

The term employed by the Holy Spirit, which is generally rendered "church" in our English New Testament, is *ekklesia*. It is a compound word formed by the preposition *ek* which means "out of" and the verb *kaleo*, which means "to call or summon." This word was not coined by the Holy Spirit, but was in general use among Greek speaking people in the first century. It never had any religious significance among the Greeks. It literally meant the "called-out ones" or an "assembly" and was applied to any body of people called out or gathered to-, ether for any purpose. It is used strictly in this sense in Acts 19:32.39.

In the New Testament, however, the term is used generally to denote the people of God, those who have been redeemed by the blood of Christ. The gospel is portrayed as a call to the lost (2 Thess.2:14) and those favorably responding thereto as having been "called out of darkness into His marvelous light" (1 Peter 2:9) or as having been delivered "from the power of darkness and translated into the kingdom of the Son of His love." (Col. 1:13) This kingdom is the church or *ekklesia* of Christ. So the church of which the New Testament predominantly speaks is that group of people who have been set apart from the world, those who are no longer in darkness and sin, but rather are in light and salvation.

Generally the word church in this spiritual sense is used in two ways: (1) It is used in a universal sense to include all of God's people everywhere--all of the saved. See Matthew 16:18; Ephesians 1:22,23; 5:25; Colossians 1:18; Hebrews 12:23. (2) It is used in the local sense to denote a body of 'people banded together for work and worship who meet together in one place. Most of the time that you find the word church in the New Testament it is used in this sense. See Acts 20:17,28; 1 Corinthians 1:2; 1 Thessalonians 1:1; 2 Thessalonians 1:1; 1 Timothy 3:5.

When more than one of these local groups is being referred to in a certain area the plural of *ekklesia* is used. For example, Paul addresses the Galatian epistle "to the churches of Galatia." (Gal. 1:2) When an even larger area is envisioned and yet separate local bodies are in mind. Paul says: "the churches of Christ greet you." (Rom. 16:16) Let us further inquire into the distinction between the universal church and the local church. Clearly this distinction lies not merely in the feature of a limited locale. In fact, there are three characteristics which must be present in order for a local group of saints to constitute a local church in the New Testament sense.

A Common Leadership - The Elders

First, a local church is characterized by a common leadership or rule--the elders. Every organized body must have some sort of leadership. In the early days of the first church in Jerusalem, the apostles furnished such leadership. ("Acts 4:37: 6:2ff) Later on, however, this temporary arrangement gave way to the leadership and rule of elders. (Acts 15:4,6) In the latter part of Paul's first preaching journey, as he was returning to the cities where churches had been established. Luke tells us that "they appointed elders in every church." (Acts 14:23) Paul wrote to Titus and stated: "For this reason I left you in Crete, that you should set in order the things that are lacking, and appoint elders in every city as I commanded you." (Tit. 1:5)

The qualifications which men must meet in order to be appointed to the office of an elder are set forth in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1. It therefore is obvious that unless and until a local group of saints has a plurality of men who meet these qualifications there cannot properly be elders in that congregation. In such an instance temporary leadership must be provided as was done for a time in Jerusalem. The Scriptures give no explicit instruction as to just what form this temporary

leadership is to take. The periodic "business meeting" of the men of the congregation seems to be in harmony with Biblical principles which clearly limit leadership function to men. (1 Tim.3:1 ; Tit, 1:6) At the same time it needs to be emphasized that such an arrangement should be temporary! It is not a scriptural substitution for elders in the local church. The old saw which observes that "it is better to be scripturally unorganized than to be unscripturally organized," while containing an element of truth, is still no justification for perpetuating a non-elder arrangement. Strikingly, it did not take years and years in the first century for local churches to appoint and benefit from the oversight of elders, which is the Lord's arrangement, and the men of the first century were not perfect either!

Before leaving this facet of our study, may it be observed that the function or province of such elders is always limited to the church of which they are elders. Their relationship, which is delineated in the terms elder, bishop and pastor or shepherd, applies only with respect to that local body which appointed them and relates to no other group. In addressing such men Peter exhorted, "Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers, not by constraint but willingly, not for monetary gain but eagerly; nor as being lords over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock." (1 Pet.5:2,3)

A Common Worship - The Assembly

A second essential component of a local church is a common worship shared in a literal physical assembly. The church being the temple of God (1 Cor.3:6) and a holy and royal priesthood (1 Pet.2:5,9), one of its principal functions is the exercise of corporate worship. True, worship is individual in nature and much worship can and should be offered individually and severally. However, some worship is to be offered together with fellow Christians. In Acts 20:7 Luke records that the

members of the local church at Troas "came together to break bread." In 1 Corinthians 11:20 Paul rebukes the members of the church at Corinth by observing that "when you come together in one place is not to eat the Lord's Supper," implying thereby that this should have been their purpose in so assembling. 1 Corinthians 16 seems to be a clear reference to this first day of the week meeting for worship, and surely none will deny that the Hebrew writer is alluding to such gatherings when he says, "Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching." (Heb.10:25) [n chapters eleven through fourteen of 1 Corinthians Paul treats extensively of the conduct of such collective worship.

Common Finances - The Treasury

A third characteristic of the local church is the pooling of monetary or material resources. This further distinguishes the local church from the universal church, which has no treasury. This pooling of resources began soon after the church came into existence when reference is made to Jerusalem saints bringing money and laying it "at the apostles' feet." (Acts 4:37;5:2) In 1 Corinthians 16:1,2 the apostle states: "Now concerning the collection for the saints, as I have given orders to the churches of Galatia, so you do also: On the first day of the week let each one of you lay something aside, storing up as he may prosper, that there be no collections when I come." Some have supposed that the instruction here involves only the individuals severally setting something aside at home, but this seems to me to defeat the very purpose stated for the weekly giving viz., "that there be no collections when I come." This pooled fund is the means by which a plurality of saints may act as one in carrying out the will of God, whether in supporting the preaching of the gospel or in

relieving needy saints. (Phil.4: 1 5.16; 1 Cor. 16:1.2. 2 Cor.8,9)

A Voluntary Association

The local church is a voluntary association of those of "like precious faith." One upon becoming a Christian is not automatically made a member of a particular local church. It is into the universal church that we are baptized (1 Cor. 12:13), and then we choose which local church we will work with as members.

Conclusion

In closing I want to emphasize that the local church arrangement is God's plan for his people. It is not his will that Christians drift from one local church to another without casting their lot with any. Faithful Christians are involved Christians and one cannot truly be involved in the Lord's work without being an active member of the local church. We need to remember that the local church is the only functional unit of God's people. No other institution is required or allowed in doing the work God assigned to the local church. As Alexander Campbell so well put it when discussing the church in reference to other organizations, "In their church capacity alone they moved."

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Visitors are always welcome!

THE LOCAL CHURCH

By
Foy Vinson

**"Paul and Timothy, servants of Jesus Christ,
To till the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi
with the bishops and deacons. (Philippians 1:1)**

The Bible Has The Answer!