, then there is no historical record of such in the New Testament.

## **B. Fellow workers function outside one another’s presence.**

Some suppose that working “with” one another means that we must always be in one another’s presence in our work. In other words, to be fellow workers in the kingdom we must be united and physically “with” one another while we work in the same ministry. But if this definition of working with one another is true, then no disciple would go anywhere in order to complete his own gifted ministry.

It may have been that this was the original dysfunction of the body in its early beginnings in Jerusalem. The members wanted to stay in Jerusalem with one another in the comfort of their Jewish culture. But God had other plans, and thus, through persecution He flushed the members of the body out of Jerusalem and out of their presence with one another. Subsequently, “*those who were scattered abroad went everywhere preaching the word*” (At 8:4). There are times when we can be personally with one another in our labors for the Lord. However, we must be careful about hindering the work of God by holding up in one place, enjoying one another’s presence while the world goes unevangelized.

It is not necessary to be in one another’s presence in order to be working with one another. We know this by what Paul wrote in Philippians 4:3:

*And I ask you also, loyal companion, help these women who labored with me in the gospel, with Clement also, and the rest of my fellow workers whose names are in the book of life.*

Paul was in prison in Rome when he wrote this statement. The “rest of my fellow workers” of the worldwide body of Christ were not there with him in prison. They were scattered everywhere. But they were still his fellow workers, and thus working with him in the furtherance of the gospel. In other words, the fellow workers did not have to be in one another’s faces in order to be fellow workers with one another.

It is true that Paul had fellow workers with him in prison (Cl 4:10-12). However, these fellow workers did not become such when they visited with him in prison. They were fellow workers before they showed up with Paul at his prison door.

When we use the word “with,” therefore, we must be cautious about what we mean, lest we teach a form of disunity in the body of Christ. Before Paul and Barnabas left on their second mission journey, they had a disagreement about taking Mark (At 15:36-41). They could not come to an agreement concerning Mark, and thus, they parted from one another’s presence. Barnabas took Mark and Paul took Silas. The two teams then went to different areas, but all went to the areas they had evangelized on the first mission journey (At 15:39,40).

Paul and Barnabas were still working “with” one another, though in different areas of the world. They had not divided the church because they went in different directions. Because they were working in different areas of the kingdom did not mean that they were church dividers. Only those who are concerned about control and authority would think such. Because they were not personally “with” one another, or had come together in the same assembly on a regular basis in order to be working “with” one another, did not mean that they had divided the

church. They were together, however, as the one body in their common mission to evangelize the world.

Working together, therefore, does not mean that we have to be in one another’s presence, or even agree with one another’s methods of evangelism. Working together means that we are working to accomplish the common goal that Jesus commanded us (Mt 28:19,20; Mk 16:15,16).

The beautiful thing about working with one another as the body of Christ is that we are all on the same page, working our gifted ministries wherever we are in the world. The oneness of the body of Christ is in the fact that we are all fellow workers in the kingdom, regardless of where we are doing our ministry in the world in obedience to Jesus. It is this fact that keeps the body united and functional. Wherever one may be in the world, he or she must understand that he or she is working with a global body of believers who have individually given their lives to Christ. Each member of the worldwide body of Christ is an important functioning member in his or her own small part in the world. Every member of the body must remember that when he or she simply walks across the street to approach their neighbor concerning Jesus, there is a worldwide body of disciples right there in spirit.