

The Importance of the Local Church

By Everett Hardin

The failure to understand the New Testament meaning and use of the term “church” has led to many errors in the religious world. To fully understand what the local church is to do, and the Christian’s relationship to the church, it is necessary to learn what the church is. Many say there is no difference between the church and the individual. Others believe that the local church has no organic entity.

The word “church” is from the Greek word “EKKLESIA,” and it literally means “a gathering of citizens called out from the homes into some public place; an assembly.” In a religious sense, the word *ekklēsia* is used in two ways: (1) “an assembly of Christians gathered together for worship.” I Cor. 14:19,35. (2) “A company of Christians.” Both of these definitions are from Thayer’s **Greek English Lexicon**, page 196. Explaining this latter definition he says of a company of Christians, “or of those who, hoping for eternal salvation through Jesus Christ observe their own religious meeting and manage their own affairs according to regulations prescribed for the body for order’s sake.”

When the Holy Spirit guided Paul in his writing about “church problems”, the letter was directed to a local church. He addressed “*the church of God which is at Corinth*,” I Cor. 1:2. When the great theme of “justification by faith” for both Jew and Gentile was written, it was to a local church. “*To all the saints in Rome, beloved of God, called to be saints*,” Rom. 1:7. And when sundry exhortations were given by our Lord through John’s writings in Revelation, they were addressed to seven local churches, Rev. 1:11.

The vision seen and recorded by the apostle John in Rev. 1, pictured Jesus as “*walking in the midst of the seven golden candlesticks*,” Rev. 2:1. The candlesticks were shown to be seven congregations of the lord’s people — that is, seven local churches. While it is true that Jesus has promised to be with those who serve Him, Matt. 28:20, it is also true that His presence is assured in the local church. If the local church is important enough for Christ to be with it, how can we deny its existence?

Spiritual Oversight

The Lord determined that there should be a plurality of elders in every church, Titus 1:5; Acts 14:23. Their qualifications are listed in I Timothy chapter three, and Titus chapter one. These men are known as elders or presbyters, Acts 20:17; I Tim. 4:14. This suggests maturity as Christians. They are not new converts. They are also known as bishops, or overseers, Acts 20:28. This sets them forth as spiritual superintendents. Finally, they are known as pastors or shepherds, Eph. 4:11. This sets them forth as spiritual shepherds of the flock, but under the Chief Shepherd who is Christ, I Pet. 5:1-4. As men experienced in spiritual matters, they guard against false teaching which might lead astray, Titus 1:9-11, they warn of dangers to the members’ spiritual health, I Thess. 5:14, and “*tend*” and “*oversee*” those who are Christians, I Peter 4:16; 5:1,2.

Yet for all the importance of the work of elders their activities, as elders, is limited to the local church. They are told, “*Feed the flock of God which is among you*,” I Pet. 5:2. Their oversight can extend no further than that. We are told, “*Obey them that have the rule over you*,” Heb. 13:17, which again shows their rule is limited to the local church. When “*elders are appointed in every church*,” it provides for oversight of the souls of God’s people — only if those people are members of local churches.

There are no presidents, vice-presidents, nor boards of directors over Christ's church. There were no societies, state, home, or foreign. Churches of Christ do not send delegates to "annual conventions" to deliberate, vote, or impose rules, decisions and obligations upon the churches.

Pooling of Resources

The local church has a treasury, a pooling of resources. In I Cor. 16:1,2 Paul instructed the church at Corinth (a local church), "*Upon the first day of the week let every one of you lay by him in store, as God has prospered him, that there be no gatherings when I come.*" They were to treasure up, lay by in store. This constitutes the treasury, a depository, a common receptacle of the local church. It is from this treasury that the local church provides for the work God has authorized it to do. Other passages imply common treasuries in local churches, 2 Cor. 11:8; Phil. 4:18-19.

Mutual Edification

We are expected to grow in Christ, to be built up in the faith, to press on to maturity, Eph. 4:14-16; I Pet. 2:2; Heb. 6:1. There is a constant need within all of us for encouragement and fellowship, in order that we may grow spiritually, I Thess. 5:14; Rom. 15:1; Phil. 2:12-13. But where can these things be done, unless we are members of a local church?

The local church is to assemble, Heb. 10:25; I Cor. 11:18 for worship, fellowship, encouragement, and teaching. The Thessalonian church was told to "*comfort one another,*" I Thess. 4:18. The Roman church was told to "*bear the infirmities of the weak,*" Rom. 15:1. The church at Corinth was told to "*be perfectly joined together in the same mind,*" I Cor. 1:10, that they were "*laborers together with God,*" I Cor. 3:9, and "*be not unequally yoked together with unbelievers,*" 2 Cor.6:14. All of these activities indicate a congregational concept of both action and fellowship that would not only allow for mutual strengthening of members, but would depend on it. We need the help of others to live the Christian life, Rom. 14:7, and we cannot isolate ourselves from fellow-citizens without the peril of our spiritual demise. We need the fellowship that can be provided only in a local church.

The Worship of The Church

Christians in the first century worshipped God "*in spirit and in truth,*" John 4:24. They "*came together*" every first day of the week (the day we call Sunday) to accomplish this very thing, Acts 2:42; Acts 20:7; Heb. 10:24-25. When the church assembled they engaged in five acts of worship.

What are these items of worship? (1) They partook of the Lord's Supper every first day of the week, Acts 20:7. (2) On the same day they gave a free-will offering as they had prospered, I Cor. 16:1,2. (3) There was congregational singing by all the members — no mechanical instruments of music were used in worship, Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16. (4) They engaged in prayer, Acts 2:42; I Thess. 5:17. And (5) they were instructed from God's word. They engaged in preaching, teaching, and reading.

The Work of The Church

We speak of evangelism, and show that it was done through local churches, 2 Cor. 11:8. The church at Philippi sent support to Paul while he preached the gospel. When he "*departed from Macedonia, no church communicated with me as concerning give and receiving, but ye only. For in Thessalonica ye sent once and again unto my necessity,*" Phil. 4:15-16. Thus the church exercised its autonomy and maintained its independence.

It was through the local church that benevolent work was done (money collected and

sent), Acts 11:29-30; I Cor. 16:1,2. When the Grecian widows “*were neglected in the daily ministrations,*” the apostles instructed the Jerusalem church to take necessary steps to care for the neglected widows, Acts 6:1-6. If the Jerusalem church was able to manage its own affairs in this respect other local churches can do the same.

When Saul was baptized in Damascus, he immediately began to preach Christ. When he came to Jerusalem, his first recorded action was: “*He assayed to join himself to the disciples,*” Acts 9:26. If you want to be an effective worker for the Lord, if you desire to grow in His service, if you are interested in helping others to grow and serve Christ — you will do as Saul did. If you believe in Jesus Christ as God’s Son, repent of your sins, and confess your faith in Jesus Christ, you will “*arise and be baptized and wash away your sins,*” Acts 22:16.
