



From Christ's Assembly to the Institutional Church: Part 1

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Assembly

The fact that the 1st century church was made up of home fellowships is not obscure history. Not only that, the home fellowship model continued for at least 200 years after the Pentecost that marked the birth of the church. Was this the intended model designed for the Great Commission? And how did the institutional church become the predominate model? Is a particular model efficacious to the success of the Great Commission? This paper seeks to answer those questions.

The institutional church as we know it today is predicated by particular elements. Those elements are public structures, orthodoxy, polity, and horizontal authority. The home fellowship model is predicated by the smaller group meeting in private homes, vertical authority, horizontal fellowship, gifts, and leadership. These are important distinctions in context of the discussion.

Furthermore, even though the terms are used interchangeably in the Bible, *deacon* and *elder* should be associated with the home fellowship model while *pastor* and *bishop* should be associated with the institutional church. At the very least, that will be the case with this paper, but "bishop" is the term that goes part and parcel with the birth of the institutional church. "Pastor" is the term that replaced bishop over time in Evangelical circles. So, for purposes of this paper *elder* will be associated with leadership/home fellowships, and pastor/bishop will be associated with the horizontal authority of the institutional church.

Another important distinction will be between "assembly" and "church." Like "bishop," *church* is part and parcel with the institutional church. The etymological use of the word church coincides with the birth of the institutional church. "Assembly" will be associated with the home fellowship model. The reasons for these distinctions will become evident as we progress.

In considering the gravity of the issue, an honest discussion will entail philosophy. The philosophical presuppositions in regard to mankind drove the tension early in church history, and it drives it now. This involves an honest discussion of *individualism* versus *collectivism*. Attitudes concerning the

assembly (home fellowship model) versus the church (institution) reveal misconceptions that run deep in the Western psyche. Yes, for the most part, the thought of home fellowships immediately raises the ire of "cult." As we will see, cults are the natural outflow of the institutional church and her very elements. For instance, cults are void of leadership, but heavily predicated by authority. Authority is the heart of the cult, not leadership.

Individualism is based on the competence of the individual. Collectivism is based on the incompetence of the individual and calls for authority over the gifted. In addition, because man is incompetent and inherently selfish, every individual's life purpose is what they can contribute to the group, or society. The individual's worth is the sum total of what he/she can contribute to the group. Though God has wired us to enjoy life, joy is reduced to an experience only that flows from the complete eradication of self. Self-esteem becomes the root of all evil, and the only truthful evaluation of self must be utter worthlessness. Collectivism is joyful wormhood.

This redefines *gift* as an attribute primarily owned by those who have the ability to orchestrate collectivism. The concept of *gift* is given tacit acknowledgment in regard to the unenlightened masses, but emphasized strongly in regard to those who can prevent societal chaos resulting from an unfettered populous. Though most are unaware of it, presidential elections are already predetermined by the philosophy of the populous. The philosophy sold will determine the outcome. This boils down to what people believe about the competence of mankind. If the people believe that individualism will lead to chaos, they will clamor about to be taken care of by a police state. Likewise, in the church, the result of gift being primarily defined as that possessed by those who prevent chaos will yield the same result. Hence, as we shall see, a strong emphasis on individual gifts is antithetical to the institutional church. The primary goal of the institutional church becomes the prevention of chaos.

What was the mindset of the 1st century assembly model? First, smaller groups meeting in homes necessarily keeps the individual in focus. It is clear that the assembly model had confidence in the individual. If every believer is truly indwelt by the Holy Spirit, such confidence should not

surprise us. There was no horizontal authority, only the vertical authority of Christ who said ALL authority had been given to Him (Matthew 28:18).

This defines a mainstay of the assembly: leadership sets the example and persuades in regard to an authority above themselves while at the same status level as the group. The apostle Paul appealed to the group and said, “Be imitators of me, just as I also am of Christ” (1Cor 11:1NET). This calls for the individual to judge the apostle according to his/her own interpretation of Scripture, and assumes the motive is to follow Christ correctly. In fact, the Bereans were called “honorable” for doing just that when they judged Paul’s teachings according to their own searching of the Scriptures (Acts 17:17).

In regard to horizontal authority, we have a very interesting event recorded in Scripture:

Mark 9:38 – John said to him, “Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.” 39 But Jesus said, “Do not stop him, for no one who does a mighty work in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. 40 For the one who is not against us is for us. 41 For truly, I say to you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you belong to Christ will by no means lose his reward.

The assembly model calls for submission to the Chief Shepherd only. Agreement or disagreement on what that is to varying degrees is a matter of fellowship. If the disagreement is too strong, break fellowship: “Can two walk together, except they be agreed?” (Amos 3:3 KJV). This is just one more strength of the assembly model: depending on the nature of the disagreement, separations can contribute to the spread of the gospel. We have an example of this regarding the relationship between Barnabas and Paul. In Acts 15 we find that they separated because of a contention between them that was too great. Paul didn’t pull apostolic rank on Barnabas, they separated, and undoubtedly, their efforts were doubled.

Also, home assemblies do not limit growth in numbers. In the New Testament, we find that there were many home assemblies in a given geography. When a letter was written to, for example, “the church * of God that is in Corinth,” that was a letter written to all of the assemblies in that city. The letters were distributed in many different ways including designated messengers. The fact that the letters were sent to designated geographies suggests a cooperation and network between the assemblies. Obviously, the issues were the same as the letters addressed all of the assemblies in that geography; usually a city.

Apparently, the assembly at Corinth had expanded its

influence by the time Paul wrote his second letter to them:

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, To the church of God that is at Corinth, with all the saints who are in the whole of Achaia:



The broader geographical area of Achaia is included in the second letter. The “whole of” in regard to Achaia assumes multiple assemblies and this assumption should be foisted upon the city of Corinth as well. The assembly of Christ expressed in several different assemblies and hopefully expressing the one mind of Christ that is key to unity.

1 Corinthians 1:10 – I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment.

1 Corinthians 2:16 – For who hath known the mind of the Lord, that he may instruct him? But we have the mind of Christ.

Philippians 2:2 – complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind.

Philippians 2:5 – Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus:

Assembly leadership appeals to the one mind in Christ as the only authority. Assembly leaders have no authority. Fellowship is determined by whether or not leadership has persuaded the assembly. This determines unity as well. Those who can agree on what Christ has commanded can walk together and minister together in single mindedness. This brings us back to a consideration of the following: can large groups of individuals agree based on the idea of individual competence? In general, is the individual capable of being reasonable? Does unity have to be dictated, or can

individuals be unified? The New Testament assembly model answers this question with a resounding, “yes”:

Acts 6:1 – Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution. 2 And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, “It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. 3 Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty. 4 But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.” 5 And what they said pleased the whole gathering, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. 6 These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them. 7 And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.

Notice that it is the word of God that increased, and the “obedience to the faith” and not men. There is only one verse in the New Testament that seems to call for an obedience to church leaders:

Hebrews 13:17 – Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.

The word “obey” in this verse is defined as follows:

g3982. πείθω peithō; a primary verb; to convince (by argument, true or false);

The idea is to be persuaded. That is how the same Greek word is translated by the same version (ESV) in Matt 27:20.

Now the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowd to ask for Barabbas and destroy Jesus.

A similar form of the word can mean “refuse to be persuaded” as in 1Peter 3:1, but on no wise does Heb 13:17 teach that we are to submit to an authority when it contradicts our understanding of Christ’s authority. This again goes hand in hand with the idea that the individual lacks competence in understanding truth.

The assembly model also lends understanding in regard to many passages like Mathew 18:15-20.** This passage contains instructions for being reconciled to an individual who has offended you; it is for conflict resolution within the assembly. Trying to apply these instructions within an institutional construct creates many, many problems. How-

ever, the passage makes perfect sense when seen from the assembly prism. This holds true for much of the New Testament. Fitting the institutional church into New Testament instruction is often like fitting a square peg in a round hole.

The institutional church does not nurture the Great Commission or discipleship. Invariably, a collectivist environment will not emphasize individual gifts which are the body parts of Christ’s assembly. Read 1Corinthians 12:14-26.

Paul’s context in 1Cor 12:14-26 is spiritual gifts (see 12:1). To say that the institutional church underemphasizes individual gifts is an understatement, and the results speak for themselves; it is a body that does not work well. Many who do not have the gift of teaching merely buy an authoritative position in the church through institutional academics. This is where they learn orthodoxy and polity, and regurgitate these traditions of men in the local church. Orthodoxy and polity will be addressed later in this paper, but this you can be sure of: the perpetuation of orthodoxy requires little giftedness.

Notes

* The word throughout the New Testament is ekklesia: “called out assembly.” Church has an etymology that coincides with the coronation of the institutional church circa 300 AD. The very definition of church includes the category of “institution” according to some dictionaries. Church is a word that is incorrectly associated with the early assemblies.

** The space will not be taken here to make the point, but Matthew 18:15-20 coincides operationally with the assembly model on all points. This is especially true when you consider that the institutional model spawns the mega church.

Addendum

From New Testament Synagogue to Home Assembly

After the birth of the assembly of Christ; seemingly, Christians just start meeting without any planning or protocol. They just start “doing church” (Acts 2:41-47). A proper understanding of the New Testament assembly model is critical to our philosophy of ministry.

Acts 10 and 11 will give you a good perspective on how Jewish the church was—the Gentiles were recognized as part of the same body with much controversy and ado. Once you understand this, it is assumed that New Testament believers simply followed the form of worship that

they were already accustomed to. Let's not forget; for many Jews, the birth of Christ's assembly was a major event, but not a conversion for them. Many were already born again before the cross (see John 3). So, what you see in New Testament assemblies was pretty much what was going on in the Jewish synagogues prior to Pentecost.

Therefore, it is no surprise to see the apostolic church ministering at the temple, in synagogues, and in homes. It was a natural transition, and a reflection of what had been happening at Jewish synagogues.

The synagogue is a concept that began sometime prior to the exodus. An Old Testament word search of "elder" makes it abundantly clear that elders led groups of people within Israel. During the exodus, the tabernacle was the primary focus for ritual, and God's people were divided into small groups of learning overseen by elders. Again, a simple word search and observance of how the word is used in the Old Testament makes this abundantly clear. Though these small groups served many critical functions, the primary focus was that of learning. Traditionally, the synagogue is known as Bet Midrash (house of study), Bet Tefillah (house of prayer), and Bet Knesset (house of assembly).^{*} Today, many synagogues have floor plans that accommodate these major ideas; a room for assembly, a room for prayer, and a room for study.

This is a longstanding tradition, and consequently, we see the same pattern in the book of Acts. Certainly, the concept of synagogue was institutionalized, and the first century was no exception. The first century synagogue, numbering around 400 in Jerusalem alone, was a combination of politically well-connected and highly structured centers and less formal home assemblies that were strictly that of the laity.^{**} Along with being well connected with state politics, many of the institutionalized synagogues integrated Greek and Roman paganism into Judaism. † Due to the traditional Jewish mentality in regard to synagogues; i.e., the term "small sanctuary" was used interchangeably between the assembly and the family, ^{**} the assemblies were unaffected by these unfortunate integrations if they chose to be, and many were.

Note: Christ's assembly grows from 120 to 3000 in one day according to Acts 2:41, and in the following verse we read, "And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers." Where to put all of these people and what to do with them was of no issue, they merely returned to their existing assemblies, primarily in homes, and continued in the synagogue tradition. Acts 2:46 makes it clear that they met at the temple and had fellowship meals in

their homes which would have also included teaching, prayer, the remembrance, and a departure with the singing of a hymn. The so-called *last supper* would have been very indicative of what went on during these assembly/synagogue meetings.

But also remember, the Jews that made up the apostolic assembly were VERY aware that the temple was temporary. In fact, after the destruction of the temple in 70 AD,

Following the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in the year 70 C.E., the rabbis decided the home would be the mikdash m'at—"small sanctuary"—a holy place responsible for fostering the family's spiritual life.††

In addition, Christ's ministry probably produced many solid synagogues prior to Pentecost.

This model continued predominately for the next 200 years, and there is no reason to think that Christ prescribed any alternatives. In fact, this is probably the strongest argument: while it is clear that assemblies were in homes, nowhere is there any indication in the New Testament that this was a transitional model or inferior to an institution.

Notes:

*George Robinson: Essential Judaism; Pocket Books 2000, p. 46.

**Louis H. Feldman and Meyer Reinhold: Jewish Life and Thought Among Greeks and Romans; Augsburg Fortress 1996, p. 68.

†Louis H. Feldman and Meyer Reinhold: Jewish Life and Thought Among Greeks and Romans; Augsburg Fortress 1996, p. 73.

†† Jewish Home & Community: My Jewish Learning.com; Online source | <http://goo.gl/N6Udu6>