Ekklēsía, Church, and the Question of Authority

~ A Scriptural Clarification for Thoughtful Readers ~

A Word on Purpose and Tone

What follows is offered in a spirit of clarity, not contention. The intent is not to create division, but to speak truth plainly and graciously. Scripture—not preference, tradition, personality, or majority opinion—must remain our final authority.

At times, faithfulness to Scripture requires raising questions that feel uncomfortable, especially when long-held assumptions are involved. Yet Scripture itself teaches that truth brings freedom, and that speaking truth can sometimes strain relationships—not because truth is harmful, but because it exposes what has gone unquestioned.

This discussion is therefore not personal, nor aimed at correcting individuals. It is an appeal to examine whether the language we use—and the authority we assume—actually reflects what the New Testament teaches.

Why This Discussion Exists

Much confusion surrounding the nature of the church begins with an unexamined assumption: that the English word *church* faithfully represents the Greek New Testament term *ekklēsía*.

This assumption is so ingrained that it is rarely questioned, yet it deserves careful scrutiny.

The New Testament does not define *ekklēsía* as an institution, hierarchy, or abstract entity. Rather, *ekklēsía* refers to a **called-out assembly**—a people physically gathered together. This is not a minor detail, nor a matter of semantics, but a foundational definition rooted in the language of Scripture itself.

A Clarifying Reminder for the Reader

Throughout this discussion, the issue under examination is not whether believers may gather, fellowship, study Scripture, or pray together.
The issue is **what the New Testament means by the word *ekklēsía***.

The English word *church* is a later term and does not define or explain the meaning of *ekklēsía* in the Greek New Testament. For clarity and consistency, this discussion intentionally distinguishes between the **biblical term *ekklēsía* and the English word *church***, which are often treated as equivalent but are **not the same in meaning.**

Ekklēsía in Scripture

In the New Testament, ***ekklēsía* consistently refers to an actual assembly of believers** who gather in embodied presence for fellowship, instruction, accountability, discipline, and the observance of the ordinances.

The New Testament consistently assumes **physical gathering when speaking of the ekklēsía** (Acts 2:42–47; Acts 14:23; 1

Corinthians 11:18; 14:23; Hebrews 10:25).

Even where the term is used outside a religious context, its meaning is unchanged. In Acts 19:41, *ekklēsía* refers to **a public assembly** that is dismissed. The dismissal itself presupposes **a physically gathered group**. The word does **not** describe **an idea, a virtual connection, or an authority structure**, but a gathering that can assemble and disperse.

This consistent usage matters, because Scripture assigns authority, oversight, and responsibility to the *ekklēsía*—not as **an abstraction**, but as **a gathered people**.

Ekklēsía in the Septuagint: Scriptural Continuity, Not Innovation

An important detail often overlooked in modern discussions is that the term ***ekklēsía* did not originate with the New Testament writers** in a theological vacuum. The Greek word they were inspired to use already carried **established scriptural meaning** through its use in the **Septuagint (LXX)**—the ancient Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures.

In the Septuagint, *ekklēsía* is repeatedly used to translate Hebrew words referring to the **assembly or congregation** of God's people. These references do not describe institutions or abstract entities, but **physically gathered assemblies** convened before the Lord.

For example:

- **Deuteronomy 9:10** refers to "*the day of the assembly*", which the Septuagint renders using *ekklēsía*, describing Israel gathered before God at Sinai.
- **Deuteronomy 18:16** again speaks of the people assembled

before the Lord, using *ekklēsía* in the Greek text.

- **Judges 20:2** describes *"the congregation of the people of God"*, rendered as *ekklēsía*, referring to the assembled tribes.
- **Psalm 22:22** (quoted later in Hebrews 2:12) uses *ekklēsía* in the Septuagint to describe the gathered congregation praising God.
- **Psalm 26:5** contrasts the righteous with the *ekklēsía* of evildoers, again emphasizing an assembled group.

These passages demonstrate that *ekklēsía* was already recognized as an accurate Greek rendering of the Hebrew concept of **assembly or congregation** long before the New Testament era. By the time of Christ and the apostles, *ekklēsía* was a familiar scriptural term associated with the gathered people of God.

This is significant because the New Testament writers—who frequently quoted from and relied upon the Septuagint—did not invent a new term to describe the people of God. Instead, they deliberately employed a word already embedded in the vocabulary of Scripture to describe assemblies that were **visible, gathered, accountable, and covenantally identified**.

In other words, the New Testament use of *ekklēsía* reflects **continuity with the Old Testament concept of assembly**, not a departure from it. From the Hebrew Scriptures, through the Greek Septuagint, and into the New Testament, *ekklēsía* consistently refers to a **people assembled**, not an institution abstracted from physical gathering.

This continuity further underscores why later ecclesiastical meanings attached to the English word *church* cannot be read back into the biblical text. The inspired use of *ekklēsía* rests firmly on Scripture's long-established language of assembly.

The Broken Visible Continuity Between Old and New Testament

The Septuagint's use of *ekklēsía* established a visible linguistic bridge between the Old and New Testaments. The same word used to describe Israel assembled before the Lord was deliberately carried forward by the New Testament writers to describe the people of God under Christ. This continuity reinforced the biblical truth that God's redemptive work unfolds as one unified story, not two unrelated programs.

However, when English translations rendered *ekklēsía* as *church*, that visible continuity was obscured. To the English reader, Israel appeared to belong to the Old Testament, while the "church" appeared to belong exclusively to the New. The connection was not removed from Scripture, but it was no longer obvious on the surface. Continuity became something one had to discover, rather than something the text naturally displayed.

This subtle shift trained generations of readers to associate the word *church* with something new, distinct, and separate from Israel—despite the fact that the biblical writers themselves did not make such a distinction.

Visualizing Ekklēsía: Assembly, Not "Church"

Before continuing, let's step away from the text for a moment and visualize this concept in two short videos. Once the videos conclude, we'll resume the study and develop these points more fully, including several details that can only be

briefly touched on in a visual format.



END of First Video
Select an option below
Load 2nd Video
Replay Video 1

The second video, if you elected to watch, introduced what is commonly called the ***"universal church"*** concept. When this idea is **examined carefully**—especially **in light of the biblical meaning of *ekklēsía***—significant interpretive questions arise. Applying a consistent grammatical and historical understanding of *ekklēsía* challenges whether this universal concept accurately reflects the way the term is used in Scripture. For further study on this issue, **click HERE** to read a focused

explanation that expands on the ideas presented in the second video.

Now that we have seen this concept illustrated visually, we can return to the text and continue examining the biblical and historical details that further clarify what is meant by *ekklēsía*.

Acts 7:38 and the Unity of God's Assembled People

This continuity is made explicit in Acts 7:38, where Stephen refers to Israel at Sinai as the *ekklēsía*:

> *"This is he, that was in the church in the wilderness…" (Acts 7:38)*

The Greek word used here is *ekklēsía*. If translated according to its established meaning, the verse reads naturally:

> *"This is he, that was in the **assembly** in the wilderness…"*

Stephen's words leave no room for a strict separation between Israel and the New Testament people of God. Israel gathered before God at Sinai is explicitly identified as the *ekklēsía*. The New Testament itself affirms continuity, not replacement or parallel tracks.

The Growth of an Ecclesiastical Framework

Historically, however, Christianity did not remain within this simple apostolic pattern. Over time, a **hierarchical ecclesiastical framework** developed—one characterized by

clerical offices, institutional authority, and centralized control. As this system matured, authority increasingly became vested in office, tradition, and institutional continuity rather than in Scripture alone.

As a result, the word *church* gradually came to signify **the institution that governs**, rather than the assembly that gathers. Scripture was often interpreted through this ecclesiastical lens instead of being allowed to define its own categories. By the late medieval period, ecclesiastical authority had become so deeply entrenched that it frequently functioned above Scripture itself.

This conditioning was not superficial. It shaped how believers understood authority, obedience, and identity—often without conscious reflection.

The Reformation and the Limits of Reform

The Reformation arose as a necessary corrective to this imbalance. Reformers recognized that Scripture had been eclipsed by ecclesiastical authority, and the principle of *Sola Scriptura* emerged as a call to restore the Word of God as the final standard.

Yet while Scripture was rightly reasserted, the inherited language and many structural assumptions remained largely intact. Theology moved faster than terminology. This tension is especially evident in the history of English Bible translation.

Translation, Language, and Entrenched Authority

The depth of ecclesiastical conditioning can be seen clearly in early English translations. William Tyndale intentionally avoided the word *church* in his New Testament, translating *ekklēsía* as *congregation*. His choice reflected the plain meaning of the Greek term and resisted the institutional assumptions attached to *church*. This was not merely a linguistic decision, but a theological one.

Tyndale's work was fiercely opposed—not because it distorted Scripture, but because it challenged established authority structures that had become intertwined with ecclesiastical language.

When the Authorized Version of the Bible was later commissioned, translators were explicitly instructed to retain the word *church* rather than translate *ekklēsía* according to its meaning. This decision was not driven by linguistic necessity, but by a desire to preserve ecclesiastical continuity and stability. By that time, *church* had become a term closely associated with authority and hierarchy.

This does not suggest that the Authorized Version is unfaithful to Scripture, nor that its translators acted with improper motives. Rather, it highlights how deeply entrenched ecclesiastical assumptions had become—even at the moment when Scripture was being made widely accessible to the English-speaking world.

Inherited Language, Inherited Assumptions

As a result, **generations of believers inherited** not only the biblical text, but also the **framework through which that text**

had long been read. Over time, ***church*** **came to feel synonymous with *ekklēsía*,** even though **the two are not the same**. This has shaped assumptions about authority, structure, and legitimacy in ways that often go unquestioned.

Scripture consistently ties authority, responsibility, and oversight to those who are *among* the **gathered people of God**, not to abstract or detached structures. Elders are exhorted to shepherd the flock *among them* (Acts 20:28), exercising oversight willingly and by example (1 Peter 5:1–3). Likewise, believers are called to submit to those who watch for their souls within lived, accountable relationships (Hebrews 13:17). These passages assume **proximity, visibility, and embodied presence**—realities that only make sense within a **physically gathered ekklēsía.**

Before asking whether something is a "true" or "false" church, a more basic question must be addressed: **does *ekklēsía*, as Scripture defines it, exist at all?** If the biblical assembly does not exist, then the authority Scripture assigns to it cannot simply be assumed.

A Scriptural Conclusion

This discussion is **not offered to diminish fellowship, question motives, or judge sincerity.** Many forms of Christian gathering can be meaningful and edifying. Yet sincerity cannot redefine the words the Holy Spirit inspired.

From the earliest days of God's covenant people, Scripture consistently presents His people as those who are **gathered before Him** to hear His Word and respond in obedience. Israel was commanded to assemble to hear the Law (Deuteronomy 31:12), the people gathered to receive instruction under Ezra (Nehemiah 8:1–3), and Christ Himself affirmed the significance of gathered presence among His followers (Matthew 18:20). The

New Testament use of ekklēsía stands firmly within this biblical pattern, reinforcing continuity rather than innovation.

Revisiting the language of Scripture is not an exercise in criticism, but an act of recovery—allowing the New Testament to speak on its own terms rather than through the accumulated weight of tradition. Scripture must define the words we use and the authority we claim.

The appeal here is simple: let God's Word speak plainly, and let us walk together in humility, truth, and peace.

> *"And the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace of them that make peace." (James 3:18)*

Questions & Responses

Q1: Why insist on using the word *assembly* instead of *church*? Isn't this just semantics?

Response:
This is not a matter of preference or semantics, but of meaning. The Greek word used throughout the New Testament is *ekklēsía*, which literally and consistently refers to a **gathered assembly of people**. The English word *church* is a later term that carries meanings—such as institution, hierarchy, denomination, or building—that are **not inherent to *ekklēsía***. Using *assembly* preserves the meaning of the original word and avoids importing assumptions the biblical text itself does not make.

Q2: Doesn't *ekklēsía* simply mean "the church"? That's how it's always been translated.

Response:
Ekklēsía does not mean "church" by definition; rather, *church* is a later English term used to translate it. In both biblical and non-biblical Greek, *ekklēsía* refers to a **called or summoned gathering**. This is evident even within Scripture itself, such as Acts 19, where *ekklēsía* refers to a civic assembly that is dismissed. No one understands that passage to mean "church," demonstrating that the word itself means *assembly*, not a religious institution.

Q3: If *assembly* is correct, why didn't the New Testament writers choose a different word?

Response:
They didn't need to. The word *ekklēsía* already carried established **scriptural meaning** through its use in the Greek Septuagint (LXX), which translated Hebrew words meaning *assembly* or *congregation*. When Israel gathered before the Lord, the Septuagint used *ekklēsía*. The New Testament writers simply continued using the same scriptural vocabulary, showing continuity rather than innovation.

Q4: Doesn't changing the word undermine the authority of the church?

Response:
On the contrary, it clarifies where authority actually resides. Scripture assigns authority to **people within a gathered assembly**, not to an abstract institution or a word itself. Elders shepherd the flock *among them*, accountability assumes proximity, and discipline presupposes a gathered body. Using *assembly* keeps authority **relational, local, and**

biblical, rather than institutional or assumed.

Q5: Isn’t this approach divisive or unnecessarily critical of tradition?

Response:
Examining language is not an attack on tradition or sincerity. It is an act of faithfulness to Scripture. Throughout church history, reform and correction have often begun by re-examining assumptions that had gone unquestioned. This discussion does not deny fellowship, faith, or good fruit among believers; it simply asks whether the words we use accurately reflect what Scripture actually says.

Q6: Early Christians used the word *church*. Why question it now?

Response:
Early Christians used the word *ekklēsía*, not the English word *church*. The English term developed later and gradually absorbed ecclesiastical and hierarchical meanings as institutional structures grew. Early English translators, such as William Tyndale, recognized this and translated *ekklēsía* as *congregation*. The later enforcement of *church* in English translations reflected ecclesiastical continuity, not linguistic necessity.

Q7: Isn’t this just “splitting hairs”? What practical difference does it make?

Response:
Words shape understanding. When *church* is assumed to mean institution, hierarchy, or abstraction, authority is easily

misplaced. When *assembly* is used, Scripture must be read more carefully: Who is gathered? Where? Under what oversight? With what accountability? This does not weaken Scripture—it **forces closer attention to it**.

Q8: Are you saying believers who use the word *church* are wrong?

Response:
No. Many believers use the word *church* sincerely and biblically in intent. The issue is not sincerity, but **definition**. This discussion seeks clarity, not condemnation. It simply argues that *assembly* is the more accurate rendering of *ekklēsía* and helps prevent confusion about authority, structure, and identity.

Summary Response

The word **assembly** is preferred because it:

- reflects the literal meaning of *ekklēsía*
- aligns with Old and New Testament usage
- preserves scriptural continuity
- avoids later ecclesiastical assumptions
- keeps authority grounded in gathered people, not institutions

This is not an attempt to redefine Scripture, but to **let Scripture define itself**.
