“LEAVING THE CHURCH”

If you read a news article from a worldly source wherein “the church” is referenced without any modifiers, you would probably understand *church* in its broadest sense as it is often used by the media. Context, as always, would be key to understanding what is actually meant.

For example, when talking about “the church” versus “the state,” one is often talking theoretically about how two social forces might interact with one another. In this case, “the church” might broadly refer to a worldview of faith in God. The word *church* is not used this way in Scripture, but contextually we understand what people mean.

“The church” might also be used to refer to culturally dominant institutions which imagine themselves as representing the church universal. In such cases, “The church said …” would be referencing the hierarchies of such institutions. Even those who protest such churches still speak of “the church” in general ways that are inclusive of all who profess some kind of faith in Jesus Christ (aka Christendom).

Certainly, *church* (*ekklesia*) is used biblically in a universal sense to refer to the one body of Christ comprised of individual saints redeemed by Christ’s blood (e.g. Eph. 1:22,23; 4:4,16). This is the church which Jesus said He would build (Mt. 16:18). However, just as “the gates of Hades” cannot prevail against Christ’s church, neither is His church subject to nor discernible by human metrics. “The church” in this universal sense has no visible head or hierarchy on earth which speaks for it. Christ is its head, and He has spoken; His words and His will have been communicated to us by His apostles and prophets (cf. Eph. 2:20).

Scripture also uses the word *ekklesia* in another distinct way to refer to multiple groups of Christians in different locales. There is *the* *one* church and then there are many *churches*. Some explain this apparent discrepancy in number by saying that the *one* (universal) church is comprised of many local churches. However, the simpler explanation is that the word *ekklesia* is used in two distinct ways with no implication that the one is made up of the many. The use of the same word *ekklesia* no more implies an organic relationship between all *ekklesiai* than would the common use of the English word *group* imply an organic relationship between all groups.

We *do* find “the church” being used in a universal sense to refer to specific members of the one body (e.g. Ac. 9:31), but nothing in this context nor in the rest of Scripture implies that the one church is comprised of local churches. Consistently, individual saints (not churches) are portrayed as “members” comprising the one body of Christ (Rom 12:4,5; 1 Cor. 6:15; 12:27; Eph 4:11-16).

So, when people announce that they are “leaving the church,” to which *church* are they referring? Some might be declaring that they are “leaving the church” in the universal sense which would mean renouncing Jesus as their head (i.e. they are no longer believers in Jesus as the risen Son of God). If a person leaves *“*the church,”then he/she *has* left Christ’s one body (Eph. 1:22,23; Col. 1:18) and are without hope.

Others might have no thought of abandoning Jesus Christ but mean that they are leaving *a* specificlocal group of Christians. Yet, the use of the definite article *the* suggests they are *not* talking about merely leaving *a* local church to join themselves to *a* different local group. It sounds like they are talking about leaving some group bigger than any one local church but smaller than the body of Christ.

Practically speaking, what some mean when they talk about themselves or others “leaving *the* church” reveals a denominational way of thinking. In a formal sense, a *denomination* is “a religious organization uniting in a single legal and administrative body a number of local churches.” While using *church* in this denominational way is perfectly good English (and understandable in a world that has come to accept denominations as the norm), *church* is never used in Scripture to refer to a group of churches. It is consistently used to refer to a group of individual people (saints).

The tendency to denominate religious groups has much historical precedent but has *no* biblical precedent. Many of us have seen charts which graphically portray the alleged branches of Christendom and show the streams of thought from whence all denominations came. Most people accept this denominational use of the word *church* as a practical reality despite the fact it is without biblical sanction or support.

Of course, there *are* people who rightly resist such denominational tendencies. Yet, some of these same people zealously go so far as to claim that *their* local church is part of the one church which was established in A.D. 33. This over-zealous claim contributes to the unscriptural idea that the *one* body of Christ *is* comprised of local churches. It essentially suggests that the one church of Christ is itself a denomination (a body of churches) set apart from all the other denominations.

Those with a sincere desire to reject inherently-divisive denominational thinking and restore scriptural thinking about “the church” need first to be clear on which church it is they are trying to restore. The *one* church—the body of Christ over which not even Hades can prevail—has *never* been in need of any kind of reformation or restoration. *People* who leave this church certainly need restoration; but the church of Jesus Christ remains sound regardless. In contrast, the many local churches which rise and fall over time may need reformation or restoration to biblical values and patterns (as we see exemplified by Jesus’ letters to the seven churches of Asia - Revelation 2,3); but the one body of Christ remains pure and undivided (cf. 1 Corinthians 1:13).

Any “restoration movement” based upon Scripture must recognize and acknowledge this distinction between *the* one church and the many local churches if such restoration is to be sustained among the many churches from generation to generation. If this distinction is *not* maintained, 1) any “restoration movement” will eventually become its own entity acknowledging only those churches which subscribe to the views of the movement, and 2) that entity will then assume that its churches essentially constitute *the* one true church.

Warning: many current denominations began with similar idealistic motives to reform or restore people and their churches to the apostolic traditions and patterns preserved in Scripture. So while saints in any local church ought to abide in the doctrine of Christ and exemplify the unity of the one body of Christ, neither their local fellowship nor any idealistic grouping of such “sound” local churches constitute or comprise *the* body of Christ.

Speaking of the numerous “churches of Christ” collectively as “the one church” propagates many misconceptions. “Leaving the church” is one of those denominational misconceptions. While one cannot leave *the* one church which Jesus built and expect to prevail over the gates of Hades, one *may* (and may need to) leave any local church (or group of churches) and yet remain a part of the one indivisible body of Christ. So let those who oppose denominational thinking as unscriptural remove the beams from their own eyes before picking out the specks in others. Denominational thinking is not solely a problem of the denominations; it is the tendency of all groups, including “non-denominational” (even “non-institutional”) churches.

So, let us “leave the church” in its denominational (group of churches) sense and hold fast to Christ alone. To God be glory in *the* church and Christ Jesus throughout all generations forever and ever (Eph. 3:21)!