What Is Church

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I. According to Scripture, all Christians belong to the universal church (1 Corinthians 12:13/Ephesians 4:4-6), which is an organism (not an organization) left on earth to communicate Christ's message and to continue his work in his absence (John 14:12-14/Acts 1:1, by implication).

A. I believe that this Church is a spiritually created and defined "body," comprised of a diversity of members who are gifted and placed in spiritual relationship to one another by the sovereign Spirit of God (1 Corinthians 12:11-12/Philippians 2:1).

II. There is a local "sampling" of the universal body of Christ in every locality wherein "two or more" persons have come to faith in Christ and gather together for mutual edification and cooperative ministry (Matthew 18:20).

A. All the believers in a given locality are the united local expression of Christ to their sector of the world.

B. No divisions are to be tolerated among them (see point 6 below).

C. In the New Testament, the 'locality' of the church was defined in terms of city boundaries (1 Corinthians 1:2/1 Thessalonians 1:1/Titus 1:5). In our own day of clustered cities and suburbs and of improved transportation, the definition of 'locality' might conceivably be extended beyond the borders of a single city or town;

III. In some localities, the local sample may consist of such a large number of believers that they cannot all meet in the same building. The result is the clustering of smaller groups into various congregations or 'house churches' (Romans 16:5,

Romans 16:10-11/Colossians 4:15 w/Philemon 2).

A. Since Paul addressed his letters to all the Christians in a given city (Romans 1:7/Philippians 1:1/Colossians 1:2), it is a fair inference that the various smaller clusters in the city enjoyed a certain amount of unity and shared life and resources with each other (at least they shared Paul's letters among themselves);

B. Biblically, it is unclear whether each 'congregation' of this type is to function as a fully-orbed microcosm of the universal Church, or whether that microcosmic expression is found in the combined congregations within a locality. For example, what Paul says about the life of the church in Corinth (e.g. 1 Corinthians 12) seems not to reflect that of every individual gathering, but of the "whole church" in the city (1 Corinthians 14:23).

C. Without further biblical information on this point, it would be folly for anyone to speak dogmatically. It seems, though, given the small number of persons that an individual house church might legitimately encompass (a synagogue could be as small as ten families; a "church," where Christ is expressed, smaller still – Matthew 18:20), one could hardly expect every individual congregation to have all the gifts (apostles, prophets, evangelists, a plurality of elders, miracle workers, etc.) functioning among its members and to be a fully-orbed expression of the body of Christ. Therefore, I incline to the view that the fuller expression of Christ is found in the sum total of active confessing Christians in all the congregations of a given locality.

IV. This suggests a built-in interdependence—not only between individual believers, but also between congregations within a locality.

A. Individual congregations that define their identities, commitments and ministries in isolation from the other

congregations in the same locality are falling into the sectarian mentality, decried by Paul, of saying "I am of…" and "I am of…" (1 Corinthians 1:12-13). They have forsaken the spiritual definition of the Body for what I have called (because it is a good label) an 'institutional model' of the church, in which 'membership' has little to do with being a limb spiritually attached by the Spirit to the rest of the Body, but is defined in terms of "membership' or 'covenanted commitment' (neither concept can be found in scripture).

B. Commitment to a group of Christians in one congregation in a way that preempts commitment to the entire church outside that congregation is wrongheaded and is described by Paul as infantile and carnal (1 Corinthians 3:2-4).

C. Relationships among Christians locally or trans-locally are spiritual in nature. They are not defined in terms of 'belonging' to one or another small group, as in a club or organization. They are defined in terms of 'organic,' God-ordained, real-life interaction that takes place (mostly) outside the scheduled "meetings" (Deduced from the fact that several of the 'gifts,' like giving, helps, administration, mercy, marriage, singleness, etc.— Romans 12:6-8/1 Corinthians 7:7; 1 Corinthians 12:28—can hardly be thought to find their primary expression in the 'church meeting,' but rather in day-to-day interaction of believers among themselves). In fact, the congregational "meeting" has little to do with relationships per se, since people may gather there who have no real-life interaction or fellowship (historic and modern experience abundantly *demonstrates this).*

V. I believe that the one mandate of the Christian is to love all who call on the Lord out of a pure heart (John 13:34/2 Timothy 2:22), not judging one another by extrabiblical criteria (John 7:24).

The unity of the whole church is seriously compromised when organizational linking—not love—is treated as an essential to

‘normative Christian fellowship.”

A. It is sin and unloving to impose a single culturally-defined model of ‘normative church life’ upon believers who, apart from that model, are walking in love, victory over sin, service, humility, and abundance of sociable fellowship, simply because they define their ‘church’ affiliation by some other standard than the extrabiblical standard most current in a given culture.

B. Such culturally-established models of ‘church’ may even, occasionally, fit biblical norms less admirably than do some alternative structures.

C. The exact frequency of formal meetings or assemblies is never prescribed in scripture. No one reading the gospels can get the impression that Jesus’ primary focus was the establishing of weekly “meetings” for His disciples! He never said a word about such. He talked about real-life relationships—and little else. Even in Acts, there is no mention of weekly meetings [1].

> *[1] 1 Corinthians 16:2 and Acts 20:7 do not mention weekly gatherings of the church, though some have read such into these passages. However, Acts 2:46-47; Acts 5:42; Acts 6:1 and Acts 19:9 speak specifically of daily gatherings.*

D. Nonetheless, such meetings provide one small avenue for communication, corporate prayer, public instruction, worship, etc., and have their place in the believer’s life (Hebrews 10:25).

E. I believe that the modern-day equivalent of these congregations may be in what are today called ‘churches’ or in homes or in ‘para-church’ meetings. The label on the building, the day or frequency of meeting, and the protocol for the gathering are not dictated by scripture. Therefore, a great deal of latitude must be granted for various organizational

'norms' by which various groups and associations of believers define themselves (Romans 14:4-6). To insist that one particular set of extrabiblical norms be imposed as non-negotiable points upon other believers is to be sectarian and carnal.

F. The fruit of love and Christian growth and service should be the biblical standard for recognizing a given association of believers (however non-institutionalized) as viable 'church.' Any other standard of definition or judgment exchanges the spiritual model of the body of Christ for an institutional model;

VI. 'Authority' and 'accountability' are spiritual dynamics inherent in godly relationships, not necessarily dictated by organizational structures (2 Corinthians 1:24/ 2 Corinthians 10:13-14/Hebrews 13:7, Hebrews 13:17).

A. This is self-evidently true, in addition to being what the Bible teaches. A man may hold an office of 'authority' in a 'church' without even being saved! Such a man has no actual authority in any spiritual sense over the life of believers. On the other hand, a man holding no organizational office may, by virtue of actual gifting and relationship, possess real authority to speak into the lives of his brothers (Acts 18:26).

B. Institutions (man-made organizations) can only guarantee such 'rulership' as the "rulers of the gentiles" possess, of which Jesus said "It shall not be so among you!" (Matthew 20:25-26).

C. The Holy Spirit confers spiritual authority and accountability in real-life relationships (1 Corinthians 4:15/2 Corinthians 3:1-2).

D. Accountability of one man to another man or institution is nowhere spoken of in the Bible. The head of every man is

Christ. Every man is directly accountable to God (Matthew 12:36/Luke 16:2/Romans 14:12/1 Corinthians11:3/2 Corinthians 5:9-10/Hebrews 4:13; Hebrews 13:17/1 Peter 3:21; 1 Peter 4:5). Because of this, none may judge another as to extrabiblical areas of conduct (Romans 14:4, Romans 14:10).

E. We must give account to God for maintaining the integrity of our own individual conscience toward God (Acts 23:1; Acts 24:16/1 Timothy 1:5, 1 Timothy 1:19; 1 Timothy 3:9).

1. The testimony of a man's conscience is the tribunal of final appeal (2 Corinthians 1:12/2 Timothy 1:3/Hebrews 13:18), because, if the conscience is overruled (seared, impure), then nothing (including membership in an organized church or submission to organizational rulers) can put a man in right relationship to God (1 Timothy 4:2/Titus 1:15).

2. This is why Paul's appeal for credibility was not on the basis of his 'position of authority,' nor his "authorization" by other men (he emphatically denies such authorization in Galatians 1) but to "every man's conscience" (2 Corinthians 4:2).

3. It is even proper and acceptable to God that a man suffer persecution for refusing to violate his conscience (1 Peter 2:19; 1 Peter 3:16).