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The Ekklesia as an Assembly That Invokes Response

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Introduction

The significance of the term *ekklesia* is often understated by modern researchers and modern Christians alike. Within today's Christian church, the *ekklesia* is often translated simply as "church." While the term church is derived from *ekklesia*, it is not a direct translation. Translating to church results in the term *ekklesia* losing much of its significance. This watered-down translation de-emphasizes the responsibilities of the *ekklesia* and the call of the body of believers to contribute to the common good and be active in all areas of their world. The term *ekklesia* was not used or derived in a vacuum. Kittel and Friedrich, authors of the *New Testament Theological Dictionary* state that there is "[n]o point in the pedantic piling up of different expressions" when defining *ekklesia*.¹ To split the definition into a secular *ekklesia* and a sacred *ekklesia* results in the piling up of different expressions needlessly. This separation falls into a classic fallacy of modern-day believers: the belief that there are some areas of life that are sacred and some that are secular. This belief is not biblical if God is over all of life.

The secular definition provided by Merriam Webster defines the *ekklesia* as "a political assembly of citizens of ancient Greek states especially the periodic meeting of the Athenian citizens for conducting public business and for considering affairs proposed by the council."² The sacred definition found in the King James Version New Testament Greek Lexicon defines the *ekklesia* as "an assembly of Christians gathered for worship in a religious meeting" or as "a company of Christians, or those of who, hoping for eternal salvation through Jesus Christ, observe their own religious rites, hold their own religious meetings, and manage their own affairs, according to regulations prescribed for the body for order's sake."³ However, while the *ekklesia* is defined differently between Christian and secular audiences, both contexts the term imply community obligation and contribution to the common good.

The idea of seeking the common good is the key underlying theme found within both historical Greek and biblical usage of the term *ekklesia*. Both definitions contain an inherent common good obligation, but this theme is de-emphasized in modern usage. The significance of promoting the common good cannot be over-stated. The common good is an idea woven throughout history. The Greek democracy was established for the common good. One of the United States Constitution's objectives is to promote the common good (or general welfare). The Bible is based on the common good as it spreads the message of the gospel to all nations in order that man might benefit from the highest good, to know Christ as savior. It should come as no surprise that the church, the *ekklesia*, is intended to contribute to the common good.

Therefore, rather than defining *ekklesia* on the basis of two separate definitions, this research seeks to synthesize the two by taking into account both contexts of the word's use and emphasizing the community obligation within the *ekklesia*. Evaluating the term *ekklesia* on this basis produces a definition that invokes responsibility and a response for those within the modern-day *ekklesia*. Similarly, the etymology of the term *ekklesia* further contributes to the idea that the *ekklesia* requires a response as it denotes a group of people who must respond to an invitation to gather. The *ekklesia* is an assembly of those who have been called and requires a response and an obligation to seek the common good on behalf of others. This expanded

¹ Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Vol. 3 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1965), 503.

² Merriam Webster, s.v. "ecclesia," accessed July 3, 2020, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/ecclesia>.

³ The KJV New Testament Greek Lexicon, s.v. "Ekklesia," accessed July 3, 2020, <https://www.biblestudytools.com/lexicons/greek/kjv/ekklesia.html>.

definition will be produced through an evaluation of the etymology of *ekklesia*, an evaluation of both Greek and biblical contexts and use of the term and will be applied to modern context.

Etymology of *Ekklesia*

Before defining the *ekklesia* in context, it is crucial to first define it etymologically. The word ἐκκλησία (*ekklesia*) is a Greek word derived from two root words, *ek* and *kaleo*. *Ek* is defined as “out of,” or “from.”⁴ *Ek* can also denote a separation.⁵ *Kaleo* means “to call,”⁶ or an invitation.⁷ Together they form *ekklesia* which is commonly translated from its roots as “those called out”⁸ *Ekklesia* is often rendered “an assembly called out,” or simply, “an assembly.” The *ekkletoi*, the called people or those called out or assembled, constitute the *ekklesia* and therefore the *ekklesia* does not denote the action of calling or the individuals called out, but rather, it denotes the assembly of those who have been called out.⁹ The *ekklesia* is a Greek word with both Greek historical use and Greek biblical usage. *Ekklesia* occurs 115 times in the Greek concordance of the Kings James Version of the Bible.¹⁰ It has commonly been translated as church, congregation, or assembly in biblical use. Often times today, when translating *ekklesia* into the word “church,” the 21st century connotation of church is read into the definition. This translation, however, does not give weight to the wider contexts of *ekklesia*, both in Greek usage and biblical usage, nor does it reveal the purpose behind the word choice, *ekklesia*.

Greek Definition and Usage of *Ekklesia*

The importance of the Greek contextual use of word *ekklesia* cannot be overstated, as the Greek context heavily influences and informs the biblical context and usage. In Greek context, the *ekklesia* is primarily a political phenomenon. This Greek political usage of the word predates the biblical usage in both the Septuagint and the New Testament.¹¹ The biblical usage is influenced by prior use of the term and, therefore, must be examined.

The *ekklesia* is recognized as the key to Athenian democracy and the most authoritative body within the democracy. Greek contextual use has defined *ekklesia* as “an assembly, of the

⁴ Blue Letter Bible, “Strong’s G1577- Ekklesia,” accessed November 1, 2019, <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lang/lexicon/lexicon.cfm?strongs=G1537&t=KJV>.

⁵ William F. Arndt et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literatures: A Translation and Adaptation of Walter Bauer’s Griechisch-Deutsches Wörterbuch Zu Den Schriften Des Neuen Testaments Und Der Übrigen Urchristlichen Literatur, 4th Rev. and Augm. Ed., 1952* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), 233.

⁶ Blue Letter Bible, “Strong’s G1577- Ekklesia.”

⁷ William Arndt, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, 436.

⁸ Blue Letter Bible, “Strong’s G1577- Ekklesia.”

⁹ Spiros Zodhiates, *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament*, Revised edition (Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers, 1993).

¹⁰ Blue Letter Bible, “Strong’s G1577- Ekklesia.”

¹¹ Moises Silva, ed., “ἐκκλησία G1711 (ekklēsia), assembly, meeting, congregation, church,” In *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology and Exegesis*, (Nashville, TN: Zondervan, 2014), Credo Reference, 402, http://ezproxy.liberty.edu/login?url=https://search.credoreference.com/content/entry/zonttae/%E1%BC%90kklis%E1%BD%B7a_g1711_ekklesia_assembly_meeting_congregation_church/0?institutionId=5072.

people at Athens, convoked by heralds,”¹² or “a gathering of people meeting for matters of common interest.”¹³ Spiros Zodhiates defines the Greek *ekklesia* as “a congregation of the *ekklētoi*, the called people or those called out or assembled in the public affairs of a free state, the body of free citizens called together by a herald.”¹⁴ Within these definitions the etymological definition of “an assembly called out,” is reinforced. The *ekklesia* is the body or the assembly of those summoned, or called, to meet.

The *ekklesia* was not simply an abstract community of those who had been summoned or called. Young-Ho Park suggests that for the Greeks, in the period of classical democracy, the primary meaning of *ekklesia* referred to a physical gathering at a specific time and place, rather than an abstract community.¹⁵ Park’s definition exhibits the *ekklesia* as having a real role and purpose to fulfill, rather than being an abstract community or an exclusively relational gathering.

The Civic Responsibility of the *Ekklesia*

The purpose of the *ekklesia* was civic. Christopher Blackwell defines the assembly and its purpose. He states that the *ekklesia* is “the regular gathering of male Athenian citizens to listen to, discuss, and vote on decrees that affected every aspect of Athenian life, both public and private.”¹⁶ It’s presumed the Athenian assembly contained 40,000 members and met at regular intervals, between 30 and 40 times a year.¹⁷ The *ekklesia*, as one of the key bodies of the Athenian democracy, operated as legislature, judiciary, and executive.¹⁸ The agenda of the *ekklesia* was set by the Boule, the Athenian administrative and governing council, but this did not limit the scope of the *ekklesia*’s responsibilities. The *ekklesia* handled decisions on suggested changes in the law, appointments to official positions, and important matters of domestic and foreign policy such as contracts, treaties, war and peace, and finance.¹⁹ Park, in his extensive research on the *ekklesia* in its Greek context, points out that the *ekklesia* gave a chance to exchange, exhibit, and confer honor through various forms such as “crowns, prominent seats, cheers of the audience to orations, and so on.”²⁰ He states, “Among the numerous possibilities for public honor, the *ekklesia* — and nowhere else—was the most important place for honoring others.”²¹ Therefore, the *ekklesia* as used in Greek context, refers to the body of citizens that carried out governing responsibilities. The *ekklesia* was also a place for citizens to exchange and confer honor and participate in the Athenian democracy.

¹² James Donnegan and Johann Gottlob Schneider, *A New Greek and English Lexicon: Principally on the Plan of the Greek and German Lexicon of Schneider: The Words Alphabetically Arranged*, 2nd edition (Boston: Hilliard, Gray & Co., 1831),394.

¹³ Frederick William Danker, *The Concise Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), ProQuest Ebook Central, <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.ezproxy.liberty.edu/lib/liberty/detail.action?docID=3038361>.

¹⁴ Zodhiates, *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament*, 541.

¹⁵ Young-Ho Park, *Paul’s Ekklesia as a Civic Assembly: Understanding the People of God in their Politico-Social World* (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2015), 11, ProQuest Ebook Central, <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.ezproxy.liberty.edu/lib/liberty/detail.action?docID=2049827>.

¹⁶ Christopher Blackwell, “The Assembly,” In *Dēmos: Classical Athenian Democracy. The Stoa: A Consortium for Electronic Publication in the Humanities*, 2003, 1, www.stoa.org.

¹⁷ Alan Ryan, *On Politics: A history of Political Thoughts from Herodotus to the Present* (New York: Liveright Publishing Co., 2012), 11.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Silva, “ἐκκλησία G1711 (ekklēsia), assembly, meeting, congregation, church,” 402.

²⁰ Park, *Paul’s Ekklesia as a Civic Assembly*, 11.

²¹ Park, *Paul’s Ekklesia as a Civic Assembly*, 11.

The Polis and *Ekklesia*

A distinction must be made between the function and the purpose of the *ekklesia*. The role of the *ekklesia* was to act as a governing body in which citizens participated in democracy. The larger question is “What purpose did the *ekklesia* serve?” The answer to this question is found within the scope of the Greek understanding of the polis, the Greek city-state. This understanding will give way to a greater understanding of the Greek context of the *ekklesia* and aid in developing an expanded definition of the term *ekklesia* and of the role the term has in modern day.

In the Greek mind, the polis held incomparable significance to any other social group as it existed for the purpose of living well. It existed not only for mere life, but for the good life. Regarding the polis, Aristotle believed it to be “the ultimate form of human organization and exists to satisfy the highest goals of social life.”²² Freedom was found only through the polis. This freedom, not to be confused with the 21st century idea of freedom, was defined first as the absence of a master and secondly as the ability to participate in control of one’s life through participation in the polis. Man had no significance outside of the polis, as he was defined by his involvement and ability within the polis. It was only through participation in the polis that man was believed to live the good life and obtain freedom because only through the polis could man control his life.²³ The polis did not grant freedom; the polis was the means through which citizens obtained freedom through participation. Park identifies the significance of the polis when he states: “Being a part of a polis was the only path to the highest human achievement and was even considered a way to overcome the futility of individual life, the ultimate limitation of which was mortality.”²⁴ The polis gave man significance.

Aristotle believed citizenship was constituted by the right of political equals to rule and be ruled in turn. The primary way of doing this was participating in the *ekklesia*.²⁵ Therefore, the *ekklesia* was the most significant means by which citizens participated and fulfilled their role as citizens. To further emphasize this point, Park posits that “participation in ruling by attending the *ekklesia* was of the highest importance in Greek identity and pride.”²⁶ The purpose of the *ekklesia* was found in the purpose of the polis; to allow citizens to participate in the polis which produced freedom and the good life.

The *ekklesia* played a pivotal role and those in the *ekklesia* were evaluated on the basis of their part within the whole of the polis. Philosophers in antiquity held this part-whole socio-cosmology in high regard and it influenced the purpose of the *ekklesia*. Kei Eun Chang believes that in the Greco-Roman world, the part-whole connection created ethical space. He states, “The fact that this concept recognized that an individual is a part of a civic organism and of the cosmic whole became a starting point for ethical theories in antiquity. Virtuous behavior was conceivable only within the context of these individual-community relationships.”²⁷ That is to say, the idea that man’s freedom and purpose is found in the polis created an ethic as citizens defined themselves and their actions according to their relationship to the whole. Being a part of

²² Ryan, *On Politics*, 83.

²³ Park, *Paul's Ekklesia as a Civic Assembly*, 13-15.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 15.

²⁵ Ryan, *On Politics*, 93.

²⁶ Park, *Paul's Ekklesia as a Civic Assembly*, 26.

²⁷ Kei Eun Chang, *The Community, the Individual and the Common Good: Τὸ Ἴδιον and Τὸ Συμμέρον in the Greco-Roman World and Paul*, The Library of New Testament Studies, (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2013), 51, <http://dx.doi.org.ezproxy.liberty.edu/10.5040/9781472550873>.

the whole, through participation in the *ekklesia*, formed an ethic in which the good of the whole was regarded by the parts that constituted the whole.

Chang points out that Aristotle's starting point for his socio-political and ethical theories rides on this establishment of a clear part-whole civic relationship.²⁸ The significance of life in polis created a clear part-whole civic dynamic which, in turn, led to involvement and consideration of the whole during participation. Chang states that "such an understanding of the universe as an organic whole bears moral implication and facilitates the connective morality of seeking the 'common advantage' of the whole."²⁹ Because the citizen was part of the polis, moral action was considered in relation to an individual's part within the whole organism and led to a mindfulness of the common advantage to the entire polis. The individuals, the parts, sought to benefit the polis, the whole, because of their relationship to the polis.

The ethic formed on the basis of a part-whole civic relationship leads to the conclusion that the purpose of the *ekklesia* in the Greek context is to pursue the common advantage of the polis. Therefore, the purpose of the *ekklesia* in the Greek context was to seek the common advantage of the polis since they were inextricably tied to the polis as a part of it. The common advantage was founded on what was advantageous to the entire polis and fulfilled the purpose of the polis, the pursuit of the good life. In Greek context, the *ekklesia* was both the means by which man found significance and freedom through participation and the means by which citizens sought the good of the polis by seeking their common advantage.

Traditional Biblical Definition and Usage of *Ekklesia*

The traditional biblical definition of the *ekklesia* is multi-faceted. However, this definition underemphasizes the wider Greek context of the definition and the influence of socio-political culture on the newly formed group of Christians. The most common single rendering of *ekklesia* within biblical usage is assembly, or assembly of Christians. Kittel and Friedrich hold to a single rendering of "assembly" as this rendering accounts for both abstract and concrete applications of the word. He notes that in biblical usage the phrasing is often the "*ekklesia* of God," rather than simply *ekklesia*. The addition of the phrase "of God," leads him to believe that a simple translation of assembly is suitable. In biblical tradition, the assembly of God is defined as having multiple facets of its existence. There is usage and evidence for a spiritual existence, a relational existence, a distinct existence in a specific geographical location, and a universal existence.

The relational and spiritual aspect of *ekklesia* take root in the etymological understanding of *ekklesia*. Recall that based on its root words, *ekklesia* means "an assembly called out." Historically, this community called out is summoned to assemble.³⁰ In the traditional biblical understanding, the *ekklesia* is understood to be a community of those who have been called out by Christ.³¹ Both the Greek *ekklesia* and the biblical *ekklesia* are called out, one by town herald, the other by Christ. They are similar in that they are called out, but by different sources. Christ has called all people to himself and those who accept the call, salvation, are members of the assembly of God. The *International Dictionary of New Testament Theology and Exegesis* states, "The *ἐκκλησία* of the Thessalonians also introduces to the Greek mind the claim that the call of

²⁸ Chang, *The Community, the Individual and the Common Good*, 51.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 46.

³⁰ Zodhiates, *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament*, 542.

³¹ Zodhiates, *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament*, 541.

God, which has gone out through the apostle and other preachers in the form of the offer of reconciliation (cf. 2 Cor 5:19-20), has brought together this assembly.”³² Therefore, spiritually and relationally speaking, the *ekklesia* of God is made up of those who have been called by God and have answered the call by accepting salvation through Jesus. Note that both calls require a response. It is not simply those who have been called, but those who have answered the call and joined the community of the *ekklesia*. The *ekklesia* is made up of those who have chosen to respond to the call and assemble.

In the colloquial sense, the *ekklesia* refers to individual, distinct assemblies of Christians. In 1 Thessalonians 1:1 and 2 Thessalonians 1:1, Paul addresses the body of believers as the *ekklesia* “of the Thessalonians in God the Father.”³³ First Corinthians 1:2 states that the letter is to the *ekklesia* “of God which is at Corinth.”³⁴ In these instances Paul is referring to the *ekklesia* as an individual and distinct entity at a geographical location. While there is a physical existence of the *ekklesia*, the building and location is not what constitutes the *ekklesia*. The assembly of believers at the specific location constitute the *ekklesia*. David Guzik alludes to this when he states, “Most people today associate the word church with a building where Christians meet. But the ancient Greek word for church (*ekklesia*) was a non-religious word for an ‘assembly’ of people, typically gathered together for a specific purpose.”³⁵ Guzik is describing how the *ekklesia* is not only a place, but is more distinctly the people gathered there for a purpose. The *ekklesia*, while being specified as occurring in a place, is still an assembly of the called. It is not reliant on the location, but it is reliant on the gathering of specific people (Christians) at a specific locale.

There are many instances of references to a specific *ekklesia*, an assembly at a specific locale, but there are also biblical references to a more general and universal *ekklesia*. Park asserts that Paul’s use of *ekklesia* alludes to there being one *ekklesia* per city, but that “the connotation can be expanded in Paul’s usage to cover the wide spectrum from house fellowship to the universal church.”³⁶ The KJV New Testament Greek Lexicon, states that the *ekklesia* can refer to, “[t]he whole body of Christians scattered throughout the earth; collectively, all who worship and honor God and Christ, whatever place they may be.”³⁷ Thus, there is a universal element to the presence of the *ekklesia*.

The universal existence of the *ekklesia* leads into the kingdom aspect of the *ekklesia* and the role the *ekklesia* plays in relation to the kingdom of God. The *ekklesia* is understood to be a part of God’s kingdom on earth, but it is not God’s kingdom entirely, as it is still a part of this age. Therefore, it is distinct from the kingdom of God but a part of it. Zodhiates describes the kingdom as a reign and the *ekklesia* as a realm. However, the kingdom and the *ekklesia* complement each other. He describes this complementing relationship:

[T]he whole history of the growth of the idea of the kingdom led, naturally, to the belief that the kingdom of God about which Christ taught would be expressed and realized in a society. His kingdom is visibly represented in His church, and the church is the kingdom

³² Silva, “ἐκκλησία G1711 (ekklēsia), assembly, meeting, congregation, church,” 402.

³³ 1 Thess. 1:1, 2 Thess. 1:1 (New American Standard Bible).

³⁴ 1 Cor. 1:2 (New American Standard Bible).

³⁵ David Guzik, “Jesus, The Wisdom of God,” in *Study Guide for 1 Corinthians 1*, Blue Letter Bible, last modified 2013, https://www.blueletterbible.org/Comm/guzik_david/StudyGuide2017-1Cr/1Cr-1.cfm.

³⁶ Park, *Paul’s Ekklesia as a Civic Assembly*, 219.

³⁷ The KJV New Testament Greek Lexicon, s.v. “Ekklesia,” accessed July 3, 2020, <https://www.biblestudytools.com/lexicons/greek/kjv/ekklesia.html>.

of heaven insofar as it has already come, and it prepares for the kingdom as it is to come in glory.³⁸

The *ekklesia*, here translated as church, is a part of the kingdom in that it is God's kingdom expressed and realized in society, but it also awaits and prepares for the future coming of the kingdom. The *ekklesia* is God's tool to realize and prepare for the kingdom on earth. What does this mean for the role of the *ekklesia* in society? This leads to the civic purpose of the *ekklesia* which first warrants a discussion of the Greek influence on the biblical *ekklesia*.

The Evolution of the *Ekklesia*

The traditional biblical usage and definition of *ekklesia* has largely ignored the civic component and the Greek context of *ekklesia*. The traditional definition is not wholly inaccurate, rather, it is incomplete. Looking at the wider context of the *ekklesia* leads to a fuller and more complete definition with far reaching implications. The definition of *ekklesia* must include a wider Greek context because the term *ekklesia* was not produced or used in a vacuum. The use of *ekklesia* to describe the Christian body is also noteworthy because it chooses not to use the term "synagogue" and instead uses the term *ekklesia* which has Greek socio-political use. The wider context also leads to an understanding of the *ekklesia* as a civic assembly, rather than a strictly religious assembly.

Hellenistic Influences

Looking at the body of believers, specifically in Corinth, the Christian population was not devoid of Greek influence. Anna Miller demonstrates how the Greek population was reestablished and grew in Corinth soon after its defeat in 146 B.C. Roman colonizers used the Greek culture and emphasized it in order to validate Roman rule.³⁹ Therefore, the Christian body at Corinth was immersed in Greek culture. The Christians were living under Roman-emphasized Greek influence and they were knowledgeable about the culture around them. Therefore, when Paul uses the term *ekklesia* when addressing them, the assembly at Corinth knew the wider context of the term. Park, regarding the Jewish relationship to Greek and Roman culture, states that "[O]ne cannot consider the Jewish world in the second-temple period a political island in the sea of the Hellenistic and Roman world. The Jewish understanding of the word *ekklesia* should be understood in the context of the Greco-Roman political reality in which Jewish communities lived."⁴⁰ These communities, Jewish and newly Christian, were immersed in Greco-Roman culture which directly influenced them.

Many scholars have argued that the term *ekklesia* within Christian circles is solely derived from its use in the Septuagint and that this usage informs the New Testament usage of *ekklesia*. However, the Greek influence at the time of its usage in the New Testament was significant. Park suggests that Paul's recipients were more exposed to Greek influence than to the world of the Septuagint. This indicates that Paul's recipients did not define the *ekklesia* on the basis of its use in the Septuagint. He points out that the Jews of the time would have had great exposure to the Greek world and political culture due to the diaspora and their presence in

³⁸ Zodhiates, *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament*, 541.

³⁹ Anna Miller, "Not with Eloquent Wisdom: Democratic Ekklesia Discourse in 1 Corinthians 1–4," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 35, no. 4 (June 2013): 334–335, doi:10.1177/0142064X13482798.

⁴⁰ Park, *Paul's Ekklesia as a Civic Assembly*, 218.

Palestine, and that this influence would have had greater significance to them than is often assumed.⁴¹ Furthermore, the *ekklesia* in the Septuagint was the model of the virtuous life, which in the Greek mind was related to the idea of the best constitution.⁴² The idea of the *ekklesia* as a model of virtuous life in the Septuagint would have fed into the Greek idea of the *ekklesia* and further enforced Greek influence.

Furthermore, it can be argued that the term *ekklesia* originated with the Hellenists, not within the church. There is no evidence for an underlying Aramaic term. Trebilco states, “The designation seems to have first emerged as the Greek term *ἐκκλησία*, rather than this being a translation of an earlier Aramaic designation.”⁴³ He further supports this assertion by emphasizing the tie to Hellenists rather than all of the early Christians when Paul writes of his persecuting the church. He believes Paul to be recalling an early designation of the Hellenists when speaking of persecuting the *ekklesia*. As a note, the usage of the term *ekklesia* to mean the Christian body of believers was introduced before Paul used it to refer to the Christian body. It seems to be a title the Christians assumed for themselves, rather than one Paul invented to denote Christian communities.

There are scholars who pose the question “why was the term *ekklesia* used to denote the body of New Testament believers and not the term ‘synagogue,’ as was often used in the Old Testament?” Some have suggested that the Christ followers did not want the association with a Jewish institution. However, this cannot feasibly be the only reason. One of the key differences between *ekklesia* and the term “synagogue” is that synagogue denotes a purely religious group, while *ekklesia* was never used previously to refer to a cultic or religious group.⁴⁴ Kittel remarks that there is insufficient evidence to argue there was ever a cultic use of the *ekklesia* in the Greek world, as it denoted predominantly civic bodies.⁴⁵ Kittel also notes that the New Testament believers chose to avoid a cultic or religious term and instead chose a “secular” one.⁴⁶

The reason why *ekklesia* was chosen, and not synagogue, is because *ekklesia* was used to invoke the idea of a civic assembly, not an exclusively religious assembly. Contextually, *ekklesia* was a Greek socio-politically driven word. Even in the Septuagint the term *ekklesia* was used to denote an assembly of the whole nation, not simply a gathering of any size.⁴⁷ It is clear from the Greek context and from Paul’s interaction with the *ekklesia* that the Christian *ekklesia* regarded itself as a civic assembly. Paul Christopher acknowledges the power of the *ekklesia*:

“As members of *ekklesia*, or groups with foundation authorized to act, individual persons are shaped into agents with transformative potential. Church and state are joined at the hip in the historical cultivation of many of the most obvious techniques of making such communities: the use of ritual and symbolic forms to transform masses of individuals into a body, the conversion of work and suffering into the civil terms of duty and virtue, the ceremonial assemblies of glory and acclamation that establish strata of rank and prestige, the activation of charity and caregiving, the fostering of distinct and overlapping

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid., 97.

⁴³ Paul Trebilco, “Why did the Early Christians Call Themselves Ekklesia?” *New Testament Studies* 57, no. 3, (July, 2011) 443-444, doi:<http://dx.doi.org.ezproxy.liberty.edu/10.1017/S0028688511000087>.

⁴⁴ Colin Brown, *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1976), 271.

⁴⁵ Kittel, *New Testament Theological Dictionary*, 514.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 503.

⁴⁷ Park, *Paul's Ekklesia as a Civic Assembly*, 96.

subjectivities, and the economies of violent sacrifice through which abstract ideals like “the nation” and “the faithful” are made manifest in the flesh.”⁴⁸

While Christopher’s work speaks against the *ekklesia* because he believes it to be an inappropriate union of church and state, this reinforces the idea that the *ekklesia* is a civic body with power and authority. Christopher outlines the many ways in which the *ekklesia* acts as a civic assembly, from the ideas of duty and virtue, to the activation of charity and caregiving. He shows that the *ekklesia* is a powerful entity with civic implications. While he believes this to be a negative thing because he sees it as a fusion of church and state, he is indicating that the *ekklesia* is a political phenomenon. This emphasizes the power and the civic nature of the *ekklesia*.

It is clear that the *ekklesia* of the first century knew this by their behavior and interaction with Paul. Miller outlines the interaction between Paul and the Corinthians as one of a subtle power negotiation as Paul establishes his authority with the Corinthians on the basis of *ekklesia* discourse. Paul uses terms that the Corinthian body would have understood as correlating to the *ekklesia*. This leads Miller to propose the Corinthian body saw themselves as a civic assembly, not a voluntary association.⁴⁹ Park similarly implies this when he states, “Paul utilized the civic term to characterize his recipients as the honorable assembly of God, as well as to secure for himself the honorable platform from which to address the civic *ekklesia*.”⁵⁰ Paul’s use of the civic term *ekklesia* indicates that the body of believers at Corinth saw themselves in this light.

Paul also indicates the idea of the *ekklesia* as a civic body when handling a situation with a leader at the *ekklesia* in Corinth. Park describes the dinner shared by the whole assembly at Corinth as a place where the public nature of the *ekklesia* and the private nature of the space, one of the believer’s houses, collided.⁵¹ Paul handled the problem by utilizing *ekklesia* as a civic term. Park states, “Paul utilized the civic term *ekklesia* as leverage in order to highlight the divine nature of the community, which should not be absorbed under any one individual influence.”⁵² This is further indication that Paul’s idea in using *ekklesia* was aligned with the unity of the civic assembly more than with a house group’s status as a church. Paul demonstrates that the *ekklesia* was tied to a civic assembly and not simply a community or voluntary association. This also implies that those involved as members of the *ekklesia* are given responsibility and authority.

The True Purpose of the *Ekklesia*

It is clear upon examining the *ekklesia* within the Greek framework, that the purpose of the *ekklesia* is also impacted. The purpose of the *ekklesia* as the assembly of God is twofold: to act as an establishment of God’s kingdom on earth, and to act in regard to the common good, compelled by love. Millard Erickson states the function of the church as evangelism, edification, worship, and social concern.⁵³ These functions fulfill the above stated purpose as they are

⁴⁸ Paul Christopher, Pamela Klassen, and Winnifred Fallers Sullivan, *Ekklesia: Three Inquiries in Church and State* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), 4, ProQuest Ebook Central, <https://ebookcentral-proquestcom.ezproxy.liberty.edu/lib/liberty/detail.action?docID=5050425>.

⁴⁹ Miller, “Not with Eloquent Wisdom,” 323-354.

⁵⁰ Park, *Paul’s Ekklesia as a Civic Assembly*, 219.

⁵¹ 1 Cor. 11:17-34 and 1 Cor. 14:23-36 (New International Version).

⁵² *Ibid.*, 220.

⁵³ Millard Erickson, *Introducing Christian Doctrine*, ed. Arnold Hustad, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2015), 400-403.

specific ways that the body of believers act in regard to the common good and fulfill the commandments to spread the gospel, love God, and love others. The purpose of the *ekklesia*, therefore, leads to active participation in the world.

As earlier described, the *ekklesia* is a part of God's establishment of his kingdom on Earth. John Calvin identified the *ekklesia* as the expression of the kingdom of Christ in the present age, both for ministers and the assembly of those called.⁵⁴ Matthew Tuininga, in his research on Calvin, states that Calvin believes the church's calling is "to point the world to the gospel that reveals creation's restoration in the kingdom of Christ."⁵⁵ Calvin also alluded to the fact the Christians are dual citizens. Christians are both subject to spiritual authorities, as citizens in God's kingdom, and subject to temporal authorities as citizens in the present age. This is why Calvin introduces the two kingdoms doctrine. As Tuininga states, the doctrine's purpose was "to clarify the nature of Christian liberty, given this tension between the 'already' and the 'not yet.'"⁵⁶ As such, Christians are subject to temporal authorities and have responsibilities to the present age.

In Romans 13, Paul discusses the authorities of temporal rulers as being established by God. Paul tells those who are evil to be afraid, for those who trespass against the law are deserving of punishment, but those who abide by the law have no cause to fear. He alludes to the fact that Christians should have nothing to fear if they are following God's command to love others, for those who love their neighbors fulfill the law.⁵⁷ This leads to the conclusion that if Christians are following God's law, they are the best type of citizens and are fulfilling the requirements of citizenship in God's kingdom through these means. Alexander Solzhenitsyn, Russian novelist and historian, in his speech, "A World Split Apart," gives insight into why this should be the case. He states, "A society which is based on the letter of the law and never reaches any higher is taking very scarce advantage of the high level of human possibilities. The letter of the law is too cold and formal to have a beneficial influence on society."⁵⁸ This gives rise to the idea that man needs more than legal code to fulfill his purpose and to be beneficial to society. Man needs a moral code that self-governs him. For Christians, God's command to love, though not encapsulated in legal code, self-governs man to the point that he should automatically fulfill the legal code by fulfilling God's commands. The Christian should reach the highest level of human possibilities to which Solzhenitsyn refers and the Christian should be the best citizen of temporal authorities because he is governed not only by legal code, but by God's law. Being a citizen of God's kingdom implies outward application to the temporal kingdom.

Further involved in being a citizen of God's kingdom is the sanctification process, the great commission, and the greatest commandment. It is clear from Scripture that God asks his citizens to grow and mature. Colossians 2:6-7 states, "Therefore as you have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him, having been firmly rooted and now being built up in Him and established in your faith, just as you were instructed, and overflowing with gratitude."⁵⁹ This verse commands believers to continue to grow, be built up in Christ, and be established in faith

⁵⁴ Matthew Tuininga, *Calvin's Political Theology and the Public Engagement of the Church: Christ's Two Kingdoms, Law and Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 358.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Rom. 13 (New American Standard Bible).

⁵⁸ Alexander Solzhenitsyn, "A World Split Apart" (lecture, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, June 8, 1978) <https://americanrhetoric.com/speeches/PDFFiles/Alexander%20Solzhenitsyn%20-%20World%20Split%20Apart.pdf>.

⁵⁹ Col. 2:6-7 (New American Standard Bible).

after receiving salvation. God also commands his followers to love him first, love others as themselves,⁶⁰ and share the gospel in order to make disciples.⁶¹ These are the commandments given to those who are citizens in God's kingdom. As such, this applies directly to the purpose of the *ekklesia*, as it is part of God's establishment of his kingdom on Earth.

God's command to love and make disciples warrants further discussion and applies directly to the *ekklesia* and the common good. Paul, in addressing believers, uses a familiar Greek idea, the part-whole relationship. One such example is 1 Corinthians 12:12 where Paul states, "For even as the body is one and yet has many members, and all the members of the body, though they are many, are one body, so also is Christ."⁶² Paul is using the part-whole relationship to describe the believers role and importance in the *ekklesia*. The assembly is made up of those who have been called, and those who have been called make up the whole of the *ekklesia*. The biblical *ekklesia*, just like the Greek *ekklesia*, utilizes the part-whole relationship which creates an ethic in which to evaluate actions as they pertain to the common good of the *ekklesia*.

In speaking to the Corinthians, Paul repeatedly uses the term *τὸ συμφέρον*, meaning the common advantage.⁶³ The seeking of the common advantage paired with the part-whole dynamic creates an ethos within the Christians *ekklesia*. However, unlike the Greek *ekklesia*, the common advantage is not a healthy polis. The common advantage for the Christian assembly is for the gospel be proclaimed to all and for all believers to love the Lord and others. Chang states that the concept of the common advantage goes beyond "Greco-Roman socio-political understanding of peace and communal well-being in *ὁμόνοια*. He also has in mind believers' sacred experience of sanctification and redemption through divine intervention."⁶⁴ Paul describes the common advantage of the many as salvation through Christ's death and resurrection, and that believers would grow in their faith and fulfill God's commands. He seeks for the Corinthians to apply this both within and outside of the *ekklesia* and sets the example in doing so. Paul claims that he is not seeking his own advantage but the advantage of the many that others may be saved.⁶⁵ Therefore, the biblical *ekklesia* is an assembly which seeks the common good, just like the Greek *ekklesia*.

However, seeking the common good within the *ekklesia* is not a coerced action, rather it is one compelled by love. It is emphasized in Scripture, specifically in 1 Corinthians 13, that love is not self-seeking.⁶⁶ Paul, in developing the pursuit of common advantage or good emphasizes Christ's example of sacrificial love that seeks the good of the many. Chang emphasizes, "By this unlikely, selfless, and provocative example, Paul seeks to reorient the Philippians' vision of life from one that is self-seeking to another that is self-giving for the gospel's progress."⁶⁷ Chang quotes Paul's writing in Philippians 2:4, "Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others."⁶⁸ Love compels believers to look to the interest of others. Love compels believers to seek the benefit and the good of others. Park notes this when he states that instead of a set of social programs Paul offers another solution to the problems the *ekklesia* faced: "The ethos perhaps distinct and particular to each congregation, evolved through applying

⁶⁰ Matt. 22:37-40 (New American Standard Bible).

⁶¹ Matt. 28:16-20 (New American Standard Bible).

⁶² 1 Cor. 12:12 (New American Standard Bible).

⁶³ Chang, *The Community, the Individual and the Common Good*, 210.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Chang, *The Community, the Individual and the Common Good*, 211-212.

⁶⁶ 1 Cor. 13:5 (New International Version).

⁶⁷ Chang, *The Community, the Individual and the Common Good*, 218.

⁶⁸ Phil. 2:4 (English Standard Version).

the obligation of mutual love to various local situations.”⁶⁹ The actions of the *ekklesia* were to be enacted through an ethic of love for others. Therefore, the purpose of the *ekklesia* is to both fulfill the greatest commandment by loving God and others, and to fulfill the great commission as a result of living out the great commandment. Therefore, in order to fulfill its purpose, the *ekklesia* must actively seek out the common advantage of the many because of God’s command to love.

Convergence of the Greek and Biblical *Ekklesia*

Before regarding the implications of the definition and purpose of the *ekklesia*, it is important to note the overlap between both the Greek and biblical contexts which inform the overall definition of *ekklesia* and contribute to its wider understanding. The aspect of citizenship holds great influence in both the Greek context and the biblical context of the *ekklesia*. With citizenship comes the responsibilities of being a citizen. For the Greeks, citizenship means obedience to the law of Athens and contributing to the good of the polis through participation in the *ekklesia*. For the kingdom of God, citizenship means obedience to God’s commands to love God and others and fulfill the great commission. This is done, in part, through participation in the *ekklesia*, by assembling with the other citizens of God’s kingdom. This understanding places the member of the *ekklesia* within the part-whole dynamic. Both the member of the Greek *ekklesia* and the biblical *ekklesia* are part of a whole body, through which they perform their role for the sake of the whole body’s health. This in turn creates an ethic for the body of the *ekklesia* by which they seek the common advantage, or common good of the body. In the Athenian assembly, the common advantage is sought for the sake of a healthy polis by which man has the good life. In the biblical assembly, the common advantage is sought for the sake of the gospel by which man has eternal life through Christ. As seen through both the Greek and biblical contexts, the *ekklesia* is an assembly of those who have been called and requires a response and an obligation to seek the common good of others.

Implications and Conclusion of Expanding the Definition of *Ekklesia*

The *ekklesia*, when studied in both the historical Greek and biblical contexts, points clearly to the same goal, to contribute to the common good. Modern usage of the term has often neglected this purpose. The understanding of *ekklesia* as an assembly gathered to seek the common good holds new application for modern-day Christians. Christians can no longer gloss over this term and render it simply as “the church,” which often conveys the idea of a once or twice weekly program. Being a part of the *ekklesia* requires a larger response. For Christians, expanding the definition of *ekklesia* based on both contexts means that first, believers must respond to the call to be a part of the *ekklesia* and be an active member of the assembly. Secondly, believers must seek the common good of those within and outside of the *ekklesia* through fulfilling the great commission by fulfilling the great commandment. This requires involvement with the rest of the world. The church cannot bunker down in church buildings and proclaim the rest of the world out of their hands. The church has a responsibility to establish the kingdom of God on Earth in anticipation for the full establishment of the kingdom of God upon Christ’s return.

⁶⁹ Park, *Paul’s Ekklesia as a Civic Assembly*, 222.

One clear way the church must be involved, though it is often much opposed, is through politics and government. In his discussion on Calvin's political theology, Tuininga states, "Government is one means by which human beings serve one another in a fallen world, a vocation necessary to the demands of love."⁷⁰ Civil government has been established as a means of justice and order in a fallen world. It is both necessary and a means by which humans serve and love each other. Christians are not fulfilling the greatest commandment if they are not involved civically and politically. To be a part of the *ekklesia* involves being part of an assembly that loves others and seeks the good of others. To love others implies caring for others well-being in all areas of life. Christians must ensure they are loving in all spheres of life, including politically. Tuininga describes why this involvement in temporal affair must take place:

"The temporal and the eternal, the spiritual and the political, overlap substantially in the real world, and they are both subject to the lordship of Christ. It is the material world that Christ will transform at the end of the age, and it is in the temporal affairs of the political kingdom that Christians witness to the restoration that is already taking place through Christ's spiritual kingdom. Christians thus seek to confess and practice the righteousness of the kingdom in every sphere of life."⁷¹

Tuininga is demonstrating how Christians are to respond to the world based on the Lordship of Christ over all areas of life.

Conclusion

Therefore, the presence and purpose of the *ekklesia* invokes a response, responsibility, and active involvement in the world. The historical Greek *ekklesia* sought to benefit the common good by creating a healthy polis. The biblical *ekklesia* sought to benefit the common good by sharing the gospel and loving God and others. Similarly, the modern-day church (*ekklesia*) should promote the common good. The modern-day *ekklesia* is to promote the common good by being an instrument of God's kingdom to advance the gospel. Therefore, the *ekklesia* is responsible for involvement in all areas of life, including the civil-social. This is not to say that the church is to establish itself as a part of the government, rather, this is to say the individual members of the *ekklesia* must take seriously its purpose and calling. For the sake of the common good, that Christ be made known to all, the church must actively make disciples and actively love God and others. It does not benefit the common good for Christians to merely meet once a week and end their engagement when they leave the church building. To promote the common good, Christians must do the hard work of being actively engaged in the world, to included civic engagement. The *ekklesia* as an assembly of those who have been called to pursue the common good are required to respond and required to participate.

⁷⁰ Tuininga, *Calvin's Political Theology and the Public Engagement of the Church*, 358.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 363.

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