

Meaning of 'Church'

Written by K B Napier
Tuesday, 20 January 2015 11:54

["Also see O-084 What's a Church?"](#)

What does 'Church' mean? It depends on the scriptural context. Here we will examine the word as it is given in scripture...

Matthew 16:18

This text is much abused by ecumenists and Roman Catholics. The 'Church' (meaning the whole Church) is built on the Rock, Jesus Christ, not on the 'small boulder' of Peter (see Bible study in Matthew 16 and Ephesians 1:22; 5:23, Colossians 1:18). The word 'church' appears 77 times, only in the New Testament, and has exactly the same list of possible meanings in each case.

The meaning used in each text is the *interpretation* required by the verse's content and the context. The word used in every verse is

ekk
lesi

a
(said eklay see-ah, with emphasis on the 'see'). It is a feminine compound noun based on two other words: the preposition

ek
, which denotes the origin, and the verb
kaleō
, meaning to call (usually aloud), to invite, to call by name or to give one a name; all these are imperatives – they MUST be done. There are other, similar, meanings, but none, when used to refer to a local church, includes the idea of making a choice or to be invited to say yes or no. A calling by God is always effectual!

Ekklesia

In the Greek the word has only one prime meaning, but four sub-meanings, with a further five categories.

Prime Meaning

A gathering of people who come from their homes to a public place. Once there, they are an 'assembly' of people. This gathering can be for any public reason, and those who gather may,

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or may not, be Christians. Therefore, its interpretation depends on the context.

Sub-Meanings

The Sanhedrin can call people to gather to make decisions. It is possible to expand this to include a public meeting of any race or creed, called by a council of any kind.

The gathering of all the Israelites, e.g. when Joshua wanted to know who they stood for – God or self, or, annual Passover feasts.

A deliberate gathering of a noisy 'throng' of men who happen to meet in the same place.

A gathering of Christians, for any reason.

We can see, then, that an *ekklēsia* may, or may not, be a gathering of Christians. This is why each use of the term 'church' must be carefully defined. The categories within these sub-meanings are:

Those from the same village or town who gather with a united purpose.

Christians gathering for worship in a meeting held for religious reasons.

A specific gathering, regular or *ad hoc*, that meets to practice the same beliefs, rites and ordinances, and who join by choice to meet, and who observe the same 'rules', whether from God or not.

All Christians throughout the whole earth.

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Dead Christians, who form an assembly of saints already in Paradise (ready to enter Heaven).

Conclusions

'Church' is the English transliteration. It can have one of ten different meanings. This is why no-one should assume 'church' always means the same thing... for a 'church' can even apply to a gathering of witches or cultists! It can refer to a gathering of Marxists or other political agitators. And so on.

A 'church' came to mean a *building* where Christians met, and the word was used whether or not genuine believers met there. Then, it was applied to people who met with heretical purposes, and by those who are in denominations. All the above can be called a 'church'. This is why we must be careful to define what we mean in each and every case. Christians are ALL part of the Heavenly *ekklēsia*, which is usually written with a capital 'C' (Church), or preceded by the definite article, 'the'.

Local gatherings of believers are referred to with a lower-case 'c' (church). All genuine local Christian churches are members of the divinely appointed Church, Whose Head is Jesus Christ. But, not all that call themselves a 'local church' are genuine; these are deceivers/deluded. Thus, they share the same condemnation as those who were Israelites by name only.

The whole Church can issue teachings, all based on the words of God, and all believers must listen to them and obey, not because a particular pastor or local church says so, but because they utter the commands of God Himself. Those who will not listen and obey must be treated as heretics (Matthew 18:17); if a whole local church consists solely of heretics, it is not a part of the true universal 'Church'. In many texts 'church' does not show the capital 'C', but the context defines whether or not it refers to the whole Church or a local church.

In one particular instance, Moses met with an angel in the wilderness, and the two were referred to as "the church"... because any number of believers together, from two to many, are a gathering of 'the Church' (See Acts 7:38). Every local church must have elders (Acts 14:23), also called presbyters, bishops or pastors; all these names refer to the same persons. Whilst a local church is autonomous, it is, however, subject to the same divine laws and demands issued to the whole Church. The elders are responsible for making sure these are followed and obeyed (here elders are called overseers, *episkopos*).

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An *ekklēsia* may meet anywhere, including an house (e.g. Romans 16:5; 1 Corinthians 16:19; Colossians 4:15, Philemon 1:2). In the days of the earliest churches, many met in secret besides streams or rivers, and many more met in Jewish synagogues, until the fourth century AD. Therefore, an actual church *building* was *commonly* called a 'church' much later... scripturally, a 'church' refers to a gathering of genuine, saved men and women, whether they meet outdoors, indoors, in a formal building, or a hired hall, or even in the home. Possibly the first example of a place being called a 'church' is found in 1 Corinthians 11:18, where believers met "in the church". We should not thus routinely state that 'church' is a 'building'. Here, it means a collection of people who were ALL saved believers. Therefore, when one is invited to a 'church' it should mean being 'invited to an assembly of Christians'.

Because of their salvation the place they met in was known as a 'church', but it should not be assumed that a building on its own is a 'church'. It is only a church when it is occupied by believers. Therefore, if it is occupied by a mixture of saved and unsaved (as is usual nowadays), it cannot, strictly speaking, be referred to either as 'the church' or a church building in the Christian sense.

In other words, if ALL those who meet are Christians, then the building they meet in can be called 'the church'. But, if there is a mixture, it is an unholy alliance of people, no better than a political gathering. Logically, then, if all those who attend are believers, once they leave and the building is empty, it is no longer 'the church', but is simply a building. This is especially so when the building is rendered empty by non-use. God is not a 'living God' to an empty place!

In 1 Timothy 3:15, we see that a local church (which has all saved members and is open regularly) is also named the "house of God" or the "church of the living God".

Some try to say that 'church' also means 'synagogue'. Synagogue has several meanings, and one of them is a congregation or assembly. However, this refers to an assembly of Jews, and is also the name of a Jewish building used for Jewish worship, and there are four separate words for it... none of them *ekklēsia*, though in one Hebrew word there can be the same meaning as an assembly of persons. Strictly speaking the 'assembly' refers to Jewish people.

In Revelation 2:9 and 3:9 we also have reference to "the synagogue of Satan". The word 'synagogue' in these texts is *synagogue*, and means an assembly of Jews and/or the buildings they meet in; otherwise, it is used of any assembly of men. In Acts 13:43, the revised version translates as 'synagogue' whereas the KJAV translates as 'congregation'. In James 2:2 there is

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reference to Christian Jews, where the word 'assembly' is the Greek for synagogue. In most New Testament texts the word translated 'assembly' is the Greek word

ekkl

ēsia

. However, one text using 'assembly' refers to the Jewish synagogue (James 2:2).

Thus, 'church' can mean a number of things, and the interpretation in any single text relies on specific content and context. In virtually all cases, 'synagogue' should not be assumed to also mean a Christian 'church' (most 'churches' today are ungodly).

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