
The Local Church: Minimum vs. Maximum

By John Piper

Copyright © 1981 Desiring God. Website: www.desiringGod.org.

Acts 2:36-47

The one great goal of the church is to demonstrate the wisdom of God to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places (Ephesians 3:10). It is not only the light of the world; it is also the light of the cosmos. It has a cosmic mission, and, therefore, all its activities, no matter how small, take on tremendous significance. But what should the church look like at the local level?

A Biblical Definition of "Church"

First we need to make some observations about a biblical definition of the church. The word "church" in the NT never refers to a building or a place. It always refers to a *people*: either the total number of believers who have ever lived, or a local group of those believers. For example, in Ephesians 1:22, 23 Paul says that God, having raised Christ from the dead above all rule and authority, "put all things under his feet and made him head over all things for the *church* which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all." That is the universal church, the whole number of the redeemed who look to Christ as their life and their authority. In this sense there could never be such a thing as *churches*. There is only one church, "one body" (Ephesians 4:4).

But in the NT the word "church" also is used to refer to the group of believers in a particular city and in a particular house. For example, Acts 11:22 refers to the "church in Jerusalem," 1 Corinthians 1:2 refers to the "church of God which is at Corinth," 1 Thessalonians is addressed (in 1:1) "to the church of the Thessalonians," and so on. 1 Corinthians 16:19 says, "The churches of Asia send greetings. Aquila and Prisca, together with the church in their house, send you hearty greetings in the Lord." In Colossians 4:15 Paul sends greetings "to Nympha and the church in her house." And Paul's letter to Philemon is also addressed to "the church in your house." So there seem to be three levels at least where the word "church" applies to God's people. One is the universal body of Christ including all believers of all times. Another is a group of Christians associated because of their geographic togetherness in a city. And a third would be a smaller segment of believers who gather in a home. These last two groups might be identical in a city

where there were so few Christians they could all meet in one home. But in a city with thousands of Christians, like Jerusalem, small house churches must have developed quickly.

It seems to me, now, that there are two ways to talk about the local church: one way seeks to find the *minimum* of what makes a group of people into a church; the other way seeks to find the *maximum* that the local church should become by the power of God. Both of these questions are important. The question of minimum is important because if we don't know the minimum, we might find ourselves settling into some fellowship as our church which in fact is not a church. This would be contrary to God's plan for all his children to be a part of a local church (1 Corinthians 12:12–14). The question of maximum is important because part of saving faith is wanting to be individually and corporately all God wants us to be. Since we already have the minimum here at Bethlehem, I want to focus on how we might progress toward the maximum life of a local church. But before that, I will outline briefly the minimum of what makes a local church as I see it from the NT.

Minimum: Seven Qualifications

I would define a local church like this: *a local church is a group of baptized believers who meet regularly to worship God through Jesus Christ, to be exhorted from the Word of God, and to celebrate the Lord's Supper under the guidance of duly appointed leaders.* According to this definition there are at least seven qualifications if a group wants to be a church in the NT sense. 1) The people must give evidence that they are *believers*—that they trust Jesus as Savior and Lord. The NT makes it clear that we are adopted into the family of God through faith (John 1:12, 13). 2) The people must be *baptized*. Jesus commanded in Matthew 28:19 that the way to make disciples was by "baptizing them . . . and teaching them." This was the uniform practice in the early church. 3) There must be a *regular assembling*. A group of people who only came together say once a year could not rightly be called a local church because there are essential activities of the church which lose their meaning when not done corporately. Therefore Hebrews 10:25 commands us not to neglect to meet together. 4) Among these meetings there must be gatherings for *worship*. This follows inevitably from the ultimate value placed on Jesus Christ who calls us together and from our relation to God through him. The church is destined to live to the praise of God's glory (Ephesians 1:6, 12, 14); therefore, it would contradict our nature not to assemble for worship (Acts 2:47; Romans 15:6, 7). 5) Our meetings must include *exhortation from the Word of God*. We were born anew through the living and abiding Word of God (1 Peter 1:23); and our life in Christ is preserved not by bread alone but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God (Matthew 4:4). The shepherds of the church are the provision God has made for feeding his sheep. Therefore we strive not to be the church where the Word of God is neglected. 6) Along with worship and exhortation we must *celebrate the Lord's Supper* in order to be the church. We are commanded to "do this in remembrance" of Christ (Luke 22:19; 1 Corinthians 11:24). Neglecting this ordinance might seem inconsequential at first, but I think a church will bleed to death through that amputation. 7) Finally, all of this must take place with *the guidance of duly appointed*

leaders. Paul appointed elders in all the churches (Acts 14:23), he gave instruction about the qualifications of deacons and elders in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1, and he said that Christ had given pastor-teachers to the church to equip the saints for ministry (Ephesians 4:1, 12). There have always been disagreements about what to call these leaders and how to organize them. But that they must be present in a group in order for that group to be a church, historic Christianity has always affirmed.

It seems to me that these seven things are the *minimum* of what it takes to make a local church: a local church is a group of baptized believers who meet regularly to worship God through Jesus Christ, to be exhorted from the Word of God, and to celebrate the Lord's Supper, under the guidance of duly appointed leaders. With this definition we should be able to determine what groups are and are not churches. For example, Campus Crusade meetings, Inter-Varsity chapters, Navigator groups, Bible Study Fellowships, Young Life and Youth for Christ clubs—these are not local churches. And the reason this is important to see is so that no Christian will content himself with participation in any of these groups (or others like them) while neglecting the regular life of the local church. They have tremendous value while working alongside and in harmony with the churches, but they can never replace the local church.

But now here we are as Bethlehem Baptist Church with the minimum qualifications in order. We are a church. But now what? The answer to that surely is that God is not interested in merely finding *minimum* standards; he calls us to be perfect as our Father in heaven is perfect. He is interested in maximum church not minimum church. Maximum church means maximum fulfillment of the goals God has for the church. So we shouldn't stop with the question, "What makes a local church?" We must go on to ask, "What makes a maximum local church?" What should we be doing with all our heart so that the world and the cosmos will see the glorious wisdom and power of God on display in our church?

Maximum: Zealous for Good Deeds

The answer I want to give to that question is the one the NT gives most often. But it is one that in my own past has not received an emphasis proportionate to its biblical importance. And I think only in the past decade has the evangelical church begun to resurrect this biblical theme after a century of partial neglect. The most common NT answer to the question, "What makes a maximum local church?" is *good deeds*: doing good things for other people. Keep in mind that the question now is not, What is the ultimate goal of the church? That was last week: the ultimate goal of the church is to live in such a way that God's wisdom (and all the other aspects of his glory) will be displayed to the world and to the hosts of heaven. The church's job is to live so that people can see that God is real. The question now is: What does that life look like? And the answer again and again in the NT is that it looks like *good deeds*.

Jesus said, for example, in Matthew 5:16, "Let your light so shine before men that they may see your *good deeds* and give glory to your Father in heaven." Are there any deeds that you have

planned into your life which you think it would be reasonable for people to look at and then conclude that because of your deeds God deserves their praise? Or is your life made up only of deeds which don't take any power beyond human nature? According to Jesus the good deeds of his disciples are the window in this world through which people come to see and adore the glory of God. Therefore, if maximum church means maximum glory for God, then maximum church must also mean maximum good deeds.

Other texts in the NT are in perfect harmony with Jesus' command. According to Ephesians 2:10, the church is "God's handiwork created in Christ Jesus for *good deeds*." God *made* us to do good deeds. We *exist* as Christians for that purpose. And this is not at all in conflict with the first chapter of Ephesians, which says that we exist "for the praise of God's glory," because Jesus showed us that it is precisely the good deeds of his disciples which convince people that our heavenly Father is glorious.

In Titus 2:14 Paul teaches that Jesus "gave himself for us to redeem us from all iniquity and to purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for *good deeds*." How could he have put it any stronger? Jesus Christ died to make us "zealous for good deeds." Hebrews 12:2 tells us that Jesus endured the cross for the joy set before him. He was able to feel that the pain was worth it because he could foresee the joy that would come from it. Part of that joy for Jesus today is looking down and seeing local churches (like Bethlehem Baptist) zealous, eager, hungry to do good deeds. When a local church is busy thinking up creative ways to do good to people, then Jesus has not died in vain and the wisdom of God is being displayed.

Churches are dying today because they are not doing anything which the world should look at and say: "There is evidence that God is real and that he is glorious." Many churches have forgotten why they exist: namely, to do good deeds in the name of Jesus so that people will be moved to give God glory (Matthew 5:16). And when a church forgets that it exists for others and for God, it becomes in-grown and self-satisfied and can go on year after year like a social club with a religious veneer. But its life is ebbing away, and people are no longer saying: "Look at all their good deeds and the humble spirit of love in which they are done; their God must be a glorious God of encouragement." I don't think Bethlehem is in that category of dying churches. It seems to me that this church really does have a heart for good deeds that bring glory to God. What we need is not so much to turn around but to press on in the same direction toward maximum good deeds.

In Acts 9:36 Luke tells us that there "was a disciple named Tabitha (or Dorcas) . . . She was full of good deeds and acts of mercy." Tabitha got sick and died. When Peter came to see her it says in verse 39, "All the widows stood beside him weeping and showing coats and garments which Dorcas made while she was with them." It seems that Dorcas was part of a group of widows who spent their time making clothes and probably distributing them to the needy (since these deeds are called acts of *mercy*). In 1 Timothy 5:9ff. Paul describes a support system that the church in

Ephesus had for such widows. In order to be enrolled in this group, Paul says (v. 10): "She must be well attested for her *good deeds* as one who has brought up children, shown hospitality, washed the feet of the saints, relieved the afflicted, and devoted herself to *doing good* in every way." So "good deeds" are acts by which people's needs are met, especially the pressing rudimentary needs of clothing and aid in distress. This is the focus again in Titus 3:14 where it says, "Let our people learn to apply themselves to *good deeds* in order to meet *urgent needs*, that they not be unfruitful" (cf. Colossians 1:10). When a church devotes itself to maximize its good deeds, it should have a special burden to meet the *most pressing* needs, which means it will be especially concerned with the poorest and most disadvantaged people. Where do the time, the effort, the skill, and the money come from to make such good deeds happen? It comes from those of us who are better off. 1 Timothy 6:17, 18 says, "As for the rich in this world, charge them not to be haughty, nor to set their hopes on uncertain riches but on God . . . They are to *do good*, to be rich in *good deeds*, eager to share, generous . . ."

Let Us Do Good to All Men

We are coming out of an era in American church life in which it has been possible for evangelical Christians to give a tithe to the church and then devote themselves financially to building the good life and all the while keep a clear conscience. It was an era in which for conservative evangelicals ethics meant primarily the avoidance of certain sins rather than the pursuit of good deeds. It was an era in which well-fed, well-clothed, well-housed, well-entertained evangelicals were able to maintain a distance and a communications blackout between themselves and the misery and destitution of our cities and many third world countries. But that era is ending. It is ending whether we want it to or not. The main reason it's ending is that the world has shrunk and will continue to shrink through worldwide media systems and sophisticated assistance channels, until we can no longer convince ourselves with impunity that the urban masses and starving Ugandans are not our neighbors whom Jesus told us to love as much as we love ourselves (to seek the good life for others with as much zeal as we seek it for ourselves).

That era of isolation and comfort is ending, also, because some of its cherished biblical defenses are crumbling at the foundations. For example, I actually heard argued on the floor of the Baptist General Conference annual meeting two years ago that the resolution to simplify our lifestyles so that we could give more to alleviate world hunger was unbiblical because when 1 John 3:17 says, "If anyone has the world's goods and sees his brothers in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him?" it means that we should be so concerned only for *Christians* because that's what "brother" means. Arguments like that are crumbling at the foundations because they are wrong. Galatians 6:10 says: "As we have opportunity let us do good to *all men*, especially to those of the household of faith." 1 Thessalonians 5:15 says, "See that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and *to all*." Romans 12:20 says, "If your *enemy* is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him drink." And Jesus said, "Love your

enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you."

The era of comfortable isolation for us American evangelicals is ending, because its justification is crumbling and because the misery and destitution of the world is coming too close now to ignore. And as it approaches, local churches in whom the Spirit of God dwells will feel themselves

drawn to some fairly radical reorientations of lifestyle, reorientations calculated to maximize

good deeds for *all* men and especially for those of the household of faith. And I am optimistic that Bethlehem with its manifest compassion for refugees and for missions and with so many people who really are zealous for good deeds—that Bethlehem will move ahead with the Spirit in these years, whichever way he blows. God willing we will not be content with minimum church. We will become a great church, a great *servant* church, filled with maximum good deeds in the name of Jesus. That's the local church we have to be if we want to display the wisdom and power of

God to the principalities and powers. That's what we have to be in our *new* era if we want to hear

a credible witness that moves people to glorify our Father in heaven.

JOHN PIPER is the Pastor for Preaching at Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis, Minnesota

Copyright © 1981 by John Piper

Disciple Nations Alliance (www.disciplenations.org)



This work is made available under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 3.0 license. You are permitted and encouraged to adapt the work, and to copy, distribute, and transmit it under the following conditions: (1) You must attribute the work by including the following statement: Copyright © 1981 by John Piper Published by the Disciple Nations Alliance (www.disciplenations.org) under terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 3.0 license. For more information, see www.creativecommons.org. (2) You may not use this work for commercial purposes.