

EIGHT ILL EFFECTS OF PROMOTING THE UNIVERSAL (INVISIBLE) CHURCH FALLACY

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Introduction

Many evangelical and Protestant groups teach and promote the non-scriptural idea that the church that Jesus built is a universal or invisible “church” that is comprised of “all who are saved.” We also find from time to time some fundamental Baptist churches have adopted this false teaching. Pace everyone who thinks the church is universal or invisible, the New Testament teaches no such thing.

I suppose those who blindly accept this teaching of a universal church as true do so because they have not really studied the subject out for themselves – they just flip to a few verses out of context, making them say what they do not really say. This is not study. This is simply referring to a few familiar passages trying to use them to say what they do not say. Possibly, these promoters of a universal church think they do no harm – that it actually sounds good. Maybe they just have not really considered diligently what they believe. Maybe they confuse the church with the family of God, or the kingdom of God. But the study of the church in the New Testament is not as abstruse some may think, which thing I hope to show.

Certain people go to the Bible with a pre-conceived idea and search out verses that they think support their view. These do not take a deductive study putting their bias aside and letting the scriptures speak for themselves. Their pride drives them to resist the truth.

And sadly, there are simple believers who blindly follow what they are taught, and go about their lives thinking they know the facts, when indeed they are deceived on this matter.

Allow me to say this: the source of truth is God. A man’s person does not make an untruth to be true. So regardless of who says what, we should search out what God says and follow that – regardless of who agrees. Too many people put confidence in man.

Whether the church that the Lord built is visible only, or invisible, or both, is *not* a minor issue; it is not a simple disagreement on details. Wrong thinking on this can affect one’s behavior so as to have eternal consequences.

This false teaching of the universal or invisible church is a *Protestant* teaching with *Protestant* roots (true Baptists are *not* Protestants, and never were); made up by Protestants as justification for their church’s existence. They want to play church and give New Testament credence and authority to their groups, so they justify their efforts with a putative false teaching. Many “Bible Churches” and “Community Churches” are in fact offshoots from Protestant groups; they hide their true identity under a generic, non-defining name. They say they are “non-denominational,” but with a little research one can find their true roots. And through these avenues the leaven spreads.

For example, Bob Jones, of the university with the same name, was a Methodist. He was an “immersed Methodist” – whatever that means. His mother was a Baptist and his father a Methodist, so he was immersed before joining and being licensed by the Methodists. So, whatever he taught and promoted, although I am sure it contained much good, is still tainted with *Protestant* doctrine. And you will find that some graduates of Bob Jones start “Bible churches” thinking they are non-denominational.

In contrast, consider my pastor, J. G. Tharpe, who was chancellor of five Baptist schools (two Baptist universities, two Baptist seminaries, and a Baptist college) under the authority of Baptist Tabernacle in Shreveport, Louisiana. This man was raised Methodist until he got saved and called to preach. When the Methodist leaders in his day knew “Jimmy Gid” was called to preach, they offered him many promises of success and religious prosperity in the Methodist system. Bro. Tharpe rejected those offers and instead became a Baptist, thus alienating many of his

family and choosing instead the hard road of fundamentalism. Bro. Tharpe became to be known as “Mr. Baptist of Louisiana” because he was solid in his Baptist teaching.

During his ministry, Baptist Tabernacle authorized the founding of close to an hundred *Baptist* churches – one of them being ours. He understood the church was “a body of baptized believers, covenanted together to carry out the commandments of Jesus Christ,” neither universal nor invisible. He rejected alien baptism, stood for the King James Version, and loved his brother. He often told the story how that once he decided to leave Methodism and join the local Baptist Church, that he went forward at the end of the Baptist service and informed the pastor that he wanted to “move his letter.” To this the preacher laughed loudly and said, “Boy... *You ain’t got no letter to move! If you are going to be a Baptist you gotta be baptized by a Baptist.*”

From that point onward, Jimmy Tharpe was a steadfast defender of the Baptist way. Not only did he live his life tenaciously as an independent Baptist, but he taught the same in all his schools.

Preliminary Teaching

Before I list the *ill effects* of falsely teaching that the church the Lord built is a universal or invisible church, I should like first to briefly teach on the subject of the church; mainly to provoke good-hearted brethren to honestly study out for themselves the truth on this matter. No doubt some will dismiss what I say being content they are fully persuaded they are right. These are beyond correction, first; and secondly, for them to admit they are wrong jeopardizes their life work. They have traveled too far down the path and cannot return to the right way. They have too much of their pride invested in what they have promoted and built to admit their error.

As the young maiden who has lost her virginity, she cannot go back and undo her actions. As for me and brethren of like understanding, we can always go where she is (not that we would); but she cannot return to where we are.

Hopefully there are a few brethren who have not traveled too far down that road. They will be humble enough to prayerfully search the scriptures and prove what I say. And hopefully, once they have seen the truth, they will admit the truth and undo what they have done in ignorance. There is no shame in admitting one is wrong. That shows one has learned. And we all are learning. To be willfully ignorant, however, is something to avoid.

To define this study, I am showing the reasons why there is no universal church. Although this may be a straining of terms, most believers understand we are born again into the *family* of God. We are children of God by faith. We become part of the kingdom of God when we are born again (John chapter 3). But we need to be clear that this kingdom or family, which we enter by being born again; is *not* a universal church. Salvation is one thing; discipleship is another. As children of God we have a duty to serve God *through* a local church assembly. Our loyalty and faithfulness to Christ is demonstrated as to how we honor the church *Jesus* built. In the last section the reader will see how an incorrect understanding of the church indeed has serious repercussions.

I proceed then, first, to supply some simple *exhibits* that I believe are beyond gainsaying:

- 1 One would have to willfully blind, ignorant, or of a dishonest purpose to deny that the churches in the New Testament were local bodies of baptized believers. It should be obvious to anyone with even a partial understanding of the New Testament that the Jerusalem church, the Antiochian church, the Corinthian church, the Ephesian church, the Philippian church, the churches in Galatia, the Thessalonian church – and over twenty more given by name – were local bodies of baptized believers. If anyone denies this fact, he is beyond the point of reason. It would be an easy study to show this fact, but I hope the readers have at least a basic understanding and knowledge of the New Testament to admit the churches in the New Testament were *not* universal and *not* invisible. Paul and the other apostles visited them. Paul and John wrote to them. There they broke bread and fellowshiped. They extended the right hand of fellowship. They met in houses. Of the hundred and fifteen or so places the word church is used, well over a hundred are undoubtedly speaking specifically of a local body of baptized believers.

So, as we take as our first step, we see the undeniable fact that the churches shown in the New Testament were indeed shown to be local, visible bodies; the question then proceeds to whether the New Testament

also supports the idea of a universal, invisible church (this to me seems so alien to the scriptures already, but for the sake of study, we shall have to address this point). I believe one will see that the answer is clearly, “no, the New Testament does not support the idea of a universal or invisible church.”

2 For exhibit 2, we shall look at the first mentions of the word church in the Bible. The first mentions in the Bible are found in Matthew’s Gospel, coined by the Lord Jesus Christ himself. In all four Gospels, the word *church* is only found in the book of Matthew, and that in chapters 16 and 18.

16:18 And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.

18:17 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.

In 16:18, Jesus said *my church* – meaning one. Consequently, to say Jesus built a church that is both *invisible* and at the same time he built a church that is *visible*, is to say our Saviour built two types of churches. By definition, the church cannot be *both* invisible and visible. What church did Jesus build? Again, the overwhelming evidence in the New Testament is that the churches were visible, local assemblies.

So then, if Jesus used the singular *church*, why do we say *churches*? Well, Paul used that word in its plural form, as did Jesus (Galatians 1; Revelation 2). They spoke in the plural showing these other churches were *more of the same*. Jesus built his church, and that church reproduced to make other churches. Think of it this way: In Genesis God made *man* (singular). He made *man* (singular) in his image. There was *one* man. But that man reproduced. No one with a right mind would contend Adam was invisible and universal, nor would they deny that his offspring were men of the same man qualities. Neither would they say when he created man as a visible being, that God later created a man that is invisible. Neither would someone say the church started as a *visible* church and then “morphed” into an *invisible*, universal church. There is no scripture supporting that idea.

As man was created singularly but reproduced, so did Jesus build his church and it reproduced. *Man* became *men* scattered throughout the world, and that Jerusalem church reproduced into many churches scattered throughout the world. And as all men can trace their origin to that first Adam, we can trace the true New Testament churches to its builder and founder Jesus Christ. In contrast, Protestant churches trace their origin to the Roman Catholic (*katholicos*) Church – the mother of harlots.

For someone to make a mannequin (or straw man) and push it upon us calling it a true man, or to call the true man invisible and universal; is bordering on an insult to one’s intelligence. But that is what Protestant do with the church. They make their own church and say it is equal to what God made.

In the second verse in Matthew (18:17) Jesus teaches us to “tell it unto the church.” This further proves the word that Jesus used defined a local assembly, for he said to his disciples to *tell it to the church* – meaning it had to be a local and visible assembly, with at least two or three gathered together. How else could one tell of an issue to this judicial body (one that would bind or loose). And two thousand years later, although in a different place and time, if we have an irreconcilable issue with our brother, we need to have the church judge. Similarly in the world, when you seek a “judge” or desire present your case’s evidence to a “jury,” you may not be speaking of any particular judge or jury; but you are certainly not referring to a universal or invisible judge or jury. Eventually you will stand before a visible, local person or group and plead your cause.

So, in the four Gospels Jesus mentions his church in two places, both in Matthew – once to say he will build it, and then shortly after that it is a judicial body to bind and loose the issues of erring brethren.

Generic Use of Words.

And as God sometimes uses the word *man* in a generic sense, he will sometimes use other words in a generic sense. In Ephesians 5:23 God says, “for the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church”; but he uses the word husband and wife in its generic sense. God is in no wise claiming there is a universal invisible husband and wife. There are many husbands and many wives.

Some say the universal church was started in Acts chapter 2 at Pentecost (with no scriptural evidence, I may add). But the scriptures clearly state the Lord added to the church in those days. And where was that church? It was located in Jerusalem, the apostles and disciples themselves baptizing the believers. According to I Corinthians 12:28, “And God hath set some in the church, first apostles....” The apostles were the first members of the church, and Jesus chose them, many being baptized of John the Baptist.

A Word Study.

In Matthew 16, Jesus used the term “*my church*,” indicating there were other types. The word Jesus chose was not by chance. Jesus did not create this word – it was a word that already had meaning. It was a word describing a thing that was well known to the hearers. His church would not be the only church that exists, but his church is differentiated from all others in that it was one that he himself would build. It is this church in particular that Jesus built that he is speaking of, to the exclusion of all other churches, when he said the gates of hell would not prevail against it. Whatever those churches were that existed before and after our Lord’s earthly ministry, he was speaking of only one church in particular – *his church!*

So it would benefit the reader to understand this word *church*, and what it meant at the time Jesus used it, and realize that when Jesus chose this word, he chose it with absolute accuracy and inspiration. He must needs use some word his followers were familiar with. He chose the word “*ekklesia*.”

Jesus could have used a word such as assembly, synagogue, council, family, body, flock, fold, army, congregation, building, temple, structure; or any one of number of words. But he specifically chose the word *ekklesia*. Why?

What was the origin of this word? Jesus was not the first to use it. What did it represent? I would expect that those who promote a universal or invisible church would not teach this too much in detail. They would simply say it means a “called out assembly,” or something as simplistic as this. But allow me, dear reader, to supply you with a more detailed and accurate use and definition of this word when Jesus chose it:

The word *ekklesia* is a political word, being in use 400 years before Jesus was born. Before the Lord used the word it was not considered a religious word. It was used when summoning an army, or to call out elected and official representatives of a government to meet for official business. Particularly in the Greek empire, the republic would call out the citizen representatives of the various city states to organize a legislative or judicial council, authorized to conduct some official business.

The Greek word comes from two words: “*ek*” meaning “out” and “*kaleo*” meaning “to call.” But you can see it goes much farther than this.

As a side note, the translators of Authorized Version used the English word “church” when translating this word in Matthew. I expect other versions use other words. But we must understand that just because modern-day dictionaries and groups define the word *church* differently in many cases, it does not mean that this is what Jesus meant, for Jesus did not write these modern dictionaries. For example, some dictionaries say a church is a house of religious service. Some may use that definition today, but we should not force a modern definition upon the Lord’s words. That is not what Jesus meant. So be careful for that.

In addition, I also expect that whatever the translators of the A.V. would had used, the meaning would still have been changed by today. So, say they used the word “council.” Today, people would go to “council” on Sunday, rather than church. Driving by a nice Christian building, one would exclaim, “Look at that

‘council,’” just as easily and loosely as they use the word church. The power and effect of the words of our Saviour have repercussions and the Devil is active to confuse. Regardless of what some people say the word *church* means, we have to discern what the meaning was when Jesus used it.

So, in summary, when the word *church* was first used in the New Testament, it was used by Jesus Christ, defining his local assembly. The law of first mention should carry a lot of weight in exegesis.

- 3 For exhibit 3, we shall look at the other places the Founder spoke of his church. Other than Matthew chapters 16:18 and 18:17, the only other places the Lord used this word was in the Revelation of Saint John. Read Revelation 1:11:

Saying, I am Alpha and Omega, the first and the last: and, What thou seest, write in a book, and send it unto the seven churches which are in Asia; unto Ephesus, and unto Smyrna, and unto Pergamos, and unto Thyatira, and unto Sardis, and unto Philadelphia, and unto Laodicea.

The Lord Jesus Christ goes on to mention these churches in chapter 1:20, and uses the word fourteen times in chapters 2 and 3; and then one last time in 22:16:

I Jesus have sent mine angel to testify unto you these things in the churches. I am the root and the offspring of David, and the bright and morning star.

It is no small thing that the first book in the New Testament you have the Saviour and Builder mentioning his church, and that it is a local, visible assembly; and then in the last book of the New Testament he mentions his churches over a dozen times – all being local, visible assemblies. To many, this would be sufficient emphasis to show his churches are local and visible assemblies. By taking the words from the mouth of the Saviour himself it is easily discerned what his church is.

But there are many places between these two books that mention the church. We find Luke writing of many events involving the churches in his book of Acts. All those are local visible assemblies. We have James mentioning the word one time in James 5:14, obviously a local assembly:

Is any sick among you? let him call for the elders of the church; and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord:

Then we have Peter using the word in I Peter 5:13 mentioning the church that is at Babylon – obviously again a local assembly.

Besides the Revelation, the beloved John used the word in only one of his other epistles, and that was his third epistle (verses 6, 9, and 10). By reading the context one can easily see this is a local assembly (he says he wrote unto the church, and how Diotrephes cast certain out of the church). I doubt if the church were universal and made up of all saved, that Diotrephes would be able to cast anyone out of the church.

This leaves the apostle Paul – the servant of God who wrote more than half of the New Testament. Interestingly, many of his epistles were written *to* churches (in Corinth, many in Galatia, in Ephesus, Philippi, and Colosse. He also wrote to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon. He wrote to Timothy, the bishop of the church of Ephesus; to Titus, the bishop of the church in Crete; and to Philemon, who had a church in his house. Without a doubt, the majority of Paul’s writings show the church is local and visible.

- 4 Now let us consider the few texts one usually uses to teach there is such a thing as a universal or invisible church – Ephesians and Hebrews. It seems superfluous to me that if Paul used the word *church* some fifty times where there is no doubt he is speaking of a local assembly, that we would have to prove what he meant when he used the same word less than a dozen times elsewhere.

Let's take Hebrews first, as this is simpler to address. Here I show the two places there that Paul uses the word church:

Hebrews 2:1 Saying, I will declare thy name unto my brethren, in the midst of the church will I sing praise unto thee.

Paul is quoting Psalms 22:22. In the Old Testament, the verse uses the word *congregation*. Here is a fine example of the Bible defining itself. Old Testament *congregation* is mentioned in the New Testament as *church*. Common sense tells me this use of the *church* means a local assembly – a *congregation*.

The second place in Hebrews is a little more interesting and revealing. Please note the passage below:

22 But ye are come unto mount Sion, and unto the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to an innumerable company of angels,
23 To the general assembly and church of the firstborn, which are written in heaven, and to God the Judge of all, and to the spirits of just men made perfect,
24 And to Jesus the mediator of the new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling, that speaketh better things than that of Abel.

Hebrews 12:22-24

Please read carefully and repeatedly the passage above. I know many good men have differed on what exactly Paul is talking about here. ***But one thing is certain and obvious: the church that Paul mentions in verse 23 is visible and local.*** That church is visible, and it is located in the heavenly Jerusalem. It is where God, Jesus, and the blood are located.

Now we can argue who exactly this general assembly and church of the firstborn is comprised of; but I will say that to me, it is made up of those who are saved and have passed from this world. As Paul said, absent from the body is to be present with the Lord. Here, Paul indeed makes a distinction between the *church of the firstborn* and the *spirits of just men made perfect*. Possibly (and to me, likely), the *church of the firstborn* are those New Testament saints who have trusted Christ and have fallen asleep. These would include the apostles, the disciples found in the book of Acts, and all the saints from the last 2,000 years – and me, if I am not caught up. These names are written in heaven. This is what Jesus told his disciple to rejoice over (Luke 10:20). The way I see it, once I depart from this world my membership will move from Historic Baptist Church in North Kingstown to Mount Sion Baptist Church in heavenly Jerusalem! – both of these churches being local, visible bodies.

The *just men made perfect* would be (in my opinion) those Old Testament saints who were found righteous and taken to heaven. We can trust that Adam, Job, Noah, Moses, Joshua, David, the prophets, and many others are now found in the heavenly Jerusalem.

But this is clear: they are all in the same place. Paul called them a general assembly. That Greek word *paneguris* (pan = all + agora = assembly) indeed means “general assembly,” a festal, public gathering of the whole people to celebrate publically. It is obviously local and visible. And for one to say that is “everybody who is saved on earth and in heaven,” violates the context and plain meaning of the verse (it does not say that), and goes against common sense: How can we all down here scattered throughout the world, waiting for our heavenly home; and at the same time be up there in one visible assembly celebrating with the Lord Jesus Christ?

Someone would say, are we not all in Christ, seated in heavenly places (Ephesians 2:6)? Well, read Ephesians chapter 2 and you will see in context that Paul is not talking about being present in the general assembly in heaven. He is talking about our position in Christ as children of God.

Well, someone else would say, that Paul said in Philippians 3:20 that our conversation is in heaven. But that conversation is not a presence in a church there, that *conversation* means a political citizenship and being subject to the laws of that kingdom. It is not saying we are members of a universal or invisible church.

So, be careful dear reader. Do not build up a teaching of a universal or invisible church based upon Hebrews 12, especially knowing of all the other evidence to the contrary. Paul is giving us a vision of heavenly Jerusalem and the things we see there. For now, these things are seen and accessed by faith. They are unseen by the human eye, but if you could visit that place now you would see these heavenly things. They are not invisible.

I readily admit there are churches on earth, local bodies of baptized believers. I also readily admit there is a heavenly church, also a local body of redeemed New Testament believers. But let this not be understood to mean we all who are saved are members of a universal or invisible *church*. This is stretching the idea far beyond what the scriptures say.

So, someone walking on this earth is going to have a hard time trying to convince me they are actually a member of that church in heaven. If so, when do they attend? When do they rejoice? How long are the services? How do you get there and back? For someone to believe that, he would have to throw out a lot of foundational truths of the Bible. If we are saved, we will be present with the Lord when we are absent from this body. Read II Corinthians 5:1-10 (see especially v. 6-8):

1 For we know that if our earthly house of this tabernacle were dissolved, we have a building of God, an house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.

2 For in this we groan, earnestly desiring to be clothed upon with our house which is from heaven:

3 If so be that being clothed we shall not be found naked.

4 For we that are in this tabernacle do groan, being burdened: not for that we would be unclothed, but clothed upon, that mortality might be swallowed up of life.

5 Now he that hath wrought us for the selfsame thing is God, who also hath given unto us the earnest of the Spirit.

6 Therefore we are always confident, knowing that, whilst we are at home in the body, we are absent from the Lord:

7 (For we walk by faith, not by sight:)

8 We are confident, I say, and willing rather to be absent from the body, and to be present with the Lord.

9 Wherefore we labour, that, whether present or absent, we may be accepted of him.

10 For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ; that every one may receive the things done in his body, according to that he hath done, whether it be good or bad.

I hope this is sufficient to make it clear that a person down here cannot be part of a general assembly and church in heaven.

In fact, note this verse in I Thessalonians 2:14:

For ye, brethren, became followers of the churches of God which in Judaea are in Christ Jesus: for ye also have suffered like things of your own countrymen, even as they have of the Jews:

These *churches* (plural) are in Christ Jesus ... but they are in Judea! Paul did not call them a singular church although they were in Christ.

Now let's briefly study the few passages in Ephesians that speak of the church:

Ephesians 1:22 And hath put all things under his feet, and gave him to be the head over all things to the church,

No problem here. Jesus is the head of the church. This has no conflict with the church being a local body of baptized believers. This verse proves no universal church.

Ephesians 3:10 To the intent that now unto the principalities and powers in heavenly places might be known by the church the manifold wisdom of God,

Again, there is no problem here. God wants the church to have the wisdom of God. This proves no universal church.

Ephesians 3:21 Unto him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end. Amen.

Again, I see no problem here, nothing teaching that the church is universal or invisible. Jesus said in Matthew 16 that he would build his church and that the gates of hell would not prevail against it. The church of the Lord, *as an institution*, will survive, prevail, and be victorious until the end.

Here, Paul says that the church should glorify her Saviour throughout all ages. I am in full support of that. So, from the first church in Jerusalem to the church of the Laodiceans, each and every church should glorify Jesus Christ.

To force this verse to say the church is universal or invisible is not right. Paul is speaking of the church as *the church*. Since he is writing to the Ephesian church, he obviously includes them, but he is not speaking specifically of any one church.

The Old Testament speaks in similar terms at times. Let's take the word *man*. Job said, Yet man is born unto trouble, as the sparks fly upward (Job 5:7). Of what man is he speaking? Of any and all men. He is speaking of man in a generic sense. But no one would use this verse and claim there is a universal, invisible man! Neither would anyone say he is excluding any man.

Notice how Paul similarly used the word *man*: For the man is not of the woman; but the woman of the man (I Corinthians 11:8). Of what man or what woman is he speaking? None in particular, but any one of all men and women. No one with an honest purpose would contend this man or woman is universal or invisible. I know this sounds ridiculous, but that is how some read the verses in Ephesians.

To further this thought, Paul also uses the word *husband* and *wife* in this fashion. This leads us to the last passage in Ephesians that uses the word church. Read carefully the passage of Ephesians 5:23-32 below:

23 For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church: and he is the saviour of the body.

24 Therefore as the church is subject unto Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in every thing.

25 Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it;

26 That he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word,

27 That he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish.

28 So ought men to love their wives as their own bodies. He that loveth his wife loveth himself.

29 For no man ever yet hated his own flesh; but nourisheth and cherisheth it, even as the Lord the church:

30 For we are members of his body, of his flesh, and of his bones.

31 For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and shall be joined unto his wife, and they two shall be one flesh.

32 This is a great mystery: but I speak concerning Christ and the church.

Notice the use of the word church in similar fashion to that of husband and wife. It is a similar relationship. No one reading this passage would claim that Christ and his church are universal or invisible, any more than the husband and wife or universal or invisible.

Please pay close attention to these comments on the above passage:

- A Verse 23: The husband is the head of the wife. What husband? Each and every one. This does not mean the wife is a headless body walking around, and the husband is the head that pops on the wife's body. The word head and body are used in the sense of leadership and ownership. The church is an independent, physical, earthly "body" of baptized believers. Jesus Christ is her head – her leader and authority. He is also the Saviour of that body. The wife is an independent, physical, earthly body. Her husband is her head – her leader and authority.
- B Verse 25: Jesus loved the church, and gave himself for it. What church? Each and every one, excluding none.
- C Verse 26: Jesus sanctifies and cleanses the church by his word. How could he do that if the church is universal or invisible? He does this through the preaching of the word. And it is necessary to have physical preachers and physical hearers in the church, congregating in certain places and at certain times for this to happen. Look at the pattern in the New Testament. Look at Paul's writings.
- D Verse 29: Jesus nourishes and cherishes his church. This is similar to point C above.
- E Verse 30: As Adam said of Eve that she is "bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh" (Genesis 2:23), so the church, the bride of Christ, is unified with her Saviour. The church members are members of his body *as a purchased possession*, not as his actual bodily members. The members are likened to a physical body (eyes, hands, feet), but that is a figurative description. Paul is not saying we are Jesus actual eyes and feet.

Think about this. Eve was an independent physical body, but her body belonged to Adam. She was *his* possession. She was so close to him she was *his* bone and flesh. But that does not mean they were Siamese twins, or that Adam was a head with no body of his own. Eve's hands, feet, eyes, and mouth were her members, of her own independent body, but as her body belonged to Adam, he could say her members were his, as they were part of his (Eve's) body. This is not too difficult to understand. One simply needs to understand the relationship of the husband to the wife. And this passage is teaching that the relationship of the husband and the wife is the same as Jesus' relationship to his church. The two become one flesh, just as my wife and I are one flesh. But she is currently in a different location. That however, does not change the relationship. I Corinthians chapter seven explains this further. The body of the wife is her husbands, and vice-versa.

This concludes the passages in Ephesians. Still we see there is no teaching here that the church is universal or invisible. In further study we will look at how the word *body* is used, but we got a good start here.

Lastly, for this section, there are a couple places in Colossians that some may try to pass off as teaching for a universal church. As these are similar to Ephesians, let's look at them briefly.

18 And he is the head of the body, the church: who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead; that in all things he might have the preeminence.

24 Who now rejoice in my sufferings for you, and fill up that which is behind of the afflictions of Christ in my flesh for his body's sake, which is the church:

Colossians 1:18, 24.

I give the same answer here. The church is a *body* of baptized believers. That *body* of believers has Jesus as the head, and it is his possession. Therefore he is the head of the body, and it is *his* body. Nowhere should we read into this passage that the church is universal or invisible.

As a follow-up, Colossians chapter 4 further uses the word church, and by the same writer. These are obviously local assemblies. I would not expect the writer would tend to change the meaning of the word *church* in the same letter.

15 Salute the brethren which are in Laodicea, and Nymphas, and the church which is in his house.

16 And when this epistle is read among you, cause that it be read also in the church of the Laodiceans; and that ye likewise read the epistle from Laodicea.

Other than these verses in Hebrews, Ephesians, and Colossians, all other usage of the word *church* in the Bible refer clearly to local assemblies. And we see that in these three books mentioned that the church is also a local assembly, with nothing to substantiate an invisible church idea.

We have just evaluated every use of the word *church* with nothing teaching a church is invisible or universal. But I am open to discuss the subject should anyone see a verse differently.

5 Let us now look closer at the use of the word *Husband* in Ephesians 5:22-33:

22 Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord.

23 For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church: and he is the saviour of the body.

24 Therefore as the church is subject unto Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in every thing.

25 Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it;

26 That he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word,

27 That he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish.

28 So ought men to love their wives as their own bodies. He that loveth his wife loveth himself.

29 For no man ever yet hated his own flesh; but nourisheth and cherisheth it, even as the Lord the church:

30 For we are members of his body, of his flesh, and of his bones.

31 For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and shall be joined unto his wife, and they two shall be one flesh.

32 This is a great mystery: but I speak concerning Christ and the church.

33 Nevertheless let every one of you in particular so love his wife even as himself; and the wife see that she reverence her husband.

(v. 21) The Apostle Paul here compares the relationship of the married couple to the relationship of the church and Christ. First we see that the wife is supposed to submit to her husband. It is assumed the church is submitted to Christ. I contend that could only be accomplished in a local physical assembly. How else could the church submit to Christ, if that church is made up of all who are saved?

(v. 23) Secondly, as mentioned already, the head of the church is Christ. Similarly the head of the wife is the husband. No one with any sense would say there is a *universal wife* that submits to her husband. Paul is using the word *head* in the sense of leadership, possession (ownership), and responsibility. It is a relationship that is a permanent joining (v. 31). He is not speaking of a literal bodiless head that has been decapitated from its own body and transplanted onto the headless body of a female. This head and body relationship is seen clearly in a godly married couple. If you are married you understand this concept. If you are a husband, you refer to your mate as “my wife.” She is your (possession) body, and her body is (or should be) fully faithful to you alone. Otherwise, she would be called an adulteress.

The husband, as the head, assumes responsibility for his wife’s learning, providence, happiness, and safety. He supplies her every need, loves her, nourishes her, and his word keeps her clean.

(v. 25) Jesus, not only built his church, but he sacrificed his life for her. I personally believe a husband should protect his wife even unto death. He is to be sacrificed mainly for love, but if not for that, simply because of his duty as a husband. I think of the Titanic disaster, and how many men died. The husbands stayed aboard that sinking ship in order to allow room on the limited life boats – the stronger giving way so that the weaker could be saved – “women and children first!” was the cry.

(v. 26) By the preaching of the word of God the church is sanctified and cleansed. This can only be done as was patterned in the New Testament – God’s preachers teaching and preaching with the power of the Holy Ghost to a local assembly. Remember, the church did not have radio and TV in the first 1900 years of her existence! Few only had Bibles.

(v. 30, 31) The two become one flesh. This is a joining through a covenant. Both the woman and the man were born as babes in a family, but there came a time when they were joined together – when the wife joined her husband. This covenant of marriage is where the wife and husband promised to love, honor and (the wife) to obey. I believe this is why fundamental churches have their covenants with the Lord. They promise to love, honor and to obey the Lord Jesus Christ. This cannot be done as a universal body.

(v. 32) The marriage relationship of the Savior to the church is a mystery – something that was unknown until revealed. Just because this church relationship is a mystery, it does not automatically follow that the church is universal – that is non-sequitur reasoning.

(v. 33) Lastly, the wife is expected to reverence her husband. I should say also that the church should reverence the Lord Jesus Christ. This, to me, can only be done in the literal sense of the word church.

6 Let us look at the use of the word *body*. In the New Testament we find three uses of the word *body* in respect to the Lord Jesus Christ: First, it was used to define the *physical body* of the Lord as he walked on this earth. This body was scourged and nailed to a cross. Mary anointed this body in Matthew 26:12, Joseph wrapped it in clean linen in Matthew 27:59, and it was this body that was raised from the dead (John 2:19-21).

The second is a spiritual use of the word, represented by the bread of communion (see Matthew 26:26; Mark 14:22). As you read John 6:51-63, Jesus specifically says the words (eating his flesh and drinking his blood) are spirit (v. 63):

It is the spirit that quickeneth; the flesh profiteth nothing: the words that I speak unto you, they are spirit, and they are life.

Read also I Corinthians 10:16.

The third use of the word *body* is describing the church as the body of Christ. Paul uses this word to show unity by the similar relationship of the members of a church to the members of a physical body. Read Romans 12:4, 5:

4 For as we have many members in one body, and all members have not the same office:
5 So we, being many, are one body in Christ, and every one members one of another.

In I Corinthians 10:16, 17, Paul also relates the church body to the communion bread:

16 The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ?
The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ?
17 For we being many are one bread, and one body: for we are all partakers of that one bread.

In chapter 11 of the same book, Paul goes on to teach on the Lord's Supper (or communion), and then he moves on to say in chapter 12 the following instruction on the church:

12 For as the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body: so also is Christ.

13 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.

14 For the body is not one member, but many.

15 If the foot shall say, Because I am not the hand, I am not of the body; is it therefore not of the body?

16 And if the ear shall say, Because I am not the eye, I am not of the body; is it therefore not of the body?

17 If the whole body were an eye, where were the hearing? If the whole were hearing, where were the smelling?

18 But now hath God set the members every one of them in the body, as it hath pleased him.

19 And if they were all one member, where were the body?

20 But now are they many members, yet but one body.

21 And the eye cannot say unto the hand, I have no need of thee: nor again the head to the feet, I have no need of you.

22 Nay, much more those members of the body, which seem to be more feeble, are necessary:

23 And those members of the body, which we think to be less honourable, upon these we bestow more abundant honour; and our uncomely parts have more abundant comeliness.

24 For our comely parts have no need: but God hath tempered the body together, having given more abundant honour to that part which lacked:

25 That there should be no schism in the body; but that the members should have the same care one for another.

26 And whether one member suffer, all the members suffer with it; or one member be honoured, all the members rejoice with it.

27 Now ye are the body of Christ, and members in particular.

28 And God hath set some in the church, first apostles, secondarily prophets, thirdly teachers, after that miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, governments, diversities of tongues.

It is not uncommon for some people to read I Corinthians 12 and assume Paul is showing us there is some universal or invisible church, but the careful reading of the text shows this *cannot* be the case. Allow me to list these reasons:

- A. Notice for as the body is one (v. 12) – Paul is referring to a physical body as the example.
- B. It says, “For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body” (v. 13). I contend this is *water baptism* that adds to the church. I do not want to expand this study to the use of the word *baptism* in the New Testament, but the Spirit of God should be active in determining who is made a member of a church. That means the church people who accept the new member by baptism, and the individual uniting with the church, are both (or should be) led by the Spirit of God. It is in this manner that God sets “the members every one of them in the body, as it hath pleased him” (v. 18). To teach this is a Spiritual baptism into a universal church would teach either Calvinism (if one equates the universal church with salvation) or a two-stage operation of God in the sense that the Spirit saves, and then the Spirit baptizes into a universal church. You can't have it both ways. Think about this.

In addition, the members that are being set into this body have Spiritual gifts, which is a major point of the chapter. Paul goes on to say in chapter 14:12 that the Spirit gives these gifts to edify the church:

Even so ye, forasmuch as ye are zealous of spiritual gifts, seek that ye may excel to the edifying of the church.

C. In verse 25, Paul says there should be no schism in the body. If all believers were part of one universal church by God's design, that means the differences of Methodism, Presbyterianism, Pentecostalism, Fundamentalism, Arminianism, modernism, Antinomianism, Catholicism – and every other schism are in the same body of Christ. This to me makes a mockery of what Paul wrote, and causes reproach to the true body of Christ. Not only that, but Paul was writing to a local church when he speaks of no schism. This would be out of the control of the Corinthian body, or any other church, if Paul meant the application to go beyond a local body.

Can an honest man really contend that all the saved people are part of a universal body that has no schism? God tempers the body so that there would be no schisms (v. 24). Did God fail? Read the passage again carefully.

D. Then, in verse 26, Paul supplies the master-stroke to show this body is local: “And whether one member suffer, all the members suffer with it; or one member be honoured, all the members rejoice with it.” Common sense shows this must be a local body. How else could *all the members* know what is happening to any particular member?

It becomes obvious then, when one reads chapter 12 in its context, that Paul is saying that the local church there in Corinth should have unity and think of themselves as a singular body, belonging to Christ, and each member having the same care one for another.

7 Contrasting the kingdom of God and the kingdom of heaven – the use in Matthew's Gospel.

I have heard some say that the body of Christ, the universal church, started at Pentecost in Acts 2 as that was when the Holy Ghost came upon the disciples. This teaching is not correct. There is no scripture supporting this idea.

In John chapter 20 Jesus told his disciples to receive the Holy Ghost when he sent them out. In Acts 2 the Holy Ghost came upon them “baptizing” them in fulfillment of the Lord's promise in Acts 1:5. The Bible says in Acts 2:4 that they were “filled” with the Holy Ghost.

It says further in Acts 2:41 and 47 that the Lord “added” unto them. The “them” is the disciples in the church. If one would study the use of the word *disciple* in the New Testament, one would see this is a person walking a disciplined life following the Lord. The New Testament disciples are saved and baptized and following the way of Christ. All disciples are members of a church. Not all church members are disciples. Not all saved people are church members.

So let's briefly examine the difference between the two kingdoms. They are both fairly easy to understand, and one can remember their difference by thinking thus: The kingdom of God is a spiritual kingdom, just as God is a spirit; the kingdom of heaven is a physical kingdom, just as heaven is a physical place.

The kingdom of God is not now seen (Luke 17:20, 21) and is to be sought first (Luke 12:31). It is made up of saved people and has no tares among the wheat.

The Kingdom of God one day will be seen (Luke 22:16-30) and is righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost (Romans 14:17). Jesus says in John 3:5: Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.

On the other hand, the kingdom of Heaven *does* have tares among the wheat (Matthew 13:24-30). The phrase *kingdom of heaven* is only found in Matthew's gospel, although referred to in other places.

My personal understanding is that when we see Jesus Christ the kingdom of God will be united in the kingdom of heaven. For now, these two kingdoms have similarities and distinctions. Jesus is King over both.

Now, here is the important thing to note: In the Gospel of Matthew in the two passages where the word *church* is used (chapters 16 and 18), we find the teaching of Jesus continues with a mention of the kingdom of heaven, likening it to the church.

Consequently, an honest man would conclude the church is associated with the kingdom of heaven more so than with the kingdom of God.

To simplify my position, I say that the church is a *physical body of baptized believers who have covenanted together to obey the Lord's commandments*. The church is *in* the kingdom of heaven, and that kingdom is made up of professed disciples. Sister churches are independent of each other, but they both are part of the kingdom of heaven, and should both be subject to the laws of the King. Because I enter this kingdom by *professed* obedience to the gospel and baptism (the keys – Matthew 16:19), I can move from one church to another without baptism being required. However, all church membership changes should be done by God's leading and blessing, all parties concerned being in unity. At the same time, every New Testament church should respect and honor sister churches and their judgment of members (binding and loosing).

Because we have professed believers who are lost (tares) in this kingdom, we need to be wise as to who we let into our churches.

The kingdom of God is a spiritual kingdom made up of only saved persons. It is closely related to the family of God, one recognizing Jesus as King, and the other God as the Father by adoption.

This means that the difference between the *family of God* and the *church* causes confusion to some. Look at it this way: the family of God is made up of all saved. Those who congregate in a local assembly are the household of faith (Galatians 6:10); the church being referred to as the *house of God* (I Timothy 3:15; I Peter 4:17).

8 Origin of the universal invisible church concept.

During the first century A.D. the church in Jerusalem grew after the Lord's ascension by the power of God. In Acts chapter 2 we see three thousand were added to the church. Many of these disciples were scattered throughout Judea, Samaria, and to the uttermost parts of the earth. Barnabas a Saul worked with the church in Antioch, and they eventually were sent out of that church. During the three missionary journeys of the Apostle Paul, dozens of independent New Testament churches were started. By the close of the New Testament John sends letters to seven churches in Asia.

All these churches were local, independent bodies of baptized believers. These churches multiplied (as Titus was instructed by Paul to ordain elders in every city of Crete). For the next two hundred years independent local assemblies multiplied until they were everywhere.

In the fourth century the Roman government was weakening as a military power and under Constantine Rome positioned herself not only as a political and military empire, but also as a religious power. Constantine realized that through religion he could still control much of his empire. Consequently, he "Christianized" his armies, and made Christianity the state church. He forced all religions to confess him as head of the Church, but still allowed them to worship as they pleased. As long as the pagans confessed they were Christian (regardless of their faith and practice) and bowed to Constantine, all was good.

Many good churches also joined this Roman *katholicos* Church. *Katholicos* means universal. This was the beginning of the Roman Catholic Church. Constantine was its first pope (not Peter), and the Church claimed to be universal and physical.

However, true New Testament churches rejected Constantine's edicts and they would not submit to the state or join with it. As a result these true churches were severely persecuted.

This oppression of Rome continued for a thousand years. This was called the Dark Ages. Ignorance and superstition abounded. Faithful copies of the New Testament books were banned and burned. The inquisition prospered and caused many faithful believers to be martyred. Still, true believers in their true churches resisted Rome regardless of the cost.

Rome divided in 1054 in the Great Schism. Thus resulting in the Eastern (Greek) and Western (Latin) branches, with their respective patriarchs in Constantinople and Rome. This schism only further provoked the Roman Church to claim universal authority.

With the 16th century came the Protestant Reformation. Luther, Zwingli, Calvin, and Knox challenged the authority of the Pope and many people were liberated from the oppressive rule of Rome. They are called *Protestants*, because they protested against Rome.

Thank God for the Reformation, but understand four important facts of history: 1. Baptists were not part of the Reformation. They continued since Jesus walked the sunny shores of Galilee, since the beginning of the New Testament. They were the ones persecuted during the Dark Ages. They are not Protestant. 2. The Protestants come *out of Rome* – their origin is traced to the Great Whore, not Jesus. 3. These Protestants also persecuted the Baptists. *The reason*: It is the same reason the Catholics had – the Baptists denied that these religions were true New Testament churches. The Baptists rejected their authority and baptism. And for this reason they continued to suffer. 4. These Protestant churches morphed into a variety of non-denominational and non-defining Evangelical Christian churches that many today attend (not necessarily being members), not really knowing the origin of these churches.

But Protestants have two huge problems. First, they do not want to admit the true churches existed and continued under Baptist doctrine from the beginning of the New Testament. Only a few Protestants and Catholics in history were candid enough to confess that it is the Baptists who have continued since the beginning. For those well-known quotes, contact this author or read Carroll's *The Trail of Blood* book. He has done an excellent work documenting and tracing the Baptists from the beginning, through the Dark Ages, to our current place in history. To admit the Baptists are indeed the true churches *invalidate* their existence. They would be admitting their lack of authority.

The second huge problem Protestants have is that they trace their origin to the Roman Catholic Church. They are daughters of Rome. That is where they find their beginning and they are tainted with her doctrine.

When they protested and separated they claimed rightly that she was not the true church. But then how could they justify their own existence, seeing they came from her? They understood the promise of Jesus Christ that his church would endure to the end, but they would not accept the truth of the Baptists. So, how could these very large problems be reconciled?

Here we have the origin of the universal, invisible church concept. They were programmed by Rome that the church was universal and *visible* – Roman Catholicism itself. Since they knew that was wrong, they said the church must be universal and *invisible*, made up of those who confess Christ as Saviour. That false teaching would give them an answer to their problems. It made no difference as to the origin of their groups as that was unimportant. As long as the church made a profession of faith in Christ, they were in. And they could elevate themselves (or at least try) to the same authority of the true Baptists.

The Protestant teaching went on to say that contrary to what Rome claimed – that *Peter* is the rock on which Jesus built his church – that this rock upon which the Saviour built his church was actually the simple *confession* of Jesus Christ as the Son of God. That would let anybody in and give equal validity to their claim as being a church. In fact, they say, since the true church is universal and invisible, it really doesn't matter too much what the local assemblies believe, teach, do, or claim. Protestant and Evangelicals falsely teach that everyone who is a Christian is automatically a member of the *one true church* (same lingo the Romanists use), and whatever we do down here as a church is *secondary*. Believers, in error, then think they need only to be loyal to Christ; and it is really of little consequence as to what local assembly he attends, or not attend, or is a member of. Baptists say Jesus is that Rock on which his church is built.

Eight III Effects of Promoting the Universal (Invisible) Church Fallacy

Now, I shall proceed with the ill effects of promoting a universal church idea. People say it, teachers teach it, churches hold to it, books mention it, and many people believe it. But the truth is not the truth because it is popular or well-received. Often the truth goes contrary to what many people believe. And only by the Holy Bible do we know what absolute truth is. I have attempted to show why the church is a local body of believers. Allow me now to show why this teaching is damaging the cause of Christ. The teaching of the Universal Church Fallacy is damaging to the work of the Lord because:

1 It causes a confusion and false teaching of the truth of God.

Most importantly, the false teaching goes directly against the plain truth that God has given us. I have tried to do the due diligence to show the reader why there is no such thing as an invisible church. I mean, to say the church can be a local visible body and at other times it can be universal and all inclusive of every believer creates confusion. To which are we to be faithful? How do we serve through both? Who are the members? What is the practical benefit of receiving such a false teaching?

2 It by necessity elevates the invisible above over the local church, giving preeminence to a non-existent thing over that for which the Saviour gave his life.

By far, an honest man would admit the lion's share of verses in the New Testament that mention the church undoubtedly reference a local assembly. Only a few could be twisted to mean something else, which some men have tried to do. I have shown that those few places are really in reference to a local assembly.

But the natural response to the idea that there is a universal, invisible church is that a believer tends to respect and honor the invisible over the local. Why would anyone be faithful to any particular local body when he is actually part of the greater and grander church? And since all believers are part of this "invisible" church, whatever ministry they claim they are doing is worthy of financial support.

You can see why the idea is proffered – it is profitable to have no earthly authority over one's doing. A man can always appeal that his work is part of the greater universal church. No need for subjecting one's ministry to a local authoritative body. Who needs validation? Just *say* one is a Christian work and all is well.

3 It invalidates scriptural baptism.

If the New Testament church is only a local body of baptized believers, it behooves the believer to seek out the right church and submit himself scriptural baptism. A simple reading of the New Testament shows baptism is by immersion. It shows it was first performed by a Baptist. It shows later that the disciples of Jesus Christ did the work. And it shows the commandment to baptize was given by Christ to the eleven – the leadership of the church in Jerusalem.

In contrast, if every believer is part of a universal church, it matters not who baptizes. And, if every group has equal standing as part of a universal church, their baptism is just as good as the next. Excuse the pun, but the doctrine of Baptism is *watered-down* when one compares it to the "spiritual baptism into a universal church." Believing in a universal church means all groups have equal authority to baptize, and all their baptisms should be honored.

But Bible-believing Baptists are the true New Testament churches. It is their baptism only that is scriptural. And a true Baptist church has a trial of water to show her connection to the first Jerusalem church. For scriptural (not believer's) baptism she stands. For this she has been persecuted for two thousand years. Even today, she is scorned for this truth.

4 It validates false religions, making them equal to the true New Testament church.

With so many different Christian groups, how can they all be correct? How can they all have equal standing? If one is as good as the other, if the Pentecostals are just as good as the Nazarenes or the Methodists, why does it matter where a believer attends, or whether he attends at all? And if Baptists are equal to Evangelical groups, why do we remain separate? Why not just discard our difference and come together in unity without any substantial teaching of truth? Going further, why do we even need Baptists? Let's just go with whoever seems best (since Baptists are just as equal to the others), and therefore it is no problem if those Baptists just fade away.

But Bible-believing Baptists are the true New Testament churches. Besides the trail of water there is a trail of blood – the martyrdom of her faithful members for those two thousand years of persecution, of which thing the Saviour made mention.

5 It makes local church membership a non-Biblical concept.

For those who know the New Testament well, the only passage that can be used to teach there is such a thing as church membership shown in the scriptures is I Corinthians 12. If this chapter is supposed to be a discourse relating to the universal church, then there is no other teaching in the New Testament that warrants local church membership.

So, universal church teaching goes hand-in-hand with the teaching that there should be no local church membership. Let us all *just attend* wherever and whenever we please. There is no reason to be members anywhere or of any one church. This may sound pleasing to some, but not to me. I understand that chapter in I Corinthians to be referring to a local church, and thus teaching local church membership.

So, brethren, let's be honest and consistent. If you accept the universal church as true, you must also admit the New Testament teaches no such thing as a local church membership. We are all just floaters wandering from one group to another with no loyalty to anyone but Christ and his invisible church.

As for me, I will spew this out of my mouth as very distasteful.

And lastly, on this point, if there be no membership, in whose name do we put the billions of dollars of property that are used by the churches? I recently talked to a woman who attended a large congregation that met in a very large building on a very large complex. There was a lot of expensive property and buildings and equipment. She explained the church had no "members," for that was unscriptural. When I asked who owned the property, she happily answered, "God!" I rephrased the question: "In whose name is the property titled?" She answered that it was in the name of the seven elders who ran the church. I then asked, "And how does one become an elder?" She answered that the elders decide that. What a system! I then proceeded to inform her that our church property and possessions are owned by the membership, and each member has equal say in its disposition. She had no comment.

6 It removes the authority to teach, preach, and support missionary endeavors.

Where do missionaries go for support? Why does it matter what kind of churches they start? It matters not what they believe or teach, for there is no one to approve them or disapprove them.

At the same time, without local church authority, anyone anywhere can claim to be doing the work of God. Any difference in teaching is of no consequence, for we are all members of the same universal church and we should have no contention in the body. With no more apostles to straighten out what the believers are doing, we can just get together and praise and worship God. Let's not be divisive for that upsets the invisible body!

Following the way of the New Testament, churches are to teach, authorize, send, and support preachers as they go into all the world to preach the gospel.

Similarly, any organization, whether a school, a mission board, a benevolent work, etc.; should be authorized by a New Testament church to do the work. The church ensures the doctrine is correct according to the New Testament and vouchsafes the work. Should there be any faults, it is the sending church that binds and looses.

Without church authority anybody can do anything with impunity and claim it is the Lord's work. As a result, we have all kinds of organizations who people think are sound enough to do the Lord's work. These organizations are not churches, but they still teach and perpetuate incorrect doctrine. All this results in a massive amount of non-scriptural works claiming to be serving God or fulfilling the Gospel mandate.

In spite of all this outward activity claiming one thing or another, only one entity – the New Testament church – is authorized by Jesus Christ to carry on his work. That is shown clearly in Matthew 28:18-20; 1 Timothy 3:15; Acts 13:1-3; Acts 1:8, etc.

7 It promotes an unhealthy attitude against the local church and her authority.

Some believers feel unaccountable for their actions and will not submit to the judgment of the church. Paul instructed the church to withdraw from and have no fellowship with brothers who are disobedient to certain commandments of God. Paul wished certain men were cut off from the churches in Galatia for troubling the churches by teaching perverted gospels.

Paul wanted misbehaving brethren to be ashamed when they would not repent, and restored to fellowship when they did repent.

But with church authority removed, and other churches willing to receive anyone and everyone, why would an erring brother need to repent? This unhealthy behavior is promoted with the idea of a universal church. One can ignore the churches judgments and still be part of the "greater church." Who in a universal church will bind and loose judgment upon unrepentant brethren?

If the universal church is made up of all believers, then a misbehaving brother could never be separated from "the church." But if there be no universal church, the brother is alone, with no fellowship he is a part of.

8 It robs laborers of Jesus Christ of their rightful reward, because they are not building on the foundation of the apostles.

This, perhaps, is the most critical negative effect of promoting a universal church teaching: the loss of rewards for labors not done through a New Testament church. In 1 Corinthians 3 you find Paul wrote the following:

5 Who then is Paul, and who is Apollos, but ministers by whom ye believed, even as the Lord gave to every man?

6 I have planted, Apollos watered; but God gave the increase.

7 So then neither is he that planteth any thing, neither he that watereth; but God that giveth the increase.

8 Now he that planteth and he that watereth are one: and every man shall receive his own reward according to his own labour.

9 For we are labourers together with God: ye are God's husbandry, ye are God's building.

10 According to the grace of God which is given unto me, as a wise masterbuilder, I have laid the foundation, and another buildeth thereon. But let every man take heed how he buildeth thereupon.

11 For other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ.

12 Now if any man build upon this foundation gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, stubble;

13 Every man's work shall be made manifest: for the day shall declare it, because it shall be revealed by fire; and the fire shall try every man's work of what sort it is.
14 If any man's work abide which he hath built thereupon, he shall receive a reward.
15 If any man's work shall be burned, he shall suffer loss: but he himself shall be saved; yet so as by fire.

Verse 14 is very clear: "If any man's work abide which he hath built thereupon, he shall receive a reward" (my emphasis). All these non-church-authorized works have their reward here. The eternal reward goes to those built on the foundation of the Jesus Christ; which I contend is the "church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth" (1 Timothy 3:15). The church is the Lord's body. He is the head of that body. He authorized and sent that body, and gave her promises that the gates of hell shall not prevail against her (Matthew 16:18).

The church is what the Lord built, and so it is required that a laborer of Jesus Christ work through this church. Thus did Paul and all the laborers in the New Testament. And who is better than these?

Saying there is a universal or invisible church will cause some to do their own work independent of a local church, thinking they are being "led by God." This robs them of the rewards they would ordinarily earn if the work was done rightly through a good church.

John wrote this in 2 John 1:7:

7 For many deceivers are entered into the world, who confess not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh. This is a deceiver and an antichrist.
8 Look to yourselves, that we lose not those things which we have wrought, but that we receive a full reward.
9 Whosoever transgresseth, and abideth not in the doctrine of Christ, hath not God. He that abideth in the doctrine of Christ, he hath both the Father and the Son.
10 If there come any unto you, and bring not this doctrine, receive him not into your house, neither bid him God speed:
11 For he that biddeth him God speed is partaker of his evil deeds.

Look to yourselves, that you lose not the things you have wrought. How? By entertaining false teaching as to the true nature of our Saviour. And how can one know what these para-church organizations truly teach and believe? Many of them try not to be too definite in what they claim to believe as this can alienate supporters. Be careful with whom you labor. Bidding God speed to a false prophet also makes you a partaker of his evil deeds.

And, finishing up, look at what our Saviour said to the angel of the church in Philadelphia (Revelation 3:10, 11):

10 Because thou hast kept the word of my patience, I also will keep thee from the hour of temptation, which shall come upon all the world, to try them that dwell upon the earth.
11 Behold, I come quickly: hold that fast which thou hast, that no man take thy crown.

Do not let any man take your crown. That would be my summation and exhortation to the reader. Be careful to put Jesus first in all things. Honor the church Jesus built and died for. Labor on this earth through that church as a faithful soldier of Jesus Christ.

Conclusion.

I hope this paper has been a help to you. I have not yet found a detailed study showing why some say the church is universal or invisible. If I could locate one I would try to answer it. What I normally find is the simple statement claiming that such a thing is so, with a handful of verses thrown in without context. I would be happy to see a valid paper written on the subject in favor of that view. I should like to see how this false idea is constructed using only

scripture. If anyone know of one, or is willing to prepare one, my contact information can be found through our church website.

May God bless your labors for him in this world.

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