

What Is a Local Church?

The universal nature of the church

The kind of church that is revealed in the Bible is uniquely the universal church. It is the kind of church that in its nature is universal. Under this revelation, a local church can only be *a location of the universal church*. All the local churches must be universal in their nature and practice because Christ Himself is universal. You cannot separate Christ and the church. The church is Christ (1 Cor. 12:12). Thus, the kind of Christ we see is the kind of church we see. The kind of church we practice must match the kind of Christ revealed in the New Testament. Whatever Christ is, the church must be the same.

We should not make the church separate from Christ. Paul never did. When there was division in Corinth, what did he say? “Is Christ divided?” (1 Cor. 1:13). We might have said, “No, Paul, say, ‘Is the *church* divided?’ ” But when the saints in Corinth had church problems, Paul’s word to them was, “Is *Christ* divided?” To Paul, to divide the church is to divide Christ. When we consider division in this way, it effects something deeper in our relationships with one another. How we talk to one another and how we treat one another takes on new significance.

If the content of the church is Christ, then the church *must* be universal in its nature and practice. Now we will see all the factors that make the church universal in nature and practice.

The counsels of the Godhead were universal

In Ephesians chapter 1 we find out that we were all chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world (v. 4). This means that God’s choice was a universal choice. He took all of us believers in. So the very counsels of God are universal. The church is not something different from the counsels of God. The church should only be an expression and testimony of those eternal counsels in the Godhead concerning each of us as members of one another in the Body of Christ. Thus, the choice in the Godhead has become our choice.

Listen to the counsel in the Godhead: “Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness” (Gen. 1:26). Then God created “man,” male and female. It was a corporate image. It is not that the male has an image and the female has another image. No, there is only one image. That one image is composed of the male and the female. Together they make up one corporate image.

Genesis 1:27 says, “In the image of God He created *him*.” Then it says, “Male and female He created *them*.” If you read Genesis, it is *him* and *them*. At first glance, this may seem confusing. Is the image just Adam? Or does the image include Adam and

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Eve? In the counsels of God, there is one image of God, one expression. The male typifies Christ, and the female the church. It is Christ the Head with His Body, the church. This is the meaning of the male and the female. Together as one they make up the image of God. So the first pages of the Bible tell us that God's purpose of expressing Himself is accomplished through Christ with the church. Isn't this precious? These are the eternal counsels of God speaking in a way that makes everything about the church universal in nature.

The incarnation was universal

What do we mean when we say that the incarnation was universal? The answer is in John 1:1 and 14: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. . . . And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us." The Word as God became flesh. This is the incarnation. As flesh, Christ came as the last Adam and as the Son of Man, the representative of a new race. Thus, His flesh was representative flesh, that is, universal flesh. As such a Son of Man, His life from beginning to end represented all of us. He was incarnated for all of us. His human living was for all of us. His crucifixion was for all of us. His resurrection was for all of us. His entire Person and work was universal. This *universal flesh* embodied in *Christ* was hammered out day by day in His human living. He lived in the environment of the flesh, the world, and the devil. He lived in the environment of a soul-life. He was even "in the likeness of the flesh of sin." He was very close to the pressures and the weaknesses of the flesh, yet without sin (Rom. 8:3; 2 Cor. 5:21).

The representative flesh of Christ was lived out in the same kind of environments we pass through (Heb. 4:15). He experienced being misunderstood by His family, by those who were closest to Him (Luke 2:48-51; John 7:5). As He lived day by day, in everything and with every step He took He was drawing from the Father (John 6:57). Whatever words He spoke, He spoke from the Father (John 8:28). He lived a human life, and that incarnated life was a universal living. It was for all of us so that one day He could become bread on the table for us to eat. We could partake of His humanity so that we ourselves would be infused with the same reactions, the same attitudes, and the same tendencies as this Son of Man (John 6:57).

Christ's incarnation was universal in its very nature. It was not a sectarian or denominational incarnation. It was not for some particular group. No! It was for *all* God's chosen ones. Christ's incarnation and His human life is universal in its scope. His flesh is representative flesh. This is also seen in the type of His flesh portrayed by the veil of the temple. The veil, separating the Holy Place from the Holy of Holies, is spoken of as a type of Christ's flesh in Hebrews 10:20: "By a new and living way which He inaugurated for us through *the veil, that is, His flesh.*" When Christ's flesh was crucified, the veil of the temple was torn from top to bottom (Matt. 27:51). The

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veil was embroidered with cherubim (Exo. 36:35). Cherubim are the living creatures that care for God's creation. They typify all of creation (Rev. 4:6-11). In other words, the veil, typifying the flesh of Christ, is interwoven with all of God's creation. Thus, His flesh represents all God's creatures. His flesh is universal. His incarnation is universal, representing the totality of God's creation. This is directly related to the church. The nature of the church is not something different from the nature of Christ's flesh. His flesh is for all of us. It is universal. So the church is also universal. The church is included in His representative flesh.

The Lord's prayer for believers was universal

The church must be universal in its nature and practice because the Lord's prayer for believers in John 17 was a universal prayer. In verses 20-21 the Lord prayed, ²⁰ "I do not ask concerning these only, but concerning those also who believe into Me through their word, ²¹ that they all may be one; even as You, Father, are in Me and I in You, that they also may be in Us; that the world may believe that You have sent Me." When the Lord prayed, "I do not ask concerning these only," He looked down the whole corridor of time. His spirit expanded and embraced human history to the very end. So in His prayer, His burden was for all those who believe into Him. That was a universal prayer. And that universal prayer was related to the universal word of the New Testament. The Lord prayed that all believers would believe through the apostles' word. All believers in every age are universally linked together by the Lord's universal prayer and the apostles' universal word. Thank God for the apostles' word. We have their word. By embracing their word, we enter into the universal nature of the church.

The crucifixion was universal

Because the cross was universal, the church cannot be anything but universal. John 3:16 says, "God so loved *the world* that He gave His only begotten Son." And in Ephesians 2:13-16 we read, ¹³ "But now in Christ Jesus you who were once far off have become near in the blood of Christ. ¹⁴ For He Himself is our peace, He who has made *both* one and has broken down the middle wall of partition, the enmity, ¹⁵ abolishing in His flesh the law of the commandments in ordinances, that He might create *the two* in Himself into one new man, so making peace, ¹⁶ and might reconcile *both* in one Body to God through the cross, having slain the enmity by it." When we look at that cross, we not only see that our sins were laid upon Christ, but we also see that all the enmity, middle walls, and divisions were dealt with and slain there. The cross links all believers in a universal way. It does not regard what we are in all the divisions of the old creation. The cross only sees us universally in Christ (2 Cor. 5:14-17).

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When the Lord died on the cross, He embraced all believers in Himself and created one new man, where there is no more Greek and no more Jew. So not only is His flesh a universal flesh, His human living a universal living, and His prayer a universal prayer, but also His crucifixion was a universal death in order to abolish all division. The very nature of the cross includes a universal oneness of believers with the Godhead and with one another. The cross was a universal transaction, putting a stop to everything parochial, regional, racial, and denominational. The intrinsic fabric of the Lord's process of incarnation, human living, and crucifixion is universal. The universal church is the kind of church that expresses the summing up of this history. It is composed of all those who are organically interrelated with one another in Christ. How can a local church be anything less than the universal church? A local church is just the gathering of Christ in His universality.

The only way to exist as the church is for you and me to make contact with the living Christ. If we make contact with Christ about everything in our lives — the world, the flesh, the devil, the natural life, and all our personal problems — the church will happen on this earth. Handle Christ. Hold Him. Let Him sum you up. Then there will be an expression of His Body. And that expression will be universal in its nature and practice.

The resurrection was universal

The resurrection of Christ was a universal event. Ephesians 2:5-6 says, ⁵ “Even when *we* were dead in trespasses, [God] made *us* alive *together* with Christ . . . ⁶ and raised *us* up *together*, and made *us* sit *together* in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus.” Christ as the Head was not the only one raised. We as the members of His Body were also raised together with Him. This means that the resurrection of Christ was a universal resurrection. We were all taken up into Him as His Body. He is the Head, with all of us as the members.

Oh, may the Lord grant us to see the universal nature of our fellowship in the church by seeing how universal we really are in Christ's resurrection. May the light so shine that the revelation itself will blind us from everything narrow. This is not to be argumentative. This is not to be adversarial toward denominational distinctions and convictions. We are not quibbling in that realm. But the revelation of Christ's own universality and of our being in Him (1 John 2:8) causes us to respond only to the purity and simplicity of Christ expressed in the church. We can respond only to the universal nature and practice of the church. Since Christ is universal, the church must be universal. His incarnation was universal, His human life was universal, His death was universal, and His resurrection was universal. The church is not something different from the universal nature of His Person and work. This shows us what a local church must be.

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The ascension was universal

The crowning event in the Lord's process to inaugurate His universal reign was His ascension and exaltation (Phil. 2:9-11). Peter spoke of Christ's exaltation on the day of Pentecost in Acts chapter 2, and he experienced its universality in chapter 10. In Acts 2:33 Peter said, "Therefore being exalted to the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, He poured out this which you now see and hear." Later, in the house of Cornelius, Peter saw the universality of this pouring out when the Spirit was poured out upon the Gentiles (Acts 10:34-36, 44-45). These verses clearly reveal how universal was Christ's ascension and exaltation.

The Spirit poured out upon all the Jews and Gentiles was a Spirit poured out from a universal Person. Indeed, everything about Christ's Person and work is universal in nature. The pouring out of the Spirit from the ascended, exalted Christ in the book of Acts ultimately reaches its climax in Revelation 22:1. There the Spirit's flow is proceeding from the throne of God and of the Lamb, supplying God's one universal habitation, the holy city, New Jerusalem. This city incorporates all God's chosen and redeemed from all the ages, both Jews and Gentiles. Again we see that every aspect of the Lord's process is universal in nature and scope.

The oneness of the church is universal

By seeing that the intrinsic nature of the Lord's Person and work is universal, we can easily see that the oneness of the church must be a reflection of that. Now we can understand the universal nature of the church. It was this universal vision that caused Paul to write the exhortations in Ephesians 4:1-6: ¹ "I, therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you to have a walk worthy of the calling with which you were called, ² with all lowliness and gentleness, with longsuffering, bearing one another in love, ³ being diligent to keep the oneness of the Spirit in the bond of peace. ⁴ There is one Body and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling; ⁵ one Lord, one faith, one baptism; ⁶ one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all."

The calling that Paul speaks of in this section is related to the universal oneness that flows in the Spirit based upon Christ's universal Person and work. No wonder Paul speaks of walking *worthily* of this calling. Walk with one another in all lowliness. Oh, be careful. Do not be high. Come down. Be low. Do not let your pride interfere with this universal oneness that is Christ Himself embodied in our relationships with one another. We live in God together. This is not a matter to be taken lightly. It means a breaking of our pride, our independence, our vindicating ourselves — all of that. We can see why Paul talks this way, why he says, "Walk with all lowliness and meekness." This means not striking back. Do not let your undealt-with

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disposition take the lead. Call on Jesus. Interrupt your disposition. Hear the members. Hear the Body. Hear the saints. Let the meekness of Christ characterize your interaction with the members of the Body (2 Cor. 10:1).

Do not speak any word that does not build up and give grace, even if it is true (Eph. 4:29). A lot of things are true, but they do not give grace. If God dealt with us according to the facts of our sinful condition, we would all be finished. He did not speak about you and me according to the facts of our condition. He spoke grace to us. He gave grace to us. By grace we are saved! Hallelujah! We received grace from our God. He forgave us. He washed us. He is not counting our trespasses against us. He is not keeping score. Our sins have all been dealt with in a once-and-for-all way at the cross.

The reason we are so exercised in our being to touch the meekness of Christ and His longsuffering and His bearing one another in love is because we are under a revelation. We do not just loosely gather together in natural relationships. We are in God together. The universal oneness of the Triune God exists in our relationships. It is a oneness that Christ hammered out from His incarnation all the way to His ascension. Then He poured out that universal oneness into us. Now between us we are keeping the oneness of the Spirit. For this, Paul says, “Be diligent” or “Be quick.” This means to be quick to keep something you already have — the oneness of the Spirit in the bond of peace. Preserve that oneness because it is the accumulated oneness of the entire process of Jesus Christ.

How do we keep this oneness? We keep it in the bond of peace. When you lose your peace with the saints, know that you have interfered with the oneness. Take note when you lose your peace. Christ is arbitrating in our hearts. The peace of Christ is arbitrating (Col. 3:15). He is the One making the decisions. He umpires the motions of our hearts. He is the One who says, “You are out! Even though you are right in what you are saying, you are out, because you lost the peace. The peace is gone. It makes no difference if you are right. You are out. You have spoken beyond Me.” The peace is the practical handle when we are touching the oneness of the Spirit. There must be peace in the churches. Brothers and sisters, do not bring in anything, no matter how good and wonderful it is to you, if it disturbs the peace. Check the peace barometer. Does it bring peace? Does it make the Body happy? The issue of peace is joy — righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit (Rom. 14:17). Wherever there is the universal oneness in the church, there is joy, happiness, and a deep sense of comfort and ease in the atmosphere.

But there are intrusions. The intrusion of our mind takes us away from this oneness. We must see that we are handling a oneness that is constituted with the incarnated, lived-out life of the Son of God, who died, rose, ascended, and poured out the Spirit. He did everything universally for His members, His Body. Because that poured-out Spirit is in us, when we touch anything that disturbs the peace, we are

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touching the effects of Calvary. The church life must always preserve a universal nature because everything the Lord did was universal.

In Ephesians 4:4-6 Paul speaks of one Body, one Spirit, one hope of our calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all, through all, and in all. These items comprise the oneness of the universal church. To have one faith means that all believers have one common response to the same Person — Christ. This is tremendous. We also have one baptism into one Body (1 Cor. 12:13). We were not baptized into two Bodies. There is only one Body, one universal church.

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In light of the universal nature of Christ's Person and work in producing His church, we can easily answer the question, what is the local church? The local church is simply a location of the universal church. It is just the universal church located practically in any given city. When the Lord spoke to John in Revelation 1:11 He said, "What you see, write in a book and send it to the seven churches which are in Asia." And then He continued by naming seven cities. He did not even say "to the church in Ephesus" or "to the church in Smyrna" or "to the church in Laodicea." He simply mentioned seven cities. First He said, "Send it to the seven churches." Then He added, "To Ephesus, to Smyrna, to Pergamos, to Thyatira, to Sardis, to Philadelphia, and to Laodicea." The seven cities are equal to the seven churches. This speaking of the Lord reveals that the local churches are just the practical locations of the universal church. There is only one universal church, and it is located city by city. The church is only one universally, and the church is only one locally according to the unit of a city.

In the New Testament practice we see only one church in each city. Even though a church may have many meeting places and thousands of believers, it is never identified in the plural as "the churches in Jerusalem" or "the churches in Ephesus" or "the churches in Corinth." It is just "the church in Corinth." Whenever the plural is used, such as "the churches of Galatia" or "the churches of Judea," it refers to a region (Gal. 1:2, 22). All of these are simply the located universal church, whether by cities or by regions. Practically this means that in whatever city I live, I gather together with others by faith under this revelation of the universal church. I do not choose whom I meet with. I just stand in that city with all those who are members of Christ, with His universal Person and work.

I am put together with you, and you are put together with me. And whether or not we like it, we have to go back to the Triune God's counsel room in eternity past and hear the Father and the Son talking about both of us together in Their one Body. And we have to say, "Amen." So if I cannot love you, and you cannot love me, it only means one thing. It means we need a deeper calling out to the Lord, a deeper singing,

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a deeper touch with Him. We need to be strengthened into our inner man, that Christ would make His home in our hearts so that we could apprehend with all the saints the vast dimensions of the knowledge-surpassing love of Christ (Eph. 3:16-19).

Brothers and sisters, this is a heavenly vision — that Christ is summing up all things in Himself. This summing up is through the church (Eph. 1:10). What kind of church? The universal church located. So we stand together, we meet together, we assemble together and enjoy our Christ. We experience Him and share Him with one another, and then the churches become the testimony of Jesus. This is what the Lord wants.

The summing up is worked out in the churches

In the book of Revelation, the Lord walks in the midst of the churches. He comes to sum up all things in Himself. He begins to touch all the areas in the churches that need His summing up, beginning with the church in Ephesus. This church was ministered to by Paul, John, Apollos, and Timothy. You could not have had a richer ministry coming into that church. And yet they lost their first love. So the Lord says, “I will come to you quickly and remove your lampstand from its place — unless you repent” (Rev. 2:5). This means the *condition* of a church can determine the *position* it has as a lampstand. We may have thought that the condition of the church does not matter as long as we have the right position. But in Revelation 2:4-5, position is relative to loving the Lord as our first love. So He tells the church to repent and go back to their first love or He will remove their lampstand. This means they were still there in Ephesus with the name “church in Ephesus,” but they were in danger of losing the testimony and the shining of the light as an expression of Christ.

If people are not saying something about the church where we are, we need to open ourselves to the Lord. Why? Because the churches should have an impact upon the world around us. There should be a testimony. People should walk in and say, “God is truly among you” (1 Cor. 14:25). Or they should say, “I do not like this place. I am angry with it. I disagree with it” (Acts 8:1; 9:1). That is also part of the response. Even persecution is an evidence that there is a testimony. When you love the light, you come to the light. But when you are in darkness, you hate the light (John 3:19-21). That means you hate the saints in the light. You may cast aspersions upon the saints, just as some did to Paul. He became an object of derision (1 Cor. 4:9-13). But in response he said, “Being reviled, we bless; being persecuted, we endure.” In other words, we have no alternative but to be channels of the divine love.

What kind of churches are the universal churches? They are churches that can be tried and come through with life. In Revelation 2:10 the Lord spoke to the church in Smyrna and said, “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,

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and you will have tribulation ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.” This speaking indicates that the kind of churches that are in the summing up of Christ are churches that pass through the fire. You are thrown into prison. You are limited. You are shut up. You are in a suffering situation. That is okay. It is for ten days. Ten days is a unit of time, and God knows what unit of time it means for each of us. But you are just shut up. This is the dealing of the cross. The churches that overcome are the ones that pass through all these trials and are not left in bitterness and hurt. They come through with resurrection life. So do not despise any of the sufferings for those ten days. It is all part of letting that resurrection life come forth.

The churches that are the testimony of Jesus are churches in which worldliness gets dealt with, such as the church in Pergamos. Pergamos means marriage. This church tended to be married to the world, where Satan’s seat is. To this church the Lord’s speaking is like a sharp two-edged sword (Rev. 2:12). God always touches our affinity with the world (1 John 2:15-17).

The proper church life is also a place like Thyatira, where our inward parts are being searched (Rev. 2:23). And it is a place like Sardis, where all hypocrisy is exposed. They had a name that they were living, but they were dead (Rev. 3:1). You cannot live in the church, properly speaking, if you are a hypocrite, if you have two lives. The Lord always touches the duality in our living. You have to have one face in the church. What we are in the meetings is what we are at home. What we are at home is what we are in the meetings. So all hypocrisy is dealt with. If there is hypocrisy in you, tell Him, “Lord, sum me up. Make me a unified person, that I may have one life.”

The universal church located in a genuine way will also, like the church in Philadelphia, be filled with overcoming saints who keep the Lord’s word and do not deny His name (Rev. 3:8, 12). And finally, the Lord’s testimony on the earth is where He still pursues the most miserable persons. This is the kind of church that is represented by Laodicea (Rev. 3:15-17). They were proud. They said that they had need of nothing. They were so sufficient in themselves, so full of deception. They were pitiful people. When we are like this, we do not know where we are. We do not know that we are naked, blind, and wretched. We are just puffed up like a balloon, thinking that we are so wonderful. But we are just miserable, lukewarm, insipid. Yet consider where the Lord is with such a church: “Behold, I stand at the door and knock” (Rev. 3:20). He is standing outside the door, still trying to gain an entrance. He is pursuing the most miserable kind of persons. So we can all be encouraged! Hallelujah!

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