

Lesson Four

What is a Local Church?

Searching for the Essential Elements

INTRODUCTION:

1. A local church is God's plan for saints to do His work together or collectively. How can one establish that there is a local church? How can one determine what is *together* work?
2. The correct terminology is a *local church*, not a *local congregation*. *Local congregation* is redundant. The Bible knows of no congregation except the local one. Examples of redundancy: tooth dentist, ham meat, tuna fish, animal veterinarian. In this lesson we propose to study the passages that reveal to us what a local church is.
3. **Special Note:** This lesson should be considered a survey or preview of lessons to come. Cover the points briefly during one class period. Detailed discussion should be saved for future lessons.

I. IT IS MORE THAN THE *LOCATION* OF A PERSON.

- A. We may ask, "Was every Christian in Greece or Achaia a member of the same local church?" (cf. 1 Cor. 1:1-3; 2 Cor. 1:1-2; Rom. 16:1). It is obvious that they were not.
- B. A Christian might live next door to the building in which Christians meet and not be a member of that local church. Many saints live much closer to several other congregations than the one with which they have chosen to be associated.

II. IT INVOLVES LOCAL GOVERNMENT.

- A. In New Testament times each local church had its own elders or overseers (Acts 14:23).
- B. A local church is a relationship of certain members to certain overseers (Phil. 1:1). In a church without elders we might say that the local church is a relationship of certain members who have decided to work and worship together with the intention of becoming fully organized.
 1. Epaphroditus was in Rome but he was a servant of the church at Philippi (Phil. 2:25; 4:18).
 2. Phoebe was going to Rome but she was a servant of the church in Cenchrea (Rom. 16:1).
- C. The local church can make decisions (1 Cor. 16:3-5 – "whomever you may approve"). The church at Corinth could select their own repre-

sentative to take their contribution for the poor among the saints at Jerusalem.

1. Each church acted independently and retained its own *autonomy* — its right and ability to govern its own affairs under the headship of Christ.
2. The New Testament cooperation of local churches was *concurrent* action. There was no organizational tie or arrangement between two or more churches.
3. No local church acted as a centralized, brotherhood agency. Later, as the church fell away from the New Testament pattern some did.

III. IT INVOLVES A LOCAL TREASURY.

- A. The Philippian church shared with Paul in his preaching at Thessalonica (Phil. 4:15-16). This necessitated a common fund or treasury from which they sent to Paul.
- B. The church treasury is the pooling of means and abilities (1 Cor. 16:1-2). It is a medium of exchange used by the church.
- C. The only way a local church can send funds as a unit (a church as such) is from a common treasury.
 1. The local church can send as a unit to support preaching the gospel (Phil. 4:16; 2 Cor. 11:8-9; 1 Cor. 9:14).
 2. The local church, as a unit, can relieve the necessities of poor saints (1 Tim. 5:16; Rom. 15:25-26).

IV. IT INVOLVES LOCAL DISCIPLINE.

- A. The Corinthian church was to deliver the sinner to Satan during their assembly (1 Cor. 5:4-5; read vs. 1-13).
- B. The local church is a unit of fellowship. In certain cases Christians are to withdraw themselves (keep aloof, NASB) and thus break the fellowship (2 Thess. 3:6).
- C. We are not to keep company or eat a meal with a brother who has been disciplined (1 Cor. 5:11).

V. IT IS A COLLECTIVE UNIT THAT WORSHIPS.

- A. The church can assemble, come together or meet together (1 Cor. 11:18, 20, 33; 14:26; Acts 20:7; Heb. 10:25).
- B. Each Christian should participate in the acts of congregational worship: singing, praying, giving, eating the Lord's Supper and studying the Word (Acts 2:42; Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16-17).

VI. IT IS A COLLECTIVE UNIT THAT WORKS.

- A. The local church has a common treasury (see point III above). Some, but not all, of the work of the local church is done through its treasury (common fund).
- B. A local church, as a unit, can relieve the physical needs of saints (Acts 11:27-30). Some have claimed that the contribution from Antioch was sent to the Jerusalem church which served as a “sponsoring church” for the relief of brethren throughout Judea. The references below indicate that the saints at Antioch sent their relief to the elders where the brethren were living in Judea (Acts 11:29-30).
 - 1. Elders received on behalf of the brethren. Overseers are stewards of God (Tit. 1:7). This may involve the stewardship of material things as well as spiritual things.
 - 2. There were churches in Judea (Gal. 1:22; 1 Thess. 2:14).
 - 3. Elders were appointed in every church (Acts 14:23; Lystra, Iconium, Antioch). There is no reason for one to doubt that elders had also been appointed in every church in Judea.
- C. A local church has abundance or is in want as a unit (2 Cor. 8:14). Not every individual was poor, but the church was poor (in want) as a unit. At that particular time the church at Corinth had an abundance in comparison with the church at Jerusalem.

VII. A LOCAL CHURCH MUST BE JOINED.

- A. One becomes a member of the Lord’s body (church universal) when he is baptized into Christ (Acts 2:47; 8:38; 10:48; 16:15, 33; 18:8, et al.). Every other baptized believer is his brother or sister in the family of God.
- B. Saul of Tarsus was baptized in Damascus. When he returned to Jerusalem he “assayed to join himself to the disciples” (Acts 9:26, ASV). The NASB says he was “trying to associate with the disciples.”
- C. A person must be identified with a local church, to desire to work and to be under the oversight of certain elders. Consider the points made above (II, B) about Phoebe and Epaphroditus. This desire may be made known in a variety of ways: coming before the congregation to make the request, signing a card, telling the elders, etc. The choice of method, which is a matter of liberty, depends on the decision of the local church.

CONCLUSION:

- 1. A local church is a unit of fellowship, a group of saints scripturally organized and functioning as a unit. These functions are under the oversight of elders. Specific functions are carried out by deacons.
- 2. Collective action (of any kind) requires:
 - a. Agreement of components to *act as one* in a given task.

- b. Pooling of means and abilities necessary to this end.
 - c. Acceptance of common oversight in order to act as one in the performance of the given task.
3. Responsibilities of members:
- a. One must be a member of a local church in order to fully discharge his duties. One must give of his resources in order that the work of the church may be accomplished.
 - b. Those who have been baptized into Christ have been added to His body and are related to God as sons and daughters by means of the new birth.
 - c. We establish a man to man relationship in the local church. One must associate him- or herself with other Christians in a local church. One becomes a partner with other brethren by sharing in the collective action of doing God's work.
 - d. One cannot congregate with himself. He must assemble with the saints to worship God. This demands attendance.

Appreciation is extended to Robert F. Turner who first directed my attention to this approach in a lesson presented at Newbern, Tennessee, in December, 1961.