

The Local Church

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Part II

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In this two part article we are examining the local church. Nowhere in all of Scripture is there a more vivid and exciting description of how a local church should function than in Acts 2:42-47.

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved. (NIV)

This passage is a clear scriptural model of how a local church should function. Notice that the believers praised God, devoted themselves to teaching, fellowship, prayer, gave to those in need (even to the point of selling their own possessions), and ate together with glad and sincere hearts.

The result was that everyone was filled with awe, many signs and wonders were done by the apostles (church leaders), they enjoyed the favor of all the people, and the Lord continually added to their number.

How exciting! These people were indeed in community as they experienced the reality of Christ in every aspect of their lives together.

Public Meetings - Let us continue our study within the context of these verses by examining the different kinds of public meetings which take place in the local church.

Public meetings are those meetings to which anyone is invited and may attend.

1. Sunday Worship - The most basic and common public church meeting is the Sunday morning service. In these meetings the whole church comes together to worship the Lord, to be taught and to enjoy a time of fellowship.

The worship time in these Sunday services should be *alive* and manifest the presence of Jesus! Don't just continue to do it the way you have always done it. That can be death to a church! Go before the Lord and diligently seek Him as to the order, style and form of worship. And be careful not to simply pattern the service after another church. For example, I have been to churches in Africa where the only instruments are a piano and an organ! Why should those lovely, talented people, who have their own musical instruments and style of music, be forced to abandon their heritage for music that is totally foreign to them? Some of the most beautiful worship I have ever heard involved nothing but hundreds of voices accompanied only by drums! It was magnificent!

Another vital part of the Sunday morning service is teaching. This service is the only time each week that the entire congregation is together. The pastor should take very seriously these

opportunities to teach the Word and principles of God. To teach is to increase knowledge. Increased knowledge and understanding is the key and foundation to discipleship and personal spiritual growth.

The pastor's approach to teaching on Sunday morning should be different than if he or she were teaching a Bible study. The congregation needs good, lively, motivational preaching on Sunday mornings. The teaching should be carefully structured within the context of preaching. To do this well is more of a challenge than to simply get up on Sunday morning and preach. Always, always have the goal in mind of increasing knowledge and insight as you speak, no matter the context.

2. Bible Study - Hold weekly Bible studies where structured teaching and Bible study is the rule. These studies may be in the church building or in various selected homes. Be sure that both the meetings and the subjects taught are monitored by the appropriate church authority such as the pastor or elders.

3. Home Meetings - Today many churches all over the world are large, having several hundred or thousand members. It is impossible to meet individual needs in such large local churches. In order to fill individual needs, and to keep the biblical concept of a New Testament church alive, many of these large churches have developed a system of cell groups, or home church meetings in which the same 10 to 20 people gather regularly, preferably weekly. In effect these home meetings become a small church in themselves. People are prayed for, ministered to, taught, and enjoy personal fellowship. In turn, they have opportunity to minister to others.

Home meetings may be grouped around some commonality such as young marrieds, seniors, teens, singles, a study of a specific topic or book of the Bible for all ages, recovering drug / alcohol users, etc. These meetings should focus on Bible study, worship or body ministry. The Holy Spirit should be free to lead and direct.

Departments - As a church grows it helps to make functional departments such as music, children, young people, adult, home visitation, and so forth. But don't make departments just for the sake of having departments. If you have only one musician, it would be foolish to designate a music department! Wait until there is a pressing need for a department, then establish it.

Leaders - A church can be no more effective than its leaders. Strive to develop skilled leaders with integrity, diligence and vision. Continually look for those who have a call on their lives or a gift in some area of ministry. In some areas the call is more important than in others. For example, I firmly believe that it is vital to have someone with a call to children's ministry to minister to children, or a call to work with teens to minister to teenagers. Don't appoint someone who is simply available if you can possibly hold out for someone with a true call to that area of need. As a leader, I have often allowed a pressing need to go unmet until God provided the right person for the position.

If you don't know a person well make the leadership appointment temporary or probationary. Make it clear to that person that

there will be a trial period after which a permanent determination will be made. Feelings are always hurt when someone is removed from a position and, although you can't avoid all hurt feelings, you can try to minimize them.

As a church grows, it should have an effective leadership development program. Carolyn and I ran into this great example some years ago in Manila, Philippines. The pastor of a quite poor church was making the Sunday morning announcements concerning the church *bus ministry*. Carolyn and I looked at each other in wonder, "What is he talking about? Does this poor church actually have *buses*?" Later that day we asked the pastor about the church bus ministry. We were both delighted and amused by his answer. Bus ministry to them was indeed different than in America. You see, the main transportation for most people in Manila is to ride the hundreds of public buses around the city. Teenagers, young pastors, and developing evangelists in training are given bus tokens and then sent from training classes to board a bus, get the driver's permission, and stand in the front of the bus and preach the gospel! I can think of no better way to train young Christians. And this is just one example. Be creative in your leadership development program.

Tithes & Offerings - God has ordained that the tithes and offerings of His people should finance His church and the evangelization of the world. To tithe means to give ten percent (10%) of your gross income to God's work. (See Leviticus 27:30-32.) If every Christian tithed there would be enough money for the church to have everything it needed, both to meet the needs of the congregation and to evangelize the whole world.

But sadly, percentage wise, few Christians tithe. Why? I believe there are two reasons. One, as the Holy Spirit begins to sanctify a believer, often one of the last things he or she is willing to give up control over is his money. I know it can be hard to begin to tithe for the first time in your life if you are already having trouble paying your bills. It takes faith to step out in giving.

The second reason is that many churches simply do not teach their people to tithe. What is their excuse? "Our people are too poor to tithe" they say. That sounds very compassionate, but it is, 1) not biblical, and 2) it deprives God's people of the blessings they receive when they tithe.

Malachi, chapter 3 speaks very plainly to the issue of tithing. But some say, "That's Old Testament and we're not bound by that." Wrong again. Jesus, speaking to the crowds and His disciples said, "The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat. So you must obey them and do everything they tell you. . ." (Mat 23:2,3 NIV) The Pharisees taught tithing, and so did Jesus.

In fact, God says that people who know they are to tithe but who do not are under a curse! Look at what He told Malachi;

"Will a man rob God? Yet you rob me.

"But you ask, 'How do we rob you?' "In tithes and offerings. You are under a curse-the whole nation of you-because you are robbing me. Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house . . ." (Mal 3:8-10 NIV)

But God doesn't stop there. He goes on to pronounce a

blessing on those who do tithe. In fact, God *invites* people to test Him in giving.

". . . Test me in this," says the Lord Almighty, "and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it. I will prevent pests from devouring your crops, and the vines in your fields will not cast their fruit," says the Lord Almighty. "Then all the nations will call you blessed, for yours will be a delightful land," says the Lord Almighty. (Mal 3:10-12 NIV)

I once had a pastor who stated, "All Christians tithe. . . some bring the tithe to the Lord, for the others, He goes and collects it!" His point was that 9/10ths of your tithed income goes farther than 10/10ths when you don't give. Your giving has the Lord's blessing on it.

The tithe belongs to the Lord, it is not ours in the first place. But offerings are another matter. Offerings are what we elect to give to the Lord and His work *above* our tithes. Offerings are ours to give, or ours to keep. There is no curse on failure to give offerings, but there is a blessing in the giving of them.

Finally, when you tithe, do not expect an immediate cause-and-effect response from God. You may see an immediate and supernatural increase in provision, or you may not. God wants to teach His people to give, not just giving to get back! So God often lets the person feel the squeeze on his finances long enough to see if he really is going to tithe consistently before His blessings begin to flow. God wants to teach His people to give, not just giving to get back!

Every church should teach tithing. Every parent should practice tithing and teach their children to tithe. It should be understood and practiced all a Christian's life.

Church Administration - Every church needs to be properly organized and run. Bills have to be paid, schedules arranged, announcements gathered for public proclamation, supplies ordered, church property accounted for and secured, and so forth. These activities come under the general head of church administration.

Not everyone has the gift or ability to administrate. In small churches the pastor often does these things, or they may come under the management of a deacon or deaconess. If the church is large enough to have a church secretary, he or she often assumes much of this burden. As the church increases in numbers and finance, the number of people needed to administrate will also increase. It works best when those who are involved in church administration are gifted by the Holy Spirit in this area. Proper church administration should always include an accounting of all tithes and offerings as well as of all expenses. These accounting systems should be maintained with confidentiality, but not secrecy. They should always be open for inspection by church officers and anyone else who has a need to know. Church members should know that the records exist and are under the oversight of the church deacons or officers. In churches that I pastored, we published a quarterly financial report for the members and announced it from the pulpit. Because of our openness, few ever bothered to get a copy of the report. This church policy denied the devil the opportunity of using church finances as a

weapon against us.

How Should the Church Relate To the Community? -

The church is properly a *spiritual* entity while the world is a *natural* entity. The world hasn't the capacity to understand spiritual things. The world sees the church as a building with people who occasionally meet there. But we see the church as a body of believers in Jesus Christ.

We, then, more than the world, have the capacity to understand their difficulty in understanding us and we should use this knowledge to our advantage. We need to develop various ways to relate to the world around us, but without allowing the world to overly influence us.

1. Theological or Philosophical - Sadly, in an effort to relate to the world, some churches have forsaken biblical standards and conformed to the world to such a degree that they are no longer recognizable as part of the true church. This change usually takes at least 2 generations. It happens so slowly that few, if any, are aware of it. This drift away from the Lord to the world may be philosophical or theological, or both.

One denomination in America began its drift in the early part of the 20th century. They began secular music concerts and poetry readings to attract the unbelievers of the community and "to be more appealing to the educated people." Next, they introduced secular theater for the same reasons. Then all offensive subjects such as blood atonement, the universal sinfulness of man, the virgin birth, etc. were deleted from the sermons. The focus of church outreach became the *physical* needs of man, to the utter neglect of his *spiritual* needs. Today, this particular denomination bears little or no resemblance to a New Testament church. How tragic.

Or a church may drift away from the Lord theologically. For example, today in America there is a cult named the Unitarian Church. They were once among the main line true churches. Tragically, they began to reject the Trinity, holding that God manifested Himself in different forms at different times, that Jesus was simply a human aberration of God, and that the Holy Spirit was His spiritual manifestation. As a result of this theological error, the Unitarian denomination is now a cult specializing in mysticism with Jesus being simply one of the ways "god" is manifested.

These two examples are why it is extremely important that no plans, programs, decisions or doctrines should ever be allowed in our churches that are against, or contradict, Scripture. Everything we do should reinforce the gospel. Even so, we must continually try to make our church as appealing as possible to the unbelieving world.

2. Practical and Functional - Jesus, during His earthly ministry, was extremely practical and He related easily to unbelievers. He should be our pattern today. In my teaching I often ask the question, "If Jesus were physically here in this town tonight, where do you imagine He would be? Would He more likely be in some prayer meeting. . . or would He be in some bar talking to someone whose life was broken?" I think He would be in the bar! If so, where should *we* be evangelizing? I know an evangelist who regularly trains people to witness in bars. I know another who trains people to witness in drug houses!

Now let's look at some ways our churches can attract or offend outsiders.

a. How to Attract Outsiders

(1) Be a Good Neighbor - By this I mean make every effort not to offend anyone who lives near your meeting place. Go see them. Ask them, "Is our music too loud? Do our prayer meetings at night disturb you?" Take steps to correct these offenses. And while you're there, find out if there are any ways you can help them.

(2) Make the Church Attractive - Keep the building and grounds clean and painted. Keep the grass cut and trash removed. Make your facility a plus in the neighborhood, not a minus.

(3) Have Community Service Plans - There are a number of ways to reach your community. Here are only a few:

- Day care for infants of working mothers
- Feeding program for poor children
- Food distribution for the poor
- Family counseling services for the community
- Errands for the sick and infirm
- Instruction classes for young mothers on child care, hygiene, discipline and training
- Vocational training classes for young people
- Periodic medical clinics (depending on the availability of health care workers)

These are only a few suggestions. I know one church in Mexico City (where there is a strong Catholic influence) that offers free grave side services. To most of us, Catholics included, grave side services are important. In Mexico City there are over 24 million people, and thousands die there daily. The Catholic church charges a fee for grave side services which the poor are unable to pay. A large evangelical church posts young ministers at the graveyards every day to hold free grave side services and minister to the grieving loved ones who can't afford to pay anything! That's creative! There are many ways a church can positively touch its community. Let the Holy Spirit give you inspired imagination.

b. How to Offend Outsiders

(1) Speak "Biblease" to Them - When speaking or witnessing to outsiders, many Christians use common Christian terminology that is often not understood or is offensive to outsiders. For example, we know that the Bible is the word of God but there are many today who don't even know who God is. How would such a person respond to being bombarded with Scripture? Not very well, I think. We must learn to meet the person where he or she is.

(2) Be Self-Righteous - Christians often approach unbelievers with a self-righteous attitude. This pride is easily discerned by the unbeliever and is offensive. Jesus never did this. He always approached people with a simple, "I love you" attitude. We need to do the same.

(3) Loud Music - Have a large, powerful sound system that is heard several blocks away. This can really offend outsiders.

(4) Become Political - Preach politics from the pulpit and criticize those whose views differ from yours.

Again, these are only a few of the more obvious ways a church can be offensive to its community. This needs to become a major area of prayer for the church leadership. I know of one church that composed a well thought out questionnaire and spent weeks canvassing their community in order to find out what unbelievers thought about church. They then made major changes to eliminate those non-biblical things that gave a negative impression. Today that church numbers in the tens of thousands in membership while still preaching a strong gospel!

How the Church Should Relate To Other Churches

First we must truly understand and believe that all who believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and Lord and Savior, are our brothers and sisters. Once we understand this, it is much easier to relate to others in the body of Christ.

1. Relating Financially - One of the most effective ways to break down walls between churches is to become involved in the needs of another church. If a church in your town is in financial trouble, take a special offering for that church.

In my last pastorate we became aware of a neighboring church whose pastor had left, leaving the church with such a heavy debt payment that they were unable to afford to pay a new pastor. Our church deacons agreed to pay their new pastor's salary for a year, allowing them time to financially recover from their debt payments.

2. Relating Through Prayer - There is no more effective way to relate to other churches in your community than through common prayer meetings. Begin with the leadership of the local churches meeting at least once a month for prayer. These meetings will build trust among leaders. As that trust and fellowship develops, the leaders can share burdens and the others can pray for them. This kind of prayer meeting takes only 2 or 3 hours a month, or a week, and is so valuable. I have noticed that here in America, where the churches of a community or region have leadership prayer meetings on a regular basis, the Lord is blessing and moving in those churches, and in the lives of the leaders who participate.

Another very effective way to relate to other churches through prayer is by praying for that other church. There are times when a church, or a key person in a church, is in desperate need of prayer. It would be most charitable to call your church to special prayer for those needs. This tells your people that you

are aware of the whole body of Christ and are committed to it. And let that other church or leader know that your people are praying for them. God will bless both those doing the praying and those prayed for.

3. Pulpit Sharing - Another way to relate to other churches is to invite the pastors of other churches to preach in your pulpit. I used to do this often. When our church sponsored a local Bible school with 6 to 8 hours per week of instruction, we invited pastors of different denominations to teach various subjects. We also scheduled various classes to be held in different churches across the city. For example, on Tuesday evening a Baptist pastor would be teaching the book of Romans in an Assembly of God church, and so forth.

4. Sharing Services and Projects - Another way to build strong community churches is to share in joint Easter or Christmas services with various pastors participating in the services. Last Easter Carolyn and I attended a community-wide Easter morning service and it was wonderful. The leadership of several local churches were gathered on the platform and the people rejoiced as one. I know it pleased the heart of God. Or your church can join other churches for athletic games or picnics just for fun!

Another important and God honoring way to build community is to share common projects and community out-reaches. Do a joint feeding program, or organize a community wide clean up of some area in your town or village, or help to paint a church in your area that needs it. Do a joint prayer walk through the rough area of town claiming the residents for Jesus. The ways are endless and with prayer, the Holy Spirit will show you what will be the most effective outreach in your community.

Make special efforts to cross denominational and doctrinal lines when relating to other churches. When the people see the leaders truly loving each other, regardless of differences in doctrine, it sends a strong message to them, teaching Jesus' love for His body. After all, Jesus did pray,

Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name--the name you gave me--so that they may be one as we are one... that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one. . . (Jn 17:11,21,22 NIV)

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