

Definition of the Local Church

The local church is a visible assembly of regenerate believers in Jesus Christ joined in a covenant union that expresses similar beliefs, values, and convictions. The covenant union identifies the order of authority (elders, deacons, and congregational relationship), teaching of the Word, worship (including baptism and communion), and disciplines that are to be observed by the community under the headship of Christ, in honor and service to him and to one another. Members are expected to exercise gifts given by the Holy Spirit for mutual service while offering hope to the lost through evangelistic and mercy ministries.

The Doctrine of Baptism

In the Old and New Testaments there are signs employed to display and remind the parties of covenantal commitments. The covenantal sign established by God for the Israelites, as a national group, was circumcision. In the New Covenant, which Jesus inaugurated in his crucifixion (Luke 22:20; 2 Corinthians 3:7-18), the ordinance of believer's baptism is employed because of Jesus' own baptism. Romans 6:3-6, a key passage on baptism, teaches that one's union with Christ happens through faith in the death and resurrection of Christ and is symbolized by the act of baptism. Because baptism indicates identity with Christ it is only to be applied to the community of believers in covenant with Jesus Christ through regeneration. Therefore, baptism is not to be administered to infants. Instead, baptism is reserved for those who have made a conscious profession of their faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord.

Baptism also depicts the newness of life which the believer has received from Christ through his resurrection power. The power of Christ provides purification for one who has been regenerated, repented of their sin, and professed faith in Christ for his atoning work. Baptism is the symbol of the cleansing work done for the believer through the work of Christ and the Holy Spirit. The mode of immersion depicts two things: the death/burial of Christ and his resurrection. The picture of unity with Christ, the death of the old man, new life in Christ, and the future hope of glorification is symbolized by immersion into and exit from water.

Baptism is also a testimonial action that depicts a commitment to live according to the status of one who is a coheir with Christ. As a testimonial, the practice of baptism should occur within the life of a local church. Baptism confirms for the regenerate their union with Christ and will inaugurate a healthy incorporation into the membership of the local church, which reflects the priority for the church of disciple-making as emphasized in Matthew 28.

The Lord's Supper

In Luke 22:19 Jesus presented the elements of the bread and the wine during the Passover meal, the “last supper,” with his disciples, saying, “Do this in remembrance of me.” Jesus transformed the prominent elements of the Old Testament life of Israel, which gave assurance of God’s provision in the past, present, and future by way of remembrance. Furthermore, Jesus taught a new meaning to the elements, because he is the fulfillment of the New Covenant between God and those of faith. The elements originally represented the covenant with Israel. Jesus taught that the elements are from that point forward representative of the New Covenant.

The New Covenant is established by Jesus through his life, death, and resurrection. The elements of the Last Supper represent the specific sacrifice of Jesus. He became the mediator by presenting his body to be broken and his blood to be shed making atonement for the sins of his people. The bread is a symbolic reminder of the suffering that Christ would experience according to prophecies and that which he actually experienced on the cross. The wine represents his blood, the sacrificial element presented by the high priest to atone for the sins of the people. As symbols, both the bread and the wine remind us that Christ is present by faith, not by sight. Furthermore, the elements remind us that we need Christ to keep us alive spiritually just as we need food and drink to keep us alive physically.

The Lord’s Supper should be taken consistently in the life of the church. In order to prevent a lack of appreciation there should be teaching associated with the meal to emphasize the joy of one’s salvation, the sufficiency of the atonement, and provision of grace in Christ. The presentation of the elements should be done so as to carefully reflect the original meaning established by Jesus. In the modern era, it is reasonable for juice to be utilized to protect underage participants and some who may struggle with the use of wine containing alcohol.

Church Discipline

In the first letter to the church at Corinth Paul addresses several issues in the young church. Unfortunately, the church had failed to exercise church discipline that would have contributed to spiritually healthy individuals and a healthier corporate life. Thus, Paul exhorted the church to employ a process of church discipline. Fortunately, the church implemented discipline and the sinful brother, who was indicted by Paul, repented and restoration was then pursued according to the testimony of Second Corinthians. The church at Corinth is an encouraging example of successful implementation of church discipline and that which had been originally instructed by Jesus.

In Matthew 16:18-19 and Matthew 18:18-20, Jesus taught his disciples about the importance of “keys of the kingdom of heaven” and “binding and loosing.” The keys are the instruments of discipline that are to be exercised in love toward a sinner so that by reproof the sinner is encouraged to repent of sin and return to right fellowship with God and the church. There are other passages in the epistles that address the matter of church discipline. Together with those in Matthew, the church is able to develop a sound method for church discipline.

Hebrews 12:6-11 relates love and discipline, while highlighting the benefits of discipline. For example, it says, “For the Lord disciplines the one he loves.” In Hebrews 12:11 the writer explains that discipline seems painful and unpleasant, “but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness.” Discipline is understood as an activity that produces maturity and fruit.

Galatians 6:1 reveals the importance and goal of the gentle restoration of the sinner. In 2 Timothy 3:16-17, Paul instructs that Scripture is to be the guide in matters of discipline and training for righteousness, emphasizing the dual aspects of discipline: correction and formation. By relating these verses to the instructions of Jesus, it is evident that the church is called to

engage with sinners for the purpose of correcting or binding of sin until repentance occurs. When there is repentance there may be a loosing of that sinner to pursue righteousness and peace with the Lord and with the church.

Formative and corrective discipline are to happen in conjunction with one another. Too often the church in the modern era has opted for formative measures only. Certainly, formative discipline offers a path that reduces the need for corrective discipline. However, if formative discipline is to have its full effect, it requires proper implementation of corrective discipline when necessary. The implementation of corrective discipline ought to exhort church members to zealously work out their “own salvation with fear and trembling,” (Philip. 2:12) through formative discipline.

Corrective discipline is often seen as a negative aspect of church life. However, upon careful examination and proper understanding, its value and implementation should be greatly appreciated. In Galatians 6:1-2 the goal of corrective discipline is given. Paul instructs that the sinner who is caught in sin is to be restored in a spirit of gentleness. This also reminds healthy believers to watch themselves, so as to avoid temptation. All of this fulfills the law of Christ.

Paul’s teaching reflects Jesus’ teaching, found in Matthew 18. Jesus begins with instructions on discipline for a personal offense. The steps toward correction begin with a personal meeting between the two individuals. The offended is to approach the offender. The goal is that the offending party would repent, forgiveness be extended, and restoration secured. However, if the sinful offender is not repentant, which may call for more than one attempt by the offended, there should be a witness taken to demonstrate that the offense is not merely the opinion of individual. The method of taking two witnesses should insure an unbiased opinion

toward the offender and the issues. Hopefully, the offender will take note of the gentle nature of the witnesses who desire for repentance, forgiveness, and restoration.

If the two witnesses are unable to accomplish the goal of corrective discipline, the next step is to involve the church membership. This complicated step will require the inclusion of at least one elder in the process. The aim of the elder(s) is to help the witnesses, the offender, and the church body navigate the meeting by giving oversight. Restoration remains the goal of the third step.

In Matthew 18:17 Jesus describes a final step. He instructs that if the offender does not respond to the church the offender is to be considered as an outsider, excluded from the fellowship that proper members enjoy. The final step should be carefully considered by the elders and membership together, as it is a definitive stance on the sin of the offender and his position. It is not necessary to rush to a point of conclusion. Instead the decision should be reached through much counsel and prayer. Determining the terms of exclusion is a delicate matter that should happen only after prayer and should be clearly communicated so there is unity and consistency. The church's desire is not to shame the offender.

Church discipline might be required if an offender has acted in a public manner. The church at Corinth dealt with such an issue and it required swifter measures. The public nature of the sin gave the church the ability to forego the first three steps and move to the final step immediately. However, this method is descriptive and not prescriptive for a public offense, though it is important to recognize that some sins might tarnish the reputation of the church and Christ so as to demand immediate attention.

Finally, there are special instructions given for the correction of leadership. In 1 Timothy 5:19-20, Paul explains that if charges are brought against an elder there are to be two or three

witnesses. Leaders are often criticized unfairly so Paul indicates that there must be clear evidence, not mere hearsay, to bring an accusation against an elder. Finally, if leadership is found to be in sin, it should be dealt with more swiftly, as modeled by Paul's address to Peter in Galatians 2:11-14.

The Leadership of the Church

In order to consider any study on the leadership of the church, it is essential to understand the role of Jesus Christ as he relates to the church. Though this may seem obvious, it is vital to clearly acknowledge the headship, authority, and responsibility of Jesus in relationship to the church. In Ephesians 1:22 and in 4:15-16, Paul describes a specific position held by Jesus: he is the head of the church. It would be appropriate to describe Jesus as the one who holds the primary spiritual and eternal office over the church as her Great Shepherd. The writer of Hebrews identifies Jesus as “the apostle and priest of our confession” (Hebrews 3:1). Apostles design and lead the planting of churches. Therefore, there is no faithful Christian church that comes into existence unless Jesus designs it and plants it, because Jesus is the head of the church. Finally, Jesus is the one who makes the church grow by sanctifying her, cleansing her, and presenting her as unblemished and holy.

Having established the fact that Jesus is the head of the church, there are important questions that follow. What does the government of the church consist of? What does the Bible say about the government of the church and those offices? Why and how do we operate according to the teaching of the Scriptures in these matters?

The government of the local church has within it three offices that can be determined by a careful examination of Scripture. The three offices are the members, elders, and deacons. The office of membership is often overlooked or undervalued, yet it should not be. Therefore, by becoming a Christian and joining a local church, a person becomes a member with an office, specifically a “*citizen*, a word that communicates the idea of being ruled while sharing in rule.”ⁱ

Elders – The Biblical Examination

It is efficient to begin with an examination of elders. One of the most telling passages of Scripture regarding the elders of the church is found in Acts 20:17-38, in which three words are used interchangeably to describe the leadership of the church. In verse 17 Luke uses the word presbyteros, translated as “elder.” In verse 28 he employs the word episkopos, translated as “overseer” or “bishop.” Finally, Luke uses the word poimainein, translated as “shepherd” or “care,” and in some instances “pastor.” The significance of the interchangeable terms emphasizes three things about the office of elder. The word “elder” speaks to who the man is, “bishop” speaks of what the elder does, “pastor” (“shepherd”) identifies how the elder ministers. In summation, all three terms are used of the same position while emphasizing the unique aspects of the ministry of the elder.ⁱⁱ

It is important to recognize that elders operated in plurality in the New Testament. James 5:14 says, “Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church . . .” Note that the word “elders” is a plural noun and is used in conjunction with the word “church” in the singular. In Acts 14:23 Luke noted that Paul appointed a plurality of elders in every church: “And when they had appointed elders for them in every church . . .” In 1 Timothy 5:17 there is found a reference to the plurality of elders in the church. “Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching.” It is important to note that Paul’s instructions to Timothy not only emphasize the matter of plurality, but he acknowledges differences in the ministries of elders in the church. Some elders would be more attentive to preaching and teaching while other elders would function in other ministry areas. Among the plurality of elders there are likely different ministry areas; however, the plurality of elders in the church is to operate with equal authority. A separate office would be required if one elder were to have more authority than the others.

Deacons – The Biblical Examination

The Greek word diakonos is used in both the noun and verb forms. The noun means “servant” or “minister.” The verb means “service” or “ministry.” On five occasions the word “deacon” is used to describe an office in the church. The use of “deacon” as an office is most clear in 1 Timothy 3:8, 12. The context indicates that Paul is instructing Timothy regarding the offices of the church. Though these qualities should be present in every Christian’s life, every person will not be examined. Examination is reserved for those who will potentially fill the office of deacon.ⁱⁱⁱ

Deacons became instrumental in the life of the church to make sure that the needs of people (widows and orphans in that particular time) were being taken care of when the Apostles were focused on teaching and prayer (Acts 6). Therefore, the first thing to note about the office of deacon is the complementary role to the elders. Elders offer pastoral oversight while deacons offer practical service to the needy.^{iv} As deacons are to complement elders, their primary role is to cooperate and communicate with the elders concerning the needs of the church.

By taking care of the physical needs of the church, deacons also address the spiritual needs of the church. In 1 Timothy 3, there are clues to some of the responsibilities of deacons. Deacons care for the finances of the church, since they had to be people who were “not greedy for gain” (v. 8). Deacons likely possessed administrative responsibilities in other activities of the church, because they were to manage their children and their households well (v. 12). It is also likely that deacons provided for the ministry needs of missionaries (Acts 16:2)

Church Membership – The Biblical Examination

The concept of the *office* of church membership is often neglected. However, there are a number of references that identify that salvation includes with it the idea of membership. Several

metaphors are used to describe believers and their inclusion in the governing of the church.

Believers are described as a spiritual house (1 Pe 2:5), fellow citizens with the saints, and members of the household of God (Eph 1:19), and one body (1 Cor 12:13).

Church members are described by two more metaphors. In 2 Corinthians 5 they are called ambassadors. In 1 Peter 2:9 believers are called a royal priesthood. The two descriptions emphasize the position of a believer with Christ and ministry roles bestowed upon them. As ambassadors they represent and share the ministry of reconciliation that is available through the gospel of Christ. As royal priests the believer is concerned with the kingdom of God and the life of holiness that is to be exhibited as a church.

Operating Together

Together the church operates in reciprocal relationships among the members and leadership. In Hebrews 13:17 believers are instructed to obey their leaders, because leaders will one day give an account for those under their care. Furthermore, a healthy ministry life is found as the leaders and members operate together for their mutual growth. In Ephesians Paul instructs the leadership to equip the body so that the body builds itself up in the faith. This requires each member to contribute to the process of growth so that love and a likeness to Christ is achieved.

For maturity to happen, it is necessary that every member attend worship services and utilize the gifts that are bestowed by the Holy Spirit. Doing this will provide for the mutual growth of other believers and the church as a whole. Together the members and leaders serve as the final human authority for the church, admitting members, providing discipline, choosing leaders, and guarding the purity of the doctrine of the word and teaching.^v

Elders have a primary responsibility in the teaching ministry of the church and each elder is vested with the right to teach and exercise authority in the church.^{vi} Being vested by the church

membership, elders are to lead in the areas of doctrine, direction, and discipline by their distinction as men of God.^{vii} This kind of leadership does not require every decision to be brought before the church, but instead enables the elders to govern in a leadership paradigm that respects the investment of the membership. Specifically, in the arena of discipline, the elders are to equip the body to implement biblical discipline according to Matthew 18. Therefore, it is not the elders' sole responsibility to enact discipline; instead they should lead the church in such a way that members are prepared to rightly engage one who is unrepentant.

All of three offices work together to maintain the faith and order of the church. As Protestants it is important to note that faith and order are not a matter of one office, but are instead a matter of the three offices of the church striving together for the purity of the apostolic gospel which is based on right principles.^{viii} The right principles consists of the “keys of the kingdom” (Matt 16:19, 18, 28). The “keys” are the authority presented to the church by Jesus. Together, the three offices determine what doctrine and practices are consistent with the gospel and identify the objective orthodox sources to assess whether a person belongs to the church by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. In order for these “keys” to be effectively employed the three offices, elder, deacon, and membership, must cooperate through mutual service and love to one another in the government of the church.

ⁱ Dever, Mark and Jonathan Leeman, eds. *Baptist Foundations: Church Government for an Anti-Institutional Age*, edited by Mark Dever and Jonathan Leeman. (Nashville, TN: B&H, 2015), 15.

ⁱⁱ MacArthur, John. *The Master's Plan for the Church*, (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1991), 185.

ⁱⁱⁱ Strauch, Alexander. *The New Testament Deacon, Minister of Mercy*, Littleton, CO: Lewis and Roth Publishers, 1992), 71.

^{iv} Ibid., 75.

^v Dever, Mark and Jonathan Leeman, eds. *Baptist Foundations: Church Government for an Anti-Institutional Age*, (Nashville, TN: B&H, 2015), 185.

^{vi} John Piper, *Biblical Eldership: Shepherd the Flock of God Among You*, sec 7.

http://www.desiringgod.org/ResourceLibrary/TopicIndex/40_Biblical_Eldership/1586_Biblical_Eldership_Part_1a/ . Desiring God Ministries 1999.

^{vii} Newton, Phil. *Elders in Congregational Life: Rediscovering the Biblical Model for Church Leadership*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2005), 42.

^{viii} Dever, Mark and Jonathan Leeman, eds. *Baptist Foundations: Church Government for an Anti-Institutional Age*, (Nashville, TN: B&H, 2015), 350-1.

Merkle, Benjamin. *40 Questions about Elders and Deacons*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2008).