***The Church, No. 1

Colossians 1:15-20

COL-124***

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Our subject is "Hymn in Honor of Christ," number 14 in Colossians 1:15-20.

Colossians 1:15-20, we have pointed out, is an early Christian hymn, honoring Jesus Christ as the Creator and the Redeemer. The hymn is arranged in two stanzas, with an interlude between. The first stanza, we pointed out, as you will see, are Colossians 1:15-16. These verses proclaim the role of Jesus Christ as the divine Creator, and present Him as the preeminent person of all the universe. This segment begins with the words, "And He is." That's the code that tells us how to separate the verses and the interlude. So, "And He is" and the rest of Colossians 1:15-16 constitute verse 1. Then, verse 17 and the first part of verse 18 are an interlude. It ties the first and second stanza together. Colossians 1:17 sums up what was said in the first stanza, in Colossians 1:15-16 – what was said about Jesus Christ as the Creator, Redeemer, and the Sustainer of the universe. Colossians 1:18a, the first part of verse 18, ties in with the second stanza, which deals with Jesus Christ as Redeemer and Head of the church, His body.

Colossians 1:17, which begins the interlude, also begins with the words, "And He is." And the second stanza begins in verse 18 after the first phrase, where again we have the words "And He is," marking the beginning of the second stanza, which then proclaims, through Colossians 1:20, the role of Jesus Christ in reconciliation as Redeemer of His creation from sin.

The whole hymn, Colossians 1:15-20, is an exaltation of Jesus Christ as the agent of the grace of God to lost sinners. Perhaps this was sung to a melody, or perhaps it was just recited in New Testament churches. But it was a forceful presentation of praise to the person of Jesus Christ. And Paul inserts this hymn, because it is the person of Christ, then, in Colossae, as today in our day, which was the object of all the antagonism and all the attack against Christianity and against the work of God.

The message of the hymn goes from the original creation by Jesus Christ to the new creation of those redeemed by Him. The hymn honors the Lord as the divine Son of God, Who is the Preeminent One in all the universe to Whom all ultimately must bow.

Jesus Christ created the angels, and we have learned about them, and He assigned them to various ranks of authority. All of them, those who are loyal, and those who became disloyal, are subject to Him. Colossians 1:18 of the interlude now is a transition to verse 2. And we're going to begin at Colossians 1:18a this morning – the transition to verse 2, which introduces Jesus Christ as Redeemer and Head of the church: "He is also Head of the body, the church:" "He." In the Greek Bible, this word is written separately. Sometimes it's just part of the verb. Here it is written separately. When it does that, it's because it wants to emphasize: the idea is "He Himself, and no other." Here is something that is exclusively the role of Jesus Christ.

He is also the Head of the body." This word "body" is the word that refers to a living organism. And what is that? The church. Now we have entered a most significant, important study. If you want to talk about something where churches are confused and mixed up, this is it – what the church is: what the Bible means by the concept of the church. The confusion on this is enormous for the simple reason that the reformers never got it straight. While they got salvation and other things (the authority of Scripture) worked out right, they never got around to the distinction between Israel and the church. When the Roman Catholics came along and took charge in the Middle Ages, they instituted the false doctrine that Israel has been transformed into the church, and that God is through with the Jewish people, and that now the gentile church has taken over, and is now God's agent. Nothing could be further from the truth.

**The Church**

Here's the word. It's the word you're acquainted with. The Greek word is "ekklesia" (ek-klay-see'-ah), E K K L E S I A. And sometimes we have this word used to name the "Ekklesia Class," maybe in a Sunday school, or something of that nature. What this word means is very simply "an assembly of called out ones." It's explaining what he means by the word "body" in Colossians 1:18: "He is also the Head of the body," and then it uses the word "church" as a substitute word for the body.

So, there is some kind of a body of people that are called "the church." Jesus Christ is the head of this distinct body of believers called "the church." The reformers simply never got this right. And then the churches that have followed from them have all consistently carried on the same Roman Catholic error that the church has replaced Israel. But I'm here to tell you that when you search the Scriptures, you'll discover that the Word of God does not teach any such thing. What the Word of God teaches is that Israel has a beginning point with a man named Abraham. It has a plan, and you get to the book of the Revelation, and the completion of the plan of God for Israel is seen there. They become a Millennial Kingdom, with Jesus Christ ruling over them. It is just like prophets of old said. You will find that on the day of Pentecost began a group of believers totally new in the history of the world, never even mentioned in the Old Testament, called the church. And it has a plan of God, and it runs parallel (completely separate) to Israel. And it gets out into the book of the Revelation, and there's the church coming to its completion as the bride of Christ. The two do not cancel each other out. And the church is totally separate, and totally different from Israel under Judaism. There is simply no connection between the two of them.

**A Living Organism**

The church is an organism. And that's the first thing you want to learn about this word "ekklesia." It is an organism. It is something that has a life. It is not just an organization. When people think about the church, they usually think of an organization. When you speak about a denominational church, what do you think of? Organization. Well, that's a use in the Scripture, but that use is founded upon something more important, and that is the totality of the invisible, universal body of believers, from Pentecost to the rapture, called Christians – the church-age believer. They form this body of believers.

**The Baptism of the Holy Spirit**

The church, in that respect, is an organism with life, though it does have expression, as we do right here now, as an organization. The church is made up of believers, then. It began on the day of Pentecost, because, to form the church, you had to have one thing that never existed before. And that is a work by the Holy Spirit that He had never performed before on a human being. That is the Holy Spirit baptizing. And you remember that the word "baptizing" means "identifying" – the Holy Spirit baptizing believers into a single body in Christ, so that a special worker of the Holy Spirit was required to identify the believer with Jesus Christ. That happened for the first time on the day of Pentecost, as that first group of believers in the risen Christ were now all fused together into one spiritual body. And then began the building process of adding one Christian, like a stone block upon block in this building that God is erecting, called the church.

When that last believer is saved, the rapture is going to trigger. As soon as that last believer that God has destined to be in His body (the body of Christ), we're out of here. The church is going to be complete, and we're going to be out of here in the rapture. So, those are the parameters: from Pentecost to the rapture of the church.

Now that is totally different than any program that you'll ever read about relative to Israel in the Old Testament. To be the head of the church body means that Jesus Christ is the sovereign Lord of the church. And that's a point that Paul is making here. He is the creator. Yes, He is the Preeminent One. But now He must be recognized as the head of the body, the church.

This metaphor of the head and the body indicates that there's an intimate relationship between Jesus Christ and His body. There is a very intimate relationship between your head and your body. Most of you know that. If you get rid of your head, things don't go too well. You have nobody to run the body. And somebody asked me recently, and I'm telling you that they asked me seriously, what I thought about inquiring about a brain transplant. Well, in this person's case, I can see why he wanted one. I told him, "You can't do that. They haven't figured that out yet. You can't transplant brains." But without that brain, he understood that whatever other problems he had in life, the brain was the key to making it all right.

So, this is a very apt metaphor to show how close Jesus Christ is to the believers who form His body. It is just like your head is close to your body. This was never true of the Jews. No Jew ever found himself as part of deity, but you do. You are in Christ, and He is in you. That is only true of Christians. It started on Pentecost, and it will stop on the day of the rapture – that relationship. The church does exist in two aspects, and that is indicated right here at the beginning of Colossians 1:2. It says, "To the saints (believers) and faithful brethren in Christ." "In Christ" refers to the church. It refers to the invisible, universal body of Christ, made up of all believers, and of all denominations, wherever and however. They're all part of this universal organism. But notice that he continues and says, "Who are at Colossae." That's the local, visible church.

So, here in this verse, he identifies two aspects of the church: the saints who are in Christ – the universal, invisible organism; and, the saints who are in the city of Colossae, the local visible organization. The church as an organization has to function on a basis which is compatible to the church as an organism. What we do as a local church has to be compatible to what is true about the church as the body of Christ.

**Grace**

At the core of all of God's dealings with us in this age of the church is the concept of grace. That's why we don't pass an offering plate – because we think that it is improper for us to put people under the public pressure of having to put something in an offering plate where everybody can watch, and see, and notice; and, that's a pressure that is incompatible with grace. So, in the local church we have to find: how do we raise the money? We inform people. We do not send a delegation of deacons to your door at a certain point of the year for your family to make the commitment of what you're going to give to the church that year, and then keep track, and send you a statement every three months saying how well you're doing. That is legalism.

**Tithing**

That is what the Jew had to do under the 10% system of tithing. But we are not the Jew. We are not Judaism. We are Christians. And we are part of Christianity. And we are the body of Christ. And grace is the guideline for everything we do.

**Priesthood**

So, that's why we seek to receive our offerings in a way that is compatible with that, because, if you are the priest of God, which is another thing that's different. In the Old Testament, only a certain, select group were priests. They had access to God. Now this is one thing the reformers did get right. They said, "Wait a minute. When you look in the Bible, every Christian is a priest. There is no Aaronic priesthood. He is a priest after the order of Jesus Christ, who was their high priest. What was Jesus Christ the priest after? After the order of Melchizedek. That great priest of the Old Testament whom Abraham met and recognized as the representative of God. And indeed Abraham said, "I want to give you an offering." And Abraham gave 10%. That's not a bad percentage, and it was practiced even before it became part of the Mosaic Law.

**Animal Sacrifices vs. the Sacrifice of Substance**

However, we are priests after Melchizedek because we are part of the priesthood of Jesus Christ. But everybody is his own priest. So, as a priest of God, you have the right to walk up and make a sacrifice. We don't give animal sacrifices. That's how we're different again. In the Old Testament, Judaism made animal sacrifices. What do we do? We make spiritual sacrifices. We walk up to that offering box. We make what the Bible calls the sacrifice of your substance. And the more you give, the more you store for treasures in heaven. That's the beauty of that. You can't out-give God. And that is an important thing to understand, to give value and purpose to your life.

**The Sacrifice of Praise**

So, tonight at the service, we'll be making another sacrifice. Some of you are going to come prepared to make the sacrifice of your lips, that the Bible calls "praise." And you will stand, and you'll make a spiritual sacrifice to God with something that you will say to Him. Many of you did this at the banquet. And boy, the reports are coming in from people who were awed. They were bowled over by what they heard. They said, "I never knew that about this person. I never saw this person in the light now. After what I heard that person say, now this person has a totally different frame of reference in my mind as I look upon them. Plus the encouragement that people said that this was to their heart, to see that God is just exactly that real.

So to be the head of the church, the body of Christ, means that He is Lord, but Lord of a totally distinct new group of believers, and very intimately related as the organism expressed as an organization.

**Carrying Judaism over into Christianity**

There are several things that really distinguish this. If you start putting things together carefully in Scripture, you will see that the church is distinguished from Israel in a variety of ways. This is of special importance in dealing with the local church ministry. Many of these local church practices today are a mixture of Judaism and Christianity. That is never done in Scripture. The Bible never carries Judaism over into Christianity. And you should take very dim view of being associated with any ecclesiastical or religious organization that you see carries over Judaism into Christianity in any respect, not the least of which is by pressure, rather than the freedom of letting God deal with His own priests, and make them do what they should do.

It is from Judaism that we get all the religious rituals that you'll find in an ordinary church service, especially in these liturgical church services, where they have an order of service, where the pastor acts as a priest, and they respond back and forth, and they go through a ritual. Roman Catholicism is a great epitome example of that.

**Altars**

That's where altars come from. I had a brother-in-law one time who said, "Why don't you have an altar in your church?" I said, "They cost too much." No. He said, "Why don't you have an altar?" He had an altar in his church, but he had a great denominational church, and they have an altar, and the pastor is up there in the robe, and they did all the things. So I said, "What is an altar for?" He said, "Well for making sacrifices." So I said, "Well what sacrifices would we make if we had an altar at the church?" It never occurred to him. He said, "We don't make animal sacrifices anymore." And the only spiritual sacrifices which we Christians have to make, you have to do by yourself (personally) with God. I, as a pastor-priest, can't do that. So, what is the purpose of an altar? The reason we don't have it is because it doesn't belong in Christianity. Our sacrifice that we needed upon the altar of God's justice has been made once for all by Jesus Christ. That's why there is no more sacrificing to make.

Now, I said that the Roman Catholics have an altar, but we must credit them with being consistent, because they say that they must sacrifice Christ over and over again repeatedly, so that people can then take that bread which has been converted into the newly sacrificed body of Christ, and eat it, so that they can go to heaven. So, at least they do have an altar, and they do sacrifice upon it (a symbolic sacrifice) – what they call a bloodless sacrifice. But of course that's another one of those Roman Catholic inventions that you can't understand unless you realize that Roman Catholicism is the Christianized expression of Nimrod's religion begun at the Tower of Babel. And Roman Catholicism is paganism with Christian terminology. It is not an expression of biblical Christianity.

**Holy Days**

So, the distinguishing points between Israel and the church are everywhere to be seen in such local church procedures. There are also holy days. Now, I don't care what you say, I know that when Easter comes along, we're going to have a lot of people here. I know that when Christmas comes along, we're going to have a lot of people here. I'm thinking of inventing holy days. People like to come out on holy days, like maybe my birthday, and anything else we can think of as a holy day, so that they can come out. Why do they do that? Well, somewhere down inside of them, they picked up from society, and from churches that they've been acquainted with, that there are special days with God. Now, there are some things that ought to be kept holy (which means "separate."

**The Sabbath Day**

We should understand that Sunday is not the Sabbath day. There's another difference. The Sabbath day is Saturday. And while it is not a day of inactivity, there's another difference. You're not inactive on Sunday. You can be very active. But on the Sabbath day of the Old Testament, you couldn't do anything. It was totally a day of rest. Sunday ought to be treated with respect. It should be treated with the Lord's Day. Stores should respectfully probably close. Some things might need to be open, but it shouldn't be a whole mall open anymore like it is now, because what is it doing? Well, it is totally disregarding the fact that the human body needs that day of spiritual rejuvenation and physical rest, and that those who are running business at high gear on Sunday have lost the basic principle, not the Jewish Sabbath, but the basic principle that God said, one in seven you must rest.

So, there are the holy days, and the sacrifices that we've already talked about. And then the priest wearing his vestments, and putting his little thing on. We have a little red thing here that covers the keys of the piano. And every now and then I put it around my shoulder like a priestly vestment, and all the kids laugh, and I kiss it before I put it on because you're supposed to do that. And the tithing – The day you walk in here and see a sign up here that says, "Every Berean a tither," don't come back. Legalism has come in and taken over. Is it wrong to tithe? No. You're a real cheap skate if you don't at least start there (personal opinion). And you find if you'll go there, and then you kick it up to 20%, you're going to have more. It's only when you don't store your treasures in heaven that you have less down here. But tithing cannot be imposed on Christians. But the biggest church in Dallas will have its famous pastor preach its annual tithing sermon. And everybody will come from everywhere to be beaten over the head that they must give 10% of their net income. And he doesn't get that from the Bible, but he pretends to. But those who don't know better now give under an improper motivation. Instead of the leading of the Holy Spirit, it's the leading of a preacher's emotional appeal to them. And the result is what? No treasures in heaven.

Now that's terrible. That is a no-brainer, bummer deal to go up to the offering box and give it in the wrong way so that you get zilch in return, in terms of eternal rewards at the Judgment Seat of Christ. And yet here's a whole vast congregation being taught to do exactly that, and everybody gets all sweaty and enthusiastic over the matter. We have this whole idea of priestly mediation – someone that stands between you and God. So, you go to a church, and there's the priest up at the altar mediating for you and God. None of that is in Christianity. Where did it come from? Well, that's the way it was done in the Old Testament. And you should not stay in a church operation that mixes law and grace. It will be a great loss to you. And people who want to have the external trivialities of religion don't understand that they have nothing, but that's what they're used to. Bereans have been asked, "Why do you go to Berean church? That's not a church. It's a gymnasium."

Now, what does that say about the person that said that? It says that this person is use to all the religious accoutrements, and all the pretenses, and all the religious signs, and that this is the presence of God? They don't understand that the more of these external, legalistic, ritualistic things they have, the less of a real spiritual contact and a walk with God they have. What does the Scripture say? God is a Spirit, and they that would worship Him must worship him in Spirit and in Bible doctrine truth. You don't worship God through holy water rituals and all the other shenanigans that priestly men have invented to make people think that they're in the presence of God.

So, I'm not making too much of this. This is a very serious matter that you understand what the church is, and that first of all, Jesus Christ is head of something very distinctively different than the Jewish Commonwealth of Israel.

Years ago, I was asked to teach a course at the Dallas Bible College when it still existed down on Swiss Avenue near the seminary. And they assigned me to teach a course on the Old Testament review (an Old Testament survey). That's where I met my good friend, St. Bernard Rouch. Little did I know what a godsend he would be, but he sat in the class. And I was teaching about the Old Testament lifestyle. Here's the way things were done in the Old Testament. And then to try to reinforce (to clarify) that, I would compare that to, how under grace, things are different: take the tithing bit; take the holy day bit; take the ritual bit; take the pressure bit; and, make the contrast. Well, the class was a pretty good-sized class. It was attentive. Buddy sat on the front row. And he would sit there and he twirl his hair around his finger, which explains what happened. But he told me afterward that he would sit there, and I'd make a contrast between Israel and the church and he'd say, "That can't be." I mean he'd been in big time churches; he'd been in reformation descent, and head back out to Inwood Road to the Inwood Sign shop, and he'd be painting his signs and working. He said, before the week was over, "I'd get hit by God: "That's right. That is the way it is. That is Scripture."

So, this went on for a couple or three weeks, and he said, "Finally I got to the point where I couldn't get back to the class fast enough to see what kind of a bombshell you were going to throw out that week." Well, apparently I'm acting in sincere innocence here, trying to teach people a great difference between how they should live today under the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit over against the fact that the Jew had no power, and no means of executing the righteousness that he was called upon to perform in those 613 commandments of the Old Testament.

Well, our old friend, Dan England (who some of you remember) was the dean. Well, one evening (these were evening classes) after class, Dan came by to speak to me, and he said, the president of the school had asked him to speak to me. He said they were getting all kinds of calls from the churches that these students were going to who were going and saying, "Why do we have this word 'tithes and offerings' in our bulletin? Why do we have this thing that's legalistic? And this thing? And they were spotting in their own church organizations these legalisms of Judaism, and the preachers didn't like it, so they were calling the school, and Dan wanted me to kind of say it in a different way to stop upsetting these guys. Well, I don't know how to say truth in a half-truth way.

It is like when General MacArthur, during the Korean War, was told that he could not bomb the bridges crossing the Yellow River from China. He could not bomb the Chinese side to keep them from bringing their people and their troops and their equipment and supplies over. He could only bomb the sides on the Korean side. General MacArthur said, "I have never learned how to bomb half a bridge." And that is the same problem as to how to tell half a truth. If it is different, it is different. But you'll put local churches in a panic once their people are informed at what grace is, and what freedoms they have, because now they suddenly sense the power of the spirit of God in their lives. Suddenly they have a day that they can walk and live with God, and a day where they can be something more than just a bunch of dogs and pigs running around as part of the world system. They can become the real royalty that they are indeed.

**Differences Between the Church and Israel**

So all of these things come from the confusion between Israel and the church. Here are some very distinct differences.

1. **Most of the Bible Deals with Israel**

About four-fifths of the Bible deals with the nation of Israel. One fifth of it distinctly deals with the church. If you compare those two parts of the Bible, they're totally different. And the only way you can squeeze Judaism into Christianity is to spiritualize Christianity. How can they talk about a Christian Sabbath day? Well, they have to spiritualize the meaning of the word "Sabbath" from Saturday to Sunday. The whole bit is twisted and distorted, to be able to achieve a religious system that is foreign to the Scriptures.

1. **Earth vs. Heaven**

Every covenant, promise, and provision of Israel is earth-centered, and it continues as a nation in the new earth, while every promise for the church is heaven-centered and continues in the heavenly citizenship forever. Israel is focused on the earth. Yes, they will have a new earth and a new Promised Land that they will live in forever. That's their heaven. We Christians are in a new Jerusalem, a heavenly people, and we are in a totally different group. We are God's heavenly people. We are distinctively different.

1. **Abraham's Seed**

There is the difference that Abraham's seed is described as the dust of the earth, referring to Israel, and the church is described as the stars of heaven. Your seed Abraham spiritually will be numerous as the dust to the ground. Your seed Abraham will also be as numerous as all the stars in the interstellar spaces: one referring to Israel (the earthy people); the other to the church – a heavenly body.

1. **Physical Birth vs. Spiritual Birth**

Israelites hold their position in the nation by physical birth, their position relationship to God. But Christians hold their relationship to God as a result of spiritual birth. Now, the Jew was born into the privileges of being a Jew in the commonwealth of Israel, with all that that connoted. It didn't mean that he was saved, just because he was born Jewish. He had to accept the coming Messiah, but he did have privileges that did not pertain to the Gentiles. The Christian comes into his privileges with God by spiritual birth.

1. **Abraham vs. Christ**

Abraham is the head of the Jewish race, while Christ is the head of the church.

1. **One Nation vs. All Nations**

Israel is made up of one nation on earth, while a church is drawn from all the nations on earth.

1. Israel is present on earth in all ages from Abraham on, while the church is restricted on earth to the present dispensation, the church age, from Pentecost to the rapture.
2. **Inward vs. Outward**

Israel faced inward to its own worship and service, while the church faces outward to reach the world with the gospel.

1. **God as "Father"**

God was not known as Father to the individual Israelite, but he is to the individual Christian.

1. **Messiah and King vs. Savior and Head**

To Israel, Christ is Messiah, Emmanuel, and King. But to the church he is Savior, Lord, bridegroom, and head.

1. **The Indwelling of the Holy Spirit**

The Israelite was not permanently indwelt by the Holy Spirit, but the Christian is, from the point of salvation on.

1. **The Law vs. Grace**

Israel functioned under the Law as a way of life, but the church is freed from the Law system to live by grace under the leading of the Holy Spirit. It's much, much better. In the Old Testament, the Jewish people were told: "Be good," and God said, "I'll bless you." In a New Testament it says, "Be good" because I've blessed you with all heavenly blessings already in Christ Jesus. That's the difference between law and grace. You already have it. It's a matter of keeping it, and being able to enter into the use of it, and not to mess it up by being out of temporal fellowship.

1. **Divine Enablement**

Israel under the Law had no divine enablement for keeping the Law, but the Christian has the supernatural power of the Holy Spirit.

1. **The Olivet Discourse vs. the Upper Room Discourse**

The Olivet discourse is Christ's farewell message to Israel, while the upper room discourse is His farewell to the church. That is a very great difference. Just go ahead and read Matthew 24:25, the Olive Discourse – farewell to Israel. Just read John chapter 17 – the farewell to the church. There is no comparison. They are totally different. He's not talking to the same group of people.

1. **Christ's Return**

Christ returns at the Second Coming to regather Israel from every part of the earth to her own land, but he returns as Lord at the rapture to gather the church into heaven's glory. We're not looking for the Second Coming of Christ. The Jews are. We Christians are looking for the rapture of the church. That is our home going.

1. **Servants vs. Royalty**

Israelites were servants of Jehovah, While Christians in the church are members of the family of God. They are royalty.

1. **The Millennial Kingdom**

Israelites will be subjects of the king in his earthly Millennial Kingdom, while Christians will be reigning with Christ the King. That is a very big difference. How can you say that Israel and the church are the same thing? Israel are going to be the subjects. Christians are going to be the rulers in the Millennial Kingdom.

**Priesthood**

Israel had a priesthood, but the church is a priesthood of all believers.

1. **Wife vs. Bride**

Israel will be the restored wife to Jehovah, but the church is the promised bride of Christ. That is a very big difference. Everywhere in the Old Testament, Israel is described as the wife of Jehovah: unfaithful, but the wife of Jehovah. But in the New Testament, the church is described as the future bride of Christ. You can't mix those two. You can't stretch it to make them equal the same thing.

1. **The Tribulation**

Israel will pass through the tribulation, but the church will be removed at the rapture before the tribulation begins.

1. **"Just Men Made Perfect" vs. "The Church of the Firstborn"**

Finally, Israelites in the new Jerusalem are called just men made perfect, While Christians in the new Jerusalem are called the church of the Firstborn. Hebrews makes the clear distinction between these two groups of believers, both of whom will have access to the new Jerusalem.

So, there is a great difference between Israel and the church. They're not the same thing. One is not the outgrowth of the other. They are two distinct plans of God. If you don't understand this, you are forever going to be mixing the legalisms of Israel into the church grace era. And the result will be that you'll deny yourself the power that is your position in Christ.

This word "ekklesia" (ek-klay-see'-ah) is used 114 times in the New Testament. Ordinarily it's translated as "assembly, congregation, or church." It was an ordinary word in use in the Greek language of New Testament times. We find it used in a pre-Christian meaning in a very distinct way here in the New Testament. For example, Acts 7:38. This is the one who was in the congregation ("ekklesia") in the wilderness. Here it is speaking about Moses, the son of Israel: "And God shall raise up for you a prophet like unto me," and so on. It says that this is the one who is in the congregation ("ekklesia") in the wilderness. Now, in the King James Bible, this word "congregation," which is the Greek word "ekklesia" here, was translated by the word "church." And all the amillennialist and all the covenant theologians who inherited the misconception from their reformer forbearers, came and said, "You see, there was a church in the Old Testament." However, because the church began on Pentecost, there was no church in the Old Testament. But this is how the word is being used. I want you to know that this word was common. "Ekklesia" was a common word in the Greek world. It was used of political gatherings. It was used of religious gatherings. It was only when the Holy Spirit took the word and gave it a technical specific meaning – the church as the body of Christ, of which He is the Head. But that's a specific meaning for a general word.

However, here's the general word here. This is the one who was in the congregation (the "ekklesia") in the wilderness: "Together with the angel who was speaking to him on Mount Sinai who was with our fathers. He received living oracles to pass on," referring to Moses.

Also in Acts 19:32: "So then some were shouting one thing and some another." Here is Paul and Silas. They're at Ephesus. They have healed the poor demonically controlled girl who was telling fortunes. And they were selling these little silver images of Diana of the Ephesians. And now Paul has exposed this to be a fraud. So a riot has taken place: "So then some were shouting one thing, and some another, for the assembly (the "ekklesia") was in confusion, and the majority did not know for what cause they had come together." The silversmiths had got a riot going, and got a bunch of people. They were shouting. People didn't even know what they were shouting for? "Oh, it doesn't matter. Just shout. Just yell. Wave your hands. Put up a fist." And here the assembly was in confusion. Is that the Christian church? It's the same word "ekklesia." You could translate it as "the church." No, it was the gathering. That's what it means. It was a mob. The word "ekklesia" means "a gathering" – a group called out from the rest.

Look at Acts 19:39: "But if you want anything beyond this, it shall be settled in a lawful assembly." Is that the Christian church? No. That was the political legislature that they were talking about – the political authorities of the city which settled this question.

Look at Acts 19:41: "And after saying this, he dismissed the assembly." Is he pronouncing the benediction of the church service (the "ekklesia")? No. What he is doing is sending the mob home (the gathering), because all the citizens were there. Just part of them were out.

So, here's pre-Christian use. Now, as we've said, this word "ekklesia" literally means "the called out ones." And before we secure today, let me show you from the word itself. This is made up of two words. This word "ek" is a preposition, and it means "out." "Klesia" comes from the Greek verb "kaleo," which means "to call." So, you put them together, and what it means is "to call out" – the called out ones. And that's very important and a very precise definition that the Holy Spirit has placed there.

The Greeks used this word to refer to a popular assembly of free citizens of the city states. The people were called out who were citizens (free men), to discuss and to determine matter of public policy. That was Greek democracy. The citizens were called "the church." They were "the called out ones" from the population. It was rooted in this concept of Greek democracy where each one who was assembled could speak up to influence the political and judicial decisions that were going to be made.

The word was also used in Greek society, in a military way. This is the word which would be used to soldiers when they were called to fall into formation to form the assembly. They were ordered to "fall in" to form the assembly: the gathering – the called out ones from all the mass of the rest of the soldiers.

Now, the Jews had an equivalent word to this. When the Jews, after their stay in Babylon, had lost their edge on Hebrew, they had become Hellenized Greek (Grecianized), and they were speaking Greek, they finally decided: "We have to have the Old Testament written in Greek. We can't handle the Hebrew. So, they translated the Hebrew into Greek. And this was called "the 70" or "the Septuagint" version, because supposedly 70 scholars put it together.

Now, when these scholars came, and they had to translate a word in the Hebrew, which looked like this: the word “qahal” (kaw-hawl'). Qahal means exactly what "ekklesia" means. It means assembly. And this is the word which was used in the Old Testament to describe exactly this idea of a group of people called out religiously or for political reasons. Now interestingly enough, in the Old Testament "qahal," the equivalent of "ekklesia." It means "assembly." And this is the word that was used in the Old Testament to describe exactly this idea of a group of people called out religiously, or for political reasons. Now, interestingly enough, in the Old Testament, "qahal" was used in reference to being called out to be instructed in the Word of God.

Deuteronomy 5:22: "These words," Moses said, "the Lord spoke to all your assembly (to all your 'qahal')." Now when the translators of the Hebrew Bible (translating into the Greek) came to "qahal," they used "ekklesia," which tells us again what it meant in the Old Testament. It was a call out assembly, at the mountain from the midst of the fire – Moses getting the two tablets of stone with the laws of God upon it.

Also, we may look at Deuteronomy 9:10: "And the Lord gave me the two tablets of stone written by the finger of God, and on them were all the words which the Lord has spoken with you at the mountain from the midst of the fire on the day of the assembly." And there you have the 'qahal' used as a gathering of people. For what? For being instructed in the mind of God through the Word of God. In the Old Testament, it was just as important to be instructed in doctrine as it is today. And the priests and the scribes who did their job for the people right (properly), they were instructing people in the Word. Those were the people who managed to make it through life as spiritual men and women.

Deuteronomy 18:16 says, "This is according to all that you asked of the Lord your God in Horeb on the day of the 'qahal (the assembly – the 'ekklesia'), saying, 'Let me not hear again the voice of the Lord my God. Let me not see this great fire anymore lest I die."

One more in Judges 20:2, "And even the chiefs of all the people, and even all the tribes of Israel took their stand in the assembly (the 'qahal' – the 'ekklesia') of the people of God – 400,000 foot soldiers who drew the sword." Here is a military group call out from the massive the people as a separate group – an assembly of believers. The point here is that they were all specialized people. They were all a specialized group. And the Hebrew word was used by the Jews for an assembly of the congregation at the door of the tabernacle when the trumpet would call.

So, that is the background of this word "church," which gives us a very clear divine direction as to what this word means in the New Testament Scripture. It came, on the one hand, from Israel (from Jewish language) as a called out group of people for a special purpose. It came from the Greek side as a called out group of people for a special purpose, whether political or religious. And then, with these two fused together, God the Holy Spirit took the word, and He implanted upon it a specialized meaning, which is what we refer to as the church of the Living God today – a distinct group of people who are the most advantaged saints of all the ages. To be a Christian is to be in the finest era of God's dealing with humanity. To be part of the body of Christ is the greatest honor that any human being will experience in eternity. And that's what's happened to us.

Next week, we'll pick up and go more deeply into what the church is all about, and what is distinctive about you as a believer from the Jew or the unbeliever.

God, our Father, we want to thank You.

Dr. John E. Danish, 1995

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