

THE ENGLISH WORD "CHURCH"

The English word "church" is found many times in various New Testament translations. While many articles have been written on "the church," very few tell the reader that the word "church" is not the translation of the word in the Greek text. Of the word "church," Kenneth S. Wuest writes:

"The word ekklesia appears in the Greek text where this word is found in the translations...The word 'assembly' is a good one-word translation of ekklesia" (Word Studies in the Greek New Testament, Volume III, Vocabulary, page 27).

The point is: The impression is left that the word "church" is the translation of "ekklesia" in the Greek text, which is not the case. Had "ekklesia" been uniformly and accurately translated, a word such as "assembly" would have been selected. The Interlinear Greek-English New Testament by George Richer Berry, shows "assembly" to be the translation of "ekklesia," yet the King James, and other versions, gives the word "church." Is "church" the translation of "ekklesia?" Smith's Bible Dictionary, page 117, states:

"The derivation of the word is generally said to be from the Greek kuriakon... 'belonging to the Lord.' But the derivation has been too hastily assumed. It is probably connected with KIRK..."

It is fair to say that neither "kuriakon" nor "kirk" are in the Greek text. The word in the Greek text is "ekklesia," and the word "church" is not derived from it. The statement that "it is probably connected with kirk" is supported by a similar statement made by Dr. William Smith, and quoted by J.A. Shackleford, in his Compendium of Baptist History, page 24:

"Dr. William Smith says the derivation of the English word church is uncertain. It was most probably derived from the word kirk which signifies a house of worship."

On pages 23,24, J. A. Shackleford adds:

"In fact the word 'church' is not found in the Greek New Testament, nor was it used for some two hundred years after the New Testament was written. This is one of the words which was not translated by King James' translators, but 'kept' under his third rule which required all the old ecclesiastical words to be kept and not translated."

"Kirk" differs from "ekklesia" in that it speaks of the place of worship, whereas "ekklesia" speaks of the people assembled. When the word "ekklesia" was brought over into the New Testament, and first used in Matthew 16:18, it had a pre-New Testament use, and was not understood to have a broader meaning than "assembly."

In pre-New Testament use, two sources contribute greatly to the use and meaning of "ekklesia." One is classical Greek. And the other is the Septuagint. Before the conquest of Alexander the Great, 332 B.C., Greek was primarily confined to Greece itself. The term "classical" is used to speak of Greek as it was spoken by the Greeks in their own country prior to that date. After Alexander subjugated the Medo-Persian Empire, his armies spread the Greek language over the then known world. As occupational troops living amid conquered peoples, they popularized the language. The language that resulted is called "Koine Greek," the word "Koine" meaning "common." Thus, the mixing of the Greeks with others produced a "common" language. This is the Greek that became the international language. Classical Greek compared to Koine Greek is somewhat like the English used by the great writers of the past as compared to the English used by the average person in ordinary vernacular.

The Septuagint, that translation of the Hebrew Old Testament into Greek, was in Koine Greek. The Hebrew Old Testament was the first collection of books translated into another tongue. This translation took place in the third and second centuries B.C. The name comes from the Latin "Septuaginta," meaning "seventy." It is sometimes referred to as the Alexandrian version, from the city of its origin, Alexandria, Egypt. It is one of four "ancient versions," the others being the Aramaic Targums, the Syriac Peshitta, and the Latin Vulgate. An "ancient version" is one which was made before the invention of printing. After 1450 A.D. the term "modern version" is usually employed. Because of its antiquity, and due to the fact that it was rendered into the same language in which

the New Testament would be written, it is extremely important. It was clearly the Bible of the apostles, and literally several hundreds of quotes in the New Testament are taken from the Septuagint. The word “ekklesia,” first used by Christ in Matthew 16:18, was spoken to the apostles. Those men were well acquainted with “ekklesia” from Septuagint use, and would never have thought of the word to be broader than “assembly.” Unfortunately, the English word “church” appears in the text of Matthew 16:18, and that word has come to mean other than “an assembly.” But, it is not the translation of “ekklesia.”

In “classical Greek,” the late B. H. Carroll cited from classical writers as to the use and meaning of “ekklesia.” This compilation is found in his work, Ecclesia—The Church, and without exception “ekklesia” never had a broader meaning than “assembly.” The late Professor Royal of Wake Forest College, who taught the legendary A. T. Robertson, said, “I do not know of any passage in classical Greek, where ekklesia is used of unassembled, or unassembling persons” (taken from Ekklesia—The Church, by Bob L. Ross, page 10).

In Septuagint use the Hebrew words “qahal” and “edhah” come into view, and are thought by some to be synonyms. The two words occur together in Exodus 12:6, “assembly...congregation.” Earl D. Radmacher, in his work, What the Church is All About, writes: “Disregarding variants, the word qahal is translated by seven Greek words in the Septuagint...it...is a broad term...yet ekklesia is never used to translate edhah,” page 125, 127. What does qahal mean where it is translated by ekklesia? The translators never used ekklesia to translate qahal except in those instances where reference is to a gathering together, an assembly. When qahal and edhah relate to the children of Israel, the late F.J.A. Hort, in his work The Christian Ecclesia, page 4, 5, writes:

“Edhah...is properly, when applied to Israel, the society itself, formed by the children of Israel or their representative heads, whether assembled or not assembled...On the other hand qahal is properly their actual meeting together...”

The late Jesse B. Thomas, in his work The Church and the Kingdom, page 200, thus writes:

“It was, thereupon, inversely and most illogically inferred that, since qahal sometimes means the whole Israelitish people and is sometimes translated by ekklesia, therefore ekklesia must always take an like breadth of meaning. Reference to the LXX, however, will show that the Greek translators of the Old Testament, so far from encouraging such an implication, have carefully precluded it. For when qahal has the broad sense it is never translated by ekklesia, but by another Greek word.”

The evidence is clearly this: “Ekklesia,” in both “classical Greek” and Septuagint use, never had a broader meaning than “assembly.” When this word was brought over into the New Testament, it was first used by Christ in the phrase, “I will build my church.” Had “ekklesia” been translated, the phrase would not read, “I will build my church,” rather, “I will build my assembly,” as rendered in Berry’s Interlinear Greek-English New Testament. Christ certainly spoke of an “ekklesia” of a different kind, called “my ekklesia,” but the word “ekklesia” did not mean other than “an assembly.” One may speak of God’s house, or a gambling house, but the difference is not in the word house, rather in the modifiers. Both are houses, but are used for different purposes. “My ekklesia” simply distinguishes between the Lord’s assembly and those of the Hebrews and Greeks. All are assemblies, but differing in purpose.

In modern use, the word “church” is modified by such words as, “local...visible...true...universal...(and)...invisible.” These modifiers, however, do not occur in scripture as modifiers of “ekklesia.” It is not necessary to modify “ekklesia” by “local...(and)...visible,” as though the antithetical ideas are present in scripture, because such is not the case. If it is an “ekklesia,” then locality and visibility inhere in it. And, if it is an “ekklesia of God,” then it is “true,” although rebuked for unscriptural practices, as was “the ekklesia of God...at Corinth.”

To modify “ekklesia” by “universal...(and)...invisible” is a flat contradiction of terms. “Catholic” means “universal,” and “ekklesia” means “assembly.” In strict definition, there has never been a universal assembly. I am cognizant of the wording of the so called “apostle’s creed” in which reference is made to “the catholic church,” or “the universal church.” Consider two facts: One, if the expression “the catholic church” is legitimately in something the apostles were inspired of God to write, then one would expect to find such a phrase in their writings. The truth is: The word “catholic” or “universal” does not occur in the whole Bible, much less in the apostle’s

writings. Therefore, how can any thinking person believe that such an expression is in something the apostles wrote? And two, Adolf Harnack was Professor of Church History at the University of Berlin. Of him, the Standard Encyclopedia says, "His industry, erudition, and historical insight have secured him a world-wide reputation, and he is by far the greatest living writer on theological subjects" (Recorded in Handbook on Baptism by J. W. Shepherd, page 483). Jesse B. Thomas, in discussing the origin of the so called "apostle's creed," cites Adolf Harnack to be traceable no further back than the middle of the fifth century" (The Church and the Kingdom, page 151). The conclusion is ineluctable, and Thomas states:

"Neither the creed itself nor the emphasized phrase are traceable to the first century" (page 151).

The New Testament uses the word "ekklesia" in a three-fold sense when referring to the Lord's assembly:

1. Concretely, in the singular, such as "the church...at Corinth" (I Corinthians 1:2). This is a specific reference to one assembly;
2. Concretely, in the plural, such as "the churches of Galatia" (Galatians 1:2). This is a particular reference to more than one assembly;
3. And, abstractly and generically, in the institutional sense, as in Ephesians 5:25, "Christ...loved the church."

The abstract use does not militate against the concrete, either in the singular, or the plural. I might say: "The car is a means of transportation." I am not speaking of any particular car, but am speaking abstractly. Would the word car in the abstract use be thought of as altogether different than what it is in concrete use? To ask is to answer! It is generally conceded that only 10 per cent of the occurrences of "ekklesia" in the New Testament, when referring to the Lord's assembly, have a meaning broader than "assembly." And that 10 per cent, out of more than 100 occurrences, would be reduced to zero if the abstract use of the word was acknowledged.

The Lord's church is "an assembly." The Lord's churches are "assemblies." This is the meaning of "ekklesia." Yes, Bible words have changed meaning through the years. But who changed them? God, or men?

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