

The Word 'Church' Creates Misunderstanding

Did you know that the King James Version was *not* the first English translation of the Bible, but the Tyndale Bible was in 1526? What is interesting is that Tyndale never translated the Greek word *ecclesia* as *church*, but *congregation* (congregacion).

He does use the word 'church' twice, but only in reference to pagan temples (see Acts 14:13, 19:37). *Ecclesia* is not used in either of these verses. So, according to Tyndale, a congregation was people who are holy and churches were buildings for religious purposes, including pagan temples.

Churches Are Buildings

The Greek word for church is *kyriakos* and does not appear in the New Testament. It dates back to the third century—meaning it did not exist when the New Testament was written. It comes from the Greek word (meaning “belonging to the Lord”). Sometime in the 300s, people began to refer to buildings where believers met as *kyriakos* or churches (About the time that the anti-Semitic Roman Emperor Constantine began building structures for Christians). And then, the body of believers themselves started to be called “the church.”

Of course, in common vernacular, most of the world associates churches with buildings.

The fact that church (*kyriakos*) does not appear in the New Testament must be the reason Tyndale refused to use it. However, when King James authorized a new translation (in 1611), one of the rules was that the *ecclesia* would not be translated congregation, but church. Why—maybe because they wanted to be consistent with common practice, or maybe it was more sinister—was congregation too Jewish? Let's remember they

also translated Yeshua's brother Jacob as James. Then again, Tyndale also translated Jacob as James.

Ecclesia (the word that is translated 'church' in your Bible) is not a religious word. In Acts 19, it refers to a town council. In verses 32, 39 and 41 the KJV correctly translates the word as assembly, referring to the meeting of the council. However, the more than 100 other times that *ecclesia* appears in the New Testament, translators simply changed the word to *kyriakos* or church. In the same way that believers were part of The Way.

'Way,' though a general word, becomes a specific word—a proper noun. *Ecclesia* simply means "those called to a regular gathering." For years, believers have said it means "called-out ones"—as in, called out from the world. While I like that, in truth, it means called out to gather for any purpose, as in Acts 19.

Is it possible that the New Testament seeks to elevate the meaning of *ecclesia*, adding a spiritual definition? Sure, in the same way a house can be white without being *the* White House, but still, the word 'church' is nowhere in the texts.

Kehila—Community

The Hebrew word used for *ecclesia* in my Hebrew New Testament is *kehila*, or community/congregation. This, in my opinion, is a much better word, because the community is *people* no matter where they meet. The New Testament congregation is a spiritual house made of people, as Simon Peter says, "*you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house*" (1 Pet. 2:5). In addition, as pointed out by one of my readers, the Old Testament book that we call Ecclesiastes (from *ecclesia*) in Hebrew is Kohelet. Kohelet comes from the word *kehila* or *kahal* (gathering; audience).

Community is also a more Jewish-friendly term. Most Jewish people would not step foot in a church, but they might come to

your community or gathering (especially if the meeting is in a non-religious building, like a home).

I am not maintaining that there was a conspiracy (although, there may have been), but rather that because *ecclesia* was not a religious word and the new word 'church' did have a religious connotation, it became the dominant word. However, I think that the word *ecclesia* (assembly) is a perfect word because at the end of the day, the body of believers is a living community of people, not a building, and that is the word in the New Testament, not church.

Is This a Big Deal?

As long as we know to whom we are referring—the people of God—then maybe not. But the confusion that remains today over whether church is a *building* or a *group of people* stems from the fact *kyriakos* are buildings, not gatherings, while the *ecclesia* are people.

In addition, because the construction of historic church buildings (that the New Testament never encourages us to build) are so closely connected with Christian animosity towards Jews, the less charged word—community, may be preferable.

You tell me. Do you think it is a big deal? Use the comments area below to share your answer.

Editor's note: William Tyndale died for his faith, as he was executed in 1536, while the KJV had the backing of King James ... who do you think was more trustworthy?

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