

The Practices of the Christian Life – the Local Church

The Christian life is a personal relationship with God, but it is not a private relationship with God. To be a true Christian is to embrace your personal responsibility – your personal sin against God, and your own need of reconciliation with God. God does not save us in groups; He saves us individually. Nevertheless, when He does so, He saves us to be part of a group, to be part of a collective group that will take us to greater heights of knowing and loving God than we could ever achieve on our own. God joins us to the church.

One of the vital practices of the Christian life is life lived in the local church. This series has been all about the Christian life, its priority, its process, its position, its posture, and now finally, its practices. We're examining the practical disciplines of the Christian life that enable us to live in God's presence by faith, and so come to know Him and love Him.

Having examined the practices of hearing the Word, praying and fasting, we come to the matter of the local church.

What is the church? The church can be meant in two ways.

The universal church is a spiritual organism – the Body of Christ made up of believers worldwide. The day you are regenerated, you become part of this church. However, as far as practices go, most of God's instructions to you as a believer, regarding church life, have to do with the local church. A local church is a gathering of believers, under the headship of the Lord Jesus Christ, who regularly gather to hear God's Word and to carry it out.

Let's break that down for a moment.

Acts 2:47 *And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved.*

1 Corinthians 12:27 ²⁷ *Now you are the body of Christ, and members individually.*

A church is made up of believers. A church is not a building. A church is not a denomination. A church is a group of born - again believers . The church is made up of all the people who are saved.

A church gathers regularly:

Acts 2:46 ⁴⁶ *So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart,*

Hebrews 10:25 ²⁵ *not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching.*

A church is under the headship of Jesus Christ. Jesus is the Head of the Church.

Ephesians 1:22-23 ²² *And He put all things under His feet, and gave Him to be head over all things to the church,* ²³ *which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all.*

Colossians 1:18 ¹⁸ *And He is the head of the body, the church, who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in all things He may have the preeminence.*

The headship of Jesus Christ in the local church is wielded through His Shepherd's Rod. What is His Shepherd's Rod?

1 Timothy 4:13 ¹³ *Till I come, give attention to reading, to exhortation, to doctrine.*

2 Timothy 4:2 ² *Preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching.*

The Word of God: The Word of God declares the will of Christ. Therefore, a church is under the headship of Christ when His Word is faithfully declared. This is when a church does not import its own agendas, priorities, goals, ambitions or values into the Word, but rather places itself in submission to the Word by allowing the original intended meaning of Scripture to govern all its beliefs and practices. Churches that are built on and centred around the Word of God – not experience; not supposed extra-biblical revelation; not dreams and visions; not marketing technique; not pop-psychology - but the Word alone – these are churches under the headship of Jesus Christ.

How is this 'Rod' wielded in the local church?

Ephesians 4:11-13 ¹¹ *And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, ¹² for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, ¹³ till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ;*

The pastoral ministry of declaring, teaching and instructing is the means by which His 'Rod' is wielded. Clearly, this is the responsibility of elders/pastor-teachers. These pastors/elders are to meet the qualifications outlined in I Timothy 3 and Titus.

If the proclamation of God's Word is missing, and there are no qualified leaders, the gathering is as yet not a local church in the biblical sense.

A local church comes to hear God's Word and respond obediently to it. Thus, the church will be obedient in areas of worship, discipleship, fellowship, stewardship, and leadership. These are the areas you should focus on when looking to find a biblical church.

In whatever area God places you, you should seek out a biblical local church. Under those categories we've just mentioned, here are some of the things we want to look for.

1) Biblically-ordered worship.

Worship is the highest and greatest purpose of the church. Evangelism and missions are vital and essential, but they are not the greatest purpose of the church. Mercy and meeting the needs of the destitute is an obligation, but they are not the greatest purpose of the church. Discernment and understanding the truth are vital, but they are not the greatest purpose of the church. The greatest purpose of the church is worship.

How do I know? Because Jesus was asked what the greatest obligation is, what the first and greatest command is.

What did He say in reply? **Mark 12:29-30** ⁹ *Jesus answered him, "The first of all the commandments is: 'Hear, O Israel, the LORD our God, the LORD is one. ³⁰ 'And you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.' This is the first commandment.*

Loving God – this is worship. Responding to God with ultimate love, which is what He is worth. This is the key reason for the church – to be a people who worship.

1 Peter 2:9 ⁹ *But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light;*

1 Peter 2:5 ⁵ *you also, as living stones, are being built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.*

Christians are described here as stones that together make up a temple. What do you do in a Temple? You worship. The church is supposed to be the place where biblically ordered worship take place.

1 Corinthians 14:40 ⁴⁰ *Let all things be done decently and in order.*

That means that the church only includes those elements in worship which God has prescribed in His Word. It means that the way these elements are used, and how they are arranged are used to evoke the right affections towards God. The church you join should have worship that consists of public prayer, the singing of psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. The reading of Scripture, the preaching of the Word, the giving of offerings and the celebration of the Lord's Supper. These are the elements that New Testament churches are to practice.

2) Biblically qualified leadership

The pastoral epistles make it very clear what a pastor is to be, and what character matters disqualify him. While you cannot make a clear judgement on just one or two meetings, eventually it can become clear if the overseer of a church is truly biblically called. If he is not qualified according to 1 Timothy 3, then he is not called – at least not at this time. Calling and qualification cannot and must not be separated. The church you join should be led by men who meet the qualifications of 1 Timothy 3, Titus 1 and 1 Peter 5.

3) A focus on spiritual growth and discipleship

Ephesians 4:11-16 *Ephesians 4:11 And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers* ¹² *for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ,* ¹³ *till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ;* ¹⁴ *that we should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting,* ¹⁵ *but, speaking the truth in love, may grow up in all things into Him who is the head -- Christ --* ¹⁶ *from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love.*

A healthy church emphasises the growth of Christians into mature, Christlike believers. To this end, in a healthy church you will see an emphasis on expository preaching. If a church is serious about following the will of Christ, then it will give much of its time to expounding and explaining the word of Christ. Along with this, there will be a helpful and healthy kind of accountability and mutual care, to make sure that we are not merely hearers but doers of the Word.

The church will teach the need to be separated from the world and sin and to be consecrated to Christlikeness and love for God. The church will preach a clear gospel of repentance and faith. This all reveals that the church is serious about discipleship; about seeing followers of Christ

develop. To summarise, a good church is made up of people who want to be disciples and who want to make more disciples. This is an emphasis you want to see in a church you join.

4) Healthy fellowship

The Greek word *koinonia* just means partakers together. It is to hold something in common. It is not a strictly religious word. Stamp collectors have fellowship. What is their fellowship around? Stamps. Bird watchers have fellowship. What is their fellowship? What do they hold jointly? The watching of birds.

So when we say Christians have fellowship, what do we mean? We mean Christians hold something in common. What is it that we hold in common? We who have believed the gospel have the greatest possible commonality: Jesus Christ Himself. He is our shared Saviour, Lord, King, Head, Shepherd, Bridegroom, Inheritance.

. As Paul puts it in Ephesians 4, once we are truly converted, truly saved, truly born again, we have in common one body and one Spirit, one calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; ⁶ one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all.

When a people have this much in common, the outworking is seen in several ways; meeting together as often as they could, praying together, studying the Word together, meeting practical needs together, enjoying meals together, living life together. When a church is healthy, it has a one-another emphasis. The Christians are devoted to sharing and strengthening with one another the thing they hold in common – their love for Christ.

5) Faithful Stewardship

1 Corinthians 4:1-2 **1 Corinthians 4:1** *Let a man so consider us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. ² Moreover it is required in stewards that one be found faithful*

A church knows that it is in the position of the servants in Christ's parable of the talents. God entrusts His church with many things: spiritual gifts; people with talents and abilities; unique opportunities; unique abilities; monetary resources; physical assets. These are things to be wisely, strategically and generously used for God's glory. A healthy church is teaching an exemplifying the stewardship principle: we are to use God's resources for God's glory. There should not be the near-obsession with money, tithing and giving that you find in some churches. Nor should there be a failure to teach on this important topic. Instead, the church should become a channel for ministry, mercy and missions.

In seeking out a church, look for orderly worship, qualified leadership, serious discipleship, healthy fellowship and faithful stewardship. When you find a church that best approximates these things, it is important to join such a church.

Joining a Church

Why should you seek to join a Biblical local church?

While it is true that every believer is a member of the universal church, that does not mean every believer is a member of every local church. Because the local church is an organised section of the universal church, entrance into the local church is not one and the same with entrance into the

universal church.

One clear illustration of this truth is baptism. Baptism does not save people. Since people are part of the universal church the moment they are saved, why be baptised? The answer is that baptism is a public witness to others, and a public identification with Christ and His people. Clearly, God wants us to take some public, visible steps to identify with His people once we have repented and believed in Christ.

The Bible gives evidence that early local churches included some form of enlistment or recognition of who was part of their assemblies and who was not. For example, the Bible describes people being 'added to the church', and even records the number being added (Acts 2:41, 47). This fact also implies that some administration was taking place. Timothy was told to 'enrol' only certain widows for financial support (1 Tim 5:9), implying that certain lists were being kept, and the church was not an open freeforall. We also see the practice of giving and receiving letters of recommendation, which suggests that local churches did not simply accept anyone and everyone (Romans 16:1, Col 4:10, Acts 18:27, 2 Cor 3:1).

Membership is a formalised commitment to the local church which, when accepted by the church, constitutes being considered a member of that local church. The commitment is often covenanting around the church covenant.

Covenanting is a very serious and important concept, mostly lost on the world today. The Bible encourages us to take our vows seriously (Eccl 5:46, Ps 15:4). At the same time, it is a joy to come under a binding commitment, when empowered by grace (Ps 22:25-26). Furthermore, formalised and public commitments are really the kind that matter. A couple might live together, and protest that they are committed to one another with or without a marriage licence. However, until they make a public covenant to be true to one another, they are not considered married. In the same way, church membership is not a mere administrative detail. It is a means to achieving proper New Testament church life. We see this in at least four ways.

1. Membership makes sense of leadership in a church and submission to that leadership (1 Pet 5:2, Heb 13:17). If no one is formally committed to a church, who are the elders actually shepherding? Who is actually required to submit to God's Word as taught by the pastors, if one's commitment can be to several churches at once (or even an Internet or TV church)? Can a pastor require submission from casual attenders? At what point does a person's regular attendance require that they become accountable to that church?
2. Membership makes church discipline sensible and possible. Church discipline is a form of correction that works by ultimately excluding someone from church fellowship and its privileges (Matthew 18:15-17). How can one exclude a person who has never been included in the first place? Furthermore, who is responsible for exercising church discipline? Can first time visitors discipline someone, or ought it to be members who are already committed to the life and health of the body? Paul expected the members of the church at Corinth to undertake church discipline of a sinning member (1 Cor 5:45).
3. Membership guards the Lord's Table (1 Cor 5:78). Membership is a form of filtering. Since membership requires a clear testimony of salvation, and an experience of Scriptural baptism, those who go through this process vouch for their (outward) qualification to partake of the Lord's Supper. The Lord's Supper is not a soup kitchen; it is a family meal. To protect people from harming themselves, membership provides this important kind of filter.
4. Membership increases accountability and commitment. We live in a time of religious independence and individualism. Everyone wants a 'private' religion without accountability. People shop for spiritual experiences like they shop for other goods, bouncing from church to church;

neglecting the ordinances; using parachurch organisations for personal growth and edification, but disconnected from a church community with its body life, its accountability to leadership and its mutual submission. Membership makes public and explicit what is personal and unseen. In membership you are making a promise that you can be held to. This is important for our sanctification, given our inclinations towards self deceit, spiritual apathy, and privatised religion. Scriptures like Galatians 6:14, James 5:16, 1920, only make sense in an environment of mutual accountability.

Once you join a local church, what are your key responsibilities?

There are really three stages:

Learning:

The Lord has given ‘pastor-teachers for the equipping of the saints’. Your first priority is to submit to the Word of God as it is taught. You are to learn and observe, taking in the Word in the context of a community of obedient believers. This implies regular attendance – so as to be present whenever the Word is declared. You can only learn how to worship, how to fellowship, how to be a better disciple, how to be a better steward, if you adopt the posture of a teachable learner.

Serving:

The equipping of individual believers takes place ‘for the work of the ministry’. As you grow in grace and in knowledge, you are seek to serve other Christians. The New Testament gives over 28 ‘one another commands’ which teach us how to serve each other. As you seek to love the other believers in a local church – God will empower the spiritual gifts He has given you.

Leading:

As your growth continues, you will reach the point where you are responsible for teaching and training others in their Christian life. The Bible expects people to reach this stage.

Hebrews 5:12 ¹² *For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the first principles of the oracles of God; and you have come to need milk and not solid food*

Titus 2:3-4 ³ *the older women likewise, that they be reverent in behavior, not slanderers, not given to much wine, teachers of good things --* ⁴ *that they admonish the young women to love their husbands, to love their children,*

2 Timothy 2:2 ² *And the things that you have heard from me among many witnesses, commit these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also.*

To begin and sustain the important practices of the Christian life that take place within a local church, we need to identify a biblical church, join it, and then begin learning, serving and then leading. Once we do that, we will increasingly understand these matters of worship, fellowship, discipleship, stewardship and leadership. We'll consider these part of church life in the next few weeks.