

**The Nature of the Distinction between the Universal and Local Church in the NT:
The Marks of a True Church**

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Introduction

Although many have used the term “true church,” there has been confusion and disagreement over what is required to have a legitimate NT church. Particularly, there is disagreement over whether discipline as a mark of the church is a mark of a true church or simply a mark of a healthy church (or more biblical church). Rolland McCune states that, “Bible-believing Christians would probably agree on all three” marks that followed the reformation (the third being discipline).¹ Albert Mohler Jr., in his journal article titled, “Church Discipline: The Missing Mark,” asserts that, “Evangelicals have long recognized discipline as the ‘third mark’ of the authentic church,” citing the Belgic Confession (1561), that includes discipline as a mark of the true church.² In the end of his article, Mohler quotes John Leadley Dagg as saying, “It has been remarked, that when discipline leaves a church, Christ goes with it.” Mohler follows this quote by saying, “If so, and I fear it is so, Christ has abandoned many churches who are blissfully unaware of His departure.”³ And yet, as we shall see, John Hammett⁴ and Mark Dever⁵ disagree: the mark of discipline is not necessarily required in order for there to be a true church.

Does Mohler (as well as McCune) confuse what is required for there to be a true church with what is required for a healthy church? Or are Hammett and Dever wrong? I will establish that they both agree in principle. Although a true church must consist of individuals with a valid profession of faith in the gospel, church discipline is not a necessary mark of a true church. Thus, understanding the nature of church discipline in relation to the universal and local aspects of the

¹ Rolland McCune, *A Systematic Theology of Biblical Christianity : Volume 3 : The Doctrines of Salvation, the Church, and Last Things* (Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary, 2010), 219.

² Jr R. Albert Mohler, “Church Discipline: The Missing Mark,” *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 4, no. 4 (2000): 16.

³ *Ibid.*, 26. Quote from J. L. Dagg, *A Treatise on Church Order* (Charleston, SC: The Southern Baptist Publication Society, 1858) 274.

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church contributes to how one defines a legitimate church. The question this paper will seek to answer is: what is required (at minimum) for there to be a church in the biblical NT sense? For a true church to be present, the minimum requirement is that there must be two true believers who affirm the gospel gathered to live out together what Christ has taught. In proving this thesis, I will seek to establish the distinction between the Universal and Local Church on earth. This paper will start by presenting Hammett's understanding of what marks should be held as marks of a true church. Then I will briefly compare his understanding to Dever's.⁶ I will then examine their understanding of what a true church is in light of three key texts that address the nature of the relationship between the Universal and Local Church on earth. I will conclude with my proposal of what is required at minimum for a gathering to be a legitimate NT church. By minimum requirement, I do not mean what is ideal, but simply what is necessary for an assembly to be a true church.

The Marks and Their Differences

John Hammett lists “the four classic *notae* of the church: unity or oneness, holiness, catholicity, and apostolicity” from the Nicene Creed and raises the questions, “How comprehensive are these marks in identifying a true and valid church? Are there other marks that need to be added?”⁷ He notes that each of these classic marks “are possessed today only partially by local churches, yet such bodies are still churches.”⁸ He recounts that the Reformation occasioned the need to identify what churches were “aligned with the one true church in which

⁶ For sake of space, I will not be interacting with McCune, and will interact somewhat with Mohler, but will focus the space of this paper on establishing Hammett and Dever's understanding of the nature of a true church and weight it in light of three key passages as I draw distinction between the Universal and Local Church.

⁷ John Hammett, “The Mission Of The Church As A Mark Of The Church,” *Journal for Baptist Theology & Ministry* 5, no. 1 (2008): 31–32.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 32–33.

they might find salvation.”⁹ Thus the Reformation produced two marks of the true church, “the pure preaching of the word” and “the proper administration of the sacraments.”¹⁰ But Hammett clarifies that the ordinances are only marks of a true church in that they mark what a church believes about the gospel (i.e., the Catholic Church).¹¹ The practice of the ordinances are not a mark of true church unless that church understands them as necessary for salvation. Thus, regarding baptism, he differentiates it from being “essential to a church’s nature,” but still “important” with regards to the health of a church.¹² Hammett rightly notes that not understanding this difference is what leads to Landmarkism which does not make this distinction “between issues of being and well-being.”¹³ Thus baptism, the Lord’s Supper, and the preaching of the word are not simply a mark of a true church vs. a non-church, but, as long as they are not understood to change the gospel message, they are simply a mark of a healthy church vs. a less healthy church.¹⁴ In basic terms, Hammett differentiates between what is “clearly an important part of the church’s life,” and what is the “being” of a church.¹⁵ The first two marks of a true church, proper preaching of the word and proper observance of the ordinances can then be viewed as one mark, a gospel church.¹⁶

A third held mark of the church is what Mohler along with others have called the mark of

⁹ Ibid., 33.

¹⁰ Ibid., 33–34.

¹¹ Ibid., 35.

¹² Ibid., 34–35.

¹³ Ibid., 35. He states, “The Landmark Baptists took the Reformation marks, measured the neighboring Methodists and Presbyterians, and found them wanting. They termed their assemblies religious societies but not gospel churches, because these groups did not practice the ordinances as Jesus had instructed.”

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid. Central Baptist Theological Seminary’s doctrinal statement section on the church is an example of this kind of distinction between what the church “is,” what “a local, visible church is,” and what a church “is to be” and do. (Though they are defining not simply what a church is, but what a “visible church is,” thus they say it is composed of those baptized by immersion. Their statements can be found here:

<https://centralseminary.edu/doctrine-mission-purpose/>

¹⁶ See Hammett, p. 34 (the first full paragraph).

church discipline. Mark Dever notes regarding Ecclesiology that, besides the ordinances, historically “three areas have drawn much of the disagreement: membership, government, and discipline,” and he says that, “[t]he third area is so intertwined with the first two.”¹⁷ Hammett terms this third mark as, “the principle of regenerate church membership,” and notes that it is specifically “the central Baptist mark of the church.”¹⁸ Hammett agrees with the underlying basis of this mark that, “the church must be composed of believers only.”¹⁹ The Baptist view of *formal* membership is that it serves the purpose of “effective church discipline,” and therefore Baptists require baptism by immersion for membership. This is to mark out those who are saved so that all those formally accepted into a church are (from man’s point of view) saved. Though Hammett agrees with the principle behind membership, he states that, “[t]he only qualification a church can make for membership is regeneration and a life lived in conformity with a profession of faith in Christ.”²⁰ Thus Hammett’s understanding of this third mark is that a church is composed of saved individuals who have a valid profession of faith. This is slightly different than the mark of discipline, in that discipline is a means of ensuring (from a human standpoint) that all in a gathering are saved. Mohler recognizes this purpose of discipline, but he wrongly goes so far as to say that a church that does not practice discipline is not a church.²¹ Dever’s understanding of the first two marks of a true church align with Hammett’s understanding,²² and when it comes to

¹⁷ Daniel L. Akin, Bruce Riley Ashford, and Kenneth Keathley, *A Theology for the Church*, Rev. edition. (B & H Publishing Group, 2014), 649.

¹⁸ Hammett, “The Mission Of The Church As A Mark Of The Church,” 35–36.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 35.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 40. Though he notes in footnote #25 that Baptists view baptism as part of that.

²¹ R. Albert Mohler, “Church Discipline,” 26.

²² See Akin, Ashford, and Keathley, *A Theology for the Church*, 640–642. Dever quotes from the Belgic Confession of 1561 as Mohler did. His understanding of the first two marks includes that a church may be considered a true church even if they are not “according to the rule (*regula*),” 642. Dever also clearly states that, “[t]here are not two separate churches, one visible and one invisible; these are two aspects of the true church.” 640. Thus, he defines the Local Church in a broad sense when he states that “the local church is simply the local assembly of Christians.” 640.

the mark of discipline, he recognizes that church discipline has become “presented as a third mark of a true church.”²³ But regarding this membership mark, Dever differentiates it from being a mark of a true church by stating instead that it is part of being “a biblically faithful church.”²⁴ Here Dever also recognizes what is biblical for a church to do, but not required for it to be a valid NT church. The practice of discipline then is not required for there to be a church, but regeneration and a valid profession of faith are. I will discuss the relationship between these later in this paper from 1 Corinthians 5. Thus, the marks of a true church are possessing the one true gospel (marks one and two combined), regeneration, and a valid profession of faith. Before moving on to examining these concepts from three passages of Scripture, Hammett has argued that there is another mark of a true church.

Hammett argues for a fourth mark: the mission of the church, namely, “its mission to minister to all types of believers, and its provision of the whole broad variety of ministries these believers need.”²⁵ Specifically Hammett lists, “teaching, fellowship, worship, service and evangelism to people of all ages, sexes and races.”²⁶ This mark is “an essential aspect of their being,” and a church that lacks these mission practices, “is an unhealthy church, one who being is severely damaged, and one whose very being as a church is called into question.”²⁷ Hammett rightly states that, “[a]s Elmer Towns and Ed Stetzer have said, ‘a church is no longer a true church when it abandons the functions of a church.’”²⁸ Therefore, a church must not forsake the

²³ Ibid., 653.

²⁴ Ibid., 657. Gathered includes “covenanting together with a specific congregation.” Ibid.

²⁵ Hammett, “The Mission Of The Church As A Mark Of The Church,” 40. He argues that this mark distinguishes a true church from a parachurch organization, pp.37-40. He also acknowledges in a footnote (#17) that Philip Jensen and Tony Payne “think parachurch groups are churches, if they gather to proclaim God’s word to a group of God’s people.” My argument for what makes up a true church can apply to some parachurch groups.

²⁶ Ibid., 38.

²⁷ Ibid., 39–40. Elmer Towns and Ed Stetzer, *Perimeters of Light: Biblical Boundaries for the Emerging Church* (Chicago: Moody Press, 2004), 70.

²⁸ Ibid., 40. Hammett quotes from Elmer Towns and Ed Stetzer, *Perimeters of Light: Biblical Boundaries for the Emerging Church* (Chicago: Moody Press, 2004), 70.

mission of the church or else it is not a true church. I will argue that one of the distinctions between the Universal Church and Local Church is that a Local Church is a gathering of believers *for the purpose of living out Christ's teaching with one another.*

Summary

To summarize, the marks of a true church followed the classic marks, and they were initially for the purpose of identifying a church that possessed the gospel uncorrupted. The first two marks of a true church are understood to be one, that is the mark of the gospel. The later third mark, the mark of discipline, was based on the fact that the church is made up only of those who are born again. This third mark is properly understood as the mark of regeneration and valid profession, and not the mark of discipline. A fourth mark of a true church was proposed that sets apart true churches as assemblies that are on mission. Therefore, an assembly is a true church when true believers who have a valid profession of faith gather together around the gospel in pursuit of carrying out their mission. Now the question remains, how does this understanding of a true church compare to the teachings of the New Testament? I will examine three key texts.

The Universal Church Locally

I will examine three texts that each deal with a unique aspect of the Local Church in relationship to the Universal, Invisible Church beginning with the birth of the Church.²⁹

The End of Acts 2

In Acts 1, a group of Christ's followers awaited the soon arrival of the Father's promise of the baptism of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:4-5) who would baptize them all "into one body," (1 Cor. 12:13, NASB) and give them "power" to carry out His commission (Acts 1:8). Having

²⁹ For this paper I will be coming from a Dispensational view with the Church beginning on the day of Pentecost.

received the gift of the Holy Spirit in the beginning of Acts 2, Peter explains from Joel that, “God says, ‘THAT I WILL POUR FORTH OF MY SPIRIT ON ALL MANKIND;’” (v.17). Following Peter’s proclamation of the message he instructs his audience how they are to respond to the gospel which would then result in them being given “the gift of the Holy Spirit” which is “the promise” (vv.38-39). Then we come to the often-quoted statement of God adding: “So then, those who had received his word were baptized; and that day there were added about three thousand souls.” (v.41). The NKJV supplies “were added *to them*.” The NIV translates it, “were added to their number that day.” The CSB and NET state, “people were added” (CSB includes, “to them”). The NASB includes a footnote on the word “souls” that says, “*i.e.* persons.” The Greek word used here is ψυχὰι which Danker lists in his lexicon as “person.”³⁰ Polhill notes that this was an addition to “the 120” in Acts 1.³¹ Let us move on to a similar statement found in v.47 before drawing a conclusion. Noted is the content found between these two verses,

42 They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. 43 Everyone kept feeling a sense of awe; and many wonders and signs were taking place through the apostles. 44 And all those who had believed were together and had all things in common; 45 and they [began] selling their property and possessions and were sharing them with all, as anyone might have need. 46 Day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart, 47 praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved.

Verse 47 concludes with a statement similar to that of v.41b but states it as something continuing to happen. This kind of fellowship follows their response and the Spirit’s baptism, and the adding of people to this continued to happen by “the Lord” (v.47). Polhill recognizes their togetherness being internal qualities and notes the importance and centrality of it being in Christ

³⁰ Frederick W. Danker and Kathryn Krug, *The Concise Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (The University of Chicago Press, 2009), 388.

³¹ John B. Polhill et al., *The New American Commentary, Acts*, vol. 26 ([Nashville, Tenn.] : Broadman & Holman, 1991-, 1991), 118.

and the Spirit.³² There was an addition to the community³³ composed of those who were already Spirit indwelt that manifested itself with both internal qualities and external commitments.³⁴ The relational service and unity are often highlighted in sermons as main points of the text to draw conclusions from, and rightly so, but the relationship between the believer's unification to the divine Spirit as underlying all the human communal aspects should by no means be understated. The fellowship experienced with the rest of the body present was a result of the spiritual fellowship each now possessed with Christ and the Comforter.

The mark of regeneration, as well as the first two marks of a true church (summed up in being a gospel church), are valid marks of a true church because it is through the acceptance of the gospel that one receives the Spirit who produces the fellowship necessary to come together as the Church. The Spirit is the one who regenerates and places all true believers in Christ's one body (Titus 3:5; John 3:5; 1 Cor. 12:13). A true believer cannot have spiritual fellowship with one who does not have spiritual life and union with Christ. If one is not part of the Universal Church, one cannot be part of a true church.³⁵

Now that I have established the foundational and primacy of the universal nature of the church (being in the Spirit) as it relates to the communal fellowship of a local church, I now move on to the gathered aspect of being the church as well as the nature of church discipline both of which are found in Matthew 18.

³² Ibid., 26:121.

³³ See Darrell L. Bock, *Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, Acts* (Baker Books, 1994), 154.

³⁴ See also Allison A. Trites and William J. Larkin, *Cornerstone Biblical Commentary, Luke, Acts*, vol. 12 (Carol Stream, Ill. : Tyndale House Publishers, 2005), 392.

³⁵ See Colin Brown and David Townsley, *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, vol. 2 (Regency Reference Library, 1986), 142. Regarding the Gk. word for church in Acts, "As in Paul, so also in the book of Acts the term ἐκκλησία indicates first of all the Christians living and meeting in a partic. place: . . . In Acts too the ἐκκλησία is ultimately one. Admittedly, it appears visible only as it gathers in partic. places, but the totality is always implied."

Matthew 18

“17 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. 18 "Truly I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven. 19 "Again I say to you, that if two of you agree on earth about anything that they may ask, it shall be done for them by My Father who is in heaven. 20 "For where two or three have gathered together in My name, I am there in their midst.”

Verse 20 along with vv.18 and 19 are the center of this unit (17:22-20:19) which is “arranged chiastically,”³⁶ with the themes of this unit being Christ’s death, “personal discipleship and the relationship between disciples.”³⁷ Verse 15 addresses two spiritual brothers and is the first step of church discipline when one has been sinned against, and the progression follows in v.16 (if he is not repentant) with taking more along to confront him. If the offender does not repent, eventually “the church” is to be informed (v.17) after which (if he is not repentant) he is then to be regarded “as a Gentile and a tax collector” (v.17).

There has been much debate over the meaning of the binding and loosing in v.18 along with its previous appearance 16:19.³⁸ Many take it in conjunction with 16:19 where Peter had just made the confession that Jesus is “the Christ” (v.16). Jesus gives Peter the “keys of the kingdom of heaven” to “bind” and to “loose” whatever has “been bound in heaven,” (v.19). Those who “compare 16:19 to 18:18” have come to “conclude that binding and loosing describe church discipline.”³⁹ But some think that “interpreting 19:19 in terms of 18:18 may be problematic” saying that “[i]t appears that people, not behaviors, are bond or loosed in 16:19.”⁴⁰

³⁶ David McClister, “‘Where Two Or Three Are Gathered Together’: Literary Structure As A Key To Meaning In Matt 17:22-20:19” (1996): 550.

³⁷ Ibid., 556.

³⁸ See David L. Turner et al., *Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, Matthew* (Baker Books, 1994), 408., as well as D. A. Carson et al., *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary : Revised Edition*, Rev. ed., vol. 9 (Zondervan, 2006), 457–458. Due to length of space, I will not be dealing with opposing views at length.

³⁹ Turner et al., *Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, Matthew*, 408.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

But it does not need to be interpreted as people being bound in 18:18⁴¹ for it is concerning someone's sin, and it results in the person becoming "as" an unbeliever to the rest due to their sin. This is to declare one's profession of faith as invalid based on their sin, and in this way corresponds to Peter's confession of Christ as some have suggested. Regarding a person who was thought to be a believer, but is now treated as unsaved by the breaking of fellowship with him is the opposite of what is seen in Acts 2 (Acts 2 teaching that a believer has fellowship with another believer based on the unity they have in the gospel). But that fellowship is lost between two when one denies the gospel by their unrepentant, confronted sin. For someone to persistently live in unrepentant sin is to invalidate their profession of faith in Christ. They are no longer a part of a local church because there are no grounds for fellowship, their professed faith in Christ has been invalidated by their sin. But because they are not bound as an unsaved person, but rather regarded "as" an unbeliever, they may still be a member of the Universal Church. This is especially possible if the purpose of excommunication is restoration.

Regarding the two believers being "gathered together in My name," (v.20) Nolland sheds light from the broader context of Matthew by stating that this concept "corresponds in part to 'agree together' in 18:19," and that "in 28:20" (the great commission) it "expresses the conscious choice of identification with what has been involved in Matthew's story: the action of the Father through the Son and by means of the Holy Spirit." He says that "[m]uch the same is intended here, but it is expressed simply in terms of the focus on Jesus ('my name')." ⁴² In this passage

⁴¹ McClister notes on p.556 that, "There has been much discussion as to the specific referents of the binding and loosing of which Jesus speaks in 18:18." And he then includes a footnote that states, "For a survey of scholarly opinion on Matt 18:18 see D. Duling, "Binding and Loosing," Forum 3/4 (December 1987) 3-31." I agree with France's understanding of v.18 (p.696) that, "the object of the 'tying' is expressed in the neuter, not the masculine; it is things, issues or actions that are tied or untied, not people," and so I take it as a declaration that, "the matter raised is really 'sin.'" (p.693).

⁴² John Nolland et al., *The New International Greek Testament Commentary, The Gospel of Matthew, A Commentary on the Greek Text*, 1st American ed. (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1978), 750.

believers declare one's actions to be sin in "correspondence" with heaven,⁴³ with the presence of the Son, by means of the unity of the Spirit. When two or more believers gather to carry out Christ's teaching, Christ is present and therefore a true church exists (in this case they are gathering to carry out discipline over sin, but in 28:20 the larger mission of the church is in view).

But what of the third stage of church discipline where, "the church" (v.17) is notified of the sin, does this imply that the two gathered in agreement over the sin are not considered "the church?" According to R.T. France, church in this instance seems to be referring to "when the community is gathered."⁴⁴ Nolland refers to it as the "whole community church,"⁴⁵ and Blomberg refers to it as the "entire church community" and states that, "[t]he main point is that the grievance is made more public."⁴⁶ Blomberg also notes that, "Jesus does not explain how we should air our grievances before the church; after all, he has not yet given any teaching on church structure," and therefore he states that from this text, "[a]pplications should major on flexibility and sensitivity."⁴⁷ France notes that, "there is no suggestion that the 'one or two others' hold any position of leadership."⁴⁸ It is not clear that "church" in this instance is denoting a separate entity than the two or three that are gathered in Christ's name. Nolland even states that the "two of you" in v.19 "appears to be the minimum group to function as the 'you' of v. 18, and therefore as

⁴³ See McClister, "'Where Two Or Three Are Gathered Together': Literary Structure As A Key To Meaning In Matt 17:22-20:19," 554, 556–557.

⁴⁴ R. T. France, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament, The Gospel of Matthew* (Eerdmans, 2007), 693.

⁴⁵ Nolland et al., *The New International Greek Testament Commentary, The Gospel of Matthew, A Commentary on the Greek Text*, 747.

⁴⁶ Craig Blomberg et al., *The New American Commentary, Mathew*, vol. 22 (Broadman & Holman, 1991), 279.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ France, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament, The Gospel of Matthew*, 693.

the ‘church’ of v.17.”⁴⁹ Thus, the best interpretation of this reference to the church would be to understand it as simply being the broader body of believer of which the two are a part rather than forcing a meaning upon the word that cannot be substantiated from this context.

How does this understanding coincide with the case of discipline in 1 Corinthians 5? And does 1 Corinthians 5 teach that church discipline is required for there to be a true church?

1 Corinthians 5 and Discipline

The Corinthians had allowed the abhorrent immorality of a professing believer among them to continue (1 Cor. 5:1). Paul, though not there with them physically, had “already judged him” of his sin of incest (vv.1 and 3). Paul makes the statement in v.5, “I have decided to deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of his flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus.” Though there may be some disagreement as to what exactly the “destruction of his flesh” is, but it is straightforward that the purpose of this is for the salvation of this man. Paul rebukes them saying in vv.6-7 that, “Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump of dough? Clean out the old leaven so that you may be a new lump, just as you are in fact unleavened. For Christ our Passover also has been sacrificed.” They are to judge “those who are within” (v.12). They are to, as the Law says, “REMOVE THE WICKED MAN FROM AMONG YOURSELVES.” (v.13). But they have yet to do so. Since they are not practicing church discipline, does that mean they are no longer a church? In the opening of the Letter Paul addresses it to, “the church of God which is at Corinth,” (v.2), and he refers to them with the word church at least four other times (vv.1:4; 10:32; 11:18, 22). In 11:18 Paul refers to what he has previously heard about them when he says, “when you come

⁴⁹ Nolland et al., *The New International Greek Testament Commentary, The Gospel of Matthew, A Commentary on the Greek Text*, 749.

together as a church, I hear that divisions exist among you;” (the NASB includes a footnote that reads, “Literally: *in church*”). It seems clear that Paul did not stop regarding them as a true church as imperfect as they were. At what point then does a church stop being a true church due to gospel-contaminating sin they allow to linger? Garland notes that, “In their present condition, they do not reflect the purity and truth of the gospel.”⁵⁰ But Paul’s warning to them is that, “a little leaven leavens the whole lump of dough” (v.6). As Garland notes, Paul “likens his sin to a toxin that will infect and ruin the whole community.”⁵¹ Although he regards them as a true church while not practicing discipline, Paul seems to be telling them that if they continue to neglect discipline, then they will fall into more and more sin to the point that they will all be effected. It does not seem to be clear when exactly that would happen. How much sin can be in a church before the whole church has invalidated their profession of faith? The example of the Corinthian church I think should serve as a caution to not regard an assembly as no longer a church when sin is among some of them. This would also apply to observance of the Lord’s Supper. The Corinthians were not observing the bread and cup properly, though not in a way that added to the gospel (11:17-34). If a church does not practice baptism, the Lord’s Supper, or discipline in the way the NT teaches, they should not be viewed as an invalid church for there may still be true believers present who hold to gospel and are imperfectly seeking to follow God’s word. An unhealthy church is still a church. Therefore, it is difficult to make a hard distinction between when those who are of Christ’s one, universal body who gather together and when they are no longer a valid NT church.

⁵⁰ David E. Garland, *Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, 1 Corinthians* (Baker Books, 1994), 180.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 179.

Conclusion

In conclusion, a Local Church is present when at least two individuals who are part of the Universal Church are gathered as members of the Universal Church (affirming the gospel) for the intentional purpose of living as the Universal Church together (to follow Christ's teachings). Therefore, the distinction I make between the Universal and Local Church is that the Local Church is a subset of the Universal Church. The Universal Church is expressed in a specific location when two or more are gathered in fellowship around the gospel to live out Christ's teachings with one another.

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