

# THE NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH - A LOCAL BODY

by Aj Kirkland

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*Kirkland's ecclesiological study arguing that the New Testament church is a local, visible assembly rather than a universal invisible institution. He distinguishes between being born into God's family and being added to the church through faith and baptism.*

6 Chapters

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## 00-Forword

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### The New Testament Church A Local Body

FOREWORD In preparing this work, there has been but one purpose in view. This has been to establish the Scriptural teaching that the New Testament Church is in nature a local assembly or institution. The first church at Jerusalem is used as an example and it is shown to have been a local assembly, and it is also shown that all other churches of the Bible were essentially the same in nature.

There are several figures of speech in the New Testament which refer to the church institution which, at a first glance, may seem to give it a universal character. But when correctly understood, these figures refer to local assemblies or a local assembly. All these figures of speech have not been discussed, but the figure of the Bride of Christ is set forth and shown to refer to a local assembly, and other figures of speech are brought in and set forth as parallel to it. This doctrine is distinctly Baptist doctrine. It is freely admitted that most of Christendom rejects it, but it is commended to the honest investigation of every lover of Divine Truth as a Bible doctrine. This study is prepared at the request of the Baptist Sunday School Committee of the American Baptist Association and is sent forth with a prayer that it may bless many in bringing them to a fuller and richer understanding and appreciation of the blood-bought church of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. The Author, A.D. 1956

## 01-False Notions About The Church

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### The New Testament Church A Local Body

#### CHAPTER 1 False Notions About the Church

Introduction. In this discussion the author proposes to discuss five thoughts: (1) False notions about the church; (2) The meaning of the word "church" proves it is a local institution; (3) The churches in the Bible were local assemblies or congregations; and (4) The Bible tells of churches, plural; and (5) The bride of Christ a local assembly.

Paul writing to the church at Ephesus by inspiration of God said, "Unto him (that is unto God) be glory in the church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end" (Ephesians 3:21).

Surely that in which God is to be glorified in every age or generation and throughout the age eternal should be a matter of utmost importance to us. The eternal purpose of God in man is that God should be glorified in him. And every child of God is commanded that whatsoever he eats, drinks or does, he is to do all to the glory of God. Since this is true, it is impossible for one to fully glorify God and be well pleasing unto Him, unless he does it through the church of our Lord and Savior. All this makes it plain that we cannot take our Lord's church lightly. If we miss the true church, we shall miss the earthly means through which God says we shall glorify Him.

#### False Notions

There is no other Bible subject that men so completely disregard as that of the church. Many say that one is as good as another. People organize every kind of religious institution and call it a church. They seem to think they can do as well as the Lord and what they set up is as good in the sight of God as the church Christ established. For that reason we have all sorts of churches with different laws, different governments and different teachings, all claiming to be the Lord's church. If we had no Bible to tell us better, if we would do a little common sense thinking, we would realize that such a condition cannot represent the facts. For our Lord set up only one church, and every church which can rightly claim to be of the Lord must be patterned after the one He established.

Another mistaken idea is the notion that the church is a sort of invisible, spiritual something that all of God's children are automatically in the moment they are saved. Perhaps more people have this idea than any other. People talk about all of God's children being in "The Big Church," or, "The Spiritual Church," and they try to explain all the different kinds of churches by saying they are just branches of the "Big Church." Some call it "The Invisible Church," and others call it "The Universal Church." The truth is there is no such idea in the Bible. Therefore such an idea is of the mind or notion of man. He just gets the notion fixed in his mind, and once a false notion becomes fixed, no matter how wrong it is, it is hard for one to get rid of it.

False Notion Based on Ignorance This false notion of the universal or invisible church, no doubt, had its beginning with the Catholic Church. The word Catholic means universal. The reason they adopted this name was to deceive the unlearned and make them believe that they had to be in, or

a member of, the Catholic or universal church to be saved. We must remember that when the Catholic Church was established there were very few people who could read. There were no Bibles then except a few hand-written copies, because there were no printing presses, and no printed books or newspapers of any kind. All this was before the printing press was invented. That made it easy for the Catholics to deceive the people, for all the people knew was what they were told by word of mouth. Rome was in power and burned almost all the Bibles the true church had and killed millions of true Christians in order to establish her false system. She forced many people, through fear and persecution to come to this false church. For more than a thousand years Rome almost succeeded, but there were a few people who kept the truth alive, while this false church, with its false notion spread over the world. The Reformation Churches

After the Bible was translated into the English language, and after the printing press was invented and the common people came to read and understand the Scriptures, people soon saw that many teachings of the Catholic Church were wrong. They began to try to reform it. This is called "The Age of Reformation." A lot of men honestly thought they could reform the Catholic Church. But every one of them, and all who followed them, were excluded from the Catholic Church, and their reformation movements came to be new churches. They did not reform the Catholic Church at all, but they were just turned out and set up new churches. The Wesley Brothers tried to reform the Anglican Church, but they were turned out and started the Methodist Church. Knox and Calvin tried to reform the Catholic Church, but were turned out and started the Presbyterian Church. Luther tried to reform the Catholic Church in Germany, but he was turned out and started the Lutheran Church. The King of England and all the Catholic Church of England were turned out because the king wanted to divorce the queen. They started the Church of England. In the United States, the Church of England became the Episcopalian Church. Alexander Campbell and others tried to reform the Presbyterian and Baptist Churches, but they were turned out and started the Campbellite Church, sometimes called Christian Church, sometimes called Disciples of Christ, and sometimes called the Church of Christ.

All these reformation churches held to some of the teachings of their mother, the Catholic Church. Most of them held to the doctrine of salvation by works. Most of them held to the doctrine of infant baptism and the practice of sprinkling or pouring instead of the Bible way of immersion, and every one of them held to the doctrine of the universal, invisible church. Since that time many new churches, too many to mention here, have started, and almost all of them have this same false notion of a universal, invisible church. This shows how a false idea can fasten itself in the minds of people and influence them. When the King James Version (Authorized Version, and this is the Bible which most of us have in our homes) was translated or written in the English language, those who wrote it were commanded by the king not to translate it or write it in such a way as to destroy the established doctrines of the Church of England. Since the Church of England believed in the universal or invisible church doctrine, the translators had to find a word for church that would keep its real meaning covered up. If they had translated its real meaning, every time you find the word church, it would not be church at all, but it would be assembly. Who ever heard of a universal assembly? Who ever heard of an invisible assembly? That is why so many people are deceived today. They do not know that the word church means assembly. The Church Not the Family of God

Some people have the idea that the family of God and the church of Christ are the same. They think when one is saved and becomes a child of God, he is in the church because he is saved. This is another false notion and nothing can be further from the truth. When one is saved, he is born into the family of God. We get into a family by birth or adoption. Every believer is born of God. "Whosoever believeth that Jesus is the Christ is born of God" (1 John 5:1). But every believer is not in the church. One gets into a church by obeying the commandments laid down in God's Word and this is by openly acknowledging Christ (receiving the Word), and after he is baptized he is added to the church. "Then they that gladly received his word were baptized: and the same day there added unto them about three thousand souls" (Acts 2:41).

Notice that they received the Word first, after that they were baptized, then, they were added to the church. This verse tells us the results of Peter's sermon. He preached Christ and told them to repent. When they received the Word, they believed on Jesus, trusting Him for salvation. When they believed, they were born into the family of God. Then they were baptized and added to the church. They were added to the church at Jerusalem. Therefore we see that we are born into the family of God, but we are added to the church of Christ.

There are two facts that almost all Christians agree upon that forever settle the question and prove that the family of God is not the church. (1) The family began in the garden of Eden and God has had children ever since that time. (2) The New Testament Church was founded by Christ and belongs to Him. God has had a family for six thousand years; Christ has had His church a little less than two thousand years. Therefore the family of God is four thousand years older than the church of Christ. And they cannot possibly be the same. There is another thing to consider: unsaved people can get into the church, but unsaved people cannot get into the family. Judas was in the church, but Jesus knew that he was a devil.

We should be glad that people can be saved without being in the church, for there are many false churches, and many people who are led into false churches would be lost if one had to be in the true church to be saved. But some will ask, "If I do not have to be in the church to be saved, then why worry about the church? What difference does it make?" The answer is simple. The Bible says, "Unto him be glory in the church"-not out of it. If he glorifies God, he must do it God's way. Therefore one should do his best to find the true church of our Lord and get in it for service, and for the glory of God.

## 02-A Called Out Assembly

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### The New Testament Church A Local Body

CHAPTER 2 The Word Church Means a Called Out Assembly To understand the word which is translated church, we must go back to the original language in which the Bible was written. Many of our readers could not read or pronounce it in its original form, for it was spoken and written in the Greek language. But we can put it in its English form and tell you how it was used in that language and you can easily see its meaning. Here is the way it looks and is spelled in its English form, Ekklesia. It is a combination of two Greek words: Ek means out and Kaleo means call and this is the verb form. When we put the two together and write the noun form of it, it is Ekklesia and means a called out assembly. This is the way it is always used in the Greek language. It means an assembly of people who are called out for a purpose. If called out for a political purpose, it would then be a political assembly, or church; if called out for a social purpose, it would be a social assembly, or church.

We see a political, or anti-religious ekklesia, or church, called out in Acts 19:25-41. Verse 25 tells us that they were called together; verse 32 tells us that it was an assembly (ekklesia, church), but here was an ekklesia (assembly, church) that was called to work against Paul who had come to preach the gospel to the heathen city, Ephesus. This is not a religious church (assembly), but a plotting church meeting to stir up the people to destroy Paul. Now in verse 39, we find where the town clerk warned the people and told them that this matter should be settled in lawful assembly (ekklesia, church). This reveals that a called out people, for holding court and trying criminals, is called a lawful assembly (ekklesia, church). Therefore we see that the words ekklesia, assembly, and church all mean the same thing when we let them mean what God intended for them to mean. We note further about this meeting in verse 41. There it is said that this unlawful, political assembly was dismissed. That means that the assembly broke up and the people went home. In Acts 7:38 we see that the children of Israel in the wilderness were called a church: "This is he, that was in the church (ekklesia) in the wilderness with the angel which spake to him in the mount Sina, and with our fathers: who received the lively oracles to give unto us." The church (assembly) in the wilderness was not the New Testament Church, but that great assembly had been called out of Egypt and was assembled there, and for that reason God called it an ekklesia, that is a called out assembly, or a church.

Now an assembly is a congregation of people located at a place. It is impossible to have a universal, invisible congregation, but it is just as possible to have a universal assembly or congregation as it is to have a universal or invisible church. So when we come to see the meaning of the word church, we can see that it is impossible for the church to be anything else but a local congregation or assembly. The Meaning of the Church Institution A church or assembly formed by Christ has officers and laws to execute or carry out His orders. He gave it the ordinances of baptism, the Lord's Supper and the commission to preach the gospel to the whole world (Matthew 28:18-20). The commission was to go, make other disciples, baptize them and teach them to

observe all things whatsoever He had commanded them. So the local assembly was to become a perpetual institution and was to continue to the end of the age. It would be perpetuated as an institution, through other institutions just like the first one, unto the end of the age. As an institution it could be dismissed and reassembled as often as necessary, and as the Lord commanded, in carrying out its work. When it dismisses or disassembles, it then exists as an institution or organization, though it is not in an actual assembly all the time.

Sometimes the Bible speaks of the church in the sense of an institution or organization and, when it does so, it speaks of no particular church, but it refers to any church or every church. Ephesians 3:21 : "Unto him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end." Paul is not talking about any particular church but he means any true church and every true church. It could be the church at Ephesus or the church at Corinth, or the church at Philippi, or the church at Antioch, and every true church.

He simply means that God wants us to glorify Him in a true church institution or organization somewhere, and it does not mean there is just one big, universal or invisible church. In this same way the Bible refers to the church institution in Ephesians 5:25 : "Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it."

Here Paul is speaking to the church at Ephesus, but when Jesus died, the only church that was in existence, was the one at Jerusalem. Did Jesus die for the church at Ephesus? He most certainly did, even though it had not been organized, just like He died for the whole human race. You, Dear Reader, had not been born when Jesus died; but He died for you because He died for the whole human race, and you belong to the human race. For that reason it embraced you, though you had not been born. So, when Jesus died for that first church institution, He died for every church that should ever come out of it and exist as an institution or organization of baptized believers, keeping house for Him. But when Paul told husbands to love their wives as Christ loved the church, he did not mean that there was just one big, universal church any more than he meant that there was just one big, universal husband, or one big, universal wife. He meant that every husband should love his wife, or that any husband should love his wife, just like Christ loves any and every true church. In Ephesians 5:23, we have a similar passage. Here it says, "The husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church: and he is the savior of the body." If this passage means that there is just one big church and Christ is the head of it, then, it would also mean that there is just one big wife with just one big husband as her head. The same thing would be true where it says Christ is the Savior of the body. (The church is sometimes called the body of Christ as it is here.) We can better understand the meaning of this verse if we ask some questions and find the answers to them.

What husband is the head of the wife? Any husband is the head of his wife. Every husband is the head of his wife.

What wife is the husband the head of? His own wife, of course.

Christ is the head of which church? Any true church, and every true church. The one at Ephesus, the one at Jerusalem, the one at Antioch, the one at Corinth, the one at Philippi and every other one in the world.

Thus when the Bible speaks of the church in the institutional sense, calling it, "the church," "the body," "the house of God," "the church of God," "the bride," "the temple of God," it is talking about the church institution or organization, and it means that that one is taken as an example of them all. Therefore, "the church" means any true church or every true church, but it never means one big universal or invisible church. "The house of God" means every house or any house (church) of God, and "the body of Christ" means any body of Christ or every body (church) of Christ. And when the Lord refers to the church as being the "Bride of Christ," it is used in the same sense. Every true church sustains the relationship to Christ a bride sustains to her espoused husband, and in this sense every church is the bride of Christ. The term, "Bride of Christ" denotes relationship and is not to be taken literally. Likewise, the term "House of God" denotes a place for God to dwell with His people, and the church is not to be taken as a literal house. So, also, the term "Body of Christ" denotes a governing body and is not to be taken as the literal body of Jesus.

One more example of how one is used as an example of all is given: "Man that is born of a woman is of few days, and full of trouble" (Job 14:1).

Here the word man is used in the singular (one man), and the word woman is used in the singular (one woman), but it means all men born of women. It means every man born of a woman is of few days and full of trouble. One is taken as an example of all the rest of them. So when the Bible speaks of the church and points out no particular church at a given place, it uses one as an example of them all. It means all the churches, or every church. We use language like that all the time. We say, "The home is the foundation of civilization," but we do not mean that there is just one big, universal home. We use one home as an example of them all. Again we say, "The judge and the jury make the court." What judge? One big judge? No, any judge, and any jury. So, "the church" means every church when we speak of the institution.

## 03-Churches of the Bible were Local Congregations

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The New Testament Church A Local Body

### CHAPTER 3 Churches of the Bible Were Local Congregations

Nothing could be more plain in the Bible than that every time a church is spoken of a local congregation is meant. In Matthew 16:18 Jesus said, "I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." Now what kind of a church was that? Was it a universal something that would spread all over the world? No. For if you will just read on till you come to Matthew 18:17 you will find where He told them that if a brother offended another brother and refused to make peace with him, "tell it to the church." How could he tell it to a universal, invisible church spread all over the world? It would be impossible to do that, but if it was a local congregation, it would be easy to do. Where Was This Church Located? This church that Jesus was talking about building was first a company or congregation that traveled with Him, but it was always a local company. It was located where He was located: "Wherefore of these men which have companied with us all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John, unto that same day that he was taken up from us, must one be ordained to be a witness with us of his resurrection" (Acts 1:21-22).

Now let us notice several things which we learn from this passage:

1. Here was a company of baptized believers that had been together from the days of John the Baptist.
2. It had been in company with Jesus and He had gone in and out among them.
3. They were with Him and saw Him ascend to heaven.
4. They were in a business meeting and elected an apostle to take the place of Judas. (Read all of Acts 1:15-26).
5. In order to be an apostle one had to be an eye witness to the ministry of Jesus, being with Him all the time from the time of John the Baptist till Jesus ascended.
6. There were at least one hundred twenty (120) in that company and they held a business meeting and elected an apostle (Acts 1:15-26).
7. That company was located in Jerusalem, after Jesus went to heaven, and met in an upper room (Acts 1:12-14).
8. It was to that same company that the Holy Spirit came on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:1-4). They were all in one place, local, in one room.
9. That company was called the church (Acts 2:47), and the Lord added to it daily such as should be (or were) saved.

10. That same company (church) was called the church which was at Jerusalem (Acts 11:22). Could anything be more plain than that the church Jesus built, the one He was with, and went in and out among them, was a local congregation, meeting in one place, and that that place was a house, an upper chamber (room) in Jerusalem? Remember nothing can be universal and local at the same time. Universal means everywhere, local means in one place. The Jerusalem Church

There is another thing we should understand about the Jerusalem church. She was the mother church and all the other churches came out of her, or out of churches which were her children, and since the Jerusalem church belonged to Christ, then, all of her children belong to Christ. In this way Christ has ever kept His church alive, and the gates of hell shall not, and cannot prevail against her. Let us find the churches that came out of the church at Jerusalem.

1. Philip went to Samaria, preached Christ and many were saved and baptized (Acts 8:4-12). This was how the church began in Samaria.

2. When Paul started to Damascus there was already a church there. He was converted on the way and was baptized by Ananias of Damascus (Acts 9:1-19).

3. Peter went to Caesarea where Cornelius and a number of others were baptized, and this is how the church began in Caesarea (Acts 10:23-48).

4. When the gospel was preached to the Greeks at Antioch, and the Jerusalem Church heard about it, they sent Barnabas as a missionary to Antioch. Barnabas got Paul (Saul) to help him and they established a church there (Acts 11:19-26). This congregation is called the church at Antioch in Acts 11:26; Acts 13:1.

So, if the congregation of disciples at Antioch was called a church, then, the congregation at Caesarea was a church, the congregation at Damascus was a church, and the congregation at Samaria was a church. So we see that while there may have been many more, here are at least four churches, all local bodies or companies of baptized believers that came directly out of the church at Jerusalem. The Church at Antioch

Now, let us follow the work of the missionaries of the Antioch church and learn about some of the churches that came out of her through her mission work, and we will see if they were local congregations like the one at Jerusalem, and the one at Antioch. The church at Antioch is chosen because the Bible chooses it. We must remember that the church which was at Jerusalem was persecuted, and the members were scattered abroad, except the apostles, so that it became weak and few in number (Acts 8:1). But the church at Antioch was strong and became one of the greatest mission-minded churches that has ever existed. It was this church that sent out Paul and Barnabas (Acts 13:1-3).

We find that the church at Antioch was a local congregation and not a universal, invisible something that spread all over the world. Notice the following language: "Now there were in the church that was at Antioch certain prophets and teachers" (Acts 13:1). The church that was at Antioch. The church was AT a place, and that place was Antioch. Antioch was a city. So the church at Antioch was located in the city of Antioch. It could not have been a universal church.

Now, if you read the next three verses (Acts 13:1-3) you will find that this church AT Antioch, led by the Holy Spirit, sent out Paul and Barnabas as missionaries. These missionaries went out on

their missionary journey, and that journey took them to the Island of Cyprus and the coast of the Mediterranean Sea. They visited and preached in the following named cities where it is said that people believed (Acts 13:1-52; Acts 14:1-28): Salamis, (on the Island of Cyprus), Paphos, Antioch of Pisidia, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe. There were probably other cities, for we are told that they preached in all those regions, but only the places where we are told that people believed are named. The next important fact that you should learn is, these bands of believers were called churches: "And when they had ordained them elders in every church, and had prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord, on whom they believed (Acts 14:23).

What do we learn here? They ordained them elders in every church. Not just one big church, but in every church. Every one of these bands of believers had their own elders (pastors and deacons), and each one was called a church. Hence, there was a church at Salamis, there was a church at Paphos, there was a church at Antioch of Pisidia, there was a church at Iconium, there was a church at Lystra and there was a church at Derbe. And Paul and Barnabas ordained elders in every church.

They were not invisible or universal things, but local bands of baptized believers. All these churches were, so-to-speak, daughter churches of the church which was at Antioch and granddaughters of the church which was at Jerusalem: for the Antioch church was the daughter of the Jerusalem church. The Second Missionary Journey from Antioch

After Paul and Barnabas returned from their first journey, they made their report to the church at Antioch which had sent them out (Acts 14:26-28). Then in Acts 15:36, we find that Paul desired to make a second journey. He and Barnabas separated, however, and this time Paul took Silas as his partner. In Acts 16:1-5, we find Paul visiting some of the same cities that he visited before, namely, Derbe, Lystra and Iconium, and now we are told plainly that there were churches in these cities. "And so were the churches established in the faith, and increased in number daily" (Acts 16:5). This confirms the truth that the church is a local body in another way. Note that the churches were established. Why did not he say the CHURCH was established? Because there was more than one and he had to make them plural in number. If there had been just one big universal church, with all the saved people in it, then Paul would have said the church was established, but since there was one local congregation in each city, and since there were several of them, he had to say churches were established.

Paul's second missionary journey carried him into Europe, that is into Macedonia in Greece. He preached at Philippi where Lydia, the Philippian jailor, and many others were saved (Acts 16:12-34). He and Silas preached at Thessalonica, at Athens (Acts 17:1-34), and then at Corinth, and at Ephesus. In all these places they left believers. All of these were in Greece except Ephesus which was on the coast of Asia. It was at Ephesus that Paul found the disciples of Apollos and got them on the right track. Aquila and Priscilla, two other missionaries, had already been to Ephesus (Acts 19:1-41; Acts 20:1-38), and had already taught Apollos the way of the Lord "more perfectly."

Now let us see about these bands of believers Paul left at these places. Were they churches? Was there a church at each place, or did they all make one big church? Let the Bible answer the question.

Let us take Philippi, Thessalonica, and Athens and see about them. These are all in the region of Macedonia and they are called by Paul, "The churches of Macedonia," 2 Corinthians 8:1 : "Moreover, brethren, we do you to wit of the grace of God bestowed on the churches of Macedonia."

Here again we find reference made to more than one church. If there was one big church, why did not Paul say, "the church of Macedonia"? There was not just one big church, but Macedonia was a country, a state, and not a city. There were several cities in the state of Macedonia and there were several churches. So Paul had to say "churches," because there is no such thing as one big church. But if you will read Php 1:1; Php 4:15 you will find that Paul actually said that these saints were a church, and he also said they had bishops (pastors) and deacons. "No church communicated with me as concerning giving and receiving, but YE ONLY" (Php 4:15).

What do these words, "no church, but ye only," mean? Simply this, you are the only church that sent me an offering. Hence we see the church at Philippi was one of the churches of Macedonia. It is silly to talk about a big universal, invisible church in the light of all this truth. There is no such thing in the Bible.

Now let us see about Corinth, another place where Paul preached. Was there a church located there? If so, could it be universal and be at Corinth?

1 Corinthians 1:2 : "Unto the church of God which is at Corinth." Could anything be more simple and plain than this? The church at Corinth; not a universal, invisible something, but the church located at Corinth. Just like we have the church at Jerusalem (Acts 11:22); the church at Antioch; so we have the church at Corinth. Nowhere in all the Bible can one find that all these churches make up one big, universal church. But what about Ephesus where Paul preached so long? He stayed there three years and was in the school of Tyrannus. Was that called a church? "And from Miletus he (Paul) sent to Ephesus, and called the elders of the church together" (Acts 20:17). And, "Unto the angel of the church of (Greek, in) Ephesus, write . . ." (Revelation 2:1).

Here it is again as plain as day. Paul sent to Ephesus and called the elders of the church together, and John says, "The church in Ephesus." What more proof would one want that every time the Lord speaks of a church, He speaks of a congregation in a given place.

What about the city of Caesarea, where Cornelius was baptized? Was there a church located there? "And when he (Paul) had landed at Caesarea, and gone up, and saluted the church, he went down to Antioch" (Acts 18:22).

Paul saluted the church at Caesarea. So, there must have been one there. It could not be universal and be at Caesarea. Just like there was a church at Jerusalem, a church at Antioch, a church at Corinth, and a church at Ephesus, so there was a church at Caesarea and Paul saluted it.

## 04-The Bible Tells of Churches, Plural

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The New Testament Church A Local Body

### CHAPTER 4 The Bible Tells of Churches, Plural

God says what He wants to say in the Bible. He does not say one thing and mean another. If He did, then we would be left to guess as to what the Scriptures teach. But since God says what He means, and means what He says, we can depend on it. When the Lord speaks of a church at a given place, like the church at Jerusalem, the church at Antioch, or the church of God at Corinth, He always speaks of just one church. The word is in the singular form. Likewise, when God speaks of several congregations in a state, or territory, He always uses the word churches. This is called the plural number and the plural number denotes more than one. It may be two or it may be a thousand. This fact alone, if there were no other reason, proves that the church of Christ is a local congregation and never a universal, invisible, or general thing which covers the whole country. If there were only one, it would never be spoken of in the plural number, but it would always be spoken of in the singular number.

Now let us notice some of the scriptures where the Lord tells about churches which are scattered throughout a territory or state. "And he went through Syria and Cilicia, confirming the churches" (Acts 15:41).

Here Paul is on his second missionary journey. He took Silas with him this time and went to some of the same places that he had visited on the first journey. Syria and Cilicia were Roman Provinces lying along the eastern coast of the Mediterranean Sea. The cities of Derbe, Lystra and Iconium were in the province of Galatia, and we are told that Paul went through these places confirming the churches. We are also told in Acts 16:5 that the churches were established (built up) and increased. In Acts 14:23 some of these cities are referred to along with a place called Antioch on the coast of the sea, and it is said that he appointed elders in every church. The thing that is important is that in these countries and cities the different church bodies are referred to in the plural number, not in the singular number, churches, not church. If there had been just one big universal church, then, it would be church, not churches. In Romans 16:4 we find Paul referring to "the churches of the Gentiles," and in the same chapter, verse 16, he says, "The churches of Christ salute you." In both passages Paul uses the plural number, churches, and not the singular number, church. If there had been just one big universal church, he would have said, "The church of the Gentiles," and, "The church of Christ," but the Holy Spirit was telling Paul what to write and He knew exactly what He wanted to say.

It is this last passage, Romans 16:16, "The churches of Christ salute you," that Campbellites use to try to prove their name, "The Church of Christ." They prove themselves to be both silly and dishonest in making such an argument. This is true first of all because the passage says churches, not church. Then, too, the words "churches of Christ," is not a name, but a phrase. A name always begins with a capital letter. Campbellites know this and they know that they are trying to deceive

people when they use this passage to try to prove their name. There is no such name as, "Church of Christ," in the Bible. But the Campbellites argue that you cannot have a plural number without having a singular number in the plural. They say that if there are churches of Christ, and the singular is in the plural, then there must be "The Church of Christ." That is like saying that since a city has houses; you talk about the houses of the city, and since the singular is in the plural, then you would have the house of the city. You may have houses of the city, but you cannot find "The House of the City." You may talk about the rivers of America, but where would you go find "The River of America"? You may find the mountains of Europe, but where could you find "The Mountain of Europe"? You may find the trees of the forest, but where can you find "The Tree of the Forest"? That is just how ignorant and silly the Campbellites are.

It is amusing also to use the same argument that the Campbellites are trying to prove their name in other passages. Let us observe, for instance, Paul says in Romans 16:4 : "The churches of the Gentiles." All right, since the Campbellites say the singular is in the plural, and, since we have churches of the Gentiles, there must be, "The Church of the Gentile." So, if I should build a church house and organize me a church, then put up a sign in front of the building, and write on that sign, THE CHURCH OF THE GENTILE, my new church would be just as Scriptural as the Campbellites' church, for I find churches of the Gentiles in the same chapter in which they find churches of Christ and they say, "The singular is in the plural." Campbellites are deceivers.

We return now to the main thought, showing that the churches of a province are never spoken of as one big church, but many churches. In 2 Corinthians 8:1, we find: "Moreover, brethren, we do you to wit of the grace of God bestowed on the churches of Macedonia."

Macedonia was a large province in Greece. Philippi was its chief city, and it was there that Paul was put in jail and the Philippian jailor was saved, (Acts 16:1-40). There were many churches in the province of Macedonia. If all the congregations put together make one big, universal church, then, why did Paul say "churches of Macedonia"? Why did not he say "the church of Macedonia"? There were many churches in Macedonia, but there was no such thing as "The Church of Macedonia." There just is no such thing as a universal or invisible church.

Again, when Paul wrote the Galatian Letter, he addressed it to churches and not to a church. Galatians 1:2 : "And all the brethren which are with me, unto the churches of Galatia."

Galatia is another province or state known as Asia Minor. There were many churches established there by Paul on his first missionary journey. Now he writes them a letter. This letter was to be read in all the churches of that state, so he addresses it to all of them. If there is just one big, universal church, it does look like Paul would have known it, especially since he was inspired by the Holy Spirit and was writing what God was telling him to write. The Lord knows what a church is. He knows it is a local assembly and not a universal, invisible something, so God just said what He wanted to say, and He let us know that it was not "The Church of Galatia," but "the churches of Galatia."

While there are many other examples which could be given showing that the churches are many in a state, it seems that one more should be sufficient. In Revelation 1:11, Jesus is speaking and He says: "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."

It would be difficult indeed to find a passage which could more clearly state the truth than this. Asia is a great country. There are seven cities named and it is stated that there was a church in each city. And if it could be any stronger for Jesus to say it than for the Holy Spirit to have it written, then it has that strength, for, these are the very words of Jesus. Jesus said that there were seven churches in Asia. He named each city where they were and sent each one of them a message. If there was just one big, universal, invisible church in Asia, then Jesus would not have made such a mistake as saying that there were seven. He would have said, "The Church of Asia." In the light of God's truth, the idea of a universal, invisible or general church is a false notion and an impossibility. The Bible Church is a local assembly of baptized believers, keeping house for God.

## 05-The Bride of Christ A Local Assembly

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The New Testament Church A Local Body

### CHAPTER 5 The Bride of Christ a Local Assembly

Most Bible students agree that the New Testament Church is sometimes referred to as "The Bride of Christ." There is, however, much confusion relative to this subject. Many people who would never think of the church as being anything other than a local assembly use the term bride in such a way as to make the impression that the bride is universal. The author believes that the church is the bride, but he believes that this is a figure of speech not to be taken literally, but denoting the sacred relationship of every true church to her Lord.

There can be a universal bride no more than there can be a universal church, if the church is the bride. For, if the church is a local assembly, the bride is a local assembly. As pointed out in a previous chapter there is no such thing as the New Testament Church, except as it applies in the institutional sense and to a local assembly in a given place. Strictly speaking, there is no such thing as "The New Testament Church." You may find a church, but not the church of the New Testament. Once our thinking is sound along this line much confusion will vanish.

One can find the church which was at Jerusalem, the church which was at Antioch, the church which was at Rome, the churches (plural) of Galatia, also, the churches of Asia. But in all these passages the Bible refers to different churches in different places. Many people are so vague and indefinite in their language when discussing the church and the bride that they leave the impression there is a sort of mystic universal bride composed of a mystic universal church. But we are forced to the conclusion that if the church is local in nature, and, if the bride is the church, then the bride must be local in nature. It is impossible for it to be otherwise.

Because of misconception on the church and the bride idea, there have been false doctrines set up with reference to what the bride really is, and with reference to Christ coming for His people, and with reference to what is called "the marriage of the Lamb." Some hold that Jesus is coming for His bride (church) alone and everybody else will be left on the earth to go through the Great Tribulation which is to follow. Others hold that only the faithful of the true church will be raptured and even unfaithful church members will be left behind. Some believe Jesus will marry this bride and she will reign with Him in the Millennium as queen. There are others who believe that all the true churches (local assemblies) combined make up the one bride. When we seek for Scripture to confirm the above mentioned doctrines we find ourselves with an impossible task. Most of the Scriptures referred to in order to prove these doctrines fall short and the arguments are inconclusive. We know that all the dead in Christ will be in the first resurrection (1 Thessalonians 4:14). We also know that all who are in the first resurrection will reign with Christ. "Blessed and holy is he that hath part in the first resurrection: on such the second death hath no power, but they shall be priests of God and of Christ, and shall reign with him a thousand years" (Revelation 20:6).

Thus we see that the saved, universally, shall reign with Christ, not just the church.

If Jesus is going to rapture out of the world only the faithful church members when He comes for His saints, there will not be an infant nor an innocent child in the rapture, but they will be left to go through the tribulation. This confusion and these misconceptions are prevalent because men take a simple figure of speech and seek to make a literal thing out of it.

What Is Meant by the Term Bride?

There are several things to which the church is compared in the New Testament and we never think of taking those things in a literal sense, but always recognize them to be figures of speech denoting the nature of the church, or denoting its relationship to Christ. We also recognize that these figures of speech refer to every church (local assembly) exactly in the same sense. The figure that applies to one assembly applies to every other assembly. If we would recognize that the term bride is simply a figure of speech denoting the relationship of every New Testament Church to Christ we would not have this maze of confusion.

Note the following passages which refer to the church as a bride or otherwise suggest it. In John 3:29, John the Baptist speaking, "He that hath the bride is the bridegroom." It is evident that Christ and the church are under consideration here. In 2 Corinthians 11:2 Paul says, "I have espoused (engaged, betrothed) you to one husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ." Paul says to the church at Rome, Romans 7:4 : "Ye also are become dead to the law by the body of Christ; that ye should be married to another, even to him who is raised from the dead, that we should bring forth fruit unto God." In Ephesians 5:23 we find the following, "For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church." From the above references we learn the following:

1. The Jerusalem church is called, or likened to, a bride.
2. The church at Corinth is likened to a bride, engaged virgin.
3. The church at Rome is likened to a bride that should be married to Christ, bringing forth fruit. This evidently means the fruit of marriage, to bear children.
4. The church at Ephesus is likened to a wife, subject to her husband.

Here is an important question. Are we to take the above things literally, or, are they figures of speech, symbols, illustrating the churches' relationship to Christ? It is evident that we cannot take them literally, for some of these churches seem to be engaged while others are already married. And we must conclude that if the church at Jerusalem was His bride, and, if the church at Corinth, the church at Rome, and the church at Ephesus are His brides, it follows that every New Testament Church is His bride, therefore, He has just as many brides as He has churches. And if they are literal brides, and if He is going to literally marry every one of them, He would be literally a polygamist, a thing which none will allow. The church is not a woman, but in the Scriptures, woman is used as the symbol of religious institutions. The nation of Israel is called the wife of God and the Scriptures say that God was married to Israel (Jeremiah 3:14). But no one would say that God came down, had a literal wedding and took Israel as a literal wife. In the same sense Israel was God's wife, the church is Christ's bride.

Jesus called Herod, "that old fox," but no one would think that He meant Herod was a literal fox. He meant that he was like a fox. Even so, it is evident that the church is not a literal woman whom

Jesus is going to marry literally. But like a chaste virgin, and a bride, symbolizes purity of relationship, so the churches are to be pure in their relationship to Christ and His commandments.

There are many figures of speech used in the Bible to denote the nature or relationship of the church to Christ. Most people never think of taking them literally, yet some will take the bride as a literal thing while ignoring all the other figures. Let us notice some of these figures:

1. The church is called a flock, (like a flock of sheep), Luke 12:32; Matthew 26:31; 1 Peter 5:2. 2. The church is called a sheepfold, a place where sheep are kept, John 10:16. 3. It is called God's husbandry, also God's building, 1 Corinthians 3:9. 4. It is called the house of God, also the pillar and ground of the truth, 1 Timothy 3:15. 5. It is called the temple of God, 1 Corinthians 3:16. 6. The church is called the light of the world and the salt of the earth, Matthew 5:13-48; Matthew 6:1-34; Matthew 7:1-29; Matthew 8:1-34; Matthew 9:1-38; Matthew 10:1-42; Matthew 11:1-30; Matthew 12:1-50; Matthew 13:1-58; Matthew 14:1-7. It is called the body of Christ, Ephesians 1:23; Colossians 1:24; 1 Corinthians 12:27. 8. The churches are called candlesticks, Revelation 1:20. 9. Then, of course, the church is called the bride, John 3:29. The question now arises, "Why take one of these expressions literally without taking all literally?" The answer is that it would be ridiculous to take all of them literally. But it is evident that if we are to take one as being literal, we must take all to be literal. Figuratively speaking, when Jesus marries, He will marry a flock of sheep, a sheepfold, a husbandry, a building, a temple, the light of the world, the salt of the earth, His body, a candlestick and a chaste virgin. But evidently we are not to take these things literally.

These figures illustrate church truth. The church is not a flock of literal sheep, but is like a flock of sheep. The church is not literally a sheepfold, or a building, or temple, or light, or salt, or a candlestick; but in some respects it is like them. So the church is not literally a chaste virgin engaged to Christ, but is likened unto a virgin. Every New Testament church (local assembly) sustains that relationship to Him. If we go beyond that, we make Christ a polygamist, for, if the church is the bride, Jesus has as many brides as He has churches.

False Churches Called Whores and Harlots In the 17th Chapter of Revelation we find described the great whore and her harlot daughters. Here is the great false religious system. It seems to be headed up in Rome, and her daughters are the false churches that came out of her. They are called whore and harlots, but this does not mean that they are literally such. It simply means that they have been untrue to Christ as an unfaithful bride or wife who turns from her husband, and the figure is used in contrast to the chaste virgin who is faithful to Christ. It has already been pointed out that women are used as symbols of religious institutions. True churches are likened to pure virgins who are faithful and false churches are likened to those who are unfaithful and play the harlot. The Bride in Glory

We have been discussing the church as it symbolizes the bride in this age, the relationship that now exists between Christ and every one of His churches. There is, however, the thought of the future, the end of the age, and "the marriage of the Lamb" to be considered. It is with reference to this phase of the subject that people build up mystic ideas and interpretations. It is true that Christ's coming for His people is likened to a bridegroom coming for a bride, and the taking of His people to Himself is likened to a marriage: but this too must be considered as a figure of speech, and does not necessarily apply to any particular church. It is evident from the Scriptures that this "marriage of the Lamb" to His bride tells of His being united with all the redeemed whom He has

received unto Himself. But even so, this will be an assembly of the redeemed in one host and will be in heaven, constituting a local congregation. As we think of a marriage in the light of the Scriptures, we must think in terms of a marriage in Bible times, not according to our modern customs of marriage. In a Bible marriage, the bridegroom simply took unto himself his bride in public display and there was a feast or celebration. Likewise when Jesus comes for His people, takes them to Himself in glory, thus bringing about the greatest celebration of all the ages (or for eternity itself, so far as we know), that will be the "marriage of the Lamb." The Church or Bride in the Millennium In passing from the present church age to the eternal glory age a word should be said concerning the church or bride as it shall exist in the millennial age. And it should be borne in mind that this is Christ's kingdom age. Therefore the kingdom aspect of Christ's redemptive work is magnified above everything else. It shall be during this time that all the saved of the earth and of all past ages shall be merged into the kingdom. This fact is made clear by Jesus in Matthew 8:11 when He says, "Many shall come from the east and the west, and shall sit down with Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, in the kingdom of heaven." Also, He declares that in the Judgment of Nations, the saved shall be divided from the unsaved and all the saved shall be brought into the kingdom. "Then shall the King say unto them on his right hand, Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world" (Matthew 25:34).

It is here that the separation shall take place by which the saved shall enter the kingdom and the unsaved shall ultimately be cast into the lake of fire (Matthew 25:46). The above evidently points to the fulfillment of John 10:26 when all the "other sheep" shall be called into the fold and there "shall be one fold and one shepherd." For Jesus tells us in Matthew 8:11 that every plant which is not planted by His Father shall be rooted up. He made this reference to the institution of Pharisaism, but when He said, "Every plant," it is evident that He included every false religious institution. Therefore the statement embraces Rome, her harlot daughters, and all apostate religious organization. It is made clear, however, that Jesus will root up the institution as such, but He will not lose one sheep (John 10:16; John 10:28). This fact is also made clear again when the great whore and her harlot daughters come to doom. It is there that God will call His people out of them. "And I heard another voice from heaven, saying, Come out of her, my people, that ye be not partakers of her sins, and that ye receive not her plagues" (Revelation 18:4).

Thus the true church of our Lord will be glorified into her greatest glory and shall occupy her place in her kingdom role throughout the earth's greatest age and all who have denied her and persecuted her through the past ages must repudiate their false positions and vindicate her as the Lord's elect. In the reward of servants Jesus shall reward every man according to his works and faithfulness, and evidently, it is here that those who have been faithful to Him and to His church shall receive the highest honors in kingdom rule, Matthew 25:14-30. With reference to this subject, Dr. Albert Garner, in his book, Bible Analysis, page 140, says, And after the church shall have given Him honor through the millennial age, she shall in ages yet to come, Ephesians 3:21. It is the conception of this writer that one of the purposes of the 1000 years reign of Christ is to bring all the saved into the Eternal City, the New Jerusalem, The Bride, the Lamb's Wife. Together, forever, He and His Bride and the Father shall dwell in the New Heaven and the New Earth, Revelation 21:22.

All the Saved To Be in the Glory Bride

Jesus uttered a prophecy and promise in John 10:16 which will have been fulfilled when the marriage of the Lamb comes. He said: "And other sheep I have, which are not of this fold: them also I must bring, and they shall hear my voice; and there shall be one fold, and one shepherd."

There can be no escape from the fact that in this chapter Jesus speaks with reference to saved people and the church. He tells us that He is the Good Shepherd giving His life for the sheep. He tells us in verses 25 and 26 that believers are sheep and unbelievers are not sheep. And He tells us in verse 28 that the sheep are those to whom He gives eternal life. Therefore, in the light of verse 16, all sheep, all who have eternal life, shall be brought into one fold, and ultimately, there shall be one fold and one Shepherd. There are those who may raise the objection that this prophecy refers to Gentiles. Let that be as it may, we cannot escape the promise that the glorious time is coming when, "There shall be one fold and one Shepherd." These are His eternal words.

Some may ask how Jesus will bring about this event of gathering all into one assembly or fold. It is not ours to know all the details of His plans. Jesus said, "Every plant, which my heavenly Father hath not planted, shall be rooted up" (Matthew 15:13). Thus every false institution shall be destroyed, but no individual sheep ever shall perish. Though they be in false churches, they shall hear His voice and they shall come to Him, and there shall be one fold and one Shepherd. This glorious truth is sufficient for us. In Revelation 21:9-27 is John's vision of the bride, the Lamb's wife. It is a vision of the Holy City, the New Jerusalem, and those who dwell in it. Verse 24 tells us that the nations of them that are saved shall walk in the light of it, and verse 27 tells us that it shall contain, "They NOTES which are written in the Lamb's book of life." We are also told in Revelation 19:7-8 that the bride is made ready. "Let us be glad and rejoice, and give honour to him: for the marriage of the Lamb is come, and his wife hath made herself ready. And to her it was granted that she should be arrayed in fine linen, clean and white: for the fine linen is the righteousness of the saints."

Note that the bride is arrayed in linen clean and white. Also note that every bloodwashed saint in heaven is arrayed in white. "These are they which came out of great tribulation, and have washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb" (Revelation 7:14). The bride in glory, then, shall consist of all the sheep, (those to whom Christ gives eternal life). It shall consist of all who are bloodwashed, all who are robed in white. It shall consist of all whose names are in the Lamb's book of life. It shall consist of the nations (races) that are saved. "Blessed are they which are called unto the marriage supper of the Lamb" (Revelation 19:9).

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