

BIBLICAL INSIGHTS #24: WHAT WOULD IT BE LIKE TO ATTEND CHURCH IN THE FIRST CENTURY?

By John Temples

Have you ever wondered what it would be like to “go to church” at a first-century congregation--Jerusalem, Corinth, Antioch, or Troas?

We identify closely with our first-century brethren. We pride ourselves on having restored the church as it was then, in doctrine and practice if not in zeal. So how close are we to duplicating a first-century worship service?

So it's the Lord's day and we are town. How do we find the church? Like today, we might ask a local. One difference, though, is that you would not need to specify which church you were looking for. Denominations--man-made churches--are a product of a much later time. Paul could say, “I teach the same thing in every church” (1 Corinthians 4:17). In the first century, you would just ask for the location of “the church.”

However, you would not ask for the location of the “church of Christ building.” Structures for the sole purpose of worship were not in use until the fourth century or later. The church would meet in some member's home, or in a rented or borrowed space, or even out in the open. Here are some Scripture references to church assembly locations:

- Acts 2:46--“So continuing daily with one accord in the temple [the public courtyard area of the Jerusalem temple], and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, praising God and having favor with all the people.” (Notice the reference to “breaking bread”--potlucks were a prominent feature of Christian gatherings from the beginning!)
- Romans 16:3,4--“Greet Priscilla and Aquila....likewise greet the church that is in their house.”
- Philemon 1,2--“To Philemon, our beloved friend and fellow laborer...and to the church in your house....”
- The church at Troas met in an upper room on the third story of a multi-level structure (Acts 20:7-9).

What is the important takeaway here? That the place where the church meets is irrelevant. The main thing is that the church *meets*, as the church, in one place. ! Corinthians 11:17-20 makes it clear that God's intent is for the whole church to come together in one place for worship.

SO WE HAVE FOUND THE HOUSE OR PLACE WHERE THE CHURCH MEETS;
NOW, WHAT TIME ARE SERVICES?

Well, we might find that the main (or only) assembly is Sunday night (or Saturday night, if they were using Jewish time). Sunday would be a work day in most first-century societies, and they would not cut any slack for the Christians. When Paul met with the church at Troas, that meeting was at night (Acts 20:7,8). We are fortunate to live in a society that still, at least to some degree, recognizes Sunday as the Christian day of worship.

The *time* of day the church assembles can vary, but the *day of the week* is fixed by Scripture (Acts 20:7, 1 Corinthians 16:2).

So we have found the house where the church meets. What will we find when we get there?

People would be greeting and hugging each other. They would not be shaking hands as we do, but "greeting each other with a holy kiss" (Romans 16:16, 1 Corinthians 16:20). What would a "holy kiss" be? For one thing, it would not be a romantic kiss; it would be on the cheeks, not on the lips. For another thing, men would kiss men and women would kiss women.

There would be much laughter and happiness. You might hear people saying "Maranatha" (1 Corinthians 16:22, KJV, ASV). This was a Greek word with Aramaic roots combining the meanings "lord" and "come." Scholars are not certain whether it expressed a reality ("the Lord has come") or a wish ("O Lord, come").

The first order of business would probably some kind of Bible class (or classes). We don't know if the early church divided into age groups for instruction, but it would have been the logical thing to do. Paul told Timothy to "instruct the brethren" and to "give attention to teaching" (1 Timothy 4:6,13). He also told

Timothy that certain subjects were to be taught to the older men, the younger men, the older women, and the younger women (1 Timothy 5:1,2). The apostle John addressed various age groups in 1 John 2. Paul instructed Titus to have mature women teach younger women (Titus 2:4,5).

In those classes, when the teacher said, "Take out your Bibles," you would notice that they were significantly thinner than modern Bibles. You would discover that their "Bible" was the Old Testament. The New Testament was written between ca AD 50 and AD 95. The church existed for some 20 years without any New Testament books at all. As the New Testament books were written, they were accepted as Scripture and added to the Bible (cf 2 Peter 3:16).

How, then, could these Christians learn the doctrine of Christ? They had the gospel in inspired men (we have it in an inspired book). In their assemblies, a prophet or inspired teacher might give a lesson on the true meaning of an Old Testament prophecy as it was fulfilled in Christ. (1 Corinthians 14 describes such an assembly.) Or, a recently-written letter from an apostle might be read. An apostle might even be the teacher for the day!

After class would come the highlight of the day: the assembly of the whole church for worship. Miraculously inspired songs, prayers, and sermons would have been a common feature of church meetings in the first century. The music would be vocal, with no instruments (Ephesians 5:19, Colossians 3:16). The singing would be more like chanting (no four-part harmony). Songs might come from the book of Psalms, or an inspired teacher might reveal a new song. (That is likely the meaning of 1 Corinthians 14:15--"I will sing with the Spirit [by inspiration], and I will sing with the understanding.")

There would also be prayers led by various men. Paul said in 1 Timothy 2:8, "Therefore I desire that the men pray everywhere, lifting up holy hands without wrath or doubting." These prayers would also be inspired, at least at first. "I will pray with the Spirit [by inspiration of the Spirit], and I will also pray with the understanding." At the end of the prayer, the audience would say "amen" ("So be it, let it be so"). (Cf 1 Corinthians 14:16)

Besides prayers, there would be the delivery of sermons. The preacher might be an apostle or a prophet, and he would have miraculous assistance in delivering

the message. In our day, we have the complete revelation of God in the Bible, so we do not need these miraculous helps.

How many sermons would there be in one assembly? How about two or three?! 1 Corinthians 14:29,30 says of these first-century assemblies, "Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others judge [pronounce approval]. But if anything is revealed to another who sits by, let the first keep silent. For you can all prophesy one by one, that all may learn and all may be encouraged."

ANOTHER FEATURE OF THE LORD'S DAY ASSEMBLIES WOULD BE THE LORD'S SUPPER

1 Corinthians 11 shows us that the observance of the Supper was a corporate act of the whole church assembled. Acts 20:7 establishes the interval of its observance: "Upon the first day of the week, the disciples came together to break bread." The elements of the Supper would be unleavened bread, the same as used in the Jewish Passover, and the fruit of the vine (grape juice). The Supper would be observed essentially as we do it today (except they would not have had those little plastic cups).

A collection would also be taken for the work of the church. 1 Corinthians 16:2--"On the first day of the week let each one of you lay something aside, storing up as he may prosper, that there be no collections when I come."

This entire service--congregational singing, prayers, sermons, the Lord's Supper, and the contribution--would be simple, dignified, and orderly, as becoming people who are in the presence of God.

After the worship, the saints would probably enjoy a meal together. Acts 2:42 states that the early Christians "broke bread from house to house." Paul partook of a meal with the brethren at Troas (Acts 20:11). For a while (perhaps several years), the church evidently combined the worship and the fellowship meal. But because of abuses, this practice fell out of favor. (You can read Paul's rebuke of this situation in 1 Corinthians 11:20-22.)

SO WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED?

That aside from minor cultural differences, churches of Christ today are worshipping essentially as our brethren did in the first century. We can take comfort in that--we know that we are “doing church” in the way that had inspired apostolic approval. We are not free to reconstruct and modify God’s worship directives as we please.

Also, we have learned to discern some differences between worship essentials and worship incidentals.

- The *place* of worship is incidental; *assembling for worship* is essential.
- The *time of day* is incidental; *the first day of the week* is essential.
- The *order of worship* is incidental; the *items of worship* are essential.

Some today might long for the excitement of worshipping in assemblies where miracles were performed, as in the first century. But Paul calls this period the “childhood age” of the church (1 Corinthians 13:11). We actually have a great advantage over our first-century brethren: we have the entire gospel, the complete New Testament, all written down and available to all in readable form.

We have a bond with the first-century church, centered on Christ who made it all possible. We owe these brethren a debt of gratitude for paving the way and meeting faithfully under trying circumstances. (For example, how faithful would you be in attendance if the only time the church could meet was in the middle of the night?)

We look forward to meeting these early Christians in heaven. --John Temples