



good shepherd
presbyterian church

Ekklesia (Church/Assembly)

Psalm 107; Acts 11:19-26; Hebrews 10:19-25

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I grew up in the church. I was baptized in the church and matured in faith through the church. As a teenager I was discipled by the church and sent out in ministry and mission through the church. I grew up at a 3000+ member church. I worshiped in college at a 50-member church of elderly people who welcomed about 20 college students to worship with them every Sunday. I worked and worshiped during college and seminary at churches that ranged in size from 20 to 10,000 (one summer in Texas). I've spent some time away from church during a very hard spiritual season, but not for long; even though I was struggling to experience faith I knew that being in worship and with the community of faith was the best place to be.

Through travel, seminary, missions, and working with organizations like Young Life and Intervarsity, I've come to have a pretty broad view of the Church Universal, realizing that Presbyterians and Americans don't have the corner on truth. Yet I also treasure and am thankful for the part of God's church that I am called to serve.

It is easy for us to think of church as the building or the programs or the denomination. But as we often say here, YOU are the church; God's Church are the people God calls together and sends out.

If you haven't figured it out yet, this morning we are going to talk about church, about "the Church." We are continuing in our summer series called "Words Matter" and looking at some of the important words and terms in the Bible. Today we are looking at the word 'ekklesia' which is used over 100x and translated in the New Testament (mostly) as 'church'. As I started researching the Greek word 'ekklesia' I realized how big a topic it is. As with many Greek words and concepts found in the New Testament, the word

already existed in the Greek world... all the Bible words weren't created just to talk about God, the writers used the language of the day to write the story. So apart from religious usage the word meant "assembly" – like when a group of people came together for a purpose. The root of 'ekklesia' is the Greek word 'kaleo' which means call. It literally means "called out of" but probably more accurate in the New Testament as "meeting with meaning."

Sometimes in the New Testament 'ekklesia' refers to the Church everywhere, the Church Universal. Other times it refers to a specific congregation or community of faith, like the church in Corinth. The same word is used for both. Today we'll try to get a sense of what 'church' means and why it is important! Along the way we'll also see that there was an equivalent term in the Old Testament. And we'll be reminded why it is so important for believers to be in community with a local body of fellow-believers.

The New Testament Church

I want to highlight at least four key characteristics of the Church.

WORSHIP: Matthew relays the story of Jesus asking the disciples, "Who do you say I am?" After different ones give a range of answers Peter says, "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God." Jesus commends Peter and replies, "Upon this rock I will build my Church (ekklesia)." (Mt. 16:18) Protestants have interpreted the passage to mean that Jesus, and the confession of Jesus as Lord and Savior (i.e. worship), is the foundation of the Church. (Even if you go with the Catholic emphasis on Peter as the first bishop – i.e. Pope – the confession of Jesus as Lord and Savior is still foundational.)

TEACHING: Acts 11:26 describes Barnabas and Saul going to Antioch to meet with the church for a year. They "taught many" and the followers of Christ were first called "Christians" in that place. Acts 2:42 also lists out teaching as one of the core activities of the early Christian community.

DISCIPLESHIP: The church was also growing by making disciples (this was Jesus' Great Commission after all!). Acts 16 describes Paul and Timothy sharing messages from the Apostles in Jerusalem and (v.5) the churches being strengthened in the faith and increasing in number daily.

MINISTRY/FELLOWSHIP/PRAYER: The church was also a place for ministry and prayer. Throughout the New Testament we read of caring for widows,

orphans, and others in need. The church also gathered to pray and share meals together. James specifically tells those who are sick to call for the elders and anointing oil to receive prayer (James 5:14).

The Old Testament 'Church'

I also want to take a moment to make a connection to the Old Testament. You might not see it in English because the word 'church' doesn't appear in our Old Testament translation. Even if you knew Hebrew you wouldn't see it because there was not a Hebrew word for 'church' either. But there was a Hebrew word for when the people of Israel came together in an Assembly, whether called together by someone like Moses or one of the Kings. And interestingly, we do have an ancient Greek translation of the Old Testament... it's actually older than most of the Hebrew manuscripts we have. And when that ancient Greek translation has to come up with a word for the Assembly of Israel, it's 'ekklesia'. So God has always been calling together His people as a community of faith, for worship and mission and service and prayer.

The thing that tipped me off to that connection is the book of Hebrews, a letter in the New Testament written to Jewish Christians to help make sense of the connection between the Law of Moses and the work of Jesus Christ. The book of Hebrews – track with me now – was written in Greek to Hebrew speaking people. But in Hebrews 10:23-25 when it speaks of assembling together it doesn't use 'ekklesia' or 'church' but another word that will sound familiar to you... see if you hear it: 'synagoge' which means 'bring with'. It's also the familiar term for what is the Jewish equivalent of the local church: the synagogue.

So I want to conclude with that passage from Hebrews. It describes a bit more the importance and purpose of the Church. It also issues a challenge to believers to not forsake this coming together as the community of faith.

The Importance of the Community of Faith (Heb 10:23-25; Eph 5)

Today's scripture from Hebrews 10 pulls together a number of conclusions from the previous chapters. So verse 19 begins with 'therefore'. "Therefore... since we have confidence to enter the holy place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way... since we have a great high priest over the house of God..." These are the connections between the Law of Moses and the work of Christ that is the subject of the book of Hebrews. We won't dig into that today,

but I want to point out three conclusions and challenges that follow, starting in verse 22:

*Let us draw near with a sincere heart in full assurance of **faith** (v.22)*

*Let us hold fast the confession of our **hope** without wavering (v.23)*

*Let us consider how to stimulate one another to **love** and good deeds (v.24)*

Do you hear a familiar trio of words: FAITH... HOPE... LOVE

And then there in verse 25, we are reminded that we cannot do these things alone; we cannot do them apart from the community of faith. Let US (plural) draw near with faith, hold fast with hope, and encourage ONE ANOTHER to love, “not forsaking our own assembling together as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another.”

It’s essential for believers to live and engage in community with one another, with the church, with the body of Christ. In Ephesians 5 and elsewhere the Church is compared to a body, with Christ as the head. Individual parts of the body can’t function apart from the others. And most of all, they cannot function without the head. This is strong, but worth considering: ***if you separate from the body of Christ, you have pulled away from Christ!***

I realize this past year was unique with COVID... that’s why we have gone to such extraordinary lengths to stay connected, from live-streaming to regular phone calls from the prayer ministry and from the deacons. But we also realized it was only for a time, though the time stretched out longer than any of us imagined it would. If you are watching or reading or listening and are unable to leave the house, let us know and we will bring community to you. It’s that important! We’ll come pray with you and bring you communion and connect as best we can. If you are traveling I’m glad we can offer a way for you to connect to your church. But don’t just consume it as entertainment; watch, share comments and prayers in the Facebook comments; reach out to someone to maintain and foster community with each other.

Do “the Church” or we as a local church always get it right? Not even close! But consider the first few chapters of Revelation, letters written to seven individual churches. Each of them was struggling in some way, some severely. But Christ didn’t not turn away from any of them, but called them

ever onward to repentance, to faithfulness, and to service. That's because God has always called His people together in worship and service.

Do hear today Christ's call to re-engage; hear the scripture's teaching that we are to live out our faith and life in community with other believers. And we are to engage the world for Christ through the community of faith. That's where we get trained and grow. It's where we test and sharpen our understanding and calling with scripture and with other believers. It's where we pray and partner with one another to serve God's mission in the world.

I want to do what is written in Hebrews 10:25... I want to ENCOURAGE each of you in your faith, in your hope, in your love. I want to ENCOURAGE each of you to dig and plant deep into the soil of this community of faith. I want to ENCOURAGE you as a church because you ARE the church and God is here, Jesus is Head of the Church, and the Holy Spirit is calling us together to love and serve the Lord. How will you respond?

Amen!