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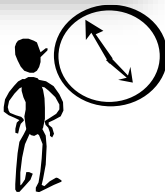
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Time of Assembly



Sunday:

Bible Study 9:00 a.m.

Worship 10:00 a.m.

Worship 5:00 p.m.

(every other week)

Wednesday:

Bible Study 6:30 p. m.

Understanding the Difference: Local and Universal Church

By Bill Robinson

I have a lot of friends that I dearly love and count them as brothers who are going to disagree with this article. Nonetheless, there are others that I dearly love and also count as brothers, for whom I feel compelled to write this. We are fast approaching the idea that these things don't matter and nothing could be further from the truth. They do matter and they are not merely religious traditions and judgments, as some would like to say they are. They are what sincere and good people believe the New Testament teaches. Every controversial issue in the church comes down to a question of authority. For a thing to be done in the name of Jesus, no matter how good we think the work is, it **must** first be authorized by Jesus (Colossians 3:17; Matthew 7:21-23).

The word "church," as used in the New Testament, merely describes a spiritual relationship. Namely, "the called out." That relationship is either referencing those individuals in a saved relationship with God in the universal church (see Matthew 16:18). Or, it may be referencing the Christian's relationship with other Christians in a local church (see Revelation 2 & 3).

The universal church that Jesus came to establish (Matthew 16:18) is composed of individuals, both living and dead, who are in a saved relationship with God through Jesus Christ (Ephesians 3:14ff). It is important to remember the church does **not** save but it is made up of the saved. Thus, the universal church is the aggregate of all saved individuals of all time. And, as such, "...to Him be the glory in the church and in Jesus Christ throughout all generations" (Eph. 3:21).

The local church is the relationship of saints to one another for the purpose of worshipping and working together

in a specific locale/city to accomplish the work that God authorized it to do (cf. I Corinthians 1:1-2; I Thessalonians 1:1; II Thessalonians 1:1; etc.). As such each local church is all-sufficient to do the work God has authorized it to do. Namely, to preach the gospel to the lost and for the building up of the saints Ephesians 4:11-16; for benevolence in relieving needy saints Acts 11:27-30). Each local church in the New Testament was autonomous (self-governing) and functioned independently from all other local churches (compare the 7 letters to the churches of Asia Revelation 2 & 3). Meaning that each local church had its own elders, deacons, and members (Philippians 1:1; Acts 14:23). This is further emphasized by Peter in 1 Peter 5:1-4, where he exhorts elders “*to shepherd the flock that is among you.*” Nowhere in the scriptures do we read of an organization larger than the local church. If the local church in Upper West Manhattan were the only church in the whole world it is all-sufficient. Meaning it could be and it could do everything God wanted it to be and do. It is not dependent on any other church or elders elsewhere to do it’s work.

The universal church has no earthly organization. In other words, the universal church has no earthly headquarters. Christ is the head of His body, the church, and is the chief shepherd over the universal church ((Ephesians 1:22-23; I Peter 5:4). The universal church is a spiritual gathering and coming together of the saved who are enrolled in heaven (see Hebrews 12:22-24).

The New Testament never speaks of local churches cooperating except concurrently. That is because they are independent and autonomous. To cooperate concurrently means each local church is aiming toward the same goal but independent of each other. There is no organization in the New Testament larger or smaller than the local church. Thus, the New Testament knows nothing of any man-made institution or arrangement for doing the work which God gave to the local church to do. That is why I noted earlier, that if the Upper West Manhattan church was the only church in all of the world it could be and it could do everything God wanted it to be and do. Now that is either a true or false statement. If false, then where is the scripture that proves otherwise? If true, then **no** human institution or centralized arrangement is necessary for doing the work God intended the local church to do.

Why does it matter about the universal and local church? As one writer has wisely observed, “...to accurately determine the work of the church we must keep a consistent and unambiguous definition of the church (universal or local) before us. If people are confused as to what constitutes a local church (or universal church - br), we can expect nothing but confusion when they try to determine the work of a local church.” [Robert Turner, p. 8, The Cogdell-Turner Discussion].

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Why Are Elders Missing in So Many Churches?

By Roger D. Campbell

We read about “the elders of the church” in the New Testament (James 5:14). In the Bible, “the elders of the church” refers to those brothers who serve as the overseers of a local flock of God (Acts 20:17, 28). They also are identified as shepherds or pastors (Ephesians 4:11) and bishops (Philippians 1:1). Paul charged Titus to set in order things that were lacking when he labored on Crete. That included appointing elders in every city (Titus 1:5).

That same apostle, along with Barnabas, “appointed elders in every church” near the tail-end of their lengthy preaching trip together (Acts 14:23).

God declares the need for Christians to have rulers over them in the spiritual realm, those who watch for their souls (Hebrews 13:17). This is an indirect reference to the elders of the church (Acts 20:17, 28).

The Holy Spirit set forth the God-required characteristics for those brothers who serve as elders in the church. They are a “must,” and we read such qualifications in Titus 1:5-9 and I Timothy 3:1-7.

If God thought it was important enough to tell mankind His will about what kind of person may serve as an overseer in His church, and He also tells such men to take heed to and shepherd His flock, then would we not conclude that He desires for His church to have qualified brothers serving as elders? Absolutely. So, yes, God is in favor of the proposal to have brothers serving as elders in His church.

You may not be aware of this, but some Christians have lived and died on the earth and never met a single elder. If God wants local churches of the Christ to have pastors (elders/shepherds) then why is it that so many do not?

Some congregations do not have elders because they are composed entirely of new converts. Novices are not allowed to be bishops (I Timothy 3:6).

Some churches do not have elders because there is only one male among their members. Other congregations have multiple male members, but only one of them is ready to serve as an overseer. In God’s plan, local churches need to have a plurality of brothers comprising an eldership (Acts 14:23).

Some local churches do not have elders because the brothers who could be considered to fill that role feel that their duties with their secular jobs do not allow them to give the kind of commitment needed to be faithful, sheep-serving elders.

Other congregations do not have elders because the male members do not have a desire to serve. Having a heart that wants to reach out and take on that responsibility is a requirement (I Timothy 3:1), so until the desire exists, there will not be an eldership.

Some congregations struggle to transition to the point of appointing elders because, quite frankly, most of the members prefer to keep going on indefinitely with no

elders. Why? Well, things seem to be going rather smoothly when everybody collectively oversees the work, so why ruin our nice little setup by appointing a few men to be our spiritual rulers? Hear this: any congregation that takes the approach that it is best not to have elders, thinking, “We do not want or need elders” is not walking in harmony with God’s plan. They need to transform their mind and grow up.

Some churches do not have elders because the brothers are hesitant to take on such a serious task because they fear that they never will be flawless. They are right about that! God’s requirement, though, is not to be flawless, but to be faithful as His steward (Titus 1:7; I Corinthians 4:2). We err if we make it sound as if God’s required character traits are so stringent that no one ever could be qualified to serve as a faithful elder. That is not a biblical concept.

Going forward, what do we need to do to get more qualified elderships in place? Education on what the Bible teaches about elders; leadership training; encouragement to our brothers to set a goal to mature spiritually so they can serve as an overseer; Godly, effective shepherding from those who already serve as elders – examples send a powerful message.

We are not lacking scriptural instruction about elders. For some congregations, it is just a matter of time before their brothers have matured enough to serve as elders. God loves the church, and so do we. He wants to see faithful elderships over every local flock of His; so do we. Let us pray about this.

Why the Change?

Author unknown

When the gospel was preached at Corinth, those who were fornicators, adulterers, and homosexuals stopped practicing those sins. "*Such **were** some of you*" (I Corinthians 6:8-11). Did the preachers actually preach against those lifestyle choices? Did no one worry that this kind of preaching was not politically correct?

Are people being convicted of sin in our preaching of the gospel today? How will people know they need the remedy of sin in Jesus if they do not first know what sin is and how serious a malady it is?

Some at Corinth **were** thieves, covetous, and drunkards, but the preaching of the gospel made them realize they needed to quit. Some were revilers and extortioners, but the gospel made them want to quit that lifestyle.

Why the change? Because the gospel is about the remedy for sin, and sin is identified so that people realize it is wrong, and they are brought to realize that if they do not cease the practice of sin they are choosing eternal separation from God. Sin still separates us from God, but if we repent of sin, we can be forgiven and reconciled back to God (Luke 13:3; Acts 2:38; 3:19; 17:30-31).

Change comes by identifying the problem and offering the solution. The gospel does both, and that is why "*such **were** some of you*" instead of "*such **are** some of you.*" We need to identify sin today in preaching the truth of the gospel. Souls are at stake, and we are the watchmen in charge of warning and telling solutions.