

Ecclesiastical Government (1st)

(Today we will begin our subject of “Ecclesiastical Government” by looking at some reasons why this subject has become confused and clouded.)

It may be wondered what is meant by “ecclesiastical government”? It is to draw our attention as to how the congregation of God is to be governed. Much discussion has been given regarding this, and one may well find a plethora of writings regarding this subject today. We do not intend to discuss in depths all of the different ideas and opinions presented, though we will try to give a simple overview of the major ones before we try to discuss the primary views between the Protestants and the Baptists.

However, before doing this, one thing should be mentioned. We do not find any such thing as a denomination in the New Testament. The idea of a governmental body ruling over independent congregations is foreign to the Scriptures. Equally, since the New Testament congregation is not anything like the Old Testament under the theonomic rule of the nation of Israel, we must not impose that governmental system on the assembly today. We are under the new covenant and it is not an extension of the old covenant as discussed in previous podcasts. Therefore, denominational headquarters with a ruling structure, imposing laws and regulations as to how a congregation is to function is totally unscriptural. Likewise, under a loose construction of various congregations that are associated together for fellowship purposes, it is unscriptural for a group of ministers or other members to enforce governmental or theological regulations on individual congregations. By this we see that denominationalism as is generally practiced today is totally unscriptural. Naturally, when a group of congregations are likeminded in doctrine and practice they are often denominated, either by themselves or by others, by some term or name. Often the name assigned to an individual congregation will denominate it. For example when a congregation incorporates a word like Baptist, Presbyterian, Methodist, or some other word in its name, it is denominated. Even when using a non-generic name such as “Such and Such Church” it is distinguishing it from all others; that is, it is denominated as not being anything else because the basic definition of denominate according to *Webster’s 1828 Dictionary* is “to name.” In fact, the word itself is of Latin origin which means “to name.” The dictionary further defines the word as follows: “To name; to give a name or epithet to; as, a race of intelligent beings denominated man. Actions are denominated virtuous, or vicious, according to their character.” The reason I am enlarging on the obvious is because some people or congregations will say something like, “I am (or we are) not of a denomination. I (we) don’t belong to anything.” While I understand what is meant by such statements, the fact that they associate with a certain theological ideology or practice, they have denominated themselves as such. Therefore, we need to be clear when we use the word so that we do not mislead those who do not understand the difference. With this being said, allow me to emphasize again that denominationalism and denominational hierarchy as is practiced today among people who profess New Testament Christianity is unbiblical. Scripturally, there is no *highest* ecclesiastical authority. Scripturally, the *only* ecclesiastical authority is the New Testament congregation.

I believe a further confusion regarding this subject is the use of the English word “church” in the New Testament. *Webster’s 1828 Dictionary* gives nine different meanings to this word. For the first and primary definition is “A house consecrated to the worship of God, among Christians; the Lord’s house. This seems to be the original meaning of the word. The Greek, to call out or call together, denotes an assembly or collection. But, Lord, a term applied by the early Christians to Jesus Christ; and the house in which they worshipped was named from the title. So church goods, *bona ecclesiastica*; the Lord’s day, *dies dominica*.”

A Dictionary of the English Language by Joseph E. Worcester, 1864, p. 241, gives the following:

Church, n. [Gr. *κυριακη*, or *κυριακον*; *κυρις*, lord; A.S. *circe*, or *cyrice*; Dut. *kerk*; Ger. *kirche*; Sw. *kyrka*; Dan. *kirke*; Scotch *kirk*. This word appears to have been originally derived from the Greek, through the Anglo-Saxon. The Goths on the Lower Danube, as stated by Dr. Trench, were first converted to Christianity by Greek missionaries from Constantinople, who imparted to them the word *κυριακη* or *κυριακον*, *church*; and the Goths lent the word to other German tribes, including the Anglo-Saxons. “The passage,” says Dr. Trench, “most illustrative of the parentage of the word is from Walafrid Strabo (about 840), who writes thus: ‘Ab ipsis autem Graecis *Kyrch à Kyrios*—et alia multa accepimus. Sicut domus Dei Basilica, i.e. Regia à Rege, sic etiam Kyrica, i.e. Dominica à Domino nuncupatur.’”].

Then Worcester gives the first definition as “A building consecrated to Christian worship and ordinances.”

Even the 1970, Unabridged-Second Edition of the *Webster's New Twentieth Century Dictionary of the English Language* says that this word is “ME. *chirche*, *cherche*; A.S. *circe*, *cyrce*; Late Gr. *kyriakon*, a church, from Gr. *kyriake* (supply *doma*, house), the Lord’s house, from *kyriakos*, belonging to the Lord or Master; *kyrios*, lord, master; *kyros*, supreme power, authority.” Found on page 324.

Since the English word “church” comes from a combination of two Greek words κύριος (lord) and οἶκος (house), how is it that this word was used as a translation of the Greek word ἐκκλησία? This Greek word, according to Joseph Henry Thayer’s *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* is defined as “Properly it means a gathering of citizens called out from their homes into some public place; an assembly; so used 1. among the Greeks from Thucydides (423 B.C.) [c.f. Herodotus (484-408 B.C.) 3, 142] down, an assembly of the people convened at the public place of council for the purpose of deliberating, Acts 19:39. 2. in the Sept. often equiv. to *הַקָּהָל*, the assembly of the Israelites, Judg. 21:8; I Chron. 29:1, etc., esp. when gathered for sacred purposed, Deut. 31:30; Josh. 8:35; etc.; in the N. T. thus in Acts 7:38; Heb. 2:12. 3. any gathering or throng of men assembled by chance or tumultuously; Acts 19:32, 41.” Then Thayer continues by supply the general meanings as under a fourth point designated as the Christian sense. Sadly, many people today supply a meaning to the word derived from the etymology of the word (i.e. ἐκκλησία): ἐκ meaning “out of” and καλέω meaning “to call.” However, Thayer shows that from the time of Thucydides (423 B.C.) and Herodotus (484-408 B.C.) its use and meaning was a gathering of citizens called out from their homes into some public place; an assembly. Additionally, William Tyndale translated the Greek word ἐκκλησία as “congregation” in every place where it is found in the New Testament—one hundred fifteen times.

How is it that this Greek word which means an assembly or congregation of people was translated church? The answer is found in the rules that King James gave the translators. He would not allow some words to be translated. Listen to *Rules 3 and 4* which was given to the translators. “The third rule requires ‘the old ecclesiastical words to be kept,’ such as ‘church’ instead of ‘congregation.’ The fourth rule prescribes, that where a word has different meanings, that is to be preferred which has the general sanction of the most ancient Fathers, regard being had to ‘the propriety of the place, and the analogy of faith.’” *Translators Revived*, Alexander McClure, p. 67. (As a side note, this is also why the Greek word for baptism was not translated dip or immerse instead of being transliterated so that other views could be inferred as to what biblically constitutes New Testament baptism; but that is another subject.) Please do not misunderstand me here because I personally believe that the King James translation is the best English translation of the Holy Scriptures. However, its influence by retaining the Catholic ideology along these lines has gone a long way in clouding the true meaning and idea of ecclesiastical government, as well as other doctrines.

In summary, with the Greek word ἐκκλησία being substituted with the English word church and so many different meanings are assigned to the word church (especially by the so-called ancient fathers, meaning the Catholics), then it is no wonder that there is great confusion not only about ecclesiastical worship and practice, but also why there are different ideas and opinion as to how it should be governed.

If one would read the word congregation or assembly when he sees the English word church in the New Testament, I believe a majority of the confusion associated with this subject would fade away. As was previously indicated, when the word “church” is used today most people do not know what the speaker means by it. Unless the listener knows what the speaker believes (or unless the speaker plainly says what he is talking about) he (i.e. the listener) is left to his own opinion as to what the speaker means.

However, our time is up today. With this introduction to the subject, it should better prepare us to clarify what our Lord would have us to understand about how the congregation is to be governed as we study the New Testament. The Lord willing, we will discuss this further in our next podcast.