

Church leadership and autonomy

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DEFINITIONS

“**Church**” [Strong 1577] refers to ‘an assembly,’ ‘a congregation’ or the ‘called-out ones.’ In the New Testament (NT), it usually denotes those called out by the gospel of Christ from the world of darkness into the kingdom of God. The term may connote:

- i. **Universal church** (all the redeemed of Christ irrespective of time or location. Both living and deceased saints constitute the universal church.) e.g. “...*I will build **my church**; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.*” - Mt 16:18b. See also Eph 1:22-23; 3:10, Col 1:18
- ii. **City-church** (all the Christians in a known city or unit of landed area) e.g. “*Unto the **church of God which is at Corinth**, to them that are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints...*” - 1 Cor 1:2. [See also Acts 8:1; 11:22; 13:1, Rm 16:1]. Some refer to this as a local church because it exists within a locale or named locality. If YOU have ever used the phrase ‘*the church which was at Jerusalem*’ (Acts 8:1) or ‘*the church which was in Jerusalem*’ (Acts 11:22) or simply used the short phrase ‘**Jerusalem church**’ then YOU are familiar with the ‘**City-church**’ concept since Jerusalem ≡ city.
- iii. **Assembled Church** (A gathering of Christians in the name of Christ for worship/service irrespective of whether it be an ad-hoc or permanent arrangement) e.g. “*Saying, I will declare thy name unto my brethren, in the midst of the church will I sing praise unto thee.*” - Heb 2:12. See also 1 Cor 14:19. An assembled church is simply a **congregation**.

Leadership is inspiring and mobilizing others to accomplish defined goals. In the church, it is a position of people and resources management to execute divine mandates in expedient manner -1Thess 5:12.

Elders refers to qualified men whom the Holy Spirit has made administrators in the church of God. These men are willingly ordained into that office by a Preacher in concert with the church. They are also known as Overseers, Pastors, Shepherds, Bishops and Presbyters; these appellations signify various functions they perform –Acts 20:17-28, 1 Tim 3:1-12, 1 Pet 5:1-4. The body or council of elders is the presbytery.

City refers to basic human settlement, an organized/named piece of land with its inhabitants. In the NT, the terms "city and town" (or even village, depending on perspective of inspired writer and of translators) could be used interchangeably as evident in the following passages; Mt 10:11, Lk 2:4, Jn 7:42.

Autonomy is self-governance; attribute of an entity that independently makes its decisions or steer itself.

INTRODUCTION

In the New Testament (NT), there is a distinct leadership pattern in the Lord’s church. The denominations have gone to one extreme of creating a complex structure of overseers at world, national, regional/provincial, state, district, city and assembly levels. Many CoCs embraced the other extreme of having overseers at only assembly level. The NT pattern of administration is clear and easy to adopt without coming up with diocese, cathedral, archdeaconry and parishes. The following are basic facts:

1. The assertion that in the first century, each city had only one assembly is *an assumption* invalidated by the inspired documentation about Jerusalem, Rome, etc. The Jews typically chased believers from the synagogues and there were no specially built church halls in the first century. In many cities, the Christians met in selected houses, resulting in multiple assemblies. Each “house-church” was an assembly that worshipped and broke bread on the first day of the week.

2. During the first century, in a typical city, as the number of disciples increased with evangelism, the single assembly would give way unto multiple assemblies but the believers still functioned as one body. Usage of multiple assemblies or only one assembly was an expediency depending on the population of saints, the ease of transporting themselves, the safety of congregating as one if under persecution, etc.
3. **Every group of worshippers is a congregation.** However, not every congregation is necessarily an autonomous church. The totality of Christians in all congregations [assemblies] within a named locality constitutes a City-church, the autonomous local church or body of Christ in that settlement.
4. Inspiration identifies a local/autonomous church relative to its geographical location [city/town/village] e.g. the church at Jerusalem; the church of Ephesus; the church in Antioch, etc. It is the specific place(s) of assembling of the City-church that are identified with an individual's name e.g. Mary's house, Aquila's house, school of Tyrannus, etc.
5. In any city, **elders** were appointed as overseers over **all the flock** irrespective of whether there were many house-churches (assemblies) or only one. The saints were obligated to obey such -Heb 13:17.
6. The NT refers to the elders of the City-church e.g. "the elders of **the church** at Jerusalem," "the elders of **the church** of Ephesus," in Acts 15:4 & 20:17 respectively. A typical assembly is NOT 'Aquila's church' or 'the church of Aquila' ...it is simply "**the church (of Ephesus segment) that meets in Aquila's house.**" There was nothing like 'the elders of the church that meets in Aquila's house' because a typical house-church is a segment (part / whole) of the City-church. Paul wrote epistles unto City-churches NOT to house-churches because the City-church is the whole church in any locality.
7. Splitting the body of Christ in a city into autonomous churches is **separation, irrespective of whether it is occasioned by a disagreement or by an agreement of the Christians involved.** Such action is injurious to the kingdom of Christ and **is NOT authorized in the NT scriptures.**

CASE STUDIES

The church in Jerusalem was distributed into different clusters or cells across the city. It appears that from inception, the disciples met in homes for worship and fellowship while going to public venues for evangelism. "*And they, continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart... And daily in the temple, and in every house, they ceased not to teach and preach Jesus Christ.*" - Acts 2:46; 5:42.

Given by the dimensions of the temple patterned after what God described unto Solomon, it possibly could not have contained all the saints for the Lord's Supper, [over five thousand men plus unspecified number of women and children] alongside the regular non-Christians. From Acts 4, the associates of the high priest [Sadducees] would NOT tolerate their preaching or worship. Upon great persecution, Saul entered every house and hauled men & women (**a plurality** of both sexes per house) into prison. He must have accosted house churches not just random family houses because:

- i. He would not know who was a Christian and who was not so randomness would have amounted to a waste of time and resources.
- ii. He would not have a strong legal basis to barge into an individual residence who was not committing a crime. It was better to attack an assembly in a home which could be identified by informants via the stream of visitors, singing, prayer etc. emanating therefrom.

- iii. He persecuted “this way” (Acts 9:1-2; 22:4; 26:10-12) and sought to apprehend any Christian even in strange cities. He needed **evidence** that they were caught in the (supposedly blasphemous) act of teaching in the name of Jesus contrary to the pronouncement of the Jewish Council. Evidence via witness testimony was crucial to secure conviction hence he raided house churches and took saints for trial at synagogues where the verdict was pronounced.

Herod executed James the son of Zebedee and arrested Peter, bent on killing him also. However, ‘*the church made prayer without ceasing unto God for him*’ –Acts 12:1-5. It became evident that the church was surely meeting in cells for upon Peter’s release from prison, we read: “*And when he had considered the thing, he came to the house of Mary the mother of John, whose surname was Mark; where many were gathered together praying. ...But he, beckoning unto them with the hand to hold their peace, declared unto them how the Lord had brought him out of the prison. And he said, Go shew these things unto James, and to the brethren. And he departed, and went into another place.*” - Acts 12:12, 17.

Thus, various cells or congregations of the City-church were having the same program of intercession at various locations in Jerusalem. Peter sent the same edifying message of his divine rescue unto each cell. Given the fact that Herod was so furious at Peter’s escape that he had the guards executed (vs 18-19), there was no way the Jerusalem church would have all gathered in a public place to worship on the following first day of the week. Mary or any of the worshippers gathered in her home could change residence within the city or visit a different assembly on a Sunday yet they remained members of the same local church. Acts 12 established that members of the church may meet in different clusters in town. Acts 15:4; 21:17-18 refers to “*the whole church ...the brethren ...all the elders*” in Jerusalem thus, if feasible all may meet in one place though that is not absolutely necessary for them to be in one accord. The city had one church with one leadership though the brethren met in single assembly/multiple assemblies.

At Ephesus, a church was meeting at Aquila’s house (Acts 18:24-27, 1 Cor 16:19) while some disciples he was unaware of were converted (Acts 19:1-10), which then met DAILY with Paul for study and evangelism in the school of Tyrannus. Later, in Acts 20:17-28 Paul sent for “*the elders of THE church of Ephesus.*” Thus, multiple assemblies in Ephesus constituted one church under a common eldership.

CITYWIDE-LEADERS (ELDERS) IS THE ONLY AUTHORIZED MODEL

For this cause left I thee in Crete, that the things lacking thou mayest arrange, and mayest set down in every city elders, as I did appoint to thee.” - Tit 1:5 [YLT]. Here, “city” is used as a **metonymy** for church because city is the physical/literal container of church in organizational structure just as cup is the physical/literal container of wine in Communion. The entity in which elders should be ordained is *the church contained in the city* - “the City-church.” Paul literally means appoint elders among “*our brethren in every city where we have preached the word of the Lord.*” This installs the leadership (presbytery) in one body of disciples to create one autonomous church in each city regardless of whether saints worship in several houses or one. This was demonstrated when Paul & Barnabas ‘*appointed elders in every church*’; that is ordained elders in the cities of Derbe, Lystra, Iconum and Antioch of Pisidia. Inspiration elsewhere describes the church as a household (Gal 6:10), as a house (1 Tim 3:15) and as a nation (1 Pet 2:9). Yet the Holy Spirit did NOT instruct that elders be ordained ‘in every household’ or ‘in every house’ or ‘in every nation.’ Neither in every street nor region nor province but “in every city.”

LEADERSHIP EARMARKS AN AUTONOMOUS CHURCH

Preacher(s) & Teachers guide the church pending ordination of elders. The designation of certain men as the scripturally qualified and ordained Overseers of the Christians in a city (single or multiple congregations) assigns and indicates the autonomy of such group. Since such leaders' jurisdiction covers the entirety of the members of the community, they direct that body in contra-distinction to others. They supervise the church's work. Paul warned the Ephesian elders to watch ALL the flock over which they were made overseers. Likewise, Peter instructs elders to shepherd the flock among them. Since elders are appointed in a city to oversee the brethren and lead in collective decision-making, this establishes the presbytery's scope and implies autonomy for the church at that settlement. We do not argue per se that elders are appointed to oversee a geographical space. Rather, we affirm that elders are ordained to oversee the Christians associated with a geographical space because the saints constitute the church at a named city. Thus, Paul did NOT charge the Ephesian Presbytery to watch the flock in Philippi and Jesus did NOT address the Ephesian leadership (angel) about issues of Laodicea! **Relative autonomy of churches is at the City-church level** (Rev 1:11-3:18) **NOT at the house-church level** (Rm 12:4-16; 16:3-15).

[Covid-19 pandemic and associated lockdown has made churches to revert to the New Testament pattern. Saints presently meet as clusters in homes rather than altogether in the modern 'church building.' Since each cluster at a meeting centre is a gathering of Christians in worship, it is an Ekkléssia, assembly, or congregation and is therefore a house-church. Why? Simply because *it is (a segment of) the church that meets in a member's house*. The leadership of each church guide brethren via messages by technological tools and occasional visits to assemblies, akin to epistles/visits of the NT. Since these clusters emanated from the church ab initio, each should give reports on its membership, attendance, activities, finances, etc. The members of the church give to THE CHURCH, not to the cluster even if they give it in a cluster. It is the leaders of the church not an individual or a cluster that should manage the collection. Recall that the leaders of the Jerusalem church were in charge of contributions in the beginning -Acts 4:37; 5:2. Also from Mary's house, Peter sent report unto others such as the cluster meeting with James -Acts 12:17.]

For a cluster to suddenly declare autonomy from a local church or move a motion for its independence is instigating division in the one body in that settlement. It depicts rebellion, dissent or ambition. Thus, such practice should not be encouraged. Those who champion such independence should be cautioned about displaying the attitude of Diotrefes. They can only be disregarded and left alone after exhortations fail to convince them that they are divisive. Just as a house-church ought not to proclaim independence from a City-church leadership [presbytery], so should a City-church not proclaim independence from the universal church leadership [Christ via His apostles & their writings].

CONCLUSION

There is a **clear NT pattern of ordaining elders over the City-church**, evident via **Direct Command** (Tit 1:5), **Approved Apostolic Examples** (Acts 14:19-23) and **Necessary Inference** (Phil 1:1). Only uninformed Christians will commend arbitrary declaration of independence by some church members to remain in same locality to create multiple autonomous churches, such misconstrue division for growth. **Heb 13:17 & 1 Cor 12:20-25 should be obeyed not violated**. The only justifiable rationale for autonomous churches that are aware of each other in a city would be where only one assembly is a faithful church obeying Rm 16:17, while the others are being admonished to obey 2 Tim 2:19.