

# SYNAGOGUE AND CHURCH OFFICIALS

by Avram Yehoshua

<http://SeedofAbraham.net>

The designations and functions for church officials parallel those of the synagogue because the Apostles weren't inventing something new, but only transposing into Greek the Jewish terms for synagogue officials. The congregations that Paul established, which many today would call 'house churches,' would in fact have been seen by the Apostles as 'house synagogues' (house congregations; places of assembly) where they would fellowship, sing praise, teach Torah and speak of Yeshua. Note, also, that Paul didn't have a monopoly on establishing assemblies or 'house synagogues' (Acts 11:19; Gal. 1:22), and therefore, his terms for 'office' weren't made up by him.

The word *synagogue* comes from the Greek, and by definition can mean 'a *Christian* assembly.'<sup>1</sup> James uses it in referring to *Christian* assemblies (James 2:2; see also Acts 9:1-2; 26:11). It would be used for the assembly of Jewish and Gentile believers at Antioch, other believing assemblies, and also, traditional Jewish congregations that didn't believe in Yeshua. In other words, both a synagogue of Jews that didn't believe in Jesus, as well as an assembly like Antioch, made up of (only) believers (Jewish and Gentile), could equally be called a *synagogue*, as well as a purely Gentile or Jewish assembly of non-believers. Actually, the word 'church,' as a distinct entity separate from the Jewish people, wasn't in the vocabulary of the Apostles.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Wesley J. Perschbacher, editor, *The New Analytical Greek Lexicon* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publications, 1990), p. 388. *Synagogue*: a 'collecting, gathering; a Christian assembly or congregation, James 2:2' (where James speaks of a *believing* synagogue, 'for if a man comes into your *synagogue* with a gold ring').

William D. Mounce, *The Analytical Lexicon to the Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1993), p. 432, has exactly what Perschbacher (above) has.

Walter Bauer, augmented by William F. Arndt, F. W. Gingrich and Frederick Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (London: The University of Chicago Press, 1979), pp. 782-783: a 'place of assembly...a *Christian assembly-place* can also be meant' (James 2:2). A 'meeting for worship, of the Jews...*Transferred* to meetings of *Christian congregations*.'

<sup>2</sup> The Greek *ἐκκλησία* (*ekklaysia*), translated into English as 'church,' literally means 'an assembly' or congregation, but it also speaks of those 'called out.' Originally, it pictured the Greek 'town meetings' of free men *called out* of the populace to vote on city matters. The spiritual aspect relates to believers being '*called out* of darkness into His marvelous *Light*' (1st Pet. 2:9) and may be one reason why Paul chose to use this word instead of *synagogue*. Christians are the 'Called Out Ones,' the Greek equivalent of the Hebraic, 'Chosen People.' Where it says, 'to the *church* at Corinth,' it should read, 'to the assembly (or congregation) at Corinth' or 'to the *called out ones* of Corinth.'

Paul's use of *ekklaysia* in no way opposes *Israel* or Mosaic Law. The word was first used of Israel about 300 years earlier in the *Septuagint*. It speaks of 'the Church in the Wilderness' at Mt. Sinai (Dt. 4:10; 9:10; 18:16; see also Acts 7:38). This was most likely the reason why Paul used *ekklaysia* instead of *synagogue*, which was a relatively newer, non-biblical term. The Church (Assembly of those *called out*) didn't begin in Acts 2 on Pentecost (the Mosaic holy day of *Shavu'ot*; Lev. 23:15-21; the Feast of Weeks). Jewish believers were *filled* with the promised Holy Spirit on that day (Ezk. 36:27; see Acts 2:46-47; 5:11-12, 42 where 'the Church' met in the Temple). Paul's churches were 'house assemblies' (1st Cor. 16:19; Phlm. 1:2; see also Rom. 16:5, 10-11, 14-15, 23), which Jews would call 'house synagogues.' Also, it doesn't seem that Paul began the congregations in Rome (1:13, 15), Ephesus (1:15; 3:1-4) or Colosse (1:3-4, 9) even though house churches (assemblies) are mentioned in two of those letters (Rom. 16:5; Col. 4:15). The assemblies in Rome were most likely begun by Jews from Rome who had been in Jerusalem for *Shavu'ot* (Acts 2:1-10f.), had come to believe in Yeshua and had returned to Rome with the Good News.

## *The Offices and Functions of the Ancient Synagogue*

1. *Nasi*: ‘Prince,’ president. The highest ranking member of the congregation. This position could also be vested in a *zakane* (#3; elder) or a *rabbi* (#8). The *nasi* saw to the spiritual and physical needs of the synagogue members, and the building itself, and also acted as the head *judge* in the *Bet Din* (#10; the judicial court).
  1. The office of *nasi* would become that of president, administrator or *episkopos* (bishop/overseer, elder or pastor) of the church or assembly of believers.
  2. Acts 15:19; 21:18; Gal. 1:19; 2:9, 12 reveal that Yakov (James), the half brother of Yeshua, was the *nasi* over the entire assembly of believing Jews in Jerusalem, even though he wasn’t an Apostle.
  3. “The leader of the synagogue (*archisunagogos*—equivalent to the Hebrew *rosh beit-ha’knesset* or ‘head of the synagogue’) took charge of the building and made arrangements for the services (Luke 8:41, 49;” Mk. 5:22). He was usually one of the elders of the congregation. Generally there was only one such leader in each synagogue (cf. 18:8, 17), but at times two or more made up the synagogue chapter. The office was sometimes held for life and passed on within a family, and occasionally the title was given honorifically to women and children.”<sup>3</sup>
  4. ‘At Antioch Paul and Barnabas were invited by the synagogue rulers to participate in the service (Acts 13:15).’<sup>4</sup>
2. *Shli’ach*: ‘sent one.’ He was an authorized Jewish emissary officially representing the synagogue. He performed acts of legal significance for the benefit of the synagogue, as opposed to himself.
  1. This is the Apostle (literally Greek for *sent one*) sent by the Lord Himself to the people (Acts 1:8) with the message of Life in Messiah Yeshua.
3. *Zakane*: ‘bearded one,’ *elder*. He was at least 40 years of age, spiritually mature, was an example to the community of how to live out one’s faith in God, and was involved in the decisions that effected the life of the community. He could also bring teachings from the Word.
  1. This office is used in the New Covenant to denote an elder, pastor, shepherd, bishop, presbyter, *episkopos*, overseer and leader.
4. *Batlan*: ‘man of leisure,’ i.e. to say, he was usually well off and so had time to study, and therefore, teach the Word of God to the people; a teacher. He fed the flock from the Word. He was supported by the community or he was wealthy. In a synagogue of 120 males there would be ten *batlanim* (plural for *batlan*).
  1. This office would become the teachers of the Word (teachers, elders and pastors).
5. *Shamash*: servant; also known as a *gabbai*. He was an official assistant to the *nasi* (the *prince* or ruler of the synagogue). The *shamash* was the ‘arms and legs’ of the *nasi* (and by extension, that of the congregation) in providing for the physical needs of the faith community from the congregation’s resources. He might collect funds and/or food from some of the wealthier members during the week to administer to the poor and the needy,<sup>5</sup> and was available to serve the *nasi* in what-

---

<sup>3</sup> Frank E. Gaebelin, General Editor; J. D. Douglas, Associate Ed., *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, vol. 9, *Acts* (Grand Rapids, MI, USA: Zondervan, 1990), Accordance Bible software.

<sup>4</sup> Walter W. Wessle, *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, vol. 8, *Mark*, Accordance Bible software.

<sup>5</sup> If the new believing assemblies were like the synagogue, in terms of their structure and function, and they were, then there were no plates passed around on Shabat to collect tithes and offerings because in Israel tithes and offerings went to the priests in the Temple, not to the rabbi in a synagogue, if a synagogue even had a rabbi. The members of a community would support the synagogue with funds and/or crops over and above their tithes and offerings (and the rabbi, if a synagogue had one, supported himself by working in a secular field, like Paul did; 1st Cor. 9:1-18), even though, of course, the people would give gifts to the rabbi

ever needed to be done in the physical realm. He also officially announced the rulings of the synagogue, called the people to the Sabbath assembly, and proclaimed the days of the feasts, etc., on the streets in the neighborhoods. The *shamash* was always a man and the wife of the *shamash* was never an official position.

1. This is the church office of an ordained deacon.
2. In Acts 6:1-6 there are seven Jewish believers from outside of Israel (Hellenist Jews) who were chosen to distribute food and/or money to the Hellenistic Jewish believers in need. After the seven were chosen, the Apostles ordained them to the office with the laying on of their hands (the prayer of consecration/ordination). With the reason for these deacons coming into existence being specifically because the Hellenistic *widows* 'were neglected in the daily distribution (Acts 6:1),' it would seem that this would have been the perfect place for some Hellenistic Jewish *women* believers among them to be ordained, too, yet, there wasn't a single woman among the seven. This fact, along with the understanding that the *shamash* was always a man, confirms that there wasn't an office of ordained deaconess in the days of the Apostles.<sup>6</sup>
6. *Hazan*: the disciplinarian for the *Bet Din* (the synagogue court, #10). He dealt out physical punishment, up to 39 lashes (Dt. 25:1-3) for anyone sentenced to lashes by the *bet din*. Today the *hazan* is the cantor or prayer leader in the synagogue, the one who sings or chants the Hebrew prayers.
  1. Today in the Church, as in Judaism, it seems that this function has changed to that of praise and worship leader.
7. *Magid*: 'to tell,' a storyteller. Not necessarily associated with one synagogue, he would travel around from synagogue to synagogue, proclaiming the Word and seeking to bring the Jewish people closer to God.
  1. This is the position of evangelist.
8. *Rabi*: (Rabbi) 'my great one' or 'my teacher.' In the days of the Apostles there were two types of rabbis. One was the local rabbi who expounded Scripture from the weekly Torah readings. He belonged to one synagogue where there might be a number of rabbis like him. The other was the traveling rabbi, who, like Yeshua, would collect students along the way as he went from one town to the next. This rabbi acted more like a *magid* (#7), or a prophet, calling the people back to God.
  1. The first rabbi is the church pastor, while the second would be more like an evangelist.
9. *Meturgeman*: interpreter/translator. He stood beside the reader of the Hebrew Bible in the synagogue and translated it into Aramaic. This was done when the Jewish people returned from Babylonian captivity and spoke Aramaic, the language of their captors. Aramaic is close to Hebrew, but by the time of Messiah, 500 years later, the language of the Jewish people living in Israel was Hebrew, not Aramaic.
  1. The need for a translator of the Greek Septuagint, the official Bible of the Jews living outside Israel, wasn't necessary because the *lingua franca* in the Apostle Paul's day was Greek, hence, the Greek New Testament, and why this synagogue office wasn't needed among believers.
10. *Bet Din*: 'House of Judgment.' The congregational court of law with jurisdiction in civil, criminal

---

in appreciation of him. Outside Israel tithes and offerings would also be sent to the Temple, but this, in the form of money (not animals or crops; 1st Cor. 16:3; 2nd Cor. 8:4, 19-20; 9:5), and they, too, would support their synagogue with other funds and/or crops, which the *shamash* would pick up and distribute to the poor and needy.

With the Temple non-existent today and the Aaronic and Levitical Priesthood out of a job, the tithe should shift to those who minister full time for the Lord. For more on that see *The Tithe in Ancient Israel* at <http://seedofabraham.net/The-Tithe-in-Ancient-Israel.pdf>.

<sup>6</sup> For more on why Phoebe (Rom. 16:1-2) wasn't an ordained deaconess, and why Paul isn't saying that women could be ordained deaconesses (1st Tim. 3:11-12), ask for the PDF *Phoebe—Ordained Deaconess?*

and religious matters. In Temple times the Sanhedrin, made up of 70 members, was the national *Bet Din* or ‘High Court.’ (This is how the Sanhedrin functioned, as a judicial body, when it tried Yeshua and found Him guilty of blasphemy because He had answered in the affirmative if He was the Messiah, the Son of God, when the High Priest put Him under oath and commanded Him to answer [Mt. 26:62-68]. It also functioned as a legislative body dealing with both secular and religious issues.) Each synagogue had a *bet din*. The smaller synagogues had the *nasi* and two elders and/or rabbis on it, and the larger congregations had the *nasi* and twenty-two elders and/or rabbis.

1. This is what the Apostle Paul spoke of to the Corinthians in 1st Cor. 5:12–6:5. He wanted them to set up a *bet din* so that it could judge the members of the congregation—to justify the righteous and to hand out punishment to the offender, if need be (see also 1st Cor. 5:1-8).

“A typical first-century synagogue service would have included:

1. the congregational recitation of the Shema (Dt. 6:4-9),
2. the *Shemoneh Esreh* (the liturgy of ‘The Eighteen Blessings,’ or ‘Prayers’),
3. a reading from the Law,
4. a reading from one of the Prophets,
5. a free address given by any competent Jew in attendance and
6. a closing blessing.”<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> Richard N. Longnecker, *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, vol. 9, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Accordance Bible software.

Revised on 31 March 2016.