The Greek Word for Church

Introduction

I was recently told the Greek word for 'church'. The problem is: while the Greek word ἐκκλησία ('*ekklesia*') is often translated as 'church', there is in reality no Greek word for 'church'.

To give you some context, a preacher was talking about the church, and explained: "the term for 'church' is the simple Greek word *ekklesia*, meaning the 'assembly of the people' who belong to but are called out of their community."

To be fair, this seems to me to be a good and helpful summary in many ways. But it is also deeply misleading.

In New Testament times, *ekklesia* referred to an assembly or gathering of people who have been 'called out' of a larger group or community – sometimes by themselves, by their own choice, anger or passion. There is deep and important truth here: it is worth spending time studying and meditating upon this.

But, even so, it is misleading to say that '*ekklesia*' is the Greek word for 'church'. It is a Greek word which *can be* translated by the English word 'church', which is a very different thing.

When we say that Greek 'has a word for' some English word or expression, we are starting in the wrong place. Unless, of course, we are wanting to translate some English into Greek – but, when considering the New Testament, this is rarely the case.

When we ask about the Greek word for something, we are starting with the 'something'. We know what we want to say, we know what we mean, and we want to know how it would have been said in the Greek of New Testament times.

I know what you mean – or, at least, I think I do – when you talk about the church. It is tempting to assume that this idea is what the New Testament writers had in their minds when they talk about the church, and then use the Greek to help us gain deeper insight into what we already know about.

But we know, when we think about it, that the New Testament writers did not understand *ekklesia* to mean what we mean by 'church'. For us, a church is a Christian group or building: we do not use the word to refer to a meeting of our local council, or to a riot – but they would have done. In our language, it is a religious term, but in the New Testament it is functional.

You could, possibly, argue that a better Greek term for 'church' is σώματος τοῦ Χριστοῦ – the body of Christ. In any case, the New Testament writers use a wide variety of terms: they talk about the assembly, the body of Christ, God's family, God's field, the holy ones, disciples, followers of the way, and Christians.

We have picked one term and given it primacy, which makes pragmatic sense, but I'm not sure it is a helpful thing to do. In giving one term priority over the others, we have changed the meaning, and in restricting it to a Christian gathering, we have changed the meaning again.

Baptising the Language

Various other New Testament terms have been baptised, Christianised, in this way.

Ironically (or is it inevitably?) the word 'baptise' (βαπτίζω, 'baptizó' in the Greek) has also been baptised. It is an article of faith for many people that you can only be baptised once, but that idea would have been absurd to people in New Testament days – a bit like suggesting that you can only ever join one organisation in your life: you joined the chess club at school so, sorry, you are not allowed to join the cricket club.

'Gospel' (εὐαγγέλιον, 'euaggelion' in the Greek but pronounced 'euangelion') is another example: when we read Mark's opening words, "The beginning of the gospel…," we are expecting a religious message – but the original meaning was simply 'good news', or 'the reward for bringing good news'. This good news was normally about security or politics – it might be good news about victory in a battle, or the announcement of a new ruler on the throne, and this good news recorded by Mark is actually about both.

When the New Testament was written, *euaggelion* was used to describe an important, authoritative official message, possibly of royal origin. Mark is priming his hearers to receive a vital political message, not a religious one: how does that affect the way we read his Gospel?

'Salvation' (σωτηρία, 'soteria' in the Greek) is a religious term these days, although 'saved' is only sometimes religious: the ball can be saved by the goalkeeper, and the company can be saved from bankrupcy by a new investor. But we only ever talk about salvation in religious terms, although (unlike 'church') we are happy to apply it to other faiths.

So when we read the new Testament, we need to remember that when the writers talk about *soteria*, it is not a religious word – even if it is, sometimes, used in a religious context

Grasping the scope

The other key thing to remember is that what we mean today by 'salvation' is only a small part of the meaning of the original Greek: it can refer to deliverance from destruction or danger, recovery of safety, healing, wholeness, health and well being. The meaning of the Greek word encompasses all these things.

When we find *soteria* in the New Testament, we tend to ask: does it mean 'healing' here, or 'rescue' or 'salvation'? Which one of them did the writer mean? But this assumes that the writer had the English concepts at the back of his mind, and was forced to choose an ambiguous Greek word to express his meaning. What the writer had in mind was *soteria*, a word which included all those meanings.

Sometimes, from the context, it is clear that one or other aspect of the meaning is supposed to come to the front – but this selection, if we make it, must come from the context, not from a translator who is being forced to choose between imperfect and limited English alternatives.

And we must remember, when we read about salvation – if we take it to mean deliverance from eternal damnation – then this is an application, a theological interpretation not contained in the actual meaning of the word.

When the New testament was written, *soteria* could mean deliverance from danger or destruction, but a dictionary of the time would not have listed 'deliverance from eternal damnation' alongside the other ways the word was used. Of course, this could be the intended meaning in a specific passage, but you have to establish that from the context: you cannot assume it.

Another word with 'multiple' Greek meanings is *pneuma* (πνεῦμα), which means 'wind', 'breath' or 'spirit'. The Hebrew *ruach* has the same range of meanings. The English translation has to decide from the context which word to use, but the Greek word encompasses all three meanings. When people ask which meaning *pneuma* has in a specific passage, this is missing the point: it means all three.

English people often treat words like *soteria* and *pneuma* as though they were homographs: words which are spelled the same, but have different meanings. In English, two common examples are 'lie' and 'tear': you can lie down at night and lie through your teeth; you can shed a tear when you are sad and tear a piece of paper in two. But homographs have distinct means and usages, while these Greek words each have a meaning which is wider than the English words available to us – in much the same way as the English word 'person' is wider in meaning than the English words 'woman' and 'man' and 'child'.

Textbooks often say that when the 'spirit' is described as 'holy' then it is always the Holy Spirit being referred to – but this is a statement about the way we translate into English, not a statement about the meaning of the text: from the Greek, it would be equally valid to describe the third person of the Trinity as the 'Holy Breath' or the 'Holy Wind'.

Reading the Bible

We say we read the Bible to hear what God is saying to us, but we do not always act as though that were the case. If we wanted to use the Bible to confirm what we already believe, our methodology may not be so very different.

We believe that the Bible is true, so it is very easy for us to take what we 'know' to be true, and assume this is what the passage we are reading means: we naturally impose our beliefs onto the text. It is – usually – not malicious, it's just the way our brains work.

Also, we speak English – so the truth we believe is expressed in English, and we expect to find those English concepts and doctrines in the pages of the Bible. We know what we mean by the words, so we read that meaning back into the text – and, in doing so, distort the text.

And, most of the time, this is fine. We don't need to study ancient Middle Eastern history and new Testament Greek in order to read and make sense of the Bible. God is love; Jesus is God made flesh – you don't need much studying to understand the important things and make the appropriate response. But if we want to move beyond the basics – and, especially, if we want to teach others – then we need to put some effort into understanding the Bible.

Hearing God speak

When we read the Bible with the intention of hearing God speak to us through the text, there is an important sequence to follow. We can't do any of this perfectly, but we can do it as well as possible, given the time and resources available.

- Pray – hearing God speak depends on God speaking and you listening. Be ready to hear, and ready to be guided by the Holy Spirit.
- Understand the words – the grammar and vocabulary, the explicit meanings, the references and associations, the word play, rhythm and rhyme, the use of techniques such as alliteration, repetition, humour, irony and parody.
- Understand the words in their original context – the culture, history, geography, politics, economics, hopes and fears of the people then.
- Understand the passage in its Biblical context – why was this text recorded and preserved, where does it fit within the overall story?
- Understand how the passage speaks to us today – how it applies to our social, cultural and theological context.
- Listen to what God is saying – not just to me, but through me to my family and friends, to my leisure and work, to my community and country.
- Act, or determine to act, on what God says – we do not encounter God to satisfy our intellectual curiosity. Study must result in changed lives, or it is futile.

One action we can take is to consider changing our jargon: the words we use are charged with both meaning and associations. To give an example we touched on earlier: we have picked one term for God's people, 'church', and given it primacy. This is an understandable thing to do, but it may not be a helpful thing. I wonder what difference it would make if, instead of saying 'church', we decided to say 'family of God' or 'body of Christ'?

I have a few techniques to use when seeking to allow the text to speak to me, a few questions I ask myself.

- If this was the first time I saw these words, if I was coming to them completely fresh, what would I understand them to mean?
- What stands out in this passage? Does the writer draw my attention to some parts? Is there anything surprising, odd, strange, or simply unusual?
- Do I agree with what I read here? Do I like it? Whatever I claim to believe, if I look at my life and what I generally do, does this confirm my actions and lifestyle or challenge them?

Next steps

This was written by Paul Hazelden as a contribution to the *Strong Foundations* exploration. You are welcome to use it and distribute it how you like, but feedback would be appreciated.

- Is it helpful?
- Would you change anything?
- Would you like to talk about how we can learn from each other about how best to follow Jesus where we are?

You can contact me through the web form at mad-bristol or join the conversation on the *Strong Foundations* site.

- Web form: http://mad-bristol.org.uk/contact/
- Strong Foundations: http://strongfoundations.pbworks.com