

## The Work of the Local Church

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In the New Testament, a clear pattern is presented regarding the organization and work of local churches. A pattern for the local church should not come as a surprise to students of the Bible. God has always conveyed Himself through the use of patterns. From Creation to the Temple, God has used patterns to demonstrate His sovereignty and tangibly show His nature.

To establish the function of the local church, Jesus selected the apostles. Jesus delegated authority to the apostles to take the lead in arranging, ordering, and ordaining offices and practices in the local church (Matt. 16:19). The Holy Spirit would guide the apostles in teaching truth and making determinations for saints and local churches (John 14:26, 15:26-27, 16:13-14; Acts 1:1-2, 2:4).

For example, the apostle Paul wrote the church at Ephesus regarding their work. He wrote, *“And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ”* (Eph. 4:11-12). From this text, we gather three general areas of work the local church is to perform.

**1. Edification:** Perfecting saints. Simply defined, edification is the promotion of spiritual growth. This work relates to building. Saints in a local church are to be making their best efforts to grow in the image or stature of Christ. When such growth happens collectively, local churches reflect Christ into their respective communities.

The only means whereby edification can occur is through the study and application of God’s word. The word of God’s grace builds us up and has the power to give us an inheritance (Acts 20:32). There is no substitute for God’s word in the work of edification.

There are several ways God’s word is used to edify. First, God’s word can be encouraged in our hearts and minds through worship. We teach and admonish each other through singing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs (Col. 3:16). Also, God’s word is used to edify through teaching and preaching. This is why churches spend a great deal of time studying God’s word together. Barnabas and Paul encouraged the church at Antioch to purpose their hearts to cleave to the Lord (Acts 11:19-23). By the guidance of elders, God’s word is to be used to feed the flock (Acts 20:28; 1 Pet. 5:1-2).

**2. Benevolence:** Work of Ministry. Benevolence relates to generous acts of kindness. Christians provide for the physical needs of one another. From the earliest days of the Church, Christians did their best to provide for the needs of each other. For example, Christians who owned land in Jerusalem sold their land and used the money to take care of needy Christians (Acts 4:32-37). Later, the church at Jerusalem would be in need due to a famine. To assist in this need, Paul collected money from other churches to offer to the needy saints in Jerusalem (Acts 11:27-30).

Regrettably to work of church benevolence is often a misunderstood topic. Many people today think churches are to provide for the needs of non-Christians. To the contrary, a clear pattern for church benevolence emerges in the New Testament. Mainly, churches took care of Christians only. Churches did not engage in providing for the welfare of non-Christians. Certainly, Christians as individuals and or families can help non-Christians (Gal. 6:10). However, churches collectively cannot.

In every passage in the New Testament where the issue of church benevolence is addressed, it always involved churches helping Christians only (Acts 2:44-45, 4:32-37, 6:1-7, 11:27-30; Rom. 15:26; 1 Cor. 16:1-2; 2 Cor. 8:4, 9:1; 1 Tim. 5:3-16). There is no apostolic pattern for local churches providing for the benevolent needs of non-Christians.

**3. Evangelism:** Edifying the body of Christ. The third area of work local churches are to engage in regards evangelism: teaching and preaching the Gospel. Evangelism is how local churches are to engage non-Christians. The body of Christ, the Church universally, grows and expands as sinners obey the Gospel. This work can be accomplished through several means.

First, local churches are to have the Gospel preached at their assemblies. Non-Christians were and are welcomed to the assemblies of the local church (1 Cor. 14:15-16). This is an opportunity for non-Christians to learn, believe, and obey the Gospel. Second, a church may send someone to preach somewhere. The church in Jerusalem sent Barnabas and Paul to preach to the saints in Antioch (Acts 11:19-21). Third, a church may provide financial assistance to a Gospel preacher. The church at Philippi financially supported Paul in his work of preaching (Phil. 4:15-16).

In summary, the local church as organized and ordained by the apostles is perfectly suited to accomplish its work. When all saints share in the work, the local church will grow. After identifying the work of the local church, Paul wrote, "Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love" (Eph. 4:15-16).

### **Conclusion**

Over time, the pattern for local churches and their work has been changed. In some instances, new work has been taken up by churches for which the apostles never authorized. Churches have become political action groups, recreation centers, and employment agencies. In straying from the work the apostles assigned, churches have blended themselves into the world and lost their spiritual identity.

Also, new patterns have been created for doing the work of the church. Rather than churches autonomously doing their work, some have supported and solicited assistance from non-church groups. There is no apostolic pattern for local churches supporting non-church groups to do the work of edification, benevolence, and evangelism.

Churches must compare their pattern of organization and work to the pattern found in the New Testament. In many cases, American culture has influenced the work of churches. This was certainly the case in the 19th to mid 20th centuries regarding the rise of the Social Gospel Movement and its subsequent influence on churches of Christ.

Historically, churches of Christ divided over issues regarding the pattern and work of the local church as instituted by the apostles. Such divisions are not surprising considering God's people have always struggled being influenced by the world (1 Sam. 8). Presently, churches of Christ remain divided over these issues. Identities of churches of Christ are largely shaped around issues related to the work of the local church.

As we consider our work, we must ask, are we following the pattern? If our work as a local church does not reflect the pattern found in the New Testament, what will we do? If we want to be a church that Jesus recognizes, we must follow the pattern His apostles established.