

Sunday, November 27, 2022 am

CLOSER TO GOD (35) The Local Church

We have covered considerable ground this year in our study of drawing closer to God. We have talked about who God is, what sin does, the grace of God and devoted considerable time to the pursuit of holiness – how holiness will affect every area of our lives. Today, I present a lesson that will be a transition to our final block of lessons addressing fellowship. Today, I want to talk about the church and how it can help draw me closer to God.

I. What is the church?

a. Defined

- i. The word “church” is found 110 times in the NKJV, (112 – KJV, 109 – NASB).
 1. It is based upon the Greek word, ἐκκλησία (ekklēsia), a word that was in common usage in 1st century Bible times. It literally means, “to call out” and had reference to a summoned assembly.
 2. The term is thus used 3x secularly in the NT – (Acts 19:32, 39, 41) and twice of Israel (Hebrews 2:12, Acts 7:38).
 3. But the term is most often translated “church” and as such has reference to the church of Christ (or God) – not a title, but a description. As such it is defined the called out body (or assembly) of God’s people.
- ii. Used in 2 senses
 1. Universally – the body of all who are saved. If you are a faithful Christian, you are part of this body. It is about relationship and fellowship with God. It is not an earthly organization. Matthew 16:18, Ephesians 1:22-23, etc.
 2. Locally – a group of that body (with judgment, its membership ought to be based on the belief that one IS saved and in fellowship with God) that join together in a given location to do work God has given us to do together. This will be our primary focus in this lesson.
- iii. A part of God’s plan and wisdom
 1. It is important that we understand that the church was/is part of God’s eternal plan. It was not an afterthought because the world was not ready for it when Jesus came to this earth (as SOME premillennialists teach).
 2. It was prophesied (the kingdom) – Daniel 2:44, Isaiah 2:2-4.
 3. Matthew 16:18-19 – Jesus declared that He was going to build His church/kingdom – this text ties them together. Matthew 16:28 notes this would happen in that generation.
 4. Ephesians 3:10-11 – we find in this text that the church is “*according to the eternal purpose which He accomplished in Christ Jesus.*” The church WAS part of His plan all along. We also are reminded in this text that the church reveals “*the manifold wisdom of God*”.
 5. Some important observations about this:
 - a. Be reminded that the church manifests God’s wisdom – what we find revealed in the New Testament is EXACTLY what God intended for the church to be. That is why we study the NT letters to churches to establish a pattern for all that we do, and that is why we ought to follow that pattern as EXACT as possible. Thus authority DOES matter.

- b. Both universal and local – previously we noted these 2 senses in which the word *church* is used in the New Testament. QUESTION: WHICH aspect of the church did God, through His manifold wisdom, establish? **BOTH**. Many believe that He only established the universal church and thus local congregations can do whatever they want, however they want. This is WHY we have so much division among professed churches of Christ. That is simply NOT true and makes the church into whatever man wants it to be – thus when we leave the pattern, it is no longer the church of Christ.
 - c. Can we improve upon God’s wisdom? When God gives us a pattern for His work and we change that pattern, what are we saying about God’s wisdom? Are we not declaring we know more than He does about what works? Are you sure you want to go down that path? Cf. Romans 9:20-21.
- b. The work of the church
- i. Evangelism – churches in NT times supported the preaching of the gospel and sounded forth the word – 1 Thessalonians 1:8, Acts 13:2-3, cf. Philippians 4:15-16
 - ii. Benevolence – in a limited capacity, churches helped needy saints, both locally and abroad – 1 Timothy 5:16, Acts 4:32-35, 2:44-45; 11:27-30
 - iii. Worship – 1 Corinthians 11-15, Acts 20:7, etc.
 - iv. Edification – a word that means to build up. Ephesians 4:11-16, 1 Corinthians 14:26, etc. MUCH of what we find in NT letters is related to this, as the NT writers to churches addressed doctrinal and relational matters. This will be our primary focus in this study.
 - v. **There is a pattern for each of these!**

II. How can the church help me draw closer to God?

- a. ***I need to be part of a local church*** – she needs to be important to me.
- i. Be reminded, the congregation is just as much a part of God’s plan as the church in its universal sense. If that is true, the local church IS important. If it is important to God, it ought to be important to me. Colossians 3:2 – set your mind on things above
 - ii. There are many reasons why I believe God EXPECTS us to be part of a local church.
 1. If He didn’t, why does it exist? Remember, it is part of His eternal plan.
 2. We have examples of this: Consider Paul: Acts 9:26 – He sought to “join” the brethren in Jerusalem when he was there with them. Acts 11:26 – Barnabas finds Paul and brings him to Antioch where they remain for a while. Acts 13:1-3 – Paul and Barnabas were PART of the local church in Antioch when they began their first missionary journey.
 3. Many NT letters are written to local churches – with instructions. If LC is not important, why do we need these?
 4. It is HOW we connect with others of “like precious faith” within our community. The truth is, in an ungodly world WE NEED EACH OTHER! Galatians 6:2, 1 Thessalonians 5:14, cf. 1 Corinthians 12:12-27 where Paul notes every part of the body is important and has its own functions.
 - iii. NOTE: Being part is more than a name in a directory. It needs to be something we are actively involved with, according to our ability.
- b. ***I have to be here – attendance is a must.***
- i. How can the church strengthen me if I am not here when we come together? Furthermore, how can I be a strength to the church that needs me if I am not here?
 - ii. Acts 20:7 – “on the first day of the week” the disciples came together to break bread (communion). Paul addressed this further (how to properly partake) in 1 Corinthians 11:17-34, 16:1-2 – we “lay by in store” when we come together.
 - iii. Ephesians 5:19 – we are to “teach and admonish one another.

- iv. Hebrews 10:25 – we are not to forsake the assembling of ourselves together...
- c. ***I need to be involved*** –
 - i. Consider again the analogy of the body. We all have a function to do.
 - ii. Ephesians 5:16 – when “every part does its share” the body will grow and we will be built up.
 - iii. I need to be invested in her – think in terms of something you are invested in. Paul was invested in the churches. When he helped start a congregation he stayed concerned. Hence the many letters we have recorded. 2 Corinthians 11:28 – Paul spoke of his “*deep concern for all the churches.*” I may not be a Paul, but I can *invest* in my congregation and make it important to me – with attendance, heart-felt worship, contributing, doing what I can to support the brethren and promote growth, etc. The more I put into her, the more I will be concerned about her wellbeing.
- d. ***I need to prefer my brethren*** –
 - i. Acts 2:46 – daily they associated with each other.
 - ii. Hebrews 3:12-13 – we are to exhort one another daily.
 - iii. Romans 12:10 – we prefer one another
 - iv. Again, WE NEED EACH OTHER! In a world that is increasingly ungodly and growing more hostile against true Christianity, we need each other even more. That is why we care about each other as we do.
- e. ***I need to strive to keep her pure*** –
 - i. This is holiness and sanctification. Ephesians 5:25-27 – Jesus gave Himself for the church to sanctify and cleanse her, to present her glorious and pure, without spot or blemish.
 - ii. This is where God is with us – 1 Corinthians 3:16-17 – speaking to the church, Paul described them as “the temple of God”.
 - iii. Revelation 2-3 records the letters to 7 churches of Asia. 5 had problems that needed to be addressed. If ignored, their standing with Jesus was threatened (cf. Revelation 2:5). The only way the church is going to help me draw closer to God is if she is striving to draw closer to Him – in doctrine (teaching), works, worship, organization and everything else about the church. When a church tolerates or practices that which is impure (again – doctrinally or morally), they are corrupting her purity and drawing people away from God instead of toward Him. That was Paul’s concern, especially in Corinth – a church laden with problems. He began by exposing their carnality (1 Corinthians 3:1-4) and then wrote to them about how to change it. The same with the churches of Galatia (cf. Galatians 1:6-9) and Rome. We need to be careful WHO we enter into fellowship with! (That will be our next lesson).
- f. WHEN all these things are present – the church is going to help me draw closer to God.

And thus it is my hope that we can see the importance of the church in our lives. As we have seen, it is part of God’s plan and absolutely crucial if we are pursuing holiness and fellowship with our Lord. Considering these things, HOW IMPORTANT is the church to you? How important is your local congregation? Think about it!