

WHAT IS A CHURCH?

By Tom Ross

*“And when they had preached the word in Perga, they went down into Attalia: And thence sailed to Antioch, from whence they had been recommended to the grace of God for the work which they fulfilled. And when they were come, and had **GATHERED THE CHURCH TOGETHER** (Emphasis mine, TWR), they rehearsed all that God had done with them, and how he had opened the door of faith unto the Gentiles. And there they abode long time with the **disciples**”* (Acts 14:25-28).

Paul and Barnabas were Gospel preaching missionaries who were called to the work by the Holy Spirit and sent out by the church at Antioch (Acts 13:1-3). At the end of their first missionary journey we find them returning to the church that had authorized them to do the work (at Antioch) for the express purpose of rehearsing, or giving a report of the work that they had done. I think it is significant to note that they did not sail to a “universal, invisible church” to deliver their report. Paul and Barnabas did not summon the elect of all ages to deliver their report. Rather, they returned to Antioch and **“GATHERED THE CHURCH TOGETHER”** to deliver the report. Biblically speaking a church of the Lord Jesus Christ, made up of baptized believers, must of necessity be a local, visible congregation that can gather together in a definite location. Paul and Barnabas were sent out by a real church, and thus they delivered their missionary report to a real church made up of real baptized disciples who had gathered for worship. There was nothing universal or invisible about the church at Antioch. Thus, a church in the New Testament is a local and visible congregation (assembly) of baptized believers who have covenanted together under the Headship of Jesus Christ to carry out the Great Commission.

It should be noted at the outset that the Biblical teaching of what a New Testament church is, is not at all what Catholics or Protestants have taught and believed through the centuries. Those who believe in the scriptural teaching of what a New Testament church is are in a decided minority.

A CHURCH DEFINED BIBLICALLY

It is important that we get our definition of what a church is from the Scriptures, rather than the opinions of Catholic and Protestant theologians. The inspired writers of the New Testament text never once used the word Catholic (katholikos, the Greek word for universal) or invisible in conjunction with the word church (ekklesia in the Greek). The Christians of the first century knew absolutely nothing about a universal or an invisible church.

I love the quote by the late Elder Davis Huckabee who wrote:

“The Greek words ekklesia (assembly) and katholikos (general or universal) are mutually exclusive; the former is expressive of locality and a restricted assembly, while the latter is expressive of universality and all-inclusiveness. Not only so, but katholikos is not even a New Testament word, nor is it to be found in the Greek Old Testament. It made its appearance sometime after the first century when it first began to be applied to the so-called general (katholikos) epistles. It was never applied by inspiration to the church.”

The Roman Catholic theologian, Augustine (353-430 A.D.) really set forth and solidified the unscriptural notion of a universal, visible church that consisted of every member of the Catholic church who submitted to the authority of its visible head, the Pope. Augustine’s version of the church was stated in the Fourth Century and was an attempt to define a church as a

single, world wide entity that a person had to belong to in order to be saved.

Later, after Martin Luther took his decided stand against some of the errors of Catholicism, Protestants had to come up with a new meaning for the word church in order to justify their split from Rome. From that time until now Protestants in the main have believed in the unscriptural notion of a universal, invisible church. There are several different variations of the universal invisible church doctrine, none of which match with the usage of the word church in the Holy Scriptures. Protestants who bear the birthmarks of their unholy mother, the Roman Catholic Church, also equate salvation with church membership in some degree. Catholics and Protestants alike insist that the everyone who is saved is of necessity in the universal church. The proponents of the universal, visible and invisible church theories fail to see the distinction made in the Word of God between the Family of God which constitutes all born again believers, and the churches of God which are made up of saved people who have been scripturally baptized by a New Testament church in Gospel order. The Scriptures make it clear that the elect are born again into the family of God and the kingdom of God (John 3:3-8). However, the Scriptures make it crystal clear that believers are added to the Lord's church by way of baptism scripturally administered (Acts 2:41; I Cor. 12:13, 18). There is only one Family of God and one Kingdom of God, both entered by way of the new birth. However, there are literally thousands of churches of the Lord Jesus Christ made up of believers baptized in Gospel order. Historically Baptists in the main have stood alone on the principle that sinners are saved through Christ alone, separate and apart from any denominational or church affiliation.

Sadly, due to the influence of C.I. Scofield's study Bible and the advent of Fundamentalism in the early 1900's many Baptists embraced the heresies of the universal, invisible church theory. Many Baptists hold to version of the church branch theory and/or the idea of a local body within a

universal body. When they want to appear to be ecumenical and acceptable to Protestants they talk of the big universal invisible church, but when it comes to the collection of tithes, offerings, and a weekly salary they appeal to the local church. I think a lot of Baptist preachers would be cured of the universal invisible church theory if they had to depend on the big, mythical, spooky church for a paycheck!

For the sake of time and space we will not examine every time the word ekklesia is translated church or assembly in our English Bible (KJV). For a detailed study I would refer the reader to a book I wrote entitled **Teachings on the Local Church** where I examine all 114 times the word ekklesia is translated church, churches, or assembly in the New Testament, including the 18 times it is used in a generic, institutional, or abstract sense. One time it is inserted as an idiomatic word in italics.

(I Peter 5:13). Three additional times it is found in the subscription at the end of Romans, I Timothy, and Titus. One thing is for certain, each and every usage of the word ekklesia translated church or assembly in the New Testament either refers directly or may be applied to the teaching of a local, visible, assembly or congregation of baptized believers. The only exceptions would be the non Christian usage of ekklesia where the word is translated "**assembly**" three times in Acts 19:32, 39, 41.

A CHURCH HAS A DEFINITE LOCATION

The unscriptural theory of the universal invisible church has many flaws and glaring errors. Perhaps the greatest error of all is that the universal invisible church has never once gathered for worship as it has no definite location. What is the stated address of the universal invisible church? Does it congregate on the Lord's Day? Who are the elders/pastors who preach and teach at the universal invisible church? None of these

questions can be answered intelligently because the universal invisible church has never congregated and has no real location.

Elder Milburn Cockrell wrote:

“The word ekklesia does not mean “the called out.” It means ‘assembly’, ‘congregation’, ‘gathering’, or ‘meeting.’ The literal and primary meaning precludes the so-called universal, invisible church. There is no such thing as an assembly which cannot assemble, or a congregation which never congregates. The meaning for the word prohibits such a meaning. The universal, invisible church has never assembled and never will on this earth in this Gospel age. Hence such a thing is a mere concept of the mind, having no real existence in time or place.”

How stark is the difference between the mythical, spooky, universal, and invisible church from the churches that are recorded in various locations in the New Testament Scriptures!

Ekklesia is translated 37 times in the plural form **“churches”** in the New Testament. This of course means that in the New Testament there were a plurality of churches, each one located in a definite place, each one recognized as the body of Christ in that specific place. It is interesting to note that when Paul wrote to the church at Corinth he said that **“The CHURCHES (emphasis mine, TWR) of Asia salute you. Aquilla and Priscilla salute you much in the Lord, with the church that is in their house...”** (I Cor. 16:19). If Paul believed in a universal, invisible church or even in a provincial church he would have said “the church of Christ” or ‘the Church of Asia’ salutes you. Yet Paul recognized each congregation of baptized believers existing in a specific place as a body of Christ. Even the ones that assembled in a house as in the case of Aquilla and Priscilla! When Jesus wanted to communicate to the seven churches of Asia the Holy Spirit did not inspire John to write to the universal invisible church of Asia. Rather,

the Scripture reads: **“John to the SEVEN CHURCHES which are in Asia”** (Rev. 1:4). In Revelation chapters two and three the location of each church is clearly identified by where it was located (Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamos, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, Laodicea).

Consider the following Scriptures where the definite location of a specific church is given:

“...the church which was at Jerusalem...” (Acts 8:1).

“...the church that was at Antioch...” (Acts 13:1).

“...Unto the church of God which is at Corinth...” (I Cor. 1:2).

“...unto the church of the Thessalonians...” (I Thess. 1:1).

“...The church that is at Babylon...” (I Pet. 5:13).

I find it instructive that three times the writers of Scripture refer to a local church as **“the whole church”** in that specific location. Each local church in the New Testament may be regarded as a genuine, whole body of Christ, not just part of something bigger. Consider the following:

“Then pleased it the apostles and elders, with the whole church (at Jerusalem, TWR) to send chosen men of their own company to Antioch with Paul and Barnabus” (Acts 15:22).

“Gaius mine host, and of the whole church, saluteth you” (Rom. 16:23).

“If therefore the whole church (at Corinth) be come together into one place” (I Cor. 14:23). All the redeemed are not referenced in these passages. Each passage refers to a specific church that congregated in a definite location. Each congregation was identified as the whole church in that location.

An entire series of studies could be written illustrating that all the metaphors of what a church is like in Scripture suggest a local, visible entity as opposed to a universal visible or universal invisible one. Who ever heard of embracing an invisible **bride**? When was the last time you walked into an invisible **building**? How would you get light from an invisible **candlestick**? How would you shear sheep from an invisible **flock**? Every metaphor of the church suggests a visible entity occupying space and time. The teaching of a local, visible assembly of baptized believers can be applied in each metaphor. Yet, the teaching of a universal invisible church can never be logically or intelligently applied. From the usage and etymology of the word church as well as the metaphors of Scripture used to describe a church, it is decidedly clear that the church is local in nature, to the exclusion of the teaching of a mythical, universal, invisible church, which is a falsehood.

Many other examples illustrating the fact that the churches of the New Testament were congregations of baptized believers that gathered in a definite location could be cited. Suffice it to say that the New Testament makes it crystal clear that a church is a local, visible body of baptized believers that congregates for worship under the Headship of Jesus Christ, for the express purpose of fulfilling the Great Commission. The churches identified throughout inspired Scripture were in no way universal or invisible.

A CHURCH MAY BE DEFINED BY WHAT IT DOES

The universal visible or invisible church has never and will never congregate for worship on this earth. The universal church has never called a pastor. The universal church has never baptized a convert. The universal church has never observed the Lord's Supper. The universal church has never sent out a missionary. The universal church has never disciplined a wayward or erring member. The universal church has never been united in

doctrine and practice. The universal church has never taken up an offering or collected tithes. The universal church has never supported a pastor or a missionary. This should be quite a conundrum for all the Catholics who believe in a universal visible church and all the Protestants who believe in a universal invisible church. Their theories of what a church is do not square with what the New Testament teaches about the functions of a church of the Lord Jesus Christ.

The Lord Jesus Christ started the first New Testament church during His earthly ministry. His twelve apostles were the first members of the first church (I Cor. 12:28). The original members of the church Christ organized were eyewitnesses of His glory, miracles, teachings, death, burial, resurrection, and ascension to Heaven. Just prior to His ascension to Heaven, the Lord Jesus Christ gave the church what is commonly referred to as the Great Commission. Christ authorized and commanded His kind of church to get to work preaching the Gospel worldwide, baptizing the converts, and teaching them to observe and practice the truth until the end of the age. Matthew 28:18-20: **“And Jesus came and spake unto them, saying, All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth. Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observable all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world. Amen.”** Baptists have been executing the commands laid out by the Head of the church for over 2000 years. When Jesus issued the Great Commission He was speaking to the members of the church He had organized and promised perpetuity unto. Interestingly enough they were assembled and worshipping in the place He had appointed them (Matt. 28:16-17). There were no baby sprinkling Catholics or Protestants in the first church. True churches of the Lord Jesus Christ have been following the Great Commission pattern without fail since Jesus first gave the command. Real, visible, local churches of the Lord Jesus Christ preach the one and only true Gospel (I Cor. 15:1-4; Rom.

1:16-17) as the only way of salvation. Real, visible, local churches administer the ordinance of baptism by immersion in literal water to signify symbolically that the new believer is dead to his old way of life, buried with Christ, and raised to walk in newness of life (Rom. 6:4-6). Once added to the church by scriptural baptism the new believers are then taught to believe, practice, and defend the faith once delivered unto the saints. Catholics and Protestants may preach the Gospel (though precious few really do) and they may teach some truth. However, they have never truly administered the ordinance of baptism in its pure and primitive form. If a religious organization has no authority to administer the ordinance of baptism they cannot be recognized as a church of the Lord Jesus Christ.

A church of the Lord Jesus Christ assembles as a body of Christ to worship the Lord on the Lord's Day as a means of proving their profession of faith. Hebrews 10:23-25 commands: **"Let us hold fast the profession of our faith, without wavering; (for he is faithful that promised;) And let us consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works: Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more as ye see the day approaching."** In I Corinthians 14, Paul is carefully explaining the gift of tongues and its proper use in the early church. It is interesting to note that Paul believed like all true Baptists that a church congregates or comes together in one place to worship. I Corinthians 14:23 and 26 declare: **"IF THEREFORE THE WHOLE CHURCH BE COME TOGETHER INTO ONE PLACE (Emphasis mine, TWR), and all speak with tongues, and there come in those that are unlearned, or unbelievers, will they not say that ye are mad?...How is it then, brethren? WHEN YE COME TOGETHER, every one of you hath a psalm, hath a doctrine, hath a tongue, hath a revelation, hath an interpretation. Let all things be done unto edifying."** I love that Paul, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, identifies the church at Corinth as the whole church that **"came**

together into one place”! Not a body within a body, but a local, visible body of Christ that comes together and assembles for worship. The universal visible nor the universal invisible “church” has never once done this! It’s a myth!

A church of the Lord Jesus Christ has the authority from Christ to receive members and also to discipline wayward or heretical members. Jesus gave clear instructions how to deal with a brother guilty of personal offenses in Matthew 18:15-17: **“Moreover if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother. But if he will not hear thee then take with the one or two more** (verses 19-20, the Lord is in the midst of those dealing with the erring brother), **that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established. And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church: but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican.”** These instructions from the Lord Jesus can only be carried out in a local, visible church of the Lord Jesus Christ. It’s quite impossible to **“tell it”** to a universal visible or universal invisible church! It’s a myth!

A church of the Lord Jesus Christ observes the ordinances of baptism and the Lord’s supper. In order to do this, they must come together as a unified body of Christ. When Paul was correcting the Corinthian church for the irregularities and improper observance of the Lord’s Supper, he made this point quite clear. **“Now in this that I declare unto you I praise you not, that YE COME TOGETHER not for the better, but for the worse. For first of all, when YE COME TOGETHER IN THE CHURCH, I hear that there be divisions among you; and I partly believe it. For there must be also heresies among you, that they which are approved may be manifest among you. WHEN YE COME TOGETHER THEREFORE INTO ONE PLACE, this is not to eat the Lord’s**

supper. For in eating every one taketh before other his own supper: and one is hungry, and another is drunken. What? have ye not houses to eat and to drink in? or despise ye THE CHURCH OF GOD, and shame them that have not? What shall I say to you? I praise you not" (I Cor. 11:17-22). The universal visible nor the universal invisible church has ever come together to observe the Lord's Supper. If it's invisible how would you share the elements with the members? Nor is it possible for this mythical, spooky church to have any sort of unity (I Cor. 1:10) with all the conflicting and contradictory beliefs its invisible members have. Its a myth!

A church of the Lord Jesus Christ has authority to send out missionaries to preach the Gospel, baptize the converts, and teach them with the ultimate aim of organizing new, autonomous, independent churches. The church at Jerusalem did this when they sent forth Barnabas to organize the believers at Antioch into a church: **"...when they were come to Antioch, spake unto the Grecians, preaching the Lord Jesus. And the hand of the Lord was with them: and a great number believed. and turned unto the Lord. Then tidings of these things came unto the ears of the church which was in Jerusalem; and they sent forth Barnabas, that he should go as far as Antioch. Who, when he came, and had seen the grace of God, was glad, and exhorted them all, that with purpose of heart they would cleave unto the Lord. For he was a good man, and full of the Holy Ghost and of faith; and much people were added unto the Lord. Then departed Barnabas to Tarsus, for to seek Saul. And when he had found him, he brought him unto Antioch. And it came to pass, that a whole year THEY ASSEMBLED THEMSELVES WITH THE CHURCH, and taught much people. And the disciples were called Christians first in Antioch"** (Acts 11:20-26). Not long after the church at Antioch followed the pattern set forth by the church at Jerusalem and sent forth missionaries to do the work of the Lord (Acts 13:1-3). The universal visible nor the

universal invisible church has ever ordained or sent out a missionary. It's a myth!

I could go on defining a true church by what it does illustrated by scriptural examples, but what I have set forth will suffice for now.

Just to reinforce what a church is I offer this excellent definition set forth by J.E. Cobb in his Baptist Church Manual:

"A New Testament church is an assembly of people called out from the world by the preaching of the Gospel accompanied by the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit, and baptized in the faith and fellowship of the Gospel, to a life of conformation to the will of God, to execute the will and perpetuate the ordinances of Christ until He comes."

(All of the quotes by other authors are cited in my book **Teachings on the Local Church**, TWR)