



The Synagogue in James 2:2

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Our brethren who support human benevolent institutions such as Mid-Western Children’s Home encounter many difficulties. The chief one being the lack of scriptural authority for such arrangements. They have sought for the authority in James 1:26-27. This argument has been frequently answered in the following ways: (1) It is directed to the individual Christian, as the context clearly shows; (2) Even if the passage were directed to the local church it does not authorize the church to make contributions to a human institution.

The next step for the institutionalist is to run to James 2:2, “For if there come unto your assembly a man with a gold ring, in goodly apparel, and there come in also a poor man in vile raiment; (3) And ye have respect to him that weareth the gay clothing, and say unto him, Sit thou here in a good place; and say to the poor, Stand thou here, or sit here under my footstool” (King James Version). From this passage they conclude that the *assembly* means the *church* and that James 1:26-27 involves church action.

In my debate with brother Larry Hood at Central City, Kentucky [Hood lived in Central City; the debate was hosted by the Beaver Dam church], in 1964, he made that argument. When I replied as I am about to here he made no further comment about James 2:2. In the debate with bro. Bill Heinselman in Akron, Ohio (December, 1967) he briefly mentioned the point without making what I considered a significant argument on it and I did not have the occasion to mention it. In the December *Gratis* he said this: “Besides the context of James 1:27 includes the church. Note the word ‘assembly’ in James 2:2.”

My Answer

The word which is translated *assembly* in the KJV is the Greek word *sunagoge* (pronounced suna-go-GAY). The word is used 57 times in the New Testament and in the KJV is translated *synagogue* in all except two places. In Acts 13:43 it is *congregation*, and in James 2:2, *assembly*. I am confident that there is sufficient evidence to conclude that *sunagoge* in James 2:2 means the **building** and not the gathering. If this is so it seems highly precarious for a preacher to seek to prove a point which has torn asunder the body of Christ on such questionable proof. Below is my evidence.

Translations of *Sunagoge*

The KJV has *assembly*; The New American Standard Bible has *assembly*, with the footnote, “or, synagogue.” The American Standard has *synagogue* in the text, with a footnote, “or, assembly.” Rotherham, in The Empha-

sized New Testament, has *synagogue*. The New English Bible says *place of worship*. From this we conclude that the translators had some difficulty in determining which was the correct word in this place, (or which word would best convey the sense of the original).

The Greek Lexicons

An appeal to the lexicons of the Greek will also show uncertainty on this point. It is important to distinguish between the definition given by the lexicographer and the application or comments made by him. Such works are simply the “tools” of the Bible student.

1. **Bagster’s Analytical Greek Lexicon:** “a *collecting, gathering*; a Christian *assembly or congregation*, Ja. 2:2; the congregation of a synagogue, Ac. 9:2, *et al.*; hence, the place itself, a *synagogue*, Lu. 7:5, *et al.*” (385).

2. **Thayer:** “...the name (synagogue) is transferred to an assembly of Christians formally gathered for religious purposes, Jas. 2:2” (*Greek English Lexicon of the New Testament*, 600).

3. **Arndt and Gingrich:** “b. a Christian assembly-place can also be meant in Js. 2:2” (*A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, 790). This is the latest and most fully informed lexicon available. [My quotation was from the first edition of the lexicon. The 3rd edition, commonly designated as *BDAG* (Bauer Danker Arndt Gingrich) has “an assembly-place for Judeo-Christians (Nazarenes) can also be meant in Js 2:2.” Other more recent materials indicate the same. *Louw-Nida* defines the term as “a building or assembly, associated with religious activity (normally a building in which Jewish worship took place and in which the Law was taught, but in Jas 2.2 a Christian assembly place) – ‘synagogue’ or ‘Christian assembly place.’”]

From this brief survey one can easily see that the word *sunagoge* can have either the meaning *assembly* or *assembly-place* (synagogue).

The Commentaries

When we investigate the commentaries we do not accept a thing because a man says so, but we examine his reasons in order that we may draw our own conclusions. The commentaries cited here are based on the Greek text.

1. **Lenski.** Lenski translates the word as *synagogue*. He says, “We take *sunagoge* to mean ‘a synagogue of yours,’ for James mentions the places in it: ‘here,’ a prominent place, ‘there,’ an obscure place. ‘Assembly’ is not the meaning, for the fact that the congregation is assembled in its place of meeting is self-evident” (*The In-*

terpretation of the Epistle to the Hebrews and the Epistle of James, 564).

2. **Vincent:** “In this passage alone the word is distinctly applied to a Christian assembly or place of worship. The simplest explanation appears to be that the word designates the *place* of meeting for the Christian body, James using the word most familiar to the Jewish Christians...” (*Word Studies in the New Testament*, I:137).

3. **Cambridge Greek Testament:** “It is at any rate clear that the *sunagoge* here mentioned is a Christian and not a Jewish place of assembly” (30).

4. **Macknight:** “The word *sunagoge* sometimes denotes an assembly of persons, sometimes the house in which such an assembly is held. Here ‘your synagogue’ does not mean a Jewish synagogue, but the house or room where the Christians assembled for worship...” (*Apostolical Epistles*, 590-591).

5. **Rackham:** “The Christians indeed, as we see from James 2:2, continued to call their places of meeting in Jerusalem synagogues: but the body which met there was the ecclesia (church) (Jas. 5:14)” (*The Acts of the Apostles*, 79).

The conclusion, based on the evidence presented by these men who are scholars in the use of the Greek language, indicates that *sunagoge* meant Jewish synagogues in which Christians met or that the term was used of some other meeting place of Christians.

Use in Scripture

With the foregoing information before us I believe that the safest way to determine what *sunagoge* means in James 2:2 is by the use of the word in other passages and the context in James.

1. *Sunagoge* was used of material buildings. According to Luke 7:5 a synagogue was *built*. Jesus points out that hypocrites love to stand and pray in the synagogues (Mt. 6:5). The scribes and Pharisees loved “the *chief seats* in the synagogue” (Mt. 23:6). Note that the sunagoge was (1) **built**, (2) had **chief seats**, (3) and that one could **stand** in it.

2. The early Christians sometimes met in synagogues. In his persecution of the church (*ekklesia*) Saul sought letters unto Damascus “unto the synagogues.” In these he expected to find some who were “of the Way” (Acts 9 :2). Saul later told the Lord that he “imprisoned and beat in every synagogue them that believed on thee” (Acts 22:19). See also Acts 26:11. Remember that the Christians met on the first day of the week (Acts 20:7). Synagogues would not be of much use to the Jews on the first day of the week. Christians of our time often meet in

lodge halls, public school buildings, and other rented facilities, without approving other activities conducted in the same building at another time. Another possible interpretation, according to the evidence above, is that the term *sunagoge* was applied to an assembly-place of Christians other than the Jewish synagogue.

3. **How the word is used in James.** James was written to “the twelve tribes which are of the Dispersion” (James 1:1). These were Jews by birth, but now Christians (1:2). They may have been meeting in synagogues as indicated above.

In James 2:3 we learn that one could *sit* or *stand* in the *sunagoge*. This harmonizes with what we learned about synagogues in point one. The church was commanded to *assemble* (Heb. 10:25) and a *place* was necessarily implied. The Christians sometimes met in a *house* (Rom. 16:5) and sometimes in a *synagogue* and possibly other places. In the earliest days the church met in the temple precinct (*hieron*, Acts 2:46).

Conclusion

It is not our purpose in this article to argue that the word *sunagoge* in James 2:2 must, beyond a shadow of a doubt, mean an “assembly-place”; I believe that the evidence favors this position. My purpose has been to show that when institutionalists seek to prove that James 1:27 involves the church by turning to James 2:2 they are resting their case on mighty shaky ground. How would you react if we had to build our case for baptism, singing, the Lord’s Supper, *etc.* on such questionable proof?

One of the important and generally recognized rules of Bible study is that “No important teaching or practice is to be based upon doubtful or ambiguous Scriptures” (Kendrick, *Rules of Bible Study*, 90). Our desire is that all men would return to that path in religion which is unquestionably right and cannot be wrong.

Note. This article was first published in *The Enlightener*, widely distributed publication of the Brown Street Church of Christ, Akron, Ohio, March, 1968, and later published in *Searching the Scriptures*, Sept., 1968). I have made a few cosmetic changes to bring the article into harmony with the style I would use today, but the basic content remains unchanged.

My references to the King James Version was because the majority of readers at the time would have been using the KJV. The more recent versions, the NKJV, the ESV, and the NRS, translate *sunagoge* as *assembly*.

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Some Synagogue Remains in Israel

Photographs by Ferrell Jenkins



First century synagogue remains at Masada. Note the seating. Fragments of Deuteronomy and Ezekiel were found in a storage room.



This synagogue at Capernaum probably dates to the late 4th or early 5th century. Evidence of a first century synagogue has been discovered under the floor of this building.



Interior of a 3rd or 4th century synagogue at Chorazin. This illustrates the type of seating that would allow the ruler of the synagogue to say "Sit here."



No synagogue has been found here, but this is a reconstruction of a first century synagogue at the Nazareth Village. Here we see the seating arrangement. Some attendees could be given places of honor. Others could be told to stand in a certain place.

The photo to the right was made in the ruins of a synagogue at Qatzrin in the Golan Heights. This synagogue was in use from the 4th to the 8th century A.D. It also illustrates the seating arrangement in the synagogue. I understand that for some it is difficult to imagine that they did not have padded pews.

