



# Church—Do You Know What It Means?

Is your understanding of *church* primarily associated with buildings, programs, worship music, missions, pastors, fund-raising, corporate structure, scheduling, and age-level ministries? If so, then a review of the biblical perspective of *church* could be very helpful and enlightening.

Basic to understanding *church* is its definition as well as its use in Scripture. Apart from this biblical basis, you are left with cultural perspectives of church that may or may not be scripturally based.

[In this study, the words *church* or *ekklesia* are used to identify a group identified as the “called out ones” in the New Testament. The word church (not italicized) is used to identify a religious organization, often incorporated or given legitimacy by another governing power.]

## WHAT DOES CHURCH MEAN? . . . PERHAPS NOT WHAT YOU THINK

You may be surprised that the Greek word for *church* in the New Testament can refer to an assembly, a gathering, or even a mob. The word also indicates that the group comes together for a common purpose.

The word translated *church* comes from *ekklesia* (transliterated from the Greek language) and is phonetically pronounced *ek-klay-see'-ah*. This word is formed from two Greek words: *ek* (meaning “from” or “out of”) coupled with a derivative of *ka-leo* (which means “to call, invite, or name”). Thus, the basic meaning of *ekklesia* is “to call out of” or, with relation to a group of people, the “called out ones.” It is understandable that *ekklesia* has been translated as “congregation” or “assembly” or “company” although these words dilute the core meaning that *ekklesia* (*church*) has a greater emphasis on people being “called out” by God instead of their meeting together.

## HOW IS CHURCH USED IN SCRIPTURE?

Matthew’s Gospel records the first mention of *ekklesia* in the New Testament, and Jesus was the speaker. In Matthew 16:18, Jesus mentioned *ekklesia* when He responded to Peter’s acknowledgment that Jesus was “the Christ, the Son of the living God.” In Matthew 18:17, Jesus also used *ekklesia* when He taught His disciples how to restore unrepentant believers.

**Matthew 16:18**, “. . . and on this rock I will build my church (*ekklesia*), and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.”

**Matthew 18:15-17**, “If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church (*ekklesia*). And if he refuses to listen even to the church (*ekklesia*), let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.”

*Ekklesia* indicates what a group **does** as much as what a group **is**. For example, the following passages refer to various groups of people (*ekklesias*) who are “called out” to meet together for specific purposes that involve most, if not everyone, in the group. As you will note, an *ekklesia* can be oriented to God’s purposes or to selfish interests.

**Acts 7:38**, This is the one who was in the congregation (*ekklesia*) in the wilderness with the angel who spoke to him at Mount Sinai, and with our fathers. He received living oracles to give to us. (In this verse, *ekklesia* refers to the people of Israel who were “called out” to Mt. Sinai in order to hear from God through Moses.)

**Acts 19:23-41** describes the mob scene in Ephesus in which the Apostle Paul’s life was at stake. In this passage the *ekklesia* was actually a mob, a group of people “called out” for a specific purpose that could lead to murder.

**Acts 19:32**, Now some cried out one thing, some another, for the assembly (*ekklesia*) was in confusion, and most of them did not know why they had come together.

**Acts 19:39**, But if you seek anything further, it shall be settled in the regular assembly (*ekklesia*).

**Acts 19:41**, And when he had said these things, he dismissed the assembly (*ekklesia*).

**1 Corinthians 11:17-18**, But in the following instructions I do not commend you, because when you come together it is not for the better but for the worse. For, in the first place, when you come together as a church (*ekklesia*), I hear that there

are divisions among you ...

**1 Corinthians 14:4-5**, The one who speaks in a tongue builds up himself, but the one who prophesies builds up the church (*ekklesia*). Now I want you all to speak in tongues, but even more to prophesy. The one who prophesies is greater than the one who speaks in tongues, unless someone interprets, so that the church (*ekklesia*) may be built up.

### WHEN DID THE NEW TESTAMENT *EKKLESIA* BEGIN?

The *church* was birthed in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost over 2,000 years ago. The New Testament book of Acts, chapter two, describes this beginning as well as the characteristics of this young *ekklesia*.

The remainder of Acts lists the many highlights of the *church's* early years. During this time, the Good News of Jesus Christ was proclaimed initially to Jews in Jerusalem and later spread to Gentiles throughout the Roman Empire. Since Jews and Gentiles were God's "called out ones" (*ekklesia*), their mutual hostility was transformed into a cooperative unity due to their common salvation provided through Jesus Christ.

**Ephesians 2:13-16**, But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. <sup>14</sup>For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility <sup>15</sup>by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two [*Jews and Gentiles*], so making peace, <sup>16</sup>and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. [*insert added*]

### WHAT IS THE PRIMARY DIFFERENCE BETWEEN *CHURCH* AND OTHER *EKKLESIAS*?

Even though *ekklesia* can refer to any "called out" group assembled for a specific purpose, a New Testament *church* differs from all other assemblies, groups, or gatherings. What is the distinction? It is this—A New Testament *church* is a divinely birthed **organism** (emphasizing life, growth, love, relationships) that is fundamentally different from a humanly formed **organization** (emphasizing structure, authority, accomplishments, goals). This critical distinction is often blurred in today's "church world."

Interestingly, a church that functions like a corporate structure (an organization) may have many *ekklesias* within it. As a result, believers can easily leave a "church organization" and its associated events/programs but have great difficulty leaving a small group of believers (*ekklesia*) within that same organizational structure.

### HOW MANY *EKKLESIAS* ARE MENTIONED IN THE NEW TESTAMENT?

As an organism, the *church* in the New Testament can refer to all the "called-out ones" throughout history (the universal *church*). It also refers to all believers in an area, a certain town, or in a home. For example:

- **UNIVERSAL *CHURCH***

**Ephesians 1:22-23**, And he (*God*) put all things under his (*Jesus*) feet and gave him as head over all things to the church (*ekklesia*), which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all. (*italics added*)

**Ephesians 3:20-21**, Now to him (*God*) who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church (*ekklesia*) and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen. (*italics added*)

**Colossians 1:18**, And he (*Jesus*) is the head of the body, the church (*ekklesia*). He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. (*italics added*)

- **BELIEVERS IN A PARTICULAR GEOGRAPHIC AREA**

**1 Corinthians 16:1**, Now concerning the collection for the saints: as I directed the churches (*ekklesias*) of Galatia, so you also are to do. (*italics added*)

**Galatians 1:22**, And I (*Paul*) was still unknown in person to the churches (*ekklesias*) of Judea ... (*italics added*)

**1 Thessalonians 1:1**, Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, To the church (*ekklesia*) of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace. (*italics added*)

- **BELIEVERS IN A SPECIFIC TOWN OR CITY**

**Acts 11:22**, News of this reached the ears of the church (*ekklesia*) at Jerusalem ... (*italics added*)

**2 Corinthians 1:1**, Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, To the church (*ekklesia*) of God that is at Corinth, with all the saints who are in the whole of Achaia (*italics added*)

**Revelation 1:11**, ... Write what you see in a book and send it to the seven churches (*ekklesias*), to Ephesus and to Smyrna and to Pergamum and to Thyatira and to Sardis and to Philadelphia and to Laodicea. (*italics added*)

- **BELIEVERS IN SOMEONE'S HOME**

**1 Corinthians 16:19**, The churches (*ekklesias*) of Asia send you greetings. Aquila and Prisca, together with the church (*ekklesia*) in their house, send you hearty greetings in the Lord. (*italics added*)

**Colossians 4:15**, Give my greetings to the brothers at Laodicea, and to Nympha and the church (*ekklesia*) in her house. (*italics added*)

**Philemon 1:1-2**, Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our beloved fellow worker and Apphia our sister and Archippus our fellow soldier, and the church (*ekklesia*) in your house: (*italics added*)

## **YOU ARE IN MORE THAN ONE EKKLESIA**

By observing the above uses of *church* in the New Testament, it is evident that all believers, past and present, are in the universal *church*. As a member of the universal *ekklesia*, you are also in a *church* identified by its location in a larger area (such as a continent, country, state, or region). Locally, you are part of an *ekklesia* in your city, town, or village. Many believers also meet in smaller *ekklesias* comprised of two or three believers up to a few dozen in a variety of settings. A local *ekklesia* can regularly meet in a large hall that can accommodate many people or—on a smaller level—meet in a home, an office, an open field, or even under a tree. The meeting location of the “called-out ones” is irrelevant; the relevance is that the “called-out ones” are coming together.

With the exception of the universal *church*—which you cannot leave—you can leave any other *ekklesia* to join with another. For example, you may choose to leave a group of believers (*ekklesia*) on one continent to join another group (*ekklesia*) on another continent. On a less expansive scale, you might move from a small *ekklesia* to another group (*ekklesia*), even in the same village or neighborhood.

In light of the relationships that are integral to *church*, it follows that a *church* is a family (Galatians 6:10). A *church* is also a body of which Jesus Christ is the Head (Ephesians 4:15-16).

**Galatians 6:10**, So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith (*or family of believers*). (*italics added*)

**Ephesians 4:15-16**, Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.

## **A CHURCH IS NOT DEPENDENT ON A BUILDING BUT IS DEPENDENT ON RELATIONSHIPS**

When a believer decides to leave or join a *church*, another building or meeting location is often in mind. In the New Testament, however, *church* is never linked to a building even though there is often a building in which a *church* may meet.

With relationships in mind, when you “leave a *church* to join another,” you depart from one group of believers in order to meet with and be in relationship with another group of believers. This is much more significant than merely leaving one worship service to begin attending another.

There is also an aspect of “leaving or joining a church” that is often overlooked. If you had the time, giftedness, and interest, you could be in a number of *churches* (*ekklesias*) simultaneously. You do not have to “completely” leave a *church* in which you now participate in order to be a functioning member of another *church*. This movement can sometimes be labeled as “church shopping” or “church hopping,” but that is a limited perspective. For example, if you are a gifted teacher, you might teach in many *ekklesias*. If you are a gifted administrator, biblical counselor, or pastor, you could be of great assistance to a number of *ekklesias* in an on-going manner. If you want to study the Bible in subject areas or for a specific ministry purpose, you might attend a number of study groups (actually, *churches*) on a regular basis. If you are a musician, your skills might benefit numerous *ekklesias* and put you in relationships with many other believers.

Being part of multiple *churches* simultaneously is not a recent development. In the New Testament, an *ekklesia* sometimes sent out some of its own members to fulfill a ministry at another location (for example: Acts 13:1-3). Representatives (missionaries, teachers, prophets, emissaries) from an *ekklesia* were used by God to start new *ekklesias* (Acts 13-14), teach correct doctrine over an extended period of time in an established *ekklesia* (Acts 18:1-10), bring news or directives from one *ekklesia* to another (Acts. 15:22-31; Acts 16:4-5), or appoint leadership in young *ekklesias*

(Titus 1:1-5). These “called out ones” were members of a local *ekklesia* that sent them out, and they were also members of their traveling ministry group (*ekklesia*) as well as possibly becoming part of the *ekklesia* that was their destination.

### **MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT CHURCH**

There are misconceptions about *church*, some of which result from an acceptance of the cultural perspective of church at the expense of the biblical definition. Other misconceptions result from traditions that are often not carefully examined for biblical integrity.

When the biblical definition of *church* is overlooked, smaller gatherings of believers who meet on a regular basis are labeled “small groups” yet, according to the New Testament, many would fulfill the characteristics of a genuine *ekklesia*. The foundation of an *ekklesia* is, at its heart, a few believers who are committed to the risen Jesus and one another and, as a result, meet together with a view to ministry and growth in Christ.

Some believe that a group of believers who meet regularly cannot be considered a *church* unless there are scripturally qualified leaders (elders) in the group. In the New Testament, however, *churches* were established as a result of people believing in Jesus Christ who then met together regularly. Logically, only after a church (*ekklesia*) came into existence was it possible to appoint (recognize the Holy Spirit’s choice of) elders to shepherd the young flock of believers.

An *ekklesia* may exist but not be considered an “official church.” This non-recognition can come from secular or religious sources. Secular authorities may not recognize small group gatherings as an “official church” because there are governmental requirements that must be met by the group. As a result, believers may choose to “render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s” and comply with “non-profit, corporation, or other ratification requirements” to be an “official church” as recognized by the government. In a government sanctioned “church,” there are usually corporate officers, corporation meetings with recorded minutes, and systematic filings to the government. Legal matters pertaining to property are typically accomplished through the government’s statutory framework for an “official church.”

From a biblical perspective, however, believers who decide to become a government recognized church can also “render unto God the things that are God’s” and **function spiritually** as a New Testament *ekklesia*. Much of the confusion concerning “what is a New Testament *church*?” results from trying to mix characteristics of a government recognized church with the living reality of a New Testament *ekklesia*. The members can be the same in both entities, but only one is a true New Testament *church*.

Strictly speaking, one can be an official member of a government sanctioned church corporation and not even be a believer. On the other hand, if one is a believer in Christ, that person is automatically a member of a New Testament *ekklesia* which requires no official sanctioning from any secular authority.

Further confusion over “what is a church?” can also result from trying to combine characteristics of a New Testament *ekklesia* and a denominationally recognized church. Denominations have requirements for a particular group of believers to be “officially” recognized as a church in that denomination. Until a group of believers meet those requirements, they are considered a “home mission work” or a “church plant” or a “home group” but not a “real” church. Even though a group of believers may not be recognized as a church by a denomination, they could be an *ekklesia* by New Testament standards.

### **CONCLUSION**

As this study indicates, there is much more to *church* than is sometimes recognized. When the various issues and perspectives are recognized and evaluated in the light of Scripture, authentic *ekklesias* can more clearly emerge and bring glory and honor to Jesus Christ.