

The Body of Christ - The Universal Church

Written by Dan Henderson

"He saith unto them, But whom say ye that I am? And Simon Peter answered and said, Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God. And Jesus answered and said unto him, Blessed art thou, Simon Barjona: for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven. And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. And I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven." **Matthew 16:15-19**

In **Matthew 16:18** Jesus promised to build His church. In **Mark 16:15-16** he instructed his disciples to teach all nations his word baptizing those that believe. On Pentecost following the ascension of Jesus those saved by obedient baptism were added by the Lord to the church **Acts 2:37-47**

. To what church were they added by the Lord?

Acts 2:47

simply states

"the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved."

What is meant by "the church" in this verse? We understand there was a group of God's children working together in the area of Jerusalem to teach the Gospel. Was this the church to which the Lord added the saved? Is this the church that Jesus promised to build? If this is the church Jesus built then I must be a part of that assembly. To better understand the phrase "the church" we must understand what church means.

Church is used throughout the New Testament in reference to a group of individuals. Strong's tells me the word church in **Mt 16:18** and **Acts 2:47** is a translation of the Greek word ekklesia. From BDB/Thayers I learn that this word is translated as church (115 times) or assembly (3 times) in the King James version of the New Testament. The definition given for this Greek word is - a gathering of citizens called out from their homes into some public place, an assembly.

The Body of Christ - The Universal Church

Written by Dan Henderson

Further in the definition I find - in a Christian sense - an assembly of Christians gathered for worship in a religious meeting. And - the whole body of Christians scattered throughout the earth, - the assembly of faithful Christians already dead and received into heaven. From this we learn that the word church can be used to refer to more than one type of assembly. It is used to refer to the local gathering of Christians and the entire company of Christians from the human race.

When Barnabas traveled to Antioch and the disciples were first called Christians were they part of the church at Jerusalem? From the context of the word church in **Acts 11:19-26**, compared to the previous passages we have looked at, we again see that it is used in two ways. It is used to refer to the entire body of the saved, a universal sense, and to refer to a local group of the saved, a local sense.

The church Jesus promised in **Mt 16:18** and the church to which the saved were added in **Acts 2:47**

is the church in its universal sense. No man has any control over this body. Jesus set the requirements to entry and He adds all that humbly submit to His requirements. The only organization given to this group is Christ as its head and ruler. (

Ephesians 1:20-23; 2:19-22; 5:23

) There is no earthly organization, no synods, diocese, parishes, etc. Jesus is supreme ruler over all. We each are under his authority alone. When one obeys the simple commands given in the Scriptures he is added to the only group Jesus called His church. There is no joining ones self to the one 'universal' church.

Jesus illustrated our relationship with Him in the church with the figure of the vine and its branches in **John 15:1-8**.

*"I am the true vine, and my Father is the husbandman. Every branch in me that beareth not fruit he taketh away: and every branch that beareth fruit, he purgeth it, that it may bring forth more fruit. Now ye are clean through the word which I have spoken unto you. Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine; no more can ye, except ye abide in me. I am the vine, ye are the branches: He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit: for without me ye can do nothing. If a man abide not in me, he is cast forth as a branch, and is withered; and men gather them, and cast them into the fire, and they are burned. If ye abide in me, and my words abide in you, ye shall ask what ye will, and it shall be done unto you. Herein is my Father glorified, that ye bear much fruit; so shall ye be my disciples." **John 15:1-10***

The Body of Christ - The Universal Church

Written by Dan Henderson

Note that Jesus refers to a man as a branch, not a church. Many today are under the mistaken impression that the church in its universal sense is made up of the many individual local congregations of God's people. Jesus states clearly that the one that abides in Him is man. The church Jesus built is made up of individual Christians. Our relationship to Christ in the church is personal not through our local group. The 'one of many' denominational concept of the church belonging to Christ is false. Jesus did not build a large assembly made up of many smaller assemblies. He did not "call out" groups, he called individuals.

Jesus prayed that all His followers would be one unified group.

"As thou hast sent me into the world, even so have I also sent them into the world. And for their sakes I sanctify myself, that they also might be sanctified through the truth. Neither pray I for these alone, but for them also which shall believe on me through their word; That they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us: that the world may believe that thou hast sent me." **John 17:18-21**

The church in its universal sense is unified as Jesus asked. Jesus built only one church **Mt 16:18**

It is made up of all Christians. It began on the day of Pentecost following His ascension into Heaven. Jesus decides who is added to His church. He decides who is taken from His church **Acts 2:47**

. The one church built by Jesus only contains the saved. If you have not been added to the Lord's church you are not saved.

"This is the stone which was set at nought of you builders, which is become the head of the corner. Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved." **Acts 4:11-12**

There is no earthly organization in the Lord's church. No man has any control over it. Nothing can divide the Lord's church. If one turns from the Lord he is ejected from the church and cannot enter again until he submits to the Lord's terms **John 15:1-8**. Nothing on earth can remove you from the Lord's church. Even physical death cannot separate you from the body of

The Body of Christ - The Universal Church

Written by Dan Henderson

the saved.

"But ye are come unto mount Sion, and unto the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to an innumerable company of angels, To the general assembly and church of the firstborn, which are written in heaven, and to God the Judge of all, and to the spirits of just men made perfect, And to Jesus the mediator of the new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling, that speaketh better things than that of Abel." Hebrews 12:22-24.

As Jesus described in the parable of the vine and branches (**John 15:1-8**) we determine our relationship with him and the Father by the fruit we bear. If we faithfully serve Jesus we will remain in His kingdom forever. If we turn from serving him we will be cut off and cast into the fire. Each individual Christian is expected by God to serve faithfully. I must produce fruit for the Lord or I will be lost.

The church which Jesus built has a mission here on earth. It is to proclaim the Word of God to a lost and dying world. This is done as each individual carries out his part in spreading the Word. As part of the one church I am to teach the Word. I am instructed in the Scriptures to work with other Christians in worship and service unto the Lord **Acts 9:26-28**. From the examples and commands of the Word we understand that individual Christians may gather in localized groups to worship and work for the Lord

Acts 11:26

. This is the church in its local sense. We work together in our separate localities to spread the Gospel to the world. We are able to encourage and strengthen one another in this way.

Each of these local churches began at different times. None of them contains all the saved. We must join ourselves to a local group. The local group has the right and authority to accept us or refuse to allow us to work with them. When we look at most local groups of Christians we will see both saved and lost individuals included. I do not have to be in any particular one of these local groups to be saved. The Lord has given us an earthly organization for these groups. Elders are to guide the flock of which they are a part. Deacons are to serve the local group under the elders. Many times these groups become divided over the thoughts of men. When I die I will no longer be a part of one of these local groups.

Man's misunderstanding of the makeup and organization of the church in its universal sense has caused many problems through the ages. Each Christian is responsible to the Lord for his

The Body of Christ - The Universal Church

Written by Dan Henderson

or her own actions and fruit bearing. This is as the Lord designed and we must abide by that design.

What about your relationship with Christ? Have you been added by the Lord to His church? Jesus said *"I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me."* **John 14:6**

Those that believe and are baptized will be saved

Mark 16:16

. About three thousand baptized believers were added to the Lord's church after the Word was preached on Pentecost

Acts 2:41

. Do you believe? Are you willing to change and follow Christ? Have you been baptized for the remission of sins? If not, why not? Jesus will add you to His fold if you accept His terms. Study your Bible, follow the teaching of Christ. Be Saved.