

“CHURCH”: TWO SENSES

We have seen that the word *ekklesia* was commonly used by the Greeks to describe a variety of assemblies: people who were called together for some particular purpose. We have also seen that our English translations of the New Testament supply the coined term “church” for this Greek word when it refers to servants of God. Further, we have also observed two distinct uses of this term even when speaking of God’s people: (1.) the universal church consisting of all the saved throughout all time, and, (2.) the local church consisting of Christians living in a given locality who have joined together to perform the work God intends to be accomplished congregationally. These assemblies share a common factor in that each is of Christ and subject to his will. But they are also different.

This is found to be undeniably true as we observe some distinctions between them found in the text of the New Testament. We will notice only a few of them here, but sufficient to make the point.

For example, the universal church promised by Jesus according to Matthew 16:18 was singular in number, “My church.” In contrast, local churches existed wherever Christians congregated to serve God, “churches of Christ,” clearly plural. (Romans 16:16). If we knew no more about the matter than this, obviously there is a difference.

The universal church consists of everyone whose name is registered in heaven, living or dead, “the spirits of just men made perfect” by the blood of Christ (Hebrews 12:22-24). The local church, however, consists of living Christians in a given locality (I Corinthians 1:1-2).

One becomes a member of the universal church when he is saved by obeying the gospel and is added to the number by God (Acts 2:38, 41, 47). One becomes a member of a local church when he asks to join it and is accepted by its members, they being convinced that the one asking for membership is a faithful Christian (Acts 9:20-25).

This calls for a significant observation. Since God adds members to the universal church, no one is excluded who should be included, nor anyone included who should not be. Not so, however, with the local church. Since humans determine membership, one may be included who should not be (I Corinthians 5:1-8), or excluded who should be included (Acts 9:26). Reverent and careful scrutiny is in order here.

Next, what is God’s purpose in the local church? –Jerry F. Bassett