



What is the Church?

by Tim Kelley

America is a “Christian” nation. Even though our culture is crumbling around us, when asked, more than 70% of the American people claim to be Christian in one way or another, and even though many of those Christians seldom darken the door of a church, they claim that their beliefs play a part in how they conduct their lives.

Being that so many claim to be Christians, it’s understandable that most of us want to be able to place each other in a theological box. By asking “what church do you go to”, we can generally find out a number of things about a person that may not be evident in normal day-to-day conversation. For instance, we can find out if a person drinks, smokes, dances, and even if he eats meat or not simply by asking “what church do you go to”. Up until recently, we could even determine if the person was or was not openly homosexual simply by asking that question.

I asked this question often when I used to go out on sales calls. I would often meet with my customers and their clients, and I found it helpful to engage in small-talk with them to sort of break the ice before we got into the work of designing their kitchen. By knowing their religious background I knew what to or what not to ask – “are you going to have a wet bar or a dry bar?”. Of course, I often cringed when they would ask about my background because the church I was part of was considered a cult by many mainstream Christians.

In the Hebraic movement, we continue to ask that same question, but in a different way. Instead of asking “what church do you go to”, we often say “what was your background”. That still provides with hints of where you were, though not necessarily indicating where you currently are.

The point of this is to show that, even though we call ourselves “Christian” and thus claim to be “followers of Christ”, we all have differing views of what it means to be a Christian, and thus we have different definitions of “the Church”. We can drive down the street and pass by a number of different church buildings, but in our mind, until we get to the one we attend, we have not come to “the Church”.

But what is “the Church”? Is it a building, an organization, a denomination, or a body of people? Few would suggest that the church is simply a building. Others would add that it’s not the organization. Yet, when it comes down to denominations, many believe that their particular denomination represents the true Christian faith. But most agree that when it all boils down, the church is simply a body of believers. Paul seems to state such very clearly –

^{KJV}Colossians 1:18 And He (Jesus) is the head of the body, the church . . .

But is the church a New Testament concept? When Yeshua (Jesus) said to Peter “. . . upon this rock I will build my church . . .”, did Peter have the foggiest idea what Yeshua was talking about? Is our concept of church today the same as it was 2000 years ago? I submit that it is not. I believe that modern Christianity has lost the understanding of what it meant to be part of what would have been identified in the first century as “the church”, and they have lost that knowledge primarily because they have failed to understand the Old Testament prophecies pertaining to God’s people – Israel.

In this study we’ll investigate the word and the concept of “church” to see what the Peter and the rest of Yeshua’s disciples would have understood when Yeshua said “. . . I will build My church”.

Let's start by looking at the English word "church". There is no consensus on the etymology of this word. One school of thought is that it was derived from the old English and German (Anglo-Saxon) word "circe".¹ In Greek mythology, Circe (Κίρκη) was the goddess of magic, who transformed her enemies into animals. She was supposedly the daughter of Helios, the god of the sun. Her name in Greek means "round hoop". Many Greek and Latin words are derived from "circe" including circle, circumference, and circus – all of which pertain to something round . . . and of course, the sun in round.

Before we go on, I want to make it perfectly clear that I am not saying that I believe the millions of people who flock to church on Sabbath or Sunday are participating in a circus or worshipping the sun. Many, if not most, church-going Christians sincerely want to worship God to the best of their knowledge and ability.

Another view is that it is derived from the Greek word *kuriakon*² which means "the lord's". *Kuriakon* comes from the same root word as *kurios*, which is commonly translated "lord". When attached to the Greek word "oikia" which means house, you come up with the phrase *lord's house*.

A person might think that it doesn't really matter about the etymology as long as the word *church* can be traced back to the Greek, and since there are two possible etymological paths that could be followed, we're OK. But that's not entirely correct because even though *church* can be traced back to the Greek, neither of these two Greek words - *circe* or *kuriakon* are found in the Greek text of the Bible - now where, not even once!

The actual Greek word for which the English word *church* is substituted is *ekklesia* (Strong's 1577) and is a combination of the two Greek words *ek* (Strong's 1537 – out of; from) and *kaleo* (Strong's 2564 – to call). Thus, *ekklesia* means *called out*. This is a common Greek word that did not find its beginning with the coming of The Messiah. The word is commonly found in Greek literature as well as the Septuagint, the 200 BC Greek translation of the Hebrew scriptures. In fact, the ancient (480-404 BCE) Greek legislative body was called the *ekklesia*. So, the word simply means an assembly of people; not necessarily for religious purposes.

There is absolutely no connection between the Greek word *ekklesia* and the Greek words *kuriakon* and *circe*. How the English translators (or *mis*-translators as some call them) made this connection is anyone's guess. You would hope there were good intentions, but more likely there was an intent to mix paganism with God's word.

The first place we see the English word *church* (Greek – *ekklesia*) in the Bible is Matthew 16:18 where Yeshua is talking to Peter.

^{NKJ} Matthew 16:18 "And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church .

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Based primarily on this passage, most Christians believe that the *church* was yet in the future. Being that as a cabinet maker I'm a part of the *building* business, I understand that you don't *build* something that already exists. You might add to it, or you might build onto it, but if a building is already built, you don't build it, unless – of course, you intend to tear the existing structure down and re-build it. Thus, based on the English translation of this scripture, it would be appropriate to believe that the church was (at the time Yeshua made the proclamation) still in the future.

¹ World Book Dictionary, 1988, vol. 23, pg. 368

² The Online Etymology Dictionary; also Random House College Dictionary, 1973, p. 241

This view is further reinforced by the fact that there was an obvious outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost just weeks after Yeshua was resurrected. To many, that day is considered the *birth day* of the Church. Thus we have statements such as this from the Catholic Encyclopedia:

The Feast of Pentecost, celebrated the fiftieth day after Easter, commemorates the descent of the Holy Spirit on the Apostles and the birth of the Church.³

Or this from a Sabbath-keeping Christian denomination:

Jesus Christ founded the New Testament Church in the city of Jerusalem on the biblical festival of Pentecost 50 days after His resurrection from the dead.

Between the time of His resurrection and the founding of His Church, Christ appeared to His apostles over the course of the first 40 days, further enlightening them concerning the nature of the coming Kingdom of God (Acts:1:3). During that time "He commanded them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the Promise of the Father" (verse 4). He explained to them, "You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth" (verse 8) . . . Therefore the Church, the spiritually transformed body of believers, began when Christ's apostles received the Holy Spirit, just as He had promised (Acts 2:1-4).⁴

The Expositor's Bible Commentary even indicates that the church (in some aspects) replaced Israel. It states that the church has two aspects; 1) the body of Christ, which the commentator says began earlier than Pentecost (being that there were followers of Jesus before Pentecost), and 2) the instrument of service. Regarding this "instrument of service", it says:

"With regard to the church as an instrument of service, called by God to take up the mission formerly entrusted to Israel, Luke is certainly presenting the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost as the church's birthday."⁵

But was Pentecost indeed the birthday of the church? Yes and no. A further study of the word *ekklesia* reveals more information. Acts chapter 7, Steven's monologue of Israel's history, show that there was a church nearly 1500 years previous to his time. In an attempt to show the Jewish leadership Israel's propensity to denounce their own deliverers, Steven shows that Israel was itself considered an *ekklesia*, a church.

^{KJV}Acts 7:37-38 This is that Moses, which said unto the children of Israel, A prophet shall the Lord your God raise up unto you of your brethren, like unto me; him shall ye hear. ³⁸ This is he, that was in the church (ekklesia) in the wilderness with the angel which spake to him in the mount Sina, and with our fathers: who received the lively oracles to give unto us . . ."

So, according to Steven, ancient Israel was also the *church*, but how could that be? The word *church* never appears in the Tnakh (the Old Testament). If the church did not come into existence until after Yeshua's resurrection, how could ancient Israel be the church? Let's see.

About 200 years before Yeshua was born, YHVH did a wonderful thing for the Bible students of later years. During that day, there were many Jewish people living in Egypt (descendants of those from the southern tribes who had fled Jerusalem to avoid the Babylonian captivity). Because Greek was the

³ <http://www.aquinasandmore.com/catholic-articles/pentecost-the-birth-of-the-church/article/275>

⁴ The Church Jesus Built; United Church of God, 2010, pg. 5

⁵ Expositor's Bible Commentary; vol. 9; pg. 271; copyright 1981, Zondervan

language of Egypt during that day, most of the Jewish people in Egypt could no longer speak Hebrew. Thus the Jewish leadership commissioned 70 priestly scribes to translate the Hebrew scriptures from Hebrew to Greek. This work is called the Septuagint (LXX). Because we have the Septuagint, we now have Greek counterparts to many Hebrew words. God provided a link between the Hebrew Tnakh and the New Testament scriptures.

One of the Greek words we have a counterpart for in Hebrew is *ekklesia*. *Ekklesia* appears over 100 times in the Septuagint. Now one would think that if *ekklesia* meant *church* in the New Testament, it would also mean *church* in the Septuagint, and thus it would mean church in the Tnakh. But that's not what the translators thought.

The Hebrew word that's translated *ekklesia* in the Septuagint is qahal (Strong's 6951 - קהל). The first place we see this word is when Isaac is sending his son Jacob away to protect him from Esau. Before Jacob left, Isaac pronounced this blessing –

^{NKJ}Genesis 28:3 "May God Almighty bless you, And make you fruitful and multiply you, That you may be an assembly of peoples . . ."

In this passage, *kahal* (*ekklesia* in the LXX) is translated *assembly*, but if the translators had been consistent, they would have translated *kahal* into *church*. Thus the passage would read -

^{NKJ}Genesis 28:3 "May God Almighty bless you, And make you fruitful and multiply you, That you may be a church . . ."

If the translators had used *church* instead of *assembly*, it would be evident that Jacob's descendants, the children of Israel, were the church. In fact, it would be an even more compelling argument if they had done the same for this verse -

^{NKJ}Joshua 8:34-35 And afterward he (Joshua) read all the words of the law, the blessings and the cursings, according to all that is written in the Book of the Law. ³⁵ There was not a word of all that Moses had commanded which Joshua did not read before all the ~~assembly~~ church of Israel, with the women, the little ones, and the strangers who were living among them.

The word *kahal* is used 123 times in the Tnakh and is never once translated *church*, yet it has precisely the same meaning as *ekklesia* in the New Testament which is almost always translated church. No wonder there is so much confusion!

If a person were to attempt to be true to the scripture, he would either use church throughout the Bible – both Old Testament and New Testament, or he would use assembly. Since *assembly* is a good translation of the word *ekklesia* and *church* is a *questionable* translation, it would seem appropriate to use the word assembly. Let's see how that would change the meaning of some key verses in the New Testament – especially when compared to the Tnakh. In the following two passages we would see that the responsibility of the overseers is to guide the assembly of God in their Torah observance -

^{NKJ}Acts 20:28 "Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the ~~church~~ assembly of God which He purchased with His own blood.

Compare with –

^{KJV} 1 Chronicles 28:8 Now therefore in the sight of all Israel the ~~congregation~~ assembly of the LORD, and in the audience of our God, keep and seek for all the commandments of the LORD your God: that ye may possess this good land, and leave it for an inheritance for your children after you for ever.

In these passages, we find that the assembly of God is called saints –

^{KJV} 1 Corinthians 1:2 Unto the ~~church~~ *assembly* of God which is at Corinth, to them that are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, with all that in every place call upon the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, both theirs and ours:

Compare with -

^{KJV} Psalm 89:7 God is greatly to be feared in the assembly of the saints, and to be had in reverence of all them that are about him.

Here we find that the assembly of the firstborn is Israel -

^{KJV} Hebrews 12:22 But ye are come unto mount Sion, and unto the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to an innumerable company of angels, ²³ To the ~~general assembly~~ festive gathering and ~~church~~ assembly of the firstborn, which are written in heaven, and to God the Judge of all, and to the spirits of just men made perfect,

^{KJV} Jeremiah 31:9 They shall come with weeping, and with supplications will I lead them: I will cause them to walk by the rivers of waters in a straight way, wherein they shall not stumble: for I am a father to Israel, and Ephraim is my firstborn.

Thus, by correctly translating the word *ekklesia*, we find that Israel is *the church* and *the church* is Israel. If that is indeed the case, was the church really born on the day of Pentecost? In a way – yes! But not the Pentecost after the resurrection of Yeshua, but roughly 1500 years earlier. According to Jewish tradition, Israel was given the Ten Commandments at Mt. Sinai on the Day of Pentecost. By Israel accepting the Ten Commandments (Exodus 19:8) they were in effect, accepting YHVH's marriage proposal. Thus, on Pentecost, they became a nation, a people, the assembly (church) of God.

This has far-reaching ramifications, because YHVH is a covenant-keeping god who promised to never leave or forsake His people. Thus, the assembly of God in the Tnakh is the same assembly of God in the New Testament.

What about Matthew 16:18? What about the church or assembly Yeshua was going to build? We'll discuss this more the next time.

Shalom Aleichem