

Our Local Assembly's Synagogue Heritage

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B Y R A Y G A N N O N

While addressing a national conference in 1973, a young missionary to American Jews complained that there were some guidelines in Assemblies of God Home Missions policy that were not in the best interests of Jewish ministry. Theodore Gannon, then national director of Home Missions, jumped to his feet to address the speaker and entire conference: "You boys go out and do it. Whatever works, we'll make policy." Many of us took his challenge to impact the American Jewish community in a bold new way by establishing incarnational Pentecostal corporate models of the Jewish Jesus.

When James (2:2) warned the local assembly against favoritism toward the socially advantaged, he used the terminology, "if a man comes into your assembly." The Greek word translated "assembly" here is *sunagōgē* (synagogue, a gathering together). James had no aversion to hailing the local assembly as a synagogue since the New Testament local assembly was established on the Jewish congregational model.

THE SYNAGOGUE IN JEWISH HISTORY

Although the synagogue is highly profiled in the New Testament, we find only dubious reference to it in the Hebrew Bible (Ezekiel 8:6). When and where did the synagogue arise as a communal institution alongside biblical faith?

When the Assyrians uprooted the northern kingdom of Israel (722 B.C.), the 10 tribes soon lost their national, cultural, and religious identities. They were quickly absorbed into the larger societies where they were replanted and

soon lost to the world. When the Babylonians carried Judah away into exile more than a century later (586 B.C.), the Jews recognized the only way to retain their own sense of community and national mission was to establish their exiled Jewish society around the study of Torah, corporate prayer, and creative means for settling internal communal disputes. A Jewish community center performed the three functions of (1) *Beth Midrash*, house of (Bible) study; (2) *Beth Tefilah*, house of prayer; and (3) *Beth Din*, a court for effecting remedy to religious family social disputes. These operated under the broader generic of *Beth Kneset*, house of assembly.

Since the Jewish exiles recognized the fulfilled prophecies of God's sometime caustic Hebrew prophets, they accepted the *galut* (exile) as divine punishment. But taking consolation in the remnant prophecies of restoration to their land, the disenfranchised exiles resolved to preserve their newly repentant devotion to biblical faith and sustain their hope for national revival. They did this by creating an institution that would inspire their knowledge of the Word, enhance their corporate devotion to worship the one true God of Israel, and enable them to handle their differences among themselves to avoid government interference and political imposition.

Spoken Hebrew died out within two generations of the Babylonian exile from the southern kingdom of Judah and was soon replaced with Aramaic, a Chaldean dialect. Almost immediately the linguistic change created Jewish need for translation of the original Hebrew biblical text. This need was soon accommodated in worship services by

means of complementary interpretations called *Targum(im)* and relevant applications for modern Babylonian Jewish life. Hence, the homily or sermon was born. Extensive portions of the Hebrew Bible, especially the Psalms, began to be read for corporate prayer and inspiration. An annual cycle for reading through the entire Torah (Law) during public worship services was created to assure a broad communal hearing of the rich counsel of God.

Emulating the early Babylonian Jewish model, other Jewish communities began establishing their own synagogues throughout areas north and west. In time the institution of the *Beth Kneset* or local synagogue would sweep back into the land of Israel and beyond into newer Jewish strongholds throughout the Mediterranean region. During the intertestamental period, there was a growing corporate sense of Jewish mission to the nations. A progressively enlightened Jewish people began understanding the Torah, Psalms, and Prophets to teach that each and every nation should be worshipping the same one God of Israel, the Creator of *all*. The synagogue became a beachhead for Jewish missionary activities among pagans eager for ethical order in the midst of the overwhelming moral morass engendered by the combination of paganism, mystery religions, Hellenism, and incipient Gnosticism. The synagogue afforded not only full proselytes but also curious Gentile God-fearers opportunity to learn of the oneness of God and of His biblical code for moral human conduct. Jewish proselytizing efforts were highly successful with multiplied

thousands of pagans fully embracing Jewish conversion and thousands more Gentiles receiving weekly ethical instruction at Jewish founts.

THE SYNAGOGUE IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

According to scholarly estimate, first-century Jerusalemites utilized 480 synagogues in the Holy City alone as supplement to their temple worship. While the temple officially remained the authoritative domain of the professional priestly line (*cohanim*), the ruler of the synagogue required no pedigree. The leader of the local *Beth Kneset* was usually an unpaid layman, with noteworthy personal piety, intellectual prowess, and keen social awareness. The focus of this inspired *rabbi* (“teacher”) was the application of the biblical principles of the Torah, not to the priesthood alone, but to the lives of common Jews. In the oral tradition of the priesthood of the believer, God expected *all* Jews to support their daily and weekly worship experiences with lives of recognizable holiness.

As new streams of Eastern and Western thought bombarded Palestinian Jewry, rabbis were compelled to provide rationale for the continued “Jewish mission” while helping the Jewish community maintain or pragmatically refashion its religious practices in a rapidly changing universe. The decisions reached by these lay scholars would eventuate in later centuries in the *Talmud*, the compilation of the *Mishnah* (oral law) and *Gemara* (completion). After the destruction of the temple in A.D. 70, rabbinical opinion would guide the Jewish masses scattered across the larger Middle East and Mediterranean worlds and create a new “rabbinic Judaism” that would flourish in synagogues throughout the Jewish Diaspora.

Among the reasons the apostle Paul systematically preached to the Jew first everywhere he was sent were: (1) he recognized in Romans 9–11 the strategic role Israel would forever play in God’s global plan of redemption,

(2) the synagogue provided him a ready platform for gospel proclamation in nearly every city he entered, and (3) the tremendous Jewish missionary appeal to God-fearers surrounding the synagogue yielded Paul a prepared market of Gentile listeners.

As new congregations were formed consisting of both believing Jews and Gentiles, they naturally patterned their own worship on the order of the synagogue. Jesus, the apostles, and Paul had participated in synagogue life replete with the reading of Scripture, corporate prayers, and sermons with application for contemporary living. The local assembly, as a corporate testimony to Christ, would extensively duplicate the synagogue. The distinctive of the messianic synagogue would be the Pentecostal operations within the worship service, even as Paul instructed: “When you assemble, each one has a psalm, has a teaching, has a revelation, has a tongue, has an interpretation. Let all things be done for edification” (1 Corinthians 14:26, NASB). Paul considered the local assembly’s gathering to be for hearing from God in worship,

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study, and prayer, and as a court for handling internal disputes, as seen in 1 Corinthians 6:1–8.

THE MODERN MESSIANIC SYNAGOGUE

When the messianic Jewish movement followed hard on the heels of the 1967 Six-Day War and the charismatic Jesus movement of the 1970s, the harvest of thousands of new Jewish believers led to the establishing of the messianic synagogue movement. The Assemblies of God became the first Protestant group to welcome messianic Jewish congregations into full fellowship despite criticisms of the synagogue

movement by other denominations and parachurch organizations. It was quickly recognized that the messianic synagogue is a Jesus-centered, usually Pentecostal, and Jewish-cultured assembly. Similarly, the typical Assemblies of God church is a Jesus-centered, Spirit-filled, and usually Gentile-cultured synagogue.

Across America today hundreds of messianic synagogues exalt Jesus as Lord and King-Messiah in the midst of Jewish communities. Several Spirit-filled Pentecostal synagogues are affiliated with the Assemblies of God. In cooperation with Home Missions, they seek to spiritually embody, in a Jewish cultural framework, the Lord Jesus the Jewish world increasingly appreciates. After all, this is the mandate every local assembly shares—to be an incarnation of the living Christ to those who would otherwise miss the beauty of Jesus. Disguised by the mask of alien cultural practices and strange stylistic preferences, the real Jesus too often remains hidden to others.

The Assemblies of God has thus far led the evangelical world in embracing

the wide range of ethnic and cultural variations required for the authentic representation of the incarnated Christ to lost mankind, without ethnocentric fears or related biases, to best serve the spiritual needs of all God’s children, Jew or Gentile. Continued support for an extensive array of culturally relevant incarnational exhibitions of Christ is indispensable to our success in fulfilling our Matthew 28 messianic mandate to reach all people groups (*ethnē*) with the Pentecostal gospel of Jesus and help them form synagogues in His honor. **E**

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