

# Ecclesiological Foundations for Church Growth

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If you want to grow something to last a season--  
plant flowers.

If you want to grow something to last a lifetime--  
plant trees.

If you want to plant something to last forever--  
plant churches.

## 1. How do you define "church"?

### a. Etymology:

#### i. Hebrew:

- (1) קהל, (*qahal*, noun form of verb "to assemble"): an assembly of any sort (115 times in the OT). The "assembly of the LORD" (14 times) is the closest OT equivalent of "church":

Numbers 16:3: They came as a group to oppose Moses and Aaron and said to them, "You have gone too far! The whole community is holy, every one of them, and the LORD is with them. Why then do you set yourselves above the LORD's assembly?"

Numbers 20:4: Why did you bring the LORD's community into this desert, that we and our livestock should die here?

Deuteronomy 23:1: No one who has been emasculated by crushing or cutting may enter the assembly of the LORD. 2 No one born of a forbidden marriage nor any of his descendants may enter the assembly of the LORD, even down to the tenth generation. 3 No Ammonite or Moabite or any of his descendants may enter the assembly of the LORD, even down to the tenth generation.

Deuteronomy 23:8: The third generation of children born to them may enter the assembly of the LORD.

1 Chronicles 28:8: "So now I charge you in the sight of all Israel and of the assembly of the LORD, and in the hearing of our God: Be careful to follow all the commands of the LORD your God, that you may possess this good land and pass it on as an inheritance to your descendants forever.

Psalms 149:1: Praise the LORD. Sing to the LORD a new song, his praise in the assembly of the saints.

Micah 2:5: Therefore you will have no one in the assembly of the LORD to divide the land by lot.

- (2) עדah (*`edah*, 145x in OT), from יָדָה (*ya`ad*, "to appoint"), translated generally as 'congregation': to meet or come together at an appointed place (found primarily in the earlier books of the OT). There are a number of times the phrase "congregation of the LORD" may be found.

Numbers 27:17: to go out and come in before them, one who will lead them out and bring them in, so the LORD's people will not be like sheep without a shepherd."

Numbers 31:16: "They were the ones who followed Balaam's advice and were the means of turning the Israelites away from the LORD in what happened at Peor, so that a plague struck the LORD's people.

Joshua 22:16: "The whole assembly of the LORD says: 'How could you break faith with the God of Israel like this? How could you turn away from the LORD and build yourselves an altar in rebellion against him now? 17 Was not the sin of Peor enough for us? Up to this very day we have not cleansed ourselves from that sin, even though a plague fell on the community of the LORD!

ii. Greek:

- (1) *ἐκκλησία* (*ekklesia*; *εκ + καλεω*): to call out, people who are called out. In secular Greek it denotes a popular assembly (compare Acts 19:32, 39). Of particular interest is the phrase "church of God":

Acts 20:28: Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood.

1 Corinthians 1:2: To the church of God in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be holy, together with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ-- their Lord and ours:

1 Corinthians 10:32: Do not cause anyone to stumble, whether Jews, Greeks or the church of God--

1 Corinthians 11:22: Don't you have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you for this? Certainly not!

1 Corinthians 15:9: For I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God.

2 Corinthians 1:1: Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, To the church of God in Corinth, together with all the saints throughout Achaia:

Galatians 1:13: For you have heard of my previous way of life in Judaism, how intensely I persecuted the church of God and tried to destroy it.

1 Timothy 3:5: (If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God's church?)

Note that the singular and plural are interchangeable. "Two or more churches do not make the church, nor are there many churches, but one church in many places, whether Jewish, Gentile, or mixed." (Schmidt, "*Kaleo*," TDNT Abridged)

- (2) *συναγωγή* (*synagoge*; *συν + αγω*): to bring together, a convened assembly is the basic idea. "If the NT prefers *ekklesia* for the church, this is perhaps because it helps to make a distinction, because *synagogue* now means primarily the local congregation, because *synagogue* is more closely tied to the building, and because it focuses on the law rather than on Christ. Furthermore, Gentile circles might well associate *synagogue* with cultic societies and thus be led into a misunderstanding of the church." (Schrage, "*synagoge*", TDNT Abridged)

iii. English

**Church:** derived from *kuriake*, meaning 'belonging to the Lord.'

2. The NT uses of the word

- a. Variations include (from Berkhof, Systematic Theology, pp. 556-7):
  - i. A circle of assembled (Rom. 16:4; 1 Cor. 16:1, Gal. 1:2; 1 Thes. 2:14) believers in some definite location (Acts 5:11, 11:26; 1 Cor. 11:18; 14:19, 28, 35).
  - ii. A 'house' church (Rom. 16:23; 1 Cor. 16:19; Col. 4:15).
  - iii. The singular used in reference to a group of churches (Acts 9:31--**not a denomination!**)
  - iv. A general sense of the whole body of believers in the world (1 Cor. 10:32; 11:22; 12:28; Eph. 4:11-16).
  - v. The whole body of the faithful (in heaven and on earth; Eph. 1:22; 3:10, 21; 5:23-25, 27, 32; Col. 1:18, 24).
- b. Figures of the church in the NT (see some of this in Towns, Vaughan, and Siefert, The Complete Book, pp. 226-247):
  - i. The church is the bride of Christ (Eph. 5:25-27; 2 Cor. 11:2-3; Rev. 19:6-8; 21:2, 9-10).
    - (1) The figure of Christ as groom implies:
      - (a) He is head of the marriage
      - (b) The union is in His name (He is the heir, we share His glory)
      - (c) He initiated the love between us
      - (d) He is grieved by our indifference
      - (e) He is responsible to cleanse us so that we are spotless.
    - (2) The figure of the church as bride implies:
      - (a) We must submit to Christ
      - (b) We must allow Him to cleanse and direct us
      - (c) We have Christ's authority as His spouse
      - (d) We share in His inheritance

- (3) What this figure communicates about growth:
  - (a) Growth occurs when we realize Christ's love
  - (b) Growth occurs when we respond to Christ's love
  - (c) The eschatological image of the marriage of the Church to Christ as it relates to church growth:

The consummation of the church is its impending marriage to Christ. We, here on earth, are in preparation for that marriage. Therefore, we need discipline and growth in spiritual maturity so that we may be spotless and blameless for our marriage. This should be a primary focus of each individual congregation.

ii. The church as the body of Christ (Eph. 1:22-23 and 1 Cor. 12:12-27; see also Col. 1:18)

- (1) The image of Christ as the head implies:
  - (a) He is the sovereign leader of the church
  - (b) He is the source of life for the church
  - (c) He is the sustainer of the life of the church.
- (2) The image of the church as the body implies:
  - (a) Unity: *many* members in *one* body
  - (b) Diversity: *diverse* members with *diverse* functions
  - (c) Mutuality (interdependence): it takes a *mutual effort* to function as a body (no one person is self-sufficient; we all need each other; Rom. 12:5; Eph. 4:25)
  - (d) Purity: if we are Christ's body, we must be pure (1 Cor. 6:13-20).
- (3) Implications of this image in regard to church growth:
  - (a) Growth occurs when Christ is given first place as the head.
  - (b) Growth occurs when we work together (not, however, implying a WCC type of organizational unity)
  - (c) Growth occurs when *every* believer is recognized as important (let each serve in his or her own capacity as the Lord gives gifts)
  - (d) Growth occurs when we recognize that the church, like the human body, is not a static organism (Eph. 2:16; Col. 2:19).

- iii. The church as the temple (or building) of God (1 Cor. 3:10-11, 16; Eph. 2:21-22; 1 Pet. 2:4-8)
  - (1) The image of Christ as the foundation and cornerstone
    - (a) Foundation: It is upon Christ that the Church stands--we should not think that we can "do it" on our own.
    - (b) Cornerstone: He is the key block (a block that causes some to stumble!) upon which the building is made.
  - (2) The image of the church as living stones (1 Pet. 2:4-8)
    - (a) We are living, growing stones implies the dynamic growth of the temple of God
    - (b) We are stones with a purpose--we are to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Christ.
  - (3) Implications for church growth:
    - (a) Growth occurs when Christ dwells in the building.
    - (b) Growth occurs when the building is properly made.
    - (c) Growth occurs when it is recognized that the whole building is "being built for growth".
- iv. The church as the sheep of Christ the Shepherd (John 10). Growth implications include:
  - (1) Growth occurs when Christ is recognized as the chief Shepherd.
  - (2) Growth occurs when the undershepherds adequately provide for the sheep.
  - (3) Growth occurs when the sheep follow the undershepherds.
- v. The church as branches of the true Vine (John 15). Growth implications include:
  - (1) Growth occurs when the branches remain in the vine.
  - (2) It is the vine which is the source of growth.
  - (3) Growth occurs when the branches are pruned.
- vi. The church as believer-priests of the High Priest (Heb. 3:1; 1 Pet. 2:9). Growth implications include:

- (1) Growth occurs when the believer-priests carry out their priestly functions.
- (2) Growth occurs when the believer-priests walk in imitation of and under the authority of the High Priest.

vii. The church as the new creation of the Second Adam (Rom. 5:8)

viii. The church as joint-heir with the First Born (Heb. 1:2; Rom. 8:17)

ix. The church as harvest after God's First Fruit (1 Cor. 15:23)

x. The church as the New Jerusalem of the King of Kings (Rev. 21:2, 9-10)

Each picture is one of life, vitality, and growth (both quantitative and qualitative).

c. The church is both **organism** and **organized**:

- i. **Organism**: the church is a communion of believers--**community** is the key. It is called the *body* of Christ and *living* stones of the temple of God.
- ii. **Organized**: The 'mother' of believers; it announces the means of salvation, nurtures, there is a need of leaders and a system of formal organization for its earthly operation.

**The church as organized is the means to the church as organism.**

3. Two major "divisions":

- a. The **local church**: "an assembly of professing believers who have been baptized and who are organized to do God's will" (Ryrie, A Survey of Bible Doctrines, p. 141). Note:
  - i. No building is needed
  - ii. They are professing believers
  - iii. The mode of baptism is not defined
  - iv. It is an 'organized organism', though the time and type of meeting is not specified
- b. The **universal church**: the body of all true believers in the heavenly realms as well as on earth.

4. The function/purpose of the church

- a. In relation to God: it is to send forth praise and glory to God for His merciful dealings with men (Eph. 3:20-21).
- b. In relation to itself:

- i. Edification:
    - (1) Building up of the saints (Heb. 10:24)
    - (2) Equipping the saints for service (Eph. 4:11-16)
    - (3) Caring for its own who are in need (Jas. 1:27; 1 Tim. 5:1-16)
  - ii. Purification: allowing Christ to cleanse it so as to be a spotless bride (Eph. 5:25b-27), including discipline in the areas of:
    - (1) Morals (1 Cor. 5)
    - (2) Purity of doctrine (2 Tim. 2:16-18)
  - c. In relation to the world
    - i. Mission: It is the agency God has chosen for carrying out the Great Commission
    - ii. Restraining force: it acts as a restraining and enlightening force in the world (Matt. 5:13-16).
5. The mark of the true church
- a. Proclaiming the Word of God
  - b. Celebrating the sacraments (baptism and the Lord's Supper)
  - c. Exercising proper church discipline
    - i. Carrying out the law of Christ regarding admission and exclusion of members.
    - ii. Promoting spiritual edification of believers by securing their obedience to Christ.
    - iii. Giving a testimony to the world of the purity of God's people.
6. **The church and the Kingdom of God:**
- a. We summarize here several aspects of the Kingdom of God as seen in the NT:
    - i. It is *dynamic*--God's ruling over creation.
    - ii. It is *present* uniquely in the person of Jesus and, in a limited sense, in believer's lives and in the church (see below in the relationship between the kingdom and the church). It is for now only partially manifest, but will eventually be fully manifest.
    - iii. It is *future* and will be fully manifest only in the consummation of this age. This will

happen after the gospel of the kingdom has been preached in the whole world. However, when it comes it will catch many unawares, and we must always be prepared for its arrival.

- iv. It is *eternal* in contrast to all other kingdoms.
  - v. It is *God's*, and He alone brings it to pass, and it will spread despite man's rejection, and it is universal in scope.
  - vi. Its *value cannot be measured*--it is worth all we have and are, and its rewards are determined by God's sovereign grace.
  - vii. It is *entered by repentance and a new birth* which is offered as a gift, but cannot be earned. This is in some way put in the hands of the Church, God's reign on earth (Matt. 16:19).
  - viii. It *demands a radical decision from us--we are to seek it above all else*.
  - ix. It *demands a radical adherence to kingdom ethics*, which exceed the righteousness of the Scribes and Pharisees.
  - x. It *belongs to the little ones of the world* (e.g., the poor in spirit and those who are as children)
  - xi. *The least in the kingdom is greater than the greatest on earth*.
  - xii. It *grows and works in hidden ways* (which are not to be mistaken for inactivity).
  - xiii. We are to *pray for its full manifestation*.
  - xiv. It is *manifest through the power of God*, see specifically in the signs and wonders of Christ, especially in the exercise of kingdom authority over demons, diseases, death, and "nature" (see Williams, Signs and Wonders, p. 112)
  - xv. *Its secrets are "given" (understood) to those who enter, but not to those outside*.
  - xvi. It is *to be preached by its citizens*.
- b. What is the relationship between the kingdom and the church? Several views have been proposed over the centuries. The view that fits best with the full biblical data is one in which the present and future aspects of the kingdom are held in dynamic tension (for an extremely concise overview of contemporary thought on the Kingdom of God, see Kirk, "The Kingdom of God"):

The kingdom really **belongs to the future, but has over-spilled into the present in the experience of the Christian community**. Beyerhaus, for example, calls the manifestation of the kingdom today the "Kingdom of Grace", and the final consummation the "Kingdom of Glory" (Beyerhaus, "World Evangelization", p. 297).

- i. "The kingdom is the whole of God's redeeming activity in Christ in the world, the church is the assembly of those who belong to Jesus Christ. Perhaps one could speak in terms of two concentric circles, of which the church is the smaller and the kingdom the larger, while Christ is the centre of both. . . . The church, as the organ of the kingdom, is called to confess Jesus as the Christ, to the missionary task of preaching the gospel in the world; she is also the community of those who wait for the coming of the kingdom in glory, the servants who have received their Lord's talents in prospect of his return." (Ridderbos, "Kingdom of God", NBD).
- ii. "Is it not better to refer to the church in even more modest terms and call it a *sign* of the kingdom? In a very special way the power of the new age is manifested in the Church, and it can rightly be said that the Church is at the center of God's redemptive dealings with the world. Such a perception, however, should not lead to a church-centered theology, but rather should become part of a kingdom-oriented theology." (Rottenberg, The Promise and the Presence, p. 67).
- iii. "In summary, while there is an inseparable relationship between the Kingdom and the church, they are not to be identified. The Kingdom takes its point of departure from God, the church from men. The Kingdom is God's reign and the realm in which the blessings of his reign are experienced; the church is the fellowship of those who have experienced God's reign and entered into the enjoyment of its blessings. The Kingdom creates the church, works through the church, and is proclaimed in the world by the church. There can be no Kingdom without a church--those who have acknowledged God's rule--and there can be no church without God's Kingdom; but they remain two distinguishable concepts: the rule of God and the fellowship of men." (Ladd, Theology of the New Testament, p. 119).
- iv. Williams makes a point worth consideration:

. . . we will insist that God's kingdom has now been established in his Son overcoming all that transpired in the Fall. Rather than being satisfied with the Word of God alone, we will expect to see the work of God. Faith will not be left dangling and disembodied in an upper story of idealism or mythological thinking. Since God has restored his rightful, direct reign among his people, we will receive the evidence of that reign. At the same time, we will also experience the tension of living in a kingdom both come and coming, which lies at the heart of the New Testament. (Williams, Signs, Wonders, p. 135)
- v. We also note four aspects of the relationship between the kingdom and the church (Shenk, "Kingdom", pp. 211-2):
  - (1) The kingdom creates the church.
  - (2) The church witnesses to the kingdom.
  - (3) The church is an instrument of the kingdom.
  - (4) The church acts under the authority of the kingdom.
- c. Finally, we may ask "What should be the relations between the Kingdom Community (i.e., the church) and the world between Christ's comings?" Two suggestions may be noted (Evangelism and Social Responsibility, p. 34):

- i. First, the new community should constitute a challenge to the old. Its values and ideals, its moral standards and relationships, its sacrificial life-style, its love, joy and peace--these are the signs of the Kingdom, . . . and present the world with a radically alternative society.
    - ii. Secondly, as the world lives alongside the Kingdom community, some of the values of the Kingdom spill over into society as a whole, so that its industry, commerce, legislation and institutions become to some degree imbued with Kingdom values.
  - d. Why examine the kingdom of God in church growth?
    - i. Confusion over the mission of the church
    - ii. Confusion in church growth, seen especially with the direct equation of church growth with kingdom growth.
- 7. Conclusion: God has raised up the church as His body both to reach the world and to preserve it until Christ returns. Calvin notes (IV,1,1):

But as our ignorance and sloth (I may add, the vanity of our mind) stand in need of external helps, by which faith may be begotten in us, and may increase and make progress until its consummation, God, in accommodation to our infirmity, has added such helps, and secured the effectual preaching of the gospel, by depositing this treasure with the Church.

. . . What God has thus joined, let not man put asunder (Mark 10:9): to those to whom He is a Father, the Church must also be a mother.