

BIBLE TEACHING AND WORSHIP GUIDE



FOR THE HOME-BASED CHURCH

Produced Weekly

The Autonomy of the Local Congregation of Believers
Matthew 18:15-20; Acts 6:3-6; 13:1-3; 1 Corinthians 5:1-5

Copy this sheet for the Gathering Time, Bible Study, and Worship Experience leaders for the next meeting of the church.

Leaders' Responsibilities:

Important: Each person who will be leading one of the three parts of a session during a Unit of sessions needs to have access to the "Basic Information for Leading the Unit of Study". That information is often provided at the beginning of that Unit of sessions. The weekly session "Background" located in the Teacher Preparation is much more specific to that day's study.

1. **The Gathering Time Leader** will gather all of the people together and help them prepare their minds and hearts for a wonderful worship experience before God. His/her responsibility is to introduce the congregation to the theme (content) and the Scripture that will be central to their worship experience for the day.

2. **The Bible Study Leader** will then help the people understand what the Scriptures have to say and teach us about the content of the study for the day. He/she will guide the people to make a general application of the study (ie: How does this Bible study apply to people today?)

3. **The Worship Time Leader** has the responsibility to use the theme and Scriptures to guide the congregation to make personal commitments to God's will for each one in regard to the study for the day. He/she will use others to lead in the music, taking the offering, ministry moment comments, and other activities and parts of the **Worship Time** that can aid in participatory worship.

Prior to this Coming Session:

Gathering Time Leader:

Prepare copies of "***The Church's One Foundation***" and be prepared to use it as directed in the instructions for the Gathering Time.

Bible Study Leader:

Worship Time Leader:

You may choose to read again “*The Church’s One Foundation*” (first read during the Gathering Time.

Music Sources:

“Bind Us Together” #43, *Maranatha! Music, Third Edition*, 1993

“The Servant Song” #613, *Baptist Hymnal* and others

“Surely the Presence of the Lord Is In This Place”, 285, *Maranatha! Music, Third Edition*, 1993

“I Love Thy Kingdom, Lord” #354, *Baptist Hymnal* and others

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Copy this section for the Gathering Time leader.

Gathering Time: (Suggested time: 15 minutes)

The Autonomy of the Local Congregation of Believers

Focal Texts:

1 Corinthians 1:1-3; Ephesians 1:22-23; 4:15-16; Acts 13:1-3; Romans 15:23-29

Background Texts:

Matthew 18:15-20; Acts 6:3-6; 13:1-3; 14:23, 27; 15:1-30; 16:5; 20:28; Romans 15:23-29; 1 Corinthians 1:1-3; 5:1-5; Ephesians 1:22-23; 4:1-16; Revelation 2-3

Main Idea:

Under the lordship of Christ, each local church is self-governing and independent in the management of its affairs.

Questions to Explore:

What is "the church?" To whom or what does your church report?

Teaching Aim:

To help participants identify the implications of the biblical teaching of local church autonomy for their local church.

Gathering together:

Copy the words of the old hymn "The Church's One Foundation" for each participant to have. Read together the words in the following manner.

Men and boys:

**The church's one foundation
Is Jesus Christ her Lord;
She is His new creation,
By Spirit and the Word:**

Women and girls:

**From heav'n He came and sought her
To be His holy bride,
With His own blood He bought her,
And for her life He died.**

Leader:

**Elect from ev'ry nation,
Yet one o'er all the earth,
Her charter of salvation,
One Lord, one faith, one birth;**

**One holy name she blesses,
Partakes one holy food,
And to one hope she presses,
With every grace endued.**

Men and boys:

**'Mid toil and tribulation,
And tumult of her war.**

Women and girls:

**She waits the consummation
Of peace forevermore.**

All:

**Till with the vision glorious,
Her longing eyes are blest,
And the great church victorious
Shall be the church at rest.**

Samuel Stone, 1866 (Public domain)

Spend a few minutes discussing the meaning of this hymn. Even adults may find the language used by Samuel J. Stone who lived from 1839-1900 to be difficult to understand. Yet the meaning is powerful and a worthy introduction to our study of the church.

Here the writer speaks of the church united – all believers of all times. We will focus today on the local church and the important things the local church – whether large or small – can do. However, it is good for us to remember that we are part of the Kingdom of God – those believers everywhere who live out their lives in service.

In the first stanza, the writer refers to the fact that the foundation of the church is Jesus Christ. The church is referred to as the “Bride of Christ” and emphasis is placed on the fact that Christ gave his life for the church.

Because of this symbolism the church is referred to as feminine. It includes people from every nation brought together by belief in the same Lord, faith and new birth.

That togetherness is expressed by saying that we all have one hope (the same hope) toward which we are moving.

The final stanza speaks of the hard work of life, the “war” against evil and our desire for peace.

The last two lines are a triumphant expression of the church moving together to victory and rest in heaven.

The words express a sense of the whole body of Christ. Especially in small home churches, it is good to remind ourselves that we are a part of God’s Kingdom work with aims and hopes like our Christian brothers and sisters the world over.

Allow time for questions and expressions of interest in the hymn.

You may want to read the hymn a second time to imprint the words on the hearts of the worshippers.

Take time at this point to mention items of prayer concern for the church, announcements of ministry or activities, and anything else that needs to be shared with or by the congregation. Pray for these needs. Remember to praise God in prayer.

Break time! Take five minutes between sessions. Encourage children to use the washroom so that they won’t need to leave during the Bible Study time.

Distribute youth/adult Bible study outlines or paper for note-taking, if available.

Also hand out the activity sheets for preschool and younger children to use during Bible Study and/or worship.

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Copy this section for the Bible Study leader.

Note to the Bible Study Leader: Suggested teaching time for the Bible study should be about 35 minutes. Use the "Teacher Preparation" for your personal study during the week before the session. Use the "Bible Study Plan" for the actual session.

Teacher Preparation

The Autonomy of the Local Congregation of Believers

Focal Texts:

1 Corinthians 1:1-3; Ephesians 1:22-23; 4:15-16; Acts 13:1-3; Romans 15:23-29

Background Texts:

Matthew 18:15-20; Acts 6:3-6; 13:1-3; 14:23, 27; 15:1-30; 16:5; 20:28; Romans 15:23-29; 1 Corinthians 1:1-3; 5:1-5; Ephesians 1:22-23; 4:1-16; Revelation 2-3

Main Idea:

Under the lordship of Christ, each local church is self-governing and independent in the management of its affairs.

Questions to Explore:

What is "the church?" To whom or what does your church report?

Teaching Aim:

To help participants identify the implications of the biblical teaching of local church autonomy for their local church.

Introduction to your personal study:

"We have a prayer breakfast at the church on Saturday morning." "Let's quiet down so we can have church." "I am a member of the Catholic church." "I am a Bible study teacher in my church." All of these statements use the word "church," but each means something different. The first refers to a building, the second to an activity, and the third to a denomination, and the fourth to a local congregation of people. Christ said, "I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it" (Matthew 16:18). What, then, does the term "church" mean?

The term "church" (ekklesia in Greek) is used 115 times in the New Testament. Sometimes the term "church" referred to all persons anywhere in who have come to a

saving knowledge of Jesus Christ (Matthew 16:18; Ephesians 1:22-23; 3:10; 4:4; 5:23-27; Colossians 1:18, 24). Most of the New Testament references (at least 92), however, refer to a local gathering of believers. Sometimes a "church" refers to all believers within a given city (Acts 8:1; 13:1), to all believers within a geographical region (Acts 9:31; cf. 15:41; 16:5), or even to groups meeting in individual homes (Romans 16:5; 1 Corinthians 16:19; Colossians 4:15). For about 300 years the early Christians did not have church buildings, so most churches met in homes. A "local church" could have been made up of numerous house churches, especially as the number of disciples grew (cf. Acts 6:1).

A local congregation is not merely a part of "the church of God" (Acts 20:28). It is the church of God in its local expression. It is the church that Christ has built in that location. Each congregation, no matter how large or small, represents his congregation, the church. Each church is a whole church, because Christ is embodied in it. But as each local church is joined to Christ, they are also joined to each other (Ephesians 4:4). Thus, the one church of God expresses itself locally in each fellowship of believers.

Background:

This Bible study lesson is about "local church autonomy." The term "autonomy" literally means "self-rule," and as such it is probably not the best term for the biblical teaching. The Bible teaches that each congregation is under the lordship of Christ. Each church is a gathered group of God's people with Christ as their head. Each congregation is led and empowered by His Spirit its God-ordained task. Thus each local church looks only to Christ for its authority to preach, teach, evangelize, and conduct its business. No other church or religious body may exercise authority over this God-called, Christ-led, and Spirit-empowered local body of believers.

Focusing on the Meaning:

This lesson looks at several passages of Scripture, specifically at several of Paul's letters to local churches and at one example of a local church as it responded to the leadership of the Holy Spirit in Acts. Letters (or "epistles") speak to specific situations happening in specific settings. At the same time, however, God has given us timeless truths from these passages that apply to us today. These are representative passages that display the biblical teaching on local church autonomy. By no means are they exhaustive. The intent of the study is not to exhaust the meaning of each passage but to get the main idea as it applies to the subject. Supporting Scripture references will be listed that can be used to strengthen the concept with your group if needed.

"To the Church of God in Corinth" (1 Corinthians 1:1-3)

"Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and our brother Sosthenes" (v. 1). An "apostle" was someone specially chosen and sent out by Jesus to preach with his authority. The risen Christ had commissioned Paul as an apostle at Paul's conversion experience (Acts 26:17). **"To the church of God in Corinth"** (v. 2).

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The Autonomy of the Local Congregation of Believers – 05-14-03-en

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Paul was writing his letter to the church that appears in one place, "in Corinth." "The church of God" is throughout the whole world, but at the same time it is fully present in each local assembly of believers (cf. 2 Corinthians 1:1).

"To those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be holy" (v. 2). The local church in Corinth is made up of people who have been "sanctified in Christ Jesus," that is, set apart by God to be his holy people because of their relationship with "Christ Jesus." As such, God has called them "to be holy," to be his and his alone, literally, to be "saints." These Christians were not declared holy because of the kind of life they have lived, but because their sins have been forgiven and wiped away by the blood of Christ who now stands in their place. They had placed their faith in him, and because of that they would continue to live lives that are faithful to him, demonstrating that by their obedience to him and their love for one another (cf. 1:15; 1 John 4:7-11). The Corinthian Christians were not the only Christians in the world. They were called to holiness **"together with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ – their Lord and ours"** (v. 2). They were part of a larger community of believers who had a common faith in the same Lord. Each congregation, then, was composed of believers who had personally claimed Jesus as their Lord. As such, these believers had been "born again" (John 3:5-6), indwelt (1 Corinthians 6:19; Ephesians 1:13-14), and led by the Holy Spirit (Romans 8:14).

"Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" (v. 3). Paul wished for them God's "grace" which are his blessings that none of us could ever deserve, as well as his "peace," which literally means "wholeness with nothing left out." These things can only be found in a relationship with God the Father through faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.

"The Church, Which is His Body" (Ephesians 1:22-23; 4:15-16)

One of Paul's common pictures of the church is "the body of Christ" (1 Corinthians 12:12-31; Romans 12:3-8; Colossians 1:18). This image emphasizes that as Christ did his work through his physical body during his earthly ministry, the main work that he does now is through his body, the church. In these passages in Ephesians, Paul emphasized that Christ's rightful place in his body is that of being the head over it. He rules over it, takes care of it, and is responsible that the entire body functions as it should. In other words, whenever Christ builds a body of believers, he retains the position of head for himself.

Ephesians 1:22-23

"And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church" (v. 22). God has given Christ authority over everything in all creation, especially **"the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way"** (v. 23). The church is the body of Christ because he fills it (2:21-22), just as he is the center of all creation (Colossians 1:17). Christ is both ruler over the church and ruler over the entire universe.

Ephesians 4:15-16

In this section of the letter (4:1-16) Paul spoke of unity and diversity in the church. Christians should be unified because we all serve the same Lord (vv. 3-6), but our unity is enriched because all Christians do not have the same gifts (vv. 7-12). The goal of each congregation should be "unity in the faith," a deeper "knowledge of the Son of God," and maturity in him, "attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ" (v. 13).

"Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is Christ" (v. 15). The body of Christ grows when it hears sound instruction, "the truth." All too often churches are plagued by "every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming" (v. 14). The church needs "the truth" spoken from the word of God, but it needs to hear it "in love." Paul called for a balanced combination of the two, even as Jesus was "full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). The truth spoken without love can cause damage to God's work, because "God is love" (1 John 4:8, 16). Love extended without being grounded in the truth of God's word does not adequately represent Christ who is "the Truth" (John 14:6). Without love, truth by itself becomes hard. Without truth, love by itself becomes soft. When Christians balance truth and love, the body will grow up and demonstrate that it is being led by its head, Christ.

"From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work" (v. 16). As the head, Christ is at work fitting and joining the entire body of believers together. He gives each body part the nourishment it needs, so each part can function properly. When this happens, the body "grows and builds itself up in love." The body grows under Christ's lordship when it hears his truth, and when it demonstrates his love.

"The Holy Spirit Said" (Acts 13:1-3)

"In the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers" (v. 1). This passage provides an example of a local church in action. "The church at Antioch" in Syria was a local body of believers that was greatly influential in the life of the early church. This passage teaches that Antioch was the birthplace of foreign missions (v. 2) and became Paul's home base for his outreach to the eastern half of the Roman empire. At Antioch the believers in Christ were first called "Christians" (Acts 11:26). It was in Antioch that the question first arose of whether or not Gentile converts must submit to the Jewish rite of circumcision (Acts 15:1-23; Galatians 2:11-21). This church had its own local leadership of five "prophets and teachers" (Barnabas, Simeon, Lucius, Manaen, and Saul/Paul), and was visited occasionally by the apostle Peter (Galatians 2:11-13).

"While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, 'Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work which I have called them'" (v. 2). The Holy Spirit had unmediated access to this body of believers. The church at Antioch was led and empowered directly by God's Spirit for its God-ordained task. **"So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off"** (v. 3). We

learn from a clearer text (Acts 15:2) and from other descriptions of how the early church practiced (Acts 6:2-6; 15:4-30) that the entire congregation, together with its leaders was probably involved here in this decision. All of them fasted and prayed; all of them listened for the voice of the Holy Spirit; and all of them laid hands on these chosen servants and sent them out. No other church or religious body exercised authority over this local body of believers, and they did not need to seek permission from another body to do what God had led them to do through His Spirit. Thus a local church looks only to Christ for its authority to preach, teach, evangelize, and conduct its business.

The picture presented in the Bible of local churches is that each church was indwelt by God's Spirit (Ephesians 2:22). Each was responsible to choose its leadership (cf. Acts 6:1-6), to conduct the specific ministry God had assigned for them (Acts 11:27-29), and to fulfill its missions task (Acts 13:1-3). Each local body also had the responsibility to care for its own members in ministry (Galatians 6:1-5, 10), discipleship (Colossians 1:24-29; 1 Thessalonians 5:12-15), and church discipline (Matthew 18:15-17; 1 Corinthians 5:4-5; 2 Corinthians 2:4-11).

Local churches also seem to have been under the spiritual authority of the apostles, who were a group of people raised up directly by the Lord to provide the foundation of the church (Ephesians 2:20; Revelation 21:14). God spoke directly to these apostles, and they delivered the official teaching of the early church (Acts 2:42). The apostles were eyewitnesses to Christ, his ministry, his death and resurrection (Acts 1:15-26; 22:6-21; 26:12-23). They were commissioned by the risen Christ to be witnesses to Christ's person, what he accomplished on our behalf, and the meaning of his redemption for Christian faith and practice. No modern Christian leader may claim such experience or authority. The apostles' teaching was binding and had an authority that came from God himself. What has happened to "apostolic authority" today? It is given in the Scriptures, specifically the New Testament (2 Peter 1:20-21; 1 John 1:1-4). Their teaching was recorded in written form and was thus preserved for us today. From the Scriptures we may hear the teaching of the apostles which guide our life, our belief, and our ministry today. Leaders today carry authority only to the extent that they faithfully teach the truths found in the inspired word of God (2 Timothy 3:14-4:5).

"Macedonia and Achaia Were Pleased to Make a Contribution" (Romans 15:23-29)

Paul had written earlier to the Gentile churches of a special offering to be taken for the poor Christians in Jerusalem (1 Corinthians 16:1). A series of famines had struck Judea, and the persecuted Christians in Jerusalem were suffering terrible economic conditions. A warning from God (Acts 11:28) helped the church through the first famine (around A.D. 46-47), but the second famine was devastating for them. The Jerusalem Christians were persecuted and poverty stricken, many of them having lost jobs and their lives because they dared to follow Jesus. Paul was moved with compassion for his Christian brothers and sisters and sought to stir up this kind of love, caring, and sacrifice in the Gentile believers for their needy brethren.

In this letter, Paul had mentioned his plans to visit the church in Rome and meet with these fellow Christians face to face (Romans 1:10-15). He would meet them while on his way to Spain to spread the gospel there (15:22-25, 28-29). First, however, he needed to accompany the members from the Gentile churches headed to Jerusalem with the relief offering for their fellow Christians (cf. Acts 20:3-6; 24:17). **"Now, however, I am on my way to Jerusalem in the service of the saints there"** (v. 25).

"For Macedonia and Achaia were pleased to make a contribution for the poor among saints in Jerusalem" (v. 26). Paul spoke several times of this offering and the spirit of generosity of these churches (cf. Galatians 2:10). He had asked the Corinthian Christians to put a certain amount aside regularly so that the offering would be ready when he arrived in Corinth (cf. 1 Corinthians 16:1-4). The churches had already given generously, and Paul thanked them for their gift (2 Corinthians 8-9). He also was encouraging them to give even more because the needs in Jerusalem were still great.

The province of Macedonia was immediately north of the Isthmus of Corinth in northern Greece, and the churches in **"Macedonia"** included churches such as Philippi, Thessalonica, and Berea. The churches in southern Grecian province of **"Achaia"** would include churches such as Corinth, Cenchræa, and possibly Athens. Their **"contribution"** is the term *koinonia*, which means "fellowship." **"They were pleased to do it."** These Christians in Greece were willing to share what they had with their fellow Christians in Jerusalem. The offering demonstrated a common bond among the people of God, a "fellowship" that only Christ could create.

"And indeed they owe it to them. For if the Gentiles have shared in the Jews' spiritual blessings, they owe it to the Jews to share with them their material blessings" (v. 27). The "contribution" that the Gentile Christians gave was in fact a "debt." As Gentile Christians, they had a spiritual indebtedness to the believers in Jerusalem, because Jewish Christians first brought the gospel to the Gentiles (Romans 11:11, 17-20). This material offering was a symbolic demonstration of the tremendous treasure of salvation they had received from their Jewish Christian brothers and sisters.

Although local churches were not bound together by a formal religious structure or authority imposed upon them, the early Christian churches had a profound sense of unity with one another. Their "fellowship" created a spiritual indebtedness to one another, like brothers and sisters in the same family. Paul said, "There is one body and one Spirit – just as you were called to one hope when you were called – one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all" (Ephesians 4:4-6). New Testament churches associated and cooperated with one another for the purposes of benevolence, fellowship, brotherhood, and for common missions causes (Acts 11:22-26; Romans 16:3-5; 2 Corinthians 9:1-2), but never for the purpose of exercising authority over one another.

Your Goal as the Leader of this Bible Study:

These passages display some major truths about the biblical doctrine of the church. A church is a local body that is vitally linked to a larger body that spans the globe. Each local body is composed of people who have personally claimed Christ as their Lord and Savior. Christ is the head of each body, and as such he directs and empowers each local church through his Holy Spirit. No other church or religious structure may exert control over a local body, but local churches do freely and willingly associate and cooperate with each other for common purposes and ministries.

For Personal Reflection:

- 1. What have I learned from this study?**

- 2. What personal experience does this lesson bring to mind?**

- 3. What is one action I will take this week to apply this Scripture passage to my life?**

Bible Study Plan (Suggested time: 35 minutes)

The Autonomy of the Local Congregation of Believers

Regroup the church after the Gathering Time and break by singing a chorus that young children can relate to—or another praise chorus if your congregation does not have children. Children who go to their own Bible teaching session should stay with the group until after this song. Have the preschoolers and children accompany the hymn with rhythm sticks, maracas, bells, etc.

Begin by helping the group locate the Focal Text in their Bibles. Also, share with them the Main Idea to be learned from the Scriptures, and the Questions to be Explored by the group.

Focal Texts:

1 Corinthians 1:1-3; Ephesians 1:22-23; 4:15-16; Acts 13:1-3; Romans 15:23-29

Background Texts:

Matthew 18:15-20; Acts 6:3-6; 13:1-3; 14:23, 27; 15:1-30; 16:5; 20:28; Romans 15:23-29; 1 Corinthians 1:1-3; 5:1-5; Ephesians 1:22-23; 4:1-16; Revelation 2-3

Main Idea:

Under the lordship of Christ, each local church is self-governing and independent in the management of its affairs.

Questions to Explore:

What is "the church?" To whom or what does your church report?

Teaching Aim:

To help participants identify the implications of the biblical teaching of local church autonomy for their local church.

Connect with Life:

As the group gathers, ask them to think of the different ways people use the term "church." (Some suggestions are in the introduction section of the teacher's study).

Then ask them: "How does the Bible define the term 'church'?" Take a moment to explain the different biblical connotations of the term (found in the teacher's material). Highlight the fact that a local church is not merely a part of the church of God, but it is indeed the church of God, a local body with Christ as its head.

State: "Today's lesson will be on the biblical doctrine of the church. Specifically we will be examining what the Bible says about 'local church autonomy.'" Explain that this simply asks the question, "To whom or what does your church report?"

Guide the Study:

State: **A "church" is a gathering of God's people that is both local and universal (1 Corinthians 1:2).**

Have someone read 1 Corinthians 1:1-3, then ask: "According to verse 2, how does Paul describe this specific church?" ("the church of God in Corinth")

Ask: "Does he call this church 'a part of the church of God?'" (No, it is the church of God that is located in Corinth).

Explain that each local church is God's church in that location. (See the introduction to the teacher's material).

Say: **A local church is composed of born-again believers (1 Corinthians 1:2).**

Have someone read verse 2 again.

Now seek answers to the following:

"What phrases does Paul use to describe the members of this church?" (those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be holy, those who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ)

"According to these descriptions, what does that say about the membership of a local congregation?" (It is composed only of believers who have personally claimed Jesus as their Lord and been made "holy" by Christ's sacrifice on their behalf, "born again" [John 3:5-6]).

"What does this verse say about the relation of local Christians to a larger body?" (They are part of a family of faith "everywhere" who claim the same Lord.) Point out that it is also joined to the one body of believers throughout the world (Ephesians 4:4).

Say: **A church is a body of believers with Christ as the head (Ephesians 1:22-23; 4:15-16).**

Have someone read Ephesians 1:22-23.

Ask: "What is the picture that Paul gives here of the church?" Explain that the "body of Christ" image emphasizes that the main work that Christ does now is through his body,

the church, even as Christ did his work through his physical body during his earthly ministry.

Continue: "According to these verses, what is Christ's rightful place in his body?" (The head) "What does that mean for who has authority in the church?" (Christ is in control).

Have someone read Ephesians 4:15-16.

Search for responses to these questions:

"According to these verses, what is the responsibility of the head of the church?" (Fitting and joining believers together, growing and building up the body, enabling each part to function properly).

Ask the group to look at verse 15 and ask: "According to this verse, what is necessary for the church to grow up into Christ?" (Speaking the truth in love)

Have the group discuss the importance of the balance of truth and love.

Seek opinions to this: "What happens when we speak the truth without love? What happens when we spread love without truth?" Point out that Christ was the perfect balance of "grace and truth" (John 1:14).

Say: **A local church is led and empowered by the Holy Spirit for ministry, mission, and church discipline (Acts 13:1-3).**

Explain that the next passage is an example of a local church in action.

Have a volunteer read Acts 13:1-3.

Call for a response to this: "How did this church find out what God wanted them to do?" (The Holy Spirit spoke directly to them.)

Ask: "Did this local church need to seek permission from someone else to do what the Holy Spirit said?" (No)

Then ask: "To whom, then, should a local church look for authority to preach, teach, evangelize, or conduct its business?" (Only to Christ as its head).

Take a moment to look at several other passages of Scripture. Hand out pieces of paper with the following Scripture references. Have someone read each passage and have the group describe what the local church was responsible to do in each case.

Acts 6:1-6 – (choose leadership)

Acts 11:27-29 – (minister to those in need)

Acts 13:1-3 – (send missionaries)

Galatians 6:1-5, 10 – (care for its own members)

Colossians 1:24-29) – (disciple its own members)

Matthew 18:15-17 – (church discipline)

Ask again: "To whom, then, should a local church look for authority to preach, teach, evangelize, or conduct its business?" (Only to Christ as its head).

5. State: **Though autonomous bodies, local churches associate and cooperate with one another for the purposes of benevolence, fellowship, ministry, and missions (Romans 15:23-29).**

Briefly describe the situation of the special offerings for the Christians in Jerusalem (found in the teacher's notes).

Have someone read Romans 15:23-29.

Ask what the Christians in Macedonia and Achaia did for the believers in Jerusalem. (Sent a contribution).

Explain that the term "contribution" is actually the Greek language term koinonia which means "fellowship."

Ask, "According to verse 27, how did Paul describe this contribution?" (It was a "debt.")

Explain that the "fellowship" between believers created a spiritual indebtedness to one another, like brothers and sisters in the same family.

Request someone to answer this: "According to these verses, then, are local churches 'independent' of one another?" (No, they associate and cooperate with one another).

Have someone read Ephesians 4:4-6.

Have the group point out everything we have in common with other believers.

If you have two or more youth, this is the time to give them the **Youth!!! Take Ten** page and allow them to go away from the adults and apply the lesson by and for themselves.

Encourage Application:

Review with the group the five biblical principles on the church studied today.

A "church" is a gathering of God's people that is both local and universal.

A local church is composed of born-again believers.

A church is a body of believers with Christ as the head.

A local church is led and empowered by the Holy Spirit for ministry, mission, and church discipline.

Though autonomous bodies, local churches associate and cooperate with one another for the purposes of benevolence, fellowship, ministry, and missions.

Have the group consider the following questions regarding your local church.

"In light of what we have learned today from God's word:

What are we as a church supposed to believe?

What are we as a church supposed to do?

Is there a promise we need to claim as a body?

Is there an example we need to follow? or avoid?"

Take a five minute break to separate the Bible Study and Worship Time. Children may need to use the washroom again before worship.

Youth!!! Take Ten

Bible Study Application for Youth

You may wish to move away from the adults for the final five to ten minutes of the Bible study and help each other as youth to apply the lesson to your own needs.

The Autonomy of the Local Congregation of Believers **Matthew 18:15-20; Acts 6:3-6; 13:1-3; 1 Corinthians 5:1-5**

A youth will lead the following activity and comments. No adults need to be present. If possible, teens should take turns in leading the application time.

This Is Church??? **Is This Church???** **Is Church This???**

This is a good day for you to think about what the church really is. It's easy to only think of church as a building. That is common to many believers of all ages. Since you are in a home church, you already have experience with a church without a building.

But do you really understand that the church is the people – the believers. When we criticize the church, we may mean the institutional structure rather than the believers themselves.

However, because the church is all of us, we are all affected when someone in the group acts in an un-Christ-like way. Few teens make it through adolescence without feeling or hearing from someone else that the church is full of hypocrites. Perhaps it is God's gift to the church that teens have high ideals and that each generation seems to want to make old things better.

Talk together about definitions of the church. From today's lesson, what new insights have you gained? What do those insights mean for your personal life?

3

Copy this section for the Worship Time leader.

Worship Time (Suggested time: 30 minutes)

The Autonomy of the Local Congregation of Believers **Matthew 18:15-20; Acts 6:3-6; 13:1-3; 1 Corinthians 5:1-5**

Beginning the Service:

Songs you may choose to sing:

“Bind Us Together” #43, *Maranatha! Music, Third Edition*, 1993

“The Servant Song” #261, *Maranatha! Music, Third Edition*, 1993

“Surely the Presence of the Lord Is In This Place”, #285 *Maranatha! Music, Third Edition*, 1993

Offering:

Praying for the World:

Pray today for those who are translating Home Church Online materials to a number of different languages. Pray that they have skill to adapt the materials as needed for different cultures. Pray that this contribution to the home church movement which is strong in many countries may be blessed by God.

Sharing Guide:

This sharing guide is written to assist the person who directs the worship time to reemphasize the teaching for the day and help guide the congregation to respond to God’s call and will for their lives in regard to the scripture studied. The leader may choose to follow the guide closely. Or, he or she may wish to only use it to give direction and a concept for preparing an original message. The leader is free to choose other ways to communicate and share the concepts presented here.

Introduction:

The Spanish language avoids some of the misunderstanding English speakers have with the word church. In English, church may be used to indicate the building in which a group of believers meet or it may be used to refer to the believers themselves. Many people think only of a building when the word church is used. Special emphasis must be made if one is referring to the people of the church rather than the building itself.

In Spanish, two different words are used. El templo refers to the building and la iglesia refers to the people. “La iglesia Betel se reúnen en el templo en la calle Independencia.” The believers of the Bethel church meet in the building on Independence Street.

As we think today of the church we are thinking of the people of the church. In fact, we are most interested in the group of people that make up our church. We have already acknowledged in the “**Gathering Time**” that we are a part of the larger body of believers. Now we focus on what our local, autonomous congregation of people is to do in the work of the Kingdom.

1. We are to resolve conflict in a responsible manner. Matthew 18:15-20

In a small home church even small irritations need to be resolved. Talking to the person with whom you have a disagreement is the first step. In verses 19-20 we are told, ***“Again, I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them.”***

These verses are not unrelated to the topic of resolving disputes but are the core element of the resolution. Praying together about a misunderstanding is the best way to bring peace of mind and understanding of another’s point of view.

If agreement cannot be reached by the initial two persons involved, then one or two other people who can be unbiased and prayerful need to enter into the resolution process.

2. We need to hold one another accountable. Matthew 18: 17-18

These very difficult verses speak of a last resort. The Christian has spoken with the one who has offended him. Hopefully there has been prayer involved. However, there is no resolution or agreement. One or two other members of the body are invited to serve as mediators. There is still no resolution – no repentance for the harm done. Then the whole body of the church may need to be informed. In a home church, this may indeed be the whole body of the church. Wisdom and discernment must be exercised here so that children or new Christians are not adversely affected. However, if Christian love and concern are expressed and everything is focused on resolution of the issue, a good model for children and new believers can be set.

Obviously, there will be times when there has been a sin against one of the members or against the whole church and the person who is involved is unrepentant. At that point,

the members seek to minister to that person as they would a non-believer. A non-believer is treated with love and concern with the ultimate goal being his or her repentance and salvation or recommitment.

3. We must recognize that prayer is the most effective tool the church has. Matthew 18:19-20

These are amazing ideas. ***“Again I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them.”***

Some of the sweetest prayer times occur by telephone. People separated by distance or by schedule can still be two or three together and know that the Father is with them. Larger churches may have scheduled prayer meetings or prayer groups or prayer teams. The small home church functions together as a praying unit. When needs arise, make a phone call and pray with another member. When tragedy comes, pray with the one in despair and pray with others for the one who is grieving. Pray giving thanks for blessings received. Pray for wisdom for decisions to be made. Pray for world events and world leaders. Pray for the children of your church. Pray together on every occasion.

4. We must care for and instruct one another. Acts 6:3-7 and Romans 15:14

Acts 6 refers to the choosing of the first deacons whose task it was to relieve the apostles of the responsibility of providing care for the widows and orphans in the church. Within every body of believers, however large or small, there are needs and there are people who are gifted at meeting those needs.

Caring for one another is not only the task of those who may be especially set aside for that ministry. It is the task of each of us. Caring in the autonomous, local church may mean taking food to a new mother or caring for the older children in the family. Caring may mean relieving the caregiver where there is an older family member. Caring may be financially helping a family whose breadwinner is without a job. Caring may be including a single adult in a family picnic. Caring may be walking through the pain of separation and divorce. Caring may be serving as a male role model in a single mother family.

Romans 15:14 is a beautiful verse. Paul says, ***“I myself am convinced, my brothers, that you yourselves are full of goodness, complete in knowledge and competent to instruct one another.”*** These words are written to the believers in Rome. The book of Romans is an in-depth discussion of the big issues of faith—God’s judgment, the importance of the law, righteousness through faith, the struggle with sin, life in the Spirit, future glory. Paul is very aware of the sinfulness of man and the weakness of the human spirit. Yet Paul says to the people, “I myself am convinced, my brothers, that you yourselves are full of goodness, complete in knowledge and competent to instruct one another.”

One of the joys of the verse we just quoted comes when we realize that Paul was not writing this letter specifically to the pastor, deacons, or even the larger group of leaders in the church in Rome. He makes quite a point of saying that he is writing to every member of the church. It takes on greater meaning when we accept Paul's declaration about the nature of the local church. The church is us—all of us. No one is less than equal to everyone else in Christ's church. Mark Romans 15:14 in your Bible. It is a verse worth learning, remembering, and applying to our church.

Call to Commitment:

And so, humbly and prayerfully, we go about the work of the local autonomous church. We resolve conflict and learn to live peaceably with others; we pray fervently for one another and for the larger community and world of which we are a part; we care for one another and we teach one another.

What a task! What a wonderful, joyful, growing, uplifting task. We are the church – the people of God. We don't have to be big, but we must do the things a church must do. We must worship together, teach and nurture one another, fellowship and enjoy and care for one another, share our testimonies with others and invite them into relationship with Christ, and we must be aware of our responsibility to those around the world who have never heard the gospel.

Concluding the Service:

Copy the words of the old hymn "The Church's One Foundation" for each participant to have. Read together the words in the following manner.

Men and boys:

**The church's one foundation
Is Jesus Christ her Lord;
She is His new creation,
By Spirit and the Word:**

Women and girls:

**From heav'n He came and sought her
To be His holy bride,
With His own blood He bought her,
And for her life He died.**

Leader:

**Elect from ev'ry nation,
Yet one o'er all the earth,
Her charter of salvation,**

One Lord, one faith, one birth;

**One holy name she blesses,
Partakes one holy food,
And to one hope she presses,
With every grace endued.**

Men and boys:

**'Mid toil and tribulation,
And tumult of her war.**

Women and girls:

**She waits the consummation
Of peace forevermore.**

All:

**Till with the vision glorious,
Her longing eyes are blest,
And the great church victorious
Shall be the church at rest.**

Samuel Stone, 1866 (Public domain)

“The Church’s One Foundation”

Read together the words in the following manner:

Men and boys:

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