

# **The Meaning and Use of “Ekklesia” in the First Christian Century**

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Evangelicals have a great responsibility in teaching and writing on the real meaning of ekklesia (church) in New Testament times. Even though Christ said the gates of hell would not prevail against His church, the fact is that Satan has placed a great smoke screen to hide the original meaning of the Greek word ekklesia. We know it is not far to impose distorted 20th-century definitions on a good first-century word.

## **I. Classical Greek writers defined “ekklesia” as assembly or congregation.**

Pre-Christian Greek writers are quoted by Dr. B. H. Carroll in his book on THE CHURCH.

**Thucydides** (460-400 B.C.) 1,87 - "He ... put the question to vote in the assembly (ekklesia) of the Spartans." 6,8 - "And the Athenians having convened an assembly (ekklesia) ... voted..."  
**Aristophanes** (448-385 B.C.), Acts 169 – “But I forbid you calling an assembly (ekklesia) for the Thracians about pay."

**Demosthenes** (384-322 B.C.), 378,24 - "When after this the assembly (ekklesia) adjourned, they came together and planned... They were afraid that an assembly (ekklesia) would be summoned suddenly

Our Greek lexicons define ekklesia as assembly. Thayer's - "an assembly of the people convened at the public place of council for the purpose of deliberating." Liddell & Scott - "an assembly of the citizens summoned by the crier, the legislative assembly." Trench's Synonyms - "the lawful assembly in a free Greek city of all those possessed of the rights of citizenship, for the transaction of public affairs." Seyffert's Dictionary - "The assembly of the people, which in Greek cities had the power of final decision in public affairs." Ewing - "In every case the word means an organized body." Dana's Ecclesiology - "In classical use ekklesia meant an assembly."

## **II. The Septuagint and Apocrypha used ekklesia as congregation.**

Dr. B. H. Carroll (ibid, 47-51) cited 114 cases in the King James Old Testament and Apocrypha where assembly or congregation are used for the Greek ekklesia in the LXX. The Greek ekklesia is used for the Hebrew words *qahal* and *edhah*, both meaning congregation. In no case do these words mean a never-assembling number of people.

Anyone knowing Greek in NT times would know that ekklesia meant an assembly. Jesus would use this word ekklesia honestly and accurately, but church history reveals many distortions and false meanings of it.

## **III. The Lord Jesus used ekklesia 23 times in the New Testament.**

"I will build my ekklesia," Jesus said in Mt. 16:18. The word "my" is the only adjective in the NT for a church in this age. (When we all get to heaven, in one great assembly, then it will be "a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing;" Eph. 5:27.)

When Jesus said "my church," it had to be different from any assembly in the OT. Then it was not a continuation of any OT ekklesia; it was a new entity. The "church in the wilderness" of Acts 7:38 was an assembly, as Scofield's footnote says: "A better translation [for church] would be 'the congregation.' The original meaning of ekklesia was **a gathering out of citizens in a public place for deliberation** (emphasis his). The LXX used it to signify the congregation of

Israel. Here it is employed in its most general sense of a called-out meeting." Then Scofield contradicts himself by suggesting a "universal" church - one which has never yet assembled.

Apart from lexicons one might learn the meaning of a word by noticing how it is used. Jesus used church twice in Mt. 18:17 where it has to mean a real, local assembly. Jesus used church 20 times in the Revelation, each time demanding a real congregation. The plural "churches" is found 12 times in the Revelation, contrary to modern careless usage which too often employs the singular for many churches in an area. We read about "the churches which are in Asia" but never "the church in Asia."

Both Jesus and the Holy Spirit emphasized the importance of defining "church" correctly. Seven times we read, "He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches." If repetition is a criterion, this is the most important verse in the NT. And why so? Because a church is Christ's body, His representative on earth, the only organization He built and authorized to carry out ALL His work in ALL the earth in ALL these centuries by ALL His people.

In Rev. 22:16 Jesus assumed that every believer would be in a real church. "I, Jesus, have sent mine angel to testify unto you these things **in the churches**." Then any believer outside a real church membership would be left out. Jesus was not jesting when He said, "I will build my church."

The first use of "church" in Mt. 16:18 is generic or institutional. Jesus meant to have more than one, even as God planned more than one man when He said in Gen. 1:26, "Let us make man." We hear "The dog is man's best friend" which means not a universal dog or a universal man, but each dog and man. So the generic use of "church" in Mt. 16:18 and elsewhere means each real church.

Since Jesus used "church" 22 times as a real assembly, then His use of it in Mt. 16:18 has to mean the same thing. He would not mean one kind of church first, and ever thereafter mean a far different kind of church. More, He did not say, "I will build two kinds of churches." That would be extremely confusing, for who could tell which kind He meant in every case?

Contrary to Scofield, not one verse says the Holy Spirit would "form" a church at Pentecost or at any other time. Christ declared that He Himself would build it and He did. He said in John 17:4, "I have finished the work which thou gavest me to do." As for the future tense of *oikodomeso*, will build, Dr. A. T. Robertson in his Short Grammar, 3rd edition, P. 141, says "The future likewise presents incompleting action which in any case may be either prolonged, repeated, interrupted or begun."

Mt. 16:18 could be "I will *edify* my church," for other verses say that churches, previously started, were still being edified, Acts 9:31; 1 Cor. 14:5, 12, 26; Eph. 4:12, 16, 29; 1 Tim. 1:4.

Jesus started building His church when He called out His first disciples, as told in Mt. 4:18-22; Mk. 1:16-20; Lk. 6:13-16 and John 1:35-45. In Mt. 10:1 Jesus "called unto him his twelve disciples" where the word for "called unto him" is *proskalesamenos* which has the same root as *ekklesia*. Then Jesus "churched" or "ekklesiad" His disciples, for they were a called-out body. He then gave them power to exorcise demons, heal the sick and raise the dead. "These twelve Jesus sent forth to preach" Mt. 10:5.

All this agrees with 1 Corinthians 12:28 and Ephesians 2:20-21:

**And God hath set some in the church, first apostles, secondarily prophets, thirdly teachers, after that miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, governments, diversities of tongues.** – 1 Corinthians 12:28

**And are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner *stone*; In whom all the building fitly framed together groweth unto an holy temple in the Lord:** - Ephesians 2:20-21

We know that Christ was the Good Shepherd, or *poimen*, meaning pastor. He said so in John 10:11, 14. Then His new church had the only perfect pastor in all history. And this church which Christ built personally, in the days of His flesh, is our model for churches ever since. For those 13 men did the best church work ever known: teaching, preaching, healing, evangelizing, comforting, counselling and helping anyone in need. What church has done better?

The four Gospels would not be needed for the Mosaic-Law dispensation then closing. The Gospels ARE needed for the NT dispensation which Christ said began with John the Baptist, Mt. 11:13; Lk. 16:16; also Mk. 1:1-8; John 1:6-17; Acts 10:37 and 13:24. This is the church age, and Jesus came to define it and to start it - in the four Gospels.

Items of church life and organization were the same before Pentecost as after. For the NT is a unit: it has one gospel, one plan of salvation, one kingdom, one baptism and one kind of church. Before Pentecost, Christ's church had the gospel, baptism, communion, missionary work, discipline, organization, soul-winning and great power.

#### **IV. Luke, in Acts, used *ekklesia* as an assembly or congregation.**

In Acts 1:13-15 we find the apostles with one accord praying with over 100 other believers, and then they had a business meeting. All this implies a real membership roll. Acts 2:41 says about 3000 souls were added to them on Pentecost. A wage earner may add to a previously existing bank account, but he does not add to one not yet started. Even so with the church. Not one verse says the Holy Spirit "formed" the church on Pentecost.

"Body" in 1 Cor. 12:13 is synonymous with "building" as a metaphor of a church; in each case a visible unity and an assembly of parts is required. A church has to assemble to be a body. A body is always local, visible and real just as an assembly is. It is all together in one place at one time. Every mention of a church in Acts demands an assembly, as each context shows. No reason exists for arguing that *ekklesia* changed its meaning, as Jesus used it. He built His church, implying structure and a framework, as every metaphor used for a church demands. What is there about a universal church to build? It has no organization, officers or ordinances; it has no address, responsibility or accountability; it has no identity, likeness or integrity. What does it have - besides obfuscatory words?

The debated plural in Acts 9:31, KJV - "Then had the churches rest" is correct as it is. The RSV singular is wrong because it violates all previous uses of *ekklesia*. And the plural has more Greek manuscripts to support it. Acts 15:41 says that Paul "went through Syria and Cilicia confirming the churches." But Scofield downgrades and deconfirms real churches by stressing

a foggy universal church which he wrongly calls the "true" church! No universal church is seen in Acts; it has no acts to report and it has no facts for support.

#### **V. The Apostle Paul used ekklesia as an assembly or congregation.**

Paul used the word "body" as a metaphor for a congregation. A metaphor is only a partial likeness to its antecedent. Thus, "the student body met in the assembly room" but when those students disperse for the last time they are no longer a body. Just so, Christians must be subject to assemble, or meet together regularly, in order to be called a body - or a church. The Christians at Rome were not a part of the body at Corinth or at Ephesus. Of course, inter-church fellowship was good then as it should be now.

Paul was not a member of the church-body at Rome when he wrote Romans. But he used the editorial "we" in many places; in others he used "we" and "ye" interchangeably. He could use "we" to identify with Christians everywhere. All six uses of "church" in Romans demands real, local assemblies. The plural "churches" is used in 16:4 accurately, whereas most modern writers would use the singular, inaccurately.

Paul used church 31 times in his Corinthian letters, twice in Galatians. In the Ephesian epistle, "church" is found nine times, each time singular. The generic sense is employed, as in 5:23 - **"For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church: and he is the saviour of the body."** Notice the singular husband, wife, church and body. Yet many liberal writers will universalize and vaporize "church" but not the husband or wife. Why are they so unfair? Or does your wife introduce you with "This is my local husband." And do you say, "This is my local wife." Why, then, does anyone ever, ever, speak redundantly of a "local church?" The NT never does. Every true church is local - no exceptions.

But Salem Kirban is currently capitalizing on this unreal, non-local, universal church fantasy. He is asking \$100 from gullible people to join his non-resident, long-distance, remote-control "Church of the Second Coming." If he had tried that in 55 A.D., Paul would have clobbered him mercilessly.

The church at Ephesus was like a building "fitly framed together" as Ephesians 2:21 says so well. No unreal, universal church can fit into that good verse. The Ephesians knew very well what an ekklesia was, They had a town-assembly long before Paul appeared - and he knew also what ekklesia meant.

The church at Ephesus was also like a body "fitly joined together and compacted by that which every joint supplieth" Ephesians 4:16. No mystical body here; no ghost-body, or phantom, or will-o-the-wisp, or ephemeral or imaginary universal nothingness here. It was a real church, as real as anybody's real body.

Take your body and treat it as some do with Christ's body. Dissect it, disembody, dismember, disintegrate, dislocate, disorganize, dispel, dissipate, dissemble, distribute and disperse it all over world. Then what sort of body does one have left? many bodies - no problem. Since Christ is "the head of every man," 1 Cor. 11:3, He can as easily be the Head of every church. For HE is universal, and He promised to be with us all to the end of this age. As Conrad Hilton is the head of his worldwide system of hotels, he is also the head of each one of his many hotels. No problem there.

A real problem is - how can any body, real or metaphorical, be always disconnected and dispersed, never meeting together in this age, and yet be called a body? To speak of all Christians as "The Body of Christ" is using words liberally - as liberals do - wresting the Scriptures from sensible meaning.

Church and body are used synonymously in Col. 1:18,24, meaning the church at Colosse and by implication all similar churches. Ideally, each church is "knit together" as Col. 2:2, 19 says so beautifully. And what can be more opposite than a "universal" church which is never together on earth?

Every NT metaphor of church demands locality, cohesiveness and visibility. "Togetherness" describes each real church, in NT times as well as now.

#### **VI. Many scholars retain the original meaning of ekklesia.**

Perhaps everyone would also if the Roman Catholics had not foisted the catholic universal idea upon Christendom so skilfully.

**J. B. Moody** in his book, MY CHURCH, preface - "The overwhelming majority of the Christian world, with all public writers and speakers, misuse and abuse the right use of the word 'church'... I would no more speak falsely of Christ's church than I would of Him."

**Roy Mason** in The Myth of the Universal, Invisible Church Theory Exploded - "There is no mention of a universal church in the Bible... Christians in the early centuries knew nothing of such... In their writings they don't speak of an all-embracing, spiritual, universal, invisible church... They knew the Greek language too well to try to use the term ecclesia in such a sense... When the Protestant reformers split the Catholic world they rejected the Roman Church as the Universal Visible Church, but they did not go back to the NT Church type... They promoted the Universal Invisible church."

**Dr. Henry M. Morris** in THE BIBLE HAS THE ANSWER (Baker, 1971) – "The true church is a local group of Christian believers, not an invisible or universal entity of some kind with no physical substance, no meetings, no church officers, no ordinances, and no organized work of evangelism or worship or training."

**Dr. B. H. Carroll** in ECCLESIA - THE CHURCH - "Locality inheres in Ecclesia. There can be no assembly now or hereafter without a place to meet."

**Dr. C. E. Tulga** in THE NATURE OF THE CHURCH - "There is no actual functioning universal church, invisible or visible, in existence today. Nowhere is such an idea taught in the NT. All redeemed men and women of all ages, whether on earth or in heaven, belong to the family of God, Eph. 3:15. Every born-again believer is in the kingdom of God, John 3:5 ... Interdenominational fundamentalism must have as a basis of unity a speculative invisible church, a church not found in the NT but invented and used by Augustine, Luther and Calvin as a useful device for holding a contradictory mixture together."

About 45 other scholars could be quoted in the same vein. Let us take the halo off from the imaginary universal church and place it on real churches where it fit so well in the first Christian century.

It is not fair to use the mediaeval "catholic" idea for the church Christ built. To do so covers real churches with a fog. If Satan had tried to obscure and smoke-screen real churches, how could he have done more or worse than by inventing the universal church idea? Yet some writers downgrade real churches by using a small c for them, but a capital C for their imaginary church!

Many precious verses on churches in the NT are robbed of their practical values by those who say they refer to the universal, invisible church. This is cheating Christ and His people. Do not read Scofield's pages from the bottom up! While most of his footnotes are very good, some are very, very bad.

Verses urging real church unity are misapplied and weakened; many passages are rendered powerless; the influence of real churches is dissipated, and the glory belonging to real churches is frittered away - all by this universalism.

The universal church idea invites proselyters and cultists to seduce those who belittle real churches; it also encourages mavericks, floaters, footloose and irresponsible people to neglect real church membership.

The universal church is an "incomprehensible, interdenominational conglomeration" of catholic-protestant ecumenical ecclesiology. The universal church idea condones non-resident membership of millions of people who give money to non-church causes, thus robbing real churches.

A real NT church is togetherness; the universal church is just the opposite. The universal church needs no pastors, teachers or musicians, so why have expensive schools for them? And why ask real churches to support such needless schools? And if all pastors and professors had to depend for salaries on the universal church only, they would soon change their theology.

What is everybody's business is nobody's business. The universal church gives no challenge; it evokes only a neutral or a negative response, such as "Ho-hum (yawn); that's away out there; I can't see it; it doesn't reach me; it's a phantom. Why does my pastor, or professor, divert attention from my real church that I love and understand?"

The entire NT focussed sharply on real churches. Let each Bible-believing Christian do likewise now, giving to Christ and his nearby church full affection, complete loyalty, and body-like cooperation.