

07 The Church - Local & Universal

Introduction

Last week we looked at the church in its relationship to the kingdom of God and in its relationship to Israel. We made the observations last week that the church is organically connected to Israel so that their history is our history. We have an actual familial connection. There is a great history, richness, and depth to who we are and how we came to be here. We also said that the church is part of something purposeful and deliberate. We have purpose and meaning here. We meet, not as an ad hoc committee, nor as a happenstance gathering around a common interest, but as part of the kingdom of God. We gather as soldiers gather. Not because they like to play with guns and so they formed a club, but because they are enlisted in the army and they have a mission to fulfill. We are connected to God's plan of redemption and we have a significant part to play.

This week we are going to be looking at the church local and universal. I pray that it will have a similar application to our lives. As we turn this work of art around, we will see this morning how the church is manifest both locally and universally. If we continue to look at the church in organic terms, we can conceive of the at various levels. We are part of the tree which has been growing through the ages. But it is not as though that whole tree has yielded only one bud - this baptist church in McCook Nebraska. No, there are thousands, millions of buds on this tree. Not only do we have a full and rich family history, we also have a vast array of existing family members.

Local

House Church

The church can be conceived of in terms of a house church such as in **Romans 16:5** "Greet also the church in their house. Greet my beloved Epaphroditus, who was the first convert to Christ in Asia." This is a local body of believers that gather on a regular basis to hear the word, to worship, to pray, and to fellowship.

This is actually becoming quite popular now-a-days. There are entire books out there arguing for the church of America to go back to the roots of Christianity and become house churches. The aim in these endeavors is more intimacy. They look at the big churches and all the programs and it all seems to fake or surface level. They aim to recapture a deeper kind of fellowship and a greater level of authenticity.

That, however, is beyond the scope of this sermon. I simply want to point out that an official gathering of believers in a home is described as a church. I feel the need to qualify by saying that there must be certain elements present for it to be a church. You can't just have some Christian friends over to watch Nascar and think that is church. But done rightly, even a home gathering can be a church.

Paul views the gathering in the home of Prisca and Aquila as a church in **1 Corinthians 16:19** "The churches of Asia send you greetings. Aquila and Prisca, together with the church in their house, send you hearty greetings in the Lord."

City Church

It is not uncommon for a church to be identified by city such as in **1 Corinthians 1:2** "To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours"

Paul repeats this welcome to the church of Corinth in **2 Corinthians 1:1** "Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, To the church of God that is at Corinth, with all the saints who are in the whole of Achaia." and to the church in Thessalonica in **1 Thessalonians 1:1** "Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace."

It is quite likely that during the early years of the life of the church, there were few enough believers that all of them from one city could gather in one place. This is still true today. In many small towns, although there may be more than one church, there aren't so many people that they could not gather in one place.

Universal

Regional Church

Now we begin to cross categories when we speak of regional churches. This is a collection of local bodies within a certain region. Thus in **Acts 9:31** Luke records that "the *church* throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was being built up. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it multiplied." There were a number of churches throughout the whole of Judea, and Samaria, and Galilee. In fact in Jerusalem there were three thousand that were saved in a single day. It would be hard to find a 1st century gathering to suite 3000 people. It soon grew to 5000. So likely Jerusalem alone had several churches, not to mention all the other cities in the Judea/Samaria region.

But did you notice that all these churches were referred to in the singular. It was the church (singular) throughout this entire region. So here we begin to see the difference between the church local and the church universal. A local body must be comprised of believers, it must have a government, it must preach the word, administer the ordinances, pray, sing, exercise discipline, etc. We will go into more detail on all these things later, the salient point here is that local bodies have a very particular shape to them. But as we cross categories to the church universal, there is not a discernible government or set of elements that marks it off. This is why Baptists churches are autonomous. We cannot see in scripture that there is any higher authority in the universal church. The authority structure ends at the local level. So as churches join with one another in associations, it is a voluntary association. There is no higher group that tells the churches what they should believe and how they should behave.

Universal Church

We have seen the term church used for a collection of churches in a region, but there are also references to what can only be understood as a universal church. Paul states in **Ephesians 5:25** "Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her." Well obviously this cannot refer to any one local body. Did Jesus love the church in Thessalonica and give himself up for her? Yes, but not her alone. Did Christ love the church of Corinth and give himself up for her? Yes, but not for Corinth alone. No, Christ gave himself up for all the churches in the world. But again, notice that Paul does not say he gave himself up for the churches (plural) but the church (singular).

We see the same kind of thing in **1 Corinthians 12:28** "And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healing, helping, administrating, and various kinds of tongues." God gave the apostles to the church (singular). The whole number of believers, all those to whom God gave the gift of apostles (from whom we get scripture) and teachers (from whom we continue to learn) are all collectively referred to as one single organism - the church.

I hope this distinction is now clear. The church universal is the whole of believers. The church local is much more concrete. There is definite structure that exists at the local level. At the local level there are definite elements that have to be a part of our gathering before it can be called the church. The local church is where the rubber meets the road. The universal church is more organism and the local church is more organization.

If it helps, you can think of water. On a macro level, water has no real shape. It can be contained in a glass or spilled out on the table. There can be a lot or there can be a little, it can be frozen, liquid or vapor. There is very little definition to water at the macro level. But on the micro level it is much more structured. There must be two hydrogen atoms and one oxygen atom. If there are two oxygen atoms then it is no longer water, it is hydrogen peroxide. They must be joined in an exact manner. There cannot be one oxygen atom floating near two hydrogen atoms. They have to be joined in an exact way. There is much more structure and predictability at the molecular level. And so it is with the church.

Application

I am a big proponent of doctrine. I am a big proponent of theology. The word theology comes from the Greek *theos logos* the study of God. Husbands, if you want to love your wives, study them. Know what things they like. Know what kind of movies they like and watch those movies with your wife. Know what kind of things she likes and buy them for her. When she speaks, listen. Listen and learn. Know where she finds her purpose. And if that purpose is being belittled, you stand up for her. Husbands, if you want to love your wife, study them.

If you want to love God, study him. Know the things he likes and the things he hates. When he speaks, you listen. When he expresses his thoughts on worship, on family, on work, on loving your neighbor, on any subject, listen to him. Study God if you love him. Doctrine also comes from the Greek. Doctrine comes from the Greek word *didaskolos*. It means teacher. If you claim to be a Christian, a follower of Christ, then you must follow his *didake*, his teaching. You must

sit at the feet of the master *didaskolos*, the master teacher. Thus doctrine and theology must be part and parcel of the life of any good Christian.

This morning we have been looking at the doctrine (the *didake*) of the church, specifically the church universal and local. So what does all this mean for us? As we love God and therefore have listened to God this morning, what shall we do with this doctrine or theology? We must act on it and apply it to our lives. There is so much more to say about the local church. And the majority of this series will be spent on the local church. So let me just give application this morning for the church universal. I think we can draw the following points out of the this doctrine:

The doctrine of the universal church means that there are other churches besides us. Shocking, I know. But there are other genuine churches that are part of this family, part of this kingdom. This doctrine serves as the foundation for associations. We love God and want to see his kingdom expand and we want to support a missionary to do that work in another land. But we do not have that much money. But look! There is another church over there! And there is yet another church over there! We are all members of the same body; we are all citizens of the same kingdom. We, therefore, have the same purpose. Well maybe church A can give money, and church B can give money, and we can give money, and collectively we can support that overseas missionary! This notion of the universal kingdom provides a doctrinal foundation for churches joining together in one purpose to expand the kingdom of God.

Another application, as I have already mentioned, is the autonomy of local churches. The local church is not just a small piece of the universal church. The structure and authority of local churches is markedly different from the church universal. We see no chain of command in the universal church. Thus each church is autonomous.

Third, the doctrine of the universal church will help us to guard against a tribal mentality. There are more real Christians in this world than just us. Even if we disagree on certain things, there are many genuine churches in the world besides us. It is not us verse the world. God is not glorified by ball hogs. Nobody likes ball hogs. The only people who like ball hogs are the ball hogs themselves. These people actually sabotage the well-being of the team. God will be most glorified by his servants working well with one another toward a common goal. But if your aim is only to grow your tribe, that will actually be hurtful to the kingdom as a whole. This does not mean that there will never be any correction or confrontation. But it does mean that any confrontation, rebuke or correction will be driven by a love of God and a desire to improve how you can work with one another for his glory.

If I may give one final exhortation, please examine your heart on these matters. How many of you heard me? It is so easy for us to come and to zone out. It is so easy to come to church and treat it just as something that you do. It is ok to zone out when brushing your teeth as a mundane task, it is not ok to treat church as a mundane task and zone out. This is where we receive our instructions from the king. It is not ok for soldiers to zone out during their mission briefing. So let me urge you again to carefully examine yourself on these matters. Confess any sin that you may harbor toward others and make sure your interaction toward them will be a benefit to the universal church and not just a shoring up of the defenses of you local church.

Let's pray.