

Where should believers meet on the Lord's Day? What does the Bible say?

Introduction

As we will see in this study, the New Testament custom for believers was to meet in homes rather than specially designed buildings that house large groups of people. That custom was by design, not by chance, as you will see if you examine the Bible study: "Church Buildings, Sermons, & Worship Services".

Bible references to house churches:

We see the biblical pattern of house churches in more than one place:

Rom 16:3 - "Greet Priscilla and Aquila my helpers in Christ Jesus: 4 Who have for my life laid down their own necks: unto whom not only I give thanks, but also all the churches of the Gentiles. Likewise greet the church that is in their house. Salute my wellbeloved Epaenetus, who is **the firstfruits of Achaia** unto Christ."

1Cor 16:19 - "The churches of Asia salute you. Aquila and Priscilla salute you much in the Lord, with the church that is in their house."

Col 4:15 - "Salute the brethren which are in Laodicea, and Nymphas, and the church which is in his house."

Phm 1:2 - "And to our beloved Apphia, and Archippus our fellowsoldier, and to the church in thy house"

Other Bible references to houses in relation to church meeting places:

Acts 2:46 - "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,"

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Acts 12:12 - "And when he had considered the thing, he came to the house of Mary the mother of John, whose surname was Mark; where many were gathered together praying."

From the Gospel accounts, we know that the temple courts provided an excellent public place for preaching the Gospel. However, it was not a place suitable for intimate fellowship and so in Acts 2:46, just after mention is made of the believers meeting in the temple daily, it also mentions them breaking bread from house to house which is a biblical reference to communion - not only the bread and fruit of the vine, but also the meal (feast of charity - Jude 12).

Acts 20:20 "And how I kept back nothing that was profitable unto you, but have shewed you, and have taught you publicly, and from **house to house**"

We see from Acts 20:20 that houses were places where Paul taught believers.

Bible references to the church as a house or a household:

Gal 6:10 - "As we have therefore opportunity, let us do good unto all men, especially unto them who are of the **household** of faith."

Eph 2:19 - "Now therefore ye are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellowcitizens with the saints, and of the **household** of God;"

1 Pet 4:17 - "For the time is come that judgment must begin at the **house** of God: and if it first begin at us, what shall the end be of them that obey not the gospel of God?"

Bible references to the church as a family:

Eph 3:14-15 "For this cause I bow my knees unto the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, Of whom the whole **family** in heaven and earth is named"

Modern day churches

Compare this idea of a household and a family of God with conventional churches which are structured more like lecture halls and tightly run corporations. In fact, most churches today ARE corporations. That is, they are incorporated and the pastor and elders are usually the board members. Also, they have constitutions and by-laws similar in structure to what most business corporations have, while the early church managed quite well with just the Bible, as long as the believers had the spirit of the Bereans in Acts 17:11.

Other scriptures that *may* be referring to house churches:

Acts 8:3- “As for Saul, he made havock of the church, entering into every **house**, and haling men and women committed them to prison.”

Acts 16:40 - “And they went out of the prison, and entered into the **house** of Lydia: and when they had seen the brethren, they comforted them, and departed.”

Acts 17:5 - “But the Jews which believed not, moved with envy, took unto them certain lewd fellows of the baser sort, and gathered a company, and set all the city on an uproar, and assaulted the **house** of Jason, and sought to bring them out to the people.”

Acts 21:8 - “And the next day we that were of Paul’s company departed, and came unto Caesarea: and we entered into the **house** of Philip the evangelist, which was one of the seven; and abode with him.”

1Cor 1:16 - “And I baptized also the **household** of Stephanas: besides, I know not whether I baptized any other.”

1 Cor 16:15 - “I beseech you, brethren, (ye know the **house** of Stephanas, that it is the firstfruits of Achaia, and that they have addicted themselves to the ministry of the saints,)”

Tit 1:10-11 - “For there are many unruly and vain talkers and deceivers, specially they of the circumcision: 11 Whose mouths must be stopped, who subvert whole **houses**, teaching things which they ought not, for filthy lucre’s sake.”

2Tim 4:19 - “Salute Prisca and Aquila, and the **household** of Onesiphorus.”

2 John 1:10 - “If there come any unto you, and bring not this doctrine, receive him not into your **house**, neither bid him God speed”

Didn’t the early church meet in the temple in Jerusalem?

We see in Acts chapter 2 that the believers certainly did meet in the temple...

Acts 2:46 - “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

However, we must consider some things. The believers were probably in the temple only because they had not yet been kicked out and because so many Jews had been saved at once at Pentecost. We can be sure that the believers were not at the temple to offer up any sacrifices for atonement. In a very short time after Pentecost, the leaders of the temple were already throwing Christians in jail, as we see in Acts chapter 4:

Acts 4:1 - "And as they spake unto the people, the priests, and the captain of the temple, and the Sadducees, came upon them, 2 Being grieved that they taught the people, and preached through Jesus the resurrection from the dead. 3 And they laid hands on them, and put them in hold unto the next day: for it was now eventide. 4 Howbeit many of them which heard the word believed; and the number of the men was about five thousand."

We also see from the above passage that the believers were going to the temple to preach the Gospel. There is no mention of them going there for fellowship or breaking of bread. As Acts 2:46 mentions, it was in the homes (house to house) where they broke bread.

But didn't the believers meet in synagogues?

The Bible clearly indicates, as we will see below, that believers, primarily Paul, visited synagogues, on the Jewish Sabbath, not the Lord's day. And the purpose was to preach the Gospel, not to have fellowship with other believers.

The word "synagogue" and Greek translation...

The Greek word that "synagogue" is derived from is "sunagoge" (Strong's # 4864).

Sunagoge is translated - or rather transliterated - into the English word "synagogue" a total of 55 times.

It is translated as "assembly" once in all of the NT - in James 2:2.

It is only translated as "congregation" once in all of the NT - in Acts 13:43.

The following scripture passages are NT references to the word "synagogue" with respect to events that occurred or were predicted to occur AFTER Pentecost (i.e. after the formation of the NT church).

In the following passages, notice the common theme - the believers would, at some time in the future (i.e. after Pentecost) be thrown out of or persecuted by those in the synagogues:

Matthew 10:17 But beware of men: for they will deliver you up to the councils, and they will scourge you in their synagogues;

Matthew 23:34 Wherefore, behold, I send unto you prophets, and wise men, and scribes: and some of them ye shall kill and crucify; and some of them shall ye scourge in your synagogues, and persecute them from city to city:

Mark 13:9 But take heed to yourselves: for they shall deliver you up to councils; and in the synagogues ye shall be beaten: and ye shall be brought before rulers and kings for my sake, for a testimony against them.

Luke 12:11 And when they bring you unto the synagogues, and unto magistrates, and powers, take ye no thought how or what thing ye shall answer, or what ye shall say:

Luke 21:12 But before all these, they shall lay their hands on you, and persecute you, delivering you up to the synagogues, and into prisons, being brought before kings and rulers for my name's sake.

How we love our church buildings so we can keep undesirables out of our homes. But the home is where the Lord did a great deal of ministering. And that is an ideal place for believers to truly fellowship, so that they might minister to one another and bear one another's burdens:

Matthew 9:10 And it came to pass, as Jesus sat at meat in the **house**, behold, many publicans and **sinners** came and sat down with him and his disciples.

Matthew 9:28 And when he was come into the **house**, the **blind men** came to him: and Jesus saith unto them, Believe ye that I am able to do this? They said unto him, Yea, Lord.

Matthew 26:6 Now when Jesus was in Bethany, in the **house** of Simon the leper,

Mark 14:3 And being in Bethany in the **house** of Simon the **leper**, as he sat at meat, there came a woman having an alabaster box of ointment of spikenard very precious; and she brake the box, and poured it on his head.

Luke 4:38 And he arose out of the synagogue, and entered into Simon's **house**. And Simon's wife's mother was taken with a great fever; and they besought him for her.

Luke 5:29 And Levi made him a great feast in his own **house**: and there

was a great company of publicans and of others that sat down with them.

Conventional churches are structured and run in a format that is ideal for allowing us to be like the Simon the Pharisee. They insulate us very well from any involvement in the lives of other believers. Conversely, the home is the ideal place for “nobodies” (like the woman with the alabaster box of ointment) to put their gifts to use for the benefit of the local body and the glory of God:

Luke 7:36 And one of the Pharisees desired him that he would eat with him. And he went into the Pharisee's house, and sat down to meat. 37 And, behold, a woman in the city, which was a sinner, when she knew that Jesus sat at meat in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster box of ointment, ... 44 And he turned to the woman, and said unto Simon, Seest thou this woman? I entered into thine house, thou gavest me no water for my feet: but she hath washed my feet with tears, and wiped them with the hairs of her head. 45 Thou gavest me no kiss: but this woman since the time I came in hath not ceased to kiss my feet. 46 My head with oil thou didst not anoint: but this woman hath anointed my feet with ointment.

Where do we find refuge from the world and those who hate our Lord? In the homes of believers. That is where Christ did much expounding of biblical truth - in an interactive yet intimate format - with his disciples ...

Matthew 13:36 Then Jesus sent the multitude away, and went into the **house**: and his disciples came unto him, saying, Declare unto us the parable of the tares of the field.

Mark 7:17 And when he was entered into the **house** from the people, his disciples asked him concerning the parable.

Mark 9:28 And when he was come into the **house**, his disciples asked him privately, Why could not we cast him out?

Mark 9:33 And he came to Capernaum: and being in the **house** he asked them, What was it that ye disputed among yourselves by the way?

Mark 10:10 And in the **house** his disciples asked him again of the same matter.

We will now see that many verses in the book of Acts show that the synagogues were places where believers went to evangelize, not for the Lord's day fellowship meeting.

In the following passage from Acts chapter 6, notice: in verse 11 we read how the men Stephen was preaching to were riled up against him. This was certainly an evangelistic message Stephen was giving to

unbelievers and not a gathering of believers for a Sunday church meeting for fellowship, prayer, breaking of bread and study of the word.

Acts 6:9 - "Then there arose certain of the synagogue, which is called the synagogue of the Libertines, and Cyrenians, and Alexandrians, and of them of Cilicia and of Asia, disputing with Stephen. 10 And they were not able to resist the wisdom and the spirit by which he spake 11 Then they suborned men, which said, We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses, and against God."

In the following passage from Acts 13, notice:

Paul is visiting the synagogue so that he might have opportunity to preach the Gospel (verse 16 - "give audience" and verse 26 "to you is the word of this salvation sent").

Paul was there on the Sabbath day (verse 14), not the Lord's day.

Acts 13:14 - "But when they departed from Perga, they came to Antioch in Pisidia, and went into the synagogue on the sabbath day, and sat down. 15 And after the reading of the law and the prophets the rulers of the synagogue sent unto them, saying, Ye men and brethren, if ye have any word of exhortation for the people, say on. 16 Then Paul stood up, and beckoning with his hand said, Men of Israel, and ye that fear God, give audience ... 26 Men and brethren, children of the stock of Abraham, and whosoever among you feareth God, to you is the word of this salvation sent."

Paul then goes on to preach the Gospel in Acts 13:17-41 >>>

In the following passage, notice:

In verse 43 the word *congregation* is actually the same Greek word for *synagogue*.

In verse 44 the reference to the sabbath, not the Lord's day.

In verse 46 that Paul is there to preach the Gospel and not to engage in fellowship with believers

Acts 13:42 - "And when the Jews were gone out of the synagogue, the Gentiles besought that these words might be preached to them the next sabbath. 43 Now when the congregation was broken up, many of the Jews and religious proselytes followed Paul and Barnabas: who, speaking to them, persuaded them to continue in the grace of God. 44 And the next sabbath day came almost the whole city together to hear the word of God. 45 But when the Jews saw the multitudes, they were filled with envy, and spake against those things which were spoken by Paul, contradicting and blaspheming. 46 Then Paul and Barnabas waxed bold, and said, It was necessary that the word of God should first have been spoken to you: but seeing ye put it from you, and judge yourselves unworthy of everlasting life, lo, we turn to the Gentiles."

In the following passage from Acts 14, notice:

In verse 1 that evangelism is the purpose of going to the synagogue with the result that Jews and Greeks believed.

In verse 3, the brethren “gave testimony unto the word of his grace”, meaning evangelism was going on.

In verse 5 the Jews proceeded “to stone them” ... doesn’t sound like a Lord’s day meeting.

Acts 14:1 - “And it came to pass in Iconium, that they went both together into the synagogue of the Jews, and so spake, that a great multitude both of the Jews and also of the Greeks believed. 2 But the unbelieving Jews stirred up the Gentiles, and made their minds evil affected against the brethren. 3 Long time therefore abode they speaking boldly in the Lord, which gave testimony unto the word of his grace, and granted signs and wonders to be done by their hands. 4 But the multitude of the city was divided: and part held with the Jews, and part with the apostles. 5 And when there was an assault made both of the Gentiles, and also of the Jews with their rulers, to use them despitefully, and to stone them,”

In the following passage from Acts 17, notice:

In verse 3 notice the focus on evangelism to the Jews with the phrase “this Jesus, whom I preach unto you, is Christ”.

In verse 5 the Jews “set all the city on an uproar and assaulted the house of Jason” This does not sound like a typical Sunday assembly of believers for prayer, study of the word, fellowship, and breaking of bread.

The “house of Jason” may have been a “house” church of the Thessalonian believers because that is where “Jason and certain brethren” (verse 6) were congregating, although this conclusion cannot be confirmed from the text. It could be that Jason had just opened up his home to Paul and Silas during their visit to Thessalonica and so other believers were “hanging out” there.

Acts 17:1 - “Now when they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where was a synagogue of the Jews: 2 And Paul, as his manner was, went in unto them, and three sabbath days reasoned with them out of the scriptures, 3 Opening and alleging, that Christ must needs have suffered, and risen again from the dead; and that this Jesus, whom I preach unto you, is Christ. 4 And some of them believed, and consorted with Paul and Silas; and of the devout Greeks a great multitude, and of the chief women not a few. 5 But the Jews which believed not, moved with envy, took unto them certain lewd fellows of the baser sort, and gathered a company, and set all the city on an uproar, and assaulted the house of Jason, and sought to bring them out to the people. 6 And when they found them not, they drew Jason and certain brethren unto the rulers of the city, crying, These that have turned the world upside down are come hither also; 7 Whom Jason hath received: and these all do contrary to the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, one Jesus.”

In the following passage, notice:

In verse 11 the phrase “they received the word” and in verse 12 “therefore many of them believed” tell us that Paul was in the synagogue in Berea to preach the Gospel to Jews who were not yet believers. This was not a Lord’s day meeting of believers for fellowship, breaking of bread, etc. These believers had just become saved.

Acts 17:10 - “And the brethren immediately sent away Paul and Silas by night unto Berea: who coming thither went into the synagogue of the Jews. 11 These were more noble than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so 12 Therefore many of them believed; also of honourable women which were Greeks, and of men, not a few.”

In the following passage, notice:

In verse 17 the phrase “disputed he” and in verse 18 “he preached unto them Jesus and the resurrection”, indicating Paul was preaching the Gospel to unbelievers who, as a response to Paul’s preaching, were calling him a “babbling” (verse 18).

Acts 17:17 - “Therefore disputed he in the synagogue with the Jews, and with the devout persons, and in the market daily with them that met with him. 18 Then certain philosophers of the Epicureans, and of the Stoicks, encountered him. And some said, What will this babbling say? other some, He seemeth to be a setter forth of strange gods: because he preached unto them Jesus, and the resurrection.”

In the following passage from Acts 18, notice:

In verse 4 Paul “reasoned” and “persuaded” the Jews and Greeks - evangelism again.

In verse 5 Paul “testified to the Jews that Jesus was Christ” - evangelism, not fellowship.

In verse 6 - the common reaction - hostility ... “they opposed themselves and blasphemed” - not the goings on of a typical Lord’s day meeting of believers.

Acts 18:4 - “And he reasoned in the synagogue every sabbath, and persuaded the Jews and the Greeks. 5 And when Silas and Timotheus were come from Macedonia, Paul was pressed in the spirit, and testified to the Jews that Jesus was Christ. 6 And when they opposed themselves, and blasphemed, he shook his raiment, and said unto them, Your blood be upon your own heads; I am clean: from henceforth I will go unto the Gentiles.”

The following scripture passages are NT references to the plural word “synagogues”.

In the following passage of Acts 9, notice:

In verse 20 we see that Paul “preached Christ” (evangelism) in the synagogues. No reference to believers meeting for fellowship, etc.

Acts 9:20 - “And straightway he preached Christ in the synagogues, that he is the Son of God.”

In the following passage of Acts 13, notice:

In verse 5 “they preached the word of God” - evangelism again.

Acts 13:5 - “And when they were at Salamis, they preached the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews: and they had also John to their minister.”

In the following passage of Acts 24, notice:

Verse 12 does not indicate that Paul would be going to a synagogue for the purpose of Christian fellowship but rather for contending for the faith - knowing that this practice of his (preaching in synagogues) often caused the people to be “raised up” against him.

Acts 24:12 - “And they neither found me in the temple disputing with any man, neither raising up the people, neither in the synagogues, nor in the city”

Notice that we do not see any indication in the above verses that the believers were visiting the synagogues for fellowship, prayer, a peaceful Bible study, or the breaking of bread, but rather to evangelize the hearers, on the Jewish sabbath day, often resulting in a very negative reaction and even the expulsion of the preachers.

Food for thought:

1. Did the early churches have specific names for their churches? If so, how did they pick those names? If not, why do you think they did not have church names?
2. Can you give any scriptural reasons as to why the local church should meet in some place other than a home?
3. Are there alternatives to meeting in homes that will allow believers to fellowship and to participate to the same degree that is possible in a house setting, and to the degree that was possible in the church mentioned in 1 Corinthians, chapters 11 through 14?
4. Is it possible that from God’s perspective, most conventional churches today are not much different than whitewashed tombs, patterned after the dead cathedrals of Rome and the dead synagogues of the Jews who, to this day, reject the Messiah? ... “Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye are like unto whited sepulchres, which indeed appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead men’s bones, and of all uncleanness.”

[Matt 23:27]

5. Is it possible that God has something different in mind for His Church than a weekly show for a theater full of pew warmers? Something vibrant, alive, bustling with Christ-centered fellowship and Christ-like love? ... “And they continued stedfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers. And fear came upon every soul: and many wonders and signs were done by the apostles. And all that believed were together, and had all things common; And sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all men, as every man had need. 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, Praising God, and having favour with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved.” [Acts 2:42-47]

6. Is it possible that the purpose of not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together is so that we might interact with one another? ... “Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching.” [Heb 10:25]
... Can we exhort one another if we have a meeting where we don’t talk to each other?
