

IN SEARCH OF TRUTH

PASSION AND ZEAL FOR LOCAL CHURCH WORK

LESSON 1

WHAT IS LOCAL CHURCH WORK?

Ephesians 2–4

In the margin of this paper, write words that come to mind when you think of local church work.

Webster's Collegiate Unabridged Dictionary defines *passion* as “intense, driving, or overmastering feeling or conviction” and *zeal* as “eagerness and ardent interest in pursuit of something.”

The church is the collective body of God's people. The local church is a part of the church committed to associating and assembling in a geographic location. Simply, local church work is God's work done by the church in a specific location.

It sounds simple. Is being part of a collective body of people who love God and want to do His will really that difficult? If it is truly simple and easy to exhibit, would letters written to local churches thousands of years ago still be needed for us to gain understanding? Would we need the examples of effective and ineffective local church work? Would we need these letters regarding encouragement, works, relationships, shortcomings, commendations, attitudes, behaviors, etc.—letters so important that we are told they will last forever (Isaiah 40:8)?

These letters were written for the understanding of all who read them. Not only is the existence of the local church critical, but *how* the local church exists is important to God. God gave the divine plan for the church, and He assigned the work. God told us *to do* and *how to do*.

Read and discuss Ephesians 2–4.

We cannot deny the message of unity throughout the New Testament. *Unity* and *oneness* are defined for us. Knowing human nature and relationships, Paul prayed that the church at Ephesus would maintain the unity of the Holy Spirit by exhibiting humility,

gentleness, patience, and love (4:2–3). He knew that spiritual family members working together for the cause of Christ would be difficult enough to require complete individual submission to the cause and the intervention of the Spirit. That should wake us up to know that our spiritual relationships must be treated with intent and emphasis. Some of us might convince ourselves that the inability to work with our brethren is acceptable. If it is acceptable, are we “one” and “unified”? Are we the church? Are we doing everything we can and praying diligently for intervention to help our inner beings overcome whatever human nature is keeping us from being unified?

While this study is about understanding what God expects His church to do, this study is also about *how* He expects the church to work collectively. Do you equate passion and zeal with the words you wrote in the margin about local church work? Are you intense, driven, and eager to get up each day and do the work of God *with* your local church? Are you truly zealous today about working with _____, _____, and _____?

QUESTIONS

1. Is it difficult for you to feel passionate about working with your local church family to serve God? If so, why?
2. Is it easier for you to feel passionate and zealous about working on personal projects for God than ones with your local church? If so, why?
3. Do you have relationships in your local church requiring greater efforts by you to overcome human nature in order to be united in Christ?
4. Should God's plan for the local church evolve with time and circumstances?

5. Should we adapt the plan situationally to each community?
6. Should we adapt the plan for each generation?
7. Should we adapt the plan depending on resources?
8. Give examples of times when local church work can evolve into areas outside of God's plan.
9. Give examples of situations when holding fast to God's plan for the local church can be difficult.
10. Discuss differences in local church work and church work within the community.

LESSON 2

FIRST-CENTURY CHURCH WORK

Acts 2:42–47; 4:32–37

The church grew rapidly on the Day of Pentecost and every day thereafter. The church began meeting together, eating together, worshipping together, studying together, praying together, caring for one another, and helping others. If we break down the previous list of actions exhibited by the early church, what work would have been involved for those actions to have occurred?

For the church to grow, there have to be saved people being added to it. For people to be saved, they must hear, believe, and confess that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and through Him is the only means of

salvation. They must acknowledge that their sin separates them from Him and that they can only come to Him through repentance and baptism. For this message to be heard and obeyed, it had to be taught. There were teachers.

The early church fellowshiped daily. The Scripture says they met, broke bread, prayed, and studied. There had to be meeting places. Most of the daily meetings and meals took place in homes (Acts 2:42–47). People opened their homes. Food was prepared. Food was served.

They were of one mind and unified. Their faith strengthened and their knowledge grew through meetings, meals, breaking of bread, and fellowshiping. Their bond was Christ.

They prayed for one another and praised God in prayer. The early church was grateful to God and grateful for one another (Acts 4:23–31).

The church took care of one another. The church continually gave as was needed. The church recognized those in need and took care of the needs. The church saw their possessions as God's possessions. The church saw the well-being of others as more important than the possession (Acts 4:32–37).

The early church was persecuted. They spoke boldly following their conversions. Many lost their lives as a result of their salvation and devotion to following the teachings of the apostles. Following times of persecution, the church scattered and grew. Earthly pain and suffering were joyful triumphs toward their greatest victory. Their devotion to Christ and one another was contagious (Acts 6–8:8; 11:19–21).

Leaders were appointed in every church (Acts 14:23). That would suggest there were qualified men within those churches.

The early church was devoted to teaching the lost and strengthening the saved (Acts 18:22–28). Elders were appointed in the churches to strengthen and protect. The elders of the early church were charged with watching out for their own spiritual lives and protecting the flock from dangers within and without (20:28–33). In Acts 20:35, Paul told the Ephesian elders:

In all things I have shown you that by working hard in this way we must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he himself said, "It is more blessed to give than to receive." (ESV)

The church was not somewhere first-century Christians went once a week. The early church was transformed in their conversions. The church was who

they were. They were passionate and zealous in living as the church and dying as the church. This was first-century church work.

QUESTIONS

1. What did church work look like in the early church?
2. When the church was first established and growing exponentially, what were the roles of the local churches?
3. Would you describe yourself as devoted to teaching the lost and strengthening the saved? Passionate? Zealous?
4. Think about your private feelings regarding opening your home to your local church. How do your actions compare to those in the early church?
5. What is your level of involvement in the daily function of the church? If it helps, make a list of work required for your local church to teach the lost, have worship services, offer Bible classes, host a meeting, have a meal, etc., and note your involvement.
6. Do you feel unified and of one mind with your congregation? Explain.
7. Do you engage in every possible opportunity to assemble, study, eat, and pray with your local church? If so, why? If not, why?
8. The closely knit, unified body of believers was crucial to the growth of the early church. What could the church today emulate from the early church to see greater growth and strength?
9. What changes can you make in yourself to be more bold in your faith—enabling the world to see your transformation?
10. Are you joyful and grateful for your struggles? Do you see your moments of struggle as times of growth? Explain.

LESSON 3

FIRST-CENTURY CHURCH WORKERS

Philippians 2:19–30

The growth of the first-century church happened rapidly within a short amount of time. In one day, the Lord added three thousand to His church (Acts 2:41). Then, only what we can assume to be a short time later, the number of the church doubled as “the number of the men came to about five thousand” (4:4). While it could be easy to look at the growth of the church throughout the book of Acts and attribute the success to just a few men, in reality, it took the work and effort of a great many people carrying out God’s plan as His workers.

Many of the letters in the New Testament include greetings and salutations to or from specific people. While these lists of people are often overlooked in our studies, we can learn a valuable lesson from the church members named in these greetings. These

Christian men and women were workers. Paul wrote to the Romans and instructed them to “greet Prisca and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus” and “greet Mary, who has worked hard for you” (16:3, 6 ESV). He referred to Tychicus as a “beloved brother and faithful minister” (Ephesians 6:21; Colossians 4:7). Epaphras, “a servant of Christ Jesus,” is even said to have “worked hard for [the church in Colossae] and for those in Laodicea and in Herapolis” (verses 12–14). These men and women and others were working to serve God and their local churches.

How did they work and serve God? They did it by bringing gifts to those in need as Epaphroditus did (Philippians 4:18). They did it by opening their homes to the church as Prisca and Aquila did (Romans 16:5). They did it by encouraging local churches as Tychicus did for multiple congregations (Ephesians 6:21–22; Colossians 4:7–8). All of these works done by the members of the early church were vital to the success and growth of the church. The rapid spread of the gospel wouldn’t have happened if it weren’t for these people (and surely others who aren’t mentioned). In much the same way, the church today won’t succeed or grow if we, the people, aren’t working.

The men and women named in these letters were wholly devoted to their work for the church. There was no stopping them. For example, Prisca and Aquila “risked their necks for [Paul’s] life” (Romans 16:3). Epaphroditus was ill, so ill he almost died. Yet his desire was to be with the Philippian church to comfort them. Paul put it plainly: “He nearly died for the work of Christ, risking his life to complete what was lacking in your service to me” (Philippians 2:25–30). This is the kind of devotion and passion these early Christians gave to their work in the church. This is the kind of devotion, passion, and zeal the church needs from its members today if it is going to grow.

QUESTIONS

1. What commonalities do named New Testament workers share?
2. What do you find significant about the greetings and salutations in the various New Testament letters?
3. Examine the greetings, salutations, and purpose of the letters. Compare the introductions Paul made between specific individuals. Do you see random selections, or do you see intentional selections of workers sent to specific locations?
4. The church grew rapidly at this time. Besides the noted works mentioned, what other work would have been done to facilitate building the foundation and growth of the church?
5. List examples of risks involved in first-century church work and church work today.
6. What risks do you face today that the first-century church did not face?
7. What resources did the early church have that we don’t have?
8. What resources does the church today have that the early church did not have?
9. What greeting would Paul have used to introduce you to your congregation?

10. After assessing your talents, what needs would a church have for Paul to send you to help? Upon self-examination, would Paul have sent help to you or would he have sent you to help?

LESSON 4

EXAMINING THE LETTERS TO THE EARLY CHURCHES

Philippians 2:1–8

In looking at the letters, also known as epistles, written to the early church, we can see they all encountered problems, many of the same problems we face in our local churches today. From division to sexual immorality to false teachings, the churches of the first century were in no way immune to the troubles of the world seeping into the church. But no matter the problem, the solution always pointed back to Christ and the unity He provides.

Paul, the author of thirteen of our epistles, wrote to these churches who were struggling and gave them correction and encouragement found in Christ. Four of his letters were written while he was confined in prison. In the first letter to the Corinthians, Paul addressed their problem of division. Some were saying they were true to Paul, some Apollos, some Peter, and some Christ (1 Corinthians 1:10–13). But Paul pointed out that Christ isn't divided and only He can lay the foundation on which this church can build their faith (3:11). He further encouraged them that regardless of their individual talents or gifts, "all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ" (12:12 ESV). There were also divisions in the Philippian church. Paul entreated "Euodia and ... Syntyche to agree in the Lord" (Philippians 4:2). He told the Ephesians they were no longer strangers or outsiders of salvation. Christ had brought them into His favor, which was previously only offered to Jews. Instead, Christ had "broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility" (Ephesians 2:11–22). When divisions plague our local churches, Christ provides unity.

The Corinthians also dealt with sexual immorality. Paul commanded them to "flee from sexual immorality." He told them their bodies were not their own but temples of the Holy Spirit. "You are not your own, for you were bought with a price" (1 Corinthians 6:18–20). In

situations where sin seems rampant, Christ is able to sanctify and bring us all together.

The Galatians were facing people who were distorting the gospel of Christ (Galatians 1:6–9). Instead of Christ's gospel of freedom, false teachers were telling this church in Galatia they had to submit to the law of Moses before they could become Christians. But Paul emphatically told them, "For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery" (5:1). The Colossians were dealing with false teachers as well, who were telling them they needed "philosophy" and "human tradition," none of which is found in Christ (Colossians 2:8). Paul told them Christ was all they needed. The gospel of Christ doesn't seek to restrain His church; it seeks to free us to work together for Him.

The early churches were confronted with serious problems, ones we see in our local churches today. But each time a problem came up, the early Christian leaders pointed them all back to Christ because He unifies us in our work. He provides a common goal for each of us to work toward. As Paul wrote to the Thessalonians, "For God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us so that whether we are awake or asleep we might live with him" (1 Thessalonians 5:9).

QUESTIONS

1. Compare and contrast the problems of the early church with problems the church faces today.
2. What roles do division and divisive attitudes play in the problems in the church today?
3. Discuss the significance of the relationship between Euodia and Syntyche. Paul noted what effect two women can have on a local church. What can the church learn from this example?

4. What message was given in Philippians 1:27? Examine yourself in relation to this message.

5. What message was given in Philippians 2:14? Examine yourself in relation to this message.

6. What roles do division and unity play in the letters to the churches?

7. Which four epistles did Paul write from prison?

8. What are the names of the other epistles written by Paul?

9. Of the four epistles written from prison, which one was written to a personal friend?

10. Which letter is comprised of instruction for selecting church leadership?

LESSON 5

EVANGELISM

Ephesians 4:11–16

Evangelism is one of the works of the church every Christian would agree is essential. Jesus Himself issued this work to His followers before the church had even started: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations,

baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:19–20 ESV). He even told the apostles that they would be taking word of His teachings and miracles as witnesses “in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth” (Acts 1:8). There was, and still is, no limit to where the gospel needs to go.

Evangelism can be viewed as an overwhelming task. Taking the Word of God to every nation and making disciples is hard work. That’s where the unity and passion of the local church are essential. We need each other to follow Christ’s example to “seek and to save the lost” (Luke 19:10). In His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said we are the salt and light of the world (Matthew 5:13–16). But one grain of salt and one light can accomplish only so much on their own. These two things are much more powerful when there are more of them.

The church is made up of many different people who are all working for a common purpose: to bring others to Christ. Paul compared the church to a body, saying, “We are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love” (Ephesians 4:15–16). Every member is essential in the growth of the church. God’s church cannot grow without our working to bring His Word to those who need to hear it. Paul often reminded the early church that some were appointed as apostles, prophets, evangelists, shepherds, or teachers, but all were tasked with building up the church (verses 11–12; 1 Corinthians 12:28–31). No matter the position you hold within your local church, you are a pivotal part in the evangelistic work of your congregation.

If the work of the church had to be narrowed down to one word, it would be evangelism. It’s why we teach; it’s why we serve; it’s why we give—we are in the work of evangelizing. Everything we do is motivated by our desire to spread the gospel of Jesus Christ. And we need the participation of everyone in the local church to accomplish this work, to build up the body of Christ.

QUESTIONS

1. Does your congregation work together in planned evangelistic efforts?

2. In what ways is your congregation passionate about evangelism?

3. What are some ideas you have for your congregation to eliminate missed evangelistic opportunities?

4. What role do *you* play in building up the church?

5. If every member plays a vital role in building up the church, as Paul compared the church to a human body, what is your strength? What important role do you fill that enables the whole body to function as it was intended?

6. If you've ever been too shy or apprehensive to share the gospel with someone else, how did you overcome that fear?

7. List ways people justify not being evangelistic?

8. Which one of the early churches written about would you choose to attend and why?

9. When was the last time you brought a soul to Christ?