

Paul's Gospel Ministry and the Synagogue

As gospel preachers, we all enjoy those Sundays when we see a new face in the congregation, whom we do not know, and who we believe may be there to hear the gospel of Christ for the very first time. It is a privilege and joy to preach God's Word Sunday after Sunday to the flock of God we know, but there is something special about seeing someone who may have not yet believed seated there to listen to the good news. To be given the opportunity to preach to an entire congregation of people like that only multiplies the excitement. That is a great opportunity.

A young preacher, whom I love dearly, has told me about his plans to preach the gospel at a local apostate UCC church (United Churches of Christ), which is without a pastor. I sense in him this excitement over this opportunity. The church flies the rainbow flag and has had recent experience with a lesbian pastor. Possessing separatist convictions, however, I had no choice but to express my concern and offer my unsolicited counsel.

As I tried to dissuade my brother from his plan, he answered back that he viewed this opportunity for ministry as parallel to Paul's practice of preaching the gospel in the first-century Jewish synagogue. I do not think the parallel holds, and I would like to use this article to explain why. First, I will note some facts about those first-century synagogues, where Jesus worshipped and Paul preached. Then I will address the question at hand. For further reading on the topic, see Alfred Edersheim's *Sketches of Jewish Social Life* (1876), chapters 16 and 17, which discusses the origin, structure, physical arrangements, and public worship of the first-century Jewish synagogue.

Origin of the Synagogue

Edersheim explains that the origin of the synagogue "is lost in the obscurity of tradition" (230). He notes that the discovery of the book of the law in the temple during the days of Josiah (2 Kings 22:8) indicates that the Old Testament was not widely available to the Jewish people of his day. Because the purpose of the synagogue was to teach people the Old Testament, this fact of Jewish history means that synagogues did not exist in the days of Josiah.

After the Babylonian Captivity, however, with its destruction of the Jerusalem temple, there arose a necessity for a ministry like the synagogue among the deported Jews. It may be then that the institution originated. Edersheim points out that Ezra's public reading of the Law in Neh. 8:2-3 gave precedent to the practice of the synagogues (231). Perhaps that address inspired the first synagogues among the Jewish people as they returned to the land of their fathers. Faced later with the Syrian persecution during the times of the Maccabees, the synagogue would have been a critical source of strength and hope for the suffering Jewish people.

Similarities with the New Testament Local Church

The word *synagogue* comes from two Greek words meaning *to lead together*. Similar to a local church, a synagogue is simply an assembly of people who have been led together. James, the pastor of the Jerusalem Church, refers to local church assemblies as synagogues in James 2:2, "For if there come unto your assembly . . ." The word translated *assembly* is the Greek word *synagogue*. There are some similarities between synagogues and the New Testament local church.

Like many of our local church buildings, Jewish synagogue construction aimed for visibility. Often, the highest ground in a community served as the sacred construction site. Alternatively, a plot near the city gate or on a busy street corner offered a suitable location. Jesus seems to have known of such synagogue locations when He warned, “And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men” (Matt. 6:5). If neither of these optimal options were available, a high pole stretched from the roof of the synagogue beyond other buildings, marking its location for all to see. The pole pointed heavenward, much like our local church steeples do today. In some smaller towns, the synagogue met in a portion of a private home set apart for this purpose. Early local churches also met in private homes (Acts 2:46, 5:42; Rom. 16:3, 5; Philem. 2).

There were rules of decorum for worship in the synagogue. The meetings called for orderly, quiet, and reverent demeanor. Paul encourages the same in the local church at Corinth (1 Corinthians 14). With what Edersheim calls “almost wearisome details and distinctions,” Jewish authorities set standards for proper dress and cleanliness at the synagogue (238). James, however, warns against ostentation in this regard: “My brethren, have not the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, with respect of persons” (James 2:1).

The synagogue was for teaching the Word of God. Edersheim explains, “There was no service of ‘praise’ in the synagogues” (245). The institution shared the goal of every good local church that still adheres to her Protestant heritage, expressed by Martin Luther: “a Christian congregation should never gather together without the preaching of God’s Word and prayer” (Ryan Martin, “Luther on the centrality of the Word in worship”; religiousaffections.org). Jesus preached the Word in the synagogues (Matt. 4:23, Mark 1:21, 6:2; Luke 4:15, 6:6, 13:10; John 6:59; 18:20). It is what He wants us to do in our local churches.

The synagogue’s structural design anticipated the public reading and preaching of God’s Word. Each had a raised platform with a pulpit in its center, at which the worship leader would stand and read the Scripture. Afterwards, he would sit and preach from an accompanying chair. Behind the pulpit sat the ark, a chest containing the sacred scrolls of the Scriptures. The congregation sat facing the ark, but the rulers of the synagogue sat on the platform with their backs to the ark facing the people. These were seats of honor among the Jews, and Jesus found in them many a prideful occupant. He said Pharisees loved “the uppermost rooms at feasts, and the chief seats in the synagogues” (Matt. 23:6). James warned against this pride as well (James 2:3).

On the whole, the synagogue of the first century was biblically orthodox in their faith and practice, but tragically mistaken in their rejection of Jesus Christ, their Messiah. Edersheim concludes, “there was nothing in the worship itself of the synagogue which could have prevented either the Lord, or His apostles and early followers, from attending it till the time of final separation had come” (244).

Differences with the New Testament Local Church

It was the Jewish synagogue that ultimately demanded “the final separation” about which Edersheim writes. During Jesus’s public ministry in Judea, authorities determined that any who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah would be expelled from the synagogue (John 9:22). On the whole, the synagogues of the Greek world never responded well to Paul’s preaching of the gospel, although some

who heard him were gloriously saved. That Jesus Himself is the center of our worship as local churches is the key difference between them and the first-century Jewish synagogue.

Other differences between our local churches and the synagogue are important. The synagogue was an institution of civil authority among the Jewish people, like courts, kings, and governors (Mark 13:9). As Baptists, we understand the separation of church and state (Matt. 20:25-26). Our local church possesses spiritual authority, not civil authority.

Although synagogues would typically welcome Gentile visitors, their membership had to submit to circumcision. Paul is clear that local church membership is to be comprised of the truly saved, both circumcised and uncircumcised (Gal. 6:15). Following the norms of first century Eastern culture, synagogues included separate meeting rooms for men and women, who worshipped apart. In contrast, both male and female members of local churches worship together (Gal. 3:28).

The Question at Hand

So, what does all of this mean for my brother's assertion that it is ok to preach the gospel in an apostate UCC church, because Paul preached the gospel in Jewish synagogues? For the following reasons, I believe that conclusion is misguided and potentially a harmful mistake.

1. When Paul visited a synagogue for a gospel opportunity, he did so in a time of transition for the people of God, from synagogue to the local church. The claim to follow his example into an apostate church today is anachronistic at best. Because Edersheim's "time of final separation" has come, no Jewish synagogue today welcomes teachers of New Testament truth into their worship services any longer. Even in Paul's ministry, separation from the synagogue came quickly, although Paul initially sought and found an evangelistic opportunity there. After this final separation, Paul taught clearly the Bible doctrine of ecclesiastical separation (2 Corinthians 6, 11). I do not believe he would have supported Corinthian pastors fellowshiping and worshipping with Jewish synagogues in Corinth in pursuit of gospel opportunity, especially if they were found to be donning rainbow flags.

2. Jesus later warns His churches against the synagogues of Satan (Rev. 2:9). The warning clearly precludes joining their services to preach the gospel. At minimum, there must have been some synagogues, the worst of them, where pastors of Jesus's local churches were not to be found ministering. This warning against false synagogues applies to false local churches today.

3. Paul treated the synagogical demand of circumcision as a touchstone of separation. The influence of the synagogue on the local church in this significant area troubled Paul deeply because it was a corruption of the true gospel. He called the position "another gospel," and he demanded that faithful believers let those holding the position "be accursed." If the circumcision controversy required this obedient separation in Paul's day, other false gospels in the UCC, such as the universalism and the denial of the efficacy and necessity of the atonement of Christ, require the same response today.

4. Biblically, a better analogy for the question at hand is Paul's relationship to the pagan temples of the first-century world. Paul never entered a pagan temple with his gospel message the way that he entered a Jewish synagogue. Instead, he even counselled believers to avoid meat sacrificed to idols in those temples for the sake of our testimony as a brotherhood who flees idolatry (1 Cor. 10:14). Surely, in

the same way, Paul would be concerned about the testimony of a brother who is willing to preach in a pagan false local church today.

The desire to reach souls in false churches is a noble desire. At times, apostate works have been recovered by orthodox pastors. Still more noble, however, is the commitment to faithfully obey the commands of Scripture. Forbidden is fellowship, communion, concord, sharing, and agreement between a true preacher and a false church (2 Cor. 6:14-17).

Setting aside the more noble cause of ministry obedience for ministry opportunity is not a new ministry philosophy. Although it once claimed the label “New,” the lessons of the failed New Evangelical experiment have taught us that revival must come through obedience to the Lord, not from our compromises for the Lord (See Roland McCune, *Promise Unfulfilled: The Failed Strategy of Modern Evangelicalism*, 2004). Let’s obey, touch not the unclean thing, and trust the Lord’s promise: “I will receive you, and will be a Father unto you, and ye shall be my sons and daughters” (2 Cor. 6:17-18). May this ever be our word from the Lord Almighty to each of our sons and daughters in the faith who is willing to listen. And having listened, may he pass the same truth to theirs someday.