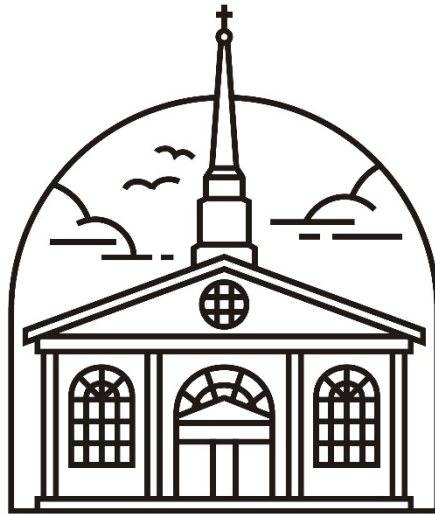


Origin of



the Church

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Lesson Five

The Early Church – The House Church

Overview

Religious temples have existed as far back as the Egyptian pyramids. Many ancient cultures built monuments to honor kings and conquerors, believing these structures would survive their demise and serve as a lasting testimony into perpetuity. The Romans were well known for building coliseums with large columns and imposing features to signify their greatness and strength.

The early church began as a movement and transformation of faith among Jewish practitioners. A prominent edifice was not an objective because the first believers in the Messiah already had a physical structure that represented their faith and culture. The first believers continued to access the temple and to honor its rituals. A time did come later after the Messianic movement began to grow in extraordinary measure when they were targeted in their synagogues as dissidents and betrayers of Judaism. The movement was driven by its belief in the Messiah, and a physical building or religious monument was not a factor in establishing or promoting their faith.

The first gatherings of the early Church were held in residential locations. The first Church Apostles were granted opportunities to teach and speak in some of the existing Jewish synagogues, but the deep dive into understanding the truth the Messiah left in the care of His disciples to pass on to others was accomplished in the house-to-house encounters among Jews and Gentile households.

Acts 8:1 And Saul was consenting unto his death. And at that time there was a great persecution against the church at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered abroad throughout the regions of Judaea and Samaria, except the apostles.

The Church at Jerusalem - The Jerusalem church was the centerpiece of the early church movement. It was the lead Church within the Pentarchy structure. (Jerusalem, Alexandria (Egypt), Constantinople, Antioch, and Rome) James, the brother of Jesus, was the Chief Apostle leading the ministry to oversee all Jews and Gentiles who believed in the Messiah.

The Jerusalem Church came under great persecution, which caused the dispersion that expanded the Messianic movement to the regions of Judea and Samaria. The man Saul, who would later become the great Apostle to the Gentiles, had a significant role in the persecution of Christians. He requested permission from the Jewish leaders to track down dissidents and return them to stand trial for their betrayal of the Jewish faith.

In a turn of fate, Saul's conversion to faith in the Messiah was such a threat to the Jewish leaders he once served that they set chase after him to take his life. The Christians he once hunted and persecuted helped him escape the deadly pursuit of those determined to take his life. (Acts 9:23-26)

The Church at Rome – The Apostle Paul does not use the term church directly in his epistle to the Church; he refers to them instead as “called of Jesus Christ” and “called to be saints,” the term that defines the Church as the Ekklesia, “the called out.”

In the letter, the Apostle states that the faith of Roman believers was known throughout the world. (Romans 1:8) This was a Church that the Apostle prayed for often. The large number of Jewish converts who populated the Church were strongly influenced by religious history. However, they embraced the truth about the Messiah; they still believed Jews were the privileged religious class because they were chosen. A large volume of foundational Church doctrine used to guide the Church today is captured in the epistle written to the Romans.

The local Church in Rome would begin to diminish because of the persecution against Christians, first led by orthodox Jews and eventually by Roman monarchs. The Church scattered from Jerusalem and Roman provinces to find safety outside the reach of Rome's empire. Diaspora reduced the numerical strength of the local Church as Churches outside of Rome and Palestine flourished.

The Church at Rome was a part of the Pentarchy, the network of five Churches representing a united faith in the Messiah across multiple countries and cultures. When Constantine came into power, he reversed the edicts and Rome's stance on the persecution of Christians.

When Rome's new leader contemplated new strategies to maintain control of

the vast Roman empire whose expanse stretched to distant lands and different cultures, he recognized the Church growing exponentially outside Palestine, and Rome could be used to undergird the Roman empire.

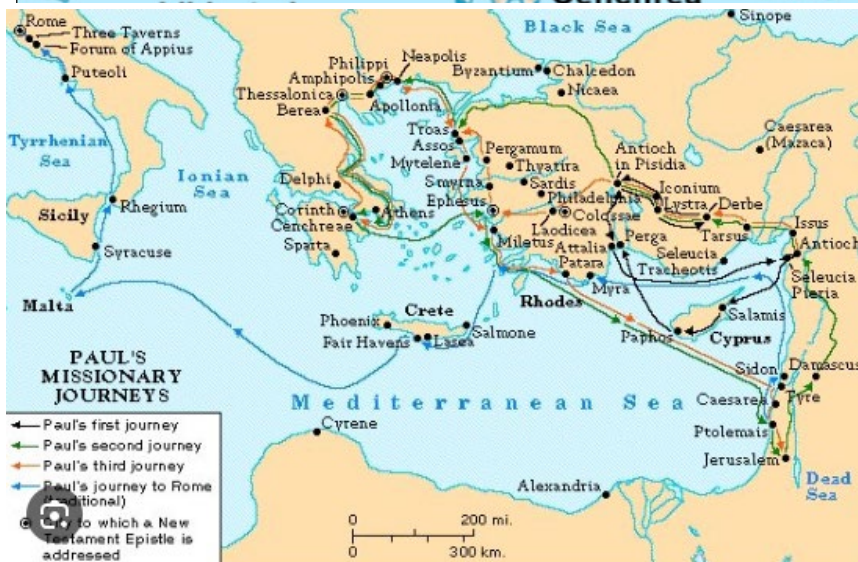
During his reign from 306 to 337 AD, Constantine the Great created an alliance with the Church in Rome that would allow him to reach across the world, establishing Christianity as the religion of the Empire.

The alliance with Rome elevated the status of the Roman Church. Over time, the leadership of the Church in Rome became more aligned with Roman Emperors than Church leadership within the Pentarchy.

The new trajectory of the Church in Rome set the groundwork for the birth of the Roman Catholic (Universal) Church.



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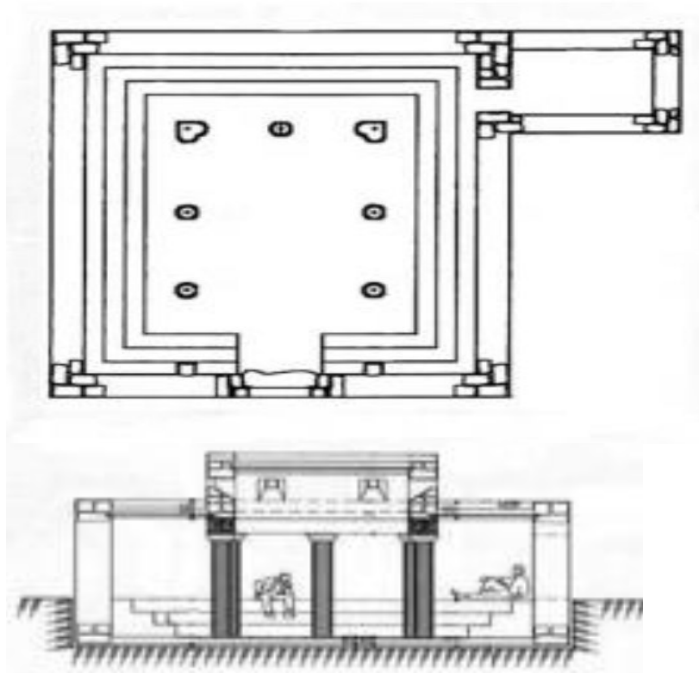
Acts 11:19 Now they which were scattered abroad upon the persecution that arose about Stephen travelled as far as Phenice, and Cyprus, and Antioch, preaching the word to none but unto the Jews only.

The Church at Phenice (Crete) – [Acts 15:3, *27:12] As a result of the persecution the Church expands west to Crete, the largest Greek Island in the Mediterranean. Introducing the gospel of the Messiah to the Greeks was a significant strategic accomplishment because the Greek language and culture had already begun to spread worldwide. Three hundred years before the Church arrived, Jewish practitioners completed the first translation of the Torah into a non-Hebrew language, resulting in the Septuagint, a Greek interpretation of Hebrew texts.

The physical location of the Church meeting place is not mentioned in scripture. However, it is likely that a Jewish synagogue already existed in Crete. In Acts 2:11, members of the Crete Jews are identified among the devout Jews attending the celebration of Pentecost.

The Crete Jews were among those who heard the convicting truth about the Messiah and committed to repent and be baptized. Messianic believers migrating from Jerusalem to Crete would be welcomed and received by others already practicing the same faith.

A synagogue is a type of social center used for a community to gather to discuss or listen to matters of importance. The synagogue in Crete would be a natural gathering place for the Jews who shared faith in the Messiah.



Early synagogues were each unique, but scholars believe they all generally shared standard features: **walls surrounded by benches, a central space defined by a colonnade, and two rear corner colonnades have heart-shaped columns** (two columns carved into one). Two rear columns are used to support a clerestory roof. The interior was open with no ceiling, providing plenty of light and ventilation. It is intended to be a comfortable space for public gatherings.

Ancient Synagogue: Jewish synagogues are generally understood as an interim need to practice routine rituals without a formal temple. Following their release from their captivity in Babylon, work led by Zerubbabel and Nehemiah to restore the temple began. However, the temple restoration took time, and the fullness of the temple was not fully realized for years.

The diaspora needed to restore the most basic religious practices, such as celebrating Sabbaths, a place for prayer, and for reading the Torah. The greater focus was on material and workforce to restore the temple, which would leave less material and labor for constructing an elaborate facility. The ancient synagogues, all lost in ruins, would have been built for convenience and with much less architectural beauty.

First Century Synagogue (*time of Christ): The first-century synagogue offered a gathering place for community, teaching, and daily prayer rituals outside the Temple City of Jerusalem. Jerusalem had no synagogue because it was home to the formal temple. The Bible identifies three synagogues in the Galilee region during the time of Christ: Capernaum, Gadara, and Nazareth, and twelve outside of Palestine during the time of the Apostles: eleven synagogues resulting from diaspora due to Roman persecution: Libertines (Roman Freedmen), Cyrenians (N.Africa), Alexandrians (Egypt), Cilicia (Asia), Salamis, Antioch-Pisidia, Iconium, Thessalonica, Berea, Corinth, Ephesus.

(Acts 6:9, 13:4-5,14; 14:1-7; 17:1-6,10,13; 18:1-4,8,19)

Leaving the sole synagogue resulting from persecutions against Christians: Damascus. (Acts 9:2)

Acts 11:19 – Now they which were scattered abroad upon the persecution that arose about Stephen travelled as far as Phenice, and **Cyprus**, and Antioch, preaching the word to none but unto the Jews only.

The Church at Cyprus –[Acts 13:4, 15:39, 21:3,16, 27:4] The persecution against the Church caused some Jews to travel north and move offshore to a small nearby island. Cyprus is located in the Mediterranean Sea, to the west of Palestine. The island was a thoroughfare to other cities well-traveled by the Apostle Paul, including southern Galatia, Ephesus, and Crete.

Jewish believers migrating to Cyprus set up synagogues in their communities. (Acts 13:5) The Hebrew term for synagogue is "*beit midrash*," which means to study. The synagogue was a place for observant Jews to use their time to study sacred texts.

A synagogue created by Jews migrating from Jerusalem because of their faith and belief in the Messiah signals a hunger to learn and understand the teachings passed on to His disciples.

Acts 11:19 – Now they which were scattered abroad upon the persecution that arose about Stephen travelled as far as Phenice, and Cyprus, and **Antioch**, preaching the word to none but unto the Jews only.

The Church at Antioch (Syria) –[Acts 11:20-22,*26, 13:1]

The majority of the people migrating to avoid persecution made their way north of Jerusalem into Syria with hopes of finding asylum in Antioch. This was the persecution initiated and led by Saul of Tarsus. Ironically, the converted "Paul" will be among those assigned to provide instructional ministry to the Antioch Church in Syria. Among the early members of the Antioch was Nicolas, the proselyte from Antioch who would be named among the first Church Diaconate. (Acts 6:5)

Initially, when the diaspora arrived, they preached only to other Jews. However, men from Cyrene and Cyprus came to Antioch and began preaching to the resident Grecian population. The growth of Messianic faith among Jews and Gentiles was so great that news of the impact was relayed to the Church leadership in Jerusalem. The Church of Jerusalem sent Barnabas to provide additional ministry support in response to Antioch's growth and spiritual hunger. Barnabas took a detour to pick up Paul to join him on the mission, and for an entire year, they remained in Antioch teaching the Church.

Antioch became the fastest-growing congregation during the Church persecution period. The persecution of Saul of Tarsus was followed by a significant onslaught against Messianic Jews that came from Herod. He found that persecuting the Christianized Jews earned him favor with the Orthodox Jewish leaders, which aided his cause to maintain favor with his Roman overlords.

The persecution of Herod added to the flight of Jews from Jerusalem, and many made the trek north to relocate to Antioch. The Church's numerical growth required the leadership in Jerusalem to send prophets and teachers to Antioch; among them was a prophet named Agabus.

The prophet predicted a worldwide drought in the days of Claudius Caesar, who ruled from AD 41 to 54. Claudius was the third Augustus ruler following the crucifixion/resurrection of Christ. The practice of relief offerings was initiated after the dearth. The Church collected donations to send relief to the Church leadership in Judaea. (Acts 11:28-30)

A complete list of those assigned to minister to the Church at Antioch is captured in Acts 13:1. Barnabas is the lead appointee and mentor specifically to Paul, followed by Simeon, also known as Niger, which means "black," indicating his native origin, and Lucius of Cyrene, a city in Libya North Africa (*Romans 16:27). Manaen, who apparently grew up alongside Herod as a child, is among the selected prophets/teachers. Finally, Saul (Paul) is listed among those responsible for ministering to the congregation in Antioch. The details added to describe the nativity of men in the list reveal the diversity of the church leadership in Antioch, which likely also reflects the congregation's diversity.

Among the chief recognitions connected to the Church in Antioch is their inspiration for the name representing the growing movement; they would be called: "Christians."

Rom 16:1 I commend unto you Phebe our sister, which is a servant of the *church which is at Cenchrea*:

The Church at Cenchrea –[Acts 18:18]

The House Church in Corinth presents a woman named Phebe, the Apostle Paul assigned to lead the ministry. The people are told to receive her solely based on the Apostle's assessment. They are instructed to assist and support her in whatever business she deems needed concerning the church.

The Apostle Paul visits the Church later in his ministry to shave his head for a vow he made after spending 18 months embattled with Jews in the synagogue at Corinth that opposed his teaching about the Messiah.

Acts 18:1 After these things Paul departed from Athens and came to Corinth; **2** And found a sure Jew named Aquila, born in Pontus, lately come from Italy, with his wife Priscilla; (because that Claudius had commanded all Jews to depart from Rome:) and came unto them. **3** And because he was of the same craft, he aboded with them and wrought: for by their occupation they were tentmakers.

Rom 16:3 Greet Priscilla and Aquila, my helpers in Christ Jesus: **4** Who have for my life laid down their own necks: unto whom not only I give thanks, but also all the churches of the Gentiles. **5** Likewise *greet the church that is in their house.*

The Church House of Priscilla/Aquila –

The Apostle Paul found a husband and wife team, Priscilla and Aquila, in his ministry excursion to Corinth. They were both Jews from Italy with Roman heritages, like himself. The Apostle and the couple also shared the same occupation in tent making. During his time at the Church in Corinth, he lived with them.

The Apostle identifies the husband and wife team as his helpers in Christ, crediting them with laying down their lives on his behalf. The closing salutation in Apostle Paul's letter to the Church at Rome includes a reference to the Church in the house of Priscilla and Aquila.

1Cor 1:2 Unto the church of God which is at Corinth, to them that are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called *to be* saints, with all that in every place call upon the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, both theirs and ours

The Church of God at Corinth –

The Apostle's letter to the Church opens with a salutation acknowledging the "called out," the Ekkesia, which is the Church. The early church was referenced more by its spiritual character than by a well-constructed marketable name with a catchphrase statement.

The Church is known for "calling upon the name" of Jesus Christ in the same manner it is done in every place. Sameness was a sign of spiritual consistency and unity. It should be possible to visit a Christian congregation in any place, hear consistent truth, and find uniform characteristics that signal belief in one God, faith, and baptism.

1Cor 16:1 Now concerning the collection for the saints, as I have given order to the churches of Galatia, even so do ye.

1Cor 16:19 The churches of Asia salute you. Aquila and Priscilla salute you much in the Lord, with the church that is in their house.

The Churches in Galatia and Asia –

There are multiple churches and communities of believers in the messiah throughout Galatia and Asia.

This is a tremendous testimony to the commitment of the Apostles and the early Church to fulfill the commission given to them by the resurrected Son of God.

The Church cannot be content with being a local organization but should focus on being a global organism. The Church was intended to be the size of the world where it is planted. The Church is a living entity, not a building. The Church is an organic movement, not structured lines and boxes on a sketch pad.

The Church of God should be reflected in every culture, community, and country. When the Church of God, His called-out people, becomes world-focused, the world will become focused on the God in the Church.