

Faith Pulpit

When is a Church a Church?

Many people are hopelessly confused by the maze of religious institutions that call themselves a church. The modern ecumenical movement has created an atmosphere quite hostile to any dogmatic, specific definition of a church. On the other hand, interdenominational thought, with its primary emphasis upon the “universal church,” and its accompanying “parachurch” organizations has given little thought to exacting definitions of the nature of a true local church. In the minds of many, the definition, organization, and function of a church are relatively unimportant, provided the church is reasonably biblical and functions as local churches traditionally function. The Bible does, of course, teach the union of all believers in Christ, their Head (1 Corinthians 12:13; Colossians 1:18). But it also teaches the nature and operation of a local church, as well. These two truths are not contradictory nor does one exclude the other.

What is a true church? This is a question of major importance since the word *ecclesia* is used approximately 116 times in the New Testament, and the vast majority of these references are to local churches. *Ecclesia* is the New Testament word for “church” and is therefore one of the most important of all New Testament words. Like so many biblical words, it has a double background.

The first of these is the Greek. In the days of Athens, the “*ecclesia*” was the convened assembly of the people. It consisted of all the citizens of the city who had not lost their civil rights. Its powers and purposes were to all apparent intents unlimited. It directed the city’s policy, declared war, and arranged alliances. It raised and budgeted funds. All of its meetings began with prayer and sacrifice. It was a true democracy. Its two great concepts were equality (*isonomia*) and freedom (*eleutheria*). It was an assembly where everyone had an equal right and an equal duty.

In the wider Greek sense, “*ecclesia*” came to mean any duly convened assembly of citizens. The Roman world made no attempt to even translate the word. It simply transliterated it into “*ecclesia*.” To

Greek and Roman worlds alike, the word denoted a convened assembly. When viewed from this perspective, the church was God's assembly, God's muster, and was convened by God.

The second use of the word has a Hebrew background. In the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament) it denotes the Hebrew word "qahal", which means "to summon." It is used regularly for the assembly or the congregation of Israel. It occurs over seventy times in the Septuagint. In the Hebrew sense, therefore, it means God's people called together by God in order to listen to or to act for God. The two original words put all of the emphasis on the action of God.

Originally, the word does not mean, as is so often stated, a body of people who have been picked out from the world. Rather, it means a body of people who have been "summoned out" of their homes to come and meet with God. And in the two biblical languages, that sense was not exclusive but inclusive. It was a summons from God to every man to come, listen to, and act on the Word of God. In essence, then, the "ecclesia" is a body of people assembling not because they have chosen to come together but assembling because God has called them to Himself. They do not convene to share their own thoughts and opinions but rather to listen to the voice of God.

In the New Testament, "ecclesia" can be used in three different ways. First, it is used of all genuine believers in the present age (1 Corinthians 10:32; 12:28 and Philippians 3:6). Second, it may refer to a particular local church (Romans 16:1; 1 Corinthians 1:2; Galatians 1:2). Third, it points to the actual assembly of believers who have met together for worship (1 Corinthians 11:18; 14:19 ; 14:23). In some of Paul's letters, he wrote to individual congregations (1 Thessalonians 1:1; 2 Thessalonians 1:2). Yet he also thought of the church, not in terms only of separate congregations, but in terms of one great church body of which each congregation was a representative. For instance, any group of Roman citizens, meeting anywhere throughout the world, was a "conventus civium Romanorum", an assembly of Roman citizens. Wherever they might be meeting, they were part of a great unity. They may be separated from Rome in space but not in spirit. The church, then, when used this way, speaks of a universal whole in which each congregation plays a part.

In the New Testament, the church is presented in three relationships. First, it is occasionally described in human terms. For instance, Paul speaks of the church of the Thessalonians (1 Thessalonians 1:1; 2 Thessalonians 1:2). In a sense, the church is composed of people and belongs to people. A church in the New Testament never describes a building. It always describes a body of men and women who have given their hearts to God. Second, it is far more frequently described in unworldly terms. It is called the "church of God" (1 Corinthians 1:2; 2 Corinthians 1:1; Galatians 1:13 ; 1 Thessalonians 2:14 ; 1 Timothy 3:5, 15). The church belongs to God and comes from God. Thus, it becomes the hands to work for Him, the feet to do His errands, and the voice to speak for Him. It is that which carries on the life of Christ. It is, therefore, an organism.

In New Testament times, the church had no buildings. The believers simply met in homes with room enough to accommodate them. These were called “house-churches” (Romans 16:5; 1 Corinthians 16:19; Colossians 4:15; Philemon 2). This, no doubt, prevented the early believers from falling victim to our “edifice complex” that draws attention away from the New Testament concept of church and toward inanimate structures and programs. The church is people and emphasizes the people’s relationship to God.

Attentive study of the New Testament, then, reveals a local church that is clearly a body of believers in the Lord Jesus Christ. A church is not a refuge for those who are religious, those who want to “help others,” or those who want to help themselves. A church is an assembly of those who have been born again.

In his epistle to the church at Rome, Paul addressed them as those who were “beloved of God, called...saints” (Romans 1:7). They were saints in the sight of God if they truly had trusted Christ as their Savior. The same truth is espoused in 1 Corinthians 1:2 when Paul said that the Corinthians were “sanctified in Christ Jesus called saints.” It is apparent that these saints were far removed from being saintly but were nevertheless saints. The Colossians were also called “saints and faithful brethren in Christ” (Colossians 1:2). The phrase “in Christ” is a favorite of Paul’s and denotes not only a changed life through faith but also an exalted position before God which includes many wonderful spiritual blessings.

Since being “in Christ” is the divine characterization of a church, an organization which bears the name “church” but violates this clear requirement of God is not a church by God’s estimate. Churches practicing the admitting of infants into their fellowship are not genuine churches. Churches which open their doors too widely to include believers and unbelievers into their fellowship are not keeping the structures of the Scriptures. Saul of Tarsus, following his conversion, had some difficulty in fellowshiping with the church of Jerusalem because “they were all afraid of him, and believed not that he was a disciple” (Acts 9:26). Those early saints did not receive the person merely because the person wished to be received. Evidence of a new life in Christ was necessary.

The gospels contain only two references dealing with the word “ecclesia.” Both references occur in the book of Matthew within the last months of the Lord’s ministry. In Matthew 16:18 the word is used once. Matthew 18:17 contains the word twice. Although the inscripturation of Matthew took place sometime after the death of Christ, these two accounts are the first historical references to the church.

Matthew 16:18 introduces the first use of the word “ecclesia” in the New Testament. Christ is speaking and tells Peter that “you are Peter (petros) and upon this Rock (petra-feminine) I will build my church, and the gates of Hell shall not prevail against it” (parentheses added).

The parallel accounts in Mark and Luke must be used to establish the time of this ministry of Christ. Mark 8:27–33 and Luke 9:18–22 indicate that just prior to the transfiguration the disciples clearly acknowledge Jesus to be the Messiah of Israel. The time of this account, then, is within the last six months of the earthly ministry of Christ.

This verse in Matthew presents a basic problem regarding the church. What part did Peter or his confession have in building the church?

Regarding the use of “petra,” some commentators call Peter “the rock.” Others say either Christ or Peter’s confession is the “petra.” The New Testament uses “petra” sixteen times. In every instance where “petra” is used to refer to a person, that person is Christ (Romans 9:33; 1 Corinthians 10:4; 1 Peter 2:8). Further, in Matthew 16:18 Christ states, in effect, that Peter is “Petros” but upon this “petra” (feminine form) Christ will build His “ecclesia.” It seems certain that the “petra” is Christ and the confession that Christ is the Messiah of Israel and therefore uniquely the Son of God. Reception of Christ, then, involves both a person and facts about that person which places the believer in the “ecclesia.” And it is such people—those who acknowledge and trust Christ as their personal Savior—who are the essential ingredient in God’s Church.

In summary, then, God’s “ecclesia” can be described in several ways. It is a convened assembly of people who have equal rights and responsibilities before God. It is a summoned assembly who listen to and act for God. It is an assembly of saints who have been built together on Christ and the gospel. The New Testament declares it to be the unique and distinctive program ordained by God to carry out His work in this present age.

A letter recently surfaced from a woman who graduated from FBBC back in the early seventies. What she says bears out the importance of the local church in a very specific way. She writes, “And now that we are out of school, the Lord has used our education in so many ways. Let me tell you some of them. We did not feel the Lord’s leading into fulltime service, but rather back home to farm. Many people, I’m sure, felt we were wasting our education this way, but I assure you that we haven’t. There is a real need for educated laymen (emphasis mine) in our churches. More times than I can count, I’ve used what I’ve learned at school...There is such a need in our churches to get involved in concentrated study of the Bible and its doctrines.”

Regardless of how the training is used, whether by vocational Christian leaders or Christian laymen, it is clear that the local church is God’s primary program for today. Other ministries have legitimacy only as they support and enhance New Testament local churches. Let’s do it God’s way!

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