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Poised for Growth: First Century Methods Fueled the Early Church Movement

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The rate at which new churches were planted in the time of the Apostles, is astonishing. The number of believers grew from about one hundred twenty in Acts 1, to three thousand disciples in Acts 2, then five thousand in chapter 4. The successive chapters describe the believers as multiplying greatly (in Acts 6:7), the churches as multiplying (in Acts 9:31), and finally, the Word of God increasing and multiplying (in Acts 12). Finally, in chapter 19, we see all the residents of Asia Minor (likely over twelve million people) having heard the Word of the Lord in just two years of starting work in Ephesus.

While such growth is rightly attributed to a move of the Spirit, we can also look for some of the methods God used which contributed to that rapid growth. Methods have tremendous influence over the outcomes we experience. As the Prophet Haggai says, we must give careful thought to our ways. This article draws upon historical documents as well as the most recent historical research into the early church and early synagogue. Note that each section begins with a passage of scripture. Though only a small portion is quoted, the reader would do well to read the entire reference before continuing with the article.

Matthew 13:53–54 “... he taught them in their synagogue ...”

Synagogue worship is a central part of first century Judaism. It developed rapidly during the Babylonian exile, some six hundred years before Christ, when the Jews needed a place to gather for prayer, read the word, maintain their culture, and express their devotion towards God in the midst of a hostile pagan culture.¹ The synagogue (meaning *gathering*) may even date back to the time of David (Psalm 70:8).

In the first century, there was no centralized authority uniting the synagogues, or providing oversight or standardization. This would develop several hundred years after the fall of the temple.² From 600 BC through the fall of the temple, the synagogue expanded wherever there were Jews, as a loose, grass-roots movement.³

Early synagogues worshiped primarily in homes.⁴ As they grew, Grecian or Roman community centers were rented and sometimes, the wealthy might build a synagogue building.⁵ Synagogue buildings were, by far, the exception.⁶ Jewish writings from the time

of Christ mention four hundred eighty synagogues within a Sabbath’s walk of the temple of Jerusalem.⁷ Archeology shows, only a handful were synagogue buildings.⁸

Matthew 16:18 “And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church.”

As is well known, *church* here, is *ekklesia*, meaning a *called-out assembly*. While we have a clear distinction between *synagogue* and *ekklesia* today, this wasn’t the case in the first century. Historical writings show twenty-two different names used to reference a synagogue meeting.⁹

Among the various terms were *sylogos*, (*congregation*) and even *ekklesia*.¹⁰ Case in point, Josephus and Philo refer to many synagogues as *ekklesia*, and use the words interchangeably. To Peter, *ekklesia* was not an unknown word; he would have understood it as a reference to Sabbath worship in the home.¹¹

Similarly, today, we have a number of words we use interchangeably with *Church*, including, assembly, parish, etc. *Church* itself is not a translation of *ekklesia* but instead, *kuriakos* meaning a [house] of God. Luke and Paul, use *ekklesia* exclusively, to refer to Christian worship meetings, and *synagogue* for Jewish. This is not however, universal. James 2:2, uses *synagogue* for a Christian place of worship.

Paul, throughout Acts, first goes to the synagogue, to convert his first disciples, and many Christian churches grew out of the synagogue.¹² The history of the first churches were within the context of the synagogue,¹³ and it is within this context that we best understand how early Christian worship functioned.¹⁴

Luke 4:16–28 “... as was his custom, he went to

the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and he stood up to read. And the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him ... And he rolled up the scroll and gave it back to the attendant and sat down ... And he began to say to them, ‘Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.’ And all spoke well of him and marveled at the gracious words that were coming from his mouth ...”

Reading the New Testament through our own cultural lens, it’s easy to mistakenly believe that the Rabbi was the head of a synagogue in Jesus’ time, and that these synagogues functioned similarly to our modern order of worship.¹⁵ This couldn’t be further from the truth.¹⁶ The synagogue was a lay movement,¹⁷ led by elders, usually chosen democratically from within the community.

According to the Mishna (dated to the first two centuries), a typical synagogue meeting would include a member standing in front to read from the law and the prophets.¹⁸ There might be up to three readings in any given meeting. The Mishna states that if two sections of the Torah were read, and one was read by either a priest or a rabbi, the next sections must be read by a non-priest or non-rabbi.¹⁹ Elders did not want these individuals exerting too much control.²⁰

Afterwards, the reader would return to their seat. Those present would then discuss the significance of the reading, together.²¹ Within the context of that broader discussion, a few individuals might occasionally share a brief exhortation, on how to apply the passage to one’s personal life.²² This same order of worship is repeatedly described in the New Testament. For instance, Acts 13:27 states, “the prophets which are read every Sabbath.” Acts 15:21 further reads, “for from ancient generations, Moses ... is read every Sabbath in the synagogues.”

In Luke 4, Jesus reads from the prophet Isaiah, then gives the scroll back to the attendant. He sat down and said, “today this is fulfilled in your presence.” Then, “all spoke,” and as we see, quite a bit of discussion came from everyone else in the room. Jesus responded again with a few sentences, creating another lively discussion. This was the typical pattern.

Notice in Acts 21, that there’s a subtle differentiation between the law being *preached* in the cities and the law *read* on the Sabbaths. “... For the law of Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath.” The Mishna, explains that during *fast days*²³ (*Jewish holidays*), one of the elders or a *traveling sage* (the rabbis) might come to preach, usually with a call to repentance.²⁴

Rather than in the synagogues, the Mishna describes the Rabbis as focused on their own tiny academies, consisting of a few pupils.²⁵ Twelve would have been a common number, reflecting the twelve tribes of Israel. It wasn’t until the seventh century, before rabbis emerged as leading the local synagogues.²⁶ Their involvement in the first century was largely relegated to occasional travel²⁷ among various synagogues to deliver special messages during the feasts.²⁸

The first century church appears to function similarly to the synagogues, with a few minor changes.²⁹ To the Old Testament scripture, they gradually added the letters we now know as the New Testament. Paul’s letter to the Colossians concludes by saying, “when this letter has been read among you, have it also read in the church of the Laodiceans; and see that you also read the letter from Laodicea.” Similarly, Paul concludes 1 Thesalonians with, “... have this letter read to all the brothers.”

The sermon developed over the next several hundred years.³⁰ And, interestingly, *sermon* is only mentioned once in the Mishna. Yet as its use grew regular in use, leaders such as Clement lamented that it did little to change the lives of believers.³¹ In the first century, it would only be heard on holidays or when a special teacher (Peter, Paul, Timothy) happened to be in town.³² They didn’t function as a part of the weekly service. Instead, the focus was on reading scripture, and the communal discussion of its application.

Acts 19:8–9 “And he entered the synagogue and for three months spoke boldly, reasoning and persuading them about the kingdom of God ... he withdrew from them and took the disciples with

him, reasoning daily in the hall of Tyrannus.”

The three words used here are, *parrhesiazomai* (to have boldness or have freedom in speaking), *dialegomai* (the equivalent of *dialogue*), and *peitho* (to persuade or seek another’s favor). Placing these words into the context of synagogue worship, it appears that Paul is speaking boldly and dialoguing during the open discussion following the reading.

Likewise, when he leaves the synagogue to create a *called out community* in the hall of Tyrannus, the Greek word *dialegomai* is used yet again. It literally states, Paul had deep discussions, with his disciples, daily. *Dialegomai* is used repeatedly in the New Testament, in describing Paul’s actions in the synagogue (see Thessalonica in Acts 17:1–2, Athens in 17:17, Corinth in 18:4 and 18:9, and Ephesus in Acts 19:8). Elsewhere Acts 14:1, describes Paul and Barnabas as “*laleo*” during the *synagogue meeting*, meaning simply to talk or speak. Paul does not appear to be giving sermons in the synagogue.

In Acts 13:14–43, in Pisidian Antioch, the rulers of the synagogue ask Paul, if he had a ‘word of encouragement,’ which happened after the reading of the Law and prophets. Paul gives a short message in response, and the synagogue members ask him to come back the following week. Notice that again, in verses 44–50, it appears that Paul’s message was given during the community discussion portion.

All of these examples from Jesus, through the apostles, follow a similar pattern where the Law is read, followed by community dialogue (*dialegomai*) where one, or several members gave an exhortation or word of encouragement. Contrarily, most of the preaching/teaching we see happening the Gospels and Acts happened by those who traveled on circuits between various synagogues and was not given on regular occasions. In terms of methodology, it should be noted that it takes a substantially less effort to establish a community that reads and discusses the scripture, than to train up a preacher who can deliver a proper sermon on the word of God, week in and week out.

1 Corinthians 14:26–33 “... When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Let all things be done for building up ... Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others weigh what is said ...”

This New Testament passage gives the clearest example of an early church meeting. Notice how highly participative it is, and

how the format resembles the synagogue structure discussed earlier. Paul even admonishes some who dominated the meeting by speaking too much, asking them, “are you the only ones [to whom] the Word of God came?” “Let two or three speak and let others weigh what is said.”

Paul is clear, the Word of God came to all, and the Spirit of God desires to speak through everyone in the community. Notice too, the similarity to the synagogue worship we’ve studied above. Finally, note in this passage, that Paul says this participative style is important so that “all can learn and be encouraged” (verse 31).

Acts 16:11–16, 40 “... And on the Sabbath day we went outside the gate to the riverside, where we supposed there was a place of prayer, and we sat down and spoke to the women who had come together. One who heard us was a woman named Lydia ...”

Without a synagogue, Jewish believers would start a prayer meeting (*proseuchē*) to begin meeting as quickly as possible. They would hope to attract more and develop the meeting into a synagogue. Paul, having been educated by the best Jewish leaders of his day, knew to look for the *proseuchē*, and joins their meeting for prayer and discussion.

Similar to starting a *proseuchē*, we see Paul throughout Acts, quickly gathering the first converts to meet together as quickly as possible. In most cases, Paul does not stick around long after they begin meeting. When Paul returns only a short time later, in verse 40, it’s generally understood that Paul attends a house church had been quickly established in Lydia’s home.

Acts 13:14–16, 13:48–50, 14:1–2 (Lystra, Iconium, and Pisidian Antioch) “... all who were appointed for eternal life believed. The word of the Lord spread through the whole region. ... [When they] returned to Lystra, Iconium and Antioch ... Paul and Barnabas appointed elders for them in each church and, with prayer and fasting, committed them to the Lord ...”

Paul and his companions, on his first missionary trip, go to several cities and successfully win many people to Christ. Paul helps them to begin meeting together. When he returns only a few months later, there are now churches in each of these communities.

Paul and Barnabas therefore appoint elders in every location, then move on. Notice specifically how Paul calls these meetings, *churches*, even though they do not yet have elders. Starting a new church appears to have

been a fluid process, which began simply with gathering new believers together.

While we have a set of necessary elements for a gathering to be a Church, Paul seems comfortable calling these groups *churches* before all these elements are present. Paul often uses developmental terms to describe Christian growth, from infants, to children, and on to maturity. Paul seems to view church development in much the same way. Infant churches may not have all necessary elements, but with time the expectation was that they would grow and develop into mature churches.

Titus 1:4-5 “To Titus ... The reason I left you in Crete was that you might put in order what was left unfinished and appoint elders in every town, as I directed you.”

Here again, Paul asks Titus to finish the work by appointing elders in house churches in each of the towns. He then describes the people suitable to be elders, using terms similar to elders in the synagogue. Notice again, that church planting was a developmental process, which simply began by gathering believers together, to which other necessary elements were gradually added.

Notice Paul’s developmental perspective of churches in 1 Thessalonians 3:10, “we pray more earnestly night and day that we may see you face to face and supply what is lacking ...” Notice also, 1 Corinthians 11, how Paul gives a very introductory and detailed description of how to perform the Lord’s Supper. Then chapter 16 contains an introductory description of how to tithe (“on the first day of the week, set aside a sum of money in keeping with your income”). Among the other foundational issues he discusses in the letter, are morality, spiritual gifts, love and care for one another. It’s clear to the reader that several of these (what we might call *essentials*), were not being done at the time the letter was written.

Instead of planting *mature*, churches, Paul planted *infant* churches by focusing on winning and gathering, then applying a developmental approach to add other necessary elements as he moved on to win and gather in other places. To ensure their continued development to mature adulthood, he regularly sent letters and co-workers to “add what was lacking.” This developmental approach is also reflected in Paul’s letter to the Ephesians. In it, he teaches the believers how to evangelize their unsaved neighbors, coworkers and employers, telling them to live as light, work hard and win their favor.

Remember that the rabbis and teachers would travel around and give further instruction among the synagogues. Now compare this to Paul’s time Troas, where he spoke all day and into the night, instructing these new believers (Acts 20:7-12). One unfortunate young man, Eutychus fell out the window to his death, as Paul talked “on and on,” trying to cover everything necessary before he left the following day.

Of particular note are Paul’s extremely brief visits, as when he was expelled from Thessalonica after only three weeks. He later sends Timothy back to help *establish* this new community in their faith (1 Thessalonians 3). Paul spent much of his time raising up new leaders like Timothy, to help develop each of these infant churches develop into maturity, over time.

Conclusion

This community discussion approach, borrowed from the synagogues, was the pattern followed by Paul and the other first century apostles. If Paul and other New Testament leaders had waited to establish churches until trained preachers were capable of leading, the church would not have been able to experience the explosive growth we see described in Acts. Utilizing a developmental approach (as was used in synagogues), where essential elements of church were added over time, removed many of the barriers to establishing these infant churches. This simple, reproducible method allowed New Testament *ekklesia* communities to spread quickly.

These churches, however, were not without issues, of which the New Testament writers discuss openly. Close relationship with regular follow-up and occasional specialized teaching, ensured these churches matured. In a developmental approach, issues are not unexpected, but are seen as an essential part of the maturing process.

If Paul and the apostles had waited to plant fully mature churches, with elders, and fully trained preachers before moving on, we would not have seen the explosion of Christianity that we see in Acts. The methods they used to win disciples and establish churches had a great deal of influence over the speed of the expansion of early Christianity. Moreover, it resulted in a vibrant community of believers that radically obeyed the word, shared sacrificially, and multiplied throughout the known world, within a very short time of the death of Christ. May we learn and apply from those who have gone before us. ☰

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Notes

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17. Skarsaune, *In the Shadow*, 124.
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26. Horsley, “Synagogues,” 61–62.
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