

DISCIPLESHIP. SUPPLEMENT 12

[CHURCH] THE WORD "CHURCH" IN THE BIBLE

1. The word "church".

The word "church" in the English language is derived from the Greek word "kuriakon (dóma)" and means "the Lord's" (house).

The word "church" in the original language of the Bible (Greek) is "ekklésia". It literally means "(God's) called out ones" (called out of the world). The word "ekklésia" in the Bible has several different meanings:

2. Ekklésia means "the church (congregation)" of God in the Old Testament period that is led by "elders".

Psalm 107:32 says, "Let them exalt him (God) in the assembly/church (Hebrew: qahal) (Greek: ekklésia) of the people and praise him in the council of the elders (Hebrew: moshab zeqenim) (Greek: kathedra presbuterón)". God's Old Testament people, Israel, is called "ekklésia", that is by exactly the same word as his New Testament people (Judges 20:2; Psalm 22:22; 2 Chronicles 29:28).

3. Ekklésia means a "gathering or meeting" of people.

Ekklésia refers to the official "assembly of the people" in Ephesus, a regularly summoned legal or political body (Acts 19:39). It refers to a gathering or meeting of people (Acts 19:32,41).

4. Ekklésia means "the church" (congregation)" of God in the New Testament period that is led by a council of elders.

The word "ekklésia" refers to the congregation of Christians during the New Testament period. The context determines which aspect of the church is meant.

(1) De local church.

Ekklésia means the local church or congregation of Christians when they gather or meet together (1 Corinthians 11:18; 1 Corinthians 14:19; 3 John 6).

(2) The independent church.

- Ekklésia means the independent church, the total of Christians in one place (Matthew 18:17): for example, Jerusalem (Acts 8:1); Judea, Galilee, Samaria (Acts 9:31) (cf. Acts 15:41; Galatians 1:22; Revelation 1:12-13,20).
- Ekklésia in the singular (Matthew 18:17; Acts 5:11; Acts 8:3; 1 Corinthians 4:17; Philippians 4:15; possibly 1 Timothy 5:16). "In each church" (Greek: kata ekklésian, distributive sense, Acts 14:23).
- Ekklésia in specific places: Jerusalem (Acts 8:1; Acts 11:22); Antioch (Acts 11:26; Acts 13:1); Cenchrea (Romans 16:1); Corinth (1 Corinthians 1:2); Thessalonica (1 Thessalonians 1:1); Ephesus (Revelation 2:1), etc.
- Ekklésia in plural (Acts 15:41; Acts 16:5; Romans 16:16; 1 Corinthians 7:17; 2 Corinthians 8:18-24; 2 Thessalonians 1:4).
- Ekklésia in specific provinces: Judea (Galatians 1:22; 1 Thessalonians 2:14); Galatia (Galatians 1:2; 1 Corinthians 16:1); Asia (1 Corinthians 16:19; Revelation 1:4); Macedonia (2 Corinthians 8:1).

(3) The house church.

Ekklésia means the church that gathers in a house (Romans 16:5).

- A church in the house of Priscilla and Aquila at Rome (Romans 16:5) and in Ephesus (1 Corinthians 16:19).
- A house church in the house of Nympha (Colossians 4:15).
- A house church in the house of Philemon (Philemon 1:1-2).

(4) The worldwide Church.

Ekklésia means the universal or worldwide Church in which for example the Roman Catholic Church is only a part, because the Greek word: "katholikos" (catholic) means "general" or "worldwide" and not only belonging to Rome or the Roman Empire! Likewise the Orthodox Church, the Protestant Church, the Evangelical Church, the Pentecostal Church and every other independent church are only "denominations" or parts of the one worldwide Church! All Christians and independent churches in the world belong to this one worldwide Church, "the Body of Christ" (Matthew 16:18; Acts 9:31; 1 Corinthians 6:4; 1 Corinthians 12:28; Ephesians 1:21-22; Ephesians 3:10,21; Ephesians 5:22-33; Philippians 3:6; Colossians 1:18,24; possibly 1 Timothy 5:16)!

(5) The local churches within the worldwide Church are described more accurately.

These more accurate descriptions give the Greek word "ekklésia" more colour and meaning.

- "All the churches of the Gentiles" (Romans 16:4).

- “All the churches of Christ (Romans 16:16).
- “The church of God in Corinth (1 Corinthians 1:2).
- “The church of God” (1 Corinthians 10:32).
- “In all the congregations of the saints” (1 Corinthians 14:33).
- “The church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Thessalonians 1:1).

5. The Church in the Old and New Testament is called with exactly the same names.

(1) Names of the Church in the Old and the New Testament.

- God’s firstborn (Exodus 4:22; Jeremiah 31:9; Hebrews 12:23)
- God’s sons and daughters (Isaiah 43:6-7; 2 Corinthians 6:18)
- The city Jerusalem (a symbol for God’s people) is called: “a woman, or a bride or spouse” (Isaiah 54:1,5-6; Revelation 21:9-10)
- The twelve tribes (Genesis 49:28; ; James 1:1; Revelation 7:4; Revelation 21:12)
- A kingdom of priests (Exodus 19:6; 1 Peter 2:9; Revelation 1:6)
- A holy nation (Exodus 19:6; 1 Peter 2:9)
- A chosen people (Deuteronomy 7:6; 1 Peter 2:9)
- God’s treasured possession (Exodus 19:5; Deuteronomy 7:6), a people that are the very own of our great God and Saviour, Jesus Christ (Titus 2:14), a people belonging to God (1 Peter 2:9)
- God’s covenant people (Leviticus 26:12; 2 Corinthians 6:16)
- A dispersed nation, a wandering people, scattered in the dispersion, strangers (Deuteronomy 30:1; Psalm 105:10-13; Ezekiel 12:15; Esther 3:8; 1 Peter 1:1)
- The first fruits of God’s harvest (Jeremiah 2:3; James 1:18)
- Sheep (one flock) of the sheep pen of Israel and of the sheep pens of the other nations (Ezekiel chapter 34; John 10:16)
- Israel (1 Samuel 7:23; Galatians 6:14-16)
- Jews (Zachariah 8:22-23; Romans 2:28-29)
- Zion (also a symbol for God’s people)(Isaiah 51:16; Isaiah 52:7; Hebrews 12:22-24)
- The present Jerusalem (that is below in slavery to the law) and the Heavenly Jerusalem that is above) (Galatians 4:25-26), The Heavenly Jerusalem (Hebrews 12:22), the New Jerusalem (Revelation 21:2) and the Holy Jerusalem (Revelation 21:10)
- The temple of God (also a symbol of God’s people) (2 Corinthians 6:16)
- Jewish and non-Jewish believers who are heirs together with Israel, members together of one Body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus (Ephesians 3:6; 2 Corinthians 1:20).
- Anointed people (Christians) who dwell amidst the people of the world (Hebrew: meshichi; Greek: christoi) (Psalm 105:15) (Acts 11:26) (christianous)!

The Jews and the Gentiles who believe in the Lord Jesus Christ form “one organism”, which is symbolized by the following:

- one flock (John 10:16)
- one family consisting of the children of God (Galatians 3:26-29)
- one new man, one household of God, one dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit (Ephesians 2:11-22)
- one Body (1 Corinthians 12:13; Ephesians 3:6)
- one olive tree (Jeremiah 11:16-17; 11:17-24)
- one chosen and holy (set apart to be dedicated to God) people (1 Peter 2:9-10).
- one New Jerusalem (Revelation 21:9-14) for Jewish believers (Hebrews 12:22-24) and for Gentile believers (Galatians 4:21-31).

Therefore

- God’s Old Testament people (Israel) has not been terminated or replaced,
- but has been continued on a higher plane (in which “the shadows” have become “realities”) (Colossians 2:17; Hebrews 9:7-10)
- and has been enlarged (extended) to include the believers in Christ from the Gentile nations,
- Together they form on complete equal footing the one people of God (1 Corinthians 12:13; Ephesians 2:11-22; Ephesians 3:2-6).

(2) The Church comes into being through the gospel and the Spirit of God.

- God called his Church to himself through the proclamation of the gospel during the Old Testament period (Isaiah 52:7; Romans 10:15-21; Galatians 3:8; Hebrews 4:1-3) and during the New Testament period (Acts 20:24; cf. Acts 13:44-49).

- Believers from the Jews and from the Gentiles are baptised by/with one Spirit into one Body (also a symbol of God's people). They are given one Spirit to drink (1 Corinthians 12:13)
- Believers meet together in a church fellowship (church meeting/gathering) (Hebrew: qahal; Greek: ekklesia) (Psalm 107:32; Judges 20:2; Psalm 22:22; 2 Chronicles 29:28; Matthew 16:18; Matthew 18:17; Acts 8:2; Acts 9:1).

“The Church” in the New Testament is called “the Israel of God” (spiritual Israel) (Galatians 6:14-16; cf. Romans 9:6b) in contrast to “the Israel according to the flesh” (natural Israel) (Romans 9:6a; 1 Corinthians 10:18 in Greek)(cf. Galatians 4:24-25 and 1 Corinthians 3:1). The Israel of God consists of Christians who boast in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to them, and they to the world (Galatians 6:14; cf. Romans 2:28-29 and 1 Corinthians 1:22-26)! “Israel” in this spiritual sense is definitely *limited to believers in Jesus Christ* from the Jews and the non-Jews in the Old Testament and the New Testament.

While the natural Israel became unfaithful to God and his Messiah (John 1:11), spiritual Israel has never rejected God and his Christ (Romans 9:6)! Spiritual Israel remains forever God's covenant people. God has never rejected spiritual Israel, that is, the believers in Israel (Romans 11:1-6). Spiritual Israel or the Church remains forever God's chosen people (*Read* Romans 8:29-30,33; Romans 9:6-18; Romans 11:1-5,28-29; Ephesians 1:4; 2 Thessalonians 2:13-14; 2 Timothy 1:9-10; cf. John 6:44,37; John 17:3,12).

In spiritual Israel (in the worldwide Church, among Christians in the world) “there is no difference between Jew and Gentile – the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him” (Romans 10:12-13; 1 Corinthians 1:24; Galatians 3:28-29; Colossians 3:11). “He (God) made no distinction between us (Jews) and them (Gentiles), for he purified their hearts by faith” (Acts 15:9).

6. What the Church is not.

(1) The Church is not just an organisation, but is a spiritual unity.

The one lampstand in the Old Testament (Exodus 25:31-32) and the seven lampstands in the New Testament (Revelation 1:20). During the Old Testament period there was but one lampstand with seven branches and seven lamps set on them that stood in the temple. This lampstand symbolised *the organisational unity* of God's Old Testament Church-State (Israel).

But during the New Testament period there are seven lampstands with a lamp on each, standing in a circle around Jesus Christ. These lampstands symbolise *the spiritual unity* of all churches in the whole world in Jesus Christ. He is “the Good Shepherd” who shepherds his sheep from the Jewish sheep pen and from all Gentile sheep pens (John 10:16). He is “the Head of his Body”, the worldwide Church (Ephesians 1:22-23). He is “the Shepherd and Overseer (Bishop) of our souls” (1 Peter 2:25). He is “the Apostle and High Priest of the faith we confess” (Hebrews 3:1). Through “the one Spirit of Jesus Christ” (Romans 8:9-10; 1 Peter 1:10-12) believers are baptised into the one Body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:13). “Seven” is the number of divine completion and perfection and “the seven lampstands” symbolise all the independent churches¹ in the whole world (Revelation 2:7). Jesus Christ is present and active in their midst!

The image of the Church as the Body of Christ (Ephesians 4:12) with all Christians being members of the Body shows clearly that all local churches are organizationally independent from each other, but not independent from Jesus Christ, the Head. They have their spiritual unity not in some church denomination, also not in some human leader as the pope, patriarch, chairman of a synod, etc. but only in Jesus Christ! No member of the Body may lord it over another member. The expressions “mother church” and “daughter church” may not imply that the mother has the right to lord it over the daughter!

(2) No church in the world should have an umbrella organisation above it.

Nowhere in the Bible is there any ground to form a so-called “umbrella organisation” as a Council, Synod or Conference, etc. that then begins to lord it over all churches! In the Bible all churches are independent and stand directly under the Lord Jesus Christ (Ephesians 1:22)!

(3) The worldwide Church should not be divided into church denominations.

Nowhere in the Bible is there ground to form so-called “church denominations”. On the contrary 1 Corinthians 3:1-4 shows that church denominations arise from worldliness and spiritual immaturity. What churches in our day need is discipleship training (Matthew 28:19-20) and teaching in the whole will of God (Acts 20:27)!

(4) No church in the world should exclusively be a national church, a peoples' church or an ethnic church.

Nowhere in the Bible is there any ground to form a so-called “state church”, “peoples' church”, or “ethnic church” that then excludes people from another country, nation, ethnic group, language or culture! The Jews and non-Jews in the New Testament together formed local independent churches in Rome (Romans 14) and Ephesus (Ephesians 2).

¹ Note: NOT seven church denominations that exist completely independent from each other (the present situation), but seven independent churches (congregations) that form a spiritual unity (of love, consultation and co-operation with each other) in Christ!

7. The Church is a spiritual unity that preserves spiritual unity.

The word “ekklésia” as church always refers to individual independent churches in specific places except when it refers to the worldwide Church, the Body of Christ, as a spiritual unity.

The different local independent churches preserve this unity through:

- the truth of the (objective) Christian Faith in the Bible (correctly interpreted) (Ephesians 4:13)
 - the (subjective, personal) knowledge of Jesus Christ (Ephesians 4:13)
 - (spiritual and moral) maturity measured against the fullness of Christ (Ephesians 4:13)
 - the (indwelling) Holy Spirit (who confirms the revelation in the Bible)
 - the (visible) love, consultation and co-operation between the independent churches/congregations.
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