

One Body under one Head, but many local churches (reading Revelation 1:1–2:7)

The Lord Jesus Christ is the sole, sovereign Head of His Body, the Church. There is one Head and one Body composed of all true believers and only true believers since Pentecost. But there are also many local churches, in the New Testament clearly distinct from one another. There are at least three perspectives from which to consider this phenomena of one Church but many churches.

I. One sovereign Lord over His church, but many individual churches.

1. Churches differ in location, strengths, faults, and needs.

The New Testament letters show both the plurality of churches, often related to their location, and the varied characteristics of these churches. Revelation 1–3 show seven distinct, geographically different churches, who receive differing commendations, criticisms, and exhortations. Therefore, it is important for each local church to be aware of her own spiritual condition and what to do about it. However, every church with every individual Christian is to learn from the commendations and criticisms, the exhortations and promises given to all the churches. “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”

2. The same Lord relates to different churches according to their need.

This is seen in the letters to the seven churches of Revelation 2–3 as well as in the way God moved each of the New Testament letters to be written. Although churches are different, the Lord is always exactly what each church needs.

II. One spiritual Body, but locally definable churches.

1. All churches shared a common profession of faith which defined who “belonged” to that church and who did not.

The New Testament letters to churches assumed a true profession of faith (e.g., Ephesians 2:1ff; Hebrews 6:9; 1 Peter 1:7). Only a true profession of faith in Christ results in receiving the Spirit and uniting the believer to others in the Body.

2. Local churches acted upon the outward profession of faith and the evidence of spiritual fruit in that person’s life.

One true gospel was demanded (cf. Galatians 1:6–9) and as a result “unbelievers” could be distinguished from “believers” (cf. 1 Corinthians 14:24). Even church discipline was based upon distinguishing who “belonged” and who did not (cf. 1 Corinthians 5:12). But some could profess faith and then eventually reveal themselves as not truly children of God (cf. 1 John 2:19). Others might be disciplined, but restored by God and brought back into fellowship (2 Corinthians 2:5–11).

3. Local churches at the same time did not lose sight of the spiritual union which exists in the Body.

Churches helped believers of other churches materially (Acts 11:27–30; 2 Corinthians 8–9), shared the spiritual gifts to the Body (Acts 8:14; 11:19–26, 27–28; cf. Ephesians 4:7–11), passed on letters from Paul (Colossians 4:16), and sent letters of recommendation (Acts 18:27; 1 Corinthians 16:3; 2 Corinthians 3:1; Romans 16:1).

III. One great Shepherd, but locally shepherded churches.

1. A local congregation is allotted to the care of their elders who are given the task of shepherding (1 Peter 5:1–4).

2. These elders (overseers) will have to give account for their local shepherding (Hebrews 13:17).

What is implied in 1 Peter 5 is explicit in Hebrews. Though elders are appointed by people (cf. Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5), they are also appointed by God (Acts 20:28) and must give account to Him.

Therefore, it is important for a local church to determine who is allotted to their care.

A true believer is in the Body of Christ and should be in a local church for the sake of spiritual growth and the obedience which only is possible in a locally defined body of believers. Only by grace through faith in Christ alone is a person accepted by God, not through church membership. But together believers grow as God has intended. True believers form one Body under the one Head, Jesus Christ, and then associate together in many, individual local churches.

Questions for further thought and discussion:

- What specific commands in the New Testament require working together locally with other believers?
- How have online options during restrictions helped local churches be what they are supposed to be? How can the benefits be kept when restrictions for churches are fully removed?
- How have biblical characteristics of the local church been blurred or lost through the time of restrictions? What could be done better, if churches are restricted because of persecution?