

ECCLESIA: TAKING BACK OUR IDENTITY

Charles Faupel

The writers of the New Testament chose the Greek word *ecclesia* (ekklēsia) to refer to the body into which they were being built for a unique purpose in the economy of God. This is an interesting choice of word, because its use in biblical times was usually in reference to a totally secular political assembly. It typically referred to a gathering of full citizens of Greek city states who were called together to make political and judicial decisions.

There was another term in common use by Jesus' time to refer to a religious gathering. That term was *sunagōgē* (translated *synagogue*), which we use generally to refer to the gathering place of Jewish congregations. Indeed, this is the term used in scripture when referring specifically to a Jewish place of worship. But the Biblical writers chose not to use this term, to refer to whom they were, which suggests to me that they were very intentional about wanting to be identified, *not* as a religious body, but rather as an alternative community loyal to an alternative government.

It is interesting that in the more than 100 times that the word translated "church" appears in the New Testament (NIV), only once is a word other than *ecclesia* the original Greek term used. In this instance (Acts 15:30) the Greek word is *plēthos*, which simply means "a crowd." The reference here is to a gathering of the church together to hear the letter coming out of the Council at Jerusalem. In fact the word that we get our word "church" from in the Greek, *kuriakē*, meaning "of the lord," is never found in the New Testament. So it seems quite clear that the New Testament writers wanted to convey that what they were about was something far different than merely establishing another religious order. In the broad sense, it was *political* in its implications and in its referent. This is not to say that they were establishing another earthly kingdom. Jesus made it very clear that His kingdom was not of this world. This is a *spiritual* kingdom. But a kingdom it is, and it demands our loyalty in the same way that any earthly kingdom does. It involves a *lifestyle* lived in allegiance to an alternative government, that being Jesus Christ Himself as our King.

J. Preston Eby makes a particularly strong case for the governing role that the term *ecclesia* was intended to convey:

"The Greek word for church is ECCLESIA. We all think we know the meaning of this word, for we hear it so often. Ecclesia means 'called out,' it's a chosen, separated people. That is true. But ECCLESIA means *much more than that!* The word ECCLESIA is a special word, with a particular usage in the Greek in which

our New Testament is written. It is a word that denotes a **legislative body**. In New Testament times when they wanted to gather people together for various purposes they had different words for different gatherings. For instance, the word SUNAGOGE (synagogue) means a gathering of people for the purpose of worship. In every Jewish community there was the synagogue, the gathering of people to worship the God of Israel. But whenever they wanted to gather together the ruling class, the legislative body — the mayor, the senate, the pro-consul, etc. — they would announce the gathering of the *ecclesia*. It was a ruling class of people with power to legislate, to make laws, to initiate governmental actions, to control events within the nation.

“That is what the church is intended to be! What today is *called* the church is not the church at all! The gatherings are not gatherings of *rulers*, but gatherings of *babes* seeking blessings and spiritual thrills. The church has become a spiritual kindergarten where people go to be entertained and taught and taught and taught again, those things which are but the *elementary* principles of the doctrine of Christ. These so-called church systems are decaying before our eyes and nothing can save them. They are not at all what Jesus had in mind when He said, ‘I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.’ The *imperfect things* that have been used of God in an *imperfect age* are vanishing away with the age itself, for ‘*when that which is perfect is come, then that which is in part (imperfect) shall be done away*’” (Eby, nd., pp. 183-184)

If we read the New Testament with the idea in mind that this body of believers, which were being established in the various cities throughout that world, constituted an entirely different *society*, certain things begin to come into focus. First, this “society” was made up of people who were also citizens of earthly kingdoms. Paul very explicitly claimed his Roman citizenship. The Jewish apostles were also part of an earthly government and culture. But this *ecclesia* transcended all of these other loyalties. They were proclaiming to the world that they pledged their allegiance to *another* kingdom, neither Rome nor Israel.

There was tension in that day between the leaders of the synagogue and Rome—tension resulting from Roman laws and edicts that conflicted with the traditions of the Jews and imposed restrictions on their freedom to conduct their religious affairs in a manner that they believed proper. The New Testament writers were proclaiming that it was not a matter of divided loyalty between Jerusalem and Rome. They were asserting, by referring to themselves as the *ecclesia* of Christ, that both of these contending kingdoms (Israel and Rome) were of a lower order and could not claim their primary allegiance.

Second, I believe that these writers were implying in this self-designation that they were not a religious people. This was a bold statement to make, because in the Jewish mind, there were only two classes of people—Jew and barbarian. Barbarians were pagan, usually worshiped a myriad of gods, and typically lived a very hedonistic lifestyle. The political assemblies, to which ecclesia generally referred in the common parlance of the day, was normally made up of pagans, or barbarians, at least in most of the Greek-speaking world. So the writers would be aware that outsiders reading their words would probably be naturally inclined to see them as barbarians. But this must have been preferable to being pigeon-holed into a religious identity. Clearly, they resisted any identity as a “religious” body, which must have had powerful ramifications.

The fact is, they were totally *other*. They were not of this world, any more than Christ Himself was of this world—because they were *in Christ*! The Kingdom in which they were participating was from above. This Kingdom was an intrusion of God’s order into the earthly realm. The lifestyle of this kingdom citizen would defy all earthly religious and political orders. This would take place, not through violent overthrow, nor through replacing religious doctrine or ceremony with an alternative one. It would take place as the citizens of this Kingdom, totally possessed and empowered by their King, would love one another and the world. Acting in love would sometimes involve challenging authorities, both religious and political. But nothing would take place, except by order of their King.

This would be a costly loyalty. They were persecuted and scattered. They were blamed for the burning of Rome and subsequently made sport of in the Coliseum. The Bible doesn’t record specific instances, but we know from the writings of Paul that unbelieving husbands and wives left their spouses. Jesus promised that it would be this way. Certainly, it would have been far less costly for them to simply establish themselves as another brand of Judaism.

Lest anyone think that these early saints paid the price so that we don’t have to because Christianity has now been established—THINK AGAIN! The true ecclesia of God is *still* something totally other than the religious smorgasbord that parades itself as Christianity. The church today is but the twenty-first century counterpart to the first century synagogue. The ecclesia of God in this hour is called to “come out of her, my people” just as those first century believers were called out of the religious establishment of their day. They did not want to come out. They were born and raised Jews, God’s chosen people. Surely, they could convince their Jewish brethren, and especially the leaders of the synagogue that Jesus WAS the promised Messiah spoken of in scripture! But it wasn’t to be.

The church in our day is no more ready for the glorious appearing of Christ that is even now being revealed and manifested in His Sons, than the first century religious establishment was ready for His appearing the first time. Those who have been called, and are responding to that

call, are now coming out of religious Babylon, and coming against the same forces as did those first century believers. The cost is the same. You will be persecuted. You will be misunderstood. Friends and family will reject you because, for some reason, your company is no longer pleasant to them. You will be vilified and slandered. You will find yourself isolated. There will be a wilderness that you must endure. All of this is part of the great redemptive plan of God to refine and to purify the Sons He is raising up to maturity for purposes of ruling and reigning with Him in the Kingdom that is here now in His beloved bride..

The Kingdom of God of which you and I are a part is *thoroughly* political—it is the very government of God. This is a spiritual kingdom, but it is not religious! It is a powerful Kingdom, spiritual in its DNA, political in its world-changing impact. So powerful, in fact, that the lion will lay down with the lamb, the wolf and the lamb shall feed together, and violence shall no more be heard in the land!

None of this will take place through the religious system. It will only take place at the time and in the manner of God’s choosing through those who have surrendered to His Kingship, which is not of this world. And it will take place, not through fleshly means, for “the weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but mighty through God to the pulling down of strongholds.”

It is truly a new world order of which we are a part, and which is to come in even greater fullness. It is one that will arise and shine amidst the ever increasing darkness over the earth—Satan’s counterfeit “new world order.” This is that for which we, the ecclesia of God, are called out. ***We must understand who we are—who we always have been—as the called out ones of God. It is time that we take back our true identity!***

REFERENCE

Eby, J. Preston. Nd. *The Kingdom of God: Book Four*. Self Published

©2012 Charles Faupel