

Buzz King
buzz@BuzzKing.com
BuzzKing.com
303 437 7419

Acts 2:42–47, New International Version.

⁴⁴ All the believers were together and had everything in common. ⁴⁵ They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. ⁴⁶ Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, ⁴⁷ praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

The rise of the Church.

Our passage today, Acts, Chapter 2, verses 44 to 47, is famous because it suggests that the early Christians might have been hardcore socialists; not surprisingly, this passage has led to a tremendous amount of debate over the centuries, especially within the U.S., a traditionally capitalistic society. But that's not why we're going to look at this passage today. Here it is. We will come back and look at it again:

⁴⁴ All the believers were together and had everything in common. ⁴⁵ They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. ⁴⁶ Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, ⁴⁷ praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

We're concerned with an important transition that's suggested by these verses: the movement of Christian worship and educational practices from the

temple to Christian churches. Notice that Christians did start out by meeting in the temple courts, the public area. By taking a closer look at this, we'll see that it wasn't just the introduction of the New Covenant, which promises a personal relationship with God and freedom from the strictures of the Old Covenant, that led to the rise of separate Christian places of worship. We'll gain a better understanding of just what a church is. The purpose of a church emerged in the early days of Christianity. Looking at the history of the rise of the church tells us a lot about our faith.

Let's start with the first temple, Solomon's temple. A key theme in the Book of Deuteronomy is the centralization of worship, prayer, and singing. Israelites were ordered, at least as far back as 800 B.C. that they were to bring their burnt offerings and animals to sacrifice to the temple in Jerusalem. They did not offer these to God in their backyard; they went to the one and only temple. They were also commanded by Hebrew scripture to go to the temple to celebrate the eight annual festivals. During one of these festivals, the Feast of the Booths, the law was read aloud. The priests of the temple were the ones who taught the law, and it was done exclusively in the temple. However, eight centuries later, Jews were worshipping, coming together to pray, singing the Psalms, studying Scripture, and celebrating the festivals at local, decentralized synagogues. How did that happen? It's important to us, because our churches are far more like synagogues than

temples, and even major Christian cathedrals are really just big churches. They are not temples. But here is a question, what does the word synagogue mean?

The word synagogue derives from *synāgogē* and means to collect, to gather, or to assemble, which is of course, what we do in a synagogue or in a church. It appears hundreds of times in the Old Testament and is used as a translation of the Hebrew word *edah*, which refers to the gathered community of the Israelite people. You might remember that the first temple was destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 B.C., and in 538 B.C., the Babylonians were overthrown and the Israelites new overlords, the Persians, led by Cyrus the Great, allows them to return home and rebuild the temple. But after the destruction of the first temple, there was a desperate need to create other places for people to worship, and worship became decentralized. More importantly, they desperately needed safe places to come together to support each other. When the second temple was built, it never regained the importance and prominence of the first temple. By New Testament times, the word synagogue was used very narrowly to refer to either a congregation or the building the congregation meets in, exactly the way we use the word church. Jews were worshiping in locations convenient to them and only rarely went to the temple. By the first century A.D., there were synagogues throughout the nation of Israel. The Gospel of Matthew tells us that Jesus preached in the synagogues of

Jerusalem. One of the major uses of the synagogue was to serve as a place to study the very complicated Jewish laws - which followers were required to follow - in much the same way we study the Bible. Synagogues never replaced the temple. Sacrifices could only be offered in the temple in Jerusalem, not in any synagogue.

While Jesus was on Earth, he routinely spent the Sabbath at a synagogue. But interestingly, and despite the fact the very first Christians were Jews, the followers of Jesus never used the word synagogue to refer to their meeting places. And only after Jesus had been resurrected, did they begin to use the word church, or *ekklēsia*, in Greek. What caused the separation, where the followers of Jesus, who were not yet calling themselves Christians, started meeting in their own spaces and calling them churches? We do know from the Gospels and the Book of Acts that there were many churches by the year 50 A.D. But even at that point, there wasn't a clean separation yet. Paul in his travels preached in many synagogues. He even visited the temple. It appears that the destruction of the second temple, in 70 A.D., by the Romans, is when the separation became complete. Christians did not need a temple, as they did not offer sacrifices to God. Jesus was the ultimate sacrifice and obviated the need to offer up doves, sheep, or cattle. They also were not welcomed in synagogues because their beliefs conflicted with those of Jewish people, and as more and more gentiles began to follow Jesus, it was natural to meet

in separate places. At first people met in house churches, and then later, perhaps not until after the year 200 A.D., the followers of Jesus met in buildings dedicated only to the practicing of the new faith. A new sabbath day emerged, Sunday, to provide a unique worship identity for the early Christians. While Christians did not call their places of worship synagogues, they did inherit the distributed, convenient practice of building local places of worship. We owe a lot to the emergence of the synagogue system several hundred years before the birth of Jesus, after the first temple was destroyed by the Babylonians. Let's look at our quote from Acts again:

⁴⁴ All the believers were together and had everything in common. ⁴⁵ They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. ⁴⁶ Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, ⁴⁷ praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

Remember that the sharing of a meal by the early Christians was inspired in part by the Jewish holiday of Passover. Remember that Jesus was a replacement for the need to periodically meet in a centralized place, the temple, to offer animal sacrifices. So, while we sit here in a building who owes its roots to the Jewish synagogue system, let's think about what else we owe to Judaism.

Countless volumes of ancient writings from throughout the world have been lost. The library of Alexandria, the largest known library of the ancient world,

contained thousands of priceless documents. Most of them were lost when the library was burned around 2000 years ago. Thousands of religions have been born and died – and their sacred books are almost all gone. But the Jews preserved the Hebrew scriptures, what we call the Old Testament. This is an incredible gift. By the time Christ came along, an immense history of the story of our God, which had been collected for well over a thousand years, was handed to us.

When I was a Christian boy, we recited the Ten Commandments. They have impacted not only our faith in a fundamental fashion, but the nature of western civilization. Much of what we consider to be moral and legal, even if we are not Christians, comes from this gift from the Jewish people.

Here is something that comes from the Gospel of John, chapter 4:

²¹ “Woman,” Jesus replied, “believe me, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. ²² You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews. ²³ Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. ²⁴ God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in the Spirit and in truth.”

Remember the Samaritan woman at the well. Jesus shows respect for this member of a rejected people by asking her for a drink of water. He tells her that anyone who drinks the water from the well will be thirsty again, but that anyone who drinks the water he has to offer will never again be thirsty. Notice that he tells

her that it is the Jews who know about the one, true God. He tells her that “*salvation is from the Jews*”. God promised a messiah to the Jews. Jesus lived, died, was resurrected, and ascended as a Jew. It was to the Israelites, our spiritual ancestors, that God first offered a path to salvation. That is an amazing gift to us.

The Jewish people also gave us all the Apostles and nearly all the authors of the New Testament. Only Luke, the author of a Gospel and the Book of Acts, is thought to have not been Jewish. There are some scholars who have concluded that even Luke was ethnically Jewish. He might have been born into a family that had been Hellenized; in other words, he was raised in a Greek cultural environment.

Even many things in our culture today, which we think of as being very Christian have strong Jewish roots. We all know Handel’s Messiah, written in 1741, and so often performed at Christmas and Easter. Handel was German, born in 1685, and very much a Christian. The Messiah was performed for the first time in Dublin on April 13, 1742. Most of the lyrics come, not from the New Testament, but from the Old, the Hebrew scriptures. We all know these words, from Isaiah:

*⁶For to us a child is born,
to us a son is given;
and the government shall be upon his shoulder,
and his name shall be called
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.*

Tradition has it that Solomon authored much of the Book of Proverbs. He of course led the building of the first great temple, and he was the son of King David. But it is highly unlikely that he wrote the Proverbs. The Book of Proverbs is of the genre of wisdom literature. It does not deal with Israelite practices, such as temple worship or sacrifice. Rather, it tells the People of God how to conduct one's life wisely. It does not offer any systematic doctrinal principles. But it does convey a clear system of reward and punishment, something intimately tied to Israelite and biblical tradition. So, although it doesn't seem very "religious" to us, it is very Jewish and it very much belongs in the Hebrew scriptures, our Old Testament.

Here is a proverb from Chapter 14: ³⁴ *Godliness makes a nation great, but sin is a disgrace to any people.* This used to be a paradigm followed by most people in the U.S. There are many parallels between the U.S. Constitution and the Bible, and most of them are between the Constitution and the Hebrew scriptures, not the New Testament. I'll do a message on this in the future. For now, though, let me just say that we owe both our faith and our national heritage to the people who in Genesis are referred to as Hebrews. In Exodus, they become the Israelites, the people who are destined to populate Israel, the Promised Land. In 2nd Kings, we see the word Jews, and it is first used to refer to the people who populated the southern part of what we call Israel; at that time, the southern part

was called Judah and it included Jerusalem. This term dates to the second century B.C. But by any name, the people of the Old Testament are responsible for the incredible depth of our faith heritage.

The word diaspora is used to describe the settling of a scattered people after being cast out of their homeland. The most common use of this word refers to the Jewish diaspora, which started when Jews were sent out of ancient Israel by the Babylonian invaders. It continued right down to the diaspora due to the Nazis. What inspired me to write this message today was a conversation I had recently with an elderly Jewish man who was originally from Israel but had not been back there since he was a boy. His goal was to regain enough strength so that he could return to his homeland before he died. He was receiving what is called palliative chemotherapy, the goal of which was not to cure him, but to help him live a bit longer and to have a better quality of life near the end. I had a great talk with him about the Jewish roots of Christianity. He was the one that pointed out to me that in the wake of destruction of the second temple by the Romans in the year 70, the synagogue system kept the Jewish faith alive. They needed, not a place to sacrifice animals, but a place to lift each other up. Jews, no matter where they go, build synagogues. No matter where we go, we build churches. But today, churches across the U.S. and Europe are being converted into private

homes, apartment buildings, office buildings, even amusement parks. The day may come when the house church, from the roots of our faith, keeps Christianity alive. But no matter what form they take, the places where we go to come together are based on the synagogues of the original Chosen People.

When I quote the Bible, I usually provide context so that we can understand just what the original author intended. This time, let me just quote Isaiah again:

¹⁹ Behold, I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.

That new thing, which was new to Isaiah 700 years before Jesus was born, is still new to us. God is still using this church to make a way for us in the wilderness.

Here is the main point I want to make today. The Israelites met in a temple to find God. They went to the synagogue to be with each other. We know that God is everywhere. We don't offer animal sacrifices. We don't need a temple. But we do need a church, our synagogue - and it is worth tremendous effort to keep alive this place so that future generations can meet as fellow believers and support each other in a scary world. Please pray with me.

God, keep this church alive. May it continue to be the home of the faithful for many decades to come. May the rise of the church never become the fall of the church. Amen.