

The Church of Living God

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I can think of few greater joys and privileges in the Christian life than participating in and helping to oversee a home "fellowship" or home "church." The weekly home fellowship of which my wife and I are a part, and which we help to oversee, is the highlight of our week. For us - and for the others who participate in this fellowship - our weekly "church" is a wonderful way to share together the blessings and love which God has so freely and generously lavished upon us as his children (I John 3:1-2). Near the end of his life the apostle Paul wrote to Timothy about the importance of such churches:

*Although I hope to come to you soon, I am writing you these instructions so that, if I am delayed, you will know how people ought to conduct themselves in God's household, which is **the church of the living God, the pillar and foundation of the truth** (I Tim. 3:14-15).*

The New Testament records that the first century believers in Jesus Christ developed a pattern in which they met together regularly for the purpose of mutual edification and spiritual growth. This type of meeting, and the people who constituted it, was called in the Greek language an *ekklesia* - usually translated as "church" in our English Bibles. Normally these Christian "churches" took place in homes (e.g. Rom. 16:3-5; I Cor. 16:19; Col. 4:15; Phm. 2) - though there is nothing in the Bible about this being any sort of requirement. Most likely, the fact that churches met in homes was more of a practical matter for the believers of that time just as it is for many of us today. And just as today, a "church" can be effective in a home, in a building set apart for the purpose of these meetings or, in any combination of the two. It is not the place where the church meets that is special. It is the *people* and the *activities* of the Christian believers within that church that makes it special. The "holy" or "set apart" nature of a church is determined both by the presence of committed believers at the regular fellowship meetings and by our Christ-like relationships with each other - both inside and outside of those meetings. In this way each of these

churches will be a "pillar and foundation of the truth" for the people of the community or region in which it is located.

When the apostle Paul started house churches in the areas that he evangelized he normally wrote to, and revisited, these believers as often as he could. But he also "ordained" or "appointed" overseers, or elders, in each church which he founded. An example of this is set forth in Acts:

They preached the good news in that city and won a large number of disciples. Then they returned to Lystra, Iconium and Antioch, strengthening the disciples and encouraging them to remain true to the faith. "We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God," they said. Paul and Barnabas appointed elders for them in each church and with prayer and fasting, committed them to the Lord, in whom they had put their trust (Acts 14:21-23)

Though such a way of doing things is certainly ideal, it must be realized that our situations are far different today from those of the time of the apostle Paul. Certainly, with all the confusion prevalent in Christendom today we don't need to wait for someone to appoint us before we take it upon ourselves to start a home fellowship. If it is "on our heart" to start and oversee a fellowship its probably "of God." After all, as Paul himself later said, it is God himself, via his Spirit, that makes us "overseers" over his flock (Acts 20:28) - not the appointment by any man or organization.

As with most endeavors the central key in starting, building and maintaining a strong fellowship of believers is Christ-like leadership. In short: somebody's got to do what it takes to make it happen. Somebody has to be willing to witness to new people, to contact existing believers and to open their home on a regular basis to be a place where likeminded believers can meet so as to grow together as God's people. Of course, to do this right takes commitment, time and just plain work. It means cleaning the house (or at least part of it), allotting time (even at the expense of a favorite TV program) and maybe even spending a little money on coffee and refreshments (God help us though when this becomes the central focus of our meetings). And of course it means co-ordinating how the meeting will be run including such activities as: prayer, singing,

manifestations of the Spirit and a teaching or sharing from the Bible.

Of course, all of the above activities are really the kinds of things that many people *could* do - if they would simply *decide* to do so. And this brings to mind one of my favorite verses in the New Testament. It is I Timothy 3:1 as set forth in the *New International Version* of the Bible. It states:

Here is a trustworthy saying: If anyone sets his heart on being an overseer, he desires a noble task (I Tim. 3:1 NIV).

The key factor here is simply whether or not a person will *decide* to "set his heart on being an overseer." If a person does decide to do this, Paul says that "he desires a noble task." Unfortunately, in most of our western societies today those professing Christian believers with the most "ability" to oversee fellowships often have the least "availability" to do so since they are using the natural leadership ability they have in other ways such as in their business, profession, family activities, etc. All of these activities can, of course, be good - and godly - when done from the right perspective. However, it is just such people who could - and many times *should* - be the examples for other believers by making their own lives available to help oversee a home fellowship or church. Then other believers could benefit from their knowledge, ability and example - all to the edification of the body of Christ and to the greater witness of God's family to the world. In short, we should always remember that helping to oversee a fellowship of believers is indeed a "noble task."

Since many of the people who read this newsletter also participate in some sort of regular home fellowship that is very similar to the pattern and purposes of the original first century churches, it is easy for us to relate to the close spiritual and personal fellowship that these first century believers enjoyed. Indeed, we must remember that it is the *relationships* we build with God and with each other - based on our common life in Christ - that will sustain us for a life-time, not special doctrines or organizations. Though sound doctrine and teaching are certainly important (Titus 1:9), dogmatism can choke the life out of any fellowship - no matter how "right" the doctrine may be. That is why love must always be primary in any fellowship of believers. We must remember that it takes time to learn, time to grow and time to knit all of our hearts together in the love of Christ.

May God grant that each of our "churches" strengthen and magnify the even greater "Church" of the body of Christ as we fellowship together in love and continue to grow up into Christ in all things. As the Book of Hebrews exhorts:

Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another - and all the more as you see the Day approaching (Heb. 10:23-25).