

## What is the Church?

In *Alice in Wonderland*, during the course of her many wanderings, Alice comes upon an egg that gets larger and larger. She soon discovers that it's Humpty Dumpty. In the course of their conversation, Humpty Dumpty uses the word *glory*. Alice says, "I don't know what you mean by *glory*."

"Of course you don't - till I tell you ... When I use a word," Humpty Dumpty says in a rather scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean, neither more nor less."

"The question is," says Alice, "whether you can make words mean different things."

"The question is," says Humpty Dumpty, "which is to be master – that's all".

We agree with Alice and laugh at the ridiculous way Humpty Dumpty wants to use words. How can you have a sensible conversation with another person if they aren't using words in the generally accepted way with the generally accepted definitions? You won't know if you understand them or not. And yet, if we're honest with ourselves, we'll admit we sometimes use words in a somewhat hazy way – not really wanting to be too precise about the definitions lest they reveal we actually disagree about their meanings.

### The Word *Church* Today

Sometimes, the problem comes because certain words are overworked. Some words are given so many definitions that it's not always easy to work out which one's being meant in any particular situation. We're going to focus on one of those words this afternoon: the word *church*.

What comes to mind when you hear the word *church*? The word can mean all sorts of different things. Let me briefly indicate eight relatively common ways the word's used in our culture. These eight definitions come from the Paul Hamlyn *Encyclopaedic Dictionary* – a big red tome that used to sit on our bookshelves when I was a teenager.

1. "an edifice for public Christian worship". In other words, a building used for a special purpose. There are plenty of them round Bathurst – All Saints Cathedral, St Stephen's Presbyterian, Bathurst Baptist, and so it goes on. They have signs out the front announcing the fact. You can look up their address in the phone book. We use the word *church* to refer to buildings. If someone asks for directions to a church, they're very likely asking for directions to a building. The building isn't a house, nor a shop, nor a factory, nor a warehouse – it's a church.
2. "public worship of God in a church; church service". The word *church* not only describes a particular type of building – it can also describe what goes on inside that building on some occasions. Not everything that goes on in the building is called *church*.
  - On Saturday afternoons, the cleaners may go in to vacuum and tidy up. That's not called *church*.
  - On Monday nights the Girls' Brigade may go in for their activities. We don't call that *church*.
 It's that range of activities that includes singing and praying and reading the Bible and listening to a sermon. You put all those activities together and do them in a church building at a particular time and you've got *church*. Or, it doesn't have to be a church

building – we do them on Sunday mornings in a school hall. If at work tomorrow someone asked you what you did on the weekend and you said: "I went to church" – that's what you'd mean.

3. "the whole body of Christian believers". The word can be used to refer to all believers of all countries of all times. Theologians often call this the *universal church*. There are all the apostles: Paul and Peter and the rest. There are all the people who became Christians through them. There's Augustine. There are Luther and Calvin and Zwingli and Knox and all the others from the Reformation. There's Billy Graham. All Christians from all centuries from all nations are included. Together we all make up the church. This is the church as she will be seen in heaven.
4. "any division of this body professing the same creed and acknowledging the same ecclesiastical authority; a Christian denomination". Thus, we can speak of the Anglican Church – meaning the whole denomination of the Church of England. That would include all the members of the Church of England throughout the world. It would also include the hierarchical machinery that goes into running the Anglican Church and everything else that's associated with the denomination. In the same way, we can speak of the Uniting Church, the Presbyterian Church, the Roman Catholic Church, the Greek Orthodox Church, and so on.
5. "that part of the whole Christian body, or of a particular denomination, belonging to the same city, country, nation, etc." So, for example, you sometimes hear people refer to the church of Australia or the church of

America. It's not always easy to know exactly what they mean by this, since there's no officially recognised group or organisation and no one's exactly sure who should be included and who should be left out. For example, do you include the Mormons in such a group? It's a theoretical group of people who exist but no one's exactly sure who's meant. It's a good way to use the word when you're looking for a scapegoat.

6. "a body of Christians worshipping in a particular building or constituting one congregation". Here the emphasis is more on the people, rather than the building or the activity that's going on inside the building. It's the group of people who make up the church and who meet regularly together. The Bathurst Evangelical Church is the group of people who make up this particular church.
7. "the ecclesiastical organisation or power as distinguished from the state." This is the use of the word *church* in the political arena – in the specific area of the separation of power between church and state. Should the church have legal power to enforce her rulings so she can, for example, burn heretics at the stake? Should the church have legal power to force all school students to attend Scripture classes? The same sorts of issues also come up in Muslim countries.
8. "the clerical profession." The church can be lined up as one among a number of professions. If you ask a teenager what he wants to do when he leaves school, some will answer "I'm going into accountancy", others "I'm going into medicine", and some "I'm going into the church". By that they mean they're going to

become a minister or, more usually, a priest.

### **The Word *Church* in the New Testament**

So, there are eight different ways we use the word *church* today. We've made the word work overtime without giving it double pay. That's how we use the word – but how's the word used in the Bible? How do the New Testament writers use the word *church*? They, of course, didn't use the word *church* at all. English hadn't even been invented when they wrote. They used a good Greek word – *ekklesia*. It's a word that referred to a gathering of people – usually a gathering of people summoned for a particular purpose, but not always. It wasn't a religious word.

You can see the word being used in a non-religious sense in the Bible in Acts 19:21-41. Paul's in Ephesus during his third missionary journey. The spread of the gospel had bad effects on the trade of the local silversmiths. As more people became Christians, so the demand for idols drops off. Christians don't want idols anymore. The bottom line for these silversmiths is that the bottom line on their accounts looks considerably less healthy. They take steps to correct the situation. They provoke a demonstration against Paul and the other Christians.

The town clerk urges the people to restrain themselves. He asks the silversmiths to make their complaint in the proper manner before the courts or the magistrates. If the people wish to take matters further they should do so in the lawful and regular *ekklesia* where such matters are decided, not in the unconstitutional and near-riotous *ekklesia* now in session. The term's used for an assembly of the people. The lawful *ekklesia* consists of

those people ere summoned to be at the meeting. They're called together for a particular purpose. The unlawful assembly also comes together for a particular purpose. They're summoned together to do something about the problem in the silver trade.

The New Testament writers also had the Old Testament. A few hundred years before Jesus, the Old Testament was translated from Hebrew to Greek. Israel often came together or assembled as a group of people – particularly during their time in the wilderness. When the word *assembly* or *congregation* was translated into Greek, the word *ekklesia* was used. Generally it refers to an assembly of the people before God – those whom God calls out to meet together for a particular purpose, such as the giving of the law. Sometimes the whole nation seems to be involved in the assembly; at other times only the leaders or the heads of the tribes seem to be involved. The term's also used to refer to assemblies of a less religious nature, such as gathering an army in preparation for war (1 Sam.17:47; 1 Chr.28:14) or the coming together of an unruly or potentially dangerous crowd (Ps.25:5).

So, this word *ekklesia*, which we translate *church*, has the basic meaning of a gathering of people – usually for a particular, specified purpose. It refers to bringing people together. How, then, do the various meanings we give to the word *church* compare with this basic meaning of the Greek word *ekklesia*?

1. building. *ekklesia* is never used of buildings in the New Testament. The early Christians didn't have special buildings. They first met in the temple, and then in the synagogues. Later, when the Jews kicked

them out of those places, they met in the home of one of their members or wherever else they could. For example, in 1 Corinthians 16:19 we read

*Aquila and Priscilla greet you warmly in the Lord, and so does the church that meets at their house.*

They had no special church buildings. They merely used what they could find. It's not until the third century that we have evidence of special buildings being constructed for Christian gatherings.

2. the service. *ekklhsia* isn't used of the church service in the New Testament. There are some passages, such as Acts 2:42-47, that tell us what the early Christians did when they gathered, but those activities aren't called *church* in the sense we use the term today. *ekklhsia* is used of the people gathered, not what they do.
3. the universal church. The word is used in this sense in several places in the New Testament. For example, in Matthew 16:13-20 after Peter confesses that Jesus is the Messiah, Jesus says to him
 

*And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.*

 Jesus isn't talking about any particular local church He was going to establish – rather, He's talking about the whole church, the total church throughout all time. That's the church Jesus built. Similarly, in Ephesians 5:21-33, where Paul writes of Jesus being the head of the church, he's talking about the whole church.
4. a denomination. In New Testament times they didn't have denominations. They're a later invention – unless

you count the various heretical groups that were around even in Paul's time. The first big split, in terms of denominations, came between the east and west – between Constantinople and Rome. Most of our modern denominations come much later still – stemming from the time of the Reformation, which was only a few hundred years ago. The New Testament doesn't use *ekklhsia* in the sense of denomination.

5. the national church. There does seem to be the rare reference to the church in this sense in the New Testament. Acts 9:31
 

*Then the church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace.*

 Presumably there was more than one congregation involved here – and yet Luke uses the word *church* in the singular. That's quite unusual. The more usual way to speak of the churches of a larger region is to use the plural term. For example
  - Rom.16:4 – *all the churches of the Gentiles*
  - 1 Cor.16:1 – *the Galatian churches*
  - Gal.1:22 – *the churches of Judea*
6. the people. This is how *ekklhsia* is usually used in the New Testament. The church is God's people gathered together in fellowship. In 1 Corinthians 11:18, Paul writes
 

*when you come together as a church*

 In 1 Corinthians 14:23
 

*if the whole church comes together*

 The *church* in the New Testament is primarily the gathering together of Christians.

7. a power structure. The idea of the church controlling the state didn't arise in New Testament times – very far from it. Church and state were quite distinct. The state was the Roman Empire – administered through its various political officials. The church lived within this empire, but had no real access to its power structures. Often, the Empire persecuted the church – and that's the expectation you find in the New Testament. The closest you get to this idea is in relation to the kingdom of God in the teachings of Jesus – but the word *church* isn't used in those contexts.

8. a profession. This modern use of the word is also foreign to the New Testament. There simply was no professional class of clergy in those days in the sense we know it today. There were no theological colleges where people trained for the ministry. Certainly, there was evidence of people being financially supported in ministry, but it wasn't a profession in the sense it's thought of in some circles today.

When you compare how we use the word with how the New Testament uses the word, you can see we make it work a lot harder than the New Testament. There are all sorts of things we mean by the word *church* that aren't included in what the New Testament means by the word. What should we do about it?

Should we, for example, try to correct our culture so it uses the word only in the New Testament sense?

- One Saturday morning you're in the main street and someone pulls up and asks you for directions to Bathurst Baptist Church because they're on their way to a wedding. Do you give them their church

directory and tell them they'll find the church at the homes of all the people listed therein?

- One Thursday, you're at a funeral at St Stephen's and someone politely comments on what a nice church it is. Do you ask how they can tell without having met all the people?

I suspect that sort of thing's fighting a losing battle. I doubt we can train ourselves to use the word *church* only with its New Testament meaning. Check out how you use the word in general conversation. There's no way we could train our society to get back to that usage.

Language does change over time. Words acquire new meanings and drop other meanings. We get used to the new meanings, and incorporate them in our vocabulary. To speak of certain buildings as being churches has become commonplace – we're used to doing that. Words are used in different ways in different contexts. Even this word *ekklesia* was not a particularly religious word when the New Testament was written.

The more important thing – and why I've gone through this in so much detail – is not to read the way we use the word back into the New Testament. When we read the word *church* in the New Testament, we need to think in terms of what the word meant then – not what it means today.

For many people the word *church* is primarily associated in their minds with a certain style of building. They look at Caringbah Baptist or Swansea Baptist and see a Sports Centre or a Squash Complex and think this can't be a church. They look at Bathurst Evangelical Church and see a school hall. It doesn't have stained-glass windows

and Gothic steeples. If those people think in those terms – or any building-type terms – when they read the New Testament, they'll never understand what the New Testament says about the church. They're on a totally different wavelength.

Likewise, for some people the word *church* is primarily associated in their minds with a certain style of meeting or service. That style can vary greatly from person to person.

- For some, it may be the traditional four-hymn sandwich.
- For others, it may be the even more traditional sixteenth century Prayer Book service.
- For still others, it may be the more bouncy and energetic style of the CLC.

It doesn't matter which it is. They hear the word *church* and they think of that particular style of service. They read the word *church* in the New Testament and they read that style of service into the word. They think that's what the New Testament's talking about – whereas the New Testament doesn't even use the word that way.

Where it can cause problems is where people want to change the style of service. Because someone wrongly thinks their style is what the New Testament's talking about, they think anyone who wants to change that is trying to undermine the New Testament itself. It's been known to lead to rather heated debates. It's important to realise such debates aren't really about the New Testament – they simply about our cultural preferences.

It's good to remind ourselves from time to time of what the church is – of who we're supposed to be as the church

in this place. We've started to do that – and we'll continue to do it over the next couple of weeks as we look at a couple of pictures the New Testament uses to describe the church.

- The church isn't about buildings or services or vast organisations. Those things may be useful and helpful, but they aren't essential. The church is about God's people gathering together as God's people. In some countries of the world today, it's illegal for churches to own property or buildings – but that doesn't stop them being genuine churches.
- The church isn't about being officially recognised by some organisation. Where you have a group of Christians regularly meeting as God's people and committed to one another as God's people and for God's purposes, there you have a church. They don't have to have an official label. In some countries of the world today, it's illegal for Christians to meet together – but they still meet in secret and that doesn't stop them being real churches.
- The church isn't about non-Christians. Certainly the church has a relationship with non-Christians and wants to see non-Christians become Christians – but the church itself consists of those who are Jesus' disciples.

When you hear the word *church*, what most readily springs to mind? If it's not a group of people, then your thinking isn't yet attuned to the New Testament. Your mind needs to be renewed in this area. The essence of the church isn't bricks and mortar nor the style of service. The essence is you and I – God's people gathered together in fellowship as God's people.