

THE ECCLESIA

by Boyce Mouton

Our English word “church” comes from the Greek word “ecclesia”. “Ecclesia” is a compound of two words: one meaning “out of” and the other “calling”.

Originally the word referred to an assembly of people and thus was translated as “congregation” in those English versions up to the time of Henry VIII. The word “church” was substituted by the Genevan revisors. It held ground in the Bishop’s Bible, and was later incorporated into the Authorized Version of 1611.

The dictionary defines “church” as a building for public, esp. Christian worship”. This, of course, is not a biblical concept. The word ‘ecclesia’ is always used in the Bible to refer to a gathering of people, and never to a building. Because of this common misunderstanding we are using the word “ecclesia’ in this article. Hopefully this will help us to avoid coloring our thinking with traditional concepts, rather than Bible teaching. The word ecclesia occurs 115 times in the N.T. Scriptures. 112 times it is translated as “church” and 3 times as “assembly” (See Acts 19:32, 39, 41).

JESUS AND THE ECCLESIA

The Scriptures record only three instances where Jesus used the term “ecclesia”. They are:

- Matt. 16:18
- Matt. 18:17
- Matt. 18:17

These are also the only three times the word ecclesia occurs in the four Gospels. These references, of course, were not made in a vacuum. John the Baptist, Jesus, and His apostles had all been preaching that the Kingdom of Heaven was at hand. Now Jesus is introducing the word ecclesia in association with the kingdom. We must bear in mind, however, that the word already had a meaning of its own to Jewish people when Jesus used it. The Old Testament Scriptures were originally written in Hebrew, but following the conquests of Alexander the Great they were translated into Greek. (This was the first instance of the Jewish Scriptures being translated into another language) That Greek translation is called the “Septuagint”. That word means “seventy” and the translation was so named because it was supposedly the work of seventy translators.

Because Christ and His apostles lived in a Greek speaking world they used the Septuagint. As proof of this, please consider this quotation from page 2722 of the International Standard Bible Encyclopedia:

“It (the Septuagint) was the Bible of most writers of the New Testament. Not only are the majority of their express citations from the Scripture borrowed from it, but their writings contain numerous reminiscences of its language. Its words are household words to them. It laid for them the foundations of a new religious terminology. It was a potent weapon for missionary work, and when VSS of the Scriptures into other languages became necessary it was in most cases the LXX and not the Hebrew from which they were made.”

The word “ecclesia” is found about 100 times in the Septuagint, 22 of these references are in the Apocrypha. It represents exclusively the Hebrew word “qahal”, which means to summon to an assembly. On many occasions the Hebrew people were summoned to an assembly, or “qahal” by Moses. They were God’s people. They were God’s “assembly”. Stephen used “ecclesia” this way in Acts 7:38 when he spoke of Israel as the “church” or “assembly” in the wilderness. This is undoubtedly the way the apostles also thought of the ecclesia.

When Jesus used the word, however, He gave it new meaning and significance. He chose

to do so at Caesarea Philippi (Matt. 16:18). William Barclay in his commentary on Matthew points out the special significance of this area. It was renowned for several reasons:

- There were many and varied religious associations here.
- Some fourteen temples to Baal were located in the area.
- Nearby was a cave said to be the birthplace of Pan, the god of nature. Caesarea Philippi was originally called "Panias". This pagan god was said to signal an impending curse by playing on his flute. Those who heard that sound were said to experience a "panic".
- The spring that came out of that cave was said to be the source of the Jordan River.
- Here also was a great white marble temple built by Herod the Great for emperor worship. Herod's son, Philip, later enriched and beautified the temple and changed the name of the city to "Caesarea" or "Caesar's town". Then added his own name "Philip" to distinguish this Caesarea from the other one on the Mediterranean coast.

The ecclesia of Jesus would triumph over Hades and make all other religious systems seem trite and insignificant by comparison. The ecclesia of Jesus would also transcend all earthly boundaries. It would transcend the boundary of time and encompass people from all generations. It would transcend the boundaries of race, sex, and culture. It would obliterate all human distinctions and blend all of humanity into one. It would dwarf all other assemblies in scope and magnitude and it would last forever.

Jesus said: "**And I tell you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church (ecclesia); and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.**" (Matt. 16:18). Peter had just affirmed that Jesus was the Christ the Son of the Living God. The name Peter means a "stone" (John 1:42). Jesus, however, was not going to build His ecclesia upon Peter, but upon the rock of His own deity. The contrast is similar to what Jesus said to the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well. On that occasion He contrasted physical water and perpetual thirst, with the water He could provide. This "living water" would cause you to never thirst again (John 4:14).

The word "Hades" is thought to mean "unseen" (coming from *a*, negative, and *eido*, to see). It corresponds to "Sheol" in the O.T. Scriptures. The Hebrew people believed that dead people continued to exist, they just could not be seen. Consequently, Hades was considered as a "place" for departed spirits.

It is significant to remember that here at Caesarea Philippi Jesus began to teach His disciples that He had to suffer and die (Matt. 16:21). He would, however, arise from the dead. The "gates" or "strength" of Hades would not prevail over His ecclesia.

It seems that the apostles of Jesus did not immediately grasp the full significance of this teaching about death, or the global scope of the ecclesia. When Jesus ascended into heaven, for example, they asked: "Lord, wilt thou at this time restore again the kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1:6) They had an inadequate understanding of the ecclesia. They associated it only with Israel. Even years later they continued to preach to none but Jews only (Acts 11:19). They knew that God's ecclesia involved Israel, but were slow to understand that it also included the gentiles. Their failure to understand this is remarkable in light of the fact that Jesus specifically commanded the apostles to go to "all nations" and preach the Gospel to "every creature".

The other two references by Jesus to the ecclesia occur in Matt. 18:17: "**If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church (ecclesia); and if he refuses to listen even to the church (ecclesia), treat him as you would a pagan or tax collector.**" The way that Jesus used the word "ecclesia" was certainly different from the way the apostles were used to hearing it used.

Eight days after telling them of His suffering and death at Caesarea Philippi, Jesus took Peter, James and John to a mountain to pray. While Jesus prayed, Moses and Elijah appeared to Him and spoke about His decease in Jerusalem (Mk. 9:28 - 36). This would demonstrate to these disciples that the death of Jesus was in harmony with the teaching of the Law and the

Prophets. Peter, however, erred and wanted to put Moses and Elijah in the same category as Jesus. At this point God Himself interrupted from heaven and said: **“This is my beloved Son: hear him”** (Matt. 18:35).

Next came a controversy about which of them would be the greatest. The kingdom of David had “mighty men” (See 2 Sam. 23) and it was assumed that Jesus would too. At this point Jesus took a little child and set him in the midst. He warned His disciples that unless they had a change of heart and became like that little child they wouldn’t even enter into His kingdom, let alone be great (Matt. 18:1 - 6).

It was at this point that Jesus changed His terminology and referred to His kingdom as the ecclesia. Note that He did not associate the ecclesia with political power and military might, but with inter-personal relationships and conduct. It was in the ecclesia that these relationships were to be solved.

In this context Jesus also promised His presence and power even if only two or three were assembled together (Matt. 18:18 - 20).

THE ECCLESIA AND THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN

As we have pointed out, Jesus used “ecclesia’ and “kingdom of heaven” interchangeably. He promised to build His ecclesia and that the gates of hades could not prevail against it. Then He promised Peter the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven (Matt. 16:19). Peter was quite familiar with kingdom terminology. John the Baptist had preached that the Kingdom was at hand. Jesus also began His ministry by preaching that the Kingdom of heaven was at hand (Mk. 1:15). The disciples were familiar with this message. Jesus even predicted that some who heard Him speak would not taste death until they had seen the Kingdom come with power (Mk. 9:1). The Apostle Paul taught that those who receive Jesus Christ as Lord have been translated out of the kingdom of darkness and into the Kingdom of His dear Son (Col. 1:13). It seems that the ecclesia represents the visible manifestation of Christ’s kingdom on earth, but not its totality. The total reign of Jesus includes realities that are both visible and invisible. Christian worship is associated with Mount Zion, the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God, thousands upon thousands of angels, the ecclesia of the firstborn ones whose names are written in heaven, God the judge of all, the spirits of just men made perfect, Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and His sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel (Heb. 12:22 - 24). The ultimate expression of his Sovereign power, of course, includes the whole universe.

Please consider that just as Adam began the human race, Jesus would begin a spiritual race. Just as Adam’s nature has been passed on to his descendants by means of a physical seed, the nature of Jesus would be passed on to His descendants by means of a spiritual seed. Paul speaks to this point in I Cor. 15. He points out that just as we have born the image of the earthly, we can also bear the image of the heavenly. Our physical DNA links us to Adam, our spiritual DNA links us to Jesus. It is not by accident that conversion is called a new birth. Nor is it incidental that this new creation is distinguished by a new covenant or code. This new covenant is not in stone, nor in our physical bodies, but in our hearts and in our minds (Heb. 8:6 - 13). So we have two Adams. The first brought physical life and the last Adam brings spiritual life (1 Cor. 15:45) Christians are new creations with a new code, and new conduct. We no longer continue in sin for His seed abides within us (1 John 3: 6 - 9).

Further teaching would help the apostles expand their understanding of the ecclesia. They would come to understand that it was the plan of God kept secret since the world began (Rom. 16:25). It was so revolutionary in scope that it had to be made known to man by special revelation (1 Cor. 2:7 - 10). It would transform the people of earth so that the manifold wisdom of God would

be seen by the principalities and powers in heavenly places (Eph. 3:10).

This ecclesia would still be Israel, but in a new sense. True circumcision is not outward in the flesh but of the heart. Therefore the “true Jew” is not someone with physical ties to Abraham, but with spiritual ties to Jesus. We become a true Jew when Jesus dwells in our hearts by faith. (Rom. 2:25 - 29). We become the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus, and if we belong to Christ then are we also Abraham’s seed and heirs according to the promise (Gal. 3:26 - 29).

THE APOSTLES AND THE ECCLESIA

Like a grain of mustard seed the apostles of Jesus formed a tiny nucleus that would some day grow to such proportions that it would fill the earth. Daniel referred to this as a stone cut out of a mountain without hands that would topple worldly kingdoms, fill the earth, and last forever (Dan. 2:31 - 45). Jesus would build His ecclesia on a foundation of the apostles and prophets with would Himself be the Chief Cornerstone (Eph. 2:20).

The word “disciple” means “learner” and the word “apostle” means “one who is sent”. The word apostle is therefore used sparingly in the Gospels. During those three years with Jesus their primary role was that of learners. Their commission to go into all nations and make disciples would come just before Jesus ascended into heaven.

While the original twelve apostles were all Jews, they did come from a variety of backgrounds. Some of their varied roots would normally have made them antagonistic to one another. Take, for example, Matthew the publican and Simon Zealotes. Simon was a Zealot who hated anyone who cooperated with Rome, and Matthew was a “publican” who collected taxes for the very government Simon hated. These two men did not congregate together because they agreed on politics, or even on the Bible. They became a part of the ecclesia because they both followed Jesus.

The unity experience by the apostles was like a microcosm of that unity which will some day encompass all of heaven and earth (Eph. 1:10). It is significant to note that these men were not only together while Christ was alive, but even after His death and resurrection they stayed together in an upper room. That embryonic ecclesia included Mary, the mother of Jesus, His brethren, and other disciples as well. Their number was about 120 (Acts 1:15).

This tiny ecclesia in the upper room is still alive today. It is quietly growing like leaven and is in the process of filling the earth.

THE ECCLESIA IN ACTS

The best manuscripts do not have “ecclesia” in the book of Acts until 5:11 where we read that “great fear came upon all the church”. The reality of the ecclesia, however, is unmistakable from chapter one.

- In Acts 1:14 we are told that the apostles assembled with one accord in prayer with the women, the mother and brethren of Jesus.
- In Acts 1:15 the number of disciples was said to be about 120.
- In those days they were guided by Scripture to select Matthias to be numbered with the eleven apostles (Acts 1:26).
- In Acts 2:41 we find that 3,000 people were “added” unto them.
- In Acts 2:44 we are told that all that believed were “together”.
- In Acts 2:47 we find that their Lord was “adding” to their number daily.
- In Acts 4:4 we are told that the number of believers was about 5,000 men.
- When Peter and John were threatened for preaching Jesus, they returned to “their own company” (Acts 4:23).

- We are told in Acts 4:32 that the multitude of believers were of one heart and of one soul.
- In Acts 5:11 we are told that great fear came upon all the ecclesia.
- In Acts 5:14 we are told that believers were the more added to the Lord, multitudes both of men and women.
- In Acts 6:1 we are told that the number of the disciples was multiplied.
- In Acts 6:2 - 6 seven men were selected by the ecclesia to serve the needy. These men were publicly set apart for that function by prayer and the laying on of the apostle's hands.
- In Acts 6:7 we are told that a great company of the priests became obedient to the faith.
- Etc.

The process of being born again and "added" to the ecclesia is summarized in I Cor. 12:13 by the work of the Holy Spirit and baptism: "For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body . . ."

THE SCATTERING OF THE ECCLESIA

Following the death of Stephen there was a great persecution against the ecclesia and they were all scattered abroad through the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles (Acts 8:1) As for Saul, he made havoc of the ecclesia, entering into every house and committing men and women into prison (Acts 8:3). When Saul himself became a Christian, then the ecclesia had rest throughout all Judea, Galilee, and Samaria (Acts 9:31). At that time we are told that they were edified, walked in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, and were multiplied. At this time there was only one "ecclesia" but now it was scattered. As we have pointed out before, those who were scattered by the persecution in connection with Stephen preached to none but Jews only (Acts 11:19).

ANOTHER ECCLESIA

We know there was an ecclesia in Jerusalem, and that it was scattered by persecution. Philip, one of the seven, went down to a city in Samaria and proclaimed Christ. Many were baptized and Peter and John were sent there that they might receive the Holy Spirit (Acts 8:15). Even though it is evident that these half-breed Jews became a part of the one body, the word ecclesia is not used at this time in association with the believers in Samaria.

Then we are told that Philip baptized a eunuch of great authority from Ethopia (Acts 8:26 - 40). This Ethiopian had been to Jerusalem to worship and was presumably a convert to Judaism. But again, while we may assume that there was now an ecclesia in Ethopia, the Scriptures do not specifically say so.

In Acts 11:26, however, we are told of another ecclesia in Antioch. This is the first mention of another ecclesia other than in Jerusalem. Barnabas had gone to Tarsus and returned to Antioch with Saul. At this point the Scriptures tell us that they assembled themselves with the ecclesia for a whole year and taught much people. We are also told that the disciples were called Christians first in Antioch.

Those who were scattered after the death of Stephen traveled Northward, speaking to none but Jews only. When they arrived at Antioch, certain of their number began to preach to Greeks. Though there is some textual variation, the best MSS read "Greeks" and not "Hellenists". The Hellenists represented Greek speaking Jews, and the Greeks represented pure pagans. It seems that for the first time an ecclesia was evangelizing the gentiles. Perhaps this is why the disciples were called Christians first in Antioch.

Remember that Jesus had specifically commissioned His apostles to preach to all nations. (Matt. 28:18 - 20). The Greek word translated as "nations" is "ethnos". This is the Bible word for

“gentile” and is translated that way 93 times in the King James Version.

Even though Jesus commanded the original twelve apostles to preach to “all the nations” or “all the gentiles” they did not do so immediately. They were good and honest men, but perhaps their limited travel and exposure made it difficult for them to have a proper vision of the ecclesia. At any rate, God extended a call to Saul of Tarsus to become an apostle to the gentiles. Saul had a different background from the original twelve apostles. He was born outside of the Promised Land in Tarsus of Cilicia. He came to Jerusalem and studied under Gamaliel (Acts 22:3). He was a top student among his peers and later came to believe that he was set apart from birth to preach to the gentiles (Gal. 1:14 - 16). The story of his remarkable conversion is recorded three times in the book of Acts and each time we are told of God’s special call in his life to preach to the gentiles (Acts 9:15; 22:21; 26:16 - 18).

While the Jews thought of the ecclesia in association with the nation of Israel, the gentiles saw the same word in an entirely different context. The word ecclesia can be traced in Greek literature as far back as five centuries before Christ. In that context it referred to a popular assembly of competent full citizens by which the city was governed. The ecclesia opened with prayers and sacrifices to the gods of the city. Every citizen had a right to speak, propositions could be made upon the testimony of expert witnesses, and decisions were made by voting. Even though Jews and gentiles received the word “ecclesia” in different historical settings, they were on a converging course in Christ. Like walls converging on the Cornerstone, or sheep drawing near to the Shepherd, the closer they came to Christ, the closer they would be to one another.

Permit me to point out parenthetically, that while Peter was the first to preach the Gospel to the gentiles (Acts 10) he did not consider himself an apostle to the gentiles. In Galatians 2:7 - 9 we are told that God was at work in Peter as an apostle to the circumcision, and in Paul as an apostle to the un-circumcised. It is interesting that our Sovereign God does not think like men. Paul had impeccable credentials among the Jews and God sent him to the gentiles. Peter had no credentials among the Jews and became God’s apostle to the circumcision. Remember that Peter’s thick Galilean accent was recognized by a servant girl (Matt. 26:73) and that the Jews in Jerusalem considered him as unlearned and ignorant (Acts 4:13).

With reference to the ecclesia, however, we now have two of them. The first was in Jerusalem and was composed exclusively of Jewish converts. The second was in Antioch and also included gentile converts.

DISAGREEMENT IN THE ECCLESIA

The tension between these two ecclesias is representative of an important struggle among believers in the First Century. Some thought the Gospel was for Jews only as in the Jerusalem church. Others thought that it was possible for gentiles to follow Jesus without first becoming Jews, as in the church at Antioch? The ramifications of this dispute are foundational to our understanding of the ecclesia. Are we saved by works of Law and an association with Judaism, or are we saved by grace apart from Jewish rites and rituals? This may be the most significant controversy ever in the history of the ecclesia. Understanding it provides insight, not only into the struggles of the apostles, but also a great many passages of Scriptures.

The controversy may be traced all the way back to Isaac and Ismael. These two men, with their mothers, are allegories of two different covenants and two different ways of approaching God (Gal. 4:21 - 31). Paul experienced first hand, both covenants. He was once a persecutor, and then became persecuted. He once was a Jew who took pride in law. He later rejected law as a means to salvation and rejoiced in the grace of God.

Paul was baptized in Damascus and in was there that he experienced his first suffering for the cause of Christ. The Scriptures note that after many days, the Jews of Damascus took

counsel to kill him (Acts 9:23). He escaped their hands by being lowered over the wall in a basket. Paul would later observe that those who are born of the flesh persecute those who are born of the Spirit (Gal. 4:29). When Paul came back to Jerusalem, the Grecian Jews also went about to slay him (Acts 9:29). This was not a momentary conflict, but was something that Paul would have to deal with for the rest of his life. It was the Jews who persecuted him in Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, Thessalonica, Berea, Corinth, etc.

Years later in Jerusalem, a Jewish mob went about to kill him. Protected by Roman soldiers he told his persecutors the story of his conversion. This is what he said about his first trip to Jerusalem as a Christian: **“When I returned to Jerusalem and was praying at the temple, I fell into a trance and saw the Lord speaking. 'Quick!' he said to me. 'Leave Jerusalem immediately, because they will not accept your testimony about me'”** **“Lord,' I replied, 'these men know that I went from one synagogue to another to imprison and beat those who believe in you. And when the blood of your martyr Stephen was shed, I stood there giving my approval and guarding the clothes of those who were killing him.'”** **“Then the Lord said to me, 'Go; I will send you far away to the Gentiles.’”** **The crowd listened to Paul until he said this. Then they raised their voices and shouted, "Rid the earth of him! He's not fit to live!"** **As they were shouting and throwing off their cloaks and flinging dust into the air,** **(Acts 22:17-23)**

Not only did non-believing Jews disagree with Paul, but so did those Jews who believed in Jesus. When Paul and Barnabas returned from their first evangelistic tour a serious controversy raised its ugly head in Antioch. Certain men came down from Judea and taught that unless you were circumcised after the custom of Moses you could not be saved. Paul and Barnabas had a great dispute with them over this issue. A similar problem is described in Galatians 2 regarding Peter. He ate with gentiles until certain came from James. Then he refused to do so. On this occasion Paul publicly rebuked him for his error (Gal. 2:11 - 17).

We need not multiply these references for you can already clearly see the polarization between these two ecclesias. The Jerusalem church was happy to preach the gospel to the gentiles, provided they became Jews first. The church at Antioch, however, thought differently. They believed that gentiles could come directly to Christ without circumcision or any other Jewish ritual.

The importance of unity in the ecclesia cannot be over emphasized. The very purpose of Christ's ministry was to gather together into one all the divided peoples of heaven and earth (Eph. 1:10). The very essence of His life was love, and love was also to be the major emphasis of His disciples. The night before Jesus died He taught His disciples: **“By this shall all men know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (John 13:35)**. A short time later He prayed that all believers **“ . . . may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.” (John 17:21-23)**

Please note the direct association between the unity of believers and the evangelization of the world.

THE CONFERENCE IN JERUSALEM

The meeting of Christians in Jerusalem with the apostles and elders is significant beyond words. Out of this meeting came a remarkable strategy which brought unity between the ecclesia at Jerusalem, and the ecclesia at Antioch. The unity they achieved has made possible the unity

we experience today between Jews and gentiles. The fact that this is not an issue today is testimony to their success.

The meeting was convened approximately twenty years after the ecclesia was born. These were formative years as the ecclesia was coming to grips with the reality of a fragmented world. In Galatians 2 Paul wrote that he went up to this conference by revelation. The fact that he met privately with James, Cephas, and John (men perceived to be pillars) indicates a cautious uncertainty regarding how these men felt. Paul was crystal clear about the Gospel he preached, but his fiery encounter with Peter at Antioch may have made him uncertain about the Gospel preached in Jerusalem.

The danger of dividing over circumcision seems so remote to us that we may find it difficult to understand the trauma and tension they experienced. The descendants of Abraham had practiced circumcision for 1,900 years. It was a defining aspect of their exclusive relationship with God and they were not going to abandon it without a fight.

After much disputing, Peter stood up and reminded them all how the gentiles had heard the Gospel from his mouth. Further, they had received the Holy Spirit just as the Jews did. Then Barnabas and Paul told of the great wonders that God had wrought among the gentiles through them. Surely these miraculous signs should at least be considered as an indication of God's approval. Finally James, the brother of Jesus, arose and reminded them of the words of the prophets that one day the gentiles would come to God.

The conclusion they came to accommodated both Jews and gentiles. Since everybody is a descendant of Noah, every body should obey the instructions that God gave Noah when he came out of the ark. That is, to abstain from the pollutions of idols, and from fornication, and from things strangled, and from blood. While all of these prohibitions are not stated specifically in Genesis 9, the Jews still consider them to be a part of the covenant that God made with Noah. Since the Jews were physical descendants, both of Abraham and Noah, they had an understandable commitment to both covenants.

The gentiles, however, were only descendants of Noah, and not of Abraham. Therefore, they concluded that all men were obligated to keep the covenant that God made with Noah, but all men were not obligated to keep the covenant that God made with Abraham. The Jews, by contrast, were free to practice circumcision, but obligated to observe the same four basic prohibitions as the gentiles. Further, the descendants of Abraham also had the freedom to observe all other aspects of the Jewish faith. While Jewish rituals were not necessary for salvation, they were necessary to keep many Jews from violating their consciences.

This decree from Jerusalem was sent to the ecclesia in Antioch by Barnabas and Saul, accompanied by Judas and Silas. The delivery of this epistle brought rejoicing and consolation in Antioch (Acts 15:23 - 33).

For approximately forty years, devout Christian Jews practiced both religions. In A.D. 70 the Jewish Temple was destroyed and strict adherence to the Law of Moses was no longer possible. For example, the Jewish feasts could only be properly celebrated in Jerusalem where Jehovah had chosen to put his name (Deut. 12:5 - 14).

Paul had a burden to promote peace with these brethren and did everything he could to convince them that he had not abandoned his Jewish roots.

- If there was a synagogue in town, he always preached there first (Rom. 1:16).
- He sheared his head in Cenchrea for he had taken a vow (Acts 18:18).
- He hurried his journey so that he might keep the feast in Jerusalem (Acts 18:21).
- When he arrived in Jerusalem he was told of thousands of Jews who believed and were all zealous of the Law (Acts 21:20).
- These Jewish believers had the mistaken idea that Paul was teaching Jews to forsake Moses and not circumcise their children, or keep the Mosaic customs (Acts 21:22).

- To prove this was not true, Paul purified himself in the temple, and paid money for four Jewish men who had taken a vow (Acts 21:24).
- Respecting these Jewish laws was only for Jewish believers. The gentiles, as we have said before, were only required to keep the four prohibitions of the covenant of Noah (Acts 21:25).
- Those who were weak in the faith were to be received, but not to argue about certain foods or special days (Rom. 14:1ff.)
- Etc.

THE FAMINE IN JERUSALEM

Just after being informed that the disciples were called Christians first in Antioch, we are told that prophets came down to Antioch from Jerusalem. One of these men, Agabus, signified by the Spirit that there would be a great famine throughout the world, and this famine came to pass in the days of Claudius Caesar. The Emperor Claudius was the son of Drusus and Antonia, and nephew of Tiberius. He reigned from A.D. 41 - 54 and is mentioned twice in the Scriptures (Acts 11:28, and 18:2). This famine was used by God to promote unity between Jews and gentiles.

Even though the decree from Jerusalem involved the Holy Spirit (Acts 15:28), it was still not easily accepted by Jewish believers. Just as there was a wall in the Temple separated Jews and gentiles, there was also a great wall of separation in society as a whole and even in the ecclesia. In almost every letter of the New Testament Scriptures we find reference to the problem between Jews and gentiles. Here are a few of these references for your consideration (Rom. 14:1 - 15:12; 1 Cor. 8:1 - 9:27; 2 Cor. 11:1 - 33; Galatians 1:1 - 6:18; Eph. 1:1 - 4:15; Col. 1:20 - 3:15, etc.) The proud Jews saw themselves as decent and moral, and the gentiles as indecent and immoral. Moreover, the original separation of Jews and gentiles had been commanded by God. It was an integral part of what God commanded Moses concerning the Children of Israel and those divine prohibitions had been in place for 1,500 years. When Jesus, for example, told the Canaanite woman that it was not good to take the children's bread and throw it to a dog (Matt. 15:26), He was using accepted terminology of the day. She demonstrated the depth of her faith when she was not offended, but rather acknowledged that even the dogs ate of the crumbs that fall from the masters' table.

It is a fact that there was a famine, and it seems that our loving Heavenly Father used it to help bring unity between the Jews and the gentiles. The famine was so severe, and the Jewish brethren became so desperate, that they ultimately swallowed their pride and accepted help from the very gentiles they had formerly despised.

The benevolent generosity of gentile believers is first mentioned in Acts 11:29 when the ecclesia at Antioch sent relief to Judea by the hands of Barnabas and Saul. Later, James, Cephas and John would give to Paul and Barnabas the right hands of fellowship as they set out to evangelize the gentiles. They were specifically asked, however, to remember the poor, something which Paul was already anxious to do (Gal. 2:9, 10).

Remembering the poor saints in Judea became an integral part of Paul's ministry. He gave instructions to gentile churches that on the first day of the week they were set aside a portion of their income for Paul to take to Jerusalem (1 Cor. 16:1 - 3). Two whole chapters in 2 Corinthians are devoted to this offering (chapters 8 and 9). Participating in this offering was called subjection to the Gospel of Christ (2 Cor. 9:13).

Even after months and years of collecting these funds, however, Paul was not certain they would even be accepted by the Jewish brethren in Judea. As Paul had completed his circuit of gentile churches and was preparing to return to Jerusalem, he dictated these words of concern to

the brethren in Rome: **“Now, however, I am on my way to Jerusalem in the service of the saints there. For Macedonia and Achaia were pleased to make a contribution for the poor among the saints in Jerusalem. They were pleased to do it, and indeed they owe it to them. For if the Gentiles have shared in the Jews’ spiritual blessings, they owe it to the Jews to share with them their material blessings. So after I have completed this task and have made sure that they have received this fruit, I will go to Spain and visit you on the way. I know that when I come to you, I will come in the full measure of the blessing of Christ. I urge you, brothers, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to join me in my struggle by praying to God for me. Pray that I may be rescued from the unbelievers in Judea and that my service in Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints there, “ (Rom 15:25-31).**

Please note the last words of this quotation. Paul was concerned that after all of his work, the Jews in Judea would be too proud to accept help from the gentiles. Paul’s letter to Rome is dated around A.D. 58.

ONLY ONE ECCLESIA

The Ephesian letter was written from Rome in about A. D. 62 - 63. Paul was a prisoner at the time, but considered himself a “prisoner of the Lord” rather than a prisoner of Rome (Eph. 4:1). As we have pointed out, when he dictated the Roman letter in A.D. 58 he was tentative and unsure about the unity between Jews and gentiles. He was not even certain his relief offering for the poor saints in Judea would be accepted. Now, however, four or five years later, he wrote with great clarity and confidence that: **“There is one body and one Spirit-- just as you were called to one hope when you were called--one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.” (Eph 4:4-6)**

His journey to Jerusalem with love offerings from the gentile world had been successful. The Jewish brethren had not only accepted gentile money, but gentile believers as well. Paul writes emphatically that the gentiles, who were once far away, have been brought near. The wall of separation between Jews and gentiles has been destroyed and God has united Jews and gentiles into one body. The former hostility between them has been replaced by peace (Eph. 2:11 - 22).

THE ECCLESIA TODAY

Jesus promised to build His ecclesia, and He is keeping that promise. From every nation, kindred, people, and tongue believers are being born again and their names are being added to the Lamb’s Book of Life. The decision to be part of the ecclesia is the most important decision we will ever make in life. It is important to remember, however, that God is the Sovereign of the universe and we dare not assume that we can enter a relationship with Him on our own terms. After we have done everything we know to do we are still unworthy servants (Lk. 17:10). It is only by His grace that we are accepted. Jeremiah promised that if we will seek God with our whole heart we will find Him (Jer. 29:13). 2 Chron. 16:9 promises that the eyes of the Lord range throughout the whole earth to show Himself strong on behalf of those whose hearts are perfect toward Him. When God finds this kind of person, He adds them to His Body (1 Cor. 12:13). Like a wise Master builder, He takes those who are saved and places them like living stones into a dwelling for His Holy Spirit (Eph. 2:22; 1 Pet. 2:5).

It is also important to remember that we become a part of the ecclesia as individuals. We are not saved by families, or groups, but by a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. The ecclesia at Thyatira, for example, had some serious problems. They had allowed the woman Jezebel to

teach and to seduce God's servants to commit fornication and to eat things sacrificed to idols. There were, however, some in Thyatira who did not follow her teaching or know the deep things of Satan (Rev. 2:18 - 29). These individuals would be saved regardless of the wicked environment in which they worshiped.

When Jesus was asked when the Kingdom of God would come, He said that it did not come by man's careful observation (Lk. 17:20). The Kingdom is within. The citizens of the Kingdom are not readily recognized by human eyes. As Paul reminded Timothy, however, the Lord knows the ones who belong to Him (2 Tim. 2:19). He is the Good Shepherd and not one of His sheep will ever be forgotten. He knew us before we were born (Ps. 139:13 - 16). He even numbers the hairs of our head (Matt. 10:30). We may be confident, therefore, that wherever and whenever someone is born again they assume their place in the ecclesia of God.

John wrote that everyone who is born of God has a special love relationship with every other person who is born of God (1 John 5:1). This love transcends every barrier. It binds together into One Body people from every nation, language, and culture. If you are a part of God's ecclesia, you will love every other person in the ecclesia. By this shall all men know that we belong to Him, because we love one another (John 13:35).