

The Biblical Definition of a Church

Introduction:

If a survey was conducted amongst those people who nominally or assuredly claim to be “Christians,” and the question was asked, “What is a Church?” — the answers coming back would be both varied and revealing.

Many people think of a ‘Church’ as the literal building where Christians meet. Even we independent Baptists are wont to use the loose language of religion and say such things as, “I’m going to the church,” when in fact we ought to say, “I’m going to the church house.”

Others consider a ‘Church’ to be a religious denomination — the Baptist Church, the Catholic Church, the Presbyterian Church, and so forth. In reality it is incorrect to speak of THE Baptist Church — there are only Baptist Churches.

The most popular idea of what a church is amongst fundamentalists and evangelical is that it is a universal, invisible, entity — the so-called “Body of Christ” into which all believers are “baptized by the Holy Spirit” at the time of conversion.

All of these “definitions” are unscriptural and damaging to the proper understanding of the truth. The question as always is: “What does the Bible teach?”

I. A Church Is An “Ekklesia”

The word “church” is rendered from the Greek word ‘ekklesia.’

Our first consideration is, “What is the meaning of ‘ekklesia’?”

The word ‘ekklesia’ is derived from the Greek preposition ‘ek’ — “out of,” and the verb ‘kaleo’ — “I call.”

Thus the root meaning of the word is “called out,” “an assembly.”

The first mention of ‘church’ in the New Testament by Jesus is in Matthew 16:18. Christ distinguished the word from all other assemblies by calling it MY Church. His use of the possessive pronoun “my” distinguishes the Lord’s assembly from all other assemblies!

II. A Church Is An “Assembly.”

The word “church” or “churches” is found 114 times in the New Testament. As noted above, the word is defined by its philology — it is an assembly.

The application of this definition to most of the references in the New Testament readily shows this to be the correct definition. Substituting ‘assembly’ for ‘church’ in I Corinthians 1:2 reads, “Unto the assembly...which is at Corinth...”

There are four implications inherent in the word “assembly”:

A. An Assembly must be LOCAL.

People cannot ‘come together’ — assemble — and yet be all over the world. The word does not tolerate any universal concept.

A motor vehicle is an assembly of various components — how ridiculous it would be to speak of a ‘universal automobile!’

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A football crowd is an assembly of multitudes in a particular stadium — how ridiculous it is to speak of a ‘worldwide crowd!’ (Millions viewing a game on television sets around the world are an audience, but never a crowd.)

This fact concerning the word assembly gives the lie to the “universal church” theory.

1. The Biblical usage of “Church”

- a) The New Testament gives 20 references to churches in 14 different cities or towns — definite locations. For example:
 - (1) Jerusalem — Acts 8:1.
 - (2) Antioch — Acts 13:1
 - (3) Corinth — I Corinthians 1:2
- b) The New Testament gives 12 references to churches (always plural) in 8 specific regions — definite locations. For example:
 - (1) Judea, Galilee, and Samaria — Acts 9:31.
 - (2) Syria and Cilicia — Acts 15:41
 - (3) Galatia — Galatians 1:2
- c) The New Testament also gives 4 references to churches (assemblies) gathering in private homes — Romans 16:5; I Corinthians 16:19; Colossians 4:15; Philemon 2.
- d) The context in which the word “church” is used clearly indicates the fact that New Testament Churches are always local.
 - (1) How can you “tell it” to something that is not there? — Matthew 18:17. The context of this Scripture mentions a ‘local’ brother and ‘local’ witnesses — so why not a ‘local’ church?
 - (2) How can you “hear” from something that is world-wide?
 - (3) The context of Acts 5:11 indicates a ‘local’ assembly — see: verses 5, 12
 - (4) How can the “least esteemed” in the universal, world-wide ‘church’ judge in matters between individual believers? — I Corinthians 6:4.
 - (5) How can a universal, world-wide ‘church’ “come together in one place?” — I Corinthians 11:18, 20; 14:23.
 - (6) How can a universal ‘church’ “communicate” with a missionary? — Philippians 4:15.
 - (7) How can a bishop “take care” of a universal church? — I Timothy 3:5.
 - (8) How can a universal ‘church’ be “charged” and “relieve widows?” — I Timothy 5:13.
 - (9) How can you “call for the elders” of a church that is universal? — James 5:14
 - (10) How can you “receive” or “cast out” people from a universal ‘church?’ — III John 10.
 - (11) How could you “send” anything to a ‘church’ that is not there? — Revelation 1:11.

2. The Generic use of “Church” also supports this assertion.

About 15 passages refer to the church generically, or institutionally — that is, no church in particular, any church in general.

Several references to ‘the church’ in the Book of Ephesians are used in this way. Those who teach the universal church theory invariably lean heavily on such verses for support.

Ephesians 5:23 says, “Christ is the Head of the church,” and it is argued that this can only mean ‘The (one universal) Church’ since there can be but one Head.

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This reasoning may appear logical, but the same Scripture passage also says, “the husband is the head of the wife.” By the same reasoning we could then prove there is a universal husband and a universal wife! That is ridiculous. In this case, the words “husband” and “wife” are generic — they apply to no husband or wife in particular, but to all husbands and wives in general.

For those experiencing difficulty grasping the concept of one Christ being Head over countless churches, consider I Corinthians 11:3 — “the head of every man is Christ...” Here we see that the one Christ is Head over countless Christians men in the world.

3. Metaphors of a New Testament Church support this assertion.

There are three prominent metaphors for a church in the New Testament. They are:

BODY — Colossians 1:18

BUILDING — Ephesians 2:20-22

BRIDE — II Corinthians 11:2

a) A Body must be local.

The New Testament likens each church to a human body — using the term, “The Body of Christ.” That our bodies are in one place is obvious, for if a man is blown apart by dynamite he is dismembered, and can no longer be called a body.

b) A Building must be local.

The New Testament likens each church to a house or a temple. Houses are found in one place — unless hit by a tornado, after which they are no longer a building.

c) A Bride must be local.

The New Testament likens each church to a bride. Every groom standing at the altar expects to see his bride in one place — by his side. The thought of a man marrying someone who is all over the world on their wedding day is absurd.

B. An Assembly must be visible.

People cannot “come together” — assemble — and not be seen. The word does not tolerate any invisible concept.

Roman Catholicism declares itself to be a universal (Catholic,) visible ‘Church.’ Protestantism continued with this universal church concept, but to account for the many and varied denominations within its embrace teaches a universal, invisible ‘Church.’

Neither teaching is Scriptural, nor fits the meaning of “assembly.”

1. The Biblical usage of “Church” supports this assertion.

The following references show the churches of the New Testament were indeed visible assemblies — II Corinthians 1:1, 15, 16; I Thessalonians 3:10.

2. The Visible Church is logical.

A church cannot operate if its members are invisible. It cannot meet in an invisible location. It cannot function with invisible officers, nor operate on invisible tithes. Our Lord gave the Great Commission to His (local, visible) Church — an invisible thing cannot evangelize, baptize, and instruct believers. Neither can an invisible church administer discipline — Matthew 18:15.

a) How can you “tell it” to something you cannot see? — Matthew 18:17.

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- b) How can you “salute” something you cannot see? — Acts 18:22
 - c) How can you “serve” something you cannot see? — Romans 16:11
 - d) How can you “take care of” something you cannot see? — I Timothy 3:5.
3. Metaphors of a New Testament Church support this assertion.
- a) A Body must be visible.
No surgeon can operate upon an invisible body. The only time we are absent from the body is when we are present with the Lord, and by then the body is dead! A body must be visible.
 - b) A Building must be visible.
No builder points to a vacant land and says, “Look at the house I built.” (The only person who is more unbalanced than that is on who pays the builder for the house!). Any building must be visible.
 - c) A Bride must be visible.
No groom wants to have an invisible bride walk down the aisle — he expects to see one who is pure and radiant in her adornment.

C. An Assembly must be Organized.

People cannot ‘come together’ — assemble — and be in complete disarray.

The Greek word ‘ekklesia’ never means a rabble or even a crowd (‘oklos’) of people. It refers to an organized group of people, in particular a citizens’ meeting to discuss the affairs of the city.

1. New Testament Church Doctrine supports this assertion.

Several Books in the New Testament are either “church” or “pastoral” epistles, and are concerned with how a church is to be organized.

I Corinthians 14:40; Colossians 2:5; Titus 1:5 — note the word. ‘order — and I Timothy 3:15 — ‘behave.’

2. Metaphors of a New Testament church support this assertion.

a) A Body must be Organized.

A pile of flesh, organs, bones, etc., along with bottles of blood, all thrown together into a bag does not constitute a body — they must be put together according to a plan. — Psalm 139:14-16.

God says the same thing of a New Testament church — I Corinthians 12:18-20, 24; Ephesians 4:16. It is to be “fitly joined together.”

b) A Building must be Organized.

A pile of bricks, lumber, plaster, nails, cement, etc., all dumped from a delivery truck onto a site does not constitute a building — these items must all be fitted together according to a blueprint, a plan.

God says the same thing of a New Testament Church — I Corinthians 3:9-11; Ephesians 2:21. It is to be “fitly framed together.”

c) A Bride must be Organized.

God has ordered marriage and the home. A betrothal places a maiden under God-given rules — e.g. Deuteronomy 22:23-24; and marriage places the wife in subjection to her husband — Ephesians 5:22.

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God says the same thing of a New Testament church — II Corinthians 11:2. It is to remain spiritually and doctrinally chaste for the Bridegroom.

D. An Assembly must be Constituted.

Any assembly must be put together with the correct ingredients. There are qualifications for membership in an assembly.

Every conceivable kind of assembly must consist of a specified constituency.

1. The New Testament clearly specifies a Church's Constituency.

It is self evident that a church is an assembly of people. The question is, "Just any people?"

Philippians 1:1 teaches that those making up the membership of a church must first be saints — they must be believers.

Acts 2:41 further defines the qualifications for New Testament church membership by giving three words:

"...RECEIVED his word..."	—	Salvation
"...were BAPTIZED..."	—	Baptism
"...were ADDED..."	—	Church Membership

Not just any person may (rightfully) belong to a New Testament church. For that matter, not just any Christian may belong to a New Testament church.

2. New Testament Church Discipline supports this assertion.

The fact that churches are instructed to keep themselves pure by excluding erring member (Matthew 18:17; I Corinthians 3-7; II Thessalonians 3:6, 14; Titus 3:10) demonstrates a very specific, limited constituency.

3. Metaphors of a New Testament Church support this Assertion.

a) A Body must be properly Constituted.

The human body is "flesh." Although certain artificial devices may be fitted to take the place of certain organs, they are always alien.

b) A Building must be properly Constituted.

A builder does not purchase a bale of hay, a bowl of jelly, and some Uranium yellowcake in order to build a house. He must order the right materials — lumber, cement, plaster, paint, bricks, nails, etc.

c) A Bride must be properly Constituted.

Not everyone can be a bride. A bride must be a female. She must be unmarried. She must be of legal age. She must be willing to join herself to the groom.

III. A New Testament Church Defined.

A simple definition is:

"A New Testament Church is an assembly of baptized believers, organized to carry out the Lord's work."

Inherent within this definition are the following key facts:

"Assembly" — hence local and visible.

"Baptized Believers" — hence specifically constituted.

"Organized" — according to the pattern given in the New Testament.

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IV. The New Testament Church Delineated

A. The Damaging Effects of the 'Universal, Invisible Church' Theory.

1. It Destroys Loyalty to One's Church.
2. It Promotes "Church-hopping."
3. It Promotes Substitute Organizations To Do the Word of Churches.
4. It Promotes Compromise.

Acceptance of this theory leads to inter-denominational fraternity — which by its very nature means doctrinal compromise, or at least a 'let's not bring that subject up' mutual understanding.

5. It Erodes Scriptural Church Discipline.
6. It Promotes Ecumenism
7. It Releases Christians From Church Related Responsibilities

B. The Multi-Church Compromise of Scofield.

In order to overcome the problems of having an invisible church, C. I Scofield and many others such as E. H. Bancroft, have come up with a three church theory:

1. The True Church — composed of the truly regenerate everywhere. Otherwise called "The Body of Christ."
2. The Visible Church — what we might term "Christendom." This is also a universal, invisible entity which includes saved and lost within the pail of the Christian 'religion'
3. The Local Church — which is somewhat similar to what the Bible really teaches.

A careful study of the references to "churches" (pl.) will not support the idea proposed above.

The New Testament makes no distinction between the so-called "Body of Christ" and the "Local Church."

The "Body" [of Christ] and the "Church" ['assembly'] are EQUATED in Colossians 1:18, 24.

The fact is every true New Testament Church is the Body of Christ in its particular location, with Christ as its Head.

According to Ephesians 4, there is but ONE [type of] Body, and the remainder of the chapter indicates this to be a real, local, visible, organized church made up of real, local, visible saints, and overseen by real, local visible pastors.