

"Church" in 1 Timothy 3:15: Local or Universal?

by Tim Haile

In their effort to justify the use of non-church religious organizations for evangelism, edification and worship, some brethren have found it necessary to *deny* that the "church" of 1 Timothy 3:15 is the *local church*. They need for it to be the *universal church*, for they reason that this allows them to justify their human societies on the basis of generic authority. Strangely, they conclude that individual saints are *the pillar and ground of the truth* when they function *jointly* in a human organization, but these same saints are *not* the pillar and ground of the truth when they function jointly through the local church! This alone shows the absolute folly and bias of their position.

Let us get the passage before us. Paul wrote, "*These things I write to you, though I hope to come to you shortly; but if I am delayed, I write so that you may know how you ought to conduct yourself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth*" (1 Timothy 3:14, 15).

It is easy to see why the supporters of man-made religious societies need for the "church" of this passage to be the *universal church*, and not the *local church*. If Paul is here speaking of the *local church*, then the local church, not the universal church, is *specified* as being "*the pillar and ground of the truth.*" Specific authority is by its very nature, *exclusive*. For example, the use of instrumental music in worship to God is excluded on the basis that "singing" is specified in Scripture (Eph. 5:19). Obviously, the defenders and promoters of non-church evangelistic collectivities cannot allow an interpretation of 1 Timothy 3:15 that specifies the *local church* as God's evangelistic collective, for such would prohibit the formation of alternative organizations. Agenda-driven interpretation is usually *flawed* interpretation.

The New Testament *Model* of the "Pillar and Ground of the Truth"

Those who deny that 1 Timothy 3:15 refers to the local church are forced to ignore several powerful examples of local church evangelism:

Philippi was praised and *commended* for her long time support of Paul in "***the defense and confirmation of the gospel***" (Phil. 1:7, 16; 4: 14-16). These passages tell us that the church at Philippi *supported* the truth. This local church functioned as "the pillar and ground of the truth."

Thessalonica "*sounded out the word of the Lord*" to the extent that they were "*examples to all in Macedonia and Achaia who believe*" (1 Thess. 1:7, 8). The local church at Thessalonica was amazingly successful in its evangelistic endeavors. In fact, no better illustration of 1 Timothy 3:15 can be produced. These brethren "*received*" the gospel message as "*the word of God*" (1 Thess. 2:13), and they faithfully proclaimed it to others. The church at Thessalonica was truly a "pillar and ground of the truth."

Jerusalem was also highly evangelistic (Acts 5:41, 42; 8:4). The church grew from 3000 to "many thousands" (Acts 2:41; 21:20) in less than thirty years.

Antioch of Syria was also highly evangelistic. In fact, God's actions through this church are proof that the local church organization is God's choice of evangelistic organizations. When the Holy Spirit wanted Paul and Barnabas to be sent on an evangelistic mission, He turned to the local church at Antioch, saying, "*set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.*" These men were "sent out" by both the local church and the Holy Spirit (Acts 13:1-4). The local church at Antioch became Paul's base of operations in 3 evangelistic missions. This passage powerfully expresses God's view of the role of the local church organization in performing evangelistic work. God did not turn to a human organization for this work; He turned to a local church.

These local churches provide a perfect model of a group of people functioning as the "*pillar and ground of the truth.*"

A Look at the Context of 1 Timothy 3

The Greek word *ecclesia* is variously applied in the New Testament. Proper meaning must be determined from the context and particular use.

- Stephen spoke of the "church (ecclesia) in the wilderness" (Acts 7:38). The context shows that he had reference to the assembly of Jews at mount Sinai.
- The town clerk of Ephesus warned the people that matters of law should be taken up in a "lawful assembly (ecclesia)," not by a riot (Acts 19:39). Context shows that he had reference to a *legal* body.
- The word *ecclesia* is used in verses 32 and 41 of Acts 19 in reference to an angry mob of people.
- Jesus said, "*Upon this rock I will build my church (ecclesia)*" (Matthew 16:18). The "church" of this passage is the universal church. There is

only one universal church (Jesus called it "my church"). It contains all of the saved of all of the earth. Their names are written in Heaven (Hebrews 12:23). It should be noted that this passage speaks of "*the spirits of just men made perfect*," which means that the universal church includes **dead saints** as well as living saints. I would love for someone to explain how dead saints can be involved in the forming, funding and functioning of human organizations!

- Paul spoke of "churches of Christ" (Rom. 16:16), "churches of Asia" (1 Cor. 16:19), "churches of Macedonia" (2 Cor. 8:1) "churches of Galatia" (Gal. 1:2) and "churches of Judea" (Gal. 1:22). He wrote letters to churches in specific localities (1 Cor. 1:2; 1 Thess. 1:1). The churches of these passages are *local churches*. They are distinguished from each other on the basis of their local identity.

- The universal church has no earthly headquarters, organization or function. Any effort to activate the church universal is an act of iniquity.

As with the above uses, the nature of the "church" in 1 Timothy 3:15 is easily determined by looking at the immediate context of the verse. The statement of verse 15 is introduced on the basis of the "things" that Paul had written. And not just any "things," but "*these things*." If one can determine the sphere of application of the "things" that Paul had written, then he can also determine the scope and meaning of the word "church" in verse 15.

1 Timothy 3:1-7 - Qualifications of Elders: Paul had just given the qualifications of "elders." Elders, also known as "bishops" and "pastors," are entrusted with feeding and superintending ("*ruling*" see 1 Tim. 5:17) the flock of God that is "among" them (Acts 20:28; 1 Peter 5:2), that is, the **local church**. They do not superintend the *universal* church, for it has no human superintendents (Eph. 1:22). Elders are to be appointed in **local churches** (Acts 14:23; Tit. 1:5), not the universal church. The "church" in 1 Timothy 3:15 must be the local church.

1 Timothy 3:8-13 - Qualifications of Deacons: Paul had given the qualifications of "deacons" just before mentioning the "church" in verse 15. These *deacons* are specially qualified servants that function under elders. Since the scope and extent of the oversight of elders is *the local church*, then deacons are servants also of the **local church**, not of the universal church. When writing the Philippians, Paul addressed himself to the saints at Philippi "*with the bishops and deacons*" (Phil. 1:1). And though the word "church" is not used in Philippians 1:1, it is used in Philippians 4:15 to describe these *same* saints. Philippians 1:1 paints a clear picture of a fully

established, scripturally organized, **local** church of Christ.

It was after writing about "these things," that Paul spoke to Timothy about how he was to conduct himself in the "church" that is the "pillar and ground of the truth." The context is clear. Paul had reference to the local church.

1 Timothy 5:16 - the Church and Benevolence: Paul said, "*If any believing woman has relatives who are widows, let her care for them. Let the church not be burdened, so that it may care for those who are really widows.*" For this verse to make sense, the "church" of this verse must be the *local* church. Again, the universal church has no organic function. Incidentally, "elders" are mentioned in the very next verse, and as we noted above, elders rule the *local* church, not the universal church. The "church" of 1 Timothy 5:16 cannot be the universal church.

Conclusion

The church of 1 Timothy 3:15 was one in which Timothy would "conduct" himself. One does not "conduct" himself in the universal church, for the universal church has no collective conduct. Those who say that the church of 1 Timothy 3:15 is the universal church do so in order to defend the existence and actions of non-church evangelistic collectivities. Though some of these brethren have doubtlessly failed to consider this consequence, their interpretation of 1 Timothy 3:15 actually demands an organized activation of the universal church. This is a serious fallacy of exegesis, and it has dangerous and far-reaching consequences. A simple analysis of the above passages will show that the "church" of 1 Timothy 3:15 is the **local** church, and that this passage thus specifies the **local church** as "the pillar and ground of the truth."

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