

100 BIBLE LESSONS

Give these lessons to people you visit, youth groups, hospital patients, church visitors and new members. Use them in Sunday School, bus ministry, jail services, nursing homes, Christian schools, small discussion groups and many other places. God's Word will answer your questions and help solve your problems.

LESSON 71 – THE CHURCH (part 2)

Anyone may be excused for being a bit confused about the meaning of the word "church"; we use the word in so many ways. It means a particular building (e.g., "the church on fourth street"), a denomination or organized faith (e.g., the Reformed Church in America), and even a Sunday meeting (e.g., "Did you go to church today?"). None of these uses is particularly biblical. The church is a basic New Testament theme, and we need to understand this meaning-filled word in its biblical sense.

The Greek word and its New Testament usage. The ekklesia is God's people viewed together as a new and whole community. Ekklesia in the New Testament can encompass any number of believers. It is used of small groups that met in homes (Ro 16:5). It encompassed all believers living in a large city (Ac 11:22; 13:1; 1 Co 1:2); a large geographical district, such as Asia or Galatia, would include more than one church (1 Co 16:1, 19).

In Acts 20 Paul passed near the great city of Ephesus on his way to Jerusalem. Many elders and believers came from the city to meet with him. Paul charged the elders to shepherd God's ekklesia. As overseers, they were to guard the flock committed to them by the Holy Spirit. It seems that the "church in Ephesus" is a single functioning community with a number of elders, though that community undoubtedly gathered as a number of small congregations in private homes.

The form of the local church. We know a little of the form of the local New Testament ekklesia. Early believers did not meet in public buildings ("churches") for at least the first 120 years of the Christian era. The typical meeting of the church was in a home. When such a congregation met, "everyone [had] a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation" (1 Co 14:26). Individuals shared, and others would "weigh carefully what [was] said" (1 Co 14:29). In part because of the relatively small size of the group, the people could "all prophesy in turn so that everyone [might] be instructed and encouraged" (1 Co 14:31). Such sharing remains essential to the very existence of the church as the community of faith.

The relatively small size of the congregation in the early church had advantages, but it also had disadvantages. On the positive side, individuals were not isolated members of a silent mass, seated on wooden pews, observing. Each person was expected to contribute and to serve others with his or her spiritual gift(s).

It is most likely that elders in the New Testament church served as a team to oversee the life of a wider community and were not "pastors" of a home-sized congregation. Thus the "elders of the church at Ephesus" were probably not leaders of household groups but overseers of a number of such congregations within the city.

Summary. Books have been written about the church, and many more will follow. Yet when we read the word ekklesia, we need to clear our minds both of our own culture's idea of "church" and of most of the issues that theologians rightly debate. As used in the New Testament, "church" is a technical theological term. It does not reflect either Greek or Old Testament meanings but is given fresh meaning by its use within the Christian community. This technical meaning can be summed up quite simply: ekklesia calls us to see believers-in-community. The community is formed by God and exists as a spiritual reality. The spiritual reality of the ekklesia finds expression in the gathering of believers to function as community.

To live together as Christ's church calls for the development of close personal relationships, for the ministry of members to one another, for the experience of family love, and for maturing in holiness. The believing community is to learn how to relate to Jesus corporately and is to build a lifestyle that reflects corporate as well as individual commitment to our Lord.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. In what way does this information challenge you?
2. How can each believer use their gifts to serve others?
3. How does this teaching challenge you to do further study about the "church"?

Information adapted from Expository Dictionary of Bible Words, by Lawrence Richards.