

RESOURCE SHEET 66

The Legacy of the Synagogue in Early Christian Gatherings and Worship

Excerpted from an article (which is possible should be read in full before the session) here: -

https://orthodoxwiki.org/Judaism_and_Early_Christianity

What, then, were the precise similarities and differences in the purpose of the Church and that of the synagogue?

The synagogue rose to significance after the Babylonian exile of the Jewish people. Upon return, the institution was not to give way to the Temple ritual but instead was a supplement to it. The synagogue, a place of religious gathering, was not so much a ritual cult as it was a place of reading and exhortation. Squarely in the Ancient Near East tradition of teaching wisdom, the synagogue was a place to discuss not only the meaning of the Pentateuch but also its application. And such applications, as seen in the scripture itself (e.g., Proverbs), was often as secularly clever in its application as it was religious. Of course, one makes this dichotomy with a modern perspective but it should not be thought that it was determined as such in the past. And so it was that in this way the pagan writers saw the Jewish people of the Hellenistic era as another school of thought as much as it was a national religion.

As noted above, the interior of the synagogue was often that of the Roman basilica or "great hall." The various functions of the Jewish synagogue were several and ran the gamut from civic to religious activities. One such civic function was the freeing of a slave, the manumission procedure. And naturally education took place within, though surely it was not a secular education as we might think of it today. Of course, the same kind of attention given to memorizing, and apologizing for, the works of Homer among the Gentile students was the same kind of tasks designated for the synagogue student but concerning the sacred books of the Jewish community. Perhaps in one sense it was "secular" insofar as the acculturation of Jewish children to their own religion and religious perspective was consequential for them to recognize their place of the Jewish people in the Hellenistic culture; i.e., it gave them a way to grasp the world.

But the religious activities were most important to be sure. The far-flung Jewish communities throughout the ancient world needed a centre and the synagogue institutions provided one for them. Even in Judea, albeit with a streamlined service that centred on devotion to reading of the *Torah*, the synagogue remained as a standard of Jewish religious life. Elsewhere, it was not unusual for the synagogal community to expand its prayers; one might say that it may well have been intended as a substitute for the acts of the Temple cult.

While there have been contenders for the "house synagogue" such evidence is not overwhelmingly positive. Indeed, what one finds is that in this era hundreds of synagogues within and without Judea were built (except for perhaps the immediate generations following the Bar-Kokba rebellion). The synagogue was, after all, a community affair, the building was the physical plant within which people could pray, read, and learn. Judgements on civic and financial matters took place and affirmed the synagogue as the centre of the community, particularly outside Judea.

In regards to the popular view that the synagogue suppressed a female role it is clear that both male and female members participated, the latter inasmuch as females were permitted locally. The evidence indicates that early on the community tradition allowed a more energetic female presence in the synagogue including the recitation of blessings, prayers, and reading from the scroll. Though apparently this role decreased to the point that by the end of the fifth century it would have been unthinkable for such to occur in a synagogue until modern times. Nonetheless, the seating of male with female was the norm and not the exception in the synagogue of the Hellenistic era, countering the trend of male and female division in both pagan associations and Christian churches.

The synagogue, then, was not only a religious centre but also a national centre. One may look about today in US cities and see that the local Hindu or Islamic centre functions not only as a transmitter of religious ideals but also offers national or ethnic examples to its population. Reminders of the "old ways" are not only religious but may be integrated with the political, national, or ethnic strains of the people. And so it was with the ancient synagogue or the modern synagogue or "Jewish Centre"; not only the religious activity but also the mundane affairs take place within.

The Christian church, on the other hand, was not quite the same in its function. Granted, one may argue that certainly there were parallels between the church and the synagogue--what else did they have to use? And naturally the prayer offerings in the synagogue paralleled the offerings in the Temple cult ritual. But several items show how different as well as similar were the functions of the Christian church, whether a "house church" or a dedicated structure for that task. One can approach this particular subject through the archaeological and literary evidence of the early Christians and see if it is possible to bring both to help construct some kind of picture.

As an illicit religion, a group without national underpinnings to make it legitimate to Roman rule and, thus, protected under law, Christianity functioned as one more Oriental religious group. Additionally, one takes care to recall the confusion of pagan writers attempting to comprehend Christianity as another Jewish group. Concretely, however, it was not seen as such during times of persecution. Because of such attacks the Christians found it wise early on to prefer the confines of a private home rather than build separately as some governors permitted. Nonetheless, such gatherings hardly resembled what would be considered today as an informal meeting of friends chatting about their faith.

Unlike the synagogue, the Christians held their gatherings not only as a time of worship but also for ceremonial reasons. And what ceremony had more meaning to the Christians than the Eucharist? The Eucharist was practiced not so much as merely a memorial or *agape* meal but as much perceived as the divine strength given through Christ to his body, his people. Debate continues among Catholic and Protestant thinkers as to the meaning of the Eucharist in the apostolic and apologetic literature. And yet, one finds a comprehension that goes beyond what would be professed of the Eucharist by the reformers of the 16th century.

Without extending this section of the article (which needs be taken up in a section on Theology), it is sufficient to say that as the Jewish pious had both the Temple and the synagogue, the Christian had them in the body of Christ; i.e., the Church. Certainly, then, it would be as wrong to say that the local church was either a "Christian synagogue" or a "Christian temple"; the ancient people in Christ saw themselves as both an assembled body and a temple of Christ.

This body had a stratification according to membership from the catechumenate to the fully-communing, and yet all were "one in Christ." As a temple, this levelling made sense in light of the Eucharist. After all, the *mysterion*, the Eucharist of Christ, could not be given to anyone but only to a repentant convert who recognized the power of the resurrected Christ. From the earliest times as recorded in St. Paul, the Apostolic Fathers, and in the early Apologists a work of worship--a liturgy--was the course of the meeting.

Early Christians celebrated two meals, the *agape* meal of the risen Christ (i.e., "Lord's Supper") and the Eucharist of Jesus (i.e., "Last Supper"). Both gave meaning as defining the Christians as the body of Christ. The *agape* was a celebration of the divine spirit of Christians through the resurrected Christ, the Eucharist was the more solemn occasion of the death of Christ before which one was to consider their own standing within the body and before God.

The strains of the *agape* meal or the "Lord's supper" and the Eucharist combined by the mid-second century into one full ceremonial meal, simply called the Eucharist. And surrounding that meal were the attendant ritual celebrated so as to insure the propriety, an issue that arose at least by the mid-first century as reflected in the Pauline correspondence with the Corinthian churches.

Hence, the Christian worship divided according to its body and to its work. The first part was the liturgy of the catechumenate involving the reading of the scripture with a sermon, the second part was the liturgy of the faithful and the giving of the Eucharist. The dismissal of the catechumens after the first division holds to this day in Orthodoxy and is a vestige of the ancient liturgy. This is the division which is more alike to that of the synagogue worship. Profession of faith, reading of Scripture, a homily of encouragement; each of these finds its place of origin in the synagogue.

Nonetheless, the Liturgy of the faithful finds it necessary for the attendance of the bishop, the symbol of church unity. Of course, the Pauline emphasis on either the "one loaf" or on the "one cup" indicates a Christian unity in the people themselves. Also, it would be a mistake to think that the importance of the bishop excludes the members; indeed, all are a royal priesthood. Still, the celebratory nature of the Eucharist does not diminish its importance as a "sacrament"; i.e., the *mysterion*.

The function of the local church is that while there may well have been parallel activity to the synagogue, ultimately the Eucharistic ritual divided the church from synagogue activity. Certainly there was a way for the synagogue to appropriate a temple-like status in light of the Solomon speech about prayer (1 Kings 8) and its practice (Daniel 6), and after the destruction of the second Temple the synagogue increased in importance. But the local church operated not only as a community gathering but also as a place where it was believed the union of heaven and earth took place through the body of Christ in the unity of the Eucharist.