

THE PHENOMENON OF *EKKLESIA*

By Floyd Mackler, 1986

Phe-nom-e-non

1. An observable fact or event. 2. An extraordinary person or thing or event.
3. An outward sign of the working of a law of nature (*The Merriam- Webster Dictionary*)

Ekklesia

1. Assembly, as a regularly summoned political body.
2. Assemblage, gathering, meeting generally.
3. The congregation of the Israelites.
4. The Christian church or congregation (*Arndt & Gingrich Greek- English Lexicon*)

Let's not use the word "church." It has so many preconceived meanings. Also, it is not even a translation of the Greek word *ekklesia*. "Church" comes from the Anglo-Saxon word *kirk* meaning, "of or pertaining to the Lord." A good statement about God's people, but not an accurate translation of *ekklesia*.

Notice our theme — *the phenomenon of ekklesia*. By phenomenon I am thinking of an eventful thing, and an unusual event at that. I am also thinking of the event as having its roots in another dimension. The cause of this phenomenon lies in the spiritual realm not the natural chain of cause and effect. In the ancient Roman Empire the followers of Jesus Christ were viewed with great suspicion. They usually met in secret, at night, in non-public places, and were rumored to be eating the body and blood of a sacrificed Son of God. What do you suppose it meant for non-believers to learn that these people identified themselves as *ekklesia*?

Well, they had the advantage of already knowing what the word meant in their world. It was, as noted above, a regularly summoned political body. It was a sort of recognized town meeting or parliament. Hence in Acts 19:39-41, the town clerk of Ephesus was concerned about the illegality of the assembly that had gathered itself, and insisted that they should go home and leave the issue at hand up to the lawful *ekklesia*. So the Christians were using a word that, in their cultural context, meant they were assembling for the purpose of deciding policies — of determining how they were going to conduct themselves as a people in their daily environment.

We need to note that in so doing they were putting themselves at odds with the established culture of that day. The Roman Empire already had its governing bodies — its policy-makers. So the Christians were, in effect, setting themselves over against those established social institutions. Jesus Christ, not the Roman Emperor, was Lord — a political statement as well as a religious one.

Paul spoke often of the *ekklesia*. He does refer to it as a place where prophetic discernment is tested and confirmed (1 Cor.14:29-33). But he seems to assume that his

readers already knew what he was talking about. We today seem to know much of what he was *not* thinking of — buildings, religious services, evangelistic centers, educational plants, religious specialists, etc. But where do we go to find a basic biblical definition of the word *ekklesia*? The book of Acts, like Paul, speaks often of the *ekklesia* without defining the concept for us. Although even there we see it functioning as the agent for updating and applying the understanding of God's purposes (Acts 15:6-30).

Jesus & Ekklesia

The first person to ever say anything about *ekklesia* as it related to God's new revelation in the Son was Christ Himself. He did not say a lot about it (that has been recorded for us), but what He said seems to give us what we need — a basic Biblical clarification of the *ekklesia*. The important place that Matthew 16 and 18 should occupy in our thinking is often undermined by textual questions (such as, what Aramaic word must Jesus have used that Matthew translates as *ekklesia*?). The effect is to bog down in the uncertainty of such issues and lose the insights that can be gained by accepting Matthew's record of Jesus' message. That message seems to contain the following elements —

- 1 Revelation from God is the foundational reality of how to be involved in Christ's *ekklesia*.
2. It is the *ekklesia* of God — God gathering together His own people.
3. There is to be a process of resolving conflicts and arriving at a mutual agreement on what should be done.
4. A determination that such policy — whether loosing or binding something — is set into motion by the joint action of their decision and God's participation.
5. That this employment of "the keys of the Kingdom" shall release a power which the grip of death cannot stop, but must capitulate.

Jesus may be linking His *ekklesia* with the idea of the Jewish synagogue. But even there the policy process remains intact. "Loosing and binding" was a formula the Rabbis used for making ethical or moral decisions that became incumbent upon the Jewish community. So we are not too far away from the ordinary Greek insistence upon unity in the determining body, and the participation of Christ and God in the determining process. These elements make a crucial difference, but still *ekklesia* has close links with the ordinary meaning of the term in that day. And the meaning of that word seems to be removed from what the commonly received meaning of "church" is in our day.

Well, there is a lot going on in the event of Christ's *ekklesia*. Also there are many levels to the dynamics in this event. The partnership with God Himself is the most exciting element, and the insistence upon unity is the most distinguishing element. But I suggest that we attempt to read the many other New Testament references to *ekklesia* in the light of the above definition. I do not know of a better clarification in the Scriptures themselves. Here we are defining *ekklesia* in terms of a specific activity (human and Divine), not in terms of specific offices or even specific listeners. It is a specific activity engaged in by specific participants, being available only to believers. But it specifies the type of activity that those believers are to engage in: expressing and discerning the mind of Christ, and focusing it into an historical situation.

New Levels of Understanding

Reading the N T references to *ekklesia* ("church") in this light will open up new levels of understanding and appreciation for God's intentions in the world. It will show us why there was such a strong and repeated insistence on unity of mind and judgment, such unity being an extension of the harmony that exists on the highest levels in Christ and the Father. It will highlight the distinctiveness of the *ekklesia* — setting God's people on their own course of determination (not shaped by the world's policy-makers). It will open up the vista of commonality among believers that transcends social structures and national boundaries of the world. It will help to clarify the role of leaders — they are to alert the *ekklesia* to the areas of concern, and to help mobilize the *ekklesia* for acting in those areas. Notice that leaders are not the policy-makers in the *ekklesia* — this is a cultural norm that is dominant in the Western world. Neither is the *ekklesia* a democracy — not a majority rule or a people rule, but a discernment of the mind of Christ by the whole body is the norm.

An Enormous Task

Unity in policy-making is a high ideal — one that seems impossible for an assembly of immature people coming from such a complex culture as ours today. The task is an enormous one. It requires faith in God's ability to reveal His will to us. It also requires that we expect people to grow up. The temptation, in the face of a difficult task, will be to resort to the old pattern of selected religious specialists being the policy-makers. This has the effect of reinforcing the immaturity of the people. More seriously, it fails to release the power of Christ into the present world. The assembly is reduced to a holding pattern of introducing people to Christ, while failing to enter into the death-conquering experience of their inheritance. It would be far wiser for religious leaders to dedicate themselves to learning how to trigger a dynamic release of power in the whole *ekklesia*. Decision-making characterizes the *ekklesia*, but not a centralization of decision-making or power. Good leadership will offer system oversight that enables the whole people to mobilize the power of Christ for the occasion.

I do not want to suggest that the above is all that there is to the *ekklesia* of Christ. I suggest it as a good starting point for a biblical understanding. A people called together to be this kind of assembly will find new and higher visions given to them in time. But this vision seems to be a correction of much of the caricature of Christianity that is presented by today's "churches." It also is a noble task to which one should not commit themselves until they have given sober reflection to the kind of dedication it requires.

Ekklesia is Supernatural

I have said that there is much going on in the *ekklesia* at many different levels. The *ekklesia* is not a phenomenon of the natural historical world only. The writer of Hebrews says that we have already been introduced into the transcendental realms, which includes participation in "the *ekklesia* of the firstborn ones who are enrolled in heaven" (Heb.12:23). Think of it as polarized by the Godhead and creation. Between these poles is a great variety of interchange — many different things are going on. On any or all of these levels of dynamic interaction, the *ekklesia* is identified by the presence of Christ.

"For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them" (Matt.18:20).

According to philosophers and linguists there are three requirements for an adequate linguistic expression. It must be simple, complete and consistent. Here we have a simple statement — the *ekklesia* is constituted by the personal presence of Christ. It is complete, for He who is Himself the center of *ekklesia*-life is the one that "fills all in all" (Eph.1:23). And it is consistent for He that expresses His fullness through the *ekklesia* is genuine truth. The presence of Christ, therefore, is an adequate expression of *ekklesia*. As few as two or three believers assembled together can now constitute the *ekklesia*.

Hence where Christ Himself is present the *ekklesia* exists in a totality. It does not require a composite collection of various assemblies to form the total *ekklesia*. Each local *ekklesia* is the *ekklesia*. Each local *ekklesia* is conscious of itself as the representative of the universal *ekklesia* (1 Thess.2:14, 1 Cor.1:2). This seems paradoxical to us — how each gathering can contain the whole *ekklesia* in its universality. But such is rooted in our blindness to spiritual reality where the whole can be contained in a part. It also fails to appreciate the truth that since Christ is the essence of the *ekklesia*, His own fullness flows through the members as they are available and capable of being His vessels (Eph. 4:7-16; Co1.2:19). The fullness, therefore, is that of Christ — a fullness available to any local *ekklesia* (could we say also, to any individual believer?). Our experience of partial fullness should not be allowed to govern our expectations.

By identifying *ekklesia* with Christ Himself (cf. 1 Cor.12:12), we see that the fullness of His perfection is available to and expressible through each gathering of two or three believers. This vision of what is given to us in Christ must be firmly revealed and made real in our experience. The unity of the *ekklesia*, for instance, is grounded in the oneness of Divine essence between the Father and the Son (John 17:1-26). It is not the unity of a local congregation or a conglomeration of different congregations — although that might be an expression of the unity of Christ's body -- but it is the transcendent oneness of Christ Himself that is His gift to us. This renders it unthinkable that the local *ekklesia* should be divided. Our acceptance of division is a silent testimony to the unreality in our lives of the perfection that is in Christ.

What Is "Fellowship"?

The same clarification changes our concept of "fellowship." We tend to use the word as relating to some interaction or association with other believers. The NT, however, uses *koinonia* mostly to refer to participation in the fullness of Christ, rather than to a horizontal sharing with others. Believers are partakers of grace (Phil.1:7), of glory (1 Pet.5:1), of the Divine nature (2 Pet.1:4), of spiritual blessings (Rom.15:27), of Christ's sufferings (Phil.3:10), of the gospel (Phil 1:5) and of the Father and His Son (1 John 1:3). Fellowship with each other is an expression of this fellowship with the Divine.

Both unity and fellowship are rooted in the accomplished fact or established reality of Christ. That truth must control our thinking about the *ekklesia*. There are many ways in which these facts are working in the universe. So we need not codify or constrain the

ekklesia to only one form. But the deeper inner reality needs to be more real to us than the external forms or temporary interactions. Multiplicity of ministry, for instance, is rooted in the multiple diversity of the grace of Christ (Eph.4:7; 1 Pet.4.10). The same illumination holds for other facets of *ekklesia* life. All exists on a higher plane, in a perfected state that we are called to envision, appropriate and enjoy in the phenomenon of *ekklesia*.

Ekklesia Is "Political"

All that I am saying about the ultimate reality of Christ and His *ekklesia* is also true of what I said earlier about *ekklesia* as a policy-making assembly. Paul saw this clearly in Phil.1:27 and 3:20. In the first reference he exhorts the believers to conduct themselves worthily of the gospel. He sees them as members of a political community in that word "conduct" (*politeuo*; our word "political" is derived from this Greek word). Their first responsibility was to live up to their citizenship in the kingdom of Christ. Then, in the second reference, he notes that this political citizenship is "in the heavens." The *ekklesia* on earth is like a foreign colony outside its mother country with certain specified rights and duties. But it is firmly rooted in the perfect political community "in the heavens" (cf. Heb.12:23).

So our thinking of the *ekklesia* as a policy-determining body is controlled by the decisions, as Jesus put it, that have already been made in heaven (Matt.16:19). Our task, as an assembly, is to discern what has already been bound or loosed in heaven and to confirm our agreement on earth with those decisions. In so doing we will translate those decisions onto the scene of human drama and history. A oneness exists in the universe. Decisions in heaven move along lines that reach into every area of our world. The role of *ekklesia* is to discern and translate those decisions untainted by the ignorance and evil of a fallen world. Such tuning into the heavenly realm means that we have contact with the eternal domain where all things are known in their finished state. Hence, the Greek tense in Matt .16:19 ("have been bound or loosed"), indicates that those decisions are already in a perfected state.

Ekklesia As Event

But as in the areas of unity, fellowship and ministry, the richness of what occurs in policy-making depends on our comprehension of the fullness of Christ. All of us have a very limited and narrow grasp of this. But this can change if we are willing to be open to new and flexible movements of the *ekklesia*. In other words, if we can experience *ekklesia* as a phenomenon or event rather than as an established structure, we can begin to tap more of the fullness of corporate life that is open to us in the person of Christ. What is needed is the sense of a movement — of rhythm and melody in the life of the *ekklesia* — rather than comfortable security in established patterns.

Ekklesia As A Bride

It is helpful to see the position of the *ekklesia* by noting that it is a feminine noun and represents a feminine aspect. Paul identifies the *ekklesia* as Christ's bride (2 Cor 11:2; Eph.5:22-32). Christ is the new man (Eph.4:13) who has the *ekklesia* as His feminine counterpart. This calls us to experience the powerful expression available to us as we

learn proper feminine qualities. In our life with Christ we are responsive, submissive, receptive and co-operative. From Him, as the husband, we receive the power to bear fruit (Rom.7.4). To Him, as His wife, we offer our very beings as vessels for His endowment (His inheritance in the saints, Eph.1.18).

Femininity is not a very familiar quality to most of us raised in a masculine-oriented culture. So-called masculine qualities are much more apparent — aggressiveness, successfulness, control, dominance, etc. To highlight femininity is to thrust most of us into a whole new learning experience (including the feminists whose view of femininity is often Amazonian). To some that does not happen until they have been forced by life's situations to be more passive. Even then it is submitted to only grudgingly, with no real display of fruitfulness or abundant energy. Apparently passive/active motifs are not very accurate for identifying feminine and masculine qualities. Better for the feminine side to regard it as inward surrender. To choose this route is the privilege and glory of the *ekklesia* as Christ's bride.

Ekklesia & The New Creation

The *ekklesia* is linked with the resurrection of Christ. It lives in the awareness of the end of the age inaugurated by that resurrection. Its inward surrender is to that consummation. The situation is one in which the return of the Lord is already being experienced in the midst of His people. Whenever Christ is proclaimed and received, He becomes present and real. Believers are called together in the reality of a new creation. While there may be some continuity with previous forms (like the Jewish synagogue), the emphasis is on the new eventfulness of the assembly. Paul uses a word for "newness" that means brand new — fresh — something not there before. In the *ekklesia*, therefore, events are contemporary — up-to-date — as it is caught up in the cosmic dimensions of the work of Christ. Through the *ekklesia* the wisdom of God is made known to the cosmic powers (Eph.3:10; 4:8).

There will be an *ekklesia*, therefore, for as long as the end time is upon us. It will be an instrument for the risen Christ to extend His sway over the whole universe -- His agent for renewal and reversal of entropy. As the resurrected Lord, His activity and presence in the *ekklesia* guaranties that "the powers of death [the gates of Hades] shall not prevail against it." There is no effective protection for the domain of death against the phenomena of the *ekklesia*.

The world, therefore, is not isolated from the *ekklesia* but, rather, the *ekklesia* is the means by which Christ moves out into the world. For its own self-preservation the *ekklesia* does not require an institutional form, but rather the dynamic interaction of truth and love between Christ and His body. In the mutual sharing of that love and the discovery of truth lies both the event of Christ's presence in the world and the interaction between the believers (Eph.4:14-16). Such an event transcends the efforts of the world to maintain its ordered systems at the expense of other systems. Here is a system drawing upon the infinite resources of truth and love — not exploiting other ordered systems. In this dynamic of truth and love is the source of life-flow which is worthy of the same honor and glory that is given to Christ Himself.

Discovery of truth and sharing of love are deeply correlated to one another. Since truth is vast, infinite, and ever-expanding we would be lost in the whirl of possibilities without the security of love. It is the assurance of God's loving care and direction that makes it possible for the realm of truth to open up to such multi-potentialities. We know that we are being cared for by Him and He will secure our safe conduct into the realm of truth. A decision can be made on our part to trust our well-being into His hands. We can will the one thing that is most important to living in the midst of such infinite resources and possibilities.

Because of Christ's resurrection, the *ekklesia* is ushered into a realm where there is a plenitude of possibilities. But this is not a dizzy world that overwhelms us if we make the right decision to begin with. That decision is to yield to the Lordship of Christ and to trust His loving care for us. In that decision we can become whole and united with others in our policy-making. But it is not a true decision unless the whole being makes it, and the whole being (either individually or corporately) can only choose as a whole being that which is best.

So let us set ourselves on to the work of self-unification by a willingness to trust Christ and to be yielded to Him. Thus we will know the direction that must be taken. Novelty stretches out from us in all directions from our present perspective. Reality opens up to new dimensions. But the many different perspectives can be integrated as we set ourselves to repeated restructure. There is no final event here — the phenomena of *ekklesia* occurs again and again. But the soul of *ekklesia* is rooted in the unifying decision to cast all upon the watch-care of the resurrected Christ. In this way spiritual insight will accompany and permeate physical, social and cultural life. The *ekklesia* will emerge as a Divine community — the descent of God making the possibilities limitless. I want to be a part of that *ekklesia* — to share in the transaction of spiritual decisions about the reality of the world and others — don't you? It will take us up into a process of mutual enrichment — our minds affecting and being affected by other minds constructing the world through the phenomena of *ekklesia*.