



The Church - What is it? Universal vs. Local

What is the New Testament Church?

- Christian community after Jesus' resurrection
- Established by Jesus Christ, guided by Apostles
- A model for churches today (Matthew 16:18)

Founded by Jesus Christ

- Church established upon Christ's teachings
- Jesus is the "rock" upon which the church was built (Matt.: 16:18) not Peter which is the foundational text used for the Catholic papacy.
- Apostles provided foundational leadership
- Jesus as cornerstone and foundation (Ephesians 2:20)

Wordplay in the Greek:

The Greek text uses two different words: "Petros" (Peter), which means "stone" or "small rock," and "petra" (rock), which can refer to a large mass of rock or bedrock. Some scholars argue that the wordplay indicates that Jesus was referring to himself as the bedrock on which the Church is built.

Ultimately, the interpretation of "upon this rock" is a complex one with various perspectives within Christianity.

"Upon this rock" refers to a statement made by Jesus in Matthew 16:18, where he says, "And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church.". The interpretation of this verse is a subject of debate, with some believing Jesus was referring to Peter himself as the rock, and others believing he was referring to Peter's confession of faith in Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the living God, or even to Jesus himself as the rock according to some theological resources.

Here's a breakdown of the different interpretations:

Peter as the Rock:

Some Christian denominations, particularly the Roman Catholic Church, interpret "this rock" as referring to Peter, and they see this as a foundational text for the papacy and the authority of the Pope as Peter's successor.

Peter's Confession as the Rock:

Other interpretations, including some Protestant traditions, understand "this rock" to refer to Peter's confession of faith in Jesus as the Christ. This view emphasizes the importance of recognizing Jesus as the Messiah and the Son of God as the foundation of the Church.

Jesus as the Rock:

Some interpretations posit that Jesus is the ultimate rock upon which the Church is built, and Peter's confession is a reflection of that truth. This view aligns with other biblical passages that refer to Jesus as the cornerstone or foundation of the Church according to some biblical commentaries.

Apostolic Leadership

- Direct witnesses to Christ's life and teachings
- Apostles guided early decisions and doctrines
- Community devoted to Apostolic teachings (Acts 2:42; Acts 15:6-22)

Gospel-Centered Community

- Proclaimed Christ's death, burial, resurrection
- Emphasized salvation through faith in Christ
- Core message consistently taught and shared (1 Corinthians 15:1-4)

Guided by the Holy Spirit

- Empowered at Pentecost with coming of the Holy Spirit
- Sanctioned preaching and miracles
- Provided wisdom and guidance for decisions (Acts 2; John 14:26)

Baptism and Communion

- Practiced baptism by immersion
- Regularly observed communion
- Symbols of commitment and remembrance (Acts 2:38; 1 Corinthians 11:23-26)

Prayer and Fellowship

- Dedicated to communal prayer and worship
- Shared possessions and cared for one another
- Strong spiritual unity and support (Acts 2:42-47; Acts 4:32-35)

Mission and Evangelism

- Actively spread the Gospel message
- Focused on discipleship and evangelism
- Committed to fulfilling the Great Commission (Matthew 28:19-20; Acts 1:8)

Leadership Structure

- Elders (pastors) and deacons appointed - note they are all PURAL
- Clear responsibilities for spiritual oversight
- Leaders selected for character and godliness (1 Timothy 3; Titus 1)

Unity in Diversity

- Encouraged love, humility, and unity
- Recognized Christ as head of the church
- Valued diverse spiritual gifts and backgrounds (Ephesians 4:1-6)

Application for Today

- Model our churches after New Testament patterns
- Prioritize Gospel, fellowship, and mission
- Foster unity, humility, and love

Church Structure

- Differences between the Universal/Invisible Church and Local Churches, including scripture references and summary of denominational views.

What is the Universal Church?

- Definition: The Universal Church refers to all true believers worldwide, past, present, and future—regardless of denomination, location, or background.
- Key Scripture References:
 - Matthew 16:18: “...upon this rock I will build my church...”
 - Ephesians 1:22-23: Christ is head over all things to the church, His body.
 - Ephesians 4:4-6: “There is one body and one Spirit...one Lord, one faith, one baptism.”
 - 1 Corinthians 12:13: “For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body...”
 - Revelation 7:9: Multitudes from every nation gathered before God.
- Characteristics:
 - Invisible, spiritual body of Christ.
 - Composed exclusively of genuine believers.
 - United through faith in Christ, transcending all boundaries.

Priority: Universal Church

Scripture-anchored argument for seeing the Universal Church (the one body of Christ across all times and places) as more fundamental than any single local congregation.

1. Biblical Emphasis on a Single, Worldwide Body

Text	Key Point
Ephesians 4:4-6	“There is one body ... one Lord, one faith, one baptism.” Paul stresses <i>oneness</i> before he ever addresses local congregational issues.
1 Corinthians 12:12-13	All believers are “baptized by one Spirit into one body , whether Jews or Greeks.” Diversity is celebrated within an already-existing universal whole.
Revelation 7:9-10	John’s end-time vision is corporate and global—“a great multitude from every nation.” The climactic picture of redemption is not a patchwork of isolated churches, but one international assembly before the throne.

Implication: Since Scripture’s grand narrative moves toward a single, multiethnic bride of Christ, the universal dimension should shape how we value and organize local expressions.

2. Christ’s Headship Is Universal, Not Congregation-Bound

- Ephesians 1:22-23 calls the Church (singular) Christ’s body, “the fullness of Him who fills all in all.”
- Local leaders (Acts 20:28; 1 Peter 5:2) are *under-shepherds*; the Chief Shepherd’s authority spans all believers, not just one flock.

Implication: Allegiance to Christ’s universal headship relativizes any authority structure that is merely local, preventing congregationalism from becoming an end in itself.

Priority: Universal Church

3. Mission Flows from a Universal Identity

- The Great Commission (“make disciples of all nations,” Matthew 28:19-20) presupposes a people of God bigger than any locale.
- Paul planted churches, yet his driving passion was that “the Gentiles might become an offering acceptable to God” (Romans 15:16)—a universal aim.

Implication: If Christians see themselves first as citizens of an all-nations Church, cooperation in evangelism, relief work, and theological training becomes an act of family solidarity rather than optional partnership.

4. Universal Unity Guards Against Parochialism and Division

- Historical splits often arose when local or national interests eclipsed the shared identity of God’s people.
- Recognizing the universal body promotes humility (“our congregation is not the whole church”) and charity toward believers with different cultures or secondary doctrines (cf. Romans 14:4).

Implication: Prioritizing universal unity mitigates sectarian pride and encourages mutual edification across denominational lines.

5. Sacraments/Ordinances Signify Universal Realities

- Baptism (Galatians 3:27-28) clothes us with Christ, erasing Jew/Gentile distinctions.
- The Lord’s Supper (1 Corinthians 10:16-17) proclaims that “we who are many are one bread, one body.”
- Both rites point beyond the local gathering to the larger communion of saints.

Anticipated Objections & Responses

Objection

“Local churches are commanded to gather (Heb 10:25).”

“Accountability happens best in local contexts.”

“Baptists prize autonomy.”

Response

Absolutely; physical assembly is essential. The question is *which reality is ultimate*. Scripture presents local meetings as *expressions* of an already-existing universal body, not the other way around.

True, but universal-church consciousness deepens accountability: when a local body strays, the wider church—through councils, partnerships, or sister congregations—can exhort and restore (Acts 15; Gal 2:11-14).

Autonomy need not mean isolation. Healthy autonomy flourishes when rooted in an identity that transcends any single congregation (cf. cooperation in the IMB or SBC).

What is the Local Church?

- Definition: Local Churches refer to visible, geographically-based assemblies of professing believers who regularly gather for worship, teaching, fellowship, and ministry.
- Key Scripture References:
 - 1 Corinthians 1:2: Paul addresses the church at Corinth.
 - Galatians 1:2: References to the churches of Galatia.
 - Acts 14:23: Paul appointing elders in every local church.
 - Hebrews 10:24-25: Believers encouraged to regularly meet together.
 - Revelation 2-3: Messages to specific local churches (e.g., Ephesus, Smyrna).
- Characteristics:
 - Visible communities of believers gathered in specific locations.
 - Includes professing believers, recognizing some may not be genuinely saved.
 - Local leadership structures (elders, pastors, deacons).
 - Regular practice of ordinances/sacraments (baptism, communion).

Priority: Local Church

Scripture-anchored argument showing why the local congregation—a gathered, visible assembly with recognized membership and leadership—should be seen as the primary focus of Christian life, with the “universal church” understood as a derivative concept.

1. New-Testament Usage of “Ekklesia” Is Predominantly Local

NT Usage

Individual congregation

Regional clusters

Examples

“the church in Corinth” (1 Co 1:2); “the churches of Galatia” (Ga 1:2)

“churches throughout Judea, Galilee, and Samaria” (Ac 9:31)

Observation

90-plus of the NT’s ~115 occurrences refer to specific assemblies, not an abstract global body.

Still concrete groups you could visit, not an invisible reality.

Implication: The default NT meaning is the local gathering; any broader sense is the exception, not the rule.

2. Mission and Pastoral Care Originate in Local Churches

- **Acts 13:1-3** — The Holy Spirit launches Paul and Barnabas from the church in **Antioch**, not from a borderless network.
- **1 Timothy & Titus** — Pastoral letters focus on organizing specific congregations to ensure doctrinal fidelity and care for widows.

Implication: Gospel advance and shepherding flourish when rooted in accountable, resource-sharing congregations.

Priority: Local Church

3. All Essential Church Commands Require a Local Context

Command	Scripture	Why Local?
Regular assembly	Heb 10:24-25	You cannot “stir one another up” or “encourage ... as you see the Day approaching” unless you routinely meet face-to-face.
Baptism & Lord’s Supper	Ac 2:41-42; 1 Co 11:17-34	Ordinances need a gathered body that can admit, supervise, and if necessary discipline participants.
Elders & deacons	Ac 14:23; 1 Ti 3; Tit 1	Qualified leaders are appointed “in every church,” presupposing identifiable flocks (1 Pe 5:2).
Church discipline	Mt 18:15-17; 1 Co 5	A defined assembly must deliberate, exclude, and restore; a nebulous global church cannot.

Implication: Without local churches the very practices that mark God’s people become impossible.

4. Local Churches Are Christ’s “Lampstands” (Rev 2-3)

- Jesus walks among seven lampstands—each an individual city-church—commending, warning, or removing them.
- His evaluation is congregation-by-congregation, underscoring their discrete responsibility and witness.

Implication: The risen Lord treats local churches as distinct entities answerable to Him.

5. Unity Is Meaningful Only If Expressed Locally

- Universal oneness (Eph 4:4-6) becomes credible when ethnic, social, and generational differences worship together in the same room (Eph 2:14-22). Abstract unity without concrete fellowship risks sentimentalism.

Anticipated Objections & Responses

Objection

“Focusing locally breeds parochialism.”

“The NT still speaks of one body (1 Co 12:13).”

“Universal identity protects against authoritarian leaders.”

Response

Healthy localism doesn’t deny the wider body; rather, it provides the concrete relationships and resources through which inter-church cooperation can happen (2 Co 8-9).

True—but Paul addresses that truth to a *local* church (Corinth) to heal their divisions. The global aspect serves the local, not vice versa.

Robust plurality of elders, congregational accountability, and mutual recognition among churches—all local dynamics—are the NT safeguards against abuse.

Side-by-Side Looksee

Aspect	Universal Church	Local Church
Visibility	Invisible, spiritual	Visible, tangible assembly
Membership	Genuine believers only	Professing believers
Scope	Global, all believers	Geographically specific
Leadership	Christ as head	Local pastors, elders, deacons
Unity Basis	Faith in Christ alone	Shared doctrines, beliefs, practices
Duration	Eternal	Temporal, earthly gathering

Denominational Views regarding the Universal and Local Church

1. Catholic Church

- Universal Church: Visible worldwide institution under authority of the Pope, unified through sacraments.
- Local Church: Local dioceses or parishes governed by bishops, priests.

2. Eastern Orthodox Church

- Universal Church: Visible unity of Orthodox churches worldwide, governed by bishops in communion.
- Local Church: Individual parishes under local bishops, reflecting universal Orthodox unity.

3. Baptist Churches

- Universal Church: Invisible, spiritual body of all true believers.
- Local Church: Autonomous, independent congregations governed by elders/pastors

4. Protestant Churches

A. Presbyterian/Reformed Churches

- Universal Church: Invisible communion of saints (all elect).
- Local Church: Visible congregations governed by elders within regional assemblies (presbyteries).

B. Methodist Churches

- Universal Church: Worldwide spiritual community of believers united in faith and practice.
- Local Church: Congregations connected through regional and global conferences, supervised by bishops.

C. Lutheran Churches

- Universal Church: Spiritual body of all believers joined through faith.
- Local Church: Congregations organized around Word and Sacrament, structured under synods.

D. Pentecostal/Charismatic Churches

- Universal Church: Spiritual body comprising all born-again believers across denominations.
- Local Church: Independent or affiliated congregations emphasizing spiritual gifts, governed by pastors or leadership teams.

Conclusion

In a general sense, "church" refers to a Christian religious community or a body of believers. It can also denote the building where Christians gather for worship. In its most fundamental sense, the church is understood as the people who have faith in Jesus Christ and follow his teachings.

1. The Church as a People:

- The Body of Christ: The church is often described as the body of Christ, with Jesus as the head and believers as its members.
- Community of Believers: It's a community of individuals united by their shared faith and commitment to Jesus Christ.
- Called Out from the World: Christians are "called out" from the world to form a distinct community with a shared purpose.
- Visible and Invisible: The church can be understood in both visible (the group of people who profess Christianity) and invisible (those who have true faith in Christ) terms.

2. The Church as a Place:

- Building for Worship: The term "church" can also refer to the physical building where Christians gather for worship, prayer, and fellowship.
- Not Limited to Buildings: Importantly, the Bible emphasizes that the church is fundamentally a group of people, not just a building.

3. Biblical Images of the Church:

- Family of God: Members of the church are adopted as God's children, becoming part of a spiritual family with Jesus as their elder brother.
- Bride of Christ: This image emphasizes the intimate and sacred relationship between Christ and the church.
- Temple of the Spirit: The church is seen as a place where God's Spirit dwells.

4. Core Functions of the Church:

- Worship: Gathering together to praise and honor God.
- Fellowship: Building relationships and supporting one another.
- Instruction in the Word: Learning from the Bible and growing in faith.
- Sacraments: Participating in practices like communion and baptism.
- Service and Mission: Extending God's influence and love to the world.

Conclusion

- Universal Church: spiritual, invisible community of all genuine believers united in Christ.
- Local Churches: visible communities that reflect universal truth in tangible ways through worship, fellowship, teaching, and ministry.
- These concepts help believers understand both their broader spiritual unity and practical expressions of faith in local congregations.
- While the New Testament commands us to commit to local bodies, it consistently grounds that commitment in a prior, richer reality: the Universal Church—the single bride Christ loved, redeemed, and is coming to claim.
- Elevating this universal identity safeguards against narrowness, fuels mission, and reflects the very heart of God’s redemptive plan “to unite all things in Christ” (Ephesians 1:10).
- The New Testament’s pattern is unmistakable: Christ builds His kingdom through identifiable local churches—each a visible colony of heaven where the gospel is preached, ordinances are administered, disciples are formed, and His presence is displayed (Mt 18:20).
- The concept of a universal church is real and precious, but it is experienced, guarded, and propagated chiefly through faithful local assemblies.