

- ***READ Matthew 16:13-20*** As Jesus and His disciples come into the region of Caesarea Philippi, our Lord pauses to ask an all-important question, *"Who do people say that the Son of Man is?"* This referring to Himself as the Son of Man is something that Jesus does 28x through the Gospel of Matthew, and it is used as a means of signifying one who is of heavenly origin and would rule over a great and eternal kingdom. Who is it though that people actually believed that Jesus was?
- The answers given by the disciples seems to indicate that people at least knew that Jesus was someone extremely special. Some thought Him to be John the Baptist. Herod himself is stated as having believed this. Some others believed that Jesus was Elijah and this may be based upon the fact that some of Jesus's miracles were similar to some of Elijah's. Jeremiah even made a bit of sense since Jesus was often rejected as He preached His message of repentance at the kingdom of heaven being at hand.
- After hearing these answers, Jesus turns the attention towards what these men believed concerning who Jesus was, and Peter responds with a well known answer. *"You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."* Not only does Peter refer to Jesus as the promised one of God, but he adds the emphasis of Jesus being the Son of the living God. This would've been a significant statement by Peter considering the fact that near to where they would have been was a site of worship to the nature god Pan and a temple dedicated to the worship of Augustus Caesar. Peter's words only emphasize the legitimate deity of Jesus and the God of heaven and throws disrespect towards false deities.
- Because of these powerful words of Peter, Jesus commends His disciple and for the first time in this Gospel refers to him as "Peter." Up until this point, Jesus has referred to Peter as Simon, but this is the perfect opportunity to use Peter (*Petros*) as a play on words that Peter's words concerning Jesus being the Messiah were rock (*petra*) solid truth and they would be the foundation upon which Jesus would build His church. Jesus's words would certainly comes to pass sometime following this declaration concerning His church and the Apostle's role in its establishment and governing of such, but I would like for us to focus on the fact that our Lord refers to this church as His church.
- The Body that Christians belong to is the Body of Christ. He is the One who established it as the Messiah, purchased it with His blood (**Acts 20:28**), and was given all authority on heaven and on earth. (**Matthew 28:18**) These facts coupled with the admonition of Paul for everything that we do to be done in the name of the Lord Jesus (**Colossians 3:23**), leads us to the inescapable truth that this Body we belong to belongs to Jesus and He has every right to dictate how it is to exist. He has every right to communicate to us how His Body ought to be structured, organized, and operated because it is His church.
- It is good for us from time to time to take a look at the teachings in the New Testament concerning what Jesus expects for His Body and church to look like and how He expects for them operate, and the is exactly what we are going to look at this morning. We are going to look at the Biblical traits of the Lord's church as a reminder of what we ought to be striving to emulate even some 2,000 years later. We claim to be the New Testament church in the 21st century, but are we achieving that claim by the way that we are structured, organized, working? That question is the focus of our study for the next few minutes, and we will begin by establishing that the Lord's church is led from heaven where Christ reigns.

I. Biblical Traits Of The Lord's Church & People

A. Heavenly Headquarters (**Hebrews 12:14-24**)

1. The letter written to the Hebrews was written partly as a means of encouraging the recipients to persevere in their faiths. Chapter 12 begins with encouragement to *"run with endurance the race that lies before us."* (**12:1**) Running in such a way might demand discipline from the Lord at times, but it also demands reminders of those who failed to achieve the greatness that stood before them. Esau would be such a person who fail short because of his desire to take hold of a single meal here on earth.

2. The Hebrew writer uses Esau as a launching point to remind the readers that they are pressing on towards something far greater than anything that this earth currently has to offer. The Jews looked to Mount Sinai as a special place where God was and the people of God were, but the Hebrew writer contrasts that thinking by stating that Christians aren't looking to a physical mountain, but to Mount Zion the great fortress and city of God, the heavenly Jerusalem.
3. It is in this heavenly dwelling place where God knows those who belong to the body of Christ (**II Timothy 2:19**) and can find their names written in the book of life. (**Philippians 4:3**) It is in this place where the Judge, the God of all, and Jesus the Mediator of the New Covenant dwells. None of these things can be found on this earth, but they are all located in that New Jerusalem where our King sits on His throne. (**Acts 2:33**)

B. Individual Christians Work Together Locally

1. However, that doesn't mean that there isn't a manifestation of this body on earth! In fact, all disciples of Jesus here on earth are a part of that great body, and we seek to contribute to that great body in whatever location that we find ourselves in. I say this based upon the example of the earliest Christians in Jerusalem coming together in a collective effort to contribute to the growth of the kingdom. (**Acts 2:42-47**)
2. Further, we can see throughout the book of Acts that Christians banded together in all sorts of locales in order to serve the Lord in joint efforts. In nearly every, if not every single, place that Paul visited he sought to establish local church that were made up of disciples who could work together for the sake of the Gospel in a particular location. This becomes even more evident when we consider how he often opened the letters that are found in the New Testament.
 - a) *"To the church of God at Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called as saints, with all those in every place who call on the name of Jesus Christ our Lord—both their Lord and ours."* (**I Corinthians 1:2**)
 - b) *"To the churches of Galatia. Grace to you and peace from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins to rescue us from this present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father."* (**Galatians 1:2-4**)
 - c) *"Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by God's will: To the faithful saints in Christ Jesus at Ephesus. Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."* (**Ephesians 1:1,2**)
3. These are just three examples of Paul's writings that show that there were Christians in different locations who joined up to work together for the sake of the Gospel. These groups were called by different names at different times. *"The churches of Christ"* (**Romans 16:16**), *"the church of God"* (**I Corinthians 1:2**), *"churches of the saints"* (**I Corinthians 14:33**), and even just *"the disciples"* are all descriptors of local groups of Christians that join together for this good work.

C. Local Church Leadership

1. Within these local groups there is also local group leadership. This is most clearly seen within the ministry of the Apostle Paul in **Acts 20 & Titus 1**. In **Acts 20**, Paul instructs the elders of the church that was in Ephesus to *"Be on guard for yourselves and for all of **the flock** of which the Holy Spirit has appointed you as overseers, to shepherd **the church of God**, which He purchased with His own blood. I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing **the flock**. Men will rise up even from your own number and distort the truth to lure the disciples into following them."* (**Acts 20:28-30**)
2. In **Titus 1:5**, Paul informs Titus, *"The reason I left you in Crete was to set right what was left undone and, as I directed you, to appoint elders in every town."* Leadership within the Lord's church is done on a local level. Each church is to have its own leadership that directs the way in which it goes for the Lord. Elders to shepherd, deacons to serve, preachers to preach, and teachers to teach. This is the Lord's design. (**Ephesians 4:11**)

3. Peter adds even more clarity to this issue of leadership being local when he writes in **I Peter 5:2,3**, *"Shepherd God's flock **among you**, not overseeing out of compulsion but willingly, as God would have you; not out of greed for money but eagerly; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to **the flock**."*

D. Local Church Autonomy

1. The existence of local leadership is simply a sign that local bodies of believers are independent in their existence. This simply means that they are responsible for their own work for the Lord and don't have any responsibility to answer to anyone for the work they are doing...except to the Lord who is the Chief Shepherd (**I Peter 5:4**) and head over all of His people and the local churches they create through their working together.
2. I am convinced that I have even seen the wisdom of God in this design during my relatively short life up to this point. It makes so much sense for the Lord to desire for these local bodies to be able to govern themselves without having to worry about answering to other people who are far removed from the work that is being done. It would make little sense for this church's leadership to have to answer to some church that is in Texas. It would make no sense for these leaders here to have to run everything by other people who are not present within this group and understand the group dynamics and needs of this flock. Those shepherds and leaders of each local group are the best equipped to know the best possible way to lead, and the Lord has granted autonomy in the way that His disciples operate as local churches.

E. Guided By Christ's Authority

1. This isn't to say that each local church is free to do just whatever it would like to do with zero common standards to live by. Let's remember that we all belong to the Body of Christ that is headquartered in heaven where Christ reigns. Again, He reigns in heaven and that means that He rules His people from that great throne. He has given us this great book that we hold in our hands that contains His will revealed to us through what He has said, what He has shown, and the conclusions we are led to understand. He has all authority, and we are obligated as a people who have been extended grace to faithfully serve Him in all that we do. We are indebted to be the type of people and the type of local churches that He died for us to be.
2. Some of the teachings we abide by are recorded as having come from His very mouth, and most of those can be found in the Gospels. However, there are many principles and teachings that guide disciples and churches that are found outside of the Gospels within the New Testament. Those teachings often come from the Apostles, and we are likewise compelled to follow their divinely inspired instructions. Paul wrote to the Thessalonians saying, *"But we ought to thank God always for you, brothers and sisters loved by the Lord, because from the beginning[f] God has chosen you for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and through belief in the truth. He called you to this through our gospel, so that you might obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. So then, brothers and sisters, stand firm and hold to the traditions you were taught, whether by what we said or what we wrote."* (**II Thessalonians 2:13-15**) These writings are the standard by which we determine the will of our King, and those who are truly living as the body of Christ will respect this standard and allow it to guide them in everything they do...even in those areas in which some judgement is allowed. But again, that is all done at the local level by those local disciples who lead a local church.

I am convinced that the structural design for the Lord's body is quite simple, and wisely done in this way. All of the saved of God individually belong to the body of Christ, and yet we are told and shown that it is good and necessary for us to work together in our local areas for the sake of the Gospel and the kingdom. Therefore, we see three different levels of structure and operation. Individual Christians work for the Lord individually and in local autonomous groups with local leadership for the sake and betterment of the kingdom that is stationed in heaven and ultimately led by the Lord.

When Christians and churches are willing to conform to this New Testament revealed design for the Lord's people then great work can be done for the kingdom. However, what happens when changes are made to what has been divinely revealed? What happens when deviations are made? I would suggest that when this happens, people cease being the type of people who can rightfully wear the name of Christ and churches cease to be the types of churches that are of Christ. What can this look like in our world, today? Consider the following examples that I believe are violations of what we have already considered.

II. Violations Of These Biblical Traits

A. Local Church Involved Entities Larger Than The Local Church But Smaller Than The Church Universal

1. Denominational Structures

- a) Instead of the headquarters of the church remaining in heaven, an earthly headquarters is established in which all of the local churches belonging to said denomination are known. My hometown of Cleveland, Tennessee is home to the world headquarters of the Church of God of Prophecy. All churches belonging to that particular denomination can be found within roll books within that building along with all members who are recognized as part of this particular denominations based upon parameters set my men.
- b) The same is true for many other denominations. A simple Google search will render results of denominations headquarters of different churches being found in Tuxedo Park, New York, Nashville, Tennessee, Salt Lake City, Utah, and The Vatican City, Italy among others. Some might argue that the church in Jerusalem served as the "headquarters" for the early church, but this simply isn't the case. Sure there were times when disciples from surrounding areas would come to speak with the leaders of that church, but that had everything to do with the presence of the Apostles who were the spokesmen for Jews during those early days of the church. No such men exist today, and there is no Biblical precedent for an earthly headquarters to be needed among the Lord's people.

2. Man-Made Organizations

- a) Another man-made structure that violates these traits that might be more familiar to our fellowship because of their presence in past years is the missionary society arrangement. Wayne Jackson does a good job of breaking down just the issue of this type of arrangements among local churches.

"In the missionary society arrangement, the participating churches agreed that each would send representatives to periodical meetings. Those representatives were empowered to form and ratify policy. The representatives subsequently would return to their respective churches with the decisions of the society.

*The congregations then, by their own agreement, were bound by the rules of the delegates. Hence churches fell under the **control** of a body that was **independent** of any one congregation.*

*This type of arrangement is wrong. It subordinates local congregations to a **legislative** body — a circumstance void of New Testament authority.*

As a matter of fact, no local church can ever be made subservient to another church. All congregations are independent and self-governing in matters of expediency."

- b) The issues begin with this sort of arrangement not being something created that is seen in Scripture. That body that is larger than the local church but smaller than the universal church is foreign to the New Testament. While it is true that we are all collaborating as local churches in a sense to support the kingdom, we understand that effort is different than willingly giving up local church autonomy and power over what we do within our local churches. We work together for the kingdom the best way we can as autonomous

local churches. That is really the issue here. Those churches that allow themselves to get into this sort of arrangement and lose control over what they do as a local church because they have given power to a body that is greater than themselves. This is clearly not the design that we see for the Lord's Body within Scripture. We might see local churches coming to the aid of other local churches who were hit my misfortunate such as a famine or persecution (**I Corinthians 16 & II Corinthians 8,9**), but that is nothing compared to churches coming together and giving up their own power over their own work for the Lord.

B. Long Distance Leadership

1. Another way we see local churches giving up their autonomy is also found within both of these structures and it is the willingness to allow people who are not local to make local decisions. This type of arrangement can be found in many different shapes and forms. Some churches might have local leadership, but they are only the tools of people who are found halfway across the world. Some churches belong to structures that are incredibly convoluted. One particular denomination begins with the first presidency and is followed by the quorum of the twelve apostles, general officers, the quorum of the seventy, presiding bishopric, the stake presidency, the ward bishopric, and finally the individual members. This particular denomination isn't alone in its complicated structure, and that makes me all the more appreciative for our Lord's simple design of shepherds, deacons, preachers, teachers, and saints working together in a local place.
2. Another particular denomination operates in such a manner that every single local group will say and do the exact same thing at any given time of assembly. Everything they do is decided in a completely separate place, and there is no consideration for the needs of any single local group. Again, this is far from the design that we see within the New Testament where local churches are led by local leaders who are to be considerate and aware of the needs of the flock that is among them wherever they might be.

C. Conferences, Councils, & Creeds

1. Finally, these Biblical traits are violated and a group fails to be the church that Jesus died for when it decides that the New Testament teachings on Christianity are no longer sufficient. Those who do such things find themselves in a similar spot to those who are rebuked by Paul in **Galatians 1 & II Timothy 3,4**. They are those who seek after a different Gospel or find their ears itching to be scratched.
2. Even just within 2019 we have seen a number of different denominations come together in grand conferences and councils in order to reassess creeds in an effort to change with the times and demands of the masses. There is little to no respect for the authority of Christ and His Apostles, and that lack of respect only leads to greater and greater wickedness and being further and further away from the truth. If we want to be the Lord's church and people then we must reject the will of men and submit only to the authority of Christ.

When we look around us, we see a world that reminds us of man's problem with thinking that we have all of the answers and we know what is best. Far too many fail to be content with the wise design given to us by our Lord Jesus. Far too many believe that they have a more effective way of doing the work of the kingdom. Far too many are not satisfied with the teachings of Jesus or His Apostles. May we reject each of these departures from the truth and remain firmly established upon the rock that is Jesus as the Messiah the Son of the living God. May we stand firmly upon the truth that He built His church and it deserves to remain just as He designed for it to be. May God humble us to accept these truths and be willing to show others the better way of God and our Savior Jesus Christ. May we bring glory to God through His church remaining only as His church.