

ACTS
A Real Local Church
Acts 14:21-28

Can we be effective Christians without being affiliated with a local church? Can we be biblical and not be related to a local church? What place should the local church play in one's Christian experience? Quite often you will hear Christians say, "I don't have to be part of an organized local church to be a dynamic Christian. Furthermore, I can stay at home and worship God by watching some religious program on TV, or I can meet with a small group of Christians in the home." The real question is what place has God, in the Bible, given to the local church? If God has said the local church is important, then we, too, should be deeply involved in the ministry of the local church.

Still, some objectors would say, "The local church seems so stilted, so formal, so far removed from where I really live. I just can't identify with the average local church today." It is true that many local churches are stilted, formal, dry and out of touch with reality, but that is the fault of the local church, not of the resurrected Christ. We are specifically told in the Bible what a local church is supposed to be, and this is clearly taught to us in Acts 14:21-28. This section of Scripture sets forth for us what a real local church is, and this should be the pattern for every local church in the twentieth century.

WINNING MEN TO CHRIST (Acts 14:21)

Preaching (14:21a)

"And after they had preached the gospel to that city . . ." -- The last city, on the first missionary journey of Paul and Barnabas, to receive a gospel witness was Derbe. The apostles had preached to two other cities in the province of Galatia, Iconium and Lystra. In these cities they met stiff opposition as they declared Christ to men and women, boys and girls. At Iconium, the missionaries were plotted against and had to leave town suddenly. At Lystra, Paul was stoned and left for dead. When they came to Derbe, they "preached the gospel to that city." They evangelized the city of Derbe; that is, they went all through the city, wherever they could get an audience, and told people about Jesus Christ. They told of the Old Testament predictions of Christ, how Christ lived a perfect life and performed miracles, how He died for sinners, how He was raised from the dead, and how He would give the forgiveness of sins and eternal life to all who change their minds about Him and who believe in Him. They also warned men of eternal judgment if they did not respond positively to the Lord Jesus Christ.

These missionaries "preached" to lost men. Preaching is different from teaching. Preaching has more to do with declaring the message of salvation to the lost, challenging them, in mind and heart, to respond to Jesus Christ as personal Savior. While all gospel preaching must have solid biblical content, it is directed to prick man's conscience about sin and judgment and appeals to the will and heart of a man for a response to Christ. Preaching is primarily for those who are not yet Christians.

In the twentieth century, there is a legitimate place to bring evangelists into a city or local church to hold evangelistic meetings to reach the lost. However, most evangelistic meetings today are attended by those who are saved.

Any biblical, local church will be evangelistic when it has a heartbeat to win men to Jesus Christ by preaching the Gospel publicly and sharing the Gospel individually. "And He said to them, 'Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation'" (Mark 16:15).

Once, when I spent a week in California, I prayed that God would give me opportunities to share the good news of Christ with others. On the flight to California, I had no opportunities, even though I tried to turn the conversation. My father and his wife would not let me encounter them with Christ. At my 25th high school reunion, I was able only to share briefly with one of my classmates. On the way back to Roanoke, I was sure God would give

me someone to talk to. In the three and a half hour flight to Chicago, I talked with a Seventh-day Adventist minister who, to my amazement, was probably a saved man. There were some obvious differences between his theology and mine, but I thought he was straight on the Gospel. Whatever, this was not a witnessing situation. I was getting discouraged, and in the O'Hare Airport in Chicago, I said to the Lord, "Lord, what is wrong? You just haven't given me any real opportunities to witness. Have you failed me?"

On the hour and a half trip from Chicago to Roanoke, I sat next to a 26 year old teacher of Spanish and French. The conversation immediately turned to spiritual things. It was obvious to me that God was at work in this young man's life. He was very interested, and as the trip was coming to an end, he said, "This conversation has greatly challenged my life. I wonder where it will lead me?" He was wide open for the Gospel and the Lord was convicting and drawing.

You see, God had not failed me. He left the best for the last, and I do expect that perhaps someday I will see that young man in heaven.

Discipling (14:21 b)

"... and had made many disciples, ..." -- The missionaries not only preached the Gospel of Christ to the lost, but they made disciples. After people responded to Christ, they were taught the basics of the Christian faith, so they could be effective for Christ. A disciple is a learner and one who follows the teachings of Jesus Christ. There were certain basic, fundamental truths that these new converts needed to be taught immediately: abiding in Christ, walking by faith, confession of sin, assurance of salvation, the Spirit filled life, resting in the plan of God, learning to pray, and other elementary, but absolutely necessary, doctrines for an effective Christian life. The Great Commission instructs us to "make disciples . . . teaching them to observe all that I commanded you" (Matt. 28:18-20).

It is obvious that these first missionaries (evangelists) did not come into a city for a week of meetings and then leave, but they preached and taught, making sure these new converts were established in the Faith once for all delivered to the saints. The apostles would probably stay weeks or months in the same city, working diligently with those who had responded to Christ.

Risking (14:21c)

"... they returned to Lystra and Iconium and to Antioch," -- These missionaries displayed tremendous courage. They went right back to the cities where Paul was stoned, where the enemies of the Gospel plotted to kill them, where they had been thrown out of town. What motivated these missionaries to return to these cities, knowing their lives were endangered? They were concerned for the saints. They thought the welfare of the infant churches was more important than their own safety. The establishing of sound local churches was of more consequence to the apostles than their own lives. "But I do not consider my life of any account as dear to myself, in order that I may finish my course, and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify solemnly of the gospel of the grace of God" (Acts 20:24). The missionaries took risks that they might further the Gospel of Christ, and God blessed every step of faith they took.

The missionaries did not take the easiest road. Instead of returning to Antioch of Syria through Celicia, Paul's native country, which was the closest route, they retraced their steps to build up the Christians. These missionaries were not looking for the easiest way; they were looking for God's way, which is often the toughest way, but it is the best and most satisfying way.

BUILDING MEN IN CHRIST (Acts 14:22)

Strengthening (14:22a)

"... strengthening the souls of the disciples, ..." -- The missionaries went back to Lystra, Iconium and Antioch of Pisidia to strengthen the saints. They were truly converted; they had instruction in the basics of Christianity, but they needed additional truth, real spiritual meat, in order to become mature in the Faith. These disciples were strengthened

by the apostles teaching them the Word of God. The apostles taught and expounded the whole counsel of God to these new converts of less than two years. Some may have been Christians only a few months. The Word sets men free, but men cannot be set free if they do not know the Word. There must always be strong doctrinal teaching so men will know what God expects of them, so they will not always be running on their emotions.

The goal of the missionaries was to get these relatively new converts to Christ off the milk of the Word on to the meat of the Word. They needed to strengthen, stabilize, and solidify these saints by orienting them to sound doctrine.

The Christian life is more than being converted; it is growing in Christ. It is going on to be what God intended us to be in Christ. It is impossible to grow in Christ without a good knowledge of the Word of God.

Why did Paul and Barnabas go back? They were not interested in decisions. They were interested in disciples. They were interested in church growth. They were interested in establishing sound local churches. They were interested in planting the church of Jesus Christ around the world. This is New Testament missions.

Encouraging (14: 22b)

“. . . encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying, ‘Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.’” -- The missionaries not only taught the new converts, but they encouraged, exhorted and challenged them to persevere in the Faith. The apostles oriented these new converts to positive Christian experience as well as sound doctrine. The missionaries were very honest with these Christians and told them that suffering for Christ was part of being a Christian. Christians must suffer tribulations and through these tribulations they will ultimately enter into heaven (the kingdom of God). These new converts found out that being a Christian wasn't all peaches and cream, and Paul told them that they were going to have trouble and not to be surprised at it when it came. Why must we as Christians suffer tribulation? First, we must suffer because the world controlled by Satan hates Christ and therefore hates those who are followers and representatives of Christ. Second, tribulation teaches us to cling to Christ by faith. Third, tribulation refines the Christian, making a real genuine spiritual man or woman. Fourth, tribulation makes the Christian long for his heavenly home and reminds him that he is but a pilgrim and stranger on this earth.

This verse tells us clearly that we all need suffering and must undergo suffering to make us grow. Let us thank God for our tribulation and endure it for His glory and our good.

It is so very important that Christians exhort and encourage one another in the Faith. We cannot really encourage one another unless we know and love one another.

“Take care, brethren, lest there should be in anyone of you an evil, unbelieving heart, in falling away from the living God. But encourage one another day after day, as long as it is still called ‘Today,’ lest anyone of you be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin” (Heb. 3:12, 13).

“. . . and let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another; and all the more, as you see the day drawing near” (Heb. 10:24-25).

Strengthening and encouraging the saints (teaching and experience) is nothing less than effective follow-up. It is staying on new converts until they become self-sustaining believer-priests and can begin to strengthen and encourage other believers exercising their own spiritual gifts and independent ministries.

ORGANIZING MEN FOR LEADERSHIP (Acts 14:23)

Appointing (14:23a)

“And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, . . .” -- The missionaries now began to officially organize these churches by recognizing those men the Holy Spirit had particularly gifted for the office of elder and they appointed them to this office. Scholars debate whether the first missionary journey lasted one or two years, but whatever length, when these missionaries came back through these cities, they recognized those men the Holy Spirit

had been equipping for leadership and appointed them as elders. The apostles, who had apostolic authority and the care of the churches, appointed these elders. The apostles, in time, would leave these churches, and after the first century the office of apostle would cease to exist. Therefore, there was a need to assign leaders over the flock who would act in the absence of the apostles. There is no stability without God ordained leadership. Paul and Barnabas merely recognized God's men for the office of elder, so as to produce stable, growing, powerful, well-organized churches. These local churches were functioning as a body without elders, but they became official, organized churches when they had appointed elders. The Christians in these local churches were inexperienced, needing counsel and direction and protection from danger and heresy. Therefore, elders were appointed to watch over the spiritual interests of the brethren. The basic tasks of an elder are to exhort, instruct, govern and administrate the believers in the local church.

There has been some debate among Christians as to the meaning of "appoint." The issue is whether the apostles sovereignly appointed these elders or whether the congregation voted for them and then the elders appointed them. In the Greek, the word "appoint" (cheirotoneo) literally means "to stretch out the hand." This same word was used in the voting of the Athenian legislative assembly, and this has caused many to think that it was the people who elected the elders by voting with the raising of the hand, and then the apostles appointed them. This view gives the congregation the right to select elders. The problem with this view is it clearly indicates that it was the apostles who appointed these elders, not the congregation -- "they (apostles) had appointed." Furthermore, the word means "to stretch out the hand," which may suggest the idea of pointing out or designating. That the apostles sovereignly appointed elders is backed up by Titus 1:5 which says, "For this reason I left you (Titus) in Crete, that you might set in order what remains, and appoint (kathistami) elders in every city as I directed you." At Grace Church, the elders recognize those men God has gifted for the office of elder and appoint them to this office with the approval of the congregation. The congregation of Grace Church can say "yes" or "no" to the men the elders put up for office, but the congregation cannot select who they want for these offices (although the elders are always open for suggestions from the congregation). This seems to be a fairly accurate New Testament principle since the apostles would have put no one in office of whom the people could not approve. To put into office someone unacceptable to the congregation, would have caused great division.

This verse says that they appointed elders (plural) in every local church. The natural reading is that there was a plurality (more than one) of elders in every local church. The New Testament churches were ruled by elders, not by the pastor or the congregation. From other passages, we may have warrant to suggest there are two types of elders, ruling and teaching.

"Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who work hard at preaching and teaching. For the Scripture says, 'YOU SHALL NOT MUZZLE THE OX WHILE HE IS THRESHING,' and 'The laborer is worthy of his wages'" (I Tim. 5:17, 18).

All elders are to rule and teach, but some specialize in teaching and others in ruling. This may lend weight to having elders who are fully paid to work at the task of the ministry on a full-time basis, and elders who are not paid, but labor among the flock as ruling elders. Surely there is a difference between an elder who can give full time to the Lord's work and an elder who can only give part time at best. The difference, however, is not in authority but. in function.

The qualifications for an elder are set before us in the Bible.

"It is a trustworthy statement; if any man aspires to the office of overseer, it is a fine work he desires to do. An overseer, then, must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, temperate, prudent, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not addicted to wine or pugnacious, but gentle, uncontentious, free from the love of money. He must be one who manages his own household well, keeping his children under control with all dignity (but if a man does not know how to manage his own household, how will he take care of the church of God?); and not a new convert, lest he become conceited and fall into the condemnation incurred by the devil. And he must have a good reputation with those outside the church, so that he may not fall into reproach and the snare of the devil" (I Tim. 3:1-7).

"For this reason I left you in Crete, that you might set in order what remains, and appoint elders in every city as I directed you, namely, if any man be above reproach, the husband of one wife, having children who believe, not accused

of dissipation or rebellion. For the overseer must be above reproach as God's steward, not self-willed, not quick-tempered, not addicted to wine, not pugnacious, not fond of sordid gain, but hospitable, loving what is good, sensible, just, devout, self-controlled, holding fast the faithful word which is in accordance with the teaching, that he may be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict" (Titus 1: 5-9).

These qualifications are to be seen in every man who is given to the office of elder, without exception. However, some of these qualifications will be more evident in some than in others for each elder has his strengths and weaknesses in these areas. Elders are not perfect people but are to have reached a certain level of spiritual maturity before they can serve. Remember, all of the elders appointed by Paul and Barnabas were probably no more than two years old in the Lord. Yet, God had done a marvelous work of grace and brought some men to rapid maturity. We can conclude that elders are not perfect men, but they must be spiritual men. Elders were not selected in the New Testament because they had good looks, winning personalities, business abilities or large bank accounts, but according to spiritual qualifications.

Organization is not a dirty word. Organization is an absolute necessity for the local church. There must be strong leadership who, in turn, organize the church into a smooth-running operation for Christ. The key to solid organization is dynamic leadership.

When Christians say, "I don't have to belong to a local church; I can meet during the week for Bible study and prayer with Christians and get more than I could get through a local church," they are sadly misinformed. God has ordained the local church with elders to exhort, instruct and govern the flock. We are not New Testament at all unless we are connected up with a local church, for the local church is God's primary means of accomplishing His work on this earth. It is, therefore, the responsibility of every Christian to be identified with a local church, and to carry out his own personal ministry in and through the local church or the family of God. It is from the family of God that Christians are strengthened, have fellowship, are encouraged and place themselves under a governing body for leadership and discipline when necessary.

Praying (14 :23b)

" . . . having prayed with fasting, . . ." -- The apostles and newly appointed elders surely were praying together. Undoubtedly, the local church of Antioch was gathered together and were also entering into this time of prayer and fasting for God's blessing on these new elders and the infant churches.

Apparently, prayer and fasting were connected with the selection, appointing, and commending of elders to the ministry. Why? This is most important for the local church, for as the leadership goes, so goes the church.

Commending (14:23c)

" . . . they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed." -- The apostles entrusted these infant churches with their new elders into the guardianship and protective care of God. These congregations were feeble, inexperienced and exposed to dangers, but with God's help through appointed leadership, the apostles believed that God would prosper these local churches.

SENDING MEN OUT FOR CHRIST (Acts 14:24-28)

Speaking (14:24, 25)

"And they passed through Pisidia and came to Pamphylia. And when they had spoken the word in Perga, they went down to Attalia; . . ." -- As the missionaries came back to Antioch of Syria, they stopped in a few places to preach the Gospel of Christ. They felt compelled to speak the Gospel where it had never been spoken before.

Returning (14:26)

" . . . and from there they sailed to Antioch, from which they had been commended to the grace of God for the work that

they had accomplished.” -- Almost two years had passed since Paul and Barnabas left Antioch of Syria to go on the first missionary journey to the Gentiles. The local church at Antioch had sent them out to preach the Gospel, disciple men, establish local churches, build the saints and appoint elders. All this time the local church at Antioch had been praying and now the missionaries had returned. Notice the words, “the work that they had accomplished.” God was gracious and they had accomplished the work they set out to do. They had not only completed the work, but were successful to the glory of God.

Sharing (14:27)

“And when they had arrived and gathered the church together, they began to report all things that God had done with them and how He had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles.” -- When the apostles, Paul and Barnabas, arrived at Antioch, they gathered the church together to have the first missionary conference. They began reporting and sharing what God had done with them and through them in reaching the lost Gentiles for Christ. What a sharing time that must have been! What a body life service! There was excitement, rejoicing and tears as they heard how God was saving Gentiles by the thousands.

At this sharing time, it was no bragging session. Paul could have spoken about his scars incurred when stoned, or how he had led many to Christ, even some high ranking dignitaries. However, he chose to speak about God’s grace. He explained how God did it all. Paul and Barnabas gave the glory to God. They were very aware of the fact that it was God who had used them and who had sovereignly opened the doors for the Gentiles to be saved. Missions is about what God is doing through men and not so much about what men are doing for God.

Each year we have a missions conference at Grace Church. This is a time when we bring in speakers and missionaries so they can tell us what God is doing in the world and how He is saving men by His grace through the preaching of the Gospel of Christ.

Ministering (14:28)

“And they spent a long time with the disciples.” -- Some have thought that Paul and Barnabas, as missionaries, came back to Antioch to furlough, but that is not necessarily true. They came back, picked up their responsibilities as leaders (probably elders) in the local church and ministered. They may have rested for a short while, but they soon were ministering in and through the local church at Antioch. They probably stayed in Antioch for six to eight years ministering to that local church and perhaps taking some other missionary journeys not mentioned in Acts.

These apostles, sent out by the church at Antioch, returned to the church at Antioch and ministered to the Christians. Today, missionaries who are home on furlough should come back and minister to one or two churches as well as get physical rest. This, of course, raises the whole question of missionary support. Do you support many missionaries with little monies or a few missionaries with large sums of money? If we support a few, then we could demand that they minister to our church when on furlough.

CONCLUSION

Saved

What makes a local church exciting? It is a place where Christians are disciplined, encouraged and strengthened by God appointed leadership to become self-sustaining believer priests who can become effective witnesses, discover their spiritual gifts and carry on an independent ministry in and through the local church. Are you a self-sustaining believer-priest?

Unsaved

God opened the door to the Gentiles that they might be saved. Are you saved? Has God opened up the door for you to hear the Gospel? Have you walked through this door by faith and accepted Christ as your personal Lord and Savior? This is the starting place. The local church, discipleship, godly leadership, prayer, missionary conferences,

or whatever, will mean nothing to you until you accept Christ and bow your will to Him as Lord.