**Autonomy of the Local Church – Part One**

**THE CHURCH IS AN ASSEMBLY | THE ESSENTIAL CHARACTERISTICS OF AN ASSEMBLY**

**INTRODUCTION:**

Baptists hold a distinct view of the New Testament church. If a survey were to be conducted among people claiming to be Christian, and the question was asked, “What is a church?” the responses would be quite varied. The average Christian probably thinks of a church as the literal building or location where Christians meet. Others think of the church in terms of a religious denomination or structured organization. They will speak of the “Catholic Church” or the “Methodist Church” and so on. Undoubtedly, the most popular concept of the church—particularly among fundamentalists and evangelicals—is that of a universal, invisible entity, the so-called “Body of Christ” into which all believers are “baptized by the Holy Spirit” at the time of conversion. These concepts are not only mistaken; they are far removed from the New Testament doctrine of the church. So, what is the church? That’s what we want to discuss today.

1. **A CHURCH IS AN ASSEMBLY**

The word “church” in our English Bible is rendered from the Greek word “ekklesia.” Because it has been rendered rather than translated, it is necessary to determine and understand the meaning of “ekklesia.”

* 1. **The etymological definition of “ekklesia.”**

1. The science of etymology is concerned with the root derivation of words.
2. The word comes from the preposition “ek,” meaning “out of” and the verb “kaleo,” meaning “to call.” Thus, the root meaning of the word “ekklesia” is “called out.”
3. Most will stop here and view the church as being composed of all those who are “called out” through salvation (in the sense of *II Timothy 1:9*, etc.). In other words, they say that “the Church” is composed of all the saved.
   1. **The usage of “ekklesia” in classical literature.** 
      1. In non-Christian Greek literature (“classical Greek”), the word “ekklesia” occurs a number of times and always with the meaning of an “assembly.”
      2. Liddell & Scott define it as “an assembly of the citizens summoned by the crier; the legislative assembly.”
      3. Seyffert defines it as “the assembly of the people, which in Greek cities had the power of final decision in public affairs.”
      4. The classical meaning of the word is that it is “an organized assembly, whose members are properly called out from their private homes or businesses, to attend public affairs.”
   2. **The New Testament usage of “ekklesia.”**

The word “ekklesia” is used of various assemblies in the New Testament.

* + 1. The Christian Usage.
       1. The first mention of the word “church” in the Bible is found in the book of Matthew.
          1. When Christ said He would build His church, His disciples showed no surprise or ignorance over His use of “ekklesia.”
          2. It was a well-understood word in the vernacular (koiné, “common” Greek).
       2. There is no evidence that Jesus assigned a new or modified meaning to the word. However, He did sanctify it when He referred to it as “MY church”—thereby distinguishing it from any and all other assemblies existing at the time.
    2. The Non-Christian Usage.
       1. The Ephesian ekklesia, mentioned in *Acts 19:32, 39, 41* was clearly an assembly of the citizens, called to conduct city business.
       2. In this account, the lawful assembly was interrupted by the intrusion of a hostile mob, but it was an assembly.

**Note:** It is not necessary to know or understand Greek in order to determine what a New Testament church is. Even though the translators of the Authorized, King James Version did not translate “ekklesia” as “assembly” or “congregation,” the usage of the word “church” or “churches” in the English Bible clearly defines them as assemblies of people. For example: “For first of all, when ye come together in the church (ekklesia), I hear that there be divisions among you; and I partly believe it… When we come together therefore into one place…” *I Corinthians 11:18, 20*

1. **THE ESSENTIAL CHARACTERISTICS OF AN ASSEMBLY**

The word “church” or “churches” is found 114 times in the New Testament. A church is an assembly and, as such, has four intrinsic features: locality, visibility, organization, and constituency (own voting party) . These features apply to any assembly of any kind. To understand these characteristics, and to prove an important point, we shall consider a few assemblies.

* The New Testament Church – the focus of our inquiry
* An automobile
* A football crowd

Each of these assemblies have the same essential characteristics.

* 1. **An assembly must be local.** 
     1. People cannot “come together” (i.e. assemble) and, at the same time be all over the world. The word “assembly” does not allow for any universal concept of the church.
     2. The Biblical usage of the word “church” supports this assertion.
        1. In all but about 15 instances, the word “church” or “churches” is used in connection with specific geographical localities – 34 locations (cities, towns, regions, or homes).
        2. The context in which the word “church” is used throughout Scripture clearly indicates that the New Testament churches are always local.
     3. The nature of any assembly supports this assertion.
        1. It is absurd to speak of a universal automobile, because its components are all put together in one place, on the assembly line.
        2. Millions viewing a football game on television are an audience, not an assembly.
  2. **An assembly must be visible.** 
     1. People cannot “come together” and not be seen. The word does not allow for any invisible concept of the church.
     2. The biblical usage of the word “church” supports this assertion. The following references show the churches of the New Testament were indeed visible assemblies: *II Corinthians 1:1, 15, 16; I Thessalonians 3:10*.
     3. A visible church is logical. A church cannot operate if its members are invisible. It cannot meet in an invisible location; it cannot function with invisible officers or operate on invisible tithes.
     4. The nature of any assembly supports this assertion.
  3. **An assembly must be organized.** 
     1. People cannot “come together” and be in complete disarray. The word does not allow for a church devoid of design and structure. New Testament churches are orderly assemblies. *Colossians 2:5*
     2. The body panels, chassis, electrical and mechanical components, windows, seats, and so forth are not dumped onto a factory floor and called an automobile; they are assembled according to a detailed plan.
     3. A pile of flesh, bones, sinews, cartilage, and bottles of blood on a table is not a human body.
  4. **An assembly must be constituted.** 
     1. An assembly is an exclusive entity. The members of a New Testament church are specified by Christ in the Word of God.
     2. A New Testament church is an assembly of people. But, not just any people.
        1. *Philippians 1:1* teaches that those making up the membership of a church must first be saints; i.e., they must be believers.
        2. *Acts 2:41* defines the qualifications for membership in a church with three key words:
           1. “received his word” – salvation
           2. “were baptized” – baptized
           3. “were added” – membership
        3. Membership in a scriptural church is exclusive. It is not open to just anyone. The requirement is that they be baptized believers. The fact that churches are instructed to keep themselves pure by excluding erring members demonstrated a very specific, limited constituency.
     3. Any assembly requires specified components.

**CONCLUSION:**

With this lesson, we can see biblically that the New Testament church is a local, visible assembly of baptized believers, organized to carry out the Lord’s work.