

What is the Church? (part 2)

By way of refresher, beloved, last Sunday we discussed 2 main senses in which the word 'church' or 'churches' is used in scripture. The first of these two senses is 'the church' as **the body of Christ** *writ large*: That Christ is the head of the church – the church is His body and His bride.

This second main sense in which the word 'church' is used in scripture is to denote a local, particular assembly of saints meeting together, in one place, for religious worship. It is this second main sense of 'the church' that we will attempt to flesh out on this day, that a fuller understanding of our duties and responsibilities, as commanded by our merciful God, may blossom therefrom.

So we will now seek the scripture, enlist the help of expositors and compare spiritual things with spiritual to get at the nature of the local, particular assembly called the church, to come to answers to the following questions:

1. What constitutes the formation of a local church?
2. What are the proper bounds of the functioning of a local church, as described in scripture?
3. What is the nature of membership in a local church?
4. What are the duties of local church members toward each other?
5. Finally, what, if any, necessity is therefore laid upon the heart of one who makes a public profession of faith in the Lord Jesus Christ to seek communion at a *bona fide* local church as a vital part of one's Christian walk?

As to the general nature of a church, Gill attempts to help us begin to see what it looks like:

Gill: There must be an union, a coalition of a certain number of persons to form a church state, one cannot make a church; and these must be united, as the similes of a tabernacle, temple, house, body, and a flock of sheep, to which a church is sometimes compared, show; the tabernacle was made with ten curtains, typical of

the church of God; but one curtain did not make a tabernacle, nor all the ten singly and separately taken; but there were certain loops and taches, with which they were coupled together; and being thus joined, they composed the tabernacle. Same with the temple of Solomon, which was another type of the gospel church: and which was made of great and costly stones; these stones, not as in the quarry, nor even when hewed and squared, lying singly by themselves, made the temple, until they were put and cemented together, and the headstone brought in and laid on: thus truly gracious souls, though they are by grace separated from the common quarry of mankind, and are hewn by the Spirit of God, and by the ministry of the word, and are fit materials for the church of God, yet do not constitute one, until "fitly framed together," and so grow unto an holy temple of the Lord. A church is called the house of God, a spiritual house, built up of lively stones, living saints; but these, be they ever so lively and living, they do not form a church, unless they are builded together, "for an habitation of God". A church of Christ is often compared to an human body; which is not one member, but many; and these not as separate, but members one of another; who are "fitly joined together, and compacted by that which every joint supplieth.

But what sufficient number, and by what mechanism do they become a 'church?'

Gill: As to number, Tertullian thought that three persons were sufficient to constitute a church; which may seem to be confirmed by Matthew 18:20:

"Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them" – Matt. 18:20

Gill (cont'd.): This number seems functionally sufficient to meet and pray together, and edify one another; but a judicial process in a church way, in case of offence, as directed to in some preceding verses, seems to require more; seeing, if the offending and offended parties cannot compromise things among themselves, one or two more are to be taken, which if two make four; if reconciliation cannot be made, the matter must be brought before the church, which must consist of a greater number than the parties before concerned (the traditional Jewish minimum number to form a 'congregation' was ten); and a church organically considered, or as having proper officers, seems to require more; the church at

Ephesus was begun with twelve men, or thereabout (Acts 19:7), yet a church should consist of no more than can meet together in one place, where all may hear, and all may be edified; and if it should be so increased that this cannot be, then it should be divided into lesser communities, which seems to be the case of the church at Jerusalem; which, upon the departure of those who were converted at Pentecost, and on the scattering of the church by persecution, formed several churches in Judea, and accounts for the early mention of them.

The number is not particularly important, except to note that it can be neither too large nor too small a number to carry out the proper and exhaustive functioning of the church, which will be manifested and spoken to shortly.

The mechanism by which a local church is formed is voluntary consent and agreement.

Gill: This union of saints in a church state, is signified by their being "joined" and as it were glued together:

"And when Saul was come to Jerusalem, he assayed to join himself to the disciples: but they were all afraid of him, and believed not that he was a disciple." – Acts 9:26

It is a union of spirits so close, as if they were but one spirit; so the members of the first Christian church were "of one heart and one soul," being "knit together in love;" and it becomes members to endeavour to "keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace":

"Endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." – Eph. 4:2

"And the multitude of them that believed were of one heart and of one soul: neither said any of them that ought of the things which he possessed was his own; but they had all things common." – Acts 4:32

"That their hearts might be comforted, being knit together in love, and unto all riches of the full assurance of understanding, to the acknowledgement of the mystery of God, and of the Father, and of Christ;" - Col. 2:2

This union between them is made by voluntary consent and agreement, not just to be a church, but to voluntarily consent and agree to both obey the commands of God and to submit ourselves to the body in performing our obedience.

“And he took the book of the covenant, and read in the audience of the people: and they said, All that the LORD hath said will we do, and be obedient.” – Ex. 24:7

“This is he (Moses), that was in the church in the wilderness with the angel which spake to him in the mount Sina, and with our fathers: who received the lively oracles to give unto us:” - Acts 7:38

Gill: God prescribed to them laws in the wilderness, and they covenanted and consented to obey them, he avouched them to be his people, and they avouched him to be their God; and then, and not before, were they called a "church."

Nothing else but mutual consent, can make a man a church member: not faith in the heart, for that cannot be known until a man declares and professes it; nor a bare profession of faith, which, though necessary to membership, does not declare a man a member of one church more than of another, nor entitle more to one than to another; unless he gives up himself to a church, and professes his desire to walk with it in a subjection to the gospel of Christ: nor baptism, though a prerequisite to church fellowship, does not make a man a member of a church, as it did not the eunuch (who Phillip baptized): nor hearing the word; for men ignorant and unbelievers may come into an assembly and hear the word (1 Cor. 14:24), yea, persons may hear the word aright, have faith, and profess it, and be baptized, and yet not be church members; it is only mutual consent that makes them such: persons must propose themselves to a church, and give up themselves to it, to walk in it, in an observance of the ordinances of Christ, and duties of religion; and the church must voluntarily receive them in the Lord. And, Such a mutual agreement is but reasonable; for how should "two walk together except they be agreed?" (Amos 3:3) and unless persons voluntarily give up themselves to a church and its (elder), they can exercise no power over them, in a church way; they have nothing to do with them that are without, they have no concern with the watch and care of them; nor are they entitled thereunto, unless they "submit themselves to one another in the fear of God;" they have no power to reprove, admonish, and censure them in a church way; nor can the (elder) exercise any pastoral authority over them, except by agreement they consent to yield to it; nor

can they expect he should watch over their souls as he that must give an account, having no charge of them by any act of theirs. Now, It is this confederacy, consent, and agreement, that is the formal cause of a church; it is this which not only distinguishes a church from the world, and from all professors that walk at large, the one being within and the other without, but from all other particular churches; so the church at Cenchrea was not the same with the church at Corinth, though but at a little distance from it, because it consisted of persons who had given up themselves to it, and not to the church at Corinth; and so were members of the one and not of the other; "one of you," as Onesimus and Epaphras were of the church at Colosse, and not of another:

"With Onesimus, a faithful and beloved brother, who is one of you. They shall make known unto you all things which are done here." – Col. 4:9

"Epaphras, who is one of you, a servant of Christ, saluteth you, always labouring fervently for you in prayers, that ye may stand perfect and complete in all the will of God." – Col. 4:12

The local church is congregational – or a local assembly of believers, a body of believers who by mutual consent and agreement, submit themselves to one another and to the doctrines, commandments, discipline and ordinances of the scripture – the word of God – and who have power by this mutual consent to admit and reject members, bound by the scripture in doing so, and also bound to choose their own officers, by mutual and unanimous consent; again, bound by the scriptures as to qualifications for such offices. Upon these agreements, a complete organized church exists. There is no authority overarching the local, New Testament church – the only authority it appeals to is that of God Almighty, as specifically outlined in scripture – and it is our sober, non-delegable duty to rightly divide the word of truth in all such doctrinal matters. We will talk more about the order and power of this church shortly.

Gill: As the original constitution of churches is by mutual consent, so the admission of new members to them, is upon the same footing: the primitive churches in the times of the apostles, "first gave their own selves to the Lord," as a body, agreeing and promising to walk in all his commandments and ordinances, and be obedient to his laws, as King of saints; "and to us," the apostles, pastors, guides, and governors, to be taught, fed, guided, and directed by them, according to the word

of God; and to one another also, "by the will of God," engaging to do whatever in them lay, to promote each other's edification and the glory of God: and so all such who were added to them, it was done by mutual consent, as it always should be; as no man is to be forced into a church, or by any compulsory methods brought into it, so neither can he force himself into one; he has no right to come into a church, and depart from it when he pleases; both the one and the other, his coming into it and departure from it, must be with consent: a man may propose himself to be a member of a church, but it is at the option of the church whether they will receive him; so Saul assayed to join himself to the disciples, that is, he proposed to be a member with them, but they at first refused him, fearing he was not a true disciple, because of his former conduct; but when they had a testimony of him from Barnabas, and perceived that he was a partaker of the grace of God, and was sound in the faith of Christ, they admitted him, and he was with them going out and coming in: and it is but reasonable a church should be satisfied in these points, as to the persons received into their communion; not only by a testimony their becoming lives, but by giving an account of what God has done for their souls, and a reason of the hope that is in them; as well as by expressing their agreement with them in their articles of faith.

I maintain that there are those who wrest that blessed verse of scripture, Matt. 18:20, to their own destruction – misapplying it in their pride and refusal to submit to the body, denying the proper functioning of the new testament church commanded to us by the Lord our God, and turning themselves into God in their own dark hearts by thinking of themselves as the church – with none others necessary besides themselves and perhaps those family members over whom they hold sway. Listen up, rebels – you're not a church!

Now, as to the proper bounds and functioning of the local church and its several members,

1. The assembling of ourselves together for the delivering and receiving of God's word
2. Communication by which mutual edification may be accomplished
3. Giving evidence of an orderly walk – and watching for such evidence in others
4. The carrying out of proper church discipline

5. The proper administration of the ordinances: Baptism and the Lord's Supper
6. Both temporal and spiritual ministering unto the saints

The church, its officers and members, exercise God-given, scriptural authority over all members. The church exercises no authority over those who are not members. The members have specific, non-delegable duties unto one another:

1. First, and which is a principal one, to love one another;

“Owe no man any thing, but to love one another: for he that loveth another hath fulfilled the law.” – Rom. 13:8

This is a debt which every man owes to another, and should be always paying, especially Christians and members of churches. 1a. This is the great law of Christ, as King in His church, His royal commandment, which He enjoins on all His subjects - the example of Christ should influence and provoke our hearts unto it, and mutual love is an evidence of being the disciples of Christ

“A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another. By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another.” – John 13:34

It is this which makes communion in a church state delightful and comfortable, as well as honourable;

“Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity! It is like the precious ointment upon the head, that ran down upon the beard, even Aaron's beard: that went down to the skirts of his garments; As the dew of Hermon, and as the dew that descended upon the mountains of Zion: for there the LORD commanded the blessing, even life for evermore.” – Ps. 133:1-3

And nothing is more uncomfortable and dishonourable, as well as more pernicious and ruinous to a church state, than want of genuine Christian love.

“But if ye bite and devour one another, take heed that ye be not consumed one of another.” – Gal. 5:15

This love of members one to another ought to be fervent, unfeigned, without dissimulation, not as men pleasers and without respect of persons.

2. It is our duty to endeavor "to keep the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace."

“Endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body, and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling; One Lord, one faith, one baptism, One God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all.” – Eph. 4:3-6.

Gill: There should be, as much as may be, an unity of mind and judgment in the doctrines of the gospel; being, as the apostle in the above place directs, "of one accord and of one mind;" or as he elsewhere says, that "all speak the same thing;" and that they "be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment," or otherwise there is danger of schism, divisions, and contentions (1 Cor. 1:10, 11). There are two ingredients here, beloved. We must be of one mind – one accord, and we must have the mind of Christ, not the mind of any man's judgment, for there is but one doctrine of faith, or scheme and system of divine truths to be believed; and church members should "stand fast in one spirit, with one mind, striving together for the faith of the gospel" (Phil. 1:27). And there should be a zealous concern for unity of worship, and that nothing be introduced into it contrary to the pattern showed and directed to in the word of God; and that they "serve the Lord with one consent, and with one mind, and with one mouth glorify God," (Zeph. 3:9; Rom. 15:6).

3. We must sympathize with each other in all conditions and circumstances that we come into, whether temporal or spiritual - any calamity, affliction, and distress, of any kind we should visit, comfort and assist any which suffer adversity in body, family or estate – especially for the sake of religion. Likewise when in inward trouble and distress of soul, through the hidings of God's face, the temptations of Satan, the weakness of grace, and the strength of

corruptions; it becomes fellow members to "comfort the feeble minded, support the weak, and bear one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ," which is the law of love and sympathy (1 Thess. 5:14; Gal. 6:2).

4. We must minister unto one another – providing that which is needed in both temporal and spiritual matters – in short:

“Distributing to the necessity of saints;” - Rom. 12:13

This distribution is for ANY necessity: monetary, labor, nursing, spiritual nourishment or restoration. And all such distribution should be looked to with the utmost of proactivity. No passivity or failure to notice such need is acceptable. We are the body of Christ. We are to look to one another with love, compassion and sympathy in the same manner as Christ has done unto us.

5. We must watch for each other's souls.

Gill: That they do not indulge to sinful lusts and pleasures, and make provision for the flesh, to fulfill the lusts thereof; and so bring a reproach on the good ways of God, and the doctrines of Christ; and to warn them that are unruly, or err from the rule of the word, and recover them from any evil way they seem to be going into; as also to watch over them, lest they receive any notion contrary to the gospel of Christ; for not only pastors of churches are to watch over them for this purpose, but members of churches are to look "diligently," "lest any man fail of the grace of God," or fall from the doctrine of grace, (Heb. 12:15) they should not suffer sin to lie upon a brother; but rebuke and admonish him for it, according to the gospel rule, first alone, and then, if such rebuke succeeds not, to do it with, and before others; and such rebukes and admonitions should be in love, and with much tenderness, as well as faithfulness; for such only are like to be kindly received, and to be successful; such that are fallen, whether into immorality or error, should be endeavoured to be restored by those who are spiritual, in the spirit of meekness (Lev. 19:17; Ps. 141:5; Gal. 6:1).

Watching for each other's soul requires us to participate in, at every level that we are called upon, church discipline.

“Moreover if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother. But if he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established. And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church: but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican.”
– Matt. 18:15-17

6. We must bear with one another.

Gill: The strong to bear the infirmities of the weak; and to bear one another's burdens, and to forbear with each other, and not bear hard on one another, considering the patience, forbearance, and longsuffering of God to them; and it becomes them to forgive one another, as Christ, and God, for Christ's sake, has forgiven them; and especially when repentance is declared and discovered, then forgiveness should be extended, not only to seven times, but to seventy times seven; for if we forgive not, neither will our heavenly Father forgive our trespasses (Rom. 15:1; Gal. 6:2; Col. 3:12; Matthew 18:21, 22; Mark 11:26).

7. We must pray for one another.

“Praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, and watching thereunto with all perseverance and supplication for all saints.” – Eph. 6:18

All members have this responsibility – not just officers of the church. In any distress or adversity, members should be prayed for (as their only help is God – the same as our own). The elders should be prayed for, to get wisdom from God – to be given proper humility, sight, judgment and strength. All members of the church should be prayed for, that they may have their various wants supplied; that they may grow in grace and spiritual knowledge; be kept faithful, and preserved blameless, to the coming of Christ.

8. We must, as members of the church, separate ourselves from the men of the world, and not touch persons and things which are defiling.

Gill: (We) are a separate people, and should dwell alone, and not be reckoned among the nations or the people of a vain and carnal world; (we) are called out of the world, and therefore should not be unequally yoked with the men of it; with men unrighteous, ignorant, lawless, disobedient, dead, and profane sinners, with whom they can have no profitable communion; and, indeed, from all such in their own societies who walk disorderly they are directed to withdraw themselves. In conversation (or activities of life) (we) are to abstain from sinful men; not that they are to have no commerce nor correspondence with them in civil things, for then, as the apostle says, they "must needs go out of the world;" but that they are not to join with them in their sinful practices, but bear a testimony against them; nor (are we) to keep up any intimate and familiar converse with them; knowing, that "evil communications corrupt good manners". Nor should they keep company with erroneous persons, with men of unsound principles; for such, who cause divisions and offences, contrary to the gospel of Christ, are to be avoided, and their conversation shunned; and such who cavil at, and consent not unto the wholesome words of Christ, and the doctrine according to godliness, are to be withdrawn from; and such who have imbibed heretical notions, repugnant to the sacred Trinity, and to the person of Christ, and the grace of the Spirit, are to be rejected; and such who bring not the doctrine of Christ with them, are not to be bid Godspeed, nor received into the houses of God's people (Rom. 16:17; 1 Tim. 6:3-5; Titus 3:10; 2 John 1:10, 11).

9. We must be constant in assembling ourselves together for religious worship.

Gill: It is remarked of the members of the first Christian church, to their honour, that they "continued steadfastly in the apostles doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread and in prayer," (Acts 2:42) that is, they constantly attended on hearing the doctrines of the apostles, which they gladly received and persevered in; and kept up their communion with them and one another, and

were not missing at the Lord's Supper, and at times of public prayer; though in after times, an evil manner, a bad custom prevailed among some of those Christian Hebrews; as to "forsake the assembling of themselves together," which the apostle takes notice of to their dishonor.

10. There should be no respect of persons among members of churches in their assemblies, and when met together on church affairs, with regard to rich or poor, greater or lesser gifts, talents, skillsets, analytic ability, etc. There should be no overbearing, no browbeating, nor any supercilious airs used; no affectation of superiority one over another, they being on an equal footing, in the same relation to one another, abating the difference of offices (Matthew 20:26, 27) all the strife should be "in honour to prefer one another;" and such who are highest, with respect to spiritual gifts or worldly riches, should "condescend to men of low estates" (Rom. 12:10, 16). Using pejorative language to describe the perspective of a brother or sister, or using forensic strategies, are worldly, vain actions, and are never properly motivated. We are to seek the Lord and walk in the light supplied to us – helping one another in a spirit of meekness.

11. We must be careful to keep the ordinances, baptism and the Lord's Supper, as they were delivered.

Gill: ...and not suffer any innovation in them, neither as to the matter and substance of them, nor as to the manner in which they are to be observed; and they should walk in them all with great unanimity and constancy, and should stand fast in the liberty wherewith Christ has made them free, and not be entangled with any yoke of bondage, nor suffer any human inventions and unwarranted practices to be imposed upon them.

12. We must be examples to one another in a holy walk and conversation, and in an observance of all the duties of religion. One of our dear sisters, an aged woman who is most certainly a teacher of good things, spoke to me the other day that she is being ministered to, but she seemed a little

frustrated that she couldn't do more to help others. Her shining example of a humble heart, an orderly walk, even in times of great affliction, I responded, is more help to this body than she could possibly imagine.

Of the offices of the church, there are only two: that of pastor, which is synonymous with elder, overseer, bishop- these are all the same office, and the primary duties are to feed the sheep, administer the ordinances, and help provide spiritual oversight of the flock (though this duty is not exclusive to the elder, as all members hold this responsibility to a degree); and that of deacon, which office is much more of a tending to secular functions within the church. Those who hold these offices must: 1) be qualified by a scriptural standard, 2) desire the office, and 3) be unanimously chosen to execute the office by the church membership. Pastors don't choose other pastors, nor do they choose deacons – it is only through the membership being of one accord that such an one is added. To be clear, there is no necessity laid upon the New Testament Church of the Lord Jesus Christ to have a singular pastor – many of the New Testament Churches in scripture had both multiple elders and multiple deacons. There is also no necessity laid upon the church to have multiple persons in each office, or even to have deacons; but at least one elder, or pastor, or bishop or overseer, is necessary to comprise a church. The duties of pastors to members and members to pastors are an important topic of spiritual investigation and discernment unto itself, and therefore will not be treated here. If the Lord should tarry and none of my elder brethren should endeavor to tackle the subject, I may return to it myself at my next opportunity.

We feel the necessity of the local church right down to our toes – I was so convicted of its necessity thirteen years ago, that I packed up my little family and headed 1500 miles to get to one, having not found one any closer (and boy did I try). Topeka isn't exactly a cultural or natural Mecca to a Florida boy. And we readily tell people that they need to get to the church. Well, do they? Finally the question is what, if any, necessity is therefore (given the constitution and functioning of the church as evidenced in scripture) laid upon the heart of one who makes a public profession of faith in the Lord Jesus Christ to seek communion at a *bona fide* local church as a vital part of one's Christian walk?

- You simply cannot minister to the saints of God from long distance. And you have no local church where you are. Get to the church.
- You simply cannot submit yourself to the body of Christ, as evidenced by agreed submission to the authority of a local church of the Lord Jesus Christ, and therefore the Lord Jesus Christ, without a local church. And you have no local church where you are. Get to the church.
- You simply cannot participate in and be subject to church discipline outside of membership in a local New Testament Church. Such participation is absolutely necessary to submission unto Christ, and you have no local church where you are. And, NO! – you are not a church unto yourself – Mr. “I’ve got a wife and kids, and that’s my church.” That is not a New Testament Church of the Lord Jesus Christ, and your maintaining that it is is merely a function of your pride and not:

“Casting down imaginations, and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ;” – 2 Cor. 10:5

Get to the church.

- You simply cannot distribute to the necessity of the saints without your day in, day out involvement in the local church – you have no idea what is needed, and you very well may be the one in need. And you have no local church to support that function. Get to the church.
- And you simply cannot heed the sober admonition of warning given by the Holy Spirit of God, through the Apostle at Hebrews 10, without the regular congregation of the church to worship the Lord our God:

“Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching.” – Heb. 10:25

You have no church. You are no church. If you call yourself a Christian, you must seek membership at a bona fide New Testament Church of the Lord Jesus Christ. If you can find a bona fide church close to you, then go there. But there is not one

that we have seen or heard of, and we keep our ear very close to the ground. We are a peculiar people.

“Who gave himself for us, that he might redeem us from all iniquity, and purify unto himself a peculiar people, zealous of good works.” – Titus 2:14

Go with us, the way is good. Get to the church.

I love you all. Amen.