

Tyndale: On the Translation of ‘Ecclesia’ by Congregation

All the words of God are pure and clean, for he is a shield unto all them that put their trust in him. Put thou nothing therefore unto his word, lest he reprove thee, and thou be found a liar.

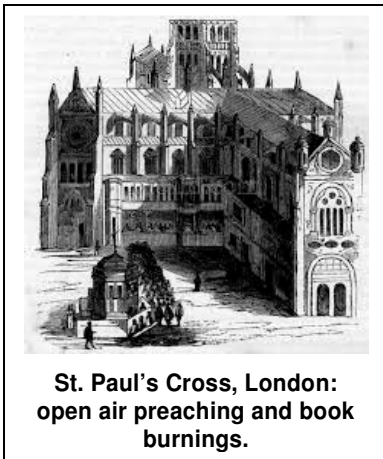
– Proverbs 30:5-6, Matthew Bible

IT WAS late October of 1526 when Tyndale’s New Testament first appeared in England. It was a little book, of a size perfect for holding in the hand, smuggled in from continental Europe where it had been printed. In his afterword, Tyndale wrote that he had translated it in great hardship, but to the best of his ability, as faithfully as he could.

Upon its arrival, Bishop Cuthbert Tunstall, an adviser to King Henry VIII and a staunch Roman Catholic, leapt into action. He issued a condemnation of Tyndale’s work, and denounced him as a Lutheran and a false and crafty Bible translator:

“Many children of iniquity, maintainers of Luther’s sect, blinded through extreme wickedness and wandering from the way of truth and the catholic faith, craftily have translated the New Testament into our English tongue, intermeddling therewith many heretical articles and erroneous opinions ...”

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Tunstall warned that Tyndale’s translation “profaned the hitherto undefiled majesty of holy Scripture with cunning perversities and heretical depravity.”² He staged a burning of the New Testament at Saint Paul’s Cross, and preached a sermon denouncing it as *doctrinam peregrinam* – that is, strange doctrine. Further book burnings would follow.

In 1528, Bishop Tunstall invited Sir Thomas More, who was considered a great scholar, to write against Tyndale, Luther, and other leading Reformers, and gave him permission to read their forbidden works. More took up his pen against the heretics with a zeal that over time assumed shocking proportions. Tyndale was “a hell-hound in the kennel of the devil ... discharging a filthy

foam of blasphemies out of his brutish beastly mouth.”³ Within the year, More produced his first refutation – a lengthy one, in four books. Entitled *Dialogue Concerning Heresies*, it took the form of an imaginary conversation between himself and a naïve young man who was seeking his wise opinions concerning the religious questions of the day. Both Luther and Tyndale were assailed as enemies of the Church and of all decency.

In his *Dialogue*, More uttered many charges against Tyndale’s New Testament to demonize and discredit it. It was calculated to mislead, as, for example, by rendering the Greek ‘*agape*’ by ‘love,’ not ‘charity,’ and ‘*metanoeo*’ by ‘repent’ rather than ‘do penance.’ Worst of all, ‘*ecclesia*’ (or ‘*ekklisia*’) was translated ‘congregation’ rather than ‘church.’ This was all so

bad, so false, that when the authorities burned it, it was not the New Testament they were burning, but a book of devilish Lutheran heresies. It was as “full of errors as the sea is of water ... wilfully mistranslated ... to deceive blind unlearned people.”⁴

Here we will consider one of Tyndale’s devilish heresies.

Tyndale on the translation of ‘ecclesia’ by ‘congregation’

In 1530 Tyndale published his *Answer to Sir Thomas More’s Dialogue*. He gave a lot of space to defending his translation of ‘ecclesia’ by ‘congregation,’ and showed how it was the best and truest rendering. He began by explaining what the Greek word meant. ‘Ecclesia’ was a general, non-specialized, secular term, which pre-dated the apostles and the Christian religion, and which had been used generally in common speech and in the Bible to refer to any sort of meeting or assembly:

Now ‘ecclesia’ is a Greek word, and was in use before the time of the apostles, and taken for a congregation among the heathen, where [there] was no congregation of God or of Christ. And also Luke himself useth ‘ecclesia’ for a church, or congregation, of heathen people three times in one chapter, even in the 19th chapter of the Acts, where Demetrius the goldsmith, or silversmith, had gathered a company against Paul for preaching against idols.⁵

At Acts 19:32, ‘ecclesia’ was used for an impromptu gathering of pagan townspeople in Ephesus. They had assembled to hear the complaints of the goldsmith Demetrius, whose trade in carved and molten images was threatened by Paul’s preaching against idols. Demetrius inflamed the crowd of townfolk with zeal for their idol Diana:

Acts 19:30, 32 in the Matthew Bible When they heard these sayings, they were full of wrath, and cried out saying: Great is Diana of the Ephesians. And all the city was on a roar, and they rushed into the common hall with one assent, and caught ... Paul’s companions.... Some cried one thing, and some another, and the ‘ecclesia’ [WT ‘congregation’] was all out of quiet ...

Later in Acts 19, ‘ecclesia’ is used in the town clerk’s speech with reference first to a lawfully ordered assembly, and then again with reference to the same mob of townfolk:

Acts 19:39-41 in the Matthew Bible Wherefore if Demetrius and the craftsmen which are with him have any [complaint] ... the law is open, and there are rulers; let them accuse one another. If ye go about any other thing, it may be determined in a lawful ‘ecclesia’ [WT ‘congregation’].... And when he had thus spoken, he let the ‘ecclesia’ [WT ‘congregation’] depart.

Interestingly, the Acts passages demonstrate how the English word ‘congregation’ has, since Tyndale’s time, become more specialized, so it no longer serves well in these contexts. But formerly it, like ‘ecclesia,’ was a general word. That is why Sir Thomas More objected to it. He preferred the specialized term ‘church,’ at least with reference to gatherings of Christians. But, since the Greek was a general word that served in all contexts, the truest translation would be correspondingly general. Tyndale explained:

And when [More] saith that ‘congregation’ is a more general term: if it were, it hurteth not, for the circumstance doth ever tell what [sort of] congregation is meant.⁶

Therefore ‘ecclesia’ was a very general word for assemblies, meetings, and gatherings of any sort – orderly or disorderly, formal or informal, religious or secular – and the nature of the gathering must be discerned from the context.

Finally, it ought to be noted that Tyndale never said '*ecclesia*' meant "called-out ones," as some moderns like to say.⁷

The meanings of 'church'

Tyndale also considered the meaning of the English word 'church.' It was not a general or neutral word, but altogether he identified five specialized meanings for it. A sixth sense current today, used in reference to different denominations as Churches in their own right, had not yet arisen; Tyndale would not have spoken of a Protestant Church, or of the Presbyterian or Anglican Churches. When he wrote, the word had the following associations:

(1) '*Church*': a parish

In one use, now obsolete, Tyndale understood 'church' to mean all the members of a community of faith in one place, as in a parish or village, or even land or country. This sense appears in his teaching on Matthew 18:17, "Tell it to the '*ecclesia*.'" Here:

... the 'church' of God or Christ [is] taken in the Scripture [to mean] the whole number of all them that receive the name of Christ to believe in him ... And [as in Matthew 18]: "If thy brother hear thee not, tell the church or congregation," and so forth. In which places, and throughout all the Scripture, the church is taken for the whole number of them that believe in Christ in that place, in that parish, town, city, province, land, or throughout all the world ..."⁸

(2) '*Church*': a gathering place

Tyndale also defined a church wistfully as any place where people had "in the old time" gathered to hear God's word, and for common prayer:

... it signifieth a place or house whither Christian people were wont in the old time to resort at times convenient, for to hear the word of doctrine, the law of God, and the faith of our Saviour Jesus Christ, and how and what to pray, and whence to ask power and strength to live godly. For the officer thereto appointed preached the pure word of God only, and prayed in a tongue that all men understood. And the people hearkened to his prayers, and said thereto "Amen," and prayed with him in their hearts ..."⁹

(3) '*Church*': greater Christendom

In a third sense, 'church' "is sometimes taken generally for all them that embrace the name of Christ, though their faiths be naught, or though they have no faith at all."¹⁰ I understand this to refer to what is called the visible Church, being all of professing Christendom, the wheat and the tares collectively.

(4) '*Church*': the elect

In a fourth and spiritual sense, 'church' is sometimes taken "specially for the elect only, in whose hearts God hath written his law with his Holy Spirit, and given them a feeling faith of the mercy that is in Christ Jesu our Lord."¹¹ This is the invisible church, or body of persons within Christendom who have a genuine saving faith: the 'elect' or chosen ones.

A note on the word 'elect' is in order. It is an obsolete form of the past participle 'elected,' and means 'chosen.' In early modern English, verbs ending in 't' were often formed in the past tense without adding -ed. These are called *absolute participles*. Thus we will find 'lift'

for 'lifted,' or 'create' for 'created.' This form still survives today in some words, as in 'manifest' (= manifested) and 'corrupt' (= corrupted).

(5) 'Church': ministers, monks, prelates and clergy

Lastly, Tyndale described a fifth sense of 'church,' which he saw as pernicious. He explained how, over time, clerics and monks had appropriated the name to themselves. As a result, in the people's mind the 'church' had come to mean monks, friars, and members of the visible ecclesiastical hierarchy, and this had resulted in an inappropriate veneration of the clerical class. Since 'ecclesia' never meant anything like this, 'church' was not only not the best translation, it risked affirming error that had deceived the people:

Wherefore, inasmuch as the clergy (as the nature of those hard and indurate adamant stones is, to draw all to them) had appropriated unto themselves the term that of right is common unto all the whole congregation of those who believe in Christ, and with their false and subtle wiles had beguiled and taken in the people, and brought them into the ignorance of the word, making them understand by this word 'church' nothing but the shaven flock of them that shaved the whole world, therefore in the translation of the new Testament, where I found this word 'ecclesia,' I translated it by this word 'congregation.' [This is why I did] it, and not of any mischievous mind or purpose to establish heresy, as Master More untruly reporteth of me in his *Dialogue*, where he railleth on the translation of the New Testament.¹²

Historian George Park Fisher confirms Tyndale's analysis, and describes the development of the medieval conception of the church (or 'Church'), and how it came to mean the hierarchical institution and its clerics:

The influence of the idea of the Church as the community of the faithful, of the elect children of God, an idea which retained a degree of power in the thoughts of Augustine, continually waned. More and more the Church came to be identified with the visible, hierarchical organization. Patristic authority, running back to Cyprian, and even farther, could be appealed to in support of this principle at the root of the medieval conception; but in the carrying out of this principle there was a wide gulf between the earlier and the later period. The exaltation of the hierarchy, the absolute dependence of the laity upon the priesthood, existed to an extent unknown in the patristic age. The privileges still left to the laity in the concerns of the soul are so scanty as to be the exception that proves the rule. Significant of the state of thought that had long existed is the language of Philip the Fair in his indignant answer to the haughty rebuke of Boniface VIII: "Holy Mother Church, the Spouse of Christ, is composed not only of clergymen, but also of laymen."¹³

Of grievous concern to Tyndale was the misuse of ill-gotten wealth by clergy, monks, and prelates (whom Tyndale often called the 'spirituality,' as here):

What good conscience can there be among our spirituality to gather so great treasure together, and with hypocrisy of their false learning to rob almost every man of house and lands ... seeking in Christ nothing but lucre?¹⁴

Tyndale said the monks and clergy crept into people's consciences, robbed them of the faith of Christ, and caused them to give their money to build new churches and cloisters through a false faith in such works, by which all suffered:

... the building of [churches and steeples] and such like, through the false faith that we have in them, is the decay of all the havens in England, and of all the cities,

towns, highways, and shortly, of the whole commonwealth. For since these false monsters crept up into our consciences, and robbed us of the knowledge of our Saviour Christ, making us believe in such pope-holy works, and to think that there was none other way unto heaven, we have not ceased to build them abbeys, cloisters, colleges, chauntries, and cathedral churches with high steeples, striving and envying one another, who should do most.¹⁵

Therefore, by using 'congregation' in his New Testament, Tyndale was both being faithful to the Greek and avoiding a usage that would contribute to the continuing exploitation or deception of the people. Indeed this, Tyndale's translation, together with his books and writings, have led some to credit him with "breaking the spell attached to the word church,"¹⁶ and "breaking the suffocating power of the medieval church."¹⁷

Tyndale's use of 'congregation' did not mean that he was anti-church; rather, he was anti-apostasy, and longed for a church, place, or congregation where the Scriptures were read and rightly preached. Nor was he averse to a benign use of the word, which he employed himself in some contexts, as in a New Testament commentary where he protested, "We be the church." Here he clearly meant the catholic congregation of true and faithful believers.

In conclusion, Tyndale's concern about 'church' was that it leavened the Scriptures and fostered error. Many people had, and still have, dearly-held and even romanticized ideas of what the 'Church' is. Unfortunately, such notions can be used to beguile people in many ways, and to exploit them not only for covetous ends, but even for murderous ends. This is so in the case of those battles that pit men against men, which make many killers and many martyrs, and are cunningly disguised as battles for the truth, or for the Church, or to protect the dignity and majesty of God. They draw men to take up the sword against others in the name of conscience, though Jesus could not have been clearer, in manifest places, that this was not how his sheep should fight. "Mother Church vs. Heretic" was one such unchristian battle. Then after the Roman Church lost this one, and after 'Church' was put in the Bible,¹⁸ Satan bred another battle under the guise "True Church vs. False Church."

Tyndale's pure translation does not prevent people from thinking, writing, or speaking about the Church (or church) howsoever they will, whether they be right or wrong. However, it keeps God's word right. It avoids adding to it in ways that history has shown may result in pernicious error. It manifestly demonstrates Tyndale's faithfulness in translation.

"Those who take the sword, will die by the sword."

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¹ As quoted in Brian Moynahan, *God's Bestseller: William Tyndale, Thomas More, and the Writing of the English Bible – A Story of Martyrdom and Betrayal* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2002), 100-01.

² *Ibid.*, 101.

³ *Ibid.*, 104.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ William Tyndale, *An Answer to Sir Thomas More's Dialogue*, first published in 1530. Parker Society edition, Ed. Henry Walter, 1850 (Eugene, Oregon: facsimile, Wipf & Stock, 2006), 15. Updated ('thrice' to 'three times,' 'images' to 'idols,' syntax).

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Fenton Hort wrote, "There is no foundation for the widely spread notion that [*ecclesia*] means a people or a number of individual men *called out* of the world or mankind. In itself, the idea is of course entirely Scriptural, and moreover, it is associated with the word and idea 'called,' 'calling,' 'call.' But ... [*ecclesia*] never occurs in a context which suggests this supposed sense to have been present to the writer's mind. Again, it would not have been unnatural if this sense of *calling out* from a larger body had been as it were put into the word in later times, when it had acquired religious associations. But as a matter of fact we do not find that it was so." (Emphasis original.) Fenton John Anthony Hort, *The Christian Ecclesia: A Course of Lectures on the Early History and Early Conceptions of the Ecclesia, and One Sermon*, first published in 1897 (Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 2005), from www.ccel.org/ccel/hort/ecclesia.html, 8-9. (Extracted July 20, 2005.)

⁸ Tyndale, *Answer*, 12-13. Updated ('multitude' to 'number').

⁹ Ibid., 11.

¹⁰ Ibid., 13.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid., 13-14. See also 12. Updated ('mocked' to 'taken in,' 'shored' to 'shaved,' 'interpreted' to 'translated').

¹³ George Park Fisher, *History of Christian Doctrine* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1909), 251.

¹⁴ William Tyndale, *The Obedience of a Christian Man*, first published in 1528 in Antwerp, Ed. David Daniell (Penguin Books, 2000), 51. The term 'spirituality' for clerics was in common use.

¹⁵ Tyndale, *Answer*, 78.

¹⁶ Brooke Foss Westcott, *History of the English Bible*, 2nd ed. (London: MacMillan and Co., 1872), 173.

¹⁷ Patrick Whitten, "Tyndale at the Huntington," *The Tyndale Society Journal*, No. 45 (Summer 2015), 22.

¹⁸ The Geneva Bible revisers were the first to give Sir Thomas More his wish, and to translate '*ecclesia*' by 'Church,' which they capitalized everywhere. In their notes, they also created the distinction 'true Church' vs. 'false Church.' Many lives were lost in the resulting Puritan crusades. Without any doubt, their departure from Tyndale's pure translation was built upon false notions of the Church. This will be explored more in *The Story of the Matthew Bible*.