

## 4. SMALL CONGREGATIONS

**Introduction:** *Instead of 1,000 people all in the same church, might it be better to have them spread out into 10 different churches?*

**ESV Study Bible:** “Early Christian churches, since they were small and not recognized as a legitimate (or legal) religion, met in homes.... There is extensive archaeological evidence from many cites showing that some homes were structurally modified to hold such churches.”<sup>1</sup>

**Fact:** The early church met almost exclusively in the private homes of its members. The main reason for this may have been persecution. Regardless of *why* they did it, the fact is that every New Testament letter that was written to an illegal congregation that met secretly in someone’s home. This necessarily meant that each congregation was smaller rather than larger—not thousands of people in a single congregation, not hundreds in the same gathering, but scores of believers. Arguably, the ecclesiology presented in the epistles was designed to work in smaller contexts.

**Premise:** Smaller churches have strategic, divinely-designed size advantages:

- Smaller settings foster intimacy, unity, love and accountability.
- The relationships described in the NT work best where everyone knows everyone else.
- A loving, family-like atmosphere is more easily developed.
- The many “one another” exhortations can be more realistically lived out.
- Church discipline takes on genuine significance.
- Disciple making is personal and natural.
- Participatory meetings are more suitable for smaller settings.
- Celebrating the Lord’s Supper as an actual family meal is more natural.
- Achieving congregational consensus is easier.

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**1. What is the definition of the Greek word for “church” (*ekklésia*)?** In English, the word church commonly refers to a building (example: “The church lies in ruins”). However, the Greek word for church, *ekklésia*, **was** never used to refer to a building. It refers to a meeting, not the meeting place; to the church not the church house. Thus, for example, when we read about the church in in Corinth, we should never envision a church building, but rather a gathering of people.

**Donald Guthrie** (NT Scholar, London Bible College): “... the expression ‘in church’ ... refers to an assembly of believers. There is no suggestion of a special building. Indeed, the idea of a church as representing a building is totally alien to the NT.”<sup>2</sup>

**2. Under the Old Covenant, God gave detailed instructions for building the tabernacle, and again later for Solomon’s temple. What change in temple thinking did the New Covenant bring?** See *John 4:21-23, Acts 7:48-49, 1 Corinthians 3:16, 6:19, 1 Peter 2:4-5,*

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<sup>1</sup> *ESV Study Bible*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2008), 2217.

<sup>2</sup> Guthrie, *Theology*, 744

*Ephesians 2:19-22*. In marked contrast to the Old Testament, there is a total absence in the New Testament regarding any instruction to construct special church buildings, temples, or cathedrals.

a.) Jesus, in speaking to the woman at the well, indicated a paradigm shift away from the idea that worship that must be in a dedicated holy place:

ESV **John 4:21-23** ... the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth....

b.) Christians, both individually and corporately, now constitute a spiritual temple:

ESV **1 Corinthians 3:16** Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?

ESV **1 Peter 2:5** ... you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house ...

**Charles Spurgeon:** "Does God need a house? He who made the heavens and the earth, does he dwell in temples made with hands? What crass ignorance this is!"<sup>3</sup>

**3. Based on the following texts, where did the early church primarily hold its meetings?** See *Romans 16:3-5a* (*1 Corinthians 16:19*), *Colossians 4:15*, *Philemon 1-2b*, *James 2:3* & *2 John 10-11*. Early Christians gathered in house churches, not church houses, often in private homes of its wealthier members.<sup>4</sup>

ESV **Romans 16:3-5** Greet Prisca and Aquila ... Greet also the church in their house.

ESV **Colossians 4:15** Give my greetings to ... Nympha and the church in her house.

ESV **Philemon 1:1-2** Paul ... to Philemon ... and the church in your house....

ESV **1 Corinthians 16:19b** Aquila and Prisca, together with the church in their house....<sup>5</sup>

NAS **James 2:2-4** ... if a man comes into your assembly ... and you say ... "You stand over there, or sit down by my footstool" ...<sup>6</sup> (Footstools are associated with homes, not church buildings. Notice also the reference to "my" footstool. It was not owned corporately by the church; it was the personal property of the man who owned the home in which the church met.).

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<sup>3</sup> Charles Spurgeon, sermon, "Building the Church," April 5, 1874.

<sup>4</sup> Although the only place ever mentioned in the New Testament for the location of a church meeting was someone's home, it is possible that they met in larger places that perhaps were rented. However, this is an argument from silence, most often advanced by those resisting the fact that the early church met primarily in private homes.

<sup>5</sup> Another reference to Aquila and Prisca's house church in Rome.

<sup>6</sup> "Footstool" (NAS) is from *hupopodion*.

**Martin Selman** (OT lecturer, Spurgeon's College, London): "The theme of the 'household of God' undoubtedly owed much to the function of the house in early Christianity as a place of meeting and fellowship (e.g. 2 Tim. 4:19; Phm. 2; 2 Jn. 10)."<sup>7</sup>

**William Hendriksen**: "... since in the first and second centuries church buildings in the sense in which we think of them today were not yet in existence, families would hold services in their own homes.... The early church numbered many hospitable members, ready and eager to offer their facilities for religious use: meetings, services, etc."<sup>8</sup>

**4. When in history did Christians first construct dedicated church buildings?** (*Do internet research*). The practice of meeting in almost exclusively homes lasted several centuries, until Christianity was legalized.

**Graydon Synder** (NT professor, Chicago Theological Seminary): "The New Testament Church began as a small group house church (Col. 4:15), and it remained so until the middle or end of the third century. There are no evidences of larger places of meeting before 300." Again quoting **Snyder**, "there is no literary evidence nor archaeological indication that any such home was converted into an extant church building. Nor is there any extant church that certainly was built prior to Constantine."<sup>9</sup> (Constantine was emperor from A.D. 306-337).

**Haunted Houses**: Sadly, within a few centuries Christians began to treat their new church buildings with the same veneration that the Hebrews had for the Jerusalem temple. For example, there were no toilets in early church buildings. The thought seems to have been that such facilities were incompatible with the holy nature of the building.<sup>10</sup>

**Porphyry**, a pagan critic of Christianity who lived from A.D. 234 to 305, wrote ironically, "even the Christians mimic temple architecture and build vast buildings in which they come together to pray, which they could indeed do unhindered in their houses, since it is very well known that the Lord hears from everywhere"<sup>11</sup>

In A.D. 312, a church leader named **Eusebius** consecrated a church building in Tyre. In the dedication, he praised the most holy altar as the center of the building. Fifty years later, the Synod of Laodicea forbade the celebration of the Lord's Supper in private homes.

Professor **Peter Davids** and German Pastor **Siegfried Grossman** commented: "Once you have an altar with 'holy food', mixing it with the common food of a communal meal appears profane. Thus, the focus on the table as altar brings about the forbidding of celebrating the Lord's Supper in houses. The irony is that in the tabernacle and temple the central act of worship was a family meal in the presence of the deity, the temple being part slaughterhouse and part bar-b-que, as well as being the place where animal fat was burned and incense was offered."<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Martin Selman, *New Bible Dictionary* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 1982), 498.

<sup>8</sup> William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary on Romans* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House), 22

<sup>9</sup> Graydon Snyder, *Church Life Before Constantine* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1991), p. 166-167.

<sup>10</sup> Davids & Grossman, "House," footnote 22.

<sup>11</sup> Peter Davids & Siegfried Grossman, "The Church in the House", paper, 1982.

<sup>12</sup> Davids & Grossman, "House."

**5. What do we know about people like Lydia, Philemon and Gaius that indicates the size of the homes that the church met in? See Acts 16:14-15, 40, 18:1-3, 20:34, 16:14-15, Romans 16:23, 1 Timothy 6:17-19, James 2:1-4, 3 John 1-5.** It is clear from Scripture that the early church sometimes met in the private homes of its more affluent members:

- Philemon was wealthy enough to own a slave (**Phlm 2b**).
- Lydia was a prosperous businesswoman who sold expensive purple fabric, and could afford servants (**Acts 16:14ff**).
- Gaius' home was big enough to host the sizable Corinthian church (**Ro 16:23**).

**Yale University Archaeologists:** "The first Christian congregations worshipped in private houses, meeting at the homes of wealthier members on a rotating basis ... Worship was generally conducted in (*either*) the atrium, or central courtyard of the house."<sup>13</sup>

**6. How was the typical first-century Roman villa better suited to host a church than a modern home? Do internet research.** For security reasons, Roman homes often had no outside windows. Instead, interior rooms had doors and windows that opened into a large atrium and an even larger courtyard (*peristyle*) adjacent to the atrium. Surrounding the atrium were the bedrooms and dining rooms.

A typical wealthy Roman home often doubled as a business. The first two rooms along the road were typically businesses. A hallway between the two stores led into the atrium of the home; at the far end of the atrium was the household business office. In short, their houses had large areas that could accommodate a gathering of Christians. It is suspected that the church met in either the atrium or the outer courtyard (*peristyle*). One early house church had the wall removed between two of the side rooms.

The inside meeting room of the Lullingstone Villa house church in Kent, England (built during the Roman occupation) measured approximately 15' x 21'.<sup>14</sup> One study of floor plans in Pompeii shows typical atriums measuring 20' x 28' (560 square feet).<sup>15</sup> **Jerome Murphy-O'Connor** measured six homes in Pompeii and found the average atrium to be 797 square feet.<sup>16</sup>

**7. Based on the size of a typical Roman villa, how many people could have been involved in a typical New Testament house church?** The simple fact is that we do not know how many (or few) believers assembled in the early Roman house churches. What we do know is that there were enough people to enjoy a wide variety of spiritual gifts, to have a plurality of elders, and to support qualified widows, elders and missionaries:

**35 People—Del Birkey** stated in his book *The House Church—A Model for Renewing the Church* that first century homes were able to accommodate at most 35 people comfortably.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> "Unearthing the Christian Building," *Dura-Europos: Excavating Antiquity* (Yale University Art Gallery).

<sup>14</sup> Measurements taken from on-line schematic, "Lullingstone Roman Villa", English-Heritage.org.

<sup>15</sup> William Smith, *Dictionary of Greek and Roman Antiquities* (London: John Murray, 1875), 430.

<sup>16</sup> Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, *Saint Paul's Corinth: Texts and Archaeology* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2002), 180.

<sup>17</sup> Del Birkey, *The House Church, A Model for Renewing Church* (Harrisonburg: Herald Press, 1988), 55.

**40 People**—Peter Davids and Siegfried Grossmann wrote an article called “The Church in the House.” In it, they gave their opinion that “the dwelling house of the middle and upper classes in the Roman Empire offered a place for larger groups ... The upper limit for a house church would have been about 40 members ... by the time of Jesus there were already many large houses of the Roman or Hellenistic type in Jerusalem, which offered space enough for the various Jerusalem house churches.”<sup>18</sup>

**30-45 People**—Fuller Seminary professor Robert Banks gave his opinion that “the entertaining room in a moderately well-to-do household could hold around 30 people comfortably — perhaps half as many again in an emergency ... it is unlikely that a meeting of the “whole church” could have exceeded 40 to 45 people, and may well have been smaller ... In any event we must not think of these as particularly large ... Even the meetings of the ‘whole church’ were small enough for a relatively intimate relationship to develop between the members”.<sup>19</sup>

**65-70 People**—According to the Yale archaeologists who excavated it, a house known to be a Christian meeting place at Dura-Europos (in Syria) could seat 65 to 70 people. The home had been modified to be used exclusively as a meeting place for a church. The impluvium had been tiled over, and benches were added around the atrium walls. Further, a wall had been removed between adjoining rooms creating a 714 square foot area, and a raised area was added at the front (for a podium?). According to Graydon Snyder, it would hold 65 to 75 persons.<sup>20</sup>

**120 People**—Acts 1:13-15 records 120 believers assembled together for a special meeting, presumably in someone’s home.

**8. What evidence is there that there was only one house church in Corinth? See 1 Corinthians 1:14, Romans 16:23 (Paul’s letter to Rome was written in Corinth), 1 Corinthians 5 (and Matthew 18), 1 Corinthians 11:17-34, 1 Corinthians 14.** That there was a single congregation in Corinth is evident from the fact:

- The letter is addressed to “the church” (singular) in Corinth.
- Paul wrote to the one church about church discipline when they gathered together (1Co 5).
- The rich ate the Lord’s Supper apart from the poor—not by going to a different church—but by arriving at the one meeting place early, before the poor arrived (1Co 11:17-34).
- The entire church was said to congregate in the home of Gaius (Ro 16:23).
- Paul gave rules of worship for when the “the whole church comes together” (1Co 14:23).

**9. Based on 1 Corinthians 14:1ff, how many people participated in the one Corinthian house congregation?** The great diversity of spiritual gifts mentioned in 1 Corinthians 14:1ff is insightful, plus multiple people with the same gift (for example: two or three tongues, two or three prophets, 1 Corinthians 14:27, 29), suggests scores of people. Furthermore, 1 Corinthians 11:17ff reveals there were both rich and poor in the church.

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<sup>18</sup> Davids & Grossman, “House.”

<sup>19</sup> Robert Banks, *Paul’s Idea of Community: The Early House Churches in Their Historical Setting* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 41-42.

<sup>20</sup> Graydon Snyder, *Ante Pacem*, 70.

**Like Goldilocks (Just the Right Size):** While we don't know an exact number in Corinth, there were more people than would fit into the typical American living room, but not nearly so many as in a modern American church building. There were probably more than just 10 or 20 people present, but there weren't hundreds either, and certainly not thousands. There were probably scores of people (40, 60, 80).

**10. Even without persecution, why might the apostles have laid down a purposeful pattern of smaller churches—a divine design?** It is a design axiom that form follows function. The apostles' belief concerning the function of the church would naturally be expressed in the form that the church took in the New Testament. The apostles did indeed have a definite way that they wanted churches organized (**1Co 4:16-17, 11:2, 16, 34b, Phlp 4:8-9, 2Th 2:13-15, Titus 1:5**) and this was best carried out in a relatively small church.

**David Watson** (Anglican clergyman): "For the first two centuries, the church met in small groups in the homes of its members, apart from special gatherings in public lecture halls or market places, where people could come together in much larger numbers. Significantly these two centuries mark the most powerful and vigorous advance of the church, which perhaps has never been equaled. The lack of church buildings was no hindrance to the rapid expansion of the church; instead ... it seemed a positive help."<sup>21</sup>

Regardless of why the early church met in homes (persecution?), the fact remains that everything in the New Testament was written to a church that met illegally in a private home and thus was relatively small. There were no mega churches of thousands of people.<sup>22</sup> The principles of New Testament church life work best in a church that is under 100 people:

- a) Participatory worship is best suited to smaller, Roman-atrium sized church (**1 Co 14**).
- b) Accountability, community, and church discipline are best suited to relatively small gatherings (**Mt 18**).
- c) Building consensus is best done in a smaller church.
- d) Church is to be small enough to be family-like (**Ga 6:10, Ep 2:19, 1Ti 5:1-2**).
- e) Mutual edification is best accomplished when everybody knows each other, rather than in situations where people easily become lost in the crowd.
- f) Smaller-sized congregations best foster the simplicity, vitality, intimacy and purity that God desires for his church. They also promote the truth that believers are a spiritual family, not a business!

**Ronald Sider** (Baptist theologian): "The overwhelming majority of churches today ... do not provide the context in which brothers and sisters can encourage, admonish and disciple each other. We desperately need new settings and structures for watching over one another in love."<sup>23</sup>

**11. What hindrances to New Testament practice might come with too large a congregation?** There may be great teaching and music, but one problem with too large a church is that it often defeats the purposes of having church meetings:

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<sup>21</sup> David Watson, *I Believe in the Church* (Great Britain: Hodder & Stoughton, 1978), 121.

<sup>22</sup> It was not long before persecution put an end to the large Jerusalem meetings.

<sup>23</sup> Ronald Sider, *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1977), 190-191.

- Sharing and intimacy is squelched.
- Participatory meetings become difficult.
- Accountability is lost.
- Eating the Lord's Supper as a meal can become burdensome.
- Nominal Christianity is harbored as it becomes easy to get "lost in the crowd."
- The architecture of some buildings can quench mutual edification (fluorescent lights, metal folding chairs, tile floors, and suspended ceilings — or — awe inspiring cathedrals, vaulted ceilings, stained glass, and intricate woodwork). Such an edifice may be suitable for a large ministry meeting led by a few gifted persons, but these types of ministry meetings are totally different from New Testament local church meetings.

**Bernard of Clairvaux:** "I will not dwell upon the vast height of their churches, their unconscionable length, their preposterous breadth, their richly polished paneling ... Your candlesticks as tall as trees, great masses of bronze of exquisite workmanship, dazzling with their precious stones ... what, think you, is the purpose of all this? O vanity of vanities—no, insanity rather than vanities!"<sup>24</sup>

**Martin Luther:** "Those ... who are desirous of being Christians in earnest ... should ... assemble by themselves in some house to pray, to read, to baptize and to receive the sacrament and practice other Christian works. In this Order, those whose conduct was not such as befits Christians could be recognized, reprov'd, reformed, rejected, or excommunicated, according to the rule of Christ in Mathew 18. Here, too, a general giving of alms could be ... willingly given and divided among the poor, after the example of St. Paul in 2 Corinthians 9. Here there would not be need of much fine singing. Here we could have baptism and the sacrament in short and simple fashion: and direct everything towards the Word and prayer and love ... But I cannot and would not order or arrange such a community or congregation at present. I have not the requisite persons for it, nor do I see many who are urgent for it. But should it come to pass that I must do it, and that such pressure is put upon me as that I find myself unable with a good conscience to leave it undone, then I will gladly do my part to secure it, and will help it on as best I can."<sup>25</sup>

**12. Considering the differences between modern homes and first-century villas, what are some dynamic equivalents for today's church?** A major drawback to modern house churches is that the homes are simply too small to hold as many people as a Roman villa would have held. Consequently, Western house churches often have so few members that no one is qualified to serve as elder and no one gifted to teach the Scriptures. While the fellowship in micro churches is fantastic, too often no disciples are being made. There also is a lack of diversity of spiritual gifts.

Even if a modern home has a room as big as a Roman villa did, it often becomes a problem to find places to park all the cars (something the Romans did not have to contend with). Some municipalities have passed zoning ordinances against house churches due to the parking problem.

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<sup>24</sup> David Knowles, *The Monastic Orders in England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1950), 82.

<sup>25</sup> Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, Volume 53, pp. 63-64.

Given the Christian West's 1500-year association with church buildings, it is rather counter cultural to meet in a private home. Consequently, many people will suspect the church to be a cult. It is a sad fact that some modern "house church" participants have given house churching a bad name. For instance, one pastor who interacted with house church advocates wrote, "These people were some of the rudest, most bitter, condescending, holier-than-thou, misrepresentations of Christianity that I've come across in years. There is no way I could have anticipated some of the venom that was spewed at me."

Perhaps the ideal is a home with a large open room, located in a rural area with ample parking. If this is not feasible, then a dynamic equivalent must be considered, such as renting an apartment club house, child day-care center, or a community room. Constructing a home-like church building (a barndominium) with lots of parking (designed to hold a Roman villa sized fellowship, not a mega church) might be considered.

**Idea:** The church planter/leader has to live somewhere himself. He has housing costs. He could purposely rent/buy suitable home to host church (double duty). Church funds otherwise used for rent would be freed up to support a pastor. Such a home would need a large meeting area and plenty of off-street parking. Since most modern homes have no room the size of an atrium in a Roman villa, building a four-car garage behind the home might be an ideal place for the church to gather.

A church meeting place should have a kitchen and plenty of tables since a major Sunday activity is celebrating the Lord's Supper as a Holy Meal. Since church is to be family friendly, should also have a safe outside area for children to play in after the meal while the adults fellowship. The furnishings should be as home-like as possible, to make people feel at ease and comfortable. There should be plenty of parking for the cars. It has been claimed that a church will only grow to 80% of its seating or parking capacity. The facility should be big enough to accommodate enough people to hive off a healthy number to start a new church and yet still leave behind a goodly number of people.

**Peter Davids** (Houston Baptist University professor) & **Siegfried Grossman** (German Baptist pastor): "The witness of the New Testament is clear: the living space of the church was the house. We judge the church-historical development to be a step backward from relationship to religion. Today a new desire for a face-to-face fellowship has broken out. For too long we have exclusively seen the formal church services as the center of the church and neglected our concrete life together in houses. We cannot slavishly imitate what took place earlier, but we should be challenged anew by this foundational structure of the church as a network of house churches. We see the following concrete challenges: The church needs face to face fellowship. The church dare not bracket out daily life from the life of the church. The church needs structures through which the reality of concrete life can be encouraged. The church must keep in balance the handing out of the word and the handing out of life."<sup>26</sup>

### 13. What practical problems might arise in too small a house church?

- There is often an absence of brothers gifted in leadership (rare to find a single qualified elder, much less a plurality of them in a too small church).

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<sup>26</sup> Peter Davids and Siegfried Grossmann, "The Church in the House," paper.

- There is often a lack of people with the ability and inclination to teach the Scriptures in-depth and regularly.
- If only a few families move away, no church is left
- Too small a church tends to be monolithic: all young couples, all singles, all people with teenaged kids, all senior adults. This is not a healthy situation (no diversity).
- Too small means less age ranges for people to relate to: People with small kids want a church with other small kids in it. They visit but don't come back.
- Not nearly the range of spiritual gifts cataloged in 1 Corinthians 12-14 (not a few people).
- The early house churches supported widows, orphans, missionaries, pastors. This is very difficult in a micro church.
- Too often, disciples are not being made.

**14. Based on the New Testament example, how big (numerically) should the average church be allowed to grow before a new church is planted?** No specific number is ever given in Scripture. The general New Testament pattern is for smaller, rather than larger, congregations. However big (or small) the early churches were, they were able to have a diversity of spiritual gifts (and multiple people with the same gift), a plurality of elders, to financially support some elders, to have someone with the time and talent to provide consistent teaching, to support missionaries and widows and to make disciples. We should be thinking in terms of scores of people in a single church, but not hundreds and yet not tens, either (too small).

**W.H. Griffith Thomas** (Anglican scholar): "For two or three centuries Christians met in private houses.... There seems little doubt that these informal gatherings of small groups of believers had great influence in preserving the simplicity and purity of early Christianity."<sup>27</sup>

**15. Why does Acts 2:46, 5:12 and 19:8-10 not nullify the pattern of smaller churches?** See Acts 3:1, 11ff, 4:1-2, 18, 21:20-26, 1 Corinthians 9:22. The thousands of new converts were distributed among many houses.

- a.) See **Acts 3:1, 11ff, 4:1-2, 18**. Evidently one reason they went to the temple porch was for prayer. It is also obvious that much evangelistic preaching occurred there. These were in essence "ministry meetings" rather than church meetings. Remember also that the church did not own the temple, did not finance its construction, and did not actually go inside it (only priests could enter in). The porch area was a good place to minister in public.
- b.) This was a transitional period. Even if one of these temple gatherings were actual church meetings and not ministry meetings, every other time the N.T. mentions a church meeting place, it is in a home.
- c.) Since these were Jewish believers, it is no surprise that there was a continued association with the temple (**Acts 21:20-26**). Not until the letter to the Hebrews was written were they told to leave Judaism and stick with Jesus. God put a decisive end to Old Covenant worship in A.D. 70 with the destruction of the temple.
- d.) In **Acts 19:8-10**, that they had discussions "daily" rather than weekly suggests that these were not typical church meetings. They were, in fact, apostolic ministry meetings. There is a difference between apostle's meetings and church meetings. When an apostle came to town, all the house churches massed together to hear him speak. Such apostle's meetings

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<sup>27</sup> W.H. Griffith Thomas *St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 1984), 422-423.

were not **1 Corinthians 14** style meetings; they were rightly more of a “one man show” (as in **Acts 20:7-12**).

e.) An apostle would evangelize a city, disciple the converts, appoint elders, and move on to another location. What occurred in **Acts 19:8-10** was evidently both evangelism (**19:10b**, like Billy Graham renting a stadium today) and training (**19:9b**, like Bill Gothard renting a civic center for a week). The local house churches remained after Paul departed and the lecture hall was rented to someone else.

**Big meetings in the New Testament:** Jesus, for example, went up on a mountainside to teach the large crowds that followed Him (**Mt 4:25-5:2a**). Furthermore, the apostles performed miracle evangelism in the temple courts, with the result that large numbers (thousands) believed in Jesus (**Acts 5:12-14**). So too today, large meetings are effective for evangelism and teaching.

**Balance:** In the New Testament, the purpose of larger meetings was special ministry (such a teaching or evangelism). The purpose of smaller meetings was the regular gatherings of the church (small enough for every to know each other, where there is accountability, emotional support, fellowship, personalized discipleship, etc.).

**ESV Acts 2:46** ... attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes ...

**Big Church Blues:** Large churches have the resources to offer spectacular music, powerful preaching and impressive programs. The problem is that such large churches can easily be very impersonal, just as one can be all alone in a city of millions. The best place for a tree to hide is in the forest. Happily, one can enjoy good music and teaching on the radio. What you cannot get over the radio is life-changing relationships with other believers.

**Some argue that home meetings were characteristic of the church in its infancy, but not in its maturity. It was right and natural, they argue, for each church to grow beyond the size of a Roman villa. How do you feel about this?** It is a fact that the bigger a church grows, the more organization it requires. Some people feel that just as children are groomed for adulthood by being given greater responsibility, so too believers must be willing to mature and take on more responsibility as a church grows and requires ever more programs and organization. To shirk the difficulties of running a larger church by remaining a Roman-villa sized house church is to delay maturity and take the easy way out. Desiring to avoid the “hassle of maintaining buildings” (or setting up sound equipment) is “a sign of immaturity—not spirituality.”

- a.) This New Testament pattern lasted well beyond the New Testament, all the way into the A.D. 300s. Roman villas were just the right size for what the church needed to accomplish!
- b.) Everything in the New Testament is written to Roman villa sized house churches, and works best in a smaller congregation.
- c.) The apostles evidently expected Jesus to return within their lifetimes. No second-generation church was expected.
- d.) The total absence of any command in the New Testament to construct church buildings, coupled with the fact that they actually went against their culture not to build edifices (see

question above), suggests that they purposely met in homes (and that it was not just a passing fancy).

### So What?

#### 16. How would you summarize the ideas covered in this study on small churches?

1. Unlike under the Old Covenant, there is a total absence in Scripture of any instructions for New Covenant believers to construct buildings.
2. The New Testament church was home based and Roman-villa sized. It met in the homes of its wealthier members.
3. The New Testament church was like a family, not a business. It was about relationships more so than programs.
4. The apostles may have purposely designed for churches to meet primarily in private homes because first-century homes could accommodate the ideal number of people for a single congregation (75 – 150).
5. Smaller churches approach the simplicity, vitality, intimacy and purity of the New Testament church.
6. The design of church buildings should be carefully considered so as not to exceed New Testament church sizes, and they should be as home-like as practicable. A question to be considered: *Does where your church meets help, or hinder, the church from fulfilling the “one another” commands?*

**ESV 1 Corinthians 1:27-29** God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose ... even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God.

\*\*\*\* = Ask this question before having someone read the text aloud.

**Next Lesson:** E-mail the next set of discussion questions out to the class (or print them up and hand them out at the end of this lesson). Ask them to consider the issues, answer the questions and be prepared to discuss them at the next meeting.

**Teacher Prep:** NTRF.org offers an article, video and mp3 on this topic.

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