

THE UPWARD CALL

*Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet;
but one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead,
I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God*

IN CHRIST JESUS.

(Philippians 3.13-14 NASB)

#02-0806

JANUARY 18, 2008

EKKLESIA — “OUT-CALLED” BODY

When you hear the word *church*, what picture forms in your mind? Today, the word *church* has become many things. To some, it means a great institution, an organization, or an enterprise with much machinery (activities, programs) that has to be maintained and supported with a big bank account, a building, a membership roll, and people sitting in pews every Sunday doing something they call “worship” (or “church”) and then listening to the pastor, much of which looks more like a rendition of Judaism. To some, *church* is a building, and to others it is an activity (they “do church”). But is this how Scripture presents what many call the *church* or, as some would prefer, the *Church*?

The word *church* is a translation of the Greek word *ekklesia*, which means “out-called” or “a calling out of.” *Ekklesia* is made up of *ek*, which means “out of,” and *klesis*, which means “a calling.” *Klesis* comes from *kaleo*, which means “to call.” The equivalent Hebrew word is *kahal* [qahal], which refers to assembling together, and as a noun is often translated as *assembly*, *congregation*, *company*, or *multitude*. The inference is that it refers to a company of people, even a multitude, gathered together for a purpose. By comparing Psalm 22.22 with Hebrews 2.12, we see that *kahal* and *ekklesia* are equivalent words.

I will declare Your name to My brothers; I will praise You in the midst of the assembly [kahal]. (Psalm 22.22 LITV) ... **“I will announce Your name to My brothers; I will hymn to You in the midst of the assembly [ekklesia].”** (Hebrews 2.12 LITV [*ecclesia* in CV])

Thus, *ekklesia* refers to the calling out of a people to assemble together, an *out-called assembly*. However, it is vital to understand that in the Greek, the word *ekklesia* is a common noun (generic term) that refers to any gathering or assembling of people that fits the description of “out-called.” In itself, there is nothing unique about the word *ekklesia*, for many gatherings could be considered “out-called.” The uniqueness is found in the “out-called” themselves, in the people, and in the purpose for their gathering. When the Greeks called together a body of citizens regarding matters of governance, it was called an *ekklesia*. In other words, *ekklesia* does not exclusively refer to believers. To prove the point, there are two examples in the book of Acts.

Some therefore cried one thing, and some another: for the assembly [ekklesia] was confused; and the more part knew not wherefore they were come together. ... But if ye inquire any thing concerning other matters, it shall be determined in a lawful assembly [ekklesia]. ... For we are in danger to be called in question for this day’s uproar, there being no cause whereby we may give an account of this concourse. And when he had thus spoken, he dismissed the assembly [ekklesia]. (Acts 19.32, 39, 40-41 KJV [*ecclesia* in CV])

These verses are excerpts from the account of the mob or riot of silversmiths that sought Paul because his teaching hurt their trade. They were a distinct “called-out” group based on their profession and their riot against Paul. If the word *ekklesia* were replaced with the translated word *church*, then it would become *the church of the riotous silversmiths*. Within this same story, there is another *ekklesia* mentioned that refers to a legal or governing council that put down the mob of silversmiths. This was a legal council or *ekklesia* that settled disputes in Ephesus. Why not call this

group *the legal church*? So, according to Scripture, there is an *ekklesia* of riotous silversmiths and an *ekklesia* of legal authorities in Ephesus.

Also, ancient Israel was an *ekklesia* as they wandered in the wilderness for forty years.

This is he who was in the assembly [*ekklesia*] in the wilderness, with the messenger who is speaking to him in the mount Sinai, and with our fathers who did receive the living oracles to give to us.... (Acts 7.38 YLT [*ecclesia* in CV])

In English Bibles, *ekklesia* is translated in different ways, depending on the context. If it refers to believers, either as a whole company or a smaller company in an area, it is most often translated *church*. When *ekklesia* refers to other groups or people who are “out-called,” translators use other words such as *assembly* or *congregation*. And yet, some of the translations that seek a more literal rendering use the word *assembly* for the word *ekklesia* in all cases. The Concordant Version uses the equivalent word *ecclesia* in all cases, which is the Anglicized form of *ekklesia* (note that it uses the letter *c* instead of the letter *k*). I generally use the Anglicized form and quote from the CV to remain as true as possible to the original because the word *church* has taken on a meaning not given to it in Scripture. If we want to remain true to what Scripture teaches regarding the so-called *church*, it is best to refer to the body of believers as **the ecclesia, which is His body** (i.e., the body of Christ) [Ephesians 1.22-23 CV] or **His body, which is the ecclesia** (Colossians 1.24 CV). Notice how Paul joins the word *ekklesia* with His body, that is, Christ’s body. Paul was a dispenser or a minister of **His body**, which he referred to as the *ekklesia*.

I am now rejoicing in my sufferings for you, and am filling up in my flesh, in His stead, the deficiencies of the afflictions of Christ, for His body, which is the ecclesia [*ekklesia*] of which I became a dispenser, in accord with the administration of God, which is granted to me for you, to complete the word of God.... (Colossians 1.24-25 CV)

Many teachers of Scripture seem to overlook the revelation given to Paul to dispense to the Lord’s people. Don’t lose sight of the fact that the word *ekklesia* merely speaks of a people called out to something but does not explain into what they are called and for what purpose. Paul’s emphasis is not on the word *ekklesia*, which is often translated as the word *church*. His emphasis is on *His body* or *the body of Christ*, which is the *ekklesia* of which Paul was given revelation to dispense in accord with God’s purpose. Paul’s words could be rephrased: “In accord with God’s purpose, I became a dispenser of the out-called company of believers, called out of the world to be Christ’s body.” In other words, Paul’s emphasis is on the *body*, not on the generic noun *ekklesia*. It is the body that differentiates or defines this *ekklesia* from all other *ekklesias*.

His body speaks volumes about what the *ekklesia* is called into; it is called out of the world and *into* Christ to become His one body. Believers are assembled together *in* Christ, a holy temple in the Lord, being built together for God’s dwelling place, *in spirit* (see Ephesians 2.21-22). They are not assembled together in a physical building or in an institution called “the Church.” They are called into life, the life of Christ, the One who is the Life, for this is what a body is all about. They are called into the one living, vibrant body of Christ, assembled or gathered together *in* Him *in* spirit, the spirit that gives life. It is true that the Lord’s people are to gather or meet together in the physical sense, but this is for the purpose of growth that comes through not only life but love.

Speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all aspects into Him who is the head, even Christ, from whom the whole body, being fitted and held together by what every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love. (Ephesians 4.15-16 NASB)

So, when you think of the word *ecclesia* (or church), think of the body of Christ; think of life and love.