Ekklēsía, Church, & the Problem of Inconsistent Language

Image Clarification:
Under the New Covenant during the 1st century, assemblies often met in homes rather than dedicated buildings. The ***distinction addressed here is not building versus home****, but* ***physical gathering versus virtual dispersion****. Scripture defines* ***'ekklesia'*** *as people* ***assembled together in the same place****.*

Purpose Statement:
This webpost is ***not about semantics or linguistic exercises*** *for their own sake. Its purpose is to present the Greek word ekklēsía as Scripture uses it and intends it to be understood, and to show how the Greek term kyriakós relates historically to the English word 'church'.* ***The goal is clarity****—allowing the biblical text to define its own language, categories, and authority.*

Introduction

Much of modern Christian discourse appeals to Scripture while simultaneously relying on i**nherited ecclesiastical language** that Scripture itself does not define. One of the clearest examples of this tension is the continued use of the English word *church* to describe realities that the New Testament consistently calls **ἐκκλησία (ekklēsía)**.

This paper argues that failing to distinguish between these terms is not a harmless semantic issue, but a source of theological and practical contradiction—especially when questions of authority, legitimacy, and identity are involved. If Scripture is our final authority, then Scripture must also be allowed to define its own terms.



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I. Ekklēsía Defined by Scripture

The Greek noun **ἐκκλησία (ekklēsía)** appears over one hundred times in the New Testament and consistently refers to an **actual assembly or gathering of people**. Lexically, the word denotes “a regularly summoned legislative body” or “an

assembly of people gathered for a specific purpose."[1]

Acts 19:41 provides a decisive example. In that passage, a secular crowd in Ephesus is explicitly called an *ekklēsía* and is then formally dismissed. The text demonstrates that *ekklēsía* is neither mystical nor abstract; it presupposes physical presence and assembly. One cannot dismiss what has not gathered.

The implication is unavoidable:
where there is no gathering, there is no ekklēsía.

II. Agreement on Definition, Inconsistency in Application

Many Christians readily affirm that *ekklēsía* means a gathering and even critique building-centered or institutional models of "church." Yet despite acknowledging this definition, they often continue to reason, categorize, and assign authority using the English word *church*, a term with a different historical and conceptual lineage.

This creates an internal inconsistency. The biblical definition is affirmed in principle, but displaced in practice. The result is a framework that claims Scripture as its authority while quietly allowing inherited language to override scriptural categories.

III. The Problem with "True Church" vs. "False Church"

A common distinction is made between a "true church" and a "false church." However, when both categories are framed using

the same non-biblical term (*church*), the evaluation itself occurs outside the definitional framework Scripture provides.

Scripture does not instruct believers to determine whether a *church* is true or false.
Scripture instructs believers to recognize and function as **ekklēsía**.

The proper question, therefore, is not:
Is this a true church or a false church?

but rather:
Does ekklēsía exist here at all?

If ekklēsía does not exist, then the authority, identity, and functions Scripture assigns to ekklēsía cannot be claimed—regardless of sincerity, intention, or historical custom.

IV. Ekklēsía and Kyriakós: Related, but Not Interchangeable

It is sometimes argued that the English word *church* is justified because it derives historically from the Greek adjective **κυριακός (kyriakós)**, meaning "belonging to the Lord." This observation is linguistically accurate, but it does not resolve the biblical issue.

In the New Testament, *kyriakós* appears only twice: in reference to **the Lord's supper** (*κυριακὸν δεῖπνον*, 1 Corinthians 11:20) and **the Lord's day** (*κυριακῇ ἡμέρᾳ*, Revelation 1:10).[2] In both cases, the word functions adjectivally, describing **ownership or association**, not an assembly of people.

Lexically, *kyriakós* means "pertaining to the Lord" or

"belonging to the Lord."[3] It never denotes a gathering, congregation, or body of people. Scripture never speaks of a *kyriakós* assembling, exercising discipline, or appointing overseers.

By contrast, **ekklēsía** is consistently used to describe the gathered people themselves. It is **definitional**, not merely descriptive. While the English word *church* developed historically through the *kyriakós* lineage—passing through Gothic (*kirika*) and Old English (*cirice*)—this linguistic development reflects later cultural usage, not New Testament ecclesiology.

In short:

- *kyriakós* describes **ownership**
- *ekklēsía* defines **what exists**

Scripture never equates the two.

Therefore, the question is not whether something is associated with the Lord, but whether **ekklēsía exists**. Where there is no assembly, there is no ekklēsía. And where ekklēsía does not exist, the authority Scripture assigns to it cannot be claimed.

The distinction between *ekklesía* **and** *kyriakós* **is not merely semantic, but grammatical and categorical.** ***Ekklēsía*** is a noun describing a gathered assembly of people; *kyriakós* is an adjective denoting possession or association with the Lord. Scripture never uses *kyriakós* to name an assembly, and never uses ***ekklēsía*** to describe ownership or institutional identity. Treating these terms as interchangeable collapses categories the New Testament carefully maintains and imports later ecclesiastical concepts into the biblical text. The result is not a clarification of meaning, but a shift in emphasis—from a **gathered people to an abstract or institutional entity**—foreign

to the language of Scripture.

V. Transliteration, Translation, and the Power of Inherited Language

The New Testament uses the Greek word ἐκκλησία (**ekklesía**), which refers to **an assembled gathering of people**. This word was not originally religious; it was a common civic term used throughout the Greek-speaking world to describe **people summoned** and **gathered** at a **specific time and place.**

A. Acts 19 and the Plain Meaning of Ekklesía

Acts 19 provides the clearest demonstration of this meaning. In Acts 19:32, Luke uses ekklesía to describe a confused and disorderly pagan crowd. In Acts 19:39, the city clerk contrasts this unlawful ekklesía with a lawful civic ekklesía. In Acts 19:41, the **ekklesía is dismissed**—and **once dismissed, it no longer exists**.[4] The term refers simply to a **gathered assembly**, regardless of purpose, legitimacy, or morality, **so long as people are actually assembled.**

English Bible translations reflect this reality by translating ekklesía as "assembly" in Acts 19, while translating the very same Greek word as "church" elsewhere. **Luke does not change words; translators change English terms.**

Acts 19 is **not a marginal example** or an exception—it is the clearest demonstration in Scripture of how the word ekklesía **was actually used**. For that reason, it deserves **special attention**.

B. Why Reference Tools Can Mislead Without Explanation

Reference tools such as Strong's Concordance, Blue Letter

Bible, and Bible Hub are valuable for locating Greek words, but they are not full lexical authorities. Strong's, in particular, is a concordance with brief glosses that often reflect traditional English translation usage rather than precise Greek meaning.

When such tools as Strong's Definitions, it correctly defines ekklēsía as an assembly, yet it appends the familiar English word **"church to be same as ekklesia,"** readers are then **conditioned** to treat the two **as interchangeable** [see footnote [5]]. This occurs not because the Greek word is ambiguous, but because English **translation tradition is being silently imported into the definition**.

Scholarly lexicons such as BDAG and LSJ, which analyze actual Greek usage rather than English tradition, consistently define ekklēsía as an assembly or gathering. The problem, therefore, lies not in Scripture, but in how **inherited language** is allowed to **override lexical meaning**.

This inconsistency reveals that "church" is **not the meaning of ekklesía,** but a later theological label applied selectively.

C. Translation Tradition and Its Lasting Effects

The English word ***church*** **does not derive from ekklesía** at all. It traces instead to the Greek adjective κυριακός (*kyriakós*), meaning "belonging to the Lord." This word appears only twice in the New Testament—referring to the Lord's Supper and the Lord's Day—and **never names an assembly of people**. Substituting *church* for ekklesía therefore replaces a noun describing a gathered people with a term rooted in ownership and institutional association.

Strong's Concordance, Bible Hub, and similar reference tools correctly define ekklesía as an assembly, yet also append the familiar English word "church," leading readers to treat the two as interchangeable when they are not. Greek lexicons, by

contrast, consistently define ekklesía as an assembly rather than an institution.[6]

This linguistic issue cannot be dismissed as a harmless historical development or a neutral translation choice. William **Tyndale translated ekklesía as "congregation,"** a rendering faithful to the Greek and threatening to ecclesiastical power structures.[7] For allowing Scripture to define its own terms rather than ecclesiastical tradition, Tyndale was executed.

Not all translations perpetuate this confusion. Vietnamese Bible translations consistently **render ekklēsía as "assembly" or "holy assembly,"** preserving the Greek meaning across contexts—including Acts 19. This demonstrates that the problem **lies not in Scripture**, but in inherited English terminology, and that such clarity is achievable when translators **prioritize meaning over ecclesiastical tradition**.

The below table uses **Matthew 16:18**, since it is the best-known occurrence of **ἐκκλησία**.

Language	Translation	Word Used	Literal Meaning	Preserves "Assembly"?
Greek (NT)	κἀγὼ… οἰκοδομήσω μου τὴν **ἐκκλησίαν**	ekklēsia	assembly, called-out gathering	**Yes**
Hebrew (Modern NT)	□□□□□ (*qehillah*)	qehillah	assembly, congregation	**Yes**
Vietnamese	**Hội Thánh**	hội = assembly; thánh = holy	holy assembly	**Yes**
Chinese (CUV)	□□	jiàohuì	teaching/religious assembly	**Partially**
Japanese	□□	kyōkai	religious assembly	**Partially**
Korean	□□	gyohoe	church/religious assembly	**Partially**

Language	Translation	Word Used	Literal Meaning	Preserves “Assembly”?
Spanish	iglesia	from *ecclesia*	church	No
Portuguese	igreja	from *ecclesia*	church	No
Italian	chiesa	from *ecclesia*	church	No
French	église	from *ecclesia*	church	No
Romanian	biserică	church	church	No
German	Kirche	from *kyriakon*	Lord’s house/church	No
Dutch	kerk	from *kirika*	church	No
Danish	kirke	from *kirika*	church	No
Norwegian	kirke	church	church	No
Swedish	kyrka	church	church	No
Icelandic	kirkja	church	church	No
English	church	from *cirice/kirika*	church	No
Russian	церковь (tserkov’)	church	church	No
Ukrainian	церква	church	church	No
Arabic (Van Dyck)	كنيسة (*kanīsah*)	church/assembly	usually church	Partially
Indonesian	jemaat	congregation	assembly/congregation	**Yes**
Malay	jemaat	congregation	assembly	**Yes**

Conclusion Section V.

A translation can be accurate in one sense and misleading in another. When a traditional English term is repeatedly used in place of a Greek word with a different meaning, readers begin to inherit assumptions that were never present in the original text. Over time, the translation no longer reflects meaning—it shapes theology. This is why returning to the original language is not academic skepticism, but fidelity to Scripture.

The conclusion is unavoidable: **where there is no gathering, there is no *ekklesía*.** And where *ekklesía* does not exist, the authority Scripture assigns to it cannot be claimed.

VI. Language Shapes Authority

Words are not neutral containers. Language shapes theology, and theology governs practice. When non-biblical terms are allowed to define biblical realities, they inevitably reintroduce the very assumptions and structures Scripture never established.

This is why appeals to authority, oversight, and legitimacy must be rooted in **ekklēsía**, not in inherited ecclesiastical vocabulary. To allow a word that does not mean *ekklēsía* to define *ekklēsía* is to surrender biblical clarity for linguistic convenience.

VI. Why This Is Not "Semantic Hair-Splitting"

Some may dismiss this discussion as semantics. Yet Scripture itself places great weight on words and meanings. Faithfulness requires more than good intentions; it requires allowing Scripture to define its own categories.

This is why careful attention to the original language matters. When Christians rely exclusively on English tradition without examining the Greek text, long-standing conditioning can obscure what Scripture is actually saying—like failing to see the trees because of familiarity with the forest.

Conclusion

The call of Scripture is simple but demanding:
let God define His own words.

Where ekklēsía exists, biblical authority, oversight, discipline, and communal life follow. Where it does not, those claims cannot be sustained—no matter how sincere or familiar the language used.

Faithfulness requires not only rejecting unbiblical practices, but also abandoning unbiblical categories. Only then can Scripture truly govern both belief and practice.

Footnotes / Lexical References

Appendix: Common Objections & Scriptural Responses

Q1: "But the word *church* comes from Greek—doesn't that make it biblical?"

Answer:
It is true that the English word *church* has a historical connection to the Greek adjective **κυριακός (kyriakós)**, meaning "belonging to the Lord." However, this fact does not make *church* equivalent to the biblical term **ἐκκλησία (ekklēsía)**, nor does it grant it the same meaning or function in Scripture.

In the New Testament, *kyriakós* appears only twice—referring to **the Lord's supper** (1 Corinthians 11:20) and **the Lord's day** (Revelation 1:10). In both cases, the word functions

adjectivally, describing **ownership or association**, not a gathering of people. Scripture never uses *kyriakós* to define an assembly, congregation, or body of believers.

By contrast, *ekklēsía* consistently refers to an **actual assembly of people who gather together**. The authority, identity, and functions commonly associated with "church" in Scripture are always grounded in *ekklesia*, not in *kyriakós*.

In short, while *church* may have a Greek linguistic ancestry, it does not carry the **biblical definition** that *ekklēsía* carries.

Q2: "If *church* comes from *kyriakós*, isn't it just another way of saying 'the Lord's people'?"

Answer:
No. This confuses **description** with **definition**.

Kyriakós describes something as belonging to the Lord.
Ekklēsía defines **what exists**—a gathered assembly.

Scripture never defines God's people merely by ownership language. Instead, it defines them by **assembly, participation, oversight, discipline, and shared life**—all realities tied to *ekklēsía*. Saying something "belongs to the Lord" does not establish it as an *ekklēsía*.

The New Testament never asks, "Does this belong to the Lord?" as the test of ecclesial identity. It assumes the Lord's ownership and then addresses how the *ekklēsía* gathers, functions, and lives together.

Q3: "Isn't this just semantics or word-splitting?"

Answer:
No. Scripture itself places great weight on words and their meanings. Doctrinal clarity depends on allowing the biblical text to define its own categories.

When non-biblical terms are allowed to replace biblical ones, theological confusion follows. In this case, using *church* as a substitute for *ekklēsía* allows authority, identity, and legitimacy to be claimed without the defining feature Scripture requires: **a gathered assembly**.

This is not hair-splitting. It is the difference between **letting Scripture speak** and allowing inherited language to govern interpretation.

Q4: "Didn't early Christians use the word 'church'?"

Answer:
Early Christians used **ekklēsía**, not the English word *church*. The English term developed centuries later through linguistic and cultural shifts, particularly as Christianity became institutionalized and associated with buildings and places.

While later Christians used *church* as a convenient term, Scripture itself never redefines *ekklēsía* in terms of *kyriakós* or "the Lord's house." The New Testament remains consistent: **the people gathered are the ekklēsía**.

Historical usage does not override biblical definition.

Q5: "Can't a virtual or dispersed group still be a church in spirit?"

Answer:
Sincerity and spiritual benefit do not create biblical categories. The New Testament does not define ekklēsía by intention, connection, or shared belief alone, but by **actual gathering**.

Acts 19:41 demonstrates this clearly: the *ekklēsía* exists as long as the people are assembled and ceases when they are dismissed. A group that never gathers cannot meet the biblical definition of ekklēsía, regardless of how meaningful the

interaction may be.

Online fellowship may be valuable—but Scripture does not assign ekklēsía authority or identity apart from physical assembly.

Q6: "Why does this distinction matter so much?"

Answer:
Because **authority flows from definition**.

Scripture assigns authority, oversight, discipline, and responsibility to *ekklēsía*. If the term is redefined—or replaced—those claims of authority become untethered from Scripture.

The issue is not preference or tradition, but faithfulness:

> ***We must let Scripture define the terms we use and the authority we claim.***

Summary

- *Church* may have a Greek linguistic ancestry, but it is not the biblical term.
- *Kyriakós* describes ownership; *ekklēsía* defines existence.
- Scripture assigns authority to *ekklēsía*, not to abstract or dispersed concepts.
- Faithfulness requires allowing Scripture—not language tradition—to govern belief and practice.
