

Use and Meaning of the Word “Church” in I Corinthians

Many people read I Corinthians 12, see the word “Church” or the word “body” (as in verse 13 and 27), and presume that the definition of the word church is, “all those saved since Pentecost” (i.e. Universal). The Catholic (Universal) church has been taught since the days of Augustine (the father of corrupt ecclesiology), but the Bible does not teach this doctrine.

Consider I Corinthians, and honestly ask, “What did the Holy Spirit mean, and what did Paul understand, when He/he used the word, “church?” Is it local (i.e. an assembly at a specific place), or is it universal (i.e. all those who are saved)?

1. I Cor 1:2 Unto the **church** of God which is at Corinth – **must be Local**
2. I Cor 4:17 . . . as I teach every where in every **church** – **Local**
3. I Cor 6:4 If then ye have judgments of things pertaining to this life, set them to judge who are least esteemed in the **church**. – **Local**
4. I Cor 7:17 But as God hath distributed to every man, as the Lord hath called every one, so let him walk. And so ordain I in all **churches**. – **Local**
5. I Cor 10:32 Give none offence, neither to the Jews, nor to the Gentiles, nor to the **church** of God: – **Could technically be Universal**, but seemingly **Local**
6. I Cor 11:16 . . . neither the **churches** of God. – **Local**
7. I Cor 11:18 For first of all, when ye come together in the **church** – **Local**
8. I Cor 11:22 What? have ye not houses to eat and to drink in? or despise ye the **church** of God – **Could go either way**, but surely seems **Local** in context.
9. I Cor 12:13 For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one **body**, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free; and have been all made to drink into one Spirit.
(This “body” is obviously the church, but is it local or universal?)
10. I Cor 12:28 And God hath set some in the **church** . . . **Local**, but **Universal is technically possible**; visible is certain.
11. I Cor 14:4 He that speaketh in an unknown tongue edifieth himself; but he that prophesieth edifieth the **church**. – **Local**
12. I Cor 14:5 . . . except he interpret, that the **church** may receive edifying. – **Local**
13. I Cor 14:12 Even so ye, forasmuch as ye are zealous of spiritual gifts, seek that ye may excel to the edifying of the **church**. – **Local**
14. I Cor 14:19 Yet in the **church** I had rather speak five words with my understanding, that by my voice I might teach others also, than ten thousand words in an unknown tongue. – **Local**
15. I Cor 14:23 If therefore the whole **church** be come together into one place – **Local**
16. I Cor 14:28 But if there be no interpreter, let him keep silence in the **church** – **Local**
17. I Cor 14:33 For God is not the author of confusion, but of peace, as in all **churches** – **Local**
18. I Cor 14:34 Let your women keep silence in the **churches**: – **Local**
19. I Cor 14:35 . . . for it is a shame for women to speak in the **church**. – **Local**
20. I Cor 15:9 For I am the least of the apostles, that am not meet to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the **church** of God. – **Could be Universal** or **Local** (i.e. Generic use of the word) – it is certainly visible.
21. I Cor 16:1 . . . I have given order to the **churches** of Galatia, even so do ye. – **Local**
22. I Cor 16:19a The **churches** of Asia salute you – **Local**
23. I Co 16:19b. . . with the **church** that is in their house. – **Local**

The question must be asked and answered honestly, “does I Cor 12:13 refer to Spirit baptism into a universal church, or water baptism into a local church?” Consider the following facts and come to a decision based on the word of God.

- Of the 22 times that the word “church” occurs in I Corinthians, all but four of them are absolutely LOCAL with no other option – they don’t work for a Universal definition. They are at one location, or refer to one group of people, or both.
- The first four are obviously LOCAL, setting a context that the use of the word “church” is local elsewhere in I Corinthians. Why would the definition change, and without explanation?
- The question is, if some are Universal (all believers) and some are Local (one local assembly), why is there no explanation when the definition switches from one to the other?
- Also, it is clear that all 22 references to church in I Corinthians work well with a Local definition.
- The use of “church” in 12:28 and 15:9 could refer to multiple churches in a generic sense (i.e. when we say “go to the store” we don’t mean that there is only one store on the face of the earth).
- The man who wants to believe in a Universal church must admit two definitions of “church”, as there are at least 18 times when I Corinthians uses “church” exclusively as a local body.
- When we get to chapter 12, it seems that such important doctrine is present that it would be wrong of Paul not to clearly re-define “church” if a redefinition from Local to Universal is intended, since the word has been used in an exclusively Local sense seven or eight times already.