

THE CHURCH AND CHURCHES

THE UNIVERSAL CHURCH

The bible refers to the church in a manner that suggests that it has two forms. First of all it speaks of 'the church' as a single entity. For example, the apostle Paul wrote, "**Give no offence, either to the Jews or to the Greeks or to the church of God.**" (1 Cor 10:32). Similarly he wrote that "**...Christ is head of the church; and He is the Saviour of the body.**" (Eph 5:23). Both these readings refer to the universal church, or the whole (ie world-wide) body of Christ.

THE LOCAL CHURCH

The bible also speaks of 'churches' in the plural form. In his letter to the Romans Paul wrote, "**The churches of Christ greet you.**" (Rom 16:16). And to the Thessalonians, "**...we ourselves boast of you among the churches of God...**" (2 Thess 1:4).

By referring to churches in the plural, Paul assumed that the one universal church was divided into a number of individual churches. The key issue therefore, is to establish on what grounds "**the church of God**" (or universal church) can be legitimately divided into "**the churches of God**" (or number of component churches). According to the New Testament, there is only one valid reason for division within the universal church, and that is on the ground of LOCALITY.

Each town or city had its own local church and it was the geographical boundary of each of these localities that determined the extent of any one particular church. The bible therefore speaks of "**the church that was at Antioch**" (Acts 13:1), "**the church of God which is at Corinth**" (1 Cor 1:2), and "**the church of the Thessalonians [or those who live in Thessalonica]**" (1 Thess 1:1 & 2 Thess 1:1).

There is no biblical record of any name attached to a church other than that of the town or city in which it was located. The LOCAL CHURCH is the only scriptural way to divide the UNIVERSAL CHURCH.

This standard applies even when applied in the modern context of large cities. In practice each city is divided into municipal districts, which are in turn subdivided into smaller administrative units called suburbs. Each one of these smaller administrative units would provide sufficient grounds for establishing a local church. The general principle is that the universal church is legitimately divided into local churches on the basis of what comprises an effective and practical geographical area.

In some cases the apostle Paul used the plural form while referring to a number of local churches situated within a larger political region. For example, "**the churches of Macedonia**" (2 Cor 8:1), "**the churches of Galatia**" (Gal 1:2), and "**the churches of Judea**" (Gal 1:22). He did this without inconsistency because each one of those regional names applied to a province within the Roman Empire. In any one of those provinces there were a number of towns and cities, and consequently a number of local churches.

This method of identifying churches was also used by Christ, when He addressed **"the seven churches which are in [the imperial province of] Asia:"** (Rev 1:4,11). Having first referred to them as a group, He then went on to address them individually - as **"..the church of Ephesus .. the church in Smyrna .. the church in Pergamos .. the church in Thyatira .. the church in Sardis .. the church in Philadelphia .. [and] the church of the Laocideans.."** (Rev 2:1,8,12,18, 3:1,7,14).

THE AUTONOMY OF THE LOCAL CHURCH

It was never God's intention for local churches to be split into denominations and controlled by national and international organisations. In the original pattern each local church was self-governing. Each one had its own character and was responsible for its own progress and well-being.

For this reason, Christ did not continue to address the seven churches in Asia collectively. Instead He ministered to each one individually, commending or admonishing them in accord with their own unique spiritual condition.

LOCAL INDEPENDENCE AND UNIVERSAL CONFORMITY

The independent character of the local church in the New Testament provided a necessary safeguard against the spreading of particular heresies or forms of apostasy throughout the universal church. Nevertheless it did not remove each church's obligation to conform to the same spiritual precepts that applied to the rest of their brethren. For example, all local churches had to submit to the authority of the Scriptures and follow the same patterns of behaviour that were taught to the church as a whole.

This principle is clearly expressed by Paul in his letters to the young churches. He wrote, **"For this reason I have sent Timothy to you, who is my beloved and faithful son in the Lord, who will remind you of my ways in Christ, as I teach everywhere in every church."** (1 Cor 4:17). And again, **"But as God has distributed to each one, as the Lord has called each one, so let him walk. And so I ordain in all the churches."** (1Cor 7:17). There was complete uniformity in Christ's commands to all the churches. He could not give a command to one church that contradicted a command He had given to another.

While local churches were independent in character, they were also interdependent in body-life. If one church was in need, then the rest were expected to come to their aid. For example Paul encouraged the church in Corinth to provide support for the church in Jerusalem, so that **"...now at this time your abundance may supply their lack..."** (2 Cor 8:14).

CHURCHES IN A HOUSE

We have already observed that the New Testament church was not divided on any grounds other than that of locality. It follows logically, that just as individual churches were not grouped into units larger than those required for practical and effective locality, neither were they subdivided into smaller units.

So while there is scriptural mention of house meetings taking place, these home fellowships did not constitute a church in themselves. Rather they were a part of the local church, with each group remaining under the overall supervision of the local church eldership.

The situation that prevailed in the church at Jerusalem illustrates this point. The bible refers to **"the church in Jerusalem"** (Acts 11:22), but never uses the plural **"churches"** in this context. However we also read of the many home fellowships that were in her midst. The Book of Acts speaks of the saints in Jerusalem **"...continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house,"** (Acts 2:46) and **"...daily in the temple, and in every house, they did not cease from teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ."** (Acts 5:42). And when Peter was released from prison, **"...he came to the house of Mary ... where many were gathered together praying."** (Acts 12:12).

At that time Jerusalem was by far the biggest church. It had the greatest number of members and consequently the greatest number of house meetings. Nevertheless the bible always refers to the church in Jerusalem as a single entity. These home fellowships were not separate churches, but part of the local church in Jerusalem and therefore under the authority of its elders.

WHAT ABOUT "THE CHURCH THAT IS IN THEIR HOUSE"?

On four occasions the New Testament specifically mentions, **"the church that is in their [or his or your] house."** (Rom 16:5, 1 Cor 16:19, Col 4:15, and Phil 2). For example, Paul wrote, **"Aquila and Priscilla greet you heartily in the Lord, with the church that is in their house."** (1 Cor 16:19).

This terminology is in fact the result of historical circumstance, rather than a matter of doctrine. The first letter to the Corinthians was written from Ephesus in about 56 AD, when the local church was still in its infancy. At the beginning or formation of each local church, numbers were so small that believers met regularly in one house. In this case it was the house of Aquila and Priscilla.

Because the church at Ephesus was meeting at Aquila and Priscilla's house, Paul referred to it as **"the church that is in their house."** He did not refer to it as "their church," but rather, **"the church that is in [or meeting in] their house."** The same background applies to the other three cases where this phrase is used.

DIVISION BY DOCTRINE OR DENOMINATIONALISM

At the present time the universal church has been subdivided into many denominational 'churches,' with each one promoting doctrinal deviations unique to itself. Paul was adamant that doctrine does not comprise legitimate grounds for dividing the church, and he admonished the Christians in Corinth for entertaining such disputes in their midst.

"Now I say this, that each of you says, 'I am of Paul,' or 'I am of Apollos,' or 'I am of Cephas [Peter],' or 'I am of Christ.' Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? ... [Y]ou are still carnal. For where there are envy, strife, and divisions among you, are you not carnal and behaving like mere men?

For when one says, 'I am of Paul,' and another, 'I am of Apollos,' are you not carnal?"
(1 Cor 1:12-13, 3:3-4).

The apostle's argument is very convicting. Though the statement "**I am of Christ**" is highly commendable as a confession of belief, Paul declares that even that is not sufficient grounds for division into a separate faction or 'church.'

In looking at the denominational maze of the twentieth century, a modern apostle could justifiably write, "each one of you says, 'I am of Luther,' or 'I am of Calvin,' or 'I am of Booth,' or 'We believe in the authority of the Scriptures,' or 'We believe in the gifts of the Holy Spirit.' Are you not carnal and behaving like mere men?"

Our "**behaving like mere men**" (ie 'like men in the world') has had dire consequences for the church. We have ignored Paul's warning and completely divorced ourselves from the pattern of the early church. As a result the modern church is fragmented into numerous denominations with all the characteristics of worldly institutions. The New Testament pattern has been ignored and autonomous local churches governed by anointed elders under the guidance of the Holy Spirit no longer exist. Instead we are inflicted with the branch offices of various international organisations, each of which are controlled by a remote hierarchy of clergy, with their own particular interpretation of doctrine, and their own set forms of worship.