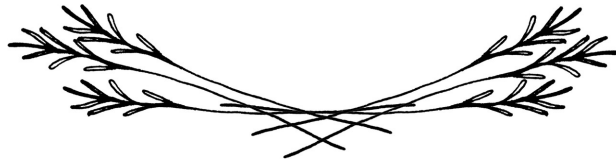


INTRODUCTION

WHY THE CHURCH?



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The church is the hope for the world. This bold assertion may strike many Christian readers as patently false—far from being the hope for the world; the church is everything that is wrong with Christianity. The church represents the institutional nature of Christianity, rules-based religion, and hypocrisy. Give me Jesus without the church! For Jesus is who is the hope for the world. He is the one who provides the perfect example of a life lived in service to God. He is the one who ate with sinners and welcomed prostitutes while chastising the hypocritical Pharisees. He is the one who sacrificed himself on behalf of others, whose blood washes away sin. He is the one who conquered death, who ascended to the right hand of God, who always intercedes on our behalf. He is the one who left behind a community of followers to carry on his mission of turning the world upside down.

Aye, there's the rub. That community of followers that Jesus left behind is the church. If the church is the body of Christ, as Paul says on a number of occasions (e.g., 1 Cor. 12:26; Col. 1:18), then you cannot have Christ without the church. (That would be like Christ without Christ.) If the church manifests the kingdom of God in the world today, then it continues the mission of the one who came announcing that kingdom. If the church is a royal priesthood and a holy nation, as Peter thinks (1 Peter 2:9), then the world needs the church to be what God designed it to be. If God has planned the church

from all eternity (Eph. 1:4) and intended the church to reveal his “manifold wisdom” to “the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places” (Eph. 3:10), then what does that mean for the importance of the church? The community Christ left behind shares his vocation of being a light to the nations (Isa. 49:6; Matt. 5:14), and bringing salvation to the ends of the earth (Matt. 28:19). The church is the hope for the world.

The importance of the church in God’s scheme of redemption becomes clear when studying Paul’s interpretation of scripture. He continually interprets the Old Testament scriptures as finding their fulfillment in the communities that he is forming throughout Europe and Asia. When the law of Moses forbids muzzling a threshing ox (Deut. 25:4), Paul insists that this commandment was written “altogether for our sake” (1 Cor. 9:9–10). The story of Israel’s sin with the golden calf (Ex. 32) was “written for our instruction” (1 Cor. 10:11; cf. Rom. 15:4). Just as Christ fulfills the promise to Abraham of a seed (Gal. 3:16; cf. Gen. 22:18), so we who are in Christ are also Abraham’s seed (Gal. 3:29). One scholar has described this interpretive strategy as Paul’s “ecclesiocentric hermeneutic,” a hermeneutic centered on the church (ecclesia).¹ Paul sees much of the Bible as leading up to and foreshadowing the church.

Terminology

The Greek word *ekklēsia* signifies the assembly of believers, and many languages have taken their word for “church” from this word (cf. Latin *ecclesia*, French *église*, Spanish *iglesia*). The English language is different in this regard: the English word “church” derives not from *ekklēsia* but from a different Greek word, *kuriakon*, an adjectival form of *kurios*, meaning “lord” (a common description of Jesus or God in

¹ See Richard B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).

Greek). The adjective *kuriakos* appears a couple of times in the New Testament, once to describe the “lordly” supper (1 Cor. 11:20), and another time to describe the “lordly” day (Rev. 1:10). In the fourth century, the adjective could signify the “lordly” house, that is, the church building, as in the following example from the early church historian Eusebius: “[The Roman Emperor Maximinus II] now allows [Christians] both to observe their form of worship and to build church buildings [*kuriaka*, plural of *kuriakon*].”²

Here the word *kuriakon* simply means “church building.” When the German tribes heard this word used for church buildings, they adopted it and applied it more broadly not only to the building but also to the institution, or the people who met in the building. The Germans bequeathed this word to the English, who made their own adjustments to the spelling and pronunciation, producing our word “church.” But this word, “church,” is now used as a translation of the New Testament word *ekklēsia*.

In the New Testament, the word *ekklēsia* appears 114 times, almost always referring to a Christian congregation or assembly. It does not have this meaning every time, such as in Acts 19:40, where it refers to an “assembly” of a pagan mob. The word also appears in the Greek Old Testament—the Septuagint, commonly abbreviated LXX—one hundred times, usually in reference to the assembly of Israel (e.g., Deut. 31:30).³ A similar Greek term, *synagōgē*, appears even more often in the LXX, a total of 221 times (e.g., Lev. 8:3). The two terms both mean “assembly” or “congregation,” but by the first century it appears that the second of these terms, *synagōgē*, had taken on the meaning of a meeting place of Jews for Sabbath worship. Likely, it was this use of

² Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 9.10.12.

³ The Old Testament was originally composed in Hebrew. It was translated into Greek beginning in the third century BC. This Greek translation, the Septuagint, was often quoted in the New Testament and became the Old Testament for the early Greek-speaking Christians. It is still the Old Testament for the Greek Orthodox Church.

synagōgē that led the Jewish followers of the resurrected Messiah to avoid the term for their gatherings and prefer the other term that was prominent in the Greek version of Israel's scriptures, *ekklēsia*.⁴

Significance

The term “church” appears only three times in the Gospels, each time on the lips of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew. This simple statistic makes it immediately clear that Jesus did not often speak about the church in those terms. Rather, he spoke of the kingdom of God, a phrase that appears 126 times in the Gospels (including related terminology, such as “kingdom of heaven”). But Jesus certainly did intend to form a community of believers who would embody his teachings and represent him to the world after his departure. The concept of the church appears more frequently in Jesus' discourses than a simple count of the appearances of the term would indicate.

The two passages in which Jesus uses the term *ekklēsia* shed important light on the nature of the community envisioned by Jesus.⁵ The first passage is the famous scene near Caesarea Philippi when Peter first confesses that Jesus is the Christ (Matt. 16:13–28). In response to this confession, Jesus says, in part, “I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it” (v. 18). This verse has generated a great deal of discussion, especially in terms of the relationship between Peter and the rock.⁶ Without entering deeply into the

⁴ See Paul Trebilco, *Self-designations and Group Identity in the New Testament* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 164–207.

⁵ It is unlikely that Jesus used the Greek word *ekklēsia* in his teaching. Jesus likely spoke Aramaic, and he probably used a corresponding Hebrew or Aramaic term, such as Hebrew *qahal* (Aramaic: *q^ēhēla*), which underlies each of the appearances of *ekklēsia* in the LXX.

⁶ See, for instance, Joseph A. Burgess, *A History of the Exegesis of Matthew 16:17–19 from 1781 to 1965* (Ann Arbor: Edwards Brothers, 1976). See also Jack P. Lewis, “‘The Gates of Hell Shall Not Prevail Against It’ (Matt 16:18): A Study of the History of Interpretation,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 38 (1995): 349–67.

discussion, I would simply point out that Peter's confession may be the rock upon which the church is built, but even if the rock is intended to be Peter himself, the meaning would not diverge far from Paul's assertion that the apostles and prophets form the foundation of the church (Eph. 2:20).

It is important to recognize two aspects of Jesus' use of the word "church" here. First, the word itself means "community" or "assembly." It is often said that "church" means the "called-out," but this is incorrect. While the word *ekklēsia* is formed by a prefix meaning "out" (*ek-*), and a lexeme meaning "called" (*klēsia*; cf. the verb *kaleō*), the compound term *ekklēsia* did not bear this significance, certainly not in first-century Greek. While Christians should be in some important ways separate from the world, we do not derive this teaching from the etymology of the word for "church." Rather, *ekklēsia* means "community," and this, in itself, is of vast significance for the nature of the Christian life. Jesus did not envision individual Christian free agents, concerned merely with their own salvation and their personal relationship with God. In this passage, it is not the individual Christian who would carry on Christ's mission in the world. Jesus established a community, a group of believers who would work together, who would care for one another, who would jointly represent Christ. Jesus himself gives the lie to the idea that one can have Christ without the church.

Second, the term *ekklēsia* connects the community established by Jesus with the community of Israel. One who reads the English Bible, beginning with Genesis, would not encounter the word "church" until Matthew 16:18, and thus might conclude that Jesus was introducing a brand new concept. But the disciples do not question Jesus about what he means by this word "church." They knew precisely what an *ekklēsia* was because the term appeared frequently in their Scriptures in reference to the community

of Israel. Jesus had come to form a renewed Israel, in line with Old Testament prophecies (e.g., Ezek. 37:15–28; Jer. 31:31). The new *ekklēsia* established by Jesus would be continuous with the people of God from the calling of Abraham forward.

The next time Jesus uses the word “church,” he is addressing a procedure for dealing with a “brother” who sins (Matt. 18:15–17). If this brother does not repent based on a personal conversation or, failing that, an intervention with a couple other believers, then the matter should come before the community (the church), and the community should attempt to persuade this brother. This text highlights the responsibility that the community bears for one another. This is no loose organization to which we can pay our annual dues and participate in if we choose. No, confessing Christ as Lord entails membership in a committed Christian community with the responsibility of helping other members of the community to maintain their faithfulness to Christ, and to accept their intervention on our behalf. Jesus intimated that his group of followers was a new type of family (Mark 3:31–35), and the term “brothers (and sisters)” is the most common designation in Paul’s letters for Christians. The community of Christ is to be as committed to one another as a family. Almost always in Paul’s letters (Ephesians and Colossians are exceptions), the term *ekklēsia* refers not vaguely to the church universal but concretely to the local congregation. This is where the rubber meets the road. The call of Jesus is a call to an actual assembly of flesh-and-blood people, with all their sins, annoyances, and folly, to be sure, but also with all their love, sacrifice, and goodwill. Whether we like it or not, Jesus has established his church, and he expects us to demonstrate a commitment to it as part of what it means to be committed to him.

Our Hope

If we want to understand our Lord better and what he expects of his followers, then we need to understand what Scripture teaches about the church. We hope that this series of studies will bless you as you seek to be salt and light to your community. We hope that it will invigorate you with the exhilarating message of the kingdom of God. We hope that it will empower you to fulfill the mission that God has entrusted to his church. We hope it will encourage your commitment to the community of believers to which God has added you (cf. Acts 2:47). Read these studies with other Christians. Look up the scripture references together. Grow in your faith together with the family of God.

Questions for Discussion

1. Can you be a faithful Christian without being a part of a local congregation?
How would Jesus or Paul respond to this question?
2. How does the meaning of the term “church” or *ekklēsia* contribute to our identity as the people of God?
3. What responsibility does the church have for one another?
4. What responsibility does the church have for the world?