

The Community of Believers

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Christianity, in its earliest form, was a religion that centered in a **person**, around whom developed a **community of believers**, out of which developed a **collection of writings** containing the beliefs and practices of the community. That person was Jesus of Nazareth, that community of believers was his church, and the writings developing out of the community of believers were the New Testament Scriptures. This person, this community, and these writings are all essentials of the religion that came to be known as Christianity. But Christianity is true to its origins only when Christ stands at its center. To displace Christ from the center of this first century portrait of Christianity and to replace him with one of these other essentials here portrayed is to distort what Christianity was in its beginnings. And this has happened as the religion of Christianity has made its way down through the centuries to the present.

The most obvious example of this is to be seen in the sectarian systems within Christianity in its present state. Here we may clearly see a shift in focus from Christ as the Lord of the community to a focus on the community itself, and especially, on the authority of the community to speak for its Lord. In its beginnings the community of believers interpreted their identity in terms of who they believed Jesus of Nazareth to be (i.e., who they were was interpreted in terms of who they believed Jesus to be). What gave them their existence and their identity was what they believed about "him," not what they believed about "themselves."

This is a point of no little significance in the present study. If we are concerned to see the Lord's church as it was in its origins, we must be ready to embrace those characteristics which marked the first century church as the Lord's church and reject all characteristics

which may be present among us which are not essential to our identity as the Lord's church. Our emphasis as his church must be on him, not us. As a people, we must be true to the first century portrayal of who these Christians were and what made them "the Lord's church." We, as Christians, are unique as a religious people because of what we believe about him and what that belief has done to us. Because of these beliefs (i.e., our Christological faith) we have become one with him and he has added us to his community - the community of believers.

The Church Of The New Testament

The Greek Ekklesia

The word "church" in the New Testament is taken from the Greek word *ekklesia* (found in 115 occurrences), which simply means, "an assembly." In the ancient Greek world this word was used to designate the lawful assembly in a free Greek city or colony of all those who possessed the rights of citizenship. The term *ekklesia* is made up of two words, *ek* (out) and *kaleo* (to call or summons), hence, we have the meaning, "to summons or call out."

In a very real way this Greek word, as used in the New Testament, identifies those who have been called or summoned out of one realm of existence into another realm of existence. It is similar to another Greek word used to identify religious assemblies. The Greek speaking Jews of first century Palestine identified their assemblies by the Greek word *synagoge* (synagogue), which literally means "the gathering." The significance of this designation for the Jews was that in the captive of 586 BC by Babylon, their fathers had preserved their faith by gathering together for the study of Scripture. Since they had neither temple nor sacrifice for the priests to offer, the study of the Hebrew Scriptures became their focal point of their faith. When they returned to Palestine, they brought "the gathering" (synagogue) with them.

In a similar manner, the earliest Christians formed groups that were similar to the synagogue, but differed primarily in that their

activities centered in their beliefs concerning Jesus of Nazareth. The earliest Christians, who were all Jews before becoming Christians, believed that Jesus was the promised Messiah, and their gatherings were for the purpose of sharing their faith with one another and celebrating these beliefs in worship. These groups were called "the *ekklesia*". As the *synagogue* was the focal point of the Jewish community, and the earliest Christians were Jews associated with synagogues, a similar assembly developed among these Jewish Christians, especially those being expelled from the synagogue because of their belief that Jesus was the Messiah. Thus, the assemblies of these Christians were called by the term "*ekklesia*" distinguishing them from the synagogue. In many ways these *ekklesiai* (assemblies) were very similar to the synagogues, especially in worship and organization.

The distinctiveness of the term *ekklesia*, however, lies in the idea of being "called out of something to or into something," where the term *synagogue* simply communicated the generic idea of "gathering together." Christians are people who believe that have been called out of one existence into another, out of an existence ruled by the power of sin into an existence ruled by the power of grace, from an existence wherein Satan was their lord into an existence wherein Christ is their Lord.

A Community of Believers

There are descriptive designations for the church. Of course *ekklesia* (translated "church") is the primary term; but he also uses a number of poetic metaphors. Most essentially the church of the NT is a community of people; it is never perceived as a building or structure as the church is thought of today.

In the language of the first century Greek-speaking world the word "community" carried the essential idea of *koinos*, meaning "common." The word for community is *koinonia* meaning, "to have in common, belonging to, to have fellowship." The verb *koinoneo* means, "to share with, to fellowship, to associate with, to communicate with." Its idea of "having in common" is found

throughout the NT for the nature of the *ekklesia* or church. In fact, the church, from its very inception was identified as a people in *koinonia*. Following the conversion of the three thousand on Pentecost they are identified as, “devoting themselves to the teaching of the apostles, and to the fellowship or community (*koinonia*), the breaking of bread and to the prayers,” (Acts 2:42).

In 1 Cor 1:9, Paul writes to the church, “God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship (*koinonia*) of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.” All having this fellowship with Christ in common are in community with one another. This is the sense in which they share the table of the Lord with one another, as Paul says in 1 Cor 10:16, “The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion (*koinonia*) of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion (*koinonia*) of the body of Christ? **17** For we, though many, are one bread *and* one body; for we all partake of that one bread.” In his second letter to the Corinthian church Paul tells them,

*Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers. For what partnership has righteousness with lawlessness? And what communion (*koinonia*) has light with darkness? **15** And what harmony has Christ with Belial? Or what part has a believer with an unbeliever? **16** And what agreement has the temple of God with idols? For you are the temple of the living God. As God has said: “ I will dwell in them and walk among them. I will be their God and they shall be My people,” (2 Cor 6:14-16).*

The concept of a community (*koinonia*), set apart as a people distinct from those who do not have *koinonia* with them is a NT concept of the church. That which they do not have in common with the world is their salvation, which Jude calls “our common salvation” (*tes koinēs hemon soterias*) which he identifies with “the faith once for all delivered to the saints,” (Jude 3). In his letter to the Galatians Paul refers to James, the Lord’s brother, Cephas or Peter, and John, who were pillars in the church in Jerusalem, giving Barnabas and himself “the right hand of fellowship” (*koinonia*), indicating that they were in fellowship with the church in Jerusalem; i.e. they were all part of the community of believers (Gal 2:9).

The apostle John, in his first letter, writes to address a division over the true identity of Christ. Those who were denying that Jesus was the Son of God, were not a part of the community of believers or they were not in fellowship with John and the apostolic community. He uses the term *koinonia* to identify those who were true to the faith:

This is the message which we have heard from him and declare to you, that God is light and in him is no darkness at all. 6 If we say that we have fellowship (koinonia) with him, and walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. 7 But if we walk in the light as he is in the light, we have fellowship (koinonia) with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanses us from all sin (1 John 1:5-6).

In addition to this, there is a term Paul's uses that reveals the church as a community of believers. That term is *allelon* [pron "all-lay-LOAN") meaning "one another" or in the genitive "of one another." That the church understood itself as a community of believers is seen in these references: Rom 12:10-16; 14:19; 15:7, 14; 16:16; 1 Cor 12:25; and Eph 4:1-3; I Thess 3:12; 4:9; Heb 10:24; 1 Peter 1:22; 4:9; 5:15; 1 John 1:7; 3:11, 23; 4:11-12; 2 John 1:5.

The Lord's Church

The expression "the Lord's Church" conveys the idea of a community of people who belong to "a Lord." Conversion for the early Christians was, in essence, a transfer of lordship. One of the major New Testament titles for Jesus is "Lord" (Luke 2:11; Acts 2:36; Rom 10:9-10; Phil 2:11; Titus 2:13 cf. Matt 28:18 and Luke 6:46). Conversion, in the thinking of Paul, is a deliverance from the lordship of sin (Satan) by the redeeming power of belief in Christ wherein one is brought under the loving lordship of Christ (cf., Rom 5-6).

Because Jesus is Lord, many practices, actions, and concepts of the church have great significance because they, in some way, focus upon, or relate to, his lordship. In 1 Cor 11:20 we read of "**the Lord's Supper**" (i.e., the communion meal; cf. 1 Cor 10:14-17; Matt 26:26ff).

In Rev 1:10 we read of "**the Lord's Day**" (i.e., the first day of the week celebrated by Christians as the day of the Lord's resurrection). In like manner we speak of "**the Lord's church**" meaning the church which is uniquely his. As the expression "the Lord's supper" distinguishes it from any other supper or meal, and "the Lord's day" distinguishes that day from the other days of the week, the expression "the Lord's church" distinguishes it from any other church/community of believers. This expression, and the concept behind it, may be seen in such passages as Matt 16:18 ("my church"), Acts 20:28 ("the church of the Lord/God"), Rom 16:16 ("the churches of Christ"), Eph 1:22 ("And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church"), and Col 1:18 ("he is the head of the body, the church").

Becoming a member of Christ's church means that one has become one with Christ. The early Christians were people who had died to their old existence and had become one with Christ in a new existence. This occurred through a reenactment of the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ in the act of baptism (Rom 6:1-4; Gal 2:20; 3:26-27). Because they had confessed him as Lord (Rom 10:9-10), they were now his servants (Rom 6:16-18; Gal 1:10), and followed his teachings as disciples to a Master (Matt 28:20; John 14:15; Heb 5:9; John 13:13). Because they had been baptized into him (Rom 10:9-10; Gal 3:27), they had entered into new existence with him (2 Cor 5:17; Rom 6:4-8). Because their identity was now interpreted in terms of his identity, they wore his name, as individuals (Acts 11:26; 1 Peter 4:16), and as a community (Rom 16:16; Matt 16:18). And because they believed that in him God had truly been in their midst (Matt 1:23; John 14:7-9), they worshipped him as the Risen One who lived in the midst of his redeemed community (Matt 28:9; Phil 2:9-11; Rev 1:12-18). All who believed his Messianic claims and had come to believe him to be the Messiah (Matt 16:16; John 1:41; 3:13-18; 4:25-26;), he added to his church - his Messianic community (Acts 2:47).

Brought into Existence by God

The church considered itself a people called into existence in fulfillment of the prophecies of the Scriptures. Their existence was the

fulfillment of the promise of God to create a new people for his name out of the house of Israel and of all the peoples of the earth (Jer 31:31-35; Isa 43:8-18-21; 51:4-8; 56:6-8; 62:1-2; 65:13-16); and this name by which they would be called would be a new name:

*For Zion's sake I will not keep silent, for Jerusalem's sake I will not remain quiet, till her righteousness shines out like the dawn, her salvation like a blazing torch. (2) The nations will see your righteousness, and all kings your glory; **you will be called by a new name that the mouth of the Lord will bestow** (Isaiah 62:1-2).*

*You will leave your name to my chosen ones as a curse; the Sovereign Lord will put you to death, but **to his servants he will give another name** (Isaiah 65:15)*

This new community was created out of revelation. At the heart of this new revelation was God himself in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. This is what this in-breaking of God into our world was all about - it was a revelation "of God" from God. Jesus came to show us the Father. "No one has ever seen God," writes John, "the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known (Greek: *exegeomai* - interpret, explain, show the meaning of)." (John 1:18). Jesus of Nazareth was the exegesis (interpretation) of God - he came to show the Father. That which he showed us was none other than "himself" . . .

Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you really knew me, you would know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him." Philip said, "Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us." Jesus answered: "Don't you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? **Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father.** How can you say, 'Show us the Father'?" (John 14:6-9)

Who these early Christians believed themselves to be was rooted in who they believed Jesus of Nazareth to be. They believed that they

were the recipients of new revelation from God and at the center of this revelation stood Jesus of Nazareth. The most essential characteristic of the church of the NT is that its focus, in its preaching and teaching, in its worship, and in all aspect of daily living, Christ was at the center of it all. This is why they were called "Christians" - the new name!

When a community of believers begins to set itself at the center of its concerns and activity, the creation of another type of community other than the original community is usually the result. This is what is important about the designation "the Lord's church." The church is who it is because of its belief in who Jesus is. We interpret ourselves correctly only when we interpret ourselves in terms of our identity as a community of believers, and that belief must centers in "who he is" not "who we are."

Imagery of the Church in the Letters of Paul

There is a certain imagery used to speak of the church in the writings of Paul. One of Paul's greatest gifts is his use of imagery to communicate the story of God's redemption of the human race. He imagery of the church is no exception. He speaks of the church as the body of Christ, the bride of Christ, the epistles of Christ, those called out of darkness into the kingdom of Christ. All of this imagery reveals Paul's inspired insights with reference to how he saw the *hekkelsia tou Christou*:

The Church is a Body

Now you are **the body of Christ**, and each one of you is a part of it (1 Cor 12:17).

And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for **the church, which is his body**, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way (Eph 1:22-23).

There is **one body** and one Spirit - just as you were called to one hope when you were called (Eph 4:4).

*For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of **the church, his body**, of which he is the Savior (Eph 5:23).*

*And he is the head of **the body, the church**; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy (Col 1:18).*

A body (Greek *soma*) is the mass, fullness, or substance of a thing; or parts of something regarded as a unit. It is in this latter sense that the term body is being used here (i.e., individuals considered as a unit or whole - a gathering, assembly, or community). Specifically, here, we are talking about a body of believers.

A Body of Believers

The beliefs of the earliest Christians were closely related to their Jewish heritage: the one God *Yahweh*, the Scriptures, and the Messianic expectation. Their distinction from Judaism, however, lay in their Messianic beliefs. They believed Jesus of Nazareth to be **the Messiah** (Matt 16:16; John 5:25; 10:24-25). They believed him to be a reigning Messiah who had conquered the Satanic forces of darkness by his death, burial, and resurrection and they called him **Lord** (Acts 2:32-36; Phil 2:9-11). They believed him to be a saving Messiah and they called him their **savior** (Luke 2:11; John 4:42; Acts 5:31; 13:23; Phil 3:20; Titus 2:13). And, even more, they believed him to be the very presence and power of God in their midst and they called him **the Son of God** (Matt 3:16-17; 16:16; 17:5; Luke 1:23; John 1:34; 3:18; Acts 9:20; Rom 1:4; 2 Cor 1:19; Eph 4:13; Heb 4:14; 7:3; 1 John 3:8; 4:15; 5:5; 5:20; Rev 2:18).

This concept is clearly present in the letters of Paul. The church is a body of believers and this imagery is seen throughout his letters:

*For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation **for everyone who believes**, for the Jew first and also for the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, "The just shall live **by faith**" (Rom 1:16-17).*

. . . that if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and **believe** in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one **believes** unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation. For the Scripture says, "**Whoever believes on Him** will not be put to shame," (Rom 10:9-11).

Who then is Paul, and who is Apollos, but **ministers through whom you believed**, as the Lord gave to each one? For I am the least of the apostles, who am not worthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me was not in vain; but I labored more abundantly than they all, yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me. Therefore, whether it was I or they, so we preach and so **you believed** (1 Cor 15:9-11).

A Body of Baptized Believers

From the New Testament we learn that by being baptized into Christ one is baptized the body:

*The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ. For **we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body** - whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free - and we were all given the one Spirit to drink (1 Cor 12:12-13).*

*Or do you not know that **as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death**? Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life (Rom 6:3-4).*

*For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For **as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ**. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for **you are all one in Christ Jesus** (Gal 3:27-28).*

A point of no little significance is that in the New Testament it is always a **believer** (i.e., one capable of belief) who is baptized (cf. Mark 16:16; Acts 2:36-41; 5:14; 16:30-34).

Called Out of Darkness

In the letters of Paul, the church is a body of baptized believers who have been called out (an *ekklesia*) of the darkness (i.e., the dominion of Satan). Paul portrays this world as the realm of the prince of the powers of the air (Eph 2:2; 6:12), or the realm of darkness wherein the power sin is at work (Acts 26:18). All men who yield to a life of sin enslave themselves to the power of sin (Rom 6:6-7, 12, 16-18). Deliverance from this power may only be effected through conversion to Christ, wherein the powers that are at work in our lives "in Christ" are greater than the power of sin at work in our lives if we are in the darkness. All those who are a part of the community of believers (i.e., the church) have been "called out of darkness."

For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth) and find out what pleases the Lord. Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them (Eph 5:8-11).

. . . so that as sin reigned in death, even so grace might reign through righteousness to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord (Rom 5:21).

So I tell you this, and insist on it in the Lord, that you must no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their thinking. They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts. (Having lost all sensitivity, they have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, with a continual lust for more. You, however, did not come to know Christ that way. Surely you heard of him and were taught in him in accordance with the truth that is in Jesus. You were taught, with

regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness (Eph 4:17-24).

*For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against **the powers of this dark world** and against **the spiritual forces of evil** in the heavenly realms (Eph 6:12).*

Called Out of Darkness into Light

The church is a body of baptized believers called out of darkness into light (i.e out of the reign of sin into the reign of grace). Conversion to Christ is deliverance out of darkness (wherein the power of sin is at work) into the light (wherein the power of grace is at work). In Rom 5:20 Paul set up this very contrast:

But where sin increased, grace increased all the more, so that, just as **sin reigned** in death, so also **grace might reign** through righteousness to bring eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord (Rom 5:20-21).

Just as sin is portrayed as a reigning power [and our world is clear evidence of this reality], grace is also portrayed as a reigning power. Where sin is the power of evil at work in the world, Paul defines grace as the power of God's goodness at work in the world, or more specifically; in our lives. It is "in Christ" that we have access to this grace (reigning power of God's goodness), (2 Tim 2:1). When one becomes a Christian, in the imagery used by Paul, he is translated out of the darkness and the reigning power of sin into the light and the reigning power of grace.

For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you and asking God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding. And we pray this in order that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and may please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in

*the knowledge of God, being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience, and joyfully giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints **in the kingdom of light**. For he has rescued us **from the dominion of darkness** and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins (Col 1:9-14).*

*As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when **you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient**. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath. But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions - it is by grace you have been saved. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus (Eph 2:1-7).*

This concept is also found in the writings of Peter:

*But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who **called you out of darkness into his wonderful light**. (1 Peter 2:9).*

The church, in the theology of Paul, is a body of baptized believers called out of darkness (i.e., the reign of Satan) into the light (i.e., the reign of Christ). This is Paul's understanding of who these people are he called the *ekklesia*. These are they who constitute "the Lord's church."

Conclusion

The church that best serves Jesus and the communities of this world is the church that realizes who they are and what their

purpose is as the Lord's church. This means the church must realize that it is not "a saving entity;" rather, it is an entity made up of "those who have been saved." The church assuming for itself the role of "savior" is a church that has usurped the role of its Lord. Jesus is the Savior of the body (Eph 5:23), his church is the community of those who recognize Jesus as their Savior.

The primary function of the church, from its inception in the first century, has to do with its role as a trustee of the faith. The church is a community of faith, a community of believers. Its concern centers on who Jesus of Nazareth is believed to be by those who are members of the church. Its function as a community of faith concerns the celebration of their faith, the growth or edification of their faith, and the sharing of their faith with one another and others throughout their community and the communities of the world.

This role has not always been clear to those who consider themselves the church; especially, with those who consider themselves invested with the power to grant redemption because they are spokespersons of the church. From the second century AD to the present, those considering themselves the representatives of the church or the voice of the church have assumed the church to be a saving institution and thus invested with the power to grant or withhold redemption for whom they choose. In this way many institutions calling themselves the Lord's church have become nothing more than political power structures and have completely lost their true identity as the community of Christ.

This is why the church is exclusively a community of faith. Controlling the community, nation or country or society at large is not the purview of the church. The Lord's church is a community, made up of smaller communities, consisting of all those who are baptized believers called out of the darkness of the Satanic influences this world into the light where God is found through belief in Jesus Christ. Those who are members of this body of believers have confessed Christ as Lord and have received him as their Savior. Their focus of faith centers in Jesus, whom they believe to be the Christ, the Son of God, the one who was "God with us" and "one of us." He is

Lord in the midst of his community, and his lordship is celebrated by this community of believer in the various assemblies of the church throughout the world. Because he our Lord he is our Savior and these titles and the roles associated with them belong him and him alone.

MWLIII

Questions for Discussions

1. What do you understand by the words: church, community, sect, and denomination?
2. Discuss the concept of first century Christianity portrayed in the opening paragraphs of this lesson. What is important about this way of seeing the early structure of Christianity?
3. What do you understand by the terms: Christian and Christianity?
4. What is significant about the Greek term *ekklesia*, translated "church" in the NT?
5. If the church is "a community of believers," what beliefs are essential to this community?
6. What do you understand by the expressions: the Lord's Supper, the Lord's Day, the Lord's Church?
7. How was the church brought into existence by God?
8. Discuss the definition of the church as reflected in the letters of Paul: a body / a body of believers / a body of baptized believers / who have been called out of darkness / into the light.
9. What, in your thinking, should be the function of a community of believes who understand themselves to be the Lord's church?
10. Discuss the church of which you are a part in terms of this lesson.