

## MEGAMYSTERY PART II)

*“For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as the Lord does the church. For we are members of His body, of His flesh and of His bones. For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh’. This is a great mystery, but I speak concerning Christ and the church.”* (Ephesians 5:29-32)

The reader who did not receive the previous issue may want to send for it. In it we introduced the great mystery of the Bible applied in the above passage, as well as in I Timothy 3:14-16, to the Christian church. In that issue we noted that the word translated “church” in the English Bible is the Greek *ekklesia*, which translates literally as the “called out”. Our English word “church” is derived from the Greek *kuriakon* which always has reference to a pagan temple of idols and is never used in the Bible in reference to the called out people of God. Three times in the Bible *ekklesia* is used of a secular gathering, and translated in our English Bible “assembly”. The other one hundred and twelve times it occurs in the New Testament, it has reference to God’s called out elect, and translated “church”. The word “church” is also used of a denomination in distinction from other denominations of Christianity, and of a building where people meet for religious purposes. It is used of all Christians of a state or nation. It is used in the name given to a particular association of professing Christians who regularly assemble in a certain locality. And it is used of all the elect and redeemed people of God. The last two are the only Biblical usages of *ekklesia* in respect to the people of God, and therefore, the only ones with which we are concerned. In the previous issue we undertook to determine what idea of the church met the criteria set in the Bible, particularly the church of which Jesus spoke in Matthew 16:18. It was demonstrated that the criteria left us by the Lord and the Apostles permits only one strict concept of the church that Christ built. That is the “universal, invisible” entire body of elect believers of all time.

This conclusion creates the prominent practical problem of this great mystery, to wit: 1) *Ekklesia* is used over eighty times in the scripture of a local gathering of believers or “local church”. All seven of those churches mentioned in Revelation were local churches (It is significant also that they all were impermanent, died and disappeared). 2) The regular congregational gathering, assembling, the prominent “one another” aspect of the *ekklesia* cannot be realized on this earth in an invisible/universal church. 3) The strong desirability, if not necessity, of some sort of commitment to, and identification with, a local body of Christians. It is possible for a Christian to survive without this, even necessary sometimes, but it is not what we find in the Bible. It can be demonstrated and argued, of course, from Paul’s own pilgrimage, that a Christian may be isolated for a while, but the normal course of life in Christ will bring Christians together. There can be no denying or mistaking the fact that the majority of practical Christian experience revolves around distinctly separate local congregations. How may this be reconciled with the singularity and perfect unity of the one true church of the living God, and the fact that no local church can measure up to the real mystical body of Jesus Christ?

## Wrong Answers

The Roman Church, while alleging itself to be the “One Holy Catholic (universal) Church”, sought to satisfy this criterion by merging local congregations under its power by dioceses, overseen by bishops and Cardinals, and identifying the local congregations by the buildings (churches) from *kirks*>*kuriakons* in which they met. Protestant, or Reformed (those churches admitting their origins in the Roman Catholic monolith) departed but little from this system, maintaining central power in the State or denominational hierarchy, while ruling the local congregation in their respective parishes by bishops or presbyteries, whose power was derived from said central denominational headquarters. These see themselves as the one unified church with scattered congregations, although they permit those congregations to call themselves churches. All of these, therefore, attempt to leave the scriptural weight of one universal unified church intact. Scores of reasons, however, deny that any or all of them can be the one exclusive church that Christ builds.

Non-Catholic, non Protestant congregations (those who claim descent from pre-Constantinian Christianity) however, in reaction against the errors of the above, commonly try to resolve the one universal church versus multiple local church problem by heavily emphasizing the local church, while minimizing or outright denying the existence of a universal church at all. The most radical and vocal of these are Baptist Landmark churches who, not only affirm that the only concept of a church is a local one, but that the only valid church, the one true bride of Christ, is a Baptist church. People who are members of non-Baptist churches may be saved and in the “kingdom of God” but are only “guests” at the wedding of Christ to His church.

The most formidable obstacle to the credibility of this local-church-only view is the many times *ekklesia* is used in the singular when no particular local congregation is in view, but the whole body of Christ. In such cases, local-church-only advocates argue that “the church” must be viewed as an abstract institution as “the home” or “the state”. Therefore when Christ spoke of building His church, He was not speaking of a single concrete entity, but only an abstract organization which would be fleshed out in localities all over the earth. This concept must do violence to the word our Lord chose to use as a description of what He was doing. “My *ekklesia*” can only mean “my called out”. Local-church-only advocates, therefore, attempt to divorce the word from its original meaning and give it the definition of “assembly”. The Lord, they say, seized on a corporate entity that already existed in the Greek political and social scene as something similar to what He was building, much like using “my sheep” to illustrate His people. This Greek *ekklesia* was an assembly called out and gathered by herald to deal with and settle a community problem. Local-church-only advocates ignore the called out aspect of this assembly and put all the emphasis on “assembly”. This concept sees the church only in its assembled mode. In fact the church exists only in those hours during which it is assembled. When it is dismissed and dispersed it does not exist! The substitution of assembly for called out is a premise absolutely essential to the argument against a universal church. But this premise is not only weak; it is untenable. In every place where the church is said to assemble in one place (I Cor. 14:23) it was the church before it assembled, and still the church when it dispersed.

If Jesus were only looking for an existing Greek word by which to describe the gathering of His people to Himself, and the principle visible criteria of such a people was their assembling in a particular locality, He would have used one of the words for assembly or gathering in common usage at the time. The distinction of *ekklesia* (called out) from *paneguris* (assembly) is clear when the two are used to express the two ideas in Hebrews 12:23. The called out will at that time be finally all assembled or gathered. Until then we are not essentially the assembled or gathered, but the called out.

The idea of a peculiarly elected, called out and separated people of God out of the whole of a fallen race is prominent in the scriptures from righteous Abel forward. The second book in the Bible, Exodus (the Exit) takes its name from this prevailing redemptive principle. God is calling out His chosen people from the bondage, the slavery, and the corruption of the world typified in Egypt. Even the Lord Jesus Christ, in order to perfectly identify with the people He came to redeem, had to fulfil that "called out" criteria (Hosea 11:1). As a child He was taken down into Egypt, ostensibly to prevent Herod's murderers from killing Him. But since when does God have to flee and hide from madmen? No, He was taken down to Egypt in order to fulfil Hosea's prophesey (Matt.2:15), which prophesey was given in order to fulfil the called out criteria of the Christian church. This mark of separation as the critical mark of the people of God is emphasized in II Corinthians 6:14-7:1, drawn from the prophecy of Isaiah 55:11, and invoked again in Revelation 18:4. Sheep are indeed an appropriate metaphor of Christians and the Christian church in many aspects. But the Greek civil *ekklesia* resembles it only in the fact that it is called by herald. Local church only advocates, however, choose to ignore that single similarity (I will leave it to the reader to guess why) and use "assembly", a word or state which in no way qualifies acceptance as God's people or signifies anything other than a group of people who get together for some purpose.

### Local Churches Come up Short

The fact of the matter is the peculiar marks of the true church are either non-existent in the institutional church, or so dimly and weakly present, it utterly fails to be the power and light that Christ ascribed to His mystical Body to wit: 1) Its inseparable identity with Christ, every member in vital organic union with Him and with one another, each and every member a true Christian. 2) The true vital headship of Christ. 3) Its constitution of all the elect of God. 4) Its true spiritual unity. 5) True holiness in all its members. 6) The real "salt of the earth" and "light of the world". 7) Its permanence and invincibility.

As loudly as it may claim to have such power and authority as the Lord ascribes to His church, the local church simply does not have the keys of the kingdom. Its attempts to bind and loose are vain and feckless. Acting as a corporate executive, it has no power to remit or retain sins. It may vote to "deliver someone over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh", but neither hell nor heaven takes any note of it.

It may claim to "authorize" Baptism or the Lord's Supper, evangelism, missions, and the establishment of other churches. But these are only vain arrogation of men. There is not a shred of evidence either in precept, precedent or principle for such authority: Not in the words or our Lord or the writings of the apostles. Neither the organized church nor its officers have such spiritual authority. We are exceedingly taxed to try to keep a

straight face at some of these pretensions. A pastor, evangelist, or missionary gets a particular project, enterprise, mission or ministry in his mind. It may or may not be inspired by the Holy Spirit, but he dares not undertake it until it is authorized by the local church. It has to be made to appear as originating and having its very roots in the church itself. So he brings it to the church, promotes it and persuades the church to authorize it. It is then ballyhooed as a ministry originating and thrust forth by the church. Please! Everyone knows it is the *minister's* ministry, and if it be a genuine one, it was instigated by Christ in the heart of the man, being authorized by Him in Matthew 28:18-20. Unless those words of Christ were spoken to those eleven men only (in which case the commission expired with their deaths), it was spoken to the church. Churches do not send missionaries. The Lord of the harvest does. The Lord sends the church! And it cannot go while it is assembled. It must be scattered to do its job. It is well, good and orderly that the local congregation (as well as other Christians and churches) should give various ministries its blessing and support, but the church's vote has no more given it divine authority than a priest's incantation of "*hoc est corpus meum*" transforms bread and wine into the body of Christ!

In fact, there is no authority in the church of the Lord Jesus Christ other than Himself. Our Lord made this abundantly clear in Matthew 20:25-28. Kings of the gentiles exercise authority over the people. The leadership of the Christian church does not! Pastors, bishops of both regional and local organized entities far too often reign as "kings of the gentiles" exercising authority over the people. Such dangerously border on behaving as petty popes, arrogant, insecure, jealous of their "authority", demanding submission and loyalty to themselves. In contrast, the greatest in the body of Christ is the most humble, diligent and tireless *servant* of the saints. Leadership in the church of the Lord is implemented in self-giving, self-denying, submission and obedience. The leader's life and service is mandated by the needs of his charges, not the other way around!

The headship of Christ must be practically subverted in the organized institution. In the denominational church, it is usurped by the denomination. In the independent church, autonomy effectively overthrows the headship of Christ. It is either confiscated by the leadership, or (by majority vote), the will of a mob which will be ruled by no one, not even Christ. In either of these cases the individual Christian who would live in obedience to his living Head is often branded as a rebel for doing so! Does the believer have two spiritual heads? A monstrosity! Is the headship of Christ mediated through another man? That is pure Romanism, the Nicholaitanism hated by the Lord. A false mediatorial "authority" has been interposed between the believer and his Head, Who is the only true Mediator between man and God, the Man Christ Jesus.

As unwelcome and shocking the thought might be, a local-church-only position combined with this overthrow and subversion of the headship of Christ is necessary for the purposes of some pastors. How else could one undertake to "build a great church", promote and prosecute specific programs shaped and ordered to proliferate churches of a specific brand, increase membership, amass money, power and influence in the world? A universal church cannot develop creeds and doctrines designed to make distinctions between itself and other Christians, and drive wedges between those who fellowship with Christ. As unkind as it may seem, this reminds me of a

prominent “mega-church” pastor, who as a young man, preached the Bible truths of divine sovereignty, election and predestination, and later publicly repudiated them. When questioned about why he did so, he admitted those truths to be Biblical, but that he abandoned them “because you cannot preach them and build and promote a great church for Christ”. There you have it! If we are dissatisfied with Christ’s progress in building His church, we must overthrow His headship, take it up ourselves, and do a better job!

No local church comes anywhere near to representing that one complete body, replete with every needed gift, and ministry, as declared in I Corinthians 12:13-27 and Ephesians 4:11-16. Such independent autonomy is a fanciful myth. Every local church and every member draws vital spiritual needs and nurture from members of other local churches both living and dead! Even while vaunting their autonomy and independence they are ever bringing in ministers and other saints from other congregations, reading their books, and drawing on what has been taught and passed down to them by believers who have long been with that company of just men made perfect

### Creeping Worldly Corruption

Local churches tend to become “things”, an organization, a public corporate entity, rather than a living organism. And as such, certain necessary evils attach themselves, which always corrupt it and mandate its apostasy.

Ownership of real estate subjects it to laws, regulations and responsibilities of society and public entities. Someone has to be legally responsible to the State. In order for the responsible agents to act under the authority of the church there must be an identifiable membership. There must be legally defined qualifications for such membership and the right to vote. There must be means to remove such persons from the rolls and deprive them of voting rights. In order to facilitate all this there must be a constitution, by-laws, and rules of order. Such constitutions and by-laws, as well as the desire for some semblance of unity, require covenants, creeds, and confessions. While these confessions make an external mechanical and legal unity within the membership, they erect barriers between these people and every other Christian and local church on earth. They also subvert the word of God. A preacher must either give his heart to the language of the Bible or to that of the creed. He cannot do both. Local churches soon learn they cannot do much without help from the Christian community outside their own membership. So they either panhandle other churches to support their programs or join denominations, start new ones, or at the very least, set up associations. These associations, in turn become public entities and must have the same membership, qualified by constitutions, by-laws, covenants, confessions and creeds. This ushers in all the evils, the chicanery, the strife and contention and perversions of the world’s politics and power struggles. These inevitable politics and power abuses soon has the whole sordid mess behaving again like “kings of the gentiles”. An insatiable thirst for money to operate its machinery and finance its programs and enterprises makes tax breaks an absolute necessity. Such churches and their associations have now become approved governmental entities and are at the mercy of its social, commercial, civil and criminal laws, vulnerable to its lawyers and lawsuits. Its freedom in Christ is gone. What a mess!!!!

### A Biblical Local Church

What are we to think? How may we think of a local church as a scriptural one? First, we should legitimize the application of *ekklesia* to the local church. Since only the one universal body of Christ can meet the criteria of the one that Christ builds, and since the Bible uses the word in respect to local congregations (assemblies) the word must be accorded a secondary *usage* when applied to a local assembly. In that sense separate local congregations may be, and are, scripturally called churches.

What are we then to do? How may we distinguish between a scriptural local church (which are relatively rare) and a spurious one (which are plentiful)? A local church may be considered a scriptural one when it may be considered the *ekklesia*, the “called out” of the Lord (all the Christians) in a particular location in a city, geographical area, or those gathered at a particular meeting house. In these modern times when non-essential doctrines and divisions mandated by creeds and confessions of men have divided true Christians, rarely do all Christians in a given geographical location assemble in the same meeting house, but meet in separate ones distinguished by various names. This is a sad, but inescapable fact, and one with which we must live charitably.

A valid local church must be contemplated as a living organism, not a **thing!** If it is “planted” by a man, a denomination, a para-church organization, or another local church it will surely be a **thing**. It can be a valid church only if it is planted by the Lord. It is something that rises, comes into being, and grows of necessity out of evangelism, the work Christ sent us to do, witnessing, preaching the gospel and making disciples of Christ. **He did not send us to plant local churches!**

This organism is not an autonomous one. It is brought into being by its marriage, its inseparable union with Christ, Who is its Head, and from Whom it draws all its vitality. Such dependence, union and vitality are both corporate and personal. Every member draws all his vitality from personal union with Christ. Nor is it spiritually independent from the whole body of Christ. It draws vitality from the saints everywhere and of all time (I Cor. 3:21-23).

Such criteria as this may be discerned not so much by researching its history, its founding, its covenant, constitutions or confessions as by the following:

Its holiness. I am not here speaking of sinless perfectionism. Nor am I speaking of outward morality and rectitude. Admirable integrity, honesty and uprightness can be found in abundant measure among people who have no use for God, or by religionists who know nothing of Christ. By holiness, I mean people who have been separated unto Christ. God fills their horizon. Christ is their life, the Lord and Governor of everything, not just a postscript to sanctify their own independent way. They are not merely religious, but devout worshippers of the true and living God.

Its worship. True believers are warm-hearted fervent worshippers! The Father seeks such worshippers. They worship God! They glory in Christ! They do this out of their hearts, in the Holy Spirit. They are not choreographed or programmed in this by preachers, song leaders and electronic claptrap. They do it spontaneously. They do it orderly. They do it heartily, vigorously, joyously. They do not “do” songs;

they sing! They do not merely “say” or “lead” prayers; they pray! They testify, exhort and encourage one another.

Its unity. There is no wrangling among themselves. They may have great diversity among them in personality, gifts, and ministries. They may even have a wide variety of views on non-essential subjects. But they are absolutely unified in what is essential. That is true spiritual unity.

Its love. They love one another. They watch over one another, are sensitive and careful to share all they have for any need that may arise. They forgive and forbear. They are longsuffering, kind, self-giving and supportive.

Its doctrine. Its preaching and teaching. Sound doctrine that is intensely Biblical, practical, helpful and timely. Such feeding of the sheep will be wholesome and effectual to the health and vitality of the saints. It is a pillar and ground of **truth!**

**Its Imperfections**

Ah! Here is the rub. How much of this must we tolerate, endure, forebear? Because this is a *local* church, and *ekklesia*

is being used here in a less than definitive way (It is not the one true church that Christ is building), in most cases it will harbor hypocrites and false professors. Mortal men cannot infallibly separate the wheat from the chaff. There will also be babes in Christ, the immature, weak and stumbling children of God. There will often be glaring weaknesses and inadequacies in the leadership. There will be those genuine children of God who will sorely try the power of Christian grace in our lives. This is precisely why the Scriptures repeatedly exhorts us to love, forbearance, longsuffering and forgiveness. We are also taught to reprove, exhort, pray for and watch over one another. None of this would be necessary if these grievous imperfections did not exist. We are being taught to be like the mighty Captain of our faith, the Lord Jesus Christ Who loved us while we were yet sinners. Christians are mini-christs, joyfully giving themselves for one another.

As in the beginning, the Lord put the man in the Garden (the best possible place on earth for him), we consider our local gathering of saints, our local church, to be our Garden, our island of paradise, our oasis, our Beulah in the barren waste howling wilderness of this world. With all its imperfections, there is no place on earth so sweet, blessed, peaceful, joyful and comforting as the gathering of the saints. We are here by God’s appointment. This is our divinely designated place of pasture, of service, self-sacrifice and giving; and the arena in which we each and every one shall grow up to the measure and likeness of Jesus. - C. M.

**GRACE BIBLE CAMP**

**681 Rock Hill Rd., Bentley LA**

Thursday Evening June 14 – Sunday Morning June 17, 2001

NO CHARGES for meals, dormitory lodging, R.V. Hookups. Bring linens if you wish dormitory lodging.

**Note:** Dormitory beds are limited. First come, first served. But if beds are exhausted when you arrive and you cannot afford motel lodging, we will find lodging for you. No one turned away! Some must leave early, making more beds available on Saturday evening.

**MOTELS**

**Pineville:** (14 miles from Camp) Day’s Inn (800)-325-2525. **Alexandria, McArthur Dr.** (about 18 miles from Camp) Holiday Inn (800)-787-8336; Hampton Inn (318) 4887-8530; Travelodge (800)-255-3040; Rodeway Inn (800) 228-2000; **Alexandria, I-49** (about 21 miles from Camp) LaQuinta Inn (800) 687-6667; Howard Johnson Express (800) 446-4656; Super 8 Motel (800)848-8888.

**AGENDA of SPEAKERS**

Thursday

7:00 P Roy Cook, Natchitoches LA  
8:00 P Holmes Moore, St. Louis MO

Friday

9:00 A Johnie Carter, McArthur AR  
10:00 A Gilbert Johnson, Cookville TX  
3:30 P Questions & Discussion  
4:15 P Peter Hutchinson, Beaumont TX  
7:30 P Holmes Moore

Saturday

9:00 A Brian Bravo, Ponchatoula LA  
10:00 A Gilbert Barr, Simmesport LA  
3:30 P Questions and Discussion  
4:15 P Barney Bryant, Carthage TX  
7:30 P Holmes Moore

Sunday

9:00 A Mark LaCour, Baton Rouge LA  
10:00 A Holmes Moore

Rolls, Cereal and Beverages available in dining hall each morning at 7:00 AM

Group devotionals at 8:30 AM

Brunch served at 11:00 AM

Dinner served at 5:00 PM

Group prayer meetings one half hour before meeting times each evening.

*Grace Bible Camps are sponsored by Grace And Truth Enterprises in conjunction with Grace Church of Bentley and other sister churches in the region. A cordial welcome to preachers, men, women, youth, children, whole families...any and all wishing to come*

*aside for a few days of soul refreshing encouragement in the word of God and Christian fellowship. H Conrad Murrell Donald D. Denny*

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