

Sunday, October 17, 2010—Grace Life School of Theology—*Church History: A Tale of Two Churches*—Lesson 5: What is the Church?

### Introduction

- The last time we meet we saw that the basic unit of study when doing church history is the local church. Therefore it is paramount that we accurately identify how the Bible defines and use the word church.
- The root meaning of the term church (*ekklesia*) is a called out group. It is used in reference to an assembly of any kind, religious or secular, lawful or unlawful.
  - Acts 19:32, 39, 41
- We must distinguish between *the universal church* (body of Christ, which constitutes the invisible body of all believers) and *the local church*: a visible manifestation of the universal church in a given locality. The invisible church includes believers already in heaven while the visible church is comprised of those yet on earth. (Geisler, 18)
- The New Testament never uses the word church refer to a physical structure.
- The Greek word *ekklesia* occurs some 115 times and except in a handful of places speaks of either the universal church or a local church or churches. While the vast majority refer to local churches, many refer to local churches, many refer to the universal church, and some seem to include both aspects. (Geisler, 43)

### Nature of the Universal Church

- Acts 20:28—while Paul is speaking to the Ephesian elders (local church), the phrase “purchased with his own blood” is more inclusive in meaning than just the local church.
- Romans 16:16
- I Corinthians 1:2
- I Corinthians 12:13, 27—the local body should operate with the unity possessed by the universal church, each part fitting in with the whole.
- Ephesians 1:22-23
- Ephesians 2:13-15—the body of Christ is the one new man where Jews and Gentiles are being reconciled to God equally in one body by the cross.
- Ephesians 2:20
- Ephesians 3:10
- Ephesians 3:21—the visible local church will not exist forever, but God will be glorified through the invisible universal church forever.

- Colossians 1:18, 24

### **Origin and Formation of the Universal Church**

- The body of Christ was in the mind of God “before the world began.” However God kept his plans to form the body of believers a secret “since the world began” until he made his plans known through the message and ministry of the Apostle Paul.
  - I Corinthians 2:7-8—God chose to hold back some of the information from that eternal life conference in eternity past so that he could accomplish his own purpose through Jesus Christ.
  - Romans 16:25-26—Paul is speaking about a message regarding Christ that was kept secret since the world began. This is the wisdom of God in a mystery for I Corinthians 2:7-8.
  - Ephesians 3:9-11—this information had been hid in God. So that God’s eternal purpose could be accomplished through Jesus Christ in verse 11.
  - Titus 2:3—when the time was right (due time) God revealed that which he promised to himself before the world began through the teaching, preaching, and apostleship of Paul.
  - I Timothy 2:6—Paul is the “due time” testifier of the secret purpose of God that he promised to himself before the world began.
- Since the formation of the body of Christ was a mystery not made know prior to Paul it was not formed in Acts 2 as the majority of professing Christendom teaches but in Acts 9 with the salvation of Saul of Tarsus.
- The following is a list of eleven reasons why the body of Christ did not begin in Acts 2
  - Acts 2:16—the events of Acts 2 are the fulfillment of prophecy made to the nation of Israel.
  - Acts 2:8-11--Pentecost was a Jewish feast day, attended by Jews and Proselytes from across the ancient world.
  - Acts 2:5, 14, 22, 36—Peter is specially addressing Israel on one of her sacred feast days.
  - Acts 2:41—there was already a church in existence at Pentecost. A thing must first exist before anything can be added to it.
  - Acts 2:17—Peter’s preaching proclaimed that Israel’s last days according to prophecy had arrived, not the first days of the Body of Christ.
  - Acts 2:30-39, 3:19-21—the kingdom was not even offered to Israel until Pentecost; It was when Israel refused this offer that the nation was set aside and the Body of Christ was formed.

- Acts 1:8—at Pentecost the disciples were baptized with, or in the Spirit for power. This is quite different from baptism by the Spirit into the Body of Christ.
  - Mark 1:7-8—At Pentecost the Lord Jesus Christ was the Baptizer, baptizing His people with or in, the Holy Spirit. Today the Holy Spirit is the Baptizer, baptizing believers into the Body of Christ.
  - The title, “the Church which is His body,” is distinct in Paul’s letters. This expression is not used at Pentecost or in other New Testament writings.
  - Acts 5:31—if the Body of Christ started in Acts 2 why are Peter and the 12 still preaching repentance to Israel?
- **Remember: you cannot have the Body of Christ of until Israel falls from her favored Time Past status. This clearly did not occur in Acts 2.**
  - **The critical question then is when does Israel fall?**
  - Acts 7:51-60—Israel commits the unpardonable sin (Matthew 12:31-32) and is rendered in unbelief thus paving the way for the formation of the Body of Christ.
  - See slide summarizing Israel’s historical rejection of the Godhead.
  - Paul was the first member of the body of Christ to be saved by Grace through faith plus nothing.
  - Paul is the perfect type of the Body of Christ. He was both a Roman Citizen and member of the nation of Israel in one person.
  - I Timothy 1:16—the Holy Spirit through the pen of Paul tells us that he was the first one and that in him God set a pattern. We are saved after the pattern that God set in Paul.

### **Importance to Church History**

- Accurately identifying when the Universal Church began is critical in the study of church history.
- Every church history book that I read makes the assumption that the body of Christ started in Acts 2. Consequently, rather than using Paul’s ministry and writings and the source for understanding the purpose, function, and pattern of local churches Acts 2 and the subsequent early chapters are viewed as the model for how the local church should function.
- As a result, even protestant church history books that reject the Catholic notion that Peter was the first Pope, upon whom Christ founded the church, are in error from the start.
- Our church is based upon the realization that Paul was the first member of the body of Christ and that his ministry model (seen in Acts) and doctrine (taught in his epistles) establish the pattern local churches should follow for the duration of the dispensation of Grace.
- All true church history needs to be judged from the Pauline perspective.

### Works Cited

Geisler, Norman. *Systematic Theology: Volume Four*. Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House Publishers, 2005.