

10. Why the Church Exists

Jesus Christ is head of the body, the church (Col. 1:18). This means that we need to be concerned with His will for what the church is supposed to be and why it exists. We have seen that “church” (ekklesia) refers to a group of people, whether universally, locally, or physically assembled. Now the question is, why does the church exist? Our primary concern here is to consider the reason for a local congregation. Why do local churches need to exist, and what is God’s work for them? What has God authorized with respect to a local congregation?

Evidence for the Local Group

Some have denied the importance of an organized local church, so let’s first consider the evidence for localized congregational activity. First is the fact that specific epistles are addressed to local congregations (1 Cor. 1:2; Gal. 1:1; 2 Cor. 1:1; 8:1; Phil. 1:1; Col. 1:2; 1 Thess. 1:1; 2 Thess. 1:1; Rev. 2-3). These epistles would be read to the church when they assembled. Within the context of the local group, funds were collected (cf. Acts 5:1-6; 1 Cor. 16:1-3), and regular meetings occurred where they worshiped together and partook of the Lord’s Supper together (1 Cor. 11:17-34; 14; Acts 20:7). The local group is charged with particular action, or, in some cases, to refrain from particular action. For example, when it comes to the care of some widows, the church was not to be burdened (1 Tim. 5:16); rather, individuals needed to take care of their own (1 Tim. 5:3-4).

These passages, and more, can only make sense in the context of a local congregational organization. Contrasted with the universal body, which has no set organization, a local group will often have, with the saints in that place, “overseers and deacons” (Phil. 1:1). These overseers, or elders, are responsible to shepherd the group over which they have the charge (Acts 20:28; 1 Pet. 5:2-3; Heb. 13:17). They are not universal shepherds, but only local.

These passages further show that God wants Christians involved in a local congregation. We need to avoid the extreme of thinking that the local church is unimportant and that only the individual matters. While the church is comprised of individuals, and individuals function within the group (Heb 10:24-25), the group as a whole unit is also a gift from God for the effective working of His will. At the same time, we need to be careful about confining Christianity to the “institution” so that the individual fails to work as God directs.

God wants local groups to exist, but why? What is it about local assemblies of Christians that make them so valuable and desirable? First, a group that can band together to help each other in their

service to God is going to make one stronger than if the individual tries to do it all alone. This purpose is expressed in the well-known passage: “Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful; and let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another; and all the more as you see the day drawing near” (Heb. 10:23-25). The stress here is not just assembling, but assembling for the purpose of encouraging each other so that when we leave the assembly we’ll be motivated to love and do good works. Encouragement is one significant reason why we need each other in a local group.

Scripture also shows that when local Christians band together in order to function as a local group, whether through the pooling of funds or assembling together (1 Cor. 11:18; 14:23), God has particular actions in mind for His people. Coming together “as a church” is an important concept.

In these cases, “church” refers to a specific group of believers who have banded together and agreed to work and function together in activities that God intended for that setting. As an analogy, think of a family, which is fitting given that God’s people are God’s household. A family can be dispersed, but still be a family. That family can also assemble and act as a family unit for specific ends. So it is with the church. The church is composed of individuals, but locally a church exists as a unit for particular purposes.

Groups or organizations often form for specific reasons. For example, a hospital may be built and staffed with doctors, nurses, and administration, and we recognize that the hospital organization does not exist as such in order to have political rallies or provide the world with donuts. Those who give to the hospital would likely be upset if they found that the money being donated was used for purposes other than what was intended. If individuals thought they were giving to an organization that was intended to feed hungry children and later found out the money was being spent to buy softball equipment, they would rightly have a problem with this misuse of funds. Why should this be any different when it comes to a local church?

The local church, as an organized group, exists for specific reasons, which is not to be confused with all other sorts of purposes and activities that can be handled in other venues and situations. For instance, the local church does not exist to provide secular education and hand out degrees. These things aren’t wrong in themselves, but it would be outside the scope of congregational purpose to provide these. The local church has a more specific and important work to do that other organizations do not do. When we say that the local church should stay out of certain activities, we are not saying that Christians as individuals and families cannot provide for those activities. On the contrary, there is a difference between individual and congregational action. Recognizing that distinction is important. This is highlighted in 1 Timothy 5, where individuals are

told to care for their own widows so that the church is not burdened (vs. 16).

The Actions of a Local Group

What are the specified actions that we find given to the local group who function “as a church” in Scripture? One primary function is that the local group participates in and supports the preaching of the gospel. For example, the church of the Thessalonians was commended because “the word of the Lord has sounded forth” from them (1 Thess. 1:7-8). The church at Philippi is commended because they, as a church, had fellowship with Paul in supporting him as he preached (Phil. 4:15-16). Since preachers have a right to make their living from the gospel (1 Cor. 9:14), and churches can help in the support of preachers, we find in this one of the main reasons for a local church to exist.

The local group functions further in the spiritual edification or building up of the saved. This is teaching that is intended to strengthen the faith and resolve of believers. Paul shows that saints are to be taught to serve. The fact that evangelists, pastors, and teachers are mentioned in this setting shows that there is a local church context for this (Eph. 4:11-16). When Paul addressed the Ephesian elders, he told them to watch over that local flock because savage wolves (false teachers) would come in and not spare them. Therefore, the word of God’s grace needed to be taught diligently among them (Acts 20:17-32). This is a reason why churches typically have Bible classes, wherein they can teach what is needed to those in differing stages of growth and understanding.

The local group works in helping to provide for saints who are in physical need. While it would be nice to be able to provide benevolence to the whole world, or even to a whole city, that kind of work is neither possible nor found within the pages of Scripture. In Scripture, where the local church organization is involved, benevolence was intended for needy saints (Acts 2:44-46; 4:33-35; 6:1-6; 11:27-30; 1 Cor. 16:1-2; 2 Cor. 8:1-4; 2 Cor. 9; Rom. 15:25-26; 1 Tim. 5:9-16). Yet even this was largely temporary. The group is responsible for taking care of its own first, then may also, if able, help saints elsewhere in need. Remember, we are speaking here of local church action, not what individual Christians may do from their own personal circumstances and opportunities. Group activity is necessarily more limited than individual activity because of purpose and work (cf. Acts 5:4). This, again, is true of all purposeful organizations.

The local group also maintains local assemblies wherein the saints seek to worship and praise God together. While this is also part of the edification process, the point here is that God’s people ought to gather together regularly in order to worship Him and care for the specified actions shown in God’s will (cf. Acts 2:42). In this context will be found coming together as a church in

order to participate together in the Lord's Supper (1 Cor. 11:18ff; Acts 20:7), thereby sharing in the body and blood of the Lord (1 Cor. 10:16).

Conclusion

Understanding these basic principles concerning the church will help us in our further study of authority, especially as it relates to the work and mission God has given the church. Local churches need to focus on the spiritual nature of God's kingdom, and the spiritual mission of His people. Acting as a collective unit is important, as Scripture demonstrates. At the same time, Christians should discern between work that God has given the local group and what He expects from the individual and family.

Discussion Questions

1. What evidence do we have in Scripture that organized, local churches existed in the first century?
2. Why is the evidence for the local churches important? What does it show us?
3. Why is a local congregation so valuable to the spiritual well-being of the Christian?
4. Why is it important to recognize the local church, as such, exists as a purposeful organization for specific work?
5. How does a local group participate in the preaching of the gospel (e.g., Phil. 4:15-16)?
6. What is the purpose of edification and why is it so important to the work of a congregation?
7. What biblical grounds are there for a church to provide benevolent help to needy saints?
8. Overall, what have you learned about the importance of a local church and the Christian's relationship to one?