

WHO WAS THE EARLY 1ST CENTURY CHURCH?

Written by Rabbi Mordecai Silver. Posted in Articles

What was the church of the First century like, the church from the Book of Acts; the church from Acts Chapter 2. But I think before I even begin to tell you about the church of the first century I need set the picture, to lay a foundation upon which I intend to build. I will build a picture of the church; a picture that I believe you may be surprised by. So let's take a trip back in time, almost two thousand years ago. Back to the city of Jerusalem. Events had just taken place that would change the world for all time. Messiah Yeshua-Jesus had been put to death. He had risen from the grave on the third day and had spent some time with His talmidim-students or disciples. Now He had left them but He had given them instructions to wait. Wait for something very special to happen and it was going to happen around one of His moedim-appointed times-festivals. A pilgrimage festival, one of only three when those over a certain age, probably 13, most likely male were to go to Jerusalem to the Temple. Let's read the story that took place in Acts Chapter 2.

Acts 2:1-47

1 The festival of Shavuot arrived, and the believers all gathered together in one place. 2 Suddenly there came a sound from the sky like the roar of a violent wind, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting. 3 Then they saw what looked like tongues of fire, which separated and came to rest on each one of them. 4 They were all filled with the Ruach HaKodesh and began to talk in different languages, as the Spirit enabled them to speak. 5 Now there were staying in Yerushalayim religious Jews from every nation under heaven. 6 When they heard this sound, a crowd gathered; they were confused, because each one heard the believers speaking in his own language. 7 Totally amazed, they asked, "How is this possible? Aren't all these people who are speaking from the Galil? 8 How is it that we hear them speaking in our native languages? 9 We are Parthians, Medes, Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Y'hudah, Cappadocia, Pontus, Asia, 10 Phrygia, Pamphylia, Egypt, the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome; 11 Jews by birth and proselytes; Cretans, Arabs ...! How is it that we hear them speaking in our own languages about the great things God has done?" 12 Amazed and confused, they all went on asking each other, "What can this mean?" 13 But others made fun of them and said,

"They've just had too much wine!" 14 Then Kefa stood up with the Eleven and raised his voice to address them: "You Judeans, and all of you staying here in Yerushalayim! Let me tell you what this means! Listen carefully to me! 15 "These people aren't drunk, as you suppose—it's only nine in the morning. 16 No, this is what was spoken about through the prophet Yo'el: 17 'Adonai says: "In the Last Days, I will pour out from my Spirit upon everyone. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. 18 Even on my slaves, both men and women, will I pour out from my Spirit in those days; and they will prophesy. 19 I will perform miracles in the sky above and signs on the earth below—blood, fire and thick smoke. 20 The sun will become dark and the moon blood before the great and fearful Day of Adonai comes. 21 And then, whoever calls on the name of Adonai will be saved." ' 22 "Men of Israel! Listen to this! Yeshua from Natzeret was a man demonstrated to you to have been from God by the powerful works, miracles and signs that God performed through him in your presence. You yourselves know this. 23 This man was arrested in accordance with God's predetermined plan and foreknowledge; and, through the agency of persons not bound by the Torah, you nailed him up on a stake and killed him! 24 "But God has raised him up and freed him from the suffering of death; it was impossible that death could keep its hold on him. 25 For David says this about him: 'I saw Adonai always before me, for he is at my right hand, so that I will not be shaken. 26 For this reason, my heart was glad; and my tongue rejoiced; and now my body too will live on in the certain hope 27 that you will not abandon me to Sh'ol or let your Holy One see decay. 28 you have made known to me the ways of life; you will fill me with joy by your presence.' 29 "Brothers, I know I can say to you frankly that the patriarch David died and was buried—his tomb is with us to this day. 30 Therefore, since he was a prophet and knew that God had sworn an oath to him that one of his descendants would sit on his throne, 31 he was speaking in advance about the resurrection of the Messiah, that it was he who was not abandoned in Sh'ol and whose flesh did not see decay. 32 God raised up this Yeshua! And we are all witnesses of it! 33 "Moreover, he has been exalted to the right hand of God; has received from the Father what he promised, namely, the Ruach HaKodesh; and has poured out this gift, which you are both seeing and hearing. 34 For David did not ascend into heaven. But he says, 35 'Adonai said to my Lord, "Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet." ' 36 Therefore, let the whole house of Israel know beyond doubt that God has made him both Lord and Messiah this Yeshua, whom you executed on a stake!" 37 On hearing this, they were stung in their hearts; and they said to Kefa and the other emissaries, "Brothers, what should we do?" 38 Kefa answered them, "Turn from sin, return to God, and each of you be immersed on the authority of Yeshua the Messiah

into forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Ruach HaKodesh! 39 For the promise is for you, for your children, and for those far away—as many as Adonai our God may call!" 40 He pressed his case with many other arguments and kept pleading with them, "Save yourselves from this perverse generation!" 41 So those who accepted what he said were immersed, and there were added to the group that day about three thousand people. 42 They continued faithfully in the teaching of the emissaries, in fellowship, in breaking bread and in the prayers. 43 Everyone was filled with awe, and many miracles and signs took place through the emissaries. 44 All those trusting in Yeshua stayed together and had everything in common; 45 in fact, they sold their property and possessions and distributed the proceeds to all who were in need. 46 Continuing faithfully and with singleness of purpose to meet in the Temple courts daily, and breaking bread in their several homes, they shared their food in joy and simplicity of heart, 47 praising God and having the respect of all the people. And day after day the Lord kept adding to them those who were being saved.

Let me repeat those last few verses. Verses 42-47.

Why is that so important? It's important because the word church that is used here has been taken out of context, out of its original intention, its original meaning. Let's pause for a moment and take a look at a verse from the Tanach—the Hebrew Scriptures or what Christianity calls the Old Testament.

Exodus 12:3

"Speak to the entire assembly of Israel, saying..."

The Hebrew is el-kahl-ah-dot Yisrael.

qahal {kah-hahl'}

congregation, assembly, company, multitude, convocation, religious purposes, company (of returning exiles), as an organized body

`edah {ay-dah'}

congregation, company, assembly, multitude, people, swarm, gathering

Now let's take a look at the meaning of the word church as translated from the word that just about everyone knows from the Greek: Ekklesia.

ekklesia {ek-klay-see'-ah}

Church, assembly, a gathering of citizens called out from their homes into some public place, an assembly of the people convened at the public place of the council for the purpose of deliberating, the assembly of the Israelites, any gathering or throng of men assembled by chance, in a Christian sense, an assembly of Christians gathered for worship in a religious meeting, a company of Christian's, or of those 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, those who anywhere, in a city, village, constitute such a company and are united into one body, the whole body of Christians scattered throughout the earth, the assembly of faithful Christians already dead and received into heaven

Boy, that is a mouthful. When the word ekklesia was used, it was with the intention that it would be the Greek interpretation of the Hebrew word kehilah or a combination of the two words that we spoke about earlier, kahal and eadah. When the translation was originally done on the Tanach-the Hebrew Scriptures it was when they were translated into what we know as the Septuagint. The Septuagint was the effort of 70, which is what Septuagint means, rabbis who translated the Hebrew into Greek so that the Scriptures would be able to read outside of those who could read Hebrew.

Why is this important? Because what we understand ekklesia to mean today is simply church. A building, structure, place of meeting, and so on and so forth. Are you beginning to see where I am going with this? The Hebrew meaning and the Greek meaning are the same if understood in the proper context because that will explain to us just what the first century congregations were about.

Please do not confuse ekklesia with the word synagogue. The synagogue was a building. The word synagogue comes from the Greek.

sunagoge {soon-ag-o-gay'}

synagogue, congregation, assembly, a bringing together, gathering (as of fruits), in the NT, an assembling together of men, an assembly of men, a synagogue, an assembly of Jews formally gathered together to offer prayers and listen to the reading and expositions of the scriptures; assemblies of that sort were held every sabbath and feast day, afterwards also on the second and fifth days of every week; name transferred to an assembly of Christians formally gathered together for religious purposes, the buildings

where those solemn Jewish assemblies are held. Synagogues seem to date their origin from the Babylonian exile. In the times of Jesus and the apostles every town, not only in Palestine, but also among the Gentiles if it contained a considerable number of Jewish inhabitants, had at least one synagogue, the larger towns several or even many.

The synagogue was separate and distinct from the Temple. The synagogue came into being as a place where people could gather for religious purposes if they could not come to the Temple. As the people moved further away from Jerusalem synagogues came into use as there was only one Temple.

In some ways the synagogues were what the church became. Synagogues were buildings; the church came into that later. But the church of the first century was not buildings. It was a body of people who were called congregations or assemblies. These were never meant to refer to buildings but to people gathered together for a particular purpose. In this case they gathered together to honor Yeshua the Messiah.

So let's look at another verse from Scripture. This time we are going to look once again at the Apostolic Scriptures-the New Testament. The Book of Acts Chapter 16 Verse 5.

Acts 16:5

So the churches grew strong in the faith, as well as growing daily in numbers.

Now listen to this translation from the Jewish New Testament. The Jewish New Testament is a translation by a Messianic Jewish Believer in Messiah Yeshua who lives in Israel.

Acts 16:5

5 Accordingly, the congregations were strengthened in the faith and increased in number day by day.

Subtle difference there, very subtle, yet very important because it conveys to us a sense of who the early Messianic Believers in the Messiah were. They were a group of people who came to believe that the Messiah was Yeshua and they gathered together wherever they could in order to learn about Him and what He had taught. They gathered together in homes and shared meals. They gathered together in the Temple to pray and share their faith in Messiah with others. Remember that the Temple was very large and could

accommodate large groups of people. Then they broke into smaller groups and went to each other's homes and shared a meal and shared what the Messiah had taught them.

It was never intended that the church would develop into a building. They were a body of people the same as the people of Israel were a body of people who moved on God's command as one. They were of one accord, one mind, and one spirit. Just look at the ancient nation of Israel after the exodus from Egypt. They were just a mass of people without direction. They slowly over time, over many, many years God through Moses molded them into a nation, a people that were called the Children of Israel. They moved under God's direction following His ways.

This is how we should understand what the congregations of Messianic Believers were like in the early first century. They were people, not buildings.

Another aspect of what is the church is the concept of kin. Kin is defined as relatives. But who are relatives? Are they strictly blood relatives or are their relationships other than blood? Israel as a nation was related through the various tribes and through their faith in God. But could one become kin without blood relationship?

Let's take a quick look at the Hebrew and Greek for kin.

basar {bah-sahr'}

flesh, body, mankind, of humans, of animals, kindred, blood-relations, flesh as frail or erring (man against God), all living things

The interesting thing about the word Basar is that this is the word that Jews who believe in the Messiah Yeshua use when talking about the gospel.

sha'er {sheh-ayr'}

flesh, near kinswoman, food, near, nigh, near kin, kin, body, kinsman, flesh relation, blood relation

qarowb {kah-robe'} or qarob {kah-robe'}

near, nigh, at hand, neighbor, kin, kinsfolk, kinsmen, of personal relationship, kinship

suggenes {soong-ghen-ace'}

kinsman, cousin, kinsfolk, kin; of the same kin, akin to, related by blood; in a wider sense, of the same race, a fellow countryman

An important concept of kin is the kinsmen redeemer.

ga'al {gah-al'}

redeem, redeemer, kinsman, revenger, avenger, ransom, at all, deliver, kinsfolks, purchase, act as kinsman-redeemer, avenge, revenge, ransom, do the part of a kinsman, by marrying brother's widow to beget a child for him, to redeem from slavery, to redeem land, to exact vengeance, to redeem (by payment), to redeem (with God as subject), individuals from death, Israel from Egyptian bondage, Israel from exile, to redeem oneself, to be redeemed

The concept of the church was never meant to be one of a physical building. The Biblical usage is one of people, a congregation or assembly, one of family, of blood relatives or people who become like kin or relatives through something besides physical birth. In the case of those of us who say that we are Believers in Messiah Yeshua we become related through our acceptance of Yeshua as our Messiah. This is a spiritual birth. This idea of the church being a building is not Biblical. The church is made up of people and this is the Body that Messiah talks about. When we hear church spoken of it should be thought of not as buildings but of the people who make up the body.

This is the congregation of the first century. They were Hebrews of the nation of Israel who were tied to one another through their bloodline and their faith in God. They already understood the ideas of kin or family, faith and its centrality to their lives, helping those less fortunate than themselves, sharing everything that they had with one another and that included their new found faith in the revealed Messiah.

As we come to a close let's take one more look at a passage of Scripture we read earlier.

Acts 2:36

36 Therefore, let the whole house of Israel know beyond doubt that God has made him both Lord and Messiah this Yeshua, whom you executed on a stake!"

Do you see what the first part of that Scripture is saying? "Let the whole house of Israel know..." The whole house of Israel! Who is the whole house of Israel? Not Judah alone.

Not the church. The whole house of Israel is made up of Judah, Ephraim and the Gerim (God-fearing non-Jews). None of them standing alone are Israel, but joined together in Messiah Yeshua they stand united as Echad-One in a unity combined. Israel reborn!