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I

The Meaning and Uses of the Word *Church*

THE ENGLISH TERM CHURCH

THE ENGLISH TERM *church*, along with the Scottish word *kirk* and German *Kirche*, is derived from the Greek *kuriakon*, which is the neuter adjective of *kurios*, "Lord," and means, "belonging to the Lord." *Kuriakon* occurs only twice in the New Testament, neither time with reference to the church as commonly used today. In 1 Corinthians 11:20 it refers to the Lord's Supper and in Revelation 1:10 to the Lord's Day.

Its application to the church stems from its use by early Christians for the place where they met together, denoting it as a place belonging to God, or God's house. With the realization that the place had significance only because of the people of God who met in it, the term was applied to the assembly itself. From this its meaning has extended to various contemporary uses: (1) a place of meeting, (2) a local organization of believers, (3) the universal body of believers, (4) a particular denomination, for example, the Lutheran Church, and (5) an organization of believers related to a particular area or nation, for example, the Church of England.

THE GREEK WORD

THE ETYMOLOGICAL MEANING

The Greek word in the New Testament for the English word *church* is *ekklesia*. It is derived from the verb *ekkaleo*, a compound of *ek*, "out," and *kaleo*, "to call or summon," which together mean "to call out." While often this etymological meaning is used to support the biblical doctrine of the church as a people called out, separated from the world by God, the usage

of this term both in secular Greek and the Greek Old Testament, which provides the background for the New Testament language, does not lend support to this doctrine from the word *ekklesia* itself.¹

IN SECULAR GREEK

Ekklesia was used by the early Greek-speaking people with its full meaning of those called forth. It was a term for the "assembly of citizens summoned by the crier, the legislative assembly." The idea of summoning, however, soon passed away in usage.² In Athens, *ekklesia* signified the constitutional assembly which met on previously fixed dates and did not need to be specifically summoned, much like our modern legislature,³ while special assemblies summoned to deal with urgent matters were called *sunklētoi*, in distinction from the ordinary *ekklesiai*.⁴ The word came to stand for any assembly, regardless of its constituents or manner of convening. This broad use is evident even in the New Testament where a confused mob which had rushed into the theater at Ephesus is twice called an *ekklesia* (Ac 19:32, 41), and in the same context the term is used for "a lawful assembly" (v. 39).

In addition, in secular Greek *ekklesia* refers only to the assembly or meeting and never to the people which compose that assembly. When the people are not assembled, they are not considered as composing an *ekklesia*. A new *ekklesia* existed each time people assembled.⁵

It is questionable whether *ekklesia* was ever used in the Greek society for a religious group. The secular use, therefore, provides little for an appreciation of the rich meaning of the New

1. The fact that neither the verb *ekkaleo*, "to call out," nor the adjective *ekkleto*, "called out" is used in the New Testament lends weight to this conclusion. Also the Hebrew word *qahal*, which is always behind the Greek *ekklesia* in the Septuagint, does not carry with it the linguistic expression "out of." Cf. Karl Ludwig Schmidt, "ekklesia" in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (hereafter cited as *TDNT*), ed. Gerhard Kittel, 3:530; James Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language*, pp. 119-29; F. J. A. Hort, *The Christian Ecclesia*, p. 5.
2. A. T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research*, p. 174.
3. J. Y. Campbell, *Three New Testament Studies*, p. 43.
4. *Ibid.*
5. *Ibid.*

Testament term outside of the formal analogy of an assembly of people meeting for a particular purpose.⁶

IN THE SEPTUAGINT

The primary background for the New Testament use of the term *ekklesia*, as with most New Testament word thought, is the Old Testament, specifically the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures in the third century B.C. The word *ekklesia* occurred almost a hundred times in the Septuagint and always translated the Hebrew *qahal* or a word of the same root.⁷ Although *qahal* is also rendered by seven other Greek words, including *sunagoge*, which indicates its breadth of meaning, *ekklesia* is the preeminent translation. *Qahal* means simply an assembly, convocation or congregation and can be used for almost any type of gathering of people. It refers to assemblies gathered for evil counsel (Gen 49:6; Ps 26:5); for civic affairs (1 Ki 12:3; Pr 5:14); for war or invasion (Num 22:4; Judg 20:2); for a company of returning exiles (Jer 31:8); or for a religious assembly to hear God's Word (Deu 9:10) or worship Him in some way (2 Ch 20:5; Neh 5:13). The word is used for the congregation of Israel (Mic 2:5; Num 16:3), but it is also used for angels (Ps 89:5, ASV) and simply for an assembled multitude (Gen 28:3; 35:11).⁸

This varied use indicates that no technical meaning was attached to *qahal* in the Old Testament or to its Septuagint Greek translation, *ekklesia*. Apparently in the interest of demonstrating continuity between Israel and the New Testament church, it is often argued that *qahal* became a sort of technical term for Israel in the Old Testament, meaning the people of God. This meaning is then said to provide the real background for the New Testament use of *ekklesia* as the early disciples saw themselves as the new Israel of God, the continuation of the Old Testament Israel.⁹ There is no evidence, however, that such is the case.¹⁰ *Qahal* and its Greek translation simply mean an

6. Schmidt, p. 514.

7. Campbell, p. 44.

8. Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, p. 874.

9. George Johnston, *The Doctrine of the Church in the New Testament*, pp. 36, 43-45; Bruce M. Metzger, "The New Testament View of the Church," *Theology Today* 19 (Oct. 1962):369-70.

10. P. S. Minear, "Church, Idea of" in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. G. A. Buttrick, 1:608; Schmidt, p. 527; Barr, pp. 119-29.

assembly. Who assembles and the significance of the assembly must be added explicitly or implicitly in the context. It is only the addition of "Lord" which makes it plain that an assembly is the congregation of God. Campbell examines the seven passages in the Old Testament where the terminology "*qahal* of the Lord" is used. This terminology is suggested as that which gives the technical meaning of "people of God" to the term *ekklesia*. He concludes that these passages afford no adequate basis for the assertion that the "*qahal* of the Lord" is the usual term for Israel as the people of God, nor for the supposition that a Christian reader of the Septuagint would be led to think that "*ekklesia* of the Lord," which is found in only five of the seven passages, had that meaning. He notes that if this is true even with the addition of the qualifying phrase "of the Lord," it is surely clear that *qahal* alone cannot have had such a technical meaning. Corroboration of this conclusion appears in the fact that in the book of Romans, which concerns itself with the relationship of the New Testament church with God's Old Testament people, and also in 1 Peter, where perhaps the most notable of Old Testament references describing Israel is applied to the church (1 Pe 2:4-10), the term *ekklesia* is entirely absent.¹¹

Moreover, the Old Testament *qahal* with its Septuagint translation, *ekklesia*, like the secular Greek use, never seems to refer to other than an actual meeting. However, a synonymous term, *edah*, did come to have the broader meaning referring to the congregation, whether actually assembled or not. In this sense it is nearer to the New Testament use of *ekklesia* than *qahal*; yet, it is never translated *ekklesia* in the Septuagint but, rather, predominantly by *synagoge*, which is also a common translation of *qahal*.¹²

Although the Septuagint use of *ekklesia* based upon the meaning of *qahal* does not reveal any of the technical sense or the full meaning of the New Testament *ekklesia*, its use for a worshipping assembly, especially in the Psalms, makes it the most suitable biblical word for the early meetings of the New Testament

11. Campbell, pp. 45-48, 53; Hort, p. 12, agrees, noting that neither *qahal* nor *edah* is used in any important passages describing Israel as a peculiar people, nor do they have a place in the great prophecies of Messianic times.

12. Campbell, pp. 44-45; Hort, pp. 4-5; Barr, pp. 125-26.

believers. As we shall see, it is with this primary meaning that the word enters New Testament usage. *Synagoge* meant essentially the same thing to the Jewish people and could be used for an early Christian meeting (Ja 2:2). But its distinct Jewish reference, along with the fact that *synagoge* came to have particular reference to the *place* of meeting, hindered its general acceptance by the Christian community.¹³

An interesting development of the term *ekklesia* appears in the apocryphal book of Ecclesiasticus where, in addition to using the term *ekklesia* in its Old Testament and secular sense of assembly, the writer appears to go beyond this sense to the people who make up the group even when not actually together. Very probably such usage provides the transition from the limited meaning of the Old Testament to the broader concept of the New.¹⁴

IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

The New Testament meaning of ekklesia. The New Testament reveals a development of the term *ekklesia* from the simple nontechnical meaning of assembly to the full-blown technical designation for the Christian people of God. That *ekklesia* does not immediately mean something entirely different from the secular and Septuagint usage is evident by these uses retained in the New Testament. In Acts 19 the purely secular meaning is used twice for an unruly mob (vv. 32, 41) and again for a lawful assembly (v. 39). The Septuagint usage occurs in Acts 7:38, where it describes the assembly of Israel in the wilderness, and in Hebrews 2:12, which cites the Septuagint of Psalm 22:22: "In the midst of the *ekklesia* I will sing praises to thee." None of these references alludes to the New Testament church.

The same general nontechnical meaning of assembly occurs in the uses of the term with qualifying phrases. Although the development is probably already taking place where *ekklesia* alone stands for the Christian assembly, there are several uses in the early writings of Paul where modifying words are used, indicating that the term itself had not yet fully developed to its technical meaning. The apostle addresses his first letter "unto

13. Johnston, pp. 40-41.

14. Campbell, pp. 49-50.

the church of the Thessalonians which is in God the Father and in the Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Th 1:1). In the same letter he writes, "The churches of God which in Judea are in Christ Jesus" (2:14), while in the second epistle to the same church, which is still very early, the apostle uses the address: "Unto the church of the Thessalonians in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" (2 Th 1:1). These phrases indicate that *ekklesia* itself still carried a general meaning of "assembly"; the particular kind of assembly had to be indicated by qualifiers similar to the Septuagint usage.¹⁵

Shortly, however, *ekklesia* developed into its full technical sense. Through use, it became so completely identified with the specific Christian assembly that the term took on that particular meaning itself and could stand for that assembly without being confused with others. The majority of the New Testament references have this technical meaning.

The New Testament use of ekklesia. A Greek concordance reveals that there are 114 occurrences of *ekklesia* in the New Testament.¹⁶ Five of these, as seen above, have no reference to the New Testament church, leaving 109 references that are so related. It is interesting to note in passing that the word does not occur in the gospels except for three references in Matthew 16:18 and 18:17. It is also absent from 2 Timothy, Titus, 1 Peter, 2 Peter, 1 John, 2 John, and Jude.

1. The local church. Predominantly, *ekklesia* applies to a local assembly of all those who profess faith and allegiance to Christ. In this sense the singular *ekklesia* refers to a specific church, as that at Thessalonica (1 Th 1:1) or any nonspecified individual assembly ("every church," 1 Co 4:17). The plural *ekklesiai* also designates a group of churches or assemblies in a particular region ("churches of Judea," Gal 1:22); or a nonspecified number of churches ("other churches," 2 Co 11:8); or for all the churches together ("all churches," 1 Co 7:17).¹⁷

2. The universal church. *Ekklesia* also designates the universal church. In this usage the concept of a physical assembly gives

15. Alfred Plummer, *A Commentary on St. Paul's First Epistle to the Thessalonians*, p. 3.

16. W. F. Moulton and A. S. Geden, *A Concordance to the Greek Testament*, pp. 316-17.

17. Hort, pp. 116-17.

way to the spiritual unity of all believers in Christ. *Ekklesia* in this sense is not the assembly itself but rather those constituting it; they are the church whether actually assembled or not. This is clearly evident in the early persecution of the church at Jerusalem. Even when believers are scattered abroad and in their homes, they are "the church" (Ac 8:1-3). The application of traits of personality, such as edification and fear, to the church also shows that it was a term descriptive not only of the Christian assembly but of Christians themselves (Ac 9:31). The *ekklesia* was therefore all those spiritually united in Christ, the Head of the church. There is no concept of a literal assembly in this sense of *ekklesia*, nor does the New Testament, as will be seen later, have any organizational structure for the church universal. The unity is that of the Spirit in the body of Christ (Eph 4:4).

Although this universal meaning is occasionally found in the earlier records (Ac 8:3; 9:31; 1 Co 12:28; 15:9), and in the foundational promise made by Christ (Mt 16:18), it is primarily used in the later epistles of Ephesians and Colossians, which constitute the epitome of the biblical theology of the church (e.g., Eph 1:22-23; Col 1:18).¹⁸

The universal church is often termed invisible, yet the New Testament never speaks of the invisible church. Even as members of a local church are concrete people, so are members of the universal church.¹⁹ It is true that the New Testament uses the term *ekklesia* for the spiritual reality of the body of Christ and also for the assembly, in which the genuineness of the spiritual reality of every individual professing member cannot be known. To this extent the exact membership in any individual church and the universal church at large cannot be known and is thereby invisible. But even this invisible membership is very visible in the reality of life. As for membership in an invisible church without fellowship with any local assembly, this concept is never contemplated in the New Testament. The universal church was the universal fellowship of believers who met visibly in local assemblies.

18. Earl D. Radmacher, "The Nature of the Church" (Doctor's diss., Dallas Theological Seminary, 1962), p. 190. Radmacher notes that out of thirteen occurrences of *ekklesia* in the books of Ephesians and Colossians, all but two (Col 4:15-16) have this universal reference to spiritual unity.
19. Hort, p. 169; Schmidt, p. 534, considers the distinction between the invisible and visible church as a form of unrealistic Platonism.

Furthermore, it is important to note that the universal use of *ekklesia* does not denote the one church as the sum of many individual churches, or the many churches together producing the universal church. The one universal church is manifested in a particular locality, yet each individual assembly is the church in that place. Typical of this New Testament concept is Paul's address to the Corinthian believers as "the church of God which is at Corinth" (1 Co 1:1; 2 Co 1:1). The thought of these phrases, as Schmidt explains, is not "'the Corinthian congregation,' which would stand by the Roman, etc., but 'the congregation, church, assembly as it is in Corinth.'"²⁰

It is often difficult and sometimes impossible to separate the local and universal meanings in the early uses of *ekklesia* (e.g., Ac 2:47; 5:11). The assembly at Jerusalem, while definitely a local church, was also a spiritual unity through the baptism of the Spirit. For a time, therefore, the two uses of *ekklesia* coincided in the one assembly of believers. The church of Jesus Christ was manifest in the church at Jerusalem. As new local churches were established and organized in other places, these were still viewed as manifestations of the one "church" as well as individually "the churches."

The use of *ekklesia* in the New Testament is limited to the senses of the local and universal church. Other connotations which have arisen with the English term *church* are not found with the New Testament word. It is never used for a church building, nor are adjectives ever attached to *ekklesia* as titles to denote a particular denomination (e.g., Baptist or Presbyterian Church), or a state or territorial church (e.g., the Eastern Church, Church of England). In the New Testament when the locality of a single church is mentioned, it is described either by the name of its members (e.g., 1 Th 1:1, "The church of the Thesalonians") or as in a certain city (1 Co 1:2, "The church . . . at Corinth"). Churches of a region are described as being "in" or "of" the region (e.g., 1 Th 2:14, "the churches . . . in Judea"; Gal 1:2, "the churches of Galatia"). Titles such as the Church of Ephesus or Galatia are never found. Even such theological concepts as militant or triumphant are never attached to the term *ekklesia* in the New Testament.

20. Schmidt, p. 505; cf. Hort, p. 168.