



Part 2: What is a Local Church?

April 24, 2013

Introduction

We have been examining Jesus' statement in Matthew 16:18 that He will build His church. In part 1, we looked at what the church is: a living organism made up of born-again individuals during the present church age. We also saw that there were two ways in which the term *ekklēsia* (ἐκκλησία) or "church" is used throughout the New Testament: the universal church and the local church. In part 2, we will examine what a local church looks like.

The Composition of the Local Church

The local church is in many ways designed to be a reflection of the universal church in a specific geographic location. The association of local churches with church buildings has often led to confusion about what a local church is. Again, we are not talking about the buildings, but rather the people who attend a local church. But one notable difference exists between the composition of the universal and local churches. The universal church, by definition, includes all church age *believers*. Local churches, on the other hand, often include both believers *and* unbelievers. This doesn't mean that this *should* be the case. A local church should strive to keep its membership limited to only true believers (Acts 2:38; cf. vv. 41, 47). But human discernment is not always infallible when it comes to admitting new members as believers or dismissing unbelievers as non-members.

The Structure of the Local Church

Throughout church history, local churches and denominations have taken different approaches to organizing the government and leadership of the each church. While each of these may have merits in their own regard, our goal is to examine the Scriptures and see what is *prescribed* for the church today.

Church Government (a.k.a. Church Polity)

There are three basic models when it comes to organizing church

government: the *episcopal* model, the *presbyterian* model, and the *congregational* model. Each of these names corresponds with the person or group that runs the local church(es) and has the final say.

The episcopal model places the final authority with the bishop or *episkopos* (ἐπίσκοπος; 1 Tim 3:1). The bishop oversees a group of group of local churches, each led by a pastor or priest. Further levels of administration can be added on by adding arch-bishops who oversee a group of bishops. Catholics, Episcopalians, Methodists, and Lutherans all follow this model of government.

The presbyterian model places the final authority with the presbytery or *presbuteros* (πρεσβύτερος; 1 Pet 5:1) — a regional group composed of elected pastors and lay people from each local congregation. Each presbytery appoints a few delegates to represent itself at the general assembly, which is usually organized at a national level for each denomination. Presbyterian and Reformed churches follow this model.

The congregational model places the final authority in the membership of the local congregation. This does not mean a local pastor is stripped of his authority within the congregation. Instead it means that the congregation gives ministerial authority to the pastor and church officers, and it reserves the right to make the final call on major decisions for itself. As members of the congregation, the pastor(s) and church officers have no more say than any other church member. Baptists, Congregationalists, and many independent or non-denominational bible churches follow this model.

The question is: Which model are we to follow as the most biblical? When we read the book of Acts and the epistles, a pattern of local church autonomy seems to be the norm. Local churches are responsible to approve and police their own membership (1 Cor 5); settle internal affairs (1 Cor 6:1–5); and appoint their own officers (1 Tim 3:1–13), messengers (Col 4:12 — Epaphras) and missionaries (Acts 13:1–3 — Paul & Barnabus). Even when local churches collaborate with one another to reach a decision, those decisions are approved by the local congregation (Acts 15:1–31; note esp. vv. 2–3, 25). All Scriptural indications seem to point to the fact that each local congregation is to be autonomous and independent in its goal of carrying out the great commission. This does not mean churches cannot work together. It

simply means that no external body or government has authority over the local congregation.

Officers in the Local Church

When we speak of church officers, we are talking about those who have an assigned office or leadership role in the church. There are again many views on this subject, but we are concerned with the biblical prescription. There are two local church offices that are clearly outlined in Scripture: the pastor and the deacon.

The qualifications for the office of pastor are outlined in detail in 1 Timothy 3:1–7 and Titus 1:6–9. There are three basic functions to the office: teaching (he is an *elder*), administration (he is an *overseer/bishop*), and shepherding (he is a *pastor*). Each of these three roles is predicated of the same person in 1 Peter 5:1–2. There are examples of large churches with multiple elders (pastors) like Jerusalem and Ephesus, but even in these there is warrant for someone being the senior pastor (James was the head pastor in Jerusalem, Acts 15). This does not imply that there is an additional group of lay-elders like you see in some presbyterian churches. The office of elder is always a paid position (1 Tim 5:17–18), and is synonymous with the office of pastor.

The office of deacon is likewise outlined in 1 Timothy 3:8–13 and Acts 6:1–6. Deacons are also spiritual leaders, but assist primarily in the social and temporal needs of the church. The office of deacon is usually more service-oriented.

The Mission of the Local Church

The mission of the local church is the same as that of the universal church. Each local assembly is responsible for carrying out the great commission in its own corner of the world (Matt 28:18–20). This means evangelism, baptizing new converts, and teaching those people all things related to the Christian faith. Within this mandate, there is also an implication for planting new churches. As the universal church expands into new areas where there is no local congregation, a new church should be planted in order to further the growth of individual believers and see the mission carried forward. As a matter of priority, the church's activities should always revolve around the great commission. This doesn't preclude the church from any social involvement in the community, but the church's activities as a whole should always involve some aspect of great commission work.

The Functions of the Local Church

There are two major areas of practice that set a local church apart from other civic or social groups: worship and carrying out the ordinances of the church.

Worship

Gathering at regular and stated times for worship is a key distinction that sets off one local congregation from the next. In modern “church-culture,” there is a common notion that worship occurs only on Sunday morning during the “worship service,” even though other gatherings like Sunday School or a mid-week bible study are scheduled to take place. Added to this is the idea that worship specifically involves only the music portion of the worship service. But the idea of worship in Scripture is much broader than singing praises to God. Worship involves prayer (1 Tim 2:1–7; Col 4:2); praise (Eph 5:19; Col 3:16; Heb 13:15); presentation of ourselves and our gifts (2 Cor 8:1–5; Rom 12:1; 1 Cor 16:2); participation in the ordinances (Acts 2:41; 1 Cor 11:17–32); and both hearing and proclaiming His word (1 Tim 4:13, 16; 5:17; 1 Thess 5:12–13). These activities are to be done by followers of Christ (Heb 10:24–25; Matt 18:20; 1 Cor 11:18, 20; 14:23) who are assembled with other believers in God’s presence (1 Cor 3:16–17; 14:25–26; 1 Tim 3:15).

Two Ordinances

The church is also called to practice two ordinances: baptism and the Lord’s Supper (a.k.a. communion). An ordinance is rite that was appointed by Christ as a visible sign of the saving truth of the gospel. They are commanded for the church to keep and we see examples of this throughout the early church in the book of Acts. These ordinances are *not* sacraments. A “sacrament” as taught by Catholics and others is something that actually conveys divine grace to the participant. But the ordinances are just symbolic memorials of what happens with the gospel. Baptism by immersion is to be performed after conversion. It is a reminder that the believer’s sins have been buried with Christ. It is also a prophecy that the believer will rise again from the grave just as Christ did. The Lord’s Supper is also for believers and is a reminder of our ongoing fellowship with Christ. It is a reminder that all of our sins — past, present, and future — are nailed to the cross; and that we are called to live out righteous lives in harmony with Christ and our fellow believers. Those who are unrepentant or have an issue with another believer should refrain from the Lord’s Table (1 Cor 11:28–31). ~AWB