

What the Bible Says About the Church

Resources

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What the Bible Says About the Church

Lesson 1: Introduction

“... I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it”
(Jesus, in Matthew 16:18)

Christ loved and gave Himself up for the church (Ephesians 5:25; cf. Acts 20:28
and Ephesians 5:29)

“... [T]he strongest argument I know for why you and I should love and care
about the Church is that Jesus does. The greatest motivation we could ever find
for being passionately committed to the Church is that *Jesus* is passionately
committed to the Church” (Harris, p. 31, emphasis his)

The English Word, “Church”

The English word, “church” (cf. the Scottish word, “kirk” and the German word, “kirche”) is ultimately derived from the Greek word, *kuriakos*, an adjective meaning “belonging to the Lord,” from the Greek noun *kurios*, meaning “lord.” *Kuriakos* is found two times in the New Testament (in 1 Corinthians 11:20 in reference to the **Lord’s** supper and in Revelation 1:10 in reference to the **Lord’s** day).

The Greek Word, *Ekklesia*

The English word, “church” has a much broader range of meaning than does the Greek word, *ekklesia* (the word from which we get such English words as ecclesiology, ecclesiastical, etc.). For example, the English word, “church” can, among other things, describe a building or a denomination, while the Greek word, *ekklesia* is never so used in the New Testament. *Ekklesia* describes not the place where God’s people assemble¹, but the people who assemble. As Radmacher states: “Nowhere in the New Testament, however, does the word *ekklesia* mean a building. The *ekklesia* of the New Testament is never a

¹In the New Testament era, believers did not assemble or congregate in church buildings, but in private homes (see Romans 16:5, 1 Corinthians 16:19, Colossians 4:15, and Philemon 2). It was not until Christianity was legalized (in the 3rd century A.D.) that church buildings became prominent.

structure composed of stones and lime, or bricks and mortar. A statement such as ‘I pass the church everyday on my way to work’ would have been unintelligible to the writers of the New Testament” (p. 148) and “...[T]he Scriptures make it plain that the *ekklesia* is the body of people at worship, not the building in which they worship” (p. 149).

The word, *ekklesia* literally means “to call out” (the Greek preposition, *ek*, meaning “out” + the Greek verb, *kaleo*, meaning “to call”), signifying that an *ekklesia* was a group called out of one place to assemble or congregate in another. Eventually, the “calling out” aspect faded and the idea of assembly or congregation became dominant. Consequently, an *ekklesia* was an assembly or a congregation of any kind (secular or sacred), whether physically assembled or not. An example of a secular *ekklesia* is found in Acts 19, where the group that assembled or congregated in the streets of Ephesus was called an “assembly” (vs. 32, 39, and 41).

Ekklesia is found 114 times in the New Testament. It is used 3 times of a secular assembly (Acts 19:32, 39, and 41). It is used 2 times of the nation of Israel (Acts 7:38 and Hebrews 2:12; translated “church” by the KJV in both, “congregation” by the NASB).² It is used 109 times of the New Testament church. Of these 109, the overwhelming majority are used in reference to the local church, the rest in reference to the “universal” or “invisible” church.³ Somewhat related to *ekklesia*

²“Covenant theologians” erroneously (in the opinion of “dispensationalists,” such as me) use these passages (as well as such passages as Galatians 6:16) to support their belief that Old Testament Israel was the church in the Old Testament and that the New Testament church is the new Israel. However, Old Testament Israel and the New Testament church are distinct entities (1 Corinthians 10:32), with distinct origins, purposes, and destinies (see McCune, *Systematic Theology 3*, pp. 79-80). Old Testament Israel was an ethnic, earthly, political entity, while the New Testament church is a heavenly, spiritual entity (Philippians 3:20), transcending all ethnic barriers (Galatians 3:28 and Ephesians 2:11-22). According to dispensationalism, God’s dealings with Israel are on hold (see Romans 11). In this dispensation, the “church age,” God is working through the New Testament church. For more on the distinction between Old Testament Israel and the New Testament church, see chart 72 of House (p. 115), included at the end of this lesson.

³McCune (*Systematic Theology 3*, pp. 76-78) places the New Testament occurrences of *ekklesia* into the following categories: the body of Christ (i.e., the universal church or the invisible church)—11 occurrences; the local church—70 or 71 occurrences (he questions whether Revelation 22:16 should be considered local or historical); the historical church (a visible expression of the body of Christ in a particular area on earth at a particular time, which he views ultimately as a subset of the local church)—27 occurrences; and other uses—6 occurrences. Snoeberger (p. 1) gives the following breakdown (of the 109 occurrences of *ekklesia* in the New Testament in reference to the New Testament church): the whole body of Christ in all ages—11 occurrences (Ephesians 1:22, 3:21, 5:23, 24, 25, 27, 29, 32, Colossians 1:18, 1 Timothy

are the Greek words, *sunagoge* (“assembly” in James 2:2) and *episunagoge* (“assembling together” in Hebrews 10:25).

The Church: Universal and Invisible, Yet Local and Visible

Nearly all recognize the difference between the church in a universal, invisible sense and a local, visible sense⁴ (see chart 73 on p. 116 of House, included at the end of this lesson). Grudem makes the following distinction: “The invisible church is the church as God sees it” (p. 855); “The visible church is the church as Christians on earth see it” (p. 856). Each local church is to be a visible manifestation of the universal, invisible church.⁵

Another common name for the universal, invisible church (and the one which will be used throughout this study) is the body of Christ (\approx a student body, etc.). In my opinion, this designation is preferable⁶ because inherent in the biblical concept of church is the idea of assembling or congregating, something that the universal, invisible church will never actually do.

3:15, Hebrews 12:23); the whole number of Spirit-baptized believers living during a particular period of history (\approx McCune’s “historical church”)—8 occurrences (Acts 9:31, 1 Corinthians 10:32, 12:28, 15:9, Galatians 1:13, Ephesians 3:10, Philippians 3:6, Colossians 1:24); and the local church—90 occurrences.

⁴Some groups erroneously erase this distinction, essentially equating the two. Two examples would include Roman Catholicism and Landmark Baptists. This is not to say that we should not strive to make the two equivalent. As Erickson (p. 1048) states: “... [W]e should do whatever we can to make the two identical. Just as no true believer should be outside the fellowship, so also there should be diligence to assure that only true believers are within.” The unfortunate reality is that there are some members of the body of Christ who are not also members of local churches (not a biblical phenomenon), as well as some members of local churches who are not also members of the body of Christ (see 1 John 2:19). Augustine (quoted in Grudem, p. 857) once said in this regard: “Many sheep are without and many wolves are within.” In regards to the former, Mack & Swavelly (p. 20) state: “...[T]he New Testament does not contain even a hint of someone who was truly saved but not a part of a local church.” R. Kent Hughes (p. 152 of *Disciplines of a Godly Man*) says the same: “... [M]embership in an invisible Church without participation in its local expression is never contemplated in the New Testament.”

⁵For a brief time, it appears that the universal/invisible church and the local/visible church were equivalent, with the local church in Jerusalem comprising both.

⁶I say preferable, as opposed to absolutely essential, for Paul does refer to the body of Christ as a “church” in Matthew 16:18, Ephesians 1:22-23, 3:21, 5:23-32, and Colossians 1:18.

The church is both an organism and an organization, with the body of Christ being more the first and the local church more the second. Jackson (p. 12) rightly reminds us at this point: “The terminology which refers to the body as an organism and the local church as an organization needs to be used carefully lest the false inference be given that the organization is man-made and unimportant.”

The Purpose of the Church: To Glorify God

The reason for existence of the believer individually and the church collectively is to glorify God. In support of the former, see Ephesians 1:6, 12, and 14 (cf. Matthew 5:16, 1 Corinthians 10:31, and Philippians 1:11). In support of the latter, see Ephesians 3:21 and Colossians 1:18 (cf. 1 Peter 2:9 and 4:10-11).

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Lesson 2: The Church as the Body of Christ

In the introductory lesson, it was pointed out that the church has both a universal, invisible aspect, as well as a local, visible aspect. The second will be the focus of the next lesson, while the first will be the focus of this lesson.

The universal, invisible aspect of the church is often called (and, in my opinion, best called; see the introductory lesson) the body of Christ; thus, the title of this lesson: The Church as the Body of Christ.

References to the Body of Christ in the New Testament

Following are some of the references in Scripture to the body of Christ: Matthew 16:18 (church); Romans 12:5 (body); 1 Corinthians 12:12-27 (body); Ephesians 1:22 (church), 23, (body), 2:16 (body), 3:6 (body), 21 (church), 4:4 (body), 12 (body), 16 (body), 5:23-32 (church; body); Colossians 1:18 (body; church) and 2:19 (body).

Definitions/Descriptions of the Body of Christ

The body of Christ is the body comprised of Spirit-baptized believers, those saved during the church age (from the Day of Pentecost to the Rapture). Some of the current members of this body are in heaven, the rest on earth. This body does not include Old Testament saints, Tribulation saints, or Millennial saints.

Following are some other definitions/descriptions of the body of Christ (universal, invisible church). Those marked with an * are, in my opinion, deficient, reflecting a non-dispensational perspective (cf. footnote 2).

“... [T]he church, which is the body of Christ, is the whole spiritual body of true Christian believers of this age regardless of location or circumstances. It is the total number of Spirit-baptized believers—those saved between the Day of Pentecost and the Rapture—whether they are in heaven or on earth” (McCune, *A Systematic Theology*, 3:201).

“The universal church is the total number of true Christian believers, whether in heaven or on earth, who have been Spirit-baptized into the body of Christ” (Snoeberger, p. 3)

“In the universal sense the church consists of all those who, in this age, have been born of the Spirit of God and have by that same Spirit been baptized into the body of Christ” (Thiessen, p. 311)

“Sometimes referred to as the universal or the invisible Church, the Church which is His Body ... includes all the redeemed, whether Jews or Gentiles, from Pentecost to the Rapture, whether in Heaven or on earth” (Jackson, p. 12)

“... [T]he church in Scripture is composed of all the redeemed in every age who are saved by grace through personal faith in the sacrificial work of Jesus Christ ...” (Reymond, p. 805) *

“... [T]he whole body of those who through Christ’s death have been savingly reconciled to God and have received new life” (Erickson, p. 1034) *

“The church is the community of all true believers for all time ... Here the term ‘the church’ is used to apply to all those whom Christ died to redeem, all those who are saved by the death of Christ. But that must include all true believers for all time, both believers in the New Testament age and believers in the Old Testament age as well” (Grudem, p. 853) *

“The church of Christ, in its largest signification, is the whole company of regenerate persons in all times and ages, in heaven and on earth” (A. H. Strong, quoted in McCune, *A Systematic Theology*, 3:201) *

Spirit Baptism: The Building Agent of the Body

Christ said in Matthew 16:18⁷ that He would build His church, both extensively and intensively (cf. Acts 2:47, Ephesians 2:20-22, 4:7-16, Hebrews 3:1-6, and 1 Peter 2:5). The mechanism by which He would do so would be Spirit baptism⁸

⁷Besides commentaries on Matthew, see the discussion of this verse in Saucy (pp. 63-64), Jackson (p. 18), House (chart 71, p. 114), Snoeberger (pp. 7-8), Radmacher (p. 137), and Thiessen (pp. 315-316). By far the most extensive treatment, and one that thoroughly refutes the Roman Catholic understanding, is found in Reymond (pp. 811-823): “Rome’s exegesis of Matthew 16 and its historically developed dogmatic claim to authoritative primacy in the Christian world simply cannot be demonstrated and sustained from Scripture itself. This claim is surely one of the great hoaxes foisted upon professing Christendom, upon which false base rests the whole papal sacerdotal system” (p. 818).

⁸Spirit baptism is “the non-experimental [experiential], judicial placing of one into union with Christ and thus into the Body of Christ” (McCune, *Systematic Theology* 3, p. 46). For more on this doctrine, see Ryrie (pp. 362-365), as well as an article by Gerald Priest in the Fall 1998 issue of the DBTS *Sentinel*, included at the end of this lesson.

(see Matthew 3:11//Mark 1:8//Luke 3:16, John 1:33, 7:39, 14:16-17, 26, 15:26, 16:7, Acts 1:5, chapter 2, and 11:15-16).

A key difference between covenant theologians and dispensationalists in the realm of ecclesiology (the doctrine of the church) is a difference over the precise building agent of the church. To the covenant theologian, the building agent is regeneration (thus, every saved individual throughout human history is a member of the church). To the dispensationalist, however, the building agent is, more precisely, Spirit baptism. If Spirit baptism is unique to this age (see next section), and if Spirit baptism is the building agent of the church (see next paragraph), then only believers of this age are members of the church.

That Spirit baptism is the building agent of the church is seen most clearly in 1 Corinthians 12:13, which states: “For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond [slaves] or free; and have been all made to drink into one Spirit” (cf. Galatians 3:27-28). In Spirit baptism, Christ is the agent, the Holy Spirit the instrument; technically, it is not the Holy Spirit doing the baptizing, but Christ doing it through the instrumentality of the Holy Spirit.

The Day of Pentecost: The Beginning of the Building

Another key difference between covenant theologians and dispensationalists in the realm of ecclesiology is a difference over the precise time the church began. Covenant theologians believe the church began in the Old Testament (either with Adam or with Abraham), while dispensationalists believe the church began in the New Testament (according to most dispensationalists, on the Day of Pentecost).

That the church began on the Day of Pentecost is seen by the following lines of evidence:

- The church was a revelational mystery, not revealed until the New Testament (Ephesians 3:1-13; cf. Colossians 1:24-27).
- The church’s foundation, Christ and the New Testament apostles and prophets (Matthew 16:18, Ephesians 2:20, and 1 Peter 2:4-10), had yet to be laid.
- According to Matthew 16:18, the church was yet future (“will build”). See also John 10:16.
- The church could not begin until after the death of Christ (Ephesians 2:13-16).
- The church could not begin until after the glorification (resurrection, ascension, and enthronement) of Christ (John 7:39; cf. Ephesians 1:20-23, 4:7-16, and Colossians 1:18).
- According to Matthew 3:11//Mark 1:8//Luke 3:16, John 1:33, 7:39, 14:16-

17, 26, 15:26, 16:7, and Acts 1:5, Spirit baptism, the building agent of the church, was yet future. According to Acts 11:15-16, Spirit baptism was past, occurring for the first time “at the beginning,” undoubtedly a reference to the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2).

The Rapture: The Completion of the Building

Most dispensationalists terminate the church age with the Rapture (1 Thessalonians 4:15-17), when all church age believers (those united with Christ/the “in Christ” of 1 Thessalonians 4:16) are removed (cf. 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12).

Some New Testament Metaphors for the Body of Christ

The New Testament is full⁹ of vivid metaphors for the body of Christ, such as:

- *A body, of which Christ is the Head*¹⁰ (Ephesians 1:22-23, 5:23, and Colossians 1:18)
- *A bride, of whom Christ is the Groom* (2 Corinthians 11:2 and Ephesians 5:22-33). Harris (p. 30, emphasis his) makes a perceptive point here: “Is it possible that God didn’t get His inspiration for loving the Church from marriage, but that one reason God *created* marriage was to illustrate His love for the Church?”
- *A building/temple, of which Christ is the Cornerstone* (1 Corinthians 3:16-17, Ephesians 2:19-22, and 1 Peter 2:4-8). Downey (pp. 6-7) makes a powerful point here: “When our church services take on the character of a sideshow, using tricks and stunts and advertising gimmicks to attract an audience, we are neither thinking nor behaving like a holy temple of God.”

⁹Reymond (footnote 13, p. 810) lists 40 different ones. “[Paul] Minear estimates the number of New Testament images referring to the church ‘conservatively’ at more than 80 and adds that the number could easily be increased to 100 if the different Greek words were counted separately” (Saucy, footnote 1, p. 19). See also chart 74 on p. 117 of House, included at the end of this lesson. According to Thiessen (p. 312), many of these metaphors are not only used for the body of Christ, but also for the local church and the individual believer.

¹⁰Christ is both the sovereign Head (Ephesians 1:22-23, 5:23-24, and Colossians 1:18) and the organic Head (Ephesians 4:15-16 and Colossians 2:19) of His body.

- *A priesthood, of which Christ is the High Priest* (Hebrews 4:15, 1 Peter 2:5, 9, and Revelation 1:6)
- *A flock, of which Christ is the Chief Shepherd* (John 10:11-16 and 1 Peter 5:4)
- *Branches, of which Christ is the Vine* (John 15:1-11)

What the Bible Says About the Church

Lesson 3: The Local Church

In the introductory lesson, it was pointed out that the church has both a universal, invisible aspect, as well as a local, visible aspect. The first was the focus of the previous lesson, while the second will be the focus, not only of this lesson, but also of the remaining lessons in this study.

What is the Local Church?

Simply speaking, a local church is the visible manifestation of the body of Christ in a particular place on earth at a particular time.

According to Thiessen (p. 312), the local church is “the group of professed believers in any one locality.” According to McCune (*Systematic Theology* 3, p. 75), “the local church is the visible expression of the body church in any one place on earth.” According to Ryrie (p. 405), “It is an assembly of professing believers in Christ who have been baptized and who are organized to carry out God’s will.”

Edward Hiscox (quoted in McCune, *A Systematic Theology*, 3:220-221) gives a fuller definition: “A Christian church is a company of regenerate persons, baptized on a profession of faith in Christ, united in covenant for worship, instruction, the observance of Christian ordinances, and for such service as the gospel requires; recognizing and accepting Christ as their supreme Lord and Lawgiver, and taking His Word as their only and sufficient rule of faith and practice in all matters of conscience and religion.” Jackson (p. 28) also gives a fuller definition: “A local New Testament church is a body of believers immersed upon a credible confession of faith in Jesus Christ, having two officers (pastor and deacons), sovereign in polity, and banded together for work, worship, the observance of the ordinances and the worldwide proclamation of the gospel.” David Auckland (“Current Trends” class notes, Maranatha Baptist Graduate School, Watertown, WI, Spring 1992) likewise gives a fuller definition, defining the local church as “an organized body of baptized believers meeting together on a regular basis for the purpose of evangelizing the community and the world, obeying the ordinances of baptism and the Lord’s table, and edifying the believers.” These definitions identify the marks of a local church and may be compared with McCune’s explanation below of what makes a local church a church.

When Did the Local Church Begin?

As with the body of Christ, the local church began on the Day of Pentecost in Acts 2. On that day, 3,000 were saved. These 3,000 were then baptized and added, not only to the body of Christ, but also to the first local church, the church of Jerusalem (Acts 2:41-47).

The local church of Jerusalem continued to grow (Acts 4:4, 5:14, and 6:7), eventually generating other local churches in Judea, Samaria, and beyond¹¹ (Acts 1:8; cf. Acts 9:31 and 16:5).¹²

What Makes a Local Church a Church?

What makes a local church a church (i.e., what marks make a church distinct, distinguishing it from other organizations/institutions)? Various answers have been given to this question, some more extensive than others. Among the less extensive answers include the following two, taken from Grudem (p. 865):

According to the 1530 Lutheran Augsburg Confession, the church is “the congregation of saints in which the gospel is rightly taught and the Sacraments rightly administered.” Similarly, according to Calvin: “Wherever we see the Word of God purely preached and heard, and the sacraments administered according to Christ’s institution, there, it is not to be doubted, a church of God exists.” According to these descriptions, the two marks of a local church are the proclamation of the Scriptures and the administration of the sacraments (ordinances).

A much more extensive answer to the question, What makes a local church a church? is offered by McCune (*A Systematic Theology*, 3:219-220), who says

¹¹This expansion permeated the eastern half of the Roman Empire, moving westward throughout modern Asia into modern Europe (the church of Philippi, founded in Acts 16, was the first church on European soil). Once Paul evangelized the eastern half of the Empire, he set his sights on the western half, hoping to use the local church at Rome as his base of operations (as Antioch had been for the eastern half; see Acts 11:26, 13:1-3, 14:26-28, 15:35, and 18:22-23) for taking the gospel as far west as Spain (see Romans 15:19-24).

¹²Interestingly, the thing that God in His providence used to fuel this expansion was persecution (see Acts 8:1 and 4). One is reminded of Tertullian’s famous quote that “the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.” Even when the persecution ceased, the expansion continued (Acts 9:31).

that the local church of the New Testament is composed of those who are: 1) true believers in the Lord Jesus Christ (Acts 2:41, 47); 2) baptized (immersed) in water as a public testimony (Matthew 28:19, Acts 2:41); 3) organized with the biblical officers of pastor and deacons (Philippians 1:1, 1 Timothy 3:1-13); 4) sharing a common faith or body of biblical truth (Acts 2:42, Jude 3); 5) observing the ordinances of baptism and communion (Matthew 26:26-30, 28:19, Acts 2:41-42); 6) carrying out the great commission (Matthew 28:18-20); and 7) meeting at regular and stated times (John 20:19, 26, Acts 20:7, 1 Corinthians 16:2, Hebrews 10:25).¹³

Based on the definitions/descriptions of men like Hiscox, Jackson, and McCune, there are many so-called local churches that are not truly churches. As Jackson (p. 26) states: "Not all organizations are churches that are called by that name." Mack & Swavely (p. 47) call such a "church" a "no church" (a name coined by Jay Adams), writing: "'No church' is a strong term, but it is an accurate one, because a body of believers that does not conform to the biblical definition of a church cannot truly be called a biblical church." Members of such "churches" are to be evangelized/proselytized (our outreach is to extend to the unsaved, the unchurched/de-churched, and the wrong-churched).¹⁴ Now for a list of who these "churches" are... ☺¹⁵

¹³Snoeberger (pp. 9-11), based upon the definition of Hiscox (under "What is the Local Church?" above), modifies one or two of the distinctives of McCune, as well as adding a few more. One may also consult Grudem's (p. 874) 12 factors that make a church "more pure."

¹⁴I like what Jackson (pp. 26-27) states in this regard: "We need to be honest and ethical in our dealings with other individuals and churches. We must remember, however, that 'churches' that are in any of the various cults or modernism or other serious error are not true churches. Actually, they constitute a mission field. People within such groups have a right to hear the truth, and we have a responsibility to give it to them. Probably we have many times been so afraid of being called proselytizers that we have avoided dealing with these people."

¹⁵Are Catholic churches true churches? Should Catholics be evangelized/proselytized? According to supporters of ECT (Evangelicals and Catholics Together), the answers are yes (to the first question) and no (to the second question). Historically, according to fundamentalists and evangelicals, the answers are no (to the first question) and yes (to the second question). Grudem (pp. 865-866) waffles over this issue. By contrast, Mack & Swavely (footnote 6, p. 49) write: "In our consideration of churches, we must therefore eliminate the majority of denominations and movements that call themselves 'Christian,' because they simply do not conform to the apostles' teaching. They either have subtracted from it by embracing liberal theology (as in the case of most mainline Protestant denominations), or they have contradicted it by adding tradition or further 'revelation' (which is true of the cults and Roman Catholicism). Such churches are not true churches at all, and Bible-believing Christians should not be a part of them."

The Importance, Centrality, Primacy, etc. of the Local Church

The importance of the local church can be seen by such passages as 1 Corinthians 3:16-17 (where the “temple”¹⁶ being spoken of is the local church at Corinth; the “you”s in these verses are plurals); 1 Timothy 3:15 (where the local church is called the “pillar and ground of the truth”; the context of the book of 1 Timothy as a whole and of chapter 3 in particular is clearly the local church); and Hebrews 10:23-25 (local church involvement is a means and a mark of perseverance in the faith; cf. 1 John 2:19¹⁷).

The local church is the center of God’s activity in this dispensation (the church age)¹⁸, the extreme individualism of contemporary Christianity, the prominence of

¹⁶Commenting on this passage and its use of a particular Greek word for “temple” (*naos*), as opposed to another Greek word for “temple” (*hieron*), Radmacher (p. 332) states: “... [I]n the temple structure the *naos* is the temple in the restricted sense—the Holy of Holies and the Most Holy Place—whereas, the *hieron* included the entire compass of the sacred enclosure. The *naos* was the habitation of God. Under such sacred terminology, Paul describes the local church (even the church at Corinth). The local church is the holy sanctuary of God. It is the dwelling place of God.”

¹⁷1 John 2:19 speaks of false teachers (the “they” throughout the verse) who left the local churches under John’s oversight (“they went out from us”), thereby showing that they were not true believers, i.e., members of the body of Christ (“they were not of us”; “but *they went out*, that they might be made manifest that they were not all of us”). If they were true believers (“if they had been of us”), they would have stayed (“they would *no doubt* have continued with us”). Calvin (quoted in Mack & Swavely, p. 5) states in this regard: “The Lord esteems the communion of his church so highly that he counts as a traitor and apostate from Christianity anyone who arrogantly leaves any Christian society, provided it cherishes the true ministry of Word and sacraments.” Whitney (p. 18) adds: “Neglect of church attendance is almost always one of the first outward signs of backsliding and one of the initial steps taken by those whose path ends in complete apostasy.”

¹⁸“It is important to observe how consistently the Word describes the local church as the center of missionary work (Acts 13:1-3; 14:23, 27), ministry, fellowship, discipline and all Christian work. We live in a day when this is frequently ignored and even denied” (Jackson, p. 29). “‘The working method of God in the world at any given time is to carry out His purpose through the members of the Body of Christ who are living in the world at that time, and the New Testament always views these members of the Body as banded together in groups known as local churches.’ It is a bold step in today’s society [these words were presumably written in 1972] and ecclesiology to make the assertion that the local church is very locus and focus of God’s working, moving program in the world. It is in fact Dr. Radmacher’s Biblical thesis that the local church is the working institution established by Christ for this age. Dr. Radmacher’s working definition of the

“parachurch” institutions/organizations¹⁹, and overemphasis on the body of Christ²⁰ notwithstanding.

The local church is the only institution/organization given the divine authorization to carry out the objectives of the church (to be discussed in the next lesson); therefore, believers are to pursue such objectives only in conjunction with and under the auspices and authority of a local church. McCune (*Systematic Theology* 3, p. 72) states in this regard, particularly in regards to the objective of evangelism: “The Bible teaches that the local church is the ‘pillar and support of the truth’ (1 Timothy 3:15), and is the only God-appointed institution authorized to carry out His program of witness and service on earth during the present dispensation of grace. Soulwinning, revival efforts, and missionary endeavors are to be under the direction and supervision of the local assembly ultimately.”

The local church is the only entity whereby the biblical mission²¹ is to be funded;

church is lucid when he states, *‘The local church is God’s agency in the world transacting God’s business.’* Today’s extra-church organizations *must* find the goal and consummation of their earthly efforts in the local church. For them to do otherwise is to be out of harmony with the designs of Christ” (from the back cover of Radmacher, *The Nature of the Church*; emphasis publisher’s). “... [T]he church is the primary means through which God accomplishes His plan in the world. It is His ordained instrument for calling the lost to Himself and the context in which He sanctifies those who are born into His family. Therefore God expects (and even demands) a commitment to the church from everyone who claims to know Him” (Mack & Swavely, p. 6; emphasis their’s).

¹⁹“The ‘Jesus Movement’ of the sixties and seventies had spawned hundreds of parachurch organizations devoted to proclaiming the Gospel and teaching the Bible, and in most cases those organizations redirected the focus of believers away from the local church. A generation of leaders were exercising their spiritual gifts in other contexts besides the assemblies they attended on Sunday. This parachurch ‘theft’” (Mack & Swavely, p. 1). “The Lord has given us the apostolic *message* we are to preach. He has also given the apostolic *method* which we are to follow. His method involves the establishment of local churches and the implementation of His work through the church. The liberals have forsaken His message and His method. However, some who preach the gospel have also forsaken His method. Declaring that ‘the church has failed,’ they set up other organizations and methods that compete with the churches, and often criticize and oppose them. Money and people are diverted from the churches. Such programs cannot be justified Biblically” (Jackson, pp. 27-28; emphasis his).

²⁰Jackson (p. 12) states in this regard: “An undue emphasis has been placed in our present day on so-called ‘body truth.’ It has resulted in minimizing the local church upon which the Scriptures major.”

²¹The biblical mission has been delineated by David Hesselgrave (*Planting Churches Cross-Culturally*, p. 20): “The primary mission of the church and, therefore, of the churches is to proclaim the gospel of Christ and gather believers into local churches

therefore, all giving in support of the mission should be directed through one's local church.²²

"Ministry" is to be done only through the local church. McCune (*Systematic Theology 2* class notes, p. 214) states in this regard: "A spiritual gift is to be exercised within the ministry and outreach of the local church. Since the only legitimate, visible, and organized expression of the Body Church is in local churches, the function and exercise of the spiritual gifts is in that sphere. While the larger Body may benefit from the gifts, i.e., more than the members of the local church of which the believer is a member, the exercise of spiritual gifts, as in all spiritual endeavors in this dispensation, is to be under the aegis of the local church."

The local church is to be given "a sacred pre-eminence over all institutions of human origin" (from many a church covenant). Ken Brown ("The Centrality of the Church: Part 3 of 3," *Sola!*, June 2000, p. 3) asks a penetrating question in this regard: "Am I building my life around the church, or the church around my life?" R. Kent Hughes (*Disciplines of a Godly Man*, p. 176; emphasis his) concludes: "...[T]he Church must be at the very center of your life."

where they can be built up in the faith and made effective in service, thereby planting new congregations throughout the world." For more on this, see the excellent paper (available from this writer) written by Steve Thomas (senior pastor of Huron Baptist Church in Flat Rock, MI) entitled, "The Biblical Mission and the Primacy of the Local Church." Diametrically opposed to this is the view of C. I. Scofield (quoted in Radmacher, p. 11; emphasis Scofield's): "Much is said concerning the 'mission of the church.' The 'church which is his body' has for its mission to build itself up until the body is complete (Eph. 4:11; Col. 2:19), but the visible church, *as such*, is charged with no mission. The commission to evangelize the world is personal, and not corporate (Matt. 28:16-20; Mark 16:14-16; Luke 24:47, 48; Acts 1:8). So far as the Scripture story goes, the work of evangelization was done by individuals called directly of the Spirit to that work (Acts 8:5, 26, 27, 39; 13:2, etc.)." Another who taught this error was Lewis Sperry Chaffer (*Systematic Theology*, 4:149): "No responsibility or service is imposed on the church *per se*. Service, like the gifts of the Spirit by whom service is wrought, is individual. It could not be otherwise. The common phrase, 'the church's task,' is, therefore, without Biblical foundation. It is only when the individuals sense their personal responsibility and claim personal divine enablement that Christian work is done."

²²Whitney (p. 95) seems to "pull the punch" at this point, when he writes: "Still, the church is the only organization established by Jesus Christ and only it—the church of the living God—is 'the pillar and ground of the truth.' Christians should give their primary support to their local churches, and then, as time and money permit, assist parachurch organizations."

What the Bible Says About the Church

Lesson 4: The Objectives of the Church

The story is told of an airline pilot who once told his passengers over the PA system: “Ladies and gentleman, this is the pilot. I have some good news and some bad news. The bad news is: we’re lost. The good news is: we’re making great time.” Many churches are like that airliner, making great time (i.e., doing a lot of things, many of them good), but not knowing where they are going (i.e., not operating by clearly-defined and consistently-implemented objectives). According to the Bible, what is the church supposed to be doing? To answer this question, we must go to the Bible to discern the objectives of the church.²³

Following are the objectives of the church according to some writers:

According to Jackson: evangelize sinners; edify saints (instruction, encouragement, prayer, cleansing); glorify God (conduct, confession, worship)

According to Erickson: evangelism; edification (fellowship, instruction or teaching); worship; social concern

According to Thiessen: glorify God; edify itself; purify itself; educate its constituency; evangelize the world; act as a restraining and enlightening force in the world; promote all that is good

According to Grudem: ministry to God: worship; ministry to believers: nurture; ministry to the world: evangelism and mercy

²³This is part of what one might call a “philosophy of ministry.” A church’s philosophy of ministry contains three basic components, the first two of which are foundational and non-negotiable (*inflexibility of foundation*): **purpose** (**why** we do what we do—to glorify God; see the introductory lesson) and **pursuits** (**what** we are to do; this lesson on the objectives of the church). The third component, **practices** (**how** we go about accomplishing our objectives—programs, policies and procedures, etc.) is somewhat flexible (*flexibility of function*) based upon one’s particular era, area, congregation, etc. A church’s leadership must continually evaluate each program to ensure that it is fulfilling its particular objective(s) within the church’s overall philosophical framework. This may necessitate altering, or even eliminating (and perhaps replacing), certain programs. While every church should have the same underlying philosophy (purpose and objectives), articulation and/or implementation of the philosophy may differ.

- According to Reymond: worship and serve God; bear witness to divine truth; evangelize and grow the church; administer the sacraments; minister to the saints; govern its affairs (enforce the laws of Christ, draw up constitutions and manuals of church order, discipline the unruly and reprobate, separate itself from error and unbelief); perform deeds of benevolence and mercy
- According to Enns: gathered: ministering to the body (teaching, fellowship, worship); scattered: ministering to the world (evangelism)
- According to Mack & Swavelly: devotion to the apostles' teaching; God-centered focus; loving concern for the needs of people (for others in the body of Christ and for those outside the body of Christ)
- According to McCune: teaching; fellowship; worship (including the observance of the ordinances); prayer; mutual assistance; preaching, evangelism, testimony
- According to Snoeberger: worship; instruction; fellowship; evangelism

The objectives of the church may be boiled down to three (*exaltation* of God, *edification* of believers, and *evangelization* of unbelievers) or four (*worship* of God, *instruction* of believers, *fellowship* of believers, and *evangelization* of unbelievers).

Worship

“And they continued steadfastly ... in breaking of bread, and in prayers. And fear came upon every soul”
(Acts 2:42-43a; cf. Acts 2:47’s “praising God”)

The English word, “worship” was once spelled “worthship.” Worship is any attitude, affection, or action that expresses the worth or value of the object worshipped.²⁴ God and God alone is worthy of worship (Revelation 4:11 and

²⁴“To worship God is thus to ascribe to Him the supreme worth to which He alone is worthy” (Saucy, p. 166). It is “the response of one’s whole being to the reality of God revealed in Christ” (Saucy, p. 168). “The worship of the church, then, consists of individual, corporate, public, and private service for the Lord which is generated by a

5:12) and, therefore, the sole object of the church's worship.

Worship is both personal/private and collective/public (see Ryrie's definition in footnote 24), with each igniting the other. The focus of this lesson is on the second of the two.

The early church clearly set aside Sunday as the day for collective worship (Acts 20:7 and 1 Corinthians 16:2), calling it the "Lord's day"²⁵ (Revelation 1:10). Why did they choose Sunday, as opposed to the Jewish Sabbath (Saturday)? Most likely, they did so because Jesus rose from the dead on Sunday (Matthew 28:1, Mark 16:2, Luke 24:1, and John 20:1; cf. the post-resurrection appearances of Christ on the Sunday of His resurrection and on the following Sunday: to Mary Magdalene in John 20:11-18; to the other women in Matthew 28:8-10; to Peter, as recorded in Luke 24:34; to the two on the way to Emmaus in Luke 24:13-32; to ten of the Eleven in John 20:19-25; and to all Eleven in John 20:26²⁶).²⁷

Collective worship (i.e., local church worship) consists of the following:

- Singing** (Ephesians 5:19 and Colossians 3:16; cf. Psalm 100:2b)²⁸
- Reading of Scripture** (1 Timothy 4:13; cf. Colossians 4:16 and 1 Thessalonians 5:27)²⁹
- Praying** (Acts 2:42; cf. Acts 4:23-31, 12:5, and 12)
- Giving offerings**³⁰ (1 Corinthians 16:2)
- Preaching the Word**³¹ (Acts 20:7; cf. 1 Timothy 4:13's "exhortation")

reverence for and submission to Him who it totally worthy" (Ryrie, p. 428)

²⁵According to Ryrie (p. 431), the designation "Lord's day" was used by the early church "to protest and contrast the Emperor's or Augustus' Day."

²⁶Verse 26 says 8 days later. Since the Jews used "inclusive reckoning," this is equivalent to one week by our way of reckoning.

²⁷According to Ryrie (p. 431), a further reason was that the day on which the church began, the Day of Pentecost in Acts 2, was on a Sunday.

²⁸Many interpreters believe that the following passages are actual early church hymns: Ephesians 1:3-14, Philippians 2:6-11, Colossians 1:15-20, and 1 Timothy 3:16b.

²⁹The public reading of Scripture was especially important in the early church, as owning a Bible was virtually unheard of.

³⁰"In fact, we call it an *offering* plate ... because it is the receptacle of a gift we *offer* to God" (Whitney, p. 121). According to Ryrie (p. 430), "the New Testament says more about giving than about any other single aspect of church life."

³¹Luther (quoted in Whitney, p. 70) called preaching "the highest worship of

- **Observing the ordinances**
 - Baptism (Acts 2:41; cf. Matthew 28:19)
 - The Lord's Supper (Acts 2:42; cf. 1 Corinthians 11:17-34)
- **Exercising spiritual gifts** (Romans 12:1; cf. Romans 12:6-8)

Instruction

“And they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine ...”
(Acts 2:42)

As mentioned in the previous lesson, the local church is the “pillar and ground of the truth” (1 Timothy 3:15). The primary way the church fulfills this responsibility is by *educating* (see 1 Timothy 3:2's “apt to teach,” 1 Timothy 4:13's “doctrine,” and 2 Timothy 2:2) and *equipping* (Ephesians 4:11-12) its membership through the office of pastor. Assisting the pastoral staff in this task within each local body of believers are those with the gift of teaching (Romans 12:7, 1 Corinthians 12:28, and Ephesians 4:11; cf. Acts 11:26, 13:1, and 15:35).

The objective of teaching is an integral part of the church's fulfillment of the Great Commission (Matthew 28:20).

Fellowship

“And they continued steadfastly in ... fellowship”
(Acts 2:42; cf. Acts 2:44-46)

The Greek word for fellowship, *koinonia* has the idea of a sharing, a partnering, or a having in common. “New Testament fellowship involves the sharing of the Christian life with other followers of Christ. Talking about the things of God with each other³², telling and hearing testimonies of the work of the Spirit of God in

God.” This involves not only the preacher, but also the parishioner. As J. I. Packer (quoted in Whitney, pp. 69-70) has put it: “Congregations never honor God more than by reverently listening to His Word with a full purpose of praising and obeying Him once they see what He has done and is doing, and what they are called to do.”

³²A common misconception is to equate fellowship with socializing. While socializing does provide opportunity for fellowship to take place, it is not in and of itself fellowship. Whitney (p. 150) writes in this regard: “Christian fellowship also extends far beyond mere *socializing*. Eating coffee and donuts or cookies and ice cream in the ‘fellowship hall’ does not necessarily mean that *koinonia* has occurred. Yet as common as Sunday morning smiles is the confusion between socializing and fellowship. And the inability to recognize the distinction is unhealthy for the soul. As theologian J. I. Packer puts it: ‘It is not a good sign when a person sees no difference between sucking sweets

our lives, serving the Lord and His people together, worshiping God and praying as one people, extending to and receiving from one another the love of Christ—these are the fibers of the fabric of fellowship” (Whitney, p. 19). Fellowship may manifest itself in any number of ways in a local church: **praying together** (Acts 4:24), **serving together** in a particular ministry or on a particular ministry project (see the entire book of Philippians³³), **helping a fellow member in financial difficulty** (Acts 2:45 and 4:34-35; cf. Acts 11:27-30), or simply **bearing one another’s burdens** (Galatians 6:2; cf. 1 Corinthians 12:26 and 1 Thessalonians 5:11).

Local church fellowship is bound up in the Greek word, *allelon*, meaning “one another,” found numerous times throughout the New Testament Epistles.

Evangelism

“And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved”
(Acts 2:47)

The book of Acts tells how God the Holy Spirit used the preaching of His Word, in spite (because?) of persecution and problems, to establish local churches in ever-widening geographical spheres (Jerusalem ⇨ Judea ⇨ Samaria ⇨ remotest part of the earth, Acts 1:8; cf. Matthew 28:19 and Luke 24:47). The objective of evangelism includes the same for local churches today: reaching their Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, etc.³⁴

The local church is the source, means, and end of missions (see the paper by Steve Thomas referenced in footnote 21). In other words, local churches are to sanction and send missionaries (Acts 13:1-3 and 15:3; cf. Acts 14:27-28); local churches are to support missionaries (Philippians 4:15-18); and missionaries are to plant local churches.

and eating a square meal. Equally it is not a good sign when Christians see no difference between social activities in Christian company and what the New Testament calls fellowship in Christ.’ Many Christians never seem to distinguish between socializing and fellowship. Think of two concentric circles. The larger circle is socializing; the inner one is fellowship. This shows how fellowship always takes place within the context of socializing, but also how we can have socializing without fellowship.”

³³The theme of the book of Philippians is Paul’s partnership with the Philippians in the gospel (see especially Philippians 1:5). D. A. Carson (on p. 19 of his commentary on Philippians, *Basics for Believers*) has an absolutely excellent discussion of this.

³⁴“In a very real sense, local evangelism, church extension or church planting, and world missions are all the same thing. The only difference lies in the length of the radius. The church must work in all of these areas” (Erickson, p. 1054).

Evangelism is a matter of both “show” (Matthew 5:16, Philippians 2:14-15, 1 Peter 2:12, and 3:1-2) and “tell” (Romans 10:13-14); the witness of one’s life, as well as the witness of one’s lips; walk and talk.

What About Social Benevolence? What About Political Involvement?

In addition to evangelism (or as part of it), several writers include in the church’s mission toward the unbelieving world some kind of social benevolence (see especially Erickson, Grudem, and Reymond). Generally speaking, covenant theologians tend to favor the idea, while dispensationalists do not. While social benevolence should not be elevated to an objective of the church, there is biblical allowance for it to a limited degree (Galatians 6:10a). The church’s primary focus in regards to benevolence, however, should be its own (Galatians 6:10b; cf. Acts 2:45, 4:32-35, Romans 12:13, 1 Timothy 5:3-16, James 2:15-16, and 1 John 3:17).

A somewhat related issue is the church’s role in regards to politics. As with social benevolence, covenant theologians tend to favor the idea of political involvement by the church, while dispensationalists tend to frown upon it. As with social benevolence, political involvement should not be considered an objective of the church. While advocating a general policy of separation of church and state, churches may still reserve the right to speak out on the socio-political issues of the day. Certainly, churches should pray for governmental leaders (1 Timothy 2:1-2). Political involvement by the church should be through its individual members as citizens, not through the church as a corporate entity. A. H. Strong (quoted in McCune, *Systematic Theology* 3, p. 92) speaks to this effect when he states that the church “has no right, as an organized body, to suppress vice in the community, or to regenerate society by taking sides in a political canvass. The members of the church, as citizens, have duties in all these lines of activity.”

McCune (*A Systematic Theology*, 3:203) concludes: “The Great Commission says nothing about social or political factors; preaching and teaching are the church’s purposes.”

What the Bible Says About the Church

Lesson 5: The Church Office of Pastor

According to Scripture, there are two, and only two, local church offices: the office of pastor and the office of deacon. This is reflected most clearly in Philippians 1:1 (Paul, writing to the local church at Philippi, specifically addresses the “bishops and deacons”) and in 1 Timothy 3:1-13 (Paul, writing to Timothy, his pastoral representative in Ephesus, gives qualifications for the office of pastor in verses 1-7, followed by those for the office of deacon in verses 8-13). Any other offices are, at best, extrabiblical.

Of these two offices, the office of pastor is the functionally higher one; therefore, it is to this office that we first turn.

The Titles for the Office of Pastor

There are three main titles for the office of pastor:

1. Pastor

The most familiar title to us, as Baptists, for the office of pastor is just that, pastor. The English word, “pastor” comes from the Latin word for “shepherd.” The Greek noun translated “pastor” is found once in the New Testament (in Ephesians 4:11). Its verbal form is found in such passages as Acts 20:28 and 1 Peter 5:2.

As a shepherd, a pastor leads/guides (Psalm 23:3b and Revelation 7:17), feeds, tends/cares for (Luke 17:7 and John 21:15), guards/protects (Psalm 23:4, John 10:11-15, and Acts 20:28-29), and provides for (Psalm 23:1-4) his sheep/flock (Acts 20:28-29 and 1 Peter 5:2-3), the local church of which he is the “undershepherd” (under the “Chief Shepherd,” the Lord Jesus Christ, 1 Peter 5:4; cf. John 10:11-16, 21:15-17, Hebrews 13:20, and 1 Peter 2:25).

2. Bishop

The word, “bishop” (so KJV) or “overseer” (so NASB and NIV) is the English translation of the Greek word, *episkopos* (from which we get our English word, “episcopalian”). Scriptures that speak of the office of pastor in terms of bishop/overseer include Acts 20:28, Philippians 1:1, 1 Timothy 3:1-2, Titus 1:7, and 1 Peter 5:2; cf. Hebrews 13:17 and 1 Peter 2:25.

As a bishop/overseer, a pastor is the superintendent of the local church he has been given the responsibility to oversee.

3. Elder

The word, “elder” is the English translation of the Greek word, *presbuteros* (from which we get our English word, “presbyterian”). Scriptures that speak of the office of pastor in terms of elder include Acts 14:23, 20:17, 1 Timothy 5:17, 19, Titus 1:5, James 5:14, and 1 Peter 5:1.

As an elder, a pastor is the president of the local church over which he has been given the responsibility to preside.

Whereas “bishop” or “overseer” is more descriptive of the duty of the pastoral office, “elder” is more descriptive of the dignity of the office (Jackson, p. 51). Whereas “bishop” or “overseer” is more Graeco-Roman in origin, “elder” is more Jewish in origin.

Pastor, bishop/overseer, and elder are titles for the same office. There is absolutely no biblical warrant for viewing them as separate offices (as episcopalian and presbyterian forms of church government do). Scriptural support for the idea that a pastor is a bishop/overseer is an elder is seen in the following passages:

- Acts 20:17-38. In the midst of his farewell address to the Ephesian “elders” (v. 17), Paul calls them “overseers” (v. 28) and exhorts them to “feed” (“shepherd,” NASB) their flock (v. 28), the local church at Ephesus. An elder is a bishop/overseer is a shepherd.
- 1 Peter 5:1-4. In this passage, Peter exhorts “the elders which are among you” (v. 1) to “feed (“shepherd,” NASB) the flock of God which is among you” (v. 2), “taking the oversight thereof” (v. 2). An elder is a shepherd is a bishop/overseer.
- Titus 1:5-9. In giving Titus the qualifications for the office of pastor, Paul instructs Titus to “ordain elders in every city” (v. 5), then tells Titus that a “bishop must be blameless ...” (v. 7). An elder is a bishop/overseer.
- 1 Peter 2:25. In this verse, Peter calls Jesus “the Shepherd and Bishop of your souls,” thus uniting shepherd with bishop/overseer.

To the above three titles for the office of the pastor, we may add the following

two: preacher and teacher (1 Timothy 3:2, 5:17, and Titus 1:9).

The Qualifications for the Office of Pastor

The qualifications for the office of pastor are given in both 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and in Titus 1:5-9 (cf. 2 Timothy 2:24). A comparison of these passages will show, on the one hand, that they are not identical and, on the other hand, that they overlap at points. Altogether, Paul gives some twenty-one qualifications³⁵:

1. Blameless (1 Timothy 3:2, Titus 1:6-7)

This is the first and foremost character qualification for the pastorate, and the one that heads both pastoral qualification lists in the New Testament (1 Timothy 3:2-7 and Titus 1:6-9) and serves as a general, overarching qualification, of which the rest are specifics. This means that there is nothing in one's life over which one's character can clearly be called into question.

2. A one-woman man (1 Timothy 3:2, Titus 1:6)

Some translate this qualification more narrowly as "husband of one wife." This qualification does not mandate that a pastor be married; however, if he is, it does demand that there be no doubt that his one woman is his wife. She is the only woman with whom he is intimate. If single, he should be saving himself sexually for one woman, his future wife. This qualification would preclude several sexual sins, such as fornication, adultery, divorce, polygamy, and pornography.

3. Temperate (1 Timothy 3:2)

The idea here is that a pastor should be one who is characterized by clarity of mind, one who is in full control of his faculties, one who has his head screwed on straight, one who is cool, calm, and collected.

4. Prudent (1 Timothy 3:2, Titus 1:8)

Pastors must be wise, having the ability to exercise sound judgment.

5. Respectable (1 Timothy 3:2)

Pastors must be well-ordered in every area of their lives—physical, financial, relational, spiritual. The Greek word is used elsewhere in the

³⁵It should be noted that these are character qualities, i.e., characteristics that ought to be the rule, rather than the exception. While no man can attain perfection in any of them, his life ought to be typified by them.

New Testament for a house that is in order (Matthew 12:44).

6. Hospitable (1 Timothy 3:2, Titus 1:8)

The Greek word literally means a lover of strangers. Hospitality is not just for pastors, however (Romans 12:13, Hebrews 13:2, 1 Peter 4:9).

7. Able to teach (1 Timothy 3:2, 2 Timothy 2:24, Titus 1:9)

As opposed to the personal/character qualifications that dominate this list, this is the one that is clearly a professional/competence qualification. According to Titus 1:9, this includes the ability to, negatively, recognize and refute error and, positively, teach truth. A pastor must be able to communicate truth accurately (2 Timothy 2:15), completely (Acts 20:27), clearly (Colossians 4:4), and convincingly (Titus 1:9).

8. Not addicted to wine (1 Timothy 3:3, Titus 1:7)

In the culture in which this qualification was first communicated, wine was not an intoxicating beverage (though it could become so if one consumed enough of it), being significantly diluted with water, and pure drinking water was anything but pure, needing to be purified by being mixed with wine. Thus, Paul could tell Timothy to drink a little wine, rather than water (1 Timothy 5:23). However, this “wine” was not to be drunk in order to get drunk. In today’s culture, wine is an intoxicating beverage, and pure water is readily available. Therefore, not only is a pastor not to be addicted to wine (or any alcoholic beverage, or any addictive substance), but he should also abstain from it. Homer Kent (*The Pastoral Epistles*, p. 133) writes in this respect: “[This qualification] does not mean that Christians today can use liquor in moderate amounts. The wine employed for the common beverage was very largely water. The social stigma and the tremendous social evils that accompany drinking today did not attach themselves to the use of wine as the common beverage in the homes of Paul’s day. Nevertheless, as the church grew and the Christian consciousness and conscience developed, the dangers of drinking came to be more clearly seen. The principle laid down elsewhere by Paul that Christians should not do anything to cause a brother to stumble came to be applied to the use of wine ... Certainly in present-day America, the use of wine by a Christian would abet a recognized social evil, and would set a most dangerous example for the young and the weak. To us, Paul would undoubtedly say, ‘No wine at all.’”

9. Not pugnacious (1 Timothy 3:3, 2 Timothy 2:24, Titus 1:7)

Though he is willing to fight when the cause is right, a pastor is not one whose default setting is fight first. He does not always have the proverbial

chip on his shoulder. He is not a brawler, nor a bully. He is not quarrelsome.

10. Gentle (1 Timothy 3:3 , 2 Timothy 2:24)

This was a characteristic of Christ (Matthew 11:29, 2 Corinthians 10:1) and is to be a characteristic of every Christian (Titus 3:2). A pastor is a gentleman in the true sense of the word.

11. Peaceable (1 Timothy 3:3)

This would be the flip side of pugnacious. A pastor is a man who seeks to be at peace with all men (Romans 12:18), one who pursues the things that make for peace (Romans 14:19).

12. Free from the love of money (1 Timothy 3:3, Titus 1:7)

This does not mean that a pastor is not to receive financial remuneration, as passages such as 1 Corinthians 9:14 and 1 Timothy 5:17-18 clearly suggest otherwise. It simply means that his motive for being a minister is not money (1 Peter 5:2). All Christians are to be characterized by this quality (Hebrews 13:5)

13. Manages his own house well (1 Timothy 3:4-5, Titus 1:6)

This may be the other (besides able to teach) professional/competence qualification in the list, administrative ability. As with the other domestic qualification in this list (one-woman man), which does not mandate that a minister be married, this qualification does not make being a parent a prerequisite for being a pastor. But if a pastor is a parent, his parenting practices must consistently reflect biblical principles. This qualification must be qualified to apply only to children still living at home and to allow for the possibility that there are instances where a pastor has properly parented, yet a child chooses to pursue his own path in opposition to the pattern and precepts his parents have put before him.

14. Not a new convert (1 Timothy 3:6; cf. 1 Timothy 5:22)

The Greek word here is the one from which we get our English word, neophyte. This is consistent with the biblical principle: test first, task second (Matthew 25:21 and Luke 16:10; cf. the examples of Joseph and Joshua). A man must learn to lead in lower-level spiritual leadership positions before being elevated to the highest spiritual leadership position in the local church.

15. Have a good reputation with those outside the church (1 Timothy 3:7)

This ought to characterize and be the concern of every Christian (Colossians 4:5 and 1 Thessalonians 4:12).

16. Not self-willed (Titus 1:7)

A pastor is to be selfless. He does not always have to have his way.

17. Not quick-tempered (Titus 1:7)

A pastor is to be a man in control of his spirit. He is to be slow to anger (James 1:19), rather than short-fused. "Short tempers do not make for long ministries" (Warren Wiersbe).

18. Loves what is good (Titus 1:8)

19. Just (Titus 1:8)

Joseph was characterized by this quality (Matthew 1:19), as was John the Baptist (Mark 6:20) and Cornelius (Acts 10:22).

20. Devout (Titus 1:8)

Whereas the previous quality (just) has more of a horizontal/manward orientation, this one has more of a vertical/Godward one. A pastor is holy.

21. Self-controlled (Titus 1:8)

The qualifications for the pastorate may be summarized with the following 3-fold division: 1) call³⁶ or *compulsion* (1 Timothy 3:1; cf. 1 Corinthians 9:16 and 1 Peter 5:2); 2) *character* or conduct/personal qualifications (most of the qualifications in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1); and 3) *competence* or capability/professional qualifications (able to teach; able to effectively shepherd his home and, therefore, the church).

Consistent with the masculines (in the Greek) in 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9, the office of pastor is for men only. Our reliable English translations, such as the

³⁶While the call to ministry would include all three (compulsion, character, and competence) of the general qualifications mentioned above (as well as a fourth, the *confirmation* of the local church through ordination), it is being used here in a more restricted sense (compulsion). Spurgeon calls it "an intense, all-absorbing desire for the work" (*Lectures to My Students*, p. 26). David Auckland ("Pastoral Problems and Procedures" class notes, Maranatha Baptist Graduate School, Summer 1992) calls it "an unquenchable, irrevocable inner compulsion to preach." For one of the best treatments of this subject, see chapter 2 ("The Call to the Ministry") of *Lectures to My Students* by C. H. Spurgeon.

NASB, clearly bring this out: “man” (1 Timothy 3:1); “he” (1 Timothy 3:1); “He” (1 Timothy 3:4); “his” (2x in 1 Timothy 3:4); “man” (1 Timothy 3:5); “his” (1 Timothy 3:5); “he” (1 Timothy 3:5); “he” (1 Timothy 3:6); “he” (2x in 1 Timothy 3:7); “man” (Titus 1:6); and “he” (Titus 1:9). Especially decisive in this regard is “husband of one wife” (as opposed to “wife of one husband”) in 1 Timothy 3:2 and Titus 1:6.³⁷ Another key text in this regard is 1 Timothy 2:11-12 (cf. 1 Corinthians 14:34-35), which forbids women from performing the authoritative function of teaching God’s Word (Matthew 7:29 and Titus 2:15) to men.³⁸

The Authority of the Office of Pastor

The local church office of pastor is the highest office in the church today (contra, for example, the “bishop” and “archbishop” in episcopalian forms of church government). Inherent in the office (seen in the titles of the office—shepherd, bishop/overseer, elder, preacher, and teacher—and their corresponding functions) is the authority to rule. Notice the following texts in this regard:

And we beseech you, brethren, to know them which labour among you, and are over you in the Lord, and admonish you (1 Thessalonians 5:12)

One that ruleth well his own house, having his children in subjection with all gravity; (For if a man know not how to rule his own house, how shall he take care of the church of God?) (1 Timothy 3:4-5)

Let the elders that rule well be counted worthy of double honour, especially they who labour in the word and doctrine (1 Timothy 5:17)

Obey them that have the rule³⁹ over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy, and not with grief: for that is unprofitable for you (Hebrews 13:17)

³⁷“The principal offices in the New Testament churches were held by men. This is perfectly clear because both elders and deacons are expected to be ‘husbands of one wife.’ No woman could meet that qualification!” (Ryrie, p. 413).

³⁸For a more extensive defense of the position that the pastorate is for men only, see Grudem (pp. 937-945). The most extensive treatment (in the opinion of this writer) is found in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism* (edited by John Piper and Wayne Grudem).

³⁹The Greek word translated “rule” in Hebrews 13:17, found also in Hebrews 13:7 and 24, is used in Acts 7:10 to describe Joseph’s position in Egypt. It was also used in the Greek literature of the day to describe a man in any leadership position, such as a military commander.

Feed the flock of God which is among you, taking the oversight thereof, not by constraint, but willingly; not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind; Neither as being lords over God's heritage, but being ensamples to the flock (1 Peter 5:2-3)⁴⁰

Per the congregational form of church government, each local church elects its own senior pastor, thereby granting him the authority to rule that congregation.⁴¹ This authority is operative as long as the senior pastor holds office.⁴² This authority extends only to the local church of which a man is the senior pastor. It extends only to "the affairs of the church" (1 Timothy 5:17, NIV).⁴³ If a pastor gives a biblical injunction, a congregation must submit. If he gives an unbiblical injunction, a congregation must not submit (Acts 5:29). If he gives an extrabiblical injunction pertaining to the affairs of the church, a congregation must submit.⁴⁴ If he gives an extrabiblical injunction not pertaining to the affairs of the church, a congregation should give consideration.

⁴⁰1 Peter 5:2 makes oversight part and parcel of shepherding ("shepherd" ["feed," KJV] being the main verb and "taking the oversight" being a participle subordinate to the main verb; cf. Acts 20:28 and 1 Peter 2:25 for a similar correlation). Even more to the point are verses such as Revelation 2:27, 12:5, and 19:15, where "rule" is literally "shepherd." See also Matthew 2:6 in this regard. While "shepherd" certainly connotes a particular manner in which a pastor is to exercise his oversight/rule (servant leadership, Luke 22:24-27; cf. 1 Peter 5:3), it does not eliminate pastoral authority.

⁴¹"The congregation does not technically invest pastoral authority in the man; it elects a man to a position with inherent authority. That is, it is impossible for a church to grant someone the pastoral office while withholding authority—the authority belongs to the office, not to the congregation" (Snoeberger, p. 29).

⁴²Technically, when a man is no longer the pastor of a local church, he is no longer a pastor and, thus, need not be addressed by the title.

⁴³Snoeberger (p. 30) gives a balanced perspective in this regard with the following scenario: "... [A] pastor has no right to order individuals in his congregation to buy Chevrolet model cars and not Ford or Toyota products. However, he may rightly advise a man not to purchase an extravagant car that will strap him financially and limit his giving or attendance (because he has to moonlight every Sunday to pay for the car)."

⁴⁴Mack & Swavely (p. 30; emphasis their's) state in this regard: "Some may claim that the elders of a church only have authority in matters specifically commanded in Scripture, but it seems quite unnecessary to have commands to submit to *them* if they are only enforcing what Scripture has already said. The fact is, for the church to function properly, leaders need to make many decisions about matters not addressed directly in Scripture (such as worship times, funds distribution, and musical styles)."

Pastoral authority is not absolute, but is relative and restricted. Pastors are, first and foremost, undershepherds to the Chief Shepherd, to Whom they are accountable (see Hebrews 13:17 and James 3:1). Pastors are also accountable to their congregations (1 Timothy 5:20), ultimately being subject to removal by the same (if they disqualify themselves from office).

In exercising his authority, a pastor is to be authoritative, not authoritarian. He is to dictate direction without being domineering or a dictator. He is to lead, not lord over.

Must a Church Have a Plurality of Elders?

There are some who insist that a church must have a plurality of elders (John MacArthur is perhaps the foremost proponent of this idea; Grudem and Saucy also espouse it). While it does appear that churches in the New Testament had a plurality of elders, this is not necessarily normative. A church may have a plurality of elders (and, in the case of larger churches, perhaps should have), but a church may also function with only one elder. A. H. Strong (quoted in McCune, *A Systematic Theology*, 3:251) states in this regard: “There is no evidence that the number of elders was uniform, or that the plurality which frequently existed was due to any other cause than the size of the churches for which these elders cared. The New Testament example ... does not require a plural eldership in every case.”

Those who espouse the single elder view point to the singulars used in the 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 qualification lists, especially in light of the plural used in Titus 1:5 and of the plurality of deacons in 1 Timothy 3:8-13, as well as to the single “angel” (lit. “messenger”) to whom each of the seven letters in Revelation 2 & 3 are addressed, especially in light of the fact that the church of Ephesus, addressed in Revelation 2:1-7, apparently had a plurality of elders (see Acts 20:17).

Even when a church does have a plurality of elders, it is doubtful biblically and practically whether such a “board of elders” can function on a purely equal plane. In regards to the former, the local church of Jerusalem had a plurality of elders, yet James was clearly the head elder (≈ senior pastor), as seen by Acts 15 (cf. Acts 12:17 and 21:18).

Furthermore, as has been shown, inherent in the office of elder are the functions of teaching and ruling (see 1 Timothy 5:17); thus, to divide elders into the two separate categories of “teaching elders” and “ruling elders” (as MacArthur does) seems to be biblically unwarranted.

What the Bible Says About the Church

Lesson 6: The Church Office of Deacon

As mentioned at the start of the previous lesson, there are two, and only two, local church offices, the office of pastor and the office of deacon. Whereas the office of pastor was the focus of the previous lesson, the office of deacon is the focus of this lesson.

There is relatively little information in Scripture concerning the office of deacon. The two primary texts are Acts 6:1-6 (the origin of the office) and 1 Timothy 3:8-13 (the qualifications for the office; cf. Acts 6:3). The function of the office must be derived from these texts.

The Origin of the Office of Deacon

Most agree that the office of deacon originated (at least in prototype⁴⁵) in Acts 6:1-6, which states (NASB):

- 1 Now at this time while the disciples were increasing *in number*, a complaint arose on the part of the Hellenistic *Jews* against the *native* Hebrews, because their widows were being overlooked in the daily serving *of food*.
- 2 So the twelve summoned the congregation of the disciples and said, "It is not desirable for us to neglect the word of God in order to serve tables.
- 3 "Therefore, brethren, select from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may put in charge of this task.
- 4 "But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word."
- 5 The statement found approval with the whole congregation; and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas and Nicolas, a proselyte from Antioch.
- 6 And these they brought before the apostles; and after praying, they laid their hands on them.

Several observations can be made concerning the office of deacon from this passage:

- Though the Greek noun for "deacon," *diakonos* (meaning "servant" or

⁴⁵“While the New Testament does not explicitly connect the office of deacon with Acts 6, it seems most reasonable to see the seven men at least as prototype deacons” (Saucy, p. 155).

- “minister”⁴⁶) does not appear in this passage, related words do: *diakonia* (“serving” in v. 1; cf. “ministry” in v. 4, same Greek word) and *diakoneo* (“serve” in v. 2).
- The office of deacon was initiated so that the apostles would not be diverted from the priority tasks of prayer and the ministry of the Word (vs. 2 and 4). At first, the apostles oversaw the disbursement of benevolent funds (Acts 4:35, 37, and 5:2; cf. Acts 11:30). Due to the extraordinary, explosive growth of the church at Jerusalem (v. 1; cf. Acts 2:41, 47, 4:4, and 5:14), this responsibility became too great to handle, so the apostles delegated it to the first deacons (v. 3).
 - The first deacons were selected by the congregation (vs. 3 and 5), subject to final approval by the apostles (vs. 3 and 6).
 - The first deacons were members of the congregation they were selected to serve (v. 3's “from among you”)
 - The first deacons were men of the highest character (vs. 3 and 5; cf. 1 Timothy 3:8-13), in keeping with the responsibility of handling funds.
 - Several of the first deacons (v. 5) powerfully ministered the Word (Stephen⁴⁷ in Acts 7 and Philip in Acts 8). Such ministry, however, is not required by the office.

The Qualifications for the Office of Deacon

Following the qualifications for the office of pastor in 1 Timothy 3:1-7 are found the qualifications for the office of deacon in 1 Timothy 3:8-13, which states (NASB):

- 8 Deacons likewise *must be* men of dignity, not double-tongued, or addicted to much wine or fond of sordid gain,
 9 *but* holding to the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience.
 10 These men must also first be tested; then let them serve as deacons if they are beyond reproach.
 11 Women *must* likewise *be* dignified, not malicious gossips, but temperate, faithful in all things.
 12 Deacons must be husbands of *only* one wife, *and* good managers of *their* children and their own households.
 13 For those who have served well as deacons obtain for themselves a high

⁴⁶*Diakonos* can be used in a general, non-technical sense for any servant of the Lord, including the “pastor” (1 Timothy 4:6), and in a specific, technical sense for the office of deacon.

⁴⁷“Stephen is a great challenge to all our deacons to mingle a flaming testimony for Christ with the more drab and routine duties which are also theirs” (Jackson, p. 57).

standing and great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus.

To these qualifications may be added those mentioned in Acts 6:3: “of honest report, full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom.”

1. A servant’s spirit

This first qualification comes from the title of the office itself. This is a willingness to do whatever needs to be done to assist the pastor in leading and serving the church. Like any spiritual leader, a deacon is to be a servant leader.

2. Reputable (Acts 6:3)

This would correspond to the pastoral qualification, having a good reputation with those outside the church (1 Timothy 3:7).

3. Spiritual (Acts 6:3; see also Acts 6:5)

A deacon must be full of the Holy Spirit, or Spirit-filled. This, of course, assumes that he is saved, being indwelt by the Spirit (Romans 8:9 and Jude 19). To be filled with the Spirit is to be controlled by the Spirit (Ephesians 5:18), with one’s life bearing the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23).

4. Wise (Acts 6:3)

This would correspond to the pastoral qualification, prudent (1 Timothy 3:2, Titus 1:8). Wisdom is the skillful use of knowledge; it is moral, more than mental, ability. This quality is especially desirable in a deacon, as he is one whose counsel a pastor does well to seek.

5. Faithful (Acts 6:5, 1 Timothy 3:9)

This was a quality of Stephen, one of the first deacons. To be full of faith is to be one who is believing and behaving in keeping with one’s claim to be a Christian; it is persevering in the faith and in faithfulness.

6. Respectable (1 Timothy 3:8)

A deacon is to conduct himself in a dignified manner, befitting the dignity of the office. He does not need to demand respect, but commands respect by his character and the way in which he carries himself.

7. Not double-tongued (1 Timothy 3:8)

A deacon is not one who talks double-talk, one who talks out of both sides of his mouth. What he says is what he means. He doesn't say one thing to one person and another thing to someone else (though he may say the same thing to someone else in a different way).

8. Not addicted to wine (1 Timothy 3:8)

See the explanation of this qualification in the previous lesson, as it is also one for the office of pastor (1 Timothy 3:3, Titus 1:7).

9. Not a lover of money (1 Timothy 3:8)

This is also a qualification for the office of pastor (1 Timothy 3:3, Titus 1:7) and is to be a characteristic of every Christian (Hebrews 13:5). A deacon is not to be so in love with money that he would resort to dishonest means to get it. This qualification is in keeping with the money-handling responsibilities of the first deacons (Acts 6).

10. Proved (1 Timothy 3:10)

This corresponds to the pastoral qualification, not a new convert (1 Timothy 3:6). This is in keeping with the principle, test first, task second (Matthew 25:21, Luke 16:10; see also the examples of Joseph and Joshua). One should not be a deacon unless he has shown consistent, Christian character over time.

11. Blameless (1 Timothy 3:10)

See the explanation of this qualification in the previous lesson, as it is also one for the office of pastor (1 Timothy 3:2, Titus 1:6-7).

12. A one-woman man (1 Timothy 3:12)

See the explanation of this qualification in the previous lesson, as it is also one for the office of pastor (1 Timothy 3:2, Titus 1:6).

13. Manages his own house well (1 Timothy 3:12)

See the explanation of this qualification in the previous lesson, as it is also one for the office of pastor (1 Timothy 3:4-5, Titus 1:6).

Several general observations can be made concerning the office of deacon from 1 Timothy 3:8-13:

- Deacons are to be men (“husbands of *only* one wife,” not vice versa, in v. 12). Consistent with this fact are the masculines (in the Greek) used in 1 Timothy 3:8-13 (notice especially “men” in vs. 8 and 10 in the NASB; cf. “men” in Acts 6:3, which is a translation of the gender-specific Greek word for males).⁴⁸
- Like pastors, deacons must be men of the highest character.
- Unlike the office of pastor, the office of deacon has no “able to teach” (1 Timothy 3:2) qualification, indicative of the fact that the office of deacon, unlike the office of pastor, is not an authoritative one.⁴⁹ Unlike the office of pastor, there is no authority inherent in the office of deacon.⁵⁰
- Like a pastor (1 Timothy 5:17), a deacon should do what he does “well” (v.

⁴⁸There is debate as to whether “women” (NASB) in 1 Timothy 3:11 refers to deacons’ wives or to a separate office of “deaconess.” Among those who argue for the deaconess position are McCune (*Systematic Theology* 3, pp. 120-121), Saucy (pp. 159-161), and Homer Kent (*The Pastoral Epistles*, revised edition, pp. 135-136). Some view Phoebe as having been a deaconess (Romans 16:1). While the NASB’s “women” leaves room for either option, the KJV, NKJV, and NIV opt for wives of deacons. Even if deaconesses are in view, they should not be viewed as a separate office on par with deacons, but as a subset of the office of deacon. If this is referring to deacons’ wives, then to be included in the qualifications for the office of deacon are the character qualifications for his wife (assuming a deacon is married, which is not demanded). That a deacon’s wife should be required to meet certain character qualifications in order for him to be a deacon is in keeping with the concept that a husband is the spiritual leader of his wife; thus, a lack of Christian character in her life is, as a rule, a reflection of a lack of spiritual leadership on his part, which would disqualify him from such a position of spiritual leadership in the church.

⁴⁹“It is significant that nowhere in the New Testament do deacons have ruling authority over the church as the elders do, nor are deacons ever required to be able to teach Scripture or sound doctrine” (Grudem, p. 920). See also Acts 6, where the first deacons were chosen, not to assist in the ministry of the Word, but to enable the apostles to continue to do so (this does not mean, however, that deacons are prohibited from ministering the Word, as two of the first deacons, Stephen in Acts 7 and Philip in Acts 8, did so). Notice also how the qualification for the office of pastor in 1 Timothy 3:4 is tied to a corresponding function in the church in 1 Timothy 3:5, while the same qualification for the office of deacon in 1 Timothy 3:12b is given no such corresponding function. “Probably with the deacons this requirement is not so much to manifest rulership ability as it is the nature of the deacon’s Christian walk” (Saucy, p. 158).

⁵⁰This is not to say that a deacon is inferior to a pastor, just that a deacon has a different role and responsibility (any more than it is to say that a wife is inferior to her husband, though she has a different role and responsibility). Like husbands and wives, pastors and deacons are equal in worth, though different in work. They are equal in terms of person, but different in terms of position.

13).

- Unlike the office of pastor, a plurality of deacons seems to be demanded by Scripture (notice especially the plurality in 1 Timothy 3:8-13 compared to the singularity in 1 Timothy 3:1-7; cf. Acts 6:1-6 and Philippians 1:1)

The Function of the Office of Deacon

Based upon the meaning of the word, “deacon” (*diakonos*, “servant” or “minister”) and upon what can be derived from Acts 6:1-6 and 1 Timothy 3:8-13, the function of the office of deacon is one of service to the local church under the direction of the senior pastor.⁵¹ Deacons may serve in as few or as many capacities as they are willing and as the senior pastor deems necessary. At no time, however, are deacons to assume a role of functional equality with or superiority over the pastor (deacons are not a “board,” at least not in the sense this word connotes in our society).

While the role of deacon is not an authoritative one, it is an influential one. Deacons are “leaders among the laity” of a local church and should perform their duties with all the dignity and decorum associated with the office. Deacons free pastors to devote themselves to the priority tasks of prayer and the ministry of the Word.⁵² They are like Aaron and Hur, upholding the hands of Moses (Exodus 17:12). They are like the men who supported Saul, men whose hearts God had touched (1 Samuel 10:26). Their value to the well-being of a local church is immense.

The office of deacon has rigorous requirements, but those who are able to serve well in this role are promised a worthy reward (1 Timothy 3:13).

⁵¹“The deacon is helper to the pastor and the church, in both spiritual and temporal things” (A. H. Strong, quoted in McCune, *A Systematic Theology*, 3:265). Thomas (p. 164) calls deacons the “officially recognized servants of the church.”

⁵²“So it would appear reasonable to conclude that the general function of the deacons is the performance of various services of a practical nature in the church, relieving the elders of burdens which might interfere with their ministry of spiritual oversight” (Saucy, p. 157).

What the Bible Says About the Church

Lesson 7: The Church Ordinance of Baptism

One of the “Baptist distinctives⁵³” is the belief that the Bible prescribes two, and only two, “ordinances,” baptism and the Lord’s Supper. In this lesson, our focus is the church ordinance of baptism; in the next, the church ordinance of the Lord’s Supper.

Before discussing the ordinance of baptism, however, we must first consider what an ordinance is.

What is an Ordinance?

An ordinance has been defined as “an outward rite instituted by Christ to be administered in the church as a visible sign of the saving truth of the Christian faith” (Thiessen, p. 323).⁵⁴ According to McCune (*A Systematic Theology*, 3:269-270), there are four “ingredients” (i.e., criteria) that make an ordinance an ordinance:

- 1) Sovereign authorization by the Lord Jesus Christ⁵⁵

⁵³The Baptist distinctives may be summarized with the acrostic B-A-P-T-I-S-T-S: **B**ible as the only rule of faith and practice; **A**utonomy of the local church; **P**—Priesthood of the believer; **T**—Two offices: pastor and deacon; **I**—Individual soul liberty; **S**—Saved church membership; **T**—Two ordinances: baptism and the Lord’s Supper; **S**—Separation of church and state. While there are other groups that hold to one or more of these distinctives, Baptists are the only group that holds to all of them.

⁵⁴Other definitions include the following: “By the ordinances, we mean those outward rites which Christ has appointed in his church as visible signs of the saving truth of the Gospel” (A. H. Strong, quoted in McCune, *A Systematic Theology*, 3:269); an ordinance is a “visible symbol of theological truth instituted by Christ for perpetual observation in the church” (Snoeberger, p. 37); and “a Christian ordinance is a ceremony that the Lord Jesus Christ has commanded to be permanently practiced by the church” (Whitney, p. 135).

⁵⁵In a sense, this is the essence of an ordinance. As Saucy (p. 191) states: “Coming from the Latin *ordo*, meaning ‘a row, an order,’ ordinance emphasizes the fact that these rites were ordained by the Lord”

- 2) Symbolism of saving truth
- 3) Specific command for perpetuation
- 4) Biblical evidence of historical fulfillment or practice; i.e., confirmation in the Book of Acts basically

Only baptism and the Lord's Supper meet these criteria.⁵⁶

Other words used for ordinance include "rite," "ceremony," and, most commonly, "sacrament." Because of its connotation (due especially to the Roman Catholic understanding of the word), it is best to avoid calling baptism and the Lord's Supper "sacraments."⁵⁷

⁵⁶Some groups add other ordinances, most notably foot washing (based on John 13:14-15). However, because foot washing was not practiced by the early church, most groups do not consider it to be an ordinance. As Whitney (p. 136) states: "They [ordinances] are also ceremonies that were practiced by churches in the New Testament. That is why most churches today do not consider foot-washing to be an ordinance, even though Jesus washed the apostles' feet and said, 'You also ought to wash one another's feet' (John 13:14). Since we do not read of this being repeated regularly as a specific practice by the New Testament churches, we believe the apostles understood it to be a living example of the humble, loving service Christians should give to others." In like manner, Reymond (p. 920) states: "John 13:15 ... should not be construed to mean that footwashing should be a third sacrament observed by the church. Only in the most general way does our Lord's washing his disciples' feet signify his redemptive activity. It is much more likely that his washing of his disciples' feet was intended as an example of humility to teach them (and us) that Christians should be ready, in lifelong service to him, to perform the most menial service for others."

⁵⁷The Roman Catholic Church observes seven "sacraments" (see chart 63 on page 103 of House, included at the end of this lesson). According to Catholicism, sacraments in and of themselves convey saving grace. The phrase Catholics use to communicate this concept is *ex opere operato*. "The phrase *ex opere operato* represents an essential part of Roman Catholic teaching on the sacraments. This Latin phrase literally means 'by work performed,' and it means that the sacraments work in virtue of the actual activity done, and that the power of the sacraments does not depend on any subjective attitude of faith in the people participating in them" (Grudem, p. 972). According to Ryrie (p. 421), the Council of Trent [mid-16th century A.D.] defined a sacrament as "something presented to the sense, which has the power, by divine institution, not only of signifying, but also of efficiently conveying grace." The Council of Trent went even further with this idea, declaring anyone who believed otherwise to be "anathema." Reymond (p. 920) cites the Council's eighth Canon on the Sacraments in General: "If anyone says that by the sacraments of the New Law grace is not conferred *ex opere operato* [i.e., by the outward rite itself], but that faith alone in the divine promise is sufficient to obtain grace, let him be anathema." Reymond (p. 919) also cites the Council's first Canon on the Sacraments in General: "If anyone says that the sacraments of the New Law were not all instituted by our Lord Jesus Christ; or that there are more or less than seven ... or that any one of these seven is not truly and intrinsically a sacrament, let him be anathema."

The Ordinance of Baptism

That baptism is an ordinance is seen by the fact that it meets the four criteria mentioned above:

- 1) Baptism was authorized by Christ (Matthew 28:19).
- 2) Baptism symbolizes a saving truth (Romans 6:3-4).
- 3) Baptism was given a command for perpetuation (Matthew 28:19).
- 4) Baptism was practiced by the early church (Acts 2:41, et. al.).

Who is to be Baptized? (the subjects of baptism)

There are basically two schools of thought as to the subjects of baptism. Baptists believe in “believers’ baptism,” i.e., only those who are believers are to be baptized. While not necessarily denying believers’ baptism, other groups also practice “pedobaptism” (or “paedobaptism”), i.e., infant baptism.

Groups that practice infant baptism include Roman Catholics (“christening”), Anglicans, Episcopalians, Lutherans, Presbyterians⁵⁸, and Methodists, as well as (according to Grudem, p. 983) some Evangelical Free Churches .

As a general rule, dispensationalists reject infant baptism, while covenant theologians support it.⁵⁹

⁵⁸The Westminster Confession of Faith (cited in Reymond, p. 923) states in this regard: “Not only those that do actually profess faith in and obedience unto Christ, but also the infants of one, or both, believing parents, are to be baptized.”

⁵⁹As Reymond (p. 936) states: “It is clear therefore that both antipaedobaptists and paedobaptists argue by way of inference from more fundamental theological premises, focused largely on the relationship between the testaments, with the former stressing a dispensational discontinuity at this point in the covenant of grace, the latter stressing the continuity of the covenant of grace respecting this matter.” Reymond (p. 937) goes on to cite John Murray: “The basic premise of the argument for infant baptism is that the New Testament economy is the unfolding and fulfillment of the covenant made with Abraham and that the necessary implication is the unity and continuity of the church.” Being the covenant theologian that he is, Reymond (p. 945) concludes: “To summarize, because little children, even babes in arms, of covenant parents are covenant children, they are not to be excluded from the church as the kingdom of Christ. And just as the sign of the covenant of grace [circumcision] was placed upon male children of covenant parents in Old Testament times, so also the covenant sign, which is now

Paedobaptists build their belief on two premises: 1) New Testament baptism is a continuation of Old Testament circumcision⁶⁰ (using Colossians 2:11-12 as a proof text); and 2) The New Testament speaks of entire households being baptized (Acts 16:15, 33, 18:8, and 1 Corinthians 1:16), the implication being that there were infants in these households.

In regards to the first premise, it can be said that paedobaptists read their covenant theology into Colossians 2:11-12, a passage that does not teach that New Testament baptism corresponds to Old Testament circumcision in the way covenant theologians view the correspondence. In regards to the second premise, it can be said that when households were baptized, those in the households who were baptized first exercised saving faith (see, for example, Acts 16:14-15, 31-34, and 18:8; compare also 1 Corinthians 1:16 with 1 Corinthians 16:15), something infants are constitutionally incapable of doing. Ryrie (p. 423) states in this regard: "... [T]he age of children is never mentioned in any passage that mentions household baptism. But it is said that all who were baptized in those households believed. This, then, would exclude infants from being included in the baptisms."

Believers' baptism is taught in the following Scriptures: Matthew 28:19, Acts 2:41, 8:12, 16:14-15, 31-34, and 18:8. Furthermore, believers' baptism is consistent with the truths baptism signifies (see below under "What Does Baptism Accomplish?"), while paedobaptism is not. Though admittedly not a decisive argument in favor of believers' baptism and against paedobaptism, Saucy (p. 203) claims: "Unambiguous testimony for the baptism of infants emerges only about the middle of the first half of the third century."

How is Baptism to be Done? (the "mode" of baptism)

There are basically three schools of thought as to the "mode" of baptism: sprinkling (also known as aspersion), pouring (also known as affusion), and immersion.⁶¹

The evidence for immersion as the "mode" of baptism includes the following:

baptism, should be administered to male and female infants and young children of covenant parents under the New Testament administration of the same covenant."

⁶⁰Reymond (p. 952) calls baptism "circumcision's sacramental successor."

⁶¹The Westminster Confession of Faith (cited in Reymond, p. 923), essentially a Presbyterian creed, states in regards to the mode of baptism: "Dipping of the person into the water is not necessary; but Baptism is rightly administered by pouring, or sprinkling water upon the person."

1. The Greek word that our English translations transliterate (rather than translate⁶²), *baptizo* has as its primary meaning to immerse, dip, or plunge.⁶³ In this regard, when we speak of the “mode” of baptism, we should not think in terms of sprinkling, pouring, or immersion, since the mode (immersion) is inherent in the very meaning of the word. Rather, when we speak of mode of baptism, we should probably think more in terms of such things as location, posture, etc. (Snoeberger, p. 42).⁶⁴ If New Testament baptism was by sprinkling or pouring, the New Testament writers had such Greek verbs at their disposal. As Saucy (p. 210) states: “It is significant that the Greek language had terms for sprinkling, *rantidzo* and pouring, *epicheo* and *proschusis*. All of these are employed in the New Testament, but never for the act of baptism.”
2. The baptisms described in the New Testament seem to imply immersion. See, for example, Matthew 3:6's “in [River] Jordan” (cf. Mark 1:5, and 9); Mark 1:10's “coming up out of the water” (cf. Matthew 3:16⁶⁵); John 3:23's

⁶²“Had the Greek word, which denotes the act of baptizing, been translated in the English version of the New Testament, there would probably have been among English readers no dispute concerning its import” (Adoniram Judson, *Adoniram Judson on Christian Baptism*, p. 3).

⁶³According to BAGD (p. 131), in the active voice *baptizo* means “dip, immerse,” and in the middle voice “dip oneself, wash.” BAGD is an acronym for the leading Greek lexicon (≈ dictionary), the work of men named Bauer, Arndt, Gingrich, and Danker. According to another leading Greek lexicon, *The New Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon* (p. 94), *baptizo* means “to dip repeatedly, to immerge, submerge”; “to cleanse by dipping or submerging, to wash, to make clean with water”; and (metaphorically) “to overwhelm.” A. T. Robertson (“Baptism: Baptist View,” *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, 1:415) adds: “It may be remarked that no Baptist has written a lexicon of the Greek language, and yet the standard lexicons, like that of Liddell and Scott (LSJ), uniformly give the meaning of *baptizo* as ‘dip,’ ‘immerse.’ They do not give ‘pour’ or ‘sprinkle,’ nor has anyone ever adduced an instance where this verb means ‘pour’ or ‘sprinkle.’ The presumption is therefore in favor of ‘dip’ in the NT.”

⁶⁴John Broadus says that the idea of ‘mode’ begs the question. The real question is, ‘What is baptism?’ To put it another way, no one argues over the ‘modes’ of the Lord’s Table—whether to recline at a table, kneel at a railing or sit in a pew. Again, the question is, what action constitutes baptism? (The ‘mode’ question should concern such things as whether it should be in a tank, a stream, or a lake and, probably by extension to today, whether the candidate should lean back, sit on a chair or get on his knees” (McCune, *A Systematic Theology*, 3:271). One modern mode is what is called “trine immersion.” According to Ryrie (p. 425), “Trine immersion is the immersion of the candidate three times (usually forward) to symbolize the association with the Trine God.”

⁶⁵Matthew 3:16 and Mark 1:9-10 speak of the baptism of Jesus. “...[P]ictures of

“much water there”; Acts 8:38's “went down both into the water”; and Acts 8:39's “come up out of the water.”

3. Immersion most clearly pictures what baptism signifies (see below under “What Does Baptism Accomplish?”).
4. The practice of the early church was immersion. “The unanimous testimony of ancient history reveals that immersion was the normal mode of baptism in the early church” (Saucy, pp. 211-212). “The practice of baptism in the New Testament was carried out in one way: the person being baptized was *immersed* or put completely under the water and then brought back up again” (Grudem, p. 967; emphasis his).⁶⁶ According to Thiessen (p. 325), “Pouring and sprinkling came about because of water shortages and as a convenience for the aged and infirm.”

What Does Baptism Accomplish? (the significance of baptism)

There are basically three schools of thought as to the significance of baptism: baptism saves, baptism incorporates one into the covenant of grace, and baptism is a symbol.

The belief that baptism saves is known as “baptismal regeneration.” Groups that hold to this belief include Roman Catholics, the Churches of Christ, some Lutherans, and some Episcopalians (Grudem, p. 981). Those who believe in baptismal regeneration point to such New Testament passages as Mark 16:16⁶⁷,

Jesus and John the Baptist both standing waist-deep in the Jordan with John holding a little bowl of water in order to pour or to sprinkle water on Jesus are ludicrous” (McCune, *A Systematic Theology*, 3:272).

⁶⁶Reymond (p. 935, emphasis his), a Presbyterian strongly disagrees: “The fact is that *there is not a single recorded instance of a baptism in the entire New Testament where immersion followed by emersion is the mode of baptism.*”

⁶⁷A few points can be made in regards to this verse: 1) Its textual basis is highly suspect. Reymond (pp. 950-951) states in this regard: “It must be noted that this verse appears in the so-called longer ending of the Gospel (16:9-20), which is supported by the Textus Receptus and some other late witnesses but not by the most reliable early manuscripts ... Its text-critical precariousness, therefore, makes the verse shaky ground for the advocacy of any form of baptismal salvation”; and 2) Even if the verse is original, notice that the last half of the verse reads: “but he that believeth not shall be [condemned],” not “but he that believeth not and has not been baptized shall be condemned.”

Acts 2:38⁶⁸, 22:16, and 1 Peter 3:21 to support their position. However, interpreting such verses to teach baptismal regeneration flies in the face of the clear teaching throughout Scripture that salvation is through faith, not works (see, for example, Galatians 2:16 and Ephesians 2:8-9). Therefore, such verses must be interpreted in light of this foundational soteriological [doctrine of salvation] truth. Baptism is not essential to salvation, the believing thief crucified with Jesus being a prime example of one who was saved without ever being baptized (Luke 23:43). However, the importance of baptism should not be downplayed by this fact.⁶⁹ “The idea of an unbaptized Christian is simply not entertained in the NT” (F. F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, p. 77).

The belief that baptism incorporates one into the covenant of grace is the teaching of covenant theology (see above under “Who is to be Baptized?”) and is, therefore, rightly rejected by dispensationalists.

Baptism symbolizes the believer’s identification⁷⁰/union with Christ in His death, burial, and resurrection. Immersion is the “mode” that best pictures the death (immersion), burial⁷¹ (submersion), and resurrection (emersion) of Christ, and the corresponding spiritual realities in the life of the believer, dying to sin and being made alive to righteousness.⁷² See Romans 6:3-4 and Colossians 2:12 in this regard. Water baptism also symbolizes the washing away of sins that takes place at conversion. See Acts 22:16 and 1 Peter 3:21 in this regard.

⁶⁸In regards to this verse, Thiessen (pp. 324-325) states: “John’s statement, ‘I baptize you in water for repentance’ (Matt. 3:11) is the same Greek construction as Peter’s ‘Be baptized ... for the forgiveness of your sins’ (Acts 2:38). Surely John assumed repentance came first; likewise, forgiveness comes before baptism.” For a more thorough treatment of this verse, especially in regards to the issue of baptismal regeneration, see “Water Baptism and the Forgiveness of Sins in Acts 2:38” by R. Bruce Compton in the Fall 1999 issue of the *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal* (pp. 3-32).

⁶⁹“Although it be a great sin to contemn or neglect this ordinance, yet grace and salvation are not so inseparably annexed unto it, as that no person can be regenerated, or saved, without it” (Westminster Confession of Faith, cited in Reymond, p. 923).

⁷⁰“Theologically, baptism may be defined as an act of association or identification with someone, some group, some message, or some event” (Ryrie, p. 422).

⁷¹It must be granted that Jesus’s body was not buried under the ground, but in a tomb (Reymond, footnote 43, p. 934).

⁷²“Water baptism pictures death to self and identification with Christ in His death, burial and resurrection. It is a moving picture—an object lesson—of the believer’s experience in coming to Christ, experiencing union with Him via the baptism of the Holy Spirit, and going on to live a new life as a new spiritual creation (2 Cor 5:17)” (McCune, *A Systematic Theology*, 3:275).

Though baptism is a symbol (as opposed to a “sacrament”), this does not imply that there is no spiritual benefit given through its observance. As Grudem (p. 954, emphasis his) states: “Although we must avoid the Roman Catholic teaching that grace is imparted even *apart from* the faith of the person being baptized, we must not react so strongly to this error that we say that there is no spiritual benefit at all that comes from baptism, that the Holy Spirit *does not* work through it and that it is *merely symbolic*. It is better to say that where there is genuine faith on the part of the person being baptized, and where the faith of the church that watches the baptism is stirred up and encouraged by this ceremony, then the Holy Spirit certainly does work through baptism, and it becomes a ‘means of grace’ through which the Holy Spirit brings blessing to the person being baptized and to the church as well.”

Who is to Do the Baptizing? (the administrator of baptism)

The ordinances are given to the local church. Therefore, their only proper observance is under the oversight of a local church. McCune (*Systematic Theology* 3, p. 132) states in this regard: “The local church is the custodian of the ordinances and it alone can arrange for baptism. This is against non-church, private baptisms in backyard pools, or para-church organizations like camps, etc., that baptize at the close of a camping session.”

Because the local church is the “custodian of the ordinances,” it has the right to authorize any one of its members to officiate a baptism. Thus, if a church is without a pastor, it can continue to baptize.

Washington Believes in Baptism

A pastor named John Gano served as chaplain in General George Washington’s army. “Although there is no documented evidence, three of John Gano’s children testified that at the close of the war their father had baptized George Washington in the Hudson River. Washington is quoted as saying, ‘I have been investigating the Scripture, and I believe immersion to be the baptism taught in the Word of God, and I demand it at your hands. I do not wish any parade made or the army called out, but simply a quiet demonstration of the ordinance.’ Daniel Gano, one of Gano’s sons and a captain of the artillery, was present and said that he, with about forty officers and men, accompanied the chaplain down to the Hudson River where the Reverend John Gano baptized George Washington” (David Cummins and E. Wayne Thompson, *This Day in Baptist History*, p. 327).

Judson Believes in Baptism

Adoniram Judson was a 19th century American missionary to Burma (today Myanmar). His father was a Congregationalist pastor and, thus, had Adoniram “baptized” as an infant and rejected the Baptist belief of believers’ baptism by immersion. Furthermore, Judson was ordained as a Congregationalist minister in 1812, just days prior to departing for the mission field. Knowing that he would cross paths with Baptist missionary, William Carey in India while on his way to Burma, Judson studied the subject of baptism on the voyage to India, becoming convinced that the Baptist position was Scriptural. Hence, he (along with his wife, Ann) was baptized by Carey upon arriving in India. Judson (*Adoniram Judson on Christian Baptism*, p. 107) testified: “... [A]nd it follows inevitably, that I, who was christened in infancy, on the faith of my parents, have never yet received Christian baptism. Must I, then, forsake my parents, the church with which I stand connected, the society under whose patronage I have come out, the companions of my missionary undertaking? Must I forfeit the good opinion of all my friends in my native land, occasioning grief to some, and provoking others to anger, and be regarded henceforth, by all my former dear acquaintance, as a weak, despicable Baptist, who has not sense enough to comprehend the connection between the Abrahamic and the Christian systems? All this was mortifying; it was hard to flesh and blood. But I thought again—It is better to be guided by the opinion of Christ, who is the truth, than by the opinion of men, however good, whom I know to be in an error. The praise of Christ is better than the praise of men. Let me cleave to Christ at all events, and prefer his favor above my chief joy.” Judson soon thereafter wrote to his wife: “Thus, my dear Nancy, we are confirmed Baptists, not because we wished to be, but because truth compelled us to be” (*Adoniram Judson on Christian Baptism*, p. 122). Judson eventually won his father over to the Baptist position and, as a result, his father was relieved of his Congregationalist pastorate.

Spurgeon Believes in Baptism

Charles Haddon Spurgeon, nicknamed “the Prince of Preachers,” was a 19th century British pastor. His father and grandfather were Congregationalist pastors and, thus, had Charles “baptized” as an infant and rejected the Baptist belief of believers’ baptism by immersion. Convinced that believers’ baptism by immersion was the teaching of Scripture, Spurgeon was baptized by immersion shortly after his conversion at the age of fifteen (having to walk 7 miles to reach the nearest Baptist pastor). He later wrote (on page 38 of volume 1 of his autobiography): “Having been brought up among Congregationalists, I had never looked at the matter in my life. I had thought myself to have been baptized as an infant; and so, when I was confronted with the question, ‘What is required of persons to be baptized?’ and I found that repentance and faith were required, I said to myself, ‘Then I have not been baptized; that infant sprinkling of mine was a mistake; and please God that I ever have repentance and faith, I will be properly baptized.’” With the wit for which he was renowned, Spurgeon once said (on page 45 of volume 1 of his autobiography): “My mother said to me, one day, ‘Ah, Charles! I often prayed the Lord to make you a Christian, but I never asked that you might become a Baptist.’ I could not resist the temptation to reply, ‘Ah, mother! the Lord has answered your prayer with His usual bounty, and given you exceeding abundantly above what you asked or thought.’”

What the Bible Says About the Church

Lesson 8: The Church Ordinance of the Lord's Supper

In the previous lesson (Lesson 7), we studied the first of the two local church "ordinances," baptism. We now turn to the second, the Lord's Supper.

The Lord's Supper is so named because it is so called in 1 Corinthians 11:20.⁷³ It is also known by other names, such as "communion"⁷⁴ (1 Corinthians 10:16), "the Lord's table" (1 Corinthians 10:21), the "breaking of bread" (Acts 2:42; cf. 1 Corinthians 10:16), and "the Eucharist."⁷⁵

The institution of the Lord's Supper is found in Matthew 26:26-29, Mark 14:22-25, and Luke 22:14-20 (cf. 1 Corinthians 11:23-30).⁷⁶ Its observance by the early church is alluded to in Acts 2:42 (Jerusalem) and 20:6-7 (Troas).

The Lord's Supper: An Ordinance

That the Lord's Supper is an ordinance is seen by the fact that it meets the four

⁷³Technically, the "Lord's Supper" referred to in 1 Corinthians 11:20 is the "agape [love] feast" (1 Corinthians 11:17-34 and Jude 12), of which the observance of the ordinance was a part. In time, the feast facet faded (in the 4th century A.D.; Ryrie, p. 427). Consequently, most churches today observe the ordinance in and of itself. "The fact that Paul could counsel its [the feast facet's] suspension in the church [in 1 Corinthians 11:22 and 34] excludes it from being an ordinance" (Ryrie, p. 427).

⁷⁴In this regard, A. H. Strong (quoted in McCune, *Systematic Theology* 3, p. 135) states that the Lord's Supper is "the highest expression of church fellowship."

⁷⁵The term, "eucharist" is derived from the Greek verb, *eucharisteo* ("I give thanks"), found in Matthew 26:27, Mark 14:23, Luke 22:17, 19, and 1 Corinthians 11:24. Because of the connotation of the term (due especially to the Roman Catholic use and understanding of it; see below), it is best to avoid calling the Lord's Supper the "Eucharist."

⁷⁶The Lord Jesus Christ instituted the Lord's Supper "the same night in which he was betrayed" (1 Corinthians 11:23), "Maundy Thursday." The reason why this day is called "Maundy" Thursday is due to the fact that it was on this day that Jesus told His disciples that He was giving them a "new commandment" (John 13:34), and the Latin word for commandment is *mandatum*.

criteria for an ordinance mentioned in the previous lesson:

- 1) The Lord's Supper was authorized by Christ (Matthew 26:26-29 and parallels).
- 2) The Lord's Supper symbolizes a saving truth (1 Corinthians 11:26).
- 3) The Lord's Supper was given a command for perpetuation (Luke 22:19, 1 Corinthians 11:24, and 25).
- 4) The Lord's Supper was practiced by the early church (Acts 2:42, et. al.).

The Lord's Supper: The Elements

The elements used in the Lord's Supper are two: 1) the "bread" (Matthew 26:26, Mark 14:22, Luke 22:19, and 1 Corinthians 11:23f) and 2) the "fruit of the vine" (Matthew 26:29, Mark 14:25, and Luke 22:18)/the "cup" (Matthew 26:27, Mark 14:23, Luke 22:17, 20, and 1 Corinthians 11:25f). The (unleavened) bread (most Baptist churches use unleavened crackers) represents the body of the Lord Jesus (Matthew 26:26, Mark 14:22, Luke 22:19, 1 Corinthians 11:24, 27, and 29), while the (unfermented⁷⁷) "fruit of the vine"/"cup" (most Baptist churches use grape juice) represents His blood (Matthew 26:28, Mark 14:24, Luke 22:20, 1 Corinthians 11:25, and 27).

The Lord's Supper: Its Frequency

According to 1 Corinthians 11:25 and 26, the Lord's Supper is to be observed "oft" or "often." This begs the question, How often? Some (based on Acts 2:46⁷⁸) suggest a daily observance. Others (based on Acts 20:7) suggest a weekly observance.⁷⁹ Ultimately, the frequency of observance is at the discretion of each individual local church. The Lord's Supper should be observed often enough that its significance is not forgotten (Luke 22:19 and 1 Corinthians 11:24-25), but not so often that it loses its significance.

⁷⁷Even if the "fruit of the vine" used by Christ at the institution of the Lord's Supper was fermented, it was so diluted with water as to render it non-intoxicating. Thus, the use of modern-day wine (which is so undiluted as to render it intoxicating) in the observance of the Lord's Supper should be avoided in either case.

⁷⁸In the opinion of this writer, Acts 2:46 is speaking of a common meal, not the observance of the Lord's Supper (as in Acts 2:42). The definite article is used in Acts 2:42 (literally: "the breaking of bread"), but not in Acts 2:46 ("breaking bread"). Furthermore, notice the accompanying words in verse 46: "did eat their meat"

⁷⁹"In actuality it has been the practice of most of the churches throughout its history to celebrate the Lord's Supper every week when believers gather" (Grudem, p. 999).

The Lord's Supper: Its Administrator

Like baptism, the Lord's Supper is a local church ordinance. Therefore, its only proper observance is under the oversight of a local church.⁸⁰

Because the local church is the "custodian of the ordinances" (McCune, *Systematic Theology* 3, p. 132), it has the right to authorize any one of its members to officiate the Lord's Supper. Thus, if a church is without a pastor, it can continue to observe the Lord's Supper. Furthermore, a local church can authorize the private serving of the ordinance to one of its members (a "shut-in," one convalescing, etc.). In the opinion of this writer, however, such a practice should be discouraged.⁸¹

The Lord's Supper: Its Participants

Who should be allowed to participate in the observance of the Lord's Supper? Based on Acts 2:41-42 and 1 Corinthians 11:27-32, the prerequisites to observing the Lord's Supper appear to be four (cf. McCune, *Systematic Theology* 3, pp. 137-138):

- 1) Those who have been saved ("they that gladly received his word" in Acts 2:41 preceding "And they continued steadfastly ... in breaking of bread" in Acts 2:42)
- 2) Those who have been baptized ("were baptized" in Acts 2:41 preceding

⁸⁰“Since the local church is the only Biblically recognized group in charge of the stewardship of spiritual things, Baptists have always contended that this ordinance should be administered by a church and not by schools, conferences or individuals” (Jackson, p. 73). “It [the Lord's Supper] is to be celebrated by the assembled church. It is not a solitary observance on the part of individuals. No 'showing forth' [1 Corinthians 11:26] is possible except in company” (A. H. Strong, quoted in McCune, *A Systematic Theology*, 3:286). Saucy (p. 231) wrongly (in the opinion of this writer) leaves room for observance of the Lord's Supper outside the oversight of the local church: “While its normal celebration is for the established church, this does not seem to preclude its observance under other conditions. Christ instituted it for the disciples before the church was inaugurated, and surely the promise of His presence in the midst of two or three (Mt 18:20) may be appropriated in the case of the supper when necessary. The experience of unity of the body, however, is best served in the larger gathering of the church.”

⁸¹So also Jackson (p. 73): “The pastor should not carry the communion to individuals and administer it personally. This cannot help but lead to looseness of administration and even to schism.”

- “And they continued steadfastly ... in breaking of bread” in Acts 2:42)⁸²
3. Those who have united in membership with the serving church (“were added unto them about three thousand souls” in Acts 2:41 preceding “And they continued steadfastly ... in breaking of bread” in Acts 2:42)
 4. Those who are not living in sin or are not under church discipline (1 Corinthians 11:27-32)

Ultimately, each local church determines whom it invites to participate in its observance of the Lord’s Supper. Among Bible-believing churches, three views predominate:

1. Open communion—any believer present may participate
2. Close communion—any member of the serving church, as well as any member of a church of like faith and practice, may participate⁸³
3. Closed communion—only members of the serving church may participate

While “open” (pun intended) to the close view, this writer is more comfortable with the closed view.⁸⁴

⁸²“... [A]s union with Christ [symbolized by baptism] precedes communion with Him [symbolized by the Lord’s Supper], so the symbols of these blessed facts belong in that logical order” (Jackson, p. 73). “... [M]any Protestants would argue from the meaning of baptism and the meaning of the Lord’s Supper that, ordinarily, *only those who have been baptized* should participate in the Lord’s Supper. This is because baptism is so clearly a symbol of *beginning* the Christian life, while the Lord’s Supper is clearly a symbol of *continuing* the Christian life” (Grudem, p. 996; emphasis his; Grudem himself, however, rejects baptism as a prerequisite).

⁸³“Most Baptist churches today accept the word of the potential participant that he is indeed a member in good standing of a sister church of like faith and practice; historically, Baptists have required letters of recommendation from the sister church before extending communion as a courtesy to transient believers. The latter is probably the best alternative, but is unlikely ever to be revived since it would require a policy shift by several churches simultaneously in order to be effective” (Snoeberger, p. 47).

⁸⁴The following citations, while not implying endorsement of the closed position by those being cited, nevertheless appear (in the opinion of this writer) to lead to such a position. “Should visitors be excluded if they are believers? Not necessarily. As a courtesy they could participate. But since discipline by a local church and fellowship within a local church are related to the Supper, then normally only those who are clearly associated with that local church should partake of the Supper in that group” (Ryrie, p. 426). “Strictly speaking ... the privileges of a Church are coextensive with the authority of the Church. A right to the communion, therefore, is limited to those over whom the Church exercises the right of discipline; that is, its own members. Consequently, if the members of sister churches are invited to partake, it is an act of courtesy proffered, and not a right allowed. This rule would of itself forbid a general, open, or free communion, since that would bring in persons whose characters the Church could not know, and

The Lord's Supper: Its Significance

Throughout church history, there have been four basic views as to the significance of the Lord's Supper, particularly in relation to the presence of Christ. Erickson (p. 1113; emphasis his) nicely summarizes the four views (cf. chart by Enns, p. 362, included at the end of this lesson; cf. chart by House, p. 124, also included at the end of this lesson):

1. The bread and wine *are* the physical body and blood of Christ.
2. The bread and wine *contain* the physical body and blood.
3. The bread and wine *contain spiritually* the body and blood.
4. They *represent* the body and blood.

Transubstantiation: The Roman Catholic View

During the "Mass⁸⁵," Roman Catholics observe the "Eucharist." At the point in the Eucharist when the priest "consecrates" the elements⁸⁶, they allegedly change substance, becoming the actual body and blood of Christ, though continuing to look, feel, smell, and taste like bread and wine. This view is called

whom, if they were unworthy, the Church could not discipline or exclude" (Edward T. Hiscox, quoted in McCune, *A Systematic Theology*, 3:285-286). "First Corinthians 5:11 also seems to indicate that the enforcement of church discipline (clearly a church function in verses 2, 13; cf. also Matt 18:17; 2 Cor 2:6) includes the withholding of fellowship and specifically of *eating*. Whether this is a precise reference to the Lord's Table is disputed, but it certainly *includes* the Lord's Table. A survey of Baptist manuals shows that Baptists have historically taken this understanding with extraordinary seriousness. One of the most frequent occasions for church discipline in early Baptist history was the failure to attend the church's celebration of the Lord's Supper. Failure to attend was interpreted as either (a) an attitude of disgruntledness or disharmony that constituted schism, or (b) an attempt to avoid accountability to the church. Communion and church discipline are integrally related in the life of the church. See especially Mark Dever, ed., *Polity* (Washington DC: Center for Church Reform, 2002)" (Snoeberger, p. 45; emphasis his). "Communion is the God-ordained means for the church to police and correct the conduct of her members" (Snoeberger, p. 47). "In principle this practice [closed communion] is valid: a church cannot evaluate the behavior of strangers or exercise discipline on them (1 Cor 5:13)—it is possible to abet an estranged member who is fleeing accountability to his own church by serving him communion" (Snoeberger, p. 47).

⁸⁵The name, "Mass" is derived from the Latin word, *missa*, from the Latin verb, *mittere*, "to dismiss." This is taken from the Latin phrase, *ite, missa est*, meaning "Go, you are dismissed," uttered by the priest at the conclusion of the service (Saucy, p. 213).

⁸⁶The priest consecrates the body with the words, "This is my body" (Latin: *Hoc est corpus meum*).

“transubstantiation⁸⁷,” which means “a change of substance” (Enns, p. 360). The problems with this view are many:

1. It misinterprets Christ’s words, “This is My body” (Matthew 26:26, et. al.) and “This is my blood” (Matthew 26:28, et. al.) in a overly-literal way, rather than in the metaphorical way they were intended to be understood (cf. “I am the door of the sheep” in John 10:7 and “I am the true vine” in John 15:1).⁸⁸
2. Christ’s body (and the blood circulating within it), being a human body, could only be in one place at one time. Therefore, it could not be both before the disciples and in Christ’s hands at the same time. Neither can it presently be both in heaven and in every place the Catholic Mass is celebrated.⁸⁹
3. Contrary to all other miracles performed by Christ and others in the New Testament, which were visible, the “miracle” of transubstantiation is invisible (Reymond, p. 959).
4. Partaking of blood was forbidden by God and abhorrent to Jews (see Genesis 9:4, Leviticus 3:17, 7:26-27, 17:10-14, Deuteronomy 12:23, and Acts 15:29).
5. According to Catholic dogma, the Eucharist is a re-presentation (rather

⁸⁷Saucy (p. 221) cites the Council of Trent’s 1551 declaration in this regard: “But since Christ our Redeemer declared that to be truly His own body which He offered under the form of bread, it has, therefore, always been a firm belief in the Church of God, and this holy council now declares it anew, that by the consecration of the bread and wine a change is brought about of the whole substance of the bread into the substance of the body of Christ our Lord, and of the whole substance of the wine into the substance of His blood. This change the holy Catholic Church properly and appropriately calls transubstantiation.”

⁸⁸Roman Catholic interpreters make the same error in their interpretation of Jesus’ Bread of Life Discourse in John 6, taking Christ’s words in verses 50-58 literally for eating and drinking, instead of metaphorically for believing (see especially v. 35; also, carefully compare what Jesus says in v. 40 with what He says in v. 54).

⁸⁹Reymond (p. 960) rightly states: “Both the Roman Catholic view and the Lutheran view contend that the communicant is actually feeding upon the physical body and blood of Christ. But since both views advocate that Christ is physically present in the elements, grave theological problems arise relative to the nature of Christ’s humanity since both must ascribe the attribute of ubiquity (‘everywhere-ness’) to his humanity. But this is to destroy the true humanity of Christ and to forsake Chalcedon’s Christology.”

than a representation) of the body and blood of Christ/a re-enactment (rather than a remembrance) of the death of Christ, a teaching that flies in the face of such Scriptures as John 19:30 (“It is finished!”), Romans 6:10, Hebrews 1:3, 9:25-26, and 10:10-14.⁹⁰

J. C. Ryle (cited in an August 3, 2003 sermon on 1 Corinthians 11:23-26 by John Piper entitled, “Why We Eat the Lord’s Supper”: Part 1) says much of the same: “Grant for a moment that the Lord’s Supper is a sacrifice, and not a sacrament ... You spoil the blessed doctrine of Christ’s finished work when he died on the cross. A sacrifice that needs to be repeated is not a perfect and complete thing. You spoil the priestly office of Christ. If there are priests that can offer an acceptable sacrifice to God besides Him, the great High Priest is robbed of His glory You overthrow the true doctrine of Christ’s human nature. If the body born of the virgin Mary can be in more places than one at the same time, it is not a body like our own, and Jesus was not the ‘last Adam’ in the truth of our nature.”

Martyred for Not Believing in Transubstantiation

J. C. Ryle (cited in an August 3, 2003 sermon on 1 Corinthians 11:23-26 by John Piper entitled, “Why We Eat the Lord’s Supper”: Part 1), speaking of those British believers who were martyred during the 1555-1558 reign of “Bloody Mary”: “The doctrine in question was the real presence of the body and blood of Christ in the consecrated elements of bread and wine in the Lord’s Supper. Did they, or did they not believe that the body and blood of Christ were really, that is corporally, literally, locally, and materially, present under the forms of bread and wine after the words of consecration were pronounced? Did they or did they not believe that the real body of Christ, which was born of the Virgin Mary, was present on the so-called altar so soon as the mystical words had passed the lips of the priest? Did they or did they not? That was the simple question. If they did not believe and admit it, they were burned.”

Consubstantiation: The Lutheran View

Similar to the Roman Catholic view and fraught with many of the same problems is the view held by Martin Luther, commonly called “consubstantiation” (literally:

⁹⁰Significantly, there were no seats upon which the priests could sit, either in the Tabernacle or in the Temple. The priests, thus, had to stand (Hebrews 10:11). When Jesus, however, entered the heavenly tabernacle (Hebrews 8:2, 9:11, 24), He sat down, signifying that the work of redemption was complete (Hebrews 10:12). As Grudem (p. 618) states: “. . . [S]itting at God’s right hand is a dramatic indication of the completion of Christ’s work of redemption. Just as a human being will sit down at the completion of a large task to enjoy the satisfaction of having accomplished it, so Jesus sat at the right hand of God, visibly demonstrating that his work of redemption was complete.”

“with the substance”). According to Luther, the literal body and blood of Christ are present “in, with, and under” the elements served in the Lord’s Supper. “The example sometimes given is to say that Christ’s body is present in the bread as water is present in a sponge—the water is not the sponge, but is present “in, with, and under” a sponge, and is present wherever the sponge is present” (Grudem, p. 994). Thus, the elements do not become the body and blood of Christ (as in transubstantiation), but contain the body and blood of Christ. This view is held by Lutherans and Episcopalians.

The Reformed or “Dynamic” View

Held by Calvin, the Reformed or Dynamic View, like the two previous views, claims that Christ is truly present in the elements. Unlike the two previous views, however, the presence is not physical, but spiritual. The Larger Westminster Catechism (cited in Reymond, p. 966) puts it this way: “As the body and blood are not corporally or carnally present in, with, or under the bread and wine in the Lord’s Supper, and yet are spiritually present to the faith of the receiver, no less truly and really than the elements themselves are to their outward senses; so they that worthily communicate in the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper, do therein feed upon the body and blood of Christ, not after a corporal and carnal, but in a spiritual manner, yet truly and really, while by faith they receive and apply unto themselves Christ crucified, and all the benefits of his death.”

The “Symbolic” View

Held by Zwingli, the Symbolic View understands the elements in the Lord’s Supper to be mere symbols of the body and blood of Christ. This is the view of most Baptists. While certainly closer to the Reformed View than either of the other two views, this view goes one step further than the former by arguing for a symbolic, rather than spiritual, presence of Christ in the elements⁹¹ (this is not to say that the Symbolic View denies any spiritual dynamic to the ordinance). Erickson (p. 1121) nicely distinguishes the Reformed View from the Symbolic View: “We might say, then, that it is not so much that the sacrament brings Christ to the communicant [the Reformed View] as that the believer’s faith brings Christ to the sacrament [the Symbolic View].” Charles Spurgeon (quoted in Mack & Swavely, p. 108; emphasis Spurgeon’s) explains the symbolic view this way: “Never mind that bread and wine, unless you can use them as folks often use their spectacles. What do they use them for? To look at? No, to look *through* them. So, use the bread and wine as a pair of spectacles. Look through them, and do not be satisfied until you can say, ‘Yes, yes, I can see the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world.’”

⁹¹“In this regard it is significant that Paul’s account of the Lord’s Supper says nothing about the presence of Christ” (Erickson, p. 1122).

What the Bible Says About the Church

Lesson 9: Church Government

How is the local church to be governed? Can one discern a definitive pattern in the New Testament? If so, is such a pattern merely descriptive (telling us what they did), or is it also prescriptive (telling us what we must also do)? Is there one form of church government clearly taught in Scripture, or a blend of several forms? Is the form mandated? If not, may each church choose its own form, based upon the principle of expediency? This lesson will seek to provide some help in answering these questions.

Forms of Church Government

There are three general forms⁹² of church government currently in use, with the different forms constituting one of the differences between denominations.⁹³

1. Monarchical Forms of Church Government

In the monarchical (literally meaning “rule by one”) form of church government, ultimate authority resides in one individual. This is the form utilized by Catholicism, Episcopalianism, and others.⁹⁴ Monarchalism in its purest form is found in Catholicism, in which ultimate authority over the entire church resides in the so-called bishop of Rome (the pope). In Episcopalianism, ultimate authority resides in the archbishop. In distinction from the Roman Catholic pope, who rules over the entire church, each Episcopalian archbishop rules over a certain geographic segment of the church.

⁹²Erickson (p. 1086) summarizes the difference between the three: “We may think of the episcopal system as a structuring of the church along monarchical or imperial lines. The presbyterian form is like a representative democracy, the congregational a direct democracy.”

⁹³“... [T]he advocates of the various forms of church government agree that God is (or has) the ultimate authority. Where they differ is in their conceptions of how or through whom he expresses or exercises it” (Erickson, p. 1069).

⁹⁴Reymond (p. 904) lists the churches that utilize this form of government: the Roman Catholic Church, the Greek Orthodox and Russian Orthodox Churches, the Church of England, the Episcopalian Church in the United States, and the United Methodist Church in the United States.

2. Oligarchical Forms of Church Government

In the oligarchical (literally meaning “rule by a few”) form of church government, ultimate authority resides in a few individuals. This is the form utilized by Presbyterianism and others.

3. Democratic Forms of Church Government

In the democratic (literally meaning “rule by all”) form of church government (also known as congregationalism), ultimate authority resides equally in every individual in the church. This is the form utilized by Baptists and others.

A fourth form of church government is “Erastianism”⁹⁵ (Reymond, p. 907). In this form, the church is governed by the state. Erastianism is found in the Lutheran Church in Germany and in the Church of England (the Anglican Church), with the second also incorporating the Episcopalian form of government.

There are some groups that advocate no official, formal, set form of church government, such as the Quakers and the Plymouth Brethren.⁹⁶

Which Form is the Most Biblical?

Being a Baptist, it should come as no surprise that this writer advocates the democratic/congregational form of church government.

That ultimate authority resides in the congregation is seen by the fact that the local church is the ultimate judicatory in matters of church discipline (Matthew 18:15-17, 1 Corinthians 5:12-13, and 2 Corinthians 2:6). It is also seen by the fact that churches made their own decisions, rather than having such decisions made for them by an outside individual or group of individuals (Acts 6:3, 5, 11:22, 15:3, 22, 1 Corinthians 16:3, and 2 Corinthians 8:19).

The monarchical forms of church government are arguably extrabiblical, arising

⁹⁵Named after its proponent, a 16th century Swiss theologian named Thomas Erastus.

⁹⁶In response, McCune (*A Systematic Theology*, 3:223) correctly contends: “... [T]he tendency to organize is indigenous to human nature. Even groups who do not believe in organization have an informal organization. They know who the leaders and the committees are, for instance. No one can just walk in, as it were, and vote or exert authority in the community. They know who belongs and who does not.”

not out of the New Testament, but out of postbiblical church history.⁹⁷ Saucy (p. 108) gives some of the historical reasons for the rise of the extrabiblical office of interchurch (as opposed to intrachurch) bishop. While the oligarchical forms of church government appear to have some limited, biblical warrant⁹⁸, in the opinion of this writer, the democratic forms have more.

While, in one sense (an ultimate sense), authority in the local church resides in the congregation (by means of its prerogative to select/elect and eject a senior pastor), in another sense (a penultimate sense) it resides in the senior pastor by virtue of the nature of his office (see under “The Authority of the Office of Pastor” in the lesson entitled, “The Church Office of Pastor”). A local church exercises authority by selecting a senior pastor. Once that senior pastor is installed and as long as he holds office, he exercises authority over the local church he pastors. This authority ends when he exits the office, at which time the congregation exercises authority by selecting another senior pastor.⁹⁹ McCune (*A Systematic Theology*, 3:230, emphasis his) also makes this distinction: “A pastor ... has more *ministerial* authority, or leadership authority, by virtue of his office. However, as a *member* of the body, he has no more authority than another. He has only one vote like everyone else.”

Admittedly, these parameters are theoretical and, therefore, somewhat static. In practice, the interplay between congregational and pastoral authority is much more dynamic, with continual give-and-take. As the pastor lovingly leads (i.e., acts in the best interests of the congregation) and as the congregation sweetly submits to his leadership, the church functions as the unified body God desires.

⁹⁷“It is acknowledged even by its advocates that the episcopal or prelatic form of church government is nowhere mentioned in the New Testament” (Reymond, p. 905). This fact does not preclude proponents of the monarchical forms of church government from pointing to Scripture in support of their position, citing such passages as Matthew 16:18-19, Acts 14:23, and Titus 1:5. In regards to Acts 14:23, proponents of democratic forms of church government point out that the Greek verb translated “ordained” can also mean “to vote by stretching out the hand” or “to create or appoint by vote” (*The New Thayer’s Greek-English Lexicon*, p. 668).

⁹⁸“It can safely be said that elements of both the presbyterian and congregational forms of church government find support in Scripture” (Enns, p. 359). In a similar way, Ryrie (p. 411) states: “The New Testament picture seems to include a blend of congregational and federal government, limited to the local level.” Besides Scriptures that speak of elders (plural), such as Acts 20:17 and James 5:14, another passage proponents of the oligarchic forms of church government point to is 1 Timothy 4:14.

⁹⁹“It is evident, therefore, that the Lord has designed the church with internal, interlocking powers and responsibilities. The church is to be subject to the pastor. Yet the pastor is subject to the church, in another sense, for he is called by them and may be disciplined by them” (Jackson, p. 48).

“There is no problem here except for those who will not be subject to the Head of the church. It is not difficult for a Bible-taught church to be subject to the overseer or pastor that God has sent. Neither is it difficult for a faithful pastor to be sensitive to the will of God’s people. What a lovely and delightful relationship exists between pastor, deacons and people when all are subject to Christ the Head” (Jackson, p. 48). Douglas McLachlan (“Who Runs the Church?": Part One, *Frontline*, no date, p. 36) says it this way: "... [T]he New Testament local church was designed to be a pastor-led, Spirit-guided, Bible-based democracy.”

A Few Corollaries and Caveats

One corollary of the congregational form of church government is that each local church is autonomous, or self-governing. No individual (such as a pope, archbishop, bishop, or any denominational official) or group of individuals (such as a church council—although Acts 16:4 appears to suggest the possibility of otherwise) outside the local church has authority over a local church. For this reason, Baptist churches have tended to be independent/anti-denominational. While still maintaining its autonomy (since it makes the choice), a local church can choose to fellowship with any other church or group of churches it desires. Such interchurch fellowship is found in the New Testament (the Acts 15 “Jerusalem Council”; the offering for the church in Jerusalem: Romans 15:25-26 and 2 Corinthians 8:19).

Another corollary of the congregational form of church government is that there is to be a separation between the church and the state. A key verse in this regard is Matthew 22:21, wherein Christ said, “Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar’s; and unto God the things that are God’s.”

The Baptist distinctive of the priesthood of the believer, the fact that each believer has direct access to God, is sometimes used to support a purely democratic form of church government. However, equal access to God does not necessarily demand equal authority in the church (Ryrie, p. 409).

What the Bible Says About the Church

Lesson 10: Church Membership

Earlier in this study (in footnote 4), we pointed out the unfortunate reality that there are some who are part of the invisible church (the body of Christ) who are not also part of the visible church (the local church).¹⁰⁰ We also pointed out that this is not a biblical phenomenon. Another unfortunate reality is that some who are part of the visible church have not committed themselves to the local church they attend by uniting with that church in membership. This, too, is not a biblical phenomenon. Does the Bible require church membership? What are the requirements for church membership? How are members received into a local church? How are members released from a local church? What are the responsibilities of church members? This lesson will attempt to answer these five questions.

The Requirement of Church Membership

“Show me a verse!” While it is true that there is no one verse in the Bible that *explicitly* mandates church membership, this fact does not de facto settle the issue. There is good reason why church membership is not directly addressed in Scripture. The New Testament Epistles, which are especially foundational in determining church polity, are occasional, that is, their writing was occasioned by a specific circumstance or set of circumstances that prompted each writer to write what he wrote. None of the New Testament writers addressed the issue of whether or not one should become a member of a church because it was never an issue in the early church! Alva McClain (quoted in McCune, *A Systematic Theology*, 3:225) states in this regard: “The necessity of membership in the local church is never questioned in the New Testament. It is taken for granted. Had we asked the believers of the Apostolic period whether it was essential to join a church, they would not have known what we were talking about. Every believer became a member of a church. It was involved in the very profession he made in Christ.”¹⁰¹

¹⁰⁰“These days, experts describe America as a nation of ‘believers’ but not ‘belongers’” (Harris, p. 16).

¹⁰¹“In the New Testament there is no such person as a Christian who is not a church member” (Douglas Millar, quoted in Whitney, p. 49). “The concept of a believer who was not a member of a local church is completely foreign to Acts and the Epistles” (Downey, p. 32) and “...Acts and the Epistles assume that *every* believer would join the membership of a local church” (Downey, p. 33; emphasis his). “The New Testament knows of no Christians who are not accountable members of local churches ...” (John

While, for this reason, church membership is not explicitly taught in the New Testament, it is implicitly so:

- Those who were saved were added to the local church in Jerusalem (Acts 2:41, 47¹⁰², and 5:14).
- Not only were believers added to local churches, but some were also subtracted through church discipline. See especially 1 Corinthians 5:12-13, where a clear demarcation is made between “them also that are without” (v. 12) / “them that are without” (v. 13) and “them that are within” (v. 12). Paul commands the Church at Corinth to “put away from among yourselves that wicked person” (v. 13). Mack & Swavely (p. 24) rightly point out that it is essentially impossible to excommunicate someone who is not a member. Church discipline presupposes church membership.
- Following the deaths of Ananias & Sapphira, “of the rest [dared] no man join himself to them [the local church in Jerusalem]” (Acts 5:13). Whitney (p. 46) has pointed out that the Greek verb translated “join” means “to glue or cement together, to unite, to join firmly.”¹⁰³

Why do some refuse to unite in membership with a local church?

Piper). “In the early church, when a person responded to the gospel of Jesus Christ, he was added to the church. There was no question whether he ought to join the local assembly; this was taken for granted” (Thiessen, p. 317). “The New Testament knows of no believer who does not submit himself for baptism and join the local church” (Radmacher, p. 190) and “... [T]he New Testament knows ... of no regenerate person who is not a member of a local church” (Radmacher, p. 342). “It is assumed in the NT that a member of the body of Christ is also a member of a local church. An unbaptized, unaffiliated Christian is not allowed for in the NT” (McCune, p. 76). “... Christians who disdain membership, are aberrations in the history of the Christian Church and are in grievous error” (R. Kent Hughes, *Disciplines of a Godly Man*, p. 153). “People who are not members of a church should be treated like unbelievers, because they are treating themselves as unbelievers” (Jay Adams, quoted in Mack & Swavely, p. 18).

¹⁰²R. B. Kuiper (quoted in Mack & Swavely, p. 20; emphasis his) says in regards to Acts 2:47: “Not only does the Lord Christ require of those who are saved that they unite with the church; He Himself joins them to the church. And the reference is unmistakably to the *visible* church.”

¹⁰³BAGD (p. 441), the leading Greek “lexicon” (≈ dictionary) defines the verb: “associate with on intimate terms, join” (BAGD is an acronym for the men who produced this lexicon: Bauer, Arndt, Gingrich, and Danker). Another leading Greek lexicon, *The New Thayer’s Greek-English Lexicon* (p. 353), defines the verb: “to join one’s self to one as an associate, keep company with.”

An anti-responsibility attitude. One reason some refuse to unite in membership with a local church may be the increasingly non-committal/irresponsible mindset of the day in which we live. Just as there are those who want the benefits of cohabitation without the commitment and accompanying responsibilities of marriage, so there are those who want all the benefits of local church life without the commitment and accompanying responsibilities of membership.¹⁰⁴ In this regard, Jackson (p. 13) speaks of “church tramps” and Whitney (pp. 52-53) of the “spiritual hitchhiker.”¹⁰⁵

An anti-mutuality and/or anti-authority attitude. Another reason some may refuse to unite in membership with a local church is an unhealthy individualism. In this regard, R. Kent Hughes (*Disciplines of a Godly Man*, p. 152) speaks of “Christian Lone Rangers.” Often associated with this is a rebellious spirit that refuses to be under the authority of anyone or anything.

An anti-accountability attitude. Another possible reason why some refuse to unite in membership with a local church is an unwillingness to be held accountable.¹⁰⁶ By becoming a member of a local church, one places himself under the accountability of that church and subjects himself to its discipline if necessary.

Another reason may be a bad experience at a previous church. However, the fact that someone else did wrong does not release us from the responsibility to do right.

¹⁰⁴“Eric Lane [in his book, *Members of One Another*] says that the believer’s relationship to the church is analogous to a marriage. He likens Christians who refuse church membership to a man and woman who merely declare themselves married and move in together without ever submitting to a legal marriage ceremony” (Mack & Swavely, p. 30).

¹⁰⁵R. Kent Hughes (in his book, *Disciplines of a Godly Man*, pp. 151-152) draws the same analogy: “Church attendance is infected with a malaise of conditional loyalty which has produced an army of ecclesiastical hitchhikers. The hitchhiker’s thumb says, ‘You buy the car, pay for repairs and upkeep and insurance, fill the car with gas—and I’ll ride with you. But if you have an accident, you are on your own! And I’ll probably sue.’ So it is with the credo of so many of today’s church attenders: ‘You go to the meetings and serve on the boards and committees, you grapple with the issues and do the work of the church and pay the bills—and I’ll come along for the ride. But if things do not suit me, I’ll criticize and complain and probably bail out—my thumb is always out for a better ride.’”

¹⁰⁶“... [An] unwillingness to join a local church is tantamount to saying we are not interested in divine accountability in our lives” (Mack & Swavely, p. 29).

The Requirements for Church Membership

Who is eligible for admission into the membership of a local church? The Bible gives two initial requirements and one requirement that is both initial and ongoing:

1. Salvation

One of the “Baptist distinctives” is belief in a saved or regenerate church membership. No one is to be admitted as a member unless first saved (thus, infant members are excluded). Biblical support for this belief is found in Acts 2:41 (salvation ⇒ baptism ⇒ church membership), 47 (“the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved”), and 5:14 (“And believers were the more added to the Lord, multitudes both of men and women”).

2. Baptism

That baptism is a prerequisite for church membership is also seen in Acts 2:41 (salvation ⇒ baptism ⇒ church membership). It is also seen in a theological sense. Just as Spirit baptism places one into the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:13), so water baptism places one into the local church.¹⁰⁷ According to Ryrie (p. 405), “the New Testament knows nothing of unbaptized church members.”

3. Orderly Walk

In order for one to be received into the membership of a local church and in order for one to retain such membership, he must live in a manner befitting a Christian. One not so living should not be received into membership unless such conduct is repented of (confessed and forsaken)¹⁰⁸. Members who are not so living and who refuse to repent of

¹⁰⁷“Spirit baptism places one into the body of Christ (1 Cor 12:13); water baptism places one into the membership of the local church. Spirit baptism places one into the organism; water baptism admits one into the organization” (McCune, *Systematic Theology 3*, p. 133).

¹⁰⁸“Persons who knowingly and publicly are engaged in sins for which church discipline is necessary (e.g., 1 Cor 5:9-13) are not to be admitted into the membership of the church in the first place” (McCune, *A Systematic Theology*, 3:228). “Since there are legitimate grounds for exclusion from membership, it naturally follows no one whose conduct or doctrinal stance is such that a church would be obliged to exclude him is

such conduct, should be excommunicated from membership (Matthew 18:15-17 and 1 Corinthians 5; cf. the following lesson on church discipline).

The Reception of Members

There are basically four ways by which a local church may receive one into its membership:

1. By baptism. New converts, as well as “seasoned saints” who have not been truly baptized (i.e., baptized by immersion subsequent to conversion) are baptized into membership.
2. By letter. Those already saved and baptized who desire to transfer their membership from a church of like faith and practice are received into the membership of the new church, contingent upon the reception of a letter of transfer from the previous church testifying that the individual is a member in good standing.¹⁰⁹
3. By experience. Those already saved and baptized who desire to transfer their membership from a church that is not of like faith and practice, or who for whatever reason are unable to secure a letter of transfer from their previous church, are received into membership based upon their testimony of Christian experience.
4. By restoration. Those who have been previously excommunicated through the church discipline process and have subsequently repented are officially received into membership again (2 Corinthians 2:6-8).

The Release of Members

One may be released from membership in a local church one of four ways:

1. By death
2. By transfer. Believers should transfer their membership very reluctantly.¹¹⁰ When providentially transplanted to a new area, believers

eligible for admission into membership” (Snoeberger, p. 16).

¹⁰⁹While not a letter of transfer per se, 2 Corinthians 3:1 speaks of “epistles [letters] of commendation” (cf. Acts 18:27 and Romans 16:1-2).

¹¹⁰“How many Christian families are so committed to the teaching, relationships,

should transfer their membership as soon as they reasonably can.

3. By discipline
4. By inactivity. An unfortunate reality, there are some members who, contrary to Hebrews 10:25, forsake assembling together. After such a period of forsaking, such members may be moved to “inactive” status (still a member, but unable to vote, etc.), dropped from the membership rolls, or disciplined. Polity regarding this situation varies from church to church.

Some Responsibilities of Members

While it is true that “membership has its privileges,” it is also true that membership has its responsibilities. Some of these responsibilities include the following:

1. Attending (Hebrews 10:25). Unless providentially hindered, a church member should attend all the regularly scheduled services of his church. The only church he should regularly attend is his own. Only rarely should he attend another church while his church is in session. No “church hopping.”¹¹¹
2. Giving (1 Corinthians 16:2). One should give regularly, significantly, cheerfully (2 Corinthians 9:7), and primarily (exclusively?) to the local church of which he is a member. One should not seek to bypass the local church by directly financing Christian individuals (missionaries, etc.) or groups (parachurch organizations, etc.) that his local church would not (does not?) support. One should certainly not do so to the detriment of his local church (see footnote 113). Giving should be done to and through the local church.
3. Serving (1 Peter 4:10). God has equipped every New Testament believer

fellowship, and ministry of their local church that they would refuse a promotion or a job offer because it would take them away from the body of Christ to which they are committed? Most Christian families would jump at the job and hope that they would be able to find a ‘good church’ where they go” (Paul David Tripp, *Age of Opportunity: A Biblical Guide to Parenting Teens*, p. 156).

¹¹¹R. Kent Hughes (*Disciplines of a Godly Man*, p. 152) speaks of a “McChristian” mentality that “picks and chooses here and there to fill one’s ecclesiastical shopping list. There are hitchhikers who attend one church for the preaching, send their children to a second church for its dynamic youth program, and go to a third church’s small group.”

("every man") to serve in the local church ("one to another") by means of spiritual gifts ("the gift").¹¹² Thus, every member of a local church should be involved in the work of the ministry ("even so minister"). No "pew potatoes." One should avoid devoting man-hours that should be devoted to one's local church to a parachurch organization.¹¹³

¹¹² "A spiritual gift is to be exercised within the ministry and outreach of the local church. Since the only legitimate, visible, and organized expression of the Body Church is in local churches, the function and exercise of the spiritual gifts is in that sphere. While the larger Body may benefit from the gifts, i.e., more than the members of the local church of which the believer is a member, the exercise of spiritual gifts, as in all spiritual endeavors in this dispensation, is to be under the aegis of the local church" (Rolland McCune, Systematic Theology II class notes, p. 214).

¹¹³ Speaking of parachurch organizations, Radmacher (p. 188) writes: "Furthermore, the support of these organizations interferes with the necessary financial backing for the local church, necessitates valuable time which should be spent in Christian service through the local church, and destroys a proper loyalty to the local church."

What the Bible Says About the Church

Lesson 11: Church Discipline

According to Jackson (p. 75), “one of the most neglected doctrines of the Word of God is church discipline.” Lest this study on what the Bible says about the church be guilty of such neglect, we conclude by examining the doctrine of church discipline.

Not only has the doctrine of church discipline suffered neglect, but so also has its practice. Churches that practice church discipline are becoming fewer and farther between.¹¹⁴ Fear of being labeled unloving, of losing members (and income), and of causing a church split may be some of the reasons for such reluctance.¹¹⁵ The potential for such unintended consequences notwithstanding, church discipline must be practiced for the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ and the good of the local church.

Purposes for Church Discipline

Following are some of the purposes for church discipline:

1. To keep a local church pure (1 Corinthians 5:6-7¹¹⁶; cf. Ephesians 1:4, 5:26-27, Colossians 1:21-22, and Hebrews 12:10-11)

¹¹⁴ While church discipline is seen as optional by many churches today, this has not been the case historically. The Reformers identified 3 marks of a true church, with the 3rd being the practice of church discipline (the other two being the preaching of the gospel and the observance of the ordinances).

¹¹⁵ In response to such reasoning, the following points can be made: 1) Our fear of disobeying God by neglecting church discipline should far outweigh our fear of the consequences that might come as a result of the wrong response of others to our obedience (Proverbs 29:25); 2) Far from being unloving, church discipline is an expression of love (Hebrews 12:6; cf. Proverbs 13:24); 3) If you fear losing members if you practice church discipline, in a sense you’ve already lost them; and 4) If there are those in your congregation who would forsake the fellowship over the proper practice of church discipline, then your church is already split.

¹¹⁶ See also Hebrews 12:15 in this regard.

Church discipline is analogous to removing a physical disease from the body through operation. Church discipline may be a means of removing unbelievers from the membership of a local church.¹¹⁷

2. To restore the sinner (Matthew 18:15, 2 Corinthians 2:6-8, Galatians 6:1¹¹⁸, and James 5:19-20)

Church discipline is not punitive, but remedial in nature.¹¹⁹ It is analogous to the discipline of a child. When a true believer falls into sin, the church discipline process is designed to put him back on the path of perseverance, thus preventing him from apostatizing (see 1 Corinthians 11:32; cf. 1 Corinthians 5:5b and possibly¹²⁰ James 5:20).

3. To restrain others from sinning (1 Timothy 5:20; cf. Ecclesiastes 8:11)

Not only is church discipline a means of helping the one being disciplined (if a true believer) to persevere in the faith, but also a means of helping each individual in the congregation to so persevere.

¹¹⁷This is not to suggest that everyone who is excommunicated from the membership of a local church by church discipline is an unbeliever (the man excommunicated from the local church in Corinth was a believer; compare 1 Corinthians 5 with 2 Corinthians 2:6-8). However, based on Matthew 18:17, an excommunicated individual is to be viewed as an unbeliever (“let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican”).

¹¹⁸The Greek verb translated “restore” in Galatians 6:1 is used in Matthew 4:21 to describe the mending of fishing nets. Its noun form was used to describe the setting of a broken bone (BAGD, p. 418). BAGD is an acronym for the leading Greek lexicon (≈ dictionary), the work of men named Bauer, Arndt, Gingrich, and Danker.

¹¹⁹“Many people fail to make a clear distinction between punishment and discipline, and there is a very significant difference between these two concepts. Punishment is designed to execute retribution for a wrong done. Discipline, on the other hand, is to encourage the restoration of one involved in wrongdoing. Punishment is designed primarily to avenge a wrong and assert justice. Discipline is designed primarily as a corrective for the one who has failed to live according to the standards of the church and/or society” (Carl Laney, quoted in House, p. 126).

¹²⁰I say “possibly” because there is some question as to what “save a soul from death” in James 5:20 means. According to some, it means save from eternal death (by preventing the backslidden believer from ultimately apostatizing). According to others, it means save from a premature physical death due to divine discipline (cf. 1 Corinthians 5:5a and 11:30). A similar debate occurs with 1 John 5:16’s “sin unto death.”

The Process of Church Discipline

Matthew 18:15-17 gives a general, four-step process¹²¹ for church discipline. Mack & Swavely (p. 133) describe the church discipline process as “confrontation that increases to whatever level is necessary to bring about change.” The following labels are taken from chart 81 on page 126 of House (included at the end of this lesson):

1. Private reproof—“Moreover if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother” (Matthew 18:15)
2. Private conference—“But if he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more, that in THE MOUTH OF TWO OR THREE WITNESSES EVERY WORD MAY BE ESTABLISHED” (Matthew 18:16; cf. Deuteronomy 19:15 and 1 Timothy 5:19)¹²²
3. Public announcement—“And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church” (Matthew 18:17a; cf. 1 Timothy 5:20)
4. Public exclusion (and subsequent disassociation¹²³)—“but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican” (Matthew 18:17b; cf. Romans 16:17, 1 Corinthians 5:4-5, 11-13, 2 Corinthians 2:6, 2 Thessalonians 3:6, and 14)

The Proper Perspective Regarding Church Discipline

Though church discipline should be pursued with uncompromising commitment

¹²¹One might add as the true first step of church discipline: self-discipline.

¹²²There is some debate regarding the two or three witnesses of verse 16. Must they be actual witnesses to the particular sin that set the church discipline process in motion (so McCune, *A Systematic Theology*, 3:295)? Or do they become witnesses (for the next step) by investigating the allegation and being part of the private conference (step 2 above)? In the opinion of this writer, the second is preferable.

¹²³In regards to such disassociation, Mack & Swavely (p. 153) advise: “Stop socializing with them in any way that is not required by family or employment responsibilities.” Any social (i.e., non-commercial, non-familial) contact with the offender should be solely for the purpose of calling him or her to repentance.

to the command of Christ, the spirit in which it is pursued should be one of reluctance, regret, humility, and love. The key text in this regard is Galatians 6:1, which states: “Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness; considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted.” See also 2 Corinthians 2:4, 2 Thessalonians 3:15, and Hebrews 12:6-7.

At whatever point in the church discipline process the offender repents, he is to be forgiven (Luke 17:3-4; cf. Christ’s teaching on forgiveness in Matthew 18:21-35 following his teaching on church discipline in Matthew 18:15-20), the process is to be discontinued (Matthew 18:15), and he is to be restored to full fellowship (2 Corinthians 2:6-8).¹²⁴ This does not imply, however, that there will be no lingering consequences. While restoration to fellowship is to be granted, restoration (if possible) to previous levels of leadership, ministry, etc. in the local church may take a considerable amount of time, depending on the individual circumstances of the case.

Grounds for Church Discipline

The Scriptures identify the following offenses as grounds for church discipline:

1. Doctrinal deviation (1 Timothy 1:19-20, 6:3-5, 2 John 9-11, Revelation 2:14-16, and 20)
2. Divisiveness/dissension (Romans 16:17 and Titus 3:10; cf. Proverbs 6:19b)

According to McCune (*A Systematic Theology*, 3:293), this would include “failure to adhere to the church covenant, constant agitation of the church over some issue (including a false doctrine¹²⁵), failure to abide by the decision of the local body on some matter, and the like.”

3. Disorderly conduct (1 Corinthians 5 and 2 Thessalonians 3:6-15)

In 1 Corinthians 5, the sin that warranted church discipline was immorality (specifically, incest). Besides immorality, 1 Corinthians 5:11 identifies the sins of covetousness, idolatry, railing (NIV: slandering), drunkenness, and extortion (cf. 1 Corinthians 6:9-10) as also being grounds for church

¹²⁴Where excommunication has taken place, the individual will have to be formally received back into the membership of the church by congregational vote.

¹²⁵See Titus 3:10, where the Greek word, *hairetikos* is translated “heretick” by the KJV and “factious” by the NASB.

discipline.

In 2 Thessalonians 3, the sin that warranted church discipline was laziness/a refusal to work. According to 2 Thessalonians 3:6 and 14, church discipline was warranted for this offense because it violated apostolic teaching. The principle this passage establishes is that any offense that violates apostolic teaching (not just the specific sin at issue, laziness/refusal to work) is grounds for church discipline.

The foregoing is probably not an exhaustive list.¹²⁶ Mack & Swavely (p. 137) broaden the scope of church discipline to include “any action that is forbidden in Scripture and cannot be overlooked [Prov 19:11].” According to Saucy (pp. 120-121): “The Scripture does not explicitly state the criterion by which an offense is worthy of discipline. It would appear from the instances mentioned that discipline concerns those who clearly have a harmful effect upon the congregation in one way or another.” What sins meet such criteria? In the final analysis, this is a judgment call the leadership of each church must make in dependence upon the Word of God and the leading of the Holy Spirit.¹²⁷

A final note: Churches should uphold one another’s discipline.¹²⁸ Saucy (p. 122) states in this regard: “The act of the congregation when rightly taken in disciplining one of its members is in reality the act of the church at large represented in a particular locality. The discipline of one church should therefore be respected by other churches. For, in the final analysis, all true disciplinary action is the exercise of authority by the Lord of the church” (see Matthew 18:18-

¹²⁶Grudem (p. 896) states in this regard: “... [T]here does not seem to be any explicit limitation specified for the kinds of sin that should be subject to church discipline. The examples of sins subject to church discipline in the New Testament are extremely diverse”

¹²⁷Snoeberger (pp. 22-23) makes the point that in previous centuries Baptists in America disciplined not only for sins of commission, but also for sins of omission. “Chief among these were the neglect of family devotions, unfaithful church attendance and especially absence from the celebration of the Lord’s Supper” (see footnote 84). He goes on to cite the research a man by the name of Greg Willis did for his doctoral dissertation at Southern Baptist Seminary. Willis examined 2,732 Baptist association records in America for the years 1781-1860 and found that, during this period, 1.45% of members were excluded annually, most for neglect of duty. In Georgia alone, 40,000-50,000 members were excluded during this period. Snoeberger concludes by stating: “Remarkably, the Baptist denomination in America experienced a greater percentage of growth during these years than at any other time in its history.”

¹²⁸“Can you imagine the individual in Corinth being excluded from the assembly and saying, ‘This isn’t a problem ... I’ll just ride my donkey over to the church in Ephesus ... they’ll let me in over there.’ Not hardly” (Stephen Davey, “Church Discipline & Restoration,” p. 25).

20 and 1 Corinthians 5:4).