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HOW THE EARLY CHURCH ORGANIZED ITSELF

The Book of Acts and the Pauline Epistles provide important insights into early church organization.

There are a variety of forms of church organization in contemporary church denominations. How did these churches adopt their own models of church organization? Would it be possible to ascertain a model of church organization from the early church? More specifically, is it possible to understand the way early believers were organized as local and universal church?

In considering the structure of the church as it is mentioned in the New Testament, there is always a danger-

ous tendency to read back into apostolic times the issues and arguments of today's literature. But the Book of Acts and the Pauline Epistles serve as sources for early church organization and the reasons behind that church structure. In addition, they reflect how it grew and organized despite persecution and a variety of cultural and philosophical influences.

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The Initial Stage of the Church

In calling the 12 disciples, Jesus Christ was beginning a new movement that would grow to become the Christian Church. "He called his twelve disciples to him and gave them authority to drive out evil spirits and to heal every disease and sickness" (Matt 10:1, NIV). It is important to note that from this small group of 12, Jesus inaugurated the basic unit of church organization and mission. "These twelve Jesus sent out" (vs. 5). The word *apostle* gives the same idea. From this beginning, the disciples were called by Jesus, and they were called to continue Jesus' mission.

In asserting His declaration to the apostle Peter, Jesus Himself expressed His willingness to build His own church. "I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it" (Acts 16:18). From this statement, it is possible to grasp the intention of Jesus to have a church and to have apostles to continue with the proclamation of the kingdom of God and the multiplication of disciples.

The church, initiated by Jesus, would be a movement that would continue the mission of the One who is now "[e]xalted to the right hand of God" (Acts 2:33). Jesus' purpose for the formation of a community of believers was so clear that He even prayed for those who would be

added to this early church nucleus. "My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message" (John 17:20). Jesus prayed also for the unity of the community of those who will be united in one body, the church (vs. 21). So, in the last week of His ministry He prayed, "Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name . . . so that they may be one as we are one" (vs. 11).

Unity was for Jesus one of the most important aspects of the movement He was beginning. In synthesis, the New Testament church is considered to be an organic body founded upon Jesus Christ with individual members interdependent, yet each having full access to the church's head, Jesus Christ.

The Great Commission

The Great Commission is found near the end of three gospels and in the first chapter of the Book of Acts. In Matthew 28:19, 20, Jesus instructed His disciples to make more disciples, baptize them, and teach them to obey everything He had taught them. Based on the centrality of Christ's authority, the use of the term *disciple* in the Great Commission, and the practice of evangelism and church development in the Book of Acts, it is expected that God's plan for carrying out this commission would focus on planting new groups of committed disciples.

The Book of Acts reveals the way the first-century missionaries implemented the Great Commission. After the Holy Spirit came upon the disciples, the church was established in Jerusalem (Acts 2). The gospel spread, and everywhere it went, churches were established. The Book of Acts records the establishment of local churches in Antioch of Syria, Antioch of Pisidia, Iconium, Lystra, Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea, Corinth, Ephesus, and Rome. One significant example of church development is found in the establishment of the church in Antioch of Syria.

The Antioch Church

As a result of the work of those who were persecuted, “men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus. The Lord’s hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord” (Acts 11:20, 21). This was the beginning of the church of Antioch. Because of this development, the church in Jerusalem sent a disciple to observe and bring reports. Sending a representative suggests that they already had a system of church organization.

It also suggests that they were concerned not only about church organization but church growth. So “they sent Barnabas to Antioch” (vs. 22). As time passed, the church in

Antioch became one of the centers for church development, since “a great number of people were brought to the Lord” (vs. 24). In order to continue nurture in Antioch, Barnabas brought Paul there. “For a whole year Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people” (vs. 26). It appears that Paul and Barnabas followed the Jewish pattern of the synagogue in organizing the Antioch church.

After one year of teaching, those who believed and regularly came to the meetings became disciples of Jesus Christ, and for this reason they were called “Christians” (Acts 11:26). They not only received a new name, but they also grew in such a way that Luke mentioned that after one year, the church was led by prophets and teachers (13:1), which indicates that church leaders were selected according to their spiritual qualifications and spiritual gifts. They even were concerned for the needs of the brothers living in Judea and provided help, “sending their gift to the elders by Barnabas and Saul” (11:30). Sending leaders and sharing gifts suggest that the church in Jerusalem and the church in Antioch were organized.

It is noteworthy that when Paul and Barnabas returned to Antioch from their missionary trip, they reported to the local church that sent them. As Luke mentioned, “From

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Attalia they sailed back to Antioch, where they had been committed to the grace of God for the work they had now completed. On arriving there, they gathered the church together and reported all that God had done through them and how he had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles” (Acts 14:26, 27). Evidently making reports of missionary activity was the practice. They were accountable for their mission to the church and for sharing the news of their missionary trip with them.

Paul’s Ministry to the Jewish Synagogues

The early synagogues helped Jews maintain their identity while living in a foreign and pagan country. They became the center of Jewish social life, serving as school, meeting place, courtroom, and house of prayer. In some towns, synagogues may have even provided lodging for travelers. Synagogues were a place where small groups of Jewish students could read and discuss the Torah and oral tradi-

tion. Worship and study, friendship and community celebration, meetings and governing of the community were centered on the synagogue.

The natural place to witness to the gospel of Jesus was in the place where Paul and Barnabas were accustomed to study the Scriptures, the synagogue. The first place they visited on their mission trip to Cyprus was the local synagogue, where “they proclaimed the word of God” (Acts 13:5). “From Perga they went on to Pisidian Antioch. On the Sabbath they entered the synagogue and sat down” (vs. 14). After the reading of the Scriptures, the leaders invited the apostle Paul to speak. Paul explained the purpose of Jesus Christ’s mission and sacrifice, and finally he concluded: “Therefore, my brothers, I want you to know that through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you. Through him everyone who believes is justified from everything you could not be justified from by the law of Moses” (vss. 38, 39). Therefore, in their early

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missionary ministry, the apostle Paul and his associates used the synagogue as a center for evangelism because they were accustomed to its structure.

After they reached the Jews, they also turned to the Gentiles because this was their mission. Although their ministry focused on the Gentiles, they followed the same method: First they visited the Jews in their synagogues, and then they turned to the Gentiles (Acts 14:1, 3). For instance, “At Iconium Paul and Barnabas went as usual into the Jewish synagogue” (vs. 1). “As usual” suggests that they made the major approach in teaching the gospel visiting the Jewish synagogues. And as a result of Paul and Barnabas’ teachings, many new disciples were added to the church.

How did they organize? Again following the pattern of the Jewish synagogues, they appointed elders in each church (Acts 14:21-23). They were organized as a local church

apart from the local synagogue. Thus the early church organization was gaining identity and using the synagogue as model for a local church organization.

So it also happened in Thessalonica: “As his custom was, Paul went into the synagogue, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that the Christ had to suffer and rise from the dead. ‘This Jesus I am proclaiming to you is the Christ,’ he said” (Acts 17:2, 3). Throughout the Book of Acts, this was the method of sharing the gospel of Jesus. When they arrived in Berea, they also followed the same method. “On arriving there, they went to the Jewish synagogue” (vs. 10).

Interestingly, they used the same approach in Athens. “He reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there” (vs. 17).

In Corinth, “[e]very Sabbath he reasoned in the synagogue, trying to persuade Jews and Greeks” (Acts 18:4). In Corinth there was a change of place after the Jews opposed Paul, so he “left the synagogue and went next door to the house of Titius Justus, a worshiper of God” (vs. 7). This suggests, further, that the early church carried on many of its meetings at the houses of the believers.

In Ephesus, Paul “went into the synagogue and reasoned with the Jews” (Acts 18:19). And in his third missionary journey, the apostle Paul arrived in Ephesus again, and following his custom, he “entered the synagogue and spoke boldly there for three months, arguing persuasively about the kingdom of God” (19:8).

Visiting the synagogues was their strategy for church mission and evangelism as well as a pattern for local church organization. In those places they visited, elders were appointed for teaching and nurturing the believers.

Appointment of Local Church Elders

The first reference to elders in the early church is found when the believers at Antioch sent a relief offering to the elders of Jerusalem “by the hands of Barnabas and Saul” (Acts 11:30, KJV). The designation of elders was certainly similar to the term used to name the leaders of the synagogue

in Judaism, but different in nature.

The apostle Paul and his helpers appointed elders in the cities they visited (Acts 14:23). It seems that one of the main purposes for returning to the cities they had already evangelized was to appoint elders. “[T]hey 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” (vss. 21-23). It seems that they followed the opinion and consent of the whole church in the process of selection.

It is important to note that when the apostle and his associates appointed elders, they used a particular leadership pattern from the Jewish synagogues. The actual leadership of the synagogues included the head of the synagogue, the minister, and the elders. According to the Book of Acts and the Pauline Epistles, they selected the term *elders* to designate the leaders of the local church. As the local church grew, they borrowed at least two categories for leadership: the elders and the ministers. The latter had a connection with the idea of service and ministry, as was the case of the church in Philippi.

It was the normal procedure for early church organization to appoint

elders in every church. Interestingly enough, when the apostle Paul addressed the Philippian church, he mentioned, “Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, To all the saints in Christ Jesus at Philippi, together with the overseers and deacons” (Phil. 1:1). Philippi was the first church established on the European continent, and the Philippians followed the pattern established by these missionary trips. Although he was using the word *overseers* in this epistle, the apostle was referring to elders, a word also recorded in the Book of Acts. Luke mentions that “Paul sent to Ephesus for the elders of the church” (Acts 20:17). In this case he used the word for elders. Later, in his address to the Ephesian elders, he used the word for overseers; therefore, for the apostle the words were interchangeable.

The appointment of elders was also an important work of the associates of Paul, such as Titus and Timothy. He mentioned 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” (Titus 1:5). Similarly, he instructed Timothy, “The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honor, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching” (1 Tim. 5:17).

Elders were religious leaders of the early church who governed the

believers in local congregations and were responsible for leadership, pastoral care, teaching, and supervision. When discrepancies and doctrinal misunderstanding arose, local leaders gathered together with elders and apostles in Jerusalem to solve doctrinal questions.

The Council of Jerusalem

The church of Antioch was confronted with a doctrinal debate: the issue was regarding circumcision of those who came to the church from a Gentile origin. Should they be circumcised before coming to the Christian community? Some men who came from Judea taught that “[u]nless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved” (Acts 15:1). In order to solve this issue, the church of Antioch appointed Paul and Barnabas, “along with some other believers, to go up to Jerusalem to see the apostles and elders about this question” (vs. 2). This is the first reference to a church council in which representatives from local churches were selected to discuss a doctrinal issue.

Thus, Paul and Barnabas were “welcomed by the church and the apostles and elders, to whom they reported everything God had done through them” (Acts 15:4). It seems that the apostles continued in a position of leadership as major overseers of the universal church and

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were willing to listen to reports on church development. Specifically, “The apostles and elders met to consider this question” (vs. 6). So at the Jerusalem Council it is possible to observe two levels of church organization: the first, the local churches who sent their elders as representatives; and the second, the universal church represented by the apostles, who were empowered to make a doctrinal statement.

In the council there was a desire to preserve the unity of the church. For this reason, the church of Antioch did not act independently, but decided to send representatives together with Paul and Barnabas to the apostles and elders at Jerusalem.

After they had a consensus, the apostles and elders, with the whole church, “decided to choose some of their own men and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They chose Judas (called Barsabbas) and Silas, two men who were leaders among the brothers” (Acts 15:22). So the church in a council had the ca-

capacity to send representatives to local churches to teach a doctrinal statement and to clarify the issue of salvation. “The men were sent off and went down to Antioch, where they gathered the church together and delivered the letter. The people read it and were glad for its encouraging message. Judas and Silas, who themselves were prophets, said much to encourage and strengthen the brothers” (vss. 30-32).

As a consequence of the decision of the local and universal church, they were strengthened in “faith and grew daily in numbers” (Acts 16:5). A very important doctrinal consensus was established under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. They agreed, “We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are” (15:11). This was the beginning of a formal process by which the universal church discussed doctrinal questions.

Thus, through the Jerusalem Council, two levels of church organization were clearly visible. The

Looking at the church development and early church organization, there were two levels of church organization in Paul's time. First, the local church elders appointed by the apostle Paul and his associates cared for the local needs of the recent community of believers. Second, the universal church leaders such as Paul and his associates functioned as overseers and universal church pastors who cared for the church at large, its nurture and health.

council operated under the leadership of the apostles (James, Peter, and John), and the whole church was present through their representatives. In other words, the structure of the church was formulated from both universal and local perspectives.

It is important to note that the apostle Paul in his third missionary journey, when he arrived at Jerusalem, clearly recognized the universal leadership of the apostles and elders in Jerusalem. "When we arrived at Jerusalem, the brothers received us warmly. The next day Paul and the rest of us went to see James, and all the elders were present. Paul greeted them and reported in detail what God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry" (Acts 21:17-19).

There was not only a recognized leadership in Jerusalem, but also a monetary contribution from local churches to Jerusalem. "About the

collection for God's people: Do what I told the Galatian churches to do. On the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with his income, saving it up, so that when I come no collections will have to be made. Then, when I arrive, I will give letters of introduction to the men you approve and send them with your gift to Jerusalem" (1 Cor. 16:1-3). There was a recognized universal leadership in Jerusalem as well as recognized leadership in the local churches.

Universal Leaders of the Church

As mentioned previously, looking at the church development and early church organization, there were two levels of church organization in Paul's time. First, the local church elders appointed by the apostle Paul and his associates cared for the local needs of the recent community of believers. Second, the universal church leaders such as Paul and his

associates functioned as overseers and universal church pastors who cared for the church at large, its nurture and health.

It is interesting to note that the apostle Paul and his associates functioned as major supervisors of the local churches in certain regions. In a certain way, these associates were universal overseers under the apostle's guidance. For instance, from Ephesus, Paul "sent two of his helpers, Timothy and Erastus, to Macedonia, while he stayed in the province of Asia a little longer" (Acts 19:22). Similarly, addressing the church at Thessalonica, the apostle wrote, "We sent Timothy, who is our brother and God's fellow worker in spreading the gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you in your faith" (1 Thess. 3:2). And after the visitation, Timothy came back with a report to Paul: "Timothy has just now come to us from you and has brought good news about your faith and love" (vs. 6).

Through the instructions that the apostle Paul gave to Timothy, some basic principles for the universal ministry may be understood. It was the apostle Paul who appointed Timothy at Lystra (Acts 16:1). Paul wanted Timothy to accompany him on his second missionary trip (vs. 3). Thus, Timothy traveled, sent by Paul, on some specific pastoral missions. For example, he sent Timothy to Thessalonica, Philippi, and Cor-

inth with specific instructions and mission (1 Thess. 3:2; 3:6; Phil. 2:19; 1 Cor. 4:17). Therefore, it is evident that Timothy functioned as a shepherd in a broader category of church organization.

Is there evidence of how Timothy performed his universal ministry? The letters Paul wrote give us some clues toward understanding his ministry. First of all, he was assigned to correct false teachers (1 Tim. 1:3). He was also charged to instruct the members of local churches (4:6). How did he perform his ministry? He was invested with authority, being an example of teaching, preaching, faith, and purity (vss. 11-14). Timothy was also commissioned to prepare other believers to teach doctrine (2 Tim. 2:2).

Another important characteristic of the apostolic ministry was the fact that universal workers addressed churches in the introduction of the epistles. For example, Apollos and Paul were considered "fellow workers" (1 Cor. 3:9). "Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus" (Phil. 1:1); "Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother" (Col. 1:1); "Paul, Silas, and Timothy" (1 Thess. 1:1; 2 Thess. 1:1). There is evidence that Paul had coworkers such as Priscilla and Aquila (Rom. 16:3), Timothy (Rom. 16:21), Titus (2 Cor. 8:23), Mark (Col. 4:10), and Luke (Philemon 24). All of them received teaching and instructions

from the apostle Paul to conduct the work of teaching and witnessing from a universal perspective.

A Unique Form of Church Organization

It is important to ask why Paul and his associates chose the synagogue as a model for local church organization. As was mentioned, their strategy for mission and evangelism was to visit the Jewish synagogues and present the gospel that Jesus was the Messiah.

There was another model that the apostles could use for church organization on both local and universal levels. Paul was very well acquainted with the political system of the Roman Empire, and he declared himself to be a Roman citizen (Acts 16:37, 38). During his trial and judgment, he recognized clearly the instances of the judiciary and political system of the Roman Empire. He evidently avoided any hint of the hierarchical system of the sort used by the political structure of that time.

Paul was following more than tradition when structuring churches patterned after the synagogues. As a well-trained Pharisee, he understood the value and purpose of the synagogue. For him it was a house of prayer and a house of Scripture study. Besides, at the center of the synagogue teachings, festivals, and worship was the expectation of the coming of the Messiah. So, in the light of

their strategy and constant visitation to the synagogues in their missionary trips, the synagogue constituted a very important place to testify that indeed Jesus Christ, the Messiah, had come and provided salvation not only for the Jews but also for the Gentiles. Clearly, Paul used this model of church organization that matched the proclamation of the Messiah.

It is also important to observe that Paul was confronted with philosophical schools of thought throughout his ministry. Although he was aware of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers in Athens, he did not organize another philosophical school called "Christian."

Contrary to any philosophical school, he emphasized the truth received by revelation and communicated by inspiration (2 Tim. 3:16). He also mentioned that the message he was teaching was not his own, but was the message of the Lord (1 Thess. 2:13). He received by revelation the message of Jesus Christ (Gal. 1:11, 12). The gospel and church mission was the apostle's passion and priority.

The apostle Paul did not follow any political form of government or any philosophical school of thought; he followed the pattern of a religious institution, a synagogue, because it represented the solution for the teaching of Jesus as the Messiah and the form for a unified church organization.

Paul was following more than tradition when structuring churches patterned after the synagogues. As a well-trained Pharisee, he understood the value and purpose of the synagogue. For him it was a house of prayer and a house of Scripture study. Besides, at the center of the synagogue teachings, festivals, and worship was the expectation of the coming of the Messiah.

The apostle Paul clearly stated that the church was “built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord” (Eph. 2:20, 21). According to this metaphor, Jesus Christ is the principal foundation upon which the apostles and prophets, and finally, the whole church are laid.

Paul asserted that James, Cephas (Peter), and John were “reputed to be pillars” (Gal. 2:9) in the church at Jerusalem. It is important to note that in most cases, Peter was recognized as a primary apostle, but primary in the sense of service (2 Peter 1:1). From its beginning, the church was strongly influenced by the preaching and teaching of Peter and John (Acts 3:1; 4:1, 13). They took the initiative to fulfill the responsibility given by Jesus, “teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection of the dead” (4:2). In

those days most of the believers were Jews, and it was not difficult for them regularly to assemble for worship in the synagogues.

As the church grew, it became necessary to include others in the organization. In an initial step, “seven men of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom” (Acts 6:3, NKJV) were elected to collaborate with the apostles. They functioned not only in the “daily distribution” but also, according to the Book of Acts, taught, preached, and baptized (8:4-40).

As a result of the preaching of the Word by the disciples, the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria grew quickly, creating the necessity for supervision by the apostles. For example, Peter traveled to encourage the believers in Lydia, Joppa, and Caesarea (Acts 9:32, 36; 10:1, 24).

A study of the Book of Acts and the Epistles shows that the apostle Peter worked primarily among the Jewish believers, and Paul among the

From this early church development, it may be implied that church organization functioned administratively at two levels: at a broader level by the apostles and at the local level by locally appointed and ordained elders.

Gentiles. Paul notes that he “had been entrusted with the task of preaching the gospel to the Gentiles, just as Peter had been to the Jews” (Gal. 2:7). In this way, ethnic and regional missionary endeavors were also carried forward.

The church at Antioch became a center for the proclamation of the gospel to the Gentiles. There, Barnabas and Paul preached to great multitudes. At the direction of the Holy Spirit, Paul and Barnabas, as apostles, went to the Gentiles to share the gospel of salvation (Acts 13:46, 47). The fact that they were semi-itinerant apostles created the need for permanent supervision by local church leaders after the apostles left. Thus, in their journey, they appointed elders in each church (14:23), demonstrating to early believers a basic church organization for the continuation and preservation of the work of all local churches.

From this early church development, it may be implied that church organization functioned administratively at two levels: at a broader level by the apostles and at the local level by locally appointed and or-

daind elders. The church in its initial organization was led by the apostles, who acted by the influence of the Holy Spirit in appointing local elders who in turn instructed the believers in their local congregations.

The apostles were called upon to validate and enhance the work of the gospel in places away from Jerusalem, and so they made trips to several locations for this purpose (Acts 8:14; 9:26, 27, 32; 11:1). Soon, the gospel work began in Lydda, Joppa, and Caesarea, and a new center developed in Antioch. With the commissioning of Barnabas and Paul as the first Christian missionaries sent by the church, there was soon the beginning of a universal church. When a doctrinal problem tested the identity of the developing church, the Antioch church selected representatives who appealed to the apostles and elders of Jerusalem, whom they evidently believed were qualified to weigh evidence and render a decision (Acts 15:2, 6, 13-21, 22, 25, 28).

As the apostle Paul established churches throughout the Gentile world, his practice was to ordain elders and charge them with the re-

sponsibility of local leadership (Acts 14:23). Later, the apostle refers to a body of “bishops and deacons” who shared the leadership of the church in Philippi (Phil 1:1, NKJV). Near the end of his life, Paul charged young Titus as regional supervisor to appoint elders in the churches of Crete (Titus 1:5).

Contemporary Church Implications

A study of early church organization and practice may have some implications for a contemporary form of church organization:

Christ is the head of the church, and the Holy Spirit is His representative.

Christ desires the unity of His church in such a way that there will be distinguishable beliefs and practices reflecting the principles of His kingdom.

Church organization is needed because of church growth and for the accomplishment of church mission.

Early church organization followed the pattern of the Jewish synagogue with which the believers were familiar.

The local church is the basic unit of God’s church and possesses a local leadership, elders and deacons, responsible for nurturing and caring for the spiritual life of the believers.

Each local church also has responsibility to the total body of

Christ, His Church.

There was recognized local and universal church organization. Local churches were led by the leadership of elders and deacons, and universal church by the itinerant apostles and evangelists, such and Paul and his associates.

There was a recognized universal church leadership in Jerusalem.

Doctrinal issues were discussed at the universal level of church organization, as was done at the Council of Jerusalem.

There were regional territorial assignments to facilitate church mission according to people’s backgrounds and cultures. They visited these provinces and organized churches in their cities.

The mission of the church is a continuation of Christ’s mission for saving the lost, and church organization was established to fulfill that mission; therefore, the church is a divine organism and a human institution. A church without mission is just another institution.

Despite different locations, ethnic origin, cultures, and traditions, the early church was united by a common gospel, mission, and form of church organization. □

** Unless noted otherwise, all Scripture references in this article are quoted from the New International Version of the Bible.