

Why We Chose a Dual-Site Model

A Response to Jonathan Leeman's, *One Assembly: Rethinking the Multisite and Multiservice Church Models (Crossway 2020)*

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In 1854, Charles Haddon Spurgeon became the pastor of a [313-member](#) Baptist congregation meeting in London's 1200-seat New Park Street Chapel. Within a year rapid growth led the church to expand the chapel capacity to [1500 seats](#). But the congregation quickly outgrew the building, so in 1856 they rented the Royal Surrey Gardens Music Hall where nearly 7,500 people assembled each Sunday. By 1861, the church bought land and built a new building, the Metropolitan Tabernacle. Spurgeon was not only a superb preacher but a prolific writer, and his unusual gifts led to international fame.

Arguably the first megachurch celebrity pastor in the English-speaking world, to this day he is one of the most quoted. Under his pastorate, thousands came to Christ and many came from far away just to hear him preach. Spurgeon would spend the remainder of his 38-year tenure at this one church, preaching to over 5,000 people each week in a 6,000-seat auditorium in the heart of London. Whatever options Spurgeon may have considered, he ultimately decided to manage the church's numerical growth through an expensive building program.

Did Spurgeon ever consider multiple services while at New Park Street Chapel? Did he contemplate multiple sites in London, where he could travel from one to the other on Sunday morning to preach? I have found no evidence that he did. And what would Spurgeon think of podcasts and video sermons? We can only speculate. What we do know is that the sermons of the current pastor of Metropolitan Tabernacle, Dr. Peter McMasters, are available on the [church's website](#) today.

Did he consider sending out a portion of his congregation to plant a new church a few blocks away? Metropolitan Tabernacle pursued an [exemplary initiative](#) of church planting in London and throughout the world, and Spurgeon dedicated much of his energy to [church planting](#). Through his Pastors' College, he trained hundreds of church planters, but he did not use this method (sending out a portion of his church members to plant a church) to avoid a move out of New Park Street Chapel into a larger facility, or ultimately to build an enormous building. Did he intentionally advise visitors to worship at other churches instead of coming to Metropolitan Tabernacle? I'm not sure.

Faithfulness to the Word is the mark of success in ministry. Numbers are not. While numbers can deceive minds, faithfulness will defy metrics. Yet God delights in adding to his

church and ordinarily causes numerical growth through faithful ministry. Consequently, growing ministries may occasionally need to ask: Where will we put all these people?

A River Runs Through It

Our church has enjoyed decades of health, unity, and steady (but unspectacular) numerical growth. Due to that growth, we started a second service in the early nineties. That was a rather easy decision for us to make then. So many other churches led by able pastor-theologians, had successfully made that transition, allowing them to make more disciples without a costly building program.

After avoiding a building program for years, we eventually built a bigger building in a different location in 1996. Soon after moving in, we returned to a two-service format to accommodate the growth. Later, we added a video venue in our gym (we call it the Field House) for the overflow in the auditorium. While the sermon in the Field House was on real-time video, all other elements of the service were in person. We managed our numerical growth this way because we believed Scripture allowed it and as a matter of financial stewardship.

Ten years ago, our church was in a unique situation. The population of our city (Decatur) at the time had plateaued, but a city nearby (Madison) was ground zero for one of the fastest-growing areas in our state. In between the two cities are thousands of acres of cotton fields and the Tennessee River. At the time, several families were driving the thirty minutes from Madison to be a part of the fellowship in Decatur. Many of our members living in Decatur, drove to or through Madison every weekday to work at places like NASA, Boeing, or Redstone Arsenal (Army Missile Command). But when Madison members shared the gospel and invited their neighbors and co-workers to attend church with them, most were understandably hesitant to cross the river.

Decatur, Alabama is one of the most churchd cities in the world (I contend) and while we are deeply involved in missions and church planting efforts in gospel-deprived places in the world, we did not believe there was a great need in Decatur for another church. While Madison had some healthy churches, there were fewer, or none, in the newest areas where our members lived. Also, city planners were projecting rapid [growth](#) in the cotton fields that surrounded our church members' homes in Madison. To shorten a long story, as we strategized about how to reach those neighborhoods (present and projected) we decided to start a second campus in Madison. Before launching the Madison Campus, I spoke with several pastors in Madison to get their input, not wanting to come in as rivals but as partners in the gospel. One of those pastors led the prayer at our dedication service when we launched the new campus. In the end, we settled on one church in two locations, and, to borrow a phrase, "[a river runs through it.](#)"

A Dual-Site Model

We did not enter this endeavor lightly. In our history, every decision, every strategy, every plan must be consonant with the Word of God. Big decisions especially require solid theological justification from the elders which is usually presented in a position paper for the church family.

At the time we were researching the possibility, [John Piper](#) (also [here](#)) and [Tim Keller](#) were leading their churches to become multisite churches. What became clear to us early on is that there are different kinds of multisite models. Some models use video for sermons, some do not. Some models plan to be multisite permanently, and some models see multisite as a temporary solution. Some models start sites far away, even in other states, and some models keep each site within the same community. In the end, we decided on a dual-site model.

By dual-site, I mean that we have no plans to add a third campus. We made the decision at the front end that we would never have more than two campuses. To be clear, I am not advocating that every or any other church do what we did. This was a unique situation and a thoughtful, prayerful, strategic decision on our part for this place in this time. But our goal throughout the process was to remain faithful and submissive to the authority of Scripture.

That's why Jonathan Leeman's book is so important. In "One Assembly: Rethinking the Multisite and Multiservice Church Models," Leeman argues that the Biblical model, and the only one we should advocate, is one church, in one location, at one time, in one service. Leeman's considered objections, and others like it, instilled a caution in us as we approached this endeavor for which I'm grateful. While the book came out in 2020, Leeman was voicing concerns as [early as 2009](#). We took these concerns into account as we discussed the possibility of a second campus and they guided and restrained our decisions along the way.

What is a church?

Leeman's thesis is clear: "there is no such thing as a multisite or multiservice church based on how the Bible defines church. They don't exist. Adding a second site or service, by the standards of Scripture, gives you two churches, not one. Two assemblies, separated by geography or numbers on a clock, give you two churches" (OA, 17). Leeman's definition of a multisite church is "anything that calls itself a 'church' but has more than one weekly gathering comprising different sets of individuals" (OA,33). His argument unfolds like this:

1. Multiservice and multisite churches *repudiate* the Biblical definition of church.

The promise of Jesus is to be present in the physical gathering of people in Jesus' name. Leeman states that Matthew 18:20 is "a proof text for this whole book" (17). The Bible does not leave freedom to structure the church in any other way than as one assembly, at one time, in one place (OA, 20,21). While there is freedom in Scripture for some things, argues Leeman, like whether to have Sunday School or small group ministry, there is no freedom to define a local church as anything but the one-assembly model.

He acknowledges that there is no explicit moral principle in the Bible saying churches should stick to one site or one service, but there is an ontological, or descriptive, claim (OA, 19). Leeman also recognizes that matters of church definition and government are second-order doctrines, important for protecting the gospel, but not essential to the gospel. His definition of church and understanding of how it should be governed is also at odds with Presbyterians, whose form of church government, in Leeman's opinion, is "picking a fight with Jesus" (OA, 37).

So, early in the book, it becomes clear that Leeman doesn't mind picking a fight with Presbyterians, or anyone else who disagrees with him on this matter. But I did not find his tone belligerent or off-putting. He is clear that this is an important issue and it is worthy of serious theological reflection, inquiry, and debate.

2. Multiservice and multisite churches *redefine* what a church is.

Here, Leeman leans heavily on a thoroughly researched and tedious tour of the Greek word, *ekklesia*. It can be translated as "assembly" but is most often translated in English Bibles as "church." (OA, 19). In the end, he concludes that people can only assemble in one place at one time. Any other explanation of the word *ekklesia* in reference to the local church is an unbiblical redefinition of what a church is and has always been.

3. Multiservice and multisite churches *reshape* the church morally.

The structure one chooses for the church (i.e., one-assembly, multiservice, or multisite) has direct bearing on the way people relate to each other. In particular, the multisite model shifts more authority and responsibility away from the congregation to church leaders. An act of "usurpation" for the leaders and an act of "abdication" for the congregation. To choose multiservice or multisite is "picking a fight with Jesus" who defined church as an assembly, not a collection of assemblies (OA, 22). In this sense, the multiservice and multisite models are immoral, as they contradict Jesus' definition of a church.

The logic that advocates for multiservice or multisite (unlinking “gathering” from “church”) is a slippery slope that paves the way for other aberrations, such as Internet church, in which each Christian makes his or her own home a site, relieving them of the inconvenience of physical church attendance and the duty to serve one another in love (OA, 28).

According to Leeman, the multisite and multiservice models do not emerge from the gospel itself and are therefore not as effective in promoting and protecting the gospel. While the unintended consequences of the multiservice and multisite models may not be immediately apparent, over time, perhaps decades, they will subtly weaken the church, put the pastors in danger, hinder evangelism, and damage the church’s testimony (OA, 23,36,37).

Another consequence, argues Leeman, is that multisite is normally held together not by the people (congregation) but by a charismatic, gifted communicator, a pastor with celebrity-like status. This is dangerous not only for the pastor, but also for the church.

The Range of *Ekklēsia*

Since Leeman dedicates so much of his argument to the meaning of *ekklēsia*, that’s where I’ll focus most of my attention.

Ekklēsia literally means “called out.” In the most basic sense, the church is made up people who have been *called out* of the world by God and *called in* to a new community. Interestingly, our word for church descends from an Old English word that is ultimately derived from the Greek word, *kuriakos* (the Lord’s own; belonging to the Lord). This is an important point to remember throughout this paper: It would be easy to equate the English word, “church, with the Greek word, *ekklēsia* because that’s how English Bibles translate *ekklēsia*, but it would be inaccurate. Our English word “church” does not mean “assembly.” It means “the Lord’s own.”

A church then, is a community of people who are called out by the Lord and eternally belong to him, having been bought with the Lord’s own blood (Acts 20:28). Furthermore, this community of believers is called out by God to physically assemble before him for worship on the first day of the week. But there is significant elasticity to the word *ekklēsia*.

Leeman does a thorough job of surveying and analyzing the various ways that the most influential Greek lexicons have interpreted the word. In my response, I mainly want to show how the word *ekklēsia* has a legitimate range of meanings.

While most systematic theologies use well-worn categories like the “local church” and the “universal church,” keep in mind that the words “local” and “universal” are not in the Greek text. *Ekklēsia* is sorted into various categories based on an interpreter’s analysis of the word’s use in its context. I still believe they are helpful categories, but for now, let’s look at

ekklesia in terms of a continuum as it can refer to a small group of believers in a particular place or to all believers everywhere; from small to all.

From its use in both classical and *koine* Greek, a common way to translate *ekklesia* is “assembly.” This seems to be Leeman’s favored translation, as the title of his book shows (OA, 20). In the chart below, instead of translating it as “church,” I’ll translate it as “assembly,” just to see how it sounds in various contexts.

The Range of <i>Ekklesia</i> : From Small to All			
Small	City	Region	All
“Greet also the <i>assembly</i> in their house...” (Rom. 16:5)	“To the <i>assembly</i> of God that is in Corinth...” (1 Cor. 1:2)	“So the <i>assembly</i> throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace...” (Acts 9:31)	“Christ loved the <i>assembly</i> and gave himself up for her...” (Eph. 5:25)
Emphasis on the assembly of the people: In one place at one time.	→	→	Emphasis on the people of the assembly: Every believer, everywhere.
The Visible Church — Professing Christians seen by God and people	→	→	The Invisible Church — Possessing Christians seen only by God
The Local Church One assembly in one location at one time.	Either one assembly in one location or one assembly in multiple nearby locations. *This is the center of the debate!	One assembly in multiple locations in a region.	The Universal Church One assembly in multiple locations, on earth and in heaven.

The focus of the debate between Leeman and multisite advocates is whether one church in a city mentioned in Scripture (i.e., Jerusalem, Corinth, Rome) ever managed its numerical growth by organizing into groups that could meet at the same place at different times

(multiple services) or in different locations (multiple sites) and yet retain its unity as one church. Leeman has written his book to say that this is not even a possibility (OA, 19). I am writing this response to show that the possibility exists.

To get a taste of how scholars have wrestled with the complex work of defining *ekklesia*, consider how Herman Bavinck summarizes the word's evolution:

“Initially this *ekklesia* existed only in Jerusalem. But before long there were believers also in Samaria, Antioch, and in many other locations among both the Jews and Gentiles; their assemblies were also called *ekklesia*. They, too, were the people, the church, the church of God at that place. As a result, the word gradually acquired several different meanings. Jesus still uses the word in a general sense without thinking of the later distinctions. But after his departure, it was applied to the circles of believers in a certain specific location because there it *was* the people of God, and then it was applied to them whether or not they in fact came together in a certain gathering place. In Acts 5:11; 11:26; 1 Cor. 11:18; 14:19, 28,35 the word *ekklesia* clearly refers to the gathering or assembly of the congregation; but elsewhere it refers repeatedly to the church itself, even when it is not gathered, and one can therefore speak of *ekklesiai* in the plural (Ro. 16:4; 1 Cor. 6:1; Gal. 1:2; 1 Thess. 2:14, etc.)” (Bavinck, 4:279–280)

Louis Berkhof, notes that

“the word [*ekklesia*] is found at least once in the singular to denote a group of churches, namely, the churches of Judea, Galilee, and Samaria. The passage in which it is so used is Acts 9:31. Naturally, this does not yet mean that they together constituted an organization such as we now call a denomination. It is not impossible that the church of Jerusalem and the church of Antioch in Syria also comprised several groups that were accustomed to meet in different places.” (Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, p. 615)

Since Berkhof wrote his systematic theology in 1932, he is not being influenced by an ill-informed intuition in favor of the modern multisite movement. Like Bavinck, he is writing long before livestreaming sermons and it's safe to say he is not being persuaded by some bias in favor of the multisite model. Rather, he looks at the usage of *ekklesia* in the New Testament and asserts the real possibility of one “assembly” comprised of several groups that were “assembling” in different locations.

Could Berkhof and Bavinck be unduly influenced by their church backgrounds? Leeman might think so given his hypothesis that various Greek scholars who differ with him on this point are biased and tend to translate *ekklesia* “in a manner that suits their denominational affiliations” (72).

However, Berkhof's understanding of *ekklesia* might give a sense of how the word was understood when churches began to adopt the multiservice model beginning in the 20th century. Based on their understanding of *ekklesia*, these church leaders saw no Biblical

prohibition to organize their church so that this one church met in one location under one leadership to worship one God and hear one sermon at two different times. They were still “a circle of believers in a definite locality, a local church...”

The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology (Colin-Brown) notes:

“The *ekklesia* has its location, existence and being within definable geographical limits. The apostle thus writes of *ekklesia tē ousē en Korinthō*, the church which is in Corinth (1 Cor. 1:2; 2 Cor. 1:2) indicating both that it belongs to the people of the place and that it has a new and different quality...As in the OT...the *ekklesia* is those who follow the call of God, come together...and yet even when their meeting is over still retain their quality of *ekklesia*” (1:299, 303)

Regarding “the church in Jerusalem” (Acts 8:3) A.T. Robertson declares that *ekklesia*

“is applied to the church which Saul is persecuting in their homes when not assembled so here the etymological meaning of ‘assembly’ disappears for ‘the church’ were now the scattered saints hiding in their separate homes. The whole body of believers in Jerusalem...were in awe and dread.” (Robertson, 3:61)

Leeman admits that older definitions of *ekklesia* found in historic Protestant creeds, confessions, and catechisms “addressed only implicitly...the question of location or gathering. The gathering was assumed” (44). The same might be said of older theologians like Bavinck and Berkhof and this is a critical assumption in Leeman’s argument.

The Regulative Principle

To my knowledge, there is no creed, confession, catechism, lexicon, or work of theology prior to the 21st century that explicitly states that the only legitimate way to understand the *ekklesia* in a particular city (i.e., Jerusalem) is as “one assembly at one time in one place.” I think Leeman would say this too is “assumed.”

I’m willing to concede that the common reading of *ekklesia* when it refers to the local church is “one assembly at one time in one place.” I happily admit that there are no clear examples or *prescriptions* in Scripture for a multiservice or multisite model.

However, there are also no clear *prohibitions* against either model. Nowhere does Scripture specifically forbid a multiservice or multisite structure. Is this a fallacious argument from silence? After all, Scripture does not specifically forbid the use of popcorn and Coke (or pizza and beer) as a means of making worshippers feel more welcome at church.

Protestants have typically recognized the *Regulative Principle* in worship. Simply put, the *Regulative Principle* requires a limited number of Biblically-mandated elements in worship but

gives what Terry Johnson calls “[considerable freedom](#)” respecting the form and circumstances of each element. The Westminster Confession of Faith (1646) states that

“the acceptable way of worshiping the true God is instituted by himself, and so limited by his own revealed will, that he may not be worshiped according to the imaginations and devices of men, or the suggestions of Satan, under any visible representation, or any other way not prescribed in the Holy Scripture” (WCF, 21.1)

The prescribed elements of worship include prayer, reading of Scriptures, preaching, singing of Psalms, and administration of the sacraments, since these “are all parts of the ordinary worship of God” (WCF, 21.5). But the Confession also recognizes that

“...there are some circumstances concerning the worship of God, and government of the church, common to human actions and societies, which are to be ordered by the light of nature, and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the Word, which are always to be observed” (WCF, 1.6)

Of note to Baptists, the Philadelphia Confession of Faith (1742) repeats these sections of the Westminster Confession of Faith verbatim.

Does this “considerable freedom” include the option of New Testament churches receiving money in a worship service to construct a building dedicated solely for assembling to worship? There is no prescription or example in all of Scripture to do so. While New Testament references to giving are mostly for the relief of the poor, none of them are for a building project (i.e., 2 Corinthians 8,9).

In other words, there is no New Testament precedent for doing what Spurgeon did in 1861. Further, a vast majority of churches today meet in buildings set apart for public worship because of a sacrificial stewardship campaign, largely conducted in the worship services of previous generations.

Similarly, does this “considerable freedom” include one church holding two identical morning worship services to accommodate the whole church in one building for the purpose of deferring that expensive building program? Does it include holding two identical morning worship services at the same time to accommodate the whole church in two buildings? These two questions, it seems to me, represent the crux of this debate.

I am not advocating here for the *Normative Principle*, which argues that anything not forbidden in Scripture is permitted. Rather I am arguing that if all the services of a multiservice or multisite church meet the requirements of the *Regulative Principle*, there appears to be some freedom in Scripture to allow the multiservice or multisite model.

The Common Problems in All Models

Most of the problems that Leeman lists as the result of a multiservice or multisite structure can and do occur in one assembly churches. He acknowledges, for example, that the tendency in most multiservice or multisite churches to put its “emphasis on a superstar pastor can occur at a one-assembly church” (34) but he adds that “the structures of a multisite church require it.” Leeman makes a compelling argument that these structures create a more conducive atmosphere for over-dependence on a gifted leader, but I’m not sure he makes the case that a multisite structure requires a “superstar pastor.”

Rather, I would argue that a healthy gospel-preaching church that is experiencing numerical success (whether in terms of attendance, membership, baptisms, churches planted, missionaries sent, podcasts downloaded, books sold, or disciples made) is experiencing that success because “the Lord added to their number” (Acts 2:47). This is Jesus keeping his promise to build his *ekklesia* (Matthew 16:18). But ordinarily, the Lord’s instrument is a gifted leader. Even the humblest pastor, if he has exceptional gifts, can be considered a superstar by the church he serves.

For example, I concur with Leeman that Mark Dever, Senior Pastor of Capitol Hill Baptist Church, is a “humble” and “talented pastor” (OA,119,120). In my limited personal interaction with him, I have found him to be a gracious and generous man. In fact, Dever is widely recognized as an exceptional leader and communicator. And as much as he would spurn the thought, he is considered a superstar by many admirers. Of course, God can raise up and set down the leaders he wants any time he wants, but it is hard to imagine the obvious success and influence of Capitol Hill Baptist Church without the much beloved Mark Dever.

Some examples of the problems Leeman sees in the multiservice and multisite churches that often occur in one-assembly churches:

- A failure to protect the gospel (36).
- Market-driven pragmatism (28)
- Over-dependence on a charismatic, superstar pastor (34).
- The church being identified as the pastor’s church (34).
- Over time people lose a sense of every-member responsibilities (36)
- Anemic evangelism (36).
- Rivalry between local churches rather than catholicity (99f).
- Members abdicating responsibility while leaders usurp authority (21,22).
- Members not caring for other members (32)
- Members saying, Wasn’t church great? (31)

Two temptations always haunt the ministry: to make much of ourselves and to view our brothers as rivals. Instead of God’s glory, we are tempted to seek our own. Instead of embracing other churches as partners, we are seduced to see them as competitors. History

proves that the one-assembly model does not guarantee success in resisting these temptations, but Leeman makes a compelling case that the multisite model places a talented pastor in greater danger of failure. Importantly, the chapter on catholicity is worth the price of the book and inspires a nobler vision of being “as interested in promoting the kingdom of Christ as you are your own church’s programs” (OA, 107).

Everyone Must Assume

Everyone on all sides of this issue relies on assumptions, inferences, and arguments from silence to make their case. Leeman rightly notes that apologists for the multisite model are constantly making assumptions: “the biblical justifications for multisite churches is rife with phrases like “Well, surely the early church must have...or “We can only assume they did not...” (OA, 75). Here Leeman issues another wise caution. I concur that a lot of unhealthy doctrine and practice has been concocted over the centuries by making unwarranted assumptions and arguments from silence.

But arguments from silence are not always fallacies. In *Silver Blaze*, Sherlock Holmes, solves a mystery by observing that since the dog didn’t bark, the criminal was known by the dog. Sometimes silence adds weight to an argument. In the New Testament, are there any barking dogs? Any warnings to church leaders about accommodating numerical growth with some practical logistical adaptation? Someone may object, “Nowhere in Scripture are we *explicitly told* that first century churches accommodated growth by holding two worship services!”

That’s true and I happily concede the point. But it’s also true that nowhere in Scripture are we *explicitly told* that first century churches accommodated growth by sending a group of their existing members to plant another church within walking distance. That may have happened. There may have been two or three churches in Ephesus when Paul addressed “the saints who are in Ephesus” (Eph. 1:1). But that would only be an assumption.

And what about using a livestreamed sermon to another campus? For obvious reasons, the Bible is silent on livestreamed sermons. One thing we do know is that the first century church used the latest communication technology to teach the Word of God. Several of Paul’s letters are widely recognized as circular letters. That is, they were intended to be circulated among several churches. It was physically impossible for Paul to attend the assembly in-person, but through these letters, publicly read at the assembly, he was able to teach God’s people. While the preaching pastor was not in their midst, Jesus certainly was.

The Bible is fraught with accounts that necessarily leave out details we think would be helpful. Consider that Exodus 12:37 reports six hundred thousand fighting men left Egypt. When we add the women, children, priests, and old men, we can estimate about two and half

million people in all. We are not specifically told that, but it is a reasonable inference. On several occasions all these people were summoned to gather to hear the Word of God. For example, Moses recalls that the Lord told him to “Gather the people to me, that I may let them hear my words...” (Dt. 4:10). The Hebrew word for “gather” is *qābāl*, which the LXX translates into the verb form of the noun *ekklesia*. So two and a half million people were gathered into an assembly, a church, at the base of Mount Sinai, where God miraculously spoke directly to all of them so that all could hear.

Yet there were other times when God did not speak directly to this “church” of two and a half million people, but Moses did. Deuteronomy begins with these words:

“These are the words that Moses spoke to all Israel beyond the Jordan in the wilderness, in the Arabah opposite Suph, between Paran and Tophel, Laban, Hazeroth, and Dizahab” (Dt. 1:1).

This raises a logistical question for the curious-minded and every possible answer will be speculative assumption. The question is this: How can a 120-year-old man address a gathering of two and a half million people so that he can be heard and understood by all of them at the same time? Did God supernaturally amplify Moses’ voice so that all of them heard the message? Did the leaders stand closer to Moses to receive the message which they in turn conveyed to others later? If they conveyed the message later, did they do so in different locations? Did they break up into groups there or go back to meet in their tents? We are not told. No matter what you conclude, you have made an assumption.

But I know this. If there was no miraculous amplification, this one “church” had to come up with some logistical adaptation to get all of Moses’ words to every member. Similarly, there are many things in the New Testament that raise logistical questions for which we only have speculative answers.

Acts 2 and the Lord’s Supper

Many multisite advocates claim that the church in Jerusalem was a multisite church since they see it as one church meeting in multiple locations (“house to house”). Leeman admits that he might be convinced by the multisiter’s argument if “there were no record of the entire Jerusalem church gathering and doing churchy things like preaching and baptism” (92). So, what are those house meetings all about? Leeman says those are “small groups” or “community groups,” like the small groups that meet throughout the week in his own church in Washington, D.C.

Let’s think about this. Acts 4:4 numbers 5000 “men,” so the total amount of believers, with women and children, in the Jerusalem church may be closer to 7,500-20,000 (Kistemaker, 148). Opinion on the total membership is far from unanimous (Bock, 188), so

for the rest of this paper, I'll go with the lower number of 7500 people. Did the whole church at Jerusalem do "churchy" things like baptism? Outside of the initial mass baptism at Pentecost (Acts 2:41), an extraordinary event, where does Acts report that this one church of 7,500 assembled to baptize new believers in one place at one time? Nowhere. And what of the ordinance of the Lord's Supper? Where does Acts explicitly report that all 7,500 church members gathered to observe the Lord's Supper at one place at one time? Nowhere. In other words, Leeman must make some important assumptions of his own.

Regarding the Lord's Supper, consider Luke's report:

Acts 2:42 And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers...

Acts 2:46 And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts...

Calvin believes that the breaking of bread in 2:42 refers to the Lord's Supper, but four verses later, when the same Greek words are used for "breaking bread," Calvin interprets these words differently (Calvin, 126). While it's natural to interpret Luke to mean that they observed the Lord's Supper in these home groups out of logistical necessity, Calvin concludes that "it seemeth to me that Luke meant no such thing" (Calvin, 132). This may be because of the presence of the definite article *tou*, in 2:42: *The* breaking of bread. Rather, says Calvin, the bread-breaking of v. 46 is simply Christians eating meals together. Five hundred years later, the debate continues and as New Testament scholar Darrell Bock notes, "what makes the choice hard to decide is that the Lord's table was part of a larger meal in the earliest church" (Bock, 150). However, a consensus of commentators is that the bread breaking in homes includes the Lord's Supper (i.e., Bruce, 73; Polhill, 121; Boice, 60; MacArthur, 89; Fernando, 123; Toussaint, 360; Elwell, 889.) Kistemaker follows Calvin, but that should surprise no one (Kistemaker, 110–113). Keep in mind that this consensus was settled before the multisite movement, and if the consensus is correct, what we have is one church in Jerusalem meeting at different times and in different locations to do rather "churchy" things. Specifically, if one church is meeting in several locations at different times to observe an ordinance of the church, that helps the multisite position. If the consensus is wrong (and Calvin is right), it helps the one-assembly position. But my main point emerges once again: everyone must make some assumptions.

Leeman's understanding is that there is enough room at the temple for everyone in this one church to assemble in one place at one time (OA, 75). Every day, some 7,500 believers gathered at the temple to be taught by the apostles, so certainly there was room for every member of the church to meet in one place, at one time, for one service on the Lord's Day. That is the only way for the church in Jerusalem to be considered one church, argues

Leeman. In fact, he says, “what makes a church a church, among other things, is that its members all meet together on Sunday” (93).

Yet Luke never explicitly reports that the entire Jerusalem church assembled in one place at one time on Sunday. The only reference in Acts to the “first day of the week” reports Paul’s meeting with a small group of disciples at Troas (Acts 20:7). I’m not contending that the entire Jerusalem church *never* assembled in one place at one time on Sunday, but I am suggesting that to say that they did so every Sunday is an assumption. (Note: If Acts 2:46 is assumed to include Sunday, compare the use of *hemera* in Acts 2:46 to its use in Acts 5:42 with the modifying adjective *pas*).

For Leeman however, “it is beyond dispute that the Jerusalem church gathered all together in the temple for preaching and baptism” (OA, 96). As support he cites Acts 2:1,6, the Day of Pentecost. It may be beyond dispute that the Jerusalem church gathered all together on that historic day. But to say that they then gathered all together in the temple every subsequent Sunday is an assumption on Leeman’s part.

At this point we see another clear example of how Leeman must make some key assumptions to support his argument. “It’s entirely possible,” writes Leeman, “that the Jerusalem church practiced the Lord’s Supper together in Solomon’s Colonnade. Obviously, the text doesn’t say that, but nor does it say where they *did* celebrate the Supper” (OA, 96). On this point, Leeman and I agree. Possible, but the text doesn’t say.

I concur with Leeman that the temple courts could accommodate this large group, but that doesn’t necessarily mean that all the members of the church actually gathered there at one time every Sunday. Even if temple authorities would have allowed so much disruption to their daily operations, the church members would be standing outside and unsheltered. Men, women, and children in weekly plenary meetings throughout the entire calendar year exposed to the elements. It’s not impossible. The political assemblies of Athens routinely gathered that size of a crowd in outdoor amphitheaters. But the assembly (*ekklesia*) of a Greek city-state was comprised only of adult males. I know it’s possible, but I’m not persuaded it is certain.

Matthew 18:20 and the First Case of Church Discipline

Leeman cites Matthew 18:20 as “proof text” for his book (OA, 17) so its worthy of a look. Both in *One Assembly* and in a [previous work](#), *Understanding the Congregation’s Authority*, Leeman shows the connection between Matthew 16:19, 18:20, and 28:16. The authority that Christ gives to the apostles is the same authority he gives to the gathered church (*ekklesia*). The church is authorized to judge and evaluate who Jesus is, what he has commanded (law), what he has done (gospel), and who is in the family of God (membership). In short, the church has the authority to proclaim the terms of God’s forgiveness and make judgments that admit

members into the church. It also has the authority to make judgments that dismiss members (excommunication). These are the keys that Jesus gave to Peter to unlock the gates into the kingdom of God. But, argues Leeman, this authority to admit and dismiss members does not belong to one or two church members, a small group Bible Study, or a council of elders. Rather, this authority only belongs to the gathered assembly: the whole church meeting at one time in one location.

In an extended treatment on Matthew 18:20 and its context, Leeman concludes that the authority of the church is “two Christians shaking hands in agreement” (OA, 57) on what the Word of God teaches (i.e., who Jesus is, what the gospel is, what is sin, who has sinned, who is confessing the gospel, who is a member of the church, who should be excommunicated from the church, what are the terms that God has announced for the forgiveness of sin, etc.). These agreeing Christians must have “gathered” (*sunagō* in Mt. 18:20) in the name of Jesus to exercise that authority. This gathering, Leeman insists, is the *ekklesia*: “By saying he’s present, quite simply, Jesus is identifying himself with this gathering and authorizing them as his assembly” (OA, 58). And if these two Christians agree together in Jesus’ name to preach the Word and agree to observe the ordinances, they constitute an *ekklesia*, a church.

So, no matter the size of the *church*, two, or three, or three hundred, Jesus is there, among them, identifying with them as they represent him. His presence there, in this gathering, is what makes them a church. So, for example, because Jesus is there at the 9:00 service and he is there at the 11:00 service in a multiservice church, each gathering is a church. It is not one church meeting at two times, but rather two different churches (OA, 59).

But couldn’t we say that Jesus is promising to be “there” in the 11:00 service and in the elder meeting and in the small group and even in the first meeting between two Christians who are at odds, who then agree to be reconciled? Isn’t Jesus promising to be powerfully present there? No, says Leeman. Jesus is not making this promise for “any small group in the church” (57). Why? Because “every small group could then wield the authority of the keys to create a church...receive members or excommunicate” (58).

If I am understanding Leeman correctly, this seems like a bridge too far. I’m with him on understanding the importance of agreement as a feature of this gathering. It is a gathering of agreeing Christians. And I accept his description of the church gathering as a place “where Jesus’s flag flies, the way a nation’s flag flies at its embassies in foreign nations” (OA, 58,59). But I don’t understand how applying the truths here to any gathering of two or more agreeing Christians (i.e., a small group, elder meeting, etc.) would automatically give them the power to admit or excommunicate a church member.

I’ve enjoyed a friendly email exchange with Leeman regarding this point, and I’m sure it’s due to my own dullness, but I struggle to grasp his position. Leeman wants us to see that the significance of Jesus being “there” is tied to the exercise of the keys (Mt. 18:18) and the

affirmation of the Father in heaven (18:19). So the binding and loosing action of verse 18 refers to the act of excommunication in verse 17. Verse 19 confirms that the agreement and the request of the two on earth is endorsed by the Father in heaven. So far so good.

But the theme of Matthew from beginning to end is the powerful presence of Jesus, the Messiah, among his people. Only in Matthew are we told that he would be called Immanuel, “God with us,” (1:23). Only in Matthew do we find the clear post-resurrection Great Commission and his promise: “I am with you always, to the end of the age” (28:20). So, his authoritative presence does not seem to be limited to the final step of church discipline (excommunication) but rather, it is promised at every step of church discipline.

Think about those “two others” that the offended Christian brings with him to the meeting with the offending Christian. They are not merely passive listeners but should also be wise counselors. Jesus said that the offender should “listen to them” (*autos*, third person, plural in Matthew 18:17). After being rebuked in love by all three of them, he does not repent, but instead leaves the room in a huff. Now there are three people in a room, and one asks, “What do we do next?” And another says, “Well Jesus said we should take this to the whole church, so let’s do that.”

At this point, they are not agreeing to excommunicate a church member. Jesus has not given them that authority to bind or loose at this stage of the discipline process. But he has given them the authority, as a gathering of three agreed Christians, to judge the offender and charge him with breaking God’s law. He has also authorized this small group to formally appeal to the next judiciary level, to bring an indictment, to the whole church. Jesus is there with them, but that doesn’t mean they are a church. They (this small, gathered, assembled group of three) are correctly exercising the authority given to them by Jesus himself to those who agree about him and his commands.

We don’t need to worry, as Leeman seems to be, that this understanding of Matthew 18:20 would result in different small groups in the church wielding authority that does not belong to them (like excommunicating a church member) or one small group disagreeing with another small group and raising the question about which small group has the greater authority. That’s why the Lord gave the church a plurality of authorized elders to shepherd the congregation through those kinds of disagreements.

Early in Acts we see the marks of a true church that the Reformers would later observe: preaching of the Word and observance of the sacraments (or ordinances). But what about the third mark, church discipline? The first case of church discipline in the early church is reported in Acts 5:1-11, the familiar account of Ananias and Sapphira. But where did this take place? Was it the temple? Solomon’s Colonnade (Acts 5:12)? Was it the same place they went after being released from custody (4:23)? We are not told. All the apostles were there, and

Ananias was there, some young men were there, but the whole church was not assembled in one place at one time.

Those who were there experienced “great fear” when God killed Ananias (the ultimate excommunication), but it wasn’t until three hours later that Saphira arrived, and she still had not heard what happened. God killed Saphira right in front of the apostles, yet the young men weren’t there to see it happen because they were returning from burying Ananias’ body. Instead, they were “at the door.” What door? Was it a gate that separated different areas of the temple area? Are the apostles in a smaller compartment of Solomon’s Colonnade that could not hold everyone? Are they at the temple at all? We are not told. At any rate, it wasn’t until the tragic and terrifying news had gotten around (through the home groups?) that “fear came upon the whole church.”

So, Luke reports that day by day the members of the Jerusalem church assembled at the temple (Acts 2:46), but it’s clear that at least on this one day, they were not all there at the same time at the same place to hear what the apostles had to teach. And what the apostles had to teach that day was exceedingly important. However, what they taught that day did in fact make its way to the whole *ekklesia*, even if it did not happen in the same place at the same time.

Also note that this exercise of church discipline did not occur in the gathering of the entire church. Was it because this was the first step that was prescribed to be in private and God cut the process short? The problem is that it wasn’t in private. Rather, it happened in the presence of all the apostles and at least several young men.

Based on his understanding of Matthew 18:20 and 1 Corinthians 5:4, Leeman argues that “discipline should not occur in an elders’ meeting, a bishop’s chair, or a small group; rather, ‘when you are assembled in the name of the Lord...with the power of our Lord Jesus...’” (OA, 86). I’m confused here. Discipline begins with the sting of the private rebuke. Perhaps Leeman is speaking of discipline only in the sense of its final step (excommunication), but at this point I am just not sure what Leeman means.

There are ways to reconcile the details that Luke provides in this account, but one thing seems clear: the powerful and authoritative presence of the Lord Jesus was “there” on that day in that place when Ananias and Saphira were publicly rebuked in discipline by an authorized church leader, even if the whole church was not there.

Acts 6:1–7 and Church Business Meetings

One of the first things to note about this familiar text is how the apostles chose to manage the numerical growth of the church at Jerusalem. They did not plant another church to create two churches in Jerusalem. Rather, they chose to remain one large and growing church, but change the structure of the church to meet a need that was threatening unity. As

a result, the office of deacon was born. That office was created out of the church business meeting described in Acts 6:1-7.

In refuting the multisite advocate's claim that there was no place large enough to accommodate such a large crowd, Leeman cites Acts 6:2: "And the twelve summoned the full number of disciples..." (75). As I have said, I agree with Leeman that the temple precincts could have accommodated the entire assembly. But Leeman places a lot of weight on the phrase "full number," which translates the Greek word *plēthos*. How is *plēthos* used throughout the New Testament? Let's just focus on its use in the book of Acts:

"And more than ever believers were added to the Lord, multitudes (*plēthos*) of both men and women" (Acts 5:14).

The ESV translators used "multitudes," presumably because "full number" would be inaccurate. It is not true that all men and women were added to the Lord, but multitudes of them were.

"Now at Iconium they entered together into the Jewish synagogue and spoke in such a way that a great number (*plēthos*) of both Jews and Greeks believed" (Acts 14:1).

It would be inaccurate to say that the "full number" of Jews and Greeks believed. However, a "great number" of them did.

"When Paul had gathered a bundle (*plēthos*) of sticks and put them on the fire, a viper came out because of the heat and fastened on his hand" (Acts 28:3).

Paul didn't gather the "full number" of sticks lying on the island of Malta, rather he grabbed a bunch of them and threw them on the fire. I think it is reasonable to assume that after Paul did this, there were sticks left in Malta.

"And some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a great many (*plēthos*) of the devout Greeks and not a few of the leading women" (Acts 17:4).

Not the "full number" of devout Greeks and leading women, but thank God, "a great many" of them.

"And what they said pleased the whole gathering (*plēthos*), and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch" (Acts 6:5).

Now the logistical challenges become obvious to anyone who has conducted a church business meeting. How do 7,500 people decide *anything*? For a long time I've tried to imagine

what these three little words entailed: “and they chose.” Once the apostles delegate this task, someone must take the lead, organize the people, solicit nominations, moderate discussion, eliminate unqualified nominees, present the nominations, call for a vote, collect the vote, and count the vote. How do they vote? Who gets to vote? Women? Children? What is the age cut off? Was the vote required to be unanimous?

My questions continue. How much time passed between the apostles’ proposal until these seven men were presented to the apostles? Did it all happen in the same place in the same meeting, or did part of the process happen in smaller groups over time? Was the “full number” of disciples summoned to one place at one time every Sunday morning for public worship or was it just for this specially called business meeting to address an urgent matter? We are not told any of these things. We are just told that at the end of the unreported process, that there was a delightful product: “these they set before the apostles.” And since we are assuming, I think it is safe to assume that all these things were done “decently and in order” (1 Cor. 14:40).

Acts 15:1–34 and the Jerusalem Council

After teachers from Judea stirred up controversy in the church at Antioch over their gospel-denying doctrine on circumcision, Paul and Barnabas were “sent on their way by the church (*ekklesia*)” to represent them in Jerusalem (15:3). Upon arrival they were “received by the church (*ekklesia*) and the apostles and the elders” (15:4). The church is apparently present while Paul, Barnabas, the apostles, and elders deliberate (15:6) until James makes a proposal that they all agree on.

Notice Luke does not say the whole church weighed in on this part of the council meeting. They are present to witness but not deliberate. Then, it “pleased the apostles and elders with the whole church to send” (15:22) two men from the Jerusalem Church along with Paul and Barnabas with a letter entailing the decision made by the apostles and elders. When they wrote the letter to the church at Antioch, they identified themselves as “the apostles, elders, and the brethren, To the brethren at Antioch” (15:23). It seems then that the only role that the church (*ekklesia*) played in the council was to witness and then possibly to approve the decision of the leaders.

Notice the distinction Luke makes between the church (*ekklesia*) and its leadership (apostles and elders). It is a distinction between the sheep and the shepherds, the care-receivers and the caregivers, the leaders and the led. Here, *ekklesia* identifies the people for whom these leaders are responsible. But when the letter is written, *ekklesia* is replaced by *adelphoi* (brothers). In other words, this letter is written from the apostles (who have authority over all churches everywhere), the elders (who have authority in the church at Jerusalem), and the brothers (who have authority in the Jerusalem church when assembled).

But the curious thing here is that *ekklesia* is Luke's word, not the word used by the leaders of the Jerusalem Council. In fact, *ekklesia* is Luke's word throughout Acts. Of its twenty-four occurrences in the book of Acts, twenty-two of them are attributed to Luke who is narrating the historical events of the early church for Theophilus nearly three decades after they occurred (Lk. 1:3; Acts 1:1). In other words, Luke, the Gentile, is writing to a Gentile, likely a Roman official, who would be familiar with the etymological roots of *ekklesia* as a reference to the political assemblies of ancient Greece.

Now what about the other two occurrences of *ekklesia* in Acts? Luke quotes Stephen using the word in Acts 7:38 to refer to the "congregation" at Mount Sinai, so this is not in reference to the New Testament church. The only other occurrence is Paul's farewell to the Ephesian elders:

Acts 20:28 Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood.

Here Paul, as an "apostle to the Gentiles" (Ro. 11:13), speaks to the elders of a church comprised mainly of Gentiles (Eph. 2:11). Most likely Paul is referring here to the universal church, given his related statement in Ephesians 5:25 that "Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her." In contrast, when the Jewish apostles and elders of the church at Jerusalem wanted to address the Gentile-dominant churches of Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia, they do not address the letter to the churches in those cities but rather "to the brothers" in those cities (Acts 15:23). The word *ekklesia* is never mentioned in the Council's letter at all. In Acts, Luke uses *ekklesia* in reference to the church, but the church itself doesn't. Why? We are not told, but it is not unreasonable to think that these Jewish believers want to assure the Gentile believers that they are indeed their brothers, the fulfillment of Abraham's covenant, fully entitled members of the family of God, heirs of the Father and joint heirs with the son (Eph. 3:6). The full inclusion of the Gentiles must be clearly established in the earliest days of the church.

Now notice the recurring theme of Gentile inclusion. The Jerusalem Council itself was convened specifically for the purpose of addressing that issue. In other words, the common use of the word *ekklesia* in the New Testament as a name for the family of God, does not seem to gain traction until the Gentiles start coming into the church in great numbers. The earliest written references (chronologically, not canonically) to the church are as a family of brothers and sisters, not an assembly of voting members; a household, not a political body. But after Gentiles are included, the predominant name for the church becomes *ekklesia*. Why is that? While we are not specifically told in Scripture, here's a possible explanation.

As the gospel advanced among Gentiles throughout the Roman Empire, it encountered a kind of resistance it did not encounter in Jerusalem: idolatry. The Greco-Roman culture, especially prominent in Athens, was “full of idols” (Acts 17:16). One of those idols was Caesar himself. The coin Jesus used to teach his disciples to “render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s” (Mt. 22:21) had an image of Caesar and his title: “Tiberius Caesar Augustus son of Divine Augustus.” For Romans, Tiberius was the son of a god. In the imperial cult, Roman citizens were expected to swear their allegiance to Caesar, even ascribing to him various attributes of deity in worship. And in their praise of the emperor, they were expected to confess that “Caesar is Lord.” Then comes the politically subversive gospel, with its announcement that the Messiah, the Son of God, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords has come to establish his kingdom on earth. He is worthy of our highest praise and demands our ultimate allegiance. Furthermore, all his true followers will boldly confess that “Jesus is Lord” (Ro. 10:9; 1 Cor. 12:3; Phil. 2:11). In fact, Jesus is Caesar’s lord, king, and judge, even if Caesar doesn’t confess it.

These Gentiles must turn from their idols, including Caesar, to serve the “living and true God” (1 Th. 1:9). They must renounce their ultimate allegiance to Rome and confess their ultimate allegiance to the kingdom of God. As believers, they are citizens of that kingdom, “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession” (1 Peter 2:9). Perhaps this is why *ekklesia*, with all of its political overtones, came to be the dominant name for the church as the gospel advanced among the Gentiles. These Gentile believers had to learn something that the Jewish believers already knew. There is only one God (Dt. 6:4), the nations of the earth are “as dust on the scales” (Isa. 40:15), and as the kings of the earth make all of their grand plans in opposition to God, “he who sits in the heavens laughs” (Ps. 2:4). Rulers will come and go, rising and falling at the pleasure of God. And when it looked like God’s people were a defeated minority, even destined for extinction, God moved a ruler to enact a policy that would spare them and keep God’s covenant promises alive (see Pharaoh, Nebuchadnezzar, and Cyrus).

Gentiles didn’t see the world that way. The universe was governed by capricious, lustful, fornicating, corrupt, greedy, proud, jealous, insecure, undisciplined gods, presided over by Zeus. In the emperor cult, Caesar is added to the pantheon of Greek and Roman divinities, and his power and authority seemed unlimited. But like all rulers before him, he is merely an instrument in the hand of a sovereign God. This is what these little churches in Gentile lands needed to know. They are on the winning side.

Consider, then, the big picture. When the New Testament is viewed as a whole, here is the chronological order of appearances of the recorded use of *ekklesia* based on a scholarly consensus of the approximate dates that the New Testament authors wrote:

Who	Where	When	Comments
James	James 5:14	44-48	Since dates are approximate, Galatians and James compete for the title, “First Book of the New Testament.” James, the brother of our Lord, is a Jewish believer writing to multiple churches comprised of Jewish believers in the Hebrew diaspora. Importantly, these are Jews who are not living in the land of promise but are dispersed throughout the Roman empire among the Gentiles. While <i>ekklesia</i> is used once in this Jewish-dominant book, <i>adelphos</i> is used twenty times.
Paul	Galatians 1:2	44-48	May be first recorded use of <i>ekklesia</i> in the Bible which appears three times in the book, while <i>adelphos</i> occurs eleven times. Importantly, Paul is warning against a return to Jewish ceremonial law that threatens the gospel.
Mark	NA	53	Mark, the earliest Gospel, never uses <i>ekklesia</i> .
Matthew	Mt. 16:18; 18:17	54	It’s unclear if Jesus spoke Aramaic or Greek with his disciples. If Aramaic, the Holy Spirit inspired <i>ekklesia</i> as the best Greek word to translate the word Jesus used.
Unknown	Hebrews 2:12	60-70	Hebrews is aimed at believers with a Jewish background. <i>Ekklesia</i> appears only two times, neither in reference to the local church (2:12; 12:23). <i>Adelphos</i> appears ten times.
Peter	NA	62	While 1 Peter is dated around 62, during the reign of Nero, his writings (1 and 2 Peter) do not contain a single use of <i>ekklesia</i> . While the audience he writes to is mainly Gentile and under persecution, he addressed them as “elect exiles” (1 Peter 1:1) rather than an <i>ekklesia</i> , reminding them that their true home is in “heaven” (1:4). By this time, they have paid the price for giving Christ allegiance over Caesar.
Luke	Acts 5:11 (Textual issue on Acts 2:47)		Luke never uses <i>ekklesia</i> in his Gospel, but uses it 24 times in Acts, more than any other book of the Bible. He is a Gentile believer writing to a Gentile who is likely a Roman official.
John	3 John 6	90	John never uses <i>ekklesia</i> in his Gospel, 1 John, or 2 John. In 2 John he refers to the church as “the elect lady and her children” (2 Jn. 1:1). In Revelation, <i>ekklesia</i> is used 19 times, but 18 of those are in Revelation 1–3 as Jesus addresses seven local churches that are located throughout the Gentile-dominated Roman Empire. By this time, the gospel has spread far into Gentile lands and <i>ekklesia</i> is the dominant word for the church. <i>Adelphos</i> appears 5 times in Revelation.

The body of Christ, then, is a body politic with unrivaled authority. Its head is the creator and sustainer of the universe and when this body assembles, they not only render the praise that is due him, but they study, apply, obey, and enforce his laws, even if his laws conflict with the laws of Caesar or his surrogates (Acts 5:29). One way to teach the Gentile believers these truths was to refer to the family of God as an *ekklesia*, a Greek word with roots in the Greek city-states where political power was not concentrated in one man, or even a few, but in all the people. Under the Roman Empire the political assemblies lost authority as power became more centralized in Rome and the emperor. In fact, the revitalization of the

assembly system would have been viewed as a direct threat by Caesar. But in the church, God has called out his people from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of light.

Every believer, as a citizen of Christ's kingdom, is authorized by God to "proclaim the excellencies" (1 Peter 2:9) of Christ to the nations of the earth. And every believer is commanded to assemble with other believers to meet with their king, sing his praises, and hear his royal decrees.

Returning to the letter written at the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15:23–29, notice that while *ekklesia* is never used, we can see that the local church is a particular group of believers who:

1. View one another as equal members in the family of God ("brothers")
2. Live close enough to each other to gather weekly in particular places like "Jerusalem," "Antioch," "Syria," or "Cilicia."
3. Follow a particular group of leaders called "elders" who live close enough to gather weekly with the particular group of believers they are charged to care for.
4. Devote themselves to the teaching of the "apostles." In this case, the teaching had to do with the full inclusion of Gentiles into God's covenant family.

To summarize, at the time of the Jerusalem Council (c. AD 50) it appears that the church was not defining itself as an assembly (*ekklesia*) as much as it was a family of brothers (*adelphoi*) because a local church is fundamentally a particular group of believers, adopted by the Father, bound together by their common confession that Jesus is Lord, who live close enough to each other to gather weekly, and who are led by a particular group of older brothers who are responsible for their protection and care. The primary calling of these leaders is to serve the flock of God as "overseers" (Acts 20:28). Maybe the point of using *ekklesia* is not so much to instruct the church on how to structure their meetings, but to make the point that as believers, they are a people who owe their highest allegiance to the Lord Jesus Christ.

The Hypothesis

Besides the one-assembly model, there is another way to understand the structure of the church in Jerusalem. While all the apostles were in the temple teaching nearly every day, many of the believers, especially the men, who were heads of households, came to learn from them. It is plausible that members of the church came at different times (many still had to work, after all, and Sunday was a workday), one group in the morning and one in the afternoon. The apostles may have even repeated in the afternoon what they taught in the morning for the different group that was there.

As these members returned to various homes for meals, they conveyed the apostles' teaching to those who were not present at the temple that day. They were all organized into smaller groups in homes where they were accountable to one another, but on the organizational chart, they are ultimately accountable to Jesus, the Head of the church, through the apostles and elders, who divided the labor of watching over the flock. Further, these home groups, possibly led by elders, did a lot of "churchy" things (like teaching, communion, baptism, and the early steps of church discipline), so that they possessed some of the basic elements required for every church. Perhaps, as Ajith Fernando suggests, these groups later "developed into house churches" (Fernando, 123). But in the end, the result was the same: one church (the church at Jerusalem) got one message.

Am I making some assumptions here? *Mea culpa*. I've used words like "possibly," "maybe," "plausible," and "perhaps," a lot in the last few paragraphs. I confess that I'm making several assumptions. And I agree with Leeman that it is an error to use the formula "assumption + assumption = certainty" (OA, 74). I am not certain about the hypothesis I present here. The central proposition I want to repeat is that multisite advocates must make some assumptions to get to their conclusion, and so must one-assembly advocates.

A Well-Managed Household

My point in all of this is not that Leeman is wrong. He may be exactly right. Rather, my point once again is this: No matter which position you take in this important debate, you will have to speculate on some things. You will have to make reasonable inferences within solid Biblical parameters. Scripture does not use a level of specificity we might prefer to describe the process of organizing, structuring, and leading the church, especially in logistically managing numerical growth, and this is by God's design. There is some freedom for each church in every generation, in every culture, in every city to adapt in a way that supports the church's God-given mission.

But what are those solid Biblical parameters that must not be crossed? What are some boundaries that we might agree on? I have referred to our church as a dual-campus church, not a multi-campus church, for a reason. We decided from the beginning to follow a dual-site model, which I want to distinguish from a multi-site model for reasons that I hope will become clear below. I know it sounds like a distinction without a difference but hear me out.

While *ekklesia* is a common word for the church, the New Testament displays a wealth of metaphors. The church is not only an assembly (*ekklesia*), but it is a family, a flock, a field, a fighting force, a body, a bride, a branch, a building, a temple, an olive tree, a priesthood, and a community of citizens. Perhaps the inspired use of these metaphors can inform our understanding of *ekklesia*, which is arguably a metaphor likening the saints of God to a body

politic in a Greek city-state. Leeman may be over-inferring from this single Greek word and asking too much of it.

Consider the metaphor of the church as the household of God. In the middle of a list of character qualifications for elders, Paul asks an important rhetorical question:

“He must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive, for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God’s church (*ekklesia*)?” (1 Timothy 3:4,5)

The church is God’s household (*oikos*). The word commonly refers to a family, the most basic unit of society, that includes spouses, children, and grandchildren (1 Tim. 5:4). In a spiritual sense the church is the family of God, composed of his redeemed and adopted children. As Paul wrote, “if I delay, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth” (1 Timothy 3:15).

God’s church is to be managed (*proistēmi*). The word means to rule, superintend, preside, guard, lead, and give aid. The managers are composed of older brothers (elders) in the church who have proven character and godly competence. A plurality of elders in each local church is charged with the privilege and responsibility to manage the church in such a way that the members of the church are conducting their lives in a disciplined and God-honoring way.

God’s church is to be cared for (*epimeleomai*). The same word is used of the Good Samaritan who saw the needs of a man brutalized by thieves, moved toward him, dressed his wounds, picked him up, placed him on his own animal, then “brought him to an inn and *took care* of him” (Luke 10:34). To take care of church members requires personal sacrifice on the part of the elders, who must not be like the priest and Levite, too busy to care, too consumed with personal agendas, brand-building, and name-making to notice the needs of individual church members.

If church members are not being wisely led and sacrificially cared for by the elders of the church, something has gone wrong. If each member is not accounted for and accountable to “behave in the household of God,” there is a problem with the structure, or the men leading it, or both.

The church as a well-managed household, a well-run family, is a hard parameter in terms of evaluating church health. Are the church members being well managed and cared for? Church history provides ample evidence that the one-assembly model does not necessarily prevent a church from being poorly managed. In fact, I contend that a two-campus church of 1000 might do a better job of caring for its members than a one-assembly church of 6000. When is a church too big? When the elders can no longer effectively manage and care for each member of the church.

Core Principles

Ten years ago, we identified core principles in Scripture that we were unwilling to abandon in our quest to establish and maintain a second campus. What does a well-managed church look like?

1. The church should be marked by right preaching of the Word, right observance of the ordinances, and the right practice of church discipline.

Here we continue to acknowledge the classic marks of a true church recovered by the Reformers. Germane to the issue of this paper is the right practice of church discipline. If a church is organized and managed in such a way that formative and corrective church discipline cannot be practiced according to biblical standards, something has gone awry, and the church is not healthy.

The foundation of church discipline is meaningful church membership because membership identifies who is accountable. By entering into our church covenant, every new member solemnly agrees to take responsibility for the church's mission and be accountable to the church family for their personal belief and behavior; their creed and their conduct.

2. The church should be led by a qualified eldership and deaconship

Sound doctrine and healthy church discipline is overseen by a plurality of qualified overseers (elders). Church discipline should almost always begin at a private and personal level. But if the disagreement is not resolved or repentance does not take place, eventually the elders will be involved as arbiters, shepherding members through the discipline process. This requires spiritual maturity and uncommon wisdom. Therefore, the elders, along with the deacons, must meet the high qualifications of Scripture.

These qualified leaders must also and always be in a position of healthy accountability. None of them should be isolated or insulated from genuine fellowship and mutual accountability for any reason. No elder or pastor is so important that he cannot be replaced. No elder or pastor is self-sufficient or above the need for loving, gentle, firm rebuke from another church member. An unaccountable church leader is an unqualified church leader.

3. Each member should be known and cared for by at least one elder.

Once a local church grows beyond a hundred people, it becomes difficult for every member to be known by one pastor. Even if the pastor knows someone by name, he

probably does not know many of the present and pressing circumstances of their life. Therefore, the Biblical prescription of multiple elders with shared leadership in the church allows for a division of labor in a well-managed household.

While each member may not know all the elders, and each elder may not know all the members, each member should know and be known by at least one elder, and preferably several. Therefore, every member of the church is represented at every meeting of the council of elders. Otherwise, how can members be cared for and held accountable? How can we know the condition of the flock? (Pr. 27:23).

4. Each member should be served by deacons.

The deacon's role of serving the church's physical and material needs does not only include managing money and maintaining buildings. It also means providing for the needs of widows, single moms, shut-ins, and others in the church who need loving and wise material assistance. Each member has the right to expect this from their church family, and this ministry is led and managed by qualified deacons.

5. Each member should be bound to other members by a church covenant and held accountable to the church family through the elders.

Whether the church has 60 or 6000 members, the ministry of loving church discipline must be managed by elder brothers in the church whom the church itself has elected. Should a church member call a fellow member they haven't seen on Sunday morning in weeks to check on them? Of course. But if in the process that member discovers something that needs the attention of the elders, they should notify the elders so the appropriate edifying action can take place.

As any church grows larger, the elders must be diligent and creative in the way they monitor church attendance. In joint staff meetings and elder meetings, someone may ask, Has anyone seen this church member in public worship lately? Through software programs, we can immediately determine if this person has been attending their community group, no matter which service or campus they attend. At any time, the elders can determine who is following through on their covenant promises regarding faithful attendance, and who is not. Consequently, the membership roll is current and made up only of active and engaged church members. The membership roll is annually purged of inactive and unrepentant members.

6. Each member should have access to the teaching elders.

Whether it is the senior pastor or any of the associate pastors, we all have time for any church member. That is one of the benefits of church membership that every church member should expect. We are available to every member for any kind of appointment. Sometimes the need is an urgent crisis, like a death in the family. Sometimes the need is urgent and ongoing, like a troubled marriage. Sometimes we are needed for funerals and sometimes we are needed for weddings and sometimes we are needed to give counsel on business decisions. At all times (within reason!) we must be accessible.

As the primary preaching pastor, I am accessible, in person, every Sunday morning to every member of the church. If I preach at the Madison campus at 9:15, I am there to greet people as they enter to worship. Later, when I preach at the Decatur campus at 10:45, I am there after the service to talk to people as long as they want to talk, whether about the sermon or their upcoming surgery. The next week, the schedule is reversed. Consequently, I am usually one of the last people to leave the building every Sunday morning. That is my joy and privilege as a pastor. Later that afternoon, I am available. On Tuesday mornings at 6:30 I am at the church-wide Men's Prayer Breakfast as we intercede for our missionaries. Thursday mornings at 6:30 I lead a men's Bible study. Throughout the week, I am available to every member of the church and I have never said no to any member who wants to meet with me.

Summary of What Our Model Requires

- One eldership that oversees the entire church and meets together.
- One deaconship that serves the entire church and meets together.
- One staff that strategizes and meets together.
- One church covenant that binds us together.
- One sermon, delivered twice, on the Lord's Day Morning that equips us together.
- One order of service on the Lord's Day Morning that guides our worship together.
- One budget that is voted on together.
- One business meeting held annually and as needed to make decisions together.
- One missions committee that meets monthly to oversee our missionary family and organize one annual missions conference, and plan missions trips where members from both campuses travel and minister together.
- One constitution.
- One membership roll.

What Our Model Precludes

1. A distant campus.

If the campuses are so far away that the preacher is unable to preach at both campuses each Lord's Day, the preacher will be unknown and unknowable to half of the church

family. If distance prevents regular meetings of a unified council of Elders, it's difficult to see how the church can be managed well.

2. A third campus.

From the beginning, we planned to have no more than two campuses. A third campus would prevent us from keeping our core commitments listed above.

For example, if a multi-site church has 17 campuses separated by hundreds of miles attended by over 43,000 people, then most of the people will never meet the Senior Pastor of the church or ever be known by the elders of the church. [This model](#) would be unworkable for us, given our core principles.

Leeman's Objection: This Is Not a Team

Leeman writes, "A question to ask multisiters is What role does a gathering play in a church becoming a church? It's not clear to me that everyone who affirms the multisite or multiservice structure has considered this question" (OA, 94).

It's a fair question and I believe Leeman when he says that it's not clear to him that everyone who affirms the multisite or multiservice structure has considered the question. What I know is that I have. Gathering plays an essential role in a church becoming a church. Gathering is a *sine qua non* of a church being a church. And by noon on every Sunday, I believe our church has gathered.

Leeman uses the team analogy to describe the church:

"A team is a group of people who play a sport together, but not only *when* they play the sport together. You wouldn't call them a team if they never played as one. But insofar as they do, you would call them a team even when they are not together. The function creates the thing, without which there is no thing...So the next time you hear someone say, 'The church is a people not a place,' you might respond: 'Sort of. The people become a people by regularly assembling in a place. You can't call the team a team if they never play together.'" (OA, 44,64; see also 19 and 81).

Suppose a football team has a regular Monday morning meeting from 9-12. The meeting takes place in a large auditorium. The auditorium is equipped with folding dividing walls that were accidentally left unfolded from an event the night before, so half of the team cannot see the other, but they can all see the head coach and the whiteboard. Is this a team gathering?

The next week, a tornado damages their building (not unrealistic where I live) so severely they must hold their team meeting in a smaller facility with no auditorium, but two smaller rooms, so that the first hour the head coach meets with the offense, while the defensive

coordinator meets with the defense in another room to cover issues specifically related to the defense. In the second hour, the head coach meets with the defense, while the offensive coordinator meets with the offense to cover issues specifically related to the offense. Would this be a team meeting?

After the meeting and throughout the week, members of the offense and defense often interact, engage in conversations on the practice field, train together in the gym, invite each other to their homes for family dinners, attend smaller meetings concerning the game plan, maybe even go on vacation together with each other's families.

If any player has a matter to discuss with any of his coaches, all the coaches are accessible. He knows the coaches and the coaches know him. There is one team rule book so that coaches impartially enforce discipline on the players and one another. For the Monday morning team meetings, this one team hears one message by the same coaches, who are supported by one budget, who have met prior to the team meeting to form one game plan for this one team which has one goal. Yet they meet at the same time in two locations. Would this gathering on Monday morning between 9 and 12 still be considered a team meeting? Would the coach be lying to the press if he told them that the team (singular) met last Monday morning?

During the game itself, the offense plays while defense sits on the sidelines, often grouped together around a coach with a whiteboard. During the game, offense and defense are separated geographically, but are playing on the same team, working toward the same goal. No one would be inaccurate to say that this team played together.

In Leeman's analogy, public worship is playing the game. I prefer another analogy in which public worship is the team meeting and playing the game happens during the week. As we receive the means of grace together on Sunday morning, we are prepared and equipped to play our positions, representing Christ in neighborhoods, schools, businesses, hospitals, and army bases, competing against the world, the flesh, and the devil, for the souls of men, women, and children. In the NFL, a team receives encouragement and instruction on Monday to represent their city on Sunday. In the church, a team receives encouragement and instruction on Sunday to represent their king on Monday.

To press the analogy further, someone might ask, Would it not be better to build a bigger and newer building to keep everyone in the same room at the same time for the team meeting? Probably, if time and money are not issues.

But the point of the analogy is not to say which is the better situation. The point is that the team has really gathered on Monday morning to accomplish their goals using the resources they have. So, my answer to Leeman's question is this: Yes, gathering is an essential and necessary part of a church being a church, but the logistics involved in that gathering may vary to some degree from church to church based on their unique circumstances and opportunities.

Christian Freedom Regarding Church Structure

As we have seen, no local church has the freedom to disparage the preaching of the Word, the observance of baptism and the Lord's Supper, the practice of church discipline, public prayer, and the public reading of Scripture. No church has the freedom to neglect songs of praise that teach sound doctrine in public worship. No church has the freedom to renounce sound doctrine and the authority of Scripture. These are all things that are specifically taught in the New Testament.

However, Scripture gives some freedom for each church to organize and strategize in their unique place and time within clear Biblical bounds to fulfill the Great Commission. In God's providence, Scripture gives us the basic components of church structure, providing two offices: elders who oversee and deacons who serve. Throughout church history, as the never-changing gospel advances across different cultures and generations, each church is given some room to adapt and adjust to their unique local culture and gospel-advancing opportunities.

For example, some churches discern in 1 Timothy 5:17 two classes of elders: teaching and ruling. Teaching elders are often financially supported by the church while ruling elders are not. Yet, there is no office called Pastor, Senior Pastor, Lead Pastor, or Preaching Pastor in the New Testament. These things are not specifically spelled out in Scripture, but they can be reasonably inferred. There is no specific command to gather for public worship on the first day of the week, but we do so because the New Testament reports that the early church did, and it seems prudent to follow their example and the example of every succeeding generation of Christians.

Historical narrative found in the book of Acts reports what was, but not necessarily what should be. For authoritative instruction, we lean more heavily on the didactic material of the epistles. Yet even the epistles give little or no specific instruction on where to meet, when to meet, how to meet, what to wear, church buildings, building programs, music style, instruments, choirs, air conditioning, sound and video systems, building stewardship campaigns, ordination services, Sunday night services, Sunday School, Wednesday night prayer meetings, nurseries, children's ministry, weddings, or funerals, but most of us believe a local church has the freedom to enjoy, practice or celebrate these things. Each church is free to decide how to do it best, or whether to do it at all. Each pastor is responsible to guide the church wisely and on these questionable matters "it is before his own Master that he stands or falls" (Ro. 14:4).

But just because you can doesn't mean you should. Each church would be wise to make these decisions in the light of sound biblical exegesis, church history, tradition, and the ongoing discussion and debate within the communion of the saints. More importantly, each

church would also be wise to make these decisions in view of the future judgment and our accountability to the Chief Shepherd.

So yes, there is some freedom here, but it should be exercised with a sober caution. Simply put, I am not certain what the apostles would think about multiple services, multi-site churches, or video venues. Some people find it hard to believe that Paul, the traditionalist, would have approved of any of it. Some people find it hard to believe that Paul, the innovator, would not have approved at all. Beyond some essential details, none of us know exactly how the church at Jerusalem was organized, and all of us are left to speculate to some degree.

Jonathan Leeman disagrees with me and holds the position that a church is not free to call itself one church if it has more than one service or more than one location, no matter how well it is managed. However, we both agree that this is a second-order issue, so that while we disagree on this matter, we can love and affirm one another as Christians and partners in the gospel (OA, 19, 37).

Conclusion

All growth brings problems and challenges, tests, and temptations. What is the best way to manage numerical growth?

The *one-assembly model* has the advantage of history and simplicity. Within the Protestant tradition, particularly the Baptist wing, this model has dominated for centuries. It is time-tested. But it was also in the Baptist wing that large building programs (i.e., Spurgeon) and multiple services in one location seemed to gain the most traction.

Another version of this model accommodates growth by planting or revitalizing other churches geographically near enough so that a portion of present members can transfer membership to another church. Still, only in the smallest of these churches will a church member know all the other members in a meaningful way.

The *multiple service model* has the advantage of accommodating growth with good stewardship, increasing the ability to make more disciples without incurring the cost of new building construction. Yet it is possible for two people to attend the same church for months or years without meeting each other.

The *dual-campus model* has the advantage of reaching strategic places for the gospel quickly, by mobilizing the resources of an established and healthy church immediately. It also allows opportunities to develop younger pastors in the role of campus pastors. The disadvantage is that much of basic church life becomes more complicated with logistical, technological, and administrative necessities. While all churches today are somewhat dependent on technology, the tech-dependence increases in a dual-campus church. It remains to be seen how long this model can be most effective, but a one-church-in-two-

location church can be structured so that it paves the way for a future establishment of each campus as two autonomous local churches who agree to work together. This is a move from one-church-in-two-locations to two-churches-in-one-association.

The *multi-campus model* has some of the advantages of the dual-campus model and all the disadvantages. While this model may experience numerical success, it often appears to be overly dependent, not only on a studio-quality video production, but also on a charismatic leader who is often viewed as a celebrity. It is often not clear to whom and how this man is accountable. Succession plans for churches are always a challenge, but if such a popular pastor is involved in a scandal, the temptation is strong to lower the bar to cover it up in a dishonorable effort to preserve the massive institution. In other words, the pastor is often not held accountable or is held to a lower standard for pragmatic reasons. But even if the pastor maintains his integrity, eventually he will retire or die, and qualified replacements for such a uniquely demanding position may be impossible to find.

Recommendation

I recommend Jonathan Leeman's book for every pastor and church leader, especially those who are considering a multiservice or multisite model. While you may not like much of what you read here, you will find it difficult to refute. It is a useful and edifying exercise to engage the theological and lexical arguments Leeman presents, and you may possibly reconsider your church's long-term plans for the sake of its long-term health.

In our case, Leeman did not dissuade us from starting a second campus, but he did persuade us to restrain our plans and limit our approach to a dual-campus model. The warnings and cautions in the book regarding the pitfalls of the multisite model remain pertinent, and to a large degree, have been vindicated in dramatic ways in recent years.