
Exegesis 7: The Church and the Churches

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This exegetical work was first prepared for a BEC Study Conference in 1979 as one of a pair of addresses taking alternative evangelical views of a matter on which the churches in the BEC are not unanimous. It is included here as a reminder that beneath our intensely practical differences lie issues of the understanding and interpretation of Scripture. More work of this kind is essential if genuine evangelical ecumenism is to make progress among us.

There is perhaps no branch of theology in which we show greater reluctance to systematize Scriptural teaching than Ecclesiology. We endeavour to be scrupulously exact in collating the Biblical data, for example, on the Doctrine of God, the Doctrine of Man, the Doctrine of the Work of Christ or the Doctrine of Scripture. But the Doctrine of the Church, though clearly set forth in Scripture, even on the matters of organisation and administration, is curiously side-stepped by many. These come to the Scriptures with minds steeped in traditional conceptions and by skilful casuistry and an immoderate use of special pleading, claim to be able to find Scripture support for their particular view of the Church.

The question that has to be determined is whether the form of Church organisation is definitely prescribed in the New Testament or not. Is it a matter of expediency — each body of believers being permitted to adopt and devise that method of organisation best suited to its own circumstances and condition? Or do the Scriptures themselves prescribe the divinely-conceived pattern?

The aspect of the Doctrine of the Church which is our particular concern in this study is the relationship between the Invisible Church¹ and its visible and temporal expression. It is our endeavour to establish the meanings which attach to the term “church” in the Scriptures. It will be necessary briefly to examine the meaning of the term *ekklesia*, to survey the antecedents of its use by the New Testament writers and to evaluate its significance in the light of certain crucial passages in the New Testament itself.

The meaning of the word *ekklesia*

It used to be fashionable to lay stress upon the etymology of the Greek word *ekklesia* — *ek*, “out” and *kalein*, “to call”. The term *ekklesia* was then held to imply that the Church was constituted of those who have been called out from the world, having been chosen, elected by God. Such a view would claim

support from such New Testament passages as 1 Peter 2:9. It is generally agreed, however, that etymological considerations alone cannot determine the precise significance of the term *ekklesia*. In the everyday Greek of New Testament times, the word *ekklesia* was more or less a technical term to denote a body of free citizens who were regularly summoned to conduct the affairs of their city. This technical use of the term is to be found in the New Testament in Acts 19:39 where the Ephesian town clerk rebuked the citizens of Ephesus for their unruly and unseemly behaviour reminding them that the matter in dispute could either be settled in the law courts or in the regular assembly, *ekklesia*. In the same passage the word is used with a non-technical connotation implying simply an assembly or gathering of people — “the assembly was confused” v32, “he dismissed the assembly” v41.

According to its common usage the word lays emphasis not so much on the fact of being called out as on the fact of assembly. The *ekklesia* was first and foremost a gathering — the stress is on “togetherness”.

The use of the word *ekklesia* by the translators of the Septuagint

In endeavouring to discover the significance of the word *ekklesia* for the writers of the New Testament it is important not to overlook the fact that they were familiar with and used extensively the Greek Translation of the Old Testament (the Septuagint). They were familiar already with the word *ekklesia* apart from its secular-political use. Undoubtedly their employment of this word was coloured by its previous use by the Septuagint translators. It will, therefore, not be out of place to consider how the term was used in the Old Testament.

Two terms are used in the Hebrew Old Testament to denote “assembly” or “congregation” viz *EDAH* and *QAHAL*. The latter is more widely used. It was this latter term that the Greek translators represented by *ekklesia*. It is to be found in Deuteronomy and throughout the Old Testament Historical Books. An examination of these passages shows that *ekklesia* standing for the Hebrew *QAHAL* is used of the congregation of Israel, especially when gathered for religious purposes (eg Deut 31:30; Jdg 20:2; 1 Sam 17:47; 1 Kgs 8:14). The following references in the Psalms also confirm that the primary thought is of God’s people assembled for worship — Psalms 22:22,25; 35:18; 40:9,10; 89:5; 107:32; 149:1. The meaning of *ekklesia* in the Old Testament is essentially an “assembly” — the stress is upon gathering together, meeting in a certain locality. When Stephen was arraigned before the Sanhedrin, he referred in his defence to Moses as “he that was in the *ekklesia* in the wilderness” (Acts 7:38).

The Old Testament Church was co-extensive with the nation. Whilst in the wilderness Israel could assemble and did assemble as one vast congregation, during her later history the word *ekklesia* is primarily reserved for those occasions when Israel was assembled for a religious purpose, but even when not so assembled, Israel had ideally only one centre of worship, though distributed in its tribes throughout Palestine. Israel as the Old Testament Church was conceived of as one congregation essentially.

An examination of New Testament passages where the word *ekklesia* occurs

Quite clearly it is possible to make direct reference to only a representative selection of passages in an attempt to establish the significance of *ekklesia* in the New Testament. I am able to assure you that as far as I am aware every single passage has been examined and my selection is designed to be truly representative.

Three uses of the term *ekklesia* may be recognised in the New Testament:

- a) It is applied to the local church assembled
- b) It frequently denotes groups of believers living in one locality comprising one congregation
- c) It stands for the Church universal — the transcendental reality of which the local church is the temporal and visible expression

a) The local church assembled

The first occurrence of *ekklesia* in this sense is in the Gospels — in Mt 18:17. The Lord Jesus Christ is here dealing with the exercise of church discipline. An erring brother who fails to respond to the admonition of the individual against whom he has committed an offence and likewise remains recalcitrant when confronted by a small coterie of believers, is to be arraigned before the church. Without question the reference is to the local church assembled.

This meaning of *ekklesia* is to be found also in 1 Cor 11:18, “when ye come together in church”. Later in this same letter in Chapter 14 there is a number of such allusions. The entire chapter is taken up with the theme of orderliness in public worship. The local church assembled is plainly implied here (cf verses 4, 19, 28, 35). Both in Acts 11:26, referring to the church at Antioch (“They assembled themselves with the church”), and in Acts 15:4 and 22, referring to the Jerusalem church, the most natural sense of the context establishes the use of *ekklesia* in the meaning of the local church assembled.

b) A group of believers living in one locality and comprising one congregation

There are numerous passages belonging to this category. Acts 5:11 speaks of the solemnizing effect that the stern judgment upon Ananias and Sapphira had on the entire church in Jerusalem. “All the church” here surely means all the believers living in Jerusalem and its environs who met together for worship as one congregation. The same holds good for Acts 8:1 “the church which was at Jerusalem”. In 1 Cor 4:17 (cf 1 Cor 7:17) the Apostle Paul commends Timothy to the Corinthians as his representative to bring them into line with the other churches which he had founded under God in matters of doctrine and conduct. It is particularly noteworthy here that Paul does not say “as I teach everywhere in the whole church”, but “as I teach everywhere in every church”, as if to point to the independence of each local congregation. This sense is further corroborated by such passages as Galatians 1:2, 1 Thess 2:14 (cf Gal 1:22). Both Judaea and Galatia were relatively small geographical areas, but there is no suggestion here of the local congregations forming part of a larger entity. Paul does not speak of “the church in Galatia”, of “the church in Judaea”. The plural *ekklesia* here must be carefully noted (cf Acts

15:41 and 16:5). In his Roman letter (Rom 16:6, cf Rom 16:4) the Apostle extends greetings to the believers in Rome from “all the churches” (RV “All the churches of Christ salute you” — not “the whole church of Christ...”) Individual churches are frequently specified, for example, “the church of God which is at Corinth” (1 Cor 1:2) and “the church which is at Cenchraea” (Rom 16:1). The suggestive phrase “church of God” we will refer to again later.

c) The Church Universal — The transcendental reality of which the local church is the temporal and visible expression

The first occurrence of the term *ekklesia* in this sense is in the Gospels. In Matthew 16:18 the Lord Jesus Christ declares to Peter and the other Apostles that He will build His Church upon the rock of the truth of Peter’s confession, “upon this rock I will build my church”. The Church here referred to is not just the visible church but the Universal Church,² comprising that vast company of the saints whom no man can number “who have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb” (Rev 7:9-17). Indeed the Universal Church is made up of all those who have ever, or will ever, make the confession “thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God”. This is the supra-temporal, the transcendental Church.

Other passages which seem to bear this significance are Eph 1:22, “and hath put all things under his feet and gave him to be the head over all things to the church which is his body, the fulness of him which filleth all in all” (cf Col 1:18). Again in Ephesians 3:10, “to the intent that now unto the principalities and powers in heavenly places might be known by the church the manifold wisdom of God”. With these statements we may also compare Ephesians 5:23 “Christ is the head of the church”, v25 “Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for it”, and Heb 12:22,23 “the general assembly and church of the first-born, which are written in heaven”.

The relationship between the Church Universal and the local church

a) How does the New Testament define the relationship between the Church Universal and the local church? Although the term *ekklesia* is used of many local congregations, the New Testament writers acknowledge but *one* Church. Yet it must be emphasized that the one *ekklesia* is not the aggregate of many local *ekklesia*. It is noteworthy that the expressions used in description of the invisible and transcendent Church are also applied to the local assembly. A number of examples to illustrate this may be cited.

b) Writing to the Ephesian Christians, the Apostle Paul declares, “Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for it” (Eph 5:25). Here the context makes it abundantly plain that Paul is referring to the Church Universal. The same Apostle, however, delivering his farewell address to the elders of the Ephesian church at Miletus exhorts them “to feed the church of God which he hath purchased with his own blood” (Acts 20:28). The transcendental Church is the body of Christ (Eph 1:23), yet Paul is able to say to the Corinthian believers, “Now ye are the body of Christ and members in particular” (1 Cor 12:27).

The wording here should be noted carefully. Paul does not say as we might have expected, “ye are members of the body of Christ”, but “ye *are* the body of Christ”.

c) Further, the application of the phrase “church of God” to both the local church and to the transcendental Church demands careful consideration. When Paul expostulates with the Corinthians about their unseemly behaviour in their participation in the Lord’s Supper, he says “despise ye *the church of God?*” (1 Cor 11:22). Similarly in the matter of their eating food that had been first presented to the gods in a pagan temple, he commands “Give none offence, neither to the Jews, nor to the Gentiles nor to *the church of God*” (1 Cor 10:32). The plural of this remarkable expression occurs in 1 Cor 11:16. Timothy is reminded that “the house of God” in which he holds office is “the church of the living God” (1 Tim 3:15). In the same way those who are appointed to hold office as overseers (bishops) must have their own households under effective disciplinary control otherwise how can such “take care of the church of God” (1 Tim 3:5).

d) The evidence presented here seems capable of only one interpretation. The invisible Church or the Church Universal takes local and temporal form in the individual assembly. The transcendental Church is concretely exhibited in the local church. Each local congregation is a kind of microcosm of the whole Church. Is not this the most natural meaning-of such an expression as “the church of God which is at Corinth” (1 Cor 1:2)? It would seem that the apostle addresses the assembly at Corinth as the local and temporal expression of the Church of God — the Church Universal. Each local church has a certain completeness in itself; it is able to and should function as the body of Christ.³

An examination of the view that the New Testament uses the word in a third sense as a collective term

There are many who maintain that the New Testament writers make use of the word *ekklesia* in another sense besides the two meanings we have already considered. It is suggested that support can be found in the New Testament for the view that *ekklesia* denotes the whole body of those who have confessed their faith in Christ throughout the world and who are organized for worship. The following passages are usually adduced to demonstrate this use of the term *ekklesia*.

a) In the great passage on the gifts of the Spirit, Paul declares to the Corinthians, “And God hath set some in the church, first apostles, secondarily prophets...” (1 Cor 12:28). Is the Apostle using the word church here in a sense other than the two meanings which we have already established? Are we to understand that the reference is to the visible church as it existed at the time throughout the world? It may be argued that mention of offices and functions confines the statement to the visible church as that church alone is organized and subject to administration. At the same time such a passage as Ephesians 2:19-22 which plainly refers to the transcendental Church still recognizes the special place that certain individuals hold in relation to this mighty spiritual edifice. The use of *ekklesia* in 1 Cor 12:28 cannot therefore be cited as

unquestionably pointing to a third dimension in the meaning of the term. The context does not *require* us to interpret *ekklesia* as implying the visible Church throughout the world.⁴ We need more conclusive evidence before we can claim that this third meaning for the term *ekklesia* has New Testament warrant. Similarly, the striking phrase, “the Israel of God” in Galatians 6:16 though regarded by many as pointing to the visible Church in the world organized for worship, is more appropriately construed as an epithet for the supra-temporal Church.⁵

b) One passage *alone* on the surface appears to offer an exception to the otherwise consistent use of the term *ekklesia* in the New Testament to denote either the local assembly or the Church Universal. The crucial statement to which we refer is in Acts 9:31. The text of the Authorised Version reads, “Then had the churches rest throughout all Judaea and Galilee and Samaria and were edified; and walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Ghost, were multiplied”. This use of the plural *ekklesiai* accords with New Testament usage and raises no problem. It has long been recognized, however, that the Authorised Version at this point lacks the support of what are held to be the best and most reliable Greek manuscripts. Probably the Revised Version substitution of the singular “church” for the plural “churches” is to be acknowledged as the correct reading. How are we to explain this solitary exception of the use of *ekklesia* in the singular to denote a group of churches located in various places throughout Judaea, Galilee and Samaria?

The first point that must be made is that this is the only passage where the word *ekklesia* is employed in the singular to designate a number of local Christian assemblies. We must, therefore, look for some explanation which will justify this use of the singular without conflicting with its universal import outside this passage. We must not omit to take note of the fact that the Apostle Paul twice uses the plural “churches” when referring to this same group of local assemblies. He tells the Galatian Christians that he was “unknown by face unto the churches of Judaea which were in Christ” (Gal 1:22). The Thessalonian believers are reminded for their encouragement that in their experience of persecution following their reception of the Word of God they “became followers of the churches of God which in Judaea are in Christ Jesus” (1 Thess 2:14).

There are two ways of explaining this exceptional use of the singular *ekklesia* in this passage:

(i) The many separate assemblies here designated by the singular *ekklesia* had in fact been *one church* originally. As a direct result of the persecution that was mounted against the Jerusalem church following the death of Stephen, the Jewish believers “were all scattered abroad throughout the regions of Judaea and Samaria, except the apostles” (Acts 8:1). The “church” referred to in Acts 9:31 was in fact the original Jerusalem church now driven by persecution to occupy different localities throughout Palestine. The singular “church” then can be explained as due to this exceptional circumstance. These separate

congregations had formerly assembled together. There are those who raise doubts as to whether the Jerusalem church being so numerous could have constituted one congregation. John Owen aptly comments, "It is of no force which is objected from the multitude of them that were said to believe, and so, consequently, were of that church, so as that they could not assemble together, for whereas the Scripture says expressly that the 'multitude' of the church did 'come together', it is scarce fair for us to say they were such a multitude as that they could not come together" (Works vol xv — An Inquiry into the Original, Nature, Institution, Power, Order and Communion of Evangelical Churches).

(ii) Supplementing this attractive explanation mention may be made of the suggestion of Dr F J A Hort that the scattered Jerusalem church occupied the territory of "the ancient Ecclesia which had its home in the whole land of Israel" (The Christian Ecclesia, p 46). Either way a unique situation obtained which made the use of the singular *ekklēsia* appropriate without violating its essential meaning of "an assembly".

A consideration of evidence that seems to go against the autonomy of the local congregation

It may still be mooted, however, whether the New Testament invariably acknowledges the complete autonomy of the local church. What conclusions are we to reach, for example, regarding the Council of Jerusalem? Does not the Jerusalem church here claim jurisdiction over the churches of Syria and Asia Minor? A careful study of the account of the Council in Acts 15 enables the following points to be established.

a) The important discussion concerning the relationship of the Gentile converts to the ceremonial ordinances of the Jewish law did not arise on the initiative of the church at Jerusalem. The church in Jerusalem did not convene the so-called Council. The circumstances which gave rise to the Council were as follows: Certain Jewish Christians from Jerusalem (or Jews who had espoused much of the Christian Gospel) visited the church at Antioch and stressed that for Gentiles as well as for Jews circumcision was a *sine qua non* of their enjoyment of the full benefits of salvation. Paul and Barnabas strenuously resisted their teaching with the result that the church at Antioch commissioned Paul and Barnabas and other representatives of the Antiochean church to take the matter up with the apostles and elders of the church in Jerusalem. The initiative belonged to the church at Antioch which voluntarily instituted this momentous debate.

b) In the deliberations of the Council, James acts as the chairman and sums up after first Peter and then Paul and Barnabas have presented their conclusive evidence that believing Gentiles were treated by God as on an equal footing with believing Jews. His proposal concerning the letter that should be sent to the Gentile churches in Antioch, Syria and Cilicia was agreed by the whole church as well as the apostles and elders. Paul and Barnabas and the other representatives from Antioch were clearly well satisfied with the outcome of the discussion though the letter that they took with them was written in the name of the apostles and elders of the Jerusalem church. The stipulations

made in the letter to the Gentile Christians are called “decrees” (*ta dogmata*) in Acts 16:4 and are stated to have been “ordained of the apostles and elders which were at Jerusalem”. This might appear to indicate that the Jerusalem church had a jurisdiction over these other churches. It must be borne in mind, however, that the church at Jerusalem was the mother church and was still directed in its affairs by the apostles and thus possessed a unique authority. Further, it was entirely composed of Jews and needed in the crisis that had arisen to declare unequivocally that Gentile believers were in no way inferior to Jewish believers. The decisions of the Council were of a binding nature not because they came from the Jerusalem church, but because they had been formulated by the apostles under the direction of the Holy Spirit (Acts 15:28).

It should be noted also that the particular matter raised at this Council was *sui generis* and no other examples of this kind of special direction to local churches is to be found in the New Testament. Insofar as the Council of Jerusalem has any bearing upon the relationship that should exist between local congregations, it may be said to provide a precedent for mutual consultation on matters of common concern. But here is to be found no warrant for setting up central bodies that have jurisdiction over the affairs of local congregations. If we claim to derive our authority from the New Testament for the organization and administration of the churches, it has to be acknowledged that no support can be found for organization of local assemblies within denominations. Such conceptions as lie behind the phrases “the Baptist Church”, “the Congregational Church”, “the Anglican Church”, are quite foreign to the teaching of the New Testament whether implicit or explicit.

The autonomy of local churches in New Testament times was in measure curtailed by the authority of the apostles. The Pauline letters as well as those of Peter, James and John contain *commands* as well as counsels and exhortations. The apostles claim by virtue of their office to have jurisdiction over the local assemblies of believers. The Apostolate, however, was a once-for-all phenomenon in the Christian Church (cf Eph 2:19,20) and can provide no precedent for the infringement of the autonomy of local congregations in post-apostolic times.

Different perhaps is the office or function of evangelist. Men such as Philip (Acts 21:8,9), Timothy (2 Tim 4:5), Titus and perhaps John Mark belonged to this class. Some of the duties that went with the work of an evangelist may be gathered from the instructions given by Paul to Timothy and Titus. Their work was to preach, to baptize and also to govern the affairs of the churches under their jurisdiction. To them was committed the responsibility of ordaining elders in the local assemblies (Tit 1:5; 1 Tim 5:22). They were also responsible for the exercise of discipline (Tit 3:10). Their authority seems to have been more general than that of the officers of the local congregations and somewhat superior. Possibly they should be regarded rather as those who were representatives of an absent authority (ie that of the Apostle Paul) rather than as possessing inherent authority. While this would apply to Timothy and Titus, it does not hold good for Philip. But then we have no evidence that

Philip acted as an evangelist in the same way as Paul's two protégés. It must therefore be left an open question as to whether there is a permanent place in the life of the churches for men of exceptional spiritual insight and wisdom who may fill the role of evangelist in the New Testament sense of that term. That certain individuals possess the gift for such a function (the word is chosen advisedly rather than "office") seems undeniable. If the gift is bestowed, then should it not be exercised?

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References

Scripture references are from the Authorized Version except where indicated otherwise.

1. By "Invisible Church" we mean the whole company of the redeemed whose names are "written in the Lamb's book of life", whether in heaven or on earth.
2. The epithets "visible" and "universal", like "invisible" (see note 1), mean different things to different people. We use the term "universal" as equivalent to "invisible". Of course, the Universal Church is always partly visible. But even then, those who appear to belong to the Church may be members only in a formal sense.
3. The question arises of necessity as to what constitutes the local church. In New Testament times the local church consisted of all believers in one locality who formed one congregation. Denominationalism has sadly fragmented the local church.
4. Paul could be referring to the church in Corinth itself in this statement. Both he and Peter were held in high esteem by members in the church who acknowledged their authority as extending to them.
5. Clearly the phrase cannot be restricted to the Church on earth, but includes all those who are Abraham's seed because they are Christ's (Gal 3:29) ie the elect race as a whole.

The means which God has ordained for giving expression to the unity we have as Christians is the honouring of the mutual obligations which He has laid upon us — eg to love one another (John 13:34,35) and to pursue that oneness of mind, heart and life which will be the outcome of our being 'sanctified in the truth' (John 17:17-23). It is the honouring of these obligations that is to tell the world that we are one, not the provision of a self-perpetuating hierarchy of priests and bishops headed by a Pope, speciously claiming that it constitutes 'the visible sign (and source) of the unity of the whole Church'. Today, as in the past, such hierarchical superstructures have only served to perpetuate 'churches' which have long since departed from New Testament doctrines and standards.

J Elwyn Davies 'STRIVING TOGETHER'
