

The Synagogue Part 5

The Synagogue – a Pattern for the First Christian Congregation
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When one compares the first Christian congregation and the synagogue, one finds many similarities. This is not so strange since the first people who converted to Christianity were Jews and were used to coming together in an organised manner that worked well. In this last part of the series about the synagogue, take a look at several similarities. But first, we are looking at the synagogue's role in the expansion of Christianity.

The Synagogue's role in the expansion of Christianity

That the synagogue has played a big part in the expansion of the Gospel is without a doubt. The *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* comments on this: "According to the description in the Acts of the Apostles, the synagogue was one of the most important factors in the early history of Christianity"¹.

When Paul visited a new city, he often used the synagogue as a starting point for his preaching. "When Paul and his companions had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a Jewish synagogue. As was his custom, Paul went into the synagogue, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures" (Acts 17: 1-2). Even if in the beginning the synagogue was used for education, there was a need to gather in other places. Separate places were then established, often in private homes, where the first Christians could come together. There is no doubt that the Christians did this already in their early days.

"So the churches were strengthened in the faith and grew daily in numbers" (Acts 16:5).
"And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, 25 not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching" (Hebrews 10: 24-25).

Let's take a closer look at the similarities between the synagogue and the Christian congregation in the first century.

Private homes

The synagogue: "Some synagogues by the end of the 1st and 2nd century in Palestine were probably private buildings that became public synagogues"².

The First Christian Congregation: In the New Testament (NT), it is mentioned that they came together in churches in private homes. Among others that are mentioned in the home of Prisca and Aquila "Greet Priscilla and Aquila, ... Greet also the church that meets at their

¹ Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, Volume VII p.835

² The Oxford Encyclopedia of Archaeology in the Near East, p.118

house” (Rom 16: 3, 5); “the church in your home” (Philemon 1: 1, 2) and “Nympha and the church in her house” (Col 4: 15).

Teaching (part 3)³

The Synagogue: “Theodotus, son of Vettenus, priest and synagogue-president ... built the synagogue for ... teaching of the Commandments”⁴.

The First Christian Congregation: “So for a whole year Barnabas and Saul met with the church [in Antioch] and taught great numbers of people” (Acts 11: 26). Timotheus was told by Paul to take care of the teaching “Until I come, devote yourself to ... teaching” (1 Tim 4: 13). On of the demands of an overseer in the congregation was that he should be “able to teach” (1 Tim 3:2) and Paul also writes to Titus: “In everything set them an example by doing what is good. In your teaching show integrity, seriousness and soundness of speech that cannot be condemned” (Titus 2: 7-8).

Reading (part 3)

The Synagogue: After a certain paragraph was read from the Torah on the morning of the Sabbath, a piece from the Prophets read. “He [Jesus] stood up to read. And the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him” (Luk 4: 16-17); “After the reading from the Law and the Prophets, the leaders of the synagogue sent word to them [Paul and Barnabas] ...” (Acts 13: 15); “For the law of Moses ... is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath” (Acts 15: 21).

It is interesting to note that gathering regularly and reading from a holy book was something unique at this time. L. Levine writes about this: “By the first century, a weekly ceremony featuring the communal reading and study of holy texts had become a universal Jewish practice. It was a unique liturgical feature in the ancient world; no such form of worship was known in paganism, yet certain mystery cults in the Hellenistic-Roman world produced sacred texts that were read on occasion. However, it was indeed *sui generis* for an entire Jewish community to devote regular meetings to such an activity”⁵.

The First Christian Congregation: Paul writes to the young Timotheus, “Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture,” (1 Tim 4: 13).

Prophets (part 3)

The Synagogue: “After the reading from the Law and the Prophets, the leaders of the synagogue sent word to them [Paul and Barnabas] ...” (Acts 13: 15). This also appears in the Mishna, in a discussion of the reading of the Law it is argued that: “And they do conclude with a reading of a prophetic lection”⁶.

³ The numbers in parentheses are references to the part of this series about the Synagogue where the topic is thoroughly discussed. The Oxford Encyclopedia of Archaeology in the Near East, Volume V, p. 118

⁴ Biblical Archaeology, p. 240.

⁵ The Ancient Synagogue, The First Thousand Years, p.140

⁶ mMegillah 4: 2 III K. The Mishna, A New Translation

The First Christian Congregation: In the Christian congregation, the prophetic was often discussed, which is something that appears in a letter that was sent to the congregations. Naturally, it is often concerned with features of the Kingdom of God and the Messiah. For example, Peter writes: “We also have the prophetic message as something completely reliable, and you will do well to pay attention to it... Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet’s own interpretation of things” (2 Pet 1: 19-20). Paul discusses the prophetic in depth in several of his letters, for example, the letter to the Romans and the Galatians.

Prayer (part 3)

The Synagogue: “And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by others” (Matt 6: 5).

The First Christian Congregation: “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer” (Acts 2: 42). “So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying to God for him” (Acts 12: 5). “As you [the congregation of the Corinth] help us by your prayers. Then many will give thanks on our behalf for the gracious favour granted us in answer to the prayers of many.” (2 Cor 1: 11).

Elders or Overseer⁷ (part 4)

The Synagogue: The elders had the main responsibilities in the local synagogue. From the elders, there was elected and one (or more) synagogue leader who had the responsibilities of the daily running. The phrase synagogue leader is translated from the Greek word *archisynagogos*, which, according to a Greek–English dictionary, means: “One who is the head and who directs the affairs of the synagogue – ‘president of a synagogue, leader of a synagogue’”⁸.

The First Christian Congregation: They were men who met certain criteria, had responsibilities in the congregation, they were called elders or overseers. “Paul and Barnabas appointed elders for them in each church” (Acts 14: 24), and Paul writes to Timothy. “Put in order what was left unfinished and appoint elders in every town, as I directed you. An elder must be blameless” (Tit 1: 5-6).

Attendants (part 4)

The Synagogue: The synagogue attendant’s task was usually to assist the synagogue leader. We find a synagogue attendant (Gr. *hyperetes*) in Luke 4: 20: “Then he [Jesus] rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down”. To retrieve and hand over scrolls to those who would read was just one of the attendant’s practical tasks in the synagogue. The research book *McClintock & Strong Encyclopedia* says which other tasks the attendant had: “He took care of the furniture, opened doors, cleaned the synagogue, lit the lamps, readied the building for service, and called the people to worship, called out the names of those who had been

⁷ That the elder and the overseer have the same task arrives from Acts 20: 17, 28 and Tit 1: 5,

⁸ Greek NT Lexicon based on Semantic Domains Louw & Nida word nr. 53.93 (Bibleworks 4.0)

chosen by the synagogue leader to come to the podium to read from the Law and the Prophets, ...”⁹.

The First Christian Congregation: In addition to the overseer, the congregation that had the responsibility was also attendants, called *deacons* or *servants*¹⁰. “In the same way, deacons are to be worthy of respect, sincere, not indulging in much wine, and not pursuing dishonest gain. They must keep hold of the deep truths of the faith with a clear conscience. They must first be tested; and then if there is nothing against them, let them serve as deacons” (1 Tim 3:8-10). The Greek word *diakonos*, which is translated with the word *deacon*, means: “One who serves as a deacon, with responsibilities to care for the needs of believers – ‘deacon, one who helps the believers’”¹¹. A deacon was a person who took care of the practical tasks in the congregation, just like the attendant in the synagogue”.

Women (part 4)

The Synagogue: In an article by Shmuel Safrai and Menahem Stern¹², it stands that in the time of Jesus, women participated fully in the religious society. This includes participating in the service and study assembly. Men and women sit together, but for social reasons, women are not allowed to read the Scripture publicly. This is also something the research book the *Standard Biblical Encyclopedia* denotes: “Any one man could lead the prayer and translate the Scripture”¹³.

The First Christian Congregation: In the congregations, it seems that men and women sat together. Even if the Christian women preached and taught¹⁴ outside of the congregation, they did not teach in the congregation. “As in all the congregations of the Lord’s people. Women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the law says. If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church” (1 Cor 14:33-34).

Hospitality (part 4)

The synagogue: According to the Theodotus inscription, there was a hostel connected to the synagogue “... built the synagogue for the reading of the Law and teaching of the Commandments, and he has built hostelry and the chambers”¹⁵.

The First Christian Congregation: In the NT, the Christians are encouraged to show hospitality. “Share with the Lord’s people who are in need. Practice hospitality” (Rom 12: 13). “Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it” (Heb 13:2), and there was a demand to the overseers in the congregation “He [the overseer] must be hospitable” (Tit 1: 8).

⁹ McClintock & Strong Encyclopedia (Synagogue - Biblical Cyclopedia)

¹⁰ “Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, to all God’s holy people in Christ Jesus at Philippi, together with the overseers and deacons” (Phil 1:1-2)

¹¹ Greek NT Lexicon based on Semantic Domains Louw & Nida word nr. 53.67(Bibleworks 4.0)

¹² <https://www.cbeinternational.org/resource/place-women-first-century-synagogues/>

¹³ International Standard Encyclopedia, Volume IV p. 681

¹⁴ For example see the mentions of the Christian women Priscilla (Acts 18: 18), Euodia and Syntyche (Phil 4: 2)

¹⁵ Biblical Archaeology, p. 240.

The Court (part 4)

The synagogue: Even if the synagogue was primarily used for teaching, it was also used as the local court also called local Sanhedrin as it appears in Luke 21: 12: “But before all this, they will seize you and persecute you. They will hand you over to synagogues ...”.

The First Christian Congregation: Paul wrote to the congregation in Corinth “If any of you has a dispute with another, do you dare to take it before the ungodly for judgment instead of before the Lord’s people? Or do you not know that the Lord’s people will judge the world? And if you are to judge the world, are you not competent to judge trivial cases? Do you not know that we will judge angels? How much more the things of this life! Therefore, if you have disputes about such matters, do you ask for a ruling from those whose way of life is scorned in the church? I say this to shame you. Is it possible that there is nobody among you wise enough to judge a dispute between believers?” (1 Cor 6: 1-5).

Punishment (part 4)

The synagogue: “Be on your guard; you will be handed over to the local councils and be flogged in the synagogues” (Matt 10:17).

The First Christian Congregation: There was not used any physical punishment in the congregation. Instead, it was placed more importance on that those who belonged to the congregation and led disorderly lives should be corrected and reprimanded. This punishment fell under the responsibilities of the overseer in the congregation. “But those elders who are sinning you are to reprove before everyone, so that the others may take warning” (1 Tim 5: 20); “He must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it ... Therefore rebuke them sharply, so that they will be sound in the faith” (Tit 1: 9, 13).

Another form of punishment was limited socialisation. One person who lived a disorderly life, but not so seriously that they could be exiled, should have limited social interactions. “In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, we command you, brothers and sisters, to keep away from every believer who is idle and disruptive and does not live according to the teaching you received from us... Take special note of anyone who does not obey our instruction in this letter. Do not associate with them, in order that they may feel ashamed. Yet do not regard them as an enemy, but warn them as you would a fellow believer” (2 Thes 3: 6, 14-15).

Expulsion

The synagogue: “His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jewish leaders, who already had decided that anyone who acknowledged that Jesus was the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue” (John 9:22).

The First Christian Congregation: Expulsion was also a practice in the Christian Congregation. Paul writes to the congregation in Corinth: “You must not associate with anyone who claims to be a brother or sister but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or slanderer, a drunkard or swindler. Do not even eat with such people. What business is it of

mine to judge those outside the church? Are you not to judge those inside? God will judge those outside. “Expel the wicked person from among you.” (1 Cor 5: 11-13); and John writes: «Anyone who runs ahead and does not continue in the teaching of Christ does not have God; whoever continues in the teaching has both the Father and the Son. If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not take them into your house or welcome them. Anyone who welcomes them shares in their wicked work” (2 John 9-11).

Collections to the Poor (part 4)

The Synagogue: The book *The History of the Jewish people* talk about the collections in the synagogue “It was in the synagogue that the collection of Alms happened. There was a difference between the weekly money box (cupa), where the local poor were financially supported once a week, and the ‘plate’, from which any person in need (especially foreigners) could get a daily portion from”¹⁶.

The First Christian Congregation: To support the poor was taken seriously in the first Christian Congregation. John writes in one of his letters: “If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person? Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth” (1 John 3: 17-18; see also James 2: 15). When special needs arose, collections were implemented. “During this time some prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. One of them, named Agabus, stood up and through the Spirit predicted that a severe famine would spread over the entire Roman world. (This happened during the reign of Claudius.) The disciples, as each one was able, decided to provide help for the brothers and sisters living in Judea. This they did, sending their gift to the elders by Barnabas and Saul” (Acts 11: 27-30).

Collections in the congregation continued also after the time of the Apostles. *Justin Martyr* writes in *1. Apology*: “And they who are well to do, and willing, give what each thinks fit; and what is collected is deposited with the president, who succours the orphans and widows and those who, through sickness or any other cause, are in want, and those who are in bonds and the strangers sojourning among us, and in a word takes care of all who are in need”¹⁷.

Financing (part 2)

The synagogue: When it concerns the financing, the research book *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*: “Synagogues were built by the help of a communal fund, either through taxes or gifts and trusts. According to the Tosefta, could any Jew be forced to contribute to the building of a synagogue”¹⁸.

The First Christian Congregation: Since the Christians in the 1st century had meetings in private homes, there was no need to contribute to the erection of buildings. But there was a need to give economic help to those like Paul who travelled and preached and visited the congregations. “We worked night and day, labouring and toiling so that we would not be a burden to any of you. We did this, not because we do not have the right to such help, but in order to offer ourselves as a model for you to imitate” (2 Thes 3: 8-9). The congregation in

¹⁶ The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ 175 B.C – A.D. 135, Volume II p. 437

¹⁷ 1 Apology, Ch. 67. <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/justinmartyr-firstapology.html>

¹⁸ Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, Volume VII, p. 813

Philippi was an example of this kind of congregation that supported him “not one church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you only; for even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me aid more than once when I was in need” (Phil 4: 15-18). There was also given guidance on how the contributions should be collected “Now about the collection for the Lord’s people: Do what I told the Galatian churches to do. On the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with your income, saving it up, so that when I come no collections will have to be made. Then, when I arrive, I will give letters of introduction to the men you approve and send them with your gift to Jerusalem” (1 Cor 16: 1-3).

This was the final part of the series about the synagogue. The four other parts that are available at Nobimu.no are:

1. The Origin of the Synagogue
2. The Architecture and the Financing of the Synagogue
3. The Function of the Synagogue I
4. The Function of the Synagogue II

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