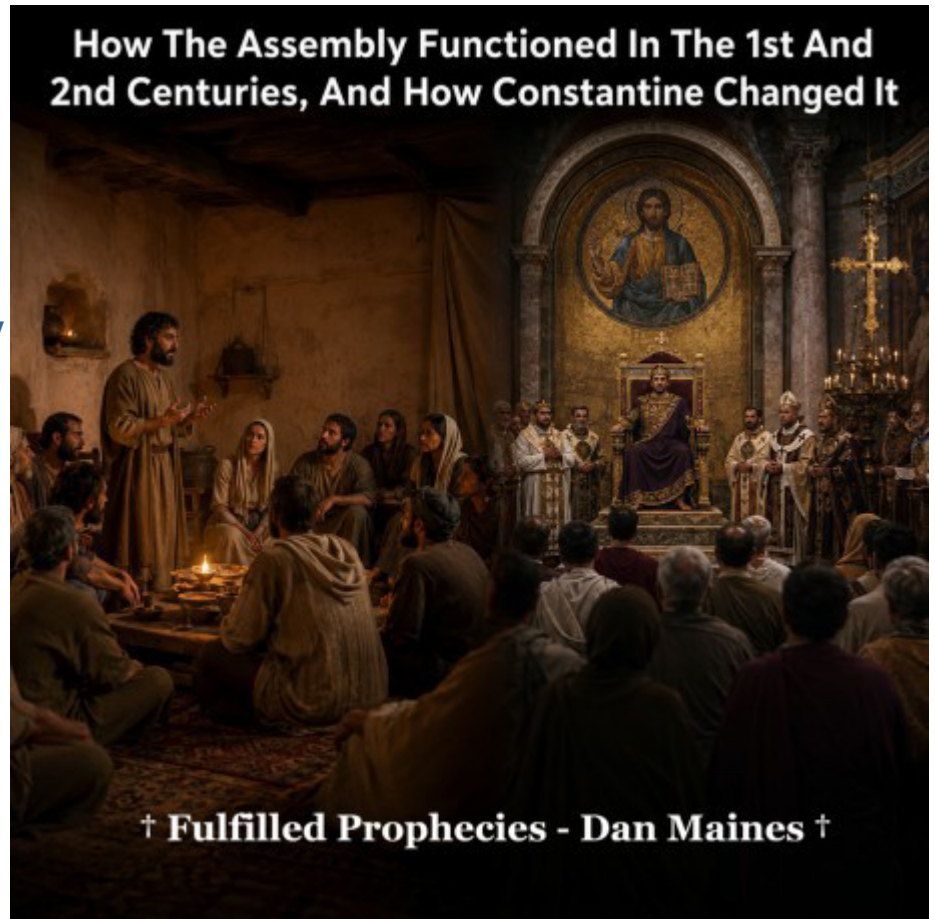


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How The Assembly Functioned In The 1st And 2nd Centuries, And How Constantine Changed It



By Dan Maines

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Introduction

† Many people today picture the modern church system as if it came directly from Christ and the apostles. But when we go back to the New Testament and the writings of the early believers, we find something very different. The early assemblies were simple, house-based gatherings centered on fellowship, teaching, prayer, and mutual edification. There were

no church buildings, no elevated priesthood class, no state-controlled religion, and no massive institutional system.

† The first century assemblies functioned as living bodies of believers gathered together in homes. Christ alone was their head. Leadership existed, but it was servant leadership, not a ruling hierarchy. Over time, especially after Constantine in the 4th century, many things changed. Christianity became institutionalized, political, and heavily influenced by Roman structure and power.

† Understanding this history helps us separate what came from Christ and the apostles from what later developed through Roman influence. It also helps explain why so much of modern church tradition looks nothing like the assemblies described in scripture. (Matthew 20:25-28; Colossians 1:18)

Acts 2:46-47

Day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved.

† The believers gathered from house to house. The assembly was centered in homes, not dedicated church buildings. (Romans 16:5)

† Their gatherings focused on fellowship, meals, prayer, teaching, and encouragement. The assembly functioned like a family, not a religious corporation. (Acts 20:7)

† The New Testament never describes Christians constructing special church sanctuaries during the apostolic age. The people themselves were the temple of God. (1 Corinthians 3:16)

Romans 16:3-5

Greet Prisca and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus, who risked their own necks for my life, to whom not only do I give thanks, but also all the churches of the Gentiles; also greet the church that is in their house. Greet Epaenetus, my beloved, who is the first convert to Christ from Asia.

† Entire assemblies met inside ordinary homes. This pattern appears repeatedly throughout the New Testament. (Colossians 4:15)

† The word church referred to the gathered people, not a building. The Greek word ekklesia simply means assembly or called-out gathering. (Acts 19:32, 39)

† The early assemblies were deeply relational. Believers knew one another personally and shared life together daily. (Hebrews 10:24-25)

1 Corinthians 14:26

What is the outcome then, brothers and sisters? When you assemble, each one has a psalm, has a teaching, has a revelation, has a tongue, has an interpretation. All things are to be done for edification.

† The gatherings were participatory. Multiple believers contributed to the assembly instead of one man performing an entire service from a platform. (Ephesians 4:11-16)

† The goal was mutual edification, not religious performance. Every believer was viewed as part of the functioning body of Christ. (Romans 12:4-6)

† Leadership existed, but the gatherings were not built around celebrity personalities or institutional authority structures. Christ

remained the center. (Matthew 23:8-10)

1 Peter 2:5

you also, as living stones, are being built up as a spiritual house for a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices that are acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

† Every believer was part of the spiritual priesthood. The New Testament does not establish a separate priestly class over the assembly. (Revelation 1:6)

† Under the Old Covenant, temple priests stood between God and the people. Under Christ, believers had direct access to the Father. (Hebrews 10:19-22)

† Constantine's later church system gradually restored distinctions resembling the old priesthood structure, elevating bishops and clergy into positions of religious power. (Matthew 23:11-12)

Matthew 23:8-10

But as for you, do not be called Rabbi; for only One is your Teacher, and you are all brothers and sisters. And do not call anyone on earth your father; for only One is your Father, He who is in heaven. And do not be called leaders; for only One is your Leader, that is, Christ.

† Jesus directly warned against religious titles and elevated religious classes.

† The early assemblies viewed believers as brethren under one head, Christ. (Colossians 1:18)

† The later Roman church system created hierarchical titles and offices completely foreign to the apostolic assemblies. (Matthew

20:25-28)

† Bishops eventually became political authorities connected to imperial power after Constantine.

Matthew 20:25-28

But Jesus called them to Himself and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles domineer over them, and those in high position exercise authority over them. It is not this way among you, but whoever wants to become prominent among you shall be your servant, and whoever desires to be first among you shall be your slave; just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many."

† Christ condemned worldly religious hierarchy and authoritarian leadership patterns. (Luke 22:25-26)

† The apostolic assemblies emphasized servant leadership instead of institutional control. Elders shepherded the flock rather than ruling as political officials. (1 Peter 5:1-3)

† After Constantine, church leadership increasingly mirrored Roman governmental structure, with bishops gaining political influence, wealth, and state authority.

1 Corinthians 9:14

So also the Lord directed those who proclaim the gospel to get their living from the gospel.

† Support existed for ministers, but the early assemblies did not operate like later institutional salary systems and church corporations.

† Ministry was centered on service, sacrifice, and teaching rather than religious career advancement. (2 Corinthians 11:7-

9)

† Many early believers worked ordinary occupations while serving the assemblies. Paul himself worked as a tentmaker. (Acts 18:3)

† Constantine's state-supported church transformed leadership into positions of wealth, prestige, and political influence.

John 18:36

Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, My servants would be fighting so that I would not be handed over to the Jews; but as it is, My kingdom is not of this realm."

† The early assemblies operated independently from state control. Christianity was often persecuted because believers would not submit Christ's kingdom to Caesar. (Acts 5:29)

† Constantine changed this relationship dramatically by joining Christianity with imperial power in the 4th century.

† Once Christianity became state-supported, the simple assembly structure began transforming into an institutional religious system connected to political authority.

Acts 7:48

However, the Most High does not dwell in houses made by human hands; as the prophet says:

† Stephen directly rejected the idea that God was confined to physical religious structures.

† The New Covenant shifted God's dwelling place from physical temples to His people. (1 Corinthians 3:16)

† After Constantine, massive church buildings again became treated as sacred religious spaces much like Old Covenant temples.

† The focus gradually shifted from the spiritual body of believers to institutional buildings and ceremonial systems.

2 Corinthians 6:16

Or what agreement does the temple of God have with idols?
For we are the temple of the living God; just as God said,

"I WILL DWELL AMONG THEM AND WALK AMONG THEM;
AND I WILL BE THEIR GOD, AND THEY SHALL BE MY PEOPLE.

† The New Testament consistently taught that believers themselves were God's dwelling place. (Ephesians 2:19-22)

† Massive cathedral systems and elaborate religious buildings developed centuries later under Roman influence.

† The focus shifted from the gathered body of believers to sacred buildings, religious offices, ceremonies, and institutional power structures.

1 Corinthians 1:12-13

Now I mean this, that each one of you is saying, "I am with Paul," or "I am with Apollos," or "I am with Cephas," or "I am with Christ." Has Christ been divided? Paul was not crucified for you, was he? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?

† The apostolic assemblies were never intended to fragment into competing denominations and institutional systems.

† The body of Christ was centered on unity in Him, not organizational identity. (Ephesians 4:4-6)

† Many later divisions grew out of institutional power struggles that developed after the apostolic period.

† The Roman church structure eventually centralized authority in ways never seen in the New Testament assemblies.

Historical References

† Ignatius of Antioch, early 2nd century, described believers gathering together regularly in local assemblies centered on fellowship, unity, and Christ.

† Justin Martyr, around AD 150, described Christians gathering simply for scripture reading, prayer, exhortation, and communal meals.

† Tertullian wrote that believers met as a spiritual society devoted to prayer, encouragement, and caring for one another.

† Eusebius recorded that Constantine financed church buildings, elevated bishops politically, and merged imperial authority with organized Christianity.

† Edward Gibbon, in *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, described how Christianity transitioned from a persecuted movement into an imperial religious institution after Constantine.

† The Council of Nicaea in AD 325 was called and overseen by Constantine himself, showing how deeply imperial authority had become intertwined with Christianity.

† Constantine financed church buildings, elevated bishops socially and politically, and gave Christianity legal and financial

privileges throughout the empire.

† Lactantius wrote about the severe persecutions before Constantine and the dramatic political shift that followed when Christianity became state protected.

How It Applies To Us Today

† Many believers assume church traditions automatically came from Christ, but history shows many practices developed long after the apostles.

† We should examine everything by scripture instead of tradition alone. (Acts 17:11)

† The true assembly is still the people of God gathered in Christ, not a building or institution. (1 Corinthians 12:27)

† Fellowship, encouragement, prayer, teaching, and mutual edification remain central to the body of Christ today. (Hebrews 10:24-25)

† Christ warned against religious systems built on status, power, and outward appearance. (Matthew 23:5-12)

† The fulfilled perspective reminds us that Christ already established His kingdom and His spiritual temple. Believers are the dwelling place of God now. (Ephesians 2:19-22)

Q & A Appendix

Q: Did the apostles build church buildings?

A: No. The New Testament consistently shows believers gathering in homes and public areas, not constructing church sanctuaries. (Romans 16:5; Colossians 4:15)

Q: What did the word church originally mean?

A: The Greek word ekklesia means assembly or gathering. It referred to the people, not a building. (Acts 19:32, 39)

Q: Did the early church have priests like the Old Covenant system?

A: No. All believers were viewed as part of the royal priesthood under Christ. (1 Peter 2:5-9)

Q: What changed under Constantine?

A: Constantine ended persecution against Christians, but he also helped institutionalize Christianity and merge it with imperial Roman power, changing the simplicity of the early assemblies.

Q: Did the apostles establish a clergy system like we see today?

A: No. The New Testament presents leaders as servants and shepherds among the brethren, not as a separate ruling priesthood class. (Matthew 23:8-12; 1 Peter 5:1-3)

Q: Were church buildings part of the apostolic assembly system?

A: No. Believers primarily gathered in homes. The idea of specially designated sacred church buildings developed later. (Romans 16:5; Acts 7:48)

Q: Did Constantine improve Christianity?

A: Constantine ended persecution against Christians, but he also helped institutionalize Christianity and merge it with imperial Roman power, changing the simplicity of the early

assemblies.

Q: Did Constantine change times and laws, perhaps even the Sabbath?

A: Constantine issued the first civil Sunday law in AD 321, declaring Sunday a day of rest across the Roman Empire. This was not a command given by Christ or the apostles. The New Testament never commands Christians to keep Sunday as a replacement Sabbath law. (Colossians 2:16-17; Romans 14:5-6)

A: The apostles taught that believers were not under the Old Covenant Sabbath system. Christ fulfilled the law, and believers were not to be judged regarding sabbath days. (Galatians 4:9-11; Colossians 2:16-17)

A: Constantine helped institutional Christianity adopt practices enforced through imperial law, blending Roman government authority with church tradition.

Q: Was Constantine a good person?

A: Constantine ended much of the violent persecution against Christians and legalized Christianity throughout the empire. In that sense, many believers viewed his actions positively.

A: However, Constantine was also a Roman emperor deeply involved in politics, warfare, and imperial control. He oversaw church councils, elevated bishops into political power, and helped transform Christianity into a state-supported institution.

A: History records that Constantine ordered executions, including members of his own family, and retained many elements of Roman imperial religion and symbolism throughout his reign.

A: The issue is not whether Constantine did some beneficial things politically, but whether the changes that followed moved the assembly away from the simple New Testament pattern established by Christ and the apostles. Many historians agree that they did.

† This is the fulfilled perspective we proclaim at Fulfilled Prophecies †

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Source Index

† Acts 2:46-47; Acts 5:29; Acts 7:48; Acts 17:11; Acts 18:3; Acts 19:32, 39; Romans 12:4-6; Romans 16:3-5; 1 Corinthians 1:12-13; 1 Corinthians 3:16; 1 Corinthians 12:27; 1 Corinthians 14:26; 2 Corinthians 6:16; 2 Corinthians 11:7-9; Ephesians 2:19-22; Ephesians 4:4-6; Ephesians 4:11-16; Colossians 1:18; Colossians 4:15; Hebrews 10:19-25; 1 Peter 2:5-9; 1 Peter 5:1-3; Matthew 20:25-28; Matthew 23:5-12; John 18:36; Luke 22:25-26; Revelation 1:6

† Ignatius of Antioch, Letter to the Ephesians; Justin Martyr, First Apology, Chapters 65-67; Tertullian, Apology, Chapter 39; Eusebius, Life of Constantine; Lactantius, On The Deaths Of The Persecutors; Council of Nicaea, AD 325; Edward Gibbon, The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire

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