

The New Testament Church

Jesus Christ personally founded the New Testament Church while He was on earth. The word translated “church” in the King James Version is **evkklhsi,a** (ekklesia). This word means “called out or called forth... a gathering of citizens called out from their homes into some public place; an assembly.” This is the proper or primary meaning given by J. H. Thayer in his *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*. He gives several examples of the usage of this word. It was used among the Greeks to denote “an assembly of the people convened at the public place of council for the purpose of deliberating.” An example of this usage is found in Acts 19: 39. The word is also used of the nation of Israel when they were assembled together in the wilderness in Old Testament times. It is used this way in Acts 7: 38. It is also used of “any gathering or throng of men assembled by chance or tumultuously.” It is used in this way in Acts 19: 32, 41. Thayer also says that the word is used in the Christian sense of “an assembly of Christians gathered for worship.” He further describes this assembly as “a company of Christians, or of those who, hoping for eternal salvation through Jesus Christ, observe their own religious rites, hold their own religious meetings, and manage their own affairs according to regulations prescribed for the body for order’s sake” It can readily be seen that each of these usages of the word **evkklhsi,a** (ekklesia) conforms to the basic meaning of an assembly.

Then Thayer makes the mistake that many do at the present day. He invents a meaning of ekklesia that is not inherent in the basic meaning. Many times people do this to support some preconceived idea. They leave the basic meaning and accepted and contextual usage of a word because they desire to teach something which is in conflict with the actual meaning of the word. We must be careful and impartial students to make sure that we do not make the same mistake.

In this vein Thayer says that the word **evkklhsi,a** (ekklesia) refers to “the whole body of Christians scattered throughout the earth; collectively, all who worship and honor God and Christ in whatever place they may be.” He gives Matt. 16: 18 as an example of this usage where he says “perhaps the Evangelist employs **th.n evkklhsi,an** [the assembly] although Christ may have said **th.n basilei,an mou** [my kingdom].” (I have supplied the words in the brackets).

Kingdom and Church

Thayer has made some basic mistakes here that we would do well to carefully consider. First, he betrays a defective view of the inspiration of Scripture. He says that while Matthew says that Christ said “on this rock I will build my assembly,” He might have actually said “on this rock I will build my kingdom.” This is absolutely unacceptable to one who holds to the only correct and orthodox view of the plenary, verbal inspiration of the Scriptures. The Lord Jesus emphatically did **not** tell Peter “on this rock I will build my kingdom.” He said, “I will build my assembly.”

Thayer obviously had a theological preconception that caused him to make the same mistake that many make today. He equated the church or assembly with the kingdom of God. The assembly and the kingdom are not synonymous. The kingdom of God is more extensive than is the assembly. The church or assembly is in God’s kingdom but it is not the same thing as the kingdom. Even a superficial reading of the Scriptures will show that the concept of the kingdom is quite extensive. This is not the place to study the kingdom, but a few examples will cast some necessary light on the subject. For example, John the Baptist preached in Matt. 3: 2 that the “kingdom of heaven is at hand.” The kingdom was already there. Yet in the Lord’s Model Prayer we are to earnestly request that “thy kingdom come.” We want God’s rule and reign to be more and more manifest until, finally, in the “new heavens and a new earth wherein dwelleth righteousness” (2 Pet. 3: 13) His will be perfectly and willingly obeyed “in earth as it

is in heaven.” We also learn that the Lord Jesus Christ “shall judge the quick and the dead at his appearing and his kingdom.”(2 Tim. 4: 1). This is obviously future. The basic meaning of the Kingdom of God is “the rule and reign of God.” This is manifested in varying degrees. We know from Scripture that God is completely ruling even now. He is right now working all things “after the counsel of his own will.” (Eph. 1: 11). He is at the present moment doing “according to his will in the army of heaven, and among the inhabitants of the earth...” (Dan. 4: 35). However, God’s rule is not as apparent now as it shall be in the future. Even now, He is in control of all men. Even now according to Proverbs 21:1 “The king’s heart is in the hand of the LORD, as the rivers of water: he turneth it whithersoever he will.” Those who think that they act independently of God absolutely do not. God is in control. However, those who are wicked are not willingly and openly doing the revealed will of God. The glorious day will come, however, when all the redeemed family of God will be worshipping God openly, completely, and joyfully. That is when the kingdom [the rule and reign of God] will be manifested in all its perfection.

All God’s children are in His kingdom as soon as they are born from above. This is plain from a study of John 3: 3-8. However not all of God’s children are in His church while they in this earth. We will examine this truth later. For now, suffice it to repeat that the kingdom and the church are not the same. The church [assembly] is in the kingdom [the rule and reign of God] but it is not identical with the kingdom.

Matthew 16:18 and Jesus Christ

Thayer has made another basic mistake that is commonly made also today by many. He is assuming that Matt. 16: 18 cannot possibly be talking about a local assembly. After all the language is too extensive to admit of such an interpretation. The Lord Jesus tells Peter that on the Rock [Christ and the divine revelation about Him] He will build His church. Thayer and many modern day writers simply assume that the Lord is talking about some nebulous entity that they call a ”universal church.” After carefully giving the basic meaning of the word **evkklhsi,a** (ekklesia) which was “assembly” he gave the contrived and unwarranted definition of “the whole body of Christians scattered throughout the earth; collectively, all who worship and honor God and Christ in whatever place they may be.”

There are two things that are fundamentally wrong with Thayer’s view. The first is that he has obviously twisted the basic meaning of ekklesia. How can those who are “scattered throughout all the earth” possibly be said to be an assembly in any sense of the word? This is an obviously flawed and ludicrous concept. The language simply will not bear this contrived meaning.

The other fundamental defect in Thayer’s concept is shown in the way the Lord Jesus used the word Himself. A simple study of this is very enlightening. Jesus Christ used the word **evkklhsi,a** (ekklesia) 23 times in the New Testament. He first used it in Matt. 16: 18. He used it twice in Matt. 18: 17. He used it 20 times in the book of Revelation. Without any shadow of doubt, each time He used the word in Matt. 18 and in the Revelation He used it in the basic sense of a local assembly. In Matt. 18 He was talking about church discipline. He mentioned the steps one must take who has been offended by an erring brother in the church. After taking the first two steps and being rejected by the offender, the aggrieved party is to “tell it to the church.” If the offender refuses to “hear the church”, he is to be disciplined. It is very obvious that the only interpretation that makes sense here is that the church (assembly) is a local congregation. The same is true of the usage of the word in the book of Revelation.

In all of the 20 times the word *ekklesia* is used here, it unmistakably refers to a local assembly. Sometimes the word is used in the plural such as in Revelation 1:4 “John to the seven churches which are in Asia...” or in Revelation 2:7 “He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches...” In the final instance in the Bible in which the word *ekklesia* is mentioned in the Bible it is used in that way: Revelation 22:16 “I Jesus have sent mine angel to testify unto you these things in the churches...”

The other times the word is used in the Revelation the reference is to a particular church. The one example we will give is in Revelation 3:1 “And unto the angel of the church in Sardis write...”

The only passage in which the Lord Jesus used the word in which the meaning could be disputed is the one in Matt. 16: 18. It appears perfectly obvious that our Lord would not use the word in a radically different sense in this one place. Let us imagine that we hear a man make a speech in which he uses a word 23 times. Let us further imagine that we are not sure how he meant the word the first time he used it. However, let us state that the next 22 times the man used the word the meaning was plain and obvious. Would we not readily assume that the first time he used it he used it in the same way he used it the subsequent 22 times? The evident answer would be “yes.”

The Institutional or Generic Sense

The probable reason that some have trouble with the usage of *ekklesia* in Matt. 16: 18 is because they have not considered the usage of words in the institutional or generic sense. We use words this way in everyday language many times. The Bible also very often uses words in this way. A prominent example is found in Job 14:1 “Man that is born of a woman is of few days, and full of trouble.” What does this mean? It means that every man who is born of a woman is of few days and full of trouble. One man is taken as an example of the rest of them. Each and every man born of woman is under consideration. It does not mean that there is one big universal man who is born of one huge universal woman. Another example of this usage is found in 1 Timothy 3:12 “Let the deacons be the husbands of one wife, ruling their children and their own houses well.” Does this mean that there is one big universal wife of whom all the deacons are to be the husbands?

To merely state this is to see the absurdity of it. This means that each deacon is to have his own wife.

Oftentimes the word translated “church” in our beloved King James Version is used in this institutional sense. This is the way it is undoubtedly used, for example in 1 Corinthians 12:28, “And God hath set some in the church, first apostles, secondarily prophets, thirdly teachers, after that miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, governments, diversities of tongues.” The only way these gifts function are in actual assemblies. The same is true of 1 Corinthians 15:9, where Paul said, “For I am the least of the apostles, that am not meet to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God.” In the first place, he is speaking primarily of the church at Jerusalem. In the second place, if he is speaking of other Christians, he obviously was persecuting baptized believers who were organized into actual local assemblies. That is the only kind of Christians there were at this stage of history.

Many other examples could be given of this *institutional*, *generic*, or *abstract* use of the word translated “church.”