

What is a "Church?"

By Dr. Gary M. Gulan, 1983, (rev. 86,89,92,94,05)

Introduction: The concept of "church" has become very vague and very corrupt in today's culture, even within the church itself. This has happened because of tradition, culture, and man's own making. We have deviated from God's master blueprint of the "church" (Gr. "ekklesis").

1. THE MYSTIQUE OF THE WORD "CHURCH"

In today's culture, the concept of church is used several ways:

- A. the church as a system or institution (i.e. the Roman Catholic Church)
- B. the church as a denomination (i.e. the Methodist church, the Pentecostal church, etc.)
- C. the church as a government style (i.e. the Congregational church, the Presbyterian church, etc.)
- D. the church as a building
- E. the church as a social club or entertainment center
- F. the church as a business organization
- G. the church as a group of people (i.e. a community)

NOTE: All of the above concepts, tend to obscure the real meaning of the word "church."

2. THE MEANING OF THE WORD "CHURCH"

The English word "church" (English "kirk") comes from a Greek word (Greek "kyriakon") which means "belonging to the Lord." This Greek word for our English word appears only two times in the New Testament (1 Cor. 11:20 - referring to the Lord's Supper; and Rev. 1:10 - referring to the Lord's Day). (Basic Theology, by Charles C. Ryrie, Victor: Wheaton, 1986, p. 393).

In the Greek New Testament the word "church" (Greek "ekklesia") is composed of two smaller Greek words, "ek" meaning "from or out of," and "kaleo" meaning "to call." Thus the New Testament word for "church" means "a group of people, called out, selected, chosen and separated from a larger more general group of people." (Christian Doctrine, By J. L. Patten, FBBC; Ankeny, 1979, p. 259).

A. Non-technical Usage

"In the Greek civil life underlying the New testament, the 'ekklesia' was an 'assembly of citizens called together for deliberate purpose.' In this general non-technical sense, 'ekklesia' is used several times in the New testament. In Acts 19:32,39,41 it refers to a town meeting at Ephesus. In Acts 7:28 and Hebrews 2:12, it is used to designate the commonwealth of Israel as called out and separated from other peoples. Matthew 18:17 uses the term also in a non-technical sense with reference to a deliberate body of people." (Christian Doctrine, By J. L. Patten, FBBC; Ankeny, 1979, p. 259).

"In classical Greek [Greek prior to the Greek underlying the New Testament] the word 'ekklesia' is found as early as Herodotus, Thucydides, Xenophon, Plato, and Euripides (fifth century BC onwards). It refers to 'an assembly of the citizens of a polis (city). Such assemblies convened at frequent intervals, as often as thirty to forty times a year in the case of Athens. While authority of the 'ekklesia' was limited to certain matters, all who were full citizens were allowed a vote in

those matters. In the secular sense of the word, then, 'ekklesia' refers to simply a gathering or assembly of persons, a meaning which is still to be found in Acts 19:32,39,41." (Christian Theology, By Millard J. Erickson, Baker: Grand Rapids, 1989, p. 1031).

B. Technical Usage In The New Testament

"The word church (Greek "ekklesia") is used 109 times out of its 114 times in the New Testament in a technical sense with reference to a group of believers Divinely called out from the world during the time frame of the 'church' which is between Pentecost and the Rapture." (Christian Doctrine, By J. L. Patten, FBBC; Ankeny, 1979, p. 259).

3. THE MINDSET OF A TRUE "CHURCH"

A. The Place And Numerical Size Do Not Define a Church

"The fact that small groups in individual houses are called 'ekklesia' indicates that neither the significance of the place nor the numerical size of the assembly determines the use of the term." (The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology, Colin Brown, Ed., Zondervan: Grand Rapids, 1979, Vol. 1, p. 300).

B. A Small Congregation Is A Complete Church

"We should note that the individual congregation, or group of believers in a specific place, is never regarded as only a part or component of the whole church. The church is not a sum or composite of the individual local groups. Instead, the whole is found in each place." (Christian Theology, By Millard J. Erickson, Baker: Grand Rapids, 1989, p. 1033).

C. A Church Can Exist Without A Building

From the examination of the word "ekklesia" we find that the church or assembly exists without a building. However, today, many believe a church doesn't exist unless it has a building. "It is striking that Jesus' followers did not describe their meetings and the community represented by them as a 'synagoge.'" (The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology, Colin Brown, Ed., Zondervan: Grand Rapids, 1979, Vol. 1, p. 296).

D. Israel Is Not The Church And The Church Does Not Fulfill Israel's Covenants

The church is not a continuation of "Israel." Christ fulfilled the picture of the Old Testament Law and Mosaic Covenant and the synagogue was the modern association with the Law, (See author's study on "the Old Testament Law and the Mosaic Covenant"). A new program was coming into practice called the "church" with a New Covenant (see author's study on the "New Covenant"). The apostles used the buildings of the "synagogues" as a place to go and win converts, not a place to start the church.

E. Religious Activities In A building Do Not Constitute A Church

During the time of the early church, the pagans were the ones who used buildings for their religion. "Scripture speaks of false churches. Paul says of the pagan temples in Corinth, 'What pagans sacrifice they offer to demons and not to God' (1 Cor. 10:20). He tells the Corinthians that 'When you were heathen, you were certainly led astray to dumb idols' (1 Cor. 12:2). These pagan temples were certainly false churches or false religious assemblies. Moreover, Scripture speaks of a religious assembly that is really a 'synagogue of Satan' (Rev. 2:9; 3:9)." (Systematic Theology, by Wayne Grudem, Zondervan: Grand Rapids: 1994, p. 864).

F. Men Do Not Build The Church.

Christ said, "I will build my church..." (Mat. 16:18). God is the one who "adds" and places who He wants in a church, (1 Cor. 12:18,24). People are added to the church not by human effort, (Acts 2:47).

G. There Is A Family element To The Church.

Family terms and comparisons are used of the church, (2 Cor. 6:18; 1 Tim. 5:1-2; Eph. 5:22-33). "The parallelism in this verse (1 Tim. 3:5) between the overseer's household and the church as God's household is made explicit in 1 Tim. 3:15 where Paul says that he provides these instructions so that Timothy will know how people should behave in the household of God. The anarthrous [no article "the"] 'ekklesia' or 'church' shows that Paul is speaking in general terms and not of one local assembly." (Pastoral Epistles, By William D. Mounce, Word: Waco, 2000, Word Biblical Commentary, Vol. 46, p. 180)

4. THE MARKS OF A TRUE "CHURCH"

I have had the opportunity to set on several councils in an association of churches where we reviewed a missionary church to see if it was a duly formed viable functioning local church. We used the following ten items to help us determine this.

A. "redeemed members" Acts 2:41

(i.e. received His word connects to Acts 2:38)

B. "baptism" by immersion Acts 2:41

C. Sound "doctrine" or "teaching" Acts 2:42 ("continued in the Apostles doctrine")

The church is to have "sound doctrine" (1 Timothy 1:10; 4:3; Titus 1:9; 2:1). The church, especially the pastor, is "to give attention" to "didaskalia," (1 Tim. 4:13); "to take heed" to "didaskalia," (1 Tim. 4:16); "to labor" in "didaskalia," (1 Tim. 5:17); "to nourish" the brethren with "didaskalia," (1 Tim. 4:6); "to speak" didaskalia," (Titus 2:1); and "to exhort and convict" with "didaskalia" those who contradict us, (Titus 1:9). The church will not always "endure" sound "didaskalia," (2 Tim. 4:3).

D. "fellowship" Acts 2:42

(same as the breaking of bread from house-to-house, Acts 2:46)

E. "breaking of bread" Acts 2:42

(i.e. Lord's Supper, different than Acts 2:46)

F. "prayer" Acts 2:42

G. "a bishop/pastor/elder" 1 Timothy 3:

H. "deacon" 1 Timothy 3:

I. "ministry" Ephesians 4:12

5. THE MYSTERY OF THE CHURCH

There are thirteen references to the "mystery of the faith" which helps us understand the church

- A. The gentiles in the body of Christ, (Eph. 3:3-6; 1:9-10)
- B. Christ is in the gentiles, (Col. 1:26-27; Rev. 1:12-13,20)
- C. The church will not die out but will be changed (i.e. the rapture, 1 Cor. 15:51)
- E. Not to be conveyed in excellency of speech or in worldly wisdom, (1 Cor. 2:10).
- F. Boldness in making the gospel known, (Col. 4:3-6; Eph. 6:19)
- G. Husband and wife roles relate to Christ and the church, (Eph. 5:22-23).
- H. The church is not Israel and God is not done with Israel, (Rom. 11:25; Eph. 1:9-14)
- I. We are related to each other and all that we have is "in Christ" (Col. 2:1-3)
- J. Godliness is a key distinction of the church, (1 Tim. 3:16)

Conclusion: The church is something new and something special.

God's people are the "church," (1 Cor. 14:32; each Epistle is written to the people called the church)

God's people are the "sanctuary" or "temple," (1 Cor. 3:16-17; 6:19; Eph. 2:21-22)

God's people are the "building," (1 Cor. 3:19)

God's people are the "living stones," (1 Peter 2:5)

God's people are the "house," (1 Peter 2:5)

God's people are the "new tablets," (2 Cor. 3:3)

God's people are no longer Jew or Gentile but a new entity, (1 Cor. 10:32; Eph. 2:14).

God's people are pilgrims on earth with a home in heaven, (Heb. 12:23).