

Foundations: Bible Truths For Christian Growth

Chapter 7: The Local Church

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Unless otherwise noted, all Bible quotations are taken from the *New American Standard Bible* : 1995 Update. LaHabra, CA : The Lockman Foundation, 1995.



DISCIPLESHIP SERIES

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Many individuals and families seem determined to function as Christian "Lone Rangers." They choose to "go it alone" rather than becoming intimately involved with a community of believers. Sadly, they are forsaking Scripture's plan in favor of their own, for the Bible allows you—and commands you—to be actively involved in a local body of believers, the local church.

Understanding the Local Church

In order to understand the meaning and significance of the local church, we first need to define what the church is. The English word "church" is the translation of the Greek word *ekklesia*. *Ekklesia* is a combination of two Greek words: *ek* (out) and *kaleo* (to call). It was used by the Greeks to refer to a group of citizens who were called out (gathered together) to discuss affairs of the state. As used in the New Testament, the church is **an assembly of Christians who are called out from the world and who belong to God**. The Greek words *ek* and *kaleo* appear together in **1 Peter 2:9**. From what have Christians been "called out"? _____

The church, then, is not a building; it is a group of born-again Christians. In the words of a children's rhyme, "The church is not a steeple...it's a people!"

The Bible uses the term *ekklesia* in two basic ways: 1. **The universal church** is comprised of all true born again Christians from Pentecost (shortly after Christ ascended into heaven; see **Acts 2**) until the rapture (Christ's appearance to "catch up" all Christians to heaven; see **1 Thessalonians 4:13–18**). It is not limited to a particular denomination. Indeed, Scripture teaches that there is only one universal (or

invisible) church (**Ephesians 4:4–6**). Based on that definition, what must one do to become part of the universal church? _____

The first mention of *ekklesia* in the Bible is in **Matthew 16:18**, and it refers especially to the universal church. Read it and answer the following questions:

Was the church past, present or future from the moment when Christ made this statement? _____

What did Christ promise to do? _____

Who is the church's Owner? _____

Who is the church's Builder? _____

Since Christ alone can "build His church," how should that affect the way we minister to people? Conduct worship services? Tell people the gospel?

2. Each **local church** is part of the universal body of Christ. It is a group of individual believers who meet together in specific geographical locations around the globe (hence the name "local") and who subscribe to the Christian

"The church of Christ consists of particular churches, guided by their own overseers. And every Christian must be a member of one of these churches."

Richard Baxter ²¹

²¹ *The Reformed Pastor* (1656), p. 11.

faith. It is also called the "visible" church. Most references to *ekklesia* in the New Testament refer to local churches.

Acts 14:23 refers to the establishment of leaders in "every church." Is that a reference to the universal or local church? _____

Many local churches are mentioned throughout the New Testament. The following verses name but a few of them. What are they?

Acts 13:1 _____

Romans 16:1 _____

1 Corinthians 1:2 _____

Revelation 3:14 _____

Think of the Golden Arches...

The relationship of the universal church to local churches is similar to the relationship of a large corporation to its individual franchises. Each McDonald's franchise has its own local leadership and unique characteristics, but each still has a central owner and common product—a Big Mac, for example. So each Bible-based local church has its own local leadership, yet each is owned by Christ and has a common message: *salvation from sin by faith in Christ.*

Rather than simply describing the church, the New Testament offers at least nine different pictures of the church. Each communicates important information regarding the church:

1. The church is Christ's **BODY**.

This is the most common picture of the church in the New Testament. Read the following passages, then answer the questions which follow them.

Romans 12:4–5; 1 Corinthians 12:12–27; Ephesians 1:22–23; Ephesians 5:23; Colossians 1:18

What lesson do we learn from the fact that the human body—though one—has many parts?

What if every member of your body wanted to carry out the function of your eyes? What lesson does that teach concerning the church? If your hand or foot is injured, the entire body is affected. What does that tell you about the church?

“Every man, woman or child who is in our churches should be set to work for the Lord.”

C. H. Spurgeon²²

Ephesians 4:15–16 is a little bit more difficult to understand. It teaches that every joint contributes to the unity of the body, and it teaches that every member of the local church should be involved in ministry. Ministry is not the job of the pastor or of a select few. Rather, it is the responsibility of the entire body! The church honors the Lord through **every-member ministry**. The result is a healthy and growing body.

²² *The Soul Winner* (New York, Fleming H. Revell, 1895), p. 129.

A Christian without a local church is like a hand without a body. ***You need the local church!***

2. The church is Christ's **FAMILY**.

A second major picture of the church highlights the intimacy that every believer has with God and with other believers. What lessons do we learn about the church from the following verses?

1 John 3:1–2a; John 1:12 _____

Galatians 3:26–28 _____

Galatians 4:5b–7 _____

In **1 John 3:1**, the Apostle John is astounded that God would grant us the privilege of being the sons of God. Yes, we are the *creatures* of a powerful God. Yes, we are the *servants* of a great Master. Yes, we are the *subjects* of a majestic King. But we are much, much more; we are the **children** of a loving Father! What influence should our being children of God—and the hope we have of an eternal inheritance in heaven—have upon the way we live (**1 John 3:3**)? _____

What are some significant privileges and responsibilities that come with being part of a family? How do those apply to the church? _____

How might we minister to others (especially new believers) in a family-like manner? _____

Why will a genuine family spirit attract unbelievers to Christ? _____

What a big family!

If you have ever seen a family with a lot of children, you have probably noticed that the other children—especially daughters—often function as “second moms.” Rather than being frustrated or sickened by the immaturity and dirty diapers of their brothers and sisters, they roll up their sleeves and help them grow up!

So it should be within the body of Christ. All too often supposedly mature believers distance themselves from new believers. Because they are offended by the habits of new Christians, they avoid them altogether, seemingly afraid that they will become soiled if they associate with Christians “less mature” or “less spiritual” than themselves. Such a spirit is even more carnal and harmful than the hang-ups of new believers! Instead, more mature believers are intended by God to help the younger, both by example and loving instruction. To whom can you be a “big brother?”

A Christian without a local church is like an orphan without a family. ***You need the local church!***

3. The church is Christ’s FLOCK.

One of the most precious images of Christ in Scripture is His ministry as the Good Shepherd (**John 10:11**). Christ often refers to His followers as sheep, and He specifically calls the church His flock. In **Acts 20:28–31**, Paul addresses the elders (spiritual leaders) of the church of Ephesus as shepherds. Read it, then answer the following questions.

Who gave the “shepherds” their position of leadership (v. 28)? _____

To what are false teachers compared (v. 29–30)? Why? _____

From where did many of the false teachers arise (v. 30)? Why is the church in need of continual “warning” (v. 31)? _____

The word “feed” in verse 28 is literally “shepherd.” Indeed, the English word *pastor* is the translation of the Greek word for *shepherd*.

What specific ministries does a pastor provide for a local church that a shepherd provides for sheep (refer to **Psalm 23** and **John 10:11–18**)? _____

A Christian without a local church is like a sheep without a flock or shepherd.
You need the local church!

4. The church is Christ’s BUILDING.

This image communicates several more unique aspects of the church. Just as **Matthew 16:18** refers to the universal church as being built by Christ, so **1 Corinthians 3:9b** says of the local church at Corinth that they collectively are “Christ’s building.” This picture especially highlights the church’s *owner* and its *progress*—it is still “under construction.”

What role do *spiritual leaders* (such as pastors) play in Christ's church "building" (1 Corinthians 3:9–10)?

In addition to being its Owner and Builder, Christ is the church's cornerstone and foundation (Ephesians 2:20 and 1 Corinthians 3:11). What does a foundation do for a building that Christ does for His church? _____

What role did the apostles and prophets—and the Scripture which they penned—play (Ephesians 2:20)? _____

1 Peter 2:5 compares you to a "stone"—a brick that is part of the building. What specific ministries can you carry out to contribute to the building up of Christ's church? _____

A Christian without a local church is like a brick without a building. ***You need the local church!***

5. The church is Christ's **BRIDE**.

Throughout the New Testament, God compares the

"The pastor is not merely a big sheep. He is a shepherd."

Bruce McAllister²³

relationship between Himself and His church to that of a husband and wife. This picture especially highlights the *intimacy* between Christ and His church.

²³ Bruce McAllister is the Director of Ministerial Training at Bob Jones University.

Ephesians 5:23–33 says much about the human marriage relationship. Yet, it also addresses the relationship between Christ and the church. Read it and answer the following questions:

Verse 23 says that Christ is the _____ and "_____ of the body".

How then should you—as part of the church—respond to Christ (v. 24)? _____

According to verse 25, how did Christ demonstrate His love for the church? _____

Who was the Initiator of this relationship? _____

Christ continues to show his love for you by sanctifying and cleansing you (v. 26). What does He use to accomplish that? *The water with the* _____. How, then, can **you** contribute to the process of your personal cleansing from sin? _____

What words does verse 29 use for Christ's care for the church? _____

One more thought concerning your marriage relationship to Christ: **James 4:4** refers to those who have a relationship with the world as "adulterers and adulteresses." Why? _____

Are there instances in which you are committing spiritual adultery? _____

6. The church is Christ's ARMY.

This picture is strikingly different from the last. In describing us as an army, Scripture highlights the church's militancy and ministry. The church is no monastery; we do not "hide out" from the world. Rather, we battle it, actively pursuing souls for Christ. What do the following verses teach about the church's militant nature?

1 Timothy 1:18 _____

2 Timothy 2:3-4 _____

No Retreat...or Treaties!

Ours is a day in which many Christians are seeking to form "alliances" or "treaties" with the world and with false teachers. Yet, Jude 3 instructs us to "contend earnestly for the faith." The church's response to sin and false teaching has always been—and must continue to be—militancy. As stated by President Roosevelt in his declaration of war against Japan following Pearl Harbor, we must "*win through to absolute victory.*" No retreat from the world...or treaties with the world!

Ephesians 6:11-18 describes the Christian's spiritual armor. Space does not permit a thorough treatment now, but you would greatly benefit from a detailed study on your own.

7. The church is Christ's FIELD.

Read **1 Corinthians 3:6-9**. The passage compares the body of Christ to a cultivated field. This picture highlights the church's dependence on God. It also describes the necessity of *laborers*.

Consider the work of a farmer. He is required to labor intently in his field. He must be diligent and see to it that the field is properly watered and cared for.

The farmer must also be dependent. Despite his careful work, he still is dependent on God to bring growth and fruit (v. 6b). What implications does Paul make from the joint effort between the church and God in verse 7-9? _____

8. The church is Christ's PILLAR and GROUND of the TRUTH.

1 Timothy 3:15 describes each local church in a unique fashion—a "pillar and support of the truth." A pillar provides support for a building—it holds it up. Similarly, the church ought to *defend* and *declare* God's truth, the Bible.

9. The church is Christ's NATION.

Another interesting picture of the church is as a nation, led by Christ and peopled by believers. **Ephesians 2:19** teaches that although you are no longer _____ and _____, but you are _____.

Colossians 1:13 gives a more detailed description: you have changed kingdoms. To which kingdom did you belong before you were saved? _____ After? _____

1 **Peter 2:9–12** makes a similar statement, but profoundly applies your change of position by requiring a change of conduct. According to these verses, how should our change of citizenship affect the way we live...at home, work, etc.? _____

You have learned much about what the church *is*. Now look briefly at **Acts 2:42** to discover what the church does. In what four activities did the early local church “continually devote themselves”?

1. **The apostles’** _____.

This is the study and proclamation of the Word of God. How do we continue in that today? _____

Notice that biblical teaching comes first, even before other aspects of worship. Scripture is central in God’s design for the church.

2. _____.

The Greek word used here is *koinonia*. In addition to godly friendships, it literally means to “have things in common.” Each of the following verses contains the word *koinonia*. What behaviors does Scripture include under the term “fellowship”?

- **Romans 15:26** _____
- **Philippians 1:5** _____
- **Philippians 3:10** _____

3. **Breaking of** _____.

This describes the observance of the Lord’s Table, as was discussed in Chapter 4.

4. _____.

Refer to Chapter 6.

Notice that the focus of all of these activities is either God or His people. What is striking in its absence? *Evangelism*. How interesting this is, considering the fact that many modern churches going to great extremes to make the “unchurched” feel at home in their services. Unfortunately, their efforts are spiritually ineffective and biblically indefensible. Worship services are for worship, not evangelism.

It has been well said that the church “gathers for worship and scatters for evangelism.”

Appreciating the Local Church

As you can tell, Scripture has much to say about the local church. The lack of emphasis placed on local church ministry today is in stark contrast to the great emphasis the church receives in Scripture. There are several reasons why you must value the local church:

1. **The local church is central in the New Testament writings:**

- The book of Acts tells of the founding and activity of the first generation of local churches.

- Much of the New Testament was written to specific local churches: Romans, 1 & 2 Corinthians, Galatians*, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 & 2 Thessalonians, 2 John and Revelation*.
- Several books were written to the leaders of specific local churches: 1 & 2 Timothy, Titus* and 3 John.
* *Note: The books of Galatians and Titus were written to geographic regions that probably contained numerous local churches. Revelation was sent to seven local churches in Asia Minor. The other books mentioned were usually sent to one specific church and then shared with others.*
- Several of the books already mentioned focus on the church as their main topic, especially Ephesians, Colossians and Paul's letters to Timothy.

2. The local church is central in God's plan for His work: The local church is key to Christ's great promise in **Matthew 16:18** (as discussed on pages 112–113).

The local church is key to Christ's great command in **Matthew 28:19–20; Mark 16:15, Luke 24:46–68** and **Acts 1:8**. Although the first emphasis of the Great Commission is evangelism, the second is intense edification, which requires the local church. What specific command does Christ give in **Matthew 28:20**? _____

Why does fulfilling that command require the local church? _____

The book of Acts records the early church's fulfillment of the Great Commission, especially tracing the ministry of the Apostle Paul. Paul's missionary journeys especially highlight the importance of the local church: *everywhere the gospel went in the first century, the result was the establishment of a local church.*

Principle:
The local church is God's tool for working in this present age.

Submitting to the Local Church

Scripture clearly commands every believer to submit to the local church. Unfortunately, many believers have fallen into one of two ditches. Some reject biblical authority altogether. Others confuse a mindless, cult-like gullibility with biblical submission. Both extremes are dangerous. As is often the case, the truth lies in the middle. Let's consider what Scripture says about leadership within the local church.

There are two primary reasons for submitting to local church leadership;

1. **God has instituted the local church.** During God's dealing with humanity, He has established three institutions which He intends to minister to men on His behalf. God ordained the first human institution shortly after creation: the family. Scripture records God's institution of the family in **Genesis 2:18–25**. The second human institution established by God was government. God granted humanity the authority to govern itself in **Genesis 9:6**.

The final human institution established by God is the local church.

How does God command children to relate to their parents (the first human institution) in **Ephesians 6:1–2**? _____

How does God command you to relate to government (the second human institution) in **Romans 13:1**? _____

How does God command you to relate to the church (the third human institution) in **Hebrews 13:7 and 17**? _____

It is worth noting that one of the first steps to submitting to the leadership of the local church is becoming an active member. Membership is an expression of like-mindedness and support, but also of submission to your God-ordained authority.

2. God has ordained spiritual leadership within the local church.

God has established a system of human leadership within the local church. A thorough treatment of church government is not possible in this brief study. However, the following texts give some basic instructions regarding leadership in the church:

- **Mark 10:42–45**—God has ordained servant leadership.
- **1 Timothy 2:12**—God has ordained male leadership.
- **1 Timothy 3:1–13**—God has ordained qualified and spiritual leadership.

- **1 Timothy 4:12** and **1 Peter 5:3**—God has ordained exemplary leadership.
- **Exodus 18:13–18; Acts 6:2–4** and **1 Timothy 5:17**—God has ordained shared leadership.
- **1 Timothy 5:17–18**—God has ordained financially-supported leadership.
- **1 Thessalonians 5:12–13**—God has ordained respected leadership.
- **James 3:1** and **Hebrews 13:17b**—God has ordained accountable leadership.

Friend or Foe?

There is a troubling trend among some Bible-believers today. In an attempt to promote the importance of the home, many Christians are minimizing the importance of the local church—sometimes forsaking it altogether. The mindset that makes the home and the church adversaries is both unbiblical and unwise. Both institutions are ordained of God, and both are essential in the process of developing godly Christians. They are not competitors, but co-laborers. Emphasis on the church and home is a matter of both/and, not either/or. Both are essential, and both benefit from each other. Scripture's finest example of the joint effort of church and home is Timothy. Timothy was a product of a godly home (1 Timothy 3:14; 2 Timothy 1:5) and a godly mentor outside the home (2 Timothy 1:2, 6).

Richard Baxter, the 17th century English pastor, provides wise counsel for those who would forsake the fellowship and reject the leadership of the local church: *“Read the Scriptures and see if they who obeyed God’s messengers, or they who despised and disobeyed them, fared best.”*²⁴

²⁴*The Reformed Pastor* (1656), p. XVIII.

Ministering in the Local Church

Attending a Bible-based church is good. Becoming a member is even better. However, you are not obeying Scripture until you are actively serving in the local church. Throughout Scripture, every believer is commanded to actively serve the Lord through the local church. The motto of the New Testament church is “every-member ministry.”

Hebrews 10:25 is often used as an argument that believers should attend church regularly. What command does it give you? _____

What reason does it give? (“and all the more”) _____

While it is true that this passage commands the believer to attend church (and that as many times per week as possible), it requires much more than “showing up.” The previous verse, Hebrews 10:24 commands you to be active in the church—to “consider how to _____ one another to _____ and _____.” How might you be such a catalyst, encouraging other Christians to love and serve the Lord?

Perhaps the most important passage regarding the

²⁵ *Systematic Theology*, p. 908.

ministry of believers in the local church is found in **Ephesians 4:11–12**. The pastor-teacher has been given as a gift to the church. His responsibility is described in the first phrase of verse 12. What is it?

Occasionally, a key lesson can be learned from the original language of Scripture that is not readily apparent in English. Such is the case here. Although verse 12 appears to list three jobs for the pastor-teacher, in reality it does not. That fact is clear in the original Greek because of an important change in words. The pastor was given for (*pros*) the equipping of the saints “for” (*eis*) the work of the ministry and “to” (*eis*) the building up of the body. In other words, Scripture commands pastors to get the rest of the church ready so that *they* can do the work of the ministry. Commenting on this passage, Bill Hull writes, “*The most sacred duty of the pastor is to get the work of the ministry done through others.*”²⁶

2 Timothy 2:2 describes what may be called the “ministry chain.” Complete the links of mentoring ministers described in this verse (specific men to general groups):

Barnabas → Paul → Timothy → _____ →

²⁶ *The Disciple Making Pastor* (Grand Rapids: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1996), p. 88.

“To church or parachurch...that is the question.”

The last two centuries have seen a rise in the existence and prominence of Christian organizations which are outside of the local church. Such institutions function *beside* the local church, and are therefore referred to as “parachurch.” While it is undeniable that such bodies as mission boards and educational institutions have contributed much to the cause of Christ, it is also true that many parachurch organizations have been harmful.

Massive “movements” for evangelism or ministry to men, women and families almost always become ecumenical, drawing a crowd by minimizing important doctrinal issues. Radio and television preachers often replace the local church. National Bible studies and discipleship programs often deprive the church of its most gifted leaders.

Not all parachurch organizations are illegitimate, and many have contributed greatly to the advancement of the universal church. However, the New Testament pattern of ministry is ministry through the local church. Your loyalty, your effort and your financial support should be invested in the ministry which the Lord has raised near your home.

A final argument for your active ministry in the local church is the fact that you—like every other believer—possess a spiritual gift. God has given you a particular ability that perhaps no one else has in the church. Furthermore, your spiritual gift was not given for your sake, but for the church’s (1 **Corinthians 12:7**). Without you, the local church will not function as God designed it to. It was stated several times that *you need the church*. It is equally true, however, that *the church needs you*.

Spiritual Gifts

Scripture lists a “catalogue” of spiritual gifts in **Romans 12:4–8**; **1 Corinthians 12:4–11**; **Ephesians 4:11** and **1 Peter 4:10–11**. Many of the gifts were temporary, functioning only during the formation of the New Testament and the lives of the Apostles. The gifts which are still functioning today are as follows:

- **Teaching**—the special ability to understand and communicate Scripture.
- **Ministering**—the special ability and desire to see needs and provide help.
- **Administration**—the special ability to provide leadership in spiritual matters.
- **Giving**—the special ability, desire and means to meet physical needs.
- **Mercy**—the special ability and burden to comfort the afflicted.
- **Exhortation**—the special ability to encourage and move people to action.
- **Evangelist**—the special ability to communicate the gospel to the lost, especially in the realm of missions and church-planting.
- **Pastor-teacher**—the special ability and call to shepherd the flock of God. It seems to be a combination of other gifts, including teaching and administration.²⁷

The list contains at least one gift which God has especially given to you to use for Him. Which of the gifts listed do you believe you may have? _____

How might you use it effectively in your local church?

You must remember that God has gifted you for His purpose and glory, not your own. The respected Bible

²⁷ Some conservative Bible scholars would add *faith* and *prophecy* to this list.

teacher A.W. Tozer made the following statement about spiritual gifts and their use: *“Our gifts and talents should also be turned over to Him. They should be recognized for what they are, God’s loan to us, and should never be considered in any sense our own. We have no more right to claim credit for special abilities than for blue eyes or strong muscles.”*²⁸

What does this information about the local church mean for you? You are directly in God’s will when you are actively attending and ministering in the local church. And you are not in God’s will if you are not actively attending and ministering in the local church. Failing to assemble with other believers is sin.

It is imperative that you find a Bible–preaching, fundamental²⁹ church and get active in it as soon as possible. However, be very careful in your choice of a church. Be sure that its teaching and practices line up with Scripture.

Scripture Memory

Hebrews 10:24–25

And let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds,²⁵ not forsaking our own

²⁸ *The Pursuit of God* (Camp Hill, PA: Christian Publications, 1982), p. 28.

²⁹ The term *fundamental* is a term used to distinguish between churches and organizations that believe and practice the Bible (fundamentalists) and those that don’t. Ask the pastor if the church you are considering is *fundamental* and he will be able to give you an answer. Pray for clear wisdom. Also, use these 12 *Foundations* chapters as a “yardstick” by which you can measure the teaching of a prospective church.

assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another; and all the more as you see the day drawing near.

Check Your Progress

What are the three most significant lessons that you have learned in this Bible study? Why are they important?

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

Answer the following questions to measure your understanding of the local church:

1. What is the difference between the universal church and the local church? (p. 112–114) _____

2. What different “pictures” does the New Testament use to describe the church? (p. 115–122) _____

3. What were the four main activities carried out by the early church? (p. 112) _____

4. Where did local churches appear in the New Testament? (p. 124–126)

5. What are the two main reasons for submitting to spiritual leadership in the local church? (p. 126–127)

6. How does Timothy exemplify the cooperative effort that God intends to take place between the church and home? (p. 128) _____

7. Which Christians does God intend to be actively involved in the work of the ministry? (p. 129)

8. Describe the “ministry chain” of 2 Timothy 2:2. (p. 130)

9. Why should your efforts and financial gifts be directed through the local church rather than a parachurch ministry (p. 131)? _____

10. Check off the following verses only when you can say them from memory:

Hebrews 10:24–25

Do you believe that you know this material well enough to teach it to someone else? ____ If not, review it until you do!