

STUDIES IN ECCLESIOLOGY
VOLUME I

WHAT IS CHURCH?



jrf

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“The ignorance which prevails in Christendom today concerning the truth about the Churches of God is deeper and more general than error on any other Scriptural subject. Many who are quite sound evangelically and are well taught on what we call the great fundamentals of the faith, are most unsound ecclesiastically. Mark the fearful confusion that abounds respecting the term itself. There are few words in the English language with a greater variety of meanings than “church.” The man in the street understands by “church” the building in which people congregate for public worship. Those who know better, apply the term to the members in spiritual fellowship who meet in that building. Others use it in a denominational way and speak of “the Methodist Church” or “Presbyterian Church.” Again, it is employed nationally or of the state-religious institution as “the Church of England” or “the Church of Scotland.” With Papists the word “church” is practically synonymous with “salvation,” for they are taught that all outside the vale of “Holy Mother Church” are eternally lost.

Many of the Lord’s own people seem to be strangely indifferent concerning God’s mind on this important subject. One from whose teachings on the church we differ widely has well said, “Sad it is to hear men devoted in the Gospel, clear expounders of the Word of God, telling us that they do not trouble themselves about church doctrine; that salvation is the all-important theme; and the establishing of Christians in the fundamentals is all that is necessary. We see men giving chapter and verse for every statement, and dwelling upon the infallible authority of the Word of God, quietly closing their eyes to its teachings upon the church, probably connected with that for which they can give no Scriptural authority, and apparently contented to bring others into the same relationship.”

A.W. Pink
Studies in the Scriptures
December 1927

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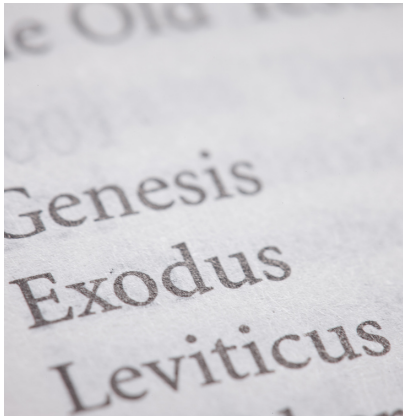


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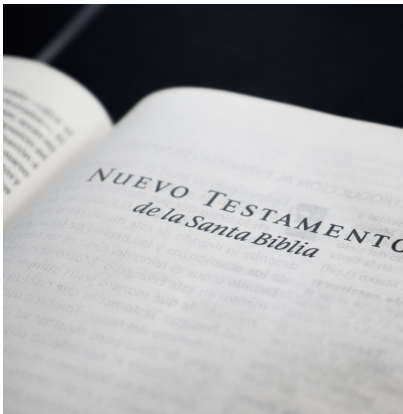
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PREFACE: THINKING ABOUT CHURCH

Since 2014, I've had ebbs and flows in my thoughts regarding the church. When I lay aside these studies, they inevitably come back seeking further clarity and resolution until I grow weary and lay them down again. Wash. Rinse. Repeat.

In that year, I was taking a seminary course called the Doctrine of the Church where we looked at every single use of "church" in the Scriptures. Note that I didn't simply say use of church in the New Testament. That's because the Greek word, *ekklesia*, translated church in our English Bibles (a poor translation by the way), is also in the Greek Old Testament (Septuagint) quite frequently. It is a common translation of the Hebrew word *qahal*, which our English Bibles translate as assembly or congregation (hold on to this).

·So the concept of ekklesia, or what we read translated as church, is not an entirely New Testament idea. We must also allow the Old Testament to inform our understanding of how we define church, but caution is warranted.

Want a practical implication of this?—How often have you been taught that the church was formed at Pentecost? Then are we prepared to explain how the church was in the wilderness with Moses, as described by Stephen in Acts 7:38 as well as the more than 100 times ekklesia appears in the Greek Septuagint. Was there a change? If so, what was it?

There is both continuity and discontinuity from Old to New Testaments regarding ekklesia. I'll hope to unpack some of this in the following pages, but for now I simply want to lay out some thoughts or better, questions. As always, the Scriptures must be our final authority.

- What is church? A building, event, identity, or other (denomination)?
- Does church require a building?
- Can we leave church?
- Can you become a member of a church?
- Who runs the church?
- Is church a 501c organization?
- Is church universal? Is church invisible?
- Is church an institution?
- Is church history monolithic?
- Is Christ building His church eschatologically?
- Where did our modern expression of church come from, Scripture or tradition?
- Can we build a church?
- Can we plant a church?

Additionally:

- Is there a biblical distinction or hierarchy between clergy and laity?
- Are “pastors” the only preachers?
- What is preaching?
- What is teaching?
- Is pastoring a profession/vocation?
- Is a formal seminary education required to “pastor” or preach?
- Is church a worship service?
- Is church participatory or non-participatory?
- What are the implications of 1 Corinthians 14:26-33 on our churches?

What about you?

What are your thoughts on church?

Have you thought about it with Scripture as your guide instead of personal experience, preference, or tradition?

Have you ever wrestled with what you have seen versus what Scripture describes?

Have you ever stopped to ask, why are we doing what we are doing?

The goal in this book is not to ask why as an end to itself. The goal is to more conform our lives to the Word of Almighty God and participate in His ekklesia as He has directed.



WHAT IS CHURCH?

INTRO: WHAT IS CHURCH?

What is Church? (Notice the absence of the definite article “the” commonly placed in front: The Church)

As mentioned earlier, since 2014, this is a question that I've been wrestling with, wading through the slough of opinions and the trappings of tradition, to look at what Scripture has to say. Some have thought this to be an inappropriate question to even consider, yet it is the same question asked by James Bannerman in his magnum opus *The Church of Christ* and it is the same question asked by Edmund Clowney in his own study *The Church*. Pick up any good systematic theology, turn to the chapter on church, and they'll begin with the same question - any proper study of the Church must begin with this question.

In fact, on a more basic, practical level, every believer must ask and further define this question based on Scripture to know what it is they are to participate in and how.

Why is this so important?

Understanding this question and answering it according to Scripture determines whether you are Roman Catholic or Protestant or other for that matter. It determines whether you include as God's people: all of the elect of God, or simply those post-Pentecost, and what to do with Israel, i.e. whether there are Two Peoples or One People of God. It determines what denomination you identify with and whether you believe in credo-baptism vs. paedobaptism. It answers whether the church is to be identified with the Kingdom or whether they are to be outposts in the Kingdom.

If you are a Millennial or Gen Z and have "left the church", properly answering this question lets you know your actions are an impossibility. Likewise, it brings resolution to many of the dichotomies that exist in matters of religion, particularly those who identify with or at least outwardly profess Christ.

On a practical level, a dear friend of mine recently left Christianity for the Roman Catholic Church (<-see that?) because she thought the church out of Rome was more biblical claiming it was older, traditional, and built upon the apostles (no, no, and no). Further, the "Bible Answer Man" left Protestant Christianity for the Eastern Orthodox Christian Church (<-see that again?) because he too came to view the answer to "What is church?" as being in-line with the EOCC. In just these examples, the creep of tradition is evident. But it's not just with them, each of us have been deeply impacted by tradition as well.

Asking these questions matters. Answering them biblically matters even more.

We may be easily tempted to shrug off a question like this or to simply assume that church is what it has always been. But notice how that assumption played out in the examples above.

What if our modern conception of church, i.e. what we see and have experienced, is not what Scripture has defined? Then what?

What if over the centuries we have, perhaps even unknowingly, allowed the layers of tradition to creep in and obscure what church really is or supposed to be?

I would suggest that largely our individual understanding of church has most often been influenced by our experience, followed closely by society, with Scripture well down the line behind family and preference. In other words, tradition over the Word of God.

Case in point, consider how you would answer the following questions:

- Is church primarily a location? (architectural)
- Is church primarily an event? (institutional)
- Is church primarily an identity? (congregational)
- Or is it a combination of all three?

The source for answering these questions should be Scripture, as the final authority in matters of faith and practice (Sola Scriptura) and where we should turn principally. But what happens if we do that and find something different than what we are used to seeing? Are we willing to change what we think and do to be more inline with what God has revealed? If we find this to be the case, it would require a certain amount of swimming upstream, against the popular tide and we know the fate of salmon swimming upstream. (Hint: it ends in death!)

Consider now how we use the word church, particularly in Western Civilization.

What church do you go to? Did you go to church on Sunday? How was church this morning? We are just getting out of church. Would you like to go to church with me? There's Purpose-Driven Church, The Emerging Church, the aforementioned Roman Catholic Church and Eastern Orthodox Church, the Mormon (LDS) Church, The Church of England, the Southern Baptist Church, the Ecumenical Church. We build churches, plant churches, reform and revitalize churches. We have un-churched, de-churched, and churched. As I look out my window at work I see 5 "churches". If I were to ask someone to walk down the block to the next church, they would stop at a building. Relatedly, we have terms like church staff, church secretary, church membership, someone who cleans the church, church maintenance, church budget, church mortgage, and increasingly popular is the notion that an individual can be the church...and on we go. The variety and meaning with which we use the word church is broad. Just simply look at the dictionary definition and its variety of meanings.

Perhaps we have let our use of the word church determine its meaning, not all too uncommon these days where we can make words mean what we want. Contrary to this thought, words do have defined

meaning and origin, called etymology. This is true across the board, but most certainly with biblical words, sometimes those found in our translations, but more importantly those found in the original biblical languages.

A wise man once told me, "Your interpretation is only as good as your translation." A thought to ponder for another day.

Before we take time to examine the etymology of church and more importantly how it is defined in Scripture, simply consider whether this question is an important one to raise.

Is it important for us to know what (or who) church is? Is it important for us to biblically define what many of us have been a part of for most of our lives?

An additional reason for why this question matters is that it effects how one addresses these points on the form and function of church:

- The mission of church
- The governance of church
- The people of church
- The "marks" of church
- The order or operation of church

Each of these depends on properly answering the question, what is church?

In summary, can we come up with a loose understanding of what church is based on some of the scattered thoughts above about how church is used in our modern vernacular? It may look something like below:

Church is _____

- A religious building
- A religious organization (may or may not be truly Christian)
- A religious meeting
- A religious people
- A religious institution
- A recurring religious event
- A particular religious denomination
- A tax-exempt religious* business

In the chapters that follow, we'll look at the origin of the word church and whether or not its usage corresponds with the Greek word *ekklesia*, translated as church in the English bibles.

WHAT IS CHURCH?



CH. 1: THE MEANING OF CHURCH

In the opening of this book on the study of church, we began with a look at some questions regarding the common understanding or misunderstanding for the usage of the word church. Then we looked at some modern conceptions of church, or what has come to be some traditional definitions of church. Here, we will add another layer to that by asking if our societal usage of church corresponds with its meaning. In subsequent chapters, we'll explore the relationship between church and its original Greek counterpart, *ekklesia*.

Recall that we have already summarized some of the more common societal uses of church as follows:

- A religious building
- A religious organization (may or may not be truly Christian)
- A religious meeting
- A religious people
- A religious institution
- A recurring religious event
- A particular religious denomination
- A tax-exempt religious business

We turn now to the origin and meaning of church.

The origin of our English word church is difficult to pin down. Some state it is a derivative of the Greek word *kurios*, which we often find translated in Scripture as Lord. Following this theory, the specific derivation of this word, *kuriakon* in Revelation 1:10, is of particular interest (see also 1 Corinthians 11:20). Here we see John was in the Spirit on the “Lord’s Day”, *kuriakon hemera*, or the day that belongs to the Lord. As most words do, *kuriakon* underwent some changes when it was imported (transliterated – alphabetic equivalence) into other languages, first being shortened to *kuriak*. Then depending on the dialect differences became *kurk* and eventually *kirk* (Scottish origin). Once in English, *kirk* became *church*. So, in summary *kuriakon* eventually became “church” and generally means belonging to the Lord.

Similarly, another theory is the relationship between church and *kuriakos*, a compound word of *kurios* (lord) and *oikos* (house) which came to mean the “house of the Lord”. One can see that this meaning could have a dual application, both spiritually as a people comprising the house of the Lord and architecturally, i.e., a building, as in similarity to the temple of God in the Old Testament. Logically, this is why some church buildings have a “sanctuary”.

However, others have disagreed with these etymologies stating instead that the origin of church is not rooted in Greek but is Celtic and is derived from the word “*cyrch*”, or circle, and this is how we arrived at *kirk*, upon which church is derived following the pattern in the previous two theories.

Along this same line of thought, in the German world, the origin of church is sometimes traced through such words as *kirche* and *kerk*, derived from the Latin *circa*, *circumcicare*, *circulus*, even *circus*! (Has your experience with church been a circus?!?) It should be pointed out that Martin Luther disliked the word *kirche*, using it sparingly in his translation of the Scriptures, in reference to pagan shrines in the Old Testament and the dedication feast at the temple in John 10:22. He

preferred “the congregation of the saints as the people or company of God.” (TDNT, Kittle Vol. III, pg. 534) In the revised Lutheran Bible and its related concordance, the word *kirche* (church), is not found at all.

Regardless of the exact origin, it's clear that church generally means belonging to the Lord, either as a reference to His people or a particular place of worship. Clearly, church carries with it a religious connotation, as noted in its meaning and confirmed in our societal uses listed above.

So far so good, right?

It's easy to see the relationship of society's usage of church to its meaning. Perhaps some expansion of the meaning has led to some misapplication of the word, as in applying it to a people/building that do not belong to the Lord in a salvific sense, but this is not entirely unusual. In other words, societies usage and understanding of the word church corresponds with its accepted meaning, generally speaking.

The question that needs to be asked next is whether this word church, as properly defined, is an appropriate translation of the Greek word *ekklesia*.



CH. 2: WHAT IS AN EKKLESIA?

So far, we have been slowly working our way through a study of church, or what some may call the doctrine of the church, simply stated, ecclesiology. In this book thus far we've looked at:

- Thinking About Church
- What is Church?
- The Meaning of Church

We turn now from the English word church to the word used in the original Koine Greek and translated most often as church, *ekklesia*. After working through the meaning of *ekklesia*, we'll need to ask whether the meaning and use of church corresponds accurately with *ekklesia*, whether church conveys the meaning of *ekklesia*, and what

our Lord intended by using *ekklesia* over a similar word, *sunagogue* (synagogue).

In biblical translations, we arrive at our English equivalents in one of two ways: 1. Transliteration, or simply the English letter equivalent 2. Translation, inserting the near English equivalent, meaning in the place of the original language word.

In our Bible translations however, particularly English, this can be tricky because no word in the original languages (Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek) has a single word that corresponds to its meaning. There is usually a range (semantic range) of words and context is the best guide to determining which word fits best. So even the most accurate, formal equivalency (attempted word-for-word as opposed to dynamic or thought-for-thought) translations have a bit of interpretation in them.

Sometimes we use transliterated words (our English letter equivalents and the Greek words you see here because I have chosen not to use Greek fonts) from the original biblical languages in our modern parlance, such as Hallelujah or Messiah or Christ. However, our usage of the transliteration doesn't always directly equal the words meaning: Hallelujah = Praise Yahweh; Messiah = Anointed; but sometimes they are closer as in *Christos* = Christ. Other common transliterated words in our New Testament where the transliteration is nearly equivalent are: Apostle (*apostelos*), Angel (*angelos*), Baptism (*baptismo*), Evangelist (*euangeli*), and Deacon (*diakonos*). Note that these words have not necessarily been translated into an English equivalent, but because they are transliterated instead, they carry their original meaning over, sometimes avoiding unnecessary replacement, but other times failing to communicate the actual meaning, as in *baptismo*=immersion.

Our English word "church" is the most common translation of the Greek word *ekklesia*. As Mounce's dictionary affirms we find the definition of *ekklesia* as "church, congregation, assembly." Since *ekklesia* is the transliteration of the original Greek word, we can see clearly that it has no letter-for-letter relationship with church. *Ekklesia* is sometimes said to mean "the called-out ones", because it is a compound of *ek* (out of) and *kaleo* (called), while probable, it's not a complete definition, though it can describe the application as a people called out into an *ekklesia*. We know that the combination of words into one doesn't necessarily convey the meaning, as in our English words butterfly or greenhouse.

Likewise, we can see that the other possibilities (semantic ranges) given by Mounce could have a greater bearing on what this word

ekklesia actually means, neither a location, building, or event but rather an assembly or gathering.

Ekklesia is used as a noun ~114 times in the New Testament, first appearing canonically in Matthew 16:18. Our Lord was not novel in His declaration to build an *ekklesia*, rather He was using or perhaps clarifying the Old Testament use and understanding of *ekklesia*.

Were you aware that the word so often translated as “church” was used in the Old Testament some 100 times?

In the Greek Old Testament, called the Septuagint (LXX), *ekklesia* is the most common translation of the Hebrew word *qahal*, meaning “assembly” or “to assemble”. Of the 162+/- occurrences of *qahal* (or *maqhel*), ~96 times it is translated as *ekklesia*. However, *qahal* can also be translated as *synagogue* or what we know as the transliterated word *synagogue*. This translation choice for *qahal* occurs ~45 times in the Septuagint. Commenting on the OT use of *qahal*, Louis Berkhof in his *Systematic Theology*, writes, “[Qahal] properly denotes the actual meeting together of the people.” (p. 555). In other words, *qahal* wasn’t abstract, but took place when the people actually met together.

The remaining translations of *qahal* occur in a variety of ways. As an aside, note how we have come to recognize the transliteration of *synagogue* and keep it in our English translations, but *ekklesia* is conspicuously absent. It’s worth pointing out that unlike *church*, *ekklesia* doesn’t carry a specifically religious connotation, it simply means gathering or assembly (see Acts 19:32, 39, 41; now why isn’t it translated *church* in these verses!?!). It gains its religious meaning when the phrase “of God” or “of Christ” is attached or implied. We might say for our purposes that *ekklesia* simply means an assembly of God in Christ.

Ekklesia is used in at least of couple of different ways in the New Testament which has caused no little amount of tension (which we will examine in more detail in a subsequent chapter). As well as being used in the singular (*church*) and plural (*churches*), it’s use in the aforementioned Matthew 16:18 seems to be general or what some have called a universal sense (see chapter 8). While it’s next use, the only other occurrence in the Gospels seems to be more specific, carrying a local application, Matthew 18:16. Kittle, writing in volume 3 of the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* writes, “From the time of Thuc. [Thucydides, 460-395 B.C.], Plat. [Plato, 428-348 B.C.], and Xenoph. [Xenophon, 430-354 B.C.], and especially in inscriptions, *ekklesia* is the assembly of the *demos* [people, mass of people assembled in a public place] in Athens and in most Greek *poleis* [cities].”

The etymology is both simple and significant. The citizens are the *ekkletoi*, i.e., those who are summonsed and called together by the herald.”

Think again how we've used the word church in our modern vernacular and even in the definition of church itself and ask whether it fits with what we've observed regarding *ekklesia*. As we've seen, typically church means a people or building belonging to the Lord, but it has also unfortunately been applied to denominations, events, institutions, even businesses, not to mention broadly as the evangelical church or the church in America.

Conversely, *ekklesia* simply means an assembly or gathering. *Ekklesia* is never used in reference to a building, ever. Also, implied in the meaning of an assembly or gathering is a plurality, not individuality; it's a group of people gathered together.

Translating *ekklesia* as church may have seemed like a fine idea if one is wanting to convey “belonging to the Lord”, but as we have seen so far, that is simply not the meaning of *ekklesia* and church is now a loaded term with baggage. It would have been acceptable in our example we looked at last time from Revelation 1:10, John was in the Spirit on the church day, but not as a translation of *ekklesia*.

Our other word used in the original Greek, *sunagogue* (synagogue), seems to have overlapping meaning with *ekklesia*, i.e. they can both mean a gathering. However, unlike *ekklesia*, *synagogue* can also refer specifically to a building, or the place where the gathering takes place. On a surface level, it would appear that our English word church may more appropriately be related to *synagogue*, rather than *ekklesia*, particularly when we consider that *synagogue* carries with it a religious meaning.

However, let us be reminded that our Lord stated specifically in Matthew 16:18 that He would build His *ekklesia*, not His *synagogue*. Both have meaning in the Old Testament, only one, *synagogue*, carries with it a specifically religious connotation as well as a strict geographic location that would have been easily recognized as such in the first century. *Ekklesia* was much more generic, carrying with it the idea of a city council or local government assembly.

Are these differences merely pedantic? Or does understanding the meaning of church, *ekklesia*, and *synagogue*, respectively, influence the form or function of what we have come to call and participate in as church?

Let's conclude with a final word from Kittle in his NT Theological Dictionary after stating that the use of assembly or gathering may be a more accurate way to translate *ekklesia*,

“This does not mean that we should banish the words ‘Church’ and ‘congregation’ from our vocabulary. Apart from the impossibility of such an undertaking, there would be no sense in forfeiting the wealth of meaning proper to these terms. What is needed is that we should grasp the precise significance of the word *ekklesia*, since at this point linguistic sobriety will help us to the true meaning and bearing from the standpoint of biblical theology.”

Two main questions remain:

1. If it's not the best-fit translation, how or why did church make it into our English bibles?
2. What, if anything, is the significance of all this?



CH. 3: CHURCH AND THE ENGLISH BIBLE

In this chapter, we will take a minor but related detour to look at how our English Bibles came to translate the original Greek word *ekklesia* (which we looked at in the last chapter) as the word church, which we examined in Chapter 1.

If you're struggling to find any practical significance with our study thus far, consider the following:

William Tyndale (1494-1536) was the first man credited with translating the Bible into English. Until this point, the Bible had primarily been in Latin (The Vulgate, Jerome ~383 A.D.) thereby restricting its readability to the priests and clergy only. Tyndale, working off of the Greek New Testament translation work performed

by Erasmus (and Luther), translated the Bible into English directly from the original language sources. He was able to translate the New Testament from Greek and half of the Old Testament from Hebrew prior to his death as a martyr.

Tyndale is considered the “Father of the English Bible” and has been referred to as the Apostle to England. Born near the border of Wales, he studied at Oxford in 1510, where the aforementioned Erasmus was teaching. He became a master of Greek and Hebrew under Erasmus as well as becoming fluent in 7 languages. In 1515, Tyndale studied at Cambridge, and may have encountered some of Luther’s early teachings. He was ordained to the priesthood in 1521, but expressed his frustrations with the failure to make the Scriptures available in the common language of the people. This was one of several similarities between Tyndale and Luther. In a famous quote, Tyndale summarizes this frustration, “I will cause a boy who drives a plow to know more Scripture than the Pope.”

Mentioning Tyndale as the Father of the English Bible isn’t meant as a slight to the excellent work performed by the Morning-Star of the Reformation, John Wycliffe (1382). However, Wycliffe lacked access to the Greek and Hebrew, thus basing his English translation on the Latin Vulgate, essentially becoming a translation of a translation. It’s likely that his work did not excel in popularity like that of Tyndale because the printing press had not yet been invented. Nevertheless, his influence should not be minimized.

In 1523, Tyndale applied to the Bishop of London for permission to translate the Scriptures into English but was denied. Despite the rejection, he undertook the effort in an underground manner in Germany, an area known for its sympathy for Reformation. Tyndale’s English translation of the New Testament, completed in 1525, challenged some of the core doctrinal beliefs which had been established and maintained by the Catholic Church through their use of the Latin bible and the distinction they maintained between clergy and laity. For this reason, his NT translation was smuggled into England. In an effort to undermine the spread of the English NT, the Bishop of London ordered all the copies to be purchased, a plan which backfired and went on to fund a second edition.

Some such challenges by Tyndale, which threatened the institutional Catholic Church, can be found in his decision to translate the word *presbuteros* to mean “elder” rather than “priest”, an obvious undermining of the Catholic priesthood. Additionally, Tyndale favored the translation of *metanoieite* as “repent” rather than “do penance”, again a clear assault on the Catholic doctrine of penance. Both of

these preferences, and we may add, more accurate translations, by Tyndale are represented in our modern English translations.

Those aside, and others, most significant to our discussion here was Tyndale's insistence upon translating *ekklesia* as congregation, not church, a hill he literally chose to die on. Until then, the popes, priesthood, and councils of Catholicism had dominated the people and kept them under their authority as a hierarchical institution known as the Roman Catholic Church. If one were unable to find the word "church" in their Bible, which they were now able to read in a common language for the first time, then clearly the authority of the Catholic Church would have come into question.

Using the word church in this way, was an authoritarian move that pointed to the universal, visible, institution that sought to expand its dominion throughout the world, by force, not by the gospel. In essence, Tyndale was rightly returning the power to the people, the assembly or congregation, and stripping it from the visible institution which had grown apostate in the centuries since the Apostolic era and most notably since the 4th Century reign of Constantine. In 1536, Tyndale was martyred under the reign of King Henry VIII. His last words were "Lord open the King of England's eyes".

Now we must ask, if Tyndale's other changes were incorporated into our English translations, why do we still find the word "church" as the translation for *ekklesia* in every single modern translation? In short, it's because during the Reformation, the reformers, such as Luther, did not offer a clean break of the "church" from the sacral society of the State. Instead, the church, if we may use that word now, became more formally wed to the State and the interest of the State to constrain the people became an even bigger problem than when they were under the banner of the Catholic Church.

Keep in mind that Luther himself refused to use the German word for church (*kirche*), preferring instead for "the congregation of the saints as the people or company of God." As significant as Luther's efforts were in ushering in the Reformation, in practice, his break from the institutional church was only half-hearted. Instead, it paved the way for the new Protestant "Church" to become even stranger bedfellows with the State.

If you struggle with that, simply ask how it was that Martin Luther was able to oppose the Catholic Church and still live, meanwhile countless martyrs who opposed the new mixture of church and state were brutally murdered? (hint: he was actually protected by the civil magistrate)

Tyndale's Bible was completed and published as The Matthew's Bible in 1537. It maintained the translation of *ekklesia* as congregation. In 1539 a second major publication of the Bible was made called The Great Bible which likewise maintained this same translation. However, in 1557 the Geneva New Testament produced by William Whittingham was the first to use the word church instead of congregation and the rest they say is history.

Later, because Protestantism became the official state religion of England, the Church of England, under the rule of King James likewise chose to retain the word church in the most widespread English translation, The King James Bible, 1611. King James (James I – Scotland) had a list of 14 specific instructions (found in most printed KJV Bibles today) to the translators of the King James Bible, who by the way were all from the Church of England. Number 3 states,

“3. The old ecclesiastical words to be kept; as the word church, not to be translated congregation, &c.”

In this way, James was able to reassert ecclesiastical (church) authority which had been held by Rome prior to the Reformation.

In conclusion, it's not difficult to see the motives behind retaining the translation of “church”. It was for power, authority, and money, not because church was the best translation of *ekklesia*. Tyndale and Luther recognized this and made a statement to the world in their translation choices.

So then we return to our original question, is church an *ekklesia*?

First, we must conclude that the word church is not an accurate translation or portrayal of what Scripture is talking about when it uses the word *ekklesia*. Primarily this is because we read our modern conception of church into the Scriptural translation of the word and arrive at the meaning, just as those in the 16th century did. Unfortunately, it has become the proverbial “loaded word”.

Second, the true meaning of church is “belonging to the Lord”, while the true meaning of *ekklesia* is an “assembly or gathering”. While the former may be an accurate description of the people of God, unfortunately, as we've seen its use is certainly not constricted to this meaning. The latter is communicating something different, or at least nuanced, namely that Christ's *ekklesia* is an assembly or gathering.

Third, because the use of church is so widespread, its usage is not going away, therefore we must be careful to define what it is. Reciting

Kittle again on this point,

“This does not mean that we should banish the words ‘Church’ and ‘congregation’ from our vocabulary. Apart from the impossibility of such an undertaking, there would be no sense in forfeiting the wealth of meaning proper to these terms. What is needed is that we should grasp the precise significance of the word *ekklesia*, since at this point linguistic sobriety will help us to the true meaning and bearing from the standpoint of biblical theology.” (pg. 505, footnote 6)

Whether we prefer to use the word church or congregation, assembly, or gathering it may not matter as much as what meaning is intended behind it. Because we have a cultural tendency to be sloppy with the usage and meaning of our words, there are inherent dangers in simply throwing around the word church without properly defining what the New Testament intends by *ekklesia*. Simply put, *ekklesia* does not convey all that our modern use of church has come to convey. It is never used in Scripture as a building. Certainly never used to refer to a denomination. It is, depending on context of course, used as an assembly or gathering of people and specifically an assembly by God in Christ when so designated (conversely, see Acts 19:32,39,41)

The question now is, what are the ripple effects from this? Anything? Or is the whole discussion pedantic?

Regardless, we should continue probing God’s Word and humbly submit to what we find, even if it costs us our precious traditions, or more, our lives as in the case of Tyndale.

CH. 4: WHAT ABOUT THE SYNAGOGUE

In our last chapter we looked at the origin for the translation of *ekklesia* as church in the English Bibles through the work of Tyndale and his decision, along with Luther's, to refuse to use the word church, opting instead for congregation. Prior to that, we asked "What is an *ekklesia*?" to see if the definition and Scriptural use matched our understanding of the word church. We found that while *ekklesia* simply means a gathering or assembly (congregation is a possibility too), church in both its meaning and common usage most often refers to a people or building belonging to the Lord. In that, we noticed that on the surface, church would seem to have more in common with synagogue, than it does with *ekklesia*, despite the semantic range overlap between these two. This will be our focus in this chapter. To do this, we'll need to refer to a few academic sources, which may lead us

to discover more than a superficial relationship between synagogue and church. In fact, evidence for this deep relationship abounds.

Noted historian Philip Schaff states, "As the Christian Church rests historically on the Jewish Church, so Christian worship and the congregational organization rest on that of the synagogue, and cannot be well understood without it." (Vol. 1 – pg 456)

Likewise, Jewish historian Alfred Eldersheim writes, "It was, surely, a wondrously linked chain of circumstances, which bound the Synagogue to the Church" (*The Life and Times of Jesus Messiah*, pg. 298) and also, "For the Synagogue became the cradle of the Church. Without it, as indeed without Israel's dispersion, the Church Universal (let's define later!) would, humanely [sic] speaking, have been impossible, and the conversation [sic] of the Gentiles have required a succession of millennial miracles." (*ibid*, pg. 299).

Furthermore, Sam Waldron in his seminary course, "Doctrine of the Church" at Covenant Baptist Theological Seminary affirms that this connection is a modern observation as well when he defends the regulative principal of worship as it pertains to Old Testament temple and synagogue by writing, "I will stipulate that the church and its worship is patterned on the synagogue." (Course Notes, pg. 171)

Each of these statements, and there could be many more, argue that the basis for what we have come to experience as "church" finds its historical origin in the synagogue. This argument is assuming that church = ekklesia =~ synagogue.

Is this significant or merely hair-splitting? Let's see.

First, it would appear that if we are to rightly understand the form and function of the modern church, then it will be proper to understand what the synagogue is or was and how it functioned, particularly in first century Judea. In other words, how do you know where you are and are going unless you understand where you have been? To answer this, let's look at the origin of the synagogue along with its first century form and function, followed by its place in the apostolic proclamation of the gospel.

Most historians and theologians assume that the synagogue developed after the Babylonian captivity (see Jeremiah and Ezekiel) when the first temple, Solomon's, was destroyed in 586 B.C. They suppose that at the time of Ezra the synagogue practice developed as a result of the crisis of a destroyed temple (~480 B.C.). In this view, the synagogue became a replacement for the temple. This may be true, but it has

difficulty sustaining its point when we arrive at the first century A.D. because there we have BOTH the temple (Herod's) and the synagogue. In this period they were parallel and complementary, not competing, nor did one supersede the other. In fact, as we will see, their functions were distinct and separate, nearly as distinct as one might see between say "Church and State."

In his helpful book, *Jewish backgrounds of the New Testament*, Julius Scott writes, "Most simply put, the synagogue developed as the center of Hebrew life after the loss of traditional institutes. It was not a substitute for temple worship and services as such, but a supplement to them." (Pg. 139) Scott would seem to affirm the origin of the synagogue as being post-exilic, which is certainly fine. The point he makes is that the synagogue was never meant to be a substitute for the regulated worship of the temple, rather a supplement.

Contra to this popular view of the post-exilic synagogue development, Levine persuasively argues that the background for the synagogue was the "city-gate". He reasons this on the basis of similarity between the community functions that took place between both ("The Nature and Origin of the Palestinian Synagogue Reconsidered"). This connection is not a difficult one to make, particularly in light of the pervasive occurrence of the city-gate in the Old Testament. He points out that the city-gate "served as a marketplace (2 Kings 7:1) and as a setting where a ruler would hold court and where prophets would speak (1 Kings 22:10; Jer. 38:7)." Additionally, Levine notes that one of the "primary functions at the city gate was judiciary. City elders would assemble there to dispense justice." (see Deut. 21:19; 17:5, 22:24). Finally, he notes the significance of the city gate as the setting for personal affairs, Ruth 4:1-2, the place of a conquering king's throne (Jer. 39:3, Jer. 1:15-16), a place for the king to meet with the people (2 Sam. 19:8-9; 1 Kings 22:10; 2 Chron. 32:6), and religious functions (2 Kings 23:8). Thus, evidence for parallel activities, even the precedent for synagogue activities, may be found in studying the city gate.

Function

While pointing out the differences between some early names for this community building, *proseuche* and *synagoge*, Levine finds a common denominator in that, "first and foremost, the synagogue served the full range of needs of a particular community. As documented in contemporary sources, such functions included political meetings, social gatherings, courts, schools, hostels, charity activities, slave manumission, meals (sacred or otherwise), and of course, religious-liturgical functions." Scott adds, "Synagogues, as the word implies, were

gathering places. The buildings were used for official public meetings, schools, tribunals of judgment, and social occasions.” (Pg. 144)

As to the Jewish synagogue, especially that in first century Palestine, the emphasis seems to be more on religious activity than community involvement, consistent with what we see in Scripture. Scott points out some of these early synagogue functions as being, “first and foremost a place for reading Scripture and prayer. It was the synagogue, with its regular reading and interpretation of the Law and of the Prophets, and with its schools for the young, that wove the Scriptures into the fabric of life and experience of the people.” (pg. 140)

Form

Archeological evidence reveals that the synagogue architecture may have varied, but largely featured, “benches along all or most of the walls, the focus of each building was the center of its hall, much as was the plan in contemporary Hellenistic and Roman communal buildings. (Levine)

Scott adds, “There were no altars nor sacrifices in the synagogue; instead only the sacred books (scrolls) were absolutely necessary. Although priests who were in attendance were usually selected to be the public readers and to pronounce the blessings, their presence was not required for synagogue service as it was for worship in the temple. The revered leaders of the synagogue were the elders of the community and those with recognizable expertise in the law. Synagogues were organized wherever there were enough men (ten) to constitute a proper assembly, whether in the land of Israel or beyond.” (Pg. 140)

While Scriptural evidence points to the oversight of a council, known as the Sanhedrin, the synagogue was basically a lay institution, because the priests were largely involved with the regulation of the temple. Scott adds, “Actual leadership was in the hands of the elders, respected heads of families in the community. The major official was the archisynagogos, the chief of the synagogue who was in overall charge of its affairs. The hazzan (minister or attendant) was, in Jewish areas, an executive officer for the town as well as the synagogue.” (p. 143)

Liturgy

The worship services, if we may use that term, were often held multiple times on the Sabbath, as well as other days of the week such as Monday and Thursday. Additionally, services were held on days of

special assemblies, feast days, etc. (Scott, p. 141)

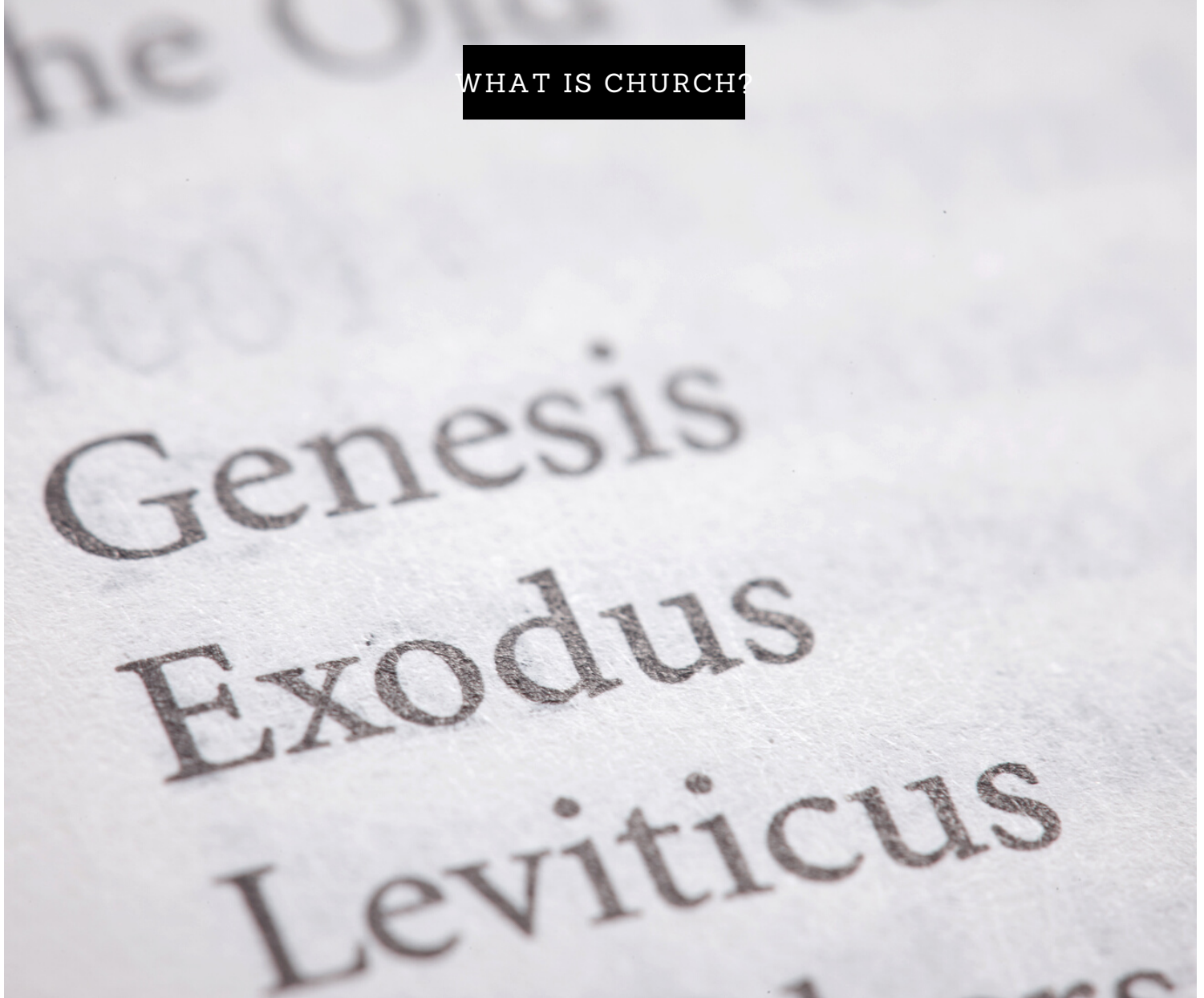
The order of worship, or liturgy, was basic but could last several hours. These included, “recitation of the Shema, the daily prayer (Shemoneh ‘Esreh), and reading of the Law and the Prophets. The reading was accompanied by a translation-interpretation (a targum), and frequently a sermon-homily.” (Scott, p.141)

Finally, we must note one of the reasons for the synagogue, at least providentially, was to provide an avenue for access to the gospel proclamation of our Lord and the apostles to the Jews. In Scripture, we see Jesus and His disciples utilizing the existing structure of the synagogue while simultaneously proclaiming the formation of the *ekklesia*. This should serve as a caution in our study on decrying the form and function of what we experience today as church vs. what constituted an *ekklesia* during the apostolic period. Perhaps Philippians 1:18 is a good exhortation for us in this regard.

What can we conclude from this synagogue layer added to our understanding of the development of church?

While *ekklesia* does not seem to provide a clear pattern for development of our concept of church, synagogue does seem to have some striking similarities. However, it must be noted that there have been some significant departures, most notably in the “liturgy”, governance, and sociopolitical aspects. The synagogue was a Word-centered, lay-led, house of study (and later of prayer) that encouraged dialogue, questions, and multiplicity of speakers. Likewise, it played a critical role in the community, serving as a location for social and political functions alike.

Before moving on it's important to remember that Jesus declared He would build His *ekklesia*, not synagogue, despite the similarities that we've noted. Having now laid some of the historical groundwork in our study, we will next turn to Scripture and explore how *ekklesia* is used along with its implications on our modern conception of church.



CH. 5: THE OLD TESTAMENT USE OF EKKLESIA

Thus far in our journey to discover What is Church, hopefully you've seen how carefully defining one's use and meaning of terms is important. After laying the foundation for some of the historical facts regarding the nature of church, *ekklesia*, and synagogue, we turn now to the scriptural use of *ekklesia*. For obvious reasons, the New Testament should be our primary guide for formulating our doctrine of church. However, before we jump into an examination of the New Testament use of *ekklesia*, translated into English as church, we must at least provide an overview of the Old Testament use, particularly as it occurs in the Greek translation of the Old Testament.

This translation is commonly called the Septuagint and is often abbreviated as LXX (70). What we know as the Old Testament today

was originally written in Hebrew and some Aramaic. However, in the 3rd Century B.C. a group of 72 Jewish scholars were commissioned to translate the Old Testament into Greek, a more common and modern language at the time. This translation is largely that which would have been in use and circulation during time of Christ and His disciples, which gives it bearing on the use and meaning of particular words, in this case, *ekklesia*.

Remember that we've already discussed the Greek translation, *ekklesia*, of the Hebrew word *qahal*. However, it should be pointed out that of the 162 occurrences of *qahal* in the Hebrew Old Testament, approximately 96 times it is translated *ekklesia* in the Greek Old Testament (LXX), while approximately 45 times it is translated *sunagoge* (synagogue). So once again we are able to see the overlap in range between *ekklesia* and synagogue.

One additional reminder is that, as we have seen, *ekklesia* and church are not exactly synonyms. *Ekklesia* generally means an assembly, gathering, or congregation, while in a strict sense church most often refers to the people of God or a building where these people meet. Conflating the two terms and their meanings has led to no shortage of difficulty. There will be more to say on this, but for now we turn our attention to Scripture.

It won't be practical to examine every single use of *ekklesia* in the Septuagint, however there are a few key, thematic uses as well as a couple of individual uses that will help provide understanding for how the New Testament uses the word, particularly as it is first used by our Lord in Matthew 16:18. If we understand that Jesus was not inventing a new concept with the statement, "I will build my *ekklesia* (church)" rather than He was utilizing an already familiar concept which He was now elucidating and re-framing, it will aid in our understanding on the meaning of church.

In his essay on the "Nature of the Church" in volume two of his works, Professor John Murray (1898-1975) provides some key thematic uses of *ekklesia* found in the Greek Old Testament that are most helpful in understanding the New Testament use. He points out that the first use in the Septuagint occurs in Deuteronomy 4:10, "how on the day that you stood before the Lord your God at Horeb, the Lord said to me, 'Gather the people to me, that I may let them hear my words, so that they may learn to fear me all the days that they live on the earth, and that they may teach their children so.'"

In this passage we may observe that the assembly is called by God, i.e. He is the one calling for the assembling (gather). Additionally, we see

that this is in reference to an actual gathering. It was not a spiritual gathering of all who identified as Israel, nor did it include those who were scattered abroad in other countries. It was an actual gathering of those physically present. While in this assembly, the people were to hear the word of God and learn to fear Him all their life, particularly for the purpose of teaching their children. In context, Moses is reminding the people of the Day of the Assembly, which occurred as the people assembled before God at Mount Sinai. This brings us to our second significant use of *ekklesia* pointed out by Professor Murray.

Murray draws attention to the “day of the assembly (*ekklesia*)” and locates this occasion in Deuteronomy 9:10; 10:4; 18:16. This Day of the Church is again a reference to the *ekklesia* gathered at Sinai. This singular reference has an interesting trajectory that leaves one wondering whether it points forward eschatologically to a future, singular *ekklesia* or gathering, see especially Hebrews 12:18-29 (more on this later). Furthermore, Stephen references this exact occasion during his speech just prior to his murder and draws attention to the “congregation (*ekklesia*) in the wilderness” (Acts 7:38). So, we are able to see how the New Testament corroborates our understanding of *ekklesia* in the Old Testament thus far.

Next, Murray points out that *ekklesia* in the Old Testament is a covenant gathering. Here he cites numerous passages including: Exodus 19:5-25; 1 Kings 8:14, 22, 55, 65; 1 Chronicles 13:2, 4; 28:8, 29:1, 10, 20; 2 Chronicles 6:3, 12, 13; 7:8 (I would add 2 Chronicles 23:3). The first of these passages of note, from Exodus 19, is again the historical account of the Mt. Sinai gathering. This has already been mentioned, but we’ll add that it was here where God established His covenant, commonly called the Mosaic Covenant (or Old Covenant), with the Nation of Israel. The entire book of Hebrews is concerned with the comparison and contrast between the Old (Mosaic) Covenant and New Covenant, ratified through the death of Christ.

The second passage under our heading of *ekklesia* as a covenant gathering, 1 Kings 8, deals with the blessing and dedication of the temple by Solomon. The background of the prior covenantal events at Sinai are given in 1 Kings 8:9-11 and the setting places this dedication firmly within the promises given in the Davidic Covenant (2 Samuel 7).

The third passage, 1 Chronicles 13:2,4 supports our conclusion from earlier that the assembly of Israel was an actual gathering and did not include those who were absent or separated for one reason or another. Here, David speaks to the assembly of Israel concerning the brothers abroad “who remain in all the lands of Israel” that they might be gathered together with them.

The remaining passages from 1 Chronicles have Davidic Covenant implications as well, while the passages from 2 Chronicles are the Chroniclers viewpoint of the temple dedication discussed earlier.

Finally, from Murray we may note the Septuagint uses that most likely frame our Lord's use of *ekklesia* in Matthew 16:18 and Matthew 18:17. He points out the following: Psalm 22:22,25; Psalm 40:9,10. We will examine these in a subsequent chapter when we open up the words of Christ concerning His *ekklesia* in the Gospel of Matthew.

In addition to these thematic uses, some additional passages should be noted which will aid in rounding out our understanding of *ekklesia* in the New Testament. First is that the Old Testament *ekklesia* had entrance requirements. These may be seen in Deut. 23:1-3 preventing entrance of emasculated males, those of illegitimate birth, and Amonites and Moabites. Second, the Old Testament *ekklesia* was a war church. This is asserted in the following passages: Judges 20:2; 21:5; 21:8; and 1 Samuel 17:47. Finally, there is an indication of a heavenly *ekklesia* as seen in Psalm 89:5.

The use of *ekklesia* in the Septuagint is broad and sometimes does not maintain its technical use or meaning. For this reason, some slight caution is warranted when attempting to derive meaning for the New Testament use. Additionally, we need to understand the national flavor of the Old Testament *ekklesia* as it relates to Israel, as well as its inception and operation under the Old Covenant. However, as pointed out here there are some noteworthy and informative backgrounds that can be gleaned from the Old Testament use and meaning. Specifically, we noted that the *ekklesia* was called by God, actually convened, pointed forward eschatologically, and was a covenant gathering. We also noted that *ekklesia* had entrance requirements, was a war or militant *ekklesia* particularly as it related to Israel, and also had heavenly implications. With these passages, and there are others we could examine, we are better equipped to turn to the New Testament scriptures and understand what meaning the word *ekklesia* is trying to convey. Allowing it to speak and define on its own terms, in its own context, will ultimately provide us with a clearer picture of how Christ is building His *ekklesia*, both the form and the function.

In a future volume (Lord willing), we will further examine the Old Testament by fleshing out the relationship of Israel, Kingdom, and Church as it pertains to *ekklesia*.



INTERLUDE: EKKLESIA & THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW

In our last chapter, we began our Scriptural examination with an overview of the Old Testament use of *qahal* and corresponding uses of *ekklesia* in the Greek Old Testament (Septuagint). Here we want to turn our attention to the first use of *ekklesia* in the New Testament, which as we have now seen is not a new concept, rather a clarification and reapplication of an existing concept.

The word *ekklesia* is used only used three times in the Gospels, all occurring in Matthew, and all used by our Lord. We will begin with an overview of these passages, some brief observations/questions, and follow up with more in-depth exposition in a subsequent chapter. The first passage is Matthew 16:18 within the context of Peter's confession

of Jesus as the Christ and Son of God

“13 Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” 14 And they said, “Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” 15 He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” 16 Simon Peter replied, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” 17 And Jesus answered him, “Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. 18 And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. 19 I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.” 20 Then he strictly charged the disciples to tell no one that he was the Christ.”

Matthew 16:13-20

Historically, this passage has been the source of two significant controversies concerning the understanding of church. First, is the identification of the rock upon which Christ will build His church. This interpretive controversy has led to no shortage of division, most notably between Protestants and Catholics.

The second controversy concerns the notion of a doctrine of the universal church. What is it? Does it or does it not exist? This has had massive implications such as who belongs to the church and may find its origin in the 3rd and 4th centuries, most notably with Augustine and the Donatist Controversy. Here is where a nuanced understanding of church vs. *ekklesia* will help navigate the waters of this controversy, which we will traverse in a subsequent chapter.

Additionally, as we dive into this passage in a later volume as mentioned last chapter, we must distinguish between this concept of *ekklesia* (church) and the kingdom, a matter of confusion that also has its source around the time of Augustine. Also, we'll need to look at to whom the “keys of the kingdom” have been given. Relatedly, what is the “binding and loosing” that is here mentioned? Answering these questions biblically, while avoiding the tangles of tradition, will aid greatly in identifying the form of Christ's *ekklesia*.

The next two uses of *ekklesia* (church) in Matthew are both found in Matthew 18:17. Here the context is the confrontation of a sinning brother or sister for the purpose of bringing them to repentance.

15 "If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. 16 But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. 17 If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. 18 Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. 19 Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. 20 For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them." Matthew 18:15-20

Here, it is often asserted that this use of *ekklesia* is substantially different than the previous use, perhaps suggestive of a more specific application, which some have determined to be a reference to the local church. For obvious reasons, if a universal church existed, it would be impossible to "tell it to the church" globally, so by necessary reasoning the scope of *ekklesia* here is often seen to be different and narrower in a local capacity. However, we will need a closer examination and not merely assume that there is an implied difference between *ekklesia* found in Matthew 16 and here in Matthew 18, as so many have done before.

Next, we find an additional mention of binding and loosing, which would seem to be a clarification and indeed an application of the previous mention in Matthew 16. Additionally, some have used this passage to promote a concept known as "church discipline", and rightly so (see 1 Corinthians 5:1-13 for application).

As we unpack these uses of *ekklesia* by our Lord in the Gospel of Matthew and turn our attention to the application of our study in the future, this will be one of the issues we will need take up. What situations warrant discipline? Who is qualified to issue this discipline? With these passages from Matthew introduced, in the next chapter we will turn our focus to the first controversial issue from Matthew 16, namely upon whom is the rock which Christ will build His *ekklesia*?

Many of the questions introduced in this interlude fall outside the scope of our introductory study of what is church. However, it's important to point them out here, even if a fuller discussion will need to be taken up later, after laying the groundwork for what church is.



CH. 6: THE FOUNDATION OF EKKLESIA

In Matthew 16:13-20 cited in the previous chapter, we have what may be properly called the first confession of Christ's ekklesia, given by Peter via revelation from God the Father. Our Lord Jesus' reply has led to numerous interpretive challenges that have caused no shortage of division and schism among those who profess the name of Christ, at least outwardly.

To address the first of these controversies, we begin by asking, "Who or what is this rock upon which Christ will build His ekklesia?"

Historically, there has been recognition given to a word play between Peter (masc. – petros) and the rock (fem. – petra) that some have used to help support their interpretation. There may be something to this

and our Lord seemingly is making a distinction between the two, i.e. "You are Peter (little rock) and on this rock (rock cliff) I will build my ekklesia". Despite the obvious differences, I do not lean on this distinction to determine the meaning of the passage.

Traditionally, the Roman Catholic Church has asserted that the "rock" in this passage is Peter, which for them sets up the doctrine of Apostolic succession upon which they fabricate their doctrine of the Pope. Some, even well-intentioned Protestants, affirm that the rock does indeed refer to Peter, their implications simply being that the church was built upon the apostles, of which Peter may have had preeminence. Of course, this latter, Protestant interpretation in no way allows for the establishment of apostolic succession from Peter to popes. Nevertheless, additional thought on this is warranted.

Others, perhaps recognizing the validity of such an interpretation have affirmed not only Peter as the rock, but Peter + his confession that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God. This is the view that I held by default, prior to studying the passage in-depth for myself, mostly relying on faithful teachers who held this view (not the best idea by the way!). Similarly, some have simply allowed that the rock is the confession that Peter makes or even the faith that he displays.

However, now arriving at this passage with fresh eyes for the purpose of defining our understanding of the church, I find myself in disagreement with all of the above interpretations concluding that, along with John Owen, the rock is none other than Christ.

First, notice the ESV translation of this interaction between Peter and our Lord:

16 Simon Peter replied, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."
17 And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven.
18 And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.

In making observations on this passage, the question that we must ask initially is not who is the rock, but why does our Lord repeat Peter's name in a formulaic expression, first in saying Simon Bar-Jonah and then declaring "you are Peter"? The answer, I humbly assert, is to repeat the formula that Peter uses. In doing so, Christ reminds Peter of the name change that He gave him (John 1:42), the little rock from the larger Rock, so to speak, thereby affirming Himself as the central focus of this confession and passage, not Peter. Note below:

“You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”

“You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church“

If our Lord was determined to declare Peter as the rock upon which He would build His ekklesia He could have simply said “You are Petros and upon this Petros I will build my ekklesia”, no word play necessary. The two confessions seem to be directly parallel, but let’s go on.

Second, note the framework for this entire section is the assertion that Jesus is the Messiah (Christ/Anointed One). It begins with the question, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” to which Peter answers, “The Christ, the Son of the living God”. The section ends with the instruction by Jesus for His disciples to “tell no one that he was the Christ.” The focus is not that Peter has been in some way given the distinction as the rock, but that Jesus is the Christ, the Anointed One and Son of God. This fact frames the entire interaction between Jesus, Peter, and subsequently the other disciples.

Third, almost as if to dispel any confusion that Peter may have been given the preeminent designation as THE rock, Matthew’s gospel follows up this account with a rather inauspicious portrayal of Peter. If in fact he was just designated as the rock upon which Christ’s ekklesia would be built, then this foundation begins to crumble in the very next narrative.

“21 From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. 22 And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, “Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you.” 23 But he turned and said to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man.” Matthew 16:21-23

Fourth, the word our Lord chooses to use here for rock, petras, has a prior usage in Matthew’s gospel. In Matthew 7:24-25 we read
24 “Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. 25 And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock.

Can there be any reasonable argument made that the rock upon which the wise man builds his house is none other than our Lord?

Fifth, outside of the Gospel of Matthew, we have clear passages that designate Christ as the stone, or Cornerstone, upon which His ekklesia

is built. Sometimes this is the word lithos, but other times it is the very word we find here in Matthew. We can see this in Romans 9:33, 1 Corinthians 10:4, and most notably 1 Peter 2:8 (see also Isaiah 28:16 and Psalm 118:22)

Finally, the equivocation of Christ as the primary rock (Cornerstone) and the apostles as the foundation upon which the “church” is built is made in Ephesians 2:20.

19 So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, 20 built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, 21 in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. 22 In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.

Additionally, note the larger context of 1 Peter 2 and the highlights I’ve made below

4 As you come to him, a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious, 5 you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. 6 For it stands in Scripture:

“Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone,
a cornerstone chosen and precious,
and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.”

7 So the honor is for you who believe, but for those who do not believe,
“The stone that the builders rejected
has become the cornerstone.”

8 and

“A stone of stumbling,
and a rock of offense.”

They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do.”

It seems likely that the above two passages, Ephesians 2 and 1 Peter 2, could easily explain the declaration of Peter as little rock and Christ as THE rock.

Peter’s role in the formation of the early church is important, no doubt. But if preeminence were to be given to any Apostle, we might more easily conclude that this eventually became the Apostle Paul, whose influence was arguably greater than Peter’s. Additionally, in Acts 15,

at the so-called Jerusalem council, a passage for another time, James seems to have a position of seniority or superiority, not Peter.

Finally, let's conclude with a summary statement from Owen,

"There is but one rock, but one foundation. There is no mention in the Scripture of two rocks of the church. In what others invent to this purpose we are not concerned. And the rock and the foundation are the same; for the rock is that whereon the church is built, that is the foundation. But that the Lord Christ is this single rock and foundation of the church, we shall prove immediately. Wherefore, neither Peter himself, nor his pretended successors, can be this rock. As for any other rock, it belongs not unto our religion; they that have framed it may use it as they please. For they that make such things are like unto the things they make; so is every one that trusteth in them: Psalm 115:8. "But their rock is not as our rock, themselves being judges;" unless they will absolutely equal the pope unto Jesus Christ."

Solus Christus!



CH. 7: THE NEW TESTAMENT USE OF EKKLESIA

Having seen now the introductory uses of *ekklesia* in the New Testament, specifically Matthew, along with how this use transitions from the use of *ekklesia* in the Old Testament to that belonging to Christ- Whom we saw is the foundation, in this chapter, we want to build upon the foundation that our Lord laid down by surveying where and how *ekklesia* is used elsewhere in the New Testament.

The majority usage of *ekklesia* occurs in just three books, Acts (24x), 1 Corinthians (21x), and Revelation (19x) comprising over half of the overall occurrences. While the remaining uses throughout the New Testament are no less important, our initial focus will be on the majority report. If the foundation of *ekklesia* in the New Testament was laid by our Lord in Matthew's gospel, then the Book of Acts builds

directly upon this foundation by picking up immediately with His disciples after His ascension. Therefore, by turning to Acts we get an expanded picture of the *ekklesia* that our Lord was building. While many commentators note that the New Testament *ekklesia* was first built at Pentecost (Acts 2), we must not neglect the fact of our Lord's little *ekklesia* that He built with His disciples. It is noteworthy that this "first" *ekklesia* was comprised of 12 Jewish disciples, indicating a regathering of Israel (Twelve tribes). This critical point aside, the first official use of *ekklesia* in Acts occurs in Acts 2:47 KJV (Note: this is a textual variant and this usage does not occur in all English translations),

"46 And they, continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart, 47 Praising God, and having favour with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved." - Acts 2:46-47 KJV

For context, we ought again to note that Christ's *ekklesia*, which began with that little band of disciples, had itself grown after His death and ascension to number around 120 (Acts 1:15). This passage supports our assertion earlier that Christ had indeed built a foundational *ekklesia* with His disciples and then through the miraculous saving act of the Spirit at Pentecost 3000 souls were added, along with those whom the Lord added daily. Technically speaking, the church, i.e. *ekklesia*, did not begin at Pentecost, but rather with our Lord. Here, however, we have clearly in view the *ekklesia* of Jerusalem, local and geographically confined. Many have wrestled over the large number and then questioned how so many could gather together in one place, often using it for justification as the first example of a mega-church. However, this line of questioning misses the point of the establishment Christ's *ekklesia* in Jerusalem. The reference to the Jerusalem *ekklesia* naturally comprises a significant amount of the occurrences in Acts as it is from here that the gospel spreads from to Judea, Samaria, and to the end of the earth, per our Lord in Acts 1:8. These uses are found in 5:11; 8:1; 8:3; 11:22; 12:1; 12:5; 15:4; and 15:22.

In summarizing the other uses of *ekklesia* in the Book of Acts, we note first Acts 7:38 occurring within the speech of Stephen with a specific reference to the church in the wilderness, i.e. Israel. This supports our earlier evidence from chapter 5 that *ekklesia* is not a new term or concept used to describe a gathering or assembly. Instead, *ekklesia* is now in Christ as it is His *ekklesia*. We ought also to remember the clear difference taking place between OT Israel and the NT gathering as noted in the passage from Acts 2:42ff, after the Spirit's outpouring.

Additionally, in Acts we find several instances of *ekklesia* used in the

plural (9:31; 14:23; 15:41; 16:5; 19:37) indicating that there is not a single church (*ekklesia*) present and active on the earth at one time, rather there are multiple churches, and they occur in specific geographic locations. Furthermore, these other churches mentioned were not in an ecclesiastical hierarchy with the aforementioned church of Jerusalem. Instead, they were each local and independent.

"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 KJV

Next, as the gospel began to spread (Acts 1:8), we have references to individual, local *ekklesiae* in Antioch (11:26; 13:1; 14:27; 15:3), Caesarea (18:22), and Ephesus (20:17; 28). Finally, we have three uses of *ekklesia* that have no religious nor Christ-connection at all, instead they simply refer to a public or civic assembly in Ephesus around the occasion of near riot after the Apostles had preached the gospel (Acts 19:32; 39; 41). The use of *ekklesia* in this way should alert us to the fact that when *ekklesia* is used in conjunction with Christ, or in the name of Christ (Matthew 18:20) something different is occurring. Likewise, this should cause us to rethink the relationship between the *ekklesia* that occurred in the Old Testament (see Acts 7:38 above) and what is happening here throughout the Book of Acts.

Summarizing the usages in Acts we've found specific references to the *ekklesia* of Jerusalem, a reference to the assembly of Israel at Sinai, plural as well as local, individual, and independent references including those in other locations as the gospel spread, and finally uses that simply refer to public assemblies apart from meeting together in the name of Christ. Local, independent, and plural are the key uses as we move forward.

Turning to our second major source in the New Testament for occurrences of *ekklesia*, 1 Corinthians, the first use is a rather obvious reference to the recipients of Paul's letter. As we read through the remaining twenty uses in the letter, we find correspondence with the patterns seen in Acts, namely that the uses are both local (Corinth) and plural (all the churches; churches of God; etc.). In Corinthians, perhaps unlike any other book in the New Testament that has references to *ekklesia*, we find it used in the plural but held up as a pattern for "all the churches." Note the occurrences below:

"But as God hath distributed to every man, as the Lord hath called every one, so let him walk. And so ordain I in all churches." 1 Cor. 7:17

“But if any man seem to be contentious, we have no such custom, neither the churches of God.”

1 Cor. 11:16

“For God is not the author of confusion, but of peace, as in all churches of the saints.” - 1 Cor. 14:33

By using *ekklesia* in this way, Paul establishes the pattern and uniformity of certain functions and elements that are to be the same across all churches. Furthermore, it underscores the prevailing idea that it is not from one universal church that these mandates flow down from, rather it is directly from the Lord down to multiple churches, *ekklesiae*, that the patterns are to be replicated. Each directly under the Lordship of Christ.

Finally, turning to Revelation, the last of our three major sources for the use of *ekklesia*, we find much of the same. The first occurrences are plural uses in reference to the seven churches, i.e. *ekklesiae* of Asia (Rev. 1:4, 11, 20; 2:7, 11, 17, 23, 29; 3:6, 13, 22; 22:16). Again, we ought to note how they are referenced independently, not in a hierarchical organizational sense. The next set of uses are in reference to each individual *ekklesia* from the seven (2:1, 8, 12, 18; 3:1, 7, 14). The final use in Revelation occurs in 22:14 and is again a plural use. Here, our Lord uses it as a summary of all that has been said and testified to by His angel to the *churches*.

Most of the remaining occurrences in the rest of the New Testament deal primarily with either the local church singularly, for instance the assembly which is being addressed in a particular letter, or plurally with references to more than one church in a specific geographic area, i.e., “churches of Galatia.” That said, there is one additional use which we alluded to previously that becomes more evident in passages from Ephesians and Colossians, specifically Ephesians 1:22; 3:10; 3:21; 5:22-33 and a similar, parallel passage in Colossians 1:18-24 as well as Hebrews 2:12; 12:23. In the next chapter of our survey of the New Testament use of *ekklesia*, we’ll examine these uses that inform how we are to understand Christ’s *ekklesia* eschatologically.



CH. 8 AN ESCHATOLOGICAL EKKLESIA

Already we have alluded to an additional use of ekklesia in the New Testament that speaks to a more general or generic use and application than local, independent, and plural uses. It is this usage (often located in Matt. 16:18) that has been often termed the universal or catholic church. But is this accurate? More importantly, is this distinction Scriptural?

To begin, we will look at Ephesians 1:22 to introduce this particular use, where we find ekklesia with reference to Christ as the head:

“And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all

in all.” Ephesians 1:22-23

The precise meaning of head in this passage has been somewhat divisive. Does head primarily refer to source or authority? The issue is not new, despite the framing of it in terms of egalitarianism vs. complementarianism. As Martyn Lloyd-Jones writes, both options are true, but only one is clearly in view here:

“Paul says that the Lord Jesus Christ is ‘the head of the church’, ‘the head of the body’. He is not thinking primarily here of authority or governance. Of course, it is true that Christ as Head of the Church is the sole authority, and we must recognize no other. There is no head of the Church save the Lord Jesus Christ; and it is the essence of the reformed position that we assert this truth. We recognize no human being as Head of the Church; Christ alone is the King and the Head of the Church. But that is not what the Apostle is emphasizing at this point; he is concerned to say that Christ as the head of the Church is the source and the centre of the life of the Church. This is made quite clear by the analogy of the body. In the body the head is the source and the centre of power. The body derives its vital energy from the head.”

That said, it is certainly true that Christ is the head of the local church in Ephesus. However, it would appear that a much larger, more broader use is intended with the reference to the church/*ekklesia* as the body of Christ. The typical Protestant interpretation of this passage falls in line with that of other denominations, such as Roman Catholicism or Eastern Orthodox, that sees this as a reference to the universal church. By that, they mean a general reference or banner over all churches throughout the world or as a reference to believers worldwide. The historical development of the universal church concept is a long discussion for another day. We most often hear this universal church referred to as ‘The Church’. Of course, this introduces some difficulties which have attempted to be resolved by distinguishing a visible church from an invisible church, naturally leading to a rather large discussion on who are the members of this church. While we will save this larger discussion for a later volume, in answering this issue now we need only to ask a couple of questions.

First, we must remember the meaning of *ekklesia* as a gathering or assembly. While an *ekklesia* may be referred to even if they’re not gathered, it still most often is a direct reference to an actual assembly. Next, within the *ekklesia* there are those who lead the gathering, activities and expression of gifts, celebrations of baptism and the

Lord's supper, prayer, testimony, edification of one another, much of which is summarized under the heading of fellowship. We need only to ask, Does any of this occur within the universal church or on a global level? No, of course not. Not only has this universal church never gathered together, contra Roman Catholicism, there is no universal leadership, nor fellowship where the above activities take place within a gathering.

A better explanation of our passage from Ephesians 1:22-23 above, including those other passages which refer to the church as the body of Christ, is to consider *ekklesia* in eschatological terms. By eschatological it is meant those things referring to the end or culmination of God's redemptive plan of salvation. In other words, the church as the body of Christ is a done deal and ought to be viewed as the completion of God's plan of salvation initiated before the foundation of the world particularly when considering the eschatological language in Ephesians 1

- He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before Him (Eph. 1:4)
- In him we have obtained an inheritance (Eph. 1:11)
- and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus (Eph. 2:6)

As seen in the references above, eschatological language often states in the present what is guaranteed in the future. This is referred to as the already/not yet. For instance, above we see that, "In him we have obtained an inheritance," which asserts the finality of our inheritance received in Christ. However, just a couple verses later we read that the Holy Spirit seals us and is the Guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it (Eph. 1:13-14). Our inheritance is already but not yet. The same is true when eschatological language is applied to the church (*ekklesia*). A reference to the church as the body of Christ is eschatological. It assumes the finality, purity, and completeness of the elect people of God gathered together in eternity in Christ. Christ has secured the redemption of His elect people through His shed blood on the cross and over time the elect are regenerated (born again) through the power of the Holy Spirit. Christ has paid the ransom and bride-price for His bride, but that bride cannot be said to include unbelievers. It cannot be said of a general *ekklesia*, nor of a universal reference to all those that claim to be a church.

The use of church in a general or universal way often leads to confusion. Consider how often you have heard the phrase The Church used, but rarely defined. Or that there are enemies in The Church; that The Church is infected with liberalism or social justice, or other uses

such as The Evangelical Church, especially during political seasons. Uses such as these and others often erroneously equate Christendom with this “universal church” and fail to recognize the existence and significance of the eschatological *ekklesia* (church) and how it relates to the local independent *ekklesia*. This is precisely where we will turn our focus next in order to see how the eschatological, or heavenly, *ekklesia* described as the body of Christ relates to a local expression of *ekklesia*.



CH. 9 THE ALREADY/NOT YET EKKLESIA

In the last chapter we left off with the question of how the local, independent ekklesia relates to the eschatological ekklesia. As we have alluded to and now see in short, they relate typologically in so far as the earthly (not yet) is to mirror or reflect the heavenly, i.e. eschatological (already). The earthly is imperfect and is being sanctified. The eschatological is in glory. This is a primary reason why a congregation, assembly, or better ekklesia, should be comprised of believers only and those who are inconsistent with their profession in Christ should be disciplined and removed as a little leaven, leavens the whole lump (1 Cor. 5:6-8). Returning to Ephesus which we looked at last chapter, how does this eschatological use relate specifically to their local assembly? Are they one part of many parts that comprise the eschatological body of Christ?

No. The use of ekklesia here is intertwining the eschatological with the local. It is a one-to-one relationship, not a one-to-many. In other words, each individual, local gathering of believers reflects the body of Christ. The ekklesia at Ephesus does not make up one part, Colossae another, Philippi yet another and so on. Instead, each local assembly in and of themselves represent the body of Christ in a typical way. This helps also further explain the plural use of ekklesia in the New Testament rather than simply lumping it under one general reference to The Church. It is also how Paul expressly describes the unity of spiritual gifts within a particular congregation (1 Corinthians 12:12-31)

In this chapter, we want to draw out the relationship of this eschatological ekklesia, what some have called the church in glory, with the local ekklesia through the concept of already/not yet. As we saw last time, Ephesians uses the already and not yet in terms of our salvation and sanctification. As a reminder, the already/not yet paradigm states in the present (not yet) what is guaranteed in the future (already). This is especially seen in Ephesians 5, where we read of the relationship between Christ and His body.

“22 Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. 23 For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior. 24 Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands.

25 Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, 26 that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, 27 so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. 28 In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. 29 For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church, 30 because we are members of his body. 31 “Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.” 32 This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church. 33 However, let each one of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband.” Ephesians 5:22-33

In this passage, the primary point is to establish the analogy between the relationship of a husband and wife to Christ and His church. First, we read the comparison of headship between a husband to his wife with Christ to His church, noting specifically that Christ is head of the church, a point we belabored last chapter; it is His body; He is its (her) Savior.

By looking at the descriptions being used here regarding the relationship between Christ and His church (ekklesia), we find definitive salvific language, meaning that Christ's death on the cross is said here to be applied through His role as Savior. In other words, for whom did Christ die or for whom does Christ serve as Savior from beginning to end? The answer is obviously the ekklesia mentioned in this verse as referenced to His body, which is eschatological. By referring to an eschatological ekklesia, the language means the gathering of all the elect into the heavenly presence of Christ, a gathering which is presently being added to daily and will culminate in the Marriage Supper of the Lamb with His bride when the final number is brought in. We may observe this in Revelation 21:1-2 where God's people, the ekklesia of Christ, is specifically referred to as a holy city – the New Jerusalem, and as a bride prepared for her husband. In Revelation 19:9 we read of the culmination of this bridal arrangement of Christ with His ekklesia in the Marriage Supper of the Lamb. When this future language is applied in the present, it is describing an already condition of the ekklesia.

Turning back to Ephesians 5, Paul is simply expounding this concept of the church as Bride and Christ as Bridegroom, but he is applying it in the present. Having seen the already in the form of Christ's Bride, the eschatological ekklesia, next we see the comparison of husband and wife to Christ and His ekklesia continuing, though now with the language of submission, i.e. "the church submits to Christ." The word submit here can be used as 1) militarily, "to arrange [troop divisions] in a military fashion under the command of a leader," or 2) non-militarily as, "a voluntary attitude of giving in, cooperating, assuming responsibility, and carrying a burden." Both are certainly true of the relationship between Christ and His church, however when held in the contextual relationship of comparing husband and wife, the latter seems more reasonable.

Now, we must ask is this continuing the eschatological use of ekklesia as we have already seen or is Paul now shifting usage? Would this voluntary attitude and cooperation be descriptive of the eschatological ekklesia? It would definitely be true, but it would be unnecessary to say that the eschatological ekklesia is presently submitting to Christ, particularly as it is heavenly and being finalized. Again, it's true, but it doesn't need to be said, it's obvious. Instead, it would be better said of the local Ephesian ekklesia and by relation all other local ekklesiae in that they are presently submitting to Christ. The relationship between the two, local and eschatological, is typological and now as we have seen also through the already/not yet paradigm.

Continuing in the passage, in verses 25-27 we have one uninterrupted

thought with multiple references to an ekklesia. Still building on the comparison between husband/wife and Christ/church, we find it now expressed in terms of love, and more specifically sacrificial love. On the one hand, it is certainly possible in the context to view the church or ekklesia as referring to Ephesus. That would be a valid interpretation insofar as it is holy. However, this interpretation may be incomplete and verse 27 above is the key. Here, we see the context of the bride again, the eschatological ekklesia, presented before Christ in, “splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing” much like we might picture a virgin bride before her husband. Then we find the language of holiness and purity applied to the ekklesia.

Does this language appropriately describe a single body, universal church that occurs in this age? Can it be said of the Church of England, or the Evangelical Church in America? Does it sound like a description that would include the possibility of unbelievers in any way? Or would it be more appropriately referring to an eschatological ekklesia gathered in the presence of the Lord? The answer seems obvious that it must be the latter.

So far, in this brief survey we have seen several ways in which ekklesia is being used, locally, as with Ephesus, collectively (though not explicitly plural), and now eschatologically – or that gathering which is ultimate and complete before the Lord. The language of Christ as head, church as body, Christ as Savior. Christ as Bridegroom and Church as Bride is eschatological language and can only be applied to the Ephesian church (or any other local church) in so far as it mirrors this eschatological reality. In other words, in so far as it is a pure representation of genuine believers i.e., the elect. Any departure from this would result in discipline from Christ (see Revelation 1-3) and any impurity through the presence of unbelievers must result in discipline from within the ekklesia (Matt. 18:15-20; 1 Cor. 5:4-5). Again, the eschatological language, that of definitive salvation and purity, can only be spoken of the local church – in this case Ephesus, as it reflects this final, future reality.

In bringing this chapter to a close, we turn now to one additional passage using ekklesia that perhaps supports more clearly the already/not yet pattern of ekklesia than what we have observed so far. This passage comes by way of summarizing the epistle to the Hebrews in chapter 12 of that letter:

“18 For you have not come to what may be touched, a blazing fire and darkness and gloom and a tempest 19 and the sound of a trumpet and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that no further messages be spoken to them. 20 For they could not endure the order that was

given, “If even a beast touches the mountain, it shall be stoned.” 21 Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, “I tremble with fear.” 22 But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, 23 and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, 24 and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.” Hebrews 12:18-24

In the second of two uses of *ekklesia* found in Hebrews (cf. [Heb. 2:12](#)), we read of a culminating exhortation from the author to those who would be tempted to fall back into Judaism because of the physical religious experiences that could be seen, heard, and touched. The contrast above is between Sinai and Zion; between earthly Jerusalem and the heavenly Jerusalem; between the assembly in the wilderness (Acts 7:38) and the heavenly assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven. This again is an eschatological *ekklesia*, however, again we see the relationship of the already to the not yet.

First, we ought to note the description (from Guthrie) given of the earthly Sinai.

- [the mountain] that can[not] be touched
- burning with fire
- darkness
- gloom
- storm
- a trumpet blast
- a voice speaking words

The imagery of Sinai being developed here is drawn from the historical event of God’s inauguration of the Old Covenant with Israel through the mediation of Moses (and angels; Acts 7:53; Hebrews 2:2; Galatians 3:19). This scene is recorded for us in Exodus 19:1-25, as well as Deuteronomy 4, 5, and 9 the latter of which draws significance to God being in “the midst of the fire”. In these Old Testament passages we find God’s call for the people to obey the covenant, their willing response to do so, the command for Moses to consecrate the people, and for them to be ready on the third day. Then in Exodus 19:12 we begin to see some of the language cited above, most notably the limits that were set around the mountain, and the consequences of death for breaking through these limits by either man or beast. This prohibition most definitely restricted access to God, which as we know was limited to the Levitical priesthood. The people could only get to God through a

priestly mediator; direct access – pictured here at the foot of the mountain, was not allowed.

On the third day, when the time to approach the mountain had come, the Lord announced it with a trumpet blast which would've have elicited immeasurable fear, particularly as it was followed with lightning, thunder, and a thick cloud of smoke like from the fire of a kiln. The response from the people was not a half-hearted compliance, instead they were riddled with fear and trembling reaching an overwhelming point when they told Moses they had had enough (Exodus 20:19). God followed this terrifying scene with the giving of His law to Moses.

Conversely, our passage from Hebrews describes the scene of the New Covenant in starkly different terms (again from Guthrie):

- The heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God
- thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly
- the church (ekklesia) of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven
- God, the judge of all people
- the spirits of the righteous made perfect
- Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant
- the sprinkled blood that speaks better than the blood of Abel

While the contrast of the New Covenant experience with the Old Covenant is not meant to be a point by point comparison, nevertheless the differences could not be more profound. While the first is marked with an atmosphere of fear and trembling due to the physical sights and sounds of thunder, lighting, fire, trumpet blasts, and a thunderous voice, the second is marked with joyful assembly, and that in the city of the living God – the heavenly Jerusalem. The contrast of the experiences is seen most clearly in the terms fear vs. joy.

Notably, for the purpose of our discussion on ekklesia, is the statement that New Covenant members have come to participate in a number of spiritual realities among which is the ekklesia of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. By firstborn, it is meant that believers, those who have been united to Christ by faith, have come to share in the family of God being now co-heirs of an inheritance with His Son. In terms of our already/not-yet pattern that we are considering this is already true of all believers (Ephesians 1:11-14), but has not yet come to consummation. The names of all of these are written in the membership roll book, as it were, in heaven.

Think of it this way. The names listed in this book were written down

before the foundation of the world. As each name is (effectually) called out in time, that person is given a new heart to repent and trust in Christ essentially responding to the rollcall with a yes. However, we note that in the context believers now also come to the “spirits of the righteous made perfect”. This creates an apparent dilemma as how can those who still war with the flesh, still sin, and are still subject to the infirmities of the body have also come to the spirits of the righteous made perfect? The answer is that what we have exemplified once again for us is the eschatological ekklesia expressed in terms of the already/not yet. Christians in the audience of this letter had already come to the assembly of the first born, already been guaranteed enrollment in the heavenly gathering, but had not yet fully experienced this through the perfecting of righteousness within them that comes only through death and entrance into glory. Their local gatherings (ekklisaea) were to be expressions, indeed reflections of the spiritual reality that they had come to these New Covenant blessings.

The banner of the eschatological ekklesia extends from election by God before the foundation of the world to the culmination of all things in Christ, glorified in the New Heavens and New Earth. The intrusion of this eschatological ekklesia occurs in time and space through the calling of the individual into fellowship with God, through faith in His Son Jesus, and fellowship with the community of the brethren physically in local assemblies by means of the Holy Spirit. The overarching picture of these assemblies of fellowship has consistently been expressed in familial language as we see here with the ekklesia of the firstborn.

Local, plural, and eschatological with an already/not-yet expression. These are the uses of ekklesia in the New Testament.

EPILOGUE

In this book, we started with an introduction into what had formed our definition of church. We then looked at the meaning of church followed with a linguistic and historical study of how church came to be in the English Bible. A minor detour into the use of synagogue was followed by looking at ekklesia in the Septuagint before diving headlong into the New Testament usage, beginning with our Lord's ekklesia in Matthew. This initial foundation was built on, specifically by Acts with the Primitive Church, 1 Corinthians with the Problem Church, and Revelation with the Promised Church. Finally, and more recently, in these books we also observed the general pattern of usage namely local, individual, as well as plural for those in a geographical region, and then the eschatological use of ekklesia. In examining this last use, we noticed that in modern parlance it is most often, and

perhaps unhelpfully, described as a universal church or generic use of church. While we will save that extended discussion for another time, we concluded that an eschatological description was more accurate because it better characterizes the reality of Christ culminating His ekklesia with the Marriage Supper of the Lamb at the inauguration of the New Heavens and Earth. When viewed this way, we note that Christ's ekklesia is simply the gathering of all the elect into His heavenly presence. However, this in-gathering takes on an already/not yet character as it takes shape over space and time as our Lord calls His elect into earthly fellowship with other believers. While the future reality is a certainty (already), it has not yet fully come to fruition. Because of this, the not yet – the earthly gatherings of believers, should reflect the already of the eschatological ekklesia. This was made evident in our last chapter looking at the uses of ekklesia in Ephesians. There we saw that Paul uses ekklesia in eschatological terms, as well as in reference to the local gathering of believers. Ephesians chapter 5 indicates briefly how these relate, not as two separate ekklesiae, rather as the earthly expression is to mirror the reality of the heavenly. Perhaps this was seen most clearly in our look at Hebrews 12 and the comparison of the Old Covenant with the New Covenant, a point that deserves additional study.

Should the Lord allow, we will next look at *Who is Church* as we wrestle through the controversial covenantal application of Who it is that makes up church.

Ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda!

WHAT IS CHURCH?



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