

# The Local Church Defined

by William MacDonald

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*The local church should be a miniature of the Church universal, giving expression to the great truths of the Church and maintaining a testimony to the unity of the body of Christ.*

**Scripture:** 1 Corinthians 1:2, Ephesians 4:4

**Topics:** "Unity in the Church", "The Nature of the Local Church"

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## Description

William MacDonald defines the local church as a community of believers gathered in Christ's name, emphasizing that true churches are not merely defined by rigid requirements but by their spiritual condition and unity in Christ. He argues that the local church should reflect the universal Church, embodying truths such as the oneness of the body, Christ as the head, and the role of the Holy Spirit. MacDonald stresses the importance of love and grace in maintaining unity among believers, warning against the divisive nature of denominationalism. He calls for a church that represents Christ faithfully, avoiding sectarianism and promoting genuine fellowship among all Christians. Ultimately, the local church's mission is to testify to the unity and holiness of the body of Christ.

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## Transcript

### THE LOCAL CHURCH DEFINED

Down through the years, there has been considerable disagreement as to what constitutes a New Testament church. The usual approach is to list a certain number of requirements or marks; if a group of Christians answers to these qualifications, then it is considered to be a true local church.

Henry Barrow has given what might be considered a rather typical definition of a church. He defined it as follows: "A true-planted and rightly-established church of Christ is a company of faithful people, separated from unbelievers, gathered in the Name of Christ, whom they truly worship and readily obey. They are a brotherhood, a communion of saints, each one of them standing in and for their Christian liberty to practice whatsoever God ha commanded and revealed unto them in His Holy Word."

First Corinthians 1:2 gives a simple, yet accurate description of a local church. "To them that are sanctified in Christ Jesus, and called to be saints, with all that in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours."

Other definitions have been far more restricted with the result that only the churches of a certain denomination or group actually qualify.

#### THE NEW TESTAMENT APPROACH

This raises a very real question. Does the New Testament list a certain number of requisites or essentials of a local church? Are the marks of an assembly stated so clearly that any believer could separate the fellowships in any area into those which are true New Testament churches and those which are not?

We would suggest that this is not the case. If becoming a true church were merely a matter of conforming to a certain pattern or going through a specified routine of meetings, then this could be done quite mechanically without spiritual exercise. Lethargy and complacency would result. Though the position of a church might be ever so correct, yet the condition of the believers might be far otherwise.

Instead of that, we believe that the New Testament approach is this. All believers are instructed that, by the grace of God, they are members of the Church. They are exhorted to gather together in such a way as to give expression to the great truths of the Church. Some assemblies of Christians give a very poor representation of the body of Christ. Other groups present a more faithful likeness. None does so perfectly.

Thus, instead of following the legalistic method which says, 'If you meet certain requirements, you will become a church,' the language of Scripture is the language of grace; namely, "You as believers are the Church; now meet in such a manner as to give an accurate expression of this fact to the world." The motive power under grace is love for the Savior, and this love should make us want to present a faithful image of the body of Christ to those around us.

#### A BRIEF SUMMARY - THE LOCAL CHURCH

To summarize then, the local church should be a miniature of the Church universal. It should be nothing and do nothing that would contradict the great truths of the Church which is the body of Christ.

As Ridout has said: "Its nature and unity must be manifested. It must be seen that it is the body of Christ, formed by and indwelt by the Holy Spirit, that all believers are members of it, united to Christ glorified and to one another; that the Lord's coming is the hope before it; and that the Name of Christ is the only one by which it is called. Furthermore, it must exhibit the unity of the body of Christ."

If then, the local church must be a replica of the complete Church, what are the great truths of the body of Christ to which it must provide a living testimony? We have already referred to seven of these fundamental truths; namely:

- A. There is one body.
- B. Christ is Head of the body.
- C. All believers are members of the body.
- D. The Holy Spirit is the representative of Christ in the Church.
- E. The Church of God is holy.

E. Gifts are given for the edification of the Church.

G. All believers are priests of God.

Our present objective, therefore, is to take these truths one by one, and seek to determine how the local church can portray them to the world.

## THE TRUTH OF THE ONE BODY

The first truth to which the local church is responsible to witness is that there is one body. How can believers testify to this fact today?

### 1. WHAT NAME SHOULD BE TAKEN

Perhaps the most obvious way is by adopting no names that would separate them from other Christians. In the church of Corinth, some were saying, "I am of Paul," "I am of Apollos," or "I am of Christ." Paul indignantly condemns such a spirit by asking, "Is Christ divided?" (1 Corinthians 1:10-17).

Today Christians divide themselves into denominations named after countries, religious leaders, ordinances, or forms of church government. All such are a practical denial of the unity of the body of Christ.

Clearly, the scriptural approach is for God's children to be known only by such names as are given in the Bible-names such as "believers" (Acts 5:14); "disciples" (Acts 9:1); "Christians" (Acts 11:26); "saints" (Ephesians 1:1); and "brethren,, (James 2: 1). It is perhaps one of the most difficult tasks in the Christian life to carry no name but that of a simple believer. The vast majority today feels that one must belong to some organized church and carry some other name than those given in the Word. Anyone who refuses to be known as anything but a child of God will suffer reproach at the hands even of other Christians and will always be a conundrum in the community. Yet how can believers consistently do otherwise?

But obviously it is not enough just to have a scripturally accurate name. It is all too possible to adhere strictly to the language of the Bible and yet be extremely sectarian in spirit. Some in Corinth were saying, "I am of Christ," for instance. Perhaps they prided themselves on the correctness of their name, but they actually meant that they were of Christ to the exclusion of other true believers. Paul found fault with them equally as much as with those who claimed loyalty to himself or Apollos.

### 2. WHAT ABOUT THE DENOMINATIONS?

When any doubt is voiced as to the scripturalness of denominations, the objection is commonly raised that the Lord has richly blessed in some of the great divisions and sects of the Church. Granting that this is true, we should still remember that the blessing of the Lord does not indicate divine approval in every detail. He honors His own Word though often its delivery is accompanied by much failure and imperfection. If God blessed only where there was perfection, there would be no blessing. Therefore the fact that any group has seen His hand does not mean that He approves of all that the group does. The message is always greater than the messenger.

The Lord's attitude toward divisions in the Church is clearly shown in 1 Corinthians 3:4: ' For while one saith, I am of Paul; and another, I am of Apollos; are ye not carnal?'

Divisions in the Church bring great evils. They create artificial barriers to fellowship. They limit the movement of gifted men of God whose ministry should be available to all the Church. They confuse the world, causing men to ask, "Which church is right?"

In his renowned work, *The Lord's Prayer for Believers*, Marcus Rainsford wrote: "For my own part, I believe sects and denominations to be the result of the devils attempt to mar and hinder as far as possible the visible union of the Church of God; and that they all have their root in our spiritual pride and selfishness, our self-sufficiency and our sin."

"May God forgive us for, and correct our divisions! Nothing gives greater occasion to the outside world, than the differences between professing Christians. The bickerings and contentions between men and women of different sects and denominations of the visible Church of God has always been one of the world's greatest hindrances. Instead of looking on, and being constrained to confess, 'See how these Christians love one another,' the world has too often reason to say, 'See how they carp at one another, see how they judge one another, see how they malign one another.'

Sadly, this deplorable state exists all too often within some local churches and dishonor is thereby brought upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

### 3. TRUE UNITY

Believers who determine to witness to the unity of the body of Christ will find it a great difficulty to separate themselves from all divisions in the Church, and at the same time maintain a loving spirit toward all the people of God.

C. H. Mackintosh, beloved author of the *Notes on the Pentateuch*, wrote: "The grand difficulty is to combine a spirit of intense separation with a spirit of grace, gentleness and forbearance; or, as another has said, 'to maintain a narrow circle with a wide heart.' This is really a difficulty. As the strict and uncompromising maintenance of truth tends to narrow the circle around us, we all shall need the expansive power of grace to keep the heart wide and the affections warm. If we contend for truth otherwise than in grace, we shall only yield a one-sided and most unattractive testimony. And on the other hand, if we try to exhibit grace at the expense of truth, it will prove, in the end, to be only the manifestation of a popular liberty at God's expenses most worthless thing."

W. H. Griffith Thomas expressed the same thought in his book, *Ministerial Life and Work*: "Let the principles be firmly fixed on the unmistakable rock of Divine truth, but let the sympathies go out as widely as possible to all who are endeavoring to live and labor for Christ. Never shall I forget the words of the saintly and noble Bishop Whipple of Minnesota, the Apostle of the Indians, as I heard them in London on a memorable occasion: 'For thirty years I have tried to see the face of Christ in those who have differed from me.'

The visible display of the unity of the body of Christ is not to be brought about by the various ecumenical movements about which so much is heard today. Such unions, councils or federations succeed only by compromising the great truths of the Scripture. Christian congregations deny their Lord when they join with those who repudiate the virgin birth of Christ, His sinless humanity, His substitutionary death, His bodily resurrection, His ascension and exaltation, and His coming again.

The true basis of Christian unity is a common devotion to Christ and His Word. When His glory is the great desire of our hearts, then we will be drawn together, and then His prayer will be answered: "That they may be one, even as we are one,, (John 17:22). As Griffith Thomas has said, "It has often been pointed out that when the tide is out, there are little pools of water here and there on the shore, separated from each other by vast stretches of sand, and it is only when the great tide rolls in and submerges them all in its vast embrace that they become one and are united. So must it be, so will it be with our severances of heart, 'our unhappy divisions'; the great tide of God's love will flow deeper and fuller into each and all of our lives, and in the ocean of that love we realize the Divine ideal of love, joy, peace for evermore."

In the meantime the responsibility of local churches is to seek to maintain a testimony to the unity of the body of Christ in a day when most of Christendom serves only to deny the fact. They can do this by acknowledging in spirit, principle and practice all their fellow-believers.

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