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Synagogues and Ekklesias

by Ernest L. Martin, Ph.D., 1984

Transcribed and edited by David Sielaff, December 2005, April 2021

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In this [lecture] I discuss a very important subject to all people who love the Bible and Christianity. It is with us all the time as we consider this subject and it is time we begin to understand it. I am talking about the origin of the *ekklesia*.¹ I am talking about the *ekklesia* as a place of assembly, not the *ekklesia* which represents Christ's body, which is one phase of the *ekklesia* as you all know. Nor am I talking about a "church" building. I am talking about the *ekklesia* as a place of assembly.

We read about *ekklesias* in the New Testament. In fact, they are found in all types of places, but a couple of times reference is made to **"the church [*ekklesia*] that is in his house"** (see also Romans 16:5; 1 Corinthians 16:19; Colossians 4:15; Philemon 1:2). You can have a gathering or a group of people coming together in a home of just a few people, and it can be considered an *ekklesia*. It would be fellowship as well.

In the Bible we also have larger congregations that met together. For example, in 1 Corinthians chapter 14 the apostle Paul talks about the Corinthian *ekklesia*. He speaks about all the people coming from the province of Achaia [in Greece], which was around Corinth, from some 50 miles, for what today we might call "conferences." They would come together for a larger group assembly.

¹ Dr. Martin later consistently used the transliterated Greek term *ekklesia* to describe the New Testament assembly to substitute for the English "church." The English term has a historical pagan background of meaning which now refers more to a building and a hierarchical structure of ecclesiastical government rather than the group of people who assemble to study Scripture and worship God. Therefore, in most instances when Dr. Martin spoke the word "church" on the tape I change to his preferred *ekklesia*.

Related: "[Anatomy of a Church, Part 1](#)," "[Anatomy of a Church, Part 2](#)," "[Female Sex Signs in Churches](#)," "[The Folly of Tradition](#)," "[The Decline of the Churches](#)," and "[Further Decline of the Churches](#)." See also Chapter 22 "[The Curse of Church Authority](#)" and Chapter 23 "[Chaos in the Churches](#)" in Dr. Martin's *Essentials of New Testament Doctrine* free online. On the ASK homepage type the word "church" into the ASK "[Site Content](#)" Tab for more information on "church" and religious authority. DWS

What About Authority in the Ekklesia?

Paul says we must have discipline in the *ekklesia*. Obviously if we did not have it, things would be chaotic and ridiculous. So, we come up with the question of who is going to run the *ekklesia*? Some people today feel there is a visible *ekklesia*, assemblies of people that meet, and that they must be governed by a hierarchy of some kind. They even seem to find evidence of that hierarchy in the New Testament. After all, [the epistle of] Ephesians speaks about God having given apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and so forth (Ephesians 4:11). Some people take those scriptures to mean there is some sort of divine hierarchy to rule the *ekklesia*.

In my article on the matter [see articles on “Church Authority” in footnote 1], I point out that the apostle is the top-ranking individual in the New Testament *ekklesia*. There is no question about that. It is possible to call the earliest apostles as bearing that rank because they all had special commissions that others did not have. There can be no apostles today, although there is one apostle in heaven. That is the only one we need.²

Normally when churches are thought of, you think of authority of some kind and obviously there must be rule, there must be discipline [and order] whenever people come together in association with one another. What kind of services are to be held? What kind of an assembly should it be to represent an *ekklesia*, and again, what type of hierarchy (if there is to be such a thing) should we have?

Synagogues

The New Testament gives good clues and teaching, but it is not the best place to start because the New Testament is really an outgrowth of the Old Testament. The *ekklesias*, or the places of assembly that are mentioned in the New Testament mainly in the book of Acts, are assemblies that have as a precursor synagogue services found in Judea and amongst the Jews wherever they lived. After all, Christianity is an outgrowth of Judaism from a historical point of view. Judaism had as its basis the Old Testament. In the Old Testament they had teachings on how to assemble at certain times, at certain places.

If we are going to understand about the *ekklesia* or places of assembly that the apostles started in the 1st century, the best place to look is at the environment around them at the time, meaning the synagogue services from whence it all began in the first place. I might add, the many times that Christ Himself taught, He taught in synagogue services, especially in Galilee. In Capernaum more miracles were done in that area than in all other places put together. Where were those miracles done? They were done in the synagogue at Capernaum. It is possible that the ruins of that very synagogue are there to this very day, or at least one built on the same site that was there in Christ’s time.

Anyone reading the book of Matthew or any of the Synoptic Gospels will find that most of the miracles performed in Galilee were done in that one synagogue. Jesus Himself was able to speak, teach, and give a lesson in the synagogue in Nazareth at least one time (Luke 4:14–30, see below).

Jesus Himself was reckoned as a layman as far as the ritualistic system of the Old Testament was concerned. He was not a priest. He was not a Levite. He was a mainline Jewish person. He did have Davidic blood in him, which means He was of royal stock, but His royal lineage gave Him no authority over anyone from a synagogue point of view. He could speak in the synagogue after the reading of the lesson was over, just as anyone else could.

Paul and the Synagogues

In fact, what do we find in the time of the apostle Paul? He would go to Iconium, maybe to Derbe, Antioch of Pisidia, all in Acts chapters 13 and 14. Paul was able to speak in all those synagogues after the reading of the Law and the Prophets. In fact, he was asked several times if he would speak to the assembled group. Ordinary people could speak. Such was the nature of the religious community and the form of the general synagogue services in effect in the time of Christ and Paul.

² Material about the meaning of the term “apostle” is found in Dr. Martin’s article “[The Curse of Church Authority](#)” and in chapters from Dr. Martin’s book [The Tithing Dilemma](#): “[Financing a Church Organization](#),” and “[Financing the Work of Christian Organizations](#).” DWS

If they would not have had open synagogue services where the layman could discuss with anyone, or between themselves in a dignified normal way, if they did not have that type of a system established in Judaism, Jesus Christ Himself as well as Paul would have had a very difficult time in teaching the people on the Sabbath days and other times. That was when Jews, Jewish proselytes, and “God fearers” would gather. They would come to the synagogue to hear the teaching of the Law.

Christian Services Today

In most church³ services that many of us have been used to, a layman keeps his mouth shut! He sits and he listens. In many other churches where they have rituals in them, you go and the ritual may be in Latin or Greek or in some other tongue, or in English, but you have nothing to do with it except sit there and listen or to take a little wafer in your mouth or perform traditional rituals *en masse*. You are there as a recipient. You are not there to give out anything.

The New Testament Era

When you come to the New Testament period, in the period of the synagogue system, it was not that way at all. The layman had as much to say as anybody. When Paul was up in Asia Minor or Greece amongst the Jews, they would all get together on the Sabbath. They had to work during the weekdays just like most of us do. They did not have the luxury of being able to turn on the radio or getting out *Cruden’s Concordance* or study of the Scripture. They did not even have the Scripture because it was too expensive to own one in those days. They were on vellum, skins, and things like that. They had to go to synagogue to even study. So, the synagogue meeting was a time of communal fraternization, a time of fellowship, when the Jews would come together on the Sabbath day.

When you get a lot of Jews together you know they are going to talk! They are some of the liveliest talkers that you can imagine. They are very entertaining sometimes. You could not have had a synagogue service with those Jewish people coming together in fellowship like that if there was a strict format such as: three songs, a prayer, a sermonette, a song, announcements, and a sermon. Where did that teaching come from? Some [Gentile] church, I think.

You just could not have it that way because the Jews would not put up with it. Synagogue services were very open indeed. That is the type of channel through which the Gospel of God was spread amongst the Jews. Even the Gentiles, the Greeks, and others, would come up to the synagogue and stand around and they would talk. Paul had the opportunity to talk in almost every synagogue. One or two he was kicked out of, but he had the chance to talk. And my, did he talk. And so, did our Lord.

It is very beautiful to have a situation like that. Those synagogue services could be called the same thing as “church” services today. Sometimes they had a little message that went along with the reading of the Law and the Prophets, but I guarantee you one thing, it did not go an hour and a half, or even 45 minutes like I give sometimes in a lecture. It was short.⁴ People could then have questions and answers, and talk back and forth. That was the normal synagogue service.

I think it is good for us if we want to know what type of services to have in an *ekklesia*. Of course, with FBR⁵ we are an educational type of organization. I keep insisting that we are not giving “church” services. I think it would be a mistake to say that we are. We are having lectures, and that is proper, [although] in many cases it is very similar, of course.

If we are talking about an ecclesiastical system of some kind, why not look at the New Testament and see what it says. To begin with we ought to go back to the Old Testament because that is where it all started in the first place. It is an outgrowth one from another. We all know that our Lord and Paul used the synagogue system to great advantage.

³ I have left the word “church” here purposely to denote the unbiblical organizations of today’s churchianity. DWS

⁴ When I grew up the Lutheran church sermons were only 20 minutes long — precisely. DWS

⁵ FBR, the “Foundation for Biblical Research,” was an organization Dr. Martin headed before he founded A.S.K. DWS

The Synagogue System

In the Old Testament it mentions that the Israelites should come together, once they were established as a nation in the land of Palestine, the sanctuary was erected, and finally the Temple was built in Jerusalem, they were required to gather at Jerusalem at particular times of the year: at Passover, at Pentecost (if they could get there), and at the period of the autumn festivals, at [the day of Atonement] and Tabernacles. There are some hints that at New Moon times people could assemble, and apparently some did do so. And, of course, there were the Sabbaths.

The question is, did people assemble at the Temple every Sabbath day? They did if they were in Jerusalem. But can you imagine having to walk 60 or 70 miles from Galilee every Friday to be at a service in the Temple for the Sabbath and then walk back to make sure you got to work Sunday morning? It was impossible for people to congregate at Jerusalem all the time. That was done only at the holy festivals.

Some Misconceptions

Here is the interesting point. In the Old Testament you will not find one word about anybody having to assemble in any town, city, or village of the land of Israel on the Sabbath day. Not one word. The Sabbath day was kept, do not get me wrong, but for assembly purposes, to have a building of some kind like a synagogue or something like that back in the time of Moses, there is not one word. The only thing you will find is that they did have to go to Jerusalem at the three holy day seasons. And they had to go to Jerusalem if they wanted to offer an animal sacrifice, a blessing, for sin, whatever.

There is another misconception I can clear up. If a person sinned back in the Old Testament, people have had the wrong impression that you just go out in your backyard, build an altar of some kind, and offer an animal sacrifice. My, if you were going to be righteous and holy, there sure would be a lot of animals being killed all over the place. However, that was completely illegal.

The Sacrificial System

You could only offer a sacrifice wherever the sanctuary was, or at the Holy Temple at Jerusalem once that was established. They did not offer many animal sacrifices. In fact, some people went for years without offering a single sacrifice.⁶ They were indeed sacrificing, but they were sacrificing in a vicarious way. The priests vicariously sacrificed for them in the Temple. On the great day of expiation, the Day of Atonement, when the two goats — one was slain, and one was let go — the one let go was a goat offered by and for all the people of Israel. Technically it was the High Priest that did it, but it applied to everyone. So, you could say that you did sacrifice an animal on the Day of Atonement, even though you did not touch it. The same thing goes for most all the other sacrifices.

You could personally offer an animal sacrifice if you wanted to do so, if you had enough money. But there were not many private animal sacrifices offered. In fact, if you add up all the national sacrifices that took care of all the sins, and the blessings as well in honor to God in thanksgiving, all the sacrifices mentioned in Leviticus chapters 1 through 5, plus the Day of Atonement sacrifices for the whole nation, they come to 1,260, equivalent to a time, times, and a half a time in number. This was done every year.

Once they were done at the end of the year, a pious Israelite praying to God daily could legally say before God, thank you God for accepting my 1,260 sacrifices, though [personally] he did not offer one of them. They were being done by somebody else. Yet you know, even that is important to realize because somebody else did it for them. The whole teaching of the sacrifices is that somebody else must do it for you. Someone else did it for us. Is that not true? Jesus Christ did. It all makes sense.

There were not many animal sacrifices done by individuals, but they could if they wanted to — and some did so. But the national sacrifices at the Temple took care of all such things. There are all types of teachings on how the priests (and sometimes the Levites who helped them) were to work in the Temple. These teachings

⁶ See Dr. Martin's article "[The Sacrificial System of Israel](#)," which has an accompanying audio file. DWS

fill the Old Testament, particularly in the Law. But that only had to do with the Temple in Jerusalem.

There is not one word in the Old Testament where God legislated that you must build a synagogue in a city or a village. The encyclopedias all know it. In fact, you do not have to read the encyclopedias, just read the Old Testament, there is not one word on the subject.

Today, the way we look at things, if you are going to build a new town in Alaska, you get a few people around, set a planning commission going from the city fathers, and they will allow places for churches and synagogues. The very first thing that comes up is: where are we going to have a church? You would think if they were going to have synagogues throughout the land, there would be something in the Old Testament about doing so. But there is not a word about that. The only thing mentioned is about the Temple itself in Jerusalem. Let me tell you simply, not everyone in Israel could go up on the Sabbath day to the Temple because they lived too far away.

Did this mean that they did not have synagogues? Certainly they had them. The word “synagogue” simply means a place of gathering, to assemble. It can be a building, but it does not have to be. It could be out in the field somewhere. But normally they would have buildings, obviously. There is nothing in the Old Testament that says anything about synagogues at all.

There is one interesting word, however, in Psalm 74. It is uncertain exactly when this Psalm was written. Not all Psalms are Davidic, and we are told this Psalm is not written by David. Psalm 74 was written by a student of Asaph, a Levite. He is talking about the destruction of the land of Israel, and I am sure he really means the land of Judea. I know that because he mentions Mount Zion. He says,

“O God, why have you cast us off forever [permanently]? why does your anger smoke against the sheep of your pasture? Remember your congregation, which you have purchased of old; the rod of your inheritance, which you have redeemed; this mount Zion, wherein you have dwelt.

Lift up your feet unto the perpetual desolations; even all that the enemy has done wickedly in the sanctuary [the Temple was desolate]. Your enemies roar in the midst of your congregations; they set up their ensigns [banners or flags] for signs. A man was famous according as he had lifted up axes upon the thick trees [the timbers of the sanctuary, to bring it down]. But now they break down the carved work thereof at once with axes and hammers.

They have cast fire into your sanctuary, they have defiled by casting down the dwelling place of your name to the ground. They said in their hearts, ‘Let us destroy them together’: they have burned up all the synagogues of God in the land. We see not our signs: there is no more any prophet: neither is there among us any that knows how long [the desolation shall continue].”

• *Psalm 74:1–9*

The whole theme is the destruction of the city of Jerusalem and in particular the Temple.⁷ But notice verse 8, they have also destroyed **“the synagogues of God in the land.”** No textual scholar accepts this translation of “synagogue” in verse 8.⁸ This is Old Testament.

As far as the Talmud is concerned (which is a compilation of Jewish traditions and history about ancient times) there were synagogues in the land in the time of King Hezekiah in the 8th century before Christ. They have no evidence of that, but they say there were synagogues in the land, not many of them, but some. They get it undoubtedly from reading this Psalm. This Psalm may have been put together, some have said, in the time of Hezekiah, but I doubt it.

After the First Temple’s Destruction

I am sure that the Psalm was written much later. I will tell you why. It talks about the destruction of

⁷ See Jeremiah 52:13, 17 for comparable statements. DWS

⁸ This use of “synagogue” is unique in the Old Testament of the King James Version. The Hebrew word in verse 8 is translated 150 times as “congregation” from a word different from “synagogue.” The Greek Old Testament (the LXX) uses the Greek *sunagoge* (notably in 74:2) but that Greek term is used for 25 different Hebrew words. Read the *Cyclopedia* article, “[Synagogue](#).” DWS

Jerusalem and the Temple, the complete and utter destruction of it. It says there are no prophets around anymore to tell us how long. In the time of Hezekiah there was Isaiah, there was Micah. Just before Jerusalem was destroyed in the 6th century BC by the Babylonians there was Jeremiah, there was Habakkuk, there was Zephaniah. There were several prophets around at these times. But there were no prophets at the time of this Psalm. When could this possibly be?

The only time we know Jerusalem was completely destroyed in this fashion was in the 6th century BC by the Babylonians, but this student of Asaph was undoubtedly looking at his Jerusalem now completely destroyed, probably after the Babylonian captivity. There was about a 70-year period in which the land of Judea was completely desolate of people and that Jerusalem itself was lying in destruction. This Psalm could very well have been written in that period when the Psalmist looked over the utter desolation of Jerusalem and Judea. After all, everything is in the past tense. He is writing it as if he is seeing the destruction of the land still present. No longer does the lion of Judah fly on Judah's ensigns, but enemy ensigns are seen everywhere around. It looks to me like this was written some time just after the Babylonian captivity.

It says "the synagogues" of God in the land were burnt up. The Talmud says this may go back to the time of King Hezekiah. But that idea does not work because that was 150 years before. But it could be in the period of the 70 years of desolation upon Jerusalem in the 6th century BC.

They may have had what we call synagogues (the word simply means gathering or meeting places) that they held throughout the land. *McClintock & Strong's Cyclopedic*⁹ says this is the only indication that any type of synagogue services were in operation before the time of Ezra in the 5th century BC. This could be. But all say there is hardly any evidence whatsoever that a large synagogue system of any kind started until after the Babylonian captivity.

They saw the Temple completely destroyed. They no longer had the priesthood during the 70-year period when they found themselves in Babylon. With great nostalgia they longed for the Temple. While they were in Babylon they undoubtedly assembled in scattered villages and it was there that they probably began the synagogue system. Most encyclopedias, most scholars, say that the synagogue system was certainly in operation by the time of Alexander the Great in the 4th century BC, and no doubt put into a beginning operation by Ezra the priest, when the readings of the Law and the Prophets were established. All Jews know Ezra established those readings. Since such readings are an integral part of synagogue services, you could probably say that somewhere in the 5th century BC is when it really got started.

We do have synagogues of the land mentioned here in Psalm 74, but that is the only reference really. Does this mean that they did not meet together on Sabbath days? Maybe they did in Old Testament times, and maybe they did as they got close to the Babylonian captivity, but there is not a word of it anywhere. In fact, in *McClintock & Strong's Cyclopedic*, the scholar who wrote the article "[Synagogue](#)" says that one of the prophets at the time of Elisha spoke about why in the world was this man (I am paraphrasing here) concerned about going to God because this is not a Sabbath or a New Moon.¹⁰ It does not say in that reference about them having to go to some place. It is to some person.

There is no evidence whatsoever, apart from that one verse in Psalm 74, that synagogue services were established throughout the land of Israel prior to about the 6th century BC. We know they sprang up in the time of Ezra, and from then on we have plenty of references to them. During the time of the Maccabees synagogues were scattered throughout the land.

The reason synagogue services really got started in a formal way was because the Temple itself was in utter desolation during this period and they had to have something to substitute it. Once they substituted it, they got used to going to places on the Sabbath, on the New Moons, and on Holy Days. Once the Temple was rebuilt after the Babylonian captivity, on Holy Days they were supposed to retreat to Jerusalem. Because the Jews became so used to synagogue services or meeting together, they wanted to continue them.

But there is one big difference between a synagogue service and a Temple service, so let us get this one

⁹ Article, "[Synagogue](#)" in John McClintock and James Strong, *Cyclopedia of Ecclesiastical and Biblical Literature*, DWS

¹⁰ The reference is to 2 Kings 4:23 in the larger story of Elisha and the Shunammite's son, 2 Kings 4:8-37. DWS

thing straight. It is most important because a lot of people do not understand this point. The Temple services were conducted according to biblical revelation only by priests, with the help of Levites. That is all. Occasionally, some representatives of the 12 tribes would come up to help, but it is just superficial. Everything done in the Temple was done by the priesthood. A priesthood was rather aristocratic, father to son, father to son, on down the line. In fact, it was very aristocratic. There were not all that many priests around.

Synagogues Were Run by Laymen, Not Priests or Levites

The synagogue system was entirely different. *McClintock & Strong's Cyclopaedia* makes it clear, and it is so evident in history, the synagogue services and system were established on the principle of the layman having something to do with the worship of God. Indeed, the synagogue system was a layman's work, almost entirely. Priests would come along, but they were superficial to the synagogue service, in the sense that it was not essential for them to be there.

It is quite true that when there was the reading from the Law and from the Prophets, they gave precedence to a priest to read it if he was in the synagogue because of his holy station. Then if the priest were not there, they would give it to a Levite next. If a Levite were not there, they would give it to any ordinary Israelite to read. Anybody could read the lesson. After a prayer, the lesson was read, a talk on the lesson was given, and then the proceedings were opened for fellowship in the whole synagogue.

They had different types of synagogues, but it was entirely a layman's type of affair. Priests could come into it but only as they agreed with layman. In fact, you could call synagogues nothing more than community centers. They were primarily religious community centers among the Jews.

It was completely a layman's kind of a deal. You could talk in services if time allowed. Every Israelite was looked on as important as the next person. It is true that they had what they call a **"ruler of the synagogue"** and he was elected by the congregation, by the people of the community. It is made quite clear in the synagogue services. Not only that but they had other people in the synagogue that did certain things.

For example, they have a man in almost every synagogue called the *"maethurgeman."* The *maethurgeman* is the interpreter. He was in almost all synagogue services, and certainly in those of the "diaspora" away from Jerusalem. This man would be there to read the lesson. If he read it in Hebrew, then he himself would interpret to the people. The way they would do it is this:

- One man would get up and read a sentence or two.
- Then another man, the *maethurgeman*, in the same tone of voice if he could do it, without any ups and downs, would try to repeat in the local dialect — whether that was Aramaic (which most Jews spoke in the 1st century), or Greek, or Latin.

These men were ordinary people who were part of the synagogue services, the reader and the interpreter, or the "speaker" and "tongues" as their titles really meant.

Let me quote here, **"Any one of the congregation who was capable of interpreting was asked to do so."**¹¹ Anybody could do so, but they had to know what they were talking about. It goes on to say that anyone [a boy] 13 years of age or above could do it. One person would do it, another time a different person would.

When you read about the synagogue, and I will sum this up right now, it was nothing but a community effort entirely. Was there a hierarchy in the early synagogue system? There was not. In other words, they did have a ruler of the synagogue, and they had other people around to keep control and order, but that was all that they had. However, those offices could change from time to time, and there is not a word in the Old Testament that a ruler of the synagogue has any official capacity as far as God's revelation is concerned. Obviously because the synagogue was part of the legal system, respect would have been accorded to him. But there is not a word about a hierarchy for synagogues because there is not a word about synagogue or how to start them or anything of that nature in the Old Testament.

¹¹ "[Synagogue](#)" in McClintock and Strong's, *Cyclopaedia*. DWS

The Ekklesia

What does all this have to do with the *ekklesia*? Very much indeed, because out of the synagogue system came the *ekklesia* system. They did not know what else to do. And what a beautiful system it was. There was no hierarchy associated with it. Because there was no hierarchy everyone had a chance to speak if they spoke in order, in a proper way. That was a beautiful system in which Jesus Christ could teach in synagogue services. Sometimes He even gave a reading of the Law, as on one occasion recorded in Matthew:

“And Jesus returned in the power of the Spirit into Galilee: and there went out a fame of him through all the region round about. And He taught in their synagogues, being glorified of all. And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up: and, as his custom was, he went into the synagogue on the sabbath day, and stood up for to read. And there was delivered unto him the book of the prophet Esaias [Isaiah]. And when he had opened the book, he found the place where it was written, ...

[Jesus read the passage.] **And he closed the book, and he gave it again to the minister, and sat down. And the eyes of all them that were in the synagogue were fastened on him. And he began to say unto them, ‘This day is this scripture fulfilled in your ears.’ ...**

[... other words were exchanged.] **And all they in the synagogue, when they heard these things, were filled with wrath, And rose up, and thrust him out of the city, and led him unto the brow of the hill whereon their city was built, that they might cast him down headlong. But he passing through the midst of them went his way.”**

• *Luke 4:14–17, 20–21, 28–30*

That was a scene quite different than even the most rambunctious synagogue service today. The people in Jesus’ own hometown synagogue rioted and tried to kill Him! But the important point is that He was allowed an opportunity to speak as a layman. He was not a member of some clergy system. There was no clergy in the synagogues.

It was also a beautiful system for the spreading of the Gospel. The same opportunity was available to the apostle Paul, and all the apostles. Note how Paul was allowed to address the synagogue:

“But when they [Paul and his associates] departed from Perga, they came to Antioch in Pisidia, and went into the synagogue on the sabbath day, and sat down. And after the reading of the law and the prophets the rulers of the synagogue sent unto them, saying, ‘You men and brethren, if you have any word of exhortation for the people, say on.’ Then Paul stood up, and beckoning with his hand said, ‘Men of Israel, and you that fear God, give audience ...’”

• *Acts 13:14–16*

Then Paul preached to them about Jesus and His resurrection. Note that his speech to them was short. It may have been 5 minutes (longer, perhaps if Luke edited out some portions). His speaking met with success.

“And when the Jews were gone out of the synagogue, the Gentiles besought that these words might be preached to them the next sabbath. Now when the congregation was broken up, many of the Jews and religious proselytes followed Paul and Barnabas: who, speaking to them, persuaded them to continue in the grace of God.”

• *Acts 13:42–43*

If they had a strict type of hierarchical system, like in the Temple, there would be no preaching of the Gospel while the Temple services were going on. There could not be. Or, services like in churches that you and I are used to, which are highly ritualistic in some ways, you would never get out the Gospel, especially if you have a hierarchical system. The man up there is the man in charge, not just because he is the man speaking, whom everyone ought to give deference to in that sense, but because he has authority which reaches beyond the assembly into the life of everyone, 24 hours a day.

The synagogue did not have that. All they had was a system of elders to look over the flock and to see they were cared for, and organizational things like that.

We have an absolute reflection of the synagogue system in one of the apostle Paul's letters. It is clear, it is absolutely plain. It is a system which, even in Greek Gentile areas, was absolutely based on the synagogue system. Though Paul took one whole chapter to say how *ekklesia* services ought to be conducted, I hardly know of a denomination today which goes by it. Yet it is right there in the New Testament. We do not have anything about synagogues in the Old Testament, but we sure do in the New Testament.

We have an exact method of worship or order and how to do things in *ekklesia* services. And you know, no one does them. Do you know why they do not do it? It is because it is congregational form of service from beginning to end. Most people do not like laity to have anything to do with the operations of the *ekklesia*, except for social functions. Certain types of churches that I know, they do not want laity to do anything except to give money. That is very important to them. Who ever heard of dumb sheep being able to give any contributions in a divine service?

Here we have 1 Corinthians chapter 14. It is crystal clear as can be. It is most interesting how people avoid this altogether, but it is completely a synagogue service in operation without the slightest doubt, with certain modifications, grant you. Even some of the offices that were in the synagogue like the maethurgeman are mentioned, but no one likes it today. It is a great deal different today than it was back then; maybe some revision needs to be made. I will say this, why not at least go by the standard that is here in the Scripture? But no one does so.

Here is what it says in 1 Corinthians 14:23, **"If therefore the whole church [ekklesia, the body of the people] be come together into one place,"** to the place of assembly. The word "synagogue" simply means a place of assembly. You could say "come to synagogue" but we would not use the term. If they **"... come together into one place, and all speak with tongues, and there come in those that are unlearned, or unbelievers, will they not say that you are mad?"** Tongues simply mean languages.

There are languages, as Paul says in 1 Corinthians 13:1, that there are languages of men, and there are languages of angels. The most common languages of men were Latin, Aramaic, and Hebrew. Paul says here, you Greeks coming together, if everyone speaks in different languages, the unbelievers would say you are mad, because look at the confusion going on. There was no order. Why do you not speak all in one language so that what you say can be profitable to people?

Most people today say this means some kind of ecstatic worship coming in under the inspiration of the Spirit. I am inspired by the Spirit quite often, I hope you all are, but I do not find myself having to do that, to come out with something that I do not know what I am talking about. Paul goes on to say that **"the spirits of the prophets"** were **"subject to the prophets"** (1 Corinthians 14:32). Many people today say they do not know what they said, how long they said it, or why they said it, but they said something. They probably did.

"But if all prophesy, and there come in one that believes not, or one unlearned, he is convinced of all, he is judged of all: And thus are the secrets of his heart made manifest; and so falling down on his face he will worship God, and report that God is in you of a truth. How is it then, brethren? when you come together, every one of you has a psalm, has a doctrine, has a tongue, has a revelation, has an interpretation. Let all things be done unto edifying."

• 1 Corinthians 14:24–26

Paul is talking to the whole *ekklesia* here: **"therefore the whole church [ekklesia] be come together"** (verse 23). He is talking about layman, everyone coming together. He does not distinguish laymen from ministers, does he? In most churches that I have been in contact with, only the ministers have a right to bring a doctrine, to bring a song, to speak a language, to have a revelation, or something like that. Paul did not say that. He said when the whole *ekklesia* comes together, let it be done decently. By that he means let it **"be done unto edifying"** and in order. Oh, we do have the synagogue coming out here.

First Corinthians 14:27, **"If any man speaks in an unknown tongue ..."** It could be Greek, or a reading of Hebrew. **"... let it be by two, or at the most by three, and that by course; and let one interpret."** That is exactly what we have in every synagogue. You had a maethurgeman there who would listen to one language being said, and he would repeat back in the language of the people who could understand it, so they could hear what

was going on, all for the edifying of the *ekklesia*. There is no use speaking to a lot of Greeks in Hebrew, when they do not understand Hebrew. However, when you read from the Old Testament, and it is in Hebrew, you better have someone there who can interpret.

The reason they had an interpreter was because the one who gave the reading from the Bible could not be the same one to interpret. There had to be another man over here listening so that he would then, in the same tone of voice, say what the other man said. If he did not say it exactly, this man would be right there to watch and to correct him. And the other man would watch the first. It was checks and balances because they did not have the Scripture like you have in front of you, because you can check me to see whether I am saying what it says. Back in those days they did not have it, they had to have this type of a situation. He says, let them be “by course.”

First Corinthians 14:28, **“But if there be no interpreter, let him keep silence in the church [*ekklesia*]; and let him speak to himself, and to God.”** He can go ahead, he can read all the Hebrew he wants to, or give any message in Hebrew, but do it to himself, because the others cannot understand. If they cannot understand, then it is not helping, it is not “edifying.”

Verse 29, **“Let the prophets speak two or three, and let the other [others, plural in Greek] judge.”** That is, other prophets, if they want to speak, let the others sit there to judge or comment, only two or three. The whole tendency is to let all types of people speak. Paul says two or three prophets. By prophets he does not mean people, necessarily, who are going to be foretelling events to occur in the future. A prophet also was one who “forth-told” [or] that “tells forth” things, like a preacher. That is one of the classic meanings of “prophet.”

“If anything be revealed to another that sits by, let the first hold his peace. For you may all prophesy one by one, that all may learn, and all may be comforted.”

• 1 Corinthians 14:30–31

Everyone could “**prophesy**,” one by one, all, everyone in the congregation, but not all at once. You see, the whole tendency in Judaism is for everyone to speak at once. Let me tell you, if you have ever been to a synagogue service after the reading of the Law and the Prophets (where everyone is very, very careful), it gets pretty festive at times. It goes on,

“And the spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets. For God is not the author of confusion, but of peace, as in all churches [*ekklesias*] of the saints.”

• 1 Corinthians 14:32–33

All the *ekklesias* of the saints are to be in this fashion. You must have order.

Women Speaking in the Ekklesia

“Let your women keep silence in the churches [*ekklesias*]: for it is not permitted unto them to speak” (1 Corinthians 14:34). That is what Paul said. I had two women in New York when I first began teaching,¹² and they were wondering whether I believed that women should speak in the *ekklesia*. This took place in a question-and-answer period. Two very astute women. Their hands were right at the top, so they asked me, what is your opinion, Dr. Martin, about whether a woman should teach or talk in the *ekklesia*, or not. I started out that the Bible says through the apostle Paul, thus and such, they just stopped me and said, Dr. Martin, we did not ask what the Bible says. We know what the Bible says. I want to know what you feel.

I said that is a very interesting way to put it. I try to go with the Bible on these things as much as possible. They said, well, what do you feel? I said I do not mind them speaking in the *ekklesia* as long as it is under order. I said, I do not know yet. It seemed to disagree with Paul, and I do not want to disagree with him. But if you want my personal opinion, I do not know why Paul said it, to be quite honest with you. That is all I have. They said, that is all we wanted to know. That was the end of it. You know who was right? They were. They just wanted to find out what I felt. They knew what the Bible said.

¹² Dr. Martin means teaching independent from a denomination. DWS

I think I know now why Paul said it. When you come to divine service, in the Old Testament and even in the New Testament times, they had a system of the man being father, ruler of the family, looking over its welfare, with the firstborn sons also doing the same thing, and as a result, obviously they dictate procedures. In a service of this nature when everyone wants to have a chance to speak, Paul said let the men do the speaking.¹³ One of these days [after our resurrection] I will ask Paul for all the details. I am sure he will answer me and I will be satisfied by it.

Congregational Order

Here is what it comes down to: when you see this order of events, it is an entirely congregational type of *ekklesia* environment from beginning to end. Paul says have control over yourself, have rule and order in the *ekklesia* and not confusion. Why in the world would he ever have to say a thing like that unless the whole tendency was for the thing to go up in smoke? Everyone wanted to speak. But if you have a hierarchical government with a minister who is in charge of your lives 24 hours a day, no one gets to speak. They are going to sit there like church mice, and they better not move. I am exaggerating, but you get the point.

That was not the way it was in the synagogues. That was not the way it was supposed to be at Corinth or as Paul says, **“in all the churches”** (verse 33). Paul knew what he was talking about. He said if you all come together you better not talk all at once, or you will be in trouble, in confusion. He said let there be two or three to give a message, in tongues. Let two or three interpret. Let two or three prophesy. You can have as many as 9 different people speaking at one occasion. They must do it in order.

Have you ever seen a church service where 9 people speak, and everyone else also wanting to speak, and having to hold back? You do not see many of them. It should be entirely congregational. What it shows is that there was no hierarchical system. There was none in the synagogue because there was nothing in the Old Testament to suggest it in the first place.

The synagogue system does not have any legislative matters or powers connected with it from the Old Testament, so as a result of that, there are only local administrative types of office. Sometimes the ruler of the synagogue was also legally endowed by the Great Sanhedrin in Jerusalem to try court cases, but that was part of the synagogue services only in a civil sense. It had nothing to do with the religious service. The synagogue was entirely a layman’s organization, and anybody could speak any time.

A Positive Environment for the Gospel

That is how our Lord spoke in the synagogues, that is how Paul, and the others spoke, and that is how the Gospel got out, because I tell you, when you get to the position where anybody can speak and express their opinion as it is in 1 Corinthians chapter 14, you have checks and balances. If you have a hierarchical system you will be taught what one man believes. If he is wrong, everyone will be wrong. If you can get everyone having their say so in balance, in a church service, in order, no confusion, then one person may say one thing another person does not like, but the other person has a chance to get up also, and say what he wants. Everyone hears it. Look at the checks and balances that go on.

That is why the Gospel was able to thrive in a good way, though they had error and heresy, but look, under this type of a banner, there was far greater protection than you can possibly imagine when under a hierarchical system. So, what kind of *ekklesia* system do we want? The Bible shows us right here. What we ought to do, if you will have an *ekklesia* system, why not take the model given in the Holy Scripture in 1 Corinthians chapter 14.

¹³ The women were to submit their questions to the man who would then speak on their behalf, representing the woman, and the entire family so to speak, to the community (1 Corinthians 14:35). This was the same argument used against the vote for women in Western countries in the past century. The man was said to vote not just for himself or his wife, he voted for the entire corporate family of which he was the head. The man represented the interests of the family to the community. This concept of representation has gone out of use in Western culture, and increasingly in most of the world today. Before God, the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the Church as Paul says in Ephesians 5:21–25. DWS

While I have no interest in starting one, I think it is good that a person [or a group of people] would follow basically the principles that we find in that congregational type of order. Granted there may be a ruler of the *ekklesia*. There may be someone to rule over affairs. Paul said, speaking to Timothy, to lay hands on no man suddenly (1 Timothy 5:22). He is speaking about the requirement of someone to be an elder. But the people of Corinth were part of a synagogue system in which everyone had a part to play if they wished. The authority could change from time to time. Even a young man could be in authority there, the next time another.

In the Book of Ephesians Paul speaks about God giving apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and others (Ephesians 4:11). In an *ekklesia* service we need them all, except the apostle, we do not need such an individual today. We have one apostle, and that apostle is Jesus Christ (Hebrews 3:1).

The apostles of the New Testament were selected personally by Christ, given a commission which was delineated very well indeed. But in the New Testament *ekklesia* they did have apostles. What about the others: prophets and evangelists and pastors? Some people have considered all these things to be ranks. If you have certain people like that having ranks, you have gotten rid of the synagogue system entirely. But worse yet, you also have gotten rid of the entire New Testament pattern of *ekklesia* entirely.

It is true the apostle Paul with his commission told those Corinthians what to do two or three times. He said to keep order in the *ekklesia*. He was an apostle commissioned of Jesus Christ to perform that job at that time. But the whole congregation was involved in things. They were all wanting to speak. They all could speak. Paul said, go ahead and speak, but speak in order and sit still and do not talk when somebody else is speaking. It was completely congregational.

If you have a congregational order of service, that means everyone has a rank. Anybody who speaks is top guy while he is speaking. What about the prophets and evangelists and pastors of Ephesians chapter 4, and the others who give help and governance in 1 Corinthians chapter 12? If you look at these verses very carefully and apply the proper type of *ekklesia* system that we have been looking at as revealed in the Scripture, it is quite apparent that all these titles are functions and not ranks, apart from the "apostle." Apostles did have absolute commissions that you can find in the Scriptures. We do not need any more apostles today except one, Jesus Christ. The fact is, it is impossible for a person to be an apostle today because the three major factors that qualify a person as an apostle are no longer extant, thankfully.

We can have people who can prophesy. We have people who can be an evangelist. Do you know what an evangelist is? He is one who sends forth the "evangel," the Gospel. He goes around and speaks from town to town. That is the modern word evangelist, and it very well could be the same thing in the Greek. If I go from place to place and preach the Gospel, call me an evangelist. Is that a rank? No, it is a function.

What Is a Pastor?

What if I am a pastor? A pastor means a shepherd over an *ekklesia* or an area, but he shepherds the flock. That is what the word *pastor* means, a shepherd. If a man is not traveling from place to place but he is in one area and the congregation wants him, like Paul said to Timothy, if he is to appoint an elder, that man must meet these qualifications. Let us say a man does, hands are laid on him by the congregation. Everyone knows who he is, and he is there staying in that one area. Call him a pastor. That is not a rank. That is a function of service to the community, not to "lead" meetings.

That is the way it is. The only way you could really make sure that a congregational or synagogue type of structure for the *ekklesia* could exist is to have a non-hierarchical system. Indeed, that is exactly what we have on earth today. We need no priesthood because the physical Temple has been destroyed. We do not need men ruling us because there is only **"one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus"** (1 Timothy 2:5).

I grant you one thing. There is a hierarchy, but the hierarchy is all in heaven. There is only one person that stands in the way between you and God the Father in that hierarchical system and that is Jesus Christ. No man has a right to tell you anything that you should do, except them.

If we had an *ekklesia* service, or if *ekklesias* want to be reared up, you better have it be congregational and you better have rules and regulations so everyone can keep quiet when somebody else is speaking. But I will

tell you, let everyone speak in forum, in order, and you will have balance. Let one man speak and rule over you, then you have trouble, because it means that all the weaknesses that man has, the group will have. Some may say, you also have all the strengths, and that is true. But there is greater strength with all having the chance of saying something than having one man get up and tell you what to do; and he may well be wrong.

The congregational system is the method. It is the synagogue system. That is how the New Testament teachings got out. Christ and Paul could not have been able to get out the Gospel in the good way that they did, unless they as laymen had a chance to speak. Thanks be to God they did. All I can say is that I hope all of you have a chance to speak. If you do, you will find that you are all important.

Ernest L. Martin, before 1984
 Edited by David Sielaff, April 2021

Addendum by David Sielaff

How Synagogues Began

The word “synagogue” (*sunagoge* in Greek) means a gathering for religious purposes. A structure later became associated with the term. There is no mention of synagogues in the Old Testament.¹⁴ The concept of the synagogue probably goes back to the period of the Babylonian exile, although exact origins are not known.

“Readers of the New Testament know, that at the time of our Lord synagogues were dotted all over the land; that in them ‘from of old’ Moses had been read (Acts 15:21); that they were under the rule of certain authorities, who also exercised discipline; that the services were definitely regulated, although considerable liberty obtained, and that part of them consisted in reading the prophets, which was generally followed by an ‘exhortation’ (Acts 13:15) or an address (Luke 4:17).”

• *Edersheim, “Synagogues”*¹⁵

Scholars surmise that during the exile, when Jews could no longer give offerings to God through the priests at the Temple, they came to understand that their prayers were offerings to God. Perhaps those who were loyal to God sought the teachings of the prophets of God, prophets such as Ezekiel in Babylon. From them they may have learned and appreciated their teachings that God is everywhere. From there a form of worship developed which became the synagogue with its simple but useful traditions.¹⁶ The Pharisees particularly found that the synagogue functioned in a useful way for them to spread Judaism and their particular teachings:

“The Synagogue may be considered a Pharisaic institution. Not that the Pharisees first instituted or founded it, for, it must have been in existence long before the advent of the Pharisees. But they developed it and perfected it, raised it to high prominence and gave it an important and central place in the religious life of the people ...

The Synagogue ... origin probably goes back to the people of the Babylonian exile. We have seen how the people in the exile learned to appreciate the prophets’ teaching that God is everywhere. Away from Jerusalem and deprived of a Temple, those who remained loyal to the God of their fathers were forced to content themselves with some kind of form of worship other than sacrifices. ...

This institution of the Synagogue service enabled the people to enjoy everywhere the benefits of their religion, to receive instruction in the Divine Torah, which restoreth the soul, and to pour

¹⁴ Psalm 74:8 in the King James Version notwithstanding. See Note 8 above. DWS

¹⁵ The underlining is mine. See Alfred Edersheim’s Chapter 16, “[Synagogues: Their Origin, Structure and Outward Arrangements](#)” in his book *Sketches of Jewish Social Life in the Days of Christ* (1876). DWS

¹⁶ See the article “[The Pharisees and their Teachings](#)” in Jacob Z. Lauterbach, *Rabbinic Essays* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1951). Professor Lauterbach was one of the great modern scholars of Talmudist and Rabbinic history. DWS

out their hearts in prayer before their Father in heaven without having to go to the Temple in Jerusalem and without depending upon a priest of a hereditary class.

- *Lauterbach, Rabbinical Essays, pp. 138–140, underlining mine*

Operations in the Synagogue Versus Christian Worship Today

Of the 34,000+ known Christian denominations and organizations,¹⁷ only a few have a “polity” or form of governance and operation that is biblical. While they are free, of course, to conduct worship in any manner they wish, it is surprising that few follow a biblical model. It has been my experience that Plymouth Brethren meetings have a forum type of meeting before an elder delivers a sermon. At that forum anyone may speak, men or women, adult or child. I understand Quaker meetings have similar open forums. There are no doubt others, but they are few in comparison. Even the congregationalist denominations have a hierarchy that grows stronger over time.

As you read Dr. Martin’s article above, the government of the early *ekklesia* was highly fluid, democratic, open, and without hierarchical leadership, unlike Christian denominations that exist today. However, as the narratives in Luke and Acts cited above show, the participants in the synagogues could turn violent when they disagreed with speakers like Christ or Paul.¹⁸ Jewish scholar Jacob Lauterbach tells about the development of Jewish services,

“Thus they [the Pharisees] developed the Synagogue service which consists of prayer and reading from the Scriptures. This was in line with their democratic tendencies and with regard for the needs of the people ...”

- *Lauterbach, Rabbinical Essays, pp. 138–139*¹⁹

All of you, Associates for Scriptural Knowledge, are members of Christ’s *ekklesia*, even though few of you meet in local *ekklesias*. As such you are free to form your own associations, and **free** to start any associations or *ekklesias* as you see fit. There is no prohibition to do so, nor do you need any commission from any human being to do so. If you should decide to “start something,” I encourage you to model the administration of your group after the biblical examples of Paul in 1 Corinthians chapter 14. This is somewhat different than the educational and religious traditions we are all familiar with, but the biblical model can still work today.

Let me remind you what Dr. Martin noted in Chapter 22 “[The Curse of Church Authority](#),” the *ekklesia* **“It a ‘family style’ environment ... meeting among themselves for fellowship, teaching and worship.”** Later in his article “[Chaos in the Churches](#),” he pointed out that Christians met in private homes (Romans 16:5; 1 Corinthians 16:19 and Acts 21:8), with occasional larger group meetings (1 Corinthians 14:23).

Dr. Martin references two books that he recommended: *The House Church in the Writings of Paul*, by Vincent Branick (Glazier, 1989) and *The House Church* by Philip and Phoebe Anderson (Abingdon, 1975).

I recommend another book from a professor I worked for in the past. It is by Dr. Robert J. Banks, *Paul’s Idea of Community: The Early House Churches in their Cultural Setting*, revised edition (Hendrickson, 1994).

David Sielaff, April 2021

¹⁷ David B. Barrett, et al., *World Christian Encyclopedia: A Comparative Survey of Churches and Religions in the Modern World* (London: Oxford University Press, 2001). Dr. Martin cited 20,000 Christian denominations in the “[May 2001 Newsletter](#).” He was citing the older 1983 edition of the *World Christian Encyclopedia*. DWS

¹⁸ Members of the *ekklesia* of believers in Jerusalem were those who vowed and plotted to kill the apostle Paul (Acts 23:12–33). They may have been from several different *ekklesias*. Remember, there were many thousands of believers in Jerusalem when Paul would have been murdered near the Temple when he was rescued, taken into custody, and protected by the Roman soldiers. DWS

¹⁹ Dr. Martin’s book [The People That History Forgot](#) (Portland: ASK, 1993), chapters 1 through 4 describe Samaritan synagogues that had pagan decorations and designs incorporated in their buildings. Dr. Martin shows these Samaritans, and their descendants were instrumental in causing the syncretistic pagan influences to completely change the Christian church during the period of the 1st to 6th centuries AD. DWS