

Chapter Four

“The Church Can’t Mean That!”

“THE CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST: ITS MEANING”

It is important for God’s people to take special care when handling truth related to His creative activities. Anytime a creative act is considered, it should be a matter of the most profound importance to us, recognizing that there are ramifications throughout time and eternity. Allow me to cite several examples:

First, of course, is God’s *ex nihilo* creation of the time-space-matter continuum that is referred to in Genesis 1.1, “*ex nihilo*” meaning that God created it out of nothing, with no preexisting materials:¹

“In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.”

Psalms 33.6 is among some other verses that also refer to the LORD’s creative activity in the physical universe in which we live:

“By the word of the LORD were the heavens made; and all the host of them by the breath of his mouth.”

However, it is in the New Testament that we learn more detail concerning God’s creative activity, that it was the Second Person of the Godhead who was the immediate agent of this universe’s beginning, with John 1.2 among those passages that shed additional light:²

“All things were made by him [Christ]; and without him was not any thing made that was made.”

The human family, the *second* thing God created, consisted of one man and one woman brought together in the Garden of Eden in a covenant relationship that also included the physical union of two distinct individuals,

¹ Ehrlich, page 124.

² John 1.10; Ephesians 3.9; Colossians 1.16; Hebrews 1.2

one of them a man and the other one a woman. That the physical union of a man and a woman does not in and of itself constitute marriage, and that the dissolution of marriage by divorce are profoundly serious matters is abundantly clear in the Bible.³ Sex outside marriage is wicked, and the destruction of marriage is also wicked. God's creation of Adam and Eve was the culmination of His activity of bringing the physical universe into existence.

Moving on to the *third* example of God's creative work, let us pause for just a moment along the way to consider human government. A quick look at the first human government revealed, in Genesis chapter 11 that was headed by Nimrod, shows that it was brought into existence in rebellion against God. Nevertheless, in both the Old Testament and the New Testament we are shown that, while God did not bring the concept of human government into existence, He nevertheless makes use of human governments and exercises sovereign rule over them to accomplish His purposes.⁴ That is why we should, insofar as we can without compromising our convictions, strive to be the best citizens in subjection to our government that we can in good conscience be.⁵

Now to the *third* thing God created. After creating the universe and all that herein is, and after creating the family unit, marriage, God created Israel. He did so by calling Abram from Ur of the Chaldees, by establishing the Abrahamic Covenant, by giving to him an heir named Isaac and then giving to Isaac an heir named Jacob, who sired Israel's twelve patriarchs.⁶

The majority of the Bible is devoted to God's dealings with the Jewish people, the physical descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. It was into the Jewish tribe of Judah that the Lord Jesus Christ would be born, and it will be in part to fulfill promises made to Abraham that the glorified and exalted Lord Jesus Christ will return to this old world in power and great glory someday.

³ John 4.16-18; I Corinthians 6.9-20; Matthew 5.31-32; 19.3-9

⁴ Good people disagree, suggesting Genesis 9.6 authorizes human government. My sermon on Romans 13.1-7 available upon request from ClassicalBaptist.Press.

⁵ Jeremiah 27.5f; Daniel 2.21, 37f; 4.17, 25, 32; 5.21; Romans 13.1

⁶ Genesis 12-50

However, it is while the virgin-born Son of the living God was here on earth that He accomplished two tasks, one task being accomplished during His earthly ministry and the other at the very end of His earthly ministry. Just a word about His second accomplishment before we turn to our Lord's first accomplishment. It was the primary reason for His coming, to take upon Himself the sins of others, to offer Himself a sinless sacrifice for those sins, and to conquer sin, death, Hell and the grave, using His glorious victory of the resurrection.

Of course, He then ascended to His Father's right hand where He is presently enthroned until the time of His second coming in power and great glory.⁷ That is what deservedly gets most of the attention. That is the ground for our salvation from sins, our forgiveness, and the impartation to us of new life in Christ. That is the Gospel. There is something wrong when these great matters are neglected: His virgin birth, His sinless life, His substitutionary sacrifice, the shedding of His blood, His glorious resurrection, and His ascension as a prelude to His Second Coming. Such matters should not be neglected to focus for long on matters less important. Nevertheless, it is to something less important than these great matters that I now turn.

I refer, of course, to the first creative thing our Lord Jesus Christ did during His earthly ministry,⁸ which was to bring into being the Church of Jesus Christ, what He termed "my church."⁹ I have shown the Church of Jesus Christ to be important, though not most important, to be a mystery, and to be spiritual,¹⁰ to be His,¹¹ and to have been brought into existence by Him

⁷ Psalm 16.11; 110.1; Matthew 26.64; Mark 12.36; 14.62; 16.19; Luke 20.42; 22.69; John 3.13; 13.1; 14.2-4; Acts 1.9-11; 2.33-35; 7.56; Romans 8.34; Ephesians 1.20; 6.9; Colossians 3.1; Second Thessalonians 1.7; Hebrews 1.3, 13; 8.1; 9.24; 10.12-13; 12.2; 1 Peter 3.22; Revelation 19.11

⁸ Not to discount His creative activity in miraculously turning the water into wine at the wedding feast in Cana, I refer here to the creation of an abiding institution.

⁹ Matthew 16.18

¹⁰ See chapter one.

¹¹ See chapter two.

sometime during His earthly ministry.¹² Bringing the Church of Jesus Christ into existence was a creative act. The Savior brought into existence something that did not exist before, though He did so by making use of already existing components, those components being His apostles.

What I have not addressed to this point is what it was the Lord Jesus Christ brought into existence when He brought the Church of Jesus Christ into being. What did He make when He made what He made? We know whatever it is is His. We know it is something of a mystery. We know it is spiritual, having an impact both in heaven and throughout eternity. What we will now consider is what the Lord Jesus Christ meant when He said, “my church.” We already know what the word “my” means; it’s His. He made it, and it belongs to Him. The word “my” declares ownership.

However, we do not yet know what is meant by the term “church.” What adds confusion to this subject is the fact that our English word church is derived from words that have disparate meanings. The etymology of the word church is as follows: Church is a word derived from the Middle English word *chirche* or *cherche*. Before that word appeared, we have the Late Greek word *kyriakon* that, in turn, developed from the word *kyriake*, meaning the Lord’s house.¹³ As you may have noticed, the word church and the words from which it is derived have always referred to a building, a structure, a facility of some kind.

However, though the word church is found in the New Testament, it translates a word that never has anything to do with a physical structure, a building, or a facility of any kind except metaphorically, the word ἐκκλησία. That is why I would like the facility in which our congregation meets regularly to be recognized as an assembly hall, so we can once and for all be rid of any reference to the Church in the New Testament being thought of as a literal building.

Let’s be sure of something. No credible Bible scholar who has ever lived has questioned or in any way challenged this assertion. The New Testament Greek word ἐκκλησία, used by the Lord Jesus Christ and by the

¹² See chapter three.

¹³ *Webster’s New Universal Unabridged Dictionary*, (New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 1996), page 324.

apostles, though for some reason translated in our Bible by the English word church, never refers to a physical building or a structure. Thus, while the Lord Jesus Christ did say “my church,” μου τὴν ἐκκλησίαν, and although the Apostle Paul, Dr. Luke, James, the writer of Hebrews, and the Lord Jesus Christ in John’s Revelation did make use of the word ἐκκλησία, they *never* used the word in the sense of a physical building of any kind.

That said, and now having a feel for what the Greek word translated church did *not* mean, we consider what the word *did* mean:

First, THE PRE-CHRISTIAN CONCEPTION OF THE WORD ΕΚΚΛΗΣΙΑ

Of course, we must recognize that we are dealing with two different cultures in the pre-Christian era. Therefore, we will try to grasp two different groups’ conceptions of the term:

First, the Greek’s conception of the term. After all, ἐκκλησία is a Greek word. Turning to Bauer and Danker’s standard work, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature*, published by The University of Chicago Press in 2000, the opening statement for the Greek word ἐκκλησία reads, “**a regularly summoned legislative body, assembly**, as gener. understood in the Gr-Rom, world.”¹⁴ Turning to Kittel’s *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, we see that ἐκκλησία in secular Greek denoted a popular assembly. “From the time of Thuc., Plat. and Xenoph., and especially in inscriptions, ἐκκλησία is the assembly.... The etymology is both simple and significant. The citizens are the ἐκκληῆται, i.e., those who are summoned and called together by the herald.”¹⁵ The verb form of the word, ἐκκλησιάζω, has to do with the activity of holding an assembly or of convening an assembly; assembling.¹⁶ Thus, we

¹⁴ Bauer, Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature*, (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), pages 303.

¹⁵ Gerhard Kittel, Editor, *Theological Dictionary Of The New Testament, Vol III*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1965), page 513.

¹⁶ Bauer, page 304.

will not find the word used by Greeks before the time of Christ in a way that did not explicitly refer to a group of people who gathered.

Now, we consider the Jewish notion of the term ἐκκλησία. Keeping in mind that there were Jewish communities in Greek-speaking regions it is important to grasp how those Jewish people understood the meaning of the ἐκκλησία and how they used the term. The word ἐκκλησία occurs about 100 times in the LXX (Septuagint, the Greek version of the Old Testament). When there is a Hebrew equivalent, it is almost always a particular word, *lhq*, meaning assembly or congregation.¹⁷ In the LXX ἐκκλησία it means “assembly,” whether in the sense of assembling or of those assembled. Only the addition κύριου makes it plain that the ἐκκλησία is the people or congregation of God.

What you might notice to be missing from both the Greek and the Greek-speaking Jewish conception of this term in pre-Christian times that is translated by the word church is any notion of abstraction. Ἐκκλησία is a concrete term and was always understood and used concretely in pre-Christian times by those who understood and spoke Greek.

Next, THE SAVIOR’S CONCEPTION OF THE WORD ΕΚΚΛΗΣΙΑ

We must grant that the Lord Jesus Christ’s use of the term during His earthly ministry is recorded in only two passages. Our glorified Lord did use the word several times in John’s Revelation. We look at each of those New Testament verses to get an idea what our Lord’s conception of the word ἐκκλησία happened to be.

Matthew 16.18: “And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.”

Matthew 18.17: “And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell *it* unto the church: but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican.”

¹⁷ Francis Brown, S. R. Driver & Charles A. Briggs, *The New Brown-Driver-Briggs-Gesenius Hebrew And English Lexicon*, (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1979), page 874.

- Revelation 1.4: “John to the seven churches which are in Asia: Grace *be* unto you, and peace, from him which is, and which was, and which is to come; and from the seven Spirits which are before his throne.”
- Revelation 1.11: “Saying, I am Alpha and Omega, the first and the last: and, What thou seest, write in a book, and send *it* unto the seven churches which are in Asia; unto Ephesus, and unto Smyrna, and unto Pergamos, and unto Thyatira, and unto Sardis, and unto Philadelphia, and unto Laodicea.”
- Revelation 1.20: “The mystery of the seven stars which thou sawest in my right hand, and the seven golden candlesticks. The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches: and the seven candlesticks which thou sawest are the seven churches.”
- Revelation 2.1: “Unto the angel of the church of Ephesus write; These things saith he that holdeth the seven stars in his right hand, who walketh in the midst of the seven golden candlesticks.”
- Revelation 2.7: “He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches; To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the tree of life, which is in the midst of the paradise of God.”
- Revelation 2.8: “And unto the angel of the church in Smyrna write; These things saith the first and the last, which was dead, and is alive.”
- Revelation 2.11: “He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches; He that overcometh shall not be hurt of the second death.”
- Revelation 2.12: “And to the angel of the church in Pergamos write; These things saith he which hath the sharp sword with two edges.”

- Revelation 2.17: “He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches; To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the hidden manna, and will give him a white stone, and in the stone a new name written, which no man knoweth saving he that receiveth *it*.”
- Revelation 2.18: “And unto the angel of the church in Thyatira write; These things saith the Son of God, who hath his eyes like unto a flame of fire, and his feet *are* like fine brass.”
- Revelation 2.23: “And I will kill her children with death; and all the churches shall know that I am he which searcheth the reins and hearts: and I will give unto every one of you according to your works.”
- Revelation 2.29: “He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches.”
- Revelation 3.1: “And unto the angel of the church in Sardis write; These things saith he that hath the seven Spirits of God, and the seven stars; I know thy works, that thou hast a name that thou livest, and art dead.”
- Revelation 3.6: “He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches.”
- Revelation 3.7: “And to the angel of the church in Philadelphia write; These things saith he that is holy, he that is true, he that hath the key of David, he that openeth, and no man shutteth; and shutteth, and no man openeth.”
- Revelation 3.13: “He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches.”
- Revelation 3.14: “And unto the angel of the church of the Laodiceans write; These things saith the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of the creation of God.”
- Revelation 3.22: “He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches.”

Revelation 22.16: “I Jesus have sent mine angel to testify unto you these things in the churches. I am the root and the offspring of David, and the bright and morning star.”

I point out several things so obvious that they are all but ignored:

First, when the Lord Jesus Christ first used the word church in Matthew 16.18, He used the concrete term meaning assembly. The term was known to everyone who spoke Greek without in any way stating, suggesting, or implying the word should be understood differently than they already understood it. I believe this to be a profoundly important, but too often neglected point.

Second, in verse 17, when the Lord Jesus Christ used the term church a second time, with reference to dealing with sin in Matthew 18.15-20, instruction was given to “tell *it* unto the church,” a directive that can only be obeyed if the Church is an actual assembly of people to whom one can speak. This statement implies or presumes the existence of Christ’s ἐκκλησία at that time.

Third, of those verses in Revelation where the word is used, our Lord referred to Churches (plural) in twelve verses and addressed His remarks to individual congregations using the singular word Church in seven of them. Therefore, He had no conception of the word church (ἐκκλησία) being anything other than as a concrete word referring to a specific assembly or assemblies. Please do not dismiss the significance of this observation.

Third, THE APOSTOLIC CONCEPTION OF THE WORD ΕΚΚΛΗΣΙΑ

There is no indication in the Gospels that our Lord Jesus Christ used the Greek word translated church any differently than it was already understood, in concrete reference to an assembly. There is no indication in the Revelation that our Lord Jesus Christ used the Greek word translated church any differently than it was already understood, in concrete reference to an assembly when speaking to the angel of a specific church or assemblies when referring to multiple congregations. He *never* used the term as a collective word for all Christians.

When we come to Acts and the epistles, we find the word translated church used in ninety verses.¹⁸ Did the writers of the New Testament understand the word ἐκκλησία differently than Greek secular speakers of their day? If so, why does it seem the Lord Jesus Christ, during both His earthly ministry and after His resurrection and exaltation, made use of the word in a manner entirely consistent with already existing secular usage, to denote a concrete reference to an assembly or assemblies, congregation or congregations?

Notice that I have not attempted to arrive at a meaning of the word ἐκκλησία by dividing that compound word into its separate components because that is a faulty way of attempting to understand a word.¹⁹ After all, you derive no understanding of what a pineapple means by consideration of the two words used to form it. The meaning of a word is utterly dependent upon how the word is used.

I have not taken the opportunity to examine every use of the word ἐκκλησία in Acts and the epistles. Nevertheless, I submit to you that the word is only and always used exclusively to designate a single congregation, a group of congregations, or the concept of the Church as an institution, such as when the Lord Jesus Christ said, “I will build my church.”

Finally, THE ERRONEOUS CONCEPTION OF THE WORD ΕΚΚΛΗΣΙΑ

Over the past few centuries, especially since the Protestant Reformation in Europe, the term church (ἐκκλησία) has come to mean in the minds of many Christians the entirety of those individuals who know Jesus Christ as their Savior.²⁰

¹⁸ W. F. Moulton and H. K. Moulton, editors, *A Concordance to the Greek Testament According to the Texts of Westcott and Hort, Tischendorf and the English Revisers*, (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1978), pages 316-317.

¹⁹ Moises Silva, *Biblical Words And Their Meanings: An Introduction To Lexical Semantics*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Academie Books, 1983), pages 44-51.

²⁰ John Hus, John Wycliffe, and other medieval nonconformists held this erroneous view, according to Mark E. Dever, in “The Church,” Daniel L. Akin, Editor, *A Theology For The Church*, (Nashville, Tennessee: B & H Academic, 2007), page 817.

My unproven opinion is that the Lutheran and Reformed apologists responded to the Roman Catholic Church's claim of being the universal *visible* Church of Jesus Christ on earth by insisting that they (Protestants) comprised the *invisible* universal Church of Jesus Christ on earth. While granting that the Protestant Reformation reemphasized the doctrine of justification by faith as being central to the Gospel, I contend that no proper understanding of the word ἐκκλησία as it is used in the Bible allows for it to be understood, except as a concrete term for actual congregations or concerning the Church as an institution.

I contend that the word church is never in the New Testament used as a descriptive term to refer to all Christians, to an invisible group of all believers. Further, I challenge those who suggest the Church is an invisible and universal group of all believers to explain why there is no evidence of the Savior, so conceiving of the word in that way, either before or after the apostles wrote what they wrote using the term.

I will grant that some words in the New Testament were taken from regular usage in the world of that day and infused with new or additional meaning. Certain words were used to communicate profound and sublime truths that stretch man's understanding of spiritual things. The Greek word ἀγάπη is just such a word, translated charity and love in our Bible.

However, crucial to our understanding of some Bible truths is recognizing the biblical use of certain terms, such as justification and faith, strictly according to their usage outside the Bible. Indeed, the Roman Catholic Church is so very wrong about salvation in part because it has drifted away from an understanding of what those words meant when used by Greek speakers of that day and have erroneously infused into the Bible's use of those words entirely foreign meanings.²¹

I contend the same error has taken place with the word ἐκκλησία. Protestants wrongly suppose the word that translates church in the New Tes-

²¹ "Augustine was the first of the Church Fathers to seriously delve into grace and doctrines other than Trinitarian issues. His teaching has affected the RCC, Lutherans, and Anglo-Catholics right up until today." "Since he [Augustine] was not familiar with Greek, he misunderstood *dikaioo* to mean 'to make righteous' instead of 'to declare righteous.'" - David R. Anderson, *Free Grace Soteriology*, (Grace Theology Press, Revised Edition edited by James S. Reitman, 2012), pages 224, 226.

tament sometimes refers to a concept never imagined by anyone who originally used the word, a concept never imagined by the Lord Jesus Christ when He used the word before and after His resurrection, and a concept never imagined by the writers of the New Testament.

The idea of an invisible universal Church comprised of those who have trusted Christ and who have supposedly been Spirit-baptized into an invisible body of believers has been foisted upon the Bible. The idea is not taught in the Bible.

What, then, is the Church of Jesus Christ? It is a body of born again, scripturally baptized believers in Jesus Christ who have been brought together by God to worship, to serve, to administer the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper, and to engage in fulfillment of the Great Commission. In short, the Church of Jesus Christ is that body in which the Christian's life has been intended by the Savior to be lived.