

Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"

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New Testament Use of "Church" A Future Gathering

But ye are come unto mount Sion, and unto the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to an innumerable company of angels, To the general assembly and church of the firstborn, which are written in heaven, and to God the Judge of all, and to the spirits of just men made perfect, And to Jesus the mediator of the new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling, that speaketh better things than that of Abel. (Hebrews 12:22–24, KJV 1900)

The first century use of the word "Church" outside Christian circles referred to the public gathering of enrolled citizens in a Greek city-state. Periodically the city's leaders called the enrolled citizens together to hear about matters of importance and to make decisions regarding the city's government. It was an easy word to adapt to the Holy Spirit's intent for the character of the New Testament church. By far the majority of appearances of this word in the New Testament relate to a local assembly of believers who gather for worship through prayer, the singing of hymns, and the preaching of the gospel, as well as for personal fellowship and mutual encouragement in the faith.

While a few Bible students insist that every appearance of the word in the New Testament always—no exceptions—refers to one of these local assemblies, a few passages seem to refer to a gathering that is far broader than a local assembly. I believe the passage before us stands near the head of the list of such passages. I hold this view because the passage simply says too much to be restricted to one local assembly.

First, notice that Paul (I believe the inspired writer of Hebrews) writes of a "...general assembly..." not a local assembly. His use of this word calls attention to a contrast between a unique local and a **general** assembly. The word itself requires emphasis on a group of assembled people, but the gathering to which the passage directs us is a large general gathering, not a relatively small local group. The point of an assembled gathering remains the central issue of the word, and of Paul's point in the passage.

Secondly, notice that the text refers to the official enrollment of this assembly. They are "...written in heaven..." not in the roll book of a local assembly of believers.

Further, consider that Paul in his writings to various local assemblies or churches directs the church to take her high responsibility to heart and to judge righteously in matters of her beliefs and conduct, as well as the conduct of her members.

But them that are without God judgeth. Therefore put away from among yourselves that wicked person. (1 Corinthians 5:13 KJV; regarding the church's failure to separate herself from the man who was living in open immorality) The implication is that the Lord directed the church to judge the man's immoral conduct and to separate herself from him, while God reserved judgment against people outside the church's membership to Himself)

Know ye not that we shall judge angels? how much more things that pertain to this life? (1 Corinthians 6:3 KJV; in the context, Paul rebukes the members of the Corinthian Church for suing each other before civil judges when they should have respectfully honored the wise, spiritual judgment of the church in such personal matters of disagreement)

I speak as to wise men; judge ye what I say. (1 Corinthians 10:15 KJV; regarding the church's administration of the Lord's Supper)

Our study passage reminds us that, in this general assembly, "...God the Judge of all..." judges in matters related to this "General assembly."

The terms used to describe the beneficiaries of this "General assembly" clearly describe all the Lord's redeemed children; "...written in heaven..." "...spirits of just men made perfect..." "...Jesus the mediator of the new covenant..." "...the blood of sprinkling that speaketh better things than that of Abel." These terms are far too broad in scope to be limited to the members of a local assembly. They describe every redeemed, chosen heir of eternal salvation who shall be so gathered at the Second Coming.

The verb tense, "...are come..." is a state of being verb in our English language. It can refer to a completed event or to an ongoing event. For example, "We are finished," refers to a completed event, but "We are going to town" refers to an ongoing event. Notice the definition of the Greek verb in this verse.

...to move toward a reference point...¹

In the prior chapter, Paul described all who walk according to the faith of Abraham as confessing that they were pilgrims in this world, seeking and on their way to a heavenly country whose builder and maker is God. While we enjoy certain "Surety" or "Earnest" advance blessings in this life, God's pledge of grace to the beloved heirs of that future, glorious world to come, full enjoyment of it awaits our final arrival. Truly, we are "...on our way to a better country," in harmony with the Abrahamic faith-walk. Therefore—

...God is not ashamed to be called their God: for he hath prepared for them a city. (Hebrews 11:16 KJV)

The practical contrasts between any local church assembly and the glorious "General assembly" of all God's children are many.

1. In any local church assembly, people come and go. They join and profess their faith in the strongest of terms, but, when trials or temptations assault them, some of them surrender to the adversary and forsake the assembly. No local assembly ever includes all the people who are enrolled in the membership roll of the assembly.
2. Most, if not all, local assemblies have a number of people who attend, who feel to be a part of the church, who contribute their hearts and resources, but who never submit to baptism and official membership. They remain associated with the assembly, but never fully enter into it as full participants. This "General assembly" includes all who were covered by Jesus' blood. It speaks only of redemption and deliverance, while Abel's blood cried out for justice against his murderer. The heavenly assembly will not have anyone who is not wholly immersed in its blood-bought eternal blessings.
3. However well a local assembly has been taught, however sincere its motives and desires, any local church may at times judge matters wrongly, or they may refuse to judge what Scripture commands them to judge. In the heavenly "General assembly," God is the exclusive Judge, and He always judges righteously.
4. At times the preachers in a local assembly may teach error, however sincere their desire to teach only truth. Likewise, even

¹ Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, vol. 1, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament : Based on Semantic Domains*, electronic ed. of the 2nd edition., 191 (New York: United Bible societies, 1996).

when the preachers preach New Testament truth correctly and clearly, at times some of the members will reject the preaching and linger in unbelief. When Paul corrected the errant beliefs of the Thessalonians regarding the Second Coming, one of the first points he made was that all of God's children shall believe "...in that day." (2 Thessalonians 1:10; if all children of God believe when they hear the gospel, why would Paul bother to make the point that they shall all believe "...in that day"?)

The list could go on, but these points demonstrate the distinction.

Why make the point? Why draw such a distinction? In the case of the Hebrew believers, fierce persecution had beaten them down to the point that many of them were discouraged in their faith; they were considering abandoning their faith and returning to the synagogue. They needed powerful encouragement to remind them of the truth and validity of their faith in Christ. They needed this reminder that they were on their way to that glorious "General assembly" where persecution and persecutors could not disrupt their joy.

The heart of the New Testament gospel consistently builds on the foundation of the Lord Jesus Christ and His finished and successful work on behalf of all His chosen heirs of eternal salvation. In most cases, when the New Testament writers mention Jesus and the resurrection, along with the Second Coming, they associate this belief with the courage in faith to endure the trials and disappointments of life, to live life as a victorious "Child of the King," not as a defeated and beaten-up step-child. In times of trouble, we all need just such a reminder, and, thank the Lord, the New Testament, and the gospel that stands firmly on the New Testament's teaching, provides just such a message.

Though I can't recall the source, I recall reading an interesting and accurate description of the two-sided view that Bible readers often take regarding the Book of Revelation. In times of safety and comfort, Christians will indulge in mystical and at times bizarre interpretations of Revelation. They will debate its message endlessly, and often heatedly. However, in times of intense persecution, Christians will read Revelation, looking eagerly for the true message of the book, God's ultimate victory over all adversaries and obstacles that set themselves against Him and against His beloved children.

Pilgrim, your lonely travels here may at times be difficult, but never forget that your journey shall end, and you shall be taken to the final and glorious reality of that place and state where God's victory secures your eternal joy and peace. Never allow that destination, the glorious "General assembly" of all God's children with their Savior, to dim in your heart.

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Worship service each Sunday
Joseph R. Holder

10:30 A. M.
Pastor