

## **Non-Church Religious Collectivities: An Examination of the "Synagogue" Argument**

By Tim Haile

Brethren are scrambling to find some passage or principle that justifies the use of secular businesses and other organic arrangements to engage in various types of evangelistic work. Some of the arguments are old, having been made by institutionalists for years. Others are new. In this article I will be addressing the *synagogue* argument. The argument is being made that Jesus' use of synagogues implies that authority existed for their establishment and use. It is then argued that since the existence, purpose and use of the Old Testament Temple did not prohibit the use of synagogues, then the existence, purpose and use of the New Testament church does not prohibit the use of synagogue-like human institutions for the purpose of teaching and worship today. One brother wrote,

*"Just as the men working together in the synagogue taught God's Word without violating the pattern for the Temple, the men working together in the Truth Magazine lectures teach God's Word without violating the pattern for the church."*

Another brother wrote,

*"Both Jesus before the establishment of the church and Paul (and others) after the establishment of the church taught the Bible in the synagogue (Acts 17:1-3). The synagogue was a human institution not mentioned in the Old Testament that was begun in the intertestament period. The earliest evidence of a synagogue is from the third century B.C. in Egypt. The synagogue was supported by individual contributions, used some of its resources for benevolence, and had prayer and taught the Bible. It had organization, being overseen by the rulers of the synagogue (archon and archisunagogos). Jesus participated in the synagogues while on earth (Luke 4:16 – 'As his custom was, he went into the synagogue on the Sabbath day') and Paul participated in them after the church was established. If the church is the only collectivity which can have singing, prayer, and teach the Bible, what was Paul doing praying and teaching the Bible in the synagogue? Yet, Acts 17:2 says that his custom or manner was to teach the Bible in the synagogue. This teaching of the Bible by this human institution occurred after the church was established and an inspired apostle participated in it. Did he sin? Can I follow an apostle's example (1 Cor. 11:1; Phil. 4:9)?"*

This last quote uses the synagogue argument to defend the use of non-church collectivities to *sing, pray, teach, take up contributions* and perform *benevolence*. An institution like this gets dangerously close to the function of the New Testament church. Combine these elements with the view that Christians can take the Lord's Supper wherever "two or three are gathered" on a Sunday and the human institution *does* supplant the Lord's church!

There are several oversights and misconceptions in this argument that need to be considered. Of course, faulty premises always result in faulty conclusions, so one must be careful where such a premise takes him.

### **Some Observations About Synagogues**

Synagogue worship sprang up some time before the coming of Christ. Some believe that it was as long ago as the Babylonian captivity. It is thought that the Jewish captives used the synagogue in place of the Temple which they had been taken from, and which was destroyed by the Babylonians. Others, as the brother indicated in the above, believe that the synagogue concept originated some time later. What we do know is that synagogue worship was very common by the time of Christ and His apostles.

The word for synagogue (*sunagoge*) means *an assembly of persons*. However, synecdoche is frequently employed in the use of this word, so that the word often refers to a *place* or *building* of some sort. Jewish elders spoke highly of the centurion of Luke 7 because he had "built" them a synagogue (Lk. 7:5). Jesus and the apostles frequently *taught in* synagogues (Matt. 4:23; Lk. 4:15; 6:6; 13:10; Acts 6:9; 9:2; 13:5, 14; 14:1; 17:1, 10; 18:4). It should be noted, however, that Jesus did use synagogues to teach *against* Jewish traditions and misconceptions about the Law. In one of the more notable of these passages the Jews became so angry over what Jesus taught in the Synagogue that they tried to *kill* Him (Luke 4:16-29). Luke 13:10-17 also records an occasion on which Jesus taught in a synagogue, but people were also upset with Him there. In fact, this passage shows that Jesus *debated* in the synagogue. This passage contains all of the necessary components of a religious debate: a *proposition, disputants* and an *audience*. Furthermore, synagogue members were excommunicated for believing that Jesus was the Messiah (Jn. 9:22; 12:42; 16:2). These familiar passages show that one must be careful to avoid reading too much into Jesus' use of synagogue facilities.

### **Major Fallacies of the Synagogue Argument**

1. Brethren are using the Jewish synagogue arrangement for their authority for *businesses* to conduct Bible lectureships. The synagogue was not a *business*. Defenders of business Bible lectureships need to find a passage or principle that speaks of a *business* teaching and worshipping, which passage they cannot find.
2. Jesus, Stephen, Paul and others taught in synagogues as long as synagogue rulers permitted them to do so. We see no examples of synagogues conducting gospel meetings and inviting such men to be a part of their preaching program. What these men did, they did on their own. They did not function as a part of the synagogue organization.
3. Jesus lived and died under the *Law of Moses*. His life and teaching were in perfect harmony with that law (Matt. 5:17, 18). Assuming that the synagogue concept was divinely authorized by general precepts of Mosaic Law, then Christ would have violated no Mosaic principle by "participating" in synagogue activities. And assuming that it was thusly authorized, it would have been authorized *during the reign of Mosaic Law* and its authority would have ended with the death of Christ (Col. 2:14, 15). In the second quote above, the brother argued that we may establish synagogue-like missionary societies on the basis that Paul "participated" in the practice. He asked, "Can I follow an apostle's example?" Has our brother forgotten that the Law of Moses had been abolished by the time of Paul's preaching (2 Cor. 3:13; Eph. 2:15)? Paul preached *against* the use of the Law of Moses as a system of justification (Gal. 2:16). He even said that he would become a *transgressor* if he built again that which he had destroyed (Gal. 2:18). Paul did regularly visit synagogues (Acts 17:1-3), but he used synagogues as a means of teaching *against* the observance of the Law of Moses. **Paul was not in agreement with the synagogue.** At Ephesus, Paul "entered into the synagogue, and reasoned with the Jews" (Acts 18:19). This didn't make Paul a part of the synagogue *system* or *organization*. Various ones got so angry with him that he and other disciples were forced to leave that synagogue (Acts 19:9). It doesn't sound like Paul was a part of the synagogue *arrangement*. Paul and the other brethren used the "school" (lecture hall) of Tyrannus as their new meeting place. The point here is that Paul merely used the synagogue as a meeting facility. Paul's use of that facility did not constitute acceptance of the synagogue concept, its teaching or its *organization*. He used the synagogue for a *place*. The same is true of Paul's use of the school of Tyrannus. His use of the school does not imply that he approved of the school and/or its

projects and purposes. He used the facility. If Jesus' and Paul's use of the synagogue is tacit approval of the synagogue organization and function, would it not follow that Paul approved of the existence, philosophy and function of Tyrannus' school? What proves too much proves nothing. There is no reasonable way for brethren to use these synagogue passages as authority for them to join together in religious collectives and conduct gospel meetings. These passages do not authorize what some brethren need for them to authorize. In fact, post-church synagogue passages show the preachers preaching *against* the things that were accepted and done by synagogue members and leaders. Assuming that synagogues were authorized by the law of Moses, they ceased to be authorized upon the death of Christ.

4. Scripture says that Jesus "**entered**" or "**went into**" their synagogues (Matt. 4:23; Mk. 1:21; 6:2; Lk. 6:6; 13:10; Jn. 6:59; 18:20). Jesus didn't "enter" into some *business arrangement* with the synagogue. He entered into the *synagogue*. Once there, His teaching was not always pleasing to synagogue members and officials (Lk. 4:16-29; 13:10-17). Passages show Jesus using a synagogue as a forum for instructing people in the true meaning of Old Testament Scriptures, and to expose the hypocrisy of religious leaders. The word "synagogue" does not necessarily imply religious *organism*. Consequently, Jesus' use of the synagogue does not necessarily imply authorization of the synagogue *concept*. Even if His participation *did* show approval for Jewish synagogues, **we are not under that law today!** And there is absolutely no way to find New Testament authority for business Bible lectureships by citing *post-church-establishment* synagogue passages!
5. Those who make the synagogue argument make it to defend the activities of *teaching, praying* and *singing*. Some use the word "*worship*." I find it particularly interesting that the only thing that we actually see Jesus doing in the synagogues was *teaching*, which, like Paul, was His *custom* to do (cp. Lk. 4:16 and Acts 17:2). The Bible consistently states that Jesus and Paul *taught* in Jewish synagogues, but institution defenders add **singing, praying** and **worship**. What other items do men get to add that are not mentioned in these passages?
6. A teacher's use of a particular worship facility or arrangement does not necessarily imply agreement with that worship arrangement or with the things that are practiced at that facility. I may preach the gospel in a church of Satan. That doesn't mean that I endorse their actions or worship

arrangement! It means that I am taking advantage of that *facility* and of an opportunity to teach that *gathering* of hearers. I agree with the above, that Jesus and Paul did teach in Jewish synagogues (Lk. 4:16-21), but this does not necessarily imply endorsement of everything that was done by those synagogues.

7. The synagogue argument is an argument from the silence of the Scriptures. It defends the establishment and operation of human religious institutions on the basis that God didn't tell the Jews not to build synagogues! By this they reason that even though Jesus built the church and gave it a mission and a work to perform, yet He did not tell us not to build other *similar* religious organizations of joint function with the same mission and work! Is that how Bible authority is now determined?

### Conclusion

Good brethren are so determined to find justification for their pet religious projects and programs that they are losing sight of the most elementary principles of determining biblical authority. Like the Jesus-group argument, the synagogue argument is just another in a series of ill-conceived arguments that prove only that some men are becoming dangerously desperate in their desire to defend what they want to do through their organizations. Jesus said, "*They shall put you out of their synagogues: yea, the time cometh, that whosoever killeth you will think that he doeth God a service.*" First century synagogues thought that they were doing God a service by their actions. They were not. Do some 21<sup>st</sup> century self-styled "synagogues" think they are "doing God a service" today? Good works are defined by God in Scripture (2 Tim. 3:17). Those who introduce a religious practice are obligated to defend it by Scripture. Synagogue passages do not authorize business Bible lectureships, nor do they authorize the establishment and operation of non-church religious organizations. Men must look elsewhere for that authority.

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