

The Doctrine of the Local Church Is a Clear Bible Doctrine

What is a church? When the Son of God came to earth He presented Himself to Israel because He was God's anointed, the Messiah, or Christ of God. It was no surprise to Him that he was hated, rejected, and crucified by the seed of Abraham, the elect according to the flesh. This was a part of a God's great plan to save, by His death, all of those given to Him by the Heavenly Father in eternity past. And in the history of mankind those redeemed shall come from every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation. (cf. Re.5.9) But it was during the time of Christ's earthly ministry that something wonderful began. As if secretly, off to the side, in almost total disregard of all of the rest of human history one day Jesus began calling disciples together. This is what the discerning mind gleans from reading the gospel accounts of the life of Jesus Christ.

Mt 4:19 And he saith unto them, Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.

Though it is not repeated at every instance when it occurred, every disciple of Christ that followed him received this call. Not an invitation to come to Christ in faith, but a call to *discipleship*. All of these that Christ called into discipleship at least had professed faith in Him and had received baptism by immersion by John the Baptist. Based on their profession, and Christ knew the true from the false, He called each one, because it served a higher purpose.

Joh 6:64 But there are some of you that believe not. For Jesus knew from the beginning who they were that believed not, and who should betray him.

1Co.11.18 For first of all, when ye come together in the church, I hear that there be divisions among you; and I partly believe it.

19 For there must be also heresies among you, that they which are approved may be made manifest among you.

It was to this little society assembled around Him that he gave His word, commandments, and His doctrine. To these He revealed the great mysteries of God that were kept secret since the beginning of the world.

*Mt.13.10 And the disciples came, and said unto him, Why speakest thou unto them in parables?
11 He answered and said unto them, Because it is given unto you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it is not given.*

...

14 And in them is fulfilled the prophecy of Esaias, which saith, By hearing ye shall hear, and shall not understand; and seeing ye shall see, and shall not perceive:

...

17 For verily I say unto you, That many prophets and righteous men have desired to see those things which ye see, and have not seen them; and to hear those things which ye hear, and have not heard them.

To miss this is to miss one of the most obvious truths in all of the New Testament. Jesus Christ began His church during His earthly ministry.

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Mt 16:18 And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. (The rock is the foundational truth which national Israel rejected: Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God.)

The church of Jesus Christ was not then, and is not now a visible or invisible, universal body. That said, many churches, if they profess to believe the doctrine of the local church at all, only pay it lip service. After all, what we do says more than what we say. Practice is doctrine applied. (Obvious point: How can churches have members scattered hundreds and thousands of miles away and be local?)

First of all, the church is compared to a human body that has many members.

1Co 12:12 ¶ For as the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body: so also is Christ (meaning that there is a parallel between a physical body with its members and Christ's body, the church).

13 For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles,

The phrase *one body* is defined by the words *whether we be Jews or Gentiles*. This describes the *kind* of church that it is. There is only one kind of church into which both Jews and Gentiles may come.

whether we be bond or free; and have been all made to drink into one Spirit.

14 For the body is not one member, but many.

There is no such thing as a universal, human body. There is no such thing as a universal house. The church is called *the house of God*. (1Ti.3.15; 1Pe.4.17) There was no such thing in the O.T. as a universal ark. There was no such thing as a universal tabernacle, or a universal temple or synagogue. Then why should anyone think that there is such a thing as a universal church? A human body cannot exist with its members scattered to the four winds, and neither can a church. The church must be able in its members to congregate into one place at one time. Otherwise the analogy of the human body teaches us a great truth: a human body might get along having lost a member, but with every loss the life is altered in some way. The same is true for a church. Church members must be able to contribute to the edification of the church by fellowshiping around the word of God and the various spiritual exercises of a gathered assembly (in singing, praising, worship, and prayers). The universal church doctrine diminishes the importance of personal interactions between every member of the body. And yes, even today's internet technology cannot fill that gap, though some do try to be a help, it is not the same.

In the Bible there is a phrase, *the whole church*. This phrase supports the local church doctrine. It means that the whole congregation comes together at one time and in one place. That is not possible for a universal church to do. First consider the phrase.

Ac 15:22 Then pleased it the apostles and elders, with the whole church, to send chosen men of their own company to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas; namely, Judas surnamed Barsabas, and Silas, chief men among the brethren ... (The whole church of Jerusalem contrasted with the whole church of Antioch.)

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Ro 16:23 *Gaius mine host, and of the whole church, saluteth you. ...* (The whole church at Corinth.)

Ac 5:11 *And great fear came upon all the church, and upon as many as heard these things.* (The whole Jerusalem church.)

Now, see that the *whole church* can meet at one time and in one place.

Ac 2:1 *And when the day of Pentecost was fully come, they were all with one accord in one place.*

1Co 11:20 *When ye come together therefore into one place ...*

1Co 14:23 *If therefore the whole church be come together into one place ...*

The N.T. epistles were written only to this kind of church. The Holy Spirit inspired holy men of God to write letters to individual, independent, autonomous, local churches. Every letter addresses either a church or a group of churches: *to all that be in Rome* (the 16th chpt. reveals upward six or seven churches, and the term *saints* always refers to baptized believers in a church relationship); *unto the churches of Galatia*; *to the saints at Ephesus* (there were at least 2, possibly three churches here [cf. Acts 18 & 19; & Aquila and Prisca 2Ti.4.19]; Philippi (Phl.4.15), Thessalonians (1Th.1.1; 2Th.1.1); Corinth (1Co.1.2; 2Co.1.1); Laodicea (Col.4.15); Colossae (Col.4.17). The churches are clearly distinguished as single or plural churches.

The Son of God spoke through the written word only to single churches. (cf. Re.1.20; 2.1, Ephesus; 8, Smyrna; 12, Pergamos; 18, Thyatira; 3.1, Sardis; 7, Philadelphia; 14, Laodicea) Not once did He refer to a universal church.

Almost 70 times in the N.T. is the term '*the church*' found. 48 of those instances refers to a certain kind of church.

Jerusalem: Acts 2.47; 5.11; 8.1, 3; 11.22; 12.1; 14.27; 15.4; 18.22; He.2.12; **the nation of Israel** (there was no such thing as a universal, national Israel): Acts 7.38; **Antioch:** Acts 11.26; 13.1; 15.3; **Ephesus:** Acts 20.17; Re.2.1; **Cenchrea:** Ro.16.1; **Aquila & Prisca's house church in Rome:** Ro.16.5; 1Co.16.19; **Corinth:** 1Co.1.2; 6.4; 11.18, 22; 14.4, 5, 48; 2Co.1.1; **Nymphas' house church:** Col.4.15; **Laodicea:** Col.4.15; **Thessalonica:** 1Th.1.1; 2Th.1.1; **Philemon's house church:** Phl. 2; **Babylon:** 1Pe.5.13; **the church where Gaius and Diotrophes were:** 3Jn. 6, 9, 10; **Smyrna:** Re.2.8; **Pergamos:** Re.2.12; **Thyatira:** Re.2.18; **Sardis:** Re. 3.1; **Philadelphia:** Re.3.7; **Laodicea:** Re.3.14; **God's church** (which tells us that there is no other kind of church): Acts 20.28; 1Co.10.32; Gal.1.13; 1Ti.3.5, 15; **the firstborn's church:** He.12.23, only those *born of God* can be in this kind of church.

18 times is the term '*the church*' used in a general sense.

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the church generally stated: Mt.18.7; 1Co 12.28; 14.19, 35; 15.9; Eph. 1.22, 23; 3.10, 21; 5.23-25, 29; Phi. 3.6; Col. 1.18, 24; 2Ti 4:22; Ja.5.14 (18 general references)

To this add that the Bible also has in it 28 times the term '*the churches.*' So, 76 out of 94 of these references beyond question refer to a local church. Are we to neglect the bulk of evidence that supports the doctrine of the local church because there are a very few which seem to say otherwise? Absolutely not! The truth is, in light of the evidence, the doctrine of the local church is incontrovertible.

Let me take the text of Mt.18.17 where the general term *the church* is found. There it reads, *tell it to the church.* To settle offenses, a member might have to go as far as to bring his grievance to *the church.* It is unthinkable that he would take that grievance to any other church than the one where he is a member. How can you take a grievance to a visible or invisible universal church? The grievance must be brought to *the church* to which he is vitally connected.

Some seem to think that a church cannot be spiritual and limited to one place in time in a single body. But I am spiritual and have such a legitimate existence in a single place, at one time, in this one body.

Churches are local and they have their own offices. These offices are for service in behalf of the church which appointed them. If these men leave that church they aren't servants in this capacity when they come into another congregation.

Eph.4.7 But unto every one of us is given grace according to the measure of the gift of Christ.

...

11 And he gave some (implied, of us [v.7], grace [v.8] to be in this kind of church [3.20, 21]), apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers;

12 For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ ...

In light of all that has been shown from the word of God, it is the independent, local, autonomous church which receives edification from the men that fill these offices. Again, this is how local churches operated then, and should today as well.

Churches in the Bible consisted of a numerable company of disciples.

Ac 1:15 And in those days Peter stood up in the midst of the disciples, and said, (the number of names together were about an hundred and twenty,)

Ac 21:20 ... Thou seest, brother, how many thousands of Jews there are which believe ...

They should *receive* members. Each member is vitally connected so that there is a proper order *body.* As we are certain about the members that we have on our bodies, so every church should know who its members are and who they are not.

Joh 1:43 The day following Jesus would go forth into Galilee, and findeth Philip, and saith unto him, Follow me.

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Ac 2:41 Then they that gladly received his word were baptized: and the same day there were added unto them about three thousand souls.

1Jo 2:19 They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would no doubt have continued with us: but they went out, that they might be made manifest that they were not all of us.

A church can reject someone from becoming a member of it.

Ac 9:26 And when Saul was come to Jerusalem, he assayed to join himself to the disciples: but they were all afraid of him, and believed not that he was a disciple.

And it can *dismiss* them from the membership.

1Co 5:13 But them that are without God judgeth. Therefore put away from among yourselves that wicked person.

Ga 5:12 I would they were even cut off which trouble you.

1Ti 1:20 Of whom is Hymenaeus and Alexander; whom I have delivered unto Satan, that they may learn not to blaspheme.

A church this ordered according to the word of God retains its identity in all that it does. Notice in the 15th chapter of Acts that the churches of Antioch and Jerusalem came together in conference yet maintained their own identity. (The churches did not have the word of God as we do today and relied upon the apostles instruction, and prophets to give them guidance until those Scriptures were completed.)

Acts 1 ¶ And certain men which came down from Judaea taught the brethren (of the Antioch church, 14.26), and said, Except ye be circumcised after the manner of Moses, ye cannot be saved.

2 When therefore Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and disputation with them, they (the Antioch church) determined that Paul and Barnabas, and certain other of them, should go up to Jerusalem unto the apostles and elders about this question.

3 And being brought on their way by the church, (the Antioch church supplied the means for travel to Jerusalem.)

4 And when they were come to Jerusalem, they were received of the church, and of the apostles and elders (which describes the whole church of Jerusalem, v.22, below ... So, after the issue was settled.)

...

22 ¶ Then pleased it the apostles and elders, with the whole church, to send chosen men of their own company to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas; namely, Judas surnamed Barsabas, and Silas, chief men among the brethren: (So each church has its own membership. V.27, the men of their own company were Judas and Silas.)

...

30 So when they were dismissed (The Jerusalem loosed them to go down to Antioch.), they came to Antioch ... (The men of the Antioch church and the men of the Jerusalem church left

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Jerusalem and came to Antioch.) ... *and when they had gathered the multitude together (of the Antioch church), they delivered the epistle ...*

...

33 And after they had tarried there a space (Judas and Silas), they were let go in peace from the brethren unto the apostles. (In other words, the Antioch brethren understood that the matter was finally settled. At that Judas and Silas were allowed to return to Jerusalem if they would. Now, Silas will remain at Antioch.

There is not any instance in the Bible that validates a visible or invisible universal church. This is an error which the Catholic and Protestant religions banter about, just as they do all of the other great truths of God's word: salvation by grace alone, the Lord's Supper, baptism, the second coming, eternal judgment, etc.

Properly, Jesus Christ is the head of each church, and though He died for all of the elect, the Bible very pointedly stated that He gave His life for His church. It is this church that bears witness of the truth of God and Christ until He returns. Like all human existence life begins with God, so every congregation receives a corporate life from Christ. As sovereignly as He gave life He can take it. And for a body of Christ it is symbolized in Re.2.5 as removing the candlestick from its place. That warning has absolutely no meaning in light of a universal church doctrine. It cannot be applied. The clearest teaching is the right one. The local church doctrine is a Bible doctrine.

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