

The IMPORTANCE of the local congregation

Philippians 2:12-16

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29 February 2004

Introduction:

I. The city of Philippi was home to a congregation of God's Church. Its influence cannot be overestimated! The Philippian congregation is forever known as characterized by "joy." The congregation at Philippi has long challenged the Lord's congregations throughout the centuries to be a distinctive group of God's people who are committed to following the Lord's Truth. Our community, neighbors, news media sources, and all others are closely watching our efforts. They pass judgments on the sincerity of our religion by the every day examples we live. The impact that we, as a congregation make upon society should be significant. This is God's intention for His congregations.

The importance of the local congregation is being minimized today. Many view the "local" congregation as unnecessary. The local congregations are being minimized even more today as "small groups" are being encouraged that effectively lessen the strength that comes from the corporate assemblies. The "small groups" minimize the ruling authority that God invested in the Eldership.

The structure of the local congregation is inspiring. Turning through the pages of the NT, one reads repeatedly that the local congregations were the focus of God's providence and the only means of proclaiming God's gospel and the only haven for God's saints!

- Jerusalem was the location of the 1st local congregation. From there the Gospel spread into all the world.
- Antioch of Syria held a congregation renown in boldness as it edified its members, taught its community, & evangelized the world!
- In Ephesus was a congregation established by Paul, committed to God's Truth, & zealous in God's service!
- The local congregations in Macedonia are forever known for their benevolent spirit!
- Local congregations in Asia Minor are remembered – Smyrna possessed eternal riches; Pergamum lived devoutly in the midst of debauchery; Thyatira was known for its faith, patience, & ministry; Philadelphia was known for its brotherly love.

The significance of the local congregation is a matter of simple understanding of salvation. Here is a fact that most are ignorant concerning because it is seldom taught — *Personal salvation is dependant upon the local congregation!* This is a blunt fact that must be stressed in our day when most are willing to ignore, berate, and minimize the local congregation. *If you want to be saved, you MUST be an active, diligent, faithful, humble member of a local congregation of God's Church!*

- a. The Church was designed by God to be an intricate part of His great scheme of redeeming lost souls. God deliberately planned for the Church to exist before Creation week began! The Church is neither a mistake nor a matter of secondary concern to God. God is very concerned about the Church!
- b. God intended the Church to occupy a critical place in the Christian's life. In the Church, the Christian is provided the environment that is critical for "perfecting salvation." It is only in the Church that one can be saved. Only those in God's Church will be blessed with the eternal bliss of heaven.
- c. The divine purpose of salvation focuses upon the Church! Those who claim the cross is more important than the Church err. Such would leave the saved "hanging" in spiritual "no-man's land." They would have been called "out of the world" by the Gospel, but where would they have then gone? Such would have placed Christians in an impossible state. God realized how critical it was for the "called out" to be placed in an environment that would continue to safeguard their souls until the Second Coming would take the saved into heaven. This "environment" for the "called out" is the Lord's Church. The intricate details in God's planning for the Church testifies to the Almighty's interest in the Church being just as He designed it.
- d. The marvelous message of the Church quickly spread throughout the world (Colossians 1:23). The hopelessness of those caught in sin's despair was replaced with the assurances of salvation (Ephesians 2:11-14). This was indeed "good news" to lost man (Acts 13:48). As the Gospel message spread, so did the Lord's Church. Before the end of the first century the Church was present all over the world (Colossians 1:6).

- e. The establishing of various congregations of the church of Christ was God's plan for offering salvation to the lost. However, as each congregation was established, the Devil's treacherous efforts began to disrupt and destroy the Church. Various efforts were used by Satan to induce compromise and ruin the work of redemption. The Lord's Church in Corinth illustrates some of the greatest evils that Satan used (and continues to use today) to hinder God's efforts of salvation. Whatever devilish design is used to entice compromise, God's Church is always urged to refrain and resist modifications and compromises. Even though there is strong persuasion to accept changes to God's divine will, Christians are not at liberty to accept these changes. The every day life of the Lord's Church must reflect dedication and commitment to God's will (1 Corinthians 15:58).

The Scriptures bring us to an undeniable conclusion – The Lord's Church is universal but it exists ONLY in the local congregations. The Church universal is only as potent as it is locally. This makes the local congregation extremely important in God's plans. Anyone who minimizes and ignores the importance of the local congregation is saying he knows more than God.

- III. As our series on doctrinal fundamentals comes to a close, look at the local congregation and understand how it alone provides the perfect environment for doing all we have discussed in previous lessons

Body:

- I. God designed the local congregation to provide the place for spiritual service.
 - A. Only the local congregation provides what Christians need for spiritual service — no other structure (small groups, synods, conferences, etc., can do this).
 1. "Church" is used in the universal sense to refer to the Lord's Church all over the earth (Matthew 16:18; Ephesians 3:10; 1 Corinthians 12:13ff; Romans 16:16). It is also used in a local sense to designate a group of Believers in a specific location (1 Corinthians 1:2; Acts 14:23; 1 Peter 5:1-3).
 2. When one becomes a Christian he automatically becomes a member of the universal Church (Acts 2:47; 1 Corinthians 12:18; Galatians 3:27). Thus, upon immersion one is usually identified

with the local church where immersed. A Christian cannot rightfully be a member in a plurality of congregations or under different Elderships at the same time. However, if one moves after immersion, there was an orderly means of that Believer identifying with another local congregation. This has been referred to by the terms "placing membership," "identifying," or "joining one's self to" another congregation (Acts 9:26).

3. The New Testament teaches that it is God's will that Believers be identified with a local congregation because it is only the local congregation that is able to provide the spiritual nourishment necessary for Christians to be pleasing to God.
- B. The provisions of the Believer's salvation can only be found within the local church – they are not possible from the universal Church. Here are some critical provisions found only in the LOCAL congregation
1. Provides the avenue through which spiritual works are to be performed. Only through the local Church will God recv the glory (Ephesians 3:10). While civic clubs and charities of benevolence do good, their main purpose IS NOT to bring glory to God. Even religiously oriented charities do not bring glory to God – they highlight differences in faith and practice.
 2. Provides the avenue through which God's Truth is proclaimed (1 Peter 2:9). Only the local congregation can do this!
 3. Provides the means through which God's benevolence is bestowed on the needy (2 Corinthians 9:12-13). Benevolence can be done via a number of agencies, but God expects His Church to do it so that praise and salvation will result. Involvement in agencies that do not teach Truth or that ignore Truth is sinful even if some "good" is done!
 4. Provides the method by which God's children are matured. The local congregation is designed by God to be a place of edification. The members of the congre come together and find strength (1 Thessalonians 5:14).
 5. Only in a local congregation will you find: the bond of fellowship (Acts 2:42-47; 1 John 1:8-10); the means for edification (Ephesians 4:15-16); the joy of corporate worship (Acts 20:7; 1 Corinthians 14:15); the strength of mutual comfort (1 Thessalonians 4:18; 2 Corinthians 1:3-4; Hebrews 3:13; 10:24). Those who are not

members of a local congregation will not find these things!

6. Seeing these provisions makes us realize the wisdom of God in planning for the local congregation (Ephesians 3:10). We will want to respond to such loving wisdom!

II. God desires that the local congregation will arouse dedicated loyalty to biblical principles.

From 2 Corinthians 11 we discover the responses that should be demonstrated in our appreciation for the local congregation of God's Church.

A. **BE JEALOUS** for the spiritual welfare of the congre (11:2).

This term *ζηλώ* refers to a passionate commitment to a person or cause. Paul is thus saying that in regard to the congregation's spiritual welfare he has put aside his personal interests and is consumed by actions and attitudes that will help the congregation be loyal in serving God!

B. **BE LOVING** in the fellowship of the congre (11:11).

Here we discover that *ἀγαπάω* is critical to the local congregation. I must display this kind of "love."

C. **BE HELPFUL** in the congre's spirit (11:7-9).

Paul's wish was that he not be "burdensome" (*ἄβαστος*) to the congregation. The term refers to one not being a "grievous, oppressive, hard to be borne emotional weight" on someone. It is used in the sense of a person's presence leading to "violence" instead of peace (*THE COMPLETE WORDSTUDY DICTIONARY NEW TESTAMENT*, Spiros Zodhiates, 58, 324). Some are often the cause of congregation turmoil instead of tranquility.

D. **BE BOLD** in sacrificial service for the congre (11:23-27).

Sacrifice personal comfort. Offer diligent service. Crucify self!

E. **BE CONCERNED** for the faithfulness of the congre (11:28).

One should imitate Paul's "care" (*μέριμνα*) for the congre. This refers to a strong thought concerning the welfare and safety. The term describes the desires that monopolize the person's thought. This is their constant thoughts! (1 Corinthians 12:25 rendered as "care").

Conclusion:

- I. The local congregation is a marvelous plan by God. The local congregation is the **ONLY** plan that is able to fulfill our spiritual needs.
 1. Nothing should ever take its place!
 2. There is no structure designed by God that is greater than the local congregation.
 - a. It is tragic that some think they can improve upon God's design by promoting "para-church" organizations that attempt to teach Scripture, do benevolence, do mission work.
 - b. It is tragic that some think they can minimize the importance of the local congregation and devise schemes that diminish the strength of the corporate assembly.
 3. All modifications to God's structure of the local congregation are justified on the grounds of being "more effective" but all modifications fail to appreciate God's design of the local congregation as the **ONLY** acceptable means for doing His will on earth.

- II. As we appreciate the plans of God for the purpose of the local congregation we must understand the urgency of maintaining the local congregation according to God's plans. This urgency is emphasized by these practical points:
 1. Christians must identify themselves with a local congregation. If God intends His work to be done only through the local congregation, how can a Christian be a "floating member" and do God's work? Identification with a local congregation is the **ONLY** way one can gain access to the provisions God has placed within the Church and the **ONLY** way one is able to serve God acceptably.
 - a. The Church "somewhere" cannot weep with us when we weep or lift us when we are discouraged.
 - b. The Church "somewhere" cannot use our talents to the fullest.
 - c. Every member of God's Church ought to be identified and working with a local congregation. It is critical that every member of the local congregation feel the obligation and responsibility to the local Church. This is God's plan.

 2. Even though God's plan is clearly revealed, Satan tempts us to change/ignore/de-emphasize God's plans for the local congregation.
 - a. God's plans for the local congregation designed — a system of

- rule (the Eldership); a pattern for true worship in the corporate assemblies; an environment in which God's authority is the absolute rule; etc. God's plans must be respected regardless of personal likes; popular support; or sincere intentions.
- b. An uncomfortable point for some to contemplate arises from our study. I am either following God's way or Satan. I will either humble my heart and submit to God's way or else join Satan's rebellion and refuse God's way and direct my own path.
 - c. What choice am I making in regard to this local congregation of God's Church?
3. One's identification with a congregation is an identification with that congregation's spirit, work, and worship! As a member of a congregation you ARE responsible for what that congregation IS!
- a. Each member at Ephesus was urged to repent and do or else be identified as a religious group that has had the candlestick removed (Revelation 2:6). Such was true with Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, and Laodicea.
 - b. Each member at Corinth was urged to cease glorying, purge out the sin, and put away the wicked man, or else they all would be leavened by the sin within that congregation (1 Corinthians 5:1-13).
4. The local congregation has been "called out" of the world and is to be a distinct group dedicated to the Lord God in every thing they do! Every member identified with the congregation is obligated to do this.