



RHYTHMS OF GRACE: A JOURNEY INTO REST

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Dear Fellow Eagles,

I hope you and your family are well, and feeling blessed and encouraged?

Continuing on from the last Eagles' Wings email, I would like to offer some more thoughts on 'church'. I hope you will find these thought-provoking, even if you don't agree with all my conclusions...

The Greek word usually translated church in the NT is *ecclesia* which means 'assembly of called-out ones'. It was a commonly-used secular word in the Greek-Roman world which referred to the gathering of free-men for civic purposes. (We see it referenced in Acts 19.) This assembly was comprised of male citizens only; no females, slaves or offspring of foreigners were included. Participation was thought to be the highest privilege, and the stated purpose was to seek the common good. Those meeting together would discuss matters of civic importance, debate legal reforms, and often in the days of Greek city-states, form strategies for war. In common speech the word was never used of religious meetings. In the New Testament era, general society used such words as *thiasos* and *synagogue* to denote such gatherings.

Ecclesia was also used in the LXX, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament, where it was often selected to translate the Hebrew word *qahal* which means to 'gather or assemble', and referred to a variety of gatherings of the Israelite community. In purpose these were both religious and secular, and could be peaceful or warring, and were sometimes convened by God, at other times by kings, priests or 'commoners'. For this reason it is hard to ascribe special significance to the word *ecclesia* in the OT, other than a specially convened large assembly.

The OE dictionary says that the word *church* which is used in our English Bibles is taken from the Greek phrase *kyriakon doma*, meaning 'the Lord's house', a phrase which is not found in the New Testament, but probably came into use when Christians started meeting in designated buildings in the 3rd century, and then passed into Old English as *cirice* or similar. The word *ecclesia*, or *ecclesiam* (Latin) continued to be used in all Bible translations until 1382, when 'church' was used for the first time, in the ground-breaking English translation of the Bible by John Wycliffe. He apparently paraphrased at this point, using the vernacular term for a religious gathering with its associated building, rather than directly translating the Biblical word.

WHAT IS CHURCH?

03/05/21

And Y seie to thee, that thou art Petre, and on this stoon Y schal bilde my chirche, and the yatis of helle schulen not haue miyt ayens it. (Wycliffe, c1382)

The word *church*, throughout the NT, was finally adopted in 1611 on the orders of King James, who made it a condition of translation for the King James Bible. This probably was because as the assumed ‘divinely appointed’ head of the infant Anglican Church he was establishing his authority over the ‘Lord’s house’.

It is interesting to reflect on *why* Jesus selected the word *ecclesia*, rather than *synagogue*, (an assembly of Jews formally gathered together to offer prayers, and listen to the reading and expositions of the scriptures) or *kyriakon doma* (the Lord’s House) in Matthew 16 & 18. Apparently neither of those terms fit His vision of the ecclesia He was building! Instead, He was thinking of either the varied national gatherings of the Septuagint, or the local civic gatherings of the Roman-Greek world—or perhaps both?

The OT image of the large assembly of the ‘people of Israel’ fits the picture of the spiritual ecclesia Jesus is building from every tribe and tongue, as discussed last time. But the Greek concept of a local *ecclesia* is also worth thinking about: an assembly of called-out, freeborn men whose specific purpose for meeting was to *promote the common good*. (As Christians, we are the called-out ones, all free—and equal; there is no male or female, and no Jew or Gentile, or other racial divide, in God’s community [Gal 3:28]). Synagogues were about withdrawal from general society; what if, in contrast, Jesus’ localised ecclesias are to exist for a purpose outside themselves—for the good of the local community?

In the last email, I suggested that whenever we gather with other believers—however few—Jesus is there in the midst, and that is ‘church’, or ecclesia. What if one of the focuses for that fellowship—and part of our worship—is the blessing of our communities? Traditionally, where this has been practised, it has tended to take the form of church programmes and ‘ministries’. What if we took a softer, more natural approach? What if we adopted local shops or businesses, schools or nursing homes, farms or factories, and prayed for the blessing of God to be released on them? What if we found quiet ways of serving our neighbourhoods, of activating ‘kingdom yeast’ in the community dough?

Through the blessing of the upright a city is exalted, but by the mouth of the wicked it is destroyed. [Proverbs 11:11]

Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper.’[Jeremiah 29:5]

When you enter a house, first say, “Peace to this house”... (or shop, or café!) [Luke 10:5]

I urge, then, first of all, that petitions, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for all people – for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. [1 Timothy 2:1]

What if we asked the Lord for creative ideas about how we can seek the common good in the place where we live? Numbers are not important; this is not about making lots of noise, fighting for a Christian ‘presence’ in a place, or adopting a political agenda; two or three people (plus Jesus) walking in faith, with a heart to bless, can transform a locality.

Truly I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything they ask for, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them.'
[Matthew 18:19,20]

The next email will explore this aspect of *ecclesia* further...

Before I close... these Eagles' Wings emails were started for those who were struggling with ‘church’; I hope different perspectives are causing faith and hope and encouragement to rise for the future? Do let me know how you are getting on!

Please note, the address for the Eagles' Wings page on the website has changed. The new address is:
<https://www.rhythmsofgraceuk.org/eagles-wings-9691.html>

Until next time,
God bless you,
Kate W at Rhythms of Grace