Why the Original Language of Scripture Matters

Introduction

Scripture affirms that God has spoken to humanity through written words inspired by the Holy Spirit. The Old Testament was written primarily in Hebrew (with portions in Aramaic), and the New Testament was written in Koine Greek—the common language of the first-century Mediterranean world. These languages represent historical stages or dialects of human speech, not "versions" in the modern publishing sense. They are the linguistic forms God chose to reveal His Word.

A central confession of the Christian faith is that God's Word is without error in what it originally affirmed. Yet believers today read Scripture almost entirely through translations. This raises an important and often overlooked question: if God inspired His Word in Hebrew and Greek, and if translations inevitably involve human decisions and some loss of precision, how should we understand claims of infallibility and accuracy? This question becomes especially urgent when a translated word no longer reflects the meaning of the original term, as in the case of the Greek word *ekkklēsía*, commonly rendered "church."

This paper explores how language, transmission, and translation relate to the authority of Scripture, and why fidelity to the original meaning is not "splitting hairs" but a biblical responsibility.

1. God’s Word and the Original Languages

The Bible consistently teaches that God’s revelation was given through specific words:

> *“All scripture is given by inspiration of God” (2 Timothy 3:16)*

Jesus Himself affirmed the precision of Scripture:

> *“Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law” (Matthew 5:18)*

The “jot and tittle” refers to the smallest elements of Hebrew writing, showing that divine inspiration applies not merely to ideas but to words. Paul likewise built theological arguments on the form of a single word (Galatians 3:16).

Thus, the doctrine of inspiration historically refers to the **original writings** (the autographs) in Hebrew and Greek. These writings, as originally given, were without error in what they taught. Koine Greek was not a later version of Scripture but the living language of the apostles’ world—just as Biblical Hebrew was the covenant language of Israel.

This means that the ultimate authority of Scripture rests in those original words and their intended meaning.

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2. Copies of Copies and the Preservation of Scripture

It is true that we no longer possess the physical originals written by Moses, Paul, or the apostles. Instead, we possess thousands of manuscript copies made over centuries. This does not undermine the authority of Scripture; rather, it reflects God’s providential preservation of His Word through faithful

transmission across generations.

Textual scholarship allows us to reconstruct the original wording with very high confidence. The remaining variations are minor and do not affect core doctrine. Therefore, when Christians speak of “the original Greek text,” they mean the text as faithfully preserved and reconstructed from the earliest manuscript evidence.

This is a legitimate concern, because: if doctrine and practice depend on what the apostles actually wrote, then what we read today must reflect that meaning as closely as possible.

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3. Error in the Original vs. Loss of Meaning in Translation

Christian theology has long distinguished between:

- **inerrancy of the original text**, and
- **fallibility of human translations**.

A translation can be faithful and still imperfect, because translation always involves interpretation. Languages do not map one-to-one. Words carry cultural, historical, and conceptual meanings that do not always transfer cleanly into another tongue.

Thus, when you say:

> *There is no error in the original, but there can be loss of meaning in translation,*

you are expressing a well-established theological principle. The issue is not that God’s Word failed, but that human

language and tradition can reshape how God's Word is understood.

This is especially serious when a translated term introduces a different concept than the original word conveyed.

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4. Ekklēsía as a Case Study

The Greek word *ekklēsía* is defined by lexicons as:

- an assembly
- a gathering of people
- a congregation called together

Its meaning is demonstrated clearly in Acts 19:32, 39, and 41, where it refers to a hostile civic crowd:

> *"The assembly (ekklēsía) was confused; and the more part knew not wherefore they were come together" (Acts 19:32)*

Here, translators rightly used "assembly," because calling this mob a "church" would distort the sense of the passage. This proves that *ekklēsía* itself does not mean a religious institution. It simply means an assembled body whose character is defined by purpose and allegiance.

Yet in most New Testament passages, the same word is translated as "church," a term that developed later and carries institutional and ecclesiastical meanings foreign to the Greek text. Historically, William Tyndale used "congregation," but later English translations adopted "church," influenced by ecclesiastical tradition.

Jesus warned that religious tradition can make "the word of God of none effect" (Mark 7:13), a caution that applies

whenever later ecclesiastical language replaces the original meaning of Scripture.

The result is that modern readers often assume the New Testament speaks of an institution rather than a gathered people. This is not merely a nuance; it reshapes doctrine, practice, and identity.

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5. Scripture's Warnings About Altering God's Words

Scripture repeatedly warns against reshaping God's Word:

> *"Diminish not a word" (Jeremiah 26:2)*
> *"Add thou not unto his words" (Proverbs 30:5–6)*
> *"We are not as many, which corrupt the word of God" (2 Corinthians 2:17)*

These warnings are not accusations against translators' motives but principles about faithfulness. They remind believers that God's Word must not be altered by tradition, convenience, or cultural assumptions.

When a translated word no longer reflects the original meaning of the inspired term, the danger is not textual corruption but **conceptual distortion**—the reader's understanding is shaped more by later theology than by Scripture itself.

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6. A Visual Explanation of the Translation Dilemma

The following video presents a simplified and visual explanation of how God's Word was originally given in Hebrew

and Koine Greek, and how translation choices can affect meaning. It focuses especially on the Greek word *ekklēsía* and how its translation as “church” has shaped modern assumptions.

This video is included to help readers better understand the importance of returning to the original language of Scripture when defining what the biblical assembly truly is.



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Having seen these principles illustrated visually, we now turn to their practical implications. Scripture—not tradition or

modern custom—must govern how we understand and practice the *ekkklēsía* as God has defined it. Faithfulness requires that our doctrine and conduct align with the pattern established by Christ and His apostles through physically gathered assemblies with appointed elders and ordered practice (Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5; 1 Corinthians 11–14).

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7. The Practical Implication: What Is a Biblical Assembly?

This linguistic issue may appear simple, but its implications are profound. The question of whether a virtual online Bible study constitutes a biblical *ekklēsía* cannot rest on personal preference or modern convenience, because Scripture itself defines the nature of the assembly. Our understanding must therefore be shaped by God's Word rather than by contemporary assumptions.

The New Testament consistently presents the *ekklēsía* as a gathered and ordered body characterized by:

- **physical gathering** (*"when ye come together"*)
- **recognized leadership**
- **continuity with other assemblies**

For a fuller explanation of what is meant by "continuity with other assemblies," see Appendix A.

An online meeting may certainly be beneficial for study and fellowship, but it does not fulfill the biblical pattern of an *ekklēsía* as revealed in Scripture. This disagreement illustrates how the word "church" has become detached from its

original meaning and reshaped by modern categories, leading to confusion about what the New Testament actually describes as the assembly of God's people.

A structured outline of the New Testament pattern for establishing a local assembly is provided in Appendix B.

Conclusion

God revealed His Word in Hebrew and Koine Greek, and those original writings are without error in what they affirm. While copies and translations have preserved Scripture with remarkable faithfulness, meaning can be obscured when translation choices replace biblical terms with later concepts. This is not merely an academic concern; it affects how believers understand doctrine, identity, and practice.

The case of *ekkklēsía* illustrates this clearly. What Scripture calls an assembly has become, in English tradition, an institution called "church." Scripture itself warns against diminishing or reshaping God's words, calling believers to humility and careful examination.

To return to the original meaning is not to reject Scripture but to honor it. It is not splitting hairs but obeying Christ's declaration that even the smallest details of God's Word matter. Faithfulness to God requires that His Word be allowed to speak in the language He chose, rather than in the language tradition has imposed.

As the Bereans were commended for searching the Scriptures daily (Acts 17:11), so modern believers are called to test inherited terminology against the inspired text itself. In doing so, they do not undermine the authority of Scripture—they reaffirm it.

Appendix A: What Is Meant by “Continuity with Other Assemblies”

In the New Testament, local assemblies (*ekklēsíai*) did not exist as isolated or self-defined gatherings. They were planted, instructed, and ordered according to a common apostolic pattern and recognized one another through shared doctrine and structure. This continuity did not consist of organizational hierarchy, but of unity in faith, practice, and submission to the Word of God.

First, assemblies were established through apostolic ministry and then entrusted to local leadership. Paul and Barnabas “ordained them elders in every assembly” (Acts 14:23), demonstrating that assemblies were not merely informal meetings but recognized communities ordered according to Scripture. Likewise, Titus was instructed to “set in order the things that are wanting, and ordain elders in every city” (Titus 1:5), indicating that assemblies were expected to conform to a consistent biblical pattern of leadership and organization.

Second, the same doctrine governed all assemblies. Paul wrote, “as I teach every where in every assembly” (1 Corinthians 4:17), and again, “so ordain I in all assemblies” (1 Corinthians 7:17). This shows that assemblies were united by common teaching and were not free to redefine themselves according to local preference or circumstance. Authority resided not in tradition or convenience, but in apostolic doctrine grounded in Scripture.

Third, assemblies maintained fellowship and mutual recognition. Believers traveled between cities and were

received by other assemblies as members of the same body of Christ (Acts 18:27; Romans 16:1–2). This continuity reflects shared identity in Christ expressed through local gatherings ordered by the same biblical principles.

Scripture also records assemblies meeting in homes (Romans 16:5; Colossians 4:15). Such gatherings were not informal or self-authorized by nature, but were biblical assemblies precisely because they were established and ordered according to apostolic instruction. A home assembly may therefore be fully biblical when it reflects the New Testament pattern of physical gathering, recognized elders, and submission to apostolic doctrine as revealed in the epistles.

This biblical pattern stands in contrast to gatherings that arise independently without reference to apostolic order or recognized leadership. It is understandable that some believers, troubled by unbiblical practices within institutional churches, seek simpler forms of gathering. Yet the New Testament does not present assemblies as self-formed or self-declared communities. Assemblies were planted and set in order through apostolic authority (Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5). Sincere conviction alone does not establish a biblical *ekklēsía*; faithfulness requires submission to the authority of Scripture in both doctrine and order.

This distinction becomes especially important when considering virtual or remote gatherings. While online meetings and virtual Bible studies may provide opportunities for instruction and encouragement, they do not meet the New Testament description of an *ekklēsía*. Scripture consistently portrays believers physically assembling together (“when ye come together”), participating in the Lord’s Supper, exercising spiritual gifts in one place, and functioning under recognized local leadership (1 Corinthians 11–14; Hebrews 10:25). A virtual gathering, by definition, consists of remote participants who are not physically assembled and therefore cannot fulfill these biblical functions.

Accordingly, when this study refers to “continuity with other assemblies,” it denotes fidelity to the apostolic pattern revealed in Scripture—unity in doctrine, leadership, and practice—rather than isolation, reactionary separation, or self-definition. To depart from unscriptural institutions may be necessary for conscience toward God, but to redefine the assembly apart from the biblical pattern is to substitute one tradition for another.

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Appendix B: Biblical Steps for Establishing a New Assembly

The New Testament presents a consistent pattern for how local assemblies (*ekklēsíai*) were formed and set in order. While Scripture does not provide a formal manual, the book of Acts and the apostolic epistles reveal recognizable stages by which believers moved from conversion to becoming a biblically ordered assembly. This pattern demonstrates that assemblies were not self-declared or casually formed, but established through apostolic instruction and submission to the authority of Scripture.

First, an assembly begins with the proclamation of the gospel and the conversion of believers. The church in Jerusalem was formed when “they that gladly received his word were baptized” (Acts 2:41). Likewise, throughout Acts, new assemblies arose where the gospel was preached and people believed (Acts 14:1; 16:14–15). An assembly, therefore, originates not from organizational decision but from God’s calling people through the Word of Christ.

Second, believers gathered physically for fellowship, teaching, and prayer. Scripture consistently describes

assemblies as bodies that came together in one place: “when ye come together in the church” (1 Corinthians 11:18), and “not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together” (Hebrews 10:25). This physical gathering defined the *ekklēsía* as a visible and local community rather than a dispersed or virtual association.

Third, apostolic doctrine established the faith and practice of the assembly. New believers “continued stedfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship” (Acts 2:42). Paul remained in Corinth for a year and six months “teaching the word of God among them” (Acts 18:11). Instruction preceded formal structure, ensuring that assemblies were shaped by Scripture before being organized by leadership.

Fourth, the assembly became recognized as a distinct local body of believers. Scripture speaks of “the church that was at Antioch” (Acts 13:1) and notes that “the church was gathered together” (Acts 11:26). This recognition did not imply institutional status but identified a local gathering of believers ordered by common faith and practice.

Fifth, qualified elders were appointed to provide spiritual oversight. Paul and Barnabas “ordained them elders in every church” (Acts 14:23), and Titus was commanded to “ordain elders in every city” (Titus 1:5). These elders were not self-appointed but met the qualifications set forth in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1. Leadership was thus grounded in character and doctrine rather than personal initiative.

Sixth, the assembly practiced ordered worship and the ordinances within the gathered body. The Lord’s Supper, spiritual gifts, and mutual edification occurred “when the whole church be come together into one place” (1 Corinthians 14:23). Paul emphasized that all things were to be done “decently and in order” (1 Corinthians 14:40). Discipline and reconciliation were also exercised within the context of the gathered assembly (Matthew 18:15–17).

Seventh, assemblies existed in unity and continuity with other assemblies. Paul taught “every where in every church” the same doctrine (1 Corinthians 4:17), and believers moved between assemblies in fellowship and recognition (Romans 16:1–2; Acts 18:27). Assemblies were autonomous in location but unified in doctrine and apostolic order.

Finally, mature assemblies participated in the planting of new assemblies. From Antioch, Paul and Barnabas were sent forth to establish assemblies in other cities (Acts 13:1–3; 14:21–23). This pattern reflects multiplication rooted in faithfulness to the apostolic model rather than independent self-formation.

This biblical pattern shows that a true *ekklēsía* is not defined by reaction against institutional religion nor by sincere intent alone, but by conformity to the authority and order revealed in Scripture. Home assemblies may be fully biblical when they are established and set in order according to apostolic instruction. Virtual or remote gatherings, however beneficial for study and encouragement, cannot fulfill this pattern because they lack physical gathering, recognized local oversight, and the communal practices described in the New Testament.

Accordingly, a biblical assembly is one that is formed through the gospel, gathered physically, grounded in apostolic doctrine, ordered by qualified elders, and united in fellowship with other assemblies according to Scripture.

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