Ekklēsia or Church, Does It Matter?

- Ekklēsia or Assembly (“Church”)

In the New Testaments of most English Bibles, the words “church” and “churches” appear a total of over one hundred times. (From now on, I will use “church” to stand for both the singular and plural.) With one exception in the King James Version (found in Acts 19:37), all of these instances of “church” are mistranslated from the Greek word *ekklēsia*. (Unless I am quoting a portion of Greek text, I will use the lexical form *ekklēsia*.) That’s right, I said *mis*translated. Not only that, they are a deliberate mistranslation of *ekklēsia*. The fact that this mistranslation is so widespread and that it is deliberate should cause us to suspect that it is important to know what *ekklēsia* really means. In this article, I am going to tell you the origins of the word “church” and its meaning, what *ekklēsia* means and how it was used in history and the Bible, what Jesus meant by His *ekklēsia*, why *ekklēsia* was deliberately mistranslated as “church”, and why all of this is important.

Church

It is generally agreed among etymologists who study the origins of words that our English word “church” comes from the Greek word *kuriakos*. This word is an adjective and it means belonging to or in some way related to the Lord. The word *kuriakos* is found twice in the Bible. It is in 1 Corinthians 11:20, where it is translated as “Lord’s” in the term “the Lord’s supper.” And it is translated “Lord’s” in the term “Lord’s day” in Revelation 1:10.

So how did this adjective that means “Lord’s” come to be the origin of our English noun “church”? Words are funny things. They change over time. The Online Etymological Dictionary says that *kuriakos* “was used of houses of Christian worship since c.300.” Remember that date.

This was the time of Constantine the Great, who was emperor of the Roman Empire from A.D. 306 to 337. Up until this time, Christians were meeting in private houses. This brought the wrath of the Roman government upon them because, as Earle E. Cairns writes in Christianity Through the Centuries, “There could be no private religion…. The Christians held most of their meetings at night and in secret. To the Roman authority this could be nothing else than the hatching of a conspiracy against the safety of the state…. The secrecy of the meetings of the Christians also brought moral charges against them. Public rumor made them guilty of incest, cannibalism, and unnatural practices” (87).

The other religions of the Roman Empire had public meeting places, but the Christians met in private houses even though it brought persecution upon them. That’s right, meeting in private houses brought persecution upon the Christians. Contrary to what is often assumed, Christians did not meet in private houses to hide from persecution. They met in private houses by choice, and this choice made them subject to persecution.

But then Constantine (along with Licinius) granted religious tolerance in the Edict of Milan. Not only was Christianity now tolerated, but Constantine favored it and began to build church buildings. He retained the idea that worship is public and expected Christians to follow that paradigm. “Constantine brought to Christianity a pagan notion of the sanctity of things and places” (Joan E. Taylor, Christians and the Holy Places, 308).

This erection of special buildings for Christian worship was

part of what has been called the Constantinian shift that eventually, after Constantine's death, led to the uniting of church and state with the issuing of the Edict of Thessalonica. This edict was released jointly by Theodosius I, Gratian, and Valentinian II. It made the faith "which is now professed by the Pontiff Damasus and by Peter, Bishop of Alexandria [the bishops of Rome and Alexandria]" the official religion of the people under those emperors. It further said, "We authorize the followers of this law to assume the title of Catholic Christians; but as for the others, since, in our judgment they are foolish madmen, we decree that they shall be branded with the ignominious name of heretics, and shall not presume to give to their conventicles the name of churches. They will suffer in the first place the chastisement of the divine condemnation and in the second the punishment of our authority which in accordance with the will of Heaven we shall decide to inflict." So, now the tables were turned—the persecuted were now the persecutors. Or perhaps the tables were not turned. Maybe the pagans were still running things but now under the new name of Christianity, or, as they put it themselves, Catholic Christianity.

Notice a couple of the words used in the edict. "Conventicles" are private meetings not sanctioned by law. The Latin word from which this is translated in the edict is *conciliabula*. It has a similar meaning to the English "conventicles." So, this edict outlawed the meetings Christians had been having in their houses all along. The English translation of the edict also uses the word "churches." But the Latin word from which this was translated is *ecclesiarum*, a Latin derivative of *ekklēsia*. So, those who did not accept the bishops of Rome and Alexandria were not to call their meetings *ekklēsia*.

It should not be supposed that everyone fell into line. Leonard Verduin writes, "Thus, before the Constantinian change had come full circle, the death sentence had been prescribed for either holding or attending a conventicle" (The Anatomy of

A Hybrid, 99). And it is well documented that the faithful who would not give in to the institutionalized state church continued to meet privately and illegally for centuries. Of these secret assemblies, Verduin writes in another of his books that "one of the things required of a convert… was the promise not to go again into a stone-pile, a *cumulus lapidum*," as they called church buildings (The Reformers and Their Stepchildren, 167).

But, for the followers of these bishops, the people who were to now be called Catholic Christians, there were official church buildings. And these buildings, as I have pointed out, were called *kuriakos*, "the Lord's." This was just a shortened way of expressing the idea these people had that these buildings were the Lord's house or *kuriakē oikia*. For, continuing with pagan notions Constantine had retained, they considered the buildings themselves to be sacred. Thus, a *kuriakos*, or church, was a sacred building.

Before continuing, I want to ask these questions: Was the *ekklēsia* that Jesus built a sacred building He built as the son of a carpenter or was it the people He called as the Son of God?

Over the years, the word "church" evolved to take on other meanings. Rather than go through a lengthy history, I will demonstrate the fact of these other meanings by simply quoting the dictionary definitions from two highly respected dictionaries, one American and the other British.

Merriam-Webster's 11th Collegiate Dictionary defines "church" as follows:

> *1 : a building for public and especially Christian worship*
> *2 : the clergy or officialdom of a religious body*
> *3 : often capitalized : a body or organization of religious believers: as a : the whole body of Christians b : DENOMINATION (the Presbyterian church) c : CONGREGATION*

> *4 : a public divine worship (goes to church every Sunday)*
> *5 : the clerical profession (considered the church as a possible career)*

Collins English Dictionary has this definition for “church”:

> *1 a building designed for public forms of worship, esp Christian worship 2 an occasion of public worship 3 the clergy as distinguished from the laity 4 (usually capital) institutionalized forms of religion as a political or social force: conflict between Church and State 5 (usually capital) the collective body of all Christians 6 (often capital) a particular Christian denomination or group of Christian believers 7 (often capital) the Christian religion 8 (in Britain) the practices or doctrines of the Church of England and similar denominations*

Notice that many of these definitions are in some way related to *buildings*, *public* worship, *clergy*, and *institutionalized* religion. None of these things are related to the biblical meaning of *ekklēsia*. They have nothing to do with the *ekklēsia* Jesus built.

Etymology of *Ekklēsia* and Use in History

The word *ekklēsia* is found in 116 places in the New Testament. In most English Bibles, it is translated as “church” in all of those places except three. In Acts 19:32 and 41, it is translated as “assembly” and refers to the people whom Demetrius had called together (see Acts 19:25), and in verse 39 it is also translated “assembly” and refers to a lawful assembly.

Ekklēsia is a compound word. The first part is *ek*. It is a preposition that means “out of,” “out from,” or “from.” The

second part of *ekklēsia*—*klēsia*—is a derivative of the Greek word *kaleō*. *Kaleō* is a verb that means "to call." So, *ekklēsia* is a compound of a preposition and a verb, but *ekklēsia* itself is a noun. In its most basic form, *ekklēsia* means "the called out from" or "those called out from." In other words, it refers to people called out from or out of something.

In ancient Greece, *ekklēsia* came to be used for the people who were called out of the community to the assembly. The Encyclopedia Britannica says,

> *Ecclesia, Greek ekklēsia, ("gathering of those summoned"), in ancient Greece, assembly of citizens in a city-state. Its roots lay in the Homeric agora, the meeting of the people. The Athenian Ecclesia, for which exists the most detailed record, was already functioning in Draco's day (c. 621 bc). In the course of Solon's codification of the law (c. 594 bc), the Ecclesia became coterminous with the body of male citizens 18 years of age or over and had final control over policy, including the right to hear appeals in the hēliaia (public court), take part in the election of archons (chief magistrates), and confer special privileges on individuals. In the Athens of the 5th and 4th centuries bc, the prytaneis, a committee of the Boule (council), summoned the Ecclesia both for regular meetings, held four times in each 10th of the year, and for special sessions. Aside from confirmation of magistrates, consideration of ways and means and similar fixed procedures, the agenda was fixed by the prytaneis. Since motions had to originate in the Boule, the Ecclesia could not initiate new business. After discussion open to all members, a vote was taken, usually by show of hands, a simple majority determining the result in most cases. Assemblies of this sort existed in most Greek city-states, continuing to function throughout the Hellenistic and Roman periods, though under the Roman Empire their powers gradually atrophied."*

Many people make the mistake of saying that *ekklēsia* merely means an assembly. This is a commendable start and is worlds better than “church,” but they forget that it means an assembly that has been called out from something. In ancient Greece, it was the assembly called out or summoned from the community.

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