

The Church Universal and Local

Introduction:

1. In previous lessons we have talked about the undenominational nature of the church.
 - a. No denominations are mentioned in the Bible.
 - b. The church described in the Bible was not divided into denominations.
 - c. The word church denotes those called out of the world and grouped together in one body. Their commonality rests in the fact that they all acknowledge Jesus Christ as Lord and have made Him king in their lives. Thus they are described as the kingdom of God, the church, the body of Christ, the flock, etc. "Church" being a plural term simply denoting that group called out of the world and united together by faith in Jesus Christ.
2. We have called for a return to this simplicity and to this unity recognizing that Jesus died to bring peace and unity and to reconcile all men in this one body.
3. My belief is that we can be just Christians without belonging to any denomination and that that is what Christ would have us do. This means then that we must abandon all denominational concepts, do away with denominational divisions and allegiances and be united together under allegiance to Christ and to Christ alone.
4. In this lesson I want to consider with you two senses in which the Bible uses the word "church" and make some relevant observations about the implications of these uses.

Discussion:

- I. There are two senses in which the word "church" is used in Scripture.
 - A. First, there is the sense in which it refers to all Christians. Some have described this as the church in the "universal" sense.
 1. This is the sense in Matt. 16:18 and in Eph. 1:22-23.
 2. In a previous lesson we observed that the church in this sense is composed of individual Christians, not denominations. Cf. Jn. 15:1-10.
 3. If one has believed in Christ, repented and been baptized they constitute the universal church having been added to that group by the Lord (Acts 2:47).
 - B. Second, there is the sense in which it refers to Christians in a particular locality.
 1. 1 Cor. 1:2 refers to "the church of God at Corinth."
 2. Acts 13:1 refers to the church at Antioch.
 3. Rom. 16:1 refers to the church at Cenchrea.
 4. It is evident that at least in some instances these churches were organized under the leadership of those called elders, shepherds, or overseers (Acts 11:30; 14:23; 15:2, 4, 6, 22, 23; 20:17, 28; Phil. 1:1; 1 Tim. 3; Titus 1).
 5. It is evident that these local groups of disciples banded themselves together with common motives, pooling their resources to do what the members of that local church agreed that God wanted them to do.
 6. Christians chose to associate themselves with the body in a particular locality (Acts 9:26ff) and thus work together to do what God wanted them to do. It is evident in the case with Saul that the disciples needed to recognize that they could work together to accomplish what God wanted them to do. They did not want a persecutor to

come in among them to work against the Lord. They needed reassurance that Paul was working with them, not against them.

7. In some cases the word church may be used to refer to a group of Christians that are not associated together for the purpose of doing work. This might be the case where “the church in someone’s house” is mentioned. Cf. the church in Prisca and Aquilla’s house (Rom. 16:5); the church in the house of Nympha (Col. 4:15); in the house of Archippus (Philemon 2). These may have been groups organized to work together, but it is not entirely clear. They may have just been a group of Christians associated with that house. Say “hi” to the church in Wayne’s house—Phyllis and I and our two boys and their families, but we do not constitute a group organized to work together. As a matter of fact, we are attached to three different work groups in three different places.

II. There is no evidence that the church universal was organized as a working organization.

- A. It is not composed of local congregations, but of Christians.
 1. Some conceptualize the universal church as composed of congregations.
 2. They proceed to group congregations together then in synods, presbyteries, dioceses, etc. Note that none of these terms are used in the Scriptures. Because such did not exist. There was no organizational structure between congregations.
 3. The universal church is not composed of congregations, but of Christians AND the universal church is not a working entity.
 4. Denominationalism conceptualizes the universal church as composed of congregations, proceeds to organize these into subgroups and create organizational structures foreign to Scripture.
- B. The local church is the only working organization in the N.T.
 1. Each one was an independent work group.
 2. The overseers of one group did not oversee the work in another group.
 3. There was no “mother church” concept.
 4. It is not that they had no relationship with one another. The Christians often knew one another and were concerned for one another. They taught the same things (Acts 15). They gave to help one another (1 Cor. 16:1-2). But each did its own work. There is no evidence that they sent money to a “mother church,” “an evangelistic society,” “to the denominational headquarters,” etc.
 5. The Christians in the local church worked together to care for the needy among them (Acts 2:44-45; 1 Cor. 16:1-2), they financially supported the preaching and teaching of the gospel (Phil. 4:15-16; 1 Tim. 5:17-18). It seems that the entirety of their work fell into these two categories: caring for the needy among them and teaching and preaching the message of God.

III. Is it not possible for Christians to do and be the same today? To work toward the same goals, to have the same purposes as those disciples described in Scripture? To organize ourselves in the same way given the fact that they were quite effective in following this simple plan. Is this not God’s plan?

Conclusion:

1. In the interest of unity; in the interest of effectiveness; in the interest of respect to the Lordship of Christ let us pattern ourselves after the instruction given by the Lord.
2. Why must we insist on some other way? Do we really believe that our way is better than His way?
3. Haven't we confessed Him as Lord? Then let us let Him be the Lord.