

# The Church in the Home

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About three years ago my wife Kristi and I began a Bible fellowship in our home for a group of mostly high school age people. Although we already attended another home fellowship on a weekly basis, we also wanted to have our own fellowship where we could specifically help younger people to learn and put into practice the truths of the Bible. As a result of our personal experiences with these fellowships together with my own study of the scriptures my interest has continued to grow in the concept of the home church. I invite you to share in a study of this subject with me.

Even a cursory reading of the New Testament Letters clearly shows that the first century believers gathered together for fellowship in homes. Examples of this abound:

*Greet Priscilla and Aquilla, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus. They risked their lives for me. Not only I but all the churches of the Gentiles are grateful to them. Greet also the church that meets at their house (Rom. 16:3-5).*

*The churches in the province of Asia send you greetings. Aquilla and Priscilla greet you warmly in the Lord, and so does the church that meets at their house (I Cor. 16:19).*

*Give my greetings to the brothers at Laodicea, and to Nympha and the church in her house (Col. 4:15).*

*Paul a prisoner of Christ Jesus, Timothy our brother, to Philemon our dear brother and fellow worker, to Apphia our sister, to Archippus our fellow soldier and to the church that meets in your home (Phm. 1-2).*

Considering the time gap between Christian believers today and the early first century believers there is a natural question to ask: should we follow this pattern by having churches in our homes today? After all, the goal of Christianity is to apply the principles of truth and replicate the pattern of life that is set out for us in the New Testament.

The problem that may arise, however, is when we have a situation within the Bible that is strictly

controlled by the culture and times of those people. Certainly, we should not be bound to follow patterns that have no relevance to our lives today. The task at hand, then, is to assess the situation that the people of New Testament times found themselves in and to determine if in fact it applies to us now. In the subject at hand, we want to know specifically why the first century believers had churches in their homes?

To answer this question we will have to look at overall patterns and principles found within the New Testament, rather than at specific commands. We have to take into account Jesus and the early disciples and then work onwards to Paul and the vast extent of his "ministry to the Gentiles." Although there is quite a difference in cultural setting between the very first believers in Jerusalem and, say, the believers in Corinth, there is also a great deal of common ground on which almost all first century believers stood. For instance, there is the shared belief in Jesus, crucified and risen, exalted as Lord and Christ, and returning in the future to establish God's kingdom in a renewed earth (e.g. Acts 2:37; 3:18-21; I Cor. 15:1-4f). We also find the shared experience of receiving God's gift of holy Spirit - the firstfruits of their inheritance to come (Acts 2:17-21; Acts 11:15-18; Eph. 1:13; Heb. 6:4; etc.). Important to our study as well is the understanding of what the concept of "church" meant to the first century believers - especially so since its definition today among many people differs considerably from the New Testament definition.

We will begin with a brief synopsis of the first century churches' common understanding of who Jesus of Nazareth was. Although to different groups of people in different regions alternate titles or descriptions would have been used for Jesus - e.g. Son of God, Son of Man, Christ/Messiah, Wisdom of God, Word of God, Image of God, etc. - the concept of what he came to accomplish was constant. To all first century believers Jesus was the one whom God had foretold in the Old Testament period would come and fulfill the promises God had made to Israel to bring restoration and salvation through the mediation of his kingdom (rule) on earth (Luke 4:18-19; Luke 4:43; Matt. 26:63-64; etc.). He was also understood not only to be the bringer of salvation to Israel but to all who would believe in him. He tore down the barrier between Jew and Gentile and created in himself one body of believing

Jews and Gentiles who were reconciled to God (Eph. 2:14-18; Gal. 5:6; Acts 15:14-18; etc.).

It is the understanding of one body which begins to touch directly on our subject of the church. This one body was formed by people being baptized by/in one Spirit into Christ (I Cor. 12:12-13). The Spirit in which they were baptized was the foretold Spirit which God was to pour out in the last days on all people. It was, in fact, this initial outpouring of the Spirit which was the proof of Jesus' resurrection to those who had not seen him after his resurrection from the dead (Acts 2:1-39). This gift of the Spirit marked off the believing community from the rest of world for it was the seal placed on them by God guaranteeing their inheritance in his future kingdom (Eph. 1:13-14; II Cor. 1:21-22; 5:5). Therefore, these believers bound together in one body and sharers together in one hope stood as the "newly constituted" people of God, the community which God had chosen to be his very own (I Pet. 2:9; Titus 2:13-14; etc.).

The idea of these believers being the new covenant "people of God" helps us understand how they thought of themselves as "church." As the *New Bible Dictionary* (p. 205) states, "The English word 'church' is derived from the Greek adjective *kyriakos* as used in some such phrase as *kyriakon doma* or *kyriake oikia*, meaning 'the Lord's house,' i.e. a Christian place of worship." This is not, however, the way the word "church" was used in the New Testament! The word which is normally translated "church" in the New Testament is the Greek word *ekklesia*. This word *ekklesia* was used in the Septuagint (the oldest Greek version of the Old Testament) to "translate the Hebrew *qahal*, referring most often to the 'congregation of Israel, especially when it was gathered for religious purposes'"<sup>1</sup> (e.g. Deut. 31:30).

It is this concept of "church" that would have been the basis for the new covenant believers' use of this term. In fact, even in its secular usage the term *ekklesia* meant a group gathered for a purpose (e.g. Acts 19:32, 39, 41). But the first century believers were the "church" (gathered ones) of God in Christ (e.g. I Thess. 1:1). Nowhere in the Bible do we find the word "church" (*ekklesia*) being used of a building. Instead, *whenever* the new covenant

believers gathered and *wherever* the believers gathered we have "church." This is because when the believers got together it was as the new community in Christ assembled to enjoy the fellowship of Christ - by way of the Spirit and by way of the fellow members of the body.

Since we have touched on some of the issues that would have affected the first century believers outlook on what "church" was all about, we can now look at the historical situations which influenced their meeting in homes. Certainly, the example of Jesus meeting together with his disciples in different homes for teachings and meals (e.g. Matt. 12:46-13:1; Luke 10:38-39; Luke 22:7-14 the "upper room") would have laid a foundation for later practice. As can easily be seen in the above examples, the most intimate type of fellowship is possible in the confines of a home. It was also Jesus who instructed the first believers to come together for the "Lord's Supper" in remembrance of him - until he shared it with them again in the kingdom of God (Luke 22:14-20). This practice obviously continued throughout the first century among both Jewish and Gentile believers (I Cor. 11:17-32).

Beginning in Jerusalem the very first believers, who were all Jewish, began to teach that Jesus of Nazareth who had been crucified and raised from the dead was "both Lord and Christ" (Acts 2:36). Although this was the true fulfillment of the Jewish people's hopes, the majority of the Jewish people did not acknowledge this as being true. As the believers' efforts to persuade the masses of Jewish people that the Messiah had arrived continued they were naturally met with conflict by those who would not accept their message. Though at first the believers were tolerated in the Jewish center for worship, the temple (Acts 2:46), it was not long before they began to be driven away. The leaders of the Jewish people suppressed their message, removed them from the temple, and even commanded them "not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus" (Acts 4:17-18). Nevertheless, the believers continued to preach the good news of Jesus, both in the temple area and in homes as well. Acts 5:41-42 offers a good summary of their response:

*The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name. Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and*

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<sup>1</sup>Gordon Fee, *Gospel and Spirit*, Hendrickson Publishers, Inc. 1991, p. 124.

*proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Christ (Acts 5:41-42).*

After much persecution and the death of Stephen some of the believers were scattered to other regions and began to "preach the word wherever they went" (Acts 8:4). This, of course, brought them into conflict with the majority of the Jewish population in these new areas. Therefore, though believers such as Paul normally first went to the synagogues, they eventually had to meet in private homes so as to avoid persecution and so as to conduct orderly "churches" in the name of Christ.

It is, of course, to Paul that the majority of the Gentile mission of the first century church is attributed. His missionary outreach spanned far and wide. From the Book of Acts and from his Letters to the local churches he had founded it is obvious that most of these churches met in homes even though initially he spoke publicly in other places in winning

converts (Acts 20:20; etc.). Paul's own practice as recorded in Acts 28 should perhaps speak loudly to us a good general example to follow as we share the gospel message with others and endeavor to help believers to grow up into Christ.

*For two whole years Paul stayed there in his own rented house and welcomed all who came to see him. Boldly and without hindrance he preached the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ (Acts 28:30-31).*

In conclusion, it seems that though some of the reasons for the first century believers meeting in homes were culturally conditioned, it is also true that house churches represent many relevant principles which best kindle the spirit of what "church" is all about.