

PART II.

ECCLESIA,
CHURCH OF CHRIST:
WHAT IS IT?

“WHAT is the Church? is the greatest problem of this century.”

—G. D. Boardman, D. D.

“Unhesitatingly, therefore, do we set aside both of the theories of the church [the Invisible and Universal] which have mainly ruled the Christian world, together with the unfledged brood of correlated ideas, to fall back upon that which rules throughout the New Testament, and for a few centuries past **has been slowly rising like a morning sun above the horizon of confused thought**, changing, by degrees, Truth’s twilight reign into the brighter light of growing day. The **real Church of Christ is a local body, of a definite doctrinal constitution**, such as is indispensable to the “unity of the Spirit,” of which is the embodiment, and of a specific form of organization.”

—E. J. Fish, D. D.

CHAPTER I.

A CHURCH OF CHRIST—WHAT IS IT?

Definitions of a Scriptural Ecclesia—by Catholics, Protestants, and Baptists—Baptists divided among themselves, etc.

Before entering upon the discussion of the Lord's Supper as a church ordinance, it is necessary for me to define what I understand by the term **church** when used in the New Testament as the English representative of the Greek word **ecclesia**—assembly.

1. Because there is such a diversity of views held by different denominations concerning it; and

2. Baptist writers do not agree among themselves as to its scriptural significance. This last fact can not be too much regretted.

THE CATHOLICS—GREEK AND LATIN.

These hold that the term "**church**" in the New Testament in its general sense, means "all who are or ever will be saved, including the angels and the blessed now in heaven; the faithful on the earth; the souls of those suffering in purgatory, together with those yet unborn who are to be saved.

The church is defined by Canisius:

"The congregation of **all people** professing the faith and doctrine of Christ, which is governed under one next to Christ, the chief head and pastor upon earth." [the Pope].—*Dens. Theol.*, p. 164.

Cardinal Bellermino (A. D. 1600) thus defines it:

"Our opinion is, that the church is one whole, not two, and that the one and true church is an assembly joined together by profession of the same Christian faith, and participation of the same sacraments, under the rule of lawful pastors, and especially of Christ's only vicar in the world, the Roman Pontiff."—*Hag. His. Docts.*, ii, 291.

Practically, there can be, according to the Catholic theory, but **one** church on earth. No one of the various congregations worshipping in the one place, nor yet the aggregate of all these in one **country** or **nation**, is a church, but the infinitesimal parts of "The One Church," the seat of which is at Rome, and the supreme earthly head, the Pope.

The Lord's Supper being a church ordinance belongs, of **right**, to every member of the Roman Catholic hierarchy in any country of earth where a priest officiates.

THE PROTESTANT THEORY.

This is well represented by the Westminster Confession of 1646, and adopted by Presbyterians generally and the Congregationalists of America. They hold that the one term **ecclesia** is used to designate two **bodies** or **two conceptions**—a **Universal invisible**, and a **Visible universal church**.

The Confession speaks thus:

“The Catholic or universal church, which is **invisible**, consists of the whole number of the elect that have been, are, or shall be gathered into one, under Christ the head thereof, and is the spouse, the body, the fullness of Him that filleth all in all.”

The larger portion of this ideal church is yet unborn! The definition is borrowed from the Roman Catholics, and placing the General Assembly as head instead of the Pontiff, is quite the same.

“The visible church, which is also Catholic or universal under the gospel (not confined to one nation as before under the law), consists of all those throughout the world who thus profess the true religion; [i.e., the Presbyterian faith] together with their children, and is the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ, the house and family of God, out of which there is **no ordinary possibility of salvation**.”

It will be seen that this “**visible church**” is, from the definition itself, as **invisible** as the former “invisible church.” It never was assembled in one place; it never can be; it never was seen, is **unseen** and **unseeable**. It will also be noticed that the definition excludes all religious denominations from being churches in any sense that do not indorse the Presbyterian Confession of Faith, and embrace the children, young and old, of the parents belonging to it; and that the Church of Christ visible, is none other than the “Presbyterian church,” out of which there is no ordinary possibility of salvation.

This theory, as practically exemplified, is this: No one of the thousands of worshiping congregations in America, which the people are taught to call and believe are churches, as the First, and Second, and Third Presbyterian “churches” in Memphis is, in fact, a church visible in any sense, but only integral parts of the one great Presbyterian church in America, of which the General Assembly is the visible head, having the sole authority to enact, repeal, and modify the laws, and determine the doctrines to be held by the membership. There can be no Presbyterian **churches** in America but only one Presbyterian **church**, national or provincial, of a specific sort, as Old School. And the same of the people called Cumberland Presbyterians, because originated (A. D. 1816) upon the Cumberland River. There is only one Cumberland Presbyterian “church” in America – the local societies are not churches.

Two facts are evident from the Presbyterian definition of church—

I. That the members of the various local worshiping societies can commune wherever the table is spread in **the great church**, since it is **one body**; and, therefore, intercommunion is a constitutional right; and—

2. That Presbyterians can not constitutionally commune outside of the Presbyterian church, since the Supper can not be celebrated outside of **the church, and there is** no true church save the Presbyterian.

If Baptist churches were constituted upon this theory, the free intercommunion of the members of the various churches would be possible, since the symbolism of church relationship between the members partaking would be preserved.

The Episcopal and Methodist Episcopal definitions of church are very similar. There is but one Protestant Episcopal Church in America; the several worshiping congregations are not **churches**, but the parts which compose the church, of which the General Convention is the visible head. So of the Methodist Episcopal. It was decided by the Supreme Court of the United States, that the local societies, worshiping in any given place, are not **churches** in any conceivable sense, possessing none of the rights and privileges of churches, and having no voice whatever in the management or control of church affairs, but that the General Conference alone is the Methodist Church of America. Before the division it would not have been proper to say the Methodist churches of America, but the Methodist Church of America. Now there are only **two** Methodist Episcopal churches in America. If the Episcopal were the true theory of church building there would be no violation of the symbolism of the Supper for the members of the local societies to Intercommune, for those of each are alike members of but one body.

There is still another accepted definition of Church of Christ not found in any confession, but is established in the Protestant literature of this age,—namely, that the Christian church is composed of all existing denominations professing to be churches, *i.e.*, that no one is the church, but only a church of “The Church,” a **branch** of the one great universal one, though they are unable to tell us where the **trunk** or whole is. This is also called the universal visible church, though it is quite invisible, and never did or can assemble.

The reader can see that Catholics and Protestants, could they agree as to the earthly headship of “the church,” are quite agreed as to its **definition**, and that both parties wholly ignore the idea of a local congregation being a church, or that the term can be literally used in the plural, although, as we shall see, it is so used no less than thirty-six times!

BAPTIST THEORIES.

Among Baptists of this age there is no general accord as to the scriptural definition of the term Ecclesia-Church, and among our theological writers there is a diversity that amounts to a confusion. Often the same writer will hold to two definitions that are evidently contradictory, *i.e.*, that it is used by the Holy Spirit to designate two radically different and opposite notions—as it if was claimed that baptize means to sprinkle water upon a person or to immerse a person into water—opposite acts. The oldest confession put forth by English Baptists (A. D. 1643), thus defines a New Testament church:

“Jesus Christ hath here on earth a spiritual kingdom which is his church [i.e., composed of his churches], whom he hath purchased and redeemed to himself as a peculiar inheritance; which church is a **company** of **visible** saints, called and separated from the world by the word and Spirit of God, to the visible profession of the faith of the gospel, being baptized into that faith and joined to the Lord and each other by mutual agreement; in the practical employment of the ordinances commanded by Christ, their Head and King.”—*Crosby*.

This, with but slight verbal alterations, purely **explanatory**, is just what I would define it to-day. They evidently use church in its true **collective** sense, implying all his churches compose his kingdom, and that each one is a company of visible saints, etc. The Baptists of that day knew no other **church**. Half a century later “many congregations” adopted, with but slight modification, the Presbyterian definition, which they in turn had modified from the Catholic definition. It runs thus—

“The Catholic or universal church, which (with respect to the internal work of the Spirit and the truth of grace) may be called invisible, consists of the whole number of the elect that have been,

are, or shall be gathered into one under Christ, the head thereof, and may be called the spouse—the body—the fullness of Him that filleth all in all.”

This confession, with this Romish definition of church, was adopted by the Philadelphia Association when it was organized in 1707 without alteration, and doubtless, without **examination**, and very many of our earlier Associations adopted it, and thus this definition has been handed down from “sire to son.” This will account for the tenacity with which it is held and defended by the tenacity with which it is held and defended by the fathers among us.

The New Hampshire Confession appeared fifty years ago, and has been adopted by the larger body of American Baptists,—gives no other definition of a New Testament church than a **local assembly**, and it had been well had no other idea ever been instilled into the minds of Baptists.

BAPTIST AUTHORS.

When we consult the writings of our own theologians, we will meet with the most confused and **contradictory** views. Dr. Dagg, in his “Church Order,” stoutly maintains that the term **ecclesia**—assembly—is used by the inditing Spirit to denote two opposite notions—an assembly local and **visible**, and an assembly universal and invisible!

He defines the first—

“A Christian church is an assembly of believers in Christ, organized into one body according to the Holy Scriptures for the worship of God.”

This is an **organized visible** body that can and must assemble in one place, and has officers, ordinances, and laws, etc. The latter thus—

“**Church universal** is the whole company of those who are saved by Christ.”

This is an unorganized, invisible body that never did assemble, having no laws, officers or ordinances. Dr. F. Wayland gives this limitless definition:

“A church is the body of sincere disciples; the form of government is the manner in which **they** have chosen to administer the **laws** of Christ in their intercourse with each other.”—*Wayland, Sermons*, p. 229.

Professor Curtis follows him in this—

“So any organized body of professing Christians, assembling from time to time for worship, may be justly considered a **Christian Church**, though if it be without valid baptism, an irregular church.”—*P. and Progress*, p. 144.

And yet **this author** elsewhere insists that without scriptural baptism there can be no church, and all Pedobaptist authors admit this.

Dr. J. M. Pendleton, a clear and venerable name, says:

“In its applications to the followers of Christ, it is usually, if not always, employed to designate a particular congregation of saints, or the redeemed in the aggregate.”—*Christian Doctrines*, p. 329.

“It refers, either to a particular congregation of saints, or to the redeemed in the aggregate.”—*Chris. Man.*, p. 5.

Here are two radically different notions given as the definition of one and the same term. Dr. Wm. Everts agrees with Dr. Dagg that—

“In its most comprehensive and important (?) sense, the whole number of the redeemed called out from the world, and separated to Christ, compose the calling or Church of Christ—the Church for which he died, for which he intercedes,” etc.

It is evident that all the members of this church could intercommune, if the Supper is a church ordinance in his acceptation of its meaning.

Dr. J. M. C. Breaker, another of our ablest denominational writers, thus defines ecclesia:

“In every place where the word occurs, it means either (1) a particular local congregation of professed Christians, or (2) the whole body of the professed disciples of Christ—that is, the aggregate, not of churches, but of the membership of all the local churches. Men are added to “the Church Universal” by becoming members of the local churches. No man can be a member of the Church Universal, who is not a member of a regular local gospel Church.”—*Chr. Rev.* Vol. 21, p. 607.

It strikes me, if Dr. Breaker should affirm that the Lord’s Supper is a church ordinance, the members of any local church could claim a right to it wherever it may be spread, on the ground that he is a member of both churches—the local and the universal.

We have, very recently, for the first time, heard brethren claim that members of one church had **equal rights** in all Baptist churches as in his own, which is utterly subversive of the fundamental principles of Baptist Church independency, since it could neither administer its own government, or control its own ordinances. This position is the natural outgrowth of Dr. Breaker’s theory, which shows how important a correct theory is.

If Dr. Breaker will substitute “kingdom of Christ” for his “church universal,” and hold that it is composed of all the **local** churches, I think it will materially relieve his definition from serious objections, and conform it to the teachings of the New Testament.

Rev. Mr. Adkins, in his “Polity and Fellowship of the Church,” says:

“The word ecclesia, as applied to the disciples of Christ, is used in the New Testament in **two distinct senses**—1. In its broadest sense, it comprehends the whole collective body of true believers on earth and in heaven, all God’s elect of every nation and every age, from the beginning to the end of time, as they will be finally gathered in heaven,” etc.

This is purely the Romish idea. Then Christ has always had a Church, or he has none now, and never will have, until the end of time, when the last soul is saved!

“2. In its restricted sense, the word **ecclesia**—Church—is applied to the disciples of Christ as permanently associated and organized, in order of the gospel, for his worship and service, and to execute his commission, and fellowship and service, and to execute his commission, and fulfill his will on earth. This has been called the ‘Visible Church,’ with the same propriety that the other is called the ‘Invisible.’”

He further says:

“The Lord’s Table, on the other hand, is set within the pale of church relations. It is the sacred banquet of the Church, to be served only within the **assembly** of the **Church**.”—*The Church, its Polity and Fellowship*, p. 83.

Within the **assembly** of the Church! **Assembly** is **the** meaning of the term “Church.” Would he say within the Church of the Church, understanding the **local** to be a **churchlet**, and the Universal the large one? Is not this confusing enough? This is Wesley’s idea of **ecclesiola in ecclesia**—little churches in large ones.

The author of “The Great Iron Wheel,” in 1855, defined ecclesia—Church—in its New Testament signification as a local assembly, and that its figurative use is grounded upon this idea, and that a universal invisible church is a **mere concept**—not existing in fact, but in the conception of the writer.

Dr. A. C. Dayton, in his “Theodosia Earnest,” wholly discards the invisible church idea, and teaches that “the particular churches are in the kingdom of Christ, as courts and juries are within the State.”

Had he said as the States of this republic are in it, and constitute it, his illustration could not have been improved upon.

Dr. E. J. Fish, in his work, “Ecclesiology,” issued in 1875, has borne a manful part in aiding to put the much-abused term—“Church”—in its true light before the public. He denies the correctness of such a classification as local and universal, or invisible, unless it can be distinctly shown that the New Testament uses terms thus illogically. He says:

“The one is no proper collective of the other, **since it collects materials wholly and extensively foreign to it**. Our proposition, then, is that the **local, generic and collective** uses of the term Church **are its only uses** in the New Testament where it means the Lord’s Ecclesia.”—pp. 77 and 78.

We see among Baptists the definitions vibrate from the Presbyterian definition, borrowed and modified from the Catholics, as one extreme, to the unbaptized bodies of professed Christians, of Wayland and Curtis, as the other. It is the **true mean** between these that I shall attempt to find. It will be observed that the **trend** of Baptist opinion is **strongly setting toward the local idea**, the definition first put forth by Baptists, before they had been led captives by the Westminster Confession of Faith, through which the church universal idea has been engrafted upon, and ingrained into, the faith of our people.

The thoughtful reader can see, that so long as Baptists are confused and divided between these contradictory theories of a New Testament Church, there can be no general agreement touching all those questions of polity and practice that grow directly out of them—as church independency, the relations of baptism and the Supper to the churches, and of the churches to the kingdom of Christ; and especially the question discussed in this work: The Intercommunion of the Members of Different local Churches.

To this subject, then, I address myself.

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