

Why House Church?

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House churches worldwide are growing as never before. Ironically, this movement is the antithesis of the mega-church dream pursued in an age when "bigger is better." What is the house church ideal, and why do some Christians pursue it?

What is a House Church?

A house church is a group of Christians who meet regularly in the intimacy of homes rather than in formal church buildings. No one denies that the earliest Christians met in houses. The book of Acts regularly describes Christian assemblies in peoples' homes (Acts 2:42; 5:42; 20:20). Church meetings are recorded in the homes of John's mother (Acts 12:12), Lydia (Acts 16:40), Aquilla and Priscilla (Rom. 16:3-5; 1 Cor. 16:19), Gaius (Rom. 16:23), Nympha (Col. 4:15), and Philemon (Philem. 2).

The Theology of Church

Was this practice pragmatic, or was there a theology behind it? One of the linchpins of new covenant truth is that every member of the body is uniquely gifted to contribute to the edification of the whole. What better way to express this reality than by meeting in small groups in the intimacy of homes? Otherwise, we may be tempted to cast our religious activities in the role of old covenant institutions.

Consider these common features of church life today. Many Christians assemble in church buildings frequently called "houses of God." They gather in the "sanctuary" (the consecrated, holy room for worship), often with an "altar" in front. They listen to "the ordained minister" as he "preaches" and presides over the "sacraments." He alone is authorized to do many of these activities, including pronouncing the "benediction" at the close of the service. All of this runs counter to new covenant truth as revealed in the Scriptures. After all, "the Most High does not live in houses made by men" (Acts 7:48, NIV), so it cannot be proper to speak of "the house of God" as if the church building were a temple. Nor do altars have relevance for the new covenant church, since Christ's sacrifice on the cross fulfilled the old covenant's sacrificial system (Heb.

8-10). Similarly, the new covenant leaves no room for sanctuaries or holy places.

For that matter, who are the "ordained ministers" in the body of Christ? According to *Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary*, "ordain" means "to invest officially with ministerial or priestly authority." When Christ died on the cross, the curtain of the temple was torn in two, indicating that no longer would people need the mediation of a priesthood and temple to approach God. At that moment a new covenant was sealed and all believers, not just a privileged few, were ordained as priests (1 Pet. 2:5; Rev. 1:6). Furthermore, all believers are called to ministry. The primary purpose of church leaders is not "to minister," but "to equip the saints for the work of ministry" (*Eph. 4:12, NRSV*).

In other words, by God's reckoning all Christians are ordained ministers. Thus the priesthood of all believers, a well-known Protestant doctrine, is implicitly denied whenever a denominationally-ordained "minister" exercises his *exclusive* authority to preach the gospel or pronounce a benediction like that described in Numbers 6:22-27. These are priestly privileges which should be open to all believers, regardless of seminary education or ecclesiastical rank.

The Practice of Church

According to the New Testament, Christians are to meet together to exhort one another, urging one another on to good deeds (cf. Heb. 10:24,25). Scripture is replete with this language of "one another." Yet how often is this Scriptural principle negated by the fact that only one person in the church (the pastor) does all the exhorting? Strange as it may seem, the preaching of the gospel rarely happened in church assemblies throughout the New Testament period. The word "preach" or "proclaim" (*kerusso*) always occurs with reference to evangelizing outside of the church. What happened within the church was not "preaching," but "teaching." Such teaching was not a polished oratory or a thirty-minute monologue, but a give-and-take dialogue. For example, in Acts 20:7, we read that Paul "spoke (Gr. *dielegeto*) to the people" (NIV). The word *dielegeto* implies more of a "dialogue" than an oratory. The teacher was accountable to the church for what he said (cf. Acts 17:11). By

contrast, how would we be received in the church today if we interrupted a "pastor's sermon" with questions?

The early church regularly assembled in members' homes to share the Lord's Supper (Acts 2:42,46; 20:7; 1 Cor. 11:20; Jude 12). This was a complete meal accompanied by a single loaf of bread and cup of wine, visible symbols of their unity (1 Cor. 10:16,17). This shared communion, not a sermon, was the focal point of their meeting. They also prayed, studied Scripture, and sang together, but always with the purpose of edifying the body (cf. Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16). Everyone, not just a few people, came with something to share - like a song, a teaching, or a spiritual gift (1 Cor. 14:26).

The Leadership of the Church

In the context of this mutual, one-another ministry, the New Testament church had no need for a one-man minister. Each church was led by example by a group of mature people, not a one-man pastor fresh out of Bible college. These leaders were known interchangeably as "pastors," "elders," and "overseers." For example, Paul called together the "elders" of the Ephesian church (Acts 20:17), addressed them as "overseers," and asked them to "shepherd" or "pastor" the church (v. 28; cf. also 1 Pet. 5:1,2). There were no "grades" of authority among leaders; elders were pastors and pastors were elders.

Timothy and Titus are often cited as exceptions - individual pastors who presided over elders. But they were traveling evangelists, not established pastors/elders (cf. 2 Tim. 4:5,9-13,21; Tit. 1:5; 3:12). The number of pastors/elders appointed in the churches was always plural (cf. Acts 14:23; Phil. 1:1; Tit. 1:7).

The Rise of the Clergy

In the second century, however, individual leaders began to rise in the churches. "Pastors" began to emerge from the groups of "elders" and began to assume far more than their share of ministry. In the third century, these leaders became the upper echelon of a "clerical" [priestly] order as distinguished from "the laity" [the people]. This is one reason that pastoral burdens today are so great - one man (the pastor) is often expected to be the church's theologian, speaker, teacher, evangelist,

administrator, and counselor. Growing churches in the second and third centuries began to stop multiplying as small house churches, and people began to donate their houses for renovation as church edifices. In the fourth century, Christians began erecting large basilicas to accommodate church assemblies. Moving out of living rooms and dining rooms into larger structures made the Lord's Supper logistically difficult to share. As a result, the loaf and the cup were separated from the meal, and the interpersonal meal with its informal fellowship was discontinued. However, the communion experience remained the focal point of the church's time together.

During the Reformation, Protestants wanted to downplay subjective experience and emphasize doctrine. To this end they moved the "mass" from the center of the service and replaced it with "the preaching of the Word." Communion became even less important and the polished sermon became the focal point of the church's experience. Professing the priesthood of all believers in name only, Protestant "ministers" continued to function in the capacity of priests. And so they continue - well-intentioned as they are - to this day.

House Church Life

The most effective way to reclaim the simplicity of the New Testament's church life is to follow its principles and patterns. Without real estate, buildings, staff salaries, utilities, and mortgages, the church's financial resources can be reallocated for more effective ministry. Without pulpits, pews, or sermons, the church can be free to pursue the mutual ministry of every believer in the assembly. Mutual participation is far more attainable in the small-group setting of living rooms. Furthermore, without the limitations of a church building's size, house churches can multiply indefinitely.

Are these teachings too incredible? Do they seem unrealistic and impracticable? Consider visiting a house church or studying the issue deeper. You may find that house church is the key to renewal in Christendom today.

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