

The New Testament Church (Part 2): What Is the Church?

Matthew 16:13-20

I. INTRODUCTION: I

- I. **2** What comes to your mind when you hear the word “church”?
 - A. A red brick building with a cross-topped spire?
 - B. A denominational organization? e.g., Methodist Church, Baptist Church, Episcopal Church
 - C. A hierarchy of clergymen? e.g., Pope, Cardinals, Bishops and parish priests of the Catholic Church?
2. Indeed, if you looked up “church” in a standard dictionary such various definitions would be listed.
3. But how the dictionary defines “church” is not what matters in the final analysis; what matters is how God’s Word, the New Testament (NT) defines the word (recall our discussion of *Concepts*).
4. **3** Throughout our study our primary source book will be the NT; we will use reference works only as they aid us in understanding what the NT has to say concerning the “church.”

II. DISCUSSION:

I. **4** Definitions: Reference Works

- A. Recall from lesson #1 that the Greek word for “church” appears 116 times in the Greek NT:
 - (1) 3 in the gospels, 24 in the book of Acts, 69 in the epistles and 20 in Revelation.
 - (2) The King James Version translates it “church” all but three times, where it is rendered “assembly” (Acts 19:32, 39, 41).
 - (3) The first appearance of “church” in the NT is Matthew 16:18 and the last is Revelation 22:16.
- B. **5** The Greek word for “church” is *ekklesia*.
- C. Definitions of *ekklesia* from word studies will help us establish the correct definition of our term.
 - (1) ****** *Synonyms of the New Testament* (Trench, pp. 1-2): “*ekklesia*...was the lawful assembly in a free Greek city of all those possessed of the rights of citizenship, for the transaction of public affairs. That they were summoned is expressed in the latter part of the word; that they were summoned out of the whole population, a select portion of it, including neither the populace, nor strangers, nor yet those who had forfeited their civic rights, this is expressed in the first.”
 - (2) **6** *Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (Vol. 1, p. 291): ****** “*ekklesia*, derived via *ek-kaleo*, which was used for the summons to the army to assemble, from *kaleo*, to call...It is attested from Eur. and Hdt. onwards (5th cent. B.C.) and denotes in the usage of antiquity the popular assembly of the competent full citizens of the polis, city.”
 - (3) **7** *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Vol. 3, p. 513): ****** “*Ekklesia* is the assembly of the demos (i.e., the common people of an ancient Greek state, civ) in Athens and in most Greek poleis (i.e., an ancient Greek city-state, civ). The etymology is both simple and significant. The citizens are the *ekkletoi*, i.e., those who are summoned and called together by the herald. This teaches us something concerning the biblical and Christian usage, namely, that God in Christ calls men out of the world.”

2. **8** Definitions: The New Testament:

- A. All good Bible students know the Bible text itself is its own best commentary, dictionary or lexicon.

- B. Anyone with a good English Bible translation should be able to read and, with some thought and comparison of a few NT verses, arrive at an accurate concept of *ekklesia*.
- C. The NT writers employ *ekklesia* 109 times denoting a group of disciples, Christians (Acts 11:26).
- D. But, the definitions we looked at from various reference works show us *ekklesia* is not always used in strictly spiritual contexts; the NT verifies this also (Remember, the Holy Spirit selected this word, *ekklesia*, from the common Greek language to primarily express a spiritual concept.).
- E. *Ekklesia* is used four times in the NT in a purely secular sense, not denoting “church” as we commonly think of it (i.e., a group of Christians); but an examination of these passages will go a long way in helping us arrive at an accurate understanding of the term “church.”
- F. The four secular uses of “church” in the NT are: (cite, then read **Acts 19:21-41** and briefly discuss)
 - (1) The unlawful assembly:

Acts 19:32: “Some therefore cried one thing and some another, for the assembly was confused, and most of them did not know why they had come together.”

Acts 19:41: “And when he had said these things, he dismissed the assembly.”
 - (2) The lawful assembly:

Acts 19:39: “But if you have any other inquiry to make, it shall be determined in the lawful assembly.”
 - (3) The “church in the wilderness”: in reference to the Jewish congregation

Acts 7:38: “This is he who was in the congregation in the wilderness with the Angel who spoke to him on Mount Sinai, and with our fathers, the one who received the living oracles to give to us,”
- G. **9** As can be seen in these contexts, the word “church” means a group of people that have answered a “call.” (e.g., Monday, April 6, 2015, 1:08 PM; Detroit Tigers home opener vs. Minnesota Twins)
- H. Importantly, please take note that the word for “church,” *ekklesia*, is a compound Greek word:
 - (1) “ek” means “out of,” and
 - (2) “klesis” (*kaleo*) comes from the word which means “to call.”
- I. Thus “church” (*ekklesia*) denotes an assembly of a certain kind of people collected or grouped together based upon things they hold in common as a result of responding to a common call.
- J. **10** Let’s break that down to its component parts; an *ekklesia* is an:
 - (1) An assembly of people,
 - (2) People grouped together upon the basis of something they hold in common,
 - (3) They have answered a common call.
- K. **11** In our secular examples from Acts 19:32, 39 and 41 the *ekklesia* was:
 - (1) An assembly of people, citizens of Ephesus who “cried out, saying, ‘Great is Diana of the Ephesians!’”
 - (2) They were grouped together based upon things they held in common: they were citizens of Ephesus who were concerned their goddess Diana’s reputation was under attack and the lucrative trade of the silversmiths who made shrines to Diana was in danger.
 - (3) They were the citizens of Ephesus who had responded to a call issued by Demetrius as he whipped up the crowd against Paul and his companions (**Acts 19:27:** “So not only is this trade of

ours in danger of falling into disrepute, but also the temple of the great goddess Diana may be despised and her magnificence destroyed, whom all Asia and the world worship.”)

L. Even though this was an “unlawful assembly” it was still an *ekklesia*; a “called out assembly or body.”

M. **12** The other two usages of *ekklesia* in Acts are in:

- (1) Acts 19:39 it refers to the civic assembly that was common among the Greeks.
 - (a) Luke refers to this *ekklesia* as the *ennomos ekklesia*; i.e., the “lawful assembly” (v. 39) that was routinely assembled to discuss the business of the community.
 - (b) Thayer calls it “an assembly of people who convened at the public place of council for the purpose of deliberating.”
 - (c) The “lawful assembly” is how Demetrius and his cohorts should have handled their problem rather than rabble rousing and stirring up a mob (i.e., unlawful assembly).
- (2) Acts 7:38 where it refers to the Jewish assembly in the wilderness led by Moses.
 - (a) This reference is part of Stephen’s speech to the Jews in Jerusalem in Acts 7.
 - (b) This “church” is not the “church” Jesus promised to build in Matthew 16:18; as that “church” was yet to be established when Jesus spoke those words.
 - (c) This *ekklesia* refers to the nation of Israel whom God selected and called from the midst of other nations to be a chosen people consecrated to Him and His will (Ex. 19:3-6; Deut. 7:6).
 - (d) Another reference to the nation is found in Psalms 22:22 and is quoted in Hebrews 2:12 where the writer spoke of singing God’s praises in “the midst of the assembly” (i.e., *ekklesia*).

N. **13** When “church” is used in spiritual contexts, in reference to Christians, there are five different contexts or usages.

- (1) *Universal Church*: the terminology *universal church* does not specifically appear in the NT, however, the concept is certainly valid (Matt. 16:18; Acts 2:47).
 - (a) Thayer: “the whole body of Christians scattered throughout the earth, collectively, all who worship and honor God and Christ in whatever place they be.”
 - (b) When Jesus promised “upon this rock I will build my church,” He referred to the church in this general sense; the composite of all who respond to the gospel.
 - (i) The universal church exists regardless of time and geography.
 - (ii) The universal church includes all the faithful saints “in Christ” whether alive or dead.
 - (c) In Hebrews the universal church is “the general assembly and church of the firstborn.”
 - (d) He was not writing of the totality of congregations throughout the world, but the sum of individual Christians worldwide; to all “who are enrolled in heaven” (Heb. 12:23).
 - (e) Every faithful Christian’s name is written in heaven; all of them together; regardless of age, sex, nationality, geographic location, and time constitute the “church” in its universal sense.
- (2) *Local Church*:
 - (a) Thayer: “who anywhere, in city or village, constitute a company and are united in one body.”

- (b) The local church is a specific group of Christians who are in the same geographical area and have purposed to band and assemble together as a body to fulfill specific goals and needs as specified by the NT.
 - (c) Paul wrote to the “*church of God which is at Corinth*” (1 Cor. 1:2) and “*the church of the Thessalonians*” (1 Thess. 1:1), using the word “church” to identify a specific, limited and local group of saints.
- (3) The *unassembled ekklesia*:
- (a) This ekklesia does not specify a local church that is *physically assembled*.
 - (b) Christians constitute “*the church*” when they are *assembled* or at their homes; e.g., Saul of Tarsus made “*havoc of the church, entering every house, and dragging off men and women, committing them to prison*” (Acts 8:3).
 - (c) Members of the ekklesia at Jerusalem, Corinth or Thessalonica are the spiritual body of Christ in those localities, whether assembled or not.
- (4) The *assembled ekklesia*:
- (a) Ekklesia also refers to an *actual assembly* of the disciples.
 - (b) Five times in one passage Paul wrote of the brethren at Corinth coming together to observe the Lord’s Supper (1 Cor. 11:17, 18, 20, 33, 34).
 - (c) One of those verses describes a coming “*together as a[n] ekklesia*” (1 Cor. 11:18: “*when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you, and in part I believe it.*”).
 - (d) Three chapters later the apostle uses the word ekklesia several times to denote the assembled body of brethren for worship and edification (1 Cor. 14:19, 33, 34, 35; e.g., 1 Cor. 14:28: “*But if there is no interpreter, let him keep silent in church, and let him speak to himself and to God.*”).
- (5) *Regional*:
- (a) Finally, ekklesia denotes saints who reside in a specific region of the world.
 - (b) It is employed in the distributive sense of all Christians of a region; Luke used the singular number—“*the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria*” (Acts 9:31 ASV).
 - (c) In the majority of manuscripts the plural number is used in Acts 9:31 (**Acts 9:31**: “*Then the churches throughout all Judea, Galilee, and Samaria had peace and were edified. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, they were multiplied.*”) to refer to local congregations in those regions (cf. Acts 15:41; Rom. 16:4; 1 Cor. 16:1; Gal. 1:2, 22; 1 Thess. 2:14; Rev. 1:4, 11, 20).

3. **14** Final thoughts:

- A. What is important to remember is the word ekklesia, contrary to many modern abuses, always describes people—a specific group or body of people, locally or universally, who have answered the call of the gospel to leave the bondage of sin and enter into fellowship with God and Christ to walk in the light.

1 Pet. 2:9: “*But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light,*”

- B. I can't over emphasize the point enough; it is vital we understand the constituent elements of these assemblies are always people.
- C. **15** Contemporary misuse of "church":
- (1) Misuses of "church" are summed up neatly in Webster's *Collegiate Dictionary*. Of the seven definitions of "church," the only biblically correct definition Webster cites is "The collective body of Christians." All other definitions given are abuses of the term "church" as given in the NT.
 - (2) The word "church" is never used in Scripture, as Webster defines it, to refer to:
 - (a) "a building for public worship,"
 - (b) "church services; divine worship,"
 - (c) "the organization of Christianity, as in a nation; esp., ecclesiastical power or government,"
 - (d) "the clerical profession,"
 - (e) "a body of Christian believers having the same creed, rites, etc.; a denomination; as, the Presbyterian Church,"
 - (f) "any body of worshipers; a religious society."
 - (3) **16** I would also add my own ideas to the misuse of "church":
 - (a) Neither *local churches* nor *religious denominations* are a part of "the church" in its *universal* sense.
 - (b) When we think "church"—local or universal—and envision anything in addition to or instead of people we are making a tragic blunder.
 - (c) Nor is "the church" a nebulous *institution* that Christ died for and to which God adds people.
 - (i) Through the years preachers, in an understandable attempt to illustrate a point, have drawn circles or other objects to illustrate "the church" and then put people into "it."
 - (ii) The "church" is not an "it." Any concept that makes the "church" one thing and the people something else is erroneous and will eventually lead to practices which are as much in error as the concept itself.
- D. **17** The "church" then describes people called to a *relationship* or *fellowship*:
- (1) In the universal church this relationship/fellowship is vertical—between God and all those who are saved ("our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ", 1 Jn. 1:3).
 - (2) In the local church this relationship/fellowship is horizontal—between individual saints (**1 Cor. 1:2**: "the church of God which is at Corinth, even them that are sanctified in Christ Jesus,"; **Phil. 1:1**: "To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the bishops and deacons:")
- E. It is essential we eliminate these modern concepts of the "church" (misuses) from our thinking for only then will we be prepared, with open minds, to grasp the true nature and character of the first-century church as revealed in the NT.

III. CONCLUSION: **18**

- I. So then, the "church" in the NT refers to that group of people who have answered God's call through the gospel (2 Thess. 2:13-14), and through obedience to God's call they have left the world and are in fellowship with God and thus saved (Acts 2:47).

****I Pet. 2:9-10:** *“But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; I O who once were not a people but are now the people of God, who had not obtained mercy but now have obtained mercy.”*

2. When a person hears the gospel (Rom. 10:17), develops faith (Jn. 8:24; Heb. 11:6), repents of his sins (Acts 17:30), confesses his/her faith in Christ (Rom. 10:9-10; Acts 8:37), and is baptized (Acts 2:38; 22:16; Gal. 3:27), he is saved as he/she is in fellowship with God (1 Jn. 1:2-3), he/she becomes a member of the body of Christ, His church (Acts 2:47; Col. 1:18).

References:

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