

The Church Universal, Local, and God's Wisdom

By Al Felder

"⁸For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the Lord. ⁹For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts." (Isaiah 55:8, 9)

One need look no further than creation itself to understand the truth of these verses of scripture. In fact, the scriptures state on a number of occasions that the splendors of creation are enough to lead men to the conclusion that there is a God. The order and precise detail with which everything operates points to the inevitable conclusion that God is real. A further and more complete knowledge of God can be gained through His word.

God's wisdom can be understood as we read His word, and comprehend His design for the church. Certainly, mankind would have done things different. Evidence of this fact can be seen from all of the many groups that have left the Biblical pattern in order to establish their own churches governed by their own rules. Yet, none of them can compare to God's plan set forth in His word. It is our goal to bring forth some very practical thoughts regarding God's design for the church that we may have a deeper understanding of His great wisdom.

When we begin to probe into God's word, we find that the word "church" is used in a universal sense as well as a local sense. The scriptures teach that the church in its universal sense is only a spiritual relationship, not an organization. *"And I say unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it."* (Matthew 16:18) This verse of scripture refers to the church in the universal sense. Jesus, in His discussion with His disciples, has in mind the church throughout all time. He is not referring to any particular place or time in which the church might exist. Instead, He is discussing the church as a whole throughout its existence. Each and every person who will obey the Gospel and be a part of the church is under consideration by Christ at this time.

There is no structure to the church in its universal sense that can be found in the scriptures. The universal church shows relationship, not structure. *"Honor all men. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the king."* (1 Peter 2:17) Concerning the use of the word brotherhood in this verse Vine says, "primarily a brotherly relation, and so, the community possessed of this relation, a brotherhood."¹ The church is the spiritual family of God.

It is for this reason that we often find members of the church referred to as brothers and sisters in the Bible. These familial terms refer to a person who has obeyed the Gospel of Christ, and has been separated from the world as a result of this action.

¹ Vine, W. E. 1996. *Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words*. Nashville, TN : Thomas Nelson, Inc., 1996. p. 82.

“⁹I wrote unto you in an epistle not to company with fornicators: ¹⁰Yet not altogether with the fornicators of this world, or with the covetous, or extortioners, or idolaters; for then must ye needs go out of the world. ¹¹But now I have written unto you not to keep company, if any man that is called a brother be a fornicator, or covetous, or an idolater, or a railer, or a drunkard, or an extortioner; with such a one no not to eat.” (1 Corinthians 5:9-11)

In this passage, a clear distinction can be seen between one who is called a brother (Christian) and one who is of the world.

The fact that the church universal is a spiritual relationship as shown in the scriptures teaches us three things: 1) We, as believers, have the same spiritual parenthood. *“²⁶For ye are all the children of God by faith in Jesus. ²⁷For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ.”* (Galatians 3:26, 27) 2) It shows that we have the same spiritual nationality. *“But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should shew forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.”* (1 Peter 2:9) 3) It shows the same spiritual interests. *“Fulfill ye my joy, that ye be likeminded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind.”* (Philippians 2:2) In essence, it is a divine family of which only those who have obeyed the Gospel of Christ are a part.

When we begin to discuss organization in regards to the Lord’s church, the scriptures teach there is none larger than the local congregation. A local congregation is nothing more than a group of believers in a particular area who assemble themselves together according to the pattern set forth in God’s word. *“Unto the church of God which is at Corinth, to them that are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, with all that in every place call upon the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, both theirs and ours.”* (1 Corinthians 1:2) All throughout the world such congregations exist, and operate by the authority given them from God.

Everyone who has obeyed the Gospel of Christ is a part of the church universal. All of the saved are in the church. Outside of the church there is no salvation. *“Praising God, and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved.”* (Acts 2:47) Because of this, membership to the local congregation is automatic. There is no voting that takes place in order for a person to become a member of the church. The Bible makes it clear that God adds people to the church. The context of this verse indicates that this occurs when a person obeys the Gospel of Christ.

As we have stated before, there is no organization to the church larger than the local congregation that can be found in the Bible. There is no earthly head or headquarters for the Lord’s church. Jesus is the head of the church. *“And he is the head of the body, the church: who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead; that in all things he might have the preeminence.”* (Colossians 1:18) The church is a kingdom of which Christ is the King, therefore, it could be said that the church is a monarchy. *“There is one lawgiver.”* (James 4:12) Christ alone is the sole lawgiver in this kingdom. *“All power is given unto me in heaven, and in earth.”* (Matthew

28:18) Only He has all authority. This being the case, all things that are done must be done according to His word.

Due to the fact that Christ is the head of the church, each congregation is autonomous (self-governing). The autonomous nature of each local congregation can be easily understood by the pattern set forth in God's word regarding how it is to govern itself. For example, each congregation is to ordain elders (plural). *"And when they had ordained them elders in every church, and had prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord, on whom they believed."* (Acts 14:23) Men who meet the qualifications set forth in the scriptures are to be appointed and oversee the local congregation.

The Greek word for elder is presbuteros. Its common meaning is an old man or an elder. Vine says, "In the Christian churches, those who, being raised up and qualified by the work of the Holy Spirit, were appointed to have the spiritual care of, and to exercise oversight over, the churches."² He later states, "The divine arrangement seen throughout the New Testament was for a plurality of these to be appointed in each church."³ There were at least two or more of these men appointed and they only oversaw the congregation to which they belonged.

Another term which is used for an elder in the Bible is the word bishop. This is the Greek word episkopos. It means an overseer, to look or to watch. How do we know that this term refers to the same office as an elder? The answer to this question can be found in Acts 20. In verse 17, the Bible says that Paul, *"called the elders of the church."* The word elder here is the Greek word presbuteros. In verse 28, Paul tells them to, *"Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers."* The word overseer in this verse is bishop or episkopos.

Concerning this text, Vine makes the following statement, "An elder is another term for the same person as bishop or overseer. The term elder indicates the mature spiritual experience and understanding of those so described; the term bishop, or overseer indicates the character of the work undertaken. According to the divine will and appointment, as in the New Testament, there were to be bishops in every local church. Where the singular is used, the passage is describing what a bishop should be."⁴

² —. **1996.** *Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words.* Nashville, TN : Thomas Nelson, Inc., 1996. p. 195.

³ —. **1996.** *Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words.* Nashville, TN : Thomas Nelson, Inc., 1996. p. 195.

⁴ —. **1996.** *Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words.* Nashville, TN : Thomas Nelson, Inc., 1996. p. 67.

There are two other terms in the English language that are used to describe this office. They are pastor and shepherd. In the Greek language they are the same word, *poimen*. This word means a shepherd, one who tends herds or flocks. Vine says, "Used metaphorically of Christian pastors."⁵ *"And he gave some, apostles; and some prophets; and some evangelist; and some, pastors and teachers."* (Ephesians 4:11) Pastors guide as well as feed the flock. Once again we look to Acts 20 where Paul tells the elders to, *"Take heed unto yourselves, and to all the flock."* (Acts 20:28) This passage lets us know that a pastor or shepherd is just another term used to describe an elder.

It is sad, but true that a gross misunderstanding of these words has led many people to completely go against God's pattern for the church. According to scripture, the oversight of the elders is limited to the local church to which they are a part. *"Feed the flock of God which is among you, taking the oversight thereof."* (1 Peter 5:2) The elders only have authority to oversee the members, discipline, teaching, and funds of the local church and it only. Any attempt to place elders over more than one local church is foreign to the scriptures.

All one must do in order to see the wisdom that God used in His plan for the church universal is look around at the various groups that have tried to organize some type of structure that God has not authorized. This departure from God's word has led to many abuses. The unscriptural uniting of local churches has never done anything but serve the egos of men as they lust for power.

Just because the church universal does not have a structure to it does not mean that God has left the individual Christian to fend for himself. God, realizing the need of man for some type of physical support and companionship; yet at the same time knowing the egos of man for positions of power, devised the best possible plan – the local church. This way, the egos of man can be kept in check and the individual Christian will have the support and encouragement needed in order to remain faithful.

The local congregation makes us more accountable to God and our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ than we would be without it. For example, we are commanded to assemble together upon the first day of the week to worship God, edify, and encourage one another. *"Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together."* (Hebrews 10:25) *"Wherefore, my brethren, when ye come together to eat, tarry one for another."* (1 Corinthians 11:33) It would be easy to neglect the commands regarding worship upon the first day of the week if we were left to ourselves, but as members of the local church we can hold each other accountable.

Also, the local congregation as designed by God serves as a disciplinary body for the purpose of helping the individual members remain faithful. This can be seen in the scriptures. *"¹It is reported commonly that there is fornication among you, and such fornication as is not so*

⁵ —. 1996. *Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words*. Nashville, TN : Thomas Nelson, Inc., 1996. p. 462.

much as named among the Gentiles, that one should have his father's wife. ²And ye are puffed up, and have not rather mourned, that he that hath done this deed might be taken away from among you. ³For I verily, as absent in body, but present in spirit, have judged already, as though I were present, concerning him that hath so done this deed, ⁴In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when ye are gathered together, and my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, ⁵To deliver such an one unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus." (1 Corinthians 5:1-5)

In this situation, a brother was living in sin. If he were left to himself there is no doubt that he would have continued in this behavior, and he would have been eternally lost. By being a part of a local church, however, he had close ties with other Christians. It was through that fellowship that he was able to get just a small taste of what eternity will be like. This fellowship is something that should be valued by all Christians.

God in His divine wisdom realizing these things arranged the local church for the purpose of discipline. When a brother or sister is in sin the scriptural procedure is to be followed for the purpose of winning them back to Christ. If they truly value their salvation and the fellowship that comes with it, they will turn from their sins when fellow Christians withhold their fellowship. This was certainly the case with the brother in Corinth.

"⁶Sufficient to such a man is this punishment, which was inflicted of many. ⁷So that contrariwise ye ought rather to forgive him, and comfort him, lest perhaps such a one should be swallowed up with overmuch sorrow. ⁸Wherefore I beseech you that ye would confirm your love toward him. ⁹For to this end also did I write, that I might know the proof of you, whether ye be obedient in all things. ¹⁰To whom ye forgive anything, I forgive also: for if I forgave anything, to whom I forgave it, for your sakes forgave I it in the person of Christ." (2 Corinthians 2:6-10)

Our fellowship with one another that comes through Christ is something that we should value.

In closing, God's ways are certainly higher than our ways, and His thoughts are higher than our thoughts. We are not perfect, but His plan is perfect. If we will but follow His word we will be the church that Jesus built, and we will have a home in heaven for all eternity.