

TOPIC IV.

THE CHURCH

The actual purpose of the church gathering based on the early church model. Are we off - or on track?

I received a note recently from a missionary in Africa who asked this question and it is also one of the topics on our list of controversial issues. Here is what he wrote,

"I would like to teach on the church and its function and purpose. After going to the funeral a few days ago, I saw and heard the same old thing; The church-the church. I have been to all denomination funerals and the emphasis is always on themselves. No wonder we could never show the Jesus video, it would highlight the Gospel and not the "church". This makes me sick."

"The church teaches the need to go to church and to be good, or else, hell. They always teach fear, fear, fear. So many non-believers go to funerals out of fear. I always wondered about the strange look on the faces of the people during funerals. There is a wide spread belief that if you don't attend a local funeral no one will bury you. Not so true, though, because if the local church holds the funeral then the family is then considered members of that denomination. I have heard of disputes over the dead bodies and which church would perform the funeral. Serious disputes that almost turned violent. Do you remember Bishop Joshua Ngataiti? The family was near shedding blood over his funeral, this within their own denomination. Fear and control. Any study you may have concerning the church's value and purpose would be appreciated."

My response to him:

"Mike,

"I truly empathize with you on this. I am sure you understand why I have had concerns over much of the teaching that comes from "church" pulpits, Bible College and Seminary "lecterns" and such. That is why I get so fired up when someone teaches something from the "church", "denominational" or theological perspective that clashes or even opposes Biblical truth."

A. The word "church" is Old English and describes a "place" of worship. It is NOT a Biblical term at all in terms of the Biblical definition. However, the term "church" or churches" appears 112 times in the New Testament. It is consistently the translation of the Greek - "ekklesia." Ekklesia is also translated "congregation" once in Acts 7:38, and "assembly" three times in Acts, none of which refer to a "Christian" congregation.¹

The translators take the Biblical Word "ekklesia" and translate it "church." But the word "church" in our language does not mean what the New Testament means by this word - at all. We will come back to that in a moment.

I checked the origin of the word "church." Beginning at the most current use of the English word and going back in time, the Old English (from which we now have the word "church") stems from the 16th century Old English, and that word was "cirice" or "circe" pronounced "Kerke." In Scotland, the Scottish word is "Kirk", even today. Going back a little more, this word actually came from the old Germanic and Saxon "kirkja." Again now going back further to the 12th century Greek, the word "kyriake" or kyriakon" meaning "Lord's house" was used, from which we now go forward to today. Let's look at that Greek word.

"The Greek kyriakon (an adjective) meaning "of the Lord" has been used of houses of Christian worship since about 300 A.D., especially in the near East, though it was less common in this sense than "ekklesia" or "basilika."² An example of the direct Greek-to-Germanic progress of many Christian words, via the Goths; it probably was used by West Germanic people in their pre-Christian period."³ The word above "kuriakon" **is** a New Testament word. It means "belonging to the Lord." It is used only twice in the N.T. and here are the references:

1. I Cor. 11:20, "Therefore when you meet together, it is not to eat the *Lord's* Supper..."

And

2. Rev 1:10, "I was in the Spirit on the *Lord's* day..."

¹ Acts 19:32, 39, 41.

² (Basilika in the N.T. means "belonging to the king or to royalty. We will ignore this.)

³ Online Etymology Dictionary

As you can see, neither reference has anything to do with what we would call a term for the "church" or for a "gathering." But, two hundred years later it became used for that ("The Lord's House") and the word was carried down through to our age as "kirk" or "church" and the meaning became totally changed.

How? Well, it came to describe a building in which worshippers met. "Belonging to the Lord" became "The Lord's House" or "The House of the Lord." Specific denominations adopted the term and we have the "Catholic Church" or the "Lutheran Church" or Methodist, Anglican, Presbyterian, Baptist "church" and all the rest. As such, it also described the governing and procedural nature of each denomination. For example, the "Presbyterian" church is an organization led by "elders" from the N.T. Greek word, "presbuteros" meaning "elder." Now we have an "authority structure" in some "church" or other, that enforces power over and the conduct of its constituents. Of course, men take the role of "head of some such church" and put Christ's actual headship on a shelf somewhere while they "sit" in His place. And then corruption and all the rest set in.

The head of the "church" is Christ Himself.

Ephesians 1:22-23, 22: "And He put all things in subjection under His feet, and gave Him as head over all things to the church, 23: which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all."

Ephesians 4:14-16, 14: "As a result, we are no longer to be children, tossed here and there by waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming; 15: but speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all *aspects* into Him who is the head, *even* Christ, 16: from whom the whole body, being fitted and held together by what every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love."

Ephesians 5:23, "For the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ also is the head of the church, He Himself *being* the Savior of the body."

Colossians 1:17-18, 17: "He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together. 18: He is also head of the body, the church; and He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that He Himself will come to have first place in everything."

B. What is the Biblical word for "church" and what does it actually mean? The word sadly translated "church" is actually "ekklesia." This word is used 77 times in the N.T. when translated "church." And an additional 35 times as the plural "churches." However it is also used in the book of Acts and translated "assembly" three times. In these three times, not once was the assembly the "church."⁴

In the case of ekklesia being used for an assembly that is not a Christian one we have, in Acts 19:32 the "assembly" being held at the great theatre at Ephesus where the "whole city" turned out to witness the clash of the silversmiths with the effects of Paul's preaching. In this "assembly" (church?) the citizens were yelling, "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians." Uh...not a "church". You can see the word "assembly" in Acts 19:30 through 19:41.

So even the Word "ekklesia" is inadequate to describe the "church" as it ought to be. In fact, the Old Testament, in I Kings 8:14 for example, a secular assembly is called an "ekklesia" in the LXX, the same word translated "church" many times in the N.T., while a religious assembly of the Jews is called a "synagogue."

"Ekklesia" does appear in the LXX a total of 77 times as well, and it refers most often to; 1. The gathering of God's people, 2. The gathering of the nation of Israel or it's representatives, 3. A gathering of prophets, priests, the leaders of Israel, or of the people of Israel, 4. All of Israel called "the assembly of the Lord."

However it is also used of an assembly of political representatives in II Chronicles 28:14; a general assembly of the people in II Chronicles 30:2, 13-17; The number of returned exiles in Ezra 2:64; used of the unfaithful Israelites in Ezra 10; used of an "assembly" of people angry with their oppressors in Nehemiah 5; of a general gathering of people in Nehemiah 7; of evildoers in Psalm 26:5; etc.

Therefore, the word itself is not indicative of the nature of the assembly. In fact, the type and nature of the assembly is often defined with other words or by the context such as in Psalm 89:5, "The heavens will praise Your wonders, O LORD; Your faithfulness also in the assembly of the holy ones."

So the word "Ekklesia", though often defined as those "called out" does not in itself define what we understand to be the assembly of God's own possession in

⁴ See footnote 61

Christ. It really means a "called meeting" without describing who is involved.

So, though "Ekklesia" does mean "a called out meeting" or an assembly, it doesn't define "who" these "called out ones" specifically are within the word itself. So people have come to define it the way they want to. It should have been properly translated as "assembly", but "alas" it wasn't. So it became a generic. It is important to note in teaching what this word meant and how it was to be defined by the "church" from the outset. The root word is also the basis for the term "elect" used by Jesus and others. It means "selected" or "called" and is used by the Calvinists and reformed churches to mean "predestined to salvation." Another topic for another time. But Jesus meant it as applying to those of true faith when He used it as those who are His by faith.

So this term is also misused by theologians but bottom line, there are those who are born into the family of God and become heirs and citizens of the kingdom of God and there are those who are not... though many think they are because they are part of a "church."

C. So, if the term "church", or the original Greek (ekklesia) in the N.T. doesn't describe what is actually what we are after, then what does?

Aha! See what a mess we have made of things, including our translations and understanding of this? So we have all sorts of people who, by being a member of a church" believed themselves to be saved.

Paul is pretty clear who is "in" and who is "out." That's the real issue. None of what we have discussed above has anything to do with that, and now I have stepped on the toes of every "church" centered person in the history of the world. At one time I would have either, 1. Been burned at the stake, 2. Stretched out on a rack, 3. Had molten lead poured down my throat, 4. Or at the least excommunicated or exiled for telling the truth. Nice. Today, I am just yelled at, thrown out, rejected or ignored.

Anyway, another problem is going to occur when I say that Abraham and all saints of faith are also "in." Hebrews 11 has something to say about this as I recall. Paul also noted,

"The Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, *saying*, "ALL THE NATIONS WILL BE BLESSED IN YOU." So then those who are of faith are blessed with Abraham, the believer." Galatians 3:8-9

And Jesus poked them good when He said,

"But what do you think? A man had two sons, and he came to the first and said, 'Son, go work today in the vineyard.' "And he answered, 'I will not'; but afterward he regretted it and went. "The man came to the second and said the same thing; and he answered, 'I *will*, sir'; but he did not go. Which of the two did the will of his father?" They said, "The first." Jesus said to them, "Truly I say to you that the tax collectors and prostitutes will get into the kingdom of God before you." Matthew 21:28-31.

Okay, here is what we want! Something we already know but perhaps didn't think of this way. Jesus came preaching "the Kingdom of God", not the "kingdom of the church." The "church" is defined the way He describes it, and not just an assembly as the word "ekklesia" normally is defined. But, it is "His Assembly", "His Called Meeting." Note:

Mat 16:18 "I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build **My church**; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it.

My assembly! Mine! Paul says it this way,

I Timothy 3:15, but in case I am delayed, *I write* so that you will know how one ought to conduct himself in the household of God, which is the **church ("assembly") of the living God, the pillar and support of the truth.**

God's assembly! (Or "gathering")

There is a denomination called "Assembly of God." That actually is a correct definition of the concept of "church" as we wish to understand it. But anyone can name anything as they wish.

Now, the phrase "the kingdom of God" does not appear in the Old Testament in that form. But it is spoken of in,

a. Obadiah 1:20-21, 20: "And the exiles of this host of the sons of Israel, Who are *among* the Canaanites as far as Zarephath, And the exiles of Jerusalem who are in Sepharad Will possess the cities of the Negev. 21: The deliverers will ascend Mount Zion To judge the mountain of Esau, And the kingdom will be the LORD'S."

"LORD" is "Yahweh." The main place where we find this is in Daniel, which Jesus was familiar with as He quotes Daniel here and there.

b. Daniel 2:44, "In the days of those kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom which will never be destroyed, and *that* kingdom will not be left for another people; it will crush and put an end to all these kingdoms, but it will itself endure forever."

c. Daniel 4:2-3, 2: "It has seemed good to me to declare the signs and wonders which the Most High God has done for me. 3: "How great are His signs And how mighty are His wonders! His kingdom is an everlasting kingdom And His dominion is from generation to generation."

d. Daniel 6:25-26, 25: "Then Darius the king wrote to all the peoples, nations and *men of every* language who were living in all the land: "May your peace abound! 26: "I make a decree that in all the dominion of my kingdom men are to fear and tremble before the God of Daniel; For He is the living God and enduring forever, And His kingdom is one which will not be destroyed, And His dominion *will be* forever."

e. Daniel 7:13-14, 13: "I kept looking in the night visions, And behold, with the clouds of heaven One like a Son of Man was coming, And He came up to the Ancient of Days And was presented before Him. 14: "And to Him was given dominion, Glory and a kingdom, That all the peoples, nations and *men of every* language Might serve Him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion Which will not pass away; And His kingdom is one Which will not be destroyed."

And there are others; Psalm 145:13; Zechariah 14:9; Isaiah 9:6-7; Micah 4:7; etc.

So Jesus' announcement of the "Kingdom of God" was not unknown to the Jews and they did not object to the use of this term as they were indeed anticipating the coming of God's Messiah and God's rule through Him.

The issue is then, how does one get "in" to the kingdom of God? This is a much better way of using terms than using the word "church" which can be entered by going through a wooden door, signing up, agreeing with some statement of faith or doctrine, being "confirmed" or "baptized" and whatever. Works. For way too many, this becomes the reason they think they are saved.

Of course, the entrance is not works at all, as Paul so eloquently writes in Ephesians 2:1-10, (one of, if not the most favorite passages for this old man.) That is why Abraham and all the O.T. saints are "in" the kingdom of God despite the rantings of the dispensationalists. I always define my stand in Christ this way, "My feet are firmly planted in the kingdom of God by faith." I never use the term church. This is a good time to differentiate the two terms. Nothing wrong with the term "church" as long as people know what we are talking about... the building, members, those who attend, a denomination, - or those in the kingdom of God through faith.

D. Its purpose.

1. Paul said one thing about this above in I Tim. 3:15.
2. In researching what the "church" did when they got together, a main purpose was simply to "encourage" one another in the faith. Persecution and false teachings were occurring.⁵

Acts 11:23, "Then when he arrived and witnessed the grace of God, he rejoiced and *began* to encourage them all with resolute heart to remain *true* to the Lord;"

Colossians 4:8, "*For* I have sent him to you for this very purpose, that you may know about our circumstances and that he may encourage your hearts;"

I Thessalonians 3:2, "...and we sent Timothy, our brother and God's fellow worker in the gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you as to your faith,"

I Thessalonians 5:11, "Therefore encourage one another and build up one another, just as you also are doing."

I Thessalonians 5:14, "We urge you, brethren, admonish the unruly, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with everyone."

⁵ Note: Revelation 2:1-3, 9-10, 13-15, 19-25; 3:9-10, will underscore the matter of persecution and false teachings. See also, Galatians 1:7; Ephesians 4:14; II Peter 2:1-3; I John 4:1; Matthew 24:24; Acts 20:29; I Timothy 4:1; II Timothy 3:13; II John 1:7; etc.

Titus 2:4, "...so that they may encourage the young women to love their husbands, to love their children,"

Hebrews 3:13, "But encourage one another day after day, as long as it is *still* called "Today," so that none of you will be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin."

Acts 15:31, "When they had read it, they rejoiced because of its encouragement."

Romans 15:4-5, "For whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction, so that through perseverance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope."

Romans 15:5, "Now may the God who gives perseverance and encouragement grant you to be of the same mind with one another according to Christ Jesus,"

Philippians 2:1, "Therefore if there is any encouragement in Christ, if there is any consolation of love, if there is any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and compassion,"

Colossians 4:11, "and *also* Jesus who is called Justus; these are the only fellow workers for the kingdom of God who are from the circumcision, and they have proved to be an encouragement to me."

Hebrews 6:18, "...so that by two unchangeable things in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have taken refuge would have strong encouragement to take hold of the hope set before us."

The reason for this mutual "encouragement" was due to the severe persecution of believers in the early church, especially from Orthodox Jewish sources.

Acts 8:1, "Saul was in hearty agreement with putting him to death. And on that day a great persecution began against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles."

Acts 11:19, "So then those who were scattered because of the persecution that occurred in connection with Stephen made their way to Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to no one except to Jews alone."

Acts 13:50, "But the Jews incited the devout women of prominence and the leading men of the city, and instigated a persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and drove them out of their district."

1 Peter 4:12-16, 12: "Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you; 13: but to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing, so that also at the revelation of His glory you may rejoice with exultation. 14: If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you. 15: Make sure that none of you suffers as a murderer, or thief, or evildoer, or a troublesome meddler; 16: but if *anyone suffers* as a Christian, he is not to be ashamed, but is to glorify God in this name."

Is this enough passages to underscore the need for encouragement. These things are happening today also, as you know, and where you are. So you need to be an "encourager" and the people to each other as well.

By the way, the word "encourage" in nearly every verse is the same word used of the Holy Spirit and is used over a hundred times in the N. T. and is also translated, "comforter", to "urge," "exhort," "implore", "admonish" and almost every time it has to do with persevering in the truth, faith and care for others.

3. Caring for one another and sharing their assets, labor, goods, time with each other and especially those in need. I could copy a lot of verses here, but you can do this as well.

4. Sending out prepared and gifted apostles and people to do mission work, help, encourage, teach, preach, follow-up a previous ministry and so on. Need verses?

5. Tend to the poor and needy, widows and orphans.

Mostly, the "church" (Christian assembly - if you will) was to "love" each other and those in their community. It was and is to be a place where Christians love and conduct themselves in a manner that glorifies Christ (and God) demonstrates godliness and holiness, beginning with its leadership.

Ephesians 4:1, "Therefore I, the prisoner of the Lord, implore you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called,"

Philippians 1:27, "Only conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or remain absent, I will hear of for the faith of the gospel;"

Colossians 1:10, "...so that you will walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, to please *Him* in all respects, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God;"

I Thessalonians 2:12, "so that you would walk in a manner worthy of the God who calls you into His own kingdom and glory."

II Thessalonians 1:5, "*This is* a plain indication of God's righteous judgment no that you will be considered worthy of the kingdom of God, for which indeed you are suffering."

II Thessalonians 1:11, "To this end also we pray for you always, that our God will count you worthy of your calling, and fulfill every desire for goodness and the work of faith with power,"

I Timothy 5:17, "The elders who rule well are to be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who work hard at preaching and teaching."

I Timothy 4:7, "But have nothing to do with worldly fables fit only for old women. On the other hand, discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness;"

I Timothy 4:8, "for bodily discipline is only of little profit, but godliness is profitable for all things, since it holds promise for the present life and *also* for the *life* to come."

I Timothy 6:3, "If anyone advocates a different doctrine and does not agree with sound words, those of our Lord Jesus Christ, and with the doctrine conforming to godliness,"

I Timothy 6:11, "But flee from these things, you man of God, and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, perseverance *and* gentleness."

Titus 1:1, "Paul, a bond-servant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ, for the faith of those chosen of God and the knowledge of the truth which is according to godliness,"

II Peter 1:3-7, 3: "...seeing that His divine power has granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness, through the true knowledge of Him who called us by His own glory and excellence. 4: For by these He has granted to us His precious and magnificent promises, so that by them you may become partakers of *the* divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world by lust. 5: Now for this very reason also, applying all diligence, in your faith supply moral excellence, and in *your* moral excellence, knowledge, 6: and in *your* knowledge, self-control, and in *your* self-control, perseverance, and in *your* perseverance, godliness, 7: and in *your* godliness, brotherly kindness, and in *your* brotherly kindness, love.

II Peter 3:11, "Since all these things are to be destroyed in this way, what sort of people ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness,"

"Godliness" is devotion to God reflected in one's life.

A definition of the church might be something like;

"His assembly of people, a living organism Paul calls 'the body of Christ' comprised of those who, by faith in Christ are members of God's household and family and citizens of His kingdom. Numbers do not matter as Jesus said, 'For where two or three have gathered together in My name, I am there in their midst.'" (Matthew 18:20)

The place, day or time is insignificant as to this assembly. A building, denominational membership, specific group identity for the world to note, or any other human or worldly designation is of no importance at all. It is simple His people, people He knows, gathered together in His name at any place and at anytime.

In reference to Hebrews 10:19-25 that reads,

19: "Therefore, brethren, since we have confidence to enter the holy place by the blood of Jesus, 20: by a new and living way which He inaugurated for us through the veil, that is, His flesh, 21: and since *we have* a great priest over the house of God, 22: let us draw near with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled *clean* from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. 23: Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful; 24: and let us consider how

to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, 25: not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging *one another*; and all the more as you see the day drawing near."

A comment is warranted. Often verse 25 is quoted to admonish people to be sure and attend "church" or be in disobedience to God's will. However, there is no specific formula given for this "assembling together." And the word for "assembling together" is not "ekklesia" but "epi-soon-ah-go-geh" from which we get "synagogue." "Synagogue" means to gather or assemble together.

In the early days, small groups met in homes. Their identity and purpose remain as described throughout this study as we see in this passage.