

PUTTING THE LOCAL CHURCH CONCEPT IN PERSPECTIVE

Is the term "local church" a scriptural term? Is the idea of local church limited only to a locality, or does it refer to the physical gathering of God's people as related to the spiritual gathering (universal)? Does Paul refer to localities because of the proximity of the believers for practical purposes or just to individual cities? In other words, in this transient, mobile age, how much distance represents a barrier or limit to practical gathering together? Is God really interested in building up community loyalties (natural city boundaries, etc.)? What constitutes a community? a town, city, county? (a community could cover an area practically assessable to participants). Does occupancy in different towns or cities inhibit intimacy or fellowship?

In summary, the concept of the local church is a visible, viable, functioning organism of believers designed to deal with very real problems or concerns relevant to the Body of Christ. This is in contrast to presenting problems of discipline, etc. to the universal church.

The concept of the local church has to do with a functioning government of God in the midst of the people of God. To dogmatically imply that only members of a natural-boundaried town or city can belong to that city, implying that we are Haytians, Caruthersvillians, etc. God in his word puts no such emphasis.

Paul wrote to the churches which were established in certain areas which could practically serve the people of that area. This practicality was no doubt dictated by modes of transportation, etc. In this day, it is not unusual for people to commute to their jobs. In fact, the availability of work predetermines places of employment. This has represented little difficulty for many people especially for distances of 15 to 20 miles (only an arbitrary distance). Why should a few miles drive to church present such an insurmountable problem? A person who can find spiritual food and a spiritual oasis in a different

"community" should not be denied that privilege on the basis of locality of residence. However, one should have no excuse for not participating in all outreaches and ministries of the particular church he associates with on the basis of proximity to his place of residence (if he calls himself a part of that church). In other words, he should live close enough to conveniently give himself in full support of that local body. Otherwise, practicality would have been lost and proximity would become of greatest essence in determining the bounds of a local church's jurisdiction.

In conclusion, it is God's will that each individual be identified with a "local" expression of the Body of Christ. One must give oneself to that Body by making oneself available for service and fellowship and by supporting that gathering. Limitations to such commitment could be a matter of determining whether that alignment is truly of God or not in the concept of a local church setting. But the boundaries of the determination of a local church should never inflexibly be predetermined by the arbitrary boundaries of a corporate limit of cities, towns, or villages. Otherwise, we would most definitely be drawing lines of division.

It would be of the highest will of God for every community to have only one church flowing in oneness of purpose and calling. To this extent, all should ever be aware at least to the point of fostering genuine unity and extending our love and right hand of fellowship to all members of the Body of Christ. Minor differences of opinions should be kept in the right perspective and should never be the grounds for disfellowship. Yet, one must never compromise important truths which sometimes can become large stumbling blocks to many. So every effort must be made to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of love. But to be practical, one must admit that only a divine intervention of the sovereignty of God will diminish the separations and divisions in the Body of Christ. Until that time, there will no doubt be the continuation of different groups and gatherings in different buildings. Yet this does not and should not preclude our loving one another.