

**The Church You Can Read about in the Bible
The Divine Purposes for the Local Church**

Intro: In our previous lesson we've looked at the various terms God used to describe the church and then raised two key questions: 1) What is the authority of the church? 2) How do the Scriptures teach? All these lessons lay the groundwork for a discussion of the form a church of Christ should take to please God.

The NT speaks of the church mostly in two senses: 1) in the universal sense, i.e. as all the saved living and dead who are in Christ; 2) in the local sense, i.e. the organized body of believers in a particular place.

Much of the NT addresses the individual Christian as a member of the universal church, telling him how to live in his various relationships with God and his fellowman. However we have seen from our earlier lessons that, wherever the gospel was preached, local churches were formed. So today we ask the question, "For what purposes did God form the local church?"

By looking at Biblical statements, commands, and examples in the NT, we can get a clearer picture of what was in God's mind; and what was instituted through His apostles.

The local church was formed to give visibility to God's redemptive purposes (in three ways).

The local church declares God's glory in the accomplishment of His redemptive plan.

The church is the result of the plan of God that began in eternity and was accomplished in the world through Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit (Eph. 3:12). Paul says that the church is a display of the "*manifold wisdom of God*" (Eph. 3:10).

The local church through its public meetings and work reveals openly the profound impact of the love of God in Christ upon men.

It identifies God's redeemed people to the world.

Since the local church is the visible face of the body of Christ, it identifies in any given community who the people of God are.

And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved. (Acts 2:47)

Likewise the local church as a separate organization implicitly declares the judgment of God upon the world and indicates their need for salvation (1 Cor. 5:12).

Consequently assembling as a church reminds God's people of their identity in Christ and their separation from the world.

The disciple's membership in a local church and his constant assembling with them is a reminder of his unique relationship with God and to his fellow-believers.

Since therefore, brethren, we have confidence to enter the holy place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way which He inaugurated for us through the veil, that is, His flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful; and let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another; and all the more, as you see the day drawing near. (Hebrews 10:19-25)

To be a part of the local church is to be reminded that we belong to God (1 Cor. 1:1; Rom. 16:16). Thus when Paul wrote to the disciples at Corinth he identified them as:

...to the church of God which is at Corinth, to those who have been sanctified in Christ Jesus, saints by calling, with all who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, their Lord and ours: (1 Corinthians 1:2)

The local church was formed to bring together God's people for corporate worship.

The local churches formed by the apostles were instructed to come together for the praise and glory of God.

The NT church is the typological fulfillment of the OT tabernacle with its priesthood and sacrifices. When the church comes together for worship, it constitutes a “*spiritual priesthood offering up spiritual sacrifices to God*” (1 Pet. 2:5).

The local church in assembled worship declares the great truths of the gospel about God.

It “*proclaims the excellencies of Him who called us out of darkness into his marvelous light*” (1 Pet. 2:9).

The local church was formed to provide ongoing instruction to God’s people.

God redemptive work in His people continues through the ongoing work of teaching in the church’s assemblies.

As the house of God “*it is the pillar and ground of the truth*” (1 Tim. 3:15).

A glimpse into the worship gathering of the church at Troas includes a sermon to the church by Paul (Ac. 20:7).

One purpose of the Corinthian assembly was to provide the occasion for edification of the saints (1 Cor. 14:26).

What is the outcome then, brethren? When you assemble, each one has a psalm, has a teaching, has a revelation, has a tongue, has an interpretation. Let all things be done for edification. (1 Corinthians 14:26)

Through its teaching ministry the local church assists disciples in the spiritual growth God seeks.

And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ; until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fulness of Christ. (Ephesians 4:11-13)

The local church was formed to bring accountability to those who profess to be disciples.

One of the works of the local church is not only to teach the truth to disciples, but to hold them accountable for their actions when they are disobedient to the Lord.

Jesus instituted a procedure by which a personal conflict might be corrected by the church if personal efforts fail (Mt. 18:15-17).

And if he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax-gatherer. (Matthew 18:16-17)

Paul urged the Corinthians while assembled to “deliver to Satan” a fornicator among them (1 Cor. 5).

Likewise the Thessalonians were instructed to withdraw themselves from every brother that walked disorderly (2 Thes. 3:6).

Thus, the local church provides a means by which disciples may be encouraged to live out their profession of faith.

The local church was formed to provide a means by which God’s people may work together.

The local church through its leadership and treasury provides a means by which disciples can work as one. In the NT we can see examples of this kind of joint effort:

The disciples at Philippi joined together to provide support to those who preached the gospel like Paul (Phil. 4:15-19).

And you yourselves also know, Philippians, that at the first preaching of the gospel, after I departed from Macedonia, no church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving but you alone; for even in Thessalonica you sent a gift more than once for my needs. Not that I seek the gift itself, but I seek for the profit which increases to your account. But I have received everything in full, and have an abundance; I am amply supplied, having received from Epaphroditus what you have sent, a fragrant aroma, an acceptable sacrifice, well-pleasing to God. And my God shall supply all your needs according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 4:15-19)

Disciples joined together to assist fellow-Christians in times of need (1 Cor. 16:1-2).

Now concerning the collection for the saints, as I directed the churches of Galatia, so do you also. On the first day of every week let each one of you put aside and save, as he may prosper, that no collections be made when I come. (1 Corinthians 16:1-2)

This kind of joint activity would require a collection of funds and oversight of those funds.

When the Gentile church sought to help the needy saints in Jerusalem Paul gave order for a weekly collection to be made when the churches assembled (1 Cor. 16:1-2).

These contributions were entrusted to the elders of the church to oversee their distribution to the needy saints (cf. Ac. 11:27-30).

Conclusion: Today more and more people feel that it is acceptable to express faith without joining the local church and carrying out these responsibilities with other Christians. This is contrary to the purpose of God. He knew that His people would need the opportunity to publicly express their faith, to be instructed, to be held accountable, to experience the fellowship of worship and working together. What the local church provides is invaluable to the believer.