

The Summation of All Things in Christ

Studies in Ephesians with a Local Church Emphasis

LESSON XV : EXCURSUS — THE CHURCH IN EPHESIANS 1:22,23

This series of lessons is called *'The Summation of All Things in Christ: Studies in Ephesians with a Local Church Emphasis.'* Therefore as we go through the book of Ephesians I will when appropriate embark on an excursus to perhaps explain more fully what I believe Paul may be saying about the church. I do this because I believe the majority of Bible students mis-apply or spiritualize truths which should be applied to our congregations.

As we look today to the doctrine of the church and how it relates to what Paul is saying in Eph 1:22,23, it would be good to begin with a little background. Some of this will be a repeat / reminder of what was discussed in our first lesson to this series.

WE ALL ACCEPT THE REALITY OF TWO ENTITIES — Although there may be a few extremists within the umbrella of Christendom that may deny one or both of the following, in the main there is no question among believers of the following two entities:

- the mystical, spiritual union of all believers with their Lord Jesus Christ
- the regular gathering of believers in organized assemblies

The latter of these is most commonly called *'church,'* the former being called in scripture *'the family of God'*:

'For this reason I bow my knees to the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, from whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named' (Eph 3:14, 15 NKJV)

This *'family of God'* is composed of all believers, those in heaven and those on earth, who by faith has embraced the Lord Jesus Christ as their Master and Savior:

'For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus.' (Gal 3:26 NKJV)

THE MISNOMER OF THE 'UNIVERSAL - INVISIBLE CHURCH' — There are however many today who would refer to that mystical, spiritual union of believers as the *'universal - invisible church.'* I believe that to be a misnomer and could possibly be doctrinally dangerous, depending upon how far a person chooses to emphasize that teaching. For example: I have known some who believed in the *'universal-invisible church'* yet were strong *'local church'* men (and women), meaning they realized the importance of their church, were supportive of it in time, finances, talents and by whatever means the Lord has gifted them. ***While I would disagree with the use of their term 'universal-invisible church' I would not fight with them over semantics.***

mis·no·mer – noun: an incorrect or unsuitable name or term for a person or thing

Unfortunately I have also known others who so strongly emphasize the *'universal-invisible church'* that they have little regard for the local assemblies. They do not feel compelled to be in the house of God, they feel no obligation to whatever church they may be attending (if any), and they feel little responsibility towards other believers. They consider themselves saved, 'spiritually baptized' into this invisible church, and are quite independent in their faith. In my opinion that attitude is one of the major negative issues with the *'universal-invisible church'* teaching.

THE "RECENT" DEVELOPMENT OF THE 'UNIVERSAL-INVISIBLE CHURCH' — If there is no such thing as the *'universal-invisible church,'* where did it come from? As far as we can tell historically, this was not taught prior to the Reformation. Before the Reformation true believers were often scattered and at times even were meeting in secret. As far as we can tell from what little writings survived, they believed in the importance of assembling on a regular basis even while being persecuted (comparable with the 'house churches' in modern China). On the other hand was the outward Catholic church which, as it apostatized, also believed in their local assemblies; so much so as to eventually teach that you had to be a member of the Catholic church to go to heaven.

Then came the Reformation – but what were the Reformers to do? Many of the Reformers despised and persecuted the Anabaptists as heartedly as the Catholics. And the Catholics were teaching that to not be a member of the church meant damnation. So out of the Reformation came the teaching that all true believers became part of the church upon salvation but this 'church' was not the outward visible church as was being taught by the Catholics. This church was invisible and that was why a true believer did not need worry about being a member of the visible church to go to heaven. While they undoubtedly would have emphasized the importance of visible church membership, the error has grown until today some preach ecumenicism and many are lackadaisical in their church relationship. For example, consider the song *'Let The Walls Come Down'* from Steve Green's CD *'We Believe'*:

All throughout the spirit realm a fearsome battle rages
The fates of men and nations hang suspended in the fray
Walls designed by satan in the twilight of the ages
Now stand as great divisions all across the world today
Walls not born of government nor strife amid the nations

But walls within our churches and between denominations
Stones of dry tradition carved in fear and laid in pride
Become a dismal prison to those withering inside

Chorus:

Let the walls come down
Let the walls come down
Let the walls that divide us
And hide us come down
If in Christ we agree
Let us seek unity
Let the walls
Let the walls come down
Let the walls
Let the walls come down

The body weak and powerless, crippled by division
The victim of a tragic and most cruel civil war
Brother fighting brother over culture and tradition
While countless lost and dying lie as casualties of war
It's time to end the foolishness of warring with each other
And kneel in true repentance that our union be restored
May we then as brothers rally round the cross of Jesus
And carry on with diligence the mission of our Lord

Chorus

Oh children of God
Oh soon to be bride
Let us humble ourselves
And crucify pride
Throw off the flesh
And its pious facade
And unite in the name of God

ECCLESIA IN EARLY CHRISTIANITY : 'ECCLESIA WAS A COMMON WORD' — When Christ spoke “*Upon this rock I will build My ecclesia*” He was using a term familiar to each disciple. “*The New Testament writers neither coined this word nor employed it in an unusual sense.* The apostles and early Christians were more familiar with the Septuagint than with the Hebrew Version. From it they generally quoted. They wrote in Greek to a Greek-speaking world, and used Greek words as a Greek-speaking people would understand them.... [It is] fiction that *Ecclesia* was used in any new, special sense. *The object of Christ's ecclesia, and terms of membership in it, were indeed different from those of the classic or Septuagint ecclesia. But the word itself retains its ordinary meaning.* In determining this meaning we look to the common, literal usage. If occasionally we find it used in a general or figurative way, these few instances must be construed in harmony with the common, literal signification.” [Carroll, *Ecclesia*]

WHAT DID THE WORD 'ECCLESIA' MEAN? — In its most basic sense, ecclesia may be defined as follows: “*Originally an assembly of citizens, regularly summoned.*” [Vincent, *Word Studies*] The ancient Greek nation was composed of a number of small city-states embracing usually but a few thousand inhabitants. It was governed by the qualified citizens; i.e. they were autonomous and democratic. Not all the inhabitants however possessed the rights of citizenship (in some cases scarcely half) so the matter of qualification was quite important. This body of citizens *called-out* to assemble and discuss civic affairs was a Greek *ecclesia* (a NT example of that may be found in Acts 19). Therefore when the Lord Jesus used this word, He used it in the sense commonly understood by those with whom He was talking. In essence what Jesus said was this: “*The Greek Gentiles have their assemblies which regularly meet to discuss things of a secular nature. I too will start and build My own ecclesia, an assembly of believers which will meet on a regular basis, not to discuss secular matters nor for social purposes but to honor and glorify My name. This assembly will be built using you apostles as the foundation (it is with you I will begin) and hell itself will not destroy this program — when I return, there will still be those assemblies meeting for My name's sake.*” **Thus during His earthly ministry, the Lord Jesus Christ started a work which continues to this day.**

Here are some further definitions of the word ‘ecclesia’:

- H. E. Dana, Greek scholar, co-author of an advance Greek grammar and professor of NT Interpretation at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, wrote this concerning the Greek background of ecclesia: “*It was commonly used in reference to bodies of qualified representatives ‘called out’ for legislative purposes.... When this governing body of those who held the qualifications of citizenship assembled for deliberative purposes they were known as an ecclesia. In its bearing upon the New Testament idea of the church the important significance of the classical usage is that the term referred to a body of persons having definite qualifications, assembled to carry out certain organized*

aims on democratic principles. To be more specific, there were in the classical usage of this term four elements pertinent to its New Testament meaning: (1) the assembly was local; (2) it was autonomous; (3) it presupposed definite qualifications; (4) it was conducted on democratic principles.” [Dana, *Ecclesia*]

● Louw-Nida’s Lexicon: *“a congregation of Christians, implying interacting membership ... Though some persons have tried to see in the term ἐκκλησία [ecclēsia] a more or less literal meaning of ‘called-out ones,’ this type of etymologizing is not warranted either by the meaning of ἐκκλησία [ecclēsia] in NT times or even by its earlier usage. The term ἐκκλησία [ecclēsia] was in common usage for several hundred years before the Christian era and was used to refer to an assembly of persons constituted by well- defined membership.”* [Louw-Nida *Greek-English Lexicon of the NT*]

Therefore when we emphasize what we mean by stating our belief in the ‘local church,’ it is like saying we believe in ‘wet water’ because locality is inherent within the word itself!

HOW IS ECCLESIA USED IN THE NEW TESTAMENT? — As we look at the NT we see the word being used in one of three manners:

- as **a particular local assembly** within the strict adherence of the word’s definition, almost always of the ecclesia began by Christ for His NT work; once to describe the assembly of the Jews as they wandered in the wilderness (Acts 7:38) and in one passage to describe a Greek “city-hall” assembly (Acts 19:32,39,41)
- as **a class or an institution**, used generically; in this instance it is used in the singular but is the same as saying “all ecclesias” (e.g., Matt 16:18). For example, if I were to say ‘The computer changed the way we do modern business,’ no one would picture a large, universal-invisible computer. We would all understand that the singular usage is representative of all computers. It is a common tool of language.
- as **a future assembly of all the redeemed in heaven**, the word ecclesia still retaining its original meaning because at that time the redeemed will actually be a gathered assembly (following B. H. Carroll’s “church in prospect”)

“In applying this headship we say that Christ is the head of the church and head over all things to the church as an institution, or as a particular congregation, or as the general assembly of the redeemed in glory.” [Carroll, 102f]

mi-cro-cosm – noun: a little world; a world in miniature

EACH LOCAL CHURCH IS A MICROCOSM OF THE FUTURE ASSEMBLY —

One of the best pastors my family ever had the honor of sitting under was **Pastor Nile Fisher**. Brother Fisher is now with the Lord but in his day he was renown and respected in the Dayton, Ohio, area for his expository skills. **Brother Fisher believed in the local church as being taught here this morning and used to say that “each church was a microcosm of**

what heaven will be.” I am in total agreement with that statement. **Therefore while the ecclesia today is of prime importance, it is yet another type and illustration of what will ultimately be eternally.** We will see Paul teaching that more clearly in later chapters of Ephesians.

Most are probably familiar with B. H. Carroll’s interpretation of the “church in glory” but I found Peter O’Brien’s support interesting (since, to my knowledge, he is not Baptist). Speaking of Ephesians 1:22, Brother O’Brien said this: “While most commentators interpret these terms as instances of the church universal to which all believers belong and which is scattered throughout the world, there are serious difficulties with this view and it is better to understand the term metaphorically of a heavenly gathering around Christ in which believers already participate (cf. Heb 12:22-24).... **The New Testament does not discuss the relationship between the local church and this heavenly gathering. Although the link is nowhere specifically spelled out, it seems that local congregations, as well as house-groups that meet in particular homes, are concrete, visible expressions of that new relationship which believers have with the Lord Jesus. Local gatherings, whether in a congregation or house-church, are earthly manifestations of that heavenly gathering around the risen Christ (cf. Heb 10:25). Therefore, here as elsewhere in Ephesians, the apostle also has in mind local congregations of Christians, in which Jews and Gentiles are fellow-members of the body of Christ and concrete expressions of this heavenly entity....** [Difficulties with taking this to refer to the ‘universal church’:] First, the term [ekklesia] can no longer have its usual meaning of ‘gathering’ or ‘assembly,’ since it is difficult to envisage how the worldwide church could assemble, and so the word must be translated in some other way to denote an organization or society. Secondly, the contexts of passages such as Col 1:15-20, which move on a heavenly plane, suggest that it is not an earthly phenomenon that is being spoken of, but a supernatural and heavenly one.” [O’Brien, 146f] **“[I]nstead of calling it ‘universal church’ O’Brien suggests ‘heavenly gathering’ because the word ‘church’ means ‘gathering’ and since a worldwide gathering could not be accomplished on an earthly plane, such a gathering would be on a heavenly plane as referred to in the contexts of Colossians and Ephesians.”** [O’Brien, *The Church as a Heavenly and Eschatological Entity*, 93-95; q.v., Hoehner, 287]

TESTIMONIES FROM ‘UNIVERSAL-CHURCH’ BELIEVERS OF THE LOCAL CHURCH — Lincoln admits to our definition of ekklesia given in the first lesson: “Paul had inherited the term ἐκκλησία [ekklēsia] from the Christian community, probably from hellenistic Jewish Christian circles. **In ordinary Greek usage it meant an assembly or gathering**, but in the LXX it was the predominant term for translating [qāhāl] and its usage for the covenant assembly of Israel before Yahweh. **In Paul it is used most frequently for the actual gathering of a group of local Christians or for the local group which gathered regularly.**” [Lincoln, 67] So as to not mis-represent Andrew Lincoln, it must be noted that he then goes on to state these verses refer to the

universal invisible “Church” (note the capital letter when speaking of “the Church”). It should also be noted that B. H. Carroll in his book “Ecclesia – The Church” explains the usages of the OT word ‘qahal’ and its relationship to our NT word ‘ecclesia’: “By an inductive study of all the *ecclesia* passages [where it is used to translate the Hebrew word ‘qahal’], you will see for yourselves that in the Septuagint it never means ‘all Israel whether assembled or unassembled, but that *in every instance* it means a gathering together, an assembly.” – B. H. Carroll, Ecclesia – The Church, p44; emphasis his]

Ernest Best comments that the metaphor of the body as denoting the church **“does not lie in the fable of Menenius Agrippa; if it did it would apply only to single congregations.”** [Best, 191] Best then adds this footnote: **“The metaphor is found widely in ancient literature**, e.g. Livy ii 32; Dion. Halic. vi 86.2; Dio Chrys. 36.16; it may go back to Aesop.” Here is a brief note concerning the fable mentioned by Ernest Best: “The famous secession of the plebs took place in 494 to 493 BC. The plebs, oppressed by the rigid enforcement of debts by the patricians, left the city and took up residence across the Anio. Menenius Agrippa was sent by the senate to negotiate with the plebs and he told the story of the revolt of the parts of the body against the stomach.” [from ancienthistory.about.com/od/coriolanus/a/Coriolanus.htm]

‘THE CHURCH IS HIS BODY’ AND THE MIS-USE OF METAPHORS — We must never forget God often uses types, parables, metaphors and word pictures in order that we may take things we readily understand and relate them to great spiritual truths. **But each of these manners of teaching must be kept in their proper context.** Allow me to illustrate by looking at one of Paul’s metaphors he used in his letter to the Corinthians:

‘For no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ.’ (1 Cor 3:11 NKJV)

This is a well-known passage of scripture which uses the word pictures of farms and buildings to teach truths about faithfulness in the ministry. Songs have even been written to that affect:

*The church has one foundation,
‘Tis Jesus Christ her Lord*

A good song with scriptural meanings. **But it would be an error to believe that every time the word ‘foundation’ is used, it is speaking of our Lord Jesus Christ.** Evidence of that fact may be found in this very epistle:

‘Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone’ (Eph 2:19,20 NKJV)

In the Corinthian passage, to what was Paul referring when he spoke of the foundation? – the answer is obviously Jesus Christ. But in Ephesians, who is the ‘foundation’ – the apostles and NT prophets. What then is Jesus Christ? – He is pictured in the Ephesians passage not as the foundation but as the *‘chief cornerstone.’* **Is that an error in the Scriptures? — no! Paul is merely using word pictures, in one passage what he is teaching is best illustrated by Jesus Christ being the ‘foundation’, in another passage what Paul is teaching is best illustrated by using the apostles and NT prophets as the ‘foundation’ and Jesus as the ‘chief cornerstone.’ No contradiction, just different uses of a similar illustration.**

This truth applies to this passage because some have argued against a local-church interpretation in this manner: *“If every local church was a ‘body of Christ’, Christ would therefore have thousands and thousands of bodies, and that is impossible.”* But that argument places upon this metaphor more than was ever intended by Paul. If one were to be a true literalist, the question becomes ‘what or where is the body of Christ?’ Some would argue the body of Christ is all Christians, the ‘universal-invisible church.’ Others would argue the body of Christ is a local assembly of believers. But often forgotten in this argument is this: **there is only one true body of Christ and it is exalted and enthroned in heaven, the perfect God-Man, God forever united with humanity. Everything else is a metaphor!** Therefore I believe Paul is using here the metaphor of a body to illustrate the Master’s relationship to each local assembly of believers. Many illustrations can be developed as we consider the body but that is not to say that the same is true of every time the word ‘body’ is used. **Context, context, context!!**

BIBLE STUDY AND OUR PRE-CONCEIVED NOTIONS — As mentioned above, I believe **the mystical union of all believers with Christ is best stated to be the family of God. I also believe it does a great injustice to the scriptural definition of ecclesia (‘an assembly, a congregation’) to translate it as ‘church’ and even more so to equate this ‘assembly’ with the family of God by referring to the ‘universal, invisible church.’** So I admit as I approach these verses I am looking at it with a ‘local-church bias’ and searching for things that supports my belief. But may I be so bold as to say, **anyone who disagrees with my interpretation of ecclesia is also approaching these verses with a ‘universal-invisible church’ bias.** Some reading this may not agree with that statement but it is true nonetheless. **Having been taught over the years of a ‘universal-invisible church,’ it is not even a deliberate action to just read that interpretation into this verse,** as well as others. It is just assumed that was Paul’s intent and the reading of the scripture continues without even a second consideration of whether that thinking is correct or not. So as I teach these verses, I recognize my bias and hopefully am honest enough with myself and my Lord to want to try to see what these verses really teach. I ask the same of those with a Universal-Invisible interpretation amongst us.

WHAT IF I AM WRONG? — We will all stand before the Lord to answer for all we have done, good or bad. James warns against taking upon one’s self the position of a teacher lightly: *‘My brethren, let not many of you become teachers, knowing that we shall receive a stricter judgment.’* (James 3:1 NKJV) I am teaching this morning that there is no such thing as a ‘universal-invisible church’ and that it is actually a misnomer for the ‘family of God.’ I realize by teaching such that I am going against the vast majority of commentators and Bible teachers living today. What if I am wrong? Well, if I am wrong and there is

such a thing as a ‘universal-invisible church’ then I still stress that the emphasis of the NT is upon the visible assembling of the saints, not this ‘universal-invisible church.’ Whether there is such a thing as a ‘universal-invisible church’ or not, it is still an error to minimize the importance of the ministry of a local assembly and to stress the unity of all believers at the expense of doctrine. It is still an error to have a lackadaisical attitude towards church attendance and our responsibilities as a church member and we greatly hinder our personal spiritual growth by ignoring the local assembly. If I am wrong on semantics then may the Lord be gracious and lead me to a fuller understanding of His Word. But I stand strong on the basic principles I am trying to get across and I do not think I am in error on these more important items.

“TO THE ECCLESIA”

to the assembly — τῆ ἐκκλησίᾳ [tē ekklēsia] **church, congregation, assembly** = always has the meaning of “assembly” and is used as a group of citizens who gather to vote on issues. It appears in the LXX seventy-seven times “assembly, congregation.”

THE ORIGINAL HEARERS / READERS OF EPHESIANS WOULD HAVE THOUGHT OF THEIR LOCAL GATHERING OF BELIEVERS

— I remind all of us of a statement Pastor made in a sermon a few weeks back: *“Regardless of how we understand ecclesia in these verses, the original audience would have thought of a local congregation without the thought of a universal-invisible church ever entering their minds!”* I agree with that statement wholeheartedly and it is something that must be considered by those rejecting a local-church interpretation. Pastor Thomas Williamson says essentially the same thing: “Nowhere in this passage of Ephesians or its context do we find any basis for interpreting the terms ‘church’ or ‘body of Christ’ in a manner different from what we have consistently found these terms to mean in other contexts. Thomas Armitage explains further: ‘When the New Testament speaks of the entire Christian community as one “Ecclesia,” it simply uses a common synecdoche, by which the whole is put for a part or a part for the whole, as the case maybe; the genus is put here for many individuals. Consequently, *when Jesus is called the Founder, the Head, the Redeemer of His “Ecclesia,” it is clearly meant, that what He is to one Christian congregation He is to all such congregations, the same severally and collectively.* Exactly the same collective figure is used of a single Christian assembly, which is made up of many individuals. It “is one body,” putting the one for the many, because each congregation is “the flock,” the “family,” the “household” of Christ, and what is true of each such assembly is equally true of all.’ (The History of the Baptists, Minneapolis, James and Klock, 1977, p. 119). It is important to keep in mind that Paul wrote the words of this epistle to one particular local church, the church in Ephesus (although he intended that it be read in other local churches in Asia as well.) *It would be natural for the hearers to apply the words of Ephesians 1:22-23 to their own local church body, especially since in the following verses Paul speaks particularly of the circumstances of the conversion of the Ephesian believers which resulted in their joining that church. The only reason we read a Universal Church concept into these verses is because we have been taught to do so from our denominational creeds and the notes in our study Bibles; however, the context of these verses and the epistle as a whole is that of a local church in Ephesus, not a Universal Church.*” [Thomas Williamson, *The Universal Church Theory Weighed in the Balanced and Found Wanting*]

syn·ec·do·che – [si-nek-duh-kee] –
noun: a figure of speech in which a part is used for the whole or the whole for a part

WHAT IS PAUL SAYING THEREFORE IN THESE VERSES? — Let us now consider what Paul was saying in these verses. In doing so, I will assume Paul was speaking of the ecclesia in its original sense. *“Even that remarkable passage, so often and so confidently quoted as referring exclusively to some supposed now-existing ‘universal, invisible, spiritual church,’ namely: Eph. 1:22,23, ‘And gave him to be head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of him that filleth all in all’ — even this very body, ‘filled unto all the fullness of God,’ is presently applied, in his prayer, to the particular congregation (Eph. 3:19).”* [Carroll, *Ecclesia*, 13]

Here are the verses as given in Young’s Literal Translation (note YLT’s proper translation of ecclesia as ‘assembly’)

²² and all things He did put under his feet,
and did give him — head over all things to the assembly,
²³ which is His body,
the fulness of Him who is filling the all in all (Young’s Literal Translation)

SOME UNDERSTAND ‘FULNESS’ IN THE SENSE OF ‘COMPLETION’ — The sense would therefore be as follows:

²² and all things He did put under his feet,
and did give him — head over all things to the assembly,
²³ which is His body,
the completion of Him in all respects [or] the completion of Him who fills all things

This interpretation has a large following, including early versions: Peshitta, The Itala or the Old Latin Vulgate, Vulgate; and commentators Chrysostom, Jerome, Thomas Aquinas, Calvin, Abbott, Bruce, Hodge, Lenski, Simpson, Hendriksen, MacArthur. A. H. Strong quotes C. H. MacIntosh favorably: *“The church is the fulness of Christ; as it was not good for the first man, Adam, to be alone, no more was it good for the second man, Christ.”* [Strong, *Systematic Theology*, 796]

“The argument with respect to the exact meaning of fulness in this particular case covers many pages in scores of commentaries. With due respect for the reasoning of those who defend other theories, and whose pleas in corroboration of their views have been examined in detail, I have, after lengthy study reached the conclusion that the following is the

correct interpretation: *the church is Christ's complement*. In other words: *'This is the highest honor of the church, that, until he is united to us, the Son of God reckons himself in some measure imperfect. What consolation it is for us to learn that, not until we are in his presence, does he possess all his parts, or does he wish to be regarded as complete.'* (John Calvin, *Ephesians*) With variations as to detail, this view, namely, that the church is, indeed, represented here as filling or completing him who fills all in all, is also defended by Abbott, Barry, Bruce, Grosheide, Hodge, Lenski, Simpson, and many others. *This interpretation to which I, along with all of those just mentioned, cling does not in any degree or manner detract from the absolute majesty or self-sufficiency of Christ. As to his divine essence Christ is in no sense whatever dependent on or capable of being completed by the church. But as bridegroom he is incomplete without the bride; as vine he cannot be thought of without the branches; as shepherd he is not seen without his sheep; and so also as head he finds his full expression in his body, the church.... The idea stressed by Calvin, namely, that Christ refuses to regard himself as complete until he possesses all his parts, also harmonizes beautifully with the love-motif which dominates this entire epistle.* [Hendriksen, 103ff]

While I do not accept this interpretation, it commands a wide following and I therefore include it as an option. Perhaps they are even correct.

SOME CONSIDER BOTH 'FULNESS' AND 'FILLING' AS BEING PASSIVE — Some also consider the final phrase in a passive sense and understand it to reference back to Christ being filled and not to Christ filling:

²² and all things He did put under his feet,
and did give him — head over all things to the assembly,
²³ which is His body,
the fulness of Him who is constantly being filled all in all.

The benefit of understanding the verse in this manner is that it agrees with Paul's statement to the Colossians:

'For it pleased the Father that in Him [Christ] all the fullness should dwell' (Col 1:19 NKJV)
'For in Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily' (Col 2:9 NKJV)

If we understand both the words 'fulness' and 'being filled' in the passive sense (as argued by Lightfoot, Best, O'Brien, et. al.) then the ecclesia would also be *'being filled by Christ, who is being filled by God entirely or in every way.'*

"That fulness with which Christ is being filled is that which fills the church or 'He who fills the church is Himself being filled.' (Ernest Best) *In other words, God's fullness which is filling Christ is filling the church."* [Hoehner, 299]

"As the divine fullness in its totality it has taken up residence in Christ, and believers have access to it in Christ... All of this presupposes, with Colossians, that Christ is the one filled by God and able to extend the divine life and power to others. In the OT God's glorious presence could be seen as permeating not only the creation but also the temple (cf. Isa 6:1; Ezek 43:5; 44:4; Hag 2:7), so it should not be surprising that in an epistle which calls the Church 'a holy temple in the Lord ... a dwelling place of God in the Spirit' (2:21, 22) it should also be seen as the place of the dynamic fullness of God in Christ." [Lincoln, 74f]

This makes good sense and does agree with Colossians passages. But 'who is filling' could also be taken in the active sense and not violate the syntax or other scriptures; just because Paul states Christ is being filled in Col 1:19; 2:9 does not demand that is the sense in these verses.

SOME CONSIDER 'FILLING' AS BEING ACTIVE / "ALL IN ALL" ADVERBIALY — If we consider 'filling' in the active sense and 'fulness' to refer to the ecclesia that is being filled by Christ, the final phrase 'all in all' could still be considered in two different manners. One way it could be understood is adverbially to mean 'in every respect' as is evidenced in the NIV translation:

²² And God placed all things under his feet
and appointed him to be head over everything for the church,
²³ which is His body,
the fullness of him who fills everything in every way. (NIV)

SOME CONSIDER 'FILLING' AS BEING ACTIVE / "ALL IN ALL" = UNIVERSE — Others take the final phrase to refer to the entire universe that is being filled with His sovereign reign:

²² and all things He did put under his feet,
and did give him — head over all things to the assembly,
²³ which is His body,
the fulness, the ecclesia, that which is filled with the presence, power, agency, riches of God and Christ, of Him who is constantly filling the all in all, the universe with His sovereign reign, the sense being God sat Christ at His right hand and will give the reign of the universe to Him

This is supported by Eph 4:10 where Paul says Christ *'ascended far above all the heavens, in order that He might fill all things'* and then proceeds to enumerate the various gifts bestowed by Christ for His churches:

'he who went down is the same also who went up far above all the heavens, [in order] that He may fill [He may bring to maturity, He may complete, He may perfect] *all things – and He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as proclaimers of good news, and some as shepherds and teachers, unto the perfecting of the saints, for a work of ministration, for a building up of the body of the Christ, till we may all come to the unity of the faith and of the recognition of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to a measure of stature of the fulness* [πληρώματος, plērōmatos] *of the Christ'* (Eph 4:10-13 YLT)

Christ can give rich gifts to His community because He is absolute Lord, because He 'fulfills' or reaches all things with His powerful presence. Note Paul speaks in similar fashion in Ephesians chapter three:

'For this cause I bow my knees unto the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, of whom the whole family in the heavens and on earth is named, that He may give to you, according to the riches of His glory, with might to be strengthened through His Spirit, in regard to the inner man, that the Christ may dwell through the faith in your hearts, in love having been rooted and founded, that ye may be in strength to comprehend, with all the saints, what [is] the breadth, and length, and depth, and height, to know also the love of the Christ that is exceeding the knowledge, [in order] that ye may be filled — to all the fulness [πλήρωμα, plērōma] *of God; and to Him who is able above all things to do exceeding abundantly what we ask or think, according to the power that is working in us, to Him [is] the glory in the assembly in Christ Jesus, to all the generations of the age of the ages. Amen'* (Eph 3:14-21 YLT)

Harold Hoehner notes the difference between the verses in chapter one and chapter three:

“Note in Col 1:19; 2:9 the word ‘fulness’ indicates God’s deity and in Eph 4:10 ‘fulness’ refers to God’s gifts to the church. In Eph 3:19 Paul prays that all believers might be filled with God’s fulness. In these contexts, fulness seems to point to God’s moral excellence, perfection, and power. Particularly in Eph 3:19 being filled with God’s fulness is to know the love of Christ. On the other hand, in the present context power is the center of the discussion, for God was demonstrating his power in that he gave Christ to the church as head over everything. The church, His body, is being filled with the moral excellence and power of God by Christ who in turn is being filled with the moral excellence and power of God. **The fulness is the character, essence, and power of God that is filling the church. Lightfoot summed it up well when he wrote, ‘All the Divine graces which reside in Him are imparted to her; His “fulness” is communicated to her: and thus she may be said to be His “fulness”** (i. 23).” [Hoehner, 300]

R. C. Sproul gives the sense of Eph 1:22,23 as follows:

“The apostle Paul ... assures us that this [rebellious, chaotic] state of affairs will not last forever. Although many things seem chaotic to us, the Lord contains them all within the boundaries of His sovereign rule. This is the point of Ephesians 1:23, which speaks of the fullness of Christ filling all in all. The sense here is not a physical or spatial filling, although the Son of God, according to His divinity, possesses the attribute of omnipresence (He is present in all locations); rather, the idea is that the exalted Christ pervades all of creation with His controlling power. God directs all things to their appointed ends in His eternal plan to make His reign manifest over all creation and unite everything in heaven and earth in submission to our Savior. Jesus, in turn, will hand the kingdom over to His Father in order that ‘God may be all in all’ (1 Cor. 15:20–28). Currently, this reign is acknowledged in a special way in the church, which is Christ’s body (Eph. 1:22–23), but at His return the entire universe will see Jesus as the point of order in creation, and the “chaotic” rebellion against His righteous rule shall end (Rev. 19:11–21).” [R. C. Sproul, Oct 5, 2013, <http://www.ligonier.org/learn/devotionals/fullness-christ>]

While these are difficult verses and I understand there are differing opinions held by those of solid reputations, this seems to be an acceptable understanding and the best I may derive in the time allowed me to study (time is the enemy of all Bible teachers and pastors). I can accept and fully respect those whose opinion differs with mine on these verses. Perhaps in the future as time would permit more studying, thinking and praying, my understanding might be more aligned with those to whom I disagree at this present moment.

SUMMATION — *Because God has given you all things in Christ for your spiritual warfare, including election, predestination, adoption, grace, redemption, forgiveness, insight, understanding, knowledge of the mystery of His will, and the sealing with the Holy Spirit; and because of reports I have heard concerning your continuing faithfulness and loyalty to God in Christ Jesus and your love towards all the believers, I never cease to give thanks for you to God as the Source of your faith and love, and remembering you and mentioning you in my prayers.*

My prayer for you is that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father characterized by glory, may give you an even deeper knowledge of who He is, leading to a more intimate relationship with Him; a practical and experiential knowledge which leads to obedience and love for God; this knowledge being imparted by the Holy Spirit in an ever-increasing fashion by giving you true insight of who God is and by making Him known to you as He truly is.

By having your understanding opened and enlightened to who God is, I pray you will increasingly have three things:

you will increasingly rest in the hope, the expectation, the confidence of your having been eternally chosen by God the Father unto salvation, the Son having paid the penalty of your sins, and the Holy Spirit having given you life and sealing you, securing your position as His child until He calls you home;

you will increasingly come to know how much the Father values you as part of His inheritance, purchased with the

blood of His own dear Son, of His incredible and infinite love He has for you through Christ, and of His desire to be with you in the fullest sense;

and that you will increasingly come to know the surpassing and exceeding greatness of His limitless power available to all believers to live the Christian life and fight the spiritual warfare.

His surpassing power which is available to all believers may be measured or compared to the working, the energy, the operative power of His manifested strength of His might, His ability which He exercised and exerted in Christ

when He raised Him out from among the dead ones,

and when He placed Him at His right hand in the heavenly and spiritual places, giving Him the highest position of honor, power and sovereignty in the universe, this position being far above every other kind of power that exists:

all who are 'first in power,' those with primacy and dominion,

all who have the 'right to act,' those with the freedom of choice and authority,

all who have the power or ability to act,

all who have the power and position as lord and master,

and any other deity or power that may be named, not only now but permanently, for all eternity. This sovereign rule of Christ will never end!

God not only gave Christ a position of honor and authority but also gave Him dominion and the right to rule over all things and beings, everything having been subjected in totality to His rulership.

And He gave Him and Him alone as the Head, the Ruler, the Leader with authority over all things to the visible, organized assembly of believers here on earth.

That assembly of believers is His body, it is in a living relationship with its leader and vitally connected to Him, it is directed and empowered by Him, and is the instrument whereby He works in this given age.

That assembly of believers is His 'fulness,' His 'plērōma,' that which is being filled with the presence, power, agency, and riches of Christ, He who is constantly filling the universe with His sovereign reign until He has final dominion over all in its fullest sense. His reign over the visible, organized assembly of believers here on earth is a microcosm, a picture of what will ultimately be true universally and eternally.

APPENDIX A: The Use of Metaphors and ‘the Baptist Bride’

I would like to add a further example to our ‘misuse of metaphors’ comments above. Earlier this week I was talking Bible with a friend I have not known long but have grown to respect and appreciate deeply. The topic of ‘Baptist Bride’ came up since part of our discussion was about the local church doctrine and we both admitted a little uncertainty concerning that teaching. But as I was finalizing this week’s lesson some thoughts hit me that I would like to share.

The ‘Baptist Bride’ teaching is based upon the doctrine of the local church but takes it one step further. Almost all who are ‘local church’ rightfully consider the churches to be the bride of Christ. Speaking to the church at Corinth Paul said the following:

“For I am jealous for you with godly jealousy. For I have betrothed you to one husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ.” (2 Cor 11:2 NKJV)

The teaching therefore is that since ‘local Baptist churches’ comprise the ‘bride of Christ’ here on earth, this reality is continued into eternity with ‘Baptist churches who have kept the faith’ being the bride. All others in heaven are the ‘friend of the bride’ (John 3:29). One pastor defended his position with this argument: *“If there is no Baptist Bride, then Christ would not be marrying the ‘chaste virgin’ that He was espoused to while on earth.”* But as I thought this week about that comment and our observations above, I believe that falls within the category of a ‘mis-used and over-applied metaphor.’ We do not have the time to fully develop the ‘Baptist Bride’ doctrine and its support or denunciation, but I would like to bring forth a similar metaphor which at best presents difficulties for the ‘Baptist Bride’ teaching. Consider Isaiah’s comment:

“For your Maker is your husband, The Lord of hosts is His name; And your Redeemer is the Holy One of Israel; He is called the God of the whole earth.” (Isa 54:5 NKJV)

Here the LORD declares Himself the husband of Israel. Jeremiah states the same thing:

“Return, O backsliding children,’ says the Lord; ‘for I am married to you. I will take you, one from a city and two from a family, and I will bring you to Zion.’” (Jer 3:14 NKJV)

One of my sources said the following:

“The Lord initiated a covenant with the nation of Israel through Moses at Mount Sinai. The rabbis have taught that this was actually a marriage covenant between the Lord and Israel. A well-known Messianic Jewish writer from the last century said, ‘Moses brought forth the people out of the camp to meet with God; while Jehovah, as the bridegroom, meets His Church at Sinai.’ (Alfred Edersheim, Sketches of Jewish Social Life in the Days of Christ (London, 1908), p.153.) The modern Jewish scholar Ronald L. Eisenberg said, ‘For the Rabbis, marriage symbolized other perfect relationships, such as those between God and Israel.’ (Eisenberg, The JPS Guide p.31.) The Old Covenant is not a Jewish law book; it is a Marriage Covenant.”

We are all familiar with words such as ‘adulteress’ and ‘prostitute’ being used in reference to Israel’s unfaithfulness; indeed, the entire book of Hosea is a picture of the relationship between Israel and her God. But Jeremiah says this unfaithfulness eventually ended in divorce:

*“They say, If a man divorces his wife, And she goes from him And becomes another man’s, May he return to her again? Would not that land be greatly polluted? But you have played the harlot with many lovers; Yet return to Me, says the Lord.... Then I saw that for all the causes for which backsliding Israel had committed adultery, **I had put her away and given her a certificate of divorce**; yet her treacherous sister Judah did not fear, but went and played the harlot also.”* (Jer 3:1, 8 NKJV)

So the metaphor continues with the Lord as the Husband and Israel as the unfaithful wife; unfaithful to the point where the Lord gives her a ‘certificate of divorce.’ But note the interesting twist in these verses: Jeremiah speaks of Israel not in the sense of all the Jews but of the Northern tribes only; His complaint in these verses is that the southern tribes of Judah did not learn from what the Lord did to the Northern Kingdom. So who was the bride of the LORD? — all Jews? The Northern kingdom only? If only the Northern Kingdom as is so evident in Jeremiah chapter three, then to whom was Isaiah referring? ***So one can see the problems and errors introduced when metaphors are pressed outside of their original intent.***

This brings up the question of the Baptist Bride: Who exactly is the ‘Bride of Christ?’ Israel (meaning the Northern Kingdom only)? All Jews? How does one reconcile the different references in Jeremiah and Isaiah? Is the bride only the church? For one to argue that there are different ‘brides’ for the OT and the NT only introduces other serious problems concerning the essence and unity of our Lord. If one were to state that it is all the same ‘bride’ with the church replacing Israel again just introduces problems. Replacement theology is the Reformed doctrine of the amillennialists and will be argued against by Paul himself in Ephesians chapter two (as well as Romans 11 and other NT passages). ***But if one were to understand each metaphor as teaching a particular truth in the context given then the difficulties are removed.*** It is for this reason among others that I tend to relegate the doctrine of the Baptist Bride to be an over-emphasis of a metaphor. May the Lord show me the error of my ways if I am mistaken.