



## Recovering the Priority of the Local Church

### Selected Scriptures

How often do you hear people say, yeah, I'm a Christian, but I'm not too interested in the organized church? Or Sure, I'm a member of the universal church. Local church? Huh, no way. I've been burned too many times by local churches. It kind of reminds you of those people who say, yeah, I love humanity. It's people I can't stand. Same sentiment. I love the church universal, but I'm not going near the local church, too painful, too complicated, too messy, too whatever.

That's so sad, isn't it? It's so sad. But I know from talking to many of you that's exactly what you've experienced. You've felt forced to choose between bad and worse. That is so tragic. You don't get that picture of the local church by reading the New Testament. The local church in Scripture is described as a vibrant, dynamic place. Here's what Luke said about it in Acts chapter 2. He says, "And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching." That's three thousand people, by the way; the first mega church right there in the

Bible. "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching." They loved teaching. They devoted themselves to the "fellowship and to the breaking of bread and the prayers." They loved prayer meetings. "And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved."

That church sounds like a great place to be, right? When you read the rest of the New Testament and you see how the local church is supposed to operate, it sounds absolutely delightful. The local church is a place where we practice the one another's of the New Testament. The local church is the place where we're to accept one another, care for one another, serve one another and encourage one another. Paul says in Colossians 3:12 and 13, "Put on then, as God's chosen ones holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another forgiving each other." That's because we've been forgiven, right? "As the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive."

We, therefore, have attitudes of honor and respect for one another. In humility, we prefer one another above our own selves. We teach one another. We exhort one another and in humility, we submit to one another's loving correction. All of that because, after the pattern of our Lord's example and in joyful obedience to his command, we are a community of people who love one another. Jesus said in John 15:12, "This is my commandment, that you love one another." How? "As I have loved you." That is why Paul said we are to "Owe no one anything, except to love one another," Romans 13:8. Or as Peter put it, we are to "love one another earnestly from a pure heart," 1 Peter 1:22. And to "keep loving one another fervently." 1 Peter 4:8, "since love covers a multitude of sins."

Listen, it's by that kind of love with all its attendant humility and compassion and kindness and encouragement, by that kind of love, Jesus said, "All people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." John 13:34-35. Church like that sounds like it's such an exciting place to be, doesn't it? What a joy! Who wouldn't want to be part of a community that treats one another like that? So what's gone wrong? How have we gotten so far off track? What's the way back?



But listen, just to bring some clarity to the situation of how things have gotten off track, the first way evangelical churches have gone off the rails is theological, it's doctrinal. That's obvious. Whether it's the local church or the church universal, Christians have been failing to trust the Bible. So they've stopped teaching it, and they've turned to gimmickry and faddism. They've tried so hard to be contemporary and relevant. Some call it contempervant. They've just failed to achieve either one. They've come across as nothing more than juvenile, nothing more than stupid and silly, not to be taken seriously at all.

So many are bored and unimpressed and unmoved that they dropped out of the local church altogether, and that's why we tried to reestablish the true purpose of the church as a repository of the truth, the pillar and ground of the truth. We guard it by giving it away. We proclaim the truth in all its distinctive, divinely revealed glory. Listen, so the church must be distinctively and unapologetically Christian. People can get entertainment anywhere. They'll only go to the church to tell them the truth. That's what we've got to be here for, folks. They'll only get the truth if we're bold enough to tell them.



The Gospel is about death, burial, and resurrection. It's the death of you, it's the burial of your former self, and it's your resurrection to an entirely new life in Christ. That's why only those who are baptized are legitimate candidates for local church membership. That is why we call baptism the initiation ritual of the local church. By obeying Jesus' command to all new converts, you know what, they demonstrate they recognize who he truly is. They recognize his authority over their life and they do what he says. They recognize his Lordship. In the land of a thousand gospels, all but one of them is false.

We need to make sure people understand the right Gospel and that they truly embrace it. It's a Gospel of repentance and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. It's the worship of the Triune God. It's a life of sanctification and repentance and discipleship. We need to make sure people joining the local church understand that, that they're truly saved, that they've embraced the true Christ through the right Gospel. Only those kinds of people are going to understand what's at stake in evangelizing the lost as they go out. Only those kind of people are going to have the changed heart, the changed life, the spiritual enlightenment necessary to proclaim a distinctively Christian message and to live a distinctively Christian life.

So first, we've got to be distinctively Christian. Secondly, we've got to make sure we're preaching an accurate Gospel. There is a third way evangelical churches have lost their savor. They've dimmed their light. This is so tremendously significant, so important. It actually leads us into our outline. What happens is that many of these large parachurch ministries, what they've done is they have uncoupled the Gospel from the local church. Through mass media, big initiatives, they have disembodied the message from the messenger.

Listen, why is that a problem? Why is that a problem? Isn't it the message of the cross, the words that save and not some group of people? Yeah, that is absolutely true. But there is a realness to all of this. There is an authenticity to what we preach when the Gospel's power to transform is on display in changed lives.

I firmly believe that the local church is a missing aspect of much of today's evangelism. I believe evangelicals over the last century have erred significantly in emphasizing the universal church to the diminishment, to the exclusion, and to the detriment of the local church. Broad interests and wide ambitions have eclipsed local church ministry. And that's bad, beloved. I in no way want to denigrate the significance of the

universal church. This is a beloved truth. But we cannot let the pendulum swing to emphasize one at the exclusion of the other. They have to both be maintained; both be proclaimed.

Turn in your Bibles to Matthew chapter 16. Matthew chapter 16, we're going to look at all the places in the Gospels where Jesus directly discusses the church, every single text where Jesus talks about the church. Do you know how many passages that is? Just two. Some of you were sweating. Just two passages Matthew 16 and Matthew 18. Just two places that Jesus used the word church and talked directly about it. Isn't that interesting?

It may seem surprising at first glance that Jesus, the head of the church, only really directly addressed the church in two places. But you have to keep in mind that Jesus came as the Messiah to the Jews. He presented himself forthrightly, transparently to his own nation, Israel. He called for their repentance, their allegiance to him in faith so that God would fulfill his promises of restoration to the nation. John 1:11 says Jesus "came to his own, and his own did not receive him." Paul taught in Romans 9 through 11 that that rejection, Israel's rejection of its Messiah, that opened the door for salvation for

all of us. While I don't rejoice in Israel's rejection, I do rejoice in the opportunity to know Israel's God. Don't you?

You know what, it's through us, us Gentiles who attained what Israel tried to attain but couldn't because they tried to attain it by works. It's us Gentiles who attained it by faith, that is, the righteousness of God that comes through faith by believing in Christ. You know what? We're going to provoke the nation of Israel to jealousy. Isn't that neat? We're on the scene. There is worldwide significance to what we do here. Through us, the church, God is going to show Israel that, again from John 1, "To all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor the will of the flesh, nor the will of man, but of God."

So in Matthew 16, this conversation with his disciples, Peter's great confession, it comes immediately on the heels of yet another confrontation with the Jewish leaders, the Pharisees and the Sadducees. The nation here, by this time, is demonstrating its rejection of Christ. And so Jesus is about to reveal a mystery. He's about to reveal something that's been hidden from long ages past, but now has yet to be revealed, and it's this entity, this body called the church; us.

Take a look at Matthew 16:13, "Now When Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, 'Who do people say that the Son of Man is?' And they said, 'Some say John the Baptist, and others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.' He said to them, 'But who do you say that I am?' Simon Peter replied, 'You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.' And Jesus answered him, 'Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this you, but my Father who is in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.' And then he strictly warned or charged the disciples to tell no one that he was the Christ." verse 21, "From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests, and scribes and be killed, and on the third day be raised." Stop there.

Here's the first point for today's outline. Point number one: We Possess Membership in the Church Universal. We Possess Membership in the Church Universal. When Jesus tells Peter there in verse 18, "I tell you, you are Peter and on this rock I will

build my church," you know, some people, like the Roman Catholics, take that to mean that Jesus will build the church on Peter. There's actually some exegetical warrant for seeing it that way. There is no warrant for seeing Peter as the first pope, or anything about papal succession. But it's not entirely without exegetical warrant to see the text that way.

Others see Jesus referring to Peter's confession in verse 16, as the rock. "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." That's the rock on which Christ would build his church. And there are very strong reasons to take it that way. But you might also think of it this way, that Jesus is announcing his intention to build this newly revealed entity called the church on those who make the same confession that Peter made; so it's truth and it's tied to people. The confession here is not separate from the people. The truth is *embodied* in the people, in the church, the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth. Heard that before?

Peter seems to have understood that in a similar way. In 1 Peter 2:4 to 5 he writes, "As you come to him," Jesus, "a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious, you yourselves like living stones are being built up

as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.”

Listen, this reference in Matthew 16:18, this is a reference about the church universal. Alright? It’s about the church of which we are all a part by the baptism of the Holy Spirit. All of us who make the same confession that Peter made, all of us who believe what Peter believed, who know Christ as Peter knew him, are known by Christ as Peter was known by Christ. Notice verse 17, “Blessed are we.” “For flesh and blood has not revealed this,” to us, “but our Father who is in heaven.”

All of us who make that confession are united in one body. As it says in 1 Corinthians 12:13, “For in one spirit, we were all baptized into one body, Jews or Greeks, slaves or free, and all were made to drink of one Spirit.” Listen, by virtue of that baptism of the Holy Spirit, we all possess membership in the church universal in union with the Triune God: Father, Son and the Holy Spirit. Our union with one another is unhindered and unaffected by space and by time. Geography doesn’t hinder our unity; neither does our location on the timeline of history. We’re all united in Christ. That’s the church universal.

But I now want to introduce another concept, and that's the reality and the authority of the local church. Point two: We Practice Membership in the Church Local. We practice, we possess membership in the church universal and we practice membership in the local church. Turn two chapters ahead to the second, the only other reference to the church in the Gospels, look at Matthew 18:15. Matthew 18:15 and Jesus says there, Matthew 18:15, "If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses.

"If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. Truly, I say whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. Again, I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them."

Wow, that's significant! This is the process and the practice of what we call, restorative church discipline. This is

church discipline. We call it restorative discipline because that's the emphasis in the text: Restorative. We're trying to gain our brother. But notice what happens if our brother refuses to listen to us. Well, then, a small group; then the call to repentance by the entire church. According to verse 17, Christ says we're to pass judgment. Based on what we see in this man's unrepentant attitude, we're to pass judgment. We're to treat this guy like an unbeliever. We're to excommunicate this guy from the church, but not vindictively; sorrowfully, lovingly. It's crystal clear to everyone now, by sending him out of the church, that this guy is not someone who needs better discipleship. This guy isn't someone who needs six more months of counseling. This guy needs some evangelizing.

Notice the reference there in verse 18 to the keys. That refers back to what Jesus told Peter in Matthew 16:19. "I will give you the keys to the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven," or we could translate that, it's actually literally, "shall have been bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth, shall have been loosed in heaven." That is, Peter, the disciples, the apostolic church, everybody, who like us, who are recipients of that apostolic truth, when we pronounce judgment in church discipline, we're pronouncing the judgment of heaven: has been bound in heaven.

Peter, the disciples, all the Jews who heard that would understand the keys as a clear reference to binding authority. In fact, in John 20:22, Jesus breathed on his disciples and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit." And then he said this in the next verse, "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld." Is that because Peter, the Apostles, inherently had something in them that gave them the authority in and of themselves to forgive sins? No. But they pronounced it. In a vivid way, Jesus pointed to the Holy Spirit there, his work to help Christians declare the certainty of forgiveness to those who repent or to deny the certainty of forgiveness to those who don't repent. So it's here in Matthew 18:15 to 20, it's in the context of church discipline, that the authority of the local church is here put to good use.

And that's why it says, Jesus says there, verses 18 to 20, "I say to you whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. Again, I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am among them." Listen, two or three gathering together, that is not talking about a small, intimate prayer meeting, folks. In

the context, it refers back to verse 16, where the two or three of you Christians got together and decided about your unrepentant friend. Using the keys, then here, refers to the authority of the church in declaring the testimony of heaven about someone's salvation.

Here in the local church, ministry is from the cradle to the grave and everything in between, and the Gospel is the power of God unto salvation for all of it. You can see it working itself out, live and in stereo right here in the context of the local church. Unlike any other place on earth, we have the opportunity to provide the watching world with an undeniable demonstration of the Gospel's power. That is why Christ gave the church the authority to discipline its members, to make judgments about the spiritual condition with those that come into contact with it. This happens at the local church level on an individual basis, not so much on the universal level.

Look, our sanctification says something about the Gospel beloved. It matters. When people walk into this building, they need to see something they cannot explain. When people encounter us in the culture, in society, in our workplaces, in our schools, in our businesses, in our homes, and our neighborhoods,



they need to see something they can't explain and something they cannot deny: life transformation through the Gospel.