

CHURCH. A provocative word which triggers a wide spectrum of emotions and experiences in people. To some, it may elicit positive memories of belonging and community; but to some, it may generate negative reminiscences of being outcast and in isolation. Although it may mean different things to different people, the consensus attitude of the general public is that it is an organized religious institution, whether it be Roman Catholic or various forms of mainline Protestant denominations. Church, in the public eyes, is a place where parents forced kids to go every Sunday morning to learn about a man who lived two millenniums ago in a far off place, when their kids can either be sleeping in or watching Sunday morning cartoon. Church is a place where the LGBT community avoided going at all costs for its condemning attitudes. Church is ... Despite the pictures media and different people groups painted about the church, none quite grasped the essence of the church. Hopefully, this study will provide better insight into what is the church and its functions in the world.

Ekklēsia – the etymology of ecclesiology

According to Erickson in his *Christian Theology*, there are two Hebraic words of interests in our study of church, קָהָל (*qahal*, *summoning call to assemble*) and אֵדָה (*'edah*, *people gathered before tent of meeting*).ⁱ *Qahal* can mean a general assembly of people (1 Kings 12:3), women (Jer. 44:15), and children (Ezra 10:1, Neh. 8:2) included; but it can also carry religious connotation in some cases (Deut. 9:10, 10:4, 23:1-3). *'Edah* first occurred in Exo. 12:3 to suggest Israel as a 'gathering of people' to celebrate Passover and to leave Egypt. The word often appears in the book of Numbers which points to a community or a law.ⁱⁱ The Greek equivalents for *qahal* and *'edah* in the Septuagint are ἐκκλησία (*ekklēsia*) and συναγωγή (*sunagōgē*). It is in the word *ekklēsia* that we find most of the church meaning in the Bible.

Prior to the Christian usage in the New Testament, the term **ἐκκλησία** (*ekklēsia*) is used in traditional Greek to mean “an ‘assembly’ regularly convened for political purposes, such as voting on issues affecting the city in which the people live.”ⁱⁱⁱ To paint a better picture, Balchin writes:

It was used in the earliest days of democracy in the Greek city states where every citizen had a say in public affairs. The herald used to go through the streets calling the people out together to some public place where they would debate whatever was on the agenda. The resulting assembly was the *ekklesia* (From the two Greek words meaning ‘call’ and ‘out’).^{iv}

Balchin reasons that the early Christians avoided using the *συναγωγή* (*sunagōgē*, *assembly of God’s people*) due to Jewish connotation.^v At that time, Judaism was one of the few religions that was officially recognized by the Roman Empire. Christianity was often seen as one of the branches of Judaism. But after many Gentiles became Christians without becoming a Jews, distinction as well as persecution followed.

Ekklēsia appears 144 times in the New Testament. Most of these occurrences appear in the Pauline letters and the book of Acts. In the majority of Pauline letters, *ekklēsia* is often used to refer to a group of believers in a specific city: “the church of God in Corinth” (1 Cor. 1:2; 2 Cor. 1:1), “the churches in Galatia” (Gal. 1:2), and “the church of the Thessalonians” (1 Thess. 1:1). In Acts, it refers to all the Christians who live and meet within a particular city: Jerusalem (Acts 5: 11; 8: 1; 11: 22; 12: 1, 5) or Antioch (13: 1). Paul visited local churches to appoint elders (14: 23) or to instruct and encourage (15: 41; 16: 5).^{vi} Although city-wide *ekklēsia* is the common usage of the word, there are instances in which there are house *ekklēsia* (Rom. 16:5, Col. 4:15) and geography-wide *ekklēsia* (Acts 9:31). While it appears to imply that *ekklēsia* is

local in its nature, *ekklēsia* is also used by New Testament writers to suggest a ‘catholic,’ or universal, sense (Eph. 1:22, 3:10; Col. 1:24). Therefore, we see that *ekklēsia* has a dual nature, local and universal. But what is the purpose of the *ekklēsia*? To answer this question, we have to look at the nature of the church.

Ecclesiology – the nature of the church

Edmund P. Clowney, in his article *The Biblical Theology of the Church*, paints three pictures which help us understand better the nature of the church in relation to its creator.^{vii} The church is first and foremost, the people of God, then the disciples of Christ, and lastly the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. The church as the people of God has its root in the Exodus where the Israelites are gathered by God at Mount Sinai to worship him (Ex. 5:1, 7:16b; Deut. 4:10, Acts 7:38). This well-known concept of *ekklēsia* is the very same concept Jesus spoke to Peter about when He is referring to His *ekklēsia* in Matthew 16:19. The fulfillment of Matthew 16:19 is found in Pentecost which is evident in the preaching of Peter in Acts 2. Edmund writes: “It is no accident that the New Testament church is formed by the coming of God the Spirit in the midst of an assembly gathered in praise.”^{viii}

The *ekklēsia* as the disciples of Christ means that particular people group are ‘gathered by Christ’ unto himself.^{ix} The Bible displays Jesus as the one who is given a particular people by the Father (Lk. 12:32, Jn. 17:2; 10:27-29) and the Divine Shepherd who calls the lost sheep of Israel (Mt. 10:5; 15:24) as well as Gentiles (Jn. 12:20-33). Throughout his letters, Paul uniquely sees that the *ekklēsia* is the body of Christ (Rom. 12:5, 1 Cor. 10:17, 1 Cor. 12:12-27, Eph. 1:22-23, 4:12, 5:23; Col. 1:24; Heb. 13:3)

Lastly, the *ekklēsia* as the fellowship of the Holy Spirit refers to functions—worship, nurture, mission—of the *ekklēsia* which the Spirit enables through His constant indwelling. The

essence of *ekklēsia* is worship and the essence of worship is the *presence of the Lord*.^x This is clearly illustrated by the formation of the church through the manifestation of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2), who is the promised Counselor (Jn 14:18). The Holy Spirit not only nurtures (Eph. 4:15-16; Gal. 5:21; Col. 19-10; 2 Pet. 3:18) but also enables the *ekklēsia* to nurture its members with various gifts (Rom. 12:6-8; 1 Cor. 12:8-10).

As stated above, the *ekklēsia* is found in its relationship to its creator, the triune God. It is first and foremost a group of people who are called out by God for His worship. Second, it found its origin, purpose, and direction through Christ the Son. And lastly, it finds its vitality and growth in and through the bonds of the Holy Spirit, first to God then to its members.

The last thing we need to know about the church nature is that it is an entirely different entity than Judaism or any of its branches. Since Hebrews chapter 8 and 9, as well as Romans 7 clearly speak of the removal of the old covenant and the establishment of the new covenant by Christ, there are two different covenantal groups of people: Israel being the people of the Old Covenant through the Mosaic Laws and the New Testament church being the people of the New Covenant through the redemptive work of Christ. As pointed out above, the nature of the *ekklēsia*, or church, is that it is the body of Christ through the fellowship of the Spirit. Church, therefore, cannot exist prior to Christ or the manifestation of the Holy Spirit. This is the reason why the verb *οἰκοδομήσω* (*oikodomēsō*, *will built a house*) of Matthew 16:18 is in the future active form.^{xi} Christ's church had not come into existence then but would at a later time. Furthermore, the requirement to become members of the body of Christ is that they are to be "baptized by one Spirit into one body" and were "given the one Spirit to drink."^{xii} When taking all that has been said into account, Pentecost could be said to be the birthdate of the church.

Ecclesiology – the function of the church

In the New Testament, Paul's unique and most frequent depiction of the church is that it is the body of Christ while Christ is its head. Anthropomorphically speaking, the church is Christ's hand and feet. Similar to a natural body where the head directs the body to do the work it asks, the church in the same manner must do the work that Christ directs. To understand the church's function, one must understand the work of Christ.

The *mission dei*, Latin for the "mission of God", is the term for the redemptive work of God. *Missio dei* is "God the Father sends the Son into the world in the power of the Holy Spirit to bring salvation in all its dimensions, that is, God's reign in its fullness."^{xiii} In other words, Christ came to save the lost (Mt. 9:12-13, 18:11; Mk 2:17; Lk. 4:17-21, 5:30-32; Jn. 6:39-40) and to restore the proper relationship between humanity and God (Rom. 5:8-10; Gal. 4:4-7; 1 Jn. 4:10). If the church is the bodily extension of Christ, it must take part in this ministry. Jesus is clear in this intent when he says "As the Father has sent me, I am sending you." (Jn. 20:21) To further consolidate this sending, Jesus reiterated this command in the Great Commission in Matthew 28:18-20 and in His last words to the believers before the ascension in Acts 1:8.

What does a church that carries out Christ's mission look like? It will be a church who saves the lost through preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ and restoring their proper relationship with God through worship, sanctification, and discipleship. Perhaps a closer study of Matthew 28:18-20 would aid us in getting a clearer picture.

And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and

teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age." (Matt. 28:18-20)

The first and primary function of the church is to go and make disciples. While this commissioning may ring a bell of familiarity to the disciple as before (Mt. 10), there are quite stark differences between the two commissions. The commissioning in Mt. 28 is more than just 'proclaiming the good news' but making disciples (building relationship, preaching, teaching, nurturing, and training). Additionally, the scope of the field is no longer just to "the lost sheep of Israel" (Mt. 10:5-6) but now to "all nations." The church's main function is to disciple people. In fact, an argument can be made that the rest of the verse is about explaining what discipleship is. Baptism is for the repenting of sin and for identifying with the Lordship of the Holy Trinity. Teaching people to be obedient is, in the same way, the invitation that Jesus extends to the disciples when He said "Follow me". It is a Jewish discipleship process of "come, observe, and do."

In short, the church's primary role is discipleship which finds its root in the Great Commission (Mt. 28:18-20). The command to 'go' reflects the incarnation of Christ and should reflect the church's responsibility to the unreached and not just its members. The command to 'make disciples' is an encompassing term which means to preach, to teach, to nurture, to train, to equip, to bring into existing fellowship and worship. The command to 'baptize' is to bring the lost to turn from sins to God. The command to 'teach them to obey' is the command to lead and to model for others what kingdom life is all about. All in all, there is no other word which encapsulates the function of the church better than 'discipleship'.

Personal philosophy of ministry

Prior to the ascension, the Lord Jesus Christ charged the Church with the task of continuing His earthly ministry. Therefore, any ministry of the church should be a response to the Great Commission (Matthew 28:18-20) with the Greatest Commandment (Mark 12:29-31) as the motivation. The core ministries of the Church are:

- **Ministry of the Word:** the Church is to use the Written Word to deepen its relationship with God, to preach, to teach, to rebuke, to correct, to train, and to equip the members of God's family so that they can be proficient in the works of the Kingdom of God (Matt. 28:18-20, 2 Tim. 3:16-17)
- **Worship:** the Church is called to enter into a relationship that enjoys (Westminster Shorter Catechism Q. I), glorifies (2 Thes. 1:12), praises (Ps. 148), confesses (Phil. 2:11), and obeys God in everything that it does (1 Cor. 10:31).
- **Spiritual Formation:** the Church is to build up its members to the fullness of Christ through various disciplines such as the reading of the Word, prayer, fasting, and meditation. (Acts 2:46-47; 1 Tim. 2:1, 8-10; 4:13; 2 Tim. 3:16-17, 4:2)
- **Evangelism:** the Church is to join itself to the mission of Jesus (Luke 19:10) by intentionally proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ to the local and global community.
- **Leadership Formation:** the Church is to recognize the God-given gifts of its members, to develop those gifts, to train its members in using those gifts, and to equip its members with the necessary resources for the edification of the body of Christ. (Exo. 18:13-23; Deut. 3:28; Prov. 22:6; Mat. 28:18-20; Phil. 4:9; 2 Tim. 2:2)

Every believer is called, by God, to Himself, to the community of believers, and to the Great Commission through various ministries of the Church. The evidences of God's

calling reside in the spiritual gifts given to the believer by the Holy Spirit, the passion imbued in the believer by the Holy Spirit, and the affirmations of the community of believers of the believer for a particular ministry.

As a member of the body of Christ, I believe that God has called me to become a minister of His sheep. He has confirmed this by blessing me with the gift of Hospitality, Caring, and Preaching. Prayers, the leading of the Holy Spirit to various ministerial opportunities, and the affirmations of the community of believers have continually confirmed my calling into a ministerial career. Through my practicum at South Gate Alliance, my summer interim role as a youth pastor at Burnaby Vietnamese Alliance Church, my on-Site experience in Cambodia, and my current ministry at Burnaby Vietnamese Alliance Church, God has confirmed again and again my call to ministry by igniting a passion to teach, to care, and to love my fellow brothers and sisters in Christ.

ⁱ Erickson, Millard J. (2013-08-15). *Christian Theology* (p. 955). Baker Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

ⁱⁱ Erickson, *Christian Theology*, p. 955.

ⁱⁱⁱ Herrick, Greg. "8. Ecclesiology: The Church", *Bible.org*. Web. 27 June 2015.

^{iv} Balchin, John F. *What the Bible Teaches about The Church*. Wheaton, Illinois: Tyndale House Publishers, 1979. Page 9.

^v Balchin, *What the Bible teaches*, page 11.

^{vi} Erickson, *Christian Theology*, p. 956.

^{vii} Clowney, Edmund P. "The Biblical Theology of the Church." *The Church in the Bible and the World: An International Study*. Ed. D. A. Carson. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1987. Print. Page 16-87.

^{viii} Clowney, *The Church*, page 20.

^{ix} Clowney, *The Church*, page 43.

^x Clowney, *The Church*, page 60.

^{xi} Bragg, E. C. "Ecclesiology." *Systematic Theology*. Trinity College University. Web. 1 July 2015.

^{xii} 1 Cor. 12:13, NIV.

^{xiii} Neufeldt-Fast, Arnold. "Examining the Believers Church within a Trinitarian-Missional Framework," *New Perspectives in Believer Church Ecclesiology*. Ed. Abe Dueck, Helmut Harder, and Karl Koop. Winnipeg, Manitoba: CMU Press, 2010. Print. Page 203.

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