

PAUL'S THEOLOGY

Lesson 50

The Church – Part 3

The Purpose of the Church

A number of years ago I had an encounter with an elderly man where we discussed “church.” I knew this man to be a Christian who had led his family to Christ. What had puzzled me as a young teenager was why this man did not ever go to church. It seemed to me that one of the signs that someone was a believer in Christ was church attendance.

The man explained that the church was full of “hypocrites” and that he had no need to gather with a bunch of hypocrites as he exercised his faith. I disagreed with his analysis and conclusion, but was unable to persuade or motivate him to change.

A few years later, I had a chance to meet with a good-hearted believer with deep-seated convictions about what it meant to go to church “right.” I had urged this man to bring his family and come to worship with us at our church home. This man would not, however. When I asked why, because I did not perceive any real differences in our church homes, he explained that our church “had a kitchen.” This well-intentioned and devout man was trying as hard as he could to follow the model of the New Testament church. He pointed out to me that nowhere in the Bible was there a reference to a church having a kitchen, and therefore his conscience would not allow him to attend a church that had one in the same building.

In the summer of 1980 I had appeared as a guest preacher at a church filled with some wonderful people. It was a Sunday morning assembly that included partaking of the Lord’s Supper. While the communion elements were passed out, the church sang several verses of a song focused on the work of Christ on the cross. The same Sunday, at the evening assembly, another preacher at the church who had been in attendance Sunday morning got up and sharply rebuked the congregation. He explained that singing during communion was a sin. His reasoning was that the Bible taught five things should occur in worship (singing, communion, preaching, giving, and praying), but nowhere did the Bible authorize a church to combine those five items and do two at once! (I refrained from debating him over whether it was appropriate for the church to sing songs that were prayers!)

We set out these stories as we approach a discussion over what is the purpose of the church? Why do we “go to church?” What should we expect when we get to church? What should church “look like?” When are those things important and when are they not?

I am sure we have all met people who have changed from one church home to another because of something they did not like, or found lacking at one church. In fact, I have done that myself! What makes a church acceptable?

We set these questions out as we consider what Paul had to say about the purpose of “attending church.”

BACKGROUND

We need to begin this lesson reminding ourselves of the prior two lessons on Paul’s theology of church.¹ We have discussed that the meaning of our word “church” (Greek *ekklesia*) as used by Paul reflected a “gathering” of believers. “Church” was usually Paul’s word for believers in an area coming together to meet, to worship, to serve, etc. Paul wrote to a number of these churches with letters/messages that he wanted the gatherings to read in public together. We can readily discern from Paul’s letters that a number of these churches met in individual homes of some of the church members.

History provides us with more details on “where” these churches met. In 1920, a soldier was digging a trench in what is now Eastern Syria. The soldier found an ancient wall with a brilliantly colored fresco painted. Archaeologists were brought in and the site of “Dura-Europos” was excavated. This was a city that was destroyed by the Persians in 256 AD. All sites uncovered, therefore, could be unquestionably dated to some time before that destruction.²

Among the 120 acres of the city, in 1931 archaeologists uncovered “the earliest and most completely known pre-Constantinian church building”³ available today for study. The building was a converted house. Archaeologists are able to reconstruct not only what the house looked like as a church, but also what the house looked like before conversion! The changes from house to church were not that great. A baptistery was added to the house, and a wall was removed to make a large room out of two smaller ones. Art adorned the walls, and the baptistery

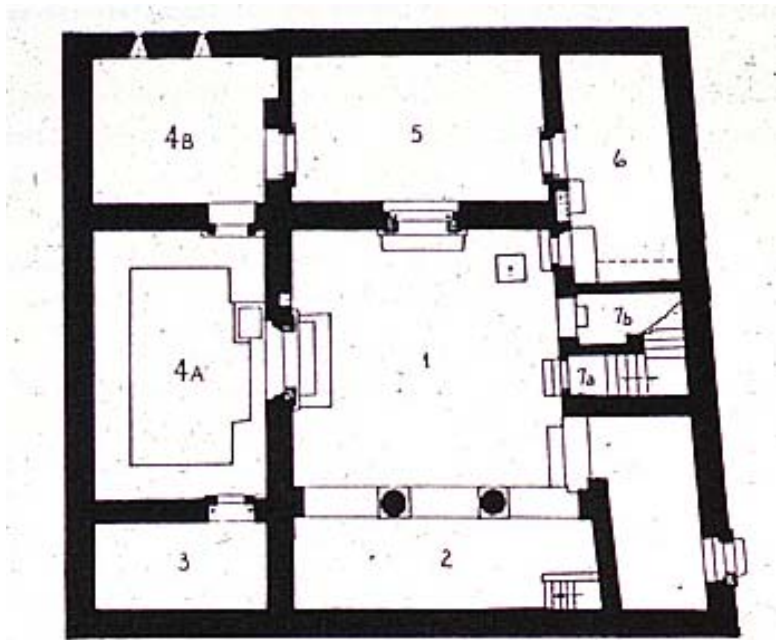
¹ Those lessons are available to watch, listen to, or read at the class website, www.Biblical-literacy.com.

² For more details see Hopkins, C., *The Discovery of Dura-Europos* (Yale University Press 1979).

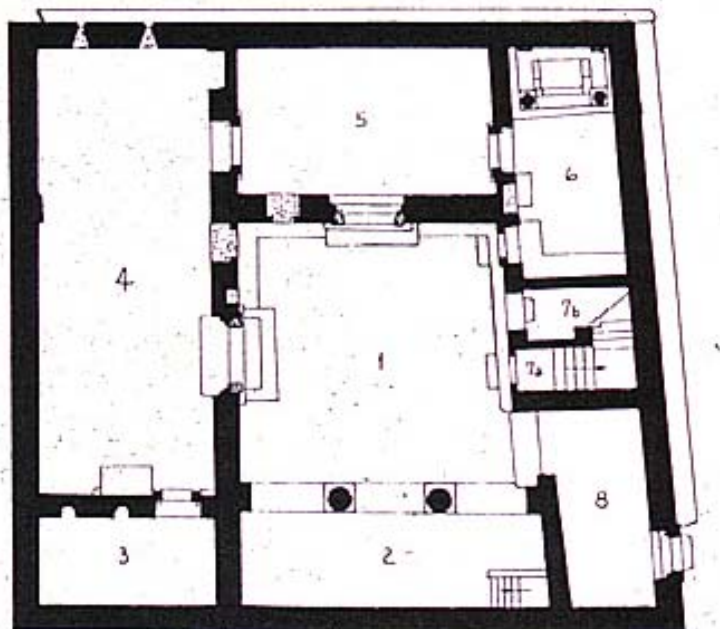
³ White, L. Michael, *The Social Origins of Christian Architecture*, Vol. 1 (Trinity Press International 1990) at 7.

frescoes include a painting of Christ as the good shepherd, the cured paralytic, and Peter walking on the water.

The Yale/French excavation team offers good drawings that give some perspective to those half a globe away:



a. Before renovation



b. After renovation

In the picture, room number 6 is the baptistery. Rooms 4a and 4b became room 4 after removal of the separating wall. This created a large common room for worship. The stairs (7a and 7b) led to an upstairs area that would have likely housed a roof top upper room available for gatherings as well.

This church offers insight into the practices of the early church, and those practices are largely consistent with the image we get in the New Testament. Christians would gather together in a common place, typically a home, to worship. When we read our passages from Paul on this subject, we can easily imagine them being read and taking place in a home like that uncovered in Dura-Europos.

But our focus this week is not so much what the location for the assembly would have looked like. Our greater interest needs to be what happened at these gatherings. Why did they take place? For then we have a better focus on our own church gatherings, their purpose and focus.

THE PURPOSE OF GATHERING AS CHURCH

I suspect that if a poll of churchgoers were taken, asking, “What is the purpose of attending church,” the majority answer would likely be, “to worship God.” Of course that is a wonderful response, yet if we study Paul on the issue we find a bit of a difference focus. Paul wrote of worship, but he taught an idea that likely seemed bizarre at the time. While most people associate worship with an activity that took place at a “house of worship,” be it a pagan temple or the temple in Jerusalem, Paul taught that the believer’s worship was the whole of life, not a segregated activity in some holy location:

I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual **worship** (Rom. 12:1).

This was a radical concept, and it has radical implications even today in certain circles and traditions. Paul, in essence, “de-sacralizes” worship as he removes it from special places, with special priests and special ritualistic acts. Paul places worship into what ordinary people do in the course of their ordinary lives.

Paul writes using a word translated “worship” eight times, but never clearly as a reference to an activity that occurs as the purpose of a church gathering.⁴ While

⁴ Rom. 1:25 contrasts those who are unbelievers as ones who, “exchanged the truth about God for a lie and **worshipped** and served the creature rather than the Creator.” Rom. 9:4 sets out historical Jewish Temple worship as one of the blessings of the Jews (“They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the **worship**, and the promises.”) 1 Corinthians 14:25 explains that an unbeliever attending a church gathering will worship the Lord when convicted of his sin by teaching that rightly sets out the word of God (the secrets of his heart are disclosed, and so, falling on his face, he will **worship** God and declare that God is really among you”). In Phil. 3:3 Paul explains that Christians are truly God’s people not

there is no doubt that worship takes place when Christians assemble together, the thrust of Paul's writings put the focus forward with different words and ideas.

1. Church and Edification

When Paul writes of Christian gatherings, he frequently uses words and phrases of “upbuilding” or “edifying” believers. At our home congregation that sources this class and these lessons, we often speak of our desire to “know, grow, and go.” This is a shorthand slogan that encapsulates our desire to see that we first “know” God by coming into a relationship with him through his Son. We then desire to “grow” in this relationship so that we can “go” into the world and take the good news of God's saving grace to an unsaved world. For Paul, a major focus of “going to church” is, in our parlance, to “grow.” Consider these passages:

- **1 Cor. 14:3-5** “On the other hand, the one who prophesies speaks to people for their **upbuilding** and encouragement and consolation. The one who speaks in a tongue builds up himself, but the one who prophesies **builds up** the church. Now I want you all to speak in tongues, but even more to prophesy. The one who prophesies is greater than the one who speaks in tongues, unless someone interprets, so that the church may be **built up**.”

Paul is discussing the events that accompany the regular gathering of the saints in Corinth. Paul is contrasting the Corinthian practice of speaking in unknown/non-translated tongues with the importance of speaking in ways that make sense. The purpose of the assembly is to build up the others there, not to simply experience personal upbuilding.

- **1 Cor. 14:12** “So with yourselves, since you are eager for manifestations of the Spirit, strive to excel in **building up** the church.”

Again Paul is stressing to the Corinthians the need to experience God in ways that help others grow in the Lord. The emphasis for Paul is the growth of the body, not simply the individual.

because they are outwardly Jews, but inwardly faithful (“For we are the circumcision, who **worship** by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh”). In Col. 2:18 Paul forbids the worshipping of angels (“Let no one disqualify you, insisting on asceticism and **worship** of angels”). In 2 Thess. 2:4 Paul explains that the “man of lawlessness” will set himself up as an object of worship (“the man of lawlessness...who opposes and exalts himself against every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, proclaiming himself to be God”). These, along with the Romans 12 passage set out in the text, are the passages where Paul writes a word translated “worship.” In Paul's original Greek, he is actually using a number of different Greek words that convey our English idea of “worship.”

- **1 Cor. 14:13, 17** “Therefore, one who speaks in a tongue should pray for the power to interpret. ...For you may be giving thanks well enough, but the other person is not being **built up**.”

Once more we see Paul driving home his dictate that the assembly be for the body as opposed to an individual’s personal indulgence and preference. We see this also in Paul’s conclusion on the matter:

- **1 Cor. 14:26** “What then, brothers? When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Let all things be done for **building up**.”

In his Thessalonian letter, Paul writes similarly of the responsibility of the believers toward each other:

- **1 Thess. 5:11** “Therefore encourage one another and **build one another up**, just as you are doing.”

This is the reason God has equipped certain people in the church with spiritual gifts and talents. It is for ministry, for building up the believers who gather together as the body of Christ.

- **Eph. 4:11-16** “And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, **for building up** the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it **builds itself up** in love.”

In each of these passages Paul uses a Greek word “oikodome” (οικοδομη). The Greek word is translated “build up” but it is a fascinating composite of two Greek words: *oikos* meaning “house” and *dome* meaning, “build.” The word was used for constructing or building a house. It is appropriate for Paul to use on a number of levels. First, Paul is writing to church gatherings that are generally meeting in homes. Second, Paul writes of the church itself as the household of God (see Part 1 of this immediate series on the Church). It is this gathering that is to be built up as it comes together.

As we study Paul's instructions to Timothy and Titus we can see some specific ways Paul urges them to help believers grow and mature. In 1 Tim. 4, Paul instructs Timothy to put forward the word of God with prayer before the believers:

If you put these things before the brothers, you will be a good servant of Christ Jesus, being trained in the words of the faith and of the good doctrine that you have followed (1 Tim. 4:6).

Later in the same chapter Paul will tell Timothy to "command and teach these things" and to "keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching" (1 Tim. 4:11, 16). Later in the following chapter Paul singles out certain elders who "labor in preaching and teaching" as "worthy of double honor!" (1 Tim. 5:17). No wonder, for this is at the heart of the church gathering for Paul. It is the teaching and expounding on the word of God that builds the believer and grows her/him into greater maturity before the Lord.

In Paul's last letter to Timothy, as Paul was reaching the end of his earthly life, he lovingly encouraged Timothy to carefully entrust the teaching chores:

You then, my child, be strengthened by the grace that is in Christ Jesus, and what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also. (2 Tim. 2:1-2).

As Paul went on to explain, teaching God's word is not simply an "event." It is not to be taken up lightly. It is to be done with care in ways that help people, not hurt or distract them:

Remind them of these things, and charge them before God not to quarrel about words, which does no good, but only ruins the hearers. Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth. (2 Tim. 2:14-15).

Paul finished his charge to Timothy giving a fuller rendition of Timothy's role in teaching and preaching:

I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching. For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths. As for you, always be sober-minded,

endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry.
(2 Tim. 4:1-4).

The importance of building up the church is found in places where Paul does not use the actual word for homebuilding. If we return to Paul's first letter to the Corinthians we can find the concept in his presentation of material on the Lord's Supper in chapter 11. Paul rebukes the practice of participating in the meal in ways that caused divisions and hurt feelings. "Rather than building up or edifying their fellow believers they were showing 'contempt for the church of God' (1 Cor. 11:22)." ⁵

2. Church and Meeting with Christ

I suspect one of the most special moments in the life of Paul, one that he daily thought about, one that affected so much of what he said and did, was the conversion experience on the road to Damascus. Had I been Paul, I would have longed to return to that time in history to see the risen Christ and speak to him verbally, hearing his words with my own ears. I would have regretted having lived at the same time as the pre-crucified Christ, yet never having spent time at his feet listening, learning, eating, fellowshiping, laughing, crying, and living. Could there be a greater moment than one spent in the physical presence of God made man?

Therefore I do not consider it a small thing when Paul writes about times spent in church as time spent in the presence of Christ. In one of Paul's passages where he wrote of the importance of singing we read:

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God. (Col. 3:16).

"The word of Christ dwell in you richly" – Paul must have felt deeply about this. For Paul had spoken with the Lord. The words of the Lord are what pulled Paul from his religion into a relationship with God.

This is consistent with the promise given by Christ before his crucifixion:

For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them. (Mt. 18:20).

In this sense the New Testament assembly is like and yet unlike the "church" that gathered at Mount Sinai in the Old Testament. In the first lesson on the "church"

⁵ Hawthorne and Martin, *Dictionary of Paul and his Letters* (IVP 1993) at 129.

as we discussed the meaning of the Greek word as a “gathering,” we explored the usage of the word in the Greek translation of the Old Testament that Paul studied. There were multiple references to the “gathering” of Israel at Mount Sinai to hear God’s word as delivered through Moses. This was, in the Greek language, a gathering of Israel as a “church.” This was a church gathering to hear the word of the Lord, similar to the assemblies of the churches that Paul wrote to.

Yet Paul understood a distinction with the Christian church assembly. In the Christian assembly, it is not simply a matter of hearing the word of the Lord; Christ himself is present. Australian scholar Peter O’Brian said it well,

The model of the New Testament assembly was the congregation (*ekklesia*) of Israel gathered at Mt. Sinai to hear the word of the Lord. Now, however, under the new covenant there is a significant difference. The Lord himself meets with his people *wherever* they gather in his name and under his authority.⁶

3. Church and Worship

How do we fit these teachings of Paul about the “church” into our framework of “worship”? They actually fit quite well! We worship God as we place him in the proper place in our lives and before the world. We recall that as Christ was coming into Jerusalem in his triumphal entry, a number of Jews were upset that the people were crying out, “Hosanna to the Son of David.” The chief priests and scribes took Jesus to task over this and the response of Jesus was, “Out of the mouths of infants and nursing babies you have prepared praise” (Mt. 21:14-16). A key to unlocking this interchange is realizing that the Aramaic “Hosanna” meant, “Please save us!”⁷

To come to Christ as Savior, to learn and grow in him, to seek his word’s transforming power; these are all acts of pure worship. As we perform his wish to build up his body, we are performing his ministry. This is pure worship. In no way does this take away from the need and importance of coming into God’s presence and offering corporate praise through the words of our mouths and the songs of our hearts. It does not detract from the need and importance of joining together in the Lord’s Supper. To the contrary, this understanding heightens those activities. For we come together to worship in ways that enrich the experience for other believers. We are to partake of communion in ways that bring the body together and so glorify the risen Lord. We are to sing in ways that help each other experience the majesty and intimacy of the present Christ.

⁶ See O’Brian’s article in Hawthorne and Martin at 129.

⁷ More typically and formally translated as “Save! We pray thee!”

Church worship is all these things, but Paul makes it a point to focus on the need to see that *church* is gathering together to hear from God and minister to each other. This will not only directly praise God with words, but also with deeds, as we fulfill his desire to grow and upbuild his people.

POINTS FOR HOME

1. “*Present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual **worship***” (Rom. 12:1).

Paul wants the entire Christian walk to be one in praise of God. We should never lose sight of the fact that everything, whether it is something we say, something we think, or something we do, it should be done to God’s glory. It should reflect who he is and what he is doing in our lives. It is to be his ministry on earth. We walk as his feet, we speak as his voice, we love as his heart, and we serve as his hands.

2. “*Therefore encourage one another and **build one another up***” (1 Thess. 5:11).

Just because our whole lives are to “worship” God, it does not mean that one can or should avoid gathering together with other believers. In fact, the opposite is true. We are to seek out “church services,” to seek out gatherings of believers, as an opportunity to edify and grow others. As we have experienced God’s presence in our lives, we should spend time learning and growing, and encourage others along the same path. God did not make everyone to take the role of teacher in the church, but he did make everyone with a role to play in building up the body. And those he did make teachers need to tread carefully and with much prayer. For they are not simply “speaking.” They are vessels to teach God’s word.

3. “*Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly*” (Col. 3:16).

When we gather together, there is a special presence of God. In ways and for reasons scripture does not fully explain, God has chosen to work in his body as a corporate whole for the good growth of the individual. When we gather together, we have a unique opportunity to experience God in ways that are not found in simple solitude. May we each make the individual decision to grow together!