

The Church

Ephesians 3:21 Unto him [be] glory in the church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end. Amen.

The Greek word (the New Testament was written in Greek) that is translated “church” is “Ecclesia.” Very simply, it means “assembly.” The word “ecclesia” is used 118 times in the New Testament. It is actually translated “assembly” three times (Acts 19: 32, 39, and 41). It means a gathering of individuals who have been called out of their houses to assemble for a particular purpose, such as the meeting in Acts 19. It was translated “church” the remainder of the times because the word was already in existence, people knew what it meant, and the translators knew that it would give us something to discuss (translate that “argue about”) for centuries to come.

Because human beings like to spiritualize everything with the intent of ridding ourselves of all responsibility, the meaning has been changed over the years to mean “that which is called out” in a spiritual sense. The original word appears to give no such license. A church is an assembly – either in a specific sense or in an institutional sense. A great majority of the occurrences of the word apply to the specific sense. Thus we find:

*Acts 9:31 Then had the **churches** rest throughout all Judaea and Galilee and Samaria, and were edified*

*Acts 11:22 Then tidings of these things came unto the ears of the **church** which was in Jerusalem*

*Acts 14:23 And when they had ordained them elders in every **church**, and had prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord, on whom they believed.*

According to my count (and I would urge you to count for yourself), at least 86 of these instances must refer to single or multiple local congregations. That is the most common use of the word, and no other logical interpretation can be made. That leaves 32 other cases, which we will now address.

The second most common usage of the word is in the institutional sense. If I say I am going to Wal-mart, you do not necessarily know which Wal-mart will get my money, but you know that it is a real place, do you not? It is not invisible, or universal. Wal-mart is an institution that manifests itself in local establishments. There is no other manifestation. We would not know there was a Wal-mart if stores did not exist.

It is the same with church. You may say “I am going to church.” Someone who is not familiar with the particular church of your choice may not know which assembly you attend, but they probably don’t think you mean that you are off to find some invisible assembly that cannot be seen or attended. Of institutional significance, we have scriptures such as:

*Acts 8:3 As for Saul, he made havock of the **church**, entering into every house(probably meaning the houses where the churches were meeting), and haling men and women committed [them] to prison.*

*I Cor 10:32 Give none offence, neither to the Jews, nor to the Gentiles, nor to the **church** of God:*

*I Cor 14:35 for it is a shame for women to speak (as in giving one’s opinion on doctrinal matters) in the **church**. (for those who hold that the church is universal, I guess it is a shame for women to speak anywhere)*

*I Tim 3:15 that thou mayest know how thou oughtest to behave thyself in the house of God, which is the **church** of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth.*

According to my count, 23 verses fall into this category, and some of those may perhaps be better placed in the first category, since they cannot be applied unless the assembly is local. That means that, out of a total of 115 times the word “ecclesia” is translated “church,” at least 109 mean local assemblies. That leaves six verses (you may argue about one or two more) to support the argument for a complete new and improved meaning of the word.

We now turn to those instances used by well-meaning folks to prove an oxymoron. Let’s face it. If “church” means assembly, it would be difficult to have a universal one while we are located down here below. You cannot find a universal church, cannot pastor a universal church, cannot take the Lord’s Supper with a universal church, and cannot bear one another’s burdens in a universal church. If, by universal church, you mean all those folks that will one day be in heaven, let’s not call it a church until it is one, OK? For now, some of the family is there, and some is here.

Ephesians 3:14-15 For this cause I bow my knees unto the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, Of whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named,

It is not assembled, nor can it be assembled at the present time. So we could call all the saved the “family of God” or the “family in heaven and earth” if we wish,

but that is different than saying it is an assembly. One day it will be all in the same place, and then we can say it's a church.

Heb 12: 22-23 But ye are come unto mount Sion, and unto the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to an innumerable company of angels, To the general assembly and church of the firstborn, which are written in heaven, and to God the Judge of all, and to the spirits of just men made perfect,

If we are confused about “church” because we wish to use the term “body of Christ,” and we believe there is only one body of Christ, we have already contradicted ourselves because we actually believe there are at least two bodies of Christ – a local body, and a universal body. If we affirm that there must only be one body of Christ, then a local church can never be a body of Christ – only a piece of one. But Paul called the “church of God which is at Corinth” a “body of Christ” (I Cor 12:27), so are they the only one? And if so, was that church the only universal church and only universal body? Perhaps we should re-think our position. OK, let's see, where are we?

It is never a good thing to change the meaning of a word simply because we would like it to mean something else in certain circumstances. Once we have established the meaning of the word “ecclesia” by a preponderance of the evidence, wouldn't it be a good idea to stick with the meaning unless we are forced to use a different one? Some well-meaning people provide very confusing information on this issue. The Schofield Reference Bible, for instance, uses self-defined terms such as the “visible church,” “invisible church,” and “true church,” (whatever that is), but depends upon its own definitions of the terms, which unfortunately, are not found in scripture.

Part of the problem, I believe, comes from the idea that if we use the term “body of Christ,” we get the notion that it must represent His physical body, and there can only be one. I have even read commentaries stating that it is ghastly to believe Christ has more than one body. So let's define the word “body.” The Greek word for “body” is “soma.” It means “a whole, comprised of the sum of its parts.” It is used, according to Strong's lexicon (Greek dictionary) as follows:

1) the body both of men or animals

a) a dead body or corpse

b) the living body

2) the bodies of planets and of stars (heavenly bodies)

3) is used of a (large or small) number of men closely united into one society, or family as it were; a social, ethical, mystical body

a) so in the NT of the church

4) that which casts a shadow as distinguished from the shadow itself

You will find basically these same definitions in Thayer's and other lexicons. So the word can mean a physical body (human, planet, etc), but if it does not mean a physical body, it appears to mean a group of people. So the term "body of Christ" could simply mean "a group of people who are of Christ." There is no requirement to include *all* the saved people in a particular body of Christ. Thus we have Paul telling the church at Corinth that they are a body of Christ, complete within themselves (I Cor 12:27). They are a body, and they are "of Christ." Simple, no?

I Cor 12: 25-27 That there should be no schism in the body; but [that] the members should have the same care one for another. And whether one member suffer, all the members suffer with it; or one member be honoured, all the members rejoice with it. Now ye are the body of Christ, and members in particular.

The only way we can fulfill this scripture, taking care for one another, suffering with one another, and rejoicing with one another, is if the body of Christ is local. I do not normally rejoice with folks that I don't even know exist.

Let us press on. We've looked at all the verses that contain the word "church" with the exception of about six. The verses that everyone seems to use to prove that the church is universal are mostly gathered in the book of Ephesians. I am going to try to list here all verses that have not been previously shown (at least to my own satisfaction, and certainly to yours) to mean a local body.

Matt 16:18 And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.

Acts 2:47 Praising God, and having favour with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved.

Eph 1:22-23 And hath put all [things] under his feet, and gave him [to be] the head over all [things] to the church, Which is his body, the fulness of him that filleth all in all.

Eph 5:23-27 Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord. 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. Therefore as the church is subject unto Christ, so [let] the wives [be] to their own husbands in every thing. Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it; That he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, That he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish. So ought men to love their wives as their own bodies. He that loveth his wife loveth himself. For no man ever yet hated his own flesh; but nourisheth and cherisheth it, even as the Lord the church: For we are members of his body, of his flesh, and of his bones. For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and shall be joined unto his wife, and they two shall be one flesh. This is a great mystery: but I speak concerning Christ and the church.

In Matthew 16:18, Christ said he was going to build a church. Although not the subject of this treatise, he did not say he was building it on Peter, he said he was building it on himself, and the truth that he was the “Christ, the son of the living God” (see verse 16, and remember there were no verses in the Bible when this was written). Just five verses later, he was rebuking Peter and calling him an offense, and Satan. That doesn’t necessarily sound like a good foundation for a church.

What kind of a church was he building? The next time we hear Jesus speaking of the church, we find him giving instruction on personal relationships, and he says that:

Matt. 18:17 And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell [it] unto the church: but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican.

What kind of a church might this be? I would think it would be extremely difficult to tell something to a universal church. How about you? Our institutional definition, however, fits quite well. Perhaps we need not look for another.

After Pentecost, as the gospel was preached and people believed, they were added to the church (Acts 2:47). What kind of a church was that?

Acts 2:41-46 Then they that gladly received his word were baptized: and the same day there were added [unto them] about three thousand souls. And they continued stedfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers. And fear came upon every soul: and many wonders and signs were done by the apostles. And all that believed were together, and had all things common; And sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all [men], as every man had need. And they, continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart,

Sounds like a local church to me. They were all together.

Now let's move on and look at the book of Ephesians. I have quoted above the verses in question. Let's look at the context in which Paul was writing. He writes to the Ephesians:

Eph 2:19-22 Now therefore ye are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellowcitizens with the saints, and of the household of God; 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: In whom ye also are builded together for an habitation of God through the Spirit.

Who is the "ye who are builded together?" Is that a universal church, an invisible "body of Christ," consisting of all the saved? The book was written from Rome, by Tychicus, to the "saints which are at Ephesus." And it was to be applied in the context of the church at Ephesus. Paul was well-known among the Ephesians. He had visited with them just before he left for his last trip to Jerusalem:

Acts 20:17 And from Miletus he sent to Ephesus, and called the elders of the church.

The church was a local church. It would seem that the scripture should be applied that way.

In Ephesians 5: 23-27, in the great dissertation of marriage, Christ, and the church, it would be well to notice how this can be applied.

That he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word,

Eph 4:11-12 And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ:

The body of Christ is to be edified by the people that the Lord gives to do this work. How can the work be done? When this was written, how could the church receive edification? Was it not through the assembly? They didn't have satellite TV.

We already know from I Cor 12:27 that a singular church is called a body of Christ. A body of Christ receives edification from the people that Christ places in the body.

I am not trying to deny that there is a sense in which the scripture speaks of all the saved, but I am trying to point out that the present day doctrine of the body of Christ and the universal assembly leads to confusion and lack of responsibility. It

is God's will that His children serve in a local assembly, and in almost all cases the application of the terms "church" and "body of Christ" can only be practically applied to such an assembly.

Heb. 10:25 Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some [is]; but exhorting [one another]: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching.

So now that we are done with the introduction (whew!), let's move on to what we believe about the church. We believe that the church:

1. Is a local body of baptized believers.
2. Was founded during Christ's earthly ministry (Matt:16:18). He did not say that the Holy Spirit would build the church. He said he would do it.
3. Did not have its beginning at Pentecost. The church had officers (apostles), a comforter (Jesus), the ordinances (baptism and the Lord's supper), a mission (Matt 28:18-20), and members (those in the upper room) before Pentecost. What they received at Pentecost was what Jesus had promised – power (Acts 1:8).
4. Is the institution through which the Lord gets glory (Eph. 3:21)

Simple, isn't it?

God Bless