

The Local Church

Lesson for Sunday, November 24, 2024

INTRODUCTION: *Remember to share the story from Baptist history on page 3...*

- ⇒ Discuss: What do people look for when they are looking for a church?
 - Often, we hear things such as programs for their children, worship style, preaching style, location, etc.
 - What we rarely ask is, “What does the Bible say about the church?”
- ⇒ The historic Baptist position on the local church is perhaps our most distinctive doctrine. We could summarize what we believe like this...
 - A New Testament church is an independent, local, visible assembly of born-again, baptized believers under the discipline of God’s Word.

BIBLE STUDY:

1. The Bible Usage of the word “Church”
 - a. The word “church” appears about 115 times in the New Testament.
 - b. It comes from the word *ecclesia*, which means “a called-out assembly.”
 - c. It is important to note that 110 of the usages of “church” in the NT are in reference to specific local churches that existed in real historical time in a real historical place.
 - d. This is important because today people often refer to “the Church” in a universal sense. But when we go to Scripture, it is impossible to apply church teachings in a universal setting.
 - e. The local church is God’s plan for these days (the cross to His return).
2. The Local Church
 - a. In Revelation 1-3 we see an important teaching of Christ on the church.
 - b. Point out by looking at the text that Jesus is addressing seven different churches.
 - c. Jesus sees “the church” as local in each of the seven illustrations. There are no churches that are not local churches.
 - d. Each church is represented as a candlestick (see Rev. 1:12 & 20).
 - e. In these chapters, each church is directly answerable to Jesus alone.
 - i. See Rev. 2:1, 8, 12, 18; 3:1, 7, 14
 - ii. Note that there is no denominational hierarchy mentioned.
 - iii. The emphasis is that when the Spirit speaks, it is not to the universal, invisible church, but to the churches (Rev. 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22).
 - iv. The Bible is consistent throughout (see Rev. 22:16).
 - f. Jesus also used the term “church” in the following places:
 - i. Matthew 16:16; 18:17.
 - ii. In these texts, the reference is not to a specific church (such as Ephesus) but is a generic application to all local churches.
 - iii. In fact, none of the biblical commands can be applied to a universal church. They can only be carried out on a local level.
 - g. Because of these teachings (and others), Baptists believe that each church is autonomous (or independent) answering only to the Lord Jesus Christ (the Head) and to His Word.
3. The Local Church in Action
 - a. What is the local church to do? See Acts 2.
 - b. Preach (vs. 14 & 40): The local church is built on the preaching of God’s Word.

- i. Preaching should be Bible-based (vs. 16ff; 25ff)
- ii. Preaching should be Gospel-centered (23-24)
- iii. Preaching should call people to repentance (37-38)
- iv. Preaching should call out the sins of the day (23, 40)
- v. Preaching should be evangelistic (37-38).
- c. Baptize (vs. 41): The idea of baptizing converts is “churching them”.
 - i. As we saw in last week’s lesson baptism is the way the Christian identifies with a local church.
- d. Grow (vs. 41): On that day, 3000 people were added to the church!
 - i. Note the growth: Acts 2:41 to 4:4 to 5:14 to 6:1 to 6:7 to 11:21 to 16:5.
 - ii. Growth should be a normal function of the church. Something is wrong when we don’t grow.
- e. Disciple (vs. 42): The members of the church continued to learn and grow in the “apostles’ doctrine”.
- f. Minister (vs. 44-45): The church functions as a family. When there is a need to be met brothers and sisters in the church step up to help meet that need.
- g. Fellowship (vs. 46): The met frequently at church and in homes.
- h. Worship (vs. 47): They praised God together.
- i. All these functions work together for a practical application: Local churches are God’s institutions to teach, to guard and to perpetuate His truth to the next generation.

APPLICATION & DISCUSSION:

- ⇒ What should be our attitude toward the local church? In one word: **Faithfulness**.
 - See Hebrews 10:25
 - Discuss what it means to be faithful.
 - Discuss: What are the main competitions to church faithfulness? What is really the issue?
- ⇒ Challenge your class to be committed to the local church. Close with Ephesians 5:20. While this passage is typically used for marriage, Paul tells us he is describing the mystery of God’s relationship to His church (vs. 32).
 - In this verse we see that Jesus loves the church and died for the church.
 - In light of Jesus’s attitude, what should ours be?

Here's a compelling story from Baptist history that highlights some of the key Baptist principles we have been discussing:

The story of Thomas Helwys is particularly significant in Baptist history. Helwys was one of the founders of the Baptist movement in England in the early 17th century. Here are the key elements of his story:

- ⇒ In 1612, Helwys founded the first Baptist church on English soil in Spitalfields, London.
- ⇒ That same year, he wrote a book called "A Short Declaration of the Mystery of Iniquity," which was one of the first English-language books to advocate for complete religious freedom and separation of church and state.
- ⇒ In this book, Helwys boldly addressed King James I (who was also the head of the Church of England), writing: "The king is a mortal man, and not God, therefore he hath no power over the mortal soul of his subjects to make laws and ordinances for them and to set spiritual Lords over them."
- ⇒ This was a radical statement for the time, as it challenged the divine right of kings and asserted that the monarch had no authority over people's spiritual lives.
- ⇒ Helwys went further, arguing for religious freedom not just for Christians of different denominations, but for all people, including Jews and Muslims.
- ⇒ For his audacity in challenging the king's authority and advocating for religious freedom, Helwys was arrested and imprisoned in Newgate Prison, where he died around 1616.

This story encapsulates several key Baptist principles:

- The importance of religious liberty and freedom of conscience
- Separation of church and state
- The autonomy of the local church
- The willingness to suffer persecution for one's beliefs

Helwys' brave stand for religious freedom, at the cost of his own liberty and ultimately his life, is a powerful example of early Baptist commitment to these principles. How does our level of commitment to being Baptist compare?