



The Local Church



Lesson Question: Who is with me on my faith journey?

Main Idea: The local church is a family of believers, united under the authority of Jesus, to carry out His purpose on Earth.

Key Terms

Local Church: Local body of believers united in mission and purpose for God’s glory.

Membership: A commitment to the body of Christ, expressed through a local body.

Baptism: A public demonstration of personal union with Jesus through water immersion.

Communion: A sacrament done in remembrance of Jesus’ death on the cross.

Spiritual Gift: A God-given ability to be used in the local church for God’s glory.

The Local Church

Americans are known for our rugged individualism. As a result, we often fail to ascribe to any corporate or collective identity. You might say that our collective identity is that of a rebel. We borrow our revolutionary identity from our forefathers who fought for independence from Great Britain. If we aren’t careful, we might allow that mentality to impact the way we think about our faith.

The trouble is that isolationist Christianity is foreign to the New Testament. From the pages of the gospels to the epics of Acts, Christianity has been practiced in partnership between people of shared purpose united in Christ.

Over the last few decades, it has become very popular to say, “The church is not the building.” This is true: a church is made up of people, not bricks, but tragically, this mentality has morphed into an excuse to ignore the gathering while claiming full participation in all that Christ has for His people. This is a plague. God has designed the church to gather in His name, for partnership as a family seeking His purpose and conducting His mission

Question 1:

Why is committed attendance and partnership in the local church important?

A New Family

Bible Verses

Acts 1:8, Matthew 16:18, Acts 2:42-47

When we think of church simply in terms of something to attend, we fail to capture the fullness of what God intended His church to be. The church is not simply something we attend. The church is a family. It is a family united under the authority of Jesus and in partnership with one another to bear one another's burdens and advance the kingdom of God. A family is not something we attend; a family is something that we belong to. The local church is an expression of Christ's vision for the church in a specific place, and as such, a local church commits to carrying out Christ's purpose locally as a part of a global church desiring to see the expansion of the gospel and the kingdom of God. In Acts 1:8, Jesus offers His vision for His church, "And you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the Earth" (Acts 1:8, English Standard Version). Therein lies the vision, a Holy Spirit-inspired family of witnesses, dedicated to advancing the gospel and expanding the kingdom through participation and partnership in a local church body, wherever they are.

Acts 2 may well mark the beginning point of the local church. Jews met regularly for worship in a synagogue, but this was different. Jesus told Peter in Matthew 16:18 that He was building a church based on the testimony that Jesus Christ is the messiah and the Son of God. He did not say He was upgrading the synagogue, He said He was building a new operation called the Church. In Acts 2:42-47, the foundations of the church are revealed. They were devoted to the apostle's teaching, devoted to fellowship and group prayer. They sold possessions to meet needs and bore one another's burdens in addition to regular meetings in the temple and in homes to praise God. These events are not something that can be done in isolation. It is impossible to devote yourself to fellowship in isolation. It is difficult to meet the needs of others in isolation, and only now, thanks to modern technology, can you donate to help someone in need without leaving your couch. The church was designed to be a family devoted to God's word, fellowship, and prayer, and bearing one another's burdens while regularly gathering together to exalt Christ. There is truly no other way to spin the founding of the church according to the precedent established early in the New Testament.

The Local Church as modeled in Acts 2:42-47

1. Devoted to God's Word
2. Devoted to fellowship
3. Devoted to prayer
4. Bearing one another's burdens
5. Meeting regularly
6. Conducting the Sacraments

A New Family

Bible Verse

1 Peter 5:2, Hebrews 13:17

Membership Matters

If you spend enough time around a church service, you will likely hear some discussion on church membership. Church membership is very important. You will not find a Bible verse that explicitly says, “Thou shalt become a member of a church,” but before you begin to doubt its importance, you must remember the Bible also does not explicitly mention the Trinity. However, the tri-unity of God is orthodox doctrine informed by all of Scripture and central to the way we think about God the Father, Jesus the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Just the same, the importance of membership is informed by all of Scripture. First of all, sprinkled throughout the letters to the churches are over 50 instructions for caring for “one another” as well as some instructions for discipline and disfellowship on rare occasions. These tools for encouragement and discipline imply a local body to which membership has been made. Likewise, Peter calls on pastors to “shepherd the flock of God among them” (1 Peter 5:2), and Scripture says that they will be given an account for the way they shepherded their flock (Hebrews 13:17). This implies a specific fold under the care of the pastor.

Membership also serves to safeguard our

hearts against consumerism. As humans, we are tempted to commit to something only as long as it benefits us. Church membership calls us to something more. It doesn’t ask “How is this church serving me?” instead it asks “How can I serve Christ through this body?” Membership has become so cheap. It feels like a declaration that says, “I will be at this church until I decide to go somewhere else.” It should be a declaration that says, “I believe God is calling me to unite with this body for His glory, and you can count on me be here to serve His purpose for my life.”

Question 2:

What are the essential marks of a biblical church as presented in Acts 2:42-47?

Question 3:

Why is Church Membership important?

A New Family

Bible Verses

Matthew 28:19-20, Romans 6:3-4, Luke 22:19-20, 1 Corinthians 11:22-26, Revelation 19:6-9

The local church is also tasked with conducting the sacraments. The sacraments are specific practices that Jesus called His church to keep and observe. They are distinct in function and frequency. These sacraments are called Baptism and Communion. Communion may also be called the Lord's Supper or the Lord's Table. Baptism is a one-time event, and communion is recurring with varying frequency, typically depending on denominational tradition. There is no biblical command for frequency.

Baptism

Baptism is an outward expression of inward change commanded by Jesus in the Great Commission (Matthew 28:19-20). It involves immersion in water. In Greek, *Baptizo* describes submersion, and this is the pattern of every New Testament baptism. This immersion is done as a public identification with the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. As Christians enter and leave the water, it is a picture of Jesus' burial and resurrection (Romans 6:3-4). Baptism is done after salvation as an outward symbol of inward change. It is the first act of obedience by the believer because it is a command of Jesus. Baptism does not save, but all Christians should be baptized.

Communion

Communion is a recurring sacrament commanded by Jesus during His last supper with His disciples (Luke 22:19-20). Like Baptism, Communion is meant to be observed by those who have been saved. Communion involves breaking bread and consuming drink in remembrance of Jesus' body that was broken (like the bread) and blood that was spilled (like the drink). As noted, this command is recurring with an unspecified frequency. The only command is that as often as it is done, it is done in remembrance of Jesus (1 Corinthians 11:22-26). It is a time of unity for the church in reflection of the gospel and anticipation of the marriage supper of the Lamb to come after His return (Revelation 19:6-9)

Question 5:

What are the sacraments? How often are they observed?

Question 6:

Why does Baptism follow salvation?

A New Purpose

Bible Verse

1 Corinthians 12:12

Spiritual Gifts

In the last section on spiritual disciplines, we discussed service as an important spiritual discipline. It is so important because God has ordained certain needs to be fulfilled by His church. To best meet these needs, God has given His people special spiritual gifts.

Spiritual gifts are not merely talents or skills. Unbelievers have talents and skills. Spiritual gifts are supernatural talents given to people by God to accomplish His purpose through them. It is the responsibility of the believer to seek out their spiritual gifting (through the power of the Holy Spirit and prayer, of course), and use it in the church for the glory of God. There are several unique giftings, and through their application, Paul's body metaphor

comes to life. Paul wrote to the church at Corinth, "For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ" (1 Corinthians 12:12). Our body parts all work together to fulfill the commands of the head. Likewise, the church is made up of many members with unique giftings to serve the purposes of Jesus.

The Bible presents several unique spiritual gifts (see figure 1). These are given to the church for the edification of the saints, advancement of the gospel, and the work of the ministry. Within this collection of gifts is everything necessary for God through the power of the Holy Spirit to work through you in His church. There are several tests online and in print to help guide you in identifying your unique spiritual gifting. What you must decide is whether or not you will put in the work to discover your spiritual gift and use it.

Figure 1

List of Spiritual Gifts*

By Passage

Romans 12:6-13

Prophecy
Ministry (Service)
Teaching
Exhortation
Giving
Leadership/Administration
Mercy
Love
Hospitality

1 Corinthians 12-13

Wisdom
Knowledge
Faith
Prophecy
Discernment
Teaching
Ministry
Governing
(Administration)
Giving

Ephesians 4:11

Evangelism
Shepherding
Teaching

1 Peter 4:8-11

Love
Hospitality
Prophecy
Ministry

*Charismatic Gifts Not Listed

A New Purpose

Once you know your unique spiritual gift, it is time to use it for God's glory in the church. You were literally designed for this. God gifted you in this special way to serve His purpose. Your mind is designed to seek out meaning and purpose, and you will do so in many areas of your life, but your purpose is to bring glory to God (Isaiah 43:7), and you will fulfill that by your service to the church and the application of your spiritual gifting to Christ's purpose and mission.

How can I serve the church?

The modern church has become very good at creating ministry opportunities; however, we are often very poor at communicating them. Almost every church has created ministries aimed at engaging people at various stages of life (babies, kids, youth, college, adults, senior adults, etc.). These unique ministries create opportunities to volunteer and serve. Don't be afraid to ask; they probably need you.

Almost every church has some form of discipleship ministry that extends beyond the pulpit ministry on Sunday mornings. This may come in the form of Sunday School or Small groups. Maybe both!. If you find yourself gifted to teach, these would be a great fit.

Chances are, they probably need you. There are always other church members in need of help, some function that is being planned, people who need to hear the gospel, or struggling media teams.

Speaking of struggling media teams, it may be that God is calling you to do something novel. Churches often struggle to keep their websites and social media pages updated. You may have a unique gift in these areas and a deep desire to serve, leaving you a great opportunity to help your church engage in regular outreach. As always, the most important question is really not, "How can I serve?" It is "Will I serve?" If you serve Jesus, you will be blessed. Remember, we are never more like Jesus than when we are serving.

Question 7:

What is your spiritual gift? How could you use it?

Question 8:

How do our spiritual gifts work together to serve Jesus' purpose?
