

The Universal Church and the Local Church

Understanding the Difference

by Bryan Gibson

These three passages all refer to the ONE universal church: “I will build My **church**, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it” (Matthew 16:18). “And He...gave Him to be head over all things to the **church**, which is His **body**...” (Ephesians 1:22-23). “To Him be glory in the **church** by Christ Jesus to all generations...” (Ephesians 3:21).

These three passages all refer to a local, organized church, of which there are MANY: “If he refuses to hear them, tell it to the **church**. But if he refuses even to hear the **church**, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector” (Matthew 18:17). “When they had appointed elders in every **church**...” (Acts 14:23). “If any believing man or woman has widows, let them relieve them, and do not let the **church** be burdened, that it may relieve those who are really widows” (1 Timothy 5:16). Do you see the difference in usage?

We must understand the distinction between the two, or else we will make errors in our thinking, terminology, and eventually our practice. Consider these differences.

The universal church is a fitting description, because it includes not only all the saved on earth (see Ephesians 3:15), but also “the spirits of just men made perfect” (Hebrews 12:28)—those who reside in the heavenly realm of Paradise (Luke 23:43). A local church is limited to saints on earth who live in a particular area (e.g., “to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi”—Philippians 1:1).

The universal church, then, “assembles” only in a figurative sense (Hebrews 12:23); whereas a local church literally “comes together in one place” (1 Corinthians 14:23).

The Lord alone adds members to the universal church. When anyone obeys the gospel “from the heart” (Romans 6:17), and is baptized into Christ for the remission of his sins (Acts 2:38), the Lord adds him to this one body (Acts 2:47; 1 Corinthians 12:13). This doesn’t make you a member of any particular local church; you have to join yourself to one (Acts 9:26), and this local church does have some control over whom they receive (Acts 9:26-27; 18:27; 3 John 1:10).

Further evidence of the Lord’s control is that if you become unfaithful to Him, He can blot you out of the Book of Life (Revelation 3:5; 22:19), and you will no longer be

considered one of His people (2 Timothy 2:19). In other words, the universal church includes only those faithful to Him, those in fellowship with Him. A local church, by contrast, may very well include some who are “not of us” (1 John 2:19). Their unfaithfulness may not be as apparent to their brethren as it is to the Lord.

While overseen by the one “Shepherd and Overseer of your souls” (1 Peter 2:25), the universal church has no visible form of organization—no headquarters, no officers of any kind, no associations, no councils, no inter-church organization of any kind. A local church, which involves a relationship of saints working together, requires a degree of organization, with a common treasury (Acts 4:32-35; 1 Corinthians 16:1-2), a meeting place, and the appointment of qualified men to serve as elders and deacons (Philippians 1:1; 1 Timothy 3:1-13; Titus 1:5-9).

Finally, Satan cannot prevail against the universal church (Matthew 16:18), which will continue into eternity. Satan can and often does prevail against local churches, because some reach a point when the Lord removes their “lampstand” (Revelation 2:5), meaning that the Lord is no longer in their midst.

Now, let’s draw some conclusions and make some applications.

The universal church is a relationship of individuals with God, that comes FIRST—before you ever join yourself to a local church; and that relationship exists even if a local church refuses to receive you (Acts 9:26; 3 John 1:9-10), provided you continue to walk in the truth.

The local church is an additional relationship, saints with saints, working together as a team (collectively) to carry out God’s purposes. And yes, it is God’s will that you join yourself to one of these teams.

The bulk of our work as Christians is NOT this teamwork, not this collective action, but what we do individually. “To Him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus...” (Ephesians 3:21)—that passage refers to the universal church and therefore what each of us does individually to bring glory to God. The local church, with its resources, does not necessarily have to be involved for God to be glorified. In other words, don’t involve it in things God has charged individuals to do.

You may be **considered** a faithful member of a local church, but NOT be in the universal church, i.e., your name may be in a church directory, but not in the Book of Life.

The church is not the means of salvation; it is the result. You don't get into the church to be saved; the church is the saved (individuals saved by the blood of Christ, who continue faithful to the Lord). Please don't think of the church as a vehicle you jump in and ride all the way to heaven. That sort of thinking will make you forget all about your loyalty to Christ.

The local church to which I belong is NOT the one true church (universal), nor is any other local church. The universal church does not meet on the first day of the week to worship, is not organized with elders and deacons, does not have a treasury, etc. Don't say then, "The New Testament church met on the first day of the week"; say instead, "The local churches we read about in the New Testament met on the first day of the week."

If we collected together **all** the local churches of Christ or even just those faithful to the New Testament pattern, that collection would still not constitute the one true universal church. The universal church is composed of individuals, not churches. Remember that when someone suggests that to get THE church in action, we must have local churches pooling their resources together. While we're on this point, don't say, "I'm church of Christ," or "He's a church of Christ preacher," or anything else that sounds like we belong to some association of churches.

The word **church** is never used to refer to a denomination; it is never used to describe a group of churches joined together under some governing body (association, convention, conference, etc.). If you are part of a denomination, you are part of something NOT found in the Bible.

What this entire study emphasizes is the need to show allegiance to Christ, first and foremost. Local churches can and often do go astray, but YOU don't have to.