

THE CHURCH AND THE CHURCHES



There may never have been a more profound significance between a singular and a plural than in the words "church" and "churches" in the New Testament. On the one hand, our Lord can speak of building his "church" on a rock (Mt. 16:18), and Paul can say, "To God be glory in the church ... throughout all generations" (Ep. 3:21). On the other hand, Luke can speak of the "churches" in Syria and Cilicia (Ac. 15:41), and Paul can speak of practices that he has established for "all the churches" (1 Co. 7:17). This distinction, the distinction between the universal and the local, is often not well understood, and in fact, popular misunderstandings have created unnecessary problems for many Christian groups. But let us begin at the beginning with the concept and the word itself.

Sometimes, definitions are clarified by explaining what something is not—especially when there are popular misconceptions. Along this line, it is important to observe that in the Bible the word church is never used to refer to buildings where Christians gather. Furthermore, the word church never refers to a sect of Christians who have beliefs somewhat different from other Christians, that is, the word does not refer to various Christian denominations. Instead the word church in the Bible has the fundamental meaning of a congregation or an assembly of people (1 Co. 11:18).

In the Old Testament, the church was the assembled congregation of Israel who came before God at the Tent of Meeting or the Temple (Ac. 7:38). Jesus used the term church to refer to the gathered assembly of the believing community, which is able to exercise discipline (Mt. 18:17). After Pentecost, Luke uses the word to refer to the various companies of Christians in Jerusalem (Ac. 5:11), Antioch (Ac. 13:1) and Caesarea (Ac. 18:22). Paul can use the word to refer to a gathering of believers in the local home of Priscilla and Aquila (Ro. 16:5; 1 Co. 16:19), and in plural form, to a group of congregations in a Roman Province (Ga. 1:2). More rarely, a broader usage appears which seems to include all the various congregations of Christians united under the single word church (1 Co. 12:28; 15:9; Ga. 1:13).

As such, the terms "church" and "churches" in the New Testament are more of a geographical identification than a denominational one. Even when the term church is used to refer to a local assembly of Christians that meets at a particular place, it is the assembled body of believers itself which comprise the church, not the physical structure in which they meet. While today we may continue to use denominational designations, such as, the Roman Catholic Church, the Eastern Orthodox Church, the Baptist Church, the Methodist Church, and so forth, such expressions reflect a modern development of meaning and do not arise from the Bible itself. Similarly, when we say that we are "going to church," or we point out that such and such a building is "a Lutheran church," we are not using the word in the way the New Testament itself uses it.

Someone may well ask, "So what?" In one sense, there is nothing wrong with using the word church in the modern sense of a denomination or a building where Christians meet, since we all know what is meant by such an expression. However, all Christians should understand that such usages have implicit dangers, since they tend to distort our understanding, and more seriously, may even come to displace the biblical meaning. Paul would have found it profoundly disturbing to come to a modern city in which Christians had polarized themselves from each other as enemies. In fact, such a situation developed in Corinth. Some house congregations were championing Apollos, some Paul, others Peter, and still others

Christ, the latter being the purists, of course (1 Co. 1:10-13). Paul said that such quarreling among Christians was an indication of worldliness (1 Co. 3:1-8). Christians must understand that together they are all God's field and God's building (1 Co. 3:9, 16), and such divisiveness must be stopped (1 Co. 3:21-23).

Of course, the argument might be put forth that since the various streams of Christian thinking are often diverse, this incompatibility justifies our tendency toward judgementalism and sectarianism. But does it? Does not Paul command the early Christians to "keep the unity of the Spirit" (Ep. 4:3) "... until we all reach unity in the faith" (Ep. 4:13)? Is not the commonality of true Christianity to be found in the one body, the one Spirit, the one hope, the one Lord, the one faith, the one baptism, and the one God—who is the "Father of all, over all, through all, and in all" (Ep. 4:4-6)?

To be sure, there will be differences of Christian opinion on a host of secondary issues. There were secondary differences even among the earliest Christians. Jewish Christians in Palestine followed the Jewish customs handed down through Moses, and Gentile Christians did not (Ac. 21:17-26). Some congregations were mostly Jewish (Ac. 11:19), others were mostly Gentile (Ga. 4:8), and some were mixed (Ac. 11:20-21; 13:1). Some Christians ate meat and drank wine, and other Christians were vegetarians and teetotalers (Ro. 14:2-3, 20-21). Some Christians observed holy days, and others did not (Ro. 14:5-6). Some congregations had a wide variety of worship expressions which do not seem to have been typical of all the other congregations (1 Co. 14:26). These secondary issues, however, were not a just cause for dividing the Christian churches from each other. God's purpose for Christianity was not to have a Jewish church and a Gentile church, or for that matter, any other kind of sectarian division. Rather, he determined to have a worldwide company of believers who were "members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus" (Ep. 3:2-6).

At the beginning of the 20th century there were an estimated 1,900 church denominations; today there are an estimated 22,000. This is not in itself wrong, but it is essential that Christians stop thinking of their particular denomination as the "true church" and all others as deviants. One's own local church or one's own denomination is not the vine and all the others branches. Rather, Jesus is the vine, and all of us are branches (Jn. 15:5)! Furthermore, Christian unity need not be construed as uniformity. Unity is attitudinal, while uniformity is merely a stifling sameness. The challenge for Christians is to live in unity with each other without insisting that in worship, structure and theology we are more uniform than were the earliest Christians.

The statement from the Nicene Creed in about the 4th century A.D. is still very appropriate: "We believe ... in one holy universal and apostolic church." This belief does not take away from the entity of the local congregations (the churches plural), but it affirms the unity of the Christian body of believers worldwide (the church singular). Labels are relatively unimportant; Christian faith is all-important.



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