

Traditions of Synagogues and *Ekklesias*

Commentary for April 1, 2021 – Two Educational Systems

"Synagogues and *Ekklesias*" is this month's article, an updated edition of an older article on the ASK website. Read the "[April 2021 Newsletter](#)" for background information.

There are two educational traditions of Western religious teaching that come to us from the ancient world. One is the Greek practice of the academies of rhetoric and philosophy that developed into our modern university system. Teachers would lecture students who were under strict discipline to listen. Such oratory had an honored place in Greek and Roman society.

From the Synagogue to the Ekklesia

A second educational tradition of Western religious teaching was the synagogue system of Judaism. This system likely began during the exile of the Jews in Babylon. The biblical model for education in the Christian *ekklesia* emerged initially from the synagogue system, a learning model that included cooperative study, presentation, with extensive discussion or debate.

Dr. Martin's "Synagogues and Ekklesias" article tells of the relationship and development of the New Testament *ekklesia* from its Jewish synagogue origins. The structure and operation of the *ekklesia* is emerged from the synagogue model so familiar to all the apostles and disciples of Christ. The *ekklesia* model would be best today, as Dr. Martin makes clear.

New Testament Christian *ekklesias* did not operate exactly like synagogues, but they shared some operating aspects with synagogues. Note what Jesus' half-brother James wrote to the 12 tribes of Israel "**scattered abroad**" in the dispersion (James 1:1). James uses the word "synagogue" because most Israelite believers met in them:

"My brethren, have not the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, with respect of persons [be not partial to "special" or rich people]. For if there come unto your assembly [sunagoge in Greek] a man with a gold ring, in goodly apparel, and there come in also a poor man in vile raiment; And you have respect to him that wears the gay clothing, and say unto him, 'Sit you here in a good place'; and say to the poor, 'Stand you there, or sit here under my footstool': Are you not then partial in yourselves, and are become judges of evil thoughts?"

• **James 2:1-4**

This describes several elements in the Jewish synagogue service and setting, with seats for those with high status while the poor and less exalted were made to stand. Recall Christ's reference to "**the chief seats in the synagogues**" (Matthew 23:6). There should never be any respect of persons as there was in the synagogues. The Jewish synagogues had this problem:

"But if you have respect to persons, you commit sin, and are convicted [convicted] of the law as transgressors."

• **James 2:9**

There is another clear distinction made by New Testament writers. The Greek term *ekklesia* is always used separately from the Greek *synagoge*. They are not found together and are not interchangeable, but they do occur a few verses apart in Acts 13:1 and 5:

“Now there were in the church [ekklesia] that was at Antioch certain prophets and teachers; as Barnabas, and Simeon that was called Niger, and Lucius of Cyrene, and Manaen, which had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch, and Saul ...

⁵ ... And when they were at Salamis, they preached the word of God in the synagogues [plural] of the Jews: and they had also John to their minister.”

Synagogues were formal meeting structures for Jewish communities. On the other hand, the earliest *ekklesias* gathered in private homes. The use of buildings outside of homes for gathering, worship, and teaching did not occur for many decades. When Paul says he preached **“to the Jew first”** (Romans 1:16), it meant he went first to the synagogue in whatever city or area he came to, before he preached to the Gentiles.¹ Paul formed *ekklesias* or assemblies of believers; he did not form synagogues, although Paul wrote it was imperative to go to the Jew first: **“It was necessary that the word of God should first have been spoken to you [Jews]”** (Acts 13:46).

When there were not enough Jewish men to form a synagogue, Paul met the Jews at a place of prayer, usually at a known location near a river (Acts 16:13–15). Gentiles were always welcome. In Rome Paul was under house arrest and he could not go to the synagogue, so the Jewish believers in Christ came to him (Acts 17:27).

The population of the Roman Empire slowly became converted after Christianity was declared a legal religion protected by Roman emperors in the 4th century AD. When tutors, teachers, and orators converted to Christianity, worship in the *ekklesias* changed. They organized around an expositional sermon with increasingly non-biblical ceremonies. This worship format discouraged audience input or questions from listeners.

Buildings for *ekklesias* were constructed with divisions of “sacred space” often imitating a Tabernacle/Temple layout. Leadership of *ekklesias* became hierarchical. Services turned into formal group practices of rituals, music, readings, and long sermons. See Dr. Ernest Martin’s, [The People That History Forgot](#) for the history of change from *ekklesia* to “church.” See also his articles: [“The Anatomy of a Church Part 1,”](#) [“The Anatomy of a Church Part 2,”](#) and [“The Curse of Church Authority.”](#)

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¹ Luke tells us Paul spoke at synagogues in the cities of (left to right):

- Damascus (Acts 9:20 after his conversion)
- Salamis in Cyprus (Acts 13:5),
- Iconium (Acts 14:1),
- Berea in Macedonia (Acts 17:10),
- Corinth (Acts 18:4), and in
- Galatia (Acts 13:42),
- Thessalonica (Acts 17:1),
- Athens (Acts 17:17),
- Ephesus (Acts 19:8).