

### Lesson 3 – Text and Context - The Local Church and the Individual Christian

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**Introduction:** What is a local church and what is its function?

A. When we go back to the authority of God alone, we should never assume by past practices that we instinctively know God's will.

1. We are to be a people that respect God's authority just as Jesus respected the Father's authority. (Jn 12:48-50)
2. If we carefully define Bible words and stay within all God has revealed, then we will clearly know the path to take. (1 Cor 2:13 ASV) – “combining spiritual things with spiritual words.”
3. Those who want to change the purpose and function of local churches either deny the need for authority or redefine Bible words to justify their actions.

B. What is a local church? Should they even exist? How do you know?

1. Without the authority of Christ there would be no such thing as churches.
2. Let us carefully look at both the text and context and gather all passages that address a local church and stay within those passages authorize!

#### I. What is a local church?

A. **Church** - ἐκκλησία, ας, ἡ (1) in a general sense, as a gathering of citizens *assembly, meeting* (AC 19.32); (2) as the assembled people of Israel *congregation* (HE 2.12); (3) as the assembled Christian community *church, congregation, meeting* (RO 16.5); (4) as the totality of Christians living in one place *church* (AC 8.1); (5) as the universal body of believers *church* (EP 1.22)

1. The common meaning of the word translated “church” is an assembly.
2. The Greek word “ekklesia” is from two words: **ek** – out and **kaleo** – to call.
3. When you read the word “church” in the Bible always think of people!
4. There are three primary meanings of the word in the New Testament.

B. The Lord Himself established one church. (Mt 16:18)

1. He is head of this church and there is “but one.” (Eph 1:22-23; 4:4-6)
2. What is the “one true church?” Is it a local church? – No!
3. This one true church is a relationship between Jesus and every individual Christian. We are baptized into this one body and into Christ. (1 Cor 12:13)
4. This one church is not a functional body it is comprised only of individuals.
5. Where is the “headquarters” of the church of Christ? Where is the head quartered?

C. The Lord also ordained that there be local churches.

(1 Cor 1:2; Rom 16:16; Gal 1:2)

1. How can there be but “one church” and there also be “churches of Christ” at the same time? Even though the same word is used (church), the context shows we are talking about 2 very different things!
2. The local church is a functional body that has a beginning and even an end under certain circumstances.

3. The local church will be the focus of our study!
- D. An assembly of Christians in a location can be the definition of the word “church” in some contexts.
  1. Sometimes it can refer to a mob of non-Christians. (Acts 19:32)
  2. It can mean a specific kind of gathering of Christians. (1 Cor 14:33-37)

## **II. How can we know when a local church is addressed in scripture?**

- A. The simple straightforward answer is to find all references to local churches in the New Testament and use those verses to understand the function of a local church.
  1. Since Jesus ordained local churches then we should let His instructions guide us when local churches are addressed!
  2. Surprisingly many brethren have objected to this approach.
- B. There are three positions that men take concerning how scriptures direct local churches to act.
  1. **Whatever the individual Christian may do, the church may do.**
    - a. Sometimes say: "Since the local church is made up of individual members, then when a Christian is given instruction or takes action then it is really the local church being instructed or acting."
    - b. If this is true then any verse instructing an individual Christian to take action also gives authority to a local church to do the same thing.
  2. **There is a distinction between the work of an individual Christian and a local church.**
    - a. This view requires that the local church be addressed in the context of a passage before assuming church responsibility.
    - b. Therefore, if a scripture addresses only the individual Christian this would not be enough to assume church action.
  3. **Local churches have no right to exist.** – This is not the focus of this study.

## **III. How does a local church begin?**

- A. There are at least three things that must exist before a local church can exist.
  1. **There must be an agreement to work and worship together.**  
(Acts 9:26-28; 1 Pt 5:2)
    - a. Paul went through a process to become part of the church at Jerusalem.
    - b. The local church has an identifiable flock.
  2. **There must be a common oversight.** (1 Pt 5:1-4; Heb 13:17)
    - a. There must be a way of making decisions. Ex. “When do we assemble?”
    - b. All oversight is under God’s authority by the “chief shepherd”.
  3. **There must be a pooling of resources.** (1 Cor 16:2; 2 Cor 11:8)
    - a. Local churches have responsibilities that require money.
    - b. Again, the Lord directs churches in all these things.
- B. There is a big difference between a local church and an occasional gathering of Christians or the action of a single Christian.

1. If a group of Christians gathered to watch the super bowl (after services!) and gathered money to buy pizza, is this a local church acting?
2. Consider a Christian who is both a member of the Lion's Club and a local church. One day he mowed the lawn of a sick person and brought him some food. Two individuals, one a Christian and the other a member of the Lion's club discussed this benevolent act. The member of the Lion's club said "Look, there is the Lion's Club helping the poor!" while the Christian said "No, that is the local church helping the poor". Which is it?

#### ***IV. Bible Passages Make a Distinction Between the Church and the Individual.***

A. Jesus spoke of the responsibilities and order in correcting a brother.

**(Mt 18:15-17)**

1. In Verse 15 the individual is to act, no church action yet.
  2. In verse 16 two or three individuals act, still no church action.
  3. In verse 17 the church now acts!
  4. When one individual acts or even a group acts this does not constitute church action in this passage.
- B. When an individual takes care of his own, this does not constitute church action. - **(1 Tim 5:16)**
- C. An individual's money is in his possession and under his control and oversight until he gives it. It then is under the control and oversight of the local church. - **(Acts 5:4)**
- D. Denominations make the same mistake in **John 15:1-8** when they want the branches to be denominations. No, the branches are individuals.

#### ***IV. There is a great difference between the responsibilities of an individual and the responsibilities of a local church.***

A. Consider the various God given relationships a Christian sustains and the possible actions one may take in these areas.

1. **Family responsibilities** - Guiding a family involves many areas and relationships such as discipline, recreation, education, and shelter. **(Eph 6:4)**
2. **Community responsibilities** - These involve caring for the weak and needy and possible involvement with community groups such as PTA, little league, Civic clubs and the March of Dimes.
3. **Governmental responsibilities** - These involve paying taxes, any positive influence towards righteousness such as campaigning, running for office or giving to a candidate. **(Rom 13:1-8)**
4. **Economic responsibilities** - These involve any honest means of earning money such as working for an employer or operating your own business such as a hardware store, a college, a printing company, a bicycle shop, and investing. **(Eph 4:28; 2 Thess 3:10-12)**

B. Let us consider the consequences of failing to make a distinction.

1. Look at the above responsibilities. Are you prepared to say that the church

may do **all** of these things? If no, then on what basis can you oppose the church's involvement in these things and *not be distinguishing between the work of an individual Christian and the local church?*

2. Sadly, false arguments used to justify pet projects of one generation will be taken to their consistent conclusion by another generation! Brethren who push for no distinction are powerless to oppose the great church **sponsored recreational projects** and businesses of our day.
3. Some have tried to limit their argument by saying there is no distinction in "spiritual works" while only the individual may participate in "secular" work.
  - a. The Bible nowhere makes such a distinction! Can you give the scripture?
  - b. In **Eph 4:28** what is "spiritual" and what is "secular"? A Christian is to work in order to give to the needy. Both are God given works and it is given in this passage to the individual! It would not be correct to apply it to the local church.

C. Let us summarize the differences between the church and the individual.

## **TWO TREASURIES**

### **Individual**

### **Local Church**

## **METHOD OF RAISING**

A. By Honest Labor (**Eph 4:28**)

A. By Voluntary Offering  
(**1 Cor 16:1-2**)

## **OVERSIGHT**

A. The Individual (**Acts 5:4**)

A. Local Elders  
(**Acts 11:30; 1 Pt 5:1-3**)

## **USE**

A. Contribution (**1 Cor 16:1-2**)

B. Pay Taxes (**Rom 13:17**)

C. Provide for Family (**1 Tim 5:16**)

A. Preaching Gospel (**2 Cor 11:8**)

B. Relieving Saints (**Acts 4:32-34**)

C. Edify Saints (**Eph 4:15-16**)