

GOD'S CHURCH AND HIS CHURCHES

Introduction

Ecclesiology is a doctrine that has not been studied as extensively as Christology and Theology have been. It had to be addressed during the Reformation period. It has come to the forefront again in our days.

The ecumenical movement has challenged the different Christian denominations to reflect on the questions as to what the church is, what it stands for, and how the different denominations relate to each other.¹ The August 6, 2000 Roman Catholic declaration *Dominus Iesus* stresses the uniqueness of the Catholic Church and “maintains that particular churches (above all the Reformation churches) are ‘not churches in the proper sense’ (*sensu proprio Ecclesiae non sunt*).”² The Seventh-day Adventist church has been involved in dialogues with different Christians churches. It cannot avoid to wrestle with these issues and address them.

Furthermore, its tremendous growth in non-Christian areas has brought up questions such as, Is it necessary for a Muslim to become an Adventist? Whom does Christ's church include? What is the role of the Adventist church and how does the remnant concept impact us?

Christian churches use different models of government. Individualism, pluralism, nationalism, as well as gender and race issues influence also the Adventist church and may suggest to lean toward a congregational approach of church government and a strengthening of national churches accompanied by looser ties to the worldwide Adventist church.

Thus, it is crucial that the Seventh-day Adventist church takes a fresh look at ecclesiology. In this paper we will be dealing with one major issue only, namely the issue what the New Testament teaches about the local church and the universal church and how the two relate to each other. The limitations of this study do not allow us to study other pertinent questions such as those mentioned above. Looking primarily at the use of the term *ekklēsia* in the New Testament we will discuss the local church and the universal church and will ask ourselves how they relate to each other.

¹Cf., Wolfgang Klausnitzer, “One Church or Unity of the Churches?,” *Theology Digest* 48 (2001): 227-231.

²Medard Kehl, “The One Church and the Many Churches,” *Theology Digest* 49 (2002): 34.

I. The Local Church and the Universal Church

In secular Greek the term *ekklēsia* designated a gathering of people, for instance, the assembly of citizens as a political entity. In the Septuagint the word is most often employed as a translation of the Hebrew word *qahal*, “gathering,” “congregation,” or “assembly.” In the New Testament it normally describes the group of those, who believe in Jesus Christ and accept him and his teachings.³ They “are joined to the organization originated by Him”⁴ and are his disciples and followers called to minister to each other and the world and to proclaim what he has commanded them (Mat 28:20).⁵ *Ekklēsia* as it refers to the Christian church is used for “(1) a church meeting (1 Cor 11:18), (2) the total number of Christians living in one place (1Cor 4:17), (3) the church universal (Mt 16:18).”⁶ It is the community of the Holy Spirit and the people of God. Whereas “universal church” refers to the church in general which is not limited by a geographic location and a certain century A.D., the local church is defined as a local congregation in a city or village, which may also be limited in time.

1. The Church in the Gospels and in Acts

(1) *The Synoptic Gospels*

The term *ekklēsia* is found in the Gospel of Matthew only. It does not occur in Mark, Luke, and John, however, quite frequently in Acts. Although it is disputed whether or not Jesus talked about his *ekklēsia* (Mat 16:18; 18:17–twice),⁷ the evidence in the Synoptic Gospels shows that “Jesus

³Cf., Erwin Fahlbusch, “Church. Subject, Tasks, and Problems of Ecclesiology,” in *The Encyclopedia of Christianity*, edited by E. Fahlbusch et al. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999), 1:477-478; and Jürgen Roloff, “Church. Historical Aspects,” in *The Encyclopedia of Christianity*, edited by E. Fahlbusch et al. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999), 1:481.

⁴Siegfried H. Horn, *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Dictionary*, (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1979), 210.

⁵Cf. G. Gloege, “Gemeinde. Begrifflich,” in *Die Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, edited by Kurt Galling (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1958), 2:1325-1329.

⁶Horn, 210.

⁷Cf., Leonhard Goppelt, *Theology of the New Testament, Volume 1: The Ministry of Jesus in Its Theological Significance* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1981), 213, who maintains that “The saying to Peter in Mt. 16:17-19 distinguished itself so greatly from all other comparable sayings of Jesus that it could not have come originally from him.” See also the discussion in Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Theology* (Downers Grove:

intended to create a visible community. . . He came to give birth to a fellowship of men and women under the Kingship of God, a religious community of which He was the leader. . . As the destined Messiah Jesus gathered a remnant community to Himself. . . A Messiah without a community was unthinkable to the Jewish mind. The concepts of disciples, a remnant, and messiahship were constitutive of a new community, a people of God, which is the Messiah's possession."⁸ Although Jesus was probably not talking about an organization, but rather about his specific people—"my church"—his sayings prepared the way for the church as we later find it in Acts and in the New Testament epistles.

The concept of Jesus' church is not limited to the term *ekklēsia*. Jesus' call to individuals to become his followers (Mat 4:19; 8:22; 19:21; Mark 2:14; 10:21; Luke 5:27; 9:59; 18:22), the election of the Twelve out of a larger group of his disciples, their designation as apostles, their sending out on a mission trip (Mark 3:13-19; Luke 6:13-16; Mat 10:1-20),⁹ Jesus' particular teachings such as the Sermon on the Mount addressed to his disciples (Mat 5-7), and his sayings about his flock (Luke 12:32, Mat 26:31) and his family (Mat 12:46-50; Mark 3:31-35; Luke 8:19-21) indicate that the Synoptic Gospels are well aware of the fact that Jesus was gathering a special people, his church.

(2) *The Gospel of John*

The Gospel of John agrees with the Synoptics. According to John 1:43; 21:22 Jesus called people to follow him and to become or remain his disciples. In John 15:1-8 Jesus compares himself with a vine and his community with its branches and challenges them to remain in him. There is an extended section on Jesus as the good shepherd of his sheep (John 10:1-18). At the end of the Fourth

InterVarsity Press, 1981), 711-712; George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1974), 109-111, 342; and K. L. Schmidt, "καλεω, κλησις, κλητος, αντικαλεω, εγκαλεω, εγκλημα, εισκαλεω, μετακαλεω, προκαλεω, συγκαλεω. επικαλεω, προσκαλεω, εκκλησια," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. by G. Kittel (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1982), 3:518-526.

⁸Raoul Dederen, "The Church," in *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology*, edited by Raoul Dederen (Hagerstown: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 2000), 540. Cf., Raoul Dederen, "Wollte Jesus eine Gemeinde gründen?" in *Die Gemeinde und ihr Auftrag*, Studien zur adventistischen Ekklesiologie, 2, edited by J. Mager (Lüneburg: Saatkorn-Verlag, 1994), 36-40, 43-47.

⁹See also the mission of the Seventy (Luke 10:1-17).

Gospel, Jesus charges Peter to tend his lambs and his sheep (John 21:15-17). Thus, there is a Messianic community, Christ's church.

In John 10:16 Jesus makes an interesting statement: "I have other sheep, which are not of this fold; I must bring them also, and they will hear my voice; and they will become one flock with one shepherd." Jesus looks ahead and sees that in the future there will be other believers. These Gentile believers will not form a Gentile church separate from a church consisting of Jewish believers. "They are to become united in one flock. And they all stand under the leadership of one shepherd. The unity is not a natural unity but one brought about by the activity of the Shepherd in 'bringing' them."¹⁰ Tasker adds that this "flock will be universal in character."¹¹ In John 10:16 as well as in Jesus' saying about his church in Matthew 16 we have a future dimension and at the same time a universal dimension.¹² Jesus knows about his church as it will grow and expand. It will be one church, a universal entity.

(3) *Acts of the Apostles*

In Acts a number of terms are used to describe the church such as "brothers" (Acts 1:15), "believers" (Acts 2:44), those "who call on your name" (Acts 9:14), "flock" (Acts 20:28,29), etc. However, the word *ekklēsia* is found 23 times, and thus we can concentrate on it. Twice it is used in the plural. In the other instances the singular is employed. In Acts 7:38 *ekklēsia* occurs in an Old Testament quotation. Three times *ekklēsia* is a political entity, the assembly of citizens, and has nothing to do with the church of God (Acts 19:32,39,40).¹³ In all the other places it refers to the community of believers. When in Acts *ekklēsia* describes the church it is normally the local church, the church in Jerusalem (Acts 8:1; 11:22;15:4), the church in Antioch (Acts 13:1); the church in

¹⁰Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1992), 512; cf. Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Gospel According to St. John* (New York: Crossroad, 1990), 2:299.

¹¹R. V. G. Tasker, *John*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, revised edition (Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1992), 130.

¹²Cf., Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, second edition (Grand Rapids: Baker Book Publishing Company, 1998), 1044.

¹³See, Schmidt, 505.

Caesarea (Acts 18:22), the church in Ephesus (Acts 20:17), or the churches in Syria and Cilicia (Acts 15:41). Paul and Barnabas appointed elders in every church (Acts 14:23). Acts informs that on Pentecost the church was empowered by the Holy Spirit and set out on its mission. Whereas Jerusalem originally was the seat of the Messianic community, soon churches were established in other places and countries. A tremendous growth took place. Some organization became necessary and was established. In addition to the apostles the Seven were chosen and elders were elected to serve local congregations.

However, the question must be asked whether or not Acts with its strong emphasis on local congregations also contains a universal dimension and knows about a universal church. Before responding we must affirm that the churches mentioned in Acts are in line with Jesus' expectations about his future church. "An important point is that the same word is used for the Jewish Christian congregation at Jerusalem and the Gentile congregation at Antioch. . . . To the ἐκκλησία belong all those who are His."¹⁴

Twice in Acts the term "the whole church" is used, but in Acts 5:11 the expression seems to refer to the Jerusalem church. In Acts 15:22, although in the context of the Jerusalem council, it may again refer to the church in Jerusalem,¹⁵ which to some extent would explain why the apostles and elders in the very same verse as well as in verse 4 are mentioned separately. The council would consist of delegates and members of the Jerusalem church.

A broader view of the church is presented in Acts 9:31: "So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria enjoyed peace, being built up; and going on in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it continued to increase." Though Luke does not yet speak about the universal church, an important step into that direction is made. The churches in a certain area are the church. "The local connection is not the decisive point. This is shown by the further references to the ἐκκλησία in Judaea, Galilee and Samaria. . . . It is not that the ἐκκλησία divides up into ἐκκλησίαι.

¹⁴Schmidt, 505.

¹⁵Cf., F. F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1988), 297.

Nor does the sum of the ἐκκλησίαι produce the ἐκκλησία. The one ἐκκλησία is present in the places mentioned . . .”¹⁶

A rich text and the last one in Acts to contain the term *ekklēsia* is Acts 20:28, which is part of Paul’s farewell speech addressed to the elders of Ephesus: “Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood.” The verse is unique insofar as it contains the phrase “the church of God,” not found elsewhere in Acts, and the term “flock” introduced here and found in Acts 20:28,29 only. In addition it is stated that this church of God was purchased by his blood. It seems appropriate to understand this text as referring to the church in general rather than to a local congregation only. Jesus has purchased his church. He called it his “flock”¹⁷

The church is described as a *flock*, a familiar Old Testament metaphor for God’s people (Ps. 100:3; Is. 40:11; Je. 13:17; Ezek 34) which was taken up by Jesus (Lk. 12:32; 15:3-7; 19:10; Jn. 10:1-30). The picture is applied to the church and its leaders . . . The church belongs to God because he himself bought it . . . The thought is of the act of redemption by which the church became God’s special property, and is based on the picture of God redeeming Israel in Isaiah 43:21 (*cf.* Ps 74:2, which significantly follows a verse in which Israel is likened to a flock).¹⁸

Whereas Jesus may emphasize the universality of his church, Acts especially mentions local congregations, however, without denying the larger picture.

2. The Church in the Pauline Literature

For Paul the church is a local entity as well as the universal group of believers. Yet, his emphasis differs from letter to letter. We will take a look at those letters first, which put a stronger stress on the local church, before moving to those who emphasize the universal church. At the same time we acknowledge that a number of Pauline epistles do not have much to say about ecclesiology and may not even address the issue at all in which we are interested.

¹⁶Schmidt, 505.

¹⁷The same noun for “flock”--*poimnion* instead of *poimnē*--is used here and in Luke 12:32.

¹⁸I. Howard Marshall, *Acts*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, revised edition (Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991), 333-334. Cf., Schmidt, 505.

a. Emphasis on the Local Church

(1) *Romans*

In Romans *ekklēsia* is found five times. It appears in the last chapter only. The church is either a local church (Rom 16:1) or a house church (Rom 16:5, 23) which also is local. All the churches of the Gentiles give thanks in Romans 16:4, and all the churches of Christ greet the Christians in Rome (Rom 16:16). However, the concept of the church is also expressed with terms such as the saints (Rom 1:7; 15:25; 16:2), those being called (Rom 8:30), and those who were chosen (Rom 8:33). In Romans 9-11 Paul discusses the election and unbelief of Israel and its relation to Gentile Christians. He mentions a remnant (Rom 9:27), uses the example of an olive tree in which wild branches, Gentile Christians, are being crafted in, and states that “all Israel will be saved” (Rom 11:26). The latter statements as well as the reference to “one body” in Romans 12:4-5 may contain a universal dimension of the church.

(2) *1Corinthians*

In 1Corinthians the church occurs frequently. The term *ekklēsia* is found 22 times, six times as a plural. In most of the cases the term refers to the local church (e.g., 1Cor 1:2; 16:19). But in addition to the church in Corinth there are other Christian churches (1Cor 4:17; 7:17), such as the churches of Galatia (1Cor 16:1) and of Asia (1Cor 16:19). These churches are “the churches of the saints” (1Cor 14:33) and the “churches of God” (1Cor 11:16).¹⁹ Are we able to detect a universal element? There are at least three texts, in which *ekklēsia* may cross local boundaries and express a universal concept—1Cor 10:32 mentioning Jews, Greeks, and the church of God, 1Cor 12:28 talking about functions and spiritual gifts in the church in the context of the body metaphor,²⁰ and 1Cor 15:9 in which Paul admits that he has persecuted the church of God. Goppelt suggests: “According to Paul, the designation *ekklēsia* was applicable to three different possibilities. (1) In I Cor. 10:32 it meant the people of God in its entirety. (2) In I Cor. 1:2 it meant the particular local community. (3)

¹⁹The phrase “church of God” in the singular occurs another four times (1Cor 1:2; 10:32; 11:22; 15:9).

²⁰Cf., Leon Morris, *1 Corinthians*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, revised edition (Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1993), 174.

In I Cor. 11:18 it meant the worshipping assembly of the community.”²¹ G. Fee while commenting on 1Corinthians 15:9 states: “This is one of the rare instances in Paul’s earlier letters where he uses ἡ ἐκκλησία with the qualifier τοῦ θεοῦ to refer to the church in a more universal sense rather than to a local body (cf. Gal. 1:13 and the plural in v. 22).”²² Thus, 1Corinthians seems to contain a universal element, although the local church is stressed.²³

(3) *2Corinthians*

2Corinthians employs *ekklēsia* nine times, once referring to God’s church as it was in Corinth (1:1) and eight times to other churches or all churches (8:1,18,19,23,24; 11:8,28; 12:13). All of the references describe local churches as probably does the term “saints.” The letter is addressed “To the church of God which is at Corinth with all the saints who are throughout Achaia” (2Cor 1:1). A glimpse at the universal church may be found in chapter 6:16 where Paul states: “We are the temple of the living God.”²⁴ In 1Corinthians the image of the temple had already been used and applied to believers, namely in 3:16 to the Corinthian church and in 6:19 to the individual Christian. The difference in 2Corinthians is that Paul here includes himself by speaking about “we” instead of “you” and thus enlarges the image of the temple of God by possibly including the entire Christian community.²⁵

²¹Leonhard Goppelt, *Theology of the New Testament, Volume 2: The Variety and Unity of the Apostolic Witness to Christ* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1982), 144.

²²Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991), 734.

²³Schmidt, 506, points out that saying addressed to the church in Corinth also apply to the church as a whole, because “each community, however small, represents the total community, the Church.”

²⁴Cf., Ralph P. Martin, *2 Corinthians*, Word Biblical Commentary 40 (Waco: Word Books, Publisher, 1986), 202.

²⁵Cf., Colin Kruse, *2 Corinthians*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, revised edition (Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991), 138.

(4) *Galatians*

In Galatians the churches of Galatia (1:2) and the churches of Judea (1:22) are mentioned. Furthermore, Paul refers to his persecution of the “church” (1:13). The latter text must be understood in a universal sense. R. Fung holds that Paul’s reference to the church of God, which he wanted to destroy, is “a reference to the universal Church as the messianic people of God in its entirety, which is, however, to be met with in various local ‘churches of God’ (1 Cor. 11:16; 1 Thess, 2:14; 2 Thess. 1:4) representing the one universal Church.”²⁶ Furthermore, the phrase “household/ family of the faith” which is contrasted with “all people” (Gal 6:10)²⁷ and the phrase “Israel of God” (Gal 6:16)²⁸ seem to have universal connotations.

(5) *Philippians*

Philippians with two occurrences of *ekklēsia* has one reference to the local church (Phil 4:15) and one reference to the universal church which Paul had persecuted (Phil 3:6). The church members are again called the “saints” (Phil 1:1; 4:21,22).

(6) *1 and 2Thessalonians*

In the Thessalonian correspondence “the church of the Thessalonians in God the/our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” (1Thess 1:1; 2Thess 1:1) is found twice. In addition “the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea” (1Thess 2:14) and “the churches of God” (2Thess 1:4) are mentioned. The church consists of “brothers” (1Thess 5:1,4,12; 2Thess 2:1; 3:1) and “believers”

²⁶Ronald Y. K. Fung, *The Epistle to the Galatians*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1990), 55; cf. Richard N. Longenecker, *Galatians*, Word Biblical Commentary 41 (Dallas: WordBooks, Publisher, 1990), 28.

²⁷Cf., Fung, 298-299; Longenecker, 283: “The expression ἡ πίστις (‘the faith’) is used here as a locution for the Christian movement (cf. 1:23; see also 3:23, 25).”

²⁸See the discussions by Fung, 310-311, who suggests to understand the phrase as “the new Israel, the new people of God—both Jews and Gentiles being included . . .” and Longenecker, 298-299, who states “that what the Judaizers were claiming to offer his converts they already have ‘in Christ’ by faith: that they are truly children of Abraham together with the Jews who believe, and so properly can be called ‘the Israel of God’ together with all Jews who believe.”

(1Thess 1:7; 2:10; 2Thess 1:10). However, the universal church is not directly present in the Thessalonian literature.

(7) *The Pastoral Epistles and Philemon*

In the Pastoral epistles specific situations and problems are addressed that Timothy and Titus had to face. 2Timothy is concerned about Timothy and his ministry and provides a report on Paul's own situation and imminent death. The term *ekklēsia* is missing in this letter. References to the troublemakers in the church (2Tim 2:17-18; 3:1-9; 4:14-15) point to a local flavor. However, the image of the church as a household containing different types of vessels (2Tim 2:30-21) and the references to God's firm foundation and his awareness of those who are his (2Tim 2:19) may be more universal in nature.²⁹

The Letter to Titus does not employ *ekklēsia* either but is interested in church order, namely the appointment of elders in different cities (Tit 1:5-9) and the question of how to deal with false teachers (Tit 1:10-16; 3:8-11). But Titus 2:14 seems to broaden the perspective when Paul talks about Jesus "who gave himself for us to redeem us from every lawless deed, and to purify for himself a people for His own possession, zealous for good deeds."³⁰

1Timothy deals also with church order, the appointment of bishops and deacons (1Tim 3:1-13), false teachers including ascetic tendencies in the church of Ephesus (1Tim 1:3-11; 4:1-5; 6:20-21), and proper conduct within the Christian community (1Tim 5-6). Three times the term *ekklēsia* is used (1Tim 3:5,15; 5:16). In 1Timothy 3:15 we hear about "the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and support of the truth." This is the only reference which could be understood in broader terms. However, the absence of an article before *ekklēsia* may suggest "that the local community is again primarily in mind, yet conceived of as part of the larger whole."³¹

²⁹Cf., Donald Guthrie, *The Pastoral Epistles*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, revised edition (Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1990), 162-163.

³⁰Cf., Guthrie, *The Pastoral Epistles*, 213.

³¹Guthrie, 99. That the local community is the focus of 1Timothy 3:15 is supported by Ralph Earle, "1, 2 Timothy" in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, edited by Frank E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1978), 11:369, although he states that "the general church of Jesus Christ may also be in view;" Gottfried. Holtz, *Die Pastoralbriefe*, Theologischer Handkommentar zum Neuen Testament 13 (Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt,

Paul's letter to Philemon knows of a local church, a house church only (Philem 1:2).

(8) *Summary*

The Pauline letter discussed so far have a strong emphasis on the local church, however, interestingly enough a number of them are also aware of the larger picture of the universal church. Paul maintains that there are local Christian congregations, there is also the church in a certain region, and there is the universal church which we already encountered with Jesus. We now turn to those Pauline letters which emphasize the universal church.

b. Emphasis on the Universal Church

(1) *Ephesians*

The most prominent letter to stress the universal church is Paul's Letter to the Ephesians. In almost all extant manuscripts and in all versions, the Greek title of the first prison letter of the New Testament is "To the Ephesians." However, some old manuscripts lack "in Ephesus" in Ephesians 1:1 and just address the saints.³² We also notice that the tone of the letter is rather impersonal. Although Paul had worked for quite a while in Ephesus and must have known many people there (Acts 19-20) and although he had a farewell meeting with the elders of Ephesus before he went to Jerusalem, where he was taken into custody, he does not mention his friends there as he does in other letters.³³ Therefore, we would suggest that Ephesians is a letter sent to the church in Ephesus which was also intended to be used as a circular or encyclical letter for the Christian churches in general or at least the churches in Asia Minor.³⁴ This suggestion would also explain the special nature of ecclesiology and its universal scope in Ephesians.

1980), 88; and William D. Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, Word Biblical Commentary 46 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2000), 220-221;

³²E.g., Codex Vaticanus, Codex Sinaiticus, and p⁴⁶.

³³Compare, e.g., with Rom 16 and Phil 4.

³⁴For a detailed discussion, see, Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1970), 508-514.

In this letter Paul writes about Jesus, salvation, and the church. During his imprisonment Paul may have had time to reflect on the church, its relation to Christ, its function and ministry, and its future. The epistle he wrote is one of the peaks of the New Testament. At the end of Ephesians 1 Paul summarizes the life of Jesus from incarnation to glorification and ends with Jesus as the head of his church (Eph 1:20-23). The second half of the second chapter shows what the church is all about emphasizing its corporate and universal aspect (Eph 2:11-30). It is Jesus who abolished the barrier between Jews and Gentiles and made the church a holy temple. In chapter 3 Paul shows that the wisdom of God is now being made known through the church (Eph3:10-11). Chapter 4 calls for the unity of the church. Although believers have received different spiritual gifts, they are to further the building up and the unity of the body of Christ, the church (Eph 4:1-16). The relationship between wife and husband reflect the relationship that exists between Christ and his church (Eph 5:21-33).

“The Letter to the Ephesians represent the church as the goal of the Christ event in a way that is unique in the New Testament.”³⁵ Here we find more explicitly a Pauline doctrine of the church. Schmidt notes that “Christology and ecclesiology are reciprocally related.”³⁶ Ephesians presents a “christological ecclesiology.”³⁷ The term *ekklēsia* occurs nine times in this short letter. In all texts *ekklēsia* refers to the universal church. Jesus is head of the church (Eph 1:22; 5:23). The wisdom of God is “made known through the church to the rulers and the authorities in the heavenly places” (Eph 3:10). To God the Father “be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever” (Eph 3:21). The church is subject to Christ (Eph 5:24). Jesus does not hate but loves the church and gave himself up for her (Eph 5:29,25) so that he may present her holy and blameless (Eph 5:27). The relationship between Christ and the church is a mystery (Eph 5:32).

But the church is also described with other terms. It is the body of Christ, and Jesus is its head (Eph1:22-23; 4:12). The church is identified with Jesus. “His presence and authority pervade

³⁵Georg Strecker, *Theology of the New Testament* (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2000), 569.

³⁶Cf., Schmidt, 509.

³⁷Ibid., 511.

the new community.”³⁸ Relationship, “co-ordination and subordination”³⁹ on the part of the church are expressed. The church is also the new person or new humanity (Eph 2:15; 4:13), the holy temple and building (Eph 2:21), God’s household (Eph 2:19), and Christ’s bride or wife (Eph 5:23-32). The church has apostolic and prophetic roots and Christ is its foundation and cornerstone (Eph 2:20). Church members, the saints (Eph 1:1), are fellow citizens (Eph 2:19). Christ has brought Jews and Gentiles into one church, which is a mystery (Eph 2:11-16; 3:4-6). He has established a united church, and the unity of his church must be maintained (Eph 4:3-6). Through baptism people are incorporated into the church (Eph 4:5). Having received spiritual gifts and offices the church is “a growing and dynamic organism”⁴⁰ (Eph 4:7-16). Its members have been saved (Eph 1) but are called to live up to their high calling (Eph 4 and 5) and demonstrate also in their household relations that Christ is their Lord (Eph 5 and 6). In Ephesians the church is not a local entity but the universal church. ⁴¹Therefore, this letter is so important. Paul wants us “to catch the splendid vision of one church, thoroughly united in the Lord, though it contains members of various races and is equipped by God to render significant service in this world.”⁴²

The term “unity” is found twice in the book, namely in Ephesians 4:3 and 13. But the concept of unity is not limited to these verses which contain a call to unity and the goal of unity for the church. The numeral “one” is used in a number of places to express unity. The second chapter describes how Jesus formed his church by making two groups, Jews and Gentiles, into one breaking down the barriers between them and destroying their enmity (Eph 2:14,15). Now they are one body (Eph 2:16) and have access to God in one Spirit (Eph 2:18). In Ephesians 4:4-6 seven times the number “one” is repeated stressing the unity of the church: one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord,

³⁸Cf., Roy B. Zuck,(ed.), *A Biblical Theology of the New Testament* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1994), 305.

³⁹Schmidt, 509.

⁴⁰Harold W. Hoehner, *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2002), 111.

⁴¹Cf., Erickson, 1044.

⁴²D. A. Carson, D.J. Moo, and L. Morris, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992), 315. See also, Hoehner, 111-112; Andrew Lincoln, *Ephesians*, Word Biblical Commentary 42 (Dallas: Word Books, 1990), xcii-xcv; Andrew T. Lincoln and A. J. M. Wedderburn, *The Theology of the Later Pauline Letters* (Cambridge: University Press, 1993), 91-126, 132-133, 137-141, 151-156, 158-161; Strecker, 568-575.

one faith, one baptism, one God and Father. In Ephesians 5:31 the marital relationship is compared to Christ and the church. As a couple becomes one flesh, so the church and Jesus do in a symbolic way. Paul “was writing to a church (or churches) consisting of Jews and Gentiles, Asiatics and Europeans, slaves and freedmen—all symbols of a disrupted world that was to be restored to unity in Christ. This would necessitate unity of person, family, church, and race. The restoration of individual unity in the life of each believer assures the unity of God’s universe.”⁴³

Thus, Ephesians presents the church as the universal church which is one and is united in the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, i.e., the Trinity.

(2) *Colossians*

Although Ephesians and Colossians are quite similar in content, there are also differences. The letter is addressed “to the saints and faithful brethren in Christ who are at Colossae” (Col 1:2). It should also be read in Laodicea (Col 4:16), but it is not a circular letter. It deals with problems in the church of Colossae, especially syncretism containing Jewish and pagan ideas as well as ascetic tendencies. Nothing of that sort was mentioned in Ephesians.

In Colossians the term *ekklēsia* is employed four times. Twice *ekklēsia* refers to a local church (4:15,16). On the other hand, Colossians 1:18 and 24 describe the universal church which is the body of Christ and he is its head.⁴⁴ The ecclesiology of Ephesians is more developed than that of Colossians. Whereas in Ephesians Paul focuses on the worldwide church, in Colossians the universal church as well as the individual congregation are on his mind. Ephesians’ strong emphasis on the unity of the church is not found in Colossians to that extent.⁴⁵ But both Ephesians and

⁴³Francis D. Nichol et al., eds., *The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1957), 6:995; see also, Leander E. Keck and Victor Paul Furnish, *The Pauline Letters* (Nashville: Abindgon Press, 1989), 128-133.

⁴⁴Cf., G. B. Caird, *New Testament Theology* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 215, who states: “. . . *ekklēsia* is twice used of the universal Church without any immediate local reference.” Cf. also, Ladd, 537.

⁴⁵However see, Col 2:19.

Colossians emphasize that the church is the body of Christ, and Christ is its head.⁴⁶ Growth of the church is also stressed (Col 2:19).⁴⁷ G. E. Ladd summarizes:

Paul uses the metaphor of the body to express the oneness of the church with her Lord. The church is not a body or society of believers but the body of Christ. . . . Paul obviously goes beyond the ordinary analogy of the physical body and its head, for the body is pictured as deriving its nourishment and unity from the head (Col. 2:19); and the body is to grow up in every way into him who is the head (Eph. 4:15). This emphasizes . . . the complete dependence of the church upon Christ for all its life and growth. This also means that the church is the instrument of Christ in the world. . . . This metaphor emphasizes also the unity of the church, especially since *ekklēsia* in Ephesians and Colossians refers to the universal church rather than the local congregation.⁴⁸

The universal aspect of the body language is also stressed by D. Guthrie: “This development of the body metaphor applied to the church emphasizes particularly its universal aspect.”⁴⁹

(3) *Hebrews*

The Letter to the Hebrews uses *ekklēsia* twice. The first text containing the word is an Old Testament quotation (Heb 2:12). The second text is unique: “But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to myriads of angels, to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the Judge of all, and to the spirits of *the* righteous made perfect” (Heb 12:23). Both texts describe a congregation. “The term is thus used in v23a in the nontechnical sense of ‘a gathering’ or ‘an assembly’ of the redeemed people of God.”⁵⁰ D. Guthrie describes those whose names are “enrolled in heaven” as “the officially

⁴⁶See, Col 1:18,24; 2:19; 3:15. The body of Christ was also found in 1Cor 12. However, there is a difference between this concept in 1Corinthians and the same concept in Ephesians and Colossians. In all texts the church is compared to a body, but whereas in Ephesians and Colossians the head represents Christ, in 1Corinthians the head represents individual members of the body. They are described as eyes and ears. 1Cor 12:21: “And the eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I have no need of you’; or again the head to the feet, ‘I have no need of you.’” Cf., Ladd, 546.

⁴⁷See, Strecker, 558.

⁴⁸Ladd, 545-546.

⁴⁹Guthrie, *New Testament Theology*, 745.

⁵⁰William L. Lane, *Hebrews 9-13*, Word Biblical Commentary 47B (Dallas: WordBooks, Publisher, 1991), 468. For further information see, 467-471.

accepted members of the heavenly Jerusalem,⁵¹ whereas Nichol calls them “the church invisible.”⁵² This *ekklēsia* cannot be understood as a local church on earth.

In Hebrews 4:9; 11:25 “the people of God” is mentioned, in Hebrews 8:10 “the house of Israel” and “my people,” and in Hebrews 10:30 “his people.” The last two references are found in Old Testament quotations. All of them should be understood in the context of the new covenant. Guthrie suggests that “the people of God” “is a comprehensive term, suitable for the universal community, which embraces both Jews and Gentiles. . . . A new community, devoted to hearing God’s voice and obeying it, has displaced the old Israel which failed in the time of testing.”⁵³

(4) *Summary*

When Paul talks about the church, he seems to understand it in two main ways. For Paul the church is the community of believers in a certain place. For him the church is also the universal church of Jesus Christ, his body, bride, people, and temple/house.

3. The Church in Other New Testament Documents

(1) *James*

James uses *ekklēsia* once. When talking about prayer for the sick and about anointing them, he mentions the elders of the church (Jam 5:14). “The reference is not to a single congregation, but to the community as a whole, since this is a catholic epistle.”⁵⁴ In James 2:2 the Christian assembly is called synagogue.⁵⁵

⁵¹Donald Guthrie, *Hebrews*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, revised edition (Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1990), 262,

⁵²Nichol, 7:487.

⁵³Guthrie, *Hebrews*, 115; cf., 176, where he explains the phrase “the house of Israel” and proposes that it is “an expression ideally inclusive of the whole people of God.”

⁵⁴Schmidt, 513.

⁵⁵Cf., Douglas J. Moo, *James*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, revised edition (Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1993), 89-90; Ralph P. Martin, *James*, Word Biblical Commentary 48 (Waco: Word Books, Publisher, 1988), 61.

(2) *1 and 2 Peter, Jude*

Peter's letters as well as Jude's epistle do not employ the term *ekklēsia*. In 1 Peter the church consists of the "elect" who are "strangers" in the world (1Pet 1:1). In chapter 2 Christ is the foundation for the spiritual house, the church. The believers are "living stones" and form "a spiritual house for a holy priesthood" (1Pet 2:4-5).⁵⁶ In 1 Peter 2:9 the privileges of Israel are applied to the Christian community. Now the church is "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God." Along with the privileges comes the responsibility to proclaim "the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light." Gentiles, who formerly had not been a people, have now become the people of God (1Pet 2:10), because they believe in Jesus. The church is "the brotherhood" and the "brotherhood throughout the world" (1Peter 2:17; 5:9). The judgment starts with the household of God (1Pet 4:17). The elders are called to shepherd the flock of God (1Pet 5:2-3). The existence of elders points to some degree of organization within the early church. The "she" of 1 Peter 5:13 may refer to the church in Rome.⁵⁷

1 Peter belongs to the general epistles. These letters are not addressed to one particular church or they are sent to many churches, not necessarily limited to one particular region. 1 Peter is supposed to reach believers throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia. The terms being used in 1 Peter such as "people of God" and "flock" have a universal character in other New Testament writings and seem to have the same meaning here. "The command to 'shepherd the flock of God' echoes the command of Jesus to Peter himself according to John 21:16: 'Shepherd my sheep' . . . The 'flock' belongs neither to the elders nor to Peter. The emphasis of John's Gospel is that the flock

⁵⁶John H. Elliott, *A Home for the Homeless: Sociological Exegesis of 1 Peter; Its Situation and Strategy* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981), suggests that an underlying theme throughout 1 Peter is the Christian community as the house of God. On page 233 he states: ". . . the Christian community constitutes a home for the alienated and the estranged. If, moreover, this community was to endure and grow, then it was essential that its distinctive features be preserved at all costs, even at the cost of conflict and suffering . . . Union with Christ, in turn, assured union with God and with all those who constituted the household of faith. . . . The chief unsettling and debilitating experience of the addressees was a sense of homelessness in an increasingly hostile environment. In a letter of consolation and confirmation the authors respond by assuring these Asia Minor Christians that in the Christian community all the homeless have a home in the household of God." See also, 148-150, 220-233, 282-288.

⁵⁷Wayne. *1 Peter*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, revised edition (Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1992), 201.

belongs to Jesus . . .”⁵⁸ R. Michaels seems to suggest that “‘the flock’ of God is universal in scope.”⁵⁹ Obviously, the famous text about the priesthood of all believers in 1Peter 2:9 must also be understood universally. Israel’s privileges recorded in Exodus 19:6 are applied to all Gentile Christians. Finally, the “brotherhood throughout the world” (1Peter 5:9)⁶⁰ points to the universal church of God.

(3) *The Johannine Letters*

The term *ekklēsia* is found in 3John 1:6,9,10 only. In all cases it refers to the local congregation. The second letter is addressed “to the chosen lady and to her children whom I love in truth” (2John 1:1). This lady receives greetings from her “chosen sister” (2John 1:13). Some understand her to be an individual⁶¹ whereas others prefer to speak about a church. This would be a local church.⁶²

(4) *Revelation*

In Revelation a strong emphasis on the church prevails.⁶³ The term *ekklēsia* is found 20 times and is used in both singular and plural. In each case *ekklēsia* stands for groups of believers. The Apocalypse contains a letter frame (chapters 1-3 and chapter 22b). All the references to *ekklēsia* are found in the letter frame only, not in the apocalyptic part, however, nineteen out of twenty in Rev 1-3, i.e., right in the beginning of the book, and one in its conclusion.⁶⁴ In Revelation 1 only the plural is found. Four times we hear about the seven churches. This changes with Revelation 2 and

⁵⁸ J. Ramsey Michaels, *1 Peter*, Word Biblical Commentary 49 (Waco: Word Books, Publisher, 1988), 282.

⁵⁹Ibid., 286.

⁶⁰Cf., Ibid., 301.

⁶¹Cf., Nichol, 7:684, who mentions both options.

⁶²Cf., Carson, 451; John Drane, *Introducing the New Testament* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 451.

⁶³Cf., Ekkehardt Mueller, “Introduction to the Ecclesiology of Revelation,” *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 12 (2001): 199-215.

⁶⁴Rev 1:4,11,20,20; 2:1,7,8,11,12,17,18,23,29; 3:1,6,7,13,14,22; 22:16.

3. At the beginning of each of the seven messages the singular is used in order to address the respective local church. However, at the end of each message the formula “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches” connect the churches with each other. Church number four, the one found in the middle of the seven churches, contains an additional plural of the term *ekklēsia*: “And all the churches shall know that I am he who searches mind and heart, and I will give to each of you as your works deserve” (2:23).

In these passages we hear about local congregations. The *ekklēsia* in Revelation is a local entity. On the other hand, the number seven and the mix of singular and plural forms of the word *ekklēsia* in each message to these churches may point to completeness and interdependence of the churches and may tell us that there are not only local congregations but also a universal church. This is more evident in the apocalyptic part of Revelation (Rev 4-22a). In spite of their shortcomings the seven churches are still God’s church. The majority of them may have to face temporal judgment, but they are not yet totally separated from him. Thus, the term *ekklēsia* in Revelation always points to some sort of relationship with God. It also always refers to the *ekklesia militans*, the church involved in battle, which toward the end of the book is depicted as the triumphant church, yet without the particular term *ekklēsia* being applied to her.

In the main body of the Apocalypse the term *ekklēsia* is replaced by symbols such as the woman clothed with the sun (Rev 12), the holy city (Rev 11:2), and the 144,000 (Rev 7:4-8; 14:1-5). These entities underline the universal nature of the church. Other terms related to the church or representing the church are the lampstands (1:20), fellow servants, brothers, servants (7:3; 12:10; 19:2,5; 22:3,6), priests and a kingdom (1:6; 5:10; 20:6), those who overcome (2-3; 15:2; 21:7), the remnant (2:24; 12:17), those in white clothes (3:4-5; 6:11; 7:9,13), the saints (5:8; 8:3-4), those who are called, chosen, and are faithful (17:14), the great multitude (7:9-17), my/his people (18:4; 21:3), and the bride (21:9; 22:17). Revelation also presents a counterpart to the church. It is Babylon, the great harlot, also named the great city (Rev 16:9; 17:1,18; 18:16). Babylon persecutes and kills true followers of God but will be judged. Finally, only the bride of the Lamb, the holy city, New Jerusalem will remain. Babylon and the true church are universal entities.

Revelation also knows about the remnant and especially emphasizes the end time remnant. The conflict between the Satanic trinity and the end-time remnant is described right in the middle

of the book, in Revelation 12-14. Satan wages war against this remnant. He also uses the sea beast and the beast coming out of the earth in his attempt to annihilate this remnant. The picture is quite bleak. It seems as if none of the true believers could survive. Yet, they are depicted with Jesus on Mt. Zion. Revelation 15-22 reports about the consequences of the conflict between God's remnant church and the Satanic trinity/Babylon. Characteristics of the remnant are among others faith in Jesus, keeping the commandments, endurance or patience, and the testimony of Jesus (12:17; 13:10; 14:12).⁶⁵

Thus, in Revelation there are local churches, and there is a universal church. Jesus walks among the churches, i.e., he is very close to them and cares for them, sending them messages of rebuke, recognition, and comfort. He loves the church. God's church has certain characteristics and tasks, encounters internal and external difficulties, and receives divine appeals and promises. The church in Revelation is the church militant and triumphant. It is visible and yet also partially invisible. It is local church, but especially a universal entity. There is a strong emphasis on the end time church.

4. Summary

The church is the community of believers. It stands in close relationship to God and Jesus. Jesus himself has founded the church, and his sayings already contain the notion of a universal church. Although in many places in the New Testament the local church is emphasized, the idea of a universal church was never lost. It is found in many Pauline epistles, but especially in Ephesians. It again emerges in some of the general or catholic letters of the New Testament. Both the local aspects as well as the universal church are strongly emphasized in the last book of the Bible. Therefore, we cannot neglect one aspect and focus on the other only. When we discuss ecclesiology the local church as well as the universal church must find their place.

II. The Relationship Between the Local and the Universal Church

1. Suggested Models of Church Government

⁶⁵Cf., Ekkehardt Mueller, "The End Time Remnant in Revelation," *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 11 (2000): 188-204.

The question is not whether or not Christians recognize the twofold nature of the church. Normally, they do. The question is, however, how they understand the relationship between the local church and the universal church and how they apply their insights to the process of choosing different forms of church government or modifying existing ones. Behind these questions looms the other one, which we cannot discuss here, namely as to how different denominations or individual Christians relate to the church of God in general or to the universal church.

In a recently published article K. Koch discusses the relationship between the local/particular church and the universal church from a Roman Catholic perspective.⁶⁶ First, he discusses the “Universal *communio*” by using a couple of Bible texts as a springboard, especially John 21 with the reference to the 153 fish, which are interpreted in a kind of allegorical way. Then he approaches “The church as sacramental *communio*.”

The basic sacraments are baptism and the eucharist, and from these Sacraments the universality of church *communio* is most clearly revealed. . . . More than ‘socialization into a community,’ baptism is reception into the universal church on the way to reception in to a concrete community. . . . In baptism, where the one universal church assumes the local and baptismal church, we find the deepest basis for the fact that in the church there can be no division into residents and aliens. . . . Just as does baptism, the eucharist proceeds from but does not end with the local church. . . . *Communio ecclesiology* is thus intrinsically eucharistic ecclesiology. . . . Because there is only one Christ and one body of Christ, the eucharist, even when celebrated at specific locations, is always at the same time universal.”⁶⁷

Before he concludes his article with a section on “Multicultural communities,” Koch deals with “*Communio ecclesia et ecclesiarum*.” In this part he reaffirms *Lumen Gentium*: “the one and unique Catholic Church exists in and is formed out of the particular churches” and warns against “ecclesial globalism” as well as against “a particular church federalism.” In his opinion these dangers can only be overcome “in the light of the mystery of the trinity,”⁶⁸ which forms a model for the relation between the universal and the local church.

Thus also, the church, in its true essence as *communio ecclesia et ecclesiarum*, is the concretization and realization of the one universal church. . . . There must be a living bridge of two-way communication between the particular churches and the universal church. The

⁶⁶Cf., Kurt Koch, “The Church–Community of Many Nations,” *Theology Digest* 50 (2003): 3-11.

⁶⁷Ibid., 4-5.

⁶⁸Koch, 6.

bishop, as pontifex, is the bridge-builder between his diocese and the universal church. . . . What the bishop is at the regional level, the pope is at the universal level.⁶⁹

Although Koch warns against the danger of overemphasizing the universal church, it seems that the universal aspect is the predominant one in his article. Furthermore, when he talks about local or particular churches, apparently he is not really interested in church communities in certain cities, but seems to focus on national churches or dioceses.⁷⁰ Obviously, his concern is that these entities do not become too independent from Rome and the pope. “The Pentecost event shows that the church, from its very beginning, was universal and is, therefore, a faith community with a catholic horizon that values diversity in unity and unity in diversity.”⁷¹

In his *Systematic Theology* W. Pannenberg has a section on “The Church as the Fellowship of Believers and Body of Christ.” In this section he briefly touches on ecclesiology in church history and recent discussions on ecclesiology especially within the Catholic Church. He states that “the understanding of the church as *koinōnia* in terms of the eucharistic worship of the local community has become increasingly the focus of interest. This is especially true of Roman Catholic theology from the time of Vatican II.”⁷² He refers to J. Ratzinger several times and notes:

Ratzinger, however, also points to the specifically Roman Catholic nuance with which the council took up this basic thought when it stated that the church of Christ is truly present in all regular fellowships of believers that are in union with their shepherds and that the NT itself would thus call churches. The stress on legality and on union with their shepherds means that the church is not simply present in full in every congregation that celebrates the Eucharist. With this emphasis, indeed, the thought of a hierarchical *communio* that governs the *communio* concept of *Lumen Gentium* as a whole finds its way already into the description of the local situation of the worshiping community inasmuch as from a Roman Catholic standpoint union with the shepherds implies the whole ministerial hierarchy right up to the pope.⁷³

⁶⁹Ibid., 8.

⁷⁰Ibid, 6: “‘. . . The idea of a national church is, in itself, a contradiction.’ Every local church, then, with all its uniqueness, is always also a particular church within the universal church . . .” See also the heading of his article.

⁷¹Ibid., 3.

⁷²Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology, Volume 3* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998), 104.

⁷³Pannenberg, 105.

The logical conclusion is that “in none of the churches that are now separated . . . is there a full presence of the one Lord in their separate eucharistic celebrations.” And he continues:

Ratzinger’s thought that the eucharistic fellowship includes fellowship with the whole church, and hence also with ministers in the various levels of the church’s life, is one that we must affirm. But explicating this matter more precisely is something that theology and ecumenical dialogue have yet to do, for the whole subject of the place of the church’s ministry in and not over the congregation stands related to it. On the view of ecclesial *communio* in the early church the fellowship of local congregations finds expression in mutual recognition of the ministers who represent them, especially when they assemble at a council. We are not, then, to see the fellowship of local congregations as if these were subsequently brought together in a federation. As local churches they are always already manifestations of the one church of Christ. This one church is not secondarily made up of local churches. Instead, the fellowship of local churches rests on the unity in the one Lord that is already there, and that is present in a special way in the celebration of the Eucharist. . . . At worship when the pure gospel is preached and the sacraments are administered, there is always a manifestation of the one church that is made holy by Jesus Christ, that goes back to the apostles, and that is catholic in its apostolic mission.⁷⁴

Although Pannenberg partially agrees with Ratzinger and accepts a eucharistic ecclesiology, he seems to have a different understanding of the role of ministers, namely as being part of the church and not forming an entity above the church. Furthermore, he mentions the preaching of the pure gospel in addition to the eucharist.

Protestants have oftentimes defined the relationship between the local church and the universal church in the following way: “. . . the local congregation is not regarded as merely a part or component of the whole church, but as the church in its local expression. The whole is in the part. The local visible *ekklēsia* is the whole church expressed locally in a particular time and space.”⁷⁵

T. Oden writes:

“The local, visible *ekklēsia* is the whole (holy, catholic, apostolic) church expressed locally in a particular time and space. . . . The congregation does not merely belong to the church catholic, it is the church catholic celebrating the good news in some spot. The whole church is convened and called to being in that locale. . . . This is why the notion of an Asian church or a proletarian church or a black church or a white church is prone to be ethnocentrically misleading. . . . The church is by definition one. . . . The church is not made universal by

⁷⁴Ibid., 105-106.

⁷⁵Dederen, “The Church,” 542, cf. 560. Quite similar, Erickson, 1043-1044; Ladd, 537; and Schmidt, 506.

adding up all the local churches and getting the sum, for the whole *communio sanctorum* is already there expressing itself locally by responding in faith to the call of the gospel.”⁷⁶

As Scriptural support Oden points to 1Corinthians 1:2,⁷⁷ and we could add 2Corinthians 1:1. According to Ephesians 2:11-21; 4:3-16 the church is one. Nevertheless, there are many churches. But, for instance, the church of Corinth, though a local congregation, is “the church of God which is at Corinth.” The wording is important, because the text does not talk about the church of Corinth, but literally “the church of God being in Corinth.” Thus, the Corinthian church is the church of God, and yet there is also a universal church of God which surpasses the Corinthian congregation.

It seems to us that whereas the Roman Catholic church exploits the concept of the universal church to the extent that the local congregation in a specific time and place is somewhat neglected, some of the Protestant definitions stress the local church to such an extent that the universal church may not be sufficiently emphasized. However we understand the relationship between local and universal church, it has practical implications and will determine the form of church government which we choose. W. Grudem, for instance, acknowledges that Christians have “to work for the unity of the visible church,” however, he does not believe in “one worldwide church government over all Christians” but is content that different ministries and organizations work next to each other. “. . . the unity of believers is often demonstrated quite effectively through voluntary cooperation and affiliation among Christian groups.”⁷⁸ R. L. Omanson after stating that the New Testament calls for unity of the church, concludes that unity does not demand uniformity, and that the local churches mentioned in the New Testament “had neither uniformity of worship nor structures, or even a uniform theology.”⁷⁹ Therefore, we should not apply higher standards today than those being used in the first century A.D.

⁷⁶Thomas C. Oden, *Life in the Spirit: Systematic Theology: Volume Three* (Peabody: Prince Press, 1998), 283.

⁷⁷Ibid.

⁷⁸Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing Company, 1994), 877.

⁷⁹R. L. Omansen, “The Church,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, edited by W. A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984), 232.

The four basic types of church government are episcopal, presbyterian, congregational, and non-government, which are sufficiently discussed in dictionaries and systematic theologies so that we do not need to repeat them here.⁸⁰ The most highly developed system of episcopal government is found in the Roman Catholic Church with its strict hierarchical structure, which leaves little or no room for the priesthood of all believers. By the way, the strong emphasis on the sacraments downplays the role of Scripture. On the other side of the spectrum are congregationalism and non-government, in which individualism on a personal or a local level is prevailing. Dederen presents a much more balanced view and has correctly concluded:

The Scriptures do not warrant the existence of an episcopal system, structuring the church along monarchical, if not imperial, lines. Nor do they call for a pattern in which each church or congregation is the complete church, independent of every other, rejecting any authoritative organizational structure over the local congregation. It appears rather that the biblical data set forth a basic representative form of church government in which much is made of the priesthood of all believers and of the gifts of grace bestowed by the Spirit, while recognizing the authority of representative bodies.⁸¹

This brings us to the question whether or not the local church represents the fulness of the church, in other words, Is the local church complete in itself?

2. The Fullness of God's Church

Even if we can agree that there are local churches and there is a universal church, that the local churches are the church of God in a certain time and locality, and that the universal church is not just the sum of the local churches, the questions still remain: Is the local church the fullness of the church? And can it exist independently?

The second question is answered more easily than the first one. Obviously, in the later New Testament writings we have a stronger emphasis on the universality of the church than in the earlier. The climax is found in the Book of Revelation. One may wonder whether or not in the middle sixties and at the end of the first century A.D. the situation in the churches had grown worse and a stronger

⁸⁰Cf., Dederen, "Autorität der Gemeinde: Ihr Ursprung, Wesen und Wirken," in *Die Gemeinde und ihr Auftrag*, Studien zur adventistischen Ekklesiologie, 2, edited by J. Mager (Lüneburg: Saatkorn-Verlag, 1994), 59; "The Church," 553-554; Erickson, 1080-1097; L. Morris, "Church Government," in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, edited by W. A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984), 238-241.

⁸¹Ibid., 554.

emphasis on the universal church had become necessary. At least in Corinth factions were found within the church, and in Rome the Gentile Christians may have boasted and looked down upon the Jewish Christians. Although the local church exerts authority when it comes to church membership and other matters,⁸² the New Testament is concerned that the different churches work together and that there is unity within the universal church. Just as an individual Christian cannot live in self-chosen isolation, so a Christian church is part of the sisterhood of churches. Living one's own life separate from others is unhealthy to say the least. Christians churches in a certain area form the church of that area and are also part of the larger body of Christ.⁸³

With regard to the first question the answer may be yes and no. The local church is the church of Christ in a specific time and place, and as such it is complete. On the other hand, a number of considerations suggest that the local church is not the full expression of the church. There are elements and ministries that transcends the boundaries of the local congregation.

- (1) The body of Christ is not complete if the church of God has an expression at one time and in one place only. The existence of a universal church, the body of Christ with Jesus as its heads implies that separation of churches from each other cannot be God's will, unless there is apostasy. The Corinthians were reprimanded because of their independence: "Was it from you that the word of God *first* went forth? Or has it come to you only?" (1Cor 14:36). On the contrary, the New Testament stresses unity. Therefore churches exchanged greetings (Rom 16:16), shared documents sent by the apostles (Col 4:16), were hospitable to traveling brothers (1Pet 4:9; John 1:5-10), and supported persecuted Christians which were not members of their respective local church (Acts 28:13-15).⁸⁴ Especially during large scale persecutions in church history, it was crucial that local churches would support each other. Aquila and Priscilla moved from Rome to Corinth (Rom 16:3; Acts 18:2) and were involved with the Christian church in both places.

⁸²Cf., Dederen, "The Church," 560.

⁸³Cf., idem, "Autorität der Gemeinde," 59.

⁸⁴Cf. Ibid., 60.

- (2) The New Testament teaches that God has given to his church different spiritual gifts and functions (1Cor 12). Yet, not all gifts are found in one local church. Some gifts surpass the local level. This is true for administrative gifts such as the gift of apostleship. It is also true for the gift of prophecy. In Acts 11:28 several prophets came from Jerusalem to Antioch. One of them, the prophet Agabus, predicted and proclaimed a great famine. This prophecy was fulfilled some time later. Thus, Agabus did not only serve his own local church but also another church. Paul and Barnabas appointed elders (Acts 14:23) as obviously Timothy and Titus did also (Tit 1:5). Their sphere of influence surpassed the local level, but the local church was helped through their ministry and did not reject them. Thus, there is a ministry—namely that of Timothy and Titus in addition to that of the apostles—which is not limited to the local church.
- (3) Some issues of theology and Christian life style could not be solved on a local level and required decisions by the church in general. Such a situation is portrayed in Acts 15. Judaizers had come from Jerusalem and had caused problems in Antioch having confused church members. Paul and Barnabas as delegates of the church of Antioch were sent to a meeting, the church council in Jerusalem (Acts 15:2). So, larger issues and questions of doctrines are best discussed on a level which is broader than that of an individual church.⁸⁵ “Major assemblies that address matters pertaining to the church in general and that concern the preservation of unity, therefore exercising authority on a broader and more extended scale than a local congregation, are unquestionably warranted by Scripture.”⁸⁶
- (4) In the New Testament local churches received directives. The actions of the Jerusalem council were not just recommendations but were meant to be binding.⁸⁷ In Acts 16:4 Luke reports: “Now while they were passing through the cities, they were delivering the decrees which had been decided upon by the apostles and elders who were in Jerusalem, for them to observe.” The letters of the New Testament contain many exhortations and admonitions

⁸⁵Cf., *Seventh-day Adventists Believe: A Biblical Exposition of 27 Fundamental Doctrines* (Washington D.C.: Ministerial Association of the General Conference, 1988), 145.

⁸⁶Dederen, “The Church,” 561.

⁸⁷Idem, “Autorität der Gemeinde,” 63.

which were expected to be taken seriously by local churches. The rejection of the gospel or the alteration of the gospel received from the apostles was so serious that those being involved were *anathema* (Gal 1:8-9).⁸⁸ Paul states: “And so I direct in all the churches” (1Cor 7:17).

- (5) The Great Commission (Mat 28:18-20) cannot be fulfilled by a local church. Resources and personnel of local churches must be pulled together in order to proclaim the gospel on a worldwide scale. In 1Corinthians 9:1-14 Paul claims the right as an apostle and missionary to be financially supported by local churches. This seems to be a reference to tithing. The Philippians have supported him, although at that time he was not in Philippi but elsewhere (Phil 4:10-19). The Colossians sent Epaphras to him as a coworker (Col 1:7; 4:12). The Great Commission surpasses what local churches can do. Only a universal church has a chance to deal with such a comprehensive task that Jesus has given to his church. What is true for the great commission applies likewise to the proclamation of the Three Angels Messages of Revelation 14:6-12. The challenge is enormous to reach all living humans with God’s final message. “. . . the NT insists on the universality or catholicity of the church. . . . The church is meant to embrace all nations (Matt. 28:19; cf. Rev. 14:6). It is not bound to a particular time or place, but encompasses believers of all generations, nations, and cultures. . . . The church teaches universally and from first to last all the teachings Christ has commanded (Matt. 28:20). . . . The universal nature of the church has clear missionary implications.”⁸⁹
- (6) Aside from the mission outreach there are other tasks for the church that surpass the capacity of a local congregation. In the first century A. D. it was the collection for the church members in Jerusalem (1Cor 16:1-4; 2Cor 8-9). Local congregations in the areas in which Paul had worked supported their fellow believers. They saved money, it was brought together, and a delegation took it to Jerusalem. Today, humanitarian work worldwide challenges the church to help as Jesus had helped.. “You know of Jesus of Nazareth, how

⁸⁸Cf. Heb 6:4-6.

⁸⁹Dederen, ‘The Church,’ 563.

God anointed Him with the Holy Spirit and with power, and how He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with Him” (Acts 10:38). Humanitarian work applies to the needs of the church itself in certain regions of the world as well as the needs of non-church members. By getting involved in large scale projects around the world, the local church supplies experts, support staff, and financial means.

- (7) The collection of the books of the New Testament and the formation of the canon of the New Testament can probably be attributed to the fact that there was—aside from other factors--a concept of a universal church among local congregations. Churches did not just keep the letter or letters sent to them by an apostle, but shared them with other churches, which apparently copied them. On the other hand, the incompleteness of local churches becomes evident. If they had to rely on their own correspondence only, some churches would not have received any part of the New Testament and others only a quite limited part.

3. Summary

One’s view on the relationship between the local and the universal church determines to a large degree the form of church government one chooses and, therefore, has practical consequences. Obviously, not all forms of church government are equal and not all reflect the data found in the New Testament equally well. A strictly hierarchical and episcopal approach as well as a congregational or a non-government approach clash with certain elements of ecclesiology as presented in Scripture.

On the other hand, while we admit that the local church is God’s church in its time and place related expression, that does not mean that the local church completely represents the fullness of the church.

III. Implications

1. Seventh-day Adventists and the Universal Church

What are some of the implications of our study for the Seventh-day Adventist church? Although the Seventh-day Adventist church is a worldwide church with many local churches, Adventists do not claim to be Christ’s universal church. The universal church is broader than any denomination. It is visible and invisible insofar that it consists of those who believe in Jesus and

follow him.⁹⁰ We cannot discuss here the issue of visibility versus invisibility, but it may suffice to say that if membership in Christ's church depends on a personal decision of individuals, the universal church cannot simply be equated with an organized church of our days in which both saints and even notorious and unrepentant sinners are living next to each other and in which not all the true believers may be gathered yet.⁹¹ Although the church as the assembly of followers of Christ has visible aspects, there is also an invisible dimension. This problem is heightened when we take into consideration the problem of apostasy among Christians, which is pointed out especially in the Book of Revelation. The pure church of Revelation 12 in its historical dimension is contrasted with the "harlot" of Revelation 17, Babylon the great city, which in turn is contrasted with the bride of the Lamb, the holy city or the new Jerusalem of Revelation 21 and 22 in its consummated dimension. Whereas, in the first century the universal church may have been quite visible, it is much more difficult and complex to see it, for instance, during the Medieval Ages, that is throughout large parts of church history.

Therefore, Adventists do not limit the concept of God's true church to their own denomination nor do they automatically extend it to other Christian churches.⁹² God's true church consists of those individuals who truly believe in him. God knows them. Adventists, on the other hand, claim that they are God's special visible end time remnant of Revelation 12:17 found also throughout Revelation 12-14 and being in opposition to the "Babylon" of Rev 14-18. In the Book of Revelation the remnant has a local as well as a universal character.⁹³

Although today a worldwide church cannot be easily equated with the universal church, it seems to us that the New Testament principles governing the relationship between local churches

⁹⁰Dederen, 546, states correctly: "The church, according to the NT, is not an invisible entity, nor a mental image. . . . At the same time the church can be described as having an invisible dimension . . ."

⁹¹Some would claim that there is no invisibility of the church. The church is found where the Eucharist is celebrated in a certain way and with a certain theological understanding. However, such a view is forced to maintain a sacramental view of the Communion which comes quite close to the position of *ex opere operato*. It does not seem to do justice to the New Testament emphasis on the decision of individuals to accept Jesus and follow him nor the problem of apostasy within the church and even apostasy of churches and /or it has—at least to some extent—to separate the organizational structure of the church, which becomes the real church, from the members of the church.

⁹²This raises the question as to how Adventists relate to other Christian denominations and other Christians.

⁹³Rev 2:24 and 12:17.

and the universal church can and must be applied to the worldwide Adventist church and its local congregations. The New Testament also reminds us that the Christian churches in a certain area are the Christian church of that area. By analogy local Adventist churches throughout the world, are the worldwide Seventh-day Adventist church.

2. Recognizing the Importance of the Local Church

Thus, the first implication of our study is that we have to take seriously the local congregation. It is on the local level that the most intense contact with the “world” occurs. It is the local church in which real growth takes place and persons are changed. We cannot neglect the local church and consider it less important than the universal church. Decisions must be made by involving the local church and not by bypassing it. If, however, the administration of the church becomes the real church, the priesthood of all believers is forgotten and the administration assumes a role which was never meant to be its role.

On the other hand, some people focus so much on the local church that whatever transcends it, is neglected, forgotten, or rejected. A specific local congregation becomes—so to speak—the center of the world and the universe. Congregationalism and independence triumph. Personal freedom and self-actualization have become the highest good ruling out everything else. Although not officially accepted and espoused by the Adventist church, Congregationalism is not a concept which is far removed from it. Even within Adventism it is promoted here and there. Some local churches have played with the thought to become independent from the church organization and the sisterhood of churches. They want to withhold their tithe percentage and pay their own pastor directly. Others develop their own theology. “Congregationalism” may also be practiced on national level creating some kind of national churches. It is the spirit of independence which is opposed to the unity of the universal church.

3. Accepting the Worldwide Church

Two sides must also be considered with regard to the worldwide church. First, we have to take seriously and accept the worldwide church. Because Scripture upholds both the importance of the local congregation and the significance of the universal church, we too have to stress both

aspects. In western cultures individual church members as well as local churches sometimes have a hard time to accept worldwide church leadership and the idea of a worldwide church. Furthermore, it is not easy to be subject to the decisions of a worldwide church council--especially if one holds different opinions⁹⁴--and trust its wisdom and its guidance by the Holy Spirit.

The topic of submission is important in the New Testament. In Hebrews 13:17 we read: "Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you." In 1 Corinthians 16:16 Paul admonishes "that you also be in subjection to such men and to everyone who helps in the work and labors." Submission is again stressed in 1 Thessalonians 5:12: "But we request of you, brethren, that you appreciate those who diligently labor among you, and have charge over you in the Lord and give you instruction." While being faithful to Scripture we are called to give up self-sufficiency, practice humility, and foster unity. Although the local church is God's church, it is not fully complete in itself. There is a ministry such as the one of Timothy and Titus which is not limited to a local congregation and which is important to a worldwide church.

But there is also the danger that authority and power may be misused. The leadership group of a worldwide church may assume too much and may directly or indirectly suppress the local church. Church hierarchy may dominate, and church leaders may rule like emperors or CEOs and expect all others to be subject to them. Although there are committees and councils, the decision of one leader may overturn and undo what others have decided in long and careful processes. Nobody may dare to speak up when the respective leader states his opinion, but many are frustrated because of his/her kingly rule and power and the political maneuvers. Leaders must not be manipulative.

4. The Issue of Power

The Adventist Church is quite diverse and yet still remarkably united. However, tensions are recognizable here and there. In some western cultures a trend toward a more congregationalistic approach to church government is discernible on the local level. On the other hand, the influence and the power of presidents have increased during the last decades. Even within the administration of

⁹⁴Cf., for instance, the question of the ordination of women to the ministry.

the church two different layers have evolved, the group of the officers and the group of the departmental people, with quite different authority in or access to decision-making.

Thus, whereas in some local churches a trend toward congregationalism is noticeable, on the administrative level of the church a trend toward episcopal church government and a stronger emphasis on the hierarchy of the church can be observed. Although these trends seem to be contradictory, they have in common the issue of power and may condition each other. The stronger local churches advocate Congregationalism, the more the administration of the church tends to stress its influence, power, and rights. And the more the administration stresses these various factors, the more the local churches try to become independent.

Peter points toward a solution of this problem when he says: “Therefore, I exhort the elders among you, as your fellow elder and witness of the sufferings of Christ, and a partaker also of the glory that is to be revealed, shepherd the flock of God among you, exercising oversight not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to the will of God; and not for sordid gain, but with eagerness; nor yet as lording it over those allotted to your charge, but proving to be examples to the flock. And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory. You younger men, likewise, be subject to your elders; and all of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, for God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble” (1Pet 5:1-5).

A struggle for power would destroy God’s church. All of us are therefore called to listen to each other, to accept each other, to let go the desire to exert power, and to be humble. Leaders are challenged to follow Christ’s example of servant leadership and become an example for church members. And church members are exhorted to accept their leaders and be subject to them. We have to overcome the dangers of fragmenting as well as of institutionalizing the church. We must not lose sight of what the church of Christ is all about. It is the group of those, who believe in Jesus Christ and accept him and his teachings, his disciples and followers, who are called to service and mission.

Conclusion

The New Testament contains a considerable amount of data on the church. In this paper we were interested in one topic only, namely the question what the New Testament teaches about the local and the universal church and how they relate to each other. We have found that different terms

are used to refer to the church. A crucial term is *ekklēsia*. It describes the local congregation in the singular and plural, the church/churches in an area and the universal church, the body of Christ. Both expressions of the church, the local and the universal, are needed. Although the local is not in all respects the complete church, we enjoy fellowship with Christ and with brothers and sisters on the local level, but also in different churches worldwide. The right balance between the local and the universal, between the local and the worldwide church must be maintained.

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