

“Examining The Local Church”

Many years ago, Charles Holt wrote in *The Examiner*, “Oh, dear brother and sister in Christ, I urge you to recognize and accept the fact that THERE IS NO CHURCH OF ANY KIND TO BE FOUND IN GOD’S WORD. Have the faith and courage to get out of the church and claim your freedom in Christ.” He also made the statement that all of the Lord’s “redeemed people, whoever they are and wherever they are, get out of the churches and begin to serve God individually and personally as the Lord’s redeemed people should.”

In his writings, Charles Holt set out to destroy the local church. Holt portrayed the local church in very unkind and harsh terms. He misrepresented and painted a very biased picture of the body of Christ. To Holt, the local church is a “Church Institution,” “A Functional Organization,” “an Organized Power Structure,” “a denomination,” “the corporate institution,” an “official worship station,” a “man-made invention called a ‘local church,’” etc. The poor members are portrayed as “slaves of the institutional church.” He said the majority of the members do not really know what is going on, they merely “obey and pay.”

Those of us who are dedicated to the will of God are as concerned as Charles Holt about preserving the gospel and avoiding institutional development within the church of Christ. We do not desire to make an “institution” (in any unscriptural sense) of the local church. But in order to honestly study the word of God, we must cut through Holt’s rhetoric and abuses and examine the facts.

The word that causes Charles Holt so many problems is the Greek word *ekklesia*. The definition of this word is “a calling out” or “assembly.” The vast majority of the occurrences in the New Testament describes God’s people in the gospel age who are “called out” or “assembled” in a spiritual relationship. Many of us probably make the honest mistake of saying, “I am going to ‘church.’” But most of us realize that the church is not represented by a building or a sign. Hopefully, we all think of the church of God being made up of people. The *ekklesia* is composed of Christians, but one person (Christian) is not the *ekklesia* or assembly in any sense (universal or local).

The apostle Paul used the term “body” and said that “*the body is not one member, but many*” (1 Corinthians 12:14). He stated in Romans 12:4-5 that “*All members have not the same office*” but we are “*members one of another.*” Ephesians 1:22-23 tells us that Christ is the head of the body and the body is the church (*ekklesia*).

In order to know if God wanted any local collective arrangement of His people, we must again turn to the Bible. In Acts 11:22, 26, brethren were locally identified in Jerusalem and Antioch. The disciples or Christians "*came together*" for specific purposes (Acts 20:7; 1 Corinthians 16:2). Paul spoke of the need for brethren to understand their responsibilities to one another in the local group of Christians (1 Thessalonians 5:12-15). The writer of Hebrews exhorted the brethren to "*consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works*" and warn them not to forsake the "*assembling*" of themselves together (Hebrews 10:24-25).

We can even go farther. Let's notice how many times the word *ekklesia* is used to describe the actual local collective. Paul addressed the *ekklesia* at Corinth (1 Corinthians 1:2; 2 Corinthians 1:1), the *ekklesia* at Thessalonica (1 Thessalonians 1:1; 2 Thessalonians 1:1), the *ekklesia* at Philippi (Philippians 1:1) and the *ekklesias* (plural) of Galatia (Galatians 1:2). Paul also spoke of the *ekklesia* in the house of Priscilla and Aquila (Romans 16:5). When one considers the plural uses of the term *ekklesia*, it becomes apparent that these were individually identifiable units (Romans 16:16, "*the churches of Christ*;" Galatians 1:2, "*the churches of Galatia*;" Galatians 1:22, "*the churches of Judea*"). John said that he was instructed to write to the seven *ekklesias* (plural) in seven specific locations in Asia (Revelation 1:11). In chapters two and three, the term *ekklesia* is used to refer to a collection of brethren in each location.

When one looks at all the passages which call for brethren to love one another and to work in a spiritual realm together, it is unbelievable that some deny that God planned any identification of those persons locally for the purpose of collective function. I do not want any misunderstandings. The local body of saints cannot work together in an institutionalized, ecclesiastical or denominational framework. There are many out there who propose this, but they must go outside the New Testament for "proof."

The fact that the Bible allows us to organize locally for accomplishing certain activities (i.e. teaching, edification, singing, prayer, fellowship, caring for one another, partaking of the Lord's supper, etc.) does not allow us to organize congregations to form a larger functional unit. The Lord provided the *ekklesia* for the purpose of bringing Christians together to be edified and accomplish God's work, just as Paul meant when he said, "*For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ*" (Ephesians 4:12). Although Charles Holt is gone, there will be others who hold to his doctrine on the local church. We need to be ready to defend the truth of God.

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