

### Imperfection of the Local Church — Part 3

The past two months we have been discussing the imperfection of the local church, and the various reactions to this imperfection. In Part 1, we talked about the reaction of some who simply reject and abandon the local church, because of its imperfections (whether real or perceived). Last month, in Part 2, we explored the reasons why we should stay with the local church. We saw that we are commanded by God to do so, even in the face of the imperfections the local churches will have! Christ knew the church would be imperfect, and yet He gave Himself for her, and He expects us to give our lives to her!

So, since it is true that the local church *is* imperfect, what *ought* to be our reaction? Should we abandon it or distance ourselves from it, like an idea that didn't work, or should we work to see it become more like the New Testament ideal?

It depends on our understanding of **the church**.

Here is where the real problem lies. What is woefully lacking among Christians today is a clear comprehension of **sound biblical doctrine** concerning the Church; a doctrine that rightly and biblically understands *what* the local church *is*, and a doctrine which is not only understood **but believed and practiced**. As an undershepherd of Jesus, I try to instill this understanding in our local church. At times it has been (and sometimes continues to be) frustrating. But, this is due in large part to what I call “the mix.” (see previous articles) We see the ideal for what the local church is to be put forth by Christ, in the Bible. Yet, we see, at the same time, how we fall short of that ideal. This becomes very frustrating, especially if we are not clear on exactly *who* promised to build the church! But, though we fall short, does this give us biblical warrant to abandon the local church?! Absolutely not! Remember, Jesus said, “*I will build My church.*” **The local church—gathered and worshipping— is God's plan for this age**, however imperfect that church may be. There is no “Plan B” (Such as monasteries, special ministries separate from the local church, “family church,” “home church,” etc.). Pulling ourselves away from imperfect Christians may be attractive and convenient (and thus the impetus for such movements), but it is **not biblical** Christianity.

Note, when someone pulls away from the church (i.e. Abandoning attendance and involvement in *any* local church, not merely one specific local church), citing the “imperfections of the church today,” a couple of things are going on, both bad. First, such a person is declaring that he has the only proper concept of what the church should be like, and there is no local church that comes close enough to warrant his involvement in it. This borders on arrogance. Second, if such a person is so mature as to be able to condemn all local churches as unfit, such a person must be very godly; so, why is such a person, who must have some very useful spiritual gifts given to him by the Holy Spirit, removing from the local church the very thing she needs so badly: His involvement with his ideas and gifts that can help the church be what she ought to be?! That seems rather selfish.

On the other hand, neither is it biblical to tolerate sin “in the midst” of the Body, or to accept such imperfection in the church as the norm. There *must* be a biblical separation from sin (Thus, the biblical carrying out of exhortation, admonishment, church discipline, etc.). And, we must ever strive for the ideal: the “*perfect man*,” as described by Ephesians 4.. We must ever strive to “*purify ourselves as He is pure*,” both personally and as a local church (*1 Jn 3:1-3*).

Now, it will always be true that as the local church ebbs and flows, in both spiritual depth and in numbers, the circumstances and dynamic of that individual church will change. As people are added (or subtracted), things change. As new people come in, things change. As new believers grow in their faith, things change. (And those of us who are more mature in the faith must be patient with them as they learn, just as people were patient with us when *we* learned!) These changes can cause imperfections to arise. This requires structure and organization in the local church. Now, the church of Jesus Christ is

*people*, not programs or structures. But, *structure* is necessary if we are to have order in the life of the church. While structure must not be the thing that rules, it must be present, if the church is to be healthy.. God's Word, by God's grace, through God's Spirit working in God's people, must be the main thing.

It is the *people* who make the ministry of the Body of Christ so beautiful and at the same time so frustrating and blemished! "The mix" presupposes that those who are genuinely saved will be spread out in maturity, from brand-new baby believers to mature "fathers and mothers" in the faith. The local church has the responsibility to minister to them all, which means we must accept them where they are, while at the same time refusing to let them *stay* where they are! This can be difficult, and is where we see the "imperfections." We must bring along the weak, while at the same time encouraging the mature, while at the same time correcting and disciplining the wayward and misled, while at the same time challenging and strengthening those who are right where they ought to be. And all this must occur in the sphere and atmosphere of genuine *family* and *biblical love* (= the supernatural, Spirit-produced ability to selflessly and sacrificially seek what is best for the other person, regardless of what you may receive in return. The fruit of the Spirit, a commitment to that person. Sometimes even a "tough love."). Scripture calls this process: the **edification of the Body**. And, according to *Ephesians 4.1-5.2*, **this** is the responsibility, not only of the shepherds/ elders of the flock, but of each and every individual believer in the flock. What a tall order! No wonder some throw up their hands and abandon the local church!

**This**, therefore, is why we *need* the *local* church. No one individual is capable of carrying this out on his or her own. We *need* each other. The local church is not only God's *plan* for this age; it is God's *means of spiritual growth* for the individual believer in this age.

The local church *isn't* perfect . . . yet. But She will be! Thank God we have a great Shepherd and High Priest, who has been "*tempted in every way as we are, yet without sin.*" One who understands, and thus enables each of us to "*deal gently with the ignorant and misguided,*" since we ourselves are beset with weakness. One who puts up with us in **our** weaknesses and growing pains, yet does not leave us there, but comes alongside us in our weaknesses and helps us to grow. And **He** is our model in this, of how we are to help and build up one another. How much can we learn from such a One in our local church! Thanks be to God, who has given us His Spirit to enable us to carry out (however imperfectly) *His* will from the heart.