

SOLIDIFYING THOUGHTS REGARDING THE CHURCH

by Kent Brandenburg

“Church” (*ekklesia*) in Matthew 16:18 is a singular noun. That does not mean there is one of them in the entire world. If I say, “I answered the phone,” I’m not saying there is only one phone in the world, since I wasn’t referencing a particular phone. The singular noun can only be used two ways: a particular or a generic. Often, the singular noun is used in a generic way in the New Testament. It is used that way all the time in Greek and in English and in many other languages. This is very basic. When Jesus says, “I will build my church,” we don’t assume that He means there will be just one. He could be talking about the church generically. I think that He was, but it isn’t easy to conclude whether it was a particular, the Jerusalem church, or His church as an institution, the generic use, by the context. It could be either and could be both. We certainly shouldn’t make any conclusions about what “church” means from a passage ambiguous in its context.

What would be good to do is to look at how Jesus uses the word *ekklesia* in His 20 other usages of it in the Bible, and what you will find is that the other usages are plainly local. That is good hermeneutics, that is, taking the ambiguous usage and interpreting in the light of every other single usage by Jesus. There is no reason to believe that Jesus wasn’t using *ekklesia* in Matthew 16:18 like He was in the other 20 usages, beginning in Matthew 18:15-17. And if *ekklesia* was ever supposed to be an entity other than local, where is the passage that explains that usage of the word. Where? There is no where, and the reason is because it has only the one meaning.

A generic use of the singular noun doesn’t change the meaning of the word. An *ekklesia* is still an assembly, the way that Tyndale translated the word in every usage of it in his translation — “congregation.”

When Jesus said “my church,” He was distinguishing His governing institution from others. This was His. His *ekklesia* was different than the meeting of the Greek city state, the Sanhedrin, the congregation of Israel. He would be the Head of this one. However, it was still an assembly. Assemblies assemble. If they don’t assemble, they are not an assembly. If it isn’t a particular assembly, then Jesus is speaking of it in a generic way, which is common in the New Testament. Cloud doesn’t mention this, perhaps because he doesn’t know. If he did know, he should at least have talked about it. If you don’t know the two usages of the singular noun, you can be confused when it comes to interpreting singulars.

There is no mystical or spiritual or platonic usage of the singular noun. You’ve got two choices: particular or generic. If Jesus was using it as a generic, that doesn’t change the meaning of *ekklesia*. He is talking still about an assembly, not just a particular one. He’s talking about it as His institution. If I say, “I will write with my pen,” “pen” doesn’t suddenly become universal and mystical without warning. It retains the meaning, even though it isn’t talking about or distinguishing a particular pen. It is “my

pen," so that narrows it down, but it doesn't create something that is a different meaning of pen. It's still a pen.