



# **Ecclesiology**

The Study of the Church

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# ECCLESIOLOGY

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## IS THIS YOUR CHURCH? ACTS 2:44-47 - A Modern Version

“And all those who had believed were apart and had nothing in common; and they began hoarding their possessions and property and neglecting anyone who might have need. And once a week the religious met for Sunday morning and evening worship plus Wednesday night Bible study. And all assembled with a divided mind, in their own churches on their own corners. And afterwards they all retreated to their houses in suburbia, to live the rest of the week apart from each other and in a lifestyle acceptable to their pagan neighbours. And they ate alone in sadness and insecurity, blaming God for their troubles. And they were laughed at by their neighbours. And God withheld from their midst any power or blessing and their number decreased day by day”.

(After Grant Edwards in "The Other Side", Issue 134, November 1982)

## OR THIS? ACTS 2:44-47 - New International Version

“All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved”. ("Get Your Act Together Cinderella" by Michael Griffiths, Griffiths 1989:14).

## GOD HAS ALWAYS WANTED HIS PEOPLE TO LIVE IN CORPORATE RELATIONSHIP

Bruce Milne writes:

"Biblical religion is inescapably corporate. Even before the fall Adam was not fulfilled without a human partner (Gn 2:18). Corporateness in God's creative purpose is echoed in his unfolding redemptive purpose. His covenants with Noah (Gn 9:8) and Abraham (Gn 12:1-3; 15:1-5; 28:14) clearly reach beyond the individual to embrace immediate descendants and even "all peoples on earth".

The Old Testament is the story of a people and all the variety of God's dealings with them. True, great individuals stand out, and personal relationship with God in his grace is fundamental (Deut 24:16; Ps 23:1; 51:10-12; Ezek 18), but the context remains essentially corporate. The believing

community is the soil in which personal faith sprouts and is nourished. Thus the Messianic hope has a corporate dimension in the Old Testament, where the Son of Man and suffering servant are both individual and corporate figures (Dn 7:13f.,27; Is 42:1; 44:1). In the light of New Testament fulfillment we see that the primary thrust of these passages is individual: they refer to the Lord Jesus Christ. But equally clearly a Messiah isolated from the Messianic people was unthinkable.

The New Testament continues this sense of corporateness. Jesus comes for the salvation of a people (Mt 1:21). He gathers a group of twelve disciples, corresponding in number to the tribes of Israel, the new people of God with whom he will bind to God in the new covenant through his redemptive mission. Jesus explicitly refers to the “church” which will arise beyond the climax of his ministry (Mt 16:18; 18:17), and his final commission clearly envisages a continuing community of faith and witness (Mt 28:19f.).

Pentecost itself was essentially corporate (Acts 2:1f.). From that point the disciples’ experience develops in corporate terms (Acts 2:44-47; 4:32-35; 5:12-16; 6:1-7). As the gospel spread to the Gentile world, the disciples grouped in churches in the different centres of population (Acts 11:26; 13:1; 14:23). James expresses the apostolic understanding of the purpose of God as “taking from the Gentiles a people for himself” (Acts 15:14).

Scripture then knows nothing of solitary religion. No one can be reconciled to God without being reconciled to the people of God among whom his experience of God’s grace immediately sets him. Thus soteriology (the doctrine of salvation) is indissolubly bound up with ecclesiology (the doctrine of the church).

(Milne 1982:209,210)

## **THE BIBLICAL DEFINITION OF THE CHURCH**

### **1. The meaning of the Greek word “ekklesia”.**

- a) Probably most people today think of the word “church” as a building. In that case the New Testament Christians never went to church at all. Apart from the temple and the synagogues, which were used by Christians before the rift came from Judaism, no buildings were set aside solely for the purpose of worship until the fourth century.

When Tyndale first translated the Bible into English in 1525 he translated the word “ekklesia” as “congregation” avoiding using the word “church”. Unfortunately the King James’ translators of 1611 used the word “church”, leaving most English speakers a sad legacy: the view that the church is a building in which a congregation may or may not be meeting.

- b) The Greek word “ekklesia” from which we get our English word “ecclesiastical” simply means “called out”. It referred to “those who have been called out”. The word was not a creation of the Christian church. When the Christian church annexed it for its purposes, it was already a word with a history, and a double history.

i. First, the word had a Jewish background.

In the Septuagint, the Greek version of the Hebrew scriptures, the word “ekklesia” translates the Hebrew word “qahal” which again comes from the root meaning: “to summon”. In the Septuagint, the word “ekklesia” is regularly used for the assembled people of Israel, that is, the assembled people of God. It is, for instance, used for the assembly of the people on the day when the Ten Commandments were given by God to Moses. The book of Deuteronomy speaks of “all the words, which the Lord spoke with you in the mount out of the midst of the fire in the day of the assembly –“ekklesia” (Deut 9:10; 18:16). Frequently the word is used for the assembly or the congregation of Israel. (Deut 31:30; Jud 20:2; 1 Sam 17:47; 1 Ki 8:14; Ps 22:22). The very use of this word carries with it the implication that the Church is the people of God. Israel was God’s chosen people; but Israel had failed to recognise and to accept God’s Son, when he came; Israel had therefore lost her place and her knowledge as a nation. The new Israel, the new people of God, the new “ekklesia” was now the Church. The very word “ekklesia” lays it down that it is the Christian Church which is the true instrument and agent of God.

Michael Griffiths notes four aspects of God’s summoning of the congregation of Israel. (Griffiths 1975:15f). In these we find four vital aspects of the New Testament Church, for Israel’s experiences as the congregation of God in the Old Testament are recorded for the church’s instruction and warning. (1 Cor 10:1-11).

➤ Called out

Israel was God’s “called out” ones. God said of them, “When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son”. (Hos 11:1f). What a marvelous shadow of the New Covenant church! God brought Israel through a process of physical bondage in Egypt (which represents, in the Bible, the kingdom of this world). They underwent a physical baptism at the Red Sea. (1 Cor 10:2) Moreover, no sooner were they released from their bondage of Egypt than Pharaoh and all his armies sought to recapture them, even as Satan is quick to try to bring the new Christian back into the bondage of sin. For the next forty years - a number which often denotes trial in the Bible - they journeyed in the wilderness where dangers and deprivation lurked; yet as they looked to God he provided their every need. Finally, they entered their earthly inheritance of the Promised Land. All of this was a physical shadow of the spiritual exodus from sin that the Christian church experiences.

Notice how Israel’s salvation was wholly the sovereign act of God. They were utterly unable to free themselves from bondage. It was the miraculous intervention of God that freed them. They could not pass through the Red Sea in order to escape from Pharaoh by their own efforts; it was God who parted the waters and defeated Pharaoh for them. Throughout their journeyings it was God who protected them and provided for them. Without him they could not have survived the pilgrimage, for he was their very sustenance.

Finally it was God who brought them across Jordan and gave them possession of the Promised Land.

The church is the “called out” people of God. The term “church of God” is in fact by far the commonest description of the church in the New Testament. (1 Cor 1:2; 2 Cor 1:1; Gal 1:13; 1 Thess 2:14; 1 Tim 3:5, 15). The church belongs to God, has come from God, and owes every good gift that it enjoys to God. Without the love of God, the initiative of God, the salvation of God, the revelation of God, and the call of God, there would be no church. When party spirit crept into the Corinthian church, Paul chided them for their fleshy cult of human personalities and their failure to realise that everything comes from God. “What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each. I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth... For we are God’s fellow workers; you are God’s field, God’s building.” (1 Cor 3:5-9). And although the church is sometimes called the “church of Christ,” or the “body of Christ,” it is the divine origin of life of the church that is being stressed repeatedly.

➤ Called for

God’s people were called for a relationship with him. This was the basis of the covenants established with Abraham and Moses. Abraham became the “friend” of God. Israel entered into covenant relationship with him, whereby he dwelt in their midst. The pillar of cloud and fire represented God’s presence among them. When the pillar moved, they moved; when it stood still, they made camp. At Sinai God instructed them to make a tabernacle in which his presence would dwell. Thus wherever Israel went God was with him.

Likewise, Christ called his disciples “my friends”. Christians are “called (by God) into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.” (1 Cor 1:9). Now that we have been “born anew”, we are to “come to him, to that living stone...; and like living stones be built into a spiritual house... to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.” It is significant that when Jesus called the twelve apostles, he called them to him and appointed them “to be with him”; and it was only from this primary fellowship with him that they were sent out to preach and heal. The church must never become a religious society for good works; at the heart of it all is this personal and corporate relationship with God.

➤ Called together

Israel’s calling was into a new community, and God called them together. They partook of the Passover together. They left Egypt together. They went through the baptism at the Red Sea together. They ate and drank together: “and all ate the same supernatural food and drank the same supernatural drink”. (1 Cor 10:4). They marched together, facing foes and trials together. They experienced God’s miraculous power together and they entered the Promised Land together.

The call of God is not purely a private affair. Abraham’s calling entailed the promise of descendants like the sand and stars in number, comprising a great family of children. When

we become Christians we also become a part of that Abrahamic family. (Gal 3:29). That we are in one great family is also evident from the fact that God speaks of us all as his sons, and the New Testament continually refers to us as brothers and sisters in Christ. So we find that after the church began “the Lord added to their number [i.e. to the church] day by day those who were being saved”. (Acts 2:47).

Further the “community” reminds us that each local church must learn to live as a true community seven days a week, and not just have a nodding acquaintance with one another for an hour or two each Sunday. Relationships must be built up in love, personal needs met by the sharing of gifts, and practical help offered by a caring fellowship giving loving service in the name of Christ....

The Protestant Church particularly has never learned the secret of community. “Protestantism in general has emphasised the individual over the community. Too often the church has been seen more as a collection of saved souls than as a community of interacting personalities. But the model of Christ with his disciples, the example of the early church, and the explicit teaching of Jesus and Paul should call us back to the importance of community. Fellowship and community life are necessary in order to prepare Christians for witness and service. Every Christian is a witness in the world, but his effectiveness depends largely on his sharing the enabling common life of the church.”

Jeff Schiffmeyer, from the Church of the Holy Redeemer, Houston, Texas, once put it vividly like this: “The effectiveness of our ministry depends on the fervency of our love for one another.”

#### ➤ Called to

When God called Abraham, it was to a future inheritance. “By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go to a place which he was to receive as an inheritance.” (Heb 11:8). So too Israel was called to journey towards a specific goal, the land of Promise. And it is no different with the church. We have been called out of spiritual Egypt for our journey towards a future inheritance. Thus Paul urged Timothy to “take hold of the eternal life to which you were called.” (1 Tim 6:12). We are presently heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, and the Holy Spirit is the first installment of our promised inheritance.

Obedience to this call will never be easy, and suffering has always been a mark of God’s people as they journey to the promised land. “After you have suffered a while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, establish, and strengthen you.” (1 Pet 5:10). Unfortunately, the trials that come upon us frequently cause us to become discouraged so that we do not make the progress we should. The setting forth of the great inheritance that awaits the church needs therefore to figure prominently in our teaching and exhortation, as the apostles constantly realised. Indeed it was this clear vision of the future that enabled Jesus himself to endure sufferings. The writer of Hebrews speaks of “Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.” (Heb 12:2). When a church has a vivid picture of the goal ahead its members will be

able to say with Paul that all the “sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.” (Rom 8:15-18).

We can never afford to lose sight of the fact that the church has been called to an inheritance, and that we are journeying continually. Ekklesia, like the kingdom of God, is something dynamic. The traditional picture of a static church, solid in its establishment, conservative in its attitudes, entrenched in familiar patterns of work and worship, is a gross distortion of the church as it is meant to be and as pictured in the Bible. The Old Testament speaks of the “church in the wilderness”, the New Testament of “aliens and exiles” (1 Pet 2:11) - members of the household of God, yes, but travelling through the desert wastes of this world and through the valleys of the shadow of death until the consummation of all things in Christ, when the kingdom of the world becomes the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ. It is therefore a people on the move, delivered from Egypt, summoned at Sinai to meet with God, and called to go with him to the land of promise.

It must never become a people that settle down in the wilderness, but always alive and alert, pressing on “toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.” (Phil 3:14).

The temptation, however, is always to look back, and not to move with the cloud and fire of God’s presence. Like an immature or insecure adult clinging to the memories of childhood, the church can cling to the past and hold on to forms and structures that were meaningful yesterday. In terms of music, language, dress, style of presentation, methods of teaching, the decoration of church buildings and church halls, the format of church magazines, and the appearance of church bookstalls (if they exist at all) and of church notice boards - all so often proclaim with one accord that God is the God of yesterday; he is not to be looked for, expected, or to be found today. And that, for the church of the living God, is tragedy.

Often throughout the history of the church the pattern has been the same: God breathes into his church fresh life by the renewing power of the Holy Spirit: man likes what he sees, organises it, regiments it; and the patterns therefore continue for decades, if not for centuries, after the Spirit has quietly made his departure. God’s plan for continuous renewal becomes the Church’s Society for Historic Preservation. The aliens and exiles have settled down in the world that is not their home; and, buried beneath an avalanche of synodical reports, liturgical reforms, ecumenical debates and ecclesiastical paraphernalia, they are virtually unable to listen to, or respond to, the gently but urgent promptings of the Holy Spirit.

However, that is not what it should be. The church must learn to be on the move, always relevant for today’s world. If it cannot speak in the language and culture of this present generation, whom it has been called to serve, it is tragically out of touch, not only with the world of today but also with the God of today. Of course God himself never changes. His love and truth endure forever. Yet our understanding of him, and his communication through us, should be changing all the time. That is the adventure of faith that the church is called to make. In the words of Leslie Newbigin, “The church is the pilgrim people of God. It is on the move - hastening to the ends of the earth to beseech all men to be reconciled to

God, hastening to the end of time to meet its Lord who will gather all men in to one.” (Newbigin 1953:25)

Also, John Stott writes:

"The Church is a people, a community of people, who owe their existence, their solidarity and their corporate distinctness from other communities to one thing only - the call of God. It all began with Abraham, called by God to leave his own country and kindred in order to be given another country and another kindred, in order to be made a great people through whom all peoples on earth would be blessed. Several times this covenant of grace was confirmed to Abraham, that through his descendants all earth's nations would be blessed. (Gn 22: 17-18). It was then further confirmed to Abraham's son Isaac and to Isaac's son Jacob. But Jacob died in captivity. So did his distinguished son Joseph. Indeed Genesis ends with the prosaic information that after Joseph died, he was embalmed and "put in a coffin in Egypt". (Gn 50:26)

But there was a great leap forward in the fulfillment of God's promise when through Moses, descended from Jacob's son Levi; He rescued the people from their slavery. "When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son." (Hos 11:1). Three months after the Exodus they entered the wilderness of Sinai, and the Lord told Moses to say to the people:

"You have seen... how I bore you on eagles" wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you will obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my own possession among all peoples; for all the earth is mine and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." (Ex 19:4-6).

So the covenant was ratified, the law given, the tabernacle worship begun. Later the promised land was conquered, and later still the monarchy established. But it all ended in disaster. God's people broke His covenant, rejected His law and despised His prophets, until there was no remedy. The judgment of God fell upon them, and the second Babylonian captivity began. Yet God did not abandon His people. In due course, true to His promise to bless them, He called them out of Babylon, as He had called them out of Egypt, and He restored them to their own land. As God said through Jeremiah:

"Therefore, behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when it shall no longer be said, "As the Lord lives who brought up the people of Israel out of the land of Egypt," but "As the Lord lives who brought up the people of Israel out of the north country and out of all the countries where he had driven them." For I will bring them back to their own land which I gave to their fathers." (Jer 16:14-15).

But God had also promised through His people to bless all the nations of the earth. And this came to pass through Christ. For God's call into the land of Canaan first of Abraham's family from Ur and from Haran, then of Jacob's descendants from Egypt, and then the remnant of Judah from Babylon all foreshadowed a better call, a greater redemption, and a richer inheritance. Through the death and resurrection of Christ, God's purpose is to call out



of the world a people for Him, to redeem them from sin, and to cause them to inherit His promises of salvation.

So the church is God's people, His "ecclesia", called out of the world to be His, and existing as a separate entity solely because of His call. The New Testament insists strongly upon this fact. God has called us "into the fellowship of his Son Jesus Christ our Lord," called us "to belong to Jesus Christ". (1 Cor 1:9; Rom 1:6) This divine call is "a holy calling", a calling "in holiness". (2 Tim 1:9; 1 Thess 4:7). God calls us to be holy as He is holy, and "to lead a life worthy of the calling" to which we have been called, so that by the sanctifying power of the Holy Spirit we may become in character and conduct what we already are in status, namely "saints", the holy, the distinct, the separate, the special people of God. (Rom 1:7; 1 Cor 1:2; Acts 15:14; Tit 2:14).

But God's call is not intended to withdraw the Church out of the world into pietism. As Bishop Leslie Newbigin puts it, "the Church... is a community in via, on its way to the ends of the earth and to the end of time". Again, "the Church is the pilgrim people of God. It is on the move - hastening to the ends of the earth to beseech all men to be reconciled to God, and hastening to the end of time to meet its Lord who will gather all into one."

It is for this reason, he argues, that the Church cannot be understood rightly except in a perspective which is at once missionary and eschatological. "eschatological", derived from (Greek) "eschatos" (last) or "eschaton" (end), refers to the end of time and the last things, the consummation which lies behind history. So, the New Testament authors declare, the God who has called us out of the world sends us back into the world:

"You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light." (1 Pet 2:9)

He has also called us like Christ to suffer in the world unjustly, and through suffering He has called us "to his eternal glory in Christ". (1 Pet 2:20-21; 5:10) Such is the Church, God's people, called out of the world to Himself, called to holiness, called to mission, called to suffering, and called through suffering to glory." (Stott 1969:17-19)

ii. Secondly, the word had a Greek background.

In the great Greek democracies the ruling body of a city was called the "ekklesia". It consisted of every citizen who had not lost his rights as a citizen. It was comprised of all free men who were citizens of their city. It was the "ekklesia" which elected and deposed the magistrates, which received and sent out ambassadors, and which had the last word in the administration of justice and the making of the laws. The herald used to go through the streets calling the people together to some public place where they would debate whatever was on the agenda. The resulting assembly was the "ekklesia". So to the Greek the word "ekklesia" would tell of the glories of citizenship; and when the Christians took over the word, the member of the "ekklesia", if he were a Greek, could think of himself most easily and naturally as a citizen of the kingdom of heaven.

It is seldom that the great historical national ideals of two lines of culture meet as they do in the word “ekklesia”.

## 2. The two ways in which the word "Church" is used in the New Testament.

The early Christians used the word “Church” in two ways. Harry C. Thiessen writes:

### i) In the universal sense.

In the universal sense the church consists of all those who, in this age, have been born of the Spirit of God and have by that same Spirit been baptized into the body of Christ (1 Cor 12:13; 1 Pet 1:3, 22-25). That the term is used in this universal sense is evident because Christ spoke of building his church, not churches (Mt 16:18); Paul grieved because he had persecuted the church (1 Cor 15:9; Gal 1:13; Phil 3:6); Christ is said to have loved the church and to have given himself for her (Eph 5:25); our Lord is purifying and sanctifying the church (Eph 5:26f.); he is the head of the church (Eph 1:22; 5:23; Col 1:18).

### ii) In the local sense.

In the local sense the word “church” is used for the group of professed believers in any one locality. Thus, we read of the church in Jerusalem (Acts 8:1; 11:22), in Ephesus (Acts 20:17), in Cenchrea (Rom 16:1), and in Corinth (1 Cor 1:2, 2 Cor 1:1). We read of the church of the Laodiceans (Col 4:16) and of the Thessalonians (1 Thess 1:1; 2 Thess 1:1). Sometimes the term is in the plural, as in the churches of Galatia (Gal 1:2), of Judea (1 Thess 2:14), and of Asia (Rev 1:4). The local churches together are to be a faithful replica of the true church, the universal church.

It is interesting that the figures used for the church are used equally of the individual believer, the local church, and the universal church. The figures of bride, body, building and flock are used of the church universal (Eph 5:25; 1:23; 2 Cor 6:16; Heb 13:20, respectively), and of the individual believer (Rom 7:4; Rom 6:12; 1 Cor 6:19; Luke 15:4-10, respectively). (Thiessen 1949:311,312).

The relation between a local company of Christians and the whole of God’s people has no parallel, for the local group is not simply one relatively incomplete part of the greater whole. The New Testament teaches rather that the local church, while indissolubly united to the whole people of God, is nonetheless a complete church. All the promises of God obtain for it, and thus the head and Lord of the Church, is as fully present there as in any extended entity. (Mt 18:20).

The illustration of this used by Alan Stibbs is helpful. (Stibbs 1948:69). When we say, “Look at the moon!” whether what we see is a thin crescent or a full moon; we do not say, “Look at part of the moon”. It is the “moon” in character, whether we see part or whole; indeed we never see more than one side at a time from earth. So also Christians meeting together are the “church”. We see only a small outcrop of a large rock formation.