What do you mean when you say Church?

The term “church” is used in Western society in the early 21st Century in a variety of ways. It can mean the building on the corner of Fourth and Main or it can mean the people in that same building. Some Christians use a more universal connotation of the “Church” meaning all of Christendom, while others insist that it means the actual believers within what is perceived as Christendom. In the phrase, “Let’s go to church”, the meaning is more likely to signify a church service rather than the building itself or the people in it. By asking someone if they “go to church” you may be wondering whether he or she frequents the offerings of a local Christian establishment. The semantics are startling!

We also use the term to describe an entire denomination such as the Church of the Latter Day Saints, the Baptist Church; the Presbyterian, the Roman Catholic and the Methodist Church just to name a few. But we call it church nonetheless.

“What a nice church” is an exclamation from a passerby who is admiring the architecture of the structure that is coincidentally across the street (diagonally) from another piece of building art that belongs to another denomination. They are both considered a church.

Often, when discussing Christendom, as opposed to other religions or when placing religion over against the government, one will hear the term, “the Church’s position on abortion” is so-and-so or “the separation of Church and State issue” is this or that. This is another usage of the English word church. It is more universal in application.

Why Study the Biblical term “church”?

It is an important study for any Bible student to discover how the word church is used in the Bible because without a firm grasp of the Biblical concept teachers can and have twisted the term to their own theological benefit (Bible Colleges and Seminaries do this on a regular basis and even Bible translations take part in much obfuscation). The theological “benefit” does damage to the plain reading of Scripture that we so urgently embrace in this book. The question we, as students of Scripture, must ask is: Are any of these usages in modern English comparable to the Biblical usage of the term? How has God, through His prophets, described a church or the church?
It might interest the reader to see that some versions of the Bible avoid the word “church” altogether, while in others we will find it in the most extraordinary places. In most English translations we find the first usage of “church” in Matthew, the first book of the Christian Scriptures. Matthew 16:18. It is the singularly most important use upon which we will open the examination. It will surely amaze most Christians that the very word “church” is only used in one other place in the entire Gospel record (Matthew 18:17) and that neither that use nor this one is about a Christian church.

When people discuss the Christian church it is usually assumed that Jesus knew of and spoke extensively about it while he was on this planet. This is usually because they consider Jesus part of the eternal Godhead, the second person in a Holy Trinity, who knew everything. Further, this discussion usually centers around Jesus’ use of the term “church” in the context of Matthew 16:18, a dialogue between he and Peter, where he says, “And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.” (KJV)

Roman Catholics have discovered in Matthew 16:18 the bestowing upon Peter leadership and guidance of the Christian church as the first Pope. Protestants, on the other hand, while agreeing with the position of Jesus speaking as God, will try to find exegetical wiggle room in distinguishing the usage of the term Peter (Greek – petros) and rock (Greek – petra), intimating that Jesus was pointing out a difference between a vacillating human and himself. I believe that the noodles have been lost in the theological sauce here and that the subject of church and the Church is much deeper than one verse, even one in such an important section of Scripture as Matthew 16.

It must be noticed (and we will point this out again later in this chapter) that the other use of the word “church” two chapters later in 18:17 is quite different from this first one.

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1 The New Jerusalem Bible (circa 1985) does not have the Matthew reference as its first, waiting until the book of Acts to bestow that honor. It translated Matthew 16:18 as follows: “So I now say to you: You are Peter and on this rock I will build my community. And the gates of the underworld can never overpower it.” This is a very good translation of the Greek word normally translated church.

2 The roots and development of papal supremacy (that Peter and his successors, the bishops of Rome, are the only true successors of Christ, pastors of the universal church and were then and now the only human representatives of Christ on earth) are shrouded both in the history and theological language of the early church fathers.

3 My simplistic bifurcation does not even begin to cover the theological debate on this verse. Volumes upon volumes have been dedicated to its exposition. I have merely used two of the best known viewpoints to set up my own theological writing. The conclusion of both Protestant and Roman Catholic schools, however, is in agreement on one thing; the “institution” of the church was referred to by Jesus on that day. I am in complete disagreement with that conclusion, as this chapter will show.
The English word church

A little bit of history on the word “church” in both the English and the underlying word in the Greek Biblical text is important here. Older English translations favored the word “congregation” over “church”. And the King James Version (KJV) preferred the term “church” for some interesting political and ecclesiastical reasons. As noted Christian theologian and apologist Alister McGrath states, “The third rule that Richard Bancroft (Anglican Archbishop and overseer of the translation of the KJV) would impose on the six companies of translators reflects this acute sensitivity: The old ecclesiastical words to be kept, namely, as the word church not to be translated congregation &c.”

The etymology of the English word “church” itself is a study in the fascinating; most dictionaries and lexicons saying that it is a transliteration of the Greek word kuriakos meaning “of the Lord” (itself used in the Christian Scriptures in 1 Cor. 11:20 (Lord’s supper) and Rev. 1:10 (Lord’s day)) and that it came through the Middle English chirche or kirhe and the Anglo Saxon cirice or cyrice. Whether this is true or not one has to wonder why the original Greek ἐκκλησία (ekklaysia) – meaning “the called out” would have been translated into so strange a word in English. There is no association or correlation at all.

In most of our English translations “church” is found in approximately one hundred and fifteen places in the Christian Scriptures (depending on the underlying Greek text chosen). In the King James Version of the Bible the Greek word, "ekklaysia" is translated "church" in all but three (3) places where it is translated "assembly" (Acts 19: 32, 39, 41). These uses in Acts are important to note since they refer to a mob, that group of tradesmen in Ephesus who tried to lynch the followers of the apostle Paul after he had supposedly taken away their livelihood of making statues of the goddess Diana. Secondarily, in the same context, the word ekklaysia refers to a civil court (or town council) to which the Ephesians’ town clerk directed the mob to take their complaints. These uses of

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4 Tyndale’s Bible (1526) - used "congregation", the Coverdale Bible (1535) - used "congregation", the Matthew Bible (1537) - used "congregation", The Great Bible (1539) - used "congregation", the Geneva Bible (1560) - used "church" and the Bishop’s Bible (1568) - used "congregation.”

5 And yet James the First had insisted that the Bishop’s Bible would be the basis for his new translation (see footnote above). Much of the work done on the KJV was to stave off structural alterations to the established church life in the early 17th Century. Radical reformers such as the Puritans were pushing their own agendas and the King would only make the certain accommodations to their radical ideas.

6 There is not much support from scholars that the modern word derives from the Anglo Saxon circol (circle) though some earlier English dictionaries tried to deduce this through associations with the German and Celtic worship rites (supposedly in “circles”) and the Welsh cyrch, French cirque and Scotch kirk.
the term in this Christian book show that “church” is hardly a good word to use for ekklaysia.

In classical Greek the word "ekklaysia" meant "an assembly of citizens (sometimes summoned by a crier)" or a “legislative assembly.” It did not have religious overtones, but was an assembly where the citizens could speak their minds and try to influence one another in the political process. In the Athenian process this assembly could declare war, determine military strategy and even elect other officials in the Greek popular council. In short it was an active “community” (usually it numbered about 6000 in a quorum) called out for certain actions in the governing of the populace.

**The Biblical Definition of church**

It is evident from a cursory reading of the Christian Scriptures that the prophets used ekklaysia at every point where we moderns would distinguish between the institution and the community. Truly the terms “assembly”, “congregation” or possibly best, “the community”, might serve rightly at all points of translation. This is the conclusion of the majority of scholars and it makes the translation of ekklaysia into “church” that much more curious.

If we were to inquire what Hebrew Scriptures teach (by means of the Greek translations) as to which word was translated into ekklaysia most often, the answer is the Hebrew word לְעֹבֵד – qahal – meaning “assembly”, “convocation” or “congregation”. This was done nearly 100 times in the Septuagint alone and it has a secular or generic meaning. Only the context or the addition of the terms such as κύριος - kurios (Lord) or Θεός - theos (God) in the context (see Deuteronomy 23: 2 and Nehemiah 13: 1) tells us it is the congregation “of the Lord” or “of God”. The fact that the Hebrew Scriptures are a corpus of writings for and about a religious community of Jews is relevant here, yet there is not one instance in the entire set of 39 books where there is a reference to the

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8 Noted German scholar K.L. Schmidt, writing in the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (TDNT), puts forth this opinion (which is echoed by the preponderance of scholars): “In translation and exposition of ἐκκλησία there is no point in the pedantic piling up of different expressions. This is primarily shown by the simple, but cogent fact that the NT always uses the same word even where we usually distinguish between the “Church” and the “congregation”. The further fact that the same word is used in secular Greek on the one side and the OT and NT on the other is an additional reason why we should try to find a single rendering.” (Volume 3, page 503) He suggests the term “assembly” or “congregation” throughout his treatise.
Christian church or to the concept of a future Christian church. In fact, in the KJV there is not one instance where the translators used the English word “church”.  

As I mentioned above, there are only two (2) uses of the word ekklaysia in the Gospels, where the religion of the Jews and their Law is still in effect; whereas it is most often found in the writings of Paul to the various Christian communities throughout Asia Minor. The second usage of the term “church” in the Gospels gives us some clarity of usage toward the term “community”.

Matthew 18:15-17 (KJV) 15 Moreover if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother. 16 But if he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established. 17 And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church: but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican.

In each instance substituting the term “assembly” or the “community” gives the more proper sense of the Greek noun; and as I have said previously, this should have been carried out in the translating of the rest of the Christians Scriptures. Luke uses the term ekklaysia in the Book of Acts in relation to the community of new believers in the resurrected Messiah, but interestingly Paul never uses the term in the universal sense with which we use it today. I adjure the student of the Christian Scriptures to look at every instance and agree or disagree.

The one thing that Paul did describe in relation to the community of believers, however, is how they should work and play together. To do that he used a figure of speech in relationship to the community; the “body of Christ”.

The term Body of Christ

We in the 21st Century Western civilization use the term “body” in the interesting idiomatic expression: a “body” of work. This refers to an accumulation of artwork whether they are paintings, costumes, scripts, screenplays or sculpture (and other genres) produced by an artist. This idiom is not found in the Biblical text. Neither is the term “body” used to refer to an “assemblage” or “group” in the sense of a public organization. The phrase the “body politic” comes to mind as one example of that idiom used in modern, Western society.

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9 This does not preclude the publishers of our English texts from inserting their own chapter or page headings directing the thoughts of the unlearned; such as the one found in one of my first Bibles (an Oxford University Press printing of the KJV) in the Book of Isaiah, chapter 45, where the page heading states, “God calleth Cyrus for his church’s sake” or later in chapter 51, “The church is comforted”.

Only the *physical* body (in some way or another) is used in Biblical parlance, inclusive of the Hebrew Scriptures (nearly 40 times). There are nearly 30 references in the Gospels and a couple in the book of Acts which all refer to someone’s physical body. Then there’s Paul convention; he uses this term when he is in discussion about Jesus’ physical body (Romans 7:4; 1 Corinthians 10:16) and when referencing another person’s physical body (Romans 4:19; 6:6, 12; 7:24; 8:10, 13, 23; 1 Corinthians 7:4, etc.). But when he references the “body of Christ” in relation to the community of Christian believers it is a metaphor that sheds light on how God envisions the community to be and communicate with one another.

For our purposes in this chapter it is critical to note that the term “body of Christ” or “body” (when the clause “of Christ” or “in Christ” is not appended, but still refers to the Christian community) is never used except when the Christian community is meant.10 There was no “body of Christ” in the Hebrew Scriptures nor was there a mystical meaning attached to the term. It is merely a metaphor that Paul used to express the connection and relationship between Christ who is the leader and the community who is “the body”.

**Is the Body of Christ (somehow) “spiritual Israel”**?

This brings us to a most important concept in our theology and here’s a problem as well; many Evangelicals think that the Christian community is now the “true Israel” or that there has always been a church (as an *institution*) “throughout all times”. This watering down of the concept of the “church, which is his (Jesus’) body” has led to dissolution of the greatness and teaching of the Secret of God, that revelation given to Paul and the other “holy apostles and prophets by the spirit” (Ephesians 3:5). “One new man”…possibly more here or an entire chapter in the doctrinal portion referred to.

As witnessed by prevailing sentiment, the supposed critical belief in Christendom is the existence of a triune Godhead and one’s faith therein. Apologetics on this subject alone could consume debate on websites and fill sermons for a lifetime. It is most unfortunate because the indispensable reality of the Christian Church, that we are the Body of Christ and that Jesus the leader of that Body, is often glossed over for the purpose of deliberating in Christological discussion. As Christians, the *actuality* of the church should arrest our immediate attention. Why are we any different in the purposes of God than any other group? Why

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10 Please see appendix ?? for a discussion of the metaphor in all of its fullness; why God chose the term, how the community of believers benefits from it and other practical matters.
should we concern ourselves with finding out Christian truths as opposed to other truths? In short, is there anything special about being Christian?

Contrary to Covenant/ Reformed (R & C) Theology’s overreaching pressure on the Biblical text to find “one people of God for all times” when dealing with the concept of a Christian church, the Biblical model of “church” has not been the same throughout all times. R & C theology sees this church as a universal entity of saints of which Christians are only a superseding (of Israel) part. Along with all the ancient saints, including, but not limited to Israel, this “church for all ages” concept is a central tenet to their theology. It is, curiously enough, the expressed opposite of that which the Scriptures portray. R & C theology sees all believers in essential continuity (however this is represented in their writings) and there are not two peoples of God. Dispensationalism, under which theological heading I reside, says Israel is Israel everywhere in the Bible and that the Christian community is not Israel.

We believe that the “church, which is his (Jesus’) body” (Ephesians 1: 22, 23) is unique in its origin and does not include the saints of the Hebrew Scriptures. This is based on the plain reading of Scripture. Some questions arise from this statement: What is it about the Christians that makes them different from Israel in the plans of God? If Israel was God’s “chosen people”, what happened to them? It is this question around which R & C theologians and Dispensationalism have most of their disagreements. R & C theologians teach that Christians are part of a universal “Israel” (many times called “spiritual Israel” or “true Israel” (and even the “Israel of God”) in their writings) along with the other believers in the Hebrew Scriptures (Jew and Gentiles alike). We say that the “body of Christ”, the Christian community, did not exist before the Day of Pentecost in 28 C.E. More...

**Is the Body of Christ (somehow) special?**

There is criticism of the dispensationalism position on the “body of Christ” because we say that there was more given to Christians over against those things given to the earlier saints in the Bible. This is simply a truism and why not? Many more truths and revelations were uncovered by God for the

11 “Supersessionism” (also termed “fulfillment” or “replacement” theology by others) is a brand of theology that says that God’s relationship with Christianity is the fulfillment of all the promises first made to Israel. In this thinking the Israelites are no longer the “people of God” and there is no future for them as that people.

12 As recently as 1965 Vatican Council II (in a document titled Nostra Aetate) Roman Catholicism affirmed, “the Church is the new people of God.” Please see my chapter on “Is Israel “history” or does she have a Future?”
“dispensation of the grace of God”. What is at the center of the battle for truth is the penchant for other theologies to see a vanilla existence for the Biblical saints. They are to have nothing more in one age than that which is given in another; an uninterrupted, non-threatening glide-path to mediocrity and the return of Christ. Well, this just isn’t the case for this “dispensation of the Secret”! God had plenty up his sleeve that truly puts the saints in this dispensation “over-the-top” when it comes to gifts and promises. Either add here or refer to the chapter “Unsearchable Riches”. 