

Sunday, February 5, 2023 am

CONCERNING FIRST PRINCIPLES

What is the Work of the Church?

I regularly emphasize the importance of the church in lessons. That is because I great concerns about the way the church is viewed, both by the denominational world and even among brethren. I am fearful that in many places, there is little developed teaching on the church. And, having said that, the New Testament has much to say about the church – EVERYTHING about the church. Understanding the church is fundament, which is why I include it in first principle lessons. In my lesson today, I want to focus on one aspect of the church – what is the work of the church?

I. Some facts about the church

- a. Defined – the church is the body of the saved. The word in the New Testament is a word associated with a gathering together for a specific purpose. When we think of the church that is what we are.
- b. The church was in God’s eternal plan – Ephesians 3:10-11. This applies to BOTH the church in its universal and local senses.
- c. Christ is the head of the church – Ephesians 1:22-23. Therefore, He has all authority where it is concerned.
- d. Church is Used in 2 senses –
 - i. Universal – the body of all saved of all time at this moment. It would include those who “died in the Lord” (Revelation 14:13) and today, anyone who is in a saved relationship with God and Christ (i.e. in fellowship with Him).
 - ii. Local – is a body of the saved (we ought to consider only those whom we believe to be in fellowship with God) who join together in a given location to do the collective work God has given us to do. The New Testament is filled with examples of local churches INCLUDING letters written to specific congregations (either 1 – Corinthians, Philippians, Thessalonians, etc.; Or many – Galatians, Revelation). As study of the New Testament helps us understand every aspect of the church – including its work. In this lesson we will talk about what that work it.
- e. Each local church is independent and autonomous – by that we mean in the New Testament every congregation was its own entity (independent) with no earthly headquarters joining together in a union of churches (which is what a denomination is) AND self-governing (autonomous) meaning we have not governing organization greater than a local church. God gave elders (bishops, pastors) responsibility ONLY over the congregation where they had been made overseers (cf. Acts 20:28, 1 Peter 5:2, etc.).
- f. God WANTS you to be part of a local church – if it is part of His eternal wisdom and pattern, we MUST view it as important. We have in times past shown this to be the case.
- g. To understand the work of the church, we need to understand authority – how to properly establish authority based upon God’s word. Remember that if the church is a part of God’s eternal plan and a manifestation of His wisdom, thus when we seek to change His pattern, we are acting OUTSIDE of His authority.
- h. The church local, as defined, has works to do. That is our focus in this lesson.
- i. EACH of these facts could be a lesson within itself and in times past we have alluded to each of them. I present this lesson with the assumption that all of these details are somewhat understood.

II. What the work of the church is NOT

- a. Entertainment based – the church is not to be in the business of entertaining, either its members or the world.

- i. It is no secret we live in an entertainment driven society. Our homes are filled with entertainment mediums. Over the past few decades we have seen this become a more prominent focus of churches. They turn the church into an entertaining venue with various genre of music (worship teams & praise bands, etc.), skits, comedians and celebrities.
 - ii. You do not find this in the churches of the New Testament. Luke 19:10, Jesus noted that He came to “seek and save that which was lost.” Romans 14:17 notes, *for the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.*
 - iii. NOTE: This is not denying the need for wholesome entertainment. It is about authority and the purpose and work of the church.
 - b. To relieve societal ills –
 - i. Today many see a primary purpose of the church is to provide social relief for the needy. It is what many have come to expect of churches and they will judge you based on how much you address these things. For many that is ALL they expect from a church.
 - ii. But a study of the NT clearly indicates it is not a work of the church at all. While the Bible DOES address benevolence, as we will see, it is very limited both in scope and purpose.
 - iii. Mark 14:7, Jesus noted, “The poor you have with you always.” Jesus was here noting, among other things, that no matter what we do (including as a society), we will not relieve poverty in the world.
 - c. To provide daycare or secular education – again, this has become a focus and work of many churches. They provide “private schools” and daycare centers for youth. But, in the New Testament, you will see this is not what churches did in the first century. It was not their focus or even addressed. The ONLY teaching you find churches doing in the first century were related to the gospel of Christ. 1 Timothy 3:15 notes that the church is described as, “the pillar and ground of truth.”
 - d. A political activist organization – This goes along with relieving societal ills as previously noted.
 - i. Today, many churches have become actively involved in political causes and candidates (sometimes pushing the boundaries of election and civil laws). But, again I encourage you to read your Bible and tell me WHERE the church became involved in such. It is not there.
 - ii. We ARE to submit to governing authorities, even when it is inconvenient (unless they demand we violate God’s laws – Acts 5:19), AND we ought to address moral concerns as they relate to the New Testament, BUT that is only because we are teaching God’s Biblical standard which will affect every aspect of our lives and we are expected to follow. BUT, that is different from becoming a politically activist organization. The churches desire where government is concerned – pray for our leaders so that we may lead a quiet and peaceful life (1 Timothy 2:1-2).
 - e. All the above are good things and Christians need to be aware of Biblical standards in each of them. But in summary, they are NOT works of a congregation, but the responsibility of the home or individual Christian. This is about authority – WHAT are we authorized to do as a congregation of Christ? NOTE: In a future lesson this year, I intend to further develop this point. Here I only briefly mention these things.

III. **What is the work of the church?**

- a. To evangelize – the great commission.
 - i. Understand the primary goal of the Christian faith is to get to heaven. As we know, only the saved will get to heaven. And the only way one is saved is by obeying the gospel. Romans 1:16-17, 10:14-17, James 1:21 – the implanted word is able to save your souls. Add to this the “great commission”
 - ii. While the great commission is carried out by Christians, a study of the NT shows churches were a part of that plan.
 - iii. The church is described as “the pillar and ground of the truth.” (1 Timothy 3:15) Let it simply be noted here that true church only exists so far as she stands true to God’s word.

- iv. Local congregations proclaimed the word –
 1. 1 Thessalonians 1:8 notes that from them the word of the Lord had sounded forth.
 2. The book of Acts shows both individuals and churches involved in preaching the gospel.
 3. The very idea of an evangelist/preacher shows that churches taught the word of God (Acts 21:8, 1 Timothy 1:3 – Paul was to remain in Ephesus and teach, etc.).
 4. 1 Corinthians 14:22-25 speaks of an unbeliever coming into the assembly, hearing the word and being convicted by it.
 5. When we assemble together and hear the word of God, the church is involved in evangelism.
 - v. Churches supported the preaching of the gospel – Philippians 1:5 Paul is grateful for the fellowship of the Philippians as they supported him in preaching the gospel – Philippians 4:15-17; 2 Corinthians 11:8 – Paul “robbed other churches” (sarcasm, but indicating they supported him to preach the gospel).
 - vi. NOTE: The survival of the TRUE church is dependent upon preaching the gospel both to the saved and the lost.
 - vii. This is why we engage in efforts to share God’s word – including providing tracts that teach on various subjects, conducting home Bible studies, our website, YouTube and Facebook pages, etc.
 - viii. Also note that they did this work without creating human organizations (e.g., Missionary societies) or “sponsoring churches” (a church that oversees a work while soliciting and accepting funds from other congregations).
- b. To edify the saints spiritually –
- i. The word “edify” means to build up. The term in the NT, always has a spiritual connotation attached to it. Where the church and edification is concerned, it is about building us up in God’s Word – so that we are grounded in truth.
 - ii. Consider the following:
 1. Ephesians 4:11-16 – leaders (teaching leaders) are given to equip the saints for “*the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ*” When we are grounded in His word we are not “tossed to and fro”. When truth is taught we are joined together and the body grows “*for the edifying of itself in love.*”
 2. 1 Timothy 1:4 – Timothy urged to remain in Ephesus to teach so that what is taught would not “*cause disputes rather than godly edification which is in faith*”.
 3. 1 Corinthians 14:4ff – Paul addresses coming together to worship and emphasizes their teaching. In this chapter, edify/edification is used 7 times. He emphasizes, “Let it be for the edification of the church that you seek to excel” (14:12). He who prophecies (a gift that taught Christians), edifies the church (14:4-5).
 4. In these passages we see the church edifying its members.
 - iii. The only “edifying” churches in the NT engaged in involved spiritual work - strengthening members in the body of Christ.
 - iv. It was not about entertainment, social gatherings, etc. NOTE: The justification for such works is usually associated with edification. But such is a misapplication of its usage in the New Testament (much like the word “fellowship”).
 - v. The church also edifies as we worship God – that is because God has designed worship in such a way that we are built up spiritually. Every act of worship while directed toward God, will also strengthen us spiritually when we do it properly.
- c. To worship God –

- i. In dealing with edification, we just mentioned worship. And as noted, worship DOES edify. Because of this, many teach that worship is a work of edification. HOWEVER, I see worship as MORE than just edification. Worship is FIRST about glorifying God. We praise God in our worship. Our edification is a PRODUCT of that worship. That is why I identify worship as a distinct work of the church.
- ii. Certainly, one of the works of the church is to worship God.
 - 1. Hebrews 10:24-25 – we are to not forsake the assembling of ourselves together.
 - 2. 1 Corinthians 11:23-26 describes the partaking of the Lord’s Supper, something that is to be done WHEN we assemble together. It is a COLLECTIVE act (that is why I am not comfortable with partaking of the Lord’s Supper in my living room (unless that is the church), in the mountains, a hotel room, or while watching a live streamed assembly, etc.). God intended that it be done when we come together as the church (1 Corinthians 11:20ff, Acts 20:7).
 - 3. 1 Corinthians 16:1-2 – it was when they assembled that they gave their contribution.
 - 4. Singing (Ephesians 5:19, Colossians 3:16, 1 Corinthians 14:15, etc.); praying (1 Corinthians 14:15; and preaching (Acts 20:7) are all acts of worship we engage in.
- iii. Ephesians 3:20-21 – notes that glory belongs to God “in the church by Christ Jesus”. When we gather to worship God, we are glorifying Him – which ought to strengthen us spiritually.
- iv. John 4:24 – we must worship “in spirit and in truth”. Understand that to be pleasing to God, we MUST respect His pattern in HOW we worship Him.
- v. That is why our worship service is simple and not focused on entertainment. Every act of worship has its unique pattern that we need to follow.
- vi. This too is a work of the church.
- d. To help relieve the needs of needy saints.
 - i. The final work we want to address is benevolence. There is scriptural precedence for the church to help the needy, but the pattern is VERY limited.
 - ii. We find instructions within a congregation –
 - 1. 1 Timothy 5:3-16 where they could help “widows indeed”. But only if they did not have believing family to help (see vs. 8, 16).
 - 2. Acts 6:1-4 – where 7 men were to be appointed to help the Hellenist widows (who were believers).
 - iii. We also find congregations who were made aware of brethren in need in other places
 - 1. Acts 11:27-30 finds the church at Antioch hearing about needy brethren in Judea. They collected funds from within themselves (disciples) and sent it to be handled by the elders of various congregations in Judea.
 - 2. 1 Corinthians 16:1-4 and other passages also show later that the church in Jerusalem was in dire straits. Brethren from various places throughout the empire determined that they would send relief to these brethren. (2 Corinthians 8:1-4, 9:6-13, etc.)
 - iv. AGAIN, there is a clear pattern as you study the New Testament about this matter.
 - 1. Each congregation acted independently and autonomously – they chose who and how the funds were to be sent.
 - 2. They sent the collection directly to where the need was
 - 3. The relief was temporary (they did not create an ongoing need that had to be addressed regularly).
 - 4. No super organizations or “sponsoring churches” were established to address the need.

- v. There is NO command, example or even inference that the church engaged in “general benevolence” (attempting to help the needy of society).
- vi. Furthermore, it was NOT used as a tool for evangelism.
- e. Today, as noted, far too many see the church as primarily a societal relief organization. They have come to expect that of the church. In many instances without ANY regard for the gospel message. IOW, they will take funds from churches for benevolence and then reject or even belittle their doctrinal teaching.
- f. Understand, the Bible is clear that we OUGHT to be concerned about the poor. But a study of scripture puts the responsibility on the individual Christian where you can more personally determine who and how much you can do (James 1:27, 1 John 3:17-18, Matthew 25:31-46, etc.). In so doing, you let your light shine and the church is not burdened (cf. 1 Timothy 5:16).

This is a brief summary of what the work of the church is. If we are striving to be the church God wants us to be we will respect His pattern in all that we do. This is a fundamental lesson with encouragement that as you seek a church, you find one that respects God’s pattern in all that they are and do. We strive to follow His pattern. Much more could be said about each of these areas. In fact, in 2017-18, I devoted about 18 months to a study of the church, including individual lessons on each of these works. They are available at our website.

Are we striving to be the church that Jesus built? Are you striving to be a part of her? Think about it!