

# Church Buildings or House-Churches?

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## Biblical and Practical Advantages for Meeting Within Homes

By Darryl M. Erkel

Whenever we think of planting churches, we imagine the process as starting within a home and, eventually, ending with the purchase of a building. We tend to pity those who do not have the means to secure their own "sanctuary." We might even look upon them as "second-class" churches because they lack the apparent amenities of a spacious building. But should house-churches really be pitied? Are they truly "second-class" churches? The following truths will help to answer such questions and, hopefully, demonstrate the practical wisdom of gathering within homes over large, religious edifices.



1. For the first three-hundred years of its existence, the Church of Jesus Christ met almost exclusively in private homes, as opposed to large buildings specially designed for religious services (Acts 20:20; Romans 16:5; 1 Corinthians 16:19; Colossians 4:15; Philemon v.2; 2 John v.10). Howard Snyder notes that "Christians did not begin to build church buildings until about A.D. 200. This fact suggests that, whatever else church buildings are good for, they are not essential either for numerical growth or spiritual depth. The early church possessed both these qualities, and the church's greatest period of vitality and growth until recent times was during the first two centuries A.D. In other words, the church grew fastest when it did not have the help or hindrance of church buildings" (*The Problem of Wineskins*, p.69).

2. There is nothing wrong about meeting in a building per se. However, if a group chooses to do so it must be careful to not erect a structure or procure internal furnishings which stifle mutual edification and participation from the saints (e.g., pulpit, pews, a rigid "order of worship," etc.). In other words, any property or building must be held lightly and should be an expression of a clear biblical understanding of the true nature of the church. Buildings, therefore, should be *functional* and *conducive* to the body-life principles of the New Testament (Romans 12:4-8; 1 Corinthians 12:4-14; 14:12,26-32; Ephesians 4:11-16; Colossians 3:16; Hebrews 10:24-25; 1 Peter 4:10-11). Structure, you see, *is* important, for

the structure of your congregational meetings can either liberate the saints for ministry, or it can suppress genuine interaction and participation!

3. Homes are conducive to the family concept and mutual edification which should mark the gatherings of Christians. It is amazing how "religious" and tight-lipped people get when they enter a church building. The setting and furnishings all give the impression that one has entered the holy of holies and that the only thing expected of him or her is to be silent and "maintain an attitude of worship." What a contrast this is with the atmosphere and setting of the house-church where the saints interact, serve and fellowship with one another! Mutual edification is much easier in a home than in the more traditional church setting. Many people have difficulty sharing burdens or a word of exhortation in a common church structure, but such difficulties are greatly reduced when the assembly meets in a home.

4. To speak of a "church building" is to apply a wrong and misleading name since, according to the New Testament, God's "building" or "temple" is *not a pile of bricks* but, instead, the people of God – "You are God's field, God's building" (1 Corinthians 3:9, 16-17; 6:19; Hebrews 3:6; 1 Peter 2:5). Is it not obvious that our ecclesiastical traditions have distorted the clear teaching of Scripture? Walter Oetting writes, "If you had asked, 'Where is the church?' in any important city of the ancient world where Christianity had penetrated in the first century, you would have been directed to a group of worshipping *people* gathered in a house. There was no special building or other tangible wealth with which to associate 'church,' *only people!*" (*The Church of the Catacombs*, p.25).

5. A home is a much better setting for the celebration of the Lord's Supper which, by the way, is an informal, full-on meal (Matthew 26:17-29; 1 Corinthians 10:16-22; 11:17-34). The late William Barclay once said, "There can be no two things more different than the celebration of the Lord's Supper in a Christian home in the first century and in a cathedral in the twentieth century. The things are so different that it is almost possible to say that they bear no relationship to each other whatsoever. The liturgical splendor of the twentieth century was in the first century not only unthought of; it was totally impossible" (*The Lord's Supper*, p.101).

6. To spend large sums of the Lord's money on building projects, maintenance and renovation is a waste of God's money (at least in most cases). It is to squander money on that which is to perish. Instead of using such funds to send out more church planters, feed the poor, assist needy believers, and promote the spread of the Gospel, we "evangelicals" have used it to build elaborate cathedrals and huge auditoriums which, in most cases, are

only used once or twice a week. Is this being a good steward of the financial resources which God provides? How many churches even stop to consider the necessity of a church building in the first place? Do you think that on the great day of judgment Christ will be pleased with our plush and gaudy edifices? Does it grieve your heart that most "evangelical" churches have a larger budget for building projects, staff salaries, and maintenance than for missions, the poor, and people-oriented ministries? What does this reveal about our priorities?

**7.** The building of permanent and extravagant structures appears to betray our belief that Christ is coming soon and that, as believers, we are a pilgrim people. One brother has said it well, "To spend wasted money and time building large, beautiful places of worship knowing that the Lord might come at any time was unthinkable to the New Testament church. The fact that the church today has no problem with the idea of spending both time and money building large, extravagant buildings is really only a reflection of just how much we're *not* expecting Jesus to come back any time soon! The church of the first century followed in the footsteps of Abraham and other Old Testament saints who were "looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God" (Hebrews 11:10) . . . The question must be asked, has today's church demonstrated this 'alien' mindset by its plethora of building plans? Or is it rather the case that our actions show forth a materialistic mindset that has been conformed to this world; one that reasons to the effect that 'We're going to be here for a while so we might as well settle down and get comfortable?'"

**8.** House-Churches are an effective witness to unbelievers. Meeting within a home means that the Gospel and brotherly, Christian love becomes audible and visible to all. The unbeliever, therefore, observes our fellowship and hospitality as well as hears our prayers and songs. While it is not the only method of witnessing that God may use, it is an effective one.

**9.** The idea that Christians must meet in specially designed buildings is contrary to the New Testament which places no significance on *where* one chooses to worship (John 4:20-24; Acts 17:24). In fact, such an emphasis on buildings, temples, and external furnishings comes from an Old Testament economy and not from the New Covenant which attaches no importance to such matters.

**10.** Some have supposed that if Christians were to meet in homes, a great deal of reverence would be lost. The "service" would lose its formality and the proper reverence directed toward God would diminish. But this argument *assumes* that a Christian gathering is to be

"formal," whereas we know from the New Testament that early church meetings were quite simple and informal. They were nothing like the highly liturgical and formalistic meetings that mark our places of worship. Moreover, we must remember that reverence is the attitude of one's heart toward God and is, therefore, not dependent upon its external surroundings. Besides, why can't reverence for God be maintained within the house-church setting?

**11.** It is not necessarily "cultic" to meet in a home. A group is considered "cultic" when its doctrines deviate from Scripture; when it possesses an authoritarian form of leadership; or when individual members are not permitted freedom of thought – *not simply because it chooses to meet within a home!* In fact, the "cultic" argument against house-churches is really counterproductive, for many cults and false religions own vast amounts of property or religious buildings (e.g., Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons, Christian Science, Masons, Islam, et al.). Should we assume that these groups are legitimate simply because they possess "official" places of worship? Furthermore, many Christian denominations, which own large churches and property, are not always free themselves from false or aberrational teachings, apostasy or unfaithful pastors? Thus, meeting in an "official" church building is no guarantee that a congregation will be free from cultism or heresy. We must remember the words of John Newton: "Let not him who worships under a steeple condemn him who worships under a chimney."

**12.** Historically, many renewal movements which helped to correct the abuses of the established and institutional churches, have met within homes (e.g., the Anabaptists, Mennonites, the Methodist "class" meetings, the early Brethren movement). Thus, contemporary evangelicals must remember better their ecclesiological heritage and roots.

**13.** Persecution has historically forced Christians to abandon official church buildings and meet within homes where, instead of growing weak because they must gather in houses, they have grown strong, close-knit, and learned more fully what it means to be the family of God. *It has been the house-church model which has most consistently promoted such qualities, not the church building model.*

**14.** The house-church is a culturally relevant model which can be adapted in any geographical region or culture. This is not necessarily so when attempting to erect a church building in a foreign country, for not only do building permits have to be secured before the church can "officially" gather (in some cases taking several months to obtain), but the building itself is often viewed with suspicion and identified more with the "Americanization" of their culture and land. By establishing churches within the existing

homes, people will tend to feel less threatened by foreign missionary structures and more apt to participate in a setting that is both familiar and comfortable. Roland Allen, in his classic work, *Missionary Methods: St. Paul's or Ours?* (Grand Rapids: Wm.B. Eerdmans, 1962), warns of the hindrances which church buildings bring when erected in foreign lands:

By our eagerness to secure property for the church we often succeed in raising up many difficulties in the way of our preaching. We sometimes, especially perhaps in such a country as China, arouse the opposition of the local authorities who do not desire to give foreigners a permanent holding in their midst. We occasionally even appeal to legal support to enforce our right to purchase the property, *and thus we begin our work in a turmoil of strife and excitement which we might have avoided . . .* Now the purchase of land and the establishment of foreign missions in these establishments, especially if they are founded in the face of opposition from the local authorities, naturally suggest the idea of a foreign domination. The very permanence of the buildings suggests the permanence of the foreign element. The land is secured, and the buildings are raised, in the first instance by the powerful influence of foreigners. That naturally raises a question in the native mind why these people should be so eager to secure a permanent holding in their midst. They naturally suspect some evil ulterior motive. They suppose that the foreigner is eager to extend his influence and to establish himself amongst them at their expense (pp.53,55).

**15.** The church building model, with its plush carpeting, soft pews, and various attempts to encourage a family-home atmosphere, will never fully achieve its goal because, from the outset, it's the wrong setting and structure. *Unconsciously, it is desperately trying to be a house-church, but never will.* It wants all the benefits and blessings which meeting in a home brings, but is unable to shed its rigid and institutional shell.

**16.** The argument that the early church was forced to meet within homes because of persecution will not stand for the following reasons: (1) Persecution of Christians was not as intense and widespread as is commonly assumed. It was sporadic and did not necessarily affect all the churches at the same time. (2) When persecution did arise, they primarily gathered in the catacombs where greater safety and privacy could be found. (3) Even when persecution did break out, the early Christians made it no secret where it met; hence Saul knew just where to go when he sought to imprison Christians (*Acts 8:3*). The interesting point here is that when believers were faced with persecution, *many of them still continued*

*to meet within homes.* This demonstrates a continued preference, even in the face of hostility, for the house-church model.

**17.** Even the great Protestant Reformer, Martin Luther, believed in and understood the value of having Christians meet within homes in order to have their services. In fact, Luther wrote about three types of divine services. The Latin liturgy and the German service were for the unlearned people, many of whom were not even believers. Those services should continue, he believed, for the primary purpose of evangelism. However, a third kind of service was most needful – a "truly evangelical" one. It would be held privately for those "who want to be Christians in earnest and who profess the Gospel with hand and mouth." Luther describes such a gathering:

[They] should sign their names and *meet alone in a house* somewhere to pray, to read, to baptize, to receive the sacrament, and to do other Christian works. According to this order, those who do not lead Christian lives could be known, reproved, corrected, cast out, or excommunicated, according to the rule of Christ ([Matthew 18](#)). Here one could also solicit benevolent gifts to be willingly given and distributed to the poor, according to St. Paul's example ([2 Corinthians 9](#)). Here would be no need of much and elaborate singing. Here one could set out a brief and neat order for baptism and the sacrament and center everything on the Word, prayer, and love (cf. Ulrich S. Leupold, *Liturgy and Hymns*, Vol.53 of *Luther's Works*, ed. Helmut T. Lehman [Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1965] pp.53ff).

Luther confessed, however, that he did not have the people to implement such an important task (this is because church attendance in Protestant territories was compulsory and also because a high percentage of the members were unregenerate):

As yet I neither can nor desire to begin such a congregation or assembly or to make rules for it. For I have not yet the people or persons for it, nor do I see many who want it. But if I should be requested to do it and could not refuse with a good conscience, I should gladly help and do my part as best I can.

***What needs to be understood here is that Luther was not talking about a small group within a large parish. Rather, he was talking about small house-churches with their own sacramental practice and ministry of the Word!***

**18.** The kind of church meeting described in the New Testament suggests a small group setting as its primary worship context. Much of what the New Testament records about early church gatherings will not fit into the large group meeting, no matter how much we try to force it. Paul's exhortations to the various churches *presupposes* the small group or house-church setting:

The size of the house-church becomes a crucial factor for the relative effectiveness of other New Testament church practices as well. The Lord's Supper (properly conducted with one loaf and one cup), the Love Feast, mutual participation, etc., are all essential elements of a church meeting; yet all have been fully or partially abandoned in today's church simply because these practices are no longer functional. Why have they ceased to be functional? It must be kept in mind that the letters which are written to the New Testament churches are in fact written to *house-churches*. Because they are written to house-churches the instructions contained in them are geared to work in a small group setting – they were never *meant* to work in a large group setting. Consequently, they *don't* work in a large group setting. To attempt to apply New Testament church practices to our contemporary large church is just as unnatural as pouring new wine into old wineskins ([Matthew 9:17](#)). Ironically, the institutional church structure has attempted to rectify this by abandoning the "new wine" and holding on to the "old wineskins." Consequently, today's church more closely resembles Judaism or Catholicism than it does *New Testament Christianity* ("Toward A House-Church Theology" [Part 2] *New Testament Restoration Newsletter* [October – 1991, Vol.1/No.6] p.2).

*Written by Darryl M. Erkel (1997)*

**Suggested Reading:**

Del Birkey, *The House Church: A Model for Renewing the Church* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1988).

[ed. Steve Atkerson] *Toward A House-Church Theology* (Atlanta, GA: New Testament Restoration Foundation, 1996).

John R. Davis, "How Church Structures Can Effectively Help or Hinder Church Growth," *Evangel* (Autumn – 1992), pp.73-83.

Robert Banks, *Paul's Idea of Community* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers Reprint, 1994). See also Robert & Julia Banks, *The Church Comes Home* (Australia: Albatross Books, 1986).

Frank A. Viola, *Rethinking the Wineskin: The Practice of the New Testament Church* (Brandon, FL: Present Testimony Ministry, 1997).

Lois Barrett, *Building the House Church* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1986).