

CHAPTER III.

The scriptural use of Ecclesia.—It is used to designate a specific organization—a Church of Christ only; by a figure of speech, the churches or kingdom of Christ.

THAT the translators of our version of the Scriptures evidently understood the Greek term **ecclesia** to be a term of specific meaning, **in its religious use**, is evidenced by the fact that they employ but one English word to translate it, and that word is **church**, which universal usage has consecrated to designate that one divine institution of which Christ is the Founder; and only by a figure of speech—the **house** in which such a body is wont to worship. In the New Testament it is never used to denote a house. We start out, then, with this fact admitted by the translators, that, whatever the term “Church” signifies in the New Testament, it means one specific thing, and not many diverse things. This is in strict accordance with the rules given in the last chapter, viz.:

“Every word must have some **one** idea or notion, and **this we call the meaning**. The sense of a word can not be diverse or multifarious in the same passage or narrative, and when used with reference to the same thing; and the **literal** sense is the **real**, all others are **figurative**.”

That this must be so, else, as Morus says:

“There can be no certainty at all in respect to the interpretation of any passage, unless a kind of necessity compels us to affix a particular sense to a word, which sense **must be one**; and, unless there are special reasons for a tropical meaning, **it must be the literal sense**.”

This must be conclusive with all Baptists who accept the reasoning as conclusive with respect to **baptizo**. Scholars find this term used seventy-nine times in the New Testament, and twenty of these instances, all admit, denote the physical act of **immersion in water**—the **literal** act of Christian baptism. In all the other instances, it has a **troped** meaning, derived from this literal meaning, which scholars agree to call the **figurative**, or **secondary** meaning. It is altogether absurd to call these fifty-nine secondary or figurative meanings distinct meanings, or uses of the term **baptizo**. They are **figurative** only, and the kind of figure is easily ascertainable.

Now apply this method to Ecclesia. We find it used one hundred and ten times in the New Testament, when applied to the Christian institution under discussion. All agree, that in ninety-one¹ of these instances, it refers to a local organized assembly, since thirty-six of them are in the plural, which necessitates the local idea; and fifty-six in the singular, having explicit reference to a local organization, as a church in one city, in one house, or one place. Thus we see, at the out start, that the local idea vastly rules the New Testament use of the term; and we are authorized to say that the literal, common, real meaning of ecclesia is a local organized assembly, and that an unorganized assembly is not the sense of the term. We are justified in

¹Since the publication of “Old Landmarkism,” my attention has been called to the fact that Acts ix: 31 is found in the singular in the Vatican MS., and is claimed for the Universal Church theory. There are nineteen instances in which it is claimed as not referring to the local idea.

saying that, in these nineteen remaining instances, the term is used **figuratively**, and that the idea that rules their true sense is that of an **organized assembly**.

It is concerning these nineteen secondary uses of the term that Baptist writers disagree, claiming, as they do, that they are a different **sense** of the term—**real meaning**.

It is the faint hope that I may contribute something toward harmonizing the differences among my own brethren that I write this chapter.

One thing I claim, as already shown above, that, if *ecclesia* is used ninety-one, out of one hundred and ten times, to denote a local assembly, its natural, **literal** sense must be “a local assembly;” and that the remaining nineteen instances are certainly secondary or **figurative** uses of the word. This must and will be granted by all candid scholars. But, in this discussion and touching the Lord’s Supper, we have to do with its **literal, real meaning**, and not with its ideal or figurative.

But I do not admit that there are nineteen instances in the New Testament where *ecclesia* is used even figuratively. A careful examination convinces me that seven or eight of them undoubtedly refer to a **local church**, while the others are used **figuratively**, by metonymy or synecdoche, the ruling idea of each being an organized assembly, and no one giving the slightest support to the Universal Church Visible idea.

The following are all the instances where any one claims that *ecclesia* refers to a universal visible or invisible church:

Acts ix: 31; 1 Cor. xii: 28 and xv: 9; Gal. i: 13; Phil. iii: 6; Heb. Xii: 23; 1 Tim. iii: 15; Eph. i: 22, iii: 10 and 21; v: 23, 24, 25, 27, 29, 32; Col. i: 18 and 24; Matt. vi: 18.

I can here give these but a brief notice, but sufficient to show that at least seven of them refer solely to a **local assembly**, and note the figure of the remaining ones.

I. Acts ix: 31 is lately brought forward with great confidence, upon the authority of the Vatican Codex, in support of the Universal Church theory, since, in that MS., *ecclesia* is in the singular—Church, instead of churches—as in our version. But there are many and formidable difficulties in the way that must be removed before this is granted.

(1) No less than four other words in the same verse would have to be changed from plural to singular to agree with Church, and authority for these changes is needed.

(2) But if that change could be established, it would not establish the fact that the churches of Judea, Galilee, and Samaria were already so organized as to constitute but **one** Church, since Paul informs the churches of Galatia (i: 23) that, **at that time**, there were **churches** in Judea; and the Vatican Codex offers no different text for this passage. This, therefore, returns Acts ix: 31 to the local class of instances.

1 Cor. xii: 28 is claimed for the Church Universal theory, but it most evidently refers to the local churches that existed in the apostle’s day, and the Church at Corinth especially; for these officers are not all in existence anywhere today, nor were they ever officers of the Church Universal or Church invisible, for those airy conceptions never had an officer of any kind; but all these were, at the time Paul wrote this, members of the Church at Corinth. So this passage refers to a local church, and can refer to nothing else.

2. I claim three others of the above as referring to the local idea, viz.: 1 Cor. xv: 9; Gal i: 13; Phil. iii: 6. In these, Paul speaks of himself as “persecuting the church;” but, until some one can prove that Paul ever left the city of Jerusalem to persecute Christians, until he left for Damascus, which he only reached to bless, I must claim what no one can dispute—that **it was only the Church at Jerusalem** that he persecuted.

3. 1 Tim. iii: 15 is claimed to refer to the Church Universal; but a literal translation – and omitting the definite article before Church, because not in the original – will show that Paul had the one Church only, of which Timothy was pastor, in his mind when he wrote this.

“That thou mayest know how thou oughtest to behave thyself in a house of God, which is a Church of the living God, a pillar and ground of the truth.”

The term is manifestly used here in its **literal sense** of a local visible assembly, because, interpreted in any other sense, it would not express the truth. Timothy certainly needed no instruction how to behave himself in the Kingdom, for he had no office in it to perform; nor in the Invisible Church Universal, for there are no offices in that to fill; but he did need to be informed how to conduct the affairs of the Church of which he was an elder and pastor, and that Church Paul tells him was “a house of God, a **church** of the living God, a pillar and ground of the truth.” This settles the meaning of the term here.

Heb. xii: 23 is another passage confidently claimed, by Baptist authors in common with Pedobaptists, as a certain and sure proof-text in support of their alleged second **real meaning of ecclesia**, viz.: Church Universal, or invisible, consisting of all finally saved, including the angels even!²

Mr. Adkins, in Church Polity,” p. 15, says:

“In its broadest sense, it, ecclesia, 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, in the consummation of all things. A remarkable instance of this application of the term is Heb. xii: 23, etc. This has been called, properly enough, the “Invisible Church.”

So with **all** writers **who advocate** the Church Universal theory.

Dr. Gardner quotes it as denoting the **spiritual** body of Christ—the Universal Invisible Church—the second **sense** of ecclesia.

That the two are here spoken of **antithetically**, a literal translation will make manifest:

“But ye have approached to Zion—a mountain and city of the living God—the heavenly Jerusalem; and to myriads—a general assembly of angels; and [ye have approached] to a Church of **first-born ones**, who have been enrolled in heaven; to a Judge who is God of all and to spirits of just, or justified persons, made perfect; to Jesus—the Mediator of a new Covenant; and to the blood of sprinkling, speaking better things than that of Abel,” etc.

Now, if this referred to a Church invisible, and ultimately to be gathered in heaven, or one already in heaven, the apostle could not have said “**ye have come to it**,” but ye are going to it. It must have been a Church which those whom Paul addressed were **then members** of.

Adam Clark offers a satisfactory exposition:

“In order to enter fully into the apostle’s meaning, we must observe—I. That the Church which is called here the ‘City of the living God,’ the ‘heavenly Jerusalem,’ and ‘Mt. Zion,’ is represented under the notion of a city.”

²CURTIS, p. 27.—“But there is not a more scriptural or delightful doctrine than that of the spiritual communion of the whole Church—the living and the dead of all ages and of all climes.”

To prove this “communion with saints in glory,” he quotes but this **one** passage—“We are come,” etc.

He says:

“**To the general assembly of innumerable angels** is probably the true connection.

“That the gospel first born, whose names are written in heaven, are here opposed to the enrolled first born among the Israelites. Exod. XXiv: 5; xix: 22. That the Mediator of the new Covenant, the Lord Jesus, is here opposed to Moses, the mediator of the old. And that the blood of sprinkling of Christ, our High Priest, refers to the act of Moses. Exod. xxiv: 8. I see nothing, therefore, in these verses which determines their sense to the heavenly state; all is suited to the state of the Church of Christ militant here on earth; **and some of these particulars can not be applied to the Church triumphant on any rule of construction whatever.**”

So Alford:

“So that there is no way left but to see, in the Church of first born ones, who are enrolled in heaven, the Church below. And this view is justified by every consideration—for, I. Thus **ecclesia** is explained, which, **everywhere, when used of men**, and not of angels, **designates the assembly of saints on earth.**”—*Notes in loco.*

Ecclesia, then, in this passage, is used in the local sense. Paul addressed these Hebrew Christians as belonging to local churches, and, therefore citizens of Christ’s kingdom. This is made conclusive by his exhortation:

28th v.—“Wherefore we receiving [*i.e.* having received] a kingdom that can not be moved, let us have grace whereby we may serve God with reverence and godly fear.”

The typical kingdom of God—the Jewish—had been shaken, but these Christian were in possession of the anti-typical one, which Christ, the God of heaven, had set up, and which was never to be shaken, broken in pieces, or given to other people than the saints, and was to stand unshaken forever.—Dan. ii: 44; Matt. xvi: 18.

I have thus released seven of the nineteen instances in which church is claimed as referring to the Church Universal—leaving only twelve out of one hundred and ten instances where ecclesia can be reasonably claimed to convey any thing but the local idea. Surely, if any one will admit that baptizo has but **one** literal meaning, how much more and stronger evidence has he to say that ecclesia has but one meaning, and that of an **organized assembly**?

I have space but to quote the remaining twelve passages, and to indicate the figure employed.

Matt. xvi: 18.—“On this rock will I build my Church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.”

This certainly does not refer to the Church universal invisible, since against that the power of Death or Satan could not prevail; for the more slain by Death, or destroyed by the machinations of Satan, the larger would the Church in heaven become. But the Church invisible, or universal, as defined by its advocates, was never “built”—organized—and has no form, laws, or ordinances; and, more, it has existed from the days of Abel.

The figure here is **metonymy**, which means “a change of terms,” and Church is used for kingdom, and is the fulfillment of the prophecy of Daniel (ii: 44):

“In the days of these kings shall the God of heaven set up a kingdom that shall never be broken in pieces,” etc.

Eph. i: 22 and v: 23, 24, 25, 27, 29, 32 the figure is **synechdoche**. In all these seven passages, one Church being used for all the churches, and it is justified from the fact that, what can be logically predicated of a whole, may be of **each of its parts**.

One of these has been specially instanced as precluding the possibility of its referring to a local church—that it must refer to the redeemed in the aggregate, viz.:

Eph. v: 25-27—“Christ also loved the Church, and gave himself for it that he might present it to himself a glorious Church, not having spot or wrinkle, or any such thing.”

I answer, this use, by **synechdoche**, of one for all, is perfectly legitimate and logical, and need mislead no one. As I have before said, what is logically true of a whole, is true of each of its parts. It would not be absurd even to predicate this of each individual member of a local church. I can say that Christ also loved me, and gave himself for me, that he might present me to himself a glorious saint, not having a spot or wrinkle, etc., and it would be equally true of every other saved person in the world. In fact, Paul uses this expression in his letter to the Galatians (ii: 20)—“The Son of God who loved me, and gave himself for me,” etc., but no more for Paul than for every other Christian on earth.

Eph. iii: 10.—“In order that now may be known to the governments and authorities in the heavens, through the **Church**, the much diversified wisdom of God,” etc.

This wisdom could only be displayed through an organized **working force**—a visible, and not through an invisible and disorganized force. The singular is used for the plural—**one for all**. The figure in the remaining instances is **synechdoche**—one for all.

There are several passages, in which ecclesia is so used in connection with “one body,” and “body of Christ,” that it is claimed that it, as well as “body,” refers to the “Church Universal,” etc. To rescue these from misuse, I will collate them:

Rom. xii: 5—“So we, the many, are one body in Christ, and, individually, members of each other” [*i.e.*, fellow-members].

Paul compared a true Christian Church, in any place, to a human body—a visible **organic unit—E pluribus unum**—one from many. He uses the same figure, with more specific applications, in his letter to the Church at Corinth:

1 Cor. x:17—“Because there is one loaf, we, the many, are one body; for we all partake of one loaf.”

1 Cor. xii: 12—“For just as the [human] body is one, and has many members, but all the members of the body, being many, are one body, so also is Christ. For indeed by one Spirit we were all immersed into one body,” etc., a local church.

Paul does not leave them in doubt as to what he meant by “body of Christ,” for in the same chapter **he** tells them that **their church** at Corinth was “a body of Christ.” “Now ye are a [not “the,” as in our version] body of Christ and members in particular” (chap. xii: 27), and nowhere in his epistle does he tell them of a great Universal Invisible Church or body, and we have no right to presume they had any idea of such a body; it was a conception of after ages, and gave rise to the Greek and Roman Hierarchies, and Baptists can not stand too clear of it.

Col. i: 18 – “He is the head of his body, the church.”

Col. i: 24—"On behalf of his body, which is the church."

Col. iii: 15—"And let the peace of Christ preside in your hearts for which you were called into a [not] one body, and be thankful," *i.e.*, called into an assembly—a Church of Christ.

It is clear to my mind that the terms "a body" and one body, and "the church" in these, and in all like passages refer to the same **organic unity**, and that is the local congregation in Rome, Corinth, Ephesus and Colosse, and that they could not make sense and refer to an unorganized and a mere ideal body. An invisible universal church is not an **organic** unity, and therefore not referred to by these terms. Here then are **ten** of the nineteen instances claimed as doubtful which a proper exegesis gives back to the real meaning, that of a local church, leaving but nine to be used in a strictly **figurative** sense, and the reader will find, by examining these instances, that the reasoning is from **one organic body** to another, and not from a real to a mere ideal body, and that real body is a local church, of which the brethren were members, to whom the epistles were addressed.

I claim to have proved, beyond successful contradiction, that the real and only true meaning of **ecclesia** throughout the New Testament, is an organized local assembly, and that the very few instances of its figurative meaning does not establish another definition or sense, any more than the figurative uses of baptizo establishes a secondary sense different from the primary.

I have shown that the idea of a great Universal Invisible Church, or a Visible Universal Church, composed of all the visible churches, or, as some claim, of all the baptized, independent of the local churches, can not, by any fair exegesis, be found. It is time for Baptists to be emancipated from the thralldom of such an idea.

Dr. H. Harvey, of Hamilton Theological Seminary, in his late work, says:

"The following uses of the word church, though now common, are not found in the New Testament **ecclesia**. 1. **As the designation of a universal invisible church.** No officers of such a church are designated, for the apostles' office was plainly temporary and expired with them. No provision is made for assembling such a church, either actual or representative. No laws, ordinances, or discipline are given for such a church. All the elements, therefore, of such a body are wanting, **nor is there any intimation of its existence.** 2. **As the designation of a national or denominational church.** Everywhere in Scripture a visible church is a local body."—*The Church*, pp. 28, 29.

The Lord's Supper, then, could not have been delivered as a denominational ordinance, but as a local church ordinance only.

I close this chapter by defining

AN EVANGELICAL CHURCH,

A body of professed believers in Christ, scripturally baptized and organized, united in covenant to hold "the faith," and preserve the order of the gospel, and to be governed in all things by the laws of Christ.

A Baptist Historical Resource
Published by the Center for Theological Research
at www.BaptistTheology.org

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