

First Baptist!” It is a moving commercial intended to express the sense that every individual is an important part of that denominational congregation. While I appreciate the sentiment this seeks to convey, I must reject its premise. Yes, every member of a sound local congregation is important, necessary, and of equal value with any other member (see 1 Cor. 12:12-27). And, yes, we are to serve God at all times in every place we find ourselves as Christians (Rom. 12:1-2). But, it ignores the biblical teaching of the nature, role, makeup, and significance of the church to use the term in ways that the Bible does not.

We constantly battle the unscriptural concept that developed centuries ago that considers the building where a local church assembles a “church”—the church is people (cf. Heb. 12:23). In modern times, a new struggle has arisen among those who abandon one (or more) assemblies of the whole church in lieu of small Bible studies that meet in different homes, calling these “house churches.” Are home Bible studies wrong? No. Are these churches? No. Where do we ever see local churches in

the New Testament split into separate local churches, then reunited on Sunday? Do these churches have independent organization? If not, is it scriptural for the elders of the whole church to oversee the work of another church? We oppose this in the denominations, how can we justify it in this scenario? All of this stems from a failure to apply the biblical concept of the church in the manner that it is taught in Scripture. It diminishes the importance of the church Jesus purchased with His own blood (Acts 20:28). It minimizes the importance of faithful work and worship with members of a local church with whom we are identified (see Heb. 10:25). It ignores the example of the apostles (Acts 11:26). Is this being picky? Is it being legalistic? No. It is showing a love for God and for His word (John 8:31).

When There Is No “Church”

With that said, let’s acknowledge a possible exception to this. Christians should seek out a faithful congregation of Christians and identify with them on a regular basis, or assemble with them when traveling (Acts 11:26). In general, Christians should not simply worship by themselves or with their families when there are sound congregations that need our encouragement and support. However, the example of Paul establishing congregations in virgin territory raises the question, “What if there is no local church somewhere?” The example of Paul, demonstrates his efforts to establish churches wherever he went. Some of these were small (Acts 19:7)—what constituted the church in cases where there were no other Christians? Usually, Paul traveled with companions, but the Bible tells us about the conversion of an Ethiopian nobleman (Acts 8:26-40). From all we know he was the first (and only) Christian in Ethiopia at the time. Did he bring others to Christ? We assume so, but prior to that he alone constituted the Lord’s church in that place. Does that contradict the principles we observed above? No. The term “church” always carries with it an inherent collective sense. When there are others with whom we are (or should be) identified, it is unscriptural to apply the term to one Christian alone. Let us maintain our commitment to use Bible names in Bible ways. This is the only way to unity and soundness of doctrine.



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OF CHRIST

Faithful Sayings

August 25,
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Services

Sunday: 9:00 AM

10:00 AM

11:00 AM

Wednesday: 7:00 PM

Elders:

Pat Ledbetter
Brady McAlister
Jeff Nunn

Deacons:

Steve Dixon
Ryan Ferguson
Ben Hight
Blake McAlister
Walker McAnear
Sam Nunn
Lance Purcell
Justin Smiley
Kevin Wise
Trevor Yontz

Evangelist:

Kyle Pope



Can One Person Be a Church?

By Kyle Pope

In our day we sometimes hear people speak of the actions of individual Christians in daily life as something by which they “are the church” when carrying out deeds of faithfulness to the Lord. Some have argued that passages such as Romans 16:5 and 1 Corinthians 16:19, which refer to Aquila and Priscilla and “the church that is in their house” (NKJV), are describing the Christians within their household, rather than a local church that assembled in their house. In some cases, these viewpoints result in attitudes that diminish the importance of the role of the local church and the need to faithfully work and assemble with a sound local church. After all, if I am “the church” wherever I am, some would argue, “I can be the church at the beach or in the mountains just as easily as I can be the church sitting in a pew!” Is this terminology biblical? Does it reflect the use of the word “church” in the New Testament or is it born out of human thinking not found in Scripture?

Basic Meaning of the Word Translated “Church”

The word “church” is translated from the Greek word *ekklesia* (ἐκκλησία) which is a Greek political term referring to “a gathering of citizens called out from their homes into some public place; an assembly” (Thayer). In many ways, this answers the question posed in the title of our study. If the general meaning of this word refers to an *assembly*, then a single person is not properly an *assembly*. We wouldn’t say “I am an assembly,” although we may be “a member of an assembly.” But, let’s look further.

In its usage among the Greeks, it generally referred to a formal political assembly of the citizens of a city or a mob. Both of these types of usage are found in Scripture. When a turmoil arose in Ephesus over the conversion of many to

Christ in rejection of the Greek goddess Diana, a mob gathered and chanted for two hours “Great is Diana of the Ephesians!” (Acts 19:23-34). Fortunately, before matters grew worse the city clerk calmed the crowd (19:35-38), urging them to let the matter be settled in a **“lawful assembly (ekklēsia)”** (19:39) and dismissed the **“assembly (ekklēsia)”** (19:41), he had previously called a **“disorderly gathering”** (19:40). In this usage, a maker of silver idols named Demetrius started the uproar (19:24-25), but he alone was never referred to as an *ekklēsia*.

Before the New Testament, in the Greek translation of the Old Testament, *ekklēsia* was used in similar ways. It was used of “the assembly of the Israelites, Judges 21:8; 1 Chronicles 29:1, etc., especially when gathered for sacred purposes, Deuteronomy 31:30” (Thayer). Let’s notice an example of this. Before the public reading of the Song of Moses, Deuteronomy 31:30 records, **“And Moses spoke all the words of this song even to the end, in the ears of the whole assembly (ekklēsia)”** (Brenton). We might note that this speaks of **“the whole assembly.”** Does that infer that one member of the *assembly* would still be considered an “assembly,” just not the “whole” assembly? No. The adjective “whole” simply clarifies

that this was not a small portion of the Israelite community, but the whole assembly gathered to hear the reading of the song. Think of it this way, what would it mean if I said, “I ate the WHOLE pie”? We wouldn’t understand that to mean I ate one piece, nor would I say “I ate the pie” (if I only ate one piece). In the same way **“whole assembly (ekklēsia)”** was not one member, but the group of Israelites assembled together.

The Concept of the “Church” in the New Testament

In the New Testament the focus is not on a geo-political assembly, but on the gathering of people under Christ. Jesus proclaimed the unity and singularity of this assembly. After Peter’s confession that Jesus is **“the Christ, the Son of the living God”** (Matt. 16:16), Jesus declared, **“And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church (ekklēsia), and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it”** (Matt. 16:18). We notice that He did not say *churches*—there is only one church that Jesus built. It is made up of all those truly saved by the blood of Christ, over whom **“the gates of Hades”** (i.e. the place of the dead) cannot prevail. They shall be released from death unto salvation. This usage is sometimes called the *universal sense* of the word **“church”** in the fact that it is not talking about an assembly in one location, but all the saved. The Hebrew writer used this sense in speaking of **“the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are registered in heaven”** (Heb. 12:23). All the saved, living and dead comprise the Lord’s church universally. Its only organization is the headship of Christ. Paul explained, **“Christ is head of the church; and He is the Savior of the body”** (Eph. 5:23). There is no earthly headquarters, and no individual could properly claim, “I am the church!” That would ignore others saved in Christ. That would focus only on our own salvation in Christ.

In many places in Scripture *ekklēsia* is used in a different sense. Local assemblies of Christians in different places are called **“the church in Jerusalem”** (Acts 11:22), **“the church of the Thessalonians”** (1 Thess. 1:1), **“the church of Ephesus”** (Rev. 2:1), or **“the churches throughout all Judea, Galilee, and Samaria”** (Acts 9:31). What is different about the way “church” is used in these texts? First, these are spoken of in the plural. Are these different denominations? No. Paul taught and practiced the same things **“in every church”** (1 Cor. 4:17). Yet, they are **“churches”** (plural) in the fact that they are distinct assemblies. Second, there is special organization and leadership over these assemblies. Paul and Barnabas **“appointed elders in every church”** (Acts 14:23). There are no human elders over all churches (cf. 1 Pet. 5:4), and the elders of one church do not hold any authority over other churches (1 Pet. 5:2). Finally, we noticed that the church universally is made up of all

the saved, but it is always possible that local churches have members who are actually **“false brethren”** (2 Cor. 11:26; Gal. 2:4). Truly, only **“The Lord knows those who are His”** (2 Tim. 2:19). We cannot know the heart, nor is that our job. All we can do is try to encourage faithfulness, and rebuke sin when it becomes evident.

In this *local sense* would it ever be proper to speak of an individual as “the church”? We noted above the argument that passages such as Romans 16:5 and 1 Corinthians 16:19, referring to Aquila and Priscilla and **“the church that is in their house,”** just describe the Christians within a household. The problem is that this ignores the political and collective sense inherent in the word. For example, let’s say you met the US Senator for your state. Would you ever say, “He is congress”? No, you would say, “He is a member of congress.” What if he invited five other Senators to his home. Would you call this, “the congress that is in his house”? No, you would say, “The members of congress that are in his house.” So it is in Scripture. These texts are talking about a local congregation that met in the home of Aquila and Priscilla.

We might note that there are times when Scripture speaks of actions and restrictions that apply within the context of the assemblies of local churches. For example, when Jesus taught us how to work to bring others out of sin, one of the last steps in the process if no repentance has taken place is to **“tell it to the church”** (Matt. 18:17). It would be impossible to tell something to the universal church. So, this is describing *telling* the local assembly about this matter at a time when they are present to hear something that they are told. In 1 Corinthians 14, Paul discusses the question of speaking in a tongue with no translator and women speaking. In both instances he commands them to **“keep silent in the churches”** (14:34, cf. 28). This helps us answer the question in the title of our study. If a Christian is the “church,” is Paul commanding Christian women or those who speak foreign languages to be silent at all times? No. In both cases he is describing actions that are not to occur *in the assembly* of the local church.

Finally, let’s consider some instances of the use of the term “church” in what I will call a *distributive* sense, but we will see that even in these examples an individual is never said to be a “church.” In some cases we see things attributed to members of the church universally or churches locally in contexts outside of the local assembly,

but let’s consider their force. One of the first examples comes after the death of Ananias and Sapphira. We are told, **“So great fear came upon all the church”** (Acts 5:11). At this point the church had not yet spread beyond Jerusalem, so this is talking about the local church in Jerusalem, but this doesn’t seem limited to fear within an actual assembly (5:1-10)—in their daily life each Christian was afraid—but it is clear that the members of the church collectively were afraid, not just one member. When the persecution of Saul arose, it is said **“a great persecution arose against the church which was at Jerusalem”** (Acts 8:1a), yet as this scattered Christians **“throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria”** (Acts 8:1b), it is then said that Saul **“made havoc of the church”** (Acts 8:3). Yet, when Saul obeyed the gospel we read, **“Then the churches throughout all Judea, Galilee, and Samaria had peace and were edified”** (Acts 9:31). In these instances, it was Christians in their daily life (in or out of local assemblies) that were persecuted, met with **“havoc,”** then felt **“peace,”** but each of these describe matters pertaining to Christians collectively, not to one alone.

Unscriptural Concepts of the “Church”

In Amarillo, Texas there is a large Baptist church that runs a commercial in which different members of the church, then finally the preacher, all repeat the words, “I am