

The Reformation and Baptist Compromise

By I. K. Cross

Baptists have been betrayed into the hands of Protestantism by their own historians. While Protestantism failed in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries to destroy them by fire and imprisonment, they have succeeded in the twentieth century through compromise and the rewriting of history in corrupting much of Baptist life.

The issue involved is whether Jesus made and kept His promise to the church of God that it would never fail through all ages, from its origin to His return, or whether that promise was made only to the kingdom of God while the true church became hopelessly corrupted prior to the sixteenth century Reformation. In more simple terms: do we have a perpetuity of true New Testament churches from Galilee and the ministry of Jesus, or do we have it only from the Reformation of the sixteenth century?

The answer to this question depends largely upon the nature of the church and the commitment Jesus made to it, as set forth in the New Testament Scriptures. Once this is determined we propose, in this manuscript, to also support the perpetuity of that church by history.

Nature of the Church

The issue that has separated Baptists from Protestants through the centuries has been the nature of the church. Baptists have held that the church is always local in nature, and a visible body, while Protestants, not able to completely free themselves from the influence of their Roman mother, hold that the true church is universal in nature, and therefore invisible. They are not able to distinguish between kingdom of God into which all believers are born, and the church of God which Jesus called out as a distinct body to serve as the executive of the kingdom.

The only place to determine the true nature of a New Testament church is the New Testament itself. Just what did Jesus declare He was going to build, and what did His apostles and other New Testament writers understand the nature of the churches to whom they ministered and wrote to be? Did Jesus call it together Himself, or did He leave it to the minds of theologians to determine for themselves in later centuries? Does it have distinct teachings set forth in the New Testament, or are men free to make their own?

Just what kind of church did Jesus say He was going to build? When Jesus and John the Baptist came preaching they declared that the “kingdom of heaven [or kingdom of God]” was at hand, and when Jesus spoke to the multitude that believed on Him, He told them about the kingdom of God. He told them that many would “sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 8:11). When He spoke to Nicodemus about being born again He spoke about entering the kingdom of God. John 3:3, 5. He also told Pilate, “My kingdom is not of this world” (John 18:36). But when He took His twelve chosen apostles to upper Galilee for a more intimate discussion He introduced them to a totally different word. There in the regions of Caesarea Philippi He told the twelve that He was going to build His church - His “ekklesia.”

While this was a new word introduced into Jesus' discussion with His disciples, it was not new to the Greek vocabulary in which the record is written, but a term that was well known and commonly understood.

The word is actually a compound of two Greek terms: "ek," meaning "out of," and "kaleo," meaning "to call." There can be little question of the intent of its usage in the New Testament. Even Dr. C. I. Scofield, who is largely responsible for popularizing the universal, invisible church theory through his notes in the Scofield Bible, states that an accurate definition of the word is, "an assembly of called out ones." The word is used of an assembly; the word implies no more. If the word implies no more than any other concept of a New Testament church has come from the minds of men and not from the words of Jesus Christ.

An old standard Bible encyclopedia published in 1915, makes a very clear statement separating the kingdom from the church: "The kingdom is quite evidently not the church, for we could hardly proclaim the Church as the first apostles proclaimed the kingdom (Acts 8:12). On the other hand, we certainly cannot say that the Church is an alternative after the rejection of the kingdom. To the extent that the Church is a fellowship of those who have accepted the kingdom, submitted to its rule, and become its heirs, we may rather believe that it is a creation and instrument and therefore a form and manifestation of the kingdom prior to its final establishment in glory.

While the kingdom is still the theme of apostolic preaching, the word 'church' is regularly used in Acts to denote the company of believers, more especially in the local sense."

A new work just off the press gives as its primary definition of a church: "A group or assembly of persons called together for a particular purpose."

The common use of "ekklesia" among the Greeks referred not merely to an ambiguous assembly, but rather to a particular kind of assembly. Dr. Paul Goodwin, for 40 years a professor at the Missionary Baptist Seminary, Little Rock, Arkansas, has clearly presented its use. He says, "A close observation of the word 'ekklesia' (church) reveals three ways in which it is used: namely, (1) Greek; (2) Hebrew; (3) Christian.

The Greek ekklesia was the assembly of free citizens of a city state. The meeting was usually called by an individual who ran through the streets of the city blowing a horn. As he points out, the only place this usage is found in the New Testament is in Acts 19:35-41, where the town clerk stops a mob and reminds them that there is a lawful assembly (ekklesia) where such matters should be settled. But, as he then states, "even this mob 'called out' to stop the work of Paul and his fellow helpers was called a 'church.'" The word used is 'ekklesia' and is translated 'assembly' only three times in all the New Testament. The rest of the time it is translated 'church.' This mob was a crowd of people called out for a purpose, and that means it was a church, but certainly it was not the Lord's church, a New Testament church!

In Acts 7:38 the assembly of the children of Israel before the tabernacle is called a church. "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." There were about

two million members in the ekklesia [church in the wilderness]. Now, no one would say it was a New Testament church, for that was centuries before Christ, but it was a church, nevertheless, and a big one.

Universal church brethren often use this passage to support their concept that the church is made up of all believers in both Old and New Testaments, but this passage proves more than they can swallow. These brethren want a universal and invisible church, yet no such word is found here. Ekklesia in Acts 7:38 describes a very local and visible assembly. Such a concept would also make national Israel the church in the Old Testament, a concept that Jesus Himself would not recognize in His personal, earthly ministry. This group certainly did not become a part of the church simply adapted to the New Testament period. Instead, John the Baptist upbraided them without mercy, refused to accept them, and made new converts to form a new organization, as is clearly stated in Acts 1:21, 22. If the church of the New Testament can be an invisible body, is it not reasonable to believe that an assembly described in the Old Testament by the same word would also be invisible. Yet, there is no evidence whatever that the congregation of Israel, referred to as “the church in the wilderness,” was ever conceived as being invisible. Thus Acts 7:38 sets forth more clearly than ever that the use of “ekklesia” in the New Testament refers to a congregation of people both local and visible, and it is so used consistently throughout the New Testament.

Continuing with his definition of this word, Dr. Goodwin says, “Let us note the Christian aspect of the word ‘ekklesia.’ When Jesus said, “Upon this rock I will build my church,” He meant the church as an institution. He used the pronoun ‘my’ to distinguish His church from the Hebrew and Greek assemblies. Paul referred to the church as an institution when he wrote: “but if I tarry long, 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” (1 Tim. 3:15).”

No reference is made here to any particular church. Timothy was to behave himself in whatever church he happened to be working.

Jesus did not introduce a new word to His disciples when he announced to them He was going to build His church, but rather He used a word that was commonly used and well understood by them. The difference only being that He was telling them He was going to build His church (ekklesia), and consequently He would establish the laws by which it would be governed. The laws of the New Testament are the laws of that church. They are God-given by its only head and founder, and no man on earth can presume to change its nature or the laws by which it is governed.

A Play on Words

Protestants and Baptists who have fallen into its trap usually turn to the use of the word “body” to try to establish their theory of an invisible and universal church in addition to the obvious local congregation so clearly set forth by our Lord in His use of the word “ekklesia.” This is simply a play on words. The term “body” is used as a figure of speech. If the term Jesus used in speaking of His church was so commonly understood to refer to a local and visible assembly, called out for a specific purpose, is it not reasonable to believe He chose that particular word

because of this clear fact? There were two other words He could have used which, would have also referred to an assembly. “Synagoga,” obviously the word from which the word synagogue comes, could have been used to refer simply to an assembly, or He could have used the word “paneguris,” which also refers to any kind of an assembly, usually on a festive occasion.

However, instead He used the most definitive word in the Greek language to describe a particular kind of assembly, and it is used consistently throughout the New Testament.

It therefore follows that any figure used to speak of the church must speak of the only clearly defined church in the New Testament Scriptures. A figure is not used to change the nature of what it illustrates, but rather to further set forth the original. There is simply no Scripture or logic to support a conclusion that the use of the term “body” speaks of a different kind of church, or, to use the term of Protestant theologians, the “church universal.” W. E. Vine, in defining the term “body” states that “In its figurative uses the essential idea is preserved.” Then in an effort to join the Protestant theologians and save his reputation with them he states, “It is used metaphorically, of the mystic Body of Christ, with reference to the whole church,” but he also then adds in the same paragraph that it is used “also of a local church.” Pray tell me how a figure can speak of a “mystic” body and a real body also if there is no other warrant in discussing the nature of the church to permit it. Obviously the idea of a mystical body referring to the “whole church,” commonly accepted by Protestant thinking, is an imprecision created during the Reformation to accommodate Rome’s daughters.

There can really be no question about the “body” being a figurative reference to the “ekklesia” when Paul states plainly in Ephesians 1:22, 23 of “the ekklesia, which is his body.” To further close the issue he states in Ephesians 4:4 that “There is one [kind of] body.” There is not a local body and an invisible body. It is either one or the other. He adds further in verse five that this one kind of body has only “one faith,” one belief. That is, it cannot be composed of many different kinds of beliefs. That “faith” is “the faith once delivered to the saints,” which Jude writes about with reference to the teachings of the New Testament in Jude 3.

The church, or ekklesia, is spoken of in an institutional sense, just as we speak of the home, or the family, as an institution. We do not speak of a large universal, invisible family, but an institution that is always recognized as referring to any local household anywhere. Thus we do not have to change the nature of the church to speak of it as an institution. In fact, Paul speaks of the husband being the head of the wife “even as Christ is the head of the church [ekklesia].” No one has any question about what Paul meant when he said “the husband is the head of the wife,” so why should there be any question as to what he meant when he said “Christ is the head of the church?” This doesn’t change the nature of the local assembly, and Paul declares that this is what the body is also. He further adds that this ekklesia, which is His body, also has only one baptism. This forever eliminates the attempt to have all believers baptized into the universal, invisible church by the Holy Spirit, as is so frequently attempted in 1 Corinthians 12:13. Otherwise, this would invalidate baptism in water, a practice commonly accepted as biblically standard by Baptist churches.

It is noteworthy also that many of the epistles are addressed to a particular ekklesia. Never are they addressed to the body, or to an invisible something that cannot be identified. When Paul

writes to “all that be in Rome:” he does not declare that he is writing to a church there, but to all the believers there, “beloved of God, called to be saints.” He gives no indication that he is writing to either an ekklesia or the “body.” He makes it rather clear that this particular epistle is written to all the believers in Rome.

However, it is quite different when he writes to “the church of God which is at Corinth.” Here he addresses an ekklesia, the one that is located in the city of Corinth. Likewise when he writes to “the churches [plural] of Galatia” he does not address the epistle to the church of Galatia as one body in that Roman province, but to a number of local congregations located there, each one an ekklesia. When he writes to “the saints which are at Ephesus,” he restricts this letter to a particular city, with instructions that are applicable to all saints, but addressed to Ephesus - a very visible location in Asia. Likewise when he writes to Philippi and Colosse. When he writes to the Thessalonians he addresses the epistle to “the church [ekklesia]” in that city.

If the so-called “true church” is a universal body, when John wrote “the revelation of Jesus Christ” which was to be delivered to the churches of Asia, why didn’t the Holy Spirit have him address the letter to “the church of Asia?” Instead He had him address it to “the seven churches” which are in Asia. Each of these was a particular ekklesia, and a particular message is addressed to each of them. If some would presume to say, “But he is addressing each of these messages to a particular local body,” that is just the point.

You can’t have it both ways. Either the church is an ekklesia a local congregation that can receive a particular message, or it is a universal conglomerate of believers that has no particular message, or it is a universal conglomerate of believers that has no particular faith and therefore no need of a particular rebuke for what it believes.

Furthermore, Jesus purchased an institution with His own blood. Paul, speaking to the elders from the church at Ephesus, admonishes them to “feed the church (ekklesia) of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood” (Acts 20:28). Individual believers are purchased with the blood of Christ, as is clearly stated throughout the New Testament. Examples are Ephesians 1:7 and Colossians 1:17. These believers make up the kingdom of God. Jesus did not have to purchase His kingdom, it was already His. But when He paid the price for our redemption He also purchased the church of God which He had established while on earth, and after His resurrection also commissioned it to evangelize the world.

That institution, made up entirely of local congregations, is identified by the New Testament doctrines it holds, and not by an invisible something that compromises the true teachings of the New Testament. To misappropriate a figure, such as the body, and make it represent something other than the true New Testament ekklesia is a tragic error that should not be tolerated.

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