

INTRODUCTION

Our English word "church" is translated in the N.T. from the Greek compound word "ekklesia." "Ek" means "out" and "klesia" means "called." Thus a simple meaning of the word is "called out."

In N.T. times Greek was the universal language thus it was spoken by Jews and Greeks and most Gentile people. While the word means "called out" yet, to the people of that day with their varied backgrounds it meant more than "called out."

The Holy Spirit selected a word from the Greek vocabulary to represent the people of God. God's Spirit used a word that was rich in imagery.

A study of this word will throw additional light on the meaning of the term and will help to grasp us a better understanding of what the church is. The roots of the word extend into Greek, Jewish and Christian backgrounds. Thus it would be well to analyze it from these three points of view.

1. THE GREEK BACKGROUND OF THE WORD.

A Among ancient Greeks the word "ekklesia" referred to an assembly of citizens of a free Greek city which came together to transact business.

B Associated with the word were three distinct ideas. The participants were free. No slave was admitted to the assembly. Only free born could attend. This idea is in harmony with a number of passages concerning God's people.

John 8:32 "And you shall know the truth and the truth shall make you."

John 1:17 "For the law was given by Moses, but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ.

Romans 6:16 "Do you not know that to whom you present your-selves servants to obey, you are that one's servants whom you obey, whether of sin to death, or of obedience to righteousness."

Christians have been set free from sin by the blood of Christ. We are no longer in bondage to Satan and sin. The truth of God's word has set us free from ignorance revealing the message of salvation and the way to heaven through Jesus Christ our Lord. While we are his servants it is a voluntary service that we render. We are not forced to be his servants. Thus we are free in every sense of the word.

The participants enjoyed citizenship. Foreigners regardless of how good their motives, were excluded from the assembly. Note Paul's statement in **Philippians 3:20** "For our citizenship is in heaven, from which we also eagerly wait for the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ."

Citizenship in the Roman Empire was exclusive to most people. Many would pay a high price in order to be citizens. We are privileged to have a spiritual citizenship, which was purchased for us by the blood of Christ. **Acts 20:28** tells us that we were purchased by his blood.

The participants transacted business. They always came together for a purpose. So too, the Lord's ekklesia has business to transact. The primary business of Christians is to live like Christ, teach others and assemble to worship

2. THE JEWISH BACKGROUND OF THE WORD.

A One of the famous translations of the O.T. was the Septuagint which was made around 300 B.C. in Egypt by seventy two Hebrew scholars. It was a translation of the Hebrew O.T. into Greek which had become the universal language at that time.

What did the Hebrew word translated as ekklesia mean to the Jews of that day?

They obviously chose the word because it would best convey the Hebrew meaning.

B In the O., T. the word applied to two conditions of the Israelites.

First, it was a gathering by appointment or agreement. Physical Israel, the people of God, assembled for various reasons—for councils, for going to war, complaints, instructions and worship, they were God's ekklesia.

Second, it referred to the society of Israel whether assembled or scattered to their tents and homes they were still his ekklesia.

3. THE CHRISTIAN BACKGROUND.

A Sir William Ramsey a foremost archaeologist says that the early Christians used the term in a "technical" and "non-technical" manner.

It was used in a non-technical sense to denote any assembly such as that mentioned in **Acts 7:38**: "This he who was in the congregation in the wilderness with the Angel who spoke to him on Mount Sinai, and with our fathers."

Another example is Acts 19:37 "For you have brought these men here who are neither robbers of temples nor blasphemers of your goddess."

In a technical sense Ramsey says that the Christians used the word to denote the church universal in the sense that each part is carved out of the whole.

B While the most common use of the term was in a universal sense yet a study of the word in its various contexts will reveal that it is used in several different senses when speaking of God's people. The context determines its use.

An example of its universal use is found in Matthew 16:18 "and on this rock I will build My church." Also Ephesians 5:23 "For the husband is head of the wife, as also Christ is head of the church; and He is the savior of the body."

It can refer to the church in a certain area. Acts 9:31 "Then the churches throughout all Judea, Galilee, and Samaria had peace and were edified."

Romans 6:14 "Who have risked their own necks for my life, to whom not only I give thanks, but also all the churches of the Gentiles."

1 Corinthians 16:1 "Now concerning the collection for the saints, as I gave order to the churches of Galatia, so also do ye."

4. Also the word can be used in a local sense.

1 Corinthians 1:2 "To the church of God which is at Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus."

Colossians 4:16 "And when this epistle is read among you, see that it is read also in the church of Laodiceans, and that you likewise read the epistle from Laodicea."

5. It can refer to the faithful within a family plus others.

Romans 16:3-5 "Greet Priscilla and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus, who have risked their own necks for my life, to whom not only I give thanks, but also all the churches of the Gentiles. Likewise greet the church that is in their house."

Colossians 4:15 "Greet the brethren who are in Laodicea, and Nymphas and the church that is in his house."

Philemon 1, 2 "Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our dearly beloved and fellow laborer, to the beloved Apphia, Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church in your house."

In Acts 12:12 we read concerning Peter, "And when he had considered this, he came to the house of Mary, the mother of John whose surname was Mark, where many were gathered together praying." There is no indication this was a local congregation that had assembled.

The many that had gathered in Mary's house were however the "ekklesia." They were not fragmenting the church by such a meeting. There was nothing unscriptural about such a meeting.

A present day example of this would be our Tender Loving Care groups which meet once each month in someone's house. They do not cease to be the church because they are few in number compared to the whole assembled the Great Barr church.

The concept that a group of Christians gathering together at some location other than a church building is not the church is a misconception of the different ways the word church is used in the N.T.

As Ramsey says, "it is a part carved out of the whole. I may have a block of cheese but then slice off a part of the block. I still have cheese".

When the Ethiopian eunuch was baptized and "went on his way rejoicing" was he the church? He was a small piece carved out of the whole.

In Matthew 18:20 Jesus said, "For where two or three are gathered together in My name, there I am in the midst of them."

Regardless of how small the group may be the Lord's presence is with them.

1 Peter 2:9 is a great definition for the Greek word ekklesia. "But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; who once were not a people but are now the people of God."

Each of us has been "called out of darkness" this is a good definition of ekklesia (called out).

6. Ekklesia can also refer to local congregations in an assembled capacity.

1 Corinthians 14 we have several examples of where the word is used for the local congregation.

Vs. 22, 23 "Therefore if the whole church comes together in one place, and all speak with tongues, and there come in those who are uninformed or unbelievers, will they not say that you are mad?" Thus the church can be scattered or it came come together in one place.

Vs 27, 28 "If anyone speak in a tongue, let there be two or at the most three each in turn, and let one interpret. But if there is no interpreter, let him keep silent in church, and let him speak to himself and to God."

Vs. 34, 35 "Let your women keep silent in the churches, for they are not permitted to speak; but they are to be submissive, as the law also says. And if they want to learn something let them ask their own husbands at home; for it is shameful for women to speak in church."

In these passages it is clear Paul is using the word church to apply to the church in Corinth in an assembled capacity.

CONCLUSION

A study of the word "ekklesia" shows that the word does not apply to any building which is the concept many people have of this word.

The N.T. word ekklesia did not refer to a denomination although today denominations are called churches. All denominations including the Catholic church and Orthodox churches came into existence centuries after the Lord's ekklesia was established in the early part of the first century (30/33) which makes it almost 2000 years old.

The bringing together of God's people into one institution called the church was in the eternal purpose of God. Through these people which the Holy Spirit chose to call the church, God would reveal his great scheme of redemption to the entire world.

In Ephesians 3:10, 11 Paul writes, "To the intent that now the manifold wisdom of God might be made known by the church to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places, according to the eternal purpose which He purposed in Christ Jesus our Lord."

The church

6

Since we have been blessed to be called out of darkness into His marvelous light, let that light radiate wherever we go or as Jesus said, "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father who is in heaven" (Matthew 5:16).

We who are God's ekklesia have a great responsibility. Let be motivated by God's love to never be ashamed to let our light shine.