
The Unity of the Spirit

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"In the Bond of Peace"

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Dear Fellow-believers,

I can think of few greater joys and privileges in the Christian life than participating in and helping to oversee a home "fellowship" or home "church." The weekly home fellowship of which my wife and I are a part, and which we help to oversee, is the highlight of our week. For us - and for the others who participate in this fellowship - our weekly "church" is a wonderful way to share together the blessings and love which God has so freely and generously lavished upon us as his children (I John 3:1-2). Near the end of his life the apostle Paul wrote to Timothy about the importance of such churches:

*Although I hope to come to you soon, I am writing you these instructions so that, if I am delayed, you will know how people ought to conduct themselves in God's household, which is **the church of the living God, the pillar and foundation of the truth** (I Tim. 3:14-15).*

The New Testament records that the first century believers in Jesus Christ developed a pattern in which they met together regularly for the purpose of mutual edification and spiritual growth. This type of meeting, and the people who constituted it, was called in the Greek language an *ekklesia* - usually translated as "church" in our English Bibles. Normally these Christian "churches" took place in homes (e.g. Rom. 16:3-5; I Cor. 16:19; Col. 4:15; Phm. 2) - though there is nothing in the Bible about this being any sort of requirement. Most likely, the fact that churches

met in homes was more of a practical matter for the believers of that time just as it is for many of us today. And just as today, a "church" can be effective in a home, in a building set apart for the purpose of these meetings or, in any combination of the two. It is not the place where the church meets that is special. It is the *people* and the *activities* of the Christian believers within that church that makes it special. The "holy" or "set apart" nature of a church is determined both by the presence of committed believers at the regular fellowship meetings and by our Christ-like relationships with each other - both inside and outside of those meetings. In this way each of these churches will be a "pillar and foundation of the truth" for the people of the community or region in which it is located.

When the apostle Paul started house churches in the areas that he evangelized he normally wrote to, and revisited, these believers as often as he could. But he also "ordained" or "appointed" overseers, or elders, in each church which he founded. An example of this is set forth in Acts:

They preached the good news in that city and won a large number of disciples. Then they returned to Lystra, Iconium and Antioch, strengthening the disciples and encouraging them to remain true to the faith. "We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God," they said. Paul and Barnabas appointed elders for them in each church and with prayer and fasting, committed them to the Lord, in whom they had put their trust (Acts 14:21-23)

Though such a way of doing things is certainly ideal, it must be realized that our situations are far different today from those of the time of the apostle

Paul. Certainly, with all the confusion prevalent in Christendom today we don't need to wait for someone to appoint us before we take it upon ourselves to start a home fellowship. If it is "on our heart" to start and oversee a fellowship its probably "of God." After all, as Paul himself later said, it is God himself, via his Spirit, that makes us "overseers" over his flock (Acts 20:28) - not the appointment by any man or organization.

As with most endeavors the central key in starting, building and maintaining a strong fellowship of believers is Christ-like leadership. In short: somebody's got to do what it takes to make it happen. Somebody has to be willing to witness to new people, to contact existing believers and to open their home on a regular basis to be a place where likeminded believers can meet so as to grow together as God's people. Of course, to do this right takes commitment, time and just plain work. It means cleaning the house (or at least part of it), allotting time (even at the expense of a favorite TV program) and maybe even spending a little money on coffee and refreshments (God help us though when this becomes the central focus of our meetings). And of course it means co-ordinating how the meeting will be run including such activities as: prayer, singing, manifestations of the Spirit and a teaching or sharing from the Bible.

Of course, all of the above activities are really the kinds of things that many people *could* do - if they would simply *decide* to do so. And this brings to mind one of my favorite verses in the New Testament. It is I Timothy 3:1 as set forth in the *New International Version* of the Bible. It states:

Here is a trustworthy saying: If anyone sets his heart on being an overseer, he desires a noble task (I Tim. 3:1 NIV).

The key factor here is simply whether or not a person will *decide* to "set his heart on being an overseer." If a person does decide to do this, Paul says that "he desires a noble task." Unfortunately, in most of our western societies today those professing Christian believers with the most "ability" to oversee fellowships often have the least "availability" to do so since they are using the natural leadership ability they have in other ways such as in their business, profession, family activities, etc. All of these activities can, of course, be good - and godly - when done from the right perspective. However, it is just

such people who could - and many times *should* - be the examples for other believers by making their own lives available to help oversee a home fellowship or church. Then other believers could benefit from their knowledge, ability and example - all to the edification of the body of Christ and to the greater witness of God's family to the world. In short, we should always remember that helping to oversee a fellowship of believers is indeed a "noble task."

Since many of the people who read this newsletter also participate in some sort of regular home fellowship that is very similar to the pattern and purposes of the original first century churches, it is easy for us to relate to the close spiritual and personal fellowship that these first century believers enjoyed. Indeed, we must remember that it is the *relationships* we build with God and with each other - based on our common life in Christ - that will sustain us for a life-time, not special doctrines or organizations. Though sound doctrine and teaching are certainly important (Titus 1:9), dogmatism can choke the life out of any fellowship - no matter how "right" the doctrine may be. That is why love must always be primary in any fellowship of believers. We must remember that it takes time to learn, time to grow and time to knit all of our hearts together in the love of Christ.

May God grant that each of our "churches" strengthen and magnify the even greater "Church" of the body of Christ as we fellowship together in love and continue to grow up into Christ in all things. As the Book of Hebrews exhorts:

Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another - and all the more as you see the Day approaching (Heb. 10:23-25).

Richie Temple

The Church in the Home

by Scot Hahn

Cary, North Carolina

About three years ago my wife Kristi and I began a Bible fellowship in our home for a group of mostly high school age people. Although we already attended another home fellowship on a weekly basis, we also wanted to have our own fellowship where we could specifically help younger people to learn and put into practice the truths of the Bible. As a result of our personal experiences with these fellowships together with my own study of the scriptures my interest has continued to grow in the concept of the home church. I invite you to share in a study of this subject with me.

Even a cursory reading of the New Testament Letters clearly shows that the first century believers gathered together for fellowship in homes. Examples of this abound:

Greet Priscilla and Aquilla, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus. They risked their lives for me. Not only I but all the churches of the Gentiles are grateful to them. Greet also the church that meets at their house (Rom. 16:3-5).

The churches in the province of Asia send you greetings. Aquilla and Priscilla greet you warmly in the Lord, and so does the church that meets at their house (I Cor. 16:19).

Give my greetings to the brothers at Laodicea, and to Nympha and the church in her house (Col. 4:15).

Paul a prisoner of Christ Jesus, Timothy our brother, to Philemon our dear brother and fellow worker, to Apphia our sister, to Archippus our fellow soldier and to the church that meets in your home (Phm. 1-2).

Considering the time gap between Christian believers today and the early first century believers there is a natural question to ask: should we follow this pattern by having churches in our homes today? After all, the goal of Christianity is to apply the principles of truth and replicate the pattern of life that is set out for us in the New Testament.

The problem that may arise, however, is when we have a situation within the Bible that is strictly

controlled by the culture and times of those people. Certainly, we should not be bound to follow patterns that have no relevance to our lives today. The task at hand, then, is to assess the situation that the people of New Testament times found themselves in and to determine if in fact it applies to us now. In the subject at hand, we want to know specifically why the first century believers had churches in their homes?

To answer this question we will have to look at overall patterns and principles found within the New Testament, rather than at specific commands. We have to take into account Jesus and the early disciples and then work onwards to Paul and the vast extent of his "ministry to the Gentiles." Although there is quite a difference in cultural setting between the very first believers in Jerusalem and, say, the believers in Corinth, there is also a great deal of common ground on which almost all first century believers stood. For instance, there is the shared belief in Jesus, crucified and risen, exalted as Lord and Christ, and returning in the future to establish God's kingdom in a renewed earth (e.g. Acts 2:37; 3:18-21; I Cor. 15:1-4f). We also find the shared experience of receiving God's gift of holy Spirit - the firstfruits of their inheritance to come (Acts 2:17-21; Acts 11:15-18; Eph. 1:13; Heb. 6:4; etc.). Important to our study as well is the understanding of what the concept of "church" meant to the first century believers - especially so since its definition today among many people differs considerably from the New Testament definition.

We will begin with a brief synopsis of the first century churches' common understanding of who Jesus of Nazareth was. Although to different groups of people in different regions alternate titles or descriptions would have been used for Jesus - e.g. Son of God, Son of Man, Christ/Messiah, Wisdom of God, Word of God, Image of God, etc. - the concept of what he came to accomplish was constant. To all first century believers Jesus was the one whom God had foretold in the Old Testament period would come and fulfill the promises God had made to Israel to bring restoration and salvation through the mediation of his kingdom (rule) on earth (Luke 4:18-19; Luke 4:43; Matt. 26:63-64; etc.). He was also understood not only to be the bringer of salvation to Israel but to all who would believe in him. He tore down the barrier between Jew and Gentile and created in himself one body of believing

Jews and Gentiles who were reconciled to God (Eph. 2:14-18; Gal. 5:6; Acts 15:14-18; etc.).

It is the understanding of one body which begins to touch directly on our subject of the church. This one body was formed by people being baptized by/in one Spirit into Christ (I Cor. 12:12-13). The Spirit in which they were baptized was the foretold Spirit which God was to pour out in the last days on all people. It was, in fact, this initial outpouring of the Spirit which was the proof of Jesus' resurrection to those who had not seen him after his resurrection from the dead (Acts 2:1-39). This gift of the Spirit marked off the believing community from the rest of world for it was the seal placed on them by God guaranteeing their inheritance in his future kingdom (Eph. 1:13-14; II Cor. 1:21-22; 5:5). Therefore, these believers bound together in one body and sharers together in one hope stood as the "newly constituted" people of God, the community which God had chosen to be his very own (I Pet. 2:9; Titus 2:13-14; etc.).

The idea of these believers being the new covenant "people of God" helps us understand how they thought of themselves as "church." As the *New Bible Dictionary* (p. 205) states, "The English word 'church' is derived from the Greek adjective *kyriakos* as used in some such phrase as *kyriakon doma* or *kyriake oikia*, meaning 'the Lord's house,' i.e. a Christian place of worship." This is not, however, the way the word "church" was used in the New Testament! The word which is normally translated "church" in the New Testament is the Greek word *ekklesia*. This word *ekklesia* was used in the Septuagint (the oldest Greek version of the Old Testament) to "translate the Hebrew *qahal*, referring most often to the 'congregation of Israel, especially when it was gathered for religious purposes'"¹ (e.g. Deut. 31:30).

It is this concept of "church" that would have been the basis for the new covenant believers' use of this term. In fact, even in its secular usage the term *ekklesia* meant a group gathered for a purpose (e.g. Acts 19:32, 39, 41). But the first century believers were the "church" (gathered ones) of God in Christ (e.g. I Thess. 1:1). Nowhere in the Bible do we find the word "church" (*ekklesia*) being used of a building. Instead, *whenever* the new covenant

believers gathered and *wherever* the believers gathered we have "church." This is because when the believers got together it was as the new community in Christ assembled to enjoy the fellowship of Christ - by way of the Spirit and by way of the fellow members of the body.

Since we have touched on some of the issues that would have affected the first century believers outlook on what "church" was all about, we can now look at the historical situations which influenced their meeting in homes. Certainly, the example of Jesus meeting together with his disciples in different homes for teachings and meals (e.g. Matt. 12:46-13:1; Luke 10:38-39; Luke 22:7-14 the "upper room") would have laid a foundation for later practice. As can easily be seen in the above examples, the most intimate type of fellowship is possible in the confines of a home. It was also Jesus who instructed the first believers to come together for the "Lord's Supper" in remembrance of him - until he shared it with them again in the kingdom of God (Luke 22:14-20). This practice obviously continued throughout the first century among both Jewish and Gentile believers (I Cor. 11:17-32).

Beginning in Jerusalem the very first believers, who were all Jewish, began to teach that Jesus of Nazareth who had been crucified and raised from the dead was "both Lord and Christ" (Acts 2:36). Although this was the true fulfillment of the Jewish people's hopes, the majority of the Jewish people did not acknowledge this as being true. As the believers' efforts to persuade the masses of Jewish people that the Messiah had arrived continued they were naturally met with conflict by those who would not accept their message. Though at first the believers were tolerated in the Jewish center for worship, the temple (Acts 2:46), it was not long before they began to be driven away. The leaders of the Jewish people suppressed their message, removed them from the temple, and even commanded them "not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus" (Acts 4:17-18). Nevertheless, the believers continued to preach the good news of Jesus, both in the temple area and in homes as well. Acts 5:41-42 offers a good summary of their response:

The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name. Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and

¹Gordon Fee, *Gospel and Spirit*, Hendrickson Publishers, Inc. 1991, p. 124.

proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Christ (Acts 5:41-42).

After much persecution and the death of Stephen some of the believers were scattered to other regions and began to "preach the word wherever they went" (Acts 8:4). This, of course, brought them into conflict with the majority of the Jewish population in these new areas. Therefore, though believers such as Paul normally first went to the synagogues, they eventually had to meet in private homes so as to avoid persecution and so as to conduct orderly "churches" in the name of Christ.

It is, of course, to Paul that the majority of the Gentile mission of the first century church is attributed. His missionary outreach spanned far and wide. From the Book of Acts and from his Letters to the local churches he had founded it is obvious that most of these churches met in homes even though initially he spoke publicly in other places in winning converts (Acts 20:20; etc.). Paul's own practice as recorded in Acts 28 should perhaps speak loudly to us a good general example to follow as we share the gospel message with others and endeavor to help believers to grow up into Christ.

For two whole years Paul stayed there in his own rented house and welcomed all who came to see him. Boldly and without hindrance he preached the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ (Acts 28:30-31).

In conclusion, it seems that though some of the reasons for the first century believers meeting in homes were culturally conditioned, it is also true that house churches represent many relevant principles which best kindle the spirit of what "church" is all about.

[Scot and Kristi Hahn have a home Bible fellowship in Cary, North Carolina. Scot also helps edit *The Unity of the Spirit*]

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Ekklesia

The Cambridge Companion to the Bible [p. 474, Cambridge University Press] explains how the Greek word "ekklesia" is used in the Bible:

In Greek culture, the term *ekklesia* means an assembly of persons convened for political or entertainment purposes. Among Greek speaking Jews, it came to mean the gathering of the covenant community in any place for purposes of information, instruction, or worship, as in Deut. 31:30, I Sam. 17:47, and I Kings 8:14. The early Christian community took over this term as a group designation, as is apparent in I Cor. 11:18; 14:4, 19, 28, 35. It is usually translated "church." There is direct evidence that originally the "assembly" took place in private homes (Rom. 16:5, I Cor. 16:19, Phil. 2, Col. 4:15). In Acts (14:23) and in the letters of Paul (I Cor. 16:1) rules are laid down to be observed in each of the individual "assemblies."

The assemblies of Christians throughout certain metropolitan areas or districts are referred to collectively as "the churches of ..." (Gal. 1:2, 22; 2 Cor. 8:1). Occasionally, Paul uses the term in a comprehensive way to refer to the whole body of God's new people (as in I Cor. 10:32, 12:28; Phil. 3:6; and probably Gal. 1:13). Even when he addresses the "church of God," he sometimes adds "which is at," followed by the name of the city or province (2 Cor. 1:1, I Thess. 2:14). The blend of local assemblies with comprehensive membership of God's people is explicit in I Cor. 1:2, where the letter is addressed to "the church of God which is at Corinth" but also to "all those who in every place call on the name of the Lord."

In the later writings attributed to Paul, *ekklesia* has come to mean the whole body of Christians, as in Eph. 1:22. Accordingly, the church is described in structural, organizational terms in Eph. 2:19-22, where the metaphors used are those of hierarchy, foundation, and temple. Similarly universal in implication is the most familiar reference to *ekklesia* in the gospel tradition, Matt. 16:16: "On this rock I will build my church." The generalized force of the term "church" is highlighted by the description of the totality of Palestinian Christians in the period of Pentecost as "the church throughout Judea and Galilee and Samaria (Acts 8:31). What began as a designation for a local fellowship of Christians had become by the end of the first century a title for the body of believers across the Roman empire.

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The Basis for Christian Fellowship

By Keith A. Price

These principles are based on many years of inter-denominational fellowship and are conclusions I have reached after making many mistakes and after having had considerable discussion with scores of Christian leaders. I am particularly indebted to the correspondence of Anthony Norris Groves - a dentist-missionary to Baghdad in the 1830s - who practiced many of these principles. Although they have never before appeared in the form I now give, I have retained a number of the excellent expressions he used in his correspondence.

1. The basis of our fellowship is life in the Christ of the Scriptures rather than Light on the teaching of the Scriptures. Those who have part with Christ have part with us. Because our communion is one of life and love more than one of doctrine and opinion, we seek to show that the oneness in the life of God through Jesus Christ is a stronger bond than that of being one of us - whether organizationally or denominationally.

2. Because our fellowship is based on our common life in Christ, we do not reject anyone because of the organization or denomination with which he may be affiliated; nor would we hold him responsible for the conduct within that system, any more than we would a child

for the conduct in the home of which he is merely a part.

3. We do not feel it desirable to withdraw from fellowship with any Christians except at the point where they may require us to do what our consciences will not permit, or restrain us from doing what our consciences require.

Even then, we maintain our fellowship with them in any matter where we are not called upon to so compromise. This ensures that (insofar as we understand the Scripture) we do not separate ourselves from them any further than they separate themselves from Christ.

4. We do not consider an act of fellowship to be indicative of total agreement; indeed, we sometimes find it a needed expression of love to submit to others in matters where we do not fully agree, rather than to prevent some greater good from being brought about. Our choice would be to bear with their wrong rather than separate ourselves from their good.

5. We believe it more scriptural to reflect a heart of love

ready to find a covering for faults,
 than to constantly look for
 that with which we may disagree.
 We will then be known
 more by what we witness for
 than by what we witness against.

6. We feel it biblical
 never to pressure men to act in uniformity
 further than they feel in uniformity;
 we use our fellowship in the Spirit
 as an opportunity
 to discuss our differences
 and find this to be the most effective way
 of leading others - or being led by them
 - into the light of the Word.

7. While enjoying such a wide range
 of Christian fellowship,
 we would not force this liberty
 upon those who would feel otherwise minded.
 In such circumstances,
 we enjoy fellowship as far as they will permit,
 then pray
 that the Lord would lead them further
 into this true liberty
 of the common life in Christ.

[This article originally appeared in the *Christian Perspectives* newsletter and is reprinted with permission. It can be found together with many other interesting articles at the "Open House Church" home page of *Christian Perspectives* at: www.mindspring.com/~mmattison]

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Scriptural Quotations About Christian Fellowship

The New Testament has much to say about the importance of Christian fellowship. Below are a few sections of scripture that pertain to this subject:

For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them (Matt. 18:20).

Accept one another, then, just as Christ has accepted you, in order to bring praise to God (Rom. 15:7).

Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to the Church daily those who were being saved (Acts 2:46-47).

Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification (Rom. 14:19).

... I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace (Eph. 4:1-3).

If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being in one spirit and purpose. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interest but also to the interests of others (Phil. 2:1-4).

Let us hold unwaveringly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another - and all the more as you see the Day approaching (Heb. 10:23-25).

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Shepherding the Church of God

by Chuck LaMattina

Chicago, Illinois

As fellow members of the body of Christ each of us is responsible to love and care for God's family. This includes watching over one another, encouraging one another, and caring for our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ in a variety of ways. However, despite the care we are each to have for one other, it is also clear that each local church in NT times also had "elders" or "overseers" who were appointed (Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5) to look after, care for and lead God's people - as a shepherd watches over his flock (I Peter 5:1-4; Acts 20:25-28). This way of caring for God's people stands as a great example for us today and we would do well to follow the pattern of the first century believers as closely as possible in this regard.

The qualifications of an elder are listed in I Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-10. Their function in serving believers is to:

- A. Rule or manage (Gr. *proistemi*) - I Timothy 3:4, 5; 5:17.
- B. Teach God's Word - I Timothy 5:17.
- C. Guard the truths of Scripture from error - Titus 1:9.
- D. Oversee the church as a shepherd does his flock - Acts 20:28; Hebrews 13:17; I Peter 5:1-3.

Elders are set in the church by God (Acts 20:28), but stress is laid upon their due appointment by other leaders (Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5).

Leadership in the Church

From my understanding of the New Testament, here are several important observations I have made on the issue of leadership in the church:

(1). Local church leaders are identified in the Bible by two basic titles. One title is the word "bishop" (KJV, NKJV) or "overseer" (NIV) from the Greek word *episkopos*. The other title is "elder" from the Greek word *presbuteros*. These terms are used

interchangeably.¹ The word "bishop" means "an overseer; someone who watches over something in order to manage or care for it." This word was used as an official title among the Greeks. In the Athenian language it was used specifically to designate commissioners appointed by governing authorities to regulate a new colony.² The word "elder" carries with it the idea of someone who is mature and distinguished, and carries a position of rank and responsibility.³

(2). These spiritual leaders were to rule ("manage" in the NIV) and shepherd God's people. To rule, or manage, is the more technical term, whereas pastor, or shepherd is the more illustrative. The Apostle Paul first uses the word "rule" in his listing of the qualifications for leadership in I Timothy 3:4-5. There he says that one who aspires to be a bishop, or overseer, should be:

one who rules his own house well, having his children in submission with all reverence (for if a man does not know how to rule his own house, how will he take care of the church of God?) (I Tim. 3:4-5 NKJV).

We need to take note that this word "rule" is in the context of a father's role in the family setting. This is a very important point. First, it denotes a relationship between a family unit and the local church. A family unit is a church in miniature. Just as a father is to lead, and guide, and be responsible for his family, and to carry authority (Eph. 6:1), so too are the elders of the church.

Secondly, this illustration from the family gives us a functional definition to the word "rule". It is an all inclusive concept. There is nothing that is not included in the father's, or the elder's task. It involves total and complete oversight of the family, or the church. In other words, God holds the father responsible for the overall leadership in the home.

¹Compare Acts 20:17, 28; Titus 1:5, 7; I Tim. 3:1,2; I Thess. 5:17, 19.

²*Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words*, edited by Unger and White. *A Critical Lexicon and Concordance to the English and Greek New Testament*, by E.W. Bullinger. *St. Paul; The Epistle to the Philippians*, by J.B. Lightfoot, McMatters Publishers, p. 95.

³*Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary and A Critical Lexicon and Concordance*.

In the same way he holds the elders responsible for the overall leadership of the church. Now, nowhere does this give a father, or an elder, the right to be a tyrannical dictator. It does give him the right, however, to lead, guide, manage and care for God's people. It also gives him the right to discipline when necessary and to do all of these activities with God-given authority.

Thirdly, this relationship between the family and the church shows us the importance of our not attempting to fashion a philosophy of leadership for either the home or the church outside of the principle taught in I Timothy 3:4-5.

Fourthly, this family relationship leads to a very important question as regards the church. It is clear from the Bible that God never intended the home to function with more than one primary leader - the husband and father (mother and other adults being secondary leaders). Does this imply that local churches also need one primary leader? Before I answer that question, let me set forth a few more pieces of information on church leadership from the terms "pastor" or "shepherd".

"Ruling" = "Shepherding"

The words "pastor" or "shepherd" are used more often in the Bible to describe the overall leadership responsibility of an "elder" than the word "rule." The Apostle Peter used this word more descriptively than any other New Testament writer. In I Peter he writes,

The elders who are among you I exhort, I who am a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that will be revealed: Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers [Gr. episkopeo], not by constraint but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly; nor as being lords over those entrusted to you. but being examples to the flock (I Peter 5:1-3).

As with the term "rule", shepherding is an all inclusive term. A shepherd is responsible for the total welfare of his sheep, and he has authority to carry out his responsibility. In the church, Jesus Christ is the Chief Shepherd (I Peter 5:4), leaders are in essence "undershepherds." Leaders, or elders, are to guard the flock from savage wolves (i.e., false

teachers - Acts 20:17-31). Look at what Paul says to the elders of Ephesus:

Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God which he bought with the blood of his own (Acts 20:28).

Elders are also to feed their "flock" by declaring to them the whole counsel of God (Acts 20:27; Titus 1:9). In addition, they are to care for them and pray for them when they are ill (James 5:14).

Psalm 23 shows us the shepherd's responsibility more completely than perhaps any other section of Scripture and it gives us a good model for leadership. Look at the following illustration of this Psalm:

Psalm 23:

v. 1. "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want."

[An elder helps meet the spiritual needs of his people]

v. 2. "He makes me to lie down in green pastures."

[An elder helps to make the believer secure and at peace]

v. 3. "He leads me beside the still waters. He restores my soul; He leads me in the path of righteousness."

[An elder leads a believer to God's Word to quench spiritual thirst, and to restore and encourage the believer to walk in the will of God]

v. 4. "... though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; For you are with me."

[An elder stays with his people to aid them in times of danger and trouble]

v. 4. " .. Your rod and Your staff comfort me."

[An elder lovingly disciplines believers when they go astray, and helps to protect them from their spiritual enemy]

v. 5. "You prepare a table before me ... "

[An elder provides the food of the Word of God for the believer to feast on]

v. 6 "You anoint my head with oil ..."

[An elder helps the believer to walk in all the fullness of the spirit of God within ("oil" being symbolic of the gift of the holy spirit)]

In essence then, an elder "shepherds" or "rules" the believers in his care by caring for them in the same way that God and Christ care for us. Ruling and shepherding describe synonymous functions when the leader shows Christ-likeness in behavior, preaches the Word of God, exhorts and warns God's people and prays and comforts them. All of this is done with divine authority as "undershepherds." It is God who has made them "overseers" (Acts 20:28).

Leadership in the Local Church

Now let us go back to the question of whether there should be one primary leader in the local church. What do the scriptures teach? First, the NT does speak of the "elders" (plural) of the church. The only exception is when an individual elder is mentioned (e.g. I Tim. 3:1-2).

Secondly, the term "church" as it is used to refer to local churches is a specific area, always refers to all the believers in that area, whether or not they met together regularly or not. For example, Acts 8:1 refers to "the church which was at Jerusalem." Now we know from the Book of Acts that there were thousands of believers in Jerusalem (Acts 2:41; 4:4). They certainly did not all meet all the time in the same place! We are told that they met in the temple and from house to house (Acts 2:46). I would venture to say that the most common meeting place was in the homes of believers. Would each of these "home fellowships" that made up the church at Jerusalem have an elder? Its very possible. Would they have more than one elder? That is possible too, especially if that group were rather large.

The church in Ephesus provides another example for us. In Acts 20:17 Paul "sent to Ephesus and called he elders of the church." Here again we have "elders" in conjunction with a single, local church. But again, this does not mean that all the believers met in the same place all the time. It is true that Paul taught in the School of Tyrannus for about two years (Acts 19:9-10), but they also no doubt met in homes. Paul said that in Ephesus "he

taught ... publicly and from house to house" (Acts 20:20). There is no clear biblical evidence that all the believers in any given city, met in a "mega church" set-up. The cultural realities of the time probably could not have supported such a venture. The church in any given city was more likely to be broken up into smaller units that occasionally all gathered together.

One last example is from the Book of Titus. In Titus 1:5 we read that Paul left Titus in Crete to "appoint elders in every city." Assuming that the church in any local area was made up of "house churches," we can ask some interesting questions:

A. Did every house church, or small fellowship, within the larger church at Jerusalem, or Ephesus, etc. have one elder only? If they did, this would not be in contradiction to the previous reference to the plurality of elders in Jerusalem, or Ephesus. This would simply indicate the possibility of more than one house church in each city.

B. Was there more than one elder in each house church? This is very possible, especially if the fellowship was rather large. Archeologists have discovered ancient homes that held Christian meetings. Some of these homes had extra rooms built-on that could hold up to a few hundred people.¹

From these biblical examples what can we honestly conclude? We can conclude that there were a plurality of elders in Jerusalem and Ephesus, and in the cities of Crete. The same would be true for Lystra, Iconium and Pisidium Antioch because we are told that in these cities Paul and Baranabas "appointed elders in every church" (Acts 14:23). But we cannot honestly conclude anything beyond this! There is simply no more biblical information regarding church structure to explain more fully the concept of elders and how they functioned and governed in any given city.

Is it wrong then for a local church, i.e., one that meets together in one place, to have a plurality of elders, or pastors? No. In fact, there is simply no way that one person can meet all the needs of every believer in the fellowship. Proverbs 11:14 also says, "... in the multitude of counselors there is safety." A group of godly elders serve as a model of Christ-

¹*Evangelism in the Early Church*, Michael Green, Eerdmans Publishing Co. pp. 207-223.

likeness for many different people. I do not believe, however, that a church should be led by "committee." I do think that elders in any particular church should thoroughly discuss matters and work them out. There should be a godly consensus. But sometimes a decision has to be made that is not popular, yet needs to be made. It is at this time that a trustworthy leader needs to step in. I also do not believe that the general membership of believers is to make decisions on how and where to lead the church. I do not believe this kind of thinking is biblical. It seems to me to be an over reaction to those church leaders who have become little dictators.

There is a lot of evidence, however, pointing to the fact that lines of authority need to be established for the church to function effectively. The Apostle Paul was certainly recognized as having authority over Timothy and Titus. In turn, these men were recognized as having authority in given cities to appoint elders. It is only reasonable to assume that certain elders were given authority to give direction to the church in any certain location. It is also highly possible that the NT churches were patterned somewhat after the Jewish synagogue. Though there was a counsel of elders within every synagogue, the Bible also tells us about those who were primary leaders. For example,

Then Crispus, the ruler of the synagogue, believed on the Lord with all his household (Acts 18:8).

Then all the Greeks took Sosthenes, the ruler of the synagogue (Acts 18:17).

In conclusion, there is I believe much biblical evidence giving elders (overseers, pastors, shepherds) authority in the church. It is also sound counsel for any church to have a plurality of elders. But there is also a good deal of biblical evidence that someone should be appointed as a primary leader. I believe that practical experience would argue for this as well. When a church does not have clear lines of authority, a group of elders can become insecure and lack vision. Along with this, the door is open for disunity due to power struggles. Finally, however, it is extremely important to realize that the more responsibility or authority an elder has, the more the elder is to be a servant! As Christ has said,

... whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant. And whoever desires to be first among you let him be your slave - Just as the Son of man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many (Matt. 20:26-28).

This servant leadership needs to be worked out in very practical applications as we seek to help people physically and spiritually to be their best for God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

[Chuck LaMattina is President of Grace Ministry USA in Chicago, IL. His books: *Our Awesome God*; *Christ Our Life* and *Essential Matters* are available for \$6 each from Grace Ministry USA, 7359 N. Hoyne, Chicago, IL. 60645]

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Leadership Qualities from Paul's Letter to Titus

The reason I left you in Crete was that you might straighten out what was left unfinished and appoint elders in every town, as I directed you.

An elder must be blameless, the husband of but one wife, a man whose children believe and are not open to the charge of being wild and disobedient.

Since an overseer is entrusted with God's work, he must be blameless - not overbearing, not quick-tempered, not given to drunkenness, not violent, not pursuing dishonest gain.

Rather he must be hospitable, one who loves what is good, who is self-controlled, upright, holy and disciplined.

He must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it (Titus 1:5-9).

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Living Letters

Dear *Unity*:

Thankyou for including us on the mailing list of your newsletter *The Unity of the Spirit* per Chuck and Marilee LaMattina's request.

We have enjoyed especially your booklet *God's Plan of Salvation!* It was well written! Thank-you once again.

Sincerely,
Sidney and Larry Stockdale
East Peoria, Illinois

Dear *Unity*:

A late "thank you" for the copy of *The Unity of the Spirit* and the booklet you sent. The newsletter contained very thought-provoking articles and we'll look forward to future issues.

We understand from the LaMattinas that your recent trip with them to Europe was a great blessing to the believers there. We'll pray for continued growth and outreach of the truth. Thanks again and may God bless your ministry.

In Christ,
Jerry Smith & Leesa Railsback
Peoria, Illinois

Dear *Unity*:

God bless you in the name of Jesus Christ. I just thought I'd drop you a line and tell you I enjoyed your article "The Hope of Glory" in the Summer edition of *The Unity of the Spirit*. You boiled things down to its supreme essence concerning a field that has become increasingly complex. Bravo!

Your newsletter and insights are I'm sure affecting many people's lives for the better. Keep up the good work.

Sincerely in Christ,
Bill Villanueva
Siler City, North Carolina

Dear *Unity*:

Warmest greetings! We thankfully received your kind and encouraging letter enclosing your love gift for the translation, publication and distribution of your wonderful book "God's Plan of Salvation" in

our Telegu language. We have already started on the translation of the book. Telegu is our official state language in the state of Andhra Pradesh and a major language in India.

I am sure that we will reach many hundreds of people through your book about the gospel! Let us pray together to reach as many as possible through the printed page in this needy land of ours where people are groping in darkness. Please keep us in your prayers!

Please also remember us as we endeavor to help the orphan children, poor, old widows, crippled, disabled and lepers. A monthly gift of US \$20 is enough to provide full support to any one of these. Presently, we need monthly support for 10-30 orphan children if possible. A monthly gift of US \$50 is also enough to support a full time worker here on the gospel field. You are warmly welcome to join us and share our much needed ministries in the future. Please feel free to write us at all times.

Brother Raju P.S. Merupu
Andhra Pradesh, South India

Anyone wishing to help support this ministry in India may write to:

Dr. Raju P.S. Merupu M.A.
Christian Library and Reading Centre
Reddy Polavaram 534315
West G District
Andhra, S. India

Dear *Unity*:

Almost a month has gone by now since our Bible conference in the Tatra mountains here in Poland. We continually think about that week and the things that we studied and learned together. We are now not only reading the Bible but also memorizing verses because God's words are certainly more effective than the words of any man (I Thess. 2:13)!! We are meeting together each Saturday and we are studying together certain sections of scripture. We started with the section in Ephesians about the armor of God. They are such wonderful words!

Leszek and Olga Druszkiewicz
and the church in our home
Krakow, Poland

Books in Review

The Kingdom of God: The Biblical Concept and its Meaning for the Church

by John Bright

This book, written in 1953 by John Bright, longtime Professor of Old Testament at Union Theological Seminary in Richmond, Virginia, is an excellent presentation of the biblical concept of the Kingdom of God and its meaning for the Church today. The book focuses especially on the Old Testament roots of the concept and then works its way through to the coming of Christ and the rest of the New Testament records. It is highly recommended for anyone who wants to grasp the biblical perspective of the Kingdom of God and its relationship to the NT Church.

The book is best explained in its own words as presented primarily in its Preface:

This book, as its title indicates, is concerned with an idea of central importance in the theology of the Bible. It seeks to trace for the benefit of the general Bible reader the history of that idea and to suggest its contemporary relevance. By this means, it is hoped, a contribution may be made to the understanding of the Scriptures. For the concept of the Kingdom of God involves, in a real sense, the total message of the Bible. Not only does it loom large in the teachings of Jesus; it is to be found, in one form or another, through the length and breadth of the Bible - at least if we may view it through the eyes of the New Testament faith - from Abraham, who set out to seek "the city ... whose builder and maker is God" (Rev. 21:2). To grasp what is meant by the Kingdom of God is to come very close to the heart of the Bible's gospel of salvation [p. 7].

It is submitted in the belief that while the complexity of the Bible is by no means to be minimized, there nevertheless runs through it a unifying theme which is not artificially imposed. It is a theme of redemption, of salvation; and it is caught up particularly in those concepts which revolve about the idea of a people of God, called to live under his rule, and the concomitant hope of the coming Kingdom of God. This is a note which is present in Israel's faith from the earliest times onward, and

which is to be found, in one way or another, in virtually every part of the Old Testament. It also unbreakably links Old Testament to New. For both have to do with the Kingdom of God, and the same God speaks in both [pp. 10-11].

This, then is the good news which the New Testament with unanimous voice proclaims: that Jesus is indeed the promised Messiah, fulfillment of all the hope of Israel, who has come to set up the Kingdom of God among men. Variegated as the message of the New Testament became, especially as it adapted itself to Gentiles who knew nothing of the hope of Israel, to make that assertion remained at the very heart of the church's gospel.

That assertion is of especial interest to us, because in it the unity of all Scripture is plainly affirmed; in it New Testament is linked unbreakably with the Old, and all biblical theology is made to hang together. For in affirming that Jesus is Messiah, the New Testament affirmed that all the Old Testament faith had longed for and pointed to has been fulfilled in him [pp. 190-191].

In the light of what has been said it becomes clear that the Kingdom of God in the New Testament must be understood in a two-fold aspect: it has come and even now is in the world; it is also yet to come. In the tension between the two the Church must live, and must always live, as the "eschatological community" [p.236].

The New Testament view of the Church is rather plain, incredibly strange as this sounds to our ears. The Church is ... the "Israel of God" (Gal. 6:16), a remnant elected by grace (Rom. 11:5), ... "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation ... God's people" (I Peter 2:9-10), and much more to the same effect. In short, she is God's holy community, the true Remnant, the people of the New Covenant, and the successor to the calling and destiny of Israel ... In that sense the Church is a peculiar people, for she is the successor of Israel as the chosen servant of God's purposes in history. As such, and as such alone, she is heir to the promises of the coming Kingdom.

[This book is available from Abingdon Press or Cokesbury: 1-800-672-1789 for \$15.97].

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The Church's Corporate Destiny In Christ

Compare the Versions: Eph. 1:3-14

KJV

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ: According as he hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before him in love: Having predestinated us unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to himself, according to the good pleasure of his will, To the praise of the glory of his grace, wherein he hath made us accepted in the beloved: In whom we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of his grace; Wherein he abounded toward us in all wisdom and prudence; Having made known unto us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure which he hath purposed in himself: That in the dispensation of the fullness of times he might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven and on earth: even in him.

In whom also we have obtained an inheritance, being predestinated according to the purpose of him who worketh all things after the counsel of his own will: That we should be to the praise of his glory, who first trusted in Christ. In whom ye also trusted, after that ye heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation: in whom also, after that ye believed, ye were sealed with that Holy Spirit of promise, Which is earnest of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession, unto the praise of his glory.

NIV

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,

who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will - to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace that he lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding. And he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfillment - to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ.

In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will. In order that we who were the first to hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory. And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession - to the praise of his glory.

NJB

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with all the spiritual blessings of heaven in Christ. Thus he chose us in Christ before the world was made to be holy and faultless before him in love, marking us out for himself beforehand, to be adopted sons, though Jesus Christ. Such was his purpose and good pleasure, to the praise of the glory of his grace, his free gift to us in the Beloved, in whom, through his blood we gain our freedom, the forgiveness of our sins. Such is the richness of the grace which he has showered on us in all wisdom and insight. He has let us know the mystery of his purpose, according to his good pleasure which he determined beforehand in Christ, for him to act upon when the times had run their course: that he would bring everything together under Christ, as head, everything in the heavens and on earth.

And it is in him that we have received our heritage, marked out beforehand as we were, under the plan of the One who guides all things as he decides by his own will, chosen to be, for the praise of his glory, the people who would put their hopes in Christ before he came. Now you too, in him, have heard the message of the truth and the gospel of your salvation, and having put your trust in it you have been stamped with the seal of the Holy Spirit of the Promise, who is the pledge of our inheritance, for the freedom of the people whom God has taken for his own, for the praise of his glory.

Notes & Quotes on the Bible

Once Again ...

I thought this would be a good time to revisit and expand on some of the topics that have been covered to date in this column *Notes & Quotes on the Bible* - especially relating to the topic of the Church. This is primarily for the benefit of new readers as well as in response to questions that we've received over the last couple of years. I should note that all past issues of *The Unity of the Spirit* are available from the address on the back of this issue. Feel free to write by letter or e-mail. In order to address topics in this issue as specifically as possible I will use a question and answer format.

Question 1:

Isn't the Church of the Body of Christ the "mystery" that wasn't made known until it was revealed to the apostle Paul? And doesn't this mean that there can't be anything about this Church in the prophecies of the Old Testament and the Gospels? And doesn't this mean that Israel and the Church are two separate and distinct entities with two different biblical programs?

Answer:

No, no and no. The New Covenant Church of the body of Christ stands in direct continuity with the Old Covenant people of God, Israel. This continuity is explicit on almost every page of the New Testament documents - the Gospels, Acts and NT Letters - where Old Testament scriptures are quoted as being fulfilled in the New Testament period by the New Covenant Church (e.g. Acts 2:16f; 3:17f; Rom. 1:2; Gal. 3:6-29; etc.). This continuity is also implicit in the OT language and concepts that are used to describe the New Covenant Church (e.g. "seed of Abraham," "Israel of God," "circumcision," "church," "temple," "people of God," "holy nation," "saints," "elect," "royal priesthood," "spiritual house," etc.) In short, what was foretold and/or foreshadowed in the Old Testament scriptures finds its ultimate fulfillment in Christ and, therefore, in his Church (II Cor. 1:20; Col. 2:17).

The Old Testament scriptures clearly foretold the coming of a New Covenant that God would set up with the house of Israel (Jer. 31:31f). The New Testament clearly and specifically shows that this New Covenant finds its fulfillment in what Christ accomplished for the Church (Luke 22:20; I Cor. 11:17-34; II Cor. 3:6; Heb. 8:7-8; etc.). Christ had told his disciples, "On this rock I will build my Church" (Matt. 16:18) and the rest of the New Testament shows him doing just that (e.g. Acts 2:47b; 26:12-18; Eph. 2:19-22; etc.).

Thus, the New Covenant people of God were clearly foretold in the Old Testament Scriptures and the New Covenant Church was clearly established - and is built by - Christ himself. There were, however, "mysteries" or "secrets" that had not been made known about this New Covenant people of God. One of these secrets is called the "mystery of Christ." Properly speaking, the mystery is *not* the one body of Christ or the Church of the body of Christ. Instead, the mystery had to do with the *composition* of the Church of the body of Christ - the New Covenant people of God. This mystery is specifically explained in Eph. 3:6:

*This mystery is that through the gospel the **Gentiles** are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus (Eph. 3:6 NIV).*

The key word here is *Gentiles*. The point being made is that through believing in Christ, *Gentiles* share equally in all that God has promised and now made available to his New Covenant people "in Christ." The corporate nature of the people of God was not a mystery. It was implied throughout the OT in language about Israel. It also was implied in specific OT prophecies about the Messiah such as the "chosen servant" of Isaiah and the "one like a son of man" of Dan. 7 - both of whom were portrayed as the corporate representative of God's people. Nor was it a mystery that the Church - the New Covenant people of God - would be "one in Christ." In fact, the oneness of the New Covenant church "in Christ" is specifically stated in John 17:

My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given

them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me (John 17:20-23).

These words which were spoken long before the apostle Paul was given his special revelation about the mystery of Christ could not be more emphatic: the Church was to be "in Christ" and "Christ in" the Church as well. What was a mystery was the *composition* of this Church - not that there would be such a Church incorporated "in Christ" - i.e., in the Messiah.

F.F. Bruce sums up the NT teaching about the "mystery of Christ" in his commentary on Ephesians 3:5-6:

The "mystery of Christ" into which Paul has received such exceptional insight is the content of the "revelation of Jesus Christ" of which he speaks in Gal. 1:12 ... Paul sometimes uses the term "mystery" of one particular element in his message - the transformation of believers into spiritual bodies at the last trumpet (I Cor. 15:51) or Israel's final restoration as the goal of its temporary relegation in favor of the Gentiles (Rom. 1:25). But his use of the term in Ephesians to denote the gospel in its fullness is in keeping with his general practice. The gospel which he received on the Damascus road by "revelation of Jesus Christ" was the law-free gospel which he proceeded to preach throughout the rest of his life; and precisely because it was law-free it was applicable to Gentiles as to Jews (the law being the barrier that had formerly kept them apart). The incorporation of Gentiles along with Jews in the new people of God - incorporation by grace through faith - was implicit in that gospel. This incorporation is the aspect of the "mystery of Christ" which is now [Eph. 3:6] emphasized.

This is a mystery in the sense that it was not made known to human beings in other generations. Similar language is used in the doxology at the end of the letter to the Romans, where Paul's gospel, "the preaching of Jesus Christ," is said to be "the revelation of the mystery which was kept secret for long ages" (Rom. 16:25), and in Col. 1:25-27, where the "word of God" which Paul is commissioned to make known is called "the mystery which has been concealed for ages and generations." In Col. 1:27 this mystery is summed up in Christ, dwelling in the hearts of Gentile believers as their hope of glory.

Elsewhere Paul insists that his gospel is no innovation. It was promised in advance though the prophets in the holy scriptures (Rom. 1:2); it was preached beforehand to Abraham (Gal. 3:8). That faith was the principle by which God would justify men and women, Gentiles as well as Jews, was not a truth concealed in earlier generations. It is a truth attested, according to Paul, in the Law, the Prophets and the Writings. He adduces evidence from the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings to establish that Christ came not only "to confirm the promises given to the patriarchs" regarding their descendants but also "in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy" (Rom. 15:8-12), and in this evidence he finds the scriptural basis for his own Gentile mission.

That God would bless the Gentiles, then, was not a new revelation. What then was the new revelation, the mystery hitherto concealed? It was this: that God's blessing of the Gentiles would involve the obliteration of the old line of demarcation which separated them from Jews and the incorporation of Gentile believers together with Jewish believers, without any discrimination, in the new, comprehensive community of God's chosen people.

This had not been foreseen ... what has now been revealed is the plan of God that human beings without distinction - Gentiles as well as Jews - should on the common ground of faith be his sons and daughters in Christ. "If children, then heirs" (Rom. 8:17). To Abraham God had pledged a noble heritage of blessing, and of that heritage Abraham's descendants were the heirs ... But now the divine plan has been revealed that "all families of the earth" should through the gospel not only be blessed in Abraham's posterity but should be reckoned among his posterity, children of Abraham because they all share the faith of Abraham, who "is the father of us all" (Rom. 4:16). Gentile believers are therefore with Jewish believers "fellow-heirs" of all the blessings pledged to Abraham and his descendants - "heirs of God," in fact, "fellow-heirs with Christ," as Paul puts it elsewhere (Rom. 8:17). For, as readers of this letter have already been told, it is in Christ that believers receive their inheritance and have been sealed with the Spirit as the guarantee of their eventual entry upon it (Eph. 1:13-14).

Gentile believers, moreover, have been incorporated into the same body as Jewish believers; they are fellow-members of the body of Christ ... Even proselytes from paganism to the Jewish faith were debarred from a few minor privileges which were reserved for Israelites by birth. In the new community there were no such restrictions.

In adding that Gentiles were "joint-partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel," Paul emphasizes a truth which he had taught at some length in Gal. 3:6-29. The promise was made to Abraham; it was fulfilled in Christ, Abraham's offspring *par excellence*, "that what was promised to faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe" (Gal. 3:22). "If you are Christ's," Paul continues, it makes no difference whether you are Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male or female: "you are Abraham's offspring, and heirs according to the promise" (Gal. 3:29). [*The New Int. Com. on the NT, The Epistles to the Colossians to Philemon and to the Ephesians*, pp. 313-316, Eerdmans].

In short, the New Covenant people of God, the Church, is clearly foretold in the pages of the OT (e.g. Jer. 31:31ff) and clearly spoken of and established by Christ himself. OT prophecies about this new covenant people of God are specifically said to be fulfilled, and/or confirmed, throughout the pages of the New Testament. What was *not* foreseen was that this body of believers in Christ would be composed of both Jew *and* Gentile on an equal basis - as one *new* man in Christ - thus, creating the true "circumcision" (Phil. 3:3), the true "seed of Abraham" (Gal. 3:29), and the true "Israel of God" (Gal. 6:16).

[See also Vol. 2 Issue 2 and Vol. 2 Issue 3]

Question 2:

But doesn't the term "bride of Christ" refer to Israel while the term "body of Christ" refer to a new and distinct church entity?

Answer:

No. There are several expressions used to denote the New Covenant people of God. The word "church" is only one among many terms including "temple," "building," "house," etc. Describing the church as a "bride" is one metaphor emphasizing certain truths while "body" is another metaphor emphasizing different truths. This is an emotional subject with many, but F.F. Bruce again explains the matter in his commentary on Ephesians:

The conception of the church as the body of Christ helps us to understand how Paul can not only speak of believers as being "in Christ" but also of Christ as being in them. They are "in Christ" as members of his body, "baptized into Christ" (Gal. 3:27); he is in them because it is his risen life that animates them. Similarly, in the organic analogy of John 15:1-8, the

branches are in the vine and the vine at the same time is in the branches.

He uses it [the term "body of Christ"] when he wishes to bring out certain aspects of the relation between church members, or between the church and Christ; when he wishes to bring out certain other aspects, he uses other terminology. From other points of view, for example, the church is thought of as the bride of Christ (2 Cor. 11:2; Eph. 5:22-32), or as the building of which he is either the foundation or the chief cornerstone, and so on. Some theologians, indeed, treat the conception of the church of the body of Christ differently from those other conceptions, admitting that they are metaphorical while insisting that the term "body of Christ" is to be taken "ontologically and realistically."

But if they were right, one could go to make assertions about the church's relation to Christ, on the analogy of the relation which the human body, with its parts and their functions, bears to the head, beyond what Paul has to say. It is better to recognize that Paul speaks of the church as the body of Christ for certain well-defined purposes, and to follow his example in using such language for these same purposes. It can be appreciated that those presentations which bring out the vital relation between Christ and the church are more adequate than others (there is no organic relation between a building and its foundation-stone ...); for this reason the head/body and husband/wife analogy have an especially firm grasp on reality [*The New Int. Com. on the NT, The Epistles to the Colossians, Philemon and Ephesians*, pp. 71, 70, Eerdmans].

[See also, Vol. 2 Issue 2]

Question 3:

But isn't the Church of the body of Christ the subject of a special "dispensation" or "administration" that was hidden in God until it was revealed to the Apostle Paul?

Answer:

No. The word that is sometimes translated as "dispensation" (KJV, NKJV, etc.) or "administration" (NIV) does not refer to a period of time. It is the Greek word "oikonomia" which primarily means the "stewardship" or "administration" of a household. This stewardship or administration is usually used in an "active" sense in the NT. It is therefore often equivalent to

"stewarding" or "administering" or the "putting into effect" of something. Andrew Lincoln explains further the nuances of the word *oikonomia* in his commentary on Ephesians 1:10:

Oikonomia can refer to (1) the act of administering, (2) that which is administered, an arrangement or plan, and (3) the office or role of an administrator, a person's stewardship; it is often difficult to decide which nuance is in view with a particular usage. In the Greek world *oikonomia* was regularly used for God's ordering and administration of the universe. Here in 1:10 it also appears to have the active force (cf. 3:9), while elsewhere (cf. 3:2; I Cor. 4:1; 9:17; Col. 1:25) it refers to Paul's apostolic role and office [Word Biblical Commentary, Ephesians, pp. 31-32, Word Books, Dallas].

There are a great variety of terms used to translate *oikonomia* in the different Bible versions. But it is never used to describe a period of time like an "age" or "epoch" as is usually done in classic dispensationalism. Instead, in Ephesians 1:10 it is God himself who will "put into effect" (NIV) his formerly secret plan "to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ." In a similar way, Paul was given the stewardship of "stewarding" or "administering" or "putting into effect" the grace of God as revealed in the "mystery of Christ" (Eph. 3:2, 9 and Col. 1:25-27). He did this by making it known to others through his apostolic ministry.

[See also Vol. 2 Issue 2]

Question 4:

But doesn't the Bible teach that the Christian hope is different from the hope of Israel? Isn't the Christian hope "heaven" while the hope of Israel is a "kingdom" on earth?

Answer:

No. In the Bible there is one God, one people of God and one hope for all of God's people. Jesus, as the Messiah of God, is also the one Lord and Christ for all of God's people - Old Testament and New. When he "comes" in glory he will raise all "those who belong to him" (I Cor. 15:23). This one biblical hope is summarized in Jesus' own saying:

"Your Kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven" (Matt. 6:10).

In biblical thought the future hope, reward, or inheritance, of God's people is "stored up" (Col. 1:5)

or "kept" (I Peter 1:4) in heaven until the time of Christ's return when he will establish God's "heavenly kingdom" (II Tim. 4:1,18) in a renewed earth. In a sense then, the biblical hope is "heaven on earth." The idea that an inheritance, reward, kingdom, city, etc. is "kept in heaven" until the time of its being received in the future is simply a Hebraic way of thinking and speaking that is reflected throughout the New Testament. The NT, for example, teaches that Abraham and the other OT Patriarchs looked for a "heavenly country" (Heb. 11:16). In the same way, the "reward" of Jesus' disciples is "in heaven" but they will only receive it when they "inherit the earth" - i.e., the "kingdom of heaven" or "kingdom of God" (Matt. 5:1-12). These are the same truths that are taught by Paul in II Cor. 5:1-5 when he speaks of a "heavenly building", "heavenly house" or "heavenly dwelling". In short, as we have born the image of the "earthly" so we will bear the image of the "heavenly" - at Christ's return, when we "inherit the kingdom of God" (I Cor. 15:42-57).

The NT scholar G.R. Beasley-Murray sums up the biblical perspective about the use of such "heavenly" language:

While the majority of Christendom has been in the habit of thinking of "heaven" as the place for which the children of God are destined, Jesus makes the startling statement that the meek are to possess the earth. This accords with the prophetic and apocalyptic traditions almost in their entirety ... The Kingdom of God *comes* from heaven to earth, and earth will be fitted to be the scene of such rule" [Jesus and the Kingdom of God, p. 163, Eerdmans].

When NT language is understood according to its original intent it is plainly that the hope of Abraham, Moses, David, and all the OT saints is the same hope as that of the NT saints: "eternal life" in the coming age of the kingdom of God.

[See also Vol. 2 Issue 1 and Vol. 3 Issue 2]

Question 5:

But don't the Old Testament and New Testament foretell the coming of a "millennial" kingdom for Israel which will fulfill God's Old Testament promises to it as a nation? And doesn't the term "kingdom of God" as used in the Gospels, Acts, NT Letters, etc. refer to this "millennial" kingdom which is spoken of in Revelation chapter 20?

Answer

No, and no. There is nothing about a "millennial" [one thousand year] reign of Christ anywhere in the Bible except in the Book of Revelation. It is "revealed" only in Rev. 20. The Old Testament expectation about the coming "kingdom of God" which is to be ruled by the "Messiah" is *always* that it will be "everlasting" or "without end." Look at a few examples:

For unto us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of peace.

*Of the increase of his government there will be **no end**. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time and **forever** (Isaiah 9:6-7).*

*In the time of those kings, the God of heaven will set up **a kingdom that will never be destroyed** ... it will crush all those kingdoms and bring them to an end, but it will itself endure **forever** (Dan. 2:44).*

*In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with clouds of heaven ... He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and men of every language worshipped him. His dominion is an **everlasting dominion that will not pass away**, and his kingdom is one that will **never be destroyed**.*

*But the saints of the Most High will receive the kingdom and will possess it **forever** - yes, **for ever and ever** (Dan. 7:13-14, 18).*

This expectation for an everlasting kingdom - *not* a one thousand year reign - is consistent throughout both the Old Testament and New Testament with the single exception of Rev. 20. Look at Luke 1:31-32 which reflects the NT view all the way through:

*You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob **forever**; his kingdom will **never end**.*

All of the references by Jesus, Paul and the other NT writers to the "kingdom of God" can only fit

within the Old Testament perspective of this kingdom being a kingdom that is "everlasting" or "without end." It was also expected to be a kingdom with no evil, death or corruption of any kind and inhabited only by the righteous who had been made immortal (Luke 20:34-38; Matt. 25:31-46; I Cor. 15:50-57). This can especially be seen in Jesus' parables about the kingdom of God (e.g. Matt. 13:24-30; 47-50; etc.). Because of this the consistent NT expectation is that "the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God" (I Cor. 6:9; etc.). There is no "neutral" third category - one is either "righteous" and made immortal or "unrighteous" and burned up. In short, in NT thinking the kingdom of God would usher in the "age to come" (Luke 18:29-30). A time when there would be a "universal restoration of all things" (Acts 3:21), or the "making new of all things" (Matt. 19:28-29), or "a new heaven and earth, the home of righteousness" (II Pet. 3:13).

Almost all NT scholars recognize these truths and it is for this reason that the subject of the "millennial" reign of Christ, which is only spoken of in Rev. 20, is so controversial. The picture of this millennium simply cannot fit the picture of the "kingdom of God" that is elsewhere consistently portrayed throughout the NT. For in the millennium of Rev. 20 there are both immortal *and* mortal people while there is also evil, death and destruction. For these reasons the millennium is the subject of a great deal of controversy among Christian NT scholars. There is however a great deal of unanimity that the millennium is nowhere spoken of outside the Book of Revelation. Consider the following statements by NT Christian scholars concerning this subject of the millennium:

Only in Rev. 20 do we find any NT teaching about the millennium [Robert H. Mounce, *The New International Commentary on the NT, The Book of Revelation*, p. 356-7, Eerdmans's].

When we turn to the New Testament, we find no trace of belief in a millennium in any writer other than John [G.B. Caird, *Black's New Testament Commentaries, The Revelation of Saint John*, p. 251, Hendrickson Pub.]

We cannot pause here to discuss the question of the millennium ... Rev. 20 is the only passage in the Bible which speaks of it and, whatever be its interpretation, it supplies a very slender base for the elaborate and exact theories that have been erected

upon it [John Bright, *The Kingdom of God*, p. 241, Abingdon Press].

The idea of a limited messianic reign on earth of specified duration, falling immediately prior to the inauguration of the eternal reign of God on earth, is not found in the OT or in any Jewish writing of John's day. What one does find, however, in both the OT and intertestamental writings, is a firm hope in the eternal reign of God on earth *that begins with triumph and reign of God's Messiah* [Robert Wall, *New International Biblical Commentary, Revelation*, p. 235, Hendrickson Pub.].

The millennial reign of Christ in Rev. 20 must be understood in the light of the Book of Revelation as a whole and not read back into the statements of other OT or NT biblical writers. Even in the Book of Revelation itself the millennium does not take place in "the age to come." Instead the age to come begins in Rev. 21 when the "former things pass away" and "the new heavens and earth" "come down from heaven." In contrast, everywhere else in the NT the age to come begins immediately at Christ's return.

NT scholar Richard Bauckham summarizes the issue of the millennium in the light of the overall NT teaching about the Christian hope for the "kingdom of God":

It should be emphasized that no other passage of scripture clearly refers to the millennium. To apply OT prophecies of the age of salvation specifically to the millennium runs counter to the general interpretation of such prophecies, which find their fulfillment in the salvation already achieved by Christ and to be consummated in the age to come. This is also how Rev. itself interprets such prophecies in chs. 21f. Within the structure of Rev. the millennium has a limited role, as a demonstration of the final victory of Christ and his saints over the powers of evil. The principal object of Christian hope is not the millennium but the new creation of Rev. 21f. [Richard J. Bauckham, *New Bible Dictionary*, "Eschatology," p. 347, Tyndale]

[See also Vol. 2 Issue 1 and Vol. 3 Issue 2. And, for a good explanation of how the millennium *may* fit within the NT doctrine of the two ages see G. E. Ladd's book *The Gospel of the Kingdom*, chapter 2 "The Kingdom is Tomorrow," esp. pp. 35-39.]

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E-mail address: richie.temple@internetmci.com

Foundation for Translation of Biblical Studies, Inc.
P.O. Box 473
Cary, NC 27511