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This Local Church And Service Organizations

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God has committed to the local church during this dispensation the task of carrying on His work, and God has determined to work through local churches. In spite of God's plan and purpose, other agencies and organizations have been established in recent decades, and it behooves the Bible believer who understands the Scriptural place and purpose of the local church to give serious thought to the proper relationship of the local church to these newly established service agencies. All soul-winning efforts can be classified in one of two ways: God-instituted or man-instituted. God has instituted the church for His work in this dispensation; all other agencies and organizations are man-instituted, and must maintain proper relationships with that which God has begun and continues using.

God has not set aside the local church. The Lord Jesus Christ Himself declared that "the gates of Hell shall not prevail against it" (Matt 16:18). God's purpose today is still to honor and to use the local church testimony. The church has not failed, and the church will not fail. Other agencies have arisen in recent years because in the face of modernism many local churches did not remain true to the Word and even entire denominations departed from the faith. Individuals and groups of individuals established independent agencies for the proclamation of the Gospel, sometimes working within the local churches or at other times exclusively outside churches. Unfortunately, some Christians have become so enamored

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of the grandiose program of such activities that they have developed a disrespect for the work of the local church.

Local Church Position

That which God instituted, which we call the local church, is both an organism and an organization. As an organism, it is a spiritual body performing a spiritual activity. To the best of our ability, the organization corresponds to the organism, though there may be some who are members on the church roll who are not regenerated and thus part of the spiritual body. Usually, in speaking of the local church Baptists have reference to the organism, the local body of believers.

Each local church is a fellowship of believers united on a common doctrinal basis and endeavoring to carry on the work of the Lord in a unity of mind and spirit. This basis of church fellowship is referred to as "like faith and practice." Whether stated or not, each local body of believers has some standard of faith and practice. The tendency today in certain areas is toward a minimal agreement in these areas, and yet the attitude taught in the Word of God should stir His people on to greater searching of the Word and a more convicted stand upon that eternal and infallible revelation.

Churches must take a stand in different areas. For instance a church should take a stand against all heresy. It does not assemble a list of cults and denominational viewpoints which it opposes; it takes a firm stand on the Word of God, and anything contrary to that faith once for all delivered is opposed. In the situation of the day, this church has taken a definite stand against modernism. It has declared unflinching loyalty to the Word of God, and against strong influences in the nation today has determined to fight modernism in any form. In taking a distinct separatist stand in this regard, this church opposes inclusivism in any shape or form. If modernism is wrong, cooperation with modernism in any fashion is also wrong.

This church has declared as to its faith and practice that it is a Baptist church. This name has not been chosen arbitrarily. Nor is it a magical name better than others. This name designates a definite and distinct body of beliefs in regard to the Word of God and government of the local church. As a Baptist church, this church maintains the Baptist distinctives: separation of church and state, priesthood of the believer, autonomy of the local church, regenerated church membership, ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper,

immersion as the only form of baptism, and the absolute authority of the Bible.

Areas of Inter-Church Relationships

There are varying degrees of recognition and cooperation among local churches. These degrees of cooperation could be extensively considered, but for a brief acquaintance three areas are enough to distinguish.

(1) The area of toleration is historically one of the Baptist distinctives. Other church groups could not tolerate the existence of bodies which were not in full accord or in submission to their doctrinal and ecclesiastical systems. Baptists have insisted on separation of the church and state, on the principle of "live and let live" in regard to other religious activities and organizations. On the face of this globe, America is still unique in adopting this Baptist principle. It was done through the influence and suggestion of Rhode Island when this country was formed. In recent decades emphasis upon the freedom of religion as one of the four basic freedoms has been universally declared by this nation. This means that though we do not agree with the cults, though we do not recognize them as Christian groups nor as propagating truth, we still will fight for their right to exist and to propagate their faith. This means that we recognize the right of modernists to exist and to promote their convictions (we will speak loudly against their unethical church stealing, but we still will defend their right to exist, even as a subversive organization).

(2) A second area of inter-church relationship is that which we have labeled sympathy and interest. In this area we recognize as believers and as Christians other individuals and other groups which believe the fundamentals of the faith (the infallibility of the Scriptures, the substitutionary atonement of Christ, and the physical resurrection and future bodily return of Christ). At this level we do not cooperate with them in any doctrinal activity, but we do engage in certain non-doctrinal areas of fellowship. In doing so we fully maintain our convictions and respect others who have convictions. This was historically the "interdenominational" understanding that has so greatly changed since. We rejoice when we learn that they are winning souls, but we continue to go our way and they continue to go theirs, "each fully persuaded" (Rom 14:5).

(3) It is in the area of affiliation that "like faith and practice" is of greatest importance. The purpose of affiliation is primarily for cooperative effort to achieve ends which local churches separately and

individually could not possibly reach. This area of affiliation recognizes that in order to work together common doctrinal convictions are important. The decision to enter into affiliation is not made on an individual basis not on a committee level but by deliberate action of the entire church body. Yet this is still in the area of "fellowship"; no local church ever "joins" anything. Such affiliations for cooperative efforts has been typical of Baptist bodies; "complete independence" has not characterized Baptists until recent years, and even many today who seek to maintain the fiction of "complete independence" discover that they are hindering the testimony of the local church.

Service Organizations

Relationships of a local church to service organizations can fall into this pattern. (1) Many such service organizations are tolerated. They are not of us; they have no particular contact with our efforts and our ministry; who have no reason to support them, to criticize them, or to recognize them. (2) Many service organizations because they are true to the Word can be recognized. They are not supported in any way, but when our paths cross we recognize them as brethren in the Lord and rejoice in the mutual blessing of God. But again most of these are not in any way related to the work of the local church. (3) Although there can be no "affiliation" with any agency or society, where there is complete doctrinal agreement, a local church supports work of like faith and practice.

We need to recognize, however, that there are two kinds of service organizations: (1) those established by this local church in one sense or another, and (2) those independently established and controlled. As Baptists we prefer insofar as possible church-related and church-controlled service groups. Nevertheless independently-controlled service organizations are not considered evil in themselves just because they are not properly church-related. Independent activities often are utilized by the local church in furthering its own program. In certain areas independent organizations have been utilized until enough churches of like faith and practice were able to establish their own service organization.

In another sense, there are two areas of operation: (1) within the local church, and (2) outside the local church. Most churches have an organized Sunday School, youth program, ladies group, etc, and these must be considered part of the one church, not independent and irresponsible. Some outside agencies are used in the local church for

boys and girls work. Some are entirely outside the church and only reach to the church for financial help--or beyond the church to take the Lord's money from the local storehouse.

1. Whether or not a service agency is used is determined solely by the local church itself. No service organization can force its services or itself in any way upon the local church. The local church decides which materials to use in Sunday School, which agency to use in sending forth its missionaries, etc.

2. The extent to which a service agency will be used is entirely up to the local church. Not only does the local church decide "Yes" or "No" concerning any service group, it continually decides how much and in what way the service agency will be engaged.

3. Any service agency is dangerous to the program of the local church if it becomes more than an aid to that program. Illustrations of this abound. A missionary organization can move into a local church situation and so control finances or speaker arrangements or pastoral calls that the testimony and work of the local church becomes nearly nullified. A boys and girls work can move into church life and so control the local body that the church itself becomes only the tail which the dog wags. Service in a local church is often greatly disrupted by the practice among some independent groups of sending representatives to other churches to tell of their work and take an offering. High-pressure youth organizations can cause young people to look with disdain upon the activities of their local youth organization.

Loyalty to Christ is best expressed in our loyalty to a Bible-honoring local church. No other program, no other leadership, no other activity or alignment can be allowed to compete with our faithfulness to that local body of believers of which the Lord Jesus Christ is the head.