

THE CHURCH IN THE HOME

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IT IS A matter of history that for the first two hundred years after Christ the church never had special buildings of their own, and when at last they did the art of exhortation degenerated into the issuing of commands. Many groups which began in homes and have now become well-known organizations have lost out in spiritual effectiveness since they moved into special buildings for their gatherings. This has not happened suddenly. A special building is not a sin but merely a sincere effort to glorify God, which may ultimately involve more drawbacks than advantages.

A study of the Acts of the Apostles and the epistles of the New Testament, especially the epistles of Paul, confronts us with the church in the home. Four times *“the church in the home”* is specifically mentioned. For instance, the apostles wrote letters to churches and to individuals and sent greetings to or from the church in So-and-So’s house. In Romans 16:5 we read, *“Likewise greet the church that is in their house”* (the house of Aquila and Priscilla). In I Cor. 16:19 we read, *“The churches of Asia salute you. Aquila and Priscilla salute you much in the Lord, with the church that is in their house.”*

And from scriptures like this we gather the idea that the church in the home of Priscilla and Aquila was a firmly established church of that time. Again, in Col. 4:15 we read: *“Salute the brethren which are in Laodicea, and Nymphas, and the church which is in his house.”* And then in Philemon verse 2 we hear Paul addressing himself to Philemon and the church in his house.

Not one single instance can be found in the New Testament where the early Christians ever built what we call a house of worship. Sometimes they will meet down by the riverside where Paul will preach and God will open Lydia’s heart that she will attend upon the Word. In Jerusalem for a while the temple was used as a place of public testimony, but also in addition to the public testimony in the temple every house of every believer was a place of meeting. We need to carefully note Acts 2:46 and then read with great care Acts 5:42. For a while, you understand, before the Jews really came to understand the issue, Jewish believers were welcome in the temple and were asked to speak.

When the temple was denied the preachers, then only the house remained. Then Paul and others journeyed into Gentile domain, and being Jewish believers, were permitted for a while to preach in synagogues. There the God-fearing people and the proselytes whose hearts God had been opening and preparing, He saved, and out of them little groups called New Testament churches gathered. But later, as the issue was more clearly defined and the Jewish people understood its implications, the synagogues were closed

to the preachers of the gospel, and then only the house or “*the church in the home*” remained. Over twenty times in the Acts of the Apostles and in the epistles we read of believers carrying out their united worship in the home of a believer. The word “*church*” is, of course, of Latin origin. The Greek word translated “*church*” in our Authorized Version is “*ekklesia*” and it means “*the called out ones.*” EK equals out from; KALEO means to call. This word is also translated “*assembly.*” The word “*church*” or “*assembly*” is found 115 times in the New Testament. It is used once for a town council (Acts 19:39), and twice for a mob or unlawful council (Acts 19:32-41). The word “*church*” or “*assembly*” is used twice for Israel in the old covenant (Acts 7:38). But the word “*church*” is used 110 times for the body of Christ or believers.

The church is not:

- (1) A building.
- (2) A denomination.
- (3) An organization, nor
- (4) Many bodies organized, such as synods, conventions, associations, denominations, Church of England, etc.

The church is:

- (1) A body of believers. Read carefully Eph. 4:4 and I Pet. 2:5.
- (2) A fellowship—one fellowship.
- (3) A living (not organization but) organism. The church as one body is clearly shown in such passages as I Cor. 12, Romans 12, Col. 1:18 and Eph. 1:22-23.

The church is a body of called out ones. Read chapter two of Ephesians, especially verses 19 and 22. The church is a “*building,*” yes, but it is a building that is being built by the Holy Spirit, not with brick and mortar and hammer and nails—and it is a building indwelt by God the Holy Spirit. It has Christ as the Chief Cornerstone and the Foundation of the church, as to order, structure and doctrine, as outlined here in this passage.

Well-nigh buried under the elaborate structures which man has built upon it is the church (so-called) of today—but God’s purpose concerning His true church has not changed.

Let’s review just a moment the assembly of called out ones. It is the building of God. It is the household of God. It is the body of Christ. It is the pillar and ground of truth. It is a holy temple. It is the habitation of God. It is a heavenly colony sojourning here on earth, bearing witness in the power of the Holy Spirit to the risen, ascended, glorified Lord. That is the church.

It is important to get fixed in our minds that the early church was taught to regard itself not merely as a collection of saved individuals but as active members of the body of Christ. Not only did all believers form the one body universal, but each group functioned as the body locally. In each of the three cases where these are mentioned (Rom. 12; I Cor. 12; Eph. 4) is no suggestion of only one man ministering to the whole group but each is shown as having the privilege of possessing some spiritual gift and the

responsibility to minister this gift to the rest of the saints so that every believer is looked on as a minister to the rest. Modern research in education has shown that we learn little by merely listening, but when we try to impart what we know to others we really begin to master our subject. This shows us the wisdom of God in planting the church, not as a vast congregation of listeners, but as a small body sharing with each other what they learn from the Holy Spirit.

The picture we have of the early church, therefore is something very simple but very vital. Whenever two or three would gather together in the name of the Lord, there they would expect to find their once crucified, now risen Lord present in the midst of them. They would also expect the Holy Spirit to work in each of them and share with each other what was thus revealed. In Col. 3 we read, *“Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly...teaching and admonishing one another”*—and this was addressed to a whole congregation, not simply to one man we call the pastor.

As the Holy Spirit worked in the midst, some or all of the gifts of the Spirit mentioned in I Cor. 12 would be manifested for He divided severally to every man as He chose. Each would himself be edified by His gift, and those who heard would likewise be blessed. As each small group divided, and so grew into a number of groups, these continued in fellowship with each other, and all of the small gathering in one city would together form the church of God in Ephesus or wherever it might be. Yet each group would have no say in the way another was carried on. The Lord was the Head of each and worked in each as He saw fit, but they would be free to exhort and admonish each other, though not to command.

We find that this true church did not usually get on well with organized religion, but if there was a division it always came about by the organized religious group casting out the true believers. Until this happened, we find the position pictured in Acts 2:46, *“Continuing daily...in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house.”*

by Evangelist Rolfe Barnard (1904-1969)