

The Telltale Bible Verse

How Acts 19:37 Exposes the Error of Translating *Ekklēsia* as “Church”

Introduction

Among the hundreds of translation choices made by the King James translators, one small, easily overlooked verse in Acts 19 offers an unusually clear window into what the English word “church” actually meant to 17th-century translators – and by extension, exposes the fundamental error in applying that same word to the Greek term *ekklēsia* throughout the rest of the New Testament. That verse is Acts 19:37.

The Verse in Question

The King James Version reads:

“For ye have brought hither these men, which are neither **robbers of churches**, nor yet blasphemers of your goddess.”
(Acts 19:37)

This is part of the town clerk’s speech during the Ephesian riot, where he defends Paul’s companions before an angry pagan mob incited by Demetrius the silversmith. The clerk points out that the Christians committed no punishable crime – they neither looted temples nor blasphemed the goddess Artemis.

What makes this verse remarkable is a simple textual fact: **the Greek word behind “churches” here is not *ekklēsia***. It is ἱεροσυλος (*hierosylos*), a compound word meaning “temple

robber,” built from ἱεροῦν (*hieron*, a sacred building or shrine) and συλαῶ (sylaō, to plunder or rob).

Out of the thirty-seven occurrences of the plural form “churches” in the King James New Testament, this is the **only instance** where the underlying Greek word is something other than *ekklēsia*. Every other time, “churches” translates ἐκκλησιᾶι (*ekklēsiai*), the plural of the word meaning a called-out assembly of people. Here alone, the translators used “churches” for a word about pagan temple architecture.

What This Proves About the Word “Church” in the Translators’ Minds

This single anomaly is a linguistic goldmine, because it reveals exactly what the translators understood the English word “church” to mean when they were free to choose any rendering they wished for a Greek word that had nothing to do with *ekklēsia*.

They chose “church” – for a **pagan temple**.

This demonstrates that in the vernacular of Tyndale (who first rendered it this way in 1526) and the later KJV translators who retained his wording, “church” was fundamentally understood as **a physical, consecrated building set apart for religious worship** – whether that worship was directed toward Yahweh, Christ, or Artemis. It was not, in their minds, primarily a word for a gathered body of people. It was architectural. It was locative. It described a place, not a people.

This matters immensely for the larger argument about *ekklēsia*, because the New Testament authors never used the Greek word for “temple” (ἱεροῦν or ναοῦς) to describe the body of believers. They deliberately and consistently used *ekklēsia* –

a word meaning a summoned gathering of people – precisely because the church, biblically, was never a building. Yet the English translators applied a building-word to the people-word, importing architectural and institutional baggage into a term that, in the first century, carried none.

The Etymological Layer: Where “Church” Actually Came From

It is worth clarifying the etymology of the English word “church” itself, so as not to conflate two separate historical threads.

The English word “church” descends from the Greek adjective κυριακός (*kyriakos*), meaning “belonging to the Lord.” In the New Testament, this word appears only twice – in 1 Corinthians 11:20 (“the Lord’s supper”) and Revelation 1:10 (“the Lord’s day”) – and never once to describe the assembly of believers. By the early 4th century, following the Constantinian shift and the construction of dedicated basilicas, the term *kyriakon* (“belonging to the Lord”) began to be applied as a substantive noun to Christian buildings, particularly in the Greek-speaking East – though it remained less common than *ekklēsia* or *basilikē* even in this period. This form migrated into Gothic as *kirika*, into Old English as *cirice* or *cyrice*, and eventually became “church” in Modern English.

Note carefully: **κυριακός does not appear in Acts 19:37**. The word there is ἱεροσολος, entirely unrelated to *kyriakos*. What Acts 19:37 demonstrates is not a direct link between *kyriakos* and paganism, but something more important: it shows that by the 16th and 17th centuries, the word “church” – which had *originated* from a term specifically meaning “belonging to the Lord” – had **broadened and secularized** into a generic English term for *any* sacred building, Christian or pagan, untethered

from the specific deity being worshipped there.

In other words: “church” started as a word tied to Christ (“the Lord’s [building]”), but by Tyndale’s day it had become simply the common word for a temple, shrine, or holy building of any kind. Acts 19:37 is the proof text for that broadening – the translators used “church” for a pagan Artemis shrine with no hesitation, because to them, “church” simply meant “sacred building.”

When the Germanic and Anglo-Saxon peoples were later Christianized, they applied their own word – *circe* – to the stone buildings and priestly institutions of the Latin Church. So when Bible translators subsequently encountered *ekklēsia* in the Greek text, they did not translate the Greek word’s actual meaning (assembly/gathering). Instead, they substituted a completely different Germanic word (*circe*/church) carrying an entirely different etymological pedigree – one rooted in architecture and institution rather than in people summoned together. This is not natural language evolution; it is a semantic substitution that replaced a dynamic, living action (a gathering of disciples) with a static physical object (a building) and, eventually, a hierarchical clerical institution.

The Inconsistency Among the Later Translations

Here the picture becomes even more revealing. Most modern translations – recognizing that ἱεροῦσολος has nothing to do with *ekklēsia* and everything to do with ἱεροῦν (temple) – corrected Acts 19:37. The ESV, NASB, NIV, and CSB all render the word as “temple robbers” or “robbers of temples,” abandoning the KJV’s “robbers of churches.”

At first glance, this looks like progress. And in a narrow, technical sense, it is – these translations correctly identified that *hierosylos* refers to temple plundering, not “church” robbery, and fixed the specific lexical error the KJV inherited from Tyndale.

But here is the critical point that must not be missed: **these same translations did not apply this correction consistently.** While they fixed the isolated word ἱεροσυλος in Acts 19:37, they retained the word “church” everywhere *ekklēsia* itself appears – over a hundred times throughout the New Testament. They recognized that “church” was the wrong word for a Greek term about temple architecture, yet they continued using that very same word “church” for a Greek term about a gathered assembly of people.

This is a glaring inconsistency. If “church” is inappropriate for ἱεροσυλος because that word has nothing to do with buildings called “churches” in the modern institutional sense, then the same translators should have recognized that “church” is *equally* inappropriate for *ekklēsia*, which likewise has nothing to do with buildings, institutions, or the architectural and denominational connotations “church” carries in English. Instead, only Tyndale – nearly five centuries earlier – got this right across the board, consistently rendering *ekklēsia* as “congregation,” precisely because he recognized what these later revisers only recognized in one isolated verse.

Modern translators fixed the symptom in Acts 19:37 while leaving the underlying disease – the mistranslation of *ekklēsia* as “church” throughout the rest of the New Testament – fully intact.

Confirming the Pattern: What *Ekklēsia* Actually Meant in the First Century

The New Testament authors did not invent the word *ekklēsia*. They adopted a term that had carried a precise, well-understood meaning in the Greco-Roman and Jewish world for over half a millennium – and that meaning had nothing to do with buildings.

Classical and Hellenistic Greek Usage. In civic Greek life, an *ekklēsia* was the formal assembly of free citizens called out from their homes to a public space to conduct governance and business. Thucydides (*History of the Peloponnesian War*, 2.22.1) uses *ekklēsia* to describe the physical gathering of Athenian citizens debating military policy. Demosthenes (*De Corona*, 18.169) describes the *prytaneis* summoning the *ekklēsia* to the Pnyx – the assembly ceased to be an *ekklēsia* the moment the people dispersed. Tellingly, Luke himself uses *ekklēsia* three times in Acts 19 (vv. 32, 39, 41) to describe the pagan civic mob and lawful assembly in the Ephesian theater – proof that the word described a gathering of people, not a sacred place, even in a thoroughly pagan context.

The Septuagint Witness. The Greek Old Testament consistently translates the Hebrew קהל (qahal, a gathered assembly) as *ekklēsia* – as in Deuteronomy 9:10 and Psalm 21:23 (LXX) / Psalm 22:22 (Masoretic), the latter quoted in Hebrews 2:12. By contrast, the Hebrew עדah (‘edah, a community whether gathered or scattered) was rendered *synagōgē*. This distinction shows that the Greek-speaking Jewish translators of the Septuagint understood *ekklēsia* specifically as an actual, convened gathering.

Standard Lexical Authorities. Liddell-Scott-Jones defines *ekklēsia* as “an assembly of citizens regularly summoned... in the NT, an assembly of Christians, a local congregation.” BDAG (3rd ed.) defines it as “a gathering of citizens called out

from their homes into some public place, an assembly,” and in the New Testament, “an assembly of Christians gathered for worship, a meeting/congregation.” Kittel and Friedrich’s *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Vol. III, K.L. Schmidt) notes that *ekklēsia* is fundamentally an event – “the assembly of people convened for a purpose” – an occurrence in space and time, not a static institution or building.

The Literal Substitution Test

One effective way to demonstrate the semantic failure of “church” as a stand-in for *ekklēsia* is to substitute the *building/institution* sense of “church” back into the New Testament text and observe the result:

- **Acts 8:3** – “Saul made havock of the church, entering into every house...” If *ekklēsia* meant a building, Saul’s act of entering *houses* to destroy the *ekklēsia* becomes incoherent. He was arresting people, not attacking architecture.
- **1 Corinthians 14:23** – “If therefore the whole church be come together into one place...” If *ekklēsia* were already a building or institution, this becomes nonsensical – “if the whole building comes together into one place.” Paul’s own grammar requires *ekklēsia* to mean the gathered people themselves.
- **Romans 16:5** – “Greet the church that is in their house.” Translating *ekklēsia* as “church” creates the strange image of an institution or building existing *inside* another building, when Paul is simply describing the assembly that met at that address.
- **Acts 19:37** – the anchor text of this article – “robbers of churches” for pagan temple-robbers, showing that the translators’ own working definition of “church” was

Why “Language Evolution” Does Not Rescue the Translation

A common defense of “church” is that language evolves – that words shift in form and meaning over time, and that “church” is simply what English speakers today (and in the 16th–17th centuries) use, making it “accurate for our time.” This argument does not hold up under scrutiny.

Sound translation is governed by authorial intent: the meaning of a text is fixed by what the original author communicated to his original audience in his own linguistic context – not by whatever a receptor-language word evolves into centuries later. When Paul wrote *ekklēsia* to the believers in Corinth (1 Corinthians 1:2; 11:18; 14:23), every reader understood it as an actual, localized gathering of people in one place. A translator who substitutes a word evoking “a building with a steeple” or “a global denominational institution” is not evolving with the language – he is importing a much later concept backward into a first-century text. A word that reverses or obscures the semantic core of the original vocabulary cannot be called “accurate” merely because generations of readers have grown accustomed to it. That is the perpetuation of an error, not the natural progress of a living language.

The Historical Pressures Behind the Word

“Church”

It would be a mistake to treat the retention of “church” as a neutral, purely linguistic matter of familiarity. The historical record shows that political and ecclesiastical pressure played a direct role.

In 1604, King James I convened the Hampton Court Conference and issued a specific set of translation rules, administered by Richard Bancroft, Bishop of London. Rule 3 explicitly commanded:

“The Old Ecclesiastical Words to be kept, viz. the Word Church not to be translated Congregation &c.” (*Alfred W. Pollard, Records of the English Bible**, 1911, p. 53; David Norton,* *A Textual History of the King James Bible**, Cambridge University Press, 2005, p. 7.)*

King James was a committed defender of the Divine Right of Kings and the episcopal hierarchy of the Church of England – famously declaring “No bishop, no king!” Rendering *ekklēsia* as “congregation” or “assembly” favored the Puritan and Presbyterian model of autonomous local gatherings, which posed a direct threat to the top-down monarchical and diocesan structure he depended on. The mandate to retain “church” was not a neutral stylistic preference – it was an explicit political and ecclesiastical directive.

This same dynamic explains why Tyndale’s own translation choices were treated as dangerous nearly a century earlier. In *A Dialogue Concerning Heresies* (1529), Sir Thomas More attacked Tyndale specifically for replacing five foundational ecclesiastical terms:

Greek Term	Tyndale’s Rendering	Traditional Rendering
<i>ekklēsia</i>	congregation	church
<i>presbyteros</i>	elder	priest

Greek Term	Tyndale's Rendering	Traditional Rendering
<i>metanoite</i>	repent	do penance
<i>agapē</i>	love	charity
<i>episkopos</i>	overseer	bishop

More argued that these substitutions stripped the institutional hierarchy of its sacerdotal authority. When Tyndale was condemned by imperial authorities at Vilvoorde in 1536, his translation choices – this list chief among them – were central evidence of his “heresy.” While it is accurate to say Tyndale was executed for making Scripture accessible in English at all, it is a distinction without a difference to claim his specific vocabulary choices played no role: the vocabulary was the accessibility that authorities feared, because it dismantled the linguistic scaffolding of institutional control.

A Comparative Timeline of English Translations

The following table traces how *ekklēsia* was rendered across the major English translations, along with the documented motivation behind each choice. This is useful for seeing that the KJV's decision was not an isolated stylistic quirk, but part of a traceable historical trajectory – one that Tyndale alone broke from consistently, and that even later “correcting” translations (which fixed Acts 19:37) never fully reversed.

Version	Year	Source Text	Translation of <i>Ekklēsia</i>	Primary Motivation
John Wycliffe	1382–1395	Latin Vulgate (<i>ecclesia</i>)	chirche / church	Translated from Latin into Middle English vernacular under the Catholic institutional framework.
William Tyndale	1526, 1534	Erasmus' Greek New Testament	congregation	First English translation from the original Greek. Rejected "church" to restore the local-assembly meaning and reject papal/prelatical control.
Coverdale Bible	1535	German / Latin / Tyndale	congregation	Followed Tyndale's Greek scholarship.
Matthew Bible	1537	Tyndale / Coverdale	congregation	Maintained Tyndale's renderings.
Great Bible	1539	Hebrew / Greek (Cranmer)	congregation	Authorized for English parishes; retained Tyndale's terminology.

Version	Year	Source Text	Translation of <i>Ekklēsia</i>	Primary Motivation
Geneva Bible	1560	Greek (Beza / Stephanus)	church	Marian exiles in Geneva adopted “church” under Presbyterian covenantal theology, retaining the concept of an institutional church system.
Bishops’ Bible	1568	Greek / Great Bible base	church	Commissioned by the Church of England hierarchy to counter the anti-episcopal notes of the Geneva Bible.
King James Version	1611	Beza / Stephanus Greek base	church	Strictly enforced by Royal Rule 3 to suppress Puritan/separatist local-assembly concepts and uphold Anglican hierarchy.

Version	Year	Source Text	Translation of <i>Ekklēsia</i>	Primary Motivation
ESV / NASB / NIV / CSB	20th–21st c.	Nestle-Aland / UBS Greek NT	church (<i>temple robbers</i> at Acts 19:37)	Corrected the isolated <i>hierosylos</i> error in Acts 19:37, but retained “church” for every other occurrence of <i>ekklēsia</i> – leaving the larger mistranslation uncorrected.

Notice the pattern in the final row. The very translations that had every opportunity – and every piece of lexical evidence – to recognize that “church” was the wrong English word for a building-based Greek term (ἱεροσυλος) in Acts 19:37 fixed *only* that one word. They did not extend the same correction to the far more consequential and far more frequent word *ekklēsia*. In other words, modern translators proved they were capable of recognizing “church” as an architecturally-loaded, inaccurate rendering – they simply chose not to apply that recognition consistently.

Conclusion: One Small Correction, One Enormous Blind Spot

Acts 19:37 functions as a kind of accidental confession. In choosing “church” for a word about pagan temple-robbing, the King James translators revealed that their working definition of “church” was a *building* – a place dedicated to worship, whether of the true God or a false one. That single word choice unmasks the deeper problem: throughout the rest of the New Testament, this same architecturally-loaded English word

was applied to *ekklēsia*, a Greek term that in the first century meant something entirely different – a living, gathered, called-out assembly of people, with no building, no institution, and no denominational apparatus attached to it.

Modern translations deserve credit for correcting the specific error in Acts 19:37, replacing “churches” with “temples” to reflect what ἱεροῦσολος actually means. But their failure to apply the same scrutiny to the far more consequential term *ekklēsia* – retaining “church” over a hundred times elsewhere – reveals that the correction was cosmetic, not principled. They fixed one anomalous verse without reconsidering the far larger and more theologically significant translation choice that Tyndale alone, among all major English translators, got right: *ekklēsia* means an assembly of people, not a place, and certainly not a building called a “church.”
