

# What is the Synagogue of Satan?

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**“...and *I know* the blasphemy of them which say they are Jews, and are not, but *are* the synagogue of Satan.” (Rev 2:9).**

Jesus Christ of Nazareth reveals quite a lot about not *just* the “synagogue of Satan,” but also the *structure* of the first century church of God as well-something people do not really notice.

## **John’s Writings**

In the Gospel of John and the book of Revelation a pattern emerges that shows what the beliefs and structure were for the first century church and the Apostles.

In the Gospel of John *especially*, we read of the “Jews Passover” and the “Jews Feast of Tabernacles” and the “Jews Preparation Day,” (See John 7:2; 11:55; 19:42). *Why* does John use this language?

“John’s concern [was] to inform the reader that he is referring to the Passover of the Jews suggests that, to use Joachim Jeremiah’s words ‘He obviously *distinguishes* the Jewish Passover from the *Christian*’” (God’s Festivals, Biacchiocchi, p.73, emphasis added). John is literally revealing to the reader the *beliefs* of the church of God! He was *distinguishing* between the ***Jews Passover and Feast of Tabernacles*** from the ***Christian Passover and Feast of Tabernacles***.

Christ was “Our Passover,” Our “First fruits,” Our “Atonement,” and he “Tabernacled” among Us, (see 1 Corinth 5:7; 15:20; 1 John 2:2; John 1:14). To the Jews because they *rejected* Christ, He was none of those things. *So John had to distinguish between the two!*

“The keeping of the festivals ***was taken for granted***” (ibid, p.72, emphasis added). The *keeping* of these festivals were *never* up for discussion. So this means that there was a ***“Christian Preparation Day;” a “Christian Passover;” a “Christian Feast of Tabernacles” etc...***

This source agrees, "...the expression '**Jews**' in the fourth Gospel generally conveys the IDEA OF CONTRAST to the Disciples of Christ (for St. John vii.15)..." (Alfred Edersheim, *Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, p.309, emphasis added).

### **True Jews and Fake ones**

The *language* of Christ is the *same* in the book of Revelation! Jesus said, "*I know the blasphemy of them which say they are Jews, and are not, but are the synagogue of Satan.*" (Rev 2:9). It was *blasphemy* to claim to be a "Jew." What *kind* of Jew? A *true* Jew of the heart and *not* just the flesh as the Apostle Paul explains in the book of Romans. And Paul's theology comes from Deuteronomy 10:16.

Paul said of being *truly* a Jew, "For he is not a Jew, which is one outwardly; neither *is that* circumcision, which is outward in the flesh:

"But he *is* a Jew, which is one *inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit, and not in the letter* [meaning in name only]; whose praise *is* not of men, but of God." (Rom 2:28-29). True Jews are people who keep the law of God in their hearts-the true "Israel of God" (Rom 2:13; Gal 6:16).

Deuteronomy 10:16 says, "Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart, and be no more stiffnecked." This is a true Israelite-one who had the same heart as the "fathers" Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob who kept the laws of God (see Genesis 26:5).

Jesus said to Nathanael, "Behold an *Israelite* indeed, in whom is no *guile*!" (John 1:47). This is what a true Israelite is! One who does *not* sin but is obedient to God.

Notice in the early church, the leaders of the church told Paul. "Thou seest, brother, how many *thousands of Jews there are which believe; and they are all zealous of the law*" (Acts 21:20). The Jews by *race* were converting to Christ and becoming ***true Jews of the heart and the spirit***, not just the flesh! Jesus was calling it "blasphemy"-a person calling him/herself a "Jew" when they were *not* true believers in Christ. Clearly in John's writings he was showing a *contrast* between the true Jews and the fake ones.

These fake Jews were people who claimed to follow Jesus but it was *in name only*. Paul wrote of these people, "They profess that they know God; ***but in works they deny him***, being abominable, and disobedient, and unto every good work reprobate." (Titus 1:16). They did *not* keep the laws of God, but the laws and commandments of men. A True Jew that "knows" God is one "keep his commandments." (1 John 2:3).

The Apostle John called these people who did *not* “know” Jesus as “Anti-Christ.” These came out of the church of God, and started their own church, “*They went out from us*, but they were *not of us*; for if they had been of us, they would *no doubt* have continued with us: but *they went out*, that they might be made manifest that they were not all of us.” (1 John 2:19).

These *denied* Christ in their “works” and were called “Anti-Christ.”

“Who is a liar but he that denieth that Jesus is the Christ? *He is antichrist, that denieth the Father and the Son.*

“Whosoever denieth the Son, the same hath not the Father: *(but) he that acknowledgeth the Son hath the Father also.*” (1 John 2:22-23).

The commentaries also recognize this *contrast*. This one source writes: “It is treated as still an honourable one, implying religious privileges, as by St Paul in Rom 2:17; Rom 2:28-29; Rom 3:1. *Contrast the way that ‘the Jews’ are spoken of in St John’s Gospel...*” (Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges, emphasis added).

This reveals that the people in the church of God were calling themselves “Jews” and “Israelites” in the *true* sense. Not *just* the flesh as many of them were, but of the “spirit” and “heart.” This includes the gentiles who converted Christ as well. As Paul eloquently says in Romans, “Therefore if the *uncircumcision* keep the righteousness of the law, shall not his uncircumcision be counted for circumcision?” (2:26); and also in Galatians, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus.

“And if ye *be* Christ’s, *then are ye Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise.*” (3:28-29).

The Apostle Paul got this theology from the Old Testament. God all along wanted the Gentiles to join the covenant community. The Gentiles in the Old testament, when they converted to Yahweh were obligated to keep the law, and they were called “Israelites,” as it says, “And when a stranger shall sojourn with thee, and will keep the Passover to the LORD, let all his males be circumcised, and then let him come near and keep it; ***and he shall be as one that is born in the land***: for no uncircumcised person [unconverted] shall eat thereof.

“***One law*** shall be to him that is homeborn, and unto the [converted] stranger that sojourneth among you.” (Ex 12:48-49)

## Christian Synagogues

What of the “synagogue” that Jesus spoke of?

What is a synagogue? “Syn’agogue, a Jewish *place* of worship. The Greek, from which the word is immediately derived, denotes ‘an assembly;’ but afterwards, by a natural deflection of meaning, *came to designate the building in which such assembly met.*” (Popular Cyclopedia of Biblical Literature, by. Kitto, emphasis added). It was a “place” of worship. And we see this in the Gospels. (Mat 4:23; Mat 9:35; Mat 13:54; Mrk 1:39; Luke 4:15-33; Luke 13:10; Jhn 18:20; Acts 9:20; Acts 13:5-44; Acts 14:1; Acts 15:21; Acts 17:2; Acts 17:10; Acts 18:4; Acts 18:19; Acts 18:26).

Again, Jesus is *distinguishing* between the true Jews and the fake ones and the true places of worship, the *Christian* synagogues, as opposed to the *fake synagogues* that were Christian in *name only*; and since they claimed to be “Jews”, and were *not*, Jesus called it “Blasphemy.”

Notice, there is a person in the New Testament called “Sosthenes,” who is called “our Brother” (1 Corinthians 1:1). He was a brother in Christ, and he was “the chief ruler of *the* synagogue,” (Acts 18:17). Was this a Christian Synagogue?

The majority of the Christians were Jews at that time. They were persecuted by the non-believing Jews of Judaism in the Jewish Synagogues. Why shouldn’t the Christians create a “Christian” Synagogue to worship Christ on the Sabbath? (see Acts 15:21).

Robert Brow writes, “...the time soon came when a separate Christian synagogue *had to be formed*. This happened in Corinth, where the new church began meeting right next to the synagogue, and one of the first converts was Crispus, who had been its leader (Acts 18:1-18). In Ephesus Aquila and Priscilla had attended the synagogue as a kind of Christian advance party. *When Paul returned, the new Christ believing synagogue* was organized within three months in a rented hall (Acts 18:19f.; 19:1-9)...There are only a few examples in the book of Acts, but obviously this movement of *Christian synagogues forming in each city went on in waves across the Roman world and far to the east along the trade routes to India and China*...The first Christian synagogues were naturally organized in the same way as those that preceded them. In Jerusalem the apostles did not wish to be involved in the responsibilities of local eldership, so they asked the Church to elect elders to deal with their own administrative problems. It is usually assumed that

Stephen and the others appointed for this were ‘deacons,’ but Luke does not say this, and the functions performed by these men are typical of *synagogue* elders...In Jewish synagogues one of the elders often became the leader or president of the board of elders. He provided a center of administration, a postal address for communications, and the leadership continuity that a committee cannot give. Luke mentions Jairus (Luke 8:49), Crispus (Acts 18:8), and Sosthenes (Acts 18:17), as men who had this function” (see The original identity of elders and bishops was demonstrated by Bishop J.B. Lightfoot in the appendix on “The Christian Ministry,” Saint Paul’s Epistle to the Philippians, pp. 181-269.).

Similarly in Christian synagogues there was a natural development of the Bishop from among the elder bishops “...The greatest difference from Jewish synagogues was the admission of women to Christian synagogue membership. Whereas first-century Jewish synagogues had no place for women - even as members - Christian women were from the first accepted into full membership. Some of them became deaconesses, like Phoebe of Cenchrea (Rom. 16:1 )...” (The Church: An Organic Picture of Its Life Chapter 2, emphasis added).

The Apostle James in his letter wrote, “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;” (James 2:2). The word “assembly,” is (Gr. “sunagoge” Strong’s #4864).

Robertson’s Word Pictures writes, “The common word for the gathering of Jews for worship (Luke 12:11) and particularly for the *building* where they met (Luke 4:15, Luke 4:20, Luke 4:28, etc.)... It may seem a bit odd for a Christian church (ekklesia) to be termed sunagoge... Epiphanius (Haer. XXX. 18) states that the Ebionites call their church sunagoge, not ekklesia. In the fourth century an inscription has sunagoge for the meeting-house of certain Christians.” (emphasis added). Ekklesia is the people-God’s “called out ones.” *The Synagogue was the meeting place or building where they met to assemble.*

Christian synagogues were structured and formed in the same way as its Jewish counterparts, one exception being its female membership. These were Christian houses of worship.

So from these scriptures we can see that the first century church of God called themselves “Jews” “Israelites,” kept the festivals of God, and assembled in places of worship called “Synagogues” which assembled on the “Sabbath” (see Acts 16:13; the word “prayer” “Proseuchē” means, “Proseuchē is common in the lxx

and the N.T. for the act of prayer as in Acts 2:42 *then for a place of prayer either a synagogue (III Macc. Acts 7:20)* (Robertson's Word Studies).

### **The Synagogue of Satan**

What is this "synagogue of Satan"? Is it *one* synagogue or many?

Jesus calls it "*the* synagogue of Satan" since he is speaking of one *specific* place-Smyrna. However, there is *one* synagogue of Satan in Smyrna and *one* also in Philadelphia. These were *multiple places of worship*, and it does *not* just mean congregations of people. When people "assemble" they assemble in places of worship called "synagogues." And John says that there were "*many* antichrists." (1 John 2:18). So there were *multiple* communities of these "antichrists" fake "Jews," and "synagogues"-places of worship.

Again, the commentaries agree that Jesus is *distinguishing* between the Christian and the Satanic places of worship: "A synagogue of Satan (comp. Rev 3:9; Jhn 8:44). This is in *marked contrast* to 'the synagogue of the Lord' (Num 16:3; Num 20:4; Num 31:16). With the exception of James 2:2, συναγωγή is, in the New Testament, always used of Jewish *assemblies* [plural]..." (Pulpit Commentary, emphasis added)

"...*Contrast* the way that 'the Jews' are spoken of in St John's Gospel...the assembly of Christian Jews is called a 'synagogue' in St James 2:2, and almost in Heb 10:25." (Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges, emphasis added).

So what is the "Synagogue of Satan"?

These are people who *came out of the church of God*, but were, "not of us; for if they had been of us, they would *no doubt* have continued with us: but *they went out*, that they might be made manifest that they were not all of us." (v.19). These claimed to be true Jews, and *assembled in their own synagogues*, but deny Christ, not keeping the law of God but went their own way, established their own *houses of worship*, pretending to belong to God, but *living in opposition* to Him.

These are "deceivers" deceiving people claiming that they are the true Jews and that their way is the true way, their places of worship are the real place to gather for service and the day of gathering is of *their* choosing, not the day *God chose*-the Sabbath "This is a *deceiver* and an *antichrist*." (2 John 1:7).



The Apostle John gave an example of one of these people in the church of God who was “not of us,” “Diotrephes.”

This man, “who loveth to have the preeminence among them, receiveth us not. “Wherefore, if I come, I will remember his deeds which he doeth, *prating against us with malicious words*: and not content therewith, neither doth he himself receive the brethren, and forbiddeth them that would, and casteth *them* out of the church. “Beloved, *follow not that which is evil*, but that which is good. He that doeth good is of God: *but he that doeth evil hath not seen God.*” (3 John 1:9-11). When John speaks of “evil” in the church, many recognize what John meant, “He is warning, ‘Do not imitate the actions of this man, Diotrephes. He is doing exactly what Satan did....*Diotrephes was a ‘Satan in the flesh’*” (Forerunner Commentary, by Richard T. Ritenbaugh, emphasis added). No doubt Diotrephes started his own congregation and synagogue whom Jesus called a “synagogue of Satan.”

Eventually these communities were persecuting the true church of God, as Jesus said, “They shall put you out of the *synagogues*: yea, the time cometh, that whosoever killeth you will *think that he doeth God service.*” (John 16:2).

These Apostate communities eventually became the Apostate church we read in Revelation 17<sup>th</sup> chapter called “MYSTERY, BABYLON THE GREAT, THE MOTHER OF HARLOTS AND ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH.

“And I saw the woman [symbol of a church in prophecy Ephesians 5:31-32] *drunken with the blood of the saints, and with the blood of the martyrs of Jesus*: and when I saw her, I wondered with great admiration.” (Rev 17:5-6).

This church is also called the “little horn” of Daniel 7 and the “beast coming up out of the earth” in Rev 13:11. This has been identified as the Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches of this world with her Protestant daughters-a “Mother of Harlots.”

The Catholic Church when it had its grip on Europe for over 1000 years persecuted the true church of God, the Paulicians, the Waldenses etc...

Their *places* of worship, the churches, are modelled after the ancient Synagogues, in fact, “...there is ample proof, that the similarity between the primitive Christian Churches, and the Jewish Synagogues was so great, that they were often considered and represented by the persecuting Pagans *as the same.*” (The Synagogue as a Model for the Christian Church by Samuel Miller, emphasis added).

Clearly after leaving the true church of God, these fake Jews started building their own synagogues modelled after the true Christian and Jewish synagogues, and Jesus called them the “Synagogue[s] of Satan.”

### **Conclusion**

The “synagogue of Satan” in Revelation is not a blanket condemnation of any *ethnic group*, but rather a strong warning against *false believers, hypocritical religion, and spiritual opposition to Christ*-yet these still claiming to be the true followers of Jesus! Christ calls this “Blasphemy”! It reminds Christians that the true people of God are known not by empty claims or appearances, but by faith, obedience, and loyalty to Jesus Christ.