

The Meaning Of Ecclesia
In The
New Testament

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FOREWORD

Here is a book, simple in style, yet profound in thought. It is certainly worthy of careful consideration by the most scholarly of our Baptist leaders, regardless of present beliefs on the subject. It is a paper that ought to be in the hands of every Baptist preacher in our country.

Pastor Overbey does well to call us back to a careful examination of the meaning of the word “ecclesia” which is translated “church” in our English Bibles. He cuts right to the heart of the matter by concentrating attention upon the well-established meaning of the word. It was the flaw of the old Allegorical, Mystical, and Pietist systems of interpretation to disregard the common meaning of words and essential rules of exegesis. Milton S. Terry, writing of the old allegorical method says, “It will be noticed at once that its habit is to disregard the common signification of words, and give wing to all manner of fanciful speculation. It does not draw out the legitimate meaning of an author’s language, but foists into it whatever the whim or fancy an interpreter may desire. As a system, therefore, it puts itself beyond all well-defined principles and laws.” (*Biblical Hermeneutics*, 2nd Ed., p. 164.) It is against this type of interpretation, which makes certain words as putty in the hands of the interpreter, that our author writes so effectively. Once the interpreter abandons the grammatical-historical method of interpretation, which pays strict attention to the meaning of words, he has no regulative principle to govern his exegesis. Thus the word for church, ecclesia, has become a wax nose to be twisted and turned into many shapes and meanings.

Here is a healthy remedy to loose interpretation on the meaning and nature of the church. Baptists have long enough and far too often accepted this Protestant doctrine which has often served as an “escape mechanism” through which many have escaped their obligations to the local institution which Jesus Christ established, thus “making the Word of God of none effect through their tradition.”

This thesis ought to prove an effective antidote to the popular belief in an invisible, universal church and all its attending unhappy and diverse effects - ecumenicism; multiplicity of extra-church organizations; disparagement of careful study of the nature, ordinances, discipline, officers, government and mission of the church; and the resulting disparagement of the importance of working in and through a true New Testament church.

It is our belief that many who carefully study this document will come to the conclusion of John Ebrard, the internationally recognized German, premillennial

scholar, who said, “An invisible Church is even in itself a *contradiction in adjecto* ... We must therefore reject this use of *eccles. invis.* What is meant to be designated by it is no Church, but the kingdom of God as yet invisible, but in future to be visibly erected.”

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The word “**church**” is used in our English versions of the Bible to translate the Greek word “**ekklesia**”. Some information about the word church should help us understand our subject better.

According to most scholars the word church comes from a Greek word meaning “the Lord’s” with the word house usually understood. The word is used in the New Testament to refer to the Lord’s Supper, **1 Corinthians 11:20**, and to refer to the Lord’s day, **Revelation 1:10**. As early as the third century the word was used to refer to the building where the Christians met. When referring to a building where Christians worshipped, the people called it the Lord’s with the word house understood. Over a period of hundreds of years the original Greek word passed into various European languages as Christianity was brought to the peoples of Europe. Time and the peculiarities of each language had its effect on the word but the word still remained recognizable. In English it is “church”, in Old English “cirice”, in German “kirche”, in Scottish “kirk”, and in Old Scandinavian “kyrka”.

One authority sums up the information thus:

The ulterior derivation has been keenly disputed. The L. circus, and a Gothic word, kelikn ‘tower, upper chamber’ (app. originally Gaulish) have both been proposed (the latter suggested by the Alemannic chilihha but are set aside as untenable; and there is now a general agreement among scholars in referring it to the Greek word “kuriakon”, properly adj. ‘of the Lord, dominicum, dominical’ (f. kurios lord), which occurs, from the 3rd century at least, used substantively (sc. doma, or the like) = ‘house of the Lord,’ as a name of the Christian house of worship. Of this the earliest cited instances are in the Apostolical Constitutions (II.59), a 300, the edict of Maximinus (303-13), cited by Eusebius (Ecc. Hist. IX. 10) a 324, the councils of Ancyra 314 (canon 15), Neo-Caesarea 314-23 (can. 5), and Laodicea (can. 28). Thenceforward it appears to have been in fairly common use in the East: e.g. Constantine named several churches built by him. (Eusebius De Laud. Const. XVII’) [J. A. Murray, *A New English Dictionary On Historical Principles*. Vol. II, p. 403.]

The word church today has a host of meanings, some of the most common being; the building in which the Christian assembly meets, the Christian assembly, the worship service, the clerical profession, all of one denomination, all professing Christians living or dead. Before pursuing our subject further we can say without

fear of contradiction that all of these meanings cannot be attributed to the word ekklesia in the New Testament. No scholar that we know of attributes more than two or three of these meanings to ekklesia in the New Testament.

Since the word church is a very broad term having many possible meanings and ekklesia is a much narrower term we must be careful in our study lest we bring the present meanings of church into ekklesia as found in the New Testament.

Hort recognized this danger when he said:

The reason why I have chosen the term ecclesia is simply to avoid ambiguity. The English term church, now the most familiar representative of ecclesia to most of us, carries with it associations derived from the institutions and doctrines of later times, and thus cannot at present without a constant mental effort be made to convey the full and exact force which originally belonged to ecclesia. [F. J. A. Hort, *The Christian Ecclesia*, p. 1.]

The word church should not be in our English versions today to represent ecclesia. Its appearance in the New Testament, we believe, has obscured the true meaning. The word church was not used in Tyndale's, Coverdale's, and Cranmer's Bible (The Great Bible). These and other versions used the word congregation to translate ecclesia.

Hort says,

'Congregation' was the only rendering of ekklesia in the English New Testament as it stood throughout Henry VIII's reign, the substitution of 'church' being due to the Genevan revisers; and it held its ground in the Bishops' Bible in no less primary a passage than **Matthew 16:18** till the Jacobean revision of 1611, which we call the Authorized Version. [*Op. Cit.*, p. 2.]

In fact it is very likely it would not have appeared in the King James Version were it not for the 15 rules King James sent to the translators that were to guide them in their work. Rule 3 states, 'The old ecclesiastical words to be kept, viz., the word church not to be translated congregation, etc.' [H. W. Robinson, *The Bible In Its Ancient and English Versions*, p. 199.]

In the long preface to the King James Bible of 1611, which is not printed today and has not been for some time it says,

Lastly, we have on the one side avoyded the scrupulositie of the Puritanes, who leave the old Ecclesiasticall words, and betake them to other, as when they put

washing for baptisme, and congregation instead of church. [J. R. Dore, *Old Bibles: An Account of the Early Versions of the English Bible*, p. 377.]

In our study of the word ekklesia in the New Testament it is clear that we should be careful to divorce the word church from it lest we read into ekklesia the meanings of the word church.

Our plan in general in this study will be to examine the word before the New Testament times in the Classical Greek and in the Septuagint. We will then in the light of this background carefully study each use of the word in the New Testament using the immediate and remote contexts to learn its meaning.

CHAPTER 2

ECCLESIA IN THE CLASSICAL GREEK

Liddell and Scott define ekklesia as “an assembly of the citizens summoned by the crier, the legislative assembly.” [R. Scott, and H. G. Liddell, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, p. 206.]

Thayer’s lexicon says, “an assembly of the people convened at the public place of council for the purpose of deliberating” [J. H. Thayer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, p. 196].

Trench gives the meaning as “the lawful assembly in a free Greek city of all those possessed of the rights of citizenship, for the transaction of public affairs” [R. C. Trench, *Synonyms of the New Testament*, 7th ed., pp. 1-2].

Seyffert’s dictionary states, “The assembly of the people, which in Greek cities had the power of final decision in public affairs” [Oskar Seyffert, *A Dictionary of Classical Antiquities*, pp. 202-203.]

Thomas says,

It was the organized assembly of the authorized voters of the local community met to transact business of common concern. It corresponded to the town-meeting of New England of later days. [Jesse B. Thomas, *The Church and The Kingdom*, p. 211.]

Ewing writes,

In every case, the word means an organized body, in opposition to a casual meeting. The Ephesian assemblage appears to be no exception to this interpretation, as the people evidently came together to hold a judicial assembly in their corporate capacity, however tumultuous in their proceedings. They rushed into the theatre, as the Athenians frequently did into bou leuterion, or forum, when Demosthenes harangued to them [Greville Ewing, *A Greek and English Lexicon*, 3rd ed., pp. 375-376.]

Dana’s book says,

In classical use ekklesia meant “an assembly.” It was derived from a combination of Greek root and prefixed preposition, the resultant meaning of which was “to call out.” It was commonly used in reference to bodies of

qualified representatives “called out” for legislative functions [H. E. Dana, *A Manual of Ecclesiology*, 2nd ed., p. 25.]

These quotations are a fair sample of the opinion of competent scholars on the meaning of the word ekklesia in classical Greek. The opinion is unanimous that the word meant an assembly of citizens of a particular city that met together from time to time to carry on business for their city.

A few words should be said about the etymology of ekklesia before going on to the next chapter.

Thayer’s lexicon states,

“fr. ekkletos called out or forth, and this fr. ekkaleo” [J. H. Thayer, *Op. Cit.*, p. 195.] This seems to be the unanimous opinion of all Greek scholars.

A distinction should be maintained between the etymology of a word and its meaning at some particular time in history. Sometimes the two are the same: many times they are quite different. “Hussy” came from “huswife” which means housewife; today it means a worthless woman or girl, or a pert girl. “Constable” came from “comes stabuli” which means attendant of the stable; today it means a peace officer. “Ekklesia” came from “ekkletos” which means called out but in the times prior to the New Testament it meant assembly or called out assembly. To say it means the called out is not correct.

Broadus writes,

The Greek word ekklesia signified primarily the assembly of citizens in a self-governed state, being derived from ekkaleo to call out; i.e., out from their homes or places of business, to summon, as we speak of calling out the militia. The popular notion that it meant to call out in the sense of separation from others, is a mistake [John A. Broadus, *Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, Vol. I of *An American Commentary on the New Testament*, p. 353.]

Hort also confirms this when he writes,

There is no foundation for the widely spread notion that ekklesia means a people or a number of individual men called out of the world or mankind [F. J. A. Hort, *Op. Cit.*, p. 5.]

CHAPTER 3

ECCLESIA IN THE SEPTUAGINT

To determine the meaning of *ekklesia* in the New Testament it is important to study its background in classical Greek and the Septuagint. The Septuagint was in use during New Testament times and the writers of the New Testament who would use the word would be influenced to some degree by the use of the Septuagint. Perhaps the best way to examine the word in the Septuagint is to give the results of the studies of three scholars in the field. We will summarize their findings and add any information we have observed in our own study.

In the Septuagint *ekklesia* is used about one hundred times. It translates the Hebrew word “*qahal*” which means ‘assembly or congregation’. In the Hebrew there are two words used for the gathering together of the people of Israel, *’edhah* and *qahal*.

Hort says,

Neither of the two Hebrew terms was strictly technical: both were at times applied to very different kinds of gatherings from the gatherings of the people, though *qahal* had always a human reference of some sort, gatherings of individual men or gatherings of nations. The two words were so far coincident in meaning that in many cases they might apparently be used indifferently; but in the first instance they were not strictly synonymous. *’edhah* (derived from a root *y’dh* used in the Niphal in the sense of gathering together, specially gathering together by appointment or agreement) is properly, when applied to Israel, the society itself, formed by the children of Israel or their representative heads, whether assembled or not assembled. On the other hand *qahal* is properly their actual meeting together: hence we have a few times the phrase *qahal ’edhah* ‘the assembly of the congregation’ [*Op. Cit.*, pp. 4-5.]

Ekklesia never translates the Hebrew word *’edhah* which Hort says might be “Israel ... whether assembled or not assembled” but translates *qahal*, which means assembly.

Dana says, speaking of the Septuagint,

“In it *ekklesia* was used to translate the Hebrew word *qahal* which means an assembly, convocation, or congregation” [H. E. Dana, *Op. Cit.*, p. 27.]

Dana notes six variations in the Septuagint in the way *ekklesia* is used.

- (1) It is used five times to indicate simply an aggregation of individuals, without reference to any specific religious character ...
- (2) Thirteen times it refers to a group assembled for a special purpose ...
- (3) In twenty-six instances the reference is to an assembly in a particular locality for religious purposes, usually for worship ...
- (4) By far the most frequent occurrence of the term is to denote a formal gathering of all the people of Israel in the presence of Jehovah, in which sense it is used thirty-six times ...
- (5) In seven places the word designates all Israel in an ideal sense, as the peculiar possession of Jehovah. It would not be accurate to say that this use contemplates "spiritual Israel," for it undoubtedly signifies the literal nation; nor can it properly be described as the "Hebrew Church," for it was a nation and not an ecclesiastical body. It is used in description of certain barriers which prevent one from becoming a participant in the privileges of God's chosen people, though no one particular assembly of God's people is in mind, as in **Deuteronomy 23:3**. "**The Ammonite and Moabite shall not enter into the assembly of the Lord.**" (See also **Lamentations 1:10**). Clearly it is the statement of a general principle, the actual application of which would be a literal gathering of the people at a definite time and place. The Old Testament and Jewish literature nowhere use *ekklesia* where it may justly be construed as "spiritual Israel" ...
- (6) Finally, we may give separate notice to those nine references in which the term is applied to that remnant of the faithful in Israel who returned from Babylonian exile [*Op. Cit.*, p. 27.]

Dana concludes his study of *ekklesia* in the Septuagint in these words.

There are three facts about the Septuagint use of *ekklesia*, and the Old Testament use of *qahal*, which are of importance to us in a study of the church.

- (1) It is never contemplated as a spiritual fact, independent of spatial and temporal limitations.
- (2) The assembly (*ekklesia*) of Israel as a peculiar possession of Jehovah was contemplated as an ideal conception, but having its only literal counterpart in a definite gathering of the people.
- (3) The word came, especially in the interbiblical period, to denote a local gathering for purposes of worship [*Op. Cit.*, p. 30.]

B. H. Carroll answers questions submitted to him concerning his study of this matter in the following quotations.

As in the Septuagint *ecclesia* translates the Hebrew word *qahal*, does it not mean "all Israel, whether assembled or unassembled?"

My reply is I see not how this question could have risen in any mind from a personal, inductive study of all the Septuagint passages, since in every instance of the 114 cited the word means a gathering together - an assembly.

You can see that for yourselves by the context of your English version. The Septuagint usage is as solidly one thing as the Macedonian phalanx [B. H. Carroll, *Ecclesia - The Church* p. 44.]

But, another question asks, "Do not some of these Septuagint passages justify the meaning of unassembled?"

While I accepted Pedobaptist ideas, I thought so, but never since I looked into the matter for myself, I do not now know of even one such passage [Op. Cit., p. 45.]

Carroll also points out as a confirmation of his conclusions that in the Revised Version the Hebrew word is translated assembly or congregation in every place that the Septuagint used the word ekklesia.

Before finishing this chapter it should be noted that some have said that *qahal* sometimes means all of the Israelitish people. Whether this is a true interpretation or not we are not prepared to say but we can say that when they try to give this broad meaning to ekklesia because it is used to translate *qahal* they make a mistake.

Thomas says concerning this matter,

It was, thereupon, inversely and most illogically inferred that, since *qahal* sometimes means the whole Israelitish people and is sometimes translated by ekklesia, therefore ekklesia must always take on like breadth of meaning. Reference to the LXX, however, will show that the Greek translators of the Old Testament, so far from encouraging such an implication, have carefully precluded it. For when *qahal* has the broad sense it is never translated by ekklesia, but by another Greek word [Jesse B. Thomas, *Op. Cit.*, p. 200.]

After personally examining every place where ekklesia occurs in the Septuagint I am convinced that the word retains the same basic meaning it has in classical Greek of assembly in every place. Usage in most places is very clear that assembly is the meaning of the word. In Deuteronomy it is used to refer to the time the people stood in a congregation before Mt. Sinai and heard the ten commandments, when Joshua assembled the nation together in the promised land to read the law to them, when Solomon prayed the dedicatory prayer for the temple and the people were assembled

before him, and many other times where the context is so clear that none would dare differ. The few places that might be questioned make good sense according to the common meaning, which fact settles the issue. A principle accepted by all scholars is that the most prevalent meaning of a word must stand in every place as long as it makes good sense. A new or rare meaning cannot be admitted even though it could be shown that it would make good sense in some particular place as long as the prevalent meaning fits the context.

Our conclusion after studying the Classical and Septuagint uses of the word is that all known instances of the word from these sources give a unanimous vote that the word means assembly. This conclusion however is not necessary to prove the conclusions in the remainder of this thesis. The only point that should be insisted upon and that we believe all scholars will admit, is that the word *ekklesia* in the Classical and Septuagint Greek has the meaning of assembly in all, or almost all, cases.

CHAPTER 4

ECCLESIA IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

Introduction

In examining our subject further we should stop and note that the King James Version of 1611 and the American Standard Version of 1901 are based on different Greek texts. Even though in meaning there is no difference of great significance yet for the sake of clarity in study we should take a quick survey of ekklesia in both versions, the English words used to translate ekklesia, and note the differences with regard to ekklesia in these two translations. In the King James or Authorized Version ekklesia appears 115 times in the Greek text. One hundred and twelve times it is translated by the word church and three times by the word assembly in **Acts 19**. The word church appears 114 times, 112 of which represent ekklesia. The other two occurrences are in **Acts 19:37** and **1 Peter 5:13**. In **Acts 19:37** the Greek word is *hierosulos* not ekklesia and means robbers of temples as correctly translated in the American Standard Version. In **1 Peter 5:13** church does not represent any Greek word in the original but is the interpretation of the translators to make better sense. For this reason church appears in italics in many Bibles. The Greek is such in this case that such an interpretation is allowed and may be the correct idea of the writer, however this passage does not concern us since ekklesia is not actually present in the original. The American Standard Version uses the word “she” in this place rather than church which is also an interpretation.

Ekklesia appears 114 times in the Greek text of the American Standard Version. In **Acts 2:47** ekklesia is not in the Greek but a pronoun translated “**them**”. The only other difference in the Greek from the King James text is in **Acts 9:31** where the word is singular in the American Standard and plural in the King James. The word church appears 110 times, all of which are used to translate ekklesia, assembly is used to translate it the three times the Greek assembly is mentioned in **Acts 19**, and congregation is used the one remaining time in **Hebrews 2:12**.

A careful examination of ekklesia before the New Testament in the Classical Greek and the Septuagint reveal that the word means assembly. It refers to persons that are organized together for a common purpose and meet together from time to time. As we approach the New Testament we have this meaning of the word and will examine the word each time in the New Testament to see if this meaning prevails. The study first reveals that the word is used of three different kinds of ekklesia. They are the Greek, Jewish, and Christian. The Greek kind is found in **Acts 19** where the word is

used three times. This was an assembly of Greeks in the city of Ephesus that met together because Paul's preaching had hurt the idol makers' business. It was the type of assembly that met in most of the Greek cities. The word is mentioned three times of this Greek assembly in verses **32, 39** and **41**.

Another kind of assembly is the Jewish which is mentioned in **Acts 7:38**. It is an assembly of Israelites that Moses addressed in the wilderness. **Hebrews 2:12** is said by some writers to refer to a Jewish assembly but we think it refers to a Christian assembly. It is a quotation from **Psalms 22:22** which is a Messianic Psalm. Perhaps the psalmist was speaking of an assembly in his day but the prophetic reference was definitely to Christ and a New Testament ekklesia. For this reason we will treat it as belonging under the Christian kind of assembly. All other times that ekklesia is used in the New Testament it refers to a Christian ekklesia. These we will examine more carefully in the remainder of this thesis. When we refer to different kinds of ekklesia in the New Testament we do not mean that the basic meaning of ekklesia is changed. The basic meaning of "assembly" is the same for each kind of ekklesia. These ekklesias are different in membership requirement, purpose, etc.

Before we examine the Christian uses of the word we must remember that those living in New Testament times in the Roman Empire would be acquainted with the Greek and the word ekklesia. The meaning they would associate with it would be assembly. Many would know of the assemblies in the various Greek cities, some even being a member of one. Some would be acquainted with the Septuagint and the way ekklesia was used in the Old Testament to designate the assembly of Israel. This common meaning of the word would be familiar and they would readily understand it to denote a Christian institution. The writers of the New Testament use it without any special explanation as if it were well-known to all. We must assume the common meaning of assembly is meant when we meet it. Only when this common meaning will not make sense are we justified in searching for a new meaning. Any other meaning must be made clear by the context.

Most of the uses of the word in the New Testament are recognized by scholars to have the common meaning of assembly. We can cover these best by dividing them up into different classes. There are a great host of plural uses of the word. The thirty-five times it appears in the American Standard Version are as follows. These are accepted by all as having the common meaning. **Acts 15:41; 16:5; Romans 16:4,16; 1 Corinthians 7:17; 11:16; 14:33, 34; 16:1, 19a; 2 Corinthians 8:1, 18, 19, 23, 24; 11:8, 28; 12:13; Galatians 1:2, 22; 1 Thessalonians 2:14; 2 Thessalonians 1:4; Revelation 1:4, 11, 20a, 20b; 2:7, 11, 17, 23, 29; 3:6, 13, 22; 22:16**. In the King

James Version **Acts 9:31** is also in the plural; however, we will take the text of the American Standard Version and treat it as singular.

Twenty-two times the word has the location indicated in the immediate context. **Acts 8:1** “which was at Jerusalem,” **Acts 11:22** “which was in Jerusalem,” **Acts 13:1** “that was at Antioch,” **Acts 15:4** “And when they were come to Jerusalem they were received of the church,” **Acts 20:17** “he sent to Ephesus and called the elders of the church,” **Romans 16:1** “which is at Cenchrea,” **Romans 16:5** “that is in their house,” **1 Corinthians 1:2** “which is at Corinth,” **1 Corinthians 16:19b** “that is in their house,” **2 Corinthians 1:1** “which is at Corinth,” **Colossians 4:15** “which is in his house,” **Colossians 4:16** “of the Laodiceans,” **1 Thessalonians 1:1** “of the Thessalonians,” **2 Thessalonians 1:1** “of the Thessalonians,” **Philemon 1:2** “in thy house,” **Revelation 2:1** “of Ephesus,” **Revelation 2:8** “in Smyrna,” **Revelation 2:12** “in Pergamos,” **Revelation 2:18** “in Thyatira,” **Revelation 3:1** “in Sardis,” **Revelation 3:7** “in Philadelphia,” **Revelation 3:14** “of the Laodiceans.”

Three times ekklesia is accompanied by the words “every” or “no”. **Acts 14:23**, **1 Corinthians 4:17**, **Philippians 4:15**. Four times ekklesia is in a context that mentions coming together. **Acts 11:26** “they assembled themselves with the church,” **Acts 14:27** “and had gathered the church together,” **1 Corinthians 11:18** “when ye come together in the church,” **1 Corinthians 14:23** “the whole church be come together into one place.”

There are eight times in 1 Corinthians that the immediate and remote context makes it very clear that the word refers to the Corinthian ekklesia **1 Corinthians 6:4**; **11:22**; **14:4**, **5**, **12**, **19**, **28**, **35**.

There are seven instances of the word in Acts that refer to the church at Jerusalem. If the American Standard Version is accepted there are only six as the word does not appear in **Acts 2:47** in that text. **Acts 2:47**; **5:11**; **8:3**; **12:1**, **5**; **15:22**; **18:22**. If one reads the first eighteen chapters of Acts we believe that all of these instances in which the word is used will be accepted as meaning assembly and referring to the ekklesia at Jerusalem. The context is quite clear that this is the case. **Acts 18:22** might be thought to refer to an ekklesia at Caesarea upon a casual reading but a careful study we believe will reveal that this is speaking of the ekklesia in Jerusalem. In **Acts 1** we find 120 disciples gathered together to select one to fill the office Judas left empty by his death. This is the group which later is referred to as the ekklesia at Jerusalem. These chapters in Acts give the early history of this ekklesia telling of its growth, persecutions, decision, etc. **Acts 8:1**; **11:22**; **15:4** are listed under usages of

the word where the immediate context gives the location. These can be called upon to help prove that the seven passages mentioned refer to the church at Jerusalem.

Acts 15:3 is another place the word is used that is accepted by all to mean assembly. This is the ekklesia at Antioch. Reading from Acts **14:26** through **Acts 15:3** will prove this. **3 John** uses the word three times in verses **6, 9, and 10**. The word obviously has its ordinary meaning of assembly here also.

In **Matthew 18:17** ekklesia is used twice when the Lord lays down the procedure to follow when one brother in Christ wrongs another. The final step to take if the brother in the wrong will not make it right is to bring him before the ekklesia and if he will not make it right then to discipline him by dismissal from the ekklesia. In this passage also the word means assembly as all will readily admit.

There are three other occurrences of the word that are also accepted by all as having the common meaning of assembly. **James 5:14** “**Is any sick among you? Let him call for the elders of the church**”; **1 Timothy 3:5** “**For if a man know not how to rule his own house, how shall he take care of the church of God?**” **1 Timothy 5:16** “**If any man or woman that believeth have widows, let them relieve them, and let not the church be charged.**”

Of the 115 times the word occurs in the King James text we have examined ninety-two and find these all have the common meaning if not the only meaning found prior to the New Testament of assembly. Generally all scholars accept these ninety-two uses as meaning assembly.

It should be stated here that the word ekklesia refers to a group of people organized to carry out some purpose that assemble from time to time. To be an ekklesia it need not be a continual assembly.

Carroll well stated this when he was asked,

“But if church means assembly does not that require it to be always in session?”
No ecclesia, classic, Jewish, or Christian, known to history, held perpetual session. They all adjourned and came together again according to the requirements of the case. The organization, the institution, was not dissolved by temporary adjournment [B. H. Carroll, *Op. Cit.*, 49.]

The passages we have studied in the New Testament thus far show us the basic meaning of the word is the same as we found in the Classical and Septuagint Greek.

Carroll says,

There is nothing in the difference between Christ's ecclesia on the one hand, and the classic or Septuagint ecclesia on the other hand to justify a new sense in the word, The difference lies not in the meaning of the word, but in the object, terms of membership, and other things [*Op. Cit.*, p. 47.]

The Christian ekklesia was composed of baptized believers who were united together for the purpose of winning people to Christ, baptizing them, and teaching them the Bible. They observed two ordinances, baptism and the Lord's Supper. Their officers were bishops and deacons. Their government was democratic. The passages studied thus far would bear this out. Although there were many such Christian ekklesias throughout the Roman Empire there was only one kind. They all have the same pattern with regard to membership, purpose, ordinances, officers, etc. as far as is indicated. In summing up the study in the New Testament to this point we find that the word means assembly in every case and that there is only one kind of Christian assembly seen in the eighty-eight times we have observed the word.

CHAPTER 5

ECCLESIA IN DIFFICULT PASSAGES IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

Although there is practically unanimous agreement among scholars on the uses of the word we have studied so far the opinion is far from unanimous on the remaining twenty-three times. Many believe the word takes on a new meaning. Many believe another Christian *ekklesia* is mentioned different in kind from the one we have studied up to this point. How are we to determine what is the correct meaning for these remaining twenty-three occurrences of the word? We believe the only principle we can proceed on that has the agreement of scholars and that should satisfy our minds is the following. The common meaning of a word must stand in every place it occurs as long as it makes sense. When it fails to make sense then a new meaning or a rare meaning must be found in the context for the word. If a new or rare meaning will make sense in a given context we cannot accept it as long as the common meaning will also make sense. To do otherwise would make all language uncertain and confusing. If in the sentence, John ate an apple, we can say apple has a new meaning of onion because it makes sense in this context we can make language meaningless. As long as the common meaning apple makes sense it must be recognized or not. This principle is so self-evident that we do not believe it necessary to do more than state it but for the sake of any misunderstanding we will quote from several scholars to show it is recognized and used to find the meaning of words.

Berkhof works upon this principle when he says,

It is an arbitrary procedure to render *ki* in **Isaiah 5:10** ‘yea,’ seeing that the conjunction is now known to have an explicative meaning and the usual sense is perfectly appropriate [L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 4th ed., p. 981.]

Terry says,

The passage in **1 Corinthians 14:34, 35**, has been wrested to mean something else than the prohibition of women’s speaking in the public assemblies of churches ... Others have sought in the word *lalein* a peculiar sense, and, finding that it bears in classic Greek writers the meaning of babble, prattle, they have strangely taught that Paul means to say: ‘Let your women keep silence in the churches; for it is not permitted them to babble ... For it is a shame for a woman to babble in church!’ A slight examination shows that in this same chapter the word *lalein*, to speak, occurs more than twenty times, and in no instance is there any necessity or reason to understand it in other than its ordinary sense of discoursing, speaking [Milton S. Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics* pp. 187-1881.]

Broadus commenting on the word generation says;

The word cannot have any other meaning here than the obvious one. The attempts to establish for it the sense of race or nation have failed. There are some examples in which it might have such a meaning, but none in which it must, for in every case the recognized meaning will answer, and so another sense is not admissible [John A. Broadus, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 491-492.]

Warfield writing on the word theopneustos says,

All that can be said on this score for the new interpretation, therefore, is that it also could be made accordant with the context; and as much, and much more, can be said for the old. We leave the matter in this form, since obviously a detailed interpretation of the whole passage cannot be entered into here, but must be reserved for a later occasion. It may well suffice to say now that obviously no advantage can be claimed for the new interpretation from this point of view. The question is, after all, not what can the word be made to mean, but what does it mean; and the witness of its usage elsewhere, its form and mode of composition, and the sense given it by its readers from the first, supply here the primary evidence. Only if the sense thus commended to us were unsuitable to the context would we be justified in seeking further for a new interpretation - thus demanded by the context. This can by no means be claimed in the present instance, and nothing can be demanded of us beyond showing that the more natural current sense of the word is accordant with the context [B. B. Warfield, *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible*, pp. 295-296.]

Carson also uses this principle to prove his point when he states,

If from other passages we learn that it has this meaning, this passage cannot teach the contrary, if the thing is possible. Upon the principle of interpretation here recognized by Mr. Ewing and Dr. Wardlaw, we might reject everything in history not suited to our own conceptions; or explain them away by paring down the meaning of words ... If immersion is the meaning of the word, it is not optional to receive or reject it. Whether or not this is its meaning, must be learned from its history, not from the abstract probability or improbability of the immersion of beds. If the history of the word declares its meaning to be immersion, the mere difficulty of immersing beds, in conformity to a religious tradition, cannot imply that it has another meaning here ... I will here reduce my observations on this point to the form of a canon. When a thing is proved by sufficient evidence, no objection from difficulties can be admitted as decisive, except they involve an impossibility [A. Carson, *Baptism, Its Mode and Its Subjects*, p. 72.]

This principle will be the one that will determine if the word has a new meaning or retains the common one in the remaining Scriptures.

Before proceeding to any of these passages we should also consider another important principle. A word may be used generically. In such cases the word may be singular and yet not refer to any particular object of the class but to every object of that class, It is as if some object of the class were taken as a representative of each object of the class and whatever is said of this representative would apply generally to each object. By way of example we may say, the automobile is the greatest invention of this century. The meaning of the word automobile is the same as commonly thought though the word refers to no particular automobile but what is said applies to each. In such cases the definite article with the word does not mean there is only one particular automobile singled out from the rest or that there is only one automobile in the world but the article is called the generic article and distinguishes one class from another class rather than one object in a class from another object in the same class. We use words generically all the time and never think of it.

‘The’ with a singular noun sometimes indicates a class or kind of object. The scholar is not necessarily a dryasdust. The elephant is the largest of quadrupeds. The aeroplane is a very recent invention. Resin is obtained from the pine. Note. In this use ‘the’ is often called the generic article (from the Latin genus, “kind” or “sort”). The singular number with the generic ‘the’ is practically equivalent to the plural without an article. Thus in the first example the sense would be the same if we had ‘Scholars are not necessarily dryasdusts!’ [G. L. Kittredge, and F. E. Farley, *An Advanced English Grammar*, p. 77.]

This is not only true in English but also in Greek.

948. The article may have a generic force, marking an object as the representative of a class; e.g., ho anthropos - man (in general); hoi anthropoi - mankind (opposed to gods or the lower animals); hoi gerontes - the aged (as a class) [W. W. Goodwin, and C. B. Gulick, *Greek Grammar*, p. 207.]

763. Generic Article - The generic article denotes an entire class as distinguished from other classes; as ho anthropos - man (as distinguished from other beings), hoi gerontes - the aged, poneron he sukophantes - the (an) informer is a vile thing [H. W. Smyth, *A Greek Grammar for Schools and Colleges*, p. 210.]

It is very common to find the singular used with the article in a representative sense for the whole class. So in *ho huies tou anthropou* (**Matthew 8:20**, and often) Jesus calls himself the son of mankind. Of **Luke 10:7**, *ho ergates* where the labourer represents all labourers [A. T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research*, p. 757.]

We believe that the word *ekklesia* is used generically many times in the remaining passages and because some scholars have failed to recognize this a new meaning has been attributed to the word wrongly.

Of the disputed passages we would like to take four first that deal with Paul's persecution of the *ekklesia*. Some believe the word does not mean assembly in these passages but means about the same as disciples. Some would call it the invisible church which means it contains all Christians whether organized or whether they ever meet in assembly. The four passages are as follows: **1 Corinthians 15:9** "because I persecuted the church of God"; **Galatians 1:13** "how that beyond measure I persecuted the church of God, and wasted it"; **Philippians 3:6** "Concerning zeal, persecuting the church;" **Acts 9:31** "So the church throughout all Judaea, and Galilee and Samaria had peace, being edified." The first three passages are from the King James Version, the last is from the American Standard Version. **Acts 9:31** in the King James text has *ekklesia* in the plural which reading if correct would be accepted by all as meaning assemblies. If the singular is correct then there is a question in the minds of some as to its meaning.

If one begins in **Acts 8:1** and reads through **Acts 9:31** the meaning should not be difficult. Summarized, this section of Scripture says that Saul was persecuting the *ekklesia* at Jerusalem. As a result of Paul and others persecuting this *ekklesia*, it was scattered throughout Judaea and Samaria, **Acts 8:1, 3**. The remainder of chapter **8** tells of Phillip's work in Samaria and his witnessing to the Ethiopian eunuch. Chapter **9** returns us to the subject of Saul and his persecuting. He is still very angry and desires to continue his evil work in Damascus. Getting the necessary authority he desired he left for Damascus but he was saved before reaching the city. The following verses tell quickly of his return trip to Jerusalem and then to Tarsus. After completing the story of the conversion of this arch persecutor, Saul, we are told "**the church throughout all Judaea, and Galilee and Samaria had peace, being edified.**" This was the church at Jerusalem which was scattered, **Acts 8:1**, the only church Scripture tells us he persecuted. When Saul was saved this scattered church has peace. The other three passages in **Galatians**, **Philippians** and **1 Corinthians** refer to this part in Paul's life. It could be that Paul is thinking more of his persecution of the institution rather than the particular *ekklesia* in Jerusalem but still

he persecuted only the church at Jerusalem as far as the Bible indicates and the word makes good sense by translating it assembly so we have no right to think it has a new meaning.

Carroll answered well when asked,

‘But when Paul says, I persecuted the church surely that can only mean that he persecuted the disciples?’

But it does mean much more. It means exactly what it says. The mere individuals as such counted nothing with Paul. It was the organization to which they belonged, and what that organization stood for. As proof of this our Lord arrested him with the question: **‘why persecutest thou me? I am Jesus whom thou persecutest.’** Jesus was not persecuted in person by Saul.

So when **‘Herod the king put forth his hand to afflict certain of the church’** - he aimed at the organization, in what it stood for, though directly his wrath fell only on James and Peter [B. H. Carroll, *Op. Cit.*, p. 43.]

Hort recognizes the fact that these uses of the word refer to the Jerusalem ekklesia when he says,

The original ecclesia of Jerusalem or Judaea, at a time when there was no other:
- **Galatians 1:13; 1 Corinthians 15:9; Philippians 3:6;** the occasion of reference in all three cases being St. Paul’s own action as a persecutor [F.J.A. Hort, *Op. Cit.*, p. 116.]

In concluding our study on these passages I would like to quote the words of Thomas.

Now, it is a curious fact that there is no proof that Paul’s ‘persecution’ ever went beyond the church at Jerusalem. In **Acts 8:3** it is said that **‘he made havoc of the church’** there. Ananias, when called on to visit Paul, replied to the Lord: **‘I have heard from many of this man, how much evil he did to thy saints at Jerusalem’** (Acts 9:13). When he began to preach, the people said: **‘Is not this he that in Jerusalem made havoc of them which called on this name?’** In Paul’s own defense before Agrippa he emphasizes his cruelties to the **‘saints’** in Jerusalem, shutting them up in prison and compelling them to blaspheme. It is true that he adds that **‘being exceedingly mad against them, I persecuted them even to strange cities.’** But the word he uses (dioko) implies that the objects of his vengeance were still the Jerusalem saints whom he was pursuing.

So that his ‘**persecution of the church of God**’ appears to have been limited to the constituency of a single church [Jesse B. Thomas, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 231-232.]

Romans 16:23 has been claimed by some as referring to all believers because of the word whole. There is no real need for such an interpretation; the usual meaning makes good sense. It is probably referring to an ekklesia that meets in the home of Gaius who is the host of both Paul and this ekklesia. This entire ekklesia which might be quite small salutes the saints in Rome. **Acts 15:22** speaks of the whole ekklesia where none can doubt it means the whole of the Jerusalem ekklesia and the same sort of language is used of the Corinthian ekklesia, **I Corinthians 14:23**.

1 Corinthians 10:32, “**Give none offence, neither to the Jews, nor to the Gentiles, nor to the church of God.**” This passage is also disputed by some but the common meaning makes good sense and so a new meaning is not warranted.

Thomas answers well those who would introduce a new meaning here.

The ‘**church of God**,’ it is argued, must here mean the church universal, since, like ‘Jews’ and ‘Greeks,’ it covers a world-group. But the offense given must needs have been to individual Jews or Greeks, since they could not as a race be thus disturbed by individual conduct. Why, then, must it needs mean more than ‘do not offend any church or any member of a church’? The fact is that the whole exhortation, as a study of the context will make clear, is directed to the regulation of personal conduct toward the different classes of the immediate community [*Op. Cit.*, p. 230.]

Hebrews 2:12: “**Saying, I will declare thy name unto my brethren, in the midst of the church will I sing praise unto thee.**” Assembly makes good sense here; the question is to what ekklesia is it referring? This is speaking of Jesus and His church we believe and it refers to the time He instituted the Lord’s Supper. **Matthew 26:30** “**And when they had sung an hymn, they went out into the Mount of Olives.**” Some think this is too early for a church but why is it? Jesus had already declared He would build His ekklesia (**Matthew 16:18**). He had given it a procedure for discipline which assumed an ekklesia was already in existence (**Matthew 18:17**). The members were baptized believers, they had the gospel and had been preaching it and baptizing their converts. The essential elements of a New Testament church are seen in the gospels. In **Acts 1** the disciples seem to be already organized as they meet to decide on Judas’ successor to his office. The only answer that seems consistent with the information of the New Testament is that Jesus sang in the ekklesia begun during His earthly ministry when He gave it the second ordinance.

1 Timothy 3:15 is considered by some as referring to the universal invisible church. If we notice the context starting back at the beginning of the book we will see it must be referring to the church at Ephesus and the problems Timothy met with there. Bishops and deacons, the officers of a local church, are the subject in chapter three. The remainder of the book indicates that the only church in mind is a local church particularly the one at Ephesus. Another fact that should be noticed is that **'house'** and **'church'** in this verse is anarthrous and should be read a house and a church which fact strongly supports the idea that ekklesia retains its usual if not only meaning in this context. The only possible objection to a local church here is the word **'house'** which could be understood in a very wide sense and best translated household. To do so would change the meaning of the word ekklesia when it would not be necessary. The word house can be understood in a sense which fits in with the common meaning of the word. The common meaning should always stand unless it is impossible.

Dana interprets this passage very well when he writes,

The figure **"household of God"** can be regarded in two ways. It may be considered from the viewpoint of its constituency, or from the viewpoint of its function. The former would require it to apply to all children of God; the latter to any group of God's children. The function of a household is to offer support and fellowship to its inmates. Any local ekklesia did this for its members. In that the local church at Ephesus, as God's agency, offered care and fellowship to all the disciples in Ephesus it might be fitly described as **"the household of God."** This significance of the figure is obvious and unstrained, and avoids all the difficulties in the way of the other, and hence should be accepted as the correct explanation. The **"ekklesia of the living God"** to which Paul refers in this verse is the church at Ephesus [H. E. Dana, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 50-51.]

Acts 20:28 is another passage thought by some to teach a different meaning for ekklesia. The reason for finding a new meaning here would be due to the fact this church is said to be **"purchased with His own blood,"** a statement thought by many to be too great to be said of any local church. We don't believe this is a good objection. Paul speaking of himself in **Galatians 2:20b** says, **"and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave Himself for me."** Why can't it be stated that Jesus purchased with His blood an organized group of professed believers in the Lord Jesus Christ? This does not exclude other churches of believers or individuals from making the same statement. Paul states the same idea referring to himself. If it be objected some may be only professed believers and not truly purchased by His blood we would agree some are

but this is no objection to the word church having its common meaning. The Scriptures refer to professed believers as saints, brethren, children of God, and by other terms which only truly apply to the ones who have been actually born-again. Yet the Scriptures recognize that some professed believers are false professors and in such cases they are as much lost as the one who has rejected Christ. The Bible warns such but still speaks according to appearance. If a person professes to be a believer and there is nothing to make one think contrariwise he is referred to by all of the wonderful terms which only really belong to the true child of God. In **1 Thessalonians 1:1** it says, “**unto the church of the Thessalonians which is in God the Father and in the Lord Jesus Christ.**” Could such statements be said of any but the saved? We think not yet Paul writes by inspiration that this church at Thessalonica “**is in God the Father and in the Lord Jesus Christ**”. They are a group of professed believers with perhaps some in their midst who are false professors still they are recognized as saved and given the terms of such. “Purchased by His blood” can be stated of every New Testament church and every individual believer. This statement is no objection to the church in **Acts 20:28** being a local one. The context makes it clear that this is referring to the church in Ephesus. Notice verses **17** and **28** in particular and examine the terms Ephesus, elders of the church, flock, and overseers and see if any church other than the church at Ephesus can be the one spoken of here.

1 Corinthians 12:28 is believed to support a universal church by some Bible students. The argument as usually stated is that apostles were not officers of a local church but their ministry was for all of the churches. So the word church cannot refer to a local group but must refer to something much bigger, a universal church that would include all believers. The idea that this passage is relating the officers of the church is completely without basis. The context indicates that these various things set in the church are best described as gifts. These gifts were necessary for the work of the Lord’s church. Some were only necessary for a short time, others for the entire history of the church. In the early days the churches needed certain gifts not needed today. Apostles were needed to establish them and give them initial direction that was not needed later. The pattern was completed in their days under the direction of the Holy Spirit as we see from the Acts and epistles. They worked with local churches as clearly seen in these books. The prophets were needed for inspired messages before the New Testament was completed. Tongues, healings, and miracles were needed in those early days to accredit the church as a Divine institution and the message it preached. The gifts of teaching, helps, and governments are still in the churches today and by the nature of their work will be needed until the Lord comes back. We believe the word church is used generically in this passage and the Scriptures are telling us of the gifts the Lord placed in that

institution that its work might be properly carried on. These gifts benefited all New Testament churches then and today even though apostles, prophets, miracles, etc. were not present in every particular church. These gifts were placed in that kind of institution rather than in every particular church for the benefit of all. The pattern, the message, and the accreditation brought about by these gifts are ours now even though the gifts that produced them are passed away. The whole chapter (**1 Corinthians 12**) is clearly speaking of a local church as a body. This chapter will be discussed later in this book. Since all of the chapter is definitely about a local church it would seem unlikely and even out of place to insert **12:28** if it is speaking about an entirely different kind of church, one universal and invisible. The common meaning makes good sense if interpreted as a generic use of the word so we need not resort to a new meaning.

We now come to the books of **Ephesians** and **Colossians**. These books are primarily relied upon to establish a new meaning for the word by believers in the universal, invisible, church theory. Ephesians uses the word nine times and Colossians twice that might be used to support this theory. The two times in Colossians are very similar to passages in Ephesians. If the universal, invisible church theory can't be proved in Ephesians it can't be proved in Colossians nor in any other book of the Bible. This book is heavily relied on by advocates of this theory and it must stand or fall in this book. We would like to first consider **Ephesians 1:22**, **Colossians 1:18** and **24** together.

The argument for this theory in these passages is that the church is spoken of as His body and Jesus is the head of His body. Body and church in these passages are singular. Local churches are many so they cannot be the church spoken of here. Christ had only one physical body so He has only one mystical body, the church. **1 Corinthians 12** is also taken in conjunction with this passage where the church as a body is discussed at length. These arguments for the invisible church theory at first hearing sound quite plausible but upon closer examination they are seen to be without any real force. First, Christ is the head of every church in the sense He rules over that church and is its final authority. Christ is the head of every man, that is He is each man's authority or ruler (**1 Corinthians 11:3**).

In Revelation the first three chapters we see the Lord Jesus Christ in the midst of seven candlesticks. The seven candlesticks are interpreted as seven particular churches. Jesus in the midst is clearly revealed as their ruler, authority, head. He praises, rebukes, exhorts, warns, directs, as only a head can do. Jesus is clearly revealed as their head here. He is head of each of these local churches and no problem is involved. In this connection we should note also that the church as a body

is discussed most fully in **1 Corinthians 12** and in that passage the head, eye and ear are represented as various members of a New Testament church. The head over the body is Christ. He directs it; He is its final authority. But each part of the body including the head is like unto certain members of a church. The husband is the head of the wife in the same sense. She has a head on her shoulders but still the husband is her head or authority. **1 Corinthians 12:12** states that a human body is one and has many members and that this is true also of the Lord's body, the church. The text actually says "**so also is Christ**" but the context makes it very clear that "Christ" refers to His body, the church.

We believe the writer is using "Christ" metonymically. The fact that it says the body is one is used as an argument that the body here must refer to something different from a local church because there are many of them, whereas there is only one of this church. This is the universal invisible church that is referred to here as a body according to those who hold this theory. This interpretation is very superficial. It is evident that the body spoken of in verse **12** is a human body and that it has two characteristics that are like the Lord's church. The human body is one and has many members. These characteristics are very clearly seen upon examining any human body. It is a unit; it has oneness; yet it is composed of many different parts each having a particular function. This is true of a New Testament church. The members are bound together as one body having certain things in common. One Lord, one faith, one baptism, one purpose, one Bible, etc. are some of these things that make the church a unit but still each member is different. God has given various gifts to each. One may be a good teacher, another a song leader, another can visit, another is very capable in business matters, etc. all of which are needed for the work of a church. The Corinthians needed this message; they were divided and needed to learn that the various gifts were all important and could work together in harmony in their church. In verse **27** this lesson is applied directly to the Corinthian church. The definite article before body is not in the Greek and so it would be better to translate this, "**Now ye are a body of Christ and members in particular.**"

1 Corinthians 12:13 we believe refers to water baptism that the Holy Spirit leads us to receive. This baptism admits us into the membership of a New Testament church. As we read this passage we notice certain situations that perfectly fit a local church but are quite contrary to the universal invisible church theory. Two of these are seen in verse **26**. If in a local church one member suffers because of the loss of his little boy the other members will suffer also but will this be true if this is speaking of a universal church? No, Christians in Africa, China, and South America cannot suffer with a Christian in our country. They have no way of knowing about the loss ordinarily. This is true also if one member is honored.

Hort is helpful on this passage and the one in **Romans 12** when he says,

He points out that in a body the whole is dependent on the diversity of office of the several members, and that each member is dependent on the office of the other members. Then he adds, “**But ye are a body of Christ (soma christou), and members severally.**” ... Here evidently it is the Corinthian community by itself that is called ‘**a body of Christ**’: this depends not merely on the absence of an article but on *humeis*, which cannot naturally mean “all ye Christians.”

In **Romans 12:3-5** all is briefer, but the ideas are essentially the same. The central verse is, “**As in one body we have many members, and all the members have not the same office, (action) so we the many are one body in Christ, and severally members one of another.**’ Here the language used is not formally applied to the Roman community in particular: but the context shows that St. Paul is still thinking of local communities, and of the principles which should regulate the membership of the Roman community, as of all others [F. J. A. Hort, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 145-146.]

Ephesians 1:23 speaks of the church as “**His body**” which means it belongs to Him. He purchased it; He directs it; and He is served by it. We believe this passage and other similar passages that refer to the church as a body and Christ as being its head refer to the local church and not to any universal invisible church. The common meaning makes good sense so it should be retained. The fact that the words church and body are singular and have the definite article are no proof against these passages referring to the local church. The generic use of the word and the definite article is what we have in these places.

Ephesians 3:10 and **21** also refer to the local church. The word in both places is in the singular and has the definite article. This will make good sense according to the common meaning of the word by interpreting the word in these places as used generically. The manifold wisdom of God is made known to all of God’s creation by the message each New Testament church preaches and by the plan of this organization which is God-given. His wisdom is seen particularly in this passage by the fact that Jews and Greeks can be members of the same church working together for Him. God is and will be glorified by a New Testament church throughout time and eternity by its preaching of Jesus Christ as God’s plan of salvation and by those who are converted and edified as a result of its message. God planned and gave the salvation in Christ and this brings glory to Him forever for those saved are saved forever. A New Testament church’s work brings glory to God forever.

Referring to **Ephesians 3:10** Dayton says,

The idea in the first of these two passages is, that the angels of God, who are elsewhere called principalities and powers, might look at this wonderful contrivance of Jesus Christ for the execution of his laws and the promotion of the comfort and piety of his people, and see in it evidences of the wisdom of God. It was a Divine contrivance, and characterized by infinite wisdom. Nothing else could possibly have done so well. Men have not believed this. Men have all the time been tinkering at God's plan, and trying to mend it. Men have set it aside, and substituted others in its place; but to the angels it appears the very perfection of wisdom. And it was one object of God in having the church established, that his wisdom might, through it, be known to those heavenly powers and principalities. But now, what was this plan? What was this church? It was, as we have seen, a local assembly, in which each member was the equal of every other, and by whom, in the name of Christ and by authority from him, his ordinances were to be administered and his laws enforced. What is there in these texts which requires a grand collection of all the churches into one, in order to make the language appropriate? Suppose a friend in England should write to me that he is about to publish a new history of the steam-engine, 'in order that unto kings and princes, in their palaces and on their thrones, might be made known through, the engine the manifold skill of the inventor': what would you think of that man's common sense, even though he were a Doctor of Mechanics, who should insist upon it, that though the steam-engine was a definite and well-known machine, and there were a vast multitude of separate and distinct steam-engines, yet there must also be, in some way or other, a vast conglomerate 'universal' engine, consisting of all the steam-engines in the world united into one; or else the language of my friend, when he speaks of 'showing the manifold skill of the inventor,' through or by 'the engine,' is altogether unintelligible? Yet this is the way that doctors of divinity reason upon a similar expression of Paul [A. C. Dayton, *Theodosia Ernest*, Vol. II, pp. 120-121.]

In the **fifth** chapter of **Ephesians** ekklesia is used six times in verses **23**, **24**, **27** and **32**. This passage is considered by many advocates of the universal, invisible church theory because of the singular and the definite article would seem church theory as one of their strongest passages for the establishing of their view. It is said that "**Christ is the head of the church**" is a statement that refers to the invisible church. The word church is used generically here and states a truth that applies to each church. The first part of this verse, **23**, uses two words generically and the fact is never questioned. "**The husband**" and "**the wife**" refer to what is commonly meant by these terms. The fact that they are both singular and are preceded by the definite

article is not considered by anyone to prove that a new meaning is had in mind here. What is said here refers to each husband and to each wife. The common meaning makes good sense and a new meaning is not warranted. To say there is a new meaning for each of illogical and extremely far-fetched to every mind. Yet this type of proof is relied on with great assurance by advocates of the universal invisible church theory. Other supposed proofs for a new meaning of ekklesia here are that the church is spoken of as a body and Christ is said to have given Himself for the church. Both of these arguments have been considered earlier in this thesis and have been known to be of no weight. Both statements can be said of each church and it makes perfectly good sense.

It is helpful to note that this passage is not primarily teaching about the church but about the relationship between husbands and wives. The relationship between Christ and the church is used to teach what the relationship should be between husband and wife. The apostle is not introducing a new teaching about some universal, invisible church. He takes the church, that all were well acquainted with, and illustrates truths by means of it concerning husbands and wives. In verse **30** it speaks of a church being his body and goes on to elaborate by saying “**of His flesh and of His bones.**” A church is spoken of figuratively as a body, a body that belongs to Christ and represents Him so, His body. A body is made up of flesh and bones and so another way of designating the same figure is to elaborate concerning its elements and say “**of His flesh and of His bones.**” The truth is only elaborated a little more but it is the same basic figure which refers to each church. This phrase however is not in the best Greek manuscripts.

The fact that the figure refers to the marriage relationship and the church in such a figure would be the wife or bride of Christ is thought of as an objection to giving the word church its ordinary meaning. The bride in Revelation is considered by most to refer to all the saints. The bride referred to in Revelation and in Ephesians is thought to refer to the same thing. We cannot say that a figure always represents the same thing. Christ and Satan are both spoken of as a lion (**Revelation 5:5; 1 Peter 5:8**). The bride in **Revelation** is not said to be the church so that passage need not be considered. It is possible that the bride there does refer to the church but there is no definite proof. If it does, it could still refer to the local church as an institution. In **2 Corinthians 11:2** the church of Corinth is referred to under the figure of a bride. The term is not used but the idea is there.

The figure of a bride illustrates well truths concerning the church when given its common meaning. Christ has the headship over it and loved it greatly, which was shown by His dying for it. Each church should seek to obey the word of Christ as a

good wife recognizing His authority and should be composed of saved people, those He loved so much He died for them. The common meaning makes good sense throughout **Ephesians** and **Colossians** so we need not hunt for another.

Matthew 16:18 is one of the most important verses having to do with our subject. Several questions should be studied in a detailed examination of this passage. Who is the rock? What is meant by **‘the gates of hell shall not prevail against it’**? What are **‘the keys of the kingdom’**? What is meant by binding and loosing? But the question that concerns us is what does the word **‘church’** mean here? Does it have a new meaning as many say which is commonly spoken of as the universal invisible church? The answer can be found to the question what does **“church”** mean here without answering the others.

This is the first time the Lord uses the word in the New Testament. Before this time the only meaning we know for the word is assembly, an idea that involves visibility and locality where people are concerned. If the word makes good sense according to this common if not only meaning known for the word it must stand and the new idea proposed which is characterized by opposite ideas must be rejected. A quick examination shows the word makes perfectly good sense here according to its ordinary meaning. Therefore the universal invisible church idea must be discarded. Some would insist He would have said churches had He had in mind the common meaning. If a man would say today, “I shall build my grocery store” there could certainly be no misunderstanding as to what he meant by grocery store. To every mind a local, visible, building where food stuffs are sold would come to mind. A new meaning would certainly not be considered by any person. If the person who said it had in his mind of building a store incorporating some of his own ideas that would make it a distinct kind from all the other kinds of grocery stores in the world and planned to have a chain of them throughout the area eventually his statement would still make good sense. If Jesus upon considering the many kinds of assemblies in the world would decide to build his own incorporating His own peculiar membership requirements, ordinances, and purposes into it and had in mind that it should multiply and be found in every community where there would be saved people why wouldn’t He say, **“I will build my assembly.”** This is exactly what He had in mind as the rest of the New Testament proves it. He had in mind His kind of assembly in distinction from other kinds when He said my assembly. He was using the term generically.

In **Genesis** when God says **“let us make man”** the fact that man is in the singular doesn’t mean that there wouldn’t be other men or that the term has a different meaning than is ordinarily associated with the word man. This statement is similar

to what we have concerning the church in **Matthew 16:18**. The church spoken of in this passage means assembly and is the same kind of assembly as found all through the New Testament. Jesus used ekklesia twenty-three times in the New Testament, three times in Matthew and twenty times in Revelation. Twenty-two of these times the word is admitted by all as having the common meaning. In **Matthew 18** it is used twice in connection with the discipline of a church member and the twenty throughout **Revelation** are either plural or are referring to one of the seven churches in Asia Minor. The first time Jesus uses the word, **Matthew 16:18**, is the only place some students are in doubt about its meaning. The fact that Jesus uses the word twenty-two times and there isn't any doubt that the word in each case means assembly should make it clear that the other time it means the same thing since it makes good sense using that meaning. If the contention of those who advocate a new meaning be followed we would have Jesus saying He would build a church and that it would never perish and then never mentioning it again but instead mentioning twenty-two times another church He never said He would build. The church He said He would build which by the nature of the idea given it is by far the greater of the two churches is never even mentioned once again but the inferior of the two is mentioned many times and Jesus in His last message is seen in the midst of seven of them rebuking, commanding, and exhorting them. To say the word has a new meaning in the one passage puts one in a very inconsistent position.

Hebrews 12:23 is the last passage we have to discuss. Many are sure ekklesia here definitely means something quite different than its common meaning. They think it is the universal, invisible church. Others believe the word keeps its common meaning of assembly but it is not referring to the kind of assembly the Lord said He would build and the kind we have seen all through the New Testament but to another kind of assembly of which there will be only one and it will be in the future in Heaven when all the saints gather together there. This would not change the basic meaning of the word which we have seen is the meaning in every passage thus far. It would bring in another kind of Christian assembly though. One that would have its own membership requirements and purpose. This would make four kinds of assemblies that the word ekklesia is used to represent. One is the Greek kind of **Acts 19**, another is the Jewish kind of **Acts 7:38**, another is the Christian kind mentioned here, and the last is the Christian kind mentioned in every other use of the word in the New Testament. The membership requirement of this new kind of Christian ekklesia mentioned here is salvation only and its purpose would probably be fellowship and worship only as the time and place would forbid that its purpose be the winning of the lost, baptizing, and indoctrinating. We believe that this view is also wrong even though it is correct in accepting the common meaning of assembly. A new kind of Christian assembly must have proof from the Scriptures of its existence. If the one

kind of Christian assembly seen in every place thus far makes sense here we must accept it as the meaning and reject this new kind. Those who advocate a new kind of Christian assembly that is only in prospect now and will actually meet in Heaven later sometime call upon **Ephesians 5** as further proof of such an assembly. **Ephesians 5** makes good sense of the only kind seen thus far so we do not discuss it here.

This prospective assembly is said to be definitely local and visible and should not be confused with the view commonly referred to as the universal invisible church theory. By rejecting the view that there is a new kind of Christian assembly mentioned in **Hebrews 12:23** we do not deny that all the saints will assemble together in Heaven at times for various purposes but only deny that the word ekklesia is ever used to refer to such. We will seek to show by a careful exposition of this whole passage that the common meaning of assembly makes good sense and that the only kind of Christian assembly seen thus far makes good sense. This positive proof will demand that we reject the other two ideas mentioned.

We should first note the translation of this passage **Hebrews 12:18-24** in the Revised Standard Version. This translation is superior on this passage to all others we have seen and is very helpful to what we believe is a correct understanding of the passage [This statement is not to be interpreted as an approval of all of the RSV by the author. Many of the translations in that version we believe are incorrect.]

“For you have not come to what may be touched, a blazing fire, and darkness, and gloom, and a tempest, and the sound of a trumpet, and a voice whose words made the hearers entreat that no further message be spoken to them. For they could not endure the order that was given, ‘If even a beast touches the mountain, it shall be stoned.’ Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, ‘I tremble with fear.’ But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the first-born who are enrolled in Heaven, and to a judge who is God of all, and to the spirits of just men made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks more graciously than the blood of Abel.”

The book of Hebrews is written to some professing Christians that are discouraged and are tempted to renounce their profession and return to their former religion. The writer encourages them in several ways. One way is to contrast law and grace showing characteristics of each. The fearful characteristics of law which we don't have being saved, when contrasted with the wonderful characteristics of grace which

we do have being saved, would serve to encourage them. Law as a way of salvation is presented centering it around Mt. Sinai where the law was given to Israel. Every characteristic pointed out would encourage the Christian realizing he had escaped them by being saved by Grace. Every characteristic of grace is centered around heaven because of its close connection with God and His special abode. The verbs are in the perfect tense. When saved they have not come to law and its fearful features but they have come to grace and its wonderful features. They had already come and were still there. The eight characteristics have more of a logical connection with Heaven than a spatial. Each of the characteristics is only briefly mentioned which would remind them of all of the results of grace, each short phrase opening up avenues of thought that they had been instructed in before, that would remind them of their great privileges and would encourage them to hold fast their profession.

All of the eight features when read would obviously remind one of Heaven but perhaps the church; so the phrase is added to show its connection. A New Testament church is made up of saved people who have followed the Lord in baptism. The term **'firstborn'** is used to describe the constituents of such a church. The name is used of saved persons and is taken from the Old Testament where the **'firstborn'** was a person of great privilege as is each born-again person. These members of a church are said to be enrolled in Heaven not there in actual location. New Testament churches are here now yet they have a close connection with Heaven because their members are enrolled in Heaven. The writer is reminding them of their great privileges as saved by grace by these eight things they have come to at their conversion. The various privileges would have past, present, and future value to each saint. **"The blood"** reminds us of the past primarily that our sin debt is paid. **"The spirits of just men made perfect"** reminds us of the future that someday we will fellowship with the saints in Heaven who no longer will have their old sinful natures which mar our fellowship now with each other but we will fellowship with saints who are perfect and there will be no cause for the frictions now among us. Each of these phrases are not meant to teach them new truths but to remind them of old. Each phrase is just thrown out and they are expected to remember all that each means and as they do the desired effect will be forthcoming. The great privileges in grace will come to mind and the terribleness of going after law as a way of salvation. **"The assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in Heaven"** would remind them of present privileges. The only organization the Lord has for the saints upon earth in which to find Christian fellowship and to work together is the church. The world offers nothing for the saved. To have an organization that we can join and have fellowship with those who have the same beliefs and future means a great deal. A New Testament church is composed of professed Christians, those who have a common destination; they are enrolled in heaven. To renounce our profession means

to give this great privilege up. Where could one go to find finer fellowship than in a New Testament church? The Christian's close ties are there.

We might suppose a similar situation to illustrate. If there were some discouraged new citizens in our country from Russia we might encourage them by saying something like this. You have not come to Russia, to Moscow the capital of world communism, to concentration camps, to Stalin that cruel dictator, to enslavement, but you have come to the United States the home of the free, to an economy that gives opportunities for great advancement, to churches with freedom of worship and to homes with all the modern appliances. They might not have a new home with the appliances but since the opportunity and privilege in the United States provides that, it could be mentioned as one of the great features of our country. Past, present, and future significance could be attached to these various features.

Interpreted like this, which we believe is correct, makes the word ekklesia make good sense according to its common meaning of assembly and to the only kind of Christian assembly seen throughout the New Testament. Because of this we cannot accept any different meaning for the term here.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

In conclusion we must say that every time ekklesia appears in the New Testament it makes sense translated according to its common meaning of assembly and that every time the word is used with a Christian significance it refers to one kind of Christian assembly.

Ekklesia never means what is commonly referred to as the universal invisible church. Even though this idea might make sense in some places it cannot be accepted for the common meaning makes good sense in these places and there is no reason to give the word a new meaning.

It might be said, “Why all the fuss? The idea of a universal invisible church is practically the same as the idea represented by the words kingdom and family.” There are two great dangers. The first is that to allow the idea of a universal invisible church to stand upon the ground it would have to stand upon, undermines the Scriptures. If we can give a word a new meaning because it can make sense that way in a particular context when the common meaning makes good sense we can change the entire Bible to suit our fancy and the next person can change it to suit his fancy. This idea if followed would actually make the Bible meaningless and all other writings as well.

The other danger is that it brings about neglect of the local church. If one is a member of the invisible church which is always considered the greater by those who believe in such an idea they are often satisfied to neglect the local church. Their attending, giving, and working in it is neglected to some extent usually because they really don't believe it is too important. Yet we find throughout the New Testament that the local church is always joined by the saved and that they worked in it. The apostles established churches, wrote to them, and held the organization in high esteem. Jesus in His last message addresses seven of them and speaks of them in a way that one could not but see their great importance. Many use the universal invisible church theory as an escape mechanism to get away from laboring for the Lord in their local church with the many problems that are always involved. The churches in the New Testament had their problems yet Christians are never in any way encouraged to neglect their responsibility to it and stand aloof to judge it and to be thankful they are in the true invisible universal church. This attitude can be seen today among some and we believe the cause is found in their belief in a universal invisible church.

SUMMARY

What does the word ekklesia mean in the New Testament? This is the question we seek to answer in this thesis. The word church is the usual translation of ekklesia in the New Testament. It is not a good translation since church has a host of meanings today that no one claims for ekklesia. We must bear this in mind as we study this word lest we be misled. Ekklesia means assembly in the classical Greek and in the Septuagint. In approaching the New Testament we see that the word is admitted by all to have this meaning in about ninety places. The other times it is used there is a difference of opinion. Some contend for assembly, others for a new meaning best described as the universal invisible church. How can we tell which is correct? The principle is used that says the common meaning must be accepted in every place it makes sense. Only when the common meaning will not make sense are we permitted to assume it has a new meaning. Following this principle we find that the word assembly makes sense in every contested passage so that any new sense must be rejected. To say it has a new meaning in the face of this evidence is to follow a false way of interpreting that could make the Bible meaningless and could undermine a person's duty to the local church.