

Special Words For God's People

Have you ever tried to picture heaven based on the Bible's description? It will probably be very different from what we expect. Our heavenly home will surely be greater than what we imagine and more glorious than the earthly symbols of gold, glass, and pearl which are used to describe it.

The same was true for those who tried to picture what God's messengers were describing as a "kingdom" and a "church." These terms are used so often in the Scriptures that we probably cannot hope to understand God's plan of salvation without understanding these two words.

THE WORD "KINGDOM"

The kingdom of God is both foretold and revealed as a kingdom in the two testaments of the Bible. It was prophesied (foretold) in the Old Testament and in the early part of the New Testament, and it is presented as a reality on earth in Acts 2 and throughout the rest of the New Testament. Since the kingdom

was sometimes portrayed in figures and symbols in prophecy, the reality of it is greater and more glorious than the picture of it given by the prophets. The prophetic picture was accurate, but it was veiled in mystery because of the figurative language which was used.

The word "kingdom" is significant in the New Testament as well as in the Old, but we are especially interested in its use in the New Testament. God's kingdom is presented in the New Testament as the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies. One is at a loss to understand Christ's church without a thorough grasp of the use of this word in the Bible. (See Appendix 4 on page 281.)

Let us examine this word from three angles, each of which relates to its use in connection with the church which Christ established.

Its Political Use

The word "kingdom" is first used in the Bible in a political sense, in reference to the realm of one who is the supreme head, the sovereign, the powerful ruler of that realm.

The political use of the word "kingdom" is also illustrated by Jehovah's relationship with the nation of Israel. At first in Israel's history, God was their king. He was the Sovereign head of their government as well as the head of their religion. Israel's government at this time was a *theocracy*, a nation ruled by God. Moses and the sons of Israel, when they saw that God had destroyed the Egyptians in the Red Sea, sang, "The Lord shall reign forever and ever" (Exodus 15:18). As Israel encamped in front of Mount Sinai, the nation was told by the Lord, "Now then,

if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be My own possession among all the peoples, for all the earth is Mine; and you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Exodus 19:5, 6a). Jehovah gave Israel the laws by which they were to live, and all justice and religious activities were administered in His name. He led Israel in her battles and received credit for her victories (Numbers 21:34). He was the King of Israel, and Israel, as a nation under His rule, was His domain.

During the days of Samuel, Israel, motivated by the desire to be like the nations around her, asked that God give her an earthly king. God granted the people's request and gave them Saul as their first king. The king of Israel was not to be a monarch in the strictest use of the term. He was responsible to Jehovah as an assistant ruler and a servant. His authority was to be limited by the law of Moses. He was to be the servant of Jehovah and was to serve as His earthly representative. He was to defend Israel against enemies, lead Israel in righteousness, and bind the nation together in unity.

A kingdom in the political sense, then, involved a king who was sovereign, a domain of some kind, subjects to rule, and laws made by the king to carry out his rule. Kingdoms could be large or small; they could involve a domain of physical land or a nomadic nation. The main idea in the word "kingdom" is the rule of a king and the obedience of the citizens to that king.

Its Prophetic Use

The word "kingdom" also has a prophetic use in

the Scriptures. This political term was used by the Holy Spirit to foretell the work which God purposed to do in the world in the last age of the world, the Christian Age.

A major Old Testament “kingdom” prophecy is found in Daniel 2. Daniel was guided by the Holy Spirit to write, “In the days of those kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom which will never be destroyed, and that kingdom will not be left for another people; it will crush and put an end to all these kingdoms, but it will itself endure forever” (Daniel 2:44). Daniel’s revelation taught important truths regarding the prophesied kingdom. First, it would be a special kingdom, or a kingly rule, set up by the God of heaven. Second, it would be a kingdom which would be eternal or unending. Third, it would be above all the other kingdoms of the world in power and endurance.

Moreover, prophecy concerning the coming of this kingdom of God had a place of central importance in the preaching of John the Baptist (Matthew 3:1, 2) and in the preaching and teaching of Jesus (Matthew 4:17). The gospel was spoken of by Christ as the gospel of the kingdom (Matthew 9:35). The twelve apostles and the Seventy (Luke 10:1–20) were sent out by Jesus to announce that the kingdom of heaven was at hand (Matthew 10:7; Luke 10:9). More than one-third of Jesus’ parables unfold truths about the kingdom. Jesus taught His disciples to pray for the kingdom to come (Matthew 6:10).

Based upon how often John and Christ taught about the kingdom, several facts may be learned: First, the coming of the kingdom was of great significance in God’s plan. Second, the coming of the

kingdom was near, "breaking in," or "at hand." Third, the kingdom which was coming was clearly the fulfillment of Daniel's prophecy. Fourth, the arrival of the kingdom was God's work, not man's. Fifth, when it arrived, the kingdom could only be entered by people when God's conditions of entrance were met (John 3:5).

From Acts 2 forward, the kingdom is always spoken of as a reality, as being present. Jesus had said to Nicodemus, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter into the kingdom of God" (John 3:5). But of Philip's preaching Christ in Samaria, Luke wrote, "But when they believed Philip preaching the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were being baptized, men and women alike" (Acts 8:12). Philip could not have preached this message had the kingdom not been present.

The prophetic use of the word "kingdom," then, refers to the spiritual reign of God over those who have submitted to His will for the world. It refers to a reign and a realm—the reign being the spiritual reign of God over a life, and the realm being the spiritual sphere where that reign of God is evident. This kingly rule of Christ is included in the word "church": As one submits to the will of Christ by receiving the gospel, he is brought into the body of Christ, the church; and as he lives in submission to the head of the church, Christ Jesus, he lives in and as part of God's earthly kingdom. The kingly rule of Christ over people's hearts creates the church. "The kingdom of God" and "the church of Christ," then, are expressions which can have the same meaning, as Jesus revealed in Matthew 16:18, 19.

Its Present-Day Use

The political background, the prophetic use, and the New Testament reality of the word “kingdom” require a present-day, practical use of the word.

First, it should be used in the sense of *prophetic fulfillment*. The kingdom of which Daniel spoke has come. God’s special work in the world in a form of kingly rule, a reign which involves a spiritual realm, is now present. Those who have bowed to the will of God have come under that kingly rule. The prophecies about God’s coming kingdom have been fulfilled.

Second, we should use the word “kingdom” in the sense of *a present-day reality*. The kingdom of God is no longer something which is to come. Christ reigns now over those who have come into His church through obedient faith. In a sense, our prayer should no longer be “Your kingdom come,” but “May I fully submit to Your will that You may reign over my life and that I might live in Your kingdom.”

Third, we should use this word in reference to *an earthly part of God’s heavenly rule*. God’s specially chosen people, the church, are the earthly part of His kingdom. Jesus and the New Testament writers have shown that the church is the kingdom of God or the kingdom of Christ which has come. Submission to a king creates a citizenship, a kingdom. Jesus called this community of obedient believers His church (Matthew 16:18, 19).

Fourth, we should see this word in the context of *a spiritual rule*. Faithful Christians are under the spiritual rule of Christ today and expect to enter into a fuller and closer relationship with God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit in eternity to come. The church

is the kingdom now, but its members look forward to the eternal kingdom which is to come. The word "kingdom" has a future meaning to it. Christ said, "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven . . ." (Matthew 7:21). Paul wrote, "The Lord will rescue me from every evil deed, and will bring me safely to His heavenly kingdom; to Him be the glory forever and ever. Amen" (2 Timothy 4:18). Paul was in the kingdom of God, but he looked forward to entering into the heavenly kingdom. He saw the kingdom as a fulfillment of prophecies in the Old and New Testaments, both as a present-day reality shown in the church which Christ built and a promise for eternity.

As one moves through the New Testament, he notices a decreasing use of the word "kingdom," whether it is "the kingdom of heaven," "the kingdom of God," or another phrase referring to the kingdom. References to the kingdom occur forty-nine times in Matthew, fifteen times in Mark, thirty-nine times in Luke, five times in John, eight times in Acts, fourteen times in Paul's Epistles, two times in the General Epistles, two times in Hebrews, and three times in Revelation. Hence, the word "kingdom" has a continued but decreasing use in the New Testament. (See Appendix 4 on page 281.)

Matthew is the only New Testament writer who uses "kingdom of heaven." Mark, Luke, and John only use "kingdom of God." While the use of the word "kingdom" decreases when one gets to Acts, the use of the term "church" increases. It is as if the term "kingdom" is replaced by the Holy Spirit with the word "church."

THE WORD "CHURCH"

A very special significance attaches to the word "church" because of its key relation to the entire New Testament message. "Church" is an English translation of a word which appears 114 times in the Greek New Testament. It is probably accurate to say that one cannot hope to understand Christ's way of salvation for the world today without understanding the use of this word in the New Testament.

Its Secular Use

The word was first of all a common, everyday word without any particular religious meaning.

A sample of this use surfaces in Acts 19 in connection with the riot which occurred in Ephesus. A disturbance regarding Christianity developed. The people rushed into a nearby theater, and confusion prevailed. The writer, Luke, said of their gathering, "So then, some were shouting one thing and some another, for the *assembly* was in confusion and the majority did not know for what reason they had come together" (Acts 19:32; emphasis mine).

The word used by Luke for the assembly in this verse is *ekklesia*, the word translated into English with our word "church." Finally, the town clerk spoke, saying,

But if you want anything beyond this, it shall be settled in the lawful *assembly*. For indeed we are in danger of being accused of a riot in connection with today's events, since there is no real cause for it, and in this connection we will be unable to account for this disorderly gathering (Acts 19:39, 40; emphasis mine).

Luke then added, "After saying this he dismissed the *assembly*" (Acts 19:41; emphasis mine).

Three times in this account of a town meeting, Luke used the Greek word *ekklesia* (Acts 19:32, 39, 41). He used it to mean just a gathering, for the assembly he called an *ekklesia* in verses 32 and 41 is pictured as a mob in verse 30. The assembly or *ekklesia* in the theater was not called together; it just happened in all the confusion and flow of events. Luke also called a lawful assembly where legal matters are settled an *ekklesia* in verse 39.

In light of Luke's usage of *ekklesia*, it is best to think of the word, in its secular use, as referring to an assembly of any kind. Sometimes an assembly is convened or summoned together, and sometimes an assembly just happens. Luke called each of these types of assembly an *ekklesia*.

Some language experts today believe that the secular use of *ekklesia* in New Testament days had more the meaning of "just an assembly" than the meaning of "a called-out assembly." The use of this word by Luke in Acts 19 would seem to confirm their conclusions.

Luke's use of *ekklesia* gives us an insight into how this word was used in the secular world before our Lord used it in a religious sense. This background of the word will be a basis on which we can build a better understanding of our Lord's use of *ekklesia*.

Its Religious Use

The word *ekklesia* had also a religious use in the New Testament.

It is clear from the Old Testament that in the Jewish background to Christianity the concept of an

assembly of God's people is present. In the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament Scriptures, the "congregation" of Israel, which is *qahal* in Hebrew, was translated into Greek with the word *ekklesia*, especially when the "congregation" consisted of Israel gathered before the Lord for religious purposes (Deuteronomy 18:16; 31:30; 1 Kings 8:65; Acts 7:38).

The word "synagogue" was also used originally to refer to an assembly of people gathered together for a specific purpose. Later, the word was applied to an assembly of Christians who had gathered for worship. James used both Greek words, *sunagoge* and *ekklesia*, apparently because he had Jewish Christians in mind as the readers of his book. He used *sunagoge* for a congregation of Christians who had gathered for worship (James 2:2), and he used *ekklesia* for the body of believers in a given locality (James 5:14).

As our Lord selected a word that would designate those who would be God's unique people through His salvation, He chose the word "church" (Matthew 16:18), which probably meant an "assembly" in its secular use, but an "assembly of God's people" in its Old Testament use. Our Lord took a secular word and gave it a special religious meaning. In His selection of this word, He drew from its secular and religious backgrounds and added new meanings of His own. The word, in the use Jesus gave it, refers to the universal people of God who have been redeemed by Christ's blood, whether they are assembled or not (Acts 8:3; Ephesians 1:22).

Another idea which is brought out in the New Testament in connection with the word *ekklesia* is the concept of one's being "called out" or "set apart."

While this thought was probably not in the common use of the word, it is an important part of the meaning in Christ's special use of it. This idea is projected into the word by the nature of the people designated.

Peter told the multitude on the Day of Pentecost, "For the promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off, as many as the Lord our God will call to Himself" (Acts 2:39). Paul told the Thessalonians to "walk in a manner worthy of the God who calls you into His own kingdom and glory" (1 Thessalonians 2:12). It was through the gospel that God had called them. Paul said, "It was for this He called you through our gospel, that you may gain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ" (2 Thessalonians 2:14). Those people who were called to God through the gospel were called "the church" (1 Corinthians 1:1-3).

Furthermore, Paul told the church at Colossae, "For He rescued us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins" (Colossians 1:13, 14). Peter said to "proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light" (1 Peter 2:9b). Peter also wrote, "But like the Holy One who called you, be holy yourselves also in all your behavior" (1 Peter 1:15).

Jesus used the word "church" to refer to all of God's people in the Christian Age without respect to locality or particular time. Although no Christian today is a member of the congregation which was established on Pentecost, all true Christians of all times and of all places are members of the same church of the Lord which was established on that

day. The church was established once for all time in Jerusalem on the first Pentecost Day after Jesus' resurrection. It had but one birthday; it is not born again and again each century or after periods of apostasy.

Its Practical Use

We would expect the meaning given to the word "church" by Jesus and the Holy Spirit to be brought out in a practical way in the New Testament, and this we indeed find to be the case.

In practical use, inspired writers used the word "church" in four ways. First, they used it to refer to a congregation of God's people in a given locality. Paul wrote unto "the church of God" at Corinth, to those who had been sanctified in Christ Jesus (1 Corinthians 1:2). The church in Philippi was referred to as "the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi" (Philippians 1:1). The saints in Thessalonica were referred to as "the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Thessalonians 1:1). All the Christians in a given locality were called "the church" of that place. An expression of the universal church is the local congregation of Christians. When one becomes a member of Christ's church, he will be a part of the body of Christians where he lives.

Second, the inspired writers used "church" in talking about the local congregations of a region. Luke wrote, "So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria enjoyed peace, being built up; and going on in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it continued to increase" (Acts 9:31). Sometimes the church in a region was desig-

nated in the plural as "churches." Paul was writing to "the churches of Galatia" as he wrote the letter to the Galatians (Galatians 1:2). It would be a scriptural use of the word "church" to speak of the church in Europe or the churches in Europe.

Third, the New Testament writers used the word "church" to show how the church is made up. They used it regarding the type of people in the churches. Paul referred to "the Gentile churches" in Romans 16: "Greet Prisca and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus, who for my life risked their own necks, to whom not only do I give thanks, but also all the churches of the Gentiles; also greet the church that is in their house . . ." (Romans 16:3-5).

Fourth, these inspired writers used the word "church" in reference to a congregation gathered for worship. The church exists when it is not assembled for worship, but the word "church" is used in a special way for the assembly of the church in a given locality. Paul referred to the Corinthians as a church when they assembled themselves together (1 Corinthians 11:18). He told women to keep silent in the churches: "The women are to keep silent in the churches; for they are not permitted to speak, but are to subject themselves, just as the Law also says" (1 Corinthians 14:34). He is obviously referring to the worship assembly of the church in this passage.

In whatever way one refers to the church, he is speaking of those who have been brought into the body of Christ by submission to the gospel of Christ. A Christian has been called out of the world and darkness and placed by God's grace into that body which Christ and the inspired writers of the New Testament called "the church."

CONCLUSION

Surely this brief study of the words God chose to refer to His people challenge us to enter His kingdom, His church. God took these secular words and, giving additional meaning to them, applied them to the people who are called into salvation through the gospel of His grace. These words refer to all who have submitted to the rule of God and have been redeemed by the blood of Christ. Through the long years of the Patriarchal and the Mosaical ages, God planned for His special people. He has fulfilled all that He inspired His messengers to foretell. Now it is up to you to enter His kingdom and be added to His church.

STUDY QUESTIONS

(answers on page 267)

1. Discuss God's relationship to Israel in terms of a king and a kingdom.
2. What responsibilities did Saul, the first king of Israel, have as the king over God's kingdom, Israel?
3. What lessons can be learned from Daniel's prophecy concerning the coming kingdom? (See Daniel 2:44.)
4. Notice the decreasing use of the word "kingdom" in the New Testament. What does this mean?
5. Explain how one can be in the kingdom of God today and yet look forward to the eternal kingdom. (See 2 Timothy 4:18.)
6. How often does the word "church" appear in the New Testament, and what significance does this suggest about the word?
7. Give the simple secular use of the word "church" as reflected in the New Testament. Name a verse where it is so used.
8. Does the word "church" in its secular sense always refer to a religious assembly? Does it always refer to a "called-

out" assembly, one that is called together for a special purpose?

WORD HELPS

bride of Christ—the church. The church's relationship to Christ is compared to a man's relationship with his wife. (See Ephesians 5:22–29.)

parables—Jesus often used stories from everyday life to illustrate spiritual truths (Matthew 13:34).

Patriarchal Age—one of three distinct periods in Bible history. The first was the Patriarchal Age, when God spoke directly to the heads of the families. The next was the Mosaical Age, when the children of Israel followed the Law given to Moses (including the Ten Commandments). This lasted until the death of Jesus on the cross. The final age is the Christian Age. In this age, all the saved are added to the church, and the New Testament is the only divine standard for doctrine and worship. This age will last until the second coming of Jesus.

prophecy—the inspired words of a prophet, viewed as a revelation of God's will; sometimes a prediction of the future made by divine inspiration.

Samuel—a great Old Testament prophet, priest, and judge.

sovereign—a king or other ruler, one who has the greatest of power. In 1 Timothy 6:14, 15, the Lord Jesus Christ is said to be "the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords."

THE NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH		
FOUNDER: CHRIST Matthew 16:18	WHERE: JERUSALEM Isaiah 2:3; Acts 2:5, 47	WHEN: A.D. 33 Acts 2
		HEAD: CHRIST Ephesians 1:22
ORGANIZATION Philippians 1:1	ELDERS: Tit. 1:5; 1 Pet. 5:1-3; Acts 20:28; 1 Tim. 3:1-7; DEACONS: Acts 6:1-6; 1 Tim. 3:8-13; MEMBERS: Acts 2:41-47; Col. 1:13; 1 Cor. 1:2	
DESIGNATIONS FOR THE CHURCH Ephesians 3:15	THE CHURCH: Col. 1:18, 24; THE BODY OF CHRIST: Eph. 1:22, 23; THE KINGDOM: Acts 8:12; THE CHURCHES OF CHRIST: Rom. 16:16; THE CHURCH OF GOD: 1 Cor. 1:2; Acts 20:28; THE FAMILY OF GOD: Eph. 2:19; 1 Tim. 3:15; DISCIPLES OF THE LORD: Acts 9:1; THE TEMPLE OF GOD: 1 Cor. 3:16; THE CHURCH OF THE FIRSTBORN: Heb. 12:23	
DESIGNATIONS FOR CHRISTIANS Ephesians 3:15	DISCIPLES: Acts 11:26; SAINTS: 1 Cor. 1:2; Phil. 1:1; CHILDREN OF GOD: Gal. 3:26; 1 Jn. 2:1; BRETHREN: Lk. 8:21; Gal. 6:1; CHRISTIANS: Acts 11:26; 26:28; 1 Pet. 4:16	
CREED	JESUS CHRIST: Mt. 16:16-18; Acts 8:37	
RULE OF FAITH AND PRACTICE: WORD OF GOD	ALL POWER: Mt. 28:18-20; Rom. 1:16; Heb. 4:12; CHURCH GOVERNMENT: 2 Tim. 3:16, 17; 2 Pet. 1:3; SEED OF THE KINGDOM: Mt. 13:3; Lk. 8:11; SWORD OF THE SPIRIT: Eph. 6:17	
WORSHIP	SINGING: Col. 3:16; PRAYER: 1 Thess. 5:17; TEACHING: Acts 20:7; COMMUNION: Acts 20:7; 1 Cor. 11:23; CONTRIBUTION: 1 Cor. 16:1, 2	
MISSION	SAVE SOULS: Mt. 28:18-20; Jn. 6:45; Eph. 3:10; 1 Tim. 4:16	
WARNING	ABIDE IN THE TRUTH: Gal. 1:6-8; Mt. 15:9, 13; 2 Cor. 11:3; Rev. 22:18, 19; 2 Jn. 9	