

# The Summation of All Things in Christ

## Studies in Ephesians with a Local Church Emphasis

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

One of the reasons I began these lessons was to evaluate and discern for myself if Paul was speaking of a universal-invisible body of all believers throughout the book of Ephesians, a supposition proposed by all Protestants and even many Baptist people, or whether Paul retained the normal usage of the word *ecclesia* to refer to a local body of believers, all in covenant with one another to carry out the purposes of Christ. Since this portion of scripture is regarded as *‘perhaps the most significant ecclesiological text in the New Testament’* (to quote Peter O’Brien), I thought it would be worth our while to first, consider this passage to see if it provides any evidence towards our search of Paul’s use of the word *ecclesia*. And secondly, having considered whether this refers to the universal-invisible church or the local assembly of believers, what can we learn from Paul’s comments?

**WHAT IF I AM WRONG?** — No one understands the Bible one-hundred percent. No one is without error. So while I am teaching Ephesians from a local church perspective, it is fair to ask the question, *“what if I am wrong?”* I have two thoughts in response to that question:

- **If Paul does teach in Ephesians a universal-invisible church, it must still be admitted that the local church aspect of *ecclesia* is the main emphasis of the New Testament.** This is obvious and undeniable. Of the 115x the word *ecclesia* is used in the NT, the word is used 1x in reference to Israel as the ‘assembly in the wilderness’ (Acts 7:38, in reference to the wilderness wanderings under Moses), 1x while quoting Psalms 22:22 (Heb 2:12), and 3x to refer to a secular townhall-type meeting (Acts 19:32, 39, 41). The rest of the usages in the New Testament refers to the Lord’s *ecclesia*. Of those usages most of them are without question a reference to a local assembly of believers; e.g., *“Likewise greet the [assembly] that is in their house”* (Rom 16:5); *“He who speaks in a tongue edifies himself, but he who prophesies edifies the [assembly]”* (1 Cor 14:4); *“Greet the brethren who are in Laodicea, and Nymphas and the [assembly] that is in his house”* (Col 4:15). There are however a handful of verses which some understand to be the universal-invisible church. One response to that interpretation is given below.

- **If Paul does teach in Ephesians a universal-invisible church, he was doing so by using the local church as a metaphor or illustration of the union of all believers.** As Pastor Messer correctly pointed out, regardless of how we understand the term ‘church’ today, the original recipients of Ephesians would have understood it as their own local assembly of believers since at that time there was no other use of the term *ecclesia*. If there is the sense of a universal-invisible church being taught in this epistle (and I have yet to see anything in our studies which would demand that interpretation) then Paul was in essence teaching this: *“You are fully aware of the union and fellowship we enjoy within our individual *ecclesias*; that same union and fellowship also applies to all believers everywhere by virtue of the new birth and our spiritual union through the Holy Spirit.”* IF Paul did speak of what we would call the universal-invisible church today, it would be in the sense just given. But today in our American Christian culture, the emphasis is just reversed: today people speak of the ‘true’ church as being the universal-invisible church, not their local assemblies, and there is little emphasis upon the assembly of believers today. Membership is minimized. Church doctrine is considered irrelevant. The need for proper baptism is unimportant. Attendance and remaining faithful to one’s church is optional. Accountability and church discipline ... well, that is not even on the radar anymore (*“How dare you judge how I live!”*). ***So even if Paul was trying to teach the union of all believers using the church as a metaphor, we have turned that teaching upside-down in our modern culture. We have lost the New Testament’s emphasis upon the importance of our being involved in our local assemblies!***

**‘WHAT ABOUT THOSE DIFFICULT VERSES?’** — Many of the so-called difficult verses are misunderstood because they allude to the assembly as an institution (some refer to this as the *generic* use of the word). What do we mean by that? In ordinary language usage, *to speak of something as an ‘institution’ is to use the singular to refer to the plural*. We are all familiar with this form of speaking; e.g.,

*‘The automobile revolutionized modern travel.’* Did anyone reading this think of a huge, universal-invisible automobile?

*‘The computer is a necessity in today’s workplace.’* Did anyone reading this think of a huge, universal-invisible computer?

*‘The modern doctor relies heavily upon specialists to supplement his practice.’* Did anyone reading this think of a huge, universal-invisible doctor?

*‘For the husband is head of the wife, as also Christ is head of the [assembly]; and He is the Savior of the body.’* (Eph 5:23) This is one of those controversial verses which is used to prove the universal-invisible church. But did anyone reading this think of a huge, universal-invisible husband or a huge, universal-invisible wife? (we will go into more detail when we get to these verses the Lord willing).

***“When Paul talks about the new man, and the church is said to be the bride made one with Christ, as Adam and Eve were made one, and when he talks about one commonwealth and one citizenship, and when he talks about them being one***

**household, and being made into one temple, he is speaking of the church as an institution.** God established a time institution. That institution is exemplified, becomes operative, in particular churches. This thought is expressed in verse 21: 'In whom each several building, fitly framed together, groweth into a holy temple in the Lord.' That is to say, each particular congregation, particular church, is an expression of the church as an institution, and its only expression. For instance, a new state may provide for 'trial by jury.' There, 'jury' is an institution, of which each particular jury is an expression. So the expression, 'I will build my church,' when that institution becomes operative, it is exemplified in a particular church. We must make the distinction in usage according to the laws of language between an institution in the abstract sense and its expression in every particular, concrete case. Speaking abstractly, we may say that the church is a temple. Speaking concretely, each particular church is a temple. Such usage of language is common. We never misunderstand its import in other matters. We never make the abstract sense a conglomeration. If we say abstractly 'the husband is the head of the wife' we do not mean all husbands are blended into one big universal husband. But we mean that in every particular case the husband is the head of the wife. Just so in Ephesians 1:22; 2:12-20; 3:10, 21 the church as an institution is discussed under several figures." [Carroll, 118f] "In Paul's earlier letters the figure of the 'temple of God' was used metaphorically to denote the local congregation at Corinth (1 Cor 3:16-17), as well as the local church and other Christians including Paul ('we are the temple of the living God', 2 Cor 6:16) among whom God dwells by his Spirit. Here in Ephesians 2:21 the 'holy temple in the Lord' is not 'the universal church', as most claim." [O'Brien, 219]

**OUR PASSAGE** — One of the main reasons for this portion of scripture is to point to the Jews and Gentiles being equally united in one body, one congregation, one assembly:

<sup>11</sup> Therefore, remember that formerly you, the Gentiles in the flesh,

who are called "Uncircumcision" by the so-called "Circumcision," which is performed in the flesh by human hands —

<sup>12</sup> remember that you were at that time:

- separate from Christ,
- excluded from the commonwealth of Israel, and
- strangers to the covenants of promise,
- having no hope
- and without God in the world.

<sup>13</sup> But now in Christ Jesus you who formerly were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

<sup>14</sup> For He Himself is our peace,

- **who did make both groups into one**
- and did break down the dividing wall of hostility,
  - <sup>15</sup> by abolishing in His flesh the enmity, which is the Law of commandments contained in ordinances,

**so that, in order that**

- **in Himself He might make the two into one new man,** thus establishing peace,
- <sup>16</sup> **and might reconcile them both in one body** to God through the cross, by it having put to death the enmity.

<sup>17</sup> AND HE CAME AND PREACHED PEACE TO YOU WHO WERE FAR AWAY, AND PEACE TO THOSE WHO WERE NEAR;

<sup>18</sup> for through Him we both have our access by one Spirit to the Father.

<sup>19</sup> **So then ... [CONSEQUENTLY, THEREFORE]**

**imagery: the STATE** —

you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints,

**imagery: the FAMILY** —

and are members of God's household,

**imagery: a BUILDING** —

<sup>20</sup> having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets,

Christ Jesus Himself being the corner stone,

**imagery: a TEMPLE** —

<sup>21</sup> *in whom* the whole building, being fitted together, is growing into a holy temple in the Lord,

<sup>22</sup> *in whom* you also are being built together into a dwelling of God in the Spirit.

## **IS PAUL SPEAKING ABOUT THE UNIVERSAL-INVISIBLE CHURCH OR THE LOCAL ASSEMBLY? —**

Admittedly one could understand verse 19 in a universal-invisible sense:

*“So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints, and are members of God’s household ...”*

But it should also be noted that v. 19 does not *demand* that it be interpreted in a universal-invisible sense and it could just as easily be applied to a local assembly setting. The evidence that points to a local assembly setting however is overwhelming and is as follows. Also notice that many of the comments below are made by those who are not Baptist, therefore it cannot be said that what follows is merely Baptists forcing the passage into their own interpretation.

## **THE NT ASSEMBLY IS A ‘NEW ENTITY’ THAT IS MORE THAN REFORMED JUDAISM**

*“by abolishing in His flesh the enmity, which is the Law of commandments contained in ordinances, in order that in Himself He might make the two into one new man, thus establishing peace” – v15*

*“The new community of which the Gentiles have become a part is not simply a development out of Israel, according to this writer. Instead, it took a new creation to produce it (v 15). The resulting one new person replaces the two old entities — Israel and the Gentiles (v 15). The privileges the Gentiles now enjoy not only match those which Israel experienced previously, but go beyond them (cf. vv 19-22).” [Lincoln, 133f] “The church is then more than a reformed Judaism.” [Best, 236]*

*“For He Himself is our peace, who did make both groups into one and did break down the dividing wall of hostility” – v14*

*“In the clause ‘who has made both one,’ ‘both’ and ‘one’ are in the neuter, denoting entities.... They have not just been brought into a mutual relationship, but have been made one in a unity where both are no longer what they previously were. In accomplishing this, Christ has transcended one of the fundamental divisions of the first-century world.” [Lincoln, 140f]*

*“The two groups are not strictly Jews and Gentiles; it is Christians from both these groups who are made into the new group. Jews and Gentiles as such still exist as independent groups.” [Best, 253]*

*“having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the corner stone” – v20*

*“We might have expected [Paul] to say that the foundation of the church was Israel rather than the apostles and prophets; in not doing so he indicates that the church is not just a simple continuation of Israel.” [Best, 281]*

*“and might reconcile them both in one body to God through the cross, by it having put to death the enmity.” – v16*

*“The church is new for it did not exist prior to Christ, but how new is new? Do we have a third group, consisting of neither Jews nor Gentiles, standing alongside both and yet different from both? Has a new people of God, contrasting with Israel the old people, come into existence? Have Gentile Christians been absorbed into Israel so that they continue it? What, in short, is the relation of the church to Israel?” [Best, 267f] Ernest Best continues by listing the problems with considering the church as being incorporated within Israel:*

- ✓ The view that the church is based upon Israel robs the newness (v. 15) of its newness and gravely diminishes the discontinuity before and after Christ if all that has happened is in effect a widening of the boundaries of Israel by the addition of Gentile believers.
- ✓ Both Jews and Gentiles are in need of saving grace (2.1-10); Gentiles who do not accept this remain outside the one new being or are not made into new people. What then of Jews who do not accept God’s saving grace? Do they have access to God (2.18) other than through Christ?
- ✓ Had Paul wished to suggest that Gentile believers became a part of historic Israel he would have made ‘nearness’ in 2.13 mean nearness to Israel.
- ✓ In the terms of 2.1-4 both Jews and Gentiles before they believed stood on the same level as transgressors of God’s will; both must be changed if both are to be redeemed.
- ✓ Paul must have known there were unbelieving Jews yet says nothing about them; this then means he saw them as a group distinct from both Christians and Gentiles.
- ✓ If Gentile Christians were absorbed into Israel they would come under the Torah, yet the Law has been abrogated for the church.

*“by abolishing in His flesh the enmity, which is the Law of commandments contained in ordinances, in order that in Himself He might make the two into one new man, thus establishing peace” – v15*

*“Paul refers to a whole new race that is formed. A new race that is raceless! This coincides with Paul’s admonition not to offend three groups of people: the Jews, the Greeks / Gentiles, and the church of God (1 Cor 10:32). The Jews and the Greeks / Gentiles are presented as unconverted and the church is that which is composed of Jewish and Gentile believers. They are not Jews or Gentiles but a body of Christians who make up the church.” [Hoehner, 379f] “Give none offense, neither to the Jews, nor to*

*the Gentiles, nor to the church of God” (1 Cor 10:32) “Removing the enmity by abolishing the law has cleared the ground for something new. In fact, Christ’s purpose was nothing less than a new creation. We have already encountered this motif in 2:10 where believers were seen as God’s creation. Here Christ, particularly through his death, is seen as the creator of a new humanity.... [I]n this context the one new person stands for the new humanity seen as a corporate entity. Christ has created this corporate new person in himself; the new humanity is embraced in his own person.... This is a new creation (cf. Gal 6:15; 2 Cor 5:17) which embodies, on a human level, that summing up of all things in unity which is part of this writer’s perspective (cf. 1:10).... The separation of the Gentiles from Israel and her election was a cleft so deep that it took the creative act of Christ’s death to fill it. Yet Christ has done more than simply to bring Gentiles into Israel’s election. The ‘new person’ he has created transcends those categories. In its newness, it is not merely an amalgam of the old in which the best of Judaism and the best of Gentile aspirations have been combined. The two elements which were used in the creation have become totally transformed in the process. This is ‘the third race’ which is different from Jews and Gentiles.” [Lincoln, 143f]*

***“And he came and preached peace to you who were far away, and peace to those who were near” – v17***

***“This verse reinforces the idea of the formation of an entirely new entity. Both the ‘far’ and ‘near’ hear the message of peace. If the Gentiles actually became Jews, then the near would not need the message of peace; rather those who were far away would enter into the fold of the near. On the contrary, the picture is that the ‘near’ also need a message of peace, and on acceptance they, with the Gentiles, enter the new fold, the church. It is the new humanity that is created.” [Hoehner, 387]***

## **IF THE NT ASSEMBLY IS A ‘NEW ENTITY’ THEN HOW DOES THAT RECONCILE WITH A ‘UNIVERSAL – INVISIBLE CHURCH’ THAT HAS EXISTED SINCE ADAM?**

The above emphases are important because if the NT assembly is a new entity, began by our Lord Jesus Christ during His earthly ministry and is not a continuation of Israel, then that argues against the universal-invisible church. By definition, the ‘universal-invisible church’ consists of all the saved, both on earth and in heaven, from Adam until the last person to be saved. That being so, how can Paul here speak of the church as a ‘new entity’ and a ‘new humanity’? Why does Paul go to great lengths to separate OT Israel from the NT assembly? The reference here must be to an earthly institution that is part of the new covenant.

## **PAUL’S WONDER AT GOD’S PLAN OF BRINGING JEW AND GENTILE TOGETHER ARGUES FOR THE NEW TESTAMENT ASSEMBLY**

We will see more of this as we continue in our study of Ephesians; e.g.,

*“... by revelation He made known to me the mystery ... that the Gentiles should be fellow heirs, of the same body, and partakers of His promise in Christ through the gospel, ... the mystery, which from the beginning of the ages has been hidden in God who created all things through Jesus Christ; to the intent that now the manifold wisdom of God might be made known by the [assembly] to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places” (Eph 3:3,6,9,10 NKJV)*

***The fact that Paul was emphasizing the Jews / Gentiles being brought together as the result of the work of God can only be appreciated if the reference is to a local assembly. If the reference was to the universal-invisible body of all believers then what is so amazing about that? “Lord, we admit the Gentiles can be saved as long as they remember their place and stay with their own kind!” “Lord, we have no problem being part of the Jewish religion as long as those snobs keep their distance and do not try to force their hypocritical piety upon us!” If that was Paul’s intention then the New Testament era would have had all sorts of Jewish-only churches alongside Gentile-only churches, each keeping their distance from the other. But it became real-life when God placed those two warring factions together into one congregation, each having to deal with the others’ differences in order to advance the kingdom of God. That is when it would have been difficult and that is why Paul is so amazed at the wisdom, the plan and the outworking of God in bringing both Jews and Gentiles together in one body, in one assembly, in one ecclesia. That it worked is evidenced by the fact this is no longer an issue, and it was only the grace and love of God through Christ that enabled those early Christian brothers to work together as they did. Without question there were problems but the eternal purpose of God was accomplished, to His glory alone.***

## **‘WHOLE’ IS BETTER READ ‘EACH SEVERAL BUILDING,’ A RENDERING WHICH FAVORS THE LOCAL ASSEMBLY INTERPRETATION**

***“in whom the whole building, being fitted together, is growing into a holy temple in the Lord” – v21***

Below are what others are saying, most of whom are not Baptists. ***Particularly note those who admit ‘each several building’ is a better rendering but reject it due to their universal church beliefs (e.g., Ernest Best, Andrew Lincoln, F. F. Bruce). This once again brings up the inherent problem we all have of reading into scripture our own interpretations.***

***““And are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief cornerstone; in whom all the (Greek, every) building fitly framed together groweth unto an holy temple in the Lord.” (Eph 2:20,21) ... The Ephesian letter was probably an encyclical, intended to circulate among several churches. Then 2:21 has greater meaning if ‘all the’ (Gk., pasa) of the King James version yields to the American Standard’s ‘each several building.’ ***This******

**more accurate translation implies that Paul was not writing about one vast universal church, but rather about many distinct, individual, 'local' churches. Then each church, in every century and in every land, may claim the first church as its divine pattern.**" [S. E. Anderson, *The First Church*, pg 12f]

"In the letter to the Ephesians, Paul says: 'In whom each several building, fitly framed together, groweth into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom ye also are builded together for a habitation of God in the Spirit.' (Eph. 2:21,22 RV) Here are two distinct affirmations: **First — each several building or particular assembly groweth into a holy temple of the Lord. That is, by itself it is a temple of the Lord. Second — What is true of each is true of the church at Ephesus, 'In whom ye also are builded together for a habitation of God through the Spirit.'**" [Carroll, *Ecclesia*, pg 12]

William Tyndale (1526) translated it like this: "*Now therefore ye are no more strangers and foreigners:|guests| but citizens with the saints, and of the household of God: and are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ being the head cornerstone, in whom every building coupled together, groweth unto an holy temple in the Lord, in whom ye also are built together, and made an habitation for God in the spirit.*" (2:19-22)

Matthew's Bible (1537 edition) which combined the translations of William Tyndale and Myles Coverdale, translated it like this: "*Now therfore ye are no moare fraungers and foreners: but cytelyns wyth the faynctes / and of the houtholde of God: & are bylt upon the foundaciō of the Apofiles & Prophetes / Jefus Chrift beynge the heed cornerftone / in whom euery byldinge coupled together groweth unto an holy tēple in the Lorde / in whom ye alfo are bylt together / and made an habitacyon for God in the Fyrete.*" (2:19-22)

"Each several building. Ordinary Greek idiom here calls for 'every building,' not for 'all the building'." [Robertson, Word Pictures]

Salmond goes through much explanation of the Greek words being used here and concludes as follows: "**Hence the rendering here must be 'every building' or 'every several building'.**" [Salmond, Expositor's GK Testament, 301]

T. K. Abbott goes into great depth of the Greek and the variances in manuscripts but concludes as follows: "**We must therefore acquiesce in some such rendering as 'every building,' or 'each several building,'**" [Abbott, 74]

Ernest Best is one who disagrees with that interpretation. He admits to this translation but argues against it since it would go against the theme of the 'church' in Ephesians, which Best states is a 'universal-invisible church' teaching (note Ernest Best also does not teach Paul wrote the book of Ephesians): "Nowhere else does AE [the author of Ephesians], unlike Paul, have individual communities (every building) in mind, least of all individual believers, but always the whole church.... It would in any case be a little absurd to think of apostles and prophets as foundations of individual communities." [Best, 286] **Note that while Best denies the Pauline authorship of Ephesians, he does admit Paul's emphasis throughout the NT is upon the local churches.**

Another who disagrees: Andrew Lincoln argues for the reading "every building" but immediately adds that does not argue for a local church interpretation: "This does not mean, however, that [Paul] now has in view every building in the sense of every local congregation. Rather, in all probability, [every building] should be taken as a Hebraism which has affected Koine usage and be understood as 'all the building' or 'the whole building.' Here, as in the rest of the letter, the writer has the universal Church in mind." [Lincoln, 156]

F. F. Bruce admits it is understood by some as "every building" growing together to form one grand complex edifice, as though the reference were to a multiplicity of local churches making up the church universal. **He adds and agrees that the local church is a complete structure in itself, a dwelling-place for the Holy Spirit** (1 Cor 3:9-17). It must be noted however that as a universal church advocate, Bruce argues against the afore-mentioned local church interpretation. [Bruce, 307]

## **SOME ARGUE AGAINST CHRIST AS THE 'CAPSTONE' BECAUSE IT DOES NOT FIT WITH THEIR 'UNIVERSAL – INVISIBLE CHURCH' INTERPRETATION**

***"having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the corner stone, in whom the whole building, being fitted together, is growing into a holy temple in the Lord" – vv 20,21***

I find Ernest Best's comments interesting on this point. Best argues for the meaning of the word to imply a "capstone" rather than "cornerstone" yet has difficulties aligning his view of v20 with the next verse. The problem is his universal church interpretation which is in the process of being built. But if the church is as yet incomplete, how can Christ be considered the capstone? This difficulty disappears if one takes a local church position and interprets v. 21 as the church *as an institution*. Ernest Best's comments: "However, this solution to the meaning of the angle-stone is difficult in that it implies that the building is well on to completion for in the next verse the growth of the church is stressed; buildings do not grow up to stones above them. Has Christ moreover no place in the church until it is partly complete? Yet there must be a sense in which the church is already complete, for v. 22 says it is God's dwelling-place; can he be envisaged as dwelling in an incomplete building?" [Best, 285f] I'm sure unknowingly but **Ernest Best's comments, definitely from a non-Baptist point-of-view, are strong arguments for a local church interpretation in this passage.**

Andrew Lincoln does a good job detailing the arguments for and against a 'capstone' interpretation. Here are some of his comments on why the word 'capstone' would fit in this verse. Note his argument fits well with a 'local-church' interpretation with the picture being used here with the church as an institution being built by Christ: "The exalted position ascribed to Christ elsewhere in Ephesians and the special emphasis on Christ's position as over against the rest of the structure in 2:20 favor this interpretation. As S. Hanson puts it, 'He is not one of the stones in the foundation in common with the Apostles, even if He is a cornerstone, but He is the top stone of the pinnacle of the building.' ... *For [Paul], the notion of a finished structure with Christ as its head is not at all incompatible with the dynamic imagery of growth. He views the Church as already Christ's fullness (1:23) and yet at the same time as having to attain that fullness (4:13; cf. also 3:19). In 4:15, 16, the passage which repeats a number of the expressions found here in 2:20-22, the imagery is precisely that of a body growing up into Christ as the head. So here, on the one hand, the Church is pictured as a finished structure with Christ as the top stone, and yet, on the other hand, it must grow into a temple in him. On such a view, the relation of Christ to the apostles and prophets is not unclear. As in 4:7-16, they are in at the beginning of the Church, but Christ is the exalted Lord over all. They are foundational, but he is the keystone which crowns the whole building.*" [Lincoln, 154ff]