

The Local Church

What is the New Testament Pattern?

A study by Pastor George Parsons, presented at the Men's Meeting on March 25, 1985. The study deals with the New Testament churches and their boundaries.

When a person comes to know the Lord Jesus Christ as his personal Saviour and Lord, he is made part of the body of Christ. This happens the moment the person believes on the Lord Jesus Christ:

"For by one Spirit are [were] we all baptized into one body" (1 Cor. 12:13).

The "body of Christ" is another designation for "the church":

"and gave Him to be the Head over all things to **the church which is His body**"
(Eph. 1:22-23)

"And He is the Head of **the body, THE CHURCH**" (Col. 1:18)

Therefore, the moment a person is saved he becomes a member of the UNIVERSAL CHURCH (that collective, total body of believers in Christ from the day of Pentecost when the church first began to the day of the rapture when the church will be completed). The universal church is in the *process* of being put together and finalized. The *completion* of the church will take place at the rapture (compare Romans 11:25).

Every believer is a member of the UNIVERSAL CHURCH. Every believer also should be a member of the local body or the local church. The following passages will help to shed light on what the local church really is as defined on the pages of the New Testament.

1 Corinthians 10:32

Don't be a stumbling block to anyone! Notice that all of humanity is divided into 3 groups. There are unsaved Jews and Gentiles. There are saved Jews and Gentiles who are part of the church. Note that the word "church" is singular. It refers to the church (the believers) anywhere and at any place. Don't be a stumbling block to the church wherever the church is. Thus the term "church" is used here in a singular, collective sense to refer to believers wherever they are. This verse does not refer to a specific local church.

1 Corinthians 4:17

"EVERY CHURCH"—this implies more than one. There are more than one local churches, but these churches were all of LIKE KIND. These churches had...

- the same teaching (1 Cor. 4:17).
- the same practice (1 Cor. 7:17).
- the same customs (1 Cor. 11:16).
- the same order (1 Cor. 14:33).

1 Corinthians 11:16

"CHURCHES" (note that the word is plural). Again this refers to the local churches. The Lord Jesus Christ manifests Himself in different localities through different local churches.

The Universal Church • The Local Church

The UNIVERSAL CHURCH includes all believers here and with the Lord (all believers who have lived, are living or shall live in this church age). The LOCAL CHURCH is made up of believers living in time and assembled together to **WORSHIP** God, **WORK** His will and **WAR** the good warfare.

A key point of difference between the UNIVERSAL CHURCH and the LOCAL CHURCH is that of **locality**. This is clearly illustrated from Revelation chapters 2-3 where we learn about the seven churches of Asia Minor. These were seven churches in seven different localities (localized churches). Each church receives an individualized letter.

Revelation 2:1--the CHURCH (singular) of (in) Ephesus (locality). Locality and locality alone is what distinguished this church from other churches.

Revelation 2:7--hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches (plural)." Every other church should pay attention to God's message to this local church, for all local churches *are His*, and are governed by His LIFE, His LAW and His LOVE.

Revelation 2:8--"the CHURCH (singular) in Smyrna." There is only one true church ("His church"- Matthew 16:18) and the one true church in Smyrna is distinguished from other true churches by locality. If I were a believer in Smyrna I would look for "the church in Smyrna" and be an active part of it.

Revelation 2:11--note the plural (every church in the age of the church should pay attention to these words).

See Revelation 2:12; 2:17; etc.

1 Corinthians 14:33

"CHURCHES"--plural. Note that *the same God* is over all the churches. There is ONE GOD, ONE HEAD of the church, but there are many local churches.

In the New Testament there were no brand names. Every local church was called a CHURCH. There were no labels such as Methodist or Presbyterian or Congregational or Baptist. They just had the name "church." How then were the churches identified and distinguished? They were identified by LOCALITY. There was only one church in each locality and either you were identified with that local church or you were not. The name CHURCH remains the same because the NATURE of the church is the same, the CHARACTER of the church is the same and the LORD of the church is the same.

1 Corinthians 15:9

Paul persecuted "THE CHURCH" (singular). Did Paul persecute only the church (believers) in Jerusalem? No, in this verse Paul is not concerned with naming all of the cities and localities. He landed his persecuting blows against the church no matter where the believers were (whether Jerusalem, Damascus or any other place).

Compare Acts 14:23 with Titus 1:5

Acts 14:23 → "ELDERS (plural) IN EVERY CHURCH (singular)"

Titus 1:5 → "ELDERS (plural) IN EVERY CITY (singular)"

By comparing these two verses we see that *every city had but one church* (and each church had elders). See also 1 Corinthians 1:2--"unto THE CHURCH OF GOD (there is only one true church, God's Church, which is AT (IN) CORINTH (this local church is distinguished from other local churches by locality)." Please note that in this verse the word "church" is singular. There cannot be more than one church in only one city. Corinth did not have several CHURCHES. This massive city only had **one** local church: "the **church** (singular) of God which was at Corinth." See also Acts 16:12 and the verses following and Philippians 1:1—"all the saints...who are at (in) Philippi (location in the world) with (together with) the bishops and deacons."

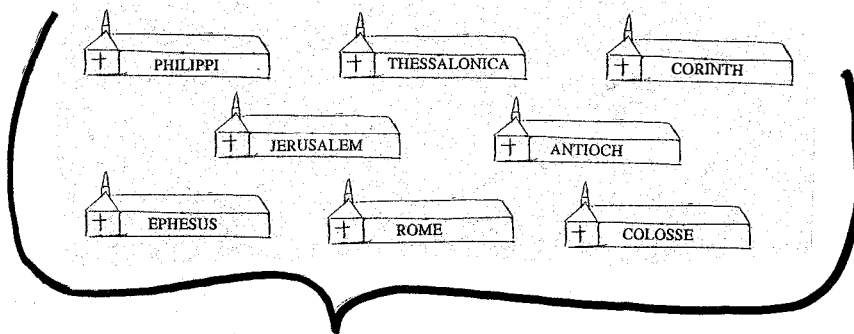
Thus the local church may be defined as *all the believers in a given locality*. Compare Philippians 1:1--"all the saints in Christ Jesus which (who) are at **Philippi**." Every city had a local church (one and only one),

except for those cities where no church had yet been planted or established. The LOCAL CHURCH is God's Church in a given locality. It is the responsibility of the church to show to that locality that there is "ONE BODY, ONE SPIRIT, ONE HOPE, ONE LORD, ONE FAITH, ONE BAPTISM AND ONE GOD AND FATHER OF ALL" (Eph. 4:4-6). This is the message that the local church should be declaring to the world. How tragic that today the message is quite different: "Here are 20 churches, pick one!" In New Testament times there was only one local church in each locality and you either belonged to that body of believers or you did not.

The Loc 1 Churches Were United!

The local churches of the first century had a UNITED testimony. Though distinguished by locality, they were still the *same church*, namely His Church, His Body, the body of Christ. If you were to visit the church in Jerusalem and the church in Antioch and the church at Corinth, what would you find? You would find three churches pointing to the same Christ, proclaiming the same gospel and practicing the same truth. You would not find three individual churches each "doing their own thing." The Churches were in different locations but they had the same Christ, the same Holy Spirit, the same Holy Scriptures and the same burning desire to do God's will and obey Christ's commands. If you had lived in the first century and had to move from Philippi to Ephesus, you would find the same kind of church in Ephesus as you had left in Philippi. If an unsaved person were to travel from Rome to Thessalonica, he would find that the believers in both of these cities pointed to the same Christ and to the same Bible. This is illustrated below:

NEW TESTAMENT CHURCHES



A UNITED VOICE--"WE THE CHURCHES!"

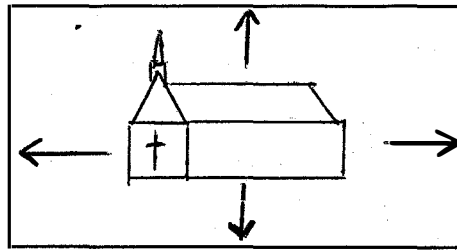
- SAME TEACHING "as I teach every where **in every church**" (1 Cor. 4:17)
- SAME PRACTICE "as the Lord hath called every one, so let him walk. And so ordain I **in all churches**" (1 Cor. 7:17)
- SAME CUSTOM "But if any man seem to be contentious, we have no such custom, neither **the churches of God**" (1 Cor. 11:16).
- SAME ORDER "For God is not the author of confusion, but of peace, as **in all churches of the saints**" (1 Cor. 14:33).

Each Local Church Must Be Independent

Each local church must stand on its own and is responsible before the Lord and answerable to Him. The Jerusalem church is not responsible for the Antioch church, and the Antioch church does not need to answer for the church in Corinth. Of course, the local churches should have a prayerful interest and concern one for another.

The limits of a locality mark the limits of a church. By definition, the local church does not allow for DIVISIONS nor for LOCAL EXTENSIONS.

The local church, its existence and its place in a given locality CANNOT BE LESS THAN that locality.

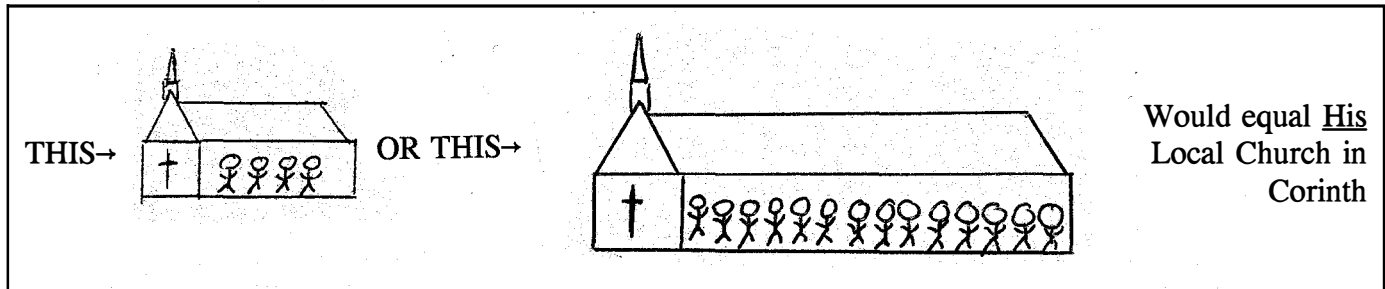


HIS CHURCH
in a given locality

YES!

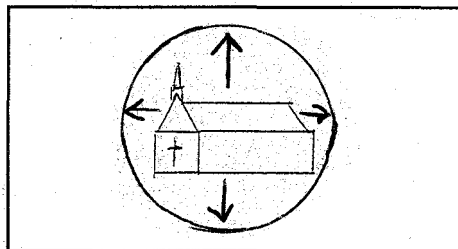
CITY OF CORINTH--The Location

The size of the assembled believers in that locality **does not** define its limits or boundaries. It is His Local Church in and for that City/Location/District. Size (number of people) is not the issue:



CITY OF CORINTH

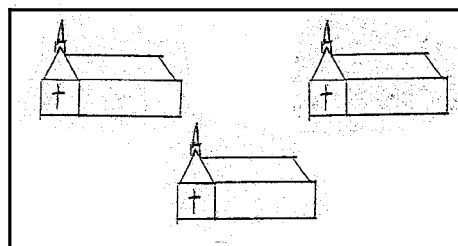
The Local Church cannot be less than the locality and still be His Local Church:



NO!

CITY OF CORINTH

The Local Church by definition does not allow for other local churches in the **same** locality. You cannot have "the church of the 2nd district of Corinth."



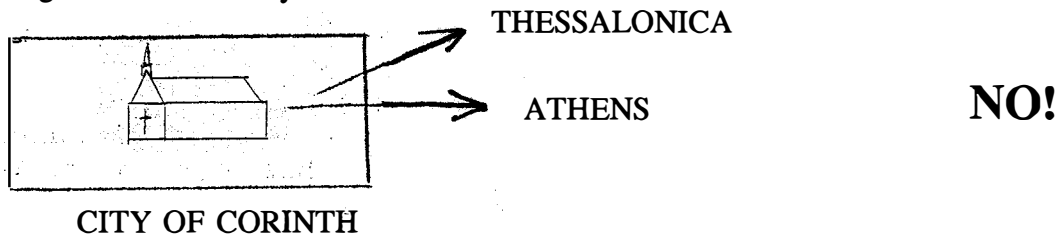
NO!

CITY OF CORINTH

The Local Church **cannot** break up into other local churches in the same locality and still be called **His Local Church** for that locality. Using Corinth again, it must be the church of the entire area of Corinth.

The Local Church has no local extension. Therefore it cannot be narrower than its Locality and still be a Scriptural Local Church.

The Local Church cannot widen its locality by linking together several other local churches, thus to be more than or larger than its locality:



You can't enlarge a church beyond its locality. For example, today we cannot say, "We are the Middletown/New York Church." The Local Church cannot be Larger than its Locality and still be His Local Church for that Locality.

However, a local church's TESTIMONY and INFLUENCE may and should extend far beyond its locality (see 1 Thessalonians 1:7-9 and Romans 1:8; etc.). The testimony of the Middletown church may extend to New York City but we are not the local church of New York City.

In the planting and establishing of local churches there should be no RUINOUS RIVALRY and no CARNAL COMPETITION.

A) Romans 15:20--As a church planter Paul made it his earnest ambition and his point of honor not to cause any RIVALRY and not to put another church where there already was a church (where Christ was already named). It was dishonorable to do such.

B) 2 Corinthians 10:13-16 ("measure"=HOW MUCH? "rule"=WHAT KIND?). Verse 13-God included you (the Corinthians) in the content (how much?) of our ministry. Verse 14-Paul followed definite rules and principles in his church planting efforts. You (the Corinthians) are part of our "how much"! Verse 15--We thank God for the labors of other men (there was no carnal competition or ruinous rivalry with Paul). Verse 16--"beyond you"="beyond Corinth" Paul was not going to go to the next city block in Corinth or to the suburbs of Corinth. He was going to go BEYOND Corinth to other localities. Paul's good thinking is reflected in the following: I will not take away from you your responsible testimony to the area in which you are located for God's glory and God's good working. Each assembly of believers must fulfil its assignment representing the Lord Jesus Christ, as His BODY. There must not be any undue confusion of His BODY in that area, by BODIES plural.

In New Testament times, workers that went from place ot place (such as Aquilla and Priscilla) fit in with the local church and harmonized with that body of believers as long as they were in the city.

If there was no church they would be used of God to evangelize and plant such a church.

What was the size of the New Testament cities?

Remember, these cities only had one church. Sometimes we hear the argument: "This city is so large and so heavily populated that it should have several local churches." What about the New Testament cities? How large were they?

Ancient history does not provide for us exact population statistics. The "Farmer's Almanac" was not published back then. Some of the sources vary as to how many people actually lived in these cities in New Testament times, but the following information should give you a good indication of size:

JERUSALEM

Josephus states that at Passover time (when there were thousands and thousands of pilgrims and visitors) there were 2,700,000 people in this city. The *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* says that the population of Jerusalem in 70 AD may have been as many as 250,000 (but probably less). It would be safe to say that there were at least 100,000.

How many believers were in the Jerusalem church (see Acts 2:41; 4:4; 5:14; etc.)? How many churches were there in Jerusalem (Acts 15:4)?

ROME

"The population of the city during the first century AD was formerly estimated as being between 1,200,000 and 2,000,000 inhabitants. In 1941, however, an inscription was discovered at Ostia with statistics indicating that in 14 AD, the year of the death of Augustus, the city of Rome had a population of 4,100,000 inhabitants" (*An Introduction to the New Testament*, D. Edmond Hiebert, Vol. 2, page 164 and see *Introduction to the New Testament* by Everett F. Harrison, p. 299).

ALEXANDRIA

Alexandria was the 2nd largest city in the Roman empire and it contained three major groups: Egyptians, Jews and Greeks. According to the *Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia*, "at the beginning of the Christian era there were 300,000 FREE MEN in the city of Alexandria." The *World Book Encyclopedia* says that at its height this city may have had a population of 1 million.

EPHESUS

There was only one church in this major city (Rev. 2:1). Its population was so great that in the 2nd century it rivaled the city of Alexandria with respect to population.

ANTIOCH

How many churches were there in this city (Acts 14:26-27)? This too was one of the largest cities in the empire. Its population also was a mixed multitude. According to the *Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia* its population in New Testament times was 500,000 (half a million).

THESSALONICA

How many local churches were to be found in this city (1 Thess. 1:1) In Paul's day this city may have had as many as 200,000 people (see *Introduction to the New Testament* by Everett F. Harrison, page 260).

CORINTH

This large commercial city had only one local church (1 Cor. 1:2). The city was heterogeneous (a mixture of everything). Everyone went there to make money and spend it. Common enterprise and business and common debaucheries were the only bond that held the people together. It was the city of sin and immorality and its population may have been as high as 700,000 (most estimates would say ½ million people). The *Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia* says there were 200,000 free men and 500,000 slaves.

OBSERVATIONS

These were large cities, even in terms of modern day population statistics (there is not a city in Connecticut that even begins to compare with the city of Rome in population). Yet there was only one church in each city. The early believers, under Paul's leadership, established churches in the great population centers, even in the midst of corruption and sin. This was wise practice because they planted churches in the "HUB." People from the surrounding areas and suburbs come to the city but the people in the cities do not always go to the surrounding areas.

What About Today?

Today we are so very far away from the New Testament pattern. The Lord predicted that this would happen in the parable of the mustard seed as found in Matthew 13:31-32. Our of true Christianity there grew up an abnormal, unusual, hideous, monstrous religious system that we might call CHURCHIANITY or CHRISTENDOM. The devil has been very successful in...

CORRUPTING (ruining and wrecking God's simple truth--2 Cor. 11:3)

COMPLICATING

CONFUSING (God is not the author of confusion, but the devil is--1 Cor. 14:33)

CLUTTERING

CREATING A MESS out of what was once beautiful and wonderful and sacred

The result of all this is that today no one really knows what the church is supposed to be. Today every name under the sun is attached to the word CHURCH to make it something other than what God says it should be. We have ANOTHER GOSPEL, ANOTHER CHRIST, and ANOTHER CHURCH. We have "CHURCHES" (plural), namely ALL KINDS of churches, but where is HIS Church and where are HIS Local Churches? We have a great conglomerate mess called CHRISTENDOM!

Amidst the mess the message is clear, the motivation and movement can be right. God's people who are in touch and in tune with God's Word can **AMEN** God's Blueprint as found in His Word. They can practice and promote God's plan by example, praying it through for proper expression in their local church. Remember that much of that which is will not swing in God's direction. Traditions and time have set the stage in which we find ourselves. *Will we serve the SYSTEM or the SAVIOUR? Do we represent TRUTH or ERROR?*

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A Complete Literature List is Available Upon Request