

An Open Letter and Call to Unity to Followers of the Lord Jesus Christ in Bloomington, Indiana by Larry C. Howard

Greetings to those who belong to the Assembly of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, in Bloomington, Indiana, to those who have been sanctified in Christ Jesus.

Brothers and Sisters, today in this home city of ours and not unlike any on earth, the Assembly of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ is divided into virtually uncountable schisms and sects, each with separate leadership and staff, exclusive meeting facilities, meeting schedules, budgets, organizational titles, creeds and separating doctrines and practices. In Bloomington alone, over one hundred separate categories of divisions exist with yet more divisions in practical organization among them. I challenge anyone to justify these divisions as having the full and unwavering support of Jesus, our Lord and Savior!

To the contrary, this fractured state of our Lord's Assembly grieves the heart of Christ, who prayed fervently for our unity, that we might reflect the oneness of God Himself. In His High Priestly Prayer, Jesus pleaded, *"I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me"* (John 17:20-21, ESV). The apostles echoed this call, urging us to reject division and pursue harmony. Paul implored the Corinthians, *"I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment"* (1 Corinthians 1:10). Likewise, he exhorted the Ephesians to be *"eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace"* (Ephesians 4:3), for there is *"one body and one Spirit... one Lord, one faith, one baptism"* (Ephesians 4:4-5). The scriptures reveal that our unity is not merely a preference but a divine mandate, essential to the credibility of His message. As Jesus declared, *"By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another"* (John 13:35), and through our oneness, *"the world may know that you sent me"* (John 17:23).

The remainder of this letter lays out a brief sketch of the historical divisions among those claiming His name and describes the consequent carnage, lays out the apostolic mandate for the practice of unity, delineates the very limited and specific criteria for separation of a person from fellowship of the ecclesia, and provides the only workable solution based on the Bible itself while considering the historical understanding of Jesus, His apostles, and His followers during that unique period of time in which no divisions were allowed. I urge you to prayerfully consider this plea to restore the one ecclesia in Bloomington, Indiana, as envisioned by our Lord. Let us cast aside the non-apostolic doctrines and practices that have fractured His body, embracing only the teachings of Jesus and His apostles (1 Corinthians 4:6). With humble hearts, let us unite as one assembly, reflecting the love and oneness that testify to the world that we are His disciples and that He was sent by the Father (John 13:35, 17:23). May we, in this city, become a beacon of Christ's unity, fulfilling His prayer and glorifying God with one voice (Romans 15:6).

I. The Wreckage of Non-Apostolic Doctrines: Historical Divisions and Violence

Despite the clear New Testament (NT) example of one ecclesia per city, and the apostolic mandate for avoiding sects (both of which I will carefully elucidate below), history reveals a tragic pattern: divisions, excommunications, and violence driven by doctrines not taught by the apostles. These disputes, often over complex theological constructs, fractured the church and led to bloodshed, contrary to the apostolic warning against divisive controversies (Titus 3:9). This section examines key examples, beginning with the doctrine of the Trinity, followed by Protestant parallels and other cases, demonstrating how non-apostolic doctrines sowed discord and death, a legacy that persists and demands repentance.

A. The Trinity: A Post-Apostolic Doctrine and Its Divisions

The doctrine of the Trinity, which holds that the one God eternally exists as three persons sharing one divine nature and that one of these persons fully possesses both a divine and a human nature, emerged over centuries through councils and debates, far beyond the NT's teachings. Jesus distinguished the Father as the one God (John 17:3), and Paul affirmed "To us there is one God, the Father... and one Lord, Jesus Christ" (1 Corinthians 8:6, Ephesians 4:6). Only John calls Jesus *theos*, using *monogenēs* (unique/only begotten, John 1:14, 18) to emphasize His distinct role, not a Trinitarian framework. The apostles never discuss "persons" or "natures," and the Greek terms *hypostasis* (person/substance) and *ousia* (being/essence) were used interchangeably in the NT (e.g., Hebrews 1:3, "He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his **hypostasis**..."), precluding their later technical use in Trinitarian formulas.

- **Development and Confusion:** The doctrine of the Trinity, as a precise metaphysical formulation of three distinct persons in one divine essence, developed over centuries after the apostolic age, with significant codification beginning at the Council of Nicaea (325 CE). Early disputes in Antioch saw Nicene and Arian factions clash, with bishops like Paul of Constantinople exiled and killed (342 CE, ~3,000 died in riots). The terms *hypostasis* and *ousia* caused confusion: at the Synod of Alexandria (362 CE), they were still synonymous, leading to misinterpretations. Pope Liberius (352–366 CE) condemned as heresy the *homousios* (same essence) formula, to this day central to orthodoxy, illustrating early doctrinal flux. A Nicene anathema, condemning those who claim the Son was of a different *hypostasis* (later, "person") than the Father, was eventually removed due to its conflation of terms, clarified only at Constantinople (381 CE).
- **Divisions and Punishments:** The Antiochene split (4th century) saw Arian and Nicene churches form separate assemblies, defying the one-ecclesia model (Acts 13:1). Excommunications were rampant: Athanasius of Alexandria was exiled five times for defending Nicene doctrine. Physical retribution followed, with Arian emperors like Constantius II (337–361 CE) ordering executions of Nicene leaders (e.g., Bishop Hosius of Cordova tortured). These disputes, rooted in non-apostolic metaphysics, fueled schisms and violence.
- **Citations:** Eusebius, *Life of Constantine* 3.59 (Antioch riots); *Theological Studies*, vol. 45, 1984, p. 62 (terminology); Athanasius, *History of the Arians* 41 (exiles); *The Early Church*, Henry Chadwick, 1993, p. 129 (Liberius, Nicene anathema).

B. Protestant Parallels: Violence Over Non-Apostolic Doctrines

The Protestant Reformation, while seeking to correct Catholic errors, often replicated them by enforcing non-apostolic doctrines through violence, fracturing the unity of the one ecclesia per city envisioned in the New Testament (NT) (Ephesians 4:5). A poignant example is the persecution of Anabaptists in Zürich for practicing adult immersion baptism (baptizō, Acts 8:38-39), a doctrine rooted in apostolic teaching (Acts 2:38), and the banishment of Anabaptists in Geneva for similar beliefs. These acts, driven by disputes over post-apostolic practices like infant baptism, deepened divisions among believers, straying from the apostolic call to unity (1 Corinthians 1:10).

- **Anabaptist Drownings in Zürich (1527–1532):** In Zürich, the cradle of the Anabaptist movement, believers like Conrad Grebel, Felix Manz, and George Blaurock rejected infant baptism, a post-apostolic practice absent from the NT, in favor of adult immersion based on faith (Romans 6:3-4). On January 21, 1525, after prayer and study, Grebel baptized Blaurock, who then baptized others, in defiance of Zürich's state church (The Chronicle of the Hutterian Brethren, 1987, p. 43). Ordered to cease or face banishment, they persisted, leading to the March 7, 1526, edict mandating drowning for "rebaptism" (Martyrs Mirror, Thieleman J. van Braght, 1660, p. 416). Felix Manz was the first martyr, drowned in the Limmat River on January 5, 1527, singing, "Into thy hands, O God, I commend my spirit" (Swissinfo.ch, Sep. 3, 2017). At least five others followed by 1532, their deaths mocked as the "third baptism" (Anabaptist World, Dec. 27, 2024). These executions, supported by reformer Huldrych Zwingli, fragmented the Zürich ecclesia, driving Anabaptists to form separate communities.
- **Anabaptist Banishment in Geneva (1537):** In Calvinist Geneva, Anabaptists faced persecution for rejecting infant baptism and advocating believer's baptism, deemed heretical by John Calvin. In early 1537, four Anabaptists from the Netherlands entered Geneva, quietly making converts. Calvin, vigilant against dissent, reported them to the magistrates, resulting in their banishment along with seven converts (New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia, Philip Schaff, 1908, p. 21). This act, while less violent than Zürich's drownings, enforced supra-apostolic conformity, further dividing Protestants and undermining the NT's one-ecclesia ideal (John 17:21).
- **Impact:** The Zürich martyrdoms and Geneva banishments entrenched divisions, as Anabaptists formed distinct groups (e.g., Swiss Brethren, Mennonites), rejecting state churches. Both cities mirrored Catholic intolerance, prioritizing non-apostolic doctrines over apostolic unity (Ephesians 4:3).
- **Citations:** The Chronicle of the Hutterian Brethren, 1987, p. 43; Martyrs Mirror, Thieleman J. van Braght, 1660, p. 416; The Radical Reformation, George H. Williams, 1992, p. 362; Felix Manz, Swissinfo.ch, Sep. 3, 2017; New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia, Philip Schaff, 1908, p. 21.

C. Other Pertinent Examples: Michael Servetus and Beyond

The pattern of punishing dissent over non-apostolic doctrines continued across traditions, with Michael Servetus as a prominent case.

- Michael Servetus (1553): Servetus, a Spanish theologian, was burned at the stake by Protestants in Geneva for denying the Trinity, a doctrine he argued lacked apostolic basis. Citing NT distinctions (e.g., 1 Corinthians 8:6, John 10:33-36), he rejected the post-Nicene formulation of three persons. Calvin, prioritizing doctrinal conformity, approved his execution, which sparked outrage and further divided Protestants.
- Other Cases: John Huss (1415), burned at Constance for rejecting non-apostolic Catholic doctrines like indulgences, and Margaret Clitherow (1586), crushed in England for Catholic loyalty amid Anglican disputes over papal authority, illustrate the widespread use of violence to enforce non-apostolic beliefs.
- Reasons: These executions targeted dissent from doctrines (Trinity, indulgences, papal supremacy) not explicitly taught by the apostles, violating NT warnings against logomachia (quarrels over words, 1 Timothy 6:4).
- Citations: Michael Servetus, Roland H. Bainton, 1953, p. 170; Jan Hus, Thomas A. Fudge, 2010, p. 172; The English Martyrs, John Hungerford Pollen, 1908, p. 89.

D. Legacy and Repentance: An Incomplete Reckoning

The divisions and violence sparked by non-apostolic doctrines—Trinitarian metaphysics, infant baptism, indulgences—have left a fractured church, with modern denominations (Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant) still separated by these issues, defying the NT’s one-ecclesia-per-city model (1 Corinthians 1:2). While recent institutional apologies acknowledge this bloody legacy, repentance remains partial, as anathemas and disfellowship persist, and the church’s violent past might have endured without external forces curbing its power.

Persistent Divisions: The Catholic Church maintains anathemas from the Council of Trent (1545–1563) against Protestant views on justification, while Protestant denominations exclude those rejecting non-apostolic doctrines like infant baptism or Trinitarianism. For example, many Baptist churches disfellowship members advocating adult immersion alone, echoing 16th-century conflicts. These divisions fragment cities into competing assemblies, contrary to apostolic unity (Ephesians 4:3).

Late and Limited Repentance: Only in recent centuries, and in some cases decades, has the institutional church begun addressing its violent past. In 1791, Pope Pius VI softened anti-Protestant rhetoric, but not until Vatican II’s *Dignitatis Humanae* (1965) did the Catholic Church condemn religious coercion, implicitly regretting executions like John Huss’s. John Paul II’s Day of Pardon in 2000 apologized for “errors” in persecuting heretics, yet anathemas remain. Protestants, too, have been slow: 1890 Lutheran ecumenical efforts and the 1997 Joint Declaration on Justification expressed regret for Reformation-era violence (e.g., Michael Servetus), but denominational exclusivity continues. The Lutheran World Federation’s 2017 Reformation commemoration called for unity, yet Trinitarian and baptismal disputes still divide.

Enlightenment’s Role: One might question whether the church’s violent policies would have persisted to this very day without external pressure. Enlightenment thinkers like Voltaire and John Locke, often fierce critics of institutional Christianity, advocated separating church and state, limiting the church’s ability to enforce doctrine through violence. For instance, Locke’s *A Letter Concerning Toleration* (1689) argued against religious persecution, influencing secular governance. By the 18th century, these ideas forced the church to relinquish state-backed executions, suggesting that reform was less a voluntary repentance than a response to secular critique.

Ongoing Need for Repentance: Despite these steps, the institutional church has not fully repented. Denominational walls and doctrinal exclusions persist, rooted in non-apostolic traditions, hindering the NT’s vision of one ecclesia (Acts 13:1). True repentance requires dismantling these barriers, aligning solely with apostolic teaching (1 Corinthians 4:6).

Citations: *Dignitatis Humanae* (1965), Vatican Archives; Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification (1997), Lutheran World Federation; *Ecumenical Review*, vol. 69, 2017, p. 45; Papal Encyclicals, Pius VI, 1791; *A Letter Concerning Toleration*, John Locke, 1689; *The Enlightenment and Religion*, S.J. Barnett, 2003, p. 89.

E. Conclusion and Bridge to Apostolic Solutions

Historical disputes over doctrines not explicitly taught by Jesus or the apostles—Trinitarian metaphysics, infant baptism, indulgences, to name just a few—have led to excommunications, schisms,

and violence, from Antioch's 4th-century riots to Zurich's 16th-century drownings. These tragedies, driven by human doctrines (Mark 7:7), defy the NT's call to unity (John 17:21) and fragment the one ecclesia per city (Acts 13:1). The institutional church's recent, incomplete repentance, spurred partly by Enlightenment critics, has muted the physical violence between believers but the spiritual rending of the body of Christ into innumerable shreds has continued unhindered. Today in Bloomington, Indiana the reasons for division include a vast number of man-made doctrines and practices including every issue from whether a church owned structure can have a fellowship hall or kitchen to whether missionaries can be funded, to doctrinal distinctions related to dispensationalism, pre-, post- and a-millennialism, predestination or free choice, to worship music styles, to issues surrounding leadership structures. In fact, the list is so diverse, so long and often made up of such seemingly impractical concerns that one is led to the very real possibility that the reasons given for division are perhaps secondary to the real issue: who is in control? Even a casual observer can see that, regardless of the assumed reasons for separation, the real issue is that a multiplicity of institutionalized powers and personalities each with their own executives, gurus and pop leader-personalities, are competing for a larger share of control over the pool of existing believers in the city (and their associated money, time and energy.) It all underscores the need for a return to apostolic teaching. The apostles themselves provided the solution, as we will explore in the following sections, through their clear mandates for unity, boundaries for disfellowship, and warnings against speculative disputes, guiding us toward one ecclesia per city, united in Christ.

II. The New Testament Model: One Ecclesia per City

The New Testament presents a vision of the church as a unified body, one ecclesia in each city, standing in stark contrast to the fragmented denominations that mark modern Christianity. This model, rooted in the apostolic teaching of Jesus and His apostles, embodies the call to unity that reverberates through the NT (John 17:21, 1 Corinthians 1:10). By examining the term ecclesia, every NT reference to local churches, and Paul's instructions for city-wide leadership, we see a consistent pattern: a single, city-wide assembly of believers, governed as one, undivided by non-apostolic doctrines or preferences. This one-ecclesia-per-city model is not merely organizational but theological, reflecting the oneness of God's people as a witness to the world (John 17:23). In a time when our city, Bloomington, and countless others are splintered by sectarianism, the NT's model offers a path to restore the unity Christ commanded.

A. Understanding Ecclesia: A Unified Assembly

The Greek word ecclesia (ἐκκλησία), typically translated “church,” carries profound significance for understanding the NT's vision of unity. Derived from ek (out) and kaleō (to call), ecclesia denotes a “called-out assembly.” In the Greco-Roman world, it referred to a city-wide gathering of citizens for civic deliberation, as seen in Ephesus where an ecclesia convened to address a riot (Acts 19:32, 39). This secular usage underscores a key feature: the ecclesia was a singular, inclusive assembly representing the entire community, not a collection of factions. The NT adopts this term to describe the Christian community, infusing it with theological meaning as the assembly of God's people, called out from the world to live as one body under Christ's lordship (Ephesians 4:4-5). The apostles' use of ecclesia—always singular for a city's believers—reflects this unified, participatory ideal, aligning with their exhortations to maintain “the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Ephesians 4:3).

B. New Testament Evidence: One Ecclesia per City

The NT consistently portrays the church as one ecclesia per city, never acknowledging multiple churches within a single locale. This pattern, evident in every reference to local churches, Paul's instructions for appointing elders in each city, and the unified actions of city-wide leadership, underscores the apostolic commitment to unity, rejecting the divisions that later arose from non-apostolic doctrines (1 Corinthians 1:10). Below are the NT examples, organized by city, region, and leadership structure, demonstrating this unified model.

City-Specific References (Singular Ecclesia):

- **Jerusalem:** “And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem” (Acts 8:1). The church in Jerusalem, despite thousands of believers (Acts 2:41) and house meetings (Acts 2:46), is consistently singular (Acts 5:11, 11:22, 15:4). It acted as one body, sending representatives (Acts 15:22).
- **Antioch:** “Now there were in the church at Antioch prophets and teachers” (Acts 13:1). Antioch's believers form one ecclesia, unified in mission (Acts 15:3), despite likely multiple gatherings.

- **Corinth:** “To the church of God that is in Corinth” (1 Corinthians 1:2; cf. 2 Corinthians 1:1). Despite factionalism (1 Corinthians 1:12), Paul addresses one ecclesia, urging unity. House gatherings (e.g., Romans 16:23) are part of this single assembly.
- **Ephesus:** “He sent to Ephesus and called the elders of the church” (Acts 20:17; cf. Revelation 2:1). Ephesus has one ecclesia, with unified leadership, despite house churches (1 Corinthians 16:19). The elders’ collective farewell to Paul (Acts 20:36-38) reflects a city-wide body.
- **Thessalonica:** “To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father” (1 Thessalonians 1:1; cf. 2 Thessalonians 1:1). A singular church reflects Thessalonica’s unified believers.
- **Philippi:** “To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers and deacons” (Philippians 1:1). One ecclesia is implied, with shared leadership.
- **Colossae:** “To the saints and faithful brothers in Christ at Colossae” (Colossians 1:2). A house church (Colossians 4:15, Nympha’s) is part of the city’s single ecclesia.
- **Laodicea:** “Have it also read in the church of the Laodiceans” (Colossians 4:16; cf. Revelation 3:14). One church in Laodicea.
- **Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia:** Each addressed as “the church in [city]” (Revelation 2:8, 2:12, 2:18, 3:1, 3:7). Singular ecclesia per city.
- **Rome:** “To all those in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints” (Romans 1:7). A house church (Romans 16:5) is part of Rome’s unified community, not a separate ecclesia.
- **Cenchreae:** “Phoebe, a servant of the church at Cenchreae” (Romans 16:1). One ecclesia in this port city.

Regional References (Plural Ecclesiai):

- **Galatia:** “To the churches of Galatia” (Galatians 1:2; cf. 1 Corinthians 16:1). The plural indicates one ecclesia per city (e.g., Antioch of Pisidia, Iconium) within the region, not multiple churches per city.
- **Macedonia and Achaia:** “The churches of Macedonia” (2 Corinthians 8:1; cf. Romans 15:26). Cities like Philippi and Thessalonica each have one ecclesia.
- **Asia:** “To the seven churches that are in Asia” (Revelation 1:4; cf. 1 Corinthians 16:19). Each city (Ephesus, Smyrna, etc.) has one ecclesia, reinforcing the singular model.
- **Judea:** “The church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria” (Acts 9:31). Likely refers to one ecclesia per city within regions, with Jerusalem’s church as a model (Acts 8:1).

House Churches as Subsets:

House gatherings, such as those in Prisca and Aquila’s home (Romans 16:5, 1 Corinthians 16:19), Nympha’s (Colossians 4:15), or Philemon’s (Philemon 2), are logistical subsets of the city-wide ecclesia, not independent churches. The NT never refers to multiple ecclesiai within a city, preserving unity.

City-Wide Leadership:

Paul's instructions to appoint elders emphasize a city-wide structure. To Titus, he wrote, "This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained into order, and appoint elders in every town" (Titus 1:5). The phrase "in every town" (κατὰ πόλιν, *kata polin*, city by city) indicates one set of elders per city, overseeing the singular ecclesia, not multiple churches.

Similarly, in Acts, Paul and Barnabas "appointed elders for them in every church" (Acts 14:23), with the context (e.g., cities like Lystra, Iconium) suggesting one ecclesia per city under unified leadership.

The Ephesian elders' collective action reinforces this. In Acts 20:17-38, "Paul sent to Ephesus and called the elders of the church" (Acts 20:17), and they jointly farewelled him, "And when he had said these things, he knelt down and prayed with them all" (Acts 20:36). These elders, representing one ecclesia in Ephesus (Rev 2:1), demonstrate a unified city-wide leadership, not separate congregations.

These passages show that elders were appointed to oversee the entire ecclesia in a city, aligning with the NT's unified model and rejecting modern denominational fragmentation.

C. The Thesis: One Ecclesia per City as a Mandate for Unity

The NT's consistent portrayal of one ecclesia per city, governed by city-wide elders, is a theological mandate for unity, fulfilling Jesus' prayer "that they may all be one... so that the world may know that you sent me" (John 17:21, 23). Paul's rebuke of Corinthian factions ("Is Christ divided?", 1 Corinthians 1:13) and call for "no divisions among you" (1 Corinthians 1:10) underscore that multiple churches in one city would violate this oneness. The ecclesia's city-wide scope, like its Greco-Roman counterpart, gathers all believers—Jew, Gentile, slave, free (Galatians 3:28)—into a single assembly, reflecting the "one body" (Ephesians 4:4). House churches, unified under shared leadership appointed per city (Titus 1:5, Acts 14:23), and collective decisions (Acts 15:22) embody this model. The Ephesian elders' unified farewell to Paul (Acts 20:36-38) further illustrates a singular ecclesia. By contrast, modern denominationalism, with its competing assemblies in cities like Bloomington, fragments this vision, often over non-apostolic issues condemned by the apostles (Titus 3:9). The one-ecclesia-per-city model, rooted in apostolic practice, offers a blueprint to restore unity, aligning with Christ's command and the NT's witness.

D. Implications for Modern Christianity

The NT's one-ecclesia-per-city model, with elders appointed city-wide, challenges the divisions that plague our churches today. In Bloomington, over one hundred separate groups claim Christ's name, each with distinct doctrines and structures, echoing the Corinthian error Paul condemned (1 Corinthians 1:12). The apostolic model calls us to unite as one assembly under unified leadership (Titus 1:5), adhering only to the teachings of Jesus and His apostles (1 Corinthians 4:6), and to reject the non-apostolic doctrines that fuel schism. By embracing this vision, we fulfill the NT's call to "maintain the unity of the Spirit" (Ephesians 4:3), becoming a testimony to the world of Christ's divine mission (John 17:23).

III. The Greco-Roman Ecclesia: A Cultural Blueprint for Unity

The New Testament's vision of one ecclesia per city, unified under apostolic teaching (John 17:21, 1 Corinthians 1:2), draws profoundly on the Greco-Roman concept of ecclesia, a term familiar to first-century audiences as a city-wide assembly of citizens. In Greek city-states and Roman colonies, the ecclesia represented a singular, participatory body deliberating civic matters, a model that Jesus and His apostles adapted to embody the unified community of believers. While the NT ecclesia mirrors this cultural blueprint, it transcends its limitations by including all believers—men, women, slave, free (Galatians 3:28)—though within apostolic boundaries. By understanding this Greco-Roman context, we see how the NT ecclesia rejects the divisions plaguing modern Christianity, offering a path to restore the unity Christ commanded in cities like Bloomington.

A. The Greco-Roman Ecclesia: A City-Wide Assembly

In the Greco-Roman world, ecclesia (ἐκκλησία) denoted the public assembly of free male citizens convened to deliberate and decide civic issues, such as laws, trials, or war. In Athens, the ecclesia met on the Pnyx hill, where citizens debated collectively, as described by Thucydides (History of the Peloponnesian War 2.59). In Roman colonies like Ephesus, an ecclesia gathered to address a riot over Paul's preaching ("The assembly was in confusion", Acts 19:32, 39), illustrating its city-wide scope. Key features of the Greco-Roman ecclesia include:

- **Singular Unity:** Each city had one ecclesia, representing all eligible citizens, not competing factions (Aristotle, Politics 3.1275b).
- **Participatory Nature:** Citizens spoke and voted, though restricted to free males, excluding women, slaves, and foreigners (metoikoi) (Xenophon, Oeconomicus 7.10).
- **Household Representation:** The male head (kyrios) represented the household (oikos), indirectly accounting for dependents' interests, as no evidence exists of women or slaves participating directly (Demosthenes, Against Neaera 59.46).

This cultural understanding of ecclesia as a unified, city-wide assembly shaped the NT's use of the term, resonating with audiences familiar with civic gatherings.

B. The NT Ecclesia: A Christian Adaptation

The NT adopts ecclesia to describe the Christian community, transforming the Greco-Roman model into a theological assembly of God's people. Jesus first uses the term ("I will build my church", Matthew 16:18), and the apostles apply it to local assemblies (e.g., "the church in Corinth", 1 Corinthians 1:2). The NT ecclesia mirrors the Greco-Roman pattern in its city-wide scope and unity but expands its inclusivity, fulfilling Christ's call for oneness ("that they may all be one", John 17:21).

- **City-Wide Unity:** Like its Greco-Roman counterpart, the NT ecclesia is singular per city (e.g., Jerusalem, Acts 8:1; Ephesus, Acts 20:17), governed by city-wide elders ("appoint elders in every town", Titus 1:5). This structure rejects multiple assemblies, as seen in Paul's rebuke of Corinthian factions ("Is Christ divided?", 1 Corinthians 1:13).

- **Participatory Nature:** The NT ecclesia encourages collective participation, with believers contributing in worship (“each one has a hymn, a lesson”, 1 Corinthians 14:26) and decision-making (“it seemed good to the apostles and elders, with the whole church”, Acts 15:22).
- **Cultural Resonance:** First-century audiences, familiar with the Greco-Roman ecclesia (Acts 19:32), would recognize the NT’s use as a call to form a unified Christian assembly in each city, transcending social barriers (Galatians 3:28).

C. Expanded Inclusivity: Women in the NT Ecclesia

While the Greco-Roman ecclesia excluded women, the NT ecclesia includes them as full members, reflecting the radical equality of the gospel (“neither male nor female... all one in Christ Jesus”, Galatians 3:28). However, apostolic boundaries limit women’s roles, prohibiting them from speaking or teaching men in the assembly (1 Timothy 2:12, 1 Corinthians 14:34). Women’s participation, though significant, is carefully delineated:

- **Female Deacons:** Phoebe is called a diakonos (servant/deacon) of the church in Cenchreae (“Phoebe, a servant of the church at Cenchreae”, Romans 16:1), likely serving in practical roles, such as aiding the poor, consistent with male deacons (Acts 6:1-6).
- **Prophetesses:** Women prophesied in the ecclesia, as seen in Corinth (“Any woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered”, 1 Corinthians 11:5). Philip’s daughters also prophesied (Acts 21:9), contributing spiritual gifts under apostolic guidelines.
- **Possible Apostolic Workers:** Junia, named by Paul as “outstanding among the apostles” (Romans 16:7), may have been an apostolic worker, though debate persists over her role and gender (some manuscripts read “Junias,” male). If female, her work likely involved evangelism or support, not teaching men (1 Timothy 2:12).
- **House Church Hosts:** Women like Lydia (Acts 16:15) and Nympha (Colossians 4:15) hosted house churches, facilitating the ecclesia’s gatherings but not necessarily leading or teaching.

These examples show women’s integral role in the NT ecclesia, surpassing Greco-Roman exclusion, yet within Paul’s boundaries (“I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man”, 1 Timothy 2:12). This inclusivity strengthens the ecclesia’s unity, embracing all believers while maintaining order.

D. Implications for Unity: A Blueprint for Today

The Greco-Roman ecclesia’s city-wide, unified structure informed the NT’s model, which Jesus and His apostles adapted to create a singular, participatory assembly in each city. By including women, the NT ecclesia transcends cultural limits, embodying the oneness of God’s people (Ephesians 4:4). Modern Christianity, with its denominational splits in cities like Bloomington, defies this model, often over non-apostolic doctrines condemned by the apostles (“avoid foolish controversies”, Titus 3:9). The NT ecclesia, rooted in its Greco-Roman blueprint, calls us to unite as one assembly per city, reflecting Christ’s prayer (“that the world may know”, John 17:23). The apostles provided clear standards to maintain this unity, as we will explore next, by defining legitimate grounds for separation and rejecting divisive disputes.