Section: Doctrine of the Church (Ecclesiology)

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**TEACHING NOTES**

Tonight we are continuing our study of the church, which is called ecclesiology. That word ecclesiology comes from the Greek word ekklesia which means a gathering of people, or a group of called out people. In the Greek Old Testament, the same word ekklesia is used to describe the congregation of the Israelites. In the New Testament, ekklesia means God’s called out people, or a gathering of God’s people. Our Bibles almost always translate the word ekklesia as church.

When we read the word church in our Bibles, we need to have the definition of ekklesia in mind as “God’s called out people”. The English dictionary gives many definitions for the word church including place of worship, worship building, worship services, or religious group. Very few dictionaries include the biblical definition of church. Most people, even some within the church, have the secular definition of church in mind when they say church. When people say “I’m going to church” they usually mean “I’m going to the church building or to a worship service.” With this in mind, I am grateful to get to teach tonight on this important topic of “What is the local Church?”

When we look closer at how God’s word uses the word ‘church” we see it referring to the body of Christ in 3 different ways:

1. As the universal church.
2. As the local church, i.e. the church of Ephesus or in our case as “Disciples Church”.
3. As the body of living believers.

I am thankful for the work our brother, Steve did a few weeks ago as he taught on “the Universal church”. Tonight, we turn our attention to the local church and its primary duties as we go over questions 108 and 109. My goal in teaching through these two questions is for you to have a very clear understanding of why the local church is such a vital component of God’s plan for His people.

I’ll start by reading both questions and answers together and then I will unpack them separately.

**Q108. What is the *local church*?**

The local church is a group of professing believers who have covenanted to unify together to worship and glorify God by fulfilling the commands and mission God has given to the body of Christ.

**Q109. What are the primary duties of the local church?**

The local church is to submit to the authority of and diligently teach the Bible, follow the leadership of qualified elders, regularly gather together, serve one another, make disciples, practice higher levels of accountability, and live missional lives together.

Before we look more closely at our definition of the local church, I want to go back and review our definition of the universal church as a way to highlight the differences.

**Q100. What is the *universal church*?**

The universal Church is all the members of the body of Christ, made up of people from all times and around the world. It is all who are called out of darkness, regenerated, and set apart by God’s saving grace. It is all the genuine believers in Jesus.

So, the universal church is all of the elect, past, present, and future. All of those who are part of the universal church will remain a part of the universal church and will never fall away because they are established and preserved by God.

**In our definition of the local church we read: “The local church is a group of professing believers”.**

Let’s stop there. Here, we have our first major distinction between the universal and the local church.

The universal church is made up of genuine believers while the local church is made up of *professing* believers. In Steve’s lesson he quoted a section of the London Baptist Confession of 1689 which used the language of invisible and visible to distinguish a major difference between the universal church and the local church. Let’s look at those again.

Chapter 26 of the confession begins by saying:

*1. The catholic—that is, universal—church may be called invisible with respect to the internal work of the Spirit and truth of grace. It consists of the full number of the elect who have been, are, or will be gathered into one under Christ her head. The church is the spouse, the body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.1*

*2. All people throughout the world who profess the faith of the gospel and obedience to God through Christ in keeping with the gospel are and may be called visible saints,2 as long as they do not destroy their own profession by any foundational errors or unholy living. All locala congregations ought to be made up of these.3*

The universal church is referred to as invisible, not because its members are invisible or because there is no visible evidence of its existence, but because of the invisible work of the Holy Spirit in regenerating the hearts of all its members. We are not with 100% accuracy able to tell who is truly saved because we cannot see what is in a person’s heart the same way God does.

The local church is referred to as the visible church because it is made up of members who show outward/visible evidence of salvation…they are professing believers. They have made a credible confession of faith in Christ, obeyed the command to be baptized, and show no sign of ongoing unrepentant sin in their lives, hence, it is a credible confession.

And yet, even with these outward evidences, it is a sad reality that some within the local church are not inwardly converted and they still secretly practice lawlessness.

We praise God for those who do not know Christ that are here to witness the testimony of the body of Christ as we worship Him and proclaim the good news of the Gospel. It is good and right that unbelievers would be invited and welcome to come and witness the corporate gathering of the church. That said, it is so important that those who profess Christ are accountable to walk in the light and repent of sin. For some this will not be the case and scripture is clear that there can be those among us who are not truly of us, meaning they are not truly saved. This is why God’s word is so clear to practice accountability and church discipline so that those who are truly of Christ are known and those who are NOT are discovered and their hypocrisy unveiled so that they do not damage the testimony of the gospel and profane the name of Christ. Sadly, many churches do not practice church discipline in a way that efforts to keep the visible church pure. The Confession goes on to say in the next paragraph:

*3. The purest churches under heaven are subject to mixture and error.4 Some have degenerated so much that they have ceased to be churches of Christ and have become synagogues of Satan.5 Nevertheless, Christ always has had and will have in this world to the very end a kingdom of those who believe in him and profess his name.6*

Some so called churches are failing to meet the visible standard of genuine faith to such a degree that they are actually more representative of Satan worshippers in that they claim the title of Christian but completely disobey and reject the law of God.

Matthew 7:21-23 21 "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. 22 On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name? ' 23 And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.

It is a very sad reality that there are some within the church who are nothing more than good actors who see temporal/worldly benefits from being associated with the church, all the while living lives of lawlessness. Many times that lawlessness is being carefully hidden in the darkness. Other times the lawlessness is out in the open but because they are in a church that does not practice loving discipline and accountability it is simply tolerated and sometimes even excused. But eventually, even those who have gotten away with their sinful secret will expose themselves when they no longer see any value in being part of the church.

1 John 2:19-20: "They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us; but they went out that they might be made manifest, that none of them were of us.

Someone who was once part of the local church and then turns and walks away from it proves that they were never really part of the universal church. They may have been a part of the local church in a visible way, through their words and attendance, and maybe even their mighty works or apparent good deeds, but they were not part of the true universal church in the invisible realm of their heart.

If you have been in the church for any amount of time you likely know a few whom this is their testimony. Men or women whom you loved, whom you served with, who you saw great things happen in their life but they turned to sin and then reject accountability or the church altogether.

Additonally, It is heartbreaking to see so many stories of well known leaders in the church who have walked away and/or had their works of lawlessness exposed. They are representative of countless others who have and will walk away from the Christian faith as the cost to remain faithful gets higher and higher. Again, this is a heartbreaking reality, but at the same time, when it does happen we can draw some sense of peace in knowing that God has ordained it and even instructed us clearly in His word.

It’s important to note that what John is talking about here is not someone leaving “A” local church for another local church. He’s talking about someone who has completely walked away from the faith and is no longer even pretending to be a part of the local church. This passage in 1 John is not to teach believers how to judge those who have left the local church, but is more intended to make us mindful that not everyone who says they are a part of the church is to automatically be counted as a brother or sister on that basis alone. It needs to be a credible confession with an ongoing practice of repentence of sin and obedience to God.

Those who disobey the word of God and do not repent, deny Jesus as Lord no matter how much they may claim to have accepted Him as their savior. And even these warnings from John are not as much about how we are to judge others as much as they are meant to be a warning to us not to be deceived by our own confession if we are not truly obeying Jesus as Lord.

We are all sinners saved by grace and our ongoing struggle with sin is real, so we don’t cast judgment on someone’s salvation every time we see them sin. We are called by God to show grace, to love them as He has commanded based on their proclamation. Hopefully, you were here for Matt’s lesson 2 weeks ago on Christian accountability within the church. He showed the Bible’s teaching on how and why we define a person as a part of the church. We may have concerns for someone’s lack of fruit, but until the biblical steps of accountability have led us to treat them as an unbeliever, or until they have turned their back on the faith, we are to graciously and patiently bear with them as brothers in Christ. We must apply this same standard to ourselves as well. In our struggle with sin we will not be perfect, but we must be honest with ourselves about our commitment to walk in true repentance and faith.

Next we read in our answer:

*The local church is a group of professing believers* ***who have covenanted to unify together.***

Part of what is seen in the profession of this group of believers is a commitment to unity. There is an obedience to the commands given in scripture regarding how we are to relate to one another.

Here at Disciples Church, we formalize this commitment through Covenant membership. Scripture does not prescribe an exact method for how the local church is to keep track of its members, so we are not saying that our method is the only way to obey the command for the church to be committed and united, but we do share the conviction that this type of formal commitment is the best way for us to have clarity and unity on what we believe and what we are called by God to do, to hold one another to the biblical standard of unity, commitment, accountability, and dependability.

We state it like this in the membership class:

1. **UNITY:** Covenant Membership provides every member with a clear understanding of the

mission, vision and core beliefs of this local church body by which they can unify around and commit to carry out.

2**. COMMITMENT:**Covenant Membership allows every member to make a commitment to each other that they

will fulfill the priorities and expectations according to an agreed upon written covenant.

3. **ACCOUNTABILITY:**Covenant Membership gives every member a formal avenue by which they can invite

this local church body and leadership to hold them accountable to what God has ordained for his children as they walk daily in Christ.

4. **DEPENDABILITY:**Covenant Membership solidifies who within the local church body can be counted on as

a dependable member who will use their time, giftedness, and finances to help this local church body fulfill

its God given mission, vision and beliefs.

**Unity in Diversity**

**1 Corinthians 1:10** I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment.

This can be very hard to do. We are all unique in the ways that God has created us and in our experiences which leads to a vast number of things that we will see and think differently about, even some matters of doctrine. When Paul says to agree and have no divisions among us, he is talking about our unity in Christ that is meant to be lived out by practicing the “one anothers”. This means that there will be times where are unity is fought for by calling one another to the truths of scripture by exhorting, teaching, and correcting one another. In these cases our unity is achieved by us actually agreeing that God’s word says what it says, and we are believing the same thing.

At other times our unity is maintained by us forgiving one another, and bearing with one another, regarding one another as more important than ourselves.

I want to look quickly at a passage from the same letter to the Corinthian church that shows an example of how we can all agree and be united in the same mind and judgment even when we have differing views and understandings on matters of Christian liberty.

**1 Corinthians 8:4-13** Therefore, as to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that "an idol has no real existence," and that "there is no God but one." 5 For although there may be so- called gods in heaven or on earth—as indeed there are many "gods" and many "lords"— 6 yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.

7 However, not all possess this knowledge. But some, through former association with idols, eat food as really offered to an idol, and their conscience, being weak, is defiled. 8 Food will not commend us to God. We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do. 9 But take care that this right of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. 10 For if anyone sees you who have knowledge eating in an idol's temple, will he not be encouraged, if his conscience is weak, to eat food offered to idols? 11 And so by your knowledge this weak person is destroyed, the brother for whom Christ died. 12 Thus, sinning against your brothers and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. 13 Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble.

There’s a lot going on in this passage but the main point I want us to see is that there is a clear description of what Christian unity is and is not.

1. It is a common commitment to the authority and sufficiency of scripture. It is NOT agreeing that there is no way to really know what the Bible says or means. We don’t simply agree to disagree with the notion that God’s word is not clear enough to ever bring united conviction about matters of doctrine.
2. It’s selfless grace, seeking the welfare of others over ourselves, seeking to out-do one another in love. It is NOT the stronger brother convincing the weaker brother that his conscience is weak and in need of strengthening so that they can both enjoy a nice steak dinner together.
3. It’s being humble and willing to acknowledge that none of us has perfect knowledge in and of ourselves. It is NOT agreeing to call something sinful when scripture clearly teaches otherwise. It would be a sin for someone to violate their own conscience, but that doesn’t mean that the thing itself is a sin. We are not to unite in willful ignorance of God’s revealed will.

I don’t have time to expand on this but I also want to make it clear that this unity is also NOT achieved by the stronger brother agreeing to abstain completely (at all times and places) from that which is a stumbling block to the weaker brother. When Paul says in verse 13, “if food makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble”, he is emphasizing the depth of his love for his brother in Christ, not that he has actually agreed to never eat meat again.

1. It’s also being humble and allowing our consciences to mature and grow as they are informed over time by scripture. It’s NOT being content to be the “weaker brother” and never having our consciences more rightly informed by scripture.
2. It’s being more concerned with defeating my own sin than I am with the sin of others. It is NOT being complacent in my pursuit of holiness because I’m too busy instructing my weaker brother.

What is being agreed to here is that there is such a thing as Christian liberty and we are to love one another by not judging one another over different opinions on these things. It’s being united in the desire to please God by not doing anything that we believe to be a sin against Him.

**Unity in Devotion**

Next, this unity is expressed in a devotion to one another.

Acts 2:42 And they devoted themselves to the apostles ' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

They were devoted. They made being a part of the gathering a priority. They were committed. While this passage is descriptive of the early church and not explicitly *pre*scriptive, it is implicitly prescriptive. It is an account of what the church looks like. We have enough instruction in the rest of scripture to make this point clear.

**1 Timothy 4:13** Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching.

**Hebrews 10:24-25** And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.

**1 Corinthians 12:21-26** The eye cannot say to the hand, “I have no need of you,” nor again the head to the feet, “I have no need of you.” On the contrary, the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and on those parts of the body that we think less honorable we bestow the greater honor, and our unpresentable parts are treated with greater modesty, which our more presentable parts do not require. But God has so composed the body, giving greater honor to the part that lacked it, that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together.

Our devotion to God and His word is expressed in our devotion to the church and to one another.

**Unity in Love**

Most of all, this unity we have is maintained and built up by our love for one another.

**Ephesians 4:2** with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love

We don’t love each other because we are all so lovable. We love each other because God has made us a family and now we choose to love one another in the same way Christ has loved us.

It is common today for people to live together and not get married. Basically they are saying to each other, “I love you, but I’m not committed to you or I’m not willing to risk real commitment.”

No one loves their children that way. They don’t have the thought that if it doesn’t work out, I always have an out. It is a love that is committed no matter what.

That is the kind of love and commitment God has called us to. John 13:35 says:

By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.

Our love and commitment to one another is real and deep. It’s not an “I love you, but don’t want to marry you.” There is a genuine commitment that is not afraid of the necessary implications of that commitment. When we covenant with one another through membership, it lets us know the depth of our commitment and our willingness to be held accountable to that commitment. It also provides a way for us to clarify what that commitment involves so we are not all operating on a different interpretation of what we’re committing to.

We must understand that every local church is meant to be a picture of the true unity that we have as brothers and sisters in Christ. Here in America, we have become way too conditioned by the plethora of choices we have. The freedom to make our own choices is arguably the most treasured value our society holds to. Individuality is king. The world encourages us to be whoever we want to be by making our own choice and determination of what is best for us. Inherent in that idea is that we should reject anyone and anything (including nature and biology) if they do not support our choice. And so this way of thinking has become ingrained in our society.

This mindset of autonomy and personal preference being ultimate has carried over into many people’s view of the church as well. There is no shortage of choices when it comes to local churches and a person must exercise extreme discernment and wisdom when faced with choosing a local church. Scripture gives us all the direction we need when it comes to evaluating the requirements we should look for in a local church. We think of it as a good thing that there are so many different denominations and different worship styles and different personalities of church leaders to match up with our own individual preferences of belief, style, and taste. People think it’s important to find a place that matches their unique preferences and personality traits. But is that what we see in scripture? Does God tell us to find a church where we all like exactly the same style of music, or art, or hobbies? Is that what God’s word describes when it talks about unity in the local church? When He tells us to be of one mind, to bear with one another, to agree, to forgive, to think more highly of others than we do of ourselves, to serve one another, to submit to our elders, to honor one another…it is not for us to gain unity, but to maintain unity. We are already united in Christ.

 **Ephesians 4:1-3** I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

We have been called to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. This is meant to be done in a local context where it can be seen in action by others. It is not a union we are a part of like a club we belong to. It is a unity that is especially seen in our diversity. It is a unity that displays the supernatural work of the Holy Spirit in our lives. It shows that we are not united by our common preferences or personalities, but by the one Spirit who has made us part of God’s family.

- A quick side note on this issue of diversity within the church. If God is the one uniting us as His word says He is, then it is God who is also responsible for the diversity within that unity. If we try to manufacture unity or diversity by the worlds or by our own standards and by outward appearances, what will happen is that we will end up setting aside the gospel as our central point of unity. There are plenty of examples of this having already happened in many local churches.

The local church is a group of professing believers who have covenanted to unify together ***to worship and glorify God.***

When we come together as the local church, the primary purpose of that time is corporate worship. Worship is our highest call. To glorify God… all is ultimately for this. This is what our mission statement says…We (Disciples Church) exist to glorify God through lives transformed by the gospel of Jesus Christ.

We are called to worship God with our entire lives, with all that we are and do. It is not something we do only when we are gathered together. We the church- the people of God, are commanded to worship him at all times. But, there is a biblically prescribed way that we are to worship corporately in the local church and that is the clarity I want us to see.

As the local church, we are gathered together to exalt God and worship Him with songs, prayer, fellowship, the sacraments, and the teaching of the Word. It is important for us to understand that the focus of our corporate time together is not reaching unbelievers.

Too many Christians are of the mindset that we need to bring people to the corporate worship services when the saints are gathered together so they can be evangelized. Don’t get me wrong - invite your unbelieving friends to join us for worship and let us pray that they will hear and see the beauty of the gospel on display in the way we worship together. We do not take a break from evangelism or set it aside in order to worship corporately. If we are worshipping God as He prescribes, then any unbeliever who is in the room with us is going to hear the gospel message and be encouraged to repent and believe unto salvation.

But we must be very careful not to fall into the trap of thinking that we should strategize our corporate gathering to be geared towards unbelievers. The primary purpose for the gathering of the saints is corporate worship of God.

Too many churches have developed business-model like strategies to get unbelievers to attend their corporate worship services. They have viewed unbelievers as the consumer that they need to reach with their product and have sought to sell them by figuring out what it is that will appeal to them. Sadly, the fruit of this approach is church gatherings all around the world, especially here in America, that have so watered down the worship of God when they gather in order not to offend unbelievers, that the corporate worship of Jesus has become non-existent in many of these so-called churches.

Remember, the local church is a group of professing believers, not unbelievers, so we should not be designing our time together for unbelievers. When churches become dominated by the influence of unbelievers, they eventually cease to be churches.

Let’s look now at the final part of our answer.

It says:

The local church is a group of professing believers who have covenanted to unify together to worship and glorifyGod ***by fulfilling the commands and mission God has given to the body of Christ.***

During the reign of king Saul, the Israelites went to war with the Amalekites and God gave them victory God and commanded them to devote the Amalekites to complete destruction, every person and all of their animals. King Saul held back slaughtering the best of the animals in order to offer them as a sacrifice to the Lord and this was God’s response through the prophet Samuel:

1 Samuel 15:22-23a "Has the Lord as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices,

as in obeying the voice of the Lord?

Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to listen than the fat of rams.

23 For rebellion is as the sin of divination, and presumption is as iniquity and idolatry.

God does not tell Saul “your heart was in the right place.” Because of his disobedience, God rejected him as king of Israel. He presumed to think that God would be ok with him disobeying because he had thought of a better idea. He was arrogant enough to think that he could come up with a thought all on his own that would somehow impress God. God help us not to take His commands so lightly.

God’s word has given us clear instruction on how we are to worship Him. We will look closer at some of these instructions in our 2nd question tonight and over the next 2 weeks we will learn more about Scriptures’ commandments regarding the ordinances of baptism and the Lord’s supper which are both vital parts of worship in the local church.

Fulfilling the commands and mission God has given the church has been covered pretty thoroughly over the last few weeks as we looked at prayer, the great commission and making disciples. As we move in to our 2nd question, I want to pay particular attention to why the local church is so important in accomplishing this mission.

**Q109. What are the primary duties of the local church?**

The local church is to submit to the authority of and diligently teach the Bible, follow the leadership of qualified elders, regularly gather together, serve one another, make disciples, practice higher levels of accountability, and live missional lives together.

Our answer lists 7 distinct duties within the local church. I am going to go through them all one at a time.

1. **The local church is to submit to the authority of the Bible.**

**2 Timothy 3:16-17** All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.

The Scriptures, that is- the written Word- the Old and New Testaments, are breathed out by God, meaning they are His words that are written on the pages. That is how God communicates to the church today. And it goes on to say that it is profitable-useful-beneficial- for teaching, reproof, correction, and training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete-[lacking in nothing- he doesn’t need to go to some other source than the Scriptures to supplement any lack],… equipped for every good work- […***every*** good work.]

Too many churches are guilty of thinking they can improve on God’s design for the church by looking to modern philosophy, social experiments, business models, marketing techniques, etc., but God’s Word is authoritative and sufficient for us to be complete and equipped for every good work.

The ***local church*** must submit to the Bible. That means more than just individuals submitting to it, that means that the heartbeat of the whole church, especially the leadership is boldly and unapologetically raising up Scripture as the standard by which every sermon is preached and every ministry decision is made and acted upon.

If you are ever in a position where you are considering moving to another city, one of the deciding factors needs to be- is there a local church that truly submits to the authority of Scripture. This is not always an easy thing to discern just by looking at a website or visiting for a few Sundays. It may require some very thorough investigating. Carelessly becoming a part of a church that does not submit to the authority of Scripture could have eternal consequences. I would go so far as to say that if you cannot find a good church and your purpose in moving there is not to plant one, you should take that as clear confirmation from God that He is not calling you there.

1. **Follow the leadership of qualified elders.**

**Hebrews 13:17** Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.

**Ephesians 4:11-12** And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers [elders], 12 to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ,

The elders have been appointed by God to lead, feed, protect, and care for the flock. A Christian who is not part of a local church is not only missing out on the benefits of being led by God’s appointed leaders, but they are also in direct violation of His command to submit to them. It is impossible for a person to obey the command to submit to the elders if they are not part of a LOCAL church.

Elders are specifically appointed to serve in local congregations.

How can I truly benefit from someone’s care and guidance if they don’t know me and I don’t know them?

**Titus 1:5** This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained into order, and appoint elders in every town as I directed you—

The early churches were named after the town they were in…the church of Ephesus, the church in Corinth, etc…Notice that Paul didn’t say he had left Titus there to appoint elders in every church…he said every town. Why is that? -------Because he was putting what remained into order. There was still work that remained before the churches in those towns were established as actual local churches. The churches in those towns were not formally established yet because they didn’t have elders.

Paul goes on in the following verses to give clear and specific instruction for the required qualifications of these elders.

A local church without biblically qualified elders is not a true church.

Is there ever a point where it would be ok for us to not follow the biblical leadership of our qualified elders? The answer is no. We trust God’s good design. And that design is that the sheep needs shepherds. You are not intended to make or find your own way. You are designed to follow and submit to qualified shepherds who lead according to God’s holy word. A key here, is the term qualified. God has given very clear instruction in His word on how we are to qualify those who are to lead the church. This is not a one and done qualification. It is an ongoing qualification. As long as our elders are qualified, we are to honor and submit to their leadership.

We must also remember that our elders are sinners saved by grace just like the rest of us. We cannot put them on a pedestal that expects an impossible level of perfection. Pray for your elders. If Satan is able to destroy the shepherds of the local church, it will be much easier to get to the flock under their care.

We want to be able to look at our elders and feel confident in following them, not because they can be trusted based on their perfection, but because God has appointed them as our leaders and He can be trusted. Our submission to our elders is ultimately a submission to God.

1. **Regularly gather together.**

We showed the need for us in the local church to regularly gather when we looked at Scripture’s command for us to be unified. We cannot fulfill God’s command for us to be making disciples and to be serving as a vital part of the body if we are not showing up. We have explicit commands all over Scripture that are predicated on our meeting together regularly.

**Hebrews 3:13** But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called “today,” that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.

How do we exhort one another every day if we are not meeting regularly? He is making a larger point about the importance of our need for each other when it comes to remaining in the faith. The book of Hebrews is not addressed to any particular church or group of churches, but the author is clearly speaking in a way that assumes his audience is part of a gathering of the local church.

**Romans 14:19 (NASB)** So then we pursue the things which make for peace and the building up of one another.

**1 Thessalonians 5:11** Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing.

**Romans 15:7** ...welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.

Someone has counted that there are at least 59 of these “one another” passages in Scripture. As Christians, we are expected, in fact, it’s assumed that we would be doing life with one another. Our individual testimonies of God’s love for us are given exponential impact when that love is being modeled in the way that we love one another as the body of Christ. The people of Bakersfield may not know the individual members of Disciples Church, but it is possible for them to know of the extraordinary love we have for one another.

In the account of Paul’s conversion in Acts 9, Jesus presents Himself to Paul, knocking Him down, and asks him “why are you persecuting ME?”- not why are you persecuting my people? Jesus so identifies with His people that He does not even distinguish himself from them.

Many professing Christians want to claim that they don’t need the church- that they are part of the universal church and need no leader but Christ. That sounds very pious, but it is not what Jesus says. The church is to function as a body with Christ as the head. For someone to say I don’t need the local church, I only need Christ, is to fashion an idol and call it Christ.

Jesus loves His body. He loves the church. He is committed to the church. He gave Himself for the church. We must not think that we can have a flippant, callous attitude toward the body of Christ and somehow not be guilty of violating the first commandment – to love the Lord our God with all our heart soul, mind and strength.

For all of the ways that Covid has upset life as we know it, in many ways it has been used by God to re-orient the local church to its purpose and importance. While it was perfectly within the bounds of scripture and reason for the church to abstain from physically gathering for a few weeks in the face of an unknown, worldwide pandemic, it is not within the bounds of scripture for us to relegate the physical gathering of the local church as something non-essential. Even the risk of death is not a reason for the church not to gather. If that were the case, why would our brothers and sisters in places like North Korea and Afghanistan continue to meet even at the penalty of death if found out?

Scripture commands us to take seriously our commitment of meeting together.

**Hebrews 10:24-25** And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.

There is a clear commandment to be obeyed here that we not neglect to meet together, but our reason for meeting together is not a begrudging duty we obey simply because we are commanded to. We obey because we love God and because we love the church, and because of the opportunity it gives us to stir up and to **be** stirred up to love and good works. Rather than neglecting to meet, we are to encourage one another. Part of the encouragement we receive from one another comes simply from our gathering together. Our shared commitment to be here, to sing, pray, and sit under the teaching of our shepherds together is an encouragement! Praise God for how the temporary loss of this grace due to Covid has stirred up so many to see more clearly the gift that it is! Not meeting together has proven to be **dis**couraging in SO many ways.

Highfill Story…….

We have also seen how seeing the Day drawing near gives us even more reason to gather and encourage even more. This doesn’t mean that the frequency of these things should be exponentially higher for us than it was for the church 2000 years ago. It means that as we become more aware of the reality that this sin-sick world is passing away and will never be a place that we can experience the physical peace that will only come when Christ returns and establishes the new earth, we will need more and more encouragement to remain faithful and keep our eyes fixed on the eternal promises of God and not on the discouraging realities of our temporary circumstances. The local church is where we get to come and taste a little bit of heaven on earth.

1. **Serve one another**

**Galatians 5:13** For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love *serve one another.*

The local church provides us the opportunity to display the love Christ has for us in the way we love and serve each other. Our service to one another is to flow out of our love for one another. The primary action here is love, not service. We have so many members who display this quality here in our church. Let us remember to always look for ways to be reciprocating that love to those who love and care for our kids, set up chairs, and vacuum floors. They are not just serving God, they are also serving US as an extension of their love for God.

I have honestly never seen it here in this church, but I have seen evidence that it is possible to serve people without loving them. There are people who will get in and serve and work hard to help out, but seem to have no interest in the people they are serving.

We can’t just see this as a box to check off. Yes, I’ve fulfilled my duty. This kind of serving is meant to be an expression of genuine love and affection for one another. And not just a general group of people, the individuals who make up that group, each person who makes up the local church we are serving.

There’s an old Charlie Brown comic where he says, “I love humanity, it’s people I can’t stand.”

We cannot say we love the bride of Christ while we are holding a grudge, hurt, or resentment towards one of the individual members of that body. We must recognize the contradiction when we are guilty of this and then repent of it by seeking restoration out of a heart of love for God and for His people. As Matt taught in his lesson on Christian accountability and discipline, even when we have to break fellowship with a brother and go so far as to commit their body to destruction, it is to be done from a heart of love in hopes that their soul will be saved.

The world defines love as an emotion that comes and goes, but God defines love as a choice, a commitment to someone else’s wellbeing. Don’t ever let a lack of emotion prevent you from making the choice to love your brother.

**Romans 12:3-6** For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them…

If you are not already serving somewhere in some way, I encourage you to talk with one of the leaders to see where the gifts God has given you can be put to use in service to the body. Do not think that your gift is insignificant. You may not even realize that you have a gift, but if you are a part of the church, then God has gifted you to play a part in the function of the body you are a member of.

1. **Make Disciples**

We covered this in great detail when we covered questions 103 and 104 of the Catechism, but I will just reiterate that the local church is designed by God to be the central hub of discipleship. A disciple of Christ recognizes the importance of being an active participant as a member of the body of Christ in the context of the local church. He also sees the blessing and benefit of growing under godly shepherds and alongside other committed members of the local church.

1. **Practice higher levels of accountability.**

Matt also covered this two weeks ago. The point I want to emphasize again is how important this is especially in the local church. We are a church who sees this command clearly in Scripture and believe that God’s commands are good and loving, therefore it would be unloving for us not to hold one another accountable. Our church has had some pruning over the course of our return to more biblical accountability. Some have decided that they are not interested in a church where they cannot come and remain anonymous in the back row. We love you too much to let you remain comfortable in not being accountable.

**Colossians 3:16** Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God.

The accountability we are called to is part of our worship, meant to be as much a part of our life together as the singing we do. It is the outflow of the word of Christ in us. It is something to be thankful for. I got emotional thinking about this as I was writing my notes. I know that I could bring a large number of you up here right now to give testimony of your thankfulness for the admonishment and accountability you have recently received. I know how thankful I am for the loving accountability I have received in my own life.

Loving admonishment and correction that is grounded in God’s word is the greatest gift we can give each other.

This higher level of accountability that we give and receive is one of the most beneficial functions of the local church. Think about how you were saved. While you were God’s enemy, Christ died for you and the Holy Spirit opened your blind eyes when you didn’t even know you were blind. The accountability we receive from the body of Christ is how we continue to have our eyes opened to that which we are blind to. Do you truly want to see? Then don’t be afraid of God’s means of helping you to see what you cannot see on your own.

1. **Live missional lives together.**

Praise God that here at Disciples Church we have learned that it is not the pastor’s and staff’s job to do all the work of evangelism.

Ephesians 4:11-12 And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, 12 to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ,

When we gather for corporate worship, we are being equipped and built up for the work of ministry. From there, we are all going back out into a world of unbelievers and taking the gospel to them and making disciples.

All of the wonderful benefits we experience together as the local church is not meant to end on us. We are to be on mission, making worshippers of God among people(s) who are currently not worshipping Him. That means going out from our place of worship to places where God is not worshipped.

It also means understanding that our presence in the world is designed by God for missional purposes. In other words, when we are carrying out the first five duties of the local church, we are actually fulfilling a large part of what it means for us to be missional by the purity and holiness of our lives together.

The local church is the physical manifestation of the body of Christ in the world. Even though it is unintentionally comprised of true believers and hypocrites, we are instructed by God’s word to operate and be governed in such a way that we are always striving for holiness and purity. That is the purpose of church discipline - to protect and maintain the purity of the church and it’s testimony.

I want to end by reading both questions and answers together again.

**Q108. What is the *local church*?**

The local church is a group of professing believers who have covenanted to unify together to worship and glorify God by fulfilling the commands and mission God has given to the body of Christ.

**Q109. What are the primary duties of the local church?**

The local church is to submit to the authority of and diligently teach the Bible, follow the leadership of qualified elders, regularly gather together, serve one another, make disciples, practice higher levels of accountability, and live missional lives together.

This is what we get to do!!! ARE YOU DOING THESE THINGS? IF NOT, JUMP IN. IF YOU ARE, HOW CAN YOU GROW?

 If you have found a way to stay outside of covenanting with the local body of Christ, It is time to get off the sidelines. If you are guilty of doing church according to your own terms then you need to repent and lean in and humble yourself before God and begin practicing what it means to be a member of the body of Christ according to God’s design.

THESE ARE THE THINGS WE MUST TALK ABOUT TONIGHT IN OUR GROUPS.

Let’s take serious this call and each of our parts in these things.

Let’s pray.