

Nor is there any extant church that certainly was built prior to the time of Constantine. – Graydon F. Snyder, *Ante-Pacem: Archaeological Evidence of Church Life Before Constantine* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1985), 67, quoted from Frank Viola, *Pagan Christianity*, p.12.

The first churches consistently met in homes. Until the year 300 we know of no buildings first built as churches. – Graydon F. Snyder, *First Corinthians: A Faith Community* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1991), 63, quoted from Frank Viola, *Pagan Christianity*, p.12.

In the first three centuries the church had no buildings. – Graydon F. Snyder, *Ante-Pacem: Archaeological Evidence of Church Life Before Constantine* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1985), 166, quoted from Frank Viola, *Pagan Christianity*, p.14.

We have no temples and no altars. – Minucius Felix, *The Octavius of Minucius Felix*, ch. 32, quoted from Frank Viola, *Pagan Christianity*, p.14.

Marcus Minucius Felix –

born , Africa?, died c. 250, Rome, one of the earliest Christian Apologists to write in Latin.

Encyclopedia Britannica

Church (buildings) – History – Antiquity – According to the New Testament, the earliest Christians did not build church buildings. Instead, they gathered in homes (Acts 17:5, 20:20, 1 Cor 16:19) or in Jewish worship places like the Second Temple or synagogues (Acts 2:46, 19:8). **The earliest archeologically identified Christian church is a house church, the Dura-Europos church, founded between 233 and 256.** – wikipedia.org

In our studies, we also discuss how meeting in homes was derived from Jesus' institution of the communion meal in the gospels.

This study will lend additional support to the conclusions of these other studies. First, we will provide a more detailed look at how Jesus' transmission of the Passover meal required Christian ritual gatherings to occur in people's homes. Second, we will show that the house-based meetings of the early Christians and ancient Jews were, in fact, a fulfillment of Old Testament requirements issued by God regarding authorized places of worship. And third, we will examine historical data about the early Jewish synagogue system which likewise took place in private residences rather than special buildings.

We will begin with a more detailed look at Passover as the basis for the regular Christian meeting ritual as established by Christ at the Last Supper.

Passover – A Prescription for House Church Meetings

As all of the gospels report, Jesus' last supper with his apostles coincided with the Mosaic festival of Passover. On the night before he was crucified, Jesus ate the Passover meal with his disciples in the upper room.

Matthew 26:19 And the disciples did as Jesus had appointed them; **and they made ready the passover.** **20 Now when the even was come, he sat down with the twelve.**

Mark 14:14 And wheresoever he shall go in, say ye to the goodman of the house, The Master saith, Where is the guestchamber, **where I shall eat the passover with my disciples?** **15** And he will shew you **a large upper room furnished and prepared: there make ready for us.** **16** And his disciples went forth, and came into the city, and found as he had said unto them: **and they made ready the passover.** **17 And in the evening he cometh with the twelve.**

John 13:1 **Now before the feast of the passover,** when Jesus knew that his hour was come that he should depart out of this world unto the Father, having loved his own which were in the world, he loved them unto the end. **2 And supper (1173) being ended...**

Luke 22:11 And ye shall say unto the goodman of the house, The Master saith unto thee, Where is the guestchamber, **where I shall eat the passover with my disciples?** **12 And he shall shew you a large upper room furnished: there make ready.** **13** And they went, and found as he had said unto them: **and they made ready the Passover.** **14 And when the hour was come, he sat down, and the twelve apostles with him.** **15** And he said unto them, With desire **I have desired to eat this passover with you** before I suffer: **16** For I say unto you, I will not any more eat thereof, until it be fulfilled in the kingdom of God. **17 And he took the cup, and gave thanks, and said, Take this, and divide it among yourselves:** **18** For I say unto you, I will not drink of the fruit of the vine, until the kingdom of God shall come. **19 And he took bread, and gave thanks, and brake it, and gave unto them, saying, This is my body which is given for you: this do in remembrance of me.** **20 Likewise also the cup after supper, saying, This cup is the new testament in my blood, which is shed for you.**

The Book of Acts as well as Paul's remarks in 1 Corinthians show that, in accordance with Jesus' instructions in the gospels (Matthew 26:26-28, Mark 14:22-24, Luke 22:19-20), the New Testament church's regular gatherings were identified as a modification of the Mosaic Passover meal which included the cup of wine and the breaking of bread.

1 Corinthians 5:7 Purge out therefore the old leaven, that ye may be a new lump, as ye are unleavened. **For even Christ our passover is sacrificed for us: 8 Therefore let us keep the feast,** not with old leaven, neither with the leaven of malice and wickedness; but with the unleavened *bread* of sincerity and truth.

1 Corinthians 10:16 The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ? **17** For we being many are one bread, and one body: for we are all partakers of that one bread...**11:20** When ye come together therefore into one place, *this is not to* eat the Lord's supper (1173). **21** For in eating every one taketh before *other* his own supper: and one is hungry, and another is drunken. **22** What? have ye not houses to eat and to drink in? or despise ye the church of God, and shame them that have not? What shall I say to you? shall I praise you in this? I praise you not. **23** **For I have received of the Lord that which also I delivered unto you, That the Lord Jesus the same night in which he was betrayed took bread:** **24** **And when he had given thanks, he brake it, and said, Take, eat: this is my body, which is broken for you: this do in remembrance of me.** **25** **After the same manner also he took the cup, when he had supped, saying, This cup is the new testament in my blood: this do ye, as oft as ye drink it, in remembrance of me.** **26** For as often as ye eat this bread, and drink this cup, ye do shew the Lord's death till he come. **27** Wherefore whosoever shall eat this bread, and drink this cup of the Lord, unworthily, shall be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord. **28** But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of that bread, and drink of that cup. **29** For he that eateth and drinketh unworthily, eateth and drinketh damnation to himself, not discerning the Lord's body.

Acts 2:42 And they continued stedfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers...**46** **And they, continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, did eat their meat** with gladness and singleness of heart,

Acts 20:7 **And upon the first day of the week, when the disciples came together to break bread**, Paul preached unto them, ready to depart on the morrow; and continued his speech until midnight.

The common experience of Christians today is attending church in special buildings with large auditoriums in which communion involves only a sip of juice and a small bite of bread often taken only on a monthly basis. Using our modern church culture's approach to the communion meal and to locations for our church gatherings can easily lead to the mistaken conclusion having homes as the location for the Last Supper, New Testament meetings, and early church meetings was merely incidental. However, tracing Jesus' institution of the communal gathering to its source in the Old Testament proves otherwise.

A look at the passage in the Law of Moses where God institutes the Passover meal clearly shows that God's people were required to gather and eat this sacred feast in their homes.

Exodus 12:6 And ye shall keep it up until the fourteenth day of the same month: and the whole assembly of the congregation of Israel shall kill it in the evening. **7** **And they shall take of the blood, and strike it on the two side posts and on the upper door post of the houses, wherein they shall eat it.** **8** And they shall

eat the flesh in that night, roast with fire, and unleavened bread; and with bitter herbs they shall eat it. 9 Eat not of it raw, nor sodden at all with water, but roast with fire; his head with his legs, and with the purtenance thereof. 10 And ye shall let nothing of it remain until the morning; and that which remaineth of it until the morning ye shall burn with fire. 11 And thus shall ye eat it; with your loins girded, your shoes on your feet, and your staff in your hand; and ye shall eat it in haste: **it is the LORD'S passover.** 12 For I will pass through the land of Egypt this night, and will smite all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, both man and beast; and against all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgment: I am the LORD. 13 **And the blood shall be to you for a token upon the houses where ye are: and when I see the blood, I will pass over you,** and the plague shall not be upon you to destroy you, when I smite the land of Egypt. 14 And this day shall be unto you for a memorial; and ye shall keep it a feast to the LORD throughout your generations; ye shall keep it a feast by an ordinance for ever. 15 **Seven days shall ye eat unleavened bread; even the first day ye shall put away leaven out of your houses:** for whosoever eateth leavened bread from the first day until the seventh day, that soul shall be cut off from Israel. 16 And in the first day there shall be an holy convocation, and in the seventh day there shall be an holy convocation to you; no manner of work shall be done in them, save that which every man must eat, that only may be done of you. 17 And ye shall observe the feast of unleavened bread; for in this selfsame day have I brought your armies out of the land of Egypt: therefore shall ye observe this day in your generations by an ordinance for ever. 18 In the first month, on the fourteenth day of the month at even, ye shall eat unleavened bread, until the one and twentieth day of the month at even. 19 **Seven days shall there be no leaven found in your houses:** for whosoever eateth that which is leavened, even that soul shall be cut off from the congregation of Israel, whether he be a stranger, or born in the land. 20 Ye shall eat nothing leavened; in all your habitations shall ye eat unleavened bread. 21 **Then Moses called for all the elders of Israel, and said unto them, Draw out and take you a lamb according to your families, and kill the passover.** 22 And ye shall take a bunch of hyssop, and dip it in the blood that is in the bason, and strike the lintel and the two side posts with the blood that is in the bason; **and none of you shall go out at the door of his house until the morning.** 23 **For the LORD will pass through to smite the Egyptians; and when he seeth the blood upon the lintel, and on the two side posts, the LORD will pass over the door, and will not suffer the destroyer to come in unto your houses to smite you.** 24 And ye shall observe this thing for an ordinance to thee and to thy sons for ever.

The fact is that God himself commanded the Passover meal to be eaten in the homes of his people. In accordance with these commands, Jesus and his disciples ate the Passover meal together in a home on the night before Christ was crucified. At that meal, Jesus modified the Passover ritual and instructed his followers to continue the feast on a regular basis. Throughout the New Testament, with no exceptions, the church gathered at least once a week in their homes as they shared in the communion meal just as Jesus had commanded them. As early church writings and church historians also attest, this practice of having church gatherings in private residences, which is inherited from Mosaic Law, continued for the first three hundred years of Christianity.

According to Frank Senn, **“Christians of the first several centuries... Their central ritual involved a meal that had a domestic origin and setting inherited from Judaism.”**

Christian Liturgy: Catholic and Evangelic (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 53. – quoted by Frank Viola, *Pagan Christianity*, Chapter 2, The Church Building: Inheriting the Edifice Complex, page 14

In the first and early second centuries, the Lord’s Supper seems to have been taken in the evening as a meal. Second-century sources show it was taken only Sundays. In the Didache, the Eucharist is still shown to be taken with **the Agape meal (love feast)**. Dix, *Shape of the Liturgy*, 23, Ferguson, *Early Christians Speak*, 82-84, 96-97, 127-130, quoted from Frank Viola, *Pagan Christianity*, p.193.

These biblical and historical observations show that the practice of having church in our homes was not incidental at all. It was intentional. God required his people to share the Passover meal with one another in their homes. And Christ, likewise, commanded his followers to keep the Passover meal together. Following Old Testament requirements and Jesus’ precedent at the Last Supper, Christians of the New Testament period and several centuries that followed continued to gather in their homes for communion and fellowship each week. It was only around the fourth century AD that Christians abandoned these biblical protocols and instead began meeting in special buildings called basilicas that were essentially auditoriums used in Greek and Roman culture for state events and religious ceremonies. (For more information on this topic please see our series entitled “History of the Early Church” under the section “The Apostolic Church, a House-Church System.”)

Modern Christians are typically entirely unaware of the significant transition that took place when the fourth-century church abandoned the long-standing house church gatherings in favor of Greco-Roman buildings and meeting formats. Those who are familiar with these fourth-century developments may consider them benign. However, a closer look at God’s commands regarding authorized places of worship in the Old Testament once again indicates that this is not the case. We will turn to this issue in the section below.

Old Testament Requirements Regarding Places of Worship

When considering the question of where Christians ought to gather for worship, it is important be aware that God is not silent or ambivalent about such matters. On the contrary, the bible reveals that God is determined to prevent his people from worshipping him in unauthorized places.

In Deuteronomy 12, God explicitly forbids his people from worshipping him in various locations throughout the land where they were to live. Rather than having

places of worship throughout their land, God's will was to restrict them to a single place of worship to be located at a site that he himself would choose.

Deuteronomy 12:1 **These are the statutes and judgments, which ye shall observe to do** in the land, which the LORD God of thy fathers giveth thee to possess it, all the days that ye live upon the earth. **2 Ye shall utterly destroy all the places, wherein the nations which ye shall possess served their gods,** upon the high mountains, and upon the hills, and under every green tree: **3 And ye shall overthrow their altars,** and break their pillars, and burn their groves with fire; and ye shall hew down the graven images of their gods, and destroy the names of them out of that place. **4 Ye shall not do so unto the LORD your God.** **5 But unto the place which the LORD your God shall choose out of all your tribes to put his name there, even unto his habitation shall ye seek, and thither thou shalt come:** **6** And thither ye shall bring your burnt offerings, and your sacrifices, and your tithes, and heave offerings of your hand, and your vows, and your freewill offerings, and the firstlings of your herds and of your flocks: **7 And there ye shall eat before the LORD your God,** and ye shall rejoice in all that ye put your hand unto, ye and your households, wherein the LORD thy God hath blessed thee. **8 Ye shall not do after all the things that we do here this day, every man whatsoever is right in his own eyes.** **9** For ye are not as yet come to the rest and to the inheritance, which the LORD your God giveth you. **10** But when ye go over Jordan, and dwell in the land which the LORD your God giveth you to inherit, and when he giveth you rest from all your enemies round about, so that ye dwell in safety; **11** Then **there shall be a place which the LORD your God shall choose to cause his name to dwell there;** thither shall ye bring all that I command you; your burnt offerings, and your sacrifices, your tithes, and the heave offering of your hand, and all your choice vows which ye vow unto the LORD: **12** And ye shall rejoice before the LORD your God, ye, and your sons, and your daughters, and your menservants, and your maidservants, and the Levite that is within your gates; forasmuch as he hath no part nor inheritance with you. **13 Take heed to thyself that thou offer not thy burnt offerings in every place that thou seest:** **14 But in the place which the LORD shall choose in one of thy tribes,** there thou shalt offer thy burnt offerings, and there thou shalt do all that I command thee.

It is important to note that, according to verse 4, God is not simply prohibiting his people from worshiping false gods in various sites, but God is even prohibiting his people from using various sites throughout their land as places of worship dedicated unto him. The rest of the Old Testament demonstrates how serious God took these matters. Throughout the records of the kings of God's people there are continuous assessments made regarding whether the rulers and the people of Israel were faithful to the Mosaic Covenant. Within those assessment are repeated statements made by God specifically about his displeasure regarding the ongoing use of places of worship that he had not authorized.

For instance, here is one such assessment in which we find God's particular evaluation at the time of King Jehoshaphat, the son of King Asa. As the account shows, even though God is pleased that Jehoshaphat did what was right in the

eyes of God, God nonetheless calls attention to the fact that Jehoshaphat did not remove other places of worship throughout the land of Israel which God had specifically prohibited in Deuteronomy 12. To put this into perspective, imagine God commending a king for doing all that was right in God's eyes, but then bothering to point out a single exception involving allowing places of worship throughout the land of Israel. Either God is being extremely petty with a man of otherwise exceptional character or God's prohibition of his people using unauthorized places of worship is very important to him, so important that he'd bother to list it as a source of displeasure regarding a king who is otherwise, by God's own account, obedient in all things.

1 Kings 22:43 And he walked in all the ways of Asa his father; he turned not aside from it, doing that which was right in the eyes of the LORD: nevertheless the high places were not taken away; for the people offered and burnt incense yet in the high places.

(For additional examples see 2 Kings 12:2-3, 14:3-4, 15:3-4, 15:34-35, 2 Chronicles 15:15-17, 20:32-33.)

To be clear, as we noted earlier, God's displeasure at the use of unauthorized places of worship is not due to a concern about worshipping other gods there. As Deuteronomy 12:4 explicitly stated, God forbid his people from worshipping him at unauthorized places of worship. 2 Chronicles 33 confirms that this is the case. As with King Jehoshaphat in 1 Kings 22, God is here commending King Manasseh for his obedience. However, once again, we see that God is displeased with the fact that his people are worshipping him (not foreign gods) at unauthorized places of worship.

2 Chronicles 33:15 And he took away the strange gods, and the idol out of the house of the LORD, and all the altars that he had built in the mount of the house of the LORD, and in Jerusalem, and cast them out of the city. 16 And he repaired the altar of the LORD, and sacrificed thereon peace offerings and thank offerings, and commanded Judah to serve the LORD God of Israel. 17 **Nevertheless the people did sacrifice still in the high places, yet unto the LORD their God only.**

In Deuteronomy 12 (and elsewhere in the Law of Moses), God prohibits his people from worshipping him in various places of worship throughout the land. Instead, he specified only a single location where he authorized them to worship him. In the ancient world, pagan nations had various temples, shrines, and places of worship throughout their lands. In the modern world, Christians and Jews have many church buildings and temples in their communities. But, in the bible, God only allowed his people to have one temple.

In the time of David we learn that God had selected Jerusalem as that singular, authorized location for his people's worship. It is there, in Jerusalem, that David's son Solomon built a temple to the Lord to be a permanent place of worship.

Three times a year, all of the men among the people of Israel were required to gather in Jerusalem to worship God at the three major festivals of Passover, Pentecost, and the Feast of Tabernacles. These required gatherings are referred to in the bible as “convocations.”

Exodus 23:17 Three times in the year all thy males shall appear before the Lord God.

Deuteronomy 16:16 Three times in a year shall all thy males appear before the Lord thy God in the place where he shall choose; in the feast of unleavened bread, and in the feast of weeks, and in the feast of tabernacles: and they shall not appear before the Lord empty.

Exodus 12:16 And in the first day there shall be a holy convocation, and in the seventh day there shall be a holy convocation (04744) to you; no manner of work shall be done in them, save that which every man must eat, that only may be done of you.

The Hebrew and English words employed in these passages simply refer to a “sacred assembly” or gathering of the people.

04744 **miqra'**

from 07121; n m; [BDB-896b] {See TWOT on 2063 @@ "2063d" }

AV-convocation 19, **assemblies 2**, calling 1, reading 1; 23

1) convocation, convoking, **reading, a calling together**

1a) convocation, **sacred assembly**

1b) convoking

1c) reading

con·vo·ca·tion – noun

1. **a large formal assembly of people.**

2. the action of **calling people together for a large formal assembly.** –

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We can see then that while God did not authorize his people to assemble at various places of worship throughout the land even when they were there to worship him, he did require them to gather together annually on three occasions in Jerusalem to worship him at the temple.

However, as we have seen, attendance for worship at the temple in Jerusalem was only required three times a year. What about the rest of the year? What did the Jewish people living all around the land of Israel do for worship on the other weeks each year?

Answers to these questions come from the Law of Moses itself. Once again, we turn to commands regarding Passover. Earlier in this study, we turned to Exodus 12 and saw that God required his people to gather in their homes and eat the sacred Passover meal.

Exodus 12:6 And ye shall keep it up until the fourteenth day of the same month: and the whole assembly of the congregation of Israel shall kill it in the evening. 7 **And they shall take of the blood, and strike it on the two side posts and on the upper door post of the houses, wherein they shall eat it.** 8 And they shall eat the flesh in that night, roast with fire, and unleavened bread; and with bitter herbs they shall eat it. 9 Eat not of it raw, nor sodden at all with water, but roast with fire; his head with his legs, and with the purtenance thereof. 10 And ye shall let nothing of it remain until the morning; and that which remaineth of it until the morning ye shall burn with fire. 11 And thus shall ye eat it; with your loins girded, your shoes on your feet, and your staff in your hand; and ye shall eat it in haste: **it is the LORD'S passover.** 12 For I will pass through the land of Egypt this night, and will smite all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, both man and beast; and against all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgment: I am the LORD. 13 **And the blood shall be to you for a token upon the houses where ye are: and when I see the blood, I will pass over you,** and the plague shall not be upon you to destroy you, when I smite the land of Egypt. 14 And this day shall be unto you for a memorial; and ye shall keep it a feast to the LORD throughout your generations; ye shall keep it a feast by an ordinance for ever. 15 **Seven days shall ye eat unleavened bread; even the first day ye shall put away leaven out of your houses:** for whosoever eateth leavened bread from the first day until the seventh day, that soul shall be cut off from Israel. 16 And in the first day there shall be an holy convocation, and in the seventh day there shall be an holy convocation to you; no manner of work shall be done in them, save that which every man must eat, that only may be done of you. 17 And ye shall observe the feast of unleavened bread; for in this selfsame day have I brought your armies out of the land of Egypt: therefore shall ye observe this day in your generations by an ordinance for ever. 18 In the first month, on the fourteenth day of the month at even, ye shall eat unleavened bread, until the one and twentieth day of the month at even. 19 **Seven days shall there be no leaven found in your houses:** for whosoever eateth that which is leavened, even that soul shall be cut off from the congregation of Israel, whether he be a stranger, or born in the land. 20 Ye shall eat nothing leavened; in all your habitations shall ye eat unleavened bread. 21 **Then Moses called for all the elders of Israel, and said unto them, Draw out and take you a lamb according to your families, and kill the passover.** 22 And ye shall take a bunch of hyssop, and dip it in the blood that is in the bason, and strike the lintel and the two side posts with the blood that is in the bason; **and none of you shall go out at the door of his house until the morning.** 23 **For the LORD will pass through to smite the Egyptians; and when he seeth the blood upon the lintel, and on the two side posts, the LORD will pass over the door, and will not suffer the destroyer to come in unto your houses to smite you.** 24 And ye shall observe this thing for an ordinance to thee and to thy sons for ever.

Exodus 12:15 Seven days shall ye eat unleavened bread; even the first day ye shall put away leaven out of your houses (01004):

Exodus 12:20 Ye shall eat nothing leavened; in all your habitations (04186) shall ye eat unleavened bread.

4186 mowshab

from 03427; n m; [BDB-444a] {See TWOT on 922 @@ "922c" }

AV-habitation 12, dwellings 8, seat 7, dwelling 4, dwellingplace 3, dwell 3, places 2, sitting 2, assembly 1, situation 1, sojourning 1; 44

1) seat, **assembly, dwelling-place, dwelling**, dwellers

1a) seat, sitting, those sitting, **sitting company or assembly**

1b) **dwelling place, dwelling**

1c) situation, location

1d) time of dwelling

1e) those dwelling, dweller

God's instructions regarding Passover provide clear affirmation that God authorized his people to gather in their home for the purposes of worship. (In this case we are discussing the service God required his people to perform to him on the festival of Passover.) Likewise, we have seen that God commanded his people to gather or assemble for worship in Jerusalem three times a year. In the biblical texts these required gatherings or assemblies for worship were called "convocations." However, they occurred only three times a year. The answer to the question of where God's people were to gather for worship the rest of the year can be found in Leviticus 23.

Leviticus 23:3 Six days shall work be done: but the seventh day is the Sabbath of rest, an holy convocation (04744); ye shall do no work therein: it is the Sabbath of the Lord in all your dwellings (04186).

Here in Leviticus 23, God specifically designates the seventh day of the week as a day of rest. This day, called the Sabbath, was a day of "holy convocation" or religious assembly. The same word is used here as in passages discussing commands for the men of Israel to gather in Jerusalem before God for worship three times a year on the major festivals. However, here in Leviticus, we see that God's command is for weekly gatherings which were to occur on the Sabbath day. More significant than that is the fact that God specifies that these weekly gatherings of his people were to occur in their homes.

From these passages we can clearly see that God prohibited his people from constructing temples throughout their land to worship him and instead only allowed them to have a single temple in Jerusalem. But, we also learn that God authorized and commanded his people to have a sacred gathering in their homes each week just as they did in their dwellings on Passover, the meal which Christ commanded his followers to continue in the New Covenant as our regular church meetings.

A study of the relevant biblical information shows that the New Testament church gatherings were based on the Passover ritual. They occurred in homes and involved a shared sacred meal. Passover itself required God's people to gather in their dwellings to eat the ritual meal. And, even though God did not allow his people to worship him at places of worship throughout their land, he did require

them to gather together weekly in their homes for sacred assembly. We can conclude from this study of relevant biblical passages that meeting in homes was not an incidental feature of Jewish or Christian religious gatherings. It was established by God in the Old Testament, continued at the Last Supper by Jesus' Christ, and faithfully kept by Christians for nearly 300 years afterwards.

The bible shows that God is absolutely not ambivalent about the places of worship where his people gather to worship him. He forbids his people from gathering together in special places of worship outside their homes throughout their land. As was the case in the Old Covenant, God's people in the New Covenant are not authorized to have temple building throughout our land where we meet for worship. This practice is prohibited by God and condemned by him as a pagan custom. In the fourth-century after Christ, Christians abandoned the system authorized in both the Old and New Testament and instead adopted the places of worship used by the Greeks and Romans. This was no benign alteration. It was a contradiction of biblical commands and institutions. And even though the temple in Jerusalem has been destroyed since the first century, our homes are still authorized places of worship where God commanded us to gather each week to fulfill our covenantal obligation of worship by sharing a meal with one another and fellowshiping in God's word. Gathering in temple buildings modelled after pagan customs in various places where we live is, in fact, a violation of biblical commands.

What about the Synagogues?

The New Testament frequently speaks about Jewish people gathering in synagogues. Moreover, the bible reports that Jesus and his followers attended the synagogues and participated in the gatherings that were held there (Matthew 4:23, 9:35, 9:20, 13:5, 14:1, 18:4). Likewise, the Greek word for "synagogue" is very similar in meaning for the Greek word for "church."

4864 **sunagoge**

from (the reduplicated form of) 4863; n f; TDNT-7:798,1107; { See TDNT 764 } AV-synagogue 55, congregation 1, assembly 1; 57

1) **a bringing together**, gathering (as of fruits), a contracting

2) **in the NT, an assembling together of men, an assembly of men**

3) a synagogue

3a) **an assembly of Jews formally gathered together to offer prayers and listen to the reading and expositions of the scriptures**; assemblies of that sort were held every sabbath and feast day, afterwards also on the second and fifth days of every week; **name transferred to an assembly of Christians formally gathered together for religious purposes** [SM: James 2:2]

3b) **the buildings where those solemn Jewish assemblies are held**. Synagogues seem to date their origin from the Babylonian exile. In the times of Jesus and the apostles every town, not only in Palestine, but also among the Gentiles if it contained a considerable number of Jewish inhabitants, had at least one

synagogue, the larger towns several or even many. These were also used for trials and inflicting punishment.

1577 **ekklesia**

from a compound of 1537 and a derivative of 2564; n f; TDNT- 3:501,394; { See TDNT 352 }

AV-church 115, assembly 3; 118

1) a gathering of citizens called out from their homes into some public place, **an assembly**

1a) an assembly of the people convened at the public place of the council for the purpose of deliberating

1b) **the assembly of the Israelites**

1c) any gathering or throng of men assembled by chance, tumultuously

1d) **in a Christian sense**

1d1) **an assembly of Christians gathered for worship in a religious meeting**

1d2) a company of Christians, or of those who, hoping for eternal salvation through Jesus Christ, observe their own religious rites, hold their own religious meetings, and manage their own affairs, according to regulations prescribed for the body for order's sake

1d3) those who anywhere, in a city, village, constitute such a company and are united into one body

1d4) the whole body of Christians scattered throughout the earth

1d5) the assembly of faithful Christians already dead and received into heaven

Today, Jewish synagogues are not altogether very different from Christian churches. Both are special buildings featuring large auditoriums originally mirroring the Greco-Roman basilica. But what about in the New Testament period? If New Testament era synagogues were like modern synagogues, then isn't it possible that the Christian use of special church buildings was derived from synagogue buildings rather than from Greco-Roman religious and state institutions? More importantly, if Jesus and his disciples went to the synagogues and were involved in synagogue gatherings wouldn't that clearly establish that using these types of buildings is acceptable to God?

These are important questions. To answer them requires determining whether the ancient synagogues from the period before, during, and just after the New Testament were, in fact, like modern synagogues or not. Were synagogues of the biblical period like the Greek and Roman basilicas or not? In point of fact, they were not. On the contrary, like the New Testament church gatherings, synagogues occurred in private residences, not in special buildings. Both archeology and the bible support this conclusion.

We will start with historical and archeological data.

In the following article the Biblical Archeology Society reproduces excerpts of a study published in the Biblical Archeological Review (BAR). As can be seen below, the article discusses a dilemma faced by archeologists searching for the remains of ancient Jewish synagogue buildings. Writings from the biblical period

report the widespread existence of synagogues throughout the ancient world and yet the archeological research has largely been unable to find the remains of any bible-era synagogue buildings matching the standard structure and arrangement common to synagogues from the post-biblical periods. As explained below, synagogues from after the destruction of the second temple (in 70 AD) are arranged much like we see today with a particularly important wall (which houses the “Torah Shrine”) at the front of the gathering hall and with all the seats facing this centralized feature. As is the case with Greco-Roman basilicas as well as church buildings of the medieval and modern era, this arrangement is designed to facilitate the more formalized liturgical ceremonies that are the hallmarks of temple and church services which have become familiar to Jews and Christians alike. By contrast, synagogues of the ancient period were comprised of a single room oriented toward the center designed for teaching purposes.

A synagogue is a place dedicated to Jewish worship and instruction. These buildings became the primary place of Jewish worship after the Temple was destroyed in 70 C.E. But **were there ancient synagogues in Israel—and in the diaspora—while the Temple still stood in Jerusalem?** In “Synagogues—Before and After the Roman Destruction of the Temple” from the May/June 2015 issue of BAR, Professor Rachel Hachlili of the University of Haifa examines ancient synagogues in Israel and throughout the ancient Near East. **Rachel Hachlili explains that there is some debate as to whether or not synagogues existed before the Roman destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E.** **On the one hand, we have textual evidence—such as the New Testament—that identifies certain structures as synagogues where Torah reading, teaching and prayer took place. For example Mark 1:21 says that Jesus and his disciples traveled to Capernaum, and “when the Sabbath came, he [Jesus] entered the synagogue and taught.”** **Additionally, we have uncovered buildings from the Second Temple period (before the destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E.) that look similar to post-destruction synagogues.** Later synagogues were sometimes built on top of these earlier structures, thereby suggesting a continuity of use. **However, all of the Second Temple-period synagogues lack the main architectural characteristic of later synagogues: the Torah Shrine.** Usually situated on the wall of the synagogue facing Jerusalem, the Torah Shrine was the receptacle for the ark containing the Torah Scrolls. It became the focus of the later synagogues: “The Torah Shrine determined the arrangement of the interior of the post-destruction synagogue. **This synagogue plan usually consisted of a hall divided by columns into a central space with side aisles and sometimes with a front (or side) courtyard. It all focused on the Torah Shrine.**” **Should the earlier structures without the Torah Shrine still be called synagogues? If not, what is the meaning of “synagogue” in the Bible?** In her BAR article, Rachel Hachlili analyzes the main differences between the post-destruction synagogues and their possible earlier precursors: **The Second Temple-period buildings were used for Torah reading and as a study center. They had a didactic aim and also served as a meeting place for the community. The synagogues of Late Antiquity, by contrast, emphasized prayer and ceremonies; their functions were liturgical and ritualistic. The focal point of the early buildings was the center of the hall, while that of the later synagogue was the Torah Shrine built**

on the Jerusalem-oriented wall. In the early structures, benches were constructed along all four walls; they faced the center for the hall. **In the later synagogues, the benches faced the Torah Shrine. Architectural decoration in the pre-destruction buildings was simple.** The later synagogues were richly ornamented both outside and inside and included mosaic floors and wall paintings. While there were differences between the pre-destruction and post-destruction synagogues, they still shared many similarities—both architectural and functional. **Regardless of whether these earlier structures deserve the term “synagogue” by the current definition, the meaning of “synagogue” in the Bible almost certainly refers to these Second Temple-period buildings.** For further details about ancient synagogues in Israel and in the diaspora, read the article “Synagogues—Before and After the Roman Destruction of the Temple” by Rachel Hachlili in the May/June 2015 issue of BAR. – Ancient Synagogues in Israel and the Diaspora: What is the Meaning of “Synagogue” in the Bible?, Megan Sauter, April 6, 2015, <http://www.biblicalarchaeology.org/daily/biblical-sites-places/temple-at-jerusalem/ancient-synagogues-in-israel-and-the-diaspora/>

The information discussed in the article above is consistent with biblical information discussed in our study entitled “Reason and Learning through Questions.” In that study we explore the scriptural evidence showing that the Jewish mode of instruction in the late biblical period at least was focused on interactive teaching. By contrast, uninterrupted sermons delivered from a raised platform with the audience facing away from one another were characteristic of the Greek and Roman orators and sophists and the basilicas they spoke in. These special buildings were designed to facilitate the one-sided style of instruction that was the feature of pagan speakers at religious and state functions. However, the ancient Jewish methodology involved the male attendees in the reading and discussion of scripture. Our article shows that this conclusion is demonstrated in the biblical texts of the New Testament.

The article above from the Biblical Archeological Society corroborates the documentary evidence we present from the scripture with the archeological evidence of biblical-era synagogues comprised of a single room arranged with the audience facing one another and designed with didactic teaching in mind. (For more information on the Christian adaptation of Greco-Roman modes of speaking and church buildings please see our articles and video series on “The History of the Early Church.” Likewise, examples of New Testament attestation that Jewish and Christian men could speak and ask questions in their gatherings can be found in passages such as Luke 2:25, Acts 13:15, 17:17, 18:4, 19, 1 Corinthians 14:34-35, and 1 Timothy 2:11-14. On the other hand, the New Testament record establishes that uninterrupted speeches only occur during evangelistic, outreach events when the audience is comprised of those who are not already followers of Christ Jesus. See Matthew 5:1-7:29, Acts 2:14-40, 7:1-53, and Acts 21:27-22:22 for the only New Testament instances of uninterrupted speeches.)

The bottom line that is established from the study published by BAR above alongside the New Testament description of Jewish and Christian meetings is that synagogues of the biblical periods do not match those of more modern buildings.

Biblical-era synagogues are not the special, auditorium-style buildings we see today corresponding to the basilica model. Rather, if the modern synagogue building is taken as the standard for what a synagogue is, then as the BAR study asserts, archeologists have concluded that it may not even be possible to say that such structures existed in the biblical period.

The quote below also addresses the same dilemma highlighted in the article above: the absence of archeological evidence supporting the existence of special synagogue buildings in the biblical period. As the quote below explains the absence of archeological remains of synagogue buildings in these periods is solved with the acknowledgment that the earliest synagogues, in fact, took place, in private residences or homes rather than in special buildings. Finding remains of special synagogue buildings of the biblical era is not possible because synagogues were not held in such structures at that time. On the contrary, because synagogues from the biblical period were located in people's homes, their remains will appear the same to modern archeologists as the remains of any other private residence.

This brief review highlights three important pieces of information about early synagogues in Palestine. First, beginning in the late Second Temple period, synagogues were used for various purposes, including worship. **Second, at some point after the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple, synagogues took on a more central role as places of Jewish worship... While a general understanding of the extent of synagogue worship in America can be determined from the survey data, for antiquity the evidence for the extent of synagogue worship is far less obvious.** Therefore, many scholars have simply assumed that synagogue worship was commonly practiced by most Jews after the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple. For example, **Stuart Miller writes the following about ancient synagogues: "Interestingly, only rarely have archeologists uncovered more than a single structure in a given town.** True, no Talmudic town has been fully excavated and, in any case, the population during different periods could have varied in size; but one still wonders where it was that most people prayed and studied." 18 **While Miller correctly identifies the discrepancy between the number of archaeologically excavated synagogues and the sizes of particular settlements,** he searches for an answer to where most Jews in these cities would have worshipped before sufficiently determining whether or not most Jews in these cities actually worshipped in synagogues. 19 **Miller's answer is that most synagogue communities probably met in converted houses during times of worship.** 20 The ubiquity of synagogue worship is assumed, and a possible, but unverifiable explanation is crafted to make sense of the lack evidence for monumental synagogue buildings. Similar assumptions about the extent of synagogue worship at this time are common in the scholarly literature.

Footnote 18: Stuart Miller, "The Rabbis and the Non-Existent Monolithic Synagogue," in *Jews, Christians and Polytheists in the Ancient Synagogue* (ed. Steven Fine; London: Routledge, 1999), 58.

Footnote 19: Stuart Miller, "The Rabbis and the Non-Existent Monolithic Synagogue," 60; Stuart Miller, "On the Number of Synagogues in the Cities of 'Erez Israel," *JJS* 49, no. 1 (1998): 65. Miller follows the lead of **L. Michael**

White and Howard Clark Kee in suggesting that synagogue communities would have met in converted houses. See L. Michael White, *Building God's House in the Roman World: Architectural Adaptation Among Pagans, Jews, and Christians* (Baltimore: Published for the ASOR by Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990); Kee, "Defining the First Century C.E. Synagogue."

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– Ancient Synagogue Seating Capacities, Chad S. Spigel, Chapter 1: Introduction, <https://books.google.com/books?id=2I37jAVg8PsC&pg=PA5&lpg=PA5&dq=ancient+synagogues+in+houses&source=bl&ots=WVCgDb0oVy&sig=y0iWeddC5wIenCIkfN-ajv2fj1U&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0CF4Q6AEwDGoVChMI0JO4o52RyQIVFPpjCh2PggrH#v=onepage&q=ancient%20synagogues%20in%20houses&f=false>

Additional support for the conclusion that the synagogues of the biblical period were simply meetings that occurred in houses (rather than as special building structures) comes from another book presenting the history of the synagogue. In the following quote, the authors discuss excavations showing that ancient synagogues originated within private residences. The conclusion of the quote states that the transition of the synagogue from gatherings in houses to gatherings in special building structures mirrors that of the Christian church.

In a declaration with fundamental implications for our study, Meyers calls for a clear distinction between synagogue as “a social and religious institution” and “as a distinct and discrete architectural entity,” and concludes that “in the first centuries (C.E.) large private houses were used as places of worship alongside other buildings that could be utilized for worship and other matters requiring public assembly. In Palestine, it would seem, it was about a hundred years after the destruction of the Temple that the synagogue as *building* began to emerge as a central feature of Jewish communal life.” Curiously, however, Meyers opens his survey of the synagogue by quoting a translation of the Theodotus inscription, and dating it to the first century C.E., although he passes over any programmatic features of the synagogue mentioned there except the reading and study of the scriptures (252). **In an earlier publication he had affirmed that “it is highly unlikely that in the period when the temple still stood, a synagogue could have been nothing more than a private house or part of a larger structure set aside for worship.”** 34 ...For example, although pious Christian pilgrims to the holy land have long been shown the remains of the synagogue in Capernaum, where (it was assumed) Jesus taught, **Meyers and Strange agree with V. Corbo, the excavator of the site, that the synagogue dates from the fourth century C.E., and that it was built on top of a house (51), 36 which may have served as a gathering place for pious Jews from the first century C.E. onward.** 37 Archaeological analysis of synagogue sites in the Jewish Diaspora shows this same pattern of architectural adaptation. L. Michael White notes that **the meeting place of the Jewish community in Delos was originally a private**

house, dating from as early as the late second century B.C.E., modified to serve as an assembly hall, just as was the case with a first-century C.E. house in Ostia. Evidence for analogous development of not only Jewish and Christian religious community centers, but also those of the cult of Mithras, was found in the excavation of Dura-Europos sixty years ago, where the synagogue, the church and the Mithraem were clearly evolved from earlier stages in which they were simply houses. 38

34 Eric M. Meyers and James F. Strange, *Archaeology, the Rabbis, and Early Christianity* (Nashville, Abingdon, 1981), 141.

36 In his essay in *Ancient Synagogues Revealed* (Jerusalem, 1981), 52, S. Loffreda suggest a date for this synagogue in the last decade of the fourth to mid-fifth century C.E.

37 This phenomenon of the replacement of private houses used as gathering places for the study of Torah and worship has been demonstrated in several synagogue sites in the Diaspora: L. Michael White, *Building God's House in the Roman World* (see note 28 above).

38 White, *Building God's House*, 7-8, 64-71 – Evolution of the Synagogue: Problems and Progress, *The Archeological Evidence for Synagoge as a Building*, Edited by Howard Clark Kee and Lynn H. Cohick, Copyright 1999 by Trinity Press International,

https://books.google.com/books?id=IY8yupzDeJwC&pg=PA22&lpg=PA22&dq=ancient+synagogues+in+houses&source=bl&ots=cKdBmZnL_V&sig=uGYSIQm1FOA-dvuQ4eUYw6XUj9M&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0CEwQ6AEwCTgKahUKEwiOsbKynZHJAhVH22MKHecSCV#v=onepage&q=ancient%20synagogues%20in%20houses&f=false

The quote above references synagogue and church found at the archeological site known as Dura-Europos. As explained below, the synagogue and church found at this location are among the oldest of their kind. And, both began simply as homes where Jewish and Christian gatherings occurred. Once again, the historical and archeological evidence attests to the fact that the Jewish synagogues of the biblical period, were, like the Christian churches, simply house-based meetings.

The Dura-Europos synagogue – The Dura-Europos synagogue (or "Dura Europas", "Dura Europos" etc.) is an ancient synagogue uncovered at Dura-Europos, Syria, in 1932. **The last phase of construction was dated by an Aramaic inscription to 244 CE, making it one of the oldest synagogues in the world.** – wikipedia.org

Church (buildings) – History – Antiquity – **According to the New Testament, the earliest Christians did not build church buildings. Instead, they gathered in homes** (Acts 17:5, 20:20, 1 Cor 16:19) or in Jewish worship places like the Second Temple or synagogues (Acts 2:46, 19:8). **The earliest archeologically identified Christian church is a house church, the Dura-Europos church, founded between 233 and 256.** – wikipedia.org

The following quote succinctly explains what can be determined about synagogues in the biblical era based on both archeological and biblical information as stated by the scholars and research contained in the quotes above.

The Synagogue – *Origins of the Synagogue* – The origins of synagogue buildings and the worship associated with them are obscure. It seems clear that synagogue buildings and meeting places started during the Babylonian exile. For one thing, the Jews who were carried away from Israel were not allowed to return, and for another, because Nebuchadnezzar had burned the Temple to the ground, so there was no way to continue Temple worship. For more than two generations between the burning of Solomon’s Temple (2 Kings 25:9) and Zerubbabel’s rebuilding it during the Persian rule (Ezra 1:2; 3:11; 6:14, 15), there was no way to obey the priestly and sacrificial regulations of the Torah, so devout Jews began to get together to pray, worship, and study the Law... *The Synagogue Building* – **There apparently were no set rules about how or where to build a synagogue, although there are Jewish sources that indicate that there had to be at least 10 Jewish men who would participate...There are no clear records of the style of the architecture of synagogues before the second century A.D. It seems likely that the oldest synagogues both in Israel and abroad seem to be houses or to have developed out of houses, and this may be true in Palestine in New Testament days, for in Mark 6:3 and Luke 13:10-17, the women do not seem to sit in galleries, as they probably do in the basilica-type synagogues of later times. Thus the early synagogues were like early Christian churches, they were house churches, only later becoming formal buildings. – <http://www.truthortradition.com/articles/the-synagogue>**

Besides the archeological evidence, the scriptural data also warrants the conclusion that the synagogues of the biblical period took place in houses. We will start with a simple statement from James 2:1-2.

James 2:1 My brethren, have not the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, with respect of persons. **2 For if there come unto your assembly (4864)** a man with a gold ring, in goodly apparel, and there come in also a poor man in vile raiment;

In this portion of his letter James is addressing a problem occurring in church gatherings wherein people of means were being treated better than poorer attendees. The critical point for our present study is that the word James uses to refer to Christian church gatherings is “assembly” which is translated from the Greek word for synagogue.

We already know that Christians met in their homes in the New Testament period (Romans 16:5, 1 Corinthians 16:19, Colossians 4:15, Philemon 1:2, Acts 2:46, 5:42, and Titus 1:11.) Here we have James discussing a Christian gathering using the Greek term that is used throughout the New Testament to refer to Jewish synagogues. The synonymous use of these terms provides clear scripture and linguistic evidence that synagogues of the biblical period were taking place in private residences.

Additional linguistic support for the association of synagogues and house church gatherings can be seen in the New Testament's use of the Greek verb "sunago" (4863) from which the noun "synagogue" (4864) is derived. Passages like Acts 4:31, 11:26, 13:44, 14:27, 15:30, 20:7-8, 1 Corinthians 5:4, and Matthew 18:20 all show that the term "gathered together" ("sunago," 4863) is applied to synagogues and churches alike. A study of the terminology shows that for the first-century Jewish and Gentile followers of Christ (including New Testament authors like James), the synagogue and the church gathering were synonymous concepts, both of which took place in houses rather than in special buildings.

Further biblical demonstration of this conclusion comes from the Book of Acts.

Acts 18:24-26 reports on an encounter between Jewish followers of Christ which took place in the city of Ephesus. In the account, a Jewish man named Apollos went into the synagogue and began speaking. Upon hearing what he had to say, two other Jewish followers of Christ named Aquila and Priscilla approached Apollos. The important part of this story is that it occurs at a synagogue in Ephesus where Jewish people gathered together. The reason it is important is because in 1 Corinthians 16:19 Paul refers to the church in the province of Asia (Minor) that met in the home of Aquila and Priscilla. As Revelation 1:11 explains the city of Ephesus was in the province of Asia Minor. More importantly, in 2 Timothy 4:19, Paul asks Timothy to greet Aquila and Priscilla. It is generally concluded that at the time of this epistle Timothy was residing in Ephesus.

1 Timothy 1:3 As I besought thee to abide still at Ephesus, when I went into Macedonia, that thou mightest charge some that they teach no other doctrine,

Saint Timothy – Timothy was an early Christian evangelist and **the first first-century Christian bishop of Ephesus,[3] whom tradition relates died around the year AD 97.** - wikipedia.org

Saint Timothy, Bishop of Ephesus - Saint Timothy, (born , Lystra, Lycaonia [now Lusna, Tur.]—**died ad 97, Ephesus [now in Turkey];** Western feast day January 24 [in Roman church January 26 with Titus], Eastern feast day January 22), disciple of St. Paul the Apostle, whom he accompanied on his missions; traditional martyr and **first bishop of Ephesus...In the Pastoral Epistles he is solely in charge of the Christians at Ephesus,** possibly the site of his release from prison as chronicled in Hebrews 13:23. **Tradition, probably based on New Testament inferences, made him first bishop of Ephesus,** where he was allegedly martyred under the Roman emperor Nerva. – Encyclopedia Britannica

If we put all of these details together it strongly suggests a particular conclusion regarding synagogues in the New Testament era. That Aquila and Priscilla hosted a house church gathering in their residence is clearly attested to. The fact that Aquila and Priscilla first encountered Apollos in a synagogue in Ephesus coupled with the New Testament's interchangeable application of the Greek terms for synagogue and church gathering provides good reason to consider that the Jewish

synagogue in Ephesus in Acts 18:24-26 was, in fact, in Aquila and Priscilla's home. Either the synagogue in Acts 18 is the same exact house gathering as is mentioned later by Paul in his letters or it was simply the case that Aquila and Priscilla hosted Jewish and Gentile gatherings in whatever home they were staying in at the time. In either case these passages exhibit additional evidence of the synonymous application of the terms synagogue and church to house-based meetings of Jews and Jewish and Gentile Christians in the biblical era.

Further scriptural evidence that early synagogues were simply house gatherings also comes from the Book of Acts. Specifically, the story of Paul's (Saul's) conversion contains the relevant details. The chronicle of these events begins in Acts 8 just after the death of Stephen.

Acts 8:1 And Saul was consenting unto his death. And at that time there was a great persecution against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered abroad throughout the regions of Judaea and Samaria, except the apostles. **2 And devout men carried Stephen to his burial,** and made great lamentation over him. **3 As for Saul, he made havock of the church, entering into every house, and haling men and women committed them to prison.** **4** Therefore, they that were scattered abroad went everywhere preaching the word.

Several important points are worth noting from these four verses in Acts 8. First, Paul's actions against Christians involved him going into houses and taking into custody anyone who believed in Jesus Christ. Second, as a result of Paul's campaign against the church, Christians in the affected areas fled abroad. The account of Paul's efforts to arrest Jewish followers of Christ continues in Acts 9.

Acts 9:1 And Saul, yet breathing out threatenings and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord, went unto the high priest, **2 And desired of him letters to Damascus to the synagogues, that if he found any of this way, whether they were men or women, he might bring them bound unto Jerusalem.**

Acts 9:3-19 records that while Paul was on his way to Damascus to arrest Christians there, he was confronted by Christ who appeared to him while he was on the road. The rest of the passage reports on Paul's subsequently becoming a follower of Jesus and his interaction with a man named Ananias who baptized him. After his change of heart, Paul immediately went into the very same synagogues where he previously intended to find and take into custody Jewish Christians and instead preached that Christ was the Son of God.

Acts 9:20 And straightway he preached Christ in the synagogues, that he is the Son of God. **21 But all that heard him were amazed, and said; Is not this he that destroyed them which called on this name in Jerusalem, and came hither for that intent, that he might bring them bound unto the chief priests?** **22** But Saul increased the more in strength, and confounded the Jews which dwelt at Damascus, proving that this is very Christ.

In Acts 22:19-20 and Acts 26:11-16, Paul himself recounts the events reported by Luke, particularly in chapters 8. In his own words, Paul states that from the time of Stephen's death to the time of his journey Damascus, he went into the synagogues and beat and imprisoned any followers of Christ that he found there.

Acts 22:19 And I said, Lord, they know that **I imprisoned and beat in every synagogue them that believed on thee:** **20** And when the blood of thy martyr Stephen was shed, I also was standing by, and consenting unto his death, and kept the raiment of them that slew him.

Acts 26:11 **And I punished them oft in every synagogue, and compelled them to blaspheme; and being exceedingly mad against them, I persecuted them even unto strange cities. 12** Whereupon as I went to Damascus with authority and commission from the chief priests,

A reading of these passages inevitably raises the unavoidable conclusion that the Jewish synagogues of the first century occurred in people's homes. Clear evidence of this fact is provided by comparing Acts 8:1-4's declaration that Paul's efforts to imprison followers of Christ took place "in every house" while Acts 9:1-2, 20-21 and especially Acts 22:19-20 and 26:11-12 explicitly report on the same events but instead declare that Paul's campaign was conducted in the synagogues. Undoubtedly, Luke is using the terms "synagogues" and "houses" (and "church") interchangeably to refer to the places where Paul searched for Jewish followers of Christ in order to persecute them and remove them from Jewish religious society as heretics.

From James' epistle, to Aquila and Priscilla's house church synagogue in Ephesus, to Paul's campaign of entering into synagogue houses to persecute Jewish Christians, to the synonymous use of the words "synagogue" and "church," the New Testament clearly confirms that both churches and synagogues took place in homes rather than separate, special buildings such as those we see in medieval and modern times.

In this section of our study we have sought to answer the potential suggestion that the fourth-century, Christian abandonment of house churches in favor of special church buildings could be explained as a derivative of a Jewish synagogue system which also utilized specialized buildings rather than houses. If it was the case that biblical-era synagogues were not house gatherings, then it would be possible to suggest that church buildings were not derived from Greek and Roman structures and customs, but to Jewish antecedents. However, having considered the available historical and biblical data we can conclude that the synagogues of the biblical period were, like the earliest churches, house-based gatherings. Therefore, suggestions that the church's eventual abandonment of a house-church gathering system was an outgrowth of a "basilica-styled" synagogue system from the biblical era must be discarded as untenable. The historical reality is that during the biblical period (and extending for some time afterward) Jewish synagogues and Christian churches were regular gatherings that took place in houses. Only in later periods did both groups transition to meeting in specialized buildings modelled

after Greek and Roman structures called basilicas which were used for both imperial and religious assemblies.

Churches Gathering in Places besides Houses?

The New Testament indicates that both Jewish and Gentile church communities gathered together in their homes, not in church buildings. Sometimes these houses were the same locations where Jewish synagogues had gathered. We have also seen that, for several centuries after the New Testament, Christians continued to meet in house settings even after they were disallowed from attending non-Christian Jewish synagogues. (For more on the developments which led to Christian expulsion from non-Christian Jewish synagogues please see our study on “The History of Judaism.”)

There is only one place where the New Testament may report on gatherings occurring somewhere besides private residences. In Acts 19:8 we find Paul going into the Jewish synagogue and disputing with and persuading those who gathered there. This continues for around three months. However, when some of the synagogue members began to oppose Paul, the text indicates that he separated the disciples and disputed daily in the school of Tyrannus instead (verse 9).

The question then is what is the “school of Tyrannus” that is mentioned in Acts 19:9? Is this an instance of Christians gathering somewhere besides a house?

First, the word translated as “school” in Acts 19:9 is the Greek noun “schole” (4981). It is only used once in the New Testament. But its basic meaning in Greek conveys a place “free from labor” “a place where there is leisure for anything,” or “a school.”

4981 schole

probably feminine of a presumed derivative of the alternate of 2192; n f; { See TDNT 778 }

AV-school 1; 1

1) freedom from labour

2) a place where there is leisure for anything, a school

It has been suggested that the school of Tyrannus should be understood as a private synagogue.

Ephesus – Paul preached Christianity in the synagogue of Ephesus during his first visit to that city (Acts xviii. 19); Apollos, a learned Jew from Alexandria, assisted by Priscilla and Aquila, proclaimed it in the same place (ib. xviii. 26). Paul, on his second visit, again preached in the synagogue; but when some Jews rejected his teaching, he went to preach in the private synagogue of a certain Tyrannus (ib. xix. 9). – Jewish Encyclopedia

Tyrannus – prince, a Greek rhetorician, in whose "school" at Ephesus Paul disputed daily for the space of two years with those who came to him (Acts 19:9). Some have supposed that he was a Jew, and that his "school" was a private synagogue. – dictionary.com

That "scholē" in Acts 19:9 should be interpreted as a reference to a "private Jewish synagogue" is inconclusive. However, this possibility is backed by historic, biblical, and linguistic support.

Linguistic support comes from the fact that the Greek word "scholē" used in Acts 19:9 is the basis from which not only the modern English word "school" is derived, but also the Hebrew term "shul." A "shul" is a common Jewish way of referring to a school or synagogue. Like the English word "school," "shul" is traced through German and Latin back to the Greek word "scholē."

school - origin of school: Middle English *scole*, from Old English *scol*, from Latin *schola*, from Greek *scholē*, **leisure, discussion, lecture, school** – Merriam-Webster's Dictionary, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/school>

Shul – definition of shul: synagogue; origin of shul: Yiddish, school, synagogue, from Middle High German *school* school – Merriam-Webster's Dictionary, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/shul>

shulor schul – Yiddish. **1.a synagogue.** – Dictionary.com Unabridged, Based on the Random House Dictionary, © Random House, Inc. 2015, - <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/shul>

school - Old English *scōl*, *scolu*, **via Latin from Greek *skholē* 'leisure, philosophy, place where lectures are given,'** reinforced in Middle English by Old French *escole*. - google.com

Biblical support for the conclusion that Tyrannus' "school" is some sort of private teaching space for the synagogue comes from several passages. First, in Luke 2:46 we find the account of Jesus as boy sitting with the teachers of the Law and rabbis both asking them questions and answering questions. Along with this we have attestation from John 7:15, Acts 4:13, and Acts 22:3 that the Jewish community had places of instruction where young men could go and learn about the scripture, ask questions, and discuss theology. All of these concepts work well with the possibility that the "school" mentioned in Acts 19:9 could have been one of the places where such activities and instruction were conducted.

Second, we have Acts 18:1-8. Like acts 19:8-10, Acts 18:1-11 reports on Paul going into the Jewish synagogue to testify about Jesus. Just as was the case in Ephesus in Acts 19, in Corinth in Acts 18 Paul began to be met with opposition in the synagogue. As Acts 18:7 explains, upon deciding to take his message to the Gentiles, Paul departed the Jewish synagogue and instead went to the house of a man named Justus who worshipped God and whose home was physically connected to the synagogue. Verse 8 then reports that Crispus, the chief ruler of

the synagogue became a believer in Christ as did many other Corinthians. Both verse 7 and verse 8 establish the close relationship of Justus' house to the synagogue.

Here in Acts 18, we can see that after leaving the synagogue Paul's first choice to continue his efforts to persuade and reason with Jews and Gentiles was a private residence that was adjoined to the synagogue. Since Paul encountered a nearly identical situation in the very next chapter (Acts 19), it is reasonable to suppose that Luke intended his audience to understand that the "school of Tyrannus" was, like the house of Justus, associated with and perhaps even located nearby the Jewish synagogue. The linguistic connections and the fact that verse 10 of Acts 19 reports that Paul continued to reason and dispute with to both Jews and Gentiles while in the "school" of Tyrannus adds support for the idea that the "school" is somehow associated with the synagogue, a place of learning, discussing the scripture and which is most likely in a residential location just as was the case in Acts 18.

Lastly, and more importantly, while Paul certainly taught in the "school" of Tyrannus, his purpose and activities were the same as when visiting the Jewish synagogue. He was disputing, reasoning, and persuading people about Christ (Acts 19:8-9). In other words, this is not a Christian church gathering of Jesus' followers. On the contrary it was an outreach event in which Paul was meeting with non-believers in an attempt to persuade them about Jesus Christ. As such, the events of Acts 19:9 cannot be taken as evidence of or support for Christians gathering for church at a location other than in a home.

Conclusions

Over the course of this study we have demonstrated three important facts regarding the biblical authorizations and prohibitions for where God's people are to gather to conduct worship. First, we saw that Christian ritual communal gatherings were based on the Passover meal which was required to take place in the homes of God's people. For this reason, the church of the New Testament era and early Christian era gathered in their homes rather than in church buildings. Doing so facilitated their sharing of the communal meal in accordance with Christ's commands as well as the continuation of the interactive teaching format inherited from ancient Judaism. Second, we showed that, unlike the pagan religious world which had temples and shrines everywhere, God only allowed his people a single temple. In both testaments, the regular weekly gatherings of God's people were to take place in their homes. God specifically prohibited his people from having or using any place of worship besides the single temple in Jerusalem and their homes. And lastly, we saw that in the biblical period the Jewish synagogue system, like the New Testament church system, was based in houses rather than special buildings. In light of these facts, it must be recognized that the modern use of church buildings as the place of gathering rather than in our homes is not an issue about which God is indifferent. On the contrary, it is a historical

aberration which inherently violates God's biblical commands about places of worship and the regular sharing of a communion meal. It's hard to imagine a more serious violation than neglecting biblical commands for the communion meal gathering, and yet the mishandling of this central ritual, which signifies our life and fellowship with Christ, is almost universal in the church today.