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MINISTRIES

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

Should we call the people of God “the church”? At first, this seems like an odd question. After all, isn’t “church” the term that the Scriptures use? For example:

Acts 20:28

Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood.

The word “church” is translated from the Greek word *ekklesia* (“ay-klay-SEE-ah”). *Ekklesia* means an assembly or a gathering of people (Thayer’s Greek Lexicon G1577). We discuss this term in some detail in our teaching, [Ekklesia](#). The issue with using the word “church” is that, while “church” can mean a gathering of people, it usually means a building or a denomination. Here is how “church” is defined in Webster’s dictionary:

1. a building for public and especially Christian worship
 2. the clergy or officialdom of a religious body
 3. a body or organization of religious believers: such as
 - a. the whole body of Christians
 - b. DENOMINATION
 - c. CONGREGATION
- (etc.)

- <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/church>, accessed June 8, 2024

As you can see, the definitions of “building” and “denomination” take precedence over “congregation.” So, it can sometimes be confusing when we call the people of God the “church,” because it may sound like we are talking about a building or a denomination instead. Consequently, we like to use words like “congregation” or “assembly” when referring to the *ekklesia*, although we will sometimes use the word “church” also. We simply want to be clear that we are referring to a people, not to a building or a denomination.

However, there is another argument that is sometimes used against the word “church,” which is that the word itself is pagan. Some say that the word came from the name of a Greek goddess; others, that it came from a Latin name for a pagan gathering. In either case, it is believed that there was some conspiracy to attach this pagan term to Christian gatherings. Consequently, proponents of this theory suggest that the word “church” should be entirely avoided. For them, it is not just a matter of clarity, but a matter of sin. In this teaching, we’re going to address this idea. Where did the word “church” come from? Why was it used to translate *ekklesia*? And, is it morally wrong to use the term today?

To answer these questions, we’re going to look at several things. First, we will look at the etymology of the word “church.” We will explore where the word came from, and what it originally meant. Second, we will examine the historical debate over its use. As it turns out, the English translators did conspire to use the word “church,” but their reasons were different than you might expect. Finally, we will evaluate what this information means for us today. We already believe that “congregation” or “assembly” are more accurate translations of *ekklesia*, but we will address the question of whether using “church” is morally wrong.

The Etymology of ‘Church’

Let’s start with the etymology of the word “church.” Church, of course, is an English word, and much of English comes from either Greek or Latin. The prevailing theory about “church” is that it comes from the Greek word *kyriakos* (“kur-ri-ah-KAS”). *Kyriakos* means “belonging to the Lord.” The term originally applied to “the Lord’s supper” (see 1 Corinthians 11:20) and the “Lord’s day” (see Revelation 1:10). The theory is that *kyriakos* eventually came to refer to the place where Christians met, and ultimately to Christians themselves. Thus, a “church” would have originally meant a gathering of people who belonged to the Lord, or the place in which they gathered. As we mentioned, this is the prevailing theory, but this theory is disputed. Some etymologists say that “church” does not come from Greek, but rather from Latin, specifically, from the Latin word *circus* (“KEER-koos”). *Circus* means a “circle,” and the theory goes that religious gatherings of all kinds in Britain were typically held in a circle. When Christians started meeting in Britain, their meetings were called “church” because that’s what all religious gatherings were called. So, etymologists argue over the origin of the word “church,” whether it comes from *kyriakos* or from *circus*, and it’s difficult to prove either one. There is one other theory that we should mention, and that is the idea that “church” comes from a different Greek word, *Circe* (“KEER-kay”). *Circe* was the name of a Greek goddess, specifically, a goddess who practiced sorcery and witchcraft. *Circe* was best known for using potions and spells to transform people into animals (Homer *Odyssey* 10.290; Ovid *Metamorphoses* 14:1-74; Virgil *Aeneid* 7.148-191). It is unclear how, under this theory, the name of this goddess came to be associated with Christian gatherings, but the point is that it originates in idolatry. This theory is not taken seriously by many etymologists, but of course, that does not automatically make it false. As we mentioned, it cannot be proven exactly where “church” comes from, so that leaves the options open. However, as we will see, when we consider the debate that happened over the use of the term “church,” this theory seems far less likely than the theories about *kyriakos* or *circus*. Let’s move on to that debate now.

Why Was ‘Church’ Used to Translate *ekklesia*?

So, why did English translators choose the word “church”? This word is found in the very first English translation of the Bible, the Wycliffe Bible from 1382. We can see this term in Wycliffe’s translation of Acts 8:3. I’ll do my best to pronounce the Old English here.

Acts 8:3, 1382 John Wycliffe Bible (www.textusreceptusbibles.com)

“But Saul greetli distruyede the **chirche**, and entryde bi housis, and drowe men and wymmen, and bitook hem in to prisoun.”

So, in the earliest English translation of the Bible, John Wycliffe thought it was appropriate to use the term “church” to translate *ekklesia*. We don’t know why he chose to do this, but we do know that later translators disagreed with his choice. In 1525, William Tyndale chose instead to translate *ekklesia* as “congregation.” Here is Tyndale’s rendition of Acts 8:3:

Acts 8:3, 1525 Tyndale Bible (www.textusreceptusbibles.com)

“But Saul made havocke of the **congregation** entrynge into every housse and drewe out bothe man and woman and thrust the into preson.”

Martin Luther also disagreed with using the term “church.” Luther translated his Bible into German, not English, but German had a word, *kirche* (“KEER-shuh”), that was equivalent to the English “church,” and Luther chose not to use this word to translate *ekklesia*. Luther instead used the term *Gemeinde* (“guh-MINE-duh”), which means “community.” Here is how Luther translated Acts 8:3. I will not attempt to pronounce the German, but you can see for yourself that he uses *Gemeinde* in this verse, rather than *kirche*.

Acts 8:3, 1534 Luther translation (www.blueletterbible.org)

“Saulus aber verstörte die **Gemeinde**, ging hin und her in die Häuser und zog hervor Männer und Weiber und überantwortete sie ins Gefängnis.”

So, in the 1500’s, translators moved away from the term “church” and toward words like “congregation” or “community.” It seemed like the term “church” was becoming obsolete. However, later English translators reverted back to using “church.” We see the term reemerge in 1560, in the Geneva Bible:

Acts 8:3, 1560 Geneva Bible (www.textusreceptusbibles.com)

“But Saul made hauocke of the **Church**, and entred into euery house, and drewe out both men and women, and put them into prison.”

The Geneva Bible was very influential, but the translation that truly cemented the use of the word “church” was the 1611 King James Bible, probably the most influential Bible translation ever. It translated Acts 8:3 as follows:

Acts 8:3, 1611 King James Version (www.kingjamesbibleonline.org)

“As for Saul, he made hauocke of the **Church**, entring into euery house, and hailing men and women, committed them to prison.”

So, why did these later translators return to the word “church”? Well, the King James translators actually gave us their reasons. Here is what they said in their preface to the 1611 edition:

“Lastly, wee have on the one side avoided the scrupulositie of the Puritanes, who leave the olde Ecclesiasticall words, and betake them to other, as when they put washing for Baptisme, and Congregation in stead of Church.”

- The Holy Bible, 1611 King James Version, page 16

So, the reason that the term “church” was preferred over “congregation” was because it was an “ecclesiastical” word. What does that mean, and why did these translators think that was important?

Let’s define what “ecclesiastical” language was. Basically, “ecclesiastical” language was *formal* language. Ecclesiastical words imply that there is an organized and authoritative group that determines church practice. So, for example, the word “Baptism” was considered ecclesiastical language, because that word implies a formal ceremony that is established by some authority. However, the term “washing,” which the Puritans wanted to use, is not a formal term. “Washing” does not sound like an authoritative tradition; it sounds like an informal thing that anyone can do. The same thinking applies to the words “church” and “congregation.” The word “church” implies a formal authority structure—a group with formal rituals that is governed by some human authority, such as the king. But the term “congregation” does not have that same connotation—it just means a gathering of people. We can see this distinction in the book, *A Glossary of Ecclesiastical Terms* (London: 1872). In that book, a “church” is defined as follows:

“The mystical Body of Christ, i.e. the fellowship of all baptized persons, which is one, holy, catholic, and apostolic.”

As you can see, this definition is very formal, and it gives credence to church authority and structure. However, this same book defines the term “congregation” like this:

“An assembly for Christian worship.”

This definition is informal, and it does not necessarily imply any kind of authority structure. It just means a group of Christians who have gathered for worship. The Puritans preferred this kind of informal language, but the Anglicans preferred ecclesiastical language. They wanted to use formal-sounding terms like “baptism” and “church.” But why did the Anglicans prefer this kind of language?

To understand this, we need to know what was happening in England at this time. In the 1500’s, the Protestant Reformation was taking effect all over Europe. In England, specifically, there were vicious fights between Catholics and Protestants, with each group taking over the government at various times and persecuting their religious rivals. In 1534, the Anglican church was founded by King Henry VIII. The Anglicans were a moderate Protestant group; they did not want to be under the authority of the Pope, but they did want to maintain many Catholic traditions. In 1559, Anglicanism became the official state religion of England, with the leader of the Anglican church being the king himself. The English wanted to end the fighting between Catholics and Protestants by establishing a state religion that everyone could join. This is why they wanted to use ecclesiastical language.

Using words that imply a formal authority structure would legitimize the authority of their own church. Of course, not everyone agreed with the Anglican system. The Puritans were a group that wanted to move even further away from Catholicism than the Anglicans did. They wanted to move away from ecclesiastical language, because they rejected the idea that the Pope had authority to determine church practice; some of them rejected the idea that any man had the authority to determine church practice (e.g., John Smyth, *The Differences of the Churches of the Separation*). So, there was disagreement between these Protestant groups about what kind of words to use. Ultimately, the more moderate Anglicans, including King James, got their way, maintaining words like “baptism” and “church” in their Bible translations.

If we look back at the timeline of English translations, we can see how this ecclesiastical language was

tied to the Catholic and Anglican churches. The Wycliffe translation of 1382, which was written when England was mostly Catholic, used the term “church.” The Tyndale translation from 1525, which was written in the middle of the Protestant Reformation, used the term “congregation” instead. Anglicanism became the state religion in 1559, and the Bible translation from the very next year, the Geneva translation of 1560, went back to using “church.” In 1611, the Anglican King James cemented the use of the term, saying that they would not go along with the extreme language of the Puritans. Most English translations have used the word “church” ever since.

So, that is how the term “church” came to be the standard word used to translate *ekklesia*, instead of words like “congregation.” At this point, we want to note something that may shed some light on where the word “church” came from. As we mentioned earlier, some believe that the word “church” comes from the name of the Greek goddess of sorcery and witchcraft, *Circe*. However, the fact that the Anglicans were so dogmatic about using the term “church” suggests otherwise. Why? Well, the Anglicans were extremely opposed to witchcraft. You did not want to be accused of being a witch in 16th century England. King James, in particular, was especially strict on this subject. In 1591, James oversaw the North Berwick witch trials, in which over 70 people from one small town were convicted of witchcraft (<https://www.historic-uk.com/HistoryUK/HistoryofScotland/North-Berwick-Witch-Trials/>). Most of them were put to death (William Wright, *Newes from Scotland* [London: 1591]). James went on to write a tract, called *Daemonologie*, in which he described the practices of witches and recommended that anyone caught doing them should be “severely punished” (King James, Preface to *Daemonologie* [Robert Walde-graue 1597]). Since the Anglicans were so opposed to witchcraft, it seems extremely unlikely that they would use the term “church” if that term was associated with a goddess of witchcraft.

Now, one might say that the Anglicans simply did not know that the word “church” came from *Circe*. While that is possible, that also seems very unlikely. They did know who the goddess *Circe* was. For example, the English writer John Gower wrote about *Circe* in his 14th century poem *Confessio Amantis*. After telling a story about *Circe*, Gower gave a warning about using sorcery, saying that it will ultimately result in a person’s death (John Gower, *Confessio Amantis* 6.1374-1788). So, the English Christians knew who *Circe* was, and they were very opposed to her and to the practices she represented. They certainly did not believe that the term “church” had anything to do with *Circe*.

So, we’ve looked at the origin of the word “church,” and at the 16th-century debate over using it to translate *ekklesia*. That brings us to the present day. Is it wrong to use the term “church” today?

Should We Use the Word ‘Church’ Today?

We have already explained that modern etymologists doubt that *church* comes from *Circe*, and we have shown that the Anglicans in the 16th century doubted that as well. All of the evidence suggests that “church” did not come from a pagan term. However, it is still possible that the word could come from the name of this Greek goddess, or from a term referring to pagan religious gatherings. But is that possibility reason enough to reject the word “church”?

In our opinion, that is not a good enough reason to reject the word. For one thing, it’s not a sin to use words that may have referred to pagan practices. God commands that we should avoid worshiping him by doing the things that idolaters do (Deuteronomy 12:2-7), but he does not command that we should avoid using their language. After all, the pagans call their gods “gods,” they call their worship “worship,” and they call their prayers “prayers,” but that does not preclude us from using those same terms. If it did, then we couldn’t use most of the English language. Secondly, even if the term “church”

meant a gathering of idolaters at one time, it does not mean that today, and it has not meant that for at least 500 years. When the Anglicans were using the term “church,” it meant a gathering of Christians, and it still means that to this day. Third, the word “church” is used to translate the Greek *ekklesia*, and *ekklesia* can itself refer to pagan gatherings! We see this in Acts 19, where a group of people who worshiped the goddess Artemis was called an *ekklesia*:

Acts 19:28-29, 32

When they heard this they were enraged and were crying out, “Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!” So the city was filled with the confusion, and they rushed together into the theater, dragging with them Gaius and Aristarchus, Macedonians who were Paul's companions in travel...

[v. 32] Now some cried out one thing, some another, for the assembly [*ekklesia*] was in confusion, and most of them did not know why they had come together.

So, if we can't use the word “church” because of its supposed reference to pagan practices, then the book of Acts can't use the word *ekklesia* by that same logic! Clearly, this is not a reasonable standard by which to judge our words. The bottom line is, when we use the word “church” today, we are not referring to a pagan gathering, and it is not sinful to use the term.

So, while we do think that words like “congregation” and “assembly” are more accurate ways to translate *ekklesia* today, we do not think that the word “church” is pagan, or that it must be avoided. The word most likely does not come from the name of a pagan god to begin with. It was chosen as the preferred translation of *ekklesia* in an attempt to uphold the authority of the Anglican church, not in an attempt to incorporate paganism into Christianity. Even if there is some ancient connection between the word “church” and pagan practices, that potential connection is not sufficient to condemn the term outright. The reason we, today, prefer to use other words is simply to communicate the idea of *ekklesia* as clearly as possible. It's not because there is something morally wrong with saying the word “church.”

As a final thought, regardless of the word you use, the important thing is to know what an *ekklesia* is. We would encourage you to recognize that an *ekklesia* is a gathering of people, not a building, and not a denomination. So, when Paul says, “[strive to excel in building up the church](#)” (1 Corinthians 14:12), he means that we should build up the people we are gathering with, not that we should build up our denomination. Likewise, when he says, “[behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God](#)” (1 Timothy 3:15), he is talking about how we should behave among God's people, not how we should behave in a church building. Whether you say “church” or not, the important thing is to understand the value that God places upon his people, rather than upon buildings or denominations.

We pray you have been blessed by this teaching.

Remember, continue to test everything. Shalom!

For more on this and other teachings, please visit us at www.testeverything.net

Shalom, and may Yahweh bless you in walking in the whole Word of God.

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