EXAMINING THE ECCLESIOLOGICAL SOUNDNESS OF

THE SOUTHERN BAPTIST MULTISITE CHURCH

MOVEMENT

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APPROVAL SHEET

EXAMINING THE ECCLESIOLOGICAL SOUNDNESS OF

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For the glory of God in the church (Eph 3:21)

and to

Rachel Sullivan,

whose ceaseless sacrifices have enabled this dissertation.

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PREFACE

A dissertation is the work of an individual, but it takes a village to support the individual in order to bring the dissertation to completion. Many words of thanks are in order for the individuals and the organizations who have made this dissertation possible. First, thanks to my sweet wife, Rachel. Your tireless sacrifices in our home and with our family created the time that has enabled the completion of my formal theological education. The sacrifices were greater than we expected, but your endurance has been stalwart. Thank you is not enough. With our now four children, I rise up and call you blessed (Prov 31:28).

Second, to the churches I have served, thank you for your patience and support, and for the freedom you allowed me to continue my academic pursuits alongside of my pastoral ministry. I believe that education strengthens pastors who in turn strengthen churches. I hope this has been your experience. I also believe that the church is the laboratory for the seminary. Thank you for being places where I could grow as a pastor and as a leader. To Oak Ridge Baptist Church, thank you for preaching the Gospel so that I could be saved from my sin and for your generosity during the early years of my education. To FBC Everman, thank you for being my Texas family and for giving me an opportunity to grow. To Woodlawn Baptist Church, thank you for your generous financial support that enabled me to continue my education and for being a church that fosters a passion for biblical ecclesiology. To FBC Paris, thank you for trusting me as your pastor and for affording me the opportunity to finish my education.

Finally, to the faculty members who have shaped me during my formal theological education, thank you for your investment in my life. To Roy Lucas, thank you for passing your baton to me (2 Tim 2:2) by providing solid instruction, encouragement,

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION:
THE MULTISITE CHURCH MOVEMENT

The multisite church prominently pulled onto the radar screen of American

Evangelicalism in 2006 with the Leadership Network[1] publication of *The Multi-Site*

Church Revolution: Being One Church in Many Locations. This book authored by

multisite practitioners and proponents Geoff Surratt, Greg Ligon, and Warren Bird is the

seminal work on the multisite church. As implied in the title, the authors define a

multisite church as "one church meeting in multiple locations—different rooms on the

same campus, different locations in the same region, or in some instances, different cities,

states, or nations. A multisite church shares a common vision, budget, leadership, and

board."[2] Over a decade later, this remains the working definition of a multisite church.

The Rise of Multisite Churches in America

The Multisite Church Movement (MCM) has taken American Evangelicalism

by storm in the past two decades. The influence of the MCM is certain. However, the

origin of the MCM is a matter of debate. Brian Frye authored the first dissertation on the

MCM. Frye identified Perimeter Church in Atlanta as a "primary example" and "the

multi-site church progenitor."[3] Perimeter Church began in 1977 when Randy Pope moved

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[1]Leadership Network is a Dallas, Texas-based leadership collaborative for pastors and churches that serves as the leading voice for the multisite church movement. "Home," Leadership Network, accessed March 24, 2018, https://leadnet.org/. According to Frye, Leadership Network and the multisite leaders they identified "are most responsible for shaping, directing, and accelerating the current and future multi-site movement." Brian Nathaniel Frye, "The Multi-Site Church Phenomenon in North America: 1950-2010" (PhD diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2011), 95.

[2]Geoff Surratt, Greg Ligon, and Warren Bird, *The Multi-Site Church Revolution: Being One Church in Many Locations* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 18.

[3]Frye's work is groundbreaking not only due to its timing, but also due to its breadth and

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to Atlanta with the vision of establishing one church with one hundred congregations around Atlanta's Perimeter Highway (Interstate 285).[4] Pope stated that, to his knowledge, Perimeter Church was the first to attempt the multisite church model. Although he attempted to find other churches practicing a similar model prior to launch, he found no other churches practicing the multisite model in 1977.[5] While Pope was unaware of their ministry, Scott Memorial Baptist Church in San Diego was also operating as "one church in two locations: Scott East and Scott West" under the leadership of Pastor Tim LaHaye.[6] However, Scott Memorial Baptist Church has not influenced the MCM as significantly as Perimeter Church. Due to their intentional and aggressive approach to multisite exemplified in their founding vision of establishing one hundred congregations, Perimeter Church is rightly understood as the forerunner of the MCM.

Others are more bold in their assertions of the origin of the MCM. In 1990, church growth expert Elmer Towns committed a chapter to describing the innovative ministry of Perimeter Church in his book *An Inside Look at 10 of Today's Most Innovative Churches*. After describing Perimeter Church, Towns makes the case that the

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quality. Brian Nathaniel Frye, telephone interview by author, September 9, 2016. Frye revealed to me in a telephone interview that since his dissertation was the first on the MCM, his dissertation committee pressed him to expand the scope of his research. The result is an excellent and thorough evaluation of the MCM. On these pages and in chapt. 1 Frye identified "examples of multi-site ministries" beginning in the late 1800s and early 1900s. These methodologies included "outpost, chapel, and branch congregations" as evangelistic tools. Frye, "The Multi-Site Church Phenomenon in North America," 94-95. While it is fair to draw similarities between these ministry approaches and multisite, Patrick Willis has identified that significant differences also exist. In each of these methodologies, the group established was considered to be deficient in comparison to a church. Accordingly, the goal was typically to transition outposts, chapels, and branches to be autonomous churches as quickly as possible. These approaches are distinct from multisite church ministry in that most multisite churches intend to maintain separate campuses indefinitely. The historical development of the MCM is considered in greater detail in chap. 2. Patrick Graham Willis, "Multi-Site Churches and Their Undergirding Ecclesiology: Questioning Its Baptist Identity and Biblical Validity" (PhD diss., Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2014), 39.

[4]Frye, "The Multi-Site Church Phenomenon in North America," 98.

[5]Kahlbau's assertion that Pope understood Perimeter Church to be the first multisite church is cited from a personal interview he conducted with Pope. Heath Kahlbau, "Is Anything New under the Sun? A Comparative Evaluation of the ante-Nicene Patristic Episcopacy and Common Polity Models within the Contemporary Multi-Site Church Movement" (PhD diss., Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2014), 125.

[6]Gary McIntosh, *Make Room for the Boom—or Bust: Six Church Models for Reaching Three Generations* (Grand Rapids: F. H. Revell, 1997), 138-40.

early church in Jerusalem functioned as one church meeting in multiple locations.[7] Brad House and Gregg Allison make a similar argument for the origin of the multisite church in their 2017 publication *MultiChurch: Exploring the Future of Multisite*. Allison has often written on the multisite church and is widely regarded as a theologically thoughtful multisite proponent. House and Allison describe the origin of multichurch, their preferred terminology for the particular expression of multisite they advocate:

> The real story of multichurch, the idea of one church meeting in multiple congregations in a city, can be traced back to the first century, to the beginning of Christianity. It would be more accurate to say that contemporary manifestations are more of a renewal of the early church methodology than a truly new development. The very first Christian church was a multisite church.[8]

Surratt, Ligon, and Bird also place the origin of the multisite church with the first church in Jerusalem. In *The Multi-Site Church Revolution*, they cite Acts 15 as evidence that the church in Antioch was a campus of the church in Jerusalem.[9] In their follow up volume, *Multisite Church Roadtrip: Exploring the New Normal*, these same authors provide a timeline of the multisite movement. The first point on the timeline is AD 32. The second point on the timeline is the 1980s.[10] Given the authoritative nature of the individuals making these claims, this argumentation must be carefully considered.[11]

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[7]Towns argues that the early church was one church (Acts 4:32), but also met house to house (Acts 2:46; 5:42). Elmer L. Towns, *An Inside Look at 10 of Today's Most Innovative Churches: What They're Doing, How They're Doing It & How You Can Apply Their Ideas in Your Church* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 1990), 242-46.

[8]The primary text House and Allison cite in support of this claim is Acts 2:42-47. A more detailed treatment of House and Allison's biblical rationale for arguing that the first church in Jerusalem was a multisite church is presented and critiqued in chap. 2. Brad House and Gregg Allison, *MultiChurch: Exploring the Future of Multisite* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2017), 31-33.

[9]Surratt, Ligon, and Bird, *The Multi-Site Church Revolution*, 92.

[10]This claim is also further considered in chap. 2 when potential historical precedents for the MCM are considered. At present, the oddity of Surrat, Ligon, and Bird's timeline should be noted. It is highly suspect to propose that the multisite church was present in the first century and then disappeared until the 1980s. It is much more reasonable to understand the MCM as recent phenomenon. Geoff Surratt, Greg Ligon, and Warren Bird, *A Multi-Site Church Roadtrip: Exploring the New Normal* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 17.

[11]According to Brian Frye, Elmer Towns was the prime disseminator of the multisite church model in its early days. Surrat, Ligon, and Bird wrote the seminal work on the MCM. Allison is the primary academic proponent of the MCM. Since this dissertation evaluates the ecclesiological soundness of the MCM from a biblical and from a Baptist perspective, the biblical argumentation of Towns, Allison, and

While the origin of the MCM is debatable, its influence is not. The rapid growth of the MCM in America over the past two decades indicates that the multisite church is undoubtedly here to stay. Ed Stetzer, church planting expert and Executive Director of the Billy Graham Center at Wheaton College, identifies multisite as "the new normal."[12] Leadership Network has chronicled the incredible growth rate of the multisite church movement over the past two decades. In the late 1990s, fewer than fifty multisite churches existed.[13] By 2006, over fifteen hundred American Protestant churches were multisite.[14] That figure rapidly escalated to five thousand multisite churches by 2009.[15] The National Congregations Study conducted by Duke University and released in 2014 revealed that each weekend five million Americans attend worship at over eight thousand multisite churches.[16] Since 2014, the number of multisite churches has leveled off. The most recent data on the MCM released by Leadership Network in March of 2018 indicates that the number of multisite churches in the U.S. remains at eight thousand. This figure holds true when multisite is broadly defined to include churches which have different venues meeting in multiple areas of the same geographical location. If narrowly

House is especially pertinent. Towns and Allison both serve in Baptist theological institutions, Towns at Liberty University, and Allison at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. Allison and House also serve as elders at Sojourn Community Church in Louisville, Kentucky, a multisite church affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention. The consideration of this argumentation must be reserved until chap. 2 when the MCM is considered from a historical perspective which includes the history of the early church as revealed in the New Testament. Frye, "The Multi-Site Church Phenomenon in North America," 303.

[12]Stetzer is not the only voice to identify the multisite church as "the new normal." Five years prior to Stetzer's post, Surratt, Ligon, and Bird subtitled their second book on the movement with this phrase, "exploring the new normal." Ed Stetzer, "Multisite Churches Are Here, and Here, and Here to Stay," February 24, 2014, http://www.christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/ 2014/february/multisite-churches-are-here-to-stay.html. Surratt, Ligon, and Bird, *A Multi-Site Church Roadtrip*.

[13]Warren Bird, "Latest Research on Multisite, Church Planting and Launching," February 15, 2018, http://leadnet.org/portable/.

[14]Surratt, Ligon, and Bird, *The Multi-Site Church Revolution*, 9.

[15]"Big News-Multisite Churches Now Number More than 5,000," accessed November 26, 2016, http://leadnet.org/big_news_multisite_churches_now_number_more_than_5000/.

[16]"Now More Than 8,000 Multisite Churches," accessed November 26, 2016, http://leadnet. org/now-more-than-8000-multisite-churches/.

defined, the number of true multisite churches with campuses meeting at different geographical locations is reduced to five thousand.[17] Due to its growth from under fifty multisite churches to eight thousand multisite churches in under two decades, the MCM is rightly called a movement.

Although the MCM has grown rapidly, the movement has not accelerated at the rate initially prognosticated by Leadership Network. In 2006, in *The Multi-Site Church Revolution*, Surratt, Ligon, and Bird made the bold prediction that "within the next few years" thirty thousand American churches would go multisite.[18] With the number of multisite churches now holding steady at eight thousand twelve years after the publication of this work, this prognostication has proven false. Nevertheless, the influence of the MCM is undeniable. The largest Protestant denomination in the United States, the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC), boasts approximately 5.2 million worship attendees each Sunday. Given the afore referenced five million Americans who attend multisite worship services each weekend, this means that if multisite churches were a denomination, they would rival the SBC in terms of weekly worship attendance.[19]

The Future of Multisite Churches in America

The rise of the MCM and its current prominence indicate a bright future for the movement. In addition to the current prominence of the MCM, two other factors also project a bright future for the movement. First, the secure future of the MCM is evidenced in the way that the movement resonates most strongly with pastors under age forty. The latest research from Leadership Network reveals that 83 percent of pastors under forty have a future vision to launch a campus or plant a church.[20] The impact of the

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[17]Bird, "Latest Research on Multisite, Church Planting and Launching."

[18]Surratt, Ligon, and Bird, *The Multi-Site Church Revolution*, 11.

[19]Bird, "Latest Research on Multisite, Church Planting and Launching."

[20]Ibid.

MCM on young pastors indicates that the impact of the movement will likely be felt for decades to come.

Second, the secure future of the MCM is further evidenced by its current evangelistic impact. The data on multisite churches collected in Leadership Network's most recent study on multisite churches released in March of 2018 represents a study of over fifteen hundred multisite churches. Many of the multisite churches surveyed have planted churches in addition to launching new campuses. These churches reported that their new campuses were more evangelistically effective than their church plants. When asked, "Which has the greater evangelistic impact?," 42 percent of respondents indicated their multisite campuses had the greater evangelistic impact compared to only 11 percent of respondents who indicated their church plants had the greater evangelistic impact.[21] In addition to the research from Leadership Network, research from *Outreach Magazine* also indicates the current evangelistic impact of the MCM. In February of 2018, *Outreach Magazine* released their lists of the largest churches in America and the fastest growing churches in America for 2017. The data collected by participating churches reveals that 90 percent of the top 20 high attendance churches in America are multisite churches.[22] Similarly, 80 percent of the fastest growing churches in America are multisite churches.[23] It should be noted that the *Outreach Magazine* research only reports on high attendance churches and rapidly growing churches and does not specify whether these churches are growing through conversion growth or through transfer growth. However, when the *Outreach Magazine* research is read in the light of the Leadership Network research that

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[21]Other responses by these churches include 28 percent of respondents who indicated that the impact of their church plants was "about the same" as new campuses and 19 percent of respondents who said "hard to answer, don't know." Ibid.

[22]"Outreach 100 Largest Churches 2017," accessed March 23, 2018, http://www.outreach magazine.com/outreach-100-largest-churches-2017.html.

[23]"Outreach 100 Fastest-Growing Churches 2017," accessed March 23, 2018, http://www. outreachmagazine.com/outreach-100-fastest-growing-churches-2017.html.

indicates the evangelistic effectiveness of multisite campuses, it is likely that the multisite churches that appear on the *Outreach Magazine* lists are experiencing significant evangelistic growth. Given that the churches listed on the Outreach 100 Annual Report are trendsetting churches,[24] the impact of the MCM will likely continue to expand as other churches seek to implement the evangelistic strategies of these churches.

The prevalence of multisite churches in America is also evident in the SBC. Of the twenty-five largest churches in the SBC, all twenty-five are multisite churches. Likewise, thirty-nine of the fifty largest churches in the SBC are multisite churches and sixty-seven of the one hundred largest churches.[25] As noted above in reference to the influence of the churches listed on the Outreach 100 Annual Report, large churches tend to be trendsetting churches. This holds true within the SBC. In 2016, Jamus Edwards published his dissertation on leadership dynamics within multisite churches, which was based on the findings of the quantitative research he conducted. When preparing for this research, Edwards consulted with Brian Frye, who suggested that Edwards include the 135 largest multisite churches within the SBC in his quantitative study since these are trendsetting churches.[26] As an employee of the State Convention of Baptists in Ohio and multisite expert, Frye is well qualified to identify influential multisite churches within the SBC. Given that many of the trendsetting churches within the SBC are multisite churches, the presence and influence of multisite churches within the convention is likely to increase in the years to come.

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[24]This dissertation presents a quantitative study of 230 representative multisite churches. Upon the recommendation of Brian Frye, Edwards sought to focus his study on trendsetting multisite churches. The trendsetting churches selected included the multisite churches listed on *Outreach Magazine*'s list of the 100 fastest growing churches in 2014, the 135 largest SBC multisite churches, and all the multisite churches in the Acts 29 Network. Jamus Howell Edwards, "Leadership Structures and Dynamics in Multisite Churches: A Quantitative Study" (PhD diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2016), 16, 21.

[25]Cross referencing the SBC 500 with the church websites of the top 100 churches reveals these figures. Thom S. Rainer, "SBC 500," accessed October 23, 2018, https://thomrainer.com/sbc500/.

[26]See also n. 24 above for comments on the multisite churches included in Edwards' research. Edwards, "Leadership Structures and Dynamics in Multisite Churches," 16, 21.

The current impact and evangelistic effectiveness of many multisite churches both within and beyond the SBC and the way this present effectiveness projects future effectiveness is reason to rejoice. Indeed, believers should always rejoice when the Gospel is proclaimed, and multisite churches are proclaiming the Gospel to over five million Americans every weekend. In Philippians 1, the apostle Paul spoke of his rejoicing over every proclamation of Christ, even when he is proclaimed by individuals with selfish motives (Phil 1:15-18). This reference to Philippians 1 is not intended to assert that multisite practitioners are driven by selfish ambitions; rather, the methodology of multisite practitioners tends to be driven by their ambition to reach people for Christ.[27] If Paul could rejoice over those who preached the Gospel out of selfish ambition, then all American Evangelicals can rejoice when the Gospel is preached in multisite churches.

Nevertheless, significant ecclesiological questions surround the multisite movement, especially for congregationalists. The church is righty driven by evangelistic ambition. However, to be faithful to Christ, a church must remain within the ecclesiological boundaries he has established. Evangelism must be conducted in conjunction with a biblically informed ecclesiology. Sadly, for many practitioners of the MCM, evangelistic passion is not matched with ecclesiological reflection. As a result, twenty years into the movement, significant ecclesiological questions pertaining to the multisite church remain unaddressed.

The Problem of Baptist Multisite Churches

The ecclesiological questions swirling around multisite churches are especially troublesome for Baptists who hold to congregationalism. The unique theological

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[27]Surratt, Ligon, and Bird speak of "the primary motive behind the multi-site approach" as obedience to the Great Commandment (Matt 22:37-39), the Great Commission (Matt 28:18-20), and the Great Charge (1 Pet 5:1-4). Surratt, Ligon, and Bird, *The Multi-Site Church Revolution*, 10. Scott McConnell states that "every multi-site church should be driven by an evangelistic passion." Evangelism as the primary motivation for multisite is a theme that runs consistently throughout the multisite church literature. Scott McConnell, *Multi-Site Churches: Guidance for the Movement's Next Generation* (Nashville: B & H, 2009), 8.

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contributions of Baptists center around ecclesiology. More specifically, congregationalism is a core aspect of Baptist ecclesiology. Congregational church governance necessitates the gathering of the congregation. Most multisite churches never assemble the totality of their membership and campuses in one location.[28] Accordingly, multisite churches that are congregationalist by conviction are hard pressed to actually govern themselves congregationally.

Baptists have historically held to the necessity of assembling the church for church governance, for church discipline, and for observing the Lord's Supper. This dissertation commits a chapter to each of these three church functions in order to demonstrate the necessity of gathering for each of them. The biblical text teaches the necessity of gathering for these three functions as does the Baptist tradition. As these arguments are presented, it will be demonstrated that, since most multisite churches never assemble the totality of their members and campuses in one location, most expressions of the multisite church model are inconsistent with traditional Baptist ecclesiology as reflected in widely influential Baptist confessions of faith and in key theological writings by influential Baptist theologians.

The multisite church model is also at odds with the definition of a church as espoused by the confessional document of the SBC, the 2000 Baptist Faith and Message (BF&M). The BF&M defines a local church as follows:

> A New Testament church of the Lord Jesus Christ is an autonomous local congregation of baptized believers, associated by covenant in the faith and fellowship of the Gospel; observing the two ordinances of Christ, governed by his laws, exercising the gifts, rights, and privileges invested in them by His Word, and

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[28]While it is true that most multisite churches never assemble the totality of their members and campuses in one location, it must also be noted that some do. For instance, Highview Baptist Church in Louisville, Kentucky, has campuses across the city that gather quarterly. Similarly, The Summit Church in Raleigh, North Carolina, gathers all campuses occasionally for "Church at the Ballpark" at the Durham Bulls Athletic Park. Darrell Grant Gaines, "One Church in One Location: Questioning the Biblical, Theological, and Historical Claims of the Multi-Site Church Movement" (PhD diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2012), 124. Thomas White and John M. Yeats, *Franchising McChurch: Feeding Our Obsession with Easy Christianity* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2009), 202.

seeking to extend the gospel to the ends of the earth. Each congregation operates under the Lordship of Christ through democratic processes.[29]

Three aspects of this description of the church present problems for multisite churches within the SBC.

First, the BF&M defines a church as "an autonomous local congregation."[30] It must be acknowledged that within the MCM there are a variety of expressions of the multisite church.[31] The label "multichurch" is a recently coined term to describe a particular model of the multisite church. House and Allison speak to the definition of a multichurch as follows:

> As we define it, multichurch is a local community of Christians that matures and multiplies its influence through launching, developing, and resourcing *multiple congregations to reach its city* with the Gospel of Jesus Christ. This is one church with multiple congregations or 'churches' in a set geographical area (bounded by an identifiable population that shares proximity and accessibility).[32]

Notice specifically the phrase "one church with multiple congregations" that is used to delineate the multichurch model. Since the BF&M defines a church as "*an* autonomous local congregation," it is out of step with the confessional document of the SBC to define

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[29]Southern Baptist Convention, "The Baptist Faith and Message: The 2000 Baptist Faith & Message," June 14, 2000, http://www.sbc.net/bfm2000/bfm2000.asp.

[30]Ibid.

[31]House and Allison propose a spectrum of multisite church models ranging from multisite to multichurch. The models they identify as multisite models are the gallery (one church expanded to multiple services/venues), franchise (one church cloned to multiple sites), and federation (one church contextualized to multiple locations) models. The models they identify as multichurch models are the cooperative (one church made up of multiple interdependent churches), and collective (collection of churches collaborating as one church) models. When many people think of multisite churches, they only think of the franchise model. It is important to recognize that many other multisite models exist. Other multisite proponents identify multisite models differently. House and Allison, *MultiChurch*, 47-51. Surratt, Ligon, and Bird identify five types of multisite churches: video venue, regional, teaching team, partnership, and low risk. Surratt, Ligon, and Bird, *The Multi-Site Church Revolution*, 29-40. Frye compiles four classifications of multisite churches to provide an extensive and extremely helpful multisite taxonomy that defines sixteen types of multisite churches: rover, relocating, venuing, multiple venues, rotation model, adopting, cross-culturalizing, localized, collaboration, mothering, partnership, regional, video, replicating, extended, and proxy. Frye, "The Multi-Site Church Phenomenon in North America," 179. Reavley combined the models of multisite churches listed by Surratt, Ligon, and Bird with the models listed by Dave Ferguson, the influential Lead Pastor of Community Christian Church in Chicagoland, to identify twelve types of multisite churches: partnership, new venue, satellite, digital, encore, third place, multi-cultural, relocation, resurrection, regional campus, team teaching, and low risk. R. Scott Reavley, "An Ecclesiology for Multisite Churches: Thinking Biblically about the Local Church in Multiple Locations" (DMin project, Western Seminary, 2007), 20-26.

[32]House and Allison, *MultiChurch*, 16.

a multichurch as "one church with *many* congregations" (italics mine). Interestingly, the multichurch model of multisite churches emerged from an SBC church, Sojourn Community Church in Louisville, Kentucky, where both House and Allison serve as elders. Nevertheless, the multichurch model is problematic for confessional Baptists who hold to the BF&M.

Second, the BF&M says that a church "is an autonomous local congregation of baptized believers, associated by covenant in the faith and fellowship of the Gospel; observing the two ordinances of Christ," which are the Lord's Supper and baptism.[33] Stated more concisely, the BF&M teaches that a church is a congregation that observes the Lord's Supper and baptism. By definition, a congregation is a group of people assembled for religious worship. This means that, according to the BF&M, a church is a group assembled to observe the Lord's Supper and baptism. Since most multisite churches never assemble the totality of their membership and campuses in one location,[34] most multisite churches are not rightly described as congregations that assemble to observe the Lord's Supper and baptism. It could be said that multisite campuses assemble to observe the Lord's Supper and baptism. However, a multisite church is defined as "one church meeting in multiple locations."[35] Therefore, it cannot be said that most multisite churches intend to assemble the totality of their membership and campuses to observe the Lord's Supper and baptism. As such, most expressions of the multisite church model are also out of step with the BF&M's teaching that a church is a congregation that assembles to observe the Lord's Supper and baptism. To comply with the BF&M's description of the church, a local church must assemble to observe the Lord's Supper and baptism.

Third, the BF&M states that "each congregation operates under the Lordship

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[33]Southern Baptist Convention, "The Baptist Faith and Message."

[34]Gaines, "One Church in One Location," 124. White and Yeats, *Franchising McChurch*, 202.

[35]Surratt, Ligon, and Bird, *The Multi-Site Church Revolution*, 18.

of Christ through democratic processes."[36] The reference to democratic processes speaks to congregational church governance. As noted above, it is important to remember that there are many multisite church models. Across these models, multisite churches do not appear to govern themselves by democratic processes. The franchise model of multisite espoused by Surratt, Ligon, and Bird leans toward Episcopal church governance. They describe the senior leadership of the church as "the big kahuna" who safeguards the brand by ensuring that the vision and values of each campus mirrors that of the church at large.[37] Even within Baptist expressions of the MCM, most multisite churches do not govern themselves under democratic processes. House and Allison argue that elder-led congregational multisite models are indeed congregational.[38] However, as they describe the multichurch polity employed at Sojourn, the actual practice of this SBC church leans toward Presbyterian church governance. At Sojourn, the congregation is involved in governance. For instance, church members affirm the budget and any significant additions to it, approve amendments to the organizational documents of the church, and confirm elders.[39] Nevertheless, the Leadership Council comprised of the elders "makes the ultimate decisions regarding the annual budget, the preaching calendar, capital and ministry campaigns, and plans for expansion."[40] Sojourn is not the only SBC multisite church that removes the final governing authority from the congregation. Governance without democratic processes appears to be the norm for multisite churches within the SBC. Of the 230 multisite churches surveyed in Edwards' study, 135 were representative SBC multisite churches. When asked about who was at the top of the organizational chart

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[36]Southern Baptist Convention, "The Baptist Faith and Message."

[37]Surratt, Ligon, and Bird, *The Multi-Site Church Revolution*, 191.

[38]House and Allison, *MultiChurch*, 91-92.

[39]Ibid., 157-58.

[40]Ibid., 153.

for decision making authority, only one respondent identified the congregation as the primary decision-making authority.[41] Assuming that the one respondent who identified the congregation as the primary decision-making authority was one of the 135 SBC multisite churches surveyed, this means that the other 134 SBC multisite churches surveyed have removed the ultimate governing authority from the congregation. For SBC multisite churches who hold to the BF&M, this is highly problematic. If the 135 SBC multisite churches in Edwards' study are indeed representative, then the vast majority of SBC multisite churches are not operating under democratic processes. That is to say, if the 135 SBC multisite churches in Edwards' study are indeed representative, then the vast majority of SBC multisite churches are operating in a manner that contradicts their stated confessional identity.

The above discussion highlights the problem of Baptist multisite churches. Since most multisite churches never intend to assemble the totality of their membership and campuses in one location, most multisite churches never gather to govern themselves, to practice church discipline, or to observe the Lord's Supper. This neglect to gather the entire congregation for these church functions is inconsistent with traditional Baptist ecclesiology as reflected in widely influential Baptist confessions of faith and in key theological writings by influential Baptist theologians. Moreover, the writings of SBC multisite churches and quantitative research conducted on SBC multisite churches reveal that most SBC multisite churches operate outside of the parameters of the BF&M, the confessional document of the SBC. Methodists who affirm episcopal church governance and Presbyterians who affirm presbyterian church governance do not share these concerns about the MCM. However, for confessional Baptists who affirm the BF&M, the problem of Baptist multisite churches must be acknowledged. Failure to acknowledge these concerns is a failure to acknowledge congregationalism as a key aspect of Baptist

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[41]Edwards, "Leadership Structures and Dynamics in Multisite Churches," 123-24.

ecclesiology, which is the key theological contribution of Baptist theologians.

Opportunity and Intention: Defining an Assembly

The previous section argued that congregational church governance necessitates the gathering of the congregation and that this necessity is problematic for multisite churches because they never assemble the totality of their membership and campuses in one location. Some might object to this line of argumentation due to the reality that virtually no congregation, single site or multisite, is able to host any gathering at which every single church member will be present. Indeed, when speaking of the gathering of a local congregation, it must be acknowledged that there will likely never be a gathering of the congregation when all church members will be present. Some members will inevitably be absent due to illness, work demands, travel, and disinterest among other reasons. An unhealthy view of church membership is another issue that prohibits the assembly of every church member in a gathering. As a result of unhealthy practices regarding church membership and a failure to exercise biblical church discipline, many church buildings cannot physically contain the entirety of the church membership were all church members to assemble at the same time.

Others may object to the argument that the gathering of the church necessitates the assembly of the totality of the church membership by pointing to large churches. Many churches are simply too large to contain their membership in one gathering. Due to stewardship reasons, they have opted to gather in multiple services, venues, or sites instead of constructing sprawling worship centers large enough to contain their entire membership in one gathering. The argumentation of this dissertation, that particular expressions of congregational governance necessitates the assembly of the totality of a church's membership and campuses in one location, is aimed at the MCM, which is the focus of this dissertation. The argumentation of this dissertation could also be marshalled against large multiservice and multivenue churches. However, since this dissertation

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focuses on the MCM, those arguments will not be raised.

As noted above, single site churches also struggle to have every single church member present in their gatherings due to the inability of members to attend, unhealthy church membership practices, and other considerations. Even in the assembly of a single site church, the entire church membership will virtually never be present. Nevertheless, in a gathering of a single site congregation, the church intends that all members be in attendance and all church members have the opportunity to be in attendance. Intention and opportunity are the distinguishing factors that mark a gathering of the congregation.

Thesis

This dissertation argues that most expressions of the multisite church model cannot function within the framework of a biblical ecclesiology.[42] Special emphasis is given to congregationalism, church discipline, and the Lord's Supper.[43] I demonstrate that for a church to govern, discipline, and commune in a way that is consistent with Scripture, they must assemble because these are ecclesiological functions the Lord has entrusted to the entire congregation. The necessity of assembly is evident in the meaning of *ekklesia*, the Greek word for church, and in the biblical teaching on congregationalism,

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[42]As noted above in n. 22, Edwards' dissertation reports the findings of a quantitative study of 230 multisite churches. Edwards makes the case from statistical probability that the 230 churches surveyed in the study are representative of the MCM. The study included questions on church discipline and on authority in decision making. Of the 230 multisite churches surveyed, only 1 church indicated that the congregation has the final authority in decision making. Similarly, only 4 of the 230 churches surveyed indicated that the entire congregation was involved in the process of church discipline. Edwards' research serves as the foundation for the quantitative argument that most multisite churches do not function within the framework of a biblical ecclesiology. Edwards, "Leadership Structures and Dynamics in Multisite Churches," 15-16, 123-24, 145-46.

[43]Several other concerns about the multisite church model could be considered including the potential for catering to religious consumers, the difficulty of pastoral care, video venue preaching in some expressions of multisite, the tendency of church members to consider the Senior Pastor to be their pastor though they have often never met him, the marginalization of the office of pastor through the separation of the ministry of preaching from the role of campus pastor, and the tendency of the model to build churches around the personality of the Senior Pastor in lieu of developing other senior leaders. Nevertheless, this dissertation focuses only upon congregationalism, church discipline, and the Lord's Supper because it is my contention that the text of Scripture requires that churches assemble in order to perform these ecclesiastical functions. Other issues surrounding the multisite church model do not relate to the assembly of the entire church.

church discipline, and the Lord's Supper. Although the attendees of each multisite campus regularly assemble, in most expressions of the multisite church model the totality of the membership and campuses of a multisite church never assemble as a whole church in one location. By definition, a multisite church is one church that meets in multiple locations.[44] However, since the Lord has entrusted church governance, church discipline, and the observance of the Lord's Supper to the entire congregation, these ecclesiological functions must be carried out in a gathering that is intended to be a gathering of the entire congregation. Since the totality of the membership and the campuses of a multisite church are never intended to assemble in most expressions of the multisite church model, it is impossible for most multisite church models to operate within the framework of a biblical ecclesiology. The ecclesiological critiques that arise against multisite churches that never assemble could also be leveled against large churches or multiservice churches that never assemble as a whole church. In light of the exponential increase in the number of megachurches in the past sixty years, this is an issue that merits consideration. Nevertheless, although this study has implications for large churches and multiservice churches, the focus of this dissertation is on the MCM.

This dissertation also argues that most expressions of the multisite church model are inconsistent with traditional Baptist ecclesiology as reflected in widely influential Baptist confessions of faith and in key theological writings by influential Baptist theologians.[45] I first examine the historical development of the MCM. In the

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[44]Surratt, Ligon, and Bird, *The Multi-Site Church Revolution*, 18.

[45]Influential Baptist confessions of faith are indicative of traditional Baptist ecclesiology due to the large number of individuals and churches who ascribed to them. It should be noted that Baptist churches do not always practice their stated polity with perfection. Nevertheless, the confessional statement to which a church ascribes portrays the ideal to which that church aspires. The writings of influential Baptist theologians are also indicative of traditional Baptist ecclesiology due to the publication and widespread circulation of their works and the perseverance of their works into the modern era. Accordingly, while this dissertation occasionally refers to the actual practice of Baptist churches, widely influential Baptist confessions of faith and key theological writings by influential Baptist theologians serve as the primary gauge for identifying traditional Baptist ecclesiology.

course of this examination, I consider three possible streams of multisite history, the ante-Nicene episcopacy, early American Methodism, and the branch ecclesiology of early Baptists in America. I argue that the practice of most American multisite churches is most consistent with the ante-Nicene episcopacy.

As the meaning of *ekklesia* and the biblical teaching on congregationalism, church discipline, and the Lord's Supper are considered, I also consider traditional Baptist positions on these doctrines.[46] This approach allows me to examine the MCM and its compatibility with biblical ecclesiology and with Baptist tradition. This examination reveals that most multisite church models are incompatible with biblical ecclesiology and Baptist tradition.

Background

As I began the Ph.D. program at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary (SBTS) in 2014, my intention was to focus my dissertation on the life, ministry and influence of Tim Keller. I spent my first semester researching Keller and urban ministry. That research revealed that it was premature to focus a dissertation on Keller's ministry. Keller did not begin to publish widely until 2008. Six years of material was insufficient to initiate dissertation research. When I began to question pursuing further research on Keller, I consulted with my faculty advisor Timothy Beougher, who also believed it was too soon for a dissertation on Keller. After my conversation with Beougher, I began to search for a different research focus.

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[46]Some readers will find it strange that while this dissertation focuses on Baptist ecclesiology it does not consider the doctrine of baptism, a core aspect of Baptist ecclesiology. The doctrine of baptism is not considered in this dissertation because the dissertation focuses on particular applications of the assembly of the church. A strong case is made from the text of Scripture for the necessity of the church assembling in order to govern, discipline, and observe the Lord's Supper. The Scripture does not emphasize the necessity of assembling for the ordinance of baptism. Accordingly, since this dissertation focuses on particular applications of the assembly of the church, the doctrine of baptism is beyond the scope of this work.

My interest in the MCM developed at the end of my first semester in the Ph.D. program in December of 2014. That semester I was enrolled in Beougher's Biblical and Theological Principles for Evangelistic Ministry seminar. During this seminar two things piqued my interest in the MCM. First, I met Jamus Edwards, who was engaged in research for his dissertation on multisite churches.[47] In addition to our conversation on multisite churches, Edwards also introduced me to two early dissertations on the MCM, "The Multi-Site Church Phenomenon in North America: 1950-2010" by Brian Frye and "One Church in One Location: Questioning the Biblical, Theological, and Historical Claims of the Multisite Church Movement" by Grant Gaines.[48] Second, I had an intriguing conversation about the multisite church with Michael Wilder and fellow Ph.D. student and fellow Baton Rouge pastor Hans Googer during a Ph.D. luncheon hosted by the SBTS Research Doctoral Studies Office.

Another helpful step on this journey was when Beougher connected me with Brian Frye in March of 2015. Through an email exchange, Frye referred me to some influential literature on the multisite church. We later connected over a telephone interview in September of 2016 to discuss the landscape of the multisite movement and some points of debate surrounding the movement. A major issue that Frye raised and suggested that I explore further was the relationship between the campus pastor and the lead pastor. However, this issue has been addressed by Chris Kouba in his doctoral project, which focuses entirely on the role of the campus pastor.[49] In addition, Warren

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[47]This 2016 dissertation was the culmination of Edwards' research. This work is particularly helpful for my argumentation. I am arguing that most multisite churches operate in a way that is inconsistent with biblical ecclesiology and traditional Baptist ecclesiology. Edwards' quantitative study posed questions to multisite church leaders pertaining to their actual practices. The majority of churches surveyed, 135 of 230, were Southern Baptist churches. His research allows me to compare my concerns about multisite churches with their actual practices. Edwards, "Leadership Structures and Dynamics in Multisite Churches."

[48]Frye, "The Multi-Site Church Phenomenon in North America." Gaines write as a systematic theologian who traces the theme of assembly throughout the biblical narrative. This led him to affirm the importance of a local church assembling in one location. Gaines, "One Church in One Location."

[49]Christopher Barton Kouba, "Role of the Campus Pastor: Responsibilities and Practices in

Bird of Leadership Network and Jim Tomberlin of Multisite Solutions have also spoken

to this issue since my conversation with Frye.[50] Accordingly, I chose not to pursue this

potential topic.

In the summer of 2015, I had the opportunity to read through the dissertations

of Frye and Gaines in that order. Frye's work was expansive and extremely illuminating

as an introduction to the multisite church phenomenon. However, as I read through Frye's

dissertation, I found myself frustrated by the loose ecclesiology of the multisite church.

When I worked through Gaines' critique of the multisite church, his argumentation

resonated with me and my ecclesiology. That summer I also read through two key works

on the MCM from Leadership Network, *The Multi-Site Church Revolution: Being One*

Church in Many Locations and *Multi-Site Church Roadtrip: Exploring the New Normal.* I

was struck by the lack of theological thoughtfulness in these two volumes and by the

blunt dismissal of any who question the MCM.[51] As I read more widely in the multisite

literature, my ecclesiological concerns over the MCM expanded and eventually

developed into the argumentation of this dissertation.

My local church ministry experience also influenced the direction of my

dissertation. From 2012-2017, I served as one of the pastors of Woodlawn Baptist Church

in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Woodlawn, like many churches in the SBC, had an unhealthy

view of church membership as evidenced by our ratio of church members to worship

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Multisite Churches" (DMin project, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2014).

[50]Warren Bird, "Campus Pastor as Key to Multisite Success," September 30, 2015, https://lead netorg/campus-pastor-as-key-to-multisite-success/. Jim Tomberlin is a well-respected multisite proponent who was the architect of the multisite strategy at Willow Creek Community Church in Chicago. After leaving Willow Creek, Tomberlin established MultiSite Solutions, an influential consulting firm that serves many multisite practitioners. Jim Tomberlin, "What Makes a Great Campus Pastor?" October 27, 2015, http://multisitesolutions.com/what-makes-a-great-campus-pastor/.

[51]Suratt, Ligon, and Bird liken those who question the multisite movement to those who think indoor plumbing is a bad idea and to those who think the children's ministry does not need a projector. This caricaturizing of those who have questions about multisite churches is dismissive and inflammatory. Such bold words are especially out of line since they come from a work that mentions Scripture only minimally and in passing. Surratt, Ligon, and Bird, *The Multi-Site Church Revolution*, 93-94, 98.

attendees. We had a membership of over twelve hundred with an average worship attendance of 275. Lewis Richerson, our Lead Pastor, began to address this issue in the fall of 2012 with a Sunday evening sermon series on ecclesiology. These messages helped sharpen my ecclesiology. These messages also propelled the pastors to initiate conversations with the congregation about intentionally reaching out to our inactive church membership. During this process of regaining meaningful church membership, the pastors again emphasized ecclesiology in May and June of 2015. During this time, the pastors taught a six-week series of combined Sunday School classes. Over those six weeks, I taught one of the four classes. This emphasis on ecclesiology also included a six-week sermon series on ecclesiology which Richerson and I preached. Studying and applying the doctrine of the church in the context of Woodlawn Baptist Church was influential in my development of a distinctive and convictional Baptist ecclesiology.

My ecclesiological convictions were deepened in the fall of 2016. On August 13, 2016, my Baton Rouge home took on four feet of water in a wave of massive flooding that rolled through town. Facing a recovery process of several months, I prepared to file for an interruption of study at SBTS. Before I could submit the completed documentation for this interruption of study, SBTS responded to my situation by extending free tuition for the semester. With this providential provision in place, I decided to proceed with coursework. Beougher agreed to lead me through an independent study on ecclesiology during this semester. Since this seminar took the shape of an independent study, I was able to play a part in shaping the syllabus. I elected to focus on Baptist ecclesiology in general and on Baptist church discipline in particular. The aggressive reading schedule for this study allowed me to broaden my familiarity with traditional Baptist ecclesiology, especially as it pertains to church discipline. I also became more familiar with key texts of Scripture pertaining to church discipline. The fruits of this independent study surface in chapter 5 of this dissertation entitled "Church Discipline: Assembling for Holiness."

As my distinctive and convictional Baptist ecclesiology developed, my study of the multisite church also progressed. I noticed a disconnect between multisite ecclesiology and Baptist ecclesiology. I also noticed that many Baptist churches are multisite churches. While there are many forms of multisite church governance, all of them are hierarchical.[52] That is, church leaders at the original campus who do not directly serve at other campuses are always involved in making decisions for those campuses. The attendees or members of particular multisite campuses are often also involved in the decision-making process, but they do not have an exclusive voice in the decision and at times do not even have an influential voice in the discussion. It is understandable that churches who are governed by episcopal or presbyterian church governance would yield to authorities outside of their local congregations. However, for Baptist churches that are congregationally governed, I came to realize that yielding to an authority outside of the local congregation violates the firmly held Baptist conviction of local church autonomy.[53] Moreover, SBC churches who surrender local church autonomy, or usurp it from other congregations, violate the BF&M.[54]

This realization led to a significant concern for me that many Baptist churches are operating outside of their stated convictions. My conviction is that many Baptist

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[52]See n. 32 above where I delineate the varying models of the multisite church as espoused by multisite church practitioners. Some models of multisite are more hierarchical than others. Nevertheless, it is my contention that all models of the multisite church are hierarchical to some degree since the original campus, an outside entity, exercises at least some measure of authority over the other multisite campuses.

[53]Many multisite proponents would balk at this position. For them, a multisite church is understood to be one church in many locations meaning that there is no violation of local church autonomy because all campuses are part of one church that has chosen to govern itself as a multisite church. However, the line between a campus and a church is blurred in the MCM. Campuses function much like churches, only with outside authority and influence from another body, the original campus. Prior to their demise in 2014, Mars Hill Church in Seattle acknowledged this similarity between campuses and churches when they began to call their campuses churches in 2011. Alex Murashko, "Mars Hill Church: Don't Call Us 'Campuses' Anymore," August 11, 2011, https://www.christianpost.com/news/mars-hill-church-dont-call-us-campuses-anymore-53736/.

[54]Article 6 of the BF&M defines a church as "an autonomous local congregation." Southern Baptist Convention, "The Baptist Faith and Message." As argued above, this understanding of the church is particularly problematic for the multichurch model advocated by Sojourn, an SBC multisite church located in Louisville, Kentucky, that understands itself to be a multichurch, which is defined as "one church with multiple congregations." House and Allision, *MultiChurch*, 16.

churches who are operating as multisite churches need to reflect more critically on their ecclesiology as it is revealed in their methodology. If a Baptist church is convictional in its Baptist ecclesiology, then it needs to think critically before going multisite. Sadly, surveying the multisite church literature reveals that many Baptist churches went multisite without seriously considering the ecclesiological implications. This indicates that many Baptist churches are not convictional Baptist churches. Convictional Baptists are Baptist because they believe that the Baptist tradition most clearly aligns with Scripture. My intention is to evaluate the MCM against the rubric of New Testament ecclesiology and Baptist tradition. I believe this evaluation assists churches, especially Baptist churches, in thinking more critically about the MCM.

Methodology

My investigation into the compatibility of the MCM with biblical ecclesiology and Baptist tradition commenced with a thorough examination of the available publications of multisite proponents. Few book length treatments of the multisite movement are available, but each was consulted. Much of the conversation on the MCM remains online. For this reason, I spent much time engaging with select internet resources. To ensure that the internet resources considered represent the mainstream multisite movement, I focused my online research on publications from leading multisite voices such as Leadership Network, Multi-Site Solutions, Dave Ferguson, Ed Stetzer, and J. D. Greear. My internet research also took into account the publications of 9Marks, the most outspoken critic of the MCM.

Doctoral dissertations are the most scholarly investigations into the MCM available. Doctoral projects also often offer helpful insights into the specific practices of multisite churches. Eleven dissertations and projects on the multisite church relate to my research. I have read all eleven and have considered them in my argumentation. I have

also conversed with several authors about their contribution to multisite literature including Brian Frye, Jamus Edwards, Patrick Willis, Heath Kahlbau, and Josh Patterson.

My look into biblical ecclesiology began with general systematic theologies and progressed to works specifically focused on ecclesiology, Bible commentaries, and lexical aids. In evaluating the Baptist tradition, I have investigated the views of notable Baptist theologians of the past and present, taking into account the various streams of Baptist history. Since Baptist confessions of faith reveal the general consensus of the Baptists who sign and affirm them, I place particular emphasis on these confessions as representative statements detailing Baptist belief. William Latane Lumpkin's classic treasury *Baptist Confessions of Faith* is especially valuable in investigating the text and the background of many Baptist confessions of faith.[55]

This dissertation argues that most expressions of the multisite church model cannot function within the framework of a biblical or Baptist ecclesiology. The argumentation is made in three major steps. First, I examine the MCM from a historical perspective and demonstrate the historical uniqueness of the MCM. Chapter 2 argues that the multisite church is a unique expression of the church that is unprecedented in church history. Appeals made by multisite proponents to the New Testament and to early American Methodism for historical precedent are examined and critiqued. This chapter then considers early Baptist life in America and the ante-Nicene episcopacy as potential roots of the MCM. This chapter then concludes that although the MCM is historically unique, the development of the multisite church most closely parallels the development of the ante-Nicene episcopacy.

Second, I demonstrate that the meaning of *ekklesia* requires that a church assemble in order to be a church by definition. This argument comes in chapter 3. Only limited attention is be devoted to this issue since it has already surfaced in multisite

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[55]William Latane Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith* (Chicago: Judson, 1969).

literature.[56] The chapter reconsiders the meaning of *ekklesia* only in order to uniquely build upon it in the following three chapters. Chapters 4 through 6 show that the significance of the local church assembly is evident in more than the meaning of *ekklesia*. Churches must assemble in order to govern, discipline, and observe the Lord's Supper in a way that is consistent with New Testament ecclesiology and Baptist tradition.

Third, in chapters 4 through 6, I demonstrate the necessity of assembling for the specific purposes of church governance, church discipline, and observing the Lord's Supper in order to possess an ecclesiology that is consistent with the New Testament and Baptist tradition. Chapter 4 examines the biblical teaching on congregationalism. The chapter first laments the modern devaluation of church polity and then argues for its significance. After identifying the three major forms of church government, a case is made for congregationalism on textual, theological, and historical grounds. Once the biblical foundation and the historic Baptist conviction concerning congregationalism is established, the chapter then evaluates the MCM against them. This chapter concludes that most expressions of the multisite church are inconsistent with congregationalism because most multisite churches never assemble the totality of their membership and campuses in one location with the intention of governance. As a result, most expressions of the multisite church are also inconsistent with biblical teaching on ecclesiology and with Baptist tradition.

Chapter 5 addresses the significant yet neglected ecclesiological doctrine of church discipline. The chapter argues that the biblical teaching on church discipline necessitates that church discipline is exercised in the context of the assembled church. In addition to the biblical emphasis on assembly for discipline, the chapter demonstrates that the Baptist tradition has also understood church discipline as a responsibility of the

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[56]Gaines devotes his entire dissertation to this topic. Gaines, "One Church in One Location." Willis commits one of his major chapters, chapt. 3, to this topic. Willis, "Multi-Site Churches and Their Undergirding Ecclesiology."

gathered church. Finally, the chapter argues that since most multisite churches never assemble the totality of their membership and campuses in one location, they are unable to practice church discipline in a way that is consistent with biblical teaching and with Baptist ecclesiology. Even if a multisite church assembles the totality of their membership and campuses in one location occasionally, they are hard pressed to exercise meaningful church discipline with strangers who attend other campuses.

Chapter 6 argues that there is an incongruity between the unity the Lord's Supper is intended to display and the multisite church. The Lord's Supper is to be observed in a corporate gathering of the entire church. The obligation of assembling for the Lord's Supper is taught in the New Testament and affirmed in the Baptist tradition. Since most multisite churches never assemble the totality of their membership and campuses in one location, this chapter displays that they simply cannot meet this obligation. Even if a multisite church assembles the totality of their membership and campuses in one location occasionally, they will find it peculiar to discern the body (see 1 Cor 11:29) with strangers from other campuses.

Following this three-step argumentation, a conclusion is offered in chapter 7. The chapter concludes the dissertation by summarizing the arguments from chapters 2 through 6. In light of this argumentation, Baptist churches are cautioned to proceed with trepidation as they consider entering the multisite movement or as they evaluate their current multisite practices. The conclusion also offers parameters for a multisite church by which a church can remain within the boundaries of New Testament and Baptist ecclesiology and remain multisite. Finally, the dissertation concludes that although multisite churches technically can remain within the boundaries of New Testament and Baptist ecclesiology and remain multisite, it is practically unwise and awkward for them to do so.

Two factors limit this dissertation. First, there is the lack of scholarly argumentation in favor of the MCM. Outside of Gregg Allison's writings, little scholarly

argumentation for the multisite movement exists. Frye is a multisite proponent, but due to the breadth of his dissertation, he committed only one chapter to developing biblical and theological boundaries for multisite churches. For this reason, I give special attention to Allison's work. However, the lack of conversation partners is an organic limitation to this dissertation. Second, there is the theological diversity among multisite churches. My concern is primarily for the multisite churches represented within the SBC. However, multisite churches have representation in many different denominations. As such, multisite practitioners from other denominational backgrounds may be uninterested in my argumentation because they do not agree with my ecclesiological premises. Thus, the ecclesiological presuppositions of potential readers may turn them away from my argumentation before they consider it. Nevertheless, I do believe that the pages committed to developing limited elements of Baptist polity, namely congregationalism, church discipline, and the Lord's Supper, open healthy streams of conversation concerning biblical ecclesiology with those who consider them.

CHAPTER 2

THE HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT
OF MULTISITE CHURCHES

Historical assessment of the MCM is highly relevant in examining the compatibility of the movement with New Testament ecclesiology and Baptist tradition. If the origin of the MCM can be traced to the New Testament, then multisite churches are compatible with New Testament ecclesiology. In addition, if a tributary of Baptist tradition reveals a multisite ecclesiology or a practice that parallels modern multisite churches, then multisite churches have a historical precedent within that tributary of Baptist tradition. A strong historical precedent for the MCM would bolster the viability of the movement.

This chapter examines the historical development of the MCM in search of a historical precedent for the movement. This examination takes place in three steps. First, the appeals made by multisite proponents for a historical precedent for the movement in the New Testament, in early American Methodism, and in early Baptists are presented. Second, the chapter examines four aspects of church history and compares each to the modern MCM in search of a historical precedent for the movement. The four aspects of church history under consideration are the New Testament, early American Methodism, the ante-Nicene episcopacy, and early Baptists. The New Testament, early American Methodism, and early Baptists are examined since they are where multisite proponents seek to find a historical precedent for the movement. The ante-Nicene episcopacy is examined in order to present an alternative possibility for the historical roots of the MCM. The examination of early Baptists is particularly pertinent because this dissertation examines the compatibility of the MCM with Baptist tradition. Third, the

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chapter concludes that, although the MCM is historically unique, the historical development of the MCM most closely parallels the historical development of the ante-Nicene episcopacy and discusses the implications for this conclusion.

Multisite Appeals for Historical Precedent

Examining the historical development of the MCM begins by examining the appeals for a historical precedent made by multisite proponents and practitioners. Although this chapter evaluates the ante-Nicene episcopacy for historical roots of the MCM, multisite proponents do not make historical appeals to that aspect of church history. Multisite proponents restrict their appeals to historical precedent for their movement to the New Testament, to early American Methodism, and to early Baptists. Accordingly, this section commences by presenting multisite appeals to the New Testament for a historical precedent for the MCM, then proceeds by presenting multisite appeals to early American Methodists for a historical precedent for the MCM, and concludes by presenting multisite appeals to early Baptists for a historical precedent for the MCM.

Multisite Appeals to the New Testament
for Historical Precedent

Proponents of the MCM make a variety of appeals to the New Testament to establish a historical precedent for the movement from Scripture. Some multisite proponents carefully develop their biblical argumentation while others merely mention Scripture in passing. This section presents multisite appeals to the New Testament for a historical precedent for the MCM from a variety of sources.

In their seminal book on the MCM, Surrat, Ligon, and Bird make limited appeals to the New Testament in support of the movement. The primary biblical argumentation they offer for multisite is the opportunity it affords churches for obeying God-given directives for the church, specifically the Great Commandment (Matt 22:37-

39), the Great Commission (Matt 28:18-20), and the Great Charge (1 Pet 5:1-4).[1] Later in the book, Surrat, Ligon, and Bird cite the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15 as evidence that the believers in Antioch functioned as a campus of the church in Jerusalem and that all of the new churches which developed in the New Testament era remained connected with the church in Jerusalem. They argue that "The Antioch group was not seen as a separate body but as an extension of the Jerusalem church and functioned under the authority of Peter and the apostles in Jerusalem."[2] The final text of significance that Surratt, Ligon, and Bird cite is Colossians 4:16. Noting Paul's instructions that his letter to the Colossians should also be read in Laodicea, they state that circulating letters created a situation within early churches where "it was not uncommon for these congregations to all experience the same teaching when they met together."[3] Since Paul used the technology of his day, circulating letters, the authors then surmise that Paul would have likely used video venues had they been available to him.[4]

The remaining appeals to the New Testament for the historical precedent of the MCM considered in this section are made by Baptist multisite proponents. Since this dissertation examines the compatibility of the MCM with New Testament ecclesiology and Baptist tradition, appeals to the New Testament for the historical precedent of the MCM by Baptist multisite proponents are particularly pertinent. Five Baptist sources are considered, beginning with the least developed argumentation and concluding with the most developed argumentation.

Thomas Bartlett offers only minimal biblical support for the MCM in his doctoral project. Citing Acts 14:23, Bartlett argues that the apostles exercised authority

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[1]Geoff Surratt, Greg Ligon, and Warren Bird, *The Multi-Site Church Revolution: Being One Church in Many Locations* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 10.

[2]Ibid., 92.

[3]Ibid.

[4]Ibid.

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over the early churches.[5] Bartlett also refers to Paul's instructions in 1 Corinthians 5 for the church to remove the immoral man as another example of apostolic authority over a local church.[6] In Bartlett's understanding, these texts provide a New Testament precedent for the Lead Pastor of a multisite church to exercise authority over the multiple campuses of the church.

In their 2008 volume *Spin-Off Churches: How One Church Successfully Plants Another*, Rodney Harrison, Tom Cheyney, and Don Overstreet consider the multisite church model as a viable church planting model. At the time of publication, all three authors served as professors in Southern Baptist seminaries.[7] Harrison, Cheyney, and Overstreet do not offer a developed argument from the New Testament for the historical precedent of the MCM. However, they do claim a historical precedent for multisite from the New Testament when they state that "Historically, the multisite church is more like the church we read about in the book of Acts and in the letter to the Corinthians, one church meeting house to house or in multiple sites."[8] This claim is significant since it comes from three Southern Baptist seminary professors.

J. D. Greear, the current President of the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC), also appeals to the New Testament for a historical precedent for the MCM. Greear argues that the New Testament does not provide specific instructions for the organization of the church or stipulate that the local church must assemble weekly.[9] Moreover, Greear states

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[5]Thomas Frank Bartlett, "Multisite Church Planting in a Rural Community" (DMin project, Temple Baptist Seminary, 2012), 53.

[6]Ibid., 47.

[7]At the when time this book was published, Harrison and Cheyney taught at Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, and Overstreet taught at Golden Gate Baptist Theological Seminary. At present, Harrison still serves at Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, while Cheyney serves as the Executive Director of Missions for the Greater Orlando Baptist Association. Overstreet passed away in 2017.

[8]Rodney Harrison, Tom Cheyney, and Don Overstreet, *Spin-off Churches: How One Church Successfully Plants Another* (Nashville: B & H Academic, 2008), 79.

[9]J. D. Greear, "A Pastor Defends His Multi-Site Church," *9Marks Journal* 6 (June 2009): 19.

that the early church in Jerusalem did not gather weekly even though they were one church (Acts 8:11, 11:22, 15:4). They only gathered occasionally to celebrate the Lord's Supper as one city-wide church (1 Cor 11:27-30; Rom 16:5).[10] Greear also contends that Paul's use of the technology available to him, circulating letters, indicates that he would have also made use of the modern technology that enables video venue multisite churches had that technology have been available to him. He writes, "Many of Paul's letters were intended to be circulated for reading throughout the churches. If Paul could have cut a DVD from the Philippian jail and passed that around, I can't see why he wouldn't have done so."[11] With these comments, the current SBC President makes an appeal to the New Testament for the historical precedent of the MCM that parallels the argumentation of Surratt, Ligon, and Bird.

Elmer Towns makes a more extensive appeal to the New Testament to establish a historical precedent for the MCM. In his 1990 publication *10 of Today's Most Innovative Churches*, Towns devotes a chapter to analyzing the MCM in its early days. In this chapter, two pages are devoted to establishing a historical precedent for the MCM from within the New Testament based on two premises. First, Towns argues that the early church in Jerusalem was one church (Acts 4:32) that also met house to house (Acts 2:46, 5:42).[12] He contends that the Lord's Supper was taken only in homes (Acts 2:46). He also contends that the church met together in the temple for celebration, preaching, motivation, and testimony (Acts 3:11), while the church also met house to house for fellowship, accountability, instruction, and identity (Acts 5:42).[13] Second, Towns argues

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[10]Greear, "A Pastor Defends His Multi-Site Church," 19-20.

[11]Ibid., 20.

[12]Elmer L. Towns, *An Inside Look at 10 of Today's Most Innovative Churches: What They're Doing, How They're Doing It & How You Can Apply Their Ideas in Your Church* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 1990), 242.

[13]Ibid., 242-43.

from Romans 16 that multiple churches in Corinth (Rom 16:16) also gathered together on occasion (Rom 16:23).[14]

The most extensive appeal to the New Testament for a historical precedent for the MCM comes from the pen of Gregg Allison. Allison also refers to house church gatherings for biblical precedent for the MCM (Rom 16:5; Col 4:15; Phlm 2) and focuses especially on the church in Corinth. He understands a house church as a "building block of the church in a location; that is, many house churches in the city of Corinth (for example) composed the church of Corinth."[15] Allison expands his argumentation by contending that while "the church in Corinth—the fundamental unit—expressed its life and ministry through meetings that took place in the houses of its members . . . . each home based gathering was a legitimate gathering of the church of Corinth."[16] With "a little conjecture" Allison argues that the church in Corinth met in the homes of Titius Justus (Acts 18:7), Crispus (Acts 18:8), and Stephanas (1 Cor 16:15). The whole church also gathered occasionally in the home of Gaius (Rom 16:23; 1 Cor 14:23).[17] In addition to the house churches of Corinth, Allision also looks to the early church in Jerusalem for a historical precedent for the MCM from the New Testament. He argues that Acts 2:46 contains "the strongest biblical support for the multisite structure."[18] The daily dispersed "house to house" meetings described in Acts 2:46 "were still the church of Jerusalem."[19] Allison also cites Acts 5:42 which states that "every day, in the temple and from house to

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[14]Towns, *An Inside Look at 10 of Today's Most Innovative Churches*, 244.

[15]Gregg R. Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers: The Doctrine of the Church* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 312.

[16]Ibid., 312-13.

[17]Ibid., 313. Allison builds this same argument with House. While Allision refers to this line of argumentation as "conjecture" in *Sojourners and Strangers*, he refers to it as "informed speculation" five years later in *MultiChurch*. Brad House and Gregg Allison, *MultiChurch: Exploring the Future of Multisite* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2017), 33.

[18]Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers*, 313.

[19]Ibid.

house, they did not cease teaching and preaching that the Christ is Jesus."[20] He argues that this text indicates that the practice of the early church in Jerusalem meeting in the temple and from house to house persisted as the regular pattern of the church in Jerusalem.[21] Allison summarizes his argument by noting that "whether meeting all together as the whole church in a large house or space, or congregating as parts of the church in smaller homes, the assemblies were considered to be *the church*: one church existing as multiple congregations or locations."[22]

**Multisite Appeals to Early American
Methodism for Historical Precedent**

The second aspect of church history to which proponents of the MCM refer for a historical precedent for the movement is early American Methodism. This appeal is made by many multisite proponents, but is typically not accompanied by meticulous historical argumentation. This section presents multisite appeals to early American Methodism for a historical precedent for the MCM from a variety of sources.

Surratt, Ligon, and Bird argue that a historical precedent for the MCM is found in the circuit-riders of early American Methodism. They reference the comments of Craig Groeschel, the Lead Pastor of Life Church, a multisite church based in Oklahoma City. Groeschel, who has a Methodist background, likes to quip that the move from a preacher on horseback to a preacher on the big screen "is simply a shift from circuit rider to closed-circuit rider!"[23] Surratt, Ligon, and Bird make this claim only in passing and do not cite any specific reference to Methodist history to validate their claim.

Similarly, Mark Driscoll also looked to early American Methodism for a

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[20]Unless otherwise noted, all quotations from Scripture in this dissertation are taken from the English Standard Version.

[21]House and Allison, *MultiChurch*, 32.

[22]Ibid., 33.

[23]Surratt, Ligon, and Bird, *The Multi-Site Church Revolution*, 91.

historical precedent for the MCM. In 2009, while serving as the Lead Pastor of Mars Hill Church, a since disbanded multisite church based in Seattle, Driscoll published *Vintage Church* which detailed the multisite practices of the church. In this book, Driscoll also alluded to the circuit-riding preachers of early American Methodism to establish a historical precedent for the movement. He states that Methodist circuit-riding preachers "would travel on horseback to preach at multiple churches" and that the multisite church model "is the circuit-riding preacher model renewed by technology."[24] Driscoll's argumentation parallels that of Surratt, Ligon, and Bird in that both arguments understand the MCM to be a resurgence of early American Methodist circuit-riders enabled by modern technology. Also like Surratt, Ligon, and Bird, Driscoll made this claim only in passing and does not cite any specific reference to Methodist history to validate his claim.

Elmer Towns also cites early American Methodism as a historical precedent for the MCM. In a work he coauthored with Ed Stetzer and Warren Bird, these authors argue that Methodist circuit-riding preachers of the 1700s and 1800s functioned as the pastors of multisite churches.[25] However, Towns also notes some dissimilarities between the circuit-riders of early American Methodism and the MCM. In another book, he notes that early American Methodist churches were often led by laity with only supplemental ministry supplied by circuit-riders when possible, while modern multisite church pastors play a larger role in leadership.[26] As with Surratt, Ligon, and Bird and Driscoll, Towns makes this claim only in passing and does not cite any specific reference to Methodist history to validate his claim.

A final noteworthy multisite proponent who looks to early American

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[24]Mark Driscoll and Gerry Breshears, *Vintage Church: Timeless Truths and Timely Methods* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009), 245.

[25]Elmer L. Towns, Ed Stetzer, and Warren Bird, *11 Innovations in the Local Church: How Today's Leaders Can Learn, Discern and Move into the Future* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 2007), 68.

[26]Towns, *An Inside Look at 10 of Today's Most Innovative Churches*, 241.

Methodism for a historical precedent for the MCM is Scott Reavley. Reavley's doctoral

project on the MCM is one of the earliest contributions to multisite literature. One model

of the multisite church Reavley describes is the encore model, a multisite model in which

the church staff duplicates one service in multiple locations. Reavley cites early

American Methodist circuit-riding preachers as a historical example of the encore

model.[27] However, as with Surratt, Ligon, and Bird, Driscoll, and Towns, Reavley makes

this claim only in passing and does not cite any specific reference to Methodist history to

validate his claim. In fact, no multisite church proponents cite specific references to

Methodist history to validate their appeals to early American Methodism for a historical

precedent for the MCM.

Multisite Appeals to the Early Baptists
for Historical Precedent

Appeals made by multisite proponents to early Baptist life for a historical

precedent for the MCM are less prevalent and less well-known than their appeals to the

New Testament and to early American Methodism. In his dissertation on the MCM

entitled "Multi-site Churches and Their Undergirding Ecclesiology: Questioning Its

Baptist Identity and Biblical Validity," Patrick Willis notes that no multisite proponents

appeal to early Baptists in America for a historical precedent for the MCM.[28] Willis is

accurate in his assessment. Willis also notes that Leon McBeth, in his classic, *The Baptist*

Heritage, speaks of the branch ecclesiology that developed around the First Baptist

Church of Charleston, South Carolina in the eighteenth century in terminology that is

similar to the terminology used by multisite proponents in reference to multisite

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[27]R. Scott Reavley, "An Ecclesiology for Multisite Churches: Thinking Biblically about the Local Church in Multiple Locations" (DMin project, Western Seminary, 2007), 22.

[28]Patrick Graham Willis, "Multi-Site Churches and Their Undergirding Ecclesiology: Questioning Its Baptist Identity and Biblical Validity" (PhD diss., Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2014), 11.

campuses.[29] McBeth describes the "arms" of the Charleston church that emerged in surrounding communities. Although they built their own buildings and called their own pastors, these arms were established by and associated with the central church in Charleston.[30] No multisite proponent has appealed specifically to early Baptists in America for a historical precedent for the MCM, but Willis believes this argument is coming soon.[31]

While no multisite proponents have appealed specifically to early Baptists in America as a historical precedent for the MCM, Baptist theologians have appealed to early British Baptists as a historical precedent for the MCM. In 2005, when the MCM was just developing into a movement, Chad Brand, former Professor of Christian Theology at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, was the first to appeal to early British Baptists in support of the MCM. Brand argues,

> Similarly, in some cities individual congregations are developing several satellite churches. This does not necessarily entail a violation of Baptist principles. Many seventeenth-century Baptist churches existed in two or more locations at the same time for various reasons, but they retained a commitment to Baptist integrity.[32]

Four years later Gregg Allison, a former colleague of Brand, also rooted the historicity of the MCM in early British Baptists. Allison looks to the First London Confession of Faith of the seven Particular Baptists churches around London in 1644 to begin this argument.[33] He cites Article XLVII on cooperation, which reads,

> And although the particular Congregations be distinct and several Bodies, every one a compact and knit citie in it selfe; yet are they all to walk by one and the same Rule, and by all meanes convenient to have the counsel and help one of another in

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[29]Willis, "Multi-Site Churches and Their Undergirding Ecclesiology," 11.

[30]Leon McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage* (Nashville: Broadman, 1987), 218.

[31]Willis, "Multi-Site Churches and Their Undergirding Ecclesiology," 11-12.

[32]Chad Brand and David E. Hankins, *One Sacred Effort: The Cooperative Program of Southern Baptists* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2005), 72.

[33]Gregg R. Allison, "Theological Defense of Multi-Site," *9 Marks Journal* 6 (June 2009): 12.

all needful affaires of the Church, as members of one body in the common faith under Christ their onely head.[34]

Allison argues that the commitment to cooperation displayed in the First London Confession of Faith has surfaced steadily throughout Baptist history, including the 2000 Baptist Faith and Message.[35] According to Allison, many modern pastors who have grown frustrated with the bureaucracy and ineffectiveness of traditional church associations and conventions often seek the deep cooperation they desire amongst multisite church campuses.[36]

Both Brand and Allison cite a massive 1955 dissertation by Hugh Wamble as their primary source for establishing a historical precedent for the MCM in early British Baptist life.[37] Describing seventeenth-century British Baptists, Wamble wrote,

> It was normal for a local church to have a scattered constituency and to be composed of scattered congregations. For convenience or protection, the membership was divided into several parts for worship. The pattern was more characteristic of the "country" or "village" churches than of "city" congregations.[38]

Wamble referenced nine early British Baptist churches that he believed portrayed the normalcy of "scattered" Baptist congregations. Of these nine churches, Wamble discussed only two, the Church at Ilston and the Church at Fenstanton.[39] Wamble argued that the Church at Ilston was comprised of broadly scattered congregations and that the Church at Fenstanton was comprised of three or four congregations.[40] Wamble did not

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[34]William Latane Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith* (Chicago: Judson, 1969). 168-69.

[35]Allison, "Theological Defense of Multi-Site," 12. Southern Baptist Convention, "The Baptist Faith and Message: The 2000 Baptist Faith & Message," June 14, 2000, http://www.sbc.net/bfm2000/bfm 2000.asp.

[36]Allison, "Theological Defense of Multi-Site," 12.

[37]Brand and Hankins, *One Sacred Effort*, 72. Allison credits Brand for pointing him toward Wamble. Allison, "Theological Defense of Multi-Site," 13n13.

[38]G. Hugh Wamble, "The Concept and Practice of Christian Fellowship the Connectional and Inter-Denominational Aspects Thereof, among Seventeenth Century English Baptists" (ThD diss., Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1955), 252.

[39]Ibid., 255-59.

[40]Ibid., 256, 259.

look to the Church at Ilston and the Church at Fenstanton to affirm the historicity of the MCM. His work preceded the MCM by decades. It was not until fifty years after its publication that Brand referenced Wamble's work when seeking to establish a historical precedent for the MCM.

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**Examining the New Testament for Roots of the
Multisite Church**

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The previous section presented multisite appeals to the New Testament for a historical precedent for the MCM. This section carefully examines the text of the New Testament in consideration of these appeals. Multisite proponents appeal to three major groups of texts when seeking to root the MCM historically in the New Testament. These texts are Acts 2-5, texts pertaining to house churches, and Acts 15. This section examines each of these groups of texts, beginning with Acts 2-5.

As expounded above, the basic multisite appeal to Acts 2-5 in support of the MCM is that the early church in Jerusalem existed as one church that met together and from house to house. Particularly important in examining these chapters is Acts 2:46 which reads "and day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts." According to Allision, this text represents "the strongest biblical support for the multisite structure."[41] However, Acts 2-5 do not establish a historical precedent for the MCM for two reasons.

First, the entirety of early church in Jerusalem gathered together (Acts 2:44, 5:12, 6:1-2). As noted above, some multisite proponents acknowledge the gathering of the whole Jerusalem church, particularly Towns and Allison. Nevertheless, the pattern of the church in Jerusalem gathering in the temple and from house to house does not provide a historical precedent for the MCM because most multisite churches never assemble the

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[41]Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers*, 313.

totality of their membership and campuses in one location.[42] Other multisite proponents

assert that the early church in Jerusalem never assembled the entirety of their

membership. Greear asserts that "historians tell us there was no space in Jerusalem

available to the disciples in which three thousand or more people could have met on a

weekly basis."[43] With this assertion Greear overlooks the most natural reading of the

summary statement of Acts 2:44 that "all who believed were together and had all things

in common" (see also Acts 5:12, 6:1-2). The early church in Jerusalem gathered at

Solomon's Portico (Acts 3:11, 5:12). Thomas White and John Yeats explain how

Solomon's Portico could contain large gatherings of early believers:

> Solomon's Porch ran along the eastern wall of the temple, which was 1,509 feet in length. To put this in perspective, the Bank of America Stadium in Charlotte, North Carolina, measures only nine hundred feet in length and eight hundred feet wide. This stadium holds 73,367 people. Admittedly, this is a stadium with seats, and the comparison is for example only. The wall would be about the length of five football fields. Also remember that this was the location where three thousand were added and where the number increased to five thousand.[44]

The precise nature of the gatherings of the early church in Jerusalem are

unclear. There is no indication in the text of the precise activities conducted by the church

in the temple or in homes. Although Towns contends that the church met together in the

temple for celebration, preaching, motivation, and testimony (Acts 3:11), while the

church also met house to house for fellowship, accountability, instruction, and identity

(Acts 5:42),[45] the texts he cites do not actually speak to the precise activities conducted

by the early church in these meetings. Multisite proponents interpret the gathering of the

entire church in the temple as representative of the gathering of multiple campuses of a

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[42]Darrell Grant Gaines, "One Church in One Location: Questioning the Biblical, Theological, and Historical Claims of the Multi-Site Church Movement" (PhD diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2012), 124. Thomas White and John M. Yeats, *Franchising McChurch: Feeding Our Obsession with Easy Christianity* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2009), 202.

[43]Greear, "A Pastor Defends His Multi-Site Church," 19.

[44]White and Yeats, *Franchising McChurch*, 174-75.

[45]Towns, *An Inside Look at 10 of Today's Most Innovative Churches*, 242-43.

church while the in-home gatherings correspond to modern multisite campuses. Interestingly, no one ever read these verses this way prior to the advent of the MCM.[46] In fact, many have argued that the texts in question represent the practice of a large group worship gathering accompanied by a small group ministry.[47] Such divergent opinions on what occurred when the early Jerusalem church gathered in the temple and in the homes of members points to the lack of precision in the text pertaining to the exact nature of these gatherings.

While the precise nature of the gatherings of the early church in Jerusalem is unclear, it is clear that the entire church regularly gathered together (Acts 2:44, 5:12, 6:1-2). The regular gathering of the church is what constituted the church in Jerusalem as a church. They were considered a church even when they were disbanded, but only because they regularly gathered. In the same way, a basketball team is still considered a basketball team when they are not together, but only because they regularly gather to function as a basketball team.[48]

Second, Acts 2-5 do not establish a historical precedent for the MCM because the oneness of the church described in these chapters requires proximity. *Epi to auto* is the Greek phrase in Acts 2:44 that is translated as "were together" in the English Standard Version. This phrase is used throughout the New Testament in reference to the assembly of the church for worship. As Everett Ferguson explains, "the principal

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[46]Jonathan Leeman, "Theological Critique of Multi-Site: What Exactly Is a 'Church?'" *9Marks* 6 (June 2009): 41.

[47]Ed Stetzer and Eric Geiger, *Transformational Groups: Creating a New Scorecard for Groups* (Nashville: B & H, 2015), 61-62. Margaret Lawson, "The Church's Role in Teaching," in *The Teaching Ministry of the Church*, ed. William R. Yount (Nashville: B & H Academic, 2008), 129-30. Another author who argues that Acts presents a large group worship gathering accompanied by a small group ministry is James Riley Estep Jr. Interestingly, Estep coauthored the book where he makes this argument with Gregg Allison. Allison contributed three chapters to the book. James Riley Estep Jr., "Basic Principles for a Theology of Christian Education," in *A Theology for Christian Education* (Nashville: B & H Academic, 2008), 49.

[48]Leeman, "Theological Critique of Multi-Site: What Exactly Is a 'Church?'" 41.

expression of 'togetherness' for the early church was in the public worship assembly."[49] The frequent use of *epi to auto* also indicates that the early church did not view itself as a church apart from a visible community which was reflected in the assembly of the church for worship. As they assembled, they demonstrated their nature as one church.[50] In addition to gathering for worship, the oneness described in Acts 2:44 also pictures relational proximity. Likewise, Acts 4:32 portrays unity and generosity stemming from this relational proximity.[51] Some multisite churches limit their geographical proximity to multiple campuses scattered across their city.[52] These multisite churches will find relational proximity difficult even if the campuses assemble occasionally because building relationships is hindered by the infrequency of their gatherings. Other multisite churches require no geographical proximity for their campuses. For instance, Suratt, Ligon, and Bird encourage multisite churches to go global by planting international campuses.[53] While campuses scattered across a city will find the relational proximity described in Acts 2-5 difficult to facilitate, international campuses will find this level of relational proximity impossible to facilitate. Accordingly, Acts 2-5 do not establish a historical precedent for the MCM.

A second group of texts cited by multisite proponents seeking to establish a historical precedent for the MCM within the New Testament are texts pertaining to house churches in Corinth. The arguments surveyed above give particular attention to the house church structure in Corinth. Allison acknowledges that his argumentation includes "a

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[49]Everett Ferguson, "'When You Come Together': *Epi to Auto* in Early Christian Literature," *Restoration Quarterly* 16, no. 3/4 (1973): 208.

[50]Ibid.

[51]John S. Hammett, "What Makes a Multisite Church One Church?" *Great Commission Research Journal* 4, no. 1 (Summer 2012): 100.

[52]House and Allison, *MultiChurch*, 16.

[53]Geoff Surratt, Greg Ligon, and Warren Bird, *A Multi-Site Church Roadtrip: Exploring the New Normal* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 61-63, 129-145.

little conjecture"[54] and "informed speculation."[55] In fact, little is actually clear when it comes to the gathering practices of the church in Corinth. The text of Scripture does not explicitly state that the church in Corinth gathered in the homes of Crispus (Acts 18:8) and Stephanas (1 Cor 16:15) as Allison surmises.[56] However, the text is clear that the church in Corinth met in the house of Titius Justus in the early days of their existence (Acts 18:7). More significantly, the text is also clear that the whole church in Corinth gathered in the home of Gaius (Rom 16:23; 1 Cor 14:23).[57] The whole church in Corinth gathered together specifically for the Lord's Supper (1 Cor 11:17, 18, 20, 33, 34), for worship (1 Cor 14:23, 26), and for church discipline (1 Cor 5:4).[58] Since most multisite churches never assemble the totality of their membership and campuses in one location, the reference to house churches in Corinth does not provide a historical precedent for the MCM because the whole church in Corinth regularly assembled.[59]

The third frequently cited text in multisite appeals to the New Testament for historical precedent is Acts 15. Multisite proponents assert that the Jerusalem Council indicates that the believers in Antioch were an extension of the church in Jerusalem and

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[54]Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers*, 313.

[55]House and Allison, *MultiChurch*, 33.

[56]Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers*, 313. House and Allison, *MultiChurch*, 33.

[57]Both Douglas Moo and Robert Mounce affirm the common scholarly conclusion that Paul wrote Romans from Corinth. Both Moo and Mounce also affirm the probability that the Gaius mentioned in Rom 16:23 is also the Gaius mentioned in 1 Cor 1:14. Both Moo and Mounce also affirm the probability that the Erastus mentioned in Rom 16:23 is the same Erastus identified as the treasurer of the city of Corinth in an inscription uncovered in Corinth. These factors are strong indications that Gaius hosted Paul and the whole church in the city of Corinth. Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 1996), 2-3, 935-36. Robert H. Mounce, *Romans*, New American Commentary, vol. 27 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1995), 24-26, 281.

[58]These verses frequently contain the English phrase "when you come together," which is combined with the Greek phrase *epi to auto* in 1 Cor 11:20. This phrase carries the meaning of togetherness and implies a public worship gathering. Ferguson, "'When You Come Together,'" 203. Under the BDAG entry for *autos*, there is a reference to the phrase *epi to au* which carries "at the same place, together" as its meaning. Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, ed. Frederick W. Danker and William Arndt, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2000), 153.

[59]Gaines, "One Church in One Location," 124. White and Yeats, *Franchising McChurch*, 202.

functioned under her authority.[60] However, close inspection of Acts 15 reveals three factors that argue against understanding this text as a historical precedent for the MCM from the New Testament. First, the text does not speak of the believers in Antioch as a campus of the church in Jerusalem. Rather, the text speaks of the church in Antioch and the church in Jerusalem. Paul and Barnabas were sent to Jerusalem "by the church" in Antioch (Acts 15:3). Likewise, upon their arrival in Jerusalem, Paul and Barnabas "were welcomed by the church" in Jerusalem (Acts 15:4). Second, representatives from both churches were involved in the decision-making process. When the apostles and elders gathered at the Jerusalem Council, Paul and Barnabas spoke on behalf of the church in Antioch (Acts 15:12) and Peter and James spoke on behalf of the church in Jerusalem (Acts 15:7-11, 13-21). The church in Jerusalem was not exercising authority over the church in Antioch. The church in Antioch was involved in the decision-making process through their delegates, Paul and Barnabas. Third, the church in Antioch received the letter from the church in Jerusalem as an encouragement rather that a commandment. The decision reached by the apostles and elders was affirmed by the entire congregation in Jerusalem (Acts 15:22) and delivered to the entire congregation in Antioch (Acts 15:30). The church in Antioch did not receive the decision from the church in Jerusalem as an authoritative command; rather "they rejoiced because of its encouragement" (Acts 15:31). The church in Jerusalem was not exercising authority over the church in Antioch as the senior leadership of multisite churches exercise authority over their campuses. Taken together, these three factors build a strong argument against interpreting Acts 15 as a historical precedent for the MCM from the New Testament.

The three major groups of texts cited by multisite proponents to establish a historical precedent for the MCM from the New Testament fail to establish such a precedent. These texts do indicate that the church in Jerusalem and the church in Corinth

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[60]Surratt, Ligon, and Bird, *The Multi-Site Church Revolution*, 92.

met in multiple locations from house to house. However, the churches in Jerusalem and Corinth also gathered together. Since most multisite churches never assemble the totality of their membership and campuses in one location, the multisite church model does not follow the pattern of the early churches in Jerusalem and Corinth.[61] Concerning Acts 15, there is simply no textual support for the claim that the church in Jerusalem exercised authority over the church in Antioch or that the believers who gathered in Antioch functioned as a campus of the church in Jerusalem. Accordingly, none of the New Testament texts cited by multisite proponents demonstrate a historical precedent for the MCM in the New Testament. Chapters 3 through 6 investigate additional aspects of ecclesiology that further reveal the incongruity of multisite ecclesiology with New Testament ecclesiology.

Examining Early American Methodism for Roots of the Multisite Church

This section examines the multisite appeals to early American Methodism for a historical precedent for the MCM detailed above. The argument of this section is that early American Methodism, particularly as seen in the life and ministry of Francis Asbury, the father of American Methodism, does not offer a historical precedent for the MCM. However, the claim by multisite proponents that early American Methodism does offer a historical precedent for the movement proves problematic from the standpoint of New Testament ecclesiology and Baptist tradition. Such a claim indicates the tendency of multisite churches to lean toward episcopal church governance.[62] This argument is made

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[61]It should be noted that while most multisite churches never assemble the totality of their membership and campuses in one location, some do. In the conclusion of this dissertation in chap. 7, parameters are established that allow a multisite church to remain multisite while also conforming to New Testament ecclesiology. The current assertion is not that all multisite churches fail to follow the model of the early churches in Jerusalem and in Corinth. The current assertion is only that most multisite churches fail to follow the model of the early churches in Jerusalem and in Corinth due to their failure to ever assemble the totality of their membership and campuses in one location.

[62]The focus of this dissertation is examining the compatibility of the MCM with New Testament ecclesiology and Baptist tradition. The case for congregational church governance is built in chap. 4. This section does not argue for congregationalism, it only demonstrates the tendency of multisite

in two steps. First, it is demonstrated that Early American Methodism does not function as a historical precedent for the MCM due to the dissimilarities between early Methodist societies and multisite campuses. Second, the episcopal church governance of early American Methodism is exhibited by portraying the hierarchical relationship between Asbury and his circuit-riding preachers. Therefore, the claim by multisite proponents that there is a historical precedent for the MCM in early American Methodism reveals ecclesiological issues with the movement because Methodism is founded on episcopal church governance.

**Dissimilarities Between Early American
Methodist Societies and Multisite
Campuses**

By examining the Methodist sacramental controversy of the 1770s and 1780s and the Methodist usage of the terms "church" and "society," this section argues that no direct historical connection exists between early American Methodism and the MCM. In the Methodist societies of colonial America, preachers were forbidden to administer the ordinances. The reason for the prohibition lays in Methodist ecclesiology. The early Methodist societies were not churches.[63] When Asbury spoke of his ministry, he did not speak in terms of church planting. Conversely, his *Journal* contains statements like, "my intention is to form a society here."[64] Likewise, when referring to Methodist buildings, Asbury did not use the term "church," but instead referred to them as "meeting houses."[65] This verbiage reveals that the early American Methodist gatherings did not consider

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churches to lean toward episcopal church governance. Since Baptist tradition affirms that congregationalism is the form of church government that is most consistent with New Testament ecclesiology, the episcopal leanings of multisite churches is problematic for the MCM from the perspectives of New Testament ecclesiology and Baptist tradition.

[63]Norman E. Nygaard, *Bishop on Horseback: The Story of Francis Asbury* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1962), 60, 155.

[64]Francis Asbury, *Journal and Letters* (1821; repr., Nashville: Abingdon, 1958), 1:82.

[65]Ibid., 1:261.

themselves to be churches, but societies under the authority of the Episcopal Church. For this reason, the *Minutes* of the first Methodist conference state that preachers are "strictly to avoid administering the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper." Instead, society members were to attend the Episcopal Church to receive the ordinances.[66]

The sacramental controversy of the 1770s and 1780s clarifies the usage of the terms "society" and "church" in early American Methodism. The essence of the sacramental controversy is captured in a letter written by Francis Asbury to John Wesley on September 20, 1783. In this letter, Asbury notes that many new members of the Methodist societies came from other denominations. In response, these denominations often made efforts to regain their lost membership. Asbury feared that if the Methodist societies could not administer the ordinances, then these converts might return to their former denominations.[67] It is also likely that those converted under Methodist influence could be lured by other denominations who did administer the ordinances. As Asbury wrote in 1783, he could see the essence of the sacramental controversy so clearly because he had lived through the controversy for over a decade.[68]

The sacramental controversy was not decisively resolved until the 1784 Christmas Conference. At this time, the Methodist Episcopal Church in America was officially established with Francis Asbury as bishop. As the bishop of an official church denomination, Asbury began to ordain the Methodist preachers so that they could

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[66]Daniel Hitt and Thomas Ware, ed. *Minutes of the Methodist Conferences, Annually Held in America; from 1773 to 1813, Inclusive* (New York: John C. Totten, 1813), 5.

[67]Asbury, *Journal and Letters*, 3:31.

[68]In a quarterly meeting in Maryland on December 22, 1772, Asbury spoke against the administration of the ordinances by Robert Strawbridge, a Methodist preacher in Maryland. Ibid., 1:60. At a later quarterly meeting in Maryland in 1774, Asbury again instructed the preachers not to administer the ordinances. Strawbridge conceded and agreed to administer baptism and the Lord's Supper only when absolutely necessary. Nygaard, *Bishop on Horseback*, 99-100. In June of 1779, Asbury wrote concerning the Virginia conference that "the preachers there have been effecting a lame separation from the Episcopal Church." Asbury, *Journal and Letters*, 1:304. The Methodist preachers in Virginia formed a presbytery and ordained one another so they could administer the sacraments to their society members. Nygaard, *Bishop on Horseback*, 158.

administer the ordinances to church members themselves. The nature of the sacramental controversy reveals that early American Methodism does not provide a historical precedent for the MCM. Prior to the organization of the Methodist Episcopal Church in America, Methodist assemblies were considered societies, not churches. Following the organization of the Methodist Episcopal Church in America, Methodist assemblies were each considered churches. Neither of these expressions of early American Methodism forms a direct historical connection between early American Methodism and the MCM because neither early Methodist societies nor the later Methodist churches possessed the "common vision, budget, leadership, and board" that characterize multisite churches.[69] The Methodist circuit-riders preached to multiple societies and then to multiple churches, never to churches organized with multiple campuses.

Episcopal Church Governance in Early American Methodism

Under the leadership of Francis Asbury, early American Methodism was characterized by a rigid form of episcopal church governance. As bishop, Asbury possessed a great deal of authority, and "he refused to give up any of it."[70] In spite of this form of church governance, Asbury was well received by the preachers, for they recognized that he acted for the good of the church rather than his own personal advancement.[71] Additionally, Asbury was accountable to the General Conference for his conduct, which gave the preachers some recourse if needed.[72] Asbury was a bishop, but

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[69]Surratt, Ligon, and Bird, *The Multi-Site Church Revolution*, 18.

[70]Charles Ludwig, *Francis Asbury: God's Circuit Rider* (Milford, MI: Mott, 1984), 164.

[71]Ezra Squier Tipple, *Francis Asbury: The Prophet of the Long Road* (New York: Methodist Book Concern, 1916), 261.

[72]Nathan Bangs, *A History of the Methodist Episcopal Church* (New York: Published by T. Mason and G. Lane for the Methodist Episcopal Church, 1839), 1:346-47. Hitt and Ware, *Minutes of the Methodist Conferences, Annually Held in America; from 1773 to 1813, Inclusive*, 42.

he was a benevolent bishop.[73]

Asbury's approach to his office was driven by his ecclesiology. He spoke of three distinct church offices which he identified as apostles, elders, and deacons.[74] The employment of the term apostle, used here in place of the usual term bishop, indicates a high view of the role of bishop. Asbury viewed the office of bishop so highly because he understood the office to be endued with authority by virtue of apostolic succession. Asbury believed that, although the apostolic form of church government marked by travelling bishops vanished in the first century, it was restored in part during the Reformation and then in fullness in the Methodist Episcopal Church in America. He wrote, "I am bold to say . . . . In 1784, an apostolic form of church government was formed in the United States of America at the first general conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church held in Baltimore, in the state of Maryland."[75] A bold claim indeed.

Asbury held closely to his favorite power, the power to appoint presiding elders and preachers. The presiding elders who labored over districts were appointed by the bishop to serve when and where he deemed best.[76] Similarly, Asbury believed that one of the greatest features of Methodism was the ability of the bishop to appoint the preachers.[77] In order to faithfully execute this duty, Asbury kept careful track of the preachers. He listed each of their names, knew them personally and prayed for them regularly.[78] His record of the preachers contained over two thousand evaluations on

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[73]Elmer T. Clark, *Francis Asbury, The Prophet of the Long Road*, n.p., n.d., 16.

[74]Asbury, *Journal and Letters*, 3:532.

[75]Ibid., 3:475-76.

[76]Methodist Episcopal Church, Thomas Coke, and Francis Asbury, *The Doctrines and Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church in America, Revised and Approved at the General Conference Held at Baltimore, in the State of Maryland, in November, 1792: In Which Thomas Coke, and Francis Asbury, Presided*, 8th ed. (Philadelphia: Parry Hall, 1792), 18.

[77]Asbury, *Journal and Letters*, 3:488.

[78]H. K. Carroll, *Francis Asbury in the Making of American Methodism* (Whitefish, MT: Kessinger, 2007), 160.

individual preachers, including notes on their particular skill sets.[79] Asbury typically announced his appointments as a climactic end to conferences. Then, to avoid controversy, he would quickly ride away.[80] Asbury believed his appointments were for the benefit of Methodism as a whole. Accordingly, he enforced his appointments, even through schismatic controversies.[81]

Although the MCM does not have a historical precedent within early American Methodism, the attempt of the movement to root itself in Methodism is instructive. Under the leadership of Francis Asbury, early American Methodism was characterized by a rigid form of episcopal church governance. All multisite churches do not practice episcopal church governance. However, the governance of most multisite churches does bear a resemblance to episcopal church governance.[82] The efforts of multisite proponents to tether their movement to early American Methodism is indicative of this tendency.

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[79]John H. Wigger, *American Saint: Francis Asbury and the Methodists* (New York: Oxford University, 2009), 378.

[80]Ludwig, *Francis Asbury*, 165.

[81]Two major schisms in early American Methodism showcase Asbury's strong commitment to enforce his appointments for Methodist preachers. Methodist historians typically refer to these two schisms respectively as the Hammett schism and the O'Kelly schism. In 1791, the Methodists in Charleston, SC, requested that William Hammett be appointed to them. George Gilman Smith, *Life and Labors of Francis Asbury, Bishop of the Methodist Episcopal Church in America* (Charleston, SC: BiblioBazaar, 2009), 129. Asbury refused to appoint Hammett to Charleston. Asbury, *Journal and Letters*, 1:707. Hammett felt attacked as a false teacher by Asbury's decision. D. A. Reily, "William Hammett: Missionary and Founder of the Primitive Methodist Connection," *Methodist History* 10, no. 1 (October 1971): 35. A large schismatic group broke off from the Methodists in Charleston to follow Hammett, but Asbury remained steadfast in his decision not to appoint Hammett to Charleston. Smith, *Life and Labors of Francis Asbury*, 137-38. A second schism in early American Methodism that stemmed from Asbury's rigidity in appointing preachers surrounded Virginia Methodist preacher James O'Kelly. At the 1792 General Conference, O'Kelly set forth a motion that preachers should be able to appeal Asbury's appointments. Frank Woodward, "Francis Asbury and James O'Kelly: The Language and Development of American Methodist Episcopal Structure," *Methodist History* 41, no. 2 (January 2003): 19. Asbury refused to hear appeals concerning his appointments. Asbury, *Journal and Letters*, 3:112. O'Kelly's motion failed by a large majority vote. Ludwig, *Francis Asbury*, 167. In protest, O'Kelly and others withdrew from the conference. Following the O'Kelly schism, the number of Methodists in Virginia decreased by over four thousand between 1793 and 1799. Frederick Abbott Norwood, "James O'Kelly: Methodist Maverick," *Methodist History* 4, no. 3 (April 1966): 27.

[82]While all multisite churches do not lean toward episcopal church governance, Jamus Edwards' dissertation reveals that most multisite churches do. Edwards' research serves as the quantitative basis for this argument. Jamus Howell Edwards, "Leadership Structures and Dynamics in Multisite Churches: A Quantitative Study" (PhD diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2016), 15-16, 123-24, 145-46.

Since episcopal church governance is inconsistent with New Testament ecclesiology, the efforts of multisite proponents to associate themselves with early American Methodism places the movement on shaky ecclesiological ground.[83] Moreover, the efforts of multisite proponents to associate themselves with early American Methodism shows the incompatibility of the MCM with Baptist tradition. The resemblance between multisite church governance and episcopal church governance is considered further in a later section in this chapter which examines the ante-Nicene episcopacy for a historical precedent for the MCM.

Examining Early Baptists for Roots of the Multisite Church

Multisite appeals to early Baptists for a historical precedent for the MCM were detailed above. The core of these appeals centers around nine British Baptist churches in the 1650s believed to be congregations meeting in multiple locations.[84] These appeals are examined in this section. Multisite proponents have not appealed to early Baptists in America for a historical precedent for the MCM. However, some opponents of the MCM believe this argument is forthcoming.[85] Consequently, this section also examines early Baptists in America in search of a historical precedent for the MCM. Multisite appeals to early British Baptists are examined first, followed by an examination of potentially forthcoming appeals to early Baptists in America. Both examinations reveal that early Baptist practices do not provide a historical precedent for the MCM.

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[83]Gaines argues that early American Methodism does provide a historical precedent for the MCM. Although this assertion is incorrect, Gaines rightly notes that this claim indicates the episcopal nature of multisite church governance. The inconsistency of episcopal church government with New Testament ecclesiology is demonstrated in chap. 4, where I build a case for congregationalism. Gaines, "One Church in One Location," 168.

[84]Wamble, "The Concept and Practice of Christian Fellowship the Connectional and Inter-Denominational Aspects Thereof, among Seventeenth Century English Baptists," 252, 255-59. Allison, "Theological Defense of Multi-Site," 12. Brand and Hankins, *One Sacred Effort*, 72.

[85]Willis, "Multi-Site Churches and Their Undergirding Ecclesiology," 11-12.

Examining Early British Baptists for
Roots of the Multisite Church

As noted above, when multisite appeals to early Baptists for a historical

precedent for the MCM were presented, this appeal is based on the 1955 dissertation of

Hugh Wamble. Wamble lists nine churches that he claims were one church meeting in

multiple congregations. However, Wamble discusses only two of these nine churches, the

Church at Ilston and the Church at Fenstanton.[86] Mention of the other seven churches is

confined to a footnote.[87] Since Wamble focuses on the Church at Ilston and the Church at

Fenstanton, this examination also focuses on these two churches.

The partnership between the Church at Ilston and surrounding congregations

emerged out of necessity. Specifically, there was a dearth of qualified ministers to serve

the various churches gathering in scattered rural congregations. In response to this issue,

the Church at Ilston agreed to supply and financially support ministers for the churches in

Hay and Llanasan at the request of the churches in Hay and Llanasan. While the scattered

congregations around Ilston became connected to the Church in Ilston in this way, they

were still considered to be autonomous churches as evidenced by two factors. First, the

partnership between the Church in Ilston and the churches in Hay and Llanasan was

initiated by the churches in Hay and Llanasan when they sent delegates to the Church in

Ilston to inform them of the scarcity of ministers in their region. The Church in Ilston

only supplied ministers to these churches in response to their requests and only until other

men could be raised up from these churches. This partnership marked the beginning of

the Baptist Association in Wales, an association of churches.[88] Second, the believers

meeting in Hay and Llanasan were expected to send at least two representatives to Ilston

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[86]Wamble, "The Concept and Practice of Christian Fellowship the Connectional and Inter-Denominational Aspects Thereof, among Seventeenth Century English Baptists," 255-59.

[87]Ibid., 255n39.

[88]Joshua Thomas, *A History of the Baptist Association in Wales, from the Year 1650, to the Year 1790, Shewing the Times and Places of Their Annual Meetings, Whether in Wales, London, or Bristol, Including Several Other Interesting Articles* (London: Dilly, Button, and Thomas, 1795), 6, 11.

on a quarterly basis for the observance of the Lord's Supper and "to give an account of the condition of their church."[89] Notice that the groups meeting in Hay and Llanasan are described as churches.

The Church at Ilston is distinguished from the modern MCM in three ways. First, multisite churches do not understand their campuses to be churches, but rather campuses of a larger multisite church. While it is acknowledged that multisite campuses look and function like churches, the campuses are not considered to be churches, typically because they function under the authority of a larger multisite church body.[90] Second, the partnership between multisite church campuses is initiated by their senior leadership, not by the campuses. Without the initiative of senior leadership, multisite campuses would not exist. By contrast, the relationship between the churches in Hay and Llanasan with the Church in Ilston were initiated by the request of the churches in Hay and Llanasan for ministerial support. Third, the Church in Ilston specified that their supplemental help to the churches in Hay and Llanasan was temporary, until the churches could raise up other ministers from their own congregation. By contrast, multisite campuses tend to remain campuses indefinitely. As of 2013, only 10 percent of multisite churches had released one of their campuses to become autonomous churches.[91]

Wamble offers less detail on the Church at Fenstanton. He states that this church met in three or four locations.[92] However, as Grant Gaines notes, Wamble offers

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[89]Frank Lee, "Ter-Centenary of Ilston, 1649-1949," *The Baptist Quarterly* 13, no. 4 (October 1949): 150.

[90]Heath Kahlbau, "Is Anything New under the Sun? A Comparative Evaluation of the ante-Nicene Patristic Episcopacy and Common Polity Models within the Contemporary Multi-Site Church Movement" (PhD diss., Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2014), 259-60. Alex Murashko, "Mars Hill Church: Don't Call Us 'Campuses' Anymore," August 11, 2011, https://www.christianpost.com/news/mars-hill-church-dont-call-us-campuses-anymore-53736/.

[91]Warren Bird, "Leadership Network/Generis Multisite Church Scorecard: Faster Growth, More New Believers and Greater Lay Participation," accessed January 4, 2018, http://leadnet.org/down load/multisite-church-scorecard-faster-growth-believers-greater-lay-participation/, 24.

[92]Wamble, "The Concept and Practice of Christian Fellowship the Connectional and Inter-Denominational Aspects Thereof, among Seventeenth Century English Baptists," 259.

no citation to support his claim.[93] Without source material for his point, Wamble's claim is unsubstantiated.

When examining Wamble's argumentation, the historical context of British Baptists is important to consider. Wamble wrote about the practice of Baptist churches in Wales in the 1650s. During this era, Baptist ecclesiology and associationalism were in their infancy as the first Baptist churches were under fifty years old. The first Baptist church was formed under the leadership of John Smyth and Thomas Helwys by British religious refugees in Holland in 1609.[94] While the first Baptist church in Wales was established in 1633, the Baptist Association in Wales, of which the Church in Ilston was a part, was not founded until 1650 when the Church in Ilston agreed to supply the churches in Hay and Llanasan with ministers.[95] Wamble argued that the practice of one British Baptist church having multiple scattered congregations was abandoned in the late 1600s due to Baptist convictions concerning congregational church governance and church discipline.[96] Gaines agrees with Wamble, noting that the practice of British Baptist churches considering themselves to be one church meeting in multiple locations was limited and short-lived.[97] However, the account of the formation of the Baptist Association in Wales described above refutes the argumentation of Wamble and Gaines. Even in the infancy of Baptist ecclesiology and associationalism, there was a commitment to local church autonomy. This commitment led to cooperative associationalism, not to primitive multisite churches. The ecclesiology of this era is

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[93]Gaines, "One Church in One Location," 133.

[94]McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage*, 21.

[95]Thomas, *A History of the Baptist Association in Wales, from the Year 1650, to the Year 1790, Shewing the Times and Places of Their Annual Meetings, Whether in Wales, London, or Bristol, Including Several Other Interesting Articles*, 3, 6.

[96]Wamble, "The Concept and Practice of Christian Fellowship the Connectional and Inter-Denominational Aspects Thereof, among Seventeenth Century English Baptists," 259-60.

[97]Gaines, "One Church in One Location," 143-46.

exemplified by the widely influential British Baptist pastor Benjamin Keach. Keach described the church in this way:

> A Church of Christ, according to the Gospel-Institution, is a Congregation of Godly Christians, who as a Stated-Assembly (being first baptized upon the Profession of Faith) do by mutual agreement and consent give themselves up to the Lord, and to one another, according to the Will of God; and do ordinarily meet together in one Place; for Public Service and Worship of God; among whom the Word of God and Sacraments are duly administered, according to Christ's institution.[98]

In Keach's widely regarded ecclesiology, a church is a body of believers that ordinarily meets together in one place.

Examining Early Baptists in America for
Roots of the Multisite Church

Multisite proponents have not appealed to early Baptists in America for a historical precedent for the MCM. However, Patrick Willis, who wrote his 2014 dissertation in critique of the MCM, believes that this appeal is right around the corner.[99] Willis points to three components of early Baptist life in America that seem to give a historical precedent for the MCM. These components flow from three major tributaries of early Baptist life in America, the Baptist associations in Philadelphia, Charleston, and Sandy Creek. First, the Philadelphia Baptist Association, which was the first Baptist association in America, formed because various congregations wanted to belong to the same church. Second, the branch ecclesiology of the Charleston Baptist Association, the first Baptist association in the South, involved branches that often formed out of the central church, First Baptist Church in Charleston. Third, the Sandy Creek Baptist Association exhibited a strong mother church with a decisive leader.[100] Each of these three components of early Baptist life in America that seem to give a historical precedent

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[98]Benjamin Keach, "The Glory of a True Church and its Discipline Displayed," in *Polity: Biblical Arguments on How to Conduct Church Life*, ed. Mark Dever (Washington, DC: Center for Church Reform, 2000), 64-65.

[99]Willis, "Multi-Site Churches and Their Undergirding Ecclesiology," 11.

[100]Ibid., 21.

for the MCM are considered in turn. It is argued that, upon closer inspection, none of these three components of early Baptist life in America actually provide a historical precedent for the MCM.

The Philadelphia tradition. Morgan Edwards was the first Baptist historian in America. Edwards described the effective ministry of Elias Keach, the son of the influential British Baptist Benjamin Keach, around Philadelphia in the 1680s and 1690s. The church at Pennepek was the center of the network of churches Keach pastored. Commenting on the various locations where Keach pastored, Edwards wrote, "they were all one church, and Pennepek the center of union" which included various gatherings in Falls, Coldspring, Burlington, Cohansey, Salem, Pennsneck, Chester, and Philadelphia."[101] Beginning in 1688, the distant congregations of the Pennepek church met quarterly for preaching and administering the ordinances. Once these "arms" became independent churches, the quarterly meetings continued for fellowship. The Philadelphia Baptist Association was formed from these meetings in 1707.[102] At first glance, the presence of scattered arms around Philadelphia that Edwards considered to be one church with Pennepek at the center appears to be a strong historical precedent for the MCM.

The minutes of the Philadelphia Baptist Association shed significant light onto the origin of the arms of the Pennepek church near Philadelphia. Much like the early Baptist churches in England, most of the Baptist churches around Philadelphia lacked qualified ministers. The Pennepek church was the exception to this rule. Speaking of the Pennepek church, the early minutes of the Philadelphia Baptist Association read,

> At this time the church had several distant places to meet in by appointment, as at Philadelphia, Burlington, &c., where several persons that were members of the

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[101]Morgan Edwards, *Materials Towards a History of the Baptists* (1770; repr., Danielsville, GA: Heritage Papers, 1984), 1:6.

[102]Walter B. Shurden, "Associationalism Among Baptists in America, 1707-1814" (PhD diss., New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, 1967), 12-13.

church resided, and they held their communion at the Lord's table at these several places; and by means of those gifted brethren their meeting at Pennepek was constantly supplied.[103]

At the 1749 meeting, the Philadelphia Baptist Association approved an essay composed by Benjamin Griffith concerning the judicatory power of the association. Griffith's statement, "That each particular church hath a complete power and authority from Jesus Christ to administer all gospel ordinances, provided that they have a sufficiency of officers duly qualified" also points to the pervasive problem of a lack of qualified ministers.[104] Once a church had qualified officers, that church had "complete power and authority from Jesus Christ" to conduct themselves.[105] The entire association affirmed Griffith's essay by affixing their signatures to it, including Oliver Hart who would go on to begin the Charleston Baptist Association.[106]

Until qualified officers were present, the churches were considered to be branches or arms. For instance, in 1701, the Church at Great Valley requested to become a branch of the Church at Welsh Tract because they were "few and destitute of ministerial helps." By 1711, the Church at Great Valley had grown. Due to their growth and their distance from Welsh Tract "they were advised to put themselves in church order by themselves, for they were distinct from the other churches."[107]

This brief review of the Philadelphia tradition reveals two significant differences between this stream of early Baptist life in America and the MCM. First, the Philadelphia Baptist Association understood their arms or branches to be deficient and sought to transition them into autonomous churches as quickly as possible.[108] Multisite

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[103]A. D. Gillette, ed. *Minutes of the Philadelphia Baptist Association, 1707 to 1807: Being the First One Hundred Years of Its Existence* (Atlas, MI: Baptist Book Trust, 1851), 11.

[104]Ibid., 60-61.

[105]Ibid.

[106]Ibid., 63.

[107]Ibid., 16.

[108]Willis, "Multi-Site Churches and Their Undergirding Ecclesiology," 34-39.

churches, on the other hand, typically do not plan to release their campuses. In his 2013 multisite church scorecard, Warren Bird wrote that this survey of 535 multisite churches revealed that "to date 1 in 10 (10 percent) multisite churches have released one or more campuses to become independent plants/churches, and another 1 in 10 (12 percent) say 'no but we're likely to.'"[109] These perspectives reveal the contrast between the MCM and the Philadelphia tradition.

Second, another noteworthy difference exists between the MCM and the Philadelphia tradition in their usage of the terms "church" and "congregation." In the multichurch model of the MCM, House and Allison define a multichurch as "one church with multiple congregations or 'churches' in a set geographical area (bounded by an identifiable population that shares proximity and accessibility)."[110] The churches surrounding Philadelphia were certainly bounded by geographical proximity and accessibility as shown in their quarterly gatherings. However, the minutes of the Philadelphia Baptist Association do not distinguish between the terms "church" and "congregation" as do House and Allison. Instead, the minutes for the associational meetings in the 1707 inaugural meeting, in the 1729 meeting, and in 1731 meeting use the terms "church" and "congregation" interchangeably.[111] These two differences

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[109]Warren Bird, "Leadership Network/Generis Multisite Church Scorecard," 24.

[110]House and Allison also distinguish between the terms "church" and "congregation" later on page 33. House and Allison, *MultiChurch*, 16, 33.

[111]In 1707, the minutes read, "before our general meeting, held at Philadelphia, in the seventh month, 1707, it was concluded by the several *congregations* of our judgment, to make choice of some particular brethren, such as they thought most capable in every *congregation*, and those to meet at the yearly meeting to consult about such things that were wanting in the *churches* . . ." Later they referred to "the brethren of the several congregations." In 1729, the opening statement described those in attendance as, "the elders and messengers of the baptized *congregations* . . . . There have been considerable additions the past year in several *churches*, and some in most . . . we find the *churches* generally to be at peace and unity . . ." Lukewarmness was said to be "the grief of the *churches.*" A similar salutation to that from 1729 appears in 1731 when attendees are described as "the elders, ministers, and messengers of the baptized *congregations*." Then later the minutes read ". . . we find the *churches* in peace among themselves . . . in most *churches* there hath been some additions this last year." Finally, the minutes stated that "the association had neither queries nor requests from any of the *churches*" and then spoke of the "*congregation*" at Piscataqua. I have added all italics in this footnote for emphasis. Gillette, *Minutes of the Philadelphia Baptist Association, 1707 to 1807*, 25, 29-32.

between the MCM and the Philadelphia tradition reveal that the Philadelphia tradition does not provide a historical precedent for the MCM.

There is also a third difference between the Philadelphia tradition and the MCM. The churches around Philadelphia suffered from a lack of qualified ministers while the MCM boasts an abundance of qualified ministers. This difference also arises in the Charleston and Sandy Creek traditions and is considered below.

The Charleston tradition. Baptists came to Charleston in 1672 and quickly began worship services. By 1740, there were five churches in South Carolina, most of them being branches of the Charleston church. These churches came together to form the Charleston Baptist Association in 1751, the first Baptist association in the South.[112] McBeth described the normalcy of the branch ecclesiology around Charleston,

> Additional churches were formed in the vicinity of Charlestown, including Eutaw, Ashley River and Stono. At first these were considered "arms" of the Charleston church, a pattern not unusual at the time in which a central church might establish branches in neighboring communities. While such members were still related to the central church, they might erect their own buildings and call their own pastors. Such was the pattern that developed around Charleston.[113]

Notice the language McBeth used in describing the frequency of the branches that emerged around the Charleston church. Such branches were the usual pattern.

As in Philadelphia, the Charleston Baptist Association expected their branches to develop into churches. The branches in Fairforest and Congaree were referred to with agricultural terms. They were said to be ripening into churches.[114] As fruit is expected to ripen for consumption, so branches were expected to ripen into churches. When they did ripen, branches were not to rot on the vine. In 1738, First Baptist Church in Charleston proposed the dismission of their branch in Eutaw in order for them to become a distinct

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[112]McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage*, 217.

[113]Ibid., 218.

[114]Edwards, *Materials towards a History of the Baptists*, 2:140, 2:144.

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church. However, the branch in Eutaw rejected their dismission. In so doing, Morgan Edwards said they shamefully laid aside their covenant with the Charleston church.[115]

As in Philadelphia and among the early English Baptists, the branches around Charleston also suffered from a lack of qualified ministers.[116] Until they had their own ordained ministers, the Charleston branches functioned under the authority of the Charleston church and their pastor for church ordinances and church discipline.[117] With such a scarcity of ministers, finding an ordained minister was typically the final aspect of branches ripening into churches.

This brief examination of the Charleston tradition reveals two significant differences with the MCM. First, the MCM does not stem from a lack of ministers. Allison, noting the abundance of trained pastors in America today, says that he has "never once found an appeal to such a shortage of personnel as a reason for multi-site churches."[118] In fact, many proponents of the MCM make the opposite argument. Many multisite proponents list leadership development as a unique benefit of the multisite model.[119] Such leadership development is necessary when multiple campuses must be staffed. This argument in favor of the MCM due to the effectiveness of leadership development in multisite churches draws a distinction between the MCM and the Charleston tradition.

Second, the MCM does not include church planting. Surratt, Ligon, and Bird wrote of the variety of approaches that a church can take in going multisite. These

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[115]Edwards, *Materials towards a History of the Baptists*, 2:132.

[116]Willis, "Multi-Site Churches and Their Undergirding Ecclesiology," 62.

[117]Ibid., 56, 60.

[118]Allison, "Theological Defense of Multi-Site," 12.

[119]Towns, Stetzer, and Bird, *11 Innovations in the Local Church*, 71. Ed Stetzer and Warren Bird, *Viral Churches: Helping Church Planters Become Movement Makers* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2010), 133-34. Greear, "A Pastor Defends His Multi-Site Church," 23. Jim Tomberlin, *125 Tips for MultiSite Churches* (Colorado Springs, CO: MultiSite Solutions, 2011), 16, 21. William M. Easum and Dave Travis, *Beyond the Box: Innovative Churches That Work* (Loveland, CO: Group, 2003), 97.

approaches include expanding into multiple locations including an additional on-premise venue, an additional off-premise location, and a partnership with another church that begins to identify itself as a campus by receiving style, staff, and content from the initial campus. However, they also noted that multisite churches do not participate in church planting when they wrote that "the term *multi-site* covers all these concepts, up to the point of starting a totally new church."[120] When church planting occurs, that is no longer an expression of the MCM.[121] By contrast, the expectation for the branches of the First Baptist Church in Charleston was that they would naturally develop into autonomous churches. Such an expectation is another distinction between the MCM and the Charleston tradition.

The Sandy Creek tradition. The Sandy Creek Baptist Association was formed in 1758, just three years after the founding of Sandy Creek Baptist Church by Shubal Stearns.[122] The inaugural meeting of the association included nine churches in addition to several branches. Each church and branch sent delegates in response to personal visits from Stearns.[123]

As in Philadelphia and Charleston, the churches of the Sandy Creek Baptist Association expected their branches to develop into autonomous local churches quickly. Describing the branch ecclesiology around Sandy Creek, North Carolina Baptist historian M. A. Huggins wrote,

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[120]Surratt, Ligon, and Bird, *The Multi-Site Church Revolution*, 27.

[121]While Surratt, Ligon, and Bird do not consider church planting to be an expression of multisite, it is important to note that many multisite churches also participate in church planting. In this multisite church scorecard, Bird describes multisite churches that engage in planting new campuses and in planting new churches. Bird, "Leadership Network/Generis Multisite Church Scorecard," 4, 24.

[122]George W. Purefoy, *A History of the Sandy Creek Baptist Association: From Its Organization in A.D. 1758 to A.D. 1858* (New York: Sheldon & Co., 1859), 62. McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage*, 227.

[123]Purefoy, *A History of the Sandy Creek Baptist Association*, 62. McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage*, 232.

> As we have observed, a strong, central, or parent church often had several branches. As soon as a branch gave promise of being able to establish discipline and sustain itself it asked the parent church to give letters of dismissal to certain members, so that they might be constituted into an independent church.[124]

Notice the language of expediency Huggins used. He wrote, "As soon as a branch gave promise of being able" to govern itself it was constituted as an independent church. Stearns' inclusion of delegates from the branches at the inaugural meeting of the Sandy Creek Baptist Association also reveals his expectation for them to develop into churches. George Purefoy, another Baptist historian, described the branches Stearns invited as branches that were maturing into churches.[125] Once this maturation occurred, the Sandy Creek churches had no authority to restrict branches from constituting as churches. At the 1822 meeting of the Sandy Creek Baptist Association, the minutes reveal that a question arose pertaining to the authority of a church over a branch. The question reads, "Has a church authority to forbid the constitution of a branch thereof, when that branch is, by a presbytery, deemed sufficient to transact the business of a church?"[126] The question was answered flatly, "It has no authority."[127] As a result of this branch ecclesiology, the associational minutes frequently describe branches quickly maturing into churches.[128]

As was common in the Philadelphia and Charleston associations, the Sandy Creek Baptist Association also lacked a sufficient number of ordained ministers to serve their branches. In 1758, when the association was formed, there were twenty ministers,

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[124]M. A. Huggins, *A History of North Carolina Baptists, 1727-1932* (Raleigh: General Board, Baptist State Convention of North Carolina, 1967), 143.

[125]Purefoy, *A History of the Sandy Creek Baptist Association*, 62.

[126]Ibid., 122.

[127]Ibid.

[128]In 1823 Mount Carmel Baptist Church planted a branch at Mount Gilead which was quickly organized into a church in 1824. In 1854 Mount Carmel formed another branch in Chapel Hill which ". . . was soon constituted into a church." Rock Spring was an arm of Sandy Creek Baptist Church at the time the association was formed but ". . . was soon afterward constituted into an independent church." Of Rocky River Baptist Church, Purefoy says, "It was then, no doubt, an arm of Sandy Creek church, and was soon afterwards constituted into a church." Ibid., 267, 278, 286.

but only seven were ordained.[129] Stearns believed that no branch could be constituted into a church without an ordained minister and often required a prolonged period of testing prior to ordination, as in the case of his brother-in-law Daniel Marshall. During this era, gifted evangelists went out from branches to start other branches prior to their ordination.[130] The Sandy Creek influence spread through the branches established by these gifted evangelists, but the number of churches grew slowly due to the lack of ordained ministers.

Stearns' slowness in ordaining ministers is indicative of a larger pattern of his controlling influence over the association. In the 1758 inaugural meeting of the Sandy Creek Baptist Association, some delegates felt that Stearns exercised dictatorial control.[131] When the association was only three years old, member churches began to complain about the authority the association was attempting to exercise over their autonomous churches under Stearns' leadership. This tension boiled over in 1770 as the Sandy Creek Baptist Association split into three geographically distinct organizations. The leadership of the Congaree Baptist Association that broke off from Sandy Creek soon exhibited the same type of undue influence as Stearns. As early as 1777, they began to receive complaints from churches about their efforts to exercise undue influence over the churches.[132] These episodes reveal that the Sandy Creek tradition has a history of strong central leaders. These episodes also reveal that Baptists committed to the autonomy of the local church rebelled against these strong central leaders when they violated the autonomy of the local church.

The above examination of the Sandy Creek tradition reveals three differences

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[129]Purefoy, *A History of the Sandy Creek Baptist Association*, 63.

[130]William Latane Lumpkin, *Baptist Foundations in the South: Tracing through the Separates the Influence of the Great Awakening, 1754-1787* (Nashville: Broadman, 1961), 43-44.

[131]McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage*, 232.

[132]Lumpkin, *Baptist Foundations in the South*, 159.

between the Sandy Creek tradition and the MCM. First, as noted under the discussions of the Philadelphia and Charleston traditions, multisite churches typically do not seek to release their campuses as autonomous churches.[133] Instead, although some multisite churches also participate in church planting,[134] key multisite proponents consider church planting to be beyond the scope of multisite.[135] By contrast, the Sandy Creek tradition sought to release their branches as autonomous churches as soon as possible.[136] They believed that no church possessed authority to forbid their branches from constituting as autonomous churches.[137]

Second, as noted under the discussion of the Charleston tradition, the MCM does not suffer from a lack of ministers.[138] Instead, multisite proponents cite leadership development as a core strength of the multisite model.[139] This represents a major difference between the Sandy Creek tradition and the MCM. From the beginning, the Sandy Creek churches lacked ordained ministers[140] and delayed constituting their branches into churches due to this shortage.[141]

Third, there is a major difference between the reaction of the Sandy Creek churches and branches to the authority of Stearns and the reaction of multisite campuses to the authority of the Lead Pastor.[142] Multisite churches are built upon the giftedness,

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[133]Bird, "Leadership Network/Generis Multisite Church Scorecard," 4, 24.

[134]Ibid., 23-24.

[135]Surratt, Ligon, and Bird, *The Multi-Site Church Revolution*, 27.

[136]Huggins, *A History of North Carolina Baptists, 1727-1932*, 143.

[137]Purefoy, *A History of the Sandy Creek Baptist Association*, 122.

[138]Allison, "Theological Defense of Multi-Site," 12.

[139]Towns, Stetzer, and Bird, *11 Innovations in the Local Church*, 71. Stetzer and Bird, *Viral Churches*, 133-34. Greear, "A Pastor Defends His Multi-Site Church," 23. Tomberlin, *125 Tips for MultiSite Churches*, 16, 21. Easum and Travis, *Beyond the Box*, 97.

[140]Purefoy, *A History of the Sandy Creek Baptist Association*, 63.

[141]Lumpkin, *Baptist Foundations in the South*, 43.

[142]Admittedly, the connection between the reaction of the Sandy Creek churches to the

vision, and authority of strong central leaders. Elmer Towns, who Brian Frye identifies as the prime disseminator of the MCM in its early years,[143] stated in an interview with Heath Kahlbau that he believes many current multisite churches will cease to be multisite once they experience a transition in senior leadership because many multisite churches are built on the Lead Pastor.[144] Multisite campuses readily accept and submit to the authority of the original campus and the Lead Pastor. Multisite campuses do not understand this submission to the authority of an outside body to be a violation of their autonomy because they belong to a church that has autonomously chosen to organize itself as a multisite church. By contrast, the churches and branches in the Sandy Creek tradition rejected Stearns' authority over them, even to the point of splintering this historic association.[145] The Sandy Creek churches and branches understood Stearns' attempts to exercise authority over them to be a violation of local church autonomy. The Sandy Creek tradition and the MCM represent two divergent understandings of how to respond to outside authorities.

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authority of Stearns and the reaction of multisite campuses to the authority of the Lead Pastor is not a direct parallel. Some of the branches in the Sandy Creek Baptist Association were formed by Stearns' Sandy Creek Baptist Church while other branches were formed by other churches in the association. By contrast, all multisite campuses are formed by multisite churches under the direction of senior leadership. Nevertheless, the connection between the reaction of the Sandy Creek tradition to outside authorities and the reaction of multisite church campuses to outside authorities is valid because some of the reaction against Stearns was generated from branches established by his church. Another difference is that multisite campuses recognize that multisite churches understand themselves to be autonomous churches who have chosen to organize themselves into multiple campuses whereas the Sandy Creek branches intended from the beginning to develop into churches. Nevertheless, the connection between the reaction of the Sandy Creek tradition to outside authorities and the reaction of multisite church campuses to outside authorities is still valid because it reveals how both groups respond to outside bodies. In the case of the Sandy Creek branches and churches, their rejection of Stearns' authority reveals their rejection of the authority of other churches. In the case of multisite campuses, their acceptance of the authority of senior leadership reveals their openness to authority from other campuses.

[143]Brian Nathaniel Frye, "The Multi-Site Church Phenomenon in North America: 1950-2010" (PhD diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2011), 303.

[144]Kahlbau, "Is Anything New under the Sun?," 162.

[145]Lumpkin, *Baptist Foundations in the South*, 159. McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage*, 232.

Examining the ante-Nicene Episcopacy for Roots of
the Multisite Church

The previous three sections examined multisite appeals to the New Testament, to early American Methodism, and to early Baptists for a historical precedent for the MCM. These sections argued that no historical precedent for the MCM is found in the New Testament, in early American Methodism, or in early Baptists. These three sections were similar in that they argued against claims made by multisite proponents. This section looks to an additional aspect of church history in search of a historical precedent for the multisite church movement, namely the ante-Nicene episcopacy. Multisite proponents do not appeal to the ante-Nicene episcopacy in order to establish a historical precedent for the MCM. Nevertheless, since multisite proponents indicate the tendency of multisite churches to lean toward episcopal church governance by their appeals to early American Methodism for a historical precedent for the MCM, looking to this aspect of church history is pertinent. Moreover, since this dissertation argues that the MCM is inconsistent with New Testament ecclesiology and with Baptist tradition, looking to the ante-Nicene episcopacy is instructive. If parallels between the development of the ante-Nicene episcopacy and the development of the MCM are evident, and if congregationalism is the form of church government most consistent with the New Testament, then the argument that the MCM is inconsistent with New Testament ecclesiology and with Baptist tradition is bolstered.[146] Accordingly, this section examines the ante-Nicene episcopacy for roots of the MCM.

The examination of the ante-Nicene episcopacy for a historical precedent for the MCM begins by tracing the development of the episcopacy during this period. Then similarities between the ante-Nicene episcopacy and the MCM are identified. The

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[146]This section does not offer an argument for congregationalism. That argument is withheld until chap. 4, when a chapter length case for congregationalism is made. This section pertains only to the historical development of the MCM. As pointed out in this section, the historical development of the MCM portrayed in this section does signal ecclesiological issues for the movement, but those issues are not brought out in detail in this chapter.

similarities identified form an argument that the MCM more closely resembles the ante-Nicene episcopacy than the New Testament, early American Methodism, or early Baptists. The MCM resembles the ante-Nicene episcopacy in that both emerged from practical need, from a desire for unity, and from a desire for cooperative missions.

The Development of the ante-Nicene Episcopacy

The development of the ante-Nicene episcopacy is be traced through the New Testament and through early Christian literature in this section. This section demonstrates that the ante-Nicene episcopacy is absent from the New Testament and from the earliest Christian literature. Instead, the earliest Christian literature conveys a twofold office structure in the early church. The development of the ante-Nicene episcopacy did not occur until the second century.

The early absence of the episcopacy. The New Testament conveys the offices of pastor and deacon as a twofold office structure for the church. Although the words "bishop" (Gr. *episkopos)* and "elder" (Gr. *presbuteros*) both appear in the New Testament, these terms are used interchangeably with the term "pastor" (Gr. *poimen*) (Acts 20:17, 28; Titus 1:5, 7; 1 Pet 5:1-4).

In addition to the New Testament, the earliest Christian literature also reveals a twofold office structure in the early church. With a composition date at the end of the first century, the *Didache* represents the earliest known Christian writing outside of the New Testament.[147] The *Didache* instructed churches to "appoint, therefore, for

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[147]Francis Sullivan states that the majority of scholars affirm that the composition of the *Didache* occurred toward the end of the first century. Francis A. Sullivan, *From Apostles to Bishops: The Development of the Episcopacy in the Early Church* (New York: Newman, 2001), 81. Michael Holmes argues for a composition date for the *Didache* of AD 80. Michael W. Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 247. J. B. Lightfoot is broader in his dating of the *Didache*. He argued that the "rough limits" of composition are between AD 80-110. J. B. Lightfoot, *Saint Paul's Epistle to the Philippians: A Revised Text with Introduction, Notes, and Dissertations* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1913), 349-50.

yourselves, bishops and deacons worthy of the Lord."[148] In addition to the twofold office structure, this passage also speaks of a plurality of leadership. The instruction of the *Didache* is for churches to appoint a plurality of leadership in the pastorate and the diaconate. There is no indication in this document of a threefold office structure, of one bishop ruling over other bishops, or of one bishop ruling over multiple churches.

Clement of Rome's First Epistle to the Corinthians, also known as *I Clement*, is another example of an early Christian writing that espoused a twofold office structure in the church. There is widespread scholastic agreement on a composition date for this letter between AD 95-97.[149] Chapter 42 spoke of the practice of the apostles appointing leadership from among the firstfruits of their labor. The letter reads: "And thus preaching through countries and cities, they appointed the firstfruits [of their labors]. Having first proved them by the Spirit, to be bishops and deacons of those who would afterwards believe."[150] Notice that only bishops and deacons are mentioned and that a plurality of leadership in both offices is again in view. Clement's understanding of the interchangeability of the terms bishop and elder is clarified as the letter continues. Speaking of the need to exercise caution when removing bishops from office, he wrote, "for our sin will not be small, if we eject from the episcopate those who have blamelessly and holily fulfilled its duties. Blessed are those presbyters who, having finished their course before now, have obtained a fruitful and perfect departure."[151] Three factors indicate that the episcopacy was yet undeveloped when Clement wrote in AD 95-97.

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[148]"The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles," in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325*, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 1950), 7:381.

[149]Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers*, 25. Kahlbau, "Is Anything New under the Sun?," 24.

[150]Clement of Rome, "The First Epistle of Clement to the Corinthians," in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325*, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 1950), 1:16.

[151]Ibid., 1:17.

First, he mentioned only the offices of bishop and deacon. Second, he referenced the office of bishop and the office of elder interchangeably. Third, he spoke of the ability to remove bishops from office.

The twofold office structure with no evident episcopacy described in the *Didache* and *I Clement* continued late into the second century. When Irenaeus described church leadership he made no mention of a bishop. Instead, he referred to a plurality of elders (Gr. *presbuteroi*).[152] When he spoke of the paschal controversy concerning the proper time to celebrate the resurrection of Christ, Irenaeus described sensible disagreement. Churches and church leaders did not attempt to enforce their view authoritatively on other churches and church leaders. Rather, they "were peaceably disposed" to one another.[153]

The appearance and expansion of the ante-Nicene episcopacy. While the twofold office structure continued into the second century, another development occurred concurrently. In Antioch, under the leadership of Ignatius, the ante-Nicene episcopacy emerged between AD 107 and 115. This development is revealed in a series of letters from Ignatius to the churches in and around Ephesus that date to this timeframe.[154] Others would date the beginning of the episcopacy slightly later, but no modern scholars date the beginnings of the episcopacy much later than 160 A. D.[155] Ignatius' writings also shed light on the nature of the developing episcopacy in the recipient churches.

In place of the twofold office structure described in first century Christian

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[152]Irenaeus, "Fragments from the Lost Writings of Irenaeus," in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325*, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 1950), 1:569.

[153]Ibid., 1:568-69.

[154]Heath Kahlbau notes the scholarly consensus that dates the letters of Ignatius between 107 and 115 AD. Kahlbau, "Is Anything New under the Sun?," 29.

[155]Gregory Dix, "The Ministry in the Early Church," in *The Apostolic Ministry: Essays on the History and Doctrine of Episcopacy*, ed. Kenneth E. Kirk (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1946), 190.

writings, Ignatius wrote of the threefold office structure of bishops, elders, and deacons. To the Smyrnaeans, Ignatius instructed, "let the laity be subject to the deacons; the deacons to the presbyters; the presbyters to the bishop; the bishop to Christ, even as He is to the Father."[156] The subjugation of the presbyters to the bishops that Ignatius called for clearly indicates the separation of these offices in his ecclesiology. Similarly, to the Trallians he wrote, "in like manner, let all reverence the deacons as an appointment of Jesus Christ, and the bishop as Jesus Christ, who is the Son of the Father, and the presbyters as the Sanhedrin of God, and assembly of the apostles. Apart from these, there is no Church."[157] For Ignatius, when the threefold office structure is absent, no church exists. To the Philadelphians, Ignatius commended those who "are in unity with the bishop, the presbyters, and the deacons, who have been appointed" by Christ.[158] This statement also reveals a threefold office structure in the second century and in Ignatius' understanding of the church.

Ignatius' letters also refer to lone bishops who possess strong authority in the churches. In the passage from his letter to the Trallians cited above, Ignatius wrote of a singular bishop, but a plurality of deacons and presbyters.[159] In his letter to the Ephesians, Ignatius identified only Onesimus as the bishop.[160] When writing to Polycarp, Ignatius identified himself as the lone bishop of Antioch and Polycarp as the lone bishop of

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[156]Ignatius, "The Epistle of Ignatius to the Smyrnaeans," in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325*, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 1950), 1:90.

[157]Ignatius, "The Epistle of Ignatius to the Trallians," in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325*, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 1950), 1:67.

[158]Ignatius, "The Epistle of Ignatius to the Philadelphians," in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325*, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 1950), 1:79

[159]Ignatius, "The Epistle of Ignatius to the Trallians," 1:67.

[160]Ignatius, "The Epistle of Ignatius to the Ephesians," in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325*, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 1950), 1:49.

Smyrna.[161] Concerning the authority of the bishop, Ignatius warned the Smyrneans that "he who does anything without the knowledge of the bishop, does [in reality] serve the devil" and that no one in the church is greater than the bishop.[162] Similarly, Ignatius offered a commendation to the Trallians for those who are "subject to the bishop as to Jesus Christ" and commanded them to do nothing without the bishop.[163]

Although Ignatius wrote clearly concerning the office and authority of the bishop, all churches in his era did not reflect the development of the episcopacy. When Polycarp, a contemporary of Ignatius, wrote to the Philippians, he made no mention of the office of bishop. Polycarp wrote only of deacons and presbyters.[164] Catholic theologian Francis Sullivan believes that the episcopacy had not yet fully developed early in the second century. Sullivan writes that Ignatius had no doubt about which structure a church should have, "but there is reason to doubt that all the Christian churches of his day actually realized it."[165] Sullivan sees a tendency in Ignatius to paint the church in his own image in order to portray it as he wishes it to be.[166]

While the letters of Ignatius provide the first indications of a developing episcopacy in the ante-Nicene era in Antioch, it was the development of the episcopacy in the influential city of Alexandria that enabled the spread of the episcopacy. Estimates vary as to when the episcopacy was established in Alexandria. Jerome rooted the

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[161]Ignatius, "The Epistle of Ignatius to Polycarp," in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325*, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 1950), 1:93.

[162]Ignatius, "The Epistle of Ignatius to the Smyrnaeans," 1:90.

[163]Ignatius, "The Epistle of Ignatius to the Trallians," 1:66.

[164]Polycarp, "The Epistle of Polycarp to the Philippians," in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325*, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 1950), 1:34.

[165]Sullivan, *From Apostles to Bishops*, 111.

[166]Ibid., 107.

development of the episcopacy in Alexandria with Mark the Evangelist.[167] The famed

church historian Eusebius dated the beginnings of the episcopacy in Alexandria to

AD180.[168] Alexandria was home to a catechetical school that resulted in the expansive

influence of Alexandria in the ante-Nicene era. Churches throughout the region sought

pastors from among the graduates of the catechetical school in Alexandria. As these

graduates spread throughout the region, they took Alexandrian ideas with them, including

the developing ante-Nicene episcopacy.[169]

The Alexandrian episcopacy is also significant because it represents the

geographically broadening authority of early bishops. Alexandrian bishops possessed

authority over surrounding churches. Having one bishop for the region with a presbyter in

each church "was the custom in Alexandria."[170] Athanasius wrote in the fourth century

that "the churches of the whole district are subject to the Bishop of Alexandria."[171] By the

early fourth century, the broad geographical authority of the bishop in Alexandria was

well established. In 318, Canon VI of the Holy Fathers reads, "let the ancient customs in

Egypt, Libya and Pentapolis prevail, that the Bishop of Alexandria have jurisdiction in all

these."[172] By 318, the bishop of Alexandria had vast geographical authority which was

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[167]Jerome, "The Letters of St. Jerome," in *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church: Second Series*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 1952), 6:288.

[168]Eusebius, "The Church History of Eusebius," in *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church: Second Series*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 1952), 1:224.

[169]Kahlbau, "Is Anything New under the Sun?," 57.

[170]Saliminius Sozomenus, "The Ecclesiastical History of Sozomenus," in *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church: Second Series*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 1952), 2:252.

[171]Athanasius, "Defense Against the Arians," in *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church: Second Series*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 1952), 4:144.

[172]"The Canons of the 318 Holy Fathers Assembled in the City of Nice, in Bithynia," in *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church: Second Series*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 1952), 14:15.

considered to be an ancient custom.

Reasons for the development of the ante-Nicene episcopacy. To this point, this section has demonstrated that the ante-Nicene episcopacy emerged early in the second century under the leadership of Ignatius in Antioch and greatly expanded following its establishment in the influential city of Alexandria. Three reasons for the development of the ante-Nicene episcopacy will now be given. Addressing these reasons is essential for comparing the development of the ante-Nicene episcopacy with the MCM in the following section.

The desire for unity is the first reason for the development of the ante-Nicene episcopacy. Jerome argued that the ante-Nicene episcopacy was established "to remedy schism and to prevent each individual from rending the church of Christ by drawing it to himself."[173] With episcopal authority in place, the church understood to whom they were to live in subjection. When all church members in a given area live in subjection to one bishop, the likelihood of church unity escalates. Princeton theologian Lyman Coleman also pointed to the desire for unity as a contributing factor to the development of the ante-Nicene episcopacy. According to Coleman, the episcopacy fostered a greater sense of oneness in feeling and action since the churches were members of the same body.[174] The early church often found herself fighting against heretical teaching. The emergency need for church unity created by encroaching heresies resulted in the further consolidation of the episcopacy.[175]

Two practical concerns were the second reason for the development of the ante-Nicene episcopacy. First, financial considerations were a factor. In the middle of the

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[173]Jerome, "The Letters of St. Jerome," 6:288.

[174]Lyman Coleman, *The Apostolical and Primitive Church: Popular in Its Government, and Simple in Its Worship*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Gould, Kendall, and Lincoln, 1844), 270.

[175]Kahlbau, "Is Anything New under the Sun?," 99. J. B. Lightfoot, *Dissertations on the Apostolic Age* (London: Macmillan and Co, 1892), 166.

second century, Justin Martyr described how "all who live in cities or in the country gathered together to one place" for worship on Sundays.[176] At these gatherings, the "president" of the church gave instruction, presided over the Lord's Supper, and collected and distributed benevolence offerings to urban and rural attendees.[177] By definition, a bishop is an overseer. When Justin and others functioned as the "president" of the church overseeing and distributing church finances for rural and urban benevolence needs, the episcopacy naturally developed as they served this practical need.[178] Money flowed from urban churches to rural residents and influence followed. Second, rural churches emerged from urban churches due to church growth. As the early churches grew, in many large cities the church buildings were not large enough to hold the entire gathering of the faithful.[179] Accordingly, it became expedient for believers from rural communities to begin worshipping in their own communities rather than coming to the city for worship gatherings.[180] As a result, rural churches developed. These rural churches continued to look to urban churches for leadership. In the ante-Nicene period, cities exerted great political and fiscal influence over rural communities. In this cultural climate, small rural churches naturally looked to large urban churches for leadership and financial support.[181]

The mission of the church is the third reason for the development of the ante-Nicene episcopacy. As the early church grew, the city churches also became parent churches of rural churches in the surrounding areas as a natural result of caring for those

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[176]Justin Martyr, "The First Apology of Justin," in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325*, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 1950), 1:186.

[177]Ibid., 1:186.

[178]Kahlbau, "Is Anything New under the Sun?," 82-83.

[179]Edwin Hatch, *The Organization of the Early Christian Churches: Eight Lectures Delivered Before the University of Oxford, in the Year, 1880* (1880; repr., New York: Ben Franklin, 1972), 190.

[180]Coleman, *The Apostolical and Primitive Church*, 249.

[181]Ibid., 249-50.

who came to faith in Christ when visiting the city and then returned home. As urban churches provided financial assistance and sent pastoral leadership to rural churches, the natural result was the sustained influence of the city churches over the rural churches.[182] As the geographical range of the ante-Nicene episcopacy expanded, it was the next natural missional step for the metropolitan bishop to oversee churches surrounding the city, especially when his city church had planted those rural churches.[183]

Similarities between the ante-Nicene Episcopacy and the MCM

The previous section traced the development of the ante-Nicene episcopacy through the early Christian literature. With this foundation in place, similarities are now drawn between the ante-Nicene episcopacy and the modern MCM. Three similarities are highlighted in this section.

First, both the ante-Nicene episcopacy and the modern MCM developed out of practical needs. As noted above, the ante-Nicene episcopacy emerged in part due to practical, cultural, and financial needs.[184] In a similar manner, multisite proponents offer practical reasons for the viability of the MCM. Justin Martyr spoke of the "president" of the church overseeing and distributing funds to church members in need throughout the city and the surrounding countryside.[185] Surratt, Ligon, and Bird similarly define the MCM in terms of central oversight. For them, "A multi-site church shares a common vision, budget, leadership, and board."[186] The ante-Nicene episcopacy and the modern MCM both espouse the practical expediency of a central funding mechanism. In the

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[182]Coleman, *The Apostolical and Primitive Church*, 248-50.

[183]Kahlbau, "Is Anything New under the Sun?," 180.

[184]Justin Martyr, "The First Apology of Justin," 1:186. Hatch, *The Organization of the Early Christian Churches*, 39-41. Coleman, *The Apostolical and Primitive Church*, 249-50.

[185]Justin Martyr, "The First Apology of Justin," 1:186.

[186]Surratt, Ligon, and Bird, *The Multi-Site Church Revolution*, 18.

second century, this central funding mechanism emerged out of necessity as rural churches depended upon city churches for financial and personnel resources.[187] Driven by the desire to expand their evangelistic reach, the modern MCM also often emerges out of necessity as multisite churches add campuses to accommodate growth or adopt struggling churches as campuses.[188] The ante-Nicene episcopacy and the modern MCM both developed to meet practical needs.

Second, both the ante-Nicene episcopacy and the modern MCM developed out of a concern for church unity. Most multisite proponents appeal primarily to the practical advantages of the multisite church model. Gregg Allison is the only multisite proponent who also appeals to a concern for church unity in defense of the MCM.[189] For Allison, the multisite church model better adheres to "the New Testament emphasis on unity, cooperation, and interdependence."[190] He believes that interconnected multisite campuses foster a higher level of cooperation than disconnected traditional congregations.[191] Allison's appeal to church unity in defense of the MCM bears a striking resemblance to the development of the ante-Nicene episcopacy. As noted above, one of the reasons for the development of the ante-Nicene episcopacy was the concern for avoiding theological schism and maintaining church unity.[192] Both the ante-Nicene episcopacy and the modern MCM developed from a concern for church unity.

Third, both the ante-Nicene episcopacy and the modern MCM developed as

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[187]Coleman, *The Apostolical and Primitive Church*, 249-50.

[188]Scott McConnell, *Multi-Site Churches: Guidance for the Movement's Next Generation* (Nashville: B & H, 2009), 5-11.

[189]Hammett, "What Makes a Multisite Church One Church?" 101.

[190]Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers*, 315.

[191]Allison, "Theological Defense of Multi-Site," 12-13.

[192]Jerome, "The Letters of St. Jerome," 6:288. Cyprian, "The Epistles of Cyprian," in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325*, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 1950), 5:413. Coleman, *The Apostolical and Primitive Church*, 270. Kahlbau, "Is Anything New under the Sun?," 88.

the next natural missional step for the church. Allison builds a theological case for multisite by pointing to its missional nature. The multisite model allows church members to engage on mission at campuses that target particular areas or population segments near their homes. With the multisite model, people do not have to remove themselves from their communities to attend church. Rather, they can engage on mission in their community.[193] The significance of the missional nature of the church in Allison's mind is evident in his definition of multichurch, the particular model of the MCM he espouses. He explains that a "multichurch is a local community of Christians that matures and multiplies its influence through launching, developing, and resourcing *multiple congregations to reach its city* with the Gospel of Jesus Christ."[194] Allison's description of the need for multisite campuses to enable church members to serve on mission in their communities is the next natural missional step of the regional megachurch movement. The growth in the number of megachurches over the past few decades has revealed a missional weakness of the megachurch movement. Megachurch members often drive long distances to attend regional megachurches. This distance creates difficulties for megachurch members to engage on mission in their own community through the ministries of their church due to the distance between their community and their church. The MCM is the next natural missional step to allow members of regional megachurches to engage on mission in their own community while remaining connected to their church by beginning to attend a campus closer to their own community.[195] Once again, this development resembles the development of the ante-Nicene episcopacy. One reason for the development of the ante-Nicene episcopacy was the difficulty residents of rural communities faced when attending worship in the city due to their distance from city

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[193]Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers*, 314.

[194]House and Allison, *MultiChurch*, 16.

[195]Kahlbau, "Is Anything New under the Sun?," 180-81.

churches. In order to continue ministering to believers from rural communities and engaging on mission in rural communities, the city churches established daughter churches in the surrounding rural communities which remained under the authority of the metropolitan bishop.[196] Both the ante-Nicene episcopacy and the modern MCM developed as the next natural missional step for the church.

Multisite proponents do not appeal to the ante-Nicene episcopacy for a historical precedent for the movement, likely because most multisite churches come from the free church tradition.[197] Nevertheless, the development of the modern MCM bears a striking resemblance to the development of the ante-Nicene episcopacy. The similarity between the development of the MCM and the development of the ante-Nicene episcopacy does not mean that all multisite churches are characterized by episcopal church governance. This dissertation acknowledges that many models of the multisite church exist. Still, of all the aspects of church history examined in this chapter, the greatest historical precedent for the MCM is evident in the ante-Nicene episcopacy.

Conclusion

The preceding examination of the historical development of the MCM has revealed similarities between the MCM and the ante-Nicene episcopacy. Nevertheless, it must be acknowledged that no other expression of the church is quite like the multisite church. Multisite churches are unlike traditional congregationally-governed churches in that, in most expressions of the multisite church model, the totality of the membership and campuses of a multisite church never assemble as a whole church in one location for the purpose of governing.[198] Multisite churches are unlike traditional churches under

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[196]Coleman, *The Apostolical and Primitive Church*, 249.

[197]White and Yeats, *Franchising McChurch*, 81, 191.

[198]Gaines, "One Church in One Location," 124. White and Yeats, *Franchising McChurch*, 202.

presbyterian church governance in that the elders who rule over multiple churches in Presbyterian synods understand each church to be its own church whereas multisite churches understand their campuses to be a part of one larger multisite church. Multisite churches are unlike traditional churches under episcopal church governance in that the bishops in these churches understand themselves to be ruling over multiple churches whereas multisite churches understand their campuses to comprise one church. There is no direct historical precedent for the multisite church.[199] Multisite churches are a historical anomaly.[200] As one early proponent of the MCM acknowledged, the roots of the movement only date back to the 1980s.[201]

While the MCM is historically unique, the preceding examination has revealed that the historical development of the MCM most closely resembles the historical development of the ante-Nicene episcopacy. Although multisite proponents do not appeal to the development of the ante-Nicene episcopacy for a historical precedent for the MCM, multisite proponents inherently understand the episcopal tendencies of the movement.[202] In an interview with Heath Kahlbau, Elmer Towns stated that multisite

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[199]John Hammett, "Have We Ever Seen This before? Multi-Site Precedents," *9 Marks Journal* 6 (June 2009): 28-30.

[200]Jonathan Leeman, *Don't Fire Your Church Members: The Case for Congregationalism* (Nashville: B & H Academic, 2016), 119.

[201]Bartlett, "Multisite Church Planting in a Rural Community," 46.

[202]This dissertation does not argue that all expressions of multisite lean toward episcopal church governance. When House and Allison describe the "multipolity" of Sojourn Community Church in Louisville, Kentucky, the church where they serve as elders, they describe a presbyterian model of church governance that is tailored to the MCM. House and Allision do not state the Sojourn's polity is presbyterian, but they describe a system of campuses electing elders who then serve on the Full Council of Elders that makes decisions for all Sojourn campuses. The Full Council of Elders functions like a Presbyterian synod. This dissertation acknowledges that it is possible for multisite churches to govern themselves congregationally if gatherings that seek to include the totality of the campuses and church membership in one location regularly occur. chap. 7 serves as a conclusion to this dissertation and presents parameters by which a church can remain multisite while also remaining within the parameters of New Testament ecclesiology and Baptist tradition. House and Allison, *MultiChurch*, 157-58. While all multisite churches do not lean toward episcopal church governance, Edwards' dissertation reveals that most multisite churches do. Jamus Edwards' research serves as the quantitative basis for this argument. Edwards, "Leadership Structures and Dynamics in Multisite Churches," 15-16, 123-24, 145-46.

churches inherently lean toward episcopacy.[203] Jim Tomberlin, the most sought-after

multisite consultant, says that the best example of a multisite church that is purely

episcopal is the Roman Catholic Church.[204] Jimmy Scroggins, the Lead Pastor of Family

Church in West Palm Beach, Florida, acknowledges that only he has the authority to hire

and fire staff.[205] These comments from multisite proponents indicate that even when

multisite churches are not officially Episcopal, they are functionally episcopal.

       This dissertation argues that most expressions of the MCM demonstrate

inconsistencies with New Testament ecclesiology and Baptist tradition. The

argumentation of this dissertation is fleshed out further in the following chapters which

examine particular aspects of Baptist ecclesiology. At this point, the absence of a

historical precedent for the MCM in the New Testament and in early Baptist life in

America combined with the historical similarities between the MCM and the ante-Nicene

episcopacy begin to reveal the inconsistency of the MCM with New Testament

ecclesiology and Baptist tradition. Ecclesiology is not a primary doctrine and Christians

often disagree over matters of church polity. Nevertheless, Baptist ecclesiology is what

distinguishes Baptist churches as Baptist. Speaking of traditional Baptist ecclesiology,

including congregational church governance, Gerald Cowen writes, "our Baptist

forebears would not have declared these the most important doctrines. They did not think

that disagreeing with them made one heterodox or carnal. It did, however, make one not a

Baptist."[206] The intended outcome of this historical examination is that Baptist churches

that are multisite churches or are considering becoming multisite churches will carefully

consider whether participation in the MCM is consistent with their confessional

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[203]Kahlbau, "Is Anything New under the Sun?," 248.

[204] House and Allison, *MultiChurch*, 249.

[205]Ibid., 250.

[206]Gerald Cowen, *Who Rules the Church? Examining Congregational Leadership and Church Government* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2003), 144.

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ecclesiology and denominational affiliation. Such careful consideration will reveal

inconsistencies between the MCM, New Testament ecclesiology, and Baptist tradition.

CHAPTER 3

EKKLESIA AND THE SIGNIFICANCE OF ASSEMBLY

Ekklesia, the Greek word for church, appears 114 times in the Greek New Testament. For over a decade, the meaning of *ekklesia* has been at the center of the debate concerning the multisite church movement (MCM). Soon after the multisite movement rose to prominence in 2006 with the publication of *The Multi-Site Church Revolution: Being One Church in Many Locations*, theologians began to question whether a multisite church whose campuses never assemble could rightly be called one church. This concern stems largely from the meaning of *ekklesia*, which centers on assembling.[1] Many of the theologians who first raised this concern over the MCM are affiliated with 9Marks, an organization committed to building healthy churches.[2] Doctoral dissertations have also given detailed attention to the meaning of *ekklesia* and its implications for the MCM. Most significantly, Grant Gaines' dissertation traces the centrality of the assembly of the people of God through the Old and New Testaments.[3]

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[1]L. Coenen, "Church, Synagogue," in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, ed. Colin Brown et al. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 1:299. Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, ed. Frederick W. Danker and William Arndt, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2000), 303. K. L. Schmidt, "ekklesia," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel and Geoffrey William Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 3:531.

[2]Grant Gaines, "Exegetical Critique of Multi-Site: Disassembling the Church?" *9 Marks Journal* 6 (June 2009): 33-37. Jonathan Leeman, "Theological Critique of Multi-Site: What Exactly Is a 'Church?'" *9 Marks Journal* 6 (June 2009): 38-45. Leeman, "A Non-Assembled Assembly," 9Marks, accessed December 25, 2015, http://9marks.org/article/a-non-assembled-assembly/. Leeman, "Twenty-Two Problems with Multi-Site Churches," 9Marks, accessed January 4, 2018, https:// www.9marks.org/article/ twenty-two-problems-with-multi-site-churches/. Bobby Jamieson, "Historical Critique of Multisite: Not Over My Dead Body," *9 Marks Journal* 6 (June 2009): 46-48. Thomas White, "Nine Reasons Why I Don't Like Multi-Site Churches, from a Guy Who Should," *9 Marks Journal* 6 (June 2009): 49-51. Thomas White and John M. Yeats, *Franchising McChurch: Feeding Our Obsession with Easy Christianity* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2009), 103. John S. Hammett, "What Makes a Multisite Church One Church?" *Great Commission Research Journal* 4, no. 1 (Summer 2012): 103. Mark Dever, *The Church: The Gospel Made Visible* (Nashville: B & H Academic, 2012), 131-38.

[3]Darrell Grant Gaines, "One Church in One Location: Questioning the Biblical, Theological,

Patrick Graham Willis also devotes a chapter in his dissertation to drawing ecclesiological lessons from the meaning of *ekklesia*.[4] Critiques of the MCM in light of the meaning of *ekklesia* are considered in this chapter. The responses of Gregg Allision and other multisite proponents to these critiques are also considered and critiqued.

In light of the significant attention already given to the meaning of *ekklesia* in the literature on the MCM, the argumentation pertaining to the meaning of *ekklesia* in this dissertation is limited to this chapter. Establishing the centrality of assembling in the life of the church is essential for the argument that is built in chapters 4 through 6. Accordingly, this chapter argues that the meaning of *ekklesia* in the Septuagint (LXX) and in the New Testament necessitates the assembly of a church in order for that church to be and function as one church. Chapters 4 through 6 then highlight three particular ecclesiological functions of the assembled church: governance, discipline, and observing the Lord's Supper. Since this dissertation also considers the compatibility of the MCM with Baptist tradition, the chapter concludes by examining the importance of the assembly of the church in Baptist tradition. This examination leads to the argument that the failure of multisite churches to assemble the totality of their campuses and membership in one location is incompatible with the Baptist tradition.

The *Ekklesia* Debate in Multisite Literature

This section presents arguments against the MCM that are based on the meaning of *ekklesia*. Then the responses of multisite proponents to this line of argumentation are also be presented. The debate on the meaning of *ekklesia* sets the stage for the word study on *ekklesia* in the following section.

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and Historical Claims of the Multi-Site Church Movement" (PhD diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2012), 47-90.

[4]Patrick Graham Willis, "Multi-Site Churches and Their Undergirding Ecclesiology: Questioning Its Baptist Identity and Biblical Validity" (PhD diss., Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2014), 91-141.

Objections to the MCM Based on the Meaning of *Ekklesia*

The objection to the multisite church model on the basis of the meaning of

ekklesia is the most well-known objection to multisite churches in popular circles.

According to Southern Baptist theologian John Hammett, it is also the most common

objection in written critiques of the MCM.[5] This section considers arguments from three

prominent multisite critics based on the meaning of *ekklesia*.

First, Grant Gaines argues that the most significant weakness of the MCM is

"the belief that a Christian organization may rightly be called an *ekklesia* (church), even

though the believers who constitute it assemble in different places."[6] In addition to

denoting an assembly, *ekklesia* is also joined with the Greek phrase *epi to auto*, which

means "in the same place" (1 Cor 11:18, 20, 14:23). Thus, the New Testament

redundantly emphasizes that a church is an assembly that gathers in the same place.[7]

Gaines then traces his argumentation to its logical end when he denies the existence of

multisite churches. He writes, "Simply put, multiple sites equal multiple churches, and

churches should be self-governing. Because multiple sites equal multiple churches there

is actually no such thing as a multi-site church."[8]

Second, Mark Dever defines a biblically faithful church as a gathered church.[9]

While he acknowledges that a church is more than a gathering, Dever argues that a

church is never less than a gathering. He points out that *ekklesia* never refers to multiple

meetings as constituting a single church in the New Testament.[10] Dever further

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[5]Hammett, "What Makes a Multisite Church One Church?" 103.

[6]Gaines, "Exegetical Critique of Multi-Site," 33.

[7]Ibid.

[8]Ibid., 35.

[9]Mark Dever enters this conversation with much credibility. Dever serves as the Senior Pastor of Capitol Hill Baptist Church in Washington, DC and as the President of 9Marks. Dever also holds a DPhil in ecclesiastical history from Cambridge University. Dever, *The Church*, 131, 138.

[10]Ibid., 132.

understands the gathering of the local church to be a witness to the eschatological gathering of the body of Christ in heaven (Rev 5:9, 7:9). Churches that never congregate distort this witness.[11] Dever does not press his argument as far as Gaines' conclusion that there is no such thing as a multisite church. Nevertheless, he does argue that the meaning of *ekklesia* indicates that the practice of multisite churches does not fit the biblical usage of this term and that the failure of multisite churches to assemble distorts the eschatological witness of the local church.

Third, Thomas White also objects to the MCM on the basis of the meaning of *ekklesia*. Noting that "assembly" is the main meaning of *ekklesia*, White argues that "decisions that compromise the 'gatheredness' [*sic*] of the congregation can potentially harm the meaning of the church."[12] In addition to multisite campuses, White also mentions overflow rooms and multiple service times as compromises to the gathering of the church that create multiple congregations.[13] White also argues that a multisite church is a contradiction of terms. Since *ekklesia* refers to a gathered or assembled church, the multisite church mantra of being "one church in many locations" is illogical. An assembly in many locations is not one assembly, but many assemblies.[14]

**Responses of Multisite Proponents to
Objections Based on *Ekklesia***

Multisite proponents have taken note of the objections based on the meaning of

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[11]Dever, *The Church*, 134-35.

[12]James White enters this discussion with noteworthy credentials. He holds a PhD in systematic theology from Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary where his dissertation research focused on ecclesiology. White currently serves as the President of Cedarville University in Cedarville, Ohio. White and Yeats, *Franchising McChurch*, 103.

[13]This dissertation acknowledges the overlap between the MCM and multi-service churches and churches with overflow rooms. Much of the argumentation this dissertation marshals against the MCM could also be marshaled against multi-service churches and churches with overflow rooms. However, considering multi-service churches and churches with overflow rooms is beyond the scope of this dissertation. Accordingly, the argumentation presented in this dissertation focuses on the MCM rather than multi-service churches and churches with overflow rooms. Ibid.

[14]White, "Nine Reasons Why I Don't like Multi-Site Churches," 49.

ekklesia and have written in response to these objections. Having noted the objections in the previous subsection, this subsection now presents the multisite responses to these objections. Four such responses are detailed below.

The most extensive response to the objection to the MCM based on the meaning of *ekklesia* comes from Gregg Allison. Allison does not believe that the validity of the MCM can be decided solely on the basis of the meaning of *ekklesia*. He argues that this objection creates three errors. First, the objection to the multisite church based on the meaning of *ekklesia* commits the methodological error of defining a concept by defining a word. Allison notes that the New Testament terms "salvation" and "justification" have rich meanings that exceed their mere definitions. Similarly, the meaning of *ekklesia* is much more than the definition of the word. Second, the objection to the multisite church based on the meaning of *ekklesia* commits a lexical error. Allison notes that "assembly" is a meaning of *ekklesia*, but only one of the meanings of the word. *Ekklesia* is also used in reference to a scattered church (Acts 8:1), the church in a region (Acts 9:31), the universal church (Matt 16:18), and partial gatherings of the church, hence the reference to "the whole church" in two passages (Rom 16:23; 1 Cor 14:23). Third, the objection to the multisite church based on the meaning of *ekklesia* commits a logical error. Allision states that this logical error lays in the false assumption that *ekklesia* must refer to a gathering of all the church's members. Romans 16:23 and 1 Corinthians 14:23 reveal this assumption to be a false premise.[15] Allison's objection is insightful.

In the first dissertation on the MCM, Brian Frye also responds to the objection to the MCM based on the meaning of *ekklesia*. He believes that New Testament texts pertaining to house church gatherings prohibit requiring *ekklesia* to mean whole church gatherings. Frye contends that the practice of early churches gathering as whole churches

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[15]Gregg R. Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers: The Doctrine of the Church* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 313-14n47.

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and as smaller house churches in Jerusalem, in Rome, and in Corinth validates the segmentation of multisite churches into multiple campuses. He writes, "If both house church gathering and local church gathering took place concurrently within the early church without harm, it stands to reason that the multisite practice of segmenting a congregation into smaller groups for corporate worship is an acceptable and viable expression of church worship."[16] Frye further argues that the churches in most cities during the New Testament era were too large to be contained in most homes. The average home held only thirty people comfortably. Larger homes of wealthy church members could hold a maximum of ninety people, but only if church members gathered in multiple rooms.[17] For Frye, requiring *ekklesia* to mean whole church gatherings negates New Testament texts that indicate the early churches did not and could not always gather together as whole churches.

Surratt, Ligon, and Bird offer a more practical response to the objection to the MCM based on the meaning of *ekklesia*. They write, "One of the main barriers to multisite expansion is the irrational belief that people are in community because they show up at the same physical space each week."[18] In their eyes, smaller groupings of people in multisite campuses offer greater opportunities for connection. For multisite churches with multiple worship venues on the same campus, community gathering spaces where attendees from each venue have the opportunity to interact with one another serve as a regular reminder that the campuses are part of one church and allow for a deeper community experience.[19]

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[16]Brian Nathaniel Frye, "The Multi-Site Church Phenomenon in North America: 1950-2010" (PhD diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2011), 229.

[17]Ibid., 224.

[18]Geoff Surratt, Greg Ligon, and Warren Bird, *A Multi-Site Church Roadtrip: Exploring the New Normal* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 48.

[19]Ibid., 50-51.

Scott Reavley argues that *ekklesia* is used flexibly in the New Testament such that it can refer to one assembly or to multiple assemblies in one city. Reavley cites the progression from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth in Acts 1:8 as an indication that God's design requires the church to be in more than one location.[20] He also points to the references to house churches in Paul's epistles as in indication of the permissibility of multiple locations for one church (Rom 16:5; Col 4:15-16).[21] Reavley summarizes his argumentation on the flexible usage of *ekklesia* in the New Testament as follows: "I am not here arguing that the New Testament church was multisite, but simply that the language and practice of the early church allows for what we now call a multisite model. We cannot dismiss it categorically."[22]

Word Study of *Ekklesia*

Prior to drawing definitive conclusions concerning the *ekklesia* debate in multisite literature, a detailed word study of *ekklesia* must be undertaken. This section traces the meaning and usage of *ekklesia* throughout the LXX and the New Testament. Special attention is given to New Testament passages where *ekklesia* is used in reference to assemblies that extend beyond the local church. It is argued that the usage of *ekklesia* in the LXX and in the New Testament evidences the centrality of the assembly of the people of God throughout the Bible.

Ekklesia in the LXX

A survey of the LXX reveals a strong connection between *ekklesia* and the Hebrew term *qahal*. As New Testament scholar Tom Schreiner notes, *ekklesia* recalls

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[20]R. Scott Reavley, "An Ecclesiology for Multisite Churches: Thinking Biblically about the Local Church in Multiple Locations" (DMin project, Western Seminary, 2007), 121-22.

[21]Ibid., 125.

[22]Ibid., 126.

qahal which denotes Israel as the assembly of God's people.[23] In the Old Testament, *qahal* is used in reference to a variety of assemblies, but always refers to an assembly of some sort.[24] *Qahal* is frequently translated as *ekklesia* in the LXX[25] and lies behind every usage of *ekklesia* in the LXX.[26] Although *qahal* is sometimes translated into other Greek terms in the LXX, the exclusive use of *ekklesia* to translate *qahal* indicates that the composers of the LXX believed *ekklesia* referred to an actual assembly.[27] When *qahal* is translated as *ekklesia* in the LXX, the collective people of Israel are frequently in view as an assembly before God (Exod 12:6; Lev 4:14; Num 10:7; Deut 10:4; 1 Kgdms 8:14).[28] More specifically, *qahal* is translated as *ekklesia* in reference to Israel as an assembly before God for judicial (Deut 9:10, 23:3; Judg 21:5, 8; Mic 2:5), political (Ezra 10:8, 12; Neh 8:2, 17), and worship purposes (2 Chr 6:3, 30:2, 4, 13, 17; Joel 2:16; Pss 21:22, 88:6).[29] While a variety of assemblies are in view, assembly is the common thread throughout the usage of *ekklesia* in the LXX.

Edah is another Hebrew word for assembly. This term refers to a congregation when the congregation is assembled and when the congregation is disbanded, whereas *qahal* refers to an actual assembly. *Ekklesia* is never used in the LXX as a translation for *edah*. As mentioned above, *qahal* is behind every translation of *ekklesia* in the LXX. The careful delineation of these terms is further evidence that the composers of the LXX

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[23]Thomas R. Schreiner, *New Testament Theology: Magnifying God in Christ* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 694.

[24]Gaines, "One Church in One Location," 49.

[25]Coenen, "Church, Synagogue," 1:292.

[26]Gaines, "One Church in One Location," 50.

[27]Ibid.

[28]Moisés Silva, ed. *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology and Exegesis*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 2:136.

[29]Coenen, "Church, Synagogue," 1:295

understood an *ekklesia* as an actual assembly.[30]

The usage of *ekklesia* in the LXX also reveals the centrality of assembly in the life of Israel. As the people of God, Israel is "the assembly of the Lord" (Num 16:3; Deut 23:1, 2, 3, 8; 1 Chr 28:8; Mic 2:5).[31] This Old Testament theme begins in the exodus. In his initial interaction with Moses, the Lord promised Moses a sign that the people will serve God at Sinai following the exodus (Exod 3:12). God fulfills his promise in the Sinai assembly that follows the exodus (Exod 19:8, 11; Deut 9:10). The establishment of a covenant at the Sinai assembly is the immediate purpose of the exodus.[32] In addition to the Sinai assembly serving as the immediate purpose of the exodus, the centrality of the Sinai assembly is further evidenced in the duration of the assembly. Stephen Dempster shows that at Sinai there is a "virtual suspension of narrative pace. Israel stays at Sinai for eleven months in real time (Exod 19:1-Num 10:11) and fifty-seven chapters in narrative time. This is important given the fact that sixty-eight chapters precede Sinai and fifty-nine chapters follow it. Sinai is central to the Torah."[33] The Sinai assembly also points beyond the post-exodus gathering to "the future promise of a redeemed people worshipping God in his sanctuary."[34]

Accordingly, the centrality of assembly stretches further into the history of Israel. While they were still assembled at Sinai, the Lord instructed Israel concerning seven appointed feasts they were to keep. Three of these feasts, Passover (Lev 23:4-8), Pentecost (Lev 23:15-22), and Booths (Lev 23:33-43), were pilgrimage feasts for which

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[30]Gaines, "One Church in One Location," 52.

[31]Ibid., 9.

[32]Ibid., 55.

[33]Stephen G. Dempster, *Dominion and Dynasty: A Theology of the Hebrew Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity, 2003), 100.

[34]Brevard S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus: A Critical, Theological Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974), 74.

the Lord expected the people of Israel to assemble in Jerusalem. Israel was to maintain a regular pattern of assembling for worship. These ongoing assemblies recalled the great assembly at Sinai.[35] They also functioned as a renewal of the decisive Sinai assembly.[36]

The centrality of assembly in the life of Israel is further evidenced in their covenantal blessings and punishments. The Lord established his covenant with Israel at the Sinai assembly (Exod 19:8, 11; Deut 9:10) and renewed it in the assembly east of the Jordan as they prepared to enter the promised land (Deut 1:1). At both assemblies the Lord spoke to Israel concerning covenantal blessings and punishments. After describing the blessings of obedience, the Lord warned Israel that if they broke their covenant with him they would be removed from their land and scattered throughout the nations (Lev 26:33; Deut 4:27, 28:64). However, if Israel repented when in exile, the Lord would graciously gather them once again (Deut 30:3).[37] The Lord's covenantal blessings and punishments to Israel in Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28 serve as the interpretive grid for the Old Testament.[38] The themes of the blessing of assembling and the punishment of scattering thus run throughout the Old Testament.

The Psalms also regularly reference the joyous assembly of God's people (Pss 22:22, 26:12, 35:18, 40:10, 89:5, 107:32, 149:1). The assemblies referenced in these texts include assemblies for the feasts of Israel and for the daily morning and evening sacrifices that occurred in the temple.[39] In addition to these specific references to worship assemblies in the Psalms, the Psalms of Assent (Pss 120-134) represent a special section

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[35]Edmund P. Clowney, *The Church* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1995), 30.

[36]J. W. Roberts, "The Meaning of Ekklesia in the New Testament," *Restoration Quarterly* 15, no. 1 (1972): 32.

[37]Gaines, "One Church in One Location," 10, 58.

[38]Paul R. House, *Old Testament Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1998), 192.

[39]Roberts, "The Meaning of Ekklesia in the New Testament," 33.

in the psalter of Psalms collected for use in the feast celebrations of Israel.[40] In both their specific references to assembling and their intended usage, the Psalms indicate the centrality of assembly in the life of Israel.[41]

The prophetic hope of Israel also points to the centrality of assembly in the life of Israel. This prophetic hope is most pronounced in Isaiah. The language of Isaiah hints at a new eschatological exodus to come (Isa 40:3-5, 43:16-17, 55:12-13). Along with this coming exodus, Isaiah also speaks of a coming assembly of the people of God. In that day, when the messianic root of Jesse stands as a signal for all peoples, "he will raise a signal for the nations and will assemble the banished of Israel, and gather the dispersed of Judah from the four corners of the earth" (Isa 11:12). Likewise, when the messianic servant appears he will "bring Jacob back to him . . . that Israel might be gathered to him" (Isa 49:5).[42] Isaiah's prophecy indicates that the centrality of the assembly of God's people is not only central in the life of Israel, but also to the prophetic hope of Israel.

Ekklesia in the New Testament

The secular usage of *ekklesia* forms the background for its New Testament usage and strengthens the argumentation for understanding the centrality of assembly in the New Testament usage of *ekklesia*. *Ekklesia* was used in reference to assembling an army. Then, beginning in the fifth century BC, it was also used in reference to the assembly of all competent citizens of a city for governance in matters of laws, political elections, and policy matters.[43] The *ekklesia* of a city assembled at regular intervals and

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[40]Erhard Gerstenberger presents two understandings of the intended usage of the Psalms of Assent represented among Old Testament scholarship. While some believe the predominant usage of the Psalms of Assent is intended to be an individual usage, many scholars believe they are intended to be used predominantly during pilgrimages to Jerusalem for festal assemblies. Erhard S. Gerstenberger, *Psalms, Part 2, and Lamentations*, The Forms of the Old Testament Literature, vol. 15 (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2001), 317-21.

[41]Gaines, "One Church in One Location," 59-60.

[42]Ibid., 61-62.

[43]Coenen, "Church, Synagogue," 1:291.

when emergency matters arose.[44] Citizens were called to assemble by a town herald.[45] The secular usage of *ekklesia* points to the centrality of assembly in the meaning of *ekklesia*.

There are 114 uses of *ekklesia* in the Greek New Testament. Of these 114 uses, the vast majority refer to a particular local church or a particular group of local churches. *Ekklesia* is used this way ninety-three times. The second most common usage is in reference to the universal church, which occurs fifteen times (Matt 16:18; 1 Cor 15:9; Gal 1:13; Eph 1:22, 3:10, 3:21, 5:23, 24, 25, 27, 29, 32; Phil 3:6; Col 1:18, 24). *Ekklesia* refers to a secular assembly three times (Acts 19:32, 39, 41), to the congregation of Israel in the Old Testament twice (Acts 7:38; Heb 2:12), and to the eschatological gathering of all believers in heaven in one unique reference (Heb 12:23).[46] In each of these uses, assembly is the common thread. The local churches in view gathered together. The universal church will one day gather in the eschatological assembly of all believers in heaven. The secular assemblies referenced in Acts 19 assembled against Paul. Israel assembled in the Old Testament. Commenting on the consistent usage of *ekklesia* in reference to assemblies in the New Testament, K. L. Schmidt argued that "accurately to reproduce the biblical use of the word and concept, we ought always to say assembly (of God)."[47] Schmidt's argument is sweeping. *Ekklesia* should always be understood as a reference to an assembly.

The type of assembly referenced by *ekklesia* in the New Testament also

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[44]Silva, *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology and Exegesis*, 2:134.

[45]Schmidt, "ekklesia," 3:513

[46]For a complete listing of the uses of *ekklesia* in the New Testament, see the table in the appendix that includes verse references, English Standard Version translations of *ekklesia* in each verse, and the referent of each usage of *ekklesia*.

[47]Schmidt, "ekklesia," 3:531. Darrell Bock also argues that while *ekklesia* is used in a variety of ways in the New Testament, it always refers to an assembly. Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 227.

necessitates geographical proximity. L. Coenen notes that, "The ekklesia has its location, existence and being within definable geographical limits."[48] This proximity is indicated by two factors. First, the New Testament authors refer to churches in particular places. Linguistic modifiers define the location of the *ekklesia* in terms of specific cities (Acts 5:11, 8:1; 1 Cor 1:2; 2 Cor 1:2; 1 Thess 1:1; 2 Thess 1:1) and houses (Rom 16:5; Col 4:15; Phlm 2). These modifiers define geographical limits for the *ekklesia* that enable regular assemblies.[49] Second, the New Testament instructs church practices that require proximity and regular assembly. Jesus' instructions for the *ekklesia* to exercise church discipline presupposes the ability of the *ekklesia* to assemble for this practice (Matt 18:17).[50] The practice of church discipline also presupposes a close proximity among the members of the *ekklesia* that allows them access to observe the lifestyle of the disciplined member to determine if repentance has occurred. New Testament language such as "when you are assembled" (1 Cor 5:4) and "when you come together" (1 Cor 11:17, 18, 20, 33, 34) implies the regular assembly of the church in Corinth.[51] Regular assembly allows for the practice of church discipline (1 Cor 5:4-5) and the observance of the Lord's Supper (1 Cor 11:20). Thus, the linguistic modifiers that accompany *ekklesia* and New Testament instructions aimed at the *ekklesia* necessitate the geographical proximity of the *ekklesia*.

Admittedly, *ekklesia* does not always directly refer to an actual assembly in the New Testament. For example, *ekklesia* is used in reference to the former Jerusalem

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[48]Coenen, "Church, Synagogue," 1:299.

[49]Ibid. Spiros Zodhiates, ed. *The Complete Word Study Dictionary New Testament* (Chattanooga: AMG, 1992), 542. Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 304. Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1998), 137.

[50]Coenen, "Church, Synagogue," 1:302.

[51]Jonathan Leeman, *Don't Fire Your Church Members: The Case for Congregationalism* (Nashville: B & H Academic, 2016), 100, 103, 112.

church that was scattered throughout Judea and Galilee as a result of Saul's persecution (Acts 9:31). This usage indicates that *ekklesia* is used in reference to an assembly, even when the members who compose the *ekklesia* are not gathered at that particular time.[52] As Coenen states, "Even when their meeting is over [they] still retain their quality of *ekklesia*."[53] Jonathan Leeman uses the helpful analogy of a football team to illustrate this point. When the team is apart they are still considered a team, but only because they were once together as a team.[54] While *ekklesia* in Acts 9:31 does not refer to an actual current assembly, it does refer to a church that once assembled, the church in Jerusalem that is now scattered throughout Judea and Galilee.[55] As the church in Jerusalem scattered as a result of the persecution that arose from Saul, the scattered church from Jerusalem began to consider itself as multiple churches. Thus, the Pauline epistles refer to a plurality of churches in Judea (1 Thess 2:14).[56]

The New Testament usage of *ekklesia* as the eschatological gathering of all believers in heaven merits further discussion. The specific text in view is Hebrews 12:23. In context, it reads, "but you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven" (Heb 12:22-23). Notice that the phrase "you have come" in this text indicates that this heavenly gathering is already inaugurated in some way. This is similar to the language of Ephesians 2:6-7, Colossians 3:1-3, and Revelation 7:9-12, 14:1-3 which indicate that the universal church is already

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[52]Gaines, "One Church in One Location," 51-53. Schmidt, "ekklesia," 3:527. Charles Edward Van Engen, *Mission on the Way: Issues in Mission Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 106.

[53]Coenen, "Church, Synagogue," 1:303.

[54]Leeman, *Don't Fire Your Church Members*, 103.

[55]Willis, "Multi-Site Churches and Their Undergirding Ecclesiology," 123-25.

[56]F. F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1988), 163.

assembled around Christ in the heavenlies.[57] Ephesians 2:6 most explicitly states to believers that God has "raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus." The text describes the past acts of God. However, texts such as 1 Thessalonians 4:17 and 2 Thessalonians 2:1 indicate that this heavenly gathering is not yet complete. Gaines explains that "this final eschatological assembly may be thought of as the 'not yet' aspect of the assembling of God's people. The church is already assembled around Christ in heaven, but it has not yet been assembled completely."[58] Yet, amazingly, believers currently share in this heavenly eschatological gathering in some way. On earth, the local church represents the heavenly eschatological gathering around Christ that is not yet complete. The local church is the "already" aspect of the eschatological assembly of God's people. Each *ekklesia* represents the full *ekklesia* that will one day gather around Christ in heaven.[59] The centrality of assembly in the New Testament usage of *ekklesia* stretches even into the eschaton.

As was the case in the LXX, assembly is the common thread of the usage of *ekklesia* in the New Testament. Churches presently on earth are functionally bound by geographical limits that enable regularly assembly. One day, all believers will participate in the eschatological heavenly *ekklesia*. In the meantime, participation in an assembly of the local church on earth should portray the coming eschatological assembly of the church in heaven. Even Acts 9:31, which does not refer to an actual current assembly, refers to the church in Jerusalem that once assembled. Amidst a diversity of usage in the LXX and in the New Testament, assembly is the common thread that unites the meaning of *ekklesia*.

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[57]Gaines, "One Church in One Location," 76-78.

[58]Ibid. 79-80.

[59]Ibid., 84-85. Schmidt, "ekklesia," 3:506.

<center>***Ekklesia* and the Necessity of Assembly**</center>

This section draws conclusions based on the word study of *ekklesia* in the previous section. In the first subsection, the responses of Allison, Frye, Surratt, Ligon, and Bird, and Reavley to objections to the MCM based on the meaning of *ekklesia* presented earlier in this chapter are reconsidered. These objections are compared with the centrality of assembly in the meaning of *ekklesia* as revealed in the word study and then refuted. The second subsection argues that the geographical proximity described above in the word study of *ekklesia* points to a relational proximity that can only be achieved by assembling. Taken together, these subsections argue that the meaning of *ekklesia* indicates the necessity of the assembly of the local church.

Refuting the Responses of Multisite
Proponents to Objections to the MCM
Based on the Meaning of *Ekklesia*

Gregg Allison responds to the objection to the MCM based on the meaning of *ekklesia* by arguing that this objection commits methodological, lexical, and logical errors.[60] Allison's response was presented above. Allison's first accusation is that objecting to the MCM on the basis of the meaning of *ekklesia* commits a methodological error. By this he means that the multisite issue cannot be settled solely on the meaning of *ekklesia* and that the concept of a church cannot be defined solely by defining *ekklesia*.[61] Allision is correct in this argument. However, as the above word study of *ekklesia* has shown, objecting to the MCM based on the meaning of *ekklesia* is not solely based on the definition of *ekklesia*. Rather, the usage of *ekklesia* throughout the LXX and the New Testament reveals the centrality of assembly in the meaning of *ekklesia*. As Gaines notes, "There is a whole biblical theology of the people of God as the 'assembly of the Lord' (from Old Testament to New Testament) that lies behind the usage of *ekklesia*" in the

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[60]Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers*, 313-14n47.

[61]Ibid.

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LXX and the New Testament.[62] Moreover, while the meaning of words extends beyond their definition, the meaning of words cannot be divorced from their definitions.[63] For instance, the word "salvation" would never be used without some type of deliverance from danger in mind. Using the word "salvation" requires an actual salvation from an actual danger. Understanding *ekklesia* as a non-assembled assembly is just as nonsensical as understanding salvation to be a non-saving salvation.[64] The objection to the MCM based on the meaning of *ekklesia* is not a methodological error. The objection to the MCM based on the meaning of *ekklesia* is founded upon a whole biblical theology that is united to the definition of *ekklesia*.

Allison's second accusation is that objecting to the MCM based on the meaning of *ekklesia* commits a lexical error. Allison contends that "assembly" is only one of the meanings of *ekklesia*.[65] This contention is incorrect. The above word study revealed that *ekklesia* always references an assembly.[66] Even the challenging use of *ekklesia* in Acts 9:31 refers to the Jerusalem church that once gathered before being scattered under persecution. Even references to the universal church refer to an assembly that will be realized in the eschatological assembly of the people of God in heaven (Heb 12:23). Objecting to the MCM based on the meaning of *ekklesia* does not commit a lexical error. The lexical meaning of *ekklesia* is always an assembly.

Allison's third accusation is that objecting to the MCM based on the meaning

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[62]Gaines, "One Church in One Location," 125-26n99.

[63]Willis, "Multi-Site Churches and Their Undergirding Ecclesiology," 104.

[64]Leeman, "A Non-Assembled Assembly." In his argument that the objection to the MCM based on the meaning of *ekklesia* commits a methodological error, Allision specifically referenced the word "salvation" (Gr. *soteria*) as an example of a word with a meaning that extends beyond its definition. This assessment is correct. However, the meaning of *soteria* cannot be divorced from its definition. Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers*, 313n47.

[65]Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers*, 313n47.

[66]Schmidt, "ekklesia," 3:531. Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 303-4. Bock, *Acts*, 227.

of *ekklesia* commits a logical error. Specifically, the logical error Allison has in view is the faulty assumption that *ekklesia* is used in the New Testament to refer to the assembly of all the members of the church.[67] However, the objection to the MCM based on the meaning of *ekklesia* is not founded on a faulty assumption. This objection is founded on the New Testament claim that "whole church" gatherings occurred in the early churches.[68] Some New Testament texts that indicate whole church gatherings include Acts 1:15, 2:1, 44, 5:12, 6:2, Rom 16:23, and 1 Cor 11:18, 20, 14:23.[69] Certainly all church members were not present at these gatherings. Nevertheless, these gatherings were intended to be gatherings of the whole church and were open to all church members. Objecting to the MCM based on the meaning of *ekklesia* does not commit a logical error; this objection is based on New Testament evidence.

In addition to Allison's response to the objection to the MCM based on the meaning of *ekklesia*, Brian Frye's response to this objection was also noted above. Frye states that the practice of early churches gathering in homes and in large whole church gatherings indicates the permissibility of the MCM.[70] However, Frye's response fails to note that most multisite churches do not follow the early church pattern of smaller gatherings and whole church gatherings. Most multisite churches never assemble the totality of their membership and campuses in one location.[71] Frye also argues that whole

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[67]Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers*, 314n47.

[68]Gaines, "One Church in One Location," 126n99.

[69]Some of the texts cited parenthetically above use the word *ekklesia* and others imply it. The usage of the phrase *epi to auto* ("in one place") is also prevalent in these texts. In Acts 1:15, 2:1, and 2:44, *epi to auto* refers to the church gathering in one place. Everett Ferguson, "'When You Come Together': *Epi to Auto* in Early Christian Literature," *Restoration Quarterly* 16, no. 3/4 (1973): 207. Gordon Fee notes that when the comment in 1 Cor 11:18 about the church in Corinth coming together as a church (*en ekklesia*) is taken with 1 Cor 11:20 which speaks of the church coming together in one place (*epi to auto*), it is evident that Paul understands the equivalency of these phrases. To come together as a church is to come together in one place. Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, rev. ed., New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2014), 597.

[70]Frye, "The Multi-Site Church Phenomenon in North America," 229.

[71]Gaines, "One Church in One Location," 124. White and Yeats, *Franchising McChurch*, 202.

church gatherings in the first century, which met in homes, were limited due to house size. He states that even in large homes only thirty people could gather in one room, with a maximum capacity of ninety people if they met in different rooms.[72] In response to this point, two counterpoints should be considered. First, there is no biblical reason to presume that all churches mentioned in the New Testament were large churches like the early church in Jerusalem. Perhaps some New Testament churches were small enough to gather comfortably in normative-size homes. Second, some early homes had a larger capacity than Frye recognizes. Upon excavation, one large first-century home with large courtyards was estimated to have the capacity to contain 1,135 people.[73] Not many of the early believers were of noble backgrounds, especially in Corinth (1 Cor 1:26). However, some of the early converts Paul baptized were of high social standing, even in Corinth (1 Cor 1:14-16; Acts 16:14, 40, 18:8).[74] In Corinth and Philippi, wealthy first-century converts housed the church (Acts 16:40, 18:8). Their wealth suggests large homes with large capacities.

True to form, the response of Surratt, Ligon, and Bird to the objection to the MCM based on the meaning of *ekklesia* is practical in nature. They note that gathering in the same location each week does not necessarily lead to meaningful relationships.[75] This statement is correct. Many church members experience the difficulty of fostering

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[72]Frye, "The Multi-Site Church Phenomenon in North America," 224.

[73]Carolyn Osiek and David L. Balch, *Families in the New Testament World: Households and House Churches* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 201-2.

[74]Acts 18:8 establishes the prominence of Crispus when it notes that he served as "the ruler of the synagogue" in Corinth. Douglas Moo and Robert Mounce also point to the prominence of Erastus. Ancient inscriptions indicate that Erastus served as the treasurer of Corinth and was later promoted to serve as a Roman magistrate. Erastus was wealthy enough to pave public roads with his personal wealth. Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 1996), 935-36. Robert H. Mounce, *Romans*, New American Commentary, vol. 27 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1995), 281. Lydia is another is another example of a wealthy convert. With the resources she earned through her lucrative business, she housed the church in Philippi (Acts 16:40) and likely funded Paul's later missionary journeys to a large extent (Phil 4:15-18; 2 Cor 11:8). John B. Polhill, *Acts*, The New American Commentary, vol. 26 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1992), 349.

[75]Surratt, Ligon, and Bird, *Multi-Site Church Roadtrip*, 48.

meaningful relationships in spite of weekly gatherings. However, what Surratt, Ligon, and Bird fail to note is the impossibility of people establishing meaningful relationships when they never gather together. The New Testament prescribes the establishment of meaningful relationships within the church as the church gathers to encourage one another (Heb 10:25) and to exercise spiritual gifts (1 Cor 14:23; Rom 1:11). The apostles exhibited a strong desire to see the churches face to face (1 Thess 2:17, 3:10; 2 John 12; 3 John 14). Establishing meaningful relationships is difficult when people regularly gather; it is impossible when people never gather.

The final response to the objection to the MCM based on the meaning of *ekklesia* considered in this section comes from Scott Reavley. As noted above, Reavley cites Acts 1:8 as an indication of God's intention for the church to spread beyond one location.[76] Reavley also points to New Testament house churches as evidence that one church can exist in multiple locations (Rom 16:5; Col 4:15-16).[77] Reavley's argumentation from Scripture is misguided. Regarding Acts 1:8, this text simply does not speak to the meaning of *ekklesia*. This text contains Jesus' prediction that his disciples will be empowered by the Holy Spirit to be his witnesses to the end of the earth. However, this text does not specify the role of the church in this mission. Regarding New Testament house churches, Reavley neglects to mention that, unlike modern multisite churches, first-century house churches included gatherings of the whole church. Reavley looks to Romans 16:5 as a proof text, but overlooks the fact that this same chapter speaks of Gaius as the host "to the whole church" (Rom 16:23).

The responses to the objection to the MCM based on the meaning of *ekklesia* do not adequately refute the objection. The centrality of assembly in the meaning of *ekklesia* revealed in the study of the word is not negated by the argumentation of

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[76]Reavley, "An Ecclesiology for Multisite Churches," 121-22.

[77]Ibid., 125.

multisite proponents. The meaning of *ekklesia* necessitates an assembly of the church that is intended to be an assembly of the whole church in one location.

Relational Proximity

The relational proximity implied in the usage of *ekklesia* in the New Testament also indicates the necessity of assembly. The mainstream proponents of the MCM place no value on the geographical proximity required to maintain relational proximity in the local church. Surratt, Ligon, and Bird advocate the multisite practice of launching and maintaining international campuses.[78] The problem with this position is that it prohibits the relational proximity prescribed for church members in the New Testament that can only be accomplished in the context of the gathered church.

The distribution of spiritual gifts within the church entails the necessity of relational proximity and the exercise of the gifts in the assembly of the church. The Lord distributed spiritual gifts through the Holy Spirit to each believer according to his will and then placed gifted believers in particular churches according to his will (1 Cor 12:7, 11-12). These spiritual gifts are to be exercised in the context of the assembled church when the whole church comes together (1 Cor 14:23) for the good of the body (1 Cor 12:7).[79] The exercise of the spiritual gifts is also rooted in relationships among church members which require togetherness and interaction in order to develop.[80] Within a multisite church, church members typically only experience relational proximity with the portion of their church represented at their campus. This limited relational proximity limits the ability of church members to exercise their spiritual gifts for the good of others or to receive the benefit of the spiritual giftedness of others. This is contrary to the Lord's

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[78]Surratt, Ligon, and Bird, *Multi-Site Church Roadtrip*, 129-45.

[79]Silva, *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology and Exegesis*, 2:140.

[80]Hammett, "What Makes a Multisite Church One Church?," 99-100.

intention for the spiritual gifts distributed according to his will (1 Cor 12:11) to be exercised when "the whole church comes together" (1 Cor 14:23).

The plural usage of *ekklesia* in the New Testament also speaks to the relational proximity of the church. Of the 114 uses of *ekklesia* in the New Testament, 35 of these uses are plural. When the authors of the New Testament speak of churches in areas beyond a city, they use *ekklesia* in the plural to indicate that multiple churches are in view rather than one church in multiple locations. This plural usage of *ekklesia* is due to the impossibility of church members having relational proximity when their churches gather in areas beyond cities.[81] In the New Testament, believers who are unable to experience the relational proximity that accompanies gathering together in one place for worship are not members of one church that gathers in multiple locations. They are members of multiple churches.

Prior to concluding the argumentation for the necessity of assembling, it must be noted that some multisite churches do attempt to periodically gather the totality of their membership and campuses in one location. Multisite churches who gather the whole church together represent a healthier expression of the MCM. Two multisite proponents advocate a geographical proximity that will enable a relational proximity. Frye encourages multisite churches to attempt gathering together as an entire church body periodically.[82] Similarly, House and Allison define a multichurch as a church meeting in multiple locations "bounded by an identifiable population that shares proximity and accessibility" within a particular city.[83] House and Allison's position represents a healthier view of multisite because it reveals an understanding of the need for relational proximity within the church and allows for whole church gatherings that can facilitate an

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[81]Hammett, "What Makes a Multisite Church One Church?," 105.

[82]Frye, *The Multi-Site Church Phenomenon in North America*, 229.

[83]Brad House and Gregg Allison, *MultiChurch: Exploring the Future of Multisite* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2017), 16.

increased level of relational proximity among campuses.

However, multisite churches that assemble occasionally still face difficulties when it comes to relational proximity. Church members who only gather occasionally are unable to know one another well. Limited relationships lead to a limited ability for church members to care for one another well.[84] This difficulty is particularly pronounced when it comes to church membership and church discipline. When considering a candidate for church membership, existing church members are hard-pressed to assess the validity of the candidate's profession of faith when they do not know the candidate. When considering a case of church discipline, church members are hard-pressed to assess the case when they are unable to observe the lifestyle of the member under discipline. Multisite churches who gather the whole church occasionally must consider how to best deal with these difficulties. Such churches can experience relational proximity, but only in limited measure and only with much difficulty.

The Importance of Assembly in Baptist Tradition

The acceptance of the MCM is pervasive in the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) today. Of the twenty-five largest churches in the SBC, all twenty-five are multisite churches. Likewise, thirty-nine of the fifty largest churches in the SBC are multisite churches and sixty-seven of the one hundred largest churches in the SBC are multisite churches.[85] In addition to these figures, many current and former SBC entity heads have been affiliated with multisite churches including R. Albert Mohler, Russell Moore, Kevin Ezell, and David Platt. Many SBC agencies also facilitate the development of multisite churches, including the North American Mission Board and many state conventions.[86] In

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[84]Leeman, *Don't Fire Your Church Members*, 119.

[85]Cross referencing the SBC 500 with the church websites of the top 100 churches reveals these figures. Thom S. Rainer, "SBC 500," accessed October 23, 2018, https://thomrainer.com/sbc500/.

[86]Willis, "Multi-Site Churches and Their Undergirding Ecclesiology," 212n30.

addition, J. D. Greear, the current president of the SBC, serves as the pastor of The Summit Church, a large SBC multisite church based in Raleigh, North Carolina.

The pervasive presence of the MCM within the SBC dates back to the early days of the movement. Frye dates the introduction of the multisite church strategy into the SBC in 1977 when Gambrell Street Baptist Church in Fort Worth, Texas began developing the key church strategy under the leadership of Joel Gregory.[87] The introduction of the key church strategy at Gambrell Street Baptist Church occurred during the same year that Randy Pope planted Perimeter Church in Atlanta, the multisite church primogenitor.[88] The SBC has been in on the MCM from the ground floor.

The pervasive presence of the MCM within the SBC would be shocking to previous generations of Baptists. B. H. Carroll served as the founding president of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary (SWBTS) in Texas in 1908. Five years prior to the founding of SWBTS, in 1903 Carroll wrote that "all Baptists deny" the "*provincial or statewide or national use* of the word church."[89] Carroll believed that *ekklesia* was never used in a collective sense, but always in reference to a particular church.[90] Ironically, Gambrell Street Baptist Church, the church that introduced the MCM into the SBC is directly across the street from SWBTS, which Carroll founded.

Carroll was not alone in his understanding of the church. As he noted, "all Baptists deny" the "*provincial or statewide or national use* of the word church."[91] In fact, the Baptist tradition has consistently affirmed the centrality of assembly in the meaning of *ekklesia*. Key quotes from influential Baptist confessions of faith and Baptist

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[87]Frye, *The Multi-Site Church Phenomenon in North America*, 54.

[88]Ibid., 94-95, 100.

[89]B. H. Carroll, *Ecclesia: The Church* (1903; repr., Paris, AR: Baptist Standard Bearer, 2006), 63.

[90]Ibid., 65.

[91]Ibid., 63.

theologians reveal this understanding. In 1677, the Second London Confession spoke of the authority of the church for exercising worship and discipline and selecting officers only when they are "thus gathered" or "a particular church gathered."[92] Similarly, early British Baptist Benjamin Keach defined a church as a group of believers that regularly meet together:

> A Church of Christ, according to the Gospel-Institution, is a Congregation of Godly Christians, who as a Stated-Assembly (being first baptized upon the Profession of Faith) do by mutual agreement and consent give themselves up to the Lord, and one to another, according to the Will of God; *and do ordinarily meet together in one Place*, for the Public Service and Worship of God; among whom the Word of God and Sacraments are duly administered, according to Christ's Institution.[93]

Later British Baptist John Gill, who was noted for his mastery of Greek and Hebrew, similarly wrote "the word *ekklesia*, always used for *church*, signifies an *assembly* called and met together."[94]

The Baptist tradition in America has also affirmed the centrality of assembly in the meaning of *ekklesia*. The centrality of assembly in the Baptist tradition in America is evident in the three major tributaries of early Baptist life in America, the Baptist associations at Philadelphia, Charleston, and Sandy Creek. Founded in 1707, the Philadelphia Baptist Association was the first Baptist association in America.[95] In the Philadelphia tradition, Benjamin Griffith taught that the practice of church discipline entailed the involvement of "every church member" and was to be undertaken when the church is "gathered together."[96] The combination of these phrases reveals Griffith's

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[92]William Latane Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith* (Chicago: Judson, 1969), 287.

[93]Benjamin Keach, "The Glory of a True Church and its Discipline Displayed," in *Polity: Biblical Arguments on How to Conduct Church Life*, ed. Mark Dever (Washington, DC: Center for Church Reform, 2000), 64-65. Italics added.

[94]John Gill, *A Body of Practical Divinity* (1770; repr., Paris, AR: Baptist Standard Bearer, 2000), 2:853.

[95]Leon McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage* (Nashville: Broadman, 1987), 239.

[96]Benjamin Griffith, "A Short Treatise Concerning a True and Orderly Gospel Church," in *Polity: Biblical Arguments on How to Conduct Church Life*, ed. Mark Dever (Washington, DC: Center for Church Reform, 2000), 105, 107.

understanding that the entire church was to gather together in one place. Griffith's work was commissioned by the Philadelphia Baptist Association in 1742 and adopted by the association in 1743, indicating that the entire association understood the centrality of the assembly of the church.[97] The centrality of the assembly of the church in the understanding of the Philadelphia Baptist Association is also evident in their 1742 affirmation of a slightly modified version of the Second London Confession which also spoke to the centrality of the assembly of the church. This confession came to be known as the Philadelphia Confession.[98]

The Charleston Baptist Association held a similar view of the centrality of the assembly of the church. Founded by Oliver Hart in 1751, the Charleston association is the oldest Baptist association in the South.[99] Hart's presence indicates similar views concerning the centrality of the assembly of the church among the Philadelphia and Charleston associations. Hart previously ministered in Philadelphia and was one of the signatories when the Philadelphia association adopted Griffith's treatise which spoke to the centrality of assembly of the church.[100] The Charleston association also adopted the Philadelphia Confession in 1767 which affirms the centrality of the assembly of the church, as noted above.[101] The Charleston Baptist Association also explicitly stated their conviction concerning the centrality of the assembly of the church. In 1773, the

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[97]James Leo Garrett, *Baptist Church Discipline: A Historical Introduction to the Practices of Baptist Churches, with Particular Attention to the Summary of Church Discipline Adopted in 1773 by the Charleston Baptist Association* (Nashville: Broadman, 1962), 16-17.

[98]As the Philadelphia Baptist Association adopted the Second London Confession they added two articles, one on the singing of songs and one on the laying on of hands. These additions are reprints of Keach's Confession penned by Benjamin Keach in 1697. Benjamin's son Elias Keach was the founder of the Philadelphia Baptist Association. Ibid., 16. Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, 349.

[99]McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage*, 219.

[100]A. D. Gillette, ed. *Minutes of the Philadelphia Baptist Association, 1707 to 1807: Being the First One Hundred Years of Its Existence* (Atlas, MI: Baptist Book Trust, 1851), 63.

[101]As the Charleston association adopted the Philadelphia Confession, they omitted the article on the laying on of hands. Garrett, *Baptist Church Discipline*, 16-17.

Charleston association adopted *A Summary of Church Discipline* that defined the church as follows:

> A particular gospel church consists of a company of saints, incorporated by a special covenant into one distinct body and *meeting together in one place* for the enjoyment of fellowship with each other and with Christ their Head in all his institutions to their mutual edification and the glory of God through the Spirit.[102]

The Sandy Creek tradition also affirmed the centrality of the assembly of the church, though in a less pronounced way. Though founded in 1758, the Sandy Creek Baptist Association did not accept a confession of faith until 1816 and even then the confession was limited to a one page document for fear that it might be considered a formal creed.[103] Although the statement was concise, the centrality of the assembly of the church was significant enough for inclusion in this concise statement. Composed in 1816, the Principles of Faith of the Sandy Creek Association define a church in part as "a congregation of faithful persons."[104] In the Sandy Creek tradition, the church is by definition "a congregation" or an assembly of the people of God.

In addition to these three major tributaries of early Baptist life in America, early Southern Baptists also affirmed the centrality of assembly in the meaning of *ekklesia*. Upon its formation in 1845, the SBC elected W. B. Johnson as its first president. Speaking on the use of *ekklesia* in Acts, in 1846 Johnson wrote:

> The nine quotations relate to the church in Jerusalem, and very satisfactorily shew, that the term indicates one church, one body of the Lord's people, *meeting together in one place*, and not several congregations, forming one church. For *all the members in Jerusalem were together in their public meeting, and met in one place* for their exercises.[105]

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[102]The Baptist Association in Charleston, South Carolina, "A Summary of Church Discipline Shewing the Qualifications and Duties, of the Officers and Members, of a Gospel Church," in *Baptist Church Discipline: A Historical Introduction to the Practices of Baptist Churches, with Particular Attention to the Summary of Church Discipline Adopted in 1773 by the Charleston Baptist Association*, by James Leo Garrett (Nashville: Broadman, 1962), 34-35. Italics added.

[103]McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage*, 232-34.

[104]Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, 358.

[105]W. B. Johnson, "The Gospel Developed Through the Government and Order of the Churches of Jesus Christ," in *Polity: Biblical Arguments on How to Conduct Church Life*, ed. Mark Dever

Johnson's language shows his understanding of the centrality of assembly in the meaning of *ekklesia*. In addition, Johnson explicitly spoke against the concept of one church existing in multiple congregations.

While pastoring the Second Baptist Church of Richmond, Virginia, J. L. Reynolds spoke of the usage of *ekklesia* in similar terms in 1849. He wrote, "The word church (in the original Greek of the New Testament, *ekklesia*), means a congregation, or assembly."[106] When distinguishing Baptist polity from other forms of church polity, Reynolds specified that Baptist polity "is distinguished from Episcopacy and Presbyterianism, by the principle that the only organized church is a particular church, a society of believers, who statedly meet in one place, for the transaction of its business."[107] Conversely, when arguing that the church is "a single local society," Reynolds spoke against the concept of a church with multiple congregations. Reynolds wrote that this is evident,

> From the meaning and use of the term. We read in the New Testament of "the Church" in a particular city, village, and even house, and of "the Churches" of certain regions; but *never of a Church involving a plurality of congregations*. A bishoprick [*sic*] was but a single congregation. There is no trace of any other kind of Church, presbyterian, diocesan, or national.[108]

John Leadley Dagg was one of the most well-known and highly regarded theologians within the SBC during the early days of the convention. Dagg served as a professor of theology and later as President of Mercer University in Georgia. Tom Nettles described Dagg as "one of the most respected men in Baptist life" who "remains one of the most profound thinkers produced by his denomination."[109] Dagg was so well-

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(Washington, DC: Center for Church Reform, 2000), 171. Italics added.

[106]J. L. Reynolds, "Church Polity or the Kingdom of Christ in its Internal and External Development," in *Polity: Biblical Arguments on How to Conduct Church Life*, ed. Mark Dever (Washington, DC: Center for Church Reform, 2000), 311.

[107]Ibid., 396.

[108]Ibid., 321. Italics added.

[109]Tom Nettles, preface to the new ed. of *Manual of Theology*, *Manual of Theology, Second*

respected that the SBC endorsed his theology by commissioning him to draft a children's catechism in 1879.[110] Concerning *ekklesia*, Dagg wrote in 1858 that "whenever the word *ekklesia* is used, we are sure of an assembly; and the term is not applicable to bodies or societies of men that do not literally assemble."[111]

P. H. Mell served as a Baptist pastor in Georgia, Chancellor of the University of Georgia, and President of the SBC. In 1860, Mell wrote on the meaning of *ekklesia*: "The word 'church' is used again in the New Testament to designate a local society . . . who *are able to meet together in one place*."[112] Mell also argued that the Baptist denomination is not rightly referred to as a church.[113] He contended that "The Baptist (and we think the scriptural) local organization is called a church, because it constitutes *an assembly capable of meeting together in one place*."[114] For Mell, a church is a church because it is possible for all members to gather in one place. While all members might not be present, the church is "capable" of assembling in one place. Accordingly, Southern Baptists are not members of one national Southern Baptist Church. Rather, Southern Baptist churches compose the Southern Baptist *Convention* of churches. Mell's argumentation alerts Southern Baptists to the traditional Baptist understanding that a church must be capable of assembling in one place in order to be a church. Therefore, a group of believers incapable of assembling is not a church. The very name of the SBC points to this tradition.

Part: A Treatise on Church Order, by J. L. Dagg (Harrisonburg, VA: Gano, 2012).

[110]Ibid.

[111]J. L. Dagg, *Manual of Theology, Second Part: A Treatise on Church Order* (1858; repr., Harrisonburg, VA: Gano, 2012), 77.

[112]P. H. Mell, "Corrective Church Discipline," in *Polity: Biblical Arguments on How to Conduct Church Life*, ed. Mark Dever (Washington, DC: Center for Church Reform, 2000), 443. Italics added.

[113]Ibid., 441-42.

[114]Ibid., 442. Italics added.

Conclusion

The chapter has argued that the centrality of assembly in the meaning of *ekklesia* indicates that the concept of a multisite church is a less than ideal representation of the meaning of *ekklesia*. The usage of *ekklesia* in the LXX and in the New Testament always refers to an assembly. Theologically, the usage of *ekklesia* emphasizes the significance of the assembly of God's people for worship. The centrality of assembly was evident in the Old Testament in the assembly of Israel and in the New Testament in the assembly of the church. In addition, the Baptist tradition has understood the meaning of *ekklesia* to necessitate the assembly of the church in one location. The biblical record and the Baptist tradition affirm the necessity of the assembly of the church on the basis of the meaning of *ekklesia*.

The multisite church model does not fit well within the parameters of denominations who affirm the necessity of the assembly of the church.[115] The Baptist tradition affirms the necessity of the assembly of the church. Most multisite churches never intend to gather the totality of their membership and campuses in one location.[116] Therefore, most expressions of the multisite church model exhibit inconsistencies with the Baptist tradition. For convictional Baptists who ground their ecclesiology in the New Testament, this means the multisite church model also exhibits inconsistencies with New Testament ecclesiology.

In the late 1800s, Baptists began to deemphasize matters of ecclesiology in lieu of church efficiency and pragmatism.[117] Interest in ecclesiology further plummeted in the early 1900s. In the past few decades, Baptists with little interest in and little awareness of

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[115]Conversely, Leeman also notes that the multisite church model is compatible with denominations who do not affirm the necessity of the assembly of the church. Leeman, *Don't Fire Your Church Members*, 8.

[116]Gaines, *One Church in One Location*, 124. White and Yeats, *Franchising McChurch*, 202.

[117]Gregory A. Wills, *Democratic Religion: Freedom, Authority, and Church Discipline in the Baptist South, 1785-1900* (New York: Oxford University, 1997), 131-34.

biblical ecclesiology have been unable to identify the ecclesiological issues with the MCM as it has emerged.[118] Thoughtful Baptists should begin to take note of the ecclesiological issues of the MCM. Most expressions of the multisite church model demonstrate inconsistencies with the Baptist tradition. More significantly, most expressions of the multisite church model also demonstrate inconsistencies with New Testament ecclesiology.

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[118]Gaines, "Exegetical Critique of Multi-Site," 35.

CHAPTER 4

CONGREGATIONALISM:
ASSEMBLING FOR GOVERNANCE

Chapter 3 argued that the meaning and usage of *ekklesia* in the Septuagint

(LXX) and in the New Testament reveal the necessity of the assembly of the church in

order for a church to be one church. Based on the biblical meaning and usage of *ekklesia*,

the Baptist tradition has also affirmed the necessity of the assembly of the church in order

for a church to be one church. As noted in chapter 3, this argument has been the central

critique of the multisite church movement (MCM) since the early days of the movement.

Chapters 4 through 6 build upon the foundation of chapter 3 by addressing

three particular ecclesiological functions that the New Testament stipulates when the

church is assembled. While critics of the MCM have often critiqued the movement for

the typical failure of multisite churches to assemble the totality of their membership and

campuses in one location, the ecclesiological functions that must occur in the context of

the assembled church have not received sufficient consideration in the multisite literature.

Chapters 4 through 6 make a significant contribution to multisite literature by arguing

that the ecclesiological functions of church governance, church discipline, and the

observance of the Lord's Supper necessitate a gathering that is intended to be an

assembly of the whole church.

The current chapter argues that the New Testament teaches congregational

church governance, which demonstrates the necessity of the assembly of the church for

governance. In order to practice congregational church governance, the church must

assemble. For multisite churches to practice congregational church governance, they must

assemble the totality of their campuses and membership in one location. Grant Gaines

and Patrick Willis, in their dissertations on the MCM, both called for a full-length dissertation on the doctrine of congregationalism and its implications for the MCM.[1] Their call for a full-length work on congregationalism has been answered in part by Jonathan Leeman with his 2016 publication *Don't Fire Your Church Members: The Case for Congregationalism*.[2] However, while Leeman addresses the MCM, he does not deal with the movement in detail in his volume. This chapter, though not a full-length treatment on congregationalism, contributes to the discussion on the implications of congregationalism for the MCM.

Following a brief analysis of competing models of church polity, the current chapter argues that a careful evaluation of the New Testament teaching on church polity reveals that congregationalism is the form of church government most consistent with the church polity revealed in the New Testament. The case for congregational church governance presented in this chapter is built based on textual and theological support. Congregationalism necessitates the assembly of the church for governance. Most multisite churches never assemble the totality of their membership and campuses in one location.[3] Therefore, the polity of most multisite church models is incompatible with New Testament church polity.

This chapter further argues that the church polity exhibited in the literature of the MCM is incompatible with the Baptist tradition. Baptists have historically affirmed congregationalism. In fact, affirming congregational church polity has historically been a

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[1]Darrell Grant Gaines, "One Church in One Location: Questioning the Biblical, Theological, and Historical Claims of the Multi-Site Church Movement" (PhD diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2012), 173. Patrick Graham Willis, "Multi-Site Churches and Their Undergirding Ecclesiology: Questioning Its Baptist Identity and Biblical Validity" (PhD diss., Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2014), 167, 215.

[2]Jonathan Leeman, *Don't Fire Your Church Members: The Case for Congregationalism* (Nashville: B & H Academic, 2016).

[3]Gaines, "One Church in One Location," 124. Thomas White and John M. Yeats, *Franchising McChurch: Feeding Our Obsession with Easy Christianity* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2009), 202.

central Baptist distinctive.[4] Since most multisite churches do not assemble the totality of their membership and campuses in one location for congregational church governance, most multisite churches are incompatible with the Baptist tradition. To strengthen this argument, the actual practices of multisite churches are compared with the New Testament teaching on congregationalism and with the Baptist tradition. This comparison confirms the incompatibility of the MCM with New Testament ecclesiology and with Baptist tradition. Prior to developing this argument, the importance of church polity is first established.

The Importance of Church Polity

The popular neglect of ecclesiology in general and church polity in particular referenced in the conclusion of chapter 3 is prevalent. The degradation of the significance of church polity is evident in scholarly circles. While theologians do not abandon church polity altogether, this doctrine is often discussed in an ambiguous manner. Millard Erickson is one such theologian. Erickson argues that the evidence from the New Testament on church polity is inconclusive and that even if there was a clear pattern of polity in the New Testament it would not necessarily be normative for today's church.[5] Erickson further claims that Paul's lists of qualifications for church officers are the only didactic material on church governance. However, the biblical argument for congregationalism advanced below reveals several didactic passages pertaining to church polity. Finally, Erickson states that the limited descriptions of church polity that are found in the New Testament do not exhibit a unitary pattern.[6] The problem with Erickson's view is that it assumes that different New Testament texts pertaining to church polity contradict

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[4]John S. Hammett, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches: A Contemporary Ecclesiology* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2005), 12, 136.

[5]Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1998), 1094-95.

[6]Ibid., 1094.

rather than complement one another. While many aspects of church polity are left to wisdom and prudence, the New Testament does present a coherent view of church polity.[7] Asserting otherwise asserts incoherency on the part of God.

Wayne Grudem also minimizes the significance of church polity. He does state that church polity is important and, unlike Erickson, he sees some clear patterns of church governance in the New Testament.[8] However, Grudem also states that ministers should "be willing to live and minister within any of several different Protestant systems of church government in which they may find themselves from time to time."[9] Christian fellowship can and should spread across denominational and polity lines. Nevertheless, conscientious ministers of the gospel should find it difficult to serve in a local church setting alongside others who hold conflicting views on church polity. Regardless of his affirmation on the importance of church polity, Grudem's statement reveals his actual position which minimizes the significance of church polity.

A third theologian with a passive approach to church polity is Leon Morris. Morris contends that the elements of all the major systems of church government are present in the New Testament. Those elements were later developed into the modern systems of church governance. Efforts to read any one system of church governance back into the New testament will result in the neglect of the other elements of church governance present in the New Testament documents. Morris concludes that although Christians may hold convictions concerning church government, they should not impose those convictions on others.[10] Morris' caution against reading the New Testament

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[7]Leeman, *Don't Fire Your Church Members*, 14.

[8]Wayne A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 905.

[9]Ibid., 904.

[10]Leon Morris, "Church Government," in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984), 241.

anachronistically is helpful. However, like Erickson, he believes there are conflicting

models of church government in the New Testament. In addition to the theological danger

of this position, this leads him to a laissez faire approach to arguments on church polity.

The minimization of the significance of church polity that is evident in

scholarly circles pervades the MCM. When seeking to establish biblical support for

multisite church polity, the primary tactic of multisite proponents is to assert a lack of

clarity in the New Testament teaching on church polity. For instance, Brian Frye argues

that no clear model of church governance emerges from the pages of the New

Testament.[11] For Frye, ecclesiology is "one of the most flexible doctrines in Scripture"

that was in a state of evolution in the New Testament.[12] Gregg Allison and Brad House

likewise argue that "Scripture provides few details on how the church should be

governed."[13] Similarly, Thomas Bartlett writes of church polity in terms of liberty:

> The decisions for a ministry, as with life in general, obviously should not violate any
> known directives from the Scriptures, but they should also flow out of this liberty to
> choose as directed by God. That liberty, however, is not a license to govern in a
> vacuum or beyond what the Scriptures clearly state.[14]

Bartlett is correct to affirm the existence of Christian liberty. However, Bartlett fails to

define the boundaries of New Testament ecclesiology from the New Testament.

Accordingly, the ecclesiological liberty Bartlett espouses is an unbounded liberty. Scott

Reavley has also written on the MCM. Reavley argues that ecclesiology should be

grounded on the Scripture. However, when he later discusses church polity, Reavley says

that the Scripture offers only "some insight."[15] When churches become convinced that

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[11]Brian Nathaniel Frye, "The Multi-Site Church Phenomenon in North America: 1950-2010"
(PhD diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2011), 13-14.

[12]Ibid., 22, 183.

[13]Brad House and Gregg Allison, *MultiChurch: Exploring the Future of Multisite* (Grand
Rapids: Zondervan, 2017), 143.

[14]Thomas Frank Bartlett, "Multisite Church Planting in a Rural Community" (DMin project,
Temple Baptist Seminary, 2012), 48.

[15]R. Scott Reavley, "An Ecclesiology for Multisite Churches: Thinking Biblically about the

Scripture offers little insight concerning church polity, church polity quickly becomes a matter of indifference.

Multisite proponents also assert a lack of clarity in the New Testament teaching on church polity when describing the multisite structures of particular multisite churches. When speaking of the relationship between campus pastors and the central elders in forthcoming organizational changes, Josh Patterson describes the now current structure of The Village Church in this way: "the campuses and campus pastors would have an increased leadership responsibility, while maintaining a strong connection to the central elders of The Village Church. The New Testament gives ample latitude for structure." Patterson grounds the acceptability of the revamped multisite structure of The Village Church in the "ample latitude" of the New Testament in relation to church governance.[16] In another work on the role of the campus pastor, Chris Kouba of Prestonwood Baptist Church argues that "the Bible gives very general instructions on how a church should operate and leaves plenty of room for various styles and methods which still fall within biblical boundaries."[17] Charles Carter describes the multisite polity of the First Baptist Church (FBC) of Windermere, Florida in his doctoral work. Carter rightly affirms that the Scripture is the sole authority in determining the function of the local church.[18] However, Carter also states that the Bible has little to say on church polity. Carter writes,

> The Bible is clear on the establishment of the church and its mission, but it is not clear on the structure of the church . . . . It is safe to say that the evidence from the New Testament is inconclusive and that each church adopted a pattern that is in

Local Church in Multiple Locations" (DMin project, Western Seminary, 2007), 79, 99.

[16]The Village Church is an SBC multisite church based in Flower Mound, Texas. Joshua Rice Patterson, "Leveraging the Multi-Site Church Approach as a Long-Term Church Planting Strategy at the Village Church in Dallas-Fort Worth" (DMin project, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2014), 95.

[17]Christopher Barton Kouba, "Role of the Campus Pastor: Responsibilities and Practices in Multisite Churches" (DMin project, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2014), 11.

[18]Charles Timothy Carter, "An Analysis of the Multi-Campus Approach of Local Church Ministry Utilizing First Baptist Church of Windermere, Florida, as a Paradigmatic Model" (DMin project, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2005), 31.

harmony with biblical teaching, yet structured to best reflect the culture of the church and her leadership.[19]

For Carter, the Scripture is clear on the mission of the church, but silent on the specific structures and methods by which the church is to accomplish that mission.[20] Rather than clear teaching from Scripture, Carter asserts that FBC Windermere arrived at their multisite strategy through the leadership of the Holy Spirit.[21] The problem with Carter's position is that it liberates ecclesiology from its New Testament moorings. A further problem with Carter's position is that it subjectifies ecclesiology by hinging it to each church's perception of the leadership of the Holy Spirit. When churches become convinced that the New Testament has little to say on church polity, they stop looking to Scripture for guidance. When Scripture is minimized, pragmatism reigns.

The New Testament is clearer on matters of church polity than the theologians and multisite proponents discussed above lead readers to believe. Admittedly, the New Testament reveals no detailed blueprint of church government. Yet the lack of an exhaustive church government manual does not mean that the Scripture is silent on the details of church government.[22] As discussed later in this chapter when a case for congregationalism is built, the New Testament has much to say on church government. It is expedient for those who hold to a high view of Scripture to discover and to obey the New Testament teaching on church government.

Baptists have long understood that although the New Testament is not an exhaustive manual of church government, the New Testament does speak significantly to church polity. Holding these realities in tension, Baptists have historically argued for the importance of church polity, but not as a matter of first importance. Nineteenth century

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[19]Carter, "An Analysis of the Multi-Campus Approach," 20.

[20]Ibid., 28.

[21]Ibid., 21, 31.

[22]Mark Dever, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*, exp. ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2004), 221.

Baptist theologian J. L. Dagg understood that church polity is "less important than a new heart."[23] Nevertheless, because the Bible speaks to church polity, believers are compelled to obey. Dagg wrote, "But we know, from the holy Scriptures, that Christ gave commands on these subjects, and we cannot refuse to obey. Love prompts our obedience; and love prompts also the search which may be necessary to ascertain his will."[24] Similarly, William Williams, a Professor of Ecclesiastical History at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary (SBTS) and contemporary of Dagg wrote, "Whilst the importance of the form of church government should not, indeed, be unduly magnified, on one hand by being placed among things *essential*, yet, on the other, it ought not to be unduly underestimated by being placed among things *indifferent*."[25] Williams' distinction is critical. Although proper belief concerning church polity is not essential for salvation, it is not a matter of indifference for, as Dagg argues, Christ has given commands concerning church polity and his lordship compels his people to obedience. Church governance lies in an often-neglected category between essential and unimportant. A proper understanding of church government is not essential, but it is important.

Furthermore, that the New Testament is not an exhaustive manual of church polity does not mean that all modern forms of church government are equally supported by the New Testament teaching. Major forms of church government are considered in the next section. After considering episcopal and presbyterian forms of church government, the following section refutes these views and build a case for congregationalism. The section after that highlights the centrality of congregationalism in the Baptist tradition. As matter of conviction, Baptists have exhibited a thorough interest in matters of church

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[23]J. L. Dagg, *Manual of Theology, Second Part: A Treatise on Church Order* (1858; repr., Harrisonburg, VA: Gano, 2012), 12.

[24]Ibid.

[25]William Williams, "Apostolic Church Polity," in *Polity: Biblical Arguments on How to Conduct Church Life*, ed. Mark E. Dever (Washington, DC: Center for Church Reform, 2000), 544.

polity and have consistently affirmed congregational church governance for several

reasons which are considered below.[26] Based on this conviction, Baptists have

historically understood congregational governance as normative for Baptist churches and

as a key distinctive in the Baptist theological identity.[27] Church polity matters because

Christ has spoken on the subject. For Baptists, obedience to Christ's commands

concerning church polity is a vital component of Baptist identity.

Forms of Church Government

A variety of forms of church government find support among evangelical

scholarship. Among them the three major forms of church government are episcopal

governance, presbyterian governance, and congregational governance. An argument in

favor of congregational church governance is developed in the following section. The

current section presents the alternative views of episcopal church governance and

presbyterian church governance.

The Episcopal View

The basic distinctive element of episcopal church governance is that there are

some things only a bishop can do.[28] Proponents of this position build their case on the

Bible and church history.[29] However, many arguments for episcopal governance are

heavily dependent on the historical data rather than the biblical data. The episcopal model

is built on a threefold ministry structure comprised of bishops, elders (or pastors), and

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[26]Hammett, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches*, 135-38.

[27]R. Stanton Norman, *The Baptist Way: Distinctives of a Baptist Church* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2005), 93.

[28]Leon Morris, "Church, Nature and Government of (Episcopalian View)," in *The Encyclopedia of Christianity*, ed. Edwin Hartshorn Palmer (Wilmington, DE: National Foundation for Christian Education, 1964), 2:483.

[29]Peter Toon, "Episcopalianism," in *Who Runs the Church? 4 Views on Church Government*, ed. Paul E. Engle and Steven B. Cowan (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 24.

deacons. The threefold ministry is distinguished from the other forms of church governance by the elevation of the office of bishop over the office of elder. The elevation of the office of bishop results in a hierarchical system that is very developed in some denominations and only minimally developed in other denominations.

One difficulty in advocating for the episcopal view is the interchangeable usage of the terms "bishop" (Gr. *episcopos*) and "elder" (Gr. *presbuteros*) in the New Testament (Acts 20:17, 28; Titus 1:5, 7). Anglican theologian Peter Toon addresses this difficulty by noting that the first-century churches who received Paul's letter to Titus understood the letter as authoritative. That is, they understood that Paul's authority exceeded that of their local bishops and elders. Even if the terms *episcopos* and *presbuteros* are interchangeable in Titus 1, the letter itself indicates an implicit hierarchy.[30] More convincingly, Roman Catholic theologian Hans Küng noted the distinct grammar used in Titus 1. In this text "elders" is plural (Gr. *presbuterous*) while "bishop" is singular (Gr. *episcopon*), indicating the possibility of many elders but only one elevated bishop.[31] Küng's argument is further strengthened by the late date of Paul's letter to Titus on the island of Crete. The ministry in Crete was likely during the last period of Paul's mission.[32]

Another argument in support of the episcopal view is the prominence of James at the Jerusalem Council. James stands out from the other elders and appears to speak to the council authoritatively (Acts 15:19).[33] When James spoke to the council, his advice was taken (Acts 15:22). However, this argument fails to note the involvement of the entire church in the decision-making process (Acts 15:3-4, 22).

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[30]Toon, "Episcopalianism," 27-28.

[31]Hans Küng, *The Church* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1968), 408.

[32]Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Paul the Missionary: Realities, Strategies and Methods* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), 121.

[33]Joseph Barber Lightfoot, *The Christian Ministry* (New York: Macmillan and Co, 1901), 25.

The historical argument is critical to the episcopal view. While the precise origins of the episcopal system are unknown, supporters of the episcopal view argue that the first clear record of church history reveals the early development of the threefold office structure of bishops, elders, and deacons. The threefold model is seen in the writings of the early church father Ignatius in the beginning of the second century. In describing church order, Ignatius spoke of "one Bishop, along with the presbytery and deacons, my fellow servants."[34] Irenaeus' writings further developed the threefold model as the second century went on.[35] However, it is not until the middle of the third century, in the writings of the North African bishop Cyprian, that the threefold ministry was clearly developed into a more detailed hierarchy. Under Cyprian's leadership, this development was very influential.[36] For Cyprian, the office of bishop was essential for church unity.[37] Accordingly, "Whence you ought to know that the Bishop is in the Church, and the Church is in the Bishop; and if anyone be not with the bishop, that he is not in the Church."[38] In light of Jesus' command to guide his disciples through the ministry of the Holy Spirit, supporters of the episcopal view interpret the historical development of the episcopacy as providentially guided.[39] The merits of this historical argumentation are evaluated below when the wider history of congregationalism is considered alongside of the presence of congregationalism within the Baptist tradition.

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[34]Ignatius, "The Epistle of Ignatius to the Philippians," in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325,* ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 1950), 1:81.

[35]Morris, "Church, Nature and Government of (Episcopalian View)," 2:484.

[36]Lightfoot, *The Christian Ministry*, 91-96. Everett Ferguson, "The 'Congregationalism' of the Early Church," in *The Free Church and the Early Church: Bridging the Historical and Theological Divide*, ed. Daniel H. Williams (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 2002), 131.

[37]Cyprian, "The Epistles of Cyprian," in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325*, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 1950), 5:333.

[38]Ibid., 5:374-75.

[39]Morris, "Church, Nature and Government of (Episcopalian View)," 2:485

The Presbyterian View

The historical development of presbyterian church governance stems from the Reformed tradition following John Calvin. The full development of the presbyterian system of church governance did not come until the Reformation on the British Isles, most notably in the formation of the Church of Scotland under the leadership of John Knox in 1560 and the subsequent publication of their *Book of Discipline*. Knox was a product of Calvin's Geneva.[40]

Presbyterianism stands as a middle ground between episcopalianism and congregationalism in terms of facilitating unity and authority in the church. In the presbyterian view, authority is jointly held by the presbytery and the local church. Power balanced between these two groups allows for a polycentric denominational community without stripping the congregation of her authority.[41] This is a system of shared authority that enables unity. In presbyterian church governance, the congregation selects elders. Calvin held that church elders were to be elected "by show of hands" and "by the consent and approval of the people."[42] The elected elders then govern the church. Some of these elders also sit on presbyteries and general assemblies that govern multiple churches in a given area. Proponents of presbyterian church polity hold that the presbyteries and the general assemblies possess authority only because it is passed to them by the congregation.[43] The concept of shared authority given by the local church distances presbyterian governance from episcopal governance which affirms the strong hierarchical authority of the bishop.

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[40]L. Roy Taylor, "Presbyterianism," in *Who Runs the Church? 4 Views on Church Government*, ed. Paul E. Engle and Steven B. Cowan (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 95.

[41]Michael Scott Horton, *People and Place: A Covenant Ecclesiology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008), 219.

[42]John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (London: S. C. M., 1961), 4.3.15.

[43]Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953), 583-84.

Acts 15 is the primary text cited in support of presbyterian church governance. It is argued that the Jerusalem Council is a gathering of the presbytery of Jerusalem and the presbytery of Antioch.[44] The reference to "the whole church" in Acts 15:22 is understood as an indication that the decision of the representative authority was considered an act of the entire congregation.[45] The details of Acts 15 is considered below in the argumentation for congregational church governance.

Another key biblical text in presbyterian model of church governance is Acts 14:23. The text reads, "When they had appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed." This text is in reference to the missionary practice of Paul and Barnabas in Southern Galatia. Alexander Strauch in his classic work *Biblical Eldership* notes that this is the first reference to the appointment of elders. Accordingly, Strauch argues that this text should be understood as paradigmatic for the appointment of elders in other early churches.[46] Although he attends a congregationally governed church, Littleton Bible Chapel in Littleton, Colorado, Strauch's ecclesiology is consistent with presbyterian church polity at this point. Strauch concedes that *cheirotonesantes*, the Greek participle typically translated as "appointed" can refer to a popular election. However, he argues that the contextual clues indicate the appointment of the elders by Paul and Barnabas rather than their election by the congregation since the eldership was appointed "for them" and not by them.[47] Lexical works tend to agree with Straunch and his understanding of

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[44]Robert L. Reymond, "The Presbytery-Led Church," in *Perspectives on Church Government: Five Views of Church Polity* ed. Chad Brand and R. Stanton Norman (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2004), 98.

[45]Taylor, "Presbyterianism," 81.

[46]Alexander Strauch, *Biblical Eldership: An Urgent Call to Restore Biblical Church Leadership*, rev. and exp. ed. (Littleton, CO: Lewis and Roth, 1995), 133.

[47]Ibid., 136-38.

cheirotonesantes in Acts 14:23.[48] This is a very plausible argument which is further considered in the treatment on congregationalism that follows.

A final noteworthy distinctive of presbyterian church polity is the bifurcation of the eldership. Advocates of presbyterian church governance understand Paul's statement in 1 Timothy 5:17 as delineating a distinction between teaching elders and ruling elders.[49] Ruling elders are expected to teach in some capacity, but only insofar as it is their responsibility to expound the faith as a believer (1 Pet 3:15; Col 3:16, 4:5-6; Heb 5:12). This level of teaching is the responsibility of all believers, not a requirement for the office of elder. In this argument, Paul's qualification that an elder must be "able to teach" does not require the gift of teaching, only the ability to teach (1 Tim 3:2). Only the teaching elders who "labor in preaching and teaching" possess the spiritual gift of teaching (1 Tim 5:17).[50]

The Case for Congregationalism

Considering the importance of church polity and the conflicting modern systems of church governance, it is incumbent upon churchmen to formulate a convincing argument for the form of government most consistent with the New Testament. This section argues that congregationalism is most consistent with the biblical teaching on church polity. Textual and theological evidence combine to form a compelling case for congregationalism.

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[48]Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, ed. Frederick W. Danker and William Arndt, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2000), 1083. Eduard Lohse, "Cheirotoneo," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Friedrich, ed. and trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 9:437.

[49]Edmund P. Clowney, *The Church* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1995), 212.

[50]Strauch, *Biblical Eldership*, 209-10.

Textual Support for Congregationalism

Arguments for church government are arguments for church authority. Thus, questions of church government pertain to the locus of church authority. Proponents of episcopal church governance argue that the Lord has entrusted authority for governance to bishops. Proponents of presbyterian church governance argue that the Lord has entrusted authority for governance to the local church in addition to presbyteries and general assemblies. Proponents of congregational church governance argue that the Lord has entrusted authority for governance solely to the local congregation, as led by their elders. Each of these arguments pertain to earthly authority. Jesus Christ is the head of the church. Every system of church polity affirms the headship of Christ over the Church (Eph 1:20-22). Arguments for church government are efforts to ascertain the earthly group(s) to whom Christ has entrusted his authority. The biblical text reveals that Jesus has entrusted the governance of his church to the local congregation. At least three groups of biblical texts support this argument: texts pertaining to the keys of the kingdom, the selection of leaders, and the maintenance of doctrinal fidelity.

The first group of texts under consideration are texts pertaining to the keys of the kingdom. Jesus has entrusted the keys of the kingdom to the local congregation. In Matthew 16:19 Jesus pledges to Peter: "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; and whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven."[51] Peter's confession of faith in the

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[51]The New American Standard Bible (NASB) is selected for this citation due to its excellent translation of the future perfect passive participles in this verse (Gr. *dedemena* and *lelumena*) as "shall have been" rather than the simple "shall be" of most English translations, including the English Standard Version (ESV), though the ESV does contain a footnote noting the possibility of the "shall have been" translation. This translation clarifies the nature of Jesus' statement to Peter. Peter and the disciples do not bind or loose. Their earthly actions simply declare what God has already bound or loosed in heaven. Exegetically, the perfect tense is the most important of all Greek tenses. When the perfect tense is used, a deliberate purpose on the part of the writer is usually in view. The perfect tense describes a completed event that has present results. Daniel B. Wallace, *The Basics of New Testament Syntax: An Intermediate Greek Grammar* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 246. In affirming that the correct textual tradition does indeed contain future perfect passive participles, J. R. Mantey traces textual variants that developed among the Fathers from the original perfect tense to a simple future tense in order to establish a textual tradition for episcopal absolution. Mantey goes on to quote an array of classic Greek grammars, all of which affirm the perfect tense as a tense emphasizing a completed action. Accordingly, Matt 16:19 does not teach episcopal absolution, but rather that men living in accordance with the commands of Jesus will do what

context of this passage indicates that binding and losing pertains to maintaining proper doctrine (Matt 16:16). The language of binding and loosing resurfaces in Matthew 18 in reference to church discipline (Matt 18:15-18). The repetition of the binding and loosing terminology in the context of church discipline indicates that binding and loosing pertains not only to the identification of proper doctrine, but also to the identification of those who do and those who do not believe proper doctrine, as reflected in their life.[52] This identification forms the basis of church membership.

Matthew 16 and 18 must be read together. Jesus' words to Peter in Matthew 16:19, when isolated from the context of Matthew 18, can be interpreted as Jesus' entrusting extensive authority to Peter. If this reading is correct, then Jesus' teaching reflects episcopal church governance. The context of Matthew 18 argues against this reading, however. In Matthew 18:17, Jesus entrusts the final earthly authority for church discipline to the local church: "If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector." Jesus' statement here provides a congregational context for Matthew 18:18, the second reference to binding and loosing. The congregational context clarifies that the authoritative exercise of the keys of the kingdom is a congregational responsibility, not simply a Petrine responsibility.

Jesus has already determined to do. Mantey presses his argument further by citing an array of Greek grammars that apply the perfect tense to Matt 16:19 in this way. J. R. Mantey, "The Mistranslation of the Perfect Tense in John 20:23, Mt 16:19, and Mt 18:18," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 58, no. 3 (1939): 243-49. D. A. Carson notes that Matthew could have chosen to use future or present tense participles, but did not. Instead, he used the perfect tense. As a result, the verbs must be rendered "shall have been bound/loosed." D. A. Carson, *Matthew*, Expositor's Bible Commentary, vol. 8, ed. Tremper Longman and David E. Garland (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 372. R. T. France points out the unusual and awkward nature of Matthew's grammar in this verse. The use of the simple future passive would be a much more natural syntax, but Matthew intentionally used the perfect tense. Simple futures would indicate Petrine initiative in binding and loosing. The perfect tense verbs Matthew actually used indicate divine initiative. The binding and loosing done by Peter will simply "decide in accordance with God's already determined purpose." Thus, "shall have been bound . . . shall have been loosed" as in the NASB is the best translation of Matt 16:19. R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2007), 626-27.

[52]Leeman, *Don't Fire Your Church Members*, 77-78.

In addition to Matthew 18:17, the biblical teaching on exercising the keys of the kingdom through church discipline is consistently congregational throughout the New Testament. The phrase "keys of the kingdom" appears only in Matthew 16:19. However, as noted above, Jesus connects the exercise of the keys to church discipline by his references to binding and loosing in Matthew 16:19 and 18:18. Jesus' language indicates that the practice of church discipline is exercising the keys of the kingdom. Accordingly, it is appropriate to consider the New Testament teaching on church discipline when discussing texts pertaining to the keys of the kingdom. In 1 Corinthians 5:4, Paul instructs the Corinthians to exercise church discipline "when [they] are assembled" as a congregation. Later in the Corinthian correspondence, Paul speaks of the need to restore the fallen brother because of his repentance. He says that the "punishment by the majority" has sufficiently brought about repentance (2 Cor 2:6). The reference to a majority indicates that a church vote took place in the process of church discipline.[53] Congregational church discipline even extends to church leadership. Elders who sin are to be rebuked "in the presence of all" (1 Tim 5:20). The consistent witness of the New Testament is that the keys of the kingdom are exercised by the entire congregation through the practice of congregational church discipline.

The second set of New Testament texts which affirm the doctrine of congregationalism are texts that pertain to the selection of church leaders. In the Book of Acts, there is a consistent pattern of churches choosing their own leadership. In Acts 1:21-26, Matthias is set forth by the 120 believers gathered in the Upper Room (cf. Acts 1:15). Notice especially Acts 1:23 which states that "they put forward two." Similarly, in Acts 6:1-6, the church selects their first body of deacons. The apostles gather the entire church and instruct them to engage in this process (Acts 6:2-3). Luke specifically notes

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[53]Daniel L. Akin, "The Single-Elder-Led Church," in *Perspectives on Church Government*, ed. Chad Brand and R. Stanton Norman (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2004), 33.

that the apostolic suggestion "pleased the whole gathering" (Acts 6:5). In Acts 13:1-3, Paul and Barnabas are commissioned for missionary service by the church in Antioch. The setting of corporate worship indicates congregational involvement in this process (Acts 13:2-3).[54] Together, these texts indicate a consistent pattern in the Book of Acts of the congregational selection of leaders.[55] While these examples of leadership selection are not exhaustive, it must be noted that the Bible contains no examples of the unilateral appointment of church leadership.[56]

Two apparently problematic texts for congregationalists are Acts 14:23 and Titus 1:5. These texts seem to speak of the appointment rather than the election of leadership. However, a careful examination of these texts reveals no contradiction with congregationalism. *Cheirotonesantes*, the Greek participle translated as "appointed" in Acts 14:23 can also refer to an election[57] or a vote by show of hands.[58] The semantic range of *cheirotonesantes* reasonably allows for congregational involvement.[59] When combined with the contextual pattern of congregational leadership selection in the Book of Acts detailed above, this appears to be the contextual usage of *cheirotonesantes* in Acts 14:23. Moreover, the involvement of Paul and Barnabas in the leadership selection process does not preclude the involvement of the congregation.[60] The Greek verb *katasteses* lies behind the English rendering of "appoint" in Titus 1:5, rather than *cheirotonesantes*. *Katasteses* possesses a narrower semantic range that implies mere

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[54]Benjamin L. Merkle, *40 Questions about Elders and Deacons* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2008), 38-40.

[55]Leeman, *Don't Fire Your Church Members*, 109. Merkle, *40 Questions about Elders and Deacons*, 40.

[56]Leeman, *Don't Fire Your Church Members*, 109.

[57]Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, 1083.

[58]Lohse, "Cheirotoneo," 9:437.

[59]Merkle, *40 Questions about Elders and Deacons*, 40.

[60]Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 921. Williams, "Apostolic Church Polity," 537.

appointment rather than the involvement of the congregation in the appointment process.[61] However, the involvement of Titus in appointing elders, especially in light of the usage of *cheirotonesantes* in Acts 14:23 and the larger congregational pattern for selecting church leadership in Acts, does not preclude congregational involvement.[62]

The third set of New Testament texts which affirm congregationalism pertain to the maintenance of doctrinal fidelity. The congregational responsibility of maintaining sound doctrine has already emerged in the previous discussion on Matthew 16:16-19. Doctrinal fidelity is also on center stage at the Jerusalem Council. Essentially, the deliberative body gathered in Jerusalem discussed the requirements for salvation. Jewish legalism, which added to the biblical requirements for salvation, sparked the discussion (Acts 15:5). Peter (Acts 15:7) and James (Acts 15:19) both understood the basic gospel requirements of repentance and faith to be in view. Revealingly, the doctrinal deliberation at the Jerusalem Council is bracketed by references to the congregational involvement of the church in Jerusalem (Acts 15:4, 22).[63] Likewise, the decision was presented to the gathered congregation in Antioch (Acts 15:30). Doctrinal fidelity is the responsibility of the entire church. Similarly, in Galatians 1:6-9, Paul faults the Galatian congregations for falling victim to doctrinal error and charges them with the responsibility of guarding doctrinal integrity.[64] Maintaining doctrinal fidelity is a responsibility entrusted to the entire congregation.

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[61]Bauer provides three lexical entries, none of which imply congregational involvement: (1) "To take someone somewhere," (2) "To assign someone a position of authority," and (3) "Cause someone to experience something." Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, 492. Albrecht Oepke also offers three lexical meanings: (1) "To conduct," "to bring," "to lead to," (2) "To set in an elevated position, in an office," and (3) "To make someone something." Accordingly, congregationalism cannot be argued on the basis of the lexical meaning of *kathistemi*. Albrecht Oepke, "kathistemi," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Friedrich, ed. and trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 3:444-46.

[62]Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 921.

[63]Edward Thurston Hiscox, *The New Directory for Baptist Churches* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1894), 154.

[64]Mark Dever, *A Display of God's Glory: Basics of Church Structure Deacons, Elders,*

**Theological Support for
Congregationalism**

In addition to the direct textual support for congregationalism, much theological support is also evident in Scripture. Textual support and theological support are not to be contrasted, for theological support derives from textual support. Instead, theological support stems from New Testament doctrines which do not specifically speak to congregationalism, but which imply this model of church governance. Three noteworthy aspects of theological support for congregationalism are the headship of Christ, the covenantal trajectory of Scripture, and the priesthood of the believers.

First, the theological concept of the headship of Christ over the church is a significant qualifier for congregational church governance (Eph 1:20-22; Col 1:18). Opponents of congregational polity often misunderstand congregationalism as a pure democracy.[65] Rightly understood, congregationalism is a polity of democratic processes executed under the kingship of Christ and pastoral leadership.[66] The headship of Christ over his church has three important implications for congregational governance. First, as parts of the body of Christ, all church members are vitally connected to Jesus Christ, the head of the church. As a result, every member of the body of Christ is qualified to participate in the governance of the body under the authority of Christ's headship. Second, the church body must carry out the will of Jesus Christ because he is the head of the church. The congregation is free to govern itself only insofar as the will of the congregation is consistent with the will of Christ.[67] Third, the headship of Christ prohibits any earthy authority from functioning as the head of the church. No bishop, regardless of his heights in an ecclesiastical hierarchy, can usurp headship over the church for Christ

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Congregationalism & Membership (Washington, DC: Center for Church Reform, 2001), 37.

[65]Taylor, "Presbyterianism," 73.

[66]Leeman, *Don't Fire Your Church Members*, 11.

[67]Robert L. Saucy, *The Church in God's Program* (Chicago: Moody, 1972), 116-17.

has reserved this headship for himself.[68]

Second, the covenantal trajectory of Scripture also points toward congregational church government. In the beginning, God made Adam in his image and in this unique creation he is brought into a unique relationship with God (Gen 1:26-28). Genesis 2:8-17 pictures Adam functioning as a priest-king by exercising dominion over the Garden of Eden with direct access to God. However, Adam fails to properly exercise his priest-king role when he falls into sin. Others who enter into covenants with the Lord experience similar failures throughout the Old Testament from Noah to Abraham to Israel to David. Only in the coming of Christ is Adam's priest-king role properly fulfilled (1 Cor 15:22).[69] For all who are in Christ, the image of God in which Adam was made, which is still present in humanity though marred by sin (Gen 9:6; Jas 3:9), is in the process of renewal through daily discipleship (Eph 4:24; Col 3:10). While this process of renewal in discipleship is ongoing, a transaction is also made at conversion. Adam's office of priest-king fulfilled in Christ is transferred to his people at conversion when they are indwelt by the Holy Spirit and made to be a kingdom of priests (Rev 5:10). This transaction is a reality for every believer.[70] Since all believers assume the office of priest-king, all believers are qualified to participate in church governance. The covenantal trajectory of Scripture points to congregational governance in which every church member is engaged.[71]

Third, the covenantal office of priest-king held by believers also points to the priesthood of the believers. The primary textual support for this doctrine comes in 1 Peter 2:4-10 and Revelation 1:6 and 5:10. Each of these texts indicates the corporate nature of

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[68]Hammett, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches*, 149.

[69]Peter John Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 215-16.

[70]Leeman, *Don't Fire Your Church Members*, 52-53.

[71]Ibid., 58.

the priesthood of the believers. First Peter 2:4-10 is a complex passage which piles up five metaphors for the local church. In these metaphors, the church is pictured as a priesthood, a nation, a race, a people, and a house. It is critical to note that each of these metaphors references the corporate body of Christ. The context of these ecclesial metaphors indicates that the priesthood of the believers is to be understood in a congregational sense rather than an individual sense. That is, individuals are not to exercise the priesthood of the believer. Rather, congregations are to corporately exercise the priesthood of the believers.[72] Revelation 1:5 and 5:10 further emphasize the congregational nature of the priesthood of the believers. These texts are addressed to churches, not individuals.[73] In fact, the singular form "priest" never appears in the key texts concerning the priesthood of the believers, only the plural form "priests."[74] In terms of the function of the priesthood, Peter specifically notes spiritual sacrifices (1 Pet 2:5) and evangelism (1 Pet 2:9). In addition to these functions, Baptists have historically linked the doctrine of the priesthood of the believers with congregational church polity.[75] Since all Christians function corporately as a priesthood of believers, it is logical to conclude that all Christians should also corporately exercise the priesthood of the believers through the governance of their local congregations.[76]

In addition to linking the priesthood of the believers to congregational church governance, Baptists have also seen the practical benefits of this doctrine. Most notably, several Baptist thinkers have noted the benefit that exercising the priesthood of the

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[72]Malcolm B. Yarnell, "The Priesthood of the Believers," in *Restoring Integrity in Baptist Churches*, ed. Thomas White, Jason G. Duesing, and Malcolm B. Yarnell (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2008), 225-27.

[73]Ibid., 230.

[74]James Leo Garrett, *Systematic Theology: Biblical, Historical, and Evangelical* (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 1990), 2:609.

[75]Norman, *The Baptist Way*, 96.

[76]James Leo Garrett, "The Congregation-Led Church," in *Perspectives on Church Government*, ed. Chad Brand and R. Stanton Norman (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2004), 184-85.

believers through congregational church governance has on personal discipleship. J. L. Reynolds, a Baptist educator and pastor in the mid-1800s noted that the exercise of the priesthood of the believers through congregational church governance helps to increase the spiritual aptitude of church members. When church members understand the significance of participating in the government of Christ's body, they are compelled to know the Scripture better.[77] In the modern era, R. Stanton Norman specifically notes that discipleship is fueled by participation in the decision-making process, for the responsibility of spiritually governing the church reminds believers of their need to practice spiritual disciplines in order to experience spiritual development.[78] Even more recently, Jonathan Leeman argues that the process of spiritual development is accelerated when church leaders are faithful to train church members to exercise the priesthood of the believers by participating in congregational church governance.[79]

Congregationalism in the Baptist Tradition

Historical support for congregationalism is not determinative for affirming its validity. The Scripture is sufficiently binding to determine church polity. Accordingly, Dagg accurately noted that ecclesiastical history is only helpful insofar as it does not contradict Scripture.[80] This means that the biblical argument for congregationalism sufficiently makes the case for congregationalism. Nevertheless, the historical support for congregationalism adds another layer to the argumentation. Since this dissertation argues that the MCM is incompatible with New Testament ecclesiology and with the Baptist tradition, this section focuses on the place of congregationalism within the Baptist

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[77]J. L. Reynolds, "Church Polity of the Kingdom of Christ," in *Polity: Biblical Arguments on How to Conduct Church Life*, ed. Mark E. Dever (Washington, DC: Center for Church Reform, 2000), 397.

[78]Norman, *The Baptist Way*, 100.

[79]Jonathan Leeman, *Understanding the Congregation's Authority* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2016), 5-6.

[80]Dagg, *Manual of Theology*, 90.

tradition. The historic Baptist understanding of congregationalism directly applies to the comparison between Baptist church polity and multi-site church polity made in the next section of this chapter.

It should be noted that the history of congregationalism is not limited to the Baptist tradition. Chapter 2 traced the development of the ante-Nicene episcopacy and argued that the episcopacy was absent from the earliest Christian literature. Instead, early Christian documents point to the practice of congregational church government in early Christian churches. With a composition date at the end of the first century, the *Didache* represents the earliest known Christian writing outside of the New Testament.[81] This work instructed churches to "appoint, therefore, for yourselves, bishops and deacons worthy of the Lord."[82] Notice that the congregation is instructed to appoint their own leadership. Clement of Rome's First Epistle to the Corinthians, also known as *I Clement*, is another example of an early Christian writing that espouses congregational church governance. There is widespread scholastic agreement on a composition date for this letter between AD 95-97.[83] Thus, this letter also represents one of the earliest Christian writings outside of the New Testament documents. Clement spoke of congregational church governance when he spoke of the appointment of church leadership "with the consent of the whole Church."[84] Hippolytus' *Apostolic Tradition* is a third-century church

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[81]Francis Sullivan states that the majority of scholars affirm that the composition of the *Didache* occurred toward the end of the first century. Francis A. Sullivan, *From Apostles to Bishops: The Development of the Episcopacy in the Early Church* (New York: Newman, 2001), 81.Michael Holmes argues for a composition date for the *Didache* of AD 80. Michael W. Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 247. J. B. Lightfoot is broader in his dating of the *Didache*. He argues that the "rough limits" of composition are between AD 80-110. J. B. Lightfoot, *Saint Paul's Epistle to the Philippians: A Revised Text with Introduction, Notes, and Dissertations* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1913), 349-50.

[82]"The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles," in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325*, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 1950), 7:381.

[83]Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers*, 25. Heath Kahlbau, "Is Anything New under the Sun? A Comparative Evaluation of the ante-Nicene Patristic Episcopacy and Common Polity Models within the Contemporary Multi-Site Church Movement" (PhD diss., Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2014), 24.

[84]Clement of Rome, "The First Epistle of Clement to the Corinthians," in *The Ante-Nicene*

document that also placed the election of church leadership in the hands of the congregation. Hippolytus identified the appointment of bishops as a congregational task: "let the bishop be ordained being in all things without fault chosen by the people . . . when he has been proposed and found acceptable to all."[85] Conversely, the early documents cited here do not refer to governing authorities outside of the local church such as a presbytery or a bishop.

The prevalence of congregational church governance declined in correspondence with the rise of the ante-Nicene episcopacy in the second century, as traced in chapter 2. Nevertheless, the history of congregationalism can be traced throughout the history of the church. In the third century through the eighth century, the Novatians believed that only the pure in heart should be in the church and thus opposed the full reentry into the church of those who exhibited little penance after apostasy under persecution.[86] In the fourth through sixth centuries, the Donatists similarly believed that only those with a credible confession of faith and demonstrable holiness should be admitted into the church.[87] This conviction for a believing church membership is a core component of congregationalism.[88] Beginning in the twelfth century, Peter Waldo and the Waldensians were driven by a strong commitment to Scripture. This commitment led them to affirm the congregational selection and appointment of elders and deacons contrary to the church order of their day.[89] In the fourteenth century, John Wycliffe said

Fathers: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 1950), 1:17.

[85]Hippolytus, _The Treatise on the Apostolic Tradition of St. Hippolytus of Rome, Bishop and Martyr_, 2nd ed., ed. Gregory Dix and Henry Chadwick (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1968), 2-3.

[86]George Punchard, _History of Congregationalism from About A.D. 250 to 1616_ (Salem, MA: J. P. Jewett, 1841), 44-46.

[87]Ibid., 68.

[88]Ibid., 47.

[89]John Waddington, _Congregational History, 1200-1567_ (London: John Snow & Company,

that had it been within his power he would have "laid the axe" to episcopal church governance.[90] In 1658, English Separatist John Owen was the primary author of the Savoy Declaration which asserted congregational authority for church governance.[91]

The practice of congregational church government returned to prominence with the advent of Baptists. Baptist history is distinguishable by a longstanding commitment to congregational church polity. Historically, Baptists have been interested in matters of church polity because they believe the Bible speaks to matters of polity and because they understand congregational church governance to be a Baptist distinctive.[92] The Baptist distinctive of congregational church governance is evident across all branches of Baptist ecclesiology. Accordingly, Baptist confessions of faith and other key documents consistently affirm the doctrine of congregationalism.

The Anabaptist tradition understood congregational church government to be a mark of the true church that was rooted in the early history of the church.[93] More specifically, the 1527 Schleitheim Confession of the Anabaptists states that the pastor of the church is to be selected by the congregation.[94] The Anabaptists are distinct from Baptists. Baptists typically do not share the Anabaptist convictions pertaining to pacifism, isolationism, and communal sharing of goods. Nevertheless, many historians believe the Anabaptist movement helped pave the way for the development of the Baptist denomination.[95] For this reason, the Anabaptist affirmation of congregational church

1869), 39-40. Punchard, *History of Congregationalism*, 110.

[90]Punchard, *History of Congregationalism*, 168-69.

[91]Erik Routley, *The Story of Congregationalism* (London: Independent, 1961), 38-40.

[92]Hammett, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches*, 136.

[93]Franklin H. Littell, *The Anabaptist View of the Church: A Study in the Origins of Sectarian Protestantism* (Boston: Starr King, 1958), 86, 94.

[94]William Latane Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith* (Chicago: Judson, 1969), 27.

[95]Leon McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage* (Nashville: Broadman, 1987), 52-53.

governance is pertinent to establishing congregational church governance as a traditional Baptist distinctive since the origins of the Baptist movement.

The origin of the first Baptist church is traced to 1609 when English Separatists John Smyth and Thomas Helwys disbanded and then reconstituted their church on the basis of believers' baptism. The church was reconstituted in Amsterdam, where this group of English Separatists had fled under religious persecution.[96] The early Baptists who emerged from this group came to be classified as General Baptists due to their affirmation of the availability of a general atonement of Christ for all who voluntarily believe.[97] Also in 1609, John Smyth penned his Short Confession of Faith in XX Articles. Article thirteen, which pertains to church government, reads that "the final appeal is to the brethren or body of the church."[98] Smyth also signed A Short Confession in 1610 that affirmed the congregational election of church elders and deacons.[99] The first Baptist churches affirmed congregational church governance.

Possibly as early as 1633 but certainly by 1638, the Particular Baptists emerged as a second group of Baptist churches in England.[100] The Particular Baptists were distinguished from the General Baptists based upon their conviction of the particular atonement of Christ intended only for the elect.[101] The seven Particular Baptist churches around London came together in 1644 to compose The London Confession of Faith.[102] This confession is likely the most influential confession of faith in Baptist life.[103]

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[96]McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage*, 34-35.

[97]Ibid., 21.

[98]Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, 101.

[99]Ibid., 109.

[100]McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage*, 44.

[101]Ibid., 22.

[102]Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, 144-45.

[103]Ibid., 152.

Article thirty-six affirms congregational authority in the election of church officers.[104]

Similarly, Article forty-two argues for congregational authority in the admission and

dismissal of church members.[105] The Second London Confession of Faith in 1677 also

affirmed congregational authority and the election of elders and deacons by the

congregation.[106] In the late 1600s, Particular Baptist pastor Benjamin Keach likewise

affirmed the congregational election of elders and deacons.[107] The influence of Particular

Baptist churches in England spilled over into America in the eighteenth century. Elias

Keach, the son of Benjamin Keach, was the key figure in the establishment of the

Philadelphia Baptist Association, the first Baptist association in America, in 1707. In

1742, the Philadelphia association adopted a slight modification of the Second London

Confession that maintained the affirmation of congregationalism. This confession came

to be known as the Philadelphia Confession.[108] Another key document in the Particular

Baptist tradition is the *Charleston Summary of Church Discipline* published originally in

1774 by the Charleston Baptist Association. This work affirmed congregational authority

for the selection of leaders as well as church membership and church discipline.[109]

Particular Baptist churches affirmed congregational church governance.

In the nineteenth century, the Regular Baptists and the Separate Baptists

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[104]Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, 166.

[105]Ibid., 168.

[106]Ibid., 287.

[107]Benjamin Keach, "The Glory of a True Church, and its Discipline Displayed," in *Polity: Biblical Arguments on How to Conduct Church Life*, ed. Mark E. Dever (Washington, DC: Center for Church Reform, 2000), 65.

[108]James Leo Garrett, *Baptist Church Discipline: A Historical Introduction to the Practices of Baptist Churches, with Particular Attention to the Summary of Church Discipline Adopted in 1773 by the Charleston Baptist Association* (Nashville: Broadman, 1962), 16. Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, 349.

[109]The Baptist Association in Charleston, South Carolina, "A Summary of Church Discipline Shewing the Qualifications and Duties, of the Officers and Members, of a Gospel Church," in *Baptist Church Discipline: A Historical Introduction to the Practices of Baptist Churches, with Particular Attention to the Summary of Church Discipline Adopted in 1773 by the Charleston Association*, by James Leo Garrett (Nashville: Broadman, 1962), 38-41, 49.

emerged in America. The Regular Baptists followed the order and the ecclesiology of the Charleston association, including their views on congregationalism.[110] The Separate Baptists emerged from Sandy Creek Baptist Church in North Carolina.[111] The Sandy Creek Baptist Association developed from the efforts of Sandy Creek Baptist Church, which led nine churches to band together in 1758.[112] In 1816, the Sandy Creek association drafted their Principles of Faith, a brief confession of faith containing only ten articles, one of which affirms congregationalism. The Sandy Creek churches and the Separate Baptists affirm that Christ is the head of the church "and that the government thereof is with the body."[113] Thus, the Sandy Creek tradition and the Separate Baptists that flowed from the Sandy Creek tradition affirmed congregationalism to the extent that they devoted one of their mere ten articles, article seven, to affirming congregationalism.

Writing in 1858, the influential Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) theologian J. L. Dagg also emphasized the congregational governance of the local church. Dagg's prominent influence in the SBC is evidenced by the commission he received from the convention in 1879 to develop a children's catechism.[114] Dagg noted that the Scripture records no instance of a church under the supervision of another church or any other ecclesiastical body.[115] Accordingly, only the congregation of the church is entrusted by God with the responsibility of maintaining church discipline and church membership.[116]

The Baptist Convention of New Hampshire affirmed the New Hampshire

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[110]McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage*, 234.

[111]Morgan Edwards, *Materials towards a History of the Baptists* (1770; repr., Danielsville, GA: Heritage Papers, 1984), 2:92.

[112]McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage*, 232.

[113]Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, 358.

[114]Tom Nettles, preface to the new ed. of *Manual of Theology*, *Manual of Theology, Second Part: A Treatise on Church Order*, by J. L. Dagg (Harrisonburg, VA: Gano, 2012).

[115]Dagg, *Manual of Theology*, 83, 88.

[116]Ibid., 83.

Confession in 1833. Later in the century, this confession gained notoriety when it was widely disseminated across America through its reproduction in the church manuals of Edward Hiscox and J. M. Pendleton.[117] The affirmation of congregationalism is noticeably absent from the New Hampshire Confession. In 1925, the SBC adopted the Baptist Faith and Message (BF&M), a confession of faith based on the New Hampshire Confession. At its formation in 1845, the SBC was comprised of a synthesis of Regular Baptists and Separate Baptists, both of which affirmed congregationalism as noted above.[118] This conviction for congregationalism drove Southern Baptists to supplement the New Hampshire Confession with affirmations of congregational church governance when they developed the BF&M. The BF&M was originally drafted in 1925. The most recent edition of the BF&M that was adopted in 2000 affirms congregationalism in article six. In this article, a church is defined as "an autonomous local congregation of baptized believers." Article six further states that "each congregation operates under the Lordship of Christ through democratic processes."[119] Accordingly, the current confessional document of the SBC is consistent with the historic Baptist affirmation of congregational church governance.

Although the New Hampshire Confession does not reference congregationalism, the teaching of congregationalism was still prevalent in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Both Hiscox and Pendleton, who were instrumental in distributing the New Hampshire Confession nationally, affirmed congregationalism in their church manuals. Hiscox wrote that churches are "self-governing" and that church government "is administered by the body acting together, where no one possesses a preeminence, but all

[117]Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, 360-61. J. M. Pendleton, *Baptist Church Manual,* (1867; repr., Nashville: Broadman, 1966), 43-61. Edward T. Hiscox, *The New Directory for Baptist Churches* (1894; repr., Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1970), 538-63.

[118]McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage*, 234.

[119]Southern Baptist Convention, "The Baptist Faith and Message: The 2000 Baptist Faith & Message," June 14, 2000, http://www.sbc.net/bfm2000/bfm2000.asp.

enjoy an equality of rights; and in deciding matters of opinion, the majority bears rule."[120] In similar fashion, Pendleton stated that in church governance "the governmental power is in the hands of the people."[121] The prevalent influence of the church manuals of Hiscox and Pendleton indicates the widespread acceptance of congregationalism among Baptists in the late 1800s. Widespread advocacy for congregationalism continued into the early 1900s as evidenced in the writings of Baptist professors A. H. Strong, Edwin Dargan, and H. E. Dana.[122]

This survey of the Baptist tradition reveals that Baptists have historically affirmed congregational church polity. From the earliest days of the Baptist denomination, Baptists have affirmed congregationalism across the various branches of Baptist life. This affirmation remains in the current confessional document of the SBC, the BF&M. Congregational church polity is a key Baptist distinctive. Therefore, Baptists who veer from congregationalism veer from their Baptist identity.

Congregationalism and the Multisite Church Movement

The previous sections argued that congregational church governance is the system of church polity affirmed in the New Testament and in the Baptist tradition. This dissertation argues that the MCM is incompatible with New Testament ecclesiology and the Baptist tradition. In order to demonstrate the incompatibility of multisite church governance with New Testament ecclesiology and the Baptist tradition, this section presents the beliefs and practices of multisite churches pertaining to church governance as exhibited in multisite literature and multisite church practices. This presentation

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[120]Hiscox, *The New Directory for Baptist Churches*, 144.

[121]Pendleton, *Baptist Church Manual,* 101.

[122]Augustus Hopkins Strong, *Systematic Theology: A Compendium Designed for the Use of Theological Students* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson, 1907), 903. Edwin Charles Dargan, *Ecclesiology, A Study of the Churches* (Louisville: C. T. Dearing, 1905), 23. H. E. Dana and L. M. Sipes, *A Manual of Ecclesiology*, 2nd ed. (Kansas City, KS: Central Seminary, 1944), 36-37.

reveals that multisite church governance more closely resembles episcopal and presbyterian church governance than congregational church governance.

Church Governance in
Multisite Church Literature

The multisite literature offers minimal discussion on church polity. However, when the topic of church polity does arise, the multisite church literature indicates that congregational church governance is not prevalent among multisite churches. Scott Reavley wrote on the MCM from a Baptist background as the pastor of New Life Church, a multisite church formerly known as West Linn Baptist Church in Oregon.[123] Reavley acknowledges that congregationalism "will certainly not work as well in multiple locations as it does in one."[124] In the mainstream multisite literature, multisite proponents also speak disparagingly of congregationalism. For instance, speaking of missional unity, Mark Driscoll writes, "Sadly, even churches that give lip service to this truth are often in practice more committed to honoring their denominational traditions, glorious heritage, founding pastor, majority vote, or critics than to honoring Jesus by introducing people to him and helping others grow in him."[125] With this statement, Driscoll contrasts missional unity with congregational votes.

In addition to denigrating congregationalism, multisite literature also contains glimpses into the governance of multisite churches that most frequently resembles episcopal church governance. Multisite literature portrays the multisite lead pastor as a bishop-like figure. In *11 Innovations in the Local Church*, Elmer Towns, Ed Stetzer, and Warren Bird describe the role of the multisite lead pastor like this: "simply put, the lead pastor becomes a bishop overseeing a series of churches or campus pastors. For some,

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[123]Reavley, "An Ecclesiology for Multisite Churches," 2.

[124]Ibid., 137.

[125]Mark Driscoll and Gerry Breshears, *Vintage Church: Timeless Truths and Timely Methods* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009), 140.

that is not a problem."[126] More colloquially, in *The Multi-Site Church Revolution*, Surratt, Ligon, and Bird speak of the multisite lead pastor as "the big kahuna" who is essential for maintaining brand quality.[127] The multisite organization chart they present also places the lead pastor at the top and makes no reference to the congregation.[128] Bill Easum and Dave Travis advocate seven effective approaches to multisite, including the apostolic approach. In this multisite model, churches "begin to centralize authority into an apostolic leader so that the person can oversee the multiplication of new congregations."[129] Jimmy Scroggins serves as the lead pastor of Family Church, an SBC multisite church based in West Palm Beach, Florida. In an interview with Heath Kahlbau, Scroggins reveals that only he has the power to hire and fire staff at Family Church.[130] It is hard not to call this episcopal. For the purposes of this dissertation, it is significant to note that many of the multisite proponents cited above are Southern Baptists, including Elmer Towns, Ed Stetzer, Dave Travis, and Jimmy Scroggins. Although the BF&M, the confessional document of the SBC, espouses congregationalism, these Southern Baptist multisite practitioners do not practice congregationalism.

The description of the role of the campus pastor in multisite literature also reveals the episcopal tendencies of multisite church governance. The campus pastor is expected to have an unwavering loyalty to executing the vision of the lead pastor.[131] The

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[126]Elmer L. Towns, Ed Stetzer, and Warren Bird, *11 Innovations in the Local Church: How Today's Leaders Can Learn, Discern and Move into the Future* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 2007), 94.

[127]Geoff Surratt, Greg Ligon, and Warren Bird, *The Multi-Site Church Revolution: Being One Church in Many Locations* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 191.

[128]Ibid., 137.

[129]William M. Easum and Dave Travis, *Beyond the Box: Innovative Churches That Work* (Loveland, CO: Group, 2003), 86.

[130]Kahlbau, "Is Anything New under the Sun?," 250.

[131]Towns, Stetzer, and Bird, *11 Innovations in the Local Church*, 78. Surratt, Ligon, and Bird, *The Multi-Site Church Revolution*, 144. Warren Bird, "Leadership Network/Generis Multisite Church Scorecard: Faster Growth, More New Believers and Greater Lay Participation," accessed January 4, 2018, http://leadnet.org/down load/multisite-church-scorecard-faster-growth-believers-greater-lay-participation/, 12. Jim Tomberlin, "Traits of a Gifted Campus Pastor," in *What Every Multisite Church Should Know*

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hierarchical relationship between the lead pastor and the campus pastor further affirms the bishop-like role of the lead pastor described in the previous paragraph. Interestingly, the campus pastor assumes an episcopal role at the campus level. In his doctoral work on the role of the campus pastor, Chris Kouba says the first responsibility of a newly hired campus pastor is to hire his staff.[132] This practice is more consistent with episcopal governance than with the congregationalist conviction that the congregation is responsible for selecting its own leadership.

Some multisite proponents straightforwardly acknowledge the episcopal governance of multisite churches. In an interview with Heath Kahlbau, Elmer Towns, a Southern Baptist and an early multisite proponent, says that multisite churches inherently lean toward episcopal governance.[133] Also in an interview with Kahlbau, Jim Tomberlin, the most sought-after multisite consultant, says the Roman Catholic Church is the best example of a multisite church that is purely episcopal.[134] Tomberlin also notes that church governance structures tend to develop from congregational to presbyterian to episcopal as churches grow. Tomberlin says that church growth is hindered when church structure does not develop this way.[135]

While some multisite proponents clearly acknowledge the episcopal tendencies of multisite church governance, other multisite proponents do not. Multisite proponents who oppose episcopal polity, which includes the majority of multisite practitioners, are understandably opposed to associating the MCM with episcopal polity.[136] However,

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(Portable Church Industries, 2018), 32.

[132]Kouba, "Role of the Campus Pastor," 88.

[133]Kahlbau, "Is Anything New under the Sun?," 248.

[134]Ibid., 250.

[135]Kahlbau, "Is Anything New under the Sun?," 173. John Vaughan describes the polity development from congregational to presbyterian to episcopal governance as a development that also occurs within megachurches. John N. Vaughan, *Megachurches & America's Cities: How Churches Grow* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1993), 84-85.

[136]Kahlbau, "Is Anything New under the Sun?," 250. White and Yeats, *Franchising*

Scroggins notes the functional episcopal governance of multisite polity that emerges from the immense influence of prominent multisite church pastors.[137] It seems best then to refer to the most frequent form of church governance of multisite churches as revealed in multisite literature as episcopal (little e) in the functional sense rather that Episcopal (capital E) in the formal sense. This is not true of all multisite churches, but it is true for the "overwhelming majority" of multisite churches.[138]

Before concluding this section, it should be noted that the multisite literature does rarely espouse congregational church governance. Brian Frye and Gregg Allison stand alone as multisite proponents who call multisite churches to maintain congregational church governance. Frye sets two parameters for multisite churches to enable congregationalism: 1) congregational participation in decision-making on matters of "church membership, church discipline, budgeting, building programs, and staff leadership selection," and 2) geographical proximity that enables pastoral collaboration among campuses and the occasional gathering of campuses.[139] Allison also advocates regular congregational meetings that bring members from various campuses together to "provide opportunities for members to discharge their congregational responsibilities."[140] Interestingly, as is demonstrated below, the church polity Allision describes in later works more closely resembles presbyterian church governance than congregational church governance.

McChurch, 81.

[137]Kahlbau, "Is Anything New under the Sun?," 171.

[138]Ibid., 252, 282.

[139]Frye, *The Multi-Site Church Phenomenon in North America*, 215-16.

[140]Gregg R. Allison, "Theological Defense of Multi-Site," *9 Marks Journal* 6 (June 2009): 16.

Church Governance in Multisite
Church Practice

　　In addition to multisite literature, the actual practices of multisite churches also reveal the scarcity of congregationalism among multisite churches. As with the multisite literature, most multisite practices resemble episcopal church governance. However, some multisite practices more closely resemble presbyterian church governance. This section presents the practices of multisite churches that resemble episcopal church governance followed by the practices of multisite churches that resemble presbyterian church government.

　　The most significant investigation to date concerning the actual practices of multisite churches is the doctoral research of Jamus Edwards that was published in 2016. Edwards' primary focus was on leadership structures and dynamics within multisite churches. However, his research also reveals significant data on the governance of multisite churches. The study results are comprised of 243 valid responses drawn from campus pastors of the 135 largest SBC multisite churches and multisite churches from the list of the 100 fastest growing churches in 2014 according to *Outreach Magazine*.[141] In consultation with Brian Frye, Edwards selected these churches due to a desire to survey trendsetting churches. Edwards and Frye believe these churches to be trendsetting churches due to their size and growth rate.[142] Edwards also designed the survey instrument in cooperation with a panel of multisite experts comprised of Greg Ligon, Brian Frye, Warren Bird, Jim Tomberlin, Scott McConnell, Gregg Allison, Larry Osborne, and Chris Kouba.[143] Given the trendsetting nature of the multisite churches surveyed and the quality of the survey instrument due to its refinement by a panel of multisite experts, Edwards' research is the most significant contribution to date

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[141]Jamus Howell Edwards, "Leadership Structures and Dynamics in Multisite Churches: A Quantitative Study" (PhD diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2016), 15-16, 116.

[142]Ibid., 16, 21.

[143]Ibid., 106.

concerning the actual practices of multisite churches.

Edwards' survey questions centered around the locus of decision-making authority in multisite churches.[144] The survey results reveal a strong leaning toward episcopal church governance in the vast majority of the multisite churches who responded. On decision-making authority in hiring campus staff, the majority of respondents indicated that hiring decisions are made solely by an individual, either a campus pastor (37.7 percent), or the lead pastor (17.6 percent).[145] On decision making authority pertaining to the church budget, 10 percent of respondents reported that budgetary decisions are made solely by the senior pastor.[146]

Edwards' survey questions also deal with the organizational structure of multisite churches. The survey asked, "Who is at the top of the organizational chart?"; 59.3 percent of respondents selected the lead pastor. Only one respondent answered the congregation, but clarified "congregation, then committee and councils, but senior pastor really."[147] The survey also asked, "Who does the campus pastor report to?"; 86.5 percent of respondents answered that the campus pastor reported to a single person, most notably to the lead pastor (33.2 percent), an executive pastor (32.3 percent), or a multisite director (12.6 percent). Not a single respondent indicated that their campus pastors reported to the entire congregation.[148]

Other research also reveals the episcopal practices of multisite churches. In his

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[144]Edwards, "Leadership Structures and Dynamics in Multisite Churches," 17.

[145]Ibid., 146, 148.

[146]Ibid., 145, 147. Of the respondents, 65.1 percent indicate that budgetary decisions are made by an executive leadership team. This practice more closely resembles presbyterian governance, so this figure is cited in the text later in this section as multisite practices that resemble presbyterian governance are presented.

[147]Ibid., 123-24.

[148]Ibid., 129. The subject of the accountability of pastors to their congregations is further discussed in chap. 5 when matters of church discipline are considered. At this point, it is sufficient to note that 1 Tim 5:19-20 teach that pastors who persist in sin are to be disciplined "in the presence of all." This means that pastors are to be held accountable by their congregations.

doctoral work on the role of the campus pastor, Kouba states that the first priority of a new campus pastor is to hire his staff.[149] Kouba also notes the role of the leadership team of Prestonwood Baptist Church in Plano, Texas where he serves as a campus pastor. He wrote that the leadership team makes "global decisions that impact all three campuses."[150] Kouba also shares the results of his survey of 87 campus pastors from 45 multisite churches.[151] The survey asked, "Who do you report to in your role as campus pastor?" Zero respondents indicated that they reported to the congregation. Instead, 91 percent of respondents indicated that they report to a single person, either the lead pastor (23 percent), or executive pastor (32 percent), or a multisite director (36 percent).[152] Thomas Bartlett is also a Baptist who studied the practices of SBC multisite churches.[153] In interviews with Bartlett, SBC church leaders spoke of the difficulty of giving up central control.[154] SBC church leaders also indicated the permissibility of central control when they suggested that those considering going multisite should determine in advance if they will have a central "team that calls all the shots."[155] Similarly, Bird's research on campus pastors reveals the central control of multisite churches. He concludes his report by supplying several actual campus pastor job descriptions from anonymous multisite churches. None of the sample campus pastor job descriptions he presents indicate that the campus pastor is held accountable to the congregation.[156]

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[149]Kouba, "Role of the Campus Pastor," 88, 99.

[150]Ibid., 5.

[151]Ibid., 20n20.

[152]Ibid., 58.

[153]Bartlett, "Multisite Church Planting in a Rural Community," 25.

[154]Ibid., 110.

[155]Ibid., 117.

[156]Warren Bird, "Campus Pastor as Key to Multisite Success," September 30, 2015, https://leadnet.org/campus-pastor-as-key-to-multisite-success/, 8-15.

While the dominant pattern of multisite practice most closely resembles episcopal church governance, some multisite practices more closely resemble presbyterian church governance. On decision making authority pertaining to the church budget, 65.1 percent of respondents in Edwards' study reported that budgetary decisions are made by an executive leadership team. Resting decision-making authority in the hands of a few leaders resembles the Presbyterian practice of a presbytery exercising decision-making authority over the church.[157]

In *MultiChurch: Exploring the Future of Multisite*, Allison and House describe the "multi-polity" of Sojourn Community Church, an SBC multisite church where they serve as elders in Louisville, Kentucky, in terms that closely resemble presbyterian church governance. At Sojourn, the leadership council is the highest level of church governance and decision-making authority.[158] The leadership council is comprised of the executive elders, the campus pastors of each campus, and a minimum of two non-staff elders.[159] The executive elders of Sojourn serve as the senior leadership team that oversees day-to-day operations. They are appointed by the lead pastor, who also serves as an executive elder.[160] The full council of elders includes the executive elders, the campus pastors and all other elders from each campus.[161] The campus elders of each campus are affirmed by that particular campus.[162] This model of governance most closely resembles presbyterian governance in that the elders of each campus are affirmed by the campus, but also make governing decisions that affect other campuses through their participation

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[157]Edwards, "Leadership Structures and Dynamics in Multisite Churches," 145, 147.

[158]House and Allison, *MultiChurch*, 152-53.

[159]Ibid, 152.

[160]Ibid., 154.

[161]Ibid., 153.

[162]Ibid., 158.

on the full council of elders and the leadership council. This approach is very similar to the presbyterian practice wherein the congregation selects elders to govern the church and some of those elders then also serve as members of a presbytery and a general assembly that governs multiple churches. Heath Kahblau currently serves as an SBC pastor, but previously served as a pastor in the Presbyterian Church in America denomination. After interviewing Allison, Kahblau concluded that the governance of Sojourn is presbyterian church governance.[163]

Other SBC multisite churches also operate under presbyterian governance. The Village Church is an SBC multisite church based in Flower Mound, Texas. Josh Patterson serves as a lead pastor at The Village Church. In his doctoral work on the multisite practices of The Village Church, he describes how a central elder board comprised of central staff and campus elders governs the church.[164] This is the major way that campuses relate to the central governing structure of The Village Church.[165] FBC Windermere, Florida represents an early SBC multisite church. In 2005, Charles Carter described church governance in terms of a pastor/staff team model wherein campus pastors function as senior pastors over their campuses but also serve on the leadership team for the entire church. Carter conceded that this model of governance more closely resembles presbyterian governance than congregational governance.[166]

Before concluding this section, it should be noted that multisite churches do rarely practice congregational church governance. On decision-making authority in hiring campus staff, Edwards' research revealed that 2.5 percent of multisite church respondents

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[163]Kahlbau, "Is Anything New under the Sun?," 251-52.

[164]Patterson, "Leveraging the Multi-Site Church Approach," 94.

[165]Ibid., 55.

[166]Carter, "An Analysis of the Multi-Campus Approach," 27.

said they included the congregation in the hiring process.[167] On decision-making authority for approving the church budget, 20.9 percent of the multisite churches surveyed indicated congregational involvement in affirming the church budget.[168]

Conclusion: Multisite Churches, Congregationalism, and Baptist Identity

Chapter 4 has demonstrated that church polity is significant because the Bible speaks to matters of church polity. After providing a glimpse of episcopal and presbyterian church governance, the chapter argued that congregationalism is the form of church polity most consistent with the New Testament. The chapter has also argued that the Baptist tradition consistently affirms congregationalism. In fact, congregationalism is a historic Baptist distinctive. The chapter then presented multisite positions on church governance as exhibited in multisite literature and the actual practices of multisite churches. This presentation revealed that the governance of most multisite churches resembles episcopal church governance, though the governance of some multisite churches resembles presbyterian church governance. Congregational church governance is rarely present in multisite churches. Accordingly, with rare exceptions, the MCM exhibits inconsistencies with New Testament ecclesiology and with Baptist tradition.[169]

Southern Baptist multisite proponents were highlighted throughout this chapter. Gregg Allison, Brad House, Brian Frye, Ed Stetzer, Elmer Towns, Jimmy Scroggins, Dave Travis, Josh Patterson, Chris Kouba, Charles Carter, Scott Reavley, and Thomas Bartlett are all Southern Baptist advocates of the MCM cited in this chapter. In addition, the chapter also noted that Jamus Edwards' research surveyed a total of 135

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[167]Edwards, "Leadership Structures and Dynamics in Multisite Churches," 146, 148.

[168]Ibid., 145, 147.

[169]The conclusion of this dissertation in chap. 7 offers parameters within which a church can operate as a multisite church and remain within the boundaries of New Testament ecclesiology and Baptist tradition.

trendsetting Southern Baptist multisite churches. Accordingly, this chapter has demonstrated the prevalence of the MCM among Southern Baptist churches.

The prevalence of the MCM among Southern Baptist churches is a strange phenomenon. The Baptist tradition has historically affirmed the New Testament teaching on congregationalism. Moreover, the current confessional document of the SBC, the BF&M, affirms congregationalism. Since multisite churches rarely practice congregationalism, it is inconsistent for Southern Baptists to affirm the MCM, with rare exceptions. Sadly, many Southern Baptists are unable to identify or unwilling to address the inconsistencies between the MCM and their confessional tradition. Nevertheless, these inconsistencies reveal the difficulty MCM has in aligning itself with the New Testament teaching on congregational church polity and, thus, the Baptist tradition. Accordingly, with rare exceptions, Baptists who are convictional congregationalists by confessional tradition should refrain from engaging in the MCM.

CHAPTER 5

CHURCH DISCIPLINE:
ASSEMBLING FOR HOLINESS

Chapter 3 argued for the necessity of the assembly of the church based on the meaning and usage of *ekklesia* in the Septuagint and the New Testament. In addition to the biblical support, the chapter also demonstrated that the Baptist tradition has consistently affirmed the necessity of the assembly of the church. Since most multisite churches never assemble the totality of their membership and campuses in one location, chapter 3 concluded that the multisite church movement (MCM), with rare exceptions, is incompatible with New Testament ecclesiology and Baptist tradition. Chapter 4 built on the argument of chapter 3 by examining congregationalism as a particular application of the gathering of the church. Since the New Testament teaches congregational church governance, the church must assemble as a congregation for governance. In addition to the biblical support, chapter 4 also argued that the Baptist tradition has consistently affirmed congregational church government. Since most multisite churches never assemble the totality of their membership and campuses in one location, most multisite churches are unable to practice congregational church governance. This reality highlights another layer of incompatibility of the MCM with New Testament ecclesiology and Baptist tradition, with rare exceptions.

Chapter 5 now continues to build on the argumentation of chapter 3 by examining church discipline as a second application of the gathering of the church. The New Testament teaches that church discipline is to be exercised in the context of the gathered congregation. The Baptist tradition also consistently affirms the exercise of church discipline in the context of the gathered congregation. Since most multisite

churches never assemble the totality of their membership and campuses in one location, this chapter argues that the MCM is incompatible with New Testament ecclesiology and with the Baptist tradition pertaining to church discipline, with rare exceptions.

The problem for the MCM pertaining to the practice of church discipline has been observed by Thomas White and John Mark Yeats in their critique of the movement. They argue that the power to exercise church discipline through the dismissal of church members is granted by God to the gathered church in Matthew 18:17 and 1 Corinthians 5:4-5. Since most multisite churches never assemble the totality of their membership and campuses in one location, White and Yeats argue that most multisite churches are unable to properly practice church discipline.[1]

Building upon the critique by White and Yeats, this chapter explores the significance of church discipline in theological, biblical, and historical perspective with a particular emphasis on Baptist tradition. Theologically, the proper practice of church discipline is essential for maintaining distinctive aspects of Baptist ecclesiology, most notably regenerate church membership and congregational church governance. Biblically, texts pertaining to church discipline are examined to demonstrate the New Testament teaching that the gathered congregation is the proper context for practicing church discipline. Historically, pertinent documents from the Baptist tradition are examined to demonstrate the prominent place church discipline holds in Baptist tradition and the historic Baptist conviction that church discipline is to occur in the context of the gathered congregation. The chapter concludes by examining the practice of church discipline in multisite churches. Church discipline is rarely mentioned in multisite church literature and practice. Nevertheless, the rare mentions of church discipline that are present in multisite church literature and practice sufficiently reveal that the MCM is incompatible

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[1]Thomas White and John M. Yeats, *Franchising McChurch: Feeding Our Obsession with Easy Christianity* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2009), 201-2.

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with New Testament ecclesiology and the Baptist tradition pertaining to church discipline, with rare exceptions.

Why Does it Matter? Church Discipline
in Theological Perspective

Church discipline is not a doctrine that stands alone. It is a doctrine that holds together several other key aspects of ecclesiology. Church discipline relates to the discipleship of believers, the gospel witness of the local church, the holiness of God, and the wrath of God. Most directly, the doctrine of church discipline holds together key aspects of biblical ecclesiology in Baptist thinking. The adjacent ecclesiological doctrines of regenerate church membership and congregational church governance and their relationship with church discipline is the focus of this section.

At its core, Baptist ecclesiology is the pursuit of a pure church. The pursuit of a pure church is what led the Puritans to dissent from the Church of England. The pursuit of a pure church further led the Separatists to withdraw into independent congregations. The pursuit of purity ultimately led dissenters to give birth to the Baptist denomination by establishing a believers-only church marked off from the world by believer's baptism.[2]

Foundational to the pursuit of a pure church is the Baptist distinctive of regenerate church membership. Regenerate church membership is the mark of the church which is most distinctively Baptist.[3] Baptist theologian John Hammett has even labeled regenerate church membership "the central Baptist mark of the church."[4] Through the practice of regenerate church membership, churches mark off their membership from the world. The church administers baptism and the Lord's Supper to those it perceives to be believers. Conversely, the church withholds baptism and the Lord's Supper from those it

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[2]Leon McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage* (Nashville: Broadman, 1987), 75.

[3]John S. Hammett, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches: A Contemporary Ecclesiology* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2005), 81.

[4]Ibid., 107.

perceives to be unbelievers.[5] In marking out its regenerate church membership, the local church does not bring about regeneration. Regeneration is solely the work of God. Rather, in marking out their regenerate church membership, local churches affirm the regenerative work of God in those they perceive to be redeemed. New Testament passages which are examined in the following section grant this authority to local church congregations (Matt 18:15-20; 1 Cor 5:1-13).

Regenerate church membership in the local church is maintained by the proper administration of church discipline. Believers are expected to bear fruit in keeping with repentance and to exhibit the fruit of the Spirit (Matt 3:8; Gal 5:16-26). When a church member habitually fails to live a life that matches his profession of faith in Christ, church discipline should be practiced to aid him in his discipleship. If that member refuses to repent, he ultimately reveals himself to be an unbeliever and should be excluded from the fellowship of the church through church discipline (Matt 18:17). However, even when an unrepentant sinner is excluded from church membership, church discipline should be redemptive in nature and other church members should seek to restore the fallen member by admonishing him as a brother (2 Thess 3:15). Church discipline enacted in this way makes regenerate church membership meaningful. Without church discipline, regenerate church membership is just a theory. With church discipline, regenerate church membership is an ongoing reality.[6]

In preserving regenerate church membership, church discipline also protects the name of Jesus. When an individual joins a local church, that individual becomes associated with Christ. For this reason, church members who persist in sin bring shame to the name of Christ. In order to prevent church members from persisting in sin, churches

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[5]Jonathan Leeman, *Church Discipline: How the Church Protects the Name of Jesus* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 39.

[6]Hammett, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches*, 106.

must discipline wayward members to protect the name of Christ.[7] Jonathan Leeman, who has written extensively on church discipline, explains it this way:

> The local church, Jesus' key carrying institution, vouches for the credibility of a Christian's profession through baptism and the Lord's Supper. Church discipline comes into play whenever that credibility is called into question. It's driven by a single question: does the church still believe an erring member is really a Christian, such that is willing to continue declaring so publicly? In short, church discipline is all about the reputation of Jesus on earth. The stakes are high indeed.[8]

Closely connected to regenerate church membership is the second adjacent ecclesiological doctrine considered in this section, congregational church governance. The strongest biblical support for congregational church government comes in the two most extensive texts in the New Testament on church discipline, Matthew 18:15-20 and 1 Corinthians 5:1-13.[9] Both texts identify the congregation as the highest earthly judicatory for deciding when church members should be excluded from the membership of the church through church discipline.

If the church is to govern itself properly as a body, then the practice of church discipline must be the norm. Congregational governance will not work without church discipline, at least not for long.[10] Church discipline is admittedly imperfect. However, the likelihood of unregenerate church members will increase greatly when church discipline is neglected. When a church continues the practice of congregational governance while neglecting to practice church discipline, the results will be disastrous as it will increase the likelihood that unbelievers will participate in governing the church of Christ. For the vitality of the local church, these doctrines must be held together. Church discipline holds

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[7]Leeman, *Church Discipline*, 41.

[8]Ibid., 45.

[9]Hammett, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches*, 147.

[10]Jonathan Leeman, *Don't Fire Your Church Members: The Case for Congregationalism* (Nashville: B & H Academic, 2016), 179.

together regenerate church membership and congregational church government. Church discipline matters.

What Does the Bible Say? Church Discipline in Biblical Perspective

The Bible speaks frequently concerning church discipline. The multiplicity of texts on church discipline merits careful consideration of the subject. Generally, "church discipline may be defined as a proleptic (or anticipatory) and declarative sign of the divine eschatological judgment, meted out by Jesus Christ through the church against its sinful members and sinful situations."[11] Seen in this light, church discipline should be understood as a loving and merciful act which serves as a preview and a warning of the eschatological judgment of God.[12] Seven key texts of Scripture paint the biblical portrait of church discipline. These passages are Hebrews 12:3-11, Matthew 18:15-20, 1 Corinthians 5:1-13, 2 Corinthians 2:5-11, 1 Timothy 5:19-20, 2 Thessalonians 3:6-15, and Galatians 6:1. Hebrews 12:3-11 provides a framework within which church discipline should be understood as a loving practice. While more passages could be considered, the other six texts have been selected to emphasize church discipline as a responsibility of the entire congregation. Each passage is briefly considered below.

Hebrews 12:3-11

Although this passage does not specifically deal with church discipline, it sets a backdrop against which church discipline is clearly seen as an act of love. Discipline in the life of the believer should not be surprising, "for the Lord disciplines the one he loves" (Heb 12:6). This discipline marks the recipient out as a child of God (Heb 12:8).

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[11]Gregg R. Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers: The Doctrine of the Church* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 181.

[12]Jonathan Leeman, *The Church and the Surprising Offense of God's Love: Reintroducing the Doctrines of Church Membership and Discipline* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 93.

As with an earthly father, God disciplines his children for their own good (Heb 12:10). Although the discipline itself is painful, the positive end is that "later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it" (Heb 12:11). Believers can be confident in this divine discipline, for while earthly fathers are flawed in their discipline, the heavenly father is not.[13]

The concept of God as Father is a major New Testament concept. There are approximately 250 references to God as father in the New Testament and approximately twenty references to his people as his children. When the familial nature of the church is in view, church discipline is understood as calling for loyalty to the family of God.[14] When understood in this light, church discipline is a fundamentally positive thing.[15] God disciplines those he loves as a loving father.

Matthew 18:15-20

Jesus' instructions on restoring erring brothers in this text is the most well-known of all the New Testament texts pertaining to church discipline. Jesus presents four steps of church discipline in this text. First, "if your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone" (Matt 18:15). If the erring brother hears and repents, "you have gained your brother" (Matt 18:15). Jesus' use of the term "brother" indicates the close relational proximity of involved parties and the familial nature of church discipline which occurs within the family of God, the church. If the erring brother does not repent, the second step of church discipline is enacted: "but if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you" in order to provide further evidence of the

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[13]David Lewis Allen, *Hebrews*, New American Commentary, vol. 35 (Nashville: B & H, 2010), 582.

[14]John S. Hammett, "Church Membership, Church Discipline, and the Nature of the Church," in *Those Who Must Give an Account: A Study of Church Membership and Church Discipline*, ed. John S. Hammett and Benjamin L. Merkle (Nashville: B & H Academic, 2012), 25, 27.

[15]Mark Dever, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*, exp. ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2004), 173.

brother's sin (Matt 18:16). Third, if the brother refuses to listen to the small group of witnesses, "tell it to the church" and give him another opportunity to repent (Matt 18:17). Bringing the matter before the church highlights the significance of the issue and intensifies the call to repentance. Finally, if the erring brother refuses to repent at the admonition of the congregation, he is to be treated "as a Gentile and a tax collector" (Matt 18:17). That is, he is to be treated as an unbeliever. This four-step process is intended to be redemptive in nature as indicated by Jesus' reference to regaining the fallen brother (Matt 18:15) and the context of parable of the unforgiving servant in which Jesus teaches the principles of repetitive and abundant forgiveness (Matt 18:21-35).[16]

The preeminent role of the local church in church discipline is striking in this text. Jesus identifies the local church as the highest earthly judicatory for dealing with issues of church discipline. The entire assembly of the church is to be involved in this process. "Tell it to the church" implies that the "whole body of Christians" or the "whole group of believers" are involved in this process.[17] The singular grammar of "let him be to you" further indicates the individual responsibility of each believer toward all the others in relation to church discipline.[18] Church discipline is a responsibility of the local church that necessitates the involvement of the entire church body. In this way, the keys of the kingdom are given to the church body as a whole for the purpose of exercising church discipline (Matt 16:19, 18:18-19).

Some have questioned the primacy of the local church in church discipline outlined in this text. The Reformed and Presbyterian tradition prefers to take "tell it to the

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[16]Wayne A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 900.

[17]Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1992), 468.

[18]D. A. Carson, "Matthew," in vol. 8 of *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Tremper Longman and David E. Garland (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 457.

church" as a reference to an assembly of elders.[19] However, Jesus' terminology does not lend itself to this interpretation. Jesus uses the Greek word *ekklesia* ("church") without the modifier *presbuteros* ("elder"). To interpret "church" as an assembly of elders is to impose presbyterian church governance on the text in a way that Jesus' words do not suggest. Jesus entrusts the whole church, not just the elders, with the final ecclesiastical authority on earth for church discipline.

The Roman Catholic tradition prefers to emphasize Matthew 16:17-20, where the keys of the kingdom are entrusted to Peter, to support their system of ecclesiastical hierarchy. However, Matthew 18 informs the context of Matthew 16. Matthew 18 indicates that the power of the keys is extended beyond Peter to the entire church.[20] Jesus entrusts the gathered local congregation, not the Pope, with the power of the keys for church discipline.

1 Corinthians 5:1-13

1 Corinthians 5:1-13 is the most extensive biblical text on church discipline. As a case study in church discipline, this passage offers several insights into its practice. This case pertains to the particularly egregious sin of incestuous sexual relations between a man and his stepmother "that is not tolerated even among pagans" (1 Cor 5:1). The Apostle Paul is shocked that the Corinthian church has, in their arrogance, failed to discipline this openly sinful church member (1 Cor 5:1-2, 6). In response, Paul instructs them to immediately excommunicate the man: "let him who has done this be removed from among you . . . When you are assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus and my spirit

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[19]John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (London: S. C. M., 1961), 4.12.2. James Bannerman, *The Church of Christ: A Treatise on the Nature, Powers, Ordinances, Discipline, and Government of the Christian Church* (1834; repr., London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1960), 2:311-312. Jay E. Adams, *Handbook of Church Discipline* (Grand Rapids: Ministry Resources Library, 1986), 69.

[20]Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 889-90. John Gill, *A Body of Divinity* (1767; repr., Grand Rapids: Sovereign Grace, 1971), 887.

is present, with the power of our Lord Jesus, you are to deliver this man to Satan . . . 'Purge the evil person from among you'" (1 Cor 5:2, 4-5, 13). The discipline prescribed here bypasses Jesus' four-step process in Matthew 18. Sin that is egregious, public, and unrepentant calls for swift and sever discipline. The purpose of this swift and severe discipline is for the salvation of the offender, "so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord" (1 Cor 5:5) and for the purity of the church, to "cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump" (1 Cor 5:7).

As in Matthew 18:17, 1 Corinthians 5:4-5 recognizes the local church as the administrator of church discipline. The excommunication is to occur "when you are assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus" (1 Cor 5:4). The public nature of the erring brother's sin affected the testimony of the entire body of the church at Corinth. Since the leaven affected the church as a community, it must be removed by an action of the entire community.[21] Paul's use of second person plural commandments throughout this passage also indicates that his instructions were intended for the church as a whole.[22] This emphasis on the corporate action of the body in church discipline is consistent with Paul's emphasis on unity and order throughout 1 Corinthians.[23] As in Matthew 18, the assembly of the local church is showcased as the highest early judicatory for church discipline.

2 Corinthians 2:5-11

In this text, Paul speaks of a brother who pained him and the rest of the Corinthian congregation (2 Cor 2:5). Paul encourages the church at Corinth to extend

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[21]J. W. MacGorman, "The Discipline of the Church," in *The People of God: Essays on the Believers' Church*, ed. Paul Basden, David S. Dockery, and James Leo Garrett (Nashville: Broadman, 1991), 80. Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 1987), 206.

[22]Roy E. Ciampa and Brian S. Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2010), 207.

[23]Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 2000), 394.

forgiveness to this brother now that church discipline has brought about his repentance. The text says, "for such a one, this punishment by the majority is enough, so you should rather turn to forgive and comfort him, or he may be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow" (2 Cor 2:6-7). That the discipline was enacted "by the majority" implies congregational involvement and a congregational vote. Otherwise, Paul would be unable to claim that the majority exercised the discipline. By referencing the majority, Paul highlights the involvement of the congregation in church discipline through a congregational vote to enact discipline and calls for a congregational embrace to restore the repentant brother.

There is debate concerning the relationship between the 2 Corinthians 2 text and the 1 Corinthians 5 text on church discipline. Some commentators believe the scenario depicted in 2 Corinthians 2 is the restoration of the incestuous man from 1 Corinthians 5.[24] Other commentators argue that these passages refer to separate instances because there is no compelling reason to associate them[25] or because the 2 Corinthians 2 text deals with an offense that harmed Paul personally while the 1 Corinthians 5 text pertains to a public offense.[26] However, since the case study in church discipline described in 1 Corinthians 5 was a painful case, it is consistent with the pain Paul referenced in 2 Corinthians 2:5. In view of that, it is best to understand these two texts as referring to the excommunication and restoration of the same individual.[27] Taken together, the Corinthian correspondence then pictures the remedial result which can ensue

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[24]Craig L. Blomberg, *Matthew*, vol. 22 in The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman, 1992), 280. Bannerman, *The Church of Christ*, 2:193.

[25]Paul Barnett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 1997), 124.

[26]George H. Guthrie, *2 Corinthians*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015), 132. Ralph P. Martin, *2 Corinthians*, vol. 40 in the Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, TX: Word, 1986), 37.

[27]Thomas R. Schreiner, "The Biblical Basis for Church Discipline," in *Those Who Must Give an Account: A Study of Church Membership and Church Discipline*, ed. John S. Hammett and Benjamin L. Merkle (Nashville: B & H Academic, 2012), 120.

when church discipline is enacted by the majority of the assembled congregation. In other words, 1 Corinthians 5 and 2 Corinthians 2 represent a church discipline success story.

1 Timothy 5:19-20

In this text, Paul offers Timothy specific instructions for exercising church discipline on the elders of the church. Other passages in the New Testament clarify that the office of elder is synonymous with the office of pastor and bishop (1 Pet 5:1-4). That is, all three terms are used interchangeably in reference to one office. Reminiscent of Matthew 18:15-17 and the Deuteronomic Code (Deut 17:6, 19:15), Paul instructs Timothy, "Do not admit a charge against an elder except on the evidence of two or three witnesses" (1 Tim 5:19). When the accused elders "persist in sin," Timothy is to "rebuke them in the presence of all so that the rest may stand in fear" (1 Tim 5:20). With these instructions, Paul again emphasizes the role of the congregation in church discipline. Erring elders are to be rebuked "in the presence of all" so that others in the congregation will not be inclined to follow their example (1 Tim 5:20). This instruction balances pastoral leadership with congregational authority. Timothy is to rebuke the fallen elder, but he is to do so before the entire congregation.

2 Thessalonians 3:6-15

Much of the New Testament instruction for enacting church discipline pertains to disciplining those who have neglected sound doctrine. One example of this type of instruction is 2 Thessalonians 3:6-15. This text specifically addresses "any brother who is walking in idleness" (2 Thess 3:6) and "is not willing to work" (2 Thess 3:10). The underlying issue with idleness is that it is contrary to the apostolic instructions the Thessalonians received from Paul. Walking in idleness is "not in accord with the tradition that you received from us" (2 Thess 3:6). Concerning the significance of following his instructions, Paul instructs the church of God at Thessalonica that "if anyone does not obey what we say in this letter, take note of that person, and have nothing to do with him,

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that he may be ashamed" (2 Thess 3:14). These statements portray Paul's understanding that any violation of the apostolic tradition he delivered was a disciplinable offense.[28] However, this discipline is not as severe as the discipline Paul describes in 1 Corinthians 5, for the brother walking in idleness is still to be admonished familiarly "as a brother" (2 Thess 3:15).[29] The congregational nature of church discipline arises from this text when readers recall that Paul is addressing these instructions to the entire church.[30]

Galatians 6:1

This text deals specifically with the congregational responsibility to seek restoration for brothers entangled in sin. The text says, "brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted" (Gal 6:1). Notice the vast extent to which church discipline is to be applied when "*anyone* is caught in *any* transgression" [italics added]. When brothers within the family of God are caught in transgression, familial connections require that those "who are spiritual" seek to restore them. The spiritual are not a higher class of Christian, for all believers are susceptible to falling into sin. This is why Paul warns those attempting to restore the erring brother to "keep watch" on themselves. The spiritual are those who are walking in the Spirit and exhibiting the fruit of the Spirit described in the context of Galatians 5:16-26.[31] "Restore" is the same term used in Matthew 4:21 and Mark 1:19 in reference to James and John mending their nets.[32]

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[28]James Leo Garrett, *Systematic Theology: Biblical, Historical, and Evangelical* (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 1990), 2:598.

[29]Leon Morris, *The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 1991), 260-61.

[30]Gary Steven Shogren, *1 and 2 Thessalonians* in the Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, vol. 13 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 329.

[31]Timothy George, *Galatians* in the New American Commentary, vol. 30 (Nashville: B & H, 1994), 410.

[32]MacGorman, "The Discipline of the Church," 81.

Those who are broken can be mended by the spiritual through the faithful application of redemptive church discipline. As the most positive of the New Testament texts on church discipline, this passage reminds readers that church discipline is to be remedial in nature rather than punitive. When exercised "in a spirit of gentleness" the redemptive end of church discipline can be realized.[33]

What Has the Baptist Tradition Believed? Church Discipline in Historical Perspective

The preceding section in relation to the biblical teaching on church discipline revealed frequent references in the New Testament to church discipline as a congregational responsibility. The high volume of these references speaks to the significance of church discipline within the New Testament. The voice of the New Testament is amplified by voices from the Baptist tradition. Although church discipline is a foreign concept to many modern churchmen, Mark Dever points out that "generations before us believed and preached and argued and published differently."[34] Beginning with the Anabaptists and culminating with modern Southern Baptists, this historical review reveals that the Baptist tradition has consistently affirmed the significance of church discipline and the responsibility of the entire gathered congregation in the practice of church discipline.

The Anabaptists

The Anabaptists are distinct from Baptists, but many historians believe the Anabaptist movement helped pave the way for the rise of the Baptists.[35] As Anabaptist theology developed, their view on church discipline became a distinguishing mark of

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[33]George, *Galatians*, 411.

[34]Mark E. Dever, "Editor's Preface," in *Polity: Biblical Arguments on How to Conduct Church Life*, ed. Mark E. Dever (Washington, DC: Center for Church Reform, 2000), ix.

[35]McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage*, 52-53.

their movement. The Magisterial Reformers such as Martin Luther, John Calvin, and Ulrich Zwingli understood disciplinary matters to be a joint effort of the church and the state, which they believed should be wed. Conversely, the Anabaptists understood that the church, not the state, should handle matters of ecclesial discipline. The Anabaptist view of church discipline was closely tied to their understanding of regenerate church membership.[36] When church members gave no evidence of regeneration, they were to be disciplined out of the church.

While the Anabaptists moved closer to the Baptist tradition in terms of regenerate church membership and believers' baptism, their practices did not reflect Baptist ecclesiology in every way, including their failure to emphasize the role of the congregation in church discipline. However, the importance of church discipline in their thinking is evident in that they radically enforced "the ban," which was their preferred terminology for church discipline. Early leaders in the Anabaptist movement advocated the firm practice of church discipline. Conrad Grebel believed that the church was first instituted in Matthew 18:15-18 when Jesus laid out the parameters for church discipline. In accordance with this, those who did not submit to the discipline of the church were to be banned.[37] Similarly, Balthasar Hubmaier taught that when a believer took his baptism vows, he agreed to subject himself to church discipline.[38]

The Anabaptist confessions of faith clearly reflect the emphasis of Grebel and Hubmair on church discipline. The Schleitheim Confession of 1527 is the first important

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[36]Jeremy Kimble, "A Historical Survey of Church Discipline," *9Marks Journal* 65 (Winter 2018): 29.

[37]Conrad Grebel, "Letters to Thomas Muntzer by Conrad Grebel and Friends," in *Spiritual and Anabaptist Writers: Documents Illustrative of the Radical Reformation*, ed. George Huntston Williams and Angel M. Mergal (London: S. C. M., 1957), 79-80.

[38]Franklin H. Littell, *The Anabaptist View of the Church: A Study in the Origins of Sectarian Protestantism* (Boston: Starr King, 1958), 88.

Anabaptist confession of faith.[39] The Schleitheim Confession advocates for church discipline for brothers who "slip sometimes and fall into error and sin, being inadvertently overtaken. The same shall be admonished twice in secret and the third time openly disciplined or banned according to the commandment of Christ."[40] In addition to the statement itself, the placement of this article within the confession also speaks to the significance of church discipline to the Anabaptists. The article on church discipline is placed second in the confession, following only the article on baptism. Also significant is that the article on church discipline implies congregational involvement in church discipline through its reference to open discipline. This understanding is further developed following the formation of Baptists.

English Baptists

The English Baptist movement marks the beginning of Baptists.[41] While there is debate about the extent of the Anabaptist influence on the English Baptists,[42] their understanding of church discipline overlaps. Accordingly, the position of the English Baptists represents a continuing understanding of the significance of church discipline in the Baptist tradition, particularly within their confessions of faith. Most notable within English Baptist thinking is the emergence of an emphasis on the role of the gathered congregation in church discipline.

The English Baptist confessions of faith consistently affirm the authority of the local church to exercise church discipline. The True Confession of 1596 is a confession

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[39]William Latane Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith* (Chicago: Judson, 1969), 22.

[40]Ibid., 25.

[41]Ibid., 115.

[42]Stephen Haines argues that the Anabaptists had significant influence on the early English Baptists. Stephen M. Haines, "Southern Baptist Church Discipline, 1880-1939," *Baptist History and Heritage* 20, no. 2 (April 1985): 15. Gregory Wills acknowledges that the Anabaptists may have influenced the early English Baptists, but says there is little evidence to support this. Gregory A. Wills, "Southern Baptists and Church Discipline: Development and Decline," in *Restoring Integrity in Baptist Churches*, ed. Thomas White, Jason G. Duesing, and Malcolm B. Yarnell (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2008), 180.

of English Separatists drafted prior to the formation of the first Baptist church in 1609.[43] The True Confession is the foundation upon which the influential First London Confession was built. Concerning church discipline, it argued that Christ has given power to the church to cut off any erring member as needed.[44] Accentuating the centrality of one assembly in church discipline, The True Confession explicitly stated that church discipline is given "not to any one member apart, or to more members sequestered from the whole."[45] This statement reflects the understanding that the right to exercise church discipline does not belong to any particular section of a church, but to the local church as a whole.

Other early English Baptist confessions of faith also speak to the significance of church discipline. John Smyth's 1609 A Short Confession of Faith in XX Articles stated "that brethren who persevere in sins known to themselves, after the third admonition, are to be excluded from the fellowship of the saints by excommunication."[46] Affirming this same understanding of church discipline, the 1611 Declaration of Faith of English People added that it is not committing sin that results in discipline, but the refusal to repent.[47]

The most significant English Baptist confession of faith is the First London Confession of 1644. William Lumpkin in his classic collection of Baptist confessions of faith argued that "perhaps no confession of faith has had so formative an influence on Baptist life as this one."[48] The First London Confession exhibited a firm conviction

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[43]Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, 81. McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage*, 34-35.

[44]Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, 89.

[45]Ibid.

[46]Ibid., 101.

[47]Ibid., 121.

[48]Ibid., 152.

concerning the role of the entire congregation in church discipline. Article 42 stated that Christ has given power to "his whole church to receive in and cast out, by way of excommunication, any member."[49] The Second London Confession of 1677 continued this tradition by reaffirming that Christ has given power to his church to exercise church discipline as needed. The Second London Confession stated, "to each of these Churches thus gathered, according to his mind, declared in his word, he hath given all that power and authority, which is any way needfull for their carrying on that order in worship, and discipline, which he hath instituted for them to observe." [50]

In addition to the confessional tradition, John Gill also spoke to the role of the entire congregation in church discipline. The famed English Baptist pastor and theologian utilized his influential pen to accentuate the congregation as God's instrument for church discipline. Commenting on 2 Thessalonians 3:6, Gill stated that the authority for church discipline "lies in the church, and not in the pastors and elders only."[51]

Early Baptists in America (1742-1900)

The early Baptists in America were largely influenced by English Baptists in their understanding of the significance of church discipline and the role of the congregation in its practice. The first widely circulated confession of faith in America was the Philadelphia Confession of 1742. Elias Keach, a Baptist pastor in America and the son of renown English Baptist pastor Benjamin Keach is largely responsible for this confession, so much so that it is also known as Keach's Confession.[52] The Philadelphia Confession is an adaptation of the Second London Confession and maintains the article

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[49]Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, 168.

[50]Ibid., 287.

[51]John Gill, *An Exposition of the New Testament, Both Doctrinal and Practical* (London: Printed for George Keith, 1774), 9:265.

[52]Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, 348-49.

on church discipline from that confession which, as noted above, stated that Christ has given power to his gathered church for the exercise of discipline.[53] The importance of the Philadelphia Confession is evident in its adoption by the influential Philadelphia Baptist Association, the first Baptist association in America.[54]

Benjamin Griffith's *A Short Treatise Concerning a True and Orderly Gospel Church* was published and adopted by the Philadelphia Baptist Association alongside the Philadelphia Confession in 1742. Commenting on Matthew 18:17, Griffith argued that "every church member has somewhat to do" with the act of church discipline.[55] When describing the act of removing a member from the church by church discipline, Griffith more explicitly stated,

> The manner of proceeding unto this great and awful instituted ordinance, is: the church being gathered together, the offender also having notice to come to make his answer and defense (if he comes not, he aggravates his offense by despising the authority of Christ in his church) . . . whether the offender be present or absent, the minister or the elder puts the question to the whole church, whether they judge the person guilty of such a crime now proved upon his is worthy of the censure of the church for the same to which the members in general give their judgment.[56]

In this quotation, Griffith spoke explicitly of the involvement of the whole gathered church in the exercise of church discipline. Griffith's understanding of the significance of church discipline is further exemplified in his references to discipline as an ordinance and to the authority of the church in church discipline as the authority of Christ.

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[53]The Philadelphia Confession is simply an adaptation of the Second London Confession with two additional articles on singing psalms and laying on hands. Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, 349, 287, 351.

[54]James Leo Garrett, *Baptist Church Discipline: A Historical Introduction to the Practices of Baptist Churches, with Particular Attention to the Summary of Church Discipline Adopted in 1773 by the Charleston Baptist Association* (Nashville: Broadman, 1962), 16. Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, 349.

[55]Benjamin Griffith, *"A Short Treatise Concerning a True and Orderly Gospel Church,"* in *Polity*: *Biblical Arguments on How to Conduct Church Life*, ed. Mark E. Dever (Washington, DC: Center for Church Reform, 2000), 105.

[56]Ibid., 107.

Another early and prolific statement from early Baptists in America on church discipline is the summary of church discipline produced by the Charleston Baptist Association in 1773. The Charleston association was the first Baptist association in the south and was as influential in the south as the Philadelphia association was in the north. This document is heavily influenced by the thinking of Gill.[57] Two significant aspects of the summary reveal the Charleston Baptist Association's understanding of the prominent role of the congregation in church discipline. First, citing Gill, the summary stated that excommunication is to be enacted only by the majority when gathered together in a regular and solemn church business meeting.[58] The regularity and solemnity of these meetings as proposed by the Charleston association assumes the involvement of the entire church. Second, the summary of church discipline referred to discipline as an ordinance of the church.[59] Referring to church discipline as an ordinance reflects not only its significance to the Charleston Baptist Association, but also their understanding of the regularity with which church discipline was to be practiced.

W. B. Johnson, the first president of the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) upon its formation in 1845, aligned his thinking with the Charleston Baptist Association's statement on discipline. Johnson followed the Charleston association in speaking of church discipline as an ordinance.[60] The reference to church discipline as an ordinance illustrates its importance in Johnson's thinking. Also indicating the importance of church

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[57]Garrett, *Baptist Church Discipline*, 20.

[58]The Baptist Association in Charleston, South Carolina, "A Summary of Church Discipline Shewing the Qualifications and Duties, of the Officers and Members, of a Gospel Church," in *Baptist Church Discipline: A Historical Introduction to the Practices of Baptist Churches, with Particular Attention to the Summary of Church Discipline Adopted in 1773 by the Charleston Baptist Association*, by James Leo Garrett (Nashville: Broadman, 1962), 54.

[59]Ibid., 51, 55.

[60]Though W. B. Johnson does refer to church discipline as an "ordinance," uses this term loosely by also referring to Scripture reading (237), singing (241), and prayer (242) as ordinances. W. B. Johnson, "The Gospel Developed Through the Government and Order of the Churches of Jesus Christ," in *Polity*: *Biblical Arguments on How to Conduct Church Life*, ed. Mark E. Dever (Washington, DC: Center for Church Reform, 2000), 204, 239.

discipline in Johnson's thinking is that he argued in relation to church discipline that "it is important to understand, that a proper attention to its exercise is indispensable to the welfare of the body."[61] Johnson also added his voice to other voices emphasizing the role of the gathered congregation in church discipline. When quoting 1 Corinthians 5:4, Johnson italicized the phrase "*when ye are gathered together*."[62] He further commented on this biblical case study in church discipline when he wrote that "the exclusion of this man was to take place when the church was gathered together."[63] Johnson later summarized the church discipline process as follows:

> The official meeting of the members of each church statedly on every Lord's Day; the performance of the duties enjoined upon them in their assembled character; the supervision of the bishops, and their instruction to the members individually and collectively; the faithful discharge of the duties of the members to each other; the like faithful discharge of the duties of the deacons or servants of the church; and the exclusion of the disorderly from membership, with the restoration of such as become penitent.[64]

The first president of the SBC repeatedly affirmed the role of the gathered congregation in the exercise of church discipline.

Other Baptists of the era also emphasized the responsibility of the gathered congregation in the practice of church discipline. In his 1858 *Manual of Theology*, when he commented on 1 Corinthians 5:4-5, Baptist theologian J. L. Dagg wrote that the discipline described in this text was not exercised "by the officers of the church, but by the whole church assembled together with the power and presence of Christ."[65] Dagg further specified that church discipline is not at the disposal of the pastor acting alone. Paul, though he possessed apostolic authority, did not enact church discipline. Rather, he

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[61]Johnson, "The Gospel Developed," 223.

[62]Ibid., 204.

[63]Ibid.

[64]Ibid., 221-22.

[65]J. L. Dagg, *Manual of Theology, Second Part: A Treatise on Church Order* (1858; repr., Harrisonburg, VA: Gano, 2012), 273.

instructed the church in Corinth to enact church discipline on the erring brother because authority for discipline rightly belongs to the assembled church.[66] The significance of church discipline in Dagg's theology is revealed in his statement that "when discipline leaves a church, Christ goes with it."[67]

Baptist pastor Eleazer Savage also argued for the importance of the gathered congregation in the practice of church discipline in 1863. Savage wrote that "The sole power of decision on all cases of discipline, is in the Church."[68] He also noted Paul's directions to the church at Corinth to practice church discipline "when gathered together" in 1 Corinthians 5:4 and went on to state that discipline is to be "inflicted by the majority" in light of 2 Corinthians 2:6.[69] Savage also argued that public sin calls for public rebuke. Accordingly, public sinners should be rebuked "before all" as instructed in 1 Timothy 5:20.[70] Rebuke "before all" necessarily entails the involvement of the gathered congregation in the process of church discipline.

Along with Johnson, Dagg, and Savage, the Baptist church manuals of the second half of the 1800s also continued to call churches to the faithful administration of congregational church discipline. Edward Hiscox noted the significance of church discipline when he wrote in his *New Directory for Baptist Churches* that it is "of the utmost importance that a correct spiritual discipline be strictly maintained."[71] Hiscox also pointed to the role of every member of the congregation in church discipline. He wrote of

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[66]Dagg, *Manual of Theology*, 273.

[67]Ibid., 274.

[68]Eleazer Savage, "Manual of Church Discipline," in *Polity*: *Biblical Arguments on How to Conduct Church Life*, ed. Mark E. Dever (Washington, DC: Center for Church Reform, 2000), 500.

[69]Ibid.

[70]Ibid., 514.

[71]Edward T. Hiscox, *The New Directory for Baptist Churches* (1894; repr., Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1970), 164.

church discipline as belonging to the church as a whole.[72] Accordingly, church discipline "should be solemnly impressed on the minds of pastors, deacons, and *every member of every Church*."[73] J. M. Pendleton's *Baptist Church Manual* also noted the importance of church discipline. As in families and schools, Pendleton asserted that discipline also has "important purposes in the churches of Christ."[74] Pendleton also noted the role of the entire congregation in the exercise of church discipline when he referenced the involvement of "all the members" in the process.[75]

Modern Baptists also note the emphasis on the role of the assembled church in church discipline among early Baptists in America. Baptist historian Gregory Wills notes that the emphasis on congregational church governance among early Baptists in America "meant that every member was responsible and that the congregation jointly exercised authority over the fellowship."[76] In his book-length treatment on church discipline in this era, Wills argues that "discipline was an affair of the entire church, which sat as a judicatory of Christ with dreadful authority over the moral behavior of the flock."[77] Early Baptists in America believed so strongly in the involvement of the entire congregation in church discipline that women and blacks also garnered voting privileges.[78] In the antebellum South where civil rights were routinely denied to women and blacks, their inclusion in voting on matters of church discipline signifies the dramatic extent to which early Baptists in America were committed to the involvement of the entire congregation

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[72]Hiscox, *The New Directory for Baptist Churches*, 169-70.

[73]Ibid., 177. Italics added.

[74]J. M. Pendleton, *Baptist Church Manual,* (1867; repr., Nashville: Broadman, 1966), 117.

[75]Ibid.*,* 132.

[76]Wills, "Southern Baptists and Church Discipline," 184.

[77]Gregory A. Wills, *Democratic Religion: Freedom, Authority, and Church Discipline in the Baptist South, 1785-1900* (New York: Oxford University, 1997), 28.

[78]Ibid., 51.

in the disciplinary process. Charles Deweese, another Baptist historian, adds his voice to Wills when he succinctly states that for the frontier Baptist churches of the mid 1800s, "discipline was considered to be the task of the entire congregation."[79]

Also among Baptists during the 1800s, a second stream of thought on church discipline diverged. The second stream of thought largely neglected the doctrine and practice of church discipline. The divergence is evident in two major statements of faith from the era. First, the Principles of Faith of the Sandy Creek Baptist Association from 1816 makes only one brief and general reference to church discipline. Article six stated in part that members of the visible church have "agreed to keep up a godly discipline, according to the rules of the Gospel."[80] Second, the 1833 New Hampshire Confession of Faith made absolutely no reference to church discipline.[81]

Following the neglect of church discipline in the second stream of thought that began to emerge in some Baptist confessions of faith in the early 1800s, a decline in the frequency of church discipline developed among Baptist churches in the late 1800s. The widespread distribution of the New Hampshire Confession, which made no reference to church discipline, came in its reproduction in the church manuals of Hiscox and Pendleton in the second half of the 1800s. Wills has extensively chronicled the decline of church discipline in this era. He writes, "To an antebellum Baptist, a church without discipline had little claim to be a church of Christ."[82] In this setting congregational disciplinary conferences regularly occurred on Saturday evenings in preparation for

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[79]Charles W. Deweese, "Disciplinary Procedures in Frontier Baptist Churches in Kentucky," *Baptist History and Heritage* 8, no. 4 (October 1973): 206.

[80]Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, 358.

[81]Ibid., 361-67.

[82]Gregory A. Wills, "Southern Baptists and Church Discipline," *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 4, no. 4 (2000): 5.

Sunday worship.[83] Antebellum Baptists in the south excommunicated nearly 2 percent of their membership each year.[84] The silence of the most popular Baptist confession of faith on church discipline coupled with newfound prosperity in the postbellum south accelerated the abandonment of church discipline. When combined with the increased popularity of worldly amusements such as dancing, card playing, horse racing, and billiard saloons, the decline of church discipline resulted in an increased number of church members, particularly young people, engaging in these activities. Intoxicated with rising notions of individual freedom, church members became resistant to receiving church discipline. As congregational church discipline became increasingly difficult to administrate, its practice gradually diminished.[85] Churches "never renounced the goal of purity or the duty of discipline, but in the end they preferred sinners in the flock rather than 'vexatious discipline.'"[86]

Modern Baptists (1901-2019)

A. H. Strong stands as an influential Baptist theologian in the beginning of the modern era who affirmed the practice of church discipline. Strong wrote of the congregational nature of church discipline and the involvement of every church member in the discipline process. He argued that "each Christian" is responsible for bringing erring brothers to repentance.[87] Strong also spoke of church discipline occurring in the context of "the assembled church."[88] Nevertheless, Strong devoted only two pages of his massive *Systematic Theology* to the topic of church discipline.

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[83]Wills, "Southern Baptists and Church Discipline," 6.

[84]Wills, *Democratic Religion*, 22.

[85]Ibid., 116-26.

[86]Ibid., 120.

[87]Augustus Hopkins Strong, *Systematic Theology: A Compendium Designed for the Use of Theological Students* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson, 1907), 924.

[88]Ibid., 926.

In the main, the decline in the practice and discussion of church discipline that began following the Civil War became more pronounced in the twentieth century. Baptist professor Edwin Dargan made no reference to church discipline in his manual of ecclesiology published in 1905.[89] The *Broadman Church Manual* of 1973 also contained no discussion of church discipline.[90] In the modern era the absence of church discipline began to go unnoticed.

Baptist confessions of faith from the twentieth century also make little reference to church discipline. The Baptist Faith and Message (BF&M) makes only scant references to church discipline. The BF&M is based upon the New Hampshire Confession of 1833 which made no reference to church discipline.[91] The original 1925 BF&M simply stated that the members of the church of Christ are "governed by his laws."[92] The 1963 BF&M revision specified that "members are equally responsible" to one another, but this is applied generally to democratic processes in congregationalism rather than specifically to church discipline.[93] The latest version of the BF&M from 2000, commenting on local church autonomy, similarly states that "in such a congregation each member is responsible and accountable to Christ as Lord."[94] Unequivocally, church members are accountable to Jesus. However, the 2000 BF&M statement on church discipline downplays the New Testament teaching of the involvement of the entire congregation in the practice of church discipline and the reality that church members are also accountable to one another. As argued above, these are teachings that the Baptist

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[89]Edwin Charles Dargan, *Ecclesiology: A Study of the Churches* (Louisville: C. T. Dearing, 1905).

[90]Howard B. Foshee, *Broadman Church Manual* (Nashville: Broadman, 1973).

[91]Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, 361.

[92]Southern Baptist Convention, "Comparison of 1925, 1963 and 2000 Baptist Faith and Message," accessed November 19, 2016, http://www.sbc.net/bfm2000/bfmcomparison.asp.

[93]Ibid.

[94]Ibid.

tradition has repeatedly affirmed.

In the modern era with church discipline having fallen into disrepute, many are calling for a return to the traditional Baptist practice of church discipline.[95] The decline of church discipline has been well-documented and often derided in superlative terms. R. Albert Mohler argues that "The decline of church discipline is perhaps the most visible failure of the contemporary church."[96] Similarly, R. Stanton Norman warns that "One of the most glaring omissions in modern Baptist church life is the absence of the regular practice of biblical church discipline."[97]

As modern Baptists call for the restoration of church discipline, an aspect of this call includes the involvement of the entire congregation in the disciplinary process. Jack MacGorman argues for the significance of Paul's instruction to the church at Corinth to gather the entire congregation together in order to exercise church discipline. Sin in the church is a whole body problem which demands a whole body solution.[98] For Charles Deweese, Matthew 18:17 indicates that "responsibility for disciplinary measures resides with the total congregation."[99] R. Stanton Norman adds that the inclusion of the entire church in the disciplinary process amplifies the severity of the discipline and the call to repentance.[100] Commenting on 2 Corinthians 2:6, Tom Schreiner echoes these sentiments

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[95]H. E. Dana and L. M. Sipes, *A Manual of Ecclesiology*, 2nd ed. (Kansas City, KS: Central Seminary, 1944), 240-44. Norman H. Maring and Winthrop S. Hudson, *A Baptist Manual of Polity and Practice* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson, 1963), 79-80. Charles W. Deweese, *Baptist Church Covenants* (Nashville: Broadman, 1990), 209. Mark Dever, *The Church: The Gospel Made Visible* (Nashville: B & H Academic, 2012), 124.

[96]R. Albert Mohler, "Church Discipline: The Missing Mark," in *Polity*: *Biblical Arguments on How to Conduct Church Life*, ed. Mark E. Dever (Washington, DC: Center for Church Reform, 2000), 43.

[97]R. Stanton Norman, "The Reestablishment of Proper Church Discipline," in *Restoring Integrity in Baptist Churches*, ed. Thomas White, Jason G. Duesing, and Malcolm B. Yarnell (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2008), 199.

[98]MacGorman, "The Discipline of the Church," 80.

[99]Charles W. Deweese, *A Community of Believers: Making Church Membership More Meaningful* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson, 1978), 68.

[100]Norman, "The Reestablishment of Proper Church Discipline," 215.

when he writes of "the vital participation of the congregation as a whole in the act of discipline."[101] Some of the most thoughtful contributions to the field of church discipline in recent years have flowed from the pen of Jonathan Leeman. Tying together several of the key New Testament texts which speak to the centrality of the assembled church in church discipline, Leeman writes:

> What's striking in the New Testament is that the whole church is often assigned responsibility for matters of dispute, discipline, and doctrine. In Matthew 18, the entire church is called in to adjudicate a dispute between Christians that cannot be resolved privately. In 1 Corinthians 5, the entire church is called in to discipline a member who refuses to repent of his sin. In Galatians 1, the entire church is called to account for the fact that it has tolerated a false teacher. In 2 Corinthians 2:6-8, the church is told to restore a repentant sinner from the discipline originally placed on him by the majority. Elders have oversight of the body and so maintain the prerogative of leadership. Still, it cannot be denied that, whatever one's polity, every Christian—every church member—is responsible to redress matters of dispute, participate in the preliminaries of discipline through admonition and rebuke, and defend the apostle's doctrine.[102]

Church Discipline, the Baptist Tradition, and the Multisite Church Movement

In much of the multisite church literature, the topic of church discipline is off of the ecclesiological radar. But some multisite proponents do think critically about the practice of church discipline within multisite churches. This section presents the church discipline practices of representative multisite churches. Following this presentation, multisite practices of church discipline are evaluated against the backdrop of New Testament ecclesiology and Baptist tradition pertaining to church discipline.

Church Discipline in Multisite Church Practices

While the topic of church discipline in multisite churches is not common in multisite literature, some multisite proponents do reference the need for biblical church

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[101]Schreiner, "The Biblical Basis for Church Discipline," 120.

[102]Leeman, *The Church and the Surprising Offense of God's Love*, 264-65.

discipline. In his doctoral work on the multisite practices of The Village Church in

Flower Mound, Texas, Josh Patterson writes of their commitment to church discipline.

Patterson asserts that The Village Church abides by Mark Dever's *Nine Marks of a*

Healthy Church, including a process of church discipline that is catered to their multisite

framework.[103] In a personal interview, Patterson described the details of the church

discipline process at The Village Church. Prior to 2014, The Village Church carried out

church discipline in the context of small group gatherings. The idea was for those closest

to the offending party to be the agents of discipline. Since 2014, The Village Church has

enacted discipline in campus gatherings under the leadership of campus elders. The post-

2014 disciplinary process was amended in 2015 to require the central elder board that

governs all campuses to affirm the disciplinary decision of campus elders before the

disciplinary matter is taken to the campus gathering by the campus elders.[104]

Brian Frye also writes of the necessity of practicing biblical church discipline

within the multisite church model. For Frye, multisite church members must be involved

"in primary decision-making processes, such as matters of church membership, church

discipline, budgeting, building programs, and staff leadership selection."[105] This

quotation reveals that Frye understands church discipline to be a primary aspect of church

governance. Frye goes on to recommend close geographical proximity in order to enable

occasional gatherings of the totality of the membership and campuses of multisite

churches for governance, including the practice of church discipline.[106]

Gregg Allison does not directly call for occasional gatherings of the totality of

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[103]Joshua Rice Patterson, "Leveraging the Multi-Site Church Approach as a Long-Term Church Planting Strategy at the Village Church in Dallas-Fort Worth" (DMin project, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2014), 60-61. Dever, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*, 166-93.

[104]Joshua Rice Patterson, telephone interview by author, Paris, KY, 18 March, 2019.

[105]Brian Nathaniel Frye, "The Multi-Site Church Phenomenon in North America: 1950-2010" (PhD diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2011), 215-16.

[106]Ibid., 216.

the membership and campuses of multisite churches for church discipline, but he hints at it. Allison does call for "regular congregational meetings that bring together all the members from the various campuses" in order to "provide opportunities for the members to discharge their congregational responsibilities."[107] In other writings Allison advocates the assembly of the church body in the process of church discipline in accordance with 1 Corinthians 5:4-5 and Matthew 18:17 in order to demonstrate the judicial weightiness of church discipline as an exercise of the authority and judgment of Christ himself.[108] In light of Allison's understanding of church discipline, it is reasonable to assume that his reference to regular congregational meetings for the purpose of discharging congregational responsibilities includes discharging the congregational responsibility of church discipline.

The MCM also rarely speaks to the actual practice of church discipline within multisite churches. However, the rare occasions when multisite proponents do describe their practice of church discipline are revealing. Most significant is Jamus Edwards' large scale survey of 230 multisite churches. Of the 230 multisite churches surveyed in Edwards' study, 135 were representative SBC multisite churches.[109] One of Edwards' research questions was "Where does decision-making authority lie in multisite churches?" On matters of church discipline, 50.8 percent of respondents indicated that church discipline issues were handled at the senior leadership level, either by an executive leadership team (24.9 percent), a governing board (15.2 percent), or the lead

[107]Gregg R. Allison, "Theological Defense of Multi-Site," *9 Marks Journal* 6 (June 2009): 16.

[108]Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers*, 183-87.

[109]Jamus Edwards' dissertation presents a quantitative study of 230 representative multisite churches. Upon the recommendation of Brian Frye, Edwards sought to focus his study on trendsetting multisite churches. The trendsetting churches selected included the multisite churches listed on Outreach Magazine's list of the 100 fastest growing churches in 2014. Other churches that Edwards included in his list of trendsetting churches, after his consultation with Frye, included the 135 largest SBC multisite churches and all the multisite churches in the Acts 29 Network. Jamus Howell Edwards, "Leadership Structures and Dynamics in Multisite Churches: A Quantitative Study" (PhD diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2016), 16, 21.

pastor (10.7 percent). 47.2 percent answered that church discipline decisions were handled at the campus level, either by the campus pastor (42.6 percent) or the campus congregation (4.6 percent). Only 2 percent of respondents indicated that church discipline was handled by the entire congregation of the multisite church, including all campuses. Edwards' research thus indicates that of the 230 multisite churches surveyed, including 135 representative SBC churches, only 2 percent indicated that they address church discipline congregationally. Also noteworthy is that 46 survey participants did not respond to this question.[110] The large number of respondents who did not answer the question pertaining to church discipline perhaps indicates a lack of interest in church discipline from many multisite proponents.

The doctoral research of Chris Kouba is another quantitative project that touches on the practice of multisite church discipline. Kouba's quantitative work is a survey of 87 campus pastors from 45 multisite churches.[111] Based on 2 Timothy 4:2, Kouba writes of the need for the campus pastor to carry out church discipline.[112] When Kouba shares his survey results on church discipline, he reveals that 72 percent of the 87 campus pastors surveyed indicated that they lead in the practice of church discipline.[113] Kouba makes no mention of the congregation in his discussion of his findings on the practice of church discipline among the 45 multisite churches surveyed.

The most extensive discussion in multisite literature of church discipline within a particular multisite church comes from a ten-page section in Mark Driscoll's *Vintage Church: Timeless Truths and Timely Methods*. In this book Driscoll shares in detail about the church discipline process at the now disbanded Mars Hill Church in

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[110]Edwards, "Leadership Structures and Dynamics in Multisite Churches," 144-46.

[111]Christopher Barton Kouba, "Role of the Campus Pastor: Responsibilities and Practices in Multisite Churches" (DMin project, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2014), 20n20.

[112]Ibid., 38.

[113]Ibid., 42.

Seattle, Washington where he served as lead pastor at the time *Vintage Church* was published in 2009. Driscoll explicitly argues for the role of the entire congregation in church discipline. He writes that "Discipline is the responsibility of the church body, which includes Jesus Christ and the elders, deacons, and members of the church."[114] A few pages later, speaking of 1 Corinthians 5, Driscoll again asserts that "Christians in the Corinthian Church were to gather together in order to take action against the offending brother. Paul defines this as 'punishment by the majority.'"[115] Driscoll also references Romans 16:17-18 and 2 Thessalonians 3:6-15 as an indication that "the whole church" should be involved in the process of church discipline, "not just a few."[116] However, later in the chapter Driscoll clarifies that the actual excommunicatory act of church discipline at Mars Hill Church was undertaken by an elder court composed of two elders. When church members at Mars Hill Church were found to be guilty of a disciplinable offense by an elder court, they were "dismissed from the church by the agreement of the elder court" rather than the congregation. After church discipline had occurred, the congregation was informed, but only in some instances.[117]

The above survey of the practice of church discipline in multisite churches leads to three conclusions. First, church discipline is rarely discussed in multisite literature and is entirely absent from the mainstream multisite literature from groups such as Leadership Network and Multisite Solutions. Second, quantitative research reveals that the entire congregation, including all campuses, is rarely involved in church discipline in multisite churches. Third, when church discipline does occur in multisite churches, it is most frequently handled at the executive level, or by the campus pastor.

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[114]Mark Driscoll and Gerry Breshears, *Vintage Church: Timeless Truths and Timely Methods* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009), 170-71.

[115]Ibid., 173.

[116]Ibid., 173-74.

[117]Ibid., 182.

Ecclesiological Concerns with Multisite
Church Discipline Practices

The practice of church discipline in multisite churches presented above raises

further ecclesiological concerns for the MCM. The most foundational concern for the

multisite practice of church discipline is the failure of most multisite churches to

assemble the totality of their membership and campuses in one location. The New

Testament stipulates that church discipline be exercised in the context of the gathered

congregation (Matt 18:17; 1 Cor 5:4-5). Since most multisite churches never gather, they

are unable to practice church discipline in a way that is consistent with New Testament

ecclesiology.[118] Jesus has bound his authority for the exercise of church discipline to the

assembly of the church (Matt 18:18-20). It follows that if multisite churches never

assemble the totality of their membership and campuses in one location, then they do not

possess the authority of Jesus for church discipline.[119]

In the discussion of the multisite practice of church discipline, it should be

remembered that, as noted above, some multisite proponents do advocate multi-campus

gatherings for church discipline. For example, multisite proponent Brian Frye argues that

multisite churches should assemble the totality of their membership and campuses in one

location for governing purposes, including church discipline.[120] Multisite proponent

Gregg Allison does not explicitly argue that multisite churches should assemble the

totality of their membership and campuses in one location for church discipline. He does,

however, argue that multisite churches should assemble the totality of their membership

and campuses in one location in order to "discharge their congregational

responsibilities."[121] Allison's other writings indicate that part of the congregational

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[118]White and Yeats, *Franchising McChurch*, 200-2.

[119]Leeman, *Don't Fire Your Church Members*, 118.

[120]Frye, "The Multi-Site Church Phenomenon in North America," 215-16.

[121]Allison, "Theological Defense of Multi-Site," 16.

responsibilities to be discharged by multisite churches when campuses assembled is congregational church discipline.[122]

Nevertheless, the majority of multisite churches do not assemble the totality of their membership and campuses in one location in order to practice church discipline. In Edwards' quantitative research, only 2 percent of the 230 multisite churches surveyed, including 135 representative SBC multisite churches, involved the entire congregation across campuses in the practice of church discipline.[123] Similarly, in Kouba's quantitative research none of the 77 churches surveyed mentioned the involvement of the entire congregation across campuses in the practice of church discipline.[124] In multisite churches, church discipline is rarely congregational church discipline, even in SBC multisite churches.

Multisite churches who do occasionally assemble the totality of their membership and campuses in one location for the practice of church governance find themselves in a better position to practice church discipline in a way that is consistent with New Testament ecclesiology. Nevertheless, problems persist even for these multisite churches. Occasional assemblies of all multisite campuses and church members do not resemble the New Testament pattern of gathering weekly (Acts 20:7; 1 Cor 16:2). Multisite churches who assemble all campuses and members occasionally, on a quarterly basis for instance, are at best a weak and inconsistent church.[125] Exercising church discipline in the context of quarterly gatherings with strangers from other campuses is an awkward practice. Yet, in order to meet the biblical requirement of exercising church discipline in the context of the assembled church (Matt 18:17; 1 Cor 5:4-5), multisite

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[122]Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers*, 183-87.

[123]Edwards, "Leadership Structures and Dynamics in Multisite Churches," 144-46.

[124]Kouba, "Role of the Campus Pastor," 38-42.

[125]Leeman, *Don't Fire Your Church Members*, 119.

churches can only practice church discipline in gatherings when they assemble with the totality of their membership and campuses in one location. Practicing church discipline with strangers from other churches is much different from practicing church discipline with a "brother" as Jesus (Matt 18:15) and Paul (2 Thess 3:15) describe. The familial language of Jesus and Paul indicates that close relational proximity enables the most meaningful and most effective exercise of church discipline. As a parent is better equipped to discipline their child than a school principal, so a well-known brother is better equipped to exercise church discipline than a stranger from another campus.[126] It is difficult, if not impossible, for church members to make an informed judgment on matters of church discipline when they are unaware of the allegations against a brother and unable to observe that brother's life for signs or repentance or a lack thereof. The lack of relational proximity among multisite church members makes the multisite application of church discipline during quarterly multi-campus gatherings an unwise and awkward application of the authority of Christ.

In addition, multisite church members would also be unable to discern if a brother from another campus is "neglecting to meet together" with Christ's church (Heb 10:25). Where there is no accountability for church attendance, there will certainly be no accountability for personal holiness. Leeman is on point again:

> Market-savvy church leaders have figured out that they can employ several services for capturing different market segments. Especially market-savvy church leaders have figured out that they can begin several "campuses," all with the same, reliable franchise brand. They have forgotten—or never been taught—that real love requires personal knowledge, because personal knowledge is a precondition of accountability, discipline, and holiness. With thousands of members spread across several campuses, some sheep will be accounted for, but many will not. Many sheep will wander away looking for a better product, and no one will ever know.[127]

A multisite church that occasionally assembles the totality of their membership

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[126]Leeman, *Don't Fire Your Church Members*, 119.

[127]Leeman, *The Church and the Surprising Offense of God's Love*, 52-53.

and campuses in one location in quarterly gatherings for the practice of church discipline is technically able to meet the biblical standard of practicing church discipline in the midst of the assembled church (Matt 18:17; 1 Cor 5:4-5). This is technically true, but practically unwise and awkward. Moreover, exercising church discipline with strangers from other campuses does not resemble the familial language used in the New Testament admonitions for church discipline (Matt 18:15; 2 Thess 3:15). Worse yet, the fact remains that since most multisite churches never assemble the totality of their membership and campuses in one location, most multisite churches are unable to practice church discipline in the manner prescribed in the New Testament. As noted in the previous section, the Baptist tradition has also affirmed the necessity of the assembly of the entire congregation to enact church discipline. With rare exceptions, this means that most multisite churches are unable to practice church discipline in a manner consistent with New Testament ecclesiology and Baptist tradition. Even on occasions when a multisite church does assemble the totality of their membership and campuses in one location for the purpose of church discipline, the practice of church discipline divorced from relational proximity is unwise and awkward.

Conclusion: Don't Just Tell it to the Campus

In spite of the growing recognition of the modern absence of church discipline, few churches are moving to restore the practice of church discipline. The advent of the MCM and its prevalence within Southern Baptist life has further complicated this difficulty. While it is difficult to restore biblical church discipline in single site churches, this difficulty is compounded in multisite churches. For multisite churches who never assemble the totality of their membership and campuses in one location, practicing church discipline as one assembly is impossible.

The two most foundational texts of Scripture pertaining to church discipline call for the involvement of the entire congregation in the disciplinary process (Matt

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18:17; 1 Cor 5:4-5). In light of these texts and others referenced above, the Baptist tradition has regularly affirmed the importance of church discipline and the centrality of one assembly in the practice of church discipline. Since a multisite church is defined as "one church meeting in multiple locations," the practice of biblical church discipline is problematic for multisite churches.[128] If a multisite church is truly one church, then the entire congregation must assemble to practice church discipline if the church desires to maintain New Testament ecclesiology. For multisite churches that never assemble the totality of their membership and campuses in one location, which describes the majority of multisite churches, it is impossible to exercise church discipline as one assembly.[129]

Practical issues surrounding the MCM also make the faithful practice of church discipline a struggle within multisite churches. Even if a multisite church occasionally assembles the totality of their membership and campuses in one location, the members will not know one another. Without relational proximity, church members from one campus will be unfamiliar with the offense of a brother from another campus and of the presence or absence of repentance in his life. A lack of relational proximity also means an absence of the appropriate familial connectivity that should characterize church discipline (cf. the usage of "brother" in Matt 18:15 and 2 Thess 3:15). Still further, the absence of relational proximity also means that church members from one campus will be unable to discern if a brother from another campus is "neglecting to meet together" with Christ's church (Heb 10:25). The typical neglect of multisite churches to assemble the totality of their membership and campuses in one location leads to the absence of relational proximity which further hinders the potential for biblical church discipline.

Even if a multisite church does gather the totality of their campuses and

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[128]Geoff Surratt, Greg Ligon, and Warren Bird, *The Multi-Site Church Revolution: Being One Church in Many Locations* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 18.

[129]White and Yeats, *Franchising McChurch*, 202.

membership occasionally, attempts to practice congregational church discipline in the context of this occasional gathering will prove unwise and awkward due to the lack of relational proximity and familial connectivity amongst members from different campuses. These concerns are largely absent from the multisite church literature. In neglecting to speak to the compatibility of church discipline and multisite church polity, the MCM is quietly neglecting an important aspect of biblical ecclesiology. With rare exceptions, even when multisite practitioners attempt to practice biblical church discipline, the polity of their churches hinders them from doing so in a way that is consistent with New Testament ecclesiology and Baptist tradition.

CHAPTER 6

THE LORD'S SUPPER: ASSEMBLING FOR UNITY

Chapter 3 established the necessity of the assembly of the church based on the meaning and usage of *ekklesia* in the Septuagint and the New Testament. In addition to the biblical support, the chapter also established that the Baptist tradition has consistently affirmed the necessity of the assembly of the church. Since most multisite churches never assemble the totality of their membership and campuses in one location, chapter 3 concluded that the multisite church movement (MCM), with rare exceptions, is incompatible with New Testament ecclesiology and Baptist tradition. Chapters 4 and 5 built on the argumentation of chapter 3 by addressing two particular applications of the assembly of the church stipulated by New Testament ecclesiology. Chapter 4 established congregationalism as a particular application of the gathering of the church specified in the New Testament and in the Baptist tradition. Since most multisite churches never assemble the totality of their membership and campuses in one location, most multisite churches are unable to practice congregational church governance as described in the New Testament and in the Baptist tradition. In a similar fashion, chapter 5 presented church discipline as an additional application of the gathering of the church required by the New Testament and affirmed in the Baptist tradition. As was the case with congregationalism, since most multisite churches never assemble the totality of their membership and campuses in one location, most multisite churches are also unable to practice congregational church discipline in a way that is consistent with New Testament ecclesiology and with the Baptist tradition.

Chapter 6 continues to build on the argumentation of chapter 3 by focusing on

the Lord's Supper as the third and final application of the assembly of the church presented in this dissertation. It is argued that the New Testament prescribes the observance of the Lord's Supper in the context of the gathered congregation. Subsequently, it is argued that the Baptist tradition has also repeatedly affirmed the observance of the Lord's Supper in the context of the gathered congregation. Since most multisite churches never assemble the totality of their membership and campuses in one location, this chapter concludes that the MCM, with rare exceptions, is incompatible with New Testament ecclesiology and with the Baptist tradition pertaining to the observance of the Lord's Supper.

The argumentation of the present chapter differs from typical treatments of the Lord's Supper in Baptist tradition. Much discussion of the Lord's Supper in Baptist literature has centered on the debate between open and closed communion, including whether or not baptism is a prerequisite to the Lord's Supper, and the nature of Christ's presence in the supper. These discussions are essential to Baptist ecclesiology, but they are not uniquely pertinent to the practice of the Lord's Supper in multisite churches. Accordingly, the present chapter does not consider these issues. Instead, the argumentation of chapter 6 focuses on two aspects of the Lord's Supper that are uniquely pertinent to the practice of the ordinance in multisite churches, namely the necessity of the assembly of the church for the observance of the Lord's Supper and the demonstration of the unity of the local church in the Supper. After considering these two aspects of the Lord's Supper, the chapter evaluates the practice of the Lord's Supper in multisite churches. This chapter concludes that multisite churches who never assemble the totality of their membership and campuses in one location cannot observe the Lord's Supper in a way that is consistent with New Testament ecclesiology and Baptist tradition. This chapter further concludes that even if a multisite church does gather the totality of their membership and campuses occasionally, attempts to observe the Lord's Supper in the context of this occasional gathering will prove unwise and awkward due to the

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inability of multisite church members to rightly "discern the body" with strangers from different campuses (1 Cor 11:29).

The Necessity of Assembling for the Lord's Supper

The New Testament teaching on the Lord's Supper compels the church to assemble for the observance of the ordinance. In addition to the New Testament teaching, the Baptist tradition has also recognized the necessity of the assembly of the church for the observance of the Lord's Supper. This section first evaluates the New Testament teaching on the necessity of the assembly of the church in the observance of the Lord's Supper and then showcase the widespread affirmation of this New Testament teaching in the Baptist tradition.

The Necessity of Assembling for the Lord's Supper in the New Testament

Hints of the necessity of the assembly of the church for the observance of the Lord's Supper appear at the institution of the ordinance at the Last Supper. When speaking of the communal nature of the Lord's Supper, Tom Schreiner notes that the disciples observed the Last Supper together in community (Matt 26:26; Mark 14:22; Luke 22:19). He writes, "They don't eat it alone in their houses, nor do they eat it only with family members. They eat of it in the assembly." Schreiner goes on to cite Jesus' instructions for all of the disciples to eat the supper (Matt 26:27; Mark 14:23).[1] The disciples ate the Lord's Supper when assembled with Jesus and with one another.

The hints of the necessity of the assembly of the church for the observance of the Lord's Supper that appear at the institution of the ordinance at the Last Supper are more clearly seen when the typological relationship between the Lord's Supper and the

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[1] Thomas R. Schreiner, "The Lord's Supper in the Bible," in *Baptist Foundations: Church Government for an Anti-Institutional Age*, ed. Mark Dever, Jonathan Leeman, and James Leo Garrett (Nashville: B & H, 2015), 136.

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Passover is recognized. In instituting the Lord's Supper on Passover, Jesus linked these two observances and remade the Passover into a reflection on his death, resurrection, and return (Matt 26:18-19).[2] The typological relationship between the Lord's Supper and the Passover is further evidenced in Paul's reference to "Christ, our Passover lamb" (1 Cor 5:7). Exodus 12 indicates that the Lord instructed all of Israel to keep the Passover (Exod 12:3, 6, 47) and that all of Israel obeyed this instruction (Exod 12:50). The typological relationship between the Lord's Supper and the Passover indicates that the Lord's Supper is intended to be a communal ordinance in which the whole community of faith participate together, as was the case with the Passover.[3] Though Israel ate the Passover meal in private homes, they offered Passover sacrifices with "the whole assembly of the congregation of Israel" (Exod 12:6).

At the institution of the Lord's Supper at the Last Supper, Jesus also alluded to eating the Supper new in the kingdom of God. As they were eating, Jesus said to his disciples, "I tell you I will not drink again of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom" (Matt 26:29). With this statement, Jesus taught his disciples that the Lord's Supper is a rehearsal for and a foretaste of the great multitude who will one day assemble for the marriage supper of the Lamb described in Revelation 19:6-10.[4] Since the Lord's Supper anticipates the eschatological gathering of the universal church at the marriage supper of the Lamb, the practice of the Lord's Supper in the local church best pictures this eschatological assembly when the Lord's Supper is observed in the context of the gathering of the local church.

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[2]Mark Dever, *The Church: The Gospel Made Visible* (Nashville: B & H Academic, 2012), 36. Gregg R. Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers: The Doctrine of the Church* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 386-87. Bobby Jamieson, *Understanding the Lord's Supper* (Nashville: B & H, 2016), 10, 27-28.

[3]Roy E. Ciampa and Brian S. Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2010), 476.

[4]Dever, *The Church*, 38. Brian J. Vickers, "The Lord's Supper: Celebrating the Past and Future in the Present," in *The Lord's Supper: Remembering and Proclaiming Christ until He Comes*, ed. Thomas R. Schreiner and Thomas R. Crawford (Nashville: B & H Academic, 2010), 339.

The hints of the necessity of the assembly of the church for the observance of the Lord's Supper that appear at the institution of the ordinance at the Last Supper become clear instructions in 1 Corinthians 11:17-34, the most detailed treatment of the Lord's Supper in the New Testament. Paul uses the phrase "when you come together" five times in this passage, making it the key phrase that holds the entire text together (1 Cor 11:17, 18, 20, 33, 34). The flurry of Paul's usage of the phrase "when you come together" at the beginning and the end of his instructions on the Lord's Supper functions as a bracket that binds entire section together.[5] In addition to the bracketing feature of "when you come together," the fivefold repetition of the phrase also indicates its significance in Paul's instructions on the Lord's Supper.

Sunerchomai is the Greek verb translated as "when you come together" throughout 1 Corinthians 11:17-34. In its various forms found in the passage, *sunerchomai* denotes gathering together in the same place. In 1 Corinthians 11:18, the passive participle form *sunerchomenun* is combined with the phrase *humun en ekklesia*. In 1 Corinthians 11:20, the same passive participle form *sunerchomenun* is combined with the Greek phrase *epi to auto*. *Epi to auto*, which means "in the same place," was a phrase regularly employed in the early church for the gathering of the church.[6] In fact, *epi to auto* was used exclusively in the writings of the apostolic fathers in reference to the gathering of the church.[7] The meaning of *epi to auto* and the close proximity between

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[5]David E. Garland, *1 Corinthians*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 553. Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, rev. ed., New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2014), 594.

[6]Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 2000), 862. Everett Ferguson, "'When You Come Together': *Epi to Auto* in Early Christian Literature," *Restoration Quarterly* 16, no. 3/4 (1973): 202. Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, ed. Frederick W. Danker and William Arndt, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2000), 153.

[7]Ferguson, "'When You Come Together,'" 204-6. Clement of Rome used *epi to auto* in reference to the church gathering together for worship with one mouth. Clement of Rome, "The First Epistle of Clement to the Corinthians," in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325*, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 1950), 1:14. In his letter to the Ephesians, Ignatius spoke of the church gathering

sunerchomenun humun en ekklesia (1 Cor 11:18, "when you come together as a church") and *sunerchomenun oun humun epi to auto* (1 Cor 11:20, "when you come together [in the same place]") indicate the interchangeable nature of these two phrases. To come together as a church is to come together in the same place.[8] The gathering of the church in the same place is the prescribed context for the observation of the Lord's Supper in 1 Corinthians 11:17-34.

Commentators and theologians stand in widespread agreement that Paul's instructions on the Lord's Supper stipulate the observance of the Supper in the context of the assembled church.[9] More specifically, the observance of the Lord's Supper should occur in the context of the assembled church when the church is gathered for worship.[10] The necessity of assembling for the observance of the Lord's Supper lies behind Paul's

together in one place to "give thanks to God, and show forth his praise." In light of the eucharistic or thanksgiving element of the Lord's Supper (1 Cor 11:24; Matt 26:27; Mark 14:23; Luke 22:19), it is possible that Ignatius' reference to gathering together to give thanks has the Lord's Supper specifically in view. Ignatius, "The Epistle of Ignatius to the Ephesians," in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325*, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 1950), 1:55. In his letter to the Magnesians, Ignatius used *epi to auto* in reference to coming together in the same place in unity with "one prayer, one supplication, one mind, one hope." Ignatius, "The Epistle of Ignatius to the Magnesians," in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325*, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 1950), 1:62. In his letter to the Philippians, Ignatius utilized the phrase *epi to auto* to implore the Philippian church to be "joined together with an undivided heart" with "one accord and one judgment." Ignatius, "The Epistle of Ignatius to the Philippians," in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325*, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 1950), 1:83. The pseudepigraphal epistle attributed to Barnabas used *epi to auto* in reference to the Israelites coming together to grumble against Moses. Numbers 21:5-7 indicates that this gathering was comprised of all Israel. Barnabas, "The Epistle of Barnabas," in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325*, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 1950), 1:145. Justin Martyr described urban and rural believers gathering "together to one place" for Sunday worship with *epi to auto*. Justin Martyr, "The First Apology of Justin," in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325*, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 1950), 1:186.

[8]Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 597-98. Ferguson, "'When You Come Together,'" 205.

[9]Ray Van Neste, "The Lord's Supper in the Context of the Local Church," in *The Lord's Supper: Remembering and Proclaiming Christ until He Comes*, ed. Thomas R. Schreiner and Thomas R. Crawford (Nashville: B & H Academic, 2010), 369, 375-77. Schreiner, "The Lord's Supper in the Bible," 140. Ciampa and Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians*, 543. Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 536, 539. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 856. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 594, 597-98. Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers*, 408. Jamieson, *Understanding the Lord's Supper*, 19, 25-26, 42-43.

[10]Van Neste, "The Lord's Supper in the Context of the Local Church," 376.

instructions for the Corinthians to "wait for one another" (1 Cor 11:33). The Corinthians were not to partake of the Lord's Supper until the church was assembled. In first-century Corinth, this meant that upper class church members working shorter hours had to wait for working class church members working longer hours to arrive before observing the Lord's Supper. Waiting allowed the Corinthian congregation to delay taking the Lord's Supper until the church had fully assembled.[11]

Acts 20:7 also speaks to the assembly of the church in the observance of the Lord's Supper. The text describes the church at Troas gathering together "on the first day . . . to break bread." As in 1 Corinthians 11, Acts 20:7 describes the observance of the Lord's Supper during the gathering of the church. The language of the text, that the church in Troas was gathered together specifically to break bread, implies that the observance of the Lord's Supper was the purpose of their assembly.[12]

The consistent pattern that emerges in the New Testament is that the Lord's Supper assumes an assembled congregation each time it is mentioned.[13] For this reason, commentators and theologians often advise churches to refrain from practicing the Lord's Supper in settings other than the gathered congregation. For instance, the Lord's Supper is not to be observed during family gatherings, or in ministry functions such as a youth retreat, a wedding ceremony, or homebound and nursing home ministry.[14] Since the Lord's Supper is intended to be observed in the assembly of the church, the Lord's

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[11]Also behind Paul's instructions for the Corinthians to wait for one another is his desire for Lord's Supper to represent the unity and fellowship the Corinthian Christians share with Christ and with one another (1 Cor 10:16-17). The Lord's Supper as a demonstration of unity is addressed in the following section. Ciampa and Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians*, 559. Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 554-55.

[12]Schreiner, "The Lord's Supper in the Bible," 139.

[13]Van Neste, "The Lord's Supper in the Context of the Local Church," 369.

[14]Thomas White, "A Baptist's Theology of The Lord's Supper," in *The Lord's Supper: Remembering and Proclaiming Christ until He Comes*, ed. Thomas R. Schreiner and Thomas R. Crawford (Nashville: B & H Academic, 2010), 153. J. M. Pendleton, *Baptist Church Manual,* (1867; repr., Nashville: Broadman, 1966), 90. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 856. Jamieson, *Understanding the Lord's Supper*, 28, 42-43.

Supper cannot be replicated apart from the gathering of the congregation, even when a church attempts to do so.[15] The New Testament stipulates the necessity of the assembly of the local church for the observance of the Lord's Supper.

**The Necessity of Assembling for the
Lord's Supper in the Baptist Tradition**

The Baptist tradition has often recognized the necessity of assembling for the observance of the Lord's Supper. Since this dissertation argues that the MCM is inconsistent with New Testament ecclesiology and Baptist tradition, the traditional Baptist position on the importance of assembling for the Lord's Supper must be considered. This section presents the repeated affirmation of the necessity of assembling the church for the observance of the Lord's Supper in the Baptist tradition.

In 1697, Benjamin Keach, an influential British Baptist leader, published *The Glory of a True Church Displayed*. In addition to the quality of Keach's work, it is also significant because it stands as the first Calvinistic Baptist treatise specifically dedicated to ecclesiastical polity.[16] In describing disorderly church members who were subject to church discipline, Keach described those "who meet not with the Church when assembled together to worship God . . . or neglect their attendance on the Lord's Supper."[17] This quotation shows a close connection between the assembly of the church and the observance of the Lord's Supper in Keach's thinking. Later in this same work, Keach said of unbelievers "that all Persons have free liberty to assemble with the Church, and to partake of all Ordinances, save those which peculiarly belong to the Church; as the

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[15]Van Neste, "The Lord's Supper in the Context of the Local Church," 376-77.

[16]James Leo Garrett, *Baptist Theology: A Four-Century Study* (Macon, GA: Mercer University, 2009), 84.

[17]Benjamin Keach, "The Glory of a True Church and its Discipline Displayed," in *Polity: Biblical Arguments on How to Conduct Church Life*, ed. Mark Dever (Washington, DC: Center for Church Reform, 2000), 73.

Lord's Supper."[18] Notice that Keach described the Lord's Supper occurring during the assembly of the church.

Another early Baptist who affirmed the necessity of the assembly of the church for the observance of the Lord's Supper was English Baptist John Gill. In 1769, he wrote that the church was to celebrate the Lord's Supper "not in private houses, unless when the churches were obliged to meet there in times of persecution; but in the public place of worship, where and when the church convened . . . for this being a church ordinance, is not to be administered privately to single persons; but to the church in a body, assembled for that purpose."[19] For Gill, because the Lord's Supper was entrusted by the Lord to the church, it was to be observed in the assembly of the church.

The Baptist confessional tradition does not often speak to the necessity of assembly for the observance of the Lord's Supper. Instead, the Baptist confessional tradition has typically focused on the memorial nature of the Lord's Supper. However, the widely influential and widely distributed New Hampshire Baptist Confession of Faith from 1833 did speak to the necessity of assembly for the observance of the Lord's Supper. Article fourteen stated that "the members of the church . . . are to commemorate together the dying love of Christ."[20] The New Hampshire Confession placed the locus of commemorating Christ's death on the gathering of Christ's church. The church is to commemorate Christ's death when they are gathered together.

While serving as the inaugural president of the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC), W. B. Johnson wrote in 1846 on the necessity of assembly for the observance of the Lord's Supper. Johnson spoke of the Lord's Day as the first day of the week when the church assembles for various functions, including the Lord's Supper. He described how

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[18]Keach, "The Glory of a True Church and its Discipline Displayed," 88.

[19]John Gill, *A Body of Practical Divinity* (1770; repr., Paris, AR: Baptist Standard Bearer, 2000), 2:923.

[20]William Latane Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith* (Chicago: Judson, 1969), 366.

"The disciples at Troas came together on this day, to break bread in the Lord's Supper" in Acts 20:7.[21] Johnson also noted Paul's emphasis in 1 Corinthians 11 on observing the Lord's Supper when the church gathered together.[22] The particular gathering of the church Johnson had in mind was the weekly worship gathering. He wrote, "The faithful observance of these two ordinances in the order of the churches, viz: The stated meeting on the first day of the week, and the breaking of bread in the supper, will develop much, very much of the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, as to the foundation of a sinner's hope for salvation."[23]

Influential Baptist theologian John Leadley Dagg also indicated the necessity of assembling for the observance of the Lord's Supper just a few years after Johnson. In his 1858 *Manual of Theology*, Dagg also pointed to Acts 20:7 as an indication that the early believers assembled on the first day of the week to observe the Lord's Supper.[24] He went on to say that "The Lord's Supper was designed to be celebrated by each church in public assembly."[25] Commenting on 1 Corinthians 11, Dagg stated that Paul "then proceeds to mention the institution of the supper, and speaks of it as observed by the whole church as assembled . . . . The rite should be celebrated by the church, in public assembly . . . . To show his death requires that it be done in public."[26] For Dagg, the Lord's Supper is an ordinance entrusted to the church for observance in the public assembly of the local church.

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[21]W. B. Johnson, "The Gospel Developed Through the Government and Order of the Churches of Jesus Christ," in *Polity: Biblical Arguments on How to Conduct Church Life*, ed. Mark Dever (Washington, DC: Center for Church Reform, 2000), 203.

[22]Ibid., 204-5.

[23]Ibid., 236.

[24]J. L. Dagg, *Manual of Theology, Second Part: A Treatise on Church Order* (1858; repr., Harrisonburg, VA: Gano, 2012), 205.

[25]Ibid., 212.

[26]Ibid., 213.

Baptist church manuals have also affirmed the necessity of assembling for the observance of the Lord's Supper. Originally published in 1859, Edward Hiscox's *Directory for Baptist Churches* was highly influential in the northern United States. Hiscox instructed that the Lord's Supper was to be "partaken of by the members of the Church assembled."[27] The influence of the Hiscox *Directory* in the north was matched by the popularity of J. M. Pendleton's 1867 *Baptist Church Manual* in the south. Pendleton also affirmed the need for observing the Lord's Supper in the context of the assembled church when he wrote that "the meeting of a *church* is indispensable to a scriptural observance of the solemn feast."[28] Elsewhere Pendleton similarly wrote that "What Paul writes to the Corinthians (1 Cor 11:20-34) clearly indicates the necessity of coming together 'to eat the Lord's Supper.'"[29] Accordingly, "all the members of such a church are required to commemorate their Lord's death" in the Lord's Supper.[30] For Pendleton, the assembly of the church was an essential element of the proper observance of the Lord's Supper. In the twentieth century, H. E. Dana affirmed the necessity of the assembly of the church for the proper observance of the Lord's Supper in his *Manual of Ecclesiology*. Dana repeatedly argued for the assembled church as the proper context for the observance of the Lord's Supper.[31] Through popular Baptist church manuals such as those of Hiscox, Pendleton, and Dana, the necessity of assembling the church for observing the Lord's Supper became a widespread idea in Baptist circles.

A. H. Strong is another influential Baptist who affirmed the necessity of the

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[27]Edward T. Hiscox, *The New Directory for Baptist Churches* (1894; repr., Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1970), 132.

[28]Pendleton, *Baptist Church Manual,* 90.

[29]J. M. Pendleton, "Distinctive Principles of Baptists," in *Selected Writings of James Madison Pendleton*, ed. Thomas White (Paris, AR: Baptist Standard Bearer, 2006), 2:233.

[30]Ibid., 2:236-37.

[31]H. E. Dana and L. M. Sipes, *A Manual of Ecclesiology*, 2nd ed. (Kansas City, KS: Central Seminary, 1944), 295-97.

assembly of the church for the observance of the Lord's Supper. Strong's influence stemmed from his post as President of Rochester Theological Seminary in New York from 1872-1912. His greatest contribution to Baptist theology is his 1907 *Systematic Theology*. In this work, Strong defined the Lord's Supper as "that outward rite in which the assembled church eats bread broken and wine poured forth."[32] Notice that Strong defined the Lord's Supper as a rite for "the assembled church." Later he stated explicitly that the Lord's Supper "is to be celebrated by the assembled church" (Acts 20:7; 1 Cor 11:18, 20, 22, 33, 34).[33]

The traditional Baptist recognition of the necessity of the assembly of the church for the proper observance of the Lord's Supper continues in the modern day. Modern Baptist theologians regularly point to the assembly of the church as the proper context for observing the Lord's Supper.[34] However, it should be noted that the current confessional document of the SBC, the 2000 Baptist Faith and Message (BF&M) does not speak to the necessity of the assembly of the church for observing the Lord's Supper. The BF&M defines the Lord's Supper as "a symbolic act of obedience whereby members of the church, through partaking of the bread and the fruit of the vine, memorialize the death of the Redeemer and anticipate His second coming."[35] The BF&M follows the Baptist confessional tradition in emphasizing the memorial element of the Lord's Supper.

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[32]Augustus Hopkins Strong, *Systematic Theology: A Compendium Designed for the Use of Theological Students* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson, 1907), 959.

[33]Ibid., 961.

[34]Wayne A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 997. John S. Hammett, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches: A Contemporary Ecclesiology* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2005), 261. Shawn D. Wright, "The Lord's Supper in History, Theology, and the Church," in *Baptist Foundations: Church Government for an Anti-Institutional Age*, ed. Mark Dever, Jonathan Leeman, and James Leo Garrett (Nashville: B & H, 2015), 160-61. Bobby Jamieson, *Going Public: Why Baptism Is Required for Church Membership* (Nashville: B & H Academic, 2015), 118, 130. R. Stanton Norman, *The Baptist Way: Distinctives of a Baptist Church* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2005), 148, 154.

[35]Southern Baptist Convention, "The Baptist Faith and Message: The 2000 Baptist Faith & Message," June 14, 2000, http://www.sbc.net/bfm2000/bfm2000.asp.

Only the 1833 New Hampshire Confession mentioned the corporate commemoration of the Lord's Supper.[36] In spite of the infrequent mention of the necessity of the assembly of the church for the observance of the Lord's Supper in the Baptist confessional tradition, the traditional Baptist affirmation of this necessity is well established in Baptist literature.

Breaking Bread in Acts

The primary argumentation of this chapter to this point is that the New Testament stipulates the assembly of the church for the observance of the Lord's Supper and that the Baptist tradition affirms this stipulation. A potential objection to this line of argumentation is the early Christian practice of breaking bread as recorded in Acts. Acts 2:42-47 describes the early church breaking bread from house to house in smaller assemblies rather than in one corporate assembly. In response to this potential objection, this section evaluates the three texts in Acts where the practice of breaking bread is described. These texts are Acts 2:42-47, 20:7-12, and 27:33-38. The evaluation of these texts reveals that breaking bread can be a reference to the Lord's Supper in Acts, but is not necessarily a reference to the Lord's Supper in every usage.

The first text under consideration it Acts 2:42-47. Acts 2:42 states that the early believers "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers." A second reference to breaking bread in this text occurs in verse forty-six where the early believers are said to be "breaking bread in their homes." Commentators are divided as to whether or not the Lord's Supper is in view in Acts 2:42-47. John Polhill, Gordon Fee, and Ben Witherington understand breaking bread and prayer to be grammatically in apposition to fellowship in Acts 2:42.[37] In their

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[36]Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, 366.

[37]John B. Polhill, *Acts*, The New American Commentary, vol. 26 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1992), 119. F. F. Bruce, *Acts*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 1988), 73. Ben Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 1998), 160-61.

understanding, breaking bread and prayer define the nature of fellowship in the early church.[38] Polhill also argues that the connection between breaking bread and fellowship entails a cultic meaning of breaking bread which indicates that the Lord's Supper is in view. Another layer of Polhill's argument is that *klasis* ("to break") is a technical term for the Lord's Supper in Luke-Acts (Luke 22:19, 24:30, 35; Acts 2:42, 46, 20:7, 11, 27:35).[39]

Other commentators do not believe the Lord's Supper is in view in Acts 2:42-47. Darrell Bock argues that the context of Acts 2:46 identifies breaking bread as eating an ordinary meal rather than observing the Lord's Supper.[40] Acts 2:46 says, "and day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts." David Peterson also concludes on the basis of Acts 2:46 that a common meal is in view rather than the Lord's Supper. He notes the customary Jewish practice of a family meal where the father breaks bread before the family to signal the beginning of the meal and to offer thanksgiving to God. For Peterson, since eating is in view in Acts 2:46, it is unlikely that a different understanding of breaking bread is intended by Luke in Acts 2:42.[41] Bock and Peterson make the most compelling argument.

The second text under consideration is Acts 20:7-12. Of the three texts under consideration in this section, this text presents the strongest case that breaking bread is a reference to the Lord's Supper. Acts 20:7 describes a scene when Paul and his travel companions (Acts 20:1-6) arrived in Troas and "on the first day of the week . . . gathered together to break bread" with the church at Troas. The church appears to be gathered in

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[38]Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 160.

[39]Polhill, *Acts*, 119.

[40]Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 150, 154.

[41]David Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2009), 161.

worship for the purpose of breaking bread. The setting of purposeful worship likely indicates that the Lord's Supper is in view. Some commentators understand the passage to be describing the observance of the Lord's Supper in the context of a fellowship meal,[42] as was the case in Corinth.[43] Polhill notes the second reference to breaking bread in this passage in Acts 20:11 which describes Paul breaking bread and eating. He then concludes that two meals are in view in this text, the Lord's Supper in Acts 20:7 and a larger fellowship meal in Acts 20:11.[44] An alternative understanding is that as Acts 2:46 clarifies that breaking bread in Acts 2:42 refers to an ordinary meal, so Acts 20:11 clarifies that breaking bread in Acts 20:7 also refers to an ordinary meal.[45] However, on the basis of the corporate worship setting of Acts 20:7, it is best to conclude that the Lord's Supper is in view here. The corporate gathering for breaking bread here is consistent with Paul's prescription for the gathering of the church in Corinth for the observance of the Lord's Supper (1 Cor 11:17, 18, 20, 33, 34).

The third text under consideration is Acts 27:33-38. This text reveals the interaction between Paul and his fellow shipmates while they were lost at sea in route to Rome. Aristarchus and Luke accompanied Paul in this journey (Acts 27:2), but the majority of the 276 persons on board (Acts 27:37) appear to be mainly unbelievers, including other prisoners (Acts 27:1). On their fourteenth day adrift, Paul implored his shipmates to eat (Acts 27:33-34). Following his admonition, Paul "took bread, and giving thanks to God in the presence of all he broke it and began to eat" (Acts 27:36). The others on board followed his example and also ate (Acts 27:36). Given that this scene does not occur in the context of a worship gathering and that both believers and unbelievers were

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[42]Bruce, *Acts*, 384.

[43]Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 606.

[44]Polhill, *Acts*, 420.

[45]Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 557.

present, there is widespread agreement that the Lord's Supper is not in view here.[46]

Conversely, Gordon Fee argues that the eucharistic language in the text ("and giving thanks to God") indicates that this was the Lord's Supper in a limited sense. Fee argues that although "to the majority this was an ordinary meal," for believers "who ate with eucharistic intention (Paul and his fellow-Christians) it was a valid eucharist."[47] Fee's interpretation of a secret Lord's Supper makes for an awkward understanding of the passage. Since the Lord's Supper is intended to be a proclamation of Christ's death, it is untenable that it would be done in stealth (1 Cor 11:26). It is more tenable to understand that Paul is merely practicing the Jewish custom of breaking bread and giving thanks before a meal.[48]

Taken together, Acts 2:42-47, 20:7-12, and 27:33-38 do not contradict the argumentation of the previous section. In fact, all three texts could be interpreted as references to ordinary meals.[49] In light of the context of Acts 2:46, it seems best to interpret the references to breaking bread in Acts 2:42 and 2:46 as references to ordinary meals. The secular context of Acts 27:33-38 is strong evidence that the Lord's Supper is also not in view when Paul breaks bread at sea. Paul's explicit teaching on the Lord's Supper stipulates the observance of the ordinance when the church comes together (1 Cor 11:17, 18, 20, 33, 34). As a travel companion of Paul, Luke was aware of Paul's understanding of the Lord's Supper and would not have contradicted Paul's teaching. The strongest case in Acts that breaking bread can refer to the Lord's Supper comes from Acts 20:7-12. No contextual clues in this passage exclude the possibility that the breaking

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[46]Polhill, *Acts*, 527. Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 772-73. Bock, *Acts*, 740. Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 693-94. Dagg, *Manual of Theology*, 206. Schreiner, "The Lord's Supper in the Bible," 137.

[47]Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 492.

[48]Polhill, *Acts*, 527. Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 694.

[49]Schreiner, "The Lord's Supper in the Bible," 137.

of bread that occurred in Troas is a reference to the Lord's Supper. Rather, the corporate worship setting of Acts 20:7 indicates the likelihood that the Lord's Super is in view in this text. The scene in Troas presents an atypical case of visiting communion. Nevertheless, the breaking of bread as a reference to the Lord's Supper in Acts 20:7-12 does not negate the necessity of assembling for the Lord's Supper argued in the preceding section for Luke described the church breaking bread "when [they] were gathered together" in Acts 20:7. Accordingly, the references to breaking bread in Acts do not negate the necessity of assembling for the Lord's Supper that is consistently presented elsewhere in the New Testament.

The Lord's Supper as a Display of Unity

In addition to compelling the assembly of the church for the observance of the Lord's Supper, the New Testament also portrays the ordinance as a visible sign of unity between Christ and his church and between church members. Along with the New Testament emphasis of the Lord's Supper as a visible demonstration of church unity, the Baptist tradition has also affirmed the Supper as a visible demonstration of church unity. This section follows the pattern of the previous section on the necessity of assembling for the observance of the Lord's Super. First, the New Testament teaching on the Lord's Supper as a visible demonstration of church unity is presented. Second, the widespread affirmation of the Lord's Supper as a visible demonstration of church unity in the Baptist tradition is presented.

The Demonstration of Church Unity in the Lord's Supper in the New Testament

One of the Lord's intentions for his Supper is the exemplification of church unity. In 1 Corinthians 10:16-17, Paul writes "The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all

partake of the one bread." The Greek word here translated as "participation" is *koinonia*, which is typically translated as "fellowship." In the larger section of 1 Corinthians 10:16-20, *koinonia* is used four times to emphasize the fellowship signaled in the Lord's Supper.[50] In addition to the usage of *koinonia* in this section, verse 17 further explains that there is one body because there is one bread. The local church is made into one body precisely because they partake of one loaf in the Lord's Supper. "*Because* there is one bread, we who are many are one body, *for* we all partake of the one bread" (1 Cor 10:17; italics mine). The effectual nature of the Lord's Supper is in view here. The Lord's Supper actually makes the many members of the church into one body and constitutes them as one church.[51] There is pervasive scholastic agreement pertaining to the unifying dimension of the Lord's Supper. When the church partakes of one bread, they are united together as one body.[52] The teaching that the Lord's Supper unites believers into one body as church members in 1 Corinthians 10:16-17 is in keeping with the theme of church unity that runs throughout 1 Corinthians (1 Cor 1:10-13, 3:4-9, 14:12).[53]

A deeper look at the context of 1 Corinthians 10:16-17 reveals that Paul's main concern for the Corinthians in this section is their abstinence from idolatry. Since the Lord's Supper unites Christians in fellowship with Christ (1 Cor 10:16-17) and since participating in idolatrous practices unites participants in fellowship with demons (1 Cor 10:20), believers are to flee from idolatry (1 Cor 10:14) because they cannot have

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[50]Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 477.

[51]Jamieson, *Understanding the Lord's Supper*, 15, 37-38.

[52]Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1998), 1112. Vickers, "The Lord's Supper: Celebrating the Past and Future in the Present," 328-29. Van Neste, "The Lord's Supper in the Context of the Local Church," 375. Ciampa and Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians*, 469, 476. Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 476-78. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 763-70. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 515-18. Schreiner, "The Lord's Supper in the Bible," 140. Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers*, 366, 391, 405, 408. Jamieson, *Understanding the Lord's Supper*, 15, 27, 37-38.

[53]Ciampa and Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians*, 476.

fellowship with the Lord and with demons (1 Cor 10:21).[54] Two fellowships of this nature are mutually exclusive. In this line of argumentation, Paul then leverages the unity between believers and Christ demonstrated in the Lord's Supper (1 Cor 10:16) to remind the Corinthian church of their unity with one another that is also demonstrated in the ordinance (1 Cor 10:17). In partaking of the Lord's Supper, the Corinthian believers not only have fellowship with Christ, they also have fellowship with one another. The Lord's Supper is a church ordinance that unites believers to one another in one body as they corporately visualize their common confession of faith in Jesus.

Sadly, the unifying element of the Lord's Supper is often downplayed in modern thinking. The practice of church members partaking from one loaf typically has no place in the modern observance of the Lord's Supper.[55] Roy Ciampa and Brian Rosner note in their excellent commentary on 1 Corinthians that 1 Corinthians 10:16-17 "has been remarkably underused in most churches' theology and liturgy of the Lord's Supper, for which all the weight ends up resting on 11:23-29."[56] The neglect of 1 Corinthians 10:16-17 in the modern explanation and observance of the Lord's Supper is particularly unfortunate because the passage sets the context for Paul's extensive teaching on the Supper in 1 Corinthians 11:17-34, which also highlights the issue of church unity.

Paul's concern for unity within the church of Corinth brackets 1 Corinthians 11:17-34. The section opens with a word of rebuke (1 Cor 11:17) followed by a statement of Paul's awareness of the divisions among the Corinthian church (1 Cor 11:18). When it came to the Lord's Supper, divisions surfaced around the economic disparity between

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[54]James M. Hamilton, Jr., "The Lord's Supper in Paul: An Identity-Forming Proclamation of the Gospel," in *The Lord's Supper: Remembering and Proclaiming Christ until He Comes*, ed. Thomas R. Schreiner and Thomas R. Crawford (Nashville: B & H Academic, 2010), 75. Ciampa and Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians*, 473. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 511-14.

[55]Van Neste, "The Lord's Supper in the Context of the Local Church," 375.

[56]Ciampa and Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians*, 469.

church members.[57] In Corinth, the Lord's Supper had become "a theatre of wealth and poverty."[58] The practice of the Supper in Corinth was preceded by a love feast. At the feast, some were going hungry while others were getting drunk (1 Cor 11:21). The picture is one of wealthy church members gathering sooner due to their freedom from a laborious work schedule while impoverished church members gathered later when their work responsibilities were completed.[59] Upon the late arrival of impoverished church members, indulgent wealthy church members were drunk, and insufficient food remained. Famine conditions in first-century Corinth further exacerbated the economic disparity.[60] To alleviate the division, Paul counsels the Corinthians, "so then my brothers, when you come together to eat, wait for one another" (1 Cor 11:33).

In the context of his instructions to the Corinthians concerning the abolition of their socio-economic divisions, Paul also issues a warning against taking the Lord's Supper unworthily. He writes, "Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord" (1 Cor 11:27). Two verses later, Paul clarifies what it is to partake of the Lord's Supper in an unworthy manner when he states that "anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself" (1 Cor 11:29). Commentators are divided over the referent of "the body" in 1 Corinthians 11:29. Some commentators believe that Paul is looking back to 1 Corinthians 10:16-17 so that the body to be discerned is the one church body.[61] Gordon Fee holds to this position concluding that the absence of the genitive modifier "of the Lord" (Gr. *tou kuriou*) in 1 Corinthians 11:29

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[57]Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 533-34.

[58]Ibid., 534.

[59]Ciampa and Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians*, 545.

[60]Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 535. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 853.

[61]Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 623. Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 997.

means that the body and blood of Christ memorialized in the supper are not in view in this verse as in 1 Corinthians 11:27. In this view, "discerning the body" in the observance of the Lord's Supper is a reminder to evaluate and maintain local church unity.[62] Other commentators believe the local referent from 1 Corinthians 11:27, "the body and blood of the Lord," is in view.[63] Anthony Thiselton argues for this position on the basis of the textual distance between 1 Corinthians 11:29 and 1 Corinthians 10:16-17, stating that these texts are too far apart for Paul to expect readers of 11:29 to refer back to 10:16-17.[64] In this view, "discerning the body" pertains to remembering the sacrifice of Christ in the observance of the Lord's Supper.

In considering the two views on 1 Corinthians 11:29, it is important to note that both views understand that the text pertains to unity. Fee, who understands "the body" as a reference to the body of the church, notes that the text reminds the Corinthian church that sociological differences are not permitted at the Lord's table for the church is one body.[65] David Garland, who advocates that "the body" refers to the physical body of Christ also notes that if the Corinthian believers are reminded of the significance of the sacrifice of Christ in the Lord's Supper, then they will also act compassionately toward their brothers and sisters in Christ.[66] Schreiner concludes that "The two themes are closely connected in any case, for believers eat in an unworthy manner when they

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[62]Gordon Fee also connects 1 Cor 11:29 to 1 Cor 10:17 by noting that Paul singled out the bread alone in 10:17 as he singled out the body alone in 11:29. A final line of argumentation that Fee presents is the anticipation of 1 Cor 12:12-26. If the body to be discerned in 1 Cor 11:29 is the local church body, then Paul is anticipating his coming argumentation in 1 Cor 12:12-26 that the church is one body. If the body referred to in 1 Cor 11:29 is the physical body of Christ, then this connection is lost. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 623-24.

[63]Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 552-53. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 893. Schreiner, "The Lord's Supper in the Bible," 142.

[64]Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 893.

[65]Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 624.

[66]Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 552-53.

mistreat other believers."[67] Regardless of the referent, "discerning the body" points to the demonstration of church unity in the observance of the Lord's Supper. Nevertheless, it is best to interpret Paul's reference to "discerning the body" as a reference to the body of the church. Fee's argument concerning the absence of the genitive modifier "of the Lord" (Gr. *tou kuriou*) in 1 Corinthians 11:29 is convincing.[68] In addition to Fee's grammatical argument, the liturgy of remembrance concerning the body and blood of the Lord that Paul provides in this context makes it difficult to imagine that the Corinthians would be able to observe the Lord's Supper without reflecting on Christ's broken body (1 Cor 11:23-25). If the Corinthians followed Paul's liturgy, they would have no need of being reminded to discern the physical body of Christ again. It is best then to understand "discerning the body" as a reference to discerning the body of the church in order to evaluate and maintain local church unity.

Taken together, 1 Corinthians 10-11 repeatedly call for a display of unity in the observance in the Lord's Supper. The one bread reminds the Corinthian believers that they are one body (1 Cor 10:16-17). The church is instructed to take steps to overcome their sinful practice of the Lord's Supper which highlighted their economic disparity (1 Cor 11:17-22, 33-34). The prescribed steps were designed to enable the portrayal of unity in the practice of the Lord's Supper. "Discerning the body" also refers to church unity, for the church is unified in remembering the sacrifice of Christ and in reflecting upon interchurch relationships.[69] In the New Testament, the Lord's Supper is intended to

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[67]Schreiner, "The Lord's Supper in the Bible," 142.

[68]The modifier "of the Lord" (Gr. *tou kuriou*) is present in the related text of 1 Cor 11:27 to specify that the physical body of Christ is in view in that text. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 623-24.

[69]Hamilton, Jr., "The Lord's Supper in Paul," 94-96. Ciampa and Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians*, 555. Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 552-53. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 891-93. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 623-24. Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 997. Schreiner, "The Lord's Supper in the Bible," 142. Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers*, 394, 407. Jamieson, *Understanding the Lord's Supper*, 18.

demonstrate the unity of the local church.

The Demonstration of Church Unity in
the Lord's Supper in Baptist Tradition

Having considered the New Testament call for the demonstration of church unity in the Lord's Supper, this section presents the traditional Baptist understanding of the demonstration of church unity in the observance of the Lord's Supper. Since this dissertation argues that the MCM is inconsistent with New Testament ecclesiology and with Baptist tradition, both must be considered. The presentation of the traditional Baptist understanding of the demonstration of church unity in the observance of the Lord's Supper in this section is the final layer of argumentation necessary prior to the comparison between the practice of the Lord's Supper in multisite churches and the practice of the Lord's Supper in the New Testament and in Baptist tradition presented in the next section.

Two writings of the early church serve as an insightful background to the Baptist tradition. Commenting on the Lord's Supper, the first-century Christian document entitled the *Didache* noted that the church has come together as one body "even as this broken bread was scattered over the hills, and was gathered together and become one."[70] Augustine of Hippo echoes this sentiment. In a sermon, he cited 1 Corinthians 10:17 in reference to the unity portrayed in the Lord's Supper that is pictured in the bread and the cup. He described how many people are brought together as one body of Christ in the church in a similar fashion as many grains come together into one loaf and as many grapes are used to make one cup of wine.[71] The imagery presented in these early Christian works is that just as the heads of grain and grapes that come together to form

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[70]"The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles," in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325*, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 1950), 7:380.

[71]Augustine of Hippo, "Sermon 272," in *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century*, ed. John E. Rotelle (Brooklyn: New City, 1990), 301.

the bread and wine taken in the Lord's Supper were once scattered across the hillside, so the church is a community once scattered but now brought together as one body in Christ. The early church understood even the elements of the Lord's Supper as a picture of the church unity demonstrated in the Supper.

The English Baptist confessional tradition also reveals an understanding of the Lord's Supper as a demonstration of unity. Article three of the 1527 Schleitheim Confession of the Anabaptists, a forerunner confession to the later Baptist confessions of faith, argued that only believers are to partake of the Lord's Supper for those who have not been united to Christ "cannot be made into one bread" with the church.[72] Since unbelievers are not united to Christ or his church, the Anabaptists believed they should not participate in the Lord's Supper because they cannot accurately portray the unity the Supper intends to display. John Smyth's 1609 Short Confession of Faith in XX Articles represents the first Baptist confession of faith following the formation of the first Baptist church in 1607. In it, Smyth contended that "The Lord's Supper is the external sign of the communion of Christ, and of the faithful amongst themselves by faith and love."[73] Notice that Smyth specified that the Supper signifies the communion of believers, which points to their unity as a church. Later in the seventeenth century, the lengthy 1677 Second London Confession of Faith stated that the Lord's Supper is "to be observed in his churches . . . and to be a bond and pledge of their communion with him, and with each other."[74] For the Particular Baptists in London who drafted this confession, the Lord's Supper was not only a demonstration of church unity, but also a pledge by church members toward one another concerning their communion as one body.

The English Baptist understanding of the demonstration of unity in the Lord's

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[72]Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, 26.

[73]Ibid., 101.

[74]Ibid., 291.

Supper continued into the eighteenth century under the teaching of the influential Baptist pastor and theologian John Gill. For Gill, many members partaking of one bread in the Lord's Supper is an emblem that the many members belong to one church body.[75] He also understood maintaining unity as a purpose of the Supper. Commenting on the Lord's Supper, Gill wrote, "another end of it is to maintain love and unity with one another."[76] For Gill, the Lord's Supper is both a symbol of unity and a means to unity.

The understanding of the demonstration of church unity in the Lord's Supper is also evident among Baptists in America. With 1 Corinthians 10:16-17 in mind, John Dagg wrote in 1858 of how the Supper signifies fellowship among the participants. Dagg went on to describe this fellowship as follows: "believers meet around the table of the Lord, in one faith in the same atonement, in one hope of the same inheritance, and with one heart filled with love to the same Lord."[77] In Dagg's thinking, the Lord's Supper symbolizes to believers the common faith in Christ they share, thus fostering unity.

Also in the 1850s, James Petigru Boyce labored to establish The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary (SBTS). As a part of his pioneering work in Southern Baptist theological education, Boyce developed a confessional document on which the seminary would stand. Completed in 1858, this document is known as The Abstract of Principles. In article sixteen, the abstract described the Lord's Supper as "a bond, pledge and renewal of their communion with him, and of their church fellowship."[78] Boyce understood the Supper to be a bond of communion with Christ and with his church. By including these words in the abstract, Boyce engraved the unifying aspect of the Lord's

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[75]Gill, *A Body of Practical Divinity*, 2:920.

[76]Ibid., 2:923.

[77]Dagg, *Manual of Theology*, 211.

[78]James Petigru Boyce, *Abstract of Systematic Theology* (Hanford, CA: Den Dulk Christian Foundation, 1887). No page number is given for this quotation. This work contains a publication of The Abstract of Principles in Appendix B, but no page numbers are given for this appendix.

Supper into the foundational document of SBTS. Since SBTS professors were and are bound to teach in compliance with the abstract, generations of Southern Baptist leaders have been trained to perceive the unity the Lord intends to display in his Supper and to instruct others of the unifying nature of the Lord's Supper.

In the era of Dagg and Boyce, Baptist church manuals also spoke to the display of unity in the Lord's Supper. Originally published in 1859, Edward Hiscox's *Directory for Baptist Churches* rightly indicated that the primary intention of the Supper is to memorialize the sacrifice of Christ.[79] Nevertheless, Hixcox did not neglect the demonstration of unity in the Lord's Supper. He wrote that the Supper also "expresses, inferentially indeed, a fellowship of all who partake with each other."[80] Just a few years later, in his 1867 *Baptist Church Manual*, J. M. Pendleton also argued that believers express their communion with one another in the practice of the Lord's Supper.[81] Elsewhere, Pendleton cited 1 Corinthians 10:17 to identify the unity portrayed in the Lord's Supper when church members all partake of the same loaf.[82] When the church manuals of Hiscox and Pendleton were widely distributed, the concept of the demonstration of unity in the Lord's Supper was widely distributed with them.

The understanding of the demonstration of unity in the observance of the Lord's Supper continued into the twentieth century among prominent Baptists. Baptist theologian A. H. Strong argued that the Lord's Supper symbolizes that all believers have partaken in Christ. As a result, Strong saw a "consequent oneness of all in whom Christ dwells . . . by being united to Christ, we become united to one another" in the observance

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[79]Hiscox, *The New Directory for Baptist Churches*, 132.

[80]Ibid., 137.

[81]Pendleton, *Baptist Church Manual*, 89.

[82]Pendleton, "Distinctive Principles of Baptists," 2:236-37.

of the ordinance.[83] In addition to the scholastic emphasis on the portrayal of church unity in the supper in the twentieth-century, a popular level understanding of this concept also existed. Famed SBC pastor W. A. Criswell also wrote that 1 Corinthians 10:16-17 indicates that the Lord's Supper stresses the communion of believers with one another. Partaking of one loaf is a visible demonstration of the unity believers have with one another. For Criswell, any true expression of the Lord's Supper inseparably leads to communion with Christ and with fellow believers.[84]

Modern Baptist theologians have continued to affirm the demonstration of church unity in the practice of the Lord's Supper.[85] Three contributions on this subject from modern Baptists are particularly noteworthy. First, Mark Dever notes that holiness is the specific way in which the church expresses the unity displayed in the Lord's Supper.[86] That is, the Lord's Supper displays that church members have received the righteousness of Christ by faith and are now aspiring to live out the implications of this imputed righteousness in practical holiness. Holiness is the aspiration around which the church is unified. Second, Stanley Grenz notes that the ongoing observation of the Lord's Supper functions as a repeated affirmation of the unity the church shares with Christ and with one another.[87] The repeated display of unity Grenz points out signifies the significance of displaying unity in the Lord's Supper. The display is so significant that it

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[83]Strong, *Systematic Theology*, 963.

[84]W. A. Criswell, *The Doctrine of the Church* (Nashville: Convention, 1980), 101.

[85]Stanley J. Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994), 699-701. Russell Moore, "Baptist View: Christ's Presence as Memorial," in *Understanding Four Views on the Lord's Supper*, ed. John H. Armstrong (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 41-42. Norman, *The Baptist Way*, 148-51. Hammett, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches*, 282. James Leo Garrett, *Systematic Theology: Biblical, Historical, and Evangelical* (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 1990), 2:672. Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 997. Jamieson, *Going Public*, 109-13. Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers*, 366, 391, 394, 405, 407-8. Jamieson, *Understanding the Lord's Supper*, 13-15, 27, 37-38.

[86]Dever, *The Church*, 36.

[87]Stanley J. Grenz, "Baptism and the Lord's Supper as Community Acts: Toward a Sacramental Understanding of the Ordinances," in *Baptist Sacramentalism*, ed. Anthony R. Cross and Phillip E. Thompson (Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster, 2003), 93.

is to be continually repeated in church practice. Third, Millard Erickson argues that since the depiction of unity is central to the observation of the Lord's Supper, then to take the Supper while factions and divisions remain is a contradiction of the very intention of the ordinance.[88] The church must be unified before she can properly display her unity. Recent contributions to the demonstration of unity in the observance of the Lord's Supper indicate that the understanding of the importance of displaying unity in the Supper persists. Modern Baptist theologians reaffirm what Baptist forebears have taught; the Lord's Supper is a unity-displaying ordinance. This is the teaching of the New Testament and this teaching is repeatedly affirmed by the Baptist tradition.

The Lord's Supper, the Baptist Tradition, and the Multisite Church Movement

While little is written about the Lord's Supper in the multisite church literature, the New Testament teaching on the observance of the Lord's Supper has significant implications for multisite ecclesiology. The previous sections established the necessity of the assembly of the church for the observance of the Lord's Supper and the intended demonstration of church unity in the Supper. These aspects of the Lord's Supper were presented from the perspectives of New Testament ecclesiology and the Baptist tradition. This section assesses the discussion of the Lord's Supper in multisite church literature in light of the teaching on the ordinance in the New Testament and in the Baptist tradition presented above. It is argued that the practice of the Lord's Supper in multisite churches is inconsistent with New Testament ecclesiology and with Baptist tradition because most multisite churches never assemble the totality of their campuses and membership in one place for the observance of the Lord's Supper. The failure to assemble for the Lord's Supper is inconsistent with New Testament ecclesiology and with Baptist tradition. With rare exceptions, the observance of the Lord's Supper in multisite churches displays a

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[88]Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 1112.

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fractured fellowship scattered across multiple locations rather than a unified body in a churchwide assembly.

The Lord's Supper in Multisite Church Literature

Minimal discussion of the Lord's Supper exists in multisite church literature. However, when the Lord's Supper does come up in multisite literature, a poor understanding of the Supper is typically reflected. This section first examines the discussion in the multisite literature pertaining to the necessity of the assembly of the church for the Lord's Supper. The section then examines the discussion in the multisite literature concerning the demonstration of unity in the Lord's Supper.

Concerning the multisite perspective on the need for assembling to observe the Lord's Supper, some multisite proponents do insist upon the assembly of the church for the ordinance. In his full-length ecclesiology *Sojourners and Strangers*, Southern Baptist theologian and multisite proponent Gregg Allison specifies the participation of all church members in the observance of the Lord's Supper. He writes, "When the church—all its members—observes the ordinance in a worthy manner, the Lord's Supper symbolizes and fosters the unity of the body of Christ."[89] Allison goes on to state that the displayed unity of the local body of Christ also pictures the unity of the universal church. The unity symbolized in the Supper leads him to "advocate that administration of the Lord's Supper should be reserved for times when the entire church can gather together for its celebration."[90] Allison's treatment of the Lord's Supper reflects an understanding of the two aspects of the Lord's Supper discussed above, namely the necessity of assembling for the Supper and the demonstration of unity in the Supper. More specifically, Allision keenly unites these two aspects of the Lord's Supper. The church must assemble for the

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[89]Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers*, 408.

[90]Ibid.

Lord's Supper precisely because of the intended display of unity in the supper.

Current SBC president and Southern Baptist multisite church pastor J. D. Greear also speaks of the assembly of the church for the observance of the Lord's Supper, though he does not argue for its necessity. Greear argues that the early church in Jerusalem did not meet together and could not meet together since no building in Jerusalem could contain the full number of disciples. Yet he concedes that "many first-century house churches came together to celebrate the Lord's Supper as one citywide church (see 1 Cor 11:17-20; Rom 16:5)."[91] For Greear, the assembly of the church for the Lord's Supper is a good idea modelled by some churches in Scripture, but not a New Testament mandate modelled by all New Testament churches.

Southern Baptist church growth specialist Elmer Towns writes about the "extended geographical parish church" in his 1990 work *An Inside Look at 10 of Today's Most Innovative Churches*. Towns published this work in the early days of the multisite concept, prior to the development of the MCM. His work represents a precursor to the MCM. Towns understands the references to breaking bread in Acts 2:42 and 2:46 as references to the Lord's Supper. Consequently, Towns does not affirm the necessity of the assembly of the church for the observance of the Lord's Supper. Instead, he specifies that the early church did not assemble for the Lord's Supper, but took the Supper "in their homes" (Acts 2:46).[92]

Mark Driscoll represents another multisite proponent whose writings do not require the assembly of the church for observing the Lord's Supper. In his 2009 book *Vintage Church*, Driscoll details the multisite practices of Mars Hill Church where he served as lead pastor at the time of the book's publication. In addition to observing the

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[91]J. D. Greear, "A Pastor Defends His Multi-Site Church," *9Marks Journal* 6 (June 2009): 19.

[92]Elmer L. Towns, *An Inside Look at 10 of Today's Most Innovative Churches: What They're Doing, How They're Doing It & How You Can Apply Their Ideas in Your Church* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 1990), 242-43.

Lord's Supper during each campus worship service on a weekly basis, Mars Hill also encouraged members to take the Supper with other believers in their homes.[93] Along with the practice of campuses observing the Lord's Supper in isolation from other campuses, Driscoll's encouragement for members to take the Supper at home is another clear indication that Driscoll did not require the assembly of the church for observing the Lord's Supper at Mars Hill Church.

Concerning the multisite perspective of the demonstration of church unity in the Lord's Supper, the multisite literature never speaks to the intended display of unity in the ordinance. Driscoll references church unity, but not in the context of the Lord's Supper. Instead, he spoke of defining and pursuing unity in five areas: theological unity, relational unity, philosophical unity, missional unity, and organizational unity.[94] These are helpful categories of unity, but the demonstration of unity the Lord intends in his Supper is overlooked by Driscoll.

Scott Reavely also discusses the Lord's Supper in his 2007 doctoral project on the MCM in the early days of the movement. Reavely rightly notes that the Lord's Supper illustrates the believers' union with Christ.[95] This understanding does justice to the teaching on the participation with Christ visualized in the Supper in 1 Corinthians 10:16. Nonetheless, Reavley makes no mention of the believers' union with one another in the Lord's Supper. The imagery of many members becoming united as one body by their participation in one bread as described in 1 Corinthians 10:17 is absent from the project. With this omission, Reavley disregards the demonstration of unity in the Lord's Supper that the New Testament stipulates.

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[93]Mark Driscoll and Gerry Breshears, *Vintage Church: Timeless Truths and Timely Methods* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009), 122.

[94]Ibid., 137-40.

[95]R. Scott Reavley, "An Ecclesiology for Multisite Churches: Thinking Biblically about the Local Church in Multiple Locations" (DMin project, Western Seminary, 2007), 77-78.

Ecclesiological Concerns with Multisite
Church Lord's Supper Practices

This section critiques the limited discussion of the Lord's Supper in multisite literature as presented above. Following the pattern of the previous section, this section begins by critiquing the multisite position on the role of the assembly of the entire church for the Lord's Supper and then proceeds to critique the failure of the MCM to recognize the role of the Lord's Supper in demonstrating church unity. These critiques reveal that, with rare exceptions, the practice of the Lord's Supper in multisite churches is inconsistent with New Testament ecclesiology and Baptist tradition.

Pertaining to the assembly of the church for observing the Lord's Supper, this chapter previously argued for the necessity of the assembly of the entire church in order for a church to be in compliance with the teaching of the New Testament and the Baptist tradition on the Lord's Supper. This argument does not assume that every church member will be present. Given varying circumstances, it is unlikely that any church will ever have every member present in a particular gathering. Nevertheless, the New Testament intends the observation of the Lord's Supper in a gathering that is intended to be a gathering of the entire church. The Lord's intention for the assembly of the church in the Supper is evidenced in Jesus' institution of the Supper when assembled with all of his disciples (Matt 26:26-27; Mark 14:22-23; Luke 22:19), in the typological relationship between the Passover and the Lord's Supper (Exod 12:3, 6, 47, 50; 1 Cor 5:7), in the foreshadowing of the marriage supper of the Lamb in the Lord's Supper (Matt 26:29; Rev 19:6-10), and in Paul's explicit fivefold instruction for the observance of the Lord's Supper when the church comes together as a church (1 Cor 11:17, 18, 20, 33, 34). The Baptist tradition has also repeatedly affirmed the New Testament teaching on the necessity of the assembly of the church for the Lord's Supper. These points are each argued in greater detail above.

Generally speaking, most multisite churches never assemble the totality of

their membership and campuses in one location.[96] The general disregard for churchwide assemblies in the MCM is present in the multisite understanding of the Lord's Supper as well. As noted above, Greear argues that although the church in Corinth assembled for the Lord's Supper, the church in Jerusalem did not for there were no venues in Jerusalem large enough to house them.[97] There are two problems with Greear's position. First, the Bible explicitly states that the entirety of the early church in Jerusalem gathered together in one place (Acts 2:44, 5:12, 6:1-2). Second, the Bible consistently pictures the observance of the Lord's Supper in an assembly, as noted above (Exod 12:3, 6, 47, 50; Matt 26:26-27, 29; Mark 14:22-23; Luke 22:19; 1 Cor 5:7, 11:17, 18, 20, 33, 34; Rev 19:6-10). It is unlikely that the early Jerusalem church practiced the Lord's Supper in a way that differed from other New Testament churches.

In an argument similar to Greear's, Towns argues on the basis of Acts 2:46 that the early Jerusalem church took the Lord's Supper "in their homes."[98] However, Towns is mistaken in understanding "breaking bread" as a reference to the Lord's Supper. Contextually, breaking bread is explained by the phrase, "they received their food with glad and generous hearts," which associates breaking bread with ordinary meals. As argued above, when the reference to eating in Acts 2:46 is combined with the understanding that breaking bread assuredly does not refer to the Lord's Supper in Acts 27:35, a strong case emerges for understanding breaking bread in Acts 2:42 and 2:46 as sharing an ordinary meal rather than observing the Lord's Supper. Since Luke had eating in view with his references to breaking bread in Acts 2, it is incorrect to conclude with Towns that Acts 2:46 provides textual support for multisite churches taking the Lord's

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[96]Darrell Grant Gaines, "One Church in One Location: Questioning the Biblical, Theological, and Historical Claims of the Multi-Site Church Movement" (PhD diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2012), 124. Thomas White and John M. Yeats, *Franchising McChurch: Feeding Our Obsession with Easy Christianity* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2009), 202.

[97]Greear, "A Pastor Defends His Multi-Site Church," 19.

[98]Towns, *An Inside Look at 10 of Today's Most Innovative Churches*, 242-43.

Supper in campus gatherings rather than in corporate whole-church worship gatherings.

Driscoll did not offer biblical argumentation for the practice of taking the Lord's Supper in each campus gathering of Mars Hill Church and in the homes of members. He simply described the practice.[99] The problem with this approach is that multisite churches understand themselves to be one church. Since the New Testament and the Baptist tradition require the assembly of the church for the proper observation of the Lord's Supper, multisite churches must assemble the totality of their membership and campuses in one location in order to observe the Lord's Supper in a way that is consistent with New Testament ecclesiology and with the Baptist tradition. Assemblies comprised of multiple campuses is not the practice Driscoll advocates. If a multisite church is to be one church that complies with the New Testament and with the Baptist tradition, then that multisite church must assemble the totality of its membership and campuses in one location for the observance of the Lord's Supper.

Allison's affirmation of the assembly of the church for taking the Lord's Supper in his writings reveals an inconsistency in his thinking. Allison is correct to call for the assembly of all church members for the Lord's Supper.[100] However, Sojourn Community Church, a Southern Baptist multisite church based in Louisville, Kentucky, where Allision serves as an elder does not consistently practice the Lord's Supper in this manner. Sojourn is a multisite church styled as a multichurch. In his book on the multichurch model at Sojourn, Allision defines a multichurch as "one church with multiple congregations."[101] When Allison discusses how church members of multiple congregations relate to one another as members of one church, he mentions the practice of the Lord's Supper. Each congregation of Sojourn observes the Lord's Supper

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[99]Driscoll and Breshears, *Vintage Church*, 122.

[100]Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers*, 408.

[101]Brad House and Gregg Allison, *MultiChurch: Exploring the Future of Multisite* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2017), 16.

independently of one another.[102] Allision later describes periodic gatherings of all Sojourn congregations during which the Lord's Supper is also observed.[103] Allison's recognition of the need for occasional gatherings of all multichurch congregations is commendable, more theologically thoughtful than the typical discussion of the Lord's Supper in multisite literature, and seeks to be consistent with the position he espouses in *Sojourners and Strangers*. However, Allison's sense of the need for occasional whole-multichurch gatherings for the Lord's Supper also indicates an understanding of the insufficiency of multichurch congregations practicing the Lord's Supper independently of one another. The inconsistency in Allision's position is that if multichurch congregations can properly observe the Lord's Supper independently of one another, then there is no need for observing the Lord's Supper in occasional whole-multichurch gatherings comprised of each congregation.

Pertaining to the demonstration of unity in the Lord's Supper, the MCM falters again. As noted above, Driscoll and Reavley speak of the Lord's Supper and they speak of church unity.[104] However, they do not unite these two discussions as the New Testament and the Baptist tradition do. Among multisite proponents, only Allision speaks to the demonstration of church unity in the Lord's Supper.[105] Nevertheless, Allison does not directly address the demonstration of church unity in the Lord's Supper in his writings on the MCM.

Rather than finding unity in the observation of the Lord's Supper, multisite proponents place the locus of church unity in other areas. In their seminal definition of the MCM, Geoff Surratt, Greg Ligon, and Warren Bird state that "a multi-site church

[102]House and Allison, *MultiChurch*, 189.

[103]Ibid., 195.

[104]Driscoll and Breshears, *Vintage Church*, 137-40. Reavley, "An Ecclesiology for Multisite Churches," 77-78.

[105]Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers*, 366, 391, 405, 407-8.

shares a common vision, budget, leadership, and board."[106] In describing what multisite church campuses have in common with one another, Surratt, Ligon, and Bird are describing what unites a multisite church as one church. They do not mention the demonstration of church unity in the Lord's Supper as a factor in multisite church unity. Their view represents a misplaced understanding of church unity. The Apostle Paul explicitly defines church unity in terms of the observation of the Lord's Supper. First Corinthians 10:17 states "*because* there is one bread, we who are many are one body, *for* we all partake of the one bread" (italics mine). Notice the causative language Paul employs in the verse. The church in Corinth is one church specifically because there is one bread. The church in Corinth is one body specifically because all church members partake of the one bread. Paul placed the locus of church unity in the demonstration of church unity in the Lord's Supper rather than in pragmatic concerns.[107]

The demonstration of unity in the Lord's Supper is intricately interwoven with the necessity of the assembly of the church for the ordinance. When multisite churches fail to assemble the totality of their membership and campuses in one location for the observance of the Lord's Supper, they cloud the demonstration of church unity the Lord intends in his Supper. Multisite campuses taking the Lord's Supper in different locations do not portray their unity as one church. Quite the opposite, multisite campuses taking the Lord's Supper in different locations reveal their separation from one another in this practice. The practice reminds observers that multisite church members taking the Lord's Supper in different locations likely have little to no relational connectedness with one another. The geographical distance between campuses creates relational distance between church members. When multisite church members take the Lord's Supper in different

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[106]Geoff Surratt, Greg Ligon, and Warren Bird, *The Multi-Site Church Revolution: Being One Church in Many Locations* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 18.

[107]Jamieson, *Going Public*, 132.

locations, they demonstrate the separation between the campuses rather than the unity of the church.

Multisite churches, like Sojourn, who do periodically assemble to observe the Lord's Supper represent a better display of the unity of the church than the majority of multisite churches who never assemble the totality of their membership and campuses in one location. Nevertheless, multisite churches who occasionally assemble the whole church for the Lord's Supper still present an inadequate demonstration of church unity. First Corinthians 11:29 speaks of "discerning the body" when practicing the Lord's Supper. As argued above, "discerning the body" refers to the role the Lord's Supper plays in maintaining church unity. "Discerning the body" means that believers are to ensure that they are rightly related to one another before taking the Lord's Supper together.[108] Believers are not to come to the table together until they are rightly related to one another, lest they partake in the Lord's Supper in an unworthy manner and subsequently bear the consequences of doing so (1 Cor 11:29-30).[109] When multisite churches observe the Lord's Supper in occasional whole-church gatherings, church members are hard pressed to discern whether or not they are rightly related to strangers from other campuses. The inability of multisite church members to rightly "discern the body" with church members from different campuses makes the observance of the Lord's Supper in the context of occasional whole-church gatherings unwise and awkward.

Conclusion

Though not often considered in multisite literature, the concern for the proper observation of the Lord's Supper is present in the New Testament and in the Baptist tradition. The New Testament teaches the necessity of assembling the church and

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[108]Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 623-24. Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 997.

[109]Schreiner, "The Lord's Supper in the Bible," 142.

demonstrating church unity in the observance of the Lord's Supper. The Baptist tradition has repeatedly affirmed both of these teachings. Furthermore, the assembly of the church for the Lord's Supper is an essential aspect of demonstrating church unity in the Supper. Since most multisite churches never assemble the totality of their membership and campuses in one location, they will struggle to practice the Lord's Supper in a manner that is consistent with New Testament ecclesiology and with Baptist tradition.

First Corinthians 11:17-34 is the most extensive treatment on the Lord's Supper in the New Testament. First Corinthians 11:17-34 is also the New Testament text which most clearly speaks to the necessity of assembling the church for the observance of the Lord's Supper. In his extended treatment on the Lord's Supper, Paul placed a fivefold emphasis on the Corinthians observing the Supper when they came together as a church (1 Cor 11:17, 18, 20, 33, 34). Repetition of this magnitude is noteworthy. The emphasis on assembling for the observance of the Supper is not unique to Paul. Rather, Paul's argument builds on a variety of biblical texts and themes that also point to the necessity of assembling in order to rightly practice the Lord's Supper (Exod 12:3, 6, 47, 50; Matt 26:26-27, 29; Mark 14:22-23; Luke 22:19; 1 Cor 5:7; Rev 19:6-10).

The New Testament teaching on the demonstration of church unity in the Lord's Supper is a related theme to the necessity of assembling for the Supper. In 1 Corinthians 10:16-17, the display of church unity in the Supper provides a background for Paul's fivefold emphasis on the church coming together for the Lord's Supper in 1 Corinthians 11:17-34. Assembly enables the prescribed display of unity in the Lord's Supper. A multisite church that never assembles will struggle to display unity through corporate participation in the Lord's Supper. A multisite church that only occasionally assembles the totality of their membership and campuses in one location is only occasionally able to ideally display unity by taking the Lord's Supper together. Moreover, even the occasional display of unity in multisite churches that occasionally host whole-church assemblies for the Lord's Supper is a strained display of unity.

Multisite church members taking the Lord's Supper with church members from other

campuses face the challenge of rightly "discerning the body" (1 Cor 11:29). "Discerning

the body" when taking the Supper pertains to church members ensuring that they are

rightly related to one another prior to participating together in one bread as one church.

Multisite church members face significant challenges when determining if they are

rightly related to members from other campuses who are strangers. There is only limited

unity or disunity between strangers from different campuses who have no personal

relationship with one another.

When a local church assembles to take the Lord's Supper in unity, the church

demonstrates their commitment to one another. Paul's instructions to the church in

Corinth pertaining to their practice of the Lord's Supper as one body in 1 Corinthians 10-

11 gives way to his instructions for their unified commitment to one another as one body

in 1 Corinthians 12.[110] Every church member has received a spiritual gift for the good of

the body (1 Cor 12:7). All church members are interdependent upon one another as parts

of one body (1 Cor 12:14-24). To ensure unity in the body, all church members are to

care for one another, suffer together, and rejoice together (1 Cor 12:25-26). The unified

commitment of church members toward one another that Paul describes in 1 Corinthians

12, informs the display of church unity when the church assembles for the Lord's Supper

as Paul describes in 1 Corinthians 10-11. When a local church assembles for the Lord's

Supper, they demonstrate their unity by expressing their commitment to one another as

one body. Multisite churches, even if they assemble the totality of their membership and

campuses in one location occasionally, will struggle to demonstrate unity in their

commitment to one another. Though each multisite campus is considered a part of the

larger multisite church, multisite church members are typically only committed to

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[110]Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 623-24.

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members at their own campus.[111] Even if multisite church members observe the Lord's

Supper with entire church membership assembled, they do so without a significant

commitment to the entire church membership. Observing the Lord's Supper without a

significant commitment between members is a less than ideal expression of the unity the

Lord's Supper is intended to portray. As Southern Baptist theologian John Hammett

states, "The design and purpose of the Lord's Supper cannot be fully experienced apart

from a commitment to those with whom one celebrates the ordinance."[112] The lack of

community and commitment among multisite church members who attend different

campuses is problematic for the MCM as this dissertation has stressed. Chapter 7

concludes this dissertation by summarizing the problematic issues with the MCM

detailed above and by presenting parameters within which a church can remain multisite

while also remaining within the boundaries of New Testament ecclesiology and the

Baptist tradition.

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[111]Gregg Allision and Mark Driscoll advocate that membership in a multisite church must be a membership that is specific to a particular campus at Sojourn Community Church and Mars Hill Church respectively. Since Allison affirms membership that is specific to a particular campus, he likely also affirms that multisite church members have a higher level of commitment to members of their particular campus than they do to their fellow church members from other campuses. If this is the case, it seems unusual that Allision would also affirm the need for whole-church gatherings for the Lord's Supper. House and Allison, *MultiChurch*, 191-92. Driscoll and Breshears, *Vintage Church*, 254-55. Patrick Willis referenced an interview with multisite pioneer Greg Ligon where Ligon states that in the majority of multisite churches membership is not campus specific but is instead membership in the church at large. Patrick Graham Willis, "Multi-Site Churches and Their Undergirding Ecclesiology: Questioning Its Baptist Identity and Biblical Validity" (PhD diss., Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2014), 193. Brian Frye, Christopher Kouba, and Rodney Harrison, Tom Cheyney, and Don Overstreet all speak of multisite church membership as membership in the whole church without reference to membership at a particular campus. The majority understanding of membership in the larger multisite church entails an understanding that multisite church members bare responsibilities toward church members at each campus. The practical difficulty for multisite church members is that of considering how to fulfill membership responsibilities toward other church members from different campuses who they do not know and with whom they gather only occasionally, if ever. Brian Nathaniel Frye, "The Multi-Site Church Phenomenon in North America: 1950-2010" (PhD diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2011), 215-16. Christopher Barton Kouba, "Role of the Campus Pastor: Responsibilities and Practices in Multisite Churches" (DMin project, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2014), 4-5. Rodney Harrison, Tom Cheyney, and Don Overstreet, *Spin-off Churches: How One Church Successfully Plants Another* (Nashville: B & H Academic, 2008), 76.

[112]Hammett, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches*, 287.

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION

This dissertation has argued that most expressions of the multisite church model represent a less than ideal reflection of New Testament ecclesiology and Baptist tradition since most multisite churches never assemble the totality of their membership and campuses in one location. The New Testament stipulates the assembly of the church for particular ecclesial functions, namely church governance, church discipline, and the Lord's Supper. In addition to the teaching of the New Testament, the Baptist tradition repeatedly affirms this understanding. The conclusion begins by offering a summary of the argumentation of the dissertation. Then, parameters are established and considered within which a church can remain faithful to New Testament ecclesiology and the Baptist tradition while also remaining multisite. Finally, some concluding remarks bring the dissertation to a close.

Summary of Argumentation

Following the introduction in chapter 1, chapter 2 addresses the MCM from a historical perspective. This chapter considers and critiques multisite appeals to the New Testament, early American Methodism, and early Baptist life in America for a historical precedent for the multisite church movement (MCM). The chapter then considers another potential source for a historical precedent for the MCM that is not appealed to by multisite proponents, namely the ante-Nicene episcopacy. This chapter argues that the multisite church is a unique expression of the church that is unprecedented in church history. Finally, the chapter concludes that, although it is unique, the multisite church

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most closely parallels the ante-Nicene episcopacy.

Chapter 3 argues that the meaning of *ekklesia* suggests that a church must assemble in order to be a church. Based on the usage of *ekklesia* in the New Testament and in the Septuagint, the chapter argues that *ekklesia* always refers to an actual assembly. The chapter then refutes the responses of multisite proponents to objections to the MCM based on the meaning of *ekklesia* and argues for the importance of relational proximity among church members. The final section presents the traditional Baptist affirmation of the necessity of the assembly of the church.

Chapters 4 through 6 build on chapter 3 by identifying three ecclesiological applications of the assembly of the church. These chapters are the primary and unique contributions of this dissertation. They show that the significance of the local church assembly is evident in more than the meaning of *ekklesia*. Chapter 4 argues that churches must assemble to practice church governance in a manner that is an ideal reflection of New Testament ecclesiology and Baptist tradition. The chapter builds a case for congregationalism based upon theological and textual grounds. The chapter then showcases the affirmation of congregationalism across various streams of the Baptist tradition. Next comes the presentation of multisite positions on church governance as exhibited in multisite literature and the actual practices of multisite churches. This presentation reveals that the governance of most multisite churches resembles episcopal church governance, though the governance of some multisite churches resembles presbyterian church governance. Congregational church governance is rarely present in multisite churches. Accordingly, the chapter concludes that, with rare exceptions, the MCM does not ideally reflect New Testament ecclesiology and Baptist tradition.

Chapter 5 argues that the church must assemble to practice church discipline in a manner that is consistent with the New Testament and the Baptist tradition. The New Testament calls for the involvement of the entire congregation in the disciplinary process. Consequently, the Baptist tradition has regularly affirmed the importance of church

discipline and the centrality of one assembly in the practice of church discipline. After establishing the New Testament teaching and the Baptist tradition on church discipline, the chapter concludes that the typical failure of multisite churches to assemble the totality of their membership and campuses in one location renders them unable to ideally conform to the New Testament and the Baptist tradition concerning church discipline.

Chapter 6 argues that the church must assemble for the observance of the Lord's Supper. The New Testament teaches the necessity of assembling the church in order to demonstrate church unity in the observance of the Lord's Supper. The Baptist tradition has repeatedly affirmed both of these teachings. Furthermore, the assembly of the church for the Lord's Supper is an essential aspect of demonstrating church unity in the Supper. The chapter concludes that since most multisite churches never assemble the totality of their membership and campuses in one location, their polity renders them unable to practice the Lord's Supper in a manner that ideally reflects New Testament ecclesiology and Baptist tradition.

Taken together, the argumentation of this dissertation presents significant ecclesiological challenges to the MCM. *Ekklesia* always refers to an assembly, but most multisite churches never assemble the totality of their membership and campuses in one location. The New Testament explicitly stipulates that churches assemble for church governance, church discipline, and observance of the Lord's Supper. Since most multisite churches never assemble the totality of their membership and campuses in one location, they will struggle to practice church government, church discipline, and the Lord's Supper in a manner that is consistent with the New Testament. This dissertation presents additional challenges for Baptist multisite churches. In addition to the teaching of the New Testament, indeed because of the teaching of the New Testament, the Baptist tradition has repeatedly affirmed the necessity of the assembly of the church and the observance of church government, church discipline, and the Lord's Supper in the context of the assembled church. Accordingly, with rare exceptions, multisite churches

do not present an ideal reflection of New Testament ecclesiology and Baptist tradition.

Multisite Church Parameters for Baptist Churches

Select footnotes throughout the dissertation have noted that the conclusion would present parameters within which a church can remain multisite while also remaining within the boundaries of New Testament ecclesiology and the Baptist tradition. The current section presents these parameters. A multisite church must regularly assemble the totality of their membership and campuses in one location to perform the ecclesiological functions of church governance, church discipline, and observing the Lord's Supper in order to remain within the boundaries of New Testament ecclesiology and Baptist tradition.

First, in order for a multisite church to remain within the boundaries of New Testament ecclesiology and Baptist tradition, the church must regularly gather the totality of their membership and campuses in one location. Chapter 3 argues for the necessity of assembly based on the meaning and usage of *ekklesia* throughout the Septuagint and the New Testament. *Ekklesia* always refers to an actual assembly. Chapter 3 also demonstrates that the Baptist tradition has regularly affirmed the necessity of assembly. Multisite campuses regularly assemble. However, since an *ekklesia* is an actual assembly, for a multisite church to be one church, they must by definition be one assembly. Accordingly, multisite churches must regularly gather the totality of their membership and campuses in one location in order to be one church. Notice that the parameter espoused here is that a multisite church must "regularly" gather the totality of their membership and campuses in one location. The term "regularly" means that there is some flexibility on the required frequency of whole-church gatherings. The New Testament churches reflect a pattern of gathering weekly, though this pattern is not explicitly prescribed (Acts 20:7; 1 Cor 16:2). Accordingly, multisite churches who gather occasionally, quarterly for instance, technically fall within the parameters of New

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Testament ecclesiology and the Baptist tradition.

Second, in order for a multisite church to remain within the boundaries of New Testament ecclesiology and Baptist tradition, the church must perform the ecclesiological functions of church governance, church discipline, and the Lord's Supper in the context of their occasional gatherings. As chapters 4 through 6 argue, the New Testament stipulates the assembly of the church for the practice of church governance, church discipline, and the Lord's Supper. Chapters 4 through 6 also demonstrate that the Baptist tradition has regularly affirmed this understanding. It follows then that multisite churches do not fall into the boundaries of New Testament ecclesiology and the Baptist tradition simply by regularly assembling the totality of their membership and campuses in one location. The nature of occasional whole-church gatherings is also an important consideration. Multisite churches must practice church governance, church discipline, and the Lord's Supper in the context of their occasional gatherings of the totality of their church membership and campuses in order to remain within the boundaries of New Testament ecclesiology and Baptist tradition.

Third, church government, church discipline, and the Lord's Supper are not the only three ecclesiological functions which a church is responsible for carrying out. For example, the New Testament also stipulates that churches must carry out the ordinance of baptism, maintain church membership, make disciples, maintain sound doctrine, and live on mission with God. Baptist tradition has also frequently spoken to these ecclesiological functions. However, the New Testament does not explicitly stipulate the assembly of the church for the execution of these ecclesiological functions. This dissertation, therefore, did not consider these ecclesiological functions. Instead, the focus of this dissertation has been on church governance, church discipline, and the observance of the Lord's Supper specifically because both the New Testament and the Baptist tradition do stipulate the assembly of the church for accomplishing these ecclesiological functions. A multisite church must regularly assemble the totality of their membership and campuses in one

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location to perform the ecclesiological functions of church governance, church discipline, and observing the Lord's Supper in order to remain within the boundaries of New Testament ecclesiology and Baptist tradition.

Conclusion

The previous section demonstrated that it is possible for a multisite church to remain multisite while also remaining within the ecclesiastical boundaries drawn in the New Testament and the Baptist tradition. Nevertheless, this dissertation concludes where many of the chapters concluded; although it is technically possible for a multisite church to remain multisite while also remaining within the boundaries of New Testament ecclesiology and Baptist tradition, it is practically unwise and awkward in three ways. First, a multisite church can govern itself during a regular whole-church assembly, but members from different campuses will struggle to understand one another's nuanced ministries, especially when campuses are affinity-based (i.e., Hispanic campus, biker campus, college campus). Second, a multisite church can exercise church discipline during a regular whole-church assembly, but the relational distance between strangers from different campuses will hinder discipline from taking the loving and familial tone found in Scripture (Matt 18:17; 2 Thess 3:15). Moreover, strangers from different campuses will struggle to make informed judgments on matters of church discipline when they are unaware of the circumstances and the details of the allegations against a brother and unable to observe that brother's life for signs or repentance or a lack thereof. Geographical and relational distances hinder the wise and practical application of church discipline in multisite churches. Third, a multisite church can observe the Lord's Supper in the context of a regular whole-church assembly, but multisite church members will struggle in discerning the body to determine whether or not they are rightly related to strangers from other campuses (1 Cor 11:29). For these three reasons, reasons that are central to the argumentation of this dissertation, engaging in the multisite church

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movement is practically unwise and awkward.

        The three central concerns that form the central argumentation of this dissertation weave together to showcase the weakness of the multisite church. A church that only assembles occasionally to be and act as a church is a weak and inconsistent church. The New Testament does not prescribe the weekly gathering of a church, but it does present the pattern of weekly gatherings (Acts 20:7; 1 Cor 16:2). Accordingly, a multisite church that only occasionally assembles the totality of their membership and campuses in one location is a weak and inconsistent church.[1]

        For Southern Baptist churches, the problems presented by the MCM are particularly acute. The Baptist Faith and Message (BF&M), the confessional document of the Southern Baptist Convention, defines a church as "an autonomous local congregation."[2] The BF&M definition of a church is problematic for Southern Baptist multisite churches because most multisite churches, including most Southern Baptist multisite churches, never congregate. In addition, the geographical distance between the multisite campuses of many Southern Baptist multisite churches limits meaningful application of the term "local." Thus, the confessional identity of Southern Baptist churches presents another issue for Southern Baptist churches who are multisite or who are considering going multisite. Southern Baptist churches who desire to remain consistent with their stated confessional convictions should enter into the MCM only with great trepidation and well-defined boundaries designed to keep them within the parameters of their confessional identity.

        As this dissertation comes to a close, the MCM presses on. The multisite church is here and here to stay. Many more chapters of the MCM will be written. Many

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    [1]Jonathan Leeman, *Don't Fire Your Church Members: The Case for Congregationalism* (Nashville: B & H Academic, 2016), 119.

    [2]Southern Baptist Convention, "The Baptist Faith and Message: The 2000 Baptist Faith & Message," June 14, 2000, http://www.sbc.net/bfm2000/bfm2000.asp.

more chapters will be written about the MCM. The most intriguing aspect of the future of the MCM is the concept of leveraging the multisite church model for church planting. In the mainstream MCM, church planting is considered outside of the boundaries of the MCM.[3] However, this stigma is beginning to lift. The Village Church is in the process of launching all of their campuses as autonomous congregations.[4] It will be interesting to see the impact of the release of The Village Church campuses on the MCM. The New Testament presents a picture of churches planting churches.[5] Should multisite churches begin to establish campuses within the boundaries established by New Testament ecclesiology and the Baptist tradition with the explicit purpose of church planting, the MCM could become a vessel for a healthy, hands-on approach to church planting whereby churches take up their responsibility of planting other churches. The role of church planting within the MCM will be an interesting development to watch.

Nevertheless, most expressions of the multisite church model struggle to function within the framework of a biblical ecclesiology. The Lord has entrusted the ecclesiological functions of church government, church discipline, and the Lord's Supper to the entire congregation as evidenced in the meaning of *ekklesia* and in the biblical

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[3]Geoff Surratt, Greg Ligon, and Warren Bird, *The Multi-Site Church Revolution: Being One Church in Many Locations* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 27.

[4]The process of releasing the campuses of The Village Church began in 2014. Joshua Patterson stated that all campuses will be independent as of 2020. Joshua Rice Patterson, telephone interview by author, Paris, KY, 18 March, 2019.

[5]David Hesselgrave argued that churches plant churches. In the New Testament, the church spearheads the mission of planting other churches. Acts 13-14 serves as an example of this New Testament reality. From Antioch in Syria, Paul and Barnabas were sent out by the church in Antioch as the Holy Spirit instructed the church (Acts 13:2-4). No details are provided in the text about Paul and Barnabas establishing churches in Cyprus or Derbe, but there are explicit statements that they made many disciples and established churches and church leadership in Pisidian Antioch, Iconium and Lystra (Acts 14:21-23). On the conclusion of this journey, Paul and Barnabas returned to Antioch in Syria and reported on God's work to their sending church (Acts 14:24-28). These chapters provide a picture of early Christian mission in which a local church sends missionaries who plant more churches and then report back to the sending church. Here church planting is initiated by the local church and results in the planting of additional local churches. Paul and Barnabas reporting back to their sending church also indicates the continuing involvement of the sending church and Paul and Barnabas' accountability to their sending church. Each of these aspects highlight the prominence of the local church in the task of church planting. David J. Hesselgrave, *Planting Churches Cross-Culturally: North America and Beyond* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 47-48.

teaching on church government, church discipline, and the Lord's Supper. Since the totality of the membership and the campuses of a multisite church are never intended to assemble in most expressions of the multisite church model, most multisite church models do not ideally reflect biblical ecclesiology. For this same reason, most expressions of the multisite church model also differ from traditional Baptist ecclesiology as reflected in widely influential Baptist confessions of faith and in key theological writings by influential Baptist theologians. Confessional Baptists who affirm the BF&M and embrace the Baptist tradition must acknowledge these concerns with Southern Baptist multisite churches. Failure to acknowledge these concerns is a failure to acknowledge congregationalism as a critical aspect of Baptist ecclesiology, which is the key theological contribution of Baptist theologians.

APPENDIX

TABLE OF EKKLESIA USAGE IN THE NEW
TESTAMENT

Table A1. Ekklesia Usage in the New Testament

Text	ESV Translation	Referent
Mt 16:18	"Church"	Future universal church
Mt 18:17	"Church"	Church gathered to discipline
Mt 18:17	"Church"	Church gathered to discipline
Acts 5:11	"Church"	Whole Jerusalem church
Acts 7:38	"Congregation"	Israel in the wilderness
Acts 8:1	"Church"	Church in Jerusalem
Acts 8:3	"Church"	Church in Jerusalem
Acts 9:31	"Church"	Jerusalem church scattered to Judea, Samaria and Galilee
Acts11:22	"Church"	Church in Jerusalem
Acts 11:26	"Church"	Church in Antioch
Acts 12:1	"Church"	Church in Jerusalem
Acts 12:5	"Church"	Church in Jerusalem
Acts 13:1	"Church"	Church in Antioch
Acts 14:23	"Church"	Churches in Lystra, Iconium and Pisidian Antioch
Acts 14:27	"Church"	Church in Antioch
Acts 15:3	"Church"	Church in Antioch
Acts 15:4	"Church"	Church in Jerusalem
Acts 15:22	"Church"	Whole Jerusalem Church
Acts 15:41	"Churches"	Churches in Syria and Cilicia
Acts 16:5	"Churches"	Churches in Derbe, Lystra and Iconium
Acts 18:22	"Church"	Church in Jerusalem
Acts 19:32	"Assembly"	Riotous crowd
Acts 19:39	"Assembly"	City gathering in Ephesus
Acts 19:41	"Assembly"	Riotous crowd

Text	ESV Translation	Referent
Acts 20:17	"Church"	Church in Ephesus
Acts 20:28	"Church"	Church in Ephesus
Rom 16:1	"Church"	Church at Cenchreae
Rom 16:4	"Churches"	Gentile churches
Rom 16:5	"Church"	Church in Prisca and Aquilla's home in Rome
Rom 16:16	"Churches"	All the churches of Christ
Rom 16:23	"Church"	The whole church that met in Gaius' house in Corinth
1 Cor 1:2	"Church"	Church in Corinth
1 Cor 4:17	"Church"	Every church
1 Cor 6:4	"Church"	Church in Corinth
1 Cor 7:17	"Churches"	All the churches
1 Cor 10:32	"Church"	Church in Corinth
1 Cor 11:16	"Churches"	All the churches
1 Cor 11:18	"Church"	Church in Corinth
1 Cor 11:22	"Church"	Church in Corinth
1 Cor 12:28	"Church"	Church in Corinth
1 Cor 14:4	"Church"	Church in Corinth
1 Cor 14:5	"Church"	Church in Corinth
1 Cor 14:12	"Church"	Church in Corinth
1 Cor 14:19	"Church"	Any Church
1 Cor 14:23	"Church"	Whole Church in Corinth
1 Cor 14:28	"Church"	Church in Corinth
1 Cor 14:33	"Churches"	All the churches
1 Cor 14:34	"Churches"	All the churches
1 Cor 14:35	"Church"	Any church
1 Cor 15:9	"Church"	Universal church
1 Cor 16:1	"Churches"	Churches of Galatia
1 Cor 16:19	"Churches"	Churches of Asia
1 Cor 16:19	"Church"	Church in Aquila and Prisca's home in Ephesus
2 Cor 1:1	"Church"	Church in Corinth
2 Cor 8:1	"Churches"	Churches of Macedonia
2 Cor 8:18	"Churches"	All the churches
2 Cor 8:19	"Churches"	All the churches
2 Cor 8:23	"Churches"	All the churches
2 Cor 8:24	"Churches"	All the churches
2 Cor 11:8	"Churches"	Churches not in Corinth
2 Cor 11:28	"Churches"	All the churches
2 Cor 12:13	"Churches"	Churches not in Corinth

Text	ESV Translation	Referent
Gal 1:2	"Churches"	Churches of Galatia
Gal 1:13	"Church"	Universal church
Gal 1:22	"Churches"	Churches of Judea
Eph 1:22	"Church"	Universal church
Eph 3:10	"Church"	Universal church
Eph 3:21	"Church"	Universal church
Eph 5:23	"Church"	Universal church
Eph 5:24	"Church"	Universal church
Eph 5:25	"Church"	Universal church
Eph 5:27	"Church"	Universal church
Eph 5:29	"Church"	Universal church
Eph 5:32	"Church"	Universal church
Phil 3:6	"Church"	Universal church
Phil 4:15	"Church"	Any church
Col 1:18	"Church"	Universal church
Col 1:24	"Church"	Universal church
Col 4:15	"Church"	Church in Nympha's house
Col 4:16	"Church"	Church in Laodicea
1 Thes 1:1	"Church"	Church in Thessalonica
1 Thes 2:14	"Churches"	Churches in Judea
2 Thes 1:1	"Church"	Church in Thessalonica
2 Thes 1:4	"Churches"	All the churches
1 Tim 3:5	"Church"	Any church
1 Tim 3:15	"Church"	Any church
1 Tim 5:16	"Church"	Any church
Phlmn 1:2	"Church"	Church in Philemon's house
Heb 2:12	"Congregation"	Congregation of Israel
Heb 12:23	"Assembly"	Eschatological gathering of all believers in heaven
Js 5:14	"Church"	Any church
3 Jn 1:6	"Church"	A local church
3 Jn 1:9	"Church"	A local church
3 Jn 1:10	"Church"	A local church
Rev 1:4	"Churches"	Seven churches in Asia
Rev 1:11	"Churches"	Seven churches in Asia
Rev 1:20	"Churches"	Seven churches in Asia
Rev 1:20	"Churches"	Seven churches in Asia
Rev 2:1	"Church"	Church in Ephesus
Rev 2:7	"Churches"	Seven churches in Asia
Rev 2:8	"Church"	Church in Smyrna

Text	ESV Translation	Referent
Rev 2:11	"Churches"	Seven churches in Asia
Rev 2:12	"Church"	Church in Pergamum
Rev 2:17	"Churches"	Seven churches in Asia
Rev 2:18	"Church"	Church in Thyatira
Rev 2:23	"Churches"	Seven churches in Asia
Rev 2:29	"Churches"	Seven churches in Asia
Rev 3:1	"Church"	Church in Sardis
Rev 3:6	"Churches"	Seven churches in Asia
Rev 3:7	"Church"	Church in Philadelphia
Rev 3:13	"Churches"	Seven churches in Asia
Rev 3:14	"Church"	Church in Laodicea
Rev 3:22	"Churches"	Seven churches in Asia
Rev 22:16	"Churches"	Seven churches in Asia

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ABSTRACT

EXAMINING THE ECCLESIOLOGICAL SOUNDNESS OF
THE SOUTHERN BAPTIST MULTISITE CHURCH
MOVEMENT

Dennis Kyle Sullivan, PhD
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2019
Chair: Dr. Timothy K. Beougher

This dissertation evaluates the ecclesiological soundness of the multisite

church movement (MCM). A multisite church defines itself as one church meeting in

multiple locations. Despite pure evangelistic motivations, the multisite church model is

inconsistent with biblical ecclesiology and with traditional Baptist ecclesiology as

reflected in widely influential Baptist confessions of faith and in key theological writings

by influential Baptist theologians.

Chapter 1 details the multisite church's rise to prominence in American

Evangelicalism and its projected longevity. This introduction also presents the problem of

Baptist multisite churches who operate outside of their stated convictions by participating

in the MCM. Finally, the thesis, background, and research methodology are presented.

Chapter 2 addresses the MCM from a historical perspective. This chapter

argues that the multisite church is a unique expression of the church that is unprecedented

in church history. This chapter considers the New Testament, the ante-Nicene episcopacy,

early American Methodism, and early Baptist life in America as potential roots of the

MCM. The chapter then concludes that, although it is unique, the multisite church most

closely parallels the ante-Nicene episcopacy.

Chapter 3 argues that the meaning of *ekklesia* requires that a church assemble

in order to be a church. Only limited attention is devoted to this issue since it has surfaced

repeatedly in multisite literature. This chapter considers the meaning of *ekklesia* in order to uniquely build upon it in the following three chapters.

Chapters 4 through 6 are the primary and unique contributions of this dissertation. They show that the significance of the local church assembly is evident in more than the meaning of *ekklesia*. Churches must assemble in order to govern, discipline, and observe the Lord's Supper in a way that is consistent with New Testament ecclesiology and Baptist tradition.

Chapter 7 concludes the dissertation by summarizing the arguments from chapters 2 through 6. Baptist churches are cautioned to proceed with trepidation as they consider their involvement in the MCM. Parameters by which a multisite church can remain within the boundaries of New Testament and Baptist ecclesiology are given. Finally, suggestions for further research on the MCM are made.

VITA

Dennis Kyle Sullivan

EDUCATION
       B.A., Clear Creek Baptist Bible College, Pineville, Kentucky, 2006
       Advanced M.Div., Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, Fort Worth,
          Texas, 2010

MINISTERIAL
       Youth Minister, Oak Ridge Baptist Church, Williamstown, Kentucky, 2002-2006
       Minister to Youth, FBC Everman, Everman, Texas, 2007-2012
       Pastor of Families with Young Children and Missions, Woodlawn Baptist
          Church, Baton Rouge, Louisiana, 2012-2013
       Pastor of Discipleship and Missions, Woodlawn Baptist Church, Baton Rouge,
          Louisiana, 2014-2017
       Lead Pastor, FBC Paris, Paris, Kentucky, 2017-

ACADEMIC
       Grader, Clear Creek Baptist Bible College, 2005