What is Church?
From Surveying Scripture to Applying in Culture

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Jesus said, "I will build my Church (*ekklesia*), and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it" (Matt. 16:18).

Where no church yet exists, what does Jesus intend to build in our day? This article considers why this discussion is needed, looks at "church" in the context of scripture, and evaluates the biblical data. It then identifies applications for participating in Jesus' work to establish his Church where it has never before existed.

Why Discussion Is Needed

In recent years, much effort has been invested in creative gospel proclamation and disciple-making in the challenging contexts of non-Christian religions. Serious thought and effort have rightfully been given to finding ways for kingdom advance without Western or Christendom assumptions about the form and function of the church. Unfortunately, some of this creative thinking and effort lacks adequate biblical foundation.

In their book, *The Rabbit and the Elephant*, the authors quote Jesus' promise, "For where two or three gather together as my followers, I am there among them," then ask, "Could this last sentence be the simplest definition of church?...As long as two or three are gathered, don't they form the basic building block of church?" (Dale et al. 2009, 8). This blurs the vital difference between two or three being "the basic building block" (very true) and "the simplest definition" (painfully weak). This blunder proliferates when other Christians naïvely follow this line of thought to adopt "two or three gathered" as their working definition of church (see Viola 2009, 1).

Rebecca Lewis, in describing "insider movements," claims, "These believing families and their relational networks are valid local expressions of the Body of Christ" (2007, 76). This wording confuses and mixes together the "spiritual" church of true believers with unbelievers and nominal believers relationally connected to the Body of Christ.[1] In recent private correspondence, Lewis stated this was not her intent. This is appreciated, yet the concern remains about the ecclesiology undergirding insider movements.

Andrea Gray, Leith Gray, Bob Fish, and Michael Baker describe significant research recently done to discover fruitful practices in church planting.

Unfortunately, some of the groups counted as "churches" fall short of the picture portrayed in scripture. For example, one worker included in the study reported, "It's not an organized thing. They do come together at different points in time, but it's not a…certain time, a certain place…I guess it's a different way of looking at church" (Gray et al. 2010, 91). The inclusion of data from reports such as this raises the question: Can a group be called a church if their only gatherings are spontaneous (on occasions such as a birthday or having an out-of-town guest) or if they do not identify themselves as a church (*ekklesia*)?

Other reports of fruitful church planting included in this study describe gatherings in which women are not allowed to attend. Do these fit the New Testament description of a church? Should they be counted as models of "fruitful" church planting? Perhaps a better description would be "a gathering with potential that is not (yet) a church." In contexts all around the world, inadequate concepts of church lay weak foundations for kingdom advancement. An accurate understanding of *ekklesia* will help us accomplish God's global purpose. What does the Bible say about the meaning of "church?"

Church in the Context of Scripture
Jesus' teaching in Matthew 18:15-20 illustrates some aspects of his vision for the church, most notably that the church is a group larger than "two or three." Some would interpret Jesus' statement in v. 20, "For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them," as a sufficient minimum description of "church."

However, the context of this verse shows it cannot rightly be taken as a sufficient criterion. The process described in vs. 15-16 involves three or four individuals, who then in v. 17 "tell it to the church," which is obviously a group larger. The dynamic of "two or three" with Jesus present by his Spirit is a vital nucleus of a church, but it's not intended as a definition of or sufficient criterion for a church.

• Acts 2:41-47 describes how the earliest church lived out kingdom life with a group of over three thousand new believers in Jerusalem. Their gatherings included a combination of large meetings ("in the temple courts," v. 46a) and small groups ("in their homes," v. 46b). Four elements of their fellowship are mentioned in v. 42: apostles' teaching, fellowship, breaking bread, and prayer. Additional elements are described in vs. 41-47.

Praise God for the beauty and power of the fellowship of these early believers! Our challenge is to differentiate between normative and merely descriptive elements of this narrative. Although space does not permit

exhaustive coverage, interaction with numerous New Testament uses of *ekklesia* can help us toward greater discernment.

• Ephesians 1:22-23. The church functions as the body of Jesus on earth, manifesting God's "fullness" to the world.

• Romans 12:5 points to the unity of believers, because we are members of Christ's body.

• 1 Corinthians 12:14-22. Diversity is an intentional part of God's design. Every part is needed. Thus, no member should feel devalued and no member should devalue others.

• 1 Corinthians 12:28. The church includes gifts of leadership (apostles, teachers, and administrators).

• Descriptions of the church as "God's household…the pillar and foundation of the truth" (1 Tim. 3:15), "God's temple" (1 Cor. 3:17), "a spiritual house," and "God's own people" (1 Pet. 2:4-10). God uniquely dwells in the church and manifests his truth through this gathering.

• 1 Corinthians 3:9; "God's field, God's building." God not only dwells in, but is actively at work in the church to grow something for his own pleasure.

• Romans 16:5; 1 Corinthians 16:19; Colossians 4:15, and Philemon 2. Churches commonly met in homes. This had obvious implications for the size of the gatherings.

• 1 Corinthians 14:23, 27, 29. The "whole church" (at least in Corinth) was a significantly large group gathered, not just a few individuals.

• 1 Corinthians 14:26. At the same time, the church gathering in Corinth must have been small enough that the normal pattern of worship could be participatory.

• Acts 14:23. It appears that the group of disciples in Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch were considered a "church" before they had elders.

• Acts 14:22 and Titus 1:5. The appointment of elders was an early and foundational priority. Apparently, a pattern of Paul's apostolic ministry was that elders were not necessarily immediately appointed on the formation of a new church, but that once a church had been formed, the appointment of elders was considered important unfinished business, to be accomplished as soon as possible and appropriate

• Titus 1:5. The command that elders be appointed "in every city/town [polis]" raises significant questions about whether every house church had its own plurality of elders, or whether the plurality of elders was for a city church, perhaps made up of numerous house churches.

• Acts 14:27 and 15:30. These special gatherings called by Paul and Barnabas might imply that smaller house fellowships were the norm and city-wide church gatherings were not weekly events (Meador 2006).

• 1 Timothy 5:17 (and most other uses of presbyteroi, such as Acts 11:30; 14:23; 15:2, 4, 6, 22, 23; 16:4; 20:17; 1 Tim. 4:14; Titus 1:5; James 4:15). Elders are mentioned in the plural. One aspect of the elders' ministry was (and is) to "direct" the affairs of the church.2

• John 14:34; Romans 12:10; Ephesians 4:32; Hebrews 3:13; 1 Peter 4:9; and other "one another" (allelous) verses, found over fifty times in the New Testament. While these do not mention the word "church," believers are clearly called to live out these commands in the context of the community of fellow believers in Jesus, that is, the church. The nature and wide diversity of these commands also makes it clear that the "one another" life of the church should be lived out in activities of everyday life, not simply when sitting together in a formal meeting.

The NT use of *oikos*. While the primary focus of this article is *ekklesia*, the Greek word *oikos* (house/household) describes an important related concept. Churches commonly met in homes, which points to a relationship between house churches and the NT pattern that salvation was often received by households (*oikos*), rather than simply by individuals (Acts 11:14; 16:15, 31).

In this way, "the households became the nuclei for the early life of the church, e.g., the house of Priscilla and Aquila at Rome (Rom. 16:3, 5), of Stephanas (1 Cor. 16:15), of Onesiphorus (2 Tim. 1:16), etc." (Dosker). This has implications for our approach to evangelism among the unreached, which is often more effective when done with a household rather than just individuals (Goodman 2006, 8-13).

Training material adapted from David Watson advises,
"Evangelize *oikos*(households), not individuals, through a process." Also,
"The church is a discipled *oikos* that becomes obeying congregations" (Parks and Steinhaus 2010, 3). The goal is for an *oikos* to become an *ekklesia*, but we cannot ignore the distinction between the two and claim every *oikos* of believers to be counted as a church.

George Patterson and Richard Scoggins propose the helpful concept of "embryonic church" (Patterson and Scoggins 2003, 24, 144). This describes a small fellowship of obedient disciples moving toward becoming a full-fledged multiplying church. It would not yet contain all the biblical characteristics of a "church," but would include the right "DNA" and be moving toward being "church." An *oikos* of believers is better seen as an embryonic church, rather than a full *ekklesia*.

Evaluating the Data, Understanding the Factors
Range of usage of church (*ekklesia*). Wayne Grudem writes, "In the New Testament the word 'church' may be applied to a group of believers at any level, ranging from a very small group meeting in a private home all the way to the group of all true believers in the universal Church" (Grudem 1994, 857). Examples of this range are:

• A church meeting in someone's house (1 Cor. 16:19).
• The Church in an entire city (1 Cor. 1:2; 2 Cor. 1:1; 1 Thess. 1:1).
• The Church in a region: "the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria" (Acts 9:31).
• The Church in the entire world (Eph. 5:25; 1 Cor. 12:28).

This article focuses on local expressions of Christ's Church, since most disagreement concerns this issue.
The role of ordinances. Two of Jesus' commands, baptism and the Lord's Supper, are known as ordinances (or, less accurately, sacraments). Most would agree with Grudem's assessment (along with Luther and Calvin) that a group practicing these ordinances "is attempting to function as a church" (1994, 865).

Church discipline. Along with "pure preaching of the gospel" and ordinances, church discipline is the third of three "Marks of the True Church" mentioned in the Belgic Confession. Jesus clearly commands this in Matthew 18:15-20, one of only two recorded times he mentioned "church." Due to its unfortunate decline over the past one hundred years, church discipline has been described as the "missing mark" of the church (Mohler 1998).

Believers active and gathering. The essential meaning of *ekklesia* as an assembly (Danker 2000) bears special consideration as we wrestle with Christ's desire in locations hostile to the gospel. Daniel Sinclair writes, "Local churches assemble…or meet (cf. Acts 2:42; 5:12; 1 Cor. 5:4; 14:23, 26; Heb. 10:25; James 2:2)….This is a crucial point in hostile contexts" (Sinclair 2005, 28).

Leadership by elders. We have already noted that the NT pattern of leadership is a plurality of elders (rather than just one). On this subject, Sinclair writes, "This is probably an indicator that an absolutely essential structural component to a local body of Christ is being under the vital leadership, teaching, and shepherding of elders" (2005, 28).

Field Applications in Challenging Contexts
Challenging contexts require creative solutions in applying biblical commands. George Patterson proposes a sound pattern for new churches in unreached contexts. Concerning appointment of elders, he counsels:

Organize a provisional board of elders as soon as mature men are converted. Show them how to win and pastor their own people right away. Remember, this is for pioneer fields with no experienced pastors nor well-organized churches. We, like Paul, must use the best men God gives us as the churches multiply, or the new disciples have no leadership at all (Acts 14:23). (Patterson 2010, 20)

This provisional approach both maintains the biblical norm (1 Tim. 3:6) and fits difficult contexts.

Issues of size and persecution. Different sizes of church may fit better in different contexts. An experienced worker in one part of the Muslim world comments, "In high persecution contexts, two to five people is the ideal number for a gathering." Some might conclude that in such a context two to five people should be considered the ideal number for a church. Others would hold that while a pattern of very small gatherings might be best in some cases, such gatherings by themselves would not fulfill the biblical characteristics of a church.

As the first of three signs of a church, Sinclair proposes,

There must be some "critical mass"—in other words, some minimal size and social makeup. A group of three single men is not a church. A fellowship of fifteen adults plus children may be. The New Testament doesn't give us a magic number, and that's probably because what is a minimal critical mass will vary from one situation to another. (Sinclair 2005)

In some cases, it might be that regular meetings of just two to five people would still be prohibitively dangerous. Such a context would raise questions of "virtual" fellowship via the Internet. Believers and church planters in a variety of contexts need Spirit-led wisdom to know when bold witness will mean taking actions likely to bring persecution, and when being "wise as serpents" will mean taking creative steps to avoid persecution.

While acknowledging the creativity needed for discipleship and spiritual growth in contexts with much persecution, it seems unwise to stretch a description of church to fit the challenges of special cases. Better to keep pleading with Jesus to do in those very challenging contexts what he has promised: "I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it."

A Church Planting Movement (CPM) Perspective
In answer to the question, "What are you calling a church?" David Garrison responds, "If you're thinking two guys in a room studying the Bible, you've…missed it. Jesus made it clear that the church is a new covenant community" (Garrison 2004, 259). He then cites factors common to all CPM churches:

• All observe baptism and the Lord's Supper (though the frequency varies)
• All meet regularly (though some on Sunday, some on Friday, and some every night of the week)
• All have some kind of organization (though it varies)….All exhibit the five purposes of a church (evangelism, ministry, fellowship, discipleship, and worship) (2004, 259-260).

Concerning "the optimal size for a CPM church," Garrison cites a comment of Victor Choudhrie (who references the "ten righteous men" of Abraham's discussion with the angels in Genesis 18:32): "We tell our new believers, when they reach ten adult church members, 'Now you have enough to reach this village for Christ, but what about the next village down the road? They have no believers. Surely two of you can go and visit that village and share with them the gospel.'" Garrison concludes, "Whether 10 members or 10,000, the church is best characterized—not by its size or forms—but by its passionate commitment to the Lordship of Jesus Christ and the fulfillment of his Great Commission" (2004, 261).

Church in Process
We can perhaps diminish some of the conflict between more traditional descriptions of church and attempts to deal realistically with the challenges of high persecution contexts by viewing church development as a dynamic process, rather than a static condition. David Watson observes: "What is right for a new church may be very different than what is right for a 100-year-old church….Churches have life cycles, and snapshots during these cycles do not define the whole of what church is" (2009). NT models and teaching leave room for great variety in the church. Yet without certain vital ingredients, a gathering (or non-gathering) cannot rightly be called a church.

Concluding Thoughts

If we intend to be a part of what Jesus is doing to build his Church, we would do well to aim carefully for the description he has given us in his word.

Watson offers a strong start toward defining church, yet does not mention leadership or identity:

The church is a group of baptized believers in the Lord Jesus Christ who meet regularly to worship, nurture one another (feed and grow one another), and fellowship (practice the one another statements of the Bible), and depart these gatherings endeavoring to obey all the commands of Christ in order to transform individuals, families, and communities. (2009)

After considering an array of key biblical texts and a variety of perspectives, I offer this attempt at a description of the local manifestation of Christ's church:

A biblical church is a significant group of Jesus' followers having an identity as a church (*ekklesia*) who gather together regularly on an ongoing basis, with recognized leadership under the headship of Christ, to worship God and encourage one another in obeying all his commands (including, but not limited to baptism and the Lord's Supper).

May the Lord Jesus be glorified as his Church is established throughout all the earth.

Endnotes

1. This confusion is all too common in everyday usage of "church." Roman Catholic teaching claims that when Jesus said "the field is the world" (Matt.13:38), he meant that "world" equals "church" and the church should consist of a mixture of believers and unbelievers until the end of the age. When "the church" gets confused and mixed up with "the world," all manner of problems result.

2. Without attempting to draw from this text prescriptive principles of church structure, we can allow this verse to round out our picture of relational and leadership dynamics in a New Testament church. One might argue that this text reflects the dynamics of a fairly mature church, yet chapter three of this letter suggests that appointment of new elders and deacons was, if not just beginning, at least very much a current issue. So it would seem that regardless of the context or level of maturity of a church, movement toward the pattern of leadership reflected in this text should be considered a normative priority.

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