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## "I Will Build My Church"

- Mt 16:18

Why did Jesus choose the word "church" to describe His followers (Mt 16:16-18)? "Church" is the English translation of the original Greek term *ekklesia*. Outside the NT, *ekklesia* was a secular word that carried strong political overtones. There were other Greek words with religious or non-political associations (like *synagoge*) that Jesus could have used, but significantly, didn't.

### The Modern Church

According to Webster's *New Collegiate Dictionary*, "church" is used in today's English to refer to a building for Christian worship, the clergy of a religious body, a body of religious believers (i.e. a congregation or a denomination), a public divine worship service (i.e. "goes to church every Sunday"), or the clerical profession (i.e. "considered the church as a possible career"). Whereas "church" is used to translate *ekklesia*, it is actually a transliteration of an entirely different Greek adjective (*kuriakos*) which meant "of the Lord" or "belonging to the Lord." It probably is a shortened form of some such phrase as *kuriakos doma* or *kuriakos oikos* ("the Lord's house"). Thus, *kuriakos*, as with "church," can refer to those who belong to the Lord (His people) or to the Lord's house (a church building). The Greek noun that most closely parallels in meaning the English concept of "church" is *synagoge* ("synagogue"). Both words can refer to either God's people or the special building in which they meet. The problem with all this is that every time you see "church" in the NT, it stands for the Greek *ekklesia*. Unlike "church," *synagoge*, or *kuriakos*, the Greek *ekklesia* never refers to a building or place of worship, and it refers to much more than just a meeting, assembly, or gathering!

### The Original Church

Outside the NT, *ekklesia* was used almost without exception to refer to a political assembly that was regularly convened for the purpose of making decisions. According to Thayer's lexicon it was "a gathering of citizens called out from their homes into some public place" and "an assembly of the people convened at the public place of council for the purpose of deliberation." The lexicon of BAGD defines *ekklesia* as an "assembly of a regularly summoned political body." In Colin Brown's *Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, *ekklesia*, in the time of the NT, is said to have been "clearly characterized as a political phenomenon, repeated according to certain rules and within a certain framework. It was the assembly of full citizens, functionally rooted in the constitution of the democracy, an assembly in which fundamental political and judicial decisions were taken . . . the word *ekklesia*, throughout the Greek and Hellenistic areas, always retained its reference to the assembly of the *polis*." In the *ekklesia*, "every citizen has the right to speak and to propose matters for discussion."

So why did Jesus (in Mt 16:13-20; 18:15-20) choose such a politically "loaded" word as *ekklesia* (rather than something like *synagoge*) to describe His people and their meetings? Evidently because Jesus intended for the meetings of Christians to parallel the meetings of the Greek legislators in the

sense that believers are to decide things in their meetings and in the sense that any kingdom citizen could speak and propose matters for discussion. Had Jesus merely wanted to describe a gathering, he could have used *sunagoge*, *thiasos* or *eranos*. Significantly however, He chose *ekklesia*. God's people, when they meet, have a decision-making mandate. A "church" is fundamentally an assembly (or meeting) of Kingdom citizens who are authorized (and expected) to make decisions, pass judgments, and weigh issues. Though this decision making need not necessarily occur at every meeting (there aren't always issues to resolve), understanding that the church has the authority and obligation to settle things is important. Any church whose meetings focus solely on praise music and teaching, to the exclusion of grappling corporately with problems and resolving issues, is failing to fulfill its full purpose as an *ekklesia*.

That Jesus expected decision making from the *ekklesia* is seen in Mt 16:13-20. After promising to build His *ekklesia* on the rock of Peter's revealed confession, Jesus immediately spoke of the keys of the kingdom of heaven and of binding and loosing. Keys represent the ability to open and to close something, "kingdom" is a political term, and binding and loosing involves the authority to make decisions. In Mt 18:15-20, the *ekklesia* (18:17) is obligated to render a verdict regarding a brother's alleged sin, and once again, binding and loosing authority is conferred upon the *ekklesia*. In Ac 1:15-26, Peter charged the Jerusalem church as a whole with finding a replacement for Judas. In Ac 6:1-6, the apostles looked to the church corporately to pick men to administer the church's welfare system. Ac 14:23 (marginal translation) indicates that some churches elected their own elders. In Ac 15:1-4, the church of Antioch decided to send to Jerusalem for arbitration, and then the whole church in Jerusalem was in on the resolution of the conflict (15:4, 12, 22). Finally, Paul continued this idea in 1 Co 14:29-30, where it was made clear that judgment was to be passed on prophetic revelation when "the whole *ekklesia* comes together" (14:23).

By way of balance, it is important to note that the church, in its decision making role, is judicial rather than legislative. This is one point where the *ekklesia* of God's people is different in function from the *ekklesia* of Greek cities. Our job is not to create law-only God can rightly do that. Instead, our duty is to apply and enforce the law of Christ correctly as contained in the New Covenant.

### Shades of Usage

The word *ekklesia* ("church") was used six different ways by NT writers. One is found in Ac 19:23-41 (esp 19:25a, 32, 39, 41). These occurrences of *ekklesia* (rendered "assembly," "legal assembly," and "assembly") referred to a meeting of "craftsmen" (19:24) who had been "called" (19:25) together by Demetrius into the town theater (19:31) to decide what to do about Paul (19:25-27, 38), though there was so much confusion the majority did not know why they had been summoned (19:32). This is an example of *ekklesia* used to refer to a regularly summoned political body (in this case, silver craftsmen and those in related trades). They convened (as a sort of trade union) to decide what to do about a damaged reputation and lost business (Ac 19:27). As it turns out, they overstepped their jurisdiction in wanting to deal with Paul, so the city clerk suggested that the matter be settled by the "legal" *ekklesia*, Ac 19:37-39 (rather than by the trade union *ekklesia*).

Another usage is seen in Ac 7:38 and Heb 2:12, where *ekklesia* was used to refer to the gathering of the Israelis in the desert at Mount Sinai. There they received God's legislation through Moses and decided to abide by it (Ac 7:38; Ex 24:3-7). Further more, *ekklesia* was used of gatherings of Israelis at the temple during David's time (Heb 2:12; Ps 22:22).

A third usage is found in Mt 18:17; 1 Co 11:17-18; 14:4-5, 18-19, 23, 28, and 34-35. In these verses,

*ekklesia* refers to the regularly scheduled, duly convened assembly of Christians. In Mt 18:17 they met to render a decision about sin. 1 Co 11 deals with a meeting of the *ekklesia* to eat the Lord's Supper, and 1 Co 14 concerns the gathering of the *ekklesia* for open discussion (with edification as the chief objective).

The fourth way it is used is seen in Ac 8:1; Ro 16:1; 1 Th 1:1 and Re 2:1, 8, 12, 18. Here *ekklesia* apparently is used to refer not to a meeting per se, but rather the totality of Christians living at one place. NT authors wrote of the one "church" (singular) in Jerusalem, one in Rome, one in Thessalonica, one in Ephesus, one in Smyrna, one in Pergamum, etc. However, the "church" in any given city may never have assembled together all in one place. The word "church" was used for the totality of believers in a city, but not necessarily to some massive, city wide meeting. Thus, there is only one church in Atlanta today (only one totality of Christians in Atlanta). However, the church in Atlanta will probably never be able to hold a plenary meeting (though perhaps it could have back in the 1840's when it was small). The one church in Atlanta is made up of hundreds of smaller churches that meet separately. Churches that did manage to conduct plenary (city-wide) sessions include the Jerusalem church (Ac 15:12, 22) and the church in Corinth (1 Co 1:2; 14:23).

Usage number five occurs in Ro 16:5; 1 Co 16:19; Col 4:15; Phm 2. As evidenced in these texts, *ekklesia* can refer to assemblies that regularly convened in a member's home. These house churches, when considered as a whole, constituted the one city church in which they were located; though they may never have all met together.

Finally, in Mt 16:18; Ac 9:31; Eph 1:22; 3:10, 20-21; 5:23, 25-27, 29, 32, and Col 1:18; 24, *ekklesia* references the totality of Christians in all places and throughout all times (the universal church). A meeting of this universal church will not occur until the second coming of Jesus.

### Application

The word *ekklesia* is thus used six different ways in the NT. The most fundamental usage is that of a group of people gathered for the purpose of making decisions. In a very real sense, the *ekklesia* is not the coming together of God's people, it is what occurs when God's people come together. We are authorized by the Lord to make decisions about the correct application of Scripture. We are expected by the Lord to enforce the law of Christ (within the family of God) and to deal with issues as they arise. This is a part of what is to occur in our open, participatory church meetings. Problems must not be swept under the rug. Questions of correct conduct must be resolved. Of course, there will not be issues on the docket every week (or even most weeks), but God's people must ever bear in mind their obligation to function as an *ekklesia* when necessary.

This understanding of the full meaning behind *ekklesia* also has a direct bearing on church government. In its human organization, the church is not supposed to be a pyramid with power concentrated at the top in one or a few men. Decisions are not to be made behind closed doors and then handed down from on high for the church to follow. The church is rather like the senate or a congress in the sense that the assembly as a whole is to deliberate upon and decide issues. The church's leaders are to facilitate this process and to serve the church by providing needed teaching and advice, but they are not the church's lords!

- S.A. and T.W.

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