

The Local Church

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Part I

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Several years ago I heard a pastor tell this story on himself. He said that when he was pastoring a very liberal church, he himself was not even saved. His standard preaching included jokes, poetry, and social issues with very little Scripture. Then he attended a conference of pastors and got gloriously saved. For the first time in his life, Jesus was a reality to him. He went back to his church and began to preach Jesus crucified, buried and resurrected for our sins. Again and again he preached this message, trying to make Jesus as real to his congregation as He had become to him.

His custom was to stand at the door after every service and greet the parishioners as they left. After several weeks of his new preaching, one old woman came up to him and angrily said, "Jesus! Jesus! Jesus! That's all I ever hear you preach anymore. Jesus! Jesus! Jesus! Why the way you talk you would think He was God or something!"

With this woman's statement, the pastor had proof that he was finally doing the work of the local church. He was preaching Jesus to the lost and doing everything he could to make Him real to his own congregation!

In this two part teaching article we are going to examine the local church. As Christian ministers and workers, it is vitally important that we have a full understanding of what the local church is, what it does, and how it does it.

What Is the Church?

We are all familiar with the truth that the church is not a building; the church is everyone who is born again having accepted Jesus as their Lord and Savior. I am impressed with the wording of signs I have seen in front of some churches which say, "The Church of Jesus Christ Meets Here." These Christians know what the church is!

The actual word *church* comes from the Greek word $\epsilon\kappa\kappa\lambda\eta\sigma\iota\alpha$, or *ekkleesia* which literally means "the called out ones." In the original secular Greek, the word was often used to describe a political gathering or assembly. Jesus took the word and applied it to those whom He called out from the world unto Himself. Hence, the assembly of believers is the *ekkleesia*, or church of Jesus Christ. Of the 114 uses of *ekkleesia* in the New Testament, 109 times the word is used to describe the community of God's people. [u](#)

1. The Church Universal

Let's look first at the broader, universal church. The universal church consists of every believer in Jesus Christ all over the world. This includes all truly born again people of all Christian churches or denominations. Of course, I do not include non-Christian cults, such as Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses, although there are certainly individuals within such cults who have experienced rebirth through calling upon the name of the Lord, (see Acts 2:21 and Rom 10:13), but for various reasons have not yet come out from the cult. It goes without saying that I am excluding the non-Christian religions of the world such as Muslims, Hindus, and so on.

The universal church also includes those who have

gone on to be with the Lord in heaven. Certainly these include those in the category of the Hebrews 11 and 12 great cloud of witnesses down through the ages.

2. The Church Local

Now we are getting to that part of the church that we can see, the local church! The local church is simply any group of believers who gather together to celebrate the good news of the gospel. Every Christian should belong to a local church. It is this church that we interact with on a day to day basis. It is within this context that we relate to other Christians, we worship God, we give our tithes and offerings, and in which we serve the Lord. Any organized gathering of believers who meet together regularly for worship, prayer, communion and fellowship is essentially a church, even though they may also relate to a larger body of believers or even to different churches.

A local church may or may not have its own building in which to meet. In the early days there were no church buildings. All Christians simply met in some convenient place, usually someone's house.

Perhaps the smallest church one can imagine is the meeting of two or three believers. Jesus said, "For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there I am in the midst of them." (Mat 18:20 KJV) Thus, one might say that it is the presence of Jesus that distinguishes the church from any other gathering or group of people!

What Is the Church Supposed To Do?

Let us now look more closely at what the local church does. First we must recognize that no two churches are alike, nor should they be. Each church is a unique expression of Jesus' body here on earth. Nor will any two churches perform the same functions exactly alike because again, each is unique. However, there are certain basic identifiable functions that should be common to all churches.

1. Praise and Worship God

In my view the primary and highest call of any church is to praise and worship God, Jehovah, Jesus the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Many of our most beautiful worship songs encompass our adoration of the three persons of the Trinity. In the local church this act of worship is usually done during what we refer to as the *worship service*. However, there is a real difference between those Christians who merely sing songs and those who truly have a vision of the Lord and fully express themselves to Him in humble adoration and unrestrained worship!

As Christians we are called to worship *God*, the Creator of the universe, the bright and morning Star, the great I AM, the Lord of lords and King of kings, the one who humbled Himself and gave His life as a ransom for our sins - the Lamb of God! Worthy of our highest praise and worship is the Lamb! I highly recommend that every church present a series of messages on worship, teaching the people not only how to worship, but why we are to worship.

2. Express Jesus To the World

I believe the second most vital function of the church is to reach the lost through evangelism. The church is the only qualified entity on earth capable of telling the unsaved of the world about the love of Jesus. This can take place in a number of different ways. One obvious way is to invite unsaved people to church. But remember, the church is primarily for the believers.

Every church needs to have on-going, well planned evangelism programs to reach beyond its walls. The main objective of evangelism is to get the message out to where lost people are. Getting them to come to our church should be a secondary goal; getting them saved is the primary goal. Here are some ways that churches have used to evangelize the lost.

a. Neighborhood Bible Studies - Schedule Bible studies in the homes of Christians where friends, relatives, co-workers and neighbors can come to hear the word of God. This kind of atmosphere is friendly, casual and non-threatening to unbelievers, including those with strong non-Christian beliefs. This is a highly effective way to evangelize the lost.

b. Neighborhood Children's Fellowship - Statistics tell us that over 80% of the people who become believers do so before their 18th birthday. It is therefore extremely important to have active child evangelism efforts in your church! Have regular gatherings of neighborhood children for games, refreshments and story telling. Of course, the stories are from the Bible! Any loving, Christ-centered parent or teenager can have this kind of neighborhood outreach.

c. Witnessing Classes - One of the first things every believer needs to be taught is how to lead someone to the Lord. Periodically teach classes on how to witness to others. The local church should also have an ongoing effort to teach people how to do door to door witnessing, street evangelism and so forth.

d. Open Air Meetings - From time to time schedule open air meetings in vacant lots, parks or wherever. Have contemporary Christian music and different evangelists speak. Sometimes several churches can work jointly to sponsor these meetings.

3. Minister To Itself

The third very important function of the local church is to minister to itself. Paul drew an analogy between the human body and the body of Christ. In his analogy he clearly demonstrates how we, as members of the body of Christ, are to care for and minister to one another.

As it is, there are many parts, but one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, "I don't need you!" And the head cannot say to the feet, "I don't need you!" On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and the parts that we think are less honorable we treat with special honor. And the parts that are unpresentable are treated with special modesty, while our presentable parts need no special treatment. But God has combined the members of the body and has given greater honor to the parts that lacked it, so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it. Now you are the

body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it. (1 Cor 12:20-27 NIV)

I have divided the ministry to the body of Christ into eight categories. I believe these demonstrate specifically how we are to be committed to one another.

a. Teaching and Preaching

One of the central functions of church life is to continually preach and teach Scripture. This takes place during the Sunday services, Sunday school, Bible classes, midweek services, and home gatherings. As time passes, some members will move on from one class or group, while new converts enter the preaching/teaching cycle.

Peter makes a powerful statement regarding our need for knowledge of Scripture. "His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness." (2 Pet 1:3 NIV)

Thus we see that Scripture knowledge is an absolutely essential element of a successful Christian life. Every church should have in place an active, on-going preaching/teaching process for every age group in the church. Scripture memorization should be included and encouraged for all ages.

b. Prayer

The fundamental business of the church is to pray, pray, and then to pray some more. We are all familiar with God's call to His people in 2 Chronicles 7:14, "If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and *pray*..." Every leader should be a praying Christian. Every leader should teach his or her people to be praying Christians. Every leadership team in every local church should pray together as a unit on a regular basis. And I don't mean to just open a meeting in prayer. At least once in a while every area of leadership in a church, or a department or unit within the church, should set aside times for prayer, not for planning and discussing, but just for prayer.

Nothing that comes from the mind of man can substitute for seeking the mind of Christ in prayer.

c. Body Ministry

Body ministry means that the various members of the local church body are to use their gifts and callings to minister to each other. For example, one who is gifted in teaching is to use his gift to teach others; one who is an intercessor is to pray for others who are in need; one who has an abundance of material things is to share them with those who have material or financial needs, and so forth.

One form of body ministry that is very effective is the home meeting. The home meeting is centered around a few believers who meet regularly in someone's home for fellowship and Bible study. After the worship and teaching is over, or sooner if the Holy Spirit directs, different people can voice their needs. As they do, gather around and lay hands on them and pray as the Holy Spirit leads. There may be prophetic words, and/or emotional and physical healings. Often it is in this small group setting that oppressive bondages and demonic strongholds are broken.

d. Baptism

Every church should have periodic classes on water baptism and regularly scheduled baptism services. When or where these services are held is not important.

e. Communion

Communion should be observed regularly in every church. Some churches have communion monthly, others weekly while some have a daily communion service.

f. Counseling

Every church should have counseling available for its members and their families. In smaller churches, this is usually done by the pastor. However, I mention two cautions concerning Christian counseling.

(1) Do Not Counsel the Opposite Sex Alone - The best counseling rule I can think of is to never counsel a member of the opposite sex alone. The devil is always looking for a way to smear or discredit Christian workers. Counseling a person of the opposite sex in private presents a golden opportunity for him. Even if you think, "I can control myself. It's no problem for me." Beware! A false rumor can cause as much damage to a pastor's reputation and destroy a church as if it were true. And if you are married, always keep your spouse informed and let the counselee know that you are telling your spouse that, at a minimum, the counseling session took place.

(2) What to Counsel - The best thing every pastor has to offer a counselee is knowledge and wisdom from the word of God. Many people do not want to conform to the requirements of Scripture thereby rendering biblical counseling ineffective. If a person is unwilling to apply biblical principles to his or her problem, there is little you can do for them.

g. Exorcism

There are times when a believer needs deliverance from demonic spirits. Every church should have one or more teams of qualified people who are experienced in exorcism. If you determine that deliverance is needed, I am not suggesting that it be done immediately after a person's conversion. It is wise to wait long enough to determine the degree of commitment to Christ the new believer demonstrates. The reason is simple. If there is only a lukewarm commitment to Christ, deliverance will probably not last.

I have purposely not gone into detail here as to how, when, where, etc. deliverance should take place. I refer readers wishing to know about deliverance to our book, [*How To Defeat Demons: An International Manual*](#), by Jim and Carolyn Murphy, published and distributed by Hundredfold Ministries, Int'l.

h. Church Discipline

Scripture makes it clear that when the early Christians fell into gross sin, the church disciplined them. Unfortunately, this kind of gross sin is ignored in many of today's churches. The leadership of every local church should be prepared to discipline. The responsibility of church discipline lies directly with the pastor and elders. The failure to properly discipline is not only wrong, but it is also destructive. Why?

1) First, one day the pastor and elders are going to answer to Jesus for their conduct in these matters. The burden of

leadership is both a sober and solemn responsibility. When a person has assumed responsibilities as pastor/elder of a church, God requires him or her to challenge those living sinful lifestyles. It is indeed sobering to read what God told Ezekiel when he said, "When I say to a wicked man, 'You will surely die,' and you do not warn him or speak out to dissuade him from his evil ways in order to save his life, that wicked man will die for his sin, and I will hold you accountable for his blood." (Eze 3:18 NIV)

2) Second, if the sin is severe enough, the person's very life may well be at stake. Look at Paul's admonition to the elders at Corinth over the man who was sleeping with his step mother.

It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that does not occur even among pagans: A man has his father's wife. And you are proud! Shouldn't you rather have been filled with grief and have put out of your fellowship the man who did this? Even though I am not physically present, I am with you in spirit. And I have already passed judgment on the one who did this, just as if I were present. When you are assembled in the name of our Lord Jesus and I am with you in spirit, and the power of our Lord Jesus is present, hand this man over to Satan, so that the sinful nature may be destroyed and his spirit saved on the day of the Lord. (1 Cor 5:1-5 NIV)

The King James translation says, "To deliver such an one unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus." (1 Cor 5:5 KJV) I believe sin of this nature is what John meant when he wrote,

"If anyone sees his brother commit a sin that does not lead to death, he should pray and God will give him life. I refer to those whose sin does not lead to death. There is a sin that leads to death. I am not saying that he should pray about that." (1 Jn 5:16 NIV)

We also see from this passage that not every sin is to be dealt with by the church, only those sins of a severe, gross nature.

3) Third, the spiritual health of the whole church can be negatively affected when gross sin is tolerated within the congregation. In some churches, if someone is an elder, deacon, a big giver, or is influential in the community, his sin is ignored. There is going to be little spiritual life in the services of a church where the Holy Spirit has been grieved over unrepentant and unchallenged sin among some of its members.

4) Lastly, unbelievers are watching. When the church tolerates blatant sin, it discredits our Lord Jesus in the eyes of an unbelieving world and makes Christianity appear hypocritical rather than attractive.

When there is a need for discipline I suggest the following. 1) The pastor and elders are to meet and prayerfully discuss the matter in absolute secrecy. 2) They are to discretely question all knowledgeable participants. They must be open to any misunderstanding or untruths. 3) They are to pray diligently about the matter, then meet again. 4) After these steps are taken, if there is a need for discipline, they should proceed in the spirit of Galatians 6:1 which says, "Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch

yourself, or you also may be tempted." (Gal 6:1 NIV) Remember, *restoration* is the object of all church discipline. Only if there is no repentance is expulsion appropriate.

Sometimes, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, even with repentance, there may need to be a public apology before the church. But once the matter is dealt with, and repentance has been demonstrated and forgiveness granted, put the matter behind you and your church.

Church Government

Every church needs some governing structure. We know that the Lord Jesus is head over the church. He is in control of the church, which is His body, in and through the Holy Spirit. But, humanly speaking, each church must have a government or decision making group.

Generally speaking all church governments fall under one of three biblical forms of government, though the actual form of government may vary slightly.

1. Democratic

Since the church described in Acts 6 democratically elected deacons, some have taken this to mean that the church is to be governed democratically. For example, most Baptist churches have a democratic form of government. By that I mean every member has an equal voice in all matters concerning the church. There are advantages as well as disadvantages to this form of government.

a. Advantage - In a democratically run church every member has a sense of importance. He or she has a feeling of belonging and ownership in the issues of the church.

b. Disadvantage - There must be frequent business meetings. Even small details have to be put before the congregation for a vote. Often this pits member against member because of differing opinions. This can cause hard feelings which could have been avoided. If an issue continues long enough, it often becomes divisive. The devil has split many churches over minor issues. I recently heard this sad joke. Someone asked, "Why are church politics so bitter?" The answer, "Because the issues are so petty!"

2. Presbyterian

Paul often addressed the elders (presbyters) of a church, giving them instructions for their local church. Based on Paul's writings, some have concluded that the local church is to be ruled by its presbyters, or elders.

a. Advantage - Control of the church rests in a small group, making it fairly easy to govern. Decisions can be made quickly. It is much easier and quicker to discuss the pros and cons of an issue within a small group that meets regularly.

b. Disadvantage - The congregation rarely knows about or has a voice in governing decisions. This sometimes makes the people feel insignificant and like sheep who are being herded here and there without any say so.

3. Episcopal

There are times in Scripture when we see Paul, as a overseer of a church (or churches), addressing another individual with instructions for that church. (See 1 Timothy 1:3-7) Overseer in the Greek is $\text{-\u0395\u03a6\u0399\u03a3\u0399\u03a4\u0395}$, or *episkopos*. In actual practice today an overseer may govern several churches. The advantages and disadvantages are similar to those of the presbyterian form of government.

You may ask, "Of these three forms of government, which is the right one?" My answer, "The one you chose." Any of the above forms will work well as long as the individuals in government are godly, Spirit-led, prayerful people. What matters is that the Holy Spirit controls the church. If those with governing authority are willful and insist on doing things their way, the church is doomed to following man's course rather than God's.

I personally favor the presbyterian form of government, but that doesn't mean it is infallible. Since all three forms of government are biblical, I don't think it matters to God which form is used, as long as He has the final word.

In Part II of this article we will continue our examination of the local church and its public meetings, its leaders, giving, and how it should relate to other local churches and the community.

1. Edited from the *Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, Edited by Walter A Elwell, Baker Books, A Division of Baker Book House Co., Grand Rapids MI 49516, page 95.

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