

The Word "Church"

The etymology of "church" is unclear. When one consults linguistic sources he finds several suggestions as to how the word may have evolved into our language. The most common theory is that it came into English from an adaptation of one or more of the European languages' adaptation of the Greek word *kyriakon* meaning "of or belonging to the Lord." For example, the German word is *kirche*. However it may have come into our language, we have it and we must deal with it. It is in all of our respected and reliable New Testament translations.

The New Testament Greek word *ekklesia* is the word translated "church." Scholars generally agree that the word means a "called (or summoned) out assembly." It was not originally a "religious" word. It had reference to any assembly called out of the general populace for a particular purpose or function. It was more than a mere gathering or assembly that may have been brought together by happenstance. Some in commenting on this word leave the impression that it referred to any kind of gathering or assembly and point to the fact that it is the word used to designate an unruly mob in Acts 19. But this "mob" did not just happen to gather, they had been called to a meeting of silversmiths (vs. 19). After they were called together the assembly got out of hand (vs. 32). After the town clerk calmed them down, he "dismissed the assembly" (vs. 41). This was an assembly (*ekklesia*) that had been formally convened and was then dismissed. The Lord's *ekklesia* (church) is not a mere gathering of people, but an assembly of people who have been called out of the world by the Lord for a purpose.

Jesus and the New Testament writers did not coin a new word when they spoke of the *ekklesia*. They used a familiar word and gave it a new application. However it may be translated into English, it requires close study of the context to determine how the word is applied in a given passage. Perhaps "assembly" would have been a better translation -- just as "immersion" would have been a better translation than "baptism." But the fact that the translators chose "church" and "baptism" should not present a huge problem for Bible readers. One can look at all the times these words are used and consider the context of each and come to an understanding of what the writer meant in a given place. Even if "assembly" were uniformly used in our translations, one would still have to study to determine the nature of the assembly and how it is used in each instance.

"Church" in scripture does not refer to a building. It refers to people in every place it is used in the New Testament. This is not to say that it is wrong to place a sign on the meeting house that simply says "Church of Christ." Some

things are understood by reasonable people. If I put a little sign on my house that simply says "Ed Bragwell," it is not apt to leave the impression that Ed Bragwell is a house. Oh, yes, I could make the sign say "Ed Bragwell lives here." But is it really necessary? You can put up a sign that says "Church of Christ meets here" if you prefer, but do not pitch a fit if others think that "meets here" is not necessary.

Many modern dictionary uses of "*church*" are not found in the scriptures. A couple of examples will demonstrate this. The first is a building for public and especially Christian worship. The second is the clergy or officialdom of a religious body. The term is never used in a denominational sense in the scriptures. Now let us turn our attention to the ways in which "*church*" is used in our English versions. It is used once referring to the Israelite nation in the wilderness (Acts 7:38). All other times it refers to God's people in some way or the other.

All Of God's People

Jesus was the first to use "*church*" in the New Testament (Matthew 16:18). Here he uses the figure of a building resting upon a rock as a foundation. He envisions the time when he would build his great called out assembly upon the foundation truth that He is the Christ, the Son of God as had been expressed by Peter. In Acts 2:47 we learn who makes up this "*church*." It is saved people.

We sometimes refer to the "*church*" as the "universal church." It is not accurate to refer to it as the "invisible church." Those who make it up are men and women everywhere who are saved by the blood of Christ. The usage of "*church*" in this sense is found in a number of places in the New Testament (Ephesians 1:22-23; 3:10; 4:4; 5:23-32; Philippians 3:6; Hebrews 12:22-23).

The church in this sense has no geographical boundaries. It has no organizational structure. It has no earthly oversight. Its only functioning unit is the individual doing the will of the Head, Jesus Christ. It never convenes as a body. It is simply a term that aptly refers to all of God's people as a group. They are God's "called out" people -- having been called out of the world into Christ.

God's People In A Community

Jesus was also the first to use "*church*" in a local sense (Matthew 18:17). Some think that since Jesus spoke this before the establishment of the church that he must be referring to some assembly other than a New

Testament congregation. But I believe that the following quotation expresses the truth of the matter: "As the Saviour was giving preparatory instruction, he was compelled to thus speak of the church by anticipation before it actually existed. The word church means 'assembly,' and the apostles knew that there would be some form of assembly in the kingdom about to be set up. When Matthew wrote his Gospel, churches were already in existence. One who will not hear the church is to be regarded as an outsider. This implies that such a one is to be excluded from the church" (*The Fourfold Gospel*, by J. W. McGarvey and Phillip Pendleton).

It should be obvious that it is "*church*" in the local sense of which Jesus speaks here as it would not be possible to tell the sin to all brethren everywhere.

Most of the times that "*church*" is used by the New Testament writers it is in the local sense, speaking of Christians in a given community. At first, there was only one local church -- Jerusalem (Acts 5:11). Before long, due to the scattering of the disciples from Jerusalem, churches were started in other communities. Each of these churches were spoken of as separate units often identifying them by their geographic locations. There was not only "*the church at Jerusalem*" (Acts 8:1; 11:22), there was the church at Antioch (Acts 11:26; 13:1) and eventually many other places (Romans 16:16; 1 Corinthians 1:2; 16:1; Revelation 1:7).

These churches had organizational structure. Each had its own overseers or shepherds as men became qualified and appointed (Acts 14:23). These were overseers only of the local church of which they were a part (1 Peter 5:1-4). There was a recognizable bounds of membership for the local church. The "*church of God*" at Corinth was told "*if therefore the whole church be come together into one place*" indicating that they would know those who constituted the "*whole church*" at that place. It was not a matter of having loose boundaries.

These local groups were joined by Christians (Acts 9:26). Local churches received (Romans 14:1) and rejected members (1 Corinthians 5:4-13). Sometimes mistakes were made in both receiving and rejecting. Jerusalem first rejected Paul, but later received him. Diotrephes wrongly cast some out of the church (3 John 9-10). The bounds of membership was controlled by each local church. They were independent autonomous functioning units or organizations.

These local organizations were the only organizations through which Christians worked in spiritual matters. There were no organizations larger than, smaller than, or other than these local churches to do the work that

God gave His people to do as organized units. By "organized unit," we do not mean a systematic arrangement utilized by the unit (local church), like a Bible class or "work group," but a unit (organization) that combines the resources of a few or many into a common resource and placing it under the control of the combined unit.

Physical Assemblies

The church existed in a given place as an organized unit whether physically assembled or not. The elders of the church at Ephesus were still elders of the church at Ephesus when they met with Paul at Miletus (Acts 20:17). When the local church (an organized unit) came together into a physical assembly, this assembly was also called a "*church*" (1 Corinthians 11:18, 20-21; 14:4-35).

One is "in church" even "at home" when "*church*" is viewed either in the universal sense or the local organization sense. One has a duty to assemble with other Christians (Hebrews 10:25). When this is done one is "in church" in the sense of a physical assembly.

"*Church of God*" or "*church of Christ*" is used to designate the church in all three senses. One needs to be in "the church" in each sense. He needs to be one of the saved (universal church), then join himself to the local disciples (local church) and then be present when the local church comes together.

Adapted From Edward O. Bragwell