

Notes for the Ekklēsia Meeting

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Why the Name "Ekklēsia"?

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Introduction to Synagogue and Ekklēsia

We are so entrenched within our cultural traditions about "how to do church", or "how to know and serve God", that it is difficult for us to see where our ideas and expectations come from. What practices and concepts have solid Biblical precedent? **What do we do or believe about "spirituality" that really has its roots in church history, not Scripture?** I fear we have unknowingly come to accept such beliefs and practices as normative, and virtually unquestionable. They have come to be almost non-negotiables, as though these ideas and practices were the very measure of "orthodoxy", or "canonicity". Any deviations are quickly labeled as "heresy", or at least regarded with alarm and suspicion. In some cases, it could be argued that we "nullify the commandments of God for the sake of our traditions", "teaching as doctrines the precepts of men" (Matt. 15:1-9). **Could it be that some of what we commonly do in our customary way of meeting together actually is *in conflict with what God's word tells us should be taking place?*** Does our approach, and the belief-system underlying it, actually frustrate and hinder the very things that the Scriptures tell us is supposed to happen when we meet?

The Lord Jesus lived at a time such as this. Occasionally, He was confrontational about some of the unhealthy dynamics of what was being done in God's name. **It was obvious, however, that He was not going to be able to reform the synagogue system.** That would have been fighting a fight with virtually no chance of winning. The fact that the system was so entrenched, was scattered around the world, and was protected by a "good-old-boy" network of religious traditionalists made such an objective virtually unobtainable. A reform movement capable of revitalizing such an established, fortress-minded institution would, in the best-case, be an uphill battle, and would require years of effort. **Instead of attempting such a crusade, or encouraging His disciples to do so, He did the unexpected. He initiated an entirely new movement!** Instead of trying to rehash, rework, and reform the old, He inaugurated an entirely new wineskin for the new wine He was going to introduce. **He did not just turn His back on Judaism, however, ...nor did He throw away the past strengths and valuable spiritual lessons that had been part of Israel's pilgrimage.** He unwrapped an Old Testament "word-picture package" and uncovered a gem that had been ignored and neglected for generations. He brought out into the sunlight a word picture that had history and prophetic destiny. **Jesus presented things in a way that allowed His disciples to continue to legitimately identify with the OT people of faith,** to value and preserve their life-lessons, **and yet not be compelled to continue the stuffiness and limitations of the religious traditions that had crept in over time.** His choice of this OT image, and even of the particular *word* He used to describe it, has deep and far reaching ramifications for how we are to understand the Church.

In order to get to the place where we can begin to appreciate the significance of these things, we must lay down a little background information as a foundation to build upon.

The Synagogue

The synagogue, that has carried down to modern times, first originated during the Babylonian exile, after the Jerusalem Temple was destroyed. It is interesting to note that **there is no Biblical direction or mandate from God to start such meetings.** No one really knows how they began, but *they arose as an attempt by the Jewish exiles to keep themselves together, and to pass along the teachings and faith of their people.* **The name, "synagogue", is derived from one of two words used in the Septuagint Greek OT to translate the Hebrew words for the "congregation" of Israel.** Originally, it was a general Greek term used for any kind of gathering, sacred or secular. By the time of the NT, however, the usage of the Greek word, *sunagōgē* had become so identified with these Jewish religious gatherings, *and the buildings they met in,* that it was only rarely used in any other context anymore.

Synagogue meetings were primarily founded to preserve the national identity of Israel. It was a neighborhood meeting place where the Scriptures were recited and read, where prayers were given, songs were

sung, and a sermon was preached. **It became a weekly tradition to go to synagogue on Sabbath days.** In addition, synagogue schools were developed where Israelite children were taught to read and were instructed in the Law during the week. Jesus and the apostles would have attended such a school. Moreover, we know from Lk. 4:16 that it was Jesus' custom to attend synagogue on Sabbath days. All in all, the **synagogue practices were very similar to those that have developed in Western church history**, and continue to be employed in most typical church meetings across our land on any given Sunday. Virtually all of the activity was led by a few select people in the front of the meeting. There was little or no opportunity for people in the congregation to share their own thoughts. If there was congregational participation, it was in the form of a preset recitation of a prayer, chant or scriptural verse, usually in response to the leadership. **The meeting was set, formalistic and preplanned.**

Jesus and the Ekklēsia

It is interesting, however, that **while Jesus came to fulfill the OT promises, He did not see His ministry as simply building upon the synagogue model of meeting together**, or the other religious institutions of His day. He did not *just* teach in the synagogue on Sabbath days. He taught in a *multitude of places* and *at various times*. He spoke to groups of all sizes. **He especially determined to spend in-depth time living with, and instructing, His twelve disciples.** These men would have been steeped in the religious traditionalism of Judaism. They were not expecting any special changes regarding how things should be done. Yet, when Peter confessed that Jesus was the Messiah (Matt. 16:16), **Jesus introduced the beginning of a new movement. He used a different Greek word, ekklēsia, for the people He was going to build.**

Ekklēsia was the other main word that had been used in the Septuagint translation to render the Hebrew words for "congregation" into Greek. It still retained its generic meaning for a "gathering" or "assembly". The word had not become tainted with religious connotations. In fact, in the common Greek of the day, it was often used for a political caucus. **It was the perfect word to use to start a new movement because the term had no preconceived, set patterns for how it was to look, or what they were to do when they gathered.** By choosing to call His followers the ekklēsia (meaning "assembly" or "called out [ones]") instead of the synagogue, **Jesus did two things:**

(1) **He succeeded in identifying His people with the OT people of God**, establishing continuity with the OT prophecies and promises; **and,**

(2) **He also differentiated what His people were to be and do from the religious system of His day.** By this word choice, He freed His people from any necessary suppositions that they must follow the expectations or methods established by the synagogue system. **In other words, He liberated them to be different, ...to be creative and distinct in how they thought of themselves and what they were all about.** They were *not* to be just "more of the same".

The ekklēsia would be the people of Jesus, those assembled for a purpose, those "called out" from everyday life, "called out" to meet together to accomplish some end.

Whatever it was to become, the ekklēsia was not to be a NT synagogue, though there is significant evidence that oftentimes Jewish converts attempted to merely carry over the dynamics of their religious experiences in Judaism into their new faith. **In Jesus, the entire direction was to change**, however. Instead of having an isolationist, protectionist mentality, where the goal was primarily to pass down the beliefs and practices from one generation to another, **Christianity was to be an aggressive "reaching out" of love and self-giving.**

Instead of being pre-programmed by a select few, and formalistic, the ekklēsia was a spontaneous, congregation-led gathering of active participants. I Corinthians 14:26 describes how *everyone* was expected to come prepared to share something to edify the others. *Every member came to minister to others*, according to their gifting and the leading of the Spirit. **The focus of the meeting was very much directed to encourage, instruct and strengthen one another.** In fact, while He was very much the Source for what they said and did, **the purpose for meeting was not primarily to worship God. It was to strengthen one another.** Questions were welcome. Sharing struggles was encouraged. There was teaching, sharing and prayer, but it was more personal, practical and supportive in nature, sparked by the immediate needs and observations of those in attendance. **It was a time to share vision, strategize and encourage others to be faithful to serve Christ as God opened up opportunities to share the love and message of Jesus with others.**

The focus of the synagogue was to "keep the world at bay". The focus of the ekklēsia was to ready God's people to go "take the world" for Christ!

Word Usage of Terms for the "Gathered People" of God in the Old Testament

Judaism - Sunagōgē

Hebrew word 'edhah (145 times) was used to describe religious gatherings in the OT.

It was rooted in the Sinaitic covenant (109 times in Ex.-Num.), was used in historical books (23 times) until the division of the kingdom (I Kg. 12:20).

Sunagōgē (synagogue) was a generic Greek term used for any gathering, but often associated with religious meetings.

Sunagōgē (synagogue) was used to translate 'edhah in the Septuagint (LXX) Greek translation of the OT.

By NT times, sunagōgē had come to be used almost exclusively for the Jewish religious gatherings. Had also come to be identified with the buildings such gatherings were held in, i.e., "synagogues".

Synagogue system was created by men (not at God's initiative, at least not as recorded in Scripture) during the Babylonian Exile, became prominent and well-established during the inter-testamental period.

Typical service required a quorum of 10 men
And included:
Songs
Reading of Scripture
Preaching, or meditation
Corporate prayer
...all led from "up front".

Christianity - Ekklēsia

Hebrew word qahal (122 times) was a secular term used to describe the political gatherings.

It was used throughout OT, including Genesis and in the prophetic books concerning restoration of God's people.

Ekklēsia was a generic Greek term used for any gathering. There is no evidence that it was ever used for any religious meetings.

Ekklēsia was consistently used to translate qahal in the Septuagint. Never used to translate 'edhah.

Ekklēsia remained relatively free of any connotations. A "plain Jane" term for a gathering of people.

Ekklēsia was established by Jesus. His apostles comprised the first interactive group of disciples. On the day of Pentecost, the apostles established home congregations as the primary vehicle for discipleship and developing community (Acts 2:42-47).

An Ekklēsia consisted of 2 or more of either sex, gathered in the name and presence of Jesus (Matt. 18:20), to build up the Body of Christ to enable *all* members to function effectively according to the prompting and leading of the Holy Spirit in each person (Eph. 4:11-16; I Cor. 14:26). Songs, scripture readings, teachings, prophetic revelations, and corporate prayers ...all were initiated and led by *any* person prompted by the Holy Spirit. *Each person* was to bring something to share, or could participate in the Body-life ministry.

Differing Characteristics of the Synagogue System and Christianity

Synagogue - Judaism

Designed to protect and pass down propositional truth.

Transmissive style of teaching -- read, study, memorize information.

Formal and liturgical emphasis in worship.

Control oriented.

Hierarchical model of leadership.

Passive listener.

Encourages sameness.

Legalistic, performance oriented.

“Outside-in approach” – control the self.

"Become like us" to be allowed to hear, participate and fit in.

Authority - Scripture interpreted by Tradition.

Term came to be identified with the *place* they met.

Ornate buildings, schools, hospices for travelers, etc.

"Up front" mentality and setup.

Don't need interrelationships for this model.

“How things look” is important.

“Dressing up” for meeting was important.

Ekklesia - Christianity

Designed to experience truth through teaching and relationships of dynamic love.

Rabbinic, experiential style of teaching -- learn by observation, instruction, and *doing*.

Flexible and creative in worship - I Cor. 14:26.

Mature and "release" oriented.

Servant-example leadership model.

Active-participant learner.

Encourages creativity and expression.

Oriented toward relationship with God and others based upon grace.

“Inside-out approach” – express the Spirit.

We "become like you" in order to show love and tell truth.

Scripture interpreted by Spirit *and* fresh leadings of the Spirit not inconsistent with Scripture.

Met primarily in homes -- no identifiable meeting place they could become known by.

Owned no buildings -- a "living room" movement that infiltrated the Roman Empire like yeast in a lump of bread dough.

"Body-life" mentality and setup.

Interrelationships *essential* to this model.

“What is real” is important -- honest sharing.

“Dressing down” to make the poor feel welcome was important.