

Church: the Word that Changed the World

When Jesus chose “ecclesia” (in the Roman Latin; “ekklesia” in the Greek) as the structure He was to give His family, His followers, His believers, after Him, He knew exactly what He had in mind. What’s more, those who heard Him say it also knew what he was talking about because ecclesia was a term for a contemporary entity that they all understood.

What was this “ecclesia,” a version of which Jesus said that He would build as His own and citation of which His listening disciples would immediately understand? Was it a religious institution ... or something else?

There were, in Jesus’ ministry days on earth, two religious institutions that He could have chosen to copy: the temple and the synagogue. He chose to copy neither. No, “Upon the Rock of Myself I will build my *temple*” or “Upon the Rock of Myself I will build my *synagogue*” never left His lips. In fact, He said, “Upon the Rock of Myself I will build my *ecclesia*.”

Oh, but, some might interject, He really meant “church” ... as in, “Upon the Rock of Myself I will build my *church*,” because that’s the way that it is written in most modern English translations (after more enlightened English speakers started “translating” the Word of God) and it’s certainly what the church teaches. For that to be true, there would have had to have been either a church entity in place for Him to copy or He would have spent a lot of time describing this brand-new “church” institution that He was setting up for the first time. Neither is true.

Why, by the way, if church is so important, did Jesus say so little about it in scripture? In point of fact, HE NEVER spoke of “church”; He spoke of his “ecclesia,” and He spoke very little about it because it was so commonly understood at the time that it needed no explanation to His followers.

So what was the ecclesia? The ekklesia was a Greek creation, adopted by the Romans (ecclesia, in Latin) as the assembly (“called out ones” – called out by the emperor) of Roman citizens sent out into a conquered nation to spread the law and culture of his kingdom throughout that nation. It was the means by which the language, law and culture of Rome was thoroughly assimilated until everyone in that land thought and acted like Rome. The ecclesia (individual members) were the delegates of Roman authority, such that whenever two or more of them were in one place together, the very authority of the emperor was there with them. So when Jesus co-opted the Greek/Roman model for His own ecclesia, He knew exactly what He was doing and His contemporary followers knew precisely what He was saying that He was doing. And with the power of the Kingdom of Heaven behind them, they could not lose. That was why the Roman Empire soon became so dead-set against them: they were invincible and could not be turned, for they answered to and were empowered by a far-higher power than Rome.

Fast-forward 300 years. Jesus’ ecclesia, known simply as “The Way,” was thriving in spite of all of Rome’s efforts to wipe them out. So Emperor Constantine cunningly devised a new way of conquering them. He gave Christians back a religious model like Jesus had refused when He chose to pattern after the secular ecclesia model rather than the religious temple or synagogue. With the official recognition of the Roman Empire for their own church (a pagan template),

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Christians would relax. And eventually they would forget about and give up the superior ecclesia model that Jesus had designed for them.

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Like the Israelites of the Old Testament who wanted a king like the pagan nations around them rather than the rule of God through His chosen leaders, Christians traded the ecclesia model wherein they served as God's called out ones, His Kingdom representatives throughout the world, for the man-made hierarchical, liturgical, building-based, tradition-driven religious model that is aptly defined by what we know as "church." And, thus, the adoption of the word "church" changed the world.

It was not a change for the better.

It's more than a word. King James and others who forced the substitution of the word, which has zero derivation from the original word, ecclesia, thereby changed the meaning that Jesus intended. Church was an entity, too, as was ecclesia, but while ecclesia was government (yes, Jesus intends His ecclesia to govern), church was religious and pagan. So the word did not precede the institution, but the word has become so prevalent in people's minds that very few can think of the ecclesia that Jesus established in terms apart from the institution that was designed to consume and replace it.

Church is many things, but it is not ecclesia. It is man-made; it is buildings; it is programs; it is liturgy; it is tradition; it is hierarchy; it is law-based; it is someplace to go and something to do – it is walls and structure and rules and restrictions. In fact, everything that defines church is a description of how it is NOT ecclesia (though, as separate and distinct from the ecclesia, it may CONTAIN some ecclesia). So it's not just a matter of terminology that does not matter.

Now, granted, inside the church may be found some of the ecclesia. Some of God's people are still in there. (And it's not necessarily a bad place to be, as long as we know what it is, and that it, the church, is not the ecclesia.) But how much of their time and energy is consumed by being and doing things that are entirely church (man-made) such that they have no ecclesia energy left in them? Do you suppose the evil one, who is intelligence personified, is pleased by that and could have had something to do with it? And even if we concede that church is good and does a lot of good things, what is the greatest enemy of the best if not the good?

So one primary way that "church" changed the world was by sucking up, absorbing and neutralizing much of the ecclesia for almost 2000 years. Now it is time for the ecclesia to evaluate what role this institution called church can play as a tool in the hands of the true body of Christ – the ecclesia.