

The Case Against the Universal Invisible Church

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But they are together brutish and foolish: the stock is a doctrine of vanities.-Jeremiah 10:8.

I shall use this verse as a basis for exposing one of the most cherished and prevailing heresies of our day. The belief in a universal invisible church is truly a doctrine of vanities.

Among Protestants and not a few Baptists there prevails the concept of a universal invisible church. It is almost universally assumed by Protestant commentators, with an ax to grind, and by misinformed Baptists, with their noses on the Protestant grindstone, that there is such a monstrous thing.

This utterly untenable and unscriptural view is plainly stated on page 1304 of the Scofield Reference Bible which says: "The true church, composed of the whole number of regenerated persons from Pentecost to the

first resurrection(I Cor. 15:52), united together to Christ by the baptism of the Holy Spirit(I Cor. 12:12-13), in the body of Christ which He is the Head(Eph. 1:22-23)." Its essence can further been seen in article VI of a statement adopted by the Southern Baptist Convention in 1962, which reads: "The New Testament also speaks of the church as the body of Christ which includes all of the redeemed of all ages."

The view that there is in the Scriptures an invisible church which is to be distinguished from the local church is quite common among "Fundamentalists" and "New Evangelical" Protestants and many Baptists. It is this erroneous idea that I purpose to thoroughly expose in this message.

The universal invisible church theory has A Detestable Origin.

This belief was first promulgated by Jovinian in the fourth century. After this, very little is heard of this dogma until the Reformation. When Martin Luther withdrew from the Catholic church and started his own church, he found himself in a dilemma. He had been teaching that there was only one church: now he had started another. So he invented the idea of a universal invisible church. The other Reformers adopted Luther's neo-orthodoxy. Thus it can be seen that in the main this theory is a Protestant Pedobaptist concept of the church which was conceived by the

Protestant Reformers to combat the equally erroneous view of a universal visible church.

Baptists, throughout their history, have always stood for a literal assembly of immersed believers. A study of their confessions of faith and their congregational life prove that they have courageously and persistently emphasized the church to be a local, visible body of baptized believers. This is their greatest contribution to Christian history in the field of Ecclesiology.

But it cannot be denied that some Baptists were influenced by Pedobaptists during the Reformation, and in consequence, many American Baptists never got back to the local church until the New Hampshire Confession in 1833. Within the past half-century there has come a resurgence of emphasis upon a universal invisible church. This theory is the very heart of the Ecumenical movement. The present Bapto-Catholic movement existing among some Baptists originated some years ago among liberal, supposed-to-be, Baptist scholars who tarried too long in Pedobaptist schools.

This doctrine of vanities Confuses The Church
and Kingdom.

The advocates of the invisible church theory contend that the church and the kingdom are one and the same. But such a dogma is not founded upon an honest

interpretation of the Scriptures, but upon a figment of their imagination. Such a doctrine exists only in the mind of a heretic.

The church and the kingdom are not one and the same. The kingdom includes all the saved on earth at any given time(Col. 1:13;Jhn. 3:3,5;Mrk. 10:13-15), while the church is composed of baptized believers. One enters the kingdom by the new birth, yet one enters the church by profession of faith and baptism(Acts. 2:41). One's place in the kingdom is eternally secure(Jhn 5:24;II Tim. 4:18), but, he can be excluded from a church(I Cor. 1:2). Lost people cannot enter the kingdom(Jhn 3:3), yet they can enter the church as Judas did. The kingdom is a monarchy over which Christ is the King; the churches are democracies over which Christ is the Head. The dominant use of the word "kingdom" is singular in the New Testament. The dominant use of the word "church" is singular and plural, but, both emphasize many.

This theory Makes Two Bodies and Two Baptisms.

A popular view concerning I Corinthians 12:13 teaches that by a Holy Spirit baptism all believers are put into the universal invisible church. They would have us believe that saved people receive two different kinds of baptism--one in water and another in the Holy Spirit. Of course, this would put believers in two different kinds of churches--one an invisible, spiritual,

universal church and the other a particular local church in a particular place. The glaring inconsistency of such a concept is seen in Ephesians 4:4-5 where Paul say's that there is "one body" and "one baptism." If the one body here is the mystical body, the invisible church, then there is no local body. But, if the body here refers to the church in the institutional sense, then there is no such thing as the mystical body of Christ. If the baptism in Ephesians 4:5 is Holy Spirit baptism, then water baptism is not needed. But, if water baptism is meant, then Holy Spirit baptism is not needed. Which horn of the dilemma will the Scofieldites take?

Those who hold the invisible church theory treat lightly the place of believers baptism in the realm of obedience and minimize the importance of church membership. Undue emphasis upon it has led to non-denominationalism of the worst kind. Baptists have never been encouraged and aided in being better and stronger Baptists by advocating the view of an invisible church. It leads one to look lightly and indifferently upon the errors of non-Baptists. If the Devil could get all Christians to believe the church is some kind of universal thing, he would soon destroy Christ's church.

The invisible church theory makes Church Membership and Being In Christ Synonymous.

The Bible tells us that the church is Christ's body, and this is true of every local New Testament church. The Corinthian church was Christ's body. I Corinthians 12:27 says:

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

Christ is also the head of the church abstractly(in thought), generically(as to kind) and institutionally(as to a mental concept of it). By Christ the Head of the church I understand that each church is subject to Christ's authority and rule. But the church is not literally Christ's body, nor is Christ literally the head of any church in the literal sense of a human beings head and body are joined together. To literalize the metaphors, body and head, is gross materialism.

Each church is under the authority of the Lord Jesus Christ as a human body is under the authority of its head. But to enter one of these bodies is not to be in Christ, for the body as such is not literally Christ's nor a part of Christ. The false apostles of II Peter and Revelation were in the churches, but, they were not in Christ. The thief on the cross was in Christ, although he was not in the church. The saints of the Old Testament were in Christ, but they were not in the church.

The proponents of this theory sometimes teach that there is no salvation outside the church. Thus they hold a view similar to the Campbellites concerning the church. They defy the church until they would render John 3:16 this way: "For God so loved the world, that he planted the church in the world, that whosoever unites with it should not perish, but have everlasting life."

The Bible teaches that the church is the body of Christ, and it also teaches that Christ is the savior of the body (Eph. 5:23). Hence, He and His body, the church, are not one and the same, seeing He does not save himself!

The concept of it is contrary to the primary and literal meaning of the term "church" and its predominant use in the New Testament.

The Greek word "ekklesia" which is usually translated "church" is found one hundred and fifteen times in the New Testament. Ninety-two times of the hundred and fifteen the word was the common meaning of assembly. Generally all scholars accept the ninety-two uses as meaning assembly. But the remaining twenty-three times it occurs is the ground of a theological debate. Some contend that the word takes on a new meaning in these remaining twenty-three occurrences. They twist and turn the word "ekklesia" to mean a universal invisible church. This new definition of

"ekklesia" is contrary to the literal meaning of the word.

From history it is known that the Greeks were organized into city-states. Each city had its own government. The power to govern was entrusted to certain qualified citizens of the city. These were called out for legislative assemblies. These called out assemblies were called "the Ekklesia." The term referred to a body of persons having definite qualifications, assembled to carry out certain organized aims on democratic principles.

Christ and His Apostles did not coin the word "ekklesia." It was already in use when they on the scene, and they merely carried its etymological meaning over into Christian literature. A careful examination of "ekklesia" before the New Testament in the Classical Greek and the Septuagint reveals that the word meant only "assembly." It had no other meaning at this time. The word could not have ever referred to a never assembled group, yet the invisible church has never assembled. If I can give a word a new meaning so as to fit my creed when the common meaning makes good sense, I can change the entire Bible to suit my fancy and the next person can do the same!

I maintain that "ekklesia" is used twenty-three times abstractly, not referring to any particular organization at any definite place, but to the church as an institution. When a concrete application of the word is made, it must be to a particular local church somewhere.

Permit me to illustrate what is meant by the abstract and concrete uses of a word. I might say that the automobile is a great invention. I have used the word "automobile" abstractly. I refer to no particular automobile. Now if I want to use the word concretely, I would say that Joe Doe has a beautiful black Ford automobile. But if I knew as little about automobiles as some religious leaders know about the church, I might try to make you believe that there is only one big invisible automobile. One would not entertain such an idea about automobiles, but when it comes to religion many forsake all reason and believe the silliest nonsense.

The invisible church theory Is Without Scriptural Warrant.

This theory is well name the invisible church theory. It is certainly an invisible church to the New Testament, for their is no reference, implication, suggestion or hint in the Scriptures of it. You will search in vain in the Bible for a world-wide organization called the church. Always and everywhere in the Bible a church

is a local body found in a given place. The so-called proof text of the advocates of this theory prove everything but their fanciful theory.

One of the chief proof texts is Ephesians 5:23, which reads: For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is head of the Church.

The Apostle does not here introduce a new teaching about some invisible church. It would be exactly as sensible to argue from this verse for the existence of a universal invisible husband and a universal invisible wife as to argue for a universal invisible church. One is just as Scriptural as the other.

Look at the verse: The husband is the head of the wife. Does this mean that there is a great big universal wife who includes all the little wives? Our opponents would say, no. But, then they turn around and say that the rest of the verse, Christ is the head of the church, means that there is an universal invisible church. But they ignore the word "even" which means in the same way. Our opponents must believe in an universal invisible wife and a universal invisible church to be consistent.

Another passage often misconstrued which refers to the church is I Corinthians 12:13:

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.

This passage means no more than in the realm and environment of and under the leadership of the one Holy Spirit the Corinthian believers, and all others who have united with particular church, were baptized into their respective churches. There is no reference to the baptism of the Holy Spirit here. The baptism of the Holy Spirit was a special and manifestive phenomena during apostolic times only. There are only four accounts of it in the New Testament. It was demonstrated on Pentecost at Jerusalem among the Jews(Acts 2:1-8); at Samaria among Samaritans and Jews(Acts 8:14-24); at Caesarea to Cornelius' household and other Gentiles(Acts 10:14-48;11:15-17); and at Ephesus presumably upon more Gentiles(Acts 19:6). After this account, there is no record in the New Testament of such a baptism. Believers are "born of the Spirit" once and are "filled with the Spirit" many times today, but none are "baptized with the Spirit" in this age.

This doctrine of vanities Is Utterly Impractical In Promoting And Propagating Christianity In This Present Gospel Age.

Since the organization of the Antioch congregation, and the scattering of the Jerusalem congregation, the emphasis in Christianity has been upon "churches." This is the only way in which the congregational life of the Christian faith can be expressed. Even the most pronounce advocates of the invisible church are forced by stark realities to organize multitudes of congregations to meet the needs of their constituencies.

If there be a universal invisible church its membership is known only to God. It has never met, assembled, nor congregated anywhere at any time; that is, the supposed assembly has never assembled. Its fellowship is imaginary. It has no ordinances whatsoever, for these are for local churches. It has no organized existence. It has and exercises no earthly authority. It has no periods of worship, hence it never prays, praises, or preaches. It has no mission in the world; no message for the world. It has no house of worship. It cannot be opposed or persecuted. It cannot carry out the great commission. It takes up no collection nor pays its pastor, since it has none. It never sends out missionaries to preach the gospel. It cannot receive nor exercise discipline. It never holds any revival meetings nor witnesses to anyone about Christ.

I would not want to attend an invisible church, would you? Imagine sitting in an invisible pew, singing out of an invisible songbook, and hearing an invisible preacher preach about the invisible church! Brethren, imagine pastoring an invisible church, preaching to an invisible congregation, and drawing an invisible pastor's salary! Those who can believe in such nonsense should be committed to an institution for the mentally enfeebled.

To say the least of it, I must say it is an inconceivable conception, and un-supposable supposition and and unspeakable superstition. Christians do no need it for it can do them no good. God does not need it for it cannot literally manifest His glory. The world does not need it for it cannot do the world any good, as it preaches the gospel neither by precept nor practice, nor does it perform any service. In the words of Edward T. Hiscox: "It represents a conception of the mind, having no real existence in time or place, and is not a historical fact, being only an ideal multitude without organization, without action, and without corporate being."