
What is the Church?

“With love there are no questions, and without it there are no answers.” Ignatius of Antioch

Having thus stated the priorities of Jesus about love, and the basic nature of the new covenant, we will now seek to show that the most basic questions about Christianity are impossible to answer from a legalistic standpoint. Ignatius of Antioch stated it succinctly when he wrote, “With love there are no questions, and without it there are no answers.” The one basic mark of the Christian is to be our love. It is to be profoundly regretted that we have departed from the simplicity of the gospel and made it into something tedious and technical.

It is almost insulting to ask a question so utterly basic as “what is the church”? We have the idea that any ten year old coming home from Christian Service Camp can answer a question like that. The Church is the body of Christ, we say. It is believers in Jesus who are called out of a world of darkness into His kingdom of light.

More careful students of the Scriptures may be aware that the word “church” is not only used of local assemblies in someone’s house as in Romans 16:5, but that it is also used of all believers, regardless of where they may be. “He is the head of the body, the church . . .” (Colossians 1:18)

The plot thickens when we try to differentiate between the singular and plural uses of the word church. If every "house church" were in fact "the church" then every city with multiple gatherings would have "churches." This is, however, not the case. As a matter of fact, the word "churches" is never used in the Scriptures to refer to the Christians in a single city. There may have been a hundred "house churches" in Jerusalem but every reference to them is always in the singular. (See Acts 5:11; 8:1, 3; 11:22; 12:1, 5; 15:4, 22; 18:22, etc.) This is not only true of Jerusalem but also of Antioch, Corinth, Ephesus, Philippi, and every other city where a church existed.

The word "churches" does occur over thirty times in the Scriptures, but it never refers to the Christians in a single city. It is always the "churches" of a country or a province. Thus we read of the "church" in Jerusalem but "churches" in Judea; the "church" of Antioch, but "churches" of Syria and Cilicia; the "church" of Ephesus, but "churches" of Asia; etc.

Ephesus affords us a most striking example. Paul left Priscilla and Aquila there while passing by on his way to Jerusalem (Acts 18:19). They continued to labor there and eventually had a church in their own home. (See I Corinthians 16:8, 19.) Paul returned to Ephesus as rapidly as possible and remained for two or three years (Acts 19:10; 20:31). While he was there all of Asia was evangelized and idol makers were in danger of going out of business (see Acts 19). Paul is forced to leave but returns some months later to summon the elders of the church to Miletus for a conference (Acts 20). "And from Miletus he sent to Ephesus, and called the elders of the church . . ." (Acts 20:17) Please note — church, not churches. All of Asia had been evangelized from Ephesus and yet they had remained only one church. There were churches in Asia (I Corinthians 16:19; Revelation 1:4, etc.) but only a "church" in Ephesus. But more amazing still is that this remarkable unity was to be continued for another generation so that when the Book of Revelation was written toward the close of the first century the Lord directed a letter "Unto the angel of the church of Ephesus" (Revelation 2:1). Thus we have followed the progress of the gospel for some forty years in the thriving metropolis of Ephesus without moving from church to churches. Somehow they remained only one church.

One Theory

Someone has said that a church ought not to consist of more people than can assemble together at one time. The Christians in Jerusalem could and did assemble in the temple in addition to meeting "house to house" therefore, in a sense, they were only one "church." The Christians in Judea were unable to meet regularly at one central location but were forced to meet in various locations, therefore they were "churches."

This simple approach has a lot of merit, but it cannot be proven beyond the shadow of a doubt and to attempt to do so would cause one to miss the whole genius of the Christian System. We are not united because we agree on some technical point of teaching but because we have surrendered to Jesus.

I know of one community in the Mid-West with a population of only 400. Not only do they have a variety of denominations but one denomination has even split and therefore has two churches in the same little community. Touche! The devil has done it again. He knows that a divided church will never win the world for Christ and every division in the body of Christ is a tribute to his cleverness and subtily.

City Church?

Yes, there is a considerable amount of evidence to commend the concept of a city church. The Christian Scriptures were originally written in Greek and the very word for "church" in the Greek language is the word "ecclesia" which did refer to an assembly of qualified citizens by which Greek cities were governed.

There does seem to have been a city church in Jerusalem, as we have mentioned before, but there also seems to have been city churches in other metropolitan centers as well. The brethren in Antioch did at least upon occasion assemble together (Acts 14:27; 15:30). So also with the brethren in Corinth (Romans 16:23). The reference to the "public" teaching in Acts 20:20 is taken by some to imply that the brethren in Ephesus had one central place of assembly.

As Paul journeyed to Jerusalem the Holy Spirit testified in every "city" that bonds and affliction were waiting for him. When he commissioned Titus to ordain elders it was also to be in "every city." (Titus 1:5)

Again, however, it would be a mistake to form a new denomination around the shreds of evidence which can be woven

together about a city church. Neither is it advisable to fragment and fracture your own church any more than it is already. *The whole purpose of this lesson is to demonstrate the utter folly and futility of seeking to establish legalistic definitions for the church.*

All That Be in Rome

The brethren in Rome were at the focal point and hub of the ancient world. Their faith was spoken of throughout the whole world (Romans 1:8). A long and unique list of exemplary Christians is given in Romans 16. There were many things to commend their work of faith and labor of love but apparently there was no city church in Rome.

The Roman letter is not addressed to the church at Rome, but rather "To all that be in Rome, beloved of God, called to be saints" (Romans 1:7). The word church is not even found in Romans until the sixteenth chapter where it is used of a church in the house of Priscilla and Aquila (Romans 16:5). Some infer the presence of other house churches in Rome by the wording of Romans 16:14-15.

Greetings are sent to Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermas, Patrobas, Hermes, and the brethren which were with them.

Other greetings are sent to Philologus, Julia, Nereus and his sister, Olympus, and all the saints which were with them.

Be that as it may, we must remember that Christ did not form His kingdom upon legal technicalities, but upon His own deity. All who are "in Christ" are saved, regardless of their views about what constitutes or fails to constitute a church in Rome.

Sorting or Serving

"Just what is the church?" I asked a distinguished professor of a Christian College. "Boyce," he replied, "whenever we become more concerned about sorting people than serving them we have missed the essence of Christ's teaching and example." How beautiful! It is not necessary for us to "draw the lines" but it is necessary for us to serve. Our love not only causes us to become enslaved to our fellow believers, it even causes us to do good to them that hate us and to pray for them which despitefully use us and persecute us. While we have some special responsibilities to those who are of the household of faith it is still our basic goal to do good unto all men. Our example is Christ. The Lord not only helped His close

friends like Mary, Martha, and Lazarus, but He also touched the ear of Malchus in the garden and from the cross cried out for mercy on behalf of those who drove the nails into His hands and feet.

To reduce the all pervading love of Christ to the shriveled up concept of "who is my brother" is an immeasurable injustice to Jesus. Even unbelievers have that kind of love. Those, by contrast, who would be the children of God must open their hearts and lives to the power that is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, and to shed abroad His love by means of the Holy Spirit.

Converging Course in Christ

The Jews and Greeks of the ancient world had totally different concepts of the "ecclesia." The wide divergence of their backgrounds would make it unreasonable to think otherwise.

The Jews, no doubt, saw the term "ecclesia" in the context in which it appears in the Septuagint. (The Septuagint is the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible.) The word "ecclesia" occurs some 100 times in that version. Israel was God's "assembly."

When Jesus spoke of building His "ecclesia" in Matthew 16:18 we have every reason to believe that the apostles were thinking only in terms of their nationalistic history. Though Jesus had specifically commissioned these men to go to all nations they continued to preach to none but the Jews for many years. Even after a series of miracles coerced Peter to the house of Cornelius he still felt locked into a ministry to the circumcision. This incredible fact is recorded in Galatians 2:9 and is probably twenty years after the Great Commission was given and ten years after the conversion of Cornelius.

"Lord, wilt thou at this time restore again the kingdom to Israel" they said (Acts 1:6). Their reading of the Septuagint had convinced them that the "ecclesia" was Israel and nothing Jesus had taught them seemed sufficient to change their minds.

When the Gospel came to the Gentiles the word "ecclesia" gave them a totally different set of associations. The word can be traced in Greek literature as far back as five centuries before Christ. It referred to a popular assembly of competent full citizens by which the city was governed. The ecclesia opened with prayers and sacrifices to the gods of the city. Every citizen had a right to speak, propositions could be made upon the testimony of expert witnesses, and decisions were made by voting.

When the Gentiles heard that Jesus was going to build His ecclesia they would naturally think of that word as they had always thought of it.

In Christ, these radically different peoples were on a converging course. The Jews came to realize that as John the Baptist put it, "God is able of these stones to raise up children unto Abraham" (Matthew 3:9). Perhaps he gestured with his hand toward Gentile territory when he made that statement.

The Gentiles came to realize that all who are in Christ are also descendants of Abraham and heirs according to the promise (Galatians 3:29). The true Jew is made by the inward experience of conversion and the real circumcision is of the heart (Romans 2:28-29). Not all the peoples of physical Israel had been accepted by God, only a remnant. The remnant of believing Jews combined with believing Gentiles composes the Israel of God in a spiritual sense (Galatians 6:16).

The Church Today

I think we can objectively say that there are some real difficulties involved in attempting to legalistically define just exactly what constituted the "church" in such cities as Jerusalem, Antioch, or Ephesus. It seems that the more deeply we probe into the question the more complex it becomes. Fenton J. Hort in his excellent book, "The Christian Ecclesia," draws a keen distinction between the use of "of" and "in" with reference to the church. There does seem to be a difference between the church "of" a city and the church "in" a city but such technicalities are far afield from the crucial questions which we face in these perilous times.

It has been stated that when the Bolshiviks took over the revolution in Russia that the clergy were locked up in a heated debate over what color robes should be worn on special Sundays.

If you think defining the church in Ephesus is a drag, give it a whirl for some modern city. Not only do we face the unbelievable quagmire of quarreling denominations but a wide assortment of other Christian institutions involved in evangelism or benevolence, or some other facet of Christian work. What is the church in St. Louis or San Francisco? From the legalistic standpoint we may be able to arrive at a definition which makes perfect sense to us. It may satisfy every question which you can personally think of to ask. But I want to unequivocally affirm that your definition will not satisfy everyone's questions.

The answer to the dilemma is not to be found in writing more laws but in showing more love. Not sorting, but serving!

Some time ago I asked a man how many churches there were in Joplin, Missouri. Just one, he said with a straight face. Further discussion revealed that the one true church of Joplin was a little group of less than one hundred people with whom this man just happened to be associated. I glanced at his hands. The absence of nail prints convinced me that his answer was not the final word on the subject.

With love there are no questions, and without it there are no answers. By this shall all men know that we are His disciples, if we have love one to another!

Questions for Discussion — Lesson Five

1. Does real love mean that we will never ask any questions? What does it mean?
2. Is it possible for someone actually to be saved whom we think is lost?
3. How would you define "the church"?
4. How would you distinguish between "church" and "churches" as used in the Scriptures?
5. Is the concept of a "city church" practical?
6. Why are there so many denominations?
7. What can you and your church do to promote unity in your community?
8. Is it possible for people to be united in Christ who do not agree on all points of doctrine? How do we determine what is essential and what is not?
9. Can you think of anything in the modern church more serious than the first century disagreements between Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians?
10. How important is it for us to know who is saved and who isn't?