

## THE CHURCH UNIVERSAL AND THE CHURCH LOCAL

INTRODUCTION: A failure to properly distinguish between the church universal and the church in its local sense is perhaps one of the basic difficulties in the misconceptions and misunderstandings concerning the church and its work as set forth in the teachings of the scriptures. The Catholic Church is the ultimate development in the concept of the church universal as an organic body to function in the performance of its mission in the world.

### I. The Term "Church" Used in Both Universal and Local Sense in the Scriptures\*

1. Instances of the term "Church" used in the universal sense. Matthew 16:18; Ephosians 5:25-27; I Timothy 3:15.
2. Instances of the term "Church" used in the local sense. I Corinthians 1:2; Romans 16:16; Colossians 4:15-16; Revelation 2:1,8.

### II. Distinctions to be Made Between Two Senses in Which the Word Church Is Used.

1. The church in its universal sense is only a spiritual relationship and not an organization.
  - (1) The church is compared to a body—Christ is its head—signifying particularly relationship to Christ, recognition of His authority, etc. Colossians 1:18; Ephesians 1:22-23.
  - (2) The church is compared to a family—God is the father. "House of God"—denoting family—I Timothy 3:15; Ephesians 2:19.
  - (3) The church is compared to a Temple—in which the Holy Spirit dwells—and therefore denotes relationship to the Spirit. Ephesians 2:21-22; I Corinthians 3:16.
  - (4) It's members are enrolled in heaven. Hebrews 1:23.

The church in its local sense is not only a relationship but an organic body—or an organization. Philippians 1:1; Acts 14:23. This is the only organic form or existence Christ has given His church on this earth.

- (1) In the local church the Christian bears a peculiar relationship to the other members of the local body—this is fellowship in its work and worship involving special responsibilities and privileges. Acts 9:26; Romans 16:1-2; II John 9-11.
- (2) Fellowship in the local body subject to its own control. Acts 9:26.
2. The church functions through the local organization and not through any universal medium or organization.
  - (1) Ephesians 4:11-12. Here the work of the church—its function—is set

forth and the means by which its function is performed. Among those means—peculiar to the local church and its organization are "pastors." Acts 20:28-32.

- (2) Romans 12:4-8. Here the local church is compared to a body with each member functioning in its own place. The fact that there is a function designated as "he that ruleth" evidences that the function is that of elders and that the figure of "body" is therefore sometimes applied to the congregation or local church. If this passage can be applied to the church universal as some try to do with the "church as a body" wherever it occurs in scripture— then those that "rule" are universal officers rather than congregational officers and the idea of "episcopacy" is justified. This obviously is not true. We therefore conclude that the local church is also set forth as a "body." As such it is subject to Christ as its head and He rules through His authorized representatives who execute His will in the local body.
- (3) Jesus dealt with the seven "Churches of Asia" as separate congregations and announced that he was familiar with "works" and faults of each as a congregation. Revelation, Chapters 2 and 3.

The New Testament scriptures are completely silent as to any universal function of the church and as to any universal organization through which such a function might be performed. If God had intended for the church universal to perform any function upon the earth is it not self evident that He would have been wise enough to give it a medium or organization through which to perform that function? The necessary conclusion then is that since God has given the church only a local organization—the congregation—He intended for its function or work to be executed through the local church as a medium. When we depart from such a medium in trying to serve God in the church, we leave God's plan and become disobedient and irreverent.

3. Fellowship with the saints in the church of the Lord is controlled by the congregation and not by any universal medium or organization.
  - (1) The church in Jerusalem did not admit Paul into its fellowship until he was commended by Barnabas. Acts 9:26-28.
  - (2) Though Paul had become a Christian through obedience to the Gospel, yet when he came to Jerusalem it was necessary for him to be received into their fellowship as a disciple by the Jerusalem church.
  - (3) Paul commended Phoebe to the fellowship of the church at Rome. Romans 16:1-2.
  - (4) The church to which John addressed his third epistle wrongfully refused fellowship to certain brethren. Ill John 5-10.

- (5) God alone can blot out the names of the saved.

Discipline to its members is not administered by any agency of the church universal on earth but rather by the local church.

- (1) Paul instructed the church at Corinth to "deliver unto Satan" the sinful member among them and it was to be done by them when they were assembled—"When ye are gathered together." I Corinthians 5:1-5. There is no way this could be done by the church as a universal body.
- (2) Paul instructed the Thessalonian church to discipline "every brother that walketh disorderly." II Thessalonians 3:6, 11-15. This could be carried out only by the local church.
- (3) God is in complete control of discipline administered to the church universal. Revelation 22:19. He also administers discipline to congregations. Revelation 2:5.

a. The Lord condemns congregations for:

- (a) Departures from true doctrine. Revelation 2:14-15. Commends those faithful to His Word. Revelation 3:8-10.
- (b) Condemns those unfaithful in life. Revelation 2:20-23.
- (c) Warns those who have not the right motives and attitude. Revelation 2:5.
- (d) Commends a refusal to accept false authority. Revelation 2:2-3.
- (e) Constantly reminds that He knows the works of every church and will judge every church according thereto. Revelation 2:23; 2:2; 2:9; 2:19.
- (f) Reminds every church of the necessity to "Hear what the Spirit saith to the churches." This will not allow following our own fancy or will but demands the absolute recognition of divine authority. (Letters to the seven churches of Asia —Revelation, Chapters 2 and 3.)

Each congregation was directly and independently responsible to the Lord for its own faithfulness to His Word and in its work.

Note: It should be remembered that the action of a congregation in withdrawing fellowship from one of its members does not necessarily mean the loss of God's recognition of such member as one of His children. Human beings sometimes err in their efforts even to carry out God's will. Likewise to be recognized as a member of the church of the Lord in a congregation here on earth does not necessarily mean recognition by God.

5. The individual Christian in fellowship with a congregation of the Lord's church shares a relationship and has obligations to that congregation, its elders and members, that he does not have toward any other congregation on earth. I Corinthians 1:10; Hebrews 10:25; I Thessalonians 5:11-15; Titus 1:9-13.

Note: Because an obligation applies universally to all Christians does not even hint that it is to be performed through some universal medium.

### III. The Local Church Possesses Every Attribute and Characteristic Which Is Ascribed to the Church Universal.

1. In Ezekiel's prophetic vision of the temple of God in chapter 40 of his prophecy and in John's vision of the temple in chapter. 11 of Revelation—the measuring reed is the "Word of God" and the Temple is the church of God. Most of the scholars agree that both visions must be spiritually applied. In Ezekiel's vision the temple in its entirety had the same dimensions as each "little chamber" therein. A physical or material building could not possibly have such characteristics.
2. The Christian in the congregation enjoys every provision of the grace of God, every divine relationship, every privilege, promise and responsibility that is assigned to the member of the church of God or provided for such.
3. Each congregation constitutes the "body of Christ," the "family of God," the "temple of God" and the "church of Christ" as completely and sufficiently as though it were the only such congregation on earth. If, indeed, there were just the one, it would not lack any characteristic or feature of the church universal. The existence of the "church of Christ" in any community is in no way dependent upon the existence of another such congregation anywhere on the face of the earth. Such a congregation would not continue to be pleasing to the Lord if it did not plant the church of the Lord elsewhere.

CONCLUSION: In discussion of this lesson it will be interesting to ask for suggestions of any attribute belonging to the church universal that does not characterize the local church that is spiritual in nature.