



Part 1

What Does the Bible Say?

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The Nature of the Church

The church is the body of people called by God's grace through faith in Christ to glorify him together by serving him in his world.¹

The People of God in the Old Testament: Israel

In order to understand the church in the full richness of God's revealed truth, we must examine both the Old and New Testaments. Christians may sometimes use the phrase "a New Testament church," but the shape of the visible church

¹ A great definition of the church was given by Henry Barrow in 1589: "This church as it is universally understood, containeth in it all the elect of God that have been, are, or shall be. But being considered more particularly, as it is seen in this present world, it consisteth of a company and fellowship of faithful and holy people gathered together in the name of Christ Jesus, their only king, priest, and prophet, worshipping him aright, being peacably and quietly governed by his officers and laws, keeping the unity of faith in the bond of peace and love unfeigned" (Henry Barrow, "A True Description of the Visible Church," reprinted in Iain Murray, ed., *The Reformation of the Church: A Collection of Reformed and Puritan Documents on Church Issues* [Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1965], 196). For a typical Baptist definition of the church, see the definition given by the Charleston Association: "A particular gospel church consists of a company of saints incorporated by a special covenant into one distinct body, and meeting together in one place, for the enjoyment of fellowship with each other and with Christ their head, in all his institutions, to their mutual edification and the glory of God through the Spirit," quoted in Mark Dever, "A Summary of Church Discipline," *Polity: Biblical Arguments in How to Conduct Church Life* (Washington, DC: Center for Church Reform [9Marks Ministries], 2001), 118.

today bears a clear continuity—though not identity—with the visible people of God in the Old Testament.

God’s eternal plan has always been to display his glory not just through individuals but through a corporate body. In creation God created not one person but two, and two who have the ability to reproduce more. In the flood God saved not one person but several families. In Genesis 12 God called Abram and promised that Abram’s descendents would be as numerous as the stars in the sky or the sand on the seashore. In Exodus God dealt not only with Moses but with the nation of Israel—12 tribes comprised of hundreds of thousands of people yet bearing one corporate identity (see Exod 15:13–16). He gave laws and ceremonies that should be worked out not only in the lives of individuals but also in the life of the whole people.

In the Old Testament, Israel is called God’s son (Exod 4:22), his spouse (Ezek 16:6–14), the apple of his eye (Deut 32:10), his vine (Isa 5:1–7; Nah 2:2), and his flock (Ezek 34:4). Through these names God foreshadowed the work he would eventually do through Christ and his church.

Etymologically, a connection exists between the Old Testament word for “assembly,” *qahal* (קהל) and the New Testament word translated “church,” *ekklesia* (ἐκκλησία). The Greek version of the Old Testament, the Septuagint, translates *qahal* in Deut 4:10 and elsewhere with *ekklesia*.² And this word for assembly, *qahal*, is closely bound up in the Old Testament with the Lord’s distinct people Israel. The rich association between the assembly of God and the distinct people of God in the Old Testament *qahal* then carries over to the New Testament *ekklesia*, the church. The church is literally an assembly (see Heb 10:25). It is God’s assembly because God dwells with the church. And the church is comprised of people who are beginning to know the reversal of the effects of the fall. So members of both Israel and the church receive a glimpse of the glory which awaits God’s people.

Isaiah saw and heard seraphim calling to one another, “Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty; the whole earth is

² Cf. Deut 4:10; Acts 7:38.

full of his glory” (Isa 6:3). John then encountered what appears to be the same heavenly assembly when he heard the angels, living creatures, and elders singing, “Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!” (Rev 5:12). Though Isaiah and John’s visions are unique, Paul told the Corinthians that unbelievers would perceive this same God at work among them: “God is really among you” (1 Cor 14:25). Heaven appears on earth in God’s assembly, the church.

Christians divide over how closely Israel should be identified with the church.³ The New Testament identifies Israel and the church with each other in one place only, where Paul refers to “all who follow this rule” in the Galatian church with the title “the Israel of God” (Gal 6:16). While some suggest that “Israel of God” refers specifically to the Jews who belong to the predominantly Gentile churches in Galatia, others are convinced that in the same letter Paul refers to all Christians, Jew and Gentile, as “Abraham’s seed” (Gal 3:29), indicating the link between Israel and church is deliberate.

Distinctions between the Old and New Testament people of God are obvious. God’s people in the Old Testament are ethnically distinct; in the New Testament they are ethnically mixed. In the Old they live under their own government with God-given laws; in the New they live among the rulers of the nations. In the Old they are required to circumcise their male offspring; in the New they are required to baptize all believers. What accounts for the change in the move from the Old Testament to the New? Jesus fulfilled the explicit promises of God in the Old Testament and even of patterns found there. He is the fulfillment of the temple and its priesthood, of the land and its rulers, even of the nation of Israel as a son of God.

Continuities between Israel and the church are more debated. Acts 15 is a particularly significant passage on this question. At the Jerusalem Council, James quoted a prophecy from Amos 9:11–12 which promises that David’s fallen

³ This distinction is fundamental to dispensationalism.

tent would be restored and that Israel would come to possess the nations that bear the Lord's name. James affirmed that this prophecy points toward the church's present circumstances and the recent influx of Gentile believers. The "apostles and elders" (Acts 15:6), meeting to consider precisely the question of the Gentile believers, seem to accept the recent influx of Gentile believers into the church as a fulfillment of the prophecy about Gentiles coming to Israel.⁴

Though Israel and the church are not identical, they are closely related, and they are related through Jesus Christ (see Eph 2:12–13). Israel was called to be the Lord's servant but was unfaithful to him. Jesus, on the other hand, is a faithful servant (see Matt 4:1–11). The temples of Solomon and Ezra, as well as in Ezekiel's vision, all point toward Jesus Christ, whose body constitutes the supreme earthly tabernacle for God's Spirit. The land of Israel, especially the city of Jerusalem, points toward the redemption of the whole earth. Heaven itself is referred to as the new Jerusalem. The multinational church fulfills the promises given to the 12 tribes (see Revelation 7). And the law of the Old Testament finds its fulfillment in Christ (see Matt 5:17). Christ is the fulfillment of all that Israel points toward (see 2 Cor 1:20), and the church is Christ's body.

At the very least, it must be said that God has consistently had a plan to glorify his name through groups of people he chose and took as his own.⁵ Hence, one writer observed, "The story of the church begins with Israel, the Old Testament people of God."⁶

⁴ This would also be similar to the way the writer to the Hebrews in Hebrews 8 appears to regard the prophecy in Jeremiah 31 concerning the houses of Judah and Israel as fulfilled in the church.

⁵ See George Eldon Ladd, *The Gospel of the Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959), 120. For contrasting views see the traditional dispensationalist position represented by John F. Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1959). For the progressive dispensational position, see Craig Blaising and Darrell Bock, eds. *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992); and Robert Saucy, *The Case for Progressive Dispensationalism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993). For the reformed position, see O. Palmer Robertson, *The Israel of God* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2000); and Robert Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 503–44.

⁶ Edmund Clowney, *The Church* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1995), 28. Clowney's book is one of the best introductions in print to the doctrine of the church.

The People of God in the New Testament: The Church

Explicit Teaching

At one particularly low point in the moral degeneration of Israel, the writer of Judges described the nation as “the people of God” (עַם הַאֱלֹהִים Judg 20:2; see 2 Sam 14:13). The Greek equivalent of this phrase (τὸ λαὸν τοῦ θεοῦ) is used by the writer of Hebrews to describe the people of Israel with whom Moses identified himself instead of identifying himself with Pharaoh’s household (Heb 11:25), and he had used this same phrase earlier to refer to Christians (4:9). Peter also employed this phrase, telling his readers, “Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God [λαὸς θεοῦ]” (1 Pet 2:10). And John the Baptist came “to make ready a people prepared for the Lord” (Luke 1:17).

Meanings of *Ekklesia*

In the New Testament, the English word *church* can be used to describe both a local congregation or all Christians everywhere. In contemporary use the word is also used to describe buildings and denominations. In these latter ways the English word *church* does not exactly parallel the Greek word in the New Testament.⁷

The word translated “church” is *ekklesia*, which occurs 114 times in the New Testament.⁸ No other Greek word is translated “church” in English versions. But *ekklesia* was used in the New Testament period to describe more than the gatherings of Christians. The word was often used in Greek cities to refer to assemblies called to perform specific tasks. In Acts 7:38 and Heb 2:12, *ekklesia* is used to describe Old Testament assemblies. Luke uses *ekklesia* three times to describe the riot that gathers in an amphitheater in Ephesus to deal with Paul (Acts 19:32,39,41). The remaining 109

⁷ William Tyndale regularly translated *ekklesia* as “congregation.”

⁸ Three times in Matthew, 20 in Acts, 66 in Paul’s writings, once in Hebrews, once in James, three in 3 John, and 20 in Revelation.

uses of the word in the New Testament refer to a Christian assembly.

Uses of Ekklesia

Jesus Christ founded his own assembly, his own church.⁹ According to Matthew's Gospel, Jesus first names his New Testament people as "my church" (16:18). As Adam named his bride, so Christ names the church. Yet Jesus only refers to the church twice in his recorded teaching (Matt 16:18; 18:17). Since Jesus understood that he was the Messiah, his references to his church almost certainly contain the Hebrew idea of *qahal* or "assembly."¹⁰ The Messiah was expected to establish his Messianic assembly, and so throughout the Gospels Christ marks out those who are faithful to recognize and follow him.

The book of Acts usually refers to specific local gatherings with the word *ekklesia*,¹¹ such as the assemblies in Jerusalem, Antioch, Derbe, Lystra, and Ephesus. These churches met and sent missionaries (see 15:3). Luke also quoted Paul as saying that the church was bought with God's "own blood" (Acts 20:28).

Paul often referred to the church (or churches) of God¹² or the church (or churches) of Christ.¹³ He identified himself as being a former persecutor of the church (Phil 3:6; see 1 Cor 15:9). And his apostolic ministry centered on planting churches and building up churches. Paul's letters (particularly to the Corinthians) are filled with instructions to the early Christians about their behavior in their assemblies. One scholar therefore observed, "When he speaks of ἐκκλησία, [Paul] normally thinks first of the concrete

⁹ This is contra the influential position expressed by Alfred Loisy in the early twentieth century that "Jesus foretold the kingdom, and it was the church that came" (Loisy, *The Gospel and the Church* [repr.; Philadelphia, Fortress Press 1976], 166).

¹⁰ The Septuagint translates the Hebrew word *qahal* (קהל) with the Greek word *ekklesia* (ἐκκλησία) 77 times.

¹¹ The one exception to this may be in Acts 9:31. But because this usage is unique, perhaps this is the result of the one church of Jerusalem, which had been scattered, still being referred to as a unit.

¹² E.g., 1 Cor 1:2; 10:32; 11:16,22; 15:9; 2 Cor 1:1; Gal 1:13; 1 Thess 2:14; 2 Thess 1:4.

¹³ E.g., Rom 16:16; Gal 1:22.

assembly of those who have been baptized at a specific place. . . . Ecclesiological statements that lead beyond the level of the local assembly are rare in Paul's letters."¹⁴ In Ephesians and Colossians, Paul intimately related and identified Christ with the churches (e.g., Eph 2:20; 3:10–12; 4:15; Col 1:17–18,24; 2:10), particularly by using the language of husband/wife and head/body to describe Christ's relationship to the church (Col 3:18–19; Eph 5:22–33).

General Epistles

The book of Hebrews mentions the church once (12:23), referring to an earthly assembly with a heavenly destiny.¹⁵ James 5:14 refers to a local church and its elders. Both 2 John and 3 John picture a particular congregation and its struggles with false teachers and leaders. Outside of Paul and Acts, the book of Revelation has more occurrences of *ekklesia* than any other book in the New Testament. Except for 22:16, these all occur in the first three chapters. The word is used 14 times in these opening chapters in a formula format to either begin or conclude a separate letter to each of the seven churches.¹⁶ And then Jesus stated that he has sent his angel "to give you this testimony for the churches." So the message of this book from chapters 4 through 22 is meant for the local churches.

Images and Names of the Church

Much of the New Testament's teaching about the nature of the church itself can be derived from the images used for the church. Paul Minear in his classic work *Images of the Church in the New Testament* points to 96 images for the church in the New Testament.¹⁷ While the number 96 may not be precisely correct, said Roman Catholic theologian Avery Dulles in his more recent work *Models of the Church*, he agreed that the New Testament authors use a

¹⁴ J. Roloff, "ἐκκλησία," in *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 1, eds. Horst Balz and Gerhard Schneider (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 412–13.

¹⁵ Heb 2:12 as a reference to an Old Testament assembly was mentioned earlier.

¹⁶ See Rev 2:1,7,8,11,12,17,18,29; 3:1,6,7,13,14,22.

¹⁷ Paul S. Minear, *Images of the Church in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960).

large number of images.¹⁸ God has inspired multiple images, each of which offers a different perspective, and none of which should so dominate our conception of the church that the depth and texture of understanding is lost. Though all are inspired, they are not interchangeable, nor are they all as comprehensive in their presentation of the nature and purpose of the church.¹⁹ The great images are familiar: the church as the people of God, the new creation, the fellowship or communion in faith, and of course, the body of Christ.

The richness of descriptions of the church teaches us that no single image can comprehend all aspects of the church. The church is the herald of the gospel (as in Acts). The church is the obedient servant (drawing from Isaiah). The church is the bride of Christ (as in Revelation 19 and 21). The church is a building (1 Pet 2:5; Eph 2:21), and the church is a temple (1 Cor 3:16; 2 Cor 6:16; Eph 2:19–22; 1 Pet 2:4–8). The church is the community of people who live in the last days inaugurated by Christ’s earthly ministry and the coming of the Spirit. Many other minor images of the church could be listed, such as “the salt of the earth” (Matt 5:13) or “a letter from Christ” (2 Cor 3:3). The church is the family of believers (Gal 6:10; cf. Mark 3:31–35) and “the family of God” (1 Pet 4:17). But particular consideration should be given to four major image clusters mentioned above.²⁰

First, the church is the people of God. This image has already been considered in the discussion of Old Testament background. It is also present in the New Testament. Peter used the title to encourage the readers of his first epistle (1 Pet 2:9–10; see Rom 9:25–26; Hos 1:9–10; 2:23). These

¹⁸ Avery Dulles, *Models of the Church*, 2nd ed. (New York: Image, 1987).

¹⁹ The present book refers to the comprehensive ends and goals of God for the church by the word “purpose” and the specific subset of that which relates to the church being sent out into the world by the word “mission.” For more on this helpful distinction, see Kevin DeYoung and Greg Gilbert, *What Is the Mission of the Church?* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011), esp. 17–20.

²⁰ Another common way to categorize the various New Testament images of the church has been to use the trinitarian structure of the people of God, the body of Christ, and the dwelling of the Spirit. So Hans Kung, *The Church*, trans. Ray and Rosaleen Ockenden (Tunbridge Wells, England: Search Press, 1968), 107–260; Dale Moody, *The Word of Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 440–48; Clowney, *The Church*, 27–70; Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 1044–51.

young Christians were struggling with the at-times painful distinction being made between their identity in Christ and others around them. Peter's language of a temple, constituted by the living stones of Christian lives with Christ himself as cornerstone (1 Pet 2:4–6), reminded these discouraged Christians that they are the people of God, the product of God's gracious work of transforming them into an integrated reality—a single people. The people of God are based on him and his act, deriving their identity from him uniquely. Many connections made with the Old Testament—the seed of Abraham (Gal 3:29), the holy nation (1 Pet 2:9), Israel (Romans 9–11)—confirm the status of the church as the people of God.

Second, the church is the new creation. Many evangelical Christians think of the new creation in connection with the explicit language of Paul in 2 Cor 5:17: "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!" They immediately associate this with the conversion of an individual believer. But the new creation image is corporate as well as individual. In the New Testament, Christ's resurrection is the firstfruits from among the dead (see 1 Cor 15:20–23). And in his resurrection, the great final resurrection has begun. In these references all the kingdom of God images become relevant. God is granting a new beginning, a new creation through Christ, in which the people of God increasingly conform to the kingdom or rule of God.

A third major image cluster used for the church is centered around the idea of fellowship. The salutations in Paul's letters present the Christians whom he was addressing as sharing particular points of distinctiveness from the world around them. So in 1 Cor 1:2, Paul wrote, "To the church of God in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be holy, together with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ—their Lord and ours." The Corinthian Christians, like Christians everywhere, share the status of being set apart for God's special purposes. Likewise, Christians everywhere are called together to holiness. Jesus prayed for his followers to know such a fellowship (see John 17), and such a fellowship we find throughout

Acts and the letters. Much of the material in the letters represents the working out of this common life, as the authors encouraged believers to interact in a way that both brings glory to God and reflects their shared status as Christ's followers, Christ's disciples, and Christ's friends (Luke 12:4; John 15:15).

Ultimately, fellowship among Christians in the church is based on the Christian's covenantal union with Christ. According to the New Testament, therefore, Christians live with Christ, suffer with Christ, are crucified with Christ, die with Christ, will be raised with Christ, and are glorified with Christ. Christ's life, sufferings, death, resurrection, and glory become theirs through their membership in his new covenant.

The final, and perhaps best known, image used to characterize the church is the body of Christ. Paul stated, "Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf" (1 Cor 10:17). He used the image at great length in 1 Corinthians 12 to describe the diversity of gifts within the one body of the church. In Eph 3:6, Paul argued that Jewish and Gentile believers belong to the same body. Did Paul invent this image? No, it was given to him at his conversion, when the risen Christ asked him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" (Acts 9:4).

The Church and the Kingdom of God

One other image in the New Testament worth considering briefly is the kingdom of God, a metaphor which refers to God's rule or reign. Jesus Christ taught his followers to pray "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come" (Matt 6:9–10). The question which naturally arises in our context is whether or not the kingdom is identical with the church. Is it one more image like the others? Though Roman Catholic theology tends to identify church and kingdom, Scripture makes a distinction between the reign of God (present and coming) and the church. The church in fact comprises the people of the kingdom, as George Eldon Ladd explained:

The Kingdom is not identified with its subjects. They are the people of God's rule who enter it, live under it, and are governed by it. The church is the community of the Kingdom but never the Kingdom itself. Jesus' disciples belong to the Kingdom as the Kingdom belongs to them; but they are not the Kingdom. The Kingdom is the rule of God; the church is a society of man.²¹

This kingdom is not a matter of geography or national politics; it is rather a matter of recognizing God's authority and living under it. One cannot speak biblically of the kingdom apart from the king.²² In the book of Acts, the apostles do not preach the church, they preach the kingdom—God's reign.²³

Thus, the church is the *koinonia* or "fellowship" of people who have accepted and entered into the reign of God. This reign is not entered into by nations, or even families, but by individuals (see Mark 3:31–35; cf. Matt 10:37). In Jesus' parable of the tenants (Matt 21:33–40), the kingdom of God is taken from the Jews and given to a people "who will produce its fruit" (v. 43; see Acts 28:26–28; 1 Thess 2:16). The relationship between the kingdom and the church can therefore be defined: *the kingdom of God creates the church*. True Christians "constitute a Kingdom in their relation to God in Christ as their Ruler, and a Church in their separateness from the world in devotion to God, and in their organic union with one another."²⁴

Matthew 16:19 is a particularly important text for understanding the relation between the kingdom and the church. Jesus promised to give "the keys of the kingdom of heaven." Whatever he precisely means by promising the keys of the kingdom, the power of the kingdom is certainly being entrusted to the church. "The kingdom is God's deed. It has

²¹ George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 111. Cf. Roman Catholic theologian Hans Kung's criticism of his church's teaching on this point in his book *The Church*, 92–93.

²² For a good summary of this, see Kevin DeYoung and Greg Gilbert, *What Is the Mission of the Church?* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011), 115–39.

²³ E.g., Philip's preaching in Acts 8:12 and Paul's in Acts 19:8 or 28:23.

²⁴ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1938), 569.

come into the world in Christ; it works in the world through the church. When the church has proclaimed the gospel of the kingdom in all the world as witness to all nations, Christ will return (Matt 24:14) and bring the kingdom in glory.”²⁵

²⁵ George Eldon Ladd, “Kingdom of God,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 2nd ed., ed. Walter Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), 611; cf. Berkhof, 568–70. For more on the keys, see Jonathan Leeman, *The Church and the Surprising Offense of God’s Love* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), esp. 182–95.