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"The Church That Meets In Your Home"

- Phm 2

Nearly without exception, today's churches gather into specially designed buildings for their Lord's Day meetings. Typically, the size of the edifice is seen as a measure of success (the bigger the better). Very small churches often rent storefronts or schools, hoping someday to have their very own "real" church building.

In contrast to this, the early church met almost exclusively in the homes of its members for the first three hundred years of its existence! Ac 2:46 and 5:42 records that the NT church met daily from house to house. Ac 12:12 makes reference to a prayer meeting in the home of John Mark's mother. Paul and Silas, after being released from the Philippian "pre-trial detention center," attended a meeting of Christians at Lydia's house (Ac 16:40). In Ac 20:20, Paul makes reference to his "house to house" teaching. We see in various NT letters references to churches in homes: the church in the home of Aquilla and Priscilla (Ro 16:35; 1 Co 16:19), Nympha (Col 4:15), and Philemon (Phm 2). The Apostle John commanded Christians not to allow false teachers in their home meetings (2 Jn 10), and James commands us not to show partiality to the wealthy person by giving him the best seat in the house and making the poor brother sit on the ottoman (Jas 2:3). When was the last time you saw a footstool in a church building?

It was not until Constantine's Edict of Milan (early fourth century A.D.) that believers began to meet in specially designed religious buildings. Why did the NT church prefer houses instead of larger meeting places? Was it a passing phase? Was it because of persecution? Was it due to poverty? Couldn't it simply have been a phenomenon of their culture? Or was it purposeful?

First, the fact that they met in houses broke with the accepted practices of both Judaism and the pagan religions of their day. The Jews had the one temple and multitudes of synagogues in which they met. The Greeks and Romans had shrines and temples for their gods and goddesses. It was the accepted practice of the day to meet in buildings designed for worship. The NT church actually went against that culture by meeting primarily in homes.

What was the reason for this break with the established religious tradition of meeting in buildings designed for worship? First, New Covenant believers themselves are God's house. Eph 2:20 states that we are "built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone." Heb 3:6 also speaks of us as being God's house. Peter refers to Christians as being "living stones" built into a spiritual house (1 Pe 2:5). 1 Co 3:16 and 6:19 tells us that we ourselves are God's temple—all of this in contrast to temples of stone and wood such as the Jews, Greeks, and Romans had. If believers are the living stones making up God's house, why would they need stone temples?

The house church is God's purposeful design. It is the NT pattern of meeting. Though this necessarily made for very small fellowships, God does not equate bigness with ability (1 Co 1:27-29). Indeed, the large size of a church is no indication of strength (blubber is not muscle). Nor does God need

programs to carry out his purpose for the church in the world (NT house churches turned the world upside down, Ac 17:6).

Furthermore, the church is to operate as a family, not as a business (Ga 6:10; Eph 2:19; 1 Ti 5:1-2). All the instructions given by the apostles were written with house churches in mind. They were geared to work in small group settings, not in large group settings.

Also, meeting in homes is conducive to the high level of intimacy that was present in the NT fellowship. In the NT, we find believers sharing all things in common. They were together constantly. They shared financially with each other. They prayed with each other. They encouraged one another to keep doing good. They rebuked each other. None of these things are possible without knowing what is going on in the lives of your fellow believers, and that requires a great deal of intimacy. The early church grew through multiplying house churches. When a church became too big, a new one was started. Any church that outgrows a living room setting will begin to lose its intimacy and accountability.

It is a design axiom that form follows function. Since God's design calls for a church whose members are accountable to one another, who encourage one another, who fellowship together, and who know each other, then it follows that the form of the church will be for each congregation to be small-no bigger than can fit into a home.

Several years ago, my uncle's house burned, destroying almost everything he had. On a Sunday shortly afterwards, he was walking out of church and as he shook the preacher's hand, the preacher asked him, "Mack, how's it going?" My uncle replied, "Oh, fine" and walked out. Some of you may be saying that he should have told him how much he was really hurting, but anyone who has ever been through a church receiving line knows that it's not a place you can share what's really going on in your life, and in a large church like that, who really wants to know?

Fellowship, as used in the NT, simply means sharing in common. Wherever it is used in the NT text, something is being shared. The basis of such fellowship is love. Jesus said, "by this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" (Jn 13:35). John wrote in his first letter, "let us not love with words or tongue but with action and in truth" (1 Jn 3:18). The NT house churches lived this out.

In Ac 2:44-45, we read that all the believers were together, had all things in common, and sold all their possessions and distributed to any who had need. It was a voluntary communism. As Paul states, "Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver." (2 Co 9:7) Paul commends the Philippians for aiding him financially (Php 4:15-16). He encouraged the Ephesian elders to work for a living so that they might support the weak (Ac 20:35). Ro 15:25-26 tells of a gift taken by the Macedonian churches to Jerusalem for the aid of the poor brethren. In 2 Co 8, Paul encourages the Corinthians to give to their aid as well. In John's third letter, Gaius is commended by the apostle for the hospitality he had shown to the brethren. There are many other such examples of fellowship. Some churches place a great deal of emphasis on correct doctrine. NT fellowship is just as important as correct doctrine, and, in fact, is one of the fruits of correct doctrine applied.

The phrase "breaking of bread" in the Greek of Ac 2:42 is so closely intertwined with fellowship that some scholars treat it as a hyphenated term, "fellowship-breaking of bread." We read in Ac 2 that the disciples regularly "broke bread in their homes and ate together" with gladness (v 46). We see elsewhere in the history of Acts that eating together was a regular activity of the NT Christians (Ac

20:11).

Christian fellowship occurs when Christians gather in a house church meeting, give financial help to a brother who needs it, help widows in the congregation, or share each others' hurts and joys. It should happen every day. "By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" (Jn 13:35).

Many dismiss early house churches as the result of persecution. However, any church history textbook will reveal that persecution prior to A.D. 250 was sporadic, localized and usually the result of mob hostility rather than the decree of a Roman official. This "persecution" myth also clashes with Scripture. Ac 2:46-47 describes home meetings at a time when the church was "enjoying the favor of all the people." When persecution did break out, meeting in homes didn't stop Saul from knowing just where to go to arrest believers (Ac 8:3). They obviously made no secret about where they met.

Others see house churches as a passing phase of infancy. The apostles, they suppose, expected the church of later centuries to build its own temples (like those of other religions). Unfortunately for this view, the early church was not anticipating a church beyond its own age. They expected Jesus' return in their lifetime (1 Co 1:7; 1 Th 1:10; Jude 21; 2 Pe 3:12; Tit 2:13).

But what of Ac 2:46; 5:12 and 19:9-10, where the church met in the temple courts and a rented lecture hall? Why does this not break the NT pattern? Jewish Christians in Jerusalem were allowed to continue practicing their Jewish customs (Ac 21:20-26; hence, the temple courts and Solomon's Porch). These same passages (2:46; 5:12) state that the Jews also followed the practice of meeting in homes. Incidentally, the temple in Jerusalem was demolished in A.D. 70 and has never been rebuilt. As regards the lecture hall, this was rented by an apostle for daily instruction, not for a regular church meeting. After two years, the apostle moved on and the lease expired! There is a big difference between an apostle's meeting and a regular church meeting.

Poverty is another explanation offered for the NT practice of home meetings. Yet 1 Ti 6:17-19 reveals that not all believers were impoverished. Indeed, where did the unbelieving Jews and Greeks get the money to construct their religious buildings? On a practical note, who is best able to sponsor missionaries, an institutional church of 1000 members that is saddled with a mortgage payment, utilities, janitorial fees, building maintenance and pastoral salaries-or a network of 1000 house church people with no staff to pay nor buildings to upkeep? According to a 1989 survey of U.S. Protestant congregations, 82% of church revenues go to buildings, staff and internal programs, leaving only 18% for outreach. With house churches the percentages are reversed! God's design is for the church to meet in houses because the size and setting of such churches best enables Jesus' teachings to be worked out in practice. The intimacy, accountability, community, and fellowship pictured as normal by the NT are best fostered in the smaller church-a house church.

- B.G.

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