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WHY FORSAKE THE LOCAL CHURCH?

By William F. McLean

The things I am about to say express some of my deepest convictions. These convictions did not come overnight; they gradually took form over a period of years as I observed present-day Christianity in the light of what I found in my study of the Word of God. You may not agree with all I have to say, but all I ask is that you hear me with an open mind.

I would like to begin by asking, “Why forsake the church?” I ask this question because many have abandoned the church and have established nonchurch organizations to accomplish the Lord’s work. “The church has failed,” I am told; “therefore, God has raised up these organizations to accomplish His work. The church is not reaching the youth; therefore, God has called us to do the job. The church is not reaching men; therefore, God has raised us up to reach them. The church is not reaching children; therefore, it was necessary for God to call us to the task. The church is not sending out missionaries, is not getting souls saved, is not taking advantage of the media of radio and television; therefore, God has raised up this, that, or the other organization to do the job.”

These criticisms are often made by sincere, well-meaning Christians, zealous in their efforts for the Lord. Too, we must admit that many of them have done a fine work. We will also admit that their criticisms may be true of some churches, but we do not consider these failures as grounds for forsaking the church. In their efforts to promote their own work—for this they must do or die—these men often do injury to the local church and bring confusion among the people of God. These men fail to see one of the most important and blessed truths in the Scriptures—the local church. They fail to understand that apart from the local church it is impossible to carry out the Great Commission, and those who follow them fail to understand God’s plan and place for the Christian during this Church Age.

Since there is so much confusion about the church today, I would like to ask, “What is a church?” Is a radio or television program a church? Is a Bible school a church? Is a Bible-distributing agency a church? Is a men’s organization a church? They preach the gospel; they get souls saved; some even send out missionaries. But are they churches?

Since the Bible is the rule and practice for the Christian, it seems reasonable that we should look to the Scriptures for a definition of a church. As I study the many references in the New Testament concerning the church, I find they divide themselves into two lines of truth. The one, and by far the smaller, restricted primarily to the epistles of Ephesians and Colossians, likens the

church to a body of which Jesus Christ is the Head; and the other line of truth, concerning which there is a great bulk of references, refers to the church as a body of believers meeting together locally in the various populated centers throughout Asia Minor and southeastern Europe. In fact, most of the epistles of Paul were written to these local, visible churches. In the book of Revelation there are seven letters addressed to seven local, visible churches. Paul was sent on his first missionary journey by the church at Antioch, a local, visible church.

These churches had two officers: the pastor and deacons; they observed two ordinances: baptism and the Lord's Supper. They were independent and self-governing. They consisted of born-again believers voluntarily meeting together for worship, ministering of the ordinances and the proclamation of the gospel. The truth concerning the invisible church, which is made up of all born-again believers regardless of race, standing, or denominational preference, is a wonderful blessing, and we thank God for it; but we must agree that due to its very nature, it was never the intent of God that it should be used to carry out His work for this Age. We must also agree that God has given us an organization, and that organization is the local church; and as we examine its structure, we are thrilled at the wisdom of God, for we find it perfectly equipped to conduct His program for this Age.

In light of this truth it stands to reason that these man-made organizations are not churches. They do not observe two ordinances; they do not have the two officers; they are not governed by those who support them; and many other points of difference too numerous to mention.

If they are not churches, what are they? If such organizations are not found in the New Testament, who authorized them? What right has any man to forsake the church organization, given by God in the New Testament, and establish an organization of his own? Since when is man wiser than God? I maintain that if half the time, money, prayer, and work poured into these nonchurch organizations annually were spent in local, Bible-believing gospel-preaching churches, there would be far more missionaries on the field, far more local churches established, far more souls won for Christ.

I'll go a step further and claim that it is impossible to properly carry out the Great Commission apart from the local church. I am sure every nonchurch leader will agree that it is our responsibility to carry out the Great Commission during this Age of Grace. However, there would be some who would disagree as to the content of the Great Commission and to whom it was given. I once had the president of a Bible school say to me, "The Lord never gave the Great Commission to any church; He gave it to individuals." Others feel that the Great Commission consists only of preaching the gospel and getting decisions for Christ. We hear the expression "Evangelize the world in this generation." By "evangelize," they mean simply to preach the gospel. The Great Commission is found in its various forms in each of the four Gospels and consists of three parts:

1. preaching the gospel;
2. baptizing the converts; and
3. teaching the converts the whole counsel of God.

There is a basic law of Bible interpretation that says, "The truth taught by our Lord in the Gospels must be interpreted in the light of additional truth found in the epistles together with

what was practiced by the apostles in the early church.” No one carries out the Great Commission who does not observe all three parts, and the person who faithfully carries out all three parts will always end with a local church—the apostle Paul did. It is impossible for a nonchurch organization to carry out the Great Commission; their structure will not allow it. Yet a pastor is constantly receiving solicitations from these organizations to support and promote their work. If they do not reach our people through the pastor, some will try to gain their support apart from the pastor. The pastor who does not respond to their appeal is put on their blacklist and considered a fighter, narrow in his viewpoint, not interested in souls or revival.

Mr. Nonchurch Leader, let me ask a few questions about your ministry. If I support your work and encourage our church to do so, will we be permitted to express ourselves freely on the doctrine of eternal security? May we speak about the blessed truth of baptism by immersion? Will the sheep of our flock be spared the fellowship of modernistic wolves who seek to rend their faith with the sharp teeth of unbelief? Will our dear people be subjected to the new evangelical who would seek to draw them into fellowship with the liberal? Will our local church, ordained of God in the Scriptures and founded by the advent of the Holy Spirit, faithfully carrying out the Great Commission, continue to be the center of activity; or must we from henceforth fit into your program?

Here is the answer I get: “There are some who fellowship with us who do not believe some of the doctrines you mention; therefore, for the sake of love, we do not stress those lesser important things. We don’t want to hurt anyone’s feelings.” Please, has anyone ever stopped to consider my feelings? By whose authority has any man the right to say that one doctrine is lesser important than another? My Bible says, “Hold fast the profession of your faith,” and I believe that includes all those wonderful doctrines that have distinguished Baptist people down through the ages. I demonstrate my love for Christ by standing firm on the truth of His blessed Word, not by departing from it for the sake of fellowship with those who do not.

Christians fail to realize that God would have them worshiping, fellowshiping, serving, and cooperating with the local church. All too often we hear well-meaning Christians making such statements as these: “I don’t have to belong to local church; I’m a member of the invisible church. If I don’t agree with the program of my church, I’ll not cooperate with it. It’s not necessary for me to give to the church; I give as I am led by the Holy Spirit.” Such an attitude always reminds me of the days of the judges, when every man did that which was right in his own eyes. I realize there is no perfect church. Pastors, deacons, and churches sometimes make mistakes; but that does not justify us in avoiding fellowship, cooperation, and giving in some church. I believe a Christian ought to be able to get along somewhere.

Once we understand the structure and function of the church, we will then see that there is no place in this Church Age for drifters who never assume their responsibility as God intended. God has placed the responsibility of government upon the congregation. To aid and lead the congregation, God has given two officers to the church: the pastor and deacons. The pastor, according to the Scriptures, is the leader: “Take heed . . . unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers ” (Acts 20:28); “Let the elders that rule well be counted worthy of double honour” (1 Timothy 5:17); “Feed the flock of God which is among you, taking the oversight thereof” (1 Peter 5:2). The word “pastor” means “shepherd.”

Therefore, we conclude that the pastor is God's undershepherd, called and placed by God as the leader of the flock. The qualifications for the deacons are clearly defined in 1 Timothy 3:10–13. This officer's conduct and testimony give evidence that God has placed His hand upon his life and equipped him for the office of deacon. In view of the foregoing truth, when a program is adopted by the church with the oversight of a godly pastor and board of deacons, for all practical purposes we must assume it is of the Lord, for they have operated in accordance with the Scriptures. Therefore, I question the right of anyone to oppose the program of such a church. To me, they are not opposing a church; they are opposing God.

Although I am not in the position to determine how the Holy Spirit may lead an individual, I am inclined to wonder at the manner in which some Christians give. Many feel that to give to a radio program, missions, or something apart from the church is more spiritual. We must remember that we do not give to things or works; true stewardship is to the Lord. Since the church is the only organization found in the New Testament, it seems reasonable that our tithes and offerings should be given to the Lord through the church, and the church before the Lord determines how the funds are to be spent.

I believe the Scriptures teach that every Christian should be a member of a local church. Nine of Paul's letters were addressed to local churches. The three pastoral epistles have to do with the oversight of the local church. The New Testament teaches that the church was given by God for worship, fellowship, ministering the ordinances, and proclaiming the gospel. The church is responsible for the care of the aged, orphans, and widows. The church offers a place of service for the Christian, and the Christian is under the discipline of the local church. When one is not a member of a local church, he is completely apart from this. How can he justify his position? Man is a rebel by nature; he will shun responsibility, and he will resist subjection. There is liberty in Christ, but it is liberty from bondage we knew in sin. The very words "in Christ" imply submission, but there is no dread in submission to Him Whose yoke is easy and Whose burden is light. If we delight in our submission to Him, then we will be submissive to His Word; and if we are submissive to his Word, we will be members of His New Testament local church. The apostle Paul likens the church to a body with many members, each member in his place functioning faithfully in a dependence upon the other members. You may say he is speaking of the invisible Body of Christ. I'll not argue the point except to say that you will never impress me with your claims of membership in an invisible body as long as you are not a member of the local, visible body, which I can see.

Don't forsake the church. God has not. He cannot, for it had its conception in the mind of God before the foundation of the world; it was provided by God the Son in His death on Calvary's cross; and it had its birth at the advent of God the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. No human organization will ever replace it; no human mind could ever conceive an organization better equipped to carry out the Great Commission; and no Christian will ever find sweeter fellowship nor more satisfying service than in the God-ordained, Christ honored, Holy Spirit-led local church.