

"THAT THEY ALL MAY BE ONE"
(Topic #11)

Will the body of Christ in each city act like a body?

Does a fellowship of pastors and elders have a mutual role to fulfil in each city?

Dear to believers is the prayer of Jesus at the last supper, asking for unity among his followers. It was a prayer not only for the disciples who were then with him, but also for all of us who believe in Him from "their message" received through the generations. He asked for unity, and spoke of a purpose. We read,

"I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one ...that they may be one as we are one. I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me." John 17:20-23 NIV

Fulfilment of the prayer for unity was seen among the early converts in Palestine. The Scriptures repeat that these disciples were of "one mind," of "one accord" or "one heart and one soul." [1] The community of believers spread within the city of Jerusalem, and grew rapidly in the surrounding regions of Judea, Samaria and Galilee. In accord with the prayer's intent, we read that men and women throughout the land, heard the Word and saw the joyful unity in the believing community. They were led in increasing numbers to repent, and to come to Jesus knowing He is the Redeemer whom the Father sent. [2]

Indeed, in that age and the ages since people have seen the living Christ in disciples, visibly acting as one body united in love through His Spirit.

In the Book of Acts, how did this powerful unity manifest itself? In what activities and what form of leadership was it shown? What groups were formed and what interaction was there among the groups? Can the patterns of priority and of leadership give direction today? Lets examine the record. Of course, structures of organization and leadership are meant to help the church in pursuing the Great Commission and related purposes which the Lord inspires. Absent purifying and energizing by the Lord, our patterns may reflect a body with a failing heart.

First, a word on terminology. The greek word ecclesia, translated as church, had meant an official meeting or more particularly religious

assemblies of Jews or even the entire congregation of the Israelite people together as a body. This last sense was adopted by Jesus and by the New Testament writers to apply to the entire body of Christian believers. It should be remembered that "the church" in this primary sense refers to the same people as the terms "kingdom of God" or "kingdom of His beloved son" or the body of Christ. [3] Believers in a particular city might be called the church at that place, though they often met separately in houses and less often in larger or city-wide gatherings. New Testament epistles were addressed to believers at a city or throughout an area, or to believers generally, not to particular congregations. References to a congregation at a house might be made for a greeting, but the "local church" in a biblical sense is one or more congregations in a local area. [4]

What early patterns do we see in the city in which the church first appeared?

Unity Among the Believers in Jerusalem

At Pentecost a small band of believers experienced the coming of the Holy Spirit, as had been promised by Jesus. The gift of expressing praise in many languages, comprehensible to thousands of visiting Jews, and the inspired sermon of Peter, brought three thousand to faith and launched the church. There followed daily worship and teaching under the leadership of the Apostles, and a daily growth in the church. Following a miracle of healing and another inspired sermon, five thousand more men were added, again followed by steady growth in Jerusalem and elsewhere [5], despite periods of great persecution. [6] Within the first few years the church at Jerusalem must have numbered many more than 10,000 persons. It is easy to accept the observation of William Smith that since so many could not meet together at once, the church "became.. an aggregate of congregations, though without losing its essential unity." Dr. Smith adds, "The apostles ...would doubtless have formed the centers of the several congregations." [7]

We are examining unity within and among congregations, which does not mean merely a warm feeling. It is a sharing and acting in accord with a common loyalty and purpose. In Jerusalem it was seen firstly in gathering and joining in prayer and praise, and in approaching all undertakings in prayer. [8]

The concept of unity among persons recognizes that what is to be united comes from what is separate. Does an achieved outward union reflect an inward unity? Impressive in the Jerusalem church was willingness in the hearts of all the congregation (literally the multitude) to share what was owned, even to the extent of selling houses and entrusting proceeds

to the apostles (Acts 4:32-36). In the dramatic incident of Ananias and Sapphira it was made explicit that the sharing was to be voluntary. Their offense was not in holding back part of sale proceeds, but in lying about it to the church, seeking to counterfeit the work of God (Acts 5:4).

This unusual self-giving was not necessarily a calling in other cities and times, just as the call of Jesus upon the rich young ruler to sell and give all (Luke 18:22), is not necessarily made to all who have wealth. Yet the Lord greatly used this sharing within the church as testimony of His benevolent character. The fate of Ananias and Sapphira also brought a fear of the Lord both in and outside of the church upon those who might take lightly the holy calling of membership in the body (Acts 5:11).

Shepherding unity in the church gives rise to questions of polity. Who will handle the sharing of resources and determining recipients? How much leadership time will this take? A problem of this sort arose and was resolved at Jerusalem. A division was occurring from discrimination against Grecian Jews in the distribution of food to widows. Seven deacons were put in charge of ministering to widows' needs. "The twelve" first called a gathering of all "the multitude" of disciples in the various congregations, who, after approving the proposal, brought forth deacon candidates. The apostles, after praying, laid hands on them, confirming the people's choice (Acts 6:1-6). Dealing with many congregations, totaling many thousands of people, different deacons probably took assignments for different congregations or groups of congregations in the city.

With continuing church growth we see in time the appointment of other positions of leadership. Elders or presbyters were assisting the apostles (Acts 11:30, 15:2). James the brother of Jesus became principal leader at Jerusalem during the second and third decades after the resurrection. A crucial council in the church at Jerusalem illustrates this leadership, and the interactive and unifying dynamic of the church process. When, at Antioch, Jewish believers from Judea were calling on the Gentiles to submit to circumcision and other aspects of the law, the whole church at Antioch (not just the elders) appointed a delegation led by Paul and Barnabus to take the matter to the apostles and elders at the mother church. After some debate there Peter eloquently argued against binding Gentile believers with Jewish law requirements. The delegation told of God's acts among the Gentile believers. James supported Peter's position with scriptural reference to God's plan for reaching the Gentiles, and gave his judgment that the strict requirements would not apply. (Acts 15:4-21).

The "multitude" of the church was attending this council (Acts 15:12). They joined their leaders in endorsing the judgment, and in choosing two men, who were prophets and leaders, to carry a favorable letter and personal encouragement to the brethren in Antioch, and also in Syria and Cilicia. (Acts 15:22, 32. Though the two chosen were leaders at Jerusalem, they were apparently not elders.) The letter did not discuss the strict requirements which were not applied to the Gentile believers, but it did speak of "necessary things" to be avoided by the churches. As to these, the injunction was a cordial "you will do well" if you avoid them. [9] It was authoritative yet cordial, like Paul's letter to Philemon.

At this early stage (perhaps 51 A.D.) we see Peter commending, yet not commanding, his view upon the church. We see James (not one of the twelve apostles) presiding as chairman. Perhaps sensing general agreement, he resolved the matter with a solution which was endorsed by apostles, elders, and "the whole church" at Jerusalem. It was a parent church speaking to a daughter church at Antioch. The compromise solution (a compromise on church practice, not on salvation theology) was crucial for the progress of God's plan to unify Jews and Gentiles in one brotherly body. (Eph. 2:13-16)

Three Related Steps: A Pattern in the Biblical Record

We believe one can see in these early events in Acts, along with some concepts in the epistles, three key measures to be taken toward unity in the body--steps on which American believers, even from varying ecclesiological persuasions, ought to agree. We submit that these basics can be followed without stirring up ancient disagreements on church authority. Other matters which could impair unity, can best be met in a context of Christian fellowship already fostered by the steps toward unity.

1. The church in a city or locality, the whole body resident there and recognized as in Christ's body, "will do well" in the pattern of the church at Jerusalem to work together on the challenges and opportunities facing the body there.

This is not much contested in theory -- only in practice. The pattern in practice in most American cities is segregation; as black and white most often gather separately, so also does the fellowship in each of the local congregations generally remain separate from the others, white or black. Congregations do not in ordinary practice view themselves as together constituting a body, nor do they act as would an integral part of the body of the Lord which consists of the believers in that place.

"For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free..." (1 Cor. 12:13, NASB)

The body here spoken of is world-wide, but those in the body whom the Lord has placed together in one place, are like fingers in the hand; there must be coordination if the hand is to work in that place. The fingers are to work in concert with the whole hand, with all the believers and congregations in that place, if they are to be in harmony with the work God intends in that place. They must see their identity as integral to that larger local body, and not only to their local congregations.

In the letter to all the faithful "saints who are at Ephesus" (not speaking to just one of the Ephesian congregations) Paul puts the picture of community inter-connectedness graphically:

"..speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into Him who is the Head, that is, Christ. From Him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work." Ephesians 4:15-16 NIV

Again, not speaking to any single Roman congregation but "to all in Rome" (Rom. 1:7) Paul writes:

"..as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others." Romans 12:4-5

The scriptural picture of a body represents not just a *congregation*, but a larger body working together at Ephesus, or Rome, or your city. Parts and functions are connected to each other and to the head. Larger parts have sub-parts, as arm, hand and fingers; all fit in systems, for movement, circulation, breathing, and so on. One sees the Lord's people, believing persons serving together in their community--showing His unity in a given place.

An example of congregations working together in a region is seen in a letter to saints in Corinth and throughout Achaia (2 Cor. 8). Paul described the shining example of the Macedonian churches. These churches had joined together in the sacrificial support of a charitable mission, and in appointing joint overseers and "messengers" trusted by the churches (vv. 19, 23) to carry out the work. Paul urged the congregations of Corinth and of the Achaian region to do the same.

The vision of believers in a city being a single body is very much alive today. Francis Frangipane, in his book The House of the Lord, refers by that term to the Christians in a city "who know Jesus as Lord, believe in the truth of the scriptures and are committed to one another as brethren." In the primary sense the Lord's house is all believers, but in a functional sense he speaks of the "living, united, praying church in the city." [10] We might say that the portion of the Lord's body which functions in each community can together be either a "city on a hill" or a "light under a bushel."

In the last two decades particularly, the vision has been expressed by the National Association of Evangelicals. Following an NAE resolution in 1975, it issued a Local Association Guidebook urging evangelicals to find "ways to work together in every community in America." In the introduction we read:

"It is essential that we stand together in witness to our oneness in Christ as a testimony to the unbeliever. (John 17:21)

"Too often we divide ourselves by our distinctives rather than uniting under the biblical truths ... We go by our church names and differing interpretation of beliefs which should not enter into the test of fellowship. [11]

Believing individuals and groups, church and para-church, have an identity in the one body of believers of the community where one is placed, with gifts called into service to the Head, for the Lord's work in that place.

2. Elders in a city or county are together responsible to seek for the church there to respond to vital matters, be they threats or opportunities, facing the body. Elders can and should meet the more readily, since smaller numbers make practical more frequent fellowship.

As the people in a city are called to serve in cooperation, so leaders are called to guide, with gifts of prayer, vision and shepherding. Again examining the Book of Acts, we see in addition to the Council at Jerusalem, other indications of a city-wide or regional group identity for elders working together.

Contributions for the relief of hunger throughout Judea (Acts 11:29-30), were received by elders. As to this first mention of elders as Christian officials, The Wycliffe Bible Commentary states,

"A group of elders ruled over each Jewish synagogue, and it is probable that the Christian church adopted the Jewish pattern.

Probably the believers constituted a number of house congregations ...and the elders may have been the leaders of these ...congregations." [12]

It is highly likely that the Judean elders receiving this famine relief, were acting as a body to deal with the emergency.

Under the ministry of Paul and Barnabus, elders were appointed in the Galatian churches at Derbe, Lystra, Iconium and Antioch (Acts 14:20-23). [13] After the concurrent establishment of elders in the Galatian region, the continuing group identity of the churches and elders of the region is further indicated in Paul's letter to the Galatian churches as a group, a dozen or so years later.

In Paul's years of teaching in a school building at Ephesus, during which "all who lived in Asia heard the word of the Lord" (Acts 19:9-10), it is likely that considerable numbers were converted and a number of congregations existed. Thus when Paul later summoned the elders from Ephesus to a possibly final meeting with him at Miletus (Acts 20:17), it was an important and poignant occasion for a meeting of a city-wide group of elders who were fellow-alumni of the Pauline seminary. Indeed, the joint schooling itself had been occasion for the regular gathering together of elders of congregations during Paul's ministry at Ephesus.

Another city-wide gathering of elders occurred when Paul came to Jerusalem after his third missionary journey. Once again the possibility of disunity among believers had arisen, based on rumors among the law-keeping Jewish believers, of deviation from the law on Paul's part. Paul made an agreement with the Jerusalem elders to give public evidence of his own observance of the Jewish laws. (Acts 21:18-26)

The cooperation which is here urged upon local Christian leaders may be seen at first as simply a needed response to perceived local situations. We are all aware of numerous situations challenging to the welfare of children and families, in so many of our cities and in suburbs and towns as well. Drugs, pornography, promiscuity, rebellion, vandalism; an amoral ethos, and deteriorating instruction as well as violence in schools; lawlessness in the streets. Equally challenging as well are the needs and opportunities for cooperation in evangelism, in education, and in ministry to hurting people.

While a particular threat, or an opportunity such as a Billy Graham Crusade, can be a spur to gathering and to cooperation, the apparent scope of a challenge need not limit the response. our Creator is creative, and will inspire new avenues of response in hearts and minds of shepherds who humbly gather to seek His will. As kindred souls

interact before the Lord, a vision may be sparked --even a plan to regain a way of righteousness among the people.

As in counsel one man sharpens another (Prov. 27:7), so the counsel of many can lead to victory (Prov. 11:14). Scripture says of a small city besieged by a powerful king,

"Now there lived in that city a man poor but wise, and he saved the city by his wisdom." (Eccl. 9:15, NIV)

When a citywide plan is clearly and desperately needed, some may know enough to hold a meeting and call for the wise men. Among Christian leaders, moreover, God may well have inspired a vision for the city, even before the people realize they are spiritually "under siege." We may begin much concerned to defend against the inroads of the enemy upon our heritage of Christian culture, but God may give vision to pursue a Great Commission, and "the gates of hell shall not prevail", in defense against the church.

3. In gatherings of elders, or elders and others representing the body, there is a call upon all to come to oneness. Gifted elders should be recognized and invited to lead as needed. (The term elders here includes, but is not limited to, pastors.)

If we have the biblical perspective that the believers in a locality, "the House of the Lord," are in God's eyes the church in that place; if we agree that elders in a community can and should give greater effect to this reality by themselves meeting to pray, and to respond to vital matters facing their shared mission, then some organizational understanding will be in order. This third step affirms explicitly what might be assumed in any case: Pastors and elders in a city can and should meet to pray. They will do well to meet regularly, and to choose leaders for the meetings. They are under a call to cooperate at times in evangelistic, educational or benevolent endeavors. They can plan together to advance the cause of righteousness in their city. With the voluntary support of all or some of their respective congregations or church bodies, such understandings for shared ministry will bind congregations and ministry groups, and not leaders only. One helpful measure for ongoing cooperative ministry, is to form a local evangelical association.

The creation of functional authority for joint activity need not conflict with formal ecclesiological beliefs. In addition to biblical precedent there is ample precedent in America, of churches which remained distinct and independent, uniting to carry on missionary and other endeavors.

Baptist congregations retain independence, yet have formed numerous societies for cooperative efforts such as missions and publications. The Southern Baptists, meeting in a convention of "messengers" from the local churches, have created by agreement an impressive combined organization to oversee and unite a variety of joint ministries, some of large scale. [14]

Evangelical churches have commonly worked closely with independent mission boards or with evangelism campaign organizations without any sense of pressure to surrender authority. The National Association of Evangelicals has initiated a procedure for local member churches to form local area associations for prayer, to present programs at their gatherings, and to engage cooperatively in ministries which they may decide upon. Neither membership in the NAE, nor in such a local association, imposes any outside authority upon a local church. [15]

**In America Today -- Such Steps of unity are Seen,
But they are Needed More!**

We have said the ideal in American cities of evangelical congregations and their leaders working together, is little contested in theory but not widely practiced. First, however, we must note there have been encouraging exceptions, and there are signs which may indicate an improving trend.

In the post World War II decades, when the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association has organized (note the word) the local churches in preparation for a crusade, the believers from many congregations have joyfully labored together. Sometimes followup classes for new believers are conducted on a joint basis. In the seventies, Campus Crusade initiated much local church cooperation and follow-up in cities around the nation with its "Here's Life" campaign. Regretfully the elders in a city seldom continue the pattern of cooperative endeavor, absent such external impetus as these organizations provide.

These two major para-church bodies, and others such as Focus on the Family, illustrate an American evangelical pattern in which many of the largest evangelistic and ministry endeavors proceed without formal church affiliation. Local churches have, it is good to see, responded cooperatively when the initiating organizations are of trusted character.

To use the biblical paradigm of the human body, these parachurch organizations are in fact a part of the church--growing as organs of the body, and filling gaps left by the collective neglect of local congregations. Drawing support from the rest of the church these

agencies pursue missions of evangelism, church planting, education, relief of suffering, and private or public justice and righteousness. Yet the formal church, the groups of local congregations which, city by city, face various profiles of local human conditions, is sometimes slow to lend active assistance, let alone to lead the para-church agencies. Separate local congregations do often support persons as individuals in para-church work, especially when they are perceived as "missionaries."

Another "arm" to consider in examining the unity and health of the Christian body in America is the National Association of Evangelicals. Formed in 1942 to provide an alternative fellowship and voice to that of the National Council of Churches, NAE has grown steadily. A 1975 convention resolution expressed the vision of "evangelicals finding ways to work and to pray together in every community in America." It has since stimulated the formation of local evangelical associations which (as mentioned earlier) join together in prayer, in programs at their gatherings, and in projects of mutual cooperation. Current projects include in various cities sponsorship of hospital and jail chaplaincies, evangelistic concerts, maternity homes, ministries to the disabled, a TV station, visits to the state legislature, alerting parents to public school problems and feeding the homeless.

While the extent, variety and impact of such local association projects do not compare with those of the myriad of independent evangelical ministries, they do bear a special testimony to that unity for which Christ prayed --- for they bring publicly together that community of the local body which is usually seen as divided among various unrelated churches.

Other moves toward unity among local leadership are stirring as well. Wichita, Kansas, provided an outstanding example of pastors standing together persistently and boldly, despite harsh repression, in united witness against clinics performing late-term (even 9th month) abortions. In Cedar Rapids, Iowa, Francis Frangipane writes that after pastors united persistently in prayer for their city, crime in Cedar Rapids substantially declined -- while increasing in the state of Iowa. He reports further, viewing the nation, that

"In hundreds of cities the Lord has raised up thousands of pastors; these leaders are meeting together regularly in prayer for each other and their cities." [16]

Some local associations have, on a foundation of prayer, developed as umbrella organizations helping and sheltering a number of Christian ministries, and bridging as well some of the separation between church and para-church. Minneapolis and Colorado Springs are notable in this respect.

In England the Evangelical Alliance fills an organizing role of leadership among the United Kingdom para-church agencies, mediating conflict (as did the Council at Jerusalem) and spearheading a united voice among the agencies as well as among the churches. No doubt such a role would be more difficult with the large agencies in America, but it is a role the National Association of Evangelicals would do well to emulate. There is a need in the body for harmonizing the different and sometimes discordant voices from the large para-church agencies.

Happily, with and without the aid of local church associations or of national para-church agencies, believers in America, transcending varieties of church membership, have joined together in many local areas to support a multitude of ministries: evangelism, youth and student ministries, Christian schools, gospel missions to the poor and the imprisoned, pro-life efforts and crisis pregnancy ministries, summer camps, Christian radio and others. There is life flowing throughout the body and a unity which wells up among those who are giving of themselves, despite lack of evident unity among so many congregations which are geographic neighbors.

Training and Discipline - A Vital Part of Unity

Despite promising signs of life, we see alarming signs of ill health in the body. Prominent media preachers and ministry leaders have been caught in sin and publicly exposed, causing disunity and great harm to the cause of Christ. Many young people from evangelical churches are nearly as bound in the ways of the world as their unbelieving peers. Divorce is often found in the church. The calling of holiness is little heard and much less practiced. Couples caught up in careerism neglect vigorous "parenting." Sometimes worse things happen which, following Paul, we may not find it seemly to speak about.

Equally disturbing, there is little action to biblically confront and deal with these ills of the body. This is not our heritage. If we do not judge ourselves, God will judge us. (1 Cor.11:31-32) He chastens those whom He loves. (Hebrews 12). Leaders must provide for judgment among the flock. (1 Cor. 5 and 6) If they fail to do so, again, God will judge, flock and leaders. And so it is with the House of the Lord, the larger flock extending through a community -- Christ's body in a town or city. Remember the ringing words from Malachi we sing in Handel's Messiah: "He shall purify..." The passage also speaks of "a refiner's fire" and gives the warning, "I will draw near to you for judgment." (Mal.3:2,3,5)

Providing direction or judgment before God intervenes and judges, is a discipline for which Scripture gives instruction. Life in the body of Christ within a city or community is to be nurtured not only with love but with discipline, and if needed, loving confrontation. This is the duty of all, but particularly of parents in the family, of shepherds in local congregations, of leaders in ministries, and of Christian leaders within the larger community.

We know discipline is a vital and integral element in training of children, of athletes, of craftsmen, or of scholars, and certainly for believers maturing in godliness (1 Tim.4:7 NASB). Whether we speak of self-discipline or group discipline, it is an element of the body life that has been sadly neglected, to the great grief of many churches and ministries whose members and even leaders have fallen into sin while brothers and sisters were failing to call them to account and lead them toward restoration.

Before speaking more on discipline at the trans-congregational level, it is useful to focus on a basic setting for Christian discipline: Small-group fellowship with mutual accountability. It is well known that congregations which are most alive and flourishing are those with people engaged in fellowship groups. It is not always remembered, however, that the reassuring promise of Jesus to small groups, "...where two or three have gathered together in My name," there I am in their midst," (Matt. 18:20, NASB) was given in disciplinary context. Verse 17 confers appellate disciplinary jurisdiction upon the church. Verse 18 seems to show heavenly confirmation of the judgment made by the church. Verse 19 specifies that our Heavenly Father takes action when even so few as two disputants become prayerfully united, in the first context of reconciliation and resolution of a matter of difference--as well as in a wider orbit of prayer concerns. Verse 20 gives a key to unity-- the few, the several or the congregation have "gathered together" in Christ's name, invoking His presence and authority, and He promises to be present.

In beginning the fellowship of Christian leaders in a community for cooperative "body-like" ministry, and the attendant "coaching," discipline, and even chastisement or stronger action sometimes needed, the lessons learned within congregations must be carried forward. Brotherly openness and mutual submission will characterize Christian fellowship in groups where Christ's business is to be done.

Just as with small groups at lower levels of responsibility, obeying biblical instruction to include in fellowship the element of loving confrontation (Eph. 4:15), is to provide an avenue for minimizing division. Such obedience continues "laying aside the old self" (v.22) when we lovingly follow the command:

"...speak the truth to one another, judge with truth and judgment for peace in your gates" Zech. 8:16; Eph. 4:25.

When speaking privately and directly, gossip doesn't spill out. Our obedience permits more thoughtful and fraternal consideration of what may or may not need to be made public. Our obedience continues "putting on the new self" (v.24) when leaders humbly accept and respond to a personal or a corporate admonition, and we love a confronting brother for his concern, instead of evading him or bristling at his words. Our obedience blesses the Lord, Whom we have invited to attend and to confirm our dealings, large or small. Matt. 18:19.

Within our cities there is the challenge not only of intra-congregational discipline neglected, but of church members who after some falling-out in one congregation, or even after expulsion, may migrate to another. There is moreover the challenge of believers who have committed some wrong against a believer from another congregation, perhaps during the course of weekday business. And there are Christian ministries, not church-affiliated, which may encounter unresolved conflict with individuals or with other ministries. In all such cases the congregation to which some aggrieved person belongs, even if willing to assist with a biblical discipline process, may have no "jurisdiction" over one or more disputants.

The biblical teaching is clear that disputes among believers are not to be brought before unbelieving judges. (1 Cor. 6:1, et seq.) To provide a biblical reconciliation process where a complaint involves members of different local churches, the participation of the different church bodies is commonly needed. Enterprising laymen may often, without church assistance, join in establishing Christian schools or crisis pregnancy centers and various other ministries. The dispute resolution or reconciliation challenge, however, places the "ball" for cooperative action uniquely in the "court" of the collective leadership of a community's local churches. It is the several elderships in which collectively resides the biblical authority and obligation to confront disputing members of different congregations.

Of course in many cases the problem is within a congregation or a Christian ministry, where existing bonds of fellowship may encourage the parties to submit to an orderly and amicable disposition. Many, perhaps more cases are not so, and often remain unresolved, and do not even come to light in the home congregations of those involved. Yet to purify the body, the other cases should come to light. There will be encouragement for resolution of these if a church-sanctioned forum serving an area is available. The variety and severity of disputes and discipline problems now faced, the mobility of persons among congregations, the

litigiousness of our culture, and the availability within particular congregations and ministries of conciliation resources needed more widely -- all these call for the congregations of a community to join in doing what is needed.

Local leadership can draw upon their collective experience and upon gifted conciliators to learn and adopt disciplinary approaches both within and among their congregations. They can, as they may be led, proceed more boldly or more cautiously, provided they proceed.

The spiritual life of a congregation suffers if evident sin is not called to account. Similarly, within the evangelical community of a city generally, the life of the body will be undermined if a biblical process is not upheld for local accountability transcending congregational lines. Local churches and their leaders must prayerfully exercise the offices of disciplinary nurture in mutual cooperation throughout the cities.

Corporate discipline is not an obstacle to unity, but a necessity for it. Hence the careful teaching, found for example in Ephesians 6:1-4, Matthew 18:15-20 and First Corinthians 5 and 6. Discipline is a part of training for work together, of training for unity. It is not only practiced by loving parents, teachers, coaches, and employers, it is indispensable for success in any team endeavor --including the mission of the church within and beyond each congregation. [17]

Congregations must face this shared problem in unity. They will find it beneficial as well as biblical to engage in some mutual submission in disciplinary matters. Two or more local bodies may wish to enter a process for a) a dispute resolution to be mutually accepted, or b) to submit a matter to one of the Christian conciliation services, or c) to jointly accept instruction from such a service in training some of their own people, who in turn might train others. Discipline not only within a local congregation, but within the evangelical community of a city generally, will be undermined if a biblical process is not upheld for local accountability transcending congregational lines.

To summarize, we have biblical patterns, which we neglect only to our loss. God enlarges the ministry of an individual as he attains discipline over himself, and learns how to be a servant to others. We are all servants, men and women under authority. God enlarges the tents of families, covenantal groups and congregations which are faithful in these ways. As groups nurture, discipline and train their own, opportunities of fruitful service grow. Where the fields are white unto the harvest, overseers must send reapers, and coordinate their labors. Not all reaping calls for the same skills, nor are they all put into action at once. Not all skills are in each congregation. Overseers must

cooperate, share resources, avoid needless duplication, and come to the aid of each other. Can we see this as a sketch of a body moving in unity?

Steps of cooperative ministry and cooperative discipline are biblically taught and urgently needed in the cities of America. City-wide and area-wide steps of ongoing cooperation among elders and their congregations are no less needed in America today than they were needed in Jerusalem or Ephesus or Corinth in the days of the Book of Acts.

To respond to the needs, it is not necessary to agree on all points in order to agree on some, and to act in agreement for the advancement of the kingdom in brotherly and sisterly ways among neighboring congregations of mutually recognized fellow believers.

Freedom to voluntarily make personal and corporal engagements within the framework of these three unifying steps, and to keep such engagements, is part of our liberties and responsibilities as believers. We see this illustrated in the Book of Acts and throughout Scriptures. As our cities show strife and despair, let us move in obedience to His prayer, "that they all may be one."

2/1/92

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Revised
1/15/93
5/6/93
1/13/94

End Notes

1. Acts 2:46, 4:24, 4:32, 5:12.
2. Acts 2:47 and 6:7 report the growth. Acts 2:38?39 and 3:18?19 indicate the message being accepted. See also note 5.
3. Matt.16:18, "Upon this rock I will build my church." See Acts 20:28; John 3:3,5; Col.1:13,24; Eph.1:22?23; Matt.21:43. Smith's Bible Dictionary, Fleming H. Revell Co., Old Tappan, NJ, 1967, provides a helpful definition/discussion.
4. E.g., Rom.1:7, 16:3?5; Col.4:15?16. The first letter to "the church of God .. at Corinth" adds as addressees "all who in every place call upon the name of the Lord." The second letter adds "all the saints who are throughout Achaia." Galatians was a message to the "churches of Galatia." The other letters do not refer to addressees as churches. (E.g., the Petrine letters went to "scattered" believers in Asia Minor.)
5. Mass conversion figures at Acts 2:41, 4:4, and other growth, even of "multitudes of men and women," reported at Acts 5:14, 2:4, 6:1, 6:7, 9:31, 11:21.
6. Acts 4:3, 5:18, 8:1, 11:19, 12:1?3.
7. Smith's Bible Dictionary, p.110. See note 3.
8. Acts 1:14, 24 (appointment of Matthias); 2:42, 47; 3:1: 4:24?31: 6:6 (appointment of deacons).
9. Acts 15:23?29. In a sense even the milder requirements, which were gladly accepted by the church at Antioch (15:31), seemed to sound in the concept of law, rather than Paul's emphasis on salvation by faith alone. Even the "essentials" referred to included dietary along with moral provisions. Yet the letter spoke not of salvation but of practice, and provided a basis on which Jewish and Gentile believers could maintain unity.
10. The House of the Lord, Francis Frangipane, Creation House (1991), pp. 12, 11, respectively.
11. National Association of Evangelicals ?? Local Association Guidebook. Field Services Department, NAE, Box 28, Wheaton, Illinois 60189.

12. The Wycliffe Bible Commentary, edited for New Testament by Everett F. Harrison, Moody Press, Chicago, 1962.
13. Commentators indicate this may have been by congregational election or apostolic appointment. NIV, footnote at Acts 14:23 also Wycliffe Bible Commentary (preceding note).
14. Handbook of Denominations in the United States, Frank S. Mead, Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1956.
15. National Association of Evangelicals ?? Local Association Guidebook. See note 11.
16. The House of the Lord (note 10 above), p. 13.
17. Relating to this need of discipline for righteousness, and the biblical instruction, U.S. Senate Chaplain Richard C. Halverson, in a forward, commends Due Process, by Daniel C. Juster, Destiny Image Publishers, Shippensburg, Pa., 1992.