

THE JERUSALEM CHURCH AS A MULTI-CONGREGATIONAL MODEL: IMPLICATIONS FOR MODERN CHURCH GOVERNANCE

By

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Abstract

This paper investigates the Jerusalem church as a multi-congregational model and its implications for modern church governance, particularly among Churches of Christ. Employing biblical exegesis and historical analysis, it explores the church's structure as depicted in Acts, where thousands met in various house churches under unified leadership by apostles and elders. The study finds that while the Churches of Christ emphasise local autonomy and plural eldership, the Jerusalem model demonstrates a cooperative city-wide church with shared authority and unified action. The paper recommends that Churches of Christ consider working together in a structured way, like through shared leadership forums and resource pooling, while still maintaining their doctrinal independence. In conclusion, the Jerusalem model offers a biblically-based framework that balances the need for congregational autonomy with a sense of unity and shared purpose, potentially enhancing contemporary church practices through a faithful and adaptable application.

Keywords: Jerusalem church, multi-congregational, church governance, apostles and elders, Churches of Christ, biblical leadership.

Introduction

The Jerusalem church, as depicted in the New Testament, offers a distinctive example of a *multi-congregational* body of believers meeting under a shared leadership structure. In Acts, the Jerusalem church swelled to thousands of members (Acts 2:41; 4:4), yet met not in a single building but in houses and temple courts, even as its leaders functioned collectively. Modern authors summarise this model as “the Jerusalem church – of over 3,000 members! – [which] met in houses but was under a single leadership of elders and apostles”.¹ This pattern of multiple gatherings yet one city-wide church raises important questions for later traditions. The Churches of Christ, in particular, emphasise congregational autonomy

and plural eldership (with “no central headquarters or ... organisation above the local church level”).² Exploring the Jerusalem church's organisation thus sheds light on how early practice might inform or challenge the polity of Churches of Christ. This paper traces the historical and biblical foundations of Jerusalem's multi-gathering church, examines its leadership structure (apostles, elders, deacons), and then relates these findings to Churches of Christ governance and contemporary church practice.

Historical and Biblical Foundations

According to Acts, the first Christian community sprang to life in Jerusalem at Pentecost (Acts 2) and grew rapidly. Luke describes the earliest believers as devoting themselves to “the apostles’

¹ Jay F. Guin, “The Future of the Churches of Christ: On Congregational Autonomy, Part 1,” *One In Jesus*, March 20, 2012, <https://oneinjesus.info/2012/03/the-future-of-the-churches-of-christ-on-congregational-autonomy-part-1/>.

² *The Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement*, ed. Douglas A. Foster et al. (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company., 2004), under “Churches of Christ.”

teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer” (Acts 2:42). Within weeks, about 3,000 people were added (Acts 2:41), and within a decade Luke can still say that “the church at Jerusalem” numbered many thousands.³ Critically, these believers did not all meet together in one place. Instead, Luke repeatedly notes that they gathered in houses: an upper room where 120 prayed and awaited the Spirit (Acts 1:12–15), the home of Mary (Acts 12:12–17), and many other private homes (Acts 2:46; 5:42). Indeed, scholars observe that “there were at least two, possibly more” house-churches in Jerusalem: the “upper room” in Acts 1 and the “house of Mary” in Acts 12 being two distinct assemblies.⁴ Practical considerations also suggest a plurality of gatherings: after Pentecost, “the two houses alone would not have been adequate” to seat all new converts. Luke himself implies multiple groups, e.g., when Peter in Acts 12:17 tells the believers gathered in Mary’s house to report to “James and the brothers,” suggesting James and others were meeting elsewhere.

Notably, Luke treats each of these house gatherings as fully functioning *churches*. He even comments that the believers “consciously saw the houses as their churches and undertook the worship services there”. For example, Acts 2:46–47 describes daily temple worship plus “breaking bread” in homes, praising God, and “glad and sincere hearts,” adding that the Lord added to their number day by day. Such activities (teaching, fellowship, meals, prayer) match Luke’s summary of the first community’s priorities in Acts 2:42. As Donkor notes, these practices “could not have happened in the temple,” so “the believers consciously saw the houses as their churches and undertook the worship services there”.⁵ In short, the Jerusalem church was *one church in one city*, but it met in multiple households and venues, each functioning like a congregation.

This Jerusalem church maintained a corporate life of sharing and unity. Acts 2:44–45 records that “all who believed were together and had all things in common,” selling property and sharing proceeds, while Acts 4:32–35 likewise emphasises that “there was not a needy person” among them, for goods were distributed as anyone had need. Such communal sharing – and the record that many signs and wonders were done through the apostles (Acts 5) – illustrates a tightly knit community. Yet even as they met from “house to house” (Acts 5:42) and even sang hymns together in the temple courts (Acts 2:46), the Jerusalem believers clearly understood themselves as one church. Acts 8:1 calls it “the church at Jerusalem” even when that church was scattered by persecution; similarly, Galatians 2:9 calls James “the Lord’s brother”, a leading figure at Jerusalem.

The solidarity of the Jerusalem church also extended into action with other churches. For example, when prophets in Antioch foresaw a famine, the Antiochene church collected relief and “sent it to the elders by the hands of Barnabas and Saul” (Acts 11:27–30). Here, the term “elders” indicates recognized Jerusalem leadership, even when James was standing at the head. This episode shows Antioch looking to Jerusalem’s leadership for guidance in charitable matters. Later, when the Gentile circumcision controversy flared, Paul and Barnabas *came up to Jerusalem* “to the apostles and elders” (Acts 15:2) for resolution. The Jerusalem Council that met (Acts 15:6) thus involved not a single set of worshippers but the gathered leaders of the church: Luke notes that “the apostles and the elders came together” to consider the issue. The subsequent letter with their conclusions was sent out “to all the churches” (Acts 15:23–29), indicating that Jerusalem’s decision had implications beyond that city.⁶

³ Kwabena Donkor, “New Testament House Churches: A Model for Today’s Complex World?,” *Ministry Magazine*, 2008, <https://www.ministrymagazine.org/archive/2008/04/new-testament-house-churches.html>.

⁴ Donkor, “New Testament House Churches.”

⁵ Donkor, “New Testament House Churches.”

⁶ David Guzik, *Enduring Word Bible Commentary Acts Chapter 15*, Acts, December 11, 2015, <https://enduringword.com/bible-commentary/acts-15/>.

In a nutshell, Acts portrays Jerusalem's church as collectively enormous but locally organized. Thousands of believers worshipped and served both in the temple and dozens of homes, yet they saw themselves as one church body in Jerusalem.⁷ This model – one congregation with many meeting places – was noted even by early co-workers: Paul later refers to “how many thousands” of believers at Jerusalem (Acts 21:20), and the multiple large gatherings (temple and homes) were necessary to include them all. While each house group had a distinct meeting, Luke's narrative always speaks of “the church” in Jerusalem as a single unit (e.g., Acts 2:47; 8:1; 15:4).

Leadership in the Jerusalem Church

In the years immediately following Pentecost, the Jerusalem church was led chiefly by the Apostles, the Twelve. Peter and John played prominent roles (e.g., Acts 3–4), and the apostolic band oversaw the initial expansion. After Judas Iscariot's death, Matthias was chosen “to become a witness with us of his resurrection” (Acts 1:22) and so joined the apostles. For a time, the Twelve (plus Matthias) guided the Jerusalem assembly. Notably, James the Just, the Lord's brother, emerges as a central leader. In his *Church History*, Eusebius records that James “was the first to be made bishop of the church of Jerusalem”.⁸ According to Clement of Rome (as preserved by Eusebius), “Peter and James and John...chose James the Just bishop of Jerusalem” after Christ's ascension. Paul likewise later calls James “the Lord's brother” as the acknowledged head of the Jerusalem church (Gal. 1:19).⁹ Thus, early tradition depicts James, not Peter, as Jerusalem's ruling elder. His authority is implied in Acts 12:17 when, after Peter's miraculous release from prison, the apostle tells believers to “report these things to James and the brethren.” In short, the Jerusalem church had apostolic leaders (with

standing from Christ) and local leaders, with James as one of the prominent leaders.

Another feature of Jerusalem's organisation found in Acts 6, is the selection of seven men to “serve tables” (Acts 6:2-6). The apostles recognised that caring for widows and the needy would cause neglect of the Word, so they appointed seven reputable men “by the prayer and laying on of the hands of the apostles”. Eusebius notes this event, writing that “approved men, seven in number, of whom Stephen was one,” were set apart in this way.¹⁰ These men (traditionally called the first *deacons*) did not appear to have governing authority in doctrine or leadership; rather, they administered charity and logistics. Notably, Luke later calls them “servants” (Greek *diakonos*) rather than elders. Thus, while the Jerusalem church did develop a distinct service ministry (the seven), these men did not supplant the apostolic eldership; they functioned under the apostles' oversight.

The first explicit mention of “elders” in Jerusalem comes in Acts 11:30 (he sent relief to the *elders* there) and especially in Acts 15. In describing the council at Jerusalem, Luke repeatedly mentions the participation of “the apostles and the elders.” For example, after Paul and Barnabas arrive, Acts 15:4 reports that “the church [in Jerusalem], the apostles, and the elders” received them and heard their report. Later (Acts 15:6), “the apostles and the elders came together to consider this matter”.¹¹ Finally, the outcome is described as the decision of “the apostles and elders,” who compose a letter for the Gentile churches (Acts 15:22, 23). All this shows that Jerusalem's decision-making body was not the apostles alone, but a council including local elders. Bruggen observes that the Acts 15 narrative presents “apostles and the elders” deciding “together with

⁷ Guin, “The Future of the Churches of Christ.”

⁸ Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, eds., *From Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Revised, trans. McGiffert Arthur Cushman, vol. 1, 2nd (Christian Literature Publishing Co, 1890),
<<http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/250102.htm>>.

⁹ Schaff and Wace, *From Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1.

¹⁰ Schaff and Wace, *From Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1.

¹¹ Guzik, *Enduring Word Bible Commentary Acts Chapter 15*.

the whole church” on the Gentile issue.¹² In other words, James (an apostle by mission) was the chairman, but he deliberated with a plurality of Jerusalem elders. These elders are never named individually, but Luke’s terminology (Greek *presbyteroi*) indicates a standing cadre of church leaders in Jerusalem. They appear to be distinct from the seven deacons of Acts 6: they surely were older, perhaps drawn from among the original believers or from synagogue leaders who came to faith. In Acts 15:4, the Antiochene delegation is welcomed by “the apostles and the elders” together, implying common authority. Thus, by the 40s–50s AD, the Jerusalem church had what we would call a *plural eldership* structure: apostles (the senior missionaries) plus local bishops collaborating in governance.

On the whole, the Jerusalem church leadership combined apostolic authority with a local council of elders. For example, Acts 15:22 records, “the apostles and the elders, with the whole church, decided...”, showing a collaborative decision-making process.¹³ Despite being spread across many houses, the church answered to this one leadership group. Moreover, as Guin notes, even Paul and Barnabas submitted to the Jerusalem elders and apostles (Acts 15:2-4) rather than making their own independent decision. The Jerusalem church did not have multiple hierarchies but one central oversight. Even when thousands were present, they were considered one church with shared leaders. (This is analogous to other cases: for instance, there is only “a church in Corinth” even though Paul later mentions several house gatherings there.)¹⁴ The Jerusalem pattern contrasts with a model of isolated house churches, each with its elders. Instead, it foreshadows what some today call a “multi-site” or “multi-congregational” church: many meeting venues under one corporate eldership.

Implications for Churches of Christ

The Churches of Christ (CoC) tradition arises from the 19th-century Restoration Movement, which sought to replicate New Testament church structures. CoC congregations typically emphasise congregational autonomy and plurality of elders. As Ferguson notes, “ecclesiastical government is congregational rather than denominational” in Churches of Christ: they have no central headquarters or higher councils, and each local church is independent.¹⁵ In practice, this means each congregation voluntarily chooses its elders (per 1 Tim. 3 and Titus 1) and deacons, who oversee that single body. CoC ecclesiology has often been summarised by the slogan “ancient order, modern conditions”: whatever is explicitly in the New Testament was replicated, and nothing beyond it. As Ferguson puts it, from the beginning, CoC “maintained no formal organisational structures larger than the local congregation.”¹⁶ While congregations do cooperate in missions or benevolence, any link is by choice, not by oversight. Indeed, Jay Guin observes that the movement has “autonomy with isolation,” to the point that being accountable to another congregation is often treated as “heresy”.¹⁷

How, then, does the Jerusalem model interact with CoC polity? On one hand, there are clear points of affinity. CoC’s practice of multiple elders in each congregation aligns with Jerusalem’s plural leadership. The apostolic tradition of 1 Pet. 5:1-3 (“shepherd the flock among you”) and Titus 1:5-7 (“appoint elders in every city”) underlie CoC’s insistence on plural elders. Jerusalem’s leaders (apostles + elders) functioned as a team rather than a lone “senior pastor,” echoing the CoC ideal that congregations

¹² Jakob van Bruggen, “The Elders in Jerusalem in the Book of Acts,” Christian Library, n.d., <https://www.christianstudylibrary.org/article/elders-jerusalem-book-acts>.

¹³ Bruggen, “The Elders in Jerusalem in the Book of Acts.”

¹⁴ Guin, “The Future of the Churches of Christ.”

¹⁵ Everett Ferguson, “The Doctrine of the Church,” in *The Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement*, ed. Douglas A. Foster et al. (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004).

¹⁶ Ferguson, “The Doctrine of the Church.”

¹⁷ Guin, “The Future of the Churches of Christ.”

be led by a plurality of qualified men.¹⁸ The CoC's stress on Bible-only authority could also resonate with Jerusalem's pattern: Acts 15 emphasises that their ruling (to Gentiles) was "what the Holy Spirit has decided," after hearing Scripture and experiences.¹⁹

On the other hand, Jerusalem's structure can challenge CoC practice. If one concludes that Jerusalem was essentially one church in the city, some may ask, should modern cities likewise have one unified church? Traditionally, many in CoC have answered "no" only by default: they simply plant a second congregation when numbers grow, without explicitly comparing to Jerusalem. But some Restorationists (notably within the "house church" movement) have argued that New Testament cities typically had one church. For example, Jay Guin points out that Acts 2 presents "the Jerusalem church of over 3,000 members [which] met in houses but was under a single leadership of elders and apostles".²⁰ He maintains that this became the "typical way of doing church throughout the Empire".²¹ If taken at face value, that pattern might imply that a city's Christians should operate as one congregation with many house-church gatherings, not as two separate congregations each with its own eldership. In that light, CoC's practice of having multiple congregations in one city (each saying "the church of [City]" with different elders) looks at least different from the Jerusalem model.

However, Acts also shows that the Jerusalem apostles and elders, while acting as one body, nonetheless addressed other congregations respectfully. After their council decision, they sent delegates with a letter to Antioch and the other Gentile churches (Acts 15:22–29); they did not impose themselves on those congregations, but gave guidance. Thus, in practice, Jerusalem cooperated with other churches (sharing decisions and resources) without compromising

each church's autonomy. Churches of Christ could learn from this: for example, voluntary councils or fellowship of elders across congregations can help unity without overriding local authority. Within CoC, the Jerusalem model highlights both unity and plurality. It affirms that multiple gatherings and multiple elders can coexist within one church body – a model not foreign to CoC (some have called their plural-elders, multi-house approach a restoration of "the Jerusalem pattern"). Yet it also underscores caution: Acts 15 exhibits connectional decisions (Jerusalem's council affected all churches) which CoC traditionally avoid. Indeed, some CoC writers explicitly warn against "connectionalism." One author argues that multiple meeting sites under one leadership is akin to a corporate, hierarchical model and "an unbiblical kind of polity."²² From this view, dividing a single church into multiple venues or twin congregations risks placing authority outside the local gathering, thus weakening accountability (e.g., Matthew 18 and 1 Corinthians 5 presume a single assembly managing discipline). In short, the Jerusalem example is not a clear mandate for or against the multi-congregational model in Churches of Christ; rather, it provides data for reflection.

Contemporary Applications

Applying the Jerusalem church model today raises practical questions. In broader Christianity, the concept of a multi-site church has become familiar. By contrast, Churches of Christ have largely retained a classic congregational model (one congregation per location). The Jerusalem case – one church meeting in many places with shared leadership can inspire CoC to explore similar structures, but adaptation must respect established principles. On the one hand, a multi-congregational approach offers benefits. Under one umbrella, several congregations (even in different languages or demographics) can share

¹⁸ V.E. Howard, *What Is the Church of Christ?*, Rev. 4th (Central Printers & Publishers, 1971).

¹⁹ Guzik, *Enduring Word Bible Commentary Acts Chapter 15*.

²⁰ Guin, "The Future of the Churches of Christ."

²¹ Guin, "The Future of the Churches of Christ."

²² Ken Fields, "The Multisite Church, Part 2," *Sharper Iron*, September 14, 2009, <https://sharperiron.org/article/multisite-church-part-2>.

resources, staff, and vision. For example, John Wesley Yoder describes a modern “multi-congregational church” in Beijing that held 11 language-specific services for 3,000 people from around the world. He notes advantages of such unity: it “models the unity of the body of Christ,” allows pastors from different congregations to learn and encourage one another, and “allows for efficient use of staff, facilities, [and] finances,” giving a stable reputation to new, smaller congregations.²³ In the CoC context, this might translate into cooperating churches jointly hiring bible teachers or elders, pooling benevolence funds, and supporting one another’s missions. A small rural CoC might maintain fellowship with sister congregations so that they can, as a network, achieve what none could alone. Indeed, cooperative mission funds or itinerant ministers have been tried (though with controversy) in CoC history as ways to serve multiple congregations.²⁴

On the other hand, any multi-congregational scheme must be carefully structured. Ken Fields’ critique of the multisite model highlights potential pitfalls: if “a congregation is a church,” then multiple sites effectively become “multiple churches” under centralized authority.²⁵ This can clash with CoC’s emphasis on local authority. For example, if two worship services or two congregations of “the same church” share one eldership, how is discipline administered? If a visitor attends Service A or Service B, are they considered part of one congregation or two? Critics warn that splitting a congregation into two venues under one leader may mimic a corporate structure that the New Testament never endorses. In practice, however, some CoC congregations have informally adopted multi-venue formats. A growing church might open additional meeting times or services (sometimes even in satellite locations) while keeping one eldership team.

When done thoughtfully, with elders present and ministry teams coordinated, this can resemble Jerusalem’s pattern of “house-to-house” worship (Acts 5:42). It can be seen as church-planting “in place” rather than planting a separate church. Jamie Hart, for example, advises that two services require “a team of leaders, not just a one-man show,” ensuring elders and volunteers can shepherd both gatherings. In such cases, the Jerusalem precedent (one church, many gatherings) is followed more closely than if a full break-off church were created.²⁶

Alternatively, Churches of Christ might pursue a networked multi-congregational model, where several local churches remain independent but hold regular joint meetings of elders and deacons. Such a model resembles Acts 15’s council or Paul’s call to “elders... in every church” (Acts 20:17). Even though some CoC has no bishops or presbyteries, they sometimes convene area-wide lectureships, youth rallies, or missions conferences that are loosely analogous to a council. Formalizing this into a “coordinating committee” would be novel, but Jerusalem’s example shows how issues can be addressed by a broader assembly of leaders. These contemporary possibilities must still navigate theological convictions. Any cross-church collaboration must remain voluntary. CoC polity teaches that while like-minded congregations “may enter into voluntary associations” for projects, no congregation can force another to comply.²⁷ Thus, a multi-congregational structure would likely be a parachurch-style partnership rather than a new hierarchical group. In CoC parlance, one might speak of a “network of collaborating churches” instead of a single multi-congregation church. For example, a group of urban CoC might appoint a rotating “connector elder” to convene monthly planning meetings, echoing what Yoder calls the

²³ John Wesley Yoder, “The Multi-Congregational Church,” Immigrant Ministry Connections, 2025, <https://www.immigrantministry.com/blog/2024-02-17>.

²⁴ Larry Ray Hafley, “Inter-Congregational Brotherhood,” *Truth Magazine* xiv (April 1970): 13–14, <http://www.truthmagazine.com/archives/volume14/TMO14379.html>.

²⁵ Fields, “The Multisite Church, Part 2.”

²⁶ Jamie Hart, “Two Services or Build?,” *Sharper Iron*, June 8, 2009, <https://sharperiron.org/forum/thread-two-services-or-build>.

²⁷ Batsell Barrett Baxter, “The Church of Christ: Who Are the Churches of Christ, and What Do They Believe In?,” Woodson Chapel Church of Christ, June 16, 2006, <https://web.archive.org/web/20060616071601/http://woodsonchapel.com/coc.cfm>.

“Connector” role in his Beijing model.²⁸ Such collaborations could strengthen small congregations (they share in the larger church’s reputation) and allow elder mentorship across churches.

Ultimately, the Jerusalem Church reminds the churches of Christ that multiple worship meetings and a diversity of congregations are biblical as long as they share a genuine unity of faith and leadership. Acts 2–15 portray a bold community experiment: many assemblies knitted in a body, led by a plurality of elders led by the Spirit. For Churches of Christ seeking growth or cultural relevance, this pattern offers both encouragement and caution. It encourages unity without uniformity (multiple ethnic congregations worshipping as one body) and shared leadership (elders collaborating). It cautions against unwittingly transplanting corporate structures that undermine local eldership. Any modern “multi-congregational” approach should therefore emulate Jerusalem’s balance: one church in purpose and teaching, yet accommodating many local fellowships, all the while maintaining the scriptural autonomy of each assembly.

Conclusion

The Jerusalem church in Acts presents a fascinating model: a single city-church with thousands of members worshipping in numerous homes and venues, yet united under a plural leadership of apostles and elders. Biblical exegesis of Acts 2, 6, 15, and early church history (e.g., Eusebius on James) shows that the Jerusalem congregation functioned as one “church” in one city, even as it embraced house-church practice and appointed various servants (the seven) and governors (elders). For Churches of Christ, this model highlights both affirmation and tension. Like Jerusalem, CoC affirms the plurality of elders and a shared mission. Unlike Jerusalem, CoC has traditionally maintained strict independence of each local assembly. The Jerusalem example suggests that New Testament churches cooperated across house boundaries and

even across city lines when needed, but without abandoning their local character. In contemporary application, CoC might learn from Jerusalem by fostering unity and resource-sharing among congregations (as in mission partnerships or area-wide councils), while heeding the warnings against centralization raised by commentators.

In summary, the early Jerusalem church shows that “one church” in a city can be “many congregations” in practice. For Churches of Christ, the lesson is not to slavishly copy a hierarchical model, but to consider how their churches can both preserve autonomy and yet pursue the unity and multi-venue vitality exemplified in Jerusalem. Any shift toward multi-congregational structures must be done in the spirit of the Jerusalem church: under the supervision of Scripture, by Spirit-led elders working in concert, and always with the goal of “keeping the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Eph. 4:3).

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²⁸ Yoder, “The Multi-Congregational Church.”

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