

Dr. David Cloud's Ecclesiology

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Recently, Dr. David Cloud gave an extended expression of his doctrine of the church in the article entitled “Are you a Baptist Brider or Local Church Only?” in his *O Timothy* (Vol. 30, Issue 9, September 3013) publication. Although Dr. Cloud normally is clear and precise in his defenses of various positions, this article is **disappointing, confusing, and dangerous**. As a pastor, and having been in Baptist circles for 44 years, I am concerned about the impact of this article on my congregation, and then on other independent Baptist churches as well. Although he does not clearly define Baptist Bride, he rightly rejects the double notions that only Baptist church members make up the bride of Christ, and that dependence for Baptist church legitimacy hinges on a visible lineage of succession back to the first century. However, he also denies that he holds to “the local church only” position, and posits instead that there are two churches, two beginnings for the two churches, two bodies, and two baptisms, suggesting theological “double-speak,” and fostering the unenviable conflict that Baptist pastors and church members have two masters (cf. Mt. 6:24; Lk. 16:13).

Although his testimony may sound commendable as he stated “I shut myself up to the Bible”¹ and that “I am just a Biblicist,” many Protestants have made similar claims and ended up with the same basic views which contradict Scripture. This is easy to corroborate since all Protestant theology books and many fundamentalist Baptist theology books use the same mantra (i.e., “spiritual body,” “mystical church,” “universal, invisible church,” etc.) and teach the same ecclesiology as Dr. Cloud. This outcome is predictable because of his heavy dependence on Protestant and protestantized fundamentalist Baptist authors and sources. His article is organized around three ecclesiological passages and then six questions he answers. This critique will follow his three initial assertions about ecclesiology, and showing how they are disappointing, confusing, and dangerous, while giving independent Baptist church members a consistent biblical ecclesiology.

I. It is Disappointing

Dr. Cloud lists passages in which he cannot fit the “local church only” position, namely Mt. 16:18, I Cor. 12:13, and Eph. 2:13-20. At the outset, one should observe the undeniable reality that these three passages are in a local church context. Although he states that “I refuse to force any predetermined definition upon words, including the word ‘church,’” he does exactly that. He has dogmatically predetermined that ἐκκλησία does not mean “called out assembly,” and alludes to Acts 19 as his defense. He states that it was not called by anyone, but of course a quick check of the passage indicates that Demetrius (vv. 24-25) called out the silver-maker tradesmen and the movement spread to the whole city assembling in the theatre (vv. 24-25, 38). Furthermore, the beloved KJV which he defends used the word “assembly”² three times for ἐκκλησία. It is Dr. David Cloud that has the dreaded predetermined definition for ἐκκλησία, contradicting Scripture and the history of the translation of ἐκκλησία. He argues that “the Spirit of God can use words and adapt them as He pleases.

¹He did not indicate whether he consulted with the pastor of his church, although presumably the two are in doctrinal agreement. The point is that we dare not ignore the God-ordained leadership of “the pillar and ground of the truth” (cf. Eph. 4:11; I Tim. 3:15).

²²The Tyndale translation called it “congregacion” (1534) and the Geneva (1560) “assembly.”

In the New Testament, words are often modified from the standard use of the first century.”³ Of course he does not use any examples, and if some scriptural words were meaningless to the original audience, how could Scripture be “profitable” to the first century churches (II Tim. 3:16)? The exegete must discover what the Scripture meant before he can understand what it means. Dr. Cloud then questions if ἐκκλησία always means assembly, projecting doubt by the inimical query “But who can say that in God’s eyes, the church is not always assembled?”⁴

With his predetermined definition of ἐκκλησία as a “spiritual body,” he forces it upon Mt. 16:18. Dr. Cloud then makes the sweeping conclusion that the Lord is building a “spiritual body” through the ages that will culminate in a “future eternal assembly of all the saints of all ages (Eph. 1:0-11; 2:16-22 [*sic*]).” This of course is not much different than the Reformed view which posits the start of the church with Abraham (or Abel, or Adam)! To exacerbate this terrible exegesis, he then adds to it the faulty notion that the expression “the gates of hell” refers to the aggressive efforts of Satan, but fails to understand that the imagery of “gates” referred to defensive mechanisms for protection (cf. Isa. 22:22).⁵ The Lord said that *the* gates of hell “*shall not prevail against*” or resist the aggressive evangelism of churches (i.e., Mt. 16:19). The Apostle Paul rightly understood the imagery, as he declared, saying, “*Who hath delivered us from the power of darkness, and hath translated us into the kingdom of his dear Son*” (Col. 1:13). Dr. Cloud wrongly concludes that Satan had effectively prevailed and prevails against all of the Lord’s assemblies, including His own, failing to recognize the Lord’s special presence with believers in this dispensation is in His baptizing agency.⁶ The Saviour promised in the Great Commission to establish immersionist assemblies and the perpetuity of this institution, saying, “*Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you* always, even unto the end of the world. Amen” (Mt. 28:19-20). Christ’s blessed promise in verse twenty reads literally from the Greek, “and behold, I am with you all of the days, even unto the culmination of the age, amen.” In this dispensation, the presence of the Lord Jesus Christ is with the institution of Baptist churches, and not with some mystical body. Did not the precious Lord say to Paul when starting the church of God at Corinth (cf. I Cor. 1:2), “*Be not afraid, but speak, and hold not thy peace: For I am with thee, and no man shall set on thee to hurt thee: for I have much people in this city*” (Acts 18:9-10; also see II Tim. 4:17).⁷

Although Dr. Cloud understands rightly that the Lord Jesus did indeed begin His immersed assembly before Pentecost, he fails to understand Christ’s promise in Mt. 16:18, and dispatches the institution of Baptist churches to a secondary category. According to him, the Lord’s institution of the immersionist assembly, in which He promised His exclusive ecclesiological presence, has failed, but His spiritual body, about which He

³The author had a Protestant seminary professor who once said that “church” and “body” are “special” nouns and in some instances mean “a spiritual, invisible, mystical church or body.” Why are only these nouns special? Paul refers to “*one mouth*” in Rom. 15:6. Why cannot he be referring to “one spiritual mouth”? Does there exist a universal, invisible, mystical, spiritual “mouth” somewhere? No, because the expressions “mouth” or “one mouth” are not “special,” except in the Mind of Plato!

⁴In every instance of the 115x that ἐκκλησία is employed in the New Testament (NT), it always refers to an assembly of something.

⁵Whoever heard of gates, obviously connected to walls, clamoring across the battle field toward the enemy?

⁶The historical failure of many Baptist churches does not mean the failure of the institution of the immersionist assembly, any more than the failure of families makes null and void the institution of the family (cf. Gen. 2:24; Mt. 19:4-6).

⁷Cf. also Mt. 18:20 and Rev. 1:13.

never spoke elsewhere,⁸ advances along (*sic*)! The Scripture predicted that the Messiah would have a congregation (cf. Ps. 22:22), which apparently began when He chose and sent out the baptized Apostles (Mt. 10:1 ff.; Eph. 2:20; I Cor. 12:29). He asserted that that “*I will build*” (οἰκοδομήσω),⁹ indicating that He would build up or edify His Baptist church (“*my church*” in contradistinction to the secular ἐκκλησία). He built it up with church discipline (Mt. 18:15-20), with the second ordinance, the Lord’s Supper (Mt. 26:26-30),¹⁰ and with the Great Commission (Mt. 28:19-20). This “built-up” Baptist church institution “*turned the world upside down*” (Acts 17:6)! The Lord Jesus Christ’s promise of perpetuity is exclusively to the institution that baptizes, and this is certainly not some “spiritual” aspect of church.

Although it seems that Dr. Cloud gives a positive statement about the local church, he then takes it away with the demeaning assertion, saying, “As important as the local church is, there is more to Christ’s church than the assemblies, not only in the future but also in the present.” This derogatory tenor is reminiscent to that of the Protestant L. S. Chafer, who stated, “The true Church is not divided, nor could it be; yet the visible church is a broken and shattered attempt at the manifestation of a Scriptural ideal” (Systematic Theology, IV, p. 149). Dr. Cloud then makes an inexplicable statement, stating, “But the fullness of the church which Christ is building will never be prevailed upon and can never be destroyed.” First, he never defines “fullness” (cf. Eph. 1:23), and second, the Lord Jesus Christ is the fulness. He is one hundred percent present whenever one of His assemblies meets, as He was with the Ephesian church. The Head is always present in complete fulness when one of His bodies¹¹ meets.

Next, Dr. Cloud makes the classic ecclesiological blunder by dredging up one verse out of its immediate and greater context. He claims that I Cor. 12:13 teaches “Spirit baptism and a spiritual body.” Although he does not elaborate on these expressions, it must be assumed that he means that the Holy Spirit baptizes believers into the spiritual body (of Christ) at conversion. If this is his position, then it contradicts what the theologian of Spirit Baptism, namely John the Baptist, taught. In one of six times recorded in the NT, the Baptist said, “*I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance: but he that cometh after me is mightier than I, whose shoes I am not worthy to bear: he shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost, and with fire*” (Mt. 3:1; cf. the other five references in Mk. 1:8; Lk. 3:16; Jn. 1:33; Acts 1:5; and 11:16). John’s assertions were not cloudy but clear, indicating that the Lord Jesus would baptize believers subsequent to their salvation in (ἐν) the Holy Ghost. Dr. Cloud has the unenviable and impossible task of harmonizing I Cor. 12:13 with six passages of Scripture.¹²

⁸In the 23x that Christ spoke of ἐκκλησία in the Gospels (Mt. 16:18; 18:17) and to John in Revelation (20x), He only referred to visible assemblies. Did the Lord build something He never talked about, or did He talk about something He never built (cf. Mt. 16:18)?

⁹In its 39x, the KJV translated the Greek verb οἰκοδομέω as “build” (24), “edify” (7), “builder” (5), “build up” (1), “be in building” (1), and “embolden” (1). Never once was οἰκοδομέω translated “start” or “begin” or “create.” Luke used the verb οἰκοδομέω with the noun ἐκκλησία, saying, “*Then had the churches rest throughout all Judaea and Galilee and Samaria, and were edified; and walking in the fear of the Lord, and in the comfort of the Holy Ghost, were multiplied*” (Acts 9:31).

¹⁰Paul taught that Christ sang in the midst of the ἐκκλησία during his earthly ministry in fulfillment of Ps. 22:22 (*vide* Heb. 2:12 with vv. 7-18). The only time the Lord Jesus sang with His brethren was after the church ordinance of the Lord’s Supper (Mt. 26:30). He will sing again in the great congregation at His second coming, identifying with the Jewish brethren starting off the Millennium (Ps. 22:25; Mt. 26:29).

¹¹Some object that the expression “bodies of Christ” never occurs in Scripture and therefore there is only one body, the spiritual, mystical body of Christ. However, there are several nouns that occur in Scripture only in the singular; for instance the noun “circumcision” only occurs in the singular (is there some spiritual, mystical circumcision [Col. 2:11]?).

¹²He it is that must use “interpretative gymnastics” to harmonize John’s teaching with Paul’s supposed teaching. This author has seen the best Greek scholars attempt to do this, and failing with convoluted eisegesis from freshly created

Therefore, the favorite and only verse for doctrine that the Holy Spirit baptizes believers simultaneous with their salvation into the spiritual (mystical, invisible) body must be understood some other way. 1) Perhaps Paul taught a different and second Spirit Baptism, indicating that in addition to Jesus baptizing believers subsequent to their salvation in the Holy Ghost (and in fire),¹³ Paul taught that the Holy Ghost baptized believers simultaneous with salvation into the spiritual body. Obviously, holding to two Spirit Baptism contradicts Paul's Ephesian teaching that there is "one baptism" (Eph. 4:6). 2) The careful exegete must recognize that I Cor. 12:13 may be interpreted in a biblically consistent manner. The KJV translators recognized that the Greek expression ἐν ἑνὶ Πνεύματι ("by one Spirit")¹⁴ could be rendered "in one spirit" (Phil. 1:27). Biblically, Paul could be speaking of unity around the church ordinances, since the Corinthians were disunited around water baptism (I Cor. 10-17) and drinking in the Lord's Table (I Cor. 11:21, 22, 25, 26, 27, 28, and 29). The expression "one body" means either numerical one body (Eph. 4:5) or united bodies (I Cor. 6:16), but never a spiritual, mystical body, any more than "one mouth" (Rom. 15:6) means a spiritual, mystical mouth. Since at least three NT churches took the title "body" (the Corinthian, Ephesian, and Colossian churches), each of the Lord's assemblies is a body of Christ (I Cor. 12:27; Eph. 1:22-23; Col. 1:18, respectively). Paul was baptized in the Damascus body and the Corinthian Christians were baptized in their church/body. Contrary to Protestant thought, this "alternate" interpretation is not "interpretative gymnastics," but it is contextual exegesis, harmonizing Paul's expression with the rest of the Epistle and with John's theology of Spirit Baptism. For what it is worth, Baptists and Baptist confessions of the past have held that I Cor. 12:13 (and corollary verses such as Rom. 6:3-4; Gal. 3:27-28; Col. 2:12) refers to the ordinances. Examples of the former are Menno Simons, Thomas Helwys, John Spilsbury, William Kiffin, Henry D'Anvers, Benjamin Keach, T. B. Montayne, and of the latter are the Waterland Confession (1580), the Dordrecht Confession (1632), the London Confession (1644), the Second London Confession (1677), the Baptist Confession (1689), the Philadelphia Baptist Confession (1742), and the New Hampshire Confession (1833). Why did not Dr. Cloud reference John's teaching on Spirit Baptism, since he had "shut [himself] up to the Bible"? The obvious reason is that he and all Protestants and all protestantized Baptists find John's theology of Spirit Baptism ecclesiologicaly inconvenient.

Finally, Dr. Cloud employed Eph. 2:13-20 to indicate that Paul was teaching about "a spiritual entity beyond the local church." Since it is clear that Paul addressed the Ephesian assembly (1:1) as he revealed this truth, it is befuddling how Dr. Cloud can deny this. However, he gives away his predisposition toward Platonic philosophy by stating that "the local church is a small reflection of this growing temple, but it is not the fullness thereof and is a deeply imperfect image thereof." Although some Baptist pastors and seminary professors may be ignorant that they are embracing Platonic philosophy, the studied and knowledgeable evangelical Baptist theologian Millard Erickson makes the startling admission, saying, "At this point some people might accuse theologians of adopting a Platonic perspective whereby local churches are regarded as instantiations or concrete particular manifestations of the pure Form, the abstract Idea, of church. Note, however, that theologians are not reading this concept into the Bible. The concept is actually present in the thought of Paul and Luke; it is not introduced by their interpreters. There is on this one point a genuine parallel between biblical thought and that of Plato. This is neither good or bad, and should not be considered an indication of Platonic influence upon the

Greek "rules." For instance, Daniel Wallace concocted a "rare" usage of the dative case to wrest the clear teaching of Scripture that the One wearing sandals is truly the agent of Spirit Baptism (cf. Mk. 1:8), *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics*, p. 374.

¹³Apparently, this is referring to the unbelieving element in John's audience (i.e., Pharisees and Sadducees) who would be immersed in hell fire.

¹⁴For all of the quasi-Ruckmanites who object to the changing of the capital "S" in "Spirit" to lower case "s," they should look at the original 1611 KJV which had the lower case "s" in "spirit."

Bible. It is simply a fact” (*Christian Theology*, p. 1033). This of course is not only wrong, it is diabolical (cf. I Tim. 4:1)! Local church members constitute the local church temple (cf. I Cor. 3:17), and these local church members are growing spiritually (cf. II Pet. 3:18)!

Dr. Cloud’s ecclesiology is first of all disappointing, in that he employed extremely weak and conflicting exegesis, very imprecise expressions, a demeaning attitude toward visible assemblies, and the classic Protestant/Platonic ecclesiology.

II. It is Confusing

Dr. Cloud’s basic ecclesiological problem is with his definitions. He, along with all Protestants and protestantized fundamental Baptists, fail to realize what is the biblical term for the universal, invisible entity in Scripture. There is a spiritual, universal invisible entity that exists and the Scripture calls it the Kingdom of God (69x).¹⁵ It is entered into at salvation when one repents of sin and believes in the Lord and is regenerated (Jn. 3:3 ff.). It is therefore universal. It is invisible as well since the Lord stated, saying, “*And when he was demanded of the Pharisees, when the kingdom of God should come, he answered them and said, The kingdom of God cometh not with observation*” (Lk. 17:20). But the Kingdom of God is never identified with the terms “*church*” or “*body*.” All of those who are regenerated and are therefore “*in Christ*” (see Jn. 14:20; Col. 1:2; Eph. 1:3; 2:6 *et al*), should be baptized into church membership (Acts 2:41) and into Christ’s body (local church). There is a vast difference between being “*in Christ*” (soteriological) and “*in Christ’s body*” (ecclesiological). Dr. Cloud and others wrongly assume that the two expressions are identical and thus confound ecclesiology with soteriology (i.e., “*church*” is a soteriological term). Further, the “*family of God*” (*vide* Eph. 3:14-15) is even a broader term encompassing all who call Jehovah God the “*Father*” (cf. Isa. 63:16; 64:8; Rom. 8:15). Thus, the “*family of God*” includes all saints from Adam forward, the “*kingdom of God*” includes all regenerated NT saints, and the “*church[es] of God*” includes all baptized church members. When the exegete keeps these biblical distinctions distinct, he is able to recognize the distinct terms for the people of God without over statement. Dr. Cloud fails to do this and makes the incredulous statement that “*the Future Eternal Assembly*” encompasses “*all the saints of all ages.*” This is merely warmed-over Reformed Theology!

Dr. Cloud beclouds the biblical understanding of the “*bride*” metaphor by denying its teaching in the only clear biblical passage. Revelation Twenty-one explicitly states that the “*bride*” is “*the new Jerusalem*” or actually the inhabitants of “*the holy city*,” represented by two components of the city which represent two distinct people groups. The twelve gates represent the twelve tribes (v. 12) “*and*”¹⁶ the twelve foundations (v. 14) represent the twelve apostles.¹⁷ Therefore, both the OT saints and the NT saints constitute the bride,¹⁸ contrary to Dr. Cloud who states, “*it means that the city is the dwelling place for His bride and not only for the bride but for Israel.*” His denial of John’s apocalyptic revelation about the bride leads to confusion.

To exacerbate this cloudy confusion, Dr. Cloud gives and then takes away. For instance, he states that Christ began His church before Pentecost, but then says, “*I do not see this as a fundamental issue one way or*

¹⁵The Kingdom of God is the realm of regeneration and the Kingdom of Heaven is the Millennial Kingdom of Christ. The terms will overlap at the beginning of the Millennium when all saints in their natural bodies will be regenerated at the outset of the Millennium (cf. Mt. 3:2; Jn. 3:3; Mt. 8:11-12; Lk. 13:28).

¹⁶The simple little conjunction *καὶ* connects the gates with the foundations, indicating both are in the city and make up the city.

¹⁷The apostles relate to NT assemblies (Mt. 10:1 ff.; Acts 1:20; I Cor. 12:28; Eph. 2:20; 4:11).

¹⁸The marriage metaphor of “*bride/wife*” refers to the most intimate relationship known to man, and the Lord used it to show His most intimate relationship with His saints (cf. Isa. 61:10; 62:4-5; Jer. 3:14; Ezk. 16:8 ff.; II Cor. 11:2).

the other.” On the contrary, this *is* the battle line, since local church Biblicists argue for Christ’s church beginning before Pentecost, and the universalists dogmatically state that it began on Pentecost! Moreover, if the Lord began His visible Baptist assembly in His lifetime, when did the “spiritual body” begin? This seems to necessitate two distinct beginnings for two meanings of church! Finally, when things get confusing for Dr. Cloud in his system of imprecision and denial, he harks back to Dt. 29:29 (twice). Although the Lord has not revealed everything to man, what He has revealed needs to be studied and interpreted exegetically, not eisegetically. Dr. Cloud’s ecclesiology is confusing because of imprecise terminology and rejection of biblical teaching.

III. It is Dangerous

The bane for independent Baptist pastors and churches is for them to be taught that there is something bigger and better than their respective assemblies. To provide a theological system that eviscerates the biblical institution of the Baptist assembly is not of God, and is therefore spiritually dangerous for the Lord’s faithful followers. Why would Christians want to invest their lives, time, and resources in something that is secondary, inferior, and weak, when they could invest in the “spiritual body”? The fact of the matter is that many Christians *do not* join churches because of the universal, invisible, spiritual body of Christ doctrine posited by well-meaning but ill-taught “authorities.” The “mystical body of Christ” teaching, to which Dr. Cloud and many others hold,¹⁹ gives the theological system which advances the ecumenical movement (I Cor. 12:13 is its watchword), as well as the para-church movement, the popular church-hopping practice, and the apathetic attitude among Christians toward church membership and involvement. Other erroneous ecclesiological views espoused by Dr. Cloud include the “seven church ages” heresy forced on the seven churches in Revelation with the Laodicean church age supposedly beginning in the early 1800’s, and the consequent unbiblical expression “end time prophecy,” *Revelation. Advanced Bible Study Series*, pp. 75-172. Dr. Cloud’s ecclesiology is dangerous because he provides *the* ecclesiological system which undermines the doctrine and practice of, and the honor and glory for, NT assemblies.

It is not with joy or pleasure that this pastor must rebuke Dr. Cloud for his ill-founded and careless ecclesiology, but for the sake of Bible Baptist Church of Cromwell, CT, he shall. Are not Dr. Cloud’s own words applicable to him: “When I expose the error of fundamentalists and independent Baptists and evangelicals, I am told that I should look at the good and not be so critical. Those who have such a philosophy do understand neither the nature of error (it begins small but increases rapidly if not dealt with) nor the job of a preacher”? *Revelation. Advanced Bible Study Series*, p. 83.

One must be careful that a certain haughty air does not exude from “watchman” type ministries giving the impression that one is above rebuke while at the same time authoritative over the Lord’s assemblies. There is limited value in this type of ministry, since the pastor is the ultimate watchdog over his assembly and must fulfill this responsibility. Pastors who become dependent on “watchman” ministries often feed their congregations with “issue-oriented” messages rather than with biblical exegesis. Certainly, Dr. Cloud’s erroneous teaching on ecclesiology has cast a dark cloud over his ministry among independent Baptists, beclouding what otherwise would be a beneficial albeit limited ministry. A disappointing, confusing, and dangerous ecclesiology is not what independent Baptists need.

¹⁹This is really the term for the teaching they are espousing, even though Dr. Cloud and others are not comfortable with it. One should remember the profound observation that a creature that walks like a dog, barks like a dog, and wags its tail like a dog, *is* a dog no matter what one wants to call it!