ONE CHURCH IN ONE LOCATION:

QUESTIONING THE BIBLICAL, THEOLOGICAL, AND HISTORICAL

CLAIMS OF THE MULTI-SITE CHURCH MOVEMENT

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Presented to

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Doctor of Philosophy

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by

Darrell Grant Gaines

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APPROVAL SHEET

ONE CHURCH IN ONE LOCATION:

QUESTIONING THE BIBLICAL, THEOLOGICAL, AND HISTORICAL

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Darrell Grant Gaines

Read and Approved by:

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Gregg R. Allison (Chair)

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Chad Owen Brand

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Stephen J. Wellum

Date_____

To Melisa,

Many women have done excellently,

but you surpass them all.

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PREFACE

Several people deserve thanks for helping make this dissertation possible. Dr. Gregg R. Allison, my supervising professor, has offered invaluable help both through his writings on the subject of multi-site ecclesiology and in his responses to what I have written. Comments and encouragement that I received from Dr. Mark E. Dever from the beginning stages of my work on multi-site have been very constructive and have been a help to me along the way.

I thank my family for what they have contributed to the completion of this work. My father and mother (a pastor and pastor's wife) were the first people to introduce me to Jesus and his church, and, in many ways, my interest in this subject exists because of what they taught me through word and example. Our children, Alivia and Weston, have made the years of Ph.D. work sweet, and have helped keep me grounded in the real world of diapers, messes, and laughter. But the person to whom I owe the most thanks and my sincerest gratitude is my sweet and godly wife, Melisa. She is the epitome of a helpmate and has offered me the kind of love and support without which none of this would have been possible. It is to her that this dissertation is dedicated.

Jackson, Tennessee   Grant Gaines
December 2012

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The multi-site church movement is taking the contemporary ecclesiological landscape by storm. In 2006, the authors of what has become a seminal book entitled, *The Multi-Site Church Revolution: Being One Church . . . in Many Locations*, claimed that "well over 1,500 churches are already multi-site," that "one out of four megachurches is holding services at multiple locations," that "one out of three churches says it is thinking about developing a new service in a new location," and that "seven out of the country's ten fastest-growing churches offer worship in multiple locations, as do nine of the ten largest churches."[1] These same authors make the following prediction: "Fifty years ago, the one-venue option [of church structure] was the norm. Fifty years from now, we believe multi-venue and multi-site will be the norm."[2] It may seem overambitious to claim that in fifty years the multi-site model will be the norm, but when one considers that in 2003 only five percent of Protestant churches in the United States said they were considering going multi-site, and that just two years later that number had risen to thirty-three percent,[3] these authors' prediction begins to seem more viable. The rate at which multi-site is growing would, alone, be sufficient to warrant a response such

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[1]Geoff Surratt, Greg Ligon, and Warren Bird, *The Multi-Site Church Revolution: Being One Church . . . in Many Locations* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 9.

[2]Ibid.

[3]Thom Rainer, "One Church, Two Locations," *Outreach* 4, no. 4 (2005): 18.

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as the one being proposed in this dissertation. But the need for a serious evaluation and response to multi-site church structure not only exists due to the increasing popularity of the movement; the lack of any extended biblical, theological, and historical treatment of the subject also calls for such an evaluation and response.

Thesis

The thesis of this dissertation is that a multi-site church that is not characterized by campus-wide gatherings does not have a sound biblical or theological basis for considering itself one church and is inconsistent with historic congregationalism.[4] In describing my thesis, it is important that I make very clear what I will be arguing and what I will not be arguing in this dissertation.

First of all, when I say that a multi-site church must be "characterized" by campus-wide gatherings in order to claim to be a single church, I am not arguing that such a church must gather at the campus-wide level every week. It will simply be argued that a multi-site church must be *characterized* by such gatherings. The frequency of campus-wide gatherings is something that must be determined based on wisdom since it is not specifically addressed in Scripture.

Second, though there are a variety of ways that multi-site churches have been structured, for the purpose of this dissertation I am focussing on only two categories of multi-site: (1) multi-site churches that *do* have campus-wide assemblies, and (2) multi-site churches that *do not* have campus-wide assemblies.[5] I will argue that the first

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[4]This would also apply to multiple service churches in which those in the multiple services never gather at the whole church level. In multi-site churches the sites are separated by space, whereas in multiple service churches the services are separated by time. But in both cases, whole groups of people never meet together, and therefore cannot claim to be *one* church.

[5]For a taxonomy of different forms of multi-site church structure, see Brian Frye, "The Multi-Site Church Phenomenon in North America: 1950-2010" (Ph.D. diss., The Southern Baptist Theological

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category of multi-site churches (those that *do* have campus-wide assemblies) can

legitimately claim to be one church by virtue of the fact that the members are

characterized by assembling at the whole church level.[6] Conversely, I will argue that the

second category of multi-site churches (those that *do not* have campus-wide assemblies)

cannot legitimately claim to be one church because their members are not characterized

by gathering together at the whole church level.

Third, there will be no discussion in this dissertation of many of the hot topic

issues related to multi-site such as the legitimacy of using simulcast, DVD, or hologram

rather than live preaching; or the pros and cons of adding a site rather than planting a

church. These and other topics are important in the multi-site conversation, but they are

outside the scope of this dissertation.

And fourth, another subject that is important in the multi-site debate but that

will not receive a full treatment in these pages is the subject of congregationalism. I will

argue that a multi-site church that does not practice campus-wide assemblies is

inconsistent with historic congregationalism, but I will not give a defense of

congregationalism itself. If the leaders and members of a multi-site church realize that

their church is actually made up of multiple churches, they will have to decide if they are

okay with that. Some people will not care that their version of multi-site is inconsistent

with congregationalism because they do not believe that congregationalism is biblical in

the first place. Or they might believe that while congregationalism is permitted in Bible,

it is not prescribed. Others *will* care that their version of multi-site is inconsistent with

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Seminary, 2011), 118-79.

[6]See ch. 5 on the concept of "whole church" gatherings.

congregationalism, because they believe congregationalism to be the biblical form of church government. This debate is important, and needs to be had; but it will have to take place outside the pages of this dissertation. I will be content if my work is able to move the multi-site conversation forward by helping people determine whether a multi-site church is really made up of multiple *sites* or whether it is made up of multiple *churches*, and thereby helping lay out a criterion for what is and is not congregational.

Background

My interest in multi-site began while I was serving on staff at Highview Baptist Church, a multi-site church in Louisville, Kentucky. While serving as one of the pastors who helped launch a new campus, I began to wonder whether what we were doing was biblical. This question piqued my interest in the subject and led me on a study trail that is now seven years in the making. A great many of my masters level papers were geared toward the subject of ecclesiology, particularly as it relates to multi-site church structure. Nearly all of my Ph.D. seminar papers were also directed toward this subject. What I have found in my research is that there is a great need for a serious biblical, theological, and historical evaluation of the various claims that multi-site proponents make to support their model of church government.

Most of what has been written on multi-site churches, both by its proponents and by its opponents, deals with the practical aspects of multi-site. Almost nothing has been written by way of serious biblical, theological, and historical evaluation.[7] All of the

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[7]The exception to this is the work of Gregg R. Allison, for which see Gregg R. Allison, "Theological Defense of Multi-Site," *9Marks eJournal* 6, no. 3 (2009): 8-20 [on-line]; accessed 27 April 2010; available from http://involve.9marks.org/site/DocServer/eJournal200963MayJune.pdf?docID=641; Internet.; idem, "Gregg Allison's Response to Jonathan Leeman's 9Marks Blog Post on Multi-Site Churches" (2011) [on-line]; accessed October 17 2011; available from http://www.9marks.org/blog/non-assembled-assembly; Internet; idem, "Are Multi-Site Churches Biblical?" (2011):[on-line]; accessed

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full-length treatments of multi-site consist almost entirely of discussions of the practical benefits of the approach.[8] For instance, the book *The Multi-Site Church Revolution* is broken up into four parts. After a brief description of the movement as a whole, part two outlines "How to Become One Church in Many Locations."[9] Part three addresses the subject of "What Makes Multi-Site Work Best."[10] Finally, part four seeks to answer the question, "Why Extend Further and Reach More People?"[11] To summarize, this book discusses statistics on the multi-site movement, how a church can become a multi-site church, how a church can do multi-site effectively, and why the authors believe that multi-site will lead to reaching more people. There is an occassional tip of the hat to New Testmament church structure, but only in passing.[12]

Likewise, the book, *Multi-Site Churches: Guidance for the Movement's Next Generation*, expressly states that its purpose is "to provide practical advice to those

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October 17, 2011; available from http://theresurgence.com/2011/05/18/are-multi-site-churches-biblical; Internet; idem, *Sojourners and Strangers: The Doctrine of the Church*, Foundations of Evangelical Theology (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 310-17.

[8]See also the important descriptive work of Frye, "The Multi-Site Church Phenomenon in North America."

[9]Surratt, Ligon, and Bird, *Multi-Site Church Revolution*, 45-121.

[10]Ibid., 125-81.

[11]Ibid., 185-200.

[12]See for example, Surratt, Ligon, and Bird, *Multi-Site Church Revolution*, 92: "You might say that the idea of 'one church, many locations' began with the persecution of the first Christ-followers in Jerusalem. When Stephen was put to death and the believers scattered, a new congregation was formed in Antioch. The Antioch group was not seen as a separate body but as an extension of the Jerusalem church and functioned under the authority of Peter and the apostles in Jerusalem. Barnabas effectively became the first campus pastor when he was sent to Antioch to care for the new congregation. As the good news spread throughout Asia and into Europe, new congregations were formed, but they were all connected back to the church at Jerusalem as evidenced by the council that was held in Acts 15." See also these authors' second book, Geoff Surratt, Gregon Ligon, and Warren Bird, *A Multi-Site Church Road Trip: Exploring the New Normal* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009). This book explores many multi-site churches and describes the way they are using multi-site structure in their ministries.

considering or embarking on this journey [of multi-site]."[13] The book covers subjects

such as why to go multi-site,[14] where to launch a new site,[15] what has to change within a

church's staff when a church decides to go multi-site,[16] and more like these. Again, there

is a rare appeal to New Testament patterns, but nothing of any significance.[17] The book is

about practical issues that one faces in attempting to go multi-site or in continuing to run

a multi-site church.

The only full length work to include a critique of multi-site is a book by

authors Thomas White and John M. Yeats entitled *Franchising McChurch: Feeding Our*

Obsession with Easy Christianity.[18] This book only contains one chapter devoted fully to

the multi-site issue, the majority of the content being a criticism of consumerism in

contemporary church life and practice.

One brief, but important, evaluation of the claims of multi-site proponents is

Gregg Allison's article, "Theological Defense of Multi-Site."[19] Allison believes that most

attempts to defend multi-site biblically, theologically, and historically are weak, and he

sets out to make better arguments in this regard. While his defense of multi-site is more

astute than others, it is still problematic. For instance, he claims that in the first century,

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[13]Scott McConnell, *Multi-Site Churches: Guidance for the Movement's Next Generation* (Nashville: B&H, 2009), 3.

[14]Ibid., 5-23.

[15]Ibid., 127-45.

[16]Ibid., 163-77.

[17]For example, in McConnell, *Multi-Site Church*, 22, the author quotes James MacDonald as saying, "There is definitely a multilocation dynamic to the church in Acts. And I don't see anything in Scripture that forbids it."

[18]Thomas White and John M. Yeats, *Franchising McChurch: Feeding Our Obsession with Easy Christianity* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2009).

[19]Allison, "Theological Defense of Multi-Site."

one citywide church was often made up of multiple house churches. An entire chapter of this dissertation will be devoted to addressing this faulty claim. Another argument of his that will be disputed in this dissertation is his claim that precedent for multi-site can be found in early English Baptists of the seventeenth century. Allison should be applauded for taking his treatment of multi-site beyond the more common discussions of its practical benefits. While his biblical, theological, and historical claims are made more carefully than those of many other multi-site proponents, his treatment of these issues remains problematic, as this dissertation will show.

Though most of what is being written on multi-site by its proponents has to do with practical issues, multi-site authors do make biblical, theological, and historical claims from time to time to support their position and validate their model of church government. Presumably, multi-site proponents are making such claims (even if only in passing) because they believe that their model needs to be grounded in some kind of biblical, theological, and historical framework; or that it at least does not need to be in opposition to such a framework. In this dissertation, the most important of these claims will be questioned.

Methodology

This dissertation will make the argument that a multi-site church that is not characterized by campus-wide gatherings does not have a sound biblical or theological basis for considering itself one church and is inconsistent with historic congregationalism in six steps. First, a framework for determining whether or not a church practice is biblical will be put forward. Second, it will be shown that the people of God as one assembly is a central theme in the Old Testament. Third, it will be demonstrated that this

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theme of the people of God as one assembly is also a central theme of the New

Testament. Fourth, it will be argued that there is not precedent for multi-site church

structure in the house churches of the New Testament. Fifth, it will be shown that multi-

site is not consistent with historic congregationalism as seen in Baptist ecclesiology. And

sixth, it will be argued that multi-site church structure is consistent with historic

connectionalism as seen, for example, in Methodist ecclesiogy—a fact that only serves to

heighten the problem with multi-site from a congregationalist point of view.

Outline

Chapter 1 gives an introduction to the multi-site movement and sets forth the

need for evaluating it. It explains the thesis of the dissertation and sets this thesis against

the background of the many issues being debated in the literature related to multi-site.

Within the corpora of literature on the subject of multi-site, there is a lack of any

extended evaluation of the arguments put forward by multi-site proponents. This kind of

evaluation is what this disseration will contribute to the multi-site discussion. The

method of evaluating such arguments and of proving this dissertation's thesis will then be

detailed, and an descriptive outline of the dissertation will be given.

Chapter 2 addresses a hermeneutical question that is foundational to any

discussion of the validity of church practices; namely, What does it mean for a church

practice to be biblical? Someone might respond that in order to determine whether a

church practice is biblical one must simply apply the Scriptures to that church practice.

The problem, though, is that as soon as one starts speaking about "applying" the Bible,

one has entered into the territory of hermeneutics and theological method. Often people

disagree over whether a church practice is biblical, not because they are at variance over

the facts in Scripture, but because they have a more fundamental disagreement over how the Bible is to be interpreted and applied; in other words, they disagree over the way in which the Bible is to be considered normative for the church.

This chapter lays some of the necessary hermeneutical and methodological groundwork needed if discussions of the validity of church practices are to move forward. Specifically, it is argued that a canonically oriented view of Scripture's normativity is superior to the traditional views represented in a principlizing hermeneutic and the regulative principle. This argument is made in two steps. First, traditional approaches to Scripture's normativity is discussed; second, it is argued that these traditional approaches are insufficient, and that a more canonically oriented view of Scripture's normativity should be adopted. With this approach, the church will be better equipped to determine whether or not a church practice like multi-site is biblical. And with this hermeneutical groundwork laid, the dissertation is able to move forward in its evaluation of the biblical warrant for multi-site, having clarified what it means to say that multi-site is either biblical or unbiblical.

Chapter 3 argues that understanding the people of God as the "assembly of the Lord" (Num 16:3; Deut 23:1, 2, 3, 8; 1 Chr 28:8; Mic 2:5) is central to understanding the nature of Israel in the Old Testament. Some multi-site proponents argue that the theme of covenant is what binds a people together and constitues them as one church, not the theme of assembly.[20] This allows them to argue that as a long as the members of multiple campuses have covenanted together, then they can be one church, regardless of the fact

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[20]J. D. Greear, "A Pastor Defends His Multi-Site Church," *9Marks eJournal* 6, no. 3 (2009): 21-27 [on-line]; accessed 27 April 2010; available from http://involve.9marks.org/site/DocServer/eJournal200963MayJune.pdf?docID=641; Internet.

that those members may never actually assemble together in worship and fellowship. This third chapter, along with the fourth, shows that the theme of assembly, and not just that of covenant, must also be seen as one of the central elements that binds a group of believers together and constitutes them as one church. The act of Israel's gathering together in one assembly is one of the factors that bound them together as one people and constituted them as the one "assembly of the Lord." Israel was first constituted as the "assembly of the Lord" at Sinai as a result of their deliverance from Egypt. The assembly at Sinai then served as a pattern for subsequent assemblies of Israel at regular times on the cultic calendar (Exod 23:14-17; Lev 23). Furthermore, the Lord's rescue of Israel from Egypt and assembling them to himself served as a type for future deliverance, a second exodus when the people of God would be brought out of exile and the assembly of the Lord would be reconstituted (see esp. Isa 40-55). Because they broke covenant with the Lord, Israel as the "assembly of the Lord" was "scattered" (Lev 26:33; Deut 4:27; 28:64), but if they repent, they will be "gathered" and reconstituted as God's assembly once again (Deut 30:3). For the old covenant people of God, gathering together as one assembly was one of the primary acts that constitued them as the assembly of the Lord. All of this is significant for the New Testament understanding of the church because, as Thomas R. Schreiner notes, "The term 'church' (*ekklēsia*) reaches back to the OT term *qāhāl*, denoting Israel as God's assembly."[21] The assembly Jesus builds (Matt 16:18) is the reconstituted "assembly of the Lord." And as will be shown in chapter four, the centrality of the theme of God's people as one assembly continues on into the the new covenant as well.

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[21]Thomas R. Schreiner, *New Testament Theology: Magnifying God in Christ* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 694.

Chapter 4 argues that the theme of the people of God as one assembly is central to the New Testament teaching on the church. In the New Testament, the ultimate form of the church is a single heavenly-eschatological assembly that is gathered in Christ by the Spirit, and each local church is viewed as a manifestation in time and space of this one heavenly-eschatological assembly. The portrayal of the church in Ephesians, Colossians, Hebrews, and Revelation, for instance, is of an assembly presently gathered around Christ in the heavenlies. Hebrews 12:18-24 may be the clearest in this regard:

> For you have not come to what may be touched . . . . But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God . . . and to the assembly [ἐκκλησία] of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven . . . and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.[22]

In Ephesians and Colossians, the church is made up of those who have been raised up with Christ and seated with Him in the heavenly places (Eph 2:6-7; Col 3:1-3). In Revelation, several glimpses of the assembly around Christ are given (e.g., 7:9-12; 14:1-3). Jesus has regathered and reconstituted the old covenant "assembly of the Lord" that was scattered in exile because of its sin, and just as all Israel assembled together in the presence of the Lord in the old covenant, so too the New Testament church has been assembled together in Christ in the heavenly places.

This one heavenly-eschatological assembly manifests itself in the form of each local assembly (i.e., church) on earth. This is the reason Paul can write to various assemblies of Christians, however large or small, and call them *the* church in whatever place they meet. Likewise, each local church is considered *the* body of Christ in any given place (1 Cor 12:27, "Now you are Christ's body"). This means that each local

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[22]Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture citations are from the English Standard Version.

assembly is a manifestation of the ultimate assembly. Just as inaugurated eschatology

involves the kingdom of God breaking into the present age, so it also involves the

heavenly and eschatological assembly breaking into the present age in the case of every

local church. In this way, each earthly assembly should be viewed as a manifestation of

the ultimate heavenly reality. Each earthly assembly has the status of a full-fledged, self-

contained, earthly manifestation of the heavenly-eschatological assembly. Thus, what

multi-site proponents consider a site or campus that is merely part of a church, the Bible

considers a church in itself.

Chapter 5 addresses the question of whether New Testament house churches

were multi-site. Those in the multi-site church movement often claim that their church

structure is biblical because in the New Testament a citywide church was comprised of

multiple house churches in the same way that one multi-site church today is comprised of

multiple sites or campuses. This chapter argues that there is not precedent for multi-site

church structure in the house churches of the New Testament, and that because of this,

multi-site proponents are unjustified in seeking to root their practice in the structure of

New Testament house churches. This argument proceeds in three steps. First, claims are

given from those multi-site proponents who argue that there is precedent in the New

Testament for their form of church structure.[23] Second, certain ideas that have been

advanced by biblical scholars and theologians that might be understood to support the

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[23]See, for example, Surratt, Ligon, and Bird, *Multi-Site Church Revolution*, 22-26, 92; J. Timothy Ahlen and J. V. Thomas, *One Church, Many Congregations: The Key Church Strategy* (Nashville: Abington, 1999), 25, 28, 32; Mark Driscoll and Gerry Breshears, *Vintage Church: Timeless Truths and Timely Methods* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008), 244; McConnell, *Multi-Site Churches*, 22; Allison, "Theological Defense of Multi-Site"; Charles Timothy Carter, "An Analysis of the Multi-Campus Approach of Local Church Ministry Utilizing First Baptist Church of Windermere, Florida, as a Paradigmatic Model" (D.Min. project, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2005); Greear, "A Pastor Defends His Multi-Site Church," 29. See also the references to Allison's work in n. 7 on p. 4 of this dissertation.

claims of multi-site proponents are put forth. And third, it is argued that the findings of such scholarship cannot be used to claim that contemporary multi-site structure finds precedent in New Testament house churches.

Some of the claims that house church scholars make that might be used by multi-siters to support their position are, first, that houses were the primary places in which the early Christians met; second, that there were usually multiple house churches in each city; and third, that wherever a household is mentioned in the New Testament a house church existed. It is argued, however, that there are at least four serious problems with making such claims. First, those who argue for multiple house churches in a city frequently assume what they set out to prove. Second, recent evaluations of Greco-Roman domestic architecture reveal that much larger crowds could fit into a home than has previously been recognized. Third, arguing for the existence of a house church simply because a Christian household is mentioned in a biblical text is unwarranted. And fourth, even if a citywide church consisted of multiple house churches, there is evidence that citywide churches would have also held assemblies of "the whole church," something that the majority of contemporary multi-site churches never do.[24]

Chapter 6 addresses the question of whether multi-site is Baptist. Some theologians favorable to the multi-site movement have argued that precedent for multi-site church structure exists in early Baptist history. To support their claims, these theologians appeal to G. Hugh Wamble's dissertation, "The Concept and Practice of

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[24]The claim that the majority of multi-site churches do not have whole church gatherings is based on my own observations. I have not done an exhaustive study of the majority of multi-site churches, so this claim cannot be made with certainty. In an email exchange with Brian Frye, who has done the most extensive research of multi-site practices to date, he agreed with my assessment, saying that he too thinks it probable that most multi-site churches do not have campus-wide gatherings, though he pointed out that it would be impossible to know this for sure unless someone did an exhaustive study on this matter.

Christian Fellowship: The Connectional and Inter-Denominational Aspects Thereof, among Seventeenth Century English Baptists."[25] Wamble shows that some early English Baptist churches considered themselves one church though they consisted of multiple meetings and meeting places. One theologian who has used Wamble's work to argue that multi-site church structure is consistent with historic Baptist ecclesiology is Chad Owen Brand. In his book on the Cooperative Program, Brand states,

> In some cities individual congregations are developing several satellite churches.
> This does not necessarily entail a violation of Baptist principles. Many seventeenth-
> century Baptist churches existed in two or more locations at the same time for
> various reasons, but they retained a commitment to Baptist integrity.[26]

Brand cites Wamble here to support his claim. Another theologian that has recently appealed to Wamble to claim that multi-site has a home among Baptists is Gregg Allison. In an article entitled "Theological Defense of Multi-Site," Allison argues that "concrete precedents for multi-site churches can be found in seventeenth-century British Baptist history," and that "consideration of these historical precedents may help to dispel the notion that the contemporary multi-site church phenomenon is merely the latest (twentieth- and twenty-first centuries) fad fueled by business models of franchising and branding, a lust for notoriety, or other insidious reasons."[27] Allison bases his claim on Wamble's work.

It is in response to Wamble and to these theologians who have appealed to his work to claim precedent for multi-site among early English Baptists that this chapter is

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[25]G. Hugh Wamble, "The Concept and Practice of Christian Fellowship: The Connectional and Inter-Denominational Aspects Thereof, among Seventeenth Century English Baptists" (Th.D. diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1955).

[26]Chad Owen Brand and David E. Hankins, *One Sacred Effort: The Cooperative Program of Southern Baptists* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2005), 72.

[27]Allison, "Theological Defense of Multi-Site," 14.

addressed. The reason Wamble's work is singled out here is because his is the only work on early English Baptist "scattered" churches of which I am aware, and because his work is often referenced by multi-site proponents who argue that there is precedent for multi-site among these early "scattered" Baptist churches. This chapter argues that though scattered congregations did exist among some seventeenth-century English Baptist churches, this practice was short-lived and did not become part of the Baptist identity that was just beginning to take shape in this early period. This is argued in two steps. First, in order to understand the nature of the scattered church among early English Baptists, a description of the structures of the nine churches that Wamble cites as scattered congregations is given. Second, it is demonstrated that this form of church structure fell out of practice very early in Baptist life, and was replaced by a commitment to the autonomy of the local assembly. Thus, while some examples of early Baptist churches may be found whose structure is similar to modern day multi-site church structure (though, as will be shown, the number is less than Wamble claims), this practice never became part of Baptist identity and, thus, should not be considered "Baptist."

Chapter 7 shows that there is historical precedent for multi-site church structure, but that this precedent is found in the connectional church government tradition such as exists in Methodism. Connectional church government is opposed to congregational church government (e.g., the Baptist tradition); thus, multi-site church government is also opposed to congregational church government. The thesis of this chapter is that Methodist circuit riders were part of an ecclesial system that was, and still is, similar to multi-site church structure because both are marked by connectional church government. This argument is made in two steps. First, by evaluating Methodist polity through the writings of one its founders, Francis Asbury, it is shown that Methodist polity

is episcopal, and therefore connectional. Second, and much more briefly, it is argued that

though some slight modifications have been made to their system, this episcopal form of

church structure continues to be practiced in the Methodist Church today. This serves as

the basis for the claim that, while multi-site is not identical to Methodist episcopalism,

the two are similar in their use of a connectional church government. The reason this

argument needs to be made is that it helps clarify the multi-site discussion by giving

some historical context to the debate between multi-site advocates and opponents. If the

sites of multi-site churches that do not hold campus-wide assemblies are actually multiple

churches (one of the main arguments of this dissertation), then the debate between those

who oppose such a structure and those who support it is actually just the age-old debate

between congregationalism and connectionalism. As has been mentioned, this

dissertation will not seek to make a case for congregationalism and against

connectionalism. This has been done before by others, and, no doubt, needs to be done

again. I would be content if those engaged in the multi-site conversation could merely

agree that this (i.e., congregational versus connectional church government) is, in fact,

the nature of the debate.

Chapter 8 offers a conclusion to the dissertation that summarizes the arguments

made in the previous chapters. It concludes that a multi-site church that is not

characterized by campus-wide gatherings does not have a sound biblical or theological

basis for considering itself one church and is inconsistent with historic

congregationalism. This chapter also gives some suggestions for continued work in the

field of multi-site ecclesiology.

CHAPTER 2

HOW TO DETERMINE WHEN A CHURCH
PRACTICE IS "BIBLICAL"

Introduction

What does it mean for a church practice to be "biblical"? Someone might

respond that in order to determine whether a church practice is biblical one must simply

apply the Scriptures to that church practice. The problem, though, is that as soon as one

starts speaking about "applying" the Bible, one has entered into the territory of

hermeneutics and theological method.[1] Often people disagree over whether a church

practice is biblical not because they are at variance over the facts in Scripture, but

because they have a more fundamental disagreement over how the Bible is to be

interpreted and applied; in other words, they disagree over the way in which the Bible is

to be considered normative for the church.

This chapter will attempt to lay some of the necessary hermeneutical and

methodological groundwork needed if discussions of the validity of church practices like

multi-site are to move forward. Specifically, it will be argued that a canonically oriented

view of Scripture's normativity is superior to the traditional views represented in a

principlizing hermeneutic and the regulative principle. This argument will be made in

two steps. First, traditional approaches to Scripture's normativity will be discussed, and

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[1]Richard Briggs writes that "we are usually muddled when we talk about 'applying the Bible.'" Richard Briggs, *Reading the Bible Wisely* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 84.

second, it will be argued that these traditional approaches are insufficient, and that a more canonically oriented view of Scripture's normativity should be adopted. With this more biblical approach, the church will be better equipped to determine whether or not a church practice like multi-site is "biblical."

Traditional Understandings of Scripture's Normativity

Before discussing what this chapter will argue is a more biblical view of Scripture's normativity, two traditional understandings of Scripture's normativity will be put forth. These are, first, the interpretative theory of principlization, and second, the regulative principle. Principlization is a general theory of biblical *interpretation*. The regulative principle is a theory for how Scriptural principles, specifically concerning church worship and church government, should be *applied* to the contemporary church. Both principlization and the regulative principle are important for our discussion because claims that a particular church practice is biblical or unbiblical are often made on the basis of these theories. While both of these theories are useful to some extent, it will be argued in a later section that they are not sufficient for understanding Scripture's normativity in general or for addressing the validity of church practices in particular.

Principlizing

The first traditional understanding of Scripture's normativity that will be discussed here is the interpretive theory of principlization. In principlizing, the interpreter seeks to discern the transcultural principles within the culturally situated text of Scripture in order that those principles might be applied to people situated in the contemporary culture. What is normative, according to this view, is not the particular

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cultural expression of the principle (e.g., the command to stone a rebellious son in Deut 21:18-21), but the principle itself (e.g., God punishes disobedience).

Principlizing is a common method of biblical interpretation. Mark Strauss claims that "this method has served the church well through the centuries and continues to be used in one form or another by almost everyone today."[2] According to Kevin Vanhoozer, "it is the default position of many evangelicals."[3] One of the scholars who helped popularize this approach for evangelicals was Bernard Ramm, who wrote the following about principlizing in his book *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*:

> The proper alternative to spiritualizing the Old Testament is to *principlize* the Old Testament. To *principlize* is to discover in any narrative the basic spiritual, moral, or theological principles. These principles are latent in the text and it is the process of deduction which brings them to the surface. . . . By principlizing we are able to obtain devotional and spiritual truth from Scripture and avoid the charge of eisegesis.[4]

Ramm goes on to give examples of how principlizing works when interpreting the Old Testament:

> When David repeatedly refuses to slay Saul we see the principle of obedience to powers that be. When Saul is not patient with God's prophet we see the principle of disobedience. When Isaiah prays for the shadow to retreat on the sundial we see the principle of great spiritual courage. In truth, Hebrews 11 is a magnificent example of principlizing. The great faith of a multitude of men is set before us as the true principle of their lives.[5]

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[2]Mark L. Strauss, "Reflections on Moving Beyond the Bible to Theology," in *Four Views on Moving Beyond the Bible to Theology*, ed. Gary T. Meadors (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 275.

[3]Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "A Response to Walter C. Kaiser, Jr.," in *Four Views on Moving Beyond the Bible to Theology*, ed. Gary T. Meadors (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 59.

[4]Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation: A Textbook for Hermeneutics*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1970), 199-200. Emphasis original.

[5]Ibid., 200.

For Ramm, the transhistorical principle behind any scriptural text is what is normative for the contemporary church. In order to discern these universal principles, the interpreter must strip away the cultural trappings of the text.

One of the most ardent contemporary supporters of the principlizing approach is Walter Kaiser. Following Ramm,[6] Kaiser defines "principlizing" this way: "To 'principlize' is to state the author's propositions, arguments, narrations, and illustrations in timeless abiding truths with special focus on the application of those truths to the current needs of the Church."[7] The objective of the interpreter is to discover transcultural truths, which Kaiser understands to be those truths that are capable of being "expressed in propositional principles."[8] Finding the universal principle is, thus, easier to do when one is dealing with didactic genres—"those happy instances where the Biblical materials are cast into a straight didactic form, such as the exegete finds in much of the Book of Romans."[9] In texts like Romans, Kaiser states, "there is hardly any need for what we are here calling 'principlization.'"[10] However, Kaiser recognizes that "most texts are not cast into a straight didactic form,"[11] and are, for this reason, not so easily principlized. For

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[6]Kaiser notes his indebtedness to Ramm, and specifically Ramm's book *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*: "Since I began my studies in hermeneutics by reading Ramm years ago as my introduction to the subject, I have employed the concept of 'principlization' over the years of my teaching and writing." Walter C. Kaiser, Jr. and Moisés Silva, *Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics: The Search for Meaning*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 92.

[7]Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Toward an Exegetical Theology: Biblical Exegesis for Preaching & Teaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), 152.

[8]Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., "A Principlizing Model," in *Four Views on Moving Beyond the Bible to Theology,* ed. Gary T. Meadors (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 23.

[9]Kaiser, *Toward an Exegetical Theology*, 150.

[10]Ibid., 150-51.

[11]Ibid., 151.

Kaiser, the cultural issues in any passage of Scripture "intrude on the text,"[12] posing complex "problems"[13] for the interpreter whose goal it is to distill the text's universal principles and restate them as propositions.

Kaiser's method of principlization consists of two basic hermeneutical steps.[14] "The first step in the process of principlization is to determine the subject of the Biblical passage."[15] In other words, the interpreter must determine "the major concern of the ancient writer."[16] The second step is "to find the *emphasis* of the text under consideration."[17] This can be done by noting important words and key terms that clue the interpreter in on what the ancient author is emphasizing.[18] Once the student of Scripture has gone through these two steps, and has thereby distilled the principle beneath the text's cultural layers, he can then express these principles in propositional statements. Kaiser's advice to the interpreter is that, when attempting to state a scriptural principle in propositional form, "it is always best to avoid using all proper names/nouns in stating the principle for each of these units of thought . . . except divine names, for all such references to all other persons, places, or historic events will only lock the text into the

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[12]Kaiser, "A Principlizing Model," 21.

[13]Kaiser, *Toward an Exegetical Theology*, 151.

[14]These two basic steps are most fundamental in Kaiser's principlizing hermeneutic. For a more detailed explanation of his method, see his concept of the Ladder of Abstraction in Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Toward Rediscovering the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), 164-66; idem, "A Principlizing Model," 24-26.

[15]Ibid., 152.

[16]Ibid.

[17]Ibid., 155. Emphasis original.

[18]Ibid.

past and handicap its application to the contemporary scene."[19] The universal principle is

transcultural, and must be loosed from its immediate cultural context, including the

people involved in the text, before it can be applied properly in the contemporary

context.[20]

The Regulative Principle

        If principlization is a common theory used for *interpreting* the Bible, then the

regulative principle should be understood as a common theory used for *applying* the

Bible. There are other theories of Bible application that could be used alongside a

principlizing hermeneutic, but a discussion of the regulative principle is especially

important for the purpose of this chapter, because it is the regulative principle that many

have used to determine whether or not certain church practices are biblical. If New

Testament churches did not observe a particular church practice, then, according to the

regulative principle, neither should churches today.[21] While there is much to commend

about the regulative principle, it will be shown in part two of this paper to be an

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[19]Kaiser, "A Principlizing Model," 23.

[20]For other descriptions of the principlizing method, see David K. Clark, *To Know and Love God: Method for Theology*, Foundations of Evangelical Theology (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2003), 91-92; Richard N. Longenecker, *New Testament Social Ethics for Today* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 4; idem, *New Wine into Fresh Wineskins: Contextualizing the Early Christian Confessions* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999), 139.

[21]J. I. Packer mentions that for the Puritans, the regulative principle had implications for church government as well as church worship: "The same principle was applied to church government." J. I. Packer, *A Quest for Godliness: The Puritan Vision of the Christian Life* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1990), 247. Ernest Reisinger and Matthew Allen also believe that the regulative principle has a bearing on church government. Ernest C. Reisinger and D. Matthew Allen, *Worship: The Regulative Principle and the Biblical Practice of Accommodation* (Cape Coral, FL: Founders, 2001), 29; so Douglas Kelly, "The Puritan Regulative Principle of Worship," in *The Westminster Convession into the 21st Century: Essays in Rememberance of the 350th Anniversary of the Westminster Assembly,* ed. Ligon Duncan (Fearn, Scotland: Mentor, 2004), 2:65.

insufficient theory of Scripture's normativity. So, what is the regulative principle, and how is Scripture's normativity construed according to it?

The regulative principle can be defined this way: "Nothing must be required as essential to public worship except that which is commanded by the word of God."[22] What many would consider to be the opposite of the regulative principle is the normative principle—the belief that "we may worship in whatever way we wish as long as it is not forbidden in Scripture."[23] The regulative principle agrees with the normative principle in holding that believers cannot worship in ways that Scripture forbids, but goes further than the normative principle in holding that believers can *only* worship in the ways that Scripture prescribes.

While the regulative principle is most clearly stated in the *Westminster Confession*, people sometimes claim that John Calvin is one of its earliest adherents. For instance, John Delivuk asserts, "The regulative principle of worship is not an innovation of the Westminster Assembly. Its roots can be traced at least to John Calvin."[24] For those who believe that Calvin held to the regulative principle, appeal might be made to statements such as the following from Calvin's *The Necessity of Reforming the Church*:

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[22]Derek W. H. Thomas, "The Regulative Principle: Responding to Recent Criticism," in *Give Praise to God: A Vision for Reforming Worship: Celebrating the Legacy of James Montgomery Boice*, ed. Philip Graham Ryken, Derek W. H. Thomas, and J. Ligon Duncan III (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2003), 75. Ernest Reisinger and Matthew Allen state it this way: "The regulative principle teaches that God has set forth in Scripture the only acceptable ways of worshiping him and that it is a sin to attempt to worship him in any other way." Reisinger and Allen, *Worship*, 10. D. G. Hart defines the regulative principle as the belief that "we may only worship God according to the way he has commanded us to worship." D. G. Hart, "It May Be Refreshing, but Is It Reformed?" *Calvin Theological Journal* 32 (1997): 417. John Delivuk writes, "The regulative principle of worship states that the only ways to worship God is in the manner that He has commanded in the Holy Scripture; all additions to or subtractions from this manner are forbidden." John Allen Delivuk, "Biblical Authority and the Proof of the Regulative Principle of Worship in *The Westminster Confession*," *Westminster Theological Journal* 58 (1996): 239.

[23]Reisinger and Allen, *Worship*, 10.

[24]Delivuk, "Proof of the Regulative Principle," 238.

There is a two-fold reason why the Lord, in condemning and prohibiting all fictitious worship, requires us to give obedience only to his own voice. First, it tends greatly to establish his authority that we do not follow our own pleasure, but depend entirely on his sovereignty; and, secondly, such is our folly, that when we are left at liberty, all we are able to do is to go astray. And then when once we have turned aside from the right path, there is no end to our wanderings, until we get buried under a multitude of superstitions. Justly, therefore, does the Lord, in order to assert his full right of dominion, strictly enjoin what he wishes us to do, and at once reject all human devices which are at variance with his command. Justly, too, does he, in express terms, define our limits, that we may not, by fabricating perverse modes of worship, provoke his anger against us.[25]

While it is certainly true that Calvin believed that worship must be biblical (as seen clearly in the passage above) and that "fictitious" and "perverse modes" of worship must be avoided, the claim that Calvin held to the regulative principle as developed later by the Puritans has been shown to be false. Whereas Delivuk claims that the regulative principle was first developed by Calvin, and therefore was not a Puritan "innovation," J. I. Packer holds that innovating on Calvin's principle was exactly what the Puritans were doing. Packer states, "The idea that direct biblical warrant, in the form of precept or precedent, is required to sanction every substantive item included in the public worship of God was in fact a Puritan innovation, which crystallised out in the course of the prolonged debates that followed the Elizabethan settlement."[26] Packer continues,

It should also be noticed that when the Puritans singled out some of the *ineptiae* of the *Prayer Book* as intolerable, when they challenged the principle that each church has liberty to ordain non-biblical ceremonies in worship where these seem conducive to edification and reverence, when they repudiated all set prayers, when they rejected kneeling in public worship, the Christian year, weekly Communion, and the practice of confirmation, they were not in fact reverting to Calvin, but departing from him.[27]

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[25]John Calvin, *The Necessity of Reforming the Church,* Ages Digital Library, *The John Calvin Collection* [CD-ROM], 197.

[26]Packer, *Quest for Godliness*, 247.

[27]Ibid., 248.

Packer points out that "it is doubtful whether they realised"[28] that they were departing

from Calvin at this point, but notes that "even if they had realised it, however, it would

not have affected their position; for their basic concern was not to secure Reformed

solidarity as such . . . but simply to obey God's authoritative word."[29] R. J. Gore also

argues that while "there is no doubt that Calvin professed adherence to the principle that

worship should be regulated,"[30] and while it has certainly "been established that Calvin

sought conformity to the Word of God in matters of worship,"[31] it is nevertheless "evident

that his application of that principle differed significantly from that of his disciples,

especially the English Puritans."[32] Calvin was less strict than the Puritans when it came

to the regulation of worship.

One of the ways that Calvin differed from the Puritans was in his allowance of

liturgical practices that the Puritans would have ruled out of order according to the

regulative principle.[33] Graham Keith, Ayr explains that whereas the Puritans rejected "the

imposition of ceremonies by the crown and the episcopal courts," and whereas John

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[28]Ibid.

[29]Ibid. The chapter in which Packer deals with "The Puritan Approach to Worship" also appears, though with a different introduction, in J. I. Packer, "The Puritan Approach to Worship," in *Puritan Papers*, *1963-1964*, ed. J. I. Packer, 3-19, Puritan Papers, vol. 3 (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2001).

[30]R. J. Gore, *Covenantal Worship: Reconsidering the Puritan Regulative Principle* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2002), 88.

[31]Ibid., 89.

[32]Ibid., 88-89. See also R. J. Gore, "Reviewing the Regulative Principle of Worship," *Presbyterion* 20, no. 1 (1994): 50, where he states, "The 'regulative principle of worship,' as developed by Calvin and as practiced by the early reformers, provides the essential parameters necessary for biblical worship while allowing for expressions of freedom in matters not deemed essential. The 'regulative principle of worship,' as originally conceived, was not intended to be an all-intrusive guide to worship, but a rule of covenantal faithfulness for the dynamic worship of God's people."

[33]Gore writes that "Calvin was far more open on the issue of liturgical practice than his Puritan successors." R. J. Gore, "Reviewing the Regulative Principle, Part II," *Presbyterion* 21, no. 1 (1995): 42.

Owen even went so far as to oppose "all set liturgies, however sound in themselves,"

Calvin was more lenient. He "would not have gone so far," writes Ayr. "He would have

had the pastors explain to their congregations the benefits of such liturgies when they

were first introduced; but would have seen it as captious to quarrel over their value."[34]

"Calvin," Ayr goes on to say, "would have embraced both ceremonies inculcating

reverence and practices promoting good order under his understanding of what lay within

the discretion of church leaders under 1 Corinthians 14:40."[35] This openness to practices

that are in keeping with Scripture, but that are not specifically prescribed by Scripture is

surely what Calvin had in mind when he wrote in his *Institutes* that "there is still a great

difference between establishing some exercise of piety which believers may use with a

free conscience, or (if it will serve them no useful purpose) abstain from it, and making a

law to entrap consciences in bondage."[36] Observing "some exercise of piety" that is not

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[34]Graham Keith, Ayr, "Too Narrow a Straightjacket? Reflections on the Historical Development of the Regulative Principle of Worship," *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* 26, no. 1 (2008): 20.

[35]Ibid., 21. "Calvin could happily have embraced such a ceremony [an ordination service] under what promoted seemliness or reverence, as well as good order" (ibid., 24). "Calvin recognised that a church may have good reason from time to time to introduce new ceremonies just as it might have cause to get rid of ceremonies or practices which had once been useful but had over time become effectively superstitions. Certainly, Calvin did urge caution. The innovations were not to be introduced hastily and their usefulness was to be carefully explained to the congregations. In Presbyterian circles, however, appeal to the Regulative Principle has sometimes unfortunately been a knee-jerk reaction to proposals deserving more serious and considered reflection" (ibid., 30-31). Douglas Kelly also argues that the issue of ceremonies not prescribed in Scripture was one area where the Puritans differed from Calvin: "As we noted earlier, the Puritans were much like the original Reformers in wishing to liberate and reform the Church by the Word of God. But the Puritans also represented a development beyond the first generation of Reformers. Clearly Calvin had held that ceremonies in worship which obscure the Gospel and further superstition must be cut out. However, at the same time, he allowed some freedom in the ordering of public worship in terms of 'subservient ceremonies.'" Kelly, "Puritan Regulative Principle," 67. "It would appear that Calvin was prepared to allow rather more freedom in national churches arranging their patterns of worship than were many of the later Puritans" (ibid., 68).

[36]John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion,* ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 2:1199.

necessarily prescribed in Scripture is allowable, for Calvin, as long as the consciences of

church members are not bound by requiring observance of these exercises.[37]

Though it is misguided to claim that Calvin held to the regulative principle as

promulgated by the Puritans, the regulative principle does find clear expression in the

Westminster Confession of Faith. The key passages are found in three places, and are as

follows:

> The whole counsel of God, concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man's
> salvation, faith, and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and
> necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture: unto which nothing at any
> time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men.
> Nevertheless we acknowledge . . . that there are some circumstances concerning the
> worship of God, and government of the Church, common to human actions and
> societies, which are to be ordered by the light of nature and Christian prudence,
> according to the general rules of the Word, which are always to be observed.[38]

> God alone is Lord of the conscience, and hath left it free from the doctrines and
> commandments of men which are in any thing contrary to his Word, or beside it in
> matters of faith or worship. So that to believe such doctrines, or to obey such
> commands out of conscience, is to betray true liberty of conscience; and the
> requiring of an implicit faith, and an absolute and blind obedience, is to destroy
> liberty of conscience, and reason also.[39]

> But the acceptable way of worshiping the true God is instituted by himself, and so
> limited to his own revealed will, that he may not be worshiped according to the
> imaginations and devices of men, or the suggestions of Satan, under any visible
> representations of any other way not prescribed in the Holy Scripture.[40]

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[37]Gore summarizes Calvin's view of the regulation of worship as follows: "To summarize,
Calvin's view of the regulation of worship may be formulated as 'freedom to worship in any manner
warranted by Scripture.' In other words, whatever is consistent with covenantal life is allowed. Differing
from Lutheranism, this principle does not allow everything that is not forbidden. Indeed, the Lutheran
principle provides insufficient positive direction. Different from Westminster's RPW [regulative principle
of worship], this principle does not require a command or logical necessity to warrant a particular (form/
element) of worship." Gore, "Regulative Principle, Part II," 46.

[38]*Westminster Confession of Faith,* in *Creeds of the Churches: A Reader in Christian Doctrine
from the Bible to the Present*, ed. John H. Leith (Garden City, NY: Anchor, 1963), 195-96; *Westminster
Confession of Faith* 1.6.

[39]Ibid., 215-16; *Westminster Confession of Faith* 20.2.

[40]Ibid., 216-17; *Westminster Confession of Faith* 21.1.

Two types of arguments for the regulative principle emerge from the *Confession*: (1) an argument from liberty of conscience, and (2) an argument that God alone has the right to institute the ways in which he is to be worshiped, and that to worship God in any other way is sinful.

The Westminster divines believed that since "God alone is Lord of the conscience," then for a worshiper to observe any practice that is either "contrary to his Word" or that is "beside it" (i.e., not specifically mentioned in it or derived from it by good and necessary consequence) is "to betray liberty of conscience." Unlike Calvin, who believed a worshiper was free to observe a practice not prescribed by Scripture as long as one's conscience was not bound, the *Confession* holds that the very act of observing such a practice *is* a sinful binding of one's conscience. So, for instance, according to Douglas Kelly, John Owen saw "any formal ritual as a civil or ecclesiastical imposition on the believer's conscience."[41] Thus, one of the main reasons the regulative principle is important, according to its proponents, is that "the church has no power to impose on worshipers what they can and cannot do; it can only insist that every Christian must be subject to the ordering of Scripture on any given issue."[42] The regulative principle, it is argued, preserves liberty of conscience.

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[41]Kelly, "Puritan Regulative Principle," 74.

[42]Thomas, "Give Praise to God," 78. It is for this reason that "only the regulative principle can maintain true Christian freedom" (ibid., 86). Reisinger and Allen also emphasize the role of the regulative principle in preserving liberty of conscience: "This is why church-made rules, traditions and the teachings of men, which by definition are over and above biblical precepts, should not be imposed on people. When a person fails to comply with the man-made rule but has been taught that this failure is sinful, the conscience produces false guilt" (Reisinger and Allen, *Worship*, 123). Likewise, Ligon Duncan states, "The regulative principle is designed to secure the believer's freedom from the dominion of human opinion in worship." J. Ligon Duncan III, "Foundations for Biblically Directed Worship," in *Give Praise to God: A Vision for Reforming Worship: Celebrating the Legacy of James Montgomery Boice*, ed. Philip Graham Ryken, Derek W. H. Thomas, and J. Ligon Duncan III (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2003), 58.

The second type of argument for the regulative principle present within the

Westminster Confession is the argument that God alone gets to decide how he is to be

worshiped, and that to worship him in any other way is sinful. Douglas Kelly notes that

those who adhere to the regulative principle often rely on appeals to the following:

> the significance of the Second Commandment with its prohibition of graven images,
> and on such incidents as the death of Uzzah and Nadab and Abihu for tampering
> with God's clearly prescribed way of worship. They also emphasize the
> significance of Christ's once-for-all Lordship, and the sufficiency of Scripture, with
> the prohibition not to add to or take from the divinely imposed covenant words.[43]

If God killed Nadab and Abihu for presenting false fire on his altar, it might be argued,

then obviously God cares about the form of our worship; therefore, to offer him worship

through forms he has not prescribed is sinful. This type of argumentation for the

regulative principle can be seen, for instance, in Joseph Pipa's treatment of the Second

Commandment when he claims that "in forbidding us to worship him through images,

God is forbidding our worshiping him according to our imaginations. By forbidding us

to worship him according to our imaginations, God requires us to worship him according

to his revelation."[44] He goes on to state that the Second Commandments also implies that

"we must avoid all occasions that tend to corrupt worship by inventing symbols or

introducing liturgical devices and any other thing that would challenge God's proprietary

rights in worship."[45] According to proponents of the Puritan regulative principle, the

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[43]Kelly, "Puritan Regulative Principle," 80.

[44]Joseph A. Pipa, Jr., "Exodus 20:4-6 and the Regulative Principle of Worship," in *The Hope Fulfilled: Essays in Honor of O. Palmer Robertson,* ed. Robert L. Penny (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2008), 273.

[45]Ibid., 273-74. "By the twofold prohibition of Exodus 20:4, 5, God establishes the spirituality of worship, which leads to the regulative principle. Since God is a Spirit, we must worship him spiritually and not according to our imaginations. Therefore, we must worship him according to revelation" (ibid., 272-73).

second commandment, and many other passages of Scripture, reveal that God alone gets to decide not only the *who* of worship, but the *how* of worship as well.[46] Man does not have the freedom to govern the church and its worship in the ways he desires; instead, he must do so only in the ways prescribed by God in Scripture.

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**Toward a Better Understanding
of Scripture's Normativity**

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While there is some good to be retained in both a principlizing method of interpretation and the regulative principle, neither offer a sufficient theory of Scripture's normativity. This section will, first, demonstrate the problems with both principlization and the regulative principle, and, second, offer a more biblical view of Scripture's normativity that retains the strengths of the other two theories but goes further than either of them in making sense of the way Scripture can be authoritative for the church today. It is only within this more biblical framework for understanding Scripture's normativity that questions concerning the validity of church practices can be sufficiently addressed.

**Critiquing Traditional Theories
of Scripture's Normativity**

Even proponents of principlization and the regulative principle recognize the difficulty of actually using their respective theories.[47] Of course, these difficulties could

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[46]Some of the passages to which Ligon Duncan appeals for support of the traditional view of the regulative principle are the story of Cain and Abel, the first and second commandments, the story of the golden calf, and Deut 4:15-18. J. Ligon Duncan III, "Does God Care How We Worship?" in *Give Praise to God: A Vision for Reforming Worship: Celebrating the Legacy of James Montgomery Boice*, ed. Philip Graham Ryken, Derek W. H. Thomas, and J. Ligon Duncan III (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2003), 28, 30, 31, 35; Duncan, "Biblically Directed Worship," 52. See also Reisinger and Allen, *Worship*, 36-47; and Nick Needham, "Westminster and Worship: Psalms, Hymns? and Musical Instruments?" in *The Westminster Confession into the 21st Century: Essays in Remembrance of the 350th Anniversary of the Westminster Assembly,* ed. Ligon Duncan (Fearn, Scotland: Mentor, 2004), 2:242-45. Needham holds that "both Old and New Testaments expressly endorse the regulative principle" (ibid., 241).

[47]For instance, Walter Kaiser states, "This area of the cultural and historical application of the biblical message is not easily resolved in every case." Kaiser and Silva, *Introduction to Biblical*

simply be due to the fact that any attempt to interpret and apply Scripture is complicated

to some extent. On the other hand, these difficulties might also be due to the fact that

there are fundamental flaws in the theories themselves. This is not to say that all

principlizing is wrong, or that it is wrong to look for principles in Scripture that are

particularly related to the worship and government of the church (as the regulative

principle does).[48] Rather, it is a certain *way* of principlizing that can be faulty, and it is

the belief that either the method of principlizing or the regulative principle are *sufficient*

explanations of Scripture's normativity that is wrongheaded.

　　　　One of the major problems with both the principlizing approach and the

regulative principle (insofar as the regulative principle relies on this method of

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Hermeneutics, 237. Kaiser also notes the difficulty with seeking a transcultural principle, when the interpreter himself is culturally conditioned: "Interpreters also must be aware of the way that their culture forces certain questions while leaving them blind to other, perhaps equally provocative questions. Furthermore, when interpreters arrive at a text, they have already formed a kind of hermeneutical spiral that has a forceful way of imposing categories or ways of looking at certain questions and the like. Interpreters must constantly go through periods of self-examination to see just how free they really are and to consider how much each of these points previously adopted has indeed affected the exegesis" (ibid., 238). Likewise, Douglas Kelly, a proponent of the regulative principle, states, "It is much easier to state these two varying rules for regulating church worship and government than to decide exactly how to work either of them out!" Kelly, "Puritan Regulative Principle," 71.

[48]As Kevin Vanhoozer notes, "One need not be a propositionalist . . . to maintain a role for propositions." Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 279. Vanhoozer criticizes "both the traditional propositionalist and critics such as [George] Lindbeck" for "(1) failing to see the propositional component in all communicative action and (2) failing to see that the larger literary forms have cognitive significance that consists of something other than conveying propositions" (ibid.). Again, Vanhoozer argues that understanding a text's propositional content is necessary, but not enough, when he writes, "To take the apostolic discourse as normative for theology, one must do more than read it as direct communication—that is, as a straightforward teaching of revealed truths. Theologians must do more (but not less!) than 'narrow' analysis that simply distills clear propositions from texts in order to assess their cogency. This kind of analysis . . . yields only thin textual descriptions that overlook the cognitive significance of larger forms of discourse, such as literary genres." Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "The Apostolic Discourse and Its Developments," in *Scripture's Doctrine and Theology's Bible: How the New Testament Shapes Christian Dogmatics*, ed. Markus Bockmuehl and Alan J. Torrance (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 200-01. David Clark also sees the necessity of principlizing, though he criticizes severely the way some people go about it: "Some kind of principlizing is necessary to evangelical theology. But there are dangers. . . . Clearly, drawing out principles from the total teachings of Scripture is one of the important tasks of theology. But using this model only—seeing all theology as principlizing the Bible—is inadequate." Clark, *To Know and Love God*, 94.

interpretation) is that the form of the Bible itself runs counter to what the principlizer seems to want it to be. The interpreter who tries to turn the Bible into a collection of transcultural, ahistorical, universal truths must wrestle with the question of why it is that God did not simply give his people a book full of mere principles in the first place. As N. T. Wright reminds us, the Bible "is not a rule book; it is a narrative."[49] To attempt merely to gather a collection of all the transcultural principles from Scripture is to "belittle the Bible" because it implies "that God has, after all, given us the wrong sort of book and [that] it is our job to turn it into the right sort of book by engaging in these hermeneutical moves."[50] Likewise, Kevin Vanhoozer notes that, in an attempt to turn every passage of Scripture into a proposition, principlizing does not sufficiently account for the Bible's literary variety: "The main defect of propositionalism is that it reduces the variety of speech actions in the canon to one type: the assertion."[51] Something is simply

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[49]N. T. Wright, "How Can the Bible Be Authoritative?" *Vox Evangelica* 21 (1991): 10.

[50]Ibid., 13. Elsewhere Wright states that "biblicistic proof-texting" is "inconsistent with the nature of the texts we have." N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, Christian Origins and the Question of God, vol. 1 (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 140. Wright contrasts the problematic approach of principlizing with what he considers to be a better way forward: "Rather than trying to filter out the actual arguments that Paul is mounting in order to 'get at' the doctrines that, it is assumed, he is 'expounding,' I have stressed that we must pay attention to those larger arguments and to the great story of God, the world, Israel, and Jesus, giving special attention to the 'Israel' dimension, within which the cross means for him what it means for him." N. T. Wright, "Reading Paul, Thinking Scripture," in *Scripture's Doctrine and Theology's Bible: How the New Testament Shapes Christian Dogmatics*, ed. Markus Bockmuehl and Alan J. Torrance (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 70.

[51]Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 31. He goes on to say that "this results in a monologic conception of theology, and of truth. To think of theology as a monologue, even a truthful monologue, is to reduce theo-drama—in which the dialogical action is carried by a number of voices—to mere theory. Neither the theo-drama nor the canonical script can be reduced to propositions and theories without significant loss. Doing justice to the biblical text ultimately requires a different kind of exegetical *scientia*, one that goes beyond propositionalism without, however, leaving propositions behind" (ibid.). According to Vanhoozer, "those who dedramatize the Bible in this way want the 'point' without the parable, the content without the form, the 'soul' without the body of the text." Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "A Drama-of-Redemption Model: Always Performing?" in *Four Views on Moving Beyond the Bible to Theology,* ed. Gary T. Meadors (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 158. David Clark makes a similar criticism of principlizing: "It can suggest, very delicately, that the genres of Scripture are of essentially the wrong type. It can hint that the Bible, to be truly or more helpfully theological, should not retain its form as prophecy, poetry, letters, or history. Rather, some seem to assume that God should have inspired more abstract propositions. They view Scripture as an 'unsorted edition of Calvin' or some other theological hero. Their

not right when an interpreter believes he must "entirely replace a literary form with an

equivalent descriptive proposition."[52] After all, as Daniel Doriani inquires, "Why should

doctrinal propositions and direct ethical imperatives gain primacy over other modes of

revelation?"[53] "The principle itself," Doriani claims, "is extrabiblical."[54] In other words,

the Bible should be interpreted in accordance with the type of book it is; namely, a book

made of up texts that come in a variety of genres. A hermeneutical method that turns all

of Scripture into principles does not meet the Bible on its own terms. As Richard Lints

reminds his readers, "Our interpretive matrix should be the interpretive matrix of the

Scriptures."[55]

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method of reading the text, by valuing abstract and general propositions over the Bible's literary genres, implies that God inspired the wrong sort of book. It suggests that the theologian's task is to translate the Bible into a *better*, *more useful* form—that is, into sets of philosophy-like statements." Clark, *To Know and Love God*, 95-96. Emphasis original. So Richard Briggs, who states that the principlizing approach, "assumes that whatever the kind of text we have, what we are *really* looking for is principles, and if we do not see them in the text then we need to find them by drawing them out of the text. Briggs, *Reading the Bible Wisely*, 89.

[52]Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "From Canon to Concept: 'Same' and 'Other' in the Relation between Biblical and Systematic Theology," *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* 12, no. 1 (1994): 112-13. To do so is to commit "the 'substitution theory' of genre" (ibid., 112).

[53]Daniel M. Doriani, "A Redemptive-Historical Model," in *Four Views on Moving Beyond the Bible to Theology,* ed. Gary T. Meadors (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 88.

[54]Ibid., 87. Of the problems with Kaiser's principlizing approach, Doriani also writes: "First, principlizing treats the particularity and cultural embeddedness of Scriptures more as a problem to be overcome than as something essential to the givenness of the Bible. Kaiser says cultural issues 'intrude' on the text; the problem is 'handled' by principlizing the text. . . . As a result, there can be no aiding interest in the genres of Scripture. Once the principle is extracted, the God-given form of Scripture falls away like a wheat husk or pea pod. Second, and more seriously, principlizing's insistence on timeless, propositional truth privileges one from of divine communication above others. While we must never deny or even minimize the importance of propositional truth, we must remember that revelation comes in many forms. Alongside propositions, the Bible contains commands, questions, prayers, promises and curses, riddles, vows, parables, and more. . . . Third, Kaiser appears to claim a privileged position with regard to the text, as if he might be able to transcend both the original culture of the Bible and his own. . . . No human can achieve a timeless, culture-free posture." Daniel M. Doriani, "A Response to Walter C. Kaiser, Jr," in *Four Views on Moving Beyond the Bible to Theology,* ed. Gary T. Meadors (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 53-55.

[55]Richard Lints, *The Fabric of Theology: A Prolegomenon to Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 269. Lints continues, "It should make sense of the past and the present and the future in the same manner that the Scriptures do. In order to do this, a theological framework cannot simply mine the Scriptures looking for answers to a set of specific questions that arise uniquely in the

At this point, the regulative principle runs into the same problem that the principlizing hermeneutic faces. Those working on the basis of the regulative principle attempt to discover rules for worship that are "either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture."[56] As Michael Farley points out, however, no part of the New Testament presents anything like "a complete manual of liturgics."[57] To seek to use the New Testament as if it were a rule book for worship, then, is to use it in a way that the New Testament itself does not intend to be used. As Farley states, "If none of the individual NT books were written to be an exhaustive liturgical manual, then it is wrong to read and apply the NT as a whole in this restrictive fashion."[58] To read and apply the New Testament in this way, Farley states, is "to read the NT in an inappropriately narrow and legalistic fashion as if the NT as a whole is to function as a collective new covenant version of Leviticus."[59] God could

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modern era. It should seek out the questions that the Scriptures are asking, for these remain the questions that are important for understanding the past and present and future" (ibid.).

[56]*Westminster Confession of Faith*, 195; *Westminster Confession of Faith* 1.6.

[57]Michael A. Farley, "What Is 'Biblical' Worship? Biblical Hermeneutics and Evangelical Theologies of Worship," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 51, no. 3 (2008): 610.

[58]Ibid., 610-11.

[59]Ibid., 610. John Frame also recognizes the contradiction that exists between the desire to use the Bible as a rule book for worship and the fact that the Bible itself does not come to us in this form: "It is not as if God has given us a document with a list of commands concerning worship, say numbered 1-75, and we could simply look at the list to resolve any questions we might have about worship. Were such a list available, we could simply look up any disputed practice on the list; if it is commanded by one of the 75 ordinances, then we would do it; otherwise, not. . . . I confess that I find it difficult to understand why God, if he wished to lay down a principle governing worship sharply distinct from his principle for governing ordinary life, did not give us something like a 'book of commands' for worship, like the book of 75 in the earlier illustration, something like the 'directories of public worship' published by various denominations. On the contrary, it appears that we must determine God's will for worship by the same hermeneutically problematic methods by which we seek to discover God's will in other areas of life." John Frame, "Some Questions about the Regulative Principle," *Westminster Theological Journal* 54 (1992): 359, 361. To imagine that questions of the regulation of worship can be solved by turning to a rule in a rule book is "to impose upon them a false simplicity" (ibid., 366). For a critical response to Frames "questions" about the regulative principle see T. David Gordon, "Some Answers about the Regulative Principle," *Westminster Theological Journal* 55 (1993): 321-29.

have given the New Testament church a new version of Leviticus for the purpose of directing new covenant worship, but he did not. This must have at least some bearing on the way we attempt to formulate what it means to regulate church worship and church government according to the Bible.

A second problem with both principlization and the regulative principle is that neither theory is sufficiently alert to the canonical contours and developments within Scripture. Principles cannot simply be culled from anywhere in the canon and applied to New Testament believers today. In doing this, R. J. Gore notes, "The redemptive-historical character of revelation is, at times, neglected,"[60] including the discontinuity that exists between the covenants.

One traditional way that Reformed theologians have attempted to set biblical laws (including those related to worship) within their redemptive-historical context is by appealing to the threefold division of the law. Civil and ceremonial laws, it is argued, are transformed with the coming of the new covenant, but the moral laws of the Old Testament remain binding upon believers of all eras.[61] The problem with this argument, however, is that the very idea that biblical law can be divided up in this threefold manner "does not hold up under close scrutiny."[62] As Douglas Moo argues, "Jews in Jesus' and

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[60]Gore, *Covenantal Worship*, 98. Gore notes, for instance, the way the *Westminster Confession* uses prooftexts in §21.1: "For example, in dealing with the definition of worship, the Westminster Confession of Faith, 21.1, uses prooftexts that had relevance in a particular cultural setting, namely the entrance of Israel into a land in which paganism was the dominant religious system: Joshua 24:14; Deuteronomy 4:15-20; 12:32; Exodus 20:4-6, among others. Certainly these texts would be a part of an overall theology of worship, but to absolutize them without due regard for their cultural setting is to distort their place in a developed theology of worship and their relevance for contemporary challenges" (ibid.).

[61]For this view see Knox Chamblin, "The Law of Moses and the Law of Christ," in *Continuity and Discontinuity: Perspectives on the Relationship between the Old and New Testaments,* ed. John S. Feinberg (Westchester, IL: Crossway, 1988).

[62]Douglas J. Moo, "The Law of Christ as the Fulfillment of the Law of Moses: A Modified Lutheran View," in *Five Views on Law and Gospel,* ed. Stanley N. Gundry (Grand Rapids: Zondervan,

Paul's day certainly did not divide up the law into categories; on the contrary, there was a strong insistence that the law was a unity and could not be obeyed in parts. This being the case, we would require strong evidence from within the New Testament to think that the word 'law' in certain texts can apply to one part of the law."[63] Strong evidence for this is precisely what Moo argues we do *not* find in Scripture. Thus, "the continuity of the law in the new covenant cannot be founded on such a distinction among the different 'kinds' of laws."[64]

A better way of applying the Bible, including the Mosaic law, will be set forth in the next section, but for now the point needs to be emphasized that a method concerned primarily with discerning transcultural moral principles for worship does not sufficiently account for Scripture's normativity. It is simply not enough to ask, "What is the principle in this text?" One must also ask of any text, "What time is it?"[65] In other words, discerning where the text is situated in the drama of redemptive history is just as important as discerning the principles within a text; for as N. T. Wright states, "If you

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1999), 335.

[63]Ibid., 336.

[64]Ibid.

[65]N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, Christian Origins and the Question of God, vol. 2 (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 138. For Wright's attempt to address this question in relation to where Jesus saw himself on the redemptive-historical timeline, see ibid., 467-72. "What time is it?" is one of a series of questions that Wright believes go into shaping a persons worldview (i.e., the narrative in which they see themselves). For the other questions, see Wright, *New Testament and the People of God*, 123. He adds "What time is it?" to his list in *Jesus and the Victory of God*. Wright criticizes the Reformers for not emphasizing enough the narrative nature of Scripture: "What we miss today, as we read the Reformers, is something which is vital within scripture itself but which, in their attention to the details, they were not concerned to stress: the great *narrative* of God, Israel, Jesus and the world, coming forward into our own day and looking ahead to the eventual renewal of all things. . . . Thus, for instance, their readings of the gospels show little awareness of them as anything other than repositories of dominical teaching, concluding with the saving events of Good Friday and Easter but without integrating those events into the Kingdom-proclamation that preceded them." N. T. Wright, *The Last Word: Beyond the Bible Wars to a New Understanding of the Authority of Scripture* (New York: HarperCollins, 2005), 76. Emphasis original.

affirm a doctrine but place it in the wrong implicit narrative, you potentially falsify it as fully and thoroughly as if you denied it altogether."[66] A text's meaning (and thus any principle within that text) develops as the narrative of God's salvation unfolds.[67] Thus, lifting a principle from its Old Testament context without accounting for the way in which that principle develops up until it reaches the same epoch as the interpreter will result in an attempt to fit an underdeveloped principle (canonically speaking) into a more developed time period. This is unnatural, and should be avoided; and yet, on their own, neither the principlizing approach nor the regulative principle can prevent this from happening.

A third weakness of the regulative principle is that Jesus seems not to have practiced it. If the regulative principle teaches that only those practices prescribed in Scripture may be observed in the worship of God, then what is to be made of Jesus' attendance of synagogues and Jewish feasts not prescribed in the Mosaic law?[68] Neither synagogue worship, nor (for example) the Feast of the Dedication of Jerusalem (John 10:22) were prescribed in the Old Testament. Both were a part of first century Jewish worship, and both were observed by Jesus, but both might also be categorized by the

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[66]Wright, "Reading Paul," 66.

[67]Peter J. Leithart, *Deep Exegesis: The Mystery of Reading Scripture* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2009), 35-74. Richard Lints also holds that a text's very *meaning* can develop: "Old Testament passages are often 'recast' in the New Testament. This is not to say that New Testament authors dismissed the original event of redemptive significance as no longer useful; rather, in light of the new revelation, they moved aspects that had formerly gone unnoticed into the foreground, thereby creating a broader horizon of interpretation. In this sense, they completed or refined the *meaning* of the original events." Lints, *Fabric of Theology*, 308-09. Emphasis original. Like Leithart, Lints even goes so far as to say that the transformation that the text produces in its contemporary readers is part of the text's meaning: "A theological analysis of a particular text must be careful not simply to tell us what the text 'means' but must also seek to capture the manner in which that meaning is conveyed and the impact it is to have on life. We must not drain away the life of the text by abstracting its meaning. Part of the meaning of the text is the transformation of life that it occasions" (ibid., 296).

[68]R. J. Gore makes this point in Gore, *Covenantal Worship*, 100-10.

Westminster divines as established "according to the imaginations and devices of men," as ways of worship "not prescribed in Holy Scripture."[69] If Jesus did not follow the regulative principle, then why should we?

Yet a fourth problem with the regulative principle is that the argument from liberty of conscience (one of its principal arguments) is faulty. For the Puritans, one of the primary motivations for developing the regulative principle was to protect their consciences from the imposition of extrabiblical observances by the state church.[70] But, as R. J. Gore points out, "Today there is no 'national church' seeking to impose uniformity of worship. Instead, we see denominational systems of local congregations in which individuals freely associate and voluntarily embrace confessions of faith, constitutions, and directories of worship. The problem of imposition is virtually nonexistent."[71] To repeat Calvin, "There is . . . a great difference between establishing some exercise of piety which believers may use with a free conscience, or . . . abstain from it, and making a law to entrap consciences in bondage."[72] A minister does not "bind" the consciences of church members simply by including an activity in the order of service that is not prescribed in Scripture. Congregants can decide whether or not they want to participate in the activity, or even whether they want to attend that particular church at all, for that matter.

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[69]*Westminster Confession of Faith*, 217; *Westminster Confession of Faith* 21.1.

[70]"Arguably, some of the views on worship practices coming out of the Reformation were influenced or affected, at least in part, by a reaction to the prevailing worship practices of the Roman Catholic Church, rather than just out of a desire to apply pure biblical principles." Dominic A. Aquila, "Redemptive History and the Regulative Principle of Worship," in *The Hope Fulfilled: Essays in Honor of O. Palmer Robertson,* ed. Robert L. Penny (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2008), 254.

[71]Gore, "Regulative Principle, Part II," 45.

[72]Calvin, *Institutes*, 1199.

Finally, another weakness of both principlization and the regulative principle is that these views are sometimes accompanied by a false antithesis that goes something like this: either one holds to the regulative principle or one does not believe that the Bible is normative for contemporary church worship and government. For instance, Reisinger and Allen state that "every part of divine worship must be authorized in the Scriptures. Otherwise, how could the 'sole authority' for religious 'practice' be the Bible? Only the regulative principle teaches that the sole authority for 'practice' is Scripture."[73] This is naive.[74] There are other, more biblical, ways of understanding Scripture's normativity than the regulative principle, and it is to this subject that the next section of this paper is addressed.

Constructing a Better Theory of Scripture's Normativity

A better way of understanding how it is that Scripture is normative for the contemporary church is by viewing salvation-history as the drama of redemption, and the Bible as the script in that drama that determines the canonical appropriateness or inappropriateness of church practices. Scripture, as script, both tells the story of previous acts in the drama of redemption and calls for a *fitting* continuation of that drama by modern believers. Two of the most prominent scholars who have argued for viewing Scripture's normative in this way are N. T. Wright and Kevin Vanhoozer,[75] and it is a

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[73]Reisinger and Allen, *Worship*, 35. They are referring to the 1925 *Southern Baptist Faith and Message*, which states that "the sole authority for faith and practice among Baptists is the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments," quoted in L. Russ Bush and Tom J. Nettles, *Baptists and the Bible* (Chicago: Moody, 1980), 105.

[74]To prove that the regulative principle *alone* "teaches that the sole authority for 'practice' is Scripture," the authors would have to debunk every other theory of Scripture's normativity. In their book, however, the only approach against which they argue is the normative principle. These are not the only options.

model like theirs that is offered here as a more canonically oriented approach to the question of Scripture's normativity.

N. T. Wright suggests that the Bible should be seen as the script to a five act play—the five acts being "creation, 'fall,' Israel, Jesus, and the church; they constitute the differentiated stages in the divine drama which scripture itself offers."[76] Currently, believers are "living in the fifth act, the time of the church. This act began with Easter and Pentecost; its opening scenes were the apostolic period itself; its charter text is the New Testament; its goal, its intended final scene, is sketched clearly in such passages as Romans 8, 1 Corinthians 15 and Revelation 21-22."[77] The Bible, according to this view, is not a static rule book for worship, but the script of a drama that encompasses the lives of people today. Contemporary believers are living during the final act (the fifth act) of that drama. The first part of the fifth act (the apostolic scene) has already been scripted, and the final part of the fifth act (the scene of the eschaton) has been hinted at. The contemporary church (those who inhabit the only part of the drama that has not been scripted) has the task of discovering "through the Spirit and prayer, the appropriate ways of improvising the script between the foundation events and charter, on the one hand, and

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[75]Wright, "How Can the Bible Be Authoritative?"; idem, *New Testament and the People of God*, 121-44; and idem, *The Last Word*. See also Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*; and idem, "Drama-of-Redemption Model." All that follows is similar to what Richard Lints calls for when he speaks of the need to take note of the epochal context of Scripture: "A contemporary theological framework must focus centrally on our 'redemptive-historical index,' by which I mean the understanding of our place in the historical unfolding of the purposes of God. We stand in a unique epoch of God's redemptive dealings with humankind, and until we have understood the relationship between our epoch and those that have preceded it and will follow it, we will retain a hopelessly fragmented conception of ourselves and our culture. We must understand where we have come from and where we are headed if we are to understand who we are right now." Lints, *Fabric of Theology*, 276. "The Bible is relevant," writes Lints, "because the present situation is but another episode in the story of the Bible—a story that has begun and climaxed and awaits a consummation foretold in the Scriptures. The Scriptures offer a framework for interpreting this past, present, and future, including our own past, present, and future" (ibid., 313).

[76]Wright, *The Last Word*, 121.

[77]Ibid., 122.

the complete coming of the Kingdom on the other."[78] This notion of "improvising" might

sound too unrestrained for some, but Wright explains that, "as all musicians know,

improvisation does not at all mean a free-for-all where 'anything goes,' but precisely a

disciplined and careful listening to all the other voices around us, and a constant attention

to the themes, rhythms and harmonies of the complete performance so far, the

performance which we are now called to continue."[79] Those called to improvise for the

contemporary scene must maintain "consistency"[80] with the previous acts, and with those

parts of the fifth act that have already been scripted (i.e., the apostolic scene and

descriptions of the eschaton). To do this, they must "immerse themselves with full

sympathy in the first four acts."[81] The purpose of having a deep knowledge of the other

acts in the biblical drama is not so that contemporary believers can merely "parrot what

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[78]Ibid., 126. His analogy of "a Shakespeare play, most of whose fifth act has been lost" deserves to be quoted at length: "Suppose there exists a Shakespeare play, most of whose fifth act has been lost. The first four acts provide, let us suppose, such a remarkable wealth of characterization, such a crescendo of excitement within the plot, that it is generally agreed that the play ought to be staged. Nevertheless, it is felt inappropriate actually to write a fifth act once and for all: it would freeze the play into one form, and commit Shakespeare as it were to being prospectively responsible for work not in fact his own. Better, it might be felt to give the key parts to highly trained, sensitive and experienced Shakespearian actors, who would immerse themselves in the first four acts, and in the language and culture of Shakespeare and his time, *and who would then be told to work out a fifth act for themselves*. Consider the result. The first four acts, existing as they did, would be the undoubted 'authority' for the task in hand. That is, anyone could properly object to the new improvisation on the grounds that some character was now behaving inconsistently, or that some sub-plot or theme, adumbrated earlier, had not reached its proper resolution. This 'authority' of the first four acts would not consist—could not consist!—in an implicit command that the actors should repeat the earlier parts of the play over and over again. It would consist in the fact of an as yet unfinished drama, containing its own impetus and forward movement, which demanded to be concluded in an appropriate manner. It would require of the actors a free and responsible entering in to the story as it stood, in order first to undertand how the threads could appropriately be drawn together and then to put that understanding into effect by speaking and acting with both innovation and consistency" (Wright, *New Testament and the People of God*, 140). Emphasis original.

[79]Wright, *The Last Word*, 126.

[80]Wright, *New Testament and the People of God*, 140.

[81]Ibid., 141. "We read scripture in order to be refreshed in our memory and understanding of the story within which we ourselves are actors, to be reminded where it has come from and where it is going to, and hence what our own part within it ought to be" (Wright, *The Last Word*, 115).

has already been said," but, rather, so that "there will be a rightness, a fittingness, about certain actions and speeches, about certain final moves in the drama, which will in one sense be self-authenticating, and in another gain authentication from their coherence with, their making sense of, the 'authoritative' previous text."[82] For an improvisation to be "fitting" it must be biblical, but discerning what practices are biblically "fitting" or "appropriate" for the church requires more than the discovery and application of principles. It requires sensitivity to the ways in which these principles have developed within the canon, and the ways those principles should be acted upon given the church's redemptive-historical place within the drama.[83]

Kevin Vanhoozer also believes that the Bible should be seen as the script to God's drama of redemption (what he calls the "theo-drama"[84]), and that Scripture's normativity must be understood in light of its nature as script. The church will truly affirm *sola Scriptura*, Vanhoozer asserts, "not by positing the Bible as a textbook filled with propositional information but by viewing the Bible as a script that calls for faithful yet creative performances."[85] "Scripture," he states, "is not simply a propositional shaft to be exegetically mined and theologically refined like so much textual dross to be purified into systems of philosophy or morality. On the contrary, both the form and content of the New Testament are elements in the divine drama of revelation and

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[82]Wright, *New Testament and the People of God*, 141.

[83]"I can only answer the question 'What am I to do?' if I can answer the prior question 'Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?'" Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 3rd ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 216.

[84]Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 37-38.

[85]Ibid., 22. "It is the unique privilege and responsibility of the people of God to perform the Scriptures and continue the way" (ibid.).

redemption."[86] Like Wright, Vanhoozer sees God's drama of redemption as consisting of five acts.[87] The church must live in light of these acts by seeing itself as inhabiting "an in-between the first and second comings of Christ time, marked by the firstfruits of the end time but not yet at the end."[88] The task of the church is to carry on the drama of redemption until Christ's second coming, all under the direction of the biblical script; or as Vanhoozer puts it: "to 'unfold' (to open or spread out) what has been 'infolded' (implied) in the discourse—the world 'of' the text."[89] This is not "a matter of replicating the author's situation (the world behind the text), or of repeating the author's words, *but of unfolding what the author says (about the theodrama) into one's own situation (the world in front of the text).*"[90] Modern day believers must unfold, or perform, the biblical script in ways that are canonically "fitting"; they are not free to do whatever they please, but are held to a biblical standard. "The scripted theodrama, the sum total of those acts that reveal God and the human good, is the standard by which all judgments of fittingness must be assessed."[91] The fact that Scripture serves as the standard of judgment means that it is possible to act in ways that are unfitting: "Not all words and acts are appropriate to the subject matter; not all words and acts achieve theo-dramatic 'fit.'"[92] According to

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[86]Vanhoozer, "Apostolic Discourse," 194.

[87]He critiques Wrights five-act scheme slightly: "I see the fall not as its own act, but as the conflict in the first act, creation. I prefer to see each of the five acts of the theodrama as set in motion by a divine at. Hence: creation, election of Israel, Christ, Pentecost and the church, consummation" (ibid.). For a similar (charitable) critique, see Samuel Wells, *Improvisation: The Drama of Christian Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2004), 52-57.

[88]Vanhoozer, "Drama-of-Redemption Model," 174.

[89]Vanhoozer, "Drama-of-Redemption Model," 166.

[90]Ibid., 167. Emphasis original.

[91]Ibid., 184.

[92]Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 59.

Vanhoozer's model, the canon is normative for the contemporary church not simply

because it contains true principles, but because it is the "*dramatic-didactic criterion that*

shows us how to go on following Jesus Christ primarily by telling, showing, and teaching

us who he is and what he has done."[93] The canonical script is the criterion for judging

whether an activity of the church is fitting or unfitting, appropriate or inappropriate. This

is what it means that Scripture is normative for the church today.

     With the models of both Wright and Vanhoozer,[94] principles are still used in the

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[93]Ibid., 149. Emphasis original.

[94]Wright and Vanhoozer were not the first to develop these ideas. For example, see the seminal work of Nicholas Lash in Nicholas Lash, *Theology on the Way to Emmaus* (London: SCM, 1986), especially chapter three entitled "Performing the Scriptures." Lash states that "Christian practice, as interpretative action, consists in the *performance* of texts which are construed as 'rendering,' bearing witness to, one whose words and deeds, discourse and suffering, "rendered" the truth of God in human history. The performance of the New Testament enacts the conviction that these texts are most appropriately read as the story of Jesus, the story of everyone else, and the story of God" (ibid., 42; emphasis original). Lash uses the analogy of Scripture being like a play that needs to be performed: "Consider another example: a company of actors and an audience performing *King Lear*. Once again, the activity upon which they are engaged is that of interpreting a text. And, once again, the quality of the interpretation depends partly upon an element of creativity that is essential to the interpretative task. We look to the actors and the producer to enable us in some measure freshly to experience and understand the play" (ibid., 41). Like Wright and Vanhoozer, Lash recognizes that there are standards for determining whether a contemporary performance is fitting: "the range of appropriate interpretations of a dramatic or literary texts is constrained by what the text 'originally meant.' This is what keeps the historians and textual critics in business. Good Shakespearean production, for example, presupposes an effective and abiding interest in what was originally meant. The author retains his authority if it is *his* text, and not some other, that we seek to interpret. . . . To put it very simply: as the history of the meaning of the text continues, we can and must tell the story differently. But we do so under constraint: what we may *not* do, if it is *this* text which we are to continue to perform, is to tell a different story" (ibid., 44; emphasis original). Stephen Barton refers to Lash as the first scholar to develop a performance interpretation model: "In the last two decades, there have been several major proponents of the idea that the most fruitful way to think about biblical interpretation is by analogy with what is involved in the interpretation of a musical score or a dramatic script. The first that I know of is the Cambridge Roman Catholic philosophical theologian Nicholas Lash, in his seminal essay, 'Performing the Scriptures,' first published in 1982." Stephen C. Barton, "New Testament Interpretation as Performance," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 52, no. 2 (1999): 180. Barton, himself, seeks to advance on this view, "arguing for a *new paradigm* for NT interpretation. This paradigm is one which sets interpretation in a framework of divine and human action understood as 'performance.' This is a larger framework than the more parochial ones of historical criticism and literary criticism conventionally understood, because the horizon of meaning is *not restricted to the past nor to the text as text*. Now the Bible is seen as unique testimony to the 'performance' of the triune God, and true interpretation is a matter of so embodying the text as to become part of that performance, sharing in the divine life" (ibid., 205-06; emphasis original). See also the important work of Michael Farley, who argues for "a more theologically oriented regulative principle" (Michael A. Farley, "Reforming Reformed Worship: Theological Method and Liturgical Catholicity in American Presbyterianism, 1850-2005" [Ph.D. diss., Saint Louis University, 2007], 337-38), and a "biblical-typological approach" to hermeneutics (Farley, "What Is 'Biblical' Worship?" 612). See also Craig G. Bartholomew and Michael W. Goheen,

process of determining canonical fittingness,[95] but they are used with heightened attention

to their place and development within redemptive history (the "What time is it?"

question).[96] This requires that an interpreter not merely discern the principles within a

text, but also the ways in which those principles develop along the Bible's storyline: it

"involves knowing where we are within the overall drama and what is appropriate within

each act."[97] When it comes to matters of church worship and church government, then,

contemporary practices will be "fitting" or "appropriate" if they go *with* the grain of the

redemptive-historical script, and must be considered "unfitting" and "inappropriate" if

they cut *against* that grain. Principles will still need to be discerned, and church worship

and government will still need to be regulated by them;[98] but, with a more canonical

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"Story and Biblical Theology," in *Out of Egypt: Biblical Theology and Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Craig Bartholomew, Mary Healy, Karl Möller, and Robin Parry, Scripture and Hermeneutics Series, vol. 5 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 144-71; and Wells, *Improvisation*.

[95]"I do see a modest role for something like principlizing, but the primary thing is to form and transform biblical interpreters through their apprenticeship to the particular habits of prophetic and apostolic judgment intrinsic to and embodied in the biblical texts." Vanhoozer, "A Response to Walter C. Kaiser Jr.," 62.

[96]As Oliver O'Donovan notes, "Every element of Scripture contributes to the testimony of the whole, but the different contributions are not uniform. The right understanding of any given element of Scripture is determined by its relation to the whole; but that means by its relation to the historical shape of the event that Scripture attests, the calling of Israel fulfilled in the coming of the Christ." Oliver O'Donovan, "The Moral Authority of Scripture," in *Scripture's Doctrine and Theology's Bible: How the New Testament Shapes Christian Dogmatics*, ed. Markus Bockmuehl and Alan J. Torrance (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 167.

[97]Wright, *The Last Word*, 121.

[98]On the need for a redemptive-historical framework in biblical hermeneutics and its relevance to debates over the regulative principle, see David F. Wells, "On Being Framed," *Westminster Theological Journal* 59 (1997): 299. Because of the weaknesses of the traditional way of understanding the regulative principle (mentioned above), much more weight must be put on the believer applying wisdom as he evaluates the fittingness of certain practices. Taking up the contested subject of whether or not to allow interpretive dance in a worship service, Timothy Keller writes, "In other words, if you think that dancers in leotards will be too distracting and sexually provocative for your congregation, just say so—don't try to prove that the Bible forbids it. It is a bad habit of mind to seek to label 'forbidden' what is really just unwise." Timothy J. Keller, "Reformed Worship in the Global City," in *Worship by the Book,* ed. D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 199 n. 12. What is required, writes Michael Farley, is "more than merely following a list of clearly prescribed biblical rules; rather, it demands the intelligent and careful exercise of biblical wisdom." Farley, "Reforming Reformed Worship," 339.

model of Scripture's normativity, Scripture can be applied with greater respect for the nature of the Bible itself and with greater sensitivity to the church's place in the biblical drama.

Conclusion

This chapter has argued that neither a principlizing hermeneutic nor the regulative principle offer a sufficient explanation of how it is that Scripture is normative for the church today. A more canonically oriented view of Scripture's normativity was then set forth that called for greater attention to be given to the narrative nature of Scripture and greater sensitivity to be had concerning the church's place in that narrative. According to this view, Scripture is normative because it serves as the standard by which contemporary church practices may be judged "fitting" or "unfitting." Making these kinds of judgments requires more than the application of principles distilled from the text; it requires the application of these principles in light of their *place* in the drama of redemption. Neither the principlizing approach nor the regulative principle is sufficiently equipped for this task. If one is to address the question of whether a church practice like multi-site is "biblical," a canonically oriented view of Scripture's normativity offers a better way forward. Chapters 3 through 5 of this dissertation are an attempt to demonstrate that multi-site is not canonically "fitting" and goes against the grain of Scripture.

CHAPTER 3

HOW CENTRAL IS ONE ASSEMBLY?
OLD TESTAMENT

Introduction

Understanding the people of God as the "assembly of the Lord" (Num 16:3;

Deut 23:1, 2, 3, 8; 1 Chr 28:8; Mic 2:5) is central to understanding the nature of Israel in

the Old Testament. Some multi-site proponents argue that the theme of covenant is what

binds a people together and constiues them as one church, not the theme of assembly.[1]

This allows them to argue that as a long as the members of multiple campuses have

covenanted together, then they can be one church, regardless of the fact that those

members may never actually assemble together in worship and fellowship. This third

chapter, along with the fourth, shows that the theme of assembly, and not just that of

covenant, must also be seen as one of the central elements that binds a group of believers

together and constitutes them as one church.

What will be argued in this chapter is that Israel was considered the "assembly

of the Lord," and that they were constituted as such by their gathering together in one

place in worship. This will be demonstrated by tracing the theme of Israel as God's

assembly throughout the Old Testament, showing the connection between Israel's

worship assemblies and their title as the "assembly of the Lord." The Old Testament

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[1]J. D. Greear, "A Pastor Defends His Multi-Site Church," *9Marks eJournal* 6.3 (2009): 21-27 [on-line]; accessed 27 April 2010; available from http://involve.9marks.org/site/DocServer/eJournal200963MayJune.pdf?docID=641; Internet.

theme of the people of God *in* assembly and *as* assembly is rooted in the paradigmatic

assembly at Sinai, is permanently instituted in the prescribed assemblies of the Mosaic

Law, is further developed at the Deuteronomic assembly, is central to the poetry and

hymnody of Israel, and becomes an important part of the eschatological hope of the

prophets. Throughout the Old Testament, Israel is considered a single assembly because

the people as a whole are characterized by all gathering together in the same place in

corporate worship. As will be shown in chapter four, this understanding of Israel as

God's assembly serves as the background for understanding the New Testament church as

the assembly of the Lord as well, and, for the purposes of this dissertation, helps set the

stage for thinking canonically about the issue of multi-site churches.

Lexical Analysis of קָהָל, עֵדָה, and ἐκκλησία

Central to the biblical theme of God's assembly are the respective Hebrew and

Greek words used to denote the concept. Because these words are used so frequently in

the development of this theme, it is important that one have a good grasp of their use in

Scripture. Thus, before beginning our study of the biblical material in salvation-historical

progression, a lexical analysis of these words and a discussion of how they relate is

needed.

An analysis of the 122 occurrences[2] of the noun קָהָל in the Old Testament

reveals that it is a technical term with "the basic meaning 'assembly, assembled group of

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[2]So F. L. Hossfeld and E. M. Kindl, "קָהָל: Basic Technical Meaning, The Religious-Cultic Assembly in Dtn/Dtr Texts, qāhāl and 'ēḏâ in P, Prophets, Chroniclers History, Psalms, Wisdom," in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, ed. G. Johannes Botterweck, Helmber Ringgren, and Heinz-Josef Fabry, trans. Douglas Stott (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 549. Eugene Carpenter's count is 123, however. Eugene Carpenter, "קהל," in *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology & Exegesis*, ed. Willem A. VanGemeren (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 889.

people.'"[3] The specific meaning is determined by the context, but this basic meaning "is maintained in all strata and throughout the entire spectrum of OT occurrences."[4] Though some might argue that קָהָל could be used to refer to the congregation of Israel even while dispersed,[5] most would follow J. Y. Campbell in holding that "there is no good evidence that in the Old Testament *qahal* ever means anything but an actual assembly or meeting of some kind."[6] Even the phrase קְהַל יְהוָה ("assembly of YHWH"), the few times it occurs, is clearly used in reference to actual assemblies.[7]

While קָהָל was not used to refer to the people of God when dispersed, עֵדָה was clearly used in this way. עֵדָה could be used to refer to people in assembly (e.g., 1 Kings 12:20), but it is primarily used in reference to a community itself ("national, legal and cultic"[8]) as opposed to the result of the assembling of a community. Koehler and Baumgartner's lexicon categorizes the majority of the word's 149 occurrences in this way.[9]

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[3]Hossfeld and Kindl, "קָהָל: Basic Technical Meaning," 547.

[4]Ibid., 551.

[5]So J. W. Roberts, "The Meaning of *Ekklesia* in the New Testament," *Restoration Quarterly* 15, no. 1 (1972): 32, who states, "Both words [קָהָל and עֵדָה are used of the congregation of Israel, seemingly somewhat interchangeably." He then states, "*'edah* often is used of Israel in the aggregate—even when settled in its homes and villages scattered throughout the land." As will be shown, this is certainly true of עֵדָה; his error is to imply that קָהָל is also used in this way.

[6]J. Y. Campbell, "The Origin and Meaning of the Christian Use of the Word EKKLHSIA." *Journal of Theological Studies* 49 (1948): 133.

[7]See discussion in Campbell, "EKKLHSIA," 133-36. "What is in any case quite beyond dispute is that these seven passages afford no adequate basis for the assertion that in the Old Testament *qehal Jhvh* is the usual term for Israel as the people of God [i.e., without reference to an actual assembly]" (ibid., 136).

[8]Ludwig Koehler, Walter Baumgartner, and J. J. Stamm. *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, trans. M. E. J. Richardson (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1995), 790.

[9]Ibid.

Both קָהָל and עֵדָה are used in contexts in which the people of God are assembled. The clear difference between the two is that, as F. J. A. Hort has noted, "'ēdhāh . . . is properly, when applied to Israel, the society itself, formed by the children of Israel or their representative heads, whether assembled or not assembled," while "qāhāl is properly their actual meeting together."[10] This distinction is especially clear when the two words occur in conjunction; for instance, Exodus 12:6: "the whole assembly [קָהָל] of the congregation [עֵדָה] of Israel." Here, there is a group of persons called עֵדָה, and the result of their having come together is called קָהָל. Because the focus of this chapter is on the actual assembling together of the people of God, Old Testament texts in which קָהָל is used will be especially important, as well as passages in which the concept of an actual assembly is present though the word קָהָל is not.

The use of ἐκκλησία in the Septuagint (LXX) reveals a close correspondence between it and קָהָל.[11] Behind every occurrence of ἐκκλησία in the LXX lies this Hebrew root. While a one to one association does not exist between קָהָל and ἐκκλησία (קָהָל is sometimes translated by other Greek words), the fact that ἐκκλησία was used exclusively to translate קָהָל indicates that the composers of the LXX understood an ἐκκλησία to be an actual assembly. That this is the way ἐκκλησία was understood in the LXX is strengthened by the fact that it is never used to translate עֵדָה; a word that, as has been mentioned, can refer to Israel whether assembled or not. The fact that קָהָל is sometimes translated by συναγωγή (a word normally used to translate עֵדָה) is not evidence that

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[10]F. J. A. Hort, *The Christian Ecclesia: A Course of Lectures on the Early History and Early Conceptions of the Ecclesia and Four Sermons* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1897), 4-5.

[11]On the meaning of ἐκκλησία in the LXX see especially William J. Dumbrell, "The Meaning and Use of Ekklesia in the New Testament with Special Reference to Its Old Testament Background" (Th.M. thesis, University of London, 1966).

anything other than an actual assembly was in view for קָהָל in those instances. It merely

suggests that, in the LXX, συναγωγή, could sometimes refer to an actual assembly;

though, as the normal translation of עֵדָה it usually referred to Israel as a community,

whether assembled or not. Thus, "synagōgē was capable of expressing the sense of both

Heb. terms, whereas ekklēsia could only be used with a specific meaning."[12] Such use of

ἐκκλησία in the LXX means that in the "Greek and Jewish worlds prior to and

contemporaneous with the NT, ekklēsia meant an assembly or gathering of people."[13]

One would expect New Testament usage of ἐκκλησία to be similar.

In fact, New Testament use of ἐκκλησία is much the same as its use in the

LXX. That is, almost all of its occurrences refer to an assembled group of people. There

is some level of development in the range of meaning, however. Whereas "in ordinary

usage [and that of the LXX] ἐκκλησία always means only an assembly, a meeting, and

not the body of people which assembles or meets together,"[14] the New Testament contains

a few uses in which an extension of the literal meaning is intended. For instance, in Acts

8:3, 9:31, and 20:17, ἐκκλησία does not refer to an actual assembly. That an actual

assembly is not the direct referent of the word in these cases, however, does not

necessarily reflect a disassociation with the idea of actually assembling. Instead, it seems

better to follow Peter T. O'Brien in suggesting that the word is being used in these

passages "as an extension of the literal, descriptive use of 'an assembly' to designate the

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[12]L. Coenen, "ἐκκλησία" in *The International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, ed. Colin Brown (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 292.

[13]Peter T. O'Brien, "The Church as a Heavenly and Eschatological Entity," in *The Church in the Bible and the World: An International Study*, ed. D. A. Carson (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2002), 91.

[14]Campbell, "EKKLHSIA," 132.

persons who compose that gathering, whether they are assembled or not."[15] Those

referred to as ἐκκλησία in these cases are "people who customarily assemble;"[16] and it is

for this reason that they may be called ἐκκλησία.

While the canonical books of the LXX do not provide precedent for this

extended use of ἐκκλησία, some have found such precedent in the apocryphal book of

Ecclesiasticus. For instance, J. Y. Campbell notes that "in Ben Sira's book there is at

least a suggestion that successive meetings of the same group of people are really the

same ἐκκλησία, not different ἐκκλησίαι."[17] This use demonstrates an element of

continuity regarding the group that regularly assembles. To move from ἐκκλησία as a

referent to an actual assembly to ἐκκλησία as a referent to a group characterized by

recurring assemblies seems to be a logical development. Thus, whether the authors of the

New Testament were influenced directly by Ecclesiasticus or not, the same logical

progression could, and likely did, occur there as well.

The New Testament also uses the word ἐκκλησία in reference to a heavenly

assembly (cf. Ephesians, Colossians, Hebrews). But, as will be discussed in chapter four,

even here it is an actual assembly that is in view.

In summary, קָהָל is used in the Old Testament in reference to an actual

gathering or assembly, whereas עֵדָה can refer to a congregation whether assembled or not.

Most occurrences of ἐκκλησία in the New Testament reflect a near linguistic equivalency

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[15]Peter T. O'Brien, "Church II: Paul," in *The IVP Dictionary of the New Testament: A One-Volume Compendium of Contemporary Biblical Scholarship*, ed. Daniel G. Reid (Downers Grove, IL, 2004), 195.

[16]Everett Ferguson, *The Church of Christ: A Biblical Ecclesiology for Today* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 131.

[17]Campbell, "EKKLHSIA," 137. So Roy Bowen Ward, "Ekklesia: A Word Study," *Restoration Quarterly* 2, no. 4 (1958): 168.

to קָהָל (and might, thus, be translated "assembly"), a fact that seems to have been influenced by the use of ἐκκλησία in the LXX, where it always refers to an actual assembly. There are a few cases in the New Testament, however, in which ἐκκλησία is used in a more abstract manner. But, even here, the fact that these groups of people can be called an ἐκκλησία suggests that, though not currently assembled, they are people characterized by assembling together in a recurring fashion.

While lexical studies are not a sufficient means of analyzing the development of a particular theme in the Bible,[18] they are an important part of such a study. From the analysis above, it is clear that at the heart of the theme of assembly in the Scriptures is the literal gathering together of the people of God in a particular geographic location. The fact that the word "assembly" became a technical term for God's people in the New Testament,[19] such that they could be called an "assembly" even when they were not currently assembled, reveals just how central these gatherings were to the cultic life of the community. The word chosen to refer to God's eschatological, new covenant people—ἐκκλησία—is a word that would, in itself, be a constant reminder that the people of God are those characterized by their assembling together. To grasp the full significance of the assembling of God's people it is necessary to study the concept (not merely the word) with special attention to the manner of its canonical development.

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[18]See n. 98 in ch. 5 of this dissertation. As Brian Rosner notes, "Concepts rather than words are a surer footing on which to base thematic study such as that involved in biblical-theological synthesis" (Brian S. Rosner, "Biblical Theology," in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology: Exploring the Unity & Diversity of Scripture*, ed. T. Desmond Alexander, Brian S. Rosner, D.A. Carson, and Graeme Goldsworthy [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000], 6).

[19]For the view that ἐκκλησία is a technical term see Ferguson, *The Church of Christ*, 131.

Exodus and the Sinai Assembly

The proper beginning of a study of the theme of the people of God as assembly is the assembly at Sinai. Through the acts of the exodus and the assembly at Sinai that resulted, Israel was delivered from bondage and constituted as "the assembly of YHWH." These events provided a pattern for the future deliverance and reconstitution of God's people.

The significance of Israel's exodus from Egypt for the formation of the nation and as a type of further redemption seen throughout the rest of the canon is difficult to overestimate. As Paul Williamson states, in terms of the formation of the nation, the exodus and the covenant that results at Sinai are *the* central events: "The exodus event constitutes the fulfillment of the preliminary stage of the prospect held out in the covenant of Genesis 15: the prospect of nationhood. . . . Indeed, this is the very purpose of the exodus event: to bring to birth the nation with whom God will establish a special relationship (Exod 6:7; cf. Gen 17:7-8)."[20] But the exodus was not just central for Israel's status as a nation; the deliverance brought about in the exodus also became a paradigm, or type,[21] for the future deliverance of God's people. As Michael D. Williams notes, "God's mighty act of delivering his people from Egypt and bringing them into a place of sonship and blessing in his presence sets the model of biblical redemption. Thus the exodus affords God's people a type, as such models can be called."[22] Israel's prophets, he

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[20]Paul R. Williamson, *Sealed with an Oath: Covenant in God's Unfolding Purpose*, New Studies in Biblical Theology 23, ed. D. A. Carson (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2007), 96.

[21]For a good introduction to typology see the seminal of work of Richard M. Davidson, *Typology in Scripture: A Study of Hermeneutical τύπος Structures*, Andrews University Seminary Doctoral Dissertation Series (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1981).

[22]Michael D. Williams, *Far as the Curse is Found: The Covenant Story of Redemption* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2005), 22.

states, "looked back upon the exodus as the quintessential redemptive event, the event to which all later redemptive events must conform."[23] Noting Joseph, Mary, and Jesus' flight into Egypt, the Baptist's confession of Jesus as "the lamb of God" (i.e., Passover lamb), the Lord's Supper that replaces the Passover meal, and the ordinance of baptism (through water), Williams concludes that the exodus pattern was also central in the life and ministry of Jesus.[24] The exodus itself is not the only aspect of the deliverance from Egypt that is central, however. The place to which Israel is brought, Sinai, and what happens there are quite significant as well.[25]

After being brought out of Egypt, Israel is brought to Sinai, where they are assembled to enact a covenant.[26] Exodus 3:12 reveals that this assembly is the immediate purpose of the exodus: "When you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall serve God on this mountain [Sinai]." In terms of the structure of the Pentateuch, the assembly at Sinai is even more central than the exodus itself. As Stephen G. Dempster points out, in the recounting of the Sinai event there is "the virtual suspension of narrative pace. Israel stays at Sinai for eleven months in real time (Exod 19:1 – Num 10:11) and fifty-seven chapters in narrative time. This is important given the fact that sixty-eight chapters precede Sinai and fifty-nine chapters follow it. Sinai is central to the Torah."[27] The

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[23]Ibid., 23.

[24]Ibid., 23-24.

[25]Even though this particular aspect of the exodus (Sinai) is not as important typologically for the rest of the canon. Though see Hebrews 12:18-24, on which see Kiwoong Son, *Zion Symbolism in Hebrews: Hebrews 12:18-24 as a Hermeneutical Key to the Epistle* (Bletchley, UK: Paternoster, 2005).

[26]J. D. Greear is correct to hold that it is the enacting of a covenant that binds God's people together, but he is wrong to divorce the theme of assembly from the theme of covenant. Israel's covenant is enacted *in assembly*. It is this covenanted assembly that constitutes Israel as "the assembly of the Lord." Both themes play a central role in the Old and New Testaments. For Greear's argument, see Greear, "A Pastor Defends His Multi-Site Church."

[27]Stephen G. Dempster, *Dominion and Dynasty: A Theology of the Hebrew Bible*, New Studies

centrality of the Sinai assembly is also seen in the pattern that it sets for the broader

theme of the assembling of the people of God in the rest of the Old Testament.

Prescribed Assemblies of the Mosaic Law

Israel's gathering at the foot of Mount Sinai came to be referred to as "the day

of the assembly" (Deut 9:10; 10:4; 18:16; and 4:10 in the LXX). It was on this day that

the people of God were constituted as "the assembly of YHWH" (Num 16:3; Deut 23:1,

2, 3, 8; 1 Chr 28:8; Mic 2:5). Thus, as Edmund P. Clowney notes, "The 'assembly in the

desert' (Acts 7:38) was the definitive assembly for Israel, the covenant-making assembly

when God claimed his redeemed people as his own."[28] The importance of the act of

assembling at Sinai is seen in the fact that the Sinai assembly sets a pattern of assembling

that becomes a regular part of Israel's cultic life. Three times a year Israel is commanded

to celebrate feasts in which "all your males appear before the Lord God" (Exod 23:17).

Clowney is surely correct when he points out that "the later assemblies of Israel recalled

that great assembly [Sinai]."[29] Donald Robinson also rightly notes that "the

'congregation' of Israel which was constituted at Sinai" is the same congregation that

"assembled before the Lord at the annual feasts in the persons of its representative

males."[30] There is probably even a sense in which these subsequent assemblies are to be

viewed as renewals, or reenactments, of the Sinai assembly.[31]

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in Biblical Theology 15 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), 100.

[28]Edmund P. Clowney, "The Biblical Theology of the Church," in *The Church in the Bible and the World: An International Study* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2002), 17.

[29]Edmund P. Clowney, *The Church*, Contours of Christian Theology, ed. Gerald Bray (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 30.

[30]Donald Robinson, "Church," in *Donald Robinson: Selected Works*, *Assembling God's People*, ed. Peter G. Bolt and Mark D. Thompson (Camperdown, NSW: Australian Church Record, 2008), 1:222.

[31]So J. W. Roberts, "The Meaning of *Ekklesia* in the New Testament," *Restoration Quarterly*

The feasts lasted seven days each, with certain days set aside as "holy convocations" (מִקְרָא קֹדֶשׁ). These convocations were "high times during the festival in which the community lays aside all usual work in order to assemble in worship of God and in celebration of the joys of life."[32] Other "holy convocations" were called for as well, including a weekly sabbath (Lev 23:3), Trumpets (Lev 23:23-25), and the Day of Atonement (Lev 23:26-32); but, "most prominent in the pentateuchal narrative are Israel's three great annual 'Pilgrimage Feasts,' when the entire nation was called to celebrate before Yahweh in the place the Lord would choose for his name to dwell."[33]

This series of holy assemblies should be viewed as part of the original purpose of Israel's deliverance from Pharaoh; namely, that the people "shall serve God on this mountain" (Exod 3:12). This is so because, as Brevard Childs argues, the purpose of the worship spoken of in Exodus 3:12 extends beyond the assembly at Mount Sinai and has as its focus "the future promise of a redeemed people worshipping God in his sanctuary."[34] This point becomes clearer when the statement of Exodus 3:12 is reworded by Moses and Aaron when they went before Pharaoh: "Let my people go, that they may hold a feast to me in the wilderness" (Exod 5:1). The feasts that were commanded in the wilderness through Moses (Exod 23:14-19; 34:18-26; Lev 23) are those that are to be permanent fixtures in Israel's cultic calendar, such that in every generation the whole

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15, no. 1 (1972): 32, who states, "A later meeting of the festival or worshipping group (three regular occasions during the year according to Leviticus 23) in a sense renews that assembly and are thus also the *ekklesia* of the Lord: one with a bodily defect is not to enter the *ekklesia* of the Lord (Deut. 23:1f.)."

[32]John E. Hartley, *Leviticus*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 4 (Dallas: Word Books, 1992), 375.

[33]C. E. Armerding, "Festivals and Feasts," in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch*, ed. T. Desmond Alexander and David W. Baker (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), 300.

[34]Brevard S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus: A Critical, Theological Commentary*, The Old Testament Library (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1974), 74.

congregation of Israel will assemble as did the first congregation at Mount Sinai. Thus, the exodus results in the constitution of Israel as YHWH's assembly, and through the reassembling of this congregation at the annual feasts, provision is made for this constitutive act to be recalled throughout their days as a nation. The qualifying phrase "throughout their days as a nation" must be added, because, as will be discussed below, if Israel was to break covenant with YHWH (as they in fact did) "the assembly of YHWH" would be scattered (Lev 26:33; Deut 4:27; 28:64).

Assembly in Deuteronomy

The Old Testament theme of the people of God as assembly is further developed in the book of Deuteronomy with an emphasis on the place of the assembly. When Israel's wilderness wanderings had come to an end, "all Israel" (Deut 1:1) gathered before Moses on the east side of the Jordan to hear a recounting of God's deeds on their behalf and to receive a second giving of the law. No new assemblies are called for during this time just prior to Israel's conquest of the Promised Land, but a new emphasis does arise; one in which the location of the holy assemblies and feasts is specified. This emphasis is on "the place"[35] where Israel will celebrate the prescribed feasts.

When Israel is brought into the land they are to "seek the place that the Lord your God will choose out of all your tribes to put his name and make his habitation there." It is "there" that they "shall go" (Deut 12:5).[36] For Israel, on the banks of the Jordan, this instruction on assembling together in the place YHWH chooses is intended to

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[35]See Deut 12:5, 11, 13, 14, 18, 21, 26; 14:23, 24, 25; 15:20; 16:2, 6, 7, 11, 15, 16; 31:11.

[36]This place is later revealed to be the temple upon Mount Zion: "I have chosen *this place* for Myself as a house of sacrifice. . . . I have chosen and consecrated this house *that My name may be there* forever" (2 Chr 7:12, 16, emphasis added).

stress the fact that Israel's cultic assemblies are to be distinct from those of the nations around them. Israel assembles at the place YHWH chooses, not the place Pharaoh desires (Exod 8:25, 28), and not "the places where the nations whom you shall dispossess served their gods" (Deut 12:2).

As J. G. McConville notes, the book of Deuteronomy views the entire story of Israel as "a journey from place to place: from Egypt to Horeb, Kadesh to Moab, the land itself where the tribes gather at Shechem (Deut 27), and the 'chosen place,' into exile (28:63-68), and back to land (30:1-10)."[37] Within this story, there is a sense in which Sinai is "the archetypal place," in that Israel's encounter with God there has the capacity "to be recreated in new places of encounter."[38] Just as all Israel stood in YHWH's presence at the foot of the mountain, so too will all Israel stand before his presence in the place where his name dwells.

Assembly in Psalms

The book of Psalms is significant for the study of the theme of assembly in that it provides "poetic commentary"[39] on the covenant life of the kingdom of Israel; a life in which cultic assemblies are central. The theme of assembly appears in this poetic commentary in two ways: First, in the actual mention of the worship assemblies of Israel; and second, in a special section of songs called psalms of ascent (Ps 120-134). Mention of Israel's worship assemblies in the Psalms generally focuses upon "the joy of attending

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[37]J. G. McConville, *Deuteronomy*, Apollos Old Testament Commentary, vol. 5 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2002), 36.

[38]Ibid.

[39]Dempster, *Dominion and Dynasty*, 191.

the assembly of the Lord, at the great feasts and perhaps also at the morning and evening

sacrifice services held daily both morning and evening in the temple until its destruction

in A.D. 70."[40] As for the psalms of ascent, the fact that there existed for these songs a

"fixed formulaic superscription," "suggests a separate collection and handling of the

combined texts."[41] These psalms of ascent were probably collected in order to be used in

the celebration that took place at Israel's cultic feasts.[42] Since the people of God in

assembly is a subject mentioned somewhat frequently (22:23; 26:12; 35:18; 40:10; 89:6;

107:32; 149:1), and since a special collection of songs were dedicated to the celebrations

of such assemblies, it is evident that gathering together was central in the life of the

covenant community.

The psalms that mention Israel's assemblies are descriptive of the experiences

current to the authors at the time of their inscription; but, there is also a sense in which

the Psalter in general and the assembly psalms in particular were viewed by the entire

community through the lens of future hope. It must be remembered that the Psalter as a

book would have been compiled in either the exilic or post-exilic era. This is evidenced

by the presence of psalms such as Psalm 137: "By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat

down and wept, when we remembered Zion" (v. 1). The first readers of the canonical

Psalter would, therefore, have been those longing for the day when the joys of Israel's

holy assemblies could be experienced once again. Such longing and anticipation was

central to the message of Israel's prophets.

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[40]Roberts, "The Meaning of *Ekklesia*," 33.

[41]Erhard S. Gerstenberger, *Psalms Part 1: with an Introduction to Cultic Poetry*, The Forms of the Old Testament Literature, vol. 14 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 317.

[42]See ibid., 318.

Assembly as a Prophetic Hope

After Israel broke covenant with YHWH and was sentenced to exile in Assyria and Babylon, the prophets began speaking of a new exodus in which YHWH would again deliver his people from bondage and reconstitute his assembly by gathering them to himself. The salvific act of the exodus and the constitutive act of the Sinai assembly were undone by Israel's exile that came as a result of their breaking covenant with YHWH. God had warned Israel that if they rebelled against Him, he would "scatter you among all peoples, from one end of the earth to the other" (Deut 28:64). Israel did rebel; and, as the Lord had said, the assembly of YHWH was dispersed. There was hope, however, for God had also promised that if they repent he "will gather you again from all the peoples where the Lord your God has scattered you" (Deut 30:3). It is this hope of a second deliverance and a regathering of the assembly of YHWH that comprises so much of the prophetic message. What is more, it remains the hope of Israel even in the era after the returns under Ezra and Nehemiah, the post-exilic period.

The prophets proclaimed a time when there would be "a new assembly of the people of God. It would come in the glorious future when God would again manifest his presence."[43] Isaiah says that on that day the Lord "will raise a signal for the nations and will assemble the banished of Israel, and gather the dispersed of Judah from the four corners of the earth" (Isa 11:12). God will send his servant "to bring Jacob back to him; and that Israel might be gathered to him" (49:5). Likewise, Ezekiel focuses a portion of his prophecies "on the spring and autumn pilgrimage feasts, when restored Israel will

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[43]Edmund P. Clowney, "The Biblical Theology of the Church," in *The Church in the Bible and the World: An International Study*, ed. D. A. Carson (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2002), 19.

gather to celebrate the triumph of the rule of God."[44] Nowhere in the Old Testament is

this hope more pronounced than Isaiah 40-55. Bernard W. Anderson notes that "it is

significant that Second Isaiah's prophecy begins (40:3-5) and ends (55:12-13) with the

theme of the new exodus," and states that, "indeed, the poems as a whole are largely

variations on the Exodus tradition."[45] Texts like Isaiah 44:16-17 abound in this portion of

Isaiah. There YHWH reminds the people of the original exodus which then serves as the

basis for his claim, "I will do something new." The Lord would bring about a new

deliverance for his people that would resemble the original deliverance from Egypt. In

this way, scattered Israel would be regathered, and the sacred assemblies would be

reestablished.

Assembly in the Post-Exilic Period

The restoration from exile was partially fulfilled in the returns under Ezra and

Nehemiah when a remnant was allowed by the king of Persia to go back to their land.

The temple was rebuilt, though it paled in comparison to Solomon's (Ezra 3:12; Hag 2:3),

and the altar and sacrifices were reestablished (Ezra 3; Neh 8:13-18). However, it is

evident among the post-exilic writings that a more complete fulfillment of restoration still

awaited God's covenant people. Instead of viewing Israel's current restoration as the

complete fulfillment of God's plan to reassemble his people and to reestablish his

kingdom, the prophet Haggai looked to a future time in which "the latter glory of this

house shall be greater than the former" (2:9). Similarly, Zechariah sets before the

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[44]Amerding, "Festivals and Feasts," 308.

[45]Bernard W. Anderson, "Exodus Typology in Second Isaiah," in *Israel's Prophetic Heritage: Essays in Honor of James Muilenburg*, ed. Bernhard W. Anderson and Walter Harrelson (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1962), 182.

returned remnant a hope for a much fuller ingathering. On a day in the future the Lord

will go forth to do battle against the nations in whose lands the people of God are still in

captivity. He will create "a very wide valley" (14:4) by which the captives will flee (v.

5), and then "the Lord my God will come, and all the holy ones with him" (v. 5).

That a complete return from exile was not achieved during the post-exilic era

has been argued convincingly by N. T. Wright and Craig A. Evans, who point out that the

overwhelming majority of post-exilic Jewish texts reveal a belief that Israel was still in

exile even after the returns under Ezra and Nehemiah. Wright explains,

> Most Jews of this period, it seems, would have answered the question "where are we?" in language which, reduced to its simplest form, meant: we are still in exile. They believed that, in all the senses which mattered, Israel's exile was still in progress. Although she had come back from Babylon, the glorious message of the prophets remained unfulfilled. Israel still remained in thrall to foreigners; worse, Israel's god had not returned to Zion.[46]

The reason the returns under Ezra and Nehemiah cannot possibly be considered complete

is because, as Wright notes, "When the great moment had come, and Babylon had been

destroyed, Israel did not become free, mistress in her own land: the Persians, who had

crushed Babylon, were generous overlords to the Jews, but overlords none the less."[47]

Though some have contested Wright concerning the continuance of Israel's exile,[48] Craig

A. Evans agrees with him, and offers a preponderance of evidence from Second Temple

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[46]N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, Christian Origins and the Question of God, vol. 1 (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 268-69.

[47]Ibid., 157. For more of Wright on this issue, see ibid., 270; N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, Christian Origins and the Question of God, vol. 2 (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 125-44, 268-75, 481, 561, 577.

[48]See Clive Marsh, "Theological History? N. T. Wright's *Jesus and the Victory of God*," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 69 (1998): 77-94; Maurice Casey, "Where Wright Is Wrong: A Critical Review of N. T. Wright's *Jesus and the Victory of God*," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 69 (1998): 95-103.

Jewish sources that support Wright's claim,[49] all of which lead Evans to conclude that "Wright is correct" and his critics are wrong.[50]

What Wright and Evans have shown is highly significant for New Testament ecclesiology because if Israel still believed herself to be in exile all the way into the first century AD, then passages in which Christ is said to reestablish the kingdom (e.g., Mk 1:15 and parallels; Matt 12:28) and reconstitute the assembly (e.g., Matt 16:18) can be interpreted in light of the prophetic hope of the return from exile and the reconstitution and regathering of the people of God. If the exile consists in the assembly of Israel being scattered (Lev 26:33; Deut 4:27; 28:64), and if this exile and scattered state persisted in Jesus' day, then Christ's claim to "build My assembly" (Matt 16:18) may be set against a very illuminating background. Because of the significance of the theme of a remaining exile, a representative list of the Second Temple Jewish texts mentioned by Evans will be given.[51]

Evans notes that there are many Second Temple texts that describe the hope for deliverance as a new exodus and that use exilic language to describe Israel's current state of affairs. He mentions Josephus's account of Theudas and the Egyptian Jew (both from the first century AD), who, by their actions, seem to have "promised a new conquest of the land, perhaps reflecting hopes of an eschatological jubilee in which the dispossessed

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[49]Craig A. Evans, "Jesus & the Continuing Exile of Israel," in *Jesus & the Restoration of Israel: A Critical Assessment of N. T. Wright's* Jesus and the Victory of God, ed. Carey C. Newman (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1999), 77-100.

[50]Ibid., 100.

[51]The above mentioned article by Evans is a slightly altered form of an article that appeared in Craig A. Evans, "Aspects of Exile and Restoration in the Proclamation of Jesus and the Gospels," in *Jesus in Context: Temple, Purity, and Restoration*, ed. Bruce Chilton and Craig A. Evans (New York: Brill, 1997) 263-93. It is from this article that the following references will be taken.

could reclaim their lost patrimony, and, in keeping with the requirement of Deuteronomy 18, offered confirming signs."[52] He also mentions Sirach 36:11, in which the author pleads with God to "gather all the tribes of Jacob and give them their inheritance, as at the beginning."[53] Similarly, Tobit expresses grief over the fact that, "He [the Lord] has scattered us among them [i.e., the nations]" (Tobit 13:3). The Qumran covenanters express a belief in Israel's continuing exile as well. For instance, 1QM 1:3 anticipates a time in the future "when the exiles of the Sons of Light return from the wilderness of the peoples to camp in the wilderness of Jerusalem."

Another set of texts that Evans mentions are those that speak of redemption in terms of the reversal of the scattering of the exile. Notable among these are Tobit 13:5, "He will afflict us for our iniquities; and again he will show mercy, and will gather us from all the nations among whom you have been scattered;" and v. 13, "for they shall be gathered and shall bless the Lord." Similarly, Baruch 4:36-37 states, "Look toward the east, O Jerusalem, and see the joy that is coming to you from God! Behold, your sons are coming, whom you sent away; they are coming, gathered from east and west, at the word of the Holy One, rejoicing in the glory of God." The *Psalms of Solomon* express the same expectations: The son of David "will gather a holy people whom he will lead in righteousness. . . . Blessed are those born in those days to see the good fortune of Israel which God will bring to pass in the assembly of the tribes" (17:26, 44). And in *2 Baruch* 78:7, the author writes, "He [i.e., the Lord] will not forever forget or forsake our

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[52]Evans, "Exile and Restoration," 264-66. On Theudas see Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 20.5.1 §97-98. On the Egyptian Jew see *Jewish Wars* 2.13.4-5 §258-63; *Jewish Antiquities* 20.8.6 §167-72. See also R. A. Horsley, "'Messianic' Figures and Movements in First-Century Palestine," in *The Messiah: Developments in Earliest Judaism and Christianity*, ed. James H. Charlesworth (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 284, who holds that Theudas and the Egyptian believed they were the initiators of a new exodus.

[53]See also Sirach 36:6, 14-16; 48:10.

offspring, but with much mercy assemble all those again who were dispersed." These and other texts that Evans collects demonstrate that Jews throughout the Second Temple period all the way up to Jesus' day still longed for a new exodus, and for the reconstitution of the assembly of YHWH.

Conclusion

This chapter has argued that Israel was considered the "assembly of the Lord," and that they were constituted as such by their gathering together in one place in worship. Before beginning a canonical study of the theme of God's people as assembly in the Old Testament, a lexical analysis of important words related to this theme was given. Then the theme of Israel as God's assembly was traced from Mount Sinai all the way to the post-exilic period. What emerged from this study is that throughout the Old Testament, Israel is considered a single assembly because the people as a whole are characterized by all gathering together in the same place for corporate worship. The next chapter will show that this understanding of Israel as God's assembly sets the background for understanding the New Testament church as the assembly of the Lord as well.

CHAPTER 4

HOW CENTRAL IS ONE ASSEMBLY?
NEW TESTAMENT

Introduction

This chapter argues that the theme of the people of God as one assembly is

central to the New Testament teaching on the church. In the New Testament, the church

is the regathered assembly of the Lord. The ultimate form of the church is a single

heavenly-eschatological assembly that is gathered in Christ by the Spirit,[1] and each local

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[1]On the ultimate form of the church as a heavenly-eschatological entity, see Peter T. O'Brien, "The Church as a Heavenly and Eschatological Entity," in *The Church in the Bible and the World: An International Study,* ed. D. A. Carson (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2002), 88-119; idem, "Church II: Paul," in *The IVP Dictionary of the New Testament: A One-Volume Compendium of Contemporary Biblical Scholarship,* ed. Daniel G. Reid (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004); idem, *Colossians, Philemon*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 44 (Waco, TX: Word, 1982), 57-61; Edmund P. Clowney, "The Biblical Theology of the Church," in *The Church in the Bible and the World: An International Study,* ed. D. A. Carson (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2002), 13-87; idem, *The Church*, Contours of Christian Theology (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1995); D. Broughton Knox, "De-mythologizing the Church," in *Church and Ministry,* ed. Kirsten Birkett, *D. Broughton Knox: Selected Works* (Kingsford, NSW: Matthias Media, 2003), 2:23-31; idem, "The Biblical Concept of Fellowship," in *Church and Ministry,* ed. Kirsten Birkett, *D. Broughton Knox: Selected Works* (Kingsford, NSW: Matthias Media, 2003), 2:57-84; idem, "The Church," in *Church and Ministry,* ed. Kirsten Birkett, *D. Broughton Knox: Selected Works* (Kingsford, NSW: Matthias Media, 2003), 19-22; idem, "Thirty-nine Articles," in *Church and Ministry,* ed. Kirsten Birkett, *D. Broughton Knox: Selected Works* (Kingsford, NSW: Matthias Media, 2003), 2:85-98; Donald Robinson, "The Church and Evangelism," in *Preaching God's Word*, ed. Peter G. Bolt and Mark D. Thompson, *Donald Robinson: Selected Works* (Camperdown, NSW: Australian Church Record, 2008), 2:114-16; idem, "The Church in the New Testament," in *Assembling God's People*, ed. Peter G. Bolt and Mark D. Thompson, *Donald Robinson: Selected Works* (Camperdown, NSW: Australian Church Record, 2008), 1:212-21; idem, "The Church of God: Its Form and Its Unity," in *Assembling God's People*, ed. Peter G. Bolt and Mark D. Thompson, *Donald Robinson: Selected Works* (Camperdown, NSW: Australian Church Record, 2008), 1:230-53; idem, "The Biblical Doctrine of the Church," in *Assembling God's People*, ed. Peter G. Bolt and Mark D. Thompson, *Donald Robinson: Selected Works* (Camperdown, NSW: Australian Church Record, 2008), 1:205-11; David Peterson, "The 'Locus' of the Church—Heaven or Earth?" *Churchman* 112, no. 3 (1998): 199-213; Graham Cole, "The Doctrine of the Church: Towards Conceptual Clarification," in *Explorations 2: Church, Worship and the Local Congregation,* ed. B. G. Webb (Homebush West: Lancer, 1987), 3-17; Robert Doyle, "Response to Graham Cole's Paper," in *Explorations 2: Church, Worship and the Local Congregation,* ed. B. G. Webb (Homebush West, NSW: Lancer, 1987), 19-25; Kevin Giles, *What on Earth Is the Church? An Exploration in New Testament Theology* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1995).

church is viewed as a manifestation in time and space of this one heavenly-eschatological assembly. Because of this, each earthly assembly should be viewed as a manifestation of the ultimate heavenly reality. Each earthly assembly has the status of a full-fledged, self-contained, earthly manifestation of the heavenly-eschatological assembly. Thus, what multi-site proponents consider a site or campus that is merely part of a church, the Bible considers a church in itself.

These arguments will be made by, first, demonstrating that the New Testament presents the new covenant people of God as the regathered assembly of the Lord, and, thus, as a fulfillment of the prophetic promise that God's people would one day be reassembled and brought out of exile. Secondly, this chapter will discuss how the ultimate form of this regathered assembly of the Lord is a heavenly-eschatological assembly that manifests itself in the form of multiple local assemblies (or "churches"). What one finds in this kind of study of the theme of God's people as "assembly" in the New Testament (as in the Old Testament) is that the act of assembling together—whether considered according to the church's ultimate form or its local form—is one of the components that binds Christians together as one assembly.

The New Covenant People of God as the Regathered Assembly of the Lord

In chapter 3, it was argued that Israel as the assembly of the Lord was scattered in exile because of their sin, but that the prophets expected there to be a regathering of this assembly at some point in the future. The original exodus and the assembly at Sinai that resulted were used by the prophets as a type of the new exodus and reassembling of God's people that was to come. In the New Testament gospels, Jesus is presented as

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fulfilling these expectations.[2] It will be argued in this section that, as the Servant of the

Lord spoken of in Isaiah 40-55, Jesus brings about the new exodus and reconstitutes the

assembly of YHWH that was scattered at the end of the Old Testament. The gospels

present Jesus as bringing about the promised new exodus resulting in the establishment of

the church.[3] One key passage where this is demonstrated is Matthew 16:13ff. This

passage presents Jesus as the Servant of the Lord that Isaiah 40-55 says will be the agent

of the new exodus. It is here that Jesus says he will build his assembly, language that

denotes the regathering of the exiles that was so prominent in Jewish eschatology leading

up to the time of Christ.

That Jesus is presented as the Servant of the Lord in Matthew 16:13ff. is most

clearly seen in the prediction of his suffering and resurrection in verse 21. R. T. France

states that "there is a strong consensus of opinion that the major, if not the only, source of

these predictions [Mark 8:31; 9:31; 10:33-34 and parallels] was Isaiah 53."[4] He notes

that this is seen in "the close correspondence in content, even if not in words, between

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[2]I recognize that some would disagree with the measure of continuity between the Old
Testament assembly of the Lord (i.e., Israel) and the New Testament assembly of the Lord (i.e., the church)
for which I am arguing. Certain forms of dispensationalism would argue for more discontinuity between
Israel and the church. However, I do think that progressive dispensationalists would basically agree with
my position, on which see Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism* (Grand
Rapids: Baker, 1993). There seems to be an emerging evangelical sense of agreement on at least some level
of continuity between Israel and the church, on which see Russell D. Moore, *The Kingdom of Christ: The
New Evangelical Perspective* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2004), 25-80. For various positions of continuity
and discontinuity, see John S. Feinberg, *Continuity and Discontinuity: Perspectives on the Relationship
between the Old and New Testaments* (Westchester, IL: Crossway, 1988).

[3]See Rikki E. Watts, *Isaiah's New Exodus in Mark* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1997);
George L. Balentine, "The Concept of the New Exodus in the Gospels" (Ph.D. diss., The Southern Baptist
Theological Seminary, 2005); Ben F. Meyer, "Jesus and the Remnant of Israel," *Journal of Biblical
Literature* 84 (1965): 123-30.

[4]R. T. France, "The Servant of the Lord in the Teaching of Jesus," *Tyndale Bulletin* 19 (1968):
45.

Jesus' predictions of mocking, suffering, and death, and the picture in Isaiah 53."[5]

Richard Bauckham too argues that Matthew 16:21 and other passion predictions in the

synoptics are a "probable reference to Isaiah 53 as the prophetic destiny that he [Jesus]

must fulfil."[6] One of the roles of the servant, according to Isaiah, was to reconstitute the

assembly of Israel. Thus, if it is true that when Jesus "began to show His disciples that he

must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes,

and be killed, and on the third day be raised" (Matt 16:21) he was viewing himself as the

Suffering Servant who would bring about the new exodus, then his declaration in v. 18 to

"build his assembly (ἐκκλησία)" is all the more likely to be a reference to the new exodus

and the reconstitution of the assembly of YHWH.

Besides the whole background of the Servant theme in Matthew 16:13ff, there

are other evidences in Jesus' claim to "build his church" that suggest that Jesus viewed

his work as involving the new exodus and the reconstitution of the assembly of YHWH.

These include his use of ἐκκλησία, as well as the claim to "build" this ἐκκλησία on a

"rock," all of which recalls the first exodus and fulfills the expectations for a second

exodus. The very word "ἐκκλησία" demonstrates that Jesus viewed his disciples as the

restored Israel. This is because, as Thomas R. Schreiner notes, "The term 'church'

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[5]Ibid.

[6]Bauckham, *Jesus and the God of Israel*, 47. Morna Hooker has written against the idea that the Servant Songs form the background to Jesus' predictions of his suffering, arguing for Dan 7 as the primary background. See Morna D. Hooker, *Jesus and the Servant: The Influence of the Servant Concept of Deutero-Isaiah in the New Testament* (London: SPCK, 1959). Against Hooker, France writes that this claim "stands in striking contrast with His [Jesus'] actual application of that chapter consistently to the glory and power which succeeded His resurrection" (France, "Servant of the Lord," 48). Many commentators do not mention whether or not Isa 40-55 is in view. However, see D. A. Carson, *Matthew*, in vol. 8 of *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein and J. D. Douglas (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 377, who hints that Isa 53 is in view. Davies and Allison explicitly state that this is improbable (W. D. Davies and D. C. Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Matthew*, *Commentary on Matthew VIII-XVIII*, International Critical Commentary [New York: T&T Clark, 1991], 2:657).

(ekklēsia) reaches back to the OT term qāhāl, denoting Israel as God's assembly."[7] Thus,

Richard E. Menninger is surely correct to state that for Jesus to use this word of his

followers suggests that "for Jesus (and for Matthew) the disciples form the true people of

God." According to Menninger, "the equivalent term for 'true Israel' was, in Matthew's

mind, ἐκκλησία."[8]

Jesus' language of "build" and "rock" make it even more explicit that when

Christ builds his ἐκκλησία he is regathering the assembly of YHWH. His language in

Matthew 16 calls forth images of the Old Testament temple that was built upon a rock—a

"temple" first constituted at Mount Sinai. The fact that Jesus does not say he will build a

temple, but an assembly does not mean that temple themes are not in view. As Ben

Meyer points out, the way ἐκκλησία is used as the object of "build" in Matthew 16:18 is a

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[7]Thomas R. Schreiner, *New Testament Theology: Magnifying God in Christ* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 694. See lexical analysis of קָהָל, עֵדָה, and ἐκκλησία in ch. 3 of this dissertation.

[8]Richard E. Menninger, *Israel and the Church in the Gospel of Matthew*, American University Studies, 7, no. 162 (New York: Peter Lang, 1994), 154. So R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 623-24, which deserves to be quoted in full: "Ekklēsia was a common Greek term for an 'assembly' of people (political and social as well as religious), but in a Jewish context it would be particularly heard as echoing its frequent LXX use for the 'assembly' of the people of God, which thus denotes the national community of Israel. But now Jesus speaks with extraordinary boldness of 'my ekklēsia'—the unusual Greek word order draws particular attention to the 'my.' The phrase encapsulates that paradoxical combination of continuity and discontinuity which runs through the NT's understanding of Jesus and his church in relation to Israel. The word is an OT word, one proudly owned by the people of Israel as defining their identity as God's people. But the coming of Israel's Messiah will cause that 'assembly' to be reconstituted, and the focus of its identity will not be the nation of Israel but the Messiah himself: it is *his* assembly. . . . For Matthew and his readers, as members of the Messiah's ekklēsia, the phrase would aptly sum up their corporate identity as the new, international people of God. . . . In using this familiar LXX term to describe the community which will derive from Jesus' ministry, Matthew is developing an important typological theme of the continuity of the people of God in Old and New Testaments." See also Donald A. Hagner, "Holiness and Ecclesiology: The Church in Matthew," in *Holiness and Ecclesiology in the New Testament*, ed. Kent E. Brower and Andy Johnson, 40-56 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 43; John W. Drake, Jr., "The Idea of 'My Church' in Saint Matthew 16:18" (masters thesis, University of the South, 1964). Dale C. Allison notes that viewing himself as regathering the twelve tribes was part of Jesus' eschatology as a whole. See Dale C. Allison, Jr., "The Eschatology of Jesus," in *The Encyclopedia of Apocalypticism*, *The Origins of Apocalypticism in Judaism and Christianity*, ed. John J. Collins (New York: Continuum, 1998), 1:285-86.

bit unexpected: "It appears where 'temple' would be expected."[9] But, as Meyer goes on

to say, the concept of assembly and temple are closely related in that ἐκκλησία "expresses

in the literal mode (the 'assembly' of God's people) what the temple symbol symbolizes

(cf. Mark 14:58 par., etc.)."[10] That is to say, such a close association exists between the

assembly of YHWH and the temple, due to the fact that Israel regularly assembled there,

that the two terms could be used interchangeably. Donald Hagner explains that one

might expect this since Israel was considered a spiritual "house" or "temple." He states,

"The metaphorical use of 'build' (οἰκοδομέω) is appropriate to a community conceived of

as a spiritual 'house' or 'temple' (cf. 'house of Israel' and note the description of the

church as 'God's building' in 1 Cor 3:9; cf. Eph 2:19-21)."[11] Bertil Gärtner argues that

spiritualizing the concept of temple in order to apply it to God's people characterized the

Qumran community as well. He states that, in Qumran, there was such a criticism of the

Jerusalem temple that there was in their theology a "'transfer' of the 'dwelling place' of

God from this temple to the community."[12] In saying that he will build his assembly

(Matt 16:18), then, Jesus most likely has temple themes in mind. By gathering the exiles,

Jesus is rebuilding the temple. The fact that he is building this assembly/temple upon a

"rock" further demonstrates that Jesus has the new temple in mind in Matthew 16:18;

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[9]Ben F. Meyer, *The Aims of Jesus* (San Jose, CA: Pickwick, 2002), 8.

[10]Ibid.

[11]Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 14-28*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 33B (Dallas: Word, 1995), 471.

[12]Bertil Gärtner, *The Temple and The Community in Qumran and the New Testament: A Comparative Study in the Temple Symbolism of the Qumran Texts and the New Testament* (New York: Cambridge, 1965), 95.

and, even more specifically, that he sees his assembly as the new covenant counterpart to the Sinai assembly that resulted from the original exodus.

There is some debate over the background to Jesus' use of "rock" (πέτρα) in Matthew 16:18.[13] The interpretation that seems most likely is that "rock" here refers to the mountain-foundation upon which a temple is built.[14] Thus, N. T. Wright states, "Just as in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus told a story about a wise man building a house on the rock (7.24), so now Jesus himself declares that he's going to do just that. Here, as there, we are meant to imagine in the background the great city, Jerusalem, built on the rocky heights of Mount Zion."[15] As G. K. Beale has shown, the themes of mountain and temple are closely linked in Old Testament and Second Temple Jewish literature. He writes,

> Such a close link between mountain and temple is made throughout the Old Testament, so that Mount Zion is sometimes merely referred to as "mountain," "hill" or other like images. These ways of speaking about Mount Zion either closely associate it or virtually equate it with the temple as a synecdoche of the whole for the part (the entire mountain is substituted for the top part where the temple is located). For example repeatedly such phrases occur as "mountain of the house"

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[13]For the different views see Luz, *Matthew 8-20*, on v. 18. Included is the view that "rock" recalls ancient Jewish mythology in which Mount Zion is a cosmic rock at the center of the world. For the tradition, see Ben F. Meyer, *Christus Faber: The Master-Builder & the House of God* (Allison Park, PA: Pickwick, 1992), 259-60. In his study on mountain theology in Matthew, Terence L. Donaldson rejects the argument that Jewish mythology is behind Matthew's use of mountain terminology. He states, "One cannot help but conclude that although *Weltnablel* ideas were prevalent in later Judaism, their importance for the development of OT mountain theology has been exaggerated" (Terence L. Donaldson, *Jesus on the Mountain: A Study in Matthean Theology*, Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series 8 [Sheffield, England: JSOT, 1985], 26). Donaldson defines the *Weltnablel* concept as "the idea that a mountain centre or other sacred place is the centre or 'navel' of the earth" (ibid., 29).

[14]So Luz, *Matthew 8-20*, 363; J. Roloff, "ἐκκλησία," in *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Horst Balz and Gerhard Schneider, s.v. "Ἀαρών—Ἐνώχ" (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 415, who states, "The explanation of the name [Peter] discloses the significance of Simon for the Church: just as the holy rock is the foundation of the Jerusalem temple, so Peter is the foundation of the holy building of the Church, the eschatological temple that Jesus himself will erect (cf. Mark 14:58 par. Matt 26:61; Rev 21:14)."

[15]N. T. Wright, *Matthew for Everyone*, part 2, *Chapters 16-28* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004), 8.

(Jer. 26:18; Mic. 4:1), "holy mountain" (about 16 times), "holy hill" (Pss. 15:1; 43:3; 99:9; Jer. 31:23) and "temple hill" (1 Maccabees 13:52; 16:20). Sometimes these references are equated with the temple in the following context: e.g., in Isaiah 66:20 "holy mountain" = "house of the Lord"; in Psalm 15:1 "holy hill" = "your tent"; in Psalm 24:3 "hill of the Lord" = "His holy place" (cf. also Ps. 43:3).[16]

In claiming to build his church, Jesus was claiming to build the eschatological assembly as a temple upon a rock-foundation or mountain, just as "every temple associated with God's people in the Old Testament is on a 'mountain.'"[17]

More specifically, it could be said with reasonable certainty that the Sinai mountain-temple and the original assembly of Israel after their exodus from Egypt is in view in Matthew 16:18, especially since the passage as a whole is tied to the theme of the Suffering Servant who brings about a new exodus. The mountain of Sinai was, according to Beale, considered a temple.[18] And this particular mountain was of special significance to the theology of the Old Testament. As Terence L. Donaldson notes,

> Although the significance of Sinai as a sacred mountain was encased within the past, Sinai still loomed large on Israel's spiritual horizon. As the place where Yahweh bound Israel to himself in covenantal relationship and gave it the law, Sinai played a foundational role as the mountain associated with Israel's constitution as a people.[19]

Indeed, Mount Sinai was so foundational that it became part of Second Temple Jewish eschatological hope. Gärtner writes that "in late Jewish traditions Sinai was often interpreted in Messianic and eschatological terms, as the pattern of the mountain of the coming salvation. . . . This 'mountain of the future' was also the foundation of the 'new'

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[16]G. K. Beale, *The Temple and the Church's Mission: A Biblical Theology of the Dwelling Place of God*. New Studies in Biblical Theology (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004), 145.

[17]Ibid., 146.

[18]Ibid., 105.

[19]Donaldson, *Jesus on the Mountain*, 34-35. He goes on to claim that "Mount Zion and Mount Sinai stand as the two historical theological pivots on which all OT *Heilsgeschichte* turns" (ibid., 35).

temple and the 'new' Jerusalem."[20] If the "rock" upon which Jesus is said to build his

assembly is to be understood as a mountain-foundation for a temple, then it is likely that

the particular mountain that Jesus had in view was Mount Sinai. That Jesus combines the

themes of assembly with his talk of a mountain makes this especially likely, since *the*

constituting assembly for Israel was the one gathered around that particular mountain.[21]

Just as the first exodus led to the constitution of the assembly of YHWH at the mountain-

temple of Sinai, so too does the new exodus lead to the reconstitution of the assembly of

YHWH *in Christ* built as a temple upon the rock foundation of Christ's apostles.

Jesus regathers the assembly of the Lord. This is what it means that he builds

his church. The theme of the people of God as assembly that is so central to the Old

Testament[22] continues on in the New Testament, being fulfilled in and further developed

by Christ. These further developments of the assembly theme in the New Testament are

that the assembly of the Lord (i.e., the church) takes on both a heavenly-eschatological

and a local form

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[20]Gärtner, *The Temple and the Community*, 90.

[21]D. Broughton Knox writes, "The most famous church or gathering of the Old Testament was, of course, the assembly of Israel when the nation was gathered around Mount Sinai" (D. Broughton Knox, "The Church," in *D. Broughton Knox: Selected Works*, *Church and Ministry*, ed. Kirsten Birkett [Kingsford, NSW: Matthias Media, 2003], 2:19). For Sinai as the background for the New Testament concept of ἐκκλησία see also ibid., 19, 24, 25; idem, "The Biblical Concept of Fellowship," in *D. Broughton Knox: Selected Works*, *Church and Ministry*, 2:57-84, ed. Kirsten Birkett (Kingsford, NSW: Matthias Media, 2003), 81; idem, "The Church, the Churches and the Denominations of the Churches," in *D. Broughton Knox: Selected Works*, *Church and Ministry*, 2:85-98, ed. Kirsten Birkett (Kingsford, NSW: Matthias Media, 2003), 86-87.

[22]See chap. 3 of this dissertation.

The Ultimate Form of the Church as a
Heavenly-Eschatological Assembly

This section will argue that the ultimate form of the church that Jesus gathers

takes the shape of a heavenly-eschatological assembly that is now spiritually gathered

around Christ in heaven, and that will one day be physically gathered around him at his

second coming.[23] The last section of this chapter will deal with how the local church

should be understood as a manifestation in time and space of this heavenly-eschatological

assembly.

Already in Heaven

The portrayal of the church in Ephesians, Colossians, Hebrews, and Revelation

is of an assembly presently gathered around Christ in the heavenlies. Hebrews 12:18-24

might be the clearest passage in this regard:

> For you have not come to what may be touched . . . . But you have come to Mount
> Zion and to the city of the living God . . . and to the assembly [ἐκκλησία] of the
> firstborn who are enrolled in heaven . . . and to Jesus, the mediator of a new

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[23]The two-stage nature of this form of the church can be explained by what is often referred to as inaugurated eschatology—the belief that the eschatological age has broken into the present in the person of Jesus Christ, but will not be consummated until his second coming. Inaugurated eschatology has become something of a consensus among biblical scholars. Richard B. Gaffin, Jr. calls it "one of the most important developments in biblical studies this century," and states that it "has now virtually reached the status of consensus" (Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., "A Cessationist View," in *Are Miraculous Gifts for Today? 4 Views*, ed. Wayne A. Grudem [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996], 29). Likewise, Thomas Schreiner states, "The language of 'already-not yet' has rightly become a commonplace in NT theology" (Schreiner, *New Testament Theology*, 23 n.1). Russell D. Moore has shown that inaugurated eschatology is a driving force behind what he calls "the new evangelical perspective," and argues that "evangelical theology has moved toward a Kingdom consensus around the concept of inaugurated eschatology" (Moore, *Kingdom of Christ*, 25). According to Moore, this consensus is so strong that even dispensationalists and covenant theologians, schools of thought known for their eschatological differences, have been able to find common ground in inaugurated eschatology. Besides the works of Gaffin, Schreiner, and Moore just noted, see especially George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, rev. ed., ed. Donald A. Hagner (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993); Oscar Cullman, *Christ and Time: The Primitive Christian Conception of Time and History*, 3rd ed. (London: SCM, 1962); N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, Christian Origins and the Question of God, vol. 2 (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996); G. K. Beale, "Eschatology," in *Dictionary of the Later New Testament & Its Development*, ed. Ralph P. Martin and Peter H. Davids (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1997).

covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

In Ephesians and Colossians the church is made up of those who have been raised up with Christ and seated with him in the heavenly places (Eph 2:6-7; Col 3:1-3). In Revelation several glimpses of the assembly around Christ are given (e.g., 7:9-12; 14:1-3). Thus, part of the "already" of the inaugurated form of the church is that, already, Christ's assembly is spiritually gathered around him in heaven.

This concept has been set forth extensively in the seminal work of two Australian scholars, D. Broughton Knox and Donald Robinson, but many others have begun to see the church as a heavenly assembly as well. Knox summarizes his position as follows:

> The way the New Testament puts it is this, that through the resurrection Jesus Christ has ascended into the heavens and has sat down at God's right hand. And Christians have been raised with him and are now "in Christ," members of his body, and are seated with him at God's right hand in the heavenlies. *We are participants in the group or gathering around God's throne which Christ is forming in the presence of God. This is the basic use in the New Testament of the word "church."*[24]

Similarly, Robinson states,

> There is another use of the word "church" in the NT which is not local, or at least not capable of multiplication: a church which is one and only, undivided and without blemish. This church is not ecumenical, as is commonly supposed, but supernal. That is to say, the church is, in this aspect, a reality "in the heavenly realm," *en tois epouraniois* (Eph. 1:3; 1:20; 3:10; 6:12). Its locality is determined by the presence of Christ in its midst. The church is where Christ is. On earth, that is where two or three are gathered together in His name (Matt. 18:20); in heaven, it is where He is seated at the right hand of the throne of God and sings praise to the Father ("in the midst of the church," Heb. 2:12).[25]

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[24]D. Broughton Knox, "The Church," in *D. Broughton Knox: Selected Works*, *Church and Ministry*, ed. Kirsten Birkett (Kingsford, NSW: Matthias Media, 2003), 2:20. Emphasis original.

[25]Donald Robinson, "The Church in the New Testament," in *Donald Robinson: Selected Works*, *Assembling God's People*, ed. Peter G. Bolt and Mark D. Thompson (Camperdown, NSW: Australian Church Record, 2008), 1:212-13.

Among more recent theologians, Peter T. O'Brien has done the most to develop this concept of the church as a heavenly assembly around Christ. Like Knox and Robinson, he holds that Hebrews 12:23 teaches that "Christians, in their conversion, have already come to that heavenly assembly."[26] Of the church in Ephesians and Colossians he states, "In Colossians and Ephesians the 'body' image is used to denote *a heavenly entity*, that is, all Christians united to the Lord Jesus Christ."[27] In Colossians, the term ἐκκλησία is "being employed metaphorically to designate *a heavenly gathering around Christ* in which the Colossians already participate."[28] Other theologians who see the heavenly assembly in Christ as an important aspect of the church in the present age are Robert Banks, Mark E. Dever, John S. Hammett, Miroslav Volf,[29] and many of those who will be mentioned in the remainder of this chapter.

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[26]Peter T. O'Brien, "The Church as a Heavenly and Eschatological Entity," in *The Church in the Bible and the World: An International Study*, ed. D. A. Carson (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2002), 97.

[27]Ibid., 112. Emphasis original.

[28]Peter T. O'Brien, *Understanding the Basic Themes of Colossians, Philemon* (Dallas: Word, 1991), 55. Emphasis original. See also idem, *Colossians, Philemon*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 44 (Waco, TX: Word, 1982), 57-61.

[29]See Robert Banks, *Paul's Idea of Community: The Early House Churches in Their Cultural Setting* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 37-46; Mark E. Dever, "A Catholic Church," in *The Church: One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic*, ed. Richard D. Phillips, Philip G. Ryken, and Mark E. Dever (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2004), 70, "While a local church is indigenous in the sense that its members are taken from the local population and it is able to congregate all together, its nature is heavenly. That heavenly nature is in Christ, and therefore can participate in the same unity, holiness, and apostolicity that all other truly Christian churches participate in, regardless of where they may be located"; John S. Hammett, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches: A Contemporary Ecclesiology* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2005), 55, who writes that unity of the church "is affirmed as a present reality, not just a pious hope. By God's own nature and by his design, the assembly gathered around Christ, composed of all his people, *is one*"; Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 139, "It is important to note, however, that ἐκκλησία in this second sense [not referring to a local church] refers not to the Christians *dispersed throughout the world* or to the totality of local churches but primarily to the universal church as a *heavenly and simultaneously eschatological* entity. As the universal church, the ἐκκλησία is the 'heavenly' church gathered around the resurrected Christ in anticipation of its eschatological consummation." Emphasis original.

Not Yet in Eschaton

   In much of this scholarship, there has also been a recognition that, while the church universal is presently assembled around Christ in the heavenlies, a day is coming in which a final gathering of the church will occur, reflecting what John L. Dagg said about the ultimate state of the church years before: "It [ἐκκλησία] applies to a local church, because the members of it actually assemble; and it applies to the church universal, because the members of it will actually assemble in the presence, and for the everlasting worship of God."[30] First Thessalonians 4:17 seems to express this when it says of the Lord's return, "Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord" (cf. 2 Thess 2:1, "the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered together to him"). This is the final meeting, the final gathering of the church. Thus, Avery Cardinal Dulles seems correct to say that ultimately the idea of "assembly" that ἐκκλησία denotes "will be realized to the full at the eschaton."[31] According to Knox, the multiple local churches on earth "will never be visibly one assembly until the second coming. Then, when Christ will be manifested, the church (that is, all believers) will be seen united around him (Col 3:4)."[32] This final eschatological assembly may be thought

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[30]John L. Dagg, *Manual of Church Order* (n.p., The Southern Baptist Publication Society, 1858; reprint, Harrisonburg, VA: Gano, 1990), 143.

[31]Avery Cardinal Dulles, *Models of the Church* (New York: Image, 2002), 96.

[32]D. Broughton Knox, "Thirty-nine Articles," in *D. Broughton Knox: Selected Works*, *Church and Ministry*, ed. Kirsten Birkett (Kingsford, NSW: Matthias Media, 2003), 2:143. For similar arguments, see Everett Ferguson, *The Church of Christ: A Biblical Ecclesiology for Today* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 132; Clowney, *The Church*, 36; Peter T. O'Brien, "Church II: Paul," in *The IVP Dictionary of the New Testament: A One-Volume Compendium of Contemporary Biblical Scholarship*, ed. Daniel G. Reid (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004), 201; David Peterson, *Engaging with God: A Biblical Theology of Worship* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1992), 247. Taras Khomych shows that the local church is understood to be an anticipatory image of the final gathering in the *Didache* as well: "Taking into account its connection with the eschatological vision presented in *Did*. 16.6 as well as with the Eucharistic petitions in *Did*. 9.4 and 10.5, the unified assembly in *Did*. 16.2 appears as an image and, at the same time, an

of as the "not yet" aspect of the assembling of God's people. The church is already assembled around Christ in heaven, but it has not yet been assembled completely.

Criticism and Response

This conception of the ultimate state of the church as a heavenly and eschatological entity has been criticized by some scholars. Two major objections have been raised. The first is that ἐκκλησία does not always mean "assembly" in the New Testament. The second is that the broader, and thus more ultimate, conception of redeemed humanity in the New Testament is not "the church (assembly)," but "the people of God."

The first criticism has been raised by Kevin Giles in his book, *What on Earth Is the Church? An Exploration in New Testament Theology*.[33] Giles argues that "the Christian community," rather than "assembly," "is the reality implied by the more developed uses of the word ekklēsia/church."[34] This claim is largely based on his evaluation of the use of ἐκκλησία in the Septuagint (LXX). Giles writes, "Added semantic content for the word ekklēsia was . . . provided by the fact that it was used to translate both *edah* and *qahal*. This meant it came to be seen as a word that could carry the meaning of both Hebrew words."[35] Since עֵדָה could refer to the congregation of Israel whether assembled or not, this means that ἐκκλησία, according to Giles, could also be expected to be used for the New Testament church whether assembled or not. This

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anticipation of the final gathering expected in the eschaton" (Taras Khomych, "The Admonition to Assemble Together in *Didache* 16.2 Reappraised," *Vigiliae Christianae* 61 [2007]: 140).

[33]Kevin Giles, *What on Earth Is the Church? An Exploration in New Testament Theology* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1995).

[34]Ibid., 18.

[35]Ibid., 25.

explains why Giles is more inclined to interpret ἐκκλησία to mean "Christian community" rather than "assembly."

The problem with Giles' argument, however, is that he is simply mistaken about the use of ἐκκλησία in the LXX. Contrary to what he claims, ἐκκλησία is *never* used to translate עֵדָה in the LXX; it is *only* used to translate קָהָל.[36] Συναγωγή, on the other hand, *was* used to translate both קָהָל and עֵדָה, which, when compared to the more restricted use of ἐκκλησία (translating only קָהָל) actually leads to the opposite conclusion than that drawn by Giles. As L. Coenen notes, "synagōgē was capable of expressing the sense of both Heb. terms, whereas ekklēsia could only be used with a specific meaning."[37] What is the specific meaning of ἐκκλησία? K. L. Schmidt answers rightly: "It means 'assembly,' whether in the sense of assembling or of those assembled."[38] Thus, the criticism of the church-as-heavenly-assembly view that Giles puts forth by arguing that ἐκκλησία should be understood as "the people of God" generally rather than "the assembly of God" in particular does not stand up to the evidence.

The second major criticism of the view that sees the ultimate state of the church as a heavenly and eschatological entity is put forth by Graham Cole.[39] Cole argues that viewing the heavenly and eschatological state of the church as "assembly" is

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[36]See Edwin Hatch and Henry A. Redpath, *A Concordance to the Septuagint and the Other Greek Versions of the Old Testament (Including the Apocryphal Books)*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1998), 433. So Schmidt, "ἐκκλησία," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964-76), 527.

[37]L. Coenen, "ἐκκλησία," in *The International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, ed. Colin Brown (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 292.

[38]Schmidt, "ἐκκλησία," 527.

[39]Graham Cole, "The Doctrine of the Church: Towards Conceptual Clarification," in *Explorations 2: Church, Worship and the Local Congregation*, ed. B. G. Webb (Homebush West, NSW: Lancer, 1987), 3-17.

too narrow. Instead, he suggests that the concept "people of God" better accounts for the nature of redeemed humanity. He argues that "people of God is the more inclusive concept. *Ekklesia* may be subsumed under 'people,' but not vice versa. For the gathering is the people of God so gathered, whilst the people of God are scattered, though still the people of God, are no longer strictly speaking the *ekklesia*."[40] Thus, Cole interprets ἐκκλησία to refer only to an assembly in its gathered state.

Cole's criticism is not well founded, however, for a couple of reasons. First, it is his own interpretation of the meaning of ἐκκλησία, not that of the New Testament's, that seems too narrow to be used as a comprehensive word for redeemed humanity. Cole's statement that "whilst the people of God are scattered . . . [they] are no longer strictly speaking the *ekklesia*" is faulty. The people of God could be considered "the assembly" (ἐκκλησία) even when not actually assembled because they were those who constituted the assembly, those who were characterized by regularly assembling, a fact that even Robinson (whose position, along with Knox, is the primary one that Cole critiques) acknowledges.[41] Thus, the New Testament authors apply the word ἐκκλησία to

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[40]Ibid., 9.

[41]See Donald Robinson, "The Church and Evangelism," in *Donald Robinson Selected Works*, *Preaching God's Word*, ed. Peter G. Bolt and Mark D. Thompson (Camperdown, NSW: Australian Church Record, 2008), 2:114, "In my view the notion of 'assembly' is inherent in practically *all* the NT occurrences, though I recognize an extension of meaning to designate 'the persons who constitute an assembly' (especially in Acts)." Emphasis original. Martin Foord mentions this in his description of the Knox-Robinson conception of the church: "Robinson (and Knox) asserted that the church on earth was fundamentally the local gathering with an extended secondary understanding of the people who make up the earthly gathering" (Martin Foord, "We Meet Again! In Heaven or on Earth? Donald Robinson's Ecclesiology," in *Donald Robinson, Selected Works*, *Appreciation*, ed. Peter G. Bolt and Mark D. Thompson [Camperdown, NSW: Australian Church Record, 2008], 1:228). So also Robert Doyle, "Response to Graham Cole's Paper," in *Explorations 2: Church, Worship and the Local Congregation*, ed. B. G. Webb (Homebush West, NSW: Lancer, 1987), 24, "Although Knox and Robinson in their earlier explorations in the meaning of church may have stated that when one left the earthly gathering his membership of the church ceased, their fully developed position stresses that membership of the church continues outside of the local expression because of the essentially heavenly nature of *ekklesia*."

people in such a way that "even when their meeting is over [they] still retain their quality of ekklēsia."[42] Furthermore, if those who argue for the universal church as presently assembled around Christ in heaven are correct, then even when a particular assembly dismisses, they are still assembled in the heavenly places around Christ, and can thereby still be considered an actual assembly. In fact, as Knox argues, ἐκκλησία can even be used of believers that never assemble on earth (e.g., Acts 9:31) because of the fact that they are all assembled in heaven:

> When the word is used in the singular referring to a larger concept than a local group, as sometimes in the New Testament, where is this single gathering or church thought to be? The answer is that it is a gathering around Christ. "Where Christ is, there is the catholic church." [quoting Irenaeus] He adds to it day by day those who are being saved. But where does the New Testament think of Christ being at the present time? The answer is clear, Christ has gone into the heavens . . . . It is there, therefore, that we are to locate the assembling, gathering or church, which he is building.[43]

It seems, then, that Cole's own narrow interpretation of ἐκκλησία has led him to dismiss "church" as the word that best conceptualizes redeemed humanity.

A second reason that Cole's position is faulty is that, as Robert Doyle argues, there is really no difference between speaking of "the people of God" and "the church":

> In the biblical literature there is in the end nothing notionally distinctive about "the people of God" over and against the "church," for both are defined in terms of being gathered entities around God. To put it another way, "the people of God," as with "the church of God," exist only because they are gathered or assembled around God, and when they are not so gathered, they are "not My people" (Hos 1:9).[44]

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[42]Coenen, "ἐκκλησία," 303.

[43]D. Broughton Knox, "De-mythologizing the Church," in *D. Broughton Knox: Selected Works*, *Church and Ministry*, ed. Kirsten Birkett (Kingsford, NSW: Matthias Media, 2003), 2:27.

[44]Doyle, "Response to Graham Cole," 20. See also ibid., 23.

Rather than substitute the phrase "people of God" for a too narrowly defined understanding of "church," Cole should adopt a better understanding of "church."

In this section it has been argued that ultimately the church is both a present reality, as it is assembled around Christ in the heavenlies, and a future reality, as it will be assembled to Christ at his second coming. In the final section of this chapter, it will be argued that each local church is an inaugurated expression of the heavenly and eschatological church, and that the Holy Spirit is the agent that makes this possible—the inaugurator of ecclesiology.

Local Church as Manifestation of Heavenly Church

It is a wonderful truth that right now the believer on earth experiences fellowship with the great heavenly assembly around Christ. As Robert Doyle puts it, "Whether one sits in an office or a Bible study declaring the wonders of the Christ who has saved us, we are truly in the heavenly presence of the redeemed and the Redeemer."[45] However, the inaugurated eschatology of the New Testament has broader implications for ecclesiology than the inclusion of *individuals* in the heavenly assembly. In the new covenant, the *corporate* life of the people of God is transformed as well. Because the believer is currently assembled in the ultimate church in heaven, he is to give expression to this as he assembles in a local church here on earth. D. Broughton Knox states it this way:

> The local gathering (or church) comes into existence to give expression to this heavenly, spiritual, profoundly true fellowship by our coming into each other's company, with Jesus in the midst. The heavenly relationship, because of the nature

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[45]Ibid., 24.

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of our physical life, must express itself in our seeking Christ's face in each other's company, that is, the metaphorical church must express itself in literal churches.[46]

The fellowship the believer has with the ultimate assembly in heaven (and that he will have in the assembly of the last day) is to express itself in the fellowship of a local assembly on earth. "The congregational meeting," writes David Peterson, "should thus be a way of expressing our common participation in that eschatological community, gathered, cleansed and consecrated to God by Messiah's work."[47] Each local assembly on earth is to be seen as an expression or manifestation in inaugurated form of that ultimately heavenly and eschatological assembly.

The fact that each local assembly is a manifestation of the heavenly and eschatological assembly is the reason Paul can write to various assemblies of Christians, however large or small, and call them *the* church in whatever place they meet. As K. L. Schmidt states, "Each community, however small, represents the total community, the Church."[48] Thus, for example, the phrase "τῇ ἐκκλησίᾳ . . . τῇ οὔσῃ ἐν Κορίνθῳ" in 1 Corinthians 1:2 and 2 Corinthians 1:1 should not be rendered "'the Corinthian congregation,' which would stand side by side with the Roman etc., but 'the congregation, church, assembly, as it is in Corinth.'"[49] Each local church is also

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[46]D. Broughton Knox, "The Biblical Concept of Fellowship," in *D. Broughton Knox: Selected Works*, *Church and Ministry*, ed. Kirsten Birkett (Kingsford, NSW: Matthias Media, 2003), 2:81-82.

[47]Peterson, *Engaging with God*, 247. So O'Brien, "The Church as a Heavenly and Eschatological Entity," 97, "Because of one's membership of the heavenly assembly gathered around Christ, Christians ought to assemble in local gatherings here on earth"; idem, "Church II," 197, "If this heavenly meeting with Christ is a figurative or metaphorical way of speaking about believers' ongoing fellowship with him, then it was appropriate that this new relationship with the ascended Lord should find concrete expression in their regular coming together, that is, 'in church.'"

[48]Schmidt, "ἐκκλησία," 506.

[49]Ibid. See also David Peterson, "The 'Locus' of the Church—Heaven or Earth?" *Churchman* 112, no. 3 (1998): 207, "The apostle does not address the Corinthians as '*a* church of God' but as '*the* church of God which is at Corinth,' implying that each congregation represents the whole entity called

considered the body of Christ (1 Cor 12:27, "Now you are Christ's body"). Commenting

on this, Donald Robinson rightly draws the conclusion that "the local church (and there is

no national or ecumenical church in the New Testament) is the earthly, historical

embodiment of the supernal church."[50] John S. Hammett draws the same conclusion

when he writes, "The local church is not regarded here [1 Cor 12:27] as merely a part of a

larger body of Christ, but as *the* body of Christ in that place."[51] Each local assembly is a

manifestation of the ultimate assembly.[52] Just as inaugurated eschatology involves the

kingdom of God breaking into the present age, so it also involves the heavenly and

eschatological assembly breaking into the present age in the case of every local church.

The idea that there is an ultimate heavenly realm set over against the earthly

realm, and that the heavenly can break into the earthly is part of the grain of New

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'church.'" Emphasis original.

[50]Robinson, "The Church in the New Testament," 221.

[51]Hammett, *Biblical Foundations*, 37. Emphasis original. Hammett goes on to state, "This is another support for a proper understanding of the autonomy of the local church. No local church should be isolated, but no local church needs a larger body to complete it or enable it to function. It is the body of Christ, possessing full ecclesial status" (ibid.). So also Ben Witherington III, *Jesus, Paul and the End of the World: A Comparative Study in New Testament Eschatology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1992), 80, "Even more crucial for Paul is the fact that each local ekklēsia is a full presentation of the ekklēsia. This becomes especially clear when Paul uses the body analogy in 1 Corinthians 12-14 to describe one local group of Christians—those in Corinth. They locally manifest all the members of the body of Christ. For Paul, they are *the* ekklēsia *tou theou* in Corinth." Emphasis original.

[52]On this subject see also O'Brien, "The Church as a Heavenly and Eschatological Entity," 97, "Perhaps it is best to suggest that the local congregations or house-groups are earthly manifestations of that heavenly assembly gathered around God and Christ"; Knox, "De-mythologizing," 31; Donald Robinson, "The Church of God: Its Form and Unity," in *Donald Robinson: Selected Works*, *Assembling God's People*, ed. Peter G. Bolt and Mark D. Thompson (Camperdown, NSW: Australian Church Record, 2008), 1:232-33; Banks, *Paul's Idea of Community*, 42; Pinnock, *Flame of Love*, 117-18; Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, *Holy Spirit, Church, and New Creation*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 4:281, "Every local church is the people of God, the body of Christ, built upon the foundation of Christ (1 Cor. 3:11, 16; 12:27), because in that location it is the same as what the church is in its entirety, and Christ is for that local church what he is for the universal church"; Arthur Wallis, *The Radical Christian: "The Ax Is Already at the Root of the Tree"* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell, 1981), 162, "Local Churches should be colonies of heaven, miniatures of 'the Jerusalem that is above,' and providing on earth a corporate expression of 'the glorious freedom of the children of God.'"

Testament eschatology.[53] In the New Testament, eschatology is not just about what will

happen on the last day, it is also about ultimate reality as it currently exists in the

heavenly realm.[54] Agreeing with Geerhardus Vos, Andrew T. Lincoln rightly notes that,

for Paul, "in the midst of this present age the age to come was now realized in principle

in heaven."[55] The reason for this is that heaven is the realm in which the ascended Christ

now reigns: "With Christ's resurrection and exaltation, the eschatological centre of

gravity had moved to the heavenly realm."[56] What is more, Paul's expectation for the

churches is that during the present "the life of heaven is to be worked out on earth by

believers (cf. Phil. 3:20; Col. 3:1ff)."[57] The heavenly realm is to invade the earthly.

Jonathan T. Pennington has shown that this division between the heavenly

realm and the earthly realm is, for instance, a major part of the theology of Matthew's

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[53]It is not platonic as some have suggested. See for example, Cole, "Doctrine of the Church," 6. Robert Doyle explains why: "It is the Christocentricity of being in the presence of God which explains the fact that the New Testament can quite happily speak of Christians being as a present reality, gathered in the heavenly church, and incidentally, avoid 'Platonism.' The high ecclesiology of Ephesians 2 comes from the fact that we are now already united by faith to Christ who is seated at the right hand of the Father. Because this union is a present reality, there is no difficulty in speaking of a continuous presence in the heavenly gathering. The difference between this and any platonic hope of participation in heavenly reality is that for Platonism, the participation in this life is, at best, fleeting, and Platonism always involves affirming a radical and (in divine terms) unbridgeable gap between the earthly and the heavenly. But, by contrast, the Bible affirms that God himself, in the human person of Jesus Christ, has bridged this gap and, at his ascension, taken up this humanity permanently into his holy presence." So Peterson, "The 'Locus' of the Church," 209 n. 19, "To describe this view as 'Platonic,' as Giles does several times, is to misunderstand the way Paul expresses his eschatology in terms of the present experience of ultimate or heavenly realities"; Lincoln, *Paradise Now and Not Yet*, 6, "These eschatological concepts are not part of a Platonic ideal spiritual world and therefore completely a-temporal and a-spatial. It must be stressed again that the language of space and time is being employed for realities which transcend space and time and the paradox which arises from applying the language of continuity to the fact of discontinuity cannot be avoided."

[54]Lincoln writes that "eschatology involves heaven as well as the Last Day," and laments the fact that "all too often in treatments of eschatology the latter pole is given all the attention and the former is virtually ignored" (Lincoln, *Paradise Now and Not Yet*, 5).

[55]Ibid., 171.

[56]Ibid., 172.

[57]Ibid., 187.

gospel, and that this is especially evident in the way Matthew uses the phrase "kingdom

of heaven." For Matthew, Pennington writes, "ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν, the kingdom of

heaven, has the sense of 'the heavenly kingdom.'"[58] In Matthew, "the world is depicted

as bipartite—heaven and earth."[59] Thus, when Jesus taught his disciples to pray, "Our

Father in heaven . . . . Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven"

(Matt 6:9-10), he was teaching them to long for the heavenly realm to break into the

earthly.[60]

What all of this means for ecclesiology is that if heaven is the ultimate locus

for "the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven" (Heb 12:23), then one

should not be surprised when the New Testament authors speak of each local church as an

expression of this heavenly reality. The heavenly realm breaks into the present in the

form of a local church, and it is through the agency of the Holy Spirit that this is made

possible.

The reason every local church can claim to be an expression of this heavenly

assembly is because the Holy Spirit unites believers to Christ who is currently seated in

the heavenly places. Paul clearly believed that the Spirit is the bond that unites believers

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[58]Jonathan T. Pennington, *Heaven and Earth in the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 295.

[59]Ibid., 348.

[60]Pennington writes, "Specifically, 6:9-10 shows that for Matthew, the current tension or contrast between heaven and earth is *not* part of God's creative and redemptive plans. The great Christian prayer is that the disjuncture between the two realms will *cease* to be: God's Name will be hallowed, his will done, and his kingdom manifested *not only in the heavenly realm but also in the earthly*. This is important because when emphasizing the contrast between heaven and earth it would be a mistake to understand this as a permanent and divinely designed state. The contrast between heaven and earth is a result of the sinfulness of the world and is thus unnatural. The eschatological goal, according to 6:9-10, is that this unnatural tension will be resolved into the unity of God's reign over heaven and earth. As the entire Gospel seeks to show, it is in Jesus Christ that the eschatological reuniting of heaven and earth has begun (cf. especially 28:18), and it will be consummated at his Parousia" (Pennington, *Heaven and Earth*, 155). Emphasis original.

to Christ: "For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body" (1 Cor 12:13). Many

scholars acknowledge that union with Christ is effected by the Holy Spirit. For example,

Sinclair Ferguson writes, "The central role of the Spirit is to reveal Christ and to unite us

to him and to all those who participate in his body."[61] Similarly, Michael S. Horton states

that "Christ indwells us not immediately or essentially, as if our natures were somehow

transfused or mingled, but by his Spirit (Col. 1:27)."[62] If it is the Holy Spirit who unites

believers to Christ, and Christ is currently in the heavenly places, then it is the Holy Spirit

who is the link between believers on earth and "the assembly of the firstborn who are

enrolled in heaven" (Heb 12:23). When believers are united by the Spirit to Christ, they

are also united by the Spirit to that heavenly assembly gathered around Christ. As

Donald Robinson states,

> Around this figure, the "Lord's Anointed" and "Servant," the "Temple not made
> with hands," in Whom all Old Testament prophecies are fulfilled, disciples gather.
> They are united to one another by one Spirit and the single confession of Christ's
> Lordship and trust in Him as Savior, and they are united to Him by His Spirit, Who
> "enlightens" and "quickens" them (1 Cor. 12; Eph. 4:1-16; Acts 2:33, 38; Rom.
> 8:9-11).[63]

The Holy Spirit, then, can be said to be the agent of inaugurated ecclesiology, bringing

the ultimate state of the church into the present experience of believers by uniting them to

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[61]Ferguson, *The Holy Spirit*, 100.

[62]Michael S. Horton, *Covenant and Salvation: Union with Christ* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2007), 186. So also Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1998), 965, "The union is effected by the Holy Spirit"; Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 842, "We also must be brought into an actual relationship with Christ through which the benefits of salvation can be applied to our lives *by the Holy Spirit*" (emphasis added); Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 450, "Through the Holy Spirit Christ now dwells in believers, unites them to Himself and knits them together in a holy unity." Badcock argues that John Calvin saw the Spirit as the "instrumental cause" in the believer's union with Christ. Badcock, *Light of Truth*, 101.

[63]Donald Robinson, "The Biblical Doctrine of the Church," in *Donald Robinson: Selected Works*, *Assembling God's People*, ed. Peter G. Bolt and Mark D. Thompson (Camperdown, NSW: Australian Church Record, 2008), 1:208.

the risen and exalted Christ.   What results is a local church that gathers on earth as an inaugurated expression of its gathered state in heaven.

Conclusion

This chapter has argued that the theme of the people of God as one assembly is central to the New Testament teaching on the church. This argument was made in three major steps. First, it was shown that Jesus picks up on the Old Testament theme of the people of God as assembly and fulfills it by regathering the assembly of the Lord that was scattered in the Old Testament. Second, it was argued that in the new covenant era, the ultimate form of this assembly that Jesus gathers is a heavenly-eschatological assembly that is currently spiritually gathered around Christ in the heavenlies, and that will one day be physically gathered around him at his second coming. Third, it was demonstrated that the New Testament presents each particular local church as a manifestation in time and space of this ultimate heavenly-eschatological assembly. There is *one* assembly of God's people in the heavenly places, and *each one* of its local expressions manifests this heavenly reality. Whether considered according to its heavenly form or its local form, the act of gathering together is one of the components that binds Christians together as one assembly. If a person has not been assembled to Christ by the Spirit, then they are not a part of the heavenly-eschatological assembly of God's people (the ultimate form of the church). Likewise, if a person does not assemble with a local group of believers, then they are not a part of that particular manifestation of this heavenly-eschatological assembly. Some critics might respond by arguing that the churches in the New Testament did, in fact, meet in multiple locations—one local church divided among many house churches. This argument will be considered in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 5

WERE NEW TESTAMENT HOUSE
CHURCHES MULTI-SITE?

Introduction

Those in the multi-site church movement often claim that their church structure

is biblical because in the New Testament a citywide church was comprised of multiple

house churches in the same way that one multi-site church today is comprised of multiple

sites or campuses. This chapter will make two arguments in response to this claim. First,

it will be argued that there is far less evidence in the New Testament for multiple house

churches comprising one citywide church than is often claimed. In fact, as this chapter

will show, I see little to no evidence for this, or even for the existence of multiple house

churches in a city at all, for that matter. The second argument that this chapter will make

is that New Testament churches were marked by "whole church" gatherings, which

means that even if a citywide church was comprised of multiple house churches, those

multiple house churches would have been characterized by worship assemblies of the

entire church. This practice would serve as a key difference between New Testament

churches and most contemporary multi-site churches that do not hold such campus-wide

gatherings.[1]

These arguments will be made in three steps. First, claims will be given from

those multi-site proponents who argue that there is precedent in the New Testament for

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[1]See n. 24 in the introduction to this dissertation.

their form of church structure. Second, certain ideas that have been advanced by biblical

scholars and theologians that might be understood to support the claims of multi-site

proponents will be put forth. And third, it will be argued that the findings of such

scholarship cannot be used to claim that contemporary multi-site structure finds

precedent in New Testament house churches.

It should be noted that this chapter (and the dissertation as a whole) is taking

issue with the most popular type of multi-site church structure, namely, a church made up

of multiple sites that are not characterized by gathering with one another at the whole

church level (see below for a discussion of the importance of whole church gatherings).

Multi-site churches that do have whole church gatherings (of people from all the sites)

can claim to be one assembly by virtue of the fact that they are characterized by these

types of gatherings. This means that the latter type of multi-site church is not necessarily

unbiblical, though I do not think them to be particularly wise.[2]

What Multi-Site Proponents Claim

Many proponents of multi-site church structure argue that they are simply

practicing the type of structure depicted in the local churches of the New Testament.

New Testament churches, so they say, were often made up of multiple sites, or house

churches, that together formed one local church. In what follows, some representative

arguments from contemporary multi-site practitioners will be given.

In what has become a seminal book on the multi-site movement, the authors of

The Multi-Site Church Revolution argue that the Jerusalem church as well as the church

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[2]As I mention in the conclusion of this dissertation, more work needs to be done on how
wisdom should be applied in the use of multi-site church structure.

in Corinth could be considered multi-site:

> The concept of having church in more than one location isn't new or revolutionary; the roots of multi-site go back to the church of Acts, which had to scatter due to persecution. Elmer Towns points out that the original Jerusalem church "was one large group (celebration), and many smaller groups (cells). . . . The norm for the New Testament church included both small cell groups and larger celebration groups." Likewise, Aubrey Malphurs observes that Corinth and other first-century churches were multi-site, as a number of multi-site house churches were considered to be part of one citywide church.[3]

Later in the book, these authors argue that the church at Antioch was a site of the Jerusalem church:

> You might say that the idea of "one church, many locations" began with the persecution of the first Christ-followers in Jerusalem. When Stephen was put to death and the believers scattered, a new congregation was formed in Antioch. The Antioch group was not seen as a separate body but as an extension of the Jerusalem church and functioned under the authority of Peter and the apostles in Jerusalem. Barnabas effectively became the first campus pastor when he was sent to Antioch to care for the new congregation. As the good news spread throughout Asia and into Europe, new congregations were formed, but they were all connected back to the church at Jerusalem as evidenced by the council that was held in Acts 15.[4]

According to these authors, New Testament churches such as the church at Jerusalem looked strikingly similar to contemporary multi-site churches—one church (the church at Jerusalem) made up of multiple congregations/campuses/sites (e.g., the Antioch "campus").

Another book that seeks to justify a multi-site approach by rooting it in the practice of the apostolic church is one that, to my knowledge, was the first book ever published on the subject: *One Church, Many Congregations: The Key Church Strategy*,

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[3]Geoff Surratt, Greg Ligon, and Warren Bird, *The Multi-Site Church Revolution: Being One Church . . . in Many Locations* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 22-26.

[4]Ibid., 92. It is interesting to note that this interpretation of Acts 15 is the classic Presbyterian argument used to justify their practice of connecting multiple congregations under one umbrella of church government. See, e.g., Robert L. Reymond, "The Presbytery-Led Church: Presbyterian Church Government," in *Perspectives on Church Government: Five Views of Church Polity*, ed. Chad Owen Brand and R. Stanton Norman (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2004), 95-116.

by J. Timothy Ahlen and J. V. Thomas.[5] In this book, the authors state, "By Christ's own command, the church at Jerusalem was to be the hub of a worldwide evangelism and church planting movement—one church with many congregations. One church starting many congregations!"[6] The Jerusalem church was comprised of multiple home congregations:

> After Pentecost, the Holy Spirit empowered the apostles to preach with boldness, and thousands of people were converted. The large number of baptized believers mentioned in the book of Acts had very few public venues in which to meet. That they met in their homes suggests that there were hundreds of small congregations meeting in and around Jerusalem during this time.[7]

According to Ahlen and Thomas, even after other congregations were formed (such as in Antioch), these congregations were linked back to "the mother church in Jerusalem."[8] The Jerusalem church "was granted authority over the new congregations as they came into being."[9] "This biblical strategy," they claim, "is identical to what the authors call the Key Church Strategy."[10]

Popular preacher and author Mark Driscoll pastors Mars Hill Church in Seattle, Washington, which is well known for its practice of multi-site. Like the other authors who have been mentioned, he too attempts to root multi-site structure in the practice of the early church. Writing of his church's early attempts to go multi-site,

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[5]J. Timothy Ahlen and J. V. Thomas, *One Church, Many Congregations: The Key Church Strategy* (Nashville: Abington, 1999).

[6]Ibid., 25.

[7]Ibid.

[8]Ibid., 28.

[9]Ibid.

[10]Ibid., 32. For these authors, the phrase "Key Church Strategy" is synonymous with "multi-site."

Driscoll states,

> Reflecting on those experiences now, it is clear that we were in many ways following the pattern of the New Testament. Many of the New Testament letters were written to networks of churches scattered throughout a particular city (e.g., Corinth, Galatia, Thessalonica, and Philippi). Some of the instructional letters, such as Hebrews, James, and epistles of Peter are called general epistles because they were intended to be read and obeyed at multiple churches. Furthermore, the New Testament seems to indicate that churches spread across regions as a linked network of congregations. For example, 1 Peter 1:1 refers to churches in the areas of "Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia." While the circumstances in the New Testament era are not the same as what we are doing today, the variety of venues there indicates that the early church was quite flexible, meeting and worshiping in distinctive situations to meet the needs and opportunities of their time.[11]

For Driscoll, the linking of multiple congregations, as multi-site does it, is simply the way many churches in the New Testament were structured.

As another advocate of multi-site churches, Scott McConnell includes the following statement from a well-known proponent of multi-site: "There is definitely a multilocation dynamic to the church in Acts. And I don't see anything in Scripture that forbids it."[12] McConnell seems to use this statement approvingly, as support for claiming that multi-site has a biblical basis.

One of the more scholarly treatments of multi-site church structure has been written by Gregg R. Allison in his "Theological Defense of Multi-Site."[13] After discounting what he sees as some of the weak arguments made by multi-site proponents, Allison puts forth what he believes is biblical justification for a multi-site church

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[11]Mark Driscoll and Gerry Breshears, *Vintage Church: Timeless Truths and Timely Methods* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008), 244.

[12]Scott McConnell, *Multi-Site Churches: Guidance for the Movement's Next Generation* (Nashville: B&H, 2009), 22, quoting James MacDonald, pastor of Harvest Bible Chapel in Chicago, IL.

[13]Gregg R. Allison, "Theological Defense of Multi-Site," *9Marks eJournal* 6.3 (2009): 8-20 [on-line]; accessed 27 April 2010; available from http://involve.9marks.org/site/DocServer/eJournal200963MayJune.pdf?docID=641; Internet.

structure. He writes,

> The New Testament indicates that the early Christians met together regularly both in large gatherings and in the homes of the more well-to-do members: "And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts" (Acts 2:46). Even in the example cited above from Corinth, the house-churches in that city would come together as the "church of Corinth" to celebrate the Lord's Supper (cf. Rom. 16:5).[14]

According to Allison, "these examples may underscore what would have been normative for the early church, as the many multi-site house churches were considered to be part of one citywide church . . . . These smaller congregations met regularly in homes (i.e., campuses) as well as all together as a church (i.e., the originating campus)."[15]

In the same journal issue, J. D. Greear, pastor of Summit Church in Durham, North Carolina, argues that the Jerusalem church as well as the church at Corinth were multi-site. He states,

> The New Testament nowhere demands that a local church meet all together each week. Nor is a single-service assembly the only model given in Acts. While it is certainly true that we see evidences of local churches assembling all together (1 Corinthians 11), we also see evidence of single local churches which met in multiple locations. The new congregation in Jerusalem is frequently referred to in the singular, one "church" (Acts 8:1; 11:22; 15:4). However, they obviously had to meet in different times and locations. Historians tell us there was not space in Jerusalem available to the disciples in which three thousand or more people could have met on a weekly basis. It also appears that many first-century house churches came together to celebrate the Lord's supper as one citywide church (see 1 Cor 11:17-20; Romans 16:5).[16]

The churches in Jerusalem and Corinth, according to Greear, were single churches that met in multiple locations.

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[14]Ibid.

[15]Ibid.

[16]J. D. Greear, "A Pastor Defends His Multi-Site Church," *9Marks eJournal* 6.3 (2009): 21-27 [on-line]; accessed 27 April 2010; available from http://involve.9marks.org/site/DocServer/ eJournal200963MayJune.pdf?docID=641; Internet.

In these arguments by multi-site proponents, the primary claim that seems to emerge as they argue that their church structure finds precedent in the New Testament is that citywide churches (e.g., Jerusalem and Corinth) were made up of multiple congregations or house churches.[17] Thus, one local church (at least often) existed in multiple congregations. In the next section, I will turn my attention to the work of scholars who have sought to uncover the structure of New Testament churches in general and house churches in particular. Though multi-site proponents rarely quote such scholarship, some of what these scholars have produced *could* be understood as evidence of New Testament precedent for multi-site (though, as will be argued in the final section, it should not be understood in this way).

What House Church Scholarship Says

This section will discuss three of the findings that are prevalent among scholars who have written on the New Testament house church, and that *could* be understood as precedent for contemporary multi-site church structure. These are, first, that houses were the primary places in which the early Christians met; second, that there were usually multiple house churches in each city; and third, that wherever a household is mentioned in the New Testament, a house church existed. Again, I have never seen a proponent of multi-site refer to any of the standard works that will be referenced, though

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[17]In another work, Charles Timothy Carter of First Baptist Church of Windermere, Florida (henceforth, FBCW) makes arguments similar to those mentioned above. He states, "This passage [Acts 2:46] points to a decentralizing of worship from just one location, *the temple*, to many, *their homes*, since even the Lord's Supper was being observed in the homes. This shift in practice may seem like a minor point, but this was a radical shift in practice for the early church. The homes now served as a smaller expression of the church. Like the early church, the leadership of FBCW had to embrace a shift in our thinking from church being what happened on one campus on the weekend, to the church being decentralized. As of this writing, FBCW is worshiping on three campuses and our adult small group ministry happens both on campus and in home groups." Charles Timothy Carter, "An Analysis of the Multi-Campus Approach of Local Church Ministry Utilizing First Baptist Church of Windermere, Florida, as a Paradigmatic Model" (D.Min. project, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2005), 29.

they frequently make arguments similar to those found in them. Part of the purpose for this section is to demonstrate the kind of arguments multi-site proponents could be referencing to bolster their position.

Homes Were the Places of Meeting

The view that the early Christians primarily met in homes seems to be a consensus among scholars who have written on the subject of the New Testament house church. This is an important part of the argument that a citywide church was comprised of multiple house churches, because such houses, it is often said, were not large enough to accommodate all the Christians in an entire city. Thus, according to many, there were by necessity multiple house churches in every citywide church.

In one of the most substantial books written on the house church, Roger W. Gehring refers to this consensus on Christians meeting in homes, and states,

> On one point nearly all NT scholars presently agree: early Christians met almost exclusively in the homes of individual members of the congregation. For nearly three hundred years—until the fourth century, when Constantine began building the first basilicas throughout the Roman Empire—Christians gathered in private houses built initially for domestic use, not in church buildings originally constructed for the sole purpose of public worship.[18]

Those who agree with him are too numerous to cite, but suffice it to say that all of the works on house churches referenced in this chapter are in the consensus view.[19] The view

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[18]Roger W. Gehring, *House Church and Mission: The Importance of Household Structures in Early Christianity* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2004), 1.

[19]One of the first, and most significant articles that emphasized the importance of the household and house church structure for understanding the early church is Floyd V. Filson, "The Significance of the Early House Churches," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 58 (1939): 105-12. Of this article, Gehring states, "Whenever the question of the significance of the physical conditions for the setting of early Christian gatherings is raised, almost all scholars point to Filson's seminal article." Gehring, *House Church and Mission*, 2-3. Robert Jewett offers the helpful reminder that an οἶκος was not always a free standing building. He argues that house churches could have, and often did, meet in apartment buildings. See Robert Jewett, "Tenement Churches and Communal Meals in the Early Church: The Implications of a Form-critical Analysis of 2 Thessalonians 3:10," *Biblical Research* 38 (1993): 23-43; Robert Jewett, "Tenement Churches and Pauline Love Feasts," *Quarterly Review* 14, no. 1 (1994): 43-58;

seems correct in that the New Testament frequently speaks of the use of homes as

meeting places among the early Christians. The Jerusalem church met "in the temple and

. . . from house to house" (Acts 2:46, NASB). Paul refers to "the church in the house"

(κατ᾿ οἶκον . . . ἐκκλησία[ν]) of someone four times (Rom 16:5; 1 Cor 16:19; Col 4:15;

Phlm 2). Paul taught "publicly and from house to house" (Acts 20:20). Before

Pentecost, the believers met in an "upper room" (Acts 1:13), presumably of a house, as

they waited upon the Holy Spirit. As Gehring has pointed out, homes also played an

important part in Jesus' teaching ministry as well as the pre-Easter teaching ministry of

the disciples (see, e.g., Matt 9:10; Mark 7:17; Luke 10:5-7).[20]

The frequent use of homes as a meeting place was not unique to Christ's

followers. Jewish synagogues, the Qumran community, as well as Greco-Roman

associations often made use of homes as a venue for their meetings. At the time that

Vincent Branick wrote his book on Pauline house churches, he was able to cite five

synagogues that had recently been the subject of archaeological investigation, and that all

"show the same type of development, all from private dwellings."[21] One such synagogue

that was "developed from a private villa"[22] bears the following inscription: "I Claudius

Tiberius Polycharmos . . . Father of the Synagogue at Stobi, having lived my whole life

according to Judaism, in accordance with a vow, [gave] the [my] houses to the holy place

(*tō hagiō tōn hyperōōn*)."[23] Likewise, the Qumran community seems to have met in

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cf. Gehring, *House Church and Mission*, 149-51.

[20]Gehring, *House Church and Mission*, 28-61.

[21]Vincent Branick, *The House Church in the Writings of Paul*, Zacchaeus Studies: New Testament (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1989), 53.

[22]Ibid., 54.

[23]Ibid., 54. For the background, entire text in Greek, as well as an English translation, see L.

homes. As Branick states,

> These Essenes outside of Qumran apparently lived and assembled in private homes. Josephus refers to a "house" where they met for meals and instructions. Philo refers to them sharing their houses. Such home-based communities would be close parallels to the Christian house churches.[24]

Greco-Roman associations also met in homes. Branick notes that most of them "formed around households. . . . The meetings of these associations and their ceremonies took place in private houses."[25] While Wayne A. Meeks seems correct to say that Christians "did not consciously model themselves on the associations,"[26] the fact that Jewish as well as Greco-Roman groups frequently met in homes demonstrates that the home was the natural place for such meetings to occur. As Stanley Stowers notes,

> The private home was a center of intellectual activity and the customary place for many types of speakers and teachers to do their work. Occasional lectures, declamations and readings of various sorts of philosophical, rhetorical and literary

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Michael White, *Texts and Monuments for the Christian Domus Ecclesiae in Its Environment*, The Social Origins of Christian Architecture, vol. 2 (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity, 1997), 352-56. Gehring emphasizes the existence of house-synagogues as well. He writes, "Synagogues may well have been widespread in 70 C.E. and earlier, not only in the Diaspora but in Palestine as well, primarily in the form of house synagogues, that is, private homes that served with or without architectural alteration as the place of assembly for a synagogue community. We can assume, particularly for the poorer areas in Galilee, that these were house synagogues rather than the pompous structures we are familiar with from the third to sixth centuries C.E. Such house synagogues probably existed even in relatively small Jewish villages. Accordingly, the Gospels pressuppose a multiplicity of them for Galilee as well. All of this is evidence that Jews of the first century were accustomed to meeting for worship in private homes, which in turn would apply also to Jesus and his disciples." Gehring, *House Church and Mission*, 30.

[24]Branick, *House Church in Paul*, 46.

[25]Ibid., 47. For a full description of Greco-Roman associations, see Richard S. Ascough, *Paul's Macedonian Associations: The Social Context of Philippians and 1 Thessalonians*, ed. Jörg Frey, Martin Hengel, and Otfried Hofius, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 2. Reihe 161 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003). Scholars writing on the New Testament house church frequently attempt to set it in the context of such Greco-Roman associations. See, e.g., Waye A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul*, 2nd ed. (London: Yale University Press, 1983), 77-80; Robert Banks, *Paul's Idea of Community: The Early House Churches in Their Cultural Setting*, rev. ed. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 4-13.

[26]Meeks, *First Urban Christians*, 79. As evidence of this, Meeks points to "the almost complete absence of common terminology for the groups themselves or for their leaders" (ibid.). So Branick, *House Church in Paul*, 49.

works often took place in homes.[27]

It seems, then, that houses were a natural meeting place for various groups in the first century, Christian house churches included.

Another bit of evidence that supports the claim that New Testament churches met primarily in homes is the fact that homes were quite possibly the only option that Christians had. Jerome Murphy-O'Connor states,

> Christianity in the first century A.D., and for long afterward, did not have the status of a recognized religion, so there was no question of a public meeting place, such as the Jewish synagogue. Hence, use had to be made of the only facilities available, namely, the dwellings of families that had become Christian.[28]

Branick makes a similar argument when he writes,

> As with most "foreign" cults in their earliest stages of expansion, the Christian meeting in private homes was probably a practical necessity. For the Christians the synagogues quickly became off limits. The pagan temples involved too many unsavory associations. And the stately basilicas were centuries away.[29]

Meeting in the homes of fellow believers or God-fearers may have been the early Christians' only option.

Yet another line of evidence in support of the view that Christians in the New Testament met in homes is the fact that architectural evidence does not show signs of buildings that have undergone structural adaptation for the purpose of church meetings until the second century. This evidence has led L. Michael White to designate A.D. 50-150 as "the first period" of Christian architectural development, in which "assembly

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[27]Stanley Kent Stowers, "Social Status, Public Speaking and Private Teaching: The Circumstances of Paul's Preaching Activity," *Novum Testamentum* 26, no. 1 (1984): 65.

[28]Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, *St. Paul's Corinth: Texts and Archaeology*, 3rd ed. (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2002), 178.

[29]Branick, *House Church in Paul*, 14.

and worship (following the pattern of Acts) would have been held in the homes of wealthier members."[30] If church meetings normally took place in homes in the New Testament era, and if these homes could only hold a relatively small number of people (as is often argued; see next section), then we can expect that citywide churches consisted of multiple house groups. One could see why this *might* be viewed as precedent for multi-site.

Multiple House Churches per City

Many scholars believe that a local church in any given city was normally made up of multiple house churches. Roger Gehring states that his "history of scholarship indicated that a majority of NT scholars tend to agree regarding this issue," calling it a "relative consensus."[31]   Indeed, this view is often assumed in many writings. For instance, Meeks states, "The number of such household assemblies in each city will have varied from place to place and from time to time, but we may assume that there were ordinarily several in each place."[32] Similarly, Abraham Malherbe asserts, "As the church grew in a particular locality, more than one house church would be formed," and that

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[30]L. Michael White, *Building God's House in the Roman World: Architectural Adaptation among Pagans, Jews, and Christians*, The Social Origins of Christian Architecture, vol. 1 (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1990), 19. See also Branick, *House Church in Paul*, 117, who writes, "Soon after Paul the private house church disappears from view, and around the middle of the second century the house church as such will give way to the dedicated church building." White sees four stages in Christian architectural development from the house church to the Constantinian basilica. He builds off of the work of Krautheimer, and adds a stage of his own, what White terms the *aula ecclesiae*. This is a stage in between stage two (the *domus ecclesia*, which were houses dedicated specifically for church meetings) and four (the basilica) that consisted of homes that, "having already undergone adaptation to *domus ecclesiae*, were subsequently remodeled as large hall structures." White, *Building God's House*, 22. Dennis Edwin Smith calls White's book "the most important analysis of the development of early Christian architecture since Krautheimer." Dennis Edwin Smith, review of *Building God's House in the Roman World: Architectural Adaptation among Pagans, Jews, and Christians*, by L. Michael White, *The Second Century* 8 (1991): 255.

[31]Gehring, *House Church and Mission*, 24.

[32]Meeks, *First Urban Christians*, 76.

"although they may have formed separate communities, such groups were not viewed as being separate churches."[33]

One of the main arguments given to support the claim that a citywide church was made up of multiple house churches is that multiple houses were a necessity due to the size of congregations and the space limitations in homes. The houses were not big enough to hold the entire church, so they say; therefore, multiple houses were needed. Many would agree with Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, who holds that only about thirty to forty people could fit into a Greco-Roman house in the first century:

> The maximum number that the atrium [the room many would view to be the most natural place for larger Christian meetings] could hold was fifty, but this assumes that there were no decorative urns or anything of that nature to take up space, and that everyone stayed in one place; the true figure would probably be between thirty and forty.[34]

Following the work of Murphy-O'Connor, Gerd Theissen states that "on the basis of an analysis of archaeological ground plans we can assume that c. 30 to 40 could meet in a private house."[35] Likewise, Robert Banks holds that, given the size of homes, a meeting of the entire church in a city "may have reached forty to forty-five people."[36] Citing both Murphy-O'Connor and Banks for support, James D. G. Dunn states that "the best estimates" on how many Christians could have gathered in one house "run up to fifty."[37]

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[33]Abraham J. Malherbe, *Social Aspects of Early Christianity*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), 70.

[34]Murphy-O'Connor, *St. Paul's Corinth*, 182.

[35]Gerd Theissen, "The Social Structure of Pauline Communities: Some Critical Remarks on J. J. Meggitt, *Paul, Poverty and Survival*," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 84 (2001): 83.

[36]Banks, *Paul's Idea of Community*, 25. According to Banks, this is the number that could fit into the "entertaining room in a moderately well-to-do household," and that "if the meeting spilled over into the atrium then the number could have been greater, though no more than double that size." Ibid.

[37]James D. G. Dunn, *Beginning from Jerusalem*, Christianity in the Making, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 607. Dunn adds, "though quite how such a large group could meet as a single, coherent meeting is less than clear." Ibid. For similar estimations see Gehring, *House Church and Mission*,

Similar arguments are put forward to explain the accommodations for the first church in Jerusalem. Floyd Filson argues that Acts 12:17 is evidence that the Jerusalem church consisted of multiple house churches, and that this was so due to size limitations in homes. He writes,

> Moreover, the suggestion of Acts 12:17 that this was not a meeting of the whole Jerusalem church, but only of one group, indicates that as the group grew in size it became increasingly difficult for all the believers in the city to meet in one house. For all ordinary occasions, at least, the body would split into smaller groups which could be housed in private homes.[38]

In his discussion of the Jerusalem church in Acts 2, Gehring likewise states that given the fact that this church numbered in the thousands, a multitude of houses would have been needed to accommodate them all.[39]

One of the strongest strands of evidence that there were multiple house churches in one citywide church is Paul's reference to "the whole church" at Corinth (Rom 16:23; 1 Cor 14:23). As Banks states, the reference to "the whole church" "implies that at other times the Christians in Corinth came together in small groups, quite possibly as 'church.' . . . The qualification 'whole,' unnecessary if the Christians of Corinth met only as a single group, implies that smaller groups also existed in the city."[40] It is

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136, 141.

[38]Filson, "Early House Churches," 106.

[39]Gehring, *House Church and Mission*, 87. For some reason, Gehring suggests that only "some of the believers gathered together in the temple as the local church body." Ibid., 89. This seems to be a major flaw in his view, given the fact that Acts 5:12 says "they were all together in Solomon's Portico." Multiple houses would have been needed when the church met "in their homes" (Acts 2:46), but it must be remembered that there was a venue (the temple) that the Jerusalem church used for gatherings of the entire church body.

[40]Banks, *Paul's Idea of Community*, 32. Murphy-O'Connor cites Banks and follows the same line of argument. Murphy-O'Connor, *St. Paul's Corinth*, 183. Of course, reference to "the whole church" does not imply that if there were smaller groups then they were necessarily formal house churches. There could have been times in which only part of the church met for various purposes without being house churches, though the possibility that they were house churches cannot be ruled out by the evidence either. It is also possible that the phrase "the whole church" (ἡ ἐκκλησία ὅλη) is simply a technical term for the

possible that Banks is correct, and that "the whole church" implies multiple house churches in the citywide church of Corinth.[41] Drawing from the evidence for whole church meetings at Corinth, Branick argues that there must have been "a kind of federation of several house churches forming a local church."[42] As Bradley Blue writes, this interpretation involves "a fundamental difference between ἡ κατ᾽ οἶκον ἐκκλησία [house church] and ἐκκλησία ὅλη [whole church]," adding that "many of the problems [in Corinth] arose because the individual house gatherings met under one roof."[43] Gehring believes that this house church/whole church structure was present in the original church at Jerusalem as well. According to Acts 2:46, the Jerusalem church was regularly "attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes." Interpreting the "homes" as house churches, Gehring states, "Opposite these house churches we find the whole Jerusalem church, which met regularly in the temple. A plurality of house churches within the whole local church can already be observed in the primitive church in Jerusalem."[44] If these scholars are correct, and there were multiple house churches in most cities where Christians lived, then one can see why multi-site proponents might claim that these house churches were structured in ways similar to contemporary multi-site churches.

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official worship assembly of believers, much like the phrase "in the same place" (ἐπὶ τὸ αὐτὸ) seems to have been.

[41]Gregory Linton's cautious language seems preferable to the assertions often made by scholars: "Some cities may have had several house churches." Gregory Linton, "House Church Meetings in the New Testament Era," *Stone-Campbell Journal* 8 (2005): 233.

[42]Branick, *House Church in Paul*, 26.

[43]Bradley Blue, "Acts and the House Church," in *Graeco-Roman Setting,* ed. David W. J. Gill and Conrad Gempf, vol. 2 of *The Book of Acts in Its First Century Setting* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 174 n. 215.

[44]Gehring, *House Church and Mission*, 296.

Household Is Equivalent to House Church

Another common trend in scholarly writings on the New Testament house

church that might support the argument that a citywide church was made up of multiple

house churches is the tendency among these scholars to view a mention of a house*hold* as

evidence of the existence of a house *church*. The mention of multiple Christian

households in one city, so the argument goes, is evidence of multiple house churches in

that city.

Although he admits that a church (ἐκκλησία) was not equivalent to a

household (οἶκος),[45] Roger Gehring frequently assumes this kind of connection in his

explanations of biblical texts. For instance, typical of Gehring's arguments is the

following statement on the house of Lydia mentioned in Acts 16:

> Here is evidence for the formation of a church in the house of a God-fearing woman
> at a very early stage of the Pauline mission. Understood in this way, the story in
> Acts 16 is a "church origins" report based on very old tradition that portrays how a
> household nucleus became a house church in the city of Philippi.[46]

Gehring makes a similar assumption concerning the house of Jason (Acts 17:5-9) in

Thessalonica:

> We thus have clear documentation of a house and its householder named Jason, both
> playing a significant role in the Pauline mission in Thessalonica. We can, then, also
> assume that a Christian community continued to gather in the house of Jason even
> after Paul's departure and that this led to the formation of a house church.[47]

As will be mentioned in the final section of this chapter, the problem with this kind of

argument is that house churches are never mentioned in these texts; they are simply

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[45]"Nevertheless, the church of Jesus Christ as a whole is not called οἶκος but rather ἐκκλησία,
λαός θεοῦ, and/or σῶμα Χριστοῦ. The ἐκκλησία transcends the earthly, temporal institutions of marriage
and family into the broad and eternal realm of salvation history." Ibid., 300.

[46]Ibid., 122.

[47]Ibid., 128.

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assumed. For Gehring, the presence of a household signals the presence of a house church. Branick seems to agree, asserting, "For them [the early Christians] the household with its family setting was the church."[48] The household/house church connection, according to Branick, was simply Paul's strategy for the Christian mission: "Most probably the conversion of a household and the consequent formation of a house church formed the key element in Paul's strategic plan to spread the Gospel to the world."[49]

One can see how this type of argument might be used in support of the position that a local church was made up of multiple house churches. For instance, multiple Christian households or houses are mentioned for the city of Corinth (of Stephanas [1 Cor 16:15]; of Crispus [Acts 18:8]; of Gaius [Rom 16:23]). If mention of a household constitutes evidence for a house church, then there were multiple house churches in Corinth. And if there were multiple house churches in the citywide church of Corinth, this could be interpreted as precedent for multi-site church structure.

House Churches Not Precedent for Multi-Site

Even given the arguments above for multiple house churches forming one citywide church, I remain unconvinced that New Testament house churches constitute precedent for contemporary multi-site churches. This section will present four serious problems with making such a claim. First, those who argue for multiple house churches in a city frequently assume what they set out to prove. Second, recent evaluations of Greco-Roman domestic architecture reveal that much larger crowds could fit into a home than has previously been recognized. Third, arguing for the existence of a house church

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[48]Branick, *House Church in Paul*, 13.

[49]Ibid., 18.

simply because a Christian household is mentioned in a biblical text is unwarranted. And

fourth, even if a citywide church consisted of multiple house churches, there is evidence

that citywide churches still held assemblies of "the whole church," something that the

majority of contemporary multi-site churches never do.

Assumed Rather Than Proven

One of the faults in the scholarly arguments for citywide churches consisting

of multiple house churches in the New Testament is that these scholars often assume what

they set out to prove. For instance, Roger Gehring simply assumes that multiple house

churches existed in the cities of Antioch, Ephesus, and Philippi.[50] Concerning church

gatherings in Antioch he states,

> Everything seems to indicate that this gathering was done in small house groups. . . .
> That the church in Antioch met κατ᾽οἶκον in the private domestic houses of affluent
> members as in Jerusalem is probable simply because this was the case for the
> overwhelming majority of all believers in the early Christian movement for the first
> three centuries.[51]

Again he states, "we can assume a plurality of house churches in Antioch." Gehring also

thinks the same can be assumed of Ephesus. He writes,

> Not much can be said about house churches in Ephesus. The greeting from "all the
> brothers" (1 Cor 16:20) points to other Christians in Ephesus who did not meet at
> Aquila's home. This, along with the relatively large size of the church in Ephesus,
> suggests a plurality of house churches there, but we cannot be certain.[52]

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[50]The problem with this assumption that Gehring and others make is that it is an assumption
without warrant. If it could be proven that multi-site churches existed in certain cities, then to make an
assumption that the case was similar in other cities would not be unwarranted, although its existence in one
place would, of course, not necessarily imply its existence in another place. Because I believe that there is
no evidence for multi-site churches in any city mentioned in the New Testament (Jerusalem and Corinth
included [see my discussion of these two cities below]), I believe that Gehring and others are making an
assumption without warrant.

[51]Gehring, *House Church and Mission*, 111.

[52]Ibid., 145. I appreciate the cautionary language that Gehring uses in his discussion of
Ephesus and the possibility of multiple house churches there ("This, along with the relatively large size of
the church in Ephesus, *suggests* a plurality of house churches there, *but we cannot be certain*." Emphasis

There are a couple of problems with these statements. First, his interpretation of 1

Corinthians 16:20 seems incorrect. As Gordon Fee notes, it is more likely that "all the

brothers" refers to Paul's traveling companions and fellow workers, not the members of a

separate house church.[53] The second problem with Gehring's statements is that, even if

he is correct that 1 Corinthians 16:20 *might* imply more than one house church in

Ephesus, it certainly does not offer decisive proof that this was the case (as he himself

admits). If multiple house churches per city is true in the "overwhelming majority" of

cases, it is strange that Antioch and Ephesus, two very important cities in the early

Christian movement, cannot be proven to be a part of this majority. The same kind of

assumptions seem to be made in Gehring's assessment of the church in Philippi. Gehring

states that "the number of Christians in Philippi apparently so grew that multiple houses

were necessary as ongoing places of assembly," and that this "would be a plausible

explanation for the plural number of overseers in 1:1."[54] "There is much in support of the

view," says Gehring, "that the ἐπίσκοποι in 1:1 were hosts and leaders of house churches

in Philippi."[55] However, besides mentioning that the church in Philippi grew rapidly,

Gehring does not provide any additional evidence to support his suggestion that the

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added). But, this caution notwithstanding, Gehring is still guilty of making too many assumptions about the church in Ephesus. The reason he believes that the evidence "suggests a plurality of house churches" in Ephesus is because he assumes that "all the brothers" (1 Cor 16:20) "points to other Christians in Ephesus who did not meet in Aquila's home" and that no house would have been available that could have accommodated the large Ephesian church. See the next section of this chapter for why this latter assumption is faulty.

[53]Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 836. Though see C. K. Barrett, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, Black's New Testament Commentaries (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1968), 396, who states that they "might be the part of the Ephesian church that did not meet in the house of Aquila and Prisca." Even if Gehring and Barrett are correct that this *might* be the case, the argument from 1 Cor 16:20 is certainly not decisive support for the position that there were multiple house churches in Ephesus.

[54]Gehring, *House Church and Mission*, 207.

[55]Ibid..

multiple overseers in Philippi were individually heads of distinct house churches in that city. That multiple house churches existed in Philippi seems simply to be assumed by Gehring, given the size of the church and the existence of plural leadership.

The problem with all of these assumptions is that Gehring is assuming what he has set out to prove. He states that in the "overwhelming majority" of cases there were multiple house churches in a city, but then for three of the most important Christian cities mentioned in the New Testament, he has to assume that this is true. With all of these assumptions one cannot help but wonder if Gehring has proven much of anything in support of his view that citywide churches were comprised of multiple house churches. As R. Alastair Campbell states in response to Gehring's assumption that the church in Antioch was made up of multiple house churches based on the fact that the "overwhelming majority" of churches were, "Well yes, but presumably the purpose of examining each of these churches in turn is to establish that consensus on a firmer footing, and this cannot be done by assuming what it undertakes to prove."[56]

Houses Could Hold Plenty

Another weakness of the view that a citywide church was made up of multiple house churches is that it relies too heavily on the faulty assertion that only around fifty people could fit in even a relatively large home. Recent scholarship has shown this to be false. Before addressing the size of crowd that a Greco-Roman house could accommodate, however, another issue related to supposed size limitations needs to be addressed; that is the question of the Jerusalem church and the ability of its many

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[56]R. Alastair Campbell, review of *House Church and Mission: The Importance of Household Structures in Early Christianity*, by Roger Gehring, *The Journal of Theological Studies* 58, no. 2 (2007): 668.

members to meet together.

It is sometimes argued that the Jerusalem church, with its thousands of members (Acts 2:41; 4:4), was too large to have met in one place. For instance, Gehring writes that the Jerusalem church "grew quite rapidly beyond the capacity of a single meeting place."[57] He mentions that some met in homes while others met in the temple.[58] The problem with this is that Acts 2:44 says that all of the believers in this church were "in the same place [ἐπὶ τὸ αὐτό]" (my translation),[59] and 5:12 that "they were all together in Solomon's Portico." Though some might still have doubts about the feasibility of fitting this many people onto Solomon's Porch, as Thomas White has pointed out, this was indeed quite possible. White explains,

> Solomon's Porch ran along the eastern wall of the temple, which was 1,509 feet in length. To put this in perspective, the Bank of America stadium in Charlotte, North Carolina, measures only nine hundred feet in length and eight hundred feet wide. This stadium holds 73,367 people. . . . The wall would be about the length of five football fields. Also remember that this was the location where the three thousand were added and where the number increased to five thousand. Thus, we know that large crowds could gather and could hear from this location. This structure was enormous, and despite the lack of microphones or speakers, large crowds apparently had no trouble hearing. Biblical evidence forces the conclusion that even the large Jerusalem church could and did gather at Solomon's Porch.[60]

Whatever one's interpretation of Acts 2:46 ("breaking bread in their homes"), it should not be denied that the entire Jerusalem church met in one place.

Appeals to size limitations are also made when it comes to house churches. As

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[57]Gehring, *House Church and Mission*, 87.

[58]Ibid., 89.

[59]For justification for translating ἐπὶ τὸ αὐτό "in the same place," see Everett Ferguson, "When You Come Together: *Epi To Auto* in Early Christian Literature," *Restoration Quarterly* 16 (1973): 202-08.

[60]Thomas White and John M. Yeats, *Franchising McChurch: Feeding Our Obsession with Easy Christianity* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2009), 175.

has already been mentioned, many scholars (e.g., Murphy-O'Connor, Banks, Theissen, and Dunn) argue that the most a Greco-Roman house could accommodate was around fifty people. If this is true, then if the church in a city ever grew over this amount, multiple homes would be needed. The problem with this view, however, is that some scholars have provided archaeological proof that many more than this could fit into the houses of wealthy homeowners in the first century, especially if the peristyle gardens (i.e., courtyards) common to many of these homes were utilized.[61] Carolyn Osiek and David L. Balch note that the House of the Citharist in Pompeii had two large dining halls, "the first of 75.5 square meters," as well as "three large peristyles, measuring approximately 300, 250, and 220 square meters."[62] Their description of this house continues:

> Six significant rooms (c. 55, 70, 25, 25, 10, and 20 sq. m.) open onto the largest garden. Figuring one-half square meter per person and an equal half square meter for furniture, vegetation, statues, and other artwork, 505 people could be served in this peristyle and adjacent rooms. Three rooms (c. 50, 8, 20 sq. m.) open onto the second largest garden, which could then serve 330 people. The smallest of the gardens has six adjacent rooms (c. 6, 9, 12, 6, 12, 45 sq. m.), so could serve 300 people. The three gardens with adjacent rooms could serve 1,135 people simultaneously.[63]

Osiek and Balch also mention the house of Menander in Pompeii, which was "1,800 square meters including two gardens (c. 150, 115 sq. m.) with a dining hall of 93.8 square

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[61]Carolyn Osiek and David L. Balch point out that worshiping in gardens would have been common even for non-Christians in the first century. See Carolyn Osiek and David L. Balch, *Families in the New Testament World: Households and House Churches*, ed. Don S. Browning and Ian S. Evison, The Family, Religion, and Culture (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 203. See also Dennis Edwin Smith, "Social Obligation in the Context of Communal Meals: A Study of the Christian Meal in 1 Corinthians in Comparison with Graeco-Roman Meals" (Th.D., Harvard University, 1980), 183-84, who suggests the courtyard as a possible meeting place for the whole church gathering of the Corinthian church. So Linton, "House Church Meetings," 233, who states, "Large homes could hold hundreds of people if the space in the gardens was utilized. Therefore, large gatherings of Christians in Corinth were quite possible."

[62]Osiek and Balch, *Families in the New Testament World*, 202.

[63]Ibid., 201-02.

meters."[64] By the same calculations (a half square meter per person and another for

furniture and ornamental features) "360 people could be served."[65] According to Osiek

and Balch, there were at least twenty-four home gardens in Pompeii that ranged from

between 255 and 2,000 square meters.[66] Given these dimensions, they state, "Cicero

might have been able to feed his two thousand . . . in these spaces."[67] The evidence

shows that houses did exist in the first century that could accommodate many more than

the commonly assumed size of a New Testament house church.

Of course, the size of such large homes is of no significance to the present

study if Christians would not have had access to houses like this. Most scholars would

agree, however, that there were indeed wealthy church members in many of the early

churches, that they would have owned large homes, and that they would have likely

offered to host the gatherings of their local church. According to 1 Corinthians 1:26, "not

many" of the Corinthian believers were "wise according to worldly standards, not many

were powerful, not many were of noble birth." As E. A. Judge notes, this would "imply

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[64]Ibid.

[65]Ibid.

[66]In A.D. 62, Pompeii was buried in the ash of the volcanic eruption of nearby Mount Vesuvius. The ash encased the city, preserving it until excavators could begin to uncover it thousands of years later. Because the city has been so well preserved (the ash practically froze the city in time) it has offered a wealth of archaeological evidence for what life would have been like in the first century, including the nature of typical homes. For more on the city and its houses, see Andrew Wallace-Hadrill, *Houses and Society in Pompeii and Herculaneum* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994). Pompeii was by no means a wealthy town, so large homes similar to those found there could have easily appeared in more affluent cities like Corinth, Ephesus, or especially Rome. Michele George even calls Pompeii "a small provincial backwater." Michele George, "Domestic Architecture and Household Relations: Pompeii and Roman Ephesos," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 27, no. 1 (2004): 11.

[67]Osiek and Balch, *Families in the New Testament World*, 202. For a description of another large house in Herculaneum see David L. Balch, "Rich Pompeiian Houses, Shops for Rent, and the Huge Apartment Building in Herculaneum as Typical Spaces for Pauline House Churches," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 27, no. 1 (2004): 34. Balch states that this and other houses like it "could have accommodated far greater than 40 persons." Ibid., 41.

that the group did not contain many intellectuals, politicians, or persons of gentle birth";

but, as he goes on to say, the use of the phrase "not many" does "suggest that the group

did at least draw upon this minority to some extent."[68] Abraham Malherbe concurs:

"When Paul says that not many of the Corinthian Christians were from the upper social

strata, he assumes that some, at least, were."[69] Malherbe goes on to demonstrate that

Crispus, Erastus, and Gaius were likely wealthy individuals.[70] Gehring points out that

while the majority of the Corinthian church were from a lower social class, those whom

Paul baptized seem to all be from the upper levels (1 Cor 1:14-16).[71] This is probably due

to the fact that ministering to the wealthy seems to have been part of Paul's mission

strategy. As Bradley Blue notes, "Consistently, Paul's objective is the conversion of a

home owner who is capable of benefaction, including a house which was used as the

alternate venue in which the Christians assembled."[72] If the church at Corinth is at all

typical of Christian communities in the first century, then large houses would have been

available as venues for church gatherings.

The fact that some Christians in first century churches were wealthy coupled

with the findings of Osiek, Balch, and others on the large crowds that could be

accommodated in the homes of wealthy patrons suggests that the oft-repeated limit of

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[68]E. A. Judge, *The Social Pattern of Christian Groups in the First Century: Some Prolegomena to the Study of New Testament Ideas of Social Obligation* (London: Tyndale, 1960), 59. Theissen concurs with Judge's view that there was a mix of rich and poor in the membership of the early churches. Gerd Theissen, *The Social Setting of Pauline Christianity: Essays on Corinth* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982), 69.

[69]Malherbe, *Social Aspects*, 72.

[70]Ibid., 72-74.

[71]Gehring, *House Church and Mission*, 186. Lydia would have been wealthy as well (Acts 16:14), as well as Phoebe, a patron of the church of Cenchreae (Rom 16:1-2).

[72]Blue, "Acts and the House Church," 152.

fifty people per house church is unwarranted. As Balch states, by studying large Greco-

Roman homes,

> We learn that the conclusions in many books that early Pauline house churches were *necessarily* small and private are mistaken. . . . Some or many Christian assemblies may indeed have been small in number, but that conclusion does not follow from the archaeological investigation of the size of houses in Pompeii.[73]

This is very significant in light of the fact that the size limitations of homes is one of the

driving forces that lead scholars to claim that there were multiple house churches in each

citywide church. If the common assumption that only around fifty people could fit into a

home is done away with, and the capability of large homes to accommodate hundreds or

even thousands of people is put in its place, then the claim that multiple house churches

were necessary due to size limitations is shown to be unjustified. This means that multi-

site proponents cannot claim that there must have been networks of multiple house

churches due to the size restrictions in first century homes.

**Difference between Households
and House Churches**

Another problem with the claim that citywide churches were comprised of

multiple house churches is the fact that it is often based on an assumption that whenever a

Christian household is mentioned in the New Testament a house church is present.[74] If

multiple households in a city implies multiple house churches, then cities like Corinth

(where multiple Christian households are mentioned) would *ipso facto* have had multiple

house churches. The problem with this argument is that it is simply not true that

households were equivalent to house churches. The existence of house churches is often

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[73]Balch, "Spaces for Pauline House Churches," 30. Emphasis original.

[74]See above for scholars who assume this.

merely assumed by some scholars who see evidence for them whenever households are mentioned.

As was mentioned above, Gehring simply assumes that Lydia's house (Acts 16) was the base for a house church in Philippi. The problem with this, of course, is that nowhere in Acts 16 is mention made of a house church.[75] Verse 15 says that Lydia was baptized, "and her household as well," and that she urged Paul and his companions to "come to my house and stay," but a house church is not mentioned. Gehring employs the same assumptions about the Philippian jailer's baptized household (Acts 16:29-34), and Jason who "received" Paul and his companions when they were ministering in Thessalonica (Acts 17:7). Neither of these accounts mentions anything about a house church. It seems that Gehring is simply assuming the presence of a house church wherever a household is mentioned. Such assumptions do not seem warranted, however, because, as even Gehring notes, the ἐκκλησία and the οἶκος were not identical.[76] First Corinthians 11:20-22, 33-34 and 14:33b-35 clearly point to a distinction in Paul's mind between the private sphere of one's home and the public sphere of the church meeting. In 1 Corinthians 11:20-22, Paul rebukes the church for abusing the Lord's supper and asks the rhetorical question, "Do you not have houses to eat and drink in?" The implied answer is, "yes," which means that people from separate, private households came

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[75]It is possible that Acts 16:40 is a reference to a house church ("So they went out of the prison and visited Lydia. And when they had seen the brothers, they encouraged them and departed."), but Gehring does not reference this, and it cannot be certain that these "brothers" constituted a house church. In any case, if the house of Lydia did host a house church in Philippi, it was not because house*hold* is equivalent to house *church*, but simply because in this particular case the house of Lydia might have been used for the meetings of a house church.

[76]Gehring, *House Church and Mission*, 300. See Léo Laberge, review of *House Church and Mission: The Importance of Household Structures in Early Christianity*, by Roger Gehring, *Theoforum* 38 (2007): 99, who questions Gehring's "practical suggestion that every house mentioned in that context could be a 'house church.'" R. Alastair Campbell critiques Gehring on this point as well. Campbell, review, 669-71.

together (presumably in the house of Gaius [Rom 16:23]) for the public meetings of the church. Likewise, in 1 Corinthians 14:33b-35 Paul states that it is inappropriate for a woman to speak in church, but that "if there is anything they desire to learn" they may "ask their husbands at home" (v. 35). Here too there is a clear distinction between the sphere of the private household and that of the public assembly of multiple households. The multiple households in which members were to eat and drink, and in which wives were to inquire of their husbands, were not churches; they were simply the separate homes of church members and their families. As Stephen C. Barton notes, "These two passages make clear that Paul regarded certain kinds of activity as 'out of place' so far as (his view of) church was concerned and 'in place' so far as (his view of) household was concerned, and that he attempted to distinguish church from household accordingly."[77] It seems better to say, with Ekkehard and Wolfgang Stegemann, that the early house churches embraced an "orientation toward the ancient household, but no structural equivalence."[78] What this means for our discussion is that multiple house churches cannot be assumed in a city simply because multiple Christian households are present.

Whole Church Gatherings

Even if the scholars are right who argue that a citywide church was made up of multiple house churches, this argument still does not constitute precedent for contemporary multi-site church structure. This is because many of these same scholars point out the fact that there were times in which the entire church in a city came together

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[77]Stephen C. Barton, "Paul's Sense of Place: An Anthropological Approach to Community Formation in Corinth," *New Testament Studies* 32 (1986): 225.

[78]Ekkehard W. Stegemann and Wolfgang Stegemann, *The Jesus Movement: A Social History of Its First Century*, trans. O. C. Dean Jr. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999), 279.

in one place, something most multi-site churches never do. Gehring states that "the

primitive [Jerusalem] church gathered for two different types of worship services."[79] One

type of gathering was "in the temple in a large meeting as the *whole church*," and the

other was "in private homes as individual church bodies in small groups as *house

churches*."[80] The gatherings in the temple, says Gehring, were assemblies of the church

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[79]Gehring, *House Church and Mission*, 82.

[80]Ibid., 83. Emphasis original. In light of this statement, I am not certain what Gehring has in mind in a footnote that he adds to qualify it: "This does not mean that every member of the whole church in all of Jerusalem was gathered in the temple." He might mean that not every person had to be present for it to constitute a meeting of "the whole church" in the same way that not every person on a church's membership role today must be present at an official church gathering for one to be justified in saying that the church has met. Robert and Julia Banks point out that, given the background of the Old Testament, the Jews were already used to meeting in both small and large groups for worship. Robert Banks and Julia Banks, *The Church Comes Home* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1998), 25-27. Though Gehring calls the Jerusalem church's small group meetings that took place in homes "house churches," he seems unjustified in doing so. The phrase κατ᾽ οἶκον in Acts 2:46 should not be rendered "house church," but "in their homes" (so ESV and NIV) or "from house to house" (NASB). Bauer's lexicon explains that in Acts 2:46b, κατ᾽ οἶκον is being used to describe "places viewed serially," a "distributive use" that could be translated "x *by* x" or "*from* x *to* x" (BDAG, 512), or, in this case, "house by house" or "from house to house." The ἐκκλησία in Jerusalem met in a large group ("in the temple") and in small groups ("house by house" or "from house to house"). This does not mean that each house was viewed as a separate house *church* (an entity denoted by the slightly different phrase ἡ κατ᾽ οἶκον ἐκκλησία), but that there were groups of believers gathered in various homes. This would be similar to a contemporary church that has multiple small groups that meet in homes. Gregg Allison sees a similarity between the use of κατ᾽ οἶκον in Acts 2:46 and the phrase ἡ κατ᾽ οἶκον ἐκκλησία (Rom 16:5; 1 Cor 16:19; Col 4:15; Phlm 2), arguing that if the former phrase means that the Jerusalem church distributed itself into various home groups, then the latter phrase means that, for example, the church in Corinth was distributed among various home groups that are similar to the campuses or sites of modern multi-site churches (Gregg R. Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers: The Doctrine of the Church*, Foundations of Evangelical Theology [Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012], chap. 9). The problem with this argument, however, is that the phrases κατ᾽ οἶκον and ἡ κατ᾽ οἶκον ἐκκλησία function differently. For separate house churches Paul does not use the phrase κατ᾽ οἶκον, but, rather, ἡ κατ᾽ οἶκον ἐκκλησία. This is a slightly different use of κατά, and is classified differently by Bauer. While in the phrase κατ᾽ οἶκον, κατά is a "marker of spatial aspect" used "of places viewed serially" (a "distributive use"), in the phrase ἡ κατ᾽ οἶκον ἐκκλησία, κατά is a "marker of spatial aspect" connoting "isolation or separateness." In other words, according to Bauer, ἡ κατ᾽ οἶκον ἐκκλησία should not be translated "the church distributed into the house," but "the church in the house" (BDAG, 511-12). Thus, when Paul writes of Aquila and Prisca, "Greet also the church in their house [τὴν κατ᾽ οἶκον αὐτῶν ἐκκλησίαν]" (Rom 16:5), or "Aquila and Prisca, together with the church in their house [τῇ κατ᾽ οἶκον αὐτῶν ἐκκλησίᾳ]" (1 Cor 16:19), he is not signaling by the use of κατά that their house group was part of a citywide church that was distributed into multiple house churches or house groups. That would be to import meaning into this verse that is not denoted by the syntax of the sentence and is nowhere signaled by the context. Paul was simply relating a greeting to (Rom 16:5) and from (1 Cor 16:19) the church (ἐκκλησία) that met in the house of Aquila and Prisca. Here, the use of κατά signals that Paul had Aquila and Prisca's church in view (not some other church)—the church that met in *their* home. Paul was considering *this* church in "isolation or separateness" (to quote Bauer) from other churches, not implying that this church was part of a conglomeration of other sites that formed some type of citywide church. The same is true for the other two uses of ἡ κατ᾽ οἶκον ἐκκλησία in the New Testament (See Col 4:15 ["Nympha

as "a publicly visible unit."[81]

The fact that the Jerusalem church[82] met together at the "whole church" level is made clear in texts such as Acts 2:44 and 5:12. Acts 2:44 says of the Jerusalem church, "And all who believed were together and had all things in common." What the ESV translates "together," in this verse, is the Greek phrase "ἐπὶ τὸ αὐτό," which is best translated "in the same place" or "in the assembly."[83] The same phrase is used in Acts 1:15, where the disciples were gathered together waiting on the Holy Spirit: "And in those days, Peter, standing up in the midst of the brothers (a multitude of about one hundred and twenty names was in the same place [ἐπὶ τὸ αὐτό]), said."[84] The phrase is used again in Acts 2:1, when the believers were gathered together on the day of Pentecost: "And when the day of Pentecost was being fulfilled, all of them were together in the same place [ἐπὶ τὸ αὐτό]."[85] The use of ἐπὶ τὸ αὐτό in Acts 2:44 is similar to these other uses. The whole Jerusalem church, which now numbered in the thousands, were all

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and the church in her house"] and Phlm 2 ["the church in your [Philemon's] house"]).

[81]Gehring, *House Church and Mission*. Gehring holds that the Corinthian church came together as a whole church as well. Ibid., 139, 171.

[82]In Acts, the church (ἐκκλησία) in Jerusalem is always referred to in the singular (Acts 5:11; 8:1, 3; 11:22; 12:1, 5; 15:4, 22).

[83]See Ferguson, "When You Come Together," 202-08; BDAG, 363, who gives this construction as one of three categories of the use of ἐπί, "answering the question 'where?'"; and W. Köhler, "*epi*," in *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Horst Balz and Gerhard Schneider (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 22, who categorizes this construction as "Local." Ferguson notes that this is also the way the phrase is used by the Apostolic Fathers. He writes that when the Apostolic Fathers use ἐπὶ τὸ αὐτό in the context of church life, the phrase always refers "to the public or common assembly of the church." He goes on to state, "We might appropriately translate *epi to auto* in every case 'in the assembly.' *Thus instead of a more general reference to unity or fellowship, there is a more specific reference to a definite expression of that unity: the assembly of the church, more particularly the worship assembly of the church*" ("When You Come Together," 206; emphasis added).

[84]My translation.

[85]My translation. Ἐπὶ τὸ αὐτό is used yet again in Acts 2:47, which states, "And the Lord added those who were being saved day by day to the assembly [ἐπὶ τὸ αὐτό]."

assembling together "in the same place." We are told in Acts 2:46 that this place was the temple, and we are further informed by Acts 5:12 that one place in the temple that was used for this large type of gathering was Solomon's Portico. Gehring is correct, then; the believers in Jerusalem gathered "in the temple in a large meeting as the *whole church*."[86]

The practice of gathering together for whole church assemblies is seen in the church of Corinth as well. In 1 Corinthians 11, Paul states that when the believers in Corinth "come together *as a church* [ἐκκλησία]" (v. 18),[87] they are "meeting together in the same place [ἐπὶ τὸ αὐτό]" (v. 20).[88] In 14:23, it is "the *whole* church [ἐκκλησία]" that "comes together in the same place [ἐπὶ τὸ αὐτό]."[89] Writing from Corinth, Paul says, in Romans 16:23, that the house of Gaius (cf. 1 Cor 1:14) was one such place used for whole church gatherings in this city: "Gaius, who is host to me and to the whole church, greets you."[90] So, the church in Corinth, like the church in Jerusalem, had whole church gatherings in which all the believers assembled together in the same location. Gordon Fee is surely correct when he comments on 1 Corinthians 11:18 ("when you come together as a church [ἐκκλησία]"), "The people of God may be called the 'church/ assembly' first of all because they regularly assembly as a 'church/assembly,'" and that "this is further confirmed by the ἐπὶ τὸ αὐτό (in the same place) in verse 20, which is

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[86]Gehring, *House Church and Mission*, 83. Emphasis original.

[87]Anthony C. Thiselton says that this phrase refers to times when the Corinthian believers met "*in one place* as a church" (Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000], 857). Emphasis original.

[88]My translation.

[89]My translation.

[90]Thomas R. Schreiner holds that "ἐκκλησία here represents the local church and that Gaius provided a place for the meeting of the entire assembly." He goes on to say that "Gaius was obviously a man of some wealth to support the church in this way" (*Romans*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament [Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1998], 808).

nearly synonymous with this present usage [of ἐκκλησία]."[91] Whole church gatherings were a central and constituting factor in the churches of the New Testament.

Though it does not explain the way a church in a city would function, the plural use of ἐκκλησία serves as evidence against a provincial or national church, and shows that (at least at this regional level) the principle seems to be in use that unless the Christians of a particular location could all meet together in the way the churches in Jerusalem and Corinth did, then they were not considered a single church, but a plurality of churches. Robert Banks writes,

> The plural references to "the *churches* in Galatia" (Gal 1:2; 1 Cor 16:1), "the *churches* of Asia" (1 Cor 16:19), "the *churches* in Macedonia" (2 Cor 8:1), and "the *churches* of Judaea" (Gal 1:22) demonstrate that the idea of a unified provincial or national church is as foreign to Paul's thinking as the notion of a universal church. Only if there were an occasional provincial meeting of all Christians could he have spoken of them in this way.[92]

Bruce Button and Fika J. Van Rensburg agree with Banks, and argue that "when he [Paul] intended to refer to groups of believers in different places he used the plural ἐκκλησίαι or a statement such as 'every church' (Rom 16:4; 1 Cor 4:17; 7:17; 11:16; 16:1, 19; 2 Cor 8:1, 18, 19, 23, 24; 11:8, 28; 12:13; Gal 1:2, 22; 1 Thess 2:14; 2 Thess 1:4)."[93] They go

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[91]Fee, *First Corinthians*, 537, n. 29. So Barrett, *First Corinthians*, 262, who writes of 1 Cor 11:20, "ἐπὶ τὸ αὐτό means much the same as ἐν ἐκκλησίᾳ in verse 18."

[92]Banks, *Paul's Idea of Community*, 31. Emphasis original. Acts 9:31 would not be an exception to this. The singular use of ἐκκλησία there is likely a use of the word in the abstract. The vast majority of the time, when the New Testament speaks of believers in a region in which it would have been impossible for everyone to regularly meet together, the plural ἐκκλησίαι is used. BDAG classifies the use of ἐκκλησία in Acts 9:31 as an example of the word being used to describe "the totality of Christians living and meeting in a particular locality or larger geographical area, but not necessarily limited to one meeting place" (BDAG, 304). This is similar to saying, "The church throughout Tennessee." On another note, Banks' rejection of the concept of a universal church is not a rejection of any category whatsoever for "all Christians." While differing from those who hold to a universal church, his view of the "heavenly church" is an attempt to account for this. Banks, *Paul's Idea of Community*, 37-46.

[93]Bruce Button and Fika J. Van Rensburg, "The 'House Churches' in Corinth," *Neotestamentica: The Journal of the New Testament Society of South Africa* 37, no. 1 (2003): 4.

on to say that "this criterion [for what constitutes a church as *one* church] may be more precisely specified by saying that, for a group of Christians to be called an ἐκκλησία, it had to gather together."[94] A single church was not present unless its members were characterized by meeting together in one place. This is the view held by Branick as well. He writes,

> While Paul affirms the existence of the private or single family house church, and while for Paul that house church remains the basic cell of the local church, he clearly wants those house churches to form a body with each other within the city-wide church. Instead of a group of house churches closed to each other or even hostile to each other, Paul envisions apparently a kind of federation of several house churches forming a local church. The Pauline local church existed thus on two levels, both connected with households, 1) a household assembly of an individual family and those associated with that family, and 2) a city-wide level meeting in a private home but consisting of several families.[95]

Branick goes on to point out the similarities that this had with the citywide assemblies of Greek cities: "In gathering the house churches together for a city-wide assembly and calling this city-wide assembly an *ekklēsia*, Paul most probably had in mind the city-wide assemblies of the Greek cities, assemblies called *ekklēsia*."[96] Thus, even if there were multiple house churches in a city, they would have also been expected to have meetings of "the whole church."

The problem with the argument that contemporary multi-site churches are simply a new expression of the structure of New Testament house churches is that almost all contemporary multi-site churches are missing Branick's second level of New Testament church structure. The multiple sites or campuses of most multi-site churches

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[94]Ibid.

[95]Branick, *House Church in Paul*, 26. See also ibid., 80, where he states that "Paul applies the term [ἐκκλησία] to a group viewed as regularly meeting. He never applies the term to refer, as we do today, to local assemblies seen as part of a larger unit."

[96]Ibid., 27.

never have a citywide (or state-wide, nation-wide, or world-wide for some churches) assembly in which the members of each individual unit gather together in assembly at the corporate level. This is not a minor difference; rather, this gets to the heart of the major problem with multi-site churches. An ἐκκλησία (assembly) cannot be *one* ἐκκλησία (assembly) unless its members are characterized by actually assembling together.[97] If multi-site proponents are going to justify their view, they cannot do it by trying to root their practice in the structure of New Testament house churches.

Conclusion

This chapter has sought to show that proponents of multi-site church structure are unjustified in claiming that the structure of New Testament house churches is precedent for multi-site. Evidence from scholars who have written on New Testament house churches, and that might be understood to serve as a biblical basis for multi-site has been presented and found lacking in at least four areas. First, it has been shown that the presence of multiple house churches in one citywide church is often assumed rather than proven. Second, the claim that a citywide church was necessarily comprised of multiple house churches due to space limitations has been shown to be false. First century houses could hold far more than is commonly assumed. Third, the tendency by some scholars to see the existence of a house church every time a Christian household is mentioned has been shown to be faulty. And fourth, even if those scholars who argue for multiple house churches per citywide church are correct, there is evidence (as even they

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[97]It is possible for a multi-site church to be "characterized by actually assembling together" if it holds whole church gatherings in which the members from all the sites assemble. This chapter is not addressing the question of how frequent such whole church gatherings should be, but is arguing that the church must be characterized by such gatherings if it is to have a right to claim to be one church rather than multiple churches.

would agree) that these churches would have also come together in assemblies of the whole church. Thus, if there were not multiple house churches in a citywide church (a view that is quite possible given points one through three above), then multi-site proponents would obviously not be able to base their church structure in that of New Testament house churches. On the other hand, if there were multiple house churches in a citywide church, multi-site would still not be able to claim this as precedent for their church structure, because these New Testament churches would have had assemblies of the entire church, something that the majority of multi-site churches never do.[98] Therefore, the conclusion of this chapter is that New Testament house churches are not precedent for multi-site.

Concluding Remarks on Chapters 2-5

Thus far this dissertation has sought to argue for the first part of its thesis: a multi-site church that is not characterized by campus-wide gatherings does not have a sound biblical or theological basis for considering itself one church. First, the hermeneutic I am using to make this biblical and theological argument was put forth in chapter 2. To determine whether a church practice like multi-site is biblical, it was argued that one must determine whether that church practice goes *with* or *against* the grain of Scripture. In the case of multi-site ecclesiology, I have argued that this means noting how the theme of the people of God as assembly is developed throughout the canon. In chapter 3, it was argued that Israel could be referred to as "the assembly of the Lord" by virtue of the fact that the people as a whole were characterized by assembling

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[98]See introduction to this dissertation for an explanation that the type of multi-site being critiqued here is the type that does not involve whole church gatherings of all the sites.

together in one place for worship. In chapter 4, it was argued that this pattern continues in the New Testament as God's assembly (his "church" [ἐκκλησία]) is able to be referred to as his "assembly" by virtue of the fact that the people as a whole are characterized by assembling together in one place for worship (i.e., the heavenly-eschatological assembly). There is ultimately one "church" or "assembly" in the new covenant—the heavenly-eschatological assembly. And this ultimate assembly manifests itself in the form of multiple local assemblies, or churches, on earth. These local assemblies, like their ultimate heavenly counterpart, are able to be referred to as a single "assembly" (ἐκκλησία) by virtue of the fact that the members of it are characterized by assembling together in one place for worship. This is argued in chapter 5 where it is shown that the members of New Testament house churches were, indeed, characterized by assembling together in one place for worship, and that, based on first century Greco-Roman domestic architecture, there is no reason to believe that such whole church gatherings could not take place in a member's home. To summarize, chapters 3-5 show that the clear pattern that runs through both Testaments is one in which the people of God can claim to be *one* assembly by virtue of the fact that the people as a whole gather in one place, together, for worship. A multi-site church whose members are not characterized by assembling in one place for worship does not have a sound biblical or theological basis for considering itself one church because this practice would cut *against* the very grain of the Scriptures themselves, being inconsistent with the pattern of God's people as assembly in both the Old and New Testaments.[99]

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[99]Gregg Allison criticizes those who give too much weight to the idea of ἐκκλησία meaning "assembly." He writes, "This issue [of whether the Jerusalem church was multi-site] cannot be argued or decided on the basis of the word ἐκκλησία alone. Some opponents of multisite churches base their criticism on the alleged fact that the word means 'assembly.'" Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers*, 313 n. 47. He goes on to say that this view makes a methodological, lexical, and logical error. My response to

The remaining two chapters take up the second part of this dissertation's thesis: a multi-site church that is not characterized by campus-wide gatherings is inconsistent with historic congregationalism. As was mentioned in the introduction to the dissertation, these chapters do not give a defense of congregationalism; rather, they simply show that a multi-site church that is not characterized by campus-wide gatherings is connectional and not congregational in its church government.

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this critique is as follows. First, Allison says that positions like mine make a methodological error. According to him, we cannot simply say that ἐκκλησία means "assembly" and think that this settles the multi-site issue, because "we do not define a concept by defining a word" (ibid.). My response to this criticism is that I agree with him, and I do not know anyone who claims that multi-site is wrong simply because ἐκκλησία means assembly. There is a whole biblical theology of the people of God as the "assembly of the Lord" (from Old Testament to New Testament) that stands behind ἐκκλησία and that plays a major role in the way I, at least, approach the question (see chapters 3 and 4 of this dissertation). Second, Allison says that positions like mine are making a lexical error. He states that ἐκκλησία does not always refer to a literal assembly, and then cites texts that demonstrate this, arguing that this gives people warrant for using the word to refer to groups that do not assemble. My response to this criticism is that I agree that there are instances in which ἐκκλησία does not refer to an actual assembly—Acts 9:31 for instance. Where I do not agree with Allison is in concluding that this serves as warrant for a multi-site structure. Obviously ἐκκλησία can refer to the church in its scattered state. I see this being true on at least two levels. At one level, a local church is still an ἐκκλησία even when they are not in their gathered state. So, Calvary Baptist Church is still an ἐκκλησία on Monday morning when the people are scattered, but they are capable of being referred to as an ἐκκλησία because they are characterized by actually gathering together on a regular basis. The other level at which I see ἐκκλησία being used abstractly is when it refers to a group of Christians that do not necessarily make up one church. Again, Acts 9:31: "The church throughout the region." This is like saying, "the church in China," or "the church in West Tennessee." It does not mean that there was literally one church in the region made up of multiple campuses. And thirdly, Allison says that positions like mine are making a logical error. This logical error, he claims, is that it is assumed that the assembly referred to by the word "ἐκκλησία" is an assembly of all the members of the church. Since this claim is simply assumed and not proven, those who argue against multi-site are making a logical error by basing their argument on a faulty assumption. My response to this is that I, at least, do not make the assumption that the local ἐκκλησία is an assembly of all its members. I do not assume this, I argue for it based on the evidence of "whole church" gatherings found in early New Testament churches (see pp. 119-25 of this chapter). Thus, I am not basing my argument on an assumption that is not proven, but rather on a claim that the New Testament evidence supports. What all of this means is that Allison's concluding statement that, "Accordingly, any approach that appeals to the meaning of the word ἐκκλησία as an argument against multisite churches is misguided because it commits [these] three errors" (ibid.), is faulty. Some who argue against multi-site might be guilty of committing these three errors, but the arguments made in this dissertation are not guilty of such a charge.

CHAPTER 6

IS MULTI-SITE BAPTIST?

Introduction

This chapter and the next argue for the second half of this dissertation's thesis:

a multi-site church that is not characterized by campus-wide gatherings is inconsistent

with historic congregationalism. This chapter makes this argument by focussing on one

prominent congregationalist group—Baptists.

Some theologians favorable to the multi-site movement have argued that

precedent for multi-site church structure exists in early Baptist history. To support their

claims, these theologians appeal to G. Hugh Wamble's dissertation entitled, "The

Concept and Practice of Christian Fellowship: The Connectional and Inter-

Denominational Aspects Thereof, among Seventeenth Century English Baptists."[1]

Wamble shows that some early English Baptist churches considered themselves one

church though they consisted of multiple meetings and meeting places. One theologian

who has used Wamble's work to argue that multi-site church structure is consistent with

historic Baptist ecclesiology is Chad Owen Brand. In his book on the Cooperative

Program, Brand states,

> In some cities individual congregations are developing several satellite churches.
> This does not necessarily entail a violation of Baptist principles. Many seventeenth-

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[1] G. Hugh Wamble, "The Concept and Practice of Christian Fellowship: The Connectional and Inter-Denominational Aspects Thereof, among Seventeenth Century English Baptists" (Th.D. diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1955).

century Baptist churches existed in two or more locations at the same time for various reasons, but they retained a commitment to Baptist integrity.[2]

Brand cites Wamble here to support his claim. Another theologian that has recently appealed to Wamble to claim that multi-site has a home among Baptists is Gregg R. Allison. In an article entitled "Theological Defense of Multi-Site," Allison argues that "concrete precedents for multi-site churches can be found in seventeenth-century British Baptist history," and that "consideration of these historical precedents may help to dispel the notion that the contemporary multi-site church phenomenon is merely the latest (twentieth- and twenty-first century) fad fueled by business models of franchising and branding, a lust for notoriety, or other insidious reasons."[3] Allison bases his claim on Wamble's work.

It is in response to Wamble and to these theologians who have appealed to his work to claim precedent for multi-site among early English Baptists that this chapter is addressed. The reason Wamble's work is singled out here is because his is the only work on early English Baptist "scattered" churches of which I am aware, and because his work is often referenced by multi-site proponents who argue that there is precedent for multi-site among these early "scattered" Baptist churches. This chapter will argue that though scattered congregations did exist among some seventeenth century English Baptist churches, this practice was short-lived and did not become part of the Baptist identity that was just beginning to take shape in this early period.[4] This will be argued in two steps.

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[2]Chad Owen Brand and David E. Hankins, *One Sacred Effort: The Cooperative Program of Southern Baptists* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2005), 72.

[3]Gregg R. Allison, "Theological Defense of Multi-Site," *9Marks eJournal* 6, no. 3 (May-June 2009): 14 [on-line]; accessed 14 November 2009; available in PDF from http://involve.9marks.org/site/DocServer/eJournal200963MayJune.pdf?docID=641; Internet.

[4]On the concept of Baptist Identity, see R. Stanton Norman, *More Than Just a Name: Preserving Our Baptist Identity* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2001); idem, *The Baptist Way:*

First, in order to understand the nature of the scattered church among early English Baptists, a description of the structures of the nine churches that Wamble cites as scattered congregations will be given. Second, it will be demonstrated that this form of church structure fell out of practice very early in Baptist life, and was replaced by a commitment to the autonomy of the local assembly. Thus, while some examples of early Baptist churches may be found whose structure is similar to modern day multi-site church structure (though, as will be shown, the number is less than Wamble claims), this practice never became part of Baptist identity, and, thus, should not be considered "Baptist."

Some Early "Scattered" Baptist Churches

Hugh Wamble only discusses two of the nine churches that he claims were one congregation meeting in multiple locations. The sources that he believes prove that the other seven churches held to this structure are mentioned in footnotes.[5] For this reason, much of this section will be given to discussing what these sources actually demonstrate. It will be argued that while some of the churches he cites did seem to practice a one church in many locations model, for many of the churches Wamble mentions the evidence cited is not sufficient to support his claim.

The Church at Ilston

Of the Ilston church in Wales (founded 1649), Hugh Wamble states, "The Ilston church, organized by John Myles, was composed of widely scattered

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Distinctives of a Baptist Church (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2005); David S. Dockery, ed., *Southern Baptist Identity: An Evangelical Denomination Faces the Future* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009). This chapter will not give a full description of Baptist identity, but restricts itself to dealing with the commonly acknowledged Baptist distinctive of local church autonomy (on which, see the sources cited above).

[5]Wamble, "Christian Fellowship," 255 n. 39; 256 n. 40; 257 nn. 41-43; 258 n. 44.

congregations."[6] He bases this statement upon two works on the Ilston church that quote from the church's records, one by Frank Lee that appeared in *The Baptist Quarterly* in 1949,[7] and one by Joshua Thomas that appeared in the *Baptist Annual Register* in 1801.[8] Upon examining these works, one finds that most of what is written gives an account of how multiple, independent churches came together to form an association. One allusion is made to the church at Ilston having "branches"; but, as will be shown below, these should probably be understood as particular churches that were, nevertheless, connected under the umbrella of one church government.

Early on some of the churches in Wales that had been planted by John Miles[9] joined forces for the advancement of the gospel. There was a scarcity of preachers at the time, so the churches decided to appoint men to go out into the surrounding villages so that the Christians there could have someone to minister to them. Thomas includes the following excerpts from the minutes of the association, showing that they recognized the need for preachers to be sent out:

> The Brethren, previously weighing the great scarcity of ministers that will soundly hold forth the word of truth in *Caermarthenshire*, and the seasonable opportunity now afforded by the Providence of God for the propagation of truth in those parts, do judge that brother *David Davis* shall henceforth endeavour to preach two first days of every two months . . . and that brother *Myles* shall preach that way one first day in every two months; and that brother *Proffer* shall preach there one first day in every two months.[10]

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[6]Ibid., 256.

[7]Frank Lee, "The Ter-Centenary of Ilston, 1649-1949," *The Baptist Quarterly* 13 (1949-50): 147-57.

[8]Joshua Thomas, *A History of the Baptist Association in Wales*, in *The Baptist Annual Register* 4 (1801-02), supplement.

[9]Though Miles' last name sometimes occurs as Myles, Frank Lee states that "Mr. Rhys Phillips in the *Trafodion* 1928, *Cymdeithas Hanes Bedyddwyr Cymru* supplies sufficient evidence to prove that the correct spelling of the name is Miles and not Myles" (Lee, "The Ter-Centenary of Ilston," 148).

[10]Thomas, *A History of the Baptist Association in Wales*, 6. Spelling in these and other

These associated churches also understood the need to support these men financially, as

traveling expenses and the general use of their time required some reimbursement:

> [It was agreed that] these ministers should be assisted by the churches and
> contributions made for that purpose. For that year it was settled, that each of the
> three churches should collect ten pounds among themselves, in the whole thirty
> pounds, and a Brother in each church was there named to take care of that
> contribution; the first collection to be made as soon as convenient after that
> agreement, without burdening any of the Brethren.[11]

In this way, Thomas notes, these churches committed "to assist each other, and to

propagate the truth."[12] Page after page of Thomas' account of this first Baptist

association of churches in Wales is given to the ways in which these multiple churches

cooperated together to spread the gospel and to provide preachers and teachers for the

newly planted churches not yet fortunate enough to have their own local pastors.

In a few places in his work, Thomas implies that the church at Ilston itself was

made up of multiple branches that constituted but one church. For instance, at one place

Thomas mentions that at Averavon, there was "a branch of the *Ilston* church, which lay

then very wide."[13] This is all that is mentioned by Thomas about this matter. The other

source cited by Wamble sheds a little more light on the structure of the Ilston church, and

seems to show that what Thomas calls "branches" of the Ilston church were considered

"churches" that were related very closely to the church at Ilston. Lee states that John

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documents quoted in this chapter has been modernized.

[11]Ibid.

[12]Ibid., 7.

[13]Ibid., 11.

Miles' "genius" as a church planter "was not only to found churches but to exercise considerable control over them."[14] He states,

> In October, 1650, it was decided at a special church meeting that there should be "breaking of bread" at Ilston every third Sunday for all members, but that those who lived in West Gower should meet on the other two Sundays at Llanddewi, and those who lived in the Welsh districts of Carmarthen at the house of "Jenett" Jones near Llanelly. Spiritual welfare enquiries were held in the Welsh districts on Tuesdays, at Ilston on Wednesdays, at Llanddewi on Thursdays, every week, but Church censures were only given at Ilston, the mother church, on the Wednesday morning of every third week.[15]

The ordinances were observed at the multiple locations, but with certain stipulations that protected the centrality of Ilston. Lee explains,

> By February, 1651, it was deemed advisable to baptize at Aberavon, but the right to receive members into full communion was reserved for Ilston. In April, 1651, the Lords Supper was permitted to be held once a quarter at Baglan or Aberavon, with the proviso that all members must partake of communion once a quarter at Ilston and that two or more members must attend Ilston every Communion Sunday to give account of "the condition of their church."[16]

It is interesting to note that, according to the original records cited in the last line of the above quotation, the meetings that met outside of Ilston were considered churches. When they came to the joint meeting at Ilston, they were to give an account of "the condition of their *church* [emphasis added]." Thus, even if Thomas is justified in calling the meeting that took place in Aberavon a "branch" of the Ilston church, it is also true that this meeting was considered a "church" in itself.

As far as the church at Ilston is concerned, the evidence cited by Wamble seems to be unclear on whether the church there was one church in multiple locations, or

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[14]Lee, "The Ter-Centenary of Ilston," 149.

[15]Ibid., 149-50.

[16]Ibid., 150. Citing, at the end, the original church records.

whether multiple local churches were subsumed under one church government whose base of operations was at Ilston. Either way, as will be shown in the second part of this chapter, this form of connectionalism did not last long for Baptists, and should not be considered an identifying mark of Baptist ecclesiology.

The Church at Fenstanton

Wamble also mentions the Fenstanton church, Huntingdonshire (founded early 1640s) as an example of a church with a scattered congregation made up of multiple meetings and meeting places. He states, "In the Fenstanton church, conventicles were held in three or four . . . places."[17] The problem with Wamble's statement is that he does not cite any evidence to support this claim. He only cites one source in his section on Fenstanton, and the citations he gives do not prove that the church met in multiple "coventicles." At one place, he cites his source as proving that the business meetings of the church were sometimes held at Fenstanton and sometimes at Caxton, which were eight miles apart.[18] The only other citation of this source that Wamble gives is one that shows that the membership of the Fenstanton church "was largely centered in six centers," and gives the places in which these church members lived.[19] It is true that the original records of the Fenstanton church reveal that many of the members lived in different locations, but this in itself does not prove that there were conventicles in each of

[17]Wamble, "Christian Fellowship," 259.

[18]Edmond Mayle, *The Records of the Fenstanton Church*, in *Minutes, Journal, and Correspondence, 1844-58 of the Hanserd Knollys Society*, vol. 9, ed. E. B. Underhill (London: Hanserd Knollys Society for the Publication of the Works of Early English and other Baptist Writers, n.d.), 1 n. 1.

[19]Ibid., 251-56.

these locations. There might have been, but this cannot be concluded from the sources

that Wamble cites.

The original records do speak of general meetings of the church. For example,

one entry in the minutes begins in the following way: "On the fourteenth day of the ninth

month, at a general meeting of the congregation held at Fenystanton."[20] But this is

merely a reference to the regular business meeting of the church; it does not suggest that

the church was made up of multiple conventicles. Thus, Fenstanton might have been one

church in multiple locations, but this is not something that Wamble has sufficiently

proven.

The Church at Porton

Wamble does not comment on the remaining seven churches that he claims had

scattered congregations made up of multiple meetings, but cites numerous works that he

believes support his general claim. For the Baptist church in Porton, Wamble cites Arthur

Tucker's article entitled, "Porton Baptist Church 1655-85."[21] Tucker's article includes

much from the original church records. According to the church records, the Porton

church was made up of "the Brethren and Sisters residing about Wallop, Sarum,

Amesbury, Stoverd, Chalke, Porton and the parts adjacent," all of which "met together as

a church of Jesus Christ" on "the third day of the fourth month 1655."[22] Tucker notes

that, originally, "the list of members numbers 111, drawn from twenty villages and

hamlets of South Wilts and West Hants, within a radius of twelve miles of the central

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[20]Ibid., 246.

[21]Arthur Tucker, "Porton Baptist Church, 1655-85," *Transactions of the Baptist Historical Society* 1 (1908-09), 56-61.

[22]Ibid., 56.

meeting place at Porton,"[23] and that "Porton seems to have been chosen as head-quarters for this district."[24] Tucker also states that baptism services were "held at various villages from which the converts were drawn," and that the "monthly Church meetings were held at Amesbury, Stoverd, Chalke and Porton in rotation, the intervening 'first days' being arranged for at each monthly gathering."[25] If the Porton church did consider itself one congregation, then this would seem to be a case in which multiple local gatherings considered themselves one church.[26]

The Church at Dalwood

The next church that Wamble cites as an example of a scattered congregation is the church at Dalwood. According to Wamble's source, this church was founded in 1650, and was made up of "17 members at Axminster, 15 at Clyton, 14 at Honiton, and 32 others at various hamlets near, besides 22 at Shute and Dalwood."[27] The only time mention is made in this source of the Dalwood church meeting in various geographic locations during the seventeenth century is during a period in 1653 when their new meeting house was still under construction. W. T. Whitley states that, during this time, "meetings were not only held in Kilmington weekly, till the new house was erected, but also thrice a month at Ottery and at Honiton."[28] Evidently in 1654 the church members

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[23]Ibid.

[24]Ibid., 57.

[25]Ibid., 59.

[26]It should be pointed out again, however, that the whole church did meet together once a month.

[27]W. T. Whitley, "Loughwood and Honiton, 1650-1800," *Transactions of the Baptist Historical Society* 4 (1914-15), 131.

[28]Ibid.

who lived in Honiton had shown an interest in becoming their own separate church, but this request was denied.[29] Over a decade later, it is evident that the group at Honiton did have separate meetings in their own village, since Whitley notes that in 1773 there was at Honiton "no resident Baptist minister, though there was a good parsonage"; rather a man named Adams "was coming over monthly" to supply for them.[30] From Whitley's article (Wamble's source) it is not clear how long these separate meetings had been occurring.

It is interesting to note that at the end of Whitley's article he states that even though there were Baptist tendencies and ministers associated with the Dalwood church, it was not officially considered a Baptist church until the beginning of the nineteenth century. "The Baptists," Whitley writes, "date their origin as a church from 1817."[31] Thus, even if the church at Dalwood did meet in distinct locations while maintaining that they were one church, there is some question about whether it was, at the time, a Baptist church. The progressive transition toward a thoroughgoing Baptist identity exemplified in the case of the Dalwood church—the practice of believer's baptism, the influence of Baptist ministers, and then a self-conscious commitment to Baptist identity—seems to be the way in which Baptist identity developed in many of these early dissenting churches. Baptist churches did not appear overnight after the Reformation; rather, they developed as a result of the blossoming of a Baptist identity.

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[29]Ibid., 132, 134.

[30]Ibid., 142.

[31]Ibid., 144.

The Church at Bedfordshire

It does not seem that Wamble's claim that the church at Bedfordshire was one church made up of multiple meetings and meeting places can be substantiated by the works he cites. For support he appeals to *The Church Book of the Bunyan Meeting 1650-1821* and an article by G. E. Page entitled, "Some Baptist Churches on the Borders of Bedfordshire and Huntingdonshire."[32] The page in the Bunyan meeting book that Wamble cites indicates that there was a lack of knowledge of the wellbeing of many of the church's members, and that

> it was agreed that [in order that] the church may have a more perfect account of the state of her members for some to . . . for up wards of visiting our friends there be appointed one or two here of Bedford for friends, and one for every other town, and that they give an account to the Church at their monthly meeting, of their state.[33]

After one more line that is almost completely illegible to me, the records list the men who were appointed by the church for the task of visiting these members with whom the rest of the church had lost touch. It seems, then, that the Bunyan church had members scattered about various towns in Bedfordshire; what it does not seem to indicate is that the people in each town were holding meetings separate from the rest of the church. There could be any number of explanations for why part of Bunyan's church had gone missing for a time, chief among these being the threat of persecution.[34]

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[32]G. E. Page, "Some Baptist Churches on the Borders of Bedfordshire and Huntingdonshire," *Baptist Quarterly* 11 (1942-45): 225-32. No transcription of the Bunyan meeting book has been published, but a copy can be accessed in the Sothern Seminary archives.

[33]*The Church Book of the Bunyan Meeting 1650-1821*, 20. The second line is unclear in the original. This is the only page from this book that Wamble cites.

[34]Wamble himself notes that persecution is one of the main reasons Baptist churches sometimes scattered. Wamble, "Christian Fellowship," 252-53.

The article by Page that Wamble cites also does not seem to demonstrate that there was one church in Bedfordshire that met in multiple locations. Mention is made of the Hail Weston church meeting "on alternate Sundays at Little Staughton and Hail Weston,"[35] but this is simply one congregation that met in a different place every other week, probably to be fair to the residents of each town. Mention is also made in this article to the sending out of gifted men from the Hail Weston church to supply other churches that were in need, such as "the Church of Christ at Rushden."[36] The churches that were supplied, however, were clearly distinct churches and not parts of the Hail Weston church. Thus, Wamble seems incorrect to include the church at Bedfordshire in his list of churches made up of multiple assemblies.

The Church at Kensworth

Wamble also seems misguided to claim that the Kensworth church was one church in multiple locations, or at least misguided to base this assertion on the evidence he cites. In James Stuart's history of Beechen Grove Baptist Church, Watford (one of Wamble's sources), Stuart states,

> The influence of the [Kensworth] church extended far and wide, not only to Hemel Hempstead and St. Albans, but to Bedford to the North; to Pirton, Hitchin and Baldock to the East, and even into Cambridgeshire. John Bunyan . . . was one of its evangelists in connection with the branch of the Church at Bedford.[37]

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[35]Page, "Some Baptist Churches," 228.

[36]Ibid., 230.

[37]James Stuart, *Beechen Grove Baptist Church, Watford: Memorials of Two Hundred Years and More* (London: Kingsgate, 1907), 7.

The question, then, is whether this and other "branches" were considered individual churches or part of the one church at Kensworth. No answer seems to be given in Stuart's book.

The other source that Wamble cites shed's more light on the situation at Kensworth, and gives evidence that there was an active association in the area.[38] W. T. Whitley points out that the church at Kensworth was scattered during the seventeenth century. He states, "Members were then on a church roll over a stretch of country from Brickhill in Buckingham to Mimms and Ridge on the borders of Middlesex, twenty-eight miles along Watling Street, and from Welwyn across to Berkhampstead."[39] However, this scattered state of the church, according to Whitley, does not seem to have been by design; rather, "there had been a widespread movement"[40] due, most likely, to persecution. It is probable that this scattered state is what Stuart has in mind when he writes of the "branches" of the Kensworth church. Thus, if the members of the Kensworth church did meet in multiple locations, it was probably due to extrinsic forces.

The Church at Plymouth

From the source that Wamble cites on the church at Plymouth, it is possible to conclude that this congregation met in multiple locations. According to John Rippon, "In 1691, there was a branch of this Church at Holdsworthy, under the more immediate

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[38]W. T. Whitley, "Edward Harrison of Petty France," *Baptist Quarterly* 7 (1934-35): 214-20.

[39]Ibid., 216.

[40]Ibid.

direction of Mr. Double."[41] Rippon also notes that there was "a branch of it at Newton."[42]

He begins his history of the church at Plymouth by stating, "In the country where the

number of the inhabitants were small, and the preachers few, many of the residents in

little villages united together for the maintenance of the Gospel and its preachers," noting

that "it is under these circumstances we find Looe, Penryn, Falmouth, and Holdsworthy,

connected with the history of the church before us."[43] While this does not necessarily

indicate one church with multiple meetings, it seems to be a legitimate interpretation of

the evidence.

The Church at Ford

The record book of the church at Ford that Wamble cites in his section on this

church is replete with mentions of supply preaching.[44] At the church business meeting,

arrangements were made for preachers to be supplied to places such as Wendover,

Thame, Crendon, Bloedlow, Scrubwood, and Kinson. This might lead one to believe that

each of these locations was a part of the one church at Ford, if it were not for the fact that

the various locations are often referred to as "churches." For example, a minute recorded

in 1690 begins like this: "At the Assembly of the Five Churches by their Representatives

at Beirton."[45] This language occurs more than once in the pages cited by Wamble.[46] One

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[41]John Rippon, "History of the Baptist Church at Plymouth," *Baptist Annual Register* 3 (1798-1801), 283.

[42]Ibid., 284.

[43]Ibid., 273.

[44]W. T. Whitley, ed., *The Church Books of Ford or Cuddington and Amersham in the County of Bucks* (London: Kingsgate, 1912), 1, 3, 5, 21-22.

[45]Ibid., 7.

[46]Ibid., 10, 32,

entry into the church records sheds much light on the way the church at Ford was structured:

> It is Agreed That those gifted disciples as Brother Jony and Brother Ransom with others which have Been Authorised by the Church to minister there gifts for there Respective Assemblies to there Edification And if Broer Hore do the like as A Gifted Disciple or any other which shall by the Church be thought fit so to do. But In case of funerals that the Agreement of the 5 churches be Regarded that upon the Death of Any member or other the Elders or Elders of the Church to whom the Deceased Belonged be sent too for to Preach the people or whom They shall Think fit, And that the Gifted Disciples do get the Authority of the Higher Powers to Authorize them therein.[47]

Two things need to be noted here. First, reference is made to "the Church" and to "the 5 churches."[48] Second, the leaders of any of the five churches must get the consent of "the Higher Powers" in order to be authorized to take certain actions. As will be noted below of the Yorkshire and Lancashire church, this seems to reflect the structure of Presbyterian church government—multiple churches subsumed under the authority of one governing body. Whether it is evidence of Presbyterian influence or not, the fact that each assembly is called a "church" indicates that the church at Ford did not consider itself one church made up of multiple meetings that were, themselves, not churches. The multiple meetings were considered churches as well.

The Church at Yorkshire and Lancashire

From the three sources cited by Wamble on the church at Yorkshire and Lancashire it does seem that this church, better known as the church of Christ in Rossendale, considered itself one church in multiple locations. As Frederick Overend

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[47]Ibid., 32.

[48]The reference to "the 5 churches" would probably explain the reference to the "Respective Assemblies" in line 3.

notes, the church in Rossendale was "a Church with its centre in Rossendale, and covering with its network of branches the whole district of Rossendale and an area extending to Bradford, Rawdon, and Keighley, in Yorkshire."[49] After the church's original meeting house was built, Overend states, "In course of time other meeting houses were built or set apart for the use of the many-branched 'Church of Christ in Rossendale.'"[50] W. E. Blomfield recognizes the scattered structure of the Rossendale church and the views on church leadership held by one of its founders and states, "This is Presbyterianism."[51] What is the explanation for this Presbyterian church structure in this supposedly Baptist church? The answer, Blomfield suggests, is that at this point (late seventeenth century) the church of Christ in Rossendale was not yet Baptist; in fact, it "was not Baptist for some years to come."[52] Thus, at first, this church was "nearer to Presbyterianism than aught else, for the religious atmosphere was Presbyterian."[53] Nevertheless, in the late 1690s the church was "moving in the direction of the Baptists."[54] Overend draws similar conclusions, noting that, even as late as 1705 the church at Rossendale "had not yet become distinctly Baptist," though its founders "had long been

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[49]Frederick Overend, *History of the Ebenezer Baptist Church Bacup: Together with an Historical Account of the "Church of Christ in Rosendale," Based on the Mitchel and Crosley Letters, hitherto Unpublished* (London: Kingsgate, 1912).

[50]Ibid., 63

[51]W. E. Blomfield, "The Baptist Churches of Yorkshire in the 17th and 18th Centuries," in *The Baptists of Yorkshire: Being the Centenary Memorial Volume of the Yorkshire Baptist Association* (London: Kingsgate, 1912), 80.

[52]Ibid., 82. See also another source cited by Wamble that points out that the term "Baptist" did not even appear in the 1712 deed of the Rawdon church when it separated from Rossendale to form its own congregation: David Glass, "Baptist Beginnings in the West Riding," *The Baptist Quarterly* 3 (1926-27): 182.

[53]Ibid., 73.

[54]Ibid., 81.

Baptists." "The Rossendale Church," states Overend, "was in process of transformation into a Baptist Church,"[55] but did not reach this state until 1710. Within five years of becoming "distinctly Baptist," branches of the Rossendale church started breaking off to form their own separate churches. Within a decade, all of them had separated.[56] Now, instead of being multiple branches of one church, there existed multiple Baptist churches that came together to form an association, the first meeting of which was held at Rawdon (originally a branch of Rossendale, now its own church) in 1719.

The church of Christ in Rossendale provides a good example of how dissenting churches in general might have transitioned into Baptist churches in particular. This church was influenced by Baptist ministers, was taught Baptist views, and then, eventually, adopted a Baptist identity. Being one church in multiple locations certainly did not become a part of this developing Baptist identity in the church at Rossendale, for by the time they had become distinctly Baptist it was only a matter of a few years before each branch became its own separate church. It will now be argued that what was true of the Rossendale church became true of Baptist churches in general.

The End of the Scattered Church and
the Question of Baptist Identity

Wamble himself suggests that what happened in the case of the church at Rossendale became the norm for scattered country churches. Toward the end of the seventeenth and the beginning of the eighteenth centuries, large scattered churches became multiple, localized churches.[57] Thus, the simple fact that scattered churches

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[55]Overend, *History of the Ebenezer Baptist Church Bacup*, 8-9.

[56]Ibid., 120, 122, 127-28.

[57]Wamble, "Christian Fellowship," 259ff.

consisting of multiple meetings occupied such a brief moment in Baptist history would

explain why this form of church structure never became an identifying mark of Baptist

ecclesiology.

Besides the circumstances of history, such as distance and persecution, there

were theological reasons for the breakdown of scattered churches. Wamble cites Hanserd

Knollys' argument from the New Testament as follows:

> Although the Church in any City, at its beginning and first Planting of it, was but
> one Congregation, and assembled themselves together in one place . . . , yet when
> the number of the Disciples was multiplied . . . and the Multitudes . . . were added
> . . . then the Church was necessitated, for the edification of the Multitude, and great
> number of Members thereof, to assembled themselves together in particular
> Congregations, and become distinct Companies . . . and each Company or
> Congregation had their Elders and Deacons.[58]

Similar theological arguments for the church as an autonomous, local gathering abound in

early Baptist literature. For instance, Benjamin Keach writes,

> A Church of Christ, according to the Gospel-Institution, is a Congregation of Godly
> Christians, who as a Stated-Assembly (being first baptized upon the Profession of
> Faith) do by mutual agreement and consent give themselves up to the Lord, and one
> to another, according to the Will of God; *and do ordinarily meet together in one
> Place*, for the Public Service and Worship of God; among whom the Word of God
> and Sacraments are duly administered, according to Christ's Institution.[59]

Similarly, W. B. Johnson states, "The term church indicates one church, one body of the

Lord's people, meeting together in one place, and not several congregations, forming one

church."[60] J. L. Reynolds also held that a church is a gathering that meets in one place.

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[58]Hanserd Knollys, *An Exposition of the Whole Book of the Revelation* (London, 1689), 172, cited in Wamble, "Christian Fellowship," 259-60. Underlining in the original.

[59]Benjamin Keach, *The Glory of a True Church and Its Discipline Display'd Wherein a True Gospel-Church Is Described. Together with the Power of the Keys, and Who Are to Be Let in, and Who to Be Shut Out* (London: John Robinson, 1697; reprint in *Polity: A Collection of Historic Baptist Documents: Biblical Arguments on How to Conduct Church Life*, ed. Mark Dever [Washington, DC: Center of Church Reform, 2001]), 64-65. Emphasis added.

[60]W. B. Johnson, *The Gospel Developed through the Government and Order of the Churches of Jesus Christ* (Richmond, VA: H. K. Ellyson, 1846; reprint in *Polity: A Collection of Historic Baptist*

He states, "The only organized church is a particular church, a society of believers, who statedly meet in one place."[61] Likewise, P. H. Mell argues, "The word 'church' is used again in the New Testament to designate a local society . . . who are able to meet together in one place."[62] John L. Dagg makes a similar statement when he writes, "Whenever the word ἐκκλησία is used, we are sure of an assembly; and the term is not applicable to the bodies or societies of men that do not literally assemble."[63] Dagg expresses his disdain for the practice of subordinating smaller assemblies of Christians to the rule of one larger church government when he calls this practice "progress towards popery."[64] Thus, while there were historical circumstances (distance and persecution) that led to the breakdown of early, scattered Baptist churches, there were many theological convictions that drove Baptists in this direction as well.

Whether the reasons were historical or theological, the fact is that scattered churches that consisted of multiple gatherings did not last long in early Baptist life. As the several parts of these congregations separated to become their own distinct churches, whatever scattered churches did exist were replaced by a network of autonomous

Documents: Biblical Arguments on How to Conduct Church Life, ed. Mark Dever [Washington, DC: Center of Church Reform, 2001]), 171.

[61]J. L. Reynolds, *Church Polity or the Kingdom of Christ in Its Internal and External Development* (Richmond, VA: Harrold & Murray, 1849; reprint in *Polity: A Collection of Historic Baptist Documents: Biblical Arguments on How to Conduct Church Life*, ed. Mark Dever [Washington, DC: Center of Church Reform, 2001]), 396.

[62]P. H. Mell, *Corrective Church Discipline: With a Development of the Scriptural Principles upon Which It Is Based* (Charleston, SC: Southern Baptist Publication Society, 1860; reprint in *Polity: A Collection of Historic Baptist Documents: Biblical Arguments on How to Conduct Church Life*, ed. Mark Dever [Washington, DC: Center of Church Reform, 2001]), 442.

[63]J. L. Dagg, *Manual of Theology, Second Part: A Treatise on Church Order* (Charleston, SC: Southern Baptist Publication Society, 1858; reprint, Harrisonburg, VA: Gano Books, 1990), 77.

[64]Ibid., 90.

churches that cooperated for the cause of the gospel without being connected by a hierarchical form of church government.

Conclusion

This chapter has sought to show that while some early English Baptist churches met in multiple locations and still considered themselves one church, this structure was short-lived in Baptist history and never became an identifying mark in Baptist ecclesiology. After evaluating the sources that Wamble cites for support, it has been shown that, in many cases, they provide insufficient evidence for his claim. What was much more common among Baptists both during and after the dissolution of scattered churches was the full ecclesial status of each local assembly and a commitment to local church autonomy. Thus, while there seems to have been a brief period of time in which some Baptist churches incorporated a one church in multiple locations model of church structure, this can by no means be considered a Baptist distinctive. Because of this, modern multi-site church structure cannot be considered Baptist.

CHAPTER 7

IS THERE HISTORICAL PRECEDENT
FOR MULTI-SITE?

Introduction

Proponents of multi-site church structure have argued that there is both a

biblical *and* historical basis for multi-site. One of the arguments that is sometimes made

is that there is precedent for multi-site ecclesiology in the example of Methodist circuit

riders. For instance, the authors of *The Multi-Site Church Revolution* make the following

statement: "In some ways, the multi-site approach is not new. . . . A case can be made

that as church history unfolded, the church had many multi-site expressions, from

mission stations to Methodist circuit riders to branch Sunday schools done by bus

ministry."[1] These authors then refer to a pastor in Oklahoma City who "has Methodist

roots," and who "likes to comment that the move from horseback preacher to satellite

broadcast is simply a shift from circuit rider to closed-circuit rider!"[2] Another multi-site

advocate that argues for precedent in Methodist circuit riders is multi-site pastor Mark

Driscoll, pastor of Mars Hill Church in Seattle, Washington. Driscoll argues that

> throughout the history of Christianity there have always been networks,
> denominations, and movements in which multiple churches were linked together in
> various ways and to various degrees for the benefit of the forward progress of the
> gospel. Historically, preachers have even traveled between churches to provide
> preaching and pastoral leadership. One such example is the Methodist circuit riders,

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[1]Geoff Surratt, Greg Ligon, and Warren Bird, *The Multi-Site Church Revolution: Being One Church . . . in Many Locations* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 91.

[2]Ibid.

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who would travel on horseback to preach at multiple churches. Each of the meeting places had local identity and leadership, with the pastor serving successively at each site. Francis Asbury (1745-1816), the founding bishop of American Methodism, traveled more than a quarter of a million miles on foot and horseback, preaching about sixteen thousand sermons as he worked in his circuits.[3]

Driscoll goes on to claim that contemporary multi-site churches are simply doing what the circuit riders were doing: "With increasing advances in technology, we are now seeing the principles of one church meeting in multiple locations exponentially applied. The result has come to be called the 'multi-site church revolution,' which includes the controversial advent of 'video venues.' In many ways this is the circuit-riding preacher model renewed by technology."[4] According to Driscoll and other multi-site advocates, they are not using a form of church structure that they have invented, but that has precedent in earlier church history. I agree with Driscoll and other multi-site advocates who see a similarity between Methodist ecclesiology and multi-site ecclesiology. Multi-site church government is connectional church government—multiple congregations, or sites, connected under the umbrella of one governing structure. This chapter will demonstrate that Methodist church government is also connectional, and that, because of this, there is a similarity between the church of the Methodist circuit rider and the church of the modern multi-site pastor.

The thesis of this chapter is that Methodist circuit riders were part of an ecclesial system that was, and still is, similar to multi-site church structure because both are marked by connectional church government. This argument will be made in two steps. First, by evaluating Methodist polity through the writings of one its founders,

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[3]Mark Driscoll and Gerry Breshears, *Vintage Church: Timeless Truths and Timely Methods* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008), 244-45.

[4]Ibid., 245.

Francis Asbury, it will be shown that Methodist polity is episcopal, and therefore

connectional. Second, and much more briefly, it will be argued that though some slight

modifications have been made to their system, this episcopal form of church structure

continues to be practiced in the Methodist Church today. This will serve as the basis for

the claim that, while multi-site is not identical to Methodist episcopalism, the two are

similar in their use of a connectional church government.

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**Francis Asbury and Methodist Episcopal
Church Government**

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Francis Asbury was the superintendent of American Methodism and was an

ardent advocate of maintaining an "Episcopal form of church Government"[5] in his

denomination. He began his ministry as a local preacher, then became a traveling

preacher (i.e., circuit rider), and was eventually appointed by John Wesley as the

Superintendent of the Methodist Episcopal Church in America. In this section, it will be

argued that Asbury was committed to episcopal connectionalism in both principle and

practice—he believed in it, struggled to uphold it, and lived it out as he made his rounds

on the Methodist circuit.

**General Commitment to Methodist
Ecclesiology**

As early as his first year in ministry (1771), Francis Asbury wrote in his

journal of his commitment to Methodist principles: "I have not yet the thing which I

seek—a circulation of preachers, to avoid partiality and popularity. However, I am fixed

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[5]Francis Asbury to David Young, February 16, 1814, in *The Journal and Letters of Francis Asbury, in Three Volumes*, ed. J. Manning Potts, Elmer T. Clark, and Jacob S. Payton (Nashville: Abingdon, 1958), 3:503.

to the Methodist plan, and do what I do faithfully as to God."[6] One year later, he

commented again on his commitment to Methodism, this time making it clearer that to

which he was committed. "Whatever comes," he states, "I am determined, while here, by

the grace of God, to proceed according to the Methodist doctrine and discipline."[7] That

"doctrine and discipline," of course, is what later came to be embodied in the Methodist

statement of faith, a statement that went by that very name.[8] In saying that he was

committed to Methodist "doctrine and discipline," Asbury was referring to Methodist

theology in general (doctrine) and Methodist ecclesiology in particular (discipline).[9]

Asbury began ministering in the Methodist circuit early in his life. Reflecting

on his early days of ministry, he writes,

> I had preached some months before I publicly appeared in the Methodist
> meetinghouses; when my labors became more public and extensive, some were
> amazed, not knowing how I had exercised elsewhere. Behold me now a public
> preacher!—the humble and willing servant of any and every preacher that called on
> me by night or by day; being ready, with hasty steps, to go far and wide to do good,
> visiting Derbyshire, Staffordshire, Warwickshire, and indeed almost every place
> within my reach, for the sake of precious souls; preaching, generally, three, four, and
> five times a week, and at the same time pursuing my calling. I think, when I was
> between twenty-one and twenty-two years of age I gave myself up to God and his
> work, after acting as a local preacher near the space of five years.[10]

This journal entry reveals that before Asbury became a traveling preacher or

superintendent, he began his ministry as a local preacher. In the same entry, he speaks of

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[6]Ezra Squier Tipple, ed., *The Heart of Asbury's Journal: Being the Substance of the Printed Journals of the Reverend Francis Asbury, Forty-five Years an Itinerant Preacher in America and Thirty-two Years a General Superintendent of the Methodist Episcopal Church* (New York: Eaton & Mains, 1904), 9.

[7]Ibid., 28.

[8]See *The Doctrine and Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church, in America. With Explanatory Notes, by Thomas Coke and Francis Asbury*, 10th ed. (Philadelphia: Henry Tuckniss, 1798).

[9]Methodism took its episcopal church government from the Anglican church from which John Wesley broke.

[10]Asbury, *Heart of Asbury's Journal*, 344.

his becoming a traveling preacher in England. All of this was according to the Methodist

episcopal structure of church government.

In a valedictory address toward the end of his life, Asbury reflected upon this

church structure that he had ministered within all of his adult life:

> My dear bishop, it is the traveling apostolic order and ministry that is found in our
> very constitution. No man among us can locate without order, or forfeit his official
> standing. No preacher is stationary more than two years; no presiding elder more
> than four years; and the constitution will remove them and all are movable at the
> pleasure of the superintendent whenever he may find it necessary for the good of the
> cause.[11]

Here Asbury gives a glimpse into Methodist episcopal polity. It is a top-down approach.

The superintendents give direction to the whole Church, especially by directing the

presiding elders. The presiding elders are set over districts full of preachers, both local

and traveling (i.e., circuit-riding). The preachers are stationed by the presiding elders

with the concession of the superintendents. This is the structure within which Asbury

labored, and to which he was committed. He describes this structure again, in the same

address, as follows:

> Our order of things is such that we have about fifty-five presiding elders, that by
> turns of four years at farthest, yet movable at any time when the episcopacy judge of
> the importance of the case. These presiding elders serve a probation of seven or
> fourteen years in large and very consequential districts and have their quarterly
> meeting Conferences of the official departments of the local ministry, possibly in
> some large circuits of long standing, that compose from sixty to eighty, or near one
> hundred members and examine characters, try cases, admit and give authority to
> exhorters and local preachers, examine local preachers and local deacons for
> election and ordination to deacons' and elders' office in the Annual Conference.[12]

Here, too, is seen the office of superintendent ("the episcopacy"), the office of presiding

elder, and the office of the local ministry. His advice to his fellow superintendent for the

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[11]Francis Asbury to William McKendree, August 5, 1813, in *Journal and Letters,* 491-92.

[12]Francis Asbury to Joseph Benson, January 1, 1816, in *Journal and Letters*, 544.

future of Methodism was that "there be only three effective bishops, as from the beginning, traveling through the whole continent, each one to preside alternately in all the Annual Conferences, one to preside during the sitting of the same Conference, the other two to have charge of and plan the stations and perform ordinations, assisted by the elders in both branches."[13] To this same superintendent, Asbury wrote of the authority that came with his office, an authority seen especially when the need to address disorder presented itself. "Put men into office in whom you can confide," wrote Asbury. "If they betray your trust and confidence, let them do it but once."[14] This was Asbury's understanding of the role of superintendent and the place of that office in the hierarchy of Methodist episcopalism.

Presiding officers were beneath the superintendents in the chain of command. Asbury's view of the role of presiding officer can be discerned in a letter he wrote to James Quinn, a presiding elder on the Muskingum District of the Western Conference:

> You will care for every circuit, every society, every preacher, every family, and every soul in your charge. You will be planning continually to extend and establish the Church of God in your section. You will be eyes, ears, mouth, and wisdom, from us [the superintendents] to the people; and from the people to us. You will be in our stead, to supply our absence. 'Tis order, 'tis system, under God, that hath kept us from schism, and heresy, and division, till we number near two hundred thousand in membership; congregate, possibly three millions.[15]

Presiding officers served as mediators between the superintendents and the local preachers and circuit riders. In an 1816 letter to a friend named Joseph Benson, Asbury writes of this mediating function of presiding officers: "If a bishop, at any distance where

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[13]Francis Asbury to William McKendree, August 5, 1813, in *Journal and Letters*, 475.

[14]Ibid., 488.

[15]Francis Asbury to James Quinn, September 24, 1812, in *Journal and Letters*, 466.

a mail can go, has consequential business to the whole Conference, he has only to communicate to one man; he to write to the other presiding elders; they to communicate to the men who have charge of stations and circuits; the work is done."[16] Here is a clear description of the three-level structure of Methodist ministers—bishops (or superintendents), presiding elders, and preachers at stations and circuits. According to Asbury, this form of connectionalism streamlined the work, as all a bishop had to do was "communicate to one man" and his plans became realities. But Asbury was not only committed to episcopal church structure, he was also strongly opposed to its opposite— localized ministry.

Asbury frequently spoke of the evils of localized ministry, and argued that the latter was a deviation from the practice of the apostles. "Alas for us," Asbury declared, "if ever our excellent constitution and order of things be changed or corrupted! . . . I believe that those who would divide the body of Christ will be 'divided in Jacob and scattered in Israel.' Thirty years' labor and experience have taught us something."[17] Without a strong episcopacy, Asbury believed the Methodist Church would not be able to stand. The superintending role of the bishops was one of the glues that held the whole Church together.

One of the reasons that Asbury was so adamant about the superintending role of bishops was because he saw episcopal structure as the example of the apostles that was to be continued by contemporary churches. Asbury believed that "there were no local bishops until the second century" and "that the apostles, in service, were bishops."[18] Of

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[16]Francis Asbury to Joseph Benson, January 1, 1816, in *Journal and Letters*, 544.

[17]Francis Asbury to William McKendree, August 5, 1813, in *Journal and Letters*, 488.

those who took up local ministry positions in the second century, Asbury has this to say: "those who were ordained in the second century mistook their calling when they became local and should have followed those bright examples in the apostolic age. . . . Bishops, presbyters, and deacons, seem to have been the established form in all the Asiatic Churches in the second century."[19] What was the "bright example" of the apostles from which local ministers had deviated? The answer, according to Asbury, is that the apostles were committed to an itinerant ministry in which overseers did not settle down in one place, but travelled among the church at large so as to maintain connection among believers. "It is my confirmed opinion," writes Asbury to his fellow superintendent, "that the apostles acted both as bishops and traveling superintendents in planting and watering, ruling and ordering the whole connection; and that they did not ordain any local bishops, but that they ordained local deacons and elders. I feel satisfied we should do the same."[20] Asbury then appeals to Acts 14:23 ("And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed") and Titus 1:5 ("This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained into order, and appoint elders in every town as I directed you") to support his position. In the examples of Timothy and Titus, Asbury saw biblical grounds for Methodist episcopalism, for these men were, according to him, appointed to a bishop-like role by the apostle Paul. By observing the ministries of Timothy and Titus, Asbury writes, "we may see the propriety of our [Methodist] superintendency, presiding elders,

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[18]Ibid., 487.

[19]Ibid.

[20]Ibid., 490.

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as in the second part of the primitive Church, which order was lost in the first and not found again until the seventeenth century, partially in Europe but more perfectly in America in the organization and establishment of the Methodist Episcopal Church."[21]

To abandon the apostolic order and its connectionalism would be to abandon the New Testament pattern and commit the same error as the church in the second century. "I wish to warn you," writes Asbury to William McKendree, "against the growing evil of locality in bishops, elders, preachers, or Conferences." He then explains that the basis for this warning and the reason he thinks the localizing of the Church is evil is because it is a deviation from the apostolic pattern: "I am bold to say that the apostolic order of things was lost in the first century, when Church governments were adulterated and had much corruption attached to them." This apostolic pattern, according to Asbury, began to be restored during the Reformation but was not fully reinstated until Wesley and the Methodists:

> At the Reformation, the reformers only beat off a part of the rubbish, which put a stop to the rapid increase of absurdities at that time; but how they have increased since! Recollect the state of the different Churches, as it respects government and discipline, in the seventeenth century when the Lord raised up that great and good man, John Wesley, who formed an evangelical society in England. In 1784, an apostolical form of Church government was formed in the United States of America at the first General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church held at Baltimore, in the State of Maryland.[22]

Again, Asbury argues that when one traces the apostolic pattern of ecclesiology into the post-apostolic age "it will manifestly appear that the apostolic order of things ended in about fifty years. With the preachers and people of that day, the golden order was lost."[23]

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[21]Ibid., 486.

[22]Ibid., 475-76.

[23]Ibid., 477-78.

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This was the problem. The solution was to restore what had been lost: "But we must restore and retain primitive order; we must, we will, have the same doctrine, the same spirituality, the same power in ordinances, in ordination, and in spirit."[24] If Methodism is allowed to localize its ministry and stray from the apostolic pattern that was recovered by Wesley, then the prospect of a unified and apostolic church was grim: "We may hope for only a partial promiscuous aristocratical spiritual body under no tie by constitution, or any check from the superintendency, doctrine, discipline, or order may go, but God will preserve."[25] The key to maintaining an ecclesial structure that was rooted in the apostolic pattern was an emphasis on the itinerancy of bishops. This is what Asbury believed the apostles were; they were traveling evangelists and bishops who supervised the life of the whole Church. "And so," writes Asbury, "it should have continued, and would have continued, if there had been a succession of a faithful seed of holy men to follow apostolic order, but as early as the second century they must have their *local* bishops."[26] Localization of ministry would lead to autonomous local congregations with little or no connection to the church at large. Congregationalists (e.g., Baptists), of course, would have no problem with this. In fact, they would argue *for* the autonomy of the local church. But, according to Asbury, this was not the pattern of the New Testament church and should not become the pattern of the Methodist Church.[27]

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[24]Ibid., 478.

[25]Francis Asbury to Edward Dromgoole, February 11, 1807, in *Journal and Letters*, 363.

[26]Francis Asbury to William McKendree, August 5, 1813, in *Journal and Letters*, 484. Emphasis original

[27]For more on Asbury's understanding of the office of Itinerant General Superintendent, and his biblical arguments for its basis, see Russell E. Richey and Thomas Edward Frank, *Episcopacy in the Methodist Tradition: Perspectives and Proposals* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2004), 63-88.

Asbury not only believed that the Methodist Episcopal Church was following the apostolic pattern of church government, he also believed that his church could claim apostolic succession since their founder, John Wesley, was ordained by the Church of England. He claimed that he could trace "regular order and succession in John Wesley, Thomas Coke, Francis Asbury, Richard Whatcoat, and William MeKendree," and poses the challenge: "Let any other Church trace its succession as direct and as pure if they can."[28] Similar comments can be found in the opening words of his address to the General Conference of 1816: "The God of glory cover your assembly and direct all your acts and deliberations for the Apostolic order and establishment of the Church of God in holy succession to the end of time."[29] Ordaining bishops in apostolic succession and seeing to it that those bishops function as overseers of the whole church (like the apostles did) was the way to maintain a ministry and a Church patterned after the New Testament. Only this connectional church government would do.

Asbury's Authority as Superintendent

Episcopal church government requires the wielding of authority by those in places of high position, and Asbury was not at all timid in functioning in this authoritative role.[30] He was appointed to it, after all, by Wesley himself. On December 24, 1784, he writes of a letter he had received from Wesley about this matter: "Here I received a letter

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[28]Francis Asbury to William McKendree, August 5, 1813, in *Journal and Letters,* 478.

[29]Francis Asbury, "Address to Conference of 1816," in *Journal and Letters*, 532.

[30]Of the office of Superintendent, John Bower writes, "During Wesley's general superintendency, the Assistant (later called the Superintendent) was all-powerful in his circuit." John C. Bowmer, *Pastor and People: A Study of Church and Ministry in Wesleyan Methodism from the Death of John Wesley (1791) to the Death of Jabez Bunting (1858)* (London: Epworth, 1975), 55. He goes on to say that "the Superintendent was, therefore, the true episcopos. He was the pastor pastorum; the key man in the Connexion." Ibid., 56-57. For a discussion of the early conceptions of the office of Superintendent, see Ibid., 52-57.

from Mr. Wesley, in which he directs me to act as general assistant; and to receive no

preachers from Europe that are not recommended by him, nor any in America who will

not submit to me, and to the minutes of the Conference."[31] The same year, his new

position was, evidently, not being received by all with open arms. He writes of an

incident at a conference meeting in which this was demonstrated and how the problem

was resolved: "Our conference began, all in peace. William Glendenning had been

devising a plan to lay me aside, or at least to abridge my powers. Mr. Wesley's letter

settled the point, and all was happy."[32]

A few months later (December 24, 1784), at the famous "Christmas

Conference," under the leadership of Asbury, Thomas Coke, and others, the American

Methodists formally established themselves as an Episcopal Church. Asbury recounts the

event as follows:

> Having continued at Perry Hall for a week, we this day rode to Baltimore, where we
> met a few preachers. It was agreed to form ourselves into an Episcopal Church, and
> to have superintendents, elders, and deacons. When the Conference was seated Dr.
> Coke and myself were unanimously elected to the superintendency of the church,
> and my ordination followed, after being previously ordained deacon and elder, as by
> the following certificate may be seen.[33]

Asbury recalls that at the same meeting, circuit riding elders were appointed to oversee

the work in America, Antigua, and Nova Scotia: "Twelve elders were elected, and

solemnly set apart to serve our societies in the United States, one for Antigua, and two for

Nova Scotia."[34] John Wesley's supreme authority is what stood behind all of these

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[31]Asbury, *Heart of Asbury's Journal*, 220.

[32]Ibid., 223.

[33]Ibid., 230.

[34]Ibid., 231.

appointments and the events that took place at the Christmas Conference. Three months

before the Conference, in a letter from Wesley to "Our Brethren in America," Wesley

writes,

> I have accordingly appointed Dr. Coke and Mr. Francis Asbury to be Joint
> Superintendents over our brethren in North America; as also Richard Whatcoat and
> Thomas Vasey to act as elders among them, by baptizing and administering the
> Lord's Supper. And I have prepared a Liturgy little differing from that of the
> Church of England (I think, the best constitued National Church in the world),
> which I advise all the travelling preachers to use on the Lord's Day in all the
> congregations, reading the Litany only on Wednesdays and Fridays and praying
> extempore on all other days. I also advise the elders to administer the Supper of the
> Lord on every Lord's Day.[35]

The power of Wesley to appoint and structure the Church in the way he saw fit, and the

ability to do all of this by simply writing a letter, is a function of the episcopal church

government to which the Methodists were committed. With this letter, Wesley delegated

his supervisory authority to Asbury, Coke and others. With this delegated authority,

Asbury and Coke could now function as Wesley himself. However, Wesley made it clear

who it was that remained in charge. In a letter to Asbury regarding his role as

superintendent of the Methodist Episcopal Church in America, Wesley writes, "There is,

indeed, a wide difference between the relation wherein you stand to the Americans and

the relation wherein I stand to all the Methodists. You are the elder brother of the

American Methodists: I am under God the father of the whole family." Based on his

position over Asbury, Wesley proceeds to rebuke him for his willingness to be called

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[35]John Wesley to "Our Brethren in America," September 10, 1784, in *Journal and Letters,* 38. According to Asbury, what Wesley desired was fulfilled at the Christmas Conference: "Accordingly, in 1784 our faithful father, Mr. Wesley, ordained Thomas Coke, bishop, or general superintendent, and Francis Asbury was elected by the General Conference held in Baltimore, Md., December, 1784, general superintendent; was first ordained deacon and elder; on December 27, bishop, or general superintendent; Richard Whatcoat in May, 1800; and William McKendree in May, 1808. Dr. Coke was ordained deacon and elder by two scriptural English bishops, and so was John Wesley. Do any ancient or modern Churches stand on any better ground than we do with respect to ordination, with John Wesley's apostolic right?" Ibid., 477.

"bishop":

> One instance of this, of your greatness, has given me great concern. How can you, how dare you suffer yourself to be called Bishop? I shudder, I start at the very thought! Men may call me a knave or a fool, a rascal, a scoundrel, and I am content; but they shall never by my consent call me Bishop! For my sake, for God's sake, for Christ's sake put an full end to this! Let the Presbyterians do what they please, but let the Methodists know their calling better.[36]

Wesley may not have been fond of the word "bishop," but he certainly was not afraid to function as one. Though Wesley appointed Asbury and Coke as superintendents, it was clear who the ultimate supervisor was. It was not as if these appointments were made arbitrarily, though. Concerning the qualifications of a bishop in the Methodist Church and the nature of his authority, Asbury writes,

> I will make a few observations upon the ignorance of foolish men who will rail against our church government. The Methodists acknowledge no superiority but what is founded on seniority, election, and long and faithful services. For myself, I pity those who cannot distinguish between a Pope of Rome and an old, worn man of about sixty years who has the power given him of riding five thousand miles a year, at a salary of $80, through summer's heat and winter's cold, traveling in all weather, preaching in all places, his best covering from rain often but a blanket; the surest sharpener of his wit, hunger; his best fare, for six months of the twelve, coarse kindness; and his reward, suspicion, envy, and murmurings all the year round.[37]

The authority that Asbury acquired as superintendent may have come by appointment, but there was also a sense in which he had earned the right to that authority through his faithful service in the ministry.

**Asbury's Itinerancy
and the Methodist Connection**

Before his appointment as superintendent, Asbury was a circuit rider. In 1774, he writes of a list of circuit appointments of which he was a part: "For the next quarter we

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[36]John Wesley to Francis Asbury, September 20, 1788, in *Journal and Letters*, 64-65.

[37]Asbury, *Heart of Asbury's Journal*, 540-41.

had our stations as follows: P. Ebert, E. Dromgoole, and Richard Owings, in Frederick Circuit; Henry Watters and Brother Webster in Baltimore Circuit; and myself in Baltimore town."[38] He gives an account of how he began preaching and eventually began traveling on the circuit:

> At about seventeen I began to hold some public meetings, and between seventeen and eighteen began to exhort and preach. When about twenty-one I went through Staffordshire and Gloucestershire, in the place of a traveling preacher; and the next year through Bedfordshire, Sussex, etc. In 1769 I was appointed assistant in Northamptonshire, and the next year traveled in Wiltshire. September 3, 1771, I embarked for America, and for my own private satisfaction began to keep an imperfect journal.[39]

Late in life Asbury spoke of his early ministerial work in the Staffordshire Circuit as well as the circuits in Bedford and Salisbury.[40] Circuit riders met with great difficulty and often had time for little rest. "In many circuits," Asbury writes,

> the preachers have hardly an opportunity of reading their Bibles, much less anything else. A great part of the day is taken up in riding, preaching, and meeting the classes; and very often at night there is a large family, but one room for all, and sometimes no candle; so that I think it would be well, under such circumstances, if the preachers could have one spare day in every week for the purpose of improving themselves.[41]

Before becoming superintendent, Asbury rode a circuit that stretched from Dover, Delaware to Green Hills, North Carolina.[42] When he became superintendent, his travel demands increased, as now he was responsible for overseeing all of the Methodist work in America. On his first episcopal tour (April to November, 1780), he rode from

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[38]Ibid., 58.

[39]Ibid., 71.

[40]Francis Asbury to Joseph Benson, January 1, 1816, in *Journal and Letters,* 543-44.

[41]Asbury, *Heart of Asbury's Journal*, 138.

[42]Ibid., 171.

Baltimore, Maryland to Charleston, South Carolina and back.[43] In a letter to Thomas

Coke, Asbury recounts the extensive travel required of him:

> Brother Whatcoat and myself, since April, have had a tour of 1800 miles from
> Baltimore thro' Maryland, Delaware, Pennsylvania, [New] Jersey, New York,
> Connecticut, Massachusetts, Northamptonshire, and Vermont. I am now, after three
> days recess, setting out on a new route to the new state of Ohio, and to Kentucky. I
> purpose then to recross the Allegheny mountains to the south, that I may be at the
> Conference in Augusta, January 1, 1804. Our seven conferences are so appointed,
> and it will require between 4 and 5000 miles riding to attend them all; and the
> journies must be completed in less than ten months.[44]

Traveling like this was difficult, but it was seen as a necessity if the unity and connection

of the Church as a whole was to be maintained.

As one might imagine, this extensive traveling took a toll on Asbury and other

riders of the Methodist circuits. Asbury's journal entry from October 14, 1803, gives the

reader a glimpse into the hardship he and other circuit riders faced. It deserves to be

quoted in full:

> What a road have we passed! Certainly the worst on the whole continent, even in
> the best weather. Yet, bad as it was, there were four or five hundred crossing the
> rude hills while we were. I was powerfully struck with the consideration that there
> were at least as many thousand emigrants annually from East to West. We must take
> care to send preachers after these people. We have made one thousand and eighty
> miles from Philadelphia; and now, what a detail of sufferings might I give, fatiguing
> to me to write, and perhaps to my friends to read. A man who is well mounted will
> scorn to complain of the roads when he sees men, women, and children, almost
> naked, paddling barefoot and barelegged along, or laboring up the rocky hills, while
> those who are best off have only a horse for two or three children to ride at once. If
> these adventurers have little or nothing to eat, it is no extraordinary circumstance,
> and not uncommon, to encamp in the wet woods after night—in the mountains it
> does not rain, but pours. I too have my sufferings, perhaps peculiar to myself—no
> room to retire to; that in which you sit common to all, crowded with women and
> children, the fire occupied by cooking, much and long-loved solitude not to be
> found, unless you choose to run out into the rain, in the woods. Six months in the

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[43]Ibid., 243. See map of similar episcopal circuit in 1788 in *Heart of Asbury's Journal*, 274.

[44]Francis Asbury to Thomas Coke, July 28, 1803, in *Journal and Letters,* 267. To see what a
months worth of Asbury's preaching appointments looked like, see ibid., 203.

year I have had, for thirty-two years, occasionally, to submit to what will never be agreeable to me; but the people, it must be confessed, are among the kindest souls in the world. But kindness will not make a crowded log cabin, twelve feet by ten, agreeable; without are cold and rain, and within six adults, and as many children, one of which is all motion; the dogs, too, must sometimes be admitted. On Saturday I found that among my other trials I had taken an uncomfortable skin disease; and, considering the filthy houses and filthy beds I have met with, in coming from Kentucky Conference, it is perhaps strange that I have not caught it twenty times. I do not see that there is any security against it, but by sleeping in a brimstone shirt. Poor bishop! But we must bear it for the elects' sake. I wrote some letters to our local brethren, and read the book of Daniel while in this house.[45]

Such were the difficulties of the traveling Methodist preacher. The local preachers, those who remained stationary at one congregation or another, did not have to endure such harsh conditions and harsh treatment. Of the differences between a traveling preacher and a local preacher, Asbury writes, "We [traveling preachers] must go at a minute's warning to our circuits, far and near, and attend with the greatest strictness to our appointments and societies. The local preachers go where and when they please; can preach anywhere and nowhere; they can keep plantations and slaves, and have them bought or given by their parents."[46] There were also differences in pay that served as a cause for the complaints of traveling preachers: "The local preachers can receive fifty or a hundred dollars per year for marriages; but we travelers, if we receive a few dollars for marriages, must return them at the Conference, or be called refractory or disobedient."[47]

But for all the difficulties that accompanied itinerant ministry in the Methodist Church, there was a certain usefulness that Asbury believed set this Methodist model of connectionalism apart from other models of church structure: "We [Methodists]," writes

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[45]Asbury, *Heart of Asbury's Journal*, 537-38.

[46]Ibid., 443.

[47]Ibid., 443.

Asbury, "can make more extensive observations [than other churches], because our preachers in six or seven years can go through the whole continent, and see the state of other churches in all parts of this new world. We of the traveling ministers, who have nothing to mind but the gospel and the church of God, may and ought to be very useful."[48] And go through the whole continent they did. The connections made between congregations by the rider on the Methodist circuit were the connections that held the Methodist Church together, and served as the infrastructure for its episcopal form of church government.[49]

After Asbury: Methodist Continuation
of the Episcopal Model

As the Methodist Episcopal Church grew, Asbury's fear of the localization of ministry became more of a reality. The original Methodist bishop (like Asbury) was not assigned to a territory, but was expected to travel throughout the entire Church, setting things in order, making appointments, presiding at conferences, and engaging in other forms of ministry that made them "genuine itinerant general superintendents."[50] Dennis Campbell explains the shift from genuine itinerancy to localized positions of ministry:

> Through the years this changed as the church grew and transportation required that a bishop serve several specific annual conferences rather than the whole denomination. This has continued in such a way that bishops generally now reside in one annual conference, and therefore are not really visible leaders of the whole church. While bishops are not permanently limited to one geographical area, this

[48]Ibid., 442.

[49]For more on Methodist itinerancy see Richard P. Heitzenrater, "Connectionalism and Itinerancy: Wesleyan Principles and Practice," in *Connectionalism: Ecclesiology, Mission, and Identity*, ed. Russell E. Richey, Dennis M. Campbell, and William B. Lawrence, United Methodism and American Culture (Nashville: Abingdon, 1997), 23-38.

[50]Dennis M. Campbell, "Ministry and Itinerancy in Methodism," in *The Oxford Handbook of Methodist Studies*, ed. William J. Abraham and James E. Kirby (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 276.

trend toward greater 'locality' has changed the nature of the episcopal office in significant ways.[51]

But while the itinerant nature of the bishop's ministry has changed through the years, the episcopal nature of Methodist church government has remained in tact.[52] The United Methodist Church[53] is now made up of multiple jurisdictions, and the election of bishops now takes place at the jurisdictional conferences rather than the General Conference. The bishops of the various jurisdictions form the Council of Bishops, and this council now functions in a role similar to that filled by Asbury and the superintendents of early Methodism.[54] Thus, the structure of the Methodist Church is not exactly the same as it was in the day of Asbury, but the role of the bishop is essentially the same. As James Kirby writes, "United Methodist bishops are charged today, as they have been in the past, with 'oversight' of the entire church."[55] The change comes in the fact that "the episcopal

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[51]Ibid., 276

[52]There are several branches of Methodism today, and not every branch adheres to an episcopal polity. For instance, the Methodist Protestant Church was formed in 1830 in an effort "to empower laypersons and to protest what they regarded as the excessive authority of the bishops." James E. Kirby, "Methodist Episcopacy," in *The Oxford Handbook of Methodist Studies*, ed. William J. Abraham and James E. Kirby (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 238. The largest group of Methodists (the United Methodist Church), however, is episcopal. For a discussion of an incident in early Methodism in which a group of Methodists protested episcopal authority see John H. Wigger, *Taking Heaven by Storm: Methodism and the Rise of Popular Christianity in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 39-42.

[53]In 1939 the Methodist Protestants, Methodist Episcopal, and Methodist Episcopal Church (South) united to become the United Methodist Church. For the effects that mergers within Methodism have had see Robert W. Sledge, "The Effects of Mergers on American Wesleyan Denominations," in *Connectionalism: Ecclesiology*, *Mission*, *and Identity*, ed. Russell E. Richey, Dennis M. Campbell, and William B. Lawrence, United Methodism and American Culture (Nashville: Abingdon, 1997), 205-18.

[54]For a list and description of those who made up the first Council of Bishops, and for a discussion of how the formation of this council changed Methodist conceptions of the episcopacy see Roy H. Short, *The Episcopal Leadership Role in United Methodism* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1985), 48-66. For the changes made to the function of the episcopacy see also James E. Kirby, *The Episcopacy in American Methodism* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2000), 77-85.

[55]Kirby, "Methodist Episcopacy," 240.

areas of United Methodism now more closely resemble those of diocesan episcopacy."[56]

The contemporary Methodist Church, then, still holds to a form of episcopacy, as did the

Methodists in Asbury's day. The multiple congregations within the United Methodist

Church, though they maintain their own localized aspects of church life, are connected to

the other churches in the denomination through the oversight of bishops and the

governance of the General Conference.[57] Methodist church government is connectional

church government; and in this sense, it bears a similarity to multi-site church structure.

To say that multi-site church structure is similar to Methodist church structure

is not to say that they are identical. Differences between the two include, for instance, the

fact that most multi-site churches would not consider themselves a denomination in the

sense that the United Methodist Church would.[58] Another difference is that, typically,

multi-site churches do not make the unbiblical distinction between the role of pastors (or

elders) and bishops, like the United Methodist Church does.[59] Yet another difference

between multi-site and Methodist church structure is that multi-site churches do not

utilize itinerate ministers (e.g., circuit riders) as one of the glues that holds the multiple

congregations together.[60] But even though these differences between the connectionalism

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[56]Ibid.

[57]On the relationship between the Council of Bishops and the General Conference as governing bodies within the United Methodist Church, see Richey and Frank, *Episcopacy in the Methodist Tradition*, 93-96.

[58]However, see Charles Timothy Carter, "An Analysis of the Multi-Campus Approach of Local Church Ministry Utilizing First Baptist Church of Windermere, Florida, as a Paradigmatic Model" (D.Min. project, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2005), 109, who suggests that "the multi-campus model may function like its own mini-denomination. When one looks at churches like Seacoast Church in Charleston, South Carolina, that has nine locations with one of those locations being in Georgia, one has to ask if it is becoming or has already become a denomination."

[59]The New Testament uses the words for "elder," "overseer" (or "bishop"), and "pastor" interchangeably. It could be argued that multi-site churches do have functional bishops (like the Methodist Church) if they have an executive staff that supervises the other campus pastors.

[60]Although, one could argue that video venue makes it possible for a pastor to be itinerate, and,

of multi-site and Methodism exist, there is a key similarity that must be recognized. That key similarity is that in both multi-site and Methodist connectionalism multiple congregations are subsumed under one church governmental hierarchy that is broader than the local congregation itself. This key similarity demonstrates that there is historical precedent for multi-site church structure in Methodist episcopal church government.

Conclusion

This chapter has sought to show that Methodist episcopal church government is similar to multi-site church government in that both are marked by connectionalism—a form of polity in which multiple congregations are connected under one governing structure. The writings of Francis Asbury reveal that early Methodism achieved this connectionalism due to their use of bishops, or superintendents. These bishops had oversight over the entire church, and gave authoritative direction as it was needed. Over time, and as the Methodist denomination grew, Methodists grouped their congregations into multiple jurisdictions. Today, individual bishops are responsible primarily for those members in their own jurisdiction. Together, however, Methodist bishops form a Council that gives oversight, along with the General Conference, to the entire denomination. Thus, while today's Methodist Church is not identical to the church over which Asbury was a superintendent, it is still properly considered an episcopal church. The connectionalism that this type of polity achieves makes the church of the Methodist circuit rider similar to the churches within the multi-site movement.

In arguing that the connectionalism of Methodists and the connectionalism of multi-site is similar, this chapter is *not* approving of multi-site connectionalism. In fact,

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in a sense, a circuit rider, without having to be physically present.

multi-site's similarity to Methodism gets at the heart of the problem with multi-site in the

first place. Multi-site has an episcopal-type church structure, like Methodism, and it is

this that congregationalists find to be unbiblical.[61] To show that multi-site is similar to

Methodism in this way, is simply to illustrate the problem with multi-site

ecclesiology. What is being argued in this chapter, then, is that congregationalists should

make some of the same criticisms of multi-site ecclesial structures that they would of

episcopal ecclesial structures. Multi-site advocates are correct to claim precedent in

Methodist ecclesiology, but it is their similarity to Methodist ecclesiology that is the

problem from a congregationalist's point of view.

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[61]Historically, congregationalists have found episcopal connectionalism unbiblical because of the kind of biblical arguments put forward in the previous chapters of this dissertation. Baptists, for example, have historically made arguments from Scripture against episcopal connectionalism, as chapter six above demonstrates. For contemporary debates between congregationalists and episcopal (and presbyterian) connectionalism, see Chad Owen Brand and R. Stanton Norman, eds., *Perspectives on Church Government: Five Views of Church Polity* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2004); Steve Cowan, ed., *Who Runs the Church? Four Views on Church Government* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004).

CHAPTER 8

CONCLUSION

This dissertation has sought to demonstrate that a multi-site church that is not

characterized by campus-wide gatherings does not have a sound biblical or theological

basis for considering itself one church and is inconsistent with historic

congregationalism. This argument was made in several steps. First, the hermeneutical

question of what it means to say that a church practice (like multi-site) is biblical or

unbiblical was addressed. In this chapter it was argued that it is too simplistic merely to

ask whether Scripture commends or forbids a church practice. Instead, one must

determine whether a practice goes with or against the grain of Scripture, which involves

taking into consideration a theme's development throughout the canon.

The next two chapters traced the theme of the people of God as the assembly

of the Lord throughout the Old and New Testaments. The chapter on the Old Testament

people of God as one assembly argued that Israel was considered the "assembly of the

Lord," and that they were constituted as such by their gathering together in one place in

worship. Here it was shown that throughout the Old Testament, Israel is considered a

single assembly because the people as a whole are characterized by all gathering together

in the same place in corporate worship. The chapter on the people of God as one

assembly in the New Testament continued the study of the assembly theme, tracing its

development into the new covenant. This chapter argued that the theme of the people of

God as one assembly is central to the New Testament teaching on the church as well.

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This argument was made by, first, demonstrating that the New Testament presents the new covenant people of God as the regathered assembly of the Lord; and, secondly, by showing how the ultimate form of this regathered assembly is a heavenly-eschatological assembly that manifests itself in the form of multiple local assemblies (or "churches"). Whether considered according to the church's ultimate form or its local form, the act of assembling together is one of the components that binds Christians together and forms them into one assembly. Both of these chapters show that in the Old and New Testaments, the people of God could be considered his "assembly" because they literally assembled in his presence with his people. Being physically present in a gathering of corporate worship is one of the activities that constituted the Old and New Testament saints as an assembly of the Lord. To claim to be a part of such an assembly without actually assembling together in God's presence with the members of that assembly (as most multi-site churches do) goes against the grain of the assembly theme as it is developed in the Old and New Testaments.

The next chapter argued that the members of New Testament house churches were characterized by assembling together in one place for worship, and that, based on first century Greco-Roman domestic architecture, there is no reason to believe that such whole church gatherings could not take place in a member's home.

What these biblical and theological chapters show is that the clear pattern running through both Testaments is one in which the people of God can claim to be *one* assembly by virtue of the fact that the people as a whole are characterized by gathering in one place, together, for worship. A multi-site church whose members are not characterized by assembling in one place for worship does not have a sound biblical or

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theological basis for considering itself one church because this practice would cut *against* the grain of Scripture.

The last two chapters dealt with historical issues related to multi-site, and sought to argue for the second part of this dissertation's thesis: a multi-site church that is not characterized by campus-wide gatherings is inconsistent with historic congregationalism. Some have argued that multi-site church structure finds precedent in early English Baptist history (Baptists being an historically congregationalist group), and, thus, is consistent with Baptist ecclesiology. In chapter six, this claim was shown to be false. It was argued here that though scattered congregations did exist among some seventeenth century English Baptist churches, this practice was short-lived and did not become part of the Baptist identity that was just beginning to take shape in this early period. But, while multi-site cannot be considered Baptist, it does find historical precedent in other denominations such as Methodism. The last chapter demonstrated that Methodist circuit riders were part of an ecclesial system that was, and still is, similar to multi-site church structure because both are marked by connectional church government. This similarity between Methodist episcopal church structure and multi-site church structure only serves to heighten the problem with multi-site from a congregationalist point of view. Like Methodism, multi-site is hierarchical in the sense that multiple congregations are subsumed under one church-governmental hierarchy that is broader than the local congregation itself. This is clearly inconsistent with congregationalism (as exemplified in Baptist polity), which holds to the autonomy of the local church.[1]

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[1]See n. 61 in ch. 7 of this dissertation.

Let me now summarize the conclusions of this dissertation by stating the type

of multi-site church that could legitimately claim to be a single church ("one church in

multiple locations," if you like) and the type of multi-site church that cannot legitimately

make this claim. A multi-site church in which the members from all the sites are

characterized by gathering together at the campus-wide level could legitimately claim to

be *one* church. A multi-site church in which the members from all the sites are *not*

characterized by gathering together at the campus-wide level cannot legitimately claim to

be *one* church. In this second type of multi-site church, the multiple sites are actually

multiple *churches* and so cannot be said to be *one* church. It would be more accurate for

multi-site churches whose sites are not characterized by campus-wide gatherings to call

their sites "churches" rather than "sites" or "campuses." A good example of a multi-site

church that has done just that is Mars Hill Church in Seattle, WA. In August of 2011, one

of the leaders from this church explained that they had "decided to put an end to the word

'campus' in the Mars Hill vocabulary."[2] Instead of calling their sites "campuses," they

now call them "churches." The reason given is that "the Bible does give us a word to

describe a body of believers gathered together on mission for Jesus: *church*."[3] Their

multiple "churches" are not autonomous, however. Each "church" is connected to all the

other churches in a typical multi-site fashion. Mars Hill has recognized that it is not

biblical to call their multiple sites "campuses" (they are more than that; they are

"*churches*") but still leave what they now call their multiple "churches" under one unified

church-governmental structure. It is still multi-site; only, now, it might be more accurate

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[2]Jamie Munson, "No More Mars Hill 'Campuses'" [online]; accessed 26 November 2012; available from http://marshill.com/2011/08/08/no-more-mars-hill-campuses; Internet.

[3]Ibid. Emphasis original.

to call it multi-*church*. It was only a matter of time before someone in the multi-site

movement admitted that their multiple *sites* that do not gather together are actually

multiple *churches*. I hope that more multi-site churches will follow Mars Hill's lead in

calling sites that never meet together what they really are—"churches." Mars Hill should

be applauded for being the first (that I know of) to do this. It is honest. But it is also

telling. If Mars Hill is right, and multiple campuses that never meet together are actually

multiple churches, then we really are dealing with the old question of whether local

churches are supposed to be autonomous or whether it is okay for multiple churches to be

governed by a hierarchy that functions at a higher level of authority than the local

congregation itself. It really is the old debate between congregationalism (e.g., Baptists)

and connectionalism (e.g., Methodists).

More work needs to be done on the subject of multi-site. For example, there is

a need for someone to write a contemporary, full-length defense of congregationalism. If

multi-site practitioners determine that their multiple sites are actually multiple *churches*,

then they must decide if they are okay with not being congregational, since, as has been

stated, subsuming multiple congregations under the umbrella of one church-governmental

hierarchy is inconsistent with congregationalism. A thorough defense of

congregationalism would, no doubt, be helpful to them as they make that decision. A

second area where further study is needed would be a theology of preaching as it relates

to place. Multi-site practitioners frequently use mediums of communication that separate

the preacher from those to whom he is preaching, and it should be asked whether this is

biblical. And a third area where there is need for further study in the field of multi-site

has to do with wisdom in the use of multi-site. Just because a model of multi-site might

be allowed by Scripture (i.e., a model characterized by campus-wide assemblies) does not

mean that it would be wise to use such a model. The questions that should be addressed

in such a study are these: Is it *wise* to practice a form of multi-site that is allowed by

Scripture? What are the guidelines for determining whether or in what circumstances it is

wise to use such a model?

I hope those interested in the multi-site movement will find what has been

written in these pages helpful as they think through this important issue related to the

church of the Lord Jesus Christ.

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ABSTRACT

ONE CHURCH IN ONE LOCATION:
QUESTIONING THE BIBLICAL, THEOLOGICAL, AND HISTORICAL
CLAIMS OF THE MULTI-SITE CHURCH MOVEMENT

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The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2012
Chair: Dr. Gregg R. Allison

This dissertation argues that a multi-site church that is not characterized by

campus-wide gatherings does not have a sound biblical or theological basis for

considering itself one church and is inconsistent with historic congregationalism. This

argument is made in six steps. First, a framework for determining whether or not a

church practice is biblical is put forward. Second, it is shown that the people of God as

one assembly is a central theme in the Old Testament. Third, it is demonstrated that this

theme of the people of God as one assembly is also a central theme of the New

Testament. Fourth, it is argued that there is not precedent for multi-site church structure

in the house churches of the New Testament. Fifth, it is shown that multi-site is not

consistent with historic congregationalism as seen in Baptist ecclesiology. And sixth, it is

argued that multi-site church structure is consistent with historic connectionalism as seen,

for example, in Methodist ecclesiogy—a fact that only serves to heighten the problem

with multi-site from a congregationalist point of view.

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