

“The Centrality of the Church in the Mission of God”

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What is the Local Church

In the writing of His story, God has four primary movements: creation, transgression, condemnation, and redemption. The physical or visible venue through which the story would be told is in the arrival of the Hero. It is this Hero who would rescue a people for Himself. The rescued would worship Him and enjoy His presence forever. The means whereby the created could worship the Creator would be by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. In the outworking of God’s story His people would always be “called out” from the mass of humanity. In much of the Old Testament record these people were identified as national Israel and within the nation a spiritual or redeemed remnant. In the New Testament record, these people are identified as “the called out ones” (**ekklesia** = “to call out”) or “the Church.”

Theologically, when speaking of the local church, we identify something that is distinct from that which is global or universal.

Biblically, when Paul speaks of the church he is primarily and (almost) exclusively speaking of the church local. When it speaks to the church global, it is still referring to local assemblies. Christ did not love the church in abstract. He loved and loves each of the parts as it represents the whole. The word occurs only twice in the Gospels (Matthew), is used extensively by Luke in Acts, expanded on by Paul, and then occurs almost exclusively in Revelation 2 and 3 (only one other time in Revelation 22:16).

The New Testament does not recognize shepherd-less sheep or sheep-less shepherds. An individual might have the gift of teaching and caring, but unless and until they occupy the office of shepherd, they are not shepherds. The same is true concerning the “sheep.” Sheep are designed for community. They were never intended to “go it alone.” Sheep needs shepherds for provision and protection. Shepherds need sheep, otherwise their identity as shepherd is forfeited.

Although the ordinances can exist apart from the assembly and although many of the functions of a “church” can exist independent of a church, this is not the New Testament picture or ideal.

How is the Local Church Defined or Described?

Although it is difficult to define the church with complete objectivity, it is not impossible. The word “church” in English is taken from old English meaning “place of worship.” This, however, is not the meaning of the word it represents in the New Testament. The New Testament word is “**ecclesia**.” It is a compound word meaning “to call out from.” It is best translated as “assembly.” The idea of “called out from” is strongly concrete, not abstract. What are the characteristics of a local assembly?

First, the assembled are a group of people who by grace believe and trust in the sacrificial death, burial, and resurrection of Christ for the forgiveness of their sins and salvation from the punishment which would have been poured out on them by the righteous God.

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Second, this group of believers commit to one Body and thus operate in submission to each other by participating in baptism, in meeting together weekly to listen to teaching from God's Word, in prayer, fellowship, singing of songs, the breaking of bread, and giving (Acts 2:47; Eph. 5:18-21; Col. 3:15-17).

Third, they are led by a local group of elders/shepherds who care for the flock through the teaching of the Word, prayer, and mentoring/discipleship (Titus 1:5-11; Acts 20:28-32). This is the intent of the "pastoral letters." They define the quality and function of those who would lead the local assembly. The organization of the assembly has leadership that provides instruction and protects the gathered sheep from false teachers (Acts 20ff; Eph. 4:10ff).

Finally, this group of believers recognize Jesus Christ as their head and, therefore, are involved in community as His body in the Mission of God (Phil. 1:27; 1 Thess. 1:6-10) and are actively assisting and equipping those within the assembly to go forth in this endeavor (2 Tim. 2:2; Acts 13:1-3).

What is the Mission of the Church?

The Mission of God in and through the Local Church is first **in** and then **through** the Local Church. The gifting of the assembly by God with apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers is for the purpose of equipping the saints. It is by the equipping that the assembled with become mature and secure (Eph. 4:12-16). They will grow in the knowledge of His grace by celebrating the person and work of Jesus Christ. The mission of God is to redeem for Himself worshippers from every tongue, tribe, people, and nation (Rev. 5:9). If the New Testament usage of the word "assembly" speaks to local assemblies, then the mission of God is carried out first and foremost through those whom He has called out to assemble for the making and maturing of disciples.

There is a larger mission of God carried out by the church universal. Thus it is possible to speak of the mission of God as including all acts by those who work independent of local assemblies, but the emphasis in the New Testament is **on**, **in**, and **through** the local assembly.

Missions refers to the carrying out of the *Mission of God* which we believe to be the making, maturing, and assembling of disciples of Jesus Christ *by* local churches *into* local churches for the strengthening and building up of the body of Christ (Eph. 4:11-13).

In each generation, we believe that God has delegated to every individual in the local assembly the above mission of advancing his kingdom on earth to their generation (Matt. 28:19-20). Practically, this necessitates that we as a church be intentional in corporately proclaiming the message of Christ to every tribe, tongue, people, and nation (Rev. 5:9), and then continuing the process of advancing God's kingdom to succeeding generations by making disciples of those who believe and encouraging them to meet together as an assembly or a local church. As a result, we will actively be strengthening existing churches and establishing new ones for the glory of God.

Waukesha Bible Church is a family of families seeking to live in **the Storyline of the Bible**. She is determined by design to have a **God-centered, Christ-exalting worship; a Word-centered teaching** focused on personal **discipleship** through intentional and systematic instruction; a **Global-impacting mission** that resolves to be a **church planting church**; and a **Grace-based fellowship** where disciples are invited to live under a **reigning grace** characterized by a **Gospel-driven sanctification** that celebrates a divine **monergism** to the Christian life.