

HOW NEW TESTAMENT CHURCHES RELATE TO ONE ANOTHER

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The biblical record of the First Century church presents a picture of a fraternity of local churches, spread throughout the central Roman Empire. This fraternity crossed geographical, linguistic, cultural, national, and ethnic boundaries. Not only was their relationship displayed in attitude, but their actions demonstrated the reality of that fraternity.

This fraternity possessed a common doctrine, exhibited a consistent pattern of local church government, recognized the same trans-local ministries, assisted one another financially, conformed to a consistent procedural pattern for bringing converts into the Kingdom, and above all, they were in submission to the same Lord.

Questions of faith and practice were settled by the revelatory apostles (Paul and the Twelve). Denominations were unknown. Even though Jewish and Gentile churches may have had slightly different perceptions of what the future Kingdom of God would look like, all of them were motivated by the expectation of the soon return of Christ and the hope of the resurrection. In those primitive days, everyone knew what was meant by the statement, "He is a Christian."

Unfortunately, such halcyon days are long past. The contemporary Church is a divided Church. Denominational hierarchies and independent kingdoms flourish. Beautiful simplicity has been replaced by complexity. Those who love God and His Church long for a restoration of the simplicity and commonality of the Church's earliest decades.

In this brief study, we will explore the subject of inter-congregational relationships as displayed in the New Testament. Our goal is to discover principles and patterns in the New Testament Church that can be applied to our current situation. Of necessity, our conclusions will involve both inductive and deductive logic, some opinion, and, we pray, insights from the Holy Spirit.

SECTION I ORGANIZATIONAL RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN NEW TESTAMENT CHURCHES

Contemporary churches display a variety of trans-congregational models. The monolithic hierarchy of Roman Catholicism dwells at one end of the spectrum. Many isolated independent churches are found at the opposite end. In between these two models there exist many varied degrees of supra-congregational hierarchies. What is the New Testament pattern? Is it that of a network of churches functioning under the oversight of an ecclesiastical hierarchy, or is it a pattern of autonomous churches that have no authority in one another's affairs, or is it something other than either of these?

If the Holy Spirit's plan for the Church included a supra-congregational¹ hierarchy, we would expect to find evidence of this in the New Testament record. We will examine the historical record in search of such an hierarchy. Then, we will examine the Epistles to see if there is evidence of such an hierarchy.

¹"Supra-congregational" is the term that we will use in this section to describe an authority over a local church, something that is above the local eldership. Webster defines *supra*, "a prefix meaning above, over..."

PART ONE: AN EXAMINATION OF ACTS

In our survey of Acts we will note those instances in which the opportunity was presented for the establishment of some sort of authority beyond that of local church leaders. Of special note will be those cases in which the nature of the situation seemed to call for such a structure.

Case Study #1: The Birth of the Church in Samaria

The first inter-congregational event recorded in Acts was the sending of Peter and John to the newly established church in the city of Samaria. The birth of a church in Samaria resulted from Saul's persecution of the Jerusalem Church, causing many Christians to flee the city. Philip, a deacon of the Jerusalem Church, fled to Samaria, where he immediately preached the Gospel of Christ. His preaching was accompanied by credentialing miracles. As a result, a large portion of the city became believers and were baptized. The Jerusalem Church responded to the news of the newly-born Samaritan Church by sending two apostles to visit the area.

If a supra-congregational authority were to be put into place anywhere, one would expect it to happen here. The main reason for this expectation is the contempt that Jerusalem Jews held toward the Samaritans. Samaria was inhabited by mongrel Jews whose religious history was mixed. At certain points, their theology and interpretation of the Law of Moses conflicted with Jewish orthodoxy. Because of this history, it would not be surprising if the "Mother Church" in Jerusalem and the apostles in particular were suspicious of the Samaritan's ability to remain true to the essentials of the faith. So, some sort of oversight from Jerusalem would seem to be a responsible action.

Another reason for us to expect the apostles to institute some sort of supra-congregational authority was the apostolic government of the Church. Up to this point, the entire church had been located in Jerusalem and the apostles were the government over the Church. Given their special place in the Kingdom, it would be a very natural and expected action for the apostles to extend their governmental role to Samaria, thus continuing to be the government of the entire church. Contrary to our expectations, Acts records no imposition of Jerusalem authority upon the Samaritans:

Now when the apostles which were at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent unto them Peter and John: Who, when they were come down, prayed for them, that they might receive the Holy Ghost: (For as yet he was fallen upon none of them: only they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.) Then laid they their hands on them, and they received the Holy Ghost.... And they, when they had testified and preached the word of the Lord, returned to Jerusalem, and preached the gospel in many villages of the Samaritans.²

No statement is made as to why Peter and John were sent to Samaria. Judging by their activity, they went to Samaria to enlarge the Kingdom by bestowing the Holy Spirit and by preaching in villages. However, the above account pictures neither the Jerusalem church nor the

²Acts 8:14-17, 25

apostolic team as exercising authority over the Samaritan church. After imparting the Holy Spirit, they left Samaria in the hands of the Spirit.

Case Study #2: The Birth of the Gentile Church in Caesarea

The second opportunity for supra-congregational authority to be put into place is recorded in Acts 10 and 11. This is the record of Peter's preaching the Gospel to the household of Cornelius, and the Jerusalem church's response to this event. For our purposes, we are interested only in the Jerusalem church's response.

Peter had been directed, sovereignly, to travel to Caesarea and to preach Christ to those gathered in the home of Cornelius, a Roman Centurion. This was the first time that the Gospel had been preached to Gentiles. When Peter returned from Caesarea, he reported to the Jerusalem Church leaders what had happened in the home of Cornelius. Initially, he was criticized for fraternizing with Gentiles. He quieted his critics by describing God's sovereign bestowal of the Holy Spirit upon the Gentiles. When they heard Peter's report, the Jerusalem leaders responded,

Then hath God also to the Gentiles granted repentance unto life.³

That was it. Once again, where one might expect some sort of paternal extra-congregational oversight to be imposed, there was none. Even though the Christians in Caesarea were uninstructed Gentiles, they were left in the hands of the Holy Spirit.

Case Study #3 The Birth of the Church in Antioch

The third opportunity for a Jerusalem-based ecclesiastical hierarchy is found in the Acts 11:19ff. This is the record of the spread of the Gospel to Antioch. At the same time that Philip had fled to Samaria, other Christians fled to Antioch. At first, these refugee evangelists preached only to Jews. However, in a short while, some also preached to Gentiles and a large church quickly came to exist. When the Jerusalem Church heard that a large number of Antiochans had become believers, they sent Barnabas to look in on them. Again, observe the absence of any hint of a "Jerusalem is headquarters" mentality.

And some of them were men of Cyprus and Cyrene, which, when they were come to Antioch, spake unto the Grecians, preaching the Lord Jesus. And the hand of the Lord was with them: and a great number believed, and turned unto the Lord. Then tidings of these things came unto the ears of the church which was in Jerusalem: and they sent forth Barnabas, that he should go as far as Antioch. Who, when he came, and had seen the grace of God, was glad, and exhorted them all, that with purpose of heart they would cleave unto the Lord. For he was a good man, and full of the Holy Ghost and of faith: and much people was added unto the Lord. Then departed Barnabas to Tarsus, for to seek Saul: And when he had found him, he brought him unto Antioch. And it came to pass, that a whole year they assembled themselves with the church, and taught much people. And the disciples were called Christians first in Antioch. And in these days came prophets from Jerusalem unto Antioch. And there stood up one of them named Agabus,

³Acts 11:18b

and signified by the spirit that there should be great dearth throughout all the world: which came to pass in the days of Claudius Caesar.⁴

Why did the Jerusalem church send Barnabas to Antioch? Again, we are not told. However, judging from Barnabas' described activity, it was to encourage the new church and to teach new converts the things of God. Note that when a company of Jerusalem prophets came to Antioch, they did not come in the role of ecclesiastical authorities. Instead, they brought a prophetic word to the church, especially about coming world conditions. So, once again, we find no record of supra-congregational authority in the relationship between Jerusalem and Antioch.

Case Study #4

Church Planting on the First Missionary Journey

The next account in Acts that presents a situation in which supra-congregational authority could have occurred is the record of Paul & Barnabas' first missionary journey. Here, home-base is not Jerusalem, but Antioch. At the instruction of the Holy Spirit, the leadership in Antioch released Barnabas and Saul (Paul) for the work into which the Holy Spirit had called them. They set out on their first missionary trip, taking the Gospel to many cities in various Roman provinces. There were converts in every city in which they preached. Paul and Barnabas were not allowed to remain long in each city. Persecution by the Jews forced them to preach and then to move on.

This was an area quite removed from both Jerusalem and Antioch. The new churches had not enjoyed the benefit of a sustained visit from an apostle. There had been no opportunity to disciple the converts and to firmly ground them in matters of the faith. All were new converts who would face opposition and possible persecution. Surely here was a situation that called for some sort of supra-congregational or apostolic oversight. Again, our expectations are not fulfilled.

And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, having prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed. (Acts 14:23)

As Paul and Barnabas retraced their steps, they exercised their apostolic authority by ordaining elders in every city, leaving each congregation under the oversight of its local elders. No accountability network between the churches nor over the churches was established by Paul & Barnabas. Significant to our discussion is the description of Paul & Barnabas' return to Antioch.

And when they were come, and had gathered the church together, they rehearsed all that God had done with them, and how he had opened the door of faith unto the Gentiles. And there they abode long time with the disciples.⁵

There was not the slightest suggestion that Paul and Barnabas should have set up some sort of accountability network. The local leaders under the oversight of the Holy Spirit was considered to be sufficient.

⁴Acts 11:20-28

⁵Acts 14:27-28

Case Study #5 The Jerusalem Council

Acts 15 is extremely important to the question of supra-congregational authority. When Judaizing teachers from Judea came to Antioch, telling the Gentiles that they must follow the Mosaic Law in order to be saved, Paul and Barnabas had "great dissension and debate with them." The entire ministry of grace was being challenged by these Judaizing teachers. The fact that these teachers had come from Jerusalem gave credence to their teaching. Yet, Paul, Barnabas, and the Antioch Church knew that hundreds had been saved and given the Holy Spirit, apart from the Law. What was to be done? The Antioch church responded in a responsible manner. They decided to send to Jerusalem a group of respected men from their church, including Paul and Barnabas. This group would discuss with the apostles and elders at Jerusalem, the controversy caused by the Judaizing teachers from Judaea.

The record does not report whether or not the Antioch church considered the Apostles and elders of Jerusalem to be authoritative in this matter. Did they send their delegation to work out the problem, as "brother to brother," or did they send the delegation to hear from "headquarters"? We are not told. For certain, there was a desire to know the truth and, by implication, there was a desire to avoid a schism between Antioch and Jerusalem. Our Lord had told His disciples how to handle differences (Matthew 5:23-24; 18:15-18). Although the teachings of Jesus did not fit this situation literally, the Antioch Church displayed the spirit of what Christ taught.

How did the apostles and elders of Jerusalem view themselves in this matter? Were they an authority to which all churches had to submit? The revelatory apostles⁶ (the Twelve and Paul) were the means of solving all problems of orthodoxy. However, this was a situation in which the Judaizers had challenged Paul's revelatory role and the accuracy of his teaching. Galatians 2:1-2 describes Paul's attitude and motivation toward the Jerusalem conference:

Then after an interval of fourteen years I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, taking Titus along also. And it was because of a revelation that I went up; and I submitted to them the gospel which I preach among the Gentiles, but I did so in private to those who were of reputation, for fear that I might be running, or had run, in vain.

Outwardly, Paul went up to Jerusalem because he had been appointed to do so by the brethren in Antioch. Inwardly, however, he had been prompted to do so by the Lord. The Antioch church's sending Paul to Jerusalem was confirmation of what Paul sensed in his spirit, i.e., that he and Barnabas should go to Jerusalem and settle this matter once and for all.

When he and the Antioch delegation arrived in Jerusalem, Paul wisely consulted with the apostolic leaders before entering the council. Paul knew that the source of his teaching was the same as that of the Twelve (the Holy Spirit).⁷ He assumed that he and the Twelve would be in agreement, unless someone's flesh got in the way, as it did with Peter and Barnabas in Antioch.⁸ Paul and Barnabas knew where they stood with the Twelve, when the deliberations described in Acts 15:6ff began. The outcome of the council seems to have been a foregone conclusion.

⁶We use the term, "revelatory apostles," to describe those whom the Holy Spirit used to give the foundational revelation of God's will and the Gospel.

⁷Paul:Galatians 1:11-12, 15-17; The Twelve:John 14:25-26

⁸Galatians 2:11ff

It must be said that the Twelve and the Jerusalem elders occupied a position that no one else ever has occupied. The Twelve were chosen by Jesus in a very public manner to be his revelators⁹. The church was born in Jerusalem, under the Holy Spirit directed ministry of the Twelve. Until Paul's call and commissioning, all of the spreading Church was an outgrowth of the Jerusalem seed-bed. Therefore, if there were any challenges to Paul's orthodoxy, this was the place to settle it. In this sense, the Jerusalem council had authority.

After the council reached consensus, they decided to record their decision in a letter to the Gentile Christians. The terminology used in reference to the letter and the terms used in the letter itself shed light on our question. First, in Acts 15:20, where the letter is proposed, James is quoted as saying, "...we write to them that they..." The Greek verb used here, ἐπιστεῖλαι¹⁰, means simply, *to write*, or, as the word is used in some instances, *to write instructions*. James' proposal does not imply a command. The terms used in James' proposal are more along the lines of instructions given by one who is an authority on a subject, rather than as a decree from one who is in authority over someone. For example, one might ask an experienced carpenter how to build a staircase. He would write, "Do it this way..." These are instructions, not commands. James' proposal implies that he and the others considered themselves to be authorities on the truth of the matter that the council had debated.

However, the letter itself contains language that bears a greater sense of authority, *For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay upon you no greater burden than these essentials*. The Greek terminology translated, *It seemed good...to us*, is the language used by rabbis when making a pronouncement.¹¹ As F.F. Bruce points out, "But the form of the words used... is authoritative enough: it was a form widely used in the wording of imperial and other government decrees. Moreover, the four abstentions prescribed are said to be *necessary*."¹²

The expression, *lay upon you*, implies that the writers of the letter had the ability (authority) to lay these things upon the recipients of the letter. This being true, the Jerusalem conference pictured in Acts 15 was no mere debate. The council established forever the truth that the Mosaic Law is irrelevant to the issue of salvation. Grace, rather than law, was affirmed as the Good News of Jesus for all nations. This was an issue that could have been resolved only by the Twelve (which by now numbered only eleven, James having been beheaded by Herod - Acts 12:1-2).

⁹The public aspect of Jesus' choice of the Twelve as his revelators is multifold. This is in contrast to Paul's being chosen by Christ as a revelator, which, for the most part, was done in private. Note the following:

- The Twelve experienced a forty-two month public ministry with Jesus.
- At the baptism in the Holy Spirit on Pentecost, the Holy Spirit spoke through the Twelve.
- During the earliest months of the Church's life, all miracle ministry was restricted to the Twelve.

¹⁰ Infinitive, aorist, active

¹¹ Knowling, R.J., *The Acts of the Apostles*, in Volume Two of *The Expositors Greek New Testament*, W. Robertson Nicoll, editor (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1976) p 328

¹² Bruce, FF., *The Book of Acts*, in *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (William B. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids) 1988, p. 299

So, even though the letter is gentle, it does carry authority. Does this mean, therefore, that the New Testament pictures a "mother church" that has authority over other churches? I think not. This was an unusual situation, involving unique people (revelatory apostles), before the existence of Scripture.¹³ They met to resolve a basic misunderstanding of the Gospel. This council never was repeated again. Neither the Jerusalem Church nor the Twelve considered themselves as being overseers of Paul and the spreading Kingdom of God.

Case Study #6 **Paul's Second Missionary Journey**

The next opportunity for supra-congregational authority to be expressed was during Paul's second missionary journey. When Paul suggested to Barnabas that they make the trip, he proposed,

*Let us go again and visit our brethren in every city where we have preached the word of the Lord, and see how they do.*¹⁴

There is no sense of oversight by an authority, it was to *see how they do*. When the trip took place, Silas rather than Barnabas, accompanied Paul. Note how Acts describes the team's activity on the trip.

And he was traveling through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches...Now while they were passing through the cities, they were delivering the decrees, which had been decided upon by the apostles and elders who were in Jerusalem, for them to observe. So the churches were being strengthened in the faith, and were increasing in number daily. (Acts 15:41; 16:4)

Paul is not described as traveling among these churches as a monarchical bishop, overseeing and supervising the churches under his authority. He delivered the letter from the Jerusalem council and he *strengthened the churches*. The picture is one of an encourager and teacher, rather than that of a ruler.

Case Study #7 **Paul's Third Missionary Journey**

The same picture prevails in the description of Paul's third missionary journey. His visits to the churches *strengthened all the disciples*.

And when he had landed at Caesarea, he went up and greeted the church, and went down to Antioch. And having spent some time there, he departed and passed

¹³The "necessary things" were determined by the fact that "Moses...has in every city those who preach him..." The Gentiles were not to conform to the Law, but they were to avoid doing those things that offended Jews. The desire, of course, was to remove barriers to the Gospel, as well as do all possible to insure peace.

¹⁴Acts 15:36

successively through the Galatian region and Phrygia, strengthening all the disciples. (Acts 18:22-23)

A very telling scene occurs toward the close of this journey. On the way to Jerusalem, while waiting at Miletus for the ship to sail, Paul sent for the elders in nearby Ephesus. The record of Paul's meeting with these elders is recorded in Acts 20:18-38. It is one of the most touching scenes in the New Testament.

And when they had come to him, he said to them, "You yourselves know, from the first day that I set foot in Asia, how I was with you the whole time, serving the Lord with all humility and with tears and with trials which came upon me through the plots of the Jews; how I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you publicly and from house to house, solemnly testifying to both Jews and Greeks of repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.

"And now, behold, bound in spirit, I am on my way to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there, except that the Holy Spirit solemnly testifies to me in every city, saying that bonds and afflictions await me. But I do not consider my life of any account as dear to myself, in order that I may finish my course, and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify solemnly of the gospel of the grace of God.

"And now, behold, I know that all of you, among whom I went about preaching the kingdom, will see my face no more. Therefore I testify to you this day, that I am innocent of the blood of all men. For I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole purpose of God.

"Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them. Therefore be on the alert, remembering that night and day for a period of three years I did not cease to admonish each one with tears.

"And now I commend you to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified. I have coveted no one's silver or gold or clothes. You yourselves know that these hands ministered to my own needs and to the men who were with me. In everything I showed you that by working hard in this manner you must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, that He Himself said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'"

And when he had said these things, he knelt down and prayed with them all. And they began to weep aloud and embraced Paul, and repeatedly kissed him, grieving especially over the word which he had spoken, that they should see his face no more. And they were accompanying him to the ship.

What is atmosphere of this meeting? Is Paul meeting with them in the role of a ruling prelate? That certainly is not the sense of this meeting. Paul is pictured as relating to these men as a

spiritual father. He is not pictured as relating to them governmentally. He exhorts them and brings a prophetic warning about the future.

CONCLUSIONS DRAWN FROM THE ABOVE CASES

These seven case studies exhaust the record of instances in Acts in which the possibility of a supra-local hierarchy could be displayed. The remainder of Acts is an account of Paul's arrest, imprisonment, journey to Rome under Roman guard, and his imprisonment in Rome while awaiting trial before Caesar. None of the case studies in Acts records the existence of an hierarchy in which churches are overseen by more mature churches, a network of bishops, or a single prelate over several churches. Where there is an intimation of authority, it is in the person of one or more of the revelatory apostles, whose authority is that of being communicators and protectors of truth.¹⁵ The revelatory function that rested in the apostles now is fulfilled through the Holy Spirit inspired Scriptures. The Acts picture is of autonomous congregations linked to one another spiritually, not organizationally.

PART TWO: AN EXAMINATION OF THE EPISTLES

Having found no evidence of a supra-congregational hierarchy in Acts, we now turn our attention to the epistles. We will survey the epistles to look for any examples of hierarchical structure or authority.

Romans

The origin of the Church at Rome is uncertain. We can be certain, however, that Paul had no direct involvement in its planting. There is no hint in the Epistle of Paul's being in an overseer or governmental role in his relationship with the Roman Church. Their relationship was fraternal and horizontal, as exemplified by his statements in Romans 1:8-12

First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for you all, because your faith is being proclaimed throughout the whole world. For God, whom I serve in my spirit in the preaching of the gospel of His Son, is my witness as to how unceasingly I make mention of you, always in my prayers making request, if perhaps now at last by the will of God I may succeed in coming to you. For I long to see you in order that I may impart some spiritual gift to you, that you may be established; that is, that I may be encouraged together with you while among you, each of us by the other's faith, both yours and mine.

The Epistles to the Corinthians

In both of the letters to Corinth, Paul does assert his authority in the Corinthian Church. One of the situations that Paul dealt with in his Corinthian letters, was the presence in Corinth of some individuals who declared themselves to be superior to Paul. They argued that Paul was not an apostle because he was not a good orator, because he was timid, because he did not allow the church to support him financially, etc. These "super apostles" (this is the term Paul applies to

¹⁵ The revelatory function that rested in the apostles now is fulfilled through the Holy Spirit inspired Scriptures.

them in II Corinthians 11:5) obviously were very charismatic, good orators, and insisted that the church support them financially. Paul probably would have tolerated this, as he did at Philippi,¹⁶ had it not been for the fact that these super apostles were preaching a different Gospel.

Another situation that Paul attacked strongly was the church's toleration of incest. The Corinthian Church seems to have been rather boastful of its tolerant attitude. Paul's response to these situations is instructive.

Paul is careful to declare that the church belongs to Christ, not to him or to any other minister of the Gospel.

What then is Apollos? And what is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, even as the Lord gave opportunity to each one. (1 Corinthians 3:5)

and you belong to Christ; and Christ belongs to God. (1 Corinthians 3:23)

Even though he declares that Christ's ownership is supreme, Paul asserts his place of authority in the Corinthian Church. This is seen in how he responds to the situation in Corinth. Instead of focusing on the sinners themselves, be they false apostles or the incestuous man, Paul scolds the church for tolerating such things. In each instance, he asserts his authority and chastises them for not respecting that authority.

The Authority of A Father in the Corinthian Epistles

Paul wrote to the church as a loving father, but also with the authority of a father, who has both the right and the responsibility to chastise misbehaving children.

I do not write these things to shame you, but to admonish you as my beloved children. 15 For if you were to have countless tutors in Christ, yet you would not have many fathers; for in Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel. 16 I exhort you therefore, be imitators of me. (1 Corinthians 4:14-16)

What do you desire? Shall I come to you with a rod or with love and a spirit of gentleness? (1 Corinthians 4:21)

Ecclesiastical Authority in the Corinthian Epistles

Paul also wrote to Corinth as one who had ecclesiastical authority over the Corinthian Church.

In the name of our Lord Jesus, when you are assembled, and I with you in spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus, 5 I have decided to deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of his flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus. (1 Corinthians 5:4-5)

¹⁶ Philippians 1:12-18 In this passage, Paul notes that some are preaching out of envy. In other words, they were taking advantage of his imprisonment. While he was confined, they were trying to out do him. They were trying to show that they were equal or superior to Paul. However, what they were preaching was the truth. So, Paul did not feel any reason to make an issue of their motive.

Note that Paul says, *I have decided*. He was not present in Corinth, but he decided what was to be done and he expected them to carry out his decision.

Now concerning the collection for the saints, as I directed the churches of Galatia, so do you also. (1 Corinthians 16:1)

The word translated, *directed*, is the Greek word, διατάσσω, which is used in the New Testament to refer to an "order" or a "command." It clearly implies authority.¹⁷

In the Second Letter to the Corinthians we find a continuation of Paul's discussion of his authority in the Corinthian Church. Early on, he assures them that he does not want to *lord it over their faith*.

Not that we lord it over your faith, but are workers with you for your joy; for in your faith you are standing firm. (2 Corinthians 1:24)

Even in the matter of the collection that he ordered in I Corinthians 16:1, noted above, in 2 Corinthians, he softens the terminology.

I am not speaking this as a command, but as proving through the earnestness of others the sincerity of your love also. (2 Corinthians 8:8)

The word translated, *command*, in this verse is a compound of the word used in I Corinthians 16:1, ἐπιτάσσω. Paul had the authority to give orders, but he did his best to avoid the appearance of heavy handed authority. Throughout the epistle he uses language that pictures Paul as having authority in the Corinthian Church. Note these examples:

and we are ready to punish all disobedience, whenever your obedience is complete. (2 Corinthians 10:6)

For even if I should boast somewhat further about our authority, which the Lord gave for building you up and not for destroying you, I shall not be put to shame, for I do not wish to seem as if I would terrify you by my letters. For they say, "His letters are weighty and strong, but his personal presence is unimpressive, and his speech contemptible." Let such a person consider this, that what we are in word by letters when absent, such persons we are also in deed when present. (2 Corinthians 10:8-11)

I have previously said when present the second time, and though now absent I say in advance to those who have sinned in the past and to all the rest as well, that if I come again, I will not spare anyone, (2 Corinthians 13:2)

For this reason I am writing these things while absent, in order that when present I may not use severity, in accordance with the authority which the Lord gave me, for building up and not for tearing down. (2 Corinthians 13:10)

¹⁷ Examples of such usage: Luke 8:55; Acts 18:2; 20:13; 23:31; 24:23; etc.

Given the language that Paul uses in both of the letters to Corinth, we can only conclude that Paul did have authority in the Corinthian Church.

- He is the founder, the father, of the Corinthian Church
- He is one of the revelatory apostles

Galatians

In the Galatian Letter, Paul spends the first two chapters defending his message of grace and his credentials as a Revelatory Apostle. He defends his role as a revelator only to credential the message that he preached to them. There is no assertion of eccleasical authority, as is found in the Corinthian Letters. Instead, Paul reasons with the Galatians and appeals to the tender heart that he has for them, as the motive for their positive response to his letter. *My children, with whom I am again in labor until Christ is formed in you--* (4:19) is the tone of the letter.

Ephesians

The Ephesian Epistle is a beautiful paternal letter. In 3:1-13, he defends his credentials as a revelator, but there is no assertion of authority.

Philippians

The Philippian Letter displays both a fraternal and a paternal relationship. There is one note of authority in 2:12.

So then, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your salvation with fear and trembling; (Philippians 2:12)

Given the mood of the letter, the sense of this verse is that they obeyed Paul as an obedient child would comply with the instructions of a father.

Colossians

In the Colossian letter there is no hint of Paul's exercising authority over the Colossian Church. It is a letter of encouragement and exhortation.

The Epistles to the Thessalonians

The First Epistle to the Thessalonians contains very tender language, but does state that Paul had the right to assert his authority.

nor did we seek glory from men, either from you or from others, even though as apostles of Christ we might have asserted our authority. But we proved to be gentle among you, as a nursing mother tenderly cares for her own children... just as you know how we were exhorting and encouraging and imploring each one of you as a father would his own children...(1 Thessalonians 2:6-7, 11)

and to make it your ambition to lead a quiet life and attend to your own business and work with your hands, just as we commanded you; (1 Thessalonians 4:11)

II Thessalonians has the same mood about it, but does contain clear evidence of Paul's authority to give commands to the church.

Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep aloof from every brother who leads an unruly life and not according to the tradition which you received from us. (2 Thessalonians 3:6)

The term translated, *command*, in 1 Thessalonians 4:11 and II Thessalonians 3:6 are identical, *παρρηγγέλλω*, meaning, *to command, to order, to charge*.

Letters to Timothy and Titus

These are letters to Paul's apostolic delegates. They are not written to churches and do not contain material that is relevant to our pursuit.

Hebrews, James, Jude, & Philemon

The nature of these letters is not relevant to our study. There is no evidence of extra-local authority in these letters.

Peter's Epistles

Both of Peter's epistles are exhortations and reminders. He does not assert eccleasical authority over the churches in his letters. However, the tone of the letter is that of the authority that resided in him as a revelator.

John's Epistles

The only hint of extra-local or apostolic authority in John's letters is in III John.

3 John 9 I wrote something to the church; but Diotrephes, who loves to be first among them, does not accept what we say.

The phrase, *does not accept what we say*, literally translated states, *does not accept us*. John had written instructions to the church; Demetrius did not respect John's apostolic authority.

CONCLUSION

As a result of our survey of the Epistles, we must conclude that there was no organized hierarchy over the local churches. There was apostolic authority. Furthermore, Paul clearly was a spiritual father to the churches that he planted. With the possible exception of a large portion of the Corinthian Church, all of them viewed him as God's infallible agent for delivering

- theological truth (truth about God),
- soteriological truth (truth about salvation),
- ecclesiastical truth (truth about the Church), and
- moral truth (the standards that governed the personal lives of believers).

Paul was viewed as an infallible authority because the information that he imparted had been given to him by Divine revelation. It was the truth. Anything that deviated from this, was error and those who advocated the deviation were described as agents of Satan.¹⁸ In this God-given role, Paul did not hesitate to function as an extra-local authority. He instructed, rebuked, and confronted local churches and their leadership, when teaching or practice strayed from the truths and patterns that he had given to the churches.

All churches viewed the Twelve as being in the same role. It was their infallible revelatory role that gave them authority over the churches. Even so, there is no evidence of an organized apostolic hierarchy over local churches. There were certain "apostolic agents," such as Timothy, Titus, Mark, etc., who exercised temporary authority in certain churches, because a Revelatory Apostle had sent them to do a specific thing in a specific church. They did not continue as a permanent extra-local authority over a church or a network of churches.

Even though New Testament Churches did not relate to one another through an organized hierarchical structure, they were united around the revelation that the Revelatory Apostles delivered to them. They had a common source for doctrine in all of the four areas outlined above. This is one of the things that united them, *the common salvation...the faith, which was once for all delivered unto the saints* (Jude 2).

APPLICATION

How does this apply to contemporary New Testament Churches? No one occupies the place of the Revelatory Apostles. They still exercise authority in the Church through the Scriptures, written by inspiration of the Holy Spirit. When local church leadership exercises responsible exegesis and follows a sound hermeneutic, then the apostles are exercising authority in that local church.

In the New Testament era, the apostles had to confront

- False Theology (Dualistic Gnosticism [John wrote his Gospel and I John to confront this false theology]),
- False Soteriology (Judaizing teachers),
- Improper Ecclesiology (One-man rule [Diotrephes]),
- Defective Moral Values (Cerinthian Gnosticism, and cultural influence [evidence of these is seen in the Corinthian Epistles and the writings of John]).

Today, the Holy Spirit inspired Scriptures do the same thing:

- False Theology - Example: Oneness Doctrine, as expressed by Jehovah's Witnesses, United Pentecostals, etc.; Ultimate Reconciliation;
- Soteriology - Example: Roman Catholicism's salvation by grace and merit; various sacramental churches' view of baptism;
- Ecclesiology - Example: Catholicism and most of Protestantism's hierarchical structure; some of the extreme elements of the Open Church Movement;
- Morals - Example: The contemporary church's accepting cultural values as the standard for Christians (homosexual and lesbian lifestyles, easy divorce, etc.)

¹⁸ II Corinthians 11:4, 13-15

Contemporary New Testament Churches will be united in their relationship to the truths given by the Revelatory Apostles.

We find no warrant in Scripture for the formation of structured supra-congregational fellowships, denominations, or other such organizations. However, there is warrant for trans-local ministries, who travel among the churches, teaching, prophesying, evangelizing and assisting local leaders. As local churches relate to these travelling ministries, they also relate to one another through these ministries. Apollos, frequently mentioned in the New Testament,¹⁹ is a prime example of such trans-local ministry. As far as we know, Apollos never did plant a church. He is called an apostle,²⁰ but he was not one of the Revelatory Apostles. His apostleship consisted of travelling among the churches, evangelizing, teaching the Scriptures, and encouraging the brethren. He was highly regarded and apparently well known by all of the churches that related to Paul.

Contemporary New Testament Churches will avail themselves of the gifts of recognized trans-local ministries. Local churches often become acquainted with one another through their mutual relationship with and, in some cases, mutual support of these ministries.

In a time of crisis, local church leadership may choose to invite such ministries to come to their aid. During the time of crisis, the local leaders may ask the visiting ministry to exercise some degree of authority in that local church. However, for the visiting ministry to occupy a permanent oversight role, in my opinion, is not warranted. It does not fit the New Testament pattern (as exemplified in all of the cases studied in Acts).

PART THREE: AN EXAMINATION OF THE POST-BIBLICAL ERA²¹

When did the supra-congregational hierarchies, exemplified by today's denominations, begin? Hints of such a structure are found in the early years of the Second Century. However, it was slow in being fully developed. It is not until the Third Century that we find the concept of a bishop overseeing a full-blown hierarchy over larger geographical areas. One of the problems in discovering the details of this development is the unreliable character of most of the documents from the period immediately following the death of the apostles. Some are genuine, but others seem to be written years later, with the name of one of the early fathers appended to the document to give it credibility. The question must be asked,

Was the episcopate and its hierarchy established by the apostles, as a replacement for their presence,

or

¹⁹ Acts 18:24-28; I Corinthians 1:12; 3:5; 4:6ff; 16:12; Titus 3:13

²⁰ I Corinthian 4:6-9

²¹ Most of the material in this section is a summary of material in Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church, Volume II* (Peabody, Massachusetts, Hendrickson Publishers, 1996; originally published by Charles Scribner & Sons 1858) pages 133f. Also, the original documents involved this period may be found in Lightfoot, J.B. *The Apostolic Fathers*, 5 volumes (Peabody, Massachusetts, Hendrickson, 1989, originally published by Macmillan, 1889, 1890.

did it evolve as an individual elder first became the "president" of a local council of elders, and then ascended to the role of overseer of several congregations?

The answer to this question is very important. If the apostles did establish an episcopal hierarchy, then we must conclude that denominational hierarchies are God's will for the Church. If, on the other hand, the hierarchy is an evolution of the eldership from the biblical pattern of local autonomy to a more formalized supra-congregational institution, then we must consider the human element in its development.

Even though Episcopalians, Roman Catholics, Orthodox Catholics, and others contend for the apostolic origin of the hierarchy, the evidence presented to substantiate this view requires interpretation and some assumptions. As Philip Schaff states, "The latter view is more natural and better sustained by the facts."²²

In other words, an inductive examination of the body of evidence available leads to the following conclusion:

Early in the Second Century many local councils experienced the rising in prominence of one of their council members; he became the "president" of the elders council. He was *primus interperes*, "the first among equals." In time, perhaps because of age or gifting, one of these presidents rose in importance, and became the "bishop" over all of the churches in the city. After about two centuries, the concept of a plenary bishop began to develop.

The primary reason for the development of the episcopate was the rising number of heresies in the First Century. When the Revelatory Apostles were living, they passed judgment on any questionable doctrine and instructed the Church to reject it. As in the case of Paul's Corinthian Epistle, and in his letter to the Galatians, these doctrinal aberrations were called "a different Gospel" (II Corinthians 11:4ff; Galatians 1:6ff). Many varied doctrines arose shortly after the death of the apostles. In the earliest years of the Second Century, the New Testament Scriptures had not been collected and uniformly distributed. The churches felt a need to have someone who could declare what was true and what was false doctrine. One of the elders in each locality became that person. In time, a bishop over a region occupied that role. Cyprian (died 258 AD), wrote that there was general unity among the bishops (Cyprian was among the first to describe the bishops as a superior clergy, even expressing the view of modern day Roman Catholicism that the clergy are the Church). It must also be noted that those who today view the early church councils as the origin of doctrinal orthodoxy are only partially correct. In most instances, the councils only made official what had become the consensus of the Church at large.

It should be noted that even Cyprian described the bishop as being closely related to the elders. The Fourth General Council, held at Carthage in 398 AD, declared that any pronouncement made by a bishop, without the concurrence of his local elders, was null and void.

Another thing that promoted the rise of the episcopacy was persecution. In the time of persecution, the church felt a demand for compact unity. The principle, "union is strength, division is weakness," prevailed. This need occasioned the rise of strong leaders, usually a single individual, who held the church together. This leader became the bishop.

Other motivations and forces promoted the rise of extra-local hierarchy, but these two are the most obvious.

CONCLUSION

²² Schaff, p 135

Even though there is no evidence of a supra-congregational hierarchy in the New Testament, an hierarchy did develop in the first two centuries (the Second and Third Centuries) after the death of the apostles. The rise of the episcopate was the result of need. It was not long before this hierarchy began to depart from the New Testament concept of "church."

- By the time of Cyprian, the spiritual unity of the Church was blindly identified with unity of organization.
- The scriptural principle, "Out of Christ, there is no salvation," was replaced with, "Out of the (visible) church, there is no salvation." The next step was, "out of the Roman Church, there is no salvation."
- Some bishops became poor examples of godliness. Hippolytus (ninth book of *Philosophurmena*) reproached the Roman bishops, Zephyrinus and Callistus (202-223), with charges of corruption, avarice, and lax discipline. Paul Samosata was deposed in 269 on charges of false doctrine, and bad moral character. Origen complained that in the larger cities the bishops surrounded themselves with bodyguards and were inaccessible to the poor.

We must conclude that although the need for the development of a supra-congregational hierarchy seemed to be overpowering, the means of meeting the need became a mixed blessing; in some ways, it became a curse.

SECTION II

RELATIONAL INDICATORS IN NEW TESTAMENT CHURCHES

If New Testament Churches were not tied to one another through an organization, how were they related? How aware of one another were they? Did each church just "plow its own row," or was there a sense of mutual fraternity? The answer is apparent in the biblical record. They knew about one another, identified with one another, and considered themselves to be a organically connected in the Kingdom of God on Earth.

INDICATOR #1: APOSTOLIC TRAVEL

One of the ways in which the churches became acquainted with one another was a result of apostles' and apostolic delegate's constant travel among the churches. Anyone acquainted with the New Testament record immediately will affirm this truth, but just for the record, here are some examples:

Acts 9:32-43 Peter toured the churches in Judaea, Galilee and Samaria, teaching, visiting, performing miracles. The record intimates that the churches in these areas kept up with his itinerary among them.

Acts 11:22-30 Prominent members of the Jerusalem Church, apostles and prophets, travelled back and forth between the churches.

Acts 13:1-14:28 Paul and Barnabas travelled in Galatia planting churches, then returned to Antioch and told that church about the new churches that had been planted.

Acts 15:3 Paul and a committee from Antioch travelled through Phoenicia and Samaria, informing the churches about the new churches that had been planted in Galatia and Pisidia.

Acts 16:1-4 Paul & Silas travelled among the churches Galatia, delivering the letter from Jerusalem.

Acts 17:1-15 Paul travelled in Macedonia, preaching the Gospel and planting churches, often accompanied in each place by believers from his last stop.

Acts 18:23 Paul travelled among the churches of Galatia and Phrygia, strengthening the disciples.

Acts 19-20 Paul visited Ephesus, Macedonia, Achaia, Asia, in a general tour.

Acts 21:4 Upon arriving at Tyre, Paul and his company looked up the disciples.

Acts 21:7 At Ptolemais, Paul and his companions greeted the brethren and spent a day with them.

Acts 21:8 Paul and his companions spent several days at Caesarea.

Acts 21:17-20a Paul reported to the Jerusalem Churches all the news about the Gentile churches.

Acts 27:3 While travelling as a prisoner to Rome, Paul was allowed to visit his friends in Sidon.

Certainly, in all of these visits, Paul spoke of the brethren in other places. Since he was a man of prayer, he probably solicited prayer in each place, for churches that were facing struggles.

INDICATOR #2 IN HIS TRAVELS, PAUL FREQUENTLY WAS ACCOMPANIED BY COMPANIONS FROM SEVERAL CHURCHES

These homogenous teams represented a mind-set that said, "We are in this together." Here are some examples of Paul's travelling companions.

Acts 13:4-5 Barnabas and John Mark, both originally from the Jerusalem Church, began the journey with Paul.

Acts 15:2, 32 A group from Antioch accompanied Paul and Barnabas to the Jerusalem Council. Some prophets from Jerusalem travelled back to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas.

Acts 16:1-3 On the second missionary journey, Paul had Silas from Jerusalem as his initial companion. They quickly were joined by Timothy from Lystra or Derbe in Galatia.

Acts 16:11 Luke joined Paul, Barnabas, and Timothy, as they set sail for Macedonia (note the "we")

Acts 19:29 Gaius and Aristarchus, from Macedonia, accompanied Paul to Ephesus.

Acts 20:4 On his trip through Macedonia, Syria, Asia, and to Jerusalem, Paul was accompanied by Sopater of Berea, Aristarchus and Secundus of Thessalonica, Gaius of Derbe, Timothy (Lystra or Derbe), and Tychicus and Trophimus of Asia.

With such a combined team, often commissioned by a local church, there was a sense of "being in this thing together."

INDICATOR #3 CHURCHES COMMENDED TRAVELING MINISTRIES TO ONE ANOTHER

The most obvious example of this is found in Acts 18:27-28

And when he [Apollos] wanted to go across to Achaia, the brethren encouraged him and wrote to the disciples to welcome him; and when he had arrived, he helped greatly those who had believed through grace; for he powerfully refuted the Jews in public, demonstrating by the Scriptures that Jesus was the Christ.

This is a very significant example, because Ephesus was located in Asia; Achaia was across the Aegean Sea, on another continent. For the Ephesian brothers to know the Achaian brothers well enough to write a letter of commendation for Apollos, indicates that a genuine relationship existed. Not only did the churches know one another, but they trusted one another.

INDICATOR #4 COOPERATION IN MINISTRY

There are various hints of co-operation in ministry, the most outstanding being the collection for the saints at Jerusalem. We will elaborate on this in the next section.

INDICATOR #5 VISITORS TO A CITY SOUGHT OUT FELLOW BELIEVERS

The many exhortations to hospitality reflected this practice. When believers from one city, travelled to another city, it was customary for them to stay in the homes of believers.

Paul's exhortation to the Roman Church concerning Phoebe is a clear illustration of a church's caring for believers visiting their area.

I commend to you our sister Phoebe, who is a servant of the church which is at Cenchrea; (Romans 16:1)

INDICATOR #6 WRITTEN GREETINGS TO ONE ANOTHER

Apostolic Epistles often include greetings from one church to another. Here are some examples.

- From Corinth and the other churches of Achaia, greetings to the Church in Rome:

All the churches of Christ greet you...Gaius, host to me and to the whole church, greets you. Erastus, the city treasurer greets you, and Quartus, the brother. (Romans 16:16b, 23)

- From Ephesus and the churches of Asia, greetings to the Church in Corinth and Achaia:

The churches of Asia greet you. Aquila and Prisca greet you heartily in the Lord, with the church that is in their house. All the brethren greet you. Greet one another with a holy kiss. 1 Corinthians (16:19-20)

- The date of Paul's letter to the Galatians is either 49 AD or about 57 AD. The setting allows for either date. If the earlier date is correct, it was written from Antioch, and contains greetings from the church there. If the later date is correct, it contains greetings from either Ephesus or Greece. In either case, brethren from one of these churches sent greetings to the Church in Galatia.

Paul, an apostle (not sent from men, nor through the agency of man, but through Jesus Christ, and God the Father, who raised Him from the dead), and all the brethren who are with me, to the churches of Galatia: Grace to you and peace from God our Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ, (Galatians 1:1-3)

- The Church at Rome sent greetings to the Churches in Asia Minor.

She who is in Babylon [Rome], chosen together with you, sends you greetings, and so does my son, Mark. (1 Peter 5:13)

INDICATOR #7 THE CHURCHES SHARED APOSTOLIC LETTERS

The letters written by the apostles came to be viewed as more than just occasional letters. The churches understood them to be repositories of Divine Revelation. Of special importance is Peter's comment concerning the writings of Paul. By way of background, Peter's two letters were written from Rome to the churches of Northern Asia Minor: Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia. In his First Epistle, Peter discussed the coming persecution that these churches were going to face. Second Peter was dispatched to these churches after the threat of persecution had passed; the new threat was the danger posed by itinerant teachers of false doctrine. In his warnings about those who distort Scripture, Peter described Paul's writings as

being in the same class as the Old Testament. Of special relevance to our discussion is Peter's assumption that at least some of Paul's letters were known and shared by these churches.

Therefore, beloved, since you look for these things, be diligent to be found by Him in peace, spotless and blameless, and regard the patience of our Lord to be salvation; just as also our beloved brother Paul, according to the wisdom given him, wrote to you, as also in all his letters, speaking in them of these things, in which are some things hard to understand, which the untaught and unstable distort, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures, to their own destruction. You therefore, beloved, knowing this beforehand, be on your guard lest, being carried away by the error of unprincipled men, you fall from your own steadfastness, but grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To Him be the glory, both now and to the day of eternity. Amen. (2 Peter 3:14-18)

Paul seems to have dispatched a letter to Colossae at the same time that he sent another letter to its nearby neighbor, Laodicea. The Colossians were Phrygian Gentiles who religious antecedents were highly emotional and mystical. They were seeking to attain to the fullness of God and when teachers came among them with a philosophy that promised a mystic knowledge of God, they were entranced by it. The Colossian letter was written to address this problem. Evidently it was a problem that plagued the other churches as well, because Paul instructed the Colossians to pass their letter on to Laodicea and then for the Colossians to read the letter that he sent to Laodicea.

Greet the brethren who are in Laodicea and also Nympha and the church that is in her house. And when this letter is read among you, have it also read in the church of the Laodiceans; and you, for your part read my letter that is coming from Laodicea. (Colossians 4:15-16)

Clearly, this exchange of letters implied a relationship between the churches as well as a common relationship to the writings of Paul.

Paul's Second Epistle to Corinth is addressed not only to Corinth, but to *all of the saints who are throughout Achaia*. (2 Corinthians 1:1)

In like fashion, Paul's Galatian Epistle was not written to a single church, but to *the churches of Galatia*. (Galatians 1:1-2)

The Revelation of John was not written to a single church, but was written to seven churches in Asia.

John to the seven churches that are in Asia: Grace to you and peace, from Him who is and who was and who is to come; and from the seven Spirits who are before His throne; (Revelation 1:4)

I, Jesus, have sent My angel to testify to you these things for the churches. I am the root and the offspring of David, the bright morning star." (Revelation 22:16)

From these examples, it can be seen that the churches of the New Testament viewed themselves as being a part of a fraternity that was linked together by a common revelation and a common body of Scripture.

INDICATOR #8 APOSTOLIC REPORTS

The New Testament Churches had knowledge of one another because Paul referred to various churches in his letters. Here are some examples:

Now, brethren, we wish to make known to you the grace of God which has been given in the churches of Macedonia, (2 Corinthians 8:1)

And we have sent along with him the brother whose fame in the things of the gospel has spread through all the churches; and not only this, but he has also been appointed by the churches to travel with us in this gracious work, which is being administered by us for the glory of the Lord Himself, and to show our readiness, (2 Corinthians 8:18-19)

therefore, we ourselves speak proudly of you among the churches of God for your perseverance and faith in the midst of all your persecutions and afflictions which you endure. (2 Thessalonians 1:4)

INDICATOR #9 UNIFORM PRACTICE

Paul stated in his letters that that there was uniformity of practice in the conduct of church services and in behavioral matters. Here are some examples.

For this reason I have sent to you Timothy, who is my beloved and faithful child in the Lord, and he will remind you of my ways which are in Christ, just as I teach everywhere in every church. (1 Corinthians 4:17)

The instruction that Paul and Timothy gave to the Corinthians, whether it be the impartation of information or instruction in conduct, conformed to what was practiced in all of the churches. This was a gentle nudge on the Corinthians, who throughout the letter are pictured as a church that was on a maverick course. This verse brings to mind Paul's statement in I Timothy 3:15, *I write so that you may know how one ought to conduct himself in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and support of the truth.*

Only, as the Lord has assigned to each one, as God has called each, in this manner let him walk. And thus I direct in all the churches. (1 Corinthians 7:17)

In this passage, Paul is discussing whether or not a believer should leave his unbelieving spouse, whether an uncircumcised person should be circumcised, whether or not a slave should seek freedom, etc. He concludes in verse 24 by stating, *Brethren, let each man remain with God in that condition in which he was called.* Relevant to our study is the statement in verse 17, *and thus I direct in all the churches.* Each church in which Paul had a role, had received the same instruction on this point.

Now I praise you because you remember me in everything, and hold firmly to the traditions, just as I delivered them to you. (1 Corinthians 11:2)

The word translated *traditions* (παράδοσεις) refers, in this passage, to traditions that have to do with the worship service.²³ Paul is stating that the tradition which was handed down to him and the one that he passed on to them was that women should have some sort of head-covering when they prayed or prophesied in church gatherings. This was the instruction that he gave to all of the churches. He concludes this discussion by writing, *But if one is inclined to be contentious, we have no other practice, nor have the churches of God* (verse 16). In other words, this was the uniform practice of all New Testament Churches.

for God is not a God of confusion but of peace, as in all the churches of the saints.
(1 Corinthians 14:33)²⁴

This is the conclusion of Paul's discussion of the use of tongues in a worship service. The Corinthian Church had a disorderly service. Paul says in essence that a worship service should reflect the character and personality of God. The Corinthian Church's disregard for order was a violation of God's character. Paul urged them to quit marching to the beat of a different drum, but to get in line with the rest of the churches.

From these and other statements, it is clear that there was uniformity, perhaps even conformity, in the New Testament churches. A believer from one region, visiting a church in another region, would have felt quite at home, whether in Galatia, Achaia, Macedonia, Syria, Asia, Rome, or Judea. This conformity was an indicator of their being a part of the one Universal Church.

INDICATOR #10

LOCAL CHURCHES VIEWED THEMSELVES AS VESSELS OF THE SAME HOLY SPIRIT

Paul said that one's salvation was evidenced by his possession of the Holy Spirit.

In Him, you also, after listening to the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation-- having also believed, you were sealed in Him with the Holy Spirit of promise, who is given as a pledge of our inheritance, with a view to the redemption of God's own possession, to the praise of His glory. (Ephesians 1:13-14)

Now He who establishes us with you in Christ and anointed us is God, who also sealed us and gave us the Spirit in our hearts as a pledge. (2 Corinthians 1:21-22)

²³ Fee, Gordon, *The International Commentary on the New Testament, I Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1987) See footnote 29, page 499.

²⁴ The NIV translators chose to tie this phrase to the next verse, *As in all the congregations of the saints, women should remain silent in the churches.* All other versions render the phrase, *As in all the congregations of the saints...* as being the conclusion of the discussion of tongues. For comments on the grammatical preference for the traditional rendering, see Fee, page 698. Which ever position one takes, the point is made that there is uniformity of practice in all churches.

Paul also spoke of the shared Christian life as *the fellowship of the Spirit* (2 Corinthians 13:4; Philippians 2:1)

When the Galatians began to succumb to the false teachers who were advocating circumcision as a requirement for salvation, Paul challenged them about how they received the Holy Spirit.

You foolish Galatians, who has bewitched you, before whose eyes Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified? This is the only thing I want to find out from you: did you receive the Spirit by the works of the Law, or by hearing with faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh? Did you suffer so many things in vain-- if indeed it was in vain? Does He then, who provides you with the Spirit and works miracles among you, do it by the works of the Law, or by hearing with faith?
(Galatians 3:1-5)

This was one of Paul's strongest arguments, in his discourse against the gospel of legalism. They knew that they had received the Holy Spirit. His presence was an evident part of their private lives and of the corporate life of the church. From these and many other statements in the New Testament, it is apparent that the presence of the Holy Spirit was an essential element of "Church." Three Temples of the Holy Spirit are mentioned in Scripture.

- The individual believer's body (I Corinthians 6:19)
- The local church (I Corinthians 3:16-17)
- The world-wide church (Ephesians 2:21-22)

Each local church, and thus the world-wide Christian community, is a dwelling place for the Spirit. A survey of Acts would reveal that a constant element in the life of the New Testament Church was "the Spirit said to them." Without the presence of the Holy Spirit, a church is just a dead organization. Even as twins receive life and nourishment from the same mother's breast, so each local church is dependent upon the Holy Spirit for its life. Having a common source of spiritual life, so richly experienced by the New Testament Churches, gave them a sense of oneness.

CONCLUSION

A survey of Acts, the Epistles, and the Revelation of John, reveals many indicators of the fraternal relationship that existed between the New Testament Churches. None considered itself to be an isolated entity. They viewed themselves as constituting an Empire-wide spiritual network.

SECTION III

FINANCIAL RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN NEW TESTAMENT CHURCHES

The most obvious expression of fraternity is the sharing of material possessions. Scripture's consistent message is that a believer should be more concerned about another's well-being than about his own financial security. In the Kingdom of God, having a personal surplus while another believer is in need is an anomaly. When the Jews inquired about behaviour in the Kingdom of God, John the Baptist said,

And the multitudes were questioning him, saying, "Then what shall we do?" And he would answer and say to them, "Let the man who has two tunics share with him who has none; and let him who has food do likewise." (Luke 3:10-11)

In similar vein, John the Apostle wrote to the Church at the close of the First Century,

We know love by this, that He laid down His life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. But whoever has the world's goods, and beholds his brother in need and closes his heart against him, how does the love of God abide in him? Little children, let us not love with word or with tongue, but in deed and truth. (I John 3:16-18)

The post-Pentecostal converts in Jerusalem demonstrated their familial relationship through a communal economy.

And all those who had believed were together, and had all things in common; and they began selling their property and possessions, and were sharing them with all, as anyone might have need. (Acts 2:44-45)

And the congregation of those who believed were of one heart and soul; and not one of them claimed that anything belonging to him was his own; but all things were common property to them...and who owned a tract of land, sold it and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet. (Acts 4:32-37)

As we proceed into Acts and the Epistles, we discover the same fraternal expression occurring between churches.

THE ANTIOCH COLLECTION

The first record of a church's taking up a collection for another church is found in Acts 11:27-30.

Now at this time some prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. And one of them named Agabus stood up and began to indicate by the Spirit that there would certainly be a great famine all over the world. And this took place in the reign of Claudius. And in the proportion that any of the disciples had means, each of them determined to send a contribution for the relief of the brethren living

in Judea. And this they did, sending it in charge of Barnabas and Saul to the elders. (Acts 11:27-30)

The believers in Judea already faced hardship because of persecution and discrimination. So, when the prophecy about a famine was given, the Antioch believers responded by taking up a collection for Judea. It is significant that the Antioch brethren gave no thought to their own welfare. The famine was going to engulf the entire Roman Empire and the Antioch Christians were going to face hardship themselves. However, instead of beginning a frenetic spasm of hoarding, they took up an offering for Judaea. Their generosity was not in response to an appeal from Jerusalem, but an expression of the Christ who dwelt in their hearts and the fraternal relationship between churches.

THE PAULINE CHURCHES

In Galatians Chapter Two, Paul describes details of the Jerusalem council that are not mentioned in the Acts 15 record of the event. One of these added details is that the Twelve had urged Paul to remember the poor.

...and recognizing the grace that had been given to me, James and Cephas and John, who were reputed to be pillars, gave to me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship, that we might go to the Gentiles, and they to the circumcised. They only asked us to remember the poor-- the very thing I also was eager to do. (Galatians 2:9-10)

The gathering of a benevolent offering for Judaea was one of Paul's main concerns as he made his third tour of the churches that were an outgrowth of his ministry. Paul wrote to the Romans that one reason he was making a trip to Jerusalem was to deliver the offering that had been raised among the Gentile Churches.

But now, I am going to Jerusalem serving the saints. For Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to make a contribution for the poor among the saints in Jerusalem. (Romans 15:25-26)

Details concerning the gathering of this collection are recorded in several of Paul's epistles, especially in his letters to Corinth.

Now concerning the collection for the saints, as I directed the churches of Galatia, so do you also. On the first day of every week let each of you put aside and save, as he may prosper, that no collections be made when I come. And when I arrive, whomever you may approve, I shall send them with letters to carry your gift to Jerusalem; and if it is fitting for me to go also, they will go with me. (I Corinthians 16:1-4)

Paul had travelled through Galatia on his way to Macedonia and Achaia. As he travelled through Galatia, he had urged these churches (Derbe, Lystra, Iconium, and probably Antioch of Pisidia) to gather a collection for the Jerusalem church. From I Corinthians 16:1-4, it is apparent that Paul had a set pattern for gathering this collection, *...as I directed the churches of Galatia, so do you also. On the first day of every week let each of you put aside and save, as he may*

prosper, that no collections be made when I come. It is probable that Gaius of Derbe brought the offering to Paul, as he was traveling to Jerusalem (Acts 20:4).

Evidently, the Corinthian Church, and those surrounding it in Achaia, had started to gather a collection for the Jerusalem Church, but in the characteristically Corinthian way, they had faltered (the Corinthian Church seems to have been one that was governed more by emotion, experience, and impulse, rather than steady commitment). So, in his Second Epistle to Corinth, Paul urged them to complete what they had begun in the previous year. To motivate them, he described the churches of Macedonia and how the Macedonians, even though they themselves were in a time of deep poverty, urged Paul to receive from them an offering for the poor of Jerusalem.

Now, brethren, we wish to make known to you the grace of God which has been given in the churches of Macedonia, that in a great ordeal of affliction their abundance of joy and their deep poverty overflowed in the wealth of their liberality. For I testify that according to their ability, and beyond their ability they gave of their own accord, begging us with much entreaty for the favor of participation in the support of the saints, and this, not as we had expected, but they first gave themselves to the Lord and to us by the will of God. Consequently we urged Titus that as he had previously made a beginning, so he would also complete in you this gracious work as well. But just as you abound in everything, in faith and utterance and knowledge and in all earnestness and in the love we inspired in you, see that you abound in this gracious work also. I am not speaking this as a command, but as proving through the earnestness of others the sincerity of your love also. For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich. And I give my opinion in this matter, for this is to your advantage, who were the first to begin a year ago not only to do this, but also to desire to do it. But now finish doing it also; that just as there was the readiness to desire it, so there may be also the completion of it by your ability. For if the readiness is present, it is acceptable according to what a man has, not according to what he does not have. For this is not for the ease of others and for your affliction, but by way of equality-- at this present time your abundance being a supply for their want, that their abundance also may become a supply for your want, that there may be equality; as it is written, "He who gathered much did not have too much, and he who gathered little had no lack." (II Corinthians 8:1-15)

Note that Paul speaks of reciprocity. *at this present time your abundance being a supply for their want, that their abundance also may become a supply for your want, that there may be equality.* In coming days, should their roles be reversed, Paul anticipated Jerusalem's taking up a collection for Corinth.

To further motivate the Corinthians, Paul tells them that their sending an offering to Jerusalem is a mark of *obedience to your confession of the gospel of Christ.* He lists the fraternal results that they will experience as a consequence of their obedience in this matter:

For the ministry of this service is not only fully supplying the needs of the saints, but is also overflowing through many thanksgivings to God. Because of the proof given by this ministry they will glorify God for your obedience to your confession of the gospel of Christ, and for the liberality of your contribution to them and to

all, while they also, by prayer on your behalf, yearn for you because of the surpassing grace of God in you. (II Corinthians 9:12-14)

Paul asserted that their obedience to their confession, expressed through the giving of the offering would produce the following results:

- There will be great thanksgiving and glory given to God;
- The Jerusalem Church will pray for them;
- The Jerusalem Church will experience a fraternal yearning for their brethren in Corinth.

Interestingly, Paul said that the collection that was taken up in Corinth was a reflection of generosity *to all*, not just to the saints in Jerusalem. The implication is that other similar offerings had been or will be collected.

CONCLUSION

An important expression of the relationship between New Testament Churches is through the sharing of finances. They care for one another, financially. In my experience, I have seen this operate time and time again. One event that stands out in memory is an offering that Communion Fellowship, a Mennonite Church in Goshen, Indiana, collected for the aid of Tulsa Christian Fellowship. In the 1980's, Tulsa's petroleum based economy was devastated by OPEC. Many Tulsans lost jobs. Some left town, abandoning their homes and surrendering their property to mortgage holders. Because TCF's members were impacted by these circumstances, the church faced a serious financial crisis. Communion Fellowship had received spiritual ministry from TCF, through one visit of three TCF elders (Bruce Clutter, Jim Barger, and Jim Garrett), and then my own frequent visits to the church. Communion Fellowship was looking to TCF as a model and for apostolic guidance. Upon learning of TCF's financial struggle, Communion Fellowship took up an offering amounting to \$5000.00 and sent it to TCF.

Another example that comes to mind is an event in which TCF' was on the giving end of the exchange. Berean Fellowship, a relatively small Tulsa congregation, led by Jim Curtis and Rich Manganero, had purchased a piece of property consisting of a few acres that had been neglected for several years. There was a spacious house on the property. The house had been remodeled years before to serve as a kennel and a veterinarian's office. One Saturday, scores of TCF members showed up at the property. Before the day was over, all of the brush that had grown up over the years had been cleared. Trash was hauled off. While work was going on outside, other TCF volunteers were busy gutting the building so that it could be remodeled for use by Berean Fellowship. Some carpenters from TCF then donated their services, working nights, doing some of the basic remodeling. Berean Fellowship could not have done this alone. They had neither the manpower nor the money.

Few things express the fraternal relationship that exists between New Testament Churches as does the caring for one another materially and financially.

CONCLUSIONS DRAWN FROM OUR STUDY OF HOW NEW TESTAMENT CHURCHES RELATE TO ONE ANOTHER

None of the New Testament Churches considered themselves to be independent, and isolated. They were a part of a fraternity, a living organism, the breath of which was the Holy Spirit.

- Relationships within the local churches, relationships with apostolic and other travelling ministries, relationships between the churches, these were a very real and vital part of their identity. That same perspective continued into the post-biblical era.
- The relationships were not expressed organizationally. They were expressed organically and spiritually. It was not until the Third and Fourth Centuries that organization became more important than relationships.
- There was enough conformity of doctrine and practice to give them a rather uniform identity. As members of a family resemble one another, so the churches throughout the Empire resembled one another.
- Genuine fraternal concern for one another existed among the churches. This was expressed by their praying for one another, assisting one another financially, and encouraging one another through letters and visits.
- There was unity. Jesus High Priestly Prayer, recorded in John 17, was answered with a, "YES," between the New Testament Churches.

Of course, there were exceptions to this idyllic picture, but this is the general description of the relationships between the churches.

It is easy for us to make application of these truths to contemporary New Testament Churches. We must be "family" to one another. Here are some ways that we will experience our relationships:

- Praying for one another. Internet and email have made it quite easy for us to alert one another to our special prayer needs. It especially is important to pray for sister churches during the Sunday worship service.
- Encouraging one another. A phone call, an email, or a letter for no reason other than we are on one another's minds is a wonderful way to share life together.
- Assisting one another financially. There may be times in which the Holy Spirit will prompt us to take up an offering for a particular church.
- Sharing trans-local ministries. There are certain brothers that God has gifted and called to the ministry of edifying local churches; some are gifted in helping churches to put things in order; some are gifted in evangelism; some are teachers. Local churches should pray and seek God about whether or not to invite and whom to invite.
- Inviting elders from one church to come and teach at another church. One way for our churches to have a sense of belonging to one another is to receive ministry from one another's leaders.
- Recommending or warning against certain teachers. It is dangerous to invite into a local church someone about whom leadership knows little. Great sorrow can be avoided if we ask one another about outside ministries.
- Helping one another to sort out theologies and movements that seem to rush across the landscape with great speed, these days. Some are blessings, but some distort the truth, in some cases, even "preaching a different Christ."
- Respecting one another's church discipline. If a brother or sister is under discipline in a particular church, sister churches should respect that and not provide a safety valve for the one being disciplined.
- When members move to another locality, sending letters of commendation to the leadership of the church where they will be living.

In summary, let us carry one another in our hearts.