

The Church of Jesus Christ

Local vs. Universal

Baptists have historically been a “church” people. The gathering of God’s people together to accomplish His purposes has been a focus since the book of *The Acts of the Apostles* traced the history and development of early churches in the Middle East, Asia and Europe.

With the development of various strains of Christianity came changes in doctrine. One of the areas in which doctrine has changed to accommodate this development is *ecclesiology*. Depending upon one’s denominational allegiance one might try to find in the Scriptures support for the belief in a universal visible church, a universal invisible church, a local church or a combination of these church views. There is an interrelationship between some specific aspects of one’s view of ecclesiology, soteriology and pneumatology which necessarily stems from the above-mentioned views of the church.

Church, Baptism, Salvation & the Holy Spirit

Baptism places one into membership in the church (Acts 2:41; I Corinthians 12:13). What this means depends upon what you perceive the church to be and what you perceive baptism to be. The Catholics believe that water baptism places one into the universal visible church. This is equivalent to salvation. Thus the mixing of ecclesiology and soteriology. The Protestants constructed a view which had the church as a universal invisible body of all the saved regardless of their visible church affiliation. To some this church was entered upon their water baptism. To others, due to their view of salvation, necessity changed the baptism from water baptism to Spirit baptism. The keystone of the arch of this view is the belief that I Corinthians 12:13 refers to Spirit baptism into a universal body. Therefore you still have church membership by baptism — Spirit baptism into the universal church (salvation). It is obvious that the term *body of Christ* came to mean the universal invisible church.

Baptists historically have not mixed ecclesiology with soteriology. Salvation by grace through faith makes one a member of the family of God and the kingdom of God (John 1:12; Galatians 3:26; John 3:3) but never the church. Membership in the church is not a salvation doctrine. An already saved person becomes a member of the church at the point of baptism (I Corinthians 12:13).

In examining the historic Baptist position regarding this issue consider the following:

Things to Consider

1. Origin and Development of the Universal Invisible Church Concept

I believe that the doctrines of the universal visible church (Catholic view) and the universal invisible church (Protestant/interdenominational view) are an historical development which is not biblical. They are a departure from the simple New

Testament church. For a study of how this developed see the attached article, *The Origin and Development of the Concept “Universal Invisible Church”*, by Dr. Thomas Strouse. Dr. Strouse wrote this article while teaching at the *Maranatha Graduate School of Theology*. He now is teaches at the *Tabernacle Baptist Theological Seminary* in Virginia Beach, Virginia.

2. John Bunyan’s view of I Corinthians 12:13

John Bunyan, 17th century English Baptist, in an interesting explanation of his belief that water baptism was necessary for church membership, used I Corinthians 12:13 as his proof. In his statement he mentioned that the belief that this passage dealt with Spirit baptism was a recent notion not held by any of those in his fellowship. See the attached quote from *The Riches of John Bunyan*.

3. *The Illustrated Book of All Religions, 1893*

This book is a compilation of the doctrinal beliefs of various denominations “**from their own publications, and viewed from their own standpoint.**” Thus, it presents what Baptists believed about themselves. In supporting their view of the perpetuity of water baptism the book listed nine arguments which the Baptists presented. Argument #9 stated that water baptism could not be superceded by Spirit baptism because “There is now, in the Scriptural sense of the words, no baptism of the Spirit.” “[W]e have no warrant to expect the Scriptural baptism of the Spirit in the present day.” Why? Because, as they said, the baptism of the Spirit was an historic event fulfilled on the day of Pentecost and at the house of Cornelius. It has no ongoing fulfillment.

NOTE: If I Corinthians 12:13 teaches what Baptists historically believed (water baptism into the body of Christ, or, church

membership) then the body of Christ into which we are baptized must be the local church! Therefore the “church which is His body” referred to in Ephesians and Colossians is the local church.

See the attached copy of the above-referenced quotes.

4. Southern Baptist Doctrinal Statement 1925 vs. 1963

Joe Odle, in his book *Why I Am a Baptist*, addresses the current difference of opinion among Baptists regarding the nature of the church — one kind of church or two kinds of churches (local only or local and universal). In dealing with the issue he noted that the Southern Baptist Convention’s official 1925 statement of faith defined the church as a local body only but that in 1963 the convention’s adopted statement added the following: “The New Testament speaks also of the church as the body of Christ which includes all the redeemed of all ages.” See the attached from Odle’s book.

Why have Baptists changed their doctrine of the church from a local church only to two churches? At the risk of being accused of excessive simplicity, I suggest that more and more Baptist preachers are receiving their theological training at interdenominational schools which present protestant theology and ignore Baptist theology. Unfortunately, even in many Baptist colleges today, the professors who are teaching theology earned their degrees at interdenominational schools and are ignorant of historic Baptist theology regarding ecclesiology. We Baptists have read Protestant theology books and listened to the interdenominationalists teach for so long that we do not even recognize Baptist theology regarding the church. When we hear it we fail to discern the practical difference such theology makes.

5. Practical Implications

Isn’t the issue one of semantics? After all, when an historic Baptist speaks of the “family of God” and a protestant / interdenominationalist speaks of the “body of Christ” or the “universal invisible church” aren’t they talking about the same group of people? The answer is YES. “Well then,” you ask, “what’s the big deal?” Consider the following implications of the Catholic/Protestant view of the universal church:

1) Doctrine of Salvation

The problem of blending ecclesiology and soteriology continues to send multitudes to hell trusting in their baptism and church membership.

2) Doctrine of Church Unity

Church unity, an often repeated theme in the New Testament church epistles, is impossible without ecumenicalism.

3) Doctrine of the Church

Much New Testament doctrine regarding the practical function of the church is contained in the passages dealing with the church as a body (the body of Christ). If those passages are talking about the universal invisible church (family of God) then we have little direct teaching regarding how the local church is to operate.

4) Christian Responsibility

Our responsibility to serve God with our spiritual gifts is outlined in passages which always attach that service to the body of Christ (Romans 12; I Corinthians 12; Ephesians 4). If the body of Christ is a universal invisible body then Christians are to exercise their spiritual gifts in service to God anywhere within the universal church. This partly explains the development of parachurch organizations and the freedom some Christians feel in living and serving outside any church.

What you believe about the nature of the church will effect how you interpret key church passages. How you interpret those passages will effect how Christians live in service to God. *Doctrine does make a difference.*

Above-referenced attachments:

1. *The Origin and Development of the Concept “Universal Invisible Church”* by Dr. Thomas Strousse
2. *The Riches of John Bunyan*
3. *The Illustrated Book of All Religions*, 1893
4. *Why I Am a Baptist* by Joe Odle

In addition to the above-referenced attachments the following are attached:

1. *Doctrine of the Church, Lecture #1* by Dr. Mike Aylestock
2. *In Christ or A Part of His Body?* By Dr. Mike Aylestock
3. *Baptized By One Spirit Into One Body* by Forrest Keener
4. *Baptism, Indwelling and Filling* by Dr. Mike Aylestock
5. *The Baptism of the Holy Spirit* by Dr. I.K. Cross