

The Church: Local and Universal...

(by Bob Pulliam)

The word "church" is used in two senses in the New Testament: Universal and Local. Much error has arisen over the mixing of these senses, and misunderstanding of their applications and limitations. In this lesson we will learn about the proper uses of these two aspects in the scriptures, and errors that have arisen by the misuse of these aspects.

The Church in it's Universal Sense...

The universal sense of the word church has reference to all of the saved of earth. The church in the universal sense has no organization whatsoever. It is simply a body, or group, of souls who share in a saved relationship through Jesus Christ. Here are some examples of the universal sense:

Mt 16:18 "upon this rock I will build my church"

Acts 2:47 "the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved."

Eph 1:22f "gave Him to be head over all things to the church, which is His body"

Eph 5:25 "Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for it"

The Church in it's Local Sense...

The local sense of the word church refers to saints in a locality who have organized themselves according to the pattern established in the New Testament to work together in worship, evangelism, and benevolence. The local church is the manifestation of the unseen, universal church upon the earth. The local church provides for man's need to see and experience (be a part of). Here are a few examples of the "Local" sense:

Acts 13:1 "in the church that was at Antioch"

Acts 15:4 "when they had come to Jerusalem, they were received by the church"

Rom 16:16 "the churches of Christ"

I Cor 1:2 "To the church of God which is at Corinth"

Distinctions to be Made Regarding the Universal and Local Church...

Membership in the local church is determined by man. In the universal church this is determined by God. A good illustration of this may be seen in III John 9f. Diotrophes was putting some out of the church. Were they lost because a dictatorial man put them out of the "local church"? Obviously Diotrophes' actions did not affect the salvation of those people; even though they were no longer members of that from which they had been put out. This is a case of one who is saved no longer being a member of a particular local church. Although it would be a temporary state, one may be saved and not be attached to any local church (e.g. Ethiopian Eunuch).

It is also possible for one to be a member of a local church and not be a member of the universal church (e.g. I Cor 5; or, secret sins unknown to the brethren). When one is saved, he is added to the universal church by the Lord (Acts 2:47). He would then seek the church in his locale to fulfill his responsibility of worship and edification in a local church (Eph 4:16). We may then say that the local church is a manifestation of the universal church; but not a unit of it. In other words, the universal church is not made up of all the local churches

combined. The universal church is all of the saved combined. The local church may have members in it who are not saved.

Errors of the Past Regarding Universal and Local Use...

Membership in a local church (sect, denomination), means automatic salvation...

This concept began within Catholic theology, and spread to other denominations as they branched off. In I Corinthians five we find the man who had his father's wife. He was a member of the local church at Corinth. Was he saved, even though he was involved in the sin of fornication? Acts 5 tells us about Ananias and Sapphira. They were still members of the church in Jerusalem after they conspired to lie (and before struck dead). Were they saved when they were struck dead? Just because you are a member of a church, you are not granted a guarantee of salvation. Any church that promises such does so without the promise of God.

The Universal church can organize and work in service to God...

This concept also began in the evolution of the Catholic church. It is now not only in the denominations all around us (with their councils, synods, conferences, etc...), but also in many churches of Christ who now pool money between many congregation for large "brotherhood" projects. Every example of work done in the New Testament exhibits individual congregations working within their own limits; and never begging for funds from other churches for "brotherhood" projects.

The idea that the universal church is comprised of all the Local churches added together opens the door for the errors mentioned above. When you have drawn this conclusion, you have paved the way for linking all of the local churches together in a worldwide organization. The Universal church is not comprised of the Local churches added together. The Universal church is comprised of all the saved on earth.

Conclusion...

The word "church" is used in two senses in the New Testament. The universal use refers to all of the saved at any particular time. The local use refers to a group of individuals who organize themselves according to the pattern of the local church in the New Testament. It is important that we distinguish between these two uses, and use each scripture properly when we come to this word.