

The “Christ has Two Churches” Theory.

A Bible Study

by Rev Earl Jackson

Recently I read the following Blog Post by Michael Britton on the [Vintage Community Church](#) blog. I am not targeting this church, or this article. I just happened to read it, and I have read lots of other articles just like it. I felt that it would be a good tool to spark some thinking. We tend to accept popularly held opinions without much thought or reflection, and I find that to be dangerous. Just because something is widely believed does not make it a Biblical or correct idea. See what you think? **Here is the article.**

The Locally Global Church

Many of us have grown up here around the "Bible Belt" of the United States hearing the phrase "going to church". In fact, church for me was always somewhere you went. People may ask, "Where do you go to church?" or "Are you going to church tomorrow?" It has simply become a part of our cultural language to "go to church".

Yet this phrase is absurd. The church is not located in space. Believers in Rwanda are connected in every way to believers in Portland, Oregon and Hoover, Alabama. They are not a different church. They are all a part of the same body, same family, same church. On this basis alone, the phrase "go to church" would be absurd.

But that is not all. The church is also not located in time. The church is not present only today, or tomorrow, or this coming Sunday. Believers that have passed on from life in this world into death have in no way, not one single way, ceased to be the church. In fact, they are more presently experiencing what we only get fading glimpses of. So, a body of believers that is in no one place and is connected throughout all of time cannot be a place that is visited. To say that I am "going to church" is an absurd picture of the Body of Christ.

The church is not a place, the church is a people.

However, the church is a local reality. The people that we gather with in worship and the people that push us to gain perspective on the eternal implications of living a life surrendered to Christ are people that we know and are, for us, located in a local body. Are we not to be especially connected to these local believers? Absolutely! We are to be spurred on to good works performed by faith in the one who works them in us as a body. This local body possesses the fruit of the Spirit (not individuals) and the gifts of the Spirit so that the local body may be an expression of Christ's presence. To be a part of this kind of gathering is special and should be praised.

But the local body that truly understands what it means to be the body will always, always, always point that local body to its connection with a global and timeless body. This is not done through once a year offerings (my apologies to Lottie Moon) or speaking engagements of missionaries. This is engaged in worship. Worship that understands the overwhelming reality that there is but one body. Worship that lifts its voice in a melody of praise that encompasses thousands of languages. Worship that proclaims God's Word with many tongues yet echoes in one single message of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

At this moment the church has become locally global.

Here we have not merely "gone to church" but rather we have experienced the miracle of the people of God.

Here are my thoughts:

I find the "Christ has two churches" idea which you seem to be expressing confusing and contradictory to the actual New Testament teachings concerning "ekklesia".

You begin your article with two assertions:

"The church is not located in space", and...

"The church is also not located in time".

This seems to show that the church is somehow a non-specific, pan-dimensional, universal or as you say "global" entity. But you later end your post with "However, the church is a local reality. The people that we gather with in worship..." This shows a very specific, "local" entity, which is in fact located both "in space" and "in time". You even call it "the local Body"... "we know and are, for us, located in a local body". These ideas are contradictory? "At this moment the church has become locally global." "Locally global"? What does that mean? It is a phrase which makes absolutely no sense, because it is self-contradictory. A non-local, non-specific, universal church, and a local visible assembly clearly are completely different ideas? But in your article this seems to make perfect sense to you?

Theologically, this "Christ has two churches" idea has been embraced by most of mainstream Christianity. This idea is nothing new. "Christ has a universal church, comprised of all for whom Christ died, (wherever, or whenever, they may be). And Christ has local "churches" (plural), comprised of people gathered in local space and time, and also comprised of believers for whom Christ died...an "invisible church" and a "visible one". Most people share this view. This is the traditional "readily accepted" and "popular thinking" about church. But is it actually what the Bible teaches? Is it the teaching of the Scriptures themselves? Lets Look:

1. "The Church" in the Gospels

It appears historically to have been formulated by the Roman Catholic interpretation of Matthew 18:18-19, where Christ tells Peter *"upon this rock I will build my church" and "I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven"*. According to the historic Catholic interpretation, "the church" and "the kingdom of heaven" (basilea) are the same thing. But are they the same thing in the actual teachings of the New Testament? Is it Biblically accurate to make "church" and "kingdom" synonymous? The Roman Catholic church has been doing so since the third century, and it seems like most Protestants agree with her ecclesiology? Should we? Are most Protestants actually following Catholic Ecclesiology instead of the Bible? Let's see?

The only other place in the four gospels where the term Ekklesia (church) is used is in Matthew 18:17 *"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 an heathen man and a publican"*. "Tell it to the church" seems clearly to be a local assembly. How do you tell something to "a universal, invisible, no time, no space" entity (if there is such a thing)? Seems a little confusing and ridiculous to me? How can you read "church" (understood as universal and invisible), side by side with the words "tell it to them"? I don't think you can. I would have great difficulty telling it to the church, if the church was some sort of global thing? Wouldn't you? But these are the only two places in the gospels where ekklesia is found, and if you embrace the Catholic

interpretation of Matthew 18:18-19, you will have an instant contradiction with Matthew 18:17 (the immediate preceding verse in the context). This idea also fights against Christ's statement in verse 20. **Notice:** they are *"gathered together"*. That describes clearly the idea of "assembly" or "congregated together". Church clearly conveys the idea of "people who are gathered together"; not the idea of "people who are all over the place, and no place in particular"? The two ideas are incongruous.

So what does the Bible actually teach? The question should never be what is the most popular opinion? but what does God's word actually show us? It does not matter if 10,000 churches hold to Rome's opinion of "the two church theory"... one universal and no place in particular, and the other local and assembled in particular localities? What does the Word of God actually say? I should remind all my readers of the importance of "Sola Scriptura". Doctrine should never be based upon tradition alone. It must always be determined by the sacred canon of Scripture.

All the Greek lexicons are agreed and united in stating that "ekklesia" means: "a called out people". (Greek *ek* = "out," and *kaleín* = "to call" by the herald for the discussion and decision of public business). In the New Testament ekklesia is synonymous with the Old Testament phrase "congregation" (the congregated ones, the assembled ones). Stephen uses the term with that exact understanding in Acts 7:38, *"This is he, that was in the church in the wilderness..."* The original etymology of the word ekklesia, means that it would be impossible for a people to congregate globally! That is impossible! Translated into this discussion, it means that adding the idea of a global assembly into the word "church" causes our understanding to be confused at best? Do you want to be confused? If so? then try to conceive of "a global congregation", a global assembly? Even more confusing is the title of the article above "The Locally Global Church". That's a real theological mess. It's confusion. And I can tell you with certainty that God did not author such notions (1Cor. 14:33). That's what you get when you force "the kingdom of heaven" into the word "church". You get confusion! The actual teaching of the Scriptures however, does not seem to do that at all?. Rome did it, because it gave the Pope a basis for His universal rule over churches everywhere. But the Bible does not do that. Watch carefully as we examine this.

When Christ said: *"tell it to the church"* and *"if he neglect to hear the church"*, in Matthew 18:17; He was indicating that the church is "a collective", and "self-governing body" of people assembled together to handle just such disputes as the one mentioned. This is using the term church in an important institutional or generic sense, but it in no way undermines the local collective assembling of the local church. The term can be use institutionally without changing the basic meaning of ekklesia as a local assembled body. Many verse do just this. Here Christ was telling His disciples to bring the problem cases (like the one mentioned), to a collective group of believers who could settle the disputes. Discipline would be decided by "collective judgment", "collective determination"...the "two or three assembled ones" would come to the right decision, because "Christ was there in their midst" (Matthew 18:20). The kingdom of heaven keys, operate in the church decisions so made, but the "kingdom of Heaven" and the "church" remain clearly different and distinct ideas. The keys of the kingdom operate in the decisions of the local collectively assembled people, but this does not automatically mean that "kingdom" and "church" are identical? B.H. Carroll the 19th Century Baptist scholar said:

"the kingdom and church on earth are not co-terminous. Kingdom, besides expressing a

different idea, is much broader in signification than a particular assembly or than all the particular assemblies. The particular church is that executive institution or business body, within the kingdom, charged with official duties and responsibilities for the spread of the kingdom.” ([Ecclesia – The Church Lectures by B.H.Carrol](#))

Kingdom principles operate within the church, but they also operate outside of the church. The church is governed by the Kingdom, but the church is not identical with it. In the broadest sense the kingdom of heaven is God's government of the whole earth, not just His government within the church. Rome recognized the importance of this, and claims to be the arm of God's government and kingdom on earth. They see the keys of the kingdom as being identical with the power and authority of the church of Rome and the papacy. This is the product of confusing basilea (kingdom) and ekklesia (church). While it is true that there is some overlap of ideas here, it is not true that the church is the kingdom of heaven. Yet, that is the assertion that has founded this idea that Christ has two churches...one global, and one local; or in the confused idea of this article one “locally global church”?

R.B.Kuiper wrote a classic Reformed view of the church in His book titled “The Glorious Body of Christ”. His chapter on “The Church Visible and Invisible” makes the very mistake we are talking about here. He justifies the notion of an invisible church based on the idea that Christ has only “one body” (Colossians 1:18). Without examining that idea at all, He proceeds to tell us who the members of the visible and invisible church are. Yet He insists that there are not two churches but only one.

A distinction is often made between the visible church and the invisible church. That distinction is both valid and valuable, but it must not be supposed that there are two Christian churches. There is only one church of Jesus Christ, for He has but one body. However this one church has different aspects, and two of them are wont to be distinguished as visible and invisible. ([The Glorious Body of Christ](#), Banner of truth Trust, 1967, Pg. 26)

Kuiper then proceeds to describe who the members of the invisible and the visible church are. For Him the membership of the invisible church is just as we have stated, a confusion of the church with the kingdom.

“...The invisible church consists solely of regenerate persons...every single member of it has been delivered from the power of darkness and translated into the kingdom of God's dear Son (Colossians 1:13). (ibid. pg. 27).

Kuiper perfectly expresses the popular view that the universal invisible church is identical with the Kingdom of God. He does not even attempt to prove it, He just assumes that it is true based on the idea that Christ has only one body. At the same time, he denies that he is teaching the two church theory, again without any proof whatsoever. He states that the terms visible and invisible are simply different aspects of the same church, and then he proceeds to confuse the kingdom of God, with the body of Christ. That's how this error works. Kuiper is the classic spokesman for the two church error. He denies that He is teaching two churches, and then He proceeds to teach two churches, a visible one and an invisible one. He gets by with this, because people just assume that it makes sense and it must be Biblical. But it is a self-contradictory and confusing misalignment of two completely different doctrines.

We need to be very cautious on this Roman Catholic sacred ground. It is the high altar of their claim to universal governance of all things in heaven and on earth. They think very highly of themselves and of the supposed authority given to their church, (directly from Christ to Peter their first Pope according to their traditional interpretation of this passage). They are the kingdom of heaven, and all things on earth are opened or locked by their key alone. Beware, because if you embrace their view? you might as well join their church, because there is salvation in no other! This error of identifying the church with the Kingdom of heaven, is a serious error, one that should be resisted with great diligence and caution. It is given it's most prominent appeal in the so-called "Apostles Creed" as Carroll accurately points out.

The confusion wrought by these human appellatives is manifest in the growth of what is commonly miscalled "the Apostle's creed." In its earliest historic forms it says: "I believe In the holy church." Later forms say: "I believe in the holy catholic, i. e., universal church." Still later: "in the holy catholic and apostolic church." Still gathering increment from other creeds it becomes: "The holy Roman catholic and apostolic church." Then comes "visible vs. In visible," or "visible, temporal, universal vs. invisible, spiritual, universal," and so ad infinitum. But the Bible in its simplicity knows nothing of these scholastic refinements of distinction. In that holy book the existing church is a particular congregation of Christ's baptized disciples, and the prospective church is the general assembly. But mark you: These are not co-existent. (ibid)

Carroll, develops the idea that when the Bible speaks of "the general assembly", "the Bride of Christ", "the New Jerusalem", it is referring to a yet future gathering of all the redeemed. It is prospective and future, not a present reality. We will be discussing this later, but for now lets continue through the New Testament for the examination of the pertinent verses.

2. "The Church" in Acts

The book of Acts is the formative period of the early church growth and development. Apostles established churches and the gospel preaching in those churches was met with great success, many conversions and unfortunately much persecution.

Acts 8:1 *And Saul was consenting unto his death. And at that time there was a great persecution against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered abroad throughout the regions of Judaea and Samaria, except the apostles.*

This verse states that there was a great persecution against THE CHURCH WHICH WAS AT JERUSALEM. Notice the location "at Jerusalem". The church at Jerusalem had a geographical location. But notice what happened. "They were all scattered abroad". The assembly became dis-assembled. The church became un-congregated. They were scattered to various surrounding "regions". This explains part of the reason for the expansion of Christianity to other regions. Individual churches (plural) were established, because persecution forced the people to dis-assemble and move to other areas. This is why certain verses in the Bible use the word in a plural sense. "Churches" as in more than one location.

Acts 9:31 *Then had the churches rest throughout all Judaea and Galilee and Samaria, and were edified; and walking in the fear of the Lord, and in the comfort of the Holy Ghost, were multiplied.*

They were multiplied (in the number of local churches that were present in various locations). This still provides no basis for the idea of a universal invisible church. That idea cannot be substantiated simply because of a plurality of local assemblies. The “Christ has two churches” theory states that there is a universal, invisible, non-assembled, global, pan-dimensional, church; and then there are local visible manifestations of it called “local bodies”. The problem is not with the idea that there are “local bodies”. This can be easily seen and proved by just the few verses we have already looked at. The problem enters when you try to establish from the scriptures this idea that there is an invisible, universal, multi-geographical, multi-national, non-assembled, assembly called “Church”? There simply are no verses in the Bible that say anything at all to that effect. This is very problematic, especially considering the widespread adherence to the doctrine. Even among Bible-believing, fundamentalistic, and Reformed groups, where the Bible is highly respected, the teaching is just assumed to be true, without any Scriptural justification whatsoever.

Here are some other verses in Acts where ecclesia is mentioned. See if you can identify any of them as references to anything other than a visible local assembly? Can you see an invisible church spoke of in them?

Acts 2:47 *Praising God, and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved.*

This was the church at Jerusalem mentioned in the previous verse where people were eating bread daily with each other, (very visible and very assembled).

Acts 5:11 *And great fear came upon all the church, and upon as many as heard these things.*

Note: this happened during an actual church service when two people were struck dead during the offering, because they lied to the Holy Spirit. There is nothing universal or invisible about this church.

Acts 7:38 *This is he, that was in the church in the wilderness with the angel which spake to him in the mount Sinai, and with our fathers: who received the lively oracles to give unto us.*

This church in the wilderness was assembled at the base of Mount Sinai. Nothing invisible or universal about it?

Acts 8:3 *As for Saul, he made havock of the church, entering into every house, and haling men and women committed them to prison.*

This is the same church at Jerusalem mentioned in Acts 8:1.

Acts 11:22 *Then tidings of these things came unto the ears of the church which was in Jerusalem*

The local church in Jerusalem. Nothing invisible here?

Acts 11:26 *And when he had found him, he brought him unto Antioch. And it came to pass, that a whole year they assembled themselves with the church, and taught much people. And*

the disciples were called Christians first in Antioch.

They assembled with the local church where the teaching took place and where disciples were gathered. You cannot assemble with something that is invisible and universal or global. **Acts 12:1** *Now about that time Herod the king stretched forth his hands to vex certain of the church.*

Certain people of the church at Jerusalem are mentioned in the next verses among them James and Peter, Apostles who had not been scattered in the earlier dispersion (see Acts 1:8).

Acts 12:5 *Peter therefore was kept in prison: but prayer was made without ceasing of the church unto God for him.*

This is the church from which Peter had been captured and taken away to jail. They prayed day and night for him. Again nothing invisible or global. This was the local church at Jerusalem praying for Peter who had been captured.

Acts 13:1 *Now there were in the church that was at Antioch certain prophets and teachers; as Barnabas, and Simeon that was called Niger, and Lucius of Cyrene, and Manaen, which had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch, and Saul.*

Not a universal church, but the church which was at Antioch, wherein certain prophets and teachers ministered. Very local language.

Acts 14:23 *And when they had ordained them elders in every church, and had prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord, on whom they believed.*

Every church, refers to churches in the places where they went in verse 21. Each city seems to have its own church. Again no universal church is mentioned or implied. Churches have elders (ordained officers to function within their own local congregation). This verse also argues against any sort of hierarchical structure where outside people are over the affairs of churches. The officers were ordained from within each local congregation.

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.*

They gathered the church together. Can you do that with something that is universal? Invisible? Global? Or a spiritual entity? Only local people can be gathered as a church, and that's exactly what happened here.

Acts 15:3-4 *And being brought on their way by the church, they passed through Phenice and Samaria, declaring the conversion of the Gentiles: and they caused great joy unto all the brethren. 4 And when they were come to Jerusalem, they were received of the church, and of the apostles and elders, and they declared all things that God had done with them.*

They were sent out by the church at Antioch and were received by the church at Jerusalem; two local assemblies, sending and receiving in a collaborative effort to settle a doctrinal issue

through Apostolic authority. Again, nothing universal or invisible the word church is used in the normal New Testament sense of local congregation.

Act 15:22 *Then pleased it the apostles and elders, with the whole church, to send chosen men of their own company to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas; namely, Judas surnamed Barsabas, and Silas, chief men among the brethren.*

This is the church at Jerusalem where “the Apostles and elders had come together” (see Acts 15:6), and where “a multitude” had gathered to hear the proceedings (see Acts 15:12). Nothing universal or invisible here.

Acts 18:22 *And when he had landed at Caesarea, and gone up, and saluted the church, he went down to Antioch.*

He landed in Caesarea and went up in person and delivered a salutation to the church. This was not done in an invisible body. It could only have been done in an actual physical location with a local assembled congregation. Proof again that church is physical, literal, assembly of people in a specific place. Nothing invisible or global about church in this verse.

Acts 20:17 *And from Miletus he sent to Ephesus, and called the elders of the church.*

Ephesus is a church that is mentioned in Revelation, and to which one of the seven letters was sent. As a local church it had local elders (officers for governing and teaching). Nothing invisible in this verse, and nothing global either.

Acts 20:28 *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.*

This verse is spoken to the elders from Ephesus as shown in the above verse. It is often cited to prove the universal church idea, because it says the church of God was purchased with His own blood. That could indeed be made to apply in a universal sense, if that were what the context was speaking of. But Paul was speaking about a local flock (Ephesus), to the elders from that congregation (the overseers), and he was telling them to feed that church because it had been purchased with the blood of Christ. All local churches are composed of redeemed people who have been purchased by the blood of Christ. But this verse is not introducing an obtuse concept of a universal invisible church in the context of an exhortation for certain elders to feed their local congregation which happens to be a blood bought congregation. Such an interpretation as a universal church idea, introduces concepts which are completely to the context of the verse. It would warp and twist the very meaning of the words right in the same verse. How could these elders oversee and feed a “universal church”? Clearly that is not what Paul has in mind here. Even if the verse can be shown to have some significance in discussing a “future gathering” of the “general assembly in heaven” (as it may); that does not discount the full weight of the immediate context regarding a correct interpretation and exegesis of the text. This verse is clearly local church in it's immediate meaning and context. (We will discuss the idea of the general assembly and church of the firstborn in Heb. 12:23 in it's own separate place. But right now we need to move on to looking at ecclesia in the Epistles).

3. “The Church” in the Epistles

This section on ecclesia as used in the New Testament Epistles will be treated a little differently than the above section on the use of ecclesia in Acts. First I am going to simply list all the verses which are self-explanatory and require no comment. All these verses show without a doubt the idea that ecclesia is local and visible, not global or invisible. Following those verses will list the verse requiring explanation or comment.

Verses on Church in the Epistles which require no comment because they show local, visible assemblies (local congregations):

Romans 16:1 ... the church which is at Cenchrea.

Romans 16:5 ...the church that is in their house.

Romans 16:23 Gaius, who is host to me and to the whole church (ESV)

1Corinthians 1:2 Unto the church of God which is at Corinth

1Corinthians 4:17 ...I teach every where in every church.

1Corinthians 6:4 ...set them to judge who are least esteemed in the church.

1Corinthians 11:18 ...when ye come together in the church

1Corinthians 11:22 What? have ye not houses to eat and to drink in? or despise ye the church of God, and shame them that have not? (context is about regulating the communion service in the local church, so none are left out).

1Corinthians 14:4 ...he that prophesieth edifieth the church.

1Corinthians 14:5 ...greater *is* he that prophesieth than he that speaketh with tongues, except he interpret, that the church may receive edifying.

1Corinthians 14:12 Even so ye, forasmuch as ye are zealous of spiritual *gifts*, seek that ye may excel to the edifying of the church.

1Corinthians 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.

1Corinthians 14:23 If, therefore, the whole church comes together and all speak in tongues...

1Corinthians 14:28 ...let him keep silence in the church.

1Corinthians 14:35 ...for it is a shame for women to speak in the church.

1Corinthians 16:19 The churches of Asia salute you.

2Corinthians 1:1 ...unto the church of God which is at Corinth.

Philippians 4:15 Now ye Philippians know also...no church communicated with me as concerning giving and receiving, but ye only.

Colossians 4:15 ...the church which is in his house.

Colossians 4:16 And when this epistle is read among you, cause that it be read also in the church of the Laodiceans

1Thessalonians 1:1 ...unto the church of the Thessalonians *which is* in God the Father and *in* the Lord Jesus Christ:

2Thessalonians 1:1 ...unto the church of the Thessalonians in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ:

1Timothy 3:5 (For if a man know not how to rule his own house, how shall he take care of the church of God?)

1Timothy 3:15...that thou mayest know how 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. (Church behavior requires that church be local, not something invisible or global).

1Timothy 5:16-17 If any man or woman that believeth have widows, let them relieve them, and let not the church be charged; that it may relieve them that are widows indeed. 17 Let the elders that rule well be counted worthy of double honour, especially they who labour in the word and doctrine.

Philemon 1:2 ...to the church in thy house.

Hebrews 2:12 Saying, I will declare thy name unto my brethren, in the midst of the church will I sing praise unto thee.

James 5:14 Is any sick among you? let him call for the elders of the church; and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord:

1Peter 5:13 The *church that is* at Babylon, elected

3John 1:5-6 Beloved, thou doest faithfully whatsoever thou doest to the brethren, and to strangers; 6 Which have borne witness of thy charity before the church:

3John 1:9 I wrote unto the church.

3John 1:10 ...neither doth he himself receive the brethren, and forbiddeth them that would, and casteth *them* out of the church.

Revelation 2:1 ...the church of Ephesus

Revelation 2:8 ...the church in Smyrna

Revelation 2:12 ...the church in Pergamos

Revelation 2:18 ...the church in Thyatira

Revelation 3:1 ...the church in Sardis

Revelation 3:7 ...the church in Philadelphia

Revelation 3:14 ...the church of the Laodiceans

Verses where ekklesia is in the plural rendered “churches”

The word ekklesia in the plural form occurs 36 times in the Greek New Testament (Acts 9:31; 15:41; 16:5; Romans 16:4, 16; 1Corinthians 7:17; 11:16; 14:33-34; 16:1,19; 2Corinthians 8:1, 18, 19, 23-24; 11:8, 28; 12:13; Galatians 1:2, 22; 1Thessalonians 2:14; 2Thessalonians 1:4; Revelation 1:4, 11, 20; 2:7, 11, 17, 23, 29; 3:6, 13, 22; 22:16). These all are correctly rendered “churches” in our English translations and they simply mean more than one local church.

Verses from the Epistles which require explanation:

Here is a complete listing of all the verses where ecclesia might be construed to teach the idea of a universal invisible church. We will discuss them later in this study under the separate category of “Problem Verses”, and will show why they do not teach the theory of a universal invisible church and why. For now we just want to list them for your reference.

1Corinthians 10:32, 12:28; 15:9

Ephesians 1:22-23; 3:10; 3:21; 5:23-33

Philippians 3:6

Colossians 1:18, 24

Hebrews 12:22-23

Summary of our Initial look at the New Testament

There is no doubt, that with but a few exceptions (as listed above, and yet to be discussed) that the New Testament seems to support the idea that the church (ecclesia) is a local and visible phenomenon and not a universal invisible phenomenon. A church made disciples (Matthew 28:19), baptized these disciples in water (Matthew 28:19), and taught them what Christ commanded (Matthew 28:20). A church received members (Romans 14:1), elected officers (Acts 1:23; 6:5), sent out missionaries (Acts 13:1-4), observed the Lord's Supper (1Corinthians 11), had regular and stated meetings (Acts 20:7; I Cor. 16:1-2), settled disputes (Acts 15:1-41), excluded the disorderly (1Corinthians 5:9-13; 2Thessalonians 3:14), restored the penitent (1Corinthians 2:1-10), and condemned false doctrine (Romans 16:17-18). None of these things could have been done by a universal, invisible church. We have looked at every verse in the New Testament (75 verses in all) and have only found 10 passages which might possibly be interpreted in some sort of universal or invisible sense. The clear weight of the evidence so far suggests that churches are visible local congregations, things which have a physical, localized presence. They are not ethereal things, or spiritual things which can neither be seen, nor assembled in a geographic area.

The Problem Verses.

(Verses which might seem to teach an invisible or universal church).

1Corinthians 10:32 *Give none offence, neither to the Jews, nor to the Gentiles, nor to the church of God:*

Paul referred to the Corinthian church as "*the church of God*" (I Cor. 1:2; 11:22). There is absolutely no reason to assume he uses the word in a different sense here. He is referring to the Corinthian church. This verse really is only a problem if you assume that it is referring to something different. But if you read it in the same way Paul has been speaking of the church to which he was writing to, you will have no problem at all.

1Corinthians 12:28 *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.*

The reasoning used to try to make this verse teach a universal invisible church is based upon the assumption that Apostles were not officers in local churches, but were rather officers in the universal church which is comprised, according to them, of all believers of all time.

The problem with their assumption is that it is not true. The Apostles were first set in the church at Jerusalem, by Jesus Christ himself. (look up and compare Matthew 10:1-5 and Acts. 8:1).

This assumption that Apostles were gifts to the universal church, would exclude all the Old Testament saints who were also believers. It assumes that the Apostles had a special ministry to all the elect, but the fact is they went to local areas and established local churches.

The Apostles never worked with all the elect, and never ministered on a universal basis, but only on a local one. They were sent to specific local areas (Acts 1:8), not to the invisible or to the nebulous universe.

The word church in this passage means the church “in an institutional sense”, with a particular reference to the Jerusalem church, and there is no reason to give it a non-local meaning. Why would Paul have suddenly given the word church a new meaning in this verse without any notice or explanation? The Corinthians were very familiar with the way Paul used the word church. They would have understood this passage without adding in universal overtones.

1Corinthians 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.*

This verse is similar to the one above where Paul uses the term church in a somewhat generic sense or in an institutional sense. He attacked the institution when he attacked even one church. His actual persecution consisted of attacks upon actual local visible churches. When he persecuted one of them, it was as if he were persecuting all of them, because His wrath and ire had been displayed against the church. The institutional use of the word church in a generic sense like this, does not imply a universal invisible church. It implies that when any church is attacked, all of them are affected.

Ephesians 1:22-23 *And hath put all things under his feet, and gave him to be the head over all things to the church, 23 Which is his body, the fulness of him that filleth all in all.*

When the term church (ekklesia) is used in a generic or institutional sense, as we have been seeing in some of these so-called problem verses, it is simply stating and applying truths which apply equally to all churches. The church is His body, is true of each local church. See 1Corinthians 12: 13-28 where the “body” metaphor is used of the church at Corinth in relation to the exercise of spiritual gifts for the “edification of the body”. Paul tells the Corinthian church “ye are the body of Christ” (1Corinthians 12:27). The same could be said of any local church. Each church is an independent and self-nurturing organism. Each church is the body of Christ because all members of the local church are believers in the Lord Jesus Christ. He is the head of the body. It does not matter whether the body is found in Corinth or in Ephesus? In Antioch or Jerusalem. Each church has Christ as it's head and they are His body. “The church which is His body” is a generic term which applies equally to every local congregation. There is no reason to make it mean anything other than Christ's general institution of the local church. What is true of one is true of all, but that does not mean that church is an invisible, universal, non-local entity. Paul does not change the basic meaning of ekklesia, just because he is using it in a way that applies equally to every local congregation.

When Paul later uses the phrase “the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church, and He is the Savior of the body” (Eph. 5:23), nobody would imagine that he was saying that a husband is the head of an “invisible universal home made up of lots of little subject wives”? The idea is ridiculous, and is not necessary to understand the metaphor that the Holy Spirit has chosen to illustrate the relation between Christ and His church. Each husband loves his own wife, and his headship is a perfect picture of the headship of Christ over His church, wherever it may be. What is true of one is true of all, but all are not one in the invisible church theory sense.

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,*

Church here is again used in the institutional sense. Wherever it exists, which is not in everyplace (as in universal), it exists to be the medium through which God's manifold wisdom and eternal purpose are to be made known not only to all men, but to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places. Each church displays the glory of God, whether it has three members or 3,000. And the message of each church speaks not only to men, but to angels about the wonderful redemptive work and wisdom of God. What is true of one is true of all, but all are not to be confused, because each is a little different than the next. It is not necessary to try to read the sum total of all the saved of all time into this verse, as the universal invisible church people want you to do. Church has the normal meaning here as in all other places. It is a local called-out assembly.

Ephesians 3:21 *Unto him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end. Amen.*

The universal invisible church crowd wants you to believe that Christ is not glorified in the church, unless it fits into their strange definition of it. But this verse affirms that He is glorified in His church just the way that He made it and that glory will continue throughout all the endless ages of eternity. The term church here is again used in an institutional sense, and it applies to each and every instance where a church of Christ actually exists. If a church exists, it exists to glorify Him. But no church exists where there is not called out people assembled as a local congregation. What is true of one is true of all. Church exists to glorify Christ its head.

Eph 5:23-33 *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. 24 Therefore as the church is subject unto Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in every thing. 25 Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it; 26 That he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, 27 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. 28 So ought men to love their wives as their own bodies. He that loveth his wife loveth himself. 29 For no man ever yet hated his own flesh; but nourisheth and cherisheth it, even as the Lord the church: 30 For we are members of his body, of his flesh, and of his bones. 31 For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and shall be joined unto his wife, and they two shall be one flesh. 32 This is a great mystery: but I speak concerning Christ and the church. 33 Nevertheless let every one of you in particular so love his wife even as himself; and the wife see that she reverence her husband.*

The universal invisible church theorist, want you to conceive of the body of Christ as the sum-total of all the saved who ever lived, amalgamated and amassed into some sort of vast ethereal and invisible universal church. They try to use this passage to convert you to their cosmic non-local, non-spacial, non-time, non visible idea of church, but actually this passage says just the opposite of what they try to make it say.

Notice:

- Christ is the head of the church in exactly the same way as the husband is the head of the wife (v 23).
- The church is subject to Christ in exactly the same way as the wife is to her own husband (v. 24).
- Husbands are to love their own wives just as Christ loves His church (v.25).
- The church is sanctified and washed by the word (v.26).
- Christ sanctifies the church, and makes it presentable without spot or wrinkle (v. 27).
- Men ought to love their wives as their own bodies (v.s 28-29).
- We are members of Christ's body, of His flesh and His bones (v. 30).
- This is the reason a man is to leave his father and mother and be joined to His wife. The two becoming one flesh (v. 31).
- This the great mystery of Christ and the church (v. 32).
- Each husband loving his own wife and each wife reverencing her own husband (v. 33).

Paul uses the same “body” language that he uses in 1Corinthians 12 where he describes the church at Corinth as the body of Christ. But he is not using the analogy of the body to convey a message primarily about the nature of the church, instead he is doing just the opposite and is conveying a message primarily about the nature of marriage (the husband and wife relationship). The relationship of Christ to His body, the church; is an illustration of the relationship of a husband to His wife. The mystery of Christ and His church is used here strictly to teach men how to be husbands and wives how to be wives. It is not Paul's primary intention to convey a mysterious doctrine about the nature of church. People who try to force that idea into this passage are stretching it far beyond Apostolic intention. Paul is showing men how to be the right kind of husbands and how to love their own wives, in a way just like Christ loved His church. Paul uses the relationship between Christ and the church as an illustration of the relationship which ought to exist between husband and wife. 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. What is true of one is true of all. If a man loves His wife like Christ loves His church, then He will be a husband who honors God.

We cannot conceive however of a husband loving an invisible group of wives, a universal unseen body of them? This whole analogy is very real, very personal, very individualistic and very specific. Paul even uses the phrase “Let each one of you in particular so love His wife”, to stress that this is a personal and individual teaching about marriage; not to be understood in some sort of nebulous, spiritual sense as would be the case if it was a universal or invisible wife he were to love. It makes as much sense to use this passage as a proof-text for the existence of a universal, invisible wife as it does to use it as a proof-text for a universal, invisible church? And that's how the universal church people should use it if they were being consistent.

Philippians 3:6 *Concerning zeal, persecuting the church; touching the righteousness which is in the law, blameless.*

My comments under this verse would be exactly the same as those above under 1Corinthians 15:9. Paul persecuted local churches, not invisible ones. An invisible church could not be persecuted, because it does not exist in reality.

Colossians 1:18 *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 verse teaches that Christ is the head of every local body. We understand it in the same way as “He is the head of every man” (1Corinthians 11:3). It does not say, or teach, that Christ is the head of an invisible universal church. It says the church is His body, similar to other passages already mentioned (See 1Corinthians 12: 13-28; Ephesians 1:22-23; and Ephesians 5:23-33).

Colossians 1:24 *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:*

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 (1Corinthians 12:27). The church at Ephesus was the church body at Ephesus (Ephesians 1:23; 4:4,12,16; 5:30). It was *“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 miscellaneous, scattered, unattached units. “The body” in Colossians means the church at Colosse (Colossians 1:1-2). All the body at Colosse was *“knit together”* (Colossians 2:18), and they had all been *“buried with him in baptism”* (Colossians 2:12). The idea of “body” stresses the idea of “many members joined together in oneness”. Such an ideal cannot be experienced by an invisibility or by a non-spacial universality. This language is peculiar to the local church, and is meaningless without the local church. The body which is His church is every local congregation.

Hebrews 12:22-23 *But ye are come unto mount Zion, 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.*

This passage is sometimes used to teach an invisible universal church based on the idea that the invisible church is the “general assembly”, the entire group of all the saved of all time, that will be finally assembled in heaven to form the convocation of the redeemed. The problem, however is that this interpretation does not jive with the context. This is not a future tense situation, and it has nothing to do with the future in-gathering of all the redeemed into heaven, although they will assuredly one day be so gathered. “Ye are come” is a perfect active indicative, and it shows that we have already arrived at “Mount Zion” and are already “the general assembly” which the text is speaking about. There is nothing anticipatory about it.

If you feel compelled to make the use of this word church in this verse to apply to a universal and invisible church, the big church, or the whole church as you conceive of it, rather than let this word church mean what it always means...“a local visible assembly”; you will not understand what “the general assembly” is.

This section of Hebrews 12 contrasts the Old Testament with the New Testament, the earthly Mount Sinai with spiritual Mount Zion. The Earthly Israel with The Spiritual Israel. The writer is showing the excellencies of the New Covenant as far superior to the Old Covenant. The church of the firstborn, is the assembly of those who have been washed in His blood. They show their relationship to Him, by the observation of the ordinances of Baptism and the Lord's

Supper. The church as “Christ's institution” is identifiable by people who assemble to keep the ordinances and worship and live out the Christian life in community with each other and with the Savior of the body. It is a general assembly. This verse uses church in an institutional sense. It is His general assembly, wherever and whenever it assembles. If you are a church member, you have already come to Mount Zion, and are already a member of His general assembly. (Church here is used the same as in Acts 20:28; Eph. 1:22; Eph. 5:24-27; and 1Tim. 3:5; It is a “general term” for the “general assembly, a generic term for the church as instituted by Christ as local assemblies meeting together in His name). It is true that one day, all the Christians of all time will one day be gathered together as a great assembly in heaven, composed of all the people whom God calls out of this world and into heaven itself. But this passage does not speak of that future in-gathering. This text is speaking about the present institution of the church, as Christ left it. It has officers and a specific evangelical function. It is always visible, even though it's people, functions, and calling is spiritual.

4. Conclusion

Christ has but one church. It is found wherever groups of Christians are assembled to meet together, pray, carry out the great commission, Baptize converts and share in the Lords Supper. It has officers and does specific real work in a real world. There is nothing invisible or universal about “the church”. “The church” is a term that is often used institutionally, or generically, to mean the institution which Christ established. It however is always visible and present when two or three meet together in His name to do His work and to function as a local community of believers. It is never invisible or non-geographical. One day when all things have been completed, in a new heaven and New earth, there will be no more church as we now know it. All the redeemed will be gathered together in a final in-gathering and will be gathered to the marriage supper of the Lamb, and will dwell eternally in a united collective of redeemed souls in heaven. But this future state in heaven is not a present reality, and does not define “church” as we should presently understand it. If we make “church” refer to some intangible, non-located, non-assembled, invisible, nebulous, universal entity, then we rob the true church of it's meaning, purpose, officers, function, ordinances and ministry in a real and tangible world. We must guard the true nature of the local church, and resist any diluting of the teaching concerning it's current position and role in God's plan for this world. This means, we should avoid confusing language and avoid using the term church in an ecumenical Catholic sense, which leads people to think all churches are the same and they are all part of something bigger and better than any local work that God may be doing. The universal church idea takes our focus off of the importance of what God is doing in our local churches. That is where his real work occurs, and he does not work in an imaginary universal invisible church. He works where his people gather together, to do His work collectively. We must never forget that important idea.

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