

The Meaning of Ekklesia by H. B. Taylor – Page 1

THE MEANING OF EKKLESIA By H. Boyce Taylor

The Meaning of Ekklesia by H. B. Taylor – Page 1

THE MEANING OF EKKLESIA

By H. Boyce Taylor

Published in the Berea Baptist Banner May 5, 1991.

Before we go further in the study of Revelation it will be well for us to get clearly in mind our reasons for saying that ekklesia never means any thing but an organized assembly. Every man's interpretation of Revelation depends on what he means by the word ekklesia or church.

If he starts wrong by perverting the words of the Lord Jesus and making His ekklesia mean an universal, invisible, unorganized and unassembling body, then his whole exposition of Revelation will be heretical. He lays an heretical foundation and his building will be wood, hay and stubble. So we want to go patiently into what the New Testament means by the word ekklesia or church.

We maintain that in all and every place where it is found in the New Testament, whether used of Israel in the wilderness or of the church of the Firstborn in Heaven or the citizens of Ephesus or of a New Testament church, it always and every where refers to an organized assembly. Its two fundamental and "essential ideas are organization and assembly". We think we have good and sufficient reasons for maintaining that position. Our readers will have to be the jury to render a verdict as to whether our contention will hold. Here are our reasons for saying so.

1. Our first reason for contending that the word ekklesia never means any thing but an organized and an assembling church is that the Lord Jesus, who is the author of the Book of Revelation, uses the word ekklesia 20 times in Revelation and every time He uses it, He refers to a local organized and assembling church. Seven times He uses it in the singular in naming the seven churches of Asia. Thirteen times He uses it in the plural referring to these seven churches and their successors. Whenever He spoke of a larger group than a local church He always used it in the plural.

2. B. H. Carroll for many years a teacher at Baylor

University and later the founder of the Southwestern Theological Seminary, in a newspaper controversy with W. J. McClothlin as to the meaning of the word ekklesia, says: "The proposed new sense (of the word ekklesia) destroys the essential ideas of the old word, namely, organization and assembly, and would leave Christ without an institution, an official business body on this earth. Our Lord Himself uses the word 23 times—once in Matthew 16; twice in Matthew 18; and 20 times in Revelation. These 23 instances settle the meaning of the word."

3. Back in the days when T. T. Eaton was the editor of the Western Recorder, in discussing with the "invisiblisticists" the meaning of the word ekklesia in Matthew 16:18 he gives these seven reasons for saying the church Jesus built was a local church.

- (1). That is the meaning of the word "Ekklesia."
- (2). That is Christ's universal usage of the word.
- (3). That is the only meaning that would have been understood by the Apostles.
- (4). That is the only kind of church recognized in the New Testament.
- (5). That is the only kind of church to which the promise has been fulfilled.
- (6). That is the only kind of church adapted to human nature.
- (7). That is the only kind that is suited to preach a pure Gospel.

4. Prof. H. E. Dana of the Fort Worth Seminary in his book, Christ's Ekklesia, page 23 says: "There were in the classical use of this term four elements pertinent to its New Testament meaning: (1) the assembly was local; (2) it was autonomous; (3) it pre-supposed definite qualifications; (4) it was conducted on democratic principles".

5. Probably the Rotheham translation of the Scriptures is one of the best and most accurate of all the versions. In the appendix on page 268, in giving his reasons why he uniformly translates the word ekklesia by the word assembly, he says: "It is well known that the Greek word for 'Church' is ekklesia, and that ekklesia strictly and fully means 'called-out-assembly.'" The very fact that Mr. Rotherham uniformly translates the word ekklesia assembly throughout the New Testament is the very strongest proof possible that he thought the word ekklesia meant only an "organized and assembling" body.

6. Ramsey in St. Paul the Traveller says on page 124: "The term (ekklesia) originally implied the assembled constituted a self-governing body like a free city".

7. Harnack in his History of Dogma says the Catholic

or Universal idea of the church sprang up in the third third of the third century. Eusebius, Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria, Hiero, Cornelius, and Cyprian all speak of "Holy Churches" and never of the catholic or universal church. On page 83, of Vol. III, Harnack says: "No one thought of the desperate idea of the invisible church: this would probably have brought about a lapse from pure Christianity far more rapidly than the idea of the Holy Catholic Church". Do not forget that, Scofield's idea of the invisible church is a lapse from pure Christianity. It is neither biblical nor scriptural but is a desperate idea born in the brain of a heretic and swallowed by Scofield in our day to decoy Baptists into the camp of the enemies of the only true churches, built and preserved by the Lord Jesus Himself.

8. Prof. Royal of Wake Forest College, whom Southern Baptists never had a better teacher of Greek, when asked if he knew of any passage in classical Greek, where the word ekklesia was ever used of unassembled or The Meaning of Ekklesia by H. B. Taylor – Page 2 unassembling persons, said: "I do not know of any such passage in classic Greek".

9. Joseph Cross, in his book, Coals From The Altar says this: "We hear much of the invisible church as contradistinguished from the church visible. Of an invisible church in this world I know nothing: the Word of God says nothing: nor can anything of the kind exist, except in the brain of a heretic. The church is a body: but what sort of a body is that which can neither be seen nor identified? A body is an organism, occupying space and having a definite locality. A mere aggregation is not a body: there must be organization as well. A heap of heads, hands, feet and other members would not make a body: they must be united in a system, each in its proper place and pervaded by a common life. So a collection of stones, bricks and timber would not be a house: the material must be built up together, in artistic order, adapted to utility. So a mass of roots, trunks and branches would not be a vine or a tree: the several parts must be developed according to the laws of nature from the same seed and nourished by the same sap."

10. Bishop Hort, one of the publishers of the Wescott and Hort Greek Testament, whose scholarship and ability certainly can not be called in question, confesses the "necessity of finding some other than etymological, grammatical or historical grounds" on which to prove the universal church. That means it can not be proved by the word ekklesia nor by the grammatical construction

of New Testament Greek nor by the historical use of the word ekklesia in New Testament days. Where does Mr. Hort say then that the idea of an universal church came from? He says the idea of an universal church came from away this side of the New Testament from the theology of uninspired men. Note what he says, He says that the idea of an universal church is not "the proper original of ekklesia": that it is not traceable to "Current usage": that the Word ekklesia is always limited by Paul himself to a local organization which has a "corresponding unity of its own"; "each is a body of Christ and a sanctuary of God". By each he means each local church. Again he says: Paul uniformly speaks of the individual church "as a body of Christ"—I Cor. 12:27: "a virgin" — II Cor. 11:2: "a temple." I Cor. 3:16.

In Ephesians 2:21 he refers to the Ephesian church as "a holy temple." In Colossians 3:15 he calls the Colossian church "called in one body." All the references are from Hort's Christian Ekklesia. Mr. Hort's testimony that Paul's use of the word ekklesia in Ephesians and Colossians is to the local church at Ephesus and Colosse is especially convincing because Scofield and all the balance of the universal church heretics go to Ephesians and Colossians to substantiate their heretical teachings. Again Mr. Hort argues that in breaking down the wall of partition between Jew and Gentile and alien classes of all sorts, the local church is the chief, if not the only agency through which this change is manifest.

11. Jesse B. Thomas in his book, Church and Kingdom, calls attention to the fact that in John 2:19-21 Jesus calls His own body a temple. This involved both local and visible tangibility (II Pet. 1:16; I John 1:1). So building in Matthew 16:18. All these allusions, according to Mr. Thomas point irresistibly to a concrete organism. In Ephesians 2:21 (R. V.) the local church is spoken of as "each several building." "Fitly framed" refers to the local church as a building and "fitly joined and compacted" as a body. The first in 2:21 and the latter in 4:16.

12. Alexander Campbell said in the Christian Baptist, p. 214: "Ekklesia literally signifies an assembly called out from others and is used among the Greeks, particularly the Athenians, for their popular assemblies, summoned by their chief magistrates and in which none but citizens had a right to sit. By inherent power it may be applied to any body of men called out and assembled in one place. If it ever loses the idea of calling out and assembling, it loses its principle features and its primitive

use.”

13. David Lipscombe in the Gospel Advocate Oct. 28, 1926: “There is not the shadow of any universal church in the New Testament, nor is there the representation of a tangible church or of one that may be reached and associated with, save the local church”. Again the same article Mr. Lipscombe says: “Just so, when speaking of things common to all churches, we say the church is the body of Christ, not meaning that all the churches are consolidated to make one body, but that each and every church is the body of Christ in its locality and what is common to all is affirmed of the church as of one body. This style of speech is common. This can be its only meaning. There is no development of the church of Christ in the world save in the local church. Paul uses this same general language of the church being the body of Christ to the church at Corinth that he does to the Colossians, Ephesians and others: ‘Ye are the body of Christ and members in particular.’ The church at Rome, the church at Ephesus, at Colosse, each was just as much ‘the body of Christ and members in particular’ as the church at Corinth. The church at Jerusalem was a complete body of Christ before another church was established. It lost none of its completeness when other churches were planted. And every other church was as complete within itself as was this church at Jerusalem. Each church was in itself a complete body of Christ, without any reference to any other church or churches in existence.

God has given to us the local church as the only manifestation of His body. It is the only body ordained or recognized by God as acceptable to Him. It is the “pillar and support of the truth.” It is “the body of Christ.” The body of which He is the Head. “From whom the whole body fitly joined together and compacted by that which every joint supplieth, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part, maketh increase of the body unto The Meaning of Ekklesia by H. B. Taylor – Page 3 the edifying of itself in love” (Eph. 4:15-16).

Let us sum up a little.

The word church was used by the Master 23 times and always meant a local church. Mr. Hort of the Westcott-Hort New Testament, admits that Paul never used it of anything but a local church. Scholars testify that ekklesia was never used in classic Greek except of an assembled or assembling body. The two essential ideas in the word ekklesia are assembly and organization.

Every illustration of a church in the New Testament, such as temple or house or body, makes the veriest of nonsense, if it is not assembled and organized. The etymology of the word ekklesia makes it of necessity a local church. The grammatical construction of the passages where used can not be twisted to mean anything but a local church. Both Hort and Harnack testify that historically the word ekklesia was never used of anything but a local church, until long after the close of the New Testament. So you are on safe ground, when you say that the church, which as the body of Christ, is always a local Baptist church. Selah! !
(News and Truth, April 6, 1932, Murray, Ky.).

[Return to Baptist History and Gallery Writings](#)