

James Bannerman. *The Church of Christ*

Without the existence of a Church, or of a body of believers, as contradistinguished from believers individually, very much of what is contained in the Bible would be unintelligible, and without practical application.

MANY, perhaps indeed most, of the controversies which have arisen in connection with ecclesiastical theology, are to be traced back to fundamental differences of opinion regarding the essential nature and character of that society which Christ has instituted.

The different or opposite notions which men have professed to gather from Scripture, in regard to the origin and essential principles of the Christian Church, have necessarily led to conclusions widely different in regard to its functions, its authority, its ordinances, and its government.

It is highly important, therefore, to lay down at the outset those scriptural principles as to the nature and character of the Church of Christ, which may prove to us guiding principles in our subsequent investigations into its powers, and the offices it is appointed to discharge.

[The Bible contains] a system of doctrines and precepts, designed and adapted for a **society of Christians**. [emphasis by CkP] This agreement and co-operation of men holding the same faith and the same Savior is not an accidental or voluntary union which has grown up of itself: it is a union designed beforehand, appointed from the beginning by God, and plainly contemplated and required in every page of the New Testament Scriptures.

1. There are precepts in the Bible addressed, not to believers separately, but to believers associated together into a corporate society; there are duties that are enjoined upon the body, and not upon the members of which it is composed; 1Co 1:10; Ep 4:11-16; Hb 10:24-25; Ja 5:16
2. [T]here are powers assigned to the community, to which the individuals of the community are strangers; 1Co 5:4-5
3. [T]here is a government, an order, a code of laws, a system of ordinances and officers described in Scripture, which can apply to none other than a collective association of Christians. 1Co 11:26; 1Pe 5:5.

There are two aspects in which the Church, as a society of believers, in contradistinction from individual believers, is represented in Scripture,

I. **In the first place, the Church is spoken of as “the body of Christ,” in a sense in which the words cannot be applied to the individual believer.** . . . so the indwelling of Christ in His Church, in a way and manner unknown to individual believers, exalts and endows the Church with gifts and graces and powers which no Christian individually possesses. The Church is “the fulness of Him that filleth all in all.”

II. **In the second place, the Church is spoken of in Scripture as the residence or earthly dwelling-place of the Spirit, the Third Person of the glorious Godhead.** It is no doubt true that the Spirit of God dwells in each individual believer, making his soul and body His temple, and glorifying the place of His presence with all heavenly and sanctified graces. But, over and above this, and in a higher sense than can apply to any individual Christian, **the Spirit of God makes His dwelling in the Church, enriching that Church with all the fulness of life and power and privilege, which no single believer could receive or contain.**

As the body of the Son of God, as the earthly dwelling-place of the Spirit of God, the Church more than the Christian—the society more than the individual—is set forth to us as **the highest and most glorious embodiment and manifestation of Divine power and grace upon the earth.** And it is in reference to the society, and not to the individuals of which it is composed—to the Church and not to its single members—that very much of the language of the Bible refers.

In the Bible, what does the word “Church” / *ekklesia* (ἐκκλησία) mean?

Any **Assembly**, organized or not civil (Acts 19:32, 38-39) or ecclesiastical

In the OT it is exclusively of religious assemblies. Dt 9:10; Ps 26:4-5; Ez 5:7-13.

There are five different but closely allied meanings of the term “Church” to be gathered from Scripture.

1. The word Church signifies the whole body of the faithful, whether in heaven or on earth, who have been or shall be spiritually united to Christ as their Saviour.
Ephesians 5:25-27
2. The term Church is made use of in Scripture to denote the whole body throughout the world of those that outwardly profess the faith of Christ.
I Corinthians 10:32; 12:28
3. The term Church is frequently employed in Scripture to denote the body of believers in any particular place, associated together in the worship of God.
Romans 16:5; I Corinthians 16:19; Colossians 4:15; Philemon 1:2.
4. The word Church is applied in the New Testament to a number of congregations associated together under a common government.

Given the great numbers of people in “city churches”, the terms

“the church at Jerusalem (Acts 8:1)”

“the church which was at Antioch” (Acts 13:1), etc.

seem to indicate several congregations in a particular region.

(Rather than, for instance, a megachurch or the “staff” and elders of a megachurch.)

Large Groups DO Gather in Various Regions. *I Corinthians 14:23; Acts 5:12; 15:30*
Nothing indicates that these large gatherings are the exclusive gatherings of God’s people in a region.

Presbyterians often call this group of congregations in a particular broader geographic area a “regional church” or a presbytery. Regional Churches / Presbyteries or megachurches! in Acts –

Jerusalem 6:5; 8:1; 11:26, 30; 15:2; 21:18;

Ephesus 18:8, 10; 20:17, 28; cf. Revelation 2:1;

Antioch 11:21-26; 13:1-3+15:30, 35;

Corinth 18:7-11; cf. I Corinthians 1:12; 4:15; 14:29, 34.

Given that foundation, we notice that “the church at Jerusalem” acts as a whole, Acts 15:3, 22 through its leadership. If so, they are gathering the elders from several congregations in the city (again, or they are they acting as a megachurch).

5. The word Church is applied, in the New Testament, to the body of professing believers in any place, as represented by their rulers and office-bearers.
Matthew 16:19; 18:18; John 20:23.