

A HOUSE OF PRAYER FOR ALL PEOPLES

“How Did We Get Here?”

Introduction: Where is here?

What do we mean when we say here? Here would mean a somewhat formal Christian religion complete with clergy, church buildings, ceremonial communion, and consistent orders of worship. Our current state is typically blamed on one man who is celebrated by the Orthodox and despised by the reformed. His name is Constantine the Great and he ruled the Western Roman Empire from 312-324 and the entire Roman Empire from 324-337.

The Evangelical Church honors him as the founder of the Roman Catholic Church and the first real pope. He is blamed for the institution of all or most of all that the Protestants dislike about the Catholic Church. But placing all blame on him for what happened in the church is a rather reductionist view of history. We have a tendency to want our history to look geometric – all nice and neat. In reality, history is biological and organic and often messy.

An example of this in modern days is ascribing total blame for the Holocaust on Hitler without taking into account the centuries of anti-Semitism in Germany that preceded him not to mention the brand of annihilistic anti-Semitism that developed in Germany decades before he was born.

Constantine had a major impact on church history. There is no denying that. But we need to look at the broad picture to get an understanding of why we do what we do.

I. From Adam to Moses (the Tabernacle)

1. In the Cool of the Garden

Gen 3:8

Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the LORD God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the LORD God among the trees of the garden. NIV

Adam and Eve fellowshiped with God in the natural course of their day. No direction was given to them to build a temple. The Lord God walked with them in the garden in the cool of the day.

2. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob – Altar Builders

Gen 12:7

The LORD appeared to Abram and said, "To your offspring I will give this land." So **he built an altar there to the LORD**, who had appeared to him. NIV

Gen 26:24-25

24 That night the LORD appeared to him and said, "I am the God of your father Abraham. Do not be afraid, for I am with you; I will bless you and will increase the number of your descendants for the sake of my servant Abraham."

25 **Isaac built an altar there and called on the name of the LORD**. There he pitched his tent, and there his servants dug a well. NIV

Gen 33:18-20

18 After Jacob came from Paddan Aram, he arrived safely at the city of Shechem in Canaan and camped within sight of the city.

19 For a hundred pieces of silver, he bought from the sons of Hamor, the father of Shechem, the plot of ground where he pitched his tent.

20 There he set up an altar and called it El Elohe Israel. NIV

Temples were not unknown to the patriarchs. Who in Abraham's day would not have known of Babel? The pagans all about them had idols and temples, but they didn't build any. In the course of their travels, they built altars and worshipped God.

3. Moses and the Tabernacle

Ex 33:7-10

7 Now Moses used to take a tent and pitch it outside the camp some distance away, calling it the "tent of meeting." Anyone inquiring of the LORD would go to the tent of meeting outside the camp.

8 And whenever Moses went out to the tent, all the people rose and stood at the entrances to their tents, watching Moses until he entered the tent.

9 As Moses went into the tent, the pillar of cloud would come down and stay at the entrance, while the LORD spoke with Moses.

10 Whenever the people saw the pillar of cloud standing at the entrance to the tent, they all stood and worshiped, each at the entrance to his tent. NIV

*Moses set up a place **outside** of the camp, away from the noise and distractions, to meet with God. Notice that all the people worshipped at the door of their tents. Later, the Lord gave Moses the revelation of the Tabernacle and told him to place it in the **center** of the camp. The worship of YHWH was to be central to their society.*

The tabernacle was a mobile structure the purpose of which was to move with the children of Israel while the sojourned. But a permanent structure was coming and Moses prophesied about it.

Deut 12:1-11

1 These are the decrees and laws you must be careful to follow in the land that the LORD, the God of your fathers, has given you to possess--as long as you live in the land.

2 Destroy completely all the places on the high mountains and on the hills and under every spreading tree where the nations you are dispossessing worship their gods.

3 Break down their altars, smash their sacred stones and burn their Asherah poles in the fire; cut down the idols of their gods and wipe out their names from those places.

4 You must not worship the LORD your God in their way.

5 But you are to seek the place the LORD your God will choose from among all your tribes to put his Name there for his dwelling. To that place you must go;

- 6 there bring your burnt offerings and sacrifices, your tithes and special gifts, what you have vowed to give and your freewill offerings, and the firstborn of your herds and flocks.
- 7 There, in the presence of the LORD your God, you and your families shall eat and shall rejoice in everything you have put your hand to, because the LORD your God has blessed you.
- 8 **You are not to do as we do here today, everyone as he sees fit,**
- 9 since you have not yet reached the resting place and the inheritance the LORD your God is giving you.
- 10 But you will cross the Jordan and settle in the land the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance, and he will give you rest from all your enemies around you so that you will live in safety.
- 11 **Then to the place the LORD your God will choose as a dwelling for his Name-- there you are to bring everything I command you:** your burnt offerings and sacrifices, your tithes and special gifts, and all the choice possessions you have vowed to the LORD. NIV

II. From the Temple to the Synagogue

1. Solomon's Prayer

David had set up a tent for the ark in Jerusalem but he had built a house for himself. So he desired to build a dwelling for the Lord. This task fell to Solomon because David was a man of war. Solomon built the temple and dedicated it in prayer.

The prayer of dedication is found in 1 Kings 8.

1 Kings 8:27-30

- 27 "But will God really dwell on earth? The heavens, even the highest heaven, cannot contain you. How much less this temple I have built!
- 28 Yet give attention to your servant's prayer and his plea for mercy, O LORD my God. Hear the cry and the prayer that your servant is praying in your presence this day.
- 29 May your eyes be open toward this temple night and day, this place of which you said, 'My Name shall be there,' so that you will hear the prayer your servant prays toward this place.
- 30 Hear the supplication of your servant and of your people Israel when they pray toward this place. Hear from heaven, your dwelling place, and when you hear, forgive. NIV

Solomon enumerates several types and occasions for prayer, but the point is that the Temple was the contact point for such prayer. There was now a place for man to contact God.

2. Exile and Synagogue Development

2 Kings 25:8-9

8 On the seventh day of the fifth month, in the nineteenth year of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, Nebuzaradan commander of the imperial guard, an official of the king of Babylon, came to Jerusalem.

9 He set fire to the temple of the LORD, the royal palace and all the houses of Jerusalem. Every important building he burned down. NIV

It was during the time of the Babylonian exile that the synagogue was developed. With no Temple to worship, the Jews gathered together (synagogue means “gathering place”) to learn the Law and to pray. It became a strong social development for the maintenance of the Jewish religion, cultural, and social life. It remained even after the temple was rebuilt.

The synagogue is a beit k’nesset, a House of Assembly which at minimum serves as a beit tefilah, a House of Prayer. Lastly, the synagogue is usually also a beit midrash, a House of Study. Because it must be a house of prayer, a synagogue requires a minyan, which is a quorum of 10 adult men required by Jewish tradition to say certain prayers and blessings.

3. Jesus and the Apostles and Synagogue

a. Teaching in the synagogue

We must never forget that Jesus was a Jew and He is the Jewish Messiah! He ministered and disciplined in a Jewish culture and as such taught in the synagogues.

Matt 9:35 NIV

Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness.

Mark 1:21-27

21 They went to Capernaum, and when the Sabbath came, Jesus went into the synagogue and began to teach.

22 The people were amazed at his teaching, because he taught them as one who had authority, not as the teachers of the law.

23 Just then a man in their synagogue who was possessed by an evil spirit cried out,

24 "What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God!"

25 "Be quiet!" said Jesus sternly. "Come out of him!"

26 The evil spirit shook the man violently and came out of him with a shriek.

27 The people were all so amazed that they asked each other, "What is this? A new teaching—and with authority! He even gives orders to evil spirits and they obey him." NIV

We must not take Jesus’ involvement in the synagogues as some sort of commendation of them. He went there because it was the culture He was born in and ministered to.

John 18:19-21 NIV

19 Meanwhile, the high priest questioned Jesus about his disciples and his teaching.

20 "I have spoken openly to the world," Jesus replied. "I always taught in synagogues or at the temple, where all the Jews come together. I said nothing in secret.

21 Why question me? Ask those who heard me. Surely they know what I said."

In fact, Jesus had strong criticism of synagogue traditions and members and more often than not was in conflict with them.

b. Conflict with the synagogue

Luke 4:28-30

28 All the people in the synagogue were furious when they heard this.

29 They got up, drove him out of the town, and took him to the brow of the hill on which the town was built, in order to throw him down the cliff.

30 But he walked right through the crowd and went on his way. NIV

Even a cursory glimpse at the gospels will show that the Jews in the synagogues were not predisposed to recognizing Jesus or His message. He even prophesied to His disciples that the synagogue would persecute them.

Matt 23:34-35

34 Therefore, indeed, I send you prophets, wise men, and scribes: some of them you will kill and crucify, and some of them you will scourge in your synagogues and persecute from city to city,

35 that on you may come all the righteous blood shed on the earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah, son of Berechiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar. NKJV

It did not take long for this persecution to begin. Stephen, the first Christian martyr after Christ, was falsely accused through a plot of the Synagogue of the Libertines. Saul went into the synagogues and hauled the Christians out to torture and murder them if they did not blaspheme by renouncing Christ.

Even with all this conflict, early Christianity viewed itself as Jewish. They still worshipped in synagogues and were very intentional of bringing the message of Jesus as Messiah to the synagogue first.

Acts 17:1-3

1 Now when they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where was a synagogue of the Jews:

2 And Paul, as his manner was, went in unto them, and three sabbath days reasoned with them out of the scriptures,

3 Opening and alleging, that Christ must needs have suffered, and risen again from the dead; and that this Jesus, whom I preach unto you, is Christ. KJV

c. Break with the synagogue

Eventually, the pressure between the two cultures was too great and the church split with the synagogue. The only synagogue mentioned in Revelation is the synagogue of Satan, which gives us some estimation of the size of the breach as early as the 90's when it was possibly penned.

Indications of this migration away from the synagogue as a place of congregation for Christians can be clearly seen in Acts.

Acts 13:42-51

- 42 As Paul and Barnabas were leaving the synagogue, the people invited them to speak further about these things on the next Sabbath.
- 43 When the congregation was dismissed, many of the Jews and devout converts to Judaism followed Paul and Barnabas, who talked with them and urged them to continue in the grace of God.
- 44 On the next Sabbath almost the whole city gathered to hear the word of the Lord.
- 45 When the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy and talked abusively against what Paul was saying.
- 46 Then Paul and Barnabas answered them boldly: "We had to speak the word of God to you first. Since you reject it and do not consider yourselves worthy of eternal life, we now turn to the Gentiles.
- 47 For this is what the Lord has commanded us: "I have made you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth."
- 48 When the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and honored the word of the Lord; and all who were appointed for eternal life believed.
- 49 The word of the Lord spread through the whole region.
- 50 But the Jews incited the God-fearing women of high standing and the leading men of the city. They stirred up persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and expelled them from their region.
- 51 So they shook the dust from their feet in protest against them and went to Iconium. NIV

Acts 19:8-10

- 8 Paul entered the synagogue and spoke boldly there for three months, arguing persuasively about the kingdom of God.
- 9 But some of them became obstinate; they refused to believe and publicly maligned the Way. So Paul left them. He took the disciples with him and had discussions daily in the lecture hall of Tyrannus.
- 10 This went on for two years, so that all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord. NIV

Who would have thought that the current trend of churches meeting in public schools would be as old as Paul's ministry in Ephesus?

III. Early Church History

1. Synagogue and Talmud

This breach only widened over time. In 66 AD, the Jews revolted against the Romans and the Christians left the city. By the end of the first century, the Jews had excluded the Christians from their synagogues by changing their liturgical prayers to add a curse upon heretics, by which they meant the Christians.

We need to realize that what we know and see of current Rabbinical Judaism (Orthodox, Conservative, or Reformed) is primarily a reaction to Christianity. How can I say that? Because its cornerstone is really the Talmud, which began to be set in place after the first century. Many of its arguments were developed and presented to answer the claims of Christianity.

2. From Houses to Places of Worship (Churches)

The common claim is that no churches were built before Constantine. Constantine supposedly converted to Christianity in 312 or 313. One of the oldest known Christian church buildings dates from 231. Churches and meeting places were known to the Christian church before Constantine, but the church generally met in the home.

We need to remember that Christianity was an outlawed religion. To build a meeting house specifically for Christian worship was inviting trouble. But we did have secret meeting places in Rome – the catacombs.

The catacombs had small chapels and there, church leaders would hide with their families in times of persecution. In fact, it was the persecutions that galvanized and made recognizable what would later be called the clergy class.

3. Diocletian to Constantine

Diocletian began the last great persecution of Christians during the Roman era. This persecution was ended by Constantine with the Edict of Milan in 313.

Constantine did not invent church buildings for Christians, but he did start a massive building project producing many more church buildings than had ever existed. He did not institute the clergy, but he did institutionalize them. There is no doubt that the Church was done damage by him, but all we call Orthodox or Catholic did not come from him and all of it is not bad.

Conclusion

Not bad? What do you mean? Well, in some respects, the Orthodox order of worship more closely resembles the church's synagogical origins. There are two primary parts to the Orthodox service: the Synaxis and the Eucharist.

The Synaxis comes from the same Greek word we get synagogue from and it means “gathering together.” This part of the service consists of prayers, Scripture readings, psalms, hymns, and

the sermon. Because it is centered on the Word of God, it is often called the Service of the Word. It is the first part of the service.

The Eucharist is the service of communion. In the early church, it was not open to the public, which led to speculations of cannibalism and violent persecution. Because of this, it is now done in public. This has been the basic anatomy of Christian worship since Justin Martyr.

The Orthodox Church places the Ministry of the Word of God first as a prelude to fellowship and communion. In this, it is truly Orthodox (of right opinion).

Acts 2:42

And they continued stedfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers. KJV

We all know of the power and success of the early church. Could it be that the pattern of their meetings enabled their prayers to affect much? This we must needs see.