Ecclesiology: Nature of the Church

ORIGIN AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE
"UNIVERSAL INVISIBLE CHURCH" CONCEPT

by Thomas M. Strouse, Ph.D.

THE PROBLEM

The expression "universal, invisible church" has a widespread usage in contemporary Christendom. For instance, Roman Catholicism admits to an invisible aspect of the church; however, they insist that the invisible church does not precede the visible church.(1) Moreover, Protestants are bound to the concept of the "universal, invisible church" because it is expressly stated in the Westminster Confession.(2) Furthermore, this concept has permeated Baptist theology and practice. For instance, John Broadus, the great Baptist preacher and scholar, refers to this concept in his discussion of Matthew 16:18 ff.(3) Baptists also incorporate this concept in their practice by engaging in ecumenicalism. Moreover, some Baptists assert the unscriptural idea of the Holy Spirit baptizing believers into the "universal, invisible Body of Christ." This concept of "church" not only undermines the theology and practice of the local New Testament church found in Baptist ecclesiology, but it also undermines the Baptist heritage to which Baptists should adhere.

THE ORIGIN OF THE CONCEPT "UNIVERSAL, VISIBLE CHURCH"

Since there is no Biblical reference for the term "universal, invisible church,"(4) the obvious question arises, "from where did the terminology come?" To answer this question it must be recognized that this terminology is the result of the development of ecclesiology dating back to the second century. Shortly after the termination of the last Apostles the term and concept "catholic (universal) church" made inroads into the ecclesiology of the Ante-Nicean Fathers. The espousal of Apostolic succession by Irenaeus, and the hierarchical development in ecclesiology caused by the over-emphasis on and the unscriptural idea of the bishopric led to the fallacious concept. Concerning the latter, Cyprian stressed that the bishops of local churches were the esse (very existence) of the church and not merely for bene esse (well being) of the church.(5) Furthermore, he stated that sole support for and obedience to the bishop was necessary to be in the church.(6) Thus, these misconceptions led to the concept of the "catholic" or "universal, visible church." This concept was set to terms by

Ignatius, who was the first to use "catholic" with "church."(7) In fact, when he wrote his letter to the church in Smyrna he declared that "wherever Jesus Christ is, there is the catholic church." Moreover, in 155 in a letter from the church in Smyrna describing Polycarp's martyrdom, the expression "catholic" was used.(8)

Therefore, the answer to the aforementioned question is obvious. Some of the early Fathers applied their misconceptions of Scripture to their ecclesiology and caused error to spread. So with the advancement of ecclesiastical hierarchicalism arose the need to redefine "church." Ekklesia no longer meant only local assemblies, but the word was also inclusive of the concept of Catholicity. And this concept continued to flourish with the help of certain expressions such as Cyprian's extra nulla salus ecclesiam (outside the church there is no salvation). This helped to establish the connecting link between soteriology and ecclesiology in the thinking of the early Church Fathers. By the end of the 4th century the concept of "catholic church" was firmly fixed in ecclesiastical writings and practice. Thus water baptism incorporated the individual into the visible "universal body of Christ," soteriologically and ecclesiologically.

THE ORIGIN OF THE CONCEPT "UNIVERSAL, INVISIBLE CHURCH"

However, not until Augustine, did ecclesiology diverge even further from Scripture. Augustine, the "great theologian of the Western Church," who was greatly influenced by neo-Platonism, encountered a controversy with the Donatists. The Donatists criticized the "visible church" because of its lack of a pure membership, asking if the church was actually split into two churches, the mixed church of the present and the pure church of the future.(9) In seeing the Donatists' legitimate criticism of the impure "visible church," Augustine was forced to couple his concept of the predestination of the elect with his Cyprianic concept of the "catholic church."(10) Thus the "church" was the communio sanctorum, likened by Augustine unto an enclosed garden equivalent to "the certain predestinated number of saints."(11) Berkhof sums up Augustine's position by stating the "real unity of the saints and therefore of the church is an invisible one."(12)

His theological ingenuity had a two-fold effect. It not only helped Augustine to neatly sidestep the Donatists' criticism, but it also was the source for later ecclesiological error. Although Augustine did not use the term "invisible" with "catholic church," he did originate the concept of "invisible, catholic church" out of theological necessity. So by the 5th century there were at least two different concepts to "church." To the "catholic," who held to baptismal regeneration and therefore unregenerate church membership, the true church was universal and also invisible. However, to the

Donatists, who demanded and practiced believer's baptism and pure church membership, the true church was the local church practicing discipline and other New Testament concepts.

REFORMERS' CONCEPT OF THE "UNIVERSAL, DIVISIBLE CHURCH"

During the pre-Reformation era of Christianity, the concept of the "church" was at least two-fold. The Anabaptists held to their local church concept while the Catholics held to their "universal (catholic) church" concept. Moreover, the roots to the "invisible catholic church" originated in Augustine; however, his concept was not necessary for further advancement until the Reformation. When Luther broke from the "Catholic Church" he kept some of their doctrines, but he also naturally dropped other of their doctrines. Accordingly, then, Luther denied that the "Catholic Church" was essentially external, but he asserted that it was to be found in the sphere of the universal.(13) So to Luther, the "invisible, catholic church" was included in the external church through which God dispenses His grace. However, the Reformed took another step away from New Testament ecclesiology and maintained that the "invisible, catholic church" went beyond the bounds of the "visible, catholic church." Thus the ecclesia universalis includes all who are saved, whether in the external church or not.

The concept "universal, invisible church" has its origin in the Church Fathers. Moreover, the "established church" has contributed to its development through the ages, diverging further and further from New Testament ecclesiology. It can be readily seen that the concept of "catholic, visible church" led to "catholic, invisible church." The Roman Catholics had their visible, external ecclesiology, and the Protestants had their invisible, internal ecclesiology, while the Anabaptists had their pure, visible ecclesiology. Therefore, Baptists should avoid incorporating into their local church ecclesiology Protestant ecclesiology which was a theological necessity against Roman Catholic ecclesiology and based upon the Platonic philosophy of Augustine, who in fact used his ecclesiology to undermine the local church ecclesiology of the ancestors of the Baptists!

ENDNOTES:

1   Louis Berkhof, Systematic Theology (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1976), p. 563.

2   Berkhof, p.564.

3   John A. Broadus, Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew, ed. Alvah Hovey

(Valley Forge, Pa.: The American Baptist Publishing Soc., 1886), pp. 358-9.

4 The strongest Biblical reference for "catholic church" is based on the textual variant found in Acts 9:31, "the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria..." However, theology which is built upon textual variants is weak indeed.

5 Kenneth S. Latourette, A History of Christianity (N.Y.: Harper and Row, Publ., 1953), p. 183.

6 Henry C. Vedder, A Short History of the Baptists (Valley Forge: The Judson Press, 1969), p. 54.

7 Clyde C. Smith, "Catholic," New Bible Dictionary, ed. J. D. Douglas (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publ. Co., 1974), p. 203.

8 Latourette, p. 130.

9 Reinhold Seeberg, Text-Book of the History of Doctrines, trans. Charles E. Hay, (Grand Rapids: Bakers Book House, 1977), 1,325.

10 Louis Berkhof, The History of Christian Doctrines (Grand Rapids: Baker's Book House. 1975), p. 229.

11 It is interesting to note, Seeberg even admits the difficulty of comprehending the visible and invisible nature of the church. He states: "From a critical point of view, the Donatistic objection is not without justification, for the church of the sacraments and the church of grace can only with the greatest difficulty be intellectually harmonized .. . We may, accordingly, speak of a two-fold, or even a three-fold, definition of the church in Augustine," p. 326.

12 Berkhof, p. 229.

13 Berkhof, p. 236.