

DO WE HAVE TO BE FAITHFUL TO OUR LOCAL CHURCH "FIRST"?

By Denver Cheddie

People often say that you must be faithful to your local church first. For example, if you wish to visit a different church one Sunday, people will tell you that your first commitment must be to your home church. If you're involved in ministry outside of the local church (e.g. campus ministries), they say that you must be faithful to your local church first. Is this correct? Or do these people make the local church a bigger deal than it really is? Are we required to be faithful TO our local church or faithful IN our local church?

I even heard one pastor say that people who only attend Sunday morning services, but not Sunday night and mid-week services, are not really saved. What he conveniently forgot to mention was that many of those folk who are in church all the time are not really spiritual, but rather use the local church as a substitute for personal devotion. They don't read the Bible themselves, they just listen to their pastors' sermons. But I bet that pastor doesn't really have a problem with that as long as those folk pay their tithes. Do these pastors really want people to study the Word for themselves, or are they threatened by believers who are too knowledgeable? Do they really want their church folk to have close relationships with God, or do they just want them to attend services? Do they really want their members to do real Christian ministry, or do they just want them to get involved in the church

programs? Are they more faithful to the local church than to the kingdom of God (universal church)?

First of all, faithfulness is a Christian virtue. In fact it is one of the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22). Believers are required to be faithful, period. But you need to know exactly what people mean when they make the above statements. When many people say those things, what they really mean is that you must be a regular attendee at church services, and that you must be a regular partaker in many of the church programs and activities. The problem is that many of these church activities are neither ministry nor fellowship, according to the Bible's understanding of those terms. Many churches are just social organizations and middle class country clubs. There isn't much real ministry going on in many churches today. And what we call fellowship are really social gatherings. Is that what we are called to be faithful to?

Most of the Bible's references to the church are to the universal church, not the local church. What the Bible calls ministry/service is very different from modern day church activities. And what the Bible calls fellowship is much more than the social gatherings over pot-luck lunches that we are accustomed to today. However, the Bible does address the local church, especially in the pastoral epistles of Paul – the ones to Timothy and Titus.

In 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1, Paul discusses the requirements of those who would be bishops and deacons. Whatever you call church positions today, they can generally be classified as bishops and deacons. The first one refers

to those with “spiritual” ministries, e.g. teaching and preaching. The latter refers to those with physical ministries, e.g. cleaning the church, organizing events, etc. Among the qualities listed are:

- a good Christian testimony especially to those who are not believers
- faithfulness in one’s family
- not greedy, self-willed or easily angered
- self control
- doctrinal soundness

Conspicuously absent from those lists is any reference to faithfulness to local church activities. Am I saying that believers should not be faithful in their local church? No. But we have to be careful to distinguish between what is in the Bible and what are man-made rules. Pastors today make rules like, “In order for someone to be a leader in the church, he or she must attend all the other church activities and meetings.” Church organizations have those rules for their pastors. Their pastors are required to attend every single meeting. Many of them have to balance secular jobs with their pastorates, and still find time to attend all of those boring meetings. This is the last thing that Paul intended when he penned 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1. Don’t you think that a pastor’s time is much better spent praying, studying God’s word, and seeking God’s face? Read Acts 6:4.

Many of these church activities are totally unnecessary and they take away precious time that people could be spending before God and with their

family, and doing real ministry. According to the above scriptures, Paul places stronger emphasis on faithfulness within one's family than faithfulness within one's local church. Paul even said that if a man was found not to be a good leader in his home, he should not be leading the people of God. This applied to both bishops and deacons. We have divorced and remarried people holding major leadership positions in church, but it's OK because they are faithful in the local church. Do I have anything against divorced people? No. All I am saying is that we have our priorities mixed up because we value our traditions above the word of God.

Some people today spend most of their free time inside the local church, while family life spends most of its time in the sewer. That's not what Paul had in mind when he penned his epistles. This is not what Jesus had in mind when he founded the church. The family has a higher priority in the plan of God than does the local church. If pastors would devote more time to developing family life, especially equipping men to lead their families in bible study and prayer, that would do a lot more for the church in the long run. But they don't get any offering if people stay at home on a Sunday evening. There, I said it! I don't believe in Sunday evening services because it takes away crucial time that the family should be spending together with God. Here is my stupid advice to any single person wanting help to prepare them for married life. Find a family that is not strong in the Lord, and conduct occasional bible studies and prayer with them. See what that accomplishes.

If I read my Bible correctly, true ministry is more outside of the local church than inside. True ministry is in our every day lives, less so within our local church walls. It is important to have spiritual authority over us, e.g. a

pastor. That is crucial to our spiritual growth and development. But I disagree with Augustine who said that if God is our Father, the Church must be our Mother. We should be careful not to get so suckered into local church activities, that they distract us from the real ministry at hand. Balance is the key.

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