

## **Series: The Church in God's Program**

### **Lesson 1: The Basics: The meaning and uses of the Word Church**

*In this lesson we will examine the biblical meaning of the term "church": its English term and its various usages; the Greek term, both in secular use and as applied by New Testament believers; and the distinction between the local and universal meaning of "church". Finally, we will close by examining what the biblical meaning of church does not mean.*

#### **The English Term Church**

The English word *church*, the Scottish word *kirk* and German *kirche* are derived from the Greek *κυριακον*, which is the neuter adjective of *κυριος*, "Lord," and means, "belonging to the Lord".

*Κυριακον* is used only twice in the New Testament, neither time with reference to the church as commonly used today. In 1Corinthians 11:20, "Therefore when you *meet together*, it is not to eat the Lord's Supper," speaks of a gathering, with no reference to place. In Revelation 1:10, "I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like the sound of a trumpet," again has no reference to a location of gathering, but to a day of when believer's gather (probably first day of the week).

Its application to the church stems from its use by early Christians for the place where they met together, denoting it as a place belonging to God, or God's house. With the realization that the place had significance only because of the people of God who met in it, the term was applied to the assembly itself. From this its meaning has extended to various contemporary uses:

- 1) a place of meeting,
- 2) a local organization of believers,
- 3) the universal body of believers,
- 4) a particular denomination
- 5) an organization of believers related to a particular area or nation, for example, the Church of England.

#### **The Greek Word**

##### *The Etymological Meaning*

The Greek term *Εκκλησια* (ekklesia) εκ, "out", and καλεο, "to call or summon," which together mean "to call out."

### ***Secular Meaning***

Originally the Greeks used the term for “assembly of citizens summoned by the crier, the legislative assembly.” The term eventually came to stand for any assembly regardless of its constituents or manner of convening.

Acts 19:32 “So then, some were shouting one thing and some another, for the *assembly* was in confusion and the majority did not know for what reason they had come together.”

Acts 19:39 “But if you want anything beyond this, it shall be settled in the lawful *assembly*.”

Acts 19:41 “After saying this he dismissed the *assembly*.”

In secular Greek *ἐκκλησία* refers only to the assembly or meeting and never to the people which compose the assembly.

### ***In New Testament Christianity***

There is a transformation of the term from the simple non-technical meaning of assembly to the technical designation for the Christian people of God. Where, Simply meaning any kind of Assembly. So that, it can refer to any gathering, even those not of the Church.

Acts 19:32,41 of an unruly mob; Acts 19:39 of a lawful assembly; Hebrews 2:12 An assembly of Israel in the wilderness, "I WILL PROCLAIM YOUR NAME TO MY BRETHREN, IN THE MIDST OF THE *CONGREGATION* I WILL SING YOUR PRAISE."

It at times refers to the independent Christian assemblies (note that these are some of Paul’s earliest letters)

1Thessalonians 1:1 “Paul and Silvanus and Timothy, To the *church* of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace.”

1Thessalonians 2:14 “For you, brethren, became imitators of the *churches* of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea, for you also endured the same sufferings at the hands of your own countrymen, even as they *did* from the Jews,

2Thessalonians 1:1 “Paul and Silvanus and Timothy, To the *church* of the Thessalonians in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ:”

*Ἐκκλησία* is used 114 times in the New Testament. Five of these have no reference to the New Testament Church (see above). It only used three times in the Gospels, all of which are in Matthew (see Matt. 16:18 and 18:17). It is also absent from 2 Tim., Titus, 1 Pet., 2 Pet., 1 John, 2 John and Jude.

1. **The local church.** This is the predominate meaning. It applies to a local assembly of all those who profess faith and allegiance to Christ.

*A singular assembly.* 1Th 1:1 “Paul and Silvanus and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace.”

*Nonspecified individual assembly.* 1Co 4:17 “For this reason I have sent to you Timothy, who is my beloved and faithful child in the Lord, and he will remind you of my ways which are in Christ, just as I teach everywhere in every church.”

*Plural.* Galatians 1:22 “I was *still* unknown by sight to the churches of Judea which were in Christ:”

*Nonspecified number of churches.* 2Corinthians 11:8 “I robbed other churches by taking wages *from them* to serve you;”

*All the churches together.* 1Corinthians 7:17 “Only, as the Lord has assigned to each one, as God has called each, in this manner let him walk. And so I direct in all the churches.”

2. **The Universal Church.** The physical assembly gives way to the spiritual unity of all believers in Christ. *Εκκλησία* in this sense is not the assembly itself but rather those constituting it; they are the church whether actually assembled or not.

***Early references.***

Act 8:1-3 “Saul was in hearty agreement with putting him to death. And on that day a great persecution began against the *church* in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. (2) Some devout men buried Stephen, and made loud lamentation over him. (3) But Saul began ravaging the *church*, entering house after house, and dragging off men and women, he would put them in prison.”

Act 9:31 “So the *church* throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria enjoyed peace, being built up; and going on in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it continued to increase.”

1Corinthians 12:28 “And God has appointed in the *church*, first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, administrations, various kinds of tongues.”

1Corinthians 15:9 “For I am the least of the apostles, and not fit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the *church* of God.”

Matthew 16:18 “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.”

***Developed more clearly in latter letters.***

Ephesians 1:22-23 “And He put all things in subjection under His feet, and gave Him as head over all things to the *church*, (23) which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all.

Colossians 1:18 “He is also head of the body, the *church*; and He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that He Himself will come to have first place in everything.”

It is important to note that the universal use of *εκκλησία* does not denote the one church as the sum of many individual churches, or the many churches together producing the universal church. The one universal church is manifested in a particular locality, yet each individual assembly is the church in that place.

The New Testament use of *ekklesia* is limited to the senses of the local and universal church. Connotations which have come about from the English term *church* are not found in the New Testament word.

1. It is never used for a church building
2. It is never used to denote a particular denomination, or a state or territorial church.
3. Titles, such as the Church of Ephesus or Galatia are never found.

