

'Being the Church' – Part 2*'It's all Greek to me!'*

by Rev. Robert Griffith

In our first sermon I encouraged you to stop 'going to Church' and start 'being the Church' and I explained what I meant by that. Of course I was not suggesting we stop gathering together. In fact, the more we understand what *being the Church* really means, then the more important our gatherings will become.

What needs to change is our perspective and our understanding of where these gatherings belong in the much larger picture of the Church. Some have suggested that it needed a global pandemic and the forced closure of all our Church buildings for an extended period of time before we started to seriously explore what being the Church really means. Perhaps that is true.

Of course, **the Church is not where we go or what we do - the Church is who we are.** We will never change the world by 'going to Church' but we can certainly change the world by 'being the Church.' In fact, that is our calling, our purpose and the reason the Church exists. As we saw in the last sermon, in the closing verses of Acts chapter 2 we have a snapshot of what the Church first looked like and we will be looking more closely at those verses in this series because they are foundational.

However, I want us to understand something even more foundational first. If we want to embrace what 'being the Church' really means then we have to understand what the Church is – or is supposed to be and what the Church is not. There is a lot to learn about the Church, but sadly, there are some things we need to unlearn as well.

So where do we go to discover the truth about the true Church – the Church which Jesus established and has been building all these years? The Bible? Of course that's where we go – and rightly so. However, on this issue, that presents us with a significant problem and what I am about to share with you is really important. What is the oldest English Bible Translation we have in the modern era? The King James Translation. Do you know when it was written? It was written over a seven year period and was completed in 1611. Then for over 350 years this was the Bible used by the English speaking world and still today there are millions of Christians who use this translation.

Now we need to understand that the Church had changed a lot before this translation was even published. As I've mentioned before, the Church we read about in the book of Acts changed dramatically less than 300 years after it was formed. In February 313AD, Christianity was declared the official religion of Rome and Emperor Constantine signed the infamous Edict of Milan. At that point everything changed.

Within a few short years the followers of Jesus were no longer meeting in homes and spreading the gospel through an integrated network of relationships and house Churches. They were now part of a State-sanctioned institution and the entire ministry of the Kingdom of God soon centred around gatherings in buildings each Sunday and that's the way it stayed.

So when a group of men (there were no women) sat around a table 1,500 years later debating the meaning of the Hebrew and Greek text as they translated the Scriptures into English, the Church was already very different and they had centuries of tradition flowing through their veins and programming their minds. That partially explains what I am about to tell you.

You see, before we examine what we think the Bible says about the Church we need to understand something which, for some of us may be confronting, but it's really important. The term 'Church' is not actually in the original Greek text.

When the translators of the King James Bible inserted the term 'church' in many places, they were in error. They broke some basic rules of translation and inadvertently **they allowed their experience and understanding of what the Church had become, to influence their description of how the Church really was in the beginning and should still be today**. The consequences of their actions have been very significant. They ended up presenting an alternative picture to what God originally had in mind for the Body of Christ.

Before I go any further, I want to say that I'm not anti-anything and nor am I starting any revolutions or talking about conspiracy theories or undermining the authority of Scriptures. Quite the opposite, in fact. Critically analyzing translations is really important if we want to be true to the original authors and hearers of the Scriptures. I'm sure that all of us want to see the Church of Jesus Christ fulfill the kingdom purposes of God and to see every disciple of Christ reach their potential and be part of the mission of Christ on earth. There is no higher calling. But clearly, that is not happening right now. Look around. Read the news. Examine the world in which we now live. You don't need to be a scholar or a theologian to work that out. The followers of Jesus, whom we call the Church, don't seem to be making much of a dent in the rapid secularization of society and the spread of evil. So something needs to change. Something that is wrong needs to be made right. Something that is missing needs to be found. Something that is holding us back needs to be removed.

The first thing that needs to change is our understanding of the word 'church' in the Bible. The King James translation uses the word 'church' 112 times, having translated the Greek word *ecclesia* to mean *church*. But let's look at the actual word Church in our language. The word comes from the Old English and German word pronounced *kirche*. In Scotland and Northern England it was *kirk* and it meant what we think of as Church. In the earlier Greek it was pronounced *ku-ri-a-kos* or *ku-ri-a-kon*. This is a word that doesn't even remotely resemble the Greek word *ecclesia* which has been translated Church in almost all places. Now the meaning of *ku-ri-a-kos* is understood by its root, *ku-ri-os*, which means *lord*. Therefore, *kuriakos* (i.e., 'church') means '*pertaining to a lord*.' It refers to something that pertains to, or belongs to, a lord.

So the word Church would have been an acceptable translation for the Greek word *kuriakos*. But the translators inserted the word 'Church' in the English versions, even though they were not translating the Greek word *kuriakos*. The word they were supposed to be translating was *ecclesia*. Now even the most liberal translator today would never regard *Church* as an acceptable translation for the Greek word *ecclesia*. This is an entirely different word with an entirely different meaning than *kuriakos*.

The Greek word *kuriakos* actually only appears in the New Testament twice. It can be found first of all in 1 Corinthians 11:20 where it refers to 'the Lord's supper,' and once again in Revelation 1:10 where it speaks of 'the Lord's day.' In both of those cases, it is translated *the Lord's* - not *Church*. Even though the word does not appear again in the New Testament the word *Church* as it has come to be known in the English language has replaced *ecclesia*.

Does any of this really make a difference? Yes it does - if we want our understanding of the Church of Jesus Christ to be what Matthew, Luke, Peter, John and Paul envisioned when they each referred to what we think of as 'Church.' So, today we are going to look at the correct meaning of the word, *ecclesia*.

This Greek word is found in the New Testament approximately 115 times, and that's just in this one grammatical form. It appears also in other forms. There are three exceptions in the King James translation where it is properly translated. They are found in Acts 19:32, 39, 41. Here the translators used the word *assembly* instead of *Church*. But the Greek word is exactly the same as the other 112 entries where *Church* was used. In Acts 19, *ecclesia* is a town council, a civil body of people gathering together in Ephesus.

So you can see that *Church* wouldn't work there as they had nothing to do with gathering as a body of believers in Christ. And yet still 112 other times the translators used the word *Church* when translating *ecclesia*. That should never have happened. The Greek word *ecclesia* is correctly defined as 'the called-out (ones)' The term 'ecc' in Greek means 'out' and 'kaleo' means 'call.' So what did the writers of the New Testament mean when they used the word *ecclesia* to describe the followers of Jesus? Well we already know that many Christian words we use today already existed before Christ and were just given a new meaning when the Church was born. For example the Greek word *euaggelion* is translated *gospel* and simply meant a proclamation. But the New Testament writers used that word to talk specifically about the gospel of Jesus Christ.

So when they chose the word *ecclesia* to describe this new community which came into being on the Day of Pentecost, what did they mean? They obviously meant a community of believers in Christ summoned by God and called out (by Him) from among the Jewish and Roman peoples to come together into a separate community under His Lordship. It meant an autonomous body of believers under the Kingship of Jesus Christ. They would bow to no other king but Jesus. They would obey the rules of the nation so long as they did not conflict with their obedience to their King. They would serve no one but the Lord. That's why these same believers often ran into trouble with rulers, whether it be the Sanhedrin or later kings and rulers. They were arrested, crucified and martyred because they served only King Jesus and not Caesar. This would have been seen as a declaration of war or treason. Such is the way of the 'called out ones' - such is the true Church. Those who came to the Lord had to understand that they were making a serious choice. But they valued an eternity with the Lord over whatever it would cost them in this life.

So Paul and Silas were not 'Church planters' as so many have called them. These men were Kingdom builders! They were not advocating that people find a place to be separate and not influence anyone around them, meeting for a few hours on the weekend, singing a few songs, hearing a sermon and then going home. These men were dethroning Caesar and the whole Roman governmental structure with its Empire class structure. Paul and others taught the principles of a theocracy where God alone ruled as benevolent but holy Sovereign and of family values and the standards of justice and equality, all of which God gave to Israel through Moses.

This was a direct attack on the very foundation of Rome. This was now the work of the Almighty one-and-only God whom they would obey at all costs, even unto death, as their hearts responded to the call to become citizens of Christ's eternal Kingdom and join themselves to the *ecclesia* or community of believers who were 'called out' of the political and cultural status quo to serve the King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

So you can see that the idea of the Church as a group of people meeting in a specific location (or building) as believers doesn't even come close to what the writers of the New Testament were thinking or living! Neither did it have anything to do with denominations of one group believing this but not that, which meant keeping their distance from their fellow believers based on those differences. It would have been heresy to even consider such divisions when the true Church was born. They were one in Christ - there was no other reality. If divisions arose, they sorted them out with firm, Godly leadership under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus Christ sent the believers into the world just as His Father had sent Him. Therefore, it would not be surprising that He told His disciples *"If the world hates you, you know that it has hated Me before it hated you."* (John 15:18). Now you can see why that would be so. Jesus came against the ungodly leadership that was functioning in the temple - men who had their own political agendas and power to protect. When you consider that the early believers for well over 200 years met in homes and were free in their associations with one another, we can see that to have their identity so connected with what takes place in a specific building where most 'Church business' takes place today, would enormously hinder their interaction with and identity within the community around them.

As you already know, the buildings that were instituted by the State and set up by Constantine in 325 A.D. changed everything. Not that buildings are bad. They provide a place for meeting, just as homes do. The buildings themselves are not the real issue, then or now. The problem is the whole idea of 'attending Church' with its rather predictable agenda as part of a non-interactive audience. That is what sucked the life out of the Body of Christ. Such a concept of Church cannot even be compared to the vital, alive, spontaneous, overflowing, passionate commitment to God and each other in the fellowship of 'the called out ones' who know they have been summoned by God to come out of the prevailing society into His Kingdom. History records that time and again they valued this calling more than their own lives.

So I ask you. Do you think God might want to make some changes in the Church we see today before Christ returns? Is it possible that the mission of Christ cannot be fulfilled until we stop going to Church and start being the Church?

Now before you shout 'amen' to quickly, be warned, this is not going to be easy. The real Church I have just described isn't something we can simply say, *"OK, let's be like that."* It will take an internal work of the Holy Spirit, just as it did for the early believers. Our job is to love the Lord with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, love each other with the love of Christ, and be available for God to speak to us, move in us and build that true Church, against which the gates of hell will not prevail. That may mean a complete re-think on our part concerning who we are and what being the Church really means for us.

Brothers and sisters, we live in exciting times. God is on the move. His Spirit is stirring in so many congregations across the world, both large and small, young and old. He is re-introducing His children to their roots. What I have been preaching for many years now is part of the wider matrix of what God is doing elsewhere also. Have we messed up? Yes, we have. Have we gotten it wrong more than we've gotten it right? Of course we have. Have we missed the essence of the New Testament view of the Church by not translating the original text well or not reading it with the Holy Spirit by our side? Most definitely. Can God fix all that and still fulfill His plan and purpose in us and through us? Absolutely!

When Jesus told His disciples about the coming of the Holy Spirit, He said that *"the Spirit will guide you into all truth."* (John 16:13). That is exactly what the Holy Spirit will do, if we let Him. It doesn't matter how many times we get it wrong, we only have to get it right once and God can and will do immeasurably more than all we ask or even imagine. That is His promise!

Friends I want to assure you that 'being the Church' is not complicated. It's not a mountain we can't climb or a river we can't cross. We have exhausted ourselves over many centuries now trying to grow the Church and build an institution – neither of which God ever called us to do! Let me stress that again: **We have exhausted ourselves over many centuries now trying to grow the Church and build an institution – neither of which God ever called us to do!**

God called us to BE. More specifically, God called us to be His. The rest is His job. Jesus Christ will build His Church, it was never our job. Jesus will advance His kingdom on earth as it is in heaven – we cannot do that. Our job is to make choices which are consistent with what the Church really is meant to be and let God do the rest.

Evangelism is not a task we are given to do – evangelism is the natural outflow of a healthy Church.

It is God Who adds to our number daily those who are being saved (Acts 2:47). Our job is to witness to the reality of Christ in us and then disciple those whom God awakens and draws into His eternal Kingdom.

In this teaching series I will not be giving you a list of things to do in order to be the Church. In fact, we may well discover a list of things we need to stop doing or stop believing! Because one of the greatest enemies to 'being' is 'doing' and our western culture has conditioned us from birth to do, do, do, do! God wants to change that, and if we let Him, then we will at last see the Church as it was meant to be. Until next time, I encourage you to meditate upon this simple, yet profound verse every day this coming week:

Proverbs 29:18 *“If people can't see what God is doing, they stumble all over themselves; But when they attend to what He reveals, they are most blessed.”*