

LESSON 3 – UNIVERSAL VS. LOCAL CHURCH

1) INTRODUCTION

- a) Understanding the nature of the church begins with understand what the word “church” actually means
 - i) In the last study, we saw that the word church comes from the Greek word “ekklesia” which means “called out of”
 - ii) “Church” describes a group of Christians who have been called out of sin and death and into a relationship with Jesus Christ (Col 1:13; 1 Pet 2:9-10)
 - iii) The church is not a building. It is not a denomination. It is not a term that man has invented. The church is a group of people

- b) In the New Testament, the word “church” is used in two senses:
 - i) Universal church – Every Christian both past, present, and future who is saved is a member of the universal church
 - ii) Local church – Christians within a geographical area that work and worship together as a local congregation of God’s people
 - iii) Though the actual terms “universal church” and “local church” are not explicitly mentioned in the bible, it is easy to see the concept taught
 - iv) The word “trinity” is also never mentioned in the bible. But we understand the concept is taught in scripture that God exists in the form of three persons: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit

- c) In this study, we will contrast the “universal church” with the “local church”, noticing how the New Testament delineates between the two
 - i) Failure to observe this distinction leads us open to erroneous concepts regarding the church. It also presents a confusing picture of the church to unbelievers in one’s evangelistic efforts

2) THE “UNIVERSAL” CHURCH

- a) Who is the church composed of?

Question 1: Read **Heb 12:18-24**. In vs. 23, who does the Hebrew say are enrolled in heaven?

- i) Every Christian is a part of a “general assembly” and the “church of the firstborn” which is enrolled in heaven
 - ii) This tells us that every person who is a Christian is a member of the universal church. This is the same church that Jesus promised to build in Matt 16:18
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- b) How many are there?

Question 2: Read **Eph 4:4**. What is the first thing that Paul says there is only one of? What does this term represent (Eph 1:22-23)?

- i) Since there is only one body, there can only be one church. If there were more than one church, Paul would not have insisted on there being one body

- ii) Since there is only one church, it follows that we must study to ensure we understand what that one true church is so that we can be apart of it
- c) When did it begin?

Question 3: Acts 2:1-47 contains the first gospel sermon as well as the first conversion. In Acts 11:15, what does Peter refer to this occasion as?

- i) Everything has a beginning, including the church. The positive response Peter and the rest of the apostles received from those penitent believers in Acts 2 represents the beginning of the church
- ii) Remember that Jesus said that once the church started, nothing would ever end it! (Matt 16:18)
- d) Who adds us to the church?

Question 4: Read Acts 2:41, 47. Who was adding those who were being saved?

- i) No man can add a person to the universal church. This is a privilege of the Lord He alone holds
- ii) A person is added to His body by following the same example of obedience that the Jews in Acts 2 followed, mainly to believe, repent, confess, and be baptized in water
- e) Who keeps the membership book?

Question 5: Read Heb 12:22-23 & Rev 20:11-15. Where is membership of the universal church recorded and who keeps it?

- i) No person can tell us whether we are in the Lord's church or not. Only the Lord can determine this because He has the record
- ii) However, one can determine whether he/she is a member of the Lord's church by obeying the word of God and ensuring they are living a life consistent with what it teaches
- iii) Sometimes others that are close to us and view our lifestyle become concerned because we are not living according to God's word. If they are able to show us our inconsistencies from scripture, we should not hesitate to make the necessary changes
- iv) We must always be able to give an account for ourselves! – 1 Pet 3:15
- f) Must I belong to this church to be saved?

Question 6: Read Eph 5:23. Who is Christ the Savior of?

- i) Since the Lord adds to the church those who are being saved (Acts 2:41, 47), we cannot be saved unless we are in His church!
- ii) However, those who are sinning in His church and unwilling to repent are cast out of His church – **John 15:2,6; Rom 11:19-22; Rev 3:16**

g) What kind of organization?

Question 7: Read **Eph 2:19-22 & 1 Pet 2:5**. What is the organization of Christ's universal church?

- i) The organization of Christ's church is spiritual in nature and not earthly. The bible is completely silent about a "Pope".
- ii) Also, no convention has the authority to come together and vote on what laws the universal church is to abide by
- iii) Also, since the organization of God's universal church is spiritual and not earthly, it cannot be divided by men

h) Can there be division in God's universal church?

Question 8: Read **Eph 4:4**. If there is only one body (church), can the Lord's church be divided?

Yes

No

- i) The Lord's church cannot be divided if there is no earthly organization to divide. If division does exist, it is completely unscriptural and one or more parties are in sin and need to repent
- ii) Those who seek to divide the Lord's body through doctrine or bad attitudes are simply cut off by the Lord Himself

i) Can death affect membership?

Question 9: Read **Heb 12:22-23**. Can death affect membership in Christ's universal church?

Yes

No

- i) The general assembly of saints both on Earth and I heaven are still members of one body despite the fact that physical death has separated them for a time

3) ***THE LOCAL CHURCH***

a) What is a local church composed of?

Question 10: Read **1 Cor 1:1 & 1 Thes 1:1**. Who was the local church in Corinth composed of? Who was the local church in Thessalonica composed of?

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- i) These two local churches were only composed of those individuals who lived in their respective areas, and that is why Paul refers to them as “the church of God at Corinth” and “the church of the Thessalonians”
 - ii) This shows us that since the universal church began on the day of Pentecost, Christians in a community came together to work and worship with one another
- b) How many local churches are there?

Question 11: Read **Rom 16:16 & Gal 1:2**. True or False: There is just one local church

True

False

- i) Though there is just one universal church that is composed of all who believe, there are many local churches that have been planted throughout the world
 - ii) In fact, Gal 1:2 tells us that there may be more than one local church in a community
- c) How does a local church begin?

Question 12: Read **Acts 11:19-26**. In vs. 21, it tells us that a large number of people in Antioch turned to the Lord. What does vs. 26 say that they had become?

- i) As the gospel spreads and people respond to it, those in a particular area start a local church when they agree to work together as one
 - ii) This is what we see with the church in Antioch. As the word of God started to convert people in that area, they eventually decided to work and worship together. They became a local church
- d) How does one enter a local church?

Question 13: Read **Acts 9:26-28**. According to vs. 26, what was Paul trying to do with the disciples in Jerusalem?

- i) It is understandable that many were hesitant to accept association with Paul at this point because he had been so active in condemning Christianity
- ii) Even today in local churches, individuals express a desire to work and worship with us on a regular basis and we do our best to get to know them to ensure we are all on the same page

iii) Local churches are responsible to maintain the purity of their church. But human judgment must be used so that while trying to find common ground, local churches do not become “private detectives”

e) Who is the local church consisted of?

Question 14: Read **Rev 3:1-4**. True or False: The local church in Sardis was composed of both the saved and the lost

True

False

- i) Since enrollment in a local church comes through human judgment and since human judgment is not perfect, it should be obvious that not everyone who is an active member of a local church is saved
- ii) Hypocrites may become member of a local church. False teachers may become members of a local church. All matter of men and women may be members of a local church for reasons other than the right reasons. But this doesn't make them members of Christ's universal church

f) What kind of organization does a local church have?

Question 15: Read **Phil 1:1**. What two positions did Paul call out at the end of this verse?

- i) A local church, when scripturally organized, will have overseers and deacons
- ii) In the NT, overseers are also called “pastors” or “elders” and their role is to oversee and feed the local church they are members of – **1 Tim 3:1-7; Tit 1:5-9**
- iii) Deacons are special servants who work under the elders of a local congregation – **1 Tim 3:8-13**
- iv) These two positions will be studied in detail in a later study. But it's important to understand that though the universal church has no earthly organization, the local church does

g) Can a local church be divided?

Question 16: Read **1 Cor 1:10-13; 3:3-4**. What was the problem at the local church in Corinth?

- i) Local churches can easily be divided over doctrine, attitudes, and personalities as was the case with the church in Corinth
 - ii) Though this is the practical reality of many local churches, it is not acceptable to the Lord. The Lord hates division! – **John 17:20-21; Eph 4:1-3**
- h) What happens to local church membership when you die?
- i) Obviously, when one dies, he/she is no longer a member of the local church he/she was a part of on Earth
 - ii) This does not affect a person's status in the universal church, only the local church