

The Lord's Church

By Elder C. D. Cole

Definition of the church

The unity for which Christ prayed seems to be as sadly lacking among His followers with respect to the church question as any other. Christ's prayer for unity among His people has been for a long time a serious question to the author, in light of his belief that Christ's prayers are always effectual. Modern Ecumenicalism is not the answer to the problem since it seeks organic union at the expense of truth. In this chapter, we shall try to arrive at a Scriptural definition of the church. Observe:

1. The Colloquial¹ Use of the Word Church.

a. The Meeting House is familiarly spoken of as a church. But this is foreign to any New Testament use of the word. The New Testament Church was not the house, but "*in the house.*" – Romans 16:5; "*The churches of Asia salute you. Aquila and Priscilla salute you much in the Lord, with the church that is in their house.*" – 1 Corinthians 16:19; "*Salute the brethren which are in Laodicea, and Nymphas, and the church which is in his house.*" – Colossians 4:15.

¹ Colloquial: Used in or characteristic of familiar and informal conversation

b. Christianity is usually referred to as the church to distinguish the followers of Christ from the state and from the world. Church history, therefore, is nothing more than the history of Christianity.

c. Denominations of Christians are commonly spoken of as churches, embracing believers in various groups without regard to faith and practice.

2. Some Modern Notions of the Church.

a. The Universal Visible Theory, also called the Imperial Theory. This finds expression in the Roman Catholic Hierarchy. The church is a visible empire with a visible human head.

b. The Universal Invisible Theory. This makes all the saved, members of the church.

c. The Church Branch Theory. This makes the various denominations mere branches of the main stem, which no longer exists.

3. The Pre-Christian Use of the Word Church.

The word church comes from the Greek word ekklesia, which means to call out or the purpose of assembling. The government of ancient Greek cities was democratic, being administered by duly qualified citizens in a lawful assembly, called together from time to time to transact business for

the public good. And this assembly was called an ekklesia. The Greek word ekklesia in itself has no religious connotation. It simply means assembly regardless of kind. In Acts 19:39, "But if ye inquire any thing concerning other matters, it shall be determined in a lawful assembly" it is used of the Greek assembly corresponding somewhat to our city council or board of aldermen.

The word ekklesia is also used of the church (congregation) in the wilderness (Acts 7:38). By accommodation ekklesia is applied to the mob gathered against Paul at Ephesus. In Acts 19:32, we read that the ekklesia (assembly) "*was confused,*" referring to the mob or unlawful assembly. The town clerk told Demetrius and his craft to take their complaint against Paul to the lawful ekklesia (assembly). And having restored order, the town clerk dismissed the ekklesia (mob). "*And when he had thus spoken, he dismissed the assembly.*" – Acts 19:41.

4. The Ekklesia or Assembly of Christ.

The English word church comes from the Greek word kuriakon, which means "of or belonging to the Lord." Kuriakon occurs only two times in the Greek New Testament. It is used of the Lord's Supper (1 Corinthians 11:20), and of the Lord's Day (Revelation 1:10). It is never translated church in the New Testament. Kuriakon was used by the early Greek Christians for the Lord's house or meeting place. The Teutonic tribes, when converted to Christianity, adopted this Greek word for their house of worship. It is found in the German Kirche, the Scottish Kirk, and the Anglo-Saxon Circe. The Greeks never employed kuriakon for the people, but only for the house.

In using the word ekklesia Christ did not coin a new word, but a word in current use and easily understood by both Jew and Greek. He did not employ the word kuriakon, but ekklesia which can only refer to people, a people called out to form an assembly. In response to Peter's confession of His deity, Christ said, "*Thou are Peter (petrol) and upon this rock (petra) I will build MY ekklesia (assembly).*" – Matthew 16:18. He thus distinguished between His assembly and other assemblies. Paul makes the same distinction in his letter to the Thessalonians. He writes to the ekklesia which is in God the Father (this distinguishes it from the Greek political assembly), and "*in the Lord Jesus Christ,*" which also distinguishes it from the Jewish synagogue. In this way, Paul made sure that his letter would reach the right assembly.

In the Greek New Testament, the noun ekklesia occurs 115 times. It is translated church 112 times and assembly three times. The word church actually occurs 113 times in our King James Bible, but in Acts 19:37 it is not ekklesia but the word for temples. The King James translators tried to use church for ekklesia in all cases, but in Acts 19:32,39,41 to do so would have been manifestly absurd; and so in these instances, they had to give the correct rendering; ASSEMBLY.

Christ himself set us the pattern for the use of the word ekklesia. In Matthew 16:18 when He said, "*I will build my church (ekklesia).*" He used the word abstractly of an institution, without defining, particularizing, or locating it. Just as we speak of the American home, the American boy, and other institutions without referring to any particular home or boy. In Matthew 18:17 our Lord used the word ekklesia (assembly) in a concrete sense of a particular assembly to which one might tell his grievances. And so when Christ's ekklesia, as an institution, becomes concrete and operational, it is an actual assembly of His followers in organized

capacity. It is a visible organization seems necessary inasmuch as it is composed of visible people. J. W. Porter says, "If there is any other sort of church than that of a visible congregation, revelation and investigation have alike failed to locate its whereabouts or define its functions. Such an inconceivable, intangible, invisible concern as the imaginary invisible church has never been known to convert anybody or to perform any functions of an actual church."

When Christ said, "*Upon this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell (hades) shall not prevail against it,*" – Matthew 16:18, He was speaking of the church prospectively, something to be built; "*I will build.*" The church was a concept in the mind of Christ just as the building is a concept in the mind of the architect before it is erected. Christ saw all the material that was to make up his holy sanctuary, every living stone that would go into it, before it had been quarried from the hard rock of sinful humanity. "*Christ also loved the church and gave himself for it; that he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, that he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish.*" – Ephesians 5:25-27. And so, the church Christ founded, the church for which He died, is promised perpetuity and glory.

The church of Christ as an institution finds expression in two kinds of assemblies: the local assembly here on earth; and the general assembly of Firstborn ones, now enrolled in heaven and to be gathered there as a glorious church.

5. Churches of Christ.

Whenever the word church is used in the New Testament of something larger than a particular, visible, assembly here on earth, the word is always plural, like the churches of Galatia, Asia, and Judaea. The church of Christ here on earth finds expression in many particular assemblies of visible people in process of salvation; the church of Christ in heaven will find expression in one universal assembly of visible people whose salvation has been completed. But there is no such thing as an invisible church here on earth or in heaven.

To a man in Florida who would not unite with any church or particular congregation, and who insisted that he belonged to the big church of Christ, the writer said something like this: "In the New Testament, the churches could be located and written to. I would like to write to your church; please give me its address and the name of its pastor." Needless to say, he was shut up.

In his commentary on Matthew, Dr. Broadus says: "The word church is not used in the New Testament to denote a congregation, actual or imaginary, of all professed Christians, unless it be in Acts 9:31 (correct text), and in 1 Timothy 3:15. In the former, the word probably denotes the original church at Jerusalem, whose members were widely scattered throughout Judaea and Galilee and Samaria by the persecution and held meetings wherever they were, but still belonged to the one original organization. When Paul wrote to the Galatians nearly twenty years later, these separate meetings had been organized into distinct churches; and so, he speaks (Galatians 1:22) in reference to that same period, of *"the churches of Judaea which were in Christ."* In Titus 3:15, the church is naturally the particular local church with which one is connected.

The New Testament never speaks of one particular assembly or church as a part of the whole, but of each assembly as "*the whole church.*" In 1 Corinthians 14:23, Paul says, "*If therefore the whole church be come together into one place...*" Writing to the Romans from Corinth, in his closing salutation, Paul says, "*Gaius mine host, and of the whole church, saluteth you.*" – Romans 16:23. Speaking of the church under the metaphor of the human body, 1 Corinthians 12:27, Paul says, "*Now ye are the body of Christ, and members in particular.*" The article is absent in the Greek. The same is true when the church is represented under the figure of a temple. The church at Corinth is called "*the temple of God*" in 1 Corinthians 3:16 and also in 2 Corinthians 6:16. In the second chapter of Ephesians, the church is in view under the figure of a building or temple. Local congregations are in view in Ephesians 2:21; "*In whom (Christ) all the building fitly framed together growth unto an holy temple (sanctuary) in the Lord.*" In Ephesians 2:22, the church at Ephesus is referred to: "*In whom (Christ) ye also are builded together for an habitation of God through the Spirit.*" We have given the correct text in these quotations. In Ephesians 3:21, "*Unto him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end. Amen.*" His redeemed people, making up the glory church, will be Christ's eternal monument as Savior. "*When he shall come to be glorified in his saints, and to be admired in all them that believe (because our testimony among you was believed) in that day.*" – 2 Thessalonians 1:10.

The ekklesia or church in glory will be the one real temple, body, flock, and bride of Christ. In glory, the church will have been built and be forever to His glory. And because each local particular assembly on earth is a representative of His institution called the church, all the figures applied to the future church in glory are also applied to each and every local assembly of saints. (Note: See introduction of this volume as to the belief of the publisher about the Bride of Christ.)

A man once said to B. H. Carroll, "How dare you apply such broad terms as 'the house of God,' 'the body of Christ,' and the 'temple of God' to your little fragment of a denomination!" Carroll replied: "I do not apply them to any denomination, nor to any aggregate of particular churches, but the scriptures do apply every one of them to the particular congregations of Christ's disciples."

In the Scriptural sense, there is no such thing as the Methodist Church, or the Presbyterian Church, or the Baptist Church, etc. We should never speak of The American Baptist Church, or the Southern Baptist Church, for there is no such thing. The Southern Baptist Convention is made up of individual messengers sent to it from thousands of Baptist churches, and these messengers have no delegated authority. Naturally, we Baptists believe that our form of church government conforms more nearly to the New Testament pattern. There is no hierarchy or grades of ministry among us. All members are equal in authority and this authority is expressed by vote. One may have more influence than another, but all have the same authority.

There is more and more being said today about "One church in one world." This means one big church made up of the churches of all denominations. But such a thing is utterly foreign to scripture, so far as Christ's church is concerned. Such an idea is retrogression rather than progress. It reverses the missionary program. In the early days Christ's church as an institution found expression in one church, the church at Jerusalem. Under persecution the church was scattered and the members went everywhere preaching the word. And wherever disciples were made, a church was organized. And some years later, we read of the churches of

Judaea. And when the church at Antioch sent Paul and Barnabas as missionaries, we soon read of churches in Galatia and other provinces.

If and when we have one church in one world, who is to be the head of this one big church? Will the head be Christ or Anti-Christ? The writer ventures the prediction that the head of this one big church will be a man living in a big house in the city of Rome, the City of Seven Hills, on the banks of the Tiber. Let no Protestant ever suppose that the Roman system of a graded ministry culminating in the supremacy of the pope will ever be relinquished or compromised. Yet with a sad heart, we fear that Christendom is headed in the direction.

Suppose history repeats itself, and there again becomes one big world church: such as the Roman Catholic Church before the reformation; suppose the reformation under Luther and others reverse itself and the Protestant denominations return to Rome; will this mean that the perpetuity promised by Christ will be repealed? Perish the thought! Just as in the past, the true churches of Christ will not be a part of the big world church, which will really be the Roman Catholic Church. The institution Christ promised perpetuity to will not perish from the earth, and this institution will always find expression in particular assemblies; which, will not be swallowed up by the big ecumenical body.