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the 21st Century**

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# To church or not to church?

by Chantal J. Klingbeil and  
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Church is about our need to stick together, to learn to get along while still here on earth, and it is about service to the world around us.

## Why church is still God's ideal for the 21st century

Who needs a local church—in an age of virtual communities, tweeting, or social networks, where the best of Adventist (or other) preaching is just a click away? What is church, anyway—just a building, often dated, with pews, high ceilings, and stained glass windows—or is there something more to church that goes beyond walls, organizational diagrams, and creeds? And beyond all these profound questions, on a more personal level, why should I have to join or commit to a church—would my personal relationship with Jesus not suffice?

We would like to answer these questions biblically and theologically. Let's begin by quickly tracing the origins of the whole church concept.

## What is church?

We normally associate the term *church* with Jesus and early Christianity. It is true that an obvious change occurred in the definition of the people of God from a principally ethnic angle toward a more inclusive perspective crossing ethnic boundaries in New Testament times. However, the concept of church is not a New Testament invention. Let's work our way backward from the New Testament to the Old Testament concept of church.<sup>1</sup>

The standard lexica provide a good summary of the usage of the Greek

terms *ekklesia* (“church”) and *synagoge* (“synagogue”) in the context of the New Testament. The word *ekklesia* is derived from the combination of the preposition *ek* and the verb *kaleo* “to call out,” was mostly connected to official summons in classical Greek, and appeared generally in political or highly structured contexts. On the other hand, *synagoge* had a much broader sense and referred to the collecting or bringing together of things and people.

The idea of collecting or calling out goes back to Old Testament times, where we can trace our spiritual roots back to an old man who was called out of the land of Ur and directed to a new land (Genesis 12:1-3). Notice that the first “church” is not a manmade structure or invention. God calls a man and promises to make him a family. This family in turn was to become a blessing to the entire world. God made the impossible possible and gave the old man Abraham many descendents. Years later He called them again—this time out of Egypt, where they had been slaves. A new creation takes place, forming, for the first time, a people.<sup>2</sup> The New Testament calls the Israelites the “church in the wilderness” (Acts 7:38, KJV). We know that this church was far from perfect, with moaners, idolaters, thieves, gluttons, and leader-bashers among them. But God quietly set about purifying and cleansing—individually and col-

lectively. God's phenomenal patience stretched on through the major and minor prophets. God was calling His Old Testament church to experience His salvation personally and extend the invitation (Isa. 56:7). Finally God called His church again. This time God's Word was Jesus (John 1:1-3).

In Jesus, God again called people. Taking up where the Israel church had left off, Jesus began training 12 disciples. These men turned the then known world upside down for Christ. Satan tried to stamp out the fledgling church with persecution. But instead of this destroying the church, *the church* went global. Next, Satan tried smothering Christ's vital life-blood within the church through manmade teachings during the Dark Ages. God kept the embers glowing in Waldensian mountain hideouts for long years, gently fanning the truth embers into the wildfire of the Reformation.

But then, gradually, the church again forgot its divine calling and settled back into complacency. And once again in the 1800s, God called a small group of young people (practically all under the age of 30) and helped them to rediscover special truths. God gave this small group gifts and the great job of telling the world of Jesus' soon return. And this is where we meet history, because right from its beginnings, the church has never been about structures, buildings, and pews.

The church has always been about people. *We are the church*. The church is the community of believers who have heard the call of Jesus.

### Images of Church

So what makes church, and particularly the Seventh-day Adventist Church, different from any other club or online community? As understood by the New Testament authors, the church is made up of people who interact with one another and together form something new that goes beyond the sum of the individual members. In order to help us see the big picture, God has painted His blueprints for His church in metaphoric language. Metaphors are not mathematical formulas but living, conceptual entities (which in the case of Scripture are also literary). They are often characterized by a multiplicity of meanings and require an existential and experimental response, particularly within the context of faith and Scripture. They help us, the readers or listeners, to grasp a particular concept that is often highly abstract or may be entirely new.

The Epistle to the Ephesians contains a number of metaphors that are relevant for us. *Family* (1:5, 11, 17, 18b; 2:18, 19; 3:14; 4:6, 14; 5:1, 23, 24, 25; 6:6, 9), *buildings* (2:20, 21, 22; 3:17; 4:12) and *body* (1:10, 23; 2:1, 5, 6, 10, 11, 15, 16; 3:6, 10; 4:3, 4, 12, 13, 15, 16, 18, 22, 24; 5:8, 23, 27, 29, 32; 6:13, 14, 15, 16, 17) are clearly the most important and appear also elsewhere in the New Testament in contexts that are important for our study of the church.<sup>3</sup> All of these metaphors go back to the Old Testament.

### Family

Adam is called “Adam, (son) of God” in Luke’s genealogy of Jesus (Luke 3:38). Jesus is not only a descendent of David, the true Messiah for the Jewish nation, but He is, through His incarnation, part and parcel of universal humanity that is related by creation sonship to the creator. The sonship of

Israel is also referred to in other contexts, for instance Deuteronomy 14:1; 32:5, 19; Isaiah 1:2; 43:6; 45:11; 63:8; Jeremiah 3:14, 19, 22; and Hosea 2:1 and 11:1.<sup>4</sup> Other references underline the parental character of God, a crucial element of the family metaphor, involving both fatherly<sup>5</sup> and motherly characteristics.<sup>6</sup> God’s motherly characteristics involve birthing experiences (e.g., Isaiah 1:2; 42:14; 46:3) and the compassion so typical of a mother (Isaiah 49:15).

Connected to the family metaphor, we can also look at the larger socio-economic context of ancient Israelite society. The Hebrew “people” must not be confused with the modern concept of “nation” that has characterized the past 150 years of Western culture. The clan and the tribe, based upon the extended family, played a vital role in ancient Mediterranean societies, including Israel.<sup>7</sup> Interestingly, up to this day, clan and tribal loyalties are far more important than national interests. While there may be an ethnic component to the concept of tribe, recent anthropological research has shown that clans and tribes in the ancient world were not exclusively based on ethnic considerations, but often focused on common worldviews or ideological premises.<sup>8</sup>

The church in the New Testament picks up where the family, clan, and tribe of the Old Testament left off: a group, not based upon ethnicity, but sharing similar values and worldviews. One should also not forget that in the Old Testament people who did not belong to a particular group based on their ethnic background could become members of that group. Rahab is incorporated into Israel’s tribal system (Joshua 2; 6:17-25) as is Ruth (Ruth 1:16-22). The social institution of the “newcomer, sojourner” is known widely in the Old Testament. The Mosaic law concerning the stranger is very proactive and requires special protection and care. The reasoning in Leviticus 19:34 is very clear: “The stranger who dwells

among you shall be to you as one born among you, and *you shall love him as yourself*; for *you were strangers* in the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God” (NKJV). Respect, tolerance and an inclusive future are part of the metaphoric blueprint for God’s church.

### Buildings

There is another metaphor used for church that we often confuse with the real thing. Paul refers to the church as a building. The Epistle to the Ephesians contains a number of these references, but notice the nuances: We (i.e., the church) are *God’s house* (2:20, 22), built upon the *foundation* of the apostles and prophets (2:20). Jesus Christ is the living *door* (or gate, John 10:9), the *cornerstone* of this living building (Ephesians 2:20) that is God’s *holy temple* (2:21). This is really mind-boggling: the metaphor transcends actual buildings and reminds us that church involves us individually. God wants to use you and me to build up the church as a living temple, a place of refuge, a living organism that, yes, meets in buildings, but goes beyond a place of worship. Can you imagine what kind of building God could have built with perfect building blocks? But he chose not to. He chose you and me, imperfect to the core, but willing to be molded to become part of “God’s house.”

### Body

Another important church metaphor involves the body (1 Corinthians 12:12-23) and emphasizes the interconnectedness of its members and their different functions. With Christ as its head (Ephesians 1:10; 4:15; 5:23), this metaphor constitutes one of the major metaphors for the church.

Being part of a body is so much more than checking in on Facebook when I feel like it. In a culture of absolute individualism, this idea of church may be the most difficult for us to understand—and accept.<sup>9</sup> The story of Achan (Joshua 7:1-5) and the result

of his actions clearly reflect the body imagery where the well-being (or lack thereof) of one member affects the entire body.

On the other hand, the faithfulness of one member of the body results in multiple blessings for the rest of the group, as can be seen in the ministry of the judges or the summary statement of some of the kings of Judah who, due to their actions, caused God to bless His people.<sup>10</sup> In our world, full of dysfunctional relationships, church is the place where we belong unconditionally and where we learn how to give, take, and live with people we may not choose to hang out with. As part of the body of Christ, we are intricately connected to one another. Your pain and loss is directly or indirectly my pain and loss. I need to be more sensitive toward you. God's idea of church is not all about me trying to find my unique way to heaven. Church is about our need to stick together, to learn to get along while still here on earth—and it is about service to the world around us.

### Why do I need church?

*Church refines us:* In a world where everything is meant to be instant, and perseverance and endurance seem very old-fashioned outside of the world of sports, church is the place where God can refine us. The word *remnant* means “that which remains.” Gold is all that is left of the large quantities of ore fed into the smelting ovens. All impurities have been burned away—only pure gold remains.

*God has a special job for the end-time church:* God has always had a remnant throughout history. During times of apostasy in Israel, there was always a remnant. Later, the Protestant Reformation called a remnant out of the old decayed church system. We often refer to the Seventh-day Adventist Church as the remnant church. Biblically speaking, that is what we are (Revelation 12:17). But hiding behind a name does not make us a remnant. God's purifying system quietly and

individually continues in the Seventh-day Adventist Church. God is still sorting the gold from the dross. God has promised to take the church through the purifying process with or without us. By being part of the church, I invite God to refine me so that I become part of the remnant.

*Church makes you a part of something big:* It is so much bigger than the w(orld)w(ide)w(eb). The idea of church reaches back to the creation story and forward into eternity. It helps us to overcome the increasing perception of isolation that eats up entire communities in the Western world. We are not alone, but are part of something bigger. This is a key concept that needs to be emphasized. Community is not an option, but a *must* in order to survive the crisis lying before us. In this context, it is important to note that the last book of the Bible, describing scenes both on earth and in heaven, mostly utilizes group imagery, emphasizing the concept of community<sup>11</sup> rather than rugged individualism.

Church, like salvation, is not a man-made idea, but it is God's idea. Through both the Old and New Testament, as well as in church history, God has been calling individuals to come and be part of a community that He is refining. This community — His church — has been called into existence to extend the invitation to follow the Lamb to people of “every nation, tribe, language, and people” (Revelation 14:6, NIV). It reminds us that together we can prepare to be a part of the heavenly community. Church is definitely the place to be!

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### REFERENCES

1. For a more in-depth discussion of this important concept and further relevant bibliography, see Gerald Klingbeil, “The ‘Church’ in the Old Testament: Systematic, Linguistic, and Metaphor Perspectives,” *Journal of Asia Adventist Seminary* 9:1 (2006), pp. 3-23.
2. The language of Exodus 1:1-7 is highly reminiscent of the creation language of Genesis 1, suggesting a clear textual and conceptual link between the creation of the world and the creation of God's people. This has been noted by many commentators. See, for example, James K. Bruckner, *Exodus*, New International Biblical Commentary 2 (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 2008), pp. 19-20.
3. The extensive biblical references are based upon my detailed study of the metaphor map of the Epistle to the Ephesians. See Gerald Klingbeil, “Metaphors and Pragmatics: An Introduction to the Hermeneutics of Metaphors in the Epistle to the Ephesians,” *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 16 (2006), pp. 273-293, which discusses many contributions to the discussion of metaphors for the church.
4. Cornelis Houtman, *Exodus. Vol. 1, Historical Commentary on the Old Testament* (Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1993), p. 13.
5. See, e.g., Deuteronomy 32:6; 2 Samuel 7:12-14 [talking to David]; 1 Chronicles 17:13; 22:10; 28:6; 29:10; Isaiah 63:16; 64:7 [ET 8], etc.
6. See David Tasker, “The Fatherhood of God: An Exegetical Study from the Hebrew Scriptures.” Concerning the motherly characteristics of God, see John Schmitt, “The Motherhood of God and Zion as Mother,” *Revue Biblique* 92 (1985), pp. 557-569; Marc Zvi Brettler, “Incompatible Metaphors for YHWH in Isaiah 40-66,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 78 (1998), pp. 97-120; Gerald Klingbeil and Chantal Klingbeil, “Metáforas femeninas de Dios en Isafas—reflexiones sobre la hermenéutica de la teología feminista,” *Theologika* 14 (1999), pp. 38-65.
7. Øystein LaBianca and Randy Younker, “The Kingdoms of Ammon, Moab and Edom: the Archaeology of Society in Late Bronze/Iron Age Transjordan (ca. 1400-500 BCE),” in *The Archaeology of Society in the Holy Land*, Thomas Levy, ed. (London: Leicester University Press, 1998), pp. 399-415; Baruch Levine, “The Clan-Based Economy of Biblical Israel,” in *Symbiosis, Symbolism, and*

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my needs, even money to express my thanksgiving and gratitude to Him.

Some years later, while studying at Loma Linda University and Fuller Theological Seminary (both in the United States), I went through a similar experience as I did at Fulton College. At Loma Linda, for example, I worked for the university security department, and I did odd jobs for different Adventist churches such as preaching, conducting training seminars, and evangelistic programs. For the three years of my doctoral program at Fuller, I was privileged to have free accommodation with the El Monte Seventh-day Adventist Church in return for helping the church caretaker look after the church grounds and do janitorial work weekly. This arrangement was providential, and an absolute blessing from God. But in addition to money earned and saved from the work I did, I was also able to manage the little financial resources I had, and carefully use them for what was important (tithe, offerings, university fees) and necessary (basic food items and clothes). Stewardship includes living within one's means, and not getting into any unnecessary debt.

In retrospect, what helped me in my giving (beyond tithe) as a student then, and even now, is the fact that I gave thought to my offerings and planned accordingly days ahead before the Sabbath. The giving of offerings was never an option; it was an integral part of my Sabbath worship and a privilege to express my gratitude to God for Jesus and for everything He had done for me. Did I ever think of not giving any offerings because of my perceived needs as a student? Yes,

many times. Was I always faithful in my financial stewardship? No, but in my failure and unfaithfulness God forgave me, and I experienced His grace to make a new start with Him. Stewardship, I have learned, is not about money only, but also about my willingness to allow Jesus to come into my life and take full control of me. Stewardship is a lifestyle where I surrender every part of me (including my finances) to God 24/7.

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## To church...

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*the Power of the Past. Canaan, Ancient Israel, and Their Neighbors from the Late Bronze Age through Roman Palestina*, William Dever and Seymour Gitin, eds; (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2003), pp. 445-53.

8. See Randall Younker, "Moabite Social Structure," *BA* 60 (1997), pp. 237-248; also LaBianca and Younker, "The Kingdoms of Ammon, Moab and Edom," *op. cit.*, pp. 404-406.
9. Compare in more detail the discussion in Gerald Klingbeil, "Between 'I' and 'We': The Anthropology of the Hebrew Bible and Its Importance for a 21st-Century Ecclesiology," *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 19 (2009), pp. 319-339.
10. Unfortunately, it must be recognized that the negative tendency is much more prominent in the Old Testament.
11. Compare the description of the churches (Revelation 1-3), the group of 24 elders (4:4), the 144,000 and the great multitude (7:4, 9; 14:1), those that overcame (15:2), the great multitude in heaven (19:1, 6), etc.

## Leonid Hrytsak

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■ *What type of skills and attitudes should a person have in order to succeed in the area of his or her work?*

Always look ahead! Most important, of course: believe in God, stick to Jesus, and live accordingly! Be focused as to where you want to go. Whatever line of work you choose—be it architecture, painting, poetry, creative writing—put your best in, and do your best. Our Lord asks for the best in us.

■ *Your latest project has to do with gardening.*

My grandma had a farm with cows and geese, a little paradise for us children. We learned to work together; everybody was needed and important. That gave us self-esteem and a feeling of belonging. We learned about community and meaning in life. Humankind has been so much alienated from nature and ultimately from God. I want to show ways of getting there again by using parables from nature as Christ did. That's what draws me to gardening.

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