

How Do We Define the Local Church?

Because the Bible looks at the church from different perspectives, different but complementary definitions are necessary. With respect to the perspectives of time and geography, we speak of the church as both *universal* and *local*. For the local church we give the following definition:

“A local church is a community of Christians who regularly gather with one another in Christ’s name to officially affirm and shepherd one another’s membership in Jesus Christ and his kingdom through gospel preaching and gospel ordinances.”

This definition likely raises a number of questions, so let’s look at each phrase in turn seeking both for clarity and for Scriptural support.

First, *“A local church is a community of Christians”* or we could say *“A local church is a community of saints.”* God intends that these *saints*, or sanctified ones, live together in community; that is, that they gather with one another, serve one another, comfort one another, encourage one another, teach one another, and so on. These *one another* concepts are so prevalent throughout the New Testament that it becomes absolutely undeniable that God intends for believers to be engaged and connected to a local community of saints, a community that Paul calls the church of God.

Next we read, *“who regularly gather with one another in Christ’s name.”*

Hebrews 10:24-25 says,
and let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another; and all the more, as you see the day drawing near. (Heb. 10:24-25)

Not only do we see in this verse those *one another* concepts we just referenced, but these community concepts are placed in the context of corporate assembly or gathering. Within the context of the Hebrews letter, it is clear that the assembly refers to gatherings organized for and around intentional gospel community. This is what is meant in our definition by gathering *“in Christ’s name.”* We gather under the headship of Christ, in obedience to Christ, for the purposes of learning from Christ, so that we can advance the cause of Christ.

Christians belong to Christ; they are united to Him and, therefore, to His body. In other words, Christians are not only *commanded* to gather, they are *designed* to gather. Gathering is not only essential for healthy community life; it is essential for a healthy Christian life (cf. Romans 12:4-5).

People give many reasons for refusing to gather with the “organized” church, but this just reveals a lack of understanding of the nature of the church or perhaps attitudes that indicate deeper heart issues that need to be corrected in gentleness.

Next, we read that these Christians gather *“to officially affirm and shepherd one another’s membership in Jesus Christ and his kingdom.”*

In our current culture, churches don’t often use words like *officially affirm* with respect to church membership, but these concepts are grounded in Scripture and are a rich part of church history. In fact, they are necessarily a part of current church practice, even if unspoken.

In this definition, the word *officially* is meant to communicate that the church is structurally organized under the authority of Scripture. It has appointed leaders who meet specified qualifications (cf. 1 Timothy 3:1-7). It is composed of members who have Spirit-appointed gifts that are used in conjunction with one another in an orderly manner (1 Cor. 14:40). It performs specific duties like the preaching of the Word and church discipline, and it celebrates the ordinances of baptism and communion. The church is not some willy-nilly community in which anything goes.

In the context of this organized community, believers *affirm* each other’s membership in Christ and His kingdom in many ways. We baptize believers in affirmation of their profession and as a sign of their membership. We share in communion in ongoing affirmation of our membership in the body of Christ. We practice church discipline both formally and informally. These things are part of what it means for the

church to use the keys she has been given by Christ (Matthew 16:13-20 and 18:15-20). But we also fellowship with one another, listening to and sharing gospel truth, in affirmation of each other's ability to hear and understand as true members of Christ and His kingdom.

These affirmations may properly be called *official* since they take place within and under the broad authority of the local church. No healthy church allows just any teaching or practice to take place in its midst but will seek to ensure a faithfulness to the gospel in all it does.

Within this context of organized community, appointed leaders are commanded to shepherd the flock of God. This is an obvious example of what it would mean to *officially shepherd* one another, and this responsibility is affirmed by Peter in his first letter:

Therefore, I exhort the elders among you, as your fellow elder and witness of the sufferings of Christ...shepherd the flock of God among you, exercising oversight not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to the will of God; and not for sordid gain, but with eagerness; nor yet as lording it over those allotted to your charge, but proving to be examples to the flock.

(1 Pet. 5:1-3)

These shepherding responsibilities clearly fall primarily upon the appointed leaders, but NOT exclusively. Notice that these leaders are to prove to be *examples* to the flock. Every believer should desire to see others fed and cared for, and every believer has a role to play in this process. Though we do have appointed shepherds, we all participate in mutual shepherding. The aim of this shepherding ministry should be to build each other up as members of Christ and as citizens of his kingdom.

Our definition concludes with “*through gospel preaching and gospel ordinances.*”

Gospel preaching is what *generates* and *energizes* the church (cf. Romans 10:17). In other words, people are *converted* through gospel preaching, and the converted *get moving* through gospel preaching.

Gospel preaching is certainly not less than Sunday morning sermons, but it is much more. We all preach or proclaim the gospel anytime we declare its truths to others. We preach the gospel to our unsaved friends when we evangelize, and we preach the gospel to our believing friends when we counsel with the Word. In this way we affirm and shepherd each other in reference to our relationship to Christ and His kingdom through the gospel.

I think it is important to clarify what we mean by *gospel preaching* since there are many who would associate that phrase with evangelistic preaching. While evangelistic preaching is certainly gospel preaching, gospel preaching is much more than evangelism.

In Romans 1:16 Paul writes,

For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. (Rom. 1:16)

If we understand salvation in this passage to refer *only* to that moment in which we are reconciled to God and saved from the penalty of sin, then it would make sense to equate the gospel with evangelism. But salvation here and throughout Romans refers to so much more than our beginning; it refers to everything that flows out of our redemption. It refers to our deliverance, not only from the penalty of sin, but from the power of sin.

In other words, the gospel is THE message of the Bible, a message powerful for both the unbeliever and the believer alike. This is why Paul told the Roman church that he was eager to preach the gospel to them. He didn't think they needed to be evangelized again. He acknowledged that they had a faith that had been “proclaimed throughout the whole world” (Romans 1:8). He desired to preach the gospel because that's the Christian message; there is no other.

Finally, and as has already been mentioned, we also affirm and shepherd each other through the gospel ordinances of baptism and communion. Baptism and communion both help to *illustrate* the gospel by what they signify, and they also create opportunities to *proclaim* the gospel as they are explained in practice. These ordinances are part of what mark religious gatherings as *Christian* gatherings, as **church** gatherings.