Why Ekklesia Matters

Introduction

It is easy to overlook the importance of words when they are commonly used and widely accepted. Familiarity often breeds assumption, and assumption can quietly shape understanding without being carefully examined. Yet Scripture: 1 Thessalonians 5:21, calls us to “prove all things” and to hold fast to what is true, not merely what is familiar or traditional.

When a term has been used for generations, it can accumulate layers of meaning—some helpful, others unintended. Over time, those added meanings may begin to influence how we read the text itself, sometimes without us even realizing it. What was once a clear expression in its original context can become filtered through centuries of usage, theology, and cultural development.

For this reason, it is not only appropriate but necessary to pause and ask whether the words we are reading today still communicate what was originally written. Are we understanding the text as it was first given, or as it has been shaped through tradition? This is not an exercise in skepticism, but in careful discernment—a desire to align our understanding as closely as possible with the intent of the inspired text.

It is within that framework that the discussion surrounding the word ekklesia must be considered. What may appear at first to be a minor issue of wording is, upon closer examination, a question of meaning, context, and faithfulness to the original message of Scripture.

Is This “Just Semantics”?

When the discussion is raised that the Greek word **ekklesia**[1] is better expressed as **assembly** or **congregation** rather than “church,” some respond by saying, “that is just semantics.” But that objection misses the real issue.

This is not merely a debate over wording. It is a question of meaning. If a translated word causes readers to picture something different from what the original audience would have understood, then the issue is interpretive.

The Authority of the Original Words

Before dismissing this discussion as “just semantics,” a more foundational question must be asked: “**where does the authority of Scripture actually reside?**”

The Word of God, inspired by the Holy Spirit, was originally given in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek[2].
These are not incidental details of history, but the very languages through which God chose to reveal His truth.

For that reason, the fullest precision of Scripture resides in the original text as given, not in later translations made into the many tongues of the nations. Translations are necessary and useful, but they are still the work of men attempting to render the meaning of the inspired text into another language.

In that process, translators must make choices involving wording, structure, and nuance[3].

Those choices may be responsible and careful, but they are still choices, which means they can shape how a passage is understood.

Therefore, if we are to debate the meaning of Scripture with accuracy, especially when a doctrinal or interpretive point rests on a specific term, we must ultimately appeal to what the inspired writers actually wrote in the original languages. Otherwise, we risk grounding our argument on a translation decision rather than on the text itself.

This is why the discussion over *ekklesia* is not a trivial matter of semantics. If God chose a particular word, then that word matters. And if that word matters, then how it is translated matters also.

Why This Is More Than Semantics

Words shape understanding. If one person hears “assembly” and thinks of people gathered together, while another hears “church” and thinks of an institution or religious system, then the terms are not functioning the same way.

The concern is not that “church” is always incorrect, but that it has accumulated meanings not inherent in *ekklesia*, which refers to a gathered people.

> *If God chose the words, then the words matter—and if the words matter, then how they are translated matters.*

Acts 7:38 – “The Church in the Wilderness”

> *“This is he, that was in the **church in the wilderness…**”*

The word translated “church” is **ekklesia**

[4].

The plain sense is that of an assembly—not a later ecclesiastical system.

Translation Choices in Acts 7:38

The KJV reads “church,” while other translations use “assembly” or “congregation”

[5].

The same Greek word is translated differently, demonstrating that translation involves interpretive judgment.

The Septuagint Background

The Septuagint

[6]

uses *ekklesia* for Israel’s gathered assembly.

This shows the term already had a well-established biblical meaning before the New Testament.

Ekklesia

- Assembly of people
- Gathered body
- Used of Israel and believers

Modern “Church”

- Institution or structure
- Building or location
- Later developed meaning

Theological Frameworks

How one understands the relationship between Israel and the New Testament people of God influences how *ekklesia* is interpreted.

Some see continuity across covenants, while others emphasize distinction

[7].

Conclusion

This is not merely a question of semantics—it is a question of whether the words we use faithfully reflect the meaning of the text as it was originally given. If a term introduces ideas that were not present in the original language, then even if unintentionally, it has the potential to shape understanding in ways that move beyond the intent of the inspired writers.

The goal is not to create division over terminology, nor to dismiss the usefulness of translation, but to pursue clarity. When Scripture is examined carefully, a consistent pattern emerges—one that calls us back to the simplicity and precision of what was first communicated. In that light, terms like ekklesia deserve thoughtful consideration rather than casual dismissal.

If God chose specific words to reveal His truth, then those words carry weight. And if those words carry weight, then we are responsible to handle them with care. This means being willing not only to accept what we have been taught, but also to examine it—to test whether our understanding truly aligns with what was written.

In the end, this is not about winning an argument, but about

aligning with truth. It is about ensuring that what we read, teach, and believe reflects the intent of Scripture itself. Only then can we move forward with confidence, knowing that our foundation is not built on assumption, but on what God has actually said.