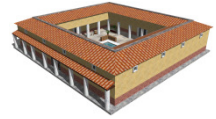


## 5. Smaller Churches—A Divine Design



**Power Points Can Be Viewed Here:** To view the PPTs, go here;  
[https://drive.google.com/open?id=1GjqfR1P6pv1e9rxvwHmSxxEcyT\\_ETjA5](https://drive.google.com/open?id=1GjqfR1P6pv1e9rxvwHmSxxEcyT_ETjA5)

### Introduction:

**PPT>>>** 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 a church was written to a church that met in someone's home. This necessarily meant that each congregation was smaller rather than larger.

**PPT>>>** The Advantages of a Smaller Setting:

- Smaller settings foster the intimacy, unity, love and accountability that characterized the early church.
- The relationships described in the New Testament work best in situations where everyone knows each other.
- A loving, family-like atmosphere is more easily developed.
- The many “one another” exhortations of Scripture can be more realistically lived out.
- Church discipline takes on genuine significance.
- Disciple making is personal and natural.
- Participatory worship fits smaller settings better and the things shared are much more meaningful.
- Celebrating the Lord's Supper as an actual family meal is more natural in a smaller setting.
- Achieving congregational consensus is easier when everyone knows everyone else and open lines of communication genuinely exist with one another.

**PPT>>> Premise:** Involvement with a smaller church can be a wonderful blessing with strategic, divinely designed advantages.

### **PPT>>> Scriptural Proof**

**PPT>>>** English, the word church commonly refers to a building. As in the sentence, “The church lies in ruins”. However, the NT was not written in English

#### **1. What is the Greek word for “church” and what (briefly) does it mean?**

**PPT>>>** The Greek word for church, *ekklésia*, was never used to refer to a building.

**PPT>>>** Fundamentally, it refers to a meeting of people. Church is a people, not a place.

**PPT>>> Donald Guthrie** “. . . 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”

**PPT>>>** Thus, when we read about the church in Ephesus or the church in Corinth, we should never envision a church building, but rather a gathering of people.

**2. Under the Old Covenant, God gave detailed instructions for the construction first of PPT>>> the tabernacle and then of PPT>>> the temple.**

**PPT>>> What change in temple theology did the New Covenant bring?** See *John 4:21ff*, *Acts 7:48-49*, *1 Corinthians 3:16, 6:19*, *1 Peter 2:4-5*, *Ephesians 2:19-22*.

**PPT>>> a.)** Jesus, in speaking to the woman at the well, indicated a paradigm shift concerning worship — a shift away from any worship that must be in a dedicated holy place (**Jn 4:21ff**, **Ac 7:48-49**).

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 . . .

**PPT>>> b.)** In marked contrast to the Old Testament, there is a **total absence** in the New Testament regarding any instruction to construct special church buildings.

**PPT>>> c.)** The New Testament indicates that Christians both individually and corporately now constitute the temple of the Lord (**1Co 3:16, 6:19**).

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

New Covenant believers are living stones, built together into a spiritual house with Jesus as the chief cornerstone (**1Pe 2:4-5, Ep 2:19-22**).

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

**PPT>>> 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!"

Sadly, within a few centuries Christians began to treat their new church buildings with the same reverence that the Hebrews had treated the Jerusalem tabernacle. 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>1</sup>

**Bernard of Clairvaux:** Objecting to the false veneration of church buildings, Bernard of Clairvaux is reported to have written, "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>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Davids & Grossman, paper, "The Church in the House", footnote 22.

<sup>2</sup> David Calhoun, Church History Course, Covenant Theological Seminary.

**3. Based on the following texts, where did the New Testament 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*. The early church met in the private homes of its wealthier members. Early Christians gathered in house churches, not church houses! Although the only place ever mentioned for a church meeting was someone's home, it is possible that the early church 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.

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

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

**PPT>>>** **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 . . .  
(A 2<sup>nd</sup> reference to Aquila and Prisca's house church in Rome.)

**PPT>>>** **NAS James 2:2-4** . . . if a man comes into your assembly with a gold ring and dressed in fine clothes, and there also comes in a poor man in dirty clothes, and you pay special attention to the one who is wearing the fine clothes, and say, "You sit here in a good place," and you say to the poor man, "You stand over there, or sit down by my footstool," have you not then made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?

**Note:** "footstool" (NAS) is from *hupopodion*. Footstools are associated with homes, not church buildings. Notice also the reference to "my" footstool. It was now owned corporately by the church, it was the personal property of the man who owned the home in which the church met.

**PPT>>>** — **Scholarly Testimony** —

**PPT>>>** "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>3</sup>

*The ESV Study Bible*

**PPT>>>** "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>4</sup>

Martin Selman  
OT Lecturer, Spurgeon's College, London

**PPT>>>** ". . . 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

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<sup>3</sup> *ESV Study Bible*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2008), p. 2217.

<sup>4</sup> Martin Selman, *New Bible Dictionary* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 1982), p. 498.

church numbered many hospitable members, ready and eager to offer their facilities for religious use: meetings, services, etc.”<sup>5</sup>

William Hendriksen  
Reformed scholar

**PPT>>>** “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>6</sup>

W.H. Griffith Thomas  
Anglican commentator

**PPT>>>** “. . . the expression ‘in church’ (*en ekklesia*) . . . 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>7</sup>

Donald Guthrie  
NT Lecturer, London Bible College

**PPT>>>** “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>8</sup>

David Watson  
Anglican evangelist

**PPT>>>** “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>

(Note: Constantine was Roman emperor from A.D. 306-337.)

Graydon F. Snyder  
NT Professor, Chicago Theological Seminary

**PPT>>> Interesting History:** Martin Luther, father of the Protestant Reformation, at one point wanted to return to the New Testament example and organize German believers into house churches. Luther wrote, “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

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<sup>5</sup> William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary on Romans* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House), p. 22

<sup>6</sup> W.H. Griffith Thomas *St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 1984), p. 422-423

<sup>7</sup> Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1981) p. 744

<sup>8</sup> David Watson, *I Believe in the Church* (Great Britain: Hodder & Stoughton, 1978), p. 121.

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

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>10</sup>

**4. When in history did Christians begin meeting in and constructing special buildings for worship (i.e. church houses)?** (*Do internet research*). The practice of meeting in homes lasted about two hundred years. 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 Eusebius, as bishop, 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 forbid the celebration of the Lord’s Supper in houses. Davids and Grossman offer this comment, “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.”

**PPT>>> What Size Home?**

**Scholars tend to be of the opinion that the church met in the homes its wealthier members:**

**PPT>>>** “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>12</sup>

Yale University booklet  
*Dura-Europos: Excavating Antiquity*

**PPT>>> 5. What do we know about Aquila and Priscilla, Lydia, Philemon and Gaius that might have led them to that conclusion?** See Acts 16:40, 18:1-3, 20:34, 16:14-15, Romans 16:23, 1 Timothy 6:17-19, James 2:1-4, 3 John 1-5. There clearly were rich people in the early church (1Ti 6:17-19, Ja 2:1-4). It is clear from Scripture that the early church met in the private homes of its more affluent members:

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<sup>10</sup> Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works*, Volume 53, pp. 63-64.

<sup>11</sup> Davids & Grossman, paper, “The Church in the House”.

<sup>12</sup> Yale University, “Unearthing the Christian Building”, booklet, *Dura-Europos: Excavating Antiquity* (Yale University Art Gallery).

- Philemon, who was wealthy enough to own a slave, also hosted the church (**Phlm 2b**).
- Lydia was a prosperous businesswoman who sold expensive purple fabric and could afford servants (**Ac 16:14**).
- Aquila and Priscilla were tent makers, a lucrative first century trade (**Ac 18:1-3**).
- Gaius' home was big enough to host the whole church in Corinth (**Ro 16:23**).

Further, archaeologists have discovered at least two Roman homes known to have been meeting places for the early church. Both of them were well-to-do homes (Dura-Europos in Syria and Lullingstone Villa in England; more on these below).

## 6. Do an internet search on Romans homes. How were their homes different in design from those today?

**PPT>>>** 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.

A typical wealthy Roman home often doubled as a business. The first two rooms were typically stores. A hall way between the two stores led into the atrium of the home and 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*). Surrounding the atrium were the bedrooms and dining rooms (one early house church had the wall removed between two of the side rooms).

**PPT>>>** An examination of floor plans in Pompeii shows typical atriums measuring 20' x 28',<sup>13</sup>

Jerome Murphy-O'Connor measured six homes in Pompeii and found the average atrium to be 797 square feet.<sup>14</sup>

**PPTS>>>** (The next PPTs are of various Roman atriums and floor plans.

**PPTS>>>** It is interesting to observe that the meeting room of the Lullingstone Villa house church in Kent, England (built during the Roman occupation) measured approximately 15' x 21',<sup>15</sup>

## 7. How many people were there in a typical New Testament house church (based on the size of Roman homes)?

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 make disciples, enjoy a wide variety of spiritual gifts, have a plurality of elders, support qualified elders and missionaries (and widows) and have consistent and in depth teaching. Here are some opinions:

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<sup>13</sup> William Smith, *Dictionary of Greek and Roman Antiquities* (London: John Murray, 1875), p. 430.

<sup>14</sup> Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, *Saint Paul's Corinth: Texts and Archaeology* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2002), p. 180).

<sup>15</sup> Author's measurements taken from on-line schematic, "Lullingstone Roman Villa", English-Heritage.org.



**35 People**—Pastor 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>16</sup>

**20-40 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: we can at least reckon with the fact that 20 people could take part in a house gathering. If the circle were larger, the group shifted out into the inner court. The upper limit for a house church would have been about 40 members. In comparison, the typical Palestinian house which had just one room would only offer space for a small group. But 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.” An explanatory footnote stated, “This is consistent with the estimate given by Peter Stuhlmacher, *Der Brief an Philemon* (EKKNT) (Neukirchen, 1975) pp.70-75. This essay is one of the important seminal works on this topic. However, to the extent that the early house churches were meal-fellowships, celebrating the Lord’s Supper as a full meal, they would not have been able to meet regularly in the courtyard. However, larger rooms could house the six tables arranged as two ‘U’s’ with their open ends facing each other, which could accommodate 18, or if squeezed 20 or so, dinner guests.”

**Note:** Even though the custom was to recline at tables when eating, in a larger gathering where space was limited, the custom could be easily circumvented.

**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>17</sup>

**Note:** Dr. Banks’ numbers may be a little on the low side. It is difficult to understand how such a small church (only 30 people) could have enough gifted people in it to have a plurality of elders, to support an elder worthy of double honor, and to have the diversity of spiritual gifts evidence in the house church in Corinth.

### PPTS>>>>

**65-70 People**—A house known to be a Christian meeting place at Dura-Europos (in Syria) could, according to the Yale archaeologists who excavated it, seat 65 to 70 people. Dura Europos ("Fort Europos") is a ruined Roman walled city built on cliff 90 meters above the banks of the Euphrates River in modern Syria. This private home had been modified to be used exclusively as a meeting place for the church. The impluvium in the atrium had been tiled over and benches were added around the walls. Further, a wall had been removed between adjoining rooms creating a 714 square foot area. A raised area was added at the front (for a podium?).

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<sup>16</sup> Del Birkey, *The House Church*, p.55

<sup>17</sup> Robert Banks, *Paul’s Idea of Community: The Early House Churches in Their Historical Setting* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 1988), p. 41-42.

**PPTS>>>** The murals of the Dura Europos house church were painted between A.D. 232 and 256 and are among the earliest examples of Christian art that survives today. The mural of the Healing of the Paralytic contains the earliest image of Jesus found anywhere. You can also see the women approaching Jesus' tomb

**PPTS>>>**

**65-75 People**—According to Graydon Snyder, it would hold 65 to 75 persons:<sup>18</sup>

1. Wall removed & two rooms combined to make “G” bigger. Its size was 16.89’ x 42.3’ (714 sq ft) with a podium at the front (clearly used for lectures).
2. In atrium (“B”), Impluvium was paved over, the floor was tiled and benches were added around the walls. This circular seating arrangement was ideal for a 1 Corinthians 14 participatory worship meeting.
3. Baptistery (“D”) added and murals painted on walls. This inner room with Christian scenes was not readily visible to visitors.

**PPT>>>**

**120**—Acts 1:13-15 records 120 believers assembled together, presumably in the upper room.

**PPT>>>** **8. What evidence is there that there was only one house church in Corinth? How large was the congregation?** 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 12-14. 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 doing church discipline when they gathered together (1Co 5).
- The rich schemed to eat the Lord's Supper apart from the poor, not so by going to a different congregation (there were no others), 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 they “the whole church comes together” (1Co 14:23).

In determining how many people were involved with the one church in Corinth, an examination of the great diversity of spiritual gifts mentioned in 1 Corinthians 12 -14 is insightful. Further, there were multiple people with the same gift (for example: two or three tongues, two or three prophets, 1Co 14:27, 29).

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

**PPT>>>** **A Divine Design?**

**PPT>>>** **9. Why might the apostles have laid down a purposeful pattern of smaller churches (as opposed to mega churches)? A Divine Design?** Regardless of why the

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<sup>18</sup> Graydon Snyder, *Ante Pacem, Church Life Before Constantine* (Mercer University Press), p. 70.



early church met in homes (purposefully or due only to persecution), the fact remains that everything in the New Testament was written to a church that met in a Roman villa and was relatively small. There were no mega churches of thousands of people in a single congregation. The principles of New Testament church life work best in a church that is under 200 people.

**PPT>>>** It is a design axiom that form follows function. The apostles' belief concerning the function of the church would naturally to 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, Php 4:8-9, 2Th 2:13-15, Tit 1:5**) and this was best carried out in a relatively small church.

**PPT>>>** For instance:

- 1.) Participatory worship is best suited to smaller, Roman atrium sized congregations, **1 Corinthians 14**.
- 2.) Accountability, community, and maintaining church discipline are best suited to relatively small gatherings, **Matthew 18**.
- 3.) Building consensus is best done in a smaller church.
- 4.) Church is to be relatively small and like a family, not big like a business (**Ga 6:10, Ep 2:19, 1Ti 5:1-2**).
- 5.) Mutual edification is best accomplished in situations where everybody knows each other rather than in situations where people easily become lost in the crowd.
- 7.) Smaller churches 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!

**PPTS>>>** Which size church would best be able to carry out the early church practices we've discussed?

#### **10. What hindrances to New Testament church life come with too large a congregation?**

One problem with too large a church is that it often defeats the very purpose of having the church meeting in the first place:

- Large crowds squelch sharing and intimacy.
- 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."
- Many times the very architecture of the building quenches mutual edification (fluorescent lights, metal folding chairs, tile floors, and suspended ceilings — or — awe inspiring cathedrals, vaulted ceilings, stained glass, 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.

#### **11. Considering the differences between modern Western homes and first-century Roman villas, we need to ask, what is a dynamic equivalent for today's church? There are differences:**

**PPT>>> Too Small:** A major drawback to modern Western 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. Even if such a gifted person were in the house church, it is too small to support him, freeing him up for ministry. There is also a lack of teaching. While the fellowship in micro churches is fantastic, too often no disciples are being made. There is a lack of diversity of spiritual gifts.

**PPT>>> Cars:** Even if our modern homes were as big as Roman villas, it often becomes a problem to find spaces 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 car parking problem).

**PPT>>> Cultic:** 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 actually be a cult or into something unhealthy. 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."

**PPT>>>**

Perhaps the ideal is a very large home with a huge open area in the country with lots of parking. If this is not feasible, then a dynamic equivalent must be considered, such as renting an apartment club house or a community center or constructing a home-like church building with lots of parking (designed to hold a Roman villa sized fellowship, not a mega church).

**PPT>>>** 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 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.

## Challenge

**PPT>>>** Davids and Grossman offer this challenge:

"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>19</sup>

— **Conclusions** —

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 you meet help or hinder the church from fulfilling the “one another” commands?*

**Extra Material**

**12. What practical problems 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).
- There is often a lack of people with the ability and inclination to teach the Scriptures in-depth and regularly.
- If only 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).

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<sup>19</sup> Peter Davids is a professor at Houston Baptist University; Siegfried Grossman is a German Baptist pastor.

- 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.

**13. 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, maybe between one and two hundred, but not thousands and yet not tens, either (too small). Assuming the idea size to be around 100, perhaps the church could grow to 150 and then send out 50 to start a new work, leaving 100 behind.

**14. Why does Acts 2:46 & 5:12 not violate the pattern of smaller churches?** See Acts 21:20-26, 1 Corinthians 9:22. It is not that the thousands of new converts all met in a single home. Rather, they 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. They 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 just a good place to meet and minister in public.

b.) This was a transitional period. Even if one argues that these temple gatherings are actual church meetings and not ministry meetings, it remains that every other time the New Testament mentions a meeting place of the church, it is in a home.

c.) These were Jewish believers, and since they were allowed to hold on to their Judaism (Ac 21:20-26), it is no surprise that there was a continued association with the temple. Not until the letter to the Hebrews was written were they told that if they had to pick one over the other, to leave Judaism and stick with Jesus. God providentially put a decisive end to all vestiges of Old Covenant worship in A.D. 70 with the destruction of the temple.

**15. Why is Acts 19:8-10 not a violation of the New Testament pattern of smaller churches?**

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

b.) 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.

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 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.” **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?**

- 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).

\*\*\*\* = 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.

Stephen E. Atkerson  
NTRF.org  
Revised 11/11/2018 (Armistice Day Centennial!)