

CHAPTER 1

IDENTITY OF THE CHURCH

Definition of the church

Biblical terms

עֲדָה *'ēdāh*, “congregation, company” (145x)

Derived from יָצַד *yā'ad*, “assign, appoint (a time)”

Related to מוֹעֵד *mô'ēd*, “meeting”

Various uses:

- Swarm of bees (Judg 14:8)
- Sinful assembled group (congregation of Korah)
- Usually holy (Israel, whether assembled or not)

Num 10:2-3, “Make two trumpets of hammered silver, and use them for calling the community together and for having the camps set out. When both are sounded, the whole community is to assemble before you at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting.”

LXX, translated by συναγωγή *sunagoge*

קָהָל *qāhāl*, “assembly, congregation” (123x)

Always people

Perhaps derived from קוֹל *qôl*, “voice, sound”

Usually used when Israel assembled; cf. Exod 12:6, “the whole assembly (*qāhāl*) of the congregation (*‘ēdāh*) of Israel”

Normally used interchangeably with *‘ēdāh*

Neither *qāhāl* nor *‘ēdāh* used before Exod 12:3 (Passover) except prophetically in Gen 28:3; 48:4 (*qāhāl*); thus these terms apply especially to God’s covenant people.

LXX: translated as συναγωγή *sunagoge* in Ex.-Num., and as ἐκκλησία *ekklesia* in rest of OT

Only some time after Christ did *sunagoge* and *ekklesia* become hostile terms; see Jas 2:2 and 5:14:

Jas 2:2, “Suppose a man comes into your meeting [*sunagoge*] wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in shabby clothes also comes in.”

Jas 5:14, “Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church [*ekklesia*] to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord.”

συναγωγή *sunagoge*, “synagogue, congregation, assembly” (57x)

From σύν *sun*, “with, together” and ἄγω *ago*, “lead, bring”

Used most often in the gospels; place of Jewish worship, or the assembled worshipers

Christian assembly in Jas 2:2

Apostate Jews called “synagogue of Satan” in Rev 2:9; 3:9

Later usage: restricted to Jews, as opposed to Christians

ἐκκλησία *ekklesia*, “church, assembly” (115x)

From ἐκ *ek* and καλέω *kaleo*, “to call out”

For NT usage, see below

The English word “church”

This English word derives from the Greek word κυριακόν *kuriakon*, “the Lord’s.” This Greek word is found in Rev 1:10, “the Lord’s day; and in 1 Cor 11:20, “the Lord’s Supper.”

The plural form κυριακά *kuriaka* (lit. “the Lord’s things”) was given to the names of churches by Constantine (acc. to Eusebius, *Life of Constantine*), in much the same way as the plural form ἅγια *hagia* is used in Hebrews to describe the tabernacle.

The Greek term was carried over into Old Saxon as *kirika*, and thus into the Scottish *kirk* and the Modern English *church*.

Normally, English Bibles translate only the Greek term *ekklesia* by the English word *church*, and that translation is always used, except for the three secular occurrences in Acts 19. If the OT had been written in Greek, the word *church* would be found often in the English OT, even as it is found in the KJV when the NT quotes or refers to the OT:

- Quoting Ps 22:22: “Saying, I will declare thy name unto my brethren, in the midst of the church will I sing praise unto thee” (Heb 2:12 KJV)
- Stephen speaking of Moses and the Hebrews in the wilderness: “This is he, that was in the church in the wilderness with the angel which spake to him in the mount Sinai” (Acts 7:38 KJV)

Hence, it is inaccurate to say that the word *church* is limited to the church in the NT.

NT usage of ekklesia

Secular assembly

Lawful

Acts 19:39, “If there is anything further you want to bring up, it must be settled in a legal assembly.”

Unlawful

Acts 19:32, “The assembly was in confusion: Some were shouting one thing, some another. Most of the people did not even know why they were there.”

Acts 19:41, “After he had said this, he dismissed the assembly.”

OT church or congregation

Acts 7:38, “the church in the wilderness” (KJV); “the congregation in the desert” (NIV)

Heb 2:12, quoting Ps 22:22, which has *qāhāl*

“He says, ‘I will declare your name to my brothers; in the presence of the congregation [*ekklesia*] I will sing your praises.’”

Particular Christian congregations

Singular

Matt 18:17, “If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector.”

Rom 16:5, “Greet also the church that meets at their house. Greet my dear friend Epenetus, who was the first convert to Christ in the province of Asia.”

Col 4:15, “Give my greetings to the brothers at Laodicea, and to Nympha and the church in her house.”

Col 4:16, “After this letter has been read to you, see that it is also read in the church of the Laodiceans and that you in turn read the letter from Laodicea.”

Plural

1 Cor 16:1, “Now about the collection for God’s people: Do what I told the Galatian churches to do.”

Group of congregations in a city

Jerusalem

Acts 8:1, “And Saul was there, giving approval to his death. On that day a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria.”

Also Acts 12:1; 15:4 (cf. James Bannerman, *The Church of Christ*, 2:321-25)

Antioch in Syria

Acts 13:1, “In the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen (who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch) and Saul.”

Thessalonica (1 Thess 1:1; 2 Thess 1:1)

Corinth (Rom 16:23; 2 Cor 1:1)

Ephesus (Acts 20:17; Rev 2:1; cf. “presbytery” in 1 Tim 4:14)

Rome (cf. Rom 16:5)

Congregations in a region

Acts 9:31, “Then the church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace. It was strengthened; and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it grew in numbers, living in the fear of the Lord.”

There is a textual variation at this verse, with E P Byz giving the plural “churches” and plural verbs; while the singular is in **ⲛ A B C p**⁷⁴, etc. The UBS text gives the singular an {A} rating, “the text is certain.” Metzger suggests the plural was introduced by copyists to conform to Acts 15:41 and 16:5 (*Textual Commentary*, p. 323).

Entire visible church at a particular time

Acts 7:38, “the congregation in the desert”

1 Cor 10:32, “Do not cause anyone to stumble, whether Jews, Greeks or the church of God.”

1 Cor 15:9, “I persecuted the church of God.”

Perhaps Matt 16:18, “On this rock I will build my church.”

Entire body of the elect from all times

Especially in Ephesians (e.g., Eph 1:22-23; 3:10, 21; 5:25)

Cf. Heb 12:23, “the church of the firstborn”

Biblical history of the church

From Adam to Abraham

No organized body of believers

Evidence of godly believers:

In Heb 11: Abel, Enoch, Noah

Others mentioned in Genesis: Adam, Eve, Seth, Enosh (4:26), Melchizedek

Job, if dated early (along with Elihu and perhaps Job’s three friends)

Still there was some kind of formalized worship:

- Call on name Yahweh (Gen 4:26)
- Sacrifices (Abel, Noah, Job)
- Clean animals sacrificed (Gen 8:20)
- Animal blood poured out (Gen 9:4)

From Abraham to Moses

The Abrahamic covenant was spread over many years in Abraham’s life (Gen 12, 13, 15, 17, 22), but the pivotal point in regard to the visible church is the covenant made when he was 99 years old (Gen 17; Rom 4). At this point God changed his name from Abram to Abraham, “father of a multitude,” and established the covenant sign of circumcision.

Starting at this point, God’s people were collected into one visible body: the beginning of the visible church. The Protestant reformers saw in the Abrahamic covenant the three basic requirements for a true church of Christ:

- 1) Faithful preaching of the word of God (Gen 17:7-9; 18:19; cf. 26:5)
- 2) Right administration of the sacraments (Gen 17:10-13)
- 3) Proper church discipline (Gen 17:14)

Since the OT church is visible, it includes true believers and hypocrites, as does the NT church. Likewise, the OT church contained children and servants; it was built on the family structure.

During the period before Moses, the church received at first divine revelations, until the death of Joseph; and then it apparently experienced a long period of silence. As the people increased in number, “elders” represented them, and “priests” performed sacrifices (Exod 3:16-18; 19:22, 24).

From Moses to Christ

The church continued its earlier identity, with its sacraments, circumcision, offerings.

It added more ordinances; e.g., Passover, feasts.

It added a separate priesthood and a central place of worship.

It should be noted that the OT church was a separate organization from the state of Israel or Judah. It was possible to be a member of the state without being a member of the church. E.g., The term “cut off from the congregation” sometimes refers to excommunication from the church privileges, as with lepers.

During this period the prophets called the people to covenant faithfulness, and warned of approaching judgment. At the end of this period John the Baptist and Jesus continued in this tradition. When the nation rejected John and Jesus, a new phase began.

From Christ to the second coming

Lord’s Supper instituted the new covenant, Heb 8.

Now in the “last days,” 1 John 2:18.

Important changes from OT times to this dispensation:

- Many OT regulations now dropped: Aaronic priesthood, sacrifices, most ceremonial laws; these things were fulfilled in Christ.
- The theocracy, which was suspended at the Babylonian Captivity, remains suspended until Christ’s second coming. This includes the special relation of the Jews to the land of Israel as a divine right, and the related unique economic and property laws.

- The Gentiles are accepted into the church as Gentiles (cf. ch. 2 below).
- Other ceremonial obligations were altered:
 - ⇒ Initiation rite: circumcision changed to baptism
 - ⇒ Covenant meal: Passover changed to Lord's Supper
 - ⇒ Day of worship: seventh day changed to first day
- The centralized temple system was replaced by the universal synagogue system in church organization; cf. Matt 18:15-20.