

The 'church' misunderstood

The church defined

Jesus said, "I will build my church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it" (Matthew 16:18).

The Holy Spirit chose Greek to write the New Testament in and He chose the Greek word "Ekklesea" to designate God's people. Translated into English it is our word "church." Ekklesia is a compound word. "Ek" means "out" and "klesia" means "called," thus literally, "the called out."



Peter gives us a definition of the word. "Who called you out of darkness into His marvellous light; who once were not a people but are now the people of God" (1 Peter 2:9). Christians have been called out of darkness to be God's people.

The word occurs 112 times in the New Testament and is applied universally 95 times as in Ephesians 5:23. It can refer to the church in a certain area as in Acts 9:31 and Revelation 1:4. It can apply to a church in a city as in 1 Corinthians 1:2, and churches with elders (James 5:14).

It refers to a church in an assembled capacity as in 1 Corinthians 14:16. It is also applied to groups meeting in houses as in Romans 16:5. It applies to individuals unassembled as in Acts 8:3 where Luke speaks of the church as men and women dragged off to prison.

When Philip baptized the eunuch the Lord added him to the church (Acts 2:47). When he arrived in Ethiopia it would be correct to say he was the church in Ethiopia. He was as much a part of the church as the church in Corinth was a part of the church.

The church grew rapidly after Pentecost. There were at least 10,000. No building was large enough in Jerusalem to accommodate them. It's reasonable to conclude several groups were meeting in different locations.

The group that met in the house of Mary, the mother of John, would be an example of such a group meeting. There is no indication they were an organized local congregation. They were however, the "ekklesia." They were not fragmenting the church by such a meeting.

There may have been other groups meeting the same night for Peter said, "Go tell these things to James and to the brethren." Such meetings were and still are scriptural. Sir William Ramsey observed, "I may have a block of cheese but then slice off a part of the block. I still have cheese."

The church is simply a body of people whose unity does not depend on its being together in one particular place, but members in their several places, united to one head, Christ, forming one living organism. Each individual is a special and significant part of the whole church.

The church has no name

Some think that "Church of Christ" is the name God has given to His "called out." In Romans 16:16 Paul writes, "The churches of Christ greet you." Did you notice the first letter in church (c) is in the lower case, not capitalized?

There is a reason the translators did this. This is a descriptive phrase, not a name. The word "of" is a preposition showing ownership, with "church" the object of the preposition, and "Christ" a noun.

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Thus literally, "the called out belonging to Christ." The phrase, "church of Christ" does not reveal a name any more than the phrase; "the dog of Bill" reveals the name of the dog. The dog of Bill simply points out who owns the dog, Bill. However, our Father has given each child of His a special name, **Christian**. If you look closely you will see each child is named after Christ.

The church is not just corporate worship

Some Christians use the expression "corporate worship" in a special sense to refer to a worship service where all the church is assembled together. Rarely is this the case. Some are always missing.

They seem to think that in only such an assembly do you have an official church, and this is the only place where real worship takes place. Any worship outside the corporate church is not acceptable.

For example a small group of Christians is out of town together camping; they should not have their own worship but seek out the nearest church building and worship there. This is false to the core.

Just because they are away from their home congregation does not mean they cease to be the church.

There are two prerequisites for worship. Jesus said, "God is a spirit and those who worship Him must worship Him in spirit and in truth." When Christians worship "in spirit" and "in truth" their worship is acceptable to God. Location is not an issue (John 4:21-24).

Jesus has promised to be with any group however small, who are meeting for spiritual purposes. "For where two or three are gathered together in My name, there I am in the midst of them" (Mathew 18:20).

Christians can worship on a creek bank, on a mountain top, in a car, or whatever location is chosen. Obviously, in most cases it will be with an organized congregation.

Could the eunuch worship "in spirit and in truth" when he reached Ethiopia since there was no "corporate" church there? If not, why not?

God's place of worship is very flexible due to unforeseen circumstances that may arise.

The church is not a building

We say we know better, but Christians often refer to a building as the church. We even have signs on our buildings with the word church in large letters. A part of the universal church may meet in a building, but the building is not the church. The people who meet in it are the church.

Peter says we (**Christians**) are living stones which make up a "spiritual house" (1 Peter 2:5).

Someone asks, "What church are you a member of?" We respond, "The church of Christ." They ask, "Where is it?" We answer, "It's over there on Main Street. It's the building with the white columns." This is not nit-picking. When we do this we leave wrong impressions about the Lord's church.

The church is Christ – centred, not building – centred

Buildings may be the single greatest hindrance to evangelism. Not because buildings are wrong, but because they fence in the gospel and enable us to shirk our responsibility to go, seek, and teach. Church buildings did not exist in the first century.

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Paul and others often spoke at a synagogue on a Sabbath, but between Sabbaths, teaching was done in the market-place, in the streets, in houses, on mountain sides, on river banks, and seashores. Wherever they could find people, they spoke of Jesus.

In the beginning it was "daily in the temple (area) and in every house" (Acts 5:42). They did not even have a New Testament to read from. They did not have structured programs of personal work. They did have a burning desire to preach, "Jesus Christ and Him crucified" (1 Corinthians 2:2). Their plan was simple. Reach the unsaved wherever they are.

One study estimates that no more than ten percent of the English speaking population of the world attend a religious service during their life time. This means that ninety percent will never enter a church building except for a funeral or a wedding.

For several generations we have been perfectly content to let them remain outside our buildings. This to some extent has been handed down to us from previous generations who depended on the "gospel meeting" to do their evangelism.

The church's mission is to bring the saving gospel to the unsaved individual. Men and women are born one at a time and they must be "born again" one at a time. Our failure is waiting for them to come to us inside our buildings.

Evangelism was never intended to be restricted to church buildings. It must be done outside the four walls of our buildings, out where the unsaved are. The building is a meeting place for those already won.

Unless we grasp this simple truth we will go on repeating our inability to win souls for Christ. The church must not fence itself in. Our fenced in buildings declare our unconcern for the spiritual needs of the lost, often within a stone's throw of our buildings.

Sadly, we have become content to coexistence with the world. The lack of individual Christian involvement is difficult to defend in view of what the Lord has clearly taught us in the great commission. One study says less than five percent of Christians ever lead a soul to Christ. Motivating members to become active in reaching the lost is probably the greatest challenge facing the Lord's church today.

But like any other failure we can repent and turn things around. We can correct our false concepts of the church and recognize the responsibility the Lord has placed on us to carry the gospel into all the world which includes our backyards.