

The Importance of the Local Church

Dr. David M. Doran

1 Timothy 3:15 clearly establishes the local assembly as the centerpiece of God's work in this dispensation. We know that Paul is referring to the local assembly because of how this verse relates to its surrounding context. What Paul has written in chapters two and three deals with matters of how the local church functions—the place of prayer, the role of women, and the qualifications for the offices of overseer and deacon. Verse 15 then states his purpose for writing these things: “so that you will know how one ought to conduct himself in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and support of the truth.” The local assembly is the place where God has assigned responsibility for upholding His truth. This truth has implications both regarding the relationship of the local church to other ministries and the place of the local church in the life of individual believers. In this article, I would like to focus only on the second implication.

Although we live in a day that focuses almost exclusively on the believer's personal relationship with God, we cannot forget that every genuine believer has been saved and placed into the Body of Christ. It may seem radical, but I would like to suggest that service to God in the local assembly is every believer's primary obligation in life. Clearly, we have other responsibilities entrusted to us by God (family, civic, vocational), but my contention is that the centrality of the local assembly in God's program gives it the place of priority. There are several reasons why this is so.

First, God saves and gifts believers for the purpose of good works, and those are to be done through the local assembly (Eph 2:10; 4:7, 12-16). It is common to view the concept of “good works” from a purely individual perspective, but the instruction found in Ephesians 4 will not allow this. The context and purpose of our service is within the Body of Christ.

Second, a proper relationship to the local assembly is essential to fulfilling all other God-given responsibilities. This is clearly true of parenting duties. You cannot bring your children up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord (Eph 6:4) apart from the local assembly. Their own spiritual growth depends on a proper relationship to the ministry of the local assembly (Eph 4:12-16). The goal of bringing them to spiritual maturity is undercut by neglect or indifference to the local assembly (Heb 10:25).

Your work is subservient to your walk with the Lord (Eph 6:5-9; Col 3:23) and your witness for Christ (Titus 2:9-10; 1 Thess 4:11-12). Both your walk and your witness are integrally related to the local assembly. It is the place where you are taught the Word, built up in your faith by mutual ministry of the Body, and enjoy the purifying effects of worship and service. Your witness for Christ is limited and incomplete if it is disconnected from the Body of Christ.

Your marriage was designed by God to reflect the relationship between Christ and the church, which means the marriage serves that picture (not vice versa, Eph 5:31-32). Even Paul says this is a mystery, but the principle is that marriage was instituted with the advanced knowledge of the relationship between Christ and the church and in order to replicate it and provide a picture of it. And what was said about raising children applies equally to marriage—you cannot build a marriage that is truly pleasing to God apart from the local assembly. Your ability to be a God-honoring spouse grows out of your walk with God in obedience to His Word and Spirit, and that is fueled in the fellowship of the local church.

Third, the call of Christian discipleship clearly places following Christ above all human relationships (Luke 14:26; Acts 5:29). It is clear that Christ has commissioned His

disciples to carry out the Great Commission, so everything else in life is subservient to that God-given responsibility. The Great Commission is fulfilled through the work of the local church in making disciples, baptizing them, and teaching them to observe all that Christ commands. The outgrowth of each local church obeying this commission is the extension of local churches among all the nations.

Fourth, the Apostle Paul indicated that marriage (and by implication, family) can be an impediment to “undistracted devotion to the Lord” (1 Cor 7:35). That implies that “undistracted devotion to the Lord” is the main thing in life. Of course, what Paul says here must be held in conjunction with all that he says in this passage and what the rest of the Scriptures teach, e.g., that marriage is honorable. My point is not to speak ill of marriage; it is to highlight a perspective which has become almost foreign to our thinking—that marriage and family are temporal concerns that should not supplant our devotion to Christ (including our service for Him). God does not keep this planet spinning for the advancement of our careers, pursuit of our life goals, or the enjoyment of our families. The world continues on because the mission of Jesus Christ has not yet been fulfilled, and that means the mission should be our supreme concern. All of these other things are good gifts from the Lord for our enjoyment and a means by which we may glorify Him, but when they become the supreme concerns of our life they can become idolatries.

Please do not conclude that serving God in the local church is justification for neglecting our other God-given responsibilities. Righteousness will not allow us to selectively choose obedience to God—we must fulfill all of His will. The case that I am making is that a proper relationship to the local church provides a unifying center and focus for all other responsibilities.

My chief task in marriage is to reflect the relationship between Christ and the church and carry out my specific responsibilities as a spouse in that relationship. If I love my wife like Christ loved the church, I will see to it that she is being nourished on the Word, growing in grace and serving Christ in the local church. If she is submitting to me like the church is to Christ, then she will be following my lead in the life of the church.

My chief task in parenting is to raise children who love and serve the Lord, something which cannot be done apart from the local church. All of my efforts will be insufficient and lack the fullness needed to bring my children to spiritual maturity and prepare them to live for eternity if my efforts do not include instructing them about the church and involving them in it.

My work is not an end, but a means to the end of providing for my family and God’s work and of displaying my commitment to Jesus Christ as my Lord.

The acid test, so to speak, is whether you allow family and work to overpower your commitment to and involvement in the local church. If so, you have gone off course and veered into worldliness—allowing the things of the world and the mindset of our culture to control your thinking and actions.