

What Is Our Work as a Local Church?

Franklin Church of Christ
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Introduction:

Howard Hill is considered by many in the sport to be the greatest archer of all time, rivaling even William Tell. He won 196 field archery tournaments in a row. He won 7 National Archery Golf tournaments. He was able to shoot a bull's-eye and then split the first arrow with a second. He was used as the stand-in for archery shooting in multiple movies such as "Robin Hood," "They Died With Their Boots On," and "Buffalo Bill." This guy was just awesome. However, I bet I could beat him. I don't need any training; I don't need any practice; I don't need any help. All I need is for him to blindfolded and spun around a few times.¹ If he has no idea what he's aiming at, I'll do better every time. The fact is we can only achieve success when we know what it is we are trying to do, when we know what we're aiming for. If we don't know what we are trying to accomplish, we'll never succeed. With that in mind, we need to ask about this local church. What are we trying to accomplish? What is the work of the local church?

I know most of us have heard lessons about the work of the local church. Most of us have heard the three part formula of 1) Evangelism 2) Edification and 3) Benevolence for the saints. However, before you say, "Oh, I've heard this," and then start thinking about lunch, I want to encourage you to back up. Does this really describe what the church does? Should we be satisfied with this three-point response? Sadly, as all too often happens when catechistic responses are formulated and we systemize our answers to important questions, this answer doesn't completely cover the richness of God's answer. If we are not careful the formula men have developed becomes more important than the actual scriptures. Then we begin to judge everything by our formula instead of scripture. Therefore, I think it is important for us to come at this question again without just relying on the formulas preachers of the past have developed. Instead, let's look for passages that actually say what the church is to accomplish.

Discussion:

- I. Who gets to decide what we do?
 - A. Before we can really answer the question about what the church should do, we need to determine who gets to set the mission for the church. Do the church's members get to decide what the church will do? Does the church's governing body of elders get to decide what the local church is supposed to do? Who gets to decide? Who gets to set the direction? Who gets to tell us our purpose?
 - B. **Ephesians 1:22-23** says that Jesus Christ is the head of the church. The church is His body. I recognize this is referring to the church universal. However, I believe it also applies to the church local as a microcosmic representation of the universal body. Jesus is the head of every local congregation. No doubt, Jesus established a body of leadership in the local church. We see that in our elders. **I Peter 5:1-3** demonstrates their leadership and government. However, notice **I Peter 5:4**. These shepherds are in subjection to the Chief Shepherd, Jesus Christ.
 - C. Consider the demonstration of Jesus' headship within the seven churches of Asia in **Revelation 2-3**. Over and over again, Jesus told those local churches what to do. They didn't get to decide on their own. The same is true for this congregation in middle Tennessee. We don't get to decide what we do on our own. Jesus is our chief Shepherd. We must make sure we are doing what He wants us to do. We must make sure we are accomplishing the work He has given us.
- II. What has Jesus said His church is to do?
 - A. As far as I can see from Scripture, God has given His church two overarching jobs that translate to the local church as well.
 - B. **Ephesians 3:20-21** says, "Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus through all generations, forever and ever. Amen" (ESV). The church's job is to give glory to God.
 1. Obviously, this means our job is to worship and praise God. Perhaps the greatest picture of this can be seen in **Revelation 4:8-11**. The creatures never cease to proclaim the holiness of the Creator. Further, the elders bow before God casting down their crowns and proclaim-

¹ Thanks to Zig Ziglar for this great illustration.

- ing the worthiness of the Lord to receive glory, honor, and power. The church's job is to glorify and honor God in like manner, humbling ourselves and honoring Him.
2. The story of Herod Agrippa I in **Acts 12:20-23** provides great insight. He delivered an oration to the people of Tyre and Sidon and they cried out, "The voice of a god, and not of a man!" He was struck with worms and died because he did not give God the glory. We are often too ready to take the glory to ourselves. Look at our programs. Look at our numbers. Look at our building. We can look at all that we do and act as if we are the ones who are glorious. Our job is not to give glory to us, our effort, and our work. Our job is to offer glory to the Lord, having others look to the Lord instead of us (cf. **Matthew 5:16**).
 3. The story of Nadab and Abihu in **Leviticus 10:1-3**, demonstrates that giving glory to God should govern everything we do. They decided to offer different fire than God had commanded. They decided to change what God had told them to do. They were consumed by fire. God's response was that by all those who come near Him, He is to be glorified. We give glory to God by doing things His way. There may be all kinds of actions we can take as a local church as part of the overarching work God has given us, but we are only accomplishing this aspect of our work when we are doing things God's way.
 4. I'm certain that some are already scratching their heads as they hear about the two works of the local church. You've heard the sermons and you are wondering about the issue of relief to the saints in need. No doubt, we know such work is authorized because of the church's example in **Acts 4:32-37**; **I Corinthians 16:1-4** and **II Corinthians 8-9**. However, have you ever noticed **II Corinthians 8:18-19**? Paul says this demonstration of God's grace through the local church providing relief for saints in need is done for the glory of the Lord himself. God is glorified as the church takes care of its own, being the means of God's grace to His children. This is part of God's glory.
- C. In **I Timothy 3:14-15**, Paul told Timothy, "I hope to come to you soon, but I am writing these things to you so that, if I delay, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth" (ESV).
1. The church's job is not to decide on truth. The church's job is not to make up truth. The church's job is not to vote on truth. The church's job is to hold up truth for all to see. The church's job is to do whatever it can to let the world see the truth.
 2. I can't help but think of Jesus' words in **John 14:6**. "I am the way, the truth, and the life." Jesus is the truth. Our job as a church is to show Jesus to the world. Our job is to hold Him up for all to see. However, at the same time, we need to understand that we can't hold up Jesus without holding up Jesus' teaching provided in the New Testament.
 3. But we must also remember **John 8:32**. We love passages that talk about truth, however, I think in too many cases we've missed the purpose of truth. We do not uphold truth to prove we are right. We do not uphold truth to prove everyone else is wrong. Jesus did not say, "The truth will make you right." He said, "The truth will make you free." At the same time, the point of holding up Jesus is not just so folks can get a good look at Him. We don't hold Jesus, the truth, for the world to see just so folks can feel good. We don't do it to give everyone warm fuzzies. We do it because when people submit to Jesus, they are set free.
 4. We need to understand this. Our job is to carry the message of freedom in Jesus Christ to all in the world. This includes those who are lost needing to enter Christ. This also includes those who are already in Christ as they grow in Him and in freedom.
 5. We often say two aspects of the local church's work are evangelism and edification. Because of that distinction, we have often misunderstood what those works even are. We say evangelism is teaching the lost and edification is teaching the saved. That really isn't true. Those definitions come from our formulas not the Bible. Evangelism is proclaiming the good news. That can be done for both the lost and saved. Edification means to build up. That too can be done for both the saved and the lost. Our job is to hold up that truth to lost and saved alike because only the truth can set us free and keep us free.
- D. This is the work of the church. This is what the church is for. The local church is here to glorify God and to hold up the truth for all to see and be set free. The church's job is to worship. The church's job is to teach. That's it. If we want to know whether or not we are hitting the mark and

accomplishing what God wants us to we need to examine how well we are glorifying God and how well we are holding Jesus up for the world to see.

III. How does the local church pay for its work?

- A. Implicit in giving the local church work to do, is the authority for the local church to pay for that work. It would be silly to authorize the church to do some work but then hamstringing it by saying it cannot pay whatever is needed to do it.
- B. That brings up a question. If the church's job is to glorify God and to hold up the freeing truth of Jesus Christ, how does the church pay for that work when paying is needed? There are two places that show the church needing funds to accomplish its work. One is in **Acts 4:32-37**. The other is **I Corinthians 16:1-4**. In both cases, the churches financed their work by the freewill donations of its individual members. The churches did not sell goods to the public. The churches did not solicit funds from local businesses. The churches did not charge for seminars and workshops. Rather, the church collected funds from the members. Further, there are no biblical principles that justify any other method for subsidizing the church's work.
- C. When we are going to pay for our work to be done, whether it be relief of saints, support of those who proclaim the gospel or lead the congregation, or whether it be materials needed to conduct our work (i.e. the emblems for the Lord's Supper), we should rely on the contributions of the individual members and nothing else. Therefore, on every first day of the week we give the members of this congregation the opportunity to contribute so our work can be done.

IV. We need to limit ourselves to the work Christ has given us.

- A. One of the best ways to fail at doing the work God has given us is to get distracted. Sadly, Satan has done a great job at getting churches today distracted from the work God has given us. He is not doing this by holding up awful and dreadful work. He doesn't tempt us away from God's work by saying, "Hey, instead of glorifying God and supporting the truth, how about you open a casino, support brothels, sell liquor?" No, instead he holds up good works that just aren't our work. He says, "How about you help moms by babysitting their kids and call it Mothers Day Out?" He says, "How about you help the poor by running a soup kitchen or having a clothing drive?" He says, "How about helping folks with cancer by paying some of their medical bills?" He then caps that off by acting like doing those things are evangelism because it might attract people to listen to the gospel message. Are those bad, sinful things? Of course not. They just aren't the work of the local church. When we start doing all those other things, we lose sight of what we have really been called to do. We may accomplish all kinds of good work, but we aren't accomplishing what God wants us to.
- B. The local church has not been called to entertain, provide social welfare, or offer secular education. The church's job is not to elect officials, pass societal laws, or impact the social order. The church's job is not to babysit, heal physical diseases, or care for the elderly. Are those good works? Sure. Should somebody do them? Absolutely. Will Christians who have been impacted by the life-changing gospel be involved in some of these things? Certainly. This just isn't the local church's work.
- C. Sadly, because so many people, including Christians, have been so impacted by the Social Gospel, what I'm sharing now seems amazing. We'll be accused of all kinds of bad things like hating the poor, despising orphans, ignoring the homeless. We'll be told that we don't have the love of Jesus. Certainly all those things might be true if we as individual Christians are not letting the true gospel impact our lives. However, as an organization, our job is to focus on our work and not get distracted. Otherwise we might accomplish a lot of the things people will call good, but not accomplish what God calls good. Remember, our job is to please the Lord, not people (**Acts 5:29**).
- D. Having said this, we need to think this through. What would happen if you called the American Cancer Society up and asked them to make a donation to the local orphans home? They would say, "No." Does that mean they hate orphans? What would happen if you asked them to make a donation to your soup kitchen to help the inner city homeless? They would say, "No." Does that mean they don't care about the homeless? What would happen if you asked them to help sup-

port a new hospital designed to treat and seek a cure for diabetes and heart disease? They would say, "No." Does that mean they are cruel to those who suffer from those maladies? What if you asked them to donate to a nursing home? They would say, "No." Does that mean they don't like old people? What if you asked them to set up a community garden or offer hot dog lunches several times a week to provide help for the needy around their buildings. They would say, "No." Does that mean they don't care about their community or the people nearby? What if we asked them to donate money to this church so we could do more evangelism? They would say, "No." Does that mean they don't care about people's souls? Interestingly, when the American Cancer Society focuses solely on their mission to seek a cure for, treat, and help those who have cancer, nobody says anything bad. In fact, we know it would be bad for them to lose sight of their mission. Why then do we do the same with the local church? The local church has two missions—glorify God and uphold the truth. We do this so men may be set free from sin and go to heaven. Why do churches struggle to give the same intensity of focus to the mission God gave them that other organizations do for their missions? We must not get distracted no matter how many complaints we receive.

Conclusion:

I do not have time to discuss the difference between individual Christians and the local congregation. But just as the individuals who work for the American Cancer Society may be involved in and donate to all kinds of other works, so do the members of the local congregation. But the work done by the local congregation and paid for by the local congregation needs to be directed by Jesus. We need to be busy giving glory to God and upholding the truth so men can be set free through Jesus Christ.

Having said this, let me make one more point. Sadly, all too often when we have lessons like this we look outward to rebuke all the churches that are doing other works. I certainly wish other churches would pay attention to the scripture and do the work God has given them. But our business is not what other churches do. Our business is making sure we do what God has for us. All too often we spend our time making sure we aren't doing what everyone else does when we preach these sermons. Today, let's look at us and assess how well we are doing. Are we hitting the bulls-eye? Or are we blindfolded, shooting aimlessly in the dark. How well are we giving glory to God? How well are we upholding the truth so people can be set free through Jesus Christ? It is not enough to talk about all the things we aren't doing because we shouldn't. If we aren't doing what we should, we are missing the mark. How are we doing?