

Fellowship, not Membership

One of the most precious truths expounded in the New Testament is the oneness of all true believers, that is, the doctrine of the unity of the body of Christ. The Scriptures are both clear and emphatic that all those who belong to Him have been equally accepted of Him and have been incorporated into His body, the church.

There is one Body... (Eph 4:4)

the body is one... (1 Cor 12:12)

that He might reconcile both (i.e. Jew and Gentile) unto God in one body by the cross... (Eph 2:16)

And He is the Head of the body, the church... (Col 1:18)

In this regard, the Bible presents two aspects of the church: the universal church and the local church. It is important that the Christian understand both of these aspects and that he furthermore recognize his relationship to each.

In 1 Corinthians 12:13, Paul makes reference to all believers as being baptized into one gathered body. This describes the church in its universal sense. The universal church comprises all Christians of all nations and of all ages—that is, all believers from the day of Pentecost until the rapture (1 Pt 1:3, 22-25). The Bible emphasizes the unity which exists in the universal church, in which there is no longer Jew nor Gentile, nor slave nor free (Gal 3:28; Eph 4:4). A good example of the concept of the universal church is found in Acts 8:1-3, in which the church, which had been at Jerusalem, was scattered because of persecution. Although these Christians were no longer geographically together, they still formed the church (v 3).

Nevertheless the most common use of the term *church* in the Bible is in reference to a local assembly. This is the meaning of the word in such passages as Romans 16:5 and 1 Corinthians 16:19. Because all the Christians of a local church may be gathered together at the same time, the local church is sometimes referred to as the “visible church.”

It is important to recognize the differences between the universal church and the local church.

Universal Church	Local Church
No differences between Christians—everyone has the same blessings Gal 3:28	There are differences in gifts and ministries 1 Cor 12
Gender equality in salvation—neither male nor female in Christ Gal 3:28	Different roles—men in leadership and vocal, women silent 1 Cor 14
Secure—no one can pluck out of His hand John 10:28	Not secure—one can be excommunicated 1 Cor 5
Only God adds Acts 2:47	Man receives into fellowship Rom 16:2

No ordinances necessary for salvation Col 2:14	"keep the ordinances" 1 Cor 11:2
Position is blameless before God Eph 1:4	Practice may be disapproved by the Lord Rev 2:4

Note that the Christian has a specific relationship and role in both aspects of the Church. Either neglecting one facet or overemphasizing the other may result in a weak ministry, a lack of personal growth, as well as misunderstanding and insecurity concerning one's relationship with God.

In this regard, some Christians have emphasized only their relationship to the universal church and have ignored the many New Testament teachings concerning the believer's role and participation in the local church. They do not see the importance or need to commit themselves to a local gathering, sometimes even neglecting to attend the church's meetings.

This is in contrast to biblical teaching. Paul, in 1 Corinthians 12, describes in detail the calling and equipping of every Christian specifically to function within the context of a local assembly of believers. The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews admonishes the Christian to be diligent not only in being present at the meetings of the church but also to seek to actively encourage and exhort others (Heb 10:24-25). Many of the most important functions and blessings of being part of the body of Christ are most clearly seen at the level of the local church. These blessings include mutual comfort and support, teaching and training in the Word of God, and accountability and spiritual protection.

However, just as there are some who neglect the Bible's teaching concerning the local church, so it is likewise not uncommon for Christians to forget the marvelous truths concerning our unity in the universal church. Sadly, since the very first days of the church, Christians have sought to align themselves with certain traditions, teachings, and personalities. In Acts 6, one may see latent factionalism in the preferential treatment given to ethnic Jews. Again, in 1 Corinthians 3:1-4 Paul exhorts the Corinthians not to align themselves with personalities resulting in a division within the church. Rather Paul emphasizes that every Christian serves the same God (v 9) and that we should labor together for His glory.

By failing to recognize the transcending nature of the universal church, a sort of third division has arisen, a division of man's own contrivance. This particular division is more inclusive than the local church yet is more limited than the universal church. It is known as a denomination. By its very nature the concept of denominations marks a separation from other Christians. This may be expressed through ethnic origin (e.g. Greek Orthodox, Russian Orthodox, Church of Ireland, etc.), the founder of the movement (e.g. Lutheran, Wesleyan), or peculiar doctrine (Reformed, Baptist, Pentecostal). When asked as to their identity, oftentimes the Christian will respond with, "I am a Baptist" or "I am a Lutheran."

The Bible categorically rejects such sectarianism. Paul, when writing to the Corinthians, began his epistle emphasizing this very truth:

(Paul)...unto the church of God which is at Corinth, to them that are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, with all that in every place call upon the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, both theirs and ours. 1 Cor 1:2-4

Note the clear teaching of unity and oneness of the Corinthian Christians with all of the other redeemed in Christ. We may be justified in modifying Paul's teaching in his epistle to the Galatians to say:

There is neither Presbyterian nor Methodist, there is neither Calvinist nor Arminian, there is neither American nor Asian: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus. (cf Gal 3:28)

The concept of denominations is thus found to be lacking scriptural support. One's membership is not to a denomination, nor even to a local church, but rather the Christian is a member of the universal body of Christ. In this way the universal church may be characterized as being composed of all true believers gathering together in fellowship in local churches all of whom have Christ as their head. The concept of the local expression of the church as a reflection of the universal is illustrated in chapters two and three of the book of Revelation in which Jesus directs His comments toward each of the local churches (each of which has its own "personality" as revealed by its own specific strengths and weaknesses) while consistently maintaining that He is in the midst of them all and the one to whom they all belong.

Given the tendency of man to (unscripturally) segregate from other Christians, the leadership at South Plains Bible Chapel has chosen to avoid the use of the term *member* with respect to those who are a part of the assembly. While it is true that the Epistle of First Corinthians uses the term *member* with respect to the individual's gifting and ministry as expressed within the local church, the usage of the word is metaphorical and the concept is far different from the modern connotation of the word. In our times, the word *member* conjures up the idea of a person who is a member of a club or a specific organization, membership to which is limited. It denotes exclusivity and distinction, even aloofness.

Instead we refer to the Christian as being "in fellowship" with us. This phrase is derived from the Greek word *koinonia* (commonality or fellowship) and reflects the idea of mutual service and care just as one would find within a family. Working together we strive to serve one another and to glorify the Name of God, remembering that we are but a small part of His much greater Church which He will continue to build until He comes to take His bride home.