

# INTRODUCTION TO THE LOCAL CHURCH

- I. While the importance of the Universal Church cannot be overstated, it is neither honest scholarship nor sound Biblical interpretation to suggest that God's working method in the world has not been, and is not currently, rooted in the local church.
  - A. The term ἐκκλησία (ekklesia—assembly) is used 114 times in the New Testament; in at least 92 of the usages, some 80% of the time, a local church is clearly in view.
  - B. This predominant use of the word demonstrates that the primary emphasis in the New Testament is on the local church and not the Universal Church.
  - C. Therefore, believers that assume that simply because they are believers and are part of the Church Universal, then they are fulfilling God's plan for their lives are misguided, or deceived.
  - D. Failure to understand this has led people to question the validity of the local church, suggesting that it is simply a man-made organization, with man-made law, and with no Scriptural sanction.
  - E. However, The Church is clearly operative in the world in the form of local churches, which are physical organizations, with physical relationships, and definite physical responsibilities in differing geographic locales.
  - F. A careful study of New Testament revelation will demonstrate that the local church holds a position of prime importance in the thinking of God; further, it is the only biblically authorized organization that has been sanctioned by God to fulfill the particulars of teaching and maturing believers.
  - G. Therefore, by definition, other organizations, no matter how well intentioned, do not have Scriptural sanction; they are not designed to do the work that God has assigned to the local church.
  
- II. The first question that must be addressed is the issue of what actually constitutes a local church.
  - A. Although the New Testament does not provide a formal definition of a local church, it does describe the normal features of a properly functioning local assembly.
  - B. Although society has changed dramatically since the time of the New Testament, if we consider the realities of the modern world together with the features of local churches we see in the New Testament, we might propose the following definition: **A local church is an assembly of believers in Christ, in a specific geographic locale, who have banded together under the biblical leadership provided by the Holy Spirit, to fulfill God's will via the intake of doctrine, application of doctrine, and providing an evangelistic witness to God and His plan.**
    1. There must be a profession of faith; not just anyone can belong to a local church, one must hear and believe the gospel. Acts 2:41
    2. Churches were always organized as soon as possible, indicating the need for sound, legitimate leadership. Acts 14:23; Tit. 1:5

3. This organization is for the purpose of doing God's will, which is expressed in many ways, assembling and learning, observing the ordinances, financially supporting the teacher, bona fide witnessing, and providing an environment for the maturation of believers and the function of spiritual gifts.
  4. Again, believers outside this environment, who are quite often not fulfilling these principles, are not only out of step with God, they are at odds with His revealed plan. Heb. 10:25
- C. Of course, this definition does allow for some flexibility as to how the local church is to function.
1. It does not require that a local church meet in a building specially set aside for such a purpose; in fact, this development did not occur for several hundred years in the Church Age.
  2. It does not indicate what form worship services are to take, or how often services are required to be held.
  3. While each local church must have a pastor-teacher, it allows for a deacon or deacons, based on the need of each individual local church.
- D. Therefore, while some have suggested otherwise, the local church is not simply a gathering of two or three believers in the name of Christ.
1. This position is based on the teaching of Jesus Christ that **where two or three have gathered together in My name, there I am in their midst.** Matt. 18:20
  2. However, this passage actually focuses on corporate Church discipline; it presupposes the existence of a local church, whose decisions Christ supports. Matt. 18:17
  3. Further, this position suggests that there is no chain of command and believers can assemble without organization or authority; however, since they lack any biblical authority to act, and one must ask what they intend to accomplish.
  4. If the above is a reasonably good working definition of the local church, then two or three gathered for fellowship is not a local church, since such assemblies are generally not organized, they do not have a legitimate head (authority), nor do they provide the teaching environment for spiritual growth and proper function.
- E. Furthermore, all para-church Christian organizations do not qualify, based on the fact that they have a selective ministry; they are not devoted to the principles of sound doctrine that are inherent within an adjusted local church.
- F. How much or how little organization is required?
1. It is clear from the New Testament that the apostles were quickly placed into the position of organizing the church in Jerusalem when they were compelled to establish the office of deacon. Acts 6:1ff
  2. Paul thought that organization was so important that he insisted that qualified leaders be put in place as soon as possible. Acts 14:23; Tit. 1:5
  3. Two offices comprised the leadership of a local church—the overseer/elder/shepherd/pastor-teacher, and the deacons.
    - a. A careful study of the term ἐπίσκοπος (episkopos), as well as other terms used for the pastor-teacher, reveals that each local church is designed to have only one overseer at a time. 1Tim. 3:2; Tit. 1:7
      - 1.) This is also consistent with the very meaning of the term, which demands that someone be ultimately responsible, a final authority. Rev. 2:1,8,12,18, 3:1,7,14

- 2.) When dealing with the office of overseer, this term is consistently found in the singular; the two times it is used in the plural are both addressed to large cities, which likely had more than one local church.
  - b. It is observed consistently in the New Testament that the term *διάκονος* (diakonos), when used technically to refer to those in the office of deacon, is generally found in the plural. ITim. 3:8,10,12,13 cf. Acts 6:2-3
  4. Therefore, the New Testament teaching suggests that a singular pastor-teacher/overseer/elder/messenger/shepherd, and a deacon or deacons are necessary for an organization to be functioning as a legitimate local church.
- G. Is baptism necessary for membership in a local church?
1. One must obviously make a distinction between the local church and the Universal Church, since baptism, or any other work, is not required to become a member of the body of Christ.
  2. Water baptism was enjoined on the apostles by the Lord Himself, and was obviously practiced universally in the apostolic church. Matt. 28:18-20; Acts 2:38,41, 8:12,36, 9:18, 10:48, 16:15,33, 18:8; ICor. 1:14; IPet. 3:21
  3. While we would encourage believers to follow their profession of faith in Christ with the external ritual of water baptism, as the Scripture commands, it is not necessary for one to do so to become a member of the local church or the Universal Church.
- H. Is it necessary for a local church to have government sanction?
1. Initially, local churches in the New Testament were protected under Roman law and considered a *religio licita* (a lawful religion), based on their association with Judaism.
  2. However, within a few decades the local churches could no longer hide the fact that they were not a part of contemporary Judaism, and their status was changed to *religio illicita* (an unlawful religion).
  3. They were then branded as enemies of the Roman Empire, and actively persecuted by the state.
  4. In 313 AD, Constantine formally declared that Christianity was to be tolerated by the state, and even supported where conflict was not apparent.
  5. It was not long before this mutual support of State and Church began to find expression in the Church's accommodation to the needs of the State, which is quite dangerous.
  6. A study of history and the theological development of the Church will reveal that the Church began this new phase of political interaction with the temporal powers of the State, resulting in new pressures that were to change the Church structurally, in its administration, and in its theological emphasis.
  7. While we recognize that the Universal Church has no reason to respond to or deal with any temporal government, the reality is that the local church must function within the framework of the society in which it lives, if it is to effect that society in a positive way.
  8. Even if the state did not require that a local church have an organized, structured set of rules, it makes perfect sense to do so, in order to fulfill the mandate to **let all things be done properly and in an orderly manner**. ICor. 14:40
    - a. The adverb *εὐσχημόνως* (euschemonos--properly) refers to that which is proper behavior, that which is appropriate or correct.
    - b. The phrase *κατὰ τάξιν* (kata taxin—in an orderly manner) refers to what is in accordance with a fixed order or sequence, that which is accomplished according to proper procedure.

- c. This verse makes it clear that Paul expected the local church to have rules and procedures by which it operated on an ongoing basis.
- 9. Given the proliferation of false teachings and cults in the last days, it makes good sense for the legitimate local church to make their theological position clear in the world; this may be aided by means of legal documentation, Bylaws or a Constitution, and a comprehensive doctrinal statement.
- 10. In addition to this reality, the continued presence of the sin nature/STA within believers in a local church is another valid reason for having legitimate, written rules of government in the local church.
- 11. Beyond this, both local and national governments offer some benefits, such as tax exemptions or deductions, that work in favor of the individuals within a local church, as well as corporately. Lk. 16:8
- 12. Therefore, there are sound logical, theological, and legal reasons for the local church to operate within the framework of the Establishment Chain of Command (ECC), as long as there is no compromise of Bible doctrine to do so.

### III. The organization and government of the local church.

- A. As previously stated, the local church must have leadership and some organization in order to qualify as a local church, which must include the offices of pastor-teacher and deacon.
- B. The pastor-teacher.
  - 1. The pastor-teacher in a local church cannot simply assume this office; there must be the spiritual appointment by the Holy Spirit, as well as recognition of this fact by the believers in a particular geographic locale. Acts 20:28, 14:23
    - a. The norm for a man aspiring to the office is the recognition of the fact that he has been selected by God for the ministry.
    - b. This does not of itself indicate that the man is ready to assume the office, only that he is aware of the fact that God has appointed him to this task.
    - c. His first step is to get the necessary training under the Timothy principle. IITim. 2:2
      - 1.) This involves the academic preparation of learning the disciplines of Greek and Hebrew, Bible history (isagogics), and the systematic study of theology.
      - 2.) It also involves the inculcation of the theological grid of an existing ministry, sitting in Bible class, growing spiritually, and absorbing the sound doctrine taught by an adjusted pastor-teacher.
      - 3.) During the time of his training, he is to be observed by the pastor-teacher, and other leaders in the church to establish the fact that he meets the qualifications for the office. ITim. 3:1ff; Tit. 1:6-9
    - d. Following his formal training, the pastor-teacher candidate must then wait until such time as God the Holy Spirit brings him together with his right congregation.
    - e. When this happens, the human element becomes quite apparent, since the group of believers will have to decide if he is indeed the man that God has for them. Acts 14:23 *The Greek term χειροτονέω (cheirotoneo), to stretch out the hand, indicates that the elders were not forced on the congregations; they approved wholeheartedly, and demonstrated that fact by voting their leaders into office.*
    - f. Assuming that a group calls a man to be the pastor-teacher, the church that trained him should then formally ordain him to the ministry.

- g. At this time, he becomes his own pastor-teacher, establishing a new church family in the geographic region of those who called him as their pastor.
- 2. Following his ordination, the pastor-teacher must prepare himself to face the culture shock of a new environment, and begin the task of teaching the Word of God.
  - a. It must be recognized that he will be coming from an organized, established local church, that has been functioning properly for some time.
  - b. He must be aware that the sheep he now inherits will not have the same level of doctrine and understanding he is used to seeing; nevertheless, he cannot allow this to discourage him.
  - c. He should be aware that any new doctrinal church will inevitably suffer the loss of certain people in the membership, who are not sufficiently positive in the first place.
    - 1.) Those that have bought into the tape/books/internet mentality will often not want to pay the price to assemble regularly.
    - 2.) They may demonstrate hostility toward the authority of the pastor-teacher, since he will be reproofing, rebuking, and exhorting them in areas of weakness; this personal approach is impossible for those living on tapes, internet teachings, etc.
    - 3.) Some will desire to retain parts of the fundamentalist grid; they may find fault with the strict teachings of doctrine that strike at their sacred cows.
    - 4.) Very often, the doctrines of authority, separation, and the necessity of face-to-face assembly will weed out those that are arrogant and who are not willing to pay the necessary price for spiritual growth and greatness.
  - d. He must recognize that his primary function is to engage in the study-teach routine, only working an outside job if absolutely, financially necessary.
  - e. While he may be tempted to shepherd the sheep in an inordinate way, due to all the faulty thinking, misapplications, and lack of application he observes, he must recognize that the best corrective for these believers is an ongoing diet of the Word of God. IITim. 3:16-17
  - f. The pastor-teacher must recognize that his primary responsibility is to teach the Bible, in a systematic verse-by-verse fashion. Acts 20:27
    - 1.) The primary function of the pastor-teacher is not to teach endless isagogics, other disciplines, or even doctrines, it is to teach the Bible to the sheep.
    - 2.) He must establish a pace in the text that allows him to adequately cover the material, while teaching in such a way as to arouse the positive volition of the sheep.
    - 3.) While the pastor-teacher must be thorough in his treatment of the text, he should not get bogged down in endless detail.
      - a.) This is not only unfruitful, it will prevent him from finishing books in a timely fashion.
      - b.) When the sheep cannot remember what happened in the first chapter of a book because the shepherd has spent many years in the book, he has defeated his own purpose.
      - c.) While the pastor-teacher is not there to cater to the sheep, it is wise to recognize that he should seek to communicate in an effective way, or the studying and teaching ends up becoming useless.
    - 4.) The pastor-teacher must be aware of any tendency to use pulpit time to advance his latest pet subject, which may detract from the text, inordinately slow the pace, and may not edify his sheep.

- 5.) The Word of God is **the agent** of spiritual growth and Phase 2 sanctification; the pastor-teacher cannot do anything better than teach the text! Jn. 17:17
3. While the pastor-teacher is to shepherd the flock around him, and not other men's sheep, he must do so with the recognition that a steady diet of the Word of God will effectively do a lot of his shepherding for him. IPet. 5:2ff; IITim. 4:3ff
    - a. In that regard, the first tack a pastor-teacher should take when he perceives or encounters problems within the congregation is to allow the natural flow of the text to address the issue.
    - b. He should not use the pulpit as a place for any type of personal attacks; he should maintain a professional posture (even toward those that are hostile), and exhort as he is led to do so by the Holy Spirit.
    - c. If he continues to observe the same or similar problems, he has the mandate to reprove in a general fashion.
    - d. If that does not achieve the desired results (believers pulling in their spiritual horns and acclimating to the doctrine), then he is free to use a more severe, personal, and pointed tone.
    - e. At all times, he is to be prepared and continue to execute his ministry with patience and decorum.
- C. The deacons.
1. Unlike the pastor-teacher, who is appointed to his office by the Holy Spirit and the congregation, the deacon is a purely voluntary position of leadership.
  2. Many of the same standards for the pastor-teacher apply to the deacon, with the exception of being able to teach. ITim. 3:8ff
  3. The origin of the office of deacon makes it quite clear that their primary function is to alleviate the pressure on the communicator by administrating the physical functions necessary to the local church. Acts 6:1ff
  4. Since his office is voluntary, he may serve as long as he desires to do so, assuming that he has the confidence of his spiritual leader.
  5. Like the pastor-teacher, the deacon is initially confirmed in his office by the congregation, which recognizes that this man is qualified, willing, and desirous of serving them. Acts 14:23
  6. Deacons are not to assume the office, nor are they to be placed there without a period of observation and testing, similar to that of an aspiring pastor-teacher. ITim. 3:10
- D. These two offices constitute the leadership that must be in place for any organization to accurately identify itself as a local church.
- E. Types of government within local churches.
1. **Centralized form of church government** involves a central council that has much (often total) authority over the running and ordinances of the local congregation. This is typical of denominational mainline churches where the pastor is appointed and regulated by the directions and rules of the central council.
  2. **Presbyterian form of church government** occurs where the local church is governed by a board of elders, which has final authority over every aspect of the church, including the appointment and work of the pastor. The pastor may or may not be a member of this board.

3. **The congregational form of government** is where the majority rules; this democratic style of government allows the people to elect their pastor and the church board. In theory, all decisions, doctrinal and otherwise are made by majority rule. These can be independent churches, but often end up with schisms and factions competing for final control of the church.
  4. **The pastoral form of government** indicates that the pastor-teacher becomes the governing authority after he has been assigned his canon by the Holy Spirit. The board of deacons operates in an advisory and co-laboring capacity. The pastor is directly accountable to God, and he runs the ministry according to his understanding of God and His plan. This type of local church is of necessity an independent church.
- F. The first two forms of church government are easily rejected, since central councils and appointed boards are not observed in the New Testament pattern. The one exception was the Jerusalem Council; however, they offered no mandate on the matter of the organization and government of the local churches.
  - G. The congregational form of government is not found in the New Testament, but has arisen over time as the idea of democracy has become a real buzzword in many cultures. However, it should be noted that these first three forms of government relegate the pastor-teacher to the position of a hireling; he can be hired and fired at will by a board, a church council, or even a disgruntled faction within the local church.
  - H. The Old Testament pattern for leadership consisted of men that were selected by God and placed into their respective ministries; they consulted no religious organization, and did not rely on the approval of the people they served. Ex. 3:10; Josh. 1:5-10; ISam. 16:1-3; Jer. 1:4-8; Amos 7:10-15
  - I. The similar pattern is seen in the New Testament, as God selected certain men to fill positions of leadership; the most notable example of this are the apostles, and the second generation of men they appointed as leaders. Jn. 15:16; ITim. 1:3; Tit. 1:5
  - J. In both the Old Testament and the New Testament, the spiritual leaders were appointed by God, who reserved the right to remove, replace, or kill them as He determined. ISam. 16:1, 31:1ff; Rev. 1:20
  - K. Each local church was independent of every other local church; each stood or fell on its own merits, as seen in the seven churches of Asia. Rev. 2,3
  - L. Note that all the seven churches of Asia were represented as lampstands. The actions or decisions of one church were not imposed on another congregation. Therefore, this forms one very important justification for all local churches to be independent.
  - M. A local church is also autonomous, in that it is designed to govern itself under Christ, His Word, and the chain of command; this consists of a qualified overseer placed there by the Holy Spirit, along with the deacons. Acts 20:28 There is no convention, conference, church council, or organizational hierarchy that binds together or dictates policy to individual local churches.
  - N. Therefore, a careful consideration of Bible doctrine and church history would indicate that a local church is to be an independent, autonomous organization, with an established Royal Chain of Command (God, Jesus Christ, the pastor-teacher, the deacons, and any delegated authorities).
  - O. The chain of command is to consist of biblically qualified men, who perform their tasks under the leadership of the Holy Spirit, according to their understanding of biblical principles.

- P. The government of the local church should be carried out by a cooperation between the pastor-teacher (the final earthly authority) and the duly appointed deacons; this is a representative form of government that allows for the orderly function of the church, avoiding the chaos of each member being involved in each decision.
- Q. While the government of a local church is comprised of the pastor-teacher and the deacons, there is no biblical justification for the false division between clergy and laity.
1. This false division is primarily promoted among groups that are often not theologically sound in the faith in the first place.
  2. Jesus Christ made it quite clear that those that would aspire to positions of leadership and authority in His plan were to function as the servants of those they led. Lk. 22:25-26
  3. The events surrounding the origin of office of deacon demonstrates that serving other believers in a physical way was the primary function; this is also inherent in the term *διάκονος* (diakonos), which is defined as an intermediate servant, one who works under the authority of a superior.
- IV. There are a number of biblical figures for the Universal Church, which may be applied to the local church; however, one should recognize that all analogies break down at some point.
- A. These analogies concern the relationship between Jesus Christ and the Universal Church; however, since we recognize that they are valid, they may be applied to the relationship between the pastor-teacher and the local congregation.
- B. We recognize that the pastor-teacher is simply an authority, who is appointed by the Holy Spirit to lead God's people; he is not Jesus Christ. Eph. 4:11
- C. The figure of the head and body indicates that the pastor-teacher is placed in his office by the Lord in order to provide guidance and direction to the local church.
1. One immediate implication of this figure is that the body can have only one head; while there is a distinction between the head and the body, it also implies a great unity between the two.
  2. This is certainly evident in the term *ἐπίσκοπος* (episkopos—overseer), which designates the pastor-teacher as the overseer, the man charged with the duty of providing direction to the body and making certain that things are accomplished properly.
  3. Further, the figure of the head stresses his authority over the body, without any implication of infallibility.
- D. The figure of the bride and groom indicates that the relationship between the pastor-teacher and the local church is one of mutual benefit, with each having specifically defined roles.
1. An understanding of this relationship would eliminate the common notion that the pastor-teacher is a transient figure, always looking for a better woman, greener pastures, or a better ministry.
  2. Both parties are responsible to the Lord to fulfill their respective obligations, and remain faithful to each other under this analogy.
  3. While we recognize that the pastor-teacher is not inherently greater than those he serves, the sheep must understand that he is not just another man; he has the authority to act on behalf of God in matters that affect the congregation. II Cor. 10:7-11
  4. This is consistent with the fact that a husband and wife are equals in many ways in a normal marriage; however, one should not lose sight of the fact that the husband is always the final authority.

- E. The figure of the building views the pastor-teacher as a builder, edifying the local church through the sound doctrine he teaches.
1. The interpretation of I Corinthians 3:9-16 indicates that the foundation of the local church is the Ph<sub>1</sub> salvation of its members. ICor. 3:11
  2. The pastor-teacher is to employ the sound doctrines of the faith, viewed as gold silver and precious stones, when instructing those under his charge. ICor. 3:12
  3. The foolish pastor-teacher engages in construction using flammable materials, doctrines of human viewpoint or worse, that will not effectively benefit those he teaches. ICor. 3:13
  4. The building will be tested for structural integrity and the wise builder will be rewarded for his efforts; the reward is based on the quality of the work, not the quantity. ICor. 3:13-14
- F. The figure of the shepherd and the flock teaches many realities. Jn. 10:1-6
1. This parabolic teaching is true of the Universal Church, but is equally applicable to the microcosm, the local church.
  2. The first, and perhaps the most important fact, is the recognition that the shepherd has a nature that is different than that of the sheep.
  3. The second important point relates to the work of the Holy Spirit, the unidentified door-keeper, Who allows access to the sheep. Jn. 10:3; Acts 20:28
  4. The primary purpose of the shepherd is to lead the sheep to pasture, indicating the supreme importance of teaching the Word of God, and feeding his flock. Jn. 21:15-17
  5. This analogy also indicates that sheep should be smart enough to figure out who their shepherd is; the man that they will willingly follow in a geographic locale. Jn. 10:4
  6. The shepherd must protect the sheep from external predators, employing any level of severity to protect the flock. Jn. 10:12; IITim. 4:14-15; Tit. 1:13
    - a. While the pastor-teacher must not be fearful of publicly identifying the wolves, he must be careful not to give the impression that he is engaging in any form of self-vindication, or personal, unjustified attacks.
    - b. Sheep are quite vulnerable, but a consistent diet of sound doctrine is the first and best line of defense; the alert pastor-teacher will be blessed with knowledge about external and internal threats, on which he will be forced to act from time to time.
  7. The shepherd relied on the sheep for his livelihood, using the wool and meat as was needed; this is analogous to the fact that the believers in the local church are to be the primary means of support for the local shepherd. Gal. 6:6; ITim. 5:17
- G. The vine and branch analogy basically emphasizes the importance of our intrinsic unity in the local church. It implies the necessity of continued unity between the pastor-teacher, from whom believers receive their spiritual nourishment for bearing fruit, and the branches; otherwise, the ability to produce fruit is compromised, if not destroyed. John 15:1-7
- H. Paul also employs the parent-child analogy to provide further understanding of the relationship between a faithful pastor-teacher and a local church. Gal. 4:19; IThess. 2:7,11
1. The first important truth in this analogy is the reality that the parent is viewed as the authority in the relationship, having responsibility to take care of his children.
  2. The adjusted pastor-teacher raises his children on a diet of sound doctrine, seeing to it that they get the milk (more readily understood doctrines) and meat (doctrines for the more mature) that they need. IPet. 2:2; Heb. 5:13-14

3. Normal children have a father and mother; the pastor-teacher is to fulfill the responsibility to be firm and direct as fathers are, as well as providing tender care and emotional support as a mother does. IThess. 2:7,11
  4. He should not provoke those under his charge to anger with excessive or unreasonable demands. Eph. 6:4
  5. Like children, believers in the local church are expected to obey their spiritual parent, recognizing that he has been given his authority for a reason. Eph. 6:1
  6. The pastor-teacher must recognize that children go through various phases in their development, and that he will need patience to raise them to maturity. IITim. 2:24, 4:2
  7. Raising children is a difficult job at best; it demands real love, self-sacrifice, and an on-going commitment to the best interests of the children.
- I. The military analogy.
1. In this analogy, the communicator is viewed as a soldier (a drill instructor), whose job it is to prepare other soldiers for the combat in the angelic conflict. IITim. 2:2-3
  2. He is to identify the enemies and instruct his sheep on the proper methods for dealing with them.
    - a. The internal enemy. Rom. 7:23
    - b. The invisible enemies, Satan and his demons. Eph. 6:12
    - c. The visible enemy, the cosmic system. Rom. 12:2; James 4:4-6; IJn. 2:15-17
    - d. Negative, or reversionistic believers. ITim. 1:18-19; IITim. 2:17
  3. He is to educate them on their weapons and the proper use of them in the warfare they face. IICor. 10:1-4; IITim. 2:2-3
  4. His goal is to protect believers so they do not become prisoners of war to the sin nature, casualties to the cosmic system, or fall to the deceptions of false teachers.

*“But in case I am delayed, I write so that you will know how one ought to conduct himself in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and support of the truth.”*

*ITi 3:15*