

THE ORIGIN AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE ENGLISH WORD *CHURCH*

One of many English words that evolved from the Greek language is the word *church*. According to Shipley, “The Greeks had at least three words for this. One of them, *ekklesia*, first the general assembly of Athens, became the French *eglise*, church. In English it abides in *ecclesiastic*. Another, *basilike*, gave us the English *basilica*. A third was the Greek *kuriakon doma*, house of the Lord.”¹ The first one above, *ekklesia*, literally means “called out” and is translated “church” in our English Bibles. But the English word *church* itself is a derivative from the last of the three above, *kuriakon*. *Kuriakon* is the accusative, singular, neuter form of the Greek *kuriakos* which is derived from *kurios* that means “lord” or “master.”

Some critics have questioned the authenticity of *kuriakos* in the Bible, since it appears only twice in the New Testament (i.e., 1 Corinthians 11.20, “Lord’s supper”; Revelation 1.10, “Lord’s day”). For this reason, Deissman lists *kuriakos* with what he labels “so-called ‘Jewish-Greek,’ ‘Biblical,’ or ‘New Testament’ words,” and he cites the lexical authorities and says, “Clavis still describes the word as *vox solum biblica et ecclesiastica*, and A. Julicher maintains, indeed, that the Apostle Paul invented this ‘new’ word. On the other hand, Cremer notes the extra-Biblical usage.” Deissmann adds, “*Kuriakos* has been comparatively frequently noticed in Inscriptions and Papyri,” and he gives several examples.² These extra-Biblical appearances, however, fail to produce certainty, because as Skeat points out, “The etymology has been doubted on account of the rareness of the Greek word *kuriakos*.” But Skeat also believes this

¹Joseph T. Shipley, *Dictionary of Word Origins*, 2nd ed. (New York: Philosophical Library, 1945), 80-81.

²G. Adolf Deissmann, *Bible Studies*, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1909), 198, 217.

etymology to be correct, because in his reference to various linguistic relatives of *church*, he states, “All these are borrowed from the Greek *kuriakon*.”³

Others agree with this assessment. McKnight writes, “The word *church*, which came through Latin, but which, like most of the early Christian terms in Latin, is of Greek origin.”⁴

Barfield likewise affirms this view and says, “The fact, for instance, that *hospital*, *parliament*, and *prison* are Latin, while *church* and *school* have come only *through* Latin from the Greek, is typical of the two main divisions into which the classical part of our language falls.”⁵

In reference to the evolution of *kuriakon*, Shipley reasons that “by a long trail over Teutonic Europe (the Romance and Celtic tongues took the word *ekklesia*) came Scottish *kirk* and English *church*.”⁶ Barfield supports this understanding and writes, “And even *church* (another word common to all the Teutonic languages) . . .”⁷ Too, the following equivalents of *church*, taken from Skeat’s work, testify to Teutonic development:

<i>cirice, circe</i>	Anglo-Saxon
<i>kerika, kirika</i>	Old Saxon
<i>kerk</i>	Dutch
<i>kirke</i>	Danish
<i>kyrka</i>	Swedish
<i>kirkja</i>	Icelandic

³Walter W. Skeat, *An Etymological Dictionary of the English Language* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1953), 109.

⁴George Harley McKnight, *English Words and Their Background* (New York: Gordian Press, 1969), 118.

⁵Owen Barfield, *History in English Words*, 2nd ed. (London: Faber and Faber, 1956), 54.

⁶Shipley, *Dictionary of Word Origins*, 81.

⁷Barfield, *History in English Words*, 40.

<i>chiricha</i>	Old High German
<i>kirche</i>	Middle High German
<i>kirche</i>	German

But how did the word get to the British Isles and eventually become part of the English language? Barfield suggests *church* “may have been brought home by German mercenaries on service in the East.”⁸ But Pei says it “came into Anglo-Saxon through the missionaries and developed on English soil.”⁹ Jespersen favors the former, and he writes:

We must not suppose that people were wholly unacquainted with Christianity before they were actually converted, and linguistic evidence points to their knowing, and having had names for, the most striking Christian phenomena centuries before they became Christians themselves. One of the earliest loanwords belonging to this sphere is *church*, OE. *cirice*, *cyrice*, ultimately from Greek *kuriakon*, ‘(house) of the Lord’ or rather the plural *kuriaka*. It has been well remarked that ‘it is by no means necessary that there should have been a single *kirika* in Germany itself; from 313 onwards, Christian churches with their sacred vessels and ornaments were well-known objects of pillage to the German invaders of the Empire. If the first with which these made acquaintance, wherever situated, were called *kuriaka*, it would be quite sufficient to account for their familiarity with the word.’ They knew this word so well that when they became Christians they did not adopt the word universally used in the Latin church.¹⁰

So the word entered England and the English language and evolved in the following manner:

cirice, *circe* (Anglo-Saxon); *cyrice* (Old English); *chirche*, *chireche*, *cherche*, *churche* (Middle English); and finally *church* (Modern English).

⁸Ibid.

⁹Mario Pei, *The Families of Words* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1962), 36.

¹⁰Otto Jespersen, *Growth and Structure of the English Language*, 9th ed. (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, 1938), 41.

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