

LESSON 8

What Is A Church

By A. Nunnery

The word "church" is used with so many applications or meanings that but few understand just what you are talking about when you speak of the "Church." We speak of the Roman Catholic church, meaning all Roman Catholics; we speak of the Methodist church meaning all Methodists; we speak of the Methodist Episcopal church, meaning that branch of the Methodists that opposed slavery; we speak of the Methodist Episcopal church South, meaning that branch of the Methodists that favored slavery; we speak of the Presbyterian church, meaning all Presbyterians; we speak of the Cumberland Presbyterian church, meaning that particular branch of the Presbyterians that are so called. The same is true for every other denomination.

People speak of "the Christian church," meaning all who worship Christ. We hear them speak of the Protestant church, meaning all who do not worship as the pope directs. We hear them speak of the "True Church," meaning all who are really saved. They speak of the Invisible church, meaning all who have been spiritually born of God. They speak of the Church Militant, meaning all saved people on earth. They speak of the Church Triumphant, meaning all who are in Heaven. We might continue to multiply these divergent meanings and applications given the word "Church" until we find ourselves overwhelmed in a heterogeneous mass of conglomeration that no one could ever untangle or get

sense out of. Our curiosity is aroused and excited when we turn to the Bible and to the scholars and find that the word Church has but one meaning and that is: An assembly, congregation, body, etc.

Dr. D. B. Ray in his *Baptist Succession* quotes a number of the leading Greek scholars on the meaning of the Greek word, "Ekklesia" as follows: "Liddell and Scott in their *Greek Lexicon* define the word Ekklesia 'An assembly of citizens summoned by the crier, the legislative assembly.'" Dean Trench in his *synonyms* (p. 17) says: 'Ekklesia, as all know, was the lawful assembly in a free Greek city of all those possessed of the rights of citizenship for the transaction of public affairs.' Ed. Robinson in his *Lexicon of the New Testament* says: 'Ekklesia, a convocation, assembly, congregation. In the literal sense a popular, or rather assembly, composed of persons legally summoned.' All Lexicographers and critics agree substantially in the above definition. The New Testament meaning of an Ekklesia -Church- demands an assembly of believers called out from the world. The word Ekklesia is composed of two Greek words -Kalien, to call, and Ek, out.

The word Church is never in the Scripture applied to a hierarchy, whether civil or religious, such as the Roman Catholic church, the Lutheran church, or the Episcopal church. Such use is a gross abuse of the word Church.

Ekklesia, the Greek word from which we get the word Church, is used in the New Testament one hundred and fifteen times, and is used in the singular to designate a local congregation, or the Church institution, seventy-six times. It is used in the plural

to designate local Churches thirty-six times, and is used three times to designate a worldly assembly, or mob. In Acts 19:32, referring to the mob it is said: 'The assembly was confused,' and in verse 39 'assembly' has the word 'Ekklesia' in the Greek; and when the town clerk had spoken, 'he dismissed the assembly' -Ekklesia- which was the unlawful assembly, which had been crying: 'Great is Diana of the Ephesians.' "

Hundreds of scholars of equal standing could be quoted who, without a single exception, define the Greek word "Ekklesia," to mean a congregation, an assembly, etc. In fact, I have never heard nor read where any scholar ever defined the word otherwise.

It is not reasonable that that Jesus would have selected a word that always meant an assembly, or congregation, if He meant that the word Church comprised all the saved in Heaven and in earth; or if the Church as set up by the Lord had been a hierarchy, such as the Roman Catholic church, the Episcopal church, or the Methodist hierarchy, it is certain that Jesus would not have selected the word Ekklesia to define His Church if the Church had been such a hierarchy, when He knew the word Ekklesia meant nothing other than an assembly, or congregation. This one fact is enough to forever settle the Church question, both as to what is meant by the word Church and what denomination among the many may be considered to be the Bible Churches. No other denomination so defines and uses the word Church, always an assembly, never to mean an aggregation that never did assemble. If I produced no

other proof to sustain the claims of the Baptists as the true Churches of Jesus Christ this argument alone forever closes the question, and sustains beyond dispute the Baptist position.

But perhaps the best and most unanswerable proof of this position is the use that our Lord Himself made of the word "Church" while He was here on earth. Since it is the Lord's Church, the Lord built the Church, He certainly knew what a Church was and is. There ought to be no further argument necessary on this question. Certainly no one will want to take issue with Jesus. Jesus is accredited in the New Testament as having used the word "Church" or the Greek word "Ekklesia" in the singular and plural twenty-two times: twenty-one times the connection in which Jesus used the word makes it impossible for Him to have had anything else in mind other than an assembly. The first time that Jesus used the word it was in Matthew 16:18: "Upon this rock, I will build My Church." In this statement there is nothing to indicate what our Saviour meant by the term Church, except the fact as shown above that the word Church, Ekklesia, always meant an assembly, congregation, etc. It is unthinkable that the Lord would have used the word Church had He meant anything other than an assembly. Jesus was speaking to His disciples, who knew what the Greek word Ekklesia meant, hence they understood exactly what He meant by the use of the term. If this had been the only time He used the word Church there would be no just grounds for doubt as to what He meant by it since the word always meant an assembly; but in Matthew 18:17, Jesus used the word twice, and

we know that in this connection He meant a congregation, or assembly. "And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the Church; but if he neglect to hear the Church, let him be unto thee as a heathen man and a publican." Here we know Jesus had in mind an assembly or congregation. Jesus knew that no one could tell of an offending brother to all the saved or the invisible family of God. We can tell anything to the Church, the congregation, etc., hence we know that Jesus had in mind an assembly when He said, "tell it to the Church."

So we now have two distinct places where we know what Jesus meant by the term "Church" against the one that is not made more plain. Is it reasonable that He would have introduced the word "Church" to mean all the saved, and then the very next time He used the word use it to mean an assembly, an entirely different thing? Any intelligent person knows better. Jesus had nothing other than an assembly in mind by the use of the term in Matthew 16:18. However, this is not all that we have on this subject from Jesus. Jesus is accredited with having used the word Church - Ekklesia- in the plural and singular eighteen times in the three first chapters of Revelation, and in every case we know that He applied the word to an assembly, or congregation. Jesus named each separate Church specifically, and called each "the Church" and when He referred to all in the aggregate He used the plural, calling them: "Churches." Then in Revelation 22:16, Jesus says: "I, Jesus, have sent mine angel to testify unto you these things in the Churches." So we have twenty-one times in which we know He

used the word Church to mean a congregation or an assembly, and one time that He does not explain what He meant by the use of the term. Can anyone think He would have used the word Church at first to mean all the saved -a people who never have assembled- and then left that use of the term and used the word twenty-one times to mean an entirely different thing? If that is true then no one could with any certainty know what our Lord meant by anything which He taught.

There is absolutely no ground for dispute or controversy about the meaning of the word Church or what a Church is. The proof is so conclusive that nothing but the blindest prejudice could cause any one to fail to see this yet the Baptists and the Baptists alone accept this truth and teach it so. All other denominations attach in some way the word Church to the aggregation of the saved and use the word to mean various institutions. Some Baptists, we are ashamed to admit, so misconstrue or abuse this word as to attach other meanings to it. Yet these same Baptists, as did Vedder, will say: "The New Testament knew no such a thing as the Church in the aggregate, but Churches;" All Baptists admit that the word Church as used in the New Testament means an assembly, congregation; but some of them think the word has another significance, that is it is sometimes used to designate all the saved.

It is true that the word Church is sometimes used in a generic sense, where a part is used to represent the whole. What is called in the language books "synecdoche," a figure of speech in

which a part is used for the whole. To illustrate: "And God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually," (Gen. 6:5). "And the Lord said I will destroy man, whom I have created from the face of the earth," (Gen. 6:7). "Man that is born of woman is of few days, and full of trouble," (Job 14:1). Many illustrations could be given; in fact, all people so use this form of figure of speech and no one is confused in understanding what we mean. In each of the above "man" is used in the singular, but we know that the word man in its strict or proper meaning has reference to one person, one organism; but we sometimes use that word just as it is in each of the above Scriptures to represent not only all men, but all men and all women as well. This is what is known as "synecdoche," in which a part is put for the whole, or the term is used in a generic sense. It was in this sense that Jesus used the term "Church" in Matthew 16:18, for Jesus is the builder of all Churches, hence like God said that He would destroy "man," He meant all men. And Job, who said "Man that is born of a woman is of few days and full of trouble." Jesus used this same common use of language when He used the term "Church" in Matthew 16:18; and Paul so used the word in a number of instances, as, for example: "Christ loved the Church, and gave Himself for it; ... that He might present it to Himself a glorious Church," etc. Again, when Paul said that God gave Jesus to be head over all things to the Church which is His body; or when Paul said Christ "is the head of the Church, as man is head of the woman;" here we see

that the same form of speech is used by the apostle with reference to the man and woman as that which He used with reference to Christ and the Church. He did not mean the term "man" meant that all mankind constitutes one great big man in the aggregate, nor that the term "woman," comprised all women, into one big woman in the aggregate, but He simply: meant by the term man; mankind, or all men and the term woman; the womankind, or all women.

The Bible is full and very plain in its teaching that the New Testament use of the word "Church" refers to a local congregation or an assembly, a visible, tangible body of men and women, that nothing but the most inexcusable prejudice could prevent anyone from seeing and accepting this fact. Paul addressed each Church as a complete body within itself. "Paul, called to be an apostle of Jesus Christ through the will of God and Sosthenes, our brother; unto the Church of God, which is at Corinth." (Cor. 1:1) Again; "And all the brethren which are with me unto the Churches." (Gal. 1:2.) Again: "Paul and Silvanus and Timotheus, unto the Church of the Thessalonians," (I Thes. 1:1). Again: "To our beloved Apphia, and Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the Church in thy house." (Philemon 1:2). Revelation, first to the close of the third chapters, uses the word "Church" in the singular and plural eighteen times, each time together with all the above quotations speaking of the Church and to the Churches as each being a complete, visible body.

We cannot help but wonder just why any person should get

the idea that the word Church means the saved in the aggregate. If a man will not be convinced from the Scriptures quoted, then he would not be persuaded though one should rise from the dead.

The fact that Jesus taught each Church to discipline its members within its own members, making the Church the last and highest authority in such matters, shows the Church to be a local assembly. (Matthew 18:17). The further fact that Jesus commanded the disciples to eat and drink at His table, in His Kingdom, shows that a Church is a visible, local congregation, and that all the Churches, constituting the Kingdom are visible bodies in which people can eat and drink and not an invisible something that can neither meet nor eat, (Luke 22:29). The fact that Jesus commanded His Church to go and teach all nations -or preach the Gospel to every creature- proves that the Church is a visible body or assembly, (Matthew 28:19-20). Paul's letter and advice to the Church at Corinth to deal with a disorderly member themselves, and that while the Church was assembled, shows Paul understood the word Church to be a visible body, fully organized and complete within itself and as revealed in Matthew 18:17, Paul shows that the Church is the highest authority over its own business.

Time and space would fall us in an endeavor to numerate the hundreds of indisputable proofs that the New Testament use of the word Church refers to nothing other than a local, visible congregation, or assembly. Let it be remembered that the Baptists and the Baptists alone use the word Church in this exclusive meaning. Hence if we had no other proof to sustain the claim of

Baptists as being the only true Churches of Jesus Christ, this fact alone would forever settle the justness of our claim. Perhaps the reader, especially if he has never had any fixed views on the Church question, has by this time commenced to inquire in his own mind why all denominations do not admit that a New Testament Church is a local congregation or an assembly, as well as do the Baptists. All of them do admit that a local congregation, or an assembly, is a Church according to the Bible; but they say this kind of a Church is "of minor importance." So much so that any people may, if they choose to, organize themselves into such Churches under whatever name they may choose. They say "the true Church" includes all who are saved and if you are a member of the true Church it does not matter about these local or visible organizations. It is easy enough to understand why they would take such a position.

If they admit that the local, visible Church, is of Divine origin, that Jesus did set up or found such a Church, that leaves them and their denomination or churches out of it, and without any claim whatever to be any part of the Churches of Jesus Christ. Because they know that history fixes the date or origin of the Church or Churches to which they belong, hundreds of years after Christ had ascended to heaven; if they admit the Divine origin of the visible local Church, then they know that the Baptists alone can make any claims to such an origin, hence their only chance is to deny that Jesus set up such a Church, but simply saved people and left all the saved at liberty to organize or not, under any or no name

if they choose. Yet they all admit that for any denomination perpetuate to itself and its teaching that denomination must organize local Churches, and this they do, and calling each of their local congregations a Church. Now just why they cannot see that if a local church is absolutely essential to the propagation of any cause or the perpetuation of any faith, Jesus knew this fact as well as they know it? And if Jesus knew there would have to be Churches if His Gospel was to be preached and His cause perpetuated, is it not reasonable that Jesus Himself would have founded such a Church, or have commanded someone else to do such a thing? Are men wiser than Jesus Christ? Do men have more interest in the Lord's cause than He Himself had? Bear in mind that the Baptists alone teach and contend that Jesus set up or established His own Church and declared it would stand forever (or the gates of hell should not prevail against it). And if we can prove that Jesus did set up such a Church then verily the Baptists have that Church, for no other denomination teaches or contends that Jesus set up His own Church and that while here in person and that this Church was a local congregation or an assembly. So if I prove that He did this, I have then sustained the Baptist contention of being the true Churches of Jesus Christ.