

When Did the church Become Universal

Davis Huckabee

When Did the church Become Universal

Davis Huckabee

Much is said today about the “Universal Church,” and probably ninety percent of the professing Christian world holds in theory this doctrine in one or the other of its two forms. So common is the belief in this that it is accepted as an axiom, or self-evident truth, that there is at present a universal church. Few people dare to question this idea and fewer still will put forth the effort necessary to determine if the “church” spoken of in the New Testament is of this character. In fact, one risks being ostracized as a rank heretic if he even questions this doctrine.

Doubtless a majority of Baptists presently hold to this theory, though this has not always been the case, for while there have long been some Baptists who have held it, yet these were in the minority until they had been subjected to long periods of influence from pedo-baptists. But we believe that any Baptist who consistently thinks through this theory, and compares it with Scripture and with historic Baptist principles will be constrained to part company either with it, or with his Baptist principles, for they are mutually antagonistic.

Truth does not change. Some truths may be emphasized more than others at times. And truth may have various applications in different circumstances, but it does not change. And this is no less true of church truth than of any other form of truth. If a man should tell us that two thousand years ago two plus two equaled four, but that after a couple of hundred years, two plus two came to equal six. And if he told us that later two plus two came to equal forty-seven, and finally it came to equal one hundred thirty one, we would quickly conclude that the man was either a madman, or else that he knew absolutely nothing of mathematics. Yet, this is exactly what the advocates of the universal church theory teach in essence.

If the New Testament type of church is presently a universal organization, then it must have always been. If, on the other hand, if it was not originally universal, then it cannot now be supposed to be so, for while there may certainly be growth in size, there cannot be a change in the basic constitution of the church without it ceasing to be what it was originally. The New Testament church is likened to a body, but while bodies may grow, they never change their basic constitution except in death. Now if it can be shown that the Lord’s churches were not believed nor taught to be universal for the first two or three hundred years after Christ, will not this indicate that universality was not originally any part of the constitution of scriptural churches? Verily so! There are three principle thoughts to be considered in the course of this study, the first of which is—

I. The Theory Examined.

Necessarily there must be a correct understanding of the terms used in this study, so we will endeavor to define the terms used. The New Testament meaning of the word translated “church” is “a called out assembly.” Our English word “church” in present day usage has a much broader meaning. Its broadest signification is simply “a religious organization of some sort.” In fact, in some instances, “religious” does not even enter into it. When this writer came to his present pastorate, and the church was organized and decided to call itself “Heritage Baptist Church,” it was found that already in the city of Salem, Ohio, there was an incorporated group called “The Heritage Church.” It was nothing more than a young peoples’ ball team.

The word “universal” signifies “of, for, or including all or the whole of something specified; not limited or restricted.. .present or occurring everywhere or in all things.” Therefore, “the Universal Church” would be a religious organization of some sort which is not limited or restricted to any one location, but which may be found occurring everywhere. This is the commonly understood meaning of “the Church.” This is a confusing of the Church of God with the Family of God.

This definition is slightly modified by different advocates of this theory, depending on whether they hold to the “Universal Visible” or “Universal Invisible” Church theory. A large portion of Protestantism and all of Catholicism hold the former view, and explain it substantially as All of the different denominations of professing Christians in the world are simply different “branches” of the one “Universal, True Church.” Thus they agree to recognize one another as scriptural churches no matter how great their differences may be. “You don’t unchurch me, and I won’t unchurch you,” is their attitude. Very broad-minded indeed! But they forget that the Apostle to the Gentiles did not set such a broad-minded example. Far from recognizing those legalistic and Judaizing men who followed him around and tried to bring the Gentiles under a yoke of bondage to works, he condemned them as “false apostles, deceitful workers,” and the devil’s ministers (2 Cor. 11:13-15). Paul did not recognize as “fellowmembers of the Universal, True Church” those who taught false religious dogma. Indeed, he would allow nothing but what he taught to be the truth, and pronounced a curse upon every departure from it. “But though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed,” Gal. 1:8. Paul evidently did not subscribe to this modern theory of the church, and therefore, he would be considered by many as a bigot of the worst kind, for he not only unchurched, but even unchristianized all who did not believe and teach as he did. But who will lay sin to his charge for so doing?

This Universal Visible Church theory is held by many denominations, and it matters not to them how diverse the different “branches” may be in doctrine and practice, all are content if they can but trace a historical connection somehow back to Rome. Almost all state churches fall into this

category.

The second view of the “Universal Church” is called the “Universal Invisible Church” theory, and those holding to this theory may, or may not believe that there is a Universal Visible Church on earth. But they do believe that there is an Invisible Church that is comprised of all truly saved persons, whether living or dead. This view also makes it possible to be very broad-minded toward heretics and immoral persons, for no matter how divergent in beliefs and practices two individuals or churches may be, they can always fellowship together because “after all, we are all members of the Universal Invisible Church.”

Those who hold this view often try to justify it by the fact that “all believers are members of the Body of Christ, which is the church.” Some who disclaim belief in any universal church, still believe that every true believer is a member of the “Body of Christ.” But these two cannot be separated. The Body of Christ and the Church of Christ are one and the same (Col. 1:24). But the Scriptures nowhere even intimate that every believer is a member of the Body of Christ. On the contrary, everywhere that reference is made to someone being a member of the Body of Christ, it is in direct reference to that one being a member of a local congregation. Nowhere in all of the New Testament is there a single reference to any unchurched Christian being a member of the Body of Christ. It is a purely gratuitous assumption to think so.

Advocates of both forms of the Universal Church theory believe and teach that every local church is a part of the Universal Church. The Scriptures do not teach this. In fact, they refute this teaching. 1 Corinthians 12 is one of the favorite resorts of those who advocate the Universal Church theory. Yet, after numerous references to the Body of Christ, in which he likens the church to a human body, Paul concludes by saying, “Now ye [the Corinthians] are the body of Christ, and members in particular” (1 Cor. 12:27). There is no definite article here so that it is literally “a body.” Observe that he did not say “Ye are a part of the Body...” Nor can this meaning be forced into this text. To try is to pervert Scripture in order to justify false teachings. Obviously the church at Corinth was not exclusively the Body of Christ, for other churches were also so denominated, but just as obviously the church at Corinth was not partially the Body of Christ. Proponents of this theory cite such Scriptures as Ephesians 4:4 in an endeavor to justify their theory. “There is one body,” and other texts that speak of “one body” are cited as proof that there is numerically but One Church, and they conclude that all the local assemblies must be but parts of it. However, the fact that the plural “churches” is often used is clear evidence that the Body, which is the Church, is not numerically one. In what sense, then, is the Body of Christ “one”? It is “one” generically; i.e., there is but one kind of body or church, and that is the local assembly. It is self-evident that there were local assemblies in the New Testament, and the fact that there were numerous of these proves that the “Body” was not “one” numerically. Therefore, by the process of elimination we can come to but one conclusion, namely, that the body of Christ, the

Church, is “one” so far as kind is concerned, and that one kind is a local assembly. In no other way can all the Biblical terms be harmonized, and this involves taking each term in its most natural meaning. The majority of usages of “church” make this truth evident, and only a lot of twisting and wresting of the Word of God can interpret this any other way. Who wants a doctrine that must be arrived at in this way.

“Universal church” is actually a contradiction in terms, for the word translated “church,” when scripturally used, cannot be applied to anything but a local assembly. The Greek word *ekklesia* means assembly or congregation, and there is no Biblical usage where it does not have the connotation of an actual assembling. “Locality inheres in *ecclesia*. There can be no assembly now or hereafter without a place to meet. When existing in fact, both the particular assembly in time, and the general assembly in eternity, are both visible and spiritual.. *Ecclesia* remains throughout an organized assembly whose members are properly called out from their private homes or business to attend to public affairs.”—B. H. Carroll, *Ecclesia—The Church*, pp. 21-22, 31.

Not only is the word “Universal” a contradiction of the word “Church,” but the word “universal” (Greek *katholikos*) is not found in the Greek New Testament, nor in the Greek Old Testament (Septuagint). In the second century it began to creep into some religious writings, and some copyists of New Testament books began to append it to some of them, as in the uninspired title “The First Epistle General (*katholikos*) of Peter.” Yet even in these usages it was a contradiction, for Peter’s epistle was not general or universal, but had four distinct limitations in its address. By the third century, this word had come to be used fairly commonly of the church, but not so much in the sense of “universal” as of “orthodox.” It referred to what was generally held by all Christians. Eusebius, the Church Historian of the fourth century uses it several times in such a way as to show that the expression had more to do with a sectarian designation—i.e., “Catholic—Orthodox”—than as descriptive of extensiveness. See Cruse’s note in Eusebius, *Ecc. Hist.*, Book VI, Chap. 43. A Universal Church in the present day sense, was unknown for several centuries after Christ. So obviously the Church was not originally Universal in nature. Here was an unscriptural word that gradually came to represent an unscriptural idea in peoples’ minds. The concept of a Universal Church is nothing more than that—a concept. It cannot have any existence from a historical standpoint, as is admitted by some of the greatest scholars who have studied the question. F. J. A. Hort, who strongly advocated this theory of the church, after giving over half of his volume to a fruitless search for scriptural proof of such a church in the New Testament, admits this. “Here [Col. 1:18], at last, for the first time in the Acts and Epistles, we have ‘the *Ecclesia*’ spoken of in the sense of the one universal *Ecclesia*. And it comes more from the theological than from the historical side; i.e., less from the actual circumstances of the actual Christian communities than from a development of thoughts respecting the place and office of

the Son of God. His headship was felt to involve the unity of all those who were united to Him.”—The Christian Ecclesia, p. 148.

Observe from this: (1) Dr. Hort could not find a Universal Church anywhere in the Bible but (as he supposed) this one place. (2) Here, he was compelled to admit that this was not a historical church, but only a theological concept. (3) It was developed here, he admits, only from thoughts concerning Christ’s place and office—from human reasoning. Yet, (4) Even here, this is not a legitimate deduction from the text, for Christ may be “Head of the body, the church” in at least three different ways without necessitating the present existence of a Universal Church. B. H. Carroll speaks of this. “When in some of the foregoing Scriptures, Christ is represented as head over all things to the church—His body, you easily meet all the requirements of the language by saying: (1) He is head over all things to His earth church as an institution. (2) He is head over all things to any particular earth church. (3) He is head over all things to His general assembly in glory.”—Ecclesia—The Church, p. 39. (5) The problem that is suggested by #3 is that man has a strong tendency to trust in his own fallible reasoning instead of in the Lord’s infallible revelation. In many areas besides church truth, people bind themselves to “what seems reasonable,” instead of simply asking, “What saith the Lord?” and yielding obediently to that. Most of the problem in assuming that the Body of Christ must be made up of all believers derives from the fact that “it sounds reasonable,” but Scripture is contrary to this idea. Human reasoning is often defective in regard to spiritual things (1 Cor. 2:11-13).

The Universal Church theory is a fabrication of men’s minds, and not a New Testament teaching. It was first produced by proud men that desired to subjugate as many persons under their own personal rule as possible, and so they fabricated the theory of the “one visible and catholic church.” Read the histories of Christianity in the second and following centuries, and one will see this clearly in all the wranglings between different would be “bishops.” This theory has been perpetuated by men of like pride and ambition, who found this theory a convenient point of fellowship, where the unpopular stand on local church truth and responsibility could be avoided. We would not be thought to put a blanket condemnation upon all that hold to this theory, for we must admit that many hold this theory through ignorance, as this writer once did. It is the writer’s fervent hope and prayer that such persons will be stirred up to an independent study of this subject, and that they will come to a knowledge of the glorious truth of the local church. We proceed to consider—

II. The Truth Expounded.

The title of this study is in the form of a question, and we propose to answer it in the course of this division. To begin with, we might ask, “Was the Jerusalem church universal?” When they had their business meeting before the day of Pentecost there were but one hundred and twenty names or thereabout on the church roll. I think that no one will be mad enough to say that this

constituted it a universal church. And even after there had been added several thousands on several different occasions, this church was still not universal. Some historians have estimated that the Jerusalem church may have had as many as fifty thousand members by the end of the first century, yet it was never otherwise than a local church. There is scriptural evidence, however, as we shall see, that before this great number was attained, this church was broken up into numerous independent congregations in the various places where they met. And this would be more in harmony with the meaning of ekklesia.

The one seeming exception to this usage is the reading of some manuscripts as followed by the Revised Version of Acts 9:31. "So the church throughout all Judaea and Galilee and Samaria had peace, being edified; and, walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Ghost, was multiplied." This appears to speak of the church in a provincial sense. Yet, nowhere else in the whole of Scripture is the word ever used in this way. And, we find several explanations that show that this was not an exception to the rule. (1) The reading adopted by the Authorized Version may be the right one, and the plural "churches" the intended meaning. But, (2) there is no evidence that there existed a single church beside the Jerusalem church at this time. And (3) we are expressly told that the members of this church had been scattered through these same regions by persecution (Acts 8:1). (4) Not only so, but the persecution by Saul is declared to have been directed only against the Jerusalem church (Acts 8:1; 9:13). Therefore, (5) this refers simply to the church at Jerusalem whose scattered members were constrained to have isolated meetings wherever they were.

"The word probably denotes the original church at Jerusalem, whose members were by persecution widely scattered throughout Judaea and Galilee and Samaria, and held meetings wherever they were, but still belonged to the same original organization. When Paul wrote to the Galatians nearly twenty years later, these separate meetings had been organized into distinct churches; and so he speaks (Gal. 1:22), in reference to the same period, of the churches of Judaea which were in Christ."—John A. Broadus, *Commentary on Matthew*, p. 359.

It is certainly folly of the worst kind to give a meaning to a single passage of Scripture which contradicts all other usages of the word or subject, when all passages can be easily harmonized by putting a different interpretation upon the passage in question. To hold that Acts 9:31 teaches a provincial church is to make it contradict the consistent usage of the word ekklesia in the New Testament, but to accept the above explanation is to harmonize all usages in the New Testament. But in order to justify their disobedience of the Word of God, some have no qualms about holding to contradictory interpretations of Scripture. But the point is clear: the Jerusalem church was not universal, and it never became universal.

We pass on to ask if that great missionary church at Antioch was universal? Again we believe that no one will take the affirmative of this. Everything that is written in the New Testament of

this church makes it clear beyond any contradiction that it was never anything but a local assembly. The same is true of the churches at Ephesus, Colosse, Corinth, Thessalonica, and everywhere else that the word “church” is used. It is a word that, by its very meaning, is incapable of being anything but local.

The consistent New Testament usage is to refer to a single Christian assembly as a “church.” When a larger area is concerned where more than one Christian assembly is found, it is always simply the plural “churches.” Thus do we read of “confirming the churches” (Acts 15:41); “so were the churches established” (Acts 16:5); “the churches of the Gentiles” (Rom. 16:4); “the churches of Christ” (Rom. 16:16); “so ordain I in all churches” (1 Cor. 7:17); “neither the churches of God” (1 Cor. 11:16); “All churches of the saints” (1 Cor. 14:33); “keep silence in the churches” (1 Cor. 14:34); “the churches of Galatia” (1 Cor. 16:1); “the churches of Asia” (1 Cor. 16:19); “the churches of Macedonia” (2 Cor. 8:1); “throughout all the churches” (2 Cor. 8:18); “chosen of the churches” (2 Cor. 8:19); “the messengers of the churches” (2 Cor. 8:23); “before the churches” (2 Cor. 8:24); “I robbed other churches” (2 Cor. 11:8); “inferior to other churches” (2 Cor. 12:13); “the churches of Galatia” (Gal. 1:2); the churches of Judaea,” Gal. 1:22; “the churches of God” (1 Thess. 2:14; 2 Thess. 1:4); “the seven churches” (Rev. 1:4, 11, 20) (bis); “the churches” (2:7, 11, 17, 23, 29; 3:6, 13, 22; 22:16). Because Scripture is from God, it is always consistent with itself, and so it is in regard to church truth.

Here are thirty-three times when the plural “churches” is used. According to the Universal Church theory, these should never have been used, for according to this theory, when any segment of Christianity larger than the local assembly is referred to, it should be called “The Universal Church,” or, at least, “The Church.” Modern day theologians are want to speak of the “Whole Church” when referring to the supposed Universal Church, but the Scriptures do not so speak. Three times the phrase “the whole church” is used in the New Testament, and in each instance it cannot possibly refer to anything but a local congregation. See Acts 15:22; Rom. 16:23; 1 Cor. 14:23. What a tremendous blunder the inspiring Spirit made in each of these instances, if we believe the reasoning of those that hold to the theory of the Universal Church! But it seems rather as if God had foreseen all the human confusion over the word “church” and refuted all humanistic ideas beforehand.

The Greek word rendered “church” appears 115 times in the New Testament, and of this number, all but seventeen have clear and certain reference to some particular, local assembly. Of these seventeen, four refer to non-Christian assemblies (viz., Acts 7:38; 19:32, 39, 41). Of the thirteen remaining, two have in view the coming Glory Church, which is not a present reality. These are Ephesians 5:27 and Hebrews 12:23. The eleven remaining passages (viz., Matthew 16:18; Eph. 1:22; 3:10, 21; 5:23, 24, 25, 29, 32; Col. 1:18, 24), are all used generically or institutionally. These passages are primarily the ones that are held to teach a Universal Church,

yet such is not the case, as an examination of each will prove.

In Matthew 16:18, the word “church” is used institutionally, that is, considered as an institution comprised of at least one scriptural church in every day from the founding of it until Christ comes again. The Universal Church theory cannot be forced upon this passage without doing violence to it. The gates of Hades may, and often have, prevailed against individual churches, but against the church considered as an institution, they shall not. He has promised perpetuity through this age for His church as an institution, and His own wisdom and power will fulfill this promise.

In the remaining passages, the word “church” is used generically, i. e., as when a person speaks of some genus or species of thing without reference to any specific individual member of that genus. But when the generic usage changes to the specific, it always refers to a specific local assembly, as all of the other references in the New Testament show. To illustrate: if someone should say, “The dog is man’s best friend,” no rational person would think that he was speaking of a Universal Dog, either visible or invisible, made up of all the dogs in the world. Any thinking person would know that he was speaking generically, that is, that what is true of the species, is generally true of every individual member of the species. On the other hand, if the same person should say, “My dog is black and white,” it would be known that he was speaking of some specific canine. Thus, the majority of the usages of the word “church” in the New Testament refer to some specific church, but those usages in Ephesians and Colossians listed above are simply generic usages, in which “church” is used abstractly. However, whenever the abstract becomes concrete, it must partake of the nature of all the specific churches mentioned in the New Testament, that is, it is a local assembly.

The books of Ephesians and Colossians are almost the sole refuge of those who espouse the theory of the Universal Church. Yet if these references to “The Church” must be construed as proving the existence of a “Universal Church,” then consider what Ephesians 5:23 must prove. “The husband is the head of the wife,” must therefore also be proof of the existence of a “Universal Husband” made up of all the husbands in the world, and of a “Universal Wife” made up of all the wives in the world, for the usage is exactly the same in both cases. Yes, this would be an absurdity! But it would be no more of an absurdity than the theory of a “Universal Church.” Alluding to the scriptural illustration of husband and wife again, we realize that what is meant is simply that, considered as a distinct class, the husband is to be the head of the wife in every right marital relationship. And if this is not so, then there is a wrong relationship. But when we pass to a concrete example, we say, “John Jones is the head of his wife.” It is no more generic and abstract, but specific.

Let us look at these references in Ephesians and Colossians and see if this is not true. “Gave Him to be the head over all things to the church, which is His body” (Eph. 1:22-23). “And he is the

head of the body, the church” (Col. 1:18). Generally speaking, the church will be subject to Christ, and so, every specific, local assembly, if it is scripturally constituted, will be subject to its Head, Christ. When it ceases this right relationship, it risks the Lord terminating the relationship by removing its candlestick, as was threatened to the Ephesian church (Rev. 2:4-5). “To the intent that now unto the principalities and powers in heavenly places might be known by the church the manifold wisdom of God” (Eph. 3:10). To the church, considered generically, is committed the task of being a teacher of the spiritual hosts in the heavenlies. But this responsibility cannot be discharged except by specific local assemblies as members of that genus. No Universal, Invisible Church could do so.

“Unto Him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus” (Eph. 3:2 1). Whether considered abstractly as a genus, or concretely as some specific member of the genus, it is the duty of a church to glorify God by Christ Jesus. But in the practical fulfillment of this duty, no nebulous will-o-the-wisp thing such as the imagined “Universal, Invisible Church” could ever fulfill this duty. Those to whom the churches are to witness and minister are physical, visible, real beings, and an invisible church cannot have any reaction upon, or relevance to, such.

“For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church” (Eph. 5:23). Consistency demands that the word “church” be dealt with here in the same way as the words “husband” and “wife” are. All three of these terms are used generically—in reference to a genus of things. If the Church, considered generically, is to be subject to Christ, then so also is every specific individual, church. The same logic applies in verse 24. Sadly, many churches are not subject to their Head, but have invented their own programs, and rest in their own power.

“Christ loved the church, and gave himself for it” (Eph. 5:25). Just as Christ died for the church considered generically, so, in like manner, He died for every individual church. See also verse 29 where the same thing applies. Truth may often be spoken abstractly, but practicality operates in the realm of the concrete, and that is where God’s will is done. God is glorified in actual workings, not in mere theory.

“This is a great mystery: but I speak concerning Christ and the church” (Eph. 5:32). Some say that the language used in these verses in Ephesians is too broad and lofty to have application to a local church. “The use of the word ‘church’ in a sense too broad for the application to a particular church must be found in this letter, if anywhere. In view of this fact, it is fortunate that we have such historical passages touching the Ephesian church as appear in Acts 20:17-38 and 1 Timothy 3:14. In both these passages there can be no doubt that the address concerns the particular church at Ephesus, and yet these broad terms are used. Take heed to all the flock in which the Holy Spirit hath made you bishops to feed the church of the Lord which he purchased with his own blood.’ These things write I unto thee...that thou mayest know how men ought to behave themselves in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and

ground of the truth.’ There is no term so broad, whether house, temple, body, flock, bride, but may be applied to a particular church, because each particular church in itself alone foreshadows the church in glory.”—B. H. Carroll, Commentary on Ephesians, p. 167.

“...For his body’s sake, which is the church” (Col. 1:24). Obviously, Paul’s ministry, which he mentions in V25, was not in any Universal Church, but was confined exclusively to local assemblies, and not to any one in particular. So, he speaks of the church generically that what he says may have application to “all the churches,” over which he had the care (2 Cor. 11:28).

Some people mistake the import of the commands to the churches because they do not realize that the Lord treats every church as if it were the only one in existence. He does not say to one, “You must concern yourself solely with local evangelism.” Nor to another, “You must be a great doctrinal church.” Nor to yet a third, “You must be a great missionary church.” Nor yet again to another, “You must be a great benevolent church.” No! He commits the same responsibilities to each and every church. And should every other church on earth but one be suddenly removed, it would neither lessen nor add to that church’s responsibilities. Therefore, when the Word of God speaks of the Church institutionally or generically, the terms are purposefully left broad enough that every local, particular assembly may take it as though it was addressed to it personally, for it does, indeed, apply to every church individually.

To answer the question contained in the title of this study: We believe that the New Testament church has never become universal, but that there is but one kind of church mentioned in the New Testament, and that one kind is the local church body. The Universal Church theory is a Pedobaptist “foundling” which has been left upon the Baptist doorstep, and which, having been taken in, is rapidly consuming the inheritance of the legitimate sons of the household.

The idea of a Universal Visible Church was not conceived for two or three centuries after the founding of the Lord’s Church, and so, it was by that many centuries too late to be New Testament truth. And when it did come on the scene, it was the product of men that were doctrinally very unsound, and they used this idea to promote their pride and ambition, as they sought to be lords over greater and greater numbers. Early Church Histories make this plain. The idea of a Universal Invisible Church was of even later origin, not coming on the scene until the days of the Reformation in the sixteenth century. This makes this theory over fifteen hundred years too late to be New Testament Truth. “The whole of the modern Baptist idea of a now existent ‘universal, invisible church’ was borrowed from pedobaptist confessions of faith in the Reformation times, and the pedo-baptists devised it to offset the equally erroneous idea of the Romanist ‘universal visible church.’ We need to be well indoctrinated on this point, because the error is not harmless. It is used to depreciate Christ’s earthly church, ‘the pillar and ground of the truth.’”—B. H. Carroll, Commentary on Ephesians, p. 164. Yet most advocates of this theory treat it as if it was clearly written in stone all through the New Testament. But it is not so.

Dr. Carroll makes a point here that is not realized by most advocates of this theory. One will search in vain for any historical references to a “Universal Invisible Church” before the Reformation. We have been told that there is possibly such a reference in Augustine’s “City Of God,” written in the fourth or fifth century, for what it is worth. If so, this was still at least four centuries too late to be New Testament Church Truth, and this was by a Roman Catholic, not an evangelical Christian. He was a rabid hater of all that did not agree with the Catholic Church, and persecuted the Baptists of his day with great vigor.

But even this possible reference may not have been a historical fact, for another Roman Catholic, J. B. Bossuet, says that the idea of a “Universal Invisible Church” originated in the days of the Reformation. So he evidently knew not of any such reference to this in Augustine’s writings, with which he would certainly have been familiar. He says that Protestants invented this idea when taunted by Catholics with the impossibility of finding a visible church of their faith before the Reformation. “Here is the dogma of an invisible Church, as clearly established as the dogma of the visible Church had been before. That is to say, the Reformation, struck at first with the true notion of the Church, defined it so as that her visibility came into her very essence; but afterwards fell into other notions through the impossibility of finding a church always visible of her belief. That it was this inevitable perplexity which drove the Calvinian Churches upon this chimera of a Church invisible (emphasis mine—DWH) none can doubt, after hearing Mr. Jurieu. That which moved (says he) some reformed doctors (he should have said whole Churches of the reformation) in their own Confessions of Faith, to cast themselves into the perplexity they were entangled in upon their denying the perpetual visibility of the Church, was because they believed, by owning the Church always visible, they should find it difficult to answer the question which the Church of Rome so often makes us:—Where was our Church a hundred and fifty years ago? If the Church be always visible, your Calvinist and Lutheran Church is not the true Church, for that was not visible.”—J. B. Bossuet, *History of the Variations of the Protestant churches*, Vol. 2, pp. 289-290. What a challenging statement this is to those that hold so tenaciously to the idea of a “Universal Invisible Church.”

As we said before, this is fifteen hundred years too late to be New Testament Truth, and so, can be nothing but a human invention, and so, heresy. Who is willing to embrace as Truth what was almost certainly unknown for fifteen hundred years after Christ established His Church and sent it on its ministry. How much better to accept the clear New Testament teaching that the Church is always and only a local assembly as cannot be doubted if we take the New Testament for our authority.

Here then is the historical origin of both these views. Who desires to embrace such a doctrine? With the question answered as to when the church became universal, we need to note the danger involved in this theory. Therefore we consider—

III. The Tendency Explained.

As noted before, this theory leads to the depreciation of the local church, for almost invariably the “Universal Church” takes precedence and importance over the local body. Yet even the most ardent advocates of this theory are constrained to admit that at most only a dozen or so verses can even be thought to refer to this. This means that even if these abstract references to the Church were granted to teach the present existence of a Universal Church, still the local church is given a ten-to-one prominence over the “Universal.” But is this the ratio of importance assigned to the local church by those who hold this theory? Hardly! Most advocates of this theory almost completely ignore the local institution, or, if they speak of it at all, they do so scornfully, treating it as an insignificant, unimportant little nothing that no self-respecting Christian would be found in, except at his funeral. But it was the local Church for which Christ’s blood was shed, for Paul’s statement to this effect was addressed to the elders appointed over this church as bishops. Acts 20:28 cannot have reference to some “Universal Church,” for there are no bishops over the Universal Church.

We heartily deprecate the Universal Church theory in both its forms, yet the holding of these theories would not be quite so bad if advocates of it among Baptists would give the local church its proper place and respect, but such is seldom, if ever, the case. If the local assembly is the “pillar and ground of the truth,” as Scripture assures us that it is (1 Tim. 3:15), then all of our loyalty belongs to it, and we have no right to yield allegiance to any other religious organization on earth or supposedly in heaven that competes with it. Therefore, it becomes sin to compromise with other denominations on the basis of a supposed common membership in the “Universal Church,” for this would be to subordinate the Church of God to a human organization, for the “Universal Church” in both its forms is a human invention.

Here, therefore, is a second tendency of this theory—to promote compromise between various denominations. The “Universal Church” theory is a compromiser’s delight, for it not only justifies compromise, it demands it. For no matter how immoral or heretical a professing Christian may be, a more faithful saint is excused by this theory from taking a stand against the other’s careless lifestyle. Yea, more, he dare not speak against the other, for by his own confession “we are members one of another” (Rom. 12:5), of the same “universal” body, according to this theory. And he would, himself be reproached as “uncharitable, judgmental and self-righteous,” for criticizing a fellow member of the “Universal Church.” And not only is this so concerning individual Christians, but it is equally so concerning churches.

On the plea that “we are all members of the Universal Church,” there is the gradual eroding away of all that is distinctively Baptist, until, at our present day, many churches that call themselves “Baptist” differ from the rest of the religious world in name only. If Baptists have a scriptural distinctiveness from other denominations, as they certainly do, then they ought to

protect and perpetuate that distinction. If they do not, then they ought to take down their name, merge with the rest of the religious world, and cease being a source of division and antagonism to the rest of the religious world. And sadly, many ignorant and spineless “Baptists” have done just that. Ignorance of their age-spanning history has caused many to assume that they are nothing more than just another “Protestant” group that originated in recent times. And, tragedy of tragedies, it is the practice in most large Baptist seminaries teach the lie that Baptists are just another Protestant group. Real Baptists have never been Protestants, for as a distinct denomination, they antedated all others, Catholic and Protestant alike. Who does one think all those noble martyrs through the ages were? Faithful, uncompromising Baptists, for the most part!

However, it is evident that Baptists do have a scriptural distinctiveness that has dated from the first century of this era down to the present time. All of the religious truth that is in the world today is here because multiplied millions of Baptist martyrs died to preserve it while Catholicism, the only other existing “Christian” denomination until the Reformation, was corrupting it. And while we rejoice to know that some other denominations have adopted some of the Baptist distinctives in recent centuries, yet “all the counsel of God” is still rarely found, and so, the work of Baptists is far from done. Much has been done by the Evil One to destroy the truth, and we are presently faced with one of the most insidious plots yet—the plan to destroy the truth by compromise and corruption—and the Universal Church theory is the most efficient weapon for this purpose.

The widespread trend among Baptist churches of uniting in super-church organizations such as conventions, associations, fellowships, etc., tends to promote the idea of a “Universal Church”—a Universal Baptist Church—for the member churches are considered as parts of a whole. Indeed, it has become fashionable among Southern Baptists to speak of their Convention as “The Southern Baptist Church.” This is a corruption of biblical Church Truth, and it will inevitably lead to the people of the pews accepting the theory of a “universal church” in the Protestant sense, and perhaps even in the Catholic sense. That is always the tendency of compromise. It finds no stopping place once it is allowed even in seemingly small matters. The Universal Church theory is the very foundation of the present Ecumenical movement, and it is the rallying point around which Rome hopes to draw all groups. Already, great numbers believe that salvation makes one a member of the “Universal Invisible Church.” And it will be but a short step for Rome to convince many that they must become members of the “Universal Visible Church” (Rome), “outside of which there is no salvation,” which has been Rome’s teaching since her origin in the third century. Many thoughtless Baptists are a lot closer to this than they realize.

But even nearer at home, the Universal Church theory has a corrupting tendency on the local

church, for it tends to discredit the democratic, congregational government of the local church. Those who are taught that salvation makes one a member of the Universal Church, are often hard to convince that one must measure up to several other requirements before he can become a member of the local body. This leads to a disparagement of “that little old insignificant local church.” This theory has too often led to the let-down of baptismal standards for church membership, so that a person is accepted on any sort of baptism, so long as he professes to be saved.

The advocacy of this theory makes for an easy Christianity (?). It requires no doctrinal soundness. It demands no separated life, but allows one to imitate the manners of the “heathen round about” who claim to also be members of the Universal Church. It allows—yea, it encourages—a person to fellowship with all sorts of spiritual deviates. But an easy Christianity in this world was never promised to the followers of the Crucified One. Indeed, our Lord said, “The time cometh, that whosoever killeth you will think that he doeth God service” (John 16:2). And again, “In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world” (John 16:33). And once again, “Ye shall be hated of all men for my name’s sake” (Matt. 10:22). This writer can see much evil in the theory of the Universal Church, but he is unable to see any good in it. Its whole appeal is to the flesh and pride of man, both of which are evil in the sight of the Lord. May Almighty God impart to us the strength necessary to stand firm in the Truth, no matter how unpopular it is. “Let us go forth therefore unto him without the camp, bearing his reproach” (Heb. 13:13).

[Return to Baptist History and Gallery Writings](#)