

◆ QUESTION :

"WHAT DOES THE WORD 'CHURCH' MEAN?"

◆ ANSWER :

Angels were present when God created the heavens and the earth: "The morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy" (Job 38:7; KJV). Even before the universe was made, the I Am Who I Am (Exodus 3:14) had a plan for His people. In His infinite understanding and love, He had planned through Jesus' blood to build together an *ekklesia*, a called-out people, commonly called the church (Ephesians 1:7-9; 3:21; 1 Peter 1:18-21).

In that church, before the admiring eyes of myriads of angels, God's wisdom was to be displayed (Ephesians 3:10, 11). Long before Jesus promised to build His *ekklesia*, His church, the angels knew that something marvelous was to appear, and they were bending over to see it (Gk.: *parakupto*¹; 1 Peter 1:12).

Neither to angels nor to men had the divine purpose been fully revealed. It was a mystery (Ephesians 3:3, 4). No eye had seen, no ear had heard, and no heart had imagined the good things to be realized in the church (Isaiah 64:4; 1 Corinthians 2:9, 10).

The prophets searched diligently for the meaning of things that they themselves had written (Matthew 13:17; 1 Peter 1:10). Finally, the fullness of time came according to God's chosen year, month, day, and hour. At last, the manifold wisdom of God was made known to the rulers and authorities in heavenly places through the church (Galatians 4:4; Ephesians 3:10, 11; Revelation 9:15).

THE WORLDWIDE, CALLED-OUT PEOPLE

To newspaper reporters and to others, the phrase "the church of Christ" designates just one more denomination. Moreover, some church members use denominational language, such as "church of Christ preachers," "church of Christ congregations," and even "I am a church of Christ."

Alvin Lowry, a Christian serviceman, when stationed in Frankfurt, Germany, looked into the telephone directory for the church of Christ, which in the German language would have been *Kirche Christi*; but it was not there. What he did find was *Gemeinde Christi*, which means "the community of Christ."

The German word *gemeinde* makes one think of Jesus' word *ekklesia*, a word which is translated "church" but means "the called out." This word conveys

the Father's plan of love to bless all men if they would become His called-out people, His separated community (Matthew 16:18).

The word Jesus used had no religious meaning in itself. Greek mythology tells of a certain Orpheus, who formed for himself the *ekklesian*—a group of wild animals, who listened to him in the Thracian mountains. Luke used the word to refer to an assembly of the Ephesian citizens, a town meeting for city business (Acts 19:39).

Luke also used the word to describe a mob, shouting and unruly, called out to vent their hate against Paul (Acts 19:32, 41). Furthermore, he

"The church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria enjoyed peace, being built up; and . . . it continued to increase" (Acts 9:31).

used the word to describe the Israelite nation as being called out of Egypt to go to the Promised Land (Acts 7:38). In addition, Luke used the word as Jesus had: to refer to that group of people who respond to Jesus' call, "Come to Me" (Matthew 11:28; 16:18; Acts 5:11; see Acts 2:47; KJV).

Most English Bibles mistranslate *ekklesia* by the word "church," which means "an edifice consecrated for public worship," according to *Webster's Dictionary*. By this definition, the word "church" has no connection with Jesus' word *ekklesia*.

Moreover, the first English translation from the Greek New Testament (produced by William Tyndale in 1525) rendered *ekklesia* not as "church," but as "congregation." The fifty-four translators of the King James Version had Tyndale's version before them, and they knew that it was accurate. Nevertheless, King James I, the head of the Church of England, forbade their following Tyndale. He ordered that *ekklesia* was not to be translated as "congregation," but as "church."²

The result is that the English-speaking world is burdened with a word unused by inspired writers. Alexander Campbell in his translation³ correctly followed Tyndale, but the word used in the King James Version, "church," still prevails.

While the word "church" is not the best translation, it is not unscriptural unless it leads people to think of a physical building. Indeed, the Lord's called-out people are a building, but not a physical one. They make up a spiritual house of living stones (1 Peter 2:5); Christians are God's building (1 Corinthians 3:9). Sinners are "called . . . out of darkness into His marvelous light" (1 Peter 2:9b).

THE LOCAL ASSEMBLY

From the time of their immersion into the one body of the worldwide, called-out people, Christians are called—not just called out, but called together in the *ekklesia*, with the same word in this context meaning a local assembly (1 Corinthians 11:18; 14:23). The Holy Spirit has employed another word besides *ekklesia* to describe the local assembly: *sunagoge*, meaning "a leading together, a congregation, an assembly" (James 2:2).

Those who love the Lord never willingly miss the local assembly (Gk.: *episunagoge*; Hebrews 10:25). Besides the fact that it is a divine command not to neglect their assembling, they enjoy togetherness. Normal people are friendly. "A man that hath friends must show himself friendly: and there is a friend that sticketh closer than a brother" (Proverbs 18:24; KJV). A loner is abnormal: "He that separateth himself seeketh his own desire, and rageth against all sound wisdom" (Proverbs 18:1; ASV).

As regards the local assembly, Christians exhort "one another, and so much the more, as [they] see the day approaching" (Hebrews 10:25; KJV). What day? The Day of Judgment? That would be an impossible meaning, for "of that day and hour no one knows" (Matthew 24:36a); that day will come as a thief (1 Thessalonians 5:4).

What day? The day of Jerusalem's destruction in A.D. 70? People could see that day approaching, but on that day Christians were not to assemble: "Then those who are in Judea must flee to the mountains" (Matthew 24:16).

What day? The Lord's Day? The first day of the week? Christians could see, and they still can see, that day approaching. From Monday through Saturday they can see it. Paul, though on a hurried trip, "stayed seven days" (Monday through Sunday) at Troas in order to assemble with other Christians for the breaking of the bread on the first day of the week (Acts 20:6, 7; see also v. 16). Also, Paul tarried seven days at Puteoli, probably for the same reason as he had at Troas (Acts 28:13, 14).

In A.D. 101, Ignatius wrote that Christians were "no longer observing the Sabbath, but living in the observance of the Lord's Day, on which our life has sprung up by him." In A.D. 150 Justin Martyr wrote that for Christians "the celebration of the Lord's Supper still held and constituted an essential part of divine worship every Sunday." *The Didache of the Apostles*, a second-century document, says that "on each Lord's Day [Christians] gathered together [to] break bread and give thanks."

THE UNIVERSAL ASSEMBLY

The climax and end-objective of the Father's planning is a universal assembly, a festal gathering, of the spirits of just men made perfect in all

ages. They will join an innumerable company of angels, in an all embracing convocation, a *paneguris* (Hebrews 12:23). This inspired word is a compound: *pan*, meaning “all,” and *aguris*, meaning “assembly.”

On a special Israelite feast day, the Lord commanded, “You will be altogether joyful” (Deuteronomy 16:15). The Greek Old Testament calls such a feast a *paneguris* (Ezekiel 46:11; Hosea 2:11; 9:5). Among the Greeks, a *paneguris* was a celebration at the Olympic Games. Among Christians, the *paneguris* is an unending celebration with the redeemed of all the ages, the whole family of God in heaven and on the earth, human and angelic (Ephesians 3:15).

In some sense, Christians already are experiencing the *paneguris*, since the author of Hebrews used the present perfect tense in Hebrews 12:22. Even now, they are in spiritual company with—though spatially separated from—God and all of those on God’s side, living and dead.

In the fullest sense, however, until Christians sit down in the eternal kingdom with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—until they see the face of God and the great white throne—the universal assembly is still in the future (Matthew 8:11; Revelation 20:11; 22:4).

CONCLUSION

The “church,” then, is the group of God’s called-out ones. That is, members of this group are those who have answered God’s call to leave sin and live obediently to Him. They assemble regularly to worship Him, and at the end of time they will join the assembly of all God’s obedient followers in heaven.

¹This same word is used in John 20:11; Mary “stooped and looked into the tomb.”

²Alexander Campbell, “King James’ Instructions,” *The Christian Baptist*, vol. 2 (Buffalo, Va.: By the author, 1827; reprint, Nashville: Gospel Advocate Co., 1955), 78.

³*The Sacred Writings of the Apostles and Evangelists of Jesus Christ, Commonly Styled The New Testament (The Living Oracles)*, trans. George Campbell, James Macknight, and Philip Doddridge, with prefaces, various emendations and an appendix by Alexander Campbell (n.p., 1826; reprint, Nashville: Gospel Advocate Co., 1954).

THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH

The mission of the New Testament church was given in the Great Commission of the Lord just before His ascension, when the clouds received Him from the sight of the wondering disciples. This Great Commission was a world-wide program, which Jesus outlined in these wonderful words:

Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age (Matthew 28:19, 20).

This command summarizes the work of the church: to teach and baptize the nations. Because of this ringing commission, the early Christians were intensely evangelistic. They went everywhere, preaching the Word. The evangelistic and missionary zeal of the New Testament church was like a consuming fire. They lived for this one thing alone, to tell others of the Christ who died to bring remission of sins to the nations.

Adapted from *The Deity of Jesus
And Other Sermons*
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ABOUT THIS STUDY

Systematic studies on the New Testament church have appeared in previous issues of *Truth for Today* over the years. One such issue, entitled “The New Testament Church,” was written by Coleman Overby (May 1992). Several lessons on “Christ’s Church,” by J. Harvey Dykes, appeared in the “John, 3” issue (November 1996). For a thorough study of this important subject, you may also want to refer to the books *What Is “the Church”?*, *God’s Design for “the Church,”* and *“The Church”: The People of God’s Purpose* by Eddie Cloer.

This issue is supplementary, dealing with questions concerning the New Testament church. These articles, essays, and word studies from the pen of Hugo McCord have been gathered from a variety of sources, including tracts, magazine articles, and volumes 1 and 2 of *Fifty Years of Lectures*. Brother McCord is noted for his unique biblical scholarship, but he would be the first to urge you to examine each of these lessons for yourself in the light of God’s Word.