

6 ► Oneness and How Believers Are Addressed

One of the most helpful ways to understand the major factors of oneness between believers is to observe *how* the saints are addressed in the New Testament letters. For this we need to look at how these New Testament letters begin. What items are mentioned at the opening of the letters? What things are emphasized? Is there a pattern in all the letters? Do the apostles address the saints in a uniform way? By studying how the saints are addressed, what do we learn about the church? These kinds of questions will lead us to the truth concerning oneness according to the Word of God. By considering the *way* Paul, Peter, John, and the other New Testament writers addressed the saints and the churches, we will see the major factors between us in our relationships with one another.

The absence of a systematized identification

In examining the opening of all the letters in the New Testament, the first thing that is evident is that there is not

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a systematized identification of the saints and the churches. They are not addressed in a systematized way or by uniform nomenclature. There is an absence of something regular and consistent at the beginning of the letters. The fact that the writers use a variety of ways to begin the letters of the New Testament tells us something about the atmosphere of the churches, that is, the churches did not have a denominating uniformity. They lacked a stereotyped flavor. Although there was a manifest oneness among the saints, the oneness did not have the atmosphere of a movement. It was the oneness of a Body — a Body with many members and many differing functions.

The absence of a systematized identification of the churches is very instructive. It helps us to see that we ourselves should not systematize. Yet, by nature man is prone to systematize. We like to systematize the Scriptures into doctrines and a systematic theology. This systematizing appeals to the mind, but it tends to take away from the reality of Christ Himself.

The church in the New Testament is not identified in a systematized way. The writers of the New Testament are so occupied with Christ and God that the impression they give at the beginning of their letters is far from

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mechanical or routine. They are fresh and varied in their expressions. They begin with the Spirit and address the major factors common among all believers.

The major factors that we see between the believers in the book of Romans are also seen in the opening words of *all* the New Testament letters. Thus, we can observe the same factors of oneness from a different angle — from the beginning of each letter in the New Testament. By this we see how the New Testament writers establish their point of contact with each locality and each saint. This further enlightens us concerning how we are related to one another as believers.

Ephesians 4:14 warns us about systematizing things. Speaking in the context of the Body, Paul says, “That we should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of [teaching], [in the sleight] of men, [in craftiness with a view to a system of error].” Notice the last phrase, “a system of error.” Many of the Bible translations do not use the word “system” in this verse. J. N. Darby’s *New Translation* says, “systematized error.” The Greek word is only used twice in the New Testament. It is used here in Ephesians 4 and again in chapter 6, verse 11. There it is translated “stratagems”: “Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the [stratagems] of the devil.” Other ver-

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sions translate it as “the wiles” or “the schemes” of the devil. The Greek word is *methodeia* (μεθοδεία), which is translated into English as “method.” The idea in this word is related to being “systematized.” A *method* of doing something or a *method* of categorizing or identifying believers is used by the enemy to systematize believers.

Satan wants to systematize us by bringing us into a method of relating to one another. The methods may be good, and they may seem right. There may be Scripture used to support them. But what happens when we come under a method is that we get systematized. Whatever systematizes us — be it a method, a way, a teaching, a practice, or a person — it is doing one subtle thing. It is replacing Christ. To systematize us around anything automatically replaces Christ Himself as the major factor of our relationships with one another.

As believers we can all fall into this systematizing unwittingly, not even intentionally. For example, we can fall into it as we are studying the Bible, if we let our Bible study replace Christ. This is what happened to the Jews in John 5:39-40. The Lord said to them, ³⁹ “You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me. ⁴⁰ But you are not willing to come to Me that you may have life.” This

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means that anything, even scriptural things, can become a replacement for Christ.

The main point to observe in the New Testament writers' approach to the saints and the churches is the absence of systematization. Although the churches in the New Testament were local churches, that is, churches meeting according to a locality (Acts 13:1), you do not get the impression that they were systematized as a movement. There is a noticeable absence of formula in the writers' addressing of the churches. Sometimes you read "the church *in*" a city; other times it is "the church *of*" a city. Still other times you read simply "the saints *in*" a city. You also find "the church of God" in a city, and "with all the saints *in*" a region. Thus, if we attempt to name the church according to the *one* consistent name found in the New Testament, we discover that there is no *one* consistent name. Instead, the church is referred to in several ways. There is "the church of God" (1 Cor. 1:2), "the local church" (Acts 13:1), and "the churches of Christ" (Rom. 16:16). We are confronted with these different identifications and more. Each is legitimately used by the writers. Which identification should we choose? Or, do we need to make that choice? Rather, should we not embrace them all?

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Paul gives us a clear indication of the answer to these questions in 1 Corinthians 3:21b-23: ^{21b} “All things are yours: ²² whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas, or the world or life or death, or things present or things to come — all are yours. ²³ And you are Christ’s, and Christ is God’s.” In other words, “the church of God” is ours, “the local church” is ours, and “the churches of Christ” are ours. All identifications are ours. This keeps us from being systematized and brings us into the fullness of our identification with Christ and with one another as the church.

The principle in these verses — all things are ours and we are Christ’s, and Christ is God’s — reveals the wisdom of God. On the negative side, it exposes the fact that when we systematize our identification, we denominate ourselves around one person or thing that can eventually replace God and Christ. This may happen unintentionally. On the positive side, the principle in these verses reveals how we need to enjoy God and Christ as our all-inclusive portion and consider all God’s servants as dispensers of Himself, without being distracted from God Himself.

The variety of ways in which the saints and the churches are addressed in the New Testament not only can preserve us from systematizing but also strongly shows that there are major factors that unite believers together. It is these major factors that we now need to see.

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**How the believers are addressed
in the New Testament**

According to God's selection

In addressing the saints in the New Testament, one of the chief factors mentioned is God's selection. For example, in Romans 1:6-7 Paul says to the believers, ⁶ "Among whom you also are the called of Jesus Christ; ⁷ to all who are in Rome, beloved of God, *called* to be saints: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." God's calling over the saints touches an aspect of God's selection. The leading thought in many of the letters is not about how the church meets, but about the status of the saints before the foundation of the world. This is what Paul emphasizes with the saints in Rome. When dealing with their mixed situation, he links them together by their calling, rather than touching the way they met as a church.

By relating to the saints in Rome on the level of God's selection, Paul shows that he does not want the saints to know one another or be related to one another in a mere doctrinal way, or in a way of uniformity of practice. Rather, he wants them to know one another as "the called of Jesus Christ." This brings us to a higher level in our

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relationships with one another. Before the foundation of the world we were foreknown, chosen, predestinated, and separated by God unto His purpose. Now, in time, God “called” us, based upon what He did in eternity past (2 Tim. 1:9). We were “called according to His purpose” (Rom. 8:28). In other words, we were not called based upon a quick decision in God. He did not look down at our pitiable condition and call us on an impulse. No. God called us because in eternity past He chose us to be His masterpiece, created in Christ Jesus (Eph. 2:10). This is how we need to recognize one another. This is how we should be related to one another — as *the called ones* of Jesus Christ.

Among “the called” there are some who are weak and some who are strong; there are some who abstain from meat and some who eat meat; there are some who regard one day above another and some who regard every day alike. Among the called ones there are differences of understanding. Yet even with the differences, we are all one because of a unique factor — we are “the called of Jesus Christ.” This is our common ground. To relate to one another according to God’s selection enlarges us to embrace all the saints in a deep and genuine way. Instead of judging and despising one another’s outward practices, we are lifted to a higher plane of receiving one another.

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We need to know and see one another not according to the flesh (2 Cor. 5:16), but according to our true identity as the called ones of Jesus Christ. We need to have a change in how we view one another. Rather than seeing one another according to how we practice, we need to see one another according to how we were chosen in Christ. Considering the saints from the perspective of God's selection immediately transfers the emphasis in our relatedness. Instead of being occupied with whether or not we are practicing a certain way, we are refocused to see the dignity of a saint in his calling — chosen and selected by God. Oh, may we come out of every lower realm and enter into the realm of God's selection. We are all "the called of Jesus Christ." Amen!

In 1 Peter 1:1-2a Peter says, ¹ "Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to the [sojourners] of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, ^{2a} [chosen] according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, in sanctification of the Spirit." Here Peter begins his first letter by relating to the saints according to God's selection. This thought should be what transcends all else in our relationships with one another. Our relationships are not based on whether we are outwardly identical in our practice or whether we all agree on the same points of doctrine. They are based on the glorious fact that we are

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all “chosen according to the foreknowledge of God.”

The major thing that should exist between us as believers is the mutual recognition of God’s selection. Before you take a disparaging thought about a saint, before you say something negative about him, you should consider that this one has been given as a gift by the Father to the Son. The Son received him from the Father. All the saints are gifts from the Father to the Son (John 6:37-39). In John 17:10 the Son said, “All Mine are Yours, and Yours are Mine.” In an eternal covenant with the Father, the Son took the saints as His own personal responsibility (Heb. 13:20), to shepherd them out of eternity past into eternity future, and raise them up in the last day (John 6:39-40). No one is able to snatch the saints out of the Father and Son’s hand (John 10:28-30).

The saints are in an irreversible process with the Father and the Son. Through time, through the history of sin, including the rebellion of Satan, through all the problems of the world and the flesh, the Son is going to see that the saints are brought all the way into resurrection. He died for them. He redeemed them. He cherishes and nourishes them. He intercedes for them and shepherds them all the way — until they are presented to Himself as a glorious church (Eph. 5:27). Hallelujah! So

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in relating to a saint, we need to be aware that we are relating to *someone* who is the Father's personal gift to the Son. Be careful how you treat that saint. God's selection truly reveals the depth of the oneness between us.

John's writings reflect the same principle of God's selection. In 2 John 1 he says, "The elder, to the elect lady and her children." To call a sister "the elect lady" is to speak of a saint according to God's selection. We may not have paid much attention to how the writers address the saints; yet, the way they address them is filled with revelation concerning the major factors that exist between us as believers. These kinds of eternal descriptions of one another bring us into the realm of acknowledging that we are all chosen by God and that we are to relate to one another according to this.

Finally, Jude opens his letter by saying in verse 1, "Jude, a servant of Jesus Christ, and brother of James, to them that are called, beloved in God the Father, and kept for Jesus Christ" (ASV). Here, what is foremost in Jude's mind are three things related to the Triune God: "called," "beloved," and "kept." Such an opening word reveals that Jude is in the same realm as John, Peter, and Paul — the realm of relating the saints together by the major factor of God's selection. Thus, one of the primary

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factors in addressing the saints is God's selection. This causes us to worship and thank God for all the saints He is holding in His hand (John 10:28-30).

According to their position in Christ

The way the saints are addressed in the New Testament reveals another major factor — their position in Christ. This position is expressed by Paul in 1 Corinthians 1:2: “To the church of God which is [in] Corinth, to those who are sanctified *in Christ Jesus*.” In Philippians 1:1 Paul again relates to the saints in the same way: “to all the saints *in Christ Jesus*.” These are two examples of addressing the saints according to their position in Christ: “sanctified in Christ Jesus” and “the saints in Christ Jesus.”

What dominates the writers' thought at the beginning of the New Testament letters is the kind of language that touches the saints' relationship to the Triune God. The language is not uniform or systematized. It is spontaneous and living. It tends to lead us to God Himself rather than to a formal atmosphere of uniformity of practice.

Let us consider Revelation 1:11. In this verse John is instructed to send a book “to the seven churches which are in Asia: to Ephesus, to Smyrna, to Pergamos, to Thyatira,

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to Sardis, to Philadelphia, and to Laodicea.” Here, the seven churches in Asia are addressed according to the seven cities they were in. Although this passage clearly identifies “one city” as “one church,” the Holy Spirit does not repeat this same utterance in a systematic way in the other books of the New Testament. This is the only occurrence in the New Testament where the name of a city is equal to a church. Thus, we see that the teaching of the ground of the church is not stressed in a formal way. If it were, then the dominant thought in believers would tend to be on *the way* believers meet rather than on God Himself. In our relationships God does not want anything but Himself to dominate our thinking.

There should be no factors that insulate us or limit our fellowship with the saints. If we feel insulated or limited in our fellowship, we can probably trace it back to some truth that we hold in a systematized way within us. If that truth is a systematized doctrine in our thinking, it will operate in us as an insulating and limiting factor between us and those believers who are not meeting according to it. For example, truths intended to preserve the oneness of believers can become factors that actually divide. Becoming divided due to systematizing can happen with baptism, eldership, the gifts of the Spirit, or any other truth in the Bible. Baptism is proper, but to be system-

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atized as a “Baptist” is not. Eldership is proper, but to be systematized as a “Presbyterian” is not. The gifts of the Spirit are proper, but to be systematized as a “Pentecostal” or “Charismatic” is not. The ground of the church is proper, but to be systematized according to it is not.

Concerning the ground of the church, it is God’s choice to gather the saints in one church according to a city (Titus 1:5). But we should not be divided by improperly holding to the teaching of the ground of the church. The fact that the New Testament does not systematize this truth indicates that it should not be our focus. Our focus should be God Himself and all His work over us and between us that has made us organically one.

The major factors of our relationships are God’s common selection of us and our common position in Christ. You cannot be related in anything higher than this! You cannot be more organic than being saints together *in Christ Jesus*. You cannot improve on God Himself. Are you a Christian? Then you are in Christ Jesus. If you are in Christ Jesus, then all you need to do is cultivate your loving relationship with this Person and appreciate Him with all the others, who are equally in Him. The believer’s position in Christ is a major factor in how the New Testament writers address the saints.

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According to Christ's redemption

Another factor that stands out at the beginning of the New Testament letters is Christ's redemption. First Peter 1:2 says, "Elect according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, in sanctification of the Spirit, for obedience and sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ . . ." To mention the "sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ" is to link us immediately in the redemption of Christ.

We must pay attention to how Peter addresses the saints, because it gives us insight into what the major factors are between us as believers. He does not address the saints in a systematized, routine way. For example, he does not say, "To all who baptize the same way" or "To all who have elders" or "To all who meet the same way." He addresses the saints in an elevated way. It is a way that focuses on the Triune God, with the redemption of Christ, as the content and reality of the church. Nothing can replace Christ.

We must stay with the New Testament way of relating to the saints. It is a way of variety, and that variety helps us to see that the reality of the church is God Himself. The reality of the church is not a doctrine, a practice, or a way of meeting. It is God Himself. The church is to express

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God (1 Tim. 3:15-16), not a way or a doctrine. The church is holding Christ! The church expresses Christ! Thus, what is prominent at the beginning of the letters is Christ's redemption. Saints, we have been redeemed by the blood of the Lamb! The major factor between us is our common redemption. Do not dare replace that. Do not dare replace our enjoyment of singing together about the blood of the Lamb that has redeemed us to God. This is a major factor of our oneness.

According to the Spirit's sanctification

The way the believers are addressed by the writers of the New Testament reveals another major factor between them — the sanctification of the Spirit. In 1 Peter 1:2 Peter says, "Elect . . . in sanctification of the Spirit, [unto] obedience and sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ." In this verse sanctification of the Spirit signifies the separating work of the Spirit of God in our environment to lead us to obey the gospel. This work of the Spirit in our lives is quite touching. It refers to how the Spirit engineers every turn in our lives to lead us to Christ.

Paul also speaks of the Spirit's sanctifying work in 2 Thessalonians 2:13: "But we are bound to give thanks to God always for you, brethren beloved by the Lord,

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because God from the beginning chose you for salvation through sanctification [of] the Spirit and belief [of] the truth.” In this verse “sanctification of the Spirit” is linked with “belief of the truth,” showing that it refers to God’s work over our lives to lead us to believe the truth of the gospel. Also, like 1 Peter 1:2, this verse speaks of our being chosen by God.

We all can bear testimony to how God has operated in our lives, both inwardly and outwardly, to prepare our hearts to receive Christ. This sanctifying work of the Spirit is common to all believers. Indeed, it is a major factor in producing a sense of mutuality in all of us. It is a unifying factor for relating us to one another according to God’s selection and God’s calling over our lives. Relating to one another according to what the Spirit has done over our lives knits our hearts together. It builds up the genuineness of our oneness. It lifts our oneness out of the realm of mere doctrine and outward agreement, into the realm of a common recognition of God operating in each of our lives. This realm ushers in God Himself between us.

According to our common calling upon the Lord

The saints in the New Testament are also addressed

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according to another major factor of their oneness — their common calling upon the Lord. When Paul begins his first letter to the Corinthians, he says in verse 2 of chapter 1: “To the church of God which is at Corinth . . . with all who in every place call on the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, both theirs and ours.” The phrase “theirs and ours” stands out in Greek (αὐτῶν καὶ ἡμῶν). It signifies that Paul is helping the Corinthians to be broadened in their receiving of all the saints. In other words, he was saying to them, “The Lord is not only *your* Lord. He is also *their* Lord as well.” As believers we have a common Lord.

There is a very common feeling in 1 Corinthians 1:2: “With all who in every place call on the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, both theirs and ours.” Are you calling on the Lord? I am calling on the Lord too. We both call “Jesus.” I do not need to examine all that you believe. He is your Lord, and He is my Lord. We, the called ones of Jesus Christ, are calling upon His name. There is a flow of love between us. There is fellowship between us. We are related to one another in this atmosphere of touching the Lord together. We are all calling upon the name of Jesus. Our common calling upon the name of the Lord is a major factor of our oneness.

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According to what they had received in Christ

Another factor of oneness revealed in the openings of the New Testament letters is related to what we have received in Christ. In 2 Peter 1:1 Peter says, “To those who have obtained like precious faith with us [in] the righteousness of our God and Savior Jesus Christ.” What an all-embracing way to connect the saints! In saying, “like precious faith with us,” Peter is acknowledging that he and the other apostles are on the same level as all the saints. As we have already pointed out, Peter may have been an imposing person to receive a letter from; nevertheless, he erases any such impression of himself by the way he speaks of the common faith between him and the saints. Peter identifies himself with all the saints and addresses them according to what he and they have commonly received in Christ. As believers we are linked by what we have all received in Christ.

What is so impressive in looking at letter after letter in the New Testament is the absence of a systematized way of addressing the saints. At the same time, it is also impressive to see that what is emphasized are the major points of God’s economy, such as God’s selection, Christ’s redemption, the Spirit’s sanctification, our position in Christ, calling upon the name of the Lord, and enjoying

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what we have all received in Christ. These are the things that build up the genuine oneness between us as believers. To stress other things could eventually alienate us from one another.

According to their spiritual condition in Christ

The saints in the New Testament are also addressed according to their spiritual condition in Christ. To the Ephesians Paul says in Ephesians 1:1, “To the saints who are in Ephesus, and faithful in Christ Jesus.” To the Colossians he says in Colossians 1:2, “To the saints and faithful brethren in Christ who are in Colosse.” This way of addressing the saints has to do with their testimony in the church where they were. They are the *faithful* in Christ Jesus. Paul’s way was to relate to them according to their spiritual condition in Christ.

To address saints as the “faithful in Christ Jesus” is yet another way of linking them together. The saints’ condition drew out that kind of response in Paul. Both in Ephesus and Colosse, the saints were recognized as faithful in relation to their spiritual condition. We know by the letter to the Colossians that there was distracting activity in the church in Colosse. There were attacks on the Person of Christ, and there were substitutes for Christ

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seeking to gain a foothold. Nevertheless, there were some faithful saints in that city taking care of the supremacy of Christ and holding Him as their Head.

According to their position in the Triune God

One of the greatest and highest ways believers are addressed in the New Testament is according to their position in the Triune God. Paul says in 1 Thessalonians 1:1, “To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” Paul also repeats this same phrase in 2 Thessalonians 1:1. This kind of utterance places the local church in its proper sphere — in God the Father and in the Lord Jesus Christ. This is an identification of the saints according to a major factor of their relationships with one another — a life hidden with Christ in God. They are related in the Triune God. Between us as believers what should loom larger than any other factor is our having been baptized into the Triune God.

The church of the Thessalonians is in the Triune God. The point emphasized here is that the local church is in the Father and the Son. This is how we need to consider each other in our relationships — we are in the Father and the Son. Whatever we do toward one another in a divisive

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way is an insult to the reality that we are in the Father and the Son. Indeed, we have been placed in this realm by God. Do not touch this realm. Do not speak negatively about any saint. We are all in the Father and the Son together. It is serious to relate to one another in any other realm. Whenever we deviate from our oneness in the Triune God, we are not according to the truth.

According to the realm of fellowship with the Father and the Son

First John begins by addressing the saints according to the realm of fellowship with the Father and the Son. In 1 John 1:1-3 we read, ¹ “That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, concerning the Word of life — ² the life was manifested, and we have seen, and bear witness, and declare to you that eternal life which was with the Father and was manifested to us — ³ that which we have seen and heard we declare to you, that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ.”

The way John begins his letter is very unique. There is no church identification, and there is no doctrinal point

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being emphasized. All that is mentioned is fellowship with the Father and the Son. So the major factor between believers in John's first letter is fellowship.

According to their environmental dealings

Another way the saints are addressed is according to their environmental dealings. In James 1:1 and 1 Peter 1:1 you see these phrases: "To the twelve tribes [in the Dispersion]" and "To the [sojourners] of the Dispersion." In both letters trials are mentioned in the first chapter. The saints were suffering in their environments. To write to them according to their environmental dealings is a precious way to relate to these brothers and sisters. Again, we do not find just one stereotyped way of addressing the saints in the New Testament letters. Here the saints were scattered in the Dispersion. Thus, when the apostles wrote to them, they identified with those saints in their situation. This is the way they were related to one another, and this is the way the letters begin.

According to their belonging to the universal church

One of the most significant ways the saints are addressed in the New Testament letters is according to their

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belonging to the universal church. In 1 Corinthians 1:2 and 2 Corinthians 1:1 we read, “the church of God which is [in] Corinth.” Thus, the saints are addressed as the universal church in a locality. In the New Testament “the church of God” is a phrase that always refers to the universal church. Properly speaking, we could never be a local church unless we are first a universal church. There is no such entity as a local church that is not also universal in its nature. Indeed, the local church is simply *another way* of describing the universal church. If our standing is not as the universal church, then our local church is a local sect. It is not the expression of the church of God.

The manner in which Paul speaks of the church of God gives you the impression that you dare not handle it in a light way. For example, in Acts 20:28 he exhorts the Ephesian elders to faithfully shepherd “the church of God which He [has] purchased with His own blood.” The church is no one’s personal property or group. It is God’s property. In the New Testament the elders are spoken of as “overseers,” that is, persons watching over God’s property. The elders function in the way of taking care of and shepherding “the church of God.” Thus, the elders must be careful how they shepherd, that they do not become like Diotrephes who cast the saints out of the church and did not receive them (3 John 9-10).

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Paul's burden in addressing the local church in Corinth as "the church of God" is that the church would realize it is not just a private, local gathering, but it is an expression of the universal church. It is "the church of God" meeting in Corinth. He does not merely say, "To the church in Corinth"; but he says, "To the church of God in Corinth." This sends a clear signal to the Corinthians that they are not carrying on a private enterprise there in Corinth. The local church in Corinth is part of the universal church of God. Thus, Paul addresses them according to the universal church. This is surely a major factor of our oneness. We are all in the universal church of God.

According to geography — cities and regions

One of the most profound, yet simple, ways the saints and the churches are addressed in the New Testament is according to geography. The building of the church is clearly prophesied by the Lord Jesus in Matthew 16:18, and the meeting of the church according to geography is opened up to us in Acts 9:31. These two portions of the Word are companion verses. One reveals Christ's purpose for building His church, and the other reveals the meeting of the churches on a geographical basis for the practical working out of that building.

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Let us consider Acts 9:31: “Then the churches throughout all Judea, Galilee, and Samaria had peace and were [built up]. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, they were multiplied.” This verse mentions not only the building up of the church, as does Matthew 16:18, but it also shows us how the practical local churches met together. The crucial point to note in Acts 9:31 is that the churches are identified on the basis of their geography rather than along denominational or sectarian lines. It is simply “the churches throughout all Judea, Galilee, and Samaria,” not the churches of Peter or John, or the churches of baptism or elders (presbyters). The churches are simply distinguished by their geographical regions. Thus, meeting according to the principle of geography is the practical way for the building of the church to take place. It is this principle that governs the relationships between believers in the New Testament for the building of the church.

In the book of Acts, the Epistles, and the book of Revelation, we see that there was essentially one consistent way the believers came together — according to geography. The geographic unit for the meeting of one church was one city, such as Jerusalem or Corinth. The geographic unit for several churches was a province, or region, such as Judea or Galatia. In other words, God’s

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building appeared in the form of local churches, that is, churches meeting together on the basis of where the believers lived. The believers were even identified according to geography. For example, those from the city of Corinth were called “Corinthians” (2 Cor. 6:11), and those from the city of Philippi were called “Philippians” (Phil. 4:15).

If you visited a city in Asia Minor in the first century to locate the church and to meet with it, you would not need to decide “which” church to attend. For example, if you visited the city of Ephesus, you would find only one church there — the church [in] Ephesus (Rev. 2:1). Or if you were in Laodicea (another city in Asia Minor), you would find only one church there (Col. 4:16). Even if you were in the larger city of Jerusalem, still the church met as one in that city (Acts 8:1). Concerning each city in the New Testament, there is mention of just one church meeting there.

Thus, what the Lord spoke prophetically in Matthew 16 regarding the building of His church was worked out practically from Acts to Revelation according to the governing principle of locality. The one common ground for all the believers to keep the oneness of the Spirit (Eph. 4:3) and to experience the building up of the Body of Christ (Eph. 4:12, 16) was the city where they lived. They simply came together on this ground.

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The genuine building of the church can take place when believers meet together on the common ground of locality rather than on the divisive grounds of personalities, doctrines, experiences, independency, organization, tradition, and so forth. To meet together according to where we live is to meet on the common ground for all believers to be built up. This kind of geographical ground is, by its very nature, all-inclusive — it must include all the born-again believers in any given city. For example, the believers in the city of Jerusalem were being built up as the church there simply because they met on the basis of locality. They were having daily prayer meetings, with house-to-house fellowship, eating “their food with gladness and simplicity of heart” (Acts 2:46). There was a real church life existing in Jerusalem in which the saints were being built up on the common ground of that city.

It is very significant that the New Testament never refers to “the churches in Jerusalem,” in the plural. Nor do we read of “the churches in Ephesus” — plural. A study of every occurrence of the word “church” in the New Testament discloses that this word always occurs in the singular when related to one city. It is just the church in that city — the church in Jerusalem (Acts 8:1), the church in Antioch (Acts 13:1), the church in Cenchrea (Rom. 16:1), the church of the Thessalonians (1 Thess. 1:1).

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When the plural phrase “the churches” is found, again we discover that it never refers to one city but always to a province, or region, of the Roman Empire, which included several cities. For example, we read of “the churches of Macedonia” (2 Cor. 8:1) and “the churches of Galatia” (Gal. 1:2). Macedonia and Galatia were not cities but provinces, or regions, made up of cities. Throughout the New Testament, whenever a local church is spoken of in the singular, it is referring to a church in a city. And whenever the local churches are spoken of in the plural, the reference is always to a region.

In the New Testament it is clear that the example set by the early churches for experiencing God’s building was to meet as one church in each city. Not only do we have their example, but we also have Paul’s clear instruction and teaching that the believers were to meet together as one church in each city.

The apostles’ teaching concerning the meeting of the church as one in each city is clearly confirmed by two key passages. The first is Acts 14:23: “So when they had appointed elders in every church, and prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed.” Here it mentions that elders were appointed “in” every church. The Greek preposition is *kata* - κατά, better translated “according to” than “in.” So the phrase

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would read, “appointed elders *according to* a church.” The elders, who represent the administration of a local church, were appointed according to a church.

A logical question to ask at this point is, what constitutes a church? Yes, Acts 14:23 says, “according to a church”; but how do we understand what a church is? Is a church any kind of group meeting together? Is a church a denomination? Is a church a group meeting together in the name of Paul? Or is it believers coming together by saying, “I am of Christ”? Are all these kinds of professing churches actually churches, according to the biblical pattern? In other words, we must establish what a church is in order to understand this verse. Acts 14:23 gives us only one basic fact: the elders were appointed according to a church. But we are still left with an unanswered question — What is a church?

Now we need Titus 1:5, the second key passage, to help clarify what a church is according to the New Testament. This verse says, “For this reason I [Paul] left you [Titus] in Crete, that you should set in order the things that are lacking, and appoint elders in every city as I commanded you.” It is very significant that the Greek preposition *κατά* is used here in the same way it is used in Acts 14:23. Literally, it means “appoint elders *according to* a city.” The instruction in Titus 1:5 is to appoint

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elders according to a city, and in Acts 14:23 it is to appoint elders according to a church. This means that the elders of a church were also the elders of a city, and vice versa, showing that the city-unit was the unit for the establishing of one church. Thus, by putting these two verses together we can see the New Testament revelation of what a church is and how the church is to meet. A church in the New Testament was equal to a city, and each of the various cities was taken as the unit for one practical local church.

It is important to note the nature of Titus 1:5. This verse not only provides an example, but it also gives specific instruction on how the church should meet. Paul is instructing Titus in how to go about establishing the believers into churches. Titus was on the small island of Crete, where there were about ninety to a hundred cities at that time. He was facing a somewhat confused situation there, because the practical church life was not yet established among the believers. He needed direction concerning how to proceed in appointing the elders for the churches. It was with this kind of background that Paul said to Titus, “set in order the things that are lacking, and appoint elders according to a city as I commanded you.” “Commanded” comes from the Greek word *διατάσσομαι*, which means to “charge” or “give orders.”

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This makes it clear that establishing one church in each city was not merely a suggestion, leaving Titus in the realm of options. Rather, it was an authoritative teaching and directive given in the imperative mood.

The fact that the saints were addressed according to geography is a precious and preserving truth. If we are members of the universal church, then we simply need to meet on the earth according to localities. Let me illustrate: There is only one moon. Whether you are in Africa, Europe, or the United States, it is the same moon wherever you are. You are just looking at the moon *in* Pretoria, *in* Paris, or *in* Los Angeles. It is the same moon in all these places. In the same way, the universal church is located geographically on the earth as the church in Ephesus, the church in Corinth, the church in Thessalonica. It is one universal church, one universal Body, with many local expressions according to geography.

According to the realm of truth

Finally, the saints are addressed according to the realm of truth. In the first verse of John's third Epistle he says, "The elder, to the beloved Gaius, whom I love in [the] truth." It is a precious thing when we stay in the realm of truth together. The truth is something higher

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than our personal opinions and disagreements. This is yet another factor of oneness between the saints.

In conclusion, it is instructive for us to consider the New Testament's various ways of addressing the saints. This variety takes in so many aspects of the truth that it safeguards us from systematizing ourselves around any one truth. It helps us remain balanced. In the variety of ways the saints were addressed we also see the major factors that were at the forefront of the apostles' hearts. And ultimately we see that nothing is to replace God Himself as the organic factor between all the saints.

