

The Mysterious Word "Church"

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The word "church" in our Bibles has alarming roots. Why did the translators use it?

There are two main approaches to producing an English version of the Bible from the original languages, which, in the case of the New Testament, was Greek. The most common approach is *translation* and the other is *transliteration*.

Transliteration is the practice of replacing the Greek letters of a word with English letters to form a new word with a distinctive meaning. This approach was used in select places with the word "baptize." The English letters of the original Greek word *baptizo*, means "to dip or sink." When Jesus dipped a morsel of bread and gave it to Judas in [John 13:26](#), this is the word *baptizo*. The scholars chose to transliterate this word, rather than translate, to avoid conflict with those branches of Christianity where approaches to baptism do not involve "dipping."

Translating, the practice of replacing Greek words with English words of similar meaning or intent is the most common practice. Our interest is in the English word for "church," which replaces the Greek word *ekklesia*. In [Acts 19:25-41](#), we have an example of the real meaning of *ekklesia*; the people of Ephesus gathered to deal with Paul's alleged preaching against their god, Artemis of the Ephesians.

So then, some were shouting one thing and some another, for the assembly was in confusion and the majority did not know for what reason they had come together.

But if you want anything beyond this, it shall be settled in the lawful assembly. After saying this he dismissed the assembly. [Acts 19:32, 39, 41](#)(NASB)

In each of these cases, *ekklesia* is correctly translated "assembly" since it means "citizens called to be a governing assembly." In [Acts 7:38](#) and [Hebrews 2:12](#), *ekklesia* is translated as congregation—also a good interpretation. The rest of the one hundred fourteen times that *ekklesia* is used in the NT, it has been replaced with "church" or "churches"—replaced, because the word "church" is neither a translation nor a transliteration of the original word. Someone chose to use "church" rather than the meaning of the Greek word or its letters.

Here begins the mystery.

OLD ENGLISH BIBLES RENDITIONS OF MATTHEW 16:18

John Wycliffe, of Yorkshire, England, translated the first Bible into English in 1382, not from the original languages, but from the Latin. Therein, Wycliffe translated the Latin word *ecclesiam* into *chirche* (in old English spelling):

And Y seie to thee, that thou art Petre, and on this stoon Y schal bilde my chirche, and the yatis of helle schulen not haue miyt ayens it. (Wycliffe, c1382)

The Latin word is similar to the Greek, but because he did not know Greek, he may have used what was commonly called a religious gathering in his day. More on this later.

Other English translations that followed were:

* Tyndale's Bible (1526) - used "**congregation**":

And I say also vnto the that thou arte Peter: and apon this rocke I wyll bylde my congregation. And the gates of hell shall not prevayle ageynst it. (Tyndale, c1526)

* Coverdale Bible (1535) - used "**congregation**"

* Matthew Bible (1537) - used "**congregation**"

* The Great Bible (1539) - used "**congregation**"

* Geneva Bible (1560) - used "**church**"

And I say also vnto thee, that thou art Peter, and vpon this rocke I will builde my Church: and ye gates of hell shall not ouercome it. (Geneva Bible, c1560)

* Bishop's Bible (1568) - used "**congregation**":

And I say also vnto thee, that thou art Peter, and vponn this rocke I wyll buylde my congregation: And the gates of hell shall not preuayle agaynst it. (Bishop Bible, c1568)

The word "congregation," in place of *ekklesia*, is a good translation since "congregation" means "to gather a flock" and refers to people, not places or institutions.

GOING IN CIRCLES

Wycliffe's word *chirche*, or as we spell it today, "church", has some interesting twists to its meaning. According to modern dictionaries, such as the American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, the word "church" is derived from a Greek word meaning house of the Lord:

[Middle English chirche, from Old English cirice, ultimately from Medieval Greek kurikon, from Late Greek kuriakon (doma), the Lord's (house), from Greek kuriakos, of the lord, from kurios, lord.]¹

This in itself is a poor derivative since it refers to a place (a house) rather than to people, as Jesus intended. Many older sources on etymology doubt this Greek connection.

In Smith's Bible Dictionary from 1884, page 452, we read:

"the derivation of the word 'church' is uncertain. It is found in the Teutonic and Slavonic languages and answers to the derivatives of ekklesia, which are naturally found in the romance languages and by foreign importation elsewhere. The word is generally said to be derived from the Greek kyriakos, meaning the lord's house. But the derivation has been too hastily assumed. It is probably associated

with the Scottish kirk, the Latin circus/circulous, the Greek klukos, because the congregations were gathered in circles."

Lidellan's Scott's Greek English Lexicon also tells us that the origin of our word "church" is uncertain. On defining the word *klukos*, from which church allegedly came, it says:

"Of or for a lord or master (speaking of a secular lord). Assumed to be original of the Teutonic kirk, kirche, or church, but how this Greek name came to be adopted by the northern nations rather than the Roman name or Greek name ekklesia has not been satisfactorily explained."

Regarding the word "church", Ebenezer Cobham Brewers Dictionary of Phrase and Fable of 1898 reads:

"The etymology of this word is generally assumed to be from the Greek, Kuriou oikos (house of God); but this is most improbable, as the word existed in all the Celtic dialects long before the introduction of Greek. No doubt the word means "a circle." The places of worship among the German and Celtic nations were always circular. (Welsh, cyrch, French, cirque; Scotch, kirk; Greek, kirk-os, etc.) Compare Anglo-Saxon circe, a church, with circol, a circle." (emphasis mine)

If "**church**" is derived from the word "**circle**," how then did the original Greek word ekklesia become "**church**" or "**circle**?"

Throughout England, pagan religious gatherings were always held at a circle. The Druids with their Stonehenge, the Celts, and Saxons also met at stone circles, to worship their gods. Many of these stone circles still exist throughout England and about twenty-eight are found in the Wycliffe's Yorkshire area. Many of the first English Christian buildings for worship were located on these circle sites or were built using stones from these circles. Through this association, the people of Wycliffe's day continued to call these buildings a "kirk"(Scottish), a cirice (Old English), or chirche (Wycliffe's version), each variation meaning "circle" and describing a place-occult-and not the people.

Although we can see Wycliffe's rationale for using the word "church" or "circle" as common English in his day, it was not suitable then or now, since it does not meet the meaning or intent of the original word—a reference to people. Because "church" or "circle" describes a place, the real meaning of *ekklesia* is lost. The better translation, "congregation," was used by most other translations after Wycliffe, except the Geneva Bible and the one authorized by King James—the later being the foundation of our modern versions.

THE KING JAMES VERSION

The story gets interesting when King James I of England decided to authorize his own translation of the Bible in 1611. The other versions fell to the Kings disfavour because their footnotes failed to honour the King. To correct this, he gathered fifty-four scholars and gave them fifteen edicts to follow as they translated and published his Authorized Version. This is a greater concern.

The first edict was that they use the Bishop's Bible (which used "congregation") with as few changes as

possible. The third edict specified that, in select places, they were to use the word "church," and not "congregation," in place of ekklesia. His fourteenth edict stated that they could use the Tyndale, Matthew, Coverdale, the Great Bible (also called the Whitchurch, Cranmer, and Cromwell Bible), and the Geneva versions of the Bible wherever they were closer to their accessible manuscripts. The King's influence is also seen where the names of the apostle and brother for Jesus were translated as "James" rather than Jacob (Iakobos)

Why would the King be so adamant about using a word, "church", that he knew to mean circle rather than using the correct translation? What do we know about this King?

One detail of his life that history books do not often discuss occurred before he became King James I of England—while he was James VI, King of Scotland.



"On the west wall of the lodgehall used by Lodge Scoon and Perth No. 3 in Perth, Scotland, can be found a mural depicting James VI kneeling at their altar at his initiation. The oldest existing record of the Lodge, called The Mutual Agreement" of 24 December, 1658, records that James was "entered Freemasonry as a Fellowcraft of the Lodge of Scoon" on 15 April, 1601."²



On April 15, 1601, King James entered the secret society of the Freemasons. In fact, Masons credit him as being the originator of the worldwide system of lodges within present-day Freemasonry. This is the greatest concern.

His version of the Bible became, and still is, the favoured version of Freemasons.

"One of the most important symbols in Freemasonry is a circle with a dot in the center—part of their motif-the shape that is drawn by the compass."³

SYMBOLS OF NOTE

Throughout Europe and England, the circle was a significant occult symbol and remains so today. It connotes inclusion or influence, as does that of being surrounded. Many good symbols such as the five-pointed star and the six-pointed Star of David become the occult pentagram, pentacles, and the hexagram when encircled, and each is used with prominence in Freemasonry and Witchcraft. Does a circle surrounding these and other symbols place them under the influence of occult powers?

Adherents of the occult believe symbols have power and influence, and especially so when those carrying or connected to the symbol are not aware of it. Would the expression "Ignorance of the law is no excuse" apply to spiritual concerns too? Does ignorance of the law of gravity excuse us of its influence?

Recently, I had occasion to pray with an individual whom Jesus was calling out of a high position within the occult. During our prayers, she asked if we could use a word other than "church" as we prayed. That startled me and when I asked, her reason was that what we refer to as occult covens are referred to as churches by those within occult circles. She wanted to be clear that her prayers referred to the Body of Christ and not to occult churches/covens/circles.

Why do occult organizations such as the Church of Illumination, Church of Scientology, Church of Wicca, Church of Satan, and others embrace the word "church" in their identity? Do they better understand its true meaning and significance? Could it be that we are naive?

TRUTH SETS FREE

Since the word "church" has no foundation in truth, we would be wise to move away from its use in our Bibles, writings, and speech, replacing it with terms such as "those people I call", "governing assembly", "congregation", or similarly suitable translations, more directly referring to God's people rather than to a place. Even our meeting places would do well with a change away from meeting in "the circle" to our "gathering place", "place of assembly", or "worship center."

Compare Jesus' words in the verses that follow, and see the richness of the real meaning.

I will build My church; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it. ([Matt 16:18 NASB](#))

In Jesus' day, walls encircled cities and access was by way of the gates. Was Jesus thinking of Samson? In their plan to capture and then take Samson's life the Philistines locked him in the city of Gaza⁴ but he tore the gates from its hinges and carrying them to the top of a nearby hill.

When Jesus calls the citizens of his kingdom to a governing assembly, the confines of the realm of the evil spirits (Hades) that encircle us will not be able to hold us when we determine to break free of its bondage.

I will edify the people I've assembled to govern; and the gates of the realm of the evil spirits will not be strong enough to keep them confined. (my rendition of 16:18).

This has a richer, more personal meaning than does the use and understanding of the word "church" today. Are we like Samson when Jesus edifies and empowers us?

Building a "church" or rather "people assembled to govern" is Jesus' work; ours is to promote the kingdom, God's kingdom, not our little local versions.

It's about people, not institutions!

BREAK FREE

Jesus called out or assembled twelve ordinary people and spent three years teaching them about the kingdom of God. Then they turned the known world upside down in 300 years—teaching and being witnesses of Jesus, with signs and wonders.

Looking back to the Pentecostal, Charismatic, Vineyard, Salvation Army, Methodist, and other movements, why did their initial revival, renewal, and uniqueness dissolve into the same basic powerless style and function as that of the mainline churches? By ineffective style and function, I refer to the process wherein people, participating for even thirty or forty years, are ill-equipped to share the joy and privileges of the gospel message with their neighbors, or to exhibit the qualities of Jesus' life.

When we unknowingly identify ourselves with the occult symbol of the circle, through our association with the word "church," do we also place ourselves under the rule and authority of occult principalities and powers as mentioned in Ephesians 6?

Are these principalities and powers responsible to see that we remain ineffective by pressing or subjugating us into a common and powerless style and function?

Are the words we use important? In the following verse, Jesus suggests they are important.

But I tell you that every careless word that people speak, they shall give an accounting for it in the day of judgment. For by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned. (Matt 12:36-37 NASB)

George Barna writes, "The church seems afraid to invest in new modes of being the church, breaking free from antiquated models and irrelevant traditions toward living the gospel in a twenty-first-century context."⁵

Is it fear, as he suggests, or is it a bondage to the confines of the circle? I will leave you to answer that question.

CONCLUSIONS

The word "church" has no foundation in scripture, being a transferred word and not an interpretation or transliteration. We should consider that there might be negative spiritual ramifications resulting from our identification with this word.



Aside from that, the Gospel is not places, buildings, or circles; rather, it is about unique, individual, and precious people. The Samaritan woman at the well changed the course of her discussion with Jesus to places of worship. Jesus turned that discussion toward people who would worship in spirit and in truth.⁶

Jesus pointed out to her that people—not places—are important.

Woman, believe Me, an hour is coming when neither in this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But an hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for such people the Father seeks to be His worshipers. God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth. ([John 4:21-24](#))

Jesus demonstrated an interest in the people, his sheep. He led them, taught them, healed them, and then sent them out to do the same. He was not interested in larger stalls or larger flocks but that they would be equipped to go out to do as he did, and so to every nation.

Ekklesia is about calling out and equipping people for the purpose of governing! He was not trying to grow institutions or corporations!

As a secondary consideration, this word "church" is so very entrenched in Christianity. While I continue with great effort to remove it from my vocabulary I've chosen, in the interim, to set this word apart, to redefine it, for my use as Israel did with the vessels of gold used in the temple. Not everyone agrees with this approach. If you do, consider a prayer like this:

"Father, the Most-High God, as and where I use the word "church" it describes and represents the "ekklesia" as Jesus (Yeshua) intended—those people assembled by Him to govern. Please redeem past use of this term from every evil and occult influence. I command a blessing on my use of this word "church" as it is used to describe the various local congregations of people redeemed by the blood sacrifice of the Lamb of God, Jesus (Yeshua). I also ask that you help me, in time, to replace this word with more accurate words such as "congregation" or "assembly" and using it to refer to people in my regular speech. In all this, be glorified. Amen"

Footnotes

1. The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language, Third Edition copyright© 1992 by Houghton Mifflin Company. Electronic version licensed from InfoSoft International, Inc. All rights reserved.
2. D. Crawford Smith and William James Hughan, History of the Ancient Masonic Lodge of Scoon and Perth (Number 3, The Lodge of Scone) Perth: Cowan and Company, Limited, 1898.
(http://freemasonry.bcy.ca/biography/james_vi/james_vi.html)
3. Christopher Knight and Robert Lomas, The Hiram Key, Arrow Books, London, England, pg. 426
4. Judges 16
5. George Barna, editor, Leaders on Leadership (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1997), page 29.
6. [John 4:19-24](#)

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