

PAUL'S THEOLOGY

Lesson 48

The Church - Overview

In 430 B.C., the designated General and First Citizen of Athens was a man named Pericles. Pericles had been the Athenians' leader for some time and was responsible for commencing construction of the Parthenon and much of the Acropolis. By 430, he had successfully waged wars, enlarging the influence and control of Athens over the surrounding areas of Greece.

But now Pericles was in trouble. Pericles had gone to war against the Spartans, and the war was not going well. What made things worse was an outbreak of some type of plague among the Athenians. This plague, which would eventually take the lives of Pericles's sons, and Pericles as well, was devastating in its reach upon the Athenians.

Among the general populace, there was a belief that the plague and the casualties of an apparently unwinnable war were the fault of Pericles. Before a full mutiny could manifest itself, Pericles called an **Assembly** of the Athenians. Using his carefully crafted oratory skills, Pericles persuaded the Athenians to continue supporting his war efforts, with the trust that time would bring victory both abroad and at home.¹

The called **Assembly** was the key. At this point in time, historians consider Athens the world's first democracy. All male citizens over the age of 30 were allowed to attend **Assemblies**. Everyone had a chance to speak and be heard, and everyone was allowed to vote. The city and its rulers were supposed to then follow the decisions of the **Assembly**.

The Greek **Assembly** outlasted Pericles. For centuries, it played a role in the civil and political life of Greek cities. It was the gathering of groups around a common purpose. It is no wonder that **Assembly** was the idea/word chosen by the Jews who were translating their Holy Scriptures into Greek when they needed to discuss the gathering of the nation of Israel for certain key events.

When the Jews were assembled together before the Lord to hear his commandments, Moses called the people a "gathering." The Jewish translated that into Greek in the centuries just before Paul as an "**Assembly**." We see it repeatedly in the Greek Old Testament (the "Septuagint"). The gatherings of the

¹ See the write up of this by Pericles's contemporary Thucydides in his *History of the Peloponnesian War*, especially book 2, chapter 60. (Loeb Classical Library 1928).

nation of Israel to hear from Moses, the Lord, Generals, priests, and prophets are translated as *Assemblies* in the Greek.²

We find the same usage of *Assembly* by Paul's Jewish near-contemporaries Josephus and Philo. Both used the *Assembly* when writing about gatherings of people for religious and/or political purposes.

There was a strong historical usage of *Assembly* as Paul was writing his letters we find in our Scriptures. This Greek word of "gathering" or *Assembly* was *ekklesia* (ἐκκλησία). We know the word as "church."

Of the 114 times the word "church/assembly" is used in the New Testament, over half (62) are by Paul. We can write this paper using the word "church" but to do so runs a risk. The concept most people in the 21st century have of "church" is very different from that which Paul had in his mind as he wrote of the church/assembly.

For Paul, and for the other Greek writers and readers of his day, the *ekklesia* (church) was a reference to a group assembly or gathering. It was not a structured organization or societal group. It certainly was not a denomination. We shall take this first lesson as an opportunity to consider what Paul wrote in general about the "church/assembly," some of the images Paul used to describe the church/assembly, and we will leave for subsequent lessons the leadership structures, the roles of the genders, and the conduct and purposes of the assemblies.

This is an important point to make because the Greek word *ekklesia* can be broken down into two roots: *ek* and *kalleo*. These roots mean literally "to call out." The word's origins in the Greek language pre-date Paul by five-plus centuries. Originally in a military sense, assemblies of soldiers were "called out" from among the populace and the resulting assembly was of those "called out." Hence giving the word *ekklesia*. Many well meaning sermons and lessons teach that the church is the *ekklesia* because the church consists of those "called out" from the world. There is theological truth that believers are in fact culled from the morass of fallen humanity, but it is not really the basis for the Greek word for church. The Greek word was well-used and referred to assemblies, whether they were for good purposes or ill!

² See Deuteronomy 4:10; 9:10; 18:16; 23:2,3; Ezra 10:8; and 2 Chron. 6:3.

PAUL AND THE CHURCH/ASSEMBLY³

1. The Local Church/Assembly

Multiple times, we read of Paul writing to the local assemblies of believers in various locales. One of the clearest indications of this comes in Paul's letters to the Thessalonians. Thessalonica was a capital city in the province of Macedonia (northern Greece). While under the influence of the Roman Empire, Thessalonica was still very Greek in its life and culture.⁴ The receivers of Paul's letters there would have had a great working knowledge of the **Assembly** (*ekklesia*) even though the Romans had stripped it of much of its power.⁵

It was to this community that Paul began his first letter:

Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, to the **church** [*ekklesia*/assembly] of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ (1 Thess. 1:1).

In near identical language, Paul began his second letter:

Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, to the **church** [*ekklesia*/assembly] of the Thessalonians in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ (2 Thess. 1:1).

The Thessalonians knew what an Assembly was, but Paul did not write to them as an ordinary Assembly of the local citizenry. Paul wrote to them as an assembly or gathering in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. They were uniquely assembled under the authority and from the source of the Divine Ruler. It was to the whole assembly that Paul's letter was to be read (1 Thess. 5:27). The assembly was to greet each other in meeting with "a holy kiss" (1 Thess. 5:2), which in our society amounts typically to a hug or handshake!

We see the same sense of "assembly" in Paul's letters to the Corinthians. Paul wrote of his concern about what was happening when the Corinthians came together for the Lord's Supper:

But in the following instructions I do not commend you, because when you come together it is not for the better but for the worse.

³ Some of the structure and order in this paper comes from the outstanding entry "Church" by P.T. O'Brien, *Dictionary of Paul and his Letters*, ed. Hawthorne, *et al.* (IVP 1993).

⁴ See *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, ed. Merrill C. Tenney (Zondervan 1976).

⁵ Wallace, Richard, *The Three Worlds of Paul of Tarsus* (Routledge 1998) at 111.

For, in the first place, **when you come together** as a **church** [*ekklesia*/assembly], I hear that there are divisions among you (1 Cor. 11:17-18).

Paul's concern was about what happened in the **Assembly**, in what the translators call the "church." There were divisions among the classes, when there should have been unity. Here, the church is a local gathering with a greater purpose and a higher calling than that of an ordinary civic, social, or trade assembly or club. Accordingly, it had a greater expectation of behavior and attitude.

We do Scripture and Paul a disservice if we see the usage of "church" in these passages as one of a denominational structure. Paul was using an ordinary well known word that functioned to identify the gatherings of the born again believers for worship and fellowship events. Much like the "church/assemblies" (*ekklesia*) of the Old Testament, God's people gathered to hear his word and experience his presence. The gathering is Paul's meaning in these passages for "church."

This same usage of assembly/church/gathering is found in the writings of Luke. In Acts, Luke will use the word in one place to refer to an assembly of believers ("When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they declared all that God had done with them." Acts 15:4). Yet, in another place, he will use the same word assembly/church for a secular gathering:

Now some cried out one thing, some another, for the **assembly** [*ekklesia*/assembly] was in confusion, and most of them did not know why they had come together...And when the town clerk had quieted the crowd, he said, "Men of Ephesus,...if you seek anything further, it shall be settled in the regular **assembly** [*ekklesia*/assembly]. For we really are in danger of being charged with rioting today, since there is no cause that we can give to justify this commotion." And when he had said these things, he dismissed the **assembly** [*ekklesia*/assembly] (Acts 19:32-41).

2. House "churches/assemblies"

At the time of Paul's writings, most scholars concede that there were no real "church buildings." Archaeology has not found evidence of any church buildings until the middle of the third century, some two hundred years later.⁶ This raises the question, "Where did the assemblies/churches meet?"

⁶ There are good scholarly articles that certain locations like the upper room were used as buildings for church assemblies as early as Acts of the Apostles, but those were exceptions, not the norm.

We know from Paul's writings as well as from the book of Acts that a great number of these assemblies took place in homes. In closing his letter to the Colossians Paul writes:

Give my greetings to the brothers at Laodicea, and to Nympha and the **church** [*ekklesia*/assembly] in her house. And when this letter has been read among you, have it also read in the **church** [*ekklesia*/assembly] of the Laodiceans; and see that you also read the letter from Laodicea (Col. 4:15-16).

There was an assembly of believers that met in the house of Nympha. There was also an assembly of believers that met in the house of the Colossian Philemon:

Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our beloved fellow worker and Apphia our sister and Archippus our fellow soldier, and the **church** [*ekklesia*/assembly] in your house (Phile. 1,2).

It is apparent from Acts 16, especially verses 15 and 40, that another assembly (church) of believers met in the house of Lydia in Phillippi.

2. The Heavenly Assembly

Paul taught the reality that the earthly and community assembling of God's followers had an eternal aspect. Paul was able to write of the "church" or "assembly" in ways that transcended space and time. We see this especially in Ephesians and Colossians.

In Ephesians 1:21-23, Paul wrote of God seating Christ in the heavenly places:

far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come. And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the **church** [*ekklesia*/assembly], which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.

Here, Paul writes of the assembly as one entity that exists in the eternity of Christ's rule. We see the same idea expressed later in the letter where Paul wrote,

Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the **church** [*ekklesia*/assembly] and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen (Eph 3:20-21).

The church/assembly Paul spoke of was one that transcends time "throughout all generations, forever and ever." Paul understood that an element of our faith and

hope was that a day would come when all the saints will gather around the throne of God. This is the ultimate church/assembly! It is all believers of all time gathered together in eternity! This is the church of which Paul wrote:

Christ loved the **church** [*ekklesia*/assembly] and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the **church** [*ekklesia*/assembly] to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the **church** [*ekklesia*/assembly], because we are members of his body. "Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh." This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the **church** [*ekklesia*/assembly] (Eph. 5:23-32).

Paul saw the church beyond simply an earthly assembly. It was an assembly destined for eternity. In this sense, Paul understood and taught that Christ is the head, not simply of a local assembly, but of the full assembly of all saints in all time. Christ was working to bring all saints together before him, spotless and without blemish!

PAUL'S IMAGES OF THE CHURCH/ASSEMBLY

Paul writes of the assembly in a number of ways, using pictures, images and metaphors to convey the significance of believers in a collective sense. We will consider three of those here.

1. The Temple

In a subsequent lesson, we shall consider how Paul saw the church/assembly as a fulfillment of Jewish history. This issue is complicated and rich enough to merit a closer evaluation. For now, however, it is fitting to consider the three passages where Paul teaches that the church/assembly is like the Temple of God:

- 1 Cor. 3:16-17 – "Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him. For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple."

At this point in his letter, Paul is addressing the problems of divisions in the Corinthian assemblies. Some claimed attachment to Paul, others Peter, or Apollos. Paul would have nothing of it. There was to be no separation. All were

one Temple. The assembly had God dwelling within it as a whole, not within its smaller “camps.”

We should add here that Paul uses the plural “you” in this passage indicating that the community is the Temple. As Thiselton notes,

Here Paul is not saying that each individual Christian is a temple within which God’s Spirit dwells, but rather that the Spirit of God dwells in the Christian community *corporately as a community*.⁷

Of course we know from a multitude of Paul’s writings that Paul knew and taught that the Holy Spirit resides in the individual believer as well, but that is not the point Paul is making here. Later in chapter 6, verse 19 Paul will explain that believers should flee sexual immorality because their individual bodies are also a “temple of the Holy Spirit.”⁸

- 2 Cor. 6:16-18 – “What agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God; as God said, ‘I will make my dwelling among them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. Therefore go out from their midst, and be separate from them, says the Lord, and touch no unclean thing; then I will welcome you, and I will be a father to you, and you shall be sons and daughters to me, says the Lord Almighty.’”

In this passage, Paul is concerned over the Corinthians “unequal” yoking with unbelievers. Referencing the assembly as God’s temple, Paul asks whether it is right for God’s Temple to be shared by idols. Of course, the answer is, “No!” This gives us Paul’s end result that believers should be seeking God’s righteousness, not the uncleanness of the world. For God himself walks in the midst of the assembly. Unlike the mountain where God revealed himself to Moses

⁷ Thiselton, Anthony C., *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: a Commentary on the Greek Text* (Eerdmans 2000) at 316.

⁸ A good friend who is an ardent believer in the tripartite make-up of man, in contrast to our lesson on this subject that argued in favor of a unitary view of man, has recently renewed our conversation on this issue. One argument offered for a three-part view of man was that as a temple of the Holy Spirit, man would be three parts just as the temple is three parts. The reasoning is that man is the courts, the sanctuary, and the Holy of Holies, each corresponding to the body, soul, and spirit. Unfortunately Paul’s vocabulary seems to exclude this approach. As noted in the text, the earlier Corinthians passage in chapter 3 is dealing with the church as the temple, not the individual. Here in chapter 6 Paul calls the individual a temple, but Paul uses a different Greek word than that used for the temple complex (courts, etc.) Paul uses “*naos*” (ναός) which is the actual building (two parts, not three!), not the courts and entire temple complex. See, Thiselton at 315ff and 474.

but was seen by the people only through his law, God, through his Spirit, inhabits the church. We have no business filling God's temple with idols!

Paul is so emphatic in his Greek that Murray Harris translates the passage as:

It is we – yes, we Christians – who form the dwelling place of God.⁹

- Eph. 2:20-22 – “So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.”

Like the passage in 2 Corinthians, Paul returns to the point that God, by his Spirit, inhabits the assembly of saints as a holy temple. It is a point of contact, God in his people.

These temple passages will be considered in a later lesson as we work through passages in the Old Testament that prophesied of the last days when all nations would gather at the temple to pray to Yahweh God. Isaiah 66:18-20 sets out a “time coming to gather [assemble] all nations and tongues” to “come” and see God's glory. Similarly, Isaiah 2:1-5 speaks of the latter days when the mountain of the house of the Lord (temple) is lifted up and all the nations flow to it.¹⁰

In a later lesson, we will consider whether this is part of Paul's understanding of the impact of Gentile believers joining the Jewish believers as the corporate assembling/gathering of believers into the true Temple of God.

2. The Body of Christ

As we have mentioned before, Paul is the only New Testament writer to use the term “body of Christ” as a reference for the church. Consider, for example, Ephesians 1:22-23:

And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the **church** [*ekklesia*/assembly], which is his **body** (*soma*), the fullness of him who fills all in all.

⁹ Harris, Murray J., *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians: a Commentary on the Greek Text* (Eerdmans 2005) at 505.

¹⁰ This passage should be considered in tandem with its sister passage of Micah 4:1-5.

As we discussed in greater length in lesson 39 in this series¹¹, Paul taught that the believers unite in Christ and together constitute his presence on earth. The Holy Spirit dwells in the believers and in the church [*ekklesia*/assembly], just as the Spirit dwelt within Jesus Christ on earth. The Spirit was poured out on the church [*ekklesia*/assembly] at Pentecost and believers are the presence of Christ on earth!

3. The Household of God

Beyond Paul's imagery of the believers as God's Temple or Christ's body, we also have Paul teaching of the church as the household of God. Consider this image as Paul sets it out to Timothy:

I hope to come to you soon, but I am writing these things to you so that, if I delay, you may know how one ought to behave in *the household of God, which is the church of the living God*, a pillar and buttress of the truth (1 Tim. 3:14-15).

In this household imagery, Paul sets out God as the Father:

[Y]ou have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, "Abba! Father!" (Rom. 8:15).

With God as Father, the church/assembly consists of believers who are his children:

But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God (Gal. 4:4-7).

Among the children, Christ is the first in importance:

For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers (Rom. 8:29).

That means Paul can rightfully refer to those in the assemblies as his brothers and sisters:

Therefore, my brothers [the Greek plural includes "sisters"], whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm thus in the Lord, my beloved (Phil. 4:10).

¹¹ Downloadable at www.Biblical-Literacy.com.

Understanding the composite assembly of Father, brothers, and sisters as not only the eternal church, but also the household of God, Paul instructs the assemblies to treat each other as family:

Do not rebuke an older man but encourage him as you would a father, younger men as brothers, older women as mothers, younger women as sisters, in all purity (1 Tim. 5:1-2).

In this sense, Paul sets up requirements for overseers of the assemblies as ones who have shown they were proper overseers of their own families:

He must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive, for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God's church? (1 Tim. 3:4-5).

Paul's writings of "church" are by no means exhaustive of what he has to say about believers and their interactions and the place they take as a corporate whole before God. Still, we proceed carefully through this study because often our terminology does not line up fully with Paul's. Thus, we are left with misconceptions about "church" that derive from our improper reading of Paul's passages. As we study his writings about the church over the next few lessons, we will come back to the question of how Paul would perceive the denominational world of "Christianity" today.

CONCLUSION

We still have a lot to consider in this area of Paul's theology. For example, what was the interaction of the church in relation to the Old Testament and the prophecies of Israel? We need to see how Paul, with the Holy Spirit's direction, set up the assembly for organization and efficiency. We need to consider what Paul taught of the purpose and behavior of the assembly. We should also consider what Paul taught as appropriate roles for different people and different genders. Those lessons are planned for the coming weeks.

POINTS FOR HOME

1. "[T]o the **church** [ekklesia/assembly] of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Thess. 1:1).

Paul never considered a building the "church." When we speak of going to "church," it is never the building that makes it "church." It is the assembling of saints together in the presence of God's Spirit. The promise from Christ was that, "where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them" (Mat. 18:20). The church is first and foremost a gathering together of God's people. It is not a denomination; it is not a

social club. It is a deliberate coming together of God's people to worship the Lord and edify each other.

2. “[T]o him be glory in the **church** [ekklesia/assembly] and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen” (Eph 3:20-21).

The unity and harmony of believers extends beyond the walls of our geography. They extend beyond the walls of our time. They extend among all believers of all time. There will come a day, when all believers will assemble together, spotless and without blemish, before the throne of our Savior, and with united voice, prostrate in humility, we will worship him with the eternal angels in heaven. Amen! Lord, come quickly!

3. “[T]he household of God, which is the **church** of the living God” (1 Tim. 3:15).

Paul understood the assembly of God not to be one of the local citizenry. Nor was it a gathering of a work guild or trade organization. The church was like a household. Believers come together as family. It is not outrageous or bizarre to call someone “Brother” or “Sister” for they surely are in the family of God. What is outrageous is to treat them as if they are of no relation whatsoever! As assuredly as God is my Father, then his children are my brothers and sisters. Similarly, the family of God should be taken care of as a family. Ask yourself where you can better show this aspect of the church to the world at large. Where can you begin to relate to the brothers and sisters of your church assembly with a closeness that exceeds the superficiality of relationships with strangers? As we unfold this lesson in practice, the world will see the difference and perceive we are Christians by our love for one another.