

Biblical Anachronism

How Later Ecclesiastical Tradition Reshaped First-Century Terminology and Interpretation

Forward

The material presented on this website may differ from commonly held or traditional views within modern evangelical Christianity. Some of the conclusions may challenge long-held assumptions and are offered in the spirit of careful biblical and historical examination.

This work is not intended to provoke controversy for its own sake, nor to diminish the sincerity of those who hold differing interpretations. Rather, it is offered in the spirit of careful biblical examination and historical inquiry. The purpose of this site is to encourage thoughtful study of the Scriptures, the original language of the biblical text, and the historical context in which the early believers lived and gathered.

Readers are encouraged not to accept or reject these conclusions on the basis of tradition ([Mark 7:7–9](#)), popularity ([Matthew 7:13–14](#)), or personal preference ([Proverbs 14:12](#)), but to examine the Scriptures daily to see whether these things are so ([Acts 17:11](#)).

If the content here challenges long-held assumptions, it is hoped that such challenge will lead not to division, but to deeper study, humility, and renewed confidence in the authority of God's Word.

Introduction

If it can be demonstrated that the English word **church**, with its accumulated institutional and architectural meanings, no longer communicates what the Greek word *ekklesia* denoted in the first century—an assembled people—then many familiar expressions and interpretations deserve to be reexamined.

Throughout church history, later vocabulary, traditions, and religious practices have often been read back into the New Testament. When this occurs, Scripture may come to be understood through concepts that did not yet exist when the biblical authors wrote. The result is what this study refers to as **biblical anachronism**.

For the purposes of this study, **a biblical anachronism is not an error in Scripture itself**. Rather, it is an **interpretive error** that occurs when later vocabulary, institutions, practices, or **theological assumptions are read back into the biblical text**, causing it to be understood differently than its original historical setting and literary context warrant.

The purpose of this study is **not to criticize Christians** for using familiar terminology or long-standing practices. Rather, it is to ask whether our language and interpretations faithfully reflect the terminology, concepts, and context employed by the inspired writers themselves.

Methodological Note: The conclusions presented in this study are derived from the hermeneutical principles outlined in **Appendix A: Methodological Framework**, which defines the interpretive approach used throughout this work.

Part I

The Term “House Church”—A First-Century Linguistic and Biblical Anachronism

1. The Biblical Standard

The New Testament consistently speaks of **the *ekklesia* in a house**, never of a **house church**. In every occurrence, the house identifies the location of the gathering, while *ekklesia* identifies the assembled people.

2. The Conceptual Error

The expression **house church** subtly reverses the biblical relationship. It gives the impression that the house defines the church, whereas the apostles consistently present the house as nothing more than the place where the assembly meets.

3. The Etymological Shift

The English word **church** developed historically from **kyriakos**, not from **ekklesia**. Over centuries it acquired institutional and architectural associations distinct from the New Testament meaning of *ekklesia*. Reading those later meanings back into the apostolic writings blurs the distinction between the meeting place and the assembled people.

4. The Resulting Contradiction

The apostles consistently distinguished between **the house** (*oikos*) as the place of meeting and **the *ekklesia*** as the assembled people. The modern expression **house church** merges concepts that the inspired writers themselves kept separate. It is therefore best understood as a **first-century linguistic and biblical anachronism**.

Part II

The Biblical Expression

Rather than asking how modern Christianity describes these gatherings, the better question is how the New Testament itself describes them.

The answer is remarkably consistent.

- Romans 16:5
- 1 Corinthians 16:19
- Colossians 4:15
- Philemon 2

Each passage follows the **same pattern**. The house identifies the **location**. The *ekklesia* identifies the **assembled people**. The biblical writers **never combine those two** ideas into the expression **house church**. That terminology belongs to a later period of church history, **not to the vocabulary of the apostles**.

Transition

The expression **house church** is not an isolated example of biblical anachronism. The same interpretive phenomenon appears elsewhere when later ecclesiastical assumptions are allowed to shape the reading of Scripture.

One of the clearest examples is found in the traditional interpretation of **1 Corinthians 11:17–34**. Just as later terminology reshaped the language surrounding *ekklesia*, later liturgical practices have often supplied the interpretive framework through which Paul's instructions concerning the Lord's Supper are understood.

The issue is the same in both cases.

Later concepts have been read back into a first-century text.

Part III

Biblical Anachronism in Interpretation – *The Traditional Reading of 1 Corinthians 11:17–34*

The traditional interpretation of **1 Corinthians 11:17–34** provides one of the clearest examples of biblical anachronism in contemporary Christian practice. Rather than allowing Paul's argument to be understood within its **first-century setting**, later liturgical traditions have frequently supplied the **interpretive framework**.

Modern pulpit tradition often presents these verses as **an individualistic exercise in private introspection**. Believers are instructed to **examine themselves for unconfessed personal sins** before partaking of a symbolic wafer and cup, lest they **eat and drink judgment upon themselves**.

Yet Paul begins neither in verse 27 nor with individual self-examination. He begins in **verse 17** by rebuking divisions within the assembly and concludes in **verse 34** by **correcting abuses associated with a communal meal**. The entire passage therefore forms a single argument and should be interpreted as such.

The Historical Context

The abuse was **not hidden personal sin** but public mistreatment of fellow believers. The wealthy arrived early, consumed their own food, became filled, and even became drunk, while poorer believers were left hungry and publicly humiliated. Paul's rebuke in verse 22 identifies the offense:

“What! have ye not houses to eat and to drink in? or despise ye the church of God, and shame them that have not?” (KJV)

“Unworthily”

The adverb **anaksiōs** (“unworthily”) describes the **manner in which the meal was being observed**, not the **moral perfection** of those participating. Paul’s concern is the **disgraceful conduct surrounding the communal meal** rather than the impossibility of attaining sinless personal worthiness.

“Discerning the Body”

Within the immediate context, **“discerning the body”** concerns recognizing the gathered body of believers and treating fellow members accordingly. The Corinthians were failing to recognize the significance of the very people they were humiliating during the meal.

An Interpretive Anachronism

As the communal meal gradually gave way to a **symbolic ritual of wafer and cup**, later generations naturally approached Paul’s instructions through that newer practice. The result was an **interpretive shift** in which a rebuke about **divisions and selfishness within a communal meal** came to be widely understood as a **warning about private introspection** before participating in a symbolic ordinance.

The biblical anachronism is **not the passage itself**. The anachronism lies in **reading a later liturgical practice back into** Paul’s first-century correction.

Conclusion

The two studies presented in this article illustrate the same hermeneutical principle.

In the first, later ecclesiastical terminology replaced the apostolic expression **the *ekklesia* in a house** with **house church**. In the second, later liturgical practice supplied an interpretive framework through which many readers came to understand Paul's correction concerning the Lord's Supper.

In both examples, the same phenomenon is observed. Later vocabulary, practices, and assumptions have been read back into the New Testament.

Faithful interpretation requires **more than translating Greek words** into English. It requires allowing the inspired **writers to speak within their own historical setting, vocabulary, and literary context**. When Scripture is permitted to define its own terminology and interpret its own context, many **long-standing assumptions** give way to a clearer understanding of the biblical text.

~ Appendices ~

Appendix A: Methodological Framework

A.1 Defining the Hermeneutical Principle

To ensure the integrity of the linguistic analysis found in this work, we employ the **Literal-Grammatical-Historical method**. This principle operates on the postulation that the author's intent is fixed at the moment of composition. Therefore, any interpretation must correspond to the vocabulary, syntax, and cultural conventions available to the original audience. We reject "canonical" or "ecclesial" interpretations that rely on later developments—effectively prioritizing the *Qahal* (Hebrew) and *Ekklesia* (Greek) as distinct, historical civic entities over against the modern "universal" institutional construct.

A.2 The Anachronistic Fallacy

As used throughout this text, **Biblical Anachronism** refers to the interpretative error of superimposing post-Constantinian theological frameworks (specifically 4th-century and later ecclesiastical nomenclature) onto the apostolic texts.

- **Prohibition against anachronistic reading:** This work explicitly rejects the assumption that the term “church” (a late, localized reference to *kyriakon*) can be used as a synonym for *ekklesia* without committing a fundamental error in historical linguistics.
 - **Application:** In cases where our analysis highlights contradictions between the text and current church doctrines, we adopt the priority of the original text’s literal, civic, and domestic reality.
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Appendix B: Defining Biblical Anachronism

B.1 What Is Biblical Anachronism?

Throughout this study the expression **Biblical Anachronism** refers to a specific hermeneutical error. It does **not** suggest that Scripture itself contains anachronisms. Rather, it describes an error committed by the interpreter.

A biblical anachronism occurs when **later vocabulary, institutions, religious practices, or theological assumptions are read back into the biblical text, causing it to be understood differently than its original historical setting, literary context, and linguistic usage warrant.**

The literal-grammatical-historical method seeks to understand Scripture as its original authors intended and as its first readers would have understood it. Consequently, meanings derived from later historical developments should not be

imposed upon earlier biblical texts.

This principle is not unique to biblical studies. Historians universally recognize that historical documents must be interpreted according to the language, customs, and institutions that existed when they were written. To attribute later concepts to earlier writings is to commit an anachronism. The same principle applies to Scripture.

B.2 Linguistic Anachronism

One form of biblical anachronism occurs when later vocabulary replaces the terminology employed by the biblical writers. The New Testament consistently employs the Greek noun **ekklesia**, a word denoting an assembly or gathering of people. The apostles also consistently distinguished the assembled people from the location in which they met.

For example, Romans 16:5, 1 Corinthians 16:19, Colossians 4:15, and Philemon 2 all refer to **the ekklesia in a house**. In each instance, the house identifies the place of assembly, while *ekklesia* identifies the assembled people.

The later expression **house church** combines these two distinct concepts into a single compound expression unknown to the New Testament writers. While the expression may be widely understood today, it represents later terminology rather than apostolic terminology.

The issue is not whether the expression is convenient. The question is whether it accurately reflects the language employed by the inspired writers.

B.3 Interpretive Anachronism

Biblical anachronism may also occur in interpretation. A passage may retain its original wording while its meaning becomes shaped by later religious practices rather than by its immediate historical context.

The discussion of the Lord's Supper in 1 Corinthians 11:17–34 provides an important example. Modern Christian practice commonly approaches this passage through the lens of a symbolic communion service consisting of a wafer or small piece of bread and an individual cup. Consequently, verses 27–29 are frequently interpreted primarily as a warning concerning private self-examination before participating in that ceremony.

Yet Paul's discussion begins in verse 17 with divisions within the assembly and concludes in verse 34 with practical instructions concerning a communal meal. The immediate context concerns selfish conduct toward fellow believers rather than the performance of an isolated religious ritual.

The biblical anachronism therefore does not lie within Paul's inspired words. It lies in allowing later liturgical practices to become the framework through which those words are interpreted.

B.4 Institutional Anachronism

Institutions also develop over time. As Christianity expanded throughout subsequent centuries, organizational structures, ecclesiastical offices, denominational systems, and institutional terminology became increasingly complex. These historical developments are important subjects of church history. They should not, however, be assumed to define the vocabulary employed by first-century writers.

When later institutional concepts are unconsciously projected backward into the apostolic writings, Scripture may be interpreted according to structures that did not yet exist. Historical development should therefore be distinguished from historical interpretation.

B.5 Liturgical Anachronism

Religious practices likewise undergo historical development. Throughout Christian history, forms of worship, ceremonial

observances, and liturgical customs have changed considerably across cultures and traditions. Such developments are matters of historical record.

The interpretive question is whether those later practices should govern the reading of first-century texts. Whenever later ceremonial forms become the primary lens through which apostolic instructions are understood, the interpreter risks reading later practice back into the biblical narrative rather than allowing the biblical narrative to define the practice.

This distinction is particularly important when studying the Lord's Supper, baptism, congregational life, and other practices whose historical forms have undergone substantial development.

B.6 Why Biblical Anachronism Matters

The purpose of identifying biblical anachronism is not to criticize sincere Christians, nor to diminish the value of historical theological reflection. Rather, its purpose is to encourage careful interpretation by allowing Scripture to speak within its own historical world.

Every generation inherits religious vocabulary and traditions from those who came before. Responsible interpretation continually asks whether those inherited concepts accurately reflect the meaning intended by the biblical authors. When later terminology, institutions, or practices replace the language and context of Scripture, the reader may unknowingly inherit conclusions that the biblical text itself never requires.

For this reason, the consistent application of the literal-grammatical-historical method requires that Scripture first be understood according to its own language, historical circumstances, and literary context before later theological developments are considered. Only then can the distinction between apostolic teaching and subsequent historical

interpretation be carefully maintained.

Appendix C: Passages Commonly Cited in Support of the Universal Church Interpretation

C.1 Purpose of This Appendix

The New Testament contains over one hundred occurrences of the Greek noun *ekklesia*. The overwhelming majority unmistakably refer to identifiable assemblies meeting in particular places. Nevertheless, a relatively small number of passages have traditionally been interpreted as referring to a universal or invisible church composed of all believers.

The purpose of this appendix is not to dismiss those interpretations, but to examine whether the passages themselves require that conclusion or whether they may be understood consistently with the ordinary lexical meaning of *ekklesia* as an assembly.

Throughout this study, the question is not whether all believers belong to Christ, nor whether all who are redeemed constitute His people. Scripture plainly affirms both truths. The question is more specific:

Did the New Testament writers employ the noun *ekklesia* to describe a universal institution, or did they continue to use the word according to its established meaning as an assembly?

Each passage below is therefore examined according to four principles:

1. The immediate literary context.
2. The historical setting.
3. The ordinary lexical meaning of *ekklesia*.
4. Whether the passage requires a universal institutional

interpretation.

C.2 Matthew 16:18

“...upon this rock I will build my ekklesia...” (KJV)

Common Interpretation

This verse is frequently regarded as the foundational proof that Christ established one universal church embracing all believers throughout history.

Contextual Analysis

The emphasis of the passage is not upon the geographical extent of Christ's people but upon His promise that He Himself would build His *ekklesia*. The future tense (“I will build”) points forward from the time of Jesus' earthly ministry.

Nothing within the immediate context defines the scope of the *ekklesia* or transforms the ordinary meaning of the word into an abstract institution. The passage emphasizes ownership, authority, and certainty of Christ's work rather than providing a technical definition of *ekklesia*.

Observations

- The promise concerns Christ's future work.
- The verse does not describe organizational structure.
- It does not define *ekklesia*.
- It does not discuss local versus universal assemblies.

Conclusion

Matthew 16:18 affirms that Christ would build His *ekklesia*. Whether that building occurs through identifiable assemblies or through an abstract universal institution is not answered by this verse alone. Consequently, the passage should not be required to bear more theological weight than its context

permits.

C.3 Matthew 18:17

“...tell it unto the ekklesia...”

Common Interpretation

Some regard this passage as evidence that *ekklesia* possesses a broad institutional meaning independent of any local gathering.

Contextual Analysis

The surrounding verses describe the resolution of personal offenses among identifiable disciples. The injured believer is instructed first to speak privately, then with witnesses, and finally to bring the matter before the *ekklesia*.

Such instructions assume a body capable of hearing testimony, rendering judgment, and exercising discipline.

These are practical actions requiring an actual assembly rather than an abstract collection of believers scattered throughout the world.

Observations

- The *ekklesia* hears.
- The *ekklesia* evaluates.
- The *ekklesia* renders judgment.
- The offender may refuse to hear the *ekklesia*.

Each activity presupposes an identifiable gathering.

Conclusion

Matthew 18:17 naturally reflects the ordinary functional meaning of *ekklesia* as an assembly capable of acting collectively.

C.4 Acts 20:28

“...to feed the ekklesia of God...”

Common Interpretation

Because Paul speaks of “the church of God,” some conclude that he refers to the universal church.

Contextual Analysis

Paul is addressing the elders of Ephesus. Their responsibility concerns the flock over which the Holy Spirit had made them overseers.

- The pastoral responsibility described is local and practical.
- Elders cannot shepherd every believer throughout the world.
- Their oversight necessarily concerns a definable body of believers entrusted to their care.

Observations

- The audience consists of Ephesian elders.
- The responsibility is pastoral oversight.
- The flock is identifiable.
- The ministry is local.

Conclusion

Acts 20:28 does not require a universal institutional understanding of *ekklesia*. The immediate context favors a concrete assembly under recognized oversight.

C.5 1 Corinthians 12:28

“And God hath set some in the ekklesia...”

Common Interpretation

This passage is often cited because Paul speaks broadly of gifts placed within “the church.”

Contextual Analysis

First Corinthians is addressed to “the ekklesia of God which is at Corinth” (1 Corinthians 1:2). Throughout the letter Paul repeatedly addresses the life, worship, discipline, fellowship, and spiritual gifts of that assembly.

Chapter 12 continues this discussion by explaining how God distributes gifts for the benefit of the body.

The context never abandons the practical concerns of the Corinthian assembly.

Observations

- The letter consistently addresses one identifiable assembly.
- The gifts are exercised among assembled believers.
- The chapter prepares for orderly assembly in chapter 14.

Conclusion

Nothing within the immediate context requires *ekklesia* to be understood as a universal institution. The discussion naturally continues Paul’s instruction to the Corinthian assembly concerning its corporate life.

C.6 Ephesians 1:22–23

“...gave him to be the head over all things to the ekklesia...”

Common Interpretation

This passage is commonly viewed as one of the strongest arguments for a universal church because Christ is described as the Head of the *ekklesia*.

Contextual Analysis

Paul emphasizes Christ's supreme authority over all creation and His unique relationship to His redeemed people.

The passage identifies Christ as Head but does not redefine the lexical meaning of *ekklesia*. Headship describes His authority and relationship rather than the geographical extent or organizational structure of those under His lordship.

Observations

- The emphasis is Christ.
- The emphasis is His authority.
- No definition of *ekklesia* is supplied.

Conclusion

The passage teaches Christ's supreme headship but does not, by itself, establish that *ekklesia* has acquired a new meaning different from its ordinary first-century usage.

C.7 Ephesians 3:10

"To the intent that now unto the principalities and powers in heavenly places might be known by the ekklesia the manifold wisdom of God." (KJV)

This verse is frequently cited as evidence that *ekklesia* denotes a universal, invisible entity transcending local assemblies. Because Paul speaks of God's wisdom being made known "by the church," some conclude that the word must describe the collective body of all believers rather than an actual assembly.

The immediate context, however, focuses on God's redemptive purpose in Christ and the inclusion of both Jews and Gentiles in the same covenant relationship. Paul is explaining the mystery previously hidden but now revealed through the gospel.

His emphasis rests upon the unity created in Christ, not upon redefining *ekklesia*.

Nothing in the passage requires the reader to abandon the ordinary meaning of *ekklesia*. Throughout the New Testament, assemblies collectively bear witness to God's wisdom before the world. The text emphasizes God's purpose being displayed through His redeemed people, but it does not pause to redefine the noun itself.

The passage therefore teaches the revelatory purpose of God's people rather than introducing a new ecclesiological definition of *ekklesia*.

C.8 Ephesians 5:23–32

“...Christ is the head of the ekklesia...” (KJV)

This section is often regarded as one of the strongest arguments for a universal church because Paul compares the relationship between husband and wife to that between Christ and the *ekklesia*. Since Christ has but one bride, many conclude that *ekklesia* must refer to one universal institution.

The comparison, however, is theological rather than lexical. Paul's purpose is to illustrate sacrificial love, submission, and covenant faithfulness. The analogy depends upon Christ's relationship to His people, not upon redefining the meaning of *ekklesia*.

Throughout Scripture, singular collective nouns frequently describe groups without altering the ordinary meaning of the words employed. The singular form does not by itself establish universality. Nor does the passage discuss organizational structure, geographical scope, or the existence of an invisible institution.

Rather, Paul presents Christ as the perfect model of covenant

love. The focus remains upon His care, nourishment, and sanctifying work among His people. The passage therefore contributes significantly to the doctrine of Christ's relationship with believers while leaving the ordinary lexical meaning of *ekklesia* unchanged.

"And he is the head of the body, the ekklesia..." (KJV)

C.9 Colossians 1:18

As in Ephesians, this verse is frequently cited because Christ is identified as the Head of the *ekklesia*. The argument commonly assumes that because Christ possesses only one body, *ekklesia* must necessarily refer to a universal entity.

Paul's concern, however, is Christ's absolute supremacy. The surrounding verses magnify His preeminence over creation, redemption, and the new creation. His headship establishes His authority and priority in all things.

The verse defines Christ far more than it defines *ekklesia*. Nothing in the immediate context suggests that Paul intends to assign the noun a meaning different from its established first-century usage. Instead, the emphasis rests upon the Lordship of Christ over His redeemed people.

Consequently, the passage teaches Christ's supremacy while remaining silent on whether *ekklesia* should be understood as a universal institution or as assemblies united under one Lord.

C.10 Colossians 1:24

"...for his body's sake, which is the ekklesia." (KJV)

Paul speaks here of his sufferings on behalf of Christ's body, identified as the *ekklesia*. Once again, the emphasis falls upon Paul's ministry to God's people rather than upon defining the word itself.

The broader context of Colossians repeatedly addresses practical concerns within identifiable assemblies. Paul sends greetings, instructions, and letters to particular congregations meeting in specific locations (Colossians 4:15–16). Nothing in the epistle suggests that the ordinary meaning of *ekklesia* has been abandoned.

Instead, Paul's statement reflects his sacrificial ministry for the benefit of Christ's people wherever they assembled. The text emphasizes the object of his service rather than introducing a new ecclesiological category.

C.11 Hebrews 12:22–24

“...to the general assembly and ekklesia of the firstborn...” (KJV)

Hebrews 12:22–24 is perhaps the most frequently discussed passage in this debate because it describes believers as having come to Mount Zion, the heavenly Jerusalem, “the general assembly and church of the firstborn.”

Unlike the preceding passages, this text employs highly figurative and covenantal language. The writer contrasts Mount Sinai with Mount Zion, the old covenant with the new, and earthly realities with heavenly privileges. The imagery is richly theological and should be interpreted within that literary framework.

Several observations deserve careful consideration. First, the expression “general assembly” translates the Greek *panēgyris*, a word referring to a festive gathering. Second, *ekklesia* immediately follows and is connected with “the firstborn.” Even within this exalted description, the imagery remains that of an assembled company rather than an abstract institution.

The passage describes the covenant privileges enjoyed by believers through Christ. Whether the gathering is viewed proleptically, liturgically, or eschatologically, the imagery continues to be that of an assembly. The text therefore

presents no compelling lexical evidence that *ekklesia* has ceased to denote an assembled people.

Because Hebrews employs highly symbolic language throughout the epistle, caution should be exercised before allowing this unique passage to redefine the ordinary meaning consistently found elsewhere in the New Testament.

C.12 Summary Observations

The passages examined in this appendix are those most commonly cited in support of the universal church interpretation. They deserve careful and respectful consideration, for each contributes important truths concerning Christ's authority, His redemptive work, and the unity of His people.

A consistent pattern nevertheless emerges. None of these passages pauses to define *ekklesia* or explicitly states that the word has acquired a new lexical meaning distinct from its established first-century usage. Instead, the discussions center on Christ's headship, the unity of believers, the progress of redemption, or the covenant relationship between Christ and His people.

This observation is significant. Theological truths concerning the unity of all believers do not, by themselves, establish that the noun *ekklesia* has become a technical term for a universal institution. To reach that conclusion requires an inference that extends beyond what these texts explicitly state.

The literal-grammatical-historical method therefore begins with the ordinary meaning of *ekklesia* and asks whether any passage clearly requires that meaning to be abandoned. The passages examined here, while rich in theological significance, do not unambiguously make that transition. For this reason, the interpreter should exercise caution before reading later ecclesiological developments back into the apostolic writings. Such a reading risks committing the very

interpretive anachronism defined in Appendix B by allowing later theological constructs to reshape the historical and linguistic world of the New Testament.

Appendix D: The Consistent Pattern of *Ekklesia* in the New Testament

D.1 Purpose of This Appendix

Much of the discussion surrounding *ekklesia* has focused upon a relatively small number of passages whose interpretation is debated. While those texts deserve careful consideration, they should not overshadow the consistent pattern established throughout the New Testament.

Language is ordinarily understood by its regular usage rather than by isolated or disputed examples. If a word appears repeatedly in similar contexts, those contexts establish its normal range of meaning. Only compelling contextual evidence should justify assigning a fundamentally different sense to the same word.

The Greek noun *ekklesia* follows this pattern. Across the New Testament it consistently describes an identifiable assembly of people. Whether the gathering is civic, as in Acts 19, or Christian, the defining characteristic remains the same: people are assembled for a recognized purpose.

This appendix surveys the recurring characteristics of *ekklesia* as they appear throughout the apostolic writings.

D.2 The *Ekklesia* Assemblies

The most fundamental characteristic of an *ekklesia* is that it assembles. This observation may appear self-evident, yet it is foundational. The noun itself denotes an assembly or gathering rather than merely the existence of individuals who happen to

belong to the same group.

Paul assumes this understanding throughout his correspondence with the Corinthians.

“When ye come together in the church...” (1 Corinthians 11:18, KJV)

Again,

“If therefore the whole church be come together into one place...” (1 Corinthians 14:23, KJV)

These statements are significant because Paul does not describe believers becoming the *ekklesia* by assembling. Rather, he speaks of the *ekklesia* assembling because it already exists as an identifiable body capable of gathering. The language presupposes that an *ekklesia* is known by its assembled expression.

D.3 The *Ekklesia* Meets in Identifiable Locations

The New Testament repeatedly associates assemblies with specific places. Paul greets:

“the ekklesia that is in their house” (Romans 16:5; 1 Corinthians 16:19; Colossians 4:15; Philemon 2).

The house is never identified as the *ekklesia*. Rather, it serves as the location where the *ekklesia* gathers. This distinction is easily overlooked in modern English because later expressions such as “house church” have become common. The apostolic writers, however, consistently distinguish between the people and the place.

The location may vary, but the identity of the assembly remains the gathered people.

D.4 The *Ekklesia* Hears and Responds

An assembly is capable of receiving instruction, responding to exhortation, and acting collectively. In Matthew 18:17, disputes are brought before the *ekklesia*. In Acts 15, the assembly hears testimony, deliberates, and reaches a common judgment.

In Paul's letters, assemblies receive instruction concerning doctrine, worship, discipline, generosity, and daily conduct. These activities require an identifiable body capable of hearing and responding together. Such descriptions naturally fit an assembled congregation.

D.5 The *Ekklesia* Exercises Discipline

One of the clearest demonstrations of an assembled body appears in the exercise of discipline. In 1 Corinthians 5, Paul instructs the believers concerning an immoral member:

"In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when ye are gathered together..." (1 Corinthians 5:4, KJV)

The disciplinary action is not described as an individual responsibility but as the action of the assembled congregation. Likewise, Matthew 18 concludes with the offender either hearing or refusing to hear the *ekklesia*. Both passages assume an identifiable assembly capable of collective judgment.

D.6 The *Ekklesia* Observes the Lord's Supper Together

The apostolic pattern consistently presents the Lord's Supper as an activity of believers assembled together. Paul's repeated expression "when ye come together" (1 Corinthians 11:17–34) frames the entire discussion. The abuses he condemns arise because some eat before others arrive, while others are left hungry. His solution is equally practical:

"Wherefore, my brethren, when ye come together to eat, tarry one

for another.” (1 Corinthians 11:33, KJV)

The passage presupposes an assembled body sharing a common meal. The *ekklesia* is not merely a collection of scattered believers sharing a common faith; it is believers gathered in fellowship.

D.7 The *Ekklesia* Sends and Receives Representatives

Assemblies also act corporately in sending and receiving messengers.

- The church at Antioch sends Barnabas and Saul (Acts 13:1–3).
- The Jerusalem assembly receives reports from missionary journeys (Acts 14:27).
- Delegates are appointed and commissioned (Acts 15).

These activities demonstrate organized, collective action. They belong to an identifiable assembly rather than to an undefined abstraction.

D.8 The *Ekklesia* Is Counted and Recognized

Throughout Acts, Luke speaks of assemblies in ways that imply recognizable identity.

- Assemblies have elders (Acts 14:23).
- Assemblies receive letters (Acts 15:30–31).
- Assemblies grow numerically (Acts 16:5).
- Assemblies support missionaries (Philippians 4:15).
- Assemblies are greeted by name (Romans 16; Colossians 4).

These descriptions consistently portray real congregations existing in real places among real people.

D.9 Summary of the New Testament Pattern

When the New Testament evidence is considered as a whole, a remarkably consistent picture emerges.

- The *ekklesia* assembles.
- The *ekklesia* meets in identifiable locations.
- The *ekklesia* hears instruction.
- The *ekklesia* disciplines members.
- The *ekklesia* shares the Lord's Supper.
- The *ekklesia* appoints leaders.
- The *ekklesia* sends representatives.
- The *ekklesia* receives correspondence.
- The *ekklesia* acts corporately.

These characteristics are not presented as exceptional; they constitute the ordinary life of the apostolic assemblies.

Taken together, they reveal a consistent and coherent pattern. The *ekklesia* is repeatedly portrayed as a gathered body of identifiable believers who assemble for worship, instruction, fellowship, discipline, prayer, and the breaking of bread. This pattern is not incidental to the New Testament record; it is woven throughout its narrative and epistolary writings.

Consequently, any interpretation that assigns *ekklesia* a meaning fundamentally detached from its assembled character bears the burden of demonstrating that such a shift is explicitly required by the biblical text. Absent such evidence, the ordinary lexical and functional pattern should remain the controlling framework for interpretation.

Concluding Observations

The passages most frequently cited in support of the universal church interpretation certainly deserve careful study. They contain profound theological truths concerning Christ's authority, His redemptive work, and the unity of His people.

Yet upon close examination, these texts generally **assume** the meaning of *ekklesia* rather than redefine it. Their primary concern is the relationship of Christ to His people, the responsibilities of believers, or the life of the assembly—not the introduction of a new technical definition of the word itself.

For this reason, caution is warranted before allowing later theological systems to assign a meaning to *ekklesia* that its first-century readers would not naturally have understood. The consistent application of the literal-grammatical-historical method requires that the ordinary lexical sense remain the starting point unless the context clearly demands otherwise.
