

# What are the Essentials of a Local Church? Guidelines for Missionary Ecclesiology

**ZANE PRATT**

---

**Zane Pratt** is Vice President for Assessment, Deployment, and Training with the International Mission Board (IMB) of the Southern Baptist Convention. He also serves as Associate Professor of Christian Missions at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, Kentucky, where he previously served as the dean of the Billy Graham School from 2011-2013. Dr. Pratt earned his MDiv from Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary and his PhD from Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary. From 1991-2011, Dr. Pratt served as a church planter and regional leader with the IMB in Central Asia. He is the co-author of *Introduction to Global Missions* (B&H, 2014) and a contributor to *Theology and Practice of Mission* (B&H, 2011).

Ecclesiology is a debated subject in evangelical missionary circles. The debate surrounds two questions. The first question asks whether local churches are even needed on the mission field. Church planting can be messy and slow. So much of church life in the West, with its buildings and programs and large budgets, seems extra-biblical. The command of the Great Commission is to make disciples, not (explicitly, at least) to plant churches. There is, in fact, no explicit command to plant churches anywhere in the New Testament (NT). Shouldn't missionaries concentrate on evangelism and discipleship, and leave off church formation as a luxury, maybe viewed as even a hindrance?<sup>1</sup>

The second question, asked by those who believe that church formation is an essential part of the missionary task, relates to the characteristics required by the NT of a local church. What is the nature of a local church, and what are

its essential structures and functions? At what point does simplicity become unbiblical reductionism, or contextualization become syncretism? How much of the missionary's experience of church in his or her home setting reflects nonnegotiable biblical norms, and how much of it reflects human tradition or the missionary's home culture? What role does the urgency of the missionary task play in the shape of the church? At the heart of all these questions lies one summary issue: what must be present in any church, in any setting, for that church to be a biblically faithful church?

### **THE NECESSITY OF LOCAL CHURCHES**

Are local churches a necessity or a luxury? Is it possible to be a faithful disciple of Jesus Christ outside of committed involvement in a local church? As already stated, there is no explicit command in Scripture to plant churches. There is also no explicit command to become a member of a church. However, this article will argue that local churches are a necessity, and that it is not possible to be a faithful Christian apart from committed involvement in a local church.<sup>2</sup>

This necessity is rooted in the very nature of the imperative given in the account of the Great Commission in Matthew's Gospel. As is well known, there is only one verb in Matthew 28:16-20, and that verb is "make disciples." The goal of Christian mission is disciples, not merely decisions. This fits with the entire flow of the biblical narrative. From the beginning God has been on a mission to glorify himself by filling his creation with his image-bearers. God created humanity, man and woman, in his image. The point of being made in the image of God was to reflect and represent God as his vicegerents and as stewards of his creation. That image was badly marred by human rebellion in the fall of humanity recounted in Genesis 3.

In the biblical narrative that followed the fall, Israel, as God's son, was to reflect and represent God to a watching world, but badly failed in that mission. Israel culminated in Jesus, God's only begotten Son, who was the perfect image of the invisible God. Jesus, being God himself in human flesh, perfectly reflected and represented God as True God who was also the True Man and the True Son. He perfectly represented the nature and character of God ("Whoever has seen me has seen the Father," said Jesus to Philip in John 14:9), and as the Risen King who has all authority in heaven and on

earth, he perfectly represented for all eternity the sovereign rule of God in his Kingdom. Jesus now sends his people to every tribe, tongue, people and nation to make disciples, who themselves are destined to be conformed to his image (Rom 8:29). This conformity will be accomplished completely when believers see Jesus face to face, because, “when he appears we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is” (1 John 3:2). The goal of Christian discipleship, then, is to be conformed to the image of Christ, and that entails reflecting the character of Christ through the transformation of every area of life, and representing Christ as his ambassador to a rebellious world, all in the context of abiding in Christ in union with him through the Holy Spirit.

The NT has no other conception of a Christian. To be a Christian is to become more and more like Christ and to engage more and more faithfully in his mission. A Christian is a disciple, and anyone who is not a disciple of Jesus is not a Christian in any biblically meaningful sense of the word. This then leads to the necessity of local churches. Where does discipleship happen? It happens in the context of the body of Christ, the church. There are three, and only three, necessary resources for growth in discipleship, but all three are essential. These three are the word of God, the Spirit of God, and the people of God. In an individualistic culture, the third resource is often neglected or downplayed. However, both 1 Corinthians 12 and Ephesians 4 make it clear that other Christians in a committed church context are required for growth and health as a disciple. 1 Corinthians 12 teaches that no Christian has all the spiritual gifts, so every believer needs what every other believer in the body brings to the table. One-on-one discipleship would be sufficient only if the person doing the discipling possessed all the spiritual gifts.<sup>3</sup> This text also teaches that believers do not exist only for themselves, but for the body, so followers of Jesus who voluntarily isolate themselves from a local church are being disobedient stewards of the gifts God has given them. Ephesians 4:1-16 likewise teaches that maturity happens when each part of the body works properly and does its part. It may or may not take a village to raise a child, but it most certainly takes a church to raise a disciple.

This is consistent with the unbroken example of the apostles and other followers of Jesus in the NT. The very first believers met together regularly to carry out the functions of a church. Everywhere the apostles went in their missionary efforts, they left behind local churches. These were not minimalist churches, either, as the appointment of elders and the detailed

instructions about church life in the epistles make clear. The NT simply has no concept of a believer in Jesus who willingly separates from the fellowship of a local church.

It is, therefore, not surprising that the Book of Hebrews commands us not to neglect meeting together, but rather to encourage each other and to stir one another up to love and good deeds (Heb 10:24-25). This happens in the context of a group of believers who are committed to one another to be the body of Christ and who assemble regularly to do so. The local church is a non-negotiable component of biblical Christianity. Planting local churches where there are none is an equally non-negotiable component of the missionary task. Those who deny its necessity or who neglect it in practice are guilty of missiological malpractice.

### **BIBLICAL ESSENTIALS FOR LOCAL CHURCHES**

This leaves the question of what constitutes a biblical church. No one answers this question in a vacuum. Everyone is influenced by their own experience of church, and the unreflective tendency of any church planter is to reproduce the patterns and characteristics of the church that raised him. This was certainly true for much of the early history of the modern missionary movement. European and North American missionaries planted churches around the globe that looked exactly like their home churches, down to architecture, church programming, and hymnody. As late as the 1990s, the International Mission Board (IMB) of the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) utilized an annual statistical report form that asked its missionaries how many graded choir programs, Royal Ambassador and Girls in Action groups, and age-graded Sunday Schools they had started in the last year. All these programs are good. There is nothing in them that violates Scripture. Each of them was created by past generations of Southern Baptists to help fulfill a biblical function of the church. However, although the functions are required by the Bible, the specific programs are not, and thoughtful missionaries seek to distinguish between the two.

#### ***The Minimalist Approach***

At the other end of the spectrum is a quest for a minimalist ecclesiology.<sup>4</sup> There are tremendous virtues to simplicity. Simplicity can be carried out

and reproduced by ordinary believers with no worldly resources, as in the NT. Churches in the NT seem remarkably devoid of the programs that characterize so much of modern church life. They had no church buildings, no sound systems, no worship bands, and no elaborate worship service productions. For those engaged in missionary service in environments that are closer to the world of the early church than to the world of Western evangelicalism, simple church is doable and sustainable without outside funding and support, while typical Western church life is not. Furthermore, the task is urgent. There are more people alive today with no access to the gospel than the total population of the world just 60 years ago. That number is only growing. Any form of church life that requires extensive training and resources will drastically slow down the spread of the gospel, and it will do so for extra-biblical reasons. At what point, however, does a quest for simplicity become extra-biblical reductionism?

The motivation behind the quest for ecclesiological minimalism is the appropriate desire to strip away any requirements or expectations for church life that are extra-biblical. There are several reasons why this motivation is appropriate. First, to quote the *Baptist Faith and Message 2000*, “God alone is Lord of the conscience, and He has left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men which are contrary to His word or not contained in it.”<sup>5</sup> No one should ever require of any church that which the word of God does not require. Second, biblically appropriate contextualization requires such an approach. The modern Western church worships in ways and makes use of technologies that would be thoroughly alien to any first century believer. However, these things may not be contrary to Scripture, and they may be culturally appropriate in a contemporary Western setting. Churches in other parts of the world should be equally free to make use of biblically neutral cultural forms that are appropriate in their own setting.<sup>6</sup> This does not mean that the point of contextualization is to make the gospel comfortable. The gospel, properly understood, is never comfortable to any sinner in any setting, although it is enormously comforting in the strongest sense of that word. It also does not mean that there are no boundaries to contextualization. Scripture has a great deal to say about church structure and function, and nothing that the Bible requires is negotiable. The point of contextualization is to strip away the offense of foreignness in things that are biblically neutral, so that the only offense left is the clearly understood offense

of the gospel. Third, as has already been stated, this approach is necessary for church to be sustainable in majority-world settings without a constant infusion of outside support. That in turn leads to the fourth and final reason, which is that this approach is necessary for the church to reproduce on its own, so that the mission harvest joins the mission force.

However, there are dangers in the language of ecclesiological minimalism. It can degenerate into a quest to see how much one can get away with. In an anti-theological world that exalts pragmatism, it can become “whatever works,” when “whatever works” is defined as what produces the greatest number of people in attendance without regard to biblical understandings of conversion, discipleship, and church. The goal is not simply the elimination of as much as possible from our understanding of church. The goal is to eliminate as much extra-biblical material as possible from our ecclesiology while simultaneously discovering and embracing everything the Bible teaches about the church. In order to be missionally effective, churches need to be robustly biblical and healthy.<sup>7</sup> Church health and missional effectiveness are not rival concerns but inseparable allies. Rather than speaking of ecclesiological minimalism, the quest should be for an ecclesiology that is robustly, but exclusively, biblical.

This also addresses the relationship between missionary urgency and the shape of missionary ecclesiology. The mission God has given his people is urgent. Scripture teaches that all people everywhere are sinners, that there is no salvation outside of Jesus Christ, and that sinners must hear (or read, or have signed to them) the message of the gospel, repent of their rebellion against God, and trust in Christ in order to be saved. Given the vast numbers of people in the world who currently have no access to the gospel, both love for God and love for neighbor make urgency an appropriate and necessary response. There is no conflict between a high view of the sovereignty of God in salvation and a sense of urgency about the missionary task, just as there is no conflict between a high view of the sovereignty of God in salvation and the necessity of evangelism. The concern sometimes expressed, however, is that a sense of urgency and a desire for the rapid spread of the gospel will lead to imprecision in gospel proclamation and reductionism in ecclesiology.<sup>8</sup> In other words, in the interest of speed, biblical requirements will be jettisoned if they are perceived as slowing down the advance of the gospel. The danger is real, and it has manifested itself at various times and

places. However, it is a fundamental principle of logic that abuse does not take away use. The fact that something can lead to certain dangers does not necessarily imply that it automatically produces those dangers. In this case, a biblical sense of urgency about the missionary task must be held hand in hand with a passionate commitment to everything that the Bible teaches a church should be and do. To lose either is to fall into error.

## **DEFINITION OF LOCAL CHURCH**

What, then, is a local church? The *Baptist Faith and Message 2000* defines it as follows:

A New Testament church of the Lord Jesus Christ is an autonomous local congregation of baptized believers, associated by covenant in the faith and fellowship of the gospel; observing the two ordinances of Christ, governed by His laws, exercising the gifts, rights, and privileges invested in them by His Word, and seeking to extend the gospel to the ends of the earth. Each congregation operates under the Lordship of Christ through democratic processes. In such a congregation each member is responsible and accountable to Christ as Lord. Its scriptural officers are pastors and deacons. While both men and women are gifted for service in the church, the office of pastor is limited to men as qualified by Scripture.

Certain theological and ecclesiological convictions are evident in this definition. Congregationalist polity, a Baptist understanding of the ordinances, and a complementarian perspective on church leadership are clearly articulated. The nature of the church is a deeply theological issue, and other theological traditions would define a local church in different terms. In many ways, Baptist distinctives are as much about the nature of the church as they are about baptism itself. However, this theology plays itself out in practice. In concrete terms, what does this definition mean, and what does it look like to plant such a church where the gospel has newly penetrated?

First, it is essential to realize that church planting is one component in a larger missionary task. The IMB has defined the missionary task as composed of six elements or components: entry, evangelism, disciple making, healthy church formation, leadership training, and exit to partnership.<sup>9</sup> These cannot be separated, and they often occur simultaneously. Missionary

church planting is not a matter of rearranging the saints. It is the fruit of evangelism and the context for disciple making. This means, in most cases, that missionary church planting involves very young believers. Given the reality that discipleship happens in the context of the body of Christ, and given the example of the apostles, who gathered new converts into churches immediately, new churches on the mission field will often be growing toward everything that Scripture requires rather than possessing full health from the start. One thinks, for example, of the fact that Paul and Barnabas planted churches in each city they visited on their first missionary journey, but only appointed elders in them on the return journey back to Antioch in Acts 13 and 14. Newly started churches made up of newly converted disciples must grow into maturity.

Given that caveat, a local church on the mission field can be defined by its nature, its structures, and its functions. A good summary statement is found in the IMB's *Foundations*: "A church is a group of baptized believers in Jesus who are committed to each other to be the body of Christ to one another and who meet together regularly to carry out the functions of a biblical church."<sup>10</sup> There are three parts to this definition, and each one is significant.

### ***Baptized Believers***

A church first of all is a group of baptized believers in Jesus. The Greek word *ekklesia* refers to an assembly or congregation.<sup>11</sup> It always has the significance of a group of people. The number of people in this group is not defined in the Bible. Unlike the synagogue in Rabbinic Judaism, there is no *minyan* or quorum required for a church to be a church. Of greater importance is the kind of people who make up this group. A biblical church is a group of baptized believers in Jesus Christ. Regenerate church membership is a key component in the definition of a local church. The NT shows no evidence of the intentional inclusion of unbelievers in a church, and it also gives both a command and a consistent example of all believers being baptized at the beginning of their life as a Christian and their involvement in church life. A church is always more than one person. All the people in this group known as a church are believers who show credible evidence of regeneration, and all of them have been baptized as believers.

It is appropriate at this point to probe more deeply into the question of church size. Does Matthew 18:20 teach that two or three people can constitute

a church? As Grayson Gilbert argues cogently,<sup>12</sup> to reach this conclusion is to wrench the verse out of context and to misapply it to a question it is not intended to address. Matthew 18:15-20 is a passage about church discipline. The promise of Jesus' presence in verse 20 is an assurance of his involvement in the difficult work of holding church members accountable. It was never intended to be a statement about how many people are required to form a church, much less a comprehensive statement on ecclesiology by Jesus. Everything else in the Bible that bears on the subject must be brought into any formulation of ecclesiology. All the same, it must be remembered that the Bible never gives a required number of members for a church, and if there are only a small number of believers in a location, that small group can still be a real church. In fact, there is no requirement for churches to be large. Large numbers are helpful to fund a building, a large staff, and complex programming, but none of these are biblical requirements for a local church. Small churches have significant advantages in terms of fellowship and pastoral care, and the biblical oxymoron of anonymous and uninvolved church membership is all too easy in a large church but more difficult in a small one. The majority of churches in the world are small, and small church fits well in high-persecution and other majority-world environments.

### ***Committed to One Another***

A church, secondly, is a group of baptized believers who are committed to each other to be the body of Christ to one another. A church is not a casual association of people. There is a covenantal nature to church membership, as expressed by the *Baptist Faith and Message 2000* definition cited above. It is true that there are no examples of formal, written church covenants in the Bible. However, the very nature of the "one another" commands of the NT indicate a high degree of commitment between Christians, and the biblical practice of church discipline requires some conception of church membership to make any sense at all. (A person can only be put out of something they are first definitively in.) Churches in the NT knew who was in and who was out. Specifically, church members are in the church in order to be the body of Christ to one another and to do the mission of Christ in the world. A church is a group of people characterized by both commitment and purpose, and both are centered in Christ.

### ***Assembled Together***

A church is also a group of baptized believers who meet together regularly to carry out the functions of a biblical church. The word “church” means assembly, and a group of people who do not assemble cannot be called a church. Although there are no specific commands in the NT regarding when or how often a church should meet, it seems clear that apostolic churches met at least once a week, on the first day of the week (1 Cor 16:2), and that in some instances they were together more often than that (Acts 2:46). It is also clear, from passages such as Acts 2:42-47 and 1 Corinthians 14:26, that they came together for specific purposes, and the *Didache*<sup>13</sup> shows us that their gatherings took on a fairly fixed form within a generation.

These three clauses, then, summarize the essence of a local church. It is a group of people, all of whom are baptized believers in Jesus Christ. It is a group of such believers who are committed to each other to be the body of Christ to one another. It is a committed, covenantal group of believers who assemble regularly to carry out the functions of a biblical church. This is a helpful starting point, but it is not enough. Scripture prescribes what those functions should be, and it also prescribes the structures that shape the church.

### **STRUCTURES OF A LOCAL CHURCH**

A local church is not an amorphous blob. It has a structure, and that structure is taught in Scripture. The structure is simple, but it is deliberate, and churches tamper with biblical polity at their own peril. The convictional foundation underlying the remarks that will follow is that classical congregationalism with a Baptist understanding of the church and its ordinances are the model taught and exemplified by the NT.<sup>14</sup> However, there will hopefully be much in this discussion that readers from other traditions will find profitable.

### ***Regenerate Membership***

The first structural element in a biblical local church is a regenerate church membership, and in many ways “church member” is the most foundational office of the church.<sup>15</sup> The concept of church membership is questioned today by many, and for good reason. Membership apart from church discipline can all too easily become meaningless, or even a source of ungodly pride and boasting.

It is well known the Southern Baptists, if asked, would be unable to find millions of the members they claim in their church membership rolls. It is also true that there is neither command nor example of keeping church membership rolls in the NT. Nevertheless, as has already been stated, churches in the NT knew who was in and who was out. They knew the individuals for whom they had pastoral responsibility. The concept of church membership is not dependent on a particular format of recording the identities of those members. Furthermore, church membership is not a passive thing in the teaching of the NT. This office carries significant responsibility, and entails serious ministry.<sup>16</sup> It is the saints who do the work of ministry, according to Ephesians 4:11-12. Church discipline is also in the hands of the membership of a church (Matt 18:17, 1 Cor 5:1-5, 2 Cor 2:5-8). The members of a church engage in worship, and even in leading worship, together (1 Cor 14:26). The gifts and ministries of every member of the church are necessary for the healthy functioning of the whole church (1 Cor 12:12-26). A robust understanding of church membership as a serious, well-defined office within the church, carrying both responsibility and accountability, is essential for church health.

### ***Biblical Leadership***

The second structure prescribed by the NT for local churches is the function and office of pastor/elder/overseer. These three titles are mentioned together as one because they are used interchangeably in Scripture. Their separation into distinct orders of ministry did not occur until after the apostolic age, and in NT churches they functioned as three different ways of referring to the same role.<sup>17</sup> The term used most often in the NT is elder. Ironically, the term used most often in modern church life, pastor, is the term used least often in the NT. Whichever term is used, the qualifications and responsibilities of this person are laid out clearly in such passages as 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9. In summary, the pastor/elder/overseer must be an exemplary disciple. The qualifications listed are not the extraordinary marks of a super saint, but rather what should be true of any mature disciple of Jesus. He must also be able to give sound instruction and refute error. This, along with 2 Timothy 4:1-2 and Hebrews 13:17, indicates that the functions of this office include authoritative teaching, pastoral exhortation and encouragement, and spiritual oversight. There are no educational credentials required by the NT to hold this office, although it is clear that anyone who serves in this way must know

the word of God well, must hold fast to sound doctrine, and must know how to teach. Only men can hold this office and function (1 Tim 2:12), although both men and women exercise significant ministries in the church. Men who hold this office may be paid (1 Tim 5:17-18, Gal 6:6), although it is not required that they must be paid. Men in ministry supporting themselves by secular labor stand in a long and honorable tradition that goes back to the Apostle Paul and his work as a tent maker. Finally, the NT never says how many pastor/elder/overseers a local church should have, but the general pattern observed in the NT indicates that a plurality of such leaders was common (Acts 14:23, 20:17; Phil 1:1). Although the example of Paul and Barnabas in their first missionary journey indicates that it is possible to be a church first and only raise up elders afterwards, these pastor/elder/overseers are clearly necessary for a church to be healthy and growing in maturity.

### ***Biblical Deacons***

The third structure given in the NT is the office and role of deacon. In many ways, it is unfortunate that the people of God over the centuries have chosen to transliterate the word “deacon” for this particular role, rather than translating it as we do pastor, elder, and overseer. Much mischief in the life of many churches could have been avoided if these saints had been called “servants” rather than given an ecclesiastical title transliterated from Greek. There are very few references to deacons in the NT. They are only mentioned in Paul’s greeting in his letter to the Philippians and in his description of the qualifications for deacons in 1 Timothy 3:8-13. In neither passage are the responsibilities of deacons mentioned. The seven men chosen to serve the Hellenistic widows in Acts 6:1-6 are never called deacons. However, their job description in Acts accords well with the title “Servant.” As with pastor/elder/overseers, the qualifications given in 1 Timothy are simply a description of an exemplary disciple. While the role of pastor/elder/overseer seems to have existed in all apostolic churches, it is not at all clear that deacons were equally universal. The safest approach would seem to be to choose deacons as needed for areas of service that arise in the church.<sup>18</sup>

This completes the NT outline for the structure of a local church. It is simple. It requires no committees, no work teams, and no programs. It does not require a building (although it does not forbid buildings either), and it can be funded through whatever resources exist within a congregation. It is

equally appropriate in an affluent suburb in the Bible Belt and in a high-persecution environment in the majority-world. It is, however, irreducible and non-negotiable. No church anywhere is free to replace, ignore, or modify any of these simple structural elements, and churches should be highly wary of adding elements to them.

## **FUNCTIONS OF A LOCAL CHURCH**

What does a local church do? The NT gives clear instruction on the things that should happen when a church assembles, and also when it scatters. A local church is not simply a club of people who get together to decide what they want to do with their time and resources. There are at least ten things that churches assemble to do.<sup>19</sup>

### ***Gathered to Worship***

A local church assembles to worship God. This worship must be done in Spirit and in truth (John 4:23-24). It includes teaching and admonition, singing songs, hymns, and spiritual songs, and giving thanks to God (Col 3:16-17). It also includes prayer and the celebration of the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper. Giving is also an act of worship (1 Cor 16:2, Ps 96:8), as are testimony and mutual encouragement (1 Thess 5:11). Worship is God-focused, not people-focused, and it should be characterized by reverence and awe (Heb 12:28-29). The church should offer worship to God, not offer worship experiences to those in attendance. All things should be done decently and in order (1 Cor 14:40), and all things should serve to edify those in attendance (1 Cor 14:26). In summary, worship should be regulated by the word of God, and it should aim to glorify God and to build up the people of God in their knowledge, trust, love, and obedience to God.<sup>20</sup>

### ***Preaching and Teaching***

A local church engages in biblical preaching and teaching (Acts 13:1, 15:35; Matt 28:20, Acts 2:42, Rom 12:7; 1 Tim 4:13; 2 Tim 4:2). The content of this teaching must be exposition and application of the word of God (1 Tim 6:3-5; 2 Tim 3:16-17, 4:2; Titus 2:1). Expository preaching is not a matter of style, but of content and intent.<sup>21</sup> Style of presentation may vary according to the cultural setting of the church and the personality and gifts of the preacher/teacher, but

goal of preaching and teaching in the church must always be to expose the text of Scripture to those who are listening and to apply it to their lives.

### ***Prayer***

A local church prays (Matt 6:5-15, Luke 18:1-8, Acts 2:42, Rom 12:12, Phil 4:6, 1 Thess 5:16-18). Church members pray corporately when they gather together, and they encourage each other to pray privately. Their prayers include worship and adoration to God, confession of sin, thanksgiving for God's blessings, supplication for their own needs, and intercession for the needs of others. Prayer honors God by its intrinsic admission that apart from Him believers can do nothing.<sup>22</sup>

### ***Baptism and the Lord's Supper***

A local church observes the biblical ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper (Matt 28:18-20, Acts 2:37-42, Rom 6:1-4, 1 Cor 11:17-34). Baptism is immersion in water in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and it must follow profession of faith in Jesus Christ. Baptism in water is specifically commanded by the Lord Jesus, and it may not be avoided or replaced with a substitute initiation ritual.<sup>23</sup> Baptism occurs once in the life of a Christian, preferably at the beginning after conversion. The Lord's Supper is a ceremonial meal involving bread and the fruit of the vine, in which church members remember and proclaim the broken body and shed blood of Jesus which accomplished their salvation (1 Cor 11:23-26), affirm their covenantal unity with one another as the body of Christ (1 Cor 10:16-17), and anticipate the return of Christ and the wedding feast of the Lamb (1 Cor 11:26, Rev 19:6-9). There is no command in Scripture regarding the frequency of observing the Lord's Supper, although it seems to have been the practice of the early church to observe this ordinance weekly.<sup>24</sup>

### ***Discipleship***

A local church engages in the discipleship of its members. This discipleship involves preaching, teaching, worship, and the ordinances, but it also involves individual exhortation, encouragement, fellowship, and mentoring (Matt 28:18-29; Eph 4:1-16; Col 1:28-29, 3:1-17; 1 Thess 5:11; 2 Tim 2:1-7, 24-26, 4:1-4). The goal of this discipleship is maturity in Christ, which is defined as conformity to the image of Christ (Rom 8:29). There are various tools used

by different churches and organizations for discipleship, but discipleship itself is not a tool or a program. Rather, it is the intentional involvement of church members in one another's lives to spur one another on to grow in grace. Discipleship involves the transformation of every area of life, and it results in ever-increasing Christlikeness, holiness, and obedience. Churches which are not intentional in discipleship are failing their church members, whether in the Bible Belt or on the edges of the advance of the gospel.

### ***Fellowship***

A local church engages in fellowship. This does not refer to holding social gatherings. Biblical fellowship means that the members of the church love one another as Christ has loved them (John 13:34-35; Rom 12:10; 1 John 3:11-18, 4:7-21), that they encourage one another and build each other up (1 Thess 5:11), that they serve one another and bear one another's burdens (Gal 5:13, 6:2), that they teach, admonish, and exhort one another (Col 3:16, Heb 3:13), and that they stir one another up to love and good deeds (Heb 10:24). Fellowship in the biblical sense involves intentionality in relationships, and requires that people know one another and engage in one another's lives enough to be spiritually useful to one another.<sup>25</sup>

### ***Accountability and Discipline***

A local church practices accountability and church discipline (Matt 18:15-20, 1 Cor 5:1-13, 2 Cor 2:5-11). This function is closely intertwined with both discipleship and fellowship. Members of the church are to hold one another accountable for their faithfulness to Christ, His word, and his church (Gal 6:1-2, 1 John 5:16, Jude 22-23). Leaders of the church are responsible for watching over the spiritual welfare of the members of the church (Heb 13:17). When church members are found in unrepentant sin, the church must exercise church discipline, always praying and striving for restoration of the expelled brother or sister.<sup>26</sup>

### ***Generous Giving***

A local church engages in biblical giving (Ps 96:8; Matt 6:1-4; 1 Cor 9:6-12, 16:1-4; 2 Cor 8:1-9:15; Gal 6:6-10; 1 Tim 5:17-18, 6:17-19). Church members give to relieve the poor, to support the ministry of the church, and to advance the gospel around the world. The NT encourages generosity, but

does not specify amounts or percentages of giving.<sup>27</sup> Careful oversight is needed in the handling of money in the church in order to ensure integrity and transparency.<sup>28</sup>

### ***Evangelism***

A local church engages in evangelism (Matt 28:16-20; Luke 24:46-48; Acts 1:8, 5:42, 8:4; Phil 1:12-18; 1 Thess 1:8). The missionary strategy of the Apostle Paul seems to have depended on ongoing local evangelism by the churches he planted. He could assert that he had fulfilled the ministry of the gospel in the eastern Mediterranean by planting those churches, even though there is no indication that he had personally proclaimed the gospel to everyone in those regions, because he expected the churches to continue the work in their localities (Rom 15:18-19). This evangelism by members of a church must be faithful to all the elements of the biblical gospel, call for repentance and faith, and point clearly toward biblical conversion and a life of discipleship.<sup>29</sup>

### ***Missions***

A local church engages in missions (Matt 28:16-20; Luke 24:46-48; John 20:21; Acts 1:8; Rom 10:5-17, 15:20-21; Rev 5:9-10, 7:9-10). This engagement takes the form of learning and embracing God's heart for the nations as found throughout the narrative of Scripture, learning about the vast gospel needs of the world, praying for the advance of the gospel and the fruitfulness of missionaries, giving to send missionaries and to fund such necessary activities as Bible translation, and actively sending missionaries from the church to the ends of the earth. The local church is the primary agency for developing and training missionaries, for discerning and affirming their call to missions, and for sending and supporting them. Mission agencies such as the IMB serve as highly useful instruments in the hands of local churches, but they do not replace the local church in this responsibility. Even new churches on the edge of the advance of the gospel need to embrace their responsibility for global missions from the beginning of their existence as a church.<sup>30</sup>

From the descriptions just given, it is evident that these functions overlap and intertwine with each other. A healthy church (both on the mission field and on the home front) should exhibit all of them. If a church is lacking or

weak in any of these functions, that lack or weakness becomes a blueprint for needed growth. Ideally, the members and leaders of the church will lead the way in undertaking whatever growth is needed, but church planting missionaries are alert to these issues and come beside new churches to help them in these areas.

## CONCLUSION

Ecclesiology is an essential component of biblical missiology. The local church trains, assesses, and sends missionaries to plant local churches. Any mission strategy which leaves converts disconnected from healthy local churches is unbiblical. The Bible has a great deal to say about the nature, structures, and functions of a healthy local church, but those biblical requirements may be implemented in any global setting. The goal in missionary church planting is not to see how similar or dissimilar newly planted churches are to the missionary's sending church and culture. The goal is also not to see how simple church can be, although simplicity within the bounds of biblical instruction is very helpful. The goal in missionary church planting is to be robustly biblical, and then to carry out appropriate contextualization within those biblical boundaries.

- 
- <sup>1</sup> This author heard these very words from a missionary working with a large international student ministry, who was told by his organizational leadership that church planting took too much time and that he should concentrate solely on evangelism and one-on-one discipleship. This was in a location that did not yet have indigenous churches.
  - <sup>2</sup> Obviously, situations where Christians are involuntarily cut off from the possibility of church involvement, such as imprisonment or exile, are not in view in this statement.
  - <sup>3</sup> This is not to say that there is no place for one-on-one discipleship. It can play a very useful role in spiritual growth. It is to say that one-on-one discipleship is never enough, and that it must take place in the context of a local church in which all the members are exercising their gifts.
  - <sup>4</sup> "Church planters must seek to understand what is the irreducible ecclesiological minimum, or the basic essence of the church, for the church to be the church among any people." J. D. Payne, *Discovering Church Planting* (Colorado Springs: Paternoster, 2009), 32.
  - <sup>5</sup> *Baptist Faith and Message 2000*, Article XVII.
  - <sup>6</sup> Examples might include taking off shoes before entering the room for worship, sitting on the floor rather than sitting in chairs or pews, using local instruments rather than pianos, guitars or a drum set, and singing the praises of God in local musical styles.
  - <sup>7</sup> Joshua Manley, "Be Patient, Missions Is Urgent" (<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/be-patient-missions-is-urgent/>), February 15, 2017.
  - <sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*
  - <sup>9</sup> *Foundations* (Richmond, VA: International Mission Board, 2019), 75.

- 11 Ibid., 90. See also Steve Smith and Ying Kai, *T4T: A Discipleship ReRevolution* (Monument, CO: WIGTake Resources, 2011), 252-253.
- 12 For a much more detailed discussion on this word, see John Hammett, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2005), 26-28.
- 13 Grayson Gilbert, "'Where Two or More Are Gathered' Doesn't Make a Church" (<https://www.patheos.com/blogs/chorusinthecoach/where-two-or-more-are-gathered-doesn-t-make-a-church/>), March 14, 2018.
- 14 "Didache," in *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Michael W. Holmes, ed.; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2007), 354-361.
- 15 One of the most satisfying expositions and defenses of the biblical foundations of congregational polity remains *The Cambridge Platform of 1648*, and the interested reader is encouraged to examine it. Other excellent resources are: Mark Dever, *The Church: The Gospel Made Visible* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2012); Mark Dever and Jonathan Leeman, eds., *Baptist Foundations: Church Government for an Anti-Institutional Age* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2015); and Hammett, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches*.
- 16 I am grateful to my friend Nathan Shank, who first articulated to me the idea of referring to church member as an office of the church.
- 17 For an excellent discussion of the responsibilities of biblical church membership, see Jonathan Leeman, *Don't Fire Your Church Members* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2016).
- 18 An excellent summary of the evidence for this interchangeability is found in Hammett, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches*, 161-162.
- 19 For a much more detailed discussion on both elders and deacons, see Benjamin L. Merkle, *40 Questions about Elders and Deacons* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2008).
- 20 These ten functions of a local church are taken from the twelve characteristics of a healthy church listed in the IMB's *Foundations*. There are ten and not twelve functions listed here because two of the twelve characteristics mentioned in *Foundations* are biblical membership and biblical leadership, which have already been considered under the structures of a local church.
- 21 Hammett, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches*, 238-249.
- 22 Mark Dever and Greg Gilbert, *Preach* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2012), 36-38.
- 23 Dever, *The Church*, 71; Hammett, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches*, 242.
- 24 One western missionary of my acquaintance, who was pursuing an Insider Movement strategy, replaced baptism with a ceremony in which new converts went into another room and changed into clean, white clothes. He rejected water baptism because it was widely regarded in the local community as the decisive break with the local religion, and he desired to keep new believers in the community as much as possible. My counsel to him was that he was in disobedience to Scripture.
- 25 For more detailed discussion of the ordinances of both baptism and the Lord's Supper, see the articles in Dever and Leeman, *Baptist Foundations*, 79-163; and Hammett, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches*, 257-296. See also Thomas Schreiner and Shawn Wright, *Believer's Baptism* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2006).
- 26 Hammett, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches*, 35-36, 232-238.
- 27 Dever, *The Church*, 63; Hammett, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches*, 105-107, 124-126; Thomas White, "The Why, How, and When of Church Discipline," in Dever and Leeman, ed., *Baptist Foundations*, 199-226.
- 28 Thomas Schreiner, "7 Reasons Christians Are Not Required to Tithe" (<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/7-reasons-christians-are-not-required-to-tithe/>), March 28, 2017.
- 29 Ivan Mesa, "How to Honor Your Maker with Your Wallet" (<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/how-to-honor-your-maker-with-your-wallet?>), January 5, 2017.
- 30 *Foundations*, 47-54, 80-83.
- 31 Andy Johnson, *Missions: How the Local Church Goes Global* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017).