

THE UNIVERSAL CHURCH THEORY

By Mike Burnham

Many of the Universal Church preachers speak of the "*rapture of the church*" yet the scripture they refer to says nothing about "the rapture of the church"...1 Thess. 4:15-16. Note that there is no mention of the church. It says "*the dead in Christ,*" and "*we which are alive and remain.*" The word church is not used. All believers are not members of the Lords Church.

WHY AND WHEN THIS THEORY STARTED

The first mention of a Universal Church was the ecumenical council of nice, called by the Emperor Constantine, that affirmed 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 a few scattered, comparatively obscure, hunted and persecuted little churches known by various names. Following the Reformation period and born of the Reformation movement, there emerged a new theory of the church...*the universal, invisible spiritual theory.*

When the Protestant reformers split the Catholic world, they did not make the radical changes they would have made had they gone back to the Bible as their standard of life, and doctrine, and conduct. They, of necessity, rejected the Roman Church as the Universal Visible Church, but they did not go back to the New Testament church type. What would they do? With what would they replace the doctrine of the Universal Visible Church? They solved the problem by coining the doctrine of the Universal Invisible Church. Such a thing didn't exist for over fifteen hundred years after Christ started his church! But this is now the working theory of all Protestantism--and sad to say many Baptists have also been snared

by this theory.

WHAT'S WRONG WITH THIS THEORY

First, it perverts the meaning of the word "*ecclesia*", which is translated church. The meaning simply put means "*a called out assembly*." those who want to bolster up the universal theory try to make the word mean "*called out*," and that only, but there was always attached to the word the significance of "*assembly*." the idea of a Universal, Invisible something that has neither organization nor locality--that doesn't assemble and never has, is completely foreign to the meaning of the word.

Thayer says that *ekklesia* had its original application to a gathering of citizens called out from their homes into a public place. Then it came to mean any assembly of people or gathering or throng of men, even when gathered by chance. Acts 19:32,39,41. The word never did mean simply "*the called out*." it always implied that the called out ones would gather or assemble. The word always did mean assembly, and later came to mean this alone. The proper meaning of the word *ecclesia* leaves the Universal theory without justification. It, in fact, ruins their theory. Even in classical Greek the word *ecclesia* means assembly.

When interpreting scripture the principle is used that says the common meaning must be accepted in every place it makes sense. Only when the common meaning will not make sense are we permitted to assume it has a new meaning. Following this principle we find that the word assembly makes sense in every contested passage, so that any new sense must be rejected. To say it has a new meaning in the face of this evidence is to follow a false way of interpreting that could make the Bible meaningless and could undermine a person's duty to the local church."

Those who teach the existence of such a church maintain that all who are saved are members of it. Yet they teach that the local church is just a local

meeting of the Universal church members. If one is already a member of the church anyway, why does he have to be baptized to become a member of what he already is?

If membership in the universal and local church is the same and one gets excluded from one, he gets excluded from the other and the action of a local church in excluding one from its membership would also cause him to lose his salvation.

NEW TESTAMENT INSTANCES OF CHURCH

Matt. 16:18...All kinds of efforts are being made today to make this passage refer to the Universal Church. In 18:17 Jesus tells us what kind of church he had in mind, "*tell it to the church.*" How could they tell something to a Universal, Invisible Church? "*The gates of hell shall shall not prevail against it.*" it would never go out of existence. An invisible church is already out of existence. Acts 8:1;9:31;20:17; Rom. 16:4; 1 Cor. 1:2; 6:4;7:17 (Gal. 1:22); 1:2.

Dr. Chafer in his systematic theology says that the gates of hell did prevail against the church, yet church history declares that the visible New Testament Church has been in every age since the apostles. He also says that the gates of hell have not and cannot prevail against the invisible Universal Church. That's true, how can the gates of hell prevail against something that does not exist and if it did exist how could anyone tell if the gates of hell prevailed or not, it is invisible, non-assembling, and non-functioning.

On page 45 of his section on ecclesiology, Dr. Chafer gives four reasons why the church began on Pentecost. First, there could be no church in the world --- constituted as she is and distinctive in all her features---until Christ's death; for her relation to that death is not a mere anticipation, but is based wholly on his finished work and she must be purified by his precious blood. **Answer:** As far as God was concerned Christ's work was as good as finished since he saw Christ slain

"from" the foundation of the world (Rev. 13:8). Christ was manifested for "us" (1 Peter 1:20). God's dealings with man has always been based on this fact (Romans 3:25,26). Secondly, there could be no church until Christ arose from the dead to provide her with resurrection life. **Answer**, Christ told Martha (John 11:25), "I am" the resurrection, and the life" not I will become. They that believed before he died had the promise of the resurrection life just as those who believed after he died, (John 11:26, 27). Thirdly, there could be no church until he had ascended up on high to become her head; for she is a new creation with a new federal headship in the resurrected Christ. He is, likewise, to her as the head is to the body. Nor could the church survive for a moment were it not for his intercession and advocacy in heaven. **Answer**, while Jesus was on the earth in his physical body he was the head of the "new" church. What the Holy Spirit and the word of God are now doing Jesus did himself personally, (John 14:26; 16:13-15; John 17:6-8,17,). If Christ could not intercede for his church or those whom the father gave him while he was on earth in his physical body then his prayer recorded in John 17 was useless and of non-effect. Jesus said that he was an advocate while on earth, (John 14:16) For "another" means another of the same kind. Fourthly, there could be no church on earth until the advent of the Holy Spirit; for the most basic and fundamental reality respecting the church is that she is a temple for the habitation of God through the Holy Spirit. She is regenerated, baptized, and sealed by the Spirit. **Answer**, this reason, I believe, is due to a misunderstanding of why the Holy Spirit was sent. Jesus was limited in his physical body to a central locality. While he was physically present with his church, he was fully capable of watching over them and keeping them (John 17:12). The Holy Spirit came, not to give power to an invisible universal church, but to each individual believer who makes up each local visible church, (what good is power to an invisible universal body that cannot assemble, teach, send missionaries, baptize, etc.). The Holy Spirit came not only to give power but to extend the mission of Christ because the Holy Spirit is not limited in any way, (Acts 1:8). I understand that there were realities that came with the coming of the Holy Spirit but that in no way precludes the fact that Christ personally started his church during his earthly ministry. As to the church being the temple of God one has to remember that the church is made up of individuals

and as each individual is the temple of God so God resides in the church. The habitation of God in the church that Jesus started was in the church in Christ: "for it pleased the father that in him should all fulness dwell" (Colossians 1:19; John 1:16-18).

"Church unionism is based on this theory"

Church unionism, like Billy Graham crusades, largely exists because of the universal theory. People from all different kinds of churches are gathered to help during a revival. Suppose a seeker comes forward and asks, "what must I do to be saved?" several preachers are down front, and a Baptist replies, "believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved." A Church of Christ preacher speaks up and says, "there's more to it than that. You must be immersed in order to be saved." a Methodist pastor speaks up and says, "pardon me, but sprinkling or pouring will do just as well." another minister speaks up and says, "and don't forget, you will be saved only until you sin again." can you imagine how confused that person who came forward would be. But convictions are thrown aside, and truth is sacrificed because we are all members of the big universal church. If all the different denominations make up the true body of Christ then there is division and confusion in the body which violates the principles of the church as the "pillar and ground of the truth," (1 Tim. 3:15), and the principles of unity in 1 Cor. 12.

"Ecumenicalism has resulted from the theory"

The ecumenical movement is likewise a product of the universal church theory. This movement is mainly protestants who are willing to be absorbed back into the catholic church. Here too, truth is sacrificed for love.

"Some controversial passages"

There would be no difficulty in understanding the meaning of church in the questioned passages were it not that men have a theory to seek to substantiate. Eph. 1:22-23. Paul is using the term church in the institutional sense. For

instance, one might speak of the American home as being based on marriage. We wouldn't think he meant some sort of universal, invisible home. To particularize one would have to designate an actual visible home. To particularize a church Paul would have had to specify an actual local assembly. Each local assembly is a body of Christ, and he should be head over all things to every such church. 1 Cor. 12:27 says that the Corinthian church is the body of Christ. If they are then every other such church is likewise the same.

Eph. 3:21; here Paul is using the word church in an institutional sense and in a prospective sense. God should receive glory in every New Testament Church but there will come a time when a general assembly composed of all of the saved members of all of these local assemblies, from the first coming of Christ to the rapture will glorify God by Christ Jesus throughout the eternal ages. Such a church does not now exist, but when it does it will be visible and local.

Eph. 5:27 this is the same general assembly we spoke of in Eph. 3:21. When the church is presented to Christ in the sense mentioned here, it will be both local and visible. Local visible churches are imperfect. These visible assemblies will at that time in the future, be purged and cleansed of all imperfections forever.

Col. 1:18, 1:24 turn to 1 Cor. 11:3 this says that the head of every man is Christ, and if Christ is head of every man (he is writing of saved persons), then what is wrong about believing that Christ is the head of every true church? Also note that it says that the "head of the woman is the man." does that mean a big universal invisible woman? No, woman is used in the institutional or abstract sense. When the meaning is exactly defined, and actual woman must be specified. The automobile kills more people than does war." What automobile? A big universal invisible automobile? No, nobody has been killed by a universal invisible automobile but by a local, visible one.

"Falsifies the date of the churches' beginning"

The universal church theory falsifies when the church was started. It displaces Christ from the position of founder of the church, and makes the Holy Spirit to be the founder! Jesus thought of the disciples as his bride, which is the church, Matt. 9:15; Mk. 2:19,20; John the Baptist thought the disciples were the bride and that they belonged to Christ, the bridegroom, John 3:29

The universal theorist holds that there was no church previous to Pentecost. They hold that the church was formed on the day of Pentecost by the baptism of the Holy Spirit. That means that Jesus died with no church existing--that he founded no church while on this earth. It means that Jesus lied, for he said, "I" will build my church.

Scofield says of the church, "this body could not begin to exist before the exaltation of Christ and the descent of the Holy Spirit." He goes on to say that a church before the death of Christ would have been an unredeemed church. That means that none of the disciples were saved before Pentecost! In order to try to back his theory he maintains that the disciples erred in choosing Matthias to take the place of Judas. He evidently does this in the attempt to discredit that business meeting that the church held before Pentecost. He claims that the Lord did not recognize that choice of Matthias, but set it aside by choosing Paul for that place. But what about Acts 6:2; 1 Cor. 15:5. Did the Holy Spirit inspire the writing of Acts? He recognized not eleven, but the eleven plus Matthias, twelve.

"What the universal theory does"

It leaves the church without any commission as Dr. Chafer states in his systematic theology, page 149, on the organized church; "the visible church, as such, is charged with no mission. The commission to evangelize the world is personal, and not corporate. Dr. C. I. Scofield makes this plain when he says, "the visible church as such is charged with no mission...the commission to evangelize the world is personal not corporate." this quotation is taken from one of the text books in his bible course. The reason for quoting Scofield is because so many of today's universal theorists have received their ideas concerning church from his

courses and his study bible.

But Jesus did give the commission to his church as a corporate group and not to the disciples as individuals. After saying, "go ye into all the world and make disciples...he added, and lo, I am with you alway even to the end of the age." how long has this age lasted? It has already lasted for nearly 2000 years. How could Jesus be with those disciples for 2000 years? He couldn't, for they would be dead and gone from the earth in a few years. But if he spoke to them in corporate capacity, as constituting his church, that makes sense. He could be...and has been with his church during all of the centuries.

If he gave the commission to the saved in general, then the command to baptize and to teach rests with all saved which not only does away with the local church but all the offices as well. You can't have overseers over no one, or organization where none exists.

It leaves the church with no ordinances. The apostles baptized people long before Pentecost, and the commission Christ gave said, "baptizing them." but if there was no church before Pentecost then that baptism wasn't any good, and if the commission was given only to individuals personally, then when those persons died the command to disciple and baptize likewise died.

The Lords Supper is likewise not a church ordinance if there was no church before Pentecost. After the institution of the Lord's Supper, they arose and sang a hymn and went out of the building. Was that a church that observed that supper that night? Look at Heb. 2:12, that is the only time mentioned in the New Testament where Jesus is recorded as singing, and that group that met there that night is called "the church." that the Lord's Supper was designed as a church ordinance to be observed all through this age, is indicated by Paul in 1 Cor. 11:26. Since his coming is to occur at the end of the age, that signifies that the memorial of his death and coming is to continue the whole time.

Look at Acts 2:41 Added unto them. Who were them? The them of v-41 is the same as "church" in v-47. How could the Lord add to a church that didn't exist?

Let's note some things before Pentecost; there is a difference between organization and empowerment. Note the expression from verse 4 of acts 1, "and, being assembled together with them..." verse 6, "when they therefore were come together." verse 14, "these all continued with one accord..." verse 15, "...Peter stood up in the midst of the disciples, (organization) and said, (the number of names together were about an hundred and twenty." these were the same "ye" that Jesus addressed in verse 8 as he promised them power to enable them to continue without his personal presence and guidance the work he had begun in their midst during his personal presence. This can be seen by reading closely verses 6-14 and verse 22 where the one picked had to have seen Jesus ascend. The purpose of the baptism of the Holy Spirit upon the church on Pentecost was to furnish the direction, power, and spiritual abilities to enable them to effectively execute the work given to the church in the great commission, which had been previously furnished by the bodily presence and personal ministry and authority of the Lord Jesus Christ. 1) they had the great commission of the church age. 2) they had the gospel, the same good news to tell the world that we have today. 3) they had a definite organization, and even a treasurer. 4) they had the ordinances-- both of them. 5) they had a business meeting and chose an apostle to take the place of Judas. 6) they had a prayer meeting. 7) they had rules for discipline within the church. They only lacked one thing--they lacked power. That lack was supplied when the Holy Spirit came upon the church and they were baptized "with" Him (not "by" Him) and filled, (Acts 2:4; 11:15-17). Nowhere was there any mention that they were to be formed into a church by Holy Spirit baptism or that the church was "born" on that day. What were the disciples told to expect? Luke 24:49; Acts 1:8.

"Wrong on how the church is constituted"

How does a person become a member of the church? Like the converts on the day of Pentecost were added to the Jerusalem church, Acts 2:41. A person

gladly receives the gospel, makes a public profession, and is baptized.

But the universalist, including a lot of Baptists, claim that a person doesn't become a member of the true new testament church in this way. They claim that one becomes a member of the church by "being baptized into the body of Christ by the Holy Spirit." this is some kind of a mystical baptism, into a mystical body. They go to 1 Cor. 12:13.

It's always dangerous to build a big theory on one passage of scripture, especially if it does not harmonize with the general teachings of the bible on the same subject. Nowhere else do we find any intimation that one gets into the church by some strange mystical spirit baptism. If that theory is true, then there are millions of baptisms of the Holy Spirit. But I can recall only four in the bible and none of them say that the people were actually "baptized by the Holy Spirit" nor does it say they were added to the church by that baptism. 1) the Holy Spirit filled the disciples on Pentecost to empower them, and to give supernatural signs such as would bear witness that they were speaking the truth of God, (Heb. 2:3,4). 2) the Samaritans also received the Holy Spirit in acts 8:5,14-18. It's assumed that they spoke in tongues since Simon "saw" the power of the Holy Spirit. This was to show the jews that the Samaritans could also be saved in the like manner that they were. 3) when the gospel spread to proselytes, there was need of proof that they could be saved, so there we have a third instance of the baptism of the Holy Spirit, such that it became unmistakably plain that proselytes could be saved on the same terms as the Jews...Acts 10:44,46. 4) we have the instance of some men at Ephesus who had been very imperfectly instructed. They had been baptized "unto John's baptism" which related to the Messiah to come, but evidently they didn't know that the savior had appeared. Paul enlightened them, and they received Christ, Acts 19:5. It doesn't say anything about the Holy Spirit baptizing them but for the benefit of the doubt we'll say they were. They evidently needed some supernatural evidence which they received when Paul layed hands upon them, v-6. It proved that the gentiles could be saved on the same terms as the Jews.

We have four instances of Holy Spirit (answering to the four different types

of people in the eyes of the Jews) and in each case it was upon groups--never upon one individual. No mention is made that these persons had been baptized into the body of Christ. In each instance the gift of tongues was bestowed as a sign unto the Jews, (1 Cor. 14:21,22).

"But what of 1 Cor. 12:13?"

Paul has been writing to the Corinthians about their church observance of the Lord's Supper. He is plainly speaking about the local church, see 11:18. They couldn't come together in an invisible church. Paul comes right on down to the last verse of chapter 11 speaking of the local church. He continues to write about the church--the assembly to which they belonged, but he changes the subject and begins to write about God's bestowal of spiritual gifts, 12:1. These gifts relate to those members of the local church. In 12:11 he says, he is not writing about invisible members of an invisible church, but ordinary visible men. Then he makes a comparison between the visible human body and the visible local church. He shows that various organs of the body have different functions, (notice that the various organs mentioned are in the head) and that one organ should not look down upon another more lowly organ just because that organ is adapted to a less important task. V-12,14,15. All of the various organs are necessary to the proper functioning of the human body. Then he teaches that the church, like the human body, needs persons with the various gifts that God has bestowed upon them, working in unity, such that there should be no jealousy--no looking down upon those adapted to the more lowly tasks. Throughout the entire chapter Paul is writing to local church members about the gifts that God bestows and the use of those gifts. He shows that not all members can enjoy the highest places. In verse 29 he says:

1 Corinthians 12:29 (KJV) Are all apostles? are all prophets? are all teachers? are all workers of miracles?

No one could use the gift of a teacher in the universal invisible church. These are gifts that could only be used in a local visible church. Why, then should verse

13 signify some kind of a church that Paul has not been writing about, and to whom his illustration here could not apply? If Paul should say that he meant the church at Corinth would that be sufficient to settle the questions? Look at verse 27.

Now let's look a little more closely at verse 13. What kind of baptism is Paul writing about here? In answering this I think we ought to consider something that Paul wrote to the Ephesians 4:4,5.

1 Corinthians 12:13 (KJV) *For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free; and have been all made to drink into one Spirit.*

Ephesians 4:4-5 (KJV) *There is one body, and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling; 5 One Lord, one faith, one baptism,*

One body...he is referring to the church. The universalist usually believes that there is the local church and beyond this the universal church, but Paul says that there is only one body, so since there are not two, but one, one should be thrown away. That one body is the local assembly--the kind that Paul wrote his epistles to. The word body here is used in the institutional sense.

I believe that the problem the universalists have is taking the "body" too literally. I believe it is symbolic, Eph. 6:29-32. When a husband and wife join together they become "one" flesh, that is, one mind, one purpose, one love. Col. 1:18 states that Christ "is the head of the body, the church." Paul means that Christ is the Lord, the master, the brain, of the body or the church and as the body functions in unity with the brain so should the church function in unity with Christ, for the church is to have the mind of Christ, (Phil. 2:1-5), the same purpose, (John 17:4; Eph. 3:21), the same love, (John 17:26). The "body" is a picture of the relationship of oneness that is to exist between Christ and the

church, (John 17:21; Romans 12:4,5). (These verses in Romans must be talking about the local visible church because there are no offices in an invisible universal church).

One baptism...what kind of baptism? Immersion in water. That is the kind of baptism that characterized the New Testament church--the kind that Paul taught and practiced, 1 Cor. 1:14,16. Did Paul teach one kind of baptism in Eph. 4 and another kind in 1 Cor. 12? In 1 Cor. 12:13 he is writing about plain old immersion in water as practiced by all the churches.

Arthur Pink told of how he had originally been taken in by the universal church theory, until he began to study the question. He mentioned the fact that in the Greek language they do not capitalize as do we who write English. That being true, the word Spirit in verse 13 is not capitalized, and there is no proof that the Holy Spirit is meant at all. He was inclined to think that the verse should read, "for in one spirit are we all baptized." or of the same mind. Another commentator says that it means we are all baptized in the name of the Holy Spirit into one local body, or by the name of the same spirit.

In verse 13 Paul stresses the function and the presence of the Holy Spirit, which is to promote unity, as the common denominator which unites all factions. When each part of the body of Christ (the visible local body) functions in response to the Holy Spirit within, there is no inward division. Then outwardly there are no longer divisions.

Notice the number of times in verses 14-16 "I" is used. This is the problem, promoting self.

In 2 Cor. 11:1,2 Paul is writing to the Corinthian Church and he is writing about that church. That this is true is made plain in verse 8. If the betrothed is the local church, will the ultimate bride be composed of the genuine members of the true local churches or the universal, invisible church, composed of all the saved from everywhere? If this were true, then Christ would have to break his engagement and marry an entirely, different woman.

The universal church has never won a soul to Christ, has never sent out missionaries, has never taught the bible to anybody, in fact, it has never done anything. In Matthew 18:17 Jesus gave the rules for church discipline. If the believer is placed into the church when he is born of the Holy Spirit, can he be excluded from the body and still retain his salvation?

If there is a universal invisible church, there isn't any place for the family and kingdom of God.

What is the family of God? The family of God includes all of the children of God in heaven and on earth...Eph. 3:15,1:10; Gal. 3:26; John 1:12. God's family is much larger than the kingdom or the church of God, for it now contains all of the saved from Abel to the last person saved today.

What is the kingdom of God? John 18:36,37; it's a kingdom of heaven, of which Jesus Christ is king and his servants, the subjects, must be born again...John 3:3-5. It is a spiritual kingdom...Rom. 14:17. It is not without but within...Luke 17:20,21. Mat. 13:38 right now the children of the kingdom live among the children of the devil. It therefore is a kingdom here on earth, made up of all the saved on earth at any given time. When a person repents and believes on Jesus Christ he is then removed from the kingdom of Satan and placed into the kingdom of the son...Col. 1:13. This is not the kingdom of Acts 1:6 or of Mat. 8:11

What is the church of God? 1 Cor. 1:2 it's a local, visible, assembly of baptized believers, called out of the world for the purpose of worshipping God and fulfilling the commands of the Lord Jesus Christ. The local individual church is the only kind of church that God has in the world today. Gal. 1:2, 1 Thes. 1:1, 1 Cor. 12:27.

When a man is born again, he is born into God's family, and he is a member of God's family forever. The relationship does not change. Whether in heaven or in earth, he is in God's family. When he is born again, he also enters God's kingdom. This relationship is for life. When he dies, he passes out of God's kingdom on earth, and enters "his heavenly kingdom."...2 Tim. 4:18. After he is born again, he is not yet in the church of God, but is now a scriptural subject for admission into a

church of God. Baptism is not essential for entrance into either the family of God or the kingdom of God, but baptism is essential to admission into a church of God...Acts 2:41, Eph. 4:5.

Who will the bride be? When Jesus started his church were there other disciples there who were not part of the church? Luke 6:12-18; Acts 1:21,22. The apostolic office was the Lord's first spiritual gift to the church...1 Cor. 12:28. The fact that he "set the apostles in the church" shows that the church existed before Pentecost. The bride is not all of the saved, for some were invited to the marriage...Rev. 19:9. In John 14:1-4, who was Jesus talking to? Only the apostles? All the saved? To jews? Or to the church? Which makes the most sense? Who is the virgin in 2 Cor. 11:2? Who is she engaged to? Who is Christ going to present to himself?...Eph. 5:25-27. How long will the church remain distinctive from other groups of saved people?...Eph. 3:21. In Rev. 22:17 we find the spirit and the bride saying, come. We know that the Holy Spirit says come, by working in peoples' hearts. The visible church says come by preaching the gospel. How does a universal, invisible, bride say, come? Can an invisible universal church fulfill Ephesians 4:11-16? Or Ephesians 3:21?

If there is a universal, invisible church, then there would be no reward for the church that endured endless persecution for Christ, and that furnished fifty million martyrs for the defense of his truth. Speaking of truth, who is the pillar and ground of the truth? It is the true local, visible church, 1 Tim. 3:15. Church here is used in the institutional sense, for a non-functioning invisible universal church cannot be the main stay, the preserver, of the truth, all Christians in general can't either, which can be seen by noting the different ways of salvation, baptizing, taking the Lords supper, etc.

The idea of a universal, invisible church composed of all the saved, organized on Pentecost, has subtly emerged within the Southern Baptist Convention. From their organization and until 1963, their doctrinal statement had defined the church as follows, "a New Testament Church of the Lord Jesus is a local body of baptized believers who are associated by covenant in the faith and fellowship of the gospel..." then in 1963 the following statement was added, "the

New Testament speaks also of the church as the body of Christ which includes all the redeemed of all ages."