

Ecclesiology: The Doctrine of the Church
Part One: The Universal Church

Who are we and what are we doing here? It's strange that we get up early on Sunday morning when we could be sleeping in like most everyone else in our neighborhoods. We shower and dress and come to this big barn-sized building for an hour or two. We sit next to people and smile at them – some of these people we hardly know, some of them we've known for a long time, but they're so different from us that it's amazing we can stand each other.

When we come in here, we do weird things. We sing songs about blood and execution, but we sing them with a smile on our faces. We close our eyes and talk to somebody who's invisible. We write checks or drop cash into a slot, and they take it away, and we very seldom wonder what happens to all that money – except that we know some of it goes to the guy who stands up in front of that big room over there, and he lectures us out of a book, parts of which were written 3,000 years ago.

I will have to say that we do some swell things. We help each other out. We show concern for needy folks in the community and around on the other side of the globe. We're fairly decent citizens; and most of the time the neighbors speak highly of us.

But who are we? And what makes us behave so differently from everybody else? Are we a civic club, like Kiwanis? Are we an entertainment venue, like the Nutter Center? Are we a counseling service or a school, or just a looseknit band of friends who like to hang out and order pizza once in a while?

You tell might me that we do these things because we're all followers of Jesus Christ. But I know people who claim to be followers of Jesus who never get up early on Sunday morning, and who never get together with other Christians, and who never occupy themselves with the strange rituals that we've adopted.

You say, "This is church. We are the Church." But who told us to be the Church? And who told us that the Church ought to be certain things or do certain things? And by the way, how do we relate to those other groups down the road and around the corner who call themselves "the Church"?

These are the same questions that people were asking 1900 years. And along with most other Christians, we decided a long time ago that we would get our answers from the Bible. So our objective today and next month is to search the Scriptures for the definition and the manual of procedure for the Church.

Jesus said, "I will build my Church." What church? Centerville Grace? The evangelical, fundamental, Bible-believing Church? The Protestant Church? Or the Church that embraces

everybody who uses even the slightest hint of the name “Christian”? Was Jesus referring to this building at 410 East Social Row? To a Conference of churches like ours that meets once a year? Or to something else?

If people tell me that I’m part of the Church, what is it exactly that I’m part of? Today we tackle the first of several far-reaching questions: Where do we fit in God’s big strategy? How can we know if our church activities are really following God’s plan?

The Meaning of the Church

1. When the New Testament speaks of the Church, it uses a Greek term, *ekklesia*, meaning “_____” – a body of people separated from the rest of the world for God’s special purpose.

2. The Bible uses *ekklesia* in two ways:

- The “_____” or “_____” Church

Matthew 16:18 – “I will build my Church.”

Ephesians 5:25 – “Christ loved the Church and gave himself up for her.”

- The “_____” or “_____” church

Matthew 18:17 – “If a brother refuses to listen to you (and to forsake his sin), tell it to the church.”

1st Corinthians 1:1-2 – “Paul ... to the church which is at Corinth.”

Note: The universal church is composed of all true believers. That is why we call it the invisible church; because only God, who sees the heart, can tell who is really “in” the church and who is not. The local church is easier to pinpoint; and it has special features that we will discuss in the next segment.

Biblical Illustrations of the Universal Church

1. Colossians 1:18 – a _____ with a Head

2. Ephesians 2:20-21 – a _____ with one Cornerstone

3. 2nd Corinthians – a _____ loved by Someone special
4. Ephesians 5:26-27 – a _____ whose Groom is Christ
5. Revelation 21:9-10 – a _____ with a wonderful Ruler
6. Titus 2:14 – a _____ rescued by a great Redeemer
7. 1st Peter 5:2-4 – a _____ with a Great Shepherd
8. Ephesians 2:19 – a _____ of resurrected saints, of whom Christ is the “Firstborn”
9. Ephesians 2:15 – a _____ of whom Christ is the Creator
10. 1st Peter 2:9 – a _____ among men
11. Hebrews 4:14 – a royal _____ between God and man
12. Ephesians 1:18 – an _____ of which Jesus Christ is Heir

The History of the Universal Church

1. It began at _____ (Acts 2)
2. It grew in _____ (Acts 2-7)
3. It spread by _____ (Acts 8-14)
4. It was split by _____ (Acts 15)
5. It grew through _____ (Acts 16-28)

The Characteristics of the Invisible Church

1. It's a _____ moving together with one heart, mind, and purpose
1st Corinthians 12:13 – “By one Spirit you have all been baptized into one body.”

Ephesians 5:23 – “The husband is the head of the wife as Christ also is head of the church.”

Ephesians 2:14-15 – “He has broken down the old barrier between believing Jews and unbelieving Gentiles, by make one new man out of them.”

Ephesians 4:4-5 – “There is one body, one Spirit, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one Father who is over all (who belong to Christ)....”

Note: No single organization can claim to be the one true Church.

2. It's a _____, each one bringing his uniqueness to add a touch of flavor to the mix.

Colossians 3:11-13 – “... There is no distinction between Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and freeman, but Christ is all, and in all.”

1st Corinthians 12:4-7 – “Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit.... But to each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.”

3. It's an _____, with no one segment being superior, and with no one excluded.

1st Corinthians 12:13 – “For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jew or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.”

4. It's an _____, cooperating together successfully because of its one Spirit.

1st Corinthians 12:26 – “And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it.”

The Purposes of the Universal Church

1. To _____ the Master

John 15:1-5, 16 – “... I am the Vine, you are the branches. He who abides in me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for apart from me you can do nothing....”

2. To _____ the Master

- In the presence of people

John 17:10 – “And all things that are mine are yours, and yours are mine, and I have been glorified in them.”

John 17:22-23 – “And the glory which you have given me I have given to them; that they may be one, just as we are one. I in them, and you in me, that they may be perfect in unity, that the world may know that you sent me.”

Philippians 2:15 – “That you may prove yourselves to be blameless and innocent, children of God above reproach in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you appear as lights in the world.”

- In the presence of spirits

Ephesians 3:8-11 – “...in order that the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known through the church to the rulers and authorities in heavenly places.”

3. To _____ the Master

John 14:3 – “And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you unto myself, that where I am there you may be also.”

John 17:24 – “Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, be with me where I am....”

It may be difficult to think of ourselves as part of the universal church; to envision ourselves as among “all the true believers of the present age.” In my life, there have been a few moments when I have gotten a glimpse of the universal church: a conference assembly of 1,200 Brethren singing, “Grace Greater than Our Sin”; a pastor’s conference where 1,400 men prayed together and sang a robust outpouring of “Amazing Grace”; a men’s conference where over 10,000 men sang praises to the Lord; a conference of African Christians where the same melodies were sung just as fervently in the Sango language. Though I may feel at those moments like a small part of something very big, still I am reminded that the One to whom we sing is acquainted with my smallest need or hurt; and he regards my meager contribution to his cause as somehow important to the success of the plan.

Resources

McClain, Alva; with revisions by Whitcomb, John C. "The Kingdom and the Church." Winona Lake, IN: Unpublished lecture notes, Grace Theological Seminary, 1972.

Ryrie, Charles C. *Understanding Bible Doctrine*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1972.

Wolston, W. T. P. *The Church: What Is It?* Edinburgh, Scotland: The Darien Press, 1905.

Assignments for Next Segment ("The Doctrine of the Church, Part Two")

1. Read Grudem's *Systematic Theology*, chapters 49-51.
2. Answer one or more of the "Questions for Personal Application" at the end of each chapter, and be prepared to share and discuss your answers in class. Or compose a question of your own (which relates to the subject matter in those chapters), research the topic, and be prepared to share your answer with the class.

Answer Key

A group called out
 Universal, invisible
 Local, visible
 Body
 Temple
 Virgin
 Bride
 City
 Victim
 Flock

Family
 New man
 Chosen race
 Priesthood
 Inheritance
 Pentecost
 Jerusalem
 Persecution
 Differences
 Trouble

Unit
 Melting-pot
 Open house
 Organism
 Be used by
 Reflect
 Be with