



# What Is The Difference Between The Universal And Local Church?

DISCOVERING GOD'S WORD BIBLE STUDY SERIES

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What is the difference between the “universal” and the “local” church? Whenever you read the Bible, you read about the word “church” being used in various ways. Sometimes it is singular. Sometimes it is plural. Sometimes it seems to just be used in reference to a local group of people. Sometimes it is used in a very broad way. Why? What’s the difference? Let’s investigate.

## **The “Universal” Church**

Sometimes, the word “church” is used in a “universal” sense. But, what does the Bible refer to at these times?

First, please understand that the term “universal church” appears nowhere in the Bible. So, why do we use it? The term is simply an accommodative term that differentiates between the one church Christ promised to build (the universal church) and the many churches of Christ (referred to in the local sense). While the term “universal church” does not appear in the Bible, the concept certainly does!

What is the “universal” church? Whenever the word “church” is used in this “universal” sense, it refers to the collection/congregation of the saved. Jesus used the word in this sense in Matthew 16:18: “And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it.” Notice that the term “church” is singular. Jesus was only establishing one church. He only has one assembly/congregation of the saved! He does *not* have many separate organizations/collections of people! So, whenever the word “church” is used in this “universal” sense, it refers to Christ’s one congregation of saved people (all of the saved who have ever lived). Acts 2:47 also demonstrates that it was those who were being saved who were being added to this church.

How do you become part of Christ’s church (His collection of the saved)? You do so by becoming a Christian. Notice how individuals were added to the universal church in Acts 2. This passage references Peter and the other apostles preaching the gospel on the Day of Pentecost (after

Jesus had ascended to Heaven). Verse 37 records the response of the people to the preaching, asking “Men and brethren, what shall we do?” Then, consider Peter’s answer in verse 38. “Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit...” The passage continues to say that about 3,000 people were obedient to this instruction and that “the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved” (Acts 2:41, 47). Therefore, the Lord adds you to the “universal” church (the collection of the saved) whenever you obey His commandments to become a Christian. His commandments are that you must: Hear God’s word (Romans 10:17), believe (John 8:24), repent of your sins (Acts 2:38), confess Christ (Romans 10:9-10), and be baptized (Acts 2:38).

Does the “universal” church have an earthly organizational structure? As we will see in a few moments, the local church has been given a God-approved earthly organizational structure. However, the universal church has no earthly organizational structure! The “universal” church of Christ has no man, woman, or counsel at the top of the organization to oversee its operation. Instead, the church of Christ has Jesus Christ as its only Head! Colossians 1:18 says, “And He is the head of the body, the church, who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in all things He may have the preeminence.” Only Jesus Christ is identified in the Scriptures as having authority over the universal church (the totality of the saved)! There is simply no authority for any other earthly organizational system over the universal church!

Does the “universal” church have a collective worship on this earth? As we’ll see in a few moments, the local church has been given specific instructions to worship God collectively. However, the universal church has no responsibility to worship God collectively. Remember, since there is no earthly organizational structure over the universal church, there is no one on earth who has the authority to call together an assembly of the universal church. No man (or group of men) has the authority to mandate such an assembly or set a specific place where the universal church must assemble together for worship. The only one who has this authority is Jesus Christ (the Head of the church). However, as you search the Scriptures, you will not find any instructions concerning an assembly of the universal church (except when we will all be together and worship God eternally in Heaven). There is no regular pilgrimage to a particular earthly meeting place identified or required of Christians today. Quite simply, there are no Biblical instructions that require or authorize an earthly assembly of the universal church. That said, individual Christians must be dedicated to worshiping God (see John 4:23-24).

Finally, does the “universal” church have a collective work on this earth? As we’ll see in a few moments, the local church has been given a particular work to accomplish by God. However, the universal church is not engaged in any collective work (whereby the church pools its resources together for the purpose of accomplishing a collective work). That said, those who are members of the universal church have the God-given responsibility to accomplish a particular work – as individual Christians (not acting collectively as the universal church). Remember, there is no God-authorized earthly organizational structure over this universal church. Therefore, there is no way to pool the resources of the universal church or organize and carry out a collective work!

## The “Local” Church

Sometimes, the word “church” is used in a “local” sense. But, what does the Bible refer to at these times?

First, please understand that the term “local church” appears nowhere in the Bible. So, why do we use it? Again, the term is simply an accommodative term that differentiates between the one church Christ promised to build (the universal church) and the many churches of Christ (referred to in the local sense). And, while the term “local church” does not appear in the Bible, the concept certainly does!

What is a “local” church? Whenever the word “church” is used in this “local” sense, it refers to an assembly/congregation of Christians who have joined themselves together in a local geographic area (i.e. Rome, Thessalonica, Ephesus, Colossae, etc.). While there is only one church (in the “universal” sense), the Bible does refer to many different churches (i.e. the church in Corinth, the churches of Galatia, the church in Philippi, etc.). These different churches are simply local churches (not different denominations)! Furthermore, local churches exist for a purpose – according to the Lord’s design! God has provided a blueprint for this local assembly that is given in the New Testament.

How do you become a member of a “local” church? Please understand that when you are obedient to the gospel’s plan of salvation, you are added to Christ’s universal church (as we discussed previously). However, this does *not* automatically make you a member of a local church! Still, it is important to become a member of a local church (when possible). As we look to the Bible for its answer to how you become a member of a “local” church, we should carefully consider the example of Saul. This is the most direct example of an individual attempting to join a local church that is given in the Scriptures. That said, please recognize that any time you read about a local church in the Scriptures, it implies that individuals joined themselves together in that way! In Acts 9:26, the Scriptures teach that after Saul became a Christian, he “tried to join the disciples” at Jerusalem. So, like Saul, you will join a local church by a mutual agreement between yourself and the members of that church.

Does the “local” church have an earthly organizational structure? Unlike what we have observed regarding the universal church (which had no God-given earthly organizational structure), God has given local churches an organizational structure. Philippians 1:1 summarizes this organizational structure: “Paul and Timothy, bondservants of Jesus Christ, To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the bishops and deacons.” Within a local congregation, God has designed for there to be “bishops” (also called “elders,” “shepherds,” “pastors,” “overseers,” and “presbyters” in the Scriptures). These men must meet specific qualifications in order to serve in this capacity and they have been given the oversight of the congregation. Deacons also must meet specific qualifications to serve in that capacity – and have the role of serving the needs of the congregation. Finally, the “saints” refer to all those who are Christians.

Does the “local” church have a collective worship? Unlike what we observed regarding the universal church (which had no collective earthly assembly or worship), God has authorized the local church to assemble and worship together. The authorization God has given local churches in the New Testament regarding their collective worship is (1) prayer, (2) singing, (3) preaching/teaching, (4) the Lord’s Supper, and (5) the collection. While individuals can and should be worshiping God outside of the assemblies of the local church any time they have opportunity to do so (see John 4:23-24), there is a specific God-given responsibility for local churches to be engaged in these five specific acts of worship.

Finally, does the “local” church have a collective work? Unlike what we observed regarding the universal church (which had no collective work), God has given the local church a specific work to accomplish (collectively). The authorization God has given local churches in the New Testament regarding their work is (1) proclaiming His word, (2) edifying/building itself up in the faith, and (3) exercising benevolence toward needy Christians. Now, individual Christians have been given many different works and responsibilities in the pages of God’s word. However, as it specifically relates to local congregations, God has limited their work to these three areas.

## **Conclusion**

There are significant differences between the “universal” and “local” church that you can read about in the pages of the Bible. Therefore, whenever you read the word “church” or “churches” in the Bible, you must be diligent to observe the context and understand whether the word is being used in a “local” or “universal” sense and make the appropriate applications. You must also make certain that you are part of Christ’s “universal” church – and you should desire to be part of a “local” church that faithfully follows the pattern God has revealed in the New Testament.

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