

The Local Church

by
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While there is no stated definition of a local church in the New Testament, there is however more than enough instruction on its function. I want to direct this study to plainly show what is expected from the local church. So we will learn what is the [definition](#) of the local church, the [purpose](#) of the local church, [Local church government and organisation](#), [Leadership and church discipline](#).

Definition of The Local Church

The definition of a local church is a group of believers, who have come together under a leader or Pastor to fulfill the great commission and hold a witness in any particular town or place in which God the Holy Spirit has planted you. You are there to conduct the ordinances of Baptism, break bread together and fellowship with other believers whilst growing in the knowledge and teaching of God's word. Some say that where two or three come together is a definition of a local church. This scripture from Math 18:20 is only saying where Jesus is or will be present, but the local church is much more than that. The word church is only usually found in the singular but it clearly is plural. For instance we can see the church at [Jerusalem](#) in Acts 8:1, 11:2, the church at [Antioch](#) in Acts 13:1, the church at [Ephesus](#), The church of [Corinth](#), the church at [Laodicea](#), all these are distinctive yet part of the Universal church.

Apart from all this the Local church is the Temple of the Lord, as are we ([1Cor 6:19](#)), because God's Spirit resides in us as well as in His church ([1Cor 3:16-17](#)).

The Purpose of the Local Church

The [first](#) purpose is to teach Bible doctrine and deliver the whole Council of God. ([Acts 2:42](#))
The [second](#) purpose is for the members to exercise the function of Priesthood ([1Cor 16:1-2](#), [2 Cor 8:1-15](#)) In the New Testament church all believers are priests and as such must represent God to the world. The [third](#) purpose is to function in corporate prayer. Believers are not only to pray individually, but as a group so you can agree together on any one action and seek the mind of God and make petitions to God ([Acts 2:42](#), [Heb 13:15](#)) our [fourth](#) purposes is to function in the ordinances of Water Baptism and the Lords Supper and exercise spiritual gifts ([1Cor 12,13,14](#)) The [Fifth](#) purpose of the Local church is to exercise both church and spiritual discipline ([1Cor 5:1-13](#), [2Thess 3:14-15](#), [1Tim 5:20](#)) The [Sixth](#) purpose is to send missionaries around the world ([Acts 11:22-24](#), [13:1-4](#)) The [Seventh](#) purpose is to take care of the needy among believers as well as others in their community. ([Acts 6:1-6](#), [2Cor 8:4-7](#)). The [Eighth](#) purpose is to make disciples and to mature all the believers in the Word. ([Math 28:18-20](#)) The [Nineth](#) purpose is to build up the body of Messiah so that they become a strong part of the Universal church. The Tenth purpose is to Glorify The Lord with the fulfillment of all these actions. ([Rom 15:6](#), [Eph 3:21](#), [2Thess 1:12](#), [1Peter 4:11](#))

Local Church Government and Organisation

This section answers the question 'What is the Biblical form of church government?' For sure different denominations have different systems, but we shall see what is required Biblically. The first example is the 'National Church' model, in this system the head of the state is the head of the church. So for us the Queen is the head of the church of England. This is also true in Scandinavia which is Lutheran, and the monarch is the head of the church. The main problem with this model is that in many cases the monarch could be an unbeliever. So it is more than clear that this model is not Biblical, infact we should have a separation between church and state.

The Hierarchical or Episcopalian Church

This describes a particular type of church government and perhaps the term Hierarchical is a better one to use, as it does not confuse people within that may be a denomination. This model along with the Episcopal model is ruled by a Bishop or some leader of another name, this leader has the power to direct the local church. It is the Bishop that governs the church and he alone has the power to ordain. This is because it is based on a method of apostolic succession.

This however is not from New Testament teaching, it does not view the church as some kind of dynasty that can be handed down to whoever, or to some family. This originally came from the Roman Empire of the 4th century which declared itself a state religion.

This is also impossible, because the office of Apostle has finished according to Ephesians 2:20. Also to be an apostle one had to have seen and be sent by the Lord, because the name Apostle in Greek means 'sent one'. It is also a particular ability of the Apostle as well as the Prophet to receive direct revelation from the Lord. In the Hierarchical Episcopalian method there is always a pyramid structure of hierarchical Priests and a distinction is made between the leader and the congregation which are often known as laity. This is not Biblical from New Testament teaching, but we can find it in such groups as Roman Catholics, Episcopal church, Methodist church and the Lutheran church.

The degree of power over the laity varies from group to group, but it is basically the same with a top down government system, beginning with the bishop then going through a hierarchical structure or priest system ending with deacons.

The Federal or Presbyterian System

Both these systems have what is known as a representative form of government in that they are ruled by representatives geographically. The local church itself is governed by a session composed of elected members with a teaching elder elected by the congregation. As well as elders being ruled by a session there is a higher order of command known as the Presbytery.

All teaching ministers are under a ruling elders, and ruling elders are usually given a district to comprise the Presbytery. Each group or Presbytery makes up the synod, and all synods compound to make the general assembly. The basic system in the local church has deacons and elders as required by the New Testament, but with two exceptions; First the ruling elders are elected by ruling congregations, which the New Testament does not. Second, the Biblical format has many teaching elders, but this model only has one. This system has led to denominational structures such as the Presbyterian church and the Reform church.

However, this system is not what is taught in the New Testament, because it does not have synods, general assemblies, or presbyteries. What it does have is a collection of independent churches under certain authorities which we will discuss later.

The Congregational Format

This format is based on an idea that no man or group has any authority over the local church. This authority is with the people of the congregation, most important matters are dealt with by the congregation without any interference from the elders. Some groups that take on this format are the Baptists, Congregationalists, United church of Christ along with some independent Bible churches. While this model is very popular it is not Biblical but these are the arguments they put forward; It is the duty of the whole church to preserve the unity of the church, and these are the scriptures they use to base their argument on; [Rom 12:6](#), [1Cor 1:10](#), [2Cor 13:11](#), [Eph 4:2](#), [Phil 1:27](#). but none of these scriptures deal with church government.

While it is the duty of the church to preserve its own unity, this statement while it is correct, says nothing about church government. While it is true that every believer has personal responsibility, this by itself does not prove that congregants have responsibility for church government, because the Bible does not teach the congregational form of government.

The **second** argument is that the whole congregation is responsible for doctrinal purity and practice. This argument uses these scriptures to argue their corner; [1Tim 3:15](#), [Rev 2:3](#), which is directed to Angels not to church government. While it is the responsibility of the congregation to protect doctrinal purity that does not reveal what kind of government should rule the church. The **third** argument used to support congregationalism is to receive as ordinances the following scriptures; [Math 28:19-20](#) states what the commission is but says nothing about government. [Luke 24:33](#) again says nothing about church government. [Acts 1:15](#) this scripture again says nothing about church government. The **fourth** passage is [1Cor 15:6](#) but this again says nothing about church government, only that Jesus appeared before more than 500 brethren besides the Apostles.

A further argument in support of congregationalism is to direct church discipline; Relevant scriptures for this argument are [Math 18:17](#) this deals with bringing a brother who sins before the church, but says nothing on how one should govern the church. Next is [1Cor 5:4](#) but this again says nothing about church government.

Conclusion

None of the passages we have visited say nothing about church government even though their constitutions use these scriptures as proof. In fact the congregational form of church government is not found at all in scripture as church government in the New Testament.

The Biblical Form of Church Government

The Biblical form of church government is that each church is independent from one another, there should be no hierarchic structure over the congregation or authority structure. Each local church is ruled by a plurality of elders and they are the authority of the church. The authority does not reside with the congregation as many may well be young believers with no experience. The relationship between the congregation and the elders is as shepherd and the sheep however, in a congregational government the sheep are telling the shepherd what to do? In the New Testament model each congregation is ruled by elders who are co-equals so that a single elder does not get head strong or caught up with pride.

Church Organisation and Leadership

First of all we see the local church had planned and scheduled meetings which required organisation. ([Acts 27:7](#), [Heb 10:25](#))

Second the church required deacons which required organisation. ([Acts 6:1-6](#))

Thirdly the church was required to exercise discipline which required organisation([1Cor 5:4](#))

Fourthly the church was to take up contributions and distribute them([Rom 15:26](#), [1Cor 16:1,2](#))

Fifthly Letters would have to be written to recommend some people to other congregations

which required organisation(Acts18:24-28, Rom 16:1, 2Cor 3:1, Col4:10)

Sixthly they had to register all widows which took organisation.(Acts6:1, 2Tim 5:9)

Seventh Paul wrote to the Corinthian church that these customs had to be observed. (1 Cor 11:1-11)

Eight Order was required in worship services so that chaos did not prevail(1 Cor 14:40, Col 2:5, 1Thess 5:14, 2Thess 3:6-7)

Ninth the local church was to keep record of membership so that they knew who had been added to the church. (Acts2:42, 4:4)

Tenth the elders had to keep certain decorum which shows organisation. (Rom 16:17, 1Cor 5:13, 14:32, 3John 5:12)

All this shows organisation in the church and church discipline.

The Offices

Elder: This term comes from the Greek word 'Presbuteros' which is where we get the word Presbytery from. The second term for the same office is **Bishop** which in Greek comes from the word 'episkopos' (Acts 20:28, Phil 1:1, 1Tim 3:1-2, Titus 1:7, 1Peter 2:25)

Another main term is the word '**Pastor**' from the Greek word '**Poimanos**' which carries the aspect of shepherding and teaching. (Acts20:28, 1Peter 2:25, 5:1-2). These are the three main terms that describe the office, they are not three different terms, but three that describe the same office. The concept of elder is a general term for older person in the Lord that is, because that's how things were done in Israel, the concept did not arise out of a vacuum, the leaders of the synagogue were called elders. So elder, bishop, Pastor are all the same person, its an overseer.

The Number of Elders

The next thing we should discuss is how many elders should a church have. Well it should have a plurality of elders to prevent one man becoming dictatorial and lording it over God's heritage. Single Pastors were never New Testament practice.(Acts 14:23, Phil 1:1, Titus 1:5)

What Are Types of Elder

There are normally two types of elder;

“Let the rulers that rule well be counted worthy of double honour, especially those who minister the word and teaching” (1Tim 5:17)

This scripture mentions two types of elder, those who rule and those who teach, and these are the two types of elder. But only one should teach, but both should keep the other from going astray.

Duties of An Elder

What therefore are the duties of an elder? First he should rule well (1Tim 3:1) Teaching elders are to feed the flock of God and guide the doctrine making sure that wrong doctrine is pointed out. (Titus 1:9, Acts15:1-6) A further job of the elder is to pray for the sick, especially in regard to sin. (James 5:14-15) they should also supervise financial matters (Acts11:27-30) There are of course sometimes traveling elders who will travel in their ministry planting churches, but in the main elders usually

stay and hold the witness in one town or city tending to the flock of God.

The Qualifications of An Elder

There are two main qualifications for the office of elder (1 Tim 3:1-7) and this scripture teaches that first of all the elder must desire the office, he must not be pushed into it in anyway. Next he should be above reproach and not open to criticism. He should be the husband of one wife (at a time) and should not divorce. He should also be temperate, not having any kind of excess in his life. He must be prudent and of a sound mind not being impulsive. He must be hospitable and kind to strangers, and able to teach. He may not however be as good as someone with the gift of teaching, but he should know his way around the Bible. He should not be prone to violence or be one who beats his wife and family.

He should not be a lover of money, and his children are to be in subjection and he should not be a new believer. People in the world (unbelievers) may not respect his beliefs, but he should still be highly thought of and respected. He must not be self willed or arrogant, or addicted to wine or drugs or any strong drink. He should be able to reason things out and his life should be characterised by holiness and he should not be theologically ignorant.

Ordination

The elder should not be elected by the congregation, but appointed by other elders. He should not choose himself but be appointed, and the appointment comes through other elders and through their laying on of hands.

Deacons

This comes from the Greek word 'diakonos' and it means 'servant' (1Cor3:5) and the Hebrew word 'Shamashim' which also means 'servant' because deacons are the servants of elders (1Cor3:5, 2Cor 6:3, Eph 3:7) This office of deacon has no Biblical authority at all, but it is often the case that deacons will run the church in the absence of the Pastor, and in some cases hire the Pastor, but this is not Biblical. Each church should have a plurality of deacons, and they are to carry out the many functions in the church the elder chooses. The life of a deacon should be very stable in accordance with 1Tim3:8. Since this is not a leadership position, its a servant position, therefore he does not need so many personal qualifications. But he should not be double tongued, but speak the truth and not get caught up in church gossip. He should not be characterised with drunkenness and should hold the faith with a good conscience.

He should be married to one wife (at a time) and not get divorced. Deacons are appointed by the same method as elders with the laying on of hands.

Deaconesses

The question is often asked is it Biblical to have the office of a deaconess. Well since this is just an office of servanthood it is not violating any Biblical law to appoint a deaconess.

The Responsibility of The Congregation

In 1Cor 16:15-16 we read that the flock has to be under subjection to those who look after their

souls in ministry. In [1Thess 5:12-13](#) it says that the flock needs to get to know those who teach them in truth and support them giving double honour for supplying them the word. This is also taught in [1Tim 5:17-19](#) those who labour in the word should be able to make a living from it, without having to worry where his food will come from. No accusation should be made against an elder without proof from three witnesses. This is because a teaching elder works in the public eye and may have been accused as a result of someones jealousy against him, also Satan works hardest against those who preach the word. In [1Peter 5:5-6](#) it teaches that the congregants should always be in acceptance with the elders, as this is a way in which humility is shown.

Church Discipline

Church discipline is necessary to avoid division and splits. It is necessary to keep doctrine pure and to make the offender repent. It is especially important to avoid false doctrine.

In the case of such discipline, the offender must first talk to the elder or Pastor, if he does not receive him he should go with another elder. If that does not work he goes to the church, if he refuses to respond then the crucial step of excommunication is necessary. Paul states that elders should mark out those who cause trouble and discipline them if they do not respond they should be excommunicated. ([Rom 16:17-18](#)) This excommunication puts the offender under Satan's control according to [1Cor 5:5](#) and in some cases it is necessary to protect the flock. The necessity for church discipline is to bring the offender to repentance if the discipline is not exercised repentance may never come ([2Cor 2:5-11](#)) This excommunication means the offender is sent out of the church and all congregants are told to ignore him. The Mathew account says “[Let him be unto you as a Gentile and a publican](#)” ([Math 18:15](#)) which means as an untouchable or undesirable. The attitude of church discipline should be first done in a spirit of meekness ([Gal 6:1](#)) Secondly it must be done in a manner of one willing to forgive if the person will respond ([2Cor 2:5-11,7:10-13](#)) the goal of discipline is always restoration it should never be punishment.