

No.1. The Definition of the Church

We recently concluded a study of the subject of *Dispensational Theology*. From that study it has to be noted that in effect Dispensationalism belittles the *Church* by its teaching on the purpose of Christ's first coming. Dispensationalism teaches that Christ came to establish an earthly, political kingdom with Jerusalem as its capital, and with Himself occupying David's throne as its king. But when the Jews rejected Him as king, He decided, we are informed, to postpone the kingdom until His second coming and in the interim period found and build His Church. Thus, in the Dispensational school of thought, the *Church* is not nearly as important as the *kingdom*; it is merely a parenthesis in the programme of God in His dealings with men.

The result of this dispensational view of the Church is that many have adopted a very low view or opinion of Christ's Church. Indeed, that low view of the Church pervades circles that may not be "officially dispensational" in persuasion, and that low view is manifested in various ways. For example, Dispensationalism has taught that we are now in *The Laodicean Period*, the church has become engulfed in great apostasy, and the most that can be hoped for is to meet in little groups and hold on until the rapture comes, which, as Dispensationalists constantly affirm is the next event in God's prophetic programme. In other words, they do not see Christ's Church as Christ's glorious body, a living & witnessing organism in this world, the pillar and ground of the truth, spreading His Gospel to the ends of the earth. We are of course aware of the present apostasy and the sins that pervade the courts of Zion, but we stand upon Christ's great statement before us in our reading today -- "*I will build my Church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.*" The full glory of Christ's church will not be seen of course until that great day. But nonetheless, we refuse to buy into the aforementioned low view of the Church. Rather we would re-echo the words of the Psalmist in Psalm 87: 2, 3 -- "*The Lord loveth the gates of Zion more than all the dwellings of Jacob. Glorious things are spoken of thee, O city of God.*"

However, having noted this Dispensational view of the Church in our recent studies, I felt it would be appropriate to enter into a study entitled *The Church -- The Glorious Body of Christ*.

DEFINITION OF THE "CHURCH"

The most rewarding way to determine what the Scripture means by the word "church" is to determine how it is used by the writers of Scripture.

O.T. & N.T. words The word "church" is not found as such in the O.T. only in the New, although the saints of Moses' day are referred to in Acts 7: 38 as "*the church in the wilderness.*" However, in the O.T. a word is used that is the counterpart of the N.T. word *church* -- the word "congregation". There are two main Hebrew words for *congregation* as found in the O.T. (1) *Edah* -- an appointed meeting. (2) *Qahal* -- an assembly called together. These two Hebrew words clearly correspond to the N.T. Greek word *ekklesia*, which is derived from the two words *ek*, "out," and *kaleo*, "to call." In its broadest and basic sense, the word *ekklesia* refers to any assembly of people, Acts 19: 32, 39, 41. But its usual application in the N.T. is to Christian people, "the ones called out" -- i.e., those called out of the rest of humanity to be the people of God. So in both eras words were used that identified God's people as a company called out from the rest of humanity. The vital importance of this definition of the word "church" is that it enables us to see at once that *The Church* in the true sense of the term is most certainly not of this world, John 18: 36.

Usage of the word church in the N.T. The word has a wide usage in the N.T., and this usage of it will enable us to understand more clearly the nature of the church of Christ. There are five distinct ways in which the word *ekklesia* is used in the N.T.

**1. To denote the entire body of God's people who are spiritually united to Christ by faith alone**

See Eph 5: 25-27 -- here the "church" refers to all for whom Christ died, who shall be presented in heaven in a faultless state. The word as used here could only be the whole company of the redeemed. Thus, here is an example of the word used reference to the entire company of those who are spiritually joined to Christ.

Matt 16: 18 -- this is the first reference to the actual word "church" in the N.T. Incidentally this verse is frequently used by dispensationalists to try to prove that the Church had not yet been born because of Christ's use of the future tense -- "*I will build My Church.*" However, the future tense in the N.T. has the peculiarity of underlining the continuation of that which has already been in existence. See Rom 3: 30 -- "*God shall justify the circumcision by faith and the uncircumcision through faith.*" The reference is to the justification of Jew and Gentile. But in using the future tense is Paul teaching that the Lord had not yet begun to justify sinners, whether Jews or Gentiles? Of course not, for multitudes of Jews and various Gentiles had already come into this blessed standing. Rather, Paul is simply teaching that the Lord would continue to do what He had already been doing -- justify the ungodly. Hence, Matt 16: 18 is to be understood as Christ declaring that He would keep on building His Church and nothing could stop it. But, coming to the main point -- the word *church* here can only refer to all true believers for this is a promise of preservation from full and complete apostasy.

The other N.T. terms are used that could not be limited to any localized and particular group or society of believers on earth, viz. "the bride of Christ," Eph 5: 31, 32; "the body of Christ," Eph 1: 23, 4: 12, 13; "the building of the Lord," Eph 2: 21. Note also Heb 12: 23 -- "*the general assembly and church of the firstborn...*" this is surely a description of the entire body of God's people. The Westminster Confession (ch. 25, section 1) states that the reference is to "*the whole number of the elect that have been, are, or shall be gathered into one under Christ, the Head thereof.*"

**2. To denote the entire body of those who outwardly & visibly profess to belong to Christ.**

Often the term "the church invisible" is used of all those who are truly the Lord's and in the final analysis are infallibly known by Him. However, the term does not mean that there is no visible manifestation of the church. There is such a visible & public manifestation -- "the church visible." This term denotes the corporate gatherings of the Church, those who profess Christ as Saviour. See 1 Cor 12: 28 -- the reference in these verse is to a visible society of those who profess faith in Christ, who publicly gather for Christian worship and the observance of His ordinances. The reference is not to believers in

Corinth only, for the spiritual leaders and gifts mentioned were common to all of the early church, just not to the believers in Corinth. The reference is to the entire company of those who professed their faith in Christ.

3. **To denote a group of believers in a particular place**

See such verses as Acts 14: 23, Rom 16: 3-5, 1 Cor 16: 18, Col 4: 15, Philemon 2, 1 Thess 1: 1. In each place in view there was a "church," an assembly of believers meeting together for worship & the service of Christ.

4. **To denote a number of associated congregations**

See Acts 8: 1 -- note the words, "*the church which was at Jerusalem.*" It is obvious that the reference could not be just to one congregation but to a plurality of them. We deduce this from the fact that there were huge numbers of believers in Jerusalem. See Acts 21: 20 where it is stated that there were "many thousands" of believers in Jerusalem, the term literally signifying *myriads* -- note Acts 2: 41, 47; Acts 4: 4, & Acts 5: 14 to see how this vast group was produced. It is inconceivable that with such a huge company of believers in Jerusalem there was not a plurality of congregations in that city. Yet in Acts 8: 1 those congregations are referred to as "the church" singular. See also Acts 15: 4, 22 where *church* singular is used to denote all the believers in the city. Cf. Gal 1: 13 where Paul tells us that he "*persecuted the church of God...*" i.e., singular, yet it was a plurality of churches that suffered his persecution. Note in Acts 8: 3 where the word "church" singular is used; yet again a plurality of congregations is in view in the reference to Saul "entering into every house." Cf. Acts 2: 46.

5. **To denote God's people as represented by their spiritual rulers**

See Matt 18: 17 where the Lord gives instruction to the effect that cases of unresolved problems between believers are to be resolved by "the church." The basis of the Lord's injunction here is with reference to the spiritual court known and established among the Jews, namely the synagogue court. The synagogue court had its elders who dealt with cases of discipline, John 9: 34 -- while the excommunication here was unjust, the reference allows us to see that there was a spiritual court among the Jews to issue spiritual discipline. The point is that it was not the congregation at large that dealt with the situation but these religious leaders, giving proof of this court system. Thus, in Matt 18: 17 in Christ's reference to "the church" His disciples would have understood the spiritual rulers rather than the ruled.

Hence, the point is established that the word "church" is employed with respect to the spiritual rulers who represent the Lord's people. This conclusion is supported by the fact that in later N.T. Scriptures the form of church government revealed is the representative system, Acts 6: 1-7, 1 Tim 3, & Titus 1.

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