BOOK 28

AUTHENTIC CHURCH

Since man is given to creating a god after his own image and a religion after his own desires, it is imperative that we continually check our religious beliefs and behavior with the word of God. Any religious people who propose to fall under the umbrella of Christianity are bound to be led by the word of God. If they are not, then they have no right to claim to be Christian. They cannot because they do not direct themselves according to the authority of the Scriptures. And since we are all with the spirit of idolatry, then we can correctly assume that if a religion does not bind itself to the word of Christ, then certainly it cannot claim the name of Christ. It is for this reason that we must demand of ourselves that we focus our entire religious being on the word of God, lest we lead ourselves astray. If we are not bound to the word of God, we will end up one day so far away from Christ that we will have no part with Him. We will have rejected His word for the traditions of men.

Roger E. Dickson, Biblical Research Library

INTRODUCTION

When one is into the word of God and feels strongly that its principles must be taught and applied, then teaching what is true is not an option. When one feels strongly called by God to fulfill his ministry as an evangelist, it takes no bravery to teach what one feels is biblically right. It takes bravery to suffer the results of preaching truth, but speaking what must be said should not be considered bravery. If we are to be true to our confession and honest with what we learn through prayerful Bible study and application, then we must get on with the program. The application of God's will in our lives is not an option if we seek to receive the reward of our confession.

Writing a book as this is none the less not easy. You will read through the material and make a judgment of my motives for saying what is said. But let me reassure you at the beginning that I am not one who has a bone to pick. There are no hidden agendas, no scores to settle. What is written comes from years of Bible study, observation in church history over fifty years, and the practical application of church growth principles I have experienced in the past thirty years as a foreign evangelist.

There are at least three practical reasons I have felt that the contents of this book must be said in written form. The first is that we must revive some New Testament principles in relational Christianity that have somehow been set aside by our insular urbanization of the church. Because we have allowed the insular culture of the Western urban life to affect our relationships with one another, it may be that we have strayed from the nature of New Testament Christian fellowship that God intended we have. In doing so, we may have redefined "church" after our relational behavior of an urban culture that is seated in the industrial/business environment of the Western world.

Second, add to the preceding cultural behavior of the church the influence of the religious world around us that has set the norms for

religious behavior. These norms have been established throughout the world for centuries. There is a definite "Christian Church Culture" that is the standard for every religious group that seeks to fall under the banner of "Christian church." If a group does not conform to the measures of this standard, then that group falls outside the standard Christian church. In our desire to be accepted by the Christian community at large, all of us are driven to conform. We desire to conform rather than conclude from Scripture the nature of true Christianity. Our Christian heritage, therefore, has taken us on a journey away from what God originally intended should be the nature of His community of believers.

Third, I am also writing this material in order to give the majority of Christians throughout the world some relief. The greater majority of Christians live in Third World environments. This means that they are not financially advantaged. Since they are not financially advantaged, most do not have the privilege of owning a church building simply because they cannot afford such. Having a church building within a Third World economic environment is generally not feasible. Thousands of our brethren thus feel doomed to be "half established" churches because they must meet in some kind of building, which in their case is usually a local public school. In the same school various segments of "the temple of Diana" are also usually meeting. Thus in an environment of wails and screams that is mixed with the instrumental chaos created by emotionally out-of-control worshipers representing an assortment of misguided religions, our brethren have sought to study God's word and meditate on the memorial feast of Jesus. They have been doomed to such an environment because of our building-oriented beliefs and our unfortunate definition of what constitutes a "local autonomous church". Our building-oriented theology has relegated many of our Third World brethren to worshiping in environments on Sundays wherein religious pandemonium often prevails in the next classroom.

Fourth, it is not the obligation of the Western church to continually build church buildings throughout the world. Since the world church is rapidly expanding outside America, the American church can no longer shoulder the responsibility of funding purpose-built church buildings for the world church. We must seek another alternative. Everyone of us live in the other alternative, that is, our homes. We must let brethren know that it is okay to meet in their homes. We must let them know that they are not consigned to meeting in public schools. As multiple-assembly churches in their communities, they can carry on evangelism without feeling that they are somehow inferior churches because they have no church building.

Since I will be taking a strong stand for the restoration of relational Christianity in the midst of small group meetings, you will conclude that I am against purpose-built church buildings. I am not if they are used for the correct purpose. However, I find them inadequate if assemblies in such are the only assemblies that are conducted by the local church. Exclusive meetings in public buildings do not bring us together. Such meetings keep us apart. Nevertheless, I am not establishing an "anti-church building" theology, which you might assume I am teaching in this book. You must not make me say something that I am not.

Because Western church members worship in the comfort and quietness of their own purpose-built church buildings, the Western world may not understand the consequences of a theology that assumes that every member of a local church must worship at one time in one location. In promoting this theology, we have encouraged brethren to strive for a physical goal to accomplish spiritual ends in church planting, that is, the building of a purpose-built facility in which the church can meet.

It is time to give sincere Christians some relief from thinking that they are not complete churches when they have no building. They need to be released from the bondage of a theology that demands they all assemble together in one place in order to be a "local church." These brethren need to know that they can be a church without all the members assembling in public schools and buildings in order for them to be identified as a "local" autonomous church.

The subject of this book is a daunting task to convey to a religious world that is very defensive concerning its church buildings. What I want to convey involves some major changes in thinking. In order to make what I feel are some necessary changes in our view of the assembly of the saints, we will need to make a paradigm shift. Since our concept of assembly is based on our understanding of what we believe is necessary to constitute an assembly, and in fact, a local church, we must investigate our concept of what "church" actually is.

This involves a paradigm shift in our understanding and application of simple New Testament Christianity. A paradigm in our worldview controls how we view the whole of all things. A paradigm determines how we see and experience our environment, as well as how we interpret what is important. It is our perspective of how we view life, and in reference to the church, how we interpret ourselves as "church" in a world of unbelievers.

We have historically interpreted church to exist because of a set of rules and doctrines that we have correctly restored and enacted in our lives. In reference to the assembly of the saints, we have viewed the assembly to exist when a certain set of "acts of worship" have been implemented in a correct "order" and carried out in a "decent" manner. What I will be challenging in this book are some things that will necessitate a paradigm shift in our thinking in reference to the assembly of the saints. I will challenge us to view "church" from the perspective of behavior, and assembly from the view that all members do not have to assemble together at the same place in order to constitute a "local" church. Make no mistake about what I am saying. This book calls for a paradigm shift. I am not discussing just another system of assembly, but a behavioral life change whereby the fellowship of the church is enhanced.

In order to accomplish the purpose of this book, I will be redundant on those points that are absolutely necessary to affect a paradigm shift. I make no apologies for this. If you are of a Western mindset, you will be labored by this. But keep in mind that this book is not directed exclusively to the Western church. I am a citizen of the world, and thus, I write to the church of the world in order to examine again the nature of Christianity in view of what God would have us be in our relationships with one another.

As you progress through the material, concepts or definitions that I use will become more definitive as I develop and expand key principles. One of the primary concepts that I have tried to convey is that the cultural environments in which we live affect our religious behavior. Christianity should not be affected by the culture of the world. Christianity should affect the culture of the world as Christians seek to be the salt of the earth. It is unfortunate, however, that culture too often affects the way we behave as Christians. This is especially true in reference to the religious culture of the world which greatly affects many of our practices as the church.

In reference to the world culture in which we all reside, I have used the term "First World" to describe the economic and business world of the West. I use the term "First World" because of the common use of the term "Third World" which is generally used to refer to the developing world. (It is anybody's guess as to where the "Second World" exists.) The term "West", or, "Western", is equated with the First World. Without being completely consistent, I use the term "Western" to mean more than the United States and Europe. One can live in a Western economic culture and area even in a Third World country. One can be a part of the business culture of the West while living across the street from a Third World environment. This dichotomy is the nature of the Third World environment. However, when I use the term "the West", or, "Western", I am thinking primarily of the United States and Europe. But we must also include Western culture and economics that prevail in many other places of the world than America and Europe. If you would broaden the definition of the West to any culture of the world that patterns itself after the Western culture of America and Europe, then we are on the same page.

The reason for the comparison of cultures between the West and the Third World is that culture affects the behavior and beliefs of Christians. Western definitions of the Bible have often been exported throughout the world. When these Western interpretations and behavioral patterns have been implanted within church thinking in a particular city, town or village of the world, some complications have emerged. This is particularly true in reference to the subject of this book. The Western concept of assembly, for example, has for many years sought to clone Third World Christians into an assembly-oriented church behavior that is often impractical in Third World economic environments. If you will allow me, therefore, I would like to challenge some concepts and practices of Western religious assemblies in reference to their impractical implementation in Third World church environments.

The Western world has now moved into what is called the "postmodern" culture. It is generally understood that the twentieth century was a century of invention and modernization, both in living and thinking. Now that we have invented and modernized, we are moving into the postmodern era. We have invented the computer and now live in an era where the computer is continually upgraded. The modern world gave us the initial discoveries. We now live in a time where discoveries and inventions are upgraded and fine-tuned.

This postmodern world is a world of business mentalities wherein business majors sit for hours reconfiguring inventions and manipulating money on a world scale. We have thus passed from an industrial/rural culture in the West to a business urban culture that has given birth to a different breed of person. Old norms and values are being sacrificed by a new generation which seeks to make its own decisions concerning the future. The new generation often ignores the past in making decisions for the future. The postmodern generation sees where society is at this point in time, and seeks to make a decision for the future that is based on present experiences, not past norms.

The postmodern world presents some unique challenges to religious leaders throughout the world, particularly religious leaders who base their theologies on the traditions of the past. The postmodern individual sacrifices tradition for a more modern source of authority by which to judge the present and the future. The postmodern resident does not view the past as the key to the future. He feels that where he is at this time – his needs and his wants – are the key to the future. The postmodern inhabitant is thus seeking real answers to real life problems. The postmodern citizen does not assume that because an answer worked in the past it will necessarily work today or in the future.

If you were born before 1960, you are considered by the postmodern world to be a "modernist". You are of a generation that was built on words and reason, arguments and structures. Answers were either black or white, right or wrong. Everything was local in that life revolved around local news, local values, local economics and local culture. On the other hand, if you were born after 1960, your life is postmodern and wired to a different life principle. Rick Chromey stated in reference to the postmodern generation that it is "wired with experiences and images. From golden arches to Nike 'swooshes,' from reality-based television to video games, everyone is a participant. It's now a karaoke world where images impact ideas and experiences create beliefs."21:240 Postmodern "Christians know faith isn't a destiny, but a dynamic. Christianity is not a period, but a question mark and exclamation point. It's discovering that God is bigger than a theology, a doctrine, or creed."^{21:246} It is for this reason that the postmodern generation feels detached from the previous generation in the sense that the postmodern religionist seeks a deeper experience with God through experiencing an active "living word" in life, not in the deadness of the letter of the law. Chromey concluded,

Since 1980, our world has undergone a metamorphosis, from a modern caterpillar to a postmodern butterfly culture. No longer black and white, it's a colorful world. Words have been replaced by images. It's not arguments, but experiences. It's not authority figures and representational government, but participatory democracy.^{21:246}

Since the postmodern resident is seeking for something more personal, more participatory and active in all aspects of life, then we must view this cultural paradigm shift as a great opportunity for evangelism. In our church paradigm shift, we must look through the present perspective of the postmodern resident in order to understand what God has to say to this person. The postmodern believer is not necessarily looking to "church" for answers to life's challenges, since church, to this person, is often believed to be burdened with too many traditions of the past. The postmodern believer is reaching directly to God for answers in order to discover a divine connection. He or she often seeks to bypass personal church experiences of the past in order to discover a direct relationship with Jesus in the present. Martoia said, "In our postmodern culture, people are looking for experiences to bring them closer to God. Why have we been so unimaginative? Postmoderns aren't looking for principles to die for; they're looking for practices to live by."^{23:59} This is the person we must reach with the gospel. This is our challenge in evangelism to the postmodern resident.

Because we have often laden the church with too many traditions, I ask for you to seriously consider what I believe are some implanted Western interpretations that we may have attached to some biblical texts, especially those texts that deal with the behavior of God's people with one another. I ask for your indulgence in this hermeneutical journey because there are some subliminal traditions that often hinder real church growth in Third World urban evangelism. They often hinder us from communicating the simple gospel to a postmodern culture.

The fact is that some of our interpretations are not practical when viewed from a Third World urban context. If you are a resident of a Western culture, it will be difficult for you to relate to some Third World situations to which I will refer throughout this book, especially situations concerning the struggle of Third World churches who seek to implement our Western obsession with church buildings. If you are a Christian in a Third World urban center, you will understand precisely what I am saying.

One stimulus for writing this book is the tremendous movement of sincere people away from traditional assembly-oriented and ceremonial religiosity that has been promoted throughout the centuries. What is interesting about this movement is the fact that it has originated out of the postmodern culture of the West. For example, Ralph Neighbour wrote,

In America, the cell church movement is presently exploding. Several hundred congregations are now discarding the "busy work" within church buildings for the reality of cell group ministries. **They realize programs based in buildings must be set aside to provide time for edification and "body life" evangelism in members' homes**. It is one of the fastest growing church structures in the world today, and points to the potential that open church ministries can produce for Christians in this generation [Emphasis mine, R.E.D.].^{2:106}

Leading in this movement are those of the baby boomer generation who are now in their 50s. This is a generation of people who want to be heard and treated as individuals. They are tired of endless repetitive religiosity that promotes structures that are controlled only by the professionals. They are frustrated with sitting on a spiritual plateau, while performing the same traditional religious ceremonies Sunday after Sunday. They are frustrated with being "anonymous believers" who have been shortchanged in churches that have long since died and are screaming out for someone to kick dirt on them. Too often, the only way "out" for these believers is "out" the door. Because established traditional leadership of the past has often refused to change, many frustrated believers have exited through the cathedral doors on their way to God at home. They have not given up on God. They have given up on traditional religions that have been created either after the traditions of men or the dictates of autocratic leadership who persist in maintaining control over the sheep of God.

The only way this generation of believers knows how to return to God is to go back home. They are thus seeking to go back to the future through the revival of their families who are meeting together in homes throughout the world. In these home meetings, they are discovering the marvelous practice of relational Christianity. This is a world movement. It is a glorious restoration in personal spiritual rebirth through personal encounters with fellow believers. It is a restoration that is happening.

When I talk about the assemblies of believers, I have used two terms to help clarify the contexts of my discussions. We have always taught that "church" refers to the people of God. The Greek word *ekklesia* that is translated "church" literally refers to a "called out assembly". However, in the context of the Spirit's discussions in the New Testament, this assembly is the community of God. The church is God's particular people. Therefore, I use the term "**single-assembly church**" to refer to those whose belief and behavior in assembly is focused on the necessity of maintaining at least one assembly of all members at a common location every week. This group affirms that this meeting identifies a church as a local church because of their coming together at the same place every Sunday.

I use the term "**multiple-assembly church**" to refer to those brethren who meet in many different houses every Sunday, but maintain their identity as a local church, and thus function as such in their region or city. Members of a multiple-assembly church often do not have the privilege of regularly meeting together in the same place. Either because of finances or desire, they seek to meet in their homes, and yet, seek to remain one church in the community.

As I progress through the material that follows, I will be more explicit concerning the beliefs and behavior of single-assembly and multiple-assembly churches. There are some specific differences between the two groups concerning assembly practices, but there are no differences between the two in reference to fundamental doctrine. In view of the revival throughout the world of multiple-assembly churches in the last two decades, this is an opportunity for us to review the biblical evidence for this phenomenon, as well as take advantage of a tremendous opportunity for world evangelism.

Chapter 1

HINDERED FOR THE FUTURE

"Behold, I have set before you an open door and no one can shut it, for you have a little strength and have kept My word and have not denied My name." The Holy Spirit, through John (Revelation 3:8)

Behavior from which we have strayed and must be restored in our relationship with God is never the original idea and thinking of any one man. Many leaders will perceive the problem almost spontaneously and begin to speak out. These leaders will arise to the occasion to lead the church to do what is right. Regardless of the traditions of the past, they will seek to restore and revive the church to do that which is right according to the authority of the word of God.

In this book I have joined a worldwide chorus of those who seek to awaken us to some challenges that face the religious world. This is not a lone perception of where we have come, nor where we are, and seem to be going. This book is a description of what is already happening in the religious world of Christendom. It is written by one who agrees with some of the challenges that are facing the church in the postmodern world where our concept of "church" seems to have become obsolete to a generation of people who are searching for something else. This is especially true in the postmodern Western urban centers of the world where church attendance is struggling. Many have been asking, "Have we developed a religiosity that is not meeting the needs of the urban dweller of this century?"

A. Stalled on stagnation:

These perceptions of non-growth are particularly applicable to the church in the postmodern urban world where stagnation seems to be the norm for church growth. I live in a Western urban business center that in many ways is not unlike urban centers of America and Europe. The church suffers from the same challenges of non-growth here that seem to be plaguing churches in all Western soci-

eties. We have often built our buildings, ceremonialized our religion, and confined our Christianity to our edifices. Order of worship is often made a ceremony around a roster of duties which selected personalities carry out every Sunday with precision performance. Preachers have been sto-

len from the lost and made the center-of-reference for the activity of a single-assembly local church. Churches busy themselves with activity that focuses on themselves and not the community of lost souls. In this introverted activity, world evangelism is lost as churches withdraw into themselves in order to preserve their existence. So where do we go from an idle religiosity that finds contentment in defining "faithfulness" by simple check marks on an attendance chart?

The question that we must ask is, Have we constructed through traditional practices a concept of the function of the church that is contrary to New Testament teaching? In answer to this question, we must venture into our historical roots. In this venture, I believe we will make discoveries that reveal some things we might not like to admit. These things refer to beliefs and behavioral norms among us which often work contrary to the spirit of true Christianity.

In the last two decades, several authors have started to realize that something is wrong when we alienate ourselves from one another in the church which is supposed to enhance personal relationships. When loneliness Oxymoron. in our lives is not solved in the church but begins there, then



Alienated Is An tir

we must wake up to the fact that something is wrong. New Testament Christianity should be a life of relationships. It is such because we have a close relationship with God through Jesus. But when these relationships do not exist, or are very shallow, then it is time to recognize where we are. It is a time for restoration to where God wants us to be. It is a time for revival in our spirit to do what God wants us to do.

Alienated relationships cause lukewarm churches. And lukewarm churches are not evangelistic. They have no world vision. They see themselves as mission points and not mission churches. Any church that does not feel a sense of necessity for world evangelism is in trouble. For the sake of the lost, we must discover the cause of this trouble. A church that does not have the mind of Christ to "seek and save the lost" throughout the world is a not a church of the mission of Christ.

B. Facing the challenges of a faith in flight:

Throughout the years the faithful have "faithfully" attended religious assemblies and given their contributions. And yet, there was a spiritual plateau above which many believers have felt they could not rise. We have worshiped in finely-tuned assemblies by looking at the back of the same head every Sunday, closed out the Sunday ceremony with brother John's closing prayer, and gone home with an emptiness we knew was never filled. In our spiritual frustration, we could never put our finger on the problem. As large single-assembly churches focused more on the mechanics of the "organization" rather than the spiritual development of the individual members, stagnation and introversion haunted us.

The challenges that face Christianity throughout the urban business world are something that must not be ignored. Speaking specifically of the European environment of Christendom, a recent cover story in *Time Magazine* reported,

The institutions of Christianity, of course, have long been in decline, but the consensus is that the pace has been quickening. "Parish life is essentially dead," admits a senior Vatican official. Church attendance has dwindled by more than 30% in Britain since 1980. Over the same period, the percentage of the population claiming membership in a religious denomination has dropped more than 20% in Belgium, 18% in the Netherlands and 16% in France. Christianity remains Europe's main religion, with about 550 million adherents. But the number of Europeans who identify as Catholic – by far the biggest denomination on the Continent – has fallen by more than a third since 1978.^{16:14,15}

The same feature article stated, "More than half of those polled in France, Britain, Germany, Spain and the Netherlands said that religion is not important to them."^{16:15} The German church historian and Lutheran bishop, Jobst Schöne, wrote, "Churches have always gone through periods when their influence is greater and periods when it was less. Now we are down. Christianity will be a minority. Nobody should close his eyes to that fact."^{16:15}

Though the preceding figures and statements may be discouraging, the fact is that faith is surviving in the European industrial/business culture. But there has been a change, a change from focusing on the "institutional church" to focusing on the individual. "It may sound strange to say," reported *Time*, "but in some ways Europe's faith has survived the church **Faith is more private, more personal, which means it may be harder to find and often maybe more at odds with Christian orthodoxy**. But in some places – among immigrants and youth – it is thriving and even growing [Emphasis mine, R.E.D.]."^{16:15} The youth of our postmodern world are moving in their faith. The challenge of the church, therefore, is to determine where they are moving, and then, keep them on track with the word of God.

C. Facing our "corporate religion":

I do not presume to answer all the questions in this book concerning the decline of interest in "church". But I do presume to confess to the fact that we have created a concept of church after the insular lifestyles of a business culture that conveniently departmentalizes God on a calendar of secular schedules. If you are stuck in the "urban corporate church", you know what I mean. If you consider yourself a normal, faithful Christian who shows up on Sunday morning like clockwork with a check list by which to check off ceremonial "acts of worship", you will not like what you will read from here on. If you are satisfied with a relationship with brothers and sisters in Christ that consists of only ten to fifteen



minutes of contact on Sunday morning in a building foyer, then stop reading right now. Pass this book on to someone else. But if you continue to read, put on your seat belt. Prepare for some jolts.

Keep in mind that the concepts herein given will certainly not seem relevant to those in environments where the church is growing, specifically in rural areas of the world. This is particularly true in India and Africa where the church in many places is growing in great numbers. In these areas, however, the growth is in the rural areas, while at the same time, there is difficulty in growing the church in large urban centers. In 1997 I had the privilege of traveling to over fifteen large cities of Africa in a 22,000 mile trek across the continent. At that time only one church in those cities was making any significant growth, while in most cases urban church growth was very slow. The real growth of the church in Africa was and continues to be in the rural areas of the continent. The reason for the negligible growth in the cities could be attributed to several reasons. What I consider the most significant reasons are addressed in this book.

D. The urban-cultured church

For many years foreign evangelists have discussed the challenges of urban evangelism. Twenty-five years ago we were discussing how difficult it was to grow a church in a large urban center. Much talk took place among world evangelists and in mission study classes con-



cerning this problem. Back in those days we never considered the fact that we may have developed a "churchianity" that never met the practical needs of the typical urbanite. The problem was not in the message we preached. Neither was it so

much in the area of methods. The problem was in our concept of Christianity. The problem centered around our behavioral pattern of being church, as well as our obsession with developing as large a single-assembly church as possible. We wanted to see how many people we could assemble under one roof to whom we could present a homiletically outlined sermon according to strict tradition, rather than working among people in their communities. **The answer to church growth in urban industrial/business centers does not lie in the creation of a magic method or program of evangelism. It lies in the manner in which a community of Christians behave in their relationships with one another and Jesus in local neighborhood interaction**. This is the method for urban evangelism.

Urban industrial/business cultures present different challenges for church growth. I grew up on a farm. When I moved to the city, I moved into a different culture. Much of my rural thinking on the farm was incompatible with the culture of the city. This was especially true in reference to my concepts concerning the function of my Christianity. For example, relationships in the rural culture generally remained with the same people for a lifetime. In urban cultures, however, relationships with different people are in constant change as one has a greater selection from which to make friends. The industrial/business urban culture thus presents this unique environment that must be addressed in reference to our establishing relationships in the body of Christ. Of this urban culture, Pearse and Matthews wrote,

We choose our friends and discard them when it suits us. This was never an option before the Industrial Revolution, when most people lived in small villages and never met more than a couple of hundred people during their entire lives, any more than it is an option today in rural India or among tribal peoples. We now choose whom we will marry, or whether we will marry at all, or live with a friend of the opposite sex (or of the same), or live alone. And whichever of these we choose, we reserve the right to change our minds later! **All of our relationships are provisional**. And if Christians insist that *their* marriages, at least, aren't provisional, the statistics suggest otherwise. **So when we come to consider our relationship with a church, it goes without saying that we are unlikely to be satisfied with anything significantly less than exactly what we want, and even then only for as long as we want it [Emphasis mine, R.E.D.].^{1:26,27}**

We have a "provisional" church that meets our needs and satisfies our level of personal relationships, but does not meet the needs of a postmodern world. Have we chosen to be a church that is steeped in past tra-



ditions but is often out of contact with the needs of the postmodern urban culture of the twenty-first century? I believe we must take another look at the nature of the church in reference to its cultural attachments. We may be a church that has become so oriented to a past culture that it has lost its relevance to the postmodern urbanite. Have we developed a fifty-year-old form of urban church behavior that does not work in our industrial/business urban centers of today?

In a time when the church seems to be without relevance in a postmodern world that has been Westernized by the economic and cultural influence of the West, people en masse in urban cultures seem to be shunning what they see as the traditional "church." One need only glance through church growth statistics to discover that Christianity is moving away from the developed industrial/business world to Third World environments wherein people "seem" to be more receptive. Christianity is becoming the faith of the poor. Now this poses some questions. Could it be that we have developed a "form of religion" that does not satisfy the needs of the developed world? Could we have shackled the church with traditional structures that no longer communicate to this postmodern world in which we live?

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E. Challenging sacred cows

Rick Warren once wrote concerning the uneasy feeling people have when approached concerning their worship,

Why do people take disagreement over worship styles so personally? Because the way you worship is intimately connected with the way God made you. Worship is your personal expression of love for God. When someone criticizes the way you worship, you naturally take it as a personal offense.^{20:284,285}

Whenever one attacks traditional practices in religion, he can expect some opposition. Opposition often comes from those who are more bound to tradition than Bible. Some are afraid that the way they have always worshiped God may not be the right way to God. We never want to challenge our worship and service to God for fear of finding a flaw in our approach to God. Those who suspect that something is wrong will always suspect those who seek to point out possible flaws in the system.

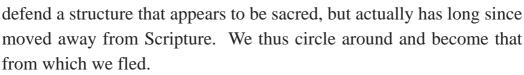
Dealing with sacred cows of worship and service is always an unpleasant task. Nevertheless, we must stroke the cow and meander into areas where traditionalists always fear to tread.

I have found that even those who feel that they are innovative in their worship, service and assemblies will not consider the things that will be discussed hereafter. In fact, our obsession with generating life in stagnant single-assembly churches by pumping up the tempo of the attendees only exemplifies the problem of our assembly-oriented Christianity. But in a time when the "hyper-assemblies" of churches are even becoming traditional and losing their "hype", we wonder if there is not a more significant problem which assembly-oriented, church-building-bound Christians must face. In facing stagnant growth, we must wake up to the fact that something may have gone terribly wrong with a first century Christianity that stormed throughout the ancient world, but is stalled in our world.

F. Back to the past:

The problem with religious movements is that they always seem

to digress into a traditional orientation of behavior, even though their doctrine remains constant. We fight for our faith, and then move into fighting with one another to defend our form of religiosity. We lose sight of faith in trying to



Let me assure you that the subject of this book is not a discussion of fundamental teachings. We are dealing with areas of opinion. At least that is my opinion. However, we must keep in mind that in areas of opinion people are often prone to move their opinions and traditions into the area of doctrine. I am not saying that I am shielded from doing the same. I have some traditions, too. But we must always challenge our traditions with the word of God. When one challenges tradition, he is often attacked for supposedly challenging doctrine. However, regardless of any such resistance, we must move into this area. It is an area in which we may have made the church irrelevant in a supposedly "unreceptive" world.

G. Estranged relationships:

On the other hand, this may be a fundamental doctrine with which we are struggling. You be the judge. Is our relationship with one another in fellowship with God a fundamental doctrine? Can we become so estranged from one another while sitting together in the same assembly that we have fallen away from the true one-another fellowship that permeates the description of the church in the first century? Since fellowship, or relationship, is subjective, then it would be hard to make a certain level of fellowship fundamental. If we do, then we are leaning toward cultism which establishes norms for intense relationships that control one another. We do not want to go down that road because it destroys our freedom in Christ. However, there is something exciting about the relationships the early Christians had with one another. It is our challenge to discover what this relationship was and how it was developed. We must discover how this relational Christianity moved them to be so world evangelistic.

One thing is true. If we feel that our inward desires to have a relationship with Jesus and others is not fulfilled, then we have missed something that is central to Christianity. If we feel alone while sitting in an assembly of Christians that is supposed to bring fellowship, then something is wrong. True Christianity will fulfill all our emotional and spiritual human needs. If the Christianity that we have developed does not, then is it true Christianity? Or, is it just a religion that we have constructed out of a necessity to satisfy a marginal religiosity that seems to crop up for an hour on Sunday morning? The fact that people sense something is wrong. The knowledge that we know we are no longer evangelistic indicates that we have lost a burning desire that moved us out of our church buildings and into the world of lost souls.

H. Movement of the Spirit?

Something very interesting is happening throughout the world in reference to Christianity. (I use the word "Christianity" in its broadest literary meaning.) When I lived in Brazil in the early 70s, masses of people were moving from the traditional cold atmosphere of traditional religion into a Pentecostal/charismatic movement that was sweeping across Latin America. Tens of thousands were in this movement. This was not only true of Brazil, but the Pentecostal/charismatic movement has swept across the religious world from the early 1900s to the present. The impetus for this movement was not so much a desire for a change in doctrine, but for a change in how the individual deals with his personal religious behavior and feelings. There was a general problem in the Catholic-oriented societies of all of Latin America. Catholic-oriented religion was cold, formal, impersonal, closed in the assemblies and out of touch with the everyday needs of the people. This could be said of many traditional religions throughout the world today. When people become frustrated with this cold and ceremonial religiosity, they begin looking for something that is more fulfilling. The religious pendulum thus swings to the extreme. The result of this swing from the past several decades of religious ceremonialism has been the rapid rise of the Pentecostal/charismatic movement.

The Pentecostal/charismatic movement of the twentieth century was a reaction to cold, formalistic religion. It was a religious movement within churches to revive a structure and form of religiosity that was out of touch with the modern urban world that generally suppressed emotional expression. But now we have moved to the postmodern world and even the charismatic movement seems to be fading. Hyper assemblies and innovative "worship styles" where people fell to the floor and danced to the point of exhaustion were supposedly an answer to rejuvenate an assembly of stagnant believers. But because there was no restoration of relational Christianity and no focus on the word of God, the hype has left the movement wanting in the twenty-first century. The decline of this movement is because after the excitement of the assembly has subsided, attendees still do not have a relationship with one another. Emotional exhaustion is not an answer for lonely hearts. It is only a placebo of the true, a counterfeit of what God intended in our worship and service as a church.

While in Brazil I experienced another interesting phenomenon. People first moved from the cold ceremonial religion of Catholicism to

the excitement of the Pentecostal/charismatic faith. But then they moved back again to somewhere in between. Once many people had swung on the pendulum from traditional religion to the



Exciting Assemblies Without Exciting Relationships Generate Exhausting Religiosity.

emotional religiosity of Pentecostalism, they realized that there was no personal satisfaction in a religiosity that was emotionally out of control. The problem was that people first found no relationships in traditional religions. They then rushed to exciting charismatic assemblies, thinking that colorful assemblies would restore some fulfillment in church life. Hyper assemblies were an effort to regenerate the religiosity of a people who were searching for something that would fulfill their basic spiritual and emotional needs in life.

The problem with the exciting assemblies was that after the assembly, emotionally drained worshipers still went home without any relationships with their fellow worshipers. They felt good, and subsequently praised the emotional fix of the assembly. However, they carried on with their estranged relationships with one another. Nothing had changed since the days of the traditional assemblies in the local cathedral. The final analysis was that the Pentecostal/charismatic movement was just another sterile attempt that failed to restore the true nature of relational Christianity.

The problem was that the assemblies of the Pentecostal/charismatic movement were geared to what the worshiper could get out of them, not what he could give in worship to God. The Pentecostal/charismatic movement missed, and continues to miss, the point that worship is what we express **to** God, not what we get from Him. Supposedly "getting the Spirit" is not what God wants from worshipers during times of worship. Since His people already have the Spirit, He seeks for a contrite spirit of worship.

I. A search for revival:

A new challenge has now presented itself throughout the world. The religious world has now moved into questioning the whole assembly orientation of the Christianity we seem to have created after our own departmentalized mentality of the Western industrial/business world. Assembly-oriented Christianity has always failed to fulfill the worshiper's basic need for a relationship with God and fellow worshipers. It has failed to generate within the hearts of worshipers a sense of love for the word of God and a love for lost souls.

So here we are in a business-oriented urban culture where people have often given up on "going to church" simply because what they want cannot be found there. The "church" that we can sign in and out of like a corporate business meeting no longer works. It never did. The problem is that I can "go to church" and be just as lonely when I get there as I was before I arrived at the church building. This religion no longer works for a generation that has been starved of relationships in an insular industrial/business urban culture. It no longer works for a postmodern generation who seeks to personally experience the word of God in their lives.

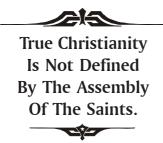
I must assure you that there is a movement in the world today against the very traditional system of assembly-oriented religion that leaves people without personal contact, and thus, without a sense of fulfillment in their relationship with God. Large single-assembly churches are under attack. It is not that religious people want to be separated from one another into small groups. The very opposite is what is happening. People want to be together. They crave personal contact in a culture that keeps them apart from one another. They are thus seeking assemblies with one another that are carried out on a more personal basis. They are seeking worship with participation, not worship that is assigned to a few professionals who give their performances on the stage, and then fade away until the next "hour of worship."

And herein is the magic of what is happening in many corners of the world today. Believers throughout the world are coming together into smaller, personal assemblies in which they can establish a personal relationship with one another around the word of God in the presence of Jesus. They are coming together in house (cell) churches where open worship is encouraged and good works initiated. They are discovering that smaller is better when in assembly with one another, for smaller makes the church grow as new assemblies are established throughout a community. As they escape the control of man-made governing religious bodies, they are rediscovering the control of Jesus as their only head and Savior. They are discovering that there is true freedom in Christ. It is a glorious revival, a revival of Jesus to be the sole head of the sole believer. He only must have this authority.

J. Challenging the assembly:

In view of the movement of religious people in the world today, we must look again at our concept of the assembly of the church in order to determine if it is truly meeting the needs of people. Have we developed some traditional opinions and practices concerning our assemblies and Christian service that have moved us away from one another, away from the word of God, and away from the lost?

I believe we have slipped some of our opinions and practices into the realm of law in reference to a denominational religiosity that was born out of the Catholic heresy of the Constantinian apostasy. We have



accepted a bill of goods from the religious world around us that often makes the church irrelevant to a postmodern urban world. In order to deal with this matter, I believe we must move into this area of discussion with vigor. If we do not, then the church of Christ

as it is today will give way to a new restoration that will surely meet the needs of a world population that is hungering and thirsting for a relationship with Jesus by enhanced relationships with one another.

Please keep in mind that when one assumes his opinions are under attack, he often reacts with the same energy as he would if he thought the Scriptures were under attack. But we must caution ourselves. We sometimes capture and contain in a catechism, and copyright as unique with our group, traditional practices that are foreign to Scripture. When the transition of opinion to "Bible" occurs, adherents have a difficult time in determining what is either Baal or Bible. What I am asking you to consider is the possibility that we may have canonized some concepts of assembly and behavioral Christianity that are foreign to the simple New Testament Christianity we read about in our Bibles. We may have become so building-oriented in our behavior that we now believe that church buildings are absolute necessities for the establishment of a local church. The extent to which we are defensive about large assemblies in church buildings betrays the extent to which we have moved this option into the realm of necessity in our beliefs and behavior.

Let me state again that this discussion does not deal with any fundamental teaching. It is simply an examination of first century assembly practices and relationships in reference to what is commonly accepted in churches today. Therefore, the degree of one's surprise to what is said may be the measure of where one is in being able to distinguish between Baal and Bible on this subject.

I want to challenge you concerning what the Bible actually teaches on these subjects, not concerning what either of us is now practicing. I believe every thought and behavioral practice that we do must be brought under the close scrutiny of the word of God. If we do not continually check ourselves with God's word, we will end up one day with a religion that we have created after our own behavior.

There are some strong feelings and opinions associated with the discussion of this material. However, we must all be reminded that we are to be judged according to the Scriptures, not according to canonized traditions that often distort objective Bible studies. When canonized traditions are in the way of understanding and applying the truth of God's word, there must be no question about sacrificing traditions in order to follow God. Remember this statement? "Whether it is right in the sight of God to give heed to you more than to God, you judge. For we cannot but speak the things that we have seen and heard" (At 4:19,20).

Chapter 2

CONFESSING UP TO WHERE WE ARE

Before we launch into some adventures concerning where we are and where I feel we need to continue with the restoration of New Testament Christianity, it is necessary to identify who we are. If you reside in a rural setting with a small congregation of fifty or fewer members, then what I say in the remainder of this book may seem strange to you. Small churches are more likely to retain the fellowship which God intended that His community should have. Small churches, which are often mostly rural churches, have a much closer fellowship than large single-assembly churches in urban centers. In other words, if one is a member of a small village church somewhere in the middle of Africa or India, then the problem that is addressed in this book will have little relevance to his or her situation.

However, if one resides in an industrial/business urban center of the world, there are some real challenges he or she must consider that are facing the church. We are struggling with our culture in relation to our Christianity. In fact, the real struggle centers on our culture. Our culture in the industrial/business world has estranged us from one another. As a result, our human spirit is starving for relationships. Because of the nature of this culture of estrangement, churches have stagnated as individuals seek other environments in which to establish personal relationships.

A new generation of youth has arisen who feel that the "church" they have been handed from their fathers does not always work in many areas of their lives. Therefore, they are out there searching. For what, they do not always know. But they do know one thing. The historical traditional "churchianity" of the past is not where many of them want to go, or return. It is this church from which they are wandering. Therefore, in order to direct this wandering, we must admit our present situation, and then get back to the word of God to find direction for the future.

The following points of present church belief and behavior are areas wherein we must acknowledge what we have some difficulties in relating to the postmodern urban world. These thoughts are set forth in order to prepare us for a reevaluation of challenges that hinder a revival of the church in urban centers throughout the world. When discussing the subject of the church meeting in the homes of members, we must deal with these in order to get back on course. It is for this reason that we must view the restoration of Christians meeting in their homes, not merely as another system of assembly, but a restoration to some basic New Testament principles and practices from which the church seems to have strayed.

A. Struggling with stagnant churches:

Regardless of opinions and procedures, methods and means, when the dust settles, souls must be saved throughout the world. The gospel must be preached to every creature by every generation of the church on earth. If we are experiencing stagnation in growth, then changes must be made. What is exciting about the past twenty to thirty years of church history is the discovery by many churches throughout the world that in order to get growing again, they must get smaller again. Soul-saving takes place in greater numbers in small groups.

It has always been known that newly established small churches grow faster than large established churches. Large churches are now

discovering that in order to start growing again, they must go smaller in their assemblies. In church mergers throughout the 70s and 80s, churches sought to prop up a front for growth, but this was only swelling, and dead bodies swell. After the consolidation of

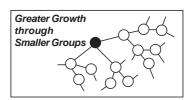


churches, the reality of stagnation and death still stared church leaders in the face. Souls were still not being saved. This realization called for repentance, a change in thinking and strategy. This change has prompted a move in many single-assembly churches to small cell groups meeting throughout their communities. What has subsequently happened is a restoration to growth for those churches who are committed to meeting the needs of people on a personal community level.

Large single-assembly churches have discovered that cell meetings must center around ten to fifteen people. A cluster of such small groups adds up to a dynamic power in any urban city. The road to sustained growth is through these powerful small groups of soldiers meeting in their communities.

In some recent studies in church growth, Christian A. Schwarz put some scientific foundation behind this practical phenomenon of evan-

gelism. He conducted a survey of 1,000 churches in thirty-two nations throughout the world. He compiled a database of 4.2 million responses. The conclusion of his research revealed that church growth is caused by "the

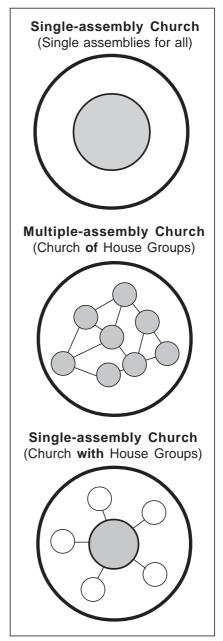


multiplication of small groups."^{12:33} Interesting? Absolutely! Schwarz's research revealed that small group evangelism is not only an answer for church growth in industrial/business cultures, but also an answer for growth in the environment of any culture of any nation in the world. If we are to get growing in world evangelism, we must focus on establishing large clusters of small groups for Christ, instead of seeking to construct large single-assembly churches that are centralized under one roof. The conclusion to Schwarz's study is that we must focus on establishing large multiple-assembly churches.

The practical application of small groups is revealing that we must start viewing the church in any region as a cluster of small groups meeting throughout communities. Growth statistics are also revealing that growing churches are not only those churches with cell groups, but also those churches that are made up by a cluster of cell groups. In his book of how he took a church of 1,500 plus members to hundreds of house churches, Larry Stockstill explained, "You can readily see that

we are not talking about a 'church with cells,' but a 'cell church.' The cells are not an appendage, demanding attention like all the other programs: they ARE the program."^{13:29} Stockstill continued, "We have often seen the church as a set of programs rather than a set of relationships. The 'home groups' were 'care groups' or some branch of ministry in the church. **The paradigm shift we must make is to begin to see the cells as 'the church'** [Emphasis mine, R.E.D.]"^{13:31}

Our struggle, therefore, is to make a paradigm shift. We must change our view of relational Christianity and the "assembly" arrangement of the church in order to motivate the troops into action. Assembly must be seen as a place of "stirring up love and good works" rather than a religious theater that is centered around a few performers who act out the parts of a play (roster). Our repentance to change will mean a paradigm shift concerning our view of how Christians are to relate to and assemble with one another as the community of God.



B. Struggling in the insular urban center.

If you are living in the typical urban center of the world, the effect of your culture on your religious behavior has probably brought about a struggle in your relationships with your fellow man. You are living among hundreds of thousands in an environment wherein you struggle to survive. In this environment you have been estranged from your fellow man. If you are living in the midst of so many, and yet feel alone, isolated, and especially, out of contact with fellow Christians with whom you crave relationships, then this challenge is to you.

This challenge is for all of us because of the nature of our environment, our culture, and the systematic religiosity that has become only a bandage to the real sickness that is starving us into isolation. The ceremonial religion we practice is not fulfilling our innermost desires for fellowship and relationship.

Have you ever sat in the assembly of a large single-assembly church building, counting every hair on the back of someone's head, struggling to give attention to a discourse on Dynamic Equivalents in Hebrew trans-



lation, hoping for the time when the preacher says, "In conclusion …"? Have you ever felt so alone among so many? You came to the assembly with expectations of finding relief from loneliness. However, after several casual "Good mornings" and "Good byes", you were still lonely. You are now frustrated by a knowledge of the fact that you were only one spectator in an orchestrated performance of a few individuals who checked off their responsibilities on the roster. Have you ever wanted to say something, but had no opportunity to speak, to cry out that God is working in your life, but found no one who would listen? If so, then welcome to the tradition of large single-assemblies in which individuals can lose their identity in the collective.

The urban culture moves us to isolate and departmentalize our religious life. We are often so involved with survival in urban life that we have little time for God and one another. What time we do have for God and fellow Christians is relegated to a religious assembly that is simply one department of events in our busy lives to maintain the essentials of urban survival. When it comes to relationships, the environment of the "religious departments" thus becomes cold and indifferent. We know there is something wrong in our environment because we know that our basic human desire to have true friendship relationships with others, especially in a church context, is not being fulfilled. We know that our Bibles teach us to have a greater fulfilling contact with one another than what can be accomplished in church building foyer time once a week. If this is where you are, then you need to keep reading. There is hope!

C. Struggling for fellowship at the table of the Lord.

Have you ever wondered that there might be more to the Lord's Supper than a pinch of wafer and sip of the fruit of the vine? Have you ever wondered about the love feasts that are mentioned in the New Testament? Where have they gone? Our insular society and "quick stop" religion have relegated to the past the rewarding fellowship meals during which the New Testament church celebrated their blood-bought

covenant with God. The Lord's Supper has been turned into a "fast food" ceremony where thousands of people can be served in a few minutes, and then sent on their way. In some large assembly urban churches I have witnessed people leaving the assembly after the Lord's



Supper was served. They punched in the ceremony, and then punched out of the assembly. Have we lost something in reference to the love feast of the first century church wherein fellowship was an experience and the table meal of the Lord was an occasion?

D. Struggling with a spiritual plateau.

This point brings us to a common problem with which we often struggle in the Christian life. We want to spiritually grow. We crave a greater relationship with Jesus and others. But something is often hindering us from reaching our desired goal. We have tried work-oriented religion. We have hyped up our assemblies to compete with any concert. We have turned up the decibels of the loud speakers and amused ourselves with every type of body motion possible. But at the end of the performance, we are back to where we started, to an estranged relationship with Jesus.

Now here is where we need to be honest. Do you feel that you are on a spiritual plateau and your face is pressed against a mental barrier that does not allow you to spiritually get beyond where you are? Do you feel that you cannot get past casual religiosity in an effort to establish a closer relationship with Jesus? Has your relationship with others become so shallow that your relationship with Jesus has reached its limit, and thus become sterile? If it has, then join the crowd of those who have come into the bondage of ceremonial religiosity. We seek something better, something that will take us on to a greater spiritual relationship with Jesus through a fulfilling ministry to others.

Our "spectator" religiosity has brought thousands to the conclusion that what we have defined and practiced as "church" no longer appeals to many of our basic emotional needs. It is not that these seekers have become nonreligious. They are simply seeking to escape ceremonial religiosity that has held them up in assembly-oriented "churchianity" for centuries. James Rutz was right when he wrote of the present scenario of assembly-oriented Christianity.

If you've ever felt alone and unimportant in church, there's a good reason: You **are** alone and unimportant.

From 11 to 12 Sunday, you're just another pretty face in the crowd.

Though surrounded by others, you're cut off. Custom walls you off in your own space and silences your voice – except for song or responsive reading.

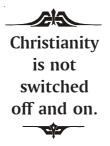
Surrounded by an audience of trainee mutes, you can find it lonely as a solo trek across Antarctica. After you've eaten all the sled dogs.

The service would be exactly the same without you. You know that. Your impact on it is like an extra gallon of water going over Niagara Falls.^{2:1}

E. Struggling with an institutionalized God and church.

The urban church is under attack from within itself. Urbanites in the postmodern world find little relief from the stress of life in the large ceremonial church assemblies that take place in beautifully designed physical structures. Our obsession in our business culture drives us to departmentalize, organize and institutionalize everything. Our church behavior has not escaped these obsessions.

Our past history of institutionalizing the church has committed us to be spectators in a highly organized performance of religious assemblies. Our focus on structure and organization and programs has stolen from us relationships and personal involvement and spiritual contact with



our Founder and fellows. We have acted out the "worship service", and then escaped from the presence of God by fleeing the sanctuary. After the "hour of worship" wherein we felt reassured by holding down a pew or bench for the designated time on Sunday morning, we had the urge to escape and be on "our time." How-

ever, in all this performance, we knew that we wanted more out of our faith. There had to be something more to Jesus than performance-oriented, assembly-focused Christianity. Even when we checked off all the "acts" of our religious performances, we knew something had gone awry in an "urban religion" where worship and God could be switched on and off like the lights down at the office.

F. Struggling with "pastorizing" personal involvement.

When we have little time for God and our fellow man, the natural thing to do is to hire out our responsibilities to a professional. Since the normal industrial/business urbanite is consumed with making money to support a life in which he or she is trapped, using one's personal ministry for the glory of God is relegated to hiring a professional to see that our job is done. We thus pass personal involvement off to a professional whom we have hired to visit the hospitals, teach the Bible classes, and above all, complete our responsibility of preaching the gospel to the world. The church is thus sterilized of personal involvement by individual members. Volunteerism vanishes as the laity expects the clergy to maintain the ship.

Our "religion" is often maintained by those who are supported by salaries from the church. After the definition of the word, we have a "clergy" among us who "pastor" our churches. The church thus feels it is the responsibility of the clergy to be "degreed" by a prominent educational institution in order to carry out the duties of the clergy. The clergy is then expected to be the final authority on interpretation, be at every church function, marry and bury, and thus, be the center-of-reference, the one-man-band for the local church.

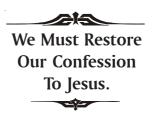
Though misapplying the term "pastor", religious groups have confessed that their clergymen pastor the flock as a one-man show around whom the local church centers its attention. If we cannot envision Jesus showing up on Sunday morning in a three piece suit to preach a three point outline, then maybe we are starting to wake up to the fact that we have developed a clergy among us. Our evangelists have become pastors, and our pastors have become a board of directors. The deacons have been decommissioned, and often linger on pews with an identity crisis.

So here we are. Professionally trained clergymen have an assortment of degrees hanging on their office walls in order to reaffirm, as doctors and dentists, their professional right to be there. We live in a church world where applications to churches without degrees are not worth the postage stamp on a letter to the churches to which they are sent. Professionalism in the pulpit has made us all hand over our brains to a theological school graduate who has the last say on any point of discussion. Our clergymen have become the unproclaimed authorities of the local church who must first put their stamp of approval on any organizational structure or biblical interpretation before it can be accepted. They are truly the single pastor of the local congregation. The church has thus become a well-greased organization that matches the structure of any corporation in the business world. We are truly doing "church business as business", and thus, the "corporate church" has emerged in the urban world. The church has been hijacked by the industrial revolution.

A clergy exists because of two things. First, one's paycheck too often determines the stand he will take in reference to the word of God. Luke revealed that this was the problem with the Pharisees. They were *"Lovers of money"* (Lk 16:14). If one did not conform to the status quo of the teaching of the Pharisees, he was branded and disfellowshipped from the circle of Pharisees.

The second reason a clergy exists is that preachers are often cowardly in reference to teaching what they know they should teach. As one preacher told me, "We think liberal, but preach conservative." What he was saying was that he knew what was right, but spoke that which had to be said in order to maintain his position. During the time of Jesus' ministry it was the cowards who would not confess Jesus. "*These words his parents spoke because they feared the Jews, for the Jews*

had already agreed that if anyone confessed that He was the Christ, **he would be put out of the synagogue**" (Jn 9:22). The clergy fears lest they should be put out of the pulpit. It is for this reason that Jesus placed much emphasis on con-



fession of Him as to who He was (Mt 10:32:33). Of those who would not stand up for the truth of the gospel, He said, "But whoever will deny Me before men, him I will also deny before My Father who is in heaven" (Mt 10:33). It is for this reason that the angel told John, "But the cowardly ... will have their part in the lake that burns with fire and brimstone ..." (Rv 21:8). Preachers must seriously consider whether they have, as Balaam, sold their ministry for hire. If they have, then they have joined the ranks of a clergy. They "have run greedily after the error of Balaam for reward" (Jd 11).

The reason the word of God deals so harshly with the concept

of greedy religious leaders is that **they will not stand up for what is truth. They will sacrifice truth for a paycheck or a position**. They will know what must be done, but will cowardly refuse to take a stand for that which must be taught and obeyed. Mobs are simply a group of cowards. The individuals of a mob cannot individually take a stand. They thus generate one another's lack of courage into making rash decisions. God wants leaders who are not led by the frenzy of a mob mentality, but by their conviction that His word is their sole authority in all religious matters. We are now in the days of the history of Christendom where leaders of courage are needed to stand up for what must be done in order to revive ourselves and restore God's word as the center-ofreference to our beliefs and Jesus as our only Master. As hundreds of churches face extinction because all their members are sixty or over, we need convicted men to cry out that something is wrong with this picture. We need leadership that will lead us back into evangelism.

G. Struggling with the "board of directors".

Our present elders have their hands full. Urban elders are stuck in an urban business world where they must also make a living to maintain a lifestyle that is burdened with bills and appointments, or just a materialistic world wherein one seeks to keep up with the worldly neighbors. They have jobs and families and community responsibilities just like everyone else. Their work with the church, therefore, is often confined to a room in which decisions must be made and handed down to the sheep. Such meetings are concluded and each man goes on his way to his business responsibilities. It is little wonder that elders move into "lordship leadership" in this scenario by making decisions, and then moving on

to other things. Most elders do not like this. However, dealing with the pressures of urban life has moved them to a "board of directors" style of leadership that confines them to boardrooms rather than house to house ministry. Few sincere elders



Roger E. Dickson, Biblical Research Library

like this. Unfortunately, this is the impact of our culture on how we behave in the function of the church.

In many industrial/business churches, elderships have become governing boards who have starved a flock that is thirsting for relationships with one another. The sheep want to be closer to the shepherds, but the shepherds are out to pasture with a demanding business schedule. Shepherds no longer smell like sheep.

The problem with a "board of directors" style of leadership is that it often moves into lordship. Making decisions is easy. Being involved in a personal way in the lives of others is not. When we move into the decision-making business, instead of the ministry business, it is easy to hand down dictates. And any time elders get involved in handing down dictates as a corporate board of directors, they turn into lords of the flock. They start standing between God and man.

When elders are viewed as men who stand between members and the Master, then we know that we have developed a hierarchial system of control as the Catholic Church that will always hinder the individual member's personal relationship with Jesus. When members have to get permission before they can get going, then you know that they just become bound. They have lost their freedom in Christ before a



board of directors who seek to maintain control of an intimidated flock. If there are no elders in the local congregation, then members are often held at bay by a dictatorial clergyman who controls the church. Mem-

bers, therefore, struggle to have a direct relationship with Jesus without first seeing the preacher or elders who stand between them and Jesus. Instead of having only one Lord with whom they are to relate, they often have many lords who seek to control their lives.

So here we are, sitting with and in a corporate church that is beautifully organized with all the fluff of a well-engineered corporation. We have the board of directors, the public relations and information man. The organization is fine-tuned to precision with assignments for every worker for every department. We have programs for everything. Schedules are established with distributed work orders. The system gives the pretense of a well run business, after all, we "must do church business as business." But in all this religious activity of spiritual bees, something is wrong. People are doing things. Tasks are being completed. The problem, however, is that everyone knows there is something wrong. Spiritual plateaus have been reached and no one has the courage to stand up and scream, "I want a closer relationship with someone! My relationship with Jesus stinks, and I need help!"

Are we stuck with a church that moves people to think that quitting church is an option? Or, do we have a church in a community that has no appeal to the community because there is no relational community in the church? We often comfort ourselves with the fact that we are right because we have the right doctrine. We have a proof text for every point of teaching. But at the end of the day, if one member cannot bridge the great chasm from being religious to being personal, then we have forgotten the statement, "*By this will all men know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another*" (Jn 13:35).

We pride ourselves in "our preacher," "our church" and "our programs" to the point that individuals become lost in a scurry of impersonal busy people. We have "churchianity" fine-tuned to give a pretense of religiosity, but would Jesus fit into our well-oiled machinery? Did we get all this machinery out of the personal ministry of Jesus through Matthew, Mark, Luke and John? Or, did we get it from a department store culture that is seated in the heart of our business urban centers?

Reaction to the above scenario has stirred a movement in the religious world of denominational churches. It is a movement away from institutional religion. Do not misunderstand this. It is not a movement away from Christ. The problem is that the postmodern urban church has moved God-fearing people so far away from Jesus that there is a rebellion within the world of denominated churches. Members of these churches want to move closer to the One in whom they believe by moving closer to their fellow man. In this move there are those who have to move away from their denominated churches in order to move closer in their relationship with Jesus. When a church hinders one's personal relationship with Jesus, then you know it is a dysfunctional church.

This twenty-first century movement in the religious world in general is a move away from dysfunctional churches, churches that do not move people closer to Jesus. It is a radical restoration that is happening in religion throughout the world. Thousands are moving away from structured religiosity in a restoration of simple New Testament Christianity. It is not a reformation of existing in-



stitutions. It is not a restoration to go back and camp in a past denominational structure. It is a radical restoration to rediscover the relational Christianity explained in God's word in order to deal with the challenges of the twenty-first century. It is an effort of the urban resident to connect directly with Jesus by reconnecting with one's fellow man.

Make no mistake about this restoration. The clergy feels threatened because they feel that their financial base is being eroded. Leaders are threatened as they see their control over others slipping away. As people seek to have only one Lord, the autocratic behavior of those who seek to lord over the flock is threatened by their loss of control of the lives of those over whom they should have had no control in the first place. From the viewpoint of autocratic leaders, this radical restoration is viewed to be a threat against organized religion. It is. Many view it as an apostasy from past traditional practices. It is. As frustrated members seek a greater relationship with one another, their relationship with Jesus is enhanced, enriched and enlightened. As members "dechurch" from institutional religiosity, they "rechurch" with one another and Jesus. Believe me, this movement is strong in the religious world. It is strong in the church since we have in so many ways copied the assembly-oriented behavior of the denominational world.

The exciting thing about this revival in Christendom is the oppor-

tunity the church has for world evangelism. Having the right understanding of New Testament teaching means that we generally do not have to struggle through a jungle of many religious traditions as does the rest of the religious world. But now we need to check our own behavior as the community of God. If we can truly restore relational Christianity, then we have the greatest appeal possible in a revival that is presently going on in the world today. If the church can work on restoring New Testament behavior in conjunction with correct fundamental beliefs, then she has the greatest appeal to a disoriented religious world that is seeking to escape from traditional religion.

We must reassure ourselves that it is not wrong to seek means by which Christians can be closer to one another in order to stir up love and good works. It is not wrong to regenerate our personal ministry by discovering the needs of our brothers and sisters in Christ, and the needs of those around whom we live in our community. It is not wrong to use our house for what it should be used, a center for physical family and spiritual family to draw closer to God. The use of our homes for relationship building and evangelism is right. We must not let anyone tell us anything different.

It cannot be wrong if we are guided by the word of God in order to find one another through finding Jesus. When we allow the word of God to guide us in establishing principles by which we can initiate and maintain closer relationships with one another and Jesus, then we know that we are on the right track. If we are stuck in our relationships with others and Jesus, stranded on a lonely religious island, then we need to start restoring simple New Testament Christianity in our lives. This may take some radical changes. If it does, then let's move on with what we know we should do in order to reestablish our relationship with God. God did not intend that Christians develop shallow relationships among themselves by being confined to mass assemblies of hundreds, or thousands, and the performance of religious ceremonies. He knew we needed more than this. He intended that we be close in a love that would signal to others that we are truly the disciples of Jesus because of our love for one another. This was the signal of discipleship.

This is precisely what we see reflected in the New Testament church. The early Christians met in a way that "preached" their loving fellowship with one another throughout the communities in which they lived.

Chapter 3

FIRST CENTURY MULTIPLE-ASSEMBLY CHURCHES

I have witnessed throughout more than twenty years of experience with small groups the tremendous impact that small-group fellowship has on evangelism and edification. Though I have had and continue to have experience with multiple-assembly churches, the real foundation of my view is the fact that the early church actually met in the homes of Christians. This would justify the principle of first viewing the assembly of the saints in the New Testament from a "house-church interpretation". At least this interpretation is more consistent in understanding New Testament "assembly texts" than the view that the early Christians somehow met in large buildings, whatever those buildings may have been.

If your heritage is as mine, you were brought up in a singleassembly, church-building religious environment. Therefore, when it comes to interpreting "assembly texts" of the New Testament, you are probably inclined toward a "large single-assembly", "church house", and often "Western culture" interpretation of these texts. If you are so inclined, I would like to challenge you with a review of those New Testament texts that give historical information concerning the meeting of the early saints. At the end of the day, we must be as objective as possible, and thus allow each text to mean only what it says. We can "read between the lines" in order to assume the historical context of the assembly environment of the early Christians. But we must not bind what we see between the lines. Assumptions and opinions are not foundations upon which fundamental teaching is to be established. And when we are talking about when, where and how concerning the assembly of the saints, we are in the area of opinion.

One thing about which all students of the New Testament agree is that the early church commonly met together in their homes for assembled worship and fellowship. This is one of those truths that does not need any deductive reasoning to establish. However, this truth concerning our understanding of how the saints in the first century assembled has been changed. It has been changed to large single-assembly, building-oriented meetings that are often impersonal and formalistic in their

nature. Those who are of this assembly culture – I came from this culture – have a difficult time in understanding the New Testament texts wherein the fellowship of the early church is defined. It is as F. LaGard Smith wrote, "For those of us who have ever 'attended worship' with sizeable congregations in



Our Heritage

rather grand buildings, the most striking feature of the early disciples was their apparent practice of worshiping together in private homes, presumably in relatively small groups."^{6:146}

The fact of house assemblies in the first century context is "striking" to us today because we grew up surrounded by the brick and mortar of church buildings. How large we could get the assembly on Sunday morning was a matter for boasting. I have sometimes asked fellow preachers, "How large is the church for which you preach?" Preachers often consider it a matter of status to preach for the larger churches. The larger the Sunday morning assembly, supposedly the greater the preacher. Once buildings were built, it was the goal of the church to "fill up the building." Programs were developed in order to "fill up the building." Preachers were hired to "fill up the building." We all grew up under the drive to "fill up the building", and thus our thinking was focused on the building and not the "fill". We even sacrificed some good preachers in order to accomplish our obsession. If the building was not filled, it had to be the fault of the preacher. So we shuffled him and his poor family on to another church and hired another preacher. We then started the process all over again.

In the preceding quote, Smith expressed how far many of us have drifted from the practice of the early church in their assemblies. The fact that the early church met in their homes is often an amazing discovery to us who were brought up in the church-building culture. Smith continued,

That no evidence exists of large congregations meeting in spacious "church buildings" for observing the memorial meal [Lord's Supper] together (whatever its actual nature) tells us much about what we aren't always told by way of detail: that first-century Christians obviously met together in a variety of homes, large and small. Among the early disciples, faith and Christian practice began at home, in more ways than one.^{6:149}

As Smith said concerning the movement of the Jewish believers, it was "from temple, to synagogue, and home again."^{6:149} And so we are back at home again. This is where Jesus started His ministry. This is what we seek to restore in our communities. Therefore, we need to follow Jesus and the early disciples as they went from house to house.

Our first hint that must stimulate this move is the glaring fact that **there is no emphasis in the New Testament on buildings and maintaining large single-assembly churches**. Emphasis is on the rapid growth of the church as a result of the preaching of the gospel, not on the growth of any single church. This should alert us to the fact that our desires for building large single-assembly churches is suspect.

We must go on this journey that I will take you on in the remainder of this book. There will be some scary points along the way. Nevertheless, we must ask ourselves, Have we drifted away from the nature of what the church is by our fascination with large assemblies in ornately constructed buildings which we show off to one another and our communities in which we



build them? Has our concept of Christianity digressed to a point that it now manifests itself in something that is foreign to simple New Testament Christianity? I want to remind you that the latter question here is the real thrust of this book. Church buildings are not the problem in and of themselves. Even large assemblies of the church on a weekly basis are not the problem. **The problem is that our Christianity has dwindled to meeting only in large assemblies in large buildings on Sunday morning**.

A. The house to house ministry of Jesus:

The teaching and fellowship of the church that is centered on our homes started with the meeting of the Jews in their homes. It was only natural, therefore, that Jesus went about from house to house as was common among Jewish rabbis. Under the Old Testament Sabbath law, the Israelite families were basically confined to their houses on the Sabbath. The house environment, therefore, was the setting for family teaching and worship. Out of this assembly environment, Jesus and the early disciples were born. It would follow, therefore, that they would continue to assemble in this manner in order to retain worship and fellowship that is focused on the family.

The focus of Jewish worship and fellowship has always centered around the home. From the beginning of time, the extended family was the foundation from which worship came and to which God communicated by speaking to the fathers of the families (Hb 1:1). When Israel was chosen from among the nations, family worship in homes continued. In order to discourage localized worship, God meant for the tabernacle to be rotated among the tribes of Israel. But a temple was constructed to replace the tabernacle, though the temple was not in the original plan of God. Nevertheless, God allowed what Israel wanted.

By the time of the ministry of Jesus, synagogues had also come into the religious environment of Israel. Synagogues were not a part of the Old Testament law. They were the invention of Jews who were scattered among the nations by the Assyrian and Babylonian captivities. Though they were the result of a desire by the Jews to have a center-ofreference for their religious identity, God allowed such to exist. When Jesus came, He used the synagogues for an opportunity to teach. He did not condemn the synagogues because faithful Jews did not consider them to be the focus of their faith. The early evangelists also used the synagogues as an opportunity for preaching the gospel. Though the synagogue was not in the original plan of God, they were accepted by God, as church buildings. However, in comparison to the number of Jews scattered throughout the world, there were very few synagogues. There was not a synagogue in every village of the ancient world. Such was not necessary because the religious focus of the Jews was on their families in their homes, not meeting down at the synagogue.

1. *Jesus went to the synagogues:* Though there were times when Jesus taught in a synagogue, much of His teaching ministry was from house to house (Mt 4:23; 13:54; Mk 1:21). The synagogues in the first century were places for the assembly of people for teaching and reading of the law. But Jesus did not focus primarily on the synagogues in His teaching ministry, though it was His custom to teach there when He had the opportunity (Lk 4:16).

Since teaching did take place in the synagogue, Jesus went to the synagogues to teach. But His purpose for going was evangelistic. Church buildings, on the other hand, are used today primarily for the worship of the church. It is important to make this distinction between the disciples' going to the synagogue and the disciples in the church building in order that one not use the synagogue as a biblical sanction for church buildings. Jesus' going to the synagogue was for evangelism. Our going to the church house is for ourselves.

2. Jesus went from house to house: The fact that Jesus did not focus on teaching in the synagogues every Sabbath could mean that He intentionally focused on meeting people where they were, whether on the roads, in the city streets, or in their homes. He continually taught from house to house (Mt 8:14; 9:10,23,28; Lk 14:1; 19:5). He went to Matthew's house for a great banquet, and on that occasion taught (Lk 5:29-32; 15:1-32). He taught when a great crowd assembled at a time He was eating in a house (Mk 3:20-34). He healed in houses (Lk 5:17-19). He taught the disciples to go from house to house when He sent them out on limited commissions (Mt 10:12-14; Lk 10:1-7). The example of His work in teaching certainly set an example for the early church to follow.

After the church was established on the day of Pentecost, homes were the ordinary location for teaching and the assembling of the saints. This fact is so obvious in the New Testament that we would conclude that the early Christians intentionally made house to house teaching and assembling their normal manner of meeting with one another. There was nothing new about this practice among the early Jewish believers. They simply continued meeting in their homes as they had been doing from the first day they set foot in the promised land.

Since the preceding is true, then it is necessary that we interpret all texts of Scripture that mention the assembly and fellowship of the saints in the first century from the viewpoint that Christians met in houses, not in large assemblies. Though we have not always approached the Scriptures from this point of view in the past, the fact of house meetings



First Century Assemblies Must Be Interpreted From A House Church Context.

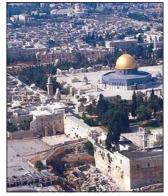
is so obvious that we must question all "church building interpretations" in reference to the assemblies of the first century church. In doing this, we will come to some different conclusions with various contexts. Therefore, I challenge you to understand the following points from the historical context that Christians normally met in the homes of members throughout any given city that is mentioned in the New Testament.

B. Assembly in houses in Jerusalem:

It is estimated that the church in Jerusalem grew to over 50,000 in her first few years of existence. Luke recorded concerning this growth: "So the word of God increased. And the number of the disciples multiplied in Jerusalem greatly. And a great company of the priests were obedient to the faith" (At 6:7). Our question is, Where did these early disciples meet in this urban center since there is no record of any purpose-built church buildings or public buildings in Jerusalem at this time that would accommodate such a great assembly?

Even if we accepted the assertion that some writers have proposed, that the Jerusalem Christians met in the temple area, the outer court of the temple of Jerusalem could not have been a place that was conducive for assembled worship. The outer court of Herod's temple measured approximately 975 by 1,462 feet (300 x 450 meters). This area would accommodate a few thousand people. However, the assem-

bly would be outside the temple proper and in a public area. The people would thus be exposed to the heat of summer and the freezing cold and snow of the winter. Are we also to assume that the Jewish priests would have allowed a few thousand Christians to take over the outer court of the temple on Sunday morning? During the time of Saul's persecution of the church, I hardly believe Christians were meeting in conspicuous places such as the temple courtyard.



Jerusalem

If Christians met in large assemblies in the outer court of the temple, then how could everyone in such a great multitude hear the message? How could they regularly serve the Lord's Supper to such a

multitude? And remember, it gets cold in Jerusalem in the winter. It snows. I personally find it very hard to believe that the Jerusalem Christians met outside in the middle of the winter in the outer court of the temple. The fact is what Bradley Blue correctly stated,

In the *Acts of the Apostles*, the first believers met together in the private homes of individuals; moreover, we read that the new communities which the Apostle Paul established were centered in the homes of some of the new converts. **The gathering of Christian believers in private homes** (or homes renovated for the purpose of Christian gatherings) continued to be the norm until the early decades of the fourth century when Constantine began erecting the first Christian Basilicas. For almost three hundred years the believers met in homes, not in synagogues or edifices constructed for the sole purpose of religious assembly [Emphasis mine, R.E.D].^{3:120,121}

Blue was right. The meeting in homes started in the beginning of the church in the city of Jerusalem. The early Christians continued this tradition for about three centuries after the establishment of the church in Jerusalem. It was not until the era of Constantine that large purposebuilt buildings were constructed for church assemblies.

The following points further substantiate house meetings in Jerusalem:

1. *Preaching in the temple and teaching in their homes:* Two thousand years ago on the day of Pentecost in Acts 2, the church exploded into existence by the conversion in one day of about three thousand people (At 2:41). This was a tremendous beginning. Pentecost

was on Sunday. Now we wonder what these three thousand Christians did the next Sunday after Pentecost. Where did they meet? In Acts 2:46 Luke recorded, "And continuing daily with one accord in the temple and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and sincerity of heart." The Christians' "continuing daily ... in the temple" was not



The Temple Was For Evangelism. The House Was For Edification.

for the purpose of assembly for worship, but for the purpose of preaching Jesus as the Christ. The temple area was first a location for daily contact for the new disciples in order to reach out to others. However, their environment for worship and fellowship was "from house to house". From the very beginning of the church in Jerusalem, this seems to have been the assembly organization of the early Jerusalem church. A few years after the Pentecost event, Luke recorded, "And daily in the temple, and in every house, they did not cease teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ" (At 5:42).

It is important to understand that "preaching Jesus as the Christ" in Acts 5:42, and other similar texts, refers to a specific audience to whom the work of preaching was directed. The word "preaching" (*kerusso*) means "to cry out" or "to proclaim as a herald." That which is preached (the gospel) is proclaimed to **unbelievers**, not believers. The believers already know the message of the gospel. Therefore, in the context of Acts 5:42 the preaching and teaching that took place in the temple was to unbelievers, not believers, though believers certainly sat in on the apostles' evangelistic preaching to Jewish unbelievers in the temple courtyard.

Since the Jewish leadership persecuted the leadership of the church between the events of chapter 2 and chapter 5 in Acts, we can assume that the Christians were not assembling in the temple on Sunday for the regular assembly of the church. **The temple itself was not a place for formal assemblies**. In the outer court of the temple, there were discussions conducted and Christians preached Jesus as the Messiah (Christ). This preaching was to the unbelievers. The outer court was a place of community and theological discussions. It was the place where Christians went to encounter Jews who came to the yearly Passover/Pentecost feasts. It was to these Jews that Christians continued to preach Jesus as the Christ. However, when it came to the regular assembly of the saints, Christians met in their homes. The early Christians broke bread from house to house where they met for their regular assemblies with one another for mutual edification and fellowship.

Acts 2:46 seems to indicate that two things were happening among the first converts. In their ministry of continuing to reach out to others, they continued with one accord to meet in the temple courtyard. However, when it came to their assembly for mutual edification and fellowship, they continued with one another from "house to house". They "broke bread" and had their fellowship meals in their homes. The temple meetings were seemingly for outreach, and the house meetings were for edification and fellowship. I do not believe they took their families to the temple courtyard for the regular assembly in order to break bread and have their fellowship meals. There is no reason to maintain this belief other than our urge to read into the context our large assembly custom of the modern Western church.

We must always keep in mind that large religious assemblies were not the custom of the Jews. There were assemblies in the synagogues. However, the synagogues **did not seat** the entire Jewish community of the particular town in which the synagogue was located. Neither was there a synagogue in every Jewish town or city. Now if we understand Acts 2:46 to refer to the regular assembly of all Christians – men, women and children – in the temple on Sunday morning, then we are reading into the text something that was not Jewish culture.

My point is that "continuing daily with one accord in the temple" does not have to refer to the regular Sunday assembly of the saints. I believe it does not because the Christians were "breaking bread" and eating their love feasts from house to house. If the phrase does refer to the regular Sunday assembly of Christians, then we must assume that the apostles taught them to assemble together in the temple the following Sunday after the Acts 2 Pentecost. This could have been the case, but not likely. If they did so teach the disciples, they asked the disciples to meet at the temple as a rendezvous point in order to carry on with their daily work of evangelism.

2. *Persecution from house to house:* Saul (Paul) led the Jews in a harsh persecution of the early church in Palestine. His actions were recorded by Luke in Acts 8:3. *"As for Saul, he made havoc of the*

church, entering into every house and dragging off men and women, committing them to prison." It is not surprising that Saul entered houses in order to arrest those he considered rebellious against Jewish tradition. Since Saul could not go from church building to church building, the only other place he could find Christians was in their homes. It could have been that through spies and surveillance he noted where Christians were meeting, and thus dragged them from their homes either during meetings or from their homes when members returned home after meetings. If Christians were commonly meeting in the outer court of the temple, then we would wonder why Saul went to the homes of Christians instead of just rounding them up in the outer court of the temple.

3. The meeting in the house of Mary: The events of Acts 12 indicate that there may have been a regular meeting of the saints in the house of Mary, or at least on the occasion of Peter's arrest when Christians were meeting for prayer on Peter's behalf. After the angel had led Peter out of Herod's prison, "he came to the house of Mary, the mother of John, whose surname was Mark, where many were gathered together praying" (At 12:12). Mary's house may have been the house where Jesus and the disciples met in an upper room a few years before this event (See Lk 22:12). On the occasion of Acts 12, it was surely used for one of the meetings of the saints, specifically for prayers for Peter. It was a large house, having an upper room, plus a gate that stood as an entrance into the courtyard that was before the house proper. Mary had a servant-girl, and thus, the house may have been large enough to accommodate this servant and many other people.

What is significant about this event is the fact that at the time of Peter's arrest there were several thousand members of the church in Jerusalem. Though Mary had a large house, all of these members could not be meeting in her house. After Peter explained what had happened to him in being released from prison by the angel, he said, "*Go tell these things to James and to the brethren*" (At 12:17). Therefore, there were other brethren meeting in other houses in Jerusalem who were also praying for Peter's release (Acts 12:5). It was not that the group in

Mary's house was the only group praying for Peter. After Peter had finalized his statements in the house of Mary, Luke recorded, "*Then he departed and went to another place*" (At 12:17). We would assume that he went to other houses where brethren were also meeting for prayer. There were house churches throughout Jerusalem. At the time of Peter's imprisonment, all these churches were praying for Peter's release, just as the group in Mary's house.

The fact that Peter sent some from Mary's house to go tell others indicates that the ones sent knew where to go. They all knew where other Christians commonly assembled. Even Peter left and went to another place. The fact that they did this indicates that he, as well as the others, personally knew the regular places of meeting of the saints in Jerusalem. The houses of common assemblies throughout the city of Jerusalem were known by almost everyone.

C. Assembly in houses in Ephesus:

Though there could have already been brethren meeting in Ephesus who had returned after their conversion during one or more of their Passover/Pentecost visits to Jerusalem, Paul, Aquila and Priscilla are given credit by Luke for initiating a church establishment in the city. The trio left Corinth and came to Ephesus during Paul's second missionary journey (At 18:18,19). Paul taught in the synagogue of Ephesus, and then immediately left for Jerusalem because he wanted to be in Jerusalem to meet another group of Jews coming for the annual Passover/Pentecost feast (At 18:21).

1. *The church in the house of Aquila and Priscilla:* When Paul left Ephesus, he went to Jerusalem, and then through Syria, and eventually back to Ephesus on his third missionary journey. It was probably during this stay in Ephesus that he wrote the 1 Corinthian letter to the brethren in Corinth. In the letter he wrote, "The churches of Asia greet you. Aquila and Priscilla greet you heartily in the Lord, with

the church that is in their house" (1 Co 16:19). Between the time Paul left Aquila and Priscilla in Ephesus on his way to Jerusalem on the second missionary journey, and the time he wrote this statement on his third journey, we could assume that the church in Ephesus was much larger in members than could meet in the house of Aquila and Priscilla. This is especially true after the mass conversions that took place in Ephesus on the third journey visit that Luke records in Acts 19.

The point is that Aquila and Priscilla conducted only one of the many house churches in Ephesus. The rest of the house churches are covered in the 1 Corinthians 16:19 statement, "the churches of Asia." The reason Paul specifically mentions the church in the house of Aquila and Priscilla was that the Corinthians personally knew this Christian couple. We can certainly assume, therefore, that the church in Ephesus was much larger than the church in the house of Aquila and Priscilla. (More on the travels of this Christian couple in a later chapter.)

2. *The house church of the twelve disciples:* While we are in Ephesus, there is another incident that we must consider in reference to house churches. The incident involves about twelve disciples who were discovered in the city on Paul's third missionary journey.

When Paul left Aquila and Priscilla in Ephesus on his second missionary journey, Aquila and Priscilla began at some time to meet in the synagogue on Saturdays. It was in the synagogue that they encountered Apollos (At 18:24-28). We know that they met in their house on Sundays since they had a group of Christians meeting in their home when Paul wrote 1 Corinthians 16:19. I would assume that other groups also started to meet throughout the city as the church began to grow.

After Apollos left Ephesus for Corinth, Paul arrived again in Ephesus on his third journey. When he arrived, Acts 19:1 states that he found "certain disciples" in Ephesus who were evidently meeting without the knowledge of Aquila and Priscilla who had been in the city for at least one year. There were about twelve men in this group (At 19:7). My point is that Paul found them, not Aquila and Priscilla or Apollos. They were a group who knew only the baptism of John, and thus were probably a group that was started by returnees from the Passover/Pentecost feast of Jerusalem prior to the ministry of Jesus, but during the time of the ministry of John the Baptist. They had returned to Ephesus with news of the coming Messiah about whom John preached, and thus started a group meeting in a house in Ephesus. When Paul returned on his third missionary journey, he discovered them. They were subsequently immersed in the name of Jesus (At 19:5).

Now we can assume the specific identity of at least two house groups in Ephesus. One was meeting in the house of Aquila and Priscilla and another in the house of the rebaptized twelve disciples. Of course, there were many other groups meeting throughout the city at the time the twelve disciples were rebaptized. When Paul returned for the visit with the elders of the church in Ephesus in Acts 20, there were many churches meeting throughout the city.

Paul discovered the house assembly of John's disciples. If they were baptized unto John's baptism before the ministry of Jesus, then they could have been meeting in this house for over twenty years by the time Paul discovered them on his third missionary journey. Would you not consider these men and their wives to be faithful disciples? This is not uncommon. I have discovered house church groups who have been meeting by themselves for as long as twenty-five years, thinking that they were the only ones who had believed and obeyed the gospel. After the discovery of one group in Africa who had been meeting in their home for twenty-seven years, the wife of the leader said to me, "It is so nice to find out about you." I am sure the twelve disciples of John in Ephesus said the same thing to Paul.

D. Assembly in houses in Colosse:

The Colossian letter was written by Paul during his first imprisonment in A.D. 61,62. He addressed the letter to "*the saints and faith-ful brethren in Christ who are at Colosse*" (Cl 1:2). At the conclusion of the letter he wrote, "*Greet the brethren who are in Laodicea, and*

Nympha and the church that is in her house. And when this letter is read among you, see that it is read also in the church of the Laodiceans, and that you likewise read the letter from Laodicea" (Cl4:15,16).

The churches in Colosse and Laodicea were probably at least five years old at the time of the writing of the Colossian letter. We would assume, therefore, that the church in Laodicea was larger in members than could meet in the house of Nympha. Paul greeted the church in the house of Nympha for possibly the same reason that he sent personal greetings from Aquila and Piscilla to the Corinthian church (1 Co 16:19). He was personally acquainted with Nympha, and thus personally knew those who were meeting in her house, though there were others meeting in other houses in Laodicea.

What is significant in Paul's language in Colossians 4:15,16 is the fact that he greeted the church in Colosse and wrote about the church in Laodicea. We would justly conclude that there were several groups of Christians meeting in Colosse and more than one group in Laodicea. The letters that Paul wrote were to be read in the house churches of both cities.

Many years after Paul wrote to the Colossians and addressed the Laodiceans, John wrote to the seven churches of Asia in the book of Revelation. Laodicea was one of those churches John specifically addressed. He wrote, "*And to the angel of the church in Laodicea*" (Rv 3:14). By the time John saw and wrote the visions of Revelation, it was still **the** church of Laodicea. Must we assume there was only one single-assembly church of Christians meeting in Laodicea at the time John wrote? Or, should we assume that there were many Christians throughout the urban area of Laodicea who were meeting in many different homes such as the home of Nympha? I think the latter assumption is correct. If we think the first is correct, then we must assume that the church in Laodicea never grew larger than the number of members that could meet in one house. Or, we must assume they built for themselves a church building on Central and Main. But this assumption is not valid in reference to our search for the location for the assembly of the saints in the cities of the first century.

E. Assembly in houses in Rome:

When we understand the house-tohouse assembly practice of the early church, Romans 16 is an exciting discovery of house churches throughout the metropolitan area of the city of Rome. At the time Paul wrote the letter of Romans, Aquila and Priscilla had moved



Roman Colosseum

from Ephesus back to Rome. When he concluded the letter, therefore, he included a personal greeting to Aquila and Priscilla, as well as a series of greetings to individuals he personally knew who were meeting throughout the city in various house churches.

In Romans 16:3 Paul wrote, "Greet Priscilla and Aquila, my helpers in Christ Jesus" "Greet the church that meets in their house" (Rm 16:5). At the time Paul made this statement, the church in Rome was certainly larger in membership than those who could meet in the house of this Christian couple. This fact is brought out in the remainder of Paul's personal greetings in Romans 16. After making a statement of personal greeting specifically to Aquila and Priscilla and the church in their house, Paul goes beyond this house church to individuals throughout the metropolitan area whom he personally knew, but who were meeting in different houses.

Individuals who were meeting at other places in the city of Rome included Epaenetus, Mary, Andronicus, Junia, Amplias, Urbanus and Stachys. In verse 10 Paul wrote, "*Greet those who are of Aristobulus*" *household*." In verse 11 he stated, "*Greet those who are of the household of Narcissus*." There were other households meeting in their own houses throughout the city. These could have been small groups consisting of an immediate family with the maids and servants of the household. In verse 14 Paul again stated, "*Greet Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermas,*

Patrobas, Hermes, and the brethren who are with them." In this verse Paul mentions specifically those with whom he was personally acquainted. However, he referred to those with whom he was not acquainted as "the brethren". All were with those whom Paul knew, meeting in some house in Rome. These would have been larger house churches than the "household house churches." He made a similar statement in verse 15, but with another list of people. "Greet Philologus and Julia, Nereus, and his sister, and Olympas, and all the saints who are with them." This was surely another house church in the city that included several families and individuals meeting together with Julia, Nereus and Olympas whom Paul personally knew.

In view of the fact that there were no church buildings in the city of Rome – church buildings came almost three hundred years later – we would conclude that there were Christians meeting throughout the city of Rome in the homes of the members. However, all the assemblies constituted the one body of Christ in Rome. The members of these house churches evidently knew of one another, and thus Paul intended for his letter to be circulated among all the groups. These churches were not autonomous from one another, but active in their communication with one another as the one church of Rome. Even when Paul stated in verse 16, "*All the churches* (ekklesia) *of Christ greet you*", he was not making divisions of autonomy in the church, but saying that all the **assemblies** of Christ outside Rome with whom he was acquainted greeted the assemblies in Rome.

Now do some assuming with me. Suppose that everyone Paul mentions in Romans 16 met in the house of Aquila and Priscilla, as some have erroneously assumed. Here is something to consider. In the context of Romans 16, Paul mentions by name only those he knows. He makes general references to others he does not personally know. Included in all the brethren to whom he refers in Romans 16, he mentions by name twenty-seven people he personally knows. Suppose each one of these was married, which I am sure was not actually the case. But if they were, that would be a lot of people. Throw in an average of two

children per married couple and we have a tremendous crowd meeting in the house of Aquila and Priscilla, that is if we assume that the church in the house of Aquila was the only single-assembly church in Rome. That may not have been impossible. We must remember that Paul refers to others in generic terms such as "those of the household of Aristobulus", "those of the household of Narcissus", the "brethren who are **with** them" and "all the saints who are **with** them." Now that is a great company of people. Did they all meet in the house of Aquila and Priscilla in order to be consider the local autonomous church of Rome?

F. Assembly in houses in Philippi:

The assembly of the church in Philippi began when a new convert said to a preacher, "*If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come to my house and stay*" (At 16:15). And so the assembly of the church no doubt began in the house of Lydia with her entire household that was converted. The family of the jailor was also obedient to the gospel. With his family and Lydia's household, a small group of Christians evidently began to meet either in the house of Lydia or the jailor (At 16:33,34). After Paul and Silas were released from prison, "*they went out of the prison and entered into the house of Lydia*. So when they had seen the brethren, they encouraged them and departed" (At 16:39,40).

Paul stayed in Philippi on this visit only a few days (At 16:12). We do not know exactly how long a few days is. It was certainly not a few weeks or a few months. When he left the city, however, he saw "the brethren" when he went to the house of Lydia (At 16:40). All "the brethren" were meeting in this one house at the time of his departure. The point is that when he left the city, the Christians were meeting in the house of the brethren. This was the only place they needed to meet simply because it was the most logical place of meeting. This is sometimes the most pratical answer to a place of meeting. We have our houses. We can meet in our houses.

G. Assembly in houses as Gaius' house:

The background to John's letter to Gaius (3 John) involves "the brethren" who were going from house to house in their work as evangelists. Gaius was one who housed these evangelists who were strangers to him, but brothers in the Lord who had gone forth for the sake of the name of the Lord (3 Jn 7). In 3 John 6, John encouraged Gaius by writing, "*You will do well to support them on their journey in a man-ner worthy of God.*" Though Diotrephes sought to hinder the coming and going of these evangelists, and even the apostles (3 Jn 9,10), Gaius was doing a good work of encouraging their house ministry (3 Jn 5). They were going from house to house in their work of evangelism, just as Jesus had instructed His disciples during His earthly ministry (Mt 10:12-14).

2 John is also written on the background of teachers going from house to house. However, the situation was the house to house work of false teachers who denied the incarnation of Jesus (2 Jn 7). John wrote, *"If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not receive him into your house and do not give him greeting"* (2 Jn 10). To not "receive him into your house" referred to the place where the teaching was done. These false teachers were subverting "whole households" as those about whom Paul warned Titus (Ti 1:11). They were not going from synagogue to synagogue, or from church building to church building. They were going from house to house. This scenario was similar to the going about of the idle speakers about whom Paul warned Timothy in 1 Timothy 5:13. There were those who were "*wandering from house to house, speaking things which they ought not."* Since Christians were meeting in houses, the natural opportunity for false teachers to do their work was from house to house.

The travel and teaching that was going on at the time John wrote 2 and 3 John was happening in the house groups of individuals as Gaius. If there were those who came to one's house who denied the fundamental doctrine of the incarnation, they were not to be received or supported.

However, faithful teachers and evangelists were to be supported by individuals as Gaius because they had gone forth for the "sake of the Name" (3 Jn 7). Evangelists were collectively being financially supported in the first century by individuals and house church groups. So should it be today.

Throughout the cities of the New Testament world, Christians were meeting in houses. It is interesting to note, however, that there are only occasional statements made in the New Testament concerning the location where Christians assembled. The fact that there are only occasional statements would indicate that God is not so concerned about where Christians assemble as He is concerning the fact that Christians should assemble. The important thing is that they assemble in order to promote love and good works (Hb 10:24,25). Because of practical reasons, the early Christians deemed it expedient to meet in the homes of Christians in order to accomplish the goal of assembling together to stir up love and good works. This practical reason is the foundation upon which Christians today should seek to assemble. Once we lose the purpose for which we must assemble, we will assemble only to fulfill a supposed legal requirement we assume God requires in order for us to be considered faithful.

Though Christians met in houses in cities throughout the first century world, they continued to remain networked with one another. They were meeting in individual houses, but were one church, functioning together in ministry and contribution for special needs. For example, when there was a famine in Judea, the churches in Macedonia begged Paul to take their contributions for the famine. They did so in order that they could have "fellowship of the ministering to the saints" (2 Co 8:4). Churches in other areas did the same. Of this unity, Luke recorded concerning contributions to the famine, "Then the disciples, everyone according to his ability, determined to send relief to the brethren who dwelt in Judea" (At 11:29). The nature of the close fellowship of churches drove them to work together with one another. They sought

the fellowship of other groups, and thus, when there was an opportunity to work together with others, they responded as one church of Christ.

Chapter 4

REVISITING CORINTH

The history of the church in Corinth, as well as Paul's letters to the Corinthians, is an intriguing adventure into the life of the early Christians. To say the least, the Corinthian church had some unique characteristics about it that have challenged Bible students for centuries. I would like to continue to challenge you with some thoughts that surround the Corinthian church. Specifically, I would like to challenge you to consider the context of the Corinthians' assembly as a church from the historical context of their meeting in small home groups throughout the city of Corinth.

Biblical interpreters have generally approached a study of the assembly of the early Christians from the present-day view of large singleassemblies in purpose-built buildings. They have thus assumed that all the Christians in and around the city of Corinth were somehow meeting together in one common place on a weekly basis. They have thus come to the context of the Corinthian church, as well as other New Testament texts that mention the assembly of the saints, with the view that there was only one assembly of the saints on Sunday in Corinth. This view is supposedly supported by some statements that Paul made in the context of 1 Corinthians 11 that are interpreted to refer to Corinth as a single-assembly church. However, I would like to challenge you to look again. Maybe we should interpret the Corinthian context from the view of their regular meeting in homes rather than in a central assembly hall.

We must come to the context of 1 Corinthians with the understanding that the Corinthians, as other New Testament churches, assembled in their homes. To affirm this interpretation, we have other New Testament statements in other texts that lead us to this conclusion. Therefore, our "house-church interpretation" of the Corinthian letter is not an assumption that is based on present single-assembly church practices. It is an interpretive approach to 1 Corinthians 11 that carries into the context the historical fact that the rest of the church throughout the first century world was meeting in homes.

In order to lay the historical background to the multiple-assembly church in Corinth, we must understand that the church was originally started as house assemblies. The Corinthians continued with this practice of assembly in the years after their initial establishment.

A. Establishment of the church in Corinth:

Paul's work in Corinth took place on his second missionary journey. However, he may not have been the first to establish the church in the city. We do not know when Aquila and Priscilla were converted. Since there is no account of their conversion when Paul first arrived in Corinth as recorded in Acts 18:1-3, we could conclude that they were converted in Rome by returnees from the annual Passover/Pentecost feast in Jerusalem. If Aquila and Priscilla were converted in Rome before they came to Corinth, then they had established a house church in Corinth before Paul's arrival in Acts 18. When Paul arrived, he met Aquila and Priscilla, joined with them in making tents, and then went to work in the synagogue with the preaching of the gospel to unbelievers (At 18:1-3). We could certainly assume that the house of Aquila and Priscilla was the first place of assembly of the church in Corinth.

Paul's preaching to the Jews in the synagogue continued until there was great opposition to his message. "So he departed from there and entered into a certain man's house, named Titius Justus, one who worshiped God, whose house was next to the synagogue" (At 18:7). Through Paul's preaching, Crispus, the chief ruler of the synagogue, and all his household, were obedient to the gospel (At 18:8). Luke records that many of the Corinthians also believed. I would assume that more obeyed the gospel than could meet in the houses of Titius Justus and Aquila.

Since Paul was ushered out of the synagogue, we would conclude that evangelistic efforts ceased in the synagogue. Paul then went to the house of Titius Justus, and subsequently, may have started meetings in his house which was next to the synagogue. Paul's move to the house of Titius Justus indicates that another church was probably started in this house. We must also add to the groups of Aquila and Crispus another possible group that was meeting in the house of Stephanas, for his household was also of the first converts of Achaia (1 Co 16:15). Add to this the fact that Cenchrea was considered the eastern harbor of the metropolitan area of Corinth. In Romans 16:1 Paul spoke of Pheobe who was a servant in the church. The church of which she was a servant could have been another house church in the vicinity of Corinth. Therefore, we could conclude that there was more than one assembly of Christians in Corinth from the very beginning of the church in the city. There was a group in the house of Titius Justus, one in the house of Aquila and Priscilla, one in the house of Stephanas, and possibly one where Pheobe met. Since "many Corinthians believed" in the city of Corinth (At 18:8), we would assume that there were Christians meeting in houses throughout the city and area of Corinth.

B. Assembly of the church in Corinth:

Five to six years after the establishment of the church in Corinth, Paul wrote the letter of 1 Corinthians from Ephesus while on his third missionary journey. In 1 Corinthians 11 there are some specific things written about the assembly of the Christians in Corinth that should be understood in the context that they were continuing their assemblies in the homes of the members. There is no proof that they were assembling in a purpose-built church building or in a public school or civic center. The Corinthians were still meeting in their homes by the time Paul wrote 1 Corinthians. We must also conclude that by the time the letter was written, there were more house churches throughout the area of Corinth. If our assumptions and conclusions are correct, then we must take another look at the statements of 1 Corinthians 11. Since the church was a multiple-assembly church, then we must understand 1 Corinthians, specifically chapter 11, from the view that the Corinthians were continuing to assemble in many different homes throughout the city of Corinth.

In 1 Corinthians 11:20 Paul made the statement, "*when you come together*" in reference to their assemblies. The added phrase in the verse, "into one place", of the KJV reading, is not in the Greek text. Paul simply referred to their coming together.

We must consider what he meant by the statement, "when you come together", in view of the historical context of the meeting of the early Christians in homes, as well as the contextual evidence that Paul gives in the 1 Corinthian letter. The traditional view of this statement and context assumes that Paul was addressing the assembly of the Corinthian church that consisted of all the Christians in and around the area of Corinth. The traditional view is that the Corinthians were meeting in a single location in a regular assembly every Sunday. Since there are no statements in the context of 1 Corinthians 11 as to where this assembly was conducted, or if any such single-assembly actually took place, then we cannot make this assumption. However, I cannot rule out the fact that the 1 Corinthian 11 contexts was directed to problems that prevailed during an occasional large celebration assembly that the Corinthians conducted. The problems of 1 Corinthians 11 could have developed out of an occasional assembly wherein the rudeness of some found an opportunity to manifest itself to the poor.

The following are some things to consider to substantiate the fact that the Corinthian church was a multiple-assembly church:

1. *The Corinthians regularly came together.* When Paul wrote to the Corinthians in reference to *"when you come together"*, some have assumed that they were all actually coming together into the

same facility on a regular basis. However, this is simply an assumption, one that is maintained because that is what is being practiced today in many areas where churches have the privilege of a purpose-built church building. This assumption is based on the erroneous definition of what constitutes a "local" congregation. Since Paul addressed the "church of God in Corinth", we have assumed that all the Corinthian Christians had to be coming together to the same location on a weekly basis because a "local" church is such because all members must come together into one facility. The problem with this view, however, is that one cannot find this definition of a "local" church in the New Testament. A second major problem with this understanding is in the historical fact that the early church met in the homes of the members. Add to this the fact that there is no evidence in the letters of 1 & 2 Corinthians that all the Corinthian Christians were coming together into one place on a weekly basis.

Consider also some practical reasons Paul would not be discussing a single-assembly of **all** Corinthian Christians at the same place. First, by the time Paul wrote 1 Corinthians, the church in and around the city of Corinth had certainly outgrown the seating capacity of one house. It had certainly even grown beyond the houses of Aquila and Priscilla, and possibly, the houses of Chloe, Stephanas, Fortunatus and Achaicus (See 1 Co 16:15-16). By the time Paul wrote the letter, the church in Corinth had grown substantially.

A second practical reason a regular Sunday assembly of every Corinthian Christian under one roof is questionable is the factor of the climate. In the winter, Corinth was not a tropical paradise. On the contrary, winters are cold in Corinth with ice and snow. Ask yourself if you would take your children to an assembly which was out on the grounds somewhere in Corinth when the temperature was below freezing, and the ground was covered with snow? This is winter in Corinth. (Why is it we always view the New Testament world as a tropical paradise wherein Christians sat around under palm trees?) Now suppose you had to meet in the snow **every** Sunday in the winter. Keep in mind that you walked a great distance to be at this common meeting, bringing your children, food for your family, and enough firewood to cook your food and warm your family all day. After you arrived, you stayed most of the day enjoying a love feast with the brethren and a lengthy worship afterward. Don't forget that you have to walk home after the meeting. Now would you do this all in the middle of a Corinthian winter, every Sunday?

There is another factor that we must add concerning the assembly of the Christians in the first century. There were no "days off" as Sunday during the week. The Roman slave owners certainly did not have an official Sunday off for the slaves. Businesses did not have a Sunday holiday. Therefore, whatever the assembly arrangement the early Christians had, it had to conform to the demands of slave owners and bosses in the business world. If there were a day off, it was probably on a Saturday after the Jewish tradition, not Sunday. I would suggest that this gives more evidence to the fact that many early Christians had to meet in their homes. An "official" assembly of the saints at a common place of meeting that consumed an entire day was probably not practical on a regular basis. They possibly conducted early morning meetings, or evening meetings in centrally located homes close to where members lived. This does not exclude the occasional meeting of all area Christians in a common location. But practicality dictates that the regular assembly of Christians was after the Jewish custom of fellowship and worship which was centered around their homes.

If we affirm that the Corinthian brethren came together into a building, then we have to find that building in Corinth. Was it the pagan temple with its one thousand prostitute priestesses? Was it a synagogue? Remember, Paul was run out of the synagogue. If we find a building, we still have to determine if the supposed building were large enough and had heating. If it had no heating, then it would have been the same as sitting outside. Keep in mind that first century architecture was not known for central-heating fireplaces to keep large buildings warm in the winter. Are we going to bring our babies together in a winter environment every Sunday in Corinth into a cold public building or under a tree?

2. The Corinthians regularly came together in their houses.

Now this concept makes more sense. Let's assume that the phrase, "when you come together", referred to their regular assembly in their houses. Paul's instructions for correction in 1 Corinthians 11 would make sense. If this were the true situation, all the members were still coming together, but they were not coming together into the same place. Paul is simply making a statement in 1 Corinthians 11:20 of their coming together in order to be in assembly with other Christians. He was not referring to all the Christians in and around the city of Corinth coming together every Sunday under a single roof or tree. He was simply referring to their common assembly, which assembly took place every Sunday, but in different homes. They were leaving their individual homes and coming together into the home of another member. Their assembly, therefore, was constituted by the fact that they were not meeting individually in their homes, but were coming together as groups in many designated homes. This certainly makes more sense than the belief that all of them were coming together into a single assembly. At least, the absurdity of coming together under one roof or tree in the middle of winter is avoided.

When they did come together in small groups in houses, some of the members were behaving as gluttonous and drunken individuals who had little consideration for others. In the house church environment this was particularly offensive to the poor. It was a behavior that could not be tolerated in the environment of such close relationships. This is the thought of verse 30: *"For this reason many are weak and sickly among you, and many sleep."* Those among them who were manifesting a gluttonous, drunken and inconsiderate behavior were spiritually weak and sickly. In fact, Paul stated that they were spiritually dead, and thus, a hindrance to the spiritual growth of the church. Paul wrote the 1 Corinthian letter in order to correct the spiritual sickness that prevailed in the Corinthian church. If they did not correct the problem through his requests of the first letter, he warned them that he would come with the rod of discipline and take care of the spiritually dead among them with the authority of a Christ-sent apostle (1 Co 4:21).

C. Assembly for the Lord's Supper:

We must understand 1 Corinthians 11 in the context of the house assemblies of the early Christians throughout urban centers as Corinth. Understanding this answers the questions that center around the problems with which Paul dealt in the context of 1 Corinthians 11, as well as the expanded context of the entire letter of 1 Corinthians.

1. *The one Corinthian church:* Paul viewed the church in Corinth as one church. He wrote, "*Paul, called to be an apostle of Jesus Christ ... to the church of God that is at Corinth*" (1 Co 1:1,2). Whatever is interpreted from the context of chapter 11, must be understood from the view that there was only one church in Corinth, not many autonomous denominations meeting in buildings on street corners throughout the city. However, the one church was meeting in many different houses. The fact that they had to meet initially in at least two houses (the houses of Titius Justus and Aquila), did not mean that these were supposedly two different congregations. All assembly groups were together considered by Paul to be the "church of God" at Corinth.

2. Coming together of the Corinthian church: Paul stated in 1 Corinthians 11:17 that the church "came together." Though his instructions were given in order to correct some ungodly behavior that was hindering their fellowship, we must look around the context of the discussion concerning their erroneous behavior in order to discover what is meant by their "coming together." Does this mean that they were



regularly coming together every Sunday into a single assembly? Or, does it mean that they came together, but not all members came together at the same location? In other words, they came together, but together in houses in different places.

We must also not discount the possibility that their coming together was actually an occasional celebration assembly. In such an assembly, all the problems that Paul mentions could have easily occurred.

3. Coming together in assembly: The fact that all the Christians in the city or area of Corinth did not come together into a single assembly on a weekly basis is brought out in verse 18 when Paul stated, "... when you come together in assembly ..." (RKJV). Though some translations render this phrase, "come together as a church", this is not an accurate translation. Paul is emphasizing their assembly together as members of the church, not their coming together in order to constitute a

local church. It is significant to note that the Greek article "the" is not found before the Greek word *ekklesia* ("assembly"). The text literally reads, "... *come together in assembly*" From the statement, therefore, coming together into **the** assembly of one large city congregation is not emphasized. Paul is simply making a statement concerning an event. The event was their coming together in assembly. Because



The Corinthians Came Together Into One Place, But Not all Members Came Together Into The Same Place.

the text does not say when they came together, we must make assumptions concerning their assembly that are based on conclusions we draw from other contexts. We are thus assuming that the "coming together" in 1 Corinthians 11 was the Lord's Day assembly about which Luke wrote in Acts 20:7. On the occasion of Acts 20:7, the disciples came together in Ephesus for the purpose of sitting at the Lord's Table for the memorial Supper and celebration fellowship feast.

Paul uses the word "when" in verses 20 and 33 of 1 Corinthians 11 to refer to the occasion of their coming together in assembly. This may be why he specifically made the statement of verse 20, "*when you come together*." He makes use of the word "when" again in verse 33. "*Therefore, my brethren, when you come together to eat*" His use of the word "when", together with the phrase, "into one place", indicates that this meeting of 1 Corinthians 11 could have been either the weekly assembly, or even an occasional assembly wherein all saints in the Corinthian metropolitan area came together for the love feast and celebration of the Lord's Supper. The word "when" would emphasize their gathering into assemblies versus their everyday lives as individual Christians or meeting as individual families in their own homes. Their coming together would simply mean the time and location when they left their home residences in order to assemble together with other Christians. This was the time "when" they came together. The location was the designated houses of different members throughout the metropolitan area of Corinth.

4. *Coming together for the worse:* The fact that Paul made the statement of their coming together indicates that the problems that were caused by the gluttonous, drunken and inconsiderate brethren were generated in this common assembly when members came together in their particular house assemblies. We do not know all the socioeconomic situations of the Corinthian society. However, the problems that Paul corrects in 1 Corinthians 11 developed when possibly suburban or rural members who were possibly poorer brethren, came together into a house church with downtown arrogant brethren who showed little consideration for the poor. If 1 Corinthians 11 is discussing an occasional celebration assembly, then we can understand how such an assembly could become the occasion for a conflict of culture and economics to manifest itself.

Some of the members in their house churches had become puffed up and arrogant. The assemblies in homes, therefore, became an occasion where these brethren manifested their gluttonous, drunken and inconsiderate behavior among other brethren, especially the poorer brethren they looked down upon. The fact that the arrogant brethren did not wait on everyone to arrive before they began to eat indicates that they had little consideration for those who had come from poorer districts of Corinth or rural areas in which there were poor brethren.

Those who were socially discriminated against possibly came from rural areas. The poorer brethren had to come from great distances before they arrived at assemblies in houses in the city. Or, some may have been working since there were no Sunday holidays for slaves or the populace as a whole in the first century. The late arrival of some to the assemblies is indicated in the fact that the food was gone and the inconsiderate were drunk by the time the latecomers arrived.

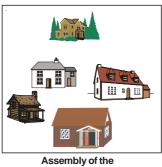


5. *Coming together in different houses:* If the Corinthians had a purpose-built church building in which to come together, then they built it in less than five to six years, the time between the establishment of the church in Corinth and the time when Paul wrote this first letter. But no Bible scholar would take this position simply because there is no evidence that they had a building. Even in the absence of a purpose-built building it is questionable to assume that they were coming together into any public place simply because such was not practical. At least, one has to prove there was such a place in Corinth in order for the Corinthian Christians to come together in assembly. Since they had houses in which to meet, then coming together on a regular basis every week in a house that is close to one's own house makes more sense.

The coming together of all Christians in a city such as Corinth is not what is either believed or practiced today in the church. Think about this. Some have suggested that the size of the city of Corinth at the time 1 Corinthians was written could have been about 50,000. I know of hundreds of cities throughout the world today that have a population of 50,000. Now consider this. In many of these cities there are two or more "autonomous local congregations" who are meeting in **separate** buildings on Sunday morning throughout the city. They are meeting at the same time at different addresses. If the "coming together" in 1 Corinthians 11:20 means that **all** Christians in a **single** city as Corinth must come together in **one** place on Sunday morning, then these churches are violating the principle that Paul is supposedly stating in 1 Corinthians 11. All the Christians who are meeting in these purpose-built buildings are not coming together into one place in the city as some have erroneously assumed that Paul was teaching. They are meeting at **different** places at the same time on Sunday. In the Corinthian context, they were coming together. However, they were coming together into many "single places". The only difference between then and now is the fact that they remained "the church of God in Corinth", as opposed to the typical city today where they would be the "church**es** of God in Corinth."

The point is that if there were five or fifty house churches meeting at different places at the same time on Sunday morning in Corinth, it did not mean they ceased being the one church of God in Corinth because they met in different homes. Neither do Paul's instructions infer that all Christians in a city must come together in one place into a "church building" for worship every Sunday in order to be considered a local congregation.

6. *Coming together to eat:* During their assemblies in homes, the Corinthians were coming together in a manner that produced an environment in which they could not partake of the Lord's Supper in the right frame of mind. The fact that Paul stated in verse 22 that they had homes in which to eat would suggest that the assembly of 1 Corinthians 11 was the regular



Assembly of the Corinthian church

weekly assembly in someone else's home. Instead of going to another's house for assembly and the love feast in which some became gluttonous, they should eat at their own homes before they went to the assembly in another's house.

The common "love feast" of the early church was probably a weekly event for most churches (See At 2:46; compare Jd 12). One of the serendipities of house assemblies is that members like to stay at the assembly. No one is anxious to go home. In the Corinthian situation it is easy to see how they could have turned the love feast into a gluttonous event each week. Since wine was available, the rich, who could afford large quantities of wine, took the opportunity to turn the love feast into the exact opposite of what it was originally instituted. Instead of promoting an opportunity for fellowship, it became an occasion for showing disrespect of others and division in the church.

When Paul gave instructions that they should eat before they went to their assemblies, he was simply stating that as individuals they should satisfy their appetites in their own homes before going over to someone else's house for assembly. If they could not control themselves at the love feast in another's house, then they should eat before they went (1 Co 11:34). In order to curb their appetites, this was also practical because of the nature of their meetings. Those who came from long distances would surely arrive late. If those who arrived early could not wait for those who arrived late, then they should eat something before leaving their own houses. Paul's advice was practical, not doctrinal. If one could control his appetite, then he did not have to eat in his own house before going to a meeting of the saints in another's house. If Paul's suggestion was doctrinal, then all of us would have to eat something at home before we went to any fellowship meal of the saints.

The instructions that Paul gave to the Corinthians were given to them because of the ungodly behavior on the part of some. But he did not have to write these things to the churches in Ephesus or Jerusalem or

Philippi. Other brethren had no problem in corrupting the coming together in the homes of others for worship and the celebration meal of the Lord's Supper. They did not have problems with arrogant members who denied Paul's apostleship or showed little consideration for the poor.



The Corinthian problem, however, provided the opportunity for Paul to write instructions concerning our behavior with one another in home churches. As we interpret 1 Corinthians 11 with the principle that the Corinthians were meeting in their homes, we have a great deal of insight into what God expects of us concerning our behavior with one another, regardless of our social status, economics or culture. We are truly to be one man in Christ.

Chapter 5

CELEBRATION AT THE FELLOWSHIP TABLE

Because we often lack emphasis on Old Testament study, we cheat ourselves in appreciating the covenant relationship we now enjoy with God. Our lack of understanding of covenants, therefore, often lends us to having a shallow appreciation of the sacrificial offering of Jesus on the altar of the cross. This leads to a limited understanding of the covenant celebration meal that followed the establishment of covenants that are explained in the Old Testament. The Lord's Supper (communion) event was established on the foundation of covenant fellowship meals of the Old Testament, particularly the fellowship meal of the Passover. Our chip of bread and sip of the fruit of the vine is far removed from the customary covenant fellowship meal that followed the establishment of covenants of the Old Testament.

The reason this discussion is important in the context of this book is that the fellowship meal which celebrates covenants is easily maintained in a home environment. The first century church certainly viewed the fellowship meal as a part of the Lord's Supper. This is what seemed to be the situation in the Corinthian context. In a house church setting, the celebration fellowship meal highlights the Supper event on a regular basis.

Our challenge is to understand the Lord's Supper that was instituted by Jesus in the context of the Passover fellowship meal. We must then determine how we can best restore the communal environment of the table fellowship meal of the first century. When the early church moved from homes to purpose-built buildings in the fourth century, the Lord's Supper fellowship feast was streamlined to a ceremonial catechism that is now far removed from the original practice and setting of the Jewish Passover feast. Our present-day observance of the Supper is significantly different from the love feast/Lord's Supper meal of the early church. The striking difference between now and then should certainly stimulate some concern over this matter and study of the subject. It is difficult to realize that we often lack in our restoration efforts some things that are important in the community of God. Nevertheless, we are committed to the word of God and to whatever directions it gives. It is for this reason that house assemblies will tremendously help in rectifying the communal environment of the Lord's Supper/love feast event of the first century church.

A. Establishment and celebration of Old Testament covenants:

Covenants in the Old Testament were established on the foundation of a sacrifice. A covenant was first made between two parties, which covenant was confirmed and instituted by an animal sacrifice (Ps 50:5). The covenant represented an agreement between two parties, and thus fellowship that was based on the agreement. At an altar of sacrifice, therefore, a covenant was established. After the altar of sacrifice, however, celebration took place as the covenanted parties came

together in a fellowship meal. The making of the covenant at the altar of sacrifice was a time of commitment and solemnity, but the time of the meal at the table was for joy and celebration in the presence of God. There was a difference, therefore, between the altar of sacrifice and the table of fellowship. Each had its own significance in the institution and continuance of the covenant.¹⁸



1. Covenant between Isaac and Abimelech: In Genesis 26:26-31, Abimelech, king of the Philistines, came to Isaac in order to establish a covenant of peace with him. "Let there now be an oath between us, between you and us; and let us make a covenant with you" (Gn 26:28). Abimelech wanted to make the covenant in order "*that you* [Isaac] *will do us no harm* ..." (Gn 26:29). A covenant was subsequently made between Isaac and Abimelech. Once the covenant was established, a covenant meal celebrated the event. Genesis 26:30 states, "*So he made them a feast, and they ate and drank*."

2. *Covenant between Jacob and Laban:* When Jacob secretly left the presence of Laban in order to return to his homeland, Laban pursued after him with the intent of doing Jacob harm (Gn 31:22,23). However, God came to Laban in a dream and warned him concerning his evil intentions against Jacob (Gn 31:24). When Laban finally overtook Jacob, he offered to make a covenant with Jacob in order to establish a peaceful relationship between the two families (Gn 31:44).

The covenant between Jacob and Laban was sworn in the presence of God who was the judge of the covenant (Gn 31:49,50,53). Both parties of the covenant would be blessed if they honored the conditions of the covenant. A peaceful relationship would continue between the families from the time of the covenant forward. In order to enact the covenant, a sacrifice was made. Following the altar of sacrifice, and as part of the covenant ceremony, a joyous meal of celebration was con-

The Fellowship Meal Is A Celebration Of The Covenant. ducted. "Then Jacob offered a sacrifice on the mountain, and called his brethren to eat bread. And they ate bread and stayed all night on the mountain" (Gn 31:54). **The meal for the sacrifice was**

not a time for solemnity, sadness and guilt. It was a time of celebration over the fact that a covenant of peace had been made between two parties. The altar of sacrifice established the covenant. The fellowship feast celebrated the altar of sacrifice and the covenant.

3. *Covenant between God and Israel:* When Israel came out of Egyptian captivity, God established a covenant relationship with the nation (Ex 19-24). After the conditions and responsibilities of the covenant were stated, Exodus 24:1-11 explains the ratification of the cov-

enant. Israel "offered burnt offerings and sacrificed peace offerings of oxen to the Lord" (Ex 24:5). "Then he [Moses] took the Book of the Covenant and read in the hearing of the people. And they said, 'All that the Lord has said we will do, and be obedient'" (Ex 24:7). Following the ratification of the covenant through sacrifices to God and oaths to keep the covenant, **the nation ate and drank** (Ex 24:11). The eating and drinking after the establishment of the covenant was a time of celebration and joy. A covenant of peace had been established with God. At the altar, sacrifices were offered for the sins of the people. At the table, celebration was made concerning the covenant that was established with God. Both events were in the presence and fellowship of God. When we eat at the table, therefore, we eat in the presence of the Lord.

Throughout the history of Israel, there were times for remembrance and renewal of the covenant that God made with Israel. When the temple was built, it was a time of remembrance and revival and recommitment to the will of God (2 Ch 5-7). When the temple was completed, "the king and all the people offered sacrifices before the Lord" (2 Ch 7:4). After the sacrifices, Solomon "sent the people away to their tents, joyful and glad of heart for the goodness that the Lord had done for David, for Solomon, and for His people Israel" (2 Ch 7:10).

After the Babylonian captivity, Israel returned and rebuilt the temple which had been destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar (Ez 6:13-22). In the remembrance and renewal of their covenant with the Lord, they offered sacrifices for all Israel (Ez 6:17). Ezra 6:22 states, "And they kept the Feast of Unleavened Bread seven days with joy; for the Lord made them joyful"

The returnees from Babylon also rebuilt the walls of the city of Jerusalem (Ne 7,8). Once the walls were rebuilt, it was a time for remembrance and revival and celebration by keeping the Feast of Trumpets (See Nm 29:1-6). On the day this feast of renewal was kept, Nehemiah exhorted the people not to mourn or weep, for it was a day of

joy and celebration (Ne 8:9). He exhorted them, "Go your way, eat the fat, drink the sweet, and send portions to those for whom nothing is prepared; for this day is holy to our Lord. Do not sorrow, for the joy of the Lord is your strength" (Ne 8:10).

No better words than the preceding words of Nehemiah could be spoken to describe the atmosphere that should surround the Lord's

Supper which we eat today. The Lord's Supper is not a time of sadness. It is a time of joy and celebration for the covenant of peace that God has established with us through Jesus. It is a time for great joy and rejoicing as in the time when



Israel was delivered from her enemies (See Es 9:19,22). It is a time to share with others (See Ps 112). It is a time of eating and drinking with celebration to the Lord.

The various "feasts" of the Old Testament law were times of eating. They were times of joy. We have often assumed that they were simply holidays for Israel to enjoy. However, they were designated times when Israel was to enjoy fellowship meals with one another in a spirit of celebration.

What is very significant in reference to the meal that followed the altar of sacrifice that ratified a covenant, was that the meal was eaten in the **presence of the Lord** (Ex 18:12; see Dt 12:7,18; 14:23,26; 15:20). When Israelites communed with one another in the celebration of the covenant meal, they did so with the knowledge that the Lord was in their presence. God's presence was His stamp of approval of the covenant itself, as well as the joy and celebration that took place after the sacrifices for the covenant. When the covenant was establish and maintained, God was present. In the celebration meal, therefore, those who communed with one another knew that they were in the presence of the Lord.

B. Establishment and celebration of the new covenant:

It is necessary to understand the sacrificial fellowship meals of the Old Testament in order to appreciate the Passover meal that became the setting for the institution of the Lord's Supper. The Passover meal

was a time of celebration. The celebration of the Passover could take place because God had established a covenant with Israel after He had delivered them from Egyptian captivity. Sacrifices were initially conducted to ratify



God's covenant with Israel at Mount Sinai. Every year after the ratification of the covenant, Israel celebrated with the Passover feast. The **Passover, therefore, was a joyous memorial and celebration of deliverance from captivity**.

The covenant with Israel was ratified with offerings for sin, which offerings continued throughout the history of Israel. The animal of the burnt offering of the Old Testament was completely consumed in sacrifice to the Lord. However, the sin and fellowship offerings were eaten as a meal, though the fat of these offerings was burned on the altar. The sin offering was eaten by the priest. The fellowship offering was eaten by both the priests and those who made the offering. Only the fellowship offering was eaten by those who gave the offering (See Lv 3:1-17; 4:10,26-35; 7:11-38). It was the fellowship offering and feast that established the foundation on which the Passover meal was based (See Dt 16:1-4). The Passover occasion was a fellowship meal where family and friends gathered for celebration. It was a time for remembering and celebrating Israel's deliverance from Egyptian captivity.

It is significant to note that the thank offering, a type of fellowship offering, was to be eaten the same day of the offering (Lv 7:15). Similarly, the votive offering had to be eaten within two days (Lv 7:16). The point is that the offering of a several hundred pound cow had to be eaten within one or two days, thus **affirming that the offerings were fellowship offerings**. One person could not eat in one or two days all the meat of a single cow (approximately 300 kilograms or 660 pounds of meat). Others participated in the fellowship of consuming the animal that was offered. The fellowship meals of the Old Testament, therefore, were communal. They were not individual. The Passover meal was not an individualistic meal. It was what Jesus said, "*I have earnestly desired to eat this Passover with you* ..." (Lk 22:15).

Since the fellowship offerings, specifically, the Passover, laid the foundation upon which the Lord's Supper was instituted, it is significant to understand that **the Lord's Supper was instituted at a time when a communal meal was eaten**. It was not an occasion to sample bread and sip wine. It took place at a meal during which Jesus used the bread to memorialize the body of



Christ. He used the wine to stimulate remembrance of the blood of the covenant (Mt 26:26-28). In reference to the meal of the fellowship offerings of Israel, John Mark Hicks explained,

The communal dimension of the meal is extremely significant. The meal involves God, priest and the worshippers (including their family and friends, or even their larger community). The community participates in the meal. God is a participant as well. The meal exhibits the relational dimensions of Israel's faith. No one eats alone. No one eats in isolation. Israel eats as a community in fellowship with God and each other. It is a familial act where worshippers sit at table with family and friends in the presence of God.^{18:43}

Fellowship meals were a significant part of the Old Testament feasts. They were joyous and festive occasions wherein the worshipers gave glory to God for the blessings of His covenants. Even for special occasions, celebration feasts were held to give praise to God. There was a fellowship meal when God inaugurated a covenant with Israel (Ex 20:24), when the covenant was renewed on Mount Ebal (Dt 27:7; Ja 8:31), when Saul was coronated (1 Sm 11:15), when Solomon was coronated (1 Ch 29:21,22), and at the dedication of the temple (1 Kg



9:25; 2 Ch 7:7). The fellowship meal was a part of Hezekiah's two-week renewal of the Passover (2 Ch 29:35; 30:22). On the occasion of the Passover celebration of 2 Chronicles 30, over 19,000 animals were offered. These animals

were not offered as burnt offerings, and thus totally consumed at the altar. They were offered to feed a great assembly that came together for the celebration. It was a great time of remembrance and rejoicing (2 Ch 30:25). *"There was great joy in Jerusalem"* (2 Ch 30:26).

Jesus came into the God-ordained culture of the fellowship meal of Israel. Much of His ministry evolved around a fellowship meal with different people. He ate at Levi's house (Lk 5:27-32), Simon's house (Lk 7:36-50), the house of Martha (Lk 10:38-42), the house of a certain Pharisee (Lk 11:37-54), the house of Zacchaeus (Lk 19:1-10), and the houses of a host of other people (See Lk 9:10-17; 22:7-38; 24:13-35). Eating with others during His ministry was an occasion for friendship, fellowship and evangelism.

The fellowship meal of the Last Supper should not be disconnected with Jesus' "meal ministry" from house to house. When Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper, He said He eagerly desired to eat the Passover with His disciples in the kingdom of God. "*I have earnestly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer*" (Lk 22:15,16). Jesus was not stating that He wanted to eat a sample of bread and a sip of the fruit of the vine in the kingdom with the disciples. He was referring to the fellowship meal of the Passover, which meal included the eating of the bread and wine of the Passover after the Jewish tradition. He wanted to eat the Passover **meal** with them. Again, this was more than a "chip and sip" occasion wherein Jesus sought to eat and drink with the disciples. He was looking forward to eating the fellowship meal in communion with the disciples. Concerning this meal which Jesus seeks to eat with us now in His kingdom, Hicks correctly explained,

Jesus instituted a supper where his people might remember him. His model for this supper was the sacrificial meals of the Hebrew Bible. In particular, he instituted his own supper in the context of a Passover meal. Jesus instituted a meal, not just bread and wine. The meal (in Luke, cupbread-supper-cup) fulfills the Passover in the kingdom of God and anticipates the full messianic banquet in the new heaven and new earth. If the Old Testament festivals involved a full meal (like the Passover) and the future messianic banquet involves a full meal, the new covenant meal, the Lord's supper, also involves a full meal [Emphasis mine, R.E.D.].^{18:80}

Because the Lord's Supper was instituted on the background of a fellowship meal, it was a communal occasion, not a single experience between one worshiper and God. It was an occasion where each individual worshiper communed in mutual fellowship with other fellow Christians.



It was an occasion where the Lord's Supper was eaten in the presence of God. The fellowship meal (love feast) and Supper were an integral part of each other that occurred on the same occasion. In the following statement, Smith gives his own interpretation of what the context of the event may have been:

What's important is to understand that our ritual pinch of unleavened bread bears no resemblance whatsoever to the robust first-century practice of actually eating together in memory of our Lord. You can almost see them holding up a freshly baked loaf of bread during the meal and saying, "As this bread which we are about to eat sustains our bodies, so it is that Christ, the Bread of Life, nurtures our spirits." Or perhaps, "In the same way that grain was gathered from all over the field to be baked together in this one loaf, we too are gathered from every possible back-ground and circumstance into one family in Christ.^{6:281}

C. Separating the love feast from the Lord's Supper:

After the practice of the Old Testament fellowship meals, the early Christians combined the eating of the Lord's Supper with the fel-

lowship meal. This was the love feast which the Corinthians had abused and some arrogant brethren used as an occasion to negatively affect the church (2 Pt 2:13; Jd 12). In the context of the institution of the Lord's Supper in Luke 22, 1 Corinthians 11 and Acts 20 reveal that the early church continued the practice of the fellowship meal in conjunction with the Lord's Supper. Outside the context of the New Testament, the *Didache* (or, "Teaching of the Twelve Apostles") is the earliest testimony to the eating of the love feast with the Lord's Supper.

The *Didache* was finalized in writing around the end of the first century. In its instructions concerning the Lord's Supper (the Eucharist), the fellowship meal and Lord's Supper were still celebrated as one feast.¹⁹ Even Ignatius, who was martyred around A.D. 115, indicates that the fellowship meal and Supper were still eaten together by the early Christians. By the middle of the third century, however, a change had come. The love feast was in the process of being separated from the Lord's Supper. By the beginning of the fourth century, this separation was final. Hicks was correct when he stated why this separation took place. "The primary impetus for the division between the Eucharist [Lord's Supper] and the *Agape* [love feast] is the shift from home-based (domestic) meetings to church-based (ecclesial) meetings."^{18:133}

And herein is my point in reference to house meetings. Once the church moved from the informal setting of meeting in small groups in homes, to meeting in large groups, especially in purpose-built buildings, the love feast died away. The Lord's Supper was relegated to "chip and sip", and thus we live with this tradition unto this day. One would not say that our present tradition is wrong. However, we would have to confess that our present traditional celebration of the Lord's Supper falls far short of the occasion where Jesus ate a fellowship meal with His disciples, during which He held up the bread and wine in memory of His body and blood of the covenant. The impractical circumstances of having fellowship feasts in public buildings has thus moved the Supper away from the table meal.

From the fourth century onward in church history, there were

several church councils to either correct or completely remove the love feast from church buildings. At the Council of Laodicea in 363 the love feast was forbidden in church buildings. At the Council of Trullen in 692 love feasts were prohibited, including the use of tables in church buildings. Throughout these centuries there was a shift, therefore, from emphasis on the fellowship table to exclusive emphasis on the sacrificial offering of the altar. The shift was so complete that the fellowship meal at the table of the Lord was completely banished from the assembly of the saints.

As the church gained increasing acceptance and grew in numbers, it began to secure its own special meeting places ("church buildings"). These became the norm after Constantine made Christianity a legal religion and ultimately Christianity became the only legal religion by the end of the fourth century (hence, "the Constantinian Shift"). The move from home to church facilitated the move from table to altar. The church setting reshaped the context of the Lord's supper. Table no longer had a function in the church building; indeed, tables were ultimately forbid-den.^{18:134,135}

So here we are. We are trapped in our buildings and tradition bound to meet in public schools and halls wherein we have formalized the Lord's Supper to a pinch of a wafer and sip of a small cup. The Supper has been condensed to a brief ceremony that focuses on the altar (the cross) without the fellowship experience of the table of the Lord. The love feast of celebration over the gospel event of the cross and resurrection has passed away. A deacon once said to me that the church where he attended was able to serve three hundred people with the Lord's Supper in ten minutes. Are we missing something here? Have we forgotten an essential part of Christian fellowship by minimizing to a ten-minute ceremony on Sunday morning an important evening event that took place two thousand years ago?

If we are ever to restore the Lord's Supper that is surrounded by the communal beauty of a fellowship meal, there will have to be some radical changes in how we view the table of the Lord and the assembly of the saints. One thing is certain. Purpose-built church buildings and public meeting halls are not conducive to the atmosphere and function of what took place during the Lord's Supper and love feast of fellowship in the first century church. Those churches who already have their buildings will have to do some innovative thinking concerning this matter. I have heard of some single-assembly churches who have moved their participation in the love feast/Lord's Supper fellowship to Sunday evenings and to the homes of the members. The entire membership has been divided up to meet in designated homes in small groups. Other churches who have fellowship halls in their buildings have moved to small groups around tables in the fellowship hall. Those churches who have no purpose-built building, and yet seek to restore the love feast/Lord's Supper celebration, can simply stay in their homes. If we would restore the gospel celebration of the Lord's Supper/love feast, the home is where we must start. If you are already there, stay put.

Chapter 6

MOVING OUT OF THE PAST

In order to get to where we should be, we must go to where we have been. We must go back to God's word, back to where that word first had an impact on the lives of our spiritual forefathers. The things that were written were written for our learning (Rm 15:4). Even the response of those who first received the commandments of God are recorded for our learning. However, we will not park on the response of the first recipients of the word of God. We will park on God's word, and thus work to respond in our generation, and the generation of our children, to apply God's word to our lives.

Our traditions often reveal our failures of the past. Though we find comfort in regularity (tradition), we sometimes wake up and dis-

cover that our traditions have carried us away to a religiosity that is sometimes contrary to the spirit of true Christianity. We often construct "church" after our traditions, and not after the directions of God.

Much of the world now lives in a postmodern urban culture in which "church" has often become irrelevant, out-of-date, and empty in fulfilling the needs of a new generation. The reason for this is not that the word of God is irrelevant to the needs of every generation. On the contrary, it is the church that becomes irrelevant when we burden ourselves with too many cumbersome man-made traditions and cultural traits that put us out of touch with a society that has changed. Because the church often takes on the nature of a particular culture, those from the church of a past culture often cannot relate to a new generation. Urban cultures continually change. Keeping pace with so many changes in culture is often difficult for churches in urban cultures. Keeping up with change is particularly difficult for rural churches who are more oriented to tradition than urban churches.

Many of the inhabitants of the postmodern urban world have turned away from a church that has been constructed after the traditions

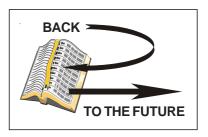
Traditions Must Be Sacrificed For The Sake Of Restoration. and culture of a past society which no longer exists or a culture that is rural. And since that society no longer exists, or is found only in a rural setting, the church that is saturated with past traditions and culture has in some ways become irrelevant to a new generation that be-

haves in different ways. It is for this reason that we must revive our desires for restoration of simple New Testament Christianity. It is time to take the uncomfortable step of identifying traditions and culture in the church in order to emphasize those principles which God intended to permeate history. Religious traditions must be sacrificed for the sake of restoration.

Nothing doctrinal has changed about the church since her establishment. The New Testament clearly explains the nature of the one church. If people will allow the word of God to be the foundation upon which we determine the beliefs and behavioral nature of the church, then the church will always exist. What is disconcerting, however, is our difficulty in understanding and applying God's directions concerning the behavior of the church, specifically in the functional nature of the church as a community of God. This is what is being challenged by the postmodern urbanite who has needs that he or she feels are not being fulfilled by a concept of "church" that is often locked into the past. In order to fulfill these needs, we must go back more than fifty or one hundred years to the roots of our traditions. We must go back to God's word and allow Him to define our behavior as members of the body of Christ in the twenty-first century.

This is where a church that is filled with postmodern thinking will have some trouble. The postmodern generation is saturated with secular humanism. Tim LaHaye stated, "Postmodernism says, "There is no absolute truth; we must create our own."^{26:38} Secular humanism is the same age-old deception that destroyed the serenity of the garden of Eden with Satan's appeal to the lust of man to have his own way. "*You will be like God*" (Gn 3:5). The postmodernist is humanistic in the sense that he affirms that there is no absolute truth. Man must thus come up with his own truth and morals. Therefore, to ask the religious humanist to go back to the Bible in order to go forth into the future is often a futile plea to one who does not know where to go.

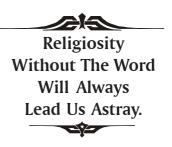
Nevertheless, we must go back to the Bible in order to advance into a postmodern world whose citizens need a relevant message from God that fulfills their emptiness in a secular world. As Jesus challenged the Philadelphia church with the future, so we



must be challenged. "*I know your works*. **Behold, I have set before** you an open door and no one can shut it, for you have a little strength and have kept My word and have not denied My name" (Rv 3:8). In order to set out on this exciting journey for the future restoration of an ancient faith, we must understand that many have been hijacked by a religiosity that has run them aground in a confused world of religious practices, which practices work contrary to God-given goals for the church. The only way one can get on track is to get into the word of God. Religious desires that are not directed by God's word will always end us somewhere apart from where God wants us to be.

A. Reexamining church history:

One of the key mistakes that some church historians have often made is to understand church history through the bias of a Catholic perspective. This has led to a distorted Catholic interpretation of church history. Our nineteenth and early twentieth century



battles with Catholicism warped our understanding of church history. We erroneously viewed everything from the standpoint of a Catholic heresy which we led ourselves to believe was the dominant force in forming church history. It is true that the Catholic heresy played a key role in church history. However, church history should not be viewed with the Catholic Church as the core of our interpretation. There is more to church history than a study of the history of the Catholic church.

Our Catholic interpretation of church history has often been so strong at times in the past that church historians reasoned that the church went out of existence before its restoration in principle and practice in recent centuries. We concluded that since we had no records of the church's existence, especially through the Dark Ages, the church did not exist. Since the Catholic Church dominated the religious world through the centuries, we assumed that it was the only church that existed. We led ourselves to believe that every era of the church must have its chroniclers to record the events of church history. But we must not forget what Jesus said, "*My words will not pass away*" (Mt 24:35).

In the context in which Jesus made the preceding statement in Matthew 24, He was not speaking only of the written word, but also of those who would believe that His word was trustworthy and the final authority in their lives. His word would not pass away because there would always be those who would believe it to be the final authority in religious matters. The word would thus exist throughout the catastrophic events that would happen in history, not only in the lives of the immediate audience of Jesus, but also in the lives of all Christians.

In the midst of the attack of the Roman Empire against the Jews and Jerusalem at the end of the 60s, those who continued to believe the message that came to them about Jesus would not pass away. This was Paul's thought in 1 Corinthians 15:1-4 in reference to the Corinthians' continuing to believe the "word" that was the



medium by which the gospel was communicated to them. If they continued to believe the word of his message, they would continue to stand firm in the gospel. The point is that there have always been those who have believed the word of the message of Jesus and the gospel. The church has not passed away throughout history because those who have believed and obeyed the gospel have not passed away.

What has actually been one of the greatest forces on directing, or misdirecting the church throughout the centuries has been the environment in which the church exists. The greatest outside forces that affect the church at any one time in history are governments, politics and the religious environment of the world. It is true that we should not allow government or the social environment in which the church resides to affect the behavior and thinking of the church. However, when we go astray as the church, we will allow our concepts and practices to be dominated by the political and religious environment in which we live. This is where many in the church were misled after three exciting centuries of church growth after the establishment of the church in the early part of the first century. When Constantine's government took hold of the guiding reins of the church, a great segment of believers strayed from simple New Testament Christianity, and thus, Christendom was doomed to 1,700 years of bondage.

In some ways, the church today still lives under the influence of an apostate movement that resulted from Constantine's detouring of Christianity. We live with some of the religious bondage of an apostate church that has come to us through a sixteenth century reformation movement

that sought to get Christianity back on track. However, from the reformation movement of the sixteenth century via a restoration movement in the nineteenth century, we are still shackled with some of the relics of Constantine's influence on the church.



In order to get back on track with some key principles of church behavior and belief, we must seek to objectively revisit our heritage. In this visitation of the past, it is often difficult to be objective. Nevertheless, we must strive for objectivity when interpreting the records of church history as they have been handed down to us.

The religious historian often has a particularly difficult time with objectivity. His problem is that he often confuses his present religious behavior and beliefs, which to him are supposedly divinely sanctioned, as the norm by which to interpret the facts of history. However, if we cannot separate traditional religious practices from Bible-revealed truth, then we will always interpret religious history from the bias of our present practices and beliefs. Therefore, we must warn ourselves to strip away as much as possible those prejudices that would misdirect our interpretation of history when considering the history of the church. We must come with objectivity to a study of church history in order to initiate restoration. Without objectivity, we will not admit where we are nor where we should go. Objectivity, with an honest approach to see where we are, is necessary to see the past in order to advance into the future. With this in mind, consider the following brief review of some major turning points in the history of the church:

B. Constantine's effect on church history:

One of the exciting aspects of church history is the tremendous growth of the church in the first century that spilled over into the second and third centuries. From house to house the early believers went into all the world. With little more than their faith, they went from the houses of one village, town and city to another in their efforts to preach the gospel to the world. They fulfilled the commission of Christ in Matthew 28:19,20, not from church building to church building, but from house to house, and often, from one hiding place to another in their efforts to preach Jesus and the cross. Even through the age of Roman persecution that was characteristic of the second century, the church continued to grow. It seemed that nothing could stop the phenomenal faith of the early believers.

At the beginning of the fourth century Satan changed his strategy. He went from persecuting the church to pacifying the church. He used government to take control of church affairs. His initial instrument to derail the church, and thus, create the Catholic heresy for 1,700 years, was the Roman State that had for almost 150 years sought to suppress Christianity out of existence. But at the beginning of the fourth century, Caesars went from attacking the church to hijacking the church. This all began with one man.

Constantine was born in A.D. 275 and died in 337. He became Caesar of the Roman Empire in A.D. 306. He was the first emperor of Rome to become a "Christian." While emperor of the Roman Empire, it was said of Constantine that in a dream he was told that he would win a strategic battle if he led his army under the sign of the cross of Christ. Indirectly, this was the



Constantine

most significant turning point of Christianity since its beginning in A.D. 30 when Peter preached the gospel for the first time on the day of Pentecost in Jerusalem. However, contrary to the beliefs of most historians, it was a turning point for the worse, not the better. A major segment of Christianity took another course of history when Constantine supposedly became a Christian, and subsequently, made Christianity a religion of the state.

1. *The age of persecution:* From the time of the establishment of the church in Jerusalem, Christians were never on an easy road. They

were persecuted from one village to another, from town to town, city to city. In fact, Paul taught newly established churches "*that we must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God*" (At 14:22). "Yes, and all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution" (2 Tm 3:12). Before his conversion, Saul (Paul) went into houses where Christians were meeting and dragged them off to prison (At 8:3). This persecution was first generated by the Jews, but it eventually developed into a fervent State persecution that was led by the Caesars of the Roman Empire.

The book of Revelation is a prophetic portrayal of how heated the persecution became under the power of the Roman Empire. In the 60s Nero led a personal vendetta against Christians by lighting his garden with the burning corpses of Christians strung up on crosses. However, Domitian

made "Christian persecution" a State pastime since Christians would not bow to the deification of Caesar. Accusations that they were insurrectionists against the Empire led many Christians to be lion's lunch for the trivial entertainment of a bored Roman citizenship who had no more worlds to conquer.

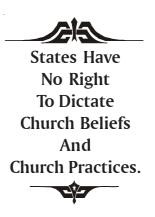
Roman persecution intensified throughout the second century. This persecution occurred sporadically throughout the third century. Persecution of Christians continued to the point of the edict of Diocletian in A.D. 303. It was on February 23, 303 that Diocletian signed this edict which was an official Roman State charter against Christianity. The edict stated that all copies of the Bible must be burned. Christian wor-





ship was banned. Leaders of the church were arrested and forced to recant their faith. It is said that the torture of Christians was so intense that even pagans were repulsed by the atrocities.^{2:45}

Diocletian did the same to believers as was done in Angola during the civil war of that country in the 1970s. A generation of church leaders was persecuted unto death. Church



houses were raided, church leaders were shot. Assemblies of churches were disbanded by an atheistic/communistic regime of ungodly men. So it was with Diocletian's persecution. With a generation of male leader-ship wiped out through the edict of Diocletian, the churches were crippled and opened to what would later be the beginnings of the great apostasy of Constantine.

2. *The age of permission:* After the tyrannical reign of Diocletian, the political pendulum swung on the impulse of Constantine's political dream in the middle of a night. He awoke one morning, and three hundred years of Christianity were changed.

After the successful battle of Milvian Bridge in 312, Constantine became the emperor of the Roman Empire. Because he followed the instincts of his dream to go to war in the name of the cross, he "converted" to Christianity. However, he had little knowledge of the Scriptures. His interpretation of Christianity was through the bias of the pagan religions of the Roman Empire. He had a great knowledge of pagan beliefs. And thus, his syncretism of Christianity and pagan religions laid the foundation for the change of religious belief for centuries to come. He brought into a church that was made leaderless by the Diocletian persecution, pagan beliefs and practices that changed the course of history. It was a change with which we live today in some areas of our beliefs and practices.

The Diocletian era of persecution was subsequently reversed by Constantine in 313. It was in 313 that the Edict of Milan was issued. This Edict pronounced Christianity as a religion that would be tolerated throughout the Roman Empire. This toleration eventually led to acceptance of Christianity, and then, recognition as the religion of the Empire. When governments make Christianity their official religion, Christianity is on its way to heresy. ("Policies" of the church should never be made by popular vote or the whims of a dictator or politician.)

Some significant events and changes came quickly during the first years of Constantine's rule. He founded Constantinople in 323. In the same year the first purpose-built church buildings were erected.^{2:16} In 325 Constantine gathered over three hundred bishops for the first Council of Nicaea, over which he presided. In 326 his mother made a trip to the Bible lands in order to seek out the location of Jesus' crucifixion and burial.

It was during this time of religious tolerance that the Emperor of the Roman Empire commissioned the construction of the first church buildings. These buildings were often built across the street from pagan temples in order to bring Christianity into an equal social acceptance with pagan religions. Gene Edwards wrote,

Here, for the first time, stood officially designated places for Christians to meet. This was a wonder which no Christian had ever seen before. Put another way, **it was in 323, almost three hundred years after the birth of the church, that Christians first met in something we now call a** "church building." For all three hundred years before that, the church **met in living rooms!**



Constantine built these assembly buildings for Christians not only in Constantinople, but also in Rome, Jerusalem, and in many parts of Italy, all between 323 and 327! This then triggered a massive "church building" fad in large cities all over the Empire. Many thousands of pagans came into these buildings. One could only wish they had all become saved and grown to maturity.^{2:47} But the fact is, many pagans did not convert fully to Christianity. As a result, pagan superstitions, mysticism, beliefs in ghosts and a host of other man-imagined religious distortions came into the beliefs and behavior of the church. The church was thus subjected to twisted beliefs for centuries to come. Constantine's capture of Christianity led the church into the Dark Ages wherein it was no longer Christianity, nor the church of our Lord, but a religion that was created after the imaginations of biblically ignorant religionists. It was a religion of spooks and twisted imaginations that brought people into the bondage of superstition. Bible authority was sacrificed for government power, then papal power, and thus, the true church was left to its own in an underground existence that was overshadowed by the Catholic dominance of church history.

3. *The age of apostasy:* It was during the preceding period of apostasy that doctrines were developed with which we live even to this day. Church buildings became the fad for the meeting of the saints. The "clergy" came into existence. (The word "clergy", which comes from the Greek word kleros, originally referred to the priest of pagan religions.) Tax money that originally went to pagan priests was directed to the church in A.D. 400. In view of the tremendous "conversion" of people to the new state religion (Christianity), it is not surprising, therefore, that many pagan priests "converted" to Christianity in order to maintain their salaries. Throughout the fourth century, the syncretism of Christianity with pagan religious practices produced a religious monster that has haunted Christendom for 1,700 years.

Edwards stated, "A.D. 380 is the date when you could probably say that Christianity became a state religion of the Roman Empire. Or you might put it another way: In 380, Christianity was merged with the pagan Roman state religion."^{2:48} This move signed the death of simple New Testament Christianity as it is recorded in history. Government took the place of God. Baal reigned over Bible, and thus, the majority of the church was taken into apostasy by the influence of the world in which it lived. The true New Testament church continued to exist in obscurity outside the control of politicians and popes. Once Catholicism developed out of the Constantinian heresy, it gained a prominent foothold in making religious history by persecuting all other faiths to underground existence for centuries to come.

The church must behave within the laws of civil government. However, when the civil government of any nation takes control of the church, or submits the church to laws that are contrary to God's law, then nothing less than apostasy will occur if Christians do not take a stand for truth. And such is what happened to the church in the centuries that followed 380.

It was good that as a person Constantine recognized the merits of being what he understood to be a Christian. However, I question his motives because of what he did to move the church into the field of state politics. Was his conversion a personal change in life, or a political move to keep the Empire together? I tend to believe that the latter was true since he reigned in the evening hours of the Roman Empire.



Throughout the centuries, interesting religious practices continued to develop in the history of apostasy that was kicked off in 380 by Christian/pagan syncretism. In 500 Gregory the Great, bishop of Rome, established the "order of worship." As pagan temple worship, church buildings became the center of worship. Years later, the professional pulpiteer came into existence through John Chrysostom. After the tradition of papal authority and the power of the priest as the sole authority in biblical interpretation, protestant preaching was consigned to the professionals. Proclamations were made by the clergy from lavishly constructed pulpits far above the audience in order to centralize beliefs and teaching around a dominant personality, the preacher. Religious behavior was thus located in a building, centered around a key personality, and then carried out by a ceremony of worship. After the ceremonies were performed, the worshiper could conveniently go on his or her way.

What is significant to our study is the rise of the church building

culture. Through the efforts of Constantine, this culture was embedded in church behavior for centuries to come. Edwards wrote, "**Without exception, there was no church building or any other kind of Christian meeting place to be found buried beneath any Constantinianera church buildings**"^{2:54,55} Historical evidence points to the fact that purpose-built buildings for the meeting of churches began with Constantine in 323, who not only built buildings in Constantinople, but also in Rome and other major cities of the Roman Empire.¹⁴ Other than the homes of the Christians, there was no "official meeting place" of Christians before the Constantinian era. Edwards concluded,

The point? Until Constantine, there was no such thing as a church building or "Christian" architecture. The church building had never been dreamed of in a dream. That which we know as the Christian faith was a living room movement! The Christian faith was the first and only religion ever to exist that did not use special temples of worship; it is the only "living room" religion in human history.^{2:55}

So here we are, ladened with brick and mortar that so often hinders dreams for mission outreach beyond commuting distance to the building. In Third World environments where foot power is the only means of commuting to the assembly, Christians beyond commuting distance are consigned to never have a church building in order to supposedly make a name for themselves in their communities. Something has gone drastically wrong in our thinking when we condemn sincere members to a sense of inferiority when they know that they will never be able to keep up with the "church building" religions in the community because they will never be able to build their own building.

Our history has delivered us a crippling blow. We live with a legacy of accepted religious behavior that has lost its practicality in many areas of the world. Though there is certainly nothing wrong with church buildings, they have become monuments we feel we must build in order to identify ourselves among those we seek to evangelize. Constantine changed our history to one that seeks to keep up with the nations around us. We have thus been handed a past that often hinders our efforts to effectively evangelize a world of 6.5 billion people, most of whom live in Third World environments wherein churches will never be able to build a church building.

Chapter 7

DEALING WITH "FINANCIAL THEOLOGIES"

We must seriously look at where we are in reference to Contantine's legacy of building-oriented assemblies. Specifically, we must take another look at some of the differences between the First World and Third World economic and cultural environments for the sake of helping us to better understand some problems that have been created by the exportation of Western cultured theological beliefs and practices into Third World environments.

I believe that if we are honest and open about some philosophical factors concerning the differences between the cultural and economic environments of the industrial/business world and the Third World, we will not burden Third World churches with some of our Western church methodology. Therefore, please be patient as we venture through some Third World realities that you may never have considered. There will be some things with which you may not agree. However, they are things that must be discussed in order to bring into perspective our struggles in establishing churches in both urban centers and rural areas of the Third World.

According to our definition of "Third World", the first century had a Third World environment. But the first century also had its First World environment. It had a First World economic environment without all the electronic and mechanical gadgets that we feel are so necessary to have in our computer-driven industrial/business world. Though there are some peculiarities about the First World cultural environment today that are different from that which existed in the first century, there are some great similarities. Economically advantaged people behave the same throughout the world and throughout history. And though there are certainly some differences between today's Third World and the first century Third World, there are also some definite similarities. Poor is still poor. The similarities between these two cultural and economic environments that are separated from one another by two thousand years, help us to understand some things about the practices of the first century church. Because we are people – and people are the same – we can place ourselves in the first century church and understand the instructions of the New Testament writers. We must get over this notion that because people lived two thousand years ago they were somehow intellectually and culturally lower on the supposed evolutionary development scale than we are today. Because Paul did not have a laptop does not mean he lacked intelligence in comparison to the world today.

Paul said that he became all things to all men that by all means he might save people through the preaching of the gospel (1 Co 9:19-23). Understanding this principle of his life is vital in order to understand our exportation of the methods of the church in a First World environment to the local context of the Third World. Many evangelists have come out of



America in the last fifty years who have brought with them some Western thinking and applications. Those who live in Third World environments must be perceptive to these methods that have come across the sea to an environment that is vastly differ-

ent from the First World environment of America and Europe. Discussed in this and the following two chapters are some of the characteristics of the methodologies of the First World church today. In some areas these characteristics have affected the way by which certain teachings of the New Testament are understood. This understanding (interpretation) has then been exported throughout the world as "doctrine", and thus, "Western churches" have unconsciously been established in Third World environments.

It is important to consider these points in order to sift through the theological and method-



"Cultural Exportation"

ological baggage that is often carried by those who go from one culture to another with the message of the gospel. When we identify the baggage, we are on our way to a better understanding of the practical application of some New Testament principles. It is always the challenge of the cross-cultural evangelist to sift cultural baggage out of the message he is preaching to a new culture. It is a rewarding experience in understanding simple New Testament Christianity.

A. Foot power and the assembly:

The First World is an environment of automobiles. In America, any given family that has several members who are of driving age will often have an assortment of cars parked in front of the family house. This is the nature of the highly mobile family of the American First World who is in love with their automobiles.

In reference to the church, this "automobilitis" makes it possible to conduct large assemblies of the church because every member is mobile. This great mobility has allowed Western urban churches the ability to dream about large single-assembly churches. Members can

drive from several kilometers (miles) in order to attend an assembly of the church that has either the best fellowship, best program for children, best preacher, best "concert," etc. The Western resident is so mobile that he takes his mobility for granted.



The West is a culture of cars, and thus, a culture that is not confined when it determines a place of meeting for the saints. But this is not the case in the Third World.

Third World residents, whether urban or rural, are confined to foot power. Admittedly, Third World feet will carry one much farther than First World feet. I once listened to a TV interview of a fifteenyear-old boy who had quit school in the rural areas of South Africa. The



interviewer asked him why he quit. "Were the courses too hard?" "Was the school bad?" "Did you not have any books?" The fifteen-year-old boy said that none of these obstacles had moved him to quit school. He simply answered, "I was tired of walking fifteen miles to school every day and walking home fifteen miles."

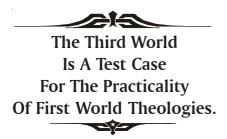
The fact is that there is a limit to how far one can walk on a regular basis to get to where he or she needs to go. Try taking a family of six or ten on a five mile walking excursion to worship on every Sunday morning.

The mobility obstacle greatly affects the size of any particular "local" congregation in a Third World environment. Third World churches cannot pride themselves with how many sheep they can herd together into one corral on Sunday morning. Though there are some large singleassembly congregations in some Third World environments, almost all churches are small, especially in rural village environments. They are often small, but by the standard of automobile distance, are relatively close together. What may take a Western member ten minutes to drive down a freeway is a great distance when relegated to foot power.

The immobility of the Third World church adds to the complexity of problems concerning church buildings and the function of elders and church leaders among the flock of God. If you are living in a typical urban center, you will identify with many rural settings of the church in Africa, India and sparsely populated areas of the world. Members are scattered throughout the city and getting them together is often difficult. The only difference between the urbanite and the village dweller, is that in the urban setting there is a great deal of people between the houses of the members. A common difficultly of the church in Third World village cultures is the fact that there are several villages in close proximity to one another, but according to past theologies, not enough members in each village to designate a plurality of elders of the church in each village.

By close proximity I mean from one to two miles in a region. Each village has an extended family of twenty-five to fifty. Now imagine the problem of getting converts from all these families together in one place for a common Sunday morning assembly. Imagine the challenge of designating elders in each village for all these sheep who are scattered throughout a cluster of villages.

Suppose converts are made in a cluster of ten to twenty villages that are in close proximity to one another. The distance between the outer villages of the cluster is two to three miles. Suppose there is a total of five hundred Christians throughout this cluster of villages. However, there are only a few Christians in each village. It is logistically impossible to get all the members of all the villages together at the same time



under the same roof on Sunday. Add to this the fact that it is almost impossible to designate elders in each village according to the thinking of some among us. So what do we do? Are we to leave these Christians without the wise spiri-

tual leadership of men who are scattered among the villages simply because we consider a local church to be only those who are able to meet together in one assembly on Sunday? Or, should we designate men as shepherds, and then let them meet together with the various groups every week instead of forcing five hundred members to meet together at the same place every week?

Third World dwellers depend on buses, taxis and trains. They have no cars, no personal transportation. Now if we demand that brethren in these economic environments must transport themselves across town in order to have large single-assembly churches, then we are not facing the reality of the situation of our Third World brethren. Consider how many members in a Western environment actually live within walking distance of a church building. The same percentage of residents in that area who are believers is about the same in any urban center in the world. Because the members of Western churches have transportation, they can develop theologies and write books on how to build large singleassembly churches. But these books have no relevance in Third World urban and rural environments where people have to walk great distances across town in order to be present at a large single assembly of the saints. If we develop a theology that demands that members have great financial means by which to transport themselves to the assemblies, then we can be assured that that theology is erroneous.

B. Dollar power and buildings:

The First World is the "First World" simply because of its ability to create great capital. That great capital has allowed the church in the Western economic environment to construct great buildings in which the church can meet. They can do this at will. If they do not have the money, they can borrow it because of low interest rates. This great financial power has allowed the Western church to do some great things in reference to financing both local programs and building great build-



ings. When we add the mobility of the First World church with the capital to build any size of building to house the vast number of those who will attend an assembly, then the size of a building is a simple matter of construction and making payments in a low interest

economic environment. Even the construction of the building itself is not a difficult decision to make when considering the capital that is available.

The easy ability to build buildings specifically for places of worship has affected the First World church in the sense that buildings have become a very vital aspect of the Christian life. Assembling in a purpose-built building is a necessary ingredient to Western Christian thinking. It is so because of the vast resources of capital to construct such buildings and the mobility of the members to congregate in the buildings. It is not difficult to understand, therefore, that church buildings have become a part of the theology and religious life of the Western world. But this is not the case in the Third World.



If the Third World church wants to build a building in an urban center, plane tickets are often purchased and appointments are made. These are tickets to America and the appointments are with American churches. I really do not believe this is what Paul had in mind when he gave us examples of how churches are to be established. But going to America to raise funds for buildings is coming to a close. In the last twenty years the size of the church outside the base of finances (America) has more than doubled. At the same time, the financial base (the American church) has not grown significantly, if it has grown at all. The financial appeals to the American church, therefore, have reaped far less funds than what was raised twenty years ago. The American church cannot now support the world church as it did twenty or thirty years ago. And, I suppose this is the way it should be. Whoever said that the American church should forever foot the bill for the world church? As a result of this financial crunch, there are far fewer church buildings being built outside America than there were twenty years ago.

The reason the church of the world has looked to the West for building church buildings is a simple matter of economics. Building church buildings in Third World economies exceeds the financial ability of the average wage earnings of the average church. For example, throughout the Third World, church buildings in large urban centers cannot be built with local funds alone. There is always the need for finances in part or whole to come from outside sources, specifically from churches of the West. Now we must consider what a local church is to do when it is growing. What is it to do when it outgrows its present building?

This is a situation that is not uncommon. The usual situation is that a church building was built in a typical Third World environment with foreign contributions fifteen to twenty years ago. As time went by, this church grew. It has now outgrown its building. Now what is it to do? Since rising costs now make it impossible to even remodel and expand its own building, is it to ask for more foreign contributions? Is this church stuck since they cannot find funds to build another building? What would you do? Building a building for a growing church is like buying baby clothes for a baby.

Is something happening here that should stimulate some thinking about what the Third World urban church should be thinking, as well as what Western church missions should be considering concerning church establishment in Third World settings? Third



World churches should be asking themselves, "If there is no more money, then should we not change our emphasis from church buildings to house churches?" Now where do we go to assemble? Consider this for a moment. When you come up with something, you will understand why I am writing this book. I believe you will come to the same conclusions that I have in reference to church assembly and organization.

If we force the poor churches of the world to maintain the concept of large single-assembly churches that must meet in church buildings, then we have placed on the wage earners of these brethren a tremendous burden. Making brethren feel second rate in the kingdom because they cannot afford a large purpose-built building in which to assemble is certainly not correct thinking. I have visited too many poor brothers who took me out to some plot of land in the bush and said, "One day we will build ourselves a building of our own." Who taught these brethren this material dream?

With our "church building theology", we want to add to the financial burden of poor brethren another house payment. The first payment is the payment on the house in which the members live. The second is the house in which we want the members to meet. If we hold to the belief that a local church is established when all the members of a particular region can meet together in a single assembly, then we have laid on the backs of the poor a burden that cannot be carried. We have unconsciously relegated them to "second class" churches who are doomed to forever meet with screaming religious fanatics in local government schools, or to meet in small groups without elders, since our definition of a local church is that all members must meet in a single assembly on Sunday. (More on this later.)

The points of this chapter express real situations with which the church must deal in Third World environments where brethren have little money. Poor brethren live with these dilemmas every day. They are challenges that center around the practical side of church existence. Nevertheless, they are things that continually challenge our preconceptions concerning the traditional large assemblies of the saints in purposebuilt church buildings. They are things that specifically challenge our theology concerning what constitutes a local "autonomous" church, as well as the function of elders.

These real-life situations should challenge the beliefs of those who have been able to maintain certain teachings because of their financial ability. It is easy to maintain the belief that a "local" church exists when all the members can assemble together at one place on a weekly basis. But this thinking is not applicable in the real world. The church that lives in the two percent Western world must not assume that their financial abilities should dictate assembly situations in Third World environments. When one lives among the financially disadvantaged, it is amazing to see how some of his or her "theologies" change.

Chapter 8

BUILDING-ORIENTED CHRISTIANITY

Discussions about church buildings almost always turn into heated debates as if some fundamental doctrine is being challenged. The rea-

son for this is that our Christianity is more building-oriented than we want to admit. It is building-oriented because we have developed a very assembly-oriented nature of Christianity. We know that we are assembly-oriented because of all the senseless divisions that have taken place over events in the assembly. Regardless of our quibbles over nonessential questions, there are some necessary concepts of "Western theology" that must be reviewed before we journey into some suggestions in later chapters concerning a change in the practical application of the word of God.

A. The Western cathedral craze:

Constantine wanted to bring "Christianity" into conformity with the pagan temples and religions of the world of his day. Large basilicas (purpose-built church buildings) supposedly meant stable religion. This rationale has historically permeated the foreign evangelist's jargon in fundraising for decades. Constantine simply wanted to make Christianity more dominant, or at least have the same face as other religions of the Em-

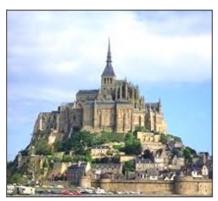
pire. This unfortunate practice has been retained and nurtured throughout the centuries, even to this day.

Medieval Europe took pride in the great cathedrals that were built. The construction of cathedrals manifested the greatness and dominance of the religion of those who assembled within these magnificent edifices. In Europe there was competition between the Church of England (Anglicans) and the Catholics as to who could build the greatest building. After the turmoil of the early years of the reformation, the splinter groups from the Catholics and Church of England began to construct their own religious centers. In order to make their own statement of strength, denominational churches of the reformation built great edifices.



When the early settlers crossed the Atlantic for the New World, or went south to Africa, they took with them a building-oriented belief. One of the first structures to be built in the new settlements was a church building. This was true of the Spanish, English, French and other colonial powers as they scrambled for territory throughout the world. The cathedrals were constructed in the middle of towns and cities. The buildings to house worship became the center of reference for the community, and this center was marked by the construction of a church building right in the middle of town. Church-building theology was exported to America from Europe. It was also exported to the rest of the world by missionaries who followed colonial powers. Through the missionary force of the church today, the same building theology continues to go into the far corners of the world.

We must be fair to the American church on this point. Long before the American missionary stepped foot within the border of any



other nation of the world, the religious mission force of Europe and Rome had constructed great cathedrals and church buildings throughout the world. It is a tourist attraction now to visit the old church buildings in the middle of towns and cities throughout the world. I remember visiting the Kuruman Mission of northern South

Africa that was started in 1816. Robert Moffat built the old wooden church building of this mission in the first of the 1800s, years before American missionaries stepped foot on the continent of Africa. The point is that Christendom has been building church buildings throughout the world ever since Constantine introduced the concept at the beginning of the fourth century.

Our emphasis on buildings is revealed by the missionary's common statement, "The community will not feel that we are here to stay unless we have our own building." And thus, our efforts to manifest our own strength in the midst of building-oriented religions continues within our own theology. We have relinquished ourselves to believe that if we cannot beat them, we must build with them. We have succumbed to the pressure of the religions around us by succumbing to the mentality of building-oriented thinking that is strong within the people who have been meeting in magnificent buildings for centuries.



Churches throughout the world often pride themselves in their buildings. I was once told by an elder, "We want to fix up our building so it will be comparable to the other churches in the area." Building-oriented Christianity is strong in the Western church. It is a strong sentiment in Christendom throughout the world. It is believed that the stability and notoriety of a church in any community is dependent on the grandeur of the building that is constructed. We thus set the grandeur of our "plants" in competition with those who are building across the street.

The necessity of buildings in the Western church is argued from the standpoint of numerous positions. "The building gives the church a sense of stability in the community." "People will not come if they do not have a comfortable building in which to meet." "If we are going to grow, we must have a building that is suitable for large meetings." "If we are going to keep our young people, we must build them a gym."

We must keep in mind that this thinking is central to much of the thinking of the church of the West. It is central simply because a church is not really considered a church unless it is meeting in a church building, whether rented or owned, preferably owned. Therefore, because the Western church is very building oriented, it often views the church in any area of the world as established if a building has been constructed for the meeting of the church.

But the preceding is not the case in the Third World. If a church in a Third World urban center wants to build a building, it usually cannot do so simply because there are not enough local financial resources to make it happen. The financial inability to build buildings forces one to reconsider the New Testament assembly of the saints. **Why did the** **first century church grow so much without buildings and we grow so little with them**? One thing has been proved without doubt, church buildings do not cause long-lasting church growth. Again, this is a truth that needs no proof for everyone knows of a number of churches that are dying in their own buildings.

B. Questioning the effect of "brick and mortar" growth:

Many people in the Western church realize that true Christianity has nothing to do with purpose-built church buildings. The reason I say this is because of the tremendous growth of the cell (house) church establishment that is now going on throughout the world in every reli-



"Tree church" in Africa

gious group. I also believe that many in the Western church have learned that their magnificent buildings have not facilitated church growth. This is especially true in European churches where many magnificent, but empty church

buildings, have been sold to be warehouses. I once received a substantial contribution for our work from a church in America who told me, "The funds had become available." My curiosity got the best of me, so

I asked someone I personally knew in the congregation if he knew the origin of the funds. He said, "We were supporting a mission effort that got involved in a building program. We just decided that we wanted our money to go to evangelism and not building buildings."

A few years ago I stood before a missions committee of about twenty-five in a very large Western church that was at the time supporting, including wives and children, over sev-



Church on Empirical Ave. & See St.

Roger E. Dickson, Biblical Research Library

enty people in mission areas. I told them, "We have started to work with house churches in our area because we are tired of coming to you and asking you to build our buildings." As soon as I made that statement, the entire room was a course of heads nodding yes and a series of "Amens." Needless to say, there were many in the room who were of the postmodern generation. They have little attachment to buildings.



Though many churches through experience have learned that brick and mortar does not cause church growth, a great deal of Christians of the Western church still feel that a building is very essential to church maintenance and growth. This building orientation of the Western church is often so strong in the minds of some that it is believed that church growth necessitates a church building. It is often said, "In order for this church to grow, we must have a building. And this building must seat twenty percent more than the attendance." Western Christians often firmly believe that growth is structured around a physical structure of meeting. The firmness of this belief in the minds of some can be measured by the level of resistance against the establishment of any church without a church building.

Throughout the years, I have discovered that building-oriented Christians love their buildings. This is especially true of preachers. Some often take pride in the edifices in which they preach to the masses. Even in the construction of the interior of the buildings, I would challenge you to notice the location and height of the pulpit in reference to the audience. It is constructed in a way that manifests the power and dominance of the "pastor" who is perched high above the audience.

In the theater arrangement of Western buildings and cathedrals, spectators (members) are expected to sit in silence, facing pronouncements from professionals who seat themselves behind the pulpit until it is their turn to make a pronouncement. The spectators are supposed to have spacious and comfortable seating, lest they become frustrated, and thus, do not show up for the weekly proclamations. It is true that in the Western world the assembly will usually not go beyond eighty percent of the seating capacity of the building. Those of you who dwell in the Third World, need not chuckle at this. Third World churches usually meet twenty percent beyond the seating capacity of their buildings. Facility capacity in Third World buildings is measured as one measures the number of people that a Nairobi taxi driver can get in his taxi. "One more!"

In some ways, the thinking that a building is necessary for church growth works against true church growth. The more a local church believes that a building will cause true church growth, the less the growth is when the church gets the building. The problem is that the local mem-



bers are depending on something that is physical to do the work of evangelism. They are looking toward the physical in order to accomplish the spiritual. They are depending on something that is of this world in order to

grow that which is not of this world. Once the building is built, there is the feeling among building-oriented members to sit down and wait for the crowds to come in. However, after twenty years of waiting, the members finally come to the realization that the crowds will never come. It is only then that they begin to realize that something else is wrong. Church buildings do not make churches grow. Christians make churches grow. Physical structures do not accomplish spiritual goals.

The Western church in the past once convinced itself that there was an inseparable link between a church building and the growth of the local church. As stated before, I believe that many in the church of the West have finally awakened to the fact that this is not the case, at least in reference to mission works throughout the world. Missions committee people are learning. For years world evangelists went to the West with a "horizontal handshake" in order to raise funds for buildings. The American church was told that the mission church would grow if it could only get a building. After fifty years of information and statistics that have proved the contrary, the American church is not going to be sold an idea that does not produce. Spending \$150,000 on a building for a church of fifty members no longer has its appeal to the Western church. The Western church is aware of too many empty buildings they have built. And besides that, they now know of churches for which they built buildings that have not grown in twenty to thirty years. Buildings do not grow churches. People do. And until we focus our attention on this fact, we will be plagued with the practice of thinking that material things are necessary in order to accomplish spiritual goals.

First World Christianity is often very visual oriented, that is, things must be seen in order to be counted. We must **see** great numbers. We must **see** great buildings. We must **see** our organization on a piece of paper. We must **see** order in the assemblies. We must **see** our preacher. We must **feel** the warm or cool temperature of the building. We must **see** charts and graphs, song books and silhouettes in stained glass windows. We must **see** each other in large numbers. We have added a new meaning to the expression "seeing is believing."

As a result of the empirical world in which the industrial/business Christian lives and thrives, the Western Christian is often empirical in his or her approach to being Christian. Because the Western citizen is possession oriented, he has con-



House Church in Africa

vinced himself that Christianity must in some way be affirmed by tangible things. The most tangible thing that can be had in this philosophy is a building to which to go on Sunday morning. One can assemble in this building on nice pews in an air conditioned or heated environment in the presence of a large visible crowd of people before whom a perfectly groomed preacher stands. But this is not the case in the Third World. When you are poor and without things, things have little to do with your religious behavior. In a rural Third World church one often sits under a tree in the midst of a small group singing praises to God on a day when the temperature reaches over 100 degrees. It is for this reason that in Third World cultures, relationships and commitment to Jesus are more important than possessions. The urban West could learn a great deal from the Third World on this point.

Chapter 9

GOD AND CLOCKS

One of the first "challenges" that hits the Western evangelist as he ventures into the Third World environment is the supposed lack of organization that he assumes to be in the behavior of the people he en-



"Time Is Money!"

counters. This supposed lack of organization confounds the Western mind with a great disorienting force. This is often the foreign evangelist's greatest struggle in dealing with the Third World mind. I have heard it said on many occasions, "How can these people get anything done. They are so disorganized and

they never show up on time. They are so backward." But we must not forget that these supposed "backward" cultures have existed for centuries without the Western system of organization that is mechanistic and analytical. The fact is that social and economic organization exists in all cultures. Organization in many cultures that is built primarily around relationships instead of production and efficiency is generally not first perceived by the Western mind. Since the Western citizen believes that productivity is centered around analytical organization, then anything without this system of organization is not efficient. It is "backward." Analytical organization, therefore, is supposed to be absolutely necessary if a culture wants to develop to the nature of the materialistic and analytical culture of the West. Our obsession with analytical organization has often determined how we interpret the Scriptures, as well as how we feel we must relate to God. If efficiency and production are based on an analytical system, then we suppose that Christianity must function after the same manner. From this reasoning, we have developed assemblies that must conform to the rigidity of a well-organized business and a worship that must conform to rules and regulations. We thus view God with a clock in one hand and an organizational chart in the other as He watches over the performances of His "employees" in church business.

A. Changing from analytical to relational behavior:

The Western industrial/business culture is built on analytical form and organization. Everything is structured. Laid out on a piece of paper. Analyzed on a graph. Dated on a calendar. Punched in on a computer program. The Western church is in like manner ordered with an agenda, organized with a roster, and encumbered with the rigidity of time, time, time. It is a culture that would probably collapse if it were not for Microsoft Excel and Access. McManus defined our modern church correctly when he wrote,

The contemporary church has chosen standardization over uniqueness. We have chosen predictability over surprise. And without realizing it, to our own regret, we have chosen comfort and convenience over servanthood and sacrifice. But in the end, whatever we have chosen is organization over life, and thus, perhaps, is the fundamental dilemma we face – that at best the church is seen as a healthy organization.^{22:14}

Even the Western church's interpretation of the first century church is based on an analytical form of organization. In the church we thought that if we could establish (restore) the right form or structure of worship of the first century, we could generate the right spiritual behavior. We thought that if everything involved in becoming a Christian, and worshiping as a Christian, could be categorized into five acts of performance, then somehow a spiritual relationship with God would be generated and a personal relationship with fellow Christians would be encouraged. But the system failed because holiness, worship, relationships with one another and God, cannot be accomplished by maintaining a rigid set of rules that are orchestrated on Sunday morning. Nevertheless, the persistence of some churches must be admired for their determination to continue that which did not bring them to the desired end, a close relationship with God and one another. In the context of such Western rigidity, Christianity often digressed into "churchianity," and the result has been an impersonal religion that often believes in a deistic God somewhere off in the far corners of the universe.

Though the church struggles with this same ceremonial and legalistically rigid assembly in many parts of the world, churches in poorer regions are generally more relational oriented. Emphasis is not so much on the form of how to get it done, but on the reason why we should do it in the first place. Things are done, not so much for material goals, but for survival of the individual in the community of an extended family. This thinking in the Third World focuses one's mind more on relationships than money and analytical organization.

House churches are an effort to place relationships before form and structure. For this reason, the meeting of Christians in their homes is not structured on a roster of events with a definite time of beginning or ending. Relationships are considered to be more important than structure. Knowing Jesus is top priority. In order to do this one must climb the ladder of personal relationships with those who are in Christ.

Maybe the Western church could learn from the dynamic of a culture that is based on relationships. In his book, *Mind and Nature*,



Personal Encounters With Others Draws Out Of Us New Personal Discoveries.

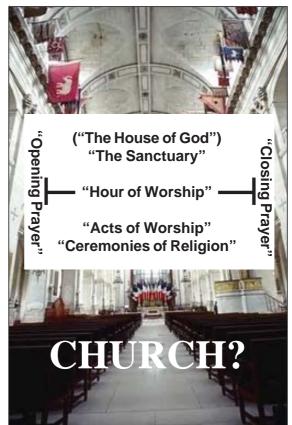
Gregory Bateson wrote of "the pattern that connects."¹⁵ His point was that we must cease our emphasis on teaching facts, and concentrate on relationships that constitute the definition of all things. And truly, it is through relationships that we discover our real potential. As we encounter one another, each encounter with a different personality draws out of us hidden potential. The more personal encounters we have, the more treasures we discover in our own treasure chest of personality. Through genuine personal encounters with one another we build a true relationship foundation upon which individuals are fine-tuned for eternal cohabitation.

B. Keeping God turned on in our daily lives:

The great emphasis placed on church buildings has come out of an overemphasis on the assembly of the church. In fact, an assemblyoriented Christianity has been developed in the industrial/business culture that is structured to fit into a rigid timetable of schedules and appointments. Because we have emphasized the form of the assembly over the spirit of Christianity, our Christianity has degenerated into a form of religion encompassed by the walls of a building. We have often localized our "Christianity" within a building. We open our "Christianity" with an "opening prayer" for the "hour of worship," and close it by a "closing prayer." God is thus locked up in the "sanctuary" and we go on our way for the rest of the week in our "secular" world where we enjoy "our time." Somehow we have "localized" our "church time", "timized" our "Christianity", and "acted out" our worship to God. Put a roof on this religious rigidity and we have what we now define as "church". The building has thus become a crucial ingredient to maintain this system of building-oriented religiosity that is foreign to the total commitment of daily holiness and worship that we see in the New Testament Christians. As there is a group called "Doctors without Borders", we need to seek for an identity that describes us as, "Christians without Walls." Those who are of the postmodern generation are seeking to escape from the walls of traditional religion in order to escape into their communities.

In the Western world it was easy to clock God in and out with a ceremonial act of prayer. We work by schedules. We organize and departmentalize our lives. Therefore, God must somehow fit into this

schedule of a busy life. What is outside His allotted time – the hour of worship – is "my time." We have thus become secular in giving God only an "hour" of our week, while we have slipped away into our own worlds of activity and things and games. In this system of religion, buildings become very important. They become the focal point of our religious behavior. After all, if we could "go to the office," then we can "go to church." What is done in the building, "God's office", is what is done with our Christianity. What we



argue about in our religion is centered around things that take place in our buildings and during our assemblies. It has become very convenient to do our religious thing in a church building, and then escape from God to go on our way. It is as the little girl who wrote a note to the preacher while she was with her family on a vacation, "Tell God to be there when we get back."

One of the serendipities of house church meetings is that one has less of a tendency to turn God off when leaving the company of



brethren. If there is no "closing prayer", then one goes on his or her way with worship on his or her heart and mind. The next time you hear a "closing prayer", watch the behavior of the people who are assembled together. The first thing you will see after the closing prayer is shuf-

fling around, picking up coats and hats, grabbing children, etc. Something has changed in the behavior of the people. A switch in the mind has been flipped. Worship is closed. "See you next Sunday." Now wait around for ten minutes after the "closing prayer" and see if anyone is still at the place of meeting. If you are alone, standing in bewilderment, then you know you are a member of an assembly-oriented church who worships God and then seeks to keep Him in a box in the place of worship, usually a church building.

House assemblies are an effort to change from confining God to a location and estranging ourselves from one another. I believe God meant for us to be together more than ten to fifteen minutes once a week in a church building foyer. I do not believe one can establish a relationship with his or her brother or sister in Christ on foyer-time only. You cannot count time sitting in the "theater" as quality fellowship. Bumping into one another in the parking lot does not count. We need quality time together in order to work out how we are going to live with one another in eternity.

C. Serving an omnipresent God:

The problem with "places of worship" is that we seek to localize God either in this place or that place. We seek to make God's presence stronger in one location, but feel away from Him in another. The God who is omnipresent is localized only when we create His presence after our own imagination.

Solomon knew that Israel would have this problem when he constructed the temple. At the end of the construction of the temple, he reminded the nation of Israel that God cannot be boxed up in a temple. "But will God dwell on earth? Behold, heaven and the heaven of heavens cannot contain You. How much less this temple which I have built?" (1 Kg 8:27; see 2 Ch 2:6). The fact is what Paul stated. "... the Most High does not dwell in temples made with hands ..." (At 7:48).

Jesus knew the inclination of men to establish locations of worship. Regardless of Solomon's pronouncements, the Jews sought to maintain Jerusalem as the place of worship. The Samaritans, on the other hand, felt that God must be worshiped on a mountain in Samaria. The Samaritan woman said to Jesus, "Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, and You say that in Jerusalem is the place where men

ought to worship" (Jn 4:20). But Jesus corrected her and the religious world when He said, "Woman, believe Me, the hour is coming when you will neither on this mountain nor in Jerusa-lem worship the Father" (Jn 4:21). The point Jesus made is that there is no special place of

There Is No Sacred Place Where Worship Is To Take Place.

worship. "God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship Him in spirit and in truth" (Jn 4:24). And this can be done everywhere, even in your own house.

The religious world has had a tremendous impact on the methodology and practices of the church. Those who do not recognize this are in danger of becoming that from which the restoration movement fled. We are not immune from adopting the practices of our religious neighbors. A great restoration to simple Christianity was started over two centuries ago. It both maintained some denominational baggage and has picked up some on its way into the twenty-first century. There is still room for more restoring. We must challenge ourselves to continue in the restoration of relationships with one another and to do good works so that we may better connect with our Savior.

Our Christianity often becomes so complex, so organized, and so formalized that it becomes spiritually sterile. We have sterile relationships with our brothers and sisters. We have sterile relationships with

We Must Go Home To Find Jesus And One Another.

God. We perform our ceremonial religious actions, and yet, we know we must develop greater relationships, both with Jesus and our fellow man. We know that there is an emptiness within that is not fulfilled by our outward performances. It is for this reason that I say it is time to go back to basics. It is time for a truly refreshing restoration of the spirit of Christianity in an environment of simple assemblies in our homes with our families and Christian friends.

Returning to small groups of Christians meeting in the homes of members is an effort to return to the relational fellowship that must be characteristic of the family of God. In order to accomplish this, there is some religious baggage that must be discarded. It must be discarded in order to enter this new world of learning how to relate with Jesus through a closer relationship with one's fellow brother or sister in Christ. House (cell) churches are not another system of assembly. They are not composed of members who cannot afford to build buildings or drive across town to a large central meeting of Christians. They are not composed of disgruntled members of the church. They are composed of Christians who are wearied with allowing either their culture or their past religiosity to separate them from one another. They have thus gone back home in order to find their home.

Chapter 10

BRING JESUS HOME

Now that we have worked our way through the negatives and surveyed our present religious culture, we need to get down to the business of investigating some perspectives as to how we view the function

of the church. I have worked with home groups for over two decades. I suppose I am even the product of a home study group as I watched my mother call farmers' wives



Roger E. Dickson, Biblical Research Library

together once a week in order to teach things she had studied throughout the week. I can always remember the card table being set up in the middle of the living room of an old farm house in central Kansas. It was my mother's study. And when a group of farmers' wives settled into the comforts of the living room, she taught everything from Genesis to Revelation, with a great deal of Christian evidences thrown in on the side. She had her own house-study group, a group of women assembled around the Bible on a country Kansas farm.

There is nothing complicated about studying the Bible. There is nothing complicated about inviting friends over to study what you have studied. I have discovered that if you do this on a weekday, you can eventually move the meeting to Sunday with ease. I think the early Christians simply assembled people in their homes in order to talk about Jesus as the Christ and Son of God. Their discussions started in the homes any time during the week. As people obeyed the gospel, they naturally moved to the first day of the week to eat a fellowship meal, during which the table of the Lord was served. There is nothing difficult or technical about this. It is simple Christianity in action.

From what you have read in this book so far, you will have little with which to disagree. However, as we progress, there are some points I need to make wherein I feel that some serious consideration and thought



It Is Only Natural For The Christian To Study The Bible And Share It With Others.

must take place in our behavior, beliefs and organization. In order to facilitate a restoration to the simplicity of Christianity in a complex world of religious chaos, a fresh wind of revival is blowing through our ranks. We must not fret ourselves with where we must go. As long as our eyes are on Jesus and we are firmly committed

to be guided by His word, then we will stay on course. Regardless of the uneasiness of these times, we must take this journey in order to lift ourselves out of the complacency of stagnation.

A. Meeting in homes:

As stated in previous chapters, one of the axiomatic truths concerning the assembly of the early Christians was their meeting in homes. This fact is not questioned by any church historians or biblical commentators. In his commentary on Colossians, David Lipscomb wrote, "It was common enough for the church to meet in a private house since there were as yet no separate houses of worship It was customary for the brethren who had large and convenient houses to gather portions of the whole community in these."^{8:317,318} Others have stated, "In the beginnings of the gospel the disciples of the Lord assembled in private houses..."^{9:272} James B. Coffman wrote in a commentary on Romans 16:4,5 in reference to the church that met in the home of Aquila and Priscilla, that "this was probably the usual manner in which the Christians of that era solved the problems of a place of worship"^{10:513} Kenneth S. Wuest quoted Bishop Lightfoot who said in reference to house churches,

There is no clear example of a separate building set apart for Christian worship within the limits of the Roman Empire before the third century. The Christian congregations were therefore dependent upon the hospitality of prominent members of the church who furnished their homes for this purpose.^{11:259}

This brings us to some very interesting recent archaeological evidence concerning the meetings of the church in its first three centuries of existence. Bradley Blue wrote concerning this matter,

Recent archaeological evidence from such diverse places as Capernaum, Rome and Kent strongly suggests that for the first few hundred years of the Church's existence, Christian groups gathered, not in large "purpose-built" church buildings, but in domestic residences which could accommodate their needs.^{3:119}

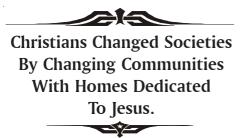
What Blue and others have discovered are archaeological evi-

dences of renovations in early Christian houses. These renovations were made in order to accommodate larger meetings in the houses of Christians. The renovations were made internally in order to accommodate larger groups. They were also made in some homes in order to conceal the existence of the *ekklesia* (church) in the house during times of persecution. We would assume that during years of hostility toward the church in its first centuries of existence, no church would seek to build a purpose-built assembly hall for the meeting of the persecuted.

The early Christians enlarged their houses for meeting simply because of the rapid growth of the church. House churches grew. Their growth demanded expansion of existing houses, as well as the establishment of other assemblies in other houses. The church thus permeated the communities where Christians lived by remaining in the communities with meetings in the homes of the members. But if the members had to flee, then there was no church building with which to deal. The mobility of a church without a building enhances its ability to grow wherever it is planted.

B. Meeting in homes in order to change communities:

It was through meetings in houses throughout the Roman Empire that the church made its inroads into changing pagan culture. R. L. Fox wrote, "... it was through the household and the house church that Christianity and its other-worldly 'assembly' first put down its roots, then



grew to undermine the old civic values and the very shape of the pagan city."^{4:89} Luke had recorded that Christians turned the world upside down for Jesus (At 17:6). The impact of biblical teaching changed so-

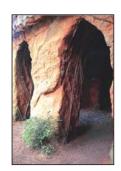
cieties as it changed people in communities. As Christians met from house to house, the influence of their behavior changed the communities in which they lived. Christianity was truly a revolutionary movement within the communities where Christians lived.

It is significant to note that in the early beginnings of the church, the change of society started by changes in the home. As Christians met in their homes, their influence in their communities had a significant impact on the lives of the people around them. Their determination to keep their influence in their own communities seems to be intentional in view of the fact that for almost three hundred years after the establishment of the church there was no concerted effort to build church buildings. In other words, there seems to have been a determined effort on the part of the early Christians to remain in their communities in order to affect the lives of their neighbors. Some have suggested that Christians "deliberately avoided" meetings in public facilities in order to accomplish this purpose.⁵

C. Meeting in homes in order to escape persecution:

One popular belief that has been commonly taught is that the early Christians lived and assembled in the catacombs of Rome during times of severe persecution. However, this belief is now being ques-

tioned by historians. The view that Christians lived and assembled in the catacombs is being questioned for the simple fact that it cannot be proved that Christians hid themselves there during persecution. The view that the Christians would have lived and worshiped in the catacombs of Rome leaves us to wonder what Christians did outside Rome. Roman persecution of Christians was



carried out throughout the Empire. To think that the church in Rome was alone persecuted is a very limited understanding of the State persecution by the Roman Empire against Christianity.

Blue suggested that instead of meeting underground, Christians met in the confines of their homes which they renovated for the purpose of accommodating larger assemblies. Some Christians had enlarged their houses instead of building church buildings in order to be inconspicuous during times of persecution in the second and third centuries. Blue wrote,

Rather than meeting underground, recent archaeological evidence suggests that the early Christian groups gathered, in domestic residences which could accommodate their needs, sometimes renovating these private homes so that they no longer served the needs for which they were originally constructed. The gathering of Christian believers in private homes (or homes renovated for the purpose of Christian gatherings) continued to be the norm until the early decades of the fourth century when under the tutelage of Constantine, the Christians began erecting the first basilicas. **For almost three hundred years the believers met in homes, not in large "purpose-built" churches ...** [Emphasis mine, R.E.D.]^{3:124}

If there is an example of methodology in what the early church did in reference to meeting in homes, then we have an example for the church moving throughout the world today from house to house. The world in many places is becoming increasingly hostile to Christianity. This is especially true in Muslim countries. China is still not open for

public preaching of the gospel. As the early church turned the world upside down by permeating hostile communities with house church meetings, so such can happen today. However, in order to do this,



Where There Is Great Hostility Against Christianity, Christians Must Meet In Secret In Homes.

a new generation of believers must arise in the church that is not attached to church buildings or that maintains its confidence or security in large assemblies.

D. Homes versus church buildings:

We must challenge the belief that church buildings had their beginnings in the latter part of the first century, and subsequently became commonly used by the church for meeting throughout the second century to this day. As previously stated, Constantine "formalized" the use of church buildings at the beginning of the fourth century. His innovation of the purpose-built assembly hall for the church, which is now often believed necessary for church assembly, has been with us since the days when he syncretized Christianity with the pagan beliefs of the Roman Empire. However, there is a restoration today by some who do not have the option of building a purpose-built structure in which to gather the church. They do not have this option either because of finances, or they live in areas where there is great hostility against Christianity. And then, there are those who simply do not want to waste finances on church buildings. They have this privilege.

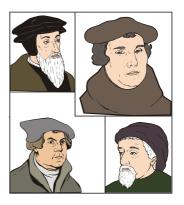
In reference to the work of R. Krautheimer that was first published in 1939 under the title, "The Beginning of Christian Architecture", Blue wrote,

The first stage in the development of the pre-Constantinian setting for Christian assembly covers the years c. 50-150. During this period of rapid expansion, the Christians would have met in the private homes belonging to individual members. The second stage covers the years c. 150-250. During this time private domestic residences were renovated and used exclusively for the purposes of the assembled Christian communities. The last stage, c. 250-313, saw the introduction of larger buildings and halls (both private and public) before the introduction of basilica architecture by Constantine.^{4:124,125}

Some have estimated that in the middle of the third century, around A.D. 250, there were possibly 30,000 Christians living in Rome. And yet, there is no evidence that these Christians were meeting in buildings throughout Rome that were purposely designated for the assembly of the church. This fact is confirmed by Justin Martyr's response to Rusticus in the middle of the second century when Rusticus inquired concerning the meeting of Christians. Justin responded, "Wherever it is each one's preference or opportunity In any case do you suppose we all meet in the same place?" The answer to the question was that Christians did not meet in the same place. They did not meet in clearly identified "church buildings", else the question would never have been asked. The fact was that they were meeting in the homes of the members in many places throughout the city of Rome and other cities.

E. House-to-house evangelism in our century:

When the Roman State took control of Christianity, church history was changed forever. Through our past Catholic interpretation of history, our understanding of Christianity and its history has too often been glued to the development of the Catholic Church which began with the Constantinian apostasy. The Reformation Movement of the 1500s was an attempt to sal-



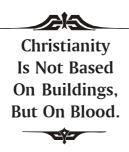
vage true Christianity and restore our thinking to the simplicity of Biblebased beliefs. However, many reformers stopped short of what was necessary to get believers back into the Bible as the final authority in religious discussions and practice and back on track to a true restoration of New Testament Christianity. Many simply tried to reform an existing church institution (the Catholic Church). Their efforts led to the construction of a variety of religious groups, all carrying with them some of the baggage of the Catholic Church from which they fled. The reformers brought with them the fulltime clergy, church buildings, localized centers of Christian worship that brought everyone to the sanctuary, orders of worship, and a host of other articles of baggage on their way out of the Catholic Church.

In the 1800s the Restoration Movement of America was a continuing effort of believers to rid themselves of the shackles of institutionalized religion. Great leaders stood up and attacked the clergy and their domination of the people. These leaders knew that if the hold of the clergy over the people could not be broken, the people would not be freed from the confines of tradition in order to enjoy the freedom of "speaking where the Bible speaks and being silent where the Bible is silent." Since this movement first sparked life into people who caught a vision of being released from the confines of man-made religiosity, there has been a great revival in returning to simple New Testament Christianity. But we still seem to be burdened with some of the baggage that Constantine strapped on the backs of believers, and subsequently was adopted by the Catholic Church.



Much of the baggage was reinstituted by insecure reformation leaders who sought to compete with their religious roots. And finally, some of the religious practices of the Catholic heresy have ended up in our restoration heritage through men who were under the peer pressure of the denominational communities in which they lived.

In our desire to be accepted in the community, we have often thrown in the towel and built our buildings in order to compete with the



group across the street whose purpose it is to make a statement in the community by how many bricks they can pile on top of one another. Even in our mission methods we have sold a bag of goods to supporters by telling them that we will not be accepted in our communities unless we also make a

statement with some spectacular edifice.

As we move into the future of the postmodern world, we must reconsider our approach to church function and evangelism. There must be a paradigm shift. The reason for radical change is because of changes that are taking place in our world. Here is an example. In 1900 there were no countries of the world that were closed to the entrance of missionaries. If one were brave enough, he could go to the darkest jungle of

the world. One could go at will throughout the world and preach the gospel. Missionaries were encouraged to traverse the world by colonial governments who were seeking to educate and civilize a world that was trapped in darkness. But things have changed. Today, there are over sixty-five countries that are officially closed to entrance of the professional missionary.^{2:146} More coun-



tries in the world are added every year to this list. Satan's greatest attack against the preaching of the gospel in the twentieth century was the visa. As countries became independent, they also became resistant to the entrance of the professional religious worker.

The twenty-first century, therefore, will be the century wherein Christians must go forth as vocational missionaries. They must seek jobs in countries wherein they can quietly spread their influence by behaving as Jesus. In order to do this, they must be trained in how to go throughout the world starting churches in their homes.

Before we offer any excuses for not going into all the world, we must remember that these postmodern times in the industrial/business world are culturally closer to the first century than any other century since. We have all the variety of religions as the Roman Empire. We have all the materialism of the society. There



are all the world conflicts of the Empire and politics as well. And especially, there exists today a great resistance to Christianity by pagan religions as was prevalent in the world of the early Christians. However, we must maintain the mandate of Jesus to go into all the world and preach the gospel. I do not think we will be able to accomplish the extent of what God expects of us if we hold on to a form of Christianity that is blocked at the border by the refusal of a visa. English teachers can go into China, though no missionary would be allowed into the country as a professional missionary. Christians must seek international jobs in order to internationally take the gospel to every creature of the world.

These are times when world evangelists must thoroughly understand the nature of the Christianity which they believe. I cannot see the early Christians going into all the world with the baggage we seem to believe is necessary for preaching the gospel today. We must remember that for three hundred years no evangelist went into all the world with building blueprints in his hand, ready to build a church building on 5th and Main. I do not think the early Christians went into all the world with all the Sunday morning concert glamour that is often characteristic of large assemblies of believers in these days.

Unless we can send vocational Christians throughout the world who know how to start and maintain small Bible study groups and worship in their homes, we will continually be blocked from many nations of the world. We must develop strategies of sending out people who can go quietly from house to house. This was the manner by which the church grew in the first century. We are moving into a new world order wherein house to house evangelism and church establishment is how we must grow in the twenty-first century. In order to be successful in world evangelism, therefore, those who go forth must either be born out of a house church environment or be trained in the dynamics of meeting in small groups in homes. In those nations where there is great resistance to Christianity, our evangelists must be skilled in functioning quietly, if not secretly, in the homes of the members. In a world where the tension between Islam and Christianity is rising, I see no other answer for the evangelization of Islamic nations.

Chapter 11

THE NATURE OF A HOUSE CHURCH

The twentieth century closed out with a revolution in the assemblies among many larger single-assembly churches. It was a revolution in realizing that in order to grow larger, large single-assembly churches had to go smaller. As a result, many single-assembly churches started small groups during the week that were focused on different problem areas of society. There were groups that focused on alcoholics, the divorced, the premarital pregnant, drug users, and just groups for members of the large single-assembly churches to enjoy a closer fellowship with one another. These churches started to grow because the members discovered one another. They discovered a closer fellowship, and thus, their emphasis turned from the large assembly on Sunday to the small groups that were meeting in homes throughout the community. This was the beginning of the restoration to house churches. This movement has now grown to maturity with a restoration to relational Christianity that is full of good works.

What was discovered by many in the small group meetings was a first century practice of the early church. It was a rewarding discovery, and one that rejuvenated many stagnant large single-assembly churches. This discovery also drove people to reinvestigate the assembly culture of the early church. Out of this reinvestigation, the house, or cell church was born and is now booming as people seek to assemble together in their homes, and then multiply to other homes throughout their communities.

A. Reaching out to one another:

The term "house church" is often used to identify small groups of believers meeting in their homes. I like the phrase because of the many statements in the New Testament where it is said that Christians met in the house of a member. Some have referred to these assemblies of Christians as "cell churches." Though there is no difference in the definition of the terms, everyone who is working with house churches agrees on the fact that well run groups produce great relationships and good works.

Most people who have been single-assembly, church-building oriented usually misunderstand the nature of house churches. Their misunderstanding is often the result of prejudice against what they believe is a digression from that which is commonly accepted as church. "Let's go to church," "Down at the church building," and "church house" are all terminologies that betray our misunderstanding of the permeating nature of Christianity that should affect the communities in which Christians live. Since we often do not understand the true nature of "church", we will often not understand the nature of New Testament Christianity that is developed through assemblies that meet in small groups in the neighborhoods of the members. We thus "go to church" outside our communities in

House Churches Are More Than Assemblies In Houses.

order to meet in the "church building" wherein we conduct "church."

A house church would not be defined simply by the fact that a group of Christians meet in the house of one of the members of the church. **House churches are not just another system of assembly**. They are the effort of Christians to restore relational Christianity as it was in the first century. Meeting in a house is only the physical location of where a small group of Christians meet out of necessity or out of a desire to keep "church" in the neighborhood. Simply meeting in a house does not define the dynamic that is developed in fellowship and the work that is maintained in a home assembly environment.

The definition of a house church would center primarily on the relational atmosphere of the members of a group who seek to work together in carrying out good works in their community. It is an effort of members to work together to meet the needs of those around whom they live. And in restoring a close relational fellowship and work, it is the desire of the members of the church to bring into their fellowship those of their immediate community.

The dynamic of house churches goes beyond the individual group. Because of the smallness of the group in its fellowship/relationship with other house churches in any given area, individual house churches focus on the dynamic of small group fellowships in order to enhance the growth and fellowship of the greater regional church. They do this through their evangelism of communities. Simply because a group of members of the church meets in a particular house of a community does not mean that the group is not a part of the church as a whole in a region. When one is looking at house churches from the viewpoint of a single-assembly church mentality, it is often a mistaken view to see house churches as small divisions of Christians who have divided themselves from one another. This is far from the nature of the church as the body of Christ, as well as the dynamic fellowship house church members seek to establish with one another. Though small groups of house church members meet in their local communities in order to offer convenience to those they seek to evangelize, they seek to remain a part of the whole.

I would say that the very opposite of division among house churches is the case. Because of their meeting in small groups, house church members crave meeting with other Christians in other areas. And thus opportunities are arranged where house churches in regions can come together for celebration assemblies. (More on this later.)

Many single-assembly churches already have a building and are carrying on with a fellowship of relationships. However, many of these churches have recognized that they must grow in their personal relationships with one another. They know that ten to fifteen minutes of informal encounters in a church building foyer is not enough time to establish deep and long lasting relationships. It is not enough time to discover individual needs. For this reason, many single-assembly churches have started cell groups which are often called house churches. This is a step in the right direction. These churches are not going to sell their buildings and move to the members' houses for their assemblies. It is not necessary that they do this. They can keep the building, but grow in the New Testament concept of fellowship that God wants us to have with one another through small group meetings.

What I am discussing is not a proposal that we sell our buildings and move into our houses. What I am saying is that there is a goal of relational fellowship to which we must aspire. In order to reach this goal, we cannot depend on large single-assembly meetings in public buildings. The atmosphere of a home is where this goal is achieved. Therefore, in order to accomplish this goal, large single-assembly churches must seriously look at the concept of establishing small assemblies, in some way, in the homes of their members. They can use their buildings for community outreach assemblies, and their homes for the fellowship celebration of the church and Supper at the table of the Lord. In other words, use the building for evangelism to draw the community that is accustomed to church buildings, and their homes for the building of the body.

Those who have no church building need not fret themselves about getting to where God wants us to be because they have no building. As we reason through some thoughts concerning the New Testament church and fellowship, I hope to convince you that contrary to common belief, church buildings have absolutely nothing to do with the fellowship, organization, and function of the church. They have nothing to do with determining if a church is considered "local". In fact, I believe you will discover the same thing I have over the years. This is the discovery that a close relationship with one's brother or sister is best established in the close encounter environment of small groups in our homes.

Those who have no building actually have a head start in the restoration of relational Christianity and the revival of the spirit of love and good works. They have no attachment to a church building. They have no commitment to a pile of bricks and mortar in which they have invested a sizeable amount of money. They do not have the urge to "fill up this building" in order to justify the years of building payments they have made to something that never brought what they expected it to bring. They can simply move on without having to tear down the church-building syndrome which has burdened so many believers for so many years.

B. Reaching out to God through one another:

A house church is a small group of Christians who seek to establish a closer relationship with one another, and thus, better understand the relationship they are to have with God. He who "does not love his brother" cannot say he loves God. And thus, house church members grow in their relationship with God because they better understand the loving relationships that they establish with one another. Their relationship with Jesus is enhanced by their growth in love for one another.

The next step in this growth is natural. When one grows in a greater relationship with Jesus, he or she is naturally driven to grow in a greater relationship with his or her fellow man. From this relationship comes doing good to all men (Gl 6:10). A house church that is void of good works is crippled. Simply getting to know one another at a deeper level is not enough. House churches that do not allow their relationships

A House Church Without Good Works Is Crippled And Sterile.

with one another and Jesus to be manifested in good works toward all men are sterile fellowships which shut out the world. **But it is an exciting phenom**enon that when people grow closer in

their relationships, they seek to manifest their love for one another through good works. When they grow in a closer relationship with Jesus, they seek to do the will of Jesus among all men.

Christianity is based on relationships. In fact, Christianity is relationships, relationships with others and with God. Our relationships with one another may take on different "forms", but the relationships are more important than the cultural forms that define them. When I moved to Brazil many years ago I could not speak Portuguese. I could not communicate in Portuguese with fellow brothers and sisters in Christ for

the first few months my wife and I lived in the country. However, I had a certain level or degree of relationship with Brazilian brothers, though it was often frustrating because I could not at first explain my feelings and thoughts. Nevertheless, I had a relationship regardless of my lack of ability to communicate verbally.



Church must first be defined as a relationship that is established between Christians because of the members' common obedience to the gospel (Jd 3). This relationship is something greater than friendships, something greater than blood relatives. As my Portuguese improved my communication with my Brazilian brothers developed. My relationships with the Brazilian brothers subsequently excelled. The same is true in a house church environment. As our communication with one another develops, the greater we develop in our relationships with one another. And when our relationships are great, then we interact with one another. When our relationship with our neighbors is great, then we interact with our neighbors. This is church. Church involves our behavioral relationships with others in order to allow the aroma of Christ in our lives to touch the lives of others. No hermit behaves as a Christian.

Though small groups enhance the immediate relationships of the members with one another, their opportunity to fellowship with the church at large is also enhanced. This is why house churches in any particular region seek to remain the one church of Christ in a city. Their desire to be with one another cancels any desire to be separated from one another. House church fellowships are usually misunderstood in this area of church interaction. A true house church fellowship seeks to work as a part of the one church in their region. Their small fellowship, whether out of choice or necessity, moves them to be a part of the whole.

C. Reaching out to the regional church:

We must not forget that the church in any city or region is the church, regardless of how, when or where the members must assemble. A church is not defined in the New Testament by the ability of the members to meet together in the same place and at the same hour on Sunday morning. This is one of the first erroneous concepts that must be corrected when discussing the meeting of the church in houses. I have found in personal discussions with others that if one can correct this concept of what constitutes a "local" church, the road is paved for objective discussions.

Where and how the church meets does not determine what a "local" congregation is. The phrase "local church" is never used in the New Testament. I have discovered, however, that people are so single-

assembly oriented, that it is difficult for them to understand that a "local" congregation has nothing to do with when and where Christians assemble. Add to this the fact that people are often so assembly-oriented that they have a difficult time understanding that assemblies do not define Christianity. Neither buildings nor assemblies define the true nature of the church or what a Christian is.

Church is first defined by understanding that Jesus is the head and king of all members of His body throughout the world who have submitted to His headship and kingship (Ep 5:23; Cl 1:18). He is the head of the one church of Christ. When one is immersed into Christ, his or her membership is placed in heaven, not on the register of some church office on earth.

When the New Testament speaks of Jesus as the head of the church, the definition of "church" is not broken down into individual assemblies of the saints who meet at specific locations at the same hour on Sunday morning. The church is first identified as universal. Jesus is the universal head of the church. He is the universal king of all those who have allowed Him to reign in their hearts (Lk 17:20,21). He is the head of the body, and the body is not to be dissected into parts and parcels.

When these points are discussed, there is often a scramble for some New Testament proof text that supports autonomous churches. The fact is that we have taken church autonomy to the level of denominationalizing the church into autonomous bodies that have little or nothing to do with one another. Churches are often defined as autono-

Jesus Is The Head Of The One Universal Church. mous insofar as we define elderships who work as a board of directors over each particular church-building assembly. Some elderships seek to maintain a realm of reign in an effort to control the sheep who are

huddled together on Sunday morning in a particular location. But is this what we see in the New Testament?

Regardless of where we are in belief and practice, we must still allow the word of God to define our "autonomy" or "unity" as the one church of Christ. It may be that our lack of emphasis on the universal nature of the New Testament church has made it possible for us to develop something that is foreign to the New Testament. But regardless of where we are in our understanding of the universal church, we must challenge ourselves to continually investigate our thinking on these matters. Have we copied a denominated perspective of Christianity that has led us to accept as "doctrine" something that was never in the mind of God in reference to the nature of New Testament Christianity? Or, has the church of the restoration developed a divisive hermeneutic that has warped our understanding of the universal church? From a history of quibbles over so many insignificant issues, I believe we have hidden behind the concept of autonomy to denominationalize the church, and thus, we have developed for ourselves a doctrine of church autonomy that is foreign to the New Testament.

Allow me the opportunity to challenge you with something. It is impossible for the universal church throughout the world to meet together at the same place and same hour on Sunday morning. How could we ever have a single Sunday assembly of the church of members throughout the world? Nevertheless, the universal church is still the one united church of Christ throughout the world. It remains the one body regardless of where the members may assemble in their relationship with one another. Now to what extent do we want to denominate this church? Will we use the word "autonomous" as another word for denominational? (There will be more detail in answering this question in a later chapter.)

D. Reaching out as urban house churches:

This brings us to the second use of the term "church" in the New Testament. Not only does the word "church" refer to the universal community of God, the word also refers to the saints who are in entire cities. Paul reminded Titus of why he left him in Crete. He was left in order to set forth elders "*in every city*" (Ti 1:5). Paul and Barnabas traveled back to the newly established churches in Lystra, Iconium and Antioch and designated elders "*in every church*" (At 14:23). In reading these texts, we would naturally assume that elders were designated for the church in every city, and thus, we would justly conclude that there was one church in every city. There was one church to a city though the members surely assembled at different places at the same time in those cities.

The word "church" is also used in the New Testament in reference to a single group of members who meet in the home of a particular member in a city. Though it might be necessary for the members of the church in a city to meet in the homes of the members, this does not disconnect the members from one another as the one church in the city. The meetings of the members are not "autonomous" from one another simply because they do not have buildings and cars. They are not "autonomous" from one another if they choose to meet in their homes at the same hour on Sunday. They are still one church, though the members have to meet in homes for assemblies.

By the time Paul wrote the letter to Titus, I am sure that the church in Crete did not have its own building. I am pretty certain that they did not meet in a school building or civic center, since neither probably existed in Crete at the time the church was established. And, I am sure that there were more members of the church in Crete when Paul left Titus than could meet in one house. If there were thus two assemblies of the church in two different houses in the same city, then there were elders working with these two different assemblies of the church that met at two different locations in the same city. They were still the one church in a city. The shepherds were still the shepherds of the one flock of God that was meeting throughout the city in different homes. There is no difference from this situation and that which is occurring today in many cities of the world. There are Christians in the urban centers. There are shepherds working among the Christians. Where the Christians meet is not a relevant aspect of the issue in determining how the shepherds work among the sheep.

Chapter 12

THE FUNCTION OF MANY AS ONE

Because of transportation problems in Third World urban environments, it is almost impossible for a large group of Christians to assemble together in the same place. Churches that force the members to assemble in such a manner often force members into consuming much of their income for bus tickets or taxi fares in order to be faithful in attending the assemblies. What often happens, therefore, is that the members either meet infrequently or cease to meet at all.

When it becomes impossible for the members to physically meet together because of financial or logistical burdens that are placed on the members, then churches must consider other systems of meeting. The houses of the members is the other option. Those members of the church who are close together can assemble and maintain a close relationship with their community. I realize that this is often difficult to understand by those who live in First World environments. It is difficult to understand because it is easy to step outside one's house in the industrial/business world, turn on the ignition of a car, and drive a great distance to meet in a building. But this is not the way the other ninety-eight percent of the world lives. Getting from one place to another is very limiting. It is limiting to the point of affecting how churches in the Third World assemble. It is for this reason that Third World churches are usually smaller in their assemblies simply because everyone has to walk to the place of meeting.

A. Going small to go big:

If the church in a city can meet together in a single assembly,

this does not mean that the same church cannot also meet in the homes of the members. As previously stated, many large single-assembly congregations have discovered that in order to grow larger, they must go smaller. In other words, in or-



der to meet the spiritual and relational needs of the membership, the members of the church have often decided to meet in their homes on a regular basis throughout the week and on Sunday evenings. In this way, the close relationships that are so necessary for spiritual development can be carried out in the house church environment. Churches who can do this have both the blessing of a regular large single-assembly of members on a weekly basis, and also the warm environment of the house church away from the context of the large assembly. Keep in mind, however, that this is usually not a privilege in Third World environments.

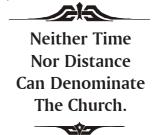
B. Staying in contact:

It is important that the members of house churches have "celebration assemblies." In areas of the world where the members cannot meet in large assemblies on a regular basis, the leaders have to use their ingenuity in how they can get all the house church members together on an occasional basis. In order to maintain our identity with one another as one church, many house churches in different cities have regular assemblies of all groups at a school hall or civic center. Such occasions keep individual members and house church groups in contact with one another.

If large single-assembly churches have only meetings of the entire congregation, they should be challenged to develop home meetings wherein members can establish better relationships with one another. We must establish large churches through the conversion of as many people as possible. But the members of large churches do not have to all meet together at the same place on Sunday morning. Unfortunately, we often judge a church as either large or small by the number of members who are able to be present during a single assembly. But this cannot be a measure of the size or strength of a church. The size of a church is determined by the number of members, not by the number of members who can assemble together in one place.

C. Being apart, but staying together:

Many single-assembly churches have come to the conclusion that they have grown too large to meet together at the same time at the same location. In the same building, they have gone to two, and sometimes three assemblies. However, these groups meet at different hours in



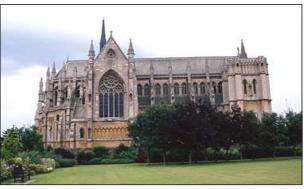
the same building. Now are they still the same church? Certainly. Do they still have the same elders? Or, have the elders also divided, one group for the first assembly, and another for the second? Certainly not. The church in a city that meets at **different places** on Sunday morning is still one church.

Now why do we often consider two groups of Christians meeting together at the same place **fifteen minutes apart** as the same congregation, while at the same time consider two groups meeting at different places **fifteen feet apart** as two different "autonomous" congregations? Why does **distance**, and not **time**, determine that we have two "local" autonomous churches? Have we become more denominational in our thinking and theology than we want to confess?

I was once approached by one of the leading members of a single-assembly church in a South African city concerning the church where he meets. At the time he approached me, the assembly was too large for the building in which they were meeting. Neither he, the elders, nor the other members knew what to do. They had simply outgrown their building. Now the building was in a large metropolitan area of a South African city. You would suppose that this church could just simply divide up, buy another plot of land, and erect another church building, thus having two "autonomous" churches in the one city. But that was not possible. First, they did not want to "divide" and become two. They wanted to remain one church with the same elders. Second, they could not possibly afford to build another building. The inflated cost of building church buildings in urban centers of Third, or Second World economies is almost prohibitive. Even if it could be done, it is prohibitive in the sense that growing churches often do not want to put all their contribution into brick and mortar. This church had grown because they were putting their money into evangelism. So are they to stop their evangelism because they want to strap on a building payment that will be paid off by their grandchildren? Now then, what is this church to do?

D. Functioning as one:

My point here is that in Third World environments – and possibly Western environments – we do not have the privilege of indigenously building our own large meeting halls in urban centers. Therefore, why have the buildings at all if the members



To what extent must we build?

have houses in which they are presently living? If you will allow us this privilege, we will simply go to more than one or two or three assemblies of the same church. In fact, we would like to go to ten, twenty or thirty assemblies of the same church in different homes of the members in a community. Now if you will allow us to do this, we are fine. We would also ask one more favor. We will not meet in the same house. Instead of throwing our money into mortar pits, we will meet in many buildings



(houses). We will even have our assemblies at the same time on Sunday morning. Though we must meet at different places, we will remain the same church. We will retain our elders and deacons. And, we will move them among the many members and

houses ("assemblies") in order that they fulfill their teaching ministry as shepherds of the flock. And, we will also move the evangelists among the house assemblies, but primarily, we will keep the evangelists among the lost where God intended them to be.

The preceding multiple-assembly church can also meet together in a single assembly. However, the common city-wide meeting together of the multiple-assembly church can happen only on an occasional basis because of transportation problems. Therefore, the only difference between the large single-assembly church and the multiple-assembly church is the frequency by which all the members of the multiple-assembly church meet together in one place. In the industrial/business world it can be done on a weekly basis. In the Third World, it can be done only on a periodic basis. The only difference between the two churches is how frequently all the members meet together at the same time and at the same location on Sunday morning. But remember, this is not a fundamental doctrinal matter. Neither is it a New Testament definition of a "local" congregation.

Simply because the church in any city is not able to meet together at the same time and place does not mean that it has broken up into separate churches. The ability of the church to assemble in whatever circumstances is never used in the New Testament to define a "local congregation." We must be careful about using the defined terminology of where we are now in our thinking to define the nature of the church, both in the first century and the twenty-first century.

It is our goal to become "big." However, we will not judge our "bigness" by the number of people we can see in one assembly on Sunday morning in a particular building. Therefore, do not assume that this book is about large churches that are autonomous from one another, which is often the situation with the European and Western style of church meetings. On the contrary, this is an investigation of a New Testament dynamic by which the first century church grew into large churches by the assembling of the Christians in the homes of the members throughout communities, cities and regions. This is an apologetic (defense) for the function of the church of the New Testament. If we can understand the nature of this first century church, then we can formulate some answers for making the church relevant to this postmodern world in which we live. We can do this because we correctly assume that God made the church relevant for all men throughout history.

The relational fellowship of Christians in house churches does challenge those churches who have only large assemblies. There is a dynamic in the small assembly of Christians that restores what I believe God intended to be the nature of the fellowship of His community of people. When this small assembly steps from the warm environment of a home into a public assembly hall, something changes. Something is lost that can never be restored. Every person who first started a church of Christians in a home, and then, moved to a large public building, knows what I am saying. If you know what I am saying, then you will understand that something was lost that must be restored. My point is that what was lost can never be restored in a large assembly context in a public building, whether owned, borrowed or rented.

If you have never had the privilege of meeting in a home in close fellowship with fellow Christians, then the dynamic to which I am referring will be foreign to you. You have probably come from a large singleassembly church, and thus, do not understand the dynamic of the small house church group. However, I would assume that you feel that something is lacking in your single assembly-oriented Christianity because something is lacking in your relationship with other fellow Christians. I pray that I am challenging your thinking in a religious world that seems to have lost contact with the world. Those who are in darkness are seeking relationships. As the community of God, we must restore an environment in which relationships can be established and matured. When this environment is restored, then there is something into which the lonely of the world can come and find family.

On one particular occasion I had a visitor in my home who had come from a large single-assembly church. He asked on Sunday morning when we were preparing to attend a meeting of the saints in a house church, "When does 'church' start?" Without going into all the discussion concerning his erroneous statement about "church", – the church had already started, both in the first century and in my personal life when I was immersed into Christ – I kindly reminded him that in a house church environment, there is often no specific time when "church" starts. No one really cares. People just start showing up at the designated house of meeting. "Well, what time do we finish?", he responded. Again, I reminded him that we never "finish." Now this was really confusing him. And, if you are meeting in any kind of public hall, or church building, you would also have a difficult time understanding this discussion.

Everyone who is involved in house churches has found it very difficult to explain to non-house church people the nature of the fellowship that exists in a house church environment. For example, no one really ever leaves the "assembly" of a house church. There is no "closing." Assembly discussions continue without end, or at least, one's sense of worship does not come to an end. What may start at 9:00^{am}, may be considered "finished" when the last person goes home at 1:00^{pm}. Somewhere between 9:00^{am} and 1:00^{pm}, people come at staggered times, but really never want to leave. Can you handle this type of Christianity? In a house church environment, people do not want to go home. They do not want to leave one another. They just stay and talk and talk, plan and visit, love and celebrate. Sound like too much for you? Then possibly you have developed a religion after your own desires. It is for this reason that I would like to challenge you with what I believe is the true nature of New Testament Christianity that is developed and nurtured in our homes.

Chapter 13

DYNAMIC FELLOWSHIPS

We have often assumed that the reason why the church grew so rapidly after its establishment in Jerusalem was because of the receptivity of the people at the time. Three thousand were baptized on the very first day of its establishment (At 2:41). Thousands followed as the church began to expand from Jerusalem, to Judea, and then to all the world. There was certainly a great deal of receptivity. However, I would suggest that more than receptivity laid the foundation upon which the early church grew.

It is true that the early disciples believed a message that met the needs of the people. The message was more than a set of doctrinal rules. The message involved One with whom men and women could relate in a loving relationship. Jesus provided an example they could

follow in their relationships with one another. However, it takes more than believing a message to motivate one to be involved in the lives of others. The message can stimulate one's desires, but one's performance must match one's desires. What we want to do must be backed up by what we do. Our Christianity should be love in action.



A. Growth in the midst of hostility:

In conjunction with the power of the message, there were other influences that stimulated the growth of the early church that we must consider. First consider the fact that the world in which the church was born was not as receptive as we might assume. After all, Judaism was one of the most unreceptive religious cultures that the world has produced. Add to this the hostility of the idolatrous religions of the Roman Empire. Christianity encountered great hostility from idolatrous religions in Ephesus, Corinth, and a host of other places where Paul and the early evangelists preached the gospel. Though there was great hostility in many places where thousands obeyed the gospel, we must also not conclude that the church grew because of persecution. The Christian faith was made firm in the hearts of men and women because of persecution, but it also drove the faith underground. And it is difficult for underground faiths to spread to others.

We must also consider the hostility of the Roman State. From the middle of the first century, the church moved into the second century where persecution came from ungodly Caesars who used the Roman government as their personal instrument against Christians. Christianity was made an illegal religion. Christians were tortured, thrown to lions, and driven into hiding in many areas. This does not present an environment of receptivity or easy evangelism.

But here is a marvelous wonder. Regardless of the hostility and persecution of the church, she continued to grow in great numbers throughout the Roman Empire. Any serious historian would wonder why. The

first answer is obvious. The growth was in the convincing power of the gospel to bring one into a saving relationship with God (Rm 1:16). However, I would suggest that there was another reason for the rapid



growth of the early church. This reason lies in the fact that the first Christians developed a fellowship that took them through the hardest of times.

We live in a world today where there is little outward physical persecution. And yet, in many of our cities throughout the world the church is struggling. In some urban centers, the church has actually declined. Have we lost something the first century church had? And if we have, how do we restore it in our generation? As we consider the lack of growth in various urban cultures of the world, it may be that we have lost a dynamic in fellowship that spurred the early church on to a



phenomenal growth. If we have lost something that is vital to the salvation of souls through evangelization of the world, then it is imperative that we restore that which was lost.

B. Losing contact with one another:

When comparing the phenomenal growth of the church in the first century with the growth of the church in stagnant areas today, some want to say that the people were more receptive then than now. But as emphasized in the preceding point, I do not think this is necessarily true. I believe we have to some extent "lost our first love." Our decline in growth is not a matter of receptivity, but a matter of what we have done in weakening the fellowship of the church and our lack of desire to propagate this weak fellowship. We have little in our fellowship, and thus, have little impetus to reach out to others with what little we have. And what we have is nothing greater than the religions around us who often have a greater fellowship than we have.

I believe that one real reason for the growth of the first century church was the dynamic of the members' fellowship with one another that encouraged them to do good works and bring others into this dynamic. Could it be that many churches in the urban centers of our present century are not growing because of a loss of that first century fellowship which members had with one another? And because that close fellowship is lost, could it be that members are not encouraged to be involved in the lives of one another and the lives of the communities in which they live?

The dynamic in fellowship the early Christians had encouraged them to remain faithful and evangelistic in times of tremendous hostility.

If their dynamic in fellowship is the answer to evangelism, then it is imperative that we do what is necessary to restore this same nature of fellowship among the saints today. If we do, I am convinced that first century church growth will happen again.

C. A dynamic interpersonal fellowship:

The question that must now be answered is, How did the early believers maintain such a close relationship with one another? I believe it was in the nature of their contact with one another and the regularity by which they maintained that contact. I am specifically referring to the nature of their assembly with one another in small groups in an informal manner in the hospitable homes of the members. The members bonded with one another because their daily activities were centered around exalting Jesus and being with one another in business, sports, entertainment and family outings. Christianity touched every aspect of their lives as they joined together to be church everywhere and in everything.

Could it be that this dynamic and environment of fellowship was the key to their growth? But at the same time, could it be that our lack of this dynamic and fellowship is the cause of our non-growth in large urban centers today where we have little contact with one another? Could it be that their fellowship extended



We Must Restore Our First Love In Order To Have All Things In Common.

beyond assemblies and involved every aspect of their lives? I think so. I believe their assemblies moved them to bond with one another in every function of their lives. How else can we explain statements such as Acts 2:44, "All who believed were together and had all things in common", and Acts 4:34, "As many as were owners of land or houses sold them and brought the proceeds"? Having things in common as they did certainly assumed more in fellowship than occasional meetings with one another in large assemblies. In order to go to the extent of having all things in common as they did, I am assuming that their sharing

was maintained more by love than duty. It is true that we give to others out of duty. But I see in the first century church something more than duty. They had "all things in common" because they were in relationships with one another that moved them to make sure every individual was fellowshipped and every need was serviced.

In order to understand the extent of their "having all things in common", we must first go back two thousand years to the first century. I would like to challenge your thinking concerning the dynamic of the fellowship of the early Christians in their homes and their daily fellowship with one another. Ministry from house to house first began with Jesus. It was continued by the members of the early church in a manner that produced a strong sense of community in the family of God. So how do we get from where we are to where they were?

D. Dealing with our culture:

In order to get to where we need to be, we must deal with our urban culture, especially our Western urban culture. This is important because this culture has been exported throughout the world through art, theaters, movies, etc. It seems that Western culture has become the norm for much of the rest of the world which seeks to copy too many Western movie stars. I will confess that there are some good things in Western culture, but there are also some things you can leave out of your baggage on the way to the airport.

It is important to understand Western culture because it has in many ways influenced the way Christians behave with one another in urban settings. Western culture has affected the Western church, and the Western church has affected the rest of us. From a secular point of view, consider the thoughts of Margaret J. Wheatley, a physicist. Her award-winning, best-selling classic, *Leadership and the New Science*, has transformed the thinking of many businessmen and government officials in many parts of the world. She has simply discovered what God has been trying to tell all men for centuries. Wheatley thus identifies the problem of Western relationships in the following statement. Hang on to your chair as you read her evaluation of our failure to relate properly to one another. In Western culture she stated that "we don't know how to work together".^{7:164} She continued,

We have not yet learned how to be together. I believe we have been kept apart by three primary Western cultural beliefs: individualism, competition, and a mechanistic world view. Western culture, even as it continues to influence people everywhere, has not prepared us to work together in this new world of relationships. And we don't even know that we lack these skills [Emphasis mine, R.E.D.].^{7:164,165}



Get the point? In the Western church we are often ignorant of the nature of the close fellowships that God intended us to have with one another. Even if we come to a realization that we are further away from one another than God intended, we often do not know how to "get close."

Relational Skills Must Be Learned From God, Not From Western Culture. We lack relational skills. Our distant relationships and lack of cultural knowledge of how to solve relational problems have been exported throughout the world with a concept of Christianity that is legalistically ceremonial, and because it is such, it lends itself to being impersonal. It is assumed to be right because of a legal set of rules with a scripture behind every

point on a doctrinal outline. We have thus trained a generation of leaders throughout the world who know the right doctrine, but do not know Jesus by knowing one another. It is as one elder in Lusaka, Zambia said, "We have too many pamphlet preachers."

E. Revisiting our past:

Here are some things we need to learn from God. "A new

commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this will all men know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another" (Jn 13:34,35). "For this is the message



that you heard from the beginning, that we should love one another" (1 Jn 3:11). "We know that we have passed from death to life because we love the brethren. He who does not love abides in death" (1 Jn 3:14). "Beloved, if God so loved us, we ought also to love one another" (1 Jn 4:11). "If we love one another, God dwells in us and His love is perfected in us" (1 Jn 4:12). "God is love, and he who dwells in love dwells in God and God in him" (1 Jn 4:16).

The early church knew how to love. Their culture was conducive to expressions of a caring love for one another. Notice how the Thessalonians, who were less than a year old as Christians when Paul wrote the first letter to them, implemented the above description of love among themselves. "But concerning brotherly love, you have no

We Must Increase More And More In Brotherly Love. need that I write to you, for you yourselves are taught by God to love one another. And indeed you practice it toward all the brethren who are in all Macedonia. But we urge you, brethren, that you increase more and more" (1 Th 4:9,10).

The Thessalonian brethren had **practiced** love for one another. Their reputation of love had come to Paul who wrote from Corinth. But they also needed to increase their loving relationships with one another. Paul encouraged them to "increase more and more." We do have a love for one another. But this love must only be the seed from which a true revival in love must be started in the church. We must increase in love "more and more."

All churches have a certain "level" of love. However, they often do not have the life skills to get beyond where they are. They have a love that has reached a plateau. And, they have often contented themselves with where they are. They are stuck in a rut, bogged down in the mire of a cultural definition of distant relationships that keep them from one another. They are fighting against "increasing more and more" because their culture screams to them to be "individualistic", "competitive" and "mechanistic." Is this the type of church the Western world has formed? And as evangelists have gone out from this culture, is this the type of church we have established in urban centers throughout the world? We must restore the nature of brotherly love that was characteristic of the Thessalonian church. It was a love that knew no limits. It was a love that Paul wanted to be increased more and more.

F. Restorations in relationships:

I do not think we must dream up some magical method for urban evangelism. I think we need to look again at the nature of the church we are planting in urban centers throughout the world. The magic is not in the methods, but in the message and personal encounters Christians establish with one another as church. We must seek to "increase more and more" in our loving relationships with one another. A mediocre love is stale and dead. It is frustrating because we have enough sense to know that God wants us to have something better. Again, Wheatley stated that we "live in a universe where relationships are primary. Nothing happens in the quantum world without something encouraging something else. Nothing exists independent of its relationships."7:69 In other words, "This is a world of process, the process of connecting, where 'things' come into temporary existence because of relationship."7:69 "No one can hope to lead any organization by standing outside or ignoring the web of relationships through which all work is accomplished. Leaders are being called to step forward as helpmates, supported by our willingness to have them lead us" [Emphasis mine, R.E.D.) 7:165

When churches focus on building relationships, they then have something to export to their neighbors and to the rest of the world. It will take a restoration to dynamic fellowship in order to discover our "first love." This is what house churches are all about. As I said before, house churches are not another system of assembly. House churches are not just answers to a lack of finances and mobility. **They are an answer to Christian estrangement**. And unless we realize how far from one another urban culture has driven us, we will not feel a desire to come together again. One the other hand, have we become comfortable with our distant relationships to the point that we feel no longing for close relationships with others, especially our brothers and sisters in Christ? If we have, then the concept of meeting with one another in small groups can be very challenging.

Chapter 14

LEARNING THE SPIRIT OF BURDEN BEARING

One aspect of Christianity is found in the fact that individuals discover the needs of one another in an atmosphere of love. One disadvantage of the church that is confined solely to large assemblies once or twice a week is the fact that it is often difficult to discover the individual spiritual needs of each person in the audience. And since personal needs are usually not voluntarily revealed by the members, they are not served. This makes it difficult for the preacher of the group to meet the needs of the entire audience by giving a message that is indirectly applicable to everyone. Though one might faithfully attend all the assemblies, there are still unanswered questions. There are many biblical applications that must be made in order to satisfy the spiritual needs of so many.

The small house group presents a different environment. It presents an environment in which needs can be discovered. It is an environment in which there are opportunities for individual members to have their spiritual needs met on a weekly basis. Because of the small number who are in attendance, those who attend have the opportunity of having their needs identified and met with biblical teaching and love by fellow group members.

The small numbers of the individual house assembly also develop an environment in which individuals are more likely to ask questions about matters that are troubling them. They will ask questions in a small group, whereas in a large group many questions go unanswered because members are too timid to ask. However, when questions are asked in a small group, there is time for immediate reflection and discussion concerning the questions and answers. It is for this reason that both spiritual growth and intellectual knowledge of the Bible are developed at a faster pace in the small assembly environment.

We must keep in mind that church refers to people and their involvement in one another's lives. People have both spiritual and physical needs. House assemblies bring people together into an environment in which the needs of every member are identified and served. What house assemblies do is force us to study again the concept of fellowship in the New Testament, which fellowship means mutual involvement in one another's lives. Discovering true fellowship in a practical way encourages us to once again discover the nature of New Testament Christianity. Here are some of those important points that we must understand concerning the true nature of the church.

A. Discovering one another's burdens:

Paul wrote, "Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ" (Gl 6:2). If one does not learn how to bear the burdens

of his brother or sister, he does not fulfill the law of Christ. He does not understand the nature of the fellowship of the church. **Christianity is discovering the burdens of one's brother or sister in Christ in order to fulfill the law of Christ to love one another** (Jn 13:34,35). Once burdens are discovered,



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love moves one to bear the burdens of others. It is easy to hide in a large assembly and be ignorant of the burdens of others. If I do not know your burdens, then I think I can plead ignorance and innocence before God. Such is the "advantage" of the large single-assembly church.

In industrial/business urban centers where individuals financially excel, they become insular from those who are less financially privileged. The economically advantaged often distance themselves from the poor in order to protect their financial domain. Some rich folks seek to hide their money in order not to be obligated to help others. It is not wrong to become economically wealthy in a capitalistic environment.

House Assemblies Produce Burden Bearing. However, it is wrong that when the rich become Christians they estrange themselves from brothers and sisters who are in need. This is why Paul admonished the rich to be willing to share (1 Tm 6:17-19). The rich do not share when

they separate themselves from those with whom they should share. When Christianity is brought into the lives of the rich, they often seek to change Christianity to justify their cultural separation, rather than Christianity changing them to be sharing people.

The house assembly is an environment in which the spiritual and financial burdens of brothers and sisters are made known to everyone. In the small group assembly, each member must make a decision. The decision is to fulfill the law of Christ, for each individual has called himself or herself a Christian. And if I call myself a Christian, I must love my brother. "But whoever has this world's goods, and sees his brother

in need, and shuts up his heart from him, how does the love of God abide in him?" (1 Jn 3:17). And, "My little children, let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth. And by this we know that we are of the truth, and shall assure our hearts before Him" (1 Jn 3:18,19).



The Road To Understanding God Is Paved With Our Gifts.

Imagine being a member of a group that is seeking to bear one

another's burdens on a daily basis. You can now understand why there are those who are resistant to the sharing nature of Christianity that is natural to the house church environment. Few who are rich seek to be in such a close relationship with brothers and sisters who are truly hurting with burdens of this world. On the other hand, those who learn to truly fellowship with one another have a heart for sharing. They have discovered that true happiness comes from sharing (Jn 13:17). They have learned the secret of what Jesus said, "*It is more blessed to give than to receive*" (At 20:35). God is a giver and the more we give the better we understand God.

B. Dealing with one another's burdens:

Burden-bearing is more than caring for physical needs. It is training in how one is to take care of his own needs. Christianity is a behavioral relationship for the training of members to be responsible for one another and for themselves. If one's burden is self-inflicted, then that person must be discipled and disciplined to help himself. In this way, each member learns to have all things in common, just like the early Christians (At 2:44).

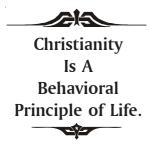
1. *Labor relationships:* The Thessalonian situation provides a good example of how we are to deal with some relationships in the church. When the Thessalonian church was first established, some "leading women" were converted (At 17:4). Among other things, these were **wealthy** women in the community. They were "leading women", not simply because they were of prominence, but because they were financially strong in the community. Their conversion to Christ presented an interesting opportunity for a test of rich Christians in the environment where others were not "leading" (wealthy) in the community.

Now imagine the vulnerability of these Christian women in the midst of some unscrupulous lazy members in the house assemblies of the Thessalonian church. Here would be the "leading" (wealthy) members in the same house church as the lazy members. In the case of the Thessalonian church, there were some wealthy Christians who were in the same church with some brethren who had quit their jobs. When Paul wrote the second Thessalonian letter to the church in Thessalonica, there were some in the church who had decided to live off the wealth of others. They begged from the rich sisters of the church. Imagine showing up for every meeting of the small group of a particular house church and having a brother ask you for help.

In order to correct the above problem, Paul wrote a rebuking chapter in 2 Thessalonians to those who had quit their jobs. In 2 Thessalonians 3:6 Paul said that the brethren who had quit their jobs were walking "disorderly." The word "disorderly" is a military term which means to walk out of step. These brethren who had quit their jobs were walking out of order. The order was that they work to support themselves. But they had quit their jobs. Paul commanded the rest of the church to withdraw from them because of their disorderliness. "*Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you withdraw yourselves from every brother who walks disorderly and not after the tradition that he received from us*" (2 Th 3:6).

The tradition that Paul had established in Thessalonica and other churches is explained in 2 Thessalonians 3:7,8. *"For you yourselves know how you ought to follow us, for we did not behave ourselves disorderly among you, nor did we eat any man's bread without paying for it, but worked with labor and hardship night and day so that we might not be a burden to any of you."*

In the context of the problem that developed in the Thessalonian church, Paul established the principle that if one will not work with his



own hands when there is work to be done, then the church has no obligation to feed him. He wrote, "For even when we were with you we commanded you this, that if anyone is not willing to work, neither let him eat." (2 Th 3:10). If one can work, and there is work available, then the church is not obligated to feed the lazy. This is because Christianity involves individuals helping one another to learn how to work. Christianity is not simply a doctrinal system of rules. It is a behavioral principle of life. When one becomes a Christian, he or she comes into a community of responsibility. As a Christian one is responsible for providing for his own necessities of life. If one needs training to do this, then there are those who can bear this burden. One can be trained to work. But if he is not willing to be either trained or he does not seek to secure a job, then the church is not obligated to feed him. He is lazy and must be disfellowshipped from the church.

Now consider the actions of Demas. When Demas forsook Paul in Rome, where did he go? Paul said he loved this world. He was worldly. His worldliness led him straight to Thessalonica. "*Demas has forsaken me, having loved this present world, and has departed to Thessalonica* ..." (2 Tm 4:10). Demas probably went back to those rich sisters in Thessalonica.

House churches present the environment wherein the lazy can be rebuked, corrected and helped. If they refuse to accept the responsibility of working with their own hands (2 Th 3:12), then they need to be corrected and trained. If they refuse correction, training and employment in working with their own hands, and thus walk disorderly, then they are to be disfellowshipped from the group. House church groups, therefore, present an environment in which members must learn how to be responsible members of society.

2. *Economical relationships:* The ability of the rich and poor to meet in one house is illustrated by the assembly in the house of Philemon (Pl 1,2). Philemon was a slave owner. One of his slaves, Onesimus, had run away as a slave to Rome. In Rome he was converted by Paul. The letter of Philemon was written by Paul and sent back with Onesimus, whom Paul instructed to return to Philemon. It was Paul's request that Philemon receive Onesimus back as a brother in Christ. According to Roman law, Onesimus had to return to Philemon. Whether he returned to continue as a slave or a freed man, we do not know. However, it is

safe to assume that he did return to the house of Philemon. Before he had left Philemon's house, he was one of the slaves of Philemon's house-hold church, and thus possibly knew Paul. On his return, we would assume he returned to the house church of Philemon. It was still the rich meeting with the poor.

Now imagine for a moment the nature of true Christianity that enables a slave owner and his slave to be a part of the same house church. Though Onesimus' situation possibly changed when he returned to the house of Philemon, before he left for Rome he was Philemon's slave. Upon return he was a brother in Christ, but surely a member of the same group with which Philemon met. The community of true Christianity is certainly a refreshing oasis we desire in the midst of a troubled world.

C. Serving one another's spiritual needs:

In the same context of Galatians 6 where Paul gave the instructions to bear one another's burdens, he said, "Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness, considering yourself lest you also be tempted" (Gl 6:1). This is the work of the church. I know of one house church that took this responsibility very seriously. When they had their meetings, if someone was not present, they immediately phoned that person in order to determine what the problem was. If there were a problem, immediate action was taken to solve it.

One of the advantages of a small group of Christians meeting together in a home is the ability to immediately identify problems. John

wrote, "If anyone sees his brother committing a sin not leading to death, he will ask and He will give to him life for those who do not commit sin unto death" (1 Jn 5:16). In the close fellowship that is developed by small assemblies one can quickly "see" (identify) those who sin.

In Order To Relieve Needs We Must See Needs.

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It is the nature of the church that we are responsible for one another in the spiritual realm. It is the nature of the house church environment to quickly identify areas of responsibility, and then immediately act. This is love in action on a daily basis. Truly, it is a great experience.

In view of the above, one of the great advantages of the house church environment for the leaders is that **they are responsible only for the house church where they attend**. Responsibility takes time. This can be a challenge for those who lead in the church, and who also work long hours at jobs in order to support their families. Those who have dedicated themselves to care for others have jobs and families, and thus have no more time for burden-bearing than anyone else. But in the house church arrangement, they are responsible only for those who meet in their house.

D. Contributing to one another's needs:

It is for the preceding reasons that house church members are stimulated to be great givers. In the early church the members of the church had all things in common (At 2:44,45; 4:32-37). The physical



needs of members were taken care of immediately. The rich could not hide behind the collection plate with an anonymous contribution that was less than the widow's mite. When one is sitting across a room with a widow in a house church, needs are known

and met. When a financial catastrophe happens in the life of a group member, other members are there with a helping hand. It is almost impossible for sharing not to occur in a house assembly environment. Needs are known and fulfilled.

Recorded in 1 Corinthians 16:1-4 was a special contribution for a special need. The contribution was for the famine in Judea. In the Corinthian situation, this contribution was made during the Sunday meeting of the house churches. In this particular case in Corinth, their responsibility toward the need, or the making of the contribution, was to be terminated when Paul arrived in Corinth. He wanted the collection to be made before his arrival, "... so that there be no collections when I come" (1 Co 16:2).

After Paul arrived, their responsibility to make the contribution for this specific need was completed. They did not have to continue this contribution for this need after his arrival because Paul and others were taking their contribution on to Judea. The point is that contributions can be made to special needs, after which the church can decide to contribute to something else.

Instead of teaching the concept of a regular weekly contributions for generic needs, 1 Corinthians 16:1-4 is actually in the context of weekly contributions for specific needs. Regular contributions can be made for specific projects, such as the famine in the context of 1 Corinthians 16. After the funds have been collected for the proposed project, then the church has the option of terminating collections for that project in order to make a collection for something else. If churches desire to do this on a weekly basis, then they are doing what Paul urged the Corinthians to do. The weekly contribution, therefore, is for the purpose of fulfilling the needs of special projects.

House churches have discovered that contributions can be given for the individual needs of each particular house church, or a common collection for needs, or works which several house churches decide to work together to fulfill. Benevolent needs are met immediately. Corporate projects are worked



out with the cooperation of all groups working together as one church in making a common collection.

It has always been a surprise to members of house churches as to how much money is available for investment in the lives of people and evangelistic works. One experiences a great feeling by knowing that his or her contribution is going into what God wants us to do, rather than going to the construction of lavish buildings. I have not found a Christian yet who would rather make a building payment than a payment to the survival of a widow or orphan, or the preaching of the gospel to the lost. Building payments are particularly troublesome in Third World environments. Money is usually so scarce that all the extra money for contributions is totally consumed by making payments on some church building. There is something absurd about this that building-oriented Christians never seem to understand.

In small church groups, the greater percentage of contributions goes to those things to which Christians are to contribute, that is, evangelism and benevolence. This is particularly true in reference to benevolence. When benevolent needs arise, contributions usually follow immediately. There are a lot of funds available among house churches because there are no building payments and building funds.

I believe leaders need to reconsider their emphasis when they start putting pressure on churches to make it a goal to build a building. It often seems that some churches have a progressive physical goal of starting a church. They first start in a house, then progress to a school, on to a civic center, and then to be "fully established", they build their own building. Throughout this chronology of "growth", there is the diabolical "building fund" wherein funds are held up in order to accomplish a material goal. Having the dream "to own our own building" is not a spiritual goal.

Chapter 15

PERFORMANCE OUT OF RELATIONSHIPS

Dynamic leadership is organized around relationships. The power of an organization is in the relational participation of everyone who is involved in the organization. Relationships mean that people are networked together around a common goal. Interdependent relationships are the grease that makes organization run smoothly.

There is nothing wrong with organization on paper. However, organization without people orientation develops problems if we want to get members involved. It is difficult getting people involved in some churches because the organization of the people is not based on the dynamic of relational participation, but on the analytical genius of some planner. You know the scenario. Programs are established. Rosters are printed and distributed. Organizational planning from the top to the bot-



tom is regimented in order to muster all the "employees" (members) into some ministry. Organizational formulas and diagrams from the corporate board rooms of corporations are brought from the

business world into church organization with only the change of names. In all this organization, members are often intimidated to conform to the organizational plan. Permission must be granted before anyone does a good deed that would affect the designated work of another.

The corporate church often prides itself on its organization. And for the organization and implementation of works, these churches are doing the best job possible for the large single-assembly church. There are some great churches who are doing great works because of their organization. However, at the end of the day, organizing without relationships is a futile effort in people manipulation. It is an effort that always falls short of nurturing individuals to perform their best. We must always keep in mind that relationship encounters encourage people to do their best. Organizational planning on a piece of paper will make us efficient, but it often conceals development in one's personal relational skills.

The fact is that power in a congregation is generated by interpersonal relationships among the members. Good leaders will learn how to facilitate relationships in order to accomplish the common goals of those who relate to one another. The Berlin Wall fell, not because of some organizational plot of a government to bring it down, but because a common goal to destroy it was generated in the lives of those it affected. When that power was ignited, the wall fell overnight. God has given us this power. When He came down and saw the united will of the people to build the tower of Babel, He said of mankind, "*Nothing will be withholden from them which they have determined to do*" (Gn 11:6). We can also build, but for the right reasons.

Now consider the scenario of the house church, especially the house church in the Third World environment. First of all, drop all the corporate organizational structure. This will never exist in the Third World church. Relationships are more important than corporate structure. Since the Third World focuses first on relationships, rather than the structure of a corporate plan, people are driven by community. Working with the flow of social individuals is more productive than conforming to a structured outline on a piece of paper.

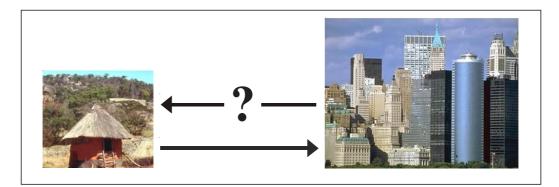
Add to the preceding the fact that the Third World is not as material-oriented as the Western world. If we define "civilization" as relationships between people, then having things and activities in one's life that is characteristic of the West is not necessarily a sign of civilization. According to what the West would define as "Third World", the vast majority of the world is Third World. It is Third World because of the lack of development, possessions and a program of human activities in which we involve ourselves to be entertained. If this is civilization, then I suppose the Third World will be the Third World for many years to come.

The Third World does not function as the West. The fact is that the Third World often does not want to function as the industrial/business world which is driven to sacrificing relationships in order to possess wealth and own a garage full of possessions. This advantage of the Third World takes possessions out of the way when establishing relationships. When I am poor, I have nothing by which to compare my situation in life with you, and thus have no occasion to exalt myself above you. We thus have all things in common, a relationship wherein I am not trying to keep up with my neighbors.

Why should relationships be sacrificed for corporate order, material prosperity, and competition in relation to possessions? Third World inhabitants simply understand that there are higher priorities in life than material prosperity and organizational structure that regiments lives into conformity to a prescribed plan or defined lifestyle. Therefore, the Third World marches to a different beat of a different drum. This does not mean that residents in poorer countries of the world do not want to advance in development, especially in food production and medical care. It simply means that the poor have a different perspective of life than the materially advantaged. And that perspective of life lends them to be focused more on human relationships than material possession and use.

It may be that these thoughts would in fact enhance the church of the First World. In other words, instead of the Third World patterning itself after the organizational structure of the Western church, maybe it should be the other way around. The Western church should look to Third World churches in order to restore community in church function. In view of the estrangement of members from one another that has happened in so many urban churches, maybe it is time that the insular urban church takes another look at what church should be.

However, this is not just a Western church problem. It is also a problem in the difference between urban and rural churches within Third World countries. The breakdown is in establishing churches first in urban centers, and then, expecting the members of the urban church to establish the church in rural areas.



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The problem comes when the urban evangelist seeks to impose urban thinking on rural people in a Third World setting. It does not work well, and thus, few urban churches in Africa have been successful in sending born and bred urbanites to the rural villages to establish churches. What has usually happened was that rural leaders went to the city to receive training. If the urban life did not forever steal them away from their rural heritage, they returned home and established the church.

House assemblies in urban centers are an effort to bring back into the lives of members fellowship that is based on relationships. They are an effort to break down urban separation in order to re-establish the relational foundations of human contact that are present in rural cultures.

Consider the environment of the house church in relation to fulfilling the needs of members. In a small group environment no one needs to get permission to serve. In fact, any organizational situation that is set up wherein members have to get permission to do that which they must do as individual Christians has to be flawed. It is flawed because Jesus must be allowed to work freely and spontaneously in one's life.

We need communication in relationships, not permission to serve. Communication among members is necessary in order to make sure needs are being fulfilled and that service is not unnecessarily doubled. However, permission to serve is sometimes foreign to the personal responsibility of Christians to do spontaneously that which is good toward all men. Paul said, "... as we have opportunity ..." (Gl 6:10). In other words, when an opportunity for personal service makes itself available, Christians do not have to run for permission to serve. When one functions in a close relationship with others, opportunities make themselves known. Action takes place. Doing that which is good just happens when people are relating with one another.

Service out of spontaneity is the greatest stimulation to personal growth. When members have the freedom to serve the needs they encounter on a daily basis, there is personal growth. One begins being Christian when servanthood becomes the behavior of one's life. We need no plan or organization to be church. When members are encouraged to serve every day of their lives, and rejoice with a group on Sunday who are doing the same, then the spiritual health of the body of Christ begins to develop into a dynamic fellowship.



Societies that are conducive to community communication produce churches that communicate. Churches should be structured after a culture that is in constant communication. Because they are in constant communication, they are able to service immediately the needs of the members. Also, needs that make themselves known in the communities in which the members of the church live are serviced. House church members do not have to show up at a business meeting in order to find something to do. Every group meeting of the church is an opportunity "to provoke one another unto love and good works" (Hb 10:24). The magic of small group service is not in highly organized programs, but in serving "on the spot." The freedom of house church members is that giving is not confined to the "collection" on Sunday morning, but to the needs of their neighbors in their communities in which they live on a daily basis.

Herein lies the greatest dynamic of the house church. Members learn to serve immediately those around whom they live. They do not drive off to an assembly that is a great distance from where they live. They live and function among those in their community. They give among those in their community. They pray and fast for their neighbors. They meet among their neighbors. They invite their neighbors to walk to their house on Sundays for prayers in order that their neighbors have the opportunity to be stirred unto love and good works. There needs to be no organizational program to function as church in this manner.

When churches have to develop programs in order to get people doing something, the people are usually motivated by the program and not by their peers. A close and loving relationship is much more effective in stirring one unto love and good works, than intimidating one to conform to deadlines and duties on a chart. Programs should only be the result of highly motivated people who are already working, but want to work together in a greater unified effort. Being Christian in our communities must not take a program to move us into action. If a program is needed to generate activity, then something is wrong with our relationships with the needs of others.

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I have found that excited Christians simply get to work. When Jesus is living in one's heart, no motivation is needed to get the job done. When one is excited about serving others, he or she will get to work. The answer to lethargy, therefore, is not another program. The answer lies in getting the love of Jesus within one's heart.

Chapter 16

STIRRING UP LOVE AND GOOD WORKS

Hebrews 10:24,25 has always been one of those passages that is frequently quoted, but frequently misunderstood. We often miss the full impact of the concept of this passage in reference to the responsibility that Christians have toward one another. Hebrews 10:25 has historically been used by preachers to Bible-beat members into showing up on Sunday in order that their number be counted. But is this what the Hebrew writer wanted to communicate? Let's look at it from a different perspective, the perspective of the early Christians meeting in their homes in order to spur one another on to a dedicated life in Christ.

Since attendance has often been established as a legal definition of "faithful", we have missed the point of Hebrews 10:25. Our preprogrammed thinking has made it difficult for us to understand the implications of what the Hebrew writer actually wanted to convey. Read carefully what is actually stated in the verse. Just as important, read carefully in order to understand what is **not** said. If we come to this passage without some preconceived interpretations, it is interesting to see what the writer has actually said, or **not** said.

And let us consider one another to stir up love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the habit of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the day approaching.

A. The "nots" of Hebrews 10:24,25:

First consider what is **not** stated in Hebrews 10:24,25. This passages does not discuss **when** the assembly is to take place. It does not discuss **where** to assemble. Neither does the writer discuss **how often** to assemble. It does not discuss **the time** of the assembly. It does not discuss any **order** of the assembly. And possibly most important of all, it does not discuss **how many of the members are to assemble** at the same time or in the same place in order to constitute an assembly of the church, or to accomplish the mandate of stirring one another up to love and good works.

It is easy to read into the passage all our preconceived ideas of what it should say. But we must remember that we cannot allow our preconceived ideas of past teaching or history to enter into our interpretation. Neither should we allow our present religious behavior to make the passage say what it does not say. We must simply take it for what it says. The old brother was right when he said, "It means what it says and says what it means."

B. The "do's" of Hebrews 10:24,25:

Now here are some points to consider concerning what Hebrews 10:24,25 does say. These are actions that house churches try to reestablish in the lives of each individual member.

1. Consider one another: Hebrews 10:24 says that as Chris-

tians we have a responsibility to "consider one another." Therefore, we must understand that Christianity is carried out in a "one another" relationship between members of the church. Christianity is relationships. If there are no "one another" relationships established among members of the church, then there is no church. Church means one another relationships. The



organization, programs, meetings, work and every other aspect of church must accomplish the goal of establishing "one another" relationships among the members. The principle of Hebrews 10:24,25 is that assemblies are to be used as the occasion for the members to build and carry out their "one another" relationship responsibilities. We must come together into some type of atmosphere wherein members can "consider" each other.

We must make contact with one another before we can consider one another. The notion that one can be a member of the body of Christ without fulfilling his or her responsibility to consider others of the body is absolutely erroneous. One cannot consider his brother or sister from a distance. There must be a regular contact with one's brother in Christ in order to fulfill the responsibility that is enjoined in Hebrews 10:24,25 upon every member of the body.

2. *Stir up:* There must be stirring among members of the Lord's body. The easiest way is the laziest way. If there is no action, we usually digress to reaction, and then, distraction from what we are to be doing. Christians must encourage – provoke – one another into action to do the work of Jesus. The Hebrew writer here gives the purpose for establishing the "one another" relationships of the church. Two things must be accomplished. Two actions must be stirred up. The first refers to our obligation of mutual interaction between members of the body. Bonding must be developed in the body in order for the body to function as a unit. A united body must then be stirred up to do good works. A body that does not work is dead. And after some time, lifeless bodies develop a stench about them that repel the lost. Therefore, bodies that

do not bond or build, die a slow death.

a. Stir up love: This stirring refers to the bonding of the members. Christians do not love one another simply in word, but in deed and truth (1 Jn 3:18). There is certainly emotion involved in the love about which the Hebrew writer speaks. However, in the fellowship of the saved,

more than emotion is involved. Action is the definition of the *agape* love of the Christian toward God and toward one another (1 Jn 3:2). God so loved the world that He gave His Son (Jn 3:16). His love was defined by action. Jesus said that we must love one another as He loved us (Jn 13:34,35). Therefore, in the assemblies about which the Hebrew writer is speaking, there must be established an environment in which each Christian can exhort fellow Christians to manifest love in action toward one another. Each member of the body must be brought into a close relationship wherein he or she is given the opportunity to be exhorted to love, as well as the opportunity to carry out his or her love toward other members. Opportunities for love are to be identified. And then, love must go into action. If one forsakes this opportunity by forsaking assemblies wherein this takes place, then he or she has missed an opportunity to be loved and to love.

Now in the large assembly culture of the big church, our responsibility of stirring up love is usually relegated to the preacher's standing before the assembly with a passionate sermon. But this is not what is being discussed in Hebrews 10:24,25. Read the passage again. It states

One Another Assemblies Involve Membership Participation. "one another." It does not state "preacher and the others." It does not present the view of a speaker–audience environment. How can "one another" be carried out in a theater environment in which the audience passively sits and one individual carries out the responsibility of doing the "stirring"? The "stirring" of the passage is the responsibility of every member, brother and sister, not simply a preacher, an elder, a teacher or deacon. Hebrews 10:24,25 states that we must stir up one another. This means that in the nature of the assembly about which the Hebrew writer is speaking, there must be an occasion established in which members can stir up one another.

The above is precisely what is brought out in the Greek text of Acts 20:7 where many translations unfortunately state, "And upon the first day of the week, when the disciples came together to break bread, Paul preached unto them ..." (KJV). But the Greek word that is translated "preached" is the verb form of the word dialaleo. This is the word from which we originate the English word "dialogue". In other

words, Paul had dialogue, or discussions with the church when they assembled together. This is certainly the correct understanding of what took place during this "third floor" assembly. I find it hard to believe that Paul stood



up with a three-point outline and "preached" to a group of Christians who surely had a host of questions to ask him before he left for Jerusalem. Through such discussions (dialogue), Christians can encourage one another by challenging one another to focus on the word of God for answers.

House churches present an environment in which every member has the opportunity to carry out the responsibility of "stirring" fellow members to love through discussion. It is hard to hide one's spiritual and physical needs in a small assembly. Therefore, needs can be identified and love can be expressed to immediately fulfill those needs. The love of members can be stirred up when the needs of members are laid open before one another in a close relationship. This is the powerful dynamic of the house church. It is an environment wherein needs are made known and loving responses happen. It is true, the closer we draw to one another, the more we learn to love. Close relationships produce active partnerships.

b. Stir up good works: The second goal that must be accomplished in the assemblies about which Hebrews 10:24,25 speaks is that members must stir up **good works** in one another's lives. The members must therefore be brought into an assembly arrangement wherein there is mutual stirring of one another to identify, explain, claim and give accountability for the accomplishment of good works. This sounds like the traditional "men's business meeting." But not exactly. It is an assembly of the saints that is focused on the saints themselves. The Hebrew writer is explaining that every member of the body, both

men and women, young and old should be brought into an assembly environment wherein there is stirring up of good works. If we could combine the worship of our traditional assemblies with the



discussions of the traditional business meetings, then we would be getting close to the nature of the first century assemblies about which Hebrews 10:24,25 speaks.

If house churches do not develop an environment for good works, they stagnate and die. People must come together for a purpose. That purpose must be more than bonding with one another and singing songs and saying prayers. Christians can enjoy themselves, but they must enjoy themselves while involved in efforts to reach out to others. Pearse and Matthews warned that house groups have "not generally had the desired effect, mostly because they are sensed by their participants to be artificial communities with no concrete purpose beyond the 'bonding' process itself."^{1:31} It is for this reason that house churches must have "concrete purposes". "It may well be that the more meetings are directed towards common action, rather than just *being* together, the more commitment is generated." [Emphasis mine, R.E.D.].^{1:31,32}

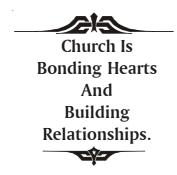
The body of Christ must be known for her good works. "Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all men, especially to those who are of the household of faith" (Gl 6:10). "But do not forget doing good and sharing, for with such sacrifices God is wellpleased" (Hb 13:16). "This is a trustworthy saying, and these things I want you to affirm confidently so that those who have believed in God might be careful to maintain good works" (Ti 3:8). In order for good works to be carried out in the lives of each member, works must be identified. The assembly about which Hebrews 10:24,25 is speaking, therefore, must be conducted in a manner by which good works are identified. (Again, this is something dif-



ferent than the speaker/audience environment which we want to read into this passage.) Good works must be identified and explained in order that members claim the works that must be done. When a good work is claimed by a member, accountability for accomplishing that work must also be made. The church must know if the need is fulfilled in order to move on to other good works.

The nature of the meeting about which the Hebrew writer is speaking is often foreign to the single-assembly "worship hour" to which the passage is often used to refer. This does not mean that Christians cannot use such assemblies for corporate worship of the church. It does mean, however, that the Hebrews 10:24,25 assembly must be more than a "worship assembly." Healthy churches provide regular assemblies of the members wherein the members can be stirred to love and good works. It might be added that if a church does not provide this opportunity, then it certainly is not following the mandate of Hebrews 10:24,25. Simply using the passage to get people to an assembly is a cheap cop-out to what the Hebrew writer was trying to say.

Now herein is the great advantage of the small church assembly that takes place every week. For an example, one house church leader related to me, "When we come together, if someone has a problem in paying bills, we make sure the bill is paid the following week. If a widow has a leaky faucet, it is fixed immediately." In the close fellowship of the house church, needs are immediately identified and immediately claimed and served. This is what the writer of Hebrews 10:24,25 is trying to convey to the members of the body of Christ. Works can be identified in small assemblies. Love can be activated because needs can be identified. c. Stir up a desire to assemble: Now then, there are some people who do not want the type of relationship that is produced by the preceding action of members toward one another. They want to duck and dive from their responsibility. To them, this type of an environment is too close and too demanding. They want to feel comfortable about being religious without the personal responsibility of having to deal with the problems of other people. They want loose bonding and little building. They want to sneak into large assemblies in order to hide on back seats, "perform" a prescribed amount of "acts of worship", and then scurry on their way to the closest restaurant for a Sunday afternoon



meal. They are perfectly comfortable to begin their "faithfulness" by an "opening prayer" and conclude it by a "closing prayer." After the "closing prayer", they like to scurry out the door, and vanish off into the wilderness of their own world. The unfortunate aspect of these beliefs and practices has been that the

leadership has accepted such as normal church behavior. As long as an attendance card has been filled out, everyone is happy.

House churches are different. It is because of this difference that many supposedly religious people do not like the environment of the small group assembly because they cannot hide in the crowds away from the needs of others. It is to these people that Hebrews 10:25 is directed. "*Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together*." When one does not want the type of "one another" responsibility with others that is identified with the nature of the true church in the New Testament, he or she will leave. If there is no desire for close bonding and works building, then there will be forsaking of the assembly. The nominal member will forsake the type of assembly that is identified in verse 24. Since this was a problem when the Hebrew writer first wrote, we can assume that the problem will prevail throughout the centuries as people come to understand that the fellowship of true Christianity is more than attendance at a religious assembly. Church is love and deed oriented; church is bonding and building. Anything else is simply a religious social club to which members show up in order to keep up their membership.

d. Stir up exhortation: Understanding the thoughts of Hebrews 10:24,25 should give us a flicker of understanding concerning the dynamic that is established in the small groups of members as they assemble together to bond and build on the mutual exhortation of

one another. This helps us understand the dynamic of the first century church. The house assembly forces us into the type of "one another" relationship and mutual activity that is explained in Hebrews 10:24. A relational dynamic is established in a small group of Christians that explodes into the community of the



house church. Mutual exhortation of one another produces an electric enthusiasm that permeates every individual of the group.

We are always amazed when we read of the explosion of growth of the first century church. We usually pass this off by saying that there was an unusual receptivity in those days. As stated previously, I question this reasoning. It is true that people were searching. But there are people who are always searching. In the midst of oppression and false religions, people are always searching for truth. In the first century, Judaism was one of the most stringent, traditional religions that the world has ever known. It still tends to be that way today in Palestine. But it was out of the environment of this religion that the church was born and grew. The phenomenal growth of the church was not in the receptivity of the people. It was in the message of the gospel that was sincerely believed by a fellowship of believers who learned something about a dynamic and empowering fellowship with one another. That fellowship drove them to be strong and evangelistic in an environment of great hostility.

The assemblies of the first century church weeded out the un-

committed. The closeness of their one another relationships produced assemblies that only the truly converted desired. And thus the converted and enthusiastic were bound together in weekly and daily assemblies wherein they energized one another by inner relational love and work definitions. Since enthusiasm is contagious, they infected one another with a holy heart burn that took them into all the world. They had more conversions because they had more commitment. They became excited about sowing the seed because they became excited about seeing the need for world evangelism. They marched out of their homes into a world at the tune of a vibrant chorus, "To the work, To the work"

The point is that when we experience close encounters of the same kind, individual potential is drawn from within each of us as we encounter one another. Hidden talents are discovered and implemented. The power of the individual is ignited, and then, the power of the one becomes a dynamic force when grouped with others. This is what members of house churches discover. What sincere Christian would not want to be a part of such a group?

Chapter 17

A SENSE OF BELONGING

When one is a member of a large single-assembly church, he or she finds it easy to become lost in the crowd. Certainly, there are those

who want to be hidden from personal attention while at the same time feeling comfortable with as little commitment and as little personal involvement as possible. But people who are truly committed to serving Jesus want



more than attendance at assemblies. People who seek God seek others. They want people involved in their lives and they want to get involved in

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the lives of others. Sincere Christians want to serve others.

One of the unfortunate side effects of the urban environment is that individuals are isolated from one another. We are alone in the midst of multitudes. And in our isolation from one another, we become lonely. When we are lonely, we become depressed. Some of the most depressed people in the world live in large urban centers of the world.

Now this brings us to the very core of the purpose of church, and what church should be and do in servicing the inner personal needs of every person. Since church is people, then people must learn how to interrelate with one another in an environment of struggle. Our interrelation with one another as individual members of the church must be founded on mutual trust and dependence. We must learn and practice a biblically defined social norm that God knows we must have in order to be true candidates for eternal cohabitation. And unless we learn and practice this biblically defined norm, we will remain as we are and the world will go unevangelized as we sit comfortably on our pews on Sunday morning. Here is how church works in developing candidates for heaven and evangelists for the world.

A. The need for confession:

If we are any type of social person, we will invariably say things we should not. We are human, and being human is manifested every time we cause offense. Offense is invariably caused by something we say. James wrote, "For in many things we all stumble. If anyone does not stumble in word, the same is a perfect man, able also to bridle the whole body" (Js 3:2). If one has offended another in word or action, and is conscious of his offense, the only way he can clear his conscience is to confess his wrong to the one he has offended (Mt 5:23,24; 18:15-17). If he does not do this, his relationship with the person he has offended will be damaged, if not broken. It is necessary, therefore, that in being the community of God we must establish occasions and environments wherein confession to God and one another can be carried out on a regular basis. Regardless of whether one meets in large or small assemblies of the church, environments must be established wherein individuals can approach one another with confession, for it is through confession that we gain a sense of belonging.

B. The confession of struggle:

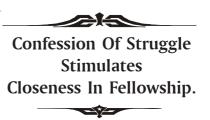
There is another aspect of confession that also must be implemented within the family of God. James wrote, "*Confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another* ..." (Js 5:16). Some translations read, "confess your faults" to one another. This may better express what James is trying to convey. When we use the word "sins" or "trespasses," we often think only of those things we have done against

one another in reference to the law of God, or sins directly against God. But I think James is referring to a broader field of burden bearing. When we are struggling with our jobs, with trying to be good par-

ents, or dealing with the unrighteous peer pressure of others, we need to confess our struggles with these situations in order that others help bear our burdens. James is dealing with more than the violation of law. He is dealing with our struggles of "missing the mark" in learning how to live with our fellow man. We need the help of others. And thus, we need others to whom we can confess our struggles in order to gain from them love, understanding and counsel. When we fail in our relationships with others, we need to confess to them our failures, and then move on.

C. The environment for confession:

Small group assemblies produce an environment wherein James' commandment in James 5:16 is fulfilled in the lives of members on a regular basis. Those who do not want to have this close relationship usually feel uncomfortable in such a setting, and thus leave the relation-





ships of such close encounters. But they are cheating themselves. The dynamic of the small group is developed in those who stay together and take advantage of the help of others. When those who stay have reached the closeness of relationship that a small group naturally develops, then it is easy to understand the

dynamic that is generated in the church by members continually confessing their struggles in life to one another. Confession helps us stir one another into loving action. It helps us to connect with one another in a way whereby we can better meet the struggles of life.

Church leaders must understand that new converts must first grow into the type of environment that encourages "confessing our struggles to one another." Those who come out of a very insular world will often find it difficult at first to join in the personal relationships that are established in house assembly dynamics. However, when their apprehensions are overcome, they will understand the necessity of having someone or a group to which they can communicate on a very personal basis.

D. The serendipity of confession:

Some have viewed the concept of confessing our struggles to one another from a negative perspective. They think such is debasing, humiliating and presents a situation for others to take control over one's self. But this is our insular Western culture speaking. What James is stating is the key to bonding and developing a secure character. When viewed from a positive perspective, mutual confession both in marriage

relationships and church fellowships promote mutual dependence on one another, and thus a sense of belonging to one another. When this relationship builds within a marriage or church as a group, bonding occurs. Love abounds. And who would want to forsake an opportunity to be loved? Who would want to



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forsake an opportunity to be helped, talked to, hugged, prayed for, and encouraged to hang in there?

Discipleship does not involve one over one, but one on one. When true discipleship takes place within the family of God, fellowship occurs as God would have it. And when this level of fellowship occurs among God's people, individuals are strengthened by one another's presence. This is the answer to attendance at the assemblies of the saints.

The first century church was dynamic because it was able to get past "Good-morning, how-are-you" relationships. Members were together in a relationship that allowed each person the privilege of confessing his or her struggles to one another and praying for one another. This concept of New Testament Christianity is often foreign to those who have for years practiced estrangement from one another in churches that required shallow personal encounters between members. It is strange to those who have felt that attendance at an assembly of the saints is the only requirement for "faithfulness". But if there is to be a paradigm shift from "estrangement Christianity" to relational Christianity, we must restore our mutual dependence on one another through mutual confession of struggles.

As brother/sister relationships in a physical blood family, there are always disagreements. However, after the disagreements, there is makeup and confession. Makeup and confession give every family member a mechanism for reconciliation and belonging. If confession never exists, then the family will break apart. So it is with the family of God that has been purchased with the blood of Jesus. Churches that have developed an atmosphere wherein confession freely exists, are churches with members who have a great sense of belonging. Churches who are confessing their struggles in life, are churches who have bonded hearts to face the trials of life.

Keep in mind that confession must be learned. This is especially true in cultures that greatly emphasize male pride, which is characteristic of about every culture of the world. It is also particularly difficult in Western cultures that encourage individualism and competitiveness. We feel that our individualism and competitiveness are under attack if we expose our inabilities to others. If we confess our faults, we feel that we lose an edge in our competition with our fellow man.



Western urban culture has a tremendous struggle in understanding and applying the mandate of James 5:16. What James commanded seems to go directly against the individualistic and competitive nature of the Western culture. Nevertheless, members of the Lord's body must learn how to move past pride, individualism and competitiveness in order to move closer to one another. We must learn to lean on one another by laying ourselves before one another in confession and prayer.

One house church leader once said to me, "When I come Sunday morning and my wife and I have had an argument during the week, we ask for the group to pray for us. After the prayer, and the help of the group, we then move on."

Does this sound too close? If it does, then maybe we do not understand the nature of the fellowship that should exist between brothers and sisters in Christ who are preparing themselves to live with one another forever in an eternal heaven. If we are to go brain dead in heaven or are turned into robots, then we will not have to learn how to be open with one another. Maybe heaven will have an urban culture and we can insulate ourselves from one another. Or, maybe heaven will be full of corners, one for each of us to go off and live on our own. But I do not think heaven will be this way. Therefore, it is imperative for the sons of God to learn how to confess to one another here on earth in order to be proper candidates for heavenly dwelling.

Herein is the serendipity of the house church. In house churches we are together in small groups. We learn to live in close contact with one another. We learn to be loving and forbearing. Paul wrote, "*Let your forbearance be known to all men*" (Ph 4:5). So where do we learn to be forbearing in our daily work with one another? The house church develops the loving atmosphere wherein individuals learn to be

forbearing with one another. People learn to work together with their faults, and thus people learn to work on their faults.

Keep in mind what we are trying to discover. We are trying to discover the dynamic in fellowship that drove the early church to be a mighty force that eventually won over the opposition of the Roman Empire. It was a force of change that swept across the world to the point that it was talked about everywhere (At 28:22). It turned the world upside down. If we truly want to restore this dynamic in the world today, then we need to get past believing that the first century world was somehow more receptive than the world today. We have used this excuse long enough. It is time to start looking at ourselves and not the world in which we live. The nature of the world has not changed for two thousand years. But the nature of the church has. I am calling for a paradigm shift to the nature of the early church. But in order to do this, we must take a serious and honest look at what church should be in the eyes of God and in the hearts of those who believe. If you are still with me in the reading of this book, I pray that I have challenged you to take an honest look at your own commitment to the will of God in restoring relational Christianity, and subsequently evangelistic Christianity.

Chapter 18

RESTORING RELATIONAL LEADERSHIP

The industrial revolution that began in the mid-eighteenth century has now had a little over two centuries to develop its own unique culture in the urban world. Now that we have moved into a new postmodern world, societies in urban centers are again being changed. They are being changed into a new and dynamic culture that will take urban societies into another century or two of human relationships. Since secular humanism has such a hold on Western culture, Christians better hang on to Jesus and His word in this new era into which we are rapidly moving.

However, there are some positive aspects about the postmodern culture The end of the twentieth century and beginning of the twentyfirst century have experienced the birth of a postmodern leadership that is team-oriented and functional in relationship building. No longer is dictatorial, autocratic and demanding leadership the norm of the leadership of the business and political world. Democracy has conquered dictatorial communism, and now we are moving into a new century where people want to make a choice. But in making choices, people must learn to work together.

Successful businesses operate on the principle of relationships that nurture the dissemination of information and cooperation between management and labor, which results in a team effort in the work place. Successful government is now viewed as a government that is skilled in conflict resolution. Instead of going to war, the democratic government movement of this century urges parties to the negotiating table. Dictators are viewed as relics of the past.

An assortment of managerial books have come out on the subject of relational leadership in the last two decades. All of these books seek to move societies closer to relational management in order to continue business and industrial development in a high tech world. The general advice of these books is that "all of us need to become better at listening, conversing, respecting one another's uniqueness, because these are essential for strong relationships."^{7:39} It is true that we are no longer in this new world disconnected from one another. We must connect in a world of relationships, not only in church, but also in the societies in which we live.

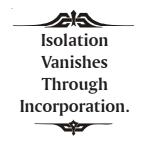
This is a perspective from the secular world of business, politics and the general culture of people as a whole. Because we live in this world as the church, we are a part of this quantum cultural process. A leadership that is successful in our world is one that is based on functional relationships. This is how the quantum flow of society functions. It is also the nature of leadership about which Jesus spoke two thousand years ago. "And whoever of you desires to be the first will be bondservant of all" (Mk 10:44).

When we discuss leadership in house churches, what Jesus said is

precisely what we seek to restore in our relationships among members of the body of Christ. Leadership is based on relationships, not positions of authority. House churches do not seek to be centered around a power figure, but around loving servants who have a genuine relationship with one another. But in order to have these relationships, we must "... become better at listening, conversing, respecting one another's uniqueness, because these are essential for strong relationships."^{7:29} When these skills are implemented, a dynamic relational power is unleashed as people learn the skills of functioning together in society.

And herein is the powerful dynamic of the house church. Individuals are brought together into a relational environment of communication and sharing by a small group of people. Every member of the church who has come out of a single-assembly church into the environment of a house church experiences this same phenomenon. They are truly overwhelmed by the dynamic relational atmosphere which empowers the

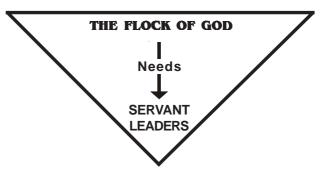
individual through group encouragement. In the house church, people are not just talking "at" one another. They are communicating with one another. The individual can become a part of the whole, and thus, experience the power of the whole. Isolation vanishes into incorporation. And as the group functions



together as one, individuals are empowered to dig up buried talents with which they can glorify God. As relationships are enhanced, the individual excels to his or her greatest potential.

This brings us to a discussion of church leadership and the general function of our leaders in the church of the industrial/business world.





Is our leadership relational, and thus, based on the process of interpersonal communication? Or, have we developed a boardroom leadership that slips decisions out under the door to the people they are supposed to be leading? Whatever we might evaluate the present leadership in the church to be, we must remember that church leadership must be based

on the word of God. Without this control over our leaders, we will certainly revert to an autocratic style of leadership that is not only contrary to Jesus' mandate in reference to servanthood leadership, but also out-of-touch

We Flee Dictators And Gravitate To Slaves.

with a newly educated generation of young minds who seek to determine their own destiny. It is for this reason that we must be cautious about the "structure" of our leadership in relation to those who are led.

Gregory Vlastos once said, "The distinctive thing about fellowship is its lesson of self-subordination."^{17:333} And so it is. It is easy to lord over a large group of people when one's leadership has digressed to handing down dictates. However, when one submits himself to a close fellowship with those in his house church, things are different. Dictatorial leaders have a very hard time in keeping people coming to their house. The great ones among us, therefore, are those who make themselves the slaves of all. We naturally flee the presence of dictators and gravitate to slaves for service. It is for this reason that the multipleassembly church weeds out leaders who do not dedicate themselves to the ministry of the saints (See 1 Co 16:15,16).

House churches must have relational leaders. If leaders cannot stand the smell of the sheep, then the sheep will not show up. The true test of a leader in the church, therefore, is if he can draw the sheep unto himself through service.

Church is the realization of true human contact. It is the community that God intended to exist for our preparation for eternal dwelling with one another. It is in this community, therefore, that examples for relationship building must exist. If it truly exists among our leaders, then we are on our way to true character building. The community fellowship that is produced in a small group is the foundation upon which leaders are born and developed. If you are transitioning from a single-assembly structure to a multiple-assembly fellowship of the church, you will have to wait for the surprise that will be coming in leadership. First generation leaders have to struggle to be relational leaders. However, those young people who grow up in house churches will have been truly discipled concerning the behavior of a leader of the church. They will have grown up at the feet of a godly leader sitting in a house, not on a distant front pew in an assembly of a mass of people. Second generation multipleassembly church leaders do not have a load of personal baggage they must discard in order to be relational leaders.

Chapter 19

CHURCH LOGISTICS

When we come to the subject of leadership working among the saints, we must review our concept of the function of leaders today with the function of leaders among members of a typical church in the first century whose members were scattered throughout a city. If there is a difference between now and then, we must make some necessary changes in order to restore a logistical function of the first century multiple-assembly church leadership. Once we see how elders functioned in the first century churches, we will be able to easily apply the same function today. However, as we survey through the function of first century shepherds, I believe many shepherds are so functioning today. I will challenge you to look at some things that might cause you to study again your concept of the house assembly of the church. But when it comes to the function of elders among the sheep, the church today is not much different in the function of elders than what was happening in the first century.

A. Reevaluating membership logistics:

We have always taught that elders must be designated in the church. This is certainly a New Testament teaching. However, the traditional view of what constitutes a "local" church has made it almost impossible for elders to be designated in most mission church situations. In a typical Western single-assembly church of one hundred members that would be considered a local church, there would possibly be two to three elders. However, this same setting of a one-hundred member church in a mission setting would be different in reference to the assembly of the saints. The members that would compose a one-hundred member multiple-assembly church would be meeting at different locations in an urban or rural area.

The average attendance of Sub-Saharan single-assembly churches in Africa in 2000 was sixty-two adults and children, which figure included about double the number of children found in the typical American church. At the same time, the average attendance in American churches was a little over one hundred. In the Western church, the members have an assortment of automobiles they use to accumulate the one-hundred-member single-assembly church. In the Third World or mission area, the automobiles are not there, and thus, the sixty-two adults and children have a difficult time getting together in a single assembly. Therefore, according to our traditional view of designating elders in a "local" single-assembly church, the Western church has the privilege of having elders because they are more mobile in getting more adult members together in one place. The Third World church must go without elders because they are immobile, and subsequently, will always meet in small groups.

This scenario makes us rethink the concept of what constitutes a local congregation. If a local congregation is defined by the number of members that can get together into one place on Sunday morning, then we have problems. Not only is this not a New Testament definition of a local church, it is not practical in real-world settings. As stated before, designating elders is not dependent on the ability of the members to meet together at the same place.

The fact that we have thousands of small single-assembly churches throughout the world who have not designated elders for decades should awaken us to the reality of what some Western interpreta-

tions have done in crippling churches. The Western interpretation of elders in their work with the sheep must be reexamined, first in view of what the New Testament actually states, or does not state, and then



in view of the practical situation of the world church, not just the Western world. (I must confess that when I moved into and worked with Third World churches over thirty years ago, my perspective of practical New Testament teachings has somewhat changed. The reason for this is that the Third World environment is much closer to the first century environment in reference to economics and mobility. My interpretations of Scripture, therefore, have become more practical to real-world settings.)

B. Revaluating church "territory":

God instituted that shepherds, (or, elders) should work among His flock. They should see after the flock in order to care for the needs of every sheep (At 20:28). They should give spiritual leadership by being an example to the church in teaching, work and godly living (1 Pt 5:1-3). As slaves to the needs of others, they should pass out their phone numbers to every member, and be ready for service when called upon to minister to the spiritual and physical needs of the suffering and weak.

When discussing the subject of several small groups of Christians meeting throughout a city, either in the first century as explained in the New Testament, or the establishment of the same today, the subject of the function of elders always comes up. Questions arise because people generally have a "Western" understanding of the historical background of the assembly of the church in the first century, or the function of elders among the sheep who live throughout a metropolitan area today. Most people are programmed to the single-assembly, church-building religious culture that prevails throughout the religious world today. Because of this, it is difficult for them to be objective in their study of the New Testament work of elders in reference to a Third World setting. For this reason, they believe that the establishment of clusters of small groups that work as one church in a region or cluster of villages is somehow a threat to something they suppose the Bible teaches. I want to reassure you, however, that what multiple-assembly churches are trying to do is simply restore the New Testament function of both the church and shepherds in their work with the flock of God. As we study through the New Testament on this subject, I believe you will agree that the practicality of the function of the New Testament church is just as relevant today as it was in the immobile first century environment. Shepherds, therefore, can work today in urban cities or village areas where there is no singular meeting of all the members of a local church under one roof. The church simply exists in these areas because there are baptized believers. Regardless of how these members meet, they function as one body.

As we reason ourselves through some basic concepts, I believe we will discover the basic reason why some would object to the concept of city elders, or elders functioning with clusters of multiple small groups of Christians. The objections usually center around traditional practices, rather than New Testament practice and teaching. But what I will point out is the fact that there should be no objections to the concept of city



Present-Day Traditional Practices Should Not Determine Biblical Truth. elders, especially from the biblical perspective. The reason that there should be no objections is because almost every urban eldership in existence today practices the concept of city elders. I believe you will agree with me on this point as we journey through the logical conclusions of what we are actually doing in the present function of church elders.

We must always keep in mind that our present traditional practices should not be used to establish truth. Nor should we read our traditional practices into the behavior of the New Testament church of the first century. When discussing the function of shepherds among the flock, there is much room for opinion. If you are a student of this subject, one of the first discoveries that you have made in this area of New Testament teaching is that there is little definition in the New Testament concerning the specifics of how elders (shepherds, or pastors) are to function in carrying out their work with the sheep. Generic principles are given. But the Holy Spirit has left the specifics up to us. How elders desire to carry out their responsibilities is in the area of opinion. It is for this reason that we should caution ourselves about establishing any dogmatic rules concerning how elders should go about fulfilling their responsibilities.

In order to answer questions concerning the designation and work of elders, we must understand how designated elders functioned in the first century. There were no church buildings in the first century church into which all members of the church in a city were drawn together for assembly. The single-assembly local church did not exist in the New Testament after the church grew beyond the seating capacity of any one home. There were no purpose-built church buildings in the second or third centuries to accommodate the growth of the church. There were no large assemblies in areas where the church was originally established. The temple was not a place of worship, especially in the winter seasons. Neither was the Jewish synagogue a place of assembly for the church of local communities.

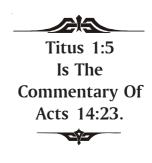
When they were allowed, Christians went to the synagogues for contact with the unbelievers. This is why Jesus went there. This is why Paul went there. But usually, Paul and other Christians were run out of the synagogues after a few lessons on the fact that Jesus was the Messiah. However, there were possibly some meetings in those synagogues where the majority of the Jews converted to Jesus. This would be indicated by James' use of the word *sunagoga* in James 2:2, if indeed James is even referring to a Sunday assembly of the saints in this context. Nevertheless, the use of the Jewish synagogues was not a common place of meeting for Christians since there were relatively few synagogues throughout the Roman Empire compared to the number of Christians. Christians thus met in their homes. No credible church historian questions this fact. Therefore, any definition concerning the function of elders in their relational leadership with the church must be in view of the first century function of elders in cities among the saints who were meeting in their homes. This is a consistent rule of interpretation by which to understand texts that deal with the assembly of the saints and the function of elders.

1. *City elders in the New Testament:* There are actually only two key passages we must again consider in a discussion concerning the supposed "territory" of the work of elders. These passages are Acts 14:23 and Titus 1:5. In Titus 1:5 Paul instructed Titus to designate elders in every city. In Acts 14:23, when Paul and Barnabas returned through the cities of Lystra, Iconium and Antioch, they designated elders in every church. The Titus 1:5 passage speaks of the church in every city, which church was composed of members meeting in their homes. Paul had just left Crete when he wrote Titus. There were no church buildings in which the members were meeting. There were only converts scattered throughout the cities of the island. Paul instructed Titus to designate elders in every city in order that the elders go from house to house teaching and maturing the saints.

We would correctly assume that Christians were meeting in their homes in the Acts 14:23 passage because the churches in Lystra, Iconium and Antioch were only a few months old when Paul and Barnabas designated elders. It is highly unlikely that they built a church building in this short period of time. They could not have been meeting in the synagogue, for they were run out of the synagogue. The only place they could have been meeting was in their homes. Now add to this the fact that the churches in the cities of Lystra, Iconium and Antioch had surely grown beyond the "seating capacity" of one house. This would mean, therefore, that there were at least **two** assemblies in each of the cities of Lystra, Iconium and Antioch. There were multiple-assembly city churches in Lystra, Iconium and Antioch when Paul and Barnabas designated elders in these cities.

Now if Titus 1:5 is the commentary of Acts 14:23, then the situation was that Paul and Barnabas designated elders of the church in the city of Lystra, the city of Iconium, and the city of Antioch. And actually,

this is the way the Acts 14:23 passage reads. They returned through Lystra, Iconium and Antioch and designated elders in the church of each city, just as Paul later gave instructions to Titus in Titus 1:5. This interpretation is historically consistent and one that simply makes more sense than the belief that there were single-assembly churches in these cities.



2. City elders in the Old Testament: This brings us to another look at the elders of Israel in the Old Testament. In discussing the purpose and work of elders, notice the phraseology that is used in reference to the "territory" of the Old Testament elders. Throughout the instructions concerning the work and function of elders, it is stated, "elders of his city" (Dt 19:12; 21:19,20; 25:8), "elders of that city" (Dt 21:3-6; 22:18), "elders of the city" (Dt 22:15-17), "elders of the town" (1 Sm 16:4), and "elders of every city" (Ez 10:14).

Though the phrase "elders of Israel" is the most common phrase used in reference to the "territory" of all the elders of the twelve tribes of Israel, their area of specific work was within the cities of Israel. When we come into the New Testament era, we can thus better understand what Paul meant in Titus 1:5. Elders were designated for the church in every city, which church was meeting in houses throughout the cities. City elders were a common Old Testament practice, which practice certainly prevailed with the Jews throughout the Roman world in the first century. **3.** *City elders in Babylon:* I do not know if Peter used the word "Babylon" in 1 Peter 5:13 figuratively in reference to Rome, or literally in reference to the actual city of Babylon. Regardless of how he used the word, he was in "Babylon" when he wrote 1 Peter. In chapter 5 when he addressed elders, he stated, "I who am a fellow elder" (1 Pt 5:1). I find it hard to believe that the apostle Peter as an elder (1 Pt 5:1), was the elder of only one small group of Christians who met together at the same place in a house in Babylon. And since the church where he resided at the time 1 Peter was written was probably meeting in a house, it becomes extremely improbable that he was one of a plurality of elders in that single meeting group of a few Christians in a house.

If "Babylon" refers to the city of Rome, then Justin Martyr's reply to Rusticus, a Roman official, that Christians meet wherever it is convenient is historical evidence that Peter was not an elder who sat on the front pew in a church building in Rome. There were no church buildings in Rome at the time Justin Martyr lived, and he lived many years after Peter.

C. Reevaluating the shepherds among the sheep:

With the establishment of a cluster of house churches in a particular urban center or rural region, only the elders need to be mobile. If we discard the definition that a church is a local congregation because of the ability of the members to meet together at the same place, then we can better understand the New Testament environment in which elders were designated in every city. We can better apply the New Testament teachings concerning the work of elders in their relational movement among the flock, though the members are meeting at different places throughout the city on Sunday.

The elders who have been designated to shepherd the flock need to be the only members of the church who have to be mobile. They can more easily move among the flock in a region than the entire membership of the church can move in order to meet together at the same place. Add to this the fact that the members can individually go to the elders. Since the purpose of the shepherds is to advise and counsel, then those who need advice and counsel can go to the elders where they live.

Sometimes the impractical nature of something manifests that the practice is surely something that God would not bind on man. Here is an example. I remember the struggles of one of two elders of an urban church in Brazil when I lived there. This elder arose early Sunday morning. He, his wife and children then began their journey to the assembly of the saints. They took a twenty-minute bus trip to the train station. They then took about a thirty-minute ride on the train. They concluded their journey to the assembly by a fifteen minute taxi trip from the train station to the church building. The elder spent about one fourth of his monthly salary on getting his family to and from the "local" church assembly three times a week. Is this practical? Or, is this just a burden we have bound on the backs of our Third World brethren? Are there some things here that we need to reevaluate in reference to our elders in Third World situations?

The point here is that the establishment of many groups of members who meet at different times in different places throughout a city allows the opportunity for designated elders to function among multipleassembly churches. Individual elders can work among those members who are in their communities. In Third World urban areas, the entire membership of a church is not mobile. This is even true of Third World village areas where members must meet in many small groups in different villages that are in close proximity to one another. Therefore, because of the immobility problem of the membership, it is always difficult to get enough members together into the same house in order to designate a plurality of elders.

Though some would say that all members must be assembled in the same house in order to be considered an autonomous church, this is neither a biblical nor practical definition of a local church. The lack of mobility has left Third World rural and urban churches without elders for decades because we have burdened the brethren with a "Western" definition of a "local" church. Brethren have been taught that a local church is a local church only if it can be a single-assembly group on Sunday morning. As a result of this teaching, many churches have generally not been able to get enough people together into one place to have a large enough assembly to designate a plurality of elders.

Since the members of Third World churches do not have the opportunity for mobility and funds for the building of expensive meeting halls for the assembly of great numbers, then the necessity for a cluster of small churches is real and necessary. However, instead of this being a hindrance, it is an opportunity to excel in church growth. Evangelists can be left to do what they are supposed to do and elders can follow in

their trail with the shepherding and teaching of the flock. The meeting of multiple small groups of Christians as a cluster of assemblies that constitute a local church presents the opportunity for a plurality of elders to be designated among many members. The one-hundred member church may be meeting in different groups on Sunday morn-



ing, but instead of consigning the small groups to be without elders for the rest of their existence, elders can be found among them in order to shepherd the needs of the flock which functions as a local church.

D. Reevaluating the sheep with the shepherds:

In view of the fact that there are no mandates in the New Testament concerning how elders should carry out their work among the flock of God, we would assume that God has given us the freedom to make some practical applications, depending on our circumstances. One of these suggested practical applications would be patterned after the function of elders in the Old Testament where people did not have great mobility in reference to the function of the elders. There were elders in every city of Israel as previously stated. However, where the elders were in the cities is also specific. In a specific situation that involved the desires of a brother not wanting to take his dead brother's wife, he was instructed to "go up to the gate to the elders" (Dt 25:7). Solomon spoke of the husband of a virtuous woman whose "husband is known in the gates, when he sits among the elders of the land" (Pv 31:23). When Jeremiah wrote in lamentation over Israel, he spoke of the elders who had "ceased gathering at the gate" (Lm 5:14). Here is my point. The people knew where the elders were located. They were at the gates of the cities. They were in neutral territory. After discussions at the gates of the city, they and the people could go home. When someone needed counseling and help, they knew where to go to find help from the elders.

The necessity of going to the elders is obvious. One cannot be helped if he or she does not want help. Taking the initiative of going to the elders expresses a desire to seek help and teaching. Sheep follow shepherds. And where the shepherds are with their loving service, there will also be the sheep.

I grew up as the son of a farmer. Among other livestock, we had several hundred sheep on the farm. I thus know somewhat about the behavior of sheep. I learned from my father numerous lessons about the behavior of these innocent animals. One specific lesson I learned was the behavior of sheep in their relationship with their shepherd. When



my father drove in the pasture among the sheep, they would all look his way. If he stopped his pickup truck and stood outside, the sheep would wander toward him. The sheep recognized both the pickup truck and the shepherd. They were

accustomed to his feeding, for there were usually fresh bales of hay in the back of the pickup truck to be freely distributed to the sheep. When a shepherd works among his sheep with feeding, they will naturally come to his presence.

When Jesus said that the great ones among you would be the servants of all, He knew our behavior. We behave like sheep. When loving servants show up, sheep come. Jesus' principle of leadership was leadership through loving service, not dictatorial lordship. When hungry sheep know they are going to get fed a barn-stored "bale" of love, they will come. Place the shepherd at the gates of the city and the sheep will be there.

E. Taking another look at church autonomy:

There is a biblical concept of freedom in Christ in the New Testament, though there is always room for more discussion on this matter. It is certainly a fact that the Jerusalem church did not exercise control over the Corinthian church, neither did Ephesus seek to control the churches in Antioch, Iconium and Derbe. There was no world hierarchical system of control of churches in the first century. The reason for this

is simple. The more control that is exercised over the sheep, the more the sheep are intimidated into conformity, the greater their loss of freedom in Christ. And the more the sheep are forced to conform to an ecclesiastical order, the greater the risk of apostasy by those who are in control if their lives are either morally ruined or doctrinally stained.



The New Testament teaches that we must cooperate as churches, but not control one another either as individuals or churches. Churches must seek to be unified, but not controlled into uniformity. When all members are subject to the one head Jesus Christ, then there is freedom among all to be submissive out of choice. If there is no freedom in the personal life of the believer in his or her relationship with Jesus, then there is no free-will submission. The same is true with the church as a whole. If city churches do not have freedom to willingly be submissive to the one Lord Jesus, then they lose their free-will as churches. If they are not free, then they often invent some worldwide governing body to take control.

There can be no universal rulers in the kingdom other than the

King of kings. There can be no other heads in the church other than He who is head of all things. Our freedom to submit to the one King of the kingdom and Head of the church thus tests our sense of brotherhood. Since we have submitted to the same King and Head, then we are a universal brotherhood. But this brotherhood is maintained by our personal free-will submission to Jesus, not to a controlling body on earth that would clone everyone into uniformity. We are thus free from one another's control over our lives because we are individually connected to Jesus by our personal submission to Jesus. Freedom in Christ is the guarantee that we will allow one another to submit free-morally to Jesus on a personal level outside the control of any man. We are free, but not autonomous from one another.

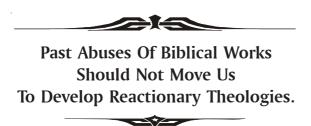
A review of the first century setting of the function of elders in the following chapter reinforces the preceding points of this chapter. If we are objective, we will discover some fascinating information concerning the function of elders who shepherded a cluster of small church groups that were meeting specifically in the cities, towns and villages of the first century world. We are given little information about rural settings of the church. The New Testament seems to focus on the cities, specifically where Paul traveled.

In studying through the historical examples of New Testament churches, please be prepared to sacrifice some traditional concepts of the function of elders that have been handed to us by a reactionary theology against churches that operate with hierarchal systems of control. To a great extent, reaction against hierarchically controlled churches has distorted our view of church autonomy and the work of elders. But we must remind ourselves not to interpret church history from the view point of these hierarchically controlled churches. Our practical understanding of the function of elders in the first century makes sense when we apply the same function to churches throughout the world today.

Chapter 20

EXAMPLE OF CITY ELDERS IN JERUSALEM

Acts 15 is the first mention of elders in the church in Jerusalem. I have always thought it interesting that in Acts 15 elders are just there, about fifteen years after the establishment of the Jerusalem church. There is no recorded ceremony for their designation, no emphasis on either



position or supposed office. They are just there in the text at the time of the Acts 15 event. It would seem that if God placed as much emphasis on the "position" or "of-

fice" of elders as some do today, instead of their work, we would have some type of ceremony recorded in Acts concerning the designation of the Jerusalem "eldership." But it is not there.

The function of elders is something that naturally arises out of spiritual growth. Their existence **is not** centered on "position," but function. If we focus on their **work**, then there is little problem about power struggles within their supposed "positions" of authority. When the church starts focusing on some position of the elders, then we are headed for a control structure of the church where men can bind on earth what God has not bound in heaven. Both Paul and Peter foresaw in their writings the lordship exaltation of elders coming in the church (See At 20:29-31; 1 Pt 5:1-3). We must not deny the fact that this problem happened in the early church. Therefore, we must not assume that something as this will not happen in the church throughout history. In view of the historical fact of lordship elderships, we must never allow the abuse of what God has designated to exist in the church to distort our understanding or appli-

cation of New Testament principles and practices. Simply because there have always been abuses by elders in that they sometimes become lords of the flock, does not justify developing any reactionary theology in reference to their function.

Since house church assembly was the means of assembly of the early church, then we must understand church autonomy and the function of elders in view of this undisputed historical fact. Regardless of our beliefs that may have been handed to us from our large single-assembly, church-building oriented tradition, we must guard ourselves from reading this methodology into the function of the early church. Neither should our reaction to erroneous church behavior we have experienced in the misguided religious world by apostate religious groups, be allowed to detour us from understanding the application of God's word in defining the work of shepherds.

This brings us to the historical setting of Acts 15, which is a record of a particular problem that prevailed in the early church. It was a problem of Jewish legalism that was threatening the very existence of the church (At 15:1,2). The problem was so severe, that a special assembly of the church was called in Jerusalem. Without going into detail concerning the problem, it is interesting to note who was called together to deal with the problem, and how the church, under the inspired direction of the apostles, made a decision concerning the problem.

Luke recorded that Paul and Barnabas, with others, were commissioned by the church in Syria to *"go up to Jerusalem to the apostles"*

All Christians In Jerusalem Were The One Jerusalem Church. *and elders concerning this question*" (At 15:2). These were the elders of the entire city of Jerusalem, not just the elders of one single-assembly church on Central and Main. Keep in mind that this event took place about fifteen years after the establishment of the church in

Jerusalem. The church at this time in Jerusalem could have had several thousand members who were meeting in houses throughout the city. When Paul and Barnabas arrived, Luke records that, "*they were*

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received by the church and the apostles and elders" (At 15:4). Notice that they were received by the church. They were not received by the churches of Jerusalem, but by the church of Jerusalem. Therefore, it was not the elders of the churches of Jerusalem, but the elders of the church in the entire city of Jerusalem. If we were writing the account according to our present-day practice of church autonomy in cities we would have said that they were "received by the churches" of Jerusalem. But this would be reading our present-day denominated church interpretation into the text. Luke was not using the statement, "the church" to refer to all the "autonomous" churches in Jerusalem. This is not what he was saying. He simply said "the church".

Luke also recorded, "*Now the apostles and elders came together to consider this matter*" (At 15:6). The elders of the one church in Jerusalem came together from all over Jerusalem in order to have a meeting concerning the problem. If the church in Jerusalem was autonomous, it was an autonomous church of the entire city, of which there were elders for the entire cluster of house churches meeting throughout the entire metropolitan area of Jerusalem. These elders came together from the entire city, not from an autonomous "Fifth Avenue Church", "Ninth Street Church", and "Downtown Church." None of this denominating of the church can be understood from the text of what is stated in Acts 15.

After speeches were made during the meeting, "*it pleased the apostles and elders, with the whole church, to send chosen men of their own company to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas* ..." (At 15:22). Notice how Luke recorded what happened. He stated that the Jerusalem elders, with the whole church of Jerusalem, not churches, consented to what was said. They then chose men "of their own company" to go with Paul and Barnabas back to the church in Antioch. What company (fellowship) was this? Is this not the church of Jerusalem? Chosen men were designated out of the company of the church of Jerusalem to return with Paul and Barnabas. The "company" did not refer to Paul and Barnabas and those visiting Jerusalem. They were the ones leaving in Leading Brothers Are Known By All the Brothers. order to return to Antioch. The word "company" refers to the church of Jerusalem from which representatives were chosen to accompany Paul and Barnabas back to Antioch. These representatives were from the one church of Jerusa-

lem, not representatives of supposed autonomous churches in Jerusalem that were denominated throughout the city.

Barsabbas (Judas) and Silas were chosen to return with Paul and Barnabas (At 15:22). Luke records that these were "*leading men among the brethren*" (At 15:22). They were leading men of the church in Jerusalem. They were not leading men of a particular church in Jerusalem. They were leading men of "the brethren" (the church) in Jerusalem. They were men who were working among the assemblies of the church of Jerusalem, and thus were "leading" because they were known by all the church groups of Jerusalem. **The fact that they were known as leaders indicates that they were circulating among the churches in order that they be known by all the house groups of the entire city of Jerusalem**. That should give us some idea of what at least evangelists should be doing, that is, circulating among the house churches, not settling in with only one group.

Luke continued his account of the Acts 15 event by saying that a letter was written to those **outside** Jerusalem, to those Gentiles in Antioch, Syria and Cilicia where the problem prevailed that was discussed during the meeting. The letter originated from "*the apostles and elders and brethren* ..." (At 15:23). These were the apostles in Jerusalem, the elders in Jerusalem, and the church (brethren) in Jerusalem. All the apostles, elders and brethren were considered the one church in Jerusalem. Nowhere in the text is the plural word "churches" used to identify the brethren in Jerusalem. The word "churches" in reference to the Jerusalem Christians is just not there.

When Paul and Barnabas, with representatives from the church of Jerusalem, went forth from Jerusalem, they took the decrees that were "decided upon by the apostles and elders who were at Jerusa*lem*" (At 16:4). Again, the emphasis in reference to elders is to all the elders **at** Jerusalem, not the elders of the church in general or even in the area of Judea. They were the elders of the whole church **at** Jerusalem. It is for this reason that the statement, "the church" in the context of Acts 15 does not refer to the church in general, but to the specific church **at** Jerusalem.

The situation concerning the elders and church in Jerusalem remained the same for many years after the Acts 15 meeting. When Paul returned to Jerusalem after his third missionary journey, there was still one church in Jerusalem, and still elders of that one church. Luke recorded, "And when we came to Jerusalem, the brethren gladly received us. Now the following day Paul went in with us to James, and all the elders were present" (At 21:17,18). All the brethren composed the Jerusalem church. All the elders were the elders of the one Jerusalem church. What other conclusion would one make from these clear statements? If we want to say that these were representative elders and brethren from several autonomous, local churches in Jerusalem, then we are reading something into the text that it does not say.

From an objective reading of the book of Acts, Theophilus, to whom the book was originally written, would assume that there were elders of the one church in Jerusalem. Since there were no church buildings in Rome where Theophilus was probably living, he could come to no other conclusion than to believe that there was one large church in Jerusalem whose members were meeting in various homes throughout the city, just as in Rome. He would also conclude that there were elders functioning among the members of the church throughout the entire city. Now if we interpreted this historical setting from the view of individual autonomous churches scattered throughout the urban area of Jerusalem as some do, then we would come to a different conclusion than Theophilus.

The historical setting of multiple groups of the church meeting throughout Jerusalem establishes a principle that should give some relief to our brethren throughout the world. Whether the church is meeting in a metropolitan area or in a village region of Africa, the principle stands that a "local" church can be defined as a cluster of many groups meeting in a particular locality, even though they have to meet at different locations on Sunday. The fact that they have to meet in small groups in different locations because of mobility problems and lack of finances to build church buildings, does not mean that they are forever doomed to be without elders because they cannot get a plurality of elders in each small house church.

Remember, the definition of a local church is not its ability to be a single-assembly church on Sunday. Since many brethren do not have this privilege because of transportation and money problems, they have to meet in different homes in the same area. Just as the elders of Jerusalem, and other New Testament elders who functioned among the cluster of groups who were living and meeting in a particular locality, so elders can be designated in similar situations today. Regardless of where the members meet, the important point is where they **live**. All of the members may not be able to meet at the same location for worship because of where they live, but this does not mean that the elders cannot go to them in their homes. This is what elders have always done.

Instead of forcing the entire church to transport itself to a common assembly center for worship once a week, why not transport the elders from house to house as they did in the first century? If individual members need the counsel of the elders, then they can go to the elders instead of the entire church to the elders in a church building. Most elders function today by going from house to house. The only difference between large-assembly churches in industrial/business urban centers today and Third World churches is that the members of the large singleassembly urban churches in First World situations have the privilege of transporting themselves in large numbers to a common location on Sunday. But this privilege of the members has absolutely nothing to do with the function of shepherds going from house to house to carry out their responsibilities of shepherding the flock.

Since the Jerusalem elders functioned on the foundation of the members meeting throughout the city of Jerusalem in houses, then we must come to the text of Acts with this understanding. Whatever difficulties we may have in understanding the text because of a lack of detailed information must not detour us from this interpretation. We must not allow our present circumstances and function of the church to be the rule by which we interpret the Jerusalem situation. The simple fact is that the Jerusalem elders functioned among many house churches of thousands of members. They were not coming together into the same place for assembly on Sunday. Since God did not give us the details of how the elders functioned in this situation, we are left with liberty to come up with our own ideas.

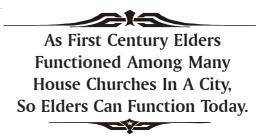
My purpose is to challenge you to rethink the function of elders in the context of the Jerusalem situation, not in the context of what is practiced today in the Western church. Therefore, with the Jerusalem context as the background, we must journey throughout the rest of the New Testament world to see if we find the same situation with other churches of the first century. Therefore, when one asks how elders should function among so many house churches in a particular city today, the answer is that they should function as the Jerusalem elders functioned among the house churches of Jerusalem. I have always found it interesting to discover that people easily see the elders of Jerusalem functioning from house to house among the members. But they have a difficult time seeing the same happen today among house churches throughout a city. It is for this reason that we need to be urged to be consistent in our application of these historical biblical truths.

Chapter 21

EXAMPLE OF CITY ELDERS IN EPHESUS AND CRETE

It is not difficult to envision the function of shepherds of the

flock as they labored among the sheep in Jerusalem and other New Testament urban centers. Since it was the nature of the sheep not to be denominated from one another, then it was the nature of the shep-



herds to cooperate together in carrying out their duties to a united flock. Shepherds lived throughout the city of Jerusalem, as well as other urban centers. This was the case with the elders in Ephesus and Crete where we have added information concerning the life and work of elders. There is harmony of all information on this subject in the New Testament that confirms the concept of city elders functioning among a united church in urban centers throughout the New Testament world.

A. City elders in Ephesus:

As was discussed in a previous chapter, there was more than one group of Christians meeting in the city of Ephesus. At one time, there was the church in the house of Aquila and Priscilla (1 Co 16:19). There was possibly another group of about twelve disciples who were rebaptized by Paul (At 19:1-7). After the mass conversion in Acts 19, there were certainly other groups that were established throughout the city of Ephesus, since the church surely grew beyond the seating capacity of the house of Aquila and Priscilla and the house of the rebaptized twelve.

When considering the New Testament information about the church in Ephesus, we are given the impression by Luke that there was only one church in the city, though this one church met at different locations throughout the city. However, the New Testament emphasizes that there was only one church in the city. Even by the time the book of Revelation was written, John addressed "*the church of Ephesus*" (Rv 2:1). Since Revelation was probably written the latter part of the first century or even before A.D. 70, we can assume that the Christians'

meeting in the houses of Aquila and Priscilla, and the rebaptized twelve, had long outgrown the houses of these first Christians. This is a reasonable conclusion that is drawn from the nature of the rapid growth of the early church.

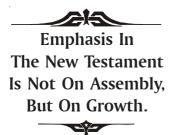
We must go back in time from the writing of Revelation to the time Paul initially visited Ephesus a few years after the establishment of the Ephesian church by himself, Aquila and Priscilla in Acts 18 & 19. Aquila and Priscilla first established a church in their house in Acts 18 when Paul left them on his way to Jerusalem (At 18:19). Though it is not stated specifically, we must assume that they started the church in their house when they first arrived. At least, when Paul wrote 1 Corinthians from Ephesus a year or so later, there was a church meeting in their house (1 Co 16:19).

Acts 18:24-28 mentions Aquila and Priscilla present in the synagogue of Ephesus on Saturday. We must keep in mind that the synagogue was not a place of worship. It was a cultural center of the Jews who came there on Saturdays for the reading of the Old Testament Scriptures. The particular incident that is mentioned in the preceding text took place on a Saturday, not at a meeting of the saints on Sunday. I say this because of the nature of Apollos' arrival and delivery of his messages. He first "spoke and taught diligently the things of the Lord" to the church when he first arrived in Ephesus (At 18:25). However, Acts18:25 states that after his speaking and teaching diligently to the brethren, "he began to speak boldly in the synagogue." What probably happened is that he first found the brethren and spoke to them. Then after speaking to at least one of the house churches, he began speaking in the synagogue. Luke's reference to his speaking "boldly" was not in the context of his speaking to the brethren. His bold speaking was in reference to his work among unbelievers in the synagogue.

We do not know how long after meeting with the brethren that Apollos began to speak in the synagogue. It was possibly a week or so. The text just says he spoke initially the things of the Lord, and then began to speak boldly in the synagogue. Since he was confused on the subject of baptism, I assume he never encountered the house group of Aquila and Priscilla before he went to the synagogue, which could be possible since Aquila and Priscilla did not know of the house group of the rebaptized twelve before Paul encountered them. What we do know is that it was in the synagogue where Aquila and Priscilla came into contact with Apollos after his initial arrival, since they went to the synagogue on Saturdays to hear the Old Testament Scriptures read, as well as make contacts for possible conversion.

Some commentators have assumed that Apollos started the house group of the twelve disciples that Paul later rebaptized (At 19:1-7). He could have started this group before he met Aquila and Priscilla while preaching in the synagogue. After being instructed by Aquila and Priscilla, he went on to Corinth before rebaptizing these disciples in the name of Jesus. When Paul later revisited the city, he encountered the twelve and then rebaptized them. However, it is probable that they had visited Jerusalem during the ministry of John the Baptist, but before the ministry of Jesus. They had simply been meeting since that visit which was probably about twenty-five to thirty years before Paul met them.

After Aquila and Priscilla were left in Ephesus on Paul's second missionary journey, and after the incident concerning Apollos, the church continued to grow in the city. Many groups started assembling throughout the city. As stated before, we assume that the rebaptized twelve



continued meeting in their house after they were rebaptized. Then in the context of Acts 19, there was a mass conversion which surely increased the membership of the church beyond the houses of Aquila and Priscilla and the house of the rebaptized twelve. Luke recorded that

the word of God grew mightily in Ephesus (At 19:20). In Acts 19 Luke records that it grew mightily among the Gentiles. The church had grown in Ephesus so much that it even endangered the idol making industry of the city (See At 19:24-27).

Though the church grew tremendously in Ephesus, we have no

record of church buildings being built or Christians meeting together at the same place at the same time on Sunday morning in order to constitute a local church of Ephesus. The Holy Spirit used Luke to convey to us that He wants us to focus on the growth of the church in the city of Ephesus. The assembly of the saints was left to the discretion of the saints. It is for this reason that how the saints meet is a matter of opinion. Whether in purpose-built buildings or in houses, the assembly of Christians is not considered to be a criteria for determining a local church.

If one can envision the tremendous number of members meeting throughout the city of Ephesus, then it is easy to understand what Luke meant when he recorded Paul's revisit to the area on his way back to Jerusalem in Acts 20. He came to the island of Miletus and "*sent to Ephesus and called the elders of the church*" (At 20:17). This was the church of the entire city of Ephesus, which church consisted of a cluster of many groups meeting on Sundays at different locations throughout the metropolitan area. There was no denominationalizing of the church as some have assumed the situation was in Ephesus. Luke simply stated that the elders of the church of Ephesus were called to meet with Paul.

During the Miletus meeting, Paul reminded the elders of **how he was with them** from the first day when he came to Asia (At 20:18). He was with the elders of the church of Ephesus, not the churches of Ephesus, nor the elderships of the different churches of Ephesus. He had taught them "*publicly and from house to house*" (At 20:20). He exhorted them, "*Therefore, take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God* ..." (At 20:28). "All the flock" refers to all the members of the church in Ephesus. The elders were "among" the members of the church in Ephesus. Therefore, they were to shepherd the church of Ephesus which included all the saints of the city of Ephesus.

The elders of Ephesus functioned as the elders in Jerusalem. They moved among the members throughout the city. On Sundays, several groups were meeting in different homes. However, in the work of the elders, they were moving among the members of the city. Since the work of elders involves function rather than position, the Ephesian elders functioned among the members from house to house. This work of the elders does not depend on how the saints assembled. Their work involves individuals they encounter from house to house.

B. City elders in Crete:

It is not difficult to understand what Paul instructed Titus to do in Titus 1:5. *"For this reason I left you in Crete, so that you should set in order the things that are lacking and designate elders in every city* " If the text "says what it means and means what it says", then we must assume that Titus did just that. He designated elders for the church in every city of Crete.

As stated in a previous chapter, I believe Titus 1:5 interprets what Paul and Barnabas did on their first missionary journey in Acts 13 & 14. A few months after they had established the church in each of the cities of Iconium, Lystra and Antioch, they returned to these cities (At 14:21). When they did, "*they designated elders in every church*" (At 14:23). In view of what had happened in Jerusalem, Ephesus, the cities of Crete, and other cities where the church was established in the first century, they designated elders in the multiple-assembly church of every city. Emphasis was on the disciples meeting in the cities, not on supposedly independent, autonomous, individual meeting groups of Christians in separate church buildings throughout each city. In Iconium, Lystra and Antioch, they did not designate elders in each house church. They designated elders according to the instructions of Titus 1:5.

In the city house church situation of the first century we can better understand why Paul instructed Titus to "ordain" (KJV) (better, "designate") elders in every city. The Greek word *kathistemi* that Paul used in Titus 1:5 means "to set forth." The elders were to be set forth in the city, that is, identified before the entire church. Since house groups were meeting throughout the metropolitan areas of the first century cities, those who were to be identified as shepherds of the flock had to be identified before the entire city church. In order for the sheep to know where to go to find spiritual food, they had to know the shepherds and their addresses.

The practical application of the function of elders as in Jerusalem, Ephesus, Crete and other New Testament areas where elders were designated, is applicable today. Single-assembly church elders are functioning today as they did in the first century. Here are some points that challenge our thinking in reference to the practical work of elders in the first century. They are also points that support the fact that most elders today who work in urban centers are functioning as city elders did in the first century church.

Chapter 22

THE FUNCTION OF CITY ELDERS

Now someone might argue, "How can there be elders of the church functioning in a city of house churches, when the members live

throughout the city?" I would answer that they would function in the exact same way elders are presently shepherding in cities today. Consider the typical church in a large metropolitan area as, for example, Toronto, Canada. Consider the typical single-assem-



If The Shepherd Can Get To The Sheep, Then The Shepherd Can Do His Work.

bly church meeting in a church building in Toronto. Suppose this singleassembly church has five hundred members.

Now consider where these members live in the city. If you are an elder in Toronto, mark on a map where the members live. I would say the members of the Toronto single-assembly church are typical members of the church in a typical urban center. They are scattered through-

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out the city of Toronto. They get in their cars on Sunday morning and drive from all over the city of Toronto in order to arrive at a common place of meeting on Sunday morning. But are they members of the church of Toronto, though they are scattered throughout the city of Toronto? Certainly. And are the elders, therefore, functioning with these members of the church of Toronto, though the members are scattered? Certainly. Where the sheep live does not hinder the function of the shepherds if the shepherds can be among the sheep.

Now one cannot bring up the fact that there are countless other single-assembly churches in Toronto. That is beside the point, and possibly a fact that proclaims our own sectarian thinking and denominational practices. The fact remains that the elders of the single-assembly Toronto

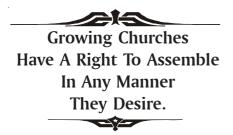
The Elders' Work Is Not Determined By The Assembly Of The Saints. church of our example are functioning with one church that is composed of members who live throughout the urban center of Toronto. If this church were the only "local" church of Toronto, assembling in only one building, then the elders of that church would be **the city elders of the**

church of Toronto. The members would live throughout the city. But the elders would still function as city elders, working from house to house.

Now if for some reason, the church house burnt down and the members had to meet in their homes, would we disband the elders? Would there now be many "local" autonomous churches in Toronto without elders because the following Sunday after the church house burnt down the membership had to meet in the homes of the members? This scenario presents the reality of the church in many world urban centers who have no buildings. These churches cannot even get to the point of building a building that can burn down. So why would we not allow them to have a plurality of elders though they have to meet in small groups throughout the city? The only difference between multiple-assembly and singleassembly churches is the fact that one has the privilege of building and assembling at a designated location on Sunday morning. The members of the other church have to meet in their homes.

A. City elders function together:

If you are of the traditional view that elders can be elders of a church only if the members of that church can come together into one place on Sunday, you still believe the same thing that is taught in the Scriptures that we have examined in this and the previous chapters. Our interpretation is the same. Your only problem may be that there is another "local" church in Toronto besides the preceding example church. This church also has elders of the city of Toronto. They also have their work of shepherding a membership that is scattered throughout the city of Toronto. They even support with you the same orphans' home, the same retirement center, and sometimes the same foreign evangelists. Both churches are working together, but meeting as elders in different rooms and places in order to make decisions. Now the problem is that the elders of these two single-assembly churches do not meet and work together as one group of elders, and the members do not meet in the same place. Because churches in urban centers today meet in this manner, we must not read this division into the church of Jerusalem or



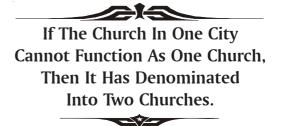
Ephesus or any other city of the first century. I am sure the elders met together then, though the members had to meet in their homes because there were no church buildings.

B. City elders in urban mission centers:

Now consider this from the practical view of church establishment in mission areas. As Paul, we go to a particular village, town or city of thirty to fifty thousand in population. A church is started in the house of a convert. We designate elders who function with this group of Christians who meet in this house. Now we meet in this house until it grows beyond the seating capacity of the house. Because a group of only twenty-five to fifty meet in this house, we have no money to build a multi-thousand dollar building in this metropolitan area. Even if we did, maybe we do not want to build a building, but rather put our money into evangelism in order to continue our growth. Therefore, we simply decide to meet in two houses on Sunday morning. Now are we two autonomous churches because we are not meeting together? Are the elders relieved of their responsibility to care for the souls of the second group meeting in a different house? Suppose we have only two elders and one decides to meet with the second group. Must we now dissolve the elders because we have supposedly two autonomous churches, and thus, cannot have a plurality of elders in each group? Now suppose we grow to five or ten or twenty house churches throughout the village, town or city. When do we stop being the one church? Do we stop being the one church in the village, town or city simply because we cannot all meet together on Sunday morning? Are we going to make these groups many "local" autonomous churches without elders because we cannot build a large purpose-built church building in which all members can meet?

If one contends that all the members must meet in one place in order to be classified as a "local" church, then he is forced into an unbiblical position on this point. If one says that the elders can be the elders of a church **only if that church has the ability to meet together at the same place on Sunday morning**, then he has taken the position that a church is constituted to be a local church simply because of its ability to assemble in one place. If one takes this position, then he must scramble

throughout the word of God in order to find proof for this definition of a "local" church. But the fact still remains that in the typical commuting single-assembly urban church, elders are function-



ing as city elders because the membership of a typical urban church is scattered throughout the typical urban center.

One can take the position that "parallel" autonomous single-assembly churches can exist in the same city. However, one would certainly be misreading the New Testament if he assumed that this is the manner by which the first century church functioned in cities. What we have previously studied concerning the New Testament situation of city churches presents the opposite of what seems to be a common practice today. There is nothing wrong with parallel autonomous single-assembly churches in the same city. But it would be erroneous to contend that this is the pattern by which the church must organize itself throughout the world. We cannot bind on others the unfortunate division that prevails in the church in many Western cities.

In the typical Western urban center, members drive by one or two "assembly centers" (church buildings) in order to get to the assigned location of meeting in order to be considered a local church under the oversight of a group of elders. So here we are in industrial/business, mobile cities, driving by one another on Sunday morning. Can you imagine this happening in Jerusalem on Sunday morning two thousand years ago. Would members walk by one church building on their way to another? One might be able to whiz by on the freeway, unnoticed by elders and members in the church houses that are bypassed. But if we lived in Jerusalem, or Ephesus, or Corinth, we would probably have to walk around the block or down alleys in order not to be spotted by a neighboring house church, and thus, embarrassed.

The present denominating of churches within urban centers has developed what some of these churches consider to be a problem. It is the practice, and sometimes, the problem of "sheep stealing." This is the paranoia of one church being afraid of "their" members being encouraged to go to another church within the same city. I personally believe that those



who either practice or encourage such have truly digressed to a sectarian mentality of denominationalism. Why do church leaders think they have a hold on any sheep? Is this not the spirit of lording over the flock? Possibly some churches are concerned about maintaining the budget? If so, then are we not carnal, functioning as lords who seek to boast in our numbers? In being and behaving as such, we destroy the city fellowship of the church.

Members in urban centers often get involved in running from one church to another. One reason for this is that members chase preachers. They go where they think the best preacher is located. As preachers change, so do these members. Would it not be interesting if we did what was practiced in the first century? Move the preachers around from church to church. This would certainly settle down floating members who chase preachers. These members would not know from one Sunday to the next who would be preaching. Has the Western church become so denominational and clergy-oriented that it could not do this?

C. City elders among the flock:

I have no better word to use in this discussion than the word "territory". It is a word that has a lot of baggage, but for lack of a better word, I will use it for this discussion. When I use the word, please keep in mind that I am referring to the personal influence and contact a shepherd would personally have with the sheep. Those sheep who are outside the practical personal work of the shepherd would not be in His "territory". Those sheep would be under the oversight of other shepherds.

The "territory" of elders is determined by their ability to be with the sheep. The "territory" of the shepherds of any church is determined by what Peter said in 1 Peter 5:2. "*Shepherd the flock of God that is among you.*" There is nothing difficult about understanding what Peter said. As long as the shepherds can be among the sheep, then they can

Shepherds Function Within The Realm Of Their Personal Contact. be shepherds of those sheep. The physical "territory" in a Third World situation may be smaller because "foot mobility" would be less than car mobility in the industrial/business world. But as long as the shepherds can get to the sheep, and the sheep to the shepherds, then the shepherds can shepherd the flock.

In order for shepherds to look after a great number of sheep, the Old Testament function of elders illustrates an optional practice of working with people. The elders sat at the gates of the cities and the sheep came to them. However, I believe even this can be abused. I heard of one sheep who traveled for 1,600 kilometers (1000 miles) to meet with an elder because there were no elders in his area. The fact remains, that when it comes to the area of the shepherding of elders, there are no defined geographical borders. Peter simply said that shepherds are to work with the flock that is among them. As long as the shepherds can be among the flock and the flock among them, then they can do their work. The fact that the New Testament does not speak of the "territory" of the shepherds indicates that we cannot speak here where nothing is said. God simply wants us to use our discretion.

Some have promoted the erroneous concept that the "territory" of the elders is determined by the ability of the sheep to gather into a common corral on Sunday morning. If the sheep can get to the church house on Sunday, and punch in their membership on the church register, then these sheep are under the oversight of the "local" elders. This may appear to be a good idea, but the fact remains that **this is not a New Testament teaching**. If you think it is, then I challenge you to come up with proof for a few concepts that this idea assumes. First of all, one has to prove that a "local" church is defined by the ability of all the members to come together at the same place for a common meeting. Second, one has to prove from the Scriptures that oversight by the elders is confined only to those with whom the elders can physically assemble at a com-

mon meeting place. Third, try finding a passage that states that one places his or her membership at a specific "local" assembly (church). As for me, I placed my membership in heaven when I obeyed the gospel. I have not moved it since.

We must remember that shepherding is not a matter of territorial authority, but a work in



Shepherding Is A Ministry Of Counseling And Sharing.

counseling and caring for the sheep among which one is present. Being a shepherd of the sheep is not focused on power and position, but caring for the welfare of others. When we view elders as a board of directors of the church, then we get into trouble with those passages in the New Testament that deal with the practical function of elders. Viewing the "eldership" as such gets us into difficulty in objectively interpreting the scriptures that explain that elders worked among the sheep as servants. Elders are not on some level of hierarchial authority. They are great among us because they are the slaves to us all. And to be a slave, one has to be serving among the sheep.

D. God's word as the final authority for elders:

We must allow God's word to determine the function of our elders among the flock. We must not be paranoid about the digressed authoritarian structure of highly organized traditional religions. We must not allow these religions to determine our interpretation of either church history or church function. It is true that throughout a period of a few centuries after the establishment of the church the pope was named. However, I question the Catholic's interpretation of how this happened. I also question our reactionary theology that has driven us to some extreme conclusions on church autonomy, conclusions that fringe on, if not promote, the denominating of the church of God.

The church originally had elders in every city, just like we function today, for the membership of our local churches is scattered throughout the city. The city elders continued for centuries after the establishment of the church on Pentecost. They continued without any practice of going Catholic in church organization, though the abuse of the authority of elders began before the end of the third century. However, when Constantine took over matters in order to bring Christianity into the mainline of all religions of the Roman Empire, things drastically changed. He urged many church leaders to organize after the hierarchial structure of the Roman Empire. From that time on, the hierarchy of the Catholic Church was born and continues to this day. Many other religious groups of the world have subsequently followed the example of the organizational structure of the Catholic Church. But we must remember that this digression did not occur for about three centuries after the beginning of the church. Therefore, the argument that city elders will naturally digress into a Catholic hierarchy is just not true. The leadership of the church only digressed to such when a secular government took control of the matters of the church.

While much of the church did follow the hierarchy of Catholic popes and priests that was patterned after Roman government, **this does not mean that all the church went into apostasy**. Simply because we have written records of the Catholic heresy does not mean that the entire church followed after the model of the Catholic Church. If we interpreted church history from a Catholic perspective, we would come to the conclusion that all the church went the way of the Catholic apostasy. But the church did not do this. The church continued as usual because good men who are good students of the word of God will always continue according to the direction of the word of God. God's word will never pass away as long as good men allow it to be their only authority.

Chapter 23

A WORLDWIDE SPIRITUAL REVIVAL

Throughout the world churches have been meeting in houses for centuries. There is nothing new about house assemblies. However, what is new in the last two decades is what seems to be a world revival in the restoration of home assemblies. This revival is a natural development from the small group fellowships and evangelistic meetings that started with large single-assembly churches in the 1970s. Large churches began to realize that they were not growing. The midweek small cell group was started by large congregations in order to promote fellowship. The idea caught on as people began to realize that the basic human spirit needed a closer relationship with other people. People began to discover that God intended that we have a closer bond with one another that was more than the casual encounters we have at large assembly. As a result, small groups have exploded into existence in almost every country of the world.

On their road to a revival of relational Christianity, small group meetings produced some surprising discoveries along the way. Those who have met in small groups have discovered that there is a tremendous fellowship that is developed among group members. These groups have begun to grow in close fellowship as members nurture one another.

This desire to be more relational is particularly true of what was originally referred to as the "X generation". This was a generation of society that was born after 1960 and had not yet identified itself twenty years ago when the term was invented. The generation has now identified itself as the postmodern generation. One of the many characteristics of this generation is its desire to be relational in life experiences. The rise of small groups among churches, therefore, was in many ways a natural development of this generation in the church to become more relational in their application of Christianity.

The members of cell groups discovered a relational fellowship that they could not find in the large single-assembly church. Their close midweek fellowship was somewhat diffused when they returned to the large assembly on Sunday morning. They went from a close fellowship of ten to twenty during the week to an assembly of the masses on Sunday morning. In the large assembly the group members sought out one another among the multitude of people they hardly knew. In all the shuffle to find fellow group members in the large assembly, they yearned for the fellowship of the midweek fellowship group. What came next was predictable and natural. Cell Groups Sought To Draw Closer To One Another And Their Communities. Cell group members threw up their hands and agreed to stay as a small group in their homes the following Sunday. And thus, the rise of the house assembly movement was reborn. It was a natural development from those who have discovered that they can be "church" while meeting in their houses and staying in their communi-

ties. They can be the local church with others who are also meeting in their homes down the street. They did not seek to draw away from others. **They simply wanted to draw closer to one another and the needs of their neighborhoods**. In order to promote spiritual growth through personal relationships, some large-assembly churches have discovered the problem and even gone from churches with cell groups to cell churches. They have moved the members into cells on Sunday throughout communities, and yet, they have remained one church.¹³

The house church folks are not against buildings. They are not against large assemblies. They only desire that on a **regular** basis, members should have a greater participation in one another's lives in order to stir up love and good works. They want to change their focus from confidence in large assemblies to confidence in one another's personal and individual support. They have discovered this in small assemblies in the warm atmosphere of the members' homes.

The following points are some of the reasons Christians have sought a revival in relationships with one another, and subsequently, a restoration in their relationship with Jesus through small group assemblies.

A. Revival in our personal relationships:

One of the first motives for establishing small groups is to get to know one another. When Christians start learning **how** to know one another in a small group environment, they start understanding the God of love. Though the final goal is to establish a greater relationship with most people desire and need.

Jesus, house church members have discovered that in order to get Jesus in their lives, they must get into one anothers' lives. And in order to get into one another's lives, we must learn life skills. We need a road map to relationships.



Small church assemblies bring members together on a regular basis in order to establish closer personal relationships between those with whom they will spend eternity. In the insular Western urban world, it is often difficult for people to establish close personal relationships because of the busy nature of lives. Friends at work are OK. Neighbors are OK. But people need relationships with others that are deeper than casual friends at work and neighbors. "Hellohow-are-you?" relationships do not provide the depth of relationship that

Those who are a part of a house church have found something that is fulfilling in interpersonal relationships. They have discovered the essence of what God meant for us to have in relationships here on this earth. They have become a part of a relational environment that is a spiritual factory for developing characters who are fit for eternal dwelling. Since heaven will be an eternal environment of close relationships, it is best to get started in a church environment that prepares people with relationship skills that will be used in a heavenly dwelling.

Church was meant to be the environment on earth for the development of characters for eternal dwelling. Therefore, the more relational church is, the better one is prepared for eternal dwelling in heaven. However, many members of the church have such an impersonal connection with one another that they are not being prepared for heaven.



Their fellowship with others is so weak, that they do not have an opportunity to interact in an environment wherein sharp edges of personality can be rounded and fine-tuned. Churches that are solely large assembly oriented struggle in establishing environments where the members can interact with one another on a personal basis. This is one of the deceptive features of the charismatic movement of this and the past century. Members of charismatic churches feel good after an emotional outburst during an assembly. However, their ability to lovingly interact with one another on a personal basis is often according to the norm of ceremonial religions. Emphasis in many of these churches is not on personal relationship skills, but on a collective emotional outpouring.

Once one takes the initial step to meet in a small church group, he or she begins to discover the dynamics by which the early first century church worked. A new discovery is made in the meaning of familiar scriptures that speak of Christian fellowship, unity, multiplication in members, exhorting one another in a relationship of personal communication and commonality. This is a discovery of how the early Christians confessed their sins to one another and prayed for one another. In small groups we discover how the first Christians did not become lost in the crowd, but were given to a sacrificial service of one's entire life. This is

All Members Of The Body Must Join Again To The Body.

a discovery of how physical and spiritual needs are easily discovered and served. Small church assemblies have led to a better understanding of what Paul meant when he wrote in Romans 12:5, "So we, being many, are one body in Christ, and individually members of one another." House church

members are members of one another because they participate in one another's lives. Being a member of one another means being involved in one another's lives. The body of Christ is composed of members who are connected with one another. Once we connect with one another, we will better connect with God.

B. Revival in our relationship with God:

In our efforts to restore the vitality of first century zeal, we have made almost every effort to restore the system by which the early church functioned in the first century. We have restored correct beliefs. We have restored doing good works. We have even "tried those who call themselves apostles" (Rv 2:2). We have led ourselves to believe that if we restored the exact system that was carried out by the first Christians in a Sunday assembly, we would somehow restore the spirit by which they behaved. In this restoration, we thought we would restore the relationship the early Christians had with the Savior. However, after years of struggle to reach our desired goal, we have discovered that restoring forms of worship only brings us to a distant relationship with Jesus and a spiritual plateau. Even inventions in worship styles have not bridged the great chasm across which we all desire to make Jesus more meaningful in our lives. We have not bridged the gap because of the great gulf between ourselves. We will bridge the gap when we construct a bridge out of biblical and relational principles.

What was established in our efforts of restoration was a legal system of behavior. We showed up on Sunday mornings to perform a system of assembly that was ritualistic and ceremonial. We led ourselves to believe that this would somehow lead us to a rewarding rela-

tionship with God. Assemblies were acted out decently and in order and we closed the assembly. But we all went home with an emptiness we tried to conceal. We knew something was miss-



ing, but we could not identify what it was. We were doing all the right things, but there was a void that all of us felt could not be filled by the performance of a legal system of assembly.

We have sought togetherness through a cultural and ceremonial conformity of all members in one large assembly. However, instead of being brought together into one another's lives, we were being held apart by being brought together solely in large assemblies. Pearse and Matthew were right when they said, "The practice of 'church' in which a large-scale regular meeting is the central feature will not bring us together. Increasingly, it is pulling us further and further apart."^{1:70} Focus solely on the large-assembly system keeps us apart because we have convinced ourselves that this is as close to one another as God wants us to be. But we are wrong, and we know it. Everybody wants close friends. And we want our close friends in Christ.

Ritualistic legalism will not bring us closer to God or our fellow brother or sister in Christ. If it could, then the Pharisees would have been spiritual giants. What many have believed in this historical struggle is that a legal system of Christianity can bring one closer to God and one another. But it will not. Legalism can never deliver continual spiritual growth. It will begin instant growth, but this growth will always end in a spiritual plateau above which one cannot excel. Performance of rituals will not bring one as close to God as the human spirit desires. What will bring perpetual spiritual growth is learning how to interact lovingly with one's brother or sister in Christ. The closer we come to one another, the closer we draw to God.

What house assemblies or small groups can do that performance of large ceremonial assemblies cannot, is bring us into contact with our brothers and sisters on a very personal basis. Jesus said that we would be known for our love of one another (Jn 13:34,35). We would not be known for our ceremonial assemblies. We would not be known for ex-



Legalism Only Produces An Instant Spiritual Growth, But a Growth That Has A Built-in Plateau. citing assemblies. We would be known for loving one another. When members confront one another on a regular basis, love develops as members are forced into dealing with one another's struggles and needs and

enthusiasms. The serendipity of this relationship is a revival in knowing God by knowing how to love one another. Our relationship with God, therefore, is developed by learning to love our brother and sister. He who loves his brother or sister in Christ knows how to love God (See 1 Jn 4:7,8). When we connect with God, we seek to become involved in His kingdom business. The closer we move to Jesus, the more we revive our involvement in His work. The closer we grow to one another, the more spontaneous our care for one another becomes. Is this not how church is to work? It is for this reason that house churches that have no purpose of work will eventually become stagnant and die. If we are truly God's people, we will show our faith by our works (Js 2:18).

C. Revival in personal involvement:

When we live close to people, we get involved in their lives. Consider sitting in someone's living room on Sunday. Across the room is

a widow, an orphan, or a jobless brother who cannot make a payment on his house or pay the bills. Are you going to sit there and not get involved in his or her life? House churches need no "involvement ministers" to take



member's hand to lead them across the living room in order to touch the lives of others. Involvement simply comes naturally as members begin developing relationships with one another. When we start knowing one another, we start loving, and thus start getting involved in one another's lives.

After Jesus had washed the feet of the disciples in John 13, He made a very important statement concerning human nature. *"If you*



know these things, happy are you if you do them" (Jn 13:17). The road to happiness is through involvement in the lives of others. God made us this way. The more we serve, the happier we are. The quickest way for one to get over depression is to find a towel and dirty feet. It works every time.

Members of house churches seek to be involved because they seek to be close to Jesus. They are tired of sitting around with nothing to do other than showing up on Sunday morning to punch in the time clock of the "hour of worship." When one draws closer to his or her brother and sister in Christ, involvement just happens. When love is generated, it must find something to do. It is for this reason that those who are nominal Christians find it very difficult to be members of a house church. There are no back pews in a living room. Everyone is on the front bench in a living room, staring responsibility right in the face.

D. Revival in male leadership:

One of the essential revivals that takes place in house churches is the revitalization of male leadership. Men can no longer idly sit in their hiding places on a pew among a large multitude of others who are doing the same. In a small group meeting, men must assume their role in leading the saints to victory. Regardless of the feminization of leadership in some cultures of the world, **God directed that men take a leading role in the spiritual leadership of the church**. They should assume spiritual leadership in their communities. Since there are no qualifications for female elders and deacons (See 1 Tm 3:1-10), we must assume that God wants men to stop holding down pews and get excited about loving in word and deed. Too many men are hiding in large single-assembly churches singing "standing on the promises" when all they are doing is sittin' on the premises. So where are we in reference to male leadership in the church in societies where men find themselves supposedly too busy for God?

I have discovered that in the industrial/business world, where materialism is rife, that men are often so involved in making money that

they have little time for servicing the needs of others. They have in many cases turned their servicing duties in the church over to the women, and thus sit only in boardrooms to hand down decisions to the women.



The women have put up with this nonsense for too long. They have now decided that they will just make the decisions themselves. Male leaders who are now too busy in their "secular" jobs have agreed to such an arrangement, and thus, church has often become a woman's thing. But this is not God's plan.

One of the interesting characteristics about the three thousand plus cultural groups throughout the continent of Africa is that the church is growing the fastest in those cultures where men play a dominant role both in society, and subsequently, in the church. Men in these societies stand up and lead. They are ahead of the women in the sense that they have taken the responsibility of leadership. When this dominant male leadership is expressed in the church, church growth happens. It happens because men are the leadership of the church and preachers of the gospel. Men are the leaders who take the church forward.

God never intended for lazy men to sit idly by while women run the show and do the work. If a church is to reach its community, Christian men must arise to the occasion and manifest an example to their neighbors a life of godliness and spiritual leadership. Healthy churches have strong male leadership. We do not want the women to slow down. We want the men to catch up and excel in leadership. We need some real men to assume leadership responsibilities and give women something to follow. Thank God for women who have decided to get on with the work of God regardless of the lazy male "leadership" of some churches. We need to get the men going, off the pews and into the highways and hedges of a needy world. We must inject spiritual life into our male leadership. Men must rise up and lead. Rutz was right when he wrote,

Christian men have a general reputation as being less like John Wayne and more like good ol' Charlie Brown. That's why millions of single Christian women would kill rhinoceroses with their bare hands to find what they call a "**real man**." You don't produce "real men" by making them sit in rows and listen for seventy years. You do it my making them stand up and boldly proclaim what's in their hearts and in the Word.

What you had in the fourth century was *the feminization of the church*. It became more suitable for women

than for men. Before that time, men had somewhere to go. Up. With the constant splitting into more and more house churches, leadership needs were heavy and participation was mandatory. Also, persecution



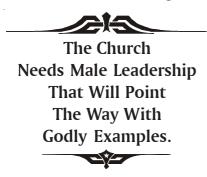
Roger E. Dickson, Biblical Research Library

flushed out the invertebrates [Emphasis mine, R.E.D].^{2:175}

House churches give more men an opportunity to be real men in the church. Instead of the few who do their performances of "leadership" by saying prayers, serving the Lord's Supper, and ushering people in and out of pews, in house churches a multitude of men are called upon to get into service. It is easy to pass off leadership to others by simply passing around a tray of grape juice in a large assembly. But you cannot pass off true leadership when looking across a living room to someone who is desperately in need of your help.

Leaders in house churches learn how to deal with people, and thus they see leadership as leading individuals who are part of the whole to accomplish great things for God. And in this world of confusion and chaos, this is the type of leadership that is needed.

In a world of darkness and chaos, we need leaders, not bosses. We need leaders who will give us an identity of who we are and what we



must do. We need leaders who will support us when we fall, and build us up when we succeed. We need leaders who will point the way with true biblical values that will withstand the darkness in which we have to walk as a church. We need leaders who will invite our partici-

pation in a real life struggle to be victorious as Christians. We need leaders who will give us direction through example, not control through policies and procedures.

The urban church has for too long been stifled by boardroom leaders who have found it easier to meet and decide rather than seek and provide. House churches are bringing a revival in male leadership to the church. It is a refreshing wind of change, one that will take the church to a great victory in this and the decades to come. With anticipation, I await the future.

E. Revival in community contact:

As the urban culture insulates the individual from his neighbors, there is a part of the human spirit that is not fulfilled. A generation of rural dwellers throughout the world have moved to the cities for jobs. In the urban world, the sense of community has come under attack by the nature of urban culture. Walls are built. Burglar alarms are installed. Gates built. Dogs bought. Getting to the front door of the urban house is now a daunting and dangerous task. All of this lifestyle has taken its toll on the human spirit. We have become insular, insulated within the confines of our own homes. In our separate and secluded environment, we have set ourselves up for loneliness

To make matters worse in our urban dwelling, in doing "church" we transport ourselves out of our communities to a "sanctuary" in some far away part of the city where we perform our religious ceremonies. It is there that we find a "sanctuary" from our communities. Once the ceremonies in the "sanctuary" are completed, in the Western culture we return to our conclave via the local restaurant in order to hide away again until the next appointed "hour of worship."

During the bussing years in the American church, Western churches loaded up children everywhere and brought them into the "sanctuary". These children were hauled off out of their communities to "safe" places of worship wherein they were culturally placed into a foreign environment. The invading culture of little people hassled the older culture of the establishment. Our "sanctuaries" were violated. Many young people were converted, but the parents, who were the original target of the method, largely remained unconverted. After a few years of this frustration, buses were sold, and we all settled down in the mainline environment of a religious culture after our making wherein we were undisturbed.

Sometimes learning urban evangelism comes slow. The problem of learning has always been in the fact that we have focused on a method when we should have been considering a revival in our Christianity. By this I mean that we should have been focusing on keeping the salt in the community. Evangelism is not playing church outside the presence of our neighbors. Church is working among our friends and neighbors on a daily basis.

I remember when I was a part of a five family team of evangelists working in the West Indies. My experience there will illustrate the alienating practices of our behavior, which at the time, seemed so right.

All of us moved to the island of Antigua in the West Indies. The island was composed of countless small villages with populations ranging from five hundred to six thousand. The capital, St. Johns, had a population of about 30,000 at the time. It was our goal to establish the church throughout the island. So what do you suppose was our plan of attack? You are right. We were Western missionaries and we planned a Western church establishment. First, we chose the main village in the middle of the island, ironically named All Saints. Second, we found a public meeting hall to which we planned to transport every convert every Sunday morning.

We laid our hands to the plow and went to work. All of us picked up our allotment of members and transported them to the central assembly in the middle of the island, week after week, month after month. We would go to a member's home village, fetch the members, and then cart them off to the village where we desired to have a large assembly. So we as evangelists turned into bus drivers, taking members away from their communities to another community where they did not know a soul.

We bused the students to the teachers when we should have been taking the teachers to the students in their communities. We could have conducted the occasional general celebration assembly at a single location. However, we had come out of a culture that said a local church does not exist unless it comes together in the same assembly on Sunday morning. And besides that, we were trying to build a "big" church with great numbers that met in the same building.

The result of our work was that house churches were never established in the villages from which we transported members. If we would have established house churches in the villages where there was at least one member, I believe the results would have been different. We would have established a model that future generations of the church in Antigua could have followed. Leaders could have been trained to nurture these churches, and thus, the permeating influence of Christians would have stayed in their villages.

The point is that in house churches members seek to stay in their communities where they know the people. They stay where they are needed. If evangelists are needed, bring the evangelists to the communities, do not take the members out of their communities to the evangelist.



In the early eighties when I worked throughout the West Indian islands, it was a common practice for American churches to buy a bus for the local evangelist they supported. He followed our example by driving endlessly throughout the island, picking up members in order to transport them to the local assembly. If I lived there today, I think I would reverse the order of transport. We would transport the evangelist to the people in their communities where a house church would be conducted. In this way, the local church could grow beyond the seating capacity of a bus.

House churches return the church to the local community. As a result, there is a dynamic revival in community outreach. Dynamic groups of believers are reaching out to their neighbors in their communities. The nature of these relational-driven members is a drawing power to the communities in which they meet. When the dynamic atmosphere of the community of God is restored in any community, the impact of the members in the community is tremendous. Members reach out to their neighbors both in word and community activity when they develop a sense of caring for the needs of their neighborhoods. It is as one house church member said to me, "Since we started meeting in our community, my life took on a greater image of Jesus because I had to behave myself before my neighbors."

House assemblies are conducive to the revival of some very important New Testament principles that deal with the Christian's relationship with his or her brothers and sisters in Christ. The advantages move us into our neighborhoods to do things we would not normally do. For example, one sister of a house church I knew loved to bake bread. She used this as her evangelistic door-opener to people in the community. She would make a couple loaves of fresh bread, take them out of the oven, and then go immediately to a neighbor's home. She would knock at the door, and hold these steaming, aroma-filled loaves before her. When the door was opened, all barriers were broken down as the aroma of the bread created an instant subject of conversation. "I've just baked this bread for you. Could I talk to you about the Bread of Life?" I do not think she ever had someone say no.

Here is another example of how the house assembly fellowship moved a South African group to reestablish relationships with those of another culture whom they had formerly shunned during the apartheid years of South African history. This



house group decided as a group of predominately white cultured South Africans to visit a religious group in their area on Sunday morning. The group they selected was of another race and culture which they had discriminated against during the apartheid years. When they arrived at the place of meeting, the representative of the house group asked to make a statement before the congregation. He was granted the request, and subsequently made his way to the front of the assembly. He said, "We as a group just want everyone here to know that we apologize for the apartheid actions of our forefathers and ourselves in the past." After he made that statement, the church jumped for joy. Praising of God sounded out in the building and tears flowed down cheeks. One of the members of the church said before all, "We used to hate you. But now we see you are just like us. We love you, too!"

The advantages of small house assemblies are actually biblical

concepts that are restored through the dynamic of Christians meeting in an environment wherein the ministry of each member is discovered, empowered and utilized. Members are empowered and reconnected with their neighborhoods. House assembly is a revival to be and do what Paul said in Galatians 3:26-28, "... *for you are all one in Christ Jesus*." And to the Ephesians he wrote, "*For He is our peace, who has made both one, and has broken down the middle wall of separation*" (Ep 2:14). House assemblies seek to break down walls of separation.

Chapter 24

RESTORING JESUS AS LORD

Paul wrote that the "*husband is the head of the wife as Christ also is the head of the church*" (Ep 5:23). Headship means that Jesus is the center of reference, the One to whom we look for relationship and direction. Jesus came in order to be our mediating link with the Father. We connect with the Father by connecting with Jesus. Thus the only way to the Father is through Jesus (Jn 14:6). It is imperative that Christians maintain a direct channel to the Father through Jesus. Doing this means that Jesus must remain the center of reference for the individual Christian. No one has a right to step in between the Chief Shepherd and His flock. If we do, we are sheep stealers.

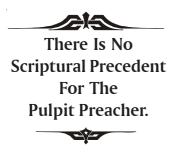
There are often subtle attacks against the principle that Jesus is the head of the church, the mediator between God and man. What has often happened in the religious world around us is that some man or organization of men has been established as an authority between the individual and Jesus. Whether a pope, priest, pastor or preacher, church leaders in the religious world in which we live have often taken the place of the individual's direct relationship with Jesus. By their behavior and relationship to "their" flock, these leaders have worked as heads of the church, whether local or universal. It is for this reason that we see in the religious world a concerted effort to get by the control of men in order to get to the Man, the man Jesus Christ. People have come to the realization that in order to have a personal relationship with Jesus, they must step around earthly religious organizations and popish leaders in order to receive direct permission from Jesus through His word to carry on with their lives.

Martin Luther was one of the first men of the Reformation Movement to seek to bring down the human barrier of authoritarian religious organizations between man and God. He saw in the Catholic Church a dominance of the priest around which everything in the local parish was maintained. He even saw this portrayed in the very church buildings of the local Catholic Church. Where the Catholic priest read the liturgy was from a rostrum that could be accessed only by a staircase. Luther wanted to bring the priest closer to the people.

Luther had one of those high pulpits placed in the front and center of the church building where the altar had been. That was new. Brand new. And so, dear reader, was born the mighty Protestant pulpit. A step in the right direction, definitely – but still a device that centralized the monopolized sharing and communication, leaving it strictly in the hands of paid employees with professional training – where we sit silently in the pews [Emphasis mine, R.E.D.].^{2:59,60}

Luther saw the problem of dominant religious control, but did not go far enough. He only put a "protestant" construction on the place of the preacher. And thus, the rise of the prominent position of the preacher was born for centuries to follow. If we think the church is immune to the perpetuation of the clergy, then we are not paying attention, or we are so accustomed to the practice that we see no problem.

There is no scriptural precedent for the local preacher as he exists today in the church. This does not make the concept of the located preacher wrong. It was simply not the manner by which we see preachers announcing the gospel to unbelievers in the first century. The dominant priest was born out of the Catholic Church. The dominant



clergy was born out of the Protestant Reformation. Our preacher's center-of-reference to the local church was born out of our infatuation with preachers and a desire to be like the nations around us. When we entered the industrial/business revolution, and then advanced into the postmodern business genera-

tion, we found it easier to hire things done rather than doing them ourselves. But the point is that we can search throughout the Scriptures and not find one syllable that supports the clergy/pastoral syndrome that prevails among us today in so many churches. The New Testament teaches the personal responsibility and ministry of every member to carry out his or her service to the Lord. One cannot hire out his or her responsibility to another.

Archaeologists have given the church a wealth of discoveries concerning the history of the church between A.D. 100 and 323. In fact, it is estimated that over 25,000 documents and artifacts have been discovered that make reference to early Christian practices. These documents and artifacts refer to church activities and events. In reference to these discoveries, Edwards wrote,

Not one of these 25,000 pieces of papyrus, etc., makes any reference to a clergyman. There is absolutely no mention of a "minister" or "priest" or "pastor" or any other term for any office or any kind of leadership.

The leaders did exist, but their role certainly didn't fill up any space in the brains of the believers who wrote the letters! Or their lives! *To the early Christian, his church elder (bishop) was a "regular guy" who was an integral "part of the family," not a member of a special class that was ever, ever referred to by title.*^{2:51}

Though one cannot teach that it is wrong to have a hired "preacher" for one specific church, most people know the negatives of this arrangement. The point is that we should not fire all our preachers, but recognize the problems of having them hired and held up in a single congregation. Once we recognize the problems, we need to deal with them. I know of very few preachers who want to be clergymen. Preachers know their Bibles well enough to know that if we allow the church to move us into being clergymen, we are headed for trouble, if we are not already there.

What is even more interesting concerning this scenario is the fact that in all our controversies, there is little discussion concerning the prevalence of the clergy among us. It is interesting to note that voices that question the position and power of the local preacher have arisen among many religious groups. Writing from the restoration urges of the present protestant world, Edwards was right when he stated the following concerning the rise of the "pastor" in the denominational world:

From that day on [the birth of the dominant "pastor" in Germany with Luther], people have written literally millions of books on every theological issue conceivable to the mind of man, yet almost no one has closely questioned the Biblical basis for the all-in-one pastor, a man who operates as the heart and soul of the church. He is just there.^{2:69}

From the sixteenth century onward the modern pastor has become an essential in the established church of the protestant world. He is not there because of a biblical principle that such should exist. He is there out of tradition.

One of the primary turns of emphasis away from the headship of Jesus has been the rise of the importance and dominance of the local preacher in the last five hundred years since Luther. Born out of the Reformation Movement wherein great men as Luther took a stand against

the dominance of the Catholic Church hierarchy, preachers have come to the front of the Protestant Reformation in order to guarantee that there is no return to such an autocratic religious system of religion. However, this has left the Protestant



Jesus Must Remain The Center-of-Reference For The Church.

world with a dominant figure around which the local church is centered, and from which all information and exegesis is professionally disseminated to the people. Preachers and preaching have been the vehicle that carries along the existence of the local congregation. As a result, the preacher has often become a one-man band in the local church, whose rise or fall depends on his skillful ability to maintain the local show. Pearse and Matthews wrote, "The centrality of preaching casts the destiny of each church on the abilities of perhaps just one person; in countless cases over the past few decades, the rise and decline of a congregation has hinged almost entirely on the ability of its main preacher to draw a crowd."^{1:107} The problem is that "the centrality of preaching means the centrality of preachers, and turns the fellowship of Christian family into a public institution"^{1:108}

We have our professionals among us. What preacher has a chance of preaching for an urban congregation in the Western church if he has no degree from a school of theology. Even in Africa the concept of the clergy prevails as men seek to be "fulltime". "Fulltime" often means that one is part of a religious elite group, and thus, separated from the local preacher who supports himself through tentmaking. There is a strong urge among our brethren to be "fulltime" because of the strong sense of clergyism that has come into the church via the influence of the religious world.

We must take the preceding problem one step further. In the church, there is often another obstacle that stands between the individual and Jesus. Smith explained,

Certainly, I'm also aware that, for every congregation where the governing board of elders weakly follows behind the CEO-minister, there are an equal number of "elderships" which are so possessive of their power and authority that the preacher is the last to learn what's going on, and has no say whatsoever in matters affecting the congregation. His job is to perform every piece in the repertoire of the "one-man band," and then go off into a corner. Far from his presence being required at elders' meetings, the preacher is regularly excluded unless specifically summoned.

Whether the elders take an active or a passive role as overseers, one thing is painfully obvious: Each model is typically characterized by an absence of involvement on the part of the elders in directly feeding their flocks. That's the preacher's job. That's why we hire him. That's why we require him to be specially trained in religious studies and be an above-average communicator [Emphasis mine, R.E.D.].^{6:195}

So it is either the preacher, if no elders are present, or the elders if they conduct themselves in the unbiblical manner of being a board of directors for the church. In the midst of all this power, where does the individual member stand in this hierarchy in his personal and individual relationship with Jesus? Does any member have direct submission to Jesus as his only head? Or, must we always view ourselves channeling our submission through the approval of someone on earth?

If tens of thousands of members function today in submission to Jesus throughout the world without elders and preachers in their midst, what would change in their relationship with Jesus if elders were designated and a preacher hired? Have you ever wondered about this? I was once working with a church that was in the process of designating elders. In discussions concerning the designation of one particular person to be an elder, one of the members said of the person, "I don't want to appoint him as an elder because I don't want him ruling over me." I see something tragically wrong with the belief that is assumed in this statement.

Since in the Third World most of our congregations are without elders, the preacher for the individual congregation is often dominant. He is in control. He is supposed to know the Bible, be at all meetings, have the final say in all matters of work and belief. Whether he likes it or not, we want to make our preacher our pastor and the master of ceremonies of every church function.

In mission efforts this scenario is exemplified if the local preacher for a specific local church is on foreign support. The local members usually have no say in what the foreign supported preacher does or how he behaves among them. His dominance is rein-

forced by his confidence in the fact that his financial livelihood does not depend on the local church. The longer the local preacher remains at a par-



ticular local church in this manner, the more dominant he becomes. He becomes in effect the head of the local church. He is the center-ofreference, the one around whom the local program thrives. He is the pastor and clergyman.

When shepherds lord over the flock, sheep creep around in fear because they have been stolen from God. They are more afraid of what the governing authority might say than what Jesus commands. And since the governing authority has become the center-of-reference for the local church, then it has become the head of the church.

One of the primary factors that has fueled the house church movement throughout the world is a desire of the individual believer to establish direct contact with Jesus as the only head of the church. This is especially true in Western cultures where individuals are more freespirited, and thus, have grown weary of the dominant power figures and governing bodies that politically control local churches. What has been interesting in the house church growth in South Africa among all religious groups is that it has come primarily out of the white-collar culture. It is this culture that is aggressive and independent. These are often the pioneers who have the leadership to stand up in their churches and say enough is enough. As a result, great waves of people have moved away from traditional-oriented religions in order to rediscover freedom in Christ.

House churches I have contacted in this country that have originated out of the religious world are driven by their desire to reconnect with Jesus, reinvestigate His word, reestablish a relationship with one another, and be independent from religious power bodies that stifle the human spirit. They seek freedom in Christ, to be free to allow God to lead them instead of institutional religion. This sounds like a restoration movement to me. The tragedy of this exciting movement is not with the movement itself, but with those who have claimed to have a patent on "restoration movements." What will happen in the South African/ Namibian restoration is that it will continue to develop. But in nurturing such movements, we must not become so sectarian that we denominate ourselves. Sometimes we become so sectarian that it is difficult for us to any longer identify true restoration movements. As we circle around and become that from which we fled, will God raise up another refreshing wind of restoration that will have a greater appeal to the world of Christendom than those who have grown sectarian?

Chapter 25

RESTORING EVANGELISTS TO THE LOST

The work of an evangelist is evangelism. And evangelism takes place among the lost. Once evangelism is accomplished, then the saved must be edified. It is then time for the shepherds of the flock to do their work of teaching. The New Testament pictures the evangelist on the move in accomplishing the work of evangelism. But there is also the work of edifying new converts. This would be a temporary work of the evangelist, otherwise he would no longer be an evangelist. Luke was left in Philippi (See At 16; 17:1). Paul left the evangelist Titus in Crete in order to "set things in order" (Ti 1:5). Paul left Timothy and Silas in Macedonia when he went on to Athens and Corinth. These evangelists were left in order to edify the newly established churches in Berea and Thessalonica and many other places. After they had accomplished their task of edifying the newly established churches, they went on their way to continue their work of preaching the gospel to the lost in other places.

Paul wrote 1 Timothy while Timothy was in Ephesus (1 Tm 1:3). However, after two to three years in the region of Ephesus, working among the churches in the area, Timothy moved on to other areas by the time 2 Timothy was written (Compare 2 Tm 4:12). The work of the evangelists among the early churches was to move among the churches while reaching out to preach the gospel to unbelievers (3 Jn 5-8). They were to do their work of church establishment and then move on to establish other churches through the preaching of the gospel to the lost. This is God's system for world evangelism. When we restore this system of evangelism, we will be surprised as to what will happen. We will restore first century church growth throughout the world.

A. Keeping evangelists among the lost:

The generic Greek word *kerusso* means "to cry out" or "to proclaim as a herald." In the context of the preaching of the gospel, the use of the word *kerusso* is in reference to "crying out" or "proclaiming"

the good news of the gospel to **the lost** (Mk 16:15). The other Greek word that is used in the New Testament in reference to preaching is *euanggelizo* (evangelize). According to the definition of this word, the evangelist is one who "announces good news." Good news (the gospel) is announced to **the lost**. The work of the preacher,



the evangelist, therefore, is to herald the good news of the gospel to the lost. His primary work is among the unbelievers, not the believers.

It is for the preceding reason that the nature of the work of the evangelist, the preacher, is to move among the lost. If he is held up by the saved, then he ceases being a preacher or evangelist to the lost. He becomes a teacher. And some in the church are designated to be teachers (See At 13:1). They are not evangelists to the lost, but teachers of the sheep. I believe we have in the past misused these New Testament words. We have used words as "preacher" and "evangelist" to refer to those who should actually be called "teachers". As some have misused the word "pastor" to refer to what we have called "preachers", we should be using the word "teacher" to refer to those to whom we call "preacher".

In any particular region, the house church arrangement keeps evangelists moving among churches for purposes of edification. But the house church mission motivates evangelists to help start other churches. No evangelist is left with one church in order to become the center-ofreference around whom that church is built. House church members do not allow such to happen simply because assemblies outgrow houses, and thus, new assemblies must be started.

As members permeate communities with their lives, contacts are made and evangelists must continually announce the good news to the lost in the community. The nature of the house church assembly keeps the evangelist involved in the lives of the lost, while at the same time edifying the converted.

What often occurs is that as soon as members grow into a large assembly, they feel the need for a professional to be the authority in teaching the group. The evangelist is then restricted in his work among



the lost, shut up in an office, and confined to prepare professionally structured sermons for the sheep. There is nothing wrong with this, but he is no longer a biblically defined evangelist or preacher. He is a teacher, for his work is among the believers. And we need those who are skilled in this minis-

try. We need skilled teachers to minister the word of God to the flock. At the same time, we need preachers and evangelists who are working among the unbelievers. In God's plan for world evangelism, there is a gift and ministry for everyone.

B. Keeping shepherds with the sheep:

We must remember that it is the work of the shepherds (pastors) to feed the flock (At 20:28). It is their responsibility to work among the sheep in order to give examples of spiritual conduct and guidance (1 Pt 5:1-5). It is the work of the evangelists to preach the gospel to the lost. When an evangelist is moved into the work of being the single preacher for a congregation, the members of the congregation naturally center their attention on this person. But this arrangement often hinders church growth because there are only so many people one person can handle in reference to teaching, problem solving, and counseling. When this one person cannot tend to the needs of all the people, then those who are needing nurturing, but do not receive it, often fall off the edges. Churches usually grow to be between seventy-five and one hundred in attendance when they are centered on one individual who is expected to serve all the needs of the church. When a preacher becomes the center-of-reference around whom a single-assembly church functions, then the growth of that church for which he ministers is determined by his ability to minister to a certain number of people. The larger the group, the more disconnected he becomes from the individuals of the group. Once the group numbers in the hundreds, he has evolved into the professional "pulpit minister" who is often disconnected from the individuals of the group as a whole.

The preceding is one reason why there are always to be a plurality of elders (pastors, shepherds) of the church in any area where the church is established (At 14:23). If there is only one teacher – the work of the elders (pastors) – then the growth of the church is stymied. When a plurality of teaching elders are working with a growing and regionally expanding church, then fantastic things happen. One reason for the plurality of elders is in the fact that several house churches were established in urban centers in the first century. In order for much teaching to be done, there had to be many teaching elders.

More mature Christians will have fewer problems, and thus, the sole evangelist will be able to work with more people. However, we



must keep in mind that when a congregation begins to number from seventy-five to one hundred new Christians, the evangelist must cease being an evangelist. He does not have the time to be an evangelist because his time is consumed

with the spiritual needs of the new members. He becomes a "pastor."

When the evangelist turns to pastoral work, another negative growth behavioral pattern sets into the single-assembly church. The

young men who are now growing up in the single-assembly church see the preacher as a "pastor" who is working with the problems of a single congregation. He is not viewed as one who is working primarily with the lost. When they grow up, they will desire to follow the example of the "local pastor" of the congregation. They will see the work of the preacher as the work they saw in the preacher under whose direction they were matured. And thus, the evangelistic outreach of the local church in any particular area becomes less because the evangelist turned to pastoral work in the local church. He loses his mission. The church is led to focus on its own problems as the evangelist focuses on the church. Such churches thus become introverted. And after a few generations, the church becomes lukewarm. Death sets in.

It is important that we keep our evangelists focused on the lost. For the sake of world evangelism we must keep the majority of our "fulltime", church-supported preachers in the field of the lost of the world. Only by doing this will we continue to establish churches throughout the world.

C. Keeping evangelists on the move:

In Luke 4:42-44 Jesus went to a solitary place in order to pray. However, the people sought Him. When they found Him they came to Him and asked that He not leave them. Churches do the same with



evangelists. Churches want to claim a preacher. They want to steal preachers away from the lost in order that he might minister to their own needs alone. Introverted churches rob the world of world evangelists.

But Jesus would not allow Himself to be stolen from the world. He would not allow the people to divert Him from His destiny. At the beginning of His ministry, Luke recorded that "*the people sought Him, and came to Him.* And they tried to keep Him from leaving them" (Lk 4:42). Churches do the same with preachers. But Jesus would reply to these churches, "*I must preach the kingdom of God to other cities also, because for this purpose I was sent*" (Lk 4:43).

Our problem is that too many preachers have been held up by churches who want "their preacher." The preacher cannot turn them down because the local church is the source of his salary. The lost thus lose a herald of good news and the church gains a professional "pastor."

But Jesus was not diverted from His destiny. After He said to the people that the good news must be preached in other cities, Luke records, "And He preached in the synagogues of Galilee" (Lk 4:44). The point is that He continued to go forth to announce the gospel of the kingdom to the "unbelievers" who gathered in synagogues. Churches must be reminded that they need to let their preachers go to the lost. Preachers need to be let go in order that they can go into all the world. What would happen in world evangelism if every church that had a fulltime preacher suddenly arose together from their pews on Sunday morning and said to the preacher, "We have decided to release you to the world. Choose your nation in the world and we will buy your plane ticket. Go!"?

House churches keep evangelists on the move. The churches can be nurtured, and then, the evangelist can move on to other churches who are seeking to be established in their communities. Through the encouragement of existing churches, the evangelist can be urged to establish new churches. As individual churches collectively support the evangelist (3 Jn), the evangelist can be fully supported to move among the churches. This is what Gaius was doing with those evangelists who were coming by the church in his house in 3 John. He was sending them on their way. Others were doing the same. The Greek word *propempo* is used in 3 John 6 in reference to what Gaius was doing for evangelism. The word refers to financially supporting one on his journey. Gaius was financially supporting the evangelists as they went on their way among the churches. For this reason, the evangelist can be supported by the churches, as well as be among the lost. No one church should claim or steal the evangelist away from his calling as an evangelist to the lost. If one house church would seek to dominate the work of the evangelist, other house churches can kindly remind them to keep him on the move. This system of preacher support worked in the first century. The church grew rapidly when evangelists were kept on the move. Church growth will happen today as it did in the first century if we are willing to restore the saints to their homes and the evangelists to the lost.

Chapter 26

TRAVELING WITH CHURCH PLANTERS

When we connect the methodology of house church establishment with the historical event of what is explained in Acts 8:4, then we have the answer to why the early church grew so fast. Luke recorded, *"Therefore, those who were scattered abroad went everywhere preaching the word."* They went forth and preached. But what happened after they preached and converted the lost? They established house churches throughout the world. This was their method of world evangelism. Church establishment was not bound by buildings. The reason the early church was so successful in planting churches was because churches could be planted in every house.

What is explained in this chapter is an example of a Christian couple going everywhere preaching the word and starting house churches. Add to their number thousands of others as in Acts 8:4 who were going forth as they did, and you have the answer to why Paul could write in A.D. 61,62 that the gospel by his time of writing from prison to the Colossians had gone forth into all the world (See Cl 1:23). Such was possible during the short period between the establishment of the church

in A.D. 30 and Paul's writing in A.D. 61,62. World evangelism was possible in that brief thirty years because of the "house church methodology" of the early sojourning Christians who were scattered abroad.

If we can understand how the Christian couple that is identified in this chapter actually functioned in their traveling about the world, then I believe we can assume that we can do the same today. This is necessary for two reasons. First, through job transfers, or just economics, people move from one place to another. In our moving about, we must not forget that all of us are missionaries. We are people with a mission, the mission of preaching the gospel to the world, and then, assembling the baptized disciples into functioning fellowship groups.

Second, we are living in a world that is continuing to shut the door to the "professional" missionary. More countries every year refuse visas to religious workers. Therefore, it is imperative that we use our jobs as a means of support to go into all the world. Everywhere Christians move, they must see themselves with a mission to establish a church in their own house. Instead of just looking in phone directories to find the

church in an area to which we move, we need to focus on every member starting a house church wherever he or she goes. If every

Every Christian A Missionary, Every Person A Mission Field.

member of the church who has moved to any country of the world does as the Christian couple of this chapter, would it not be amazing to see what could exist in the world today? How many thousands of pages would be in the phone directory for contacts for the church in every city?

A. An evangelistic team is born:

Our thrilling New Testament example of first century house-tohouse evangelism and church establishment begins in Pontus. It begins with the birth of a Jew whose father and mother evidently instructed him well in the Scriptures and in whom they instilled a reverence for God. We do not know the parents' names. We do not know the specific city, town or village of birth of this individual. All we know is that this devout Jew was born in the northern region of Asia Minor which was known at the time as Pontus.

The first mention we have of Pontus in the New Testament is in Acts 2 during the Pentecost of A.D. 30 in the city of Jerusalem. On that exciting day of change in the nation of Israel, there were Jews in Jerusalem who had come from all over the Roman world in order to remember the passing over (Passover) by the Angel of God who caused death to the firstborn of Egypt, but deliverance of Israel from their captivity. Fifty days earlier on the A.D. 30 Passover a special passing over of the sins of man had taken place. The Lamb that was offered was the Son of God on a cross outside Jerusalem. The message of the crucified and resurrected Son of God was first preached on the Pentecost of A.D. 30. On this day it could have been that the parents of our resident of Pontus were first present with those who had come from that area for the annual Passover/Pentecost feast in Jerusalem (At 2:9). If he were present, he was a very young man, for the A.D. 30 event happened over twenty years before we encounter him in Corinth.

There were some from Pontus who went to Jerusalem and returned after the A.D. 30 Passover/Pentecost feast. They would have certainly reported in the Pontus synagogue the spectacular events that occurred that year in the city of Jerusalem. Even if he had not personally made a trip to Jerusalem during one of the Passover/Pentecost feasts, Aquila, who was from Pontus, would have grown up knowing of the "sect" of Christians. He would have heard stories of the unique happening at the A.D. 30 Passover/Pentecost. Every year after that annual Passover/Pentecost feast, he would hear stories from returnees from Jerusalem, for the apostles stayed in Jerusalem for about twenty years and met Jews who came to the event every year. Miracles happened in A.D. 31, 32, 33, etc. as the word was confirmed by the Lord. Every Jew who returned after an annual Passover/Pentecost feast had stories to tell people in synagogues throughout the world. I would guess that hardheaded Jewish leaders in the synagogues throughout the world just gritted their teeth for a couple months after every Passover/Pentecost feast. How many stories did Aquila hear while growing up in the synagogue in Pontus?

B. Fellow-workers come together:

In the New Testament, we first meet Aquila in Corinth. With his wife, Priscilla, Aquila had **recently** arrived in Corinth after being driven out of Rome by Claudius around A.D. 50. We meet this couple as refugees in a city that was known for its immoral religious practices in reference to the idol god Aphrodite, the goddess of love. Luke records the historical encounter with the apostle Paul in Acts 18:1-3.

After these things Paul departed from Athens and came to **Corinth**. And he found a certain **Jew** named **Aquila**, born in **Pontus**, having **recently** come from Italy with his wife **Priscilla**, because **Claudius** had commanded all Jews to leave Rome. And **he came to them**. And because he was of the **same trade**, **he stayed with them and worked**, for by trade **they** were **tentmakers**.

When Paul arrived in any city, he evidently went straight to the market place in order to buy thread and material for making tents. This visit to the market place in Corinth could have been either before or after going to the synagogue. In either place he could have met Aquila and Priscilla. Whatever the case, Aquila and Priscilla had recently set up house, and thus, Paul "came to them" for lodging. Because of their devout nature, there was an immediate relationship developed between these three that would last throughout the remainder of Paul's life.

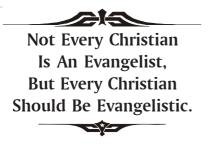
We do not know if Aquila and Priscilla were Christians at the time Paul met them in Corinth. They could have been. After all, Aquila could have been in the company of those Jews who visited Jerusalem twenty years before in A.D. 30. Or, he could have encountered the apostles there in any subsequent Passover/Pentecost visit after A.D. 30, for the apostles remained in Jerusalem for approximately twenty years

after A.D. 30. Or, he could have been one of those from the city of Rome who made the same annual visits to Jerusalem for Passover and Pentecost (At 2:10). Luke does not inform us as to when Aquila and Priscilla obeyed the gospel. What we do know, however, is that Paul "came to them" because they were very receptive to his message and work.

C. Aquila and Priscilla become fellow workers:

It is in Corinth that our odyssey with this couple begins. Beginning with the encounter of the three devout believers in Corinth, their friendship with one another grew to the point that Paul later referred to them as "fellow workers." This was the same term that he used in reference to all who worked in the preaching and teaching of the gospel (Rm 16:3).

Now it is significant to understand that both Aquila and Priscilla were tentmakers. Luke records that "they" were of the same trade as Paul. It was a situation, therefore, where Priscilla could say to Aquila, "Go preach with Paul, I can finish this tent." Or, Aquila could have said to Priscilla, "Do your ministry. I will finish the tent." Their union in



marriage was matched by their union in business, which prepared them for the great work they were about to set out on after their months together with Paul in establishing house churches throughout the city of Corinth.

D. Aquila and Priscilla move to Ephesus:

From Corinth we move on to Ephesus. Aquila and Priscilla stayed about eighteen months longer in Corinth after meeting Paul. Their next movement was on to Ephesus where they stayed while Paul went on to Jerusalem (At 18:18-21). Paul was in a hurry to be in Jerusalem for the Passover/Pentecost feast, knowing that Jews from all the Roman world would again be there. After an initial visit to the Ephesian synagogue to reason with the Jews, he caught the first ship out of Ephesus that was headed for Palestine. Aquila, Priscilla and Paul, therefore, must be given credit for the establishment of the church in Ephesus. However, Aquila and Priscilla must be given credit for the continued edification of the newly established churches through their teaching.

Though Aquila and Priscilla started the church in their house, they continued to meet in the synagogue. Since the Jewish synagogue was a community center for the Jews and a place where one had the opportunity to hear the Old Testament Scriptures read, it would only be natural that they would continue meeting in the synagogue. As long as they were allowed to meet there they would have an opportunity to affirm that Jesus of Nazareth was the fulfillment of prophecies concerning the Messiah that were read every Sabbath. So there they were every Sabbath, possibly being an irritant to those Jews who would not accept Jesus as the fulfillment of Messianic prophecy.

On one of these Sabbaths a powerful speaker from North Africa was visiting. He was allowed to speak, and from his oration, Aquila and Priscilla learned that he, either personally or through others, had encountered John the Baptist (At 18:24,25). After this speech, and with humble dignity, Aquila and Priscilla took Apollos aside and "*explained to him the way of God more accurately*" (At 18:26). The powerful and eloquent Alexandrian preacher thus received instruction from the humble tentmakers, and then, at the possible advice of Aquila and Priscilla, went on to Corinth (At 18:27,28).

In Acts 18 Luke records that Paul made his trip to Palestine and Syria. He arrived again in Ephesus on his third missionary journey. Though Luke does not mention the presence of the missionary couple Aquila and Priscilla in Ephesus in Acts 19, we know that they are still there at the time Paul returned on his third journey. From Ephesus around A.D. 54,55, Paul probably wrote the 1 Corinthian letter (1 Co 16:8). In 1 Corinthians 16:19 Paul wanted the Corinthians to know that a special couple who was dear to his heart sent their greetings to the church. "*The churches of Asia greet you.* Aquila and Priscilla greet you heartily in the Lord, with the church that is in their house."

It would only be natural for Aquila and Priscilla to send their greetings back to brothers and sisters they had labored with in the establishment of the Corinthian church. Significantly, in the 1 Corinthians 16:19 passage Paul makes a statement to the fact that Aquila and Priscilla continued to do what personal evangelists do, that is, establish and maintain an assembly (church) of God's people in their home. Since the church of Ephesus met throughout the city in the homes of Christians, Aquila and Priscilla led in doing the same. They were the type of Christians who drew people to themselves, and thus, an assembly of Christians met in their home on a regular basis.

E. Aquila and Priscilla move to Rome.

From Ephesus Aquila and Priscilla moved on. Between A.D. 56 and 59, from somewhere in Asia Minor or Macedonia, Paul wrote a letter to the church in Rome. We do not know exactly where he was when he wrote the letter. In the letter, he mentions our missionary couple

whom we would not expect to be back in the city from which they were driven by Claudius. But there they were. In Romans 16:3-5 Paul wrote, "*Greet Priscilla and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus, who risked their own*



necks for my life, to whom not only I give thanks, but also all the churches of the Gentiles. Likewise greet the church that is in their house."

These "fellow workers" of Paul are again on the move. They had manifested their bravery in Asia Minor, for in some way Aquila risked the neck of Priscilla and Priscilla risked the neck of Aquila in a lifethreatening event that almost claimed the life of Paul (1 Co 16:9; see 2 Co 11:23-27). We do not know what happened. We only know that this couple was very courageous in their defense of Paul. Fellow workers watch one another's backs.

By the time of the writing of the letter to the Romans, therefore, the reputation of Aquila and Priscilla had gone throughout all the churches of the Gentiles. And again, while in Rome they went to work by setting up a meeting of the church in their house. They were fellow workers for the preaching of the gospel wherever they went.

F. Aquila and Priscilla move on from Rome:

After the writing of the Roman letter, Paul finished his third missionary journey in Jerusalem where he was arrested around A.D. 59. He was imprisoned for two years in a Caesarean jail (At 24:27). From Caesarea he was sent to Rome where he was imprisoned for two more years in A.D. 61 - 63 (At 28:30). It was from Rome that Paul wrote



Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians and Philemon. In none of these letters does he mention Aquila and Priscilla with him in Rome. Evidently, they had left Rome before Paul's first imprisonment of A.D. 61 -

63. We would assume, therefore, that as

good fellow workers who sought to preach the gospel to the world, they were again on the move to another location.

From his first Roman imprisonment, Paul was undoubtedly released. From Rome he went to Crete with Titus (Ti 1:5). From there he went to Ephesus and through Macedonia. He was again arrested and taken to Rome. It was during this second imprisonment in A.D. 67 that he was eventually beheaded. Either immediately before his second arrest by the Roman State or during the second imprisonment, he knew his end was near. He thus wrote two final letters, one to Titus and the other to Timothy. In these two letters he made his final remarks for all of us.

Timothy was somewhere in Asia Minor, but not in Ephesus, when

he received the 2 Timothy letter. Paul had sent Tychicus to Ephesus, and thus, Timothy was not there (2 Tm 4:12). We are not told where Timothy was when he received the letter. However, regardless of where he was, Aquila and Priscilla were with him or in the area. Paul wrote, "*Greet Prisca* and Aquila, and the household of Onesiphorus" (2 Tm 4:19).

Paul's fellow workers were again working together. At the close of his life, Timothy, Aquila and "Prisca" were together continuing what Paul had invested in them. It is significant to note in this personal letter that Paul greets Priscilla as "Prisca." In formal letters to churches, it was the formal name "Priscilla." But in a personal letter to Timothy in the evening of his life, Paul resorts to his special nickname for a beloved sister who was a faithful companion in many trials throughout their ap-

The Spiritual Heritage We Must Leave Our Children Is The Desire And Ability To Start House Churches In Their Own Homes. proximately seventeen years of labor together to preach the gospel to the world. The use of the nickname sparks countless thoughts in our minds of times Aquila, Prisca and Paul spent together discussing their work of pricking their fingers with tentmaking

needles and pricking the hearts of men with the gospel. It would have been great to have just been in their presence. They were all fellow workers in the kingdom business of Jesus. Paul, Titus, Timothy, Aquila, Prisca, and Silas all fall into that category of heroes who maintained the faith in the midst of extreme difficulty to lay the foundation upon which we stand today. They established small groups of Christians wherever they went. We today are the heritage of their faithful work.

The responsibility of carrying on in house church establishment will be the heritage that we must leave with our children. If they grow up in our homes in a Bible-study centered environment, they will naturally know how to start house churches when they grow up and go into all the world. I think one of the greatest heritages we can leave our children is the ability to start a church in their own homes.

Chapter 27

FROM HERE TO THE FUTURE

It is difficult to explain a particular experience to one who has not experienced the same as you. Experiences are personal, almost unique to each individual since they are interpreted differently by the uniqueness of each of us. It is for this reason that I have always had a difficult time explaining to single-assembly members the experience of a small group environment if they have never participated in such. It is as if we are struggling across a cultural barrier that seems to be impossible to cross. I do not say this arrogantly. I have just found that house church members go through an exciting experience of discovery when they first become participants in a small group. It is an experience they all have difficulty in explaining to others. It is simply something that is seen in the brightness of their behavior and their dedication to the group. In fact, I have found that single-assembly members are often intimidated by the zeal for fellowship that is expressed by house church members. It is as if they see something in house church members they want, but are not willing to make the sacrifice to have because they are so locked into a traditional culture of religion.

The communication concerning the nature of the house church environment is easier with those who belong to small single-assembly congregations. Members of these churches have a head start over those who have been consumed with the Western obsession for large assemblies. Nevertheless, I pray that in some way I have communicated to you in this book the greatness of being small in assembly and practical in our Christianity. Large congregations are not obtained by trying to get everyone under one roof. They are built by getting everyone into small groups throughout the communities in which the members live.

In many ways, it is easier for the postmodern generation to tran-

sition to the experiential dynamic of the house church. It is easier for them because of their desire to be relational in their Christian experience. Since multiple-assembly churches seek to develop a ministry for everyone, small churches have the advantage of growing large by remaining small in their assemblies. They can do this because they have always had a ministry for everyone. Everyone has felt a part of the thirty-five to fifty member church.

There is no emphasis in the New Testament on large single-assembly churches. This modern-day obsession is not a part of either the methodology or dreams of the early Christians. In fact, the lack of discussion in the New Testament in reference to large singleassembly churches would lead us to believe that the Lord's concern is not to see how many we can huddle together into a large group. On the contrary, the emphasis in the New Testament is on "one another". The

larger the assembly-orientation of a single-assembly church, the weaker the emphasis is usually on "one another" relationships. If large single-assembly churches do not have house churches, they will continue to struggle to bring relationships into



the members' everyday Christianity. Since many single-assembly churches have now come to realize this, there seems to be a change from focusing on large assemblies to smaller, more personal encounters of members. This is happening even in large single-assembly churches. Those large single-assembly churches that ignore the need for relational and interactive Christianity will struggle in the future.

We know where we are in reference to Christianity in these times. We have our buildings. We have made excruciating payments throughout the years to build and maintain the same. We have thus maintained a special sacrificial attachment to the monument we have constructed. At the same time, we have distanced ourselves from one another within the confines of our monuments. So where do we go from here?

We live in a drastically changing world. It is making greater

cultural changes than it has in the last five hundred years. The world, in the metaphor of John the apostle, is a restless "sea" that is going through a metaphorical hurricane. In all the currents and waves, leaders are often disillusioned. Frustrated. At wit's end. So where do we go from



here? Out of chaos always comes something new. In fact, chaos is society's subliminal means by which to reconstruct itself for future generations. Wise leadership will see the chaos, not as a ruin of everything we

know, but as an opportunity for surfing the waves to new conquests. Social chaos brings new dimensions that must be faced by the church in order to reach the lost.

A. The rough road to restore relational Christianity:

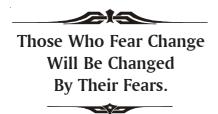
Everyone who is involved in multiple-assembly churches have worked themselves through many difficulties in order to come to where they are. They have not "left the church", as one brother accused another when he went from a single-assembly church to a multiple-assembly church. House church members have simply desired to have more personal relationships in their Christianity than an infrequent attendance at a large assembly. But this transition is not without its difficulties.

1. Transitioning through fears and objections: Some have often objected, "We are not ready for this!" But when is the time for courageous steps to be taken to restore a greater relationship with one's brother or sister in Christ? Sometimes we do not realize where we are. We are always on the move in our culture and in our religious behavior. Sometimes we wake up and find that we are further away from God than we should be. We are further away from our brothers and sisters in Christ than Jesus intended us to be. Therefore, it is always the right time to move closer to Jesus by moving closer to one another.

The transition from an insular cultured church to a relational

church is challenging because the move influences our "religious culture". Those who are members of small single-assembly churches have an easier time. Those who live in urban insular cultures have a more difficult time. Regardless of where we are, we must make the move. We must confront our individualism, our distant relationships, and our estrangement from Jesus. We must understand where God wants us to be, and then make a courageous effort to get there, regardless of our cultural past. House churches are an effort to get to where God wants us to be in our fellowship with one another. They are an effort to construct a new "religious culture" that is based on the biblical instruction of where God wants us to be with one another and Jesus.

The transition is always a fearful thing for those who draw their support from the superficial strength of a large single-assembly church. Preachers often fight to keep sheep huddled under their direct control in order that the collection plate not miss the hands of one contributor. However, if the fulltime preacher could only understand that a multiple-assembly church would release him to the lost, then his fears of a loss of



support would be calmed. He would find greater fulfillment in being what he has always wanted to be and in doing what he has always wanted to do. He would be able to move among the house

churches, establish new groups, minister throughout a broader geographical area, and possibly be considered an evangelist again instead of a oneman-band as the pastor of a single-assembly church. He could concentrate on helping members discover their ministry, encourage leaders to assume responsibility of house groups, and find fulfillment in himself as one who is truly equipping the saints unto the work of the ministry (Ep 4:11-16).

Instead of focusing on attendance at the large single assembly, sheep can be restored to the Chief Shepherd who nurtures through His word. The word of God should become the center of reference for those who are daily meeting and seeking guidance from the Lord. As evangelists and elders go from house to house, hungry sheep are always waiting for new feed that has been activated in the lives of personal shepherds. Though the depth of Bible study is sometimes weak in a house church that does not demand serious study by house church leaders, when serious Bible students do come around to teach series of lessons, the mental sponge of the house group is ready to absorb the lessons.

When single-assembly churches convert to multiple-assembly churches, they are usually surprised with their growth. They are able to move out to a larger geographical area, and thus, reach more people who are receptive to the gospel. Since they are not seeking to remove prospects great distances out of their communities, their house churches within the local communities simply grow. As members change from driving away from their community evangelistic responsibilities, they need to bloom where they are planted.

When discussing house churches, some are defensive about what they should do with their present building if they go to a multiple-assembly church. The answer to this concern is obvious. Keep the building. I realize that some are defensive about their buildings because of the large sums of money that they have put into them over the years. But this is not a time to sell the building. It is a time to use it for evangelism. If a church already has a building, then they should change from focusing their concern on the building to focusing on individuals. Change from



emphasis on the Sunday assembly to fellowship for the saints in the homes of the members. Use the building as a place of evangelism to the religious community that is born and bred on "building Christianity". Bring the community to

the house churches through the church building; go with them in the front door, and then out the back door to the house of a member who can love and nurture them. Then take the fellowship of the saints, the fellowship meals, and the Supper of the Lord to the homes of the saints on Sunday evening. In this way, a single-assembly church with an already built facility has the advantage of using the building as a "Christian community service center" for evangelistic outreach rather than a sanctuary for the worship of the saints. If it helps get people to the building, pull out the pews, buy some removable plastic chairs, and install a basketball goal. Anything that does not conflict with the word of God is worth doing in order to get ourselves into contact with seekers.

We must change the purpose of our church buildings. We must stop being bad stewards by using our buildings only for "worship" assemblies and Bible classes. Our movement into our communities must force us to assimilate into the needs of our neighbors. Our buildings must change from being assembly halls to assimilation facilitators. Our buildings must facilitate our ministries to the communities. We need blood bank centers, facilities for Christian schools, facilities for alcoholic's

encounter groups, counseling offices, senior citizens' craft shops, civic leaders' conferences rooms, child care, halfway houses, dorms for the homeless, soup kitchens, etc. Buildings must become Christian community service centers that take us back into our communities.



2. Light at the end of the tunnel: It was easier in the first century for the church to meet in their homes. Throughout the history of Israel, God focused the Jewish family on the home. The home was the center of family worship. The fathers and mothers were given instructions to daily teach their children in and around the activity of the home. In fact, I often wonder if the Jew's legal law of the "Sabbath-day journey" was not instituted to keep people close to their homes. There was no "going to the temple" in the religious behavior of Israel throughout its history. There were no instructions concerning the synagogue in the Old Testament. It was a Jewish invention. But we have been "going to

church" for 1,700 years, driving away from our homes, and away from our neighborhoods. How do we change this culture? The transitional generation of house church members will have a difficult time doing this, but they must lead the way. They must change their religious culture against the norm of what is commonly accepted by the religious world.

However, there is light at the end of the tunnel. The light is in the children of house church members. Those children who have sat quietly in their living rooms on Sunday morning listening to elder John speak about stories of Jesus will grow up in a different environment. They will know nothing other than to keep Jesus in the home and the

neighborhood. They will be the generation who truly restores the simplicity of Christianity as it should work in a community. When starting a house church, always look with hope to the generation of the children who will become the future of what you are doing.



B. Presumptuous predictions:

Sometimes, small things change the history of the world forever. In 1456 one of those small things happened that changed the cultural, social and economic dynamic of the entire world. The world has not been the same since. An invention was made and history changed. This invention brought the world out of the Dark Ages. It brought the world into the industrial revolution. And, it laid the foundation upon which the Reformation Movement occurred in the religious world. The invention that made all these changes was the printing press of Gutenberg.

Think about this for a moment. The printing press brought information to the world. Books could be printed in mass. Newspapers could inform and educate. Information was taken from a privileged few and handed on a printed piece of paper to millions of people throughout the world. The Bible was printed and given to common people. No longer did men reign through the ignorance of the people. The printing press changed the history of the world forever.

I look back to the first century, to a time when the world needed information in order to change. I believe the same historical dynamic occurred when through the laying on of the apostles' hands, the Holy Spirit was given (At 8:18). With the giving of the Holy Spirit, God intended that information flow to thousands of people throughout the world through the specific gifts of inspired preaching and teaching. When the apostles first learned that there were obedient believers outside Jerusa-

lem, they went to lay hands on the new believers in order that they might receive the gifts of the Spirit to continue the flow of inspired information (At 8:14,15). Whenever

The Greater The Information Flow The Greater The Social Change.

a Christ-sent apostle came into contact with a baptized believer, the gifts of the Spirit were given (At 19:1-6). Every believer had a right to the gifts of the Spirit. For almost twenty years the apostles stayed in Jerusalem in order to receive traveling Jews who came to Jerusalem for the annual Passover/Pentecost feasts. When these sojourners heard the gospel, believed and were immersed, hands were laid on them to receive the gifts of inspired preaching and teaching that came from the Holy Spirit. They subsequently returned to their homelands with new information. It was information that changed the world forever. In the absence of the written word of God, information, "the truth", was disseminated throughout the world by Jewish believers. After the passing of the inspired gifts, the written word of God continued the information flow. As a result, in just three centuries, the power of information concerning Jesus conquered an empire. When information flows throughout the world, the world changes.

In the first century, information changed the world forever as men and women first heard the spoken word, then eventually read the written word of the story of Jesus that came from the hand of Spiritinspired writers (Lk 1:1-4; Jn 20:30,31). When Gutenberg invented the printing press, the world was thrown into another epic of information flow. As a result, world changes came. Today, it is happening again. John von Neumann invented the modern computer, and said, "I don't know how really useful this will be."^{24:33} If he would have only known.

The computer has changed the world. But more than that, the end of the 20th century saw the introduction of the Internet. Billions of words of information are now accessible by the click of a finger in any part of the world. The Internet has signaled the beginning of a new era because it has produced a phenomenal flow of information throughout the world. The global information flow has subsequently given birth to a new pioneering generation.

World culture is changing. This paradigm shift in global culture is more than a new generation. It is more than the postmodern generation. The postmodern generation is only the pioneering generation of many centuries of a different world to come. It is only the beginning of a whole new dimension of world history, a new world order. The world will never be the same again. It will never be as we read in our history books. Are you ready for this global paradigm shift?

Now to my postulations concerning the future. Where do we seem to be going with a global cultural paradigm shift that is changing everything we know? I am a "modern", one who was born before the birth of the postmodern generation in 1960. I am thus one of the "transitionals", one of those who has had the privilege of living in the past, but now having the privilege of experiencing the birth of a new world order. The global paradigm shift in culture does not frighten me because I know that Jesus is the same today, yesterday, and forever. But what excites me are the possibilities about the future in reference to world evangelism. If the Lord does not come to finalize this chapter of world history before its end, the postmodern generation is the first of many generations that will be receptive fields for world evangelism. Here are some things I feel are coming, things for which the concept of multiple-assembly churches will prepare us to meet.

1. Single-assembly churches will always be with us. Though

many of these churches are growing gray-headed, they will continue to exist. Many of these churches throughout the world continue to remain small, but vibrant. In the Western context, however, the leadership of many of these churches will continue to struggle for the existence of the church. Some may secure growth to the point of compromising fundamental teaching in order to keep the crowd. Names have been and will be changed, controversies over doctrine shunned, and a social gospel preached in order to maintain a group that will make the building payments. As long as there are preachers as the one who said to me, "I like standing before a large assembly of people," there will always be singleassembly churches.

As previously stated, there is nothing wrong with single-assembly churches. Though they are limited in what they can do to produce the level of relationships that is desired by many people in insular societies, they will continue to exist as a point of contact for those who seek only a limited association with fellow Christians, or the desires of those



who see "church" as only a pastime "hour of worship" once a week. However, we must not limit the church to this methodology of assembly. House churches produce something that many

want and need. Therefore, there should be no antagonism between singleassembly and multiple-assembly churches. We are not on a playing field of religious completition. On the other hand, there will be increasing frustrations on the part of larger single-assembly churches as they see their numbers dwindle with members going back home to find one another and Jesus.

2. The postmodern generation will continue to leave many large single-assembly churches. This has already started. As the postmodern generation leaves the traditional single-assembly church in search of relational Christianity, less focus will be made on the use of church buildings for church growth. This movement has already started in America. There are numerous large church buildings throughout ur-

ban centers that have fewer worshipers in them today than there were twenty years ago. Because of the migrating generation in the past three decades, many large single-assembly churches have started house churches in order to bring a greater level of personal relationships into the membership. As the postmodern generation, and the generations of their children and grandchildren move into the leadership of churches in the future, single-assembly churches in large buildings will continue to lose members. Chromey wrote,

... postmodern evangelism is less arguments for God's existence as it is simply sharing relationships and experiences. It's incarnational evangelism. Postmodern Christians are those who have discovered Christianity to be the supreme truth, carved not from reason as much as personal experience. Postmoderns don't seek to understand God, but to experience His presence.^{21:261}

It is for this reason that postmoderns have little affinity with brick and mortar and the large assemblies that take place within the confines of church building walls. The postmodern's belief is centered on experience. Assembly is valid only if it enhances one's experience with another in a true relationship. Therefore, a system of assembly that does not fulfill a desire for experiential contact will be ignored for something that will. It is for this reason that postmoderns seek assemblies that encourage a more experiential atmosphere or participation on the part of everyone involved. Chromey continued his explanation of the postmodern migrant who is frustrated with the present system of assembly.

Have you ever considered how nonrelational the average Sundaymorning worship service is? Think about it. Most congregations sit in bolted pews and look at the backs of heads. The pulpit occupies center stage and focuses attention on one person. Worship is led by a few. The emblems are passed by a few. The announcements are given by one person. The prayer is offered by one person. The sermon is delivered by one person.

No wonder church is boring to postmoderns.^{21:262}

If this is true of postmoderns, then we are headed toward some challenges in maintaining large assemblies in single-assembly churches. America seems to be following after the tradition of the empty church buildings of Europe. If you ever have the opportunity, walk the streets of Amsterdam or London on Sunday morning. Walk into one of the ornate church buildings with stained glass windows. You will not find a large assembly of believers in these buildings. There will only be a few faithfuls scattered here and there in a building that will seat hundreds. Is this where America is going? As it is now, in order to maintain large singleassemblies in many American urban churches, members have to drive from great distances in order to get to the church building. The present membership of many urban churches is distributed throughout a tremendous geographical area.

Many in the coming generations, however, will choose not to make the epic journeys across town in order to sit like mutes in an empty building. The postmodern generation, and those who follow them, will seek to experience one another in smaller assemblies in their communities. They will seek to take their Christianity to the highways and hedges. The challenge of this generation of leadership in the church is to make sure they have a message to take. Community involvement without the message of the gospel is simply community involvement. There is no "church" about what one would do.

3. The postmodern religious culture will move many from the church to social religiosity. It is a good move for the church to get involved in the community. Our assembly-oriented past moved us away from our neighborhoods and away from the needs that were next door. However, the postmodern individual wants to experience his or her beliefs in the lives of others by personal involvement in ministry to physical needs. But after we have met the physical needs of others, we must not forget that there are fundamental teachings that must be believed and obeyed. It is necessary, therefore, to study the Bible in order to determine what God would have us do in obedience to commandments and in teaching others what they must also do to obey God. I know that the postmodern generation is the "whatever" generation in the sense that everything presents itself as abstract truth, and thus, there are no commandments to be obeyed. It is a generation that has a philosophy that is based in secular humanism. Within the thinking of this generation is a paradox in philosophy. It has all the information, and yet seeks to have no concrete truth. This thinking has affected many in the church. However, if there is just one commandment in the New Testament that must be obeyed in order to please God, then there is an identity of the church and everyone must conform to this identity. Only one commandment means that there is a concrete truth that must be discovered and obeyed.

Tim LaHaye pictured the postmodern generation as an identity crisis of these times. He wrote,

By contrast, on college campuses across the land, brilliant young people, studying with learned, experienced teachers, are facing what they call an identity crisis. Despite enormous libraries, unlimited access to the World Wide Web, sophisticated computers, and the finest information technology available, today's collegians are bewildered by the who and why of human existence. One fundamental law of teaching states, "You cannot impart what you do not possess."^{26:82}

We must not run through Jerusalem toward our community and forget that there are laws of God that must be followed in order to be pleasing in His sight. Because there are those who will make God's word abstract in the sense that there are no definite laws to be obeyed,

many in the postmodern generation will lose their way, and thus create a religion after their own desires and a God after their own image. These will remain religious, but develop a religiosity after man and not after God. And in doing so, many



churches will lose their distinctiveness in the midst of a host of "faiths" that are similarly without direction because of their ignorance of the Bible.

4. The transitional generation of moderns need to prepare

for some dynamic changes. It is no longer if there will be changes in how we view the church. There will be change, great change as the postmodern generation, and the generations after them, come into the leadership of the church. Leaders of the present church will either fight the change until they take churches as we know them out of existence, or they will identify the points of receptivity of the new wave of culture that is coming through and evangelize it.

I believe it will be hard for some of the present leadership to deal with what is happening and coming. There is a generation gap not only in the church as a whole, but also in the leadership of the church. The generation of moderns in the church is still trying to figure things out on an analytical chart and syllogistic system of argument. They are still allowing themselves to be burdened with past traditions that often hinder adaptive change. But the new postmodern generation simply responds by saying, "Whatever".

Regardless of some inadequacies, specifically in the area of a biblical foundation, the postmoderns are trying to determine their own direction by throwing off anything that sounds remotely traditional. I think Sweet was right in the following statement:

Much of the "innovative" church movement is in name only. Its idea of "innovation" is giving the old jalopy a new paint job or massproducing franchised spiritual experiences like McDonald's and Starbucks mass-produce franchised fast-food and quality-coffee experiences. Seeker-sensitive worship is often high-modern, native-insensitive worship The boomer generation's preference for topiaried worship, with highly sculpted performances and Broadway-trimmed productions, is native numb. What God worth his Pearly Gates would call this worship, they ask themselves. Little wonder postmoderns are increasingly distant from both traditional and innovative churches.^{25:45}

I do not think the present conflicts over how Christians should worship in assemblies ("worship wars") will continue in the generations to come. It will not be a battle over "worship styles" – wherever that is in the Bible – but a whole new expression that is more personal oriented, if not more individual. It will not be "worship wars", but "assembly wars". There will be a transition from large to small, from clumps to clusters. Traditional leadership will seek to hang on to the old styles of



assembly and worship, but as the postmodern generation moves into the leadership of the church, there will be changes. Because of the tension that now prevails in many churches, postmoderns have come to the conclusion that many of the present churches will not change,

and thus they are not showing up to argue the change. Chromey stated, "Many postmodern (Gen X) leaders are leaving the traditional church with the disillusionment that it's impossible to 'pour new wine into old wineskins'."^{21:16}

The "community church" phenomenon has not just exploded into the Western church society because of independent preachers who wanted to start a church. The community church movement that started in the 70s was a signal of where Christendom was moving. The traditional church was not keeping up with the changes, and thus many of the sons and daughters of the members of traditional churches fled to the community churches where they found more than ceremonial assemblies and hierarchal leadership.

5. *Missions may be in danger of disappearing from the agenda of the local church.* It is true that the modern generation of the church presented some difficulties for the evangelist who had to raise funds in order to be a foreign evangelist (missionary). Nevertheless, the traditional church biblically knew its responsibility to preach the gospel to the world. Though traditional Christians often reluctantly gave to foreign

missions, they did give and continue to do so. However, many of the postmodern generation have become lost in their abstract "theology" to the point that they have no theology, especially a theology for missions. There is no message that would qualify one as a "missionary"



A Church Without A Distinct Message Has No Mission To The World.

to others with the distinct message of the gospel. If we believe that our mission is only social in dealing with the social aspects of the community, we will sometimes forget that people must be immersed for the forgiveness of their sins in response to Jesus who rules over all things. A church without a mission is no church at all. In fact, how can we even use the word "church" to refer to a group of socialists who have forsaken a definite message to preach?

As many postmodern churches seek to be anonymous among other religious groups in the sense of not being doctrinally identified as a distinctive church, they will cease being identified as the church. In an effort to be like every church in the neighborhood, they will cease being the church of the neighborhood. They will thus lose their mission as they lose their distinctive message. It is true that many churches have simply denominationalized and become just like the church down the street. However, every church, including the one down the street which we call a "denomination" must seek to discover simple New Testament Christianity. And in order to do this, there must be somewhere to seek – the New Testament – and something to discover – sound New Testament teaching concerning the distinctiveness of the church. We must search our way through a maze of traditions and doctrines that keep us away from one another, and ultimately, away from God.

The "whatever" generation must be challenged by the word of God to understand that there is only one way to God, and that way is through Jesus and His word. And it is by Jesus' word that we will be judged (Jn 12:48). This one point gives the church a distinctive teaching, a teaching that must be believed, for by it we will be judged. I believe the postmodern generation is in the process of a spiritual revival. However,

the revival must be guided by the word of God. We must be totally engrossed in God's word in order not to be sidetracked to a religiosity that is created after our own desires and not God's direction, and subsequently sterile of concrete truth. We must remem-



Focus On A Distinct Message Drives Us To Focus On Lost Souls.

ber that it is not in man who walks to direct his own paths.

6. The church is growing in global awareness. One of the things that does encourage me about the future of the postmodern church is the fact that the average member of the church is more globally perceptive than he or she was forty or fifty years ago. America, for example, is coming out of its cultural cocoon and joining the rest of the world. Someone once said of the September 11 event that "America has now joined the rest of us."

Many thought that the computer would isolate the individual. But the exact opposite has happened. The computer and Internet have opened the door for international chat rooms, international discussion groups, international dating, international board conferencing, etc. The

The World Has Become Smaller One Byte At A Time. Internet has made the world small and brought millions of people together. Every thirty minutes 2,800 people come online for the first time. This is a world in touch with itself. It is a world that can by the click of mouse bring into one's living room an entire world of information.

As computer and Internet usage continue to expand throughout the world, the changing world will be bombarded with information. The preaching of the gospel by a distinct church will be in competition with an assortment of religious groups who are competing for the attention of every world citizen. It is for this reason that the church must come online. When new residents move into communities in the typical American city, they no longer go shopping for a church Sunday after Sunday. They simply go to their computer. They go online as the family surrounds a computer screen. They click through an assortment of churches in order to find the one that suits their needs. If a church is not online with a web site, it will be out of sight for the postmodern generation.

7. Our system of teaching will have to change for the postmodern generation. "The postmodern doesn't need a professor to pour knowledge into an empty brain. With a few clicks on the Internet, postmoderns have access to more information than anyone 40 years ago had in 22 years of education. Postmoderns want to see the knowledge work."^{21:262} It is true that "postmodern teachers will be guides from the side, not sages from the stage. Future education will be timeless (no 50-minute periods) and wall-less (outside a room)."^{21:262}

We are moving into an era where we want to walk with Jesus

down a Galilean path and ride with Paul in a storm-driven boat. We want to be where the action is and a part of the action itself. Ever wonder why people like real-life television programs as *Survivor* and *The Osbornes*? The reason is that the new generation wants to be in on the action and participate in the event. Churches, therefore, that do not offer real-life education and ministry in the lives of others will continue to decline in the future.



Christianity is a real-life action event. Jesus' teaching was "on the spot" to real-life situations that presented themselves to Him as He went about with His roving classroom of disciples. Instead of the "tell" classrooms that are common with the modern generation, the next generation wants a "show and tell" classroom experience. They want men as Paul who desired to put Timothy in school by his side (At 16:1,2). This is the "preacher training school" of the future.

Before I started in a limited way to understand the postmodern generation, I was often perplexed when visiting some churches in America. I was often asked by the younger mission committee members, "How can we be personally involved in your mission?" I could not answer that question. I was living in a foreign country which was thousands of miles away from those who wanted to be personally involved. The only way I could answer the question was that one "personally" sign a "personal" check and send it to my sponsoring congregation. That is as personal as one could get in foreign missions other than selling everything he or she had and joining me on the field. Of course, that was not what people were saying who wanted to be personally involved. I still do not know how to answer the question. But the question does express the fact that the new generation of postmoderns want "hands on" Christian experience. I think good things will come out of this desire. But at the end of the day, "hands on" world evangelism demands selling out to be sold on one's mission.

8. *Multiple-assembly churches will grow.* Since multipleassembly churches lend themselves to being relational and interactive, they will continue to grow at a light-speed pace. Moderns who are stuck in single-assembly churches feel threatened. And they should. The

postmodern generation is bored stiff with spectator religion. Postmoderns do not show up anymore because they have been bored with too many performers who have just stood up and carried out their "duties" on the roster. Postmoderns want a piece of the involvement pie.



As the paradigm shift comes in the church, the postmodern generation will grow into the leadership of the church. As this continues to happen in the years to come, churches will change in the way they behave. If you are behind the curve on your knowledge of this new generation or resistant to the coming changes that the postmoderns will bring, then you will one day stand up in an empty building listening to the echo of your own voice. As I suggested before, visit a cathedral on Sunday morning in London and listen to the echo of a priest as he conducts mass for a few lingering parishioners scattered throughout a building that was made to seat five hundred people.

As Christians gain confidence in the relational aspect of house churches, they will spiritually grow. Multiple-assembly churches will grow. They will produce a generation of young people who know only the fellowship of love and caring in a small group. Leaders who see this setting as a permanent behavioral pattern of the church, and not just a step until we "get our own building", will continue to plant more churches in order to keep the people together, not in numbers, but in hearts. And in order to do this, they will keep their church groups small in order to grow large multiple-assembly churches.

9. The confrontation between Christianity and Islam will *increase.* The preceding point will be necessary because in the world to come, the radical Islamist will not go away. In the past forty years he has developed a culture of terrorism in his religion. This has become his instrument of "evangelism," or a means by which to keep the infidels away in order to get his way. The war on terrorism will not be won by the West. It will not because the West does not understand the nature of the Islamist, nor his cause. It is a nature and cause that is on the opposite side of the Christian continuum. For the new Islamist, terrorism is not a method of operation. The young suicide bomber is what he or she is by religious culture. Terrorism is a part of the commitment of the extremists of the Islamic religion, and thus, a way of religious behavior. Radical Islamists, therefore, will not compromise. They will not show up at the free democratic discussion form. They will not come to the negotiating table. Does the Western church really know how to evangelize this culture?

When I grew up in middle America, we never knew what Islam was. We had never seen a Muslim. It was not until I studied world religions in my early 20s that I heard about the Islam faith. That was in the late 60s. Now, there are over **six million** Muslims in America. In another forty years, will there be sixteen million? And in another sixty years, will there be sixty million? Keep in mind that in the worldview of the Muslim, time is not a factor. The Muslim does not care if it takes another six hundred years, America and the world will accept the Islamic faith.

I believe Christians should wake up. In the past, Christians have left their communities and fled to their church buildings. They did "their religion" in buildings while Muslims stayed in the communities in order to clean up the drug trade. Muslims bought the houses and businesses of many communities, and now live in Muslim suburbs. Christians prided themselves in being social liberals and free. Muslims handed out strict punishment to those who violated their neighbors. No wonder there are many "conversions" to Islam in seemingly "Christian" countries.

10. The professional missionary will linger, but possibly disappear as a relic of the past. There are a hosts of obstacles that will challenge the church-supported, fulltime missionary who seeks to go into all the world on a missionary visa. One of the first obstacles against the professional missionary is the growing tension between Christianity and Islam. Because of the polarization between the Christian and Islamic worldviews, the professional, fully supported missionary will be stopped at the border of many countries. The wars in the Arab countries in the past two decades have opened up some glimmers of hope into the conclaves of Islam domain. However, the worldwide resistance of Islam against Christianity has been brought on stage, and thus, the confrontation will increase.

As nations become more nationalistic and self-dependent, they will no longer see the need for the missionary of the past. Third World nations will continue to receive "benevolent" missions, but the teaching missionary without a helping hand to aid the poor and underprivileged, will find himself without an entry visa. Missions, therefore, will become more social oriented with programs that help the citizenship of nations. This is good, but many have gone before with this mission and forgotten their message. We must have more motivation than drilling water wells and teaching English. These tentmaking works must only be vehicles that are used to carry in the gospel of Jesus. It is for this reason that our new mission force must be trained in ministry to the physical needs of humanity, but with the primary purpose of ministering the gospel to those they help. I see this as a phenomenal opportunity for world evangelism. I see the postmodern generation as a great source of prospects to carry out this mission. However, the postmoderns must arm themselves with the message. What good is a missionary without a message of truth?

In order to go into hostile territory, we must train a new generation of missionaries that are able to survive in secret. If we are going to reach those areas of the world that are governmentally and religiously hostile to Christianity, then we must change our tactics from developing large single-assembly churches with buildings built on the main streets of Baghdad to the quiet meetings in homes on the outskirts of Beijing. Missionaries must be trained to feel at home in small numbers in homes. We must learn to sing in quietness. "Covert Christianity" will have to be

something that is learned. But it will be hard to learn by a generation who likes shouting to the top of their voice through amplifiers and loud speakers. The Christian behavior that will permeate like leaven throughout a hostile world will



have to take on a nature that was characteristic of the early Christians who leavened the ancient Roman world under great persecution.

The problem is that the West has no "preacher training schools" and university missions training programs that are attuned to the training of "covert evangelists". We like standing up before great crowds of people. We like our large assemblies. We like charismatic speakers who deliver marvelous three-point orations. We like We like But the world is not attuned to our Western likes. The Western church may cherish dynamic speakers, but the effective worker in a hostile world is quiet, persistent, often unnoticed leaven going about from house to house.

We are often ineffective simply because we are not even allowed into some countries where we can use our bombastic methods of evangelism. We do not even go there because the nature of our Christianity dictates to us that these countries are "closed doors". They are closed, but closed only to our form of Christianity. Frankly, we do not go to these nations because we do not know how. We are not trained to be quiet, secret, permeating leaven going from one small group of two or three believers to another. The new missionary for the hostile world will probably have to be trained somewhere else than by the Western urban church.

I see house churches as the hope of the future for training a new breed of missionaries who can go into hostile regions. Those who have been born out of a small group atmosphere know how to survive with a few. Their joy is not in how many, but the quality of the relationships between the how few. They know how to go from house to house, and

not find their strength by going from large assembly to large assembly. The small house assembly, therefore, will emotionally and relationally prepare a new generation of missionaries who know how to evangelize the world from house to house.



Must we go only to those nations of the world who will allow in the professional missionary with his Western form of church behavior? Must we go only to those countries where we can legally register the church? Must we go only to those countries where church buildings can be built and we can own property? Must we go only to those countries about which one elder wrote me, "We want to feel safe when we come and visit"? Try answering all these questions through the thinking of Jesus and Paul.

11. The church will continue to become the church of the poor. According to the *Time Magazine* report of the February 2000 issue, Christianity is now growing faster in Africa than in any other region of the world. India is close behind. The countries of Africa and the

The Poor In Spirit Will Reach The Poor In The World. nation of India are economically classified as Third World. It is encouraging to see the accelerated growth of the church in Third World countries. But it is discouraging to see the decline of the church in the West. Nevertheless, this is reality.

If the American church continues on its present road, a hundred years from now, it will be where the church in Europe presently is. Secular humanism moved religion out of much of Europe. It is doing the same in America. It is for this reason that the church in Africa and India must arise to the occasion to take up the mantel for global evangelism. As the American church moves into the sunset of her existence, we must be prepared for another geographical transfer of the center of Christianity. This transfer is to the poor, and Africa and India are poor. I would say to the church in Africa and India, wake up. The responsibility for world evangelism for the next several centuries is coming your way.

It is for this reason that this book has been written. I have sought to give hope to a Third World church that must assume its responsibility for global evangelism. Some changes must be made in our supposed theological difficulties in reference to meeting in homes. Some changes must be made in our behavior and methodology that was handed to us from the West. The "church building", "assembly-centered" phase of church history is over. The postmodern generation will not build church buildings for the world church in the future. The center of their Christianity will not be in large single-assembly churches. This generation of Christians is not a building-oriented, but people motivated. As this generation comes into the leadership of the church, world church leaders will be facing a stone wall with their appeals for funds to build buildings. It will take some time for the rest of the world to figure this out. But the handwriting is on the wall.

Brethren must in the Third World, therefore, come up with innovative ideas for assembly. A new generation of Christians has arisen who do not see growth centered on a building, but on relationships. It is this generation that will take the church into the future and into all the world. It is this generation of the church that can see the kingdom as leaven spreading from house to house throughout a world that in many places is becoming more hostile. Herein is our hope. We will evangelize the world from one house to another. A new generation with an Acts 20:20 vision will go from house to house with the message of the gospel. That is how it happened in the first century. It can happen again!

Epilogue

If you have made it this far in reading through Book 6, then you have probably labored through some challenging points. Your religious heritage has probably been challenged. You may be wondering what to do with the challenges with which you are now faced. I realize that what you have read in this Book 6 has greatly challenged you. But unless we are continually challenged in our present situation, we will become stagnant and denominational.

Allow me the opportunity to take you through a few final thoughts that may help us in our efforts to restore relational Christianity in the midst of a denominational world that has affected us in so many ways. It may be that we have convinced ourselves that we can be undenominational while behaving as a denomination. But we know that when we start behaving denominationally, we lose sight of our goal of restoring New Testament Christianity.

We must never forget our efforts to restore primitive Christianity in this world. We must never forget that we are in a struggle in the midst of a denominated world to remain undenominational. Though many do not understand the abstract nature of undenominational Christianity, as leaders we must both understand and apply restorational thinking in order that we not become just another denomination. Restoration to small group assemblies in the context of the multiple-assembly church is a natural setting that breaks down denominational tendencies, which tendencies seem to creep into our behavior when we seek to be a large assembly just as the nations around us. For this reason, we must never become complacent. We must remain vigilant lest we hypocritically condemn that which we have possibly become, just another denomination.

However, we must not assume that large assemblies are wrong. Neither should we assume that church buildings are wrong. They are not. To condemn the use of purpose-built church buildings in our efforts to restore New Testament Christianity would be missing the issue. It is not the building that is the problem. It is our non-relational Christianity that causes the problems. Neither are large assemblies the problem. It is how we view our Christianity in the midst of a denominated world. If we seek to be just as the denominations around us, then certainly we will become just that. We will become just another denomination in a religious world that dictates that we behave denominationally. (I will deal extensively with this subject in BRL Volume VIII.)

For those of you who have felt that church buildings have been under attack throughout the contents of Book 6, you must not feel defensive. Neither should you feel that you are under attack because of some brick and mortar into which you have poured a great deal of money. You have the building. You have the large assembly. It has been my challenge to you not to view either your building or your assembly as just another denomination on the block. We are not in physical competition with the denominations around us. Since we are not, then we must use our imagination as to how we should not be viewed by our denominational neighbors as just another denomination. In order not to be viewed as just another denomination, I would suggest that we focus more on our behavior as our identity in the community and less on brick and mortar.

The church should always be identified first by behavior. I believe this is what Jesus had in mind in John 13:34,35. I believe this is also what Peter had in mind when he wrote, "*But sanctify Christ as Lord God in your hearts and be ready always to give a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you, yet with meekness and fear*" (1 Pt 3:15). Our hope is manifested in our behav*ior.* It is loving behavior that identifies us as the children of God. Behav*ior stimulates inquiry, and thus teaching follows as we give answer concerning our hope.* Those who work in any particular community out of a purpose-built building may have a more difficult time focusing on behav*ior over the physical advertisement of a building.* The building may often distract us from our real and necessary focus. Nevertheless, all of us must restore the desire to be identified by our love of one another.

The revolution of large single-assembly churches to incorporate

house churches in their fellowship manifests that many churches are realizing that we must restore relational Christianity. We must allow the Lord Jesus Christ in our hearts to be the advertisement of who we are. In order to restore our focus on our hearts and behavior, we must work with one another in an effort to be what God would have us be. And what we must be are disciples of Jesus who seek to be with one another in close relationships that draw others into the family of God.

And "authentic church" is manifested to the community by the love of the members for one another. It is undenominational simply because loving members seek to be with others. They seek to draw others to Christ through their behavior. A sectarian attitude moves us to remove ourselves from others. On the other hand, love draws us to others and others to us. When Christians grow in love of one another, therefore, the spirit of sectarianism is destroyed. The denominationalism that is the fruit of sectarianism is destroyed. It is for this reason that we must learn the spirit of love that is developed in the close relationships that are a serendipity of small group fellowships.

When we begin our restoration of focusing on relationships instead of physical structures, then we are on the road to undenominational Christianity. We are on our way to being the family of God in the midst of so many who have relegated Christianity to the ceremonial traditions of men. When the fruit of the Spirit is truly manifested in the community of God, then the church is on its way to growth.

Throughout Books 1-5 of this volume I have focused on many suggestions that will help the disciple of Jesus to function in his or her ministry. There was a great deal of emphasis placed on how to do this in our practical behavior of serving the needs of others. In considering the material of Books 1-5, please keep in mind that practical suggestions must be carried out with a heart of love. Our service to one another in Christ is the result of our bond that we have in Jesus. Some have fallen victim to institutional or traditional religiosity in the midst of a large singleassembly churches. Our challenge to them to get to work. All of us must discover our gifts and use them to the glory of God in ministry to others.

As previously stated, those who are content to live at ease in Zion on a church pew or bench, while hidden in the midst of a large assembly, often do not want to know the needs of others. If they did, they would have to get to work in serving others. The danger of large assemblies is that they often become caves in which we can hide. If large assemblies of the church is all that we attend, then there are always those who are hidden from the needs of others. It is for this reason that large single-assembly churches should initiate small group assemblies. When people come together into a small group, work is identified. No one can sit idly by when work is to be done.

I would not condemn the methodology of using a purpose-built church building as an instrument of evangelism. The denominational world is seated in the culture of church buildings. If our buildings can be effectively used for evangelism in order to draw people into the close fellowship of our small groups, then we will be using the buildings for the correct purpose. Though most Christians throughout the world will never have the privilege of building or buying a church building, they must not use the lack of a building as an excuse for not growing as a church. Keep in mind that buildings do not build churches. People do. Those who have no building have some advantages over those who do. At least they do not have to deal with the denominating effect that a building has on the thinking of members. They do not lead themselves to lean on a physical crutch for the growth of the church. Their lack of a building forces them to focus on other things than a building that cause the growth of the church.

As the church we must simply keep before us at all times that the kingdom of God is within us. It is not something that is physically around us. Since it is in us, we must focus our attention on our hearts and how we behave with those around whom we live. If the contents of this volume have helped you to better behave around those in the community in which you live, then I have accomplished my goal for the many years of writing that have gone into this work. We must seek to be the undenominated global family of God that was initiated in the first century. Whatever works against the universality of the church, must be questioned. If we burden ourselves with any thinking or thing that encourages us to denominate from one another, then we must be willing to make all necessary sacrifices in order to get back on track. This may be easy to write about, but the task of remaining relational and undenominational in the midst of a world of Christendom that is so denominated is a difficult thing to do and maintain. Nevertheless, we must challenge ourselves to stay with the course. We must continue to remember our scriptural roots and the One who brought us out of the bondage of traditional and ceremonial religion in order to deliver us to freedom. We are now free to obey. We are free to serve one another in a community that is destined for eternal dwelling.

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Suggested Reading

Other than the bibliography of the text of the book, the following are some good books to read to make one aware of the religious world in which we live in reference to traditional assemblies. Some of the books are also good in giving ideas of how to move the church back home. Though the authors come from many religious backgrounds and beliefs, they confirm the fact that in Christendom as a whole there is a revolution in house (cell) church assemblies throughout the world. The following reading will give you an idea of what is happening in this most exciting era of church history.

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