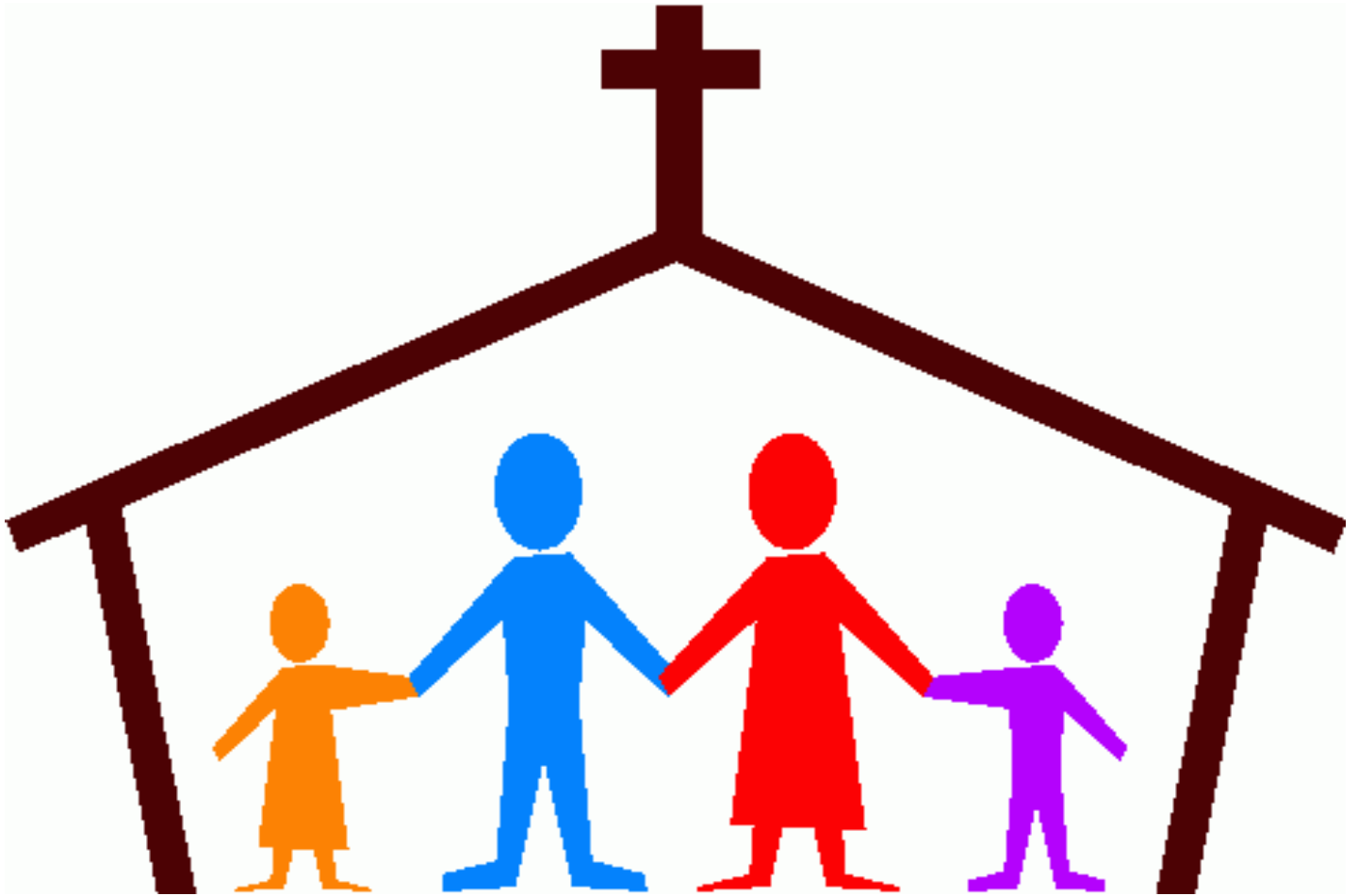


The Church Of Christ

Lesson 5:

The Universal And Local Church



Discovering God's Word

Bible Study Series

The Church Of Christ
Lesson 5: The Universal And Local Church

Learn the difference between the "universal" and "local" church and why each one is important

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Discovering God's Word Bible Study Series

Study Number: DGW65

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About the author: My name is Eric Krieg. I am a disciple of Jesus, a Bible student, a truth seeker, and an evangelist. My interest is in using the Bible as my only guide in my faith. My desire is to help others understand the message of the Bible and pursue true, New Testament Christianity.

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My plea: It is my hope and prayer that you are searching for the truth that is contained in God's word, the Bible. My desire is to help you understand and obey these truths God has revealed in the pages of His word. It is to that end that I write this material. Please observe all of the Scripture references and evaluate whether the conclusions I have drawn are in harmony with God's word. If they are, I ask that you make honest application of those truths to your life and obey God's instructions.

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The Church Of Christ

Lesson 5: The Universal And Local Church

As we saw in lesson 1 of this study, the word “church” (from the Greek word “ekklesia”) is used in various ways in the Scriptures. Most notably, this word is used with regard to God’s people. Then, whenever it is used in reference to God’s people, it is frequently used in reference to two things: The “universal” and the “local” church.

Although these two terms are not used in the Scriptures, certainly these terms accurately convey the ideas that are presented in the pages of God’s word. Therefore, it is important for us to consider these two specific Bible uses of the word “church” so that we can properly understand each one – and so that we do not reach false conclusions about the church.

The purpose of this fifth lesson in the study, “The Church Of Christ,” is to help you gain a better understanding of what the Bible teaches about the “universal” church and the “local” church. We want to investigate each one and discover what each term refers to, how you become a member of each one,

why you should be a member of each, and learn about the responsibilities of membership to each one.

The Universal Church

Sometimes the word “church” (the Greek word “ekklesia”) is used in a “universal” sense. But, what does the Bible refer to at these times? How do you join this church? Why should you join this church? What responsibilities do you have as part of this church? Let’s investigate.

What is the universal church?

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). Again, while the term “universal church” does not appear in the Bible, the concept certainly does!

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 – only one church! 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.

Now that we have briefly defined what the term “universal church” references, let’s consider a few specific areas about the universal church. Let’s consider what the Bible teaches about its organizational structure, its work, and its worship to help you better understand this church.

(1) The organizational structure of the universal church. 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 has no human head, no counsel of men, and no man-made creed books to govern the church! Therefore, the universal church of Christ has no man, woman, or counsel at the top of the organization to oversee its operation (we'll see why in just a moment). However, many of the man-made churches today do have a hierarchical structure over their churches that govern all of their local churches and members. Some churches have a president, some have governing bodies, some have counsels, the Catholic Church recognizes the Pope as its earthly leader, etc.

However, 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!

Jesus Christ is the one who has been given all authority (Matthew 28:18) – and we must do everything in the "name of the Lord Jesus" (Colossians 3:17)! He is clearly identified in the Scriptures as being the "Chief Shepherd" (1 Peter 5:4) – even above the elders (shepherds) in local congregations. He is the only one who has absolute authority over His church. He is the one and only King over His Kingdom. He is the one and only Head of His body.

As a result, the universal church submits itself only to Jesus Christ. It does not submit to any man or group of men over (or equal to) Jesus Christ! The church's only creed is the Bible – the revealed word of God that will judge us on the Last Day (John 12:48; Revelation 20:11-15).

(2) The work of the universal church. 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! Yet, many denominations have established such an earthly headquarters for their members and churches to contribute to financially. Then, those who are in positions of authority over these churches determine how the collected funds should be allocated and what work should be accomplished.

While this sort of arrangement is commonly seen as a good thing and a way to expedite the work of the church, it is entirely without authority! You can search the entire New Testament and never find such an arrangement. Instead, God has given His people a work to accomplish *individually* and the local church a work to accomplish. And, since this is the only authorization that has been given by God, we can be assured that God's work can be entirely carried out in this way (as it was in New Testament times).

(3) The worship of the universal church. 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 should be regularly worshipping God. In John 4:23-24, Jesus said: “But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him. God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth.” God’s people are authorized to worship any time and any place they have the opportunity and desire to worship God. And, individual Christians can worship God together (see Acts 12:5). Particularly, local churches are given specific instructions to regularly assemble together and worship God (1 Corinthians 14; Acts 20:7; Hebrews 10:24-25). Yet, individual Christians can and should worship God outside of these assemblies as well.

Furthermore, the church anticipates the day in which we will all be in Heaven worshipping the Lord together for all eternity. On that occasion, in that beautiful place, we can all join together in worship before the throne of God. However, there are no instructions or authority for the collective assembly and worship of all of God’s people on earth!

How you become a member of the universal church

How do you become part of Christ’s church (His collection of the saved)? You do this by becoming a Christian. Notice how individuals were added to the universal church in Acts 2. Specifically notice verses 37-42: “Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, ‘Men and brethren, what shall we do?’ Then Peter said to them, ‘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. For the promise is to you and to your children, and to all who are afar off, as many

as the Lord our God will call.’ And with many other words he testified and exhorted them, saying, ‘Be saved from this perverse generation.’ Then those who gladly received his word were baptized; and that day about three thousand souls were added to them. And they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers.” Verse 47 says, “praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved.”

This passage comes in the context of 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, after Peter had given them instructions to repent and be baptized for the remission of their sins, he continued preaching to them and about 3,000 people were obedient to the instructions. Particularly, note, then, that these individuals were added to “the church.” So, it is upon obedience to God’s commandments involved in becoming a Christian that an individual is added to Christ’s church (i.e. the “universal church) – and counted among the saved!

You need to understand, then, what God has commanded you to do in order to become a Christian and be added to His church.

(1) You must hear the word of God. Romans 10:17 says, “So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.” Hearing God’s word is a necessary step before you are capable of believing or obeying it. For instance, Acts 18:8 says that the Corinthians first heard God’s word, then they believed and were baptized.

(2) You must believe. Listen to Jesus’ words in John 8:24: “Therefore I said to you that you will die in your sins; for if you do not believe that I am He, you will die in your sins.” Believing that Jesus Christ is the Son of God is necessary for salvation and is a prerequisite to baptism (see Acts 8:37). However, “faith only” is not sufficient for salvation or entrance into Jesus’ church. James 2:24 plainly says, “You see then that a man is justified by works, and not by faith only” (see also Matthew 7:21-23).

(3) You must repent of your sins. When Paul was preaching to idolaters in Athens, he said that God “now commands all men everywhere to repent” (Acts 17:30). Also, repentance was identified as being necessary whenever Peter was preaching to the Jews in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost in Acts 2:38. Repentance is a change in mind regarding past sins – and a determination to make the necessary changes and live for the Lord.

(4) You must confess Jesus Christ. Notice the language of Romans 10:9-10: “that if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation.” A good example of this confession is seen in Acts 8:37, just prior to the baptism of the man of Ethiopia: “Then Philip said [to the man of Ethiopia], ‘If you believe with all your heart, you may [be baptized].’ And he answered and said, ‘I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.’” So, this is not a confession of sin; but, it is a confession of the Lord Jesus Christ (see also Matthew 10:32-33).

(5) You must be baptized. Specifically, the baptism that God requires of people today is the baptism (immersion) in water for the forgiveness of sins. This is the baptism that the man of Ethiopia was baptized with in Acts 8:38-39: “So he commanded the chariot to stand still. And both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water, and he baptized him. Now when they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord caught Philip away, so that the eunuch saw him no more; and he went on his way rejoicing.” According to the Scriptures, this baptism is necessary to “be saved” (Mark 16:16; 1 Peter 3:20-21), to be forgiven of your sins (Acts 2:38; Acts 22:16), and to come into Christ (Galatians 3:26-27).

Specifically, the Bible teaches that it is at this point that an individual is added to Christ’s church. Again, this is what was seen in Acts 2:37-47. The 3,000 who were obedient to the instructions to repent and be baptized for the remission of their sins were added to the church. In fact, the Scriptures teach us that we are baptized into one body. Consider 1 Corinthians 12:12-13: “For as the body is one and has many members, but all the members of that one

body, being many, are one body, so also is Christ. For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body — whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free — and have all been made to drink into one Spirit.” Now, this passage is not teaching that we are baptized by the Holy Spirit into the one body of Christ. Instead, as we obey the instructions of God’s Holy Spirit (who revealed the things written in the Bible), we comply with the command to be baptized – and enter Jesus’ body (church)! Galatians 3:26-27 demonstrates the same point: “For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ.” Therefore, baptism (immersion in water) is the specific point at which we are forgiven of our sins and added to Jesus’ church.

Then, you are expected to remain faithful to Jesus throughout your earthly life. Jesus instructed Christians to be “faithful until death” in order to receive the “crown of life” (Revelation 2:10). If we fail to remain faithful to God, we lose our salvations. Galatians 5:4 records Paul’s comments to the Galatian Christians who had “become estranged from Christ” and “fallen from grace.” John 15:2 makes reference to the unfruitful branch (the fruitless disciple of Christ) being taken away. Verse 6 says that the branch that does not abide in Christ is “cast out as a branch and is withered; and they gather them and throw them into the fire, and they are burned.” Therefore, if you fall away from God after becoming a Christian, you must again seek His forgiveness (through repentance, confession, and prayer, see Acts 8:22 and 1 John 1:9).

If you have not done these things, you are not part of His church – because you have not been forgiven of your sins and are not counted among His saved people! Not if you have faith (see James 2:14-26). Not if you profess allegiance to Jesus Christ (see Matthew 7:21-23). Not if you have had water sprinkled or poured on your head (see Romans 6:3-4). Not if you have done anything other than what God has commanded! And, not even if you have done what God has commanded for the wrong reasons! For instance, some are baptized after they believed they were saved. Or, some are baptized into the churches of men rather than being baptized into

Jesus' church. However, this is all done for the wrong reasons!

Why you should be a member of the universal church

Why is it even important to be a member of this universal church? First, you need to be a member of this church because the church is composed of the saved – and the saved are part of this church. Those who are not saved are not part of this church. Therefore, if you are not part of this church, you are not in a saved condition. Remember, the Lord was adding “to the church...those who were being saved” (Acts 2:47). Those who are part of Christ's church will forever live with the Lord in Heaven; but, those who are not part of His church will experience the eternal punishment of Hell (Revelation 20:15).

Second, you need to be a member of this church because there is only one true church. Christ only promised to build one church (Matthew 16:18) – and He only built one church (Acts 2:41, 47)! Therefore, Paul said that there is only “one body” (Ephesians 4:4). There is no other body that contains those who are saved other than the church of Christ. Acts 4:12 says, “Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.” There is salvation in no other church besides in the church that belongs to Jesus Christ!

Responsibilities of membership

What does it mean to be part of the universal church that belongs to Jesus Christ? What responsibilities does membership into this church have? Remember that there is no earthly world-wide oversight of the universal church (Christ is the only Head of the universal church). Therefore, your responsibility as part of the universal church is to be faithful to Jesus Christ.

Revelation 2:10 summarizes this responsibility: “Do not fear any of those things which you are about to suffer. Indeed, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and you will have tribulation ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.” Jesus expects His followers to faithfully endure

through all of the trials, temptations, and persecutions of life. He expects His followers to possess the character that is approved of God (i.e. Colossians 3:12-17). He expects His followers to be laboring for Him (1 Corinthians 15:58). He expects His followers to be living holy lives (1 Peter 1:15-16). He expects His followers to be doers of God's word in all areas of their lives (James 1:22), including obeying His commandments concerning His Christian brothers and sisters.

The Local Church

Sometimes the word “church” (the Greek word “ekklesia”) is used in a “local” sense. But, what does the Bible refer to at these times? How do you join a local church? Why should you join a local church? What responsibilities do you have as part of a local church? Let's investigate.

What is a local church?

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!

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. He has provided a blueprint regarding the organizational structure,

work, and worship of the local church. We will now proceed to highlight these things at this time – and focus on them in greater detail in future lessons.

(1) The organizational structure of the local church. 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.

Please also note that while a local church should have overseers (elders) and deacons, there are times when a local congregation does not have men qualified to fulfill those offices (according to the qualifications given in the Scriptures). These local congregations were still authorized to exist in New Testament times. For instance, Acts 14:23 references a time when Paul and his companions were appointing elders in every church. Yet, the necessary inference is that these churches were in existence prior to having elders appointed to oversee them. Still, God’s plan is for there to be elders, deacons, and saints in every local congregation. We’ll spend a greater amount of time focusing on the organizational structure of the local church in lesson 6.

(2) The work of the local church. 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 up

itself, 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. We will be giving each one of these areas our attention in lesson 7 of this series.

(3) The worship of the local church. 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 worshipping 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. We will be giving each one of these areas our attention in lesson 8 of this series.

How 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). We’ll discuss why momentarily. For now, please consider how an individual actually becomes a member of a local church.

As we look to the Bible for its answer to this question, 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!

After Saul (later known as Paul) had become a Christian, he attempted to join the disciples in Jerusalem. Acts 9:26 says, “And when Saul had come to Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples; but they were all afraid of him, and did not believe that he was a disciple.” Clearly, the disciples were afraid of this man (having known about his past persecutions of Christians) and were skeptical of permitting him to join the local church in Jerusalem. However, Barnabas (in verse 27) took Paul and brought him to the apostles, declaring how Paul had seen the Lord on the road, how the Lord spoke to Paul, and how Paul had preached boldly in Damascus in the name of Jesus.

Now, consider a couple of lessons from this example – and some conclusions based on them. (1) It is an individual decision for a Christian to join himself/herself to the disciples in a particular area (i.e. to a specific local church). Therefore, an individual who becomes a Christian should seek out a local congregation of Christ’s people to join himself/herself to (if possible). Or, he/she may need to attempt to start a local church. Either way, it is the responsibility of the Christian to seek out a local church to associate with. Then, that Christian must let his/her desire to join the congregation be made known to the congregation.

(2) The members of a local church can refuse to allow an individual to join them. Please consider that each local congregation should be diligent in accepting those who wish to join the congregation; yet, it must also be careful as to who is accepted into the congregation. Once again, notice that the church in Jerusalem did not accept Saul into the congregation until *after* Barnabas took him and demonstrated that Saul really was a Christian! This same point can also be demonstrated from Acts 20:28-31. In this text, Paul warned the Ephesian elders about “savage wolves” who would come in among and harm the flock (that local congregation). Therefore, he told them to “watch.” Also consider how 1 Corinthians 5 and 2 Thessalonians 3:6, 14-15 demonstrate that congregations have the responsibility to withdraw (withhold fellowship) from members who have left the Lord. Quite simply, the test of fellowship for anyone to be a member of a local church is summarized in 1 John 1:5-7. This

passage helps us to understand that if two people are each in fellowship with God, then they are in fellowship with one another. Therefore, if someone is in fellowship with God, they should be permitted to join a local church!

Next, before we consider some reasons why you should desire to be a member of a local church, let’s consider how you should choose a local church to be a member of. (1) Choose a church in or near your community, when possible. This is what we saw with Paul whenever he came to Jerusalem and tried to join himself to the disciples there in Jerusalem. Other examples of local churches would demonstrate the same point – the Roman Christians were members of churches in Rome, the Corinthian Christians were part of the church in Corinth, the Jerusalem Christians were members of the church in Jerusalem. There is great benefit to be part of the local church that is in or near to your community! (2) Only join a church that is doing what is right. Not all churches believe or practice the right things. There are many local churches (even local “churches of Christ”) that are not following the New Testament pattern (2 Timothy 1:13) and do not do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus (Colossians 3:17). In this case, God does not want you to be in fellowship with them. Ephesians 5:11 says, “And have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather expose them.” (3) Sometimes there may not be a faithful congregation of the Lord’s people in your community (or a nearby community). In this case, you will want to try to start a local church that practices only New Testament Christianity.

Why you should be a member of a local church

I do not read any passage in the Bible that makes *local* church membership necessary for salvation. If it was, you would not be able to be in a saved condition until you joined yourself to a local church. Furthermore, there are a number of times in which individuals become Christians (and members of Christ’s universal church); but, there are no local churches of Christ in their communities practicing the things instructed by the New Testament. For instance, what about the man of Ethiopia in Acts 8? Verse 39 says that he went on his way rejoicing after

he become a Christian. However, it mentions nothing about this man joining a local church. There may or may not have been a local church in Ethiopia for him to join at that time.

That said, the approved example throughout the New Testament is for individuals who become Christians to join themselves to other Christians in a local geographic area. There is overwhelming evidence to support joining local churches. Notice that every time you read about a local church in the Scriptures, it implies that individual Christians joined themselves together in that way! Certainly, there is wisdom involved in God's plan for local churches – and we should not be quick to determine *not* to join a local church! Consider some reasons why you should be a member of a local church.

(1) You will help accomplish God's work in your local community. God's people (the church) is identified as being the pillar and support of truth (1 Timothy 3:15). That is, God's people (the church) hold up the truth of God's word. Therefore, a local church will be responsible for holding up God's word in a local community. The local church in Thessalonica is an excellent example of this (see 1 Thessalonians 1:8). You should attempt to use your talents, abilities, and opportunities to contribute to the work of spreading the gospel and accomplishing all of the God-given work of the local church. Ephesians 4:11-16 makes it very clear that each member of the body of Christ has something positive to contribute to the overall function of the body. Thus, whenever a local body (church) of Christ has members who are dedicated to doing their parts, the gospel of Christ will be spread, Christians will be strengthened, needs will be met, and glory will be given to God! Furthermore, while we certainly have individual responsibilities, we must not underestimate the good that can be done whenever individuals work together as a team rather than working separately (see Ecclesiastes 4:9-12)!

(2) You will be assembling with your brethren and worshiping God together. God is seeking those who will worship Him in spirit and in truth (John 4:23-24). While this can and should be done privately, the approved examples of the Scriptures also show that this is to be done collectively as a local church. In fact, each local

church has the obligation to assemble together on the first day of the week. These assemblies of the local church are beneficial to everyone who is involved. Along with the worship that is given to God, there is strength that is to be gained from such worship – as you can know that you are not alone in worshiping God! Furthermore, there are some things that you only read about local churches doing whenever they were together. For instance, the Bible only identifies the Lord's Supper and the collection as things that are done when the church has come together (see Acts 20:7 and 1 Corinthians 16:1-2).

(3) You share in edification. Christians cannot fulfill the instruction to encourage one another daily if they are all alone! Hebrews 3:12-13 warns about the danger of departing from God and about the deceitfulness of sin. So, the passage instructs Christians to offer daily encouragement to one another so that they would not succumb to the daily temptations of life! God has provided a base of fellowship and strength that is greater than the individual Christian – which is the local church! Therefore, as a member of the local church, you will be both encouraging to your brothers and sisters in Christ and you will be receiving encouragement from them. You will be gaining as well as helping to supply the needed strength to overcome the shared obstacles, temptations, and trials of life! Not only will this come from your interactions with your brethren; but, it will also come through your collective acts of worship and Bible teaching (both publicly and privately)!

(4) You share in accountability. There is accountability in a local church. If there are elders in the church, they help watch over the souls of each member (to make sure that the members are living right). However, all of the members in a congregation must share in the responsibility to watch over each other's souls! This is implied in James' instructions in James 5:19-20: "Brethren, if anyone among you wanders from the truth, and someone turns him back, let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save a soul from death and cover a multitude of sins." Each member of a local church should be willing to receive correction from their brethren whenever they sin. Generally speaking, there is a love and concern

for the spiritual well-being of each member of the congregation! And, there are even times when this love and concern will make it necessary for a local church to withdraw from an erring brother or sister (see 1 Corinthians 5 and 2 Thessalonians 3:6, 14-15).

Responsibilities of membership

Clearly, there are great blessings associated with being a member of a local church. Being a member of a local church helps each Christian to stay the course of faithful living throughout his/her lifetime! It is designed to make it more difficult for Christians to drift away from faithfully serving God. However, along with the blessings of local church membership, there is also individual responsibility to the local church.

Consider some of the responsibilities briefly. (1) Each member of a local church must be devoted to fulfilling his/her God-given responsibilities toward his/her Christian brethren (particularly in the local church), see Galatians 6:1-2. (2) Each member of the local church has the responsibility to faithfully attend and participate in the assemblies of the local church (see Hebrews 10:24-25). Willfully absenting yourself from any of these assemblies is sinful. (3) Each member of a local church has the responsibility to conduct his/her life in such a way that is faithful to God (Revelation 2:10). (4) Generally speaking, every member of a local church must be willing to contribute however he/she can contribute to the local church. Each member is a part of the local body of Jesus Christ – and provides something unique and useful to the overall health and function of the body (see 1 Corinthians 12:12-27 and Ephesians 4:11-16)! Therefore, each member should seek to find ways to utilize his/her talents, abilities, opportunities, strengths, etc. in the service of the Lord and in the local church! Realize that the work of the local church will only be accomplished (most effectively) whenever every member contributes what he/she is capable of contributing!

Conclusion

Throughout the pages of the New Testament, you can read about both the universal and the local church. If you want to be saved, you must be a part of Christ's universal church. In addition, it is a wise and God-approved thing to choose to be part of a local church of Christ that is dedicated to following the pattern of sound words (revealed in the New Testament).

Beginning in the next lesson, we will be turning our attention directly to the local church. Specifically, we will be focusing on its organizational structure in lesson 6, its work in lesson 7, and its worship in lesson 8. We want to discover the God-given pattern for local churches in each one of these areas.

Study Questions

What are the two ways the term "church" is frequently used in Scripture?

1. The Universal Church

What is the universal church?

*What is the organizational structure of the universal church?

*What is the collective work of the universal church?

*What is the collective worship of the universal church?

Why should you be a member of a local church?

How do you become a member of the universal church?

What are the responsibilities involved in being a member of a local church?

Why should you be a member of the universal church?

What are the responsibilities involved in being a member of the universal church?

2. The Local Church

What is the local church?

*What is the organizational structure of the local church?

*What is the work of the local church?

*What is the worship of the local church?

How do you become a member of a local church?