

THE NATURE OF THE CHURCH

Matthew 16:18

by Dan Cozart

My assigned subject is "The Nature of the Church". My text is Matthew 16:18. It is here that our Lord speaks of entering into a building program and He is careful to tell us what He will be building....."! will build my church". This implies that there was no church prior to this time. There was no church in the Old Testament. It is to be found only in the New Testament. It is also clear that it is a **church** that He is building. He did not say He would be building a Kingdom Hall....a Tabernacle....a Temple....the Salvation Army....the Promise Keepers....the Gideons....a Fellowship....a Synagogue....a Denomination....a Convention...a Chapel....the Family of God or the Kingdom. What He did say is that **He Would Build His Church!**

Historically, there are three major views of the church.

(1) The Roman Catholic View. This view states that the church is a **universal and visible assembly**. This System allows a worldwide, universal organization with headquarters in Rome where the Pope rules over this universal and visible church.

(2) The Protestant View. This view states that the church is a **universal and invisible assembly** referred to as "the body of Christ". Protestants were forced either to accept Catholic baptism as valid or admit they made a mistake in leaving the Catholic system. So, they agreed the church was universal, but could not continue with Rome being the visible head. Therefore, they invented the term "invisible church".

(3) The Biblical View. This view teaches the church to be a **local and visible assembly**. Baptist scholars have supported this view down through the ages with conviction.

B.H. Carroll, *Ephesians*, page 166: "The whole of the modern Baptist idea of a now 'universal, invisible church' was borrowed from Pedo-Baptist 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'."

Arthur Pink, *Studies in the Scriptures*, December 1927: "Now the kind of church which is emphasized in the New Testament is neither invisible nor universal; but instead, visible and local. The Greek word for 'church' is *ecclesia*, and those who know anything of that language are agreed that the word signifies 'an assembly'. Now, an assembly is a company of people who actually assemble. If they never assemble, then it is a misuse of language to call them 'an assembly'. Therefore, as all of God's people never have yet assembled together, there is today no universal church."

Jesse B. Thomas, *The Church and the Kingdom*, page 275: "A church universal, composed to a disintegrated, unorganized throng of members of all the churches is from the functional point of view inconceivable. How could an indistinguishable, unrecognizable company of God's elect, the invisible church, serve either the one purpose of a church or the other?"

J.R. Graves, *Why Be A Baptist?*, page 47 "The two essential ideas in the word *ekklesia* are assembly and organization. Every illustration of a church in the New Testament, such as temple or house or body, makes the veriest nonsense if it is not assembled and organized. The etymology of the word *ekklesia* makes it of necessity a local church."

Thomas Armitage, *History of Baptists*, pages 188-120 "In the apostolic age the church was a local body, and each church was independent of

every other church. The simple term *ecclesia* designates one congregation, or organized assembly, this being its literal and primal meaning... it follows then, that the New Testament nowhere speaks of the 'Universal, Catholic, or Invisible Church', as indicating a merely ideal existence, separate from a real and local body. A local church fully expresses the meaning of the word *ecclesia* wherever it is found in Holy Writ."

S.H. Ford, *Brief Baptist History*, page 95 "It should be remembered that by church, Baptists mean what the New Testament teaches....a local, real congregation of baptized believers united together for God's service."

Having introduced this subject, let us proceed to the text itself.

THE MEANING OF THE WORD CHURCH

When Jesus said "I will build my church", what kind of church was He referring to? Would it be invisible or visible? Would it be universal or local? It cannot be bothrather it must be either or. He did not build two kinds of churches, both visible and invisible. If it is local, then it cannot be invisible. It must be one or the other.

We must first look at its etymology. The Greek word is *ekkelesia*. It is made up of two Greek words: *ek* meaning "out of" and *klesis* meaning "called out ones".

How was this word used? The meaning of a word is not determined by its etymology, but rather by how it is used. The Greeks used it to describe an assembly....thus, *ekklesia* means "an assembly of called out ones, or ones called out for the purpose of assembly." If it does not assemble, it is not a church.

There were three kinds of *Ecclesias* in the New Testament. First, there was the assembly in the wilderness (Acts 7:38). Here Stephen is reviewing the history of Israel. He calls them "the church (*ecclesia*) in the wilderness". It simply means that Israel was a congregation or assembly in the wilderness. That is what *ecclesia*

means. It was not a universal, invisible group of people, but rather they were quite local and visible. They were assembled.

Next, there was the assembly of the citizens of Ephesus (Acts 19:32-39,41). When Paul preached in Ephesus, it caused a riot. The town council was called out to deal with the matter. That council was called an *ecclesia* or assembly. They were not universal nor invisible Quite the contrary, they were local and visible. That is the meaning of the word. They were called out for the purpose of assembly.

Third, we have the Lord's assembly given in Matthew 16:18. Our Lord said "I will build my church (*ecclesia*). " He said He would build His assembly. It would not be like the assembly in the wilderness of which Stephen spoke. Rather, it would be a different *ecclesia* and assembly. It would not be "their" assembly, but "MY" assembly.

THE DEFINITION OF THE WORD *CHURCH*

How would we properly define the meaning of the church? It would be erroneous to say that the church is all of the elect of God from all ages. This would put Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the church which was not even in existence.

It would also be erroneous to say that the church is made up of all denominations since Pentecost. Whenever would this worldwide church come together? A body that is disassembled is not a body.

The church is an assembly of voluntary, baptized believers in the Lord Jesus Christ, assembled for the purpose of carrying out the commands of Christ.
"Assembly" rules out universal and invisible. "Believers " rules out the unregenerate and all those who have not consciously and actively trusted Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord. "Baptized" rules out all of those who are unbaptized as well as those sprinkled or poured. "Voluntary" rules out all small children and babies who have not exercised a willingness. "Lord Jesus Christ" eliminates all other religions in the world. Salvation is in Christ and Christ alone. "The purpose of carrying out the commands of Christ" eliminates all not organized for the purpose carrying out the Great Commission.

HOW THE CHURCH IS PRESENTED IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

First, it is used in an institutional sense (Ephesians 3:10,21). Quite often when the church is used as *the Church*, it is speaking of the church in a generic or institutional fashion. We often speak of *the Home*. We are speaking of the system of the home which is made up of all literal and local homes. In the same way when we talk of *the school*, we mean the school as a system and not any one particular school. Yet, the school institutionally is made up of all local schools. If there were not local and visible schools, there would be no school system. It is the same with the church. The first mention of the word "church" is to be found in our text in Matthew 16:18. Our Lord was not thinking of any particular assembly, whether the church at Jerusalem or anywhere else. He said the gates of Hell would not prevail against His church. The Jerusalem church is no longer with us. This could be said to thousands upon thousands of local assemblies. What He meant, however, was that His church as an institution would never pass away or be destroyed and it has not. The church of our Lord is still here today after 2000 years.

Second, the church is used as a particular, local and visible assembly (Revelation 1:4). There were seven literal and visible assemblies such as "the church at Ephesus", "the church at Sardis", "the church at Thyatira" and "the church at Laodicea". Each one was an individual, independent church defined by location and membership.

Finally, the church is used in a prospective sense (Ephesians 5:25-27). Here, Christ is presented as a husband, while the church is presented as the wife or bride. In order to have a husband and wife, there must be a marriage. That marriage has not happened yet. It will one day when Christ returns the second time. At that time, the church will be presented without spot and blemish. It is called "the church of the first-born" in Hebrews 12:23. It will involve all of the redeemed of the ages, but **only when they assemble in Glory and become the Glorified Church**. That has not happened. It will occur in the future. In that day, we will all believe the same thing. There will be no denominational differences. It is the **Prospective Church or Assembly in Glory**.

THE PREDOMINANT USE OF *EKKLESIA* IN THE NEW TESTAMENT IS LOCAL AND VISIBLE.

Ekklesia is used 118 times in the King James Version of the New Testament. Three times it is rendered "assembly". It is rendered "church" 115 times. Of the 115 times it is rendered church, it speaks of the Israelite congregation one time in the Old Testament; four times it speaks of the prospective church in heaven; fourteen times it is used of the church as an institution or generically; **ninety-six** times it is used without question as a **local and visible assembly**.

The Scriptural citations for such a predominant and prevalent usage are very clear:

(1) Christ used the word *ecclesia* twenty-one times. Three of these are found in Matthew 16:18 and Matthew 18:17. Eighteen times He spoke of the *ekklesia* in Revelation. With the exception of our text as used generically, He always spoke of the church as local and visible. Christ never spoke of an invisible and universal church.

(2) The Apostle Paul wrote letters to literal and local churches: to the church at Rome, to the church at Corinth, to the church at Galatia, to the church at Ephesus, to the church at Colossae, to the church at Thessalonica and others.

(3) The historical churches in Acts were local and visible.

Acts 2:47	<i>"The Lord added to the church daily"</i>
Acts 5:11	<i>"Fear came upon all the church"</i>
Acts 8:1	<i>"The church which was at Jerusalem"</i>
Acts 12:1	<i>"Herod sought to vex certain of the church"</i>
Acts 14:23	<i>"Ordained them elders in every church"</i>
Acts 15:4	<i>"They were received of the church"</i>
Acts 16:5	<i>"So were the churches established"</i>
Acts 18:22	<i>"And saluted the church"</i>
Acts 20:17	<i>"Called the elders of the church"</i>

(4) The New Testament church could be disciplined (Matthew 18:17). Ill John 10
"Casteth them out of the church"

METAPHORS ARE USED TO DESCRIBE THE CHURCH AS LOCAL, TANGIBLE AND A VISIBLE ASSEMBLY

1. The church is referred to as a flock (I Peter 5:3). This involves some sheep under a shepherd.
2. The church is referred to as the house of God (I Timothy 3:15). This involves many parts under a builder.
3. The church is referred to as a husbandry (I Corinthians 3:9). This involves many plants under a husbandman.
4. The church is referred to as a body (Romans 12:4-5). This involves many members under one head.
5. The church is referred to as God's building (I Corinthians 3:9). This involves many pieces joined by a builder.
6. The church is referred to as a temple (I Corinthians 3:16). This involves many worshippers coming to the one worshipped....all are local and visible.

In conclusion, what the Lord Jesus promised in Matthew 16:18 and was empowered at Pentecost was the institution of the church made up of local and visible assemblies of baptized believers. He is the builder of His church.

There are a few things in the Bible of which it is said that Christ built, but none were invisible. He built the heavens and the earth in Genesis. They were not invisible. He is building the New Jerusalem in Revelation and that will not be invisible. He started the church 2000 years ago and it too is local and visible. Never fall for the universal, invisible trap!!