

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THE CHURCH?

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INTRODUCTION

Before we can answer the question “what is the purpose of the church?”, we first need to determine what the church is.

- What is the church?
- Where does the term church come from?
- What does the Bible have to say about Church?

HOW PEOPLE SEE THE CHURCH

Many people see the church as:

- a. A building used for public worship.
- b. A particular Christian organization.
- c. The Christian religion
- d. Club or social institution

To understand the idea of the Church, we need to look at what the Bible says about it. Here are some verses where “church” is mentioned in the English Bible:

Matthew 16:18,

"...And I say also unto you, that you art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church.

Acts 2:46-47

And continuing with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they shared food with gladness and simplicity of heart, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved.

Ephesians 1:22

And He has put all things under His feet and gave Him to be Head over all things to the church,

James 5:14

Is any sick among you? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord.

Let's take a closer look at the word Church to understand what God is saying to us. It is essential that we understand its original meaning as it was used in New Testament times. In order to establish a New Testament church, we must first know what the word "church" means in Scripture.

THE WORD “CHURCH” IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

In the Greek New Testament the word used to refer to God's people is not church, but “Ecclesia”. (ἐκκλησία (ekklēsia) ek-klay-see'-ah) It means : “A calling out”, “a congregation or assembly” and it implies “A point from where motion or action proceeds.”

The Greek word "ecclesia," is used about 115 times in the New Testament, and in most bibles, it is always translated as "church" (except in Acts 19:32,39,41, where it is properly translated as "assembly"). Most English Bibles translate the word "Ecclesia" as church, which is actually incorrect because it is not a direct translation. Translating to church results in the term ekklesia losing much of its significance and sometimes even purpose. The modern idea that a church is a building or meeting place has brought about the dualistic belief that there are some areas of life that are sacred and some that are secular. This belief is not biblical if God is over all of life.

ORIGIN OF THE TERM ECCLESIA

Many of the Greek philosophers played around with the term Ecclesia. These include:
Plato (was born around 428 B.C., during the final years of the Golden Age of Pericles' Athens)
Socrates (was born circa 470 BC, in Athens, Greece)
Aristotle (was born circa 384 B.C. in Stagira)

The term Ecclesia was not a religious term. It was more a political, legal, legislative and governmental term.

WHAT WAS THE ECCLESIA?

Ecclesia is "a called out assembly of citizens summoned by the Master or Emperor and is a legislative assembly." The word as used in the New Testament is taken from the root of this word, which simply means to "call out." In New Testament times the word was exclusively used to represent a group of people assembled for a particular cause or purpose. It was never used exclusively to refer to a religious meeting or group.

The roots of the word ekklesia go all the way back to the city of Athens in its classical period, which stretched from roughly 550 to 350 BC. Within the city-state ekklesia consisted of all the citizens who had retained their civil rights. The ekklesia's powers were almost unlimited. It elected and dismissed magistrates and directed the policy of the city. It declared war, and it made peace. It negotiated and approved treaties and arranged alliances. It chose generals, assigned troops to different campaigns, raised the necessary money, and dispatched those troops from city to city. It was an assembly in which all members had equal right and duty. As the Roman Empire rose and supplanted the Greeks, the Romans adopted the term into Latin. All of this was done to establish and preserve the common good of people's lives.

An examination of the Greek word "ecclesia" reveals that the word is properly translated into English as the "assembly" or "congregation." Within the Biblical concept, ecclesia is used to refer to a group of persons that are organized together for a common purpose and who meet together around the purposes of their Lord to establish the common good. The idea of seeking the common good is the key underlying theme found within both historical Greek and biblical usage of the term ekklesia. God's Truth is the common good that preserves society.

The Greek democracy was established for the common good. The ekklesia therefore is an assembly of those who have been called and requires a response and an obligation to seek the common good on behalf of others.

Thus, ecclesia, centuries before the writing of the New Testament, was clearly characterized as a political phenomenon, repeated according to certain rules and within a certain framework.

The word ἐκκλησία (ekklesia) is derived from two root words, ek and kaleo. Ek is defined as “out of,” or “from.” Ek can also denote a separation. Kaleo means “to call,” or an invitation. Together they form ekklesia which is commonly translated from its roots as “those called out”. Ekklesia is often rendered “an assembly called out,” or simply, “an assembly.” The ekkletoi, the called people or those called out or assembled, constitute the ekklesia and therefore the ekklesia does not imply the action of calling or the individuals called out, but rather, it means the assembly of those who have been called out.

WHERE DID WE GET THE TERM CHURCH?

The word church (in our Bibles) ultimately traces its origin to a Greek term, kūrīkón, which was related to kurios, “lord.” The phrase kūrīkón oikía meant “the Lord’s house.” In the Middle Ages, the Greek term for “house of worship” was shortened to kūrḱón. And that’s the word that was loaned to West Germanic as kirika and eventually to Old English as cirice. Many English words, especially those related to Christianity, came from Greek and passed through early German dialects. The word church is one of those words.

The early Quakers (people who belong to a historically Protestant Christian set of denominations known formally as the Religious Society of Friends), as a matter of principle, refused to call the buildings where they met “churches,” since the biblical word church referred to people, not a building. The Quakers instead called a building designed for Christian worship a “steeplehouse.” That term is now archaic, as many church buildings no longer have a steeple.

WE ARE JESUS’ ECCLESIA

We have been chosen by Jesus to live with Him, hear His heart and take it to those who do not know Him yet. Christians are God’s ambassadors in that they have been “approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel” (1 Thessalonians 2:4). As we go through this world, we represent another Kingdom (John 18:36), and it is our responsibility to reflect the “official position” of heaven. We are in this world, but not of it (John 17:16).

The Ecclesia is a steward that demonstrates the character and nature of our Master, Jesus Christ. The ecclesia is the assembly through which the very nature of God flows in establishing His goodwill on earth. Let me give you an example.

People often treat forgiveness as if it is our property. We decide to whom we can give it as if it is ours to give. The thing is that forgiveness is not our property. Forgiveness always belongs to Jesus. If someone hurt you and you forgive them, all you are doing is passing on the forgiveness of Jesus to them. If I hurt someone and they forgive me, all that they are doing is passing on Jesus’ forgiveness to me. It is not my property, it is the property of God. If we as the church forgive someone we are allowing the stream of forgiveness from God’s heart to flow through us and into the heart of someone else. We don’t stop it. It comes from God, through us, to others. If forgiveness did belong to us we would try to control it like so many other things in our lives. Forgiveness, love, compassion, grace, etc. are all good and perfect properties of God that are supposed to pass through the Ecclesia to those around us.

WHAT ECCLESIA IS NOT

Social club or a humanitarian organisation

Non-profit organization

A building or a structure

Religious system

WHERE DOES GOD DWELL?

God "dwelleth not in temples made with hands" (Acts 17:24,48, 2 Corinthians 5:1, Hebrews 9:24).

1 Cor 6:19

Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own;

Ephesus council was called ecclesia:

In Acts 19, "ecclesia" is a town council: a civil body in Ephesus. Ecclesia is a civil body of select (called, elected) people.

THE EARLY CHURCH'S UNDERSTANDING OF ECCLESIA

It is clear upon examining the ekklesia within the Greek framework, that the purpose of the ekklesia as the assembly of God is twofold:

- to act as an establishment of God's kingdom on earth, and
- to act in regard to the common good of people, compelled by love.

Church is not a once or twice-weekly program. It is not a place you go to, but rather it is who you are. Being a part of the ekklesia requires a larger response. Looking at the original concept and meaning of ecclesia means that first, believers must respond to the call to be a part of the ekklesia and be an active members of the assembly. Secondly, believers must seek the common good of those within and outside of the ekklesia by fulfilling the great commission by fulfilling the great commandment. This requires involvement with the rest of the world. The church cannot bunker down in church buildings and proclaim the rest of the world out of its hands. The ecclesia has a responsibility to establish the kingdom of God on Earth in anticipation of the full establishment of the kingdom of God upon Christ's return.

Therefore, the presence and purpose of the ekklesia invoke a response, responsibility, and active involvement in the world. The ekklesia is responsible for involvement in all areas of life, including the civil-social. It does not benefit the common good for Christians to merely meet once a week and end their engagement when they leave the church building. To promote the common good, Christians must do the hard work of being actively engaged in the world, to included civic engagement. So, the Ecclesia (those being called out by their master) would sit with their master, lord or emperor, they would hear his heart and go out to make it law. The ecclesia had governmental and judicial power. They served as representatives of their master.