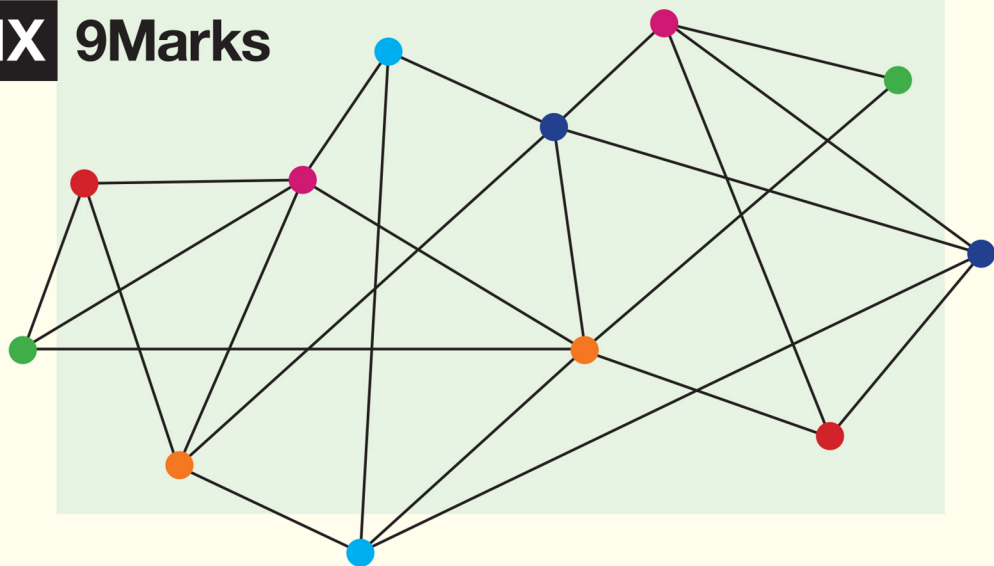


IX 9Marks



ONE ASSEMBLY

Rethinking the Multisite & Multiservice Church Models

Jonathan Leeman



“Evangelical churches that are multisite or multiservice are like that for good-intentioned, pragmatic reasons. Jonathan Leeman challenges us to think exegetically and theologically about a popular practice that may not be as strategic as so many assume.”

Andy Naselli, Associate Professor of Systematic Theology and New Testament, Bethlehem College & Seminary

“Too often we don’t think about what it means to be a church or to do church together. Jonathan Leeman’s book, therefore, might shock our pragmatic and individualistic sensibilities. Still, Leeman makes an excellent case that the word *church* in the Scriptures means ‘assembly,’ and that two assemblies are by definition two churches. The matter is complex and people who love the Scriptures disagree, but I think Leeman’s case is the most plausible.”

Thomas R. Schreiner, James Buchanan Harrison Professor of New Testament Interpretation, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“*One Assembly* is more than a critique of the multiservice and multisite movement. Leeman persuasively argues for the biblical faithfulness, beauty, and effectiveness of a single church service. Instead of slowing down gospel growth, the single-service model actually promotes the Great Commission by encouraging church planting. This is a must-read for anyone interested in church growth.”

Aaron Menikoff, Senior Pastor, Mount Vernon Baptist Church, Sandy Springs, Georgia

“Jonathan Leeman clearly loves the church. He loves it enough to lay out here, with clarity and compassion, the one-assembly model that Scripture so consistently presents. Eminently engaging and stemming from deep personal experience, this book helpfully shows us not only what Scripture says a ‘church’ is but also how churches with multiple sites or services can move toward a single gathering. Leeman’s carefully considered treatment is timely and relevant to all Christians, not just pastors and scholars.”

Anne Rabe, Former Lecturer in Classics, University of Kansas

“Leeman convincingly shows from Scripture and plain reason that a mark of the local church is *one assembly*, and churches do well to practice this biblical norm. I plead with church leaders to prayerfully hear Leeman’s case so that Christ is more exalted, we are more faithful, and our churches most effectively advance the Great Commission.”

P. J. Tibayan, Pastor-Theologian, Bethany Baptist Church, Bellflower, California

“This book analyzes the multisite and multiservice model with tremendous commitment to Scripture, clarity, and precision. Jonathan Leeman brings to light the implications of the multisite and multiservice movement’s chronological and geographical fragmentation of the one assembly: the redefinition of the nature of the church and the reshaping of the church morally. Every pastor must seriously consider his arguments.”

Jonas Madureira, Senior Pastor, Word Baptist Church, São Paulo, Brazil

“Many churches take multiple services as a given. Increasingly, churches are embracing multisite models. With the boldness, courage, and zeal of a reformer, Jonathan Leeman invites us to submit our assumptions and practices in ministry to the scrutiny of what the Bible says about the church. Even if you don’t agree with everything that *One Assembly* concludes about the church, Leeman is surely correct to call the church to build her life, worship, and service upon the foundation of Scripture alone. Let *One Assembly* provoke you, challenge you, and, above all, drive you to God’s word.”

Guy Prentiss Waters, James M. Baird Jr. Professor of New Testament, Reformed Theological Seminary, Jackson, Mississippi

“Jonathan Leeman has advanced significantly the discussion on what constitutes a local church. An *ekklēsia*, most fundamentally, is what it does: it is a gathering. Those looking to defend an alternative approach (either multisite or multiservice) will likely find some previously unconsidered arguments and data here. Leeman has assembled the most thorough case for one service/one church. Not everyone will be persuaded, of course; but Leeman’s work was influential in our church’s decision to move from multiservice to a single service.”

Ryan Kelly, Pastor of Preaching, Desert Springs Church, Albuquerque, New Mexico

“The church of Jesus and the apostles cannot be redefined by our culture or our needs. This book describes the difficulties in my own experience of pastoring a multisite church that lost its building and was forced to split into six home campuses. Leeman provides an alternative for the multisite model, including the church-planting strategy our elders are preparing to follow. This book will challenge you and bless other church leaders in situations like mine.”

Victor Shu, Lead Pastor, Radiant Grace Church, East Asia

ONE ASSEMBLY

Other 9Marks Books

The Rule of Love: How the Local Church Should Reflect God's Love and Authority, Jonathan Leeman (2018)

Church in Hard Places: How the Local Church Brings Life to the Poor and Needy, Mez McConnell and Mike McKinley (2016)

Why Trust the Bible?, Greg Gilbert (2015)

The Compelling Community: Where God's Power Makes a Church Attractive, Mark Dever and Jamie Dunlop (2015)

The Pastor and Counseling: The Basics of Shepherding Members in Need, Jeremy Pierre and Deepak Reju (2015)

Who Is Jesus?, Greg Gilbert (2015)

Nine Marks of a Healthy Church, 3rd edition, Mark Dever (2013)

Finding Faithful Elders and Deacons, Thabiti M. Anyabwile (2012)

Am I Really a Christian?, Mike McKinley (2011)

What Is the Gospel?, Greg Gilbert (2010)

Biblical Theology in the Life of the Church: A Guide for Ministry, Michael Lawrence (2010)

Church Planting Is for Wimps: How God Uses Messed-up People to Plant Ordinary Churches That Do Extraordinary Things, Mike McKinley (2010)

It Is Well: Expositions on Substitutionary Atonement, Mark Dever and Michael Lawrence (2010)

What Does God Want of Us Anyway? A Quick Overview of the Whole Bible, Mark Dever (2010)

The Church and the Surprising Offense of God's Love: Reintroducing the Doctrines of Church Membership and Discipline, Jonathan Leeman (2010)

What Is a Healthy Church Member?, Thabiti M. Anyabwile (2008)

12 Challenges Churches Face, Mark Dever (2008)

The Gospel and Personal Evangelism, Mark Dever (2007)

What Is a Healthy Church?, Mark Dever (2007)

ONE ASSEMBLY

Rethinking the Multisite and
Multiservice Church Models

Jonathan Leeman

One Assembly: Rethinking the Multisite and Multiservice Church Models

Copyright © 2020 by Jonathan Leeman

Published by Crossway
1300 Crescent Street
Wheaton, Illinois 60187

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher, except as provided for by USA copyright law. Crossway® is a registered trademark in the United States of America.

Cover design: Dan Farrell

First printing 2020

Printed in the United States of America

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from the ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

All emphases in Scripture quotations have been added by the author.

Trade paperback ISBN: 978-1-4335-5959-4

ePub ISBN: 978-1-4335-5962-4

PDF ISBN: 978-1-4335-5960-0

Mobipocket ISBN: 978-1-4335-5961-7

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Leeman, Jonathan, 1973- author.

Title: One assembly: rethinking the multisite and multiservice church models / Jonathan Leeman.

Description: Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2020. | Series: 9Marks | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2019036101 | ISBN 9781433559594 (trade paperback) | ISBN 9781433559600 (pdf) |

ISBN 9781433559617 (mobipocket) | ISBN 9781433559624 (epub)

Subjects: LCSH: Multi-site churches. | Church.

Classification: LCC BV637.95 .L44 2020 | DDC 254—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2019036101>

Crossway is a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers.

LB	30	29	28	27	26	25	24	23	22	21	20			
15	14	13	12	11	10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1

CONTENTS

Series Preface	9
Special Thanks	11
Introduction	13
1 A Church Is the Geography of Christ’s Kingdom	41
2 A Church Is an Assembly	67
3 A Church Should Be Catholic	99
Appendix 1: New Testament Uses of <i>Ekklēsia</i> /“Assembly”	129
Appendix 2: Does Acts 9:31 Refer to a Regional “Church”?	143
<i>Anne Rabe</i>	
Notes	151
General Index	165
Scripture Index	170

SERIES PREFACE

The 9Marks series of books is premised on two basic ideas. First, the local church is far more important to the Christian life than many Christians today perhaps realize.

Second, local churches grow in life and vitality as they organize their lives around God's word. God speaks. Churches should listen and follow. It's that simple. When a church listens and follows, it begins to look like the One it is following. It reflects his love and holiness. It displays his glory. A church will look like him as it listens to him.

So our basic message to churches is, don't look to the best business practices or the latest styles; look to God. Start by listening to God's word again.

Out of this overall project comes the 9Marks series of books. Some target pastors. Some target church members. Hopefully all will combine careful biblical examination, theological reflection, cultural consideration, corporate application, and even a bit of individual exhortation. The best Christian books are always both theological and practical.

It's our prayer that God will use this volume and the others to help prepare his bride, the church, with radiance and splendor for the day of his coming.

SPECIAL THANKS

A number of friends read and offered good counsel on this book. So thank you, Alex Duke, Sam Emadi, Grant Gaines, Greg Gilbert, Bobby Jamieson, Michael Lawrence, Jake Meador, Aaron Menikoff, Anne Rabe, Matthew Sleeman, Matt Smethhurst, and Mark Vroegop. I'm also grateful to Mark Dever and Ryan Townsend for their support, encouragement, and feedback. Finally, Crossway—particularly Lane Dennis, Dave DeWit, and Thom Notaro—have been both patient and helpful every step of the way. Not all these names share my perspective, so don't blame them. But each contributed in love to make the book better.

INTRODUCTION

The church's main hall is full. People in the back scan the crowd, looking for an empty seat. You cannot see any. I am assisting a flustered usher. She is assisting a flustered mother with young children. Where can we put them?

Four young, single men sit comfortably in the back row. They're oblivious. I want to say something. Hello, guys?

These days you have to show up early if you want seats. It's the same upstairs on the children's ministry floor. Want to check your toddler into childcare during the service? Better get there fifteen minutes early. Even then, you'll find a crowd of parents hovering, waiting for check-in to begin.

Back downstairs with the big people, the usher runs out of bulletins. She panics. There's nothing else I can do. I sit down with my family. Oh well.

Another Sunday morning in a full church.

Multisite or Multiservice—An Easy and Wise Solution?

I'm not exaggerating, by the way. The very Sunday after I wrote the words above, I arrived twenty minutes early at the children's ministry check-in desk with my three-year-old. Her class was already full. I walked away quietly chuckling at the irony. "Are you sure you want to argue against multiple services or sites?" I asked myself. My daughter spent the entire service on my lap.

For moments like these, starting a second site or service does seem like the obvious solution. It seems like *good financial stewardship*

because it's more cost-effective than building a bigger building. It seems like *good time stewardship* because it's less logistically taxing than planting a whole new church and can happen more quickly. It offers *predictability and familiarity* for church members and *pastoral safety* for leaders. You avoid sending forty vulnerable sheep off to start a new church with a young, untested planter.

Most crucially, it makes *Great Commission sense*. We want as many people as possible to hear the gospel. We don't want them leaving because they cannot find seats. Therefore, let's not be too persnickety over the structures of a church. Right? A number of good friends, whom I respect and who are better evangelists than I am, have chosen multisite or multiservice for just this reason.

Of course, not all reasons for adding sites or services commend themselves. One multisite pastor told his staff that becoming a multisite church made them appear "legitimate." It was a status symbol for him. But never mind the bad reasons. What do we make of the good reasons, like the Great Commission?

That's what motivated my pastor friend Mark to adopt the multisite model. He challenged me over dinner, "If a non-Christian walks into our church, and it's full, I cannot tell him to go elsewhere." He continued, "Suppose you have a revival, and an extra few hundred people show up one Sunday. Would you turn them away?" I hope not.

Another multisite pastor friend, J. D. Greear, wrote that the elders of his church chose to pursue a multisite strategy because they "believed it was the most efficient way to reach the maximum number of people in our city . . . as quickly as possible." J. D. well understands that a concern for evangelism does not negate everything else the Bible says about the church. He, too, values "accountability, community, and faithful polity." Yet, he maintains that "a church that does not have [evangelism] near the top of its priorities cannot be closely aligned with our Savior's purposes, regardless of what else they get right. In heaven, there is more joy over one sinner that repents than how we organize the 99 who are already his."¹ Insisting

DEFINING MULTISITE

Geoff Surratt, Greg Ligon, and Warren Bird’s definition of a multisite church emphasizes the shared leadership and administrative structure: “A multi-site church shares a common vision, budget, leadership, and board.”* John Piper’s definition emphasizes the shared leadership and the teaching: “The essence of biblical church community and unity hangs on a unity of eldership, a unity of teaching, and a unity of philosophy of ministry.”†

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

† John Piper, “Is It Important for the Sake of Community That a Church Have Only One Service?,” *desiringGod.org*, October 20, 2008, <https://www.desiringgod.org/interviews/is-it-important-for-the-sake-of-community-that-a-church-have-only-one-service>.

on the single-assembly church, J. D. contends, is “evangelistically harmful.”

Both of these conversations illustrate the strength of Great Commission instincts among evangelicals. We recognize that salvation is most crucial. This is both a doctrinal conviction and an automatic reflex. Salvation is more important than goods and kindred, more important than the kingdoms of this world, and certainly more important than church order. As Martin Luther taught us to sing,

Let goods and kindred go,
this mortal life also;
the body they may kill.

So, in one sense, I agree with Pastors Mark and J. D. entirely. We should prize conversion and spiritual growth over church structure. And the Great Commission should be uppermost in our minds as churches.

Might We Be Shortsighted?

But hold on. Should we pit church structure and conversion against one another? I care about my children more than my house, but my house keeps my children alive and healthy. Likewise, evangelicals rightly prioritize salvation, but we cannot abandon the house of salvation, which is the church. Doing so will hurt our ability to fulfill the Great Commission. It's true there is more joy over one sinner who repents than a rightly organized ninety-nine. Yet, let's not grab an *either-or* where the Bible provides a *both-and*. Jesus in fact uses this very illustration about the ninety-nine and the one just so: rightly organizing the ninety-nine is crucial for reaching the one (Matt. 18:10–20). Read the parable about the lost sheep in context.

As evangelicals, we can be shortsighted, like eating candy before a marathon for the burst of sugar energy we expect it to give. We fixate on the number of people in the pews *this Sunday*, but lose sight of how a healthy biblical church is the best way to fulfill the Great Commission over time—to run the whole marathon with endurance. Biblical church order serves disciple-making. Biblical polity aids evangelism. Don't separate them.

Too often, we are tempted to change the rules to get more of a good thing. Yet, in the process we undermine ourselves. Think of a university that addresses a downward trend in student grades by making tests easier. They might fix the grade problem in the short term, but they won't produce better engineers, nurses, or math teachers over time. Or think of a clothing company that increases profits by producing cheaper clothes. They'll do better in the short run, but they'll hurt their reputation in the long run. I stopped shopping at one of my favorite stores because holes in the sweaters and unstitched seams in the shirts showed up after one season of wearing them.

In the same way, the good desire for conversions shouldn't lead us to compromise other biblical principles. It will hurt those numbers and the church's mission in the long run. "A growing number of people is not a number of growing people," Mark Dever has said. Un-

biblical methods and strategies for fulfilling the Great Commission might look good for a moment, like grade inflation ballooning the number of As. But they produce false positives, inaccurate readings, anemic churches, a weakened mission. They hinder the Great Commission. Healthy, biblical churches, on the other hand, advance it.

Those Sites and Services Are Churches

Which brings us back to the multisite and multiservice models. Here's the biggest problem, as I'll seek to show in this book: They're not in the Bible. At all. And that means they work against, not with, Jesus's disciple-making plan.

To put it another way: *there is no such thing as a multisite or multiservice church* based on how the Bible defines a church. They don't exist. Adding a second site or service, by the standards of Scripture, gives you two churches, not one. Two assemblies, separated by geography or numbers on a clock, give you two churches.

Plenty of things exist today that *call* themselves multisite or multiservice churches: "Join us on Sunday at 9:00 or 11:00," or "One church, three locations." Such a "church" might be a legal and institutional reality, and I will use the singular word "church" throughout this book when referring to a multisite or multiservice arrangement as a legal and institutional entity. But make no mistake, biblically speaking, such entities form a collection of churches. Each site and service is its own church, even as they share pastors, a budget, and a brand. The "north campus" and the "south campus" are both churches. The 9:00 a.m. service and the 11:00 a.m. service are both churches.

Jesus says, "Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them" (Matt. 18:20). He's not "there" in the administrative structure that binds several campuses together. He's not "among" the unified vision, budget, and board. He's there in the gathering of two or three, or two or three thousand. The gathering represents him, speaks for him, flies his flag. If you want a proof text for this whole book, here it is in three present-in-time-and-

WHAT ABOUT THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN SITES AND SERVICES?

A year before completing this book I gave a short talk on the topic of this book at a pastors' retreat, and several pastors were surprised that I equated multisite churches and multiservice churches. After the talk, one pastor said to me, "Multisite and multiservice are different kinds of things. Why are you lumping them together?"

I agree they are things we experience differently. Different impulses motivate a church to go in one direction or the other. And the different institutional configurations have different relational and logistical implications, which means the two configurations will differently impact a church's ability to fulfill its mission. That said, multisite and multiservice churches have this in common: they divide the assembly. One divides it geographically, the other chronologically, producing more than one assembly. And if I'm right that, formally speaking, the regular assembly is an essential ingredient for making a church a church, then both multiple sites and multiple services present us with multiple churches.

space words: "gather," "there," "among." Matthew 18:20 does not provide all the ingredients for a church, as we'll think about in chapter 1. The New Testament also adds preaching and the ordinances for specifying how we gather "in his name." Yet a church doesn't possess less than the ingredients mentioned here. It's not less than a gathering. Jesus is there at 9:00 a.m. He's there at 11:00. Each speaks for him. Each can act for him. Each is a church. And this is the uninterrupted pattern we'll discover throughout the New Testament regarding local churches.

It's common these days to say that a church is a people, not a place. And that's sort of true. It's the people who *are* a church—not

the building, pastors, budget, vision, or brand. But those people *become* a church in part by gathering in a place. That place, that gathering, is the geography of Christ's kingdom, as I'll also argue in chapter 1. One might as well say, "A basketball team is a people, not a practice or a game." Again, true, but it misses something crucial. The players become a team by practicing and playing together. No practicing and playing as one, no team. For a church, likewise, a physical togetherness, an assembly, is an essential part of the formula.

When you read "church" in your English Bible, the Greek word behind it is *ekklēsia*, which, in the plainest translation, is "assembly."² Again, a New Testament church is more than an assembly, but it's not less, as I'll seek to show. A people who don't regularly assemble cannot be an assembly, a church. They're just a bunch of people. Meanwhile, contemplate the word "multisite." It means *sites multiple, not together, not an assembly*.

One friend told me he liked the idea of the whole church being together, but he was uncertain of "how much we should insist on this principle of being single service or site." Let's be clear, I replied. There is no explicit "moral principle" in the Bible saying churches should stick to one site or service. I'm not starting with that kind of moral claim. I am starting with an ontological or a descriptive claim, as in: no matter what you call it, the Bible would say you have actually started another church with that second site or service. The second gathering, whether separated by time or by space, simply *is* its own church.

Structural Conversations Are Moral Conversations

Now, that ontological claim comes with moral implications. The problem is bigger and more complex than what we name the thing, because changing a church structure changes its moral shape.

We evangelicals don't know how to talk or think about structures, so strong are our individualistic and anti-institutional biases. At most, we treat the idea of church structure as pragmatic

“CHURCH” NOT A DIRECT TRANSLATION OF *EKKLĒSIA*

Part of what confuses our understanding of what constitutes a church is the fact that our English word “church” doesn’t actually derive from *ekklēsia*. It roots back in the Greek word *kyriakos* (an adjective for “of the Lord,” *kyrios*) or *kyriakē* (*oikia*), referring to a house of the Lord, which was sometimes used for houses of worship after AD 300. This eventually passed on through to the proto-Germanic *kirika* to the Old English *cirice* to the Middle English *chirche* to our own “church.” As such, our English word “church” has spent centuries, like a slow meandering river, picking up all kinds of flotsam and sediment, from the idea of a building to the idea of a hierarchical structure (e.g., Roman Catholic *Church*, Evangelical Lutheran *Church*). So our English Bibles use “church” to translate *ekklēsia*, but the English word bears a much broader, more complicated range of meaning and resonance. Where *ekklēsia* possessed the comparatively brick-like clarity of “assembly,” “church” is a more elastic word, carrying two thousand years’ worth of accumulated intuitions and associations. One of the first translators of the English Bible, William Tyndale, therefore translated *ekklēsia* as “congregation”—for example, “and upon this rocke I wyll bylde my congregacion.” All of this is to say, when we hear “church” with our English ears, we hear a lot more than early Greeks heard whenever someone said *ekklēsia*.

and arbitrary, as if it were a separate thing from what the church itself is. “A church structured *this* way or *that* way is still a church,” we assume. “And the Bible leaves us freedom for structuring it *this* way or *that* way.”

That’s a fair assumption for some things, like whether or not we have a Sunday school program or small group ministry or task-

specific deacons or biweekly elder meetings. But when it comes to defining what a church is or its basic system of governance, that's not the case. The very existence of a church depends upon some structure, some way of organizing and binding individual Christians together. No structure, no church.

Furthermore, realize what a "structure" is: it's a collection of rules, or moral judgments, that bind and shape our relationship with other people. To become a father or husband, for instance, is to occupy a rule structure that comes with a set of responsibilities—duties—and a package of rights and wrongs.

Structural conversations, in other words, are moral conversations. That's true in every domain of life, whether home, work, or government. It's true in matters of church structure, too.

To the seminary ethics professors out there, you should teach church structure and polity in your ethics class, because that's what church polity is—one subcategory of ethics.

So back to my original point: change a church's structure and you change the moral shape of the church. You change how people relate—their sense of responsibility to one another—however subtly and imperceptibly. Changing from a congregational to a presbyterian or an episcopal church government, for instance, changes its moral shape. Each distributes responsibilities and duties between leaders and members differently. You give more responsibility to the leaders, less to the members. Likewise, changing from one service to two, or one site to three, does the same thing, even if people are not fully aware of those differences. Whether you mean to or not, you inevitably shift some degree of authority and responsibility upward onto the shoulders of the leaders, even if you maintain the same formal structure (congregational, elder-rule, etc.). Over time, that shift, like wheels aimed at a slightly new angle, will dramatically alter the direction of the church and how it fulfills its mission.

The question for Christians, therefore, must be Does the Bible say anything about church structure? Christian ethics must be biblical ethics. Where the Bible morally binds the conscience, we

bind the conscience. Where it doesn't, we don't, but leave each believer to the realm of prudence and freedom. We want our ethics (or church structures) to depend not upon the wisdom of man but upon the inspired wisdom of God. We don't want our church structures to demand more than the Bible says, but nor do we want them to demand less than the Bible says.

In short, we all need two lists: a list of the structural things the Bible mandates for all churches everywhere because they make a church a church, and a list of the things that can vary from context to context. My concern in this book is with that first list. We want to define the church like Jesus defines the church; else we'll ask our churches to do different things than Jesus asks them to do. And that raises questions of faithfulness and obedience.

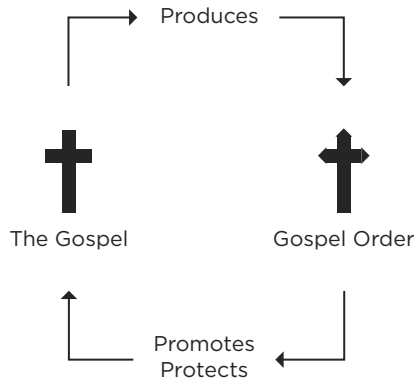
If Jesus points to an assembly and says, "That's a church," while we point to a collection of assemblies bound together under one administration and say, "And that's a church," recognize what we're doing. We are changing the definition of what a church is. What's more, we are giving at least some of the work that should belong to the assembly to the administration that binds the multiple assemblies together. For the leadership, that's an act of usurpation; for the members, abdication. And this is true whether you are a congregationalist like me or not. We are, then, saying we know better how to handle discipleship, witness, and mission than Jesus. We are picking a fight with Jesus!

The Gospel and Gospel Structures

Let me say one more thing about biblical church structures: they emerge from the gospel itself. They are not arbitrary or artificially stapled onto God's people. Rather, the gospel produces a social order, and that order shows itself in how we organize our churches. The organization or order in turn protects and promotes the gospel (see fig. 1).

The gospel and biblical church order do not work at cross purposes. They reinforce one another.

Figure 1. Gospel flow chart



One of those biblical minimums of church order, this book is arguing, is one assembly. You can no more be a multisite church than you can be a multisite body. The single assembly of a church demonstrates, proves, embodies, illustrates, incarnates, makes concrete, makes palpable and touchable and hearable and seeable the unity we possess in the gospel. Gathering as a local assembly is the very first imperative to the indicative of the unity we possess as members of the universal church. It literally makes that unity visible and active. The body of Christ is not just an idea. Nor is the family of God. Nor is the temple of the Spirit. You can actually *see* and *hear* and *reach out and touch* the body, family, and temple in the gathering. The gathering manifests the universal church, or what people sometimes capitalize as the *Church*. The gathering makes the Church present, and a church present to itself. That is, it enables the members to discover, see, and recognize themselves together as *a church* and as *the Church*.

What's more, the gathering represents the authority of Christ. It depends upon and testifies to his lordship. Multisite advocates argue that once a church reaches a certain size, people cannot possibly know one another. This misses the point. A church is a church not because everyone knows everyone else, though we certainly hope everyone knows some people. A church is a church ultimately

because of the authority of Christ and his declaration that he would identify himself with gatherings: “I’m there in the gathering of two or three in my name.” That was his decision, not ours. Consider, therefore, what a church gathering is: it’s a group of people bowed in submission to something. To what? To Christ. Their physical togetherness, then, testifies to his lordship.

Yet, divide the assembly in space or time, and gospel authority must move, once again, to the leaders who bind those assemblies together. The shared submission of those assemblies now testifies—again, even subtly—to the leaders who unite them.

It’s therefore crucial to keep presence and authority tied together—both because Christ explicitly tied his name to the gathering and because he makes every member of the church a priest-king. Presence and authority are in sync in the assembly.

That said, there’s an inevitability to the authority of Jesus in the gathering. A friend in a doctrinally solid multisite church recently told me their members’ meetings, which combine all the campuses, are in a downward spiral of conflict. Members of the three sites each prefer the leadership of their own campus pastors and find themselves tempted to mistrust the pastors from other campuses. It’s true their conflict might have had a number of sources, but the thought bubble above my head read, “You have separated presence and authority and gone against the biblical pattern. You picked a fight with Jesus. I’m sad, but not surprised by the resulting tensions.”

Church Intuitions

Let me explain our fight with Jesus one more way. We all have a basic set of intuitions about what a church is. An intuition, mind you, is your gut sense about something, your snap judgment about it before you consciously think about it. And we all have a gut sense about what a church is, an automatic reflex that shows up in the way we talk about a church.

Suppose you reflexively think of the church as a building. You will talk about “driving down to the church” or “walking inside the

church.” You’ll exclaim, “I can’t believe they’re selling the church to a condo developer.” Or you might view a church as a performance event, like a show or a concert. You “enjoyed church yesterday.” You “are frustrated by how long church lasted.” Or you might view a “church” as its leaders. You “love the church’s vision.” You “heard the church excommunicated Jack” or “the church changed its doctrine,” by which you mean the pastors did those things.

In each of these scenarios, whatever your doctrine is, your intuitive or functional view determines your practice.

To be sure, our church intuitions can be more or less biblical, mixing biblical elements together with cultural elements. And they can change over time. I expect that some of my intuitions are misshaped. Admittedly, it’s hard to see which ones. If you want to know about the water, don’t ask the fish. But compare the phrases mentioned above about “driving down to the church” or “enjoying church” with the way the Bible uses the word.

The Bible talks about the church *as a people*.

- “Tell it to the church” (Matt. 18:17).
- “When he had landed at Caesarea, he went up and greeted the *church*, and then went down to Antioch” (Acts 18:22).
- “Greet also the *church* in their house” (Rom. 16:5).

It talks about it *as a people who gather together*.

- “And when they arrived and gathered the *church* together, they declared all that God had done with them” (Acts 14:27).
- “When you come together as a *church*, I hear that there are divisions among you. . . . So then, my brothers, when you come together to eat, wait for one another” (1 Cor. 11:18, 33).
- “If, therefore, the whole *church* comes together and all speak in tongues . . .” (1 Cor. 14:23).

It talks about the church *as a people who act together*.

- “And if they refuse to listen even to the *church* . . .” (Matt. 18:17).

- “When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the *church*. . . . Then it seemed good to the apostles and elders, with the whole *church*, to choose men from among them and send them” (Acts 15:4, 22).

Notice that this last example also distinguished the church from the leaders.

I’m not suggesting verses like these are proof of one assembly. My point is merely that these biblical authors talk about the church a little differently than we do.

Furthermore, if your idea of a church at the functional or gut level is a *building*, you will do quite a bit to take care of that building. The building will be very important to you. If your view at the functional or gut level is *performance*, you will prioritize attending the performance and the quality of the performance, but you might not prioritize your participation in worship and spending time with the church family the rest of the week.

The fight with Jesus, then, shows up in any area where our view of the church differs from his. The person who intuitively or functionally views the church as a weekly performance will more likely attend to some biblical duties but not others. We fight Jesus by redefining the church. We fight Jesus by forsaking any of the responsibilities he’s given to us.

If this book were a full-on ecclesiology, we would have to talk about the church as family, church as body, church as bride, church as pillar and foundation of truth, church as citizens of the kingdom, and so forth. We would need both the structural, institutional elements and the familial, fellowship elements—the skeleton and the muscle. And we would need to ensure that our intuitive assumptions and sense of responsibility were stuffed full with all that wonderful content.

The single biblical element we’re meditating upon in this book comes from the word itself—*ekklēsia* in the Greek, “church” in English. Have you ever stopped and asked why Jesus picked the word

ekklēsia? He could have used a more religious-sounding word like “synagogue.” We would have advised him to use softer, more inclusive words like “community” or “fellowship” or “society.” And certainly, he and the apostles were happy to use other metaphors, too, like “flock” and “family” and “body.” But Jesus also chose a hard-boundary, brick-heavy word that to first-century ears meant “assembly,” whether people were reading the Greek Old Testament or classical Greek writers like Aristotle. They would have heard it with different intuitions or assumptions than we possess when we hear the word “church.” It’s a religious word for us. For them it was more political. It communicates *building* to us, not to them. It insinuates a *hierarchy* to us, not to them.

Turning back to the topic of multisite and multiservice models, then, realize that our ability to make sense of these models depends not just upon our formal doctrine but also upon our intuitions. If you intuitively view the church as a building, you won’t balk when the pastors recommend adding a second service. Same building, same church, right? If you intuitively view the church as a Sunday morning performance or as the leadership, you won’t think it’s weird when they recommend adding another site. It won’t violate your sense of what the church is or needs. In fact, why not perform this show in as many venues as possible?

Marketplace Intuitions

Think about it. Through the centuries, Christians have often built churches mimicking the structures of the culture around them. The Roman pope and episcopacy of the 600s matched itself to the Roman emperor and hierarchies of the Roman government. The committee structures of Baptist churches in America in the 1950s matched themselves to the corporate structures of the General Electric and Ford Motor Company of the 1950s. And churches in Africa today often treat the pastor like a tribal chief. The lesson is that none of us should assume we are impervious to our surrounding influences.

Multisite or multiservice pastor friends of mine have admitted they adopted the model without first doing a careful study. The literature says the same. “Without really thinking about it, we became a multi-site and video-venue church,” says Mark Driscoll.³ Brad House and Gregg Allison testify to the point more broadly: “Multi-site leaders are fond of borrowing a phrase from startup companies that boast about ‘building the plane in the air.’”⁴

Now, leading and growing an organization always involve some improvisation. Yet consider what people do when they improvise. They look around the room to see what’s lying about, what objects or words or ideas can be put to use. Is it any surprise, therefore, that in the last fifty years American churches would pursue the multiple-site-and-service model? When we are not “really thinking about it,” we inevitably stray in the direction of what’s already around us.

Our intuitions are swayed by the marketplace more than we care to admit. If you lived through the 1970s to ’90s, you witnessed the larger chains swallowing up all the independent retailers. You remember when Barnes & Noble closed down your favorite bookstore, Blockbuster Video shuttered the local video shop, and Jiffy Lubes began popping up on the corners where the independent garages used to sit. By the same token, you might remember when small churches kept closing their doors at approximately the same rate that the nearby megachurch was building yet another addition.⁵ As Ed Stetzer has noted, “There are as many megachurches today in the greater Nashville area as there were in the entire country in 1960.” Multiservice churches existed before the 1970s, but they started to become commonplace through the 1980s and ’90s, reaching 32 percent of churches by 2016.⁶ In 1990 ten churches nationwide were multisite; in 2019 over five thousand were.⁷

In the twenty-first century, we have watched the aforementioned chain retailers lose to the Internet: Barnes & Noble has given way to Amazon; Blockbuster Video to Netflix. Times change. Sure enough, the Internet church becomes a thing. Well-known churches like

Saddleback, Life.Church, Northpoint, and others all offer “online campuses.” If you accept the premise of multisite, in which *gathering* and *church* are unlinked, it’s hard to dispute the logic of the Internet church. Unhooking the word “church” from a gathering of one people (multiservice) and a geographic location (multisite) makes this the next logical step. The word “multisite,” again, justifies the phenomena—why not have as many sites as there are members?

And the trend continues. One writer recently praised something he called the “omni-channel approach.” This allows members to “attend one Sunday, listen to the message on podcast the following week, watch a live online stream the Sunday after, and catch the message on-demand in a church app the week after that.” The point is, he said, we’re shifting from “a location-centric approach, to an audience-centric approach.”⁸

This is the era of the franchise, the celebrity, quality entertainment, and the Internet. We value quality products, quick access, efficient processes, predictable outcomes, and visible results. From governments to schools to churches, we want our leaders to provide the answers and to do all the work. In this environment, the multisite and multiservice models simply make sense. They’re intuitive.

And please understand: I’m not just pointing the finger. I can complain about the closing of bookstores in one minute and order a book from Amazon in the next; critique consumerism in churches in my weekday job, and then complain in my heart about the music on Sunday. I distinctly remember showing up once in a small church where the only instrument was a pianist banging out the basic chords of the hymns we sang. His lack of skill distracted me. Like most people, I like entertainment-production quality, including in my church.

In such a world, to oppose multiple sites and services can feel like opposing the Internet. Good luck. Church leaders concede these models are “not ideal,” like “not baking your own bread is not

ideal.” So we shrug our shoulders and resign ourselves to the fact that this is how the world works nowadays.

When I told one pastor friend I was writing this book, he replied, “People are going to think you’re a loon!” I remember because I don’t hear the word “loon” very often. Yet I think he’s right. Conversation after conversation tells me this book is spitting into the wind. Why? Either because I’m wrong, which is possible, or because the multisite and multiservice models accord with today’s cultural intuitions, of which I’m certain. The multisite and multiservice models feel like “Of course!” and “Why not!” which tells you that our intuitions are speaking. Franchise restaurants, movie theaters, voluntary associations, consumeristic mentalities, our obsession with celebrities and political leaders, autonomy and personal choice, professional-quality media productions, growing expectations of big government, brand management and consistency—all this provides the soil in which multiple sites and services naturally sprout, particularly when we are “not really thinking about it.” Then, if we are challenged to think about it, we want to defend what we’ve already built.

Therefore, I’m asking you to do two things as you read this book. First, consider the biblical arguments. But, second, stop and examine your own intuitions or assumptions about what a church is. Could they be less biblical and more contemporary than you realize?

Subtly Changing Intuitions

I am not saying the members and leaders of multisite and multiservice churches are all consumers. Many preach against consumerism. Multisite pastor Mark Driscoll argues that “a campus is not set up for church consumers” and that approaching church like consumers “is sin.”⁹

The trouble is that the institutional structures speak and teach and train. The medium is the message, as it’s said. And the multiple-site-and-service structure works against the best pastoral in-

tentions. The “church” is no longer just the gathered people. The “church” is now several gatherings of people, plus the administrative superstructure. So guess where the burden of responsibility shifts? To the thing uniting all those groups of people—the administrative superstructure, which includes the leaders and their weekly performance.

Compare the experience of stepping into three different churches.

Multiservice

Let’s start at the 9:00 a.m. service of a multiservice church. A pastor stands up and welcomes everyone to “Redemption Church.” What or who is Redemption Church? Well, our doctrine tells us that Redemption Church is a people, not a place. So Redemption Church, on paper, must be the members in the building at the moment, together with the members who show up at the 10:30 and noon services—everyone who signed a membership covenant. The thing is, no one gets to sing or pray or hear sermons with “the church.” The only shared experience “the church” enjoys is the building and the performance, albeit at different times; like “You saw the Broadway show Hamilton? So did I!” The shared building and performance, experientially, makes the church a “we” and an “us.”

Church ends. We head to a restaurant. We bump into another member from the church and say, “Did you make it to church?” or “Wasn’t church great?” By “make it to church,” we don’t mean all the members, in spite of our theology, because the members never actually met as one. We mean the people up front or the building. “Wasn’t church great,” too, means the people up front. The people up front are what we all shared. The membership (church) didn’t do anything together.

The same verbal ambiguity occurs later in the week when we invite our non-Christian neighbors to “church,” meaning the event or performance at the 9:00 or 10:30 or noon hour. We cannot invite

them to the actual church itself, that is, the members, because the church (the members) never meets.

And little by little our church intuitions change. In the way we use the word “church,” and talk about “church,” and think about what “church” is, “church” changes from a people to a performance or leaders or a building, even if our doctrine stays the same. We don’t treat it like Scripture does: “Greet also the *church* in their house” (Rom. 16:5); “Then it seemed good to the apostles and elders, with the whole *church*, to choose men from among them” (Acts. 15:22).

This doesn’t just happen among consumeristic, megachurch Americans. It can happen anywhere. I asked a bus tour driver in Kenya if he had a church. “Yes.” What kind of church is it? “Anglican.” Do you like your church? “Yes.” How come? “Because if I miss one service, I can just attend another one.” I dare surmise, the mere fact that his church had multiple services— no matter what else may or may not be true about his church—worked against his ability to apprehend his church as a people to whom and for whom he is responsible.

One Assembly

Suppose then we leave Redemption Church and attend the single weekly gathering of Faith Church. The pastor there also refers to “our church” and “Christ’s body” and “the family of God.” But now those words mean something touchable, hearable, seeable. We can look around the room and behold with our eyes the “family” and “body” of Faith Church. The universal church is fully manifest in that room, where the temperature rises by seven degrees from the body heat. Faith Church is united by the people up front, as in the multiservice Redemption Church. But it’s also united by its own performance. Together the church sings and the church prays and the church listens and the church makes decisions, even if five thousand people are in the room. And it’s this shared performance of all the people, gathered in Jesus’s name through preaching and the Supper in one place, that makes Faith Church a church, a fam-

DON'T MULTISITE CHURCHES COME IN A VARIETY OF MODELS?

Multisite churches come in all sorts of shapes and sizes. Some project the preacher on a screen. Some ask him to speed across town by car to preach in each location. Some have their own campus pastors who do the work or split the work of preaching. Some gather every campus together quarterly. Some permit each campus to exercise a degree of autonomy; some don't. I'm not going to work through all these differences example by example, and I happily admit that some formulations better conform to the scriptural pattern than others.

The common denominator I'm interested in is with anything that calls itself a "church" but has more than one weekly gathering comprising different sets of individuals. (I'm not speaking about a church that has, say, a morning and an evening service, where the same people attend both services.)

ily, a body. Ironically, Redemption "Church" can never do these things as a church.

Two different structures cultivate two sets of intuitions over time.

Multisite

Now, let's travel over to a third church, the multisite Grace Church. I'm not surprised that the multiservice church became commonplace in the American church experience before the multisite did. Multiservice *feels* less troubling to the oneness and "churchness" of a church. Members of the multiservice all gather in the same building. They see each other in the hallways and parking lot. At the same time, the multiservice model broke the connection between church and gathering. It trained Christians to view "church"

as performance for several decades, allowing the multisite model to easily, perhaps inevitably, follow, just like the Internet church inevitably follows the multisite church. That said, ironically, some multisite models do better than others, as well as better than the multiservice model, at teaching people that the church involves gathering. Members of a campus or site will sometimes possess their own space, their own pastors, their own music leaders, and sometimes even their own preacher, and often (most crucially) a stable group of members. Relative to the members of any given *service*, therefore, the members of any given *site* will potentially cultivate a thicker sense of “we.”

That said, the “church” remains one head with multiple bodies. So we show up at the south campus of Grace Church. When the service leader refers to “our church,” “this body,” and “this family,” these concepts remain as abstract and non-incarnate as in the multiservice Redemption Church. Then the preacher appears on video. He might be in the most dangerous place of all, so much prominence being given to him. Each site has its own band and dedicated pastors, but this charismatic and gifted communicator is the primary point of ecclesiastical and structural unity between different campuses. He is the only human being that everyone in all the sites and services encounters in common. He is the pinnacle and essence of what makes a video-model multisite church a church. It’s almost as if the church finds its identity in him. The church is a “we” through him. Despite the best intentions, the church becomes the church of *that preacher*. It’s identified with him. It draws visitors through him. Members have dinner and talk about him. He is the source of every member’s pleasure or displeasure, and the subject of newspaper articles. The members know well enough to say with their mouths that the church is the people. But functionally, the church is identified with him. Again, our intuitions change, even when our doctrine doesn’t.

To be sure, this emphasis on a superstar pastor can occur at a one-assembly church, too. But the structures of the multisite

church require it, because he quite literally *is* the point and substance of unity between campuses. He is therefore at the very core of what constitutes Grace “Church.”

In short, change the basic biblical structures and you’ll slowly, subtly change people’s understanding of what the church is, what the church does, and what members are responsible to do.

My pastor friend Bob learned all this the hard way. When he led the church from three services back to one, he discovered how the very fact of three services had taught the church poorly. Here’s how Bob put it:

Years ago, we outgrew our space, so we added a second service, and then a third. The result was that I was teaching my people that their church provided options for them that they could select for what suited them on that day. Up too late on Saturday night? No problem, pick the late service. Got a lot to do on Sunday? No problem, hit the early service. It’s not that I ever said that, but that is what happened. In fact, over time the people who came to the early service were so committed to the convenience of that time, that when we were able to all meet together at one time in one place, they left. I only thought they were part of the church. Initially, I wanted to blame them for thinking only of themselves and not being committed. Then it dawned on me. I had taught them that.¹⁰

If the church is a family that gathers, what might seem like a subtle structural alteration—going from one service to two then three—changes the DNA of what a church is. It’s now not a family that gathers but an event to attend or the people up front. And that mutation will teach, even if you teach with your mouth contrariwise. The medium is the message.

Conclusion

You want the argument of this book in a nutshell? I’ll give it to you in three r’s: Multisite and multiservice churches *repudiate* the Bible’s

definition of a church, *redefine* what a church is, and so *reshape* the church morally. And all that means these models pick a fight with Jesus. The fight involves abdication by the members and usurpation by the leaders, even if unintended.

Think back to the gospel flow chart above (p. 23). By changing what a church is, the multiple-site-and-service model, like unbiblical polity in general, subtly

- weakens a church's ability to protect both the gospel and the people of the gospel,
- puts the pastors in a spiritually precarious position,
- weakens every member's individual Christian discipleship, and
- hurts evangelism and the church's witness.

I keep saying "subtle" or "subtly," just like the sinking foundation under my last home was subtle. It took a decade for the crack in the wall and ceiling to widen to the point where we could identify the problem. So, too, the weakened foundations of a multisite or multiservice church show themselves only over time, sometimes decades.

Good pastors in multisite and multiservice churches have an instinctive sense of these problems and therefore will work against the ill effects of the changes. I can name dozens of otherwise healthy multisite and multiservice churches filled with good Christians doing great work. But the change in what the church *is* is real because it's mathematically hardwired into the structure: two is not one. And these pastors and churches will always have to work against their structure, like running on a track with weights around your legs. Over time, furthermore, people will easily lose sight of their every-member responsibilities and corporate purposes.

For all these reasons and more, it is by no means clear to me that multisite and multiservice churches will do a better job of reaching

PICKING A FIGHT WITH JESUS? REALLY?

A multisite pastor friend of mine graciously read a draft of this book. Amid affirming comments, he also observed, “I don’t like this ‘fight with Jesus’ thing—at all.” How serious a charge was I making? he wondered. “Where does multisite fall on the theological triage scale?”

The phrase “theological triage” refers to how important a doctrine is, the way an emergency room nurse has to triage patients coming through the door. *First-order doctrines* are essential to the gospel. Think of the Trinity, the doctrine of sin, or Christ’s person and work. Get them wrong and you get the gospel wrong.

Matters of church definition as well as church organization such as baptism, the Supper, and polity are *second-order doctrines*. If first-order doctrines are essential to the gospel, second-order issues are important for protecting the gospel over time. Plus, they are essential to being a church, because that’s one thing a church does—protect the gospel over time. Baptists and Presbyterians can agree on first-order issues and so affirm one another as Christians. But they define the church differently. Baptists like me define a church as “believers.” Presbyterians define it as “believers and their children.”

Third-order doctrines are issues we can disagree on but still be members of the same church, like our view on the millennium or the gift of tongues.

The multisite question, I believe, is a second-order question. It concerns a new definition of a church: multiple gatherings and their administrative superstructure. For that reason, my regard for multisiters matches my regard for Presbyterians. I happily embrace each in the gospel, but with hat in hand and love in my heart, yes, I believe that both pick a fight with Jesus by wrongly defining the church.

the lost. Even while the numbers of the multisite megachurches explode, let's remember, we do not have heaven's eyes. Tabulating conversions is not like counting widgets rolling down the assembly line. I therefore don't assume that, on the last day, when the real numbers are tallied, multisite methods will prove to be "the most efficient way to reach the maximum number of people as quickly as possible," at least if they are building on the wisdom of man instead of God.

I think of my pastor friend Paul who added a second service to his church when the building became full. His motives were good: he didn't want to close the doors to unbelievers. Yet he was also cautious about dividing the church. "We were completely committed to remaining one church," he told me. Therefore, he led the church to adopt every measure they could think of to maintain that sense of oneness. "I was determined it would work," he continued. "Every elder committed to be at both services. The services were identical in every way, and we put a fellowship time between the services." They asked people in the first service to stay late and people in the second to come early.

Yet, after ten months of trying hard, Paul said, "We realized we were creating two churches." New members didn't know people in the other service. And the Spirit did different things in the two services, even as the leaders tried to keep them identical. The two assemblies simply encountered different experiences, and "two services made us two churches." Plus, each church was a little weaker because of the model. Members relied more on the elders to maintain the sense of unity. And the elders were effectively pastoring two churches, meaning there was less of them for each. There was an unintended abdication and usurpation.

Therefore, they "squished" (Paul's word) everyone back into one service. The first Sunday back together, Paul said, was a mix of joy ("so good to be here with you again") and surprise ("you've been coming to the church for *how* long?"). Eventually, they found a bigger meeting space. Not only that, a nearby church needed help. So

they sent a pastor and thirty members, reigniting that congregation and its witness.

What they learned in hindsight was that the pressure of a full building forced them to grow in ways they weren't expecting. At first, they thought about just themselves: how can *we* keep growing? The second service offered a pressure-release valve, which allowed them to remain parochial-minded and focused on their own ministry. Gratefully, they quickly realized this first solution created new problems. So they thought again: "Can we help other churches?" It would take sacrifice, but they discovered they could. Not only that, but they remembered that this other church is on the same team. By virtue of the gospel, the *we* includes *them* (the other church).

In short, defining the church the way Jesus defined the church, in spite of practical pressures to do otherwise, led to both spiritual and evangelistic growth. It forced them to become more catholic-minded, as I'll define that in chapter 3. And it gave them the opportunity to raise up another gospel witness, another church.

In fact, my map for this book starts there at the destination—chapter 3. Part of me wants you to begin there. The third chapter offers the alternative to multiple sites and services, and the alternative is exciting. Picture powerfully evangelistic churches working together, like you see in the New Testament; churches who think bigger than just their own ministries. That's the vision we need, and getting there requires us to nudge our church intuitions back in a catholic (small *c*) direction—meaning that the church is global, and we need to learn how to work together.

The alternative, in other words, is not a quick fix. It means changing the way we think—even feel—about "church" and our lives together in churches. Chapter 1 begins this process of reorientation by considering the kingdom theme in Scripture and why Jesus would use the word *ekklēsia*. I will call this gathering "the geography of Christ's kingdom." This chapter is the heaviest lift theologically.

Chapter 2 is basically one big word study on how the New Testament uses the word *ekklēsia*. I'll argue that, in spite of what you may

Introduction

have read elsewhere, the Bible consistently and uniformly presents local churches as assemblies.

Chapter 3, as I say, then points to the alternative, which is a far bigger church world than the one you might presently inhabit.

Ultimately, if we're going to know what to do when the building is so full the usher cannot find people seats, we need a different set of intuitions, intuitions that are more like Christ's and the apostles'. I hope that, even if you aren't finally persuaded by my exegesis, you'll enjoy meditating on the Bible and the church. That's what I try to do.

A CHURCH IS THE GEOGRAPHY OF CHRIST'S KINGDOM

In the introduction, I argued that all of us view our churches through intuitions that are both biblical and cultural. My goal in this chapter is to pick up the kingdom theme in Scripture in order to push our church intuitions in a more political direction.

Maybe that sounds counterintuitive? But, no, I don't mean anything about Republicans and Democrats, lobbyists and legislatures. I mean that the gathering of a local church is an outpost or embassy of heaven. Through preaching and the ordinances, Jesus publicly identifies himself with us in the gatherings: "I am there among them," he said. He tied his authority to the gatherings. So it's there that we affirm our allegiance to him and our accountability to one another. There we raise his flag and brandish our kingdom passports. There his *ekklēsia* shows itself as an *ekklēsia* and acts as an *ekklēsia*.

In a sentence, the point of this chapter is this: the church gathering is where Christ's kingdom becomes visible and active, and Jesus's word *ekklēsia* communicates just this. By "visible" I mean you can literally see it, hear it, touch it. By "active" I mean we officially and publicly speak for the kingdom's sake. We conduct the kingdom's corporate business. Worship and submission unite.

Or let me put it this way: the church gathering is the “geography” of Christ’s kingdom. Christians often say the church is not like ancient Israel in that it has no land, no geography. But the gathering is that geography. You might have visited an overseas embassy of your nation and heard it said that you were stepping onto the soil of your nation. The church gathering is where the nations of the earth can step inside the kingdom of heaven, this embassy of the eschaton. And it’s where the citizens of that kingdom wield authority.

What Makes a Church a Church?

Let’s start with the question What makes a church a church?

The married couple Oleg and Marina, brand-new believers, knew they wanted a church. They had learned the gospel from an American missionary named Will, yet there was no evangelical Protestant church in their twenty-thousand-person city in the Ural Mountains of Russia.

“Lord, give us a church in our city,” they prayed.

One day in the market, Oleg and Marina met a watch repairman named Sergei. He had been in prison for stealing, but now the seventy-year-old man was a Christian. So was his wife, Zena, who had been a hardened atheist until her husband shared the gospel with her. Oleg and Marina noticed how Sergei used words like “God,” “blessing,” and “prayers.” Finally, Marina asked, “Are you a Christian?” When Sergei said he was, she responded, “So are we! And we have been praying to find more believers in order to have a church.” Sergei replied, “You must have been, because three days ago I prayed the same thing.”

Marina asked Will to teach her and Oleg, Sergei and Zena, and their single friend Olga—five in all. They met on the second floor of Sergei’s house, above the kitchen, in a room that serves as a bedroom and living room. For seven weeks Will explained the necessity of gospel belief, apostolic teaching, fellowship and accountability, the Lord’s Supper, prayer, service, giving, worship, and evangelism. He taught about the church from Matthew 18 and Acts 2. He then

asked the group of five, "Will you commit to these things together?" Oleg replied, "Except for the Lord's Supper we already do these things." The five of them split up a loaf of freshly baked white bread and ate it. Then they passed around a cup. Each drank.

They were now a church. They gave themselves the name "Christ's Church." All this happened four years ago (as of this writing), and since then more family members and friends have come to faith and joined.

From week one, they were a multiethnic, multinational church, including Udmurts, Russians, and Americans (Will and his wife). Now Ukrainians and a Tatar also belong to their number.

Traditional Protestant Answers

Back, then, to our question: What made Oleg, Marina, Sergei, Zena, Olga, and Will and his wife a church?

Before we look to Scripture ourselves, let's consider how Protestants before us, themselves drawing from Scripture, answered that question:

- *Lutherans*. "A congregation of saints in which the gospel is rightly taught and the Sacraments are rightly administered" (Augsburg Confession, art. 7).
- *Anglicans*. "A congregation of faithful men in which the pure Word of God is preached and the sacraments be duly ministered" (Thirty-Nine Articles, art. 19).
- *Presbyterians*. "Those . . . that profess true religion; and . . . their children" in "particular churches, which are . . . more or less pure, according as the doctrine of the gospel is taught and embraced, ordinances administered, and public worship performed" (Westminster Confession of Faith, 25.2, 4).
- *Baptists*. "A company of visible saints, called and separated from the world, by the Word and the Spirit of God, to the visible profession of the faith of the gospel, being baptized into the faith, and joined to the Lord, and each other, by mutual

agreement, in the practical enjoyment of the ordinances”
(1644 London Baptist Confession, art. 33).

Drawing from these definitions, we might say that Marina, Oleg, Sergei, and the rest became a church by gathering together for certain activities, namely, preaching and the ordinances. The church isn't the activities; it's the people (“congregation,” “company”) as constituted by certain activities (preaching, ordinances). Further, we would say that Marina and company remain “a church” even when they are not engaged in those activities.¹

The dynamic here is reminiscent of what makes a team a team. A team is a group of people who play a sport together, but not only *when* they play the sport together. You wouldn't call them a team if they never played as one. But insofar as they do, you would call them a team even when they are not together.² The function creates the thing, without which there is no thing.

Citizens of a Heavenly Kingdom

What these older definitions addressed only implicitly, however, is the question of location or the gathering. The gathering was assumed. There were no video campuses requiring these early Protestants to tighten up that part of their definitions.

But can we delocalize what these confessions say a local or particular church is? My short answer in this chapter is no. Jesus explicitly identifies himself with the gathering because the gathering makes his kingdom visible and active through their mutual agreement and testimony. The gathering, as I've said, is the “geography” of the kingdom.

To see that, let's imagine Oleg and the other six under an X-ray machine that gives us a biblical perspective on the skeletal structure holding them together as a particular church. What would we see?

Among other things, we would discover that, through the gospel, these seven are held together as citizens of Christ's kingdom. Their passports might say Udmurt, Russian, and American. Yet God de-

livered each of them “to the kingdom of his beloved Son” (Col. 1:13) and made them “fellow citizens” of this more ultimate nation (Eph. 2:19; also, Phil. 3:20). As such, their gatherings, set there in Russia’s Ural Mountains, are like outposts or embassies of this heavenly kingdom.

Perhaps you are wondering, doesn’t Christ’s kingdom rule unite all Christians everywhere? Yes, it does: invisibly. What a local church does is make that rule visible. It expresses or manifests his kingdom rule in a way that everyone—insiders and outsiders—can actually see with their eyes and hear with their ears. This happens when a group of Christians physically gathers together, agrees upon the gospel to be preached, undertakes a naming ceremony (baptism), and then enjoys a regular family meal that affirms both the gospel and their unity (the Lord’s Supper).

We need the biblical X-ray machine to see this because, entering that second-floor room, we don’t *see* a kingdom, at least in terms that people typically associate with kingdoms. There are no flags, no government officials, no parliamentary buildings, no border entry stations. We only see this group of seven people doing what folk today call “religious” stuff.

Yet the biblical story of our church gatherings is set within the larger story of God’s kingdom and how God reveals his rule on earth. God walked with Adam and Eve in the garden, a King in his kingdom. His rule was public and visible, both in his own person and in their obedience. When God excommunicated Adam and Eve from the garden for their sin, God remained King over all creation, yet his rule became invisible.

The course of redemptive history and geography in the Bible is the story of God making his rule and kingdom visible at different times in different ways. (Picture a submarine surfacing from time to time while crossing the Atlantic.) God publicly expressed his kingdom rule in mighty acts of judgment and salvation, covenantal institutions like the temple, and covenantal signs like circumcision. Most interesting for our purposes here, God also made his kingdom

visible in the gatherings of his people. The Old Testament refers to these as “the assembly of the Lord” and “the assembly of Israel,” and by the phrase “the day of the assembly.” We’ll come back to these in a moment.

Yet the story of the Old Testament is also the story of how inadequately the visible mechanisms of rule guide the human heart, which is desperately sick (Jer. 17:9). God therefore promised a new covenant, one that would establish his kingdom internally through the preaching of the gospel.

The new covenant, then, does its work, in the first instance, *invisibly*. The King forgives sins, giving every citizen of the covenant equal political standing before his throne. Then he writes his law on their hearts, so that every citizen will freely choose to obey (Jer. 31:31–34; Ezek. 36:24–27). Word and Spirit conspire together to produce a kingdom where the law is just and people want to obey it (Ezek. 37:1–14).

Meditate for just a moment on that: laws and hearts match! It’s the greatest political program in history. It’s the promise of the kingdom of heaven on earth.

The reforming of our church intuitions must begin here. There’s a place to talk about other biblical metaphors, too, like body and family. But the political element is also central to what the church is. It’s a skeletal structure, holding the whole thing together.

Making the Kingdom of Heaven Visible

Yet something is still missing from our new covenant storyline. This new covenant kingdom remains invisible, publicly inaccessible, unidentified. How does one citizen know who the others are? And how do the unbelieving nations know who does and does not belong to this kingdom? Members of the old covenant had circumcision, Sabbath keeping, and eventually a land to identify themselves, to say nothing of their familial and ethnic ties. Crucially, they also had “the assembly [*ekklēsia*] of the Lord” and “the day of the assembly.” Yet what do the people of the new covenant have?

Or we could put the problem this way: the new covenant kingdom works from the inside out, unlike all other kingdoms and political communities, which work from the outside in. But the external trappings of a kingdom, for now, are suspended. There are no borders, land, government offices, flags, army, police force. Yet it's still a kingdom. So how do you exercise border patrol in a kingdom with no borders and no land? *Something* needs to make the very real, made-in-heaven political community of the new covenant visible.

Here we come to Jesus's presentation of the church. The church is not a shopper's club or exercise class, where we come once a week to get a good workout. The gathered, assembled, congregated church is the kingdom of heaven made visible on planet earth. It's Christians bound together—experiencing the firstfruits, the first taste, the first experience of God's society-creating rule.³

Walk to the second floor of Sergei's house and peek your head through the door when the seven Christians meet. Look, there it is! The kingdom of heaven in the gathered members of the church.

As I suggested a moment ago, the force field of God's rule binds all the saints both to him and to one another. We are all "fellow citizens" (Eph. 2:19). Yet that rule *manifests itself, enacts itself, and becomes visible* in the local assembly.⁴ The kingdom of God becomes present in every particular congregation. How? The particular congregation or local church is where a group of saints both gather together and "shake hands" on the gospel (through the preaching and ordinances). It's where they agree on who Jesus is and that they are fellow disciples of Jesus, an agreement I will characterize as the essence of church authority in a moment.

When Christians formally gather together in Christ's name, they become the "geography" of Christ's presently landless kingdom. You can literally see it with your eyes because the people are gathered together. The gathering is like the US embassy in London. Walk inside, and they will tell you that you are standing on American soil. In a church that meets at different times or in different

locations, you cannot do this. You cannot see “the church” (by their definition). You can only see a part of the church.

This is what Jesus says in Matthew's Gospel, especially chapters 16, 18, 26, and 28. We need to walk through these verses carefully, perhaps more painstakingly than anywhere else in the book. But right here is where I hope to prove from Scripture everything I've just said: Christ's kingdom rule becomes visible in the local church, and the demonstration of that kingdom rule requires a gathering where the saints affirm one another in the gospel and one another's membership in the gospel. Again, all this is part of reprogramming our church intuitions.

Are you ready?

Introducing the *Ekklēsia*

Jesus enters Matthew's Gospel telling us “the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matt. 4:17). He explains who will receive this kingdom (5:3). He tells his followers to pray for it, seek it, and proclaim it (6:10, 33; 10:7). He binds the satanic strong man and so demonstrates it (12:27–29). He promises to reveal its secrets (13:11). He describes it with parables (13:24, 31, 33, 44, 45, 47, etc.). And then . . .

He says that he will build his church, his *ekklēsia* (Matt. 16:18).

Wait a second—his what?

After so much talk about a kingdom, the word “church” might strike modern ears as a strange word to choose. A kingdom is a political thing. And a church is a religious thing, isn't it? Does Jesus change the subject? Apparently not, because right after saying he will build his church, he gives Peter, and by extension all the apostles, the “keys of the kingdom,” apparently as the means by which this church will be built. So why then does he refer to an *ekklēsia*?

In fact, Jesus does choose a decidedly political and covenantal word, when he could use a word with a little less political resonance, like “synagogue.”⁵

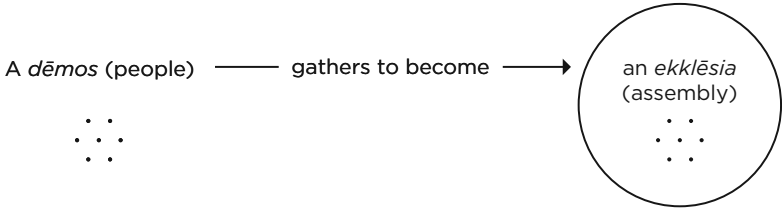
To understand this, let's do a five-century flashback from Jesus's day, like a television show that begins and then jumps to twenty-

four hours earlier. I want to see if we can hear Jesus's term *ekklēsia* through first-century ears by backing up in the plotline. We start on the streets of fifth-century-BC Athens, where we hear playwrights like Euripides and historians like Thucydides using *ekklēsia* to refer to the gathering of full citizens of what they called the *polis*, or political community, for making decisions on judicial and political matters.⁶ Any male citizen could attend an *ekklēsia*, debate, and vote by show of hands on officers and various proposals (votes in the courts occurred by ballot).⁷ To do all that, of course, someone had to *be there*.

By the fourth century BC, Aristotle saw the powers of these *ekklēsiai* as relatively broad: "The assembly [*ekklēsia*] should be supreme over all causes, or at any rate over the most important."⁸ Alexander the Great, who was tutored by Aristotle, brought the *polis* with its *ekklēsiai* to all the Greek cities of Asia and beyond. Alexander's successors eventually established thirty Greek cities in Palestine. By the time the New Testament was being written, the *ekklēsiai* had diminished in power and significance. The term could be used more broadly to refer to an unorganized crowd (as in Acts 19:32, 41). But organized assemblies continued to exist, as in Acts 19:38–39, where the town clerk of Ephesus tells a crowd to bring their charges to the courts or, if the courts don't satisfy their concerns, to settle them "in the regular assembly [*ekklēsia*]."⁹

What's interesting, furthermore, is that classical Greek treated the *ekklēsia* simply as the assembly. If you had said to Aristotle, "The *ekklēsia* is a people, not a place, right?" he would have looked at you cockeyed. "The people are the people," he would have said. "And to be an *ekklēsia* they have to gather in a place." In other words, classical Greek had one word for people (*dēmos*) and another word for assembly (*ekklēsia*). And so an *ekklēsia* was necessarily tied to the idea of a place. The people (*dēmos*) had to gather together in a place to become an assembly (*ekklēsia*).¹⁰ Then, when the *ekklēsia* disbanded, the people would no longer be called an *ekklēsia* (see fig. 2).

Figure 2. *Ekklēsia* in classical Greek



We'll come back to this idea in the next chapter.

In the third century BC, a number of Jewish scholars began translating the Hebrew Bible into common Greek. The Greek translation, called the Septuagint, uses what would later be Jesus's term of choice, *ekklesia*, to refer to the people of Israel gathered together, visibly demonstrating their nationhood under God.¹¹

- The Israelites gathered at the base of Mount Sinai amid fire on “the day of the assembly”—the day of *ekklesia* (Deut. 9:10; 10:4; 18:16).
- Rules of citizenship excluded certain people from worship in “the assembly of the LORD”—the *ekklesia* of the Lord (Deut. 23:1–8).¹²
- Moses instructed “all Israel” to “assemble” every seven years to hear the words of the law, and then he offered his final charge to “the assembly of Israel”—the *ekklesia* of Israel (Deut. 31:10–12, 30).
- Centuries later, King Solomon dedicated the temple by praying to God and then blessing “all the assembly of Israel” (2 Chron. 6:3).

The *ekklesia* served a crucial role in making God's kingdom visible, as I said a moment ago.¹³ God established his covenant with his people in the assembly.¹⁴ And the people gathered to worship God in the assembly.

Sing to the LORD a new song,
his praise in the assembly [*ekklesia*] of the godly! (Ps. 149:1)

Commentators today sometimes distinguish the political and religious usages of *ekklēsia*,¹⁵ but the Hebrew mind would not have abided such a clean distinction. To bow before God as King is to bow before him as Redeemer. Indeed, God makes his rule visible precisely in order that he might be known and worshiped.

Further, the Greek Old Testament's use of *ekklēsia*, which translates the Hebrew *qahal*, is similar to classical Greek in that it refers only to the assembly.¹⁶ Other words would be used to refer to the people who gather, especially *synagogue* (Hebrew: *edah*) and people (Hebrew: *am*). For example:

- “Then Moses and Aaron fell on their faces before all the assembly [Greek: *ekklēsia*; Hebrew: *qahal*] of the congregation [Greek: *synagōgē*; Hebrew: *edah*]” (Num. 14:5).
- “Assemble [Greek: *ekklēsas*; Hebrew: *qahal*] the people [Greek: *laos*; Hebrew: *am*]” (Deut. 31:12).

In other words, a first-century Jew who knew the Greek New Testament may have responded to the claim that “an *ekklēsia* is a people, not a place” the way I said Aristotle would have: “Well, yes, it’s a people, but only because they are gathered in a place” (see fig. 3).

Figure 3. Terms used in Old Testament Greek and Hebrew



The *ekklēsia* or assembly of Israel was something that assembled. It visibly pictured a people worshiping and submitting themselves to the rule of God.

When God exiled Israel from the land, first the Northern Kingdom then the Southern, he effectively disbanded the assembly. Yet

the prophet Joel, in the same breath in which he promised the outpouring of God's Spirit (Joel 2:28–32; Acts 2:17–21), also told Israel to “gather the people” and “consecrate the congregation”—the *ekklēsia* (Joel 2:16). Israel's entire political career and national history is pictured as a gathering, then a scattering through exile, and then a promise of another gathering.

The New Testament's usage of *ekklēsia* does develop beyond what we see in classical and Old Testament usage, as we'll consider in the next chapter. For now, however, I want you to think about all this Greco-Roman and Jewish background¹⁷ as you stop again and hear Jesus showing up and saying, “I will build my *ekklēsia*.” Why did he pick that word?

Jesus had in mind a gathering of a new Israel.¹⁸ Here was the true end of exile. Here was a new body politic. Here was the reconstituting of God's kingdom through outposts of that heavenly kingdom on earth. Jesus came to gather a new assembly, a new *ekklēsia*.¹⁹

No, Jesus did not intend his disciples to take over a geographic plot of land by sword. But nor did he intend for them to be a “religion” merely characterized by certain beliefs. Rather, he wanted to constitute them as a kingdom—a political reality. And so he chose a political word that necessarily came with spatial meaning: *ekklēsia*. His disciples would submit to him, and they would submit to him together. Visibly. In a place. As a testimony to his rule. As if they were a landed kingdom like any other kingdom.

Ancient Greco-Roman and Septuagint definitions of the word do not determine Jesus's definition. New Testament usage does. But it's not difficult to see how all this background would have struck those who heard Jesus. How differently first-century ears would have heard that word than we do. There were no marketplace intuitions for them, as in “I really enjoyed that church. That preacher was hilarious. But did you see good programs for the kids?”

Indeed, two chapters later, Jesus sounds more like Aristotle or like the courts that would have patrolled Israel's citizenship boundaries for purposes of worship (see Deut. 23:1–8):²⁰ “If he refuses to

listen to them, tell it to the [*ekklēsia*/assembly] church. And if he refuses to listen even to the [*ekklēsias*/assembly] church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector” (Matt. 18:17). In this moment, Jesus treats the church as a judicial assembly acting together in judgment. The apostles followed suit. Decades later, Paul asks the Corinthian church, “Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge?” (1 Cor. 5:12).

Church Authority: The Keys of the Kingdom and Agreement

Do you see how I’m trying to reshape our church intuitions? I’m connecting it to the language of kingdom and the political in order to infuse our vision of a local church with the concept of authority, as with the Greek legislative assembly or the Israelite people gathered to hear God’s commands. The church is an authoritative body, like an embassy. The very word *ekklēsia* or “church” vibrates and glows with both kingdom and spatial significance. It is a political or authority-structured thing. And just as the idea of a kingdom typically invokes thoughts of a land or a place, so Jesus chooses a word for the people of this kingdom that necessarily invokes the idea of place—an assembly.

What’s crucial to understand, next, is what role each individual member plays in making a church what it is, because that will help us further understand the necessity of a gathering. We’ll discover that this authority is not just *over* us. It *is* us. We are all together the vibrating, glowing thing.

In Matthew 18, Jesus gives authority to these local *ekklēsiai*, these embassies of his kingdom. And in the process he defines the role that every member plays in the authority structure of a church. A church’s authority, Jesus teaches, rests in our agreement with one another on the *what* and the *who* of the gospel. And this agreement can occur only by our gathering together.

Let me explain. The setting for the lesson is a hypothetical case of church discipline. Verse 15 presents the problem and the first round of evaluation and judgment: “If your brother sins against you,

go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother.” “You” here is singular. So you as a church member must do your judicial duty of protecting the church, the *ekklēsia*, by rescuing a brother from his sin. Assuming you and the brother disagree, you must work for agreement by involving others.

Verse 16 then describes a second round of evaluation and judgment, this time invoking an old Jewish courtroom principle from Deuteronomy 19. Two or three must agree for a charge to stick: “But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses.” Verse 17, which we just saw, locates the third round of evaluation and judgment in the assembly. The assembly is the final court of appeal. “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.”

Verse 18 then offers the authoritative grounds by which the assembly can do this. The assembly possesses the keys of the kingdom for binding and loosing. “Truly, I say to you [plural], whatever you [pl.] bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you [pl.] loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.” The keys are not explicitly mentioned here. But two chapters earlier Jesus gave Peter the keys to bind and to loose right after affirming both Peter and Peter’s confession (see Matt. 16:15–20). Jesus had said to him, “I will give you [singular] the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you [sg.] bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose [sg.] on earth shall be loosed in heaven” (16:19). The apostles held the keys to bind and loose, but so do churches.

To bind and loose is to do the work of a judge. A judge does not make law, and a judge does not make a person innocent or guilty. Rather, a judge interprets the law and then declares a judgment on a person with the pound of a gavel. He or she “binds” or “looses” someone by applying the law. Likewise, a church assembly, with keys of the kingdom in hand, does not *make* the gospel or *make*

someone a Christian. Rather, the assembly is authorized here in Matthew 18 to say, "This is a right/wrong confession of the gospel" and "This is/is not a gospel confessor."

To summarize, the keys give a church the authority to render judgment on the *what* and the *who* of the gospel—to say, "This is our statement of faith" and "This person is a member." Or not.

That's what Jesus does when he affirms Peter and Peter's confession in Matthew 16. That's what the church does here in Matthew 18, only in reverse.

Verse 19 goes on to re-explain verses 15–18 ("Again I say to you"), and this is crucial, so make sure you follow. Jesus now takes the conversation beyond the church-discipline case study and applies it to any judicial matter that a church must decide upon, such as receiving members or affirming a statement of faith ("anything they ask"):²¹ "Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven."

The word to focus on for the moment is "agree." If verse 18 locates church authority symbolically in the keys of the kingdom, verse 19 re-describes this authority as *an agreement*. The two or three witnesses in verse 16 must *agree* before taking a matter to the whole church. The members of the church in verse 17 must *agree* before excluding someone from membership as a final act of discipline. They must *agree* to bind or *agree* to loose. And behind all this, the members of a church must *agree* on who Jesus is, just like Jesus asked the disciples back in chapter 16. Is Jesus John the Baptist? Elijah? One of the prophets? Or the Christ, the Son of the living God? Only when they *agree* on who Jesus is can they *gather in his name*, as we'll consider from 18:20 in a moment.

The very heart of church authority is an *agreement* between believers. How does that make sense? Well, remember Jeremiah's new covenant promise granted every citizen equal political standing before God's throne (Jer. 31:34). No longer would there be a separate class of priests who could grant access to God. Instead, all would be priests, as Luther famously argued. As such, any church authority

over a member of the new covenant—a Christian—must come *through the agreement* of the member. And to be sure, this authority is always *under* the word of God. But the church's authority exists when Christians *agree* upon what that word says. (As I said in the introduction, church order emerges organically from the gospel.)

To be a church, everyone, whether two or two thousand, must *agree* that they are talking about the same gospel (today we call this a statement of faith). And they must *agree* that the members of the church, as best they can tell, subscribe to the gospel (today we call this a membership directory). Working to ensure that we remain in agreement is one way to describe our priestly responsibility in the gospel (see 2 Cor. 6:14–7:1). In a case needing church discipline, of course, that agreement is breaking down.

This is why I said a moment ago that church authority is not just *over* us. It *is* us. We are the vibrating and glowing political thing. In other words, the authority I am describing here is the authority that actually *creates a local or particular* church. The authority of the keys, which is the authority of Christians agreeing with one another and shaking hands on it, is the authority that creates a church.

All that is very theological. So think instead of Oleg and Marina standing in the market and meeting Sergei for the first time. He mentioned words like “God,” “blessings,” and “prayer.” They began to wonder, “Is he one of us?” They asked him. He answered. More questions about the gospel followed: Which Jesus do you believe in? Do you understand yourself to be a sinner saved by grace? Have you repented? What do you think the Bible is? Little by little both parties began to realize they *agreed* upon the gospel, as well as one another's membership in the gospel. And that *agreement* on earth formed the basis of an earthly covenant before the Father in heaven. They could *bind* each other by that agreement. And through that agreement and that mutual binding they became a church.

Hence, the 1644 London Baptist Confession, we saw a moment ago, defined a church as “a company of visible saints . . . joined to the Lord, and each other, by mutual agreement.” Multisite pastor J. D.

Greear, likewise, rightly observes that a covenant—a mutually binding agreement—is of the essence of a church.²²

Church authority, as we learn in Matthew 16 and 18, verse 19 especially, is two Christians shaking hands in agreement. They agree on the gospel and their membership in the gospel.

The Gathering as the Temporary but Visible Geography of the Kingdom

But there's one more step here. Just as people need to come together to shake hands, so the saints need to gather together in order to formally share agreement as a church. So says Jesus by explicitly identifying himself with *the gathering*. "For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them" (Matt. 18:20).

Like fifteenth-century Spanish explorers crossing oceans in search of gold, here our ship runs aground on the temporary-but-visible geography of Christ's kingdom: the gathering. It's temporary because it lasts on a weekly basis for only a couple of hours. It's temporary because we have not yet attained our permanent inheritance. But the geography is real nonetheless. It's spatial. It's physical. It exists. It's not theoretical. It's visible. And it's where the action happens.

Do you see them? Oleg, Marina, Sergei, Zena, Olga, Will, and his wife? Squished together in an upstairs room together above the kitchen? Several in chairs, others on the side of the bed, one or two on the floor? The gospel actually produces its own kind of space.²³

These are the two or three (or seven) gathered in Jesus's name, meaning they *agree* on who he is, and they agree on one another's professions of faith. They don't agree upon the Mormon Jesus or the Jehovah's Witness Jesus or the Muslim Jesus. Rather, they can say to one another: "You believe Jesus is God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made? Me too!"

Some want to argue that the two or three witnesses in Matthew 18:20 can be any small group in the church. Yet think about that possibility. Every small group could then wield the authority of the

keys to create a church over and against the rest of the church. Each could receive members or excommunicate, or affirm its own statement of faith. But what would happen if one small group *agreed* on an act of excommunication and another didn't? Or a change in the statement of faith? Effectively, we would be witnessing a church split, because all these are the precise activities that make a church a church: groups of gathered people agreeing upon a gospel *what* and a gospel *who*. This gathered group who share agreement on these matters *is* the church. It's the basic unit of kingdom authority, whether that group consists of two or three or three thousand.

The ancient Jewish courtroom principle, where two or three witnesses make a charge stick, applies here in the gathering. They are bound together in a shared testimony or witness. The gathering and the agreement glue them together with a legal glue. It's not casual or spontaneous. It's formal and official.

Jesus then seals the gathering, he seals the agreement, he seals the activities of binding and loosing, with his own presence: "There am I among them."²⁴ What does it mean that he is among them? Does he hover as a mystical fog in the room? We know Jesus has physically ascended and is seated at the right hand of the Father in heaven. And we know the Spirit of Jesus indwells all those who belong to him, as John's Gospel tells us (John 14:17, 26; 15:26). Yet Matthew's Gospel does not speak about the Spirit in this fashion, and the incarnate Jesus refers to *his presence in the assembly*, not *the Spirit's presence in the believer*.

By saying he's present, quite simply, Jesus is identifying himself with this gathering and authorizing them as his assembly.²⁵ He is saying, "They're with me and I'm with them," the way Yahweh identified himself with the people of the Old Testament: "I am their God, and they are my people." Notice, too, that Jesus promises to "build" this people on a rock just like the temple was built upon a rock, the temple where God dwelled.

In contemporary parlance, we might say that the gathering is where Jesus's flag flies, the way a nation's flag flies at its embassies

in foreign nations, identifying each embassy with its home nation. By extension, that means the actions of the gathering represent him, even though he has now ascended to heaven and possesses all authority in heaven and earth (Matt. 28:18). The gathering can bind and loose on earth, knowing that they speak for him and the Father in heaven, like ambassadors or embassies.

In this sense, Jesus is “there” (*ekei*). He is “among” (*en mesō*) them.²⁶ Jesus is *there* in the second-floor room at Sergei’s house when the seven saints gather. He identifies with them and they represent him. Also, he is *there* at the 9:30 a.m. service and *there* at the 11:00 a.m. service of a multiservice church. He is *there* at the north campus and *there* at the south campus of a multisite church. He identifies with each assembly, and each assembly can therefore make binding and loosing decisions on behalf of heaven. Each assembly has all the binding and loosing authority that creates a church. Each has him. Each is a church.

Jesus does not say, “When saints gather at 9:00 and 11:00, I am *half there* and *half there*, *half among* the one group and *half among* the other, each of them half-way speaking for me.” He says, “When the 9:00 a.m. gathers, I’m there. And when the 11:00 a.m. gathers, I am there. Both of them speak for me. Both represent my kingdom rule. You can see the geography of the kingdom in both places.” And—I am contesting—he is saying, “Both are churches.” So, too, with the north and south “campuses.”

Furthermore, Jesus doesn’t say, “I’m there with the unified budget, brand, and board of multiple campuses.” The church-creating authority described in Matthew 18 does not rest in the leaders. It’s not merely over us. It rests in us, the actual assembly. We’re all *under* it and *in* it because it’s our agreement with one another.

In a multisite or multiservice church, the leaders either possess key-wielding authority outright or at least are the mediators of the agreement. They are the unifying factor. You and I might attend different assemblies, yet somehow the leaders enact my agreement that you are a Christian, or your agreement that I should be

WHAT IF A SINGLE CHURCH SERVICE IS TOO BIG FOR PEOPLE TO KNOW ONE ANOTHER?

Multisite and multiservice advocates often claim that once a church reaches a certain size, church members cannot all know one another. So dividing up a church between services or sites, if anything, helps members in each site or service know one another better. Practically speaking, they might be right.

But what I'm arguing here is that a particular church on earth is *not* constituted simply by our relationships or fellowship. It's constituted by Christ's authority, which he gives to the gathering. Therefore, this particular argument misses the point of what constitutes the church. A regular gathering of twenty thousand people, gathered for preaching and the celebration of the ordinances, is *in principle* a church in a way that two services of ten persons apiece who all know one another is not a single church. Yes, the former will have significant pastoral challenges! It might even want to divide, much as God eventually scattered the church in Jerusalem. But it remains a church.

excommunicated. Inevitably, in other words, authority shifts upward onto their shoulders. Perhaps all this would be fine if Christianity were a faith of merely words and ideas. People make binding agreements all the time over the phone, through the Internet, through a messenger. But Jesus means for his kingdom not just to be audible but also to be visible and active. He means to keep words and lives together. The gathering is where that happens, even if there are ten thousand people and you cannot begin to know everyone. The principle remains the same: *This* is the assembly. *These* are God's citizens on earth. Do you see them? They formally affirm Christ's name and one another not just in word but also with their physical bodies.

If there is a proof text in the Bible for the one-assembly church, it's Matthew 18:20. A church requires more than what we find in this verse, like the ordinances, but not less. Indeed, we can narrow it down to three words: "gather," "there," "among." When two or three gather to affirm the gospel with the authority of heaven, Jesus is there among them, identifying his authority with theirs and saying they represent heaven.

The geography of Christ's kingdom shows up there temporarily but visibly.

How We Wield the Keys and Seal Our Agreement:

Baptism and the Supper

How do believers gather in Jesus's name, formally shaking hands in agreement on the *what* and the *who* of the gospel? We do it through baptism and the Lord's Supper. Baptism is the doorway into a church, while the Lord's Supper is the regular family meal for the church.²⁷ As I've been saying, Matthew 18:20 doesn't give us everything we need to make a church. We also need the ordinances, which Jesus provides in Matthew 26 and 28. These enact our agreement with one another.

First, Jesus establishes the Supper in Matthew 26. He gives it as a sign of inclusion in the new covenant. Paul then connects the Supper with the church: "Because there is one bread," he says, "we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread" (1 Cor. 10:17; cf. 11:29). Therefore, he tells us to "wait for one another" when we "come together as a church" for the Supper (1 Cor. 11:18, 33). Partaking of the bread shows that we are one body. It reveals who the body of Christ is. It makes us visible to the world and each other. The Supper, we might say, makes the invisible church visible.

Second, Jesus establishes baptism in Matthew 28. Yet several textual clues tell us to read Matthew 28 in light of Matthew 16 and 18. Presumably, the ones who bind and loose in heaven and earth (Matt. 18) are subject to the one with all authority in heaven and earth (Matt. 28). Presumably, the ones who gather in his name

(Matt. 18) are the ones to baptize in his name (Matt. 28). And, presumably, the ones with whom he dwells now (Matt. 18) are the ones with whom he will dwell always (Matt. 28).

The difference between the universal church and the local church, we might say, is that the local involves both geography and the exercise of church authority, which is exercised through the ordinances.

Picture it this way: two individuals are shipwrecked on an island with a Bible. They each read it and come to faith. Their first act of “agreement” in that faith would be shown in baptizing each other (cf. Acts 8:26–39). And through that baptism they would have taken the first step in becoming a church.²⁸ For them to be a church on an ongoing basis would require them to affirm one another by sharing the Supper.

Or think of missionary Will asking the Ural Mountain group if they were ready to commit themselves to one another—to commit to being a church. Oleg recognized that all they lacked was the Lord's Supper. Participating in the Supper that day, and then on an ongoing basis, made them a visible, particular church. The ordinances “put a visible difference between those that belong unto the church, and the rest of the world,” says the Westminster Confession (27.1).

What Is a Church?

We have covered a lot of territory in this chapter. First, we have sought to re-form our church intuitions by considering the crucial role of authority based on the Bible's kingdom storyline.

Second, we have discovered that the word “church” or *ekklēsia* is a political one, which speaks to the very nature of what a church is and what the gathering is.

Third, we have seen that Jesus gives the whole congregation authority to create itself as a local church through agreeing upon who he is and agreeing with one another's membership in him—the *what* and the *who* of the gospel.

Fourth, we have seen that Jesus ties his presence to any of these gatherings where people agree with one another in this binding fashion.

And fifth, we have learned that we conduct all this business through the ordinances.

Can we delocalize the early Protestant definitions of a local church? No, we can't, and for three reasons. First, a gathering is necessary for people to shake hands or mutually agree with one another, at least in the word-and-body fashion envisioned by Jesus and Old Testament courtroom rules.

Second, perhaps most importantly, Jesus explicitly identifies with the gathering.

Third, the gathering makes God's kingdom actually and concretely visible.

Remarkably, this is what we see in the church in Jerusalem in the opening chapters of Acts. "And they were all together in Solomon's Portico," this five-football-field-long structure on the east side of the temple.²⁹ The kingdom of God became visible among them—*there*. "None of the rest dared join them," Luke continues, "but the people held them in high esteem. And more than ever believers were added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women" (Acts 5:12–14). There they baptized and—presumably—partook of the Lord's Supper. In these early and unusual days, in fact, the church met every day in the temple and in their homes, perhaps like small groups in our day. They shared food, possessions, financial resources, even homes and properties with one another (Acts 2:42–47; 4:32–37).

So it was in Corinth. Paul even seems to borrow from Jesus's instruction (Matt. 18:20) to address a matter of excommunication in Corinth: "When you are assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus and my spirit is present, with the power of our Lord Jesus . . ." (1 Cor. 5:4). We just heard Paul's call for the people to wait for one another in receiving the Supper. And he offers very clear guidelines for their worship assemblies together in chapter 14. We'll return to

Jerusalem, Corinth, and a few other New Testament churches in chapter 2.

For now, think back to Oleg and Marina praying for a church. They had already heard the gospel and had repented and believed. Yet they knew something was missing. With the gospel in their hearts, they suddenly felt like aliens or exiles in foreign territory, even if they were Russian citizens living in Russia. Something in them desired their new homeland. And so they prayed for a church, where they would find the fellowship, oversight, and instruction of other saints. They wanted safe harbor. So they came together and became *a* church. Yet, since every church, no matter how small, represents the whole church, they became not just *a* church but *the* church.³⁰

What is a church? It's an embassy of Christ's kingdom. It's a group of Christians who together identify themselves and each other as followers of Jesus and as *the* church through regularly gathering (in one place at one time) in his name, preaching the gospel, and celebrating the ordinances. All this they do by the authority of the keys.

So next time you hear someone say, "The church is a people, not a place," you might respond: "Sort of. The people become a people by regularly assembling in a place. You can't call the team a team if they never play together."

THE WORK OF THE GATHERED CHURCH

What does the gathering do? The following:*

Glorifies God. All of life should be spent this way (1 Cor. 10:31), yet the gathering declares this purpose (see Eph. 3:10, 21).

Exemplifies the church. We are God's people, Christ's body, the Spirit's temple, the shepherd's flock, the vine's branch, the kingdom's citizens, the demonstration of God's wisdom and

grace. And the assembly illustrates all of this. Insiders and outsiders alike can *see* this, *experience* this, *feel* these things in the assembly (1 Cor. 11:17–34; 13; 14:1, 3–5, 12, 33).

Edifies the saints. Everything done in the gathering should be for building up the saints, Paul teaches (see 1 Cor. 14:4, 12, 26; Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16).

Expresses and promotes fellowship. The assembly *expresses* fellowship. We enjoy it then and there. And the assembly *promotes* fellowship. It encourages us to fellowship together on Monday to Saturday (see Heb. 10:23–25).

Impresses outsiders. Christians will evangelize throughout the week, yes, but the assembly itself possesses evangelistic power. The seeker-sensitive or attractional church gets this much right (see 1 Cor. 14:24–25).

Commemorates and proclaims salvation. The assembly commemorates and proclaims salvation. Paul states very clearly that “as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes” (1 Cor. 11:26).

Illumines and affirms the members of the people of God. Baptism names us with Christ (Matt. 28:19), and the Supper reveals who the body of Christ is (1 Cor. 10:17; see also 11:29). The reverse of this occurs in the discussion of church discipline in 1 Corinthians 5, where Paul tells the church that the unrepentant sinner should “be removed” from their fellowship (v. 2).

* The first six points come from Everett Ferguson, *The Churches of Christ: A Biblical Ecclesiology for Today* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 244–46. I added the seventh.

IX 9Marks

Building Healthy Churches

9Marks exists to equip church leaders with a biblical vision and practical resources for displaying God's glory to the nations through healthy churches.

To that end, we want to see churches characterized by these nine marks of health:

- 1. Expository Preaching**
- 2. Biblical Theology**
- 3. A Biblical Understanding of the Gospel**
- 4. A Biblical Understanding of Conversion**
- 5. A Biblical Understanding of Evangelism**
- 6. Biblical Church Membership**
- 7. Biblical Church Discipline**
- 8. Biblical Discipleship**
- 9. Biblical Church Leadership**

**Find all our Crossway titles
and other resources at
9Marks.org.**

IX 9Marks



“Leeman’s work was influential in our church’s decision to move from multiservice to a single service.”

RYAN KELLY

Pastor of Preaching, Desert Springs Church, Albuquerque, New Mexico

Maybe you have been there: you’re running late to church, and you know it will be hard to find an empty seat. This is an all-too-frequent experience in a growing church. For churches experiencing this dilemma, a common solution is to add another service or location. This seems like a cost-effective fix. Besides, no one wants to turn away non-Christians. But is it the best option?

Jonathan Leeman presents a series of biblical, theological, and pastoral arguments to help reorient our minds to a scriptural definition of *church*. He makes the case that maintaining a single assembly best follows the Bible, fulfills the Great Commission, and furthers our partnership with other churches.

“People who love the Scriptures disagree, but I think Leeman’s case is the most plausible.”

Thomas R. Schreiner, James Buchanan Harrison Professor of New Testament Interpretation, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“This book will challenge you and bless other church leaders in situations like mine.”

Victor Shu, Lead Pastor, Radiant Grace Church, East Asia

“Instead of slowing down gospel growth, the single-service model actually promotes the Great Commission by encouraging church planting. This is a must-read for anyone interested in church growth.”

Aaron Menikoff, Senior Pastor, Mount Vernon Baptist Church, Sandy Springs, Georgia

JONATHAN LEEMAN (PhD, University of Wales) is the editorial director for 9Marks. He is the author or editor of over a dozen books and teaches at several seminaries. Jonathan lives with his wife and four daughters in a suburb of Washington, DC, and is an elder at Cheverly Baptist Church.

CHURCH