

“Universal Church” Heresy by R. K. Maiden

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Questions to be answered in this article:

- Wherein is ecclesiological liberalism more dangerous than theological liberalism?
- Why are Baptists not “Protestants?”
- Show that the New Testament church is a local body of believers rather than a general body.
- What was the tap-root of the ecclesiological heresy?
- Where and how did this error start?
- Show how Protestantism fell heir to this heresy.
- Give proof that the Federal Council of Churches sponsors this heresy.
- Show that some Baptist leaders are accepting the heresy.
- Show that acceptance of the “branch” theory destroys Baptist witness and Baptist churches.
- Should Baptists honor the teaching of Christ or capitulate to the current militant effervescent sentimentality on the “church branch” theory?
- Tell of recent efforts of “unionists” to unite with anti-Christian religionists. Give substance of utterance of Dr. Cadman, President of the Federal Council on this.
- Tell of the action of Church Students’ Conference, where churches and the Lord of the churches were declared effete, and a humanitarian, socialistic “church” proposed.
- Give further proof that to rob Christ of His glory as Redeemer and Lord is the real “unionistic” objective.
- How can Baptists offset this vast program to betray the Lord and His churches?

The counsels of perfection of the Apostles regarding unity are not of union of organization, but of keeping the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. That was the essential requirement of the apostolic church, where variety of organization was already experienced. Many therefore regard what is called “the need for external unity” as outside the program of those who follow God’s Word. There is deep truth in the recent utterance of a minister who said, “I do not see any object in sweeping churches into one organization. It will be a peril rather than a help. High religious organization always has been a peril.” . . . Those beliefs of doctrine which are based upon the Written Word have always produced the same unique spiritual experience everywhere in all places and ages. Reunion that would compromise God’s Word or its doctrines could only prove to be a broken reed. Reunion of the denominations in their present state would have a two-fold effect (1) It would separate real believers in Christ from the federation of professing believers bent upon uniformity. (2) It would consolidate those who are preparing the way for the pseudo-Christian scientific, humanitarian church of anti-Christ. In spite of the vast clamour for external union, through all of the varieties of organization in visible church groups today, those who have been redeemed by the blood of Christ are one the world over, There is ONE FLOCK, but MANY FOLDS.—Prof. C. W. Hale Amos, of Cambridge University, in *The Church or the World?* “Universal Church” Heresy

Preliminary observations. Some of my readers, not aware of the present aggressions of liberalism, may think me unduly exercised over Liberalistic programs and advances. But such readers would not register surprise at my attitude if they were conversant with all the facts. I have no disposition to exaggerate

current conditions and trends, but am deeply concerned. Our Baptist Zion is either unaware of the menace of ecclesiological liberalism or else supinely indifferent, The chief concern so far shown among us seems to be with theological liberalism, This, too, is a menace of prodigious proportions. But this giant heresy is being recognized for what it is and is being courageously opposed and exposed, while little is being said or done in defense of New Testament ecclesiology—the New Testament Church. I do not hesitate to go on record as firmly holding the belief that Baptists have more to fear from ecclesiological liberalism than from theological liberalism. If, as all true Baptists believe, Baptists have a heaven-given mission in the world and message for the world, and would faithfully perform their mission and deliver their message, at all costs they must maintain their separateness, loyalty and integrity,

Baptists not “Protestants.” When I use here the terms “Protestant” and “Protestantism,” I do not include Baptists, who should never be classified with Protestants. Such classification does violence to the facts of history. Baptists were bravely protesting against the doctrines and practices of Rome long before there was any Protestantism. “The People Called Baptists” should have their eyes opened to the fact that there is a deliberate effort on the part of leading Liberalists to oppose the truth by covering the whole land with an enveloping fog of sentimentalism. I find myself unable to escape the conclusion that our Baptist churches cannot hope permanently to survive and function as New Testament churches, except on the condition that they, at all costs, shall maintain churches that are in fact and not merely in theory and claim New Testament churches, in doctrine, in polity and in practice. They have nothing to gain but much—even their own right to exist as a separate body—to lose by compromises and entangling alliances.

New Testament meaning of “church.” It is important to keep definitely in mind the fact that in its beginning the great apostasy was ecclesiastical. It was a departure by gradual almost insensible, processes from the simple, independent, self-governing polity of the earlier churches. The drift toward episcopacy had set in before the death of the last Apostles. Baptists have held and taught that Christ “built” a church. “I will build my church.” Ecclesia (church) He named it. Let the meaning of the word be examined. In what sense did Christ and the writers of the New Testament use it? Christ did not invent it, nor did He put into it any unfamiliar or unusual meaning. It was borrowed from the Greeks, and is a compound of two Greek words, a preposition and a verb, meaning primarily “called out.” Omitting three or four doubtful instances, the word translated “church” occurs 113 times in the New Testament. It is used in three senses. In ninety-two instances it is used in the primary and ordinary sense; that is, of a particular, independent, autonomous body, as “The Church at Jerusalem,” “Antioch,” “Corinth,” etc. Then it is used a few times in the abstract or institutional sense, as in Matthew 16:18. When the term is used without reference to a particular church, it is used in the institutional sense, but when reduced to the concrete it becomes a particular church. The term is used also in the sense of a general assembly, a purely spiritual sense, as in Heb. 12:23 and Eph. 5:25-27. But in every instance of this kind the assembly is a thing in prospect, and not now in actual existence. That is, it teaches us that there is not now, but there will be, a general assembly of all the redeemed of all time—past, present and future. This assembly can now have only an ideal existence. It is manifest, therefore, that the only church now in existence after the New Testament order and having New Testament authority, is the particular, independent, self-governing, unattached body of baptized believers—a pure democracy, a normal Baptist church. It is significant that Christ’s last message was not to the church, but to the churches. (Rev. chap. 1). John saw the crucified, risen, ascended and glorified Christ “in the midst of the golden lamp stands.” John was commanded to “write in a book an account of what you see and send it to the seven churches.” The message to the Church at Ephesus begins: “This is what He who holds the seven stars in the grasp of His right hand says, He who walks to and fro among the lamp stands of gold. The seven lamp stands are the seven churches.” To those who accept Revelation as divinely inspired and authoritative, the representation of Christ in the midst of the churches, walking to and fro among them, should be the end

of all controversy as to whether “My [His] church” is a universal, invisible, unorganized, unintegrated company, or a visible, spiritual, self-governing company of baptized believers—a small visible, spiritual democracy.

Parent ecclesiological heresy. The conception and adoption of the “universal church” theory is the parent heresy in ecclesiology. How, when and where did this theory originate? The change from the idea of the individual, self-governing church to the universal church had its origin in one of the most colossal blunders of all Christian history—that of making *ecclesia* and *basileia* identical. So far from being identical, the difference between “Church” and “Kingdom” is so great as to require that they be contrasted rather than compared. Jesus and the writers of the New Testament never confused the two terms; never used one where the other can be substituted without doing violence to both terms. With two or three exceptions, *ecclesia* is used in the New Testament in the local, particular, multiple sense, while, without a single exception, *basileia* is used in the singular and universal sense. The taproot of the universal church theory is the identification of the Church and the Kingdom, making these two coincident, co-extensive and co-terminous. The theory of the identity of Church and Kingdom and of the universality of the church were twin-born. New Testament writers knew nothing of a world church. As nearly as can be determined, the first formal, official identification of Church and Kingdom was projected when the Roman Empire became nominally Christianized, about the time of the consummation of the great ecclesiastical apostasy. It was the Ecumenical Council of Nice, called by Constantine, Emperor of Rome, that affirmed and projected as its creed the idea of a “Catholic” World Church. From then down to the Lutheran Reformation of the sixteenth century, the universal, visible theory of the church held the field, except for the scattered, comparatively obscure, hunted and persecuted little churches, known by various names at different times and places—churches of the New Testament type in doctrine and polity. Following the Reformation period and born of the Reformation movement, there emerged a new theory of the church—the universal, invisible spiritual theory. Protestantism adopted Rome’s heresy. Protestantism stood at its beginning and continues to stand for the identification of Church and Kingdom. It reasons that since the Kingdom is universal, the Church must be universal. And, too, since the Kingdom is invisible and spiritual, the church must be invisible and spiritual. So we find that the genesis of the heresies of the universal, invisible, spiritual church is in treating Church and Kingdom as synonymous. “If Christ and His appointed messengers cautiously preserved the distinction between ‘Church’ and ‘Kingdom,’ uniformly treating the former as local and visible, and the latter as universal and invisible, nothing but harm can come from blurring the line of demarcation which they have set, and so confusing their teaching concerning each. The two ideas—that of a local organization on one side, and that of a scattered and unaffiliated world community on the other—are too incongruous to dwell harmoniously together under a common designation” (Thomas, Church and Kingdom, p. 292).

Church “branch” theory. The “branch” theory is the natural offspring of the universal, invisible, which was born of the mother heresy—making Church and Kingdom identical. When the 1936 Preaching Mission, sponsored by the Federal Council of Churches, was underway, E. Stanley Jones acted as the special spokesman for the Council, keeping it and its aims before the people. While this is being written, my eye caught the following paragraph in the Watchman-Examiner of December 24, 1936: “Dr. E. Stanley Jones, in the interest church union, urges the formation of a kind of super-church entitled ‘The Church of Christ in America,’ which will comprise all denominations. He would suggest that the various denominations be called after their denominational names in this way, for example, ‘The Presbyterian Branch of the Church of Christ in America.’ He says: ‘The figure that I have in mind is that of a tree, with many different branches adhering to the central trunk,—The Church of Christ in America—and that trunk in turn adhering into the root—Christ.’”

This, “The Church of Christ In America,” is the logical sequence of the “universal, invisible, spiritual” theory and the “branch” theory of the church. Beyond doubt Dr. Jones speaks not only his own mind but

the mind of the Federal Council of Churches, and incidently reveals the Council's ultimate objective. What he proposes is similar to what was proposed and undertaken by the "Follow-Up" Committee of the Edinburgh Conference. That committee, it is recalled, took a swing around the world, visiting mission fields and holding conferences to foster the idea of unifying different mission interests, bringing them into co-operative relation and under common control, and to unionize and nationalize the churches—Baptist, Methodist and what not. Happily this undertaking ended in inglorious failure. This church branch program did not eventuate as its promoters planned and expected, but it had an educational value in the interest of its heretical theory. The leaven of ecclesiastical liberalism was carried abroad. Seeds were sown that will germinate and grow into a harvest of "universal church" sentiment and practice. The position assumed and the program revealed by Dr. Jones and the Federal Council is practically the same as that of the Edinburgh "Follow-Up Committee."

Baptists infested with the theory. Our Baptist churches should refuse to be deceived by the wooing and cooing of the Federal Council of Churches. It is making "a nose of wax" of New Testament teaching concerning the church. Where it is not doing this, New Testament teaching is ignored and treated as of little consequence, and New Testament authority is nonchalantly flouted. It would if it could, and will if it can, dominate Baptist churches and disintegrate the Baptist denomination. Concerning the church, a false and misleading terminology is gaining currency, and that, too, among Baptists. More and more Baptists are yielding to the clamor for a more liberal interpretation of the term church, and more and more they are thinking, speaking and writing of the church in pedo-Baptist terms and with pedo-Baptist meaning. In his book: *Can a Man be a Christian Today?*, Dr. W. L. Poteat, former president of Wake Forest College, in referring to organized Christianity, calls it "The Christian Church." Here is a quotation from a sermon preached by Prof. Marshall, Bible teacher of McMaster University, Canada, a Baptist institution: "Baptists do not regard baptism as essential to membership of the Christian Church—the church universal—even though they insist on immersion as a condition of admittance into the Baptist section of the Christian Church." Here we have the branch theory espoused and acclaimed by a prominent Baptist—the "Church Universal" with a "Baptist Section." This unscriptural, anti-scriptural, theory of the church is gradually sweeping a wider area.

Will Baptists dig their own grave? The Baptist denomination digs its own grave when it consents to be counted as one of the "fifty-seven Varieties." It cannot survive, and has neither need nor right to survive, if it suffer itself to be classified as a "section" or "branch" of the so-called "universal, invisible, spiritual church." A Baptist church that thinks of itself as a "branch" or "section" of a "universal, invisible, spiritual church," or "the Christian Church," is a Baptist church in name only. Baptist churches that co-ordinate the Baptist denomination and themselves with the churches of other denominations, and accord to these churches New Testament standing, are acting consistently, not with Baptist principles and polity, but with their liberal attitude and practice, when they affiliate, federate and co-operate with non-Baptist bodies. By their liberal attitude and practice they put themselves under obligation to practice inter-denominational comity to its utmost limits, to accept the baptisms of non-Baptist bodies as scriptural and valid, to exchange letters with non-Baptist bodies, to practice open communion, and adopt the policy of open membership. This is the inescapable logic of the "Church branch" theory.

Baptists must resist the disintegrating program. The consistent, self-respecting, self-preserving, Christ-honoring position for our Baptist churches in this day of shallow thinking, dissolving convictions, loose loyalty and effervescing sentimentality, is to deny New Testament church standing to all religious bodies that refuse to practice New Testament polity and reject as unscriptural and invalid any and all of their ecclesiastical acts. Baptists need desperately to review their own Baptist history, rethink the Baptist position and rediscover the Baptist conscience. "The anvil on which the Jesuit hammer will break to pieces is the Baptist conscience. I would like all the world through to put the Baptist conscience against the Jesuits." This is true witness by Hugh

Price Hughes, noted Wesleyan Minister in England. If our Baptist people and churches would maintain their loyalty to the law of the New Testament relative to the church, they must utterly repudiate the program, and stubbornly and courageously resist the encroachments of the Federal Council of Churches, the organized, recognized, aggressive, official representative of ecclesiological liberalism.

Recapitulation. The false identification of Church and Kingdom begat the empire theory of Papal Rome, and the universal, invisible, spiritual theory of Protestantism, which begat the Church branch theory, which begat the Federal Council, which begat—what? The Luther Reformation was not a full break with Rome. The Reformers got out of Rome only to wander eternally in the wilderness. They had rebelled against and discarded the papal theory of the visible, universal church, but had not gone on to accept the New Testament Church type. So the post-Reformation leaders found themselves under the necessity of inventing a theory to set over against the papal theory. So the universal, invisible, spiritual theory of the church was invented. And this is now the working theory of all Protestantism—the theory that Baptists are up against, the theory that threatens and purposes, through the agency of the Federal Council, the disintegration of the Baptist denomination.

Unionism raised to 'nth power. Once off the New Testament reservation and out into the wide spaces there is no telling how far those afflicted with unionitis may wander, or what crazy notions they may get into their heads. In ecclesiological liberalism, which invariably ripens into unionism, there is a whole brood of potential follies. Recently, in a public address at Omaha, Neb., Dr. Charles M. Sheldon, author of *In His Steps*, advocated and urged the merging of all Protestants, Catholics and Jews into one great organization—an international church. “The time has come,” he said, “for denominations to pass on to something else.” When Dr. S. Parks Cadman was president of the Federal Council, he made a tour through Ohio and Indiana, delivering addresses in a number of cities. The object of these meetings and addresses was to narrow and dim the line of separation between denominations, bring them closer together and create generally an atmosphere of “unity”—not unity in Christ but tacked on to His name. In this tour of addresses, Dr. Cadman was spokesman for the Federal Council. It was reported that the Indianapolis meeting was arranged by a committee composed of three Jews, three Catholics and three Protestants. Dr. Cadman’s address was published in part in *Christian Work*, as follows: “We must believe in the Jews who gave to civilization the idea of God the Father of all, the Roman Catholics, who, to quote Principal H. R. Workman, furnished for seven hundred years the only center of faith and love and light upon the earth. Let us leave our theological weapons at the door and gather in the temple of brotherhood, where we can sit, all bands of us, elbow to elbow. Surely Americans can unite upon the religion of the Fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man.”

The “Universal Church” being hatched before our eyes. This fits in with the world church heresy. In Dr. Cadman’s program there is no recognition of so much as the existence of the New Testament church. And he was expressing the attitude and revealing the program of the Federal Council of Churches. “Civilization,” we are being told, “has now reached a point at which the eyes of all Christian men should be turned distinctly in the direction of the universal church with a view of its organization.” There is being hatched out of the universal church theory a brood of noisy ecclesiastical liberals who are berating denominationalism. The country was furnished with an illustration of the daring and dangerous lengths to which the universal, invisible church doctrine may be carried, in the Student Conference, held a few years ago at Evanston, Ill., where war was openly declared on denominationalism, where churches were pronounced failures and the teachings of Jesus were acclaimed impracticable and effete, and where a program for a universal, humanitarian, socialistic church, was announced.

To rob Christ of His glory the ultimate objective. A while ago a prominent churchman voiced the hope for a consolidation of Christendom that would take in Unitarians and the papal hierarchy. The vastly wealthy John D. Rockefeller, Jr., who has withdrawn all support from the Northern Baptist Program, announces his purpose from now on to march with the liberals and unionists, and put his money behind their program. When all the denominations are blended into one he would call it, “The Church of

the Living God." Some time ago announcement was made in the public press of a movement to be launched at Berkley, Calif., for a cosmic religion and world church. Christ, Buddha and Confucius, were to be taken as great; religious founders and leaders, on equal terms. The objective, it was said, was the blending of all religions into one and all churches into one. This, it was claimed will be "cosmic" religion—the basic religion. There was made a concrete exhibit of the "brotherhood of man" in the Parliament of Religions at the great exposition at Chicago. Cardinal Gibbons, representative of the Vatican, held the center of the stage, and opened the meeting with prayer. Grouped about him were representatives of Brahma, Buddha and Mohammed. All united in repeating the Lord's prayer, led by a Jewish Rabbi, a Shinto priest invoked the benediction of eight million deities of Japan. Never, on so great scale, has Christianity been so compromised and disgraced. But here were ecclesiastical liberalism and unionism, in their uttermost and ultimate reach. And all this is, potentially, in the union for which many are pleading and for the full bringing of which the Federal Council is committed.

Baptists Must Awake. Baptists and Baptist churches here and there are dipping their colors to this ecclesiastically evaporating, disintegrating movement. The simple, specific, serious purpose of this discussion is to plead with all the earnestness and conviction of my soul the cause of the simple New Testament church, the independent, self-governing body of baptized believers, as against the visible empire conception of Romanism and the universal, invisible, spiritual conception of Protestantism. The New Testament church, opposed and oppressed by the visible empire church theory of papal Rome on one side and the universal, invisible, spiritual church theory of Protestantism on the other side, must awake to its danger and rise to its defense.

[Pastor Wilson's comments: This excellent article appeared in Re-thinking Baptist Doctrines, a book published in 1937 by The Western Recorder, a Southern Baptist periodical. The book is a compilation of the writings of some of the leading pastors and educators in the Southern Baptist Convention. It is indeed sad that the convictions expressed in this article and in the others that appeared in that book are completely foreign to Southern Baptists of our day. To quote from the author of this article: "A Baptist church that thinks of itself as a 'branch' or 'section' of a 'universal, invisible, spiritual church,' or 'the Christian Church,' is a Baptist church in name only." This unfortunately applies, perhaps without exception, to the churches of the Southern Baptist Convention today.]

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