

Discerning New Evangelicalism

Lesson Fifteen

Universalism versus Localism

“¹⁵ He saith unto them, But whom say ye that I am? ¹⁶ And Simon Peter answered and said, Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God. ¹⁷ And Jesus answered and said unto him, Blessed art thou, Simon Barjona: for flesh and blood hath not revealed *it* unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven. ¹⁸ And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. ¹⁹ And I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven” (Matthew 16:15-19).

“¹⁵ Moreover if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother. ¹⁶ But if he will not hear *thee*, *then* take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established. ¹⁷ And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell *it* unto the church: but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican. ¹⁸ Verily I say unto you, Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven” (Matthew 18:15-18).

Most fundamental Pastors are waging war for the doctrinal preservation of the local churches God has called them to. Oftentimes the warfare is fought within the walls of their own local churches with members who have been deceived and led astray. Many pastors are getting tired of the struggle. Some have become tired and have retired (often without telling their congregations). Others have surrendered and have become neutral (essentially the same as retirement). Most local churches are just one pastor away from a slide into New Evangelicalism.

When it comes to the need for discernment among modern day Christians, one of those areas of *muddy water* is the doctrine of the Church. Many people are easily led into ecumenism and other unbiblical alliances because of their misunderstanding of the doctrine of the Church (Ecclesiology). Needless to say, Christians need to know what the Bible teaches regarding the Church if they want to survive spiritually in today’s *smorgasbord* of doctrine.

After reading these two portions of Scripture once again, it is clear that they refer to both local churches and an all encompassing *ekklesia* that includes all “born again” believers. There really can be no real serious debate about this reality. However, the theological diversities regarding the doctrine of the Church result from seeing the Scriptures through the eyes of either Covenant Theology or Dispensational Theology.

Even within these two very differing approaches to an overview of God’s plan of the ages there are those who view the Church as either a “universal body” or a “local body” of believers. Although most Covenant Theologians see the existence of individual churches in localities, they tend to lump all believers into a universal (physical and theonomic) “body.” They do so because their theology regarding the Church is mainly Augustinian.

Augustine saw the Church as a universal, physical entity that replaced the nation of Israel as God’s chosen people. All the prophecies regarding the future of Israel were interpreted to apply to the Church. Secondly, the prophesies regarding the Church are interpreted in the same way God’s promises came to the nation of Israel. They are seen to be earthly and physical rather than heavenly and spiritual.

Since Augustine viewed the Church as replacing the nation of Israel, he applied all of God’s promises to the restoration of the nation of Israel and its world dominion to this universal “body” called the Church. From that point of view, the Church’s mission became Theonomic. A doxological missional vision with a soteriological imperative was replaced with a Theonomic missional vision with a sociological imperative. The so called *Christian Crusades* and the *Inquisition* became the natural result of this distorted view of the Church.

The *Christian Crusades* and the *Inquisition* were really nothing more than the theological extension of the *Cherem* (khay'-rem) of Israel (Joshua 6:17-19). All Roman Catholics were viewed as warriors who entered the world arena with a *take no captives* mentality to capture the earth for Christ's habitation. (Although this usually was viewed only in a metaphorical sense, the Roman Catholic Church and the "Vicar of Christ" became the visible expression of "Christ's habitation" on earth).

The Covenant Theological view of the Church as the replacement of the nation of Israel naturally led to the development and acceptance of a hierarchy of a Priesthood with a High Priest (the Pontiff) and a succession of lesser priests to minister in varying capacities (sacerdotalism). It also naturally opened the door for the replacement of the circumcision and the sacrifices under the sacerdotal system of the Old Testament with infant baptism and the doctrines of transubstantiation and consubstantiation in making the Lord's Supper sacramental (Holy Communion or the Eucharist) and the continual sacrifice of Christ. Although the Reformation rejected Papal authority, it continued to hold to the Covenant Theological position regarding the Church.

Whether a person holds to a Covenant Theological position regarding a *Universal Church* or a Dispensational Theological position regarding the *Mystical/Kingdom Church*, both tend toward the same outcomes within New Evangelicalism. They both tend towards a Theonomic world view with a need to unite all professing Christians (regardless of their belief systems) under an ecumenical banner. This distortion of the doctrine of the Church leads many well meaning evangelicals and fundamentalist into cooperation with modernists, sacramentalists and those who hold to widely varying theological positions (inclusivism).

Of course, there are universal principles that govern all local churches. When Christ addresses "the Church," He is addressing all believers with universal principles that apply in all local churches. Each individual believer will be held accountable to Christ for those universal principles when the Church is finally assembled at the rapture (I Thessalonians 4:16-17) and the Judgment Seat of Christ (II Corinthians 5:9-10). However, these universal principles applied universally to all believers do not constitute a functioning entity called a *Universal Church*. This is a Roman Catholic doctrine that is born from failing to distinguish between God's earthly and temporal promises to the nation of Israel and God's eternal, spiritual promises to all those who are "born again."

Even Abraham, the father of the Jews, looked beyond the temporal, physical promises of God to see God's promises as eternal and spiritual.

⁸By faith Abraham, when he was called to go out into a place which he should after receive for an inheritance, obeyed; and he went out, not knowing whither he went. ⁹By faith he sojourned in the land of promise, as *in* a strange country, dwelling in tabernacles with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise: ¹⁰For he looked for a city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God. ¹¹Through faith also Sara herself received strength to conceive seed, and was delivered of a child when she was past age, because she judged him faithful who had promised. ¹²Therefore sprang there even of one, and him as good as dead, *so many* as the stars of the sky in multitude, and as the sand which is by the sea shore innumerable. ¹³These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off, and were persuaded of *them*, and embraced *them*, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. ¹⁴For they that say such things declare plainly that they seek a country. ¹⁵And truly, if they had been mindful of that *country* from whence they came out, they might have had opportunity to have returned. ¹⁶But now they desire a better *country*, that is, an heavenly: wherefore God is not ashamed to be called their God: for he hath prepared for them a city" (Hebrews 10:8-16).

From the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:1-4) to the day of the Rapture (I Corinthians 15:51-53), the Church of Christ is a local, autonomous (Acts 6:1-6) assembly of believers (Acts 2:41) called out of the world in salvation and united together as a communion of believers (Acts 2:42-47) as testified to by their common salvation and ritual baptism. They regularly gather for the purposes of worship, the administration of the ordinances of believer's baptism, the Lord's Supper and for personal edification to prepare themselves to do the "work of the ministry." They are dispersed (disassembled) for the purposes of evangelism and discipleship in the "world" (the "work of the ministry," Matthew 28:18-20).

Clearly the vast majority of the usage of *ekklesia* refers to assembled local churches. There are 115 occurrences of *ekklesia* in the Greek New Testament. In Acts 19:37 the phrase “robbers of churches” translates *hierosulos*, which means a temple-despoiler. In Acts 19:32, 39 and 41 *ekklesia* refers to a pagan mob (“assembly”) at Ephesus. Of the 111 other occurrences of *ekklesia*, only 17 of the following (see notes in text) refer to the mystical/Kingdom aspect of the Church:

Matthew 16:18 - “And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.”

Acts 2:47 - “Praising God, and having favour with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved.”

The verses in the early chapters of Acts can be interpreted either way. For a brief time, the church at Jerusalem was both a local church and contained all of the church. Although the meaning of *ekklesia* here seems to be somewhat subjective, the local church is obviously the intent of the text.

Acts 7:38 – “This is he, that was in the church in the wilderness with the angel which spake to him in the mount Sina, and *with* our fathers: who received the lively oracles to give unto us: . . .” This refers to the congregation of Israel.

Acts 15:3-4 – “³ And being brought on their way by the church {probably refers to their sending local church at Antioch; see Acts 14:26}, they passed through Phenice and Samaria, declaring the conversion of the Gentiles: and they caused great joy unto all the brethren. ⁴ And when they were come to Jerusalem, they were received of the church (local), and of the apostles and elders, and they declared all things that God had done with them.”

Acts 15:22 – “Then pleased it the apostles and elders, with the whole church {local church at Jerusalem}, to send chosen men of their own company to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas; *namely*, Judas surnamed Barsabas, and Silas, chief men among the brethren: . . .”

The Jerusalem council was probably the first association of churches. Paul and Barnabas were sent there by the local church at Antioch. In Acts 15, they are dealing with the apostles who primarily resided at Jerusalem.

Acts 20:17 – “And from Miletus he sent to Ephesus, and called the elders of the church.”

This refers to the pastors of the household churches at Ephesus, even though the singular “church” is used. There is no reason to presume that because the plural for “elders” is used that this refers to a plurality of churches. The “church” at Ephesus probably had more than one pastor/elder.

Acts 20:28 – “Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood.”

Again, elders of more than one local church were there, and the understanding of Baptists of the Biblical doctrine of church government definitely reinforces this.

I Corinthians 10:32 – “Give none offence, neither to the Jews, nor to the Gentiles, nor to the church of God: . . .”

This probably refers to all the redeemed of this age (mystical/Kingdom Church) in contrast to the Jews and Gentiles.

I Corinthians 15:9 – “For I am the least of the apostles, that am not meet to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God.”

Paul didn’t persecute one local church, but the Christians anywhere he went.

Galatians 1:13 – “For ye have heard of my conversation in time past in the Jews’ religion, how that beyond measure I persecuted the church of God, and wasted it: . . .” (same as above)

Ephesians 1:22 – “And hath put all *things* under his feet, and gave him *to be* the head over all *things* to the church . . .”

Ephesians 3:10 – “To the intent that now unto the principalities and powers in heavenly *places* might be known by the church the manifold wisdom of God . . .”

Ephesians 3:21 – “Unto him *be* glory in the church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end. Amen.”

Ephesians 5:23-25 – “²³ For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church: and he is the saviour of the body. ²⁴ Therefore as the church is subject unto Christ, so *let* the wives *be* to their own husbands in every thing. ²⁵ Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it; . . .”

Ephesians 5:27 – “That he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish.”

Ephesians 5:29 – “For no man ever yet hated his own flesh; but nourisheth and cherisheth it, even as the Lord the church: . . .”

Ephesians 5:32 – “This is a great mystery: but I speak concerning Christ and the church.”

All of these verses refer to the mystical/Kingdom aspect of the Church, Christ’s body. Christ has only one body. Even though that “body” is presently divided into many local churches, it is clear here that He gave Himself for one (mystical/Kingdom) Church, which has to mean more than the local aspect of the church.

Philippians 3:6 – “Concerning zeal, persecuting the church; touching the righteousness which is in the law, blameless.”

Paul didn’t persecute one local church, but the Christians anywhere he went.

Colossians 1:18 – “And he is the head of the body, the church: who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead; that in all *things* he might have the preeminence.”

Colossians 1:24 – “Who now rejoice in my sufferings for you, and fill up that which is behind of the afflictions of Christ in my flesh for his body’s sake, which is the church: . . .”

Again, singular body must mean all believers of this age.

Hebrews 2:12 – “Saying, I will declare thy name unto my brethren, in the midst of the church will I sing praise unto thee.”

The congregation of Israel is what is being referred to here .

Hebrews 12:23 – “To the general assembly and church of the firstborn, which are written in heaven, and to God the Judge of all, and to the spirits of just men made perfect, . . .”

This refers to all believers of this age, therefore the mystical/Kingdom Church.

Therefore, there are 17 uses of *ekklesia* that do not refer to just the local church. Of the 115 usages of *ekklesia*, it is safe to say that at least 98 clearly refer to the local church, while another 5 to 8 are questionable.

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1. Discuss why so many Pastors are losing the war for the preservation of doctrinal truth in the local churches they pastor. _____

2. Discuss why most fundamental churches are just one pastor away from New Evangelicalism. _____

3. Discuss the differing views of the doctrine of the Church from both the Covenant and Dispensational Theological positions. _____

4. Discuss how the Augustinian view of the Church impacts the missional vision of churches that hold to that position. _____

5. Discuss in what way the *Christian Crusades* and the *Inquisition* (as the outgrowth of Covenant Theology's position on the Church) are similar to the *Cherem* of Israel (Joshua 6:17-19). _____

6. If the above is the natural outgrowth of Covenant Theology's doctrine of the Church, what can we expect in the future from those who hold to a Covenant Theological view of the Church? _____

7. Discuss why Covenant Theology naturally provides a rationalistic opportunity for the development of such things as the Pope, a priestly hierarchy, and sacramentalism (to name a few). _____

8. Discuss why a *Universalist Church* view naturally lends itself to cooperation with modernists and Sacramentalists even when it is held to by those who proclaim themselves to be evangelicals or fundamentalists. _____

9. Read Hebrews 10:8-16. God's promises to the nation of Israel were temporal and earthly. Discuss Abraham's view of God's promises and how they differ from the Covenant Theological view. _____

10. Define the New Testament doctrine of the Church using Scripture to form your answer.. _____

11. Of the 115 uses of *ekklesia* in the New Testament, how many refer to all believers corporately and how many refer to local churches? Discuss your conclusion regarding the doctrine of the Church. _____

