



In 1 Corinthians 12:28¹ the apostle Paul gives a rough sketch for the structure of the local church. The local church is actually a part of the universal church, the whole body van Jesus Christ.

Paul writes:

- *Just as a **body, though one**, has many parts, but all its many parts form **one body, so it is with Christ**. For we were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body - whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free - and we were all given the one Spirit to drink. (1 Corinthians 12:12-13)*

Paul writes this with the local church in mind, but each local church is also a part of the whole body van Jesus Christ.

Paul says of the Lord's supper:

- *Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all share the one loaf. (1 Corinthians 10:17)*

And that one loaf is Jesus Christ.

Unfortunately, small human thinking reduces these statements to maintaining so many different local churches with differing views.

Jesus is not divided, however, because:

- *... yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live. (1 Corinthians 8:6)*

Most of the letters in the New Testament are not addressed to individual churches, but to the inhabitants of cities such as Rome, Corinth, Ephesus, Philippi, Colosse, Thessalonica, or regions such as Galatia or broader:

- *James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, To **the twelve tribes scattered among the nations**: Greetings. (James 1:1)*
- *Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, To God's elect, exiles **scattered throughout the provinces of Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia**, ... (1 Peter 1:1)*
- *Simon Peter, a servant and apostle of Jesus Christ, **to those who** through the righteousness of our God and Saviour Jesus Christ **have received a faith as precious as ours**: ... (2 Peter 1:1)*

For this one body, the universal church, which is the gathering of all upright believers, disciples of Jesus Christ, God has given a structure, which Paul describes in Ephesians 4:11.

This is the focus of the present study.

Why the universal church?

The first reason:

Paul opens this letter by saying:

- *Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, to God's holy people [in Ephesus], the faithful in Christ Jesus: ... (Ephesians 1:1)*

¹ Study: 1 Corinthians 12:28 - Structure of the local church.



Words that are not found in all authoritative ancient manuscripts are indicated by footnotes in the edition of the New International Version used in The School of Life's studies.

Since "in Ephesus" is footnoted thus, this means that authoritative manuscripts have been found in which Paul's opening sentence reads:

- *Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, to God's holy people _____, the faithful in Christ Jesus: ... (Ephesians 1:1)*

Paul apparently dictated this letter to several people, or this letter was copied several times. It was therefore not intended to be sent to one particular city or church. It was to be handed personally to the church in the different cities. This is why the space was left open, so that the name of the relevant city could be filled in.

Only the letter addressed to Ephesus has survived, along with other copies in which no place name was filled in.

The second reason:

In his letters Paul mostly reacts to situations within the churches to which he writes.

That is not the case as far as the letter to the Ephesians is concerned.

Paul writes this letter whilst in prison and wanting to encourage the church.

In this letter, addressed to pagan believers, he explains briefly the meaning of the Gospel and what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ.

Such as in the texts

- *That, however, is not the way of life you learned when you heard about Christ and were taught in him in accordance with the truth that is in Jesus. You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness. Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to your neighbour, **for we are all members of one body.** (Ephesians 4:20-25)*

And:

- *As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, **bearing with one another in love.** Make every effort **to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit,** just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; **one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.** (Ephesians 4:1-6)*

Paul does not write this with one particular church in mind, but to every church that is conscious of being a part of the universal body of Jesus Christ.

Jesus prayed to His Father:

- *"My prayer is not for them (the 12 apostles) alone. I pray **also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one,** Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. **May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me.** **I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one - I in them***



and you in me - so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. (James 17:20-23)

This is apparently extremely important to Jesus, so much so that He prays twice in succession that those who believe in Him would be one **and** perfectly united, so that a strong testimony will emanate from His body (the universal church).

This is what Paul meant when he wrote a letter with general teaching to the different churches.

He admonished them to maintain the unity of the Spirit, through the bond of peace.

The text of Ephesians 4:11:

Remark:

Here Paul elaborates upon what he referred to in 1 Corinthians 12:5.²

- *There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord (Jesus).*

In order to guard over the unity of the (universal) church, Paul sees a number of people, given to the church by Jesus, in a particular ministry.

In a more literal translation:

- *He who descended is the very one who ascended higher than all the heavens, in order to fill the whole universe. (Ephesians 4:10)*
- *And He (Jesus) has indeed given,*
 - *apostles furthermore*
 - *prophets furthermore*
 - *evangelists furthermore*
 - *pastors en*
 - *teachers, ... (Ephesians 4:11)*

With a clear purpose:

- ***... to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up***
- ***until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God ...***
- ***Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching ...***
- ***Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ.***
- ***From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.***
- ***So I tell you this, and insist on it in the Lord, that you must no longer live as the Gentiles do ...***
- ***That, however, is not the way of life you learned when you heard about Christ***
- ***and were taught in him in accordance with the truth that is in Jesus.***
- ***You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires;***

² Study: Spiritual life in the church.



- ***to be made new in the attitude of your minds;***
- ***and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.***
- ***Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to your neighbour, for we are all members of one body.*** (Ephesians 4:12-25)

A tremendous perspective, as it should be, so that power will emanate from the (universal) body of Jesus Christ: so that the world will believe and recognise that Jesus came to this world and died vicariously for our sins.

The structure of the universal church.

Paul sees 5 ministries that are intended to support the different local churches and keep them together.

These are people whom Jesus gives to the (universal) church, for the edification of His Body.

Apostles, prophets, teachers.

Apostles, prophets and teachers are described in the study on 1 Corinthians 12:28, in which Paul describes the structure of the local church.

That study can be consulted for further explanation.³

Apostles, prophets and teachers will first of all be appointed by God to a ministry in the local church. There they can gain experience and grow in their ministry through a life in relationship with Jesus Christ .

From their local church they can then be given by Jesus for ministry to the universal church, in order to support the local churches and to establish new churches.

Think of the apostles who initially gave leadership to the church at Jerusalem, but who later spread out over the whole world.

Paul and Barnabas too, who, together with other prophets and teachers, worked in the church at Antioch, from where they were sent out.

- *While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.”*
- *So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off.*
- *The two of them, sent on their way by the Holy Spirit, went down to Seleucia and sailed from there to Cyprus. (Acts 13:2-4)*

Evangelists.

Clearly a ministry that is not exercised in the local church, but outside of it.

Preferably based on, or in consultation with one or more local churches.

³ Study: 1 Corinthians 12:28 – The structure of the local church.



Someone who has received from God the natural capability to explain complex matters in a simple, comprehensible manner, will be capable of explaining the essence of the Gospel in a simple manner to people who are not acquainted with God's Word, if he has a living relationship with Jesus Christ as well.

Such a person is given by Jesus Christ to the (universal) church as an evangelist.

People who are converted through the ministry of an evangelist will have to be cared for by the local churches. Not necessarily by directing or immediately taking them to a meeting, but by offering them the possibility of further instruction from the Bible.

Jesus' commission is:

- *Therefore go and make **disciples** of all nations, ... and **teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.** (Matthew 28:19)*

The commission is not to convert all the nations, but to make disciples of them.

Conversion, through the ministry of an evangelist, should result in a life in relationship with the Triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

A life that is also consistent with the norms and values of the Heavenly Kingdom.

Pastors.

It seems strange that the pastor is a ministry to the universal church and not to the local church.

Paul tells the elders of the church(es) at Ephesus:

- *Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood. (Acts 20:28)*

Overseers and elders⁴ have the responsibility of keeping watch over the **local church**.

This does not confer responsibility for the life of the individual believer upon them.⁵

That responsibility lies with the believer himself, in relation to Jesus, as Peter writes:

- *For "you were like sheep going astray," but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls. (1 Peter 2:25)*

This Shepherd and Overseer is Jesus. He is the Good Shepherd who keeps watch over the souls of the individual believers.

The task of the pastor:

The task of a pastor is:

- To lead the sheep to green pastures and cool waters (think of Psalm 23).
To do this they will sometimes first have to remove the poisonous plants from the pasture.
- To keep the flock together and bring back sheep that go astray.
- To look after sick sheep.
- To protect the flock against predatory animals.

4 Study: Elders and overseers.

5 Study: Hebrews 13:17 – Have confidence in your leaders.



The pastors, given to the universal church, have a commission that will be a combination of these different tasks.

In view of the fact that they are given to the universal church, the sheep must represent the different individual churches here.

Pastors must be alert and correct the churches where necessary.

In view of the fact that Paul mentions pastors and teachers together, they will be in close contact with one another and, together, watch over sound doctrine in the local churches.

They must be alert to false doctrines in the churches and expose them.

They will also have to warn against attacks from outside the church, in the changing spirit of the world, and ensure that the churches receive sound and clear teaching from the Word in order to be armed against them.

Summary:

Jesus has given people to the church:

- *... to equip his people for works of service,*
- *so that the body of Christ may be built up*
- *until we all reach unity in the faith*
- *and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature,*
- *attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. (Ephesians 4:12-13)*

It is of great importance therefore:

- that people with these ministries be seen and recognised
- that the local churches be open to advice 'from above' in order to seek the will of God together:

And this:

- *... that now, through the church, **the manifold wisdom of God** should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, according to his eternal purpose that he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord. In him and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence. (Ephesians 3:10-12)*

What divine power would go forth into the world from the Body van Jesus Christ if unity in Christ were to be restored, throughout all the different local churches and denominations!!