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# GOD'S MYSTERY REVEALED

I WILL NEVER FORGET THAT MOMENT, though it happened almost forty years ago. In 1968, during the middle of the Vietnam War and the height of an anti-institutional movement that was complete with hippies, free love, and free speech, I was teaching at Dallas Theological Seminary on the subject of the church.

As normally happens, the larger cultural trend had begun to spill over into the subcultures of our society. To my surprise, what had captured the minds and hearts of many young Americans was now reaching into evangelical Christianity. One seminary student raised the question: “Who needs the church?”

The student then proceeded to answer his own question—at least in part—by saying, “Perhaps God is going to bypass the church in order to carry out the Great Commission.” A few of his classmates agreed, especially the relatively new Christians who had become believers on the college campus.

Frankly, I was not only suprised, but rather stunned—though I was able to maintain my composure. I quickly realized that I could not assume a clear understanding of biblical ecclesiology, even in a theological seminary. Consequently I made a decision to do something I had never done before nor since. In the middle of the semester, I informed the students that I wanted them to disregard my syllabus that I had prepared for the course—the goals, the basic outline, and the assignments. “We’re going back to *the* syllabus,” I said, meaning the New Testament. Beginning with the Great Commission, we began exploring how the disciples of Jesus Christ carried out this command as recorded in the book of Acts and the New Testament letters. More specifically, our goal was to take a fresh look at God’s plan for the church—then and now.

This was a life-changing experience for all of us—including the professor. In fact, the decision I made that day eventually led me out of the seminary classroom as a full-time professor to become a church planting pastor.

### THE GREAT MYSTERY: THE CHURCH

After nearly four decades starting and pastoring churches, I remain very excited about this great mystery God has revealed: His church. Though the church is “under fire” and is often called irrelevant, just as it was during the “anti-institutional” era in our culture, it is still the essence of the New Testament story. Though what the New Testament identifies as “the church” has often been distorted from the first century until today, the Scriptures declare that this mystery and glorious reality was even in the mind of God before He created the world (see Ephesians 1:4).

To carry out this divine plan within the framework of time, God sent His Son, Jesus Christ, to redeem us with His blood and to forgive our sins (see Ephesians 1:7). As a result, someday—perhaps soon—believers throughout time will be presented to Christ as His perfect bride. What a glorious moment that will be as we celebrate that great event, the wedding of the Lamb (see Revelation 19:7). On that won-

derful day we'll be like Christ—"a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish" (Ephesians 5:27).

In the meantime, we live in the here and now. All over the world God has called His sons and daughters to be His "workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works" (Ephesians 2:10). We are to reflect His character, which is His righteousness and holiness.

The Scriptures give us very specific criteria for evaluating the extent that we as His people are growing into "the whole measure of the fullness of Christ" (Ephesians 4:13). This measurement is what our study in this book is all about! Thankfully, the Word of God makes very clear what the image of Christ is, and with God's help we can reflect that image in wonderful ways. The more we understand God's glorious plan for the church and the more we are involved in this process of spiritual growth, the more excited we'll become about the church of Jesus Christ! I know that I am, and I hope that you will be, too!

### *Defining the Church*

Before we unfold God's plan for evaluating the maturity level in a local church, we need to define the term "church." In other words, what are we measuring?

It's my deep personal conviction that the primary sources for gaining this understanding are the books of the New Testament. Therefore, let's take a careful look at this amazing set of historical documents and what they declare about the unique revelation from God that Paul called the "mystery of Christ" (Ephesians 3:4). When Paul wrote "to the saints in Ephesus" (Ephesians 1:1) and the other churches in Asia,<sup>1</sup> he reminded them that this "*mystery* . . . was not made known to men in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets" (Ephesians 3:4-5).

What is this mystery? Paul went on to answer this question, especially since some believing Jewish people had difficulty understanding God's divine plan. Perhaps they had trouble comprehending this mystery since the Gentiles were "excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world" (Ephesians 2:12). But now, Paul insisted

that both Jews and Gentiles were “members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus” (Ephesians 3:6; see also 2:13–22).

While describing this amazing revelation—that is, this “mystery”—Paul maintained a spirit of great humility. He truly considered himself “less than the least of all God’s people” (Ephesians 3:8)—because of the way he had persecuted followers of Jesus Christ (see 1 Timothy 1:12–14). Yet God called him “to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ” (Ephesians 3:8). Paul never ceased to be amazed that, by God’s grace, he was chosen to proclaim this mystery, which he emphasized was revealed and embodied in the church.

### *The Ekklesia of God*

The Greek term *ekklesia* appears throughout the New Testament to describe the church. Jesus used the word three times. The other one hundred or so occurrences refer to both Jews and Gentiles who had responded to the gospel and put their faith in the Lord Jesus Christ for eternal salvation. Furthermore, the term is used to describe both the universal church and the local church. (See appendix A for a complete listing of verses that use the word *ekklesia*.)

### The Universal Church

Biblical authors used *ekklesia* approximately twenty times<sup>2</sup> to refer to the universal church, which we can describe in two ways:

1. All first-century believers scattered throughout the Roman world.
2. All believers of all time who are members of the body of Christ.

Let me illustrate. When Paul wrote to the Galatians and Corinthians, he confessed that as an unbeliever he had “persecuted the *church* of God” (Galatians 1:13; see also 1 Corinthians 15:9; Philippians 3:6). Paul was obviously referring not only to the believers in Jerusalem where he began his attack on the church but to all followers of Christ in the Roman world. In his testimony before King Agrippa,

he said that he “even went to foreign cities to persecute” those who had accepted Jesus Christ as the true Messiah (Acts 26:11).

However, Paul did not write exclusively about the first-century church. He also included Christians throughout the ages. In Ephesians, his references to the church certainly include believers who become a part of the body of Christ any time from Pentecost to that moment when the church is removed from the world. For example, he wrote, “And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way” (Ephesians 1:22–23; see also 3:10–11, 20–21; 5:23–25, 27, 29, 32).

### The Local Church

Although biblical writers used the term *ekklesia* to refer to all believers in Jesus Christ, both at a period in time and throughout the church age and into eternity, in most instances (eighty-two to be exact) they used this term to refer to believers who lived in specific geographical locations. In other words, in approximately 80 percent of the time the words “church” or “churches” were selected to refer to what we call “local churches” (see appendix A).

We must not, however, think of these “local churches” in terms of contemporary structural models. In most instances, New Testament passages pertain to all professing believers in a particular city or community. For example, Luke cited “the church at Jerusalem” (Acts 8:1) and “the church at Antioch” (Acts 13:1). Describing Paul’s first missionary journey, Luke referenced “each church” in “Lystra, Iconium and Antioch [Pisidian]” (Acts 14:21, 23).

On his second missionary journey, Paul wrote to “the *church* of the *Thessalonians*” (1 Thessalonians 1:1). However, Paul pluralized this term when he addressed “the *churches* in Galatia” (Galatians 1:2). In the same letter, he mentioned “the *churches* of Judea” (Galatians 1:22). And in his first letter to the Corinthians, he sent greetings from “the *churches* in the province of Asia” (1 Corinthians 16:19). In his second letter to the Corinthians, he used “the Macedonian *churches*” as an example of generosity (2 Corinthians 8:1).

In each of these verses, the biblical writers named local congregations in various geographical areas—primarily villages, towns, or cities. As it is today, churches in the first century were established in various population centers.

The word *ekklesia* literally means an “assembly,” or “congregation,” of people. However, New Testament writers used the word more broadly to describe Christians whether they were gathered together for worship or scattered throughout an area—in their homes, at work, shopping, visiting relatives, or recreating at the local spa. We must also remember that believers in a given city could not gather as one community since they had no facilities to meet in—other than their homes. Yet, they were called a single church in a particular city.

#### GOD’S DESIGN FOR RELATIONSHIPS WITHIN THE LOCAL CHURCH

What kind of relationships should exist among the followers of Jesus Christ? How are we to function? What should we look like to both believers and nonbelievers? What qualities reflect maturity? The answers to these questions will help us reach our goal: discovering the true measure of a healthy local church.

New Testament writers most frequently described local church participants as *disciples*, *brothers*, and *saints* (see appendix B). As with *ekklesia*, each functional definition gives fresh insight as to why these terms were selected. Clearly the church is made up of people who are followers of Jesus Christ, who have deep relationships with one another, and who increasingly reflect who God is as they manifest the fruit of the Holy Spirit.

#### ***Disciples***

The word “disciple” appears thirty times in Acts. In each occurrence, it describes true followers of Jesus Christ. Furthermore, when Luke identified believers as disciples, he did so only in the context of local churches—not the universal church (see appendix A). In fact, he used the term “disciples” interchangeably with the term “churches.” For

example, when Paul left on his second missionary journey, we read that “he [Paul] went through Syria and Cilicia, *strengthening the churches*” (Acts 15:41). When he left on his third journey, Luke recorded that he “traveled from place to place throughout the region of Galatia and Phrygia, *strengthening all the disciples*” (Acts 18:23). In other words, in Paul’s mind, “churches” *were* “disciples.” They were one and the same.

### The Gospel Records

When Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John penned the Gospels, they identified *disciples* as all who followed Jesus and listened to His teachings. The basic Greek word for “disciple,” *mathetes*, literally means “a learner.” That is why the term is used to describe the “disciples of John the Baptist” (Matthew 9:14 NLT), the “disciples of the Pharisees” (Mark 2:18), and the “disciples of Moses” (John 9:28). Those who followed and listened to Jesus’ teaching were also identified as “disciples of Jesus.”

Although a large number of people claimed to be Jesus’ learners, many of these so-called disciples turned their backs on the Savior when His demands became too great. For example, after Jesus had multiplied the loaves and fish for the huge crowd that had followed Him to the far shore of Galilee, He challenged a smaller group to accept Him as the Bread of Life. Not everyone welcomed the news. Some of the people became confused and disillusioned. John recorded that “many of his *disciples* turned back and no longer followed him” (John 6:66).

Clearly then, when we look carefully at the disciples of Jesus in the Gospel records, we discover people who were never fully committed to Christ. In fact, most were disciples in name only. Even all of the twelve disciples (the apostles) eventually deserted Jesus. Judas, of course, betrayed the Lord, but the others were also disloyal—they fled when Christ was arrested (see Matthew 26:56).

### The Book of Acts

When we encounter those who are called “disciples” in Acts, the term takes on a much broader and deeper meaning—and for two very important and related reasons.

*First, these disciples had experienced the presence of the Holy Spirit.*

As Luke picks up the rest of the story in Acts, Jesus had completed His redemptive plan. Yet many of His followers thought that as the Messiah, Jesus would establish an earthly kingdom in Israel. In fact, just before Jesus ascended to heaven from the Mount of Olives, some asked, “Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?” (Acts 1:6).

Their limited knowledge about Jesus was about to change. Once the Lord had ascended, His disciples—numbering approximately 120—obeyed Jesus’ command to wait in Jerusalem (see Acts 1:4, 13–14). Then, on the day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit descended on them with power.

This relatively small group formed the core of a rapidly growing church. As with all true believers, they became members of the universal church—the body of Christ.

“John baptized with water, but in a few days,” Jesus had told them, they would “be baptized with the Holy Spirit” (Acts 1:5). When this supernatural event took place, they began to understand why Jesus had really come into this world.

*Second, these disciples had a born-again experience.* Following Christ’s ascension and the coming of the Holy Spirit, the apostles and the other believers in Jerusalem understood much more clearly what they had heard from the lips of Jesus. At that point, He wasn’t only their teacher and they His learners, but He was also their Lord and Savior. They became His disciples in a new and much more meaningful way. That small band of born-again believers soon multiplied many times when three thousand listeners accepted Peter’s message on the day of Pentecost. They put their faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and were baptized (see Acts 2:41).<sup>3</sup>

Don’t misunderstand. Not all who joined this expanding group of disciples suddenly became paragons of faith, virtue, and holiness. But even then, as in every church today, some of these disciples matured quickly. Others took a longer period of time before they were able to truly “live a life worthy of the calling [that they had] received” (Ephesians 4:1). This is why Jesus commissioned the apostles not only to “make disciples” (secure true professions of faith) but also to teach these

disciples everything He had taught them (see Matthew 28:19–20). In other words, it takes time and effort to produce mature, dedicated, and committed disciples who measure up to God's standards individually and corporately as husband and wives, as whole households, and as a local fellowship of believers. This is certainly evident in Luke's history of the church as recorded in Acts.

### ***Brothers***

As the apostles began to take the Great Commission seriously, a different word was used to characterize these followers of Jesus Christ. In addition to being called “disciples,” they were also called “brothers”—a concept that the authors of the New Testament turned to more frequently than any other when writing about those who became a part of the *ekklesia* of God (see Acts 20:28).

#### Both Generic and Specific

The Greek word *adelphoi*, translated as “brothers” or “brethren,” is often used generically to refer to both brothers and sisters in Christ. This dual meaning appears in many languages. For example, in Spanish, the term *hermanos* (brothers) can be used to refer exclusively to men, or it can be used to refer to both men and women. Unfortunately, we have no equivalent word in the English language that describes both men and women. Consequently, when we read our Bibles, it's easy to interpret “brothers” as being masculine, but many times it includes both men and women.<sup>4</sup>

As we've seen, the word *disciples* only appears in Acts. However, *brothers* can be found both in Acts and in many other New Testament books. In fact, in Acts believers are called brothers thirty-two times—almost the same number of times they're referred to as disciples (see appendix B).

#### A Unique Family Term

*Brothers* is a very intimate term. It's a familial concept that implies that believers are flesh and blood siblings. However, when men and women put their faith in Jesus and become His disciples, they also

become “brothers and sisters in Christ”—born of the seed of Abraham (see Genesis 12:2–3; Romans 4:9–12). As Paul stated so clearly in his letter to the Romans, Abraham “is the father of all who believe” (Romans 4:11). And in his letter to the Ephesians, he wrote that when we put our faith in Christ, we’re born again into God’s eternal family and become “members of God’s household” (Ephesians 2:19).

### *Saints*

Another word that’s used to describe born-again members of the church is *saints* (from the Greek word *hagios*). This term appears in the New Testament nearly fifty times in this relational context but it is also used to describe the Spirit of God. He is called the Holy (*hagios*) Spirit. Consequently, when New Testament writers selected the term “saints,” they were describing people who were “holy ones” in God’s sight.

For example, Paul addressed the Corinthians as saints (see 2 Corinthians 1:2), even though most of them were living anything but godly lives (see 1 Corinthians 3:1–3). Yet because of their faith in Jesus Christ and their true salvation experience, God viewed them through Christ’s death and resurrection as perfectly *hagios*, or holy.

This is the way God sees each of us. If He didn’t, no one could be saved. This is why the doctrine of salvation by grace through faith and not by works is so important. None of us by our own strength can live perfect lives in order to qualify us to gain entrance into God’s eternal kingdom. As Paul informed the Galatians, we can never be saved or justified by trying to keep the law (see Galatians 2:16). Only Jesus Christ kept the law of God perfectly, and that is why He is our Savior.

However, even though we can’t reach this standard in this life, it is still God’s will for all of us to become holy as God is holy (see 1 Peter 1:15–16). We are to renew our minds so that we “do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but [are] transformed” (Romans 12:2). Put another way, we’re to rid ourselves of the sinful acts of the flesh and to manifest the fruit of the Holy Spirit in all of our relationships (see Galatians 5:16–26).

## GUIDING PRINCIPLES

**PRINCIPLE 1. WHEN MEASURING A CHURCH, we can only evaluate a local, visible body of believers.**

The universal church is a wonderful reality. At this moment, it exists in all parts of the world and all believers everywhere are members. However, as the *bride of Christ* (another name for the universal church), all believers (of all time) are being made ready—by God—for that great moment when we will be presented to the Lord at the wedding supper of the Lamb (see Revelation 19:7–8).

The omniscient God, of course, can measure the universal church, whether at a moment in history, throughout history, or on into eternity. However, from a human point of view, we can only measure what we see and experience. Consequently, God has given us many illustrations in the New Testament to assist us in measuring our own local churches—wherever we exist in the world. Although first-century churches existed in various cultures far removed from our own, what we read about them yields powerful guiding principles that transcend cultural boundaries. That is why we can identify these principles as “supracultural.”

**PRINCIPLE 2. WHEN MEASURING A CHURCH, we must measure functions, not forms or structures.**

In actuality, the Scriptures give us very little information regarding the forms in New Testament churches. This is by divine design. If God had made church structures absolute, He would have locked believers into a particular culture. God-ordained functions and principles, however, transcend all cultures, and when we examine the way our churches are functioning, we can then evaluate whether our forms are appropriate and adequate.

As we proceed to take the pulse of a healthy church, we'll look specifically at the functions God has outlined for local churches and what these functions should produce in terms of mature believers. The

results of these functions, when carried out properly, will in turn provide criteria for measuring our local churches in the twenty-first century. In essence, these criteria become the guiding principles located at the end of each chapter.

**PRINCIPLE 3. WHEN MEASURING A CHURCH, we must have a comprehensive understanding of biblical discipleship.**

True disciples aren't just learners or followers of a great moral teacher named Jesus Christ. They're born-again believers who have put their faith in Jesus Christ as the Son of God and have experienced redemption.

This doesn't mean that all true disciples are mature disciples. As Jesus commanded, we are not only to "make disciples of all nations" but we are also to teach "them to obey everything" He has commanded (Matthew 28:19–20).

Luke recorded a beautiful illustration of how the Great Commission can be carried out. On the first missionary journey, Paul and Barnabas proclaimed the Word of the Lord in Derbe and won (literally "made") a large number of *disciples*. Luke then recorded that they "returned to Lystra, Iconium and Antioch [where they had also made a large number of disciples]." As they once again traveled through these cities, they were "*strengthening* the disciples and *encouraging* them to remain true to the faith" (Acts 14:21–22).

**PRINCIPLE 4. WHEN MEASURING A CHURCH, we must evaluate the degree to which the true disciples in that church are functioning as a family.**

The family, or household, metaphor takes us back to the creation story. We read that God said, "Let us make man [humankind] in our image, in our likeness" (Genesis 1:26). Stanley Grenz captured this great truth when he wrote:

*The God we know is the Triune One—the Father, Son and Holy Spirit united together in perfect love. Because God is “community”—fellowship shared among the Father, Son and Spirit—the creation of humankind in the divine image must be related to humans in fellowship with each other. God’s own character can only be mirrored by humans who love after the manner of the perfect love, which lies at the heart of the Triune God.<sup>5</sup>*

The relationship enjoyed by Adam and Eve was possible because *together* they could experience the fellowship that existed in the eternal Trinity. But sin marred this beautiful relationship and the relationships that God intended for their offspring. The human family was destined for pain, tension, jealousy, and all the other evil works of the flesh since this couple’s sin spread to the whole human race (see Romans 5:12–14).

But God had a wonderful plan of restoration. In the fullness of time, He sent His Son into the world. The “Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us” (John 1:14). Jesus Christ died for the sins of the world in order to enable us to once again be in fellowship with God and with one another.

To cause this to happen, He designed and unfolded a wonderful mystery, the church—a group of disciples who were not only born-again learners but brothers and sisters in Christ who form one body, regardless of our gender and ethnic and economic backgrounds. We are meant to be a family—the household of God.

“How does this happen?” Grenz asked in his book *Created for Community*. His answer captures the essence of true fellowship and community:

*The Holy Spirit is the one who transforms us from a collection of individuals into a fellowshipping people. In conversion, he draws us out of our isolation and alienation. In so doing, he knits us together as one people.*

*Indeed, there arises among us a oneness which  
is nothing less than the unity of the Spirit himself”  
(Ephesians 4:3).<sup>6</sup>*

**PRINCIPLE 5. WHEN MEASURING A CHURCH, we must evaluate the degree to which believers are reflecting the fruit of the Spirit in their relationships with one another.**

When Paul wrote “to the churches in Galatia” (Galatians 1:2), he gave us very comprehensive criteria for measuring holiness in a local community of believers. We are to consider the degree to which we reflect the fruit of the Holy Spirit, which, according to Paul, “is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control” (Galatians 5:22–23).

The apostle was contrasting these Christlike qualities with the “acts of the sinful nature,” which he outlines as “sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissension, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like” (Galatians 5:19–21).

Note two important things about this passage. First, Paul was in essence contrasting holy living with unholy living. We must remember that the third person of the Godhead is frequently identified as the Holy (*hagios*) Spirit—and here Paul was describing those qualities that reflect God’s power and presence in our lives once we are “baptized by one Spirit into one body” (1 Corinthians 12:13).

Second, the same qualities that reflect God’s holiness are, for the most part, relational in their outworkings. They’re not feelings that flow out of individual believers’ lives when each of us is “filled with the Spirit.” Rather, when, *as a local body of believers*, we “live by the Spirit” (Galatians 5:16) and “keep in step with the Spirit” (Galatians 5:25), we will love one another. As we do, we’ll experience joy, peace, unity, and oneness. We’ll demonstrate patience and kindness in our relationships. We’ll treat one another with goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. This is the fruit of the Holy Spirit.

By contrast, people who live carnal lives will often reflect the acts

of the sinful nature in their relationships—such as sexual immorality, impurity, and debauchery. Rather than loving one another and demonstrating patience and kindness that lead to peace, unity, and oneness, there will be acts of “hatred, discord, jealousy,” and even “fits of rage.” There will be “selfish ambition, dissension, factions and envy.” As we’ll see in chapter 4, the Corinthians represented a church that was not reflecting the “fruit of the Spirit” but rather the “acts of the sinful nature.”

Unfortunately, the *corporate* nature of these contrasts in Paul’s letter to the Galatian churches has often been overlooked and even misinterpreted.<sup>7</sup> We have tended to individualize Paul’s directives, which has often led us to “emotionalize” the fruit of the Spirit. This can lead to false expectations and even disillusionment in our personal experiences. However, when we understand the relational and communal focus that Paul had in mind, we have a clearer picture and can better evaluate a local body of believers. We can discern whether that band of believers demonstrates *the fruit of the Holy Spirit* or the acts of the sinful nature. In essence, the positive qualities are a reflection of God’s holiness, and as saints we are to become more and more conformed to the image of Jesus Christ. This is certainly what Peter had in mind when he exhorted Christians to be holy because God is holy (see 1 Peter 1:15).

## THINKING AND GROWING TOGETHER

As you approach this assignment, be careful to come with a non-judgmental attitude. To avoid judging others, include yourself in this evaluation. To what extent are *you* a maturing Christian?

- ⇒ As you observe the overall functions and behaviors of believers in your church, to what extent are they becoming mature disciples—men and women who are *growing* in their knowledge of the Word of God and *obeying* everything Jesus has taught them?
- ⇒ To what extent are the believers in your church operating as a loving, unified family, being “devoted to one another in brotherly love” (Romans 12:10)? To help you carry out this exercise, look specifically at the other “one another” directives outlined in chapter 7, pages 148–49.
- ⇒ To what extent are the believers in your church reflecting the fruit of the Spirit in all of their relationships? In other words, to what extent are they “saints” who increasingly reflect the righteous and holy life of Jesus Christ?

### NOTES

1. The phrase “to the saints at Ephesus” does not appear in the earliest Greek manuscripts. It was probably added later since Ephesus was where Paul’s extensive outreach to Asia began. During his two-year ministry in the lecture hall of Tyrannus, Luke recorded “that all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord” (Acts 19:10). This is why Paul’s letter to the Ephesians is often classified as a circular letter. It was no doubt read first in the church in Ephesus and then in other churches such as those in Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea, which the apostle John later identified as the “seven churches in the

province of Asia” (Revelation 1:4). This also may explain why Paul identified the church in a universal sense in this letter to the Ephesians rather than in a local sense.

2. I have used the term “approximately” since it is at times difficult to differentiate whether the authors of Scripture were using *ekklesia* to refer to the universal church or the local church. However, as you will note in appendix A, in most instances it is very clear.

3. It is difficult to tell when the eleven apostles and the others in that small band of disciples became born-again believers. For the apostles, was it when Jesus “breathed on them and said, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit’” (John 20:22)? Did Thomas, who was absent when Jesus said this, become a true disciple after he saw the nail prints in Jesus’ hands and the wound in His side and confessed, “My Lord and my God” (John 20:28)? Only God knows the answers to these questions. One thing is sure: They were definitely true disciples on the day of Pentecost.

4. For an enlightening study, consult the references to “brothers” in appendix B. Note the context and attempt to discern when these references are used generically to refer to both “brothers” and “sisters” in Christ.

5. Stanley J. Grenz, *Created for Community* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 80.

6. *Ibid.*, 214.

7. Paul’s letter was addressed “to the *churches* in Galatia” (Galatians 1:2)—that is, *communities* of believers. Paul continued this corporate emphasis by using the second person plural in the Greek text throughout this passage we have just examined. “Do not [as a body] use *your* freedom [in your relationships] to indulge the sinful nature,” Paul wrote. “Rather,” he continued, “*serve one another* in love” (Galatians 5:13). To carry out this corporate directive, we are to “*live* by the Spirit” in all of our relationships. And if we “live by the Spirit,” we are to “keep in step with the Spirit.” And if we “keep in step with the Spirit,” we will “not become conceited, provoking and envying *each other*” (Galatians 5:25–26).