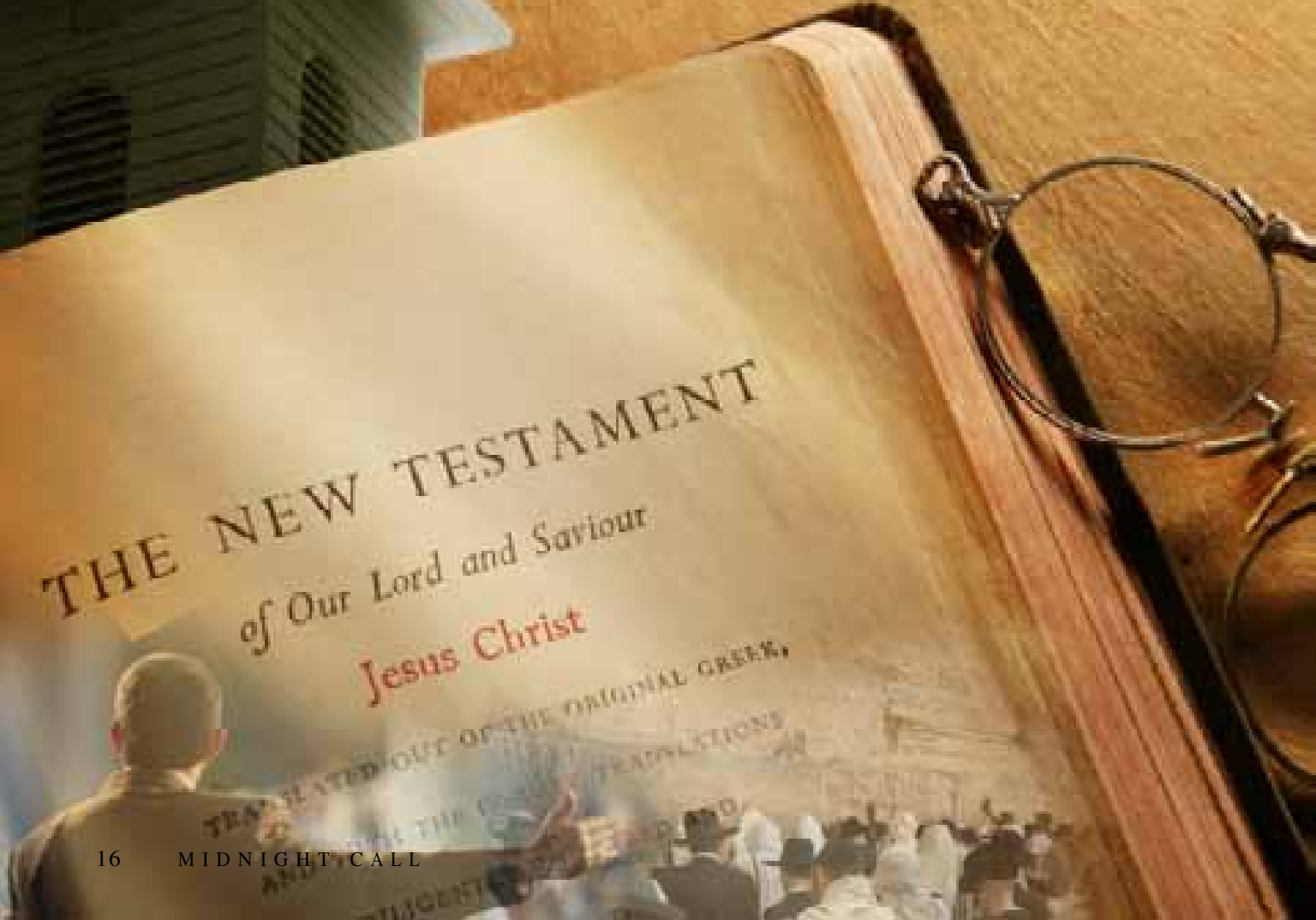





# GOD'S PURPOSE FOR THE CHURCH

PART I

BY DR. RON J. BIGALKE JR.



THE NEW TESTAMENT  
of Our Lord and Saviour  
**Jesus Christ**

TRANSLATED OUT OF THE ORIGINAL GREEK,  
AND FROM THE BEST TRANSLATIONS  
AND COMMENTARIES

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God has a specific purpose for the Church that is to be distinguished from His plans and purposes for regenerate national Israel. Those purposes affect the relationship of Israel to the biblical covenants, and the relationship of the Church to the Tribulation (seventieth week of Daniel), Second Coming, and Millennium.

If the significant disagreements regarding general eschatology (i.e. Rapture, Tribulation, Second Coming, Millennium) among evangelicals is not due to a lack of clarity in Scripture, but exist primarily because of one's usage or disregard of a consistent and literal interpretation of biblical prophecy, then certainly differences arise in regards to understanding the purpose of God for the Church. Scripture does teach that the Old Testament promises made with national Israel will be fulfilled with a future, regenerate, national Israel. Since Israel and the Church are distinct entities, there is no sense in which the latter can fulfill promises to the former (unless, of course, one *wrongly* assumes priority of the New Testament, resulting in the meaning of the promises in their original context being changed or reinterpreted so that they were not unconditional or eternal). God has a specific purpose for the Church that is to be distinguished from His plans and purposes for regenerate national Israel. Those purposes affect the relationship of Israel to the biblical covenants, and the relationship of the Church to the Tribulation (seventieth week of Daniel), Second Coming, and Millennium. Prior, however, to understanding the specifics of the future for Israel and the Church, it is necessary to understand the identity and meaning of the word "church." What is the Church? Willimon provided an answer.

I do not exist as a Christian save by the call of God. For that matter, neither did Israel exist as God's people except by God's choice. Likewise, the church is not church except that God wills it to be so.

There is something amiss in the definition of the church as a "voluntary association" of believers. The church does not exist because some religiously enlightened people have decided to voluntarily associate with one another to advance the study of Jesus. The challenge of biblical faith is not "Do you agree?" or "Do you feel?" but "Will you join up?"

Like Paul (Acts 9:1-31), like the Gentiles (Acts 15:14; Romans 9-11), like Israel, we are called together by God. "You did not choose me, I chose you" (John 15:16) is a word both humbling and comforting to the individual believer and to the church as a whole. The church begins, like faith itself, not with pious individuals, but with God, a God who chooses to deal with us as a people, a family, a nation.<sup>1</sup>

#### THE MEANING OF THE WORD "CHURCH"<sup>2</sup>

Although the English word "church" is opulent in meaning, and used quite commonly and extensively, the biblical meaning is often misunderstood. The term has been used in reference to a building (whether a cathedral or storefront), corporation with tax-exempt status, denomination, national or state church, people who meet together corporately in obedience to biblical commands, religion generally (i.e. separation of church and state), and the universal Body of Christ. The word "church" is actually only vaguely related to the concept of the Greek word *ekklesia* used in the New Testament.

The English term *church*, along with the Scottish word *kirk* and German *Kirche*, is derived from the Greek *kuriakon*, which is the

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neuter adjective of *kurios*, "Lord," and means, "belonging to the Lord." *Kuriakon* occurs only twice in the New Testament, neither time with reference to the church as commonly used today. In 1 Corinthians 11:20 it refers to the Lord's Supper and in Revelation 1:10 to the Lord's Day.

Its application to the church stems from its use by early Christians for the place where they met together, denoting it as a place belonging to God, or God's house.<sup>3</sup>

### Usage Prior to the New Testament

The doctrine of the Church is not based upon the English word, but rather upon the Greek word *ekklesia* that is used 114 times in the New Testament (three in Matthew's Gospel, 23 in Acts, 62 in Paul's letters, six in non-Pauline letters, and 20 in Revelation).

There are words whose etymology it is interesting to watch, as they are transformed and consecrated by the Christian church—words that the church did not invent but has employed in a loftier sense than the world has ever used them. The very word by which the church is named is a key example of this type of transformation. For we have *ekklesia* in three distinct stages of meaning — the secular, the Jewish, and the Christian.<sup>4</sup>

The Greek word in the New Testament for the English word *church* is *ekklesia*. It is derived from the verb *ekkaleo*, a compound of *ek*, "out," and *kaleo*, "to call or summon," which together mean "to call out." While often this etymological meaning is used to support the biblical doctrine of the church as a people called out, separated from the world by God, the usage of this term both in secular Greek and the

Greek New Testament, which provides the background for the New Testament language, does not lend support to this doctrine from the word *ekklesia* itself.<sup>5</sup>

### Usage in Classical Greek

Although *ekklesia* was used of the formal Greek assembly (legislature), it was used as reference to any assembly regardless of who was included or how it was instituted. The classical Greek usage is used in only one passage of the New Testament (Acts 19:32, 39, 41). *Ekklesia*, as demonstrated by the common understanding in the Acts passage, was a broad term which did not have religious connotations. It merely referred to an assembly but is never once used absolutely of the people who composed the assembly.

### Usage in the Greek Old Testament

An investigation of the Septuagint [Greek Old Testament] use of the word *ekklesia* includes a consideration of the Hebrew words *qahal* and *edah* (the two principal Hebrew words for "gathering" or "assembly") along with the related use of the Greek *sunagoge* to translate these words.

Both *edah* and *qahal* refer to an assembly or gathering, yet *ekklesia* is never used to translate *edah*.<sup>6</sup>

The two Hebrew words that refer to an "assembly" or "gathering" are *qahal* and *edah*. At times these words appear synonymous. However, the translators of the Septuagint differentiated *qahal* and *edah*. For instance, the Septuagint never uses *ekklesia* to translate *edah*, rather, it will translate *qahal* as *ekklesia*.<sup>7</sup>

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Discussion of the use of *ekklesia* in the Septuagint carries significance not only to the study of any biblical passage, but also to understanding a distinction between Israel and the Church. For instance, *ekklesia* in the Septuagint was never used to connote a spiritual verity that would be free of spatial and earthly confines.

The translators used *sunagoge* to translate *qahal*.<sup>8</sup> Although *qahal* and *edah* did not [have] a technical meaning in the Hebrew Old Testament, the differentiation in the Septuagint led to a technical meaning in the New Testament as the synagogue and the Church.

Discussion of the use of *ekklesia* in the Septuagint carries significance not only to the study of any biblical passage, but also to understanding a distinction between Israel and the Church. For instance, *ekklesia* in the Septuagint was never used to connote a spiritual verity that would be free of spatial and earthly confines. The simple meaning of *ekklesia* is an assembly. There is absolutely no factual basis for attempts to find the Church, as defined in the New Testament, referenced in the Old Testament on the basis of the usage of *ekklesia*. The New Testament advanced and gave technical meaning to the usage of *ekklesia*.<sup>9</sup>

Matthew's use of *ekklesia* was a reference to the natural Jewish mindset of an "assembly"; it is even possible (although not likely) that Matthew was referring to a Jewish "assembly" as the synagogue in 18:17. Trench referred to the classic case of usage determining meaning of *ekklesia*. "It was not without due reason that our Lord (Matthew 16:18; 18:17) and His Apostles claimed this, as the nobler word, to designate the new society of which He was the Founder, being as it was a society knit together by the closest spiritual bonds, and altogether independent of space."<sup>10</sup> The following quote also demonstrates the na-



tional Jewish understanding of the word.

The word [*ekklesia*] occur about 100 times in the LXX. . . . When there is a Heb. Equivalent, it is almost always *qahal*. . . . In the LXX [*ekklesia*] is a wholly secular term; it means "assembly," whether in the sense of assembling or of those assembled. . . . The real point is who assembles, or who constitutes the assembly.<sup>11</sup>

### Usage in the New Testament

Refinement and transformation from a generic (non-technical) term into a technical term both unique and rich in meaning awaited usage in the New Testament. There are only two verses, Acts 7:38 and Hebrews 2:12, which use *ekklesia* as a reference to Israel such as used in the Septuagint.<sup>12</sup> It is possible, but not likely, that Matthew 18:17 is also a reference to a Jewish gathering such as the synagogue.<sup>13</sup>

Usage determines meaning and the New Testament clearly uses *ekklesia* in a manner that distinguishes it from both its Greek and Old Testament significance.<sup>14</sup> There is a significant reason for the New Testament usage of *ekklesia* as opposed to *sunagoge*.

The distinction between Israel and the Church is the natural result of interpreting the Bible historically and grammatically (i.e. literal, plain interpretation). One must interpret the words of the Bible in their normal or plain meaning. The opposite would be a spiritualizing (allegorizing) of the biblical text.

This distinction resulted in the choice of *ekklesia* by Christ (Matthew 16:18; 18:17) and His apostles as the more noble of the two words. It designated the new society of which Jesus was the founder, being as it was a society knit together by the closest spiritual bonds and altogether independent of space.<sup>15</sup>

The determined opposition of the Jewish religious leaders could be a reason why the New Testament never used *sunagoge* as reference to the Church.<sup>16</sup>

Customarily the concept of the church has focused on the universal and local church. Sometimes, erroneously, the categories are stated as invisible and visible. But even universal and local do not seem to cover all the facets of the concept. Universal serves well as a label for the body of Christ, whether on earth or in heaven (Hebrews 12:23). But local needs further defining. How local is the church?

Apparently we need more than the customary twofold organization of the church — universal and local. (1) There is the universal church — all believers in heaven or on earth. (2) There is the visible church — local churches in various areas, especially those I am acquainted with. (3) There is the local church — the particular assembly with which I have my primary and sustained relation. Every believer actually belongs to all these three aspects of the church, and 1 Corinthians 10:32 applies to any of them with which he has contact any time.<sup>17</sup>

### Usage Not Found in the New Testament

The New Testament concept of the Church is never used of a building,<sup>18</sup> a particular denomination (Baptist, Lutheran, Presbyterian) or of a territo-

rial church (e.g. Church of England, Roman Catholic Church),<sup>19</sup> or of the kingdom of God (or the kingdom of heaven).<sup>20</sup> The Church is never designated as Israel. Though it has been common for some Christians to reference the Church as the “new Israel,” a concordance study in the New Testament will demonstrate contrariwise. In each of the 66 occurrences of the word “Israel” in the New Testament, the term always refers to the Jewish people.<sup>21</sup> Both the Church and Israel have special relationships with God, but they must be distinguished. The distinction between Israel and the Church is the natural result of interpreting the Bible historically and grammatically (i.e. literal, plain interpretation). One must interpret the words of the Bible in their normal or plain meaning. The opposite would be a spiritualizing (allegorizing) of the biblical text. Dr. Charles Ryrie wrote,

Use of the words Israel and church shows clearly that in the New Testament national Israel continues with her own promises and that the church is never equated with a so-called “new Israel” but is carefully and continually distinguished as a separate work of God in this age.<sup>22</sup>

Since Israel and the Church are distinct entities, the unfulfilled prophecies to Israel of both blessing and curse have not been transferred to the Church. Indeed, as the cursings to Israel were fulfilled literally, so will the future restoration blessings be fulfilled literally.

### DEFINITIONS OF NEW TESTAMENT *EKKLESIA*

Classic definitions of the Church are particularly deficient in terms of

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The Church is not the consequence of human organization; rather, it is built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets. Furthermore, the Church is God's workmanship (Ephesians 2:10), created in accordance with His eternal purpose in Christ (1:4) so God may demonstrate the exceeding riches of His grace (2:7).<sup>25</sup>

New Testament theology. Definitions of the universal Church and the local church are often stated separately, and to the exclusion of either the universal or local church.

The catholic or universal church, which is invisible, consists of the whole number of the elect. . . . The visible church, which is also catholic or universal under the Gospel, consists of all those throughout the world that profess the true religion, together with their children. . . . (Westminster Confession of Faith, Chapter XXV).

The church is a company of visible saints, called and separated from the world by the Word and Spirit of God, to the visible profession of the faith of the Gospel; being baptized into that faith (Baptist Confession of Faith, Article XXXIII).

The *World Book Dictionary* expresses contemporary misunderstanding of the word "church" biblically and theologically (some of the definitions are entirely inconsistent with the New Testament).

1. a building for public Christian worship or religious services. 2. public worship of God in a church. 3a. Usually, Church. a group of persons with the same religious beliefs and under the same authority; denomination. b. that portion of the whole body of believers in Christ, or of one denomination of these, which belongs to a particular country, nation, state, or city. 4. a locally organized unit of a group of Christians for religious services; congregation. 5. Usually, the Church, all Christians; the whole body of believers in Christ collectively. 6. Also,



Church, the organization of a church; ecclesiastical authority or power as embodied in the clergy and historically constituting one of the three estates. 7. the profession of a clergyman. 8a. any religious body other than Christian; a non-Christian creed or congregation. b. a building for public worship or religious services of such a body. 9. any building, group, or organization like a church.<sup>23</sup>

There is a minimum of 80 and as many as 100 descriptive terms used with reference to the Church in the New Testament. Therefore, the essential elements for defining the Church must incorporate the identity and function of the Church.

The nature of the church is far too broad to be exhausted in the meaning of the one word *ekklesia*. To describe its manifold meaning the New Testament writers employed numerous descriptive expressions. They explained the concept of the church both in literal terms and in rich metaphorical descriptions. This richness of description precludes a narrow concept of the church and warns against magnification of one aspect to the disregard of others.<sup>24</sup>

Title: Saint Paul Writing His Epistles

Artist: Valentin de Boulogne or Nicolas Tournier

Year: about 16 century

Museum: Blaffer Foundation Collection, Houston, TX.

Unity of believers in a local church (community) is only a part, not all, of the universal Church. The local church is a voluntary assembly of Christians and is the sphere where the Holy Spirit manifests His gifting and edifying which makes Christ known to a lost world.



#### Essential Elements of a Definition

Theologically, only one Church exists as regards the Body of Christ universally (1 Corinthians 12:12-27; Ephesians 4:4-6). The reason is that Christians are currently fellow citizens and saints of the household of God. The Church is not the consequence of human organization; rather, it is built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets. Furthermore, the Church is God's workmanship (Ephesians 2:10), created in accordance with His eternal purpose in Christ (1:4) so God may demonstrate the exceeding riches of His grace (2:7).<sup>25</sup> The Church is invisible only as regards those of the Body who are already present with the Lord. The local gathering of believers in the service of Christ is as a part of the universal Church. It is essential to understand the universal and localized elements for a complete understanding of the New Testament doctrine of the Church. Accordingly, the plural, "churches," is used in the New Testament as a description of multiple

assemblies in a city or territory. Those who are Christians by grace through faith in Christ alone are expected to be members of both the universal and local church.

The Church includes all, and only, those who have been regenerated (born again). The new birth by the Holy Spirit results in faith and re-

pentance in the completed redemptive work of Christ and union with Christ and with fellow believers (Acts 2:47; 20:28). The Church is unique to this age (dispensation). The origin of the Church was still future in Matthew 16:18. Members are placed into the Body of Christ through the baptism of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:13). After His resurrection, Christ said the baptizing work of the Holy Spirit was still future (Acts 1:4-5). The Church excludes believers of the Old Testament and those who trust in Christ for salvation after the Church has been raptured.

Unity of believers in a local church (community) is only a part, not all, of the universal Church. The local church is a voluntary assembly of Christians and is the sphere where the Holy Spirit manifests His gifting and edifying which makes Christ known to a lost world. The local church should be a microcosm of the unity and purity that is reality of the universal Church. The universal Church is instructed to evangelize/disciple, serve, teach, and worship, but the ex-

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## The Church has a holy calling distinct from Israel, as this is evident from an understanding of the foundation and origin of the Church.

pression of this instruction is fulfilled by the local assembly through the empowering of the Holy Spirit. The ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper are not the exclusive privilege of the local church, but are universal expressions of the believer's identity with and remembrance of Jesus Christ (Acts 2:41; 8:36-38; 18:8; 1 Corinthians 11:23-26).

The Church is the regenerate of this age, both in heaven and on earth, who have been redeemed by grace through faith in the finished work of Christ, and are united with Him and each other by the baptizing work of the Holy Spirit, and who assemble voluntarily in any local community for the express purpose of edification, making disciples, worship, and administration of the ordinances. The Church has a holy calling distinct from Israel, as this is evident from an understanding of the foundation and origin of the Church. (MC)

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### ENDNOTES

- 1 William H. Willimon, *What's Right with the Church* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), 36.
- 2 The outline that follows is adapted primarily from P.T. O'Brien, "Church," in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, eds. Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin, and Daniel G. Reid (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1993), 123-31; and, Dr. Ken Hanna, "Theology 405" (unpublished class notes, Dallas Theological Seminary, Summer 2000), 1-8.
- 3 Robert L. Saucy, *The Church in God's Program* (Chicago: Moody, 1972), 11.
- 4 Richard Chenevix Trench, *Synonyms of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989; reprint, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2000), 17.
- 5 Saucy, *Church in God's Program*, 11-12.
- 6 Radmacher, *Nature of the Church* (1972; reprint, Hayesville, NC: Schoettle, 1996), 123, 127.
- 7 The translation of *qahal* as *ekklesia* is not exclusive since *qahal* is translated in the Septuagint with approximately 7 other Greek words. It is even translated 25 times as *sunagoge*. Therefore, *qahal* was used quite broadly as an "assembly" or "gathering" in the Old Testament.
- 8 From Exodus to Proverbs, the Septuagint translates *edah* approximately 130 times as *sunagoge*.
- 9 Acts 7:38 and Hebrews 2:12 are the only New Testament passages which use *ekklesia* as a reference to Israel similar to that found in the Septuagint.
- 10 Trench, *Synonyms*, 4. Indeed, Trench even demonstrated the religious leaders opposition to the fact that the New Testament never used *sunagoge* to describe the Church (Ibid., 5).
- 11 Karl Ludwig Schmidt, "ejkklhsiva," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 10 vols., ed. Gerhard Kittel, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964-76), 3:527.
- 12 Saucy, *Church in God's Program*, 13.
- 13 Radmacher, *Nature of the Church*, 139-42.
- 14 Ibid., 132.
- 15 Trench, *Synonyms*, 19.
- 16 Ibid., 19-20; Radmacher, *Nature of the Church*, 140.
- 17 Charles C. Ryrie, *Basic Theology* (Wheaton: Victor, 1986), 395.
- 18 Radmacher, *Nature of the Church*, 161.
- 19 Ibid., 162; Saucy, *Church in God's Program*, 18.
- 20 Radmacher, *Nature of the Church*, 168; Ryrie, *Basic Theology*, 399.
- 21 Paul Enns, *The Moody Handbook of Theology* (Chicago: Moody, 1989), 352.
- 22 Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, rev. ed. (Chicago: Moody, 1995), 129.
- 23 *World Book Dictionary*, version 2.0.1 (The Software MacKiev Company, 2005).
- 24 Saucy, *Church in God's Program*, 19.
- 25 Geoffrey W. Bromiley, "Church," in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, rev. ed., 4 vols., gen. ed. idem (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979-84), 1:693.
- 26 Ryrie, *Basic Theology*, 395.