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THE CHURCHES OF CHRIST – WHAT ARE THEY?

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We have called attention to the teaching of the New Testament that the Church of our Lord universally is made up of individuals and is not composed of "churches." Universally it is a relationship between the saved of the earth and the sacred three of the Godhead. The New Testament also teaches just as definitely that "churches of Christ" in their own locality are organic, functional entities. These "churches" were independent of the other, each had its own organization, carrying on its own work and was a complete entity or body in itself. If there had been but one on the face of the earth, it would have been the "church of Christ."

These "churches of Christ" not only were independent of each other and were not federated or amalgamated in any manner, but they had no denominational organization of any kind. They were congregational in both government and function. In New Testament scriptures there is nothing to indicate any "intercongregational" function or relationship. The members of the church at Philippi, Ephesus, or Rome. Likewise the elders at Ephesus were not elders of Rome, Corinth, or the church in any other place. The relationship that existed between the elders of the church at Ephesus and the members of the church there did not exist between these elders and any members of any other congregation on earth, and the members

of the Ephesian church did not sustain the relationship they had to the elders of that church to any other eldership on earth.

The elders of a local church were to "feed," "tend and take the oversight" of the flock where they were "Bishops" and the flock "among you." This was their obligation toward no other flock on earth. Likewise the members were to "obey" those elders who had the "rule over them," "submit yourselves" only to them. They sustained no such relationship to any other eldership on earth. (Acts 20:17-28; I Peter 5:2-3; Heb. 13:7,17)

Moreover, the members of a local church had duties and obligations toward one another that they did not have and could not fulfill toward the members of any other local congregation for the reason not only that it was not their responsibility to do so but they lacked the opportunity to render the same service toward members of any other local congregation. Some of these duties were: "And we beseech you, brethren, to know them which labour among you, and are over you in the Lord, and admonish you; and esteem them very highly in love for their work's sake. And be at peace among yourselves. Now we exhort you, brethren, warn them that are unruly, comfort the feebleminded, support the weak, be patient toward all." (I Thess. 5:12-13) "For we hear that there are

some which walk among you disorderly, working not at all, but are busybodies. Now them that are such we command and exhort by our Lord Jesus Christ, that with quietness they work, and eat their own bread. But ye, brethren, be not weary in well-doing. And if any man obey not our word by this epistle, note that man, and have no company with him that he may be ashamed. Yet count him not as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother." (II Thess. 3:11-15) "Take heed, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief, in departing from the living God. But exhort one another daily, while it is called today; lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin." (Heb. 3:12-13) "Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness; considering thyself, lest thou be also tempted. Bear ye one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ." (Gal. 6:1-2)

These passages above and many others that could be included with them set forth obligations that Christians owe to each other. They are mutual obligations and while they can be performed or discharged toward any Christian as opportunity presents itself, yet, the full obligation of discharging these obligations one toward another can be discharged both from the viewpoint of obligation and opportunity in the fellowship between Christians in the relationship they sustain as "members one of another" in the local church.

We may be able to enjoy fellowship in a limited measure with Christians wherever we go and have contact with them or by contributing to their welfare either spiritually or physically across the world as we have opportunity but the full obligations of Christian fellowship can be enjoyed and discharged only in the local church.

Moreover, the local church has the right to control its own fellowship. When Paul went up to Jerusalem from Arabia where he had preached the gospel for some three years after his conversion, he wanted to have fellowship with the saints in Jerusalem and accordingly made an effort — "assayed" — to join himself to the disciples: but they were all afraid of him, and believed not that he was a disciple. (Acts 9:26) It was not till Barnabas commended him to them that they received him into their fellowship and he "went in and out" among them. This means that a Christian should associate himself with the disciples locally (the local church), be a member of it and have fellowship with it for this is what Paul's example teaches us. But it also means that the local church is not under obligation to receive one into its

fellowship until confidence in him has been established as a genuine Christian.

The local church of Christ has a right to expel and exclude from its fellowship those who walk disorderly and contrary to the will of the Lord. This was commanded by Paul in I Cor. 5 and II Thess. 3:6-15. God has therefore ordained the local church as a medium of fellowship) through which Christians may discharge their duty toward God and toward one another. The local church as a community of Saints, with its Bishops and Deacons, is a divinely designed medium through every privilege in the "fulness of divine grace" provided and every obligation to God to glorify Him "through the church" can and should be fulfilled.

It should be obvious from all of this that a Christian's duty from the viewpoint of both his obligation to God and toward his fellow Christians are to be discharged primarily and predominantly through the local church and that God has ordained and provided this functional, organic entity as a means for so doing. When this is pointed out it is often asked, "What if there is no local church where one lives?" The answer is that if you are a Christian, you will get busy and start one and if that is impossible, then you should "shake the dust off your feet" and go elsewhere. You need, as a Christian, for the sake of your own spiritual interest as well as for the sake of your service to God in the accomplishment of His purposes to be identified with a church of Christ — a community of Christians, situated geographically where it will be possible for you to worship and serve God's purposes in fellowship with other Christians. Only thus can you do your full duty toward God and receive the encouragement and edification and will enable you to go to heaven.

Each local church was an entirely independent entity, to fulfill its mission, designated by divine will, through its own organization made up as God has designed of "all the saints (of that community of Christians) with its Bishops and Deacons." (Phil. 1:1) The idea of one local church "withdrawing fellowship" from another local church is as contrary to the teaching of the Word of God and completely unsupported by truth. When a congregation becomes apostate, departs from the faith, will not honor the Word of God, allow it to be preached, or follow it as the sole rule of faith and practice, it cannot be recognized by faithful Christians as a true and scriptural church of Christ, but there is no organic tie with other churches to sever. In the event of departure from the faith, no encouragement can be extended or fellowship offered lest we become a partaker of the apostasy.

(II John 9-11) God will remove the candlestick which represents its identity (Rev. 2:5) except repentance takes place, but there are no inter-congregational ties to sever for none exists to begin with.

No mission or function of the church; no identifying characteristic of the "churches of Christ" involved in any "inter-congregational" objectives or activity. When more than one state is involved in any activity or whenever activity crosses state lines it becomes "inter-state" and the federal government — a large organization takes over to control it. Only "intra-state" activity is possible by a single state. Even so, when congregations pool their resources and any activity or function in any project involves "inter-congregational" activity, it takes an organization larger than just a "church of Christ" to carry it out. This is what is wrong with any local church trying to carry out a program of work, whether evangelistic or benevolent in its nature, for the whole brotherhood or more than one church. It perverts God's organization for the church from a local, functional unit to a "brotherhood unit" operation and there cannot be any scriptural authority for it. The Bible does not teach it by precept, commandment, approved example or necessary inference. — *15 W. Par Ave., Orlando, Florida 32804*
