

Work of the Church

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Introduction

The church of our Lord is a divine institution with a divine mission. It has been given a great and glorious work to accomplish. The church is a demonstration of God's wisdom and purpose (Eph. 3:8-12). In modern conception, the church is an amalgamated social club/welfare agency. However, in God's design, the church is a *spiritual* institution which ministers primarily to man's *spiritual* needs (1 Pet. 2:4-10).

The church that belongs to Christ will conform to the divine pattern revealed in Scripture. Just as the Lord had a pattern for his tabernacle/temple, the focal point of Israel's worship during the Mosaic dispensation, he also has a pattern for his spiritual temple, the church, which is the focal point of acceptable worship today.

Down through the ages, men have sought to reshape the church to their liking. As Israel of old wanted a king to go before them, many today desire something more elaborate and ostentatious than simple New Testament Christianity. However, those who discount the divine pattern for the church disparage the God of heaven. Those who would reshape the church rob it of its power.

What is the work of the church? From a Scriptural standpoint, it has been assigned the duties of evangelism, edification, and benevolence. In these areas, the church of our Lord is all-sufficient and fully-equipped to do the work that God has given it to accomplish.

Universal vs. Local

Holy Scripture refers to the church in two distinct senses: universal and local. Viewed from a universal standpoint, the church has no organization, but is composed of all those down through the ages who have submitted to God's will. However, in a local sense, the church has a very distinct organization: each independent and autonomous congregation should have elders, deacons, an evangelist(s), and active members (Acts 14:23; 1 Cor. 1:1-2; Phil. 1:1-2). Though automatically added to the church universal (Acts 2:46-47), we must join ourselves to a local congregation (Acts 9:26-28).

To achieve their goals, men create bureaucratic, ecclesiastical hierarchies. Sadly, such thinking permeates the church today, with crippling and incapacitating effect.

The Random House Dictionary of the English Language defines "bureaucracy" as "excessive multiplication of, and concentration of power, in administrative bureaus or administrators." Political bureaucracies become bogged down in red tape and regulation. Religious bureaucracies inevitably lead to stagnation and decline. The key to church growth is personal involvement.

Each local congregation must do the work God has given it to accomplish. When this pattern is followed, successful results ensue. However, in both the secular and spiritual realms, men often shift responsibility from an individual/local level to a broader/collective level. This path inevitably leads to disappointing and diminished results.

Centralized control of the work of the church is objectionable for three reasons: First, it violates congregational autonomy; second, it is inefficient; and third, it opens the door to corruption from the top-down. In striking contrast, congregational action under the direction of local elders is preferable because it is in harmony with God's will, it is far more effective in its use of resources, and local autonomy serves as a barricade/firewall against the threat of apostasy.

Evangelism

Christ came into this world of sin in order to seek and save the lost (Matt. 18:11; Luke 19:10). Man cannot be saved apart from obeying the gospel (John 3:36; Heb. 5:8-9). The church has been assigned the task of holding forth the word of life to a lost and dying world. It is described as the "pillar and ground of the truth" (1 Tim. 3:14-15). In giving the Great Commission, Jesus enjoined evangelistic responsibility directly upon the apostles (Matt. 28:18-20; Mark 16:15-16; Luke 24:44-49), and indirectly, upon all disciples (1 Thess. 1:6-8). This focus is clearly evident in the Acts of the Apostles (Acts 5:42; 8:4; 8:12; 8:25; 8:35; 8:40; 10:42; 11:20; 13:32; 14:7; 14:15; 14:21; 15:35; 16:10; 17:18; 20:25; 28:31).

Since this is a divinely commissioned work, the church can use its resources to preach the gospel. In the First Corinthian letter, Paul defended the right of evangelists to be supported (1 Cor. 9:6-14). The Philippian church provided the apostle with financial support on repeated occasions (Phil. 1:3-5; 4:15-19). He also received wages from other churches during the time he preached at Corinth (2 Cor. 11:8).

The church is fully equipped to accomplish its divinely ordained mission. Unfortunately, many lack faith in God's arrangement. Laying aside the divine pattern, they substitute their own methods of evangelism.

Missionary Societies have been popular with many religious denominations and even certain elements of the brotherhood in years gone by. Such organizations are separate and distinct from the church. They receive contributions from local congregations and in turn do evangelistic work for them. It is wrong for churches to contribute to another organization to perform the work God has assigned to it. Such abdication of responsibility suggests that men do not believe that the church can accomplish its task and is therefore unable to fulfill God's work. This attitude reflects upon the wisdom of God who has planned the church. Let us remember that during the first century, the gospel was preached to the whole world without the aid of a missionary society.

More recently, the "Sponsoring Church" arrangement has become a very popular method of evangelism among many churches of Christ. Individual churches send contributions to a church which is "sponsoring" a certain work, such as the support of foreign missions, radio and television programs, etc. The "sponsoring church" supervises the program and oversees the work. The "Herald of Truth" radio and television broadcasts and the "One Nation Under God" literature distribution campaign are examples of this practice. In principle, this arrangement is no

different than the missionary society. No church has the right to turn any part (or all) of its evangelistic oversight to another church or set of elders. Every New Testament congregation was independent and autonomous (Acts 14:23; 1 Pet. 5:1-4). However, the sponsoring church arrangement destroys congregational autonomy. It also limits growth. Local churches stagnate when they depend on others to do their own work!

Another problem is also evident today. So many churches have become sidetracked. They have abdicated their God-given mission and have become little more than a social club. In promoting the social gospel, they have turned away from their main responsibility of soul-winning. Do we win people by ball games and ice-cream suppers or by teaching the Word (John 6:26-27, 44-45; 1 Pet. 1:23-25)? Those employing carnal appeals manifest a lack of faith in the message of truth. The gospel, not fun and frolic, is God's power to save (Rom. 1:16-17; 2 Thess. 2:13-15).

Edification

The verb is used of Christ, in foreshadowing his physical death: "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will **build**/raise it up" (Matt. 26:59-61; 27:39-40; Mark 14:55-59; 15:29-30; cf. John 2:19-22). The noun is used of Christ, in reference to his glorified position: "The stone which the **builders** rejected, this became the chief corner stone" (Matt. 21:42; Mark 12:10-11; Luke 20:17-18; 1 Pet. 2:6-8). Exercising due care and caution, let us ensure that our upbuilding efforts are consistent with the will of God.

Both terms are frequently used in the teaching of Jesus, in reference to barns (Luke 12:18), houses (Matt. 7:24, 26; Luke 6:48, 49; 14:30), a synagogue (Luke 7:5), the Temple of Solomon (Acts 7:47, 49) and Herod's Temple (Matt. 24:1; Mark 13:1, 2; John 2:20), tombs (Matt. 23:29; Luke 11:47, 48), towers (Matt. 21:33; Mark 12:1; Luke 14:28), the physical location of a city (Luke 4:29), and the earthly occupation of builders (Luke 17:28).

Both terms are used symbolically, of the former house of Judaism (Gal. 2:18), and the future home of heaven (2 Cor. 5:1). Both terms are used in reference to the church, our present spiritual habitation, built upon a solid and enduring foundation (Matt. 16:13-19; Eph. 2:19-22).

Christians are built up through proper reliance upon the Word of God (Acts 9:26-31; 20:28-32). Christians are built up through the proper use of spiritual offices (Eph. 4:11-16). Christians are built up through the proper exercise of spiritual authority (2 Cor. 10:7-11; 12:19; 13:10). Christians are built up through proper spiritual labors (Rom. 15:18-21; 1 Cor. 3:1-9).

First Century Christians were built up through the proper exercise of spiritual gifts (1 Cor. 14:1-5, 12-19, 26-33). Christians are built up through the considerate exercise of Christian liberty and respect for another's conscience (Rom. 14:19-21; 15:1-3; 1 Cor. 8:7-13; 10:23-30).

Christians are built up through the proper practice of *agape* love (1 Cor. 8:1-3; cf. 13:4-7). Christians are built up through proper spiritual association with one another (Eph. 4:29; 1 Thess. 5:11).

Edification carries the idea of spiritual instruction and education. In giving the Great Commission, Jesus told the disciples to "teach... baptize.. and teach the baptized" (Matt. 28:20).

With the passing of time, we should grow and mature as Christians (2 Pet. 3:18). The church is to edify, or build up, its members. Periods of worship, active teaching and work programs, and even church discipline, all serve to edify.

Since this is a divinely commissioned work, the church can use its resources to provide for the spiritual growth of its members. A meeting place, class materials, song books, etc. are all justified on this basis. However, this does not authorize fellowship halls because recreational activities are not part of the work of the church. Parents, not the church, have the responsibility for providing recreation for their children (1 Cor. 11:22).

Let us recognize that the work of edification is to be done through the organization of the local congregation. Moreover, the New Testament church fulfilled its responsibility without depending upon human institutions such as “Christian Colleges.” Colleges can be useful from the standpoint of the home, but the church can accomplish its work on its own.

Benevolence

The Random House Dictionary of the English Language defines “benevolence” as “(1) desire to do good to others; goodwill; charitableness: to be filled with benevolence toward one’s fellow creatures; (2) an act of kindness; a charitable gift; (3) English History: a forced contribution to the sovereign.”

Individual Responsibility

Old Testament Emphasis (Deuteronomy 15:7-11; Job 31:16-22; etc.)

New Testament Emphasis

There are 3 categories of benevolence dealt with in the New Testament: individual responsibility, congregational responsibility, and congregational cooperation in the area of benevolence.

The vast majority of New Testament passages that deal with benevolence have to do with individual responsibility (Matthew 6:1-4; 10:40-42; 19:16-22; 25:31-46; Luke 3:8-11; 6:38; 10:30-37; 12:13-21, 12:31-34; 14:12-14; 16:19-31; Acts 9:36-41; 10:1-4; 20:34-35; Romans 12:8, 13, 20; 1 Corinthians 13:3; Galatians 6:10; Ephesians 4:28; 1 Timothy 5:4, 8, 16a; 6:18; Hebrews 6:10; 13:2, 15-16; James 1:26-27; 2:15-16; 1 John 3:17-18).

Congregational Responsibility

The local church must care for its own needy members (Acts 2:42-47; 4:32-37; 6:1-3; 1 Timothy 5:3-16). It is important to recognize that the Lord has limited the benevolent work that the church does from its treasury. Every case of collective benevolent work in the New Testament was made to needy “saints” (Acts 2:44-45; 4:32-35; 6:1; 11:29; Romans 15:26; 15:31; 1 Corinthians 16:1; 2 Corinthians 8:4; 9:1; 9:12; 1 Timothy 5:16). There is no command, example or inference that authorizes the church to engage in the work of general benevolence. Such assumptiveness would

overly burden the church. Therefore, we should let the church do the work that God has assigned it to perform.

Church Cooperation In Benevolence

Finally we read of situations where local churches helped other local churches. Sometimes unforeseen situations arise and a church becomes unable to supply its need. When this happened in the first century, sister churches helped the congregation(s) in need by sending relief.

During the reign of Claudius, when a famine struck the brethren in Judea, the disciples at Antioch sent a contribution for their relief, sending it by the hands of Saul and Barnabas to the local elders took care of the distribution of these funds (Acts 11:27-30).

Almost a decade later, the churches of Macedonia and Achaia sent a contribution unto the poor saints at Jerusalem (Romans 15:25-31; 1 Corinthians 16:1-4; 2 Corinthians 8-9). This relief was sent directly to the church in need with each congregation selecting its own messenger to carry its gift. Notice that this was concurrent action. No church lost its autonomy when participating in this form of cooperation.

If the church can only provide for needy saints, what about the other needy people? Apparently some feel that the only way benevolent needs may be supplied is from the church treasury, but such is not true. Remember that the overwhelming emphasis in the New Testament is own individual responsibility (Galatians 6:10; James 1:27; etc.). God has provided that the family should care for its own (1 Timothy 5:4, 8, 16). He has ordained civil powers or governments to minister for good to its subjects (Romans 13:1-7; cf. Psalm 82:1-4; Isaiah 1:23; 3:14-15 10:1-2; Ezekiel 22:6-7).

Through what organization shall benevolent assistance be provided? Some have insisted upon church contributions to human organizations to supply the needs of the poor. However, the New Testament church did not rely upon such man-made organizations to perform its work. All the work God assigned to the church can be done through the local congregation. We do not have the right to change God's pattern and put our church work under some board of directors. Feeling the strength of this argument, some brethren have argued that the homes for orphans and the aged should be placed under a particular set of elders, and other churches should contribute to them. The problem with that plan is that it results in an unscriptural "sponsoring church" arrangement.

New Testament benevolence was very simple in concept. Benevolent work was done within the framework of the local congregation. Each church should provide for its own saints and there should be no organizations requiring unscriptural supervision.

Conclusion

What work has it been given to accomplish? How can the church use its resources? The church can use its resources to accomplish the work God has given it. That work is evangelism, edification and benevolence. The church will grow if we follow God's pattern. We must respect

the authority of God's word (Col. 3:17). Therefore, let us follow the divine pattern as it relates to all aspects of the Lord's church (1 Pet. 4:11).

Sources: Weldon Warnock, "The Work of the Church," *Searching the Scriptures*, August 1978, p. 162; Luther Blackmon, "The New Testament Church: Its Mission," *The New Testament Church: A Truth Booklet*, p. 13; Weldon Warnock, "The Work of the Church," *Speech at the Dallas Preacher's Meeting*, July 13, 1990; Ferrell Jenkins, "Individual vs Congregational Action," *Speech at the Dallas Preacher's Meeting*, July 13, 1990; etc.