

THE “CHURCH”

We all have an image in our mind when we hear the word “church”. But where does this image come from? Is it based on the Bible, or is it based on the teachings and traditions of men, or on our own personal history? What does God’s Word say about “the church”?

“ekklesia”

The Greek word that is translated “church” in our modern English translations is “ekklesia” (or “ecclesia”). Its Greek root words are “ek” (out) “klesia” (called).

Inconsistent translations

The first thing we notice is that “ecclesia”, which is found 115 times in the Greek New Testament, is translated “church” 112 times in the KJV and “assembly” 3 times. If we look at Acts 19:32,39,41 we see “ecclesia” 3 times, once in each verse, and here “ecclesia” cannot possibly carry the meaning of “the church”. Here it is clearly an assembly of people, or even a mob; but certainly not “the church” of God. The Acts 19:39 reference is a “legal ecclesia”, such as a court or jury.

The “church” of Moses?

Acts 7:38 refers to an Old Testament event from the days of Moses, and tells us about an “ecclesia” in the wilderness. Here the NIV translates the word “assembly”, recognizing that an assembly in Moses’ day cannot be talking about “the church” as we know it. Have we not been taught that “the church” was born at Pentecost in the book of Acts? The KJV does use the word “church” in this passage, but could this “church” in the wilderness in Old Testament times really be “the church” as we know it?

Upon This Rock

Matthew 16:18 is a familiar passage, with Jesus saying to Peter, “You are Peter, and on this rock will I be building my ecclesia.” What ecclesia? Is it the same ecclesia that believers are a part of today? My church upbringing since the time I was a child tell me that here Jesus is introducing for the first time “The Church”, with a promise to build it either on Peter, or on Peter’s faith (which Peter demonstrated in verse 16 when he acknowledged Jesus as the Son of God).

Is Today’s “Church” Really Built Upon Peter?

We have already seen that “ecclesia” does not always mean the same thing, but we have allowed the translators of our modern English Bibles to do our thinking for us. These translators have taken the 3 occurrences of “ecclesia” (4 in the case of the NIV) and have determined that in these 3 or 4 cases “ecclesia” does not mean “church”. In all other cases they have determined for us that “ecclesia” does mean “church”, and in the 112 times we see the word “church” we have been taught that it’s always the same “church”..... the “church” that we are a part of today.

But if “ecclesia” means an “assembly” or a “mob” in Acts 19:32 and 19:41, and if “ecclesia” means a “court” or “jury” in Acts 19:39, what makes us think the other 112 times it means “church”. Translators use the word “church” in these 112 cases because it seems to fit as far as our understanding of “church” goes, but is this correct?

Is the “ecclesia” in Matthew 16:18 (“Upon this rock will I be building my ecclesia”) the same as in Ephesians 1:22, for example (“...subjects all under His [Christ’s] feet, and gives Him, as Head over all, to the ecclesia which is His body, the complement of the One completing the all in all.”)?

Look Again at Matthew 16:18

Immediately after Jesus says to Peter, “on this rock will I be building My ecclesia”, He goes on to say, “I will be giving you the keys of the kingdom of the heavens.” Then He proceeds to tell His disciples of His impending death and resurrection. In other words Jesus is preparing to depart this world, and He is making provision for the continuance of the Kingdom message. Jesus proclaimed from the early days of His ministry, “The kingdom is near.” But He, the King (and therefore the Kingdom) has been rejected by Israel’s leaders. After His departure Peter becomes the leader to carry forward the same kingdom message. Truly Peter has been given the keys of the kingdom, and he displays signs and wonders as the kingdom message is proclaimed in the first half of the book of Acts. The “ecclesia” (or the “called-out” ones; the assembly) continues to gather to await the introduction of the kingdom that had been promised by the prophets of old, proclaimed by John the Baptist, proclaimed by Jesus Himself, and now proclaimed by Peter.

But the kingdom is again rejected throughout Acts. Peter, the rock on whom the “ecclesia” is being built, fades; and Paul takes the center stage. By the end of Acts we see the kingdom rejected one final time by Israel’s leaders, and Paul responds: “Let it be known to you, then, that to the nations was dispatched this salvation of God, and they will hear.”

The "Ecclesia" Responding to Paul's Message

Peter was entrusted with "the evangel (gospel) of the Circumcision", and Paul with "the evangel of the Uncircumcision" (see Galatians 2:7). Note that the evangel (gospel) is not "*to*" the Circumcision or the Uncircumcision, but "*of*" the Circumcision or Uncircumcision (when properly translated). It is a different message; which is why Paul would occasionally refer to it as "my evangel (gospel)".

This being the case, how can we think that the "ecclesia" that gathered when hearing the kingdom message from Peter is the same "ecclesia" that gathered in response to Paul's message? Peter's evangel (gospel) proclaimed the coming kingdom. But the kingdom has been rejected time and again by Israel's leaders. Paul observes that Israel has been set aside "until the complement of the nations may be entering" (Romans 11:25).

If we want to be the "ecclesia" that we are called to be in God's Word, we must take care to differentiate between the message (and the "ecclesia") of the kingdom, which was to the Jewish nation first; and the message (and the "ecclesia") of the Uncircumcision, which proclaims reconciliation, peace with God, Ambassadorship, and no differentiation between Jew and Gentile.

The Real Meaning of "Ecclesia"

To determine the real meaning of any word found in God's Word we must not turn to the "experts" or the translators; for they very obviously disagree. Instead, let us search the Scriptures and look at every occurrence of the word "ecclesia" to determine its meaning.

We have seen that "ecclesia" could be a mob, an assembly, a legal assembly (court/jury), or a group of people "called out" by God. "Ecclesia" does not mean "Church". "Ecclesia" by itself simply means a group of people. It is a neutral term. We must look to the context each time we see the word "ecclesia" to determine which group of people is being referred to.

So What is "The Church"?

Where in God's Word are we told the requirements to "join" or become a "member" of "The Church"? In God's Word one is either a part of the "ecclesia" or not. Where are the creeds? The only creed is the Word of God itself. The reason we find creeds within "the church" today is because of arguments and disagreements and opinions of men.

We who are Believers are "the ecclesia" when we meet together, and when we are alone. We are "the ecclesia" when we gather for worship at a "church building" on Sundays, or when we gather in a home on Tuesdays. Yes God's Word instructs us to meet together, and fellowship together; and there are examples within Scripture of these things. But a Believer is a part of "the ecclesia" if he is a part of the life of a "church", or if he is not.

God's Word does contain examples of church structure and leadership, but much of our modern day church structure is a bureaucracy of man's invention, that goes well beyond the simplicity of "the ecclesia" found in Scripture.

The Bottom Line...

Again, what image comes to your mind when you hear the word "church"? Is it possible that your beliefs about what the church is, or what it does, or when it meets, or how it worships....are based upon traditions or your own personal history and biases?

Let us earnestly seek God's Word as to how His "ecclesia" is to be, and not the traditions of men. Get a copy of the Concordant Literal New Testament (available from Concordant Publishing Concern, www.concordant.org). Using the Key Word Concordance found at the back of the volume, search every instance where "ecclesia" is used. Study the context. Determine in each case if it is the "ecclesia" of today, or a different "ecclesia" that is being talked about. Don't trust the translators of the modern English Bibles; they have a notion as to what "The Church" is supposed to be, and they have done the thinking for you. Study God's Word, seeking the meaning of each word as found in the original languages. Think for yourself!

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