



The New Life in Christ

Lesson 7

The Ecclesia of God

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When men and women are baptized into Christ they belong to God as part of His family. God has commanded that His children should be organised into a community of believers and He tells us clearly how this should happen – there should be one body or world wide community of disciples.

“For just as the **body is one** and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ.

For by one Spirit **we were all baptized into one body**—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free...”
1Corinthians 12:12-13

In our English Bible, this organisation is called the church or assembly or congregation. However, in the Greek language, which was used to write the New Testament, a special word was used, the word ‘ecclesia’. An ecclesia is a group of people who are brought together for a special purpose and there is a use of the word in the New Testament which illustrates this. Acts 19 tells us of the time Paul spent in Ephesus and of the problems he had with some of the people of the city.

“For a man named Demetrius, a silversmith, who made silver shrines of Artemis, brought no little business to the craftsmen.

These he **gathered together**, with the workmen in similar trades, and said, “Men, you know that from this business we have our wealth...”

Now some cried out one thing, some another, for the **assembly** was in confusion, and most of them did not know why they had come together.”
Acts 19:24-25&32

These people were *gathered together* by an evil man to oppose the Apostle Paul. God has *gathered together* men and women into His ecclesia to worship Him and to belong in His family.

The first use of the word ‘ecclesia’ in the Greek version of the Old Testament is in the book of Deuteronomy. It describes the way in which the Children of Israel were separate from all the other nations surrounding them. They had been brought out of Egypt by God and He wanted to lead them to the Promised Land; they were called for this purpose and so they were His ecclesia. So it is with God’s church today. It is made up of people who are special and who have been called out of the world so that God can lead them to His Kingdom.

This privilege of belonging to the ecclesia of God is only for those who have been baptized into ‘the things concerning the name of Jesus Christ and the Kingdom of God’ (Acts 8:12). True disciples separate themselves from the world and also recognise that they cannot truly worship God with other men and women who call themselves Christians but who do not understand and accept the true Gospel message. The call to belong to the ecclesia of God is a call to be *separate*. The apostle Paul wrote about this to the Corinthian ecclesia and said:

“For we are the temple of the living God; as God said, “I will make my dwelling among them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.

Therefore **go out from their midst, and be separate from them**, says the Lord, and touch no unclean thing; then I will welcome you,

and I will be a father to you, and you shall be sons and daughters to me, says the Lord Almighty.”
2Corinthians 6:16-18

It is a great honour to belong to the ecclesia of God and when baptized members meet to worship they should always remember this fact. God has called them to these things and they should not neglect them.

“Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful.

And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works,
not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another,
and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.” Hebrews 10:23-25

In his Letter to the Ephesians Paul described the ecclesia as a place in which disciples grow spiritually; he used a word which means ‘to be built up.’ He wrote that, within an ecclesial organisation, brothers and sisters would be able to:

- Grow in knowledge and understanding (4:13-15)
 - Grow in love and so strengthen and build the ecclesia (4:15-16)
- However, he tells us that this will only happen if every member of the ecclesia is involved and contributes to it (4:16).

Paul used a special phrase to describe the ecclesia. He wrote that the people in it are ‘one body’ and he used this phrase in this way ten times in his letters, for example:

“For as in **one body** we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function,
so we, though many, are **one body in Christ**, and individually members one of another.”
Romans 12:4-5

This phrase ‘one body’ describes the very close way brothers and sisters live and worship together as part of God’s family and Paul writes the following things about it.

1. Just as we have different parts of our own, human bodies e.g. eyes and hands, so there are different parts to the spiritual body – not every brother and sister is the same and is able to do the same tasks in the ecclesia. However everyone is essential and valued by God and has an important part to play in the body of Christ. We all need each other just as we need all the different parts of our own physical bodies in order to function properly. (Romans 12:4-5, 1Corinthians 12:12, 20)
2. The head of this body is Christ (Ephesians 4:15-16). He is in charge of it and there is no human authority on earth which is in charge of the ecclesia.
3. Racial or tribal background or gender is unimportant, God values all His children equally (Galatians 3:26-29).
4. Although there is one body, one ecclesia, of which Christ is the head (Ephesians 5:23), it is described as having many branches. So Paul wrote to ‘the church (ecclesia) of God which is at Corinth’ (2Corinthians 1:1). Wherever the true disciples of Jesus meet in worship, it is the ecclesia of God.

We need then to look at all the different roles within an ecclesia and to consider what the Bible tells us about them.

Ecclesial Business Meetings

After the ascension of the Lord Jesus, the ecclesia in Jerusalem grew rapidly and it soon became clear that it needed extra people to organise and look after it. The account of this is found in Acts 6:1-7 and it sets the pattern for our ecclesial organisation today. We can list the main points mentioned like this.

1. The responsibility of the senior leaders of the ecclesia (the apostles) was to preach, pray and teach the Word of God, nothing should get in the way of this.
2. However, they needed help, particularly in pastoral matters, to look after the brothers and sisters in the ecclesia.
3. They did not make the decisions themselves but called all the brothers and sisters together for a business meeting to discuss it.
4. The apostles gave guidance on what they thought should be done but it was the whole ecclesia that made the decision and chose the men whom they wanted to do these jobs for them. No

doubt not everyone voted for the same men, but everyone accepted the majority decision and supported it.

The result was that a disagreement in the ecclesia was solved and everyone felt that they were looked after fairly. This allowed the ecclesia to continue to preach and so Luke says that ‘the Word of God increased’.

This is a very important lesson for us; good and fair ecclesial organisation, which involves every brother and sister in its decisions, helps to bring peace and to create an atmosphere in which disciples can concentrate on preaching the Word. Once a decision has been fairly made by a majority within the ecclesia, all members should support it.

We read of another business meeting in Acts 15, this one involved the elders and apostles from many ecclesias. They came together to discuss something that many of them strongly disagreed about, there was ‘much debate’ and again there are lessons for us to learn about how we deal with disagreements in our ecclesias.

1. They met to talk about the matter; they did not send letters or just stay at home. Although there were strong and opposing views, they listened to each other.
2. There was time for everyone to speak.
3. When the respected brethren, Peter and James, spoke everyone was quiet and listened.
4. They based their decision on the Word of God, not on their own views.
5. Once a decision was made, they all accepted it and lived by it.

The Responsibilities of Elders

When the apostle Paul went on his preaching missions, the organisation of ecclesias was very important to him. He knew that newly baptized brothers and sisters needed ecclesial organisation and he chose men in each town to be elders (Acts 14:23). It does not mean that automatically he chose the oldest, most senior man to be the elder in an ecclesia. Timothy was a young man but he was the elder of the ecclesia in Ephesus, chosen because of his spiritual nature and Paul tell us a lot about the qualities we should look for as we chose brethren to be the elders of our ecclesias.

We should note that it is not wrong to want to be an elder in an ecclesia – it is the motives behind the desire that are important.

“If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task. Therefore an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. He must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive, for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God's church? He must not be a recent convert, or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil.”
1Timothy 3:1-6

“For an overseer, as God's steward, must be above reproach. He must not be arrogant or quick-tempered or a drunkard or violent or greedy for gain, but hospitable, a lover of good, self-controlled, upright, holy, and disciplined. He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it.” Titus 1:7-9

“So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock.”
1Peter 5:1-3

These passages give us a very clear picture about the attributes of an ecclesial elder. He should be like this:

- A man who knows his Bible and can teach others about the Gospel message.
- A man who lives according to the Gospel.
- A man who is self controlled and moderate in his behaviour and who deals in a calm and thoughtful way with ecclesial problems however difficult they may be.
- A man who is not angry or violent.
- A man who does not get drunk.
- A man who is hospitable and welcomes other people into his home.
- A man who does not take money for the work of being an elder nor does he steal from the funds of the ecclesia.
- A man who is not arrogant or proud.
- A man who has developed spiritually and is not newly baptized

Some elders see themselves as ‘in charge’ or as ‘the leader’ of their congregation. This leads them to be arrogant and unkind in the way they treat people and this gives a very bad example to the ecclesia. After Jesus had washed the disciple’s feet in the Upper Room he said:

“For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you. Truly, truly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them.” John 13:15-17

An ecclesial elder (a Recording Brother or Secretary) should be the *servant* of his ecclesia. He should be like a shepherd looking after his sheep and helping them on the way to the Kingdom of God.

The Roles of Men and Women

Paul wrote that:

“For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” Galatians 3:27-28

These are wonderful words and confirm the idea of the ‘one body’. The colour of our skin, whether we are man or woman, all these things are irrelevant to God when we become members of His family. However the Bible is quite clear that there are different roles within the ecclesia for men and women. Within the ecclesia the men are to lead the prayers and worship of the congregation. It is their responsibility to teach and to lead the public preaching of the Gospel. The sisters are to listen quietly to the men and to be subject to them (1Timothy 2:8-15). Paul says that the reason for this is that Adam was first formed by God. He should have taken the lead in worship of God together with his wife but the woman (Eve) was deceived and took the fruit, gave it to her husband and transgressed God’s law. By obeying God’s commandments about the differing roles for men and women in the ecclesia, we restore the pattern that God gave from the beginning.

This does not mean that there is no role for sisters. Their influence is vital within any ecclesia. It was Lydia (Acts 16) who set an example of hospitality and kindness which influenced the ecclesia in Philippi. Dorcas was a sister in Joppa who was well known as a disciple who did many good deeds and looked after the poor (Acts 9). Sisters teach in Sunday School and often have ability with little children that men do not. Sisters also have a very great influence in their own homes in the way they behave and set a Godly example both for their children and their husbands (Titus 2:4-5).

One public acknowledgement of these different roles for men and women within the ecclesia is the way in which men are told to worship with uncovered heads and women are instructed to cover their heads for worship and prayer (1Corinthians 11).

Ecclesial Meetings

Every ecclesia should meet weekly, on Sunday if possible, to share bread and wine in memory of the life and death of Jesus (see Lesson 6) and a suggested programme for this service is shown at the end

of this lesson. However, it is a weak ecclesia that just meets in this way. The ecclesia, and individual members, must grow spiritually.

“...so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, **when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.**”
Ephesians 4:14-16

It is careful reading and studying of the Word of God with prayer which helps us to grow (1Peter 2:1) and the ecclesia should meet weekly for Bible study at a Bible Class. This should help brothers and sisters move on from first principles to consider what the writer to the Hebrews calls ‘the meat of the word’. There should also be a meeting weekly to preach the Gospel at which the ecclesia looks outward to share with the people who live round about the wonderful news of the Gospel. These meetings are not easy to organise and run, especially when the ecclesia is small. However, help is available and the Christadelphian Isolation League will send out by post written Exhortations, Lectures and Bible Class papers that can be used by ecclesias.

Suggested Order of Memorial Service for Christadelphian Ecclesias

Hymn

Prayer

Two Daily Bible Readings from the Bible Reading Companion

Hymn

Exhortation (a talk based on the Bible which will be of comfort and help to the brothers and sisters)

Introduction to Bread and Wine

Prayer for Bread

Prayer for Wine

Hymn

Collection for the ecclesia and announcements about future arrangements

Hymn

Prayer

Questions

1. What does the word ‘ecclesia mean?
2. What do people have to do to belong to the ecclesia of God?
3. How should disciples behave when they meet to discuss the affairs of the ecclesia?
4. What sort of man should disciples choose to be an elder?
5. Within the ecclesia what are the roles of:
(a) brethren (b) sisters
6. What do we learn from 1Peter 5:1-5?