

WHAT IS THE CHURCH?

I will attempt to answer this question from a biblical perspective. The term church has been dislodged from its biblical roots and has derived a more cultural meaning. Today, many people think of a church as a building or denomination. For example, you will often hear people say, "I am going to church," or "I belong to the Catholic Church."

Ekklesia

The word translated as "church" in the New Testament is the Greek word *ekklesia*. *Ekklesia* is a compound word, *ek* = out + *kaléō* = to call. The word "church" in the New Testament refers to an assembly of people called into fellowship under the headship of Christ.

Ekklesia refers almost exclusively to the body of Christ in the New Testament. Nonetheless, there are a few exceptions. For instance, in Acts 7:38, the word *ekklesia* is used to describe the congregation of Israel in the wilderness under Moses. The King James Version confuses this matter by interpreting *ekklesia* in Acts 7:38 as "the church". As a result, many interpreters cite this verse as a proof text claiming the church existed in Old Testament times. However, most updated versions of the Bible have recognized this mistake and have interpreted Acts 7:38 with either assembly or congregation. Other exceptions to the rule are Acts 19:32, 41, where *ekklesia* describes an unruly mob, and Acts 19:39 a Law Court.

Definition of the Church

The Church is the assembly of all believers, both living and dead who

enjoy spiritual union with Christ through the grace of the gospel. This definition corresponds with what is commonly called the Universal Church. Within the parameters of the Universal Church, we also have the local church or churches. There are differences between the two, as the following chart highlights (credit to Norman Geisler).

Universal Church

1. Invisible
2. One Church
3. An organism
- 4 Saved members
5. Living and dead members
6. Whole body of Christ
7. Indissoluble

Local Church(es)

Visible
 Many churches
 An organization
 Saved and lost members
 Living members
 Part of the body of Christ
 Dissoluble

Summary

The New Testament church is not a building or a denomination. It is an assembly of believers called together through the baptism of the Holy Spirit under the Lordship of Christ. The term church in the New Testament may refer to either the Universal Church or the Local Church(es).