

The False Theory Of The Universal Church

Origin of Universal Church Theory.

During the time between the NT apostles and the council of Nicea in AD 325, several developments occurred that would negatively impact NT ecclesiology. T. Strouse points out two such negative influences of the Apostolic fathers.¹ First, was the influence of Platonic philosophy upon the Apostolic fathers (Patristics). Secondly, “was the effort of the Patristics to look to the OT for NT practices and superimpose the OT *sacral* society upon the NT church.”² Concerning the former, Strouse sheds light on the Platonic philosophy that influenced the Patristics,

Plato (429-347 BC) determined that reality was in the universal, or Oversoul, and that it was imperfectly manifested in the physical world as shadows on a cave wall. In his thinking, each man had a ‘soul,’ which was part of the universal Oversoul...His mind/body dualism and universal/particular contrasts had a major impact on this famous student Aristotle...Plato’s emphasis on the universal, in contrast with the particular, led to universalism or ‘*catholicity*’...it was the rational outworking of pantheism.³

The influence of this Platonic thinking on the Patristics is clearly seen by their eisegesis⁴ of *catholicity* upon the Scriptures, particularly the doctrine of ecclesiology.

Thus, the theory of *catholicity* (universalism) was born even prior to the earthly ministry of Christ in the days of Plato. No doubt, Christ knew very well of the *catholicity* mindset of many in the heavily influenced Greco-Roman world. Could

¹ A term given to Christian writers who lived near the times of the Apostles. Some of these writings...are used to determine beliefs, conditions, and practices of the early churches following the passing of the Apostles. David Cloud, “Apostolic Fathers” *Way of Life Encyclopedia of the Bible & Christianity*, 4th ed. (Port Huron: Way of Life Literature, 2002), p. 34.

² T. Strouse, *I Will Build My Church*, p. 53.

³ Ibid. p. 54.

⁴ The practice of forcing an idea or thought into a given passage of Scripture. Opposite of exegesis.

it be that this is the very reason Christ chose the *narrow* word *ekklesia* that was also entrenched in the minds of the Greek speaking world and attached the personal pronoun “My” *ekkklesia*, so as to firmly place in the minds of His listeners the *local*, non-universal, idea of His NEW institution? This author believes the testimony of the NT would answer in the affirmative to the above question.

The Origin of the Universal, VISIBLE Church

A needful question to the Bible reader should be, “Where did the *concept* and the *term* ‘Universal Church’ originate, since it is a non-biblical term found nowhere in the Scriptures?” As previously stated, the term “catholic church” began to make inroads into Christian thinking and writings around the 2nd century, during the time of the Patristics. Ignatius (AD 30-107) is the person credited with combining the two terms, “catholic” (meaning universal) and “church.” Coxe quotes Ignatius who said, “wherever Jesus Christ is, there is the Catholic Church.”⁵ These corrupt Apostolic fathers began early in the 2nd century, perhaps even late 1st century, to make real headway with this false notion of a “Catholic *Visible Church*.” Also, laying the groundwork for this false notion of a Universal, *Visible Church* were statements made by Patricians like Ignatius, as he stated, “apart from these [Deacons, Bishop, Presbyters], there is no church,”⁶ and also Irenaeus’ statement in defense of apostolic succession⁷ where he states, “For with this church [Rome], because of its position of leadership and authority, must needs agree every church, that is, the faithful everywhere; for in her the apostolic tradition has always been preserved by the faithful from all parts.”⁸ In other words, Irenaeus was stating that every church had

⁵ A. Cleveland Coxe, ed. *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publ. Co., 1981), p. 90.

⁶ Coxe, p. 67.

⁷ The belief that the authority and position of the Apostles has been transferred from generation to generation to church leaders...The N.T. does not teach, though, that the office or authority of the Apostles was ever passed from the original man to others. The false idea of apostolic succession is a man-made, rather than a biblical, doctrine. The authority to build and govern local churches...comes directly from the N.T. Scriptures and from the Holy Spirit. Cloud, “Apostolic Succession,” *Way of Life Encyclopedia*, p. 34.

⁸ Henry Bettenson, *Documents of the Christian Church* (NY: Oxford University Press, 1957), pp. 96,97.

to be in agreement with the Church at Rome in order to be a “true” church. One can begin to see the development of the hierarchy within the Roman Church taking hold early in the 2nd century, with the unbiblical emphasis of the bishopric. This is also illustrated in a statement of Cyprian arguing for the absolute necessity of a Bishop to constitute a true church when he referred to them as the *esse* (very existence) of a church, not merely for *bene esse* (well being) of that church.⁹ He did not stop there, he went on to say also that total support of the bishop and obedience to the bishop was a must in order to remain in the church.¹⁰ It should be noted that the strongest *alleged* biblical teaching for the Catholic *Visible* Church is based on a textual variant¹¹ found in Acts 9:31 which would read, “the **church** (singular) throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria...” However, this is not the reading of the Textus Receptus¹² (or the Received Text) which has the preserved reading, “the churches (plural) rest throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria...” Acts 9:31 then is not a proof text for the territorial church as the proponents of the Catholic *Visible* Church would have everyone believe.¹³

It was the Ecumenical Council of Nicea in AD 325, called by Constantine, the Emperor of Rome, that “affirmed and projected as its creed the idea of a ‘Catholic’ World Church.”¹⁴ Constantine’s wedding of the State (Rome) and the Church (church of Rome) made public this movement (Sacral Society/State Religion) of the Roman Catholic Church (Universal *Visible* Church).

As A. J. Kirkland states, “the reason they [Catholic Church fathers] adopted this name was to deceive the unlearned and make them believe that they had to be in,

⁹ Kenneth S. Latourette, *A History of Christianity* (N.Y.: Harper and Row, Publ., 1953), p.183.

¹⁰ Henry C. Vedder, *A Short History of the Baptists* (Valley Forge: The Judson Press, 1969), p. 54.

¹¹ Textual variant =

¹² This *Received Text* upon which the AV of 1611– the King James Version is translated.

¹³ Those that support the use of the Critical text in claiming that the Critical Text does not differ from the any Received Text doctrine are simply not correct. The doctrine of ecclesiology is erroneously effected in Acts 9:31.

¹⁴ Cross, p. 23.

or a member of, the Catholic or universal church to be saved.”¹⁵ He goes on to say also that one must remember that when the Catholic Church was being established that there were very few people that were literate. The entire NT, although already canonized relatively early in the 2nd century most likely, may not have been readily available to each congregation since this was before the time of the printing press. This made it somewhat easy for the Catholic Church to deceive the people. As most often was the case, the educated and literate of the day were the clergy. Rome was in power and burned all the Bibles they could get their hands on, and killed thousands of true believers in order to establish her false system. She forced many out of fear of persecution to join this false church. For almost a thousand years this continued. However, there were numbers of small assemblies, for the most part obscure, that kept, guarded, and proclaimed the truth of the Scriptures. Baptist history records that these individuals in these assemblies were persecuted severely, many were killed, for the truth.¹⁶

Therefore, to answer the question at the beginning of this section, “Where did the concept of and the term ‘Universal Church’ come from” is clear. A number of “Church Fathers” forced their Platonic philosophy and theological grids upon the ecclesiology of Scripture, which caused their erroneous ecclesiastical error to infiltrate Christian thinking.¹⁷ Strouse adds to this,

With the advancement of ecclesiastical hierarchicalism arose the need to re-define ‘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 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,”

¹⁵ A. J. Kirkland, *The New Testament Church: A Local Body* (Texarkana, Bogard Press, 1956), p. 6.

¹⁶ Kirkland, pp. 6,7.

¹⁷ This author does realize that the Church Fathers error was not limited to ecclesiology, but the focus of this section is the focus upon their error in the doctrine of the church.

soteriologically and ecclesiologically.¹⁸

Perhaps one to the greatest tragedies that ever befell Christianity under the guise of a blessing was Constantine's Council of Nicea. For through the efforts of this council was born the Roman Catholic Church with its universal, *Visible* church theory, and then later the universal, *Invisible* church theory through her Protestant daughter.¹⁹

The Origin of the Universal, INVISIBLE Church

By the end of the 4th century, the concept of the Universal, *Visible* Church was widespread. The erroneous writing and teaching of the Church Fathers was clearly the established thought and ecclesiastical practice of most. However, it was not until Augustine (AD 354-430) that biblical ecclesiology would further move away from Scripture. Augustine was confronted by a group of believers known as the Donatists. The Donatists were critical of the "visible church" because of its lack of a pure membership. The controversy arose by these Donatists asking if the church consisted of two churches, the mixed church²⁰ of the present and the pure membership of the future. Augustine realized this presented a problem, so he was forced to combine his concept of the predestination of the elect with his Visible, Catholic Church mindset.²¹ In other words, he was saying that *within* the *Visible*, Catholic Church is the elect, which makes up the *Invisible* or "True Church." This "True Church" was invisible to man, but visible to God. Thus, the concept of the *Invisible* Church was born. So by the end of the 5th century there was a dual concept of the term "church" for those that held to baptismal regeneration. There was the *Visible*, Universal Church, and there was the *Invisible*, Universal Church. However, to the

¹⁸ Thomas Strouse, An essay written in 1979 entitled, "*The Origin And Development Of The Concept Universal, Invisible Church.*"

¹⁹ Cross, p. 22.

²⁰ Remember the Visible, Catholic Church taught that outside The Church there was no salvation. How did one get inside The Church? Through Baptism! But what about the infant or young child that dies? Therefore, the practice of infant baptism was born. Personal faith (regeneration) was not required prior to baptism, therefore, the membership was not pure.

²¹ Louis Berkhof, *The History of Christian Doctrines* (Grand Rapids: Baker's Book House, 1975), p. 229.

Donatists, and other assemblies that held to biblical ecclesiology, that taught BELIEVER'S immersion as the prerequisite for church membership, the true church was a local assembly comprised of regenerated, immersed individuals banded together for the purpose of fulfilling the Great Commission.

However, it was not Augustine who popularized the Universal, *Invisible* Church concept. In fact, Augustine did not even use the term "invisible" with "catholic church." It was not until the early 16th century, in the days of the Reformation, that Augustine's concept of the *Invisible*, Catholic Church became "necessary" for further development.

Because of Martin Luther's opposition of the *Visible*, Catholic Church, and his subsequent excommunication in 1521, he was forced to adopt Augustine's concept of the *Invisible* Catholic Church. Luther rightfully called into question the authority of the papal office, but erroneously attributed their authority to all believers. Luther then promoted the concept of what he called the "*temporal estate*" as it was applied to the common members of the *visible* Catholic Church from prince to peasant. He then contrasted this "*temporal estate*" with what he called the "*spiritual estate*" (higher authority) which he taught belonged exclusively to the Pope, priestes and monks. It was upon this precept that the catholic elders based their authority. While Luther was correct to question their authority based upon their office alone, he erred when he did not find fault in their deviation from the authority of the Word of God as a basis for any believer's authority. Then Luther forced the interpretation of I Corinthians 12:13 as a reference to all believers being united in the "*spiritual estate*" and thereby having co-equal authority. Luther stated his position this way,

There has been a fiction by which the Pope, bishops, priests, and monks are called the *spiritual estate*; princes, lords, artisans, and peasants are the *temporal estate*. This is an artful lie and hypocritical invention, but let no one be made afraid by it, and that for this reason: that all Christians are truly of the *spiritual estate*, and there is no difference among them, save of office. As St. Paul says (I Cor. xii), we are all one body, though each member does its own work so as to serve the others. This is because we have one baptism, one Gospel, one faith, and are all Christians alike: for baptism, Gospel, faith, these alone make spiritual and Christian people.²²

²² Henry Bettenson, *Documents of the Christian Church* (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 193.

This *spiritual estate* conveniently provided an abstract entity wherein Luther was able to find protection from the papal authority that sought to discipline him through the visible Catholic Church. However, Luther argued that since he was a member of the supposed *spiritual estate* (invisible church), the visible church had limited authority.

There is little support for the erroneous teaching of a *spiritual church* prior to Luther's argument that was borne out of his desperation. However, since the time that Luther established this new teaching concerning "church," many theologians have willfully accepted the platonic idea of a *true church* existing in the *spiritual* realm. Erickson admits:

At this point some people might accuse theologians of adopting a Platonic perspective whereby local churches are regarded as instantiations or concrete particular manifestations of the pure Form, the abstract Idea, of church. Note, however, that theologians are not reading this concept into the Bible. The concept is actually present in the thought of Paul and Luke; it is not introduced by their interpreters. There is on this one point a genuine parallel between biblical thought and that of Plato. This is neither good nor bad, and should not be considered an indication of Platonic influence upon the Bible. It is simply fact.²³

There is no doubt that Erickson and many others may willfully accept this platonic mindset and intertwine it with their own theology, they still have no Scriptural support outside of wrestling words and whole passages from their clearly intended context. There simply is no basis for such an erroneous teaching in the inspired written words of either Paul or Luke. These passages, some of which have been mentioned already while others will be addressed later in this book, in which they wrestle the context away, clearly have the local church in view not some mystical, spiritual church. In I Corinthians, Paul was clearly writing to a disunited local church of which he desired that they would be unified in the matters that he discussed in his epistle to them. This unity was to take place within their immediate, local body. It is ridiculous and obviously contrary to the context of Paul's epistle to force the teaching that a platonic (mystical, invisible) institution was in view in Paul's

²³ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1992), p. 1033.

first epistle to the Corinthian church.

Leonard Verduin states that when Luther broke free from the *Visible*, Catholic Church he “stopped short of a full reformation...[and] bogged down halfway between Catholicism and the New Testament Church organization.”²⁴ He discarded some of the Visible Church’s doctrine, but he still held to much of its doctrine (ie: Sacral Society, infant Baptism, and others). Luther denied that the “True Church” was essentially external, but it was to be found in the universal.²⁵ Thus, to Luther the “True Church” was the *Invisible*, Catholic Church which was within the *Visible* (external) Church through which God dispenses His grace. This faulty view of the church led to even further removal of biblical teaching, as the reformers were forced to embrace the concept that the *Invisible*, Catholic Church went even beyond the *Visible*, Catholic Church. Thus, the Universal, Invisible Church included *all who were saved*, whether in a visible church or not.

Local, NT Churches Fought The Unbiblical Universal, Invisible Church Theory

The *nature* of the church is what separated NT churches from the state church. Assemblies, like the aforementioned Donatists, refused to go along with the merging of the Christ’s *ekklesia* with the state (Rome),²⁶ and as Verduin states, “it was the question of the nature of the church...that formed the heart of the controversy between the Catholics and the Donatists.”²⁷ Cross also states that the biblical teaching of the church simply as a local congregation was not limited to the Donatists prior to the Reformation, but consistently held by those called “Baptists,” who were labeled “heretics” by those who held the Catholic (Universal) concept.²⁸

It is the assertion of this author that there have *always* been bodies of believers (churches) down through the centuries that have held to and defended the biblical NT teaching of Christ’s *ekklesia* as a local, autonomous assembly entered into only after believer’s immersion. It is also beyond question that for centuries before the

²⁴ Leonard Verduin, *The Reformers and Their Stepchildren* (1964), p. 38.

²⁵ Berkof, p. 236.

²⁶ I. K. Cross, *The Battle for Baptist History* (Columbus, Ga: Brentwood Christian Press, 1990), p. 18.

²⁷ Leonard Verduin, *The Reformers and Their Stepchildren*, pp. 32,33.

²⁸ Cross, *The Battle for Baptist History*, p. 19.

Reformation there were bodies of Christians under various names, who were persecuted because of their Scriptural belief in a regenerated, baptized, local church membership. Scripture predicts the existence of biblical NT assemblies from the earthly ministry of Christ until the rapture (Matt. 16:18; Matt. 28:20; Eph. 3:21).

It is important to understand that Baptists traditionally have held to the view that the Scriptures teach only a local church ecclesiology.²⁹ Also, that these local churches are comprised only of a group of *immersed believers* actively engaged in exalting *Jesus Christ* and *His Word*, in practicing the two New Testament *ordinances* and in carrying out the *Great Commission*.

Baptists of the 21st century who are accepting this Protestant concept of the church are, as Cross states, “putting new wine in old bottles, and the bottles are bursting and spilling much Baptist truth never to be recovered.”³⁰ This author believes that it is important to note that truth is not determined by Baptists, but by the Word of God. However, this author does believe that the historical Baptists, not always known by the name Baptists, were biblical in their ecclesiology.

The dual concept, that Christ has two kinds of churches (local and universal) is the popular thinking of today. To illustrate the thinking of many within Christianity this author will quote Dr. John Gill, a well known leader in Baptist history. In his “A Body of Doctrinal and Practical Divinity,” he is quoted as saying of the word *ekklesia* that it is “always used for church, [and] signifies an assembly called and met together....The church may be considered as a particular assembly of saints meeting together in one place for religious worship.” If he stopped at this point, he would be biblical in his teaching. However, he goes on to restate the unbiblical, yet accepted, concept of the church by the mass of Christian educators, theologians, commentators, and even preachers of the Word. He adds, “There is another sense in which the church may be said to be Catholic, or general, as it may consist of such in any age, and in several parts of the world, who have true faith in Christ, and hold him to be head, and are baptized by one Spirit into one body;...all such who are truly partakers of his grace; though they have not made an open profession of him in a formal

²⁹ For a thorough examination of Baptist beliefs concerning ecclesiology see Thomas M. Strouse, *I Will Build My Church* (Va. Beach, Va.: Tabernacle Baptist Theological Press, 1995). I. K. Cross, *The Battle for Baptist History* (Columbus, Ga: Brentwood Christian Press, 1990). J. T. Christian, *A History of the Baptists*, 2 Vols. (Texarkana: Baptist Sunday School Committee, 1922). William R. Estep, *The Anabaptist Story* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1963).

³⁰ Cross, *The Battle for Baptist History*, p. 18.

manner.”³¹ His dual concept of Christ’s *ekklesia* is clear. This is the concept that is so widely accepted and taught today throughout most of Christianity, including Baptist churches, colleges, seminaries, ministries, and books. Thus, they teach that there is the *local* concept of *ekklesia*. This is the church that is visible. This is the church that has bishops, deacons, meets for worship, practices the two ordinances, and so on. Then there is the “True Church.” This is the Universal, *Invisible* Church. It is comprised of every believer, in every place, which is entered into at the moment of regeneration by the baptism of the Holy Spirit (I Cor. 12:13).

A Confusion Of Biblical Terms

The change from the idea of the individual, self-governing church to the Universal, Invisible Church had its origin in one of the most colossal blunders of all Christian history – that of making *ekklesia* (church) identical with *patria* (family) and *basileia* (kingdom). The reader must understand that the Universal, Invisible Church proponents confuse the “family of God”³² and the “kingdom of God”³³ with the NT “church of God.”³⁴ Concerning the unbiblical merging of *basileia* (kingdom) with *ekklesia* (church), Cross quotes Maiden, who stated, “So far from being identical, the difference between ‘church’ and ‘kingdom’ is so great as to require that they be contrasted rather than compared.”³⁵ Likewise, Cross also deals with this confusion of terms by stating,

³¹ John Gill, *A Body of Doctrinal and Practical Divinity* (1769-70, from 1984 reprint), pp. 853, 854.

³² The “family of God” would include all saints (OT and NT saints), both in heaven and on earth (Eph. 3:14, 15).

³³ The “kingdom of God” consists of every believer that is regenerated by the new birth (John 3:3-5). It is universal and invisible according to Luke 17:20,21. It could be termed the realm of regeneration. This would not include the OT saints, but only NT saints that have been born again. These would be included in the “family of God.”

³⁴ The “church of God” is the saved, immersed, candlestick (NT church) member (Acts 20:28; I Cor. 1:2; et al.). This would not include disobedient believers who have not followed the Lord in believer’s baptism and in joining a visible, local church. However, the saved, immersed, church member would be included in both the “family of God” and the “kingdom of God.”

³⁵ Cross, *The Church: Local or Universal*, p. 22.

The issue that has separated Baptists from Protestants through the centuries has been the *nature of the church*. Baptists have held that the church is always local in nature, and a visible body, while Protestants, not able to completely free themselves from the influence of their Roman mother, hold that the true church is universal in nature, and therefore invisible. They are not able to distinguish between the kingdom of God into which all believers are born, and the church of God which Jesus called out as a distinct body to serve as the executive of the kingdom.³⁶

Tragically, the Universal, Invisible Church theory has been widely accepted by NT churches throughout the world. This false concept of the church has been woven into the thinking of Christ's churches as though it were an unchallenged biblical teaching. But is this the case? Does the Bible teach this Universal, Invisible Church theory? Can it be supported from a contextual and exegetical handling of the Word of God? The answer is emphatically, NO! In fact, when the supposed passages of Scripture that teach this dual concept of the church are examined exegetically and within its contextual flow, it becomes clear that the only biblical teaching of the NT church is the *local* church.

³⁶ Cross, *Battle for Baptist History*, p. 7.