

The Work of the Church

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Introduction.

- A. In a lesson about a month ago, we spent a bit of time looking at the confusion in the religious world about what the church that Jesus Christ established actually is. There are all sorts of people practicing all sorts of things, who all nonetheless claim to be part of the one true church. Obviously, that cannot possibly be true.
- B. However, this confusion about what the church IS is easily matched by the confusion about what the church is FOR. When we look at many of the churches that claim to be following Jesus Christ, in practice, their purpose for existing is quite unclear. Sure, almost all of them get together on Sunday morning, but many of them pursue other activities that seem to take up as much time or more as worship. Half an hour on the Internet will reveal churches with NASCAR clubs, potty-training classes, environmental rallies, and spiritual dancing.
- C. Now, when we look at these things, it's only right that we should question them. After all, did Jesus really die on the cross so that His church could offer all the services of a social club? Or did Jesus want His church to be and do something else? Once again, this is not a question that we cannot answer. We see Jesus' purpose for the church clearly defined in the blueprint He laid down in the New Testament. If we want to do what Jesus wants, we have to return to that blueprint. We have to open God's word to uncover the work of the church.

I. The Work Defined.

- A. As we look at this topic, the first thing we need to do is to come up with some way of defining the work of the church in general terms. Basically, if the church had a mission statement, what would it be? Some people say that the church doesn't really have a mission statement. They say that unless God specifically told the church not to do something, that the church can go out and do it. Now, that just doesn't make sense. Let's say that I give my life savings to buy a business. Am I just going to let the employees of my new business do whatever they want? Am I going to let them work on whatever they want, spend the money of my business on whatever they want, unless I've specifically told them not to? Of course not! No earthly business owner operates in that way! Instead, I'm going to have a plan for my business. I'm going to tell the employees what they need to do, and if they exceed my instructions and do what they want to instead, they're going to be out the door. Now, if I'm just a dumb human, and I'd only pay money for my business, yet I'd keep a tight rein on it, how carefully do you think Christ has directed the church He bought with His own blood? Friends, in this church, or in any church, we need to do the first works that Christ established, and only those works.
- B. Beyond this, there's a slightly more restrictive version of this anything-goes approach that some claim churches can follow. They say that if the Bible authorizes an individual Christian to do something, then the church is also authorized to do it. Immediately, this one smells funny. After all, individuals can do all sorts of things that the body of the church cannot do. In addition, the Bible reveals to us that there is a difference between the actions of an individual and a church. 1 Timothy 5:16 explains. Here, if a believer has a dependent widow, he is to care for that widow himself, rather than the church caring for that widow itself. The individual work that we do as Christians is a separate thing from the work that the church does.
- C. So, then, now that we've pared away all the excess, we can get down to the things that God positively commands the local church to do. There are several things that the Bible places in this category, but they can all part of one big idea. Look with me at 1 Timothy 3:15. This tells us that the work of the church is to support the truth. This means that the mission of the church is to see that the gospel of Christ is proclaimed, both inside the church and outside of it, and the church is empowered to use any means that are necessary to achieve that end. There is nothing that is more important.
- D. Now if this is true, that Christ has dedicated His church to the soul-saving work of teaching the truth, then it also makes sense that He doesn't want His church doing anything else. For example, let's say that I offer you \$1000 to run a 40-yard dash in six seconds or less. How are you going to run that race? Are you going to put on big heavy clunky combat boots and strap a 45-pound weight to your back? When you're running, are you going to weave back and forth like you were playing Chutes and Ladders? Nobody would do that! Instead, you're going to get rid of every encumbrance you can so that you will run faster, and you're going to run as directly as you can toward the goal. In the same way, if we want to be a church that teaches the truth as effectively as possible, we're going to strip away everything that interferes with that goal, and we're going to pursue it as directly as we can, because everything else is less important.

II. Evangelism.

- A. As we mentioned earlier, the Bible specifies several main areas in which the church pursues this goal of supporting the truth, and the first of these is evangelism. The word "evangelism" comes from a Greek word that means "to preach good news," and that's exactly what evangelism is. It's bringing the gospel to the lost.

- B. Along these lines, the Bible describes two kinds of participants in the work of evangelism. The first of these categories is composed of ordinary, rank-and-file Christians. Consider what Paul says about the church in Philippi in Philippians 2:14-15. They were to be lights of goodness in a world that was given over to evil. Sometimes, this just involves righteous living. Other times, it involves preaching the word to family, friends, and co-workers. The Bible makes clear, though, that everyone in the church should be involved in this work.
- C. Another way that the church fulfills this work of evangelism, though, is through the financial support of gospel preachers. Paul discusses his own support from the Philippians in Philippians 4:14-16. They provided for his needs so that he was able to devote all of his time to the Lord's work. Just like the Philippians were, local churches today are also authorized to support preachers. Those preachers can work with the congregation; they can work with other congregations or even in areas without one. It's up to the church involved.
- D. That's the New Testament plan for evangelism: churches working directly and churches supporting workers. Nothing beyond this is necessary for the spread of the gospel, and nothing beyond it will ever be necessary. After all, the greatest growth the church has ever seen occurred in the first century, a time when all Christians followed this simple method. Even if that were not so, the Bible does not authorize us to use any other means. The Scripture is completely silent on missionary societies, sponsoring-church arrangements, or any of the other thousand and one things that man's wisdom has produced. We know that this silence means that God does not approve, because if God had approved, it would have been at least permitted if not commanded.

III. Edification.

- A. Just as the church has the responsibility to teach those outside through evangelism, so it also has the responsibility to teach its members through edification. The passage that classically defines edification is Ephesians 4:11-13. This passage begins by describing the various gifts that God has given to men: various kinds of teachers. Apostles and prophets no longer exist today, but we have the record of their teaching preserved in the New Testament. However, God still gives both evangelists and pastors and teachers.
- B. In Ephesians 4:12, we see what these teachers are meant to do: equip the saints for the work of ministry and edify the body of Christ. These are not two unrelated ideas; indeed, they are the same idea, because edification is not the process of giving another Christian warm fuzzy feelings. It's the process of equipping them to be useful in the kingdom of God. Remember, friends: God wants Christians who work. This process of edification, of equipping for service, is to continue until all Christians attain to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ. That is to say, until we are as useful in the kingdom of God as Jesus was, we still need to be edified and equipped. Edifying is at the heart of what we do together as a church.
- C. The breadth of this command to edify gives us latitude to do a number of things not specifically mentioned in Scripture. For example, nowhere in Scripture is a church building specifically mentioned. However, we recognize from Hebrews 10:25 that we are to assemble together in order to edify one another, which authorizes this building as a place to assemble. Our church building, along with a hundred other things, are expedients; they are specifically designed and intended to accomplish the Biblical purpose of edification.
- D. By contrast, though, when we consider the denominations around us, we see practices in many of them that are not intended to produce edification. For instance, it's quite common to see a basketball goal or court in the backyards of denominational churches. Are those basketball courts there to equip the saints for the work of service? Of course not. They're there so the church members can play basketball. Basketball courts, and all other things that lack an edifying purpose, are not part of the work of the church.

IV. Benevolence.

- A. The last area in which the church works is benevolence. Benevolence is kind of a code word we use to describe the assistance the church gives to needy saints. This doesn't mean that the church is a meal ticket; after all, Paul says in 2 Thessalonians 3:10 that if a man is not willing to work, he should not eat. However, for Christians who are unable to support themselves, the Bible tells us that the church should help them. We see an example of this in Acts 4:34-35, when the church in Jerusalem gave assistance to brethren who needed help. This can also occur on a larger scale, as we see described in Acts 11:27-30. Here, the church in Antioch helped the churches of Judea during a famine. At times, brethren in other countries still need this help today.
- B. Now, we might ask, what does all of this benevolence have to do with supporting the truth? Well, if you remember from our discussions of both evangelism and edification, every Christian, to the extent of his ability, is to participate in both. The vineyard of the Lord is supposed to be filled with workers, not shirkers. If a Christian is without the basic needs of life, he can't share in the work of the church, so the point of benevolence is to help him out so that he can become useful again. Benevolence is about the truth too.
- C. Finally, there are some who ask, "What about non-Christians who are in need?" God makes provision for such people through the generosity not of the church, but of individuals. We see this in James 1:27. It's not that helping the poor is not a worthy goal, and it's not that the church is run by heartless people who don't care. It's just that as important as filling the needs of the body is, the needs of the soul are more important.

Conclusion. If you would like to be part of the work of the church, join together with it today.