

Defining The Church

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Brethren, if you look through the New Testament, one of the themes that we see talked about is the Church of God. If you think about it in terms of the word church itself, it is something that we use in various ways in our common language today. In the Church of God, we will refer to being in the church or when you came into the church or we're going to church today or things of that nature.

Also, you just look at our greater society, particularly here in the U.S. and English speaking countries. Oftentimes when you hear the word church used, it's probably used in two contexts. One is referring to a physical building where people meet. People might say, "Down the street there's a church; there's a Baptist church, there's a Catholic church." They are referring to the actual physical building where people are meeting at.

Sometimes we use the word church to refer to a corporation, like the Catholic Church or the Baptist Church or XYZ Church of God organization. We use it as what we would refer to in the U.S. as a 501(c)(3). That's the legal status of how a non-profit organization is incorporated. When churches are started up, they are a 501(c)(3) corporation. That may not mean anything to all of you outside the U.S., but that's how it's done in the United States.

You can see we use the word church in a variety of meanings in our culture today. It's important to understand when we are reading the Bible and we are looking and have seen the word church used all throughout the New Testament, not only in understanding how that term is used, but even associated concepts that are based upon the meaning of church there. It's important for us to understand what the Bible means when it uses the word church. We see it all throughout the New Testament.

What we are going to do today is understand this particular word. When you see the word church in the New Testament, it is coming from the Greek word "ekklesia." That is a word that can be used in a variety of contexts. I think it's important to understand that to understand the different references to how the church is talked about in the Bible and again to also understand some associated concepts related to that. That will make more sense as we go on further today. If you would like a title for this sermon it's

Defining The Church

We're going to focus on is the word ekklesia, which is the word that you see when you see the English word church in the English Bible, the Greek word ekklesia is what's being referred to. If you look throughout the New Testament, the word ekklesia is used one hundred and fourteen times, so it's used quite a bit throughout the whole New Testament. It doesn't always refer to the Church of God. We are even going to see

some examples today where that word is used for groups that are not even affiliated with the Church of God.

To understand how all of this is utilized let's first of all understand what the word itself actually means. The Greek word "ekklesia" is Strong's number 1517 and according to Thayer's Greek Lexicon by Joseph Thayer it's defined as *a gathering of citizens called out from their homes into some public place, an assembly*. If you have been around the Church of God for a number of years, you have probably heard this word referred to as the assembly or the called out ones. You can see from that definition I just quoted that that is consistent with how it's used. I want to first of all point out that it doesn't refer to a building. Oftentimes in English today in our common culture we refer to a church. We say, "There's a church down the street," and we're referring to the physical building that's there or again we're referring to a corporation. As we're going to see, neither one of those definitions accurately describe what the Bible means when it uses this particular term. This particular term can be used in a variety of contexts.

The first thing we are going to do today is look at the broadest sense that this word can be used. The broadest sense it can be used as is referring to everyone who is called into a New Covenant relationship, offered salvation and is basically considered called out ones or assembly as a part of God's church. That means all of those in a New Covenant relationship who are being given an opportunity for salvation. In this broadest sense it can refer to that entire collective group regardless of location or even the time in which they lived. To see that let's turn over to Matthew 16:17-18. What we're going to look at here is the scripture where it's the very first time that ekklesia is used in the New Testament. Just to give a little bit of context that leads up to this, Christ asked the apostles, "Who do people say that I am?" He gets their answers. Some say He's Elijah. Some say He is John the Baptist and other things. Then He turns around to the apostles and said, "Who do you think I am?" Peter's response is, "You are the Son of the living God."

Matthew 16:17. *Jesus answered and said to him, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in heaven.*

18) And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church [ekklesia], and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it. (NKJV)

What He is referring to here by the "gates of Hades" is the grave. He is saying that the gates of the grave shall not prevail against it. What He is saying is this group is never going to die out. It's going to last throughout time and we're not going to ever reach a point where it expired; everybody died out and there's nobody left. By virtue of explaining it like that He's obviously referring to a group here that exists throughout time. He's not limiting it to location or timeframe. He's saying that of all of those He has called into a New Covenant relationship regardless of when they lived. That's the only way that He could say that the grave will never prevail against it; it'll never die out. All throughout time it's going to exist is what He is referring to here. If we turn over to Colossians 1, we will see this term used again in its broadest sense. We will also see a

little more clear definition of exactly what qualifies as being a part of this group. It's referred to as the called out ones or the assembly. It's referring to those in this context who have been called into a New Covenant relationship and are being offered salvation. In Colossians 1:18 it is referring to Jesus Christ. He says:

Colossians 1:18. *And He is the head of the body, the church ... (NKJV)*

This is the ekklesia. Notice that this ekklesia is referred to as the body. As we are going to see the body of Christ is another way that this is described.

18b) ... who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in all things He may have the preeminence. (NKJV)

Skip down to verse 24 and we'll pick up on this.

24) I now rejoice in my sufferings for you, and fill up in my flesh what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ, for the sake of His body, which is the church (NKJV)

It is the ekklesia. In other words name, another way to describe the church is the body of Christ is what he is saying. Continue in verses 25-26.

*25) of which I became a minister according to the stewardship from God which was given to me for you, to fulfill the word of God,
26) the mystery which has been hidden from ages and from generations, but now has been revealed to His saints. (NKJV)*

This is another clue as to who is being referred to as this assembly or called out ones. These are the saints. These are those called into a New Covenant relationship. What we are using here is the broadest definition of this particular word. You will see why I am saying that here shortly. It's referring to all of those called into this relationship regardless of location, regardless of timeframe.

To see another example of this, turn over to Ephesians 5:22-32. In the section of scripture, the primary thing that Paul is talking about is Biblical gender roles. He is basically talking about the roles that God has established in marriage, because they are unique and different, even though we are in a culture today that wants to think that gender is a social construct and doesn't really exist. The Bible is very clear that God designed men and women differently and He defines through these scriptures the role He wants a husband to play and the role He wants a wife to play that are distinctly different and they complement one another. Notice as we read through this, one of the things that's weaved throughout this whole discussion here that Paul is talking about with gender roles is the relationship between Jesus Christ and the church. When he's referring to church here again it's the Greek word ekklesia. Just notice as we go through this when he's talking about the relationship of the church we see a little more who the church is.

Ephesians 5:22. *Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord.*
23) *For the husband is head of the wife, as also Christ is head of the church [ekklesia]; and He is the Savior of the body.*
24) *Therefore, just as the church is subject to Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in everything.*
25) *Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her,*
26) *that He might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word,*
27) *that He might present her to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish.*
28) *So husbands ought to love their own wives as their own bodies; he who loves his wife loves himself.*
29) *For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as the Lord does the church [ekklesia].*
30) *For we are members of His body, of His flesh and of His bones.*
31) *"For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh."*
32) *This is a great mystery, but I speak concerning Christ and the church [ekklesia]. (NKJV)*

We won't take the time to look at this, but if you read through Revelation 21 and 22, everyone who has made it has been born into the Kingdom of God. Everything is spiritual. The physical has been done away with. You basically see three major parties referred to in those two chapters; God the Father, the Son, Jesus Christ, and the Bride of Christ, which is the church as we've seen. This is using the term ekklesia in its broadest form. This is everybody who is called into a New Covenant relationship and given the opportunity of salvation regardless of when or where that they lived.

Just to understand the associated concepts with this, notice by this definition, it's not a building neither is it a corporation. It's not defined by corporational boundaries. It's everyone that God has decided to call and is working with through His spirit. Now the reason I point that out today is if you have been in the church for any length of time, a common misunderstanding is we look in the Bible where it refers to God having one true church, but in our minds we substitute that with a corporational definition that God only works through your particular 501(c)(3) organization. Everything is defined by the boundaries of that organization. I'm sure that if you've been around in the Church of God for any length of time, you've seen this type of mentality.

Individuals will say that God only works through a particular Church of God organization and a particular leader. If you're not in that organization, you're not in a right relationship with God and you may not be in the Kingdom of God. You're risking not being in the place of safety because you've got to be in this particular organization. That's the only one that God works with. I like to sarcastically call this the "God only works where we tell Him He can" idea, because basically that's the mentality people

have. It's like we get to define and tell God where He works. The Bible very directly addresses this mentality. It severely condemns it. There is no excuse for this mentality, if we're willing to be honest with the Bible. Let's turn over now to Mark 9:38 and notice this. We're going to notice something the apostles say to Christ that is directly relevant to this particular subject and see how Christ addressed it.

Mark 9:38. *Now John answered Him, saying, "Teacher, we saw someone who does not follow us casting out demons in Your name, and we forbade him because he does not follow us." (NKJV)*

Notice their logic. They saw a guy who was casting out demons. They didn't say he was claiming to cast out demons, but he was a fraud. They didn't make that allegation. They said he's casting out demons and he's doing it in Christ's name. He recognizes who Christ is, that He's the Messiah. He's properly using this and most importantly if he's truly casting out demons, he is being backed up by God the Father with the power to do this. He is legitimate by virtue of what's happening here. They're not taking issue of what he's teaching or how he's behaving. They're not saying that he's leading people astray teaching heresy or he's living a double life and he's not living what he preaches. They didn't say that. Their whole issue with him is we forbade him because he does not follow us.

Let's put that in twenty first century language. "We forbade him because he's not in our corporate organization." That's what they're saying. Now notice in verses 39-41 Christ's response to this.

39) But Jesus said, "Do not forbid him, for no one who works a miracle in My name can soon afterward speak evil of Me.

40) For he who is not against us is on our side.

41) For whoever gives you a cup of water to drink in My name, because you belong to Christ, assuredly, I say to you, he will by no means lose his reward. (NKJV)

Christ is correcting them for this, telling them they have the wrong approach. Realize they're not taking issue with a legitimate Biblical issue. In other words we should always examine fruits. We should always compare what someone teaches to God's word. We should always have the approach of don't believe me, believe your Bible and be like the Bereans and search the scriptures to see if what they're teaching is true. If it's not true, then that's a legitimate issue to take up with someone. If they're living a double life and they're preaching one thing and living another, that's a very legitimate issue. What he's specifically addressing here is that they forbade him because he was not in their corporate organization. He absolutely condemns this and the Bible condemns this multiple times. Turn over to 1 Corinthians 1:10-17.

1 Corinthians 1:10. *Now I plead with you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions*

among you, but that you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment.

11) For it has been declared to me concerning you, my brethren, by those of Chloe's household, that there are contentions among you.

12) Now I say this, that each of you says, "I am of Paul," or "I am of Apollos," or "I am of Cephas," or "I am of Christ."

13) Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?

14) I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius,

15) lest anyone should say that I had baptized in my own name.

16) Yes, I also baptized the household of Stephanas. Besides, I do not know whether I baptized any other.

17) For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel, not with wisdom of words, lest the cross of Christ should be made of no effect. (NKJV)

Notice the whole issue he's addressing here is "I follow Apollos, I follow Paul." Does that not sound familiar? Today it's more often done with corporational names than it is with individual minister's names, but it's the same mentality. It's the same logic. Understand I'm not endorsing everyone who claims to be a part of a Church of God group and all of their teachings; not by any means. We should always evaluate teachings against the Bible. Search the scriptures to see if these things are true. We should always evaluate fruits of behavior, but that's not what the issue is. They're trying to say this guy is superior to that guy and if you're legitimate you have to be following this guy. Notice what else Paul has to say about this. Turn over to 1 Corinthians 3:1-4.

1 Corinthians 3:1. *And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual people but as to carnal, as to babes in Christ.*

2) I fed you with milk and not with solid food; for until now you were not able to receive it, and even now you are still not able;

3) for you are still carnal. For where there are envy, strife, and divisions among you, are you not carnal and behaving like mere men? (NKJV)

Notice what he gives as an example next is the evidence that they are behaving as carnal, immature children.

4) For when one says, "I am of Paul," and another, "I am of Apollos," are you not carnal? (NKJV)

What is so ironic about this to me is when I see this mentality in our Church of God environment today, where people are saying that the group they attend with is the only Church of God organization that God's working through. That normally comes with claims that they are spiritual giants, the most mature, and the ones that have it all together. Paul thought the opposite. He thought by making that claim you are identifying yourself as the carnal and the immature not as the spiritual giants who are the ones that we should all follow. These are the people you should run from is what Paul is saying. Notice verses 5-17 where he explains how God actually works.

- 5) *Who then is Paul, and who is Apollos, but ministers through whom you believed, as the Lord gave to each one?*
- 6) *I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase.*
- 7) *So then neither he who plants is anything, nor he who waters, but God who gives the increase.*
- 8) *Now he who plants and he who waters are one, and each one will receive his own reward according to his own labor.*
- 9) *For we are God's fellow workers; you are God's field, you are God's building.*
- 10) *According to the grace of God which was given to me, as a wise master builder I have laid the foundation, and another builds on it. But let each one take heed how he builds on it.*
- 11) *For no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ.*
- 12) *Now if anyone builds on this foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw,*
- 13) *each one's work will become clear; for the Day will declare it, because it will be revealed by fire; and the fire will test each one's work, of what sort it is.*
- 14) *If anyone's work which he has built on it endures, he will receive a reward.*
- 15) *If anyone's work is burned, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire.*
- 16) *Do you not know that you are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?*
- 17) *If anyone defiles the temple of God, God will destroy him. For the temple of God is holy, which temple you are. (NKJV)*

He's saying that God works through numerous people and nobody cornered the market on having all of the gifts and all knowledge on all subjects. It just doesn't work that way.

The best way I know how to kind of make an analogy of this is several years ago Rick Railston did a multiple part sermon series on the subject of marriage. He made an interesting point which I think is an adequate analogy for what we're trying to address here. He was talking about how men and women are different. The way he worded it is he said, "God gave some of His character traits to the man and some of His character traits to the woman. You inherently were designed differently. We have different strengths and weaknesses." The point he was trying to make was that neither one of them cornered the market. Both have their own unique strengths and weaknesses and complement each other in working together.

Well, God tends to do that with ministers as well. There are different talents, different strengths He gives to different people to complement together. Now understand I'm not trying to say that everyone who claims to be a part of a Church of God and is a teacher today, is someone you should follow. I'm not suggesting that at all. We should always be like the Bereans and search the scriptures to see if what is being taught is accurate, because there's lots of heresy out there today. We should always be evaluating fruits of behavior. We're going to look at that shortly here in Galatians 5. It gives us the good

list and the bad list and they're all character traits. We should always be looking at it like that. As human beings we can get the idea that we like a particular leader and he has it all. He understands everything perfectly.

When all of this is done and hopefully we all get born in the first resurrection and make it to the marriage supper and we're sitting around the table, there will be one and only individual there who can honestly make the claim that when He walked the earth, He understood everything perfectly and taught it exactly right. His name is Jesus Christ. There will be nobody else there who can make that claim because we're all fallible. We all have our limitations. We all have our shortcomings and we all have more to learn. That's why we can always be growing in grace and knowledge, because we just don't have everything figured out. We are striving for that. I think it's important to understand that, particularly in today's Church of God environment.

I am not by any means giving a blanket endorsement of everyone who claims to be a teacher in the Church of God, because there is a plethora of crazy ideas out there. The whole idea of thinking we've cornered the market in this group and we have nothing more to learn and everybody else is illegitimate who's not with us is just a very, very carnal mentality. In fact, it is listed as one of the works of the flesh. Turn over to Galatians 5:19. You are probably familiar that this particular chapter gives the good list and the bad list. It gives you the list of the works of the flesh and of the fruits of God's spirit. When God tells us to examine the fruits, this is the list He's referring to, the list of character traits and how well we're following God's instructions. What we're going to focus on right now is the list of the works of the flesh and one of them in particular. We are going to read Galatians 5:19-21

Galatians 5:19. *Now the works of the flesh are evident, which are: adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lewdness, 20) idolatry, sorcery, hatred, contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, dissensions ... (NKJV)*

We're going to come back to this one.

20b) ... heresies, 21) envy, murders, drunkenness, revelries, and the like; of which I tell you beforehand, just as I also told you in time past, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. (NKJV)

In other words this is the list of character traits that when you see these you want to try to get this out of your own life and you want to run in the other direction from those who exhibit this type of lack of character in their example. As I mentioned here, we're going to come back to where it says dissensions. What I just read to you I read out of the New King James Version. When it mentions dissensions, it doesn't always give us a real clear picture of what exactly Paul is trying to address here. However, if you read The Living Bible's translation of this, it paints a very, very clear picture. I just love this

definition. I'm going to read to you word for word what The Living Bible states instead of saying dissensions, here's what it says.

20)... the feeling that everyone else is wrong except those in your own little group ... (TLB)

Could you not get more hitting the nail on the head than that? The very idea of we've cornered the market on God. We're the apple of His eye. We have everything together and everybody else is wrong. If anybody else wants to be legitimate in a relationship with God, well they have to join our group. Is that not what we hear a lot today? The Bible directly says this is a work of the flesh. Anyone who makes this type of claim and says this organization is the only right one and you've got to be following this organization, realize they have immediately disqualified their claim of spiritual superiority. Normally, we have it the most together. We're the most enlightened. We're the apple of God's eye and you should be with us. By virtue of making that claim they basically just put a stamp on their head of I'm carnal and immature and behaving as a babe. That's the way Paul described it. That's directly what's happening there.

Let's get back to our main subject here. As I started off we were looking at the word ekklesia. As I mentioned, you can just translate it as the assembly or the called out ones. As we are going to see later today, it doesn't always refer to the Church of God. Of the hundred and fourteen times it's used throughout the New Testament it is most often referring to the Church of God, but not always. As I mentioned, there are a number of nuances of meaning that it's important to understand with this particular word to have a total understanding of this in the various ways that it's used. The broadest form that it can be used is the idea of all of God's people that are called into a New Covenant relationship regardless of where they lived or what time they lived in. The term is used a number of times in the Bible in that sense.

However, it's also used in other senses where it more narrowly defined what it's referring to. It can also refer to just a single congregation in a particular city and not everyone included in that, just the church over in this particular area. In other words we are talking about a particular congregation in a particular town. Let's notice that in 1 Corinthians 1:1-3.

*1 Corinthians 1:1. Paul, called to be an apostle of Jesus Christ through the will of God, and Sosthenes our brother,
2) To the Church of God which is at Corinth ... (NKJV)*

Notice he is using the word ekklesia here, but he is obviously referring in this part of the sentence just specifically to the church that's there in the city of Corinth. He's referring to a specific congregation. He is not always using it in the broad sense. Now it's very specific to one location. When you read the rest of the sentence here you notice he also then makes a reference to the church in general.

2b) ... to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, with all who in every place call on the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, both theirs and ours:

3) Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. (NKJV)

Notice he also further defined who this assembly, these called out ones are; those who are called to be saints, have been called to a relationship with Jesus Christ and God the Father. So, we're talking about those in a New Covenant relationship, but notice he uses this reference to in two ways. One is specifically the church in Corinth, but then he also opens it up knowing that this letter is going to be read by lots of people over time and he says all those that are called into this relationship. The word can be used a couple of ways here. Turn over to 1 Thessalonians 1:1 and we'll see another reference to a specific congregation.

***1 Thessalonians 1:1.** Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. (NKJV)*

Again, he is specifically referring to the ekklesia of the Thessalonians, those in the area of Thessalonica. He is using the term pretty specifically. It can certainly be used to refer to everyone called into a New Covenant relationship, but in this case he's just talking about those in the Thessalonica area. I just want you to understand how the word can be used in different nuances of meaning and to completely understand it in associated concepts we have to realize this.

Not only can the word be used in the broad sense of everybody who's called in a New Covenant relationship, it can also be used in the sense of a specific congregation in a particular town. It can also refer to a cluster of congregations in a geographical region. Notice that in 1 Corinthians 16:1.

***1 Corinthians 16:1.** Now concerning the collection for the saints, as I have given orders to the churches of Galatia, so you must do also: (NKJV)*

Notice it's plural, churches. In the next several verses he goes into detail in regards to this collection and how he wants them to do that. What I want you to notice is he is using the word ekklesia here. It's plural and he's referring specifically to just those in the area of Galatia, because Galatia was more of a geographic region obviously having more than one congregation associated with it. He is using the term in that sense just to refer to that cluster of congregations in a plural sense in one area. We see a variety of ways that this can be utilized. Also look at verse 19.

19) The churches of Asia greet you. ... (NKJV)

We are going to come back to this scripture later and read the rest of it. Notice here again he's using the term churches, ekklesia, plural and now we're talking about the region of Asia. For another example, turn to 1 Corinthians 4:14-17.

1 Corinthians 4:14. *I do not write these things to shame you, but as my beloved children I warn you.*

15) For though you might have ten thousand instructors in Christ ... (NKJV)

Notice he's referring to the fact that God works through a number of individuals. He uses them all together for His purposes. It's not just one individual.

15b) ... yet you do not have many fathers; for in Christ Jesus I have begotten you through the gospel. (NKJV)

He was the main person that started the churches in these areas.

16) Therefore I urge you, imitate me.

17) For this reason I have sent Timothy to you, who is my beloved and faithful son in the Lord, who will remind you of my ways in Christ, as I teach everywhere in every church. (NKJV)

Notice again we are identifying individual congregations. You can refer to reasons. You can refer to the whole group in general. There are a variety of ways that this particular term can be used.

Another way I want you to see how this can be utilized is it can also specifically refer to a small handful of people meeting in a living room. The Bible literally makes at least four different references specifically to congregations in a house. The reason I point that out is if you have been around in the church for a number of years and particularly experienced the days of the Worldwide Church of God, it was very common to have a sizeable local congregation in your area. It may have been one hundred, two hundred, three hundred. In the Dallas-Fort Worth area, back before the breakup of Worldwide there were five congregations. There were three in Dallas. There were two in Fort Worth. When you got them all together on a holy day, it was two thousand five hundred people. That was all just in a geographic area, a couple of thousand people that lived there. Of course, it's nowhere near that size today. If you put all of the church groups together, you might get a third of all of that in terms of all of the numbers. I don't know the exact numbers, but it's gone down dramatically. That was a common situation, particularly in the U.S. back in the heyday of Worldwide of having large congregations everywhere and lots of social structure around it. Even today in some of your larger organizations it may be still common to have a congregation of some size in a particular area and again all of the social structure that comes with that. Sometimes people who experienced that think that a few people in a living room watching a DVD or listening on a phone line is not church. They think you have to have a rented hall and a big group of people and elders and deacons and special music and all of that available. That's a church.

That doesn't match with Paul's letters. We are going to see here that Paul, at least four different times, specifically mentions churches that are meeting in someone's home and speaks very favorably of it. Turn over to Romans 16:3-5. I also want you to notice here how positively he speaks of Priscilla and Aquila.

Romans 16:3. *Greet Priscilla and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus, 4) who risked their own necks for my life, to whom not only I give thanks, but also all the churches of the Gentiles. (NKJV)*

Notice he is not saying they're second class citizens and they were barely a part of it. No, he's holding them up as heroes and saying these people risked their lives for me. I appreciate them and everybody appreciates them because they're great.

5) Likewise greet the church that is in their house. (NKJV)

They had a congregation in their living room is the situation he's describing here. We obviously don't know how many people that we're talking about here, but generally if you are meeting in a house, that's normally a fairly small group. I've seen situations a number of times in our modern day context where you might have thirty, forty people or more meeting in a living room, if you have a sizeable home. More often than not if someone's meeting in a living room, it's a number of people you can count on your fingers or an individual or just a couple of families or something of that nature is not unusual today. This is not unheard of in church history by any means. Paul is addressing this, as we are going to see, multiple times. He doesn't say they meet in a living room, so they're not really a church. He's holding these people up as everyone appreciates them because they're shining examples, even though they're meeting in a living room. Notice, he mentions these two individuals twice. Turn to 1 Corinthians 16:19. I am going to go back and include the latter part of a verse that we looked at just a minute ago.

1 Corinthians 16:19. *The churches of Asia greet you. Aquila and Priscilla greet you heartily in the Lord, with the church that is in their house. (NKJV)*

These two are hosting a congregation of some size. We don't know what the numbers are. These two get mentioned twice in the Bible specifically for hosting a church in their house.

There are two other examples that address the same thing with different individuals. Turn over to the book of Philemon verses 1-2. It's a tiny little book that's only about a chapter long, easy to miss since it's only about one page.

Philemon 1. *Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, to Philemon our beloved friend and fellow laborer, 2) to the beloved Apphia, Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church in your house: (NKJV)*

Once again we have a group meeting in a living room and they're referred to as the ekklesia, the same terminology used to refer to a cluster of congregations, to an individual congregation or to all of God's people throughout time together. It's the same exact word and they are treated just as legitimately. Also turn over to Colossians 4:15

Colossians 4:15. *Greet the brethren who are in Laodicea, and Nymphas and the church that is in his house. (NKJV)*

Once again we're referring to a group called an ekklesia, the assembly, the called out ones, that are brought together and they're actually meeting in a living room. Again, we can't know exactly how many people we're talking about here.

Now let's also look at another area where it's important to understand the nuances of meanings of ekklesia. Let's turn over to Matthew 18:15-16. I mentioned before when we were in Matthew 16 that that was the very first time in the New Testament that the word ekklesia was used and what we're about to read here is the second time that it's used.

Matthew 18:15. *"Moreover if your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother. 16) But if he will not hear, take with you one or two more, that 'by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.'" (NKJV)*

As you can see, Christ is giving the instructions here of how to deal with conflicts between individuals, of how to go about addressing something to try to resolve a conflict and work out an issue.

Just as a side note before we go onto the next verse, which is going to be my main focus here, I just want to point out in verse 16 when he is referring to take a witness with you it's important to understand what he's really getting at here. What you really want is someone who can speak to the original behavior, the source of the conflict to begin with. Oftentimes when people see this they are in a conflict with another individual and they're trying to go through this process. They bring their good friend with them who they trust and have a good relationship with, not necessarily someone that the other person that they're in conflict with has any meaningful relationship with. Their friend is not necessarily a witness to the behavior that's the source of the conflict. That really doesn't solve anything, because if the other party is going to go, of course your friend agrees with you. You brought your buddy that you knew was your good friend and was going to take your side. What does that prove? If you look at this by two or three witnesses and you look at the references in the Old Testament, what you'll see is when Moses is talking about that in his writings he's referring to additional witnesses who saw the original behavior, who can say yes, I was there. I saw you do it or I've experienced you in other contexts and that same behavior that he's talking about is a pattern, because I've seen you do that too. That type of thing is what you're looking for. At a minimum you want someone that the other party you're in conflict with respects their

opinion. Otherwise what's going to happen is both parties just bring their good friends who are going to take their side and it really solves nothing. What I want to focus on here is in verse 17.

17) And if he refuses to hear them, tell it to the church. But if he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector. (NKJV)

Now this particular verse gets debated these days in the Church of God. Historically the Church of God in general has taken the point of view that when it refers to church here, it's referring to the leadership of an organization. It's basically saying take it to the ministry. Take it to the leaders in your area who can help to try to resolve a conflict.

The counter argument to that always goes like this: "Well, no the Greek word that Christ used here was ekklesia. Ekklesia means the people. That means you air the issue before the whole congregation and all of the other people. You take it to all of them and then let everybody weigh in on it." First of all, let us just take this from a practical wisdom standpoint. As we started off in this sermon, I mentioned ekklesia can be used as a very broad term, not only to refer to all of the people that are called into a New Covenant relationship alive today, but it can refer to everybody throughout time. Of course he's obviously not talking about taking a conflict to people who aren't alive anymore. At the same time look at this with our modern day technology. You could take that concept and say well, everyone called in the New Covenant relationship, let's put it on the internet and email everybody out there in the world and get everybody to weigh in on this. You could literally take it to that extreme. Normally that's not how people take this particular issue. They say it's referring to the congregation in your area and you take it to the whole congregation.

First of all, before we even get into looking at the meaning of the word I am going to walk this through from a practical wisdom standpoint, you might say. Assume you have a congregation of a hundred or more people and you have two people with a complex conflict that's gone on for a while with them. You take the attitude of okay ekklesia is the people. Let's air it to the whole group. Consider the group that you're doing this with. If you have a group of a hundred or more people in that regard, you have everything from your seasoned long-term Christian, who may be very familiar with God's word and very much developed in the maturity of their life, all of the way to maybe your new person just baptized last week. Even amongst your people you might say that have been around longer and been more mature, that doesn't automatically speak to maturity and how well that they deal with particular issues. You have a whole variety of concepts here, of people in different places here that you could throw this out to. If you have all of them weighing into this, what you're going to wind up with in many cases is not only kind of chaos in terms of mass opinion on this. You're going to get lots of people in debates now. The person A, who wasn't even involved in the original conflict is now mad at person B, who wasn't involved in it either. They had no problem with each other, but they took different sides on this particular issue and they both dug in on what the issue is. Now they are mad at each other. You have created mass chaos is what is the result of this. If you look at this from a practical wisdom standpoint,

and if you've ever worked with conflict resolution in this regard, everything points to that's not what Christ was talking about. That never really satisfies, in my experience, individuals who point out that no, ekklesia means the people and that means you take it to everybody.

We've already seen ekklesia can have lots of different nuances of meaning. We also have to ask the question: Can the word ekklesia refer to the leadership of an assembly and not just to all of the people? The answer is yes. Turn over to Acts 19:21-41. What you are going to see here in the section that we're going to read is the word ekklesia is used a couple of times here. In every case in this particular chapter it's not referring to the Church of God. It's just referring to an assembly of people.

Acts 19:21. *When these things were accomplished, Paul purposed in the Spirit, when he had passed through Macedonia and Achaia, to go to Jerusalem, saying, "After I have been there, I must also see Rome."*

22) *So he sent into Macedonia two of those who ministered to him, Timothy and Erastus, but he himself stayed in Asia for a time.*

23) *And about that time there arose a great commotion about the Way.*

24) *For a certain man named Demetrius, a silversmith, who made silver shrines of Diana, brought no small profit to the craftsmen.*

25) *He called them together with the workers of similar occupation, and said: "Men, you know that we have our prosperity by this trade.*

26) *Moreover you see and hear that not only at Ephesus, but throughout almost all Asia, this Paul has persuaded and turned away many people, saying that they are not gods which are made with hands.*

27) *So not only is this trade of ours in danger of falling into disrepute, but also the temple of the great goddess Diana may be despised and her magnificence destroyed, whom all Asia and the world worship."*

28) *Now when they heard this, they were full of wrath and cried out, saying, "Great is Diana of the Ephesians!"*

29) *So the whole city was filled with confusion, and rushed into the theater with one accord, having seized Gaius and Aristarchus, Macedonians, Paul's travel companions.*

30) *And when Paul wanted to go in to the people, the disciples would not allow him. (NKJV)*

Just notice what's taking place here. Demetrius, it says, is a silversmith. He's basically making idols of Diana and he's making a lot of money selling these, as well as a number of craftsmen. Paul and others are going in the area and preaching that these are pagan gods. They're not legitimate. You don't want to be worshipping that. As people are coming to Christianity, they're not buying the idols any more. This is hurting their business. Obviously, he does not like this. What we are about see here is what he's trying to do is to stir up the people to a mob decision and turn them all against Paul and his followers basically to stomp out this threat. As we read here, all of the people rushed into the theater kind of all upset about this. Let's notice when we read the rest of the account here, they are referred to as the assembly, the ekklesia.

31) Then some of the officials of Asia, who were his friends, sent to him pleading that he would not venture into the theater. (NKJV)

They were trying to keep Paul from going in there.

32) Some therefore cried one thing and some another, for the assembly was confused ... (NKJV)

He's referring to the ekklesia. If you look up the Greek word there we're talking about the ekklesia is this assembly of people that's come together. It has nothing to do with the Church of God, but that's the same Greek word that we're using.

32b) ... and most of them did not know why they had come together.

33) And they drew Alexander out of the multitude, the Jews putting him forward. And Alexander motioned with his hand, and wanted to make his defense to the people.

34) But when they found out that he was a Jew, all with one voice cried out for about two hours, "Great is Diana of the Ephesians!" (NKJV)

Notice you have a crowd of people here who are emotionally stirred up and they don't even want to hear what the facts are. This is what can happen with mob rule. They've got all of their emotions stirred up. They don't even want to hear what the counter arguments are or get the facts to make a judgment on an issue.

35) And when the city clerk had quieted the crowd, he said: "Men of Ephesus, what man is there who does not know that the city of the Ephesians is temple guardian of the great goddess Diana, and of the image which fell down from Zeus?"

36) Therefore, since these things cannot be denied, you ought to be quiet and do nothing rashly.

37) For you have brought these men here who are neither robbers of temples nor blasphemers of your goddess.

38) Therefore, if Demetrius and his fellow craftsmen have a case against anyone, the courts are open and there are proconsuls. Let them bring charges against one another." (NKJV)

Notice he's trying to calm down a mob and he's saying this is not the proper way to handle this. If you guys want to solve a dispute here, there are designated people in the role to deal with this. We're not going to do this by mob rule is what he's saying. Notice the next verse.

39) "But if you have any other inquiry to make, it shall be determined in the lawful assembly." (NKJV)

This is the lawful ekklesia. In other words there are designated individuals, designated procedures to deal with conflicts and issue of this nature. We're not going to do it by mob rule he is saying.

*40) "For we are in danger of being called in question for today's uproar, there being no reason which we may give to account for this disorderly gathering."
(NKJV)*

In other words stirring up the mob resulted in chaos.

*41) And when he had said these things, he dismissed the assembly [ekklesia].
(NKJV)*

So, notice again ekklesia can be used. Most often in the New Testament when that word is used it's referring to the Church of God. There are cases like this where it's referring to an assembly that has nothing to do with the Church of God. Again, not only does it refer in a sense of the Church of God to a variety whether it's everybody who is ever called into a New Covenant relationship. It can refer to a cluster of congregations. It can refer to one specific congregation. It can refer to a handful of people in a living room. It can also refer to the leadership of an assembly. If you understand that, then you understand better how to interpret Matthew 18:17 where it's referring to taking it to the church.

Another way to look at that is let's also notice that the word ekklesia is used in the New Testament to refer to the congregation in the wilderness, in other words Ancient Israel led by Moses. That same Greek word is used in Acts to refer to that group. Let's turn over to Acts 7:37-38.

Acts 7:37. *"This is that Moses who said to the children of Israel, 'The Lord your God will raise up for you a Prophet like me from your brethren. Him you shall hear.'*

38) "This is he who was in the congregation" ... (NKJV)

If you look up the Greek word used there for congregation, it's ekklesia.

38b) ... "in the wilderness with the Angel who spoke to him on Mount Sinai, and with our fathers, the one who received the living oracles to give to us," (NKJV)

I want you to notice again here. The congregation in the wilderness, in other words Ancient Israel being led by Moses, is referred to as the ekklesia when it's referred to in Greek. Not let's notice how did that ekklesia deal with disputes and conflicts? Did they do it through designated leaders who were given the responsibility to deal with that or did they throw it out to mob decision. Turn over to Exodus 18:13-26 and we'll see this very issue addressed.

Exodus 18:13. *And so it was, on the next day, that Moses sat to judge the people; and the people stood before Moses from morning until evening.*

14) *So when Moses' father-in-law saw all that he did for the people, he said, "What is this thing that you are doing for the people? Why do you alone sit, and all the people stand before you from morning until evening?"*

15) *And Moses said to his father-in-law, "Because the people come to me to inquire of God.*

16) *When they have a difficulty" ... (NKJV)*

If you have a New King James Version as I do, look at where it says difficulty and you'll see a little 1 next to it. In the margin it says dispute. In other words when they're in conflict with one another, when they have a dispute between different individuals is what we're talking about.

16b) *... "they come to me, and I judge between one and another; and I make known the statutes of God and His laws."*

17) *So Moses' father-in-law said to him, "The thing that you do is not good.*

18) *Both you and these people who are with you will surely wear yourselves out. For this thing is too much for you; you are not able to perform it by yourself.*

19) *Listen now to my voice; I will give you counsel, and God will be with you: Stand before God for the people, so that you may bring the difficulties to God.*

20) *And you shall teach them the statutes and the laws, and show them the way in which they must walk and the work they must do.*

21) *Moreover you shall select from all the people able men, such as fear God, men of truth, hating covetousness; and place such over them to be rulers of thousands, rulers of hundreds, rulers of fifties, and rulers of tens.*

22) *And let them judge the people at all times. Then it will be that every great matter they shall bring to you, but every small matter they themselves shall judge. So it will be easier for you, for they will bear the burden with you.*

23) *If you do this thing, and God so commands you, then you will be able to endure, and all this people will also go to their place in peace."*

24) *So Moses heeded the voice of his father-in-law and did all that he had said.*

25) *And Moses chose able men out of all Israel, and made them heads over the people: rulers of thousands, rulers of hundreds, rulers of fifties, and rulers of tens.*

26) *So they judged the people at all times; the hard cases they brought to Moses, but they judged every small case themselves. (NKJV)*

Notice what he did. He said he particularly chose able individuals familiar with God's laws and the basis of how they should judge matters. He put those designated individuals to help to deal with disputes. He basically established a leadership structure in this ekklesia, this congregation, these called out ones who were there to deal with these types of disputes and to address them. Think about this logically. Again if you put this put into a congregation, a wide spectrum of individuals you've got various degrees of knowledge of God's word, various levels of spiritual emotional maturity involved in this situation. If you throw a complicated situation out to them, you can just

create division and chaos and get people fighting with each other who never had an issue with one another to begin with until you put this issue out to them. Christ was not saying if you have a difficult situation, air it before everybody and get mob rule, because He knew that this would result in chaos. Proverbs even tells us a very basic principle that reveals some of this to us. Turn over to Proverbs 17:9.

Proverbs 17:9. *He who covers a transgression seeks love, but he who repeats a matter separates friends. (NKJV)*

This is what would result if every time there was a difficult conflict between a couple of individuals you aired all of their issues and all of their accusations and counter accusations and all of their dirty laundry in front of everyone. You are going to create this situation. You are going to separate the best of friends and not just the individuals involved. Oftentimes depending upon the circumstances and the details you can make innocent bystanders who weren't involved in the situation to begin with now become strongly, emotionally entrenched in their point of view on a subject because maybe one of the parties in conflict is their good friend and they kind of emotionally side with their good friend. Now someone else that they know who they never had a problem with in the first place has taken the other point of view with that and now these two are in conflict with each other. You just create massive division.

The key to understanding this whole issue is to understand ekklesia and what it means. I've always found this whenever someone raises this particular argument. The argument is always no, Christ used ekklesia in Matthew 18:17. That means everybody in the church, so that means you air it to everyone. No, if you understand how this particular word is used, if you know how to define the word we translate as church today and understand what it means, you realize it can be used in a variety of contexts. It's not a building. It's not a corporation. It's a group of people. Again, it can be everyone called into a New Covenant relationship with God. It can be just those in a particular congregation called into that. It can be a cluster of congregations. It can be a small number of people meeting in a living room. It can also be the designated leadership of that particular group, all depending upon the context and how it's used.

If we understand this and take the time again to look at this and understand the overall subject, we can learn how to properly understand these subjects and to look at this. If we learn how to do this, we can keep ourselves from falling into some of the common pitfalls in misunderstanding this subject, if we just learn how to understand all of the variations of meaning that ekklesia can be translated as or to put it simply, if we learn how to define the church.