

In Search of the Universal Invisible Church

By Elder Milburn Cockrell Pastor - Berea Baptist Church Mantachie, Mississippi
THIS EBOOK MADE AVAILABLE BY THE INTERNATIONAL MISSIONARY BAPTIST MINISTRIES PUBLISHING
SMYRNA, TENNESSEE

In Search of the Universal Invisible Church

Elder Milburn Cockrell
Pastor - Berea Baptist Church
Mantachie, Mississippi

Chapter I THE MEANING OF 'EKKLESIA'

Throughout all Protestant Christendom there prevails the teaching that the word church has a twofold meaning in the New Testament. They say at times it is used in the local sense and at other times in the sense of a universal, invisible church consisting of all believers. They make the word to have a literal sense and a figurative sense.

Universal church people are not agreed on just what this invisible church really is. The strict dispensationalists would give this definition: "The true church, composed of the whole number of regenerate persons from Pentecost to the first resurrection (**I Cor. 15:52**), united together and to Christ by the baptism of the Holy Spirit (**I Cor. 12:12-13**), is the body of Christ of which He is the Head (**Eph. 1:22-23**). As such it is a holy temple for the habitation of God through the Spirit (**Eph. 2:21-22**); is 'one flesh' with Christ (**Eph. 5:30-31**); and espoused to Him as a chaste virgin to one husband (**II Cor. 11:2-4**)." (See The Scofield Reference Bible, footnote on **Hebrews 12:23**, p. 1304).

Strict covenant theologians have a much larger church than dispensationalists. They say: "The catholic or universal Church, which is invisible, consists of the whole number of the elect, that have been, are, or shall be gathered into one, under Christ the head thereof; and is the spouse, the body, the fulness of Him that filleth all in all" (Confession of Faith of the United Presbyterian Church, Chap. 25, Article 1, p. 36, of the 1961-62 annual).

For 117 years of its existence the Southern Baptist Convention had no article of faith about the universal, invisible church. In the 1950s and 1960s the liberals ceased power, and in 1962 a revised confession was adopted which said: "The New Testament speaks also of the church as the body of Christ which includes all the redeemed of all ages" (Article VI). This is essentially the strict covenant view of the church.

The dispensationalists make the church to be the whole number of regenerate persons from Pentecost to the first resurrection. They would exclude the Old Testament saints from being in the church and all New Testament saints before the day of Pentecost. The covenant theologian has a much larger church consisting of the

whole number of the elect, that have been, are, or shall be gathered into one. Nevertheless, both schools have a universal, invisible church. This view is so generally believed that any person who dares to reject it is branded as a "misguided fanatic."

In this booklet I shall not inquire any more as to what theologians and creeds say about the church. There is no such thing as an inerrant creed or an infallible theologian. The final court of appeal is the Bible. What men may say about the Bible is unimportant. The great question is: What is the New Testament idea of a church? Does the New Testament authorize only the local idea of the word church, or does it authorize the universal, invisible idea, or both? It will be my purpose to prove that when we are shut up to the New Testament alone, only one definite idea of the church rules the field. In the New Testament the true and actual church is a local, visible body of baptized believers.

A limited reading of the New Testament will prove that a church made disciples (**Matt. 28:19**), baptized these disciples in water (**Matt. 28:19**), and taught them what Christ commanded (**Matt. 28:20**). A true New Testament church received members (**Rom. 14:1**), elected officers (**Acts 1:23; 6:5**), sent out missionaries (**Acts 13:1-4**), observed the Lord's Supper (**I Cor. 11**), had regular and stated meetings (**Acts 20:7; I Cor. 16:1-2**), settled disputes (**Acts 15:1-41**), excluded the disorderly (**I Cor. 5:9-13; II Thess. 3:14**), restored the penitent (**II Cor. 2:1-10**), and condemned false doctrine (**Rom. 16:17-18**). None of these things could have been done by a universal, invisible church.

Since the term "the universal, invisible church" is nowhere found in the New Testament, I must say that we do not have much to go on in our search. But in order to make sure the word church never has any meaning other than a local church, we must examine every passage in the New Testament on this important subject. Let us look into the Book and see what God has been pleased to reveal. If the universal, invisible church is of the great importance which some attach to it, surely the Bible will set this doctrine forth in plain language for all to see. Otherwise, there is no need nor place for the universal, invisible church.

The word "church" found in our KJV is a translation of the Greek word *ekklesia*. In the Greek New Testament it occurs 115 times. In our KJV church is found 114 times. However, two of these times should be excluded from our study. In **Acts 19:37** the Greek word is *hierosulos* not *ekklesia*. This is the Greek word for temple. Then in **I Peter 5:13** *ekklesia* does not occur in the Greek text. The word church is supplied by the translators. 'Ekklesia is translated three times "assembly" in **Acts 19**. Hence we need to subtract two passages in the KJV (**Acts 19:37** and **I Peter 5:13**) which makes 112. Then we need to add 3 (**Acts 19:32, 39, 41**). Thus giving us 115 times *ekklesia* occurs in the Greek New Testament.

THE NON CHRISTIAN USAGE



In order to discover the primary and literal meaning of the Greek word ekklesia, let us look carefully at its non- Christian usage in **Acts 19**. "***For the assembly*** (ekklesia) ***was confused***" (**Acts 19:32**). **Acts 19:39** says: "***It shall be determined in a lawful assembly***" (ekklesia). **Acts 19:41** declares: "***He dismissed the assembly***" (ekklesia). Hence we see the competent scholars of the King James Version believed that the literal meaning of ekklesia was "assembly." They did not translate it "the called out."

Wickcliff (1380) translates these three passages "church." Tyndale (1534), Cranmer (1539), the Geneva Bible (1557), and the Rhemish Version (1582) all translate the word in Acts 19 "congregation." The New International Version, the New English Bible, The New Testament by Charles Williams, the Twentieth Century New Testament, the Centenary Translation, the Judaeon New Testament, the Weymouth Version, Moffatt's version, and the Emphasized Bible all translate all three verses in **Acts 19** as "assembly." The Amplified New Testament translates verse **39** and **41** "assembly," but in verse **32** it is "gathering." The New Berkeley Version translates verse 32 and 39 "assembly," but in verse 41 it is "gathering." The New Testament in Basic English has "meeting" and so does the Good News for Modern Man (a version which is so bad it ought to be called bad news for any man).

None of these translate ekklesia "the called out." If as our opponents claim the word means "the called out," why did not any of these scholars so translate? Yet they say all scholars agree with them! The word ekklesia does not mean "the called out." It means "assembly," "congregation," "gathering," or "meeting." This literal and primary meaning precludes the so-called universal, invisible church. There is no such thing as an assembly which cannot assemble, or a congregation which never congregates. The meaning of the word prohibits such a meaning. The universal, invisible church has never assembled and never will on this earth in this gospel age. Hence such a thing is a mere concept of the mind, having no real existence in time or place.

One time in the New Testament the word church ekklesia is applied to the congregation or assembly of Israel in the wilderness: "***This is he, that was in the church in the wilderness with the angel which spake to him in the mount Sina, and with our fathers: who received the lively oracles to give unto us***" (**Acts 7:38**). The congregation in the wilderness was not a church in the New Testament sense. But it was a local, visible body of people in one place. There was no universal, invisible congregation of the Israelites. This cannot mean "the whole number of regenerate persons from Pentecost to the first resurrection," nor can it mean "the whole number of the elect, the have been, are, or shall be gathered into one." Ekklesia (church) retains its primary and literal sense of assembly or congregation.

ITS PLURAL USAGE

The word Ekklesia in the plural form occurs 36 times in the Greek New Testament (**Acts 9:31; 15:41; 16:5; Rom. 16:4, 16; I Cor. 7:17; 11:16; 14:33-34; 16:1,19; II**

Cor. 8:1, 18, 19, 23-24; 11:8, 28; 12:13; Gal. 1:2, 22; I Thess. 2:14; II Thess. 1:4; Rev. 1:4, 11, 20; 2:7, 11, 17, 23, 29; 3:6, 13, 22; 22:16). So far as I know no one has yet invented the doctrine of the universal, invisible churches. Therefore, the plural tolerates nothing but the local idea. It leaves no place for either the universal, invisible church of the Protestants, or the universal visible church of the Catholics. These 36 plural usage's confirm the literal and primary sense of the word is correct. This leaves 75 other passages.

Some make a big to do over **Acts 9:31**. They contend the Greek text has the word church in the singular here. It is true that Greek copies vary between "churches" and "church." The Alexandrian copy, the Latin Vulgate, the Syriac, the Ethiopic Version, and some others read in the singular number. However, the Textus Receptus has "churches." I believe this is the proper original text, and I will leave the matter there. But even if one receives the translation of "church" rather than "churches," he does not have a universal, invisible church. Instead, he would have a provincial use of the word church, a thing which would favor the meaning of the word church as held by the Catholics.

THE CHURCH IN A CERTAIN PLACE

Twenty times the word church is used in the singular number, and it points to a church which meets in a certain place. These passages are as follows:

- "The church which was at Jerusalem" (Acts 8:1).***
- "The church which was in Jerusalem" (Acts 11:22).***
- "The church that was in Antioch" (Acts 13:1).***
- "The church at Cenchrea" (Rom. 16:1).***
- "The church that is in their house" (Rom. 16:5).***
- "The church of God which is at Corinth" (I Cor. 1:2).***
- "The church which is in his house" (Col. 4:15).***
- "The church of the Laodiceans" (Col. 4:16).***
- "The church of the Thessalonians" (I Thess. 1:1).***
- "The church of the Thessalonians" (II Thess. 1:1).***
- "The church in thy house" (Phile. 2).***
- "The church of Ephesus" (Rev. 2:1).***
- "The church in Smyrna" (Rev. 2:8).***
- "The church at Pergamos" (Rev. 2:12).***
- "The church in Thyatira" (Rev. 2:18).***
- "The church in Sardis" (Rev. 3:1).***
- "The church in Philadelphia" (Rev. 3:7).***
- "The church of the Laodiceans" (Rev.3:14).***

These verses most certainly refer to a local church, an assembly of people who meet in a given locality, a body of baptized believers. There is no such thing as a

universal, invisible church which meets in a certain place. A church which gathers in a certain place is both local and visible. This leaves 55 more verses to consider.

LOCATION IN THE IMMEDIATE CONTEXT

In 23 other passages the word church is located in a certain place in the immediate context. These verses are as follows:

"The Lord added to the (Jerusalem) church" (Acts 2:47).

"Fear came upon all the (Jerusalem) church" (Acts 8:3).

"As for Saul, he made havock of the (Jerusalem) church" (Acts 8:3).

"His hands to vex certain of the (Jerusalem) church" (Acts 12:1).

"But prayer was made without ceasing of the (Jerusalem) church" (Acts 12:5).

"And being brought on their way by the (Antioch) church" (Acts 15:3).

"They were received by the (Jerusalem) church" (Acts 15:4).

"He ... saluted the (Jerusalem) church" (Acts 18:22).

"Called the elders of the (Ephesian) church" (Acts 20:17).

"The church that is in their house" (Rom. 16:5). The name of this church is uncertain, but it was local for it met in a house.

"Least esteemed in the (Corinthian) church" (I Cor. 6:4).

"Despise ye the church of God" (I Cor. 11:22). Paul called the Corinthian church by this title in I Corinthians 1:1.

"He that prophesieth edifieth the (Corinthian) church" (I Cor. 14:4).

"The (Corinthian) church may receive edifying" (I Cor. 14:5).

"The edifying of the (Corinthian) church" (I Cor. 14:12).

"In the (Corinthian) church I had rather speak" (I Cor. 14:19).

"Let him keep silence in the (Corinthian) church" (I Cor. 14:28).

"For women to speak in the (Corinthian) church" (I Cor. 14:35).

"Let not the (Ephesian) church be charged" (I Tim. 5:16).

"In the midst of the (Jerusalem) church will I sing praise unto thee" (Heb. 2:12).

"Thy charity before the (Ephesian) church" (III John 6).

"I wrote unto the (Ephesian) church" (III John 9).

"Casteth them out of the (Ephesian) church" (III John 10).

IN CONNECTION WITH COMING TOGETHER

We are now going on to consider the remaining 32 passages. Three times the word church is connected with a coming together. This precluded a universal, invisible church in the strongest possible manner. They also demonstrate what a church really is in the New Testament sense. These verses can mean nothing but a local, visible body of baptized believers.

First, consider Acts 11:26 which says: **"And it came to pass, that they assembled themselves with the church, and taught much people."** The reference is to the church

at Antioch. With this local, visible body of baptized believers Paul and Barnabas assembled themselves; they assembled with the assembly. We also see that the church is a place where people assemble to hear the Bible taught.

Second, look at **Acts 14:27**: "***And when they were come, and had gathered the church together, they rehearsed all that God had done with them, and how he had opened the door of faith unto the Gentiles.***" Please note the words "***gathered the church together.***" A church in the New Testament sense can be gathered together in one place. In this one place the things of God can be rehearsed. Such can never be said of some supposed universal, invisible church.

Third, **I Corinthians 11:18** tells us: "***For first of all, when ye come together in the church, I hear that there be divisions among you; and I partly believe it.***" Please observe the words "***when ye come together in the church.***" A church is a place where people "come together.., into one place" (**I Cor. 11:20**). To use the word church of some ideal multitude who have never come together into one place is absurd. Such a thing cannot be a church in the Biblical sense; it is only a mythical church, a church that is made to exist in religious minds out of theological necessity.

THE WHOLE CHURCH

We now have 29 passages left. Thus far we have not found even one thing which in the least resembles the universal, invisible church. To the universal church people the whole church consists of "the whole number of the elect, that have been, are, or shall be gathered into one." But in the New Testament "the whole church" is always used to refer to a local church. Then why do they use the expression "the whole church" to mean all the elect? Where is their Scriptural authority for doing so?

I shall prove what I have said. "***If therefore the whole church come together into one place, and all speak with tongues, and there come in those that are unlearned, or unbelievers, will they not say that ye are mad?***" (**I Cor. 14:23**). The whole church here could be assembled into one place. The meaning is the whole membership of the Corinthian church. Note **Romans 16:23**: "***Gaius mine host, and of the whole church, saluteth you.***" This is the church which met in Gaius' house, the church which could salute the Roman Christians. The same usage can be seen in **Acts 15:22** "***Then pleased it the apostles and elders, with the whole church.***" The "***whole church,***" in this verse is the church at Jerusalem.

COUPLED WITH OTHER WORDS

We are now down to 26 passages yet to be studied. Two times the word church is accompanied by the word "every."

"***And when they had ordained them elders in every church***" (**Acts 14:23**).

"***I teach in every church***" (**I Cor. 4:17**).

One time church is coupled with "no."

"No church communicated with me" (Phil. 4:15).

These verses point also to a local visible body of baptized believers. These churches had elders and sent offerings. The universal, invisible church has no elders and sends no offerings, seeing it is a conception of the mind, having no existence in time or place, and is not a historical fact, being only an ideal multitude without organization, without action, and without corporate being.

We have already seen that 92 out of the 115 times the word ,ekklesia(church) occurs in the Greek New Testament it means a local body as well defined as the legislative assembly of a Greek Free City. This makes it certain that the local idea commonly and exclusively rules in the New Testament. Ninety-two verses out of 115 favor my position - a very strong argument in favor of the Landmark position. Unless there are good reasons contained in the Scriptures themselves to make the word have a new meaning, we must always understand the word church to refer to a local body of baptized believers.

FIVE OTHER SURELY LOCAL

When one takes a close look at five other passages, he will see that they also point to a local body.

I Timothy 3:5 says: "***For if a man know not how to rule his own house, how shall he take care of the church of God?***" This cannot be the big church, for no pastor can take care of such a church.

James 5:14 says: "***Is any sick among you? let him call for the elders of the church.***" This, too, is a local assembly, for no one could call the elders of the universal, invisible church.

Three other passages need not claim our attention long either.

"I persecuted the church of God" (I Cor. 15:9; Gal. 1:13).

"Concerning zeal, persecuting the church" (Phil. 3:6).

Any person knows that Paul did not persecute the elect of all ages, some dead, some alive, and some not born. According to **Acts 8:1-4**, Saul or Paul persecuted the Jerusalem church. Here again the sense is doubtless local. Thus 97 out of the 115 permits the meaning of a local, visible body of persons. This leaves 18 more verses.

Chapter II

THE MEANING OF 'EKKLESIA (Continued)

I went to great length to examine the usage of ekklesia in the Greek New Testament. Ekklesia is the Greek word translated church in our English Bible. My examination revealed that in 97 of the 115 passages the word has the primary and literal meaning of a local, visible assembly. In none of these 97 verses did the word church mean a universal, invisible church consisting of all the elect.

There remains 18 more verses to be examined. These are the debatable passages. Most theologians maintain the word church takes on a new meaning in these verses. They say that the 18 remaining passages use the word church in the larger sense, meaning a big universal church. This new meaning is contrary to the primary and literal meaning of ekklesia, and this new meaning is contradictory to the local idea which permeates the entire New Testament. The big church idea has been invented from theological necessity, not from etymological requirement.

But do these remaining 18 verses authorize a new meaning of the word church? Or, does the word retain its primary meaning of a local, visible body of baptized believers? From what we have already seen the odds are 97 to 18 against such a new meaning. Nevertheless, the Biblical answer can be discovered only by a careful examination of these remaining 18 verses. If the word church has a new meaning the text and context should give sufficient evidence to warrant this new meaning. On the other hand, if such a meaning is not required, then we have every reason to reject the universal, invisible church theory as totally without scriptural warrant.

THE GENERIC USE OF A WORD

I believe that in a number of the remaining 18 verses the word church is used in the generic sense. In such a case the word may be singular and yet not refer to any particular object of the class but to every object of that class. Let me illustrate what I mean by a word being used abstractly, or generically. "The home is a Divine institution." The word home is used generically or abstractly in this sentence. The definite article with the word does not mean there is one particular home singled out from the rest. The word home has not taken on a new meaning; it retains its common meaning. There is no such thing as a universal, invisible home.

The word church is used abstractly in some of these debatable verses, not referring to any particular church at any definite place, but to the church as an institution. When a concrete application of the word is made it must be to a particular local church somewhere. Most Bible scholars chose to ignore the abstract usage of the word church

in the Bible, although they will freely concede such is true of other words. Rather than allowing the word to retain its common meaning throughout the New Testament, a most reasonable and logical thing to do, they ascribe a new meaning to the word. They say it must mean a universal, invisible church. ekklesia never had such a meaning in the Greek writings. This new meaning is contrary to the primary and literal meaning of ekklesia. If I can give a word a new meaning so as to fit my creed when the common meaning makes good sense, then I can change the entire Bible to suit my fancy and the next person can do the same!

MATTHEW 16:18

I shall take these verses in the order in which they occur in the books of the New Testament. The first one to be considered is **Matthew 16:18**. In this verse Jesus said: *"And I say 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."* Jesus is using the word church here in the generic, abstract, or institutional sense. He refers to the church as a Divine institution against which the gates of Hell shall not prevail. Yet it would have been understood by His hearers in a special sense as applicable to them.

Jesus spoke here to His disciples (**Matt. 16:13**), the company of baptized believers which followed Him from the baptism of John (**Acts 1:21-22**). It was to the same group of baptized disciples He gave the rules of church discipline, the Lord's Supper, and the Great Commission. There can be no doubt that Jesus addressed His words to a local, visible body of baptized believers who constitute the first New Testament church in the world.

The ordinary sense makes perfectly good sense in **Matthew 16:18**. First, the words were addressed to a local, visible body of baptized believers. They were not addressed to the elect of all ages. Second, those who heard these words would have understood ekklesia in its primary and ordinary sense. I say this because I cannot believe the Master Teacher would have intended a common word to have a new meaning without some word of explanation. Third, by reading the Gospels and the Book of Acts, we see the kind of church which Christ built. He personally built the church which later became known as the Jerusalem Church. Through this mother church He built other churches, all such churches were local, visible bodies like the first church.

The fourth reason I believe 'ekklesia must be understood in its primary sense is because Jesus used this word 23 times, 3 times in Matthew and 20 times in Revelation. Twenty-one of these times the word is admitted by most as having the common meaning. Then why give it a new meaning in **Matthew 16:18**? Remember, the odds are 22 to 1 that Christ used it in its primary meaning. It seems to me to be the height of folly to assume that our Lord announced He would build a universal, invisible church, and then he never mentioned this church again while speaking 22 other times about a church He never promised to build!

MATTHEW 18:17

Some seem to think the big church is referred to in Matthew 18:17. The passage says: "***And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church: but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as a heathen man and a publican.***" This is surely a reference to the church which Christ had already founded. A person could only tell of a personal offense to a local church of baptized believers. It would be impossible to tell such to "the whole number of the elect, that have been, are, or shall be gathered into one." **Matthew 18:17** reveals that the church the matter can be told to can discipline a member. This can never be said of the so- called big church of Pedobaptists.

ACTS 20:28

Then there is **Acts 20:28** which reads: "***Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood.***" These words were addressed to the elders of the Ephesian church (**Acts 20:17**), and they can point only to the local church at Ephesus. These elders had a flock, a local assembly. They were to feed this church and keep heretics out of it (**Acts 10:29**). Such things could only be done in a local, visible body of baptized believers.

But an objector will say, "This church was purchased by the blood of Christ. This must mean all the elect for whom Christ died." Not so! The Scriptures elsewhere limit the death of Christ to Israel (**John 11:51**) and to Paul (**Gal. 2:20**). **Acts 20:28** teaches that the Ephesian Church was a blood- bought church, and such is true of every New Testament Baptist Church in the world.

I CORINTHIANS 10:32

Next is **I Corinthians 10:32** which declares: "***Give none offence, neither to the Jews, nor to the Gentiles, nor to the church of God.***" The common meaning again makes good sense. At least two times Paul referred to the Corinthian church as "***the church of God***" (**I Cor. 1:2; 11:22**). It is only logical and proper to believe he used the word church in the same sense here.

An objector will say, "But this is the church in the broadest sense, which embraces the whole number of the elect. This must be so for the passage speaks of Jews and Gentiles." This reasoning ignores the fact that many churches had both Jews and Gentiles in their membership. Also the offense mentioned in this verse was to individual Jews and Gentiles. Hence it must have referred to those living in the community where the Corinthian church was located. Paul is merely telling the Corinthian Church not to offend different racial groups nor the church of which they

were members. It would have been impossible for them to have offended dead Jews and Gentiles as well as Jews and Gentiles not born.

I CORINTHIANS 12:28

Another passage is **I Corinthians 12:28** which says: "***And God hath set some in the church, first apostles, secondarily prophets, thirdly teachers, after that miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, governments, diversities of tongues.***"

Universal, invisible church contenders maintain that the apostles were not officers of a local church. They affirm that the ministry of the apostles was for all believers. But in what sense can it be said the apostles were ministers to the elect in the Old Testament time? Remember, the universal, invisible church "consists of the whole number of the elect, that HAVE BEEN, are, or shall be gathered into one."

This contention ignores the fact that Jesus only personally set apostles in one church, the first church known as the Jerusalem Church (**Matt. 10:1-4; Acts 8:1**). These men worked with other local churches. They never at any time worked with the elect "that had been." The word church in this passage means the church in an institutional sense, with a particular reference to the Jerusalem church. The word church in **I Corinthians 12:28** makes good sense in the local sense, and there is no reason to seek some other sense. Why would Paul have suddenly given the word church a new meaning in this verse without any notice or explanation? If he had done so would the Corinthians have understood him?

EPHESIANS 1:22

Universal church men consider the Book of Ephesians their stronghold. One passage they rely upon to teach their doctrine is **Ephesians 1:22** which reads: "***And hath put all things under his feet, and gave him to be the head over all things to the church.***" Here the word church is used generically, abstractly, or in the institutional sense. It states a truth which applies to each true New Testament church. Jesus Christ is the sovereign Ruler over each church, just as He is the head of every man (**I Cor. 11:3**).

Some attempt to make the word church to mean in this verse the totality of all the redeemed of all ages. The context will not allow such a broad meaning of the word church in this verse. Christ was made the head of the church following His resurrection from the dead (**Eph. 1:20-23**). This precludes the covenant theologian's definition of the church. Nor is there any reason to see the universal, invisible church of the dispensationalists. The Lord rules over those in His churches in a more definite sense than over all believers. Those believers outside the purview of the churches are in a state of disobedience concerning the ordinances.

When you hear someone say, "The husband is the head of his home," no one understands such a speaker is referring to a big universal home made up of all the

little homes. They know the speaker has used the word home in the institutional sense. Then why can't they see that the word church is used in the institutional sense in **Ephesians 1:22**? The head of the church is locally and visibly present in Heaven at the Father's right hand. Likewise, His body on earth is local and visible; otherwise, you have a visible Head and an invisible body - a monstrous thing, a spooky church!

EPHESIANS 3:10

Next I call attention to **Ephesians 3:10** "*To the intent that now unto the principalities and powers in heavenly places might be known by the church the manifold wisdom of God.*" Some think the word church is expanded so as to comprehend all the saved in this verse. Such a new meaning is not at all necessary, unless you have a theory to defend. Again the word church is used generically. No single local church could monopolize such glorious work as is here referred to. It is the church institution which makes known the wisdom of God to men and angels. This institution only has God's command to teach all things Christ commanded by the authority of Heaven (**Matt. 28:19-20**).

EPHESIANS 3:21

Verse 21, of **Ephesians** Chapter 3, goes on to say: "*Unto him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end.*" This is another generic usage. God receives glory through the church as an institution. This means He receives it in each local assembly of baptized believers. Everything done in the church according to God's revealed will is to His glory. Preaching, teaching, praying, singing, giving, ordination of officers, and the administration of the ordinances are all to God's glory by Jesus Christ (**I Cor. 14:23-24; II Cor. 8:19-23**). God can receive no glory from an invisible church. But He can and does receive glory from the institution He founded "unto all generations of the age of ages."

EPHESIANS 5:23-25, 27, 29, 32

One of the chief proof texts of universal church men is said to be **Ephesians 5**. Others see in **Ephesians 5** a church in prospect (generally called "the glory church"). Listen to the passage: "*For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church: and he is the Saviour of the body. Therefore as the church is subject unto Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in every thing. Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it ... That he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish ... For no man ever yet hated his own flesh; but nourisheth and cherisheth it, even as the Lord the church ... This is a great mystery: but I speak concerning Christ and the*

church."

In this portion of Scripture Paul's primary object is to expound marriage. To do this he uses the relationship between Christ and the church as an illustration of the relationship which ought to exist between husband and wife. (See especially verses 23-25). What is said in these verses is as applicable to one church as another, just as what is said of the marriage relation is equally applicable to all husbands and wives.

Paul does not in **Ephesian 5** introduce a new teaching about some universal, invisible church. It would be exactly as sensible to argue from this verse for the existence of a universal, invisible wife as a universal, invisible church. One is just as Scriptural as the other.

Look at the verse: "***The husband is the head of the wife.***"

Does this mean that there is a great big universal, invisible wife who includes all the little wives? Our opponents would say no. But then they turn around and say that the rest of the verse, "***even as Christ is the head of the church,***" means that there is a universal, invisible church. They ignore the word "***even***" which means in the same way. To be consistent our opponent should believe in both a universal, invisible church and a universal, invisible wife. However, it would be much more sensible and Scriptural to see that the word wife and church are used generically in this verse.

Some Baptists contend the word church is used in **Ephesians 5** in a broad sense and not to a particular church. They say such a church has no real existence now except in the preparation of its members. They say it is not yet a church except in purpose, plan, and prospect. They say it is a church by anticipation. Then they go on to make this church in prospect include all the saved. Such Baptists have two kinds of churches in the Bible just as much as the Protestants.

I do not believe in the so-called glory church of the future any more than a universal, invisible church at present. First, the apostle does not speak here in the future tense. "***Christ is*** (not shall be) ***the head of the church.***" "***The church is*** (not shall be) ***subject to Christ.***" There would have been no point in using the relationship between Christ and the church to illustrate the relationship which ought to exist between husband and wife, unless the relationship between Christ and the church already existed and was fairly well understood by the Ephesian Church.

COLOSSIANS 1:18, 24

It is urged by some that **Colossians 1:18** teaches the big church theory: "***And he is the head of the body, the church: who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead; that in all things he might have the preeminence.***" This means that Christ is the head of each local church, just as He is the head of every man (**I Cor. 11:3**).

Colossians 1:24 reads: "***Who now rejoice in my sufferings for you, and fill up that which is behind of the afflictions of Christ in my flesh for his body's sake, which is the church.***" Some make a big do over the word body in this verse. They

insist it means some big universal body consisting of the general community of all believers. I do not deny the church is the body of Christ. The Colossian Church was the body of Christ, and the church in the institutional sense is the body of Christ.

To understand a symbol we must first understand the reality of the symbol. The body of a man is something both local and visible. The same may be said of the bodies of both plants and animals. Never does the word body mean a universal, invisible nothing. There is no such thing as a scattered, invisible, mystic, non-functioning body. A heap of heads, hands, and hearts do not make a body. Miscellaneous, scattered, unattached units do not make a body. Neither can invisible members scattered throughout the world and divided by centuries make up the body of Christ.

Every local church in the apostolic age was the body of Christ in that place. The Corinthian Church was "**the body of Christ**" in the city of Corinth (**I Cor. 12:27**). The body in **Ephesians 1:23; 4:4,12,16; 5:30** was the church body at Ephesus. Paul called the Ephesian Church "**a building fitly framed together**" (**2:21**), "**built together**" (**2:2**), and "**fitly joined together**" (**4:16**). Such togetherness can only be said of a local assembly of baptized believers. It cannot be said of some future church not yet joined together. Even so, the body in Colossians means the church at Colosse (**1:1-2**). All the body at Colosse was "**knit together**" (**2:18**), and they had all been "**buried with him in baptism**" (**2:12**).

According to **Ephesians 4:4**, "**There is one body**" as to kind in this gospel age. If it is the universal, invisible body, then there is no local and particular body. On the other hand, if it is the local body (a thing which harmonizes with the Bible's definition of the body of Christ in **I Corinthians 12:27**), then there is no such thing as a universal, invisible body. One must either give up the local church or the big church. There are no more two kinds of bodies of Christ than there are two kinds of faith or two kinds of God. The baptism which puts one in the body in **Ephesians 4:5** is water baptism, seeing it is a baptism which follows faith: "**One Lord, one faith, one baptism.**" Water baptism puts one in a local church, not some invisible church.

I TIMOTHY 3:15

Another debatable verse is **I Timothy 3:15** which says: "**But if I tarry long, that thou mayest know how that thou oughtest to behave thyself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth.**" Some would make "**the church of the living God**" the big church. Others expand the term "**the house of God**" to mean the whole body of believers. This is all wrong.

Beginning at chapter 1 of the Book we can see the church of the living God is the church at Ephesus. In chapter 3 the context is about bishops and deacons, the officers of a local church. Thus Paul is telling Timothy about behavior in the church at Ephesus. How could Timothy be responsible to conduct himself properly in the

universal, invisible church? Behaving in a universal, invisible church is absurd! How could millions of believers, divided by centuries, teaching doctrines opposed to each other, be considered "***the pillar and ground of the truth***"? Only a true local church which holds to sound doctrine can be considered the pillar and ground of the truth.

HEBREWS 12:22-24

The chief proof text for either the universal, invisible church or the glory church is supposed to be **Hebrews 12:22-24**. It is written: "***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.***"

Many are absolutely sure the word church means something quite different than its common meaning in these verses. Here they say it definitely means a universal, invisible church. Others would refer it to a future glory church consisting of all believers. A brief examination of the verse excludes both ideas. This cannot refer to the universal, invisible church of all believers, for the writer says, "***Ye are come.***" The invisible church has not come together as some of its members are unborn. Nor can it point to some sort of a visible glory church to be gathered in Heaven at some future day. "***Ye are come***" militates strongly against the glory church idea. The writer does not speak in **Hebrews 12:22-24** of a future church, but of a present church.

This section of **Hebrews 12** contrasts the Old Testament dispensation with the New Testament dispensation, the earthly Mount Sinai with spiritual Mount Zion. The writer shows the excellencies of the New Covenant are far superior to the Law Covenant. This is being done as a means of causing the Hebrews to persevere in their Christian profession.

We cannot understand this to mean these Jewish Christians had literally come to Mount Zion in Jerusalem, for that was as true of the whole Jewish nation as of those the apostle addressed. Nor can we understand that they were literally in Heaven, for none to whom he wrote were in Heaven at the time he spoke. He must have meant that by the characteristics of the new dispensation the Hebrew Christians had done these things. He is showing the blessings which presently belong to the gospel dispensation. These are not future but present. Hence he says: "***Ye are come.***"

Mount Zion speaks of the gospel church as a Divine institution. The Hebrews had come to Mount Zion by becoming members of the New Testament church. "***The city of the living God***" is another reference to the church. The church is compared to a city (**Matt. 5:13-16**) and a building (**Matt. 16:18; I Cor. 3:9; Eph. 2:19-22**). "***The heavenly Jerusalem***" speaks of the church as it is the future home of the bride (**Rev. 21:9-10**). The "***myriads of angels in full assembly***" (improved translation) show how

baptized believers in a church are social worshippers with angels (**I Cor. 11:10; Eph. 3:10**).

All these things were so because they were come into the church of the firstborn. Those in the church in the Hebrew Epistle were registered in Heaven, but they were not yet in Heaven. "**God the Judge of all**" shows how God is the qualified Judge of all, especially those in the church (**I Peter 4:17**). "**The spirits of just men made perfect**" means justified men made perfect in Christ. The church is a fellowship of such men, and in Christ they are as perfect on earth as they ever will be in Heaven (**Col. 2:10**). "**To Jesus the mediator of the new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling**" means the Hebrew Christians had come to Christ by faith (**Rom. 3:25**) and been sprinkled with His precious blood (**Heb. 10:22**). Church members symbolize this blessed relationship by the observation of the Lord's Supper in a local church (**Matt. 26:27-30**).

OBSERVATIONS

Thus we have concluded our examination of every one of the 115 verses in the New Testament dealing with the church. Out of the entire 115 we have not found one single verse which teaches the universal, invisible church. Therefore, I conclude the term "invisible" church is most appropriate as the big church is no place found in the New Testament. In the New Testament there is no reference which does not fall under the local idea or one of its logical derivatives, which is simply the local idea in another form. The Bible is utterly innocent of the inward conflict of the theory of a universal, invisible church. It is everywhere self consistent. The Landmark position is overwhelmingly affirmed by the Word of God.

The common sense impression made by reading texts in which the word church occurs and a critical examination of doubtful passages demonstrate the actual church of the New Testament is a local society and never anything but a local society. The real church of Christ is a local body, of a definite doctrinal constitution such as is indispensable to the "**unity of the Spirit**" of which it is the embodiment. I believe this to be the teachings of the Holy Bible. I must stand upon these truths even if most of the world calls me a "misguided fanatic."

Chapter III

The Evils Of The Universal Church Theory

Throughout all Christendom people speak of the blessings of belief in the universal, invisible church theory. Most of these are imaginary. Really there is neither a need nor a place for such a church. Belief in this theory has resulted in great disobedience to Christ and untold harm to true New Testament Baptist churches. I shall point out a few of these evils.

1. This theory teaches an imaginary church. This is not something affirmed by some lone Landmarker. Our opponents freely concede such is the case in their own writings. Edward T. Hiscox defines the universal, invisible church he believed in as "a conception of the mind, having no real existence in time or place, and is not a historical fact, being only an ideal multitude without organization, without action, and without corporate being" (The New Directory Of Baptist Churches, p. 24). This is a most noble confession. It admits the big church exists only in people's minds, and that it is not capable of literal manifestation at the present time.

2. This false teaching discredits the local church of the New Testament. Universal church men apply such terms as the body, the house, the building, and the bride of Christ to the big church. Hence they miss the great lessons being taught concerning the local, visible body of baptized believers. These metaphors of the church are perverted and abused until they lose their practical teaching. Great stress is laid upon "the true church" (universal, invisible mythical church) as being Divine while a local church is "man's church."

Some of these universal church theorists look upon the local church as a "necessary evil." Others see no need of attending or being a member of a local church. They watch TV or go to the golf club while the "unimportant" local church meets on the Lord's Day. Their tithes and offerings are sent to some evangelistic association, mission board, Christian foundation, or Christian college. The universal church teaching has robbed local churches of active members. If people took the invisible church teaching to its logical conclusion, they would close the doors of all local churches and leave God's preachers without a church in which to preach.

On page 1299 of the Scofield Reference Bible there is found this note: "Church (visible) Summary: The passages which speak of the Church of God (here and I Cor. 10:32) refer to that visible body of professed believers, called collectively 'the church,' though it exists under many names and divisions based upon differences in doctrine or in government. For the most part, within this historical church has existed the true Church, 'which is his body'. It is plain from this note that Mr. Scofield does not look upon the local church as "the true church." This implies each local church is a false church and not a true church of Jesus Christ. This is an awful slam upon every local

church which is a true, authentic, and genuine church.

3. The universal, invisible church robs God of His glory. The Bible teaches that God receives glory in this age through the church (**Eph. 3:21**). But the local church has little or no place in the majority of modern schools, radio programs, or missionary endeavors. Men are appropriating to themselves the glory which belongs to God in and through His church. They glory in their little Babels, while turning up their noses at the church which Jesus actually built. All these extra scriptural organizations, void of church authority and without Heaven's sanction, are nothing but parasites upon the backs of local churches. They contribute nothing to the true churches but take much from them. By doing this they rob God of His glory.

4. This theory is responsible for much of the disobedience with regard to the ordinances. Why are there so many professed Christians not church members? Why so many nominal believers living without New Testament baptism? Why is there little or no desire to remember the Lord's death? It is because vast multitudes have been convinced they are already members of the big imaginary church which is the real important thing. These unbaptized, disobedient, misguided souls pride themselves as being a part of "the true church." To many of them the ordinances are "non-essentials" which greatly divide the body of Christ. It would be below their dignity to concern themselves with such "minor details." They feel they have the baptism of the Holy Spirit and that is all that really matters. Any system of teaching which causes men to fail to be baptized as Christ was does not honor the Head of the church.

5. This theory is responsible for much of the inter-denominationalism and non-denominationalism of this generation. According to modern thinking, to be "unsectarian" is to become an angel among devils! Heretical preachers and union revivalists have founded their whole movements upon the premise that all Christians are in "the true church." They say Christians should drop their "petty differences" and work together to advance the "cause of Christ." Down with the little local church which stands in the way of "church unity." Invite all to the "Lord's table" regardless of their faith or lack of saving faith. Take anyone's immersion regardless of what they teach. Doctrine is not important. We have no creed but Christ. This is the cry heard from universal, invisible church men in this generation even in so-called Baptists ranks.

Baptist churches have nothing to gain from a union meeting and everything to lose. By such meetings Baptists declare that man-made churches are equally churches of Jesus Christ, although many of them teach just the opposite of what Christ taught! With the pleasing pretense that there is "no difference," Baptist churches are affectionately requested to surrender the doctrine of God's sovereignty, salvation by grace, and believer's baptism. The reason they must do this we are told is because we are all members of the big church, the mystical body of Christ made up of all believers. For Baptists to unite with heretics is to say that error is as good as truth, disobedience is as good as obedience, unrighteousness is as good as righteousness. All

know that this is not so. The truth is a sacred truth that we Baptists have no right to betray for any cause or under any circumstance.

6. This theory promotes the Ecumenical Movement which is destined to become the Great Whore (the apostate church) in the Book of Revelation. Those familiar with the writings of ecumenical leaders know these liberals plead a visible union of all churches on the basis of the fact that all believers are in the universal, invisible church. These super church men know that so long as a Christian makes the true church the local church which is sound doctrinally, he will never become a part of the Ecumenical Movement.

Liberals in the Southern Baptist Convention have been laboring for years to get rid of Landmarkism, or the belief in a local, visible church to the exclusion of a universal, invisible church. They know that Landmarkism must go before the Southern Baptist churches will be willing to enter the National and World Councils of Churches.

W. O. Carver (1868-1954) taught for years that the word church is used in the New Testament primarily to refer to "the universal, invisible spiritual church, regenerate believers, constituting the body of Christ." This teaching can be found in an article on "Baptist Churches" written by Carver for the book, edited by R. Newton Flew, entitled: *The Nature Of The Church*. Mr. Carver's paper on "Baptist Churches" was a part of a "group of papers, prepared as material for discussion at the Third World Conference on Faith and Order At Lund, Sweden, (which) gets down to specifics in hope for church unity in Christendom" (inside front jacket).

You want more proof that the universal, invisible church teaching is preparing Southern Baptist for entrance into the Ecumenical Movement? E. Glen Hinson, Professor of Church History, Southern Baptist Seminary, Louisville, KY, has written a book called *The Integrity Of The Church*. It is filled with the invisible church doctrine and ecumenicalism. Hinson believes Baptists should engage in "dialogue, cooperation, and communion" with other denominations (p. 87). The reason for this is all Christians are in "the one body." He also says, "Christians can learn much from other faiths and thus should welcome the current trend toward dialogue" (p. 95). On page 141 he mentions "a Christian Marxist dialogue going on in Europe."

Mr. Hinson declares on page 33 that if we consider the Bible infallible and inerrant in all its parts, "we will apostatize from what it teaches by letting bigotry create an excuse of zeal to make everyone believe what we believe." On pages 110-111 he justifies the ordination of women to the ministry and pleads with churches to push for ERA. On page 140 he says, "To affirm evolution is not to deny God ..." On page 145 he says the job of the church is not "winning the lost to Christ" but to make "a wholesome, well integrated person within the context of the society in which he or she lives."

Please consider that this liberal has no problem with belief in a universal, invisible church. All liberals hold to the big church idea. Ye not one single person who believes in the local church only can be found who is a liberal theologian. This fact alone

should open some people's eyes. If liberals and the leaders of the Ecumenical Movement were deprived of their invisible church, they would lose their chief argument for the super church they seek to build. This also should open some people's eyes. Furthermore, I would ask can a system of teaching which fits perfectly with liberal theology and fosters the Ecumenical Movement be of God?

7. This erroneous view greatly confuses Christians. It would have them to believe there are two different kinds of churches in the world today, one local and visible while the other is invisible and universal. When they read the Bible and come across the word church, they must pause and ask themselves, "Which church is this?" To ascertain the answer they must not consult the Holy Spirit but books written by universal church men to know the answer. To teach that Christ has two different kinds of churches in the world today is contradictory to the Bible. **Ephesians 4:5** says: "**There is one** (as to kind) **body.**" Universal, invisible church people have two bodies!

According to **I Corinthians 4:5**, a church must be assembled to carry out its business. Paul said it must "gather together." This can only be so of a local church. The universal, invisible church has never yet assembled as some of its members are not yet born. Nevertheless, invisible church theorists insist a person must believe this never assembled church is the "true church" of Jesus Christ. This is most confusing to any intelligent person who can see from **I Corinthians 5:4** that what can't gather together cannot properly be considered a church in the New Testament sense.

The Bible teaches disorderly church members are to be disciplined (**Matt. 18:15-20; I Cor. 5:9-13; II Thess. 3:6; Titus 3:10**). This is to prevent the church from being blamed with their sin. This is the command of God for the local church. But if the big church idea is true God allows people in "the true church" which He commanded us to exclude from the local church! This would make God inconsistent and foolish, a thing which we know cannot be. Yet if the Lord has only one kind of church, a local church, then there is no problem.

8. This theory is utterly impractical in preaching the gospel to a lost world. If such a thing as the universal, invisible church exists, its membership is known only to God. It has never met or assembled in all the history of the world. Hence it furnishes no place for believers to engage in public worship (**Heb. 10:25**). It has no church covenant as a covenant can only exist between members of a local church. It has no ordinances or officers, for these are for real churches. It has no church building, no song books, no musical instruments, no pews, no pulpit, and no offering box. It has and exercises no earthly authority. It has no mission in the world or message for the lost world. It has never been persecuted by the world as the world has never seen it. It cannot receive members, nor exclude members. It has never sent out one missionary and never will. It has no Sunday School, no vacation Bible schools, no music schools, and no evangelistic meetings. Its fellowship is imaginary. It is only a mere concept of the mind, a spooky thing and not a true New Testament church.

Since the organization of the Jerusalem Church by Jesus Christ, the emphasis in

Christianity has been upon the "**churches of God**" (**I Cor. 11:16**). This is the only way the congregational life of the Christian faith can be expressed.

Even the most pronounced advocates of the invisible church are forced by stark realities to organize multitudes of congregations to meet the need of their religious programs. From the practical stand point, none of them want to preach in an invisible church to invisible members who sit in invisible pews. No universal, invisible church preacher wants to pastor an invisible church nor draw an invisible salary. Isn't it strange that they make so much over the supposed invisible church!

9. This theory ruins young preachers. Often some young Landmark preacher will begin to read the Puritans who were universal church men. He will become so engrossed with their writings that he embraces their ecclesiology, never knowing that the Puritans were bitter persecutors of their Baptist forefathers. At other times some young Land mark preachers will hear some silver-tongued, Reformed Baptist preacher bring a great message on justification. He becomes so carried away with such a person that he jumps on the Reformed (I prefer the term "Deformed") Baptist bandwagon. I personally know of some who did this and became scarcely less than immersed Presbyterians.

In my lifetime I have seen this theory ruin the ministry of young preachers in our ranks. Some very promising young ministers were widely used in revival meetings and Bible conferences. Others were successful pastors. Then they jumped on the universal, invisible church bandwagon. Some lost their churches, had their revival work terminated, and ceased to be used on Bible conference programs. At least two ended up having to go to work in a store to support their families. It grieves me to see our young men fulfill the prophetic Scripture (**II Tim. 4:3-4**). I, for one, long to see them be recovered from their errors. The universal, invisible church took much away from them and gave them nothing in return.