

Can A Church Cancel Services?

Recent events have caused us to modify and cancel aspects of the work of the church. Perhaps the most difficult decision many churches are making is the decision to end all services. This raises an important question: does a local church have the authority to suspend or terminate the assembly of the saints for worship? There are a number of questions that are tied to this one. First, what constitutes a local church? Second, what assemblies are subject to the authority of the local church?

What Creates a Local Church?

The Bible teaches that the universal church was established with Christ as the head (Ephesians 1:22) and the Apostles and Prophets as the foundation (Ephesians 2:19-20) (with Jesus Himself as the chief Apostle (Heb. 3:1) and chief Prophet (Mat. 21:11), thus the chief cornerstone of the foundation). The local church is established when a local group of Christians are gathered with the intent and purpose of fulfilling ALL of the purposes given to the local church (not just worship).

Isn't a local church merely when two or more are gathered in the name of Jesus? Jesus made a statement to the Apostles like this when He gave them the "*keys of the kingdom*" in Matthew 18:18-19. There He described how they would work together in His name. However, this is not the description of a local church. Specifically, we are told that if a church is not pursuing ALL of the purposes given to the church (worship, organization, evangelism, benevolence, unity of doctrine, edification) it is not sound; it is condemned by Christ. This is the message of Revelation 2-3 and the seven churches; this is the message to Corinth and to the churches of Galatia.

The Worship of the Local Church

The Apostle Paul wrote specifically to the church in Corinth that their unity of doctrine and their purpose of worship was not being fulfilled. In 1 Corinthians 11-14 Paul describes problems and solutions in the purpose of worship, and by doing so establishes for us the basis of our understanding of the purpose of worship in a church.

First, Paul tells them (and us) that the main purpose of the assembly of worship was gathering together for the purpose of observing the Lord's Supper. In 1 Corinthians 11:18 he speaks of them "*coming together as a church*", and then in verse 20 he says "*coming together in one place*". When he describes these things, he says that they are failing in the reason for this: to eat the Lord's Supper. Thus, the heart of the assembly of worship is the Lord's Supper.

The Lord's Supper (also called "*breaking bread*" and "*communion*") is the symbolic meal given to the church. When Jesus instituted it He declared it would be a regularly occurring event (Luke 22:19, 1 Cor. 11:24). We see in Acts 20:7 that primitive Christians observed it on the first day of every week. In following that pattern we too observe it only on the first day of every week.

There are a number of clear specifications to communion. First, we must take it as a church. If we are not understanding the nature of the church (i.e. taking with the local church, the body of Christ) we risk being condemned by it according to 1 Corinthians 11:29. Paul makes this clear a second time issuing the command to wait for others to take it (1 Cor. 11:33).

Let us be clear that while communion is central to the worship of the local church, it is not the pre-imminent nor exclusive act of worship. We also have commands to sing (Eph. 5:19), pray (1 Tim. 2:8), and we see that when churches assembled in the first century that the Scriptures were taught (Acts 20:7). As well, there is the command to take up a collection on the first day of every week (1 Cor. 16:1-2), which we presume is attached to our worship as well. What makes communion unique is that it is specific to the assembly, and is not permitted apart from it.

There are other assemblies that a church can have. Being charged to evangelize or to edify (teach) might be assemblies included and attached to the worship assembly or separate from it. We do not have a specified authority on the times of these services; they are set by the authority of a local church.

Authority to Cancel the Worship Assembly

The *“coming together of the church in one place to eat the Lord’s Supper”* is an authority given to the local church in 1 Corinthians 11. As mentioned before, if a church is not purposed towards this (or any of the other purposes given to the local church) it is failing as a church; its “lampstand” is in danger of being removed (Rev. 2:5). But is there a time when that assembly might be canceled with authority?

One consideration would be when there occurs the dissolution of a local church. There is no conversation in the New Testament about the termination of a local church work, but we presume that circumstances occur where this happens. If a local church meets in a town that over time shrinks to be too small, then that local church will also disappear. There is no direction from Scripture as to how this should occur, but we know it must. A local church does not exist without members.

The other consideration is when a local assembly is canceled temporarily. Is there an authority for briefly canceling services? Jesus acknowledge that sometimes the sanctity of the Sabbath would be broken because of circumstances in the world (Luke 14:5). How does that apply to a local church?

In 1 Corinthians 14 Paul speaks about the conduct of the church when it is gathered as an assembly (1 Cor. 14:23). While much of the conversation is about the miraculous gifts that were present in the first century assemblies, we see other acts (singing, praying in vs. 15) that help us see that this passage is about our assembly too. The guiding principle of the assembly is set forth in 1 Corinthians 14:33 *“Let all things be done decently and in order”*.

But what if there arises a circumstance where the assembly cannot be accomplished “*decently and in order*”? What happens when weather, sickness, civil events or other circumstances of the world hamper the (immediate) accomplishment of the assembly? The answer seems to be in 1 Corinthians 14:26-33. Specifically, Paul states that if someone in the assembly has a revelation from God, but there is none to interpret or confirm, that they are NOT to move forward with that part of the assembly. Consider how remarkable this is; God gives a man a message, yet without the proper order, it is not revealed.

Here is the key of authority: we are told that if we cannot accomplish some act of worship decently and in order, we are not to proceed. We must conclude that this is true of ALL acts of the assembly. Since communion is the central part of the first day assembly, we understand that if that cannot be accomplished decently and in order, it must not proceed. The assembly must not move forward in such circumstances.

This principle can be seen in the Old Testament. When a man or woman was defiled by an unclean thing (such as a dead body), they were not to observe the Passover, but to do so at a later time (Num. 9:1-11). The principle is clear: when worship cannot be observed in order, it cannot be observed. This pattern is found in many places in the Old Testament; in moving the ark, in making sacrifices, and other acts of OT worship. These things were written for our understanding (1 Cor. 10:11).

Is a local assembly (either its overseers or the men of the assembly) authorized to cancel an assembly if it cannot be done decently and in order? **Indeed, they are REQUIRED to do so.**