

Church Meetingplaces

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New Testament congregations congregated. The assemblies assembled. There were regular gatherings of those throughout the world who became followers of Jesus of Nazareth. Congregational gatherings were characteristic in the early decades of the spread of the Gospel; today, however, assembling seems not always to be as characteristic as it was in the first century.

This survey of church meetingplaces is not as such an investigation of physical structures in which congregations met. It is rather a survey of the fact that congregations customarily assembled and that believers knew where the gathering would be, whether in a private home or some public area. Evidence that believers congregated regularly is present in the book of Acts and the NT Epistles, as well as in records of early church history. Although the NT is silent concerning many details of church assemblies, the information that is extant suggests patterns concerning how frequently churches met, those who convened, and the places where they met.

Frequency of Assembly

How often did believers gather together? Did they have stated times of regular congregational worship and congregational business meetings? Were there also smaller or special gatherings? What evidence appears in the NT concerning the frequency and length of congregation gatherings?

Daily or Weekly. The frequency of church meetings seems to have varied rather than to have retained a set pattern. There are indications that early believers at first met every day. "And all that believed were together . . . continuing daily with one accord in the temple" (Acts 2:44, 46). "And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved" (Acts 2:47). New missionary churches established by the apostle Paul were established in the faith "and increased in number daily" (Acts 16:5). New believers at Berea

"received the Word with all readiness of mind, and searched the Scriptures daily" (Acts 17:11). The author of the epistle to the Hebrews urged the congregation to which he wrote to "exhort one another daily" (Heb 3:13). Of these verses, only Acts 2 directly suggests a gathering. The other passages may indicate daily evangelism, personal Bible study, or social exhortation. Even if daily gatherings once were the pattern, there is no clear indication that that practice persisted.

There are also hints of weekly gatherings, corresponding to customary patterns of Jewish worship in synagogues. Again, the evidence is not decisive. As a minimum, believers may have met weekly, on the Sabbath (Saturday) or on the first day of the week (Sunday). There are three references to examine.

In the first reference, Acts 20:7, Paul and party had stopped at Troas as they sailed toward Jerusalem, and they stayed at Troas seven days (Acts 20:6). Planned departure would be on Monday (Acts 20:7). On the first day of the week (Sunday), believers gathered together to break bread (Acts 20:7). This may have been a last opportunity before their departure, or it may indicate a regularly scheduled time of gathering.

The second reference is in a letter to the Corinthians, directing them concerning the recommended accumulation of a collection for needy saints in Jerusalem (1 Cor 16:1-3). Instead of waiting until Paul arrives, they are to set their gifts aside on the first day of the week, putting money in store "that there be no gatherings when I come" (1 Cor 16:2). The word Paul used for "put in store" (a verb, *thesaurizo*, to reserve, to keep in store) appears in the LXX as a noun (*thesauros*, treasury, deposit) in Malachi 3:10, "Bring ye all the tithes into the storehouse." Paul thus is speaking of their offering as an act of worship, as a part of appropriate activity during the customary gathering each Sunday, as an act of contributing money to be accumulated and retained until the church should decide on the means of conveying the offering to the needy (1 Cor 16:3).

The third reference is John's designation when he was on the isle of Patmos, "I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day" (Rev 1:10). Instead of meeting on the Jewish Sabbath, gatherings of Christians throughout the world were held regularly on the first day of the week, and that day came to be referred to as the Lord's day. Earliest secular references to Sunday as the Lord's day are much later (500 A.D.). John may instead have reference to the OT Day of the Lord (*yom Yahweh*), seeing in the vision the Lord gave him

extensive detail of the tribulation portion of the predicted Day of the Lord (Revelation chapters four through eighteen).

Along with these hints of daily and weekly gatherings, it is important to list a direct command for believers to assemble. The writer of the epistle to the Hebrews urged that believers not forsake the assembling together (Heb 10:25). The author suggests that churches assemble regularly in a recognized and presumably publicized manner. Believers actively participated in assembly functions, encouraging one another and admonishing one another (Heb 3:13; 10:24-25; 1 Pet 3:8; Eph 4:25; 1 Thess 4:18; 5:11; Col 3:16; Rom 15:14). Disgruntled or neglectful believers were reminded how important assembling should be (Heb 10:25).

From these evidences, for those who accept that pattern of church polity in the NT as normative, certain principles can be enumerated. (1) Believers met regularly in congregational assemblies. (2) Interest in Christianity at first was such that there were daily assemblies. (3) Christians seem to have met together at least once a week, on the first day of the week, which at some indiscernible time came to be known as the Lord's day. The customary day of meeting was not different in different parts of the world. (4) Congregations determined the time and place of their gatherings. Gatherings were not secretive, unprepared, or unannounced.

Among Bible-believing churches in the United States today the pattern of frequency has settled into meeting twice on the Lord's day and once midweek. Sunday gatherings are usually morning and evening. Some congregations in certain situations choose morning and afternoon. Inasmuch as Scripture does not clearly indicate how many times congregations should congregate, churches endeavor to have services often enough to enable greatest edification.

Patterns in America have varied more for midweek services than for Sundays. Some meet on Wednesday night, some on Thursday. In an area where many members work regularly on second shift, some churches have provided both a morning and an evening midweek gathering.

Length. The length of service in NT times may have greatly exceeded the usual length of service today. At Troas when Paul preached until midnight (Acts 20:7), this was considered long preaching (Acts 20:9). Then some talked (fellowshipped) until break of day (Acts 20:11).

In Jerusalem Ananias came to the church gathering, misrepresenting the offering he brought (Acts 5:1-4). About three

hours later (Acts 5:7) his wife Sapphira arrived. If this was for a "second service," then the first might have lasted two or three hours. If she was just coming late, then the total gathering may have been for five hours or so.

Services in America may be for an hour or an hour and a half. In some other countries preaching may extend for three or four hours, with two or three preachers at times. Length and frequency are not specified in the NT; individual congregations decide.

Who Met as an Assembly?

The question next to guide this survey is whether gatherings of churches as churches were distinct and discernible. Was any casual meeting of Christians a church gathering? If so, then the walk on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-32) would constitute a gathering, and a simple identification of meetingplaces would be just "anywhere and everywhere."

Two or Three. There are some who use Matthew 18:20 to identify a church gathering, "where two or three are gathered together in My name, there am I in the midst of them." For several reasons such an identification is not proper. The context does twice mention "church" in the one verse (*ekklesia*, Matt. 18:17, two of the three uses of *ekklesia* in the Gospels), but verse twenty is not in any way explaining what constituted the church mentioned in verse seventeen. Consideration of use of the article and of the verbs further clarifies.

(1) Both uses in verse seventeen have the article (*te ekklesia* and *tes ekklesias*). Use of the article suggests a recognizable unit, a unit the disciples would clearly recognize, a unit quite familiar to them. Matthew 16:18, "I will build My church," is an earlier reference to the church Christ could expect His disciples to know about.

(2) Although the instruction of Jesus is for the church age, the verb is not distinctly future in Matthew 18:17. In Matthew 16:18 when Jesus announced that He would build His church, He used the future tense (*oikodomeso*). Actual beginning would be at Pentecost (see Acts 1:4-5, "not many days hence"). In Matthew eighteen, the disciples by Christ's personal instruction are being trained concerning the importance of the church (Matt 18:15-17). Jesus describes regular and repeated practice, "tell (*eipon*) to the church, and if he refuses to hear even the church, let him be (*esto*) as a gentile." Jesus is telling His disciples: for final decision, take it to the church.

Jesus had taught and continued to teach. Dr. Luke wrote a second time to Theophilus "of all that Jesus began both to do and teach" (Acts 1:1), relating in the book of Acts what Jesus continued to do and to teach through the next decades. The Lord Jesus Christ when on earth had taught His disciples church truth and even after His ascension personally continued to instruct and direct the outworking of what He had taught them while with them in public ministry.

The *ekklesia* is the final and authoritative body in a three step procedure for dealing with disagreement or discipline (Matt 18:17). Is it a church gathering when two or three meet in Jesus' name (Matt 18:20)? The context of Matthew 18 gives quite a different connotation to any gathering of two or three in the setting of proper handling of differences. Two are together when an offended brother goes to an offending believer (Matt 18:15), the first step for settling a disagreement. Three or four are present as the offended for a second attempt takes with him one or two others (Matt 18:16). Standards employed in reaching a decision must be as God has already revealed. Scripture is to guide, whether for decisions of individuals or for the decision of the church (Matt 18:18). Agreement prior to and apart from church consideration will be honored by God (Matt 18:19).

Any time believers get together "in My name," they should recognize the presence of Jesus (Matt 18:20; see Mal 3:16). Their charges or accusations as to that which offended are to be expressed in a manner acceptable in the ears of the Savior. Any solution sought should be according to the spirit and letter of the teaching of Christ. Believers today should similarly be practicing the presence of Jesus, recognizing that He promised, "Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world" (Matt 28:20). Whether conversing about problems, procedures, or personal interests, believers should be conscious of the also-presence of Jesus.

Discernible. The church introduced by the Lord Jesus Christ is more than just an informal meeting of two or three believers. What is it that distinguishes a church of the Lord? What features are characteristic of the churches founded by the disciples who had been instructed by Jesus and were guided by Jesus? How can such a proper NT church be recognized? What was the nature of the NT church groups that gathered?

There are several distinctions that are helpful for proper recognition of a NT church group. (1) A church is composed of born again believers. "All that believed were together" (Acts 2:44).

(2) They were a "company" (Acts 4:23), a united, gathered, distinct entity. (3) They were in agreement; "the multitude of them that believed were of one heart and of one soul" (Acts 4:32; see also Acts 1:14; 2:1, 46; 5:12; 15:25). (4) There were recognized leaders. Paul and Barnabas arriving at Jerusalem were received by the church and the apostles and elders (Acts 15:4). Paul and Timothy addressed "the saints in Christ Jesus which are at Philippi, with the bishops and deacons" (Phil 1:1).

According to such NT usages, a gathering of a few believers for Bible study or for a street meeting is not a church assembly. Businessmen meeting for lunch, testimonies, preaching, and prayer do not constitute a church. A Sunday school class is not a church. An Awana activity is not a church gathering. A seminary class is not a church.

A church normally has a pastor and deacons, but a church can meet when it has no pastor. A church can gather even if no deacons are present. Scripture gives no hint of a quorum of believers necessary. The functioning church is that group present at the announced time and place for a gathering of the body. A church can arrange for a meeting of the youth, of ladies, of new converts. These are meetings of believers but not meetings of the church body.

A meeting of the church, for our consideration of church meetingplaces, might be regularly scheduled or special. The congregation may gather for business meetings or for worship services. The assembly is a gathering of the entire body, not of just a certain portion. For such church gatherings all are invited; all know of the time and place of meeting. No believer should neglect the assembling of the assembly (Heb 10:25).

Believers today can learn certain principles surveyed in this section. (1) Only one form of congregational structure was introduced by the Lord Jesus Christ and established in early decades, that of the local church. (2) Personal attendance at scheduled gatherings including spiritual participation resulting in the edification of fellow believers were customary and commanded (Heb 10:25). (3) Meetings with other believers may be beneficial but cannot be substituted for active local church participation. Parachurch activities may have a place in furthering work of a local church but should never be thought more important than the structure Jesus established, the local church.

Where Did Congregations Meet?

Did early congregations construct or own church buildings? There is no indication concerning congregations mentioned in Acts or in the Epistles, nor of churches as they expanded the first few decades, that congregations owned any property, or that any congregation owned a building in which to meet. Rather, the proper designation seems to be that congregations met as permitted either in private homes or in public areas. The structure or nature of the physical structure, whether wood or brick, is insignificant. What is important is whether the area is appropriate for assembly of the church.

Private Homes. Private homes were frequently used as meetingplaces of NT congregations. Many homes were ample in size and design. Larger homes throughout the Roman Empire had an open courtyard surrounded by two, three, or four stories on all four sides, an arrangement which provided a convenient open garden area with open stairs or balconies, often ample for united worship by a hundred or more people. The central garden or court might include wells (2 Sam 17:18), baths, shade trees, a fireplace (Luke 22:55), or an open air kitchen. As the Gospel spread, homes were made available as a meetingplace for new congregations.

There are several references in the NT of homes which were opened to churches. A church met in the home of Nymphas near Laodicea (Col 4:15). Onesimus was sent back from Rome to his owner Philemon in Colosse, in whose home the congregation met (Phlm 2; the reading "in the church" of Col 4:16 was in a home setting, to the assembled congregation). The church at Ephesus met in the home of Aquila and Priscilla (1 Cor 16:19). Later when they returned to Rome, Aquila and Priscilla once again made their home available for a congregation (Rom 16:3-5). The meetingplace at Troas had a third floor (Acts 20:9).

Some have referred to such gatherings as house churches, a label that seems unwise. The world may speak of a storefront church or a home church in a derogatory fashion. Christians ought to recognize that a church is an honored gathering in God's estimation no matter where it might meet. Churches that met in private homes were true churches.

Considerable information is given concerning the meetings of the church at Corinth. After leaving the synagogue (Acts 18:4-7), Paul entered the house of Justus (Acts 18:7). Since he had been lodging with Aquila and Priscilla (Acts 18:2-3), the house of Justus

does not seem to be a new place of dwelling for Paul, Silas and Timothy but a new place of meeting for believers. Note that later at Ephesus Paul led believers forth from the synagogue (Acts 19:9). The first possible place of meeting at Corinth thus was the synagogue, the next the home of Justus.

That the believers in Corinth met as one congregation rather than in several different places is evident in Paul's letter to them. Paul wrote that the expulsion of a member should be considered "when ye are gathered together" (1 Cor 5:4), what we call a business meeting. Paul advised that matters should be considered by those who are least esteemed "in the church" (1 Cor 6:4), a reference to a single, discernible group of believers. Paul judged that at times the nature, purpose, and conduct of their coming together might not be proper (1 Cor 11:17, 33-34). Their coming together "in the church" was not an indication of a gathering in a church building but rather their gathering together as a congregation (1 Cor 11:18). When they assemble, they come together "into one place" (1 Cor 11:20).

Paul instructed the Corinthians, if any man hunger, he is to eat at home rather than when the church is assembled for observance of the Lord's table (1 Cor 11:34). Paul's inquiry, "Have ye not houses to eat and to drink in?" (1 Cor 11:22) suggests that the church of Corinth may have met in a public area. At least it would emphasize that they regularly met in one home of a member which for the most of them was not their customary place to take their meals.

Paul stressed to the Corinthians the importance of speaking intelligibly "in the church" (1 Cor 14:19). If there is no interpreter for one who can only speak a foreign language, he is to remain silent "in the church" (1 Cor 14:28). Women are not to cause disruption "in the church" (1 Cor 14:35) but to ask at home. When the whole church at Corinth came together "unto one place," unbelievers could come and observe what took place (1 Cor 14:23). There was a distinct, recognizable gathering of the body of believers at Corinth which was not confused with a building nor any place of meeting. There is no hint of two or more congregations of Corinthian believers.

Public Areas. New churches began holding their meetings in homes and as they grew too large for any available home, arranged to gather in a public area. Although the evidence at Corinth for use of a public area is not conclusive, at Ephesus and at Jerusalem a definite public area is named.

As a regular practice the initial witnessing of Paul and his party during missionary journeys was in a synagogue. At Ephesus Paul led

out the believers (Acts 19:9). It would seem correct to judge that Christians did not yet meet as a church in the synagogue. Jewish synagogues often were separate and private structures (public halls in a sense). Probably believers never met as churches in synagogue structures.

At Ephesus when Paul led believers forth from the synagogue, they may have already been too numerous to meet in a private home. Or Paul may have chosen to maintain a public place of witness by meeting "in the school of one Tyrannus" (Acts 19:9). Such a "school" among the Greeks was an open public area where a teacher regularly lectured to any who gathered. If he was of some reputation, the area might continue to be referred to as the place of his school even after his death. Such a public area would not be a "hall" as many people think of a hall today. There might be boundary pillars or distinct borders, but frequently there would be no roof overhead.

When teachers such as Socrates (in Athens) or Tyrannus taught in such public places, they seem not to have had to obtain permission from any political authority. Free assembly was customary. Thus it seems likely that the use of the area known as the school of Tyrannus in Ephesus was only a matter of using an area not being used by others, provision for such use being by common understanding of the populace. Although nothing is known directly from history or from archaeology about the school of Tyrannus, some have conjectured that the reference is to a building owned by one named Tyrannus and rented from him. Such would still be gathering in a public area rather than in a private home.

The place of gathering in a public area is also recorded for the church in Jerusalem in 30 A.D. After the healing of the lame man at the Beautiful gate of the temple, he, Peter, John and many people gathered "in the porch that is called Solomon's" (Acts 3:11). Again later believers in Jerusalem "were all with one accord in Solomon's porch" (Acts 5:12). Jesus had earlier ministered there (John 10:23). Josephus mentions the porch of Solomon as a distinct part of the temple (*Ant.* XV, 409-420; *Wars* V, 184-192). This portion of the temple was ample for the assembly of a large congregation. But, did all believers in Jerusalem gather in one assembly?

The question of whether there was more than one congregation in Jerusalem is of greater importance for that period prior to the persecution that arose following the stoning of Stephen (Acts 8:1-3). When the church of Jerusalem was scattered abroad throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria (Acts 8:1), congregations resulted in

many villages and cities east and north of Jerusalem. The size of the congregation in Jerusalem thereafter was considerably smaller. Both before and after dispersion, there was emphasis on the oneness of the congregational gathering in references to the Jerusalem church. The singular "church" is used (Acts 8:1) as elsewhere (Acts 5:11; 8:3; 11:22; 12:1, 5; 15:22, 25). The singular "church" is employed in a general fashion of several congregations in an area (best readings have a singular at Acts 9:31), but such are never said to assemble in one place or to be of one mind as is frequently reported of the church in Jerusalem.

A passage significant for this consideration is the account of the imprisonment of Peter in Acts chapter twelve. The one who was likely the first head pastor of the Jerusalem church, James, was killed with the sword (Acts 12:2). When Peter, the chief spokesman among the apostles, was taken, "prayer was made without ceasing of the church unto God for him" (Acts 12:5). After being led forth by an angel, Peter "came to the house of Mary the mother of John, whose surname was Mark; where many were gathered together praying" (Acts 12:12). Before going into hiding, Peter requested that those in the house "Go show these things unto James, and to the brethren" (Acts 12:17). This second head pastor of the Jerusalem congregation (not the James killed, verse 2), a half-brother of the Lord Jesus Christ, was later a strong influence in the decision recorded in Acts 15 as well as author of an inscripturated general epistle.

What was the nature of the gathering in the house of Mary? Was it a house used as a meetingplace of a small church such as was later the pattern in the missionary expansion? There are indications that it was what today would be called a cottage prayer meeting rather than a church gathering.

(1) The church of Jerusalem is spoken of as a single unit in this chapter (Acts 12:1, 5) just as elsewhere in the book of Acts. In chapter four Peter and John return "to their own company" (4:23). They who "were assembled together" were all filled with the Holy Ghost (Acts 4:31) and "great fear came upon all the church" (Acts 5:11). In Acts 11:22 and later in chapter fifteen, the full body of believers in Jerusalem acted as a single unit. References in the first and fifth verses of Acts twelve are of a single church, corresponding to other references to the Jerusalem church in Acts.

(2) The group meeting in the home of Mary was not called "church" but rather "many" (Acts 12:12). The assembly thus is not

labeled a church gathering but identified as a gathering of believers from the church.

(3) There is no hint in Acts 12:12-17 of local leadership for the many who were in the home. Those to whom Rhoda reported and those asked to report to "James and the brethren" (Acts 12:15-17) are not identified or designated in any fashion. There is thus in this passage no hint of separate congregations with separate leaders nor any hint of subordinate pastors subject to the higher authority of James.

If there was one congregation in Jerusalem which at first met daily, the size of that gathering is important. Only twice are figures given (Acts 2:41; 4:4). Neither figure is of direct help. Of the three thousand saved on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:41), a great number were pilgrims from foreign lands (Acts 2:5-11). Mention of strangers from Rome (Acts 2:10) may be deliberate to indicate the origin of the congregation to whom Paul wrote his epistle to the Romans (see Acts 19:21; Rom 1:7, 10-12; 15:20). Similarly, of the five thousand who believed (Acts 4:4), many or even most could have been from surrounding areas and only temporarily present in Jerusalem. Adding the three thousand and five thousand does not necessarily give a figure for the size of the Jerusalem congregation. Jerusalem from 30 to 40 A.D. had a total population of perhaps 30,000 to 50,000. At first, believers were well thought of by the populace (Acts 2:47; 5:13). The rapidly increasing number in the first few months was considered a political threat to those who controlled the temple and the Sanhedrin (Acts 4:1, 5-6). If this growing group met in one place for its gatherings as the book of Acts repeatedly indicates, a public area rather than a house courtyard would be needed.

A small congregation might meet in an upper room (Mark 14:14-15; Luke 22:11-12; Acts 1:13; 20:8). For a thousand residents or more to meet, a larger place of assembly was necessary. The one that is twice named (Acts 3:11; 5:12), Solomon's porch, may have been a regular place of meeting or one of several places of meeting.

The porch that is called Solomon's of the Herodian temple was a part of the outer court of the gentiles. It included colonnaded walkways along the east side of the greater temple area. According to Josephus, it extended the full length of the eastern enclosing wall, 1,536 feet. Solomon's porch may have provided one open area large enough for the Jerusalem congregation as it grew. It was central and convenient, even for daily gatherings. It was available so long as

the people looked with favor on these new believers and until leaders began to persecute followers of this new way (Acts 4:1-3).

Certain principles concerning meetingplaces seem significant for today. (1) It is important to distinguish between the church as a body of believers and the building or area a congregation may use for assembly. (2) We should not speak disparagingly of any meetingplace nor of any group which might not have a "respectable" meetingplace. (3) Choice of the place of assembly, just as of the frequency of assembly, is determined by the local congregation to meet congregational needs. (4) Offers of homes or halls may be accepted, consistent with a church's witness. (5) As larger facilities are needed, churches may change location of meeting or enlarge facilities. Renting or owning is the decision of the local assembly.

For Baptists, autonomy of a local assembly of believers is to be maintained so that each congregation is self-governing, self-propagating, and self-supporting. The church meetingplace if owned by the local congregation should be one they can afford, one conducive to the church's evangelistic outreach, and one properly congruous with the local area.