

Some Notes on Semantics, Illustrated with ἐκκλησία

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In regards to legitimate methodology in terms of language study in general and of lexical semantics in particular, diachronic study and synchronic study are both valid and have their place, but emphasis should always be on synchronic study; diachronic concerns serve, at best, a secondary role in the exegesis of the NT.¹

This has not always been the focus of NT scholars. Past generations have, unfortunately, employed a much more heavily diachronic approach, focusing on “root meanings,” etymology, classical Greek usage, etc. Such an approach is exemplified in a wide range of writers, from the popular level “golden nuggets” of Kenneth Wuest, to the very technical, diachronic focus of much of TDNT (esp. the earlier vols., though there are some notable exceptions among individual writers), to the classic “word study” volumes. Vincent’s comments may serve as representative of this older perspective.

A language ... is a growth out of a people’s life; and its words are not arbitrary symbols fixed by decree and vote, but are struck out, as needed, by incidents and crises. They are

¹ Diachronic study can be very helpful in some historical, sociological, ethnological, and philological contexts. As a matter of fact, you will find some extensive diachronic data later in this paper — though the purpose of it is to demonstrate that such a method is generally unhelpful. The focus of these notes, however, is on NT exegesis. In that context diachronic concerns must play a sharply limited role. The purpose of these notes is not to argue that conclusion. Anyone reading these notes without any previous background on the subject is referred to the discussions of such methodological issues in the next paragraph (listed in a somewhat logical sequence). It should be noted that diachronic study, *relatively speaking*, has more value in OT studies than in the New due largely to the quantity of words which are used infrequently. (There are many more *hapax legomena* in the OT than in the NT.) But even there such study based on cognate languages has varying degrees of value based often on how close in time (note the importance of synchronic concerns here) or how similar the cognate language is (e.g., Ugaritic is more valuable than Arabic). Such study may well provide possible explanations — but they are just that, possible, not certain. The degree of probability varies widely.

Select bibliography: D. A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996); Moisés Silva, *God, Language and Scripture: Reading the Bible in the Light of General Linguistics*, Foundations of Contemporary Interpretation, vol. 4 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990); also reprinted in the combined series volume, *Foundations of Contemporary Interpretation*, ed. M. Silva, 197–280 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996); Moisés Silva, *Biblical Words and Their Meanings: An Introduction to Lexical Semantics*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994); David Alan Black, *Linguistics for Students of New Testament Greek* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988); Peter Cotterell and Max Turner, *Linguistics and Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1989); J. P. Louw, *Semantics of New Testament Greek* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982); Eugene A. Nida and Johannes P. Louw, *Lexical Semantics of the Greek New Testament*, SBL Resources for Biblical Study, vol. 25 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992); and James Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (Oxford Univ. Press, 1961). Also note the brief comments in Daniel Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the NT* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 4–5. Part of the point of including this short bibliography (which could be expanded substantially, esp. with journal articles) is to demonstrate that this is not some novel idea but is “mainstream” methodology among contemporary, working NT exegetes/scholars, both evangelical and critical (though more of those listed here are evangelicals than critical scholars). For what it’s worth, I consider Carson and Silva to be among the top NT scholars in the world today.

the formulas in which new needs and first impressions of external facts spontaneously voice themselves, and into which social customs run. *Hence language becomes more picturesque as we recede toward its earlier forms. Primitive speech is largely figurative; primitive words are pictures.* ... the old words, as they become pressed into the new service and stretched to cover a wider range of meaning, lose their original sharpness of outline. They pass into conventional symbols in the multiform uses of daily speech; they become commonplace factors of a commonplace present, and remain historic only to lexicographers and philologists. *None the less, these words forever carry hidden in their bosom their original pictures and the mark of the blow which struck each into life; and they will show them to him who lovingly questions them concerning their birth and their history.*²

I will not repeat the discussion in the standard sources to demonstrate the fallacy of this approach as one's primary approach to the text of the NT. I would suggest, however, an illustration of how this old diachronic approach has influenced evangelical theology. That illustration pertains to the explanation, often repeated, of the meaning of the word ἐκκλησία. As most who read this paper will already know, the word is often defined as the group of those people who have been called out of the world by God. This is said to be based on the etymology of the word: ἐκκλησία = ἐκ (out of) + καλέω (to call).

Now, I have no quarrel with the theology of that statement. It is palpably true that the church does, indeed, consist of those whom God has called to himself and who are constituted as a group of fellow believers who formerly were part of the world (i.e., the mass of unredeemed humanity in rebellion against God).³ My objection, however, is to the *basis* on which this statement is offered. The *methodology* used is, in my opinion, invalid, and that is not a light matter. Although we have “gotten away with it” in this instance (because the conclusion happens to state a valid theological truth), the method by which one does exegesis and arrives at theological conclusions is vitally important. If the text determines our theology (as I think everyone who accepts the authority of Scripture must admit) rather than our theology determining our understanding of the text, then the method employed can have far-reaching implications. In some instances we may come to orthodox (i.e., biblical) conclusions, but in other instances using an invalid method may result in unorthodox (i.e.,

² M. R. Vincent, *Word Studies in the New Testament*, 4 vols. ([New York]: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1887; reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1946), 1:vii, emphasis added. See similar extravagant language in Milton S. Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, 2d ed. (1883; reprint, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974), 175–76 and in R. C. Trench, *The Study of Words*, 22d ed., rev. A. Mayhew (New York: Macmillan, 1891).

³ This can readily be established *on the clear statement of Scripture* from such passages as Acts 15:14; Rom. 8:30; and John 17:6–26. In none of these texts (or contexts), however, is the word ἐκκλησία used to express this concept. Unbelievers may be *taken* from the Gentiles (λαβεῖν ἐξ ἐθνῶν, Acts 15:14), *called* to salvation (ἐκάλεσεν, Rom. 8:30), or *given* to Christ out of the world (ἔδωκάς μοι ἐκ τοῦ κόσμου, John 17:6), but they are never described as “called out of the world.”

unbiblical) conclusions of greater or lesser magnitude. Method is tremendously important.

So, let's examine this particular argument and method. What are its implications? For representative statements of the diachronic approach to defining ἐκκλησία, consider these, first from an evangelical theology text.

“The word ‘church’ is a translation of a Greek word ‘ekklesia’ and is frequently used of any assembly or congregation of people whether gathered for religious or for political purposes. The word actually means ‘called out ones.’ In early Greece, cities were often ruled by pure democracy in which every citizen in the town would gather together to act upon matters of mutual interest. As they would be called out from their ordinary occupations to an assembly where they could vote, the word came to mean the result of being called out, or those who were thus assembled.”⁴

From closer to the other end of the theological spectrum, a critical scholar argues that “The etymology is both simple and significant. The citizens are the ἑκκληῖται, i.e., those who are summoned and called together by the herald. This teaches us something concerning the biblical and Christian usage, namely, that God in Christ calls men out of the world.”⁵ Such quotes could be multiplied.⁶ It is possible that one of the major sources of these explanations is Trench’s *Synonyms*: “ἡ ἐκκλησία ... was the lawful assembly in a free Greek city of all those possessed of the rights of citizenship, for the transaction of public affairs. That they were *summoned* is expressed in the latter part of the word; that they were summoned *out of* the whole population, a select portion of it, including neither the populace, nor strangers, nor yet those who had forfeited their civic rights, this is expressed in the first. Both the *calling* (the κλησις, Phil. iii. 14; 2 Tim. i. 9), and the *calling out* (the ἐκλογή, Rom. xi. 7; 2 Pet. i. 10), are moments to be

⁴ L. S. Chafer, *Major Bible Themes*, rev. J. F. Walvoord (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974), 237. In a similar, though less elaborate form, “The word *ekklesia*, translated ‘church’... comes from two Greek words: *ek*, ‘out,’ and *kaleo*, ‘to call.’ The two words together mean ‘to call out.’ It follows therefore that *ekklesia* refers to a called-out assembly or a gathering of people” (Robert Lightner, *Evangelical Theology: A Survey and Review* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1986], 227–28). A nearly identical argument is sometimes offered for the OT word קהל (assembly) as well. T. F. Torrance, e.g., traces the meaning and etymology of this word to קול (voice) and concludes that “the OT *qahal* was the community summoned by the Divine Voice, by the Word of God” (“Israel and the Incarnation,” *Judaica* 13 [1957], 1–2, as cited by Barr, *Semantics*, 119). I cannot address this OT issue in the confines of this brief paper; the student who is seriously interested in such things is encouraged to read Barr’s devastating critique of Torrance’s methodology on pp. 120–29.

⁵ Karl Ludwig Schmidt, “καλέω, κτλ.,” *TDNT* 3:513. This quote is from a section of the article discussing the use of ἐκκλησία in the Greek world. It is interesting, however, that after making such an emphatic statement here (“the etymology is ... significant”), later in the article Schmidt minimizes, if not sets aside altogether, this conclusion: “not impossible, but not probable.... We cannot indulge in arbitrary or fanciful etymologizing” (3:530).

⁶ See the quotes appended to this paper.

remembered, when the word is assumed into a higher Christian sense, for in them the chief part of its peculiar adaptation to is augustus lies.⁷

Most seek to draw their support (diachronically) from the practice of the city states in ancient Greece. It is often noted that a herald would summon (ἐκκαλέω) the citizens (ἐκκληῖται) from their homes to gather in a public meeting place. The resulting assembly of citizens who had been thus summoned from their homes was referred to as the ἐκκλησία.

What are we to make of this? First, ἐκκλησία is used to describe the legislative assembly in ancient Greece. This use is present in Thucydides, Plato, Aristotle, etc.⁸ Aristotle uses it to describe such legislative bodies in various times (e.g., Homeric) and cities (e.g., Sparta). In Athens we know that at one time there was both a legislative body of citizens (ἐκκλησία) and a senate (βουλή). There were other terms that were also used for these and similar gatherings such as σύλλογος. But a complication for this approach arises in that ἐκκαλέω is *not* used to describe the summoning of these assemblies. That action is referred to with the verbs συναγείρειν, συνάγειν, συλλέγειν, ἀθροίζειν, ποεῖν, γίγνεται, etc. It is the opposite of διαλύειν, ἀναστήσαι, ἀφιέναι, and ἀναβάλλειν (all of which mean to dissolve or adjourn an assembly). The related verb, ἐκκλησιάζω, normally means to debate or deliberate in assembly. There are a *few* references in which this verb means to convene an assembly. I have found references to only two such, but the only reference which is clear from the information given in L&S (and *DNTT* 1:291) refers to an assembly of *soldiers*: τοὺς αὐτοῦ στρατιώτας (Aen. Tact. 9.1).⁹ The verb ἐκκλησιάζω, however, is not used in the NT. This means that from the extensive (though not exhaustive), representative lists given in the unabridged classical lexicon, *none* provide any evidence for an actual usage of the terminology that supports the claims so often made. There is no reference to or focus on a “calling out from” in connection with any of the related terms in the body of classical literature.

The methodological fallacy here, even from a diachronic perspective, ought to be obvious: a semantic claim is made that has no factual support in actual usage. The only basis is the presumed etymological significance of the compound words. But how do we know that any speaker of ancient Greek ever made such an association? If there is no

⁷ Richard Chenevix Trench, *Synonyms of the New Testament*, 9th ed. (1880; reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953), 1–2. This may well have been a common explanation in the 19th C. since it also appears in Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, 176–77.

⁸ See Liddell & Scott's *Greek-English Lexicon*, 9th ed. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1940–1996), s.v. ἐκκλησία for the relevant citations (the older 8th ed. is also adequate for this documentation).

⁹ The other *possible* reference is D.S. 21.16 where it apparently refers to λαός.

evidence that can be cited, then we are dealing with a “clumsy tool for determining meaning” and we should admit that the “specification of meaning on the sole basis of etymology can never be more than an educated guess.”¹⁰

It might also be worth noting that the verb form καλέω, when prefixed with the preposition ἐν, *changes* the meaning significantly — and in a direction that could not be predicted based simply on the etymology.¹¹ That is, ἐγκαλέω means *to accuse* — scarcely related in any obvious way to calling. With an alpha privative, ἀνεγκλησία/τος means *blameless*, i.e., *cannot be accused*. On the other hand, ἐισκαλέω and ἐκκαλέω are synonymous (both mean *to invite*). We therefore dare not assume that the prepositional meaning is transparent; sometimes it is, sometimes it isn’t.¹² In other words, there is no way to predict what, if any, affect a prepositional prefix will have — and it cannot be assumed on an etymological basis. Only actual usage is a reliable guide.

There is another possible line of argument that might result in a similar conclusion (i.e., defining ἐκκλησία as suggested above), but which is not directly an etymological argument. The suggestion is that particularly in Ephesians this meaning can be demonstrated on the basis of literary allusions through the use of similar sounding words that are frequently associated or repeated throughout the book, that is, a form of paronomasia.¹³ The associated terms suggested are ἐκκλησία and καλέω. I have only heard this argument suggested in conversation and have never read or heard this explanation in any published treatment of ecclesiology or of Ephesians,¹⁴ so I cannot

¹⁰ Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies*, 33.

¹¹ I’m sure someone could devise a creative etiology to explain this seeming anomaly, but would there be any textual evidence to support such a conjecture?

¹² On semantic transparency and opacity, see Silva, *Biblical Words and Their Meanings*, 48.

¹³ *Paronomasia* or *wordplay* is defined as the “use in proximity of words that display similarity of sound with dissimilarity of meaning” (E. L. Greenstein, “Wordplay, Hebrew,” in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. D. Freedman, 6:968–71 [New York: Doubleday, 1992], 6:968). If paronomasia is defined as words that are *dissimilar* in meaning, then it would seem highly unusual to use this as the appropriate category for defining ἐκκλησία on that basis!

E. W. Bullinger’s *Figures of Speech Used in the Bible* (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1898; reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1968) addresses paronomasia on pp. 307–20. He defines this figure as follows: “one word is *placed alongside of another*, which sounds and seems like a repetition of it. But it is not the same; it is only similar.... Two things are emphasized, and our attention is called to this emphasis by the similarity of sound.... The eye or ear is at once attracted by the similarity of sound or appearance, and our attention is thus drawn to a solemn or important statement which would otherwise have been unheeded. Sometimes a great lesson is taught us by this figure; an interpretation is put upon one word by the use of another; or a reason is given in the one for what is referred to by the other. Sometimes a contrast is made; sometimes a thought is added.”

¹⁴ This may only indicate that I have not read with sufficient breadth! (I would be grateful for any references to published sources that have proposed anything similar to what is described here.) On the other hand, it could also indicate a novel or idiosyncratic proposal — and I confess to some degree of skepticism when it comes to novelty in either exegesis or theology.

evaluate it from published sources. Assuming a standard definition of paronomasia (see note 13), what is the evidence in Ephesians for such usage?

We could start by asking what words there are in Ephesians that are cognates of ἐκκλησία (i.e., words from the same root). We could then ask what words there are which sound similar. Then we would need to ask if any of these words are used together¹⁵ in Ephesians or if any of them are used to explain the others (even if not adjacent or in the same sentence — technically this would not be treated as paronomasia, but could be significant nonetheless).

The cognates of ἐκκλησία that are found in Ephesians are καλέω (I call), κληῖς (calling), and παρακαλέω (I exhort). *Similar* words that are *not* cognate include κληρόω (I appoint, receive), κληρονομία (inheritance), and συγκληρονόμος (fellow heir); these are all from the root κλήρος (lot, portion) and are etymologically unrelated to καλέω/ἐκκλησία.¹⁶

So, beginning with the technical definition of paronomasia (similar sounding words that are different in origin), we can observe that *only one* pairing of these sets occur together in Ephesians. This is the use of κληῖς near κληρονομία in 1:18, yet these are in different clauses separated by seven words. It is hypothetically possible that a reader would note a similar sound in these two words, but this is not the normal position for paronomastic pairs. If it *were* considered significant (which I doubt), it might be possible to draw some remote associations between one's calling and one's inheritance. (Those two words have some conceptual relationship.) But this says nothing about the meaning of ἐκκλησία.

The other possibility is for cognate words to occur together. Although this is not technically classed as paronomasia, it might be considered significant in some way. There are two such pairings in Ephesians. The first such collocation of words from the same root occurs in 4:1 where καλέω, κληῖς, and παρακαλέω all occur together. Although this is not paronomasia, it probably *is* significant that καλέω and κληῖς occur together in this verse.¹⁷ The verb and noun form of the same root definitely are juxtaposed in a noticeable way here: τῆς κλήσεως ἧς ἐκλήθητε (the calling with which

¹⁵ This is the way in which paronomasia would normally be understood — the paronomastic word pairs would be side-by-side or at least in the same phrase, clause, or sentence, not scattered throughout a literary corpus.

¹⁶ J. Harold Greenlee, *A New Testament Greek Morpheme Lexicon* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), 196–97, 202; see also 42, 67, 74; TDNT 3:487, 758. A concordance of these terms gives the following locations in Ephesians: ἐκκλησία (9×): 1:22; 3:10, 21; 5:23, 24, 25, 27, 29, 32; καλέω (2×): 4:1, 4; κληῖς (3×): 1:18; 4:1, 4; παρακαλέω (2×): 4:1; 6:22; κληρόω (1×): 1:11; κληρονομία (3×): 1:14, 18; 5:5; and συγκληρονόμος (1×): 3:6.

¹⁷ The relevance of παρακαλέω occurring in the same verse seems remote at best since it communicates a different semantic field than either of the other two words.

you were called).¹⁸ But what is its semantic significance? It probably can be said to serve as emphasis, but there is certainly no definition involved — they are the same word (though one in verbal and the other in nominal form). And there is still no help for understanding ἐκκλησία which does not even occur in this paragraph. (It does occur in the preceding paragraph, but with a major break [ἀμήν] in between. It seems quite arbitrary to assume any semantic connection at this point.) There is a second such expression in 4:4 where καλέω and κλησιν occur together again. The conclusion is similar, though the words are separated further here (six intervening words) and the collocation is not so obvious — and in any case the repetition seems less semantically helpful.

The above examples are the *only* instances of the words under consideration being paired in Ephesians. There are only *three* instances, only one of which is probably significant — and that is unrelated to ἐκκλησία. The word ἐκκλησία is not used in conjunction with *any* of its cognates or with the other three words that might be thought to sound similar. They never occur in the same sentence, and never in close proximity to each other. The argument of the book never hinges on the reader associating these terms.

Perhaps there would be more grounds for connecting ἐκκλησία with various derivative terms in Ephesians if Paul had used ἔκκλητος/ἐκκαλέω instead of simply κλησιν/καλέω since ἔκκλητος is used (though rarely) as the designation for members of an ἐκκλησία in classical Greece (e.g. Xenoph. *Hist. Graec.*, II.4.38; see also Eur. *Or.*, 949).¹⁹ The major difference in this usage, however, is that the Greek citizens are explicitly designated as ἔκκλητος *by virtue of their membership in a political/national assembly* (ἐκκλησία). By contrast, neither Ephesians nor any other of the epistles ever make this connection. Paul does discuss ἡ ἐκκλησία extensively and he also refers to Christians as those who have been called (κλησιν /καλέω), but he never connects the two concepts or even discusses/uses them in the same paragraph.

In NT, especially Pauline usage, κλησιν /καλέω are technical terms related, not to ecclesiology, but to soteriology. These terms are most closely related in conceptual reference to the term regeneration (παλιγγενεσία). The fact that one must be saved in order to be a member of ἡ ἐκκλησία ἥτις ἐστὶν τὸ σῶμα αὐτοῦ says nothing about the *meaning* of the term ἐκκλησία any more than the terms “memory” or “chips” tell us anything about the *meaning* of the word “computer” — even though every computer

¹⁸ Note that ἐκλήθητε is an aorist passive form of καλέω, not a form of the word ἐκκαλέω or ἐκκλησία.

¹⁹ TDNT 3:530.

must contain both of these and without which there could not be a computer.²⁰ Using such an argument to define ἐκκλησία confuses lexical semantics with theological description.

But perhaps this is being too technical. Perhaps we are just supposed to assume that a reader would notice that there were similar sounds repeated in the text and conclude from this that it must be semantically significant. That is, forget the technical definition of paronomasia, forget the philological/morphological relationships (or lack of them), and just play on the similar phonology.

First, is that a valid assumption for *any* language? Are speakers/writers really that subtle in communicating meaning? The massive amount of linguistic study done in the 20th C. has demonstrated that far from using subtle nuances to discriminate semantic values, languages use significant quantities of redundancy.²¹ Although he is addressing a grammatical instead of a phonological point (in this case, the significance of verb tense), the following principle as stated by Silva is very relevant here. “No reasonable writer would seek to express a major point by leaning on a subtle grammatical distinction — especially if it is a point not otherwise clear from the whole context (and if it is clear from the context, then the grammatical subtlety plays at best a secondary role in exegesis).”²² If an isolated grammatical feature is not determinative in interpretation — and this when there is an explicit form in the text to discuss — how much more is this relevant to the association of similar (but widely scattered) sounds that are not explicitly connected in the text?

Second, are these presumed similarities used in such a way in the text (in this case, in Ephesians) that a reader would have some way to check his “hunch” that there was some form of phonetic word association going on here? In the examples cited above, most of the proposed words are widely scattered.²³ Other than one or two examples (as noted above), most are never related to each other in any contextual way.

²⁰ Yes, I know, the original computer was built with vacuum tubes. I am referring to desktop computers as we presently know them. Perhaps there will be some other technology that does not use chips in the future. But this is just an illustration!

²¹ Martin Joos, “Semantic Axiom Number One,” *Language* 48 (1972): 257–65. See also Buist Fanning, *Verbal Aspect in NT Greek*, Oxford Theological Monographs (Oxford: Clarendon, 1990), 82 and Silva, *God, Language and Scripture*, 56.

²² Silva, *God, Language and Scripture*, 115. He makes the same point using a semantic illustration in *Biblical Words and Their Meanings*, 153–58.

²³ The word distribution is interesting: ἐκκλησία occurs only once in Eph. 1, twice in ch. 3, and six times in 5:23–33; καλέω is found in none of these chapters, occurring only twice in ch. 4; κλησιν occurs once in ch. 1 (the closest proximity to any occurrence of ἐκκλησία, but several sentences and almost 90 words apart; NA²⁷ also marks a subparagraph break in between) and twice in ch. 4. Although the occurrence of a specific word is not necessary for the subject matter to relate to a specific theological concept, the lack of any of these various cognates in the same

Third, would this work for any other similar phonetic pairings in the book? Here we must get somewhat speculative and hypothetical. But what if we took the time to list other similar sounding word pairs in Ephesians. Would the result be of any semantic or exegetical value? Judge for yourself. The following sets all have as much similarity in sound as do the proposed ἐκκλησία, καλέω, κλήσις, παρακαλέω, κληρώ, and κληρονομία.²⁴

γέ, γῆ (γῆς), γάρ
 γίνομαι (γίνεσθε, κτλ.), γινώσκω (γινώσκοτες)
 εὐδοκία (εὐδοκίαν), εὐλογία (εὐλογία), εὐωδία (εὐωδίας)
 καινός (καινόν), καιρός (καιρόν, κτλ.)
 κραυγή, κρυφή
 μακράν, μᾶλλον
 ναός (ναόν), νεκρός (νεκρούς, νεκρῶν), νήπιος, νήπιοι
 κοπιάω (κοπιάτω), κραταιόω (κραταιωθῆναι)
 γνωρίζω (γνωρίσαι, κτλ.), ριζόω (ἐρριζωμένοι), περιζώννυμι (περιζωσάμενοι)

Or, if we include similar sounding endings, we could add:²⁵

καλέω, καταργέω, κατοικέω
 μυστήριον, κατοικητήριον

All of these occur in Ephesians, some of them equally frequently as the proposed καλέω group, others less so (e.g., γίνομαι, γινώσκω occur 8 and 3 times respectively in Ephesians).²⁶ But do any of them provide any valid semantic information that helps one understand the words involved? The answer is (I hope!) obviously, no. It tells us nothing semantic to recognize that *knowing* (γίνομαι) and *becoming* (γινώσκω) sound

sections of the book raises serious doubts about any authorial intention that these words be viewed as in any way semantically related simply on a philological or phonetic basis.

²⁴ Inflected forms are given in parentheses; in some cases both the lexical and inflected forms occur in Ephesians.

²⁵ And we could even dress these up with fancy, technical names: perhaps homoeoteleuton, homoeorptoton, or paromoeosis (see Bullinger, *Figures of Speech*, 176–79). If we used common noun endings, the potential matches could rise considerably. As one example: υἰοθεσίαν, αἰχμαλωσίαν, ἐργασίαν, θυσίαν. If we used lexical forms instead of the inflected forms found in the text, we could add others (e.g., κληρώ, κλέπτω).

²⁶ Even if some of these pairs were rejected as too “loose” (I’ve deliberately tried to be “generous” to find any possible matches that might be proposed) it is certain that at least some are equal or better matches phonetically than those words proposed as definitive of ἐκκλησία.

like they are related to the same root.²⁷ A poet might use this assonance to create the “sound” of his poetry or for rhetorical effect, but even in poetry this is not normally a semantic device.²⁸

Even words which *are* etymologically related in that they are formed from the same root do not help explain each other. In Ephesians we find both πρόθεσις and ἀποτίθημι— both built on the root *θε, as well as θυμός and ἐπιθυμία — both from the root *θυ (the base verb form is θύω). Neither of these pairs are mutually explanatory, however. Despite the fact that these forms occur multiple times in Ephesians, there is no contextual evidence that Paul intended them to be used to understand each other.

Now perhaps there is some possible combination or explanation that I have overlooked, but I’ve tried to make the suggestion work in any combination I could think of, to no avail.

There is simply no such valid methodology that can be used for semantic, exegetical purposes in the NT studies or in theology. Our priority must always be on context. Context is King.²⁹ We must base our exegesis and our theology on the explicit statements of Scripture.

Many of the same conclusions which are in fact reached could be reached from actual *statements* made explicitly in OT and NT and without the attempt to draw evidence from the significance of particular *words*. In other words, what may be a good theological case is spoiled by bad linguistic argument; and is not supported by actual exegetical argument from texts which say things from which the general thesis could be supported.³⁰

Addendum

²⁷ These two words (γίνομαι, γινώσκω) technically have different stems and roots. The root/stem of γίνομαι is *γεν. The root of γινώσκω is *γνω, with present stem *γινωσκ, and aorist stem *γεν. They are only superficially similar in the present tense — though they certainly sound similar.

²⁸ In Hebrew poetry, which is based on parallelism of one sort or another, word plays are not infrequent. But in the NT there is very, very little poetry. We should not thus assume that what *might* be significant in an OT poetic text has similar significance in a NT text. The differences in genre are considerable. Word plays are also found in narrative in the OT, but even there the *function* of this literary device is not semantic, but rhetorical (see Greenstein, “Wordplay,” ABD 6:970).

²⁹ The occurrence of widely scattered forms in the same NT book that may sound similar is *not* a contextual argument. If anything, it creates a false sense of context by attempting to connect words (and their surrounding statements) that are not connected syntactically or by any formal discourse structure.

³⁰ Barr, *Semantics*, 127. In context, Barr’s comments relate specifically to arguments such as are discussed in this paper regarding the meaning of ἑκκλησία and ἐκκλησία.

What then of a positive explanation of ἐκκλησία? Although this draft cannot develop it in detail, allow the following quotations from *TDNT* to serve as a starting point for your own further study.

Constitutive for the Christian ἐκκλησία within Greek usage is the line from the Septuagint to the NT. Only on this line does the word take on its particular significance. Once the correspondence between the OT and the NT ἐκκλησία had become clear to those who derived from Judaism and yet also transcended it, this connection provided direction and force.³¹

The decisive thing is the genealogical derivation of ἐκκλησία from the Gk. Bible [i.e., the LXX]. No new term was used for the Church, just as κύριος was no new term for God. These considerations do not make it mathematically certain that the Gk. Bible is alone decisive in respect of ἐκκλησία or *ecclesia*. But there is a high degree of probability that when the Latins adopted the Greek term they felt the need not merely for a term which Greek Christians had taken from their own vocabulary but for one which had a sacred history in the sacred Book (515).

It may be asked, and has been asked, who was the first in the early Christian movement to use ἐκκλησία. ... It seems difficult ... to fix on a single individual. More probably the term was used by Greek-speaking Jewish Christians, who came from the Hellenistic Synagogue and who attached to themselves Gentile Christians, thus forming congregations after the pattern of the Hellenistic Synagogue. Originally Jews, these Hellenistic Christians knew the LXX. They no longer called themselves συναγωγή ... but ἐκκλησία. As Christians, they adopted an expression which was no longer used very much by Jews. In contrast to LXX usage, συναγωγή was increasingly acquiring a restricted and local sense. This was an argument in favour of ἐκκλησία. In Greek terms, this was also a more significant word (516–17).

If by way of the LXX the NT ἐκκλησία is the fulfillment of the OT לְקָרָא, and if אֲרָצָא, ³² which represents this לְקָרָא, has also to be considered as an equivalent, there is no point in laying particular stress on the derivation of the noun ἐκκλησία from the verb ἐκκαλεῖν and the related adjective ἑκκλητος. In this respect it is significant that neither ἐκκαλεῖν nor ἑκκλητος occurs in the NT (530).

Whether Paul and other Greek speaking Christians were thinking of those “called forth” when they used the word ἐκκλησία, we cannot tell. It is not impossible, but not probable.... If we are to grasp the true sense, we cannot indulge in arbitrary or fanciful etymologizing; we must study the *usus* and *abusus* of the word. There are theologians who emphasise the similarity between *Sünde* [sin] and *Sonderung* [separation] to show that sin is separation from God, and this makes sense in German. There are also philosophers who interpret *Zufall* (chance) existentially as *Zu-fall* (what befalls), which

³¹ K. L. Schmidt, *TDNT* 3:514. Further quotations are identified only by a parenthetical page number in the text. The point of these quotations is more significant than at first appears in that *TDNT* is one of the classic diachronic word study tools. Yet here this particular writer is arguing *against* such diachronic conclusions on the basis of largely synchronic considerations (though he does not use those terms).

³² An Aramaic word; the modern form is *Knesset*, the name of Israel's parliament.

is quite artificial even in German. But at root these are more or less pseudo-philological considerations though they may convey sound ideas.... Ἐκκλησία is in fact the group of men called out of the world by God even though we do not take express note of the ἐξ. The original קָהָל לַיהוָה [sic?³³] already bears the same sense, and it does not give linguistic expression to the “out of” (530–31).

Other Theology Quotations

(Some of these simply illustrate the widespread etymological fallacy discussed above; others provide supplemental discussion.)

Negative Examples

- “The English word ‘Church’ is the translation of the Greek word ‘ecclesia’ which means ‘called out.’” It was used of an assembly or congregation that might be called out for various purposes. The significance of this term as used in the New Testament is twofold. It refers to those who are called out from among the nations as a people for his name who constitute the Church, the Body of Christ. In this sense it is an organism. It also refers to those who are called out of any given community to carry out the principles and precepts of Christ found in the New Testament, as a body of Christians. In this sense it is an organization” (Bancroft, *Elemental Theology*, 237; 2d ed. = 305).
- “The word ‘ekklesia’ is derived from ‘ek,’ out, and ‘kaleo,’ to call, denoting in good Greek usage the assembly of citizens when called out from their homes to gathering places for the discussion of public business” (Bancroft, *Christian Theology*, 260).
- “The New Testament word ‘church’ (Gk. *ekklesia*, a ‘called out’ assembly) has both secular and sacred meanings, depending upon its context” (Barackman, *Practical Christian Theology*, 285).
- “The English word *church* also translates the Greek word *ekklesia*, which is derived from *ek*, meaning ‘out of,’ and *kaleo*, which means ‘to call,’ hence, the church is ‘a called out group’ (Paul Enns, *Moody handbook of Theology*, 347).
- “*Ekklesia* is derived from the Greek *ek* (‘out of’) and *kaleo* (‘called’), hence, ‘called out of.’ ... The areas from which the word was drawn point out the shades of meanings impregnated into it. Whether or not the primitive church was fully aware of this full-orbed meaning when it first used *ekklesia* may be debatable; nevertheless, as the church expanded its life in the world, the term *ekklesia* grew with it because of its inherent potential of meaning” (D. Smith in *Contmp. Wesleyan Theology*, ed. Carter, 2:576–77).
- See also William Evans, *The Great Doctrines of the Bible*, 182.

Positive Examples

- “The preposition *ek* in *ekklesia* (*ekkaleo*) is often interpreted to mean ‘out from among the common mass of the people,’ and to indicate in connection with the Scriptural use of *ekklesia*, that the Church consists of the elect, called out of the world of humanity. This interpretation is rather doubtful, however, for the preposition originally simply denoted that the Greek citizens were called out of their homes. Now it would not have been unnatural if that entirely Scriptural idea had been put into the word in God’s revelation.

³³ This form should, perhaps, be קָהָל לַיהוָה — this is the form that normally appears in the OT for “assembly of the Lord” (e.g., Num. 16:3).

But, as a matter of fact, we have no proof that this was actually done. The compound verb *ekkalew* is never so used, and the word *ekklesia* never occurs in a context which suggests the presence of that particular thought in the mind of the writer” (Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*⁴ [1941], 556). [Note the semantic and theological method evident in Berkhof’s statement; this is the correct approach—even if he does assume that there was some significance to the prefixed preposition in classical Greek, he does not make this theologically determinative since there is no contextual evidence to support it.]

- “The word translated ‘church’ in the New Testament and in the Septuagint is *ekklesia*. Whereas this noun is related to the verb *ekkaleo* which means ‘to call out,’ its biblical and ecclesiastical usage simply indicates an assembly or a body of people” (Buswell, *Systematic Theology*, 2:216).
- See Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 3:1030–34; although he notes that the word was used in classical Greek, he never predicates the meaning of the word on its etymology. A good discussion.
- See also Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 853–54, esp. n.3. (Grudem explicitly notes that he takes a nondispensational view of the church, n. 1.)