

SABBATH THOUGHT 2023-02-25—EKKLESIA OF GOD

May God bless you on His Sabbath day!

A friend reminded me recently about a word in the NT that has been mistranslated almost as long as English Bibles have existed. It is the Greek word *ekklesia*, which has been universally translated as *church*. While many understand this, the problem is that word *church* redefines and obscures our relationship with God the Father and Jesus Christ. First, look at the meaning of the word *church*:

DEFINITION OF CHURCH:

- A **building** used for Christian worship.
- A particular Christian **organization**, typically one with its own clergy [*or ministry—author’s comment*], buildings, and distinctive doctrines.
- An institutionalized religion as a political or **social** force.

To appreciate why *church* is a completely inappropriate translation for *ekklesia* requires understanding both the meaning of the Greek as well as an historical perspective. Here is the definition of *ekklesia*:

DEFINITION OF EKKLESIA:

- Literally—“a calling out.”
- Concretely—“a called out assembly.”
- In actual biblical usage—designates a group of people who were summoned to a gathering.

Ekklesia means a called out assembly. If a church was the intended meaning in Scripture, then something similar to the Greek word *kyriakon* (“house of the Lord”) would have been used. However, the Greek word *ekklesia* **never** refers to a building, organization, or denomination. When William Tyndale first translated the NT in 1526, he used the word *congregation*, which properly infers a sense of assembling according to a summons because *congregate* means “the action of gathering together.” This use of *congregation* was maintained with the publishing of Matthew’s Bible in 1537 as well as the Great Bible in 1539.

However, a Swiss follower of John Calvin started emphasizing the word *church* in 1556 to promote a Protestant hierarchical and authoritative church organization. This influenced the 1557 Geneva NT to translate *ekklesia* as *church* and it has remained a corruption of English Bibles ever since, including the venerable King James Version.

The proper meaning of *ekklesia* as “a calling out” (a summons or invitation) also implies that there is someone who does the calling. Obviously, it is God who calls His people¹:

ACTS 2:39 For the promise is to you and to your children, and to all those who are afar off, **as many as the Lord our God may call.**”

Because our calling is from the one true God, there are no DIVISIONS among His children. This is **embodied** in the meaning of *ekklesia* and upheld by Scripture²:

ROMANS 12:4-5 For even as we have **many members [parts of the body] in one body**, but all members [parts of the body] do not have the same function; 5 Likewise, **we, being many [parts of the body], are one body in Christ**, and each one members of one another.

The word translated *members* does not refer to someone associated with a group, it means a limb or body part. There should be a oneness of the people who are called by God (the whole point of 1 Corinthians 12:12-25). In every respect *ekklesia* refers to all who are called by God to come assemble before Him. The word *church* **never** describes the true body of believers. It might seem bad enough that all Bibles translate *ekklesia* as *church*, but the real evil is that it divides the true believers according to a building, organization, or denomination that sets up **men** between them and God!

Ekklesia originally had roots in the “assembly of the congregation³,” which was what the ancient Israelites were called by God during the Exodus. *Ekklesia* is formed by two Greek words: *ek* (*out*) and *kaleo* (*called*). In most cases, *ekklesia* is a reference to those who are called or invited by God, chosen out of this evil world, and who then assemble before Him. In contrast with the OT, God BROUGHT the ancient Israelites out of Egypt—many against their will. But those of the NT covenant are INVITED by God as is the case in the wedding supper⁴. Those who respond are then chosen by Him to leave the ways of this world and be faithful unto God⁵ alone.

In contrast, *church* always refers to a building, organization, or denomination in English. **By definition, the word church divides people (i.e., as congregants in a particular building), through an alliance with a particular association (i.e., members of an organization), or by doctrinal differences. The word church always separates people into exclusive divisions that are established and organized by men.**

In all regards, those of the *ekklesia* are not bound or grouped by any person, building, organization, or denomination. A proper translation of *ekklesia* is “called out ones” or

¹ See also Rom. 8:28; 9:11; 11:29; 1 Cor. 1:9; 7:17; Phil. 3:14; 1 Thess. 2:12; 4:7; 2 Thess. 1:11; Heb. 5:4; 1 Pet. 5:10; 2 Pet. 1:3.

² See also 1 Cor. 1:2; 10:17; 12:12-25; Eph. 2:16; 4:4; Col. 3:15.

³ The Hebrew influence for *ekklesia* is found in the words *miqra'* (H4744) = convocation, lit. “a called out assembly” and *qara'* (H7121) = proclaim, lit. “to call out.”

⁴ Matt. 22:1-8.

⁵ Rev. 17:14.

“called out assembly” with the implication that they are called by God. They are not **members** of the Body of Christ, but **belong** to it. A membership requires applying for permission to join a group. Belonging means “to be **rightly placed**.” The reason that the *ekklesia* are not **members** of an organization is that they BELONG to God—we were purchased by Him through the blood sacrifice of His Son, Jesus Christ.

I know that all of this has been rather technical and is likely becoming an antidote for insomnia. However, the point about all of this is that it is a serious problem if we have a separatist mentality when it comes to God’s people. The **true *ekklesia* belong to God**. No person, building, organization, or denomination of men should stand between us and God. We are purchased by God with the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Paul said it best when it comes to how we THINK of those who are **members** of a church vs. **belonging** to God:

1 CORINTHIANS 7:23 *For you were bought with a price. **Do not become slaves of man.***

There is little anyone can do about all of the wrong translations of *ekklesia* in Bibles, but changing how we speak can make a difference in how we THINK about each other—we are all one Body and we are all purchased and washed by the blood of Christ!

1 CORINTHIANS 10:16-17 The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not **the fellowship of the blood** of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not **the fellowship of the body** of Christ? 17 For we, being many, **are one body and one bread**, because we are all partakers of the bread.

God’s people should NEVER be referred to, or considered to be, a *church*. Whenever someone says they are a member of XYZ Church of God, they are saying that they do not entirely belong to God AND, as a result, are separated and divided from all other churches of God. This is NOT how God views His people. Those who are Christ’s should not place their loyalty, allegiance, or commitment upon any person, building, organization, or denomination because we are no longer a part OF THIS WORLD⁶. There will be no disunity among God’s true children:

JOHN 17:21-23 **That they all may be one**, even as You, Father, *are* in Me, and I in You; **that they also may be one in Us**, in order that the world may believe that You did send Me. 22 And I have given them the glory that You gave to Me, in order **that they may be one**, in the same way *that* We are one: 23 I in them, and You in Me, **that they may be perfected into one**; and that the world may know that You did send Me, and have loved them as You have loved Me.

Perhaps you think I am just being fussy, but words really do matter because language defines our thinking. Consider this: People claiming to be a member of a particular COG rarely associate with other COGs. They declare, many times with feigned sadness, that there are “some” of God’s children in other groups but (there is usually a “but”) they are

⁶ John 17:14, 16.

not doing as great a work of preaching the gospel, do not have as deep an understanding doctrines, are not giving as much of their income, are being fed milk instead of meat, are not as loving, do not provide as well for the brethren, etc.

This attitude is far more destructive toward those who do not (or cannot) associate with a COG. Be honest about this. So-called independents are looked down upon by those in the COGs. Those in the COGs generally view “independent” brethren as spiritually lost souls while those in a COG organization—who are under the authority of **men**—are all but guaranteed to be in the Kingdom. In many regards, the opposite might be closer to the truth because we all must “work out **own** salvation with fear and trembling.” (Phil 2:12).

This attitude has been around at least since WCG—I know because I have attended with a number of different COGs. I have also seen (and committed) the hypocrisy when someone leaves one COG for another. The new group is promoted as having “better” everything—from messages to doctrines to brethren. The real betrayal arises when the brethren in the previous COG are now shunned. This is the result of thinking we are “members” of an organization rather than belonging to the called out Assembly of God:

HEBREWS 12:23 To **the general assembly and [ekklesia = congregation] of the firstborn**, which are written in heaven, and to God the Judge of all, and to the spirits of just men made perfect,

While there are certainly distinct problems within the different *ekklesia* of Revelation 2-3, they were all acknowledged as the *ekklesia*. If we truly believe we belong to the *ekklesia* rather than a church, then boundaries would not exist between ANY of God’s people. It is time to put away “church” thinking and appreciate that the children of God are: the “called out (*ekklesia*) ones,” “chosen of God⁷,” “called to be saints⁸,” belong to the “Body of Christ⁹,” will be the “Bride of Christ¹⁰,” are of the “Household of God¹¹,” et al. Read the scriptures in the footnotes and meditate on the fact that we have all been purchased by the same body and blood as the Passover draws near! The *ekklesia* are those who are called by GOD, chosen by GOD, purchased by GOD, faithful to GOD, belong to GOD, and assemble before GOD. No one enters into the Kingdom of God because they have a membership with a man-made building, organization, or denomination.

May God’s grace and peace be upon you!

Steven Greene

<https://sabbathreflections.org>
sabbathreflections@gmail.com

⁷ Luke 23:35; John 15:19; 1 Cor. 1:27-28; Eph. 1:4; 2 Thess. 2:13; Jas. 2:5; 1 Pet. 2:4, 9; Rev. 17:14.

⁸ Rom. 1:7; 1 Cor. 1:2.

⁹ Rom. 12:5; 1 Cor. 12:12, 27; Eph. 4:12; 5:23; Col 2:17.

¹⁰ Rev. 19:7-9; 21:9; 22:17.

¹¹ Eph. 2:19.