

Garden of
Gethsemane



CLASS #1: LAYING THE FOUNDATION

WHAT IS THE ECCLESIA ANYWAY: SETTING THE FOUNDATION FOR THE BIBLICAL CONSTRUCT

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CLASS OUTLINE: LAYING THE FOUNDATION

- Setting the Stage: Defining “Ecclesia”
- Why “Church” is used in the English Bible
- Synagogue = ~Ecclesia
- Old Testament Precedents
- Some Final Comments



The Great Synagogue
of Rome

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SETTING THE STAGE: DEFINING ECCLESIA

- The term *Ecclesia* (or *ekklesia*) is a Greek word that fundamentally means **“assembly” or “gathering”**
 - It is a highly significant term because it was used in two very different contexts in the ancient world, both of which inform its modern usage
 - Political/Secular Context—Ancient Greece
 - Religious Context—New Testament Christianity

ECCLESIA

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The Ancient Ecclesia: The “Called Out” Assembly of Athens

The “Called Out” Assembly



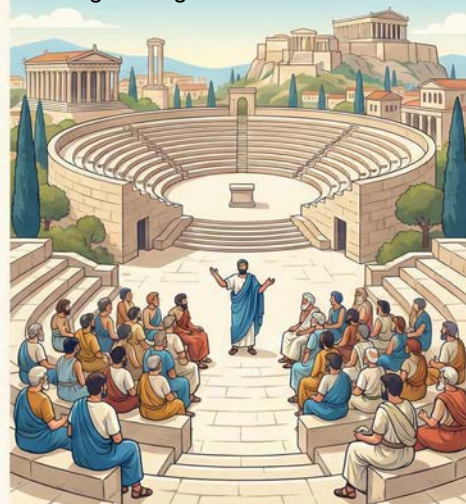
Derived from *ek* (out of) and *kaleo* (to call) to describe gathered citizens.

A Formal Political Body



It was the official assembly of citizens summoned to govern the city's affairs.

Setting the Stage: Political/Secular Context



Final Executive Control



The body held ultimate authority over policy, military strategy, and legal decisions.

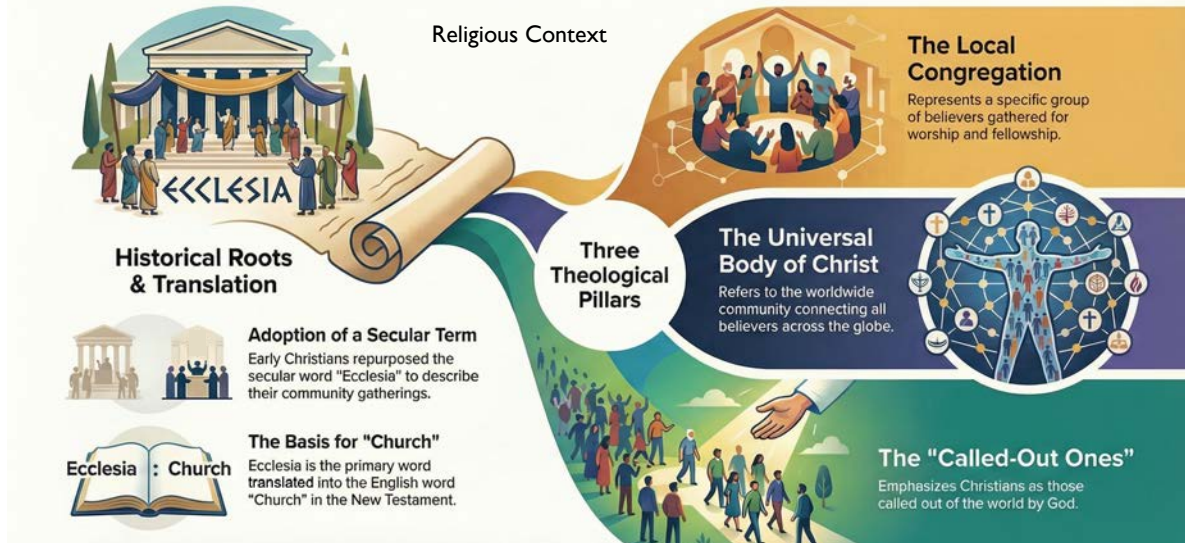
Civic Obligation



Participation was viewed as a mandatory contribution to the common good of the city.

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Understanding Ecclesia: The Roots of the "Church"



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Ecclesia: Purpose Beyond the Building

Redefining the term from a physical location to a functional, organized assembly focused on spiritual impact and governance.

THE NATURE OF THE ASSEMBLY



BEYOND THE FOUR WALLS
Ecclesia is not defined by a building, but by the function of the gathering.



SPIRITUAL GOVERNANCE
The term implies a role in leadership and advancing a spiritual kingdom.



FUNCTIONAL IMPACT
It focuses on active influence rather than passive attendance.

MODERN & UNIVERSAL CONTEXT



THE ORGANIZED ASSEMBLY
Modernly refers to any formally organized group or congregation of people.



DIVERSE UNITY
Represents a collective of various backgrounds united under a shared spiritual purpose.



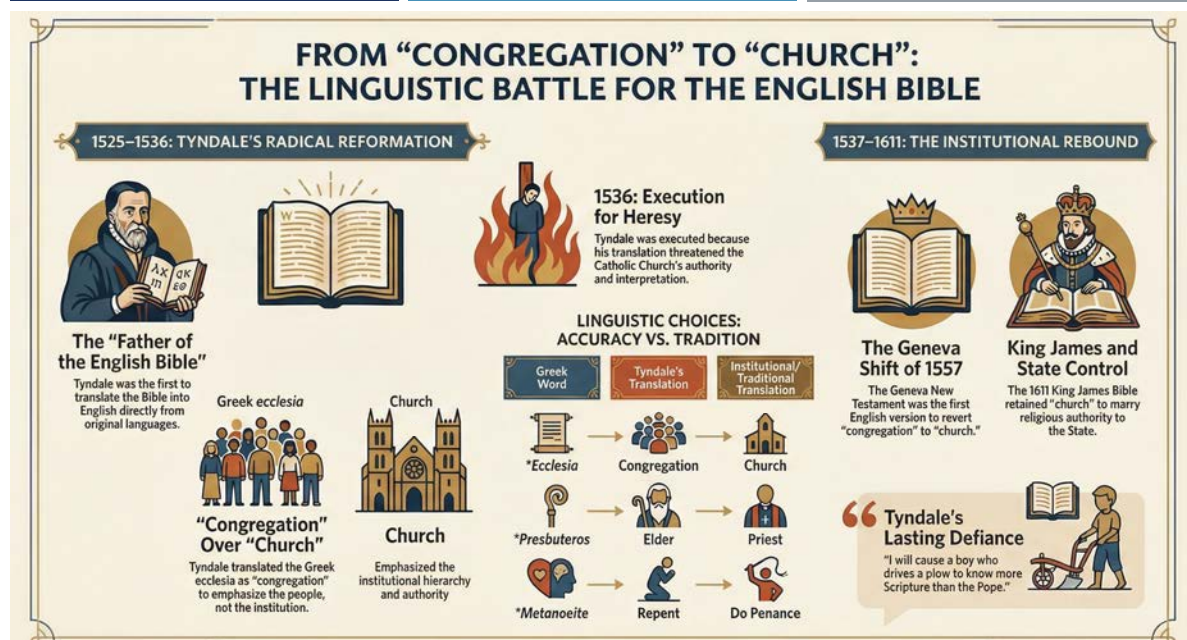
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AS ALWAYS: THE OLD TESTAMENT & NEW TESTAMENTS AGREE

- It is important to note that the concept of ecclesia, or what has been translated as church, is not an entirely New Testament idea
- We must allow the Old Testament to inform our understanding of how we define ecclesia
- We need, for example, to explain how the ecclesia was in the wilderness with Moses, as described by Stephen in Acts 7:38
- More than 100 times ecclesia appears in the Greek Septuagint (i.e., Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament)
- Overall, there is continuity from Old to New Testaments regarding ecclesia

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Why "Church" is used in the English Bible



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WHY “CHURCH” IS USED IN THE ENGLISH BIBLE (1/7)

- Up to William Tyndale (1494-1536), the Bible had primarily been translated into Latin (The Vulgate, Jerome AD ~383), thereby primarily restricting its readability to the priests & clergy
 - He was the first man credited with translating the Bible into English
- Working off the Greek New Testament translation, work performed by Erasmus (and Luther), Tyndale translated the Bible into English directly from the original language sources
 - He was able to translate the New Testament from Greek & half of the Old Testament from Hebrew prior to his death



William Tyndale,
Catherine Marchand

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WHY “CHURCH” IS USED IN THE ENGLISH BIBLE (2/7)

- Tyndale became a master of Greek & Hebrew under Erasmus, as well as becoming fluent in 7 languages
- In 1515, Tyndale studied at Cambridge and may have encountered some of Luther's early teachings
- He was ordained to the priesthood in 1521 but expressed his frustrations with the failure to make the Scriptures available in the common language of the people
 - In a famous quote, Tyndale summarizes this frustration, **“I will cause a boy who drives a plow to know more Scripture than the Pope.”**
- Tyndale is considered the “Father of the English Bible”
 - Note: John Wycliffe (1382) based his English translation on the Latin Vulgate, essentially becoming a translation of a translation

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WHY “CHURCH” IS USED IN THE ENGLISH BIBLE (3/7)

- In 1523, Tyndale applied to the Bishop of London for permission to translate the Scriptures into English, but was denied
 - He undertook the effort in secret in Germany
- Tyndale’s English translation of the New Testament was completed in 1525
 - It challenged some of the core doctrinal beliefs that had been established and maintained by the Catholic Church through their use of the Latin Bible and the distinction they maintained between clergy and the general population
 - For example, his decision to translate the word *presbuteros* to mean “**elder**” rather than “**priest**”
 - And the translation of *metanoieite* as “**repent**” rather than “**do penance**”
 - Bible scholars have found these to be more accurate translations

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WHY “CHURCH” IS USED IN THE ENGLISH BIBLE (4/7)

- Tyndale’s insistence upon translating *ecclesia* as “**congregation**,” not church, is a major reason why he was killed
 - He was arrested, convicted of heresy, and executed on October 6, 1536, near Brussels
 - His death was ordered because his theological views and his efforts to translate the Bible into English were considered a threat to the Roman Catholic Church and the ruling monarch
- Until Tyndale’s translation, the popes, priesthood, and councils of Catholicism had dominated the written word and controlled its interpretation
- “The Church” (i.e., the Catholic Church) believed that if one were unable to find the word “church” in their Bible, which they were now not able to, then clearly the authority of the Church would come into question

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WHY “CHURCH” IS USED IN THE ENGLISH BIBLE (5/7)

- Tyndale was returning the power to the people, the assembly, or congregation
 - Stripping it from the visible institution that had grown apostate in the centuries since the Apostolic era and most notably since the 4th Century reign of Constantine
- While some of Tyndale’s more accurate translation exists in the King James version, the use of **congregation** has not, why?
 - Because during the Reformation, Luther or others, did not offer a clean break of the “Church” from the “State”
 - Instead, the church, became more formally wed to the State and the interest of the State to constrain the people became an even bigger problem than when they were under the banner of the Catholic Church

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WHY “CHURCH” IS USED IN THE ENGLISH BIBLE (6/7)

- It should be noted that Luther refused to use the German word for church (kirche), preferring instead for “the congregation of the saints as the people or company of God”
- As Luther’s efforts ushered in the Reformation, in practice, his break from the institutional church was only half-hearted
 - Instead, it paved the way for the new Protestant “Church” to become even stranger bedfellows with the State



Martin Luther,
Lucas Cranach

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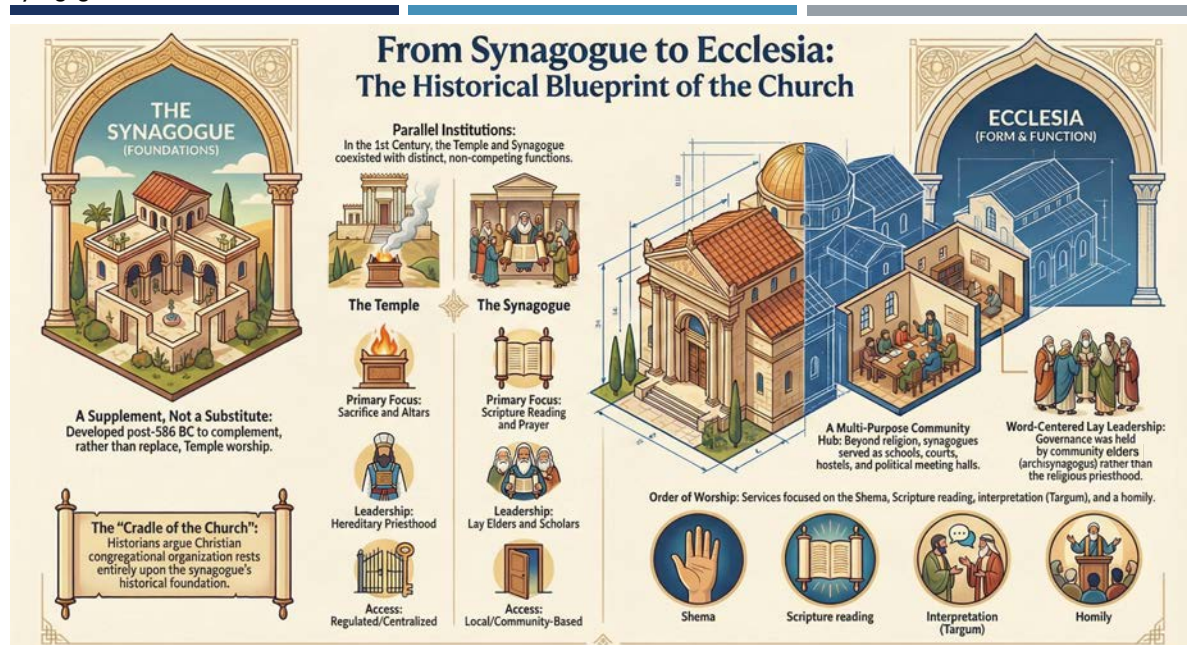
WHY “CHURCH” IS USED IN THE ENGLISH BIBLE (7/7)

- Tyndale’s Bible was completed and published as **The Matthew’s Bible** in 1537
 - It maintained the translation of *ecclesia* as congregation
- In 1539, a second major publication of the Bible was made called **The Great Bible** which maintained this same translation
- In 1557, the **Geneva New Testament** produced by William Whittingham was the first to use the word “church” instead of “congregation”
- The Church of England, under the rule of King James, chose to retain the word church in the most widespread English translation, The King James Bible, 1611
 - And here we are today

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Synagogue = ~Ecclesia



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SYNAGOGUE = ~ECCLESIA (1/10)

- Many Biblical scholars argue that the basis for what we have come to understand as “church” today finds its historical origin in the synagogue
 - To answer this, we will need to look at the origin of the synagogue along with its first century form and function, followed by its place in the gospel
- Most historians & theologians assume that the synagogue developed after the Babylonian captivity when Solomon’s temple was destroyed in 586 BC
 - Many suppose that at the time of Ezra the synagogue practice developed because of the crisis of a destroyed temple—this implies that the synagogue became a replacement for the temple
 - But there is some difficulty with this point when we arrive at the first century AD because there, we have BOTH Herod’s temple and synagogues

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SYNAGOGUE = ~ECCLESIA (2/10)

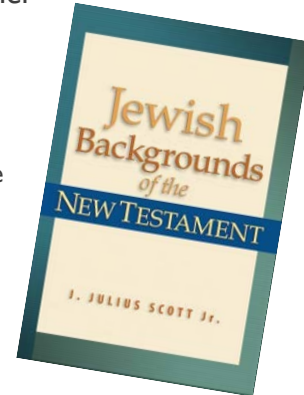
- The historian Philip Schaff wrote,
 - “As the Christian Church rests historically on the Jewish Church, so Christian worship and the congregational organization rest on that of the synagogue & cannot be well understood without it.” (Vol. I – pg. 456)
- According to the Jewish historian Alfred Eldersheim,
 - “It was, surely, a wondrously linked chain of circumstances, which bound the Synagogue to the Church” (*The Life and Times of Jesus Messiah*, pg. 298)
 - “For the Synagogue became the cradle of the Church. Without it, as indeed without Israel’s dispersion, the Church Universal would, humanely speaking, have been impossible, and the conversation of the Gentiles have required a succession of millennial miracles.”

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SYNAGOGUE = ~ECCLESIA (3/10)

- In the time of Christ, the temple & synagogue appear to be parallel and complementary, not competing, nor did one supersede the other
 - Their functions were distinct & separate, nearly as distinct as one might see between say “Church & State”
- Julius Scott wrote, in *Jewish Backgrounds of the New Testament*,
 - “Most simply put, the synagogue developed as the center of Hebrew life after the loss of traditional institutes. It was not a substitute for temple worship and services as such, but a supplement to them.” (Pg. 139)
 - The synagogue was never meant to be a substitute for the regulated worship of the temple, rather a supplement



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SYNAGOGUE = ~ECCLESIA (4/10)

- **Function**
 - Levine, in “The Nature and Origin of the Palestinian Synagogue Reconsidered,” states that,
 - “...first and foremost, the synagogue served the full range of needs of a particular community. As documented in contemporary sources, such functions included political meetings, social gatherings, courts, schools, hostels, charity activities, slave manumission, meals (sacred or otherwise), and of course, religious-liturgical functions.”
 - Scott adds,
 - “Synagogues, as the word implies, were gathering places. The buildings were used for official public meetings, schools, tribunals of judgment, and social occasions.” (Pg. 144)
 - As to the Jewish synagogue, especially that in first century Palestine, **the emphasis seems to be more on religious activity than community involvement**, consistent with what we see in Scripture

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SYNAGOGUE = ~ECCLESIA (5/10)

■ Function (con't)

- Scott also points out some of these early synagogue functions as being,

- "...first and foremost a place for reading Scripture and prayer. It was the synagogue, with its regular reading and interpretation of the Law and of the Prophets, and with its schools for the young, that wove the Scriptures into the fabric of life and experience of the people." (pg. 140)



Jerusalem Great
Synagogues,
Unknown

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SYNAGOGUE = ~ECCLESIA (6/10)

■ Form

- Archeological evidence reveals that the synagogue architecture may have varied, but largely featured,
 - "...benches along all or most of the walls, the focus of each building was the center of its hall, much as was the plan in contemporary Hellenistic and Roman communal buildings." (Levine)
- Scott adds,
 - "There were no altars nor sacrifices in the synagogue; instead, only the sacred books (scrolls) were absolutely necessary. Although priests who were in attendance were usually selected to be the public readers and to pronounce the blessings, their presence was not required for synagogue service as it was for worship in the temple. The revered leaders of the synagogue were the elders of the community and those with recognizable expertise in the law. Synagogues were organized wherever there were enough men (ten) to constitute a proper assembly, whether in the land of Israel or beyond." (Pg. 140)

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SYNAGOGUE = ~ECCLESIA (7/10)

■ Form (con't)

- While Scriptural evidence points to the oversight of a council, known as the *Sanhedrin*, the synagogue was basically a **lay institution**, because the priests were largely involved with the regulation of the temple
- Scott adds,
 - “Actual leadership was in the hands of the elders, **respected heads of families in the community**. The major official was the *archisynagogos*, the chief of the synagogue who was in overall charge of its affairs. The *hazzan* (minister or attendant) was, in Jewish areas, an executive officer for the town as well as the synagogue.” (p. 143)

The synagogue was the gathering place to learn & be reminded of the word of God.

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SYNAGOGUE = ~ECCLESIA (8/10)

■ Worship

- According to Scott, the services were often held multiple times on the Sabbath, as well as other days of the week such as Monday & Thursday. Additionally, services were held on days of special assemblies, feast days, etc. (p. 141)
- The order of worship was basic but could last several hours
 - These included, “recitation of the *Shema*, the daily prayer (*Shemoneh 'Esreh*), and reading of the Law and the Prophets. The reading was accompanied by a translation-interpretation (a *targum*), and frequently a sermon-homily.” (Scott, p. 141)



Rob Melnychuk,
Getty Images

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SYNAGOGUE = ~ECCLESIA (9/10)

■ Worship (con't)

- Finally, we must note one of the reasons for the synagogue, at least providentially, was to provide an avenue for access to the gospel proclamation of our Lord and the apostles to the Jews
- In Scripture, we see Jesus and his disciples utilizing the existing structure of the synagogue while simultaneously proclaiming the formation of the ecclesia—of course Jesus came to the Jews first
 - This should serve as a caution in our study on discussing the form & function of what we experience today as “church” vs. what constituted an ecclesia during the 1st Century
 - Perhaps Philippians 1:18 is a good exhortation for us in this regard

The bottom line: where Christ is preached!

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SYNAGOGUE = ~ECCLESIA (10/10)

■ What can we conclude?

- The set up & structure of the synagogue does have some striking similarities to what we call “church” today
 - However, it must be noted that there have been some significant departures from **main-stream** Christianity, most notably in the worship, governance & sociopolitical aspects
 - The synagogue was a Word-centered, lay-led, house of study (and later of prayer) that encouraged dialogue, questions, and multiplicity of speakers
 - The synagogue played a critical role in the community, serving as a location for social & political functions alike

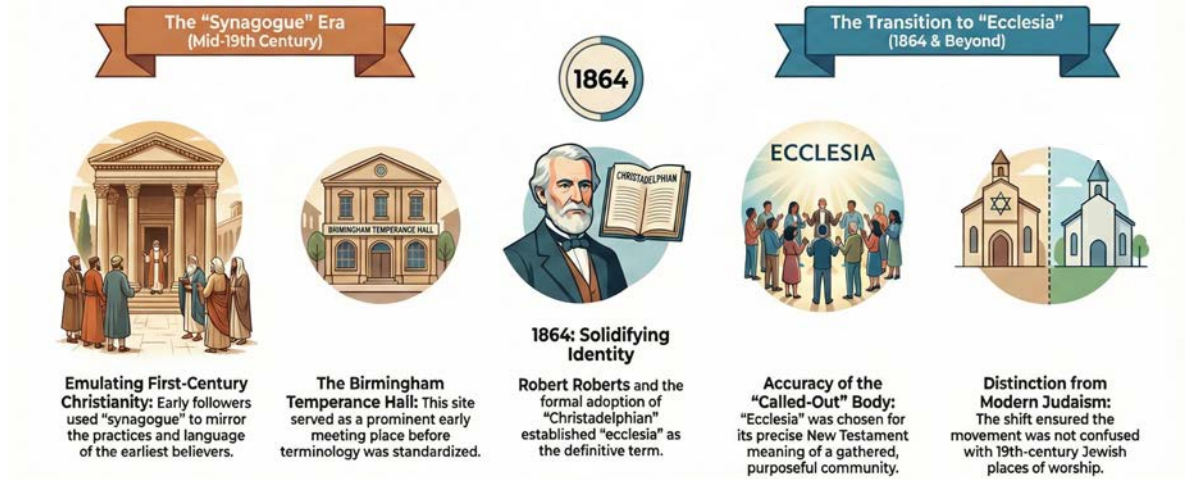
Sounds like our community.

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Christadelphian Use of the Term "Synagogue"

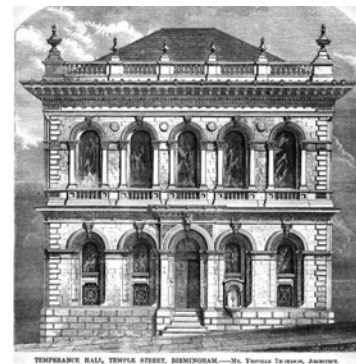
From Synagogue to Ecclesia: The Christadelphian Linguistic Shift



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CHRISTADELPHIAN USE OF THE TERM "SYNAGOGUE" (1/3)

- It is interesting to note that in the early history of the Christadelphian community, it wasn't unusual for an ecclesia to use the term "synagogue" for their congregations before adopting & standardizing the Greek word **ecclesia**
 - The use of **synagogue** reflected a desire to emulate the practices of first-century Christianity, but the term was ultimately replaced to better align with the language of the New Testament



Birmingham
Temperance Hall

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CHRISTADELPHIAN USE OF THE TERM “SYNAGOGUE” (2/3)

- The movement in Birmingham, UK & worldwide gradually transitioned to using only ecclesia for several key reasons:
 - **Clearer New Testament reference:** Ecclesia more accurately conveys the idea of a “called-out” body of believers
 - **Distinction from modern Judaism:** By the mid-19th century, “synagogue” was almost exclusively associated with Jewish places of worship
 - **Organizational clarity:** As the movement grew and became more structured, particularly with the establishment of *The Christadelphian* magazine and a formal “Statement of Faith” in Birmingham, consistent terminology became essential

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CHRISTADELPHIAN USE OF THE TERM “SYNAGOGUE” (3/3)

- While early followers in Birmingham, UK likely used “synagogue” for a time, this was a transitional phrase
- The adoption of the name “Christadelphian” in 1864 and Robert Roberts’ influence solidified ecclesia as the definitive term for congregations in Birmingham & globally



Birmingham Suffolk St.
Ecclesial Hall

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Some Final Comments

DEFINING THE BIBLICAL ASSEMBLY





'ASSEMBLY' or 'GATHERING'

Derived from the Greek word for a formal political gathering of citizens.



Never a building or denomination

Scripture uses the term specifically for people, never for physical structures.



A purpose-driven gathering

It refers to a specific assembly called by God in Christ.

HISTORICAL & TRANSLATION SHIFTS



Tyndale's "Congregation" translation

William Tyndale used "congregation" to challenge established doctrines, leading to his execution.



SYNAGOGUE



ECCLESIA

From Synagogue to Ecclesia

Early communities utilized "synagogue" as lay-led study hubs before "ecclesia" became standard.



Meaning outweighs the label

The intent behind the word matters more than the specific term used.

Understanding "ecclesia" requires looking beyond modern definitions of "church"

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Tomorrow: The Early Ecclesia

The Ecclesia: A Journey from Foundation to Future

FOUNDATIONS AND ANCIENT ROOTS

CONTINUITY AND FUTURE REVIVAL



Establishing the Biblical Construct

Laying the groundwork for understanding the foundational nature of the Ecclesia.



The Wilderness and Promised Land

Examining the early Ecclesia during the journey of the Children of Israel.



Christ and the First Century

Insights gained from Christ's initiation of the original first-century Ecclesias.



Persistence Through the Centuries

Proof that God's word and the Ecclesia have never died out.



Addressing Modern Spiritual Crises

An urgent call for communal action to face contemporary faith challenges.



Revival and the Kingdom Age

Strategies for avoiding spiritual death and maintaining the Ecclesia's future.



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