

Multi–Church?

Analytic Reflections on the Metaphysics of Multi–Site and Multi–Service Ecclesiology

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Abstract: Multi–site and multi–service ecclesiology has become common place in many areas over recent decades. This innovation has not been subjected to rigorous systematic or analytic theological thought. Therefore, this article subjects these ecclesiological variations to critique and finds them wanting. It offers four theological principles by which to analyze the nature of the church and determines that multi–site and multi–service churches fail to meet the necessary requirements for what is required of a numerically identical Protestant church. Therefore, it is metaphysically impossible for multi–site and multi–service churches to exist as the numerically same church. Each multi–site or multi–service entity is its own numerically distinct local church.

Key Words: Church, Ecclesiology, Multi–Site, Multi–Service, Group Theory

The current ecclesial milieu includes numerous variations of church gatherings such as “multi–site” and “multi–service.” While multi–sites are a far more recent phenomenon, multi–services have been ongoing for several decades and are nearly ubiquitous among growing congregations.¹ Both variations are largely necessitated by numerical growth whereas the multi–site model is especially underwritten by technological advances. Before the explosion of large cities and the invention of the motor vehicle, most churches simply did not have the pressure of growth that often creates the need for these ecclesial practices. Despite the ballooning of both variations, little work has been done to consider the legitimacy of these methods beyond mere pragmatic considerations. As multi–site and multi–service defenders Brad House and Gregg Allison admit:

¹ Multi–service churches existed before the 1970’s but didn’t become commonplace until the 80’s and 90’s. See (Leeman 2020, 28).

Practically speaking, we had few options. Turning people away who wanted to hear the gospel was simply not an option. This move to a multisite expression was driven pragmatically by a need for space, and little thought was given to the trajectory on which this set the church. This pattern of growth is typical for most churches as they stumble into multisite (House and Allison 2017, 23).

Given the newness of these developments, their pragmatic character, and the overall lack of analytic engagement on issues of ecclesiology in general, these ecclesial modifications have not been subjected to any sustained form of analytic theological research.² Therefore, I intend to assess and critique multi-site and multi-service ecclesiology from an analytic perspective. I do this primarily in a deconstructive manner by considering if these practices can fulfill the necessary requirements of the church. My conclusion is not the bold assertion that they fail to remain a church but more modestly that they create an altogether new church. In other words, it is metaphysically impossible to have a multi-site or multi-service local church that maintains numerical identity. A new church, by necessity of previous metaphysical commitments, is created whenever multi-site or multi-service is implemented, no matter the external claims.³ In a roundabout way I am asking about the special composition question of the church. When does a church begin and cease to exist? Do two people praying constitute a church? Do five people partaking of communion constitute a church? Are time and space necessary elements for the existence of a church? These are metaphysical questions regarding the ontological status of the church and need far more analytic engagement, which

² This is the key reason for why there are few sources to draw from regarding these ecclesial innovations and that most sources engaging the topic are popular level or recent PhD dissertations that merely summarize the current debate from popular level sources. For a popular example, see (Surratt, Ligon, and Bird 2006). One will nearly search in vain for a chapter—or even a section—dedicated to rigorous theological discussion regarding the usage of multi-site. Multi-site is an assumed theological good, at worst a theological neutral, and only pragmatic reasons are put forward in its favor. For a dissertation summary example, see (Frye 2011). The tide may be turning as evidenced by this book length (albeit short) treatment: (Leeman 2020). However, his work is likely to spark more popular and pastoral level debate than it is analytic engagement.

³ See (Leeman 2020, 17). He similarly argues, saying, “there is no such thing as a multisite or multiservice church based on how the Bible defines a church. They don’t exist. Adding a second site or service, by the standards of Scripture, gives you two churches, not one.”

is the chief goal of this paper, besides arguing against multi-site and multi-service churches for Protestant convictions.⁴

1. Defining Multi-Site and Multi-Service

Before defining multi-site and multi-service, I first need to minimally define how I am using “church” in what follows. By “church” I mean to denote a single visible local manifestation of the invisible church that preaches the Word and duly administers the sacraments, as Article XXIX of the Anglican Thirty-Nine articles would put it. The invisible church is the whole of God’s elect people irrespective of time or space. The visible local church is a specific congregation that is numerically distinct from other churches. I refrain from parsing this more deeply at this point since doing so may beg the question and exclude multi-site and multi-service from the start as true local churches in this sense. Therefore, “single visible local manifestation” serves to be specific enough to hold the weight of the distinctions I will make but hopefully agnostic on the question of multi-site and multi-service from the start. With this clarification in hand, unless otherwise explicitly noted, when I speak of “denying” multi-site or multi-service I am speaking of them denying the numerical identity implied by the single visible local manifestation. This does not mean that they can’t be a *church* but that they aren’t the *same* church.

Now, what are multi-site churches—at least for Protestants? Multi-site churches come in various packages. House and Allison provide two broad categories for what a multi-site church is. There are traditional multi-site churches that consist “of one church that expresses itself in multiple campuses” (House and Allison 2017, 50). For example, church A decides to start a new “campus” 20 miles south of church A’s physical location. This is dubbed as “campus 2” of church A, where the original location is “campus 1”. Now church A has two separate physical locations for its Sunday gatherings but continue under the banner of church A. It is now one church in multiple locations. Regardless of how they define these differences, these churches have one central headquarters along with several subordinate locations. The headquarters may be completely controlling and robust or it may be that all locations merely collaborate under a name and budget while lacking the oversight typical of a centralized episcopal government (House and Allison 2017, 48–49). There are also newer multi-site churches that are dubbed “multi-churches” and consist “of one church that expresses itself in multiple churches that form a polity

⁴ Due to the scope of this paper and my ecclesiological expertise, I largely ignore questions regarding whether “multi-site” or “multi-service” might function in various non-Protestant understandings of the church.

that provides the responsibility and authority to make decisions about budget, contextualization of ministries, and more” (House and Allison 2017, 50). On this model, church A does not merely have campus 1 and campus 2 but has church 1 and church 2 under the pseudo-denominational banner of church A. I think this version (“multi-church”) isn’t a multi-site model and should be understood as a traditional form of denominationalism, however loose or tight that denomination may be. Since my argument is primarily against multi-sites that do not view themselves as distinct local churches, I will ignore “multi-church” iterations defined in this way.

But even among these two broad categories there is still a large spectrum of practice. The multi-sites can either be physical or non-physical. For example, some use internet sources as an “online campus” while others are only physical locations. Some are identical in all iterations and some are independent, or at least flexible. Therefore, the various forms of multi-site churches need to be accounted for if a proper diagnostic is to be attempted. What links these variations together is the splintered location of the various “campuses” or “sites” and the centralized unified name and budget (at minimum) (House and Allison 2017, 50; Surratt, Ligon, and Bird 2006, 18, 51). Most have a centralized leadership as well, or at least some form of collaborative leadership. But the bottom line of multi-site is that they create new *geographical* locations for worship. Whether that location is only 5 miles away or potentially 5,000 miles away varies from church to church.

But this geographic difference is slightly vague. Suppose Church A is large enough to have a main sanctuary and an overflow room a mere 20 feet away. In both locations a service is held simultaneously that is completely distinct except that the overflow room receives a video feed of the service that takes place in the sanctuary. Is this multi-site? They occur in two separate geographic locations but are intuitively much “closer” than regular multi-site variations. Therefore, geography alone might seem insufficient to define multi-site.⁵ But I don’t find this objection especially worrisome. Any distance—no matter how small—that creates regular distinct worship centers is sufficient to create a multi-site on my intuition. As long as the focus of worship is a distinct location, it is multi-site. Therefore, I would claim that such a scenario *is* a multi-site.⁶

Next, what are multi-service churches? Multi-service churches are often identical worship services at different times of the same physical church location.

⁵ My thanks to an anonymous reviewer for this helpful call for clarification.

⁶ I do make accommodation for unique and irregular situations. If the overflow room is only temporary, I think it would be possible to avoid the conclusion that it is a completely different church.

These are mostly used in order to accommodate larger congregations with limited space. For example, church A has a seating capacity of 300. They have one service at 11:00 AM. They grow to the point that they are at capacity. They must turn people away from their service since they can only seat 300. To accommodate more growth, they create a second service at 9:00 AM that is identical in every way (i.e. the same pastor preaches the same message, the same musicians sing the same songs, etc.) in order to effectively double their capacity. In doing this they maintain the same ruling leadership (whether the congregation, elders, or something else), the same budget, the same name, and the same facility while splitting up their worship gatherings into two separate temporal groups. There are also multi-service churches that create minimally differing services to accommodate preferences in worship. For example, church A decides to start a second service at 9:00 AM to accommodate the more “traditional” as opposed to “contemporary” preferences of their congregation. In this way they maintain the same ruling leadership (whether the congregation, elders, or something else), the same budget, the same name, and the same facility while changing the “style” of worship—which is usually just the style of music. Regardless of the reasons for creating a duplicate service, rather than creating a new geographical space for worship (like multi-site), multi-service maintains the same geographical space and creates a new *temporal* space for worship.

Therefore, these churches appear to demarcate between essential and non-essential properties for a numerically identical church based on their practice and the few published expositions. If it is to be a multi-site or multi-service church it requires several elements. But it also allows for flexibility on others. To restate them formally, they are:

Essential to Multi-Site/Multi-Service: Name, budget, and sometimes leadership

Non-Essential to Multi-Site/Multi-Service: Time and space

Someone may wonder how the church name could be conceived as essential. Maybe when church A starts campus 2 (as in example one), they decide to give it a different name, though it functions the same. What then? I think this critique is right. But maybe the idea is that there is something deeper that binds these two locations besides an outward name. Maybe the name is an outward expression of something they are trying to express about their ontological makeup. They are the *same* church but in multiple locations. So quantifiable aspects like name, budget,

and leadership can be non-essential but express something essential. A bond of commitment toward one another's flourishing that isn't extended the same way to other churches. But this is somewhat vague, and vagueness isn't helpful for subjecting multi-site and multi-service to analytic investigation. Therefore, I surmise that the chief essential commitment of multi-site and multi-service churches is this: the *belief and commitment* that they are the numerically identical local church despite change in time and space. The name may change, the budget may be divided, the leadership may be decentralized, yet the various locations believe *and* are committed to the claim that they remain the same instantiation of the local church as they were before their innovation. But the real claim about multi-site and multi-service churches that is provocative in my estimation is that change of time and space does not create a distinct local congregation. It is this that I want to primarily examine. Can time and space truly be considered as non-essential aspects of the local church? If they can be non-essential to the metaphysics of ecclesiology, I see no problem with these ecclesiastical practices. However, if they are essential, it will be metaphysically impossible for them to exist as numerically identical local churches.

2. Assessing Multi-Site and Multi-Service

Given these definitions, I need to first proffer the theological justification for multi-site and multi-service in order to best assess whether the potential cost is worth the perceived benefit. This is typically agreed to be pragmatic in nature—such ecclesiological formulations produce evangelism and mission. But it is not just pragmatic missional success that is championed, House and Allison also claim there is further “solid theological justification” since “multisite fosters the biblical and theological virtues of unity, cooperation, and interdependence”(House and Allison 2017, 41, 43). So, there are two primary benefits according to multi-site and multi-service adherents: mission and virtue. But are there theological reasons to be skeptical of such benefits? To this I now turn.

Given the commitments of multi-site and multi-service to relegate both time and space to non-essential aspects of the local church, what is necessary for something to constitute a true church on a Protestant understanding? If the local church requires spatiotemporal continuity, numerical identity cannot be maintained for multi-site and multi-service formulations. Therefore, in what follows, I provide four separate diagnostic composition principles for ecclesial bodies to determine if such practices are compatible with a traditional Protestant understanding of the church and what is necessary for its numerical identity.

The Marks of the Church Principle

First, Article 29 of the Belgic confession gives three common marks of a true church endorsed by nearly all Protestant thinkers. A true church has right gospel preaching, a right administration of the sacraments, and rightly practices discipline. If a church is to be counted as true, they must practice all three. For example, Michael Horton explains the content of the church in a similar way, saying, “through preaching, baptism, and admission (or refusal of admission) to the Communion” the church is formally constituted (Horton 2008, 243). However, some Protestants have been wary of using more than one mark—the Word of God rightly preached. Herman Bavinck helpfully explains that the difference is “more a difference in name than in substance and that actually there is only one mark, the one and the same Word, which is variously administered and confessed in preaching, instruction, confession, sacrament, life, and so forth” (Bavinck 2003, 4:312). So, while most Protestants are willing to collapse the marks into one, I think it is helpful for clarity’s sake to provide the fuller list of three.

But what counts as *right* preaching, sacraments, and discipline? What is obvious is that right practice requires biblical fidelity but what is not obvious, and of special importance for my purposes, is whether they necessitate anything regarding time or space for local congregations. This is the key aspect of the marks that must be understood if multi-sites and multi-services are to be evaluated. Therefore, I will not consider other various distinctives that may be essential to these marks that have no impact on time or space.

Beginning with preaching, the obvious definition of *right* includes the faithfulness of the gospel message. But what about time and space? For example, does right preaching require the preacher and member to be physically located in the exact same *space* at the exact same *time*? If so, how close must the member be? Could the member be within earshot but outside of the building and it continue to constitute right preaching? Can the member listen to the podcast later that week? If the content and reception of the message match up with what is traditionally understood to be “right”, what does time and space have to do with it?

1 Corinthians 14 continually comments about “when you come together” and “the whole church comes together” being linked to edification, which commonly is subsumed under preaching. If this is true, it would be natural to infer that the same temporal space should be occupied, *at minimum*. For edification or preaching to take place rightly—at least for the premier regular worship gathering—the church must come together as the whole church at the same time. More than the same time, the same geographical space is naturally inferred as well. For example,

Colossians 4:16 says “and when this letter has been read among you, have it also read in the church of the Laodiceans; and see that you also read the letter from Laodicea.” The fact that Paul expects his letter to be read “in the church” suggests a gathered singular community in one place at one time. His command would have little sense if taken to be understood as “have it also read in the campuses of the church of the Laodiceans” or “have it read in the church of the Laodiceans, alongside their online webcast with the members present there,” or “have it read in the multiple house churches of the Laodiceans.” But why could we not make such an assumption? Paul was ignorant of such technological advances. And isn’t the whole point of the New Testament to no longer be tethered to a spatial worship location but be freed to worship in “spirit and in truth”? Many are likely to think that freedom from spatiotemporal requirements for worship is part of the New Covenant *ethos*. Therefore, even if this assumption that the freedom of worship in spirit and truth entails freedom to gather how we please is faulty, requiring sameness of spatiotemporal location based on the mark of right preaching likely lacks the intuitive punch required to militate against multi-site or multi-service without further theological justification. Even if right preaching has implications for time and space, it seems too hasty to deduce such robust conclusions as spatiotemporal simultaneity. Therefore, the mark of right preaching appears to have space for the possibility of multi-site or multi-church variations and is insufficient to deny either format.

Next, can the sacraments be “rightly” administered or can discipline be “rightly” practiced without the same temporal and spatial location? For example, can either be administered to an online audience? Maybe there is a way to accommodate for the difficulties of this, but it seems unlikely or extremely difficult. Moreover, at least for most traditional understandings of the Eucharist, physical *coextensive* geographical *and* temporal location is required since the core meaning of it is about unity and unity cannot be displayed in the way expected if people are unable to physically witness one another.⁷ Therefore, it cannot be practiced in separation or isolation (Erickson 1992, 1112). How else could the church share in one cup and one bread? As Tom Gregg muses, Holy Communion is fundamentally about “the effects of salvation in the horizontal dimension of space-time”(Greggs 2019, 225). It is not about some ethereal non-physical non-located individualistic meal. It is a corporate act necessarily located in space-time. Yes, this certainly grates against the cultural current of independence, but the Eucharist is not about individualism but communal life under the Cross.

⁷ See (Gardner 2018, 518).

However, an anonymous reviewer mused here about the practice of the Reserved Sacrament in the Scottish Episcopal Church where the consecration of the elements must occur in one joint service but some of the very same bread and wine can be set aside and taken to the home-bound later in the week to *extend* communion. Therefore, despite being separated geographically and temporally, they are sharing in the *very same* cup and bread. Why would this violate the principle of unity? I tread softly here, as this is a delicate subject area for those in need, but I maintain that this does violate the unity required by the Eucharist. The Eucharist is a unified meal and intuitively, while leftovers from a meal can be delivered to others, they are no longer sharing in the same unified meal as those who ate it together at the appropriate time. For example, if my family shared in a meal but saved some of the leftovers and delivered it to a friend later on that week. Even though they would be eating from the very same elements that we did, they wouldn't be sharing in the same unified meal experience. While it would overlap with the physical elements, it would utterly lack the communal experience that is central to the unity portrayed in the Eucharist. Therefore, I maintain the necessity of coextensive spatiotemporal presence for the sacrament.

But what if a church instructed everyone to use technology to video chat one another, where they can physically see one another and communicate? I think this too fails because the Eucharist also requires whatever constitutes the "fullness of the local church" to partake *together* to display this unity. For example, in 1 Corinthians 11, Paul admonishes the Corinthians for partaking at distinct *times* and in distinct *locations*. They must do so *together*. Therefore, they cannot take it at different times or different locations lest the content of the sacrament be emptied of its meaning. That is the point of the command in 1 Corinthians 11:33—to wait for one another. If spatial and temporal factors were irrelevant, this command would have little sense.⁸ Paul doesn't offer an alternative for the Corinthians that could satisfy them as individuals. He doesn't suggest partaking of the Table in separation on each person's own terms. Paul commands a spatiotemporal coextensive (i.e. simultaneous) communal meal (Greggs 2019, 229). Therefore, if a multi-site church administers the sacraments, but at different times or locations, that "campus" is not a "campus" but a numerically distinct local church. If it fails to administer the Eucharist to all its campuses simultaneously—both geographically and temporally—it cannot metaphysically be numerically identical. And if it fails to

⁸ See (Fee 2014, 628; Thiselton 2000, 899). Fee argues the verb "may have to do with time" but "Paul's greater concern" is parity at the Table. This would mean translating the verb as "receive" rather than "wait." Although Thiselton argues that "wait for" is the "entirely correct" translation. But even if it means "receive with one another," the spatiotemporal element is still assumed.

administer them at all (e.g. to an online campus or otherwise), the more scandalous conclusion is necessitated—it isn't a church at all but a faux one, being at best a religiously inclined society of sorts.

But *true* simultaneity is nearly impossible to achieve in the administration of the Eucharist. Suppose a large congregation takes a full 20 minutes to serve communion to the entire assembled community as each member individually receives the bread and wine from the Pastor/Elder? The first person receiving it is hardly simultaneous with the last person who receives it. And where is the line of demarcation? 5 seconds? 5 minutes? 5 hours? Besides, even in contexts where communion is taken "together", some will eat the bread and drink the wine milliseconds before and after others. This isn't really "simultaneous." And what about the sameness of space? Is the building sufficient to carry this weight? What if the church gathers in a field? How far away would be too far? Must he/she remain in eyesight or ear shot?⁹ Vagueness about this concept abounds. But vagueness isn't a metaphysical problem. It is an epistemological problem. Just because we aren't sure which lost hair finally classifies someone as bald doesn't mean there isn't a difference between a full head of hair and a bald one. In the same way, while there may be vagueness about simultaneity in the Eucharist, I think it is fair to assume its spatiotemporally continuous if it's in the same gathering with everyone present. This is heavily context dependent. Some gatherings may last far longer than others. But as long as the gathering does it together without excluding others, I see no reason to worry about the vagueness of true simultaneity here. It doesn't have to be scientifically specific. It is an inherently vague, yet intuitive notion. Therefore, 5 seconds is no problem. 5 minutes is probably no problem depending on the context. 5 hours is likely a problem. However, more theological justification is needed to clarify the metaphysical commitments of the Eucharist.

A final worry arises for the Eucharist, however. If spatiotemporal simultaneity is required for the Eucharist does this mean that the sacraments must be practiced at every gathering to be a church in any sense? No. It only means that any church that fails to practice them in this way is inadvertently creating a new church entity.¹⁰ Now, if the church never administers the Eucharist to its parishioners (i.e. an online multi-site), this *would* entail that it is not a church.

Next, regarding the mark of right discipline, it would be straightforward to administer discipline to a multi-service church. If the leaders are present for both services and keep track of all their members, discipline can be maintained. Of

⁹ Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for this clarifying scenario.

¹⁰ Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for this question.

course, the mutual encouragement and watchful eye of fellow members might be lacking if they only attend one service. What about a multi-site church? Even here, most churches have designated leaders to keep watch, minus the “online” site variety where this would be a logistical nightmare, if possible. Discipline becomes obviously more difficult the more physical locations are created, but not impossible per se. Therefore, it appears that discipline only requires some level of geographical and temporal continuity—but it need not overlap. Now that these three marks have been briefly extrapolated, it is helpful to denote the “marks principle” below:

The Marks Principle: *X* is a numerically identical local church if and only if *X* rightly practices preaching, the sacraments, and discipline.

All Protestant congregations are required to satisfy this if they are to be considered a numerically singular local church. In the spirit of generosity, I think two of the marks *can* be satisfied by multi-site and multi-service—right preaching and right discipline. But the sacraments, notably the Eucharist, likely entails a denial of multi-site and multi-service as they are typically practiced and understood.

The Gathering Group Principle

The second principle that might have implications for multi-site and multi-service is derived from the Apostles Creed confession of the “communion of saints.” There are two separate arguments that can be made from this confession. The first is the “definitional” argument. The claim is minimally that the definition of the church necessitates that spatiotemporal coextensive gathering is required:

1. The church is defined as an assembly
2. Assembly means spatiotemporal coextensive gathering
3. ∴ Spatiotemporal coextensive gathering is necessary for church identity

So, by definition this communion of saints, or “church”/*ekklesia* is an assembly—a gathered community (Turretin 1994, 3:6–8). For example, Herman Bavinck says the church is a *gathering* of believers most essentially (Bavinck 2003, 4:307). Dietrich Bonhoeffer muses similarly, saying, “the Body of Christ takes up physical space here on earth” (Bonhoeffer 2015, 225). According to Mark Dever the lexical search for defining the church is sufficient—spatiotemporal coextensive gathering is *essential* to church identity (Dever 2012, 133). Jonathan Leeman follows suite,

claiming that the definition of church is necessarily tied to the idea of place because classical Greek had another word for people apart from a spatiotemporal gathering. The *ekklesia* was only possible when people physically gathered (Leeman 2020, 49, 80). Further, the Old Testament background of assembly means a gathering of coextensive time and space according to J. Y. Campbell who comments that “there is no good evidence that in the Old Testament *qahal* ever means anything but an actual assembly or meeting of some kind” (Campbell 1948, 133). D. Grant Gaines agrees:

The Old Testament theme of the people of God in assembly and as assembly is rooted in the paradigmatic assembly at Sinai, is permanently instituted in the prescribed assemblies of the Mosaic Law, is further developed at the Deuteronomic assembly, is central to the poetry and hymnody of Israel, and becomes an important part of the eschatological hope of the prophets. Throughout the Old Testament, Israel is considered a single assembly because the people as a whole are characterized by all gathering together in the same place in corporate worship (Gaines 2012, 48).

Similarly the New Testament commands: “And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near” (Hebrews 10:24–25).

But what does assembly or gathering really entail? Definitions alone do not give complete clarity. Indeed, even how BDAG defines church appears to leave room for multi-site permutations, saying *ekklesia* means “congregation or church as the totality of Christians living and meeting in a particular locality or larger geographical area, but not necessarily limited to one meeting place” (Danker et al. 2000, 3b.beta). Nothing necessarily prohibits multi-site or multi-service from claiming gathering can be sufficiently met through other means or other frequencies. But Mark Dever argues that while a church is more than a gathering it is never less—to remove this part is to destroy the whole (Dever 2012, 135). The church must *regularly* gather together (Dever 2012, 132). Robert Banks agrees, claiming that church “cannot refer to a group of people unless they all do in fact actually gather together” (Banks 2012, 40). For example, Dever asks, “in what sense can it be a “church” if it never gathers together?” (Dever 2012, 133). On his argumentation, if the church never coextensively gathers, it cannot be called a church. And if a church regularly gathers in separate locations, it is not one church but multiple. Moreover, according to most Protestant confessional dogma the church must weekly gather on a particular day for public worship—the Lord’s

Day.¹¹ So, why should regularly gathering in a coextensive space and time be considered a necessary condition for the church to remain numerically the same? Can definitions alone hold the weight?

House and Allison argue that the definitional argument is insufficient. They think spatiotemporal coextensive gathering cannot be baked into the definition. They argue:

Assembly and gathering are not the only translations of this word. It can refer to meetings of Christians in particular houses (Acts 12:12), the church in a city (1 Cor. 1:1–2; 1 Thess. 1:1), all the churches in a region (Acts 9:31), the universal church (Matt. 16:18; Eph 1:21–23), the Christian people (1 Cor. 10:32), and even the saints already in heaven (Heb. 12:23) (House and Allison 2017, 39).

They wonder why the Apostle Paul would add the modifier “whole” to church in Romans 16:23 and 1 Corinthians 14:23 if a physical coextensive gathered location were assumed in the definition of assembly (House and Allison 2017, 40). Doing so is begging the question. Given this critique, I think it’s better to provide a more robust second argument.¹²

According to John Webster the church is a “social space” (Webster 2004, 10). John Hammett fills out the idea of social space, claiming that the local church is defined as “very much a matter of the quality of relationships members have with each other, and little to do with organizational matters” (Hammett 2017, 8). Indeed, the idea that the church indicates the activity of gathering as a social community most fundamentally is generally agreed upon (Abraham 2010, 171). So, a thicker argument than the definition is what I call the “gathered group” argument:

1. The church is a social group
2. The activities of the church required for it to exist as social group necessitate spatiotemporal coextensive gathering
3. ∴ The church must gather coextensively

¹¹ See for example The Westminster Confession of Faith Chapter 21, The Baptist Faith and Message 2000 Section 8, The Savoy Declaration Chapter 22, and the Confession of Faith of the Evangelical United Brethren Church Article 14.

¹² See (Leeman 2020, 67–97). He notably spends a full chapter defending the definitional argument and responding to many of these critiques. I think he does an admirable job but lacks much of the needed theological “punch” to convince those who are not already convinced of his position against multi-site and multi-service.

But both premise 1 and premise 2 need explanation and defense. I will prove both in what follows.

Premise 1 requires a brief foray into the nature of group theory and its implications for the church since the church is a group—even if supernatural.¹³ Broadly construed, there are two understandings of groups, realist and non–realist. Realist understandings of groups take groups to be more than just the individuals that compose the group. They are “structured social groups with emergent causal powers” (Elder–Vass 2011, 144). Therefore, groups exist as wholes over and above the individuals and can hold beliefs, perform actions, pursue goals, and be held responsible. In some respect these abilities for the group are non–existent for the individuals but emerge as either epistemologically useful terminological concepts or metaphysically real group cognitive capacities.¹⁴ These metaphysically real capacities create some level of downward causation where groups exert influence on the individuals, rather than only individuals performing causative acts. It is only by virtue of the group that these novel properties or actions are possible.¹⁵ Conversely, non–realist understandings of groups take groups to be nothing more than the individuals themselves—in short, groups don’t exist. In other words, this is a form of group *eliminativism*. Now, there is a real worry that group realism would overly “bloat” our ontology of the world because it would commit us to an infinite number of new ontological entities besides what already exists (Effingham 2010, 252). From a purely metaphysical standpoint, this is a stringent critique. Though it is possible to affirm group realism and not identify groups with *sui generis* entities.¹⁶ And group realism, as I understand it, can avoid overly bloated ontological commitments by requiring novel causal powers for group existence.¹⁷ This would mean that no two objects can automatically be considered a group.

¹³ For a thorough treatment of group theory as it relates to the ontology of the church see (Cockayne 2019).

¹⁴ See (O’Connor and Theiner 2010, 80). Theiner and O’Connor go on to provide a non–trivial and non–mysterious model of emergent group cognition that is worth consulting due to the limited space and focus of this paper.

¹⁵ See (Elder–Vass 2011, 13–39); For examples of emergence besides groups, see (Inman 2018, 143–47).

¹⁶ See (Effingham 2010, 255–57). Effingham identifies groups with sets. Whatever ontological entity groups are to be identified with is largely irrelevant for my purposes. If group realism is metaphysically possible, my argument is safe.

¹⁷ See (Effingham 2007). While Effingham’s primary goal is to defend restricted composition for material objects I think his answer that composition occurs if and only if the object that two objects compose is causally efficacious is what should be used for the necessary and sufficient conditions for group theory as well.

They must jointly produce emergent properties that previously did not exist. The tree and clock tower on the University lawn do not form a group because they do not have any novel causal powers together that they lacked as individual entities.

More importantly from a theological perspective, non-realism about groups does not make sense of the biblical literature or philosophical coherence when it comes to the church. As John Webster notes, the church is “not a purely eschatological polity or culture. It is what men and women do because of the gospel. The church is a human gathering; it engages in human activities; it has customs, texts, orders, procedures, possessions, like any other visible social entity” (Webster 2004, 25). Indeed, Scripture ascribes numerous examples of group beliefs, group actions, and group responsibility to the church. These are novel and emergent causal powers and properties that do not exist apart from the group. They depend on the individuals being organized in a particular way—in this scenario, “churchwise.” Without the existence of the group, the powers and properties we see evidenced cannot exist (Elder-Vass 2011, 66–67). So, a non-realist group theory would require any talk of the “church” to be merely a metaphor for the individuals (Cockayne 2019, 108). And Scripture demands the existence of the group—“I will build my church...” says Jesus (Matthew 16:18). If this is true, non-realism about groups is *prima facie* faced with significant challenges.

For example, Galatians 1:6 says “I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and turning to a different gospel.” The “you” in this verse is plural, indicting the entire Galatian church of wrongdoing. If non-realism about groups is true, how would the Apostle be able to universalize the moral responsibility to the entire group? Elsewhere Philippians 2:2 says, “Complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind.” While this is an exhortation to a state not yet achieved, it is important to note that it is considered possible for the Philippian church to attain a unified *mind* and *belief*. While it is possible to take the Apostle to mean that each individual has the same beliefs, it seems more natural to understand it as a group belief. Finally, 2 Corinthians 9:5 says, “So I thought it necessary to urge the brothers to go on ahead to you and arrange in advance for the gift you have promised, so that it may be ready as a willing gift, not an exaction.” Here the Apostle assumes both the will and ability to perform a group action. Even beyond Scripture, there are basic philosophical challenges for non-realism. As Joshua Cockayne explains, “If group eliminativism is true, then we cannot hold corporations responsible for their actions, or place ethical demands on political parties, but we can only dictate what individual members of these groups

can or should do” (Cockayne 2019, 108). More so, to deny the reality of groups would require an individual level explanation for *everything* typically attributed to groups, which has yet to be done (Tollefsen 2015, 138). Based on this very brief foray, the group (i.e. the church)—*at minimum*—is more than just the individual disciples, which I think justifies Premise 1 sufficiently.

Now, why should multi-site or multi-serve proponents accept Premise 2? Can multi-site and multi-service churches affirm group realism without gathering spatiotemporally? After all, they claim to hold beliefs, perform actions, pursue goals, and be held responsible just like normal churches. And the very core of their existence is a *belief and commitment* as noted previously. If the necessity of a coextensive gathering for the church is to be viewed as essential to group realism, this must be proved.

The necessity of coextensive gathering largely depends on what form of group realism is taken to be accurate. Broadly speaking, there are two versions of realism—redundant and non-redundant realism (List and Pettit 2011, 7). Redundant group realism, most labeled as “Authorization” theories, claims that all group agency talk is fundamentally redundant. Whatever is said of the group reduces to the individual level. Non-redundant theories, typically “Animation” or “Functional” theories, claim that group talk is non-redundant, i.e. some things said of the group are not reducible to the individuals. The differentiating factor is that animation theories assume the group is non-individualistic, so that nothing said of the group can reduce to the individual while functional accounts maintain the individual. *Prima facie*, animation theories struggle to affirm basic Scriptural ideas such as the reality of individual disciples (not to mention their overtly metaphysical problems), therefore it is unlikely that this is consistent with Christian thought (Cockayne 2019, 115). Authorization theories also falter due to their denial of a serious commitment to the reality of group talk, as shown above. Given this, the remaining alternative for identifying the group theory of the church is a functionalist account, which at minimum argues that group states depend on the way they function in the system it belongs to rather than the intrinsic material constitution (Tollefsen 2015, 48, 69). The truthmaker for groups in this case is not the individuals alone but the individuals functioning as certain sorts of agents—i.e. acting.

Given that group realism and functionalism are the only ways to make sense of Scripture and philosophical coherence, what is necessary for a group like the church to exert group like actions such as having beliefs, performing actions, pursuing goals, and being held morally responsible? And what actions might be unique to the church that are not present for other groups? Might spatiotemporal

coextensive gathering make the cut? Consider this example: it is common practice for members of two distinct churches to gather for various reasons. Maybe Brandon is a member of First Baptist and Conner is a member of First Presbyterian. Yet Brandon and Conner regularly gather for theological discussion. Maybe their discussion rises to the level of worship one evening and they sing hymns together. Does this mean they are no longer members of differing churches but their own new church? Most would intuitively say no, but on group theory they are functioning in such a way. They are acting together. So why would they not be considered a church? Why would a group need more than singing hymns together to be a true church? While such an aspect may be necessary, it is not sufficient for the existence of a true church. Regular coextensive physical presence for weekly public worship is also necessary for a true church because the “group” that fails to gather regularly for formal public worship (e.g. Heb. 10:24–25) fails to form the proper intentional states required for group existence as far as the Scriptures define the church. Without regular coextensive spatiotemporal gathering the group cannot act in ways that are necessary for “churchwise” group existence. Nor can the church be held accountable as the Scriptures assume about the nature of the group that is the church. And the church is clearly a group with ethical demands placed upon it on Scriptural grounds.

Given these characterizations, what is minimally true for the spatiotemporal presence required of a local ecclesial body to form beliefs, perform actions, pursue goals, and be held morally responsible? Douglas Estes has argued that online presence can fulfill this *more* than physical (Estes 2009, 27). So maybe a conference call or an online group chat can satisfy what we typically think of as coextensive physical presence. In both contexts people can interact through speech and listening, and some church services only require these things. Therefore, if Estes is right, we should modify Premise 2 because spatiotemporal gathering isn’t what the church is after. It is actually after coextensive presence. As long as the group is “together” in some sense where they can interact, this satisfies the necessary conditions from Scripture and continues to maintain group status.

But the presence required for group realism and the structure of the church group in Scripture is minimally the causal nexus of action and knowledge.¹⁸ People

¹⁸ See (Inman 2017, 169–70). There are other conceptions of presence that are metaphysically “thicker” than the “causal nexus of action and knowledge” but I utilize the minimal definition for maximum argumentative power. If the minimal definition of presence cannot be satisfied by multi-site or multi-service, the maximal definition surely cannot be satisfied either. Inman defines these two views as “fundamental location” and “derivative location.” Here I take derivative location to be the minimal definition only requiring an object to stand in some relation to a distinct entity (in

must be able to know what is going on in the gathered group *and* must be able to act in real ways to influence the gathering. They must have the ability to have “direct knowledge” and exert “direct action” on the group. They must be able to hold beliefs, perform actions, and be held responsible *as a group*. For example, no online service or temporally or geographically extended site or service will allow each member to practice “teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom” (Colossians 3:16), or to greet one another with a “holy kiss” (2 Corinthians 13:12; 1 Thessalonians 5:26) (Herrington 2017, 31). Such an approach would handicap basic obedience to biblical texts. While a holy kiss may be culturally conditioned, surely the relevant cultural transfer would still require a physical handshake or hug. Without a physical means of appropriation, this is either severely limited or removed altogether. As another example, would a “member” of an online site be held responsible for the actions of the church? On most normal intuitions, the answer is obviously no. More is required from someone than mere online “attendance.”

While “presence” might be a vague notion, most have strong intuitions about when it is fulfilled. For example, when someone harbors bitterness because a dear friend wasn’t present at their wedding, this naturally means they weren’t physically there. Or suppose a more pragmatic example. Imagine a missionary couple in an unreached location, though they have internet access. They watch every church service live on the internet. They text, call, and video call members of the church weekly. They even pray together with the church each day. I would imagine the missionary couple would still feel disconnected as if something additional was *missing*. This may be a vague example, but I think it minimally shows the point. There is something more to the necessary presence for groups than knowledge or action available via an extended spatial location. Distance—temporally and geographically—mitigates what group presence requires. These individuals are unable to exert “direct action” on the group or have “direct knowledge.” Both acts are mediated. Consider a more common scenario. In contemporary culture grandparents often live great distances from their grandchildren. Yet they want to maintain a relationship. Since the advent of video chatting software, they have often utilized this to create a greater mode of presence. And yet no grandparent or grandchild would say that this version of presence is sufficient for what they think of as normal full presence. Talking

this case a relation of action and knowledge) rather than being located in its own right as fundamental location requires.

through a video screen is insufficient for practicing normal embodied presence. But counterexamples abound of other multi-site “congregations.”

However, nearly every major business has several locations and yet is one and the same company. Why can this not be true for the church? These are clearly groups that exist and perform the basic acts of groups and yet do not find the same level of presence as a basic requirement for numerical identity. But even in technologically savvy companies that have moved to remote employee models, a certain degree of presence is missing. All aspects of group theory lag for groups that do not gather in spatiotemporal coextensive ways. For example, if members of a group meet separately from the main group and the main group commits a crime, it would be difficult to hold the group as morally responsible. Further, the church is not an organization of individual producers but of communal family life. The actions required for group status for the church are different than corporations. Further, even multi-site and multi-service defenders like House and Allison admit that “*presence* requires embodiment and relationship” (House and Allison 2017, 105). And since humans are embodied, they are essentially located in time and space. Therefore, no online video can satisfy the criterion of spatiotemporal coextensive gathering (House and Allison 2017, 106). And the Scriptures repeatedly express the superiority of face-to-face meetings (2 John 12; 3 John 13–14; Rom. 1:10–15; 1 Cor. 16:7; 2 Cor. 1:16). But what about the invisible church? This doesn’t require spatial presence as suggested above and maintains “group” status. But if we remove spatiotemporal presence from the local church, the local church ceases to exist since it cannot function as a group based on the demands of group theory leaving only the universal church.

Given the necessity of spatiotemporal coextensive gathering for group status below is a distillation of what is minimally required for ecclesial group presence:

The Gathering Group Principle: *X* is a numerically identical local church if and only if *X* can experience the requisite direct action and knowledge of presence required for group realism.

Can multi-site or multi-service satisfy the gathering group principle? Neither are in the same geographical location at the same time. Neither typically visually see the other members of the congregation. Neither can greet or embrace one another in typical ways. Neither perform the same actions nor form the same beliefs in typical scenarios. Neither can be held responsible in the ways required of group realism. Therefore, multi-site and multi-service churches fail the gathering group principle, which requires more than what both can offer. Technological advances

in the future may significantly mitigate the challenges of the gathering group principle but nothing can replace the embodied presence of someone in one place, at one time, with another. Therefore, embodiment provides a deeply anthropological requirement for the nature of the church. If humans are necessarily embodied and necessarily social creatures, this would most naturally entail physical gathering for embodiment and social conditions to most robustly be satisfied. Social interaction at its greatest levels require coextensive physical presence. For example, what married couple would find being in different places sufficient for their intimate relational bond? But most fundamentally the gathering group principle requires sufficient direct action and knowledge for responsibility in the group which is significantly more than any non-physical variation can offer. No one physically absent can exert direct knowledge and control. Multi-site and multi-service may hold beliefs, but they cannot perform actions or be held responsible in the ways typically ascribed to groups on group realism nor can they perform multiple basic biblical commands.

But what if I am spatiotemporally present in the gathering but not mentally present?¹⁹ And if I'm not mentally present, I won't form beliefs, perform actions, or be held responsible in the typical robust way needed for church identity. While true, unless I am unconscious, I am present nonetheless. Even if I am daydreaming, there are parts of the gathering I continue to engage in. I continue to possess the ability for direct knowledge and direct control immediately. And there is virtually no scenario where I avoid any and all group actions if I am physically present. Lest I slide in the back doors after the service starts, avoid all eye contact, stare at my phone for the duration, play music through my headphones so I hear nothing, and leave before the service ends, I see no reason to think all group actions are absent. The more pressing issue is likely to be this—what member of a local church would act in such a way in every worship gathering? I see no real scenario where this would obtain.

So, let me spell out the final argument here since it has been extensive. The goal has been to substantiate the thesis that spatiotemporal coextensive gathering is essential to church numerical identity:

1. The church is a social group
2. Group realism is required for the existence of the church group

¹⁹ Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for posing this penetrating question.

3. The church is required to perform actions such as hold beliefs, interact as a social space (e.g. greet one another, admonish one another, sing to one another) and be held responsible to be maintain this group status
4. The actions the church is required to perform as a group require spatiotemporal coextensive gathering
5. ∴ Spatiotemporal coextensive gathering is required for the church

The argument itself is valid. And based on my summary of group theory and basic biblical descriptions of the church as a group, I think it is sound as well.

Therefore, based upon these two principles, do multi-site or multi-service groups count as numerically identical churches? I argue that they do not. I argue that these two conditions are necessary and have implications for where and how churches meet. Multi-site and multi-church can meet the requisite conditions for preaching and discipline but fail the sacraments and gathering. If one is willing to give up the Eucharist and group realism, then a case for multi-site or multi-service might be more realistic. But if the Eucharist and group realism remain, multi-site and multi-service cannot. Legion of new churches are created at the behest of multi-site and multi-service creators because each forms a metaphysically distinct entity by their group actions.

But are these the only diagnostic composition principles that are necessary conditions for church identity that are relevant to multi-site and multi-service variations? It depends. If one is Reformed in polity there is also the regulative principle that must be encountered. Also, the various ecclesial polities in general should be considered. Therefore, I will very briefly provide two further principles since many Protestant multi-sites and multi-services fall under their umbrellas.

The Regulative Principle

First, the regulative principle is defined succinctly by the Second London Confession in section 22 as:

The acceptable way of worshipping the true God, is instituted by himself, and so limited by his own revealed will, that he may not be worshipped according to the imagination and devices of men, nor the suggestions of Satan, under any visible representations, or any other way not prescribed in the Holy Scriptures.

They affix Deuteronomy 12:32 as a proof text. This means that only things such as reading, preaching the scriptures, hearing the scriptures, teaching/admonishing

one another through psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, and the administration of the sacraments are counted as legitimate means of worship. Therefore, since there are no explicit multi-site or multi-service examples in Scripture, they would violate the regulative principle. But many argue that there are examples in Scripture (House and Allison 2017, 38–39). For example, according to House and Allison “the very first Christian church was a multisite church” (House and Allison 2017, 31). They say, “where and when did all this activity take place? In two locations: in the temple and from house to house” (House and Allison 2017, 32). The Roman church (Rom 16:5, 14–15) and the Laodicean church (Col 4:15) met in multiple locations (House and Allison 2017, 33). Even the Second London says in section 22:

Neither prayer nor any other part of religious worship, is now under the gospel, tied unto, or made more acceptable by any place in which it is performed, or towards which it is directed; but God is to be worshipped everywhere in spirit and in truth; as in private families daily, and in secret each one by himself; so more solemnly in the public assemblies, which are not carelessly nor wilfully to be neglected or forsaken, when God by his word or providence calls thereunto.

However, it later says:

As it is the law of nature, that in general a proportion of time, by God's appointment, be set apart for the worship of God, so by his Word, in a positive moral, and perpetual commandment, binding all men, in all ages, he has particularly appointed one day in seven for a sabbath to be kept holy unto him, which from the beginning of the world to the resurrection of Christ was the last day of the week, and from the resurrection of Christ was changed into the first day of the week, which is called the Lord's Day: and is to be continued to the end of the world as the Christian Sabbath, the observation of the last day of the week being abolished.

Thus, the question to be determined is *not* whether the church can gather separately and remain the numerically same church throughout the week *but* whether they can gather separately continually on the Lord's Day and continue as the same local church. Therefore, examples of the church meeting separately do not necessarily entail that they practiced a multi-site or multi-service polity. It just means they met together more regularly than the Lord's Day alone. So, the regulative principle can offer a further principle for ecclesiology if one is apt to accept it:

The Regulative Principle: *X* is a numerically identical local church if and only if *X* gathers regularly and simultaneously on the Lord's Day for worship.

The regulative principle doesn't necessarily deny that something is a numerically identical local church if they practice *more* meetings than the Lord's day since they are doing more than what a local church must do rather than less. There are no examples in Scripture of a church gathering at different times or different locations for public worship on a regular basis and being considered the same local church. Therefore, it should not be a practice. The only way a multi-site or multi-service church could avoid this conclusion is to prove from silence or further deductive argument that churches in Scripture practiced their multi-polity and provide sufficient explanation of group realism and the Eucharist.

The Polity Principle

The final principle I consider is the polity principle which discounts congregational or autonomous church variations. This means that no multi-site or multi-service has the ontological makeup to remain either congregational or autonomous. By ontological necessity it is an episcopal or Presbyterian denomination. By congregational or autonomous polity, I mean a church government structure that prohibits external authority from determining *anything* in the church. Each local church is completely free to make their own decisions. Since most multi-site and multi-service churches functionally have differing bodies submitting to a singular leadership, congregational polity is automatically ruled out. Even in the variations that give authority to the different campuses or locations, there is still a group of leaders that exercise oversight over all the congregations. If a church is to claim any autonomous polity it cannot practice multi-site or multi-service without violating its own principles. Therefore, the polity principle is noted below:

The Polity Principle: *X* is a numerically identical local church if and only if *X* is completely free from external oversight.

But what if these multi-sites and multi-services say, "so long as all congregants have voting rights for all important decisions, there is no polity problem"? If this is the case, the principle *may* be sufficiently fulfilled. But in so doing they likely deny the gathering group principle by removing group agency. If voting is all that the

individual members do to compose the church, the church becomes an extremely thin entity. It seems that far more should be required than voting. Most would want true action that takes place in deliberative endeavors which requires reasoning among the church members and not just voting.²⁰ Otherwise, they could simply deny this principle and affirm a different polity. There is no problem with affirming Episcopal or Presbyterian polity, but many continue to claim congregational or various autonomous polities despite functioning otherwise. This is a serious problem for churches that continue to claim a polity that disagrees with their fundamental makeup. These churches must either reject their denominational affiliation in favor of their pragmatic ecclesiological concerns or reject their ecclesiological innovations. There is no third alternative that can allow for autonomous polity and multi-site or multi-service.

Conclusion

To this point I have primarily argued that multi-site and multi-service variations create numerically distinct local congregations. But I have also gestured toward theological “costs” involved. One may wonder what cost there is if these remain true churches. What’s really the problem then? Well, *some* multi-sites aren’t churches, which is detrimental to the spiritual health of those who are deceived. Online multi-site variations cannot administer the sacraments. Therefore, they are not local churches and any attempt to convince their “congregants” otherwise is spiritual malpractice. But I suggest that there are costs for multi-site churches that remain true churches as well. As Jonathan Leeman argues, “changing a church structure changes its moral shape” (Leeman 2020, 17). I think the moral costs are this: confusion on polity, diminution of communal brotherhood, and potential rejection of claimed polity. First, confusion on polity is due to the falsity of the claim that multi-sites and multi-services are the *same* church. The claim may not appear deadly but when there is falsity in the very definition of an entity, this is problematic for derivative thinking. If the foundation is broken, the structure itself is perilous. Moreover, as Leeman notes, “institutional structures speak and teach and train” (Leeman 2020, 30). A confused structure will beget confused disciples. Second, the demands of communal relations from the New Testament cannot be followed on these polities which is perilous for those committed to obedience and robust discipleship. Some even claim that there are other serious ethical implications since these ecclesial variations have a tendency to demand constant

²⁰ See (Tollefsen 2015, 64).

growth and efficiency, sacrificing “people on the altar of success” (White and Yeats 2009, 82–83). This is not a necessary entailment from multi-site and multi-service but does appear more likely in my estimation. Third, in a similar vein as the first danger, churches may unknowingly deny the polity they claim allegiance to which can cause unnecessary friction among parishioners and leaders.

Given the four necessary conditions for a single local church, I contend that they provide enough clout to outweigh the multi-site and multi-service benefits of virtue and mission. Minimally, if the marks principle and the gathering group principle are to be taken seriously, no multi-site or multi-service is metaphysically feasible. Besides, for those pragmatically inclined, there are likely plenty of other pragmatic avenues that might produce mission and virtue that fit within the framework of these four principles. It’s not as if single-service and single-location churches can’t produce virtue or mission. It is an assumption based purely on external numerical growth to consider otherwise. Indeed, single-site and single-service churches require a greater catholicity since they do not have the means to accommodate the growth that multi-site and multi-service attempt to resolve (Leeman 2020, 39).

Greater effort and consideration should be put forth in pursuing and cultivating methods that are consistent with this mere Protestant understanding of the local church. I am sure there are more arguments both in favor of multi-church variations and against them. My hope is that this paper spurs more research and argumentation on this particular ecclesiological innovation—even to the detriment of my own arguments in the pursuit of truth. While my conclusion may appear dogmatic in the negative overly stringent sense, I think such argumentation can muster better future argumentation. It is easier to come to a proper conclusion when the debate lines are clearly marked. More modestly, however, I hope to have shown that multi-site and multi-service shouldn’t be accepted without further theological vetting. In fact, I wonder if the common parishioner would even find single-site and single-service as more intuitive, if not minimally more desirable. What church member wouldn’t desire more opportunity for pastoral care, oversight, and community relationships that all come from single service churches? In the end, pragmatic considerations should not unduly influence the discussion. The marks principle, gathering group principle, regulative principle, and denominational principle should all be considered in the brewing debate and I hope this work contributes to further theological examination of it.

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