

Faith Pulpit

Baptists and the Body of Christ

All Baptists believe that the local church is central to God's work in this age. This belief is based upon 1 Timothy 3:1–15, where officers of the church are described as bishop (verses 1–7) and deacons (verses 8–13) and their qualifications are given. Paul writes to them, “That thou mayest know how thou oughtest to behave thyself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth” (verse 15). Here the local church is described as “the house of God” and as church of the living God” because it is in and through the local church that God is actively working. Although the church is not equated with the truth, it is described as the truth's main support [pillar] and foundation [ground].

All Baptists agree that the New Testament uses the Greek word for “church” [ecclesia] to refer to the idea of a local church or to actual local churches most of the time. Some Baptists believe that in a Christian sense this word is used in the New Testament to refer exclusively to the local church. Other Baptists disagree. For example, the doctrinal statement of Faith Baptist Bible College and Theological Seminary states:

We believe that the church, which is Christ's body, is composed of all true believers (those who have been born again through a personal acceptance of Christ as Savior) from Pentecost to the Rapture; that this church was brought into being on the day of Pentecost by the Holy Spirit's baptizing into one body all who were believers at that time; that on the day of Pentecost and since that time others have been and are being added to Christ as Savior; that at the Rapture this church will be complete and will be caught up to be united with Christ as His bride, never to be separated from Him.

A Few Key Passages

Ephesians 1:1–23 . In this chapter Paul praises God the Father for all His wonderful blessings to us. He says, ” 3Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath blessed us with all spiritual

blessings in heavenly places in Christ.” Then he begins to mention these specific blessings: (a) He chose us to stand before Him holy and without blame—verse 4. We will stand before Him holy and blameless when we are glorified at Christ’s return, according to Ephesians 5:27. (b) He redeemed us with the blood of His Son, bringing forgiveness of sins—verse 7. (c) He sealed us with His Holy Spirit—verses 13–14. This blessing was not given to believers before the Day of Pentecost, according to John 7:37–39: “37In the last day, that great day of the feast, Jesus stood and cried, saying, If any man thirst, let him come unto me, and drink. 38He that believeth on me, as the scripture hath said, out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water. 39(But this spake he of the Spirit, which they that believe on him should receive: for the Holy Ghost was not yet given; because that Jesus was not yet glorified.)” (d) He gave us and other believers (“saints”) an inheritance which involves a confident expectation (“hope”) related to His calling—verse 18. (e) He gave us power—the same mighty power that raised Jesus from the dead, the same great power that placed Jesus at the Father’s own right hand, and the same exceedingly great power that put all things under the feet of Jesus and made Him Head over all to the church, which is His body—verses 19–23.

These blessings are not rewards for faithfulness in a local church; rather, they are benefits of salvation for all true believers in Christ from Pentecost until Christ returns. Therefore the church, which is His body, encompasses all these believers.

1 Corinthians 12:12–13 . This passage states, “12For as the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body: so also is Christ. 13For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free; and have been all made to drink into one Spirit.”

The following facts are evident: (a) In verse twelve, the physical body is contrasted with its members. Notice the emphasis on the one body versus the many members: “For as the body is ONE and hath MANY members, and all the members of that ONE body, being MANY are ONE body: so also is Christ.” We find the same emphasis in verse thirteen: “For by ONE Spirit are WE ALL baptized into ONE body.” (b) The “Spirit” is the Holy Spirit. A careful examination of verses 3–11 will make this very clear. (c) By in the phrase, “by one Spirit” is correctly translated as an instrumental use. It is the same Greek word used in verses three and nine where it is also translated as by. (d) “We all” includes, at the very minimum, Paul and the members of the Corinthian church. “We all” at the beginning of verse thirteen refers to the same people again at the end of the verse: “and have been all made to drink into one Spirit.” John 7:37–39 describes ” they that believe on him [Jesus].” (e) Paul was not baptized in water at Corinth but in Damascus (see Acts 9:1–19). Paul and the Corinthians were “all baptized into one body;” this “baptism” did not involve water but the Holy Spirit. For this reason verse thirteen identifies the Holy Spirit as the One Who is performing this “baptism.” (f) Since Paul does not say, “by one Spirit are we all baptized into A body” but rather “into ONE body,” this one body cannot be a local church. Paul and the Corinthian believers were not water baptized into the same local church. Rather,

this “body” is larger than any local church. It comprises all true believers in this age—all who are baptized into it by the Holy Spirit.

Reply to Some Objections

(1) “Belief in a universal, invisible church is a Protestant doctrine.” Reply: Infant-baptizing Protestant denominations teach that there is a universal, invisible church, but in their thinking, the visible church is larger than the invisible, since the visible church includes both believers and their children, while the invisible church comprises only true believers. In contrast to this thinking, Baptists who believe in a universal church teach that it is larger than the sum total of local church members, since many former members of local churches have died and are now in heaven, and many true believers have never been members of New Testament local churches.

Belief in a universal church predates the beginning of Protestantism and is found in the Nicene/Constantinopolitan Creed of A.D. 325/381, which affirms the existence of “one, holy, catholic [universal] and apostolic Church.” This belief is also found in the Second London Confession, a Baptist statement of faith adopted in A.D. 1689. It states, “Chapter 26: Of the Church. 1. The catholic or universal church, which (with respect to the internal work of the Spirit and truth of grace) may be called invisible, consists of the whole number of the elect, that have been, are, or shall be gathered into one, under Christ, the head thereof; and is the spouse, the body, the fulness of Him that filleth all in all.”

(2) “This promotes ecumenism.” Reply: Belief in a universal church no more promotes ecumenism than does the belief that all the saved belong to the “family of God.” People who teach that eternal life and forgiveness of sins are free gifts from God, given when a person trusts in Christ alone, must recognize the spiritual unity of those who are genuinely saved, regardless of their church affiliation.

Dr. Myron J. Houghton

Former Chair of Theology at [Faith Baptist Theological Seminary](#) | [Other Articles](#)

Myron Houghton (Ph.D., Th.D.) began his ministry in 1971 at Denver Baptist Bible College as head of the Theology Department and joined the faculty at Faith Baptist Bible College and Theological Seminary in 1983 when the two schools merged. He retired from FBTS in May 2019 after nearly 50 years of teaching.

Dr. Houghton was promoted to Heaven on July 13, 2020, leaving a legacy of service and faithfulness to the thousands of men and women who he impacted during his ministry.