

# “Stop Dating the Church! - Part 3”

## Selected texts

~ Delivered at Central Baptist Church on September 30, 2018 by Pastor Barton Priebe

### INTRODUCTION

- **(SHOW SLIDE 1)** We have all heard of the major public opinion firms such as Gallup and Ipsos Reid but within Christianity, the major public opinion polls are done by a man named George Barna.
  - Barna has been tracing a major trend, or movement, among Christians in North America that he says is **“redefining faith and the Church in our country.”**<sup>1</sup> He first started writing about it in 2005 when he released his book entitled, **“Revolution.”**
    - He calls this movement **“the Revolution”** and calls Christians within it **“revolutionary Christians.”** So what does this trend look like?
- According to Barna, **(SHOW SLIDE 2)** **“[Revolutionary Christians] are devout followers of Jesus Christ who are serious about their faith, who are constantly worshipping and interacting with God, and whose lives are centred on their belief in Christ. . . . These are individuals who are determined to glorify God every day through every thought, word, and deed in their lives”.**<sup>2</sup>
  - Certainly, any movement where Christians are striving to live to the glory of God should be applauded. To this side of the Revolution we should say, **“bravo!”**
- But there is one big shift in how these revolutionary Christians envision living this life out that is different from *all* previous generations of Christians. What is that difference? A **“revolutionary Christian”** does not believe they have to attend or join a church in order to live a God-glorifying life. Although being part of a church may be helpful, it is not of vital importance. What matters is living for Jesus and bringing Him into every aspect of life - what Barna calls **“being the Church.”** The thesis of his book is contained in this quote:
  - **(SHOW SLIDE 3)** **“The Revolution is about recognizing that we are not called to go to church. We are called to be the Church.”**<sup>3</sup>
  - **(SHOW SLIDE 4)** **“Whether you become a Revolutionary immersed in, minimally involved in, or completely disassociated from a local church is irrelevant to me and to God for that matter...What matters is not whom you associate with (i.e. a local church), but who you are.”**<sup>4</sup>
- What should be said in response to all this?
  - First, I agree 100% with Barna that this movement is happening. Two weeks ago we called it a movement of Christians who want to date the church but who do not want to marry it. When you date someone you are not bound to them with any sort of commitment, you can operate on your time schedule, enjoy your freedom, and leave anytime you want. As Barna points out, we have an entire generation growing up who want to date the church but do not want to be married to her.
  - Second, we must agree that we *are* called to *be* the Church. Any form of Christianity that confines itself to the walls of a church building, or thinks just attending a service is all there is to it, is no Christianity at all. Christians are to *be* the Church at home, at work, in leisure, to the hurting and to the poor. I applaud Barna’s call to live out *all* of one’s life to the glory of God.
    - But what about this question of the church? The question I want to ask this morning is this: **(SHOW SLIDE 5) Can a Christian live a life that is pleasing to God while having little or nothing to do with the church?**

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<sup>1</sup> George Barna, *Revolution* (Illinois: Tyndale House Publishers, 2005), viii.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 39. Italics in original.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

- As we answer this question I want to show you a very different vision of the church than the one most people have today. It is a vision that has been shared by all Christians throughout the ages and a vision that is meant to increase your joy as a Christian, to help you grow, and to be part of what God is doing in this world.
  - In order to answer the question and grant this renewed vision of the church, I want to change our method a little this morning. Usually we zoom in on one passage of scripture and examine it. But from time to time it can be extremely helpful to zoom out and see the big picture.
    - So this morning I want to zoom out show you three things the Bible teaches about this idea of ‘church’. Once we see these three things then we can show how they apply in our lives.

### THE UNIVERSAL/BIG “C” CHURCH IN THE N.T.

- So let’s start by just talking about what the New Testament means when it talks about the church. The Greek word for “**church**” in the New Testament is “**ekklesia**.” Now this word appears some 114 times and it is used in two distinct ways. It is crucial that you understand these two ways it is used.
- **(SHOW SLIDE 6)** In the first place **ekklesia refers to what we call the “big ‘C’ Church” or the “universal Church.”** Let me give you a definition and then show some scriptural examples.
  - **(SHOW SLIDE 7) The universal Church includes all people, in heaven or on earth, who have been reconciled to God through Jesus Christ.**
    - Notice that the Church is not a building or an institution or a religion. It is a people. The Church, by definition, is every person who has embraced the good news that through Jesus Christ we are reconciled to God. The gospel creates the Church. Whenever a person confesses their sin and receives Jesus, they are added to this group called ‘the Church.’
    - And notice that it is not confined to one particular geographic location; it is invisible in that you cannot point to it. Notice also that it spans all the earth and that it includes Christians long since dead.
- An example of this is Colossians 1:18. **READ 18 - (SHOW SLIDE 8) And he is the head of the body, the church.**
  - So clearly Paul is not thinking of a specific group of Christians in a specific geographical location. Christ is the head of His body, the church – that is over all Christians.
    - We saw this in Ephesians 5:25 as well: **(SHOW SLIDE 9) Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.** Jesus gave his life for a people called “the church.”
- Do you get the idea? You cannot point to some particular geographic location and say, “**there is the universal Church.**” Why? Because it is a spiritual entity that includes all true Christians – those who are alive and in those who are in heaven. Therefore, if you have repented of your sin and cast yourself upon the mercy of Jesus, you are a member of the big “C” Church.
  - Now at this point I do not think any Christian would disagree. Every Christian would say that what matters is that you become a member of this Big “C” Church by coming to faith in Christ. And like Barna says, after you become a member of this Church then go and *be* the Church to the world.
    - The emphasis today is primarily upon that meaning of Church.

### THE LOCAL/LITTLE “c” CHURCH IN THE N.T.

- There is only one major problem. When the NT speaks of the *ekklesia*, it is very rarely referring to the universal Church. In fact, of the 114 references, only 22 of them refer strictly to the universal Church. The remaining 92 references refer to the second meaning of *ekklesia*. So what is this all-important second usage of *ekklesia* referring to?
  - **(SHOW SLIDE 10)** The second usage of *ekklesia* also refers to what we call “**the little ‘c’ church**” or “**the local church.**” Let me give you a definition.

- **(SHOW SLIDE 11) The local church is the universal Church expressed in any particular place.**
- Do you see how the local is distinct from the universal? It is localized and therefore is not global. It is visible, you can point to it. Obviously a local church does not include Christians who have died.
  - The vast majority of the letters in the New Testament are written to local churches. For example, listen to how Paul begins 1 Corinthians. **READ 1-2 - (SHOW SLIDE 12) Paul, called by the will of God to be an apostle of Christ Jesus, and our brother Sosthenes, <sup>2</sup>To the church of God that is in Corinth . . .** So Paul is not writing to all Christians everywhere. He is writing to an identifiable group of Christians who meet together in the city of Corinth.
    - Or look at Revelation chapters 1-3. John begins his letter by writing, “**John to the seven churches that are in Asia.**” Then in chapters 2 and 3 he dictates letters from the risen Jesus to these churches. Revelation 2:1: **To the angel of the church in Ephesus write.** Revelation 2:8: **And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write.** And this goes on to include letters to Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea. Now most of those names are foreign to us but realize that all of these names of cities located in what is now modern day Turkey.
- So you see then that unlike the universal Church, a local church *can* be identified. Jesus does not address an unidentifiable mass of Christians living in Asia Minor. He writes letters through John to seven visible and identifiable churches located in actual historic cities and towns.
  - In fact, almost every New Testament letter is written not to an individual but to a local church.
- So how do you identify a church? Are two Christians meeting for coffee in Starbucks a church? The NT identifies at least four marks of a church. First, a local church preaches and teaches the gospel of Jesus Christ. Second, it practices the Lord’s Supper and Baptism. Thirdly, a church holds its members accountable and practices discipline when needed. Fourth, it is has leaders who oversee it and lead it.
  - So you see two Christians meeting in Starbucks are both part of the Big C Church but they are not a local church. A Christian club on a university campus is made up of Christians who are part of the Big C Church but they are not a local church.
    - In summary so far then we have seen that the NT uses *ekklesia* in two ways: first, to the universal/invisible Church and secondly to the visible/local church. Far more prominence and emphasis is given to the second use.

#### THE INSEPERABLE CONNECTION OF UNIVERSAL AND LOCAL

- With all that terminology and understanding as background I want to sharpen our original question by replacing a few terms. **(SHOW SLIDE 13) Can a Christian (who is a member of the universal Church) live a life that is pleasing to God while having little or nothing to do with the local church?**
  - Barna, and most of this generation, says, “Absolutely!” In fact he commends it. To quote Barna again, he says, **(SHOW SLIDE 14) “I am not called to attend or join a church. I am called to be the Church.”**<sup>5</sup> In another place he says, **(SHOW SLIDE 15) “It’s not about the church. It’s about the Church.”**<sup>6</sup>
    - Do you see the root issue here in how people are thinking about church today? The root issue is a separation of the universal and local into two separate churches. One is essential – the universal Church. The other is optional – the local church.
- We are now at the heart of everything I am trying to get at today because we are not done defining the NT view of *ekklesia*. There is third, and final thing the NT says about *ekklesia*.
  - **(SHOW SLIDE 16) According to the New Testament, there is only one church. It is invisible/universal in nature but expresses itself in visible/local churches.**

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.,129.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 38.

- Let me be very clear here. When the NT speaks of *ekklesia* it is not speaking of two separate churches as if you can take one without the other. In the NT there is only one church that is expressed in two ways.
  - It is universal in nature but expressed in local visible groups of believers. There is one church, not two. This is the root of why this trend we are talking about – Christians make a sharp separation between the two. But the New Testament does do such thing.
    - The New Testament makes a clear *distinction* between the two, but it never allows for a *separation* between the two.
- So here is the answer to our question then. **(SHOW SLIDE 17) Can a Christian (who is a member of the universal Church) live a life that is pleasing to God while having little or nothing to do with the local church?**
  - **No. Biblically speaking it is illogical to speak of membership in the universal Church without this being expressed through membership in a local church.**
- Membership in the invisible Big “C” Church is always expressed by membership in a visible little “c” church. In the NT, as soon as a person was united to Christ by faith (that is they became a member of the Big “C” Church) they were immediately baptized and united to a local church. The invisible always expressed itself visibly.
  - Marriage to Christ was shown in commitment to one of His churches. Union to Christ meant union to one of His churches. Look again at the definition of the local church. **(SHOW SLIDE 18)** Notice that I said **“the local church is the universal church expressed in any place.”**
    - In the Bible you cannot therefore speak of the local church without reference to the universal Church and you cannot speak of the Universal Church without speaking about the local church. There is only one church.
- The Christians of the first few centuries would never have dreamed of even asking our question this morning because they viewed their communion in the local church as the visible outworking of their spiritual communion with the universal Church.
  - Historian John Kelley writes, **(SHOW SLIDE 19) “What these early fathers were envisaging was almost always the empirical, visible society; they had little or no inkling of the distinction, which was later to become important between a visible and an invisible Church.”**<sup>7</sup>
    - This is why Alfred Kuen writes, **(SHOW SLIDE 20) “The Christian of the first century would never have conceived of his Christian life other than in communion with his brothers and sisters in the church...the Robinson Crusoe Christian does not exist.”**<sup>8</sup>
- All throughout the New Testament we see this inseparable connection between the big “C” Church and the little “c” church – between the spiritual invisible Church and the visible church.

#### **THE INSEPERABLE CONNECTION BETWEEN THE UNIVERSAL AND LOCAL CHURCH AT PENTECOST**

- Think of the passage that was read for us. Peter gets up in front of the crowd. He tells them the glorious good news that the risen Jesus is God’s exalted king. The people receive the good news and we read that 3000 people were added that day.
  - Now what happened next? Did the Peter stand up and say, **“Congratulations! You are all members of the universal Church. Now go back to your individual lives and be the Church.”** No. We read that all these Christians devoted themselves to each other – that they gathered for corporate worship, for teaching, for fellowship with each other, and they went out and shared the good news.
    - Do you see what happened? First, people were brought to saving knowledge of Jesus Christ. Then this union with Christ was expressed visibly by uniting with the other believers to form a local church.

<sup>7</sup> J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1978), 191.

<sup>8</sup> Robert Culver, *Systematic Theology – Biblical and Historical* (Germany: Mentor Publishing, 2005), 802.

- Notice that there is not even a distinction made here between universal and local. At Jerusalem they are one and the same. **READ 41 - So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls.** They accept the message, were baptized, and were joined to the church. Look at verse 47. **READ 47 - And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.** What does God do with those he saves? He adds them to the number of the visible church.
  - In the beginning, the connection between the universal and the local is so close that there is not even a distinction. For a brief period of time, every member of the universal Church was a member of the visible church in Jerusalem as they came together under the leadership of the apostles for the purposes of teaching, fellowship, worship, and prayer.
    - So we see from Pentecost that there is one church that manifests itself in two ways – membership in the invisible Church showed itself by membership in the visible local church.
- The rest of the book of Acts demonstrates the same thing. Everywhere the apostles went they preached the gospel. When people believed and were baptized a church was formed. Elders, or pastors, were then appointed to lead them.

### UNIVERSAL AND LOCAL IN JESUS' WORDS TO SAUL

- One of the most powerful examples of this inseparable connection between the invisible and the visible is the conversion of Saul of Tarsus.
  - In Acts 9 we read that Saul began persecuting the local church in Jerusalem (the church we just talked about in Acts 2). But one day, as Saul was travelling to Damascus, the risen Jesus himself appears to him. Saul is struck down and Jesus himself speaks. But listen carefully to what Jesus says to Saul.
    - **READ 4-5 - Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?"<sup>5</sup> And he said, "Who are you, Lord?" And he said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting."** Hold on a second. Who was Saul persecuting? Was he persecuting Jesus himself? No. Saul wasn't part of the group that had Jesus crucified. Moreover, Jesus is now risen and ascended back to God. Who was Saul persecuting? It is very clear in chapter 8:3. **READ 3 - But Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison.** So clearly Saul is persecuting visible local churches and yet what does Jesus say? Jesus says, **"You are persecuting me."**
- Do you see the connection between Jesus and the local church? In Jesus' mind, a local church is a visible expression of Christ's body on earth. To strike at a local church, therefore, is to strike at Jesus Himself.
  - Saul's first lesson in Christianity was the union of the spiritual with the physical, the universal Church of which Christ is the head with the local church of which Christ is also the head.
    - Again, there is an inseparable connection between the two. The invisible always manifests itself visibly.

### CONCLUSION

- Let's bring all of this teaching together now. Why have I taken all this time to explain what the Bible teaches about the church? Because our beliefs affect how we live. Ideas have consequences. If you believe the local church is just a man-made organization and what really matters is just making sure you are part of the Big 'C' Universal Church, then it follows that you will have little or nothing to do with a local church.
  - But what happens if you grasp the vision we have set out today? What happens when you see that New Testament places its primary emphasis on the local church, not the Universal Church? What happens when you see the inseparable connection between the invisible Big 'C' Church and the visible little 'c' church? What happens when you see that every Christian in the New

Testament joined him or herself to a local church? What happens when you see that Jesus so closely identifies himself with the local church that to attack them is to attack Jesus himself?

- It radically changes the way you relate to the local church. You say, ***“Jesus, please forgive me for not viewing the local church like you do.”*** Then you do what Christians have always done: you commit yourself to being part of a local church. You become a member and enter into the family life. You pour out your life in loving and serving your brothers and sisters and contributing to the mission of the church to bring the good news to the world.
- All that we have said today brings us around to ask ourselves two questions.
- **(SHOW SLIDE 21)** First, **have you been reconciled to God through Jesus Christ?** Have you received the good news of the gospel that Jesus came to save sinners? Have you repented of your sins and asked Jesus to save you? If so, then you have been united to Christ. You are a member of the universal Church of Christ.
  - **(SHOW SLIDE 22)** Second, **have you demonstrated your invisible union with Christ by becoming a member of one of His visible churches?** Can you say, ***“This local church is my home. These are my people. I am committed to them. I will serve them, love them, and care for them with the gifts God has given me”***.
    - Let’s be honest, there is nothing revolutionary about a Christian having little or nothing to do with a local church. That’s just going along with the crowd and thinking like everyone else. Do you want to be truly revolutionary? Become a member of a church. In our day, that is a revolutionary act! We will have another membership class in Oct 21<sup>st</sup> following the service.
- What is the church? The vision of the New Testament is a people who have embraced the good news and been reconciled to God through Jesus Christ.
- Since they are now united to Jesus they unite themselves to a visible expression of his body, which is a local church. They commit themselves to join with others believers to worship, fellowship, care for one another, receive biblical instruction, and share the good news with the world.
    - May God enable us to live out this vision of the church