

'Being the Church' - Part 2

by Rev. Robert Griffith

Last week I encouraged you all to stop *'going to Church'* and start *'being the Church'* and I explained what I meant by that. Of course I was not suggesting you stop gathering together like this. In fact, the more we understand what *being the Church* really means, then the more important our gatherings will become. What will change is our perspective and our understanding of where these gatherings fit in to the much larger picture of the Church. Church is who we are, not where we go and we will never change the world by going to Church. We will only change the world by being the Church!

As we saw last week, in the closing six 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 the weeks ahead because they are foundational. However, I want us to understand something even more foundational first. If we want to understand 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 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. But then for over 350 years, this was the Bible for 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 an 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 sat around a table 1,500 years later debating the meaning of the 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 and 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 allowed their experience and understanding of how 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 had in mind for the Body of Christ.

Now before I go any further, I want to say 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.

Now 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 a dent in the rapid secularization of society and 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. You see, 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 is found once 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 to be what Matthew, Luke, Paul, Peter and John 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'; 'kaleo' means 'call.'

So what, then, 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 Greek word 'euaggelion' is translated gospel and simply meant a proclamation but the New Testament writers used that word to talk 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 than 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, of 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.

Paul and Silas were not 'church planters. 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 message, and then going home. They 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 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.

So you can see that the idea of 'church' as a group of people meeting in a specific location (building) as believers doesn't even come close to what the writers of the New Testament were thinking and 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. They were one in Christ - period! 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 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 aren't the real issue, then or now. The problem is the whole idea of 'attending church' with its rather predictable agenda as part of the non-interactive audience. That is what sucked the life out of the Body. Such a concept of Church cannot even be compared to the vital, alive, spontaneous and 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 before Christ returns?

The 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.

Brothers and sisters, we live in exciting times. God is on the move. His Spirit is stirring in Churches across the world, both large and small, young and old. He is re-introducing His children to their roots. Whether you believe it or not, what I have been preaching here this past two years is part of the wider matrix of what God is doing elsewhere also.

Have we messed up? Yes. Have we gotten it wrong more than right? Of course. Have we missed the essence of the New Testament view of the Church by not translating it well or 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's 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 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. He called us to be His. The rest is His job. He will build His church. He will advance His kingdom on earth as it is in heaven. 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.

"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." (Prov. 29:18)

May we have eyes to see and ears to hear what God is revealing and may we have hearts to respond to what God is doing in our midst right here, right now!