

The Called Out Ones

Is the ecclesia just an assembly, or is it something more?

By David Yeubanks

In a recent e-mail conversation with a friend we were discussing the subject of "ekklesia" (the Greek word used in Scripture that is translated as "church" in our English bibles - sometimes alternately spelled "ecclesia"). Many of us who have come out of the routine of organized religion and institutional Christianity (or "church-ianity" as I rather like to call it) are familiar with this term ecclesia and understand it to represent "the called out ones". This definition is derived from the fact that ecclesia is actually a compound of two words in the Greek (ek, which means "from out of" and kaleo, which means "to call forth").

One of my colleagues in the "out-of-church" movement (as people often refer to) prefers not to emphasize this meaning (i.e. "the called out ones"), undoubtedly because it may detract from his preferred emphasis on the planting of house churches. This brother says that the word ecclesia did not mean "called out ones" in the first century but rather held reference to a general assembly of believers who, most frequently, met together in homes...

In preface, to be fair, I will agree that the word "ecclesia" was used at that time in history (in secular context) to refer to a "general assembly" of people, BUT... I believe the "called out" meaning was also understood and, in fact, became far more significant when Jesus stated that He would build His assembly. I will illustrate this detail as clearly as possible (using Scripture) in this article.

First, let's take a look at the popular Strong's Greek Dictionary (which generally tends toward a more "institutional" twist on things, but still, notice the primary meaning of the word):

Strong's G1577 - ekklesia - From a compound of G1537 (ek - "from out of") and a derivative of G2564 (kaleo - to call aloud or call forth); **a calling out**, that is, (concretely) a popular meeting, especially a religious congregation (Jewish synagogue, or Christian community of members on earth or saints in heaven or both): - assembly, church.

In 1 Peter chapter 2, Peter begins by describing how God has called us and fashioned us as "living stones" into a "spiritual house" (1 Peter 2:5). He then makes the following statement, which is most significant:

1 Peter 2:9-10 - "But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should shew forth the praises of him who hath **called you out of** darkness into his marvelous light: Which in time past were not a people, but are now the people of God: which had not obtained mercy, but now have obtained mercy.

The words "called out" and "of" are the Greek words "ek" and "kaleo" (the two compounds of the words ek-klesia). It seems rather obvious to me the parallel here; Peter describing the "called out ones" as a spiritual household of living stones.

Another very strong support for the "called out ones" understanding of "ekklesia" is the following passage in Hebrews:

Hebrews 12:23 - To the general assembly and church of the firstborn, which are written in heaven, and to God the Judge of all, and to the spirits of just men made perfect...

Notice the word "general assembly"... Interestingly, the Greek word here is NOT "ekklesia". It is another word, "paneguris" (Strong's G3956), which means: "a *mass meeting*." It, like ekklesia, is a compound of two words which simply mean: "*all-gather*". In essence, it is a *gathering*.

Now notice that the author of Hebrews actually gives mention to two things; the "general assembly" AND "the ekklesia". If ekklesia was only understood as a general gathering of people, then why would the author present them uniquely apart from each other? Wouldn't that be redundant? The context seems to present a clear answer (i.e. "the church/assembly **of the firstborn, which are written in heaven...**")... The ekklesia was a unique reference to all those who had been called out from darkness into His marvelous light. This was no ordinary "assembly"... This was, very specifically, the assembly **OF THE FIRSTBORN**; i.e. Born-again believers in Christ Jesus! The text emphasizes, "**which are written in heaven**," thus denoting the spiritual substance of this assembly.

Then, remember James (notice the word "assembly" here)?

James 2:2 - "For if there come unto your assembly a man with a gold ring, in goodly apparel, and there come in also a poor man in vile raiment..."

Interestingly, he does NOT use the word ekklesia here either to identify this assembly. He uses the word "sunegoge", which is translated "synagogue" or "meeting place." Yet later on (in chapter 5), James does use the word ekklesia. Observe how he uses it:

James 5:14 - "Is any sick among you? let him call for the elders of the church (ekklesia); and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord..."

It may important to note that the term "elder" was not an "office" in those days. It was a word that simply means "old man". It was common for communities have to respected "elders" that were looked up to among the people. But James is making a clear distinction here... These are not just any old men from the community, these are trusted elders **from the household of faith - from among God's "called out ones"**.

Now take a look at what Paul said on one occasion, speaking to the Thessalonian believers:

2 Thessalonians 2:1 - Now we beseech you, brethren, by the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, and by our **gathering together** unto him.

The Greek word for "gathering together" (as used in the preceding passage) is "episunigoge" (Strong's G1997). Sounds a little bit like synagogue and means basically the same thing. Strong's translates it as meaning: "a complete collection; specifically a Christian meeting (for worship)."

Hmmm... Why didn't Paul use ekklesia to define this worship meeting?

To me it's quite clear that ekklesia, despite its secular use in times past, came to mean something unique among the early followers of Christ... undoubtedly because He said:

"...upon this rock I will build (establish) my church (ekklesia); and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." (Matthew 16:18)

This was a very strong and singular statement. If Jesus had meant simply any old gathering or meeting for worship (perhaps even a "house church"), there were other, more appropriate words He could have used. But this "calling from out of darkness into His marvelous Light" is the crux of the Gospel and I believe is what gives this use of ekklesia such unique and significant meaning in the New Testament. It seems that His followers caught on to this and continue the thought. It's also interesting that the word "build" that Jesus used means "to build a house". I'm sure your mind will call to remembrance the concepts of house building made by the other apostles...

1 Peter 2:5 - Ye also, as lively stones, are **built up a spiritual house**, an holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God by Jesus Christ.

1 Timothy 3:15 - But if I tarry long, that thou mayest know how thou oughtest to behave thyself in the **house of God, which is the church** of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth.

Note that the preceding passage (in 1 Timothy 3:15) is often misused by pastors of institutional churches to imply that the "house of God" is a "church building" and that their church building is thus qualified by this reference to "house of God", arguably denoting a "structure". However, as we have already seen, these words bear a spiritual context in mind. Furthermore the word "house" is better understood as "household" or "family" as it is defined in the original Greek. So, in other words:

The "spiritual assembly of born again believers" (i.e. the church) is thus represented as "the family of God" (i.e. the house or household of God).

My opinion, based on the context of Scripture, is that those individuals who wish to make emphasis of the "ecclesia" as being just a general assembly of people (gathering in a home for worship), is playing with a technicality and using it to their advantage. Perhaps these individuals do not realize they are doing this. Perhaps they simply need a greater revelation from the Lord than they have been open to receive. Or... perhaps I am flat wrong altogether, in which case I encourage you, the reader, to study the Scripture and come to your own conclusion based on what is written and the leading of the Holy Spirit.

I sincerely believe that the Scripture rests solidly on the "called out" emphasis of the word "ecclesia" and that the burden of proof rests with these modern-day "church planters". So far, I don't think they have adequately proven their point and are merely using their argument to draw support for their position.

Any person who takes their Bible in hand will soon discover that there is not even one verse that presents a character called "church planter" anywhere! Neither is there even one verse that defines an apostle as being a "church planter". Neither is there any commission by Christ to go and "plant churches". There is not a single passage of Scripture that defines the Church as being a "house meeting" or "worship service". And, finally, there is not a single passage of Scripture that defines the Lord's Church as being represented by a building made with hands. In fact, just the opposite is true.

Acts 7:48 (Stephen, just before he was stoned to death by the religious crowd) - "But the Most High God doesn't live in houses made by humans. It is just as the prophet said, when he spoke for the Lord, 'Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. What kind of house will you build for me? In what

place will I rest? I have made everything.' You stubborn and hardheaded people! You are always fighting against the Holy Spirit, just as your ancestors did."

Does this mean there is something wrong with meeting together with other believers in a home? Certainly not. Does this mean that believers shouldn't gather together for worship, prayer or sharing testimonies or the preaching of the Word of God? Certainly not. All those things may be good and beneficial. The point is, simply, that WE - who have been called out of darkness into His marvelous light and are born again into the Family of God - WE ARE HIS CHURCH! Meetings can be beneficial but do not define who we are in Him. This should be concretely understood so that no self-appointed apostle, seeking to build or plant his own little so-called "church" (or especially who want to insert themselves as the significant "apostle" among them), will have the opportunity. The Church is the Family of God - PERIOD! It cannot be "planted" by man or "started" or "built" by man. It is a spiritual house made up living stones of which Jesus Himself is the architect.

Matthew 16:18 - (Jesus said) "...upon this rock **I will build (*plant, establish, etc.*)** my church (ekklesia - assembly); and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it."

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