

“CHURCH”

Nearly all English speaking people think of the term church in a religious, spiritual context. It is assumed, therefore, that the appearance of this word in our translations of the New Testament is an English rendering of a Greek term inherently religious and spiritual.

In fact, *church* is not actually a translation at all but rather a term coined to convey a religious, spiritual connection and is supplied for the Greek *ekklesia*. However, translated literally, *ekklesia* indicates “...a gathering of citizens called out from their homes into some public place; an assembly...” (Thayer, pp. 195, 196). According to this authority, and others, *ekklesia* was used by the Greeks to describe an assembly of a community’s citizens who were called out to express their views or to be informed on some public matter.

It should not be surprising, then, to find this Greek word rendered in our New Testament by terms other than church. Stephen applied it to the Israelites God delivered from (called out of) Egyptian bondage (Acts 7:38). The King James and American Standard Versions supply the term “church” in this passage. More recent translations accurately use “congregation.”

Silversmiths in Ephesus made their livings fashioning images of the goddess Diana. Paul’s debunking of Diana’s deity upset them, to put it mildly in view of the riotous mob they called out to protest (Acts 19:23-41). Notice that the rioters are described as an assembly, from *ekklesia*, (:32, 41). Trying to defuse the situation, the city’s clerk warned them of Rome’s wrath with such disorder and reminded them that if there were actually legitimate issues to be addressed, lawful assemblies, from *ekklesia*, were available to hear such matters (39).

So, if this term had such a common use among the Greeks, how is it that we find it used in the New Testament with definite reference to what Jesus promised to build, i.e., “My *church*” (Matthew 16:18)? This is difficult if we hold to the idea that Jesus’ church, the church of Christ, is an ecclesiastical institution, an amalgamation, if not a confederation, of local congregations—a denominational concept foreign to the Bible. But it is easy if we understand that the church of Christ’s promise is simply people called by the gospel out of the darkness of sin into the marvelous light God has revealed through his only begotten Son, Jesus Christ (I Peter 2:4-10).

(Series on “church” to be continued)

—Jerry F. Bassett