

Your Letters



Church or ecclesia?

Brother Peter Cox in his short piece of the above title ([May 2008, p. 99](#)) gives us a useful reminder of how easy it is for words to lose their true meaning in translation. However, I am not persuaded by the assertion that the word 'church' necessarily conveys something radically different from the word 'ecclesia'.

The problem, of course, centres on how words and phrases in the original languages of the Bible should be rendered in our own language, and whether they are better transliterated (that is, taken across unchanged into the second language) rather than being translated. As far as I can think, Scripture offers precious little guidance on this matter. We do find a few transliterations in the New Testament where Hebrew words have been adopted unaltered in the Greek; 'satan' is one which springs to mind. Such transliterations seem pretty rare, however. When the apostles, speaking Greek, quote from Old Testament passages written in Hebrew, they nearly always use ordinary Greek words to do so.

Undoubtedly this increases the chances of diluting the nuances of certain Hebrew words, but provided we identify the source of the quotation, then with the help of our concordances and other study aids we can still identify subtle differences between two or more different words translated the same way (although word-based studies like this do not turn us into language experts). What we can say is that the apostles do not generally seem to have been in the habit of transliterating words into the languages in which they were teaching and preaching. James's approach in James 5:4 to the Hebrew title 'LORD of hosts' is instructive in this regard, because he transliterates 'sabaoth' but, rather than using the actual name of God, substitutes the ordinary Greek word for 'Lord', just as most English translations of the Bible do in fact. This probably gives us an inspired indication of how the apostles treated the name 'Yahweh'.

There is much to be said for carefully choosing words and phrases which most accurately convey Scriptural ideas. But if I read the word 'church' in my English Bible, the last thing I have in mind

is the corrupt religious system of Christendom, and I doubt that many of my Christadelphian brothers and sisters using the word 'church' do either. When I use *any* word, it has the meaning I intend it to have. It is incumbent upon me to make that meaning as plain as possible, thus avoiding any confusion in the minds of the hearers, but I cannot see that there is anything to be gained in singling out particular English words for opprobrium if the sense in which they are used remains obvious.

The etymology of words in the language in which we read the Word of God is surely irrelevant. As we read the Scriptures, there are thousands of English words we pass over without ever stopping to think where they come from. Simply because the apostate religious world uses a certain English word in the wrong sense is not necessarily reason enough to abandon use of that word altogether, provided the meaning we intend is clear. As Brother Cox demonstrates regarding the use of the word *ekklēsia* in Acts 19, the Holy Spirit selects an existing term with hitherto only secular connotations to refer to the body of believers. It is the context on each occasion that determines which meaning is intended; a new word is not invented to distinguish between the two.

If we wish to insist on special treatment for *ekklēsia*, we might like to keep in mind the irony of the fact that the Roman Catholic Church (the very organisation we are trying to distance ourselves from) beat us to it by many centuries. It adopted the word into Latin long before we did so into English—a point which will not have escaped the attention of any of us visiting Rome and seeing the word emblazoned above the front door of the Vatican. If we are advocating use of the word 'ecclesia' at the same time that the pope is using it to describe something very different, then perhaps the English word 'church' is not so problematic after all.

The exhortation towards clarity of speech and thought is a sound one, but I cannot see much merit in frequent transliterations of Hebrew and Greek words, especially when this was evidently not general apostolic practice. The wonderful encouragement we gain from the knowledge that we belong to an ecclesia of those called out from

Gentile darkness comes from us understanding how this word is used in Scripture, not by merely employing it in preference to alternatives. Let us take care, then, that in aiming for maximum clarity we do not in the process make our brother “an offender for a word” (Isa. 29:21).

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