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# The Summation of All Things in Christ

Studies in Ephesians with a Local Church Emphasis

LESSON CXIX : THE WISE AND SPIRIT FILLED LIFE OF SUBMISSION / THE HAUSTAFEL (5:15-6:9)

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## ***Ephesians 5:25-33 — Paul to the CHURCHES —***

When we discussed the Haustafeln (“Household Codes”) several lessons back, we saw there were actually several in the New Testament: two by Paul (Eph 5:22-6:9 and Col 3:18-4:1), one by Peter (1 Pet 2:13-3:7), and possibly several fragments which might be included in this genre (e.g., 1 Tim 2:8-15; 5:1,2; 6:1,2; Titus 2:1-10; Rom 13:1-7; et. al.). But the unique thing about our Ephesian Haustafel is Paul’s inclusion of the relationship of our Lord Jesus with His churches and how it relates to husbands and wives. We will now take several lessons to consider how Paul uses the word ‘church’ in this passage. Some things to point out as we begin:

- the word ‘church’ (ekklesia, more commonly spelled ‘ecclesia’) is used 6x in these verses, more than anyplace else in the New Testament (the word ‘ecclesia’ is used 1x in each of the following verses: vv. 23, 24, 25, 27, 29, 32). Note the RV 1885 and ASV 1901 uses the word ‘church’ 7x in these verses but the one extra time the word is used does not translate ‘ecclesia’ but rather is used for ‘it, her’; this was corrected in the RSV and NASV.
- some would argue against the KJV because “*King James demanded ecclesia be translated ‘church’ instead of the then common ‘congregation’*,” and that is true. But note other earlier translations also used the word ‘church’ (Geneva, 1560 and 1599; and Wycliffe, 1382) so this ‘unfortunate rendering’ did not begin with the KJV.
- most of the early English translations correctly translated ‘ecclesia’ as ‘congregation’: Tyndale, 1525 and 1534; Coverdale, 1535; Matthews, 1537; and Cranmer’s Bible (the ‘Great Bible’), 1539.
- of our modern versions, to my knowledge only the Young’s Literal Translation 1898 correctly translates ‘ecclesia’ as ‘assembly’ (even a little better than using ‘congregation’ in my opinion); Kenneth Wuest’s Expanded Translation 1961 also used ‘assembly’ throughout the NT with the exception of Matthew 16 and Ephesians 5. The word ‘church’ is almost universally accepted in our modern versions.

**ADMITTED BIAS —** This passage is the reason I started studying Ephesians over twenty years ago. I am unapologetically a ‘local-church’ Baptist, meaning I believe the word ‘ecclesia’ means ‘assembly, congregation’ (referring to local congregations of believers in the NT and of assembled Israel most of the time in the LXX; see B. H. Carroll’s *Ecclesia: The Church* for his LXX study). Without question the majority of times ‘ecclesia’ is used in the NT it refers to a local congregation of believers; even the universal-invisible church advocates admit this. But there are a few verses where this understanding may be called into question, our present Ephesian passage being one of those instances. I wanted to study Ephesians therefore to see if the local-church meaning made sense and to my great satisfaction, every place ecclesia has been used so far is fully understandable using the local-church interpretation (in some verses it is demanded). The question now is if that will remain true in the passage before us. So I freely admit my bias: I want to see what Paul is saying in Ephesians 5 using a local-church meaning for ecclesia. ***And while some may condemn my bias, might I ask the reader to consider their own bias?*** Even before reading this passage,

every Protestant and many Baptists will approach this using a universal-invisible church bias. *Is that bias more appropriate than mine?* So let us each attempt to approach Paul's writing here with an open mind to what Paul intended.

## THE FIRST CENTURY ECCLESIA

The word ecclesia came from the combining of two Greek words, ἐκ (ek = out of or from) and καλέω (kaleō = to call or summon). The typical Protestant definition therefore states "the church are those 'called out' from the world, meaning every Christian." ***This over-generality does great injustice to the word ecclesia!*** There are a couple reasons to believe that definition to be insufficient.

First, if we just consider the main root word καλέω (kaleō) we see it is often used just to refer to something 'named':

*'you shall call His name JESUS'* (Matt 1:21)

*'they shall call His name Immanuel'* (Matt 1:23)

*'you shall call his name John'* (Luke 1:13)

*'But why do you call Me "Lord, Lord," and do not do the things which I say?'* (Luke 6:46)

*'stayed on the mountain called Olivet'* (Luke 21:37)

This is a common usage, one of which we are all familiar. But this same root word is also used in the sense of the Lord 'calling out a people unto Himself':

*'For I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance'* (Matt 9:13)

*'the sheep hear his voice; and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out'* (John 10:3)

*'And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose'* (Rom 8:28)

*'God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord'* (1 Cor 1:9)

*'To those who are called, sanctified by God the Father, and preserved in Jesus Christ'* (Jude 1)

In all of the verses above (and examples could be multiplied throughout the NT) the word used is a form of our word καλέω (kaleō) and not the word ἐκκλησία (ecclēsia). But if ecclesia merely means 'those called out' as the Protestants say, then why was the word ecclesia never used? Another example, this verse even including the preposition ἐκ (ek), the prefix in our word ecclesia:

*'But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light'* (1 Pet 2:9)

When Peter says the Lord 'called you out', the phrase he uses is ἐκ σκότους ὑμᾶς καλέσαντος [ek skotous humas kalesantos; lit. 'out of darkness called ye', the 'ye' ('you' plural) coming before 'called' in the Greek]. So even while using the words 'ek' and 'kaleō', Peter still did not use the word 'ecclesia' But as asked above, if ecclesia merely means 'those called out' as the Protestants

say, then why was the word *ecclesia* not used? Check it out: ***not once in the Scriptures is the word ecclesia used to refer to those called out unto the Lord in the sense of salvation – not once!***

In each of the verses above, the word for ‘call’ or ‘call out’ is a form of our word καλέω (kaleō), but Paul also commands believers to ‘come out’ by using another word with a similar meaning:

*‘Therefore **Come out** from among them And be separate, says the Lord. Do not touch what is unclean, And I will receive you’ (2 Cor 6:17)*

The word Paul uses here is ἐξέρχομαι (exerchomai) meaning ‘to go out, to come out.’ But our point is the same: if all *ecclesia* means is ‘to call out, those called out unto the Lord for salvation’, why was the word *ecclesia* not used? There must be a reason why the NT writers avoided using *ecclesia* to merely refer to those who have been saved.

As we now consider the word itself, we see ***the word ecclesia is used in the NT with a more formal sense than the general sense some place upon this word.*** Look at how the grammarians and lexicons define the word (a lexicon is a dictionary of Greek words):

In its most basic sense, *ecclesia* 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 an institution which continues to this day.*** Further definitions:

- H. E. Dana, Greek scholar, co-author of an advance Greek grammar and professor of NT Interpretation at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, wrote this concerning the Greek background of *ecclesia*: ***“It was commonly used in reference to bodies of qualified representatives ‘called out’ for legislative purposes.... When this governing body of those who held the qualifications of citizenship assembled for deliberative purposes they were known as an ecclesia. In its bearing upon the New Testament idea of the church the important significance of the classical usage is that the term referred to a body of persons having definite qualifications, assembled to carry out certain organized aims on democratic principles. To be more specific, there were in the classical usage of this term four elements pertinent to its New Testament meaning: (1) the assembly was local; (2) it was autonomous; (3) it presupposed definite qualifications; (4) it was conducted on democratic principles.”*** [Dana, *Ecclesia*]

- Louw-Nida's Lexicon: "*a congregation of Christians, implying interacting membership* ... Though some persons have tried to see in the term ἐκκλησία [ecclēsia] a more or less literal meaning of 'called-out ones,' this type of etymologizing is not warranted either by the meaning of ἐκκλησία [ecclēsia] in NT times or even by its earlier usage. ***The term ἐκκλησία [ecclēsia] was in common usage for several hundred years before the Christian era and was used to refer to an assembly of persons constituted by well-defined membership.***" [Louw-Nida *Greek-English Lexicon of the NT*]
- Thayer's Greek lexicon: "a gathering of citizens called out from their homes into some public place; an assembly" [J. H. Thayer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*]
- Liddell and Scott: "an assembly of citizens regularly summoned; the legislative assembly" [R. Scott and H. G. Liddell, *A Greek-English Lexicon*]
- Trench's Synonyms: "the lawful assembly in a free Greek city of all those possessed of the rights of citizenship, for the transaction of public affairs" [R. C. Trench, *Synonyms of the New Testament*; q.v. Overbey, *Ecclesia*]
- Seyffert's Dictionary: "The assembly of the people, which in Greek cities had the power of final decision in public affairs." [Oskar Seyffert, *A Dictionary of Classical Antiquities*; q.v. Overbey, *Ecclesia*]

## **ECCLESIA WAS A COMMON WORD**

So when Christ spoke '*Upon this rock I will build My ecclesia*' (Matt 16:18) He was using a term familiar to each disciple. ***"The New Testament writers neither coined this word nor employed it in an unusual sense.*** The apostles and early Christians were more familiar with the Septuagint than with the Hebrew Version. From it they generally quoted. They wrote in Greek to a Greek-speaking world, and used Greek words as a Greek-speaking people would understand them.... ***[It is] fiction that Ecclesia was used in any new, special sense. The object of Christ's ecclesia, and terms of membership in it, were indeed different from those of the classic or Septuagint ecclesia. But the word itself retains its ordinary meaning.*** In determining this meaning we look to the common, literal usage. If occasionally we find it used in a general or figurative way, these few instances must be construed in harmony with the common, literal signification." [B. H. Carroll, *Ecclesia*] ***Therefore, while we may debate and argue theology today, without question the first-century believers would have understood Paul to have a local assembly sense to the word 'ecclesia'.***

It is important here to note that one of the things inherent within the ecclesia is form and structure; when Jesus said He would build His ecclesia starting with His apostles, each present would have immediately thought of the secular ecclesia common in every city-state. These secular ecclesias had membership and order, they were more than mere gatherings. So are the Lord's ecclesias, the Lord's churches, the gatherings started and which continue to this day in the name of our Master. Contrast that with those who believe every time they gather together in any sort of fashion with other believers, it is a 'church' since '*where two or three are gathered together, there I am in their midst*' (Matt 18:20). True, the Lord may be present when believers are gathered but that does not necessarily mean it is a church. An ecclesia has structure, form, and order which includes membership, ordinances, leadership, times of song, prayer and teaching, church discipline, and other such items. A church is more than a couple believers getting together, even for religious purposes.

## THE SECULAR ECCLESIA

We see the only NT secular usage of ecclesia in Acts 19:30-41; the word is used 3x in this portion of scripture:

Tyndale 1534 — When Paul would have entered in unto the people, the disciples suffered him not. Certain also of the chief of Asia which were his friends, sent unto him, desiring him that he would not press into the common hall. Some cried one thing and some another, and the congregation was all out of quiet, and the more part knew not wherefore they were come together. Some of the company drew forth Alexander, the Jews thrusting him forwards. Alexander beckoned with the hand, and would have given the people an answer. When they knew he was a Jew, there arose a shout almost for the space of two hours, of all men crying, great is Diana of the Ephesians. When the town clerk had ceased the people, he said: ye men of Ephesus, what man is it that knoweth not how that the city of the Ephesians is a worshipper of the great goddess Diana, and of the image which came from heaven. Seeing then that no man saith here against, ye out to be content, and to do nothing rashly: *For he have brought hither these men which are neither robbers of churches, nor yet despisers of your goddess.* Wherefore if Demetrius and the craftsmen which are with him, have any saying to any man, the law is open, and there are rulers, let them accuse one another. If ye go about any other thing, it may be determined in a lawful congregation. For we are in jeopardy to be accused of this day's business: forasmuch as there is no cause whereby we may give a reckoning of this concourse of people. And when he had thus spoken, he let the congregation depart.

Young's 1863 — And on Paul's purposing to enter in unto the populace, the disciples were not suffering him, and certain also of the chief men of Asia, being his friends, having sent unto him, were entreating him not to venture himself into the theatre. Some indeed, therefore, were calling out one thing, and some another, for the assembly was confused, and the greater part did not know for what they were come together; and out of the multitude they put forward Alexander — the Jews thrusting him forward — and Alexander having beckoned with the hand, wished to make defence to the populace, and having known that he is a Jew, one voice came out of all, for about two hours, crying, 'Great [is] the Artemis of the Ephesians!' And the public clerk having quieted the multitude, saith, 'Men, Ephesians, why, who is the man that doth not know that the city of the Ephesians is a devotee of the great goddess Artemis, and of that which fell down from Zeus? these things, then, not being to be gainsaid, it is necessary for you to be quiet, and to do nothing rashly. *'For ye brought these men, who are neither temple-robbers nor speaking evil of your goddess;* if indeed, therefore, Demetrius and the artificers with him with any one have a matter, court [days] are held, and there are proconsuls; let them accuse one another. And if ye seek after anything concerning other matters, in the legal assembly it shall be determined; for we are also in peril of being accused of insurrection in regard to this day, there being no occasion by which we shall be able to give an account of this concourse;' and these things having said, he dismissed the assembly.

***“These three occurrences of the term ecclesia, in which it is not possible to translate it ‘church,’ are sufficient to call our attention to the fact that the word still had for early Christians its common significance, and was not invariably used in its restricted sense as the designation of a body of believers.”*** [Dana, *Ecclesia*]

A note of great interest on Tyndale's translation: in v37 *“For ye have brought hither these men which are neither robbers of churches, nor yet despisers of your goddess.”* (Acts 19:37) While altogether not an accurate translation (*“robbers of temples”* is more accurate), it does show the

word “church” was in common use when Tyndale translated his NT yet he chose to translate ecclesia “congregation”.

## THE WORD ‘CHURCH’ IS A SUBSTITUTION, NOT A TRANSLATION

*Any translator not translating ecclesia as assembly, congregation or the like is allowing their theology to bias their translating. The fact they use the word ‘church’ is therefore not a recognition of the actual intention of the word ecclesia, rather it should be regarded as a commentary. Ecclesia may be correctly translated assembly (or congregation) in all instances and the passage will make perfect sense.* I am not alone with that conviction: “It is this word [‘church’] with these connotations which is employed to translate *ecclesia*. *It is clear how utterly inadequate — not to say inaccurate — it is.*” [Dana, *Ecclesia*] “Now our English word ‘church’ as a rendering of *ecclesia* is doubly unfortunate, for while it fails both to represent and interpret the Greek original, its historical and conventional usage carries us even farther away from both the Hellenic and Hebrew minds and associations.” [A. M. Fairborn, *Studies in Religion and Theology*; q.v. Dana, *Ecclesia*]

F. J. A. Hort (1828-1892), an accepted Greek scholar and definitely not one biased by Baptist influences, wrote this concerning the danger of not translating the term properly: “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....* ‘Ecclesia’ is the only perfectly colorless word within our reach, carrying us back to the beginnings of Christian history, and enabling us in some degree to get behind words and names to the simple facts which they originally denoted.” [Hort, *Ecclesia*] Hort as much as possible avoided using the word “church” or even “congregation” in his lectures (later published).

Edward H. Overbey agrees: *“The word church should not be in our English versions today to represent ekklesia. Its appearance in the New Testament, we believe, has obscured the true meaning.... In our study of the word ekklesia in the New Testament it is clear that we should be careful to divorce the word church from it lest we read into ekklesia the meanings of the word church.”* [Overbey, *Ecclesia*]

*Therefore as Paul wrote his letters and as his recipients read (or heard them being read) they would have immediately turned their thoughts to their local secular ecclesias which were in every large principality. They would also understand their gathering to be like the secular, only their Christian ecclesia was for the honor of their Lord and Master Jesus Christ.* We thus understand that in every instance *ecclesia* is used in the NT, the word is used in one of three manners:

- as *a particular local assembly* within the strict adherence of the word’s definition, almost always of the ecclesia began by Christ for His NT work; once to describe the assembly of the Jews as they wandered in the wilderness (Acts 7:38) and in one passage to describe a Greek “city-hall” assembly (Acts 19:32,39,41)
- as *a class or an institution*, used generically; in this instance it is used in the singular but is the same as saying “all ecclesias” (e.g., if we said ‘*the computer is a necessity in today’s offices*’, no one would imagine a huge universal-invisible computer; if we said ‘*the car is a necessity to most families*’, no one would imagine a huge universal-invisible car)

- as **a future assembly of all the redeemed in heaven**, the word ecclesia still retaining its original meaning because at that time the redeemed will actually be a gathered assembly (following B. H. Carroll's "church in prospect"); this is one viable explanation of Paul's use in Ephesians 5

## WHAT IS OUR CHURCH'S POSITION?

Our official church position may be found in our doctrinal statement: ***"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."*** [from the Doctrinal Statement of Emmanuel Baptist Church as found on the official church website, [www.ebckey.org](http://www.ebckey.org); February 18, 2023]

## WHAT IS PAUL SAYING IN EPHESIANS 5?

Repeating our comment above: *"While we may debate and argue theology today, without question the first-century believers would have understood Paul to have a local-assembly sense to the word 'ecclesia'."* So how are we to understand Ephesians 5:22-33?

<sup>22</sup> Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. <sup>23</sup> For the husband is head of the wife, as also Christ is head of the ***ecclesia, the organized assembly of believers gathered in His name***; and He is the Savior of the body. <sup>24</sup> Therefore, just as the ***ecclesia, our own assembly*** is subject to Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in everything. <sup>25</sup> Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the ***ecclesia, our assembly of believers*** and gave Himself for her, <sup>26</sup> that He might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word, <sup>27</sup> that He might present her to Himself a glorious ***ecclesia, a glorious assembly***, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish. <sup>28</sup> So husbands ought to love their own wives as their own bodies; he who loves his wife loves himself. <sup>29</sup> For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as the Lord does the ***ecclesia, the assembly of believers***. <sup>30</sup> For we are members of His body, of His flesh and of His bones. <sup>31</sup> "For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh." <sup>32</sup> This is a great mystery, but I speak concerning Christ and the ***ecclesia, His assembly***. <sup>33</sup> Nevertheless let each one of you in particular so love his own wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband. (Eph 5:22-33 NKVJ with 'ecclesia' expanded)

*Without question, this would have been how the first-century believers would have heard and understood what Paul wrote. They would have thought of their own ecclesia, their own assembly of believers because that is all they knew! Some comments for clarification:*

***Jesus is only head of that one assembly? Jesus died only for that particular assembly? Jesus loves only that particular assembly?*** — Even if we were to understand Paul as only speaking of that one single assembly of believers, that would be no different than Paul saying 'Jesus loved me and died for me' (Gal 2:20). No one needs to explain what Paul means there: ***what Paul is saying of himself is true of each and every believer***. Paul therefore could have been speaking generically;

what is true of one assembly of believers is true of each and every assembly of believers.

**Further thoughts on first-century thinking: (a) every true believer was a member of an ecclesia, of an assembly of believers; and (b) every member of an ecclesia was a believer.** — This takes a little explaining. (a) As far as we are able to determine, it was not even a consideration for someone to profess Christ and not follow in baptism and fellowship with other believers. This was a natural process, unlike much of today's lack of commitment after a profession of faith. May there have been exceptions? – while that would be impossible to prove one way or the other, if we were to assume there were exceptions it would have been much less likely than today. Nor do we see any evidence in the NT of someone *not* becoming part of an assembly of believers. In all the NT, there is a peculiar lack of any admonition by the apostles such as, 'After you profess Christ, you really should join with the fellowship of believers in your locality.' The one step was immediately followed by the other. (b) When any NT writer wrote to an ecclesia (to an assembly of believers), they wrote *as to Christians*. No where in any NT letters are there 'exceptions', e.g., *'to the believers I write this, but to those not saved but are members of that assembly I write this ...'*. Everything that was written in any of the NT letters is assumed to be written to a believer in Christ (who was also a church member). Our churches were never meant to be a 'mixed multitude' of the lost and saved (although there would always be unsaved visitors, e.g., 1 Cor 14:23-25, they were *visitors* who came to witness a gathering of those who belong to Christ). Does that mean the apostles were blind to the truth there may be unbelievers amongst the true believers? – no, of course not. Why else would the apostles write for each person professing Christ to *'examine yourselves as to whether you are in the faith; test yourselves'* (2 Cor 13:5); and *'therefore, brethren, be even more diligent to make your call and election sure'* (2 Pet 1:10). The apostles also taught church discipline, the object of such actions being to remove the unsaved (or those professing faith yet were acting inconsistently with the teachings of Christ) from the assembly of believers. So obviously they understood there could be 'tares' amongst the 'wheat' (Matt 13:24-30). But the fact there may be those deceived among the true believers does not negate the accepted truth: *anyone making a profession of faith would be baptized and become a member of an ecclesia, and the members of any ecclesia would be composed of believers in Christ!* That being true, while the early believers would have thought of their own assembly as Eph 5 was being read, we would be on solid theological grounds to make application to other ecclesias and possibly even to individual believers.

**WHAT ABOUT v. 27, THE 'CHURCH IN GLORY'?** — As I read through the entire passage using 'ecclesia' instead of 'church', I see no problem with the original listeners thinking Paul was speaking of their own ecclesia in eternity, and that which was true of their own assembly would be true of each and every ecclesia (or even each and every believer). I think that is the most consistent with the passage as a whole. But if for some reason they would have been thinking of 'all ecclesias in existence / all believers' (which I find doubtful and unnecessary; remember, all they knew were their own local assemblies, whether their city/state's secular assembly or their own assemblies of worship), the term 'ecclesia' would still retain its original meaning of 'assembly' but this time it would be the assembly of all the elect of all time. Dr. B. H. Carroll refers to this as 'the church in glory' or 'the glory church', and I find that very plausible.

**WHAT ARE THE REAL ISSUES?** — So why do those who hold to the universal-invisible church teaching attack the local-assembly interpretation?

- Believing in the local assembly of believers is not to deny that all true believers belong to the Lord and are going to heaven. What they call the ‘universal-invisible church’ would be more correctly called ‘the family of God’ (*For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus* – Gal 3:26) but we are all speaking of the same thing. The difference is mere semantics.
- We are not teaching everyone who belongs to a church is saved, nor are we teaching someone has to be a member of a church to go to heaven.
- We are not teaching any one church or denomination is more highly favored because of their denomination (although we do believe any church is only as strong as its doctrines).
- We are not teaching any special eternal favor of any denomination.

If so many times the argument is nothing more than semantics, why do some find fault the local-assembly interpretation? On the other hand, why do those who hold to a strict local-assembly interpretation of ecclesia find fault with those who hold to the universal-invisible church teaching?

- One reason is that today there is an unhealthy emphasis upon the ‘universal-invisible church,’ often to the degradation of the value of believers gathering together with others within our local churches. Believers need other believers to grow in the faith and the Lord has put in place the means for us to do so: our local assemblies. We disregard our local assemblies to the detriment of our own spiritual well-being (as well as missing the opportunity of being used to be a blessing to others). So an over-emphasis on what many call the universal-invisible church actually hinders the means of spiritual growth put in place by our Lord Jesus Christ.
- Another reason would be that a misunderstanding of what the Scriptures teach regarding the assembly of believers has led to errors in other areas of doctrine. A few examples: the Scriptures teach that Christ started His churches during His earthly ministry, but those who teach the universal-invisible church believe the church was ‘born’ on the Day of Pentecost. That of course leads to other errors such as baptism when considered with what they call ‘spiritual baptism.’ A misunderstanding of the Lord’s intent of His churches (as we see in Ephesians 2,3) has led some to the error of amillenialism, equating the saved people in the OT with what they call the ‘universal-invisible church’ (what they call those who are saved in the NT). Error begets error.
- Probably the biggest error coming out of the universal-invisible church teaching is ecumenicism. Unity is no longer the unity within our churches but is thought to mean we should all forget doctrine and gather together regardless of our beliefs (Catholics, Lutherans, Pentecostals, Presbyterians, Anglicans, Baptists, Church of Christ, Church of God, et. al., all forgetting any differences and becoming ‘one’). Some would even go so far as to include all faiths, Christianity with Judaism, Muslims, Buddhists, etc. So while Paul does teach unity within our assemblies (Eph 4:1-16), it is a unity which includes doctrine (Eph 4:4-6) while we are to remove ourselves from those who teach error (1 Cor 5:1-8; Rom 16:17,18; Acts 20:29-31; 2 Thess 3:6, 14; 2 John 9,10). Ecumenicism is a grievous error (but note, this is not to imply all who hold to the universal-invisible church are ecumenical, only that again, one error begets another much-worse error).

## PRACTICAL OBSERVATIONS

**CHURCH ATTENDANCE IS NOT MAGIC** — Teaching on the local-assembly is not to imply that merely going to church somehow has a ‘*mystical, magical power*’ and all we need to do is show up and get our ‘*spiritual fix*’ to guarantee God’s blessings. Rather a local-assembly teaching involves a whole set of things which are divinely intertwined: *church attendance, prayer support, financial support, emotional support, teaching, learning, a love for the word of God, a concern for those with whom we’ve covenanted together ...* these are some of the things thought of most quickly. Each of these overlap and are involved in each other. ***Church attendance with a hardened heart, an apathetic attitude or the like will not necessarily be corrected merely by stepping in the church building*** (although there are times when the Lord sovereignly chooses to intervene and break a calloused heart; this typically does not happen while watching football but while sitting under the word of God). ***But when God’s man (a missionary, a pastor, a Sunday School teacher or whoever) prays and prepares both his heart and a solid biblical message, and God’s people pray and prepare their heart to receive a message from God, the Lord as a rule does a work only He can do.*** “For the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.” — Heb 4:12

**WE NEED TO ATTEND CHURCH** — Pastor Nile Fisher, a beloved pastor my wife and I enjoyed sitting under when we were just a young married couple, made this observation concerning church attendance: ***When any believer stays out of church for an extended period, they will either (a) backslide to the point they don’t know if they’re saved or lost; or (b) become so self-righteous they cannot enter a church service without an air of superiority and being critical.*** Now many years later, I can validate the truth of his statement.

***“[The] historical reading concerning the business assemblies of the several petty but independent, self-governing Greek states, with their lawful conference, their free speech, their decision by vote ... sounds much like the proceedings of particular and independent Baptist churches today.”***

[B. H. Carroll, *Ecclesia: The Church*]

***“The prevalent Protestant conception of the church is utterly foreign to the conception 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.”***

[H. E. Dana, *Christ’s Ecclesia — The New Testament Church*]

***“For many [the local church] is all too literal and imperfect and visible. It is much easier to live in a dream church than in a real one.”***

[B. H. Kazee, *The Church and the Ordinances*]

# **Emmanuel Baptist Church of Bellbrook, OH**

## **Church Covenant**

Having been led, as we believe, by the Spirit of God to receive the Lord Jesus Christ as our Savior, and on the profession of our faith, having been baptized in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, we do now in the presence of God, angels, and this assembly, most solemnly and joyfully enter into covenant with one another, as one body in Christ.

### **For the Advancement of this Church**

We engage, therefore, by the aid of the Holy Spirit, to walk together in Christian love; to strive for the advancement of this church in knowledge, holiness, and comfort; to promote its prosperity and spirituality; to sustain its worship, ordinances, discipline, and doctrines.

### **As Christian Stewards**

To contribute cheerfully and regularly to the support of the ministry, the expenses of the church, the relief of the poor, and the spread of the gospel through all nations.

### **Devotions**

We also engage to maintain family and private devotions; to educate our children religiously; to seek the salvation of our kindred and acquaintances.

### **As Christian Brethren**

We further engage to watch over one another in brotherly love; to remember each other in prayer; to aid each other in sickness and distress; to cultivate Christian sympathy in feeling and courtesy in speech; to be slow to take offense, but always ready for reconciliation and mindful of the rules of our Savior to secure it without delay.

### **Before the World**

We shall strive to walk circumspectly in the world; to be just in our dealings, faithful in our engagements, and exemplary in our deportment; to avoid all tattling, backbiting, and excessive anger; to abstain from the sale and use of intoxicating drinks as a beverage; and to be zealous in our efforts to advance the kingdom of our Savior.

### **When We Move**

We do moreover engage that when we move from this place we will as soon as possible unite with some other church where we can carry out the spirit of this covenant and the principles of God's word.