

What Makes a Local Church?

The New Testament provides us a number of excellent examples of the organization and establishment of the Universal Church and local congregations. The Universal church was established by Christ when He received all authority from the Father at the resurrection (Matt. 28:18). Jesus is the head of that church (Eph. 1:22), and the Apostles and prophets (who together give us the New Testament) are the foundation (Eph. 2:20). Once established, it neither changes nor is diminished in any way.

We know that the local church is not the same. Local churches are created (and end) all the time. We see through the book of Acts the establishment of churches in Judea, Galatia, Asia and Achaia. We see that they are organized with teachers, preachers, elders and deacons. A local church is limited to the members of the universal church in that area at that time.

Does Matthew 18:18-20 Establish the Local Church?

It is logical that we want to understand what establishes a local church. Some have looked to a statement by Jesus in Matthew 18:18-19 as the establishment criteria of a local church.

Matthew 18:18 "Assuredly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again I say to you that if two of you agree on earth concerning anything that they ask, it will be done for them by My Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them."

Many have concluded that anytime two or more Christians are gathered in the name (authority) of Christ, they have established a local church. Is this accurate?

First we ought to look at the context and audience of this passage. It begins at the first part of the chapter with a discussion of who is the greatest in the kingdom. It moves to forgiveness in verse 15-17, and there in that passage the local church is mentioned ("*tell it to the church*"). It might seem then that the context of the statement is within the local church. But in fact, it is not.

The next statement made by Jesus changes the context entirely. He says "whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven". Does this sound familiar? You may recognize that this is a restatement of Matthew 16 and Jesus speaking with Peter, after Peter confessed Jesus as the Christ:

Matthew 16:18-19 "And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it. And I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."

This passage (Matt. 16) is understood to be the authority of the Apostles (called the “*keys of the kingdom*”). It is tied to important ideas like the baptism of the Holy Spirit and the foundation of the universal church. Its restatement in Matthew 18:18-20 is seen to confirm that all of the Apostles were given the authority to deliver the Law of Christ (Keys of the Kingdom is seen as the authority of God, Luke 11:52). Matthew 18:18-20 is important because it tells us all of the Apostles were authorized to the same degree as Peter to establish the Kingdom of Heaven, the Universal Church.

Thus, the context of Matthew 18:18-20 is NOT to the local church, but to the Universal Church. Christ is declaring that the testimony of the Apostles is not determined by them as any one person, but by their collective agreement. Consider that the Apostles came together to determine issues such as the matter of circumcision in Acts 15.

Is it possible to stretch the context of Matthew 18:18-20 to the local church too? This actually creates several problems (not including the issue of the original context NOT being the local church). First, if Matthew 18:18-20 were applied to the local church, then the context actually has no specific persons involved. Any Christians gathered together would then form the local church. At first, many may not see the problem with that. But consider all of the reasons two or more Christians come together. Maybe they are coming together to play music. Suddenly they are a church with instrumental music. Maybe they are drafted together into the army. Suddenly they are a church coming together to kill people. If two or more Christians becomes the establishment of a local church, the problem is that this creates churches with purposes that are not the purpose of the church.

Some use this passage to authority works of the church like worship. For example, a group of Christians are on a cruise ship and are at sea on the first day of the week. They turn to Matthew 18 and decide that they are in fact a local church. Therefore, they arrange a worship service with communion. Is this an appropriate application of the passage? First, we deduce that it is not the context of the passage. But another point is that this application may contradict other things we know about the local church. Is the only work of a local church worship? In fact, we know that local churches are charged with evangelism, edification, benevolence, church discipline, and church organization. For a church to be sound, it must pursue all of these purposes. We know this to be true from Revelation 2-3, when the seven churches of Asia are evaluated. In that evaluation, they were found lacking (unsound) if they did not pursue all of the purposes given to them.

Does the “church” on a cruise ship intend to evangelize? To care for the saints? Will they seek to appoint elders and deacons and evangelists? Do they even intend to meet again? A local church is more than just the members; many churches change members constantly, people being added and leaving so that over a course of years some churches change the majority of their membership. The assembly is also the authority of the church. The cruise ship church has been created with the purpose of failing. It has no intention of fulfilling the purposes of the church, and as such is a church which would be condemned by God, if indeed it is a church. Perhaps the best it can hope is NOT to be seen as a church.

We use the cruise ship analogy because that example is actually found in the Bible. Acts 27 records the voyage of Paul to Rome. That voyage lasted at least 3 weeks, maybe a month. At no time is there mention that Paul and his companions formed a church to worship. Some might wonder if it happened and was not mentioned, and yet we are trained not to “*think beyond what is written*” (1 Cor. 4:6). We understand that silence is a form of authority too, and there is no mention of an assembly of the saints occurring on board (while it is mentioned that when Paul was able he DID meet with saints in established congregations). In fact, Paul states in Acts 27:33 that it had been two weeks since anything had been eaten; would this not include the Lord’s Supper?

Finally, consider the problematic application of Matthew 18:18-20. If it could be used to establish a local church, then why go out to find other saints, when I can establish a church with just my family? Why work with other saints if it is not necessary? Suddenly, membership in the local church becomes less and less meaningful, as we decide that we can be members of the church without the church.

Matthew 18:18-20 is a passage that describes Jesus’ authorizing the Apostles in their work in becoming the foundation of the universal church. It does not pertain to the establishment of a local church. If someone attempts to create a local church from this passage, they are not rightly dividing the Word of Truth, and risk creating something that is not acceptable to God.

What Does Establish a Local Church?

When the Apostles went out, one of their works was in establishing local churches. We see this in Acts and the epistles. The pattern we see was (1) gathering local Christians together and (2) charging them to the purposes of the church. Paul mentions establishing the church in Rome with spiritual gifts in Romans 1:11; we might consider that these gifts are transformed into the New Testament. That is clear when we see what was stated by Paul in 1 Timothy 3:

1 Timothy 3:15 but if I am delayed, I write so that you may know how you ought to conduct yourself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth.

It is no surprise then that the most important letter in discussing this work is the letter of 1 Timothy. In this letter is found the pattern of establishing a local church.

1 Timothy begins with Paul charging Timothy (1 Tim. 1:18) to establish the church in Ephesus. This is established by creating teachers.

1 Timothy 1:3 As I urged you when I went into Macedonia--remain in Ephesus that you may charge some that they teach no other doctrine

1 Timothy continues into chapter 2 speaking of the spiritual work of the church (prayer and worship). It is dedicated to prayer (1 Tim. 2:1, 8) and to Godly conduct among the members. It

moves into the pursuit of church organization with the appointment of elders and deacons in 1 Timothy 3. In the first part of 1 Timothy 4 Paul speaks of the importance of maintaining the purity of the church, and explains the importance of church discipline. He moves in 1 Timothy 4:8-16 in the importance of the work of teaching in the church. 1 Timothy 5 speaks to the work of taking care of needy Saints (benevolence), and again returns to discipline.

How does one establish a church? By establishing the purposes of the church: edification, benevolence, worship, discipline/purity, and pursuing organization. Not mentioned but understood to be included in this is evangelism, reaching the lost. A church is established by an agreement to pursue all of the purposes of the church.

It makes sense then that a church is not just a physical gathering, but a spiritual unity of the mind. Local churches are created and established when they have a unity of mind that is also a unity of mind in Christ. This is the word "fellowship" in 1 John 1; a church is established when they unite in the mind of Christ for the purposes Christ has given to the local church.