

3 Words for Church

- 3.1** The linguistic root of the word *ekklēsia* is roughly *ek+kaleō* – meaning that the word sounds like 'called out'. But *ekklēsia* was a word in use in the C1 to mean *assembly* or *congregation*. In the Greek version of the OT (the 'Septuagint' of LXX c200BC) it renders the word Hebrew word *Qahal* or 'assembly' of Israel (so Judges 20.2; 21.5; 1 Sam 17.47; 2 Kings 8.14, 65 etc. so too Acts 7.38). It is also used in the NT to mean the city 'assembly' at Ephesus in Act 19.32-39.
- 3.2** Some Christian denominations avoid the word 'church' and prefer the word *congregation*, *assembly* or *gathering*. At the Reformation William Tyndale (1494-1536), later martyred for translating, printing and distributing the Bible in English famously said to a learned clergyman 'I defie the Pope and all his lawes. If God spare my lyfe, ere many yeares I wyl cause the boy that driveth the plough to know more of the Scripture, than thou dost.' Through the incorporation of his biblical phrases into the later King James Bible he, with Shakespeare, is one of the two great sources of English idioms. One translation of his that has not survived is his insistence on translating the word *ekklēsia* as 'congregation.' He wanted to get away from the association of the word 'church' with popes, hierarchy, bishops and buildings and choose a word closer to the New Testament church: people gathered in Christ's name. Over the years, like the Jewish word *synagogue* which also accumulated overtones of organisation and real estate when it originally meant a gathering of people, 'church' has come to carry rather heavy 'ecclesiastical' overtones. Accordingly most non-conformist churches have, historically, been careful to call their buildings for worship 'chapels' to distinguish them from the congregation of those who worship there, which is the true 'congregation' or church.
- 3.3** The word *ekklēsia* appears only twice on the lips of Jesus in the NT both in the Gospel according to Matthew (16.18 'the gates of Hades will not prevail against it' and 18.17 if a brother will not listen to the church he is to be treated as an outsider). However, Jesus of course left behind a 'church' without using the word, under the leadership of the 'apostles' - a group that turned to be more extensive than 'the twelve'.
- 3.4** Early Christian churches met in houses (so Rom 16.5; Philem 2) and most NT references to the church are to a local congregation of believers in particular town, which probably consisted of a number of household churches. Hence together the churches in many places are 'the churches' (plural eg 1 Cor 11.16). But Paul can also refer to 'in church' meaning in a worship gathering (1 Cor 14.19).
- 3.5** Other texts show a more universal even cosmic vision of a universal over arching church and these are often the basis of 'doctrines of the church' or the branch of theology called *ecclesiology*. In the NT this 'big picture' doctrine of the church is still not an institution but the universal fellowship of those joined in Christ (so Eph 1.22-23; 2.20; 1 Tim 3.15; Heb 12.23).



Teaching Service: This is Church

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1 Introduction – The Key Biblical Metaphors for the Church

- 1.1 The Body of Christ** This is used in two ways: (i) of the local church as a united body (one Lord, one Spirit etc.) with a diversity of gifts. It is a vision of the church as a mutually ministering charismatic community. (Rom 14; 1 Cor 12; Eph 4); (ii) used of the universal church it is an image of unified growing up into the head of the church who is Christ. Here the emphasis is on Christ as the source of life, unity and authority in the church, into which the church is to grow together (Eph 4.15f).
- 1.2 The Bride of Christ** is an eschatological image. Drawing on the metaphor of a wedding it involves the ideas of: (i) the hoped for final union with Christ; (ii) the need for preparation—usually understood as a call to purity and holiness. This idea of the final eschatological church which combines the church in heaven and earth leads to reflection on questions of who is part of the true church.
- 1.3 The Household of God.** The 'kinship' language of the NT (brother/sisters etc.) is extensive. It is the language of relationship, affection, mutuality and sibling relations rather than of legal or political status, rights or 'equality.' With this 'fictive' (they are brothers and sisters but not by blood) kinship language comes virtually no interest in the idea of church as a 'family' in our rather narrow modern western sense. Rather the language is of household with its ideas of: (i) authority in the Father; (ii) the diversity of the people; (iii) the correspondence between the basic social unit of the Graeco-Roman city and the church meeting and gathering in such households. Perhaps the key text to use this idea is 1 Tim 3.14f: 'I am writing so ... you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of truth.'
- 1.4 1 Peter 2.9:** 'you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, holy nation, God's own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light.' This text suggests that the NT people of God are the inheritors of the election promised to Israel. Although some in the early church were happy to admit that all believers share the kingly and priestly ministry of Christ, special status was reserved for the ordained. Luther radically narrowed the distinction between ordained and lay when he taught the priesthood of all believers. This was the doctrine that all believers are 'truly priests, bishops and popes...' differing in *work* but not in *status*. This makes ministry functional, not a matter of ordination to a different order of ministry, and that role is exercised on behalf of all believers who share it and ceases when the role is no longer exercised (Luther 1520 *Appeal*).

Key Insights into the Doctrine of the Church in Five Stages

2.1 Foundations: The Creedal Doctrine

How do we protect the unity, integrity and doctrine of the church from heretics?

- 2.1.1 Four things guarantee the integrity of the church: (i) the teaching of the Apostles; (ii) the 'order' of the church = continuity of the succession of bishops; (iii) the creeds; (iv) the reading and exposition of Scripture (Irenaeus late C2).

This leads to the doctrine of the unity of the visible institutional church as the unique 'house of salvation'. Based on the Rahab story in Joshua 2, Origen (c 200) writes: 'Outside the church, no one is saved'

The 'Nicene' Creed (381AD version) includes: 'we believe in one, holy, catholic and apostolic church.' These become established as four 'marks' of the church:

- 2.1.2 **One** - united in Christ. Just as one tree has many branches and the light of the sun has many beams so too: 'You cannot have God as father unless you have the church as mother... anyone who leaves the Church of Christ behind cannot benefit from the rewards of Christ' 'we are born of her womb...nourished by her milk...given life from her breath.' (Cyprian 251AD).

- 2.1.3 **Holy** - separated from the world and to God, morally transformed in Christ. *Issue 1: Ministry* - Grace is received through the (authorised, catholic) sacraments. The merits of Christ not the moral purity of the minister make the sacraments effective. *Issue 2* - When the church is not holy in fact. The church is mixed (says Augustine based on the parable of the Wheat and Tares in Mt 13.24-30): 'in the ineffable fore-knowledge of God many who seem to be outside the church are actually within, just as many who seem to be within are in reality outside.' This is the doctrine of the church defined eschatologically – similar to the later idea of the 'invisible' church.

- 2.1.4 **Catholic** - universal (in space, time, people, doctrine etc.) but in the West it came to mean 'the church in sacramental fellowship with the bishop of Rome.'

- 2.1.5 **Apostolic** - going back to the apostles, in particular by the laying on of hands from one generation of bishops to the next by 'tactile apostolic succession' supposedly going back to Peter as the first bishop of Rome.

- 2.1.6 Later the state derives its authority from the church (as moon get its light from the sun). So the power of kings derives from the authority of the Pope (C12). This is a massive claim to secular power and a bid for the submission of the state to the church. (At the English Reformation Henry VIII broke with Rome by asserting his right to be head of the English church.)

2.2 Reform: The C16 Reformation: True Gospel, True Church

How to protect doctrine & holy living from church traditions diverging from the gospel?

There are inherent tensions when church doctrine moves away from the apostolic gospel (indulgences, saints, apostolic claims, grace=sacraments, immoral prelates etc.).

- 2.2.1 The Church is defined by the Word of God. So Melancthon: the church is called catholic because its members 'accept and externally profess one ... true doctrine throughout all ages from the beginning until the very end...'

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'anywhere you hear or see such a word preached, believed, confessed and acted upon, do not doubt that there is the true *ecclesia sancta catholica*, a "holy Christian people" must be there...God's word cannot be without God's people and conversely God's people cannot be without God's word...' (Luther)

- 2.2.2 The church is defined as the word rightly preached and the sacraments (baptism and communion) rightly practised. John Calvin: 'Wherever we see the Word of God purely preached and listened to, and the sacraments administered according to Christ's institution, it is in no way to be doubted that a church of God exists...' (*Institutes* IV.i.9)

The reuse of the idea of true church being the eschatological church leads to the idea of the spiritual unity of all those who will be finally saved in Christ = 'the invisible church'. Particular churches are only more or less pure according to the purity of their doctrine and worship. Even the purest churches are 'mixed.'

After years of warring European states with different religions, the Peace of Westphalia (1648) settled on the principle that each ruler may choose the religion of their own jurisdiction, providing the roots of the current patchwork of European nation states.

- 2.2.3 The key ideas are: (i) the authenticity of the church (ie **apostolicity**) as being about **doctrine** not institutional continuity (bishops); (ii) being *catholic* and *one* are rooted in apostolic **doctrine**; (iii) this undercuts all RC claims to authority based on institutional continuity; (iv) it is both a generous doctrine (allowing difference provided there is agreement on doctrinal essentials) but defensive (don't split off other than on the essentials); (v) it focusses on church services not individual holiness.

2.3 The Radical Reformers: The Concern for Corporate Holiness

The radical reformers (Anabaptists) worried about personal holiness. They wanted a pure visible church and so emphasised: (i) the church as a voluntary company of believers in a visibly pure church; (ii) the church as a company of bible readers with a free conscience before God; (iii) the local church of disciples is the locus of biblical interpretation; (iv) church and state are to be separate (+no swearing oaths or acting as magistrates) which points towards religious toleration and ecclesiastical pluralism.

2.4 The Puritans and a Procedure for Communal Holiness

John Owen (1616-83) and the Gospel Church: (i) Christians are more than good citizens - they live under the law of Christ; (ii) regeneration is the real cause of membership in the body of Christ; (iii) God knows the heart but other believers know the fruit; (iv) the holiness of the church is maintained by: discipline of habitual sinners; admonition of scandalous sin; visible conformity to gospel holiness; professed following of a holy life.

2.5 Restoring the Church: A Call to return to the First Church

Restorationism is class of approaches to church that recall the church to reform in the light of the early church's life and ministry. They emphasise: (i) church planting; (ii) every member ministry in a local church body; (ii) patterns of ministry closer to that of the NT; (iii) local congregations joined in 'apostolic networks.'