

Torah Terminology: Should We Use the Word “Church”?

Use with the full teaching and a Bible. Read or watch first, complete the questions, then discuss and apply. For family study, an adult can select suitable portions and accept spoken answers.

Test the teaching’s explanations against the cited passages. Keep the answer key and facilitator notes separate when distributing learner pages.

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Teaching summary

This teaching examines whether “church” is an appropriate word for the people of God and whether using it is morally wrong. In passages such as Acts 20:28, “church” translates the Greek word *ekklesia*, meaning an assembly or gathering of people. Because “church” commonly brings a building, denomination, or religious institution to mind, “congregation” and “assembly” can communicate the meaning more clearly. That preference for clarity is distinct from the claim that “church” is a pagan word that believers must never use.

The teaching considers the word’s origin, giving greatest weight to a connection with Greek *kyriakos*, meaning belonging to the Lord. It also discusses other proposals, but similarity in sound does not establish a historical connection. Its practical argument does not depend on proving that every proposed origin is possible: a claim about a word’s past must be supported, and its present meaning also matters.

The teaching compares translation choices: Wycliffe used church, Tyndale used congregation, and Luther used the German *Gemeinde*, meaning community. The Geneva Bible and the King James Bible used church. The 1611 King James preface explicitly defended established ecclesiastical words against the Puritans’ alternatives. This documents a translation preference; broader explanations of political motives remain historical interpretation.

The teaching places the King James preference in the religious conflicts of Reformation England and connects it with Anglican institutional authority. It also argues that opposition to witchcraft makes a deliberate association with Circe unlikely. These historical arguments help explain the teaching’s conclusion, but they are distinct from linguistic evidence for a word’s origin.

The teaching then asks whether a possible pagan connection would make the word sinful today. It distinguishes adopting idolatrous worship practices, addressed in Deuteronomy 12:2-7, from using language also used by idolaters. Words such as “gods,” “worship,” and “prayers” can appear in different religious settings without becoming forbidden vocabulary. Present meaning also matters: “church” refers to Christians, rather than to a gathering of idolaters. Acts 19:28-29, 32 strengthens this argument because the crowd associated with Artemis is itself called an *ekklesia*. A word’s use for a pagan gathering does not prevent its use for God’s people.

Finally, the teaching concludes that “congregation” and “assembly” are preferable for clarity, but saying “church” is not sinful. Whatever term is chosen, the focus must remain on people. In 1 Corinthians 14:12, building up the church means strengthening the people with whom believers gather, rather than advancing a denomination. In 1 Timothy 3:15, conduct in God’s household

concerns behavior among his people, rather than behavior inside a religious building. Understanding the value God places on his people is more important than insisting on one English label.

Summary points

- Ekklesia means an assembly or gathering of people.
- “Congregation” and “assembly” can communicate more clearly than “church,” which may suggest a building or denomination.
- The teaching favors the Greek origin connected with belonging to the Lord; other proposed origins should not be treated as equally established.
- Tyndale used “congregation,” while Luther chose a German word meaning “community.”
- The Geneva and King James translations helped establish “church” in English Bibles.
- The King James preface documents a preference for established ecclesiastical language.
- The teaching’s discussion of political motives and witchcraft is historical interpretation.
- Avoiding idolatrous worship does not require abandoning every word used by idolaters.
- Acts 19 uses ekklesia for an assembly associated with Artemis, showing that such usage does not make a word forbidden.
- Using “church” is not sinful; the essential concern is understanding and building up God’s people.

Fill in the blank

Use the teaching and the cited Bible passages. Equivalent wording is welcome when it expresses the same meaning.

Basic

1. The Greek word translated “church” in Acts 20:28 is _____.
2. Ekklesia describes a gathering of _____, rather than a building or denomination.
3. The preference for “congregation” or “assembly” is primarily a matter of _____ in communication.
4. The Anglican preference for formal religious language helped uphold its institution’s _____.
5. Using the word “church” today is not _____.
6. In 1 Corinthians 14:12, believers are encouraged to _____ the people with whom they gather.

Challenging

1. The proposed Greek root kyriakos means “_____.”
2. Deuteronomy 12 addresses idolatrous worship _____, rather than declaring shared vocabulary sinful.
3. The German word Luther used instead of kirche was _____.
4. The 1611 King James preface objected to the language choices of the _____.
5. The goddess associated with the crowd called an ekklesia in Acts 19 was _____.
6. The passage about how to behave in the household of God is 1 Timothy _____.

Group discussion

Discuss respectfully and support answers from the passages. Use these lines for brief notes or a notebook for longer responses.

1. Why does the difference between a gathering of people and a building or denomination matter when reading passages about the church?

2. How does the translation history help explain the preference for “church” in the King James Bible?

3. Why does a claimed word origin not by itself establish that the word is sinful to use?

4. How do Deuteronomy 12:2-7 and the example in Acts 19 help distinguish idolatrous practices from shared vocabulary?

5. How could you explain your preference for “assembly” or “congregation” while making clear that using “church” is not sinful?

6. What would building up God’s people and behaving properly among them look like in your group, in light of 1 Corinthians 14:12 and 1 Timothy 3:15?

Answer key

For the leader or parent. Answers follow the teaching and the passages. Accept equivalent wording that expresses the same meaning.

Basic

1. ekklesia

Acts 20:28; teaching introduction

2. people

Acts 20:28; teaching introduction

3. clarity

Teaching introduction and conclusion

4. authority

Teaching section Why Was Church Used to Translate Ekklesia

5. sinful

Teaching section Should We Use the Word Church Today

6. build up

1 Corinthians 14:12

Challenging

1. belonging to the Lord

Teaching section The Etymology of Church

2. practices

Deuteronomy 12:2-7; teaching section Should We Use the Word Church Today

3. Gemeinde

Teaching discussion of Luther's translation

4. Puritans

King James 1611 preface, quoted in the teaching

5. Artemis

Acts 19:28-32

6. 3:15

1 Timothy 3:15

Facilitator notes

These responses give direction for discussion. They are not a test of identical wording. Invite participants to explain the passages and consider a faithful practical response.

1. The passages concern care, conduct, and mutual encouragement among people. Clear terms can keep us from treating a building or institution as the whole meaning of the assembly.

Acts 20:28; 1 Corinthians 14:12; 1 Timothy 3:15

2. The translations show that different words were available. The King James preface explicitly prefers established ecclesiastical language. The teaching's account of institutional motives is an interpretation of that history, not a biblical command about English vocabulary.

Teaching section Why Was Church Used to Translate Ekklesia; quoted 1611 preface

3. An origin claim needs evidence, and a word's current meaning and use also matter. The teaching argues that ordinary vocabulary used in more than one religious setting is not thereby forbidden. Avoid presenting unsupported etymologies as established facts.

Teaching sections The Etymology of Church and Should We Use the Word Church Today

4. Deuteronomy addresses how people worship; Acts can use ekklesia for the confused gathering around Artemis. Shared vocabulary does not by itself make Christian use of the word an act of idolatrous worship.

Deuteronomy 12:2-7; Acts 19:28-32

5. We can explain that assembly helps us communicate a gathering of people clearly, while accepting that another person may use church with the same meaning. The preference should not become an accusation of sin.

Teaching introduction and conclusion

6. Consider practical ways to encourage, serve, and act faithfully toward one another. Ask what our group needs and identify a concrete response. The focus of these passages is people rather than loyalty to a building or label.

1 Corinthians 14:12; 1 Timothy 3:15

Put it into practice

Choose one response to the passages. What will we do, and when will we revisit it? Share only what you are comfortable sharing.