

## Multiple Assemblies vs Single Assembly Church: what is the jurisdiction of Elders?

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### Preamble

#### I. Church

The term “church” refers to the ‘called-out ones’; in our context of the New Testament (NT), it denotes those called out by the gospel of Christ from the world of darkness into the kingdom of God. The term “**Church**” could be used in these senses:

1. **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
2. **City church** (all the Christians in a known city or unique administrative land area) e.g. “...*unto **the church of the Thessalonians** which is in God the Father and in the Lord Jesus Christ...*” -1 Thess 1:1b. “*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]
3. **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. “*For first of all, when ye come together in the church...*” - 1 Cor 11:18. “*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 4:17; 14:19.

When some passengers on a bus, boat or plane who are strangers to one another, as Christians decide to sing/pray at the start of their journey, they constitute ‘a church’ during that activity.

**Any gathering of Christians, which meets or congregates/assembles regularly at a designated place for worship and the work of the kingdom** (edification, evangelism & benevolence) *has come to be known as a LOCAL CHURCH*. Thus, a standing assembled church, (unlike an ad-hoc cluster of random saints) meets anywhere that a group of familiar Christians deems convenient/expedient to come together, and is the ‘local church’ for each member of that group. There MAY BE one or more congregations located in a city wherein are Christians -Rm 16:5-23.

#### II. Elders

The term “Elders” generally refers to older and mature men.

In the Old Testament, Eldership was cascaded or at various layers after the nation received God’s law at Sinai though the Israelites had elders even before Moses was sent unto them. In our context of the NT,

Elders denotes 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

### III. City

The term “city” refers to human settlement with administratively defined boundaries; often refers to a well-organized dwelling area such as a big town or village or a collection of contiguous hamlets. A central authority may confer its functions and special symbolic status. As a dwelling place of many inhabitants, it is typically a structured and administered land area demarcated from others with walls or some other border landmarks. The size of the land mass, population and civilization of dwellers highlight its sophistication - <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/City> & <https://biblehub.com/topical/c/city.htm>

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.

Matthew 10:11 *And into whatsoever **city or town** ye shall enter, enquire who in it is worthy; and there abide till ye go thence.*

Luke 2:4 *And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judaea, unto the **city of David**, which is called **Bethlehem**; (because he was of the house and lineage of David.*

John 7:42 *Hath not the scripture said, That Christ cometh of the seed of David, and out of the **town of Bethlehem**, where David was?*

### Introduction

A people seeking to restore the first century Christianity must continuously review their practice to ensure that they are on the right track. A true church must have answers to the most profound human needs, especially psychologically, emotional, and spiritually; otherwise, it is not the church of Christ (Mt.11:28). A sincere restoration movement must not be afraid to make changes whenever the need arises. We firmly believe that the church in the 21st century is very different of what the 1st-century church was. Many religious practices of Christians have changed throughout the ages via human supposition, ignorance and sometimes via outright disobedience to the word of God. Based on Col 3:17, Jude 3, etc. it is evident that we are in a dire need for a paradigm shift. Therefore, this writ is an attempt to join the voices crying that we return to the old paths so that we may be what we should be and reach our desired destination. Our focus is in the structure and governance of the Lord's church on earth.

### **In what follows, we will show that:**

1. The church, as structured and administered today, is different from the 1st-century church.
2. A typical church of the 1st century was a network of cell (home group) churches.
3. The Holy Spirit treated all house assemblies of each city collectively as one church.
4. Elders were ordained over cities and not over each congregation of the same city.
5. Multiple assembly churches would be effective than single assembly churches.

### **1. The church, as structured today, is different from the 1st-century church.**

Today, the church is structured in such a way that every group of Christians meeting under the same roof claims to be autonomous from every other similar group, even if they are three houses away. Thus, they separately and respectively hire their own preacher, ordain their own elders, initiate/execute independent programs and develop their peculiar idiosyncrasies. Hence, it becomes difficult to enforce discipline on an erring member of the other group since they must not infringe on the autonomy of the other congregation. They can either accept a disfellowship letter sent by the other group or fail to recognize it.

The Holy Spirit does NOT intend for a Preacher to spend most of his time on church administration but to preach to the lost. That is why He provides that qualified men serve as Overseers. Unfortunately in our era, most Preachers are too engrossed in managing churches and teaching. Where elders are in place, many operate as the board of directors who make decisions for the church, and their decisions are final, whether right or wrong. Thus, most of them become lords instead of leaders, and we love to have it so.

### **In the 1st-century church, things were different.**

- a) The church of Jerusalem, as a case study, were distributed into different cell churches 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. We know that at a stage, the number of the **men alone was about five thousand** (Acts 4:4) and that the temple [given its size as specified in the OT] could not have accommodated all the believing men, women and their children.

When persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem, Saul was arresting saints from houses either as individuals or as assembled worshippers (Acts 8:3). That *‘the church was scattered abroad except the apostles’* did NOT mean the apostles were the only believers left in the Jerusalem. Rather it means that their group was the only segment of the church left intact;

Christians fled the town amidst other groups such as men, women, widows, the seven to serve tables, etc. There were still many disciples in the city aside the apostles - Acts 9:26-27; 11:2. Later, 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.

The members of the city-church were assembled at various locations in Jerusalem thus various cells or congregations of that one body of Christ were having the same program of intercession. 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 have the Lord’s Supper on the first day of the week. The Christians and their leaders would definitely have worshipped in private homes or various clusters even on Sunday. **The point is** Acts 12 establishes that members of the church may meet in different clusters in homes. Secular history confirms that there were no purpose-built structures for churches in the first century.

- b) Evangelists were deployed and supported by churches to do their primary assignment of preaching to save the lost (Acts.13:1-5, 14:26). No preacher was restricted to any congregation in an employer-employee relationship. Individuals and churches supported evangelists as they went about preaching, planting churches, grooming men to be church officers and setting things in order in new congregations.
- c) The elders guided the church in decision-making and **not** making decisions for them without carrying them along (Acts.6:3, 15:22). They were not Lords of the Church (I Pt.5:2-3).

## **2. A typical church of the 1st century was a network of cell (home group) churches.**

Today, each congregation functions as an autonomous institution perhaps with zonal fellowships as appendages. These appendages only gather as programmed by the main church with restrictions. For example, they cannot assemble differently at the same time that the main church has an activity. Secondly, they cannot congregate to observe the Lord's Supper apart from the parent church.

In contrast, a typical church of the 1st century had members distributed in different houses as we saw with the Jerusalem church. When preachers enter a city or village in the first century, they would preach and often convert some individuals and/or entire households. Any such household is an ad-hoc assembled congregation when the family conducts a devotional. If it hosts other saints for the worship and work of the church regularly on the first day of the week then it constitutes a local church.

- a) There were at least two households converted in **Philippi** and these might have constituted one or two assemblies (Acts 16:14-15, 32-33, 39-40). They however made up one city-church (Phil 1:1)
- b) At a particular time, there were at least two groups of believers meeting in **Ephesus** and perhaps more since there was a mass conversion in Ephesus (Acts 19:18-20). A church (brethren) had existed at Aquila's house (Acts 18:24-27) before Paul later arrived to convert some disciples [who were following the teachings of John the Baptist and unaware of Aquila's group], conduct daily studies with these men and debated unbelievers in the school of Tyrannus (Acts 19:1-9).

It was during this second visit to Ephesus that Paul wrote in his first epistle to Corinth: "*The churches of Asia salute you. Aquila and Priscilla salute you much in the Lord, with the church that is in their house*" -I Cor. 16:19. [The apostle specifically mentioned that Christian couple since they were previously in Corinth (Acts 18:1-3) and well known to the Corinthians.]

Paul taught the Ephesian saints including their elders both publicly and from house to house (Acts 20:20). After two years, he departed into Macedonia (Acts 19:10-21).

- c) The saints in **Rome** were a chain of house groups. Rm 16:3-5 indicates that the church in Aquila's house was NOT the entire saints in Rome; it is either a dependent cell or an autonomous assembly. Vs 10, 11, 13 has greetings for Christian households of named individuals  
Vs 14, 15 has greetings for Asyncritus and Philologus who were each hosting brethren either as visitors or as cells of the city-church or as autonomous churches.

Since the letter was "*to all that be in Rome, beloved of God, called to be saints*" (1:7) and Rome is a city, it technically refers to '*the church at Rome.*' [This is similar to Eph 1:1 "*to the saints which are at Ephesus*" which we know refers to '*the church at Ephesus*' -Rev 2:1, Acts 20:17]

- d) How did 'the church of God which is at **Corinth**' emanate? When Paul arrived in that city, he met and stayed with a recently relocated Jewish couple from Rome, who are Christians. This trio would have worshipped as a house church on Sundays while doing their craft of tent making on weekdays (Acts 18:1-3). With time and reasoning, Paul converted MANY Jews and Greeks though some were antagonistic in the synagogue. "*And he continued there a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them.*" (vs 4-17)

Surely, the church continued to meet even after the trio of Paul, Aquila and Priscilla left the town (vs 18). Thus, just prior to their departure there could have been more than one assembly point in Corinth. For Paul to have written them: “*If therefore the whole church be come together into one place...*” (1 Cor 14:23) suggests the possibility of a meeting attended by persons who ordinarily gather as clusters at numerous locations. During Paul's second visit, the whole church was hosted by Gaius (Rm 16:23), one of the foundation members (1 Cor 1:14).

[Some saints e.g. Sisters (Tit 2:3-3) or Young men (Tit 2:6) could meet at different locations on a weekday for edification. Yet the whole church could come together into one place on Sunday, this does not make the various assemblies held in the week to be autonomous churches.]

- e) The church in **Colosse** may be another example of the multiple assembly structure. We note that Paul wrote to this church and wrote to Philemon who scholars believe was resident therein.

*“To the saints and faithful brethren in Christ which are at Colosse... All my state shall Tychicus declare unto you, who is a beloved brother, and a faithful minister and fellowservant in the Lord: Whom I have sent unto you for the same purpose, that he might know your estate, and comfort your hearts; With Onesimus, a faithful and beloved brother, who is one of you. They shall make known unto you all things which are done here. ...Epaphras, who is one of you, a servant of Christ, saluteth you, always labouring fervently for you in prayers, that ye may stand perfect and complete in all the will of God. For I bear him record, that he hath a great zeal for you, and them that are in Laodicea, and them in Hierapolis. ...Salute the brethren which are in Laodicea, and Nymphas, and the church which is in his house. And when this epistle is read among you, cause that it be read also in the church of the Laodiceans; and that ye likewise read the epistle from Laodicea. And say to Archippus, Take heed to the ministry which thou hast received in the Lord, that thou fulfil it.” -Colossians 1:2; 4:7-9, 12-13, 15-17*

*“Paul, a prisoner of Jesus Christ, and Timothy our brother, unto Philemon our dearly beloved, and fellowlabourer, And to our beloved Apphia, and Archippus our fellowsoldier, and to the church in thy house: ...I beseech thee for my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my bonds: Which in time past was to thee unprofitable, but now profitable to thee and to me: **Whom I have sent again: thou therefore receive him**, that is, mine own bowels: Whom I would have retained with me, that in thy stead he might have ministered unto me in the bonds of the gospel: But without thy mind would I do nothing; that thy benefit should not be as it were of necessity, but willingly. For perhaps he therefore departed for a season, that thou shouldest receive him for ever; Not now as a servant, but above a servant, **a brother beloved**, specially to me, but how much more unto thee, both in the flesh, and in the Lord?” -Philemon 1:1 -2, 10-16*



Some possibilities from both passages, given the presumption that Philemon was a Colossian are:

- i. The church in Philemon's house is the only assembly in Colosse, Paul merely wrote two separate letters: one to the church and another to its host. When Philemon receives Onesimus who happened to be his run-away slave that Paul had converted and urged to return, both he and the congregation has gained a brother.
- ii. The church in Philemon's house is one out of two or more cells of the city-church in Colosse. When Philemon receives Onesimus back as a brother, the returnee will be with his master and plausibly in the same congregation. Paul's letter introducing Onesimus to the saints in the city is useful since the cells are part of the same church.
- iii. The church in Philemon's house is one of several autonomous churches in Colosse. **This seems absurd and unlikely** for the following reasons:
  - a) Why introduce Onesimus to the saints in the city as "one of you" and expect him to brief them about Paul if he would only be returning to his master and Philemon's independent assembly? [Naturally, he should not be expected to be attending another congregation distinct from his master's assembly]
  - b) Paul's letter to "the saints and faithful brethren in Colosse" includes every saint meeting in Philemon's house! As seen in Rome with Aquila, technically, the house church of Philemon would then be part of "*the church in Colosse*". If Philemon's group was a distinct and autonomous church, Paul would likely have written that congregation a separate epistle as he did for Laodicia and given similar dual-reading instructions. [Whenever an inspired person wanted to write **a single letter to different churches**, he indicated so in the salutation. Such epistle was "unto churches" in a named region not a city (Gal 1:2) or 'unto the church at named city with all that in every place call upon the name of Jesus' (1 Cor 1:2) or unto 'brethren scattered across territories' (Jms 1:1, 1 Pet 1:1) or 'to them that are sanctified by God the Father, and preserved in Jesus Christ' irrespective of location (2 Pet 1:1, Jude 1:1)]
- iv. The location of the church in Nymphas' house cannot be inferred with certainty from Col 4:13-15. It could be a house church in Colosse or in Laodicea or even in Hierapolis. It was definitely not the sole church of Colosse nor the entire church of Laodicia since it was saluted distinctly alongside these two entities.

There is no reason to think that some churches in other cities aside Jerusalem were not structured as house cells. The fact is that in the first century, congregations of the same city did not claim autonomy in respect

to one another. House-churches within the same city altogether functioned as one church, and so had significant impacts on the society.

### 3. The Holy Spirit treated all house assemblies of each city collectively as one church.

The inspired apostles and the Lord Jesus Christ do NOT recognize or signify that there are several autonomous churches in a city but rather considers all clusters as part of the one church in a city. E.g.

1. All the Christian assemblies in Jerusalem were “*the church [not churches] in Jerusalem*” (Acts 11:22).
2. I Cor 1:2 establishes that all the saints in the city of Corinth were “*the church [not churches] of God which is at Corinth.*” Even when division was creeping in amongst them, the inspired apostle beseeched them to remain united. Paul wrote “*as the body is one, and hath many members... Now ye are the body of Christ, and members in particular.*” (12:12, 27)

Hence, all the Christians in a city constitute the church and body of Christ in that community, their clusters do not amount to different autonomous churches before God so they ought to have a common leadership to function as one. That was also why the saints in Thessalonica were not addressed as “churches” but rather as “*the church of the Thessalonians which is in God the Father*” -1 Thess 1:1, 2 Thess 1:1

3. In His revelation unto John the beloved apostle, Jesus mentioned one church per city though he mentioned seven churches in the region of Asia. **Christ acknowledged all the saints in a city as one church affiliated with a messenger irrespective of the number of assemblies in that city.**

“*Saying, I am Alpha and Omega, the first and the last: and, what thou seest, write in a book, and send it unto the seven churches which are in Asia; unto Ephesus, and unto Smyrna, and unto Pergamos, and unto Thyatira, and unto Sardis, and unto Philadelphia, and unto Laodicea.*”

The Lord addressed and sent His distinctive message (Rev 1:11) unto the angel or messenger [**human servant-leadership**; elders and/or preacher] of each city-church. This was because only those who have the rule over or lead a church could work to rectify the lapses Christ identified as well as maintain efforts in aspects where He commended them.

For example, Christ not only recognized **the church in Pergamos** (2:12), He acknowledged the practices of certain Christians (e.g. clusters) within that city-church, when He said (vs 14-15):

“*But I have a few things against thee, because **thou hast there them that hold the doctrine of Balaam, who taught Balac to cast a stumblingblock before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed unto idols, and to commit fornication. So hast thou also them that hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitans, which thing I hate.***”



The Lord also addressed **the church in Thyatira** (2:18) and chastised her for allowing some saints to be seduced unto idolatry, noting those seduced would be punished with the seductress (vs 20-23). He distinguished between the messenger of the church (leadership) and the rest (non-seduced saints in that city) saying no other burden would be laid upon them (vs 24).

#### **4. Elders were ordained over cities and not over each congregation of the same city.**

- a. Ancient Israel had elders over God's people in various cities (Judg.8:16, Ruth.4:2). In the New Testament, the Holy Spirit revealed the truth that elders be appointed over Christians who are the new and spiritual Israel. For instance, there were elders over the church at Philippi in the region of Macedonia (Phil 1:1). Those who labour over the Thessalonians (1 Thess 5:12) would be appointed elders when qualified. That church constitute another autonomous group in Macedonia. Paul and Barnabas ordained elders over the saints in Lystra & Derbe (cities of Lycaonia), Iconium and Antioch in Pisidia.

*“Howbeit, as the disciples stood round about him, he rose up, and came into the city: and the next day he departed with Barnabas to Derbe. And when they had preached the gospel to that city, and had taught many, they returned again to Lystra, and to Iconium, and Antioch, Confirming the souls of the disciples, and exhorting them to continue in the faith, and that we must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God. **And when they had ordained them elders in every church**, and had prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord, on whom they believed. And after they had passed throughout Pisidia, they came to Pamphylia.” -Acts 14:20-24*

- b. Paul instructed Titus to do what he and Barnabas did, appoint elders over cities vis

*“For this cause left I thee in Crete, that thou shouldest set in order the things that are wanting, and **ordain elders in every city**, as I had appointed thee” - Titus 1:5*

#### **Is Acts 14:23 in disagreement with Titus 1:5?**

There is only one command on where to ordain Elders -in every city (Tit 1:5); that is over the Christians in a city while there is one example of the process when elders were ordained -in every church (Acts 14:23); that is among the Christians that make up a church.

Could the action of Paul, on eldership ordination (example) be different from what he as an apostle instructed via a letter (command) unto an Evangelist? NO!

The two must be equivalent since both activities were executed under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. What would make the two activities correspond? Let us examine possible scenarios.

**i. IF “in every church” means ‘within each assembly’ in a city.’**

This implies that if there were three different assemblies in a city, each would appoint its own eldership. Since elders rule over the flock and make decisions as those who will give account to Christ the Chief Shepherd, it means each presbytery is not responsible unto others and could act **autonomously**. Such could NOT have happened in Jerusalem, Ephesus, Rome, Colosse, etc. because:

- a) The reference unto saints in Jerusalem was "the church at Jerusalem" (Acts 8:1; 11:22) NOT "the churchES at Jerusalem" which should be used if the assemblies were distinct/independent.
- b) Thus, Jerusalem had different house-based congregations or cells but a common presbytery over the city-church. (Acts.15:4, 22-23). Likewise, Paul sent for the “elders of the church in Ephesus” (Acts 20:17) NOT “the elders of the churchES in Ephesus” irrespective of the number of assemblies in that city, indicating the saints there constitute one body or church.
- c) Peter was an apostle & an elder (1 Pet 1:1; 5:1). He was not limited to one assembly in Jerusalem. He was going to various assemblies and delivering similar edifying message and instruction unto the cells (Acts 12:12,17)
- d) Since there were many house-churches in a typical city, which drew membership from the family owning a house with some other saints, it might not have been easy to find plurality of qualified older men to appoint in each house within the short interval of Paul planting churches and revisiting them in Acts 14.

**ii. IF “in every church” means ‘across all the assemblies in a city’ or ‘the city-church’.**

This would imply that if there were three different assemblies in a city, they would appoint a common eldership to rule and watch over them all. This is more probable because in the epistles and Rev 2-3,

- a) The Lord Jesus, the builder and owner of the church recognizes and delineates His people using the names of their locations e.g. the church at Jerusalem, the church in Ephesus, etc.
- b) The leadership of each city-church over all saints is referred to as ‘the messenger’ of that church.
- c) Each assembly in a city is **not independent** but is rather a part of the church in that city.

**5. Multiple assembly churches are more effective than single assembly churches.**

In single assembly churches, much emphasis is consciously or otherwise laid on the building. Many churches use the size and structure of the building as a yardstick to measure how well they are doing. When they are up to one hundred and fifty members, some teachers and song leaders may have to wait until three to six months to lead. That, of course, even make upcoming talents to stand no chance of developing. Thus, talents or skills are neglected and eventually buried. A single assembly church often

exists in a locality for decades without being noticed by most members of the community. When you go out to preach, people keep asking, “Which one is the Church of Christ again? New churches everywhere!” That is because CoC do not spread out among the community as it was in the first century. Many members live far from the meeting hall and have to commute a long distance to get to the assembly place. Sometimes, needy members forsake the assembly of the saints because they do not have transport fare. However, the church could have more funds if some of the money spent on transportation is contributed as an offering. That can be achieved if the assembly is at walkable distances to where most members live. More disturbing is the fact that personal evangelism is difficult because the prospect travels through long distances to church. Many prospects are being discouraged by that. It may be why some Christians do not even consider personal evangelism. In a single assembly church, some individuals find it difficult to express themselves; intimidated by the crowd. It is always amazing to see supposedly timid individuals express themselves willingly in smaller groups. Some single assembly churches are like social clubs where people gather to make casual contacts with one another and head home at the resounding of the closing ‘Amen.’ There is hardly a real fellowship/rapport between them. Collapse the cathedral, and many will disappear. Could it be that we have groomed Christians who are only impressed by the building and the ceremonies that happen therein, not the real relationship with one another? If so, let us repent!

In contrast, a multiple assembly church would take the Church closer to both members and prospects. The talents in the assembly will be discovered, nurtured and fully utilized for the glory of God. Each group of Christians will flourish as they evangelize their locality. The ready-made talents will get busier and express themselves better. Good leaders will naturally emerge. Deeper relationships amongst members will blossom. Individuals will experience emotional fulfillment as they connect at a different level with one another. More human, financial, material and other resources would be pooled at the leaders’ feet to advance the cause of Christ. A city-church of all members of assemblies, as one body would be much more impactful than each individual assembly in a city acting independently. The book of Acts testifies to the effectiveness of a multiple-assemblies church with proper leadership. *“Then the word of God spread, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were obedient to the faith”* -Acts 6:7. Luke reported this just a few years from the beginning of the church.

## **Conclusion**

Note that **this is not an advocacy for statewide or regional eldership or church headquarters as some misconstrue to accuse us**. Regions are made up of cities and since all the Christians in each city constitute a church, each region is made up of churches e.g. “The churches of Galatia” (I Cor.16:1). In the

universal church, only Jesus and the apostles rule (and still do via scripture today). The Holy Spirit could have instructed preachers to appoint elders for the church at the universal, national, provincial, regional, state or street level. He deliberately DID NOT but chose the city level. It is the government and/or traditional authorities that delineates land area boundaries for settlements. All the saints in a city or town or village constitute the church (one body) of Christ in that locality and is the organizational level, which Christ designed for *successive church officers*. In such locale, let appointed elders rule the church in matters of opinion, their jurisdiction is area-wide. If having multiple assemblies under an eldership in Jerusalem was not sinful in the first century then replicating it now, is typical and scripturally authorized. God never declared multiple assemblies abnormal or stated that such was a temporary arrangement.

Church growth in our generation is incremental compared to the exponential trend recorded in the first-century. This fact is a red flag that perhaps we are not doing something right. Another red flag is the fact that churches now exist for decades without having elders unlike in the first century when elders were ordained just few years after churches were planted. Therefore, we must humbly and carefully return to the Bible to examine if we are really in full alignment with the faith once delivered unto the saints. We need to continuously review what we have received from foreign missionaries so that we can separate scripture from exegetical baggage. Modern individualism and western democratic tendencies have promoted the notion that every group of worshippers in a city having multiple-assemblies may brand themselves an “*autonomous congregation*” but in the NT, it was not so. **To assert that a clear pattern of elders over the city-church, evident in the NT via Direct Command (Tit 1:5), Approved Apostolic Examples (Acts 12:12,17; 15:4 & 14:19-23) and Necessary Inference (Rev 1-3) is not binding today, is to willfully ignore the truth. Let us go back to the scriptures to speak where it speaks and to practice it.** In times like this, only the sincere and courageous will do what is right.

### **Recommendations**

1. Congregations should be established across each area such that people will not have to travel long distances for corporate worship. [Preachers and Teachers must be encouraged in their work]
2. Let all the Christians in a city or town or village; be recognized as **the church** in that locale irrespective of the number of meeting points for services i.e. congregations/assemblies.
3. The brethren across the numerous congregations should freely interact, hold programs e.g. seminars to sensitize on this issue, and be well taught on church leadership matters.
4. Preachers should inform the disciples in every city-church to seek out qualified men among them to serve as Elders and Deacons. [This will allow Preachers to focus on evangelism -Acts 6:2-6]
5. The men ordained as Elders will rotate themselves around the clusters as Peter was doing in Acts 12:12, 17 and not stay put to serve just one assembly or where he emanated from.

## Addressing Observations & Objections

**Ob:** How long will a congregation meet in a brother's house? What happens if the man relocates to another place or the property owner quits him from that house?

**Ans:** There can be no stipulated period of time the church can meet in a particular brother's house. The church should meet in a convenient, chosen location as far as it is feasible. When it becomes unfeasible, the church should make an alternative arrangement.

**Ob:** Using private houses will be good for our members but not for visitors. Must we meet in homes?

**Ans:** In many NT cities, when the church started they were meeting in private homes and likely had visitors (1 Cor 14:23). Till now, new congregations can hardly afford to quickly acquire [build/rent] a hall for worship purposes; many start in a home or public facility [e.g. school].

However, this is not about meeting in homes or meeting in public facility, **meeting could take place anywhere**. This is on whether elders should be ordained jointly over multiple assemblies or over each single assembly, in a city! Each NT area populated with Christians had either a single assembly or multiple assemblies but not more than a presbytery. There is **no inspired record** of any city with several autonomous churches having separate elderships. This matter is actually defense of **one body** (the church) **versus** defense of *several mushroom bodies* (autonomous churches) in a city. Do not reduce it to a discussion about meeting in homes. Recall the early Christians also worshipped in public places like temple, seaside, etc. It is not the ability of saints to gather under the same roof every Sunday that makes them one church but their having one Lord, one name, one decision-making leadership, etc.

**Ob:** The elders of the Old Testament has no relevance or bearing to the concept of elders in the New Testament. What comparison exists between the two?

**Ans:** The scriptures show that counsel and guidance comes from the elderly –Deut 32:7. The concept of elders precedes the nation of Israel and was widespread in the ancient world - Gen 50:7, Exo 3:16-18, Num 22:4-7. In any society, wise or mature men of integrity are supposed to provide guidance, serve as role models and adjudicate matters (1 Cor 6:5). In the OT, there were:

- a. The elders of a man's house (his family) which may correspond to the oldest males on his paternal side e.g. grandads, uncles, etc.

2 Samuel 12: 16-17 *David therefore besought God for the child; and David fasted, and went in, and lay all night upon the earth. And **the elders of his house** arose, and went to him, to raise him up from the earth: but he would not, neither did he eat bread with them.*

- b. The elders of a house means the elders of related families or a tribe (Deut 31:28). E.g. David belonged to the house of Judah and often related with the elders of Judah.

2 Samuel 2:4, 10 *And the men of Judah came, and there they anointed David king over the house of Judah. And they told David, saying, That the men of Jabeshgilead were they that buried Saul... Ishbosheth Saul's son was forty years old when he began to reign over Israel, and reigned two years. But the house of Judah followed David.*

2 Samuel 19:11 *And king David sent to Zadok and to Abiathar the priests, saying, Speak unto the **elders of Judah**, saying, Why are ye the last to bring the king back to his house? seeing the speech of all Israel is come to the king, even to his house.*

- c. The elders of a city. Though specific portions of the land of Canaan were initially apportioned to the various tribes, the people mingled and travelled across the land thus the leadership of each city was not necessarily made exclusively from the leadership of the possessing tribe especially as new areas were built up after settlement and additional conquests.

Deuteronomy 21:1-3 *If one be found slain in the land which the LORD thy God giveth thee to possess it, lying in the field, and it be not known who hath slain him: Then thy elders and thy judges shall come forth, and they shall measure unto the cities which are round about him that is slain: And it shall be, that the city which is next unto the slain man, even **the elders of that city** shall take an heifer, which hath not been wrought with, and which hath not drawn in the yoke.*

Gilead was like Lagos where the name applies to the state and well as the (mega) city, which has other cities within it. In ancient Israel, the OT mentions ‘*the elders of Gilead*’ six times in Judges 11. Gilead had cities in it right from ancient times (Num 32:26, Josh 13:25) thus the elders of Gilead would refer to the elders over the region. These could be the elders of its cities or a selection therefrom.

- d. The elders of Israel, which existed even before Moses saw the burning bush. The elders of the tribes from which God later approved a representative council of seventy constitute these.

Exodus 3:16 *Go, and gather the **elders of Israel** together, and say unto them, The LORD God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob, appeared unto me, saying, I have surely visited you, and seen that which is done to you in Egypt:*

Exodus 12:21 *Then Moses called for all the **elders of Israel**, and said unto them, Draw out and take you a lamb according to your families, and kill the Passover.*

Numbers 11:16 *And the LORD said unto Moses, Gather unto me seventy men of the elders of Israel, whom thou knowest to be the elders of the people, and officers over them; and bring them unto the tabernacle of the congregation, that they may stand there with thee.*



In this age of the NT, the ones ministering in a cluster is as the elders of a family in OT Israel. The totality of pastors over the clusters constitute the elders of the city-church and corresponds to the elders of a city in ancient Israel. The regional church is not activated nor tribal/ethnic distinctions in the kingdom hence God has not put human administration at both levels. The apostles reign with Christ in His kingdom; the universal church, and still function so via their inspired writings. They are the equivalent of the elders of Israel, since the (universal) church is a spiritual kingdom and holy nation.

**Ob:** So we should revert to the way of denominations, which means Diocese and Districts are scriptural. We will be having Area Leaders like where I was coming from. Can we go their way without having headquarters and General Overseer on earth instead of heaven and Christ?

**Ans:** We can revert to true NT Christianity without going denominational or having uninspired organizational configuration once we recognize that no cluster is inherently superior to another in a multiple assemblies city, and that each presbytery over a city-church is autonomous. A city-church do NOT need any man-made superstructure above it such as state-wide, regional or national Overseer(s). 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. The CoC 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. One church and pastorate per city is a divine and not a Pauline arrangement since it was the norm irrespective of who evangelized an area.

**Ob:** You have stated a concept that seems theoretical. How can this be applied today?

**Ans:** Nigerian brethren have been grappling with the implementation of citywide church leadership although in an **inconsistent** way! Consider a city X with numerous assemblies Y1, Y2, Y3...

Nowadays, every assembly has a preacher who spends most of his schedule teaching, managing and caring for that cluster. He is known as *the minister of the congregation*. Virtually, everything revolves around him as the frontrunner in that cell of Christians. He is *so busy managing the church* that he spends little or no time preaching to outsiders or going for evangelistic/missionary journeys. The ministers of the clusters in the city meet regularly to review, plan and cooperate on the affairs of the church as a whole in that geo-location. They edify one another, compare notes and address welfare matters, etc. This is known as **the Preachers Forum**. [Others include renowned Teachers and call it '*Preachers and Leaders Forum*'] However, their plans on cooperative or joint-congregational efforts do not always achieve great success since their respective autonomous congregations decides on its own affairs at its "business meeting." Some congregations even discourage or prohibit their Preacher from attending such Forums.

[Hitherto, a church might have cells that meet only mid-week and call such “house fellowship” or “zonal meeting” but such clusters were not permitted to meet and break bread on the first day of the week.

**Now, God has somehow used the Covid-19 pandemic to make us practice the truth of house-churches under one leadership as it was originally.** Since public gatherings are limited, church halls are under lock. Congregations (**including the ones having elders**) have respectively activated cells whereby upon the first day of the week, the members worship in their homes [*total lockdown*] or few households in proximate residences gather to worship in one house [*partial lockdown*]. The leadership of the church still watches over all the members and take reports from cells, the leaders exhort and follow-up on each cell via Phonecall, Email, Web portal, SMS/Chats or even visits where feasible. This clustering for worship in houses is not a sinful act justified by an emergency but is scriptural and was common in the NT. Before Coronavirus, such operates in China, Russia, Saudi Arabia, some parts of USA, South Africa, Northern Nigeria, etc. We need not totally discard such arrangement after the pandemic but should endeavor to consolidate. Such groupings may continue but occasionally all could come together into one place, especially for fellowship, conflict resolution, discipline, crucial briefing or decision-making.

In the New Testament, Preachers like Timothy, Titus, Silas, Tychichus, etc. were regularly going for preaching missions with one staying behind for months or few years to set things in order at each city as others move on. At times apostles like Paul & Barnabas impart spiritual gifts to new converts, get chased out of town by Jews but would revisit within few years to check on each city-church. Men who desires and merits the position of overseer would be identified and ***a plurality of such across the congregation(s) were appointed to constitute the presbytery over the church in city X.***

To elaborate on the Recommendations, practical steps in a city would be:

1. Spend considerable time to teach this lesson to re-orientate Christians in various assemblies.
2. Occasionally have a meeting in one place to enhance fellowship e.g. lectureship hosted by alternate congregations. This will create opportunity for all the city saints to know those who are apt to teach, vigilant, temperate, hospitable or otherwise.
3. As individuals, the Christians in various assemblies should also freely interact socially to know themselves on personal basis.
4. The Preachers and Teachers of the congregations should jointly review issues and then advice the church based on scriptural guidelines. For example, on the work of the church and its organization.
5. Brethren look out for qualified men to serve as Bishops from the various congregations.

[For example, in a place X with three congregations (A, B & C); A may have 1, B may have 3 and C may have 0 potential elders. Then one qualified person in B could start to attend C.]

6. The identified men are further trained by the Preachers on eldership and thereafter ordained over all the saints across the three congregations. The appointed men are **the new leadership to collectively manage the purse/resources** of THE CHURCH IN X, which has three cells.

[Just as ‘the elders of the church in Jerusalem’ oversaw the affairs of all its cells]

7. These ‘elders of X’ are not an “*invisible, external body*” but shepherds appointed among them.
8. None is an Elder of just A or B or C but each is an Elder of A, B & C.
9. The ‘elders of church X’ should settle down to care for **all the flock** and make sure none of its members or clusters lack basic necessities.
10. The church when stabilized could regularly sponsor some of the Preachers on ground, to go on preaching mission in virgin land. [To establish new churches in other cities]

**Ob:** If no one is qualified in my house Church for instance and three people are qualified from three other house Churches and appointed, will those three houses not amount to be leaders of the city Church? My house Church will now be supervised by the elders from another house Church. They can close my house Church anytime and merge us with another house since my house Church is not autonomous.

**Ans:** The right mentality should be that the eldership is the eldership of the city Church regardless of where they emerged. Where they emerge should not even be an issue to keep mentioning nor have special status. Seeing things as “my house Church” versus “their house Churches” smacks of carnality or immaturity or denominationalism. More importantly, a good eldership will be fair to all regardless of where they emerged. So whatever advice they give the church must be explained to the understanding of all concerned. There has to be a justifiable reason for any position the eldership takes.

For instance, as government gradually eases the *lockdown on Covid-19 pandemic*, it increases number of people who may gather in public. The leaders of your congregation may decide that each family should no longer worship alone but three households should henceforth meet. If your family is instructed to assemble at another place, would you revolt against their alleged ‘closing down your house Church’ and consequently ordain elders in your home as a new autonomous Church?

**Ob:** Cities in the first century are different from cities now, how can we identify a city and a city-church?

**Ans:** An area or city is identified via:

1. Traditional or government records by its name that it is a city/town/village

2. A delineation marking out its boundary e.g. through visible landmarks such as street addressing, pillars, signposts, billboards, walls, border patrol/checkpoint, GPS Coordinates, maps, etc.

**Administrators and scholars recognize three types of cities in Nigeria – ‘city, town and village.’** See [https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_Nigerian\\_cities\\_by\\_population](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Nigerian_cities_by_population)

If you can go from a place (e.g. Ojota in Lagos) to another distant settlement (e.g. your hometown in another state) or travel from one city to another successfully using any means of transportation then YOU CAN identify and locate a city. There are signposts aside maps that would tell one whether he is in Ikeja city or outside the capital of Lagos. It is even easier in our age of technology: your GPS enabled phone would let you know! The traditional rulers and/or government officials know the boundaries of their respective territories so one can know if interested in finding out. Cities/town/villages are settlement areas of communities and should not be conflated with Local Government Areas (LGAs) [called Counties in USA] which are government divisions. An LGA may consist of a fraction of a city, a single city or several cities. A state consists of whole numbers of LGAs while it may contain fractional parts of a city. A country consists of whole states and whole LGAs.

In the first century, Paul, Luke, John and other Christians could identify, talk of or write to say, the church at Jerusalem, the church in Corinth, the church in Ephesus, etc. Can we identify the church in Ikeja? Or the church in Benin or the church in Argungu today? We can if we allow the scriptures to show us what was the church in a city such as Corinth or Ephesus.

1 Cor 1:1 & Eph 1:1 respectively shows the letters were primarily written...

- *Unto the church of God which is at Corinth, to them that are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints...*
- *To the saints which are at Ephesus...*

Hence, the saints or Christians constitute the church in a city.

This means residents who have obeyed the gospel of Christ (and their children who have not attained the age of accountability). How are these saved/safe persons identified **as a church**? It is via their

1. Personal profession or public confession of faith
2. Individual declaration of house address to confirm it lies within the perimeters of the city.

Those who mutually profess Christianity whose contact address lies within the interior or on the boundary of a city, which acknowledge one another make up a city-church. A Christian from outside the city would be a stranger until he is welcomed as a visitor or new member in that church during his stay in the city (Acts 9:26-28).

It does not matter whether the saints in a city gather in one hall or two different halls separated by a physical distance; such constitute one church when in perfect harmony; operating as one body under one leadership. Consider a gathering in a hall where some are on the ground floor and others are worshipping on different floors. If these groups are under same oversight and wear same name and function as one, we know it is the same church irrespective of different activities going on in the building. If however, those worshipping on different floors have different names, leaderships and operate as distinct entities, we know they constitute different bodies (denominations).

Likewise, when the separating distance is several buildings/streets away, assemblies that have common leadership, operating as one is the same church spread over that city as clusters. However, Christians in different assemblies in a city, who operate as autonomous churches having different elderships; these appear not to be of the same mind. Each leadership designs and executes its own programs at its own pace and owes no explanation unto others. If a Christian should establish another independent CoC on same or next street to your church hall, it reeks of dissention so long your assemblies are not perceived as cluster of each other that can inter-mingle and inter-operate.

**We can know the city-church at any given time.** Enquiries about “what if government create or merge cities” are superfluous. For instance, the Nigerian Government has been creating administrative territories and adjusting boundaries since 1963. **The National Boundary Commission** *"intervene, determine and deal with any Boundary dispute that may arise among States, Local Government Areas or Communities in the Federation with a view to settling the dispute; Define and Delimitate Boundaries..."*

When a state or city is altered/created then the individuals and organizations therein accept their resulting identity. **Many have through such exercise in Nigeria, had their state of origin changed and/or their city of origin/residence renamed or reshaped.** The church in such place was equally affected either by a change of name and/or of membership. What is the extreme possible scenario? The natural and logical implication is that when a city is split into two, the erstwhile city-church would become two churches in different cities. If two cities were merged then two city-churches become clusters of a new city-church.

**Ob:** Pg. 14A: Titus 1.5 cannot be used to establish a divine pattern for one church over a city. The area is a social construct, while the eldership is a divine construct. Even if we apply city to mean a define{d} territory, it won't solve the problem of who can authoritatively defines what constitutes an ecclesiastical locality.

**Ans:** The Holy Spirit in the book of Acts and the epistles as well as Jesus in Rev 1-3 recognize man-made cities and treated the saints in each as an “ecclesiastical locality.” The distinction being made between

elders and cities as ‘divine versus social’ construct is an unwarranted accusation of intellectual myopia against the Holy Spirit as if He did not know what He was doing. He knows everything about each city whether past, present or future. God created the settlement that man named Eden. “*And hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth, and hath determined the times before appointed, and the bounds of their habitation.*” -Acts 17:26 The Bible makes it clear that the Lord knows the difference between a house, a street, a city, a region, a province, a nation and the world. [He gave Ananias the exact address of where to find Saul in Damascus via a vision.] **He has prepared a heavenly city** (Heb 11:10, 16) for his saints. Likewise, God knows the difference between hour, day, week, month, season, year, age, etc. When Christ commanded disciples to observe His memorial using bread and wine, should we posit that the Lord’s Supper is divine but ‘bread/wine are social construct or of human origin’ hence do not constitute a pattern for the church today? Should different communities in Nigeria claim that the unleavened bread and the fruit of the vine of Palestine is neither indigenous to them nor produced now as both were in the first century, so we don’t have to use either? Are we free to use our local palm-wine and bake moin-moin for the Communion? No, because in scripture there are theological reasons behind the given elements. The unleavened bread represents the sinless, incorruptible body of Jesus, the wine represents His blood and the city represents an administrative unit of His kingdom among men.

**Ob:** City then is not exactly city now; our cities have varying sizes, population and boundaries markers unlike in the NT.

**Ans:** That is irrelevant so long we still have cities or equivalents. Even in the first century, the cities had varied sizes, population, etc. yet God instructed that elders be appointed in every city and the early Christians obeyed. We need to realize that government is an agent of God for civil administration (Rm 13:1-2) so God endorses their creation, delineation and modification of cities.

The NT says we should pray for those in authority (1 Tim 2:2). Today, nobody argues that emperor, principalities, powers, proconsuls, chamberlains, etc. existed then so we should **not pray** for president, governors, counsellors, mayors or local government chairmen, etc. We recognize that the designation change does not reduce the essence of the command.

We also know that timing/dating system viz hours/day/month/year was scientifically altered from what obtained in the first century. Most societies now use the Gregorian rather than the Jewish calendar. Besides, Jews count 6am to 6pm as day, 6pm to 6am is night and the beginning of a 24-hour Day (See Gen 1:5, Lev 7:15, Mk 16:1-2). Yet we still break bread on OUR first day of the week, nobody says ‘*do not take communion on Sunday because our first day of the week is not exactly same as that of the Jews.*’ So for one to aver that city then isn’t exactly city now is an untenable excuse for disobeying Tit 1:5.



**Ob:** Pg. 6A: ...(Acts 8:3), reference is to the various families/households (not cells or house churches) he was dragging and jailing. While we can infer that members of the Jerusalem church met in members home, this passage is talking about the church as Christians of a living in the Jerusalem locality.

**Ans:** Acts 8:1a,3 *“And Saul was consenting unto his death. And at that time there was a great persecution against the church which was at Jerusalem... As for Saul, he made havock of the church, entering into every house, and haling men and women committed them to prison.”*

Though plausible, it is very unlikely that Saul was merely bursting into random individual homes to arrest people. He could not just have entered “every house” in Jerusalem searching for Christians. When the persecution arose, the saints could no longer gather at the temple to preach or worship. The text says that he entered EVERY house [the church were in], and hauled MEN & WOMEN (a **plurality** of both sexes per house) into prison. This shows it was not just husband and wife but several adults arrested per incident. He must have accosted house churches not just random family houses because:

- a) He would not know who was a Christian and who was not so randomness would have amounted to a waste of time and resources.
- b) He would not have a strong legal basis to barge into an individual residence who wasn't 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.
- c) He testified before Jewish leaders (Acts 22:4) *“And I persecuted **this way** unto the death, binding and delivering into prisons both men and women.”*

He told King Agrippa (Acts 26:10-12), *“Which thing I also did in Jerusalem: and **many of the saints** did I shut up in prison, having received authority from the chief priests; and when they were put to death, I gave my voice against them. And I **punished them oft in every synagogue**, and compelled them to blaspheme; and being exceedingly mad against them, I persecuted them even unto strange cities. Whereupon as I went to Damascus with authority and commission from the chief priests.”*

This shows he was interested in where he could apprehend many, with **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.

**Ob:** Pg. 8A & 14A: Acts 9.31 ...is saying that all the believers in the provinces of Judea, Galilee, and Samaria constitute one church. Furthermore, the text implies that this church is edified by one leadership

(the participle which edified them) so that they can be walking in the Lord and remain in the comfort of the Holy Spirit. ...Acts 9:31 makes it clear that church can {be} referring to all the congregations in several cities.

**Ans:** Compare *the military fights in Borno* with *the military in Borno fights*. The former means ‘the entire Nigerian military prosecutes war in Borno state’ while the latter means ‘only a segment of the Nigerian military stationed in Borno state prosecutes war.’ The whole Nigerian military via DHQ in Abuja and its units/resources nationwide prosecutes the war in Borno hence ‘*the military fights in Borno*’ is fitting.

“*Then had the church rest throughout all Judaea and Galilee and Samaria, and were edified...*” Acts 9:26-31 says the (universal) church had rest in the named provinces, after its chief persecutor in those areas (Saul -Acts 8:1-3; 22:5; 26:11) was converted (Acts 9:4-20). Christ’s universal church does not have humans over it save His apostles.

Acts 9:31 does NOT teach, “*The church in Judaea and Galilee and Samaria had rest...*” viz. ‘a multi-provincial church’ (with/out appointed elders) had rest. [Analogous to ‘*the military in Borno fights*’]

Whether local or universal, the body [church] edifies itself (Eph 4:16) via the input of each member (1 Cor 14:26, Rm 14:19, 1 Thess 5:11) not just through the leadership.

Church does NOT refer to “all congregations in several cities.” Church refers to all Christians in any place or a specific place. Not assemblies but individuals are called out, converted, baptized and translated into the kingdom of God’s dear Son.

**Ob:** Pg. 1M: Peter wrote to the scattered believers in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, **I exhort the elders among you...shepherd the flock of God** (1 Peter 5:1-2). Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, and Bithynia were not cities, but rather territories.

**Ans:** Peter did not write to Christians in various territories as a mere elder but as an “*apostle of Jesus Christ*,” an officer in the universal church –1 Pet 1:1 [See also Mt 16:18-19, Eph 2:19-20, 2 Pet 1:1]. Was Peter addressing Overseers who were OVER these Territories? That would be a wrong supposition. The elders were appointed in every city of these territories; plurality of elders is in each city-church. Peter merely exhorted the elders in empathy, as a fellow elder who understood what shepherding entails.

**Ob:** So the whole of Lagos or Ibadan should have just one set of elders over its congregations? Are those not too big and is it not wise to have several autonomous assemblies in such a big city?

**Ans:** God knew that there were and would be big or small cities when He inspired the command in Titus 1:5. Lagos is not just a city but a **megacity** and a **state having many cities**. Ikeja the capital city of Lagos has a church of Christ at Ikeja. This and other cities in Lagos should each have their own elders

irrespective of the number of assemblies per city. [For instance, if Ojota has two congregations then both constitute ‘the church at Ojota’ and should appoint a joint or common set of elders.] Likewise, one may wish to ascertain if Ibadan is still a city or now officially contains other towns or village settlements. Recall there are several traditional rulers therein some of which were pronounced 1st class Obas by the former Governor. If still a single city then it should have a single presbytery. We should not be wise in our own eyes to jump the gun. Jerusalem church did not split into several autonomous churches when the number of men alone exceeded 5000 but retained one leadership over all the saints in the city.

**Ob:** Pg. 16A: When a church becomes too large and expansive for elders to shepherd the flock directly, it can't exist as one congregation; it may need to split by allowing one or more of its cells to become autonomous congregation(s). The only way out would be if they appoint deacons or teachers to coordinate cells on their behalf. This, too, is risky.

**Ans:** How large is “too large”? Why would splitting into autonomous churches be the ONLY solution? Should additional deacons just be appointed thereby saddling the existing elders with more supervisory responsibility? How about appointing additional qualified men as elders where such appointee(s) from an existing or new cell, coordinate that cell aside also serving the whole church and guiding new deacons? After all, Timothy was left behind in the city-church of Ephesus (1<sup>st</sup> 1:3) that already had an eldership but was later written on criteria for appointing elders and deacons (3:1-13). He was charged to honour the elders that rule well, publicly rebuke those that sin and advised not to hasty appoint any man (5:17-22).

**Ob:** Pg. 9A: Those who are teaching that the Holy Spirit sanctioned the Greco-Roman settlement structures and that the apostles made them binding, should as well teach that slavery has divine sanction today.

**Ans:** Christ’s golden rule and other precepts of Christianity had already nullified slavery in principle though the reality took time to dawn on societies. Paul’s letter to Philemon was suggestive too. The apostles merely tolerated it just as we tolerate having ‘housemaids, etc.’ Indeed, “*Ordain elders in every city*” is an inspired direct command in the NT, it is not a temporary toleration like slavery which was envisaged to fade with time as men imbibe the faith.

This is not about “Greco-Roman system” but about God’s will for His church in human settlements. The basic unit of inhabited land area has some form of native or civil organization. When it has a church, it means there are many believers therein. The point is elders are to be appointed in the church in distinct organized areas whatever such are called whether it be ‘city, town, village.’ **The argument is NOT**

**actually on ‘what is a city.’** The question is: “once any settlement is agreed as equivalent or approximate to a city, should it have one eldership for all the assemblies therein or as many elderships as assemblies?” The scripture authoritatively answer: “Yes, one body with one leadership per city.”

**Ob:** Pg. 12A: I don’t know what kind of inference or implication or deduction or induction one can use to conclude that Acts 19. 8-10 was talking about a church meeting and worshipping at the lecture hall of Tyranus. While it is true that disciples implied believers, it will be overstretching to argue that it also implied church here. The message here is that of schooling; worship took place elsewhere on another day.

**Ans:** Overstretching? Interestingly Pg. 5A states “Church, from ecclesia, simply means a separated group of people. ... believers in a formal, real-time gathering as in corporate worship or meeting:...” *while the passage under consideration says that Paul separated the disciples from the hostile, unbelieving Jews unto a school.* If some Christians regularly gather to study/proclaim the word of God (and possibly pray) and such do not constitute ‘a church’ [by A’s cited definition] that are worshipping God then we wonder what “church or worship” really means!

**Ob:** Pg. 15A: ...with this concept, will city-church have a purpose built meeting place? What will be its purpose? Will all the members meet there?...

**Ans:** Christians have liberty to use discretion and expediency in determining where they would meet as a group or corporate body, to serve and worship God. True worship is not restricted to a particular building or place (Jn 4:20-24, Acts 17:24-25). To “have a purpose built meeting place” is **not required** in NT scripture. “*If therefore the **whole** church be come together into one place, and all speak...*” is what inspiration says (1 Cor 14:23), it doesn’t legislate who must build or own such “place.” It could be a home or hall or field or beach, etc. Furthermore, ‘IF’ suggests acknowledgement and/or permission not that they must all come into one place. Note also that this particular verse addresses speaking unto edification not the Lord’s Supper as some had imagined. The WHOLE church MAY choose to meet at any venue agreed upon, for a worship service or a discussion. On the Communion, what inspiration says is: “*When ye come together therefore into one place... one taketh before other his own supper:... my brethren, when ye come together to eat, tarry one for another*” -1 Cor 11:20-33. Interestingly, this passage does not mandate that the WHOLE church in the city of Corinth (or elsewhere) MUST come together into one place to break bread! It simply acknowledges their coming together to break bread. Those who have agreed to be members of a congregation are commanded to wait for one another before dining on the Lord’s Table. Thus, a time could be fixed on the set day by each congregation in a city to kick-off their meeting. The important thing is saints coming together “as a church” (11:18) for the event not as friends or townspeople

or business partners, etc. It is immaterial whether the service holds in a private home or a rented hall or a purpose built basilica provided the participants discern the fellowship meal as the Lord's body and not as a social or personal meal.

**Ob:** What of cities that have congregations that are in disagreement, the reason for the separation from inception is varied teaching and practices. How do you group such as one city-church?

**Ans:** Unity of Christians is based on matters of faith. Disparities between congregations are usually based on matters of opinion. Whatever the case, the ministers/teachers of such congregations must come together, study to harmonize their views and then educate the people. It may require the involvement of neutral brethren from other places (Acts 15). Whatever resolutions reached must be such that is in tandem with the seven pillars of church unity (Eph 4:4-6). If an assembly practices something as a matter of opinion without insisting that others must practice as they, then there is no cause for alarm. Otherwise, after repeated attempts at discussion and debates in search of harmony, it could be obvious which one is in error. 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.

**Ob:** Pg. 2U: The implication of the thought "no denominational organization" means that the local church is not denominated into further groups. Further, the idea of "no hierarchy of authority outside the local church" means that there is no other legal authority recognized by the Scripture outside the boundaries of a local church.

**Ans:** Is it sinful for a typical assembly/congregation to operate "house fellowships" or to have clustered, corporate worship during the lockdown occasioned by Covid-19? Curiously, Cottrell cited on Pg. 3U, admit: "*At least in some of these areas, such as Jerusalem (Acts 2:41; 4:4; 5:14), it is highly unlikely that the Christians regularly met as a single congregation.*"

Actually, "local church" is not clearly defined in the U treatise that states:

Pg. 2U - "*but the local church has a location.*"

Pg. 4U - "*we may speak of local congregations made up of believers in a limited area who are united together for mutual edification and service.*"

[Is '*location/limited area*' a house or a street or a city or a region or the entire world and at which level has God directed that elders be ordained?]

**Ob:** Pg. 12U: This fact establishes the apostolic **pattern of plural leadership for individual churches** and also strongly implies that the authority and function of elders **were restricted to a particular local church**. This latter point can be seen in Acts 20:17,28: "And from Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called to him the elders of the church... '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.'" The words "among which" (*ἐν ᾧ*) refer to the flock in Ephesus.<sup>31</sup>

**Ans:** We also canvass for plurality of elders in the church! Acts 20:28 speaks of ALL the flock or totality of Christians [in any existing cluster(s)] as "*the church of God*" NOT "*the churchES of God*" in the city of Ephesus. It is those who are among the sheep that the Holy Spirit made **overseers** so that they may be 'over' to 'see' clearly in order to feed and protect. We affirm 'all the flock' refers to ALL the saints in Ephesus, not just those assembling at Tyrannus' school or at Aquila's house.

**Ob:** Pg. 13U: The bone of contention is the interpretation of Paul's charge in Titus 1:5 "to appoint elders in every city... For Constable "in every town" means in the house church in each town seeing that there are many towns.

**Ans:** Constable's usage of the phrase "**the** house church in each town" assumes only one meeting place exists per town. That is not necessarily true as evident in Jerusalem, Rome, etc.

**Ob:** Pg. 14U: Keathley Hampton, III commenting on Titus situation posits, ...While we cannot say for sure, it would seem logical that there was not more than one house church in each town. This supports the idea of a plurality of leadership in each house church.

**Ans:** It does not seem logical and one need not cite someone who is not sure. Acts 12:12,17 shows there were multiple house churches in Jerusalem. The Col 4:14-15 you cited on the previous page shows there may have been two congregations in either Colosse or Laodicea (Nymphas house and another assembly), Rom 16:3-15 shows there was more than one house church in Rome. Keathley Hampton was **WRONG**.

**Ob:** Pg. 15U: A variation of this theory developed in Lagos says, "When [we] say there are multiple assemblies in Bariga, each is a part of and NOT the entire church at Bariga. None is superior to the other, none oversees others, none is headquarters. *The minister(s) working in these cells* teach them about eldership and men who qualify from amidst the brethren in Bariga are ordained as elders over the three cells. These men from various meeting venues know the sheep and serve as the presbytery over **the church at Bariga**. Not that each cell is autonomous having its own eldership."



However, one is forced to ask, “Does it mean that each cell has a resident preacher and yet not autonomous?” Where the cells are not autonomous or not independent then, they are subject to a single body somewhere which is not invisible. But if the cells are autonomous it can operate on her own without external interference with respect to decision making. Now the Scripture enjoins the church to give on the first day of the week, since the cells are not autonomous, they cannot decide on the usage of the collection. This means that their collection is subject to the decision of another body which is outside the cell-group (single assembly?).

**Ans:** The scenario illustrated does not state that each cell has a resident preacher. It allows one or more preachers to work with the three cells of the one Bariga church. [Recall Titus worked with several churches in the cities of Crete while Paul and Barnabas worked with several congregations in Pisidia.] Nevertheless, having a ‘resident preacher’ is not what portrays autonomy. Autonomy for a group is self-governance; to independently make its own decisions. If the cells were not autonomous then they would be subject to an external (usually known/visible) body somewhere. That cannot happen in the described scenario because it was stated that the three cells are part of one body and that the decision makers (elders) would be appointed from their midst. That would be internal! Just as an individual is not the church so likewise is a cell not the church in a multiple assemblies church. It is the totality of members across all cells that make up the church. Money belongs to an individual before it is contributed into the pool or purse of the church (Acts 5:4a) and he can no longer purport to dictate how such fund must be used afterwards. A cell in reality does not have any money! The members of the church give to THE CHURCH, not to the cell even if they give it in a cell. It is the leaders of the church not an individual or a cell that would manage all the collection.

[At the beginning of the church, the apostles administered the contributions from saints. After elders were appointed in the Jerusalem church, such would have had oversight on collections and received donations for that church only. Antioch saints sent relief unto the elders of the brethren (in the churches) in Judaea (Acts 11:27-30). In 1 Cor 16:1-4, members gave into a collection by “the church in Corinth.”]

**Ob:** Pg. 17U: The outset of the church in Jerusalem was both universal and local. ... It is also the case that prayers and meetings were held at certain homes like that of John Mark’s mother’s house (zonal meetings) (Acts 12:12). At this initial stage, there were no house churches with separate elderships. Thus, the apostles and elders had oversight functions. But with the persecution the church spread, and the Jerusalem church ceased to be the universal and local church.

**Ans:** Your first statement admits the initial dual nature of the Jerusalem church. The second admits that church worship services held in several private homes. The third statement concedes that each cluster or

house church was under a common eldership, none was independent having its own unique leadership. The fourth sentence states that the apostles and elders had oversight functions. [Actually, the Elders had jurisdiction over the Jerusalem church while the Apostles have jurisdiction over the universal church] The fifth implies that with persecution, gospel spread and establishment of new assemblies in Samaria and other places, the Jerusalem church ceased to be the universal church but remained a local church. [Was the Jerusalem church “the local church” for John Mark’s mother and NOT the cell that met in her house? Seems you invariably advance our position that in a town having multiple assemblies, the city-church is the one to ordain elders, not each congregation!]

**Ob:** Pg. 18U: With those devout men who buried Steven, it is clear that there were not multitude in Jerusalem at this time, as at chapter 8 they had already scattered. This means that the church could still meet in one place. From the foregoing, it is clear that the Jerusalem church never had several house churches under the oversight function of elders and the apostles. This means that when the apostles and elders met in Acts 15, it was not one eldership over several house churches.

**Ans:** Acts 9:26-27; 11:2 shows that there were still other disciples in Jerusalem after persecution broke out against the church. What is a ‘house-church’? If it is a gathering of saints who meet in a house “as a church” then Peter (an elder and an apostle) was exercising oversight over the saints in Mary’s house when he gave them information in Acts 12 and directed that cell to pass his message unto others meeting at different locations.

Acts 15:22 says: *“Then pleased it the apostles and elders, with the whole church, to send chosen men of their own company to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas; namely, Judas surnamed Barsabas, and Silas, chief men among the brethren.”*

This simply indicates it was a gathering of the **whole** church and not a meeting of a cell.

**Ob:** Pg. 18U: When the persecution broke and churches started in Samaria and in the Gentile world, house churches manifested because Paul knew he had little freedom with the synagogues.

**Ans:** Jesus had indicated in Jn 4 that true worship is independent of a fixed building/mountain or geographical place. House churches manifested in Jerusalem before it did in the Gentile world. It manifested before and after *“a great company of the priests were obedient to the faith”* –Acts 6:7. Paul met with people, prospects and saints, in schools, seashore/riverside, ships, homes, arena, etc. and did not limit his preaching activities to synagogues.

**Ob:** Pg. 19U: It is not the case that elders were appointed to oversee such synagogues centrally.

**Ans:** In Judaism, elders were appointed over cities not over synagogues! The “rulers of a synagogue” are simply its officiating ministers. Civil leaders are not necessarily religious leaders in the OT; recall that only Levites could supervise worship assemblies or religious convocations under the Law.

**Ob:** Pg. 19U: Although Button and Van Rensburg appears to {have} misunderstood the concept and application, it is clear that at the zonal meetings, various groups of the local church meets. However, they do not do so at the peril of the whole church.

**Ans:** How and when would the meeting of cells or groups be “**at the peril of the whole church**”? Since ‘peril’ means danger and could lead to fatality, the destruction of the ‘city church’ concept occurred via proliferation of groups that ‘declared autonomy’!

**Ob:** Pg. 20, 21, 22U: There is somewhat a controversy on the idea of a *pulpit preacher*. ... Paul is a pure evidence of an itinerant preacher no doubt. The nature of the work of Timothy in the church at Ephesus is not a work done as an itinerant preacher. ...Therefore, preachers preach both to sinners and saints alike.

**Ans:** Agreed but a preacher is not scripturally constrained to one work in only one congregation or city. He may work with several assemblies in various locations with or without wages from these provided he has personal funds or financial support from some other Christians/churches.

**Ob:** How many cities were in Crete, how many churches were there and how many men were appointed elders in every city?

**Ans:** The scriptures do NOT furnish the figures you are requesting so one would have to speculate or cite extra-biblical sources to make an assertion. **Grammatically and logically**, Titus 1:5 implies that there were several cities in Crete and a plurality of elders were to be appointed in each city-church. If there is only one assembly in a city, it should ordain qualified men as elders. If there are many assemblies in a city, qualified men from across the congregations should be appointed as elders over all the assemblies.

Below are some churches of Roman provinces mentioned in the NT, distributed across many cities.

**Churches of Macedonia** (2 Cor 8:2) - Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea

**Churches of Judea** (Gal 1:22) - Caesarea, Sharon, Joppa, Lydda, Tyre

**Churches of Galatia** (Gal 1:2) - Iconium, Antioch of Pisidia, Derbe and Lystra cities of Lycaonia

**Churches of Asia** (1 Cor 16:19) - Ephesus, Laodicea, Smyrna, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, Colosse,  
Hierapolis, Pergamos, Troas

The provinces, their regions and cities that Paul visited or wrote to [saints] are illustrated in Figure 1.



Figure 1: Paul's journeys (Source: Holman Bible Publishers, 1998)

## Reference

- CO) McIntosh Chimeziri and Joseph Ogundare, April 2020. Multiple Assembly Churches VS Single Assembly Churches.
- A) Sunday AkpoOghene Akpore, May 2020. City church analyses.
- M) Akanle Matthew, April 2020. A plurality of Elders in each congregation as Church leaders.
- U) Solomon Ifeanyi Usim, April 2020. The organisational structure of the New Testament Church and other incidental matters.

**NB:** {} Mine in citations

- This material is a revision of the CO article to address issues raised by discussants on MOG WhatsApp Group.
- The A article admits that house churches are scriptural and the church at Jerusalem was one body with an eldership over various cells. It examined both sides of the issue but ended up recommending that citywide eldership be studied for implementation today.
- The M article is a submission on the traditional CoC view of eldership and queries city-church eldership.
- The U article does not fully address the position of CO or the arguments advanced on MOG but presents the congregational leadership view. It merely quoted extensively, the works of some CoC authors that review denominational views of church organization.