
The Summation of All Things in Christ

Studies in Ephesians with a Local Church Emphasis

LESSON XXXIV : THE LOCAL CHURCH IN EPHESIANS 2 (2:11-22)

This last portion of scripture is packed full of church-related items; so much so that Peter O'Brien says that this "*paragraph has been regarded as 'perhaps the most significant ecclesiological text in the New Testament'.*" [O'Brien, 193] That being true, and since these lessons are sub-titled "Studies in Ephesians with a Local Church Emphasis", I thought it proper to review some of what we have seen in this chapter which relates to our local church sub-thesis.

WHY 'EPHESIANS WITH A LOCAL CHURCH EMPHASIS'? — I have been a 'local church' man for about thirty-five years. While my understanding of this doctrine has been clarified and honed through the years, I still believe the emphasis of the NT is upon the organized, local assembly of the Lord's people rather than the universal family of God. But I also realize many believe in the universal-invisible church and some of their greatest proof-texts are in the book of Ephesians. So as a 'local church' man, I began this study years ago for a couple reasons:

(1) *Does Paul really teach a 'universal-invisible church' or has this doctrine been read into Paul's words?* That people unconsciously read into these verses is undeniable; listen to what H. E. Dana, Professor of NT Interpretation at the Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, gives as the motive for his writing in the preface of his book *'Christ's Ecclesia - The New Testament Church'* [printed by the Southern Baptist Convention, Nashville TN, 1926]:

"The subject of this treatise has received slight attention from Protestant scholarship.... This is because Protestantism has been all too content with the view of the church which it has received from tradition, and this view has been deeply affected by the developments which fructified ['bore fruit'] in Roman Catholicism. **The prevalent Protestant conception of the church is utterly foreign to the conception reflected on the pages of the New Testament. But it is almost an impossibility to get modern Christians to recognize that fact. They freely read their ideas into the New Testament and then imagine they have found them there.**"

(2) *Secondly, if Paul's original emphasis was the local assembly, what are we missing today by mis-applying his teachings to the universal family of God?*

Those were my impetuses for this study, and I have greatly enjoyed and rejoiced in what we have learned so far in these lessons. In support of my thoughts concerning the church in Ephesians, I would like to loosely quote a couple godly men whom I greatly respect:

Pastor **William I. Brown**, our family's pastor for over twelve years and who is now with the Lord, said *the 'church' in Ephesians chapter three was without question a local assembly of believers, and he saw no reason not to consider the rest of the usage within Ephesians as being the same.*

Our present under-shepherd, Pastor **Darrell Messer** (D. of Div) made this comment at the beginning of these lessons: *regardless of how we consider the term now, the original recipients of this letter would have immediately thought of their own local assembly since at that time there was no other consideration of the word 'ecclesia'.*

I am in full agreement with both of those observations.

WHAT I AM TEACHING AGREES WITH OUR DOCTRINAL STATEMENT — Our Doctrinal Statement says this:

"A Gospel Church — We believe that a Church of Jesus Christ is a congregation of baptized believers, associated by covenant in the faith and fellowship of the gospel; observing the ordinances of Christ; governed by his laws, and exercising the gifts, rights, and privileges invested in them by his Word; that its only scriptural officers are Bishops, or Pastors, and Deacons, whose qualifications, claims, and duties are defined in the Epistles to Timothy and Titus; that it is an independent, sovereign, local body, possessing the absolute right of self-government, free from the interference of any hierarchy of individuals or organizations, secular or sacred; that Christ Jesus is its only head; that it is scriptural for true churches to fellowship together in contending for the faith and furtherance of the gospel and that each church is the sole judge of the measure and method of its fellowship.

So while my teaching this morning may be new or unusual to some, I wanted to clarify that I am not teaching something in opposition with our own church's Doctrinal Statement. Compare our statement with the following. This week I spoke briefly with a co-worker who I just discovered professes to be a believer. Out of curiosity I later visited their church's website and immediately went to the church's doctrinal statement — to me, this is of primary importance for any church. I was pleased to read the doctrinal statement agreed with most of what our church would teach, but of special interest concerning this lesson was their belief about the church. While our church emphasizes the local assembly, note how this church stresses the universal-invisible body of believers:

"About the Church — We believe that the church is the body of Christ, of which Jesus Christ is the head. The members of the church are those who have trusted by faith the finished work of Christ. The purpose of the church is to glorify God by loving Him and by making Him known to the lost world. (Ephesians 1:22-23, 5:24-30; 1st Corinthians 12:4-13,27)"

LET US DEFINE SOME TERMS — Pertinent to our discussion are a few terms which should be defined. These terms cannot be found in scripture but are rather theological distinctions used to describe the differing beliefs. The three most general divisions of these are as follows:

universal visible	Definition: the church is not limited to any given locality but is world-wide (universal) and is likewise a physical, material church (visible). The only representation of that definition is the Catholic church: one single, worldwide church under the guidance and control of Rome.
universal invisible	Definition: the church is not limited to any given locality but is world-wide (universal) and in contrast to the Catholic teaching, this body is a spiritual church (invisible). The particulars of this belief differs between groups: “Some believe it includes all the elect, living, dead and unborn; others limit it to the believers of this church age; still others to those only who are living at a particular time in this age. Some identify it with the kingdom of God, the family of God, or the ‘body of Christ,’ whatever they conceive this body to be, and so on, ad infinitum.” [Kazee, <i>Church</i>] Personally I would refer to this truth as the “ <i>family of God</i> ” and not call it the “ <i>universal-invisible church.</i> ”
local visible	Definition: the church is a physical, material church (visible) but is limited to a given locality (local). This is accepted in part by all Christian groups but to some Baptists it is the <i>only</i> scriptural definition of the NT church. <i>I would be counted with those Baptists who only believe in a local-visible definition of the church.</i>

Therefore when I speak in class of the ‘local church’ I mean ***the assembly of believers in covenant with one another to carry out the purposes of Christ;*** in other words, all those belonging to a single congregation of believers. Each one of these congregations make up a single body of believers, independent from all other bodies of believers, and there are therefore thousands upon thousands of these bodies on earth at this time. We should also note that the term ‘local church’ itself is actually a redundancy; the Greek word ‘ecclesia’ is inherently local by its very definition (see below).

THE PROBLEM IS ONE OF EMPHASIS — If all so-called ‘local church Baptists’ also accept there is the mystical union of all believers, and all so-called ‘universal-invisible church Protestants’ also accept the local assembly of Christians, then what is the problem? Where do we differ? Through the years I have come to believe the difference is mainly one of emphasis.

There was a time years ago, especially when I first came to accept what I now believe about the ‘ecclesia’, that I would get fairly upset whenever anyone would speak of the ‘universal-invisible church’. I now believe ***many of our differences is merely a matter of semantics and not worth the division it causes between believers. The important thing in my mind is this: practically speaking, is there a strong emphasis upon the local church or is church life ignored?*** I have known ‘universal-church’ people who place great importance on being an active member of a local church. While I do not agree with their terminology, at least they have the right priority concerning their local church. The ‘universal-invisible church’ people that bother me are those who care little about their local church since they are part of ‘the one true church’. They are ignoring the local assemblies to the detriment of their own spiritual growth.

I have also known strong, staunch ‘local church’ Baptists who in reality have little regard for their own church. Therefore, ***while I would definitely place a strong emphasis upon theology and doctrine, I also see the importance of the practical application of those doctrines coupled with love and grace for those who may not see it exactly as I do.***

THE ‘MYSTICAL UNION OF ALL BELIEVERS’ SHOULD NOT BE REFERRED TO AS THE ‘UNIVERSAL INVISIBLE CHURCH’ — All protestant denominations and even many Baptist congregations teach the word ‘church’ means ‘a called-out gathering’ and that the ‘true church’ is the spiritual, mystical union of all believers. I disagree with their use of those terms. ***While there is a universal, spiritual union of all the saved, alive and in heaven, this is called in scripture the family of God.*** All who believe are part of that family, regardless of church affiliation. “*For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus.*” (Gal 3:26) As for the Bible’s use of the term we translate ‘church,’ allow me to quote a paragraph from the first lesson of this series on Ephesians:

In its most basic sense, ecclesia [the Greek word translated ‘church’] 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.**

The reader is referred to the first lesson for further details as to the meaning of the Greek word 'ecclesia' and how our word 'church' came to be used in reference to that NT assembly.

'CHURCH' IS A VERY POOR TRANSLATION OF THE GREEK WORD 'ECCLESIA' — Here is a quote from Fenton John Anthony Hort that I find interesting because while the 'local church' teaching is definitely a Baptist distinctive, no one could be further from a Baptist than Dr. Hort. F. J. A. Hort delivered a series of lectures at Cambridge in 1888 / 1889 which were compiled and published in a book, *'The Christian Ecclesia – A Course of Lectures on the Early History and Early Conceptions of the Ecclesia'* [printed Macmillan and Co., LTD, New York, 1898]. This was his opening statement to those lectures:

“The reason why I have chosen the term Ecclesia is simply to avoid ambiguity. The English term *church*, now the most familiar representative of *ecclesia* to most of us, carries with it associations derived from the institutions and doctrines of later times, and thus cannot at present without a constant mental effort be made to convey the full and exact force which originally belonged to *ecclesia*.”

I ACKNOWLEDGE THE FUTURE GATHERING OF SAINTS COULD BE REFERRED TO AS THE 'GLORY CHURCH' — The term 'glory church' or 'church in glory' is a phrase lifted from the Baptist pastor and theologian B. H. Carroll. While some Baptists may take Bro Carroll to task for that terminology, I agree with Bro Carroll on this point. As mentioned above, the term 'ecclesia' means 'an organized assembly gathered for a distinct purpose' and for here and now, the only true representation of a NT 'ecclesia' is Christians who gather in the name of Christ, organized to carry forth His commands. But in eternity future when all the saints who will ever be saved will be gathered, they too will fit the definition of 'ecclesia' – they will be an assembly gathered for a distinct purpose. At that point it would constitute what some today may call the 'universal-invisible church' but it must be remembered *this gathering is yet future. For here and now (and the DEFINITE thrust of the New Testament), the only representation of the 'ecclesia' are local congregations meeting to worship and serve our Lord.*

ONE REASON WHY SOME REJECT THE 'LOCAL CHURCH' — This 'local church' teaching is a minority view and one reason for that is just the vast influence of the Protestants upon theology and writing. But even when one is exposed to the local church teaching, many times it is rejected without investigation or careful thought. Probably many reasons could be given for that but I believe one reason is because of *the manner by which it is often presented by some Baptists*. I have sat under Baptist pastors who believe the most important doctrine in the NT is the 'church' and they will hardly preach a message without some reference to the 'local church' (and make no mistake about it, by 'local church' they mean 'Baptists' ... not all Baptists but just *their* kind of Baptists). There are tracts tracing the Baptists back to the days of the NT in a chain-link type fashion, demanding no one is a 'true NT church' if they cannot so trace their roots. (Note I do accept what Dr. J. M. Carroll calls 'the trail of blood' and I do not believe Baptist came out of the Protestant movement during the Reformation, but I also do not find it necessary to create a 'chain-link' succession back to John the Baptist in order to authenticate and justify our existence as one of the Lord's ecclesias.) There are some local church Baptists who carry this throughout eternity, teaching only Baptists will be the 'true bride of Christ' while all those who were not a Baptist here on earth will forever be the 'friend of the bride.' I ask, *is that 'Baptist Bride' or 'Baptist Pride'?* I believe such extreme views on this doctrine pushes people away from a 'local church' interpretation of the scriptures. Brethren, in my opinion (and I fully recognize I could be wrong), *I believe the emphasis should be on the importance of attending and supporting (with our presence, our attitudes, our finances, our talents, our love and concern for others in the church) our own local body of believers. When one slips into making it an issue of 'we are the only ones' or 'God looks upon us with a little more favor than He looks upon others' then the teaching has left the spirituality of the scriptures and entered into the carnality of our own fallen human natures.*

