

ἐκκλησία: What did it mean to them?

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INTRODUCTION

In most evangelical circles ἐκκλησία, the term used for ‘church,’ is debated. But what is it about this term that causes so much confusion? Why does ἐκκλησία seem to be misrepresented? Another question to ask is what did ἐκκλησία mean to the first century Christian? There is all too often the use of a quick methodological approach that seems to focus on the etymology of ἐκκλησία rather than a contextual and theological methodology, the former being most important.

This term is important as to both its meaning and usage. However, one must not confuse the two. “It is easy, especially in the course of a sermon, to comment on the broad meanings of a word at the risk of obscuring its specific function in the text.”¹ Therefore, when applying rules of interpretation/exegesis (e.g. grammatical-historical hermeneutics) it is essential that the New Testament exegete recognize that the meaning ought to coincide with its contextual usage. This then allows for the diversity of usage throughout the NT (e.g. Gospels, Acts, and Epistles). However, this process is sometimes carelessly employed and word-studies become skewed and erroneous. Carson states, “The fallacy in this instance lies in the supposition that the meaning of a word in a specific context is much broader than the context itself allows and may bring with it the word’s entire semantic range. This step is

¹ Moisés Silva, *Biblical Words and their Meaning: An Introduction to Lexical Semantics* rev and exp ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 26.

sometimes called illegitimate totality transfer.”² Because of this fallacy, many teachers of God’s word have lost a rich nuance of Scripture regarding the people of God, which the following discussion will seek to recapture.

The purpose of this paper is to provide the New Testament student with a proper explanation of the term ἐκκλησία. A brief discussion of three areas will help to validate and substantiate the claim that ἐκκλησία simply indicates an ‘assembly’ or a ‘body of people.’ The foundation for this claim is a proper methodology, which informs one’s understanding of etymology and historical development, and context.

METHODOLOGY

In regards to language study, specifically lexical semantics, the interpreter’s methodology is important. There are two methodological approaches to lexical semantics that are both valid and have their place. They are diachronic study and synchronic study. Diachronic study is simply defined as the “analysis of language from a historical perspective, whereas synchronic study is the analysis of language as a state irrespective of its historical antecedent.”³ Interpreters of past generations used a heavily diachronic approach when identifying the meaning in the New Testament.

The diachronic approach centers on root meanings and the etymology of words. Although this method is helpful in some historical contexts, it is for the most part generally

² D. A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 60.

³ Silva, *Biblical Words and their Meaning*, 219, 221; also see 35-38; Select bibliography: James Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (Oxford Univ. Press, 1961), 107-60; Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies*, 2nd ed., 27-64; Moisés Silva, “God, Language and Scripture: Reading the Bible in the Light of General Linguistics,” in *Foundations of Contemporary Interpretation*, ed. M. Silva, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 197-280; Eugene A. Nida and Johannes P. Louw, *Lexical Semantics of the Greek New Testament*, SBL Resources for Biblical Study, vol. 25 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992); Daniel Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the NT* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 4-5.

unhelpful when determining the meaning of words in a given context.⁴ When exegeting a given passage, the important issue to remember is that the etymology or given root meaning of a word does not always project over a certain semantic range of meaning just because the word in the passage incorporates that root.⁵ This is a common approach.⁶

On the other hand, the synchronic approach specifically deals with the context in which the word is found. Succinctly put, context is king. The priority must always be on context.⁷ Just because a word is used in the LXX one way does not guarantee that it is used in a similar way in the NT. Although a word may carry somewhat of a similar English gloss over time, the context in which it is found ultimately determines the nuance of meaning.

As most evangelicals already know, ἐκκλησία is defined as the group of people who have been called out of the world by God. Although the theology behind this statement is true, the method (diachronic approach) in acquiring this meaning is invalid. This definition is

⁴ This writer agrees with Carson. He states that he is “far from suggesting that etymological study is useless. It is important, for instance, in the diachronic study of words (the study of words as they occur across long periods of time), in the attempt to specify the earliest attested meaning, in the study of cognate languages, and especially in attempts to understand the meanings of hapax legomena (words that appear only once)” (*Exegetical Fallacies*, 33).

⁵ Ibid. He explains by stating “that the meaning of a word *may* reflect the meanings of its component parts. For example, the verb ἐκβάλλω, from ἐκ and βάλλω, does in fact mean ‘I cast out,’ ‘I throw out,’ or ‘I put out.’ The meaning of a word *may* reflect its etymology . . . Even so, my point is that we cannot responsibly *assume* that etymology is related to meaning. We can only test the point by discovering the meaning of a word inductively” 32-33. Carson provides an excellent discussion concerning root fallacies that are common in the study of semantics (28-33).

⁶ Kenneth Wuest, *Word Studies in the Greek New Testament*, 4 vols. (Waco, TX: Word, 1980); much of Gerhard Kittel, ed., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* transl. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, 10 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964); and M. R. Vincent, *Word Studies in the New Testament*, 4 vols. (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1887; reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1946).

⁷ Rod Decker comments, “If the text determines our theology (as I think everyone who accepts the authority of Scripture must admit) rather than our theology determining our understanding of the text, then the method employed can have far-reaching implications. In some instances we may come to orthodox (i.e., biblical) conclusions, but in other instances using an invalid method may result in unorthodox (i.e., unbiblical) conclusions of greater or lesser magnitude. Method is extremely important” (Rodney J. Decker, course notes for NT2, Seminar in Greek Studies, Baptist Bible Seminary, Clarks Summit, PA fall 2002, p. 3.).

based on the etymology of the words ἐκ (out of) + καλέω (to call). This paper will show that the diachronic approach is not the proper methodology. Therefore, it may not provide an accurate meaning of the word in a given text in the NT.

This paper includes a brief analysis of its etymology and historical development, and contextual usage. Although this analysis is not exhaustive, it illustrates a correct methodological approach to determine the meaning of ἐκκλησία in its contextual usage. The synchronic approach is used in discovering the meaning of ἐκκλησία unless specific historical information is necessary, then the diachronic approach is used.

ETYMOLOGY AND HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT

The Greek word translated ‘church’ is ἐκκλησία. Its basic meaning was ‘assembly’ and referred to what was done rather than where it was done. “The popular etymology deriving the word from ‘called out’ (εκ + καλεω) is not supported by the actual usage of the word. The emphasis was on the concrete act of assembly, not a separation from others.”⁸ This section illustrates two concepts related to ἐκκλησία: (1) what is the etymology or root meaning in light of (2) its historical development throughout ancient history.⁹ It is through these two concepts that an understanding of ἐκκλησία emerges.

⁸ Everett Ferguson, *The Church of Christ: A Biblical Ecclesiology for Today* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 130. Further discussion in the context section of this paper, however demonstrates that depending on the usage and the words surrounding ἐκκλησία (e.g. its modifiers or qualifiers), the word can indeed mean separation from others. The emphasis is placed on context and therefore must determine the meaning of the word.

⁹ A diachronic approach to meaning is used in this section to provide the necessary historical framework for which ἐκκλησία.

Classical Usage

How was ἐκκλησία used in classical Greek? The significance of the use of ἐκκλησία may not necessarily provide the NT exegete with the meaning in a particular passage, but it demonstrates the importance of understanding where a word comes from and how it was used.¹⁰

In the secular sense, ἐκκλησία refers simply to a gathering or assembly of persons.¹¹ Ferguson states the political characteristic as “The assembly (*ekklesia*, the usual term for the political assemblies of citizens in Greek cities; see Acts 19:39, 41) of citizens in Athens provided a kind of direct democracy for many legislative and judicial decisions.”¹² Nonetheless, “*ekklesia* was a noble word from its political use in Greek civic life, and this made appropriate its adoption by Jews for their religious assemblies.”¹³

¹⁰ At this point, it must be noted that the information given is historical and diachronic in nature. This however does not lessen the significance of the information, but it does heighten the importance of methodology in a given context. By using this information for contextual meaning rather than historical information, runs the risk of the methodological fallacies discussed earlier in this paper.

¹¹ Campbell states that the ordinary usage of *ekklesia* always meant only an assembly, a meeting, and not the body of people who assembled (*Three New Testament Studies* [Leiden: Brill, 1965], 43). Radmacher contends that “as time passed, the original meaning of the word seems to have disappeared from common usage. Instead of referring to the popular assembly of citizens called out by the herald to transact public affairs, the word came to mean simply an assembly, irrespective of its constituents and how they were gathered or summoned” (*The Nature of the Church*, [Hayesville, NC: Schettle Publishing Co., 1996], 119).

¹² Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity* 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 42. See also Peter T. O’Brien, “Church,” in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin, and Daniel G. Reid (Downers Grove: IVP, 1993), 123-24.

Coenen adds, “*ekklesia* centuries before the translation of the OT and the time of the NT, was clearly characterized as a political phenomenon, repeated according to certain rules and within a certain framework. It was the assembly of full citizens, functionally rooted in the constitution of the democracy, an assembly in which fundamental political and judicial decisions were taken. What is noteworthy, however, is that the word *ekklesia*, throughout the Gk. and Hel. areas, always retained its reference to the assembly of the *polis*” (“Church, Synagogue,” in *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, ed. Colin Brown, 4 vols. [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986], 1:291).

¹³ Ferguson, *The Church of Christ*, 131.

The word ἐκκλησία is found as early as Herodotus, Thucydides, Xenophon, Plato, and Euripides.¹⁴ The usage refers specifically to an assembly of citizens of a city and these particular assemblies met as often as thirty or forty times a year and consisted of full citizens who voted on political matters.

To summarize the use of ἐκκλησία in classical Greek, one can say that it simply meant an ‘assembly’ or ‘gathering of people.’ This is what the term meant to the people of that day. It did not designate an organization or a society. It did however possess a religious meaning, but this was not its predominate use. This assembly of citizens in a self-governed state consisted of people who voted, held organized meetings, discussed and decided public business, and were called to the militia. This assembly could even refer to a mob. Therefore the connotation of ἐκκλησία referring to ‘the called out,’ is inaccurate. Radmacher concludes,

There is no foundation for the widely spread notion that *ekklesia* means a people or a number of individual men *called out* of the world or mankind. In other words, it does not mean a body of people who have been picked out from the world. It has not in it that exclusive sense. It means a body of people who have been summoned out. The summons was not to any selected few—it was not exclusive; it was a summons from the state to every man to come and shoulder his responsibilities.¹⁵

How then does the classical use of ἐκκλησία contribute to the writings of the NT? Radmacher’s analysis of Dana is helpful. He suggests that although Dana finds four similarities between the secular and religious ἐκκλησία (the assembly was local, autonomous, presupposed definite qualifications, and conducted on democratic principles), the similarities are only external, organizational similarities. These similarities were organizational and

¹⁴ Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985), 1031.

¹⁵ Radmacher, *The Nature of the Church*, 118.

without religious meaning.¹⁶ Therefore, although similarities may be present, they are not to be the criterion of the character of the Christian ἐκκλησία.

LXX Usage

In the LXX ἐκκλησία is the word used to translate *lhqf* (*qahal*). The Hebrew word *lhqf* was used in the OT to signify an assembly or congregation.¹⁷ *Lhqf* means ‘assembly’ and can be used of any kind of group of people brought together. Coenen explains,

Who, then is addressed as the *qāhāl*, denoted by it, and belongs to it? In the earliest strata of the OT the word is rare and stands primarily for the summons to war of all the men capable of bearing arms (Gen. 49:6; Num. 22:4) . . . to a certain extent, these represent the people, but occasionally the word stands for the whole congregation of the people . . . *qāhāl* also had a religious element alongside that of a solemn assembly. In the subsequent period (the stratum of the deuteronomic history) the word admittedly lost once again its strictly religious character (e.g. 1 Ki. 8:65; 12:3ff) and came to mean simply the special, general assembly of the people, including women and probably even children . . . In Chr., where with 30 occurrences *qāhāl* is most frequent, it appears both in a representative sense for the assembly of the leaders of Israel summoned by the king to take decisions, which may be religious or political, and also for the crowd gathered for sacrifice and worship (e.g. 2 Chr. 20:5, 14; 30:2, 4). This crowd (gathered in the temple) is also designated *qāhāl* in the Pss. (e.g. 22:23; 89:6 ‘or the holy ones’; 149:1 ‘of the faithful’). But there is also a *qāhāl* of the evil-doers (Ps. 26:5). Thus, from the point of view of meaning, *qāhāl* extends from call-up for military service, via meeting political consultation or judicial hearing, to assembly for worship.¹⁸

¹⁶ H. E. Dana, *A Manual of Ecclesiology* (Kansas City, KS: Central Seminary, 1944, 26, as cited by Radmacher, 120-21). Wayne O. McCready also comes to similar conclusions as Dana in his article (“Ekklesia and Voluntary Associations,” in *Voluntary Associations in the Graeco-Roman World* ed. John S. Kloppenborg and Stephen G. Wilson [London: Routledge, 1996], 61-64, 69-70).

¹⁷ F. Brown, S. Driver, and C. Briggs, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1997), 874. The type of assembly and congregation is dependent upon context and usage. Possible definitions include: “assembly specially convoked for evil, counsel; for war or invasion; a company of returning exiles” and “congregation as organized body of Israel; restored community in Jerus; of angels.”

The other Hebrew term that is closely related to *lhqf* is *hdf*(e, which also means ‘congregation,’ spec. ‘congregation of peoples, of the righteous,’ ‘of animals,’ ‘elsewhere of Israel’ (*BDB*, 417). Because ἐκκλησία never translates *hdf*(e in the LXX, the emphasis throughout this section is on *lhqf*.

¹⁸ Coenen, “Church, Synagogue,” 1:293. Radmacher agrees, “The breadth of *qahal*, therefore, as pointed out, makes it evident that the Hebrew concept of *qahal* was of an untechnical noun that only gained particularity by the context. After noting this nontechnical usage of the word, one is able to see the fallacy of those definitions that explain it as the technical term for the redeemed community or the church in the Old Testament” (*The Nature of the Church*, 125).

This OT term may or may not shed light on the meaning of ἐκκλησία. Although ἐκκλησία is always used to translate some nominal form of the word *lhqf* that does not mean the use of *lhqf* automatically becomes the basis for an explanation of ἐκκλησία. For example there are some, who claim *lhqf* is to be traced back to *lq* (voice) and conclude that the OT *qāhāl* was a community summoned by the Divine Voice, the Divine word of God. This is an erroneous etymological approach that is damaging to the word's meaning.¹⁹ It is also fallacious to assume that because one considers *lhqf* as coming from *lq* and therefore the 'assembly' is called by God, that this methodology is also retrospective when considering ἐκκλησία as an 'assembly' called by God because it comes from *εκ + καλεω*.

The background of the OT term *lhqf* does provide some information concerning the basic Greek usage of ἐκκλησία. It provides the necessary information for a basic meaning. Due to the use of ἐκκλησία in the LXX, the Greek translation of the Hebrew OT, a discussion of its usage demonstrates not only the importance of understanding *lhqf* but also that their similar meanings warrants it.

In the Septuagint ἐκκλησία was used to describe assemblies of any kind. Of the one hundred and twenty occurrences of *qahal* in the Hebrew OT, ἐκκλησία is used in the LXX seventy-seven times. In each of these occurrences, the meaning of 'assembly' or 'meeting' is always used. Schmidt states, "In the LXX, *ekklesia* [sic.] has no ecclesiastical significance; it simply means 'gathering' and denotes either coming together, or being together. The nature

¹⁹ T. F. Torrance, "Israel and the Incarnation," *Judaica* 13 [1957], 1-2, as cited by Barr, *Semantics*, 119. Barr stresses that, "All cases of *qahal* fit perfectly well with the sense of 'assembly,' 'group.' It may be, let us say, that some such semantic history as 'speak > call > summon > assemble' has led to this sense, but there is no reason to suppose that the earlier elements in that historical sequence are still alive in the semantic value of the word" *Semantics*, 120.

of the gathering depends entirely upon the nature of those who compose it.”²⁰ The term ἐκκλησία was not used in a technical sense (e.g. ‘church’). An author uses modifiers to more narrowly define the type of assembly in a specific context. The modifiers identify the assembly as religious, political, military, judicial, national, or racial. Radmacher states, “The Jews preparing the Septuagint did not think in terms of ‘the *ekklesia*’ as an abstract institution, they conceived of it as ‘an *ekklesia*’ whenever it met.”²¹

Josephus used the word frequently, always of a gathering. His use of the term varies from religious to political assemblies. Philo also used the term some thirty times. All uses except for five were quotations from the LXX.

Another venue in which ἐκκλησία is used is in the books of the Apocrypha, specifically in Ecclesiasticus. Here Ben Sira, the author, uses it in a number of ways. For example: an assembly of a mob, a company of worshippers in the temple, and an assembly of those who met for instruction.²²

²⁰ Karl Schmidt, “The Church,” in *Bible Key Words from Gerhard Kittel’s Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament*, ed and trans by J. R. Coates and H. P. Kingdon vol. 1 (New York: Harper, 1951, 51, as cited by Radmacher, *The Nature of the Church*, 130).

Coenen suggests, “Where *ekklesia* is used in the LXX for *qāhāl*, it indicates the assembly of the people or a judicial assembly (e.g. Deut. 9:10; 23:3ff; Jdg. 21:5, 8; Mic. 2:5), the political body (e.g. the returned exiles Ezr. 10:8, 12; Neh. 8:2, 17). It also indicates, especially in the Chronicler, the assembly of the people for worship (e.g. 2 Chr. 6:3 at the consecration of the temple; 30:2, 4, 13, 17 at Hezekiah’s Passover; cf. also Joel 2:16 and several times in the Pss., e.g. 21:22; 88:6). Nevertheless, even in these instances . . . *ekklesia* is only used where it is a question of the people as God’s assembly, characterized by having answered Yahweh’s call. *Synagoge*, on the other hand, apart from its general use as assembly, place of assembly, harvest and the mustering of troops, was clearly used to denote the religiously defined community of Yahweh” (*NIDNTT*, 1:295-96).

²¹ Radmacher, 131. Ferguson agrees, “It is disputed whether the references to the assemblies of Israel gave to *ekklesia* the connotation of ‘people of God’ in Jewish usage. An actual ‘assembly’ seems all that can be certainly inferred from the usage, even in later Jewish writings” (*The Church of Christ*, 131).

²² Campbell offers an extensive discussion concerning Ecclesiasticus and how this may have influenced NT writers (*Three New Testament Studies*, 49-51). For a discussion on the Apostolic Fathers and their inclusion of ἐκκλησία, see Stephen C. Walke, “The Use of Ecclesia in the Apostolic Fathers,” *Anglican Theological Review* 32 no. 1 (Jan. 1950): 39-52.

To summarize the LXX usage, it is to be noted that ἐκκλησία is used simply as an ‘assembly.’ The ‘assembly’ may meet for any given purpose and the identity of this ἐκκλησία is based on its modifiers used in the context. There is no evidence that the word acquired a specifically religious connotation in the LXX. The consideration of the use of ἐκκλησία in classical Greek is necessary.

NEW TESTAMENT CONTEXT

By the time of the writing of the New Testament, the word ἐκκλησία already obtained an extensive history of its own. From its etymological meaning ‘to call out,’ the word in the classical Greek period came to simply mean ‘assembly’ or ‘group of people.’ Also, it is to be noted that ἐκκλησία did not acquire any kind of technical significance in the Septuagint. Therefore, Radmacher concludes that “when the writers of the New Testament, whose Bible was the Septuagint, used ἐκκλησία, they were not inventing a new term. They found the term in common use and simply employed what was at hand.”²³

To continue this study of ἐκκλησία does not mean that the above diachronic analysis is unimportant or even inaccurate. As stated earlier, it has its place and that place is to trace its historical development. Therefore, as one approaches the study of ἐκκλησία in the NT, he should be aware of its etymological and historical characteristics. But also, and most importantly, he should also be cognizant of the context in which this word is found by recognizing what qualifiers and modifiers are present. This may shed light as to its meaning in a given context.²⁴

²³ Radmacher, *The Nature of the Church*, 132.

²⁴ Charles Ryrie’s comment is helpful here. He states, “If the word ‘church’ has to do with an assembled group, then different uses of the concept in the New Testament should tell us (a) what is the

The word ἐκκλησία is used one hundred and fourteen times in the NT (62 in the Pauline epistles, 3 in Matthew, 23 in Acts, 20 in Revelation, and 6 occurrences in non-Pauline epistles). This section of the paper discusses the meaning of some of these occurrences within a given context.²⁵ While the analysis is not exhaustive, the claim is that ἐκκλησία in the NT means assembly.

ἐκκλησία in Paul

Paul's use of ἐκκλησία occurs in different contexts but the majority is Christian. This does not mean that Paul is launching a new technical term. But it does mean that he is using the basic meaning 'assembly' and placing it within a context. The qualifiers give the meaning a Christian nature. Ferguson explains that "the word 'assembly' itself says nothing about the nature of the assembly, often descriptive phrases are added to the word in order to characterize the Christian assembly. These phrases do not give names to the church in an official sense but are descriptions of the nature of the church" (e.g. 1 Thess. 1:1; 2 Thess. 1:1).²⁶

The first use of ἐκκλησία is Paul's reference to those who have received Christ. His proclamation of Christ provides evidence to an assembly that is Christians in nature (e.g.

character or nature of the group assembled, and (b) what are the focus and reasons that draw that particular assembly together" (*Basic Theology* [Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1986], 394).

²⁵ Approximately seventy-five percent of the occurrences of ἐκκλησία are found in Paul and Acts. Conclusions relative to the balance of occurrences elsewhere are consistent with the conclusions of this paper. ἐκκλησία means 'assembly' and the NT author will use modifiers to identify its specificity. For example, in Matthew 16:18 the Lord is not referring to a Jewish assembly. The use of the future tense, 'I will build,' anticipates the Christian assembly.

Frederick Danker defines ἐκκλησία this way, "(1) a regularly summoned legislative body, assembly; (2) a casual gathering of people, an assemblage, gathering; (3) people with shared belief, community, congregation" (*A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature* 3rd ed. Based on the sixth edition of Walter Bauer's *Griechisch Deutsches Wörterbuch*, [Chicago: U. of Chicago Press, 2000], 305-06).

²⁶ Ferguson, *The Church of Christ*, 132.

“unto the church of the Thessalonians which is in God the Father and in the Lord Jesus Christ” 1 Thess. 1:1; 2 Thess. 1:1).²⁷ Its relation to the deity defines the character of the Christian assembly.²⁸ Paul qualifies the nature of the ἐκκλησία with the phrase ‘which is in God the Father and in the Lord Jesus Christ.’

Another example of ἐκκλησία in Paul is that of a local assembly or gathering of people, whether it was the whole church, 1 Cor. 14:23; or a house church such as Rom. 16:5, Philemon 2.²⁹ Coenen adds, “The fact that small groups in individual houses are called *ekklesia* (Phlm. 2; 1 Cor. 16:19; Rom. 16:5; cf. also Col. 4:15) indicates that neither the significance of the place nor the numerical size of the assembly determines the use of the term. What counts is the presence of Christ among them and faith nourished by him.”³⁰

A third example of ἐκκλησία refers to the universal church. This use of ἐκκλησία is highly debated. Paul views local and regional gatherings of saints “as making up the one church throughout the world (1 Cor. 10:32; 11:22; 12:28), which is the ‘one body’ of Christ (Eph. 1:22; Col. 1:18, 24; Rom. 12:4-5; 1 Cor. 12:12-27; Eph. 4:4) and the ‘wife’ of Christ

²⁷ Coenen adds, “the *ekklesia* of the Thessalonians also introduces to the Gk. mind the claim that the call of God, which has gone out through the apostle and other preachers in the form of the offer of reconciliation, has brought together this assembly” (*NIDNTT*, 299).

O’Brien makes the distinction and explanation as to why it is Christian in nature. He explains, “The term [*ekklesia*] is employed in the same way as in Greek and Jewish circles, that is, like other assemblies (*ekklesiai*) in the city, it is described as a ‘gathering of the Thessalonians.’ But it is distinguished from the regular political councils by the addition of the words ‘in God the Father,’ and from the regular synagogue meetings by the use of the term *ekklesia* and the additional phrase ‘in the Lord Jesus Christ’” (*Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, 124).

²⁸ Ferguson states, “More often the qualifying phrase used with *ekklesia* relates the church to God or to Christ: ‘the church of God’ (1 Cor. 10:32; 11:22; 15:9; Gal. 1:13; 1 Tim. 3:5, 15); ‘churches of God’ (1 Cor. 11:16; 2 Thess. 1:4); ‘churches of Christ’ (Rom. 16:16); ‘churches in Christ’ (Gal. 1:22)” (*The Church of Christ*, 133).

²⁹ George Eldon Ladd includes “it can designate the totality of believers living in one place – in Cenchrea (Rom. 16:1), Laodicea (Col. 4:16), or the cities of Judea (Gal. 1:22) and Galatia (Gal. 1:2)” (*A Theology of the New Testament* rev ed. [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993], 582).

³⁰ Coenen, *NIDNTT*, 301.

(Eph. 5:25-27, 31-32). For this reason he believes it entirely appropriate to ask Christians in every church to pattern their lives according to the same standard of conduct.”³¹ Whether Paul means the local or universal sense of the assembly is not the issue. What is the issue is that the idea of ‘assembly’ is not lost regardless of its use.

Paul’s use of ἐκκλησία echoes the meaning of ‘assembly.’ It is important that Paul does not employ a technical use of ἐκκλησία. Rather he uses the general meaning of the word as ‘assembly’ or ‘gathering’ and distinguishes the specific meaning through the use of qualifiers and modifiers. Because of Paul’s use of ἐκκλησία along with its modifiers, the NT exegete cannot assume that Paul’s use of ἐκκλησία always refers to the local church.

ἐκκλησία in Acts

Luke uses ἐκκλησία twenty-three times in the books of Acts. However, they may not all refer to the church, whether it was in the local or universal sense. He too uses modifiers to narrowly define the type of assembly in a given context. This examination of ἐκκλησία is only representative and not exhaustive.

Acts, like that of Paul, also employs different examples of the term ἐκκλησία. First, Luke uses it to indicate all the Christians living and meeting in a particular place. For example: the primitive community in Jerusalem (Acts 5:11; 8:1; 11:22; 12:1, 5); the Church at Antioch (13:1); and other places that Paul visited in order to give encouragement (14:23;

³¹ Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 830.

Ladd contrastingly states, “The church universal is not thought of as the totality of all the local churches; rather, each community, however small, represents the total community, the Church. The correct rendering of such verses as 1 Corinthians 1:2 and 2 Corinthians 1:1 is not ‘the Corinthian congregation standing side by side with other congregations,’ but ‘the congregation, church, assembly, as it is in Corinth.’ The local church is not part of the church but is *the church* in its local expression. This means that the whole power of Christ is available to every local congregation, that each congregation functions in its community as the universal church functions in the world as a whole, and that the local congregation is no isolated group but stands in a state of solidarity with the church as a whole” (*A Theology of the New Testament*, 582).

plur. 15:41; 16:5). It can also refer to those Christians who are not necessarily meeting in a particular place. Coenen explains,

Admittedly, it appears only as it gathers in particular places (cf. 14:27). But it always implies totality . . . *ekklesia* is those who follow the call of God, come together and yet even when their meeting is over still retain their quality of *ekklesia*. It is one throughout the whole world and yet is at the same time fully present in every individual assembly. The sing. and plur. are qualitatively identical. Therefore Luke can speak in the sing. equally of the church at large (Acts 8:3) and of the *ekklesia* ‘throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria’ (9:31).³²

The second example of ἐκκλησία seems to be the most troublesome for those who place an all-inclusive argument that ἐκκλησία means ‘called out’ by God, and in most cases, assume a local church context. The two examples of ἐκκλησία are Acts 7:38 and 19:32, 39f. In the case of Acts 7:38, Luke’s use of ἐκκλησία is simply referring to the gathering of Israel before Mount Sinai for the receiving of the law.³³ This use is one of a physical assembly, like that found in the Septuagint.³⁴ The other use, Acts 19:32, 39f, is representative of a riotous mob that assembled in Ephesus. This assembly of people is composed of heathen people whose reason for assembling was simply to exercise a political privilege.

Luke’s use of ἐκκλησία also echoes the normal meaning of ‘assembly.’ The above analysis points to the fact that context plays an important role in the specific meaning of ἐκκλησία. It is clear that ἐκκλησία does not mean ‘called out ones.’ To simply apply the etymology to the meaning of a word without considering the context is erroneous. As one

³² Coenen, *NIDNTT*, 303. This idea of oneness is also found in Ladd (*A Theology of the New Testament*), 384-91; Ryrie, *Basic Theology*, 395.

³³ Ibid. “Here the group were Israelites assembled to receive God’s law through Moses. The spiritual character of this group was mixed—some personally and individually rightly related to God and some not. Of course, all were related to him in the sense that God had chosen the nation, but this alone did not guarantee the spiritual salvation of each person. This national calling was the reason for the gathering at the base of Mt. Sinai” (*Basic Theology*, 394).

³⁴ Most would recognize that ‘congregation’ would be a better translation.

contemplates the contexts of each occurrence in Acts, he will quickly realize that a proper methodology in obtaining meaning is important (cf. 19:32, 39f).

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The meaning of ἐκκλησία emerges from the above discussion as simply ‘assembly’ or ‘gathering of people.’ The uses of ἐκκλησία in classical Greek, LXX, and the New Testament, illustrate this meaning. It is the writer’s use of qualifiers that ultimately provide a more narrow meaning of ἐκκλησία in a given context. These qualifiers identify the ‘assembly’ in a specific context. The qualifiers simply provide the nature in which the ἐκκλησία operates. For example, ἐκκλησία can operate as an assembly of Christians, citizens, or an unruly mob. The underlying emphasis of the term ἐκκλησία is the meaning ‘assembly.’ Past generations of interpreters, however conclude that the etymology of ἐκκλησία, ‘called out’ (εκ + καλεω), is a valid meaning. This approach is not supported by the use of the word in the NT.

In order to provide the reader with some methodological and theological implications, this paper revisits the three questions posed in the introduction. Thus, what is it about this term that causes so much confusion and why does ἐκκλησία seem to be misrepresented? The confusion stems from a desire to distinguish the church from other assemblies. Theology not proper lexical concerns, influences this. It is clear that the Christian assembly is qualitatively distinct. It is not the word per se that brings one to this conclusion. The distinction is maintained because authors of the NT use qualifiers to more narrowly define the Christian assembly. Due to this confusion, interpreters misrepresent the meaning of the term ἐκκλησία.

This misrepresentation comes from an improper methodology in lexical semantics. The interpreter must implement a synchronic approach when determining the meaning of ἐκκλησία in a given context. This helps the interpreter avoid the common etymological fallacy

that root meanings of words project over a certain semantic range of meaning just because the word in the passage incorporates that root. The diachronic approach to lexical semantics is a valid method. However, it has its place and is generally unhelpful when determining the meaning of words in a given context.

Therefore, what did ἐκκλησία mean to the first century Christian? Simply put, they saw it as an 'assembly' or 'gathering of people' regardless of its nature. There was no special connotation nor was it a technical term for a Christian group of people. The NT writers simply implemented the general meaning of ἐκκλησία and distinguished its specific meaning through the use of qualifiers and modifiers.

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