

What was the Church to the 1st Century Apostles

We have learnt so far that:

1. The first church was Jewish.
2. The church was formed using Hebraic thinking that was instilled in the Jews by God.
3. Greeks think 'form' and Hebrews think 'function' – very oppositional.
4. The church was 'westernised' and turned into a religion by Constantine.

So what do we think of the church: Is it a building?; is it a meeting?; is it something else?

Without becoming Jewish, we need to adopt God's attitude towards what we call today, 'the church'.

The Greek word used for 'church' in the manuscripts that the New Testament is translated from is *ekklesia*. It is used to mean an assembly of the followers of Jesus. Jesus never used the word *ekklesia*. He used a Hebrew word that was translated into Greek as *ekklesia* as recorded in Matthew's gospel.¹ Here he was defining what his followers would be like in the future when they increased on the Earth – the 'ekklesia' were the elders who met at the city gate and oversaw the affairs of the city. Another word is used only in James² to describe an assembly of God's people, *synagoge*, from which the word 'synagogue' is derived referring to gathered Jews.

The question that arises from this is: "If Jesus didn't speak the word *ekklesia*, and the apostles in their writings do not use the useful Jewish word *synagoge*, what are we supposed to understand that the 'church' is?" Skip Moen, a Jewish scholar, can help us with this answer by looking at words that the first church used for assemblies in their culture.

"The Old Testament uses two different words for the religious gathering of God. They are almost interchangeable – almost, but not quite. The first is *qahal*. This word means "assembly" and is used for nearly any kind of gathering, even gatherings in rebellion against God. However, in connection with Israel, it is especially the *assembly for religious purposes* such as the giving of the Law³. There is another Hebrew word, '*edah*', which also generally means "assembly" and is often translated "congregation". But, while *qehillah* (from *qahal*) can be translated by both Greek words, *ekklesia* and *synagoge*, '*edah*' is never translated as *ekklesia*. Only *synagoge* translates both *qehillah* and '*edah*'. That means that *ekklesia* can be an assembly, but it can never be a congregation (in Hebrew). Only a *synagoge* can be both an assembly *and* a congregation...

Hebrew culture used *qahal* for a very important concept: *gathering to accept the covenant*. *Qahal* is a word that carries the idea of calling by appointment to a particular purpose of God. This is an *event*, not a place! It is focused on God's purpose, not our participation. However, when it comes to "congregation", the word is almost always '*edah*'. 123 times this word is found in the Torah. It is related to the verb "to appoint". It is all about the *unity* of those appointed, not about the individuals gathered. It is not bound to a special place or time. It is always about a special people *appointed as one unified whole* before God."⁴

That's interesting. The Hebrew idea of perfect unity in appointment and purpose is not connected to *ekklesia*, the word we usually take to mean 'the church'.

So to summarize simplistically: The two Hebrew words for 'assembly' differ in meaning. *Qehillah* focuses on the event – an experience with God. '*Edah*' focuses on the unity of God's people gathered. The Greek word *ekklesia* used for 'church' never conveys '*edah*', only *qehillah*. But *synagoge* conveys both '*edah*' and *qehillah*.

1 - Matthew 16:18 and 18:17

2 - James 2:2

3 - see Deuteronomy 9:10

4 - Skip Moen (2007) "The Event of Church (1)" (<http://skipmoen.com/2007/12/21/the-event-of-church-1/>)

“It appears as though the Hebrew idea behind *ekklesia* is about a "happening", an *event*, not a place. A church is a gathering event called by God for His purposes. It doesn't appear to be a routine meeting in a particular place with a set agenda. Remember that the verb *qahal* is first found in the idea of a gathering of soldiers for war. It is the purpose that precipitates the gathering, not the other way around. Church, from a Hebrew perspective, is all about *why* we come together, not about *where* we come together.

...Maybe we should have church rather than go to church. How much more might we accomplish for the Kingdom if we began to think of church as an event rather than a building?...

When we point in this direction, we realize that there is an element in the Hebrew idea that is *not present* in the Greek word *ekklesia*. '*Edah* – the unity of the gathered assembly – is never picked up by the word *ekklesia*. The *event* of church does not mean *unity*. The event is focused on the reason for the event, namely, the call of God. We gather because God calls us to gather, and we gather because He has something to tell us and something for us to do. But that is not the same as being in unity. It is the word *synagoge* that enables us to communicate the idea of a single, unified whole. If we are going to experience '*edah*, our gathering cannot focus on the individuals in the group. It must focus on the whole group all together. Does this give you a clue about Paul's comments on sharing the single mind of Christ or Jesus' comments on unity?

The 'church' is a unity, a single body (remember Paul's language) where every individual fades into the whole, integrated unit, where no single member is any more valuable than any other and where every member is vital to the functioning of the whole. '*Edah* is a body without hierarchy, without 'professionals', without status-seekers and without individual glorification. It is the *one* assembly, doing what God commands.

What directions begin to emerge? Perhaps we need to re-think 'church'. If the Bible's view of church is an *event* called for a purpose of a *single, completely unified* body, a lot of things will have to change. Now, what will you do about it?"⁵

L. Coenen writes, “If one compares the two Hebrew words, it becomes clear...that '*edah* is the unambiguous and permanent term for the covenant community as a whole. On the other hand, *qahal* is the ceremonial expression for the assembly that results from the covenant..."⁶

Ekklesia only captures one of these ideas: *qahal*, the ceremonial expression of the assembly. So, God calls His people together for a particular purpose.

“But there is also '*edah*. In order for the church to also be '*edah*, it must *belong*, not as individuals, but as a whole unit, to God's permanent, covenant family. Let this sink in a bit. The conclusion is shocking. The covenant is not about individuals. I do not have a personal covenant relationship with God. My covenant relationship with God is based in the community as a whole. Furthermore, church as '*edah* is **not** for the non-believer. If you are not part of the covenant family, you are not part of this assembly – and you shouldn't be there!

This is a dagger in the heart of the “seeker-friendly” idea of church. The seeker-friendly church is not a church from the Bible's point of view. It is a *meeting* of mixed minds and motives. It is equivalent to the crowd who heard Peter preach on the day of Pentecost. He had only one message – Repent! All of the rest of the teaching, training and equipping is for the family of the covenant community, not for the outsiders...

When we mix family and strangers, what kind of signals are we sending? How can you gather at God's call for His purposes when half your crowd doesn't even know Him? How can you be of single-minded unity when your audience is filled with rebels? What made you think that God even

5 - Skip Moen (2007) "The Event of Church (2)" (<http://skipmoen.com/2007/12/22/the-event-of-church-2/>)

6 - See L. Coenen "Church" in New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology, 1 p:291-307

called those idol-worshippers to His event? In our efforts to make the “church” relevant, we have destroyed it. We no longer gather at His request to receive His purposes and act as a single body in the world. We gather in a meeting, filled with all kinds of agendas, rebellious enemies standing side-by-side with devoted followers. And we hope to encounter God!? How crazy is that?

Clean house! That’s what Peter says. Start on the inside! Our churches are filled with the great unwashed, and, as a result, our focus is anything but pure. Of course, we must reach to the lost, but separate church from meetings and you just might discover that the body is nourished.”⁷

In Summary:

1. The church is not the meeting, it is the people.
2. The church assembly is an event.
3. The church assembles because God calls them.
4. The church assembles to hear from God.
5. The church is a unified whole, in covenant together as family.
6. The church assembles as believers, not with unbelievers.
7. The church is without hierarchy, without ‘professionals’, without status-seekers and without individual glorification.
8. The church is the one assembly, doing what God commands.

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7 - Skip Moen (2007) “The Event of Church (2)” (<http://skipmoen.com/2007/12/22/the-event-of-church-2/>)

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