



The Reflector

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The Word “Church”

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The etymology of our English word, *church*, is not at all clear. When one consults linguistic sources he finds several suggestions as to how the word may have evolved into our language. The most common theory is that it came into English from an adaptation of one or more of the European languages’ adaptation of the Greek word, *kyriakon*, meaning “of or belonging to the Lord.” For example, the German word is *kirche*. However it may have come into our language, we have it and we must deal with it. It is in all of our more respected and reliable translations of the New Testament.

The New Testament Greek word, *ekklesia*, is the word translated “church” in these English versions. Scholars generally agree that the word means a “called (or summoned) out assembly.” It was not originally a “religious” word. It had reference to any assembly called out of the general populace for a particular purpose or function. It was more than a mere gathering or assembly that may have been brought together by happenstance. It was summoned out for a reason. Some in commenting on this word leave the impression that it referred to just any kind of gathering or assembly and point to the fact that it is the word used to designate an unruly mob in Acts 19. But this “mob” did not just happen to gather together, they had been called to a meeting of silversmiths (v. 19). After they were called together the assembly got out of hand (v. 32). After the town clerk calmed them down, he “dismissed the assembly” (v. 41). This was an assembly (*ekklesia*) that had been formally convened and was then dismissed. The Lord’s *ekklesia* (church) is not a mere

gathering of people, but an assembly of people who have been called out of the world by the Lord for a purpose.

Jesus and the New Testament writers did not coin a new word when they spoke of the *ekklesia*. They used a word already familiar and gave it a new application. However it may be translated into English, it requires close study of the context to determine how the word is applied in a given passage. Perhaps “assembly” would have been a better translation – just as “immersion” would have been a better translation than “baptism.” But the fact that the translators chose “church” and “baptism” should not present a huge problem for Bible readers. One can look at all the times these words are used and consider the context of each and come to an understanding of what the writer meant in a given place. Even if “assembly” were uniformly used in our translations, one would still have to study further to determine the nature of the assembly and how it is used in each instance.

“Church” in scripture does not refer to a building. It refers to people in every place it is used in the New Testament. This is not to say that it is wrong to place a sign on the meeting house that simply says “Church of Christ.” Some things are understood by reasonable people. If I put a little sign on my house that simply says “Ed Bragwell,” it is not apt to leave the impression that Ed Bragwell is a house. Oh, yes, I could make the sign say “Ed Bragwell lives here.” But is it really necessary? You can put up a sign that says “Church of Christ meets here” if you prefer, but don’t pitch a fit if others think that “meets here” is not necessary.

Many modern dictionary uses of *church* are not found in the scriptures. The first two definitions given by Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary are good examples: “1: a building for public and especially Christian worship. 2: the clergy or officialdom of a religious body.” Nor is it ever used in a denominational sense in the scriptures.

Now let us turn our attention to the ways in which “church” is used in our English versions. It is used once referring to the Israelite nation in the wilderness (Acts 7:38). All other times it refers to God’s people in some way or the other.

All of God’s People

Jesus was the first to use “church” in the New Testament (Matt. 16:18). Here he uses the figure of a building resting upon a rock as a foundation. He envisions the time when he would build his great called out assembly upon the foundation truth that He is the Christ, the Son of God as had been expressed by Peter. In Acts 2:47 we learn who makes up this “church.” It is saved people.

We sometimes refer to this “church” as the “universal church.” It is not accurate to refer to it as the “invisible church.” Those who make it up are quite visible. They are men and women everywhere who are saved by the blood of Christ. The usage of “church” in this sense is found in a number of other places in the New Testament (Eph. 3:10; 4:4; 1:22,23; 5:23-32; Phil. 3:6; Heb. 12:22,23 and similar passages)

The church in this sense has no geographical boundaries. It has no organizational structure. It has no earthly oversight. Its only functioning unit is the individual doing the will of the Head, Jesus Christ. It never convenes as a body. It is simply a term that aptly refers to all of God’s people as a group. They are God’s “called out” people – having been called out of the world into Christ.

God’s People in a Community

Interestingly enough, Jesus was also the first to use “church” in a local sense (Matt. 18:17). Some think that since Jesus spoke this before the establishment of the

church that he must be referring to some assembly other than a New Testament congregation. But I believe that the following quotation expresses the truth of the matter.

“As the Saviour was giving preparatory instruction, he was compelled to thus speak of the church by anticipation before it actually existed. The word church means ‘assembly,’ and the apostles knew that there would be some form of assembly in the kingdom about to be set up. When Matthew wrote his Gospel, churches were already in existence. One who will not hear the church is to be regarded as an outsider. This implies that such a one is to be excluded from the church” (**The Four-fold Gospel**, by J. W. McGarvey and Phillip Pendleton).

It should be obvious that it is “church” in the local sense of which Jesus speaks here as it would not be possible to tell the sin to all brethren everywhere.

Most of the times that “church” is used by the New Testament writers it is in the local sense, speaking of Christians in a given community. At first, there was only one local church – Jerusalem (Acts 5:11). Before long, due to the scattering of the disciples from Jerusalem due to persecution and possibly other factors, churches were found in other communities. Each of these churches were spoken of as separate units often identifying them by their geographic locations. There was not only “the church at Jerusalem” (Acts 8:1; 11:22), there was the church at Antioch (Acts 11:26; 13:1) and eventually many other places (Rom. 16:16; 1 Cor. 1:2; 16:1; Rev. 1:7, etc.).

These churches (called out assemblies) had organizational structure. Each had its own overseers or shepherds as men became qualified and appointed (Acts 14:23). These were overseers only of the local church of which they were a part (1 Pet. 5:1-4). There was a recognizable bounds of membership for the local church. The “church of God” at Corinth was told “if therefore the whole church be come together into one place” indicating that they would know those who constituted the “whole

church” at that place. It was not a matter of having vague and loose boundaries.

One could be a member of the church at one place while visiting at another place – Phoebe was a servant of the church at Cenchrea while she was evidently at Rome (Rom. 16:1).

These local groups were joined by Christians (Acts 9:26). Local churches received (Rom. 14:1) and rejected members (1 Cor. 5:4-13). Sometimes mistakes were made in both receiving and rejecting. Jerusalem first rejected Paul, but later received him. Diotrophes wrongly cast some out of the church (3 John 9-10). The point is, that the bounds of membership was controlled by each local church. They were independent autonomous functioning units or organizations.

These local organizations were the only organizations through which Christians worked in spiritual matters. There were no organizations larger than, smaller than or other than these local churches to do the work that God gave his people to do as organized units. By “organized unit,” we do not mean a mere systematic arrangement utilized by the unit (local church), like a Bible class or “work group,” but a unit (organization) that combines the resources (or some of the resources) of

a few or many into a common resource and placing it under the control of the combined unit.

Physical Assemblies

The church existed in a given place as an organized unit whether physically assembled or not. The elders of the church at Ephesus were still elders of the church at Ephesus when they met with Paul at Miletus (Acts 20:17). When the local church (an organized unit) came together into a physical assembly, this assembly was also called a “church” (1 Cor. 11:18, 20-21; 14:4-35).

One is “in church” even “at home” when “church” is viewed either in the universal sense or the local organization sense. One has a duty to assemble with other Christians (Heb. 10:25). When this is done one is “in church” in the sense of a physical assembly.

“Church of God” or “church of Christ” is used to designate the church in all three senses. One needs to be in “the church” in each since. He needs to be one of the saved (universal church), then join himself to the disciples locally (local church) and then be present when the local church comes “together in the church.”

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“In Church” vs. “At Home”

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That the word church is used in several different senses in the New Testament cannot be denied. The misunderstanding of these various uses has led many to misunderstand what the Bible teaches concerning the church. We all know that the basic meaning of the word that is rendered “church” in most English translations is “a called out assembly.” But this definition does not make clear all the various ways in which the word is used. The definition of any occurrence of the word must be determined also by the context in which it is used. We know that sometimes the word is used in reference to a relationship to God enjoyed by all the saved or what we

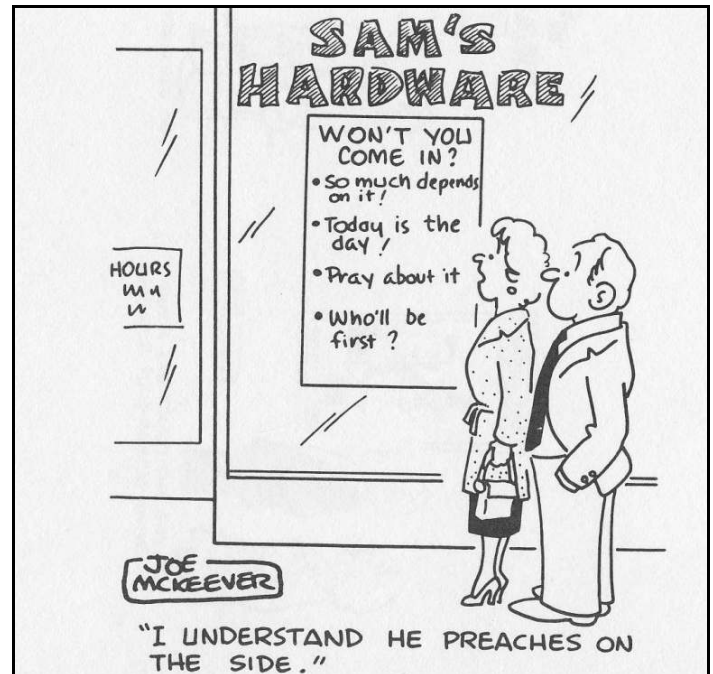
sometimes call the “universal church.” (See Matt. 16:18; Acts 2:47; etc.) We also know that at other times the word is used in reference to a group of Christians in a given locality who have joined themselves together to worship and serve the Lord. (See 1 Cor. 1:2; Gal. 1:2; etc.) I think that we all understand these basic uses of the word. But there are other variations in meaning that we see in some contexts. One such meaning is associated with what we might call the church in the assembled state as opposed to the unassembled state. Now it is true that a Christian who is a part of a local church is a member of that church whether the church is assembled or unassem-

bled. I am still a member of the local church here in Russellville, when assembled with them on Sunday or sitting at my computer here at home right now writing this article. However, there is a sense in which the word church is used that distinguishes between the church being assembled together and not being assembled together. Sometimes the term “in the church” is used to indicate something that is done when the church is assembled together. In contrast to this, the term “at home” is used to indicate what Christians do when they are not assembled together “in the church.” We want to notice two such instances in which such usage found.

1 Corinthians 11:17-34

In the eleventh chapter of 1 Corinthians we see a distinction made between what Christians may do “in the church” and “at home” in respect to eating. Paul states in verse 18 that he had heard that when they had come together “in the church” that there was a problem. The basic problem was that their purpose for coming together should have been to eat the Lord’s Supper (v. 20), but instead they were eating their “own supper” (v. 21). After giving instructions about the eating of the Lord’s Supper in the church, Paul then instructs them that if they want to eat their own supper to eat it “at home” (v. 34). Here the terms “in the church” and “at home” are used to contrast times when the church is assembled and when it is not assembled. Now it is true that we are all still members of the church whether we are assembled “in the church” or unassembled “at home.” But it is also true that certain actions should be done when we are assembled together “in the church” and other things should be done when we are unassembled “at home.” We therefore get into trouble when we try to reverse these things. We ought to think about this when we decide that we want to eat our “own” meals when we come together “in the church.” We also need to consider this when we want to take the Lord’s Supper out and serve it to others “at home” who have not assembled with the saints “in the church.”

1 Corinthians 14:34-35



In the fourteenth chapter of 1 Corinthians we have another instance of this distinction being made. We are told that it is shameful for women to speak “in the church.” Instead, women are instructed to “keep silent in the churches” and to reserve their speaking until they are “at home.” Now once again we see a distinction made between what is to be done “in the church” and what is to be done “at home.” I know that it is not popular these days to point out the distinction that is made in this passage. To prohibit a woman from speaking anywhere or at any time, makes one a target of ridicule and scorn. But we must consider what is said here when we begin advocating that women should be allowed to speak up more in our assemblies or that it is just old fashioned or archaic to prohibit them from doing so. I hear many today claiming that we have just “misinterpreted” the Scriptures in this matter and decide that instead we need to adhere to a “new” or “enlightened” interpretation.

Let us be content to follow the things that God has revealed for us to participate in as Christians whether we are assembled “in the church” or not assembled “at home.” Let us also be careful to maintain the distinctions that the Scriptures make between the two.