

A detailed analysis of the evidence for house churches

Introduction

No matter how clearly I explain this, most people just cannot get their heads around the need to abandon institutional churches meeting in a dedicated building, either hired, purchased or purpose built. The fact that supposed Christians cannot understand that church meetings in a big warehouse are anathema and contrary to all apostolic teaching, is beyond me. How can Christians read about Jesus discipling only 12 people in the Gospels and not understand the need for church meetings that are small in size and meeting in close proximity to each other?

Although I have gone over this in the context of many papers on church, here I wish to focus on all the evidence pointing towards the divine precedent for house churches.

The testimony

What is the church for?

The church is the bride of Christ, the body of Christ, the people of God, the temple of God, the household of God; what do all these things mean?

The church is the testimony of God. The church manifests all that God is. The reflection of God in the world is forever going to be the church.

The purpose of the divine decree was that God would have a material testimony in the world; something that manifested his divine attributes (but not his infinite characteristics). The church is the physical manifestation of God corporately as Christ was individually. The body of Christ in the new world will be the dwelling place of God in the flesh and the outward reflection of God's character and glory.

Even now the church is called to bear witness to God in the way that it functions. God has given the church grace, the power of the Spirit, and knowledge of his will so that the church points to God on the Earth.

Now the central focus of the being of God is the Trinity. What is the Trinity? It is a loving, communal relationship of three Persons in holy, perfect accord. The Godhead is a loving community of three Persons in complete unity and harmony. This is what the church is called to represent. A community of love and harmony doing good.

This is why the church must exist on the Earth in the local church as a family of committed people meeting in perfect harmony and helping each other. This can only be done in small settings, in a community based in a house. Each local church is called to be a testimony to the Godhead; and this requires small congregations in homes meeting in perfect fellowship practising mutual edification.

Thus any church that focuses on a man leading the work from the front, that shuts down congregational participation and fellowship, cannot manifest the fellowship of the Godhead.

The basic needs of the local church

The local church must fulfil a divine function; it has a certain practical purpose. We must understand that purpose and then arrange meeting places to best fulfil that purpose.

Items that are not the stated purpose of gathering

Worship

There is no NT text telling us that we gather together to worship; none at all.

Now it is clear that when worshippers of God meet they will worship. So worship occurs in the gathered church, but that is not the stated purpose for gathering.

To mount a music band

There is not a shred of evidence for a church having any instrumental music; none whatsoever. In fact, instrumental music did not develop for hundreds of years and was always opposed by the early church fathers, such as Chrysostom, and continued to be opposed by Calvin, Luther and even Spurgeon. Instrumental music was not common in Reformed churches until Moody and Sankey. I will not prove that here; see my various papers on this.

To be a platform for a particular preacher or leader

This is one of the main reasons for getting a big building and having a large congregation. Leaders like big numbers to boost their authority and so strive to gather such in a sizeable building.

The very idea of going to church to hear a certain leader preach is anathema to Biblical directions. This is the very opposite of what church is.

To be big enough to be a witness to the world

Many so-called Charismatic apostles have used this as an excuse to gather large numbers. They seek to have a voice in society and be recognised as great leaders. They may disguise this as wanting to testify to the Lord, but their real goal is pride.

Again this is the reverse of what church is. The church is a mystery to the world; the world does not understand or like it. The church is light and the world is in darkness. The church is life and the world is dead. The church is truth and the world is full of lies. The church is godly but the world is demonic. There is no fellowship between the church and the world.

Individual Christians are called to be a witness to the Gospel in the world and show, by their good deeds, that they are of God. But the church is not for the world, it is a corporate testimony to God and the angels (Eph 3:10).

To be administratively useful

Many ministries gain a large building to not just house a Sunday congregation of hundreds but various offices and rooms for a range of purposes to enable the ministry to function.

I have had 'apostles' proudly show me around their buildings boasting of how useful this is to the Lord's work. This involved rooms with multiple functions: smaller meeting rooms; administrative offices; rooms for technical works, such as editing videos or audio

recordings; storage rooms for things like PA systems and so on. All of these are nonsense; they have nothing to do with the gathered church at all. One famous church I was shown around even had its own lithographic printing room for professional book publishing. They are the accoutrements of a growing business enterprise that boosts the leader's pride and turns the church into an organisation.

Even worse is when a 'church' building is hired out to the world to make money for the work. This is a travesty. The world has nothing to do with the church; the church is called out from the world. Yet worse is when 'church' rooms are rented out to overtly grossly sinful purposes. I know of a large church in an industrial shed that rents out its main hall for homosexual conferences.

The practical purpose of the church

The fundamental practical purpose of the gathered church is mutual edification. I will enlarge on this later. This means that the room used must be conducive to open ministry, sharing, every member participation, discussion, debate, instruction, encouragement and exhortation. In short, it must be a small place to enable the weakest person to not be intimidated.

It should also be small enough to enable breaking of bread without any practical difficulty.

A large lounge in a domestic dwelling is the largest place to suffice for these needs. Any larger and the dynamic works against mutual edification.

It is impossible to specify numbers, but a congregation should be small enough to fit into a large domestic room in a house. Unless the home is huge, this would limit the numbers to between 30 and 50.

The example of Jesus

Then He said to His disciples ... Do not fear, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. Lk 12:22, 32

Jesus may have used the sermonic format to preach the Gospel to crowds (though the term is not used in the NT) but really he proclaimed the Gospel.¹ It was more of a triumphal announcement. Yet this formal type of preaching was not used by Jesus to train his disciples in private.

Jesus knew that formal preaching or sermonising is a poor method of training people in didactics. This is well established today. Theologian RL Dabney reckoned that his congregation only retained about 4% of his sermonic teaching.

What really gets teaching applied is open discussion; being able to scratch where people itch. So Jesus taught his disciples by didactic instruction and then asking questions and fielding their questions. It was common for discussion to break out, which aids doctrinal instruction.

Within his instruction Jesus would use many techniques, such as using typology, allegory, parallelism, parables, historical narrative as illustration and so on. But the main point was

¹ The word 'preached' used of Jesus is a translation of various Greek words such as heralding (*kerusso*), or bringing good news (*euaggelizo*).

that it was informal, natural, and conducted in intimate fellowship. This is the model that we are to follow in the church.

The main task of leaders is to teach the church to equip the saints for ministry (Eph 4:12). This must be done effectively by following the example of Jesus. This can only be done in small corporate settings, within homes.

Objection

Jesus had scores of followers apart from the disciples.

This is true, we could name Lazarus, Cleopas and several women, such as Mary and Martha; but this is irrelevant. Jesus only particularly disciplined the 12; this is why they were specially chosen. They were given detailed knowledge not passed on to the general followers (Matt 13:11; Lk 8:10). They also questioned the Lord and saw his godly example every day in every situation.

The 12 were chosen (apart from Judas) in order to be Jesus' representatives after the cross; they brought the final words of Jesus to the church, via the teaching of the Holy Spirit. Their job would be to supervise the early church and conform it to the will of God. We have to respect the fact that Jesus limited this to 12 for a good reason. Jesus knew that shepherding and discipling a larger number would restrict effectiveness.

Only the 12 were given the interpretation of parables. Only the 12 were able to see Christ at prayer or in suffering. Only the 12 were with him in all sorts of occasions. Only the 12 celebrated Passover with him. Only the 12 saw him still the storm on the lake. Only the 12 were commissioned as apostles. Only the 12 were accepted after a night of prayer. Only 11 of the 12 led the early church in Jerusalem.²

Clear NT texts

Church persecution affected invasion of houses

As for Saul, he made havoc of the church, entering every house. Acts 8:3

Church meetings were always in houses and nowhere else

Continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, praising God. Acts 2:46-47

Daily in the temple, and in every house, they did not cease teaching and preaching Jesus *as* the Christ. Acts 5:42

Greet the church that is in their house. Rm 16:5

² The question of the role of Matthias is debated (Acts 1:23-26). Were the apostles too hasty in accepting him as one of the 12 or was that role earmarked for Paul? He is not mentioned in the NT after his acceptance. Should they even have used Old Covenant lots to decide, as leaders of the New Covenant submitted to the Holy Spirit? They were told to wait for the Holy Spirit and this appointment took place before it. Paul is certainly an apostle of the Lamb (Rm 1:1; 1 Cor 1:1, 9:1; 2 Cor 11:5), and there are only 12 of these (Rev 21:14). Either they made a mistake or there are 13 apostles of the Lamb. [Apostles to the churches (e.g. Rm 16:7) are different to the 12.] The apostles were on a steep learning curve after the resurrection and it took time to get many things right, such as: neglect of Hellenist widows (c6), preaching to Gentiles (Acts 10:34-35), accepting Gentiles (Gal 2:11-12), the need for deacons (c6) or the need for elders (c11).

Aquila and Priscilla greet you heartily in the Lord, with the church that is in their house. 1 Cor 16:19

Greet the brethren who are in Laodicea, and Nymphas and the church that *is* in his house. Col 4:15

To the beloved Apphia, Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church in your house. Phm 1:2

The church is called a spiritual house

You also, as living stones, are being built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. 1 Pt 2:5

Prayer meetings were in houses

The house of Mary, the mother of John whose surname was Mark, where many were gathered together praying. Acts 12:2

Pentecost was in a house

Suddenly there came a sound from heaven, as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting. Acts 2:2

Paul always taught the church in houses

Now on the first *day* of the week, when the disciples came together to break bread, Paul, ready to depart the next day, spoke to them and continued his message until midnight. There were many lamps in the upper room where they were gathered together. Acts 20:7-8

I kept back nothing that was helpful, but proclaimed it to you, and taught you publicly and from house to house. Acts 20:20

Objections

What about the Hall of Tyrannus?

And he went into the synagogue and spoke boldly for three months, reasoning and persuading concerning the things of the kingdom of God. But when some were hardened and did not believe, but spoke evil of the Way before the multitude, he departed from them and withdrew the disciples, reasoning daily in the school of Tyrannus. And this continued for two years, so that all who dwelt in Asia heard the word of the Lord Jesus, both Jews and Greeks. Acts 19:8-10

‘Reasoning’ is the word *dialegomai*, which means discourse, debate, converse, argue, discussion. It is where Paul taught the unbelieving Gentiles the word of Jesus. It was a place used by Paul for evangelistic purposes. The idolatrous Ephesian authorities would

not have allowed the worship of Jesus in a public building. As it was Paul received significant persecution by the Artemis-worshipping Ephesians (Acts 19:23ff.).³

What about the temple?

So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house. Acts 2:46

Now Peter and John went up together to the temple at the hour of prayer, the ninth *hour*. Acts 3:1

Now as the lame man who was healed held on to Peter and John, all the people ran together to them in the porch which is called Solomon's, greatly amazed. Acts 3:11

And through the hands of the apostles many signs and wonders were done among the people. And they were all with one accord in Solomon's Porch. Acts 5:12

Daily in the temple, and in every house, they did not cease teaching and preaching Jesus *as* the Christ. Acts 5:42

'Go, stand in the temple and speak to the people all the words of this life.' And when they heard *that*, they entered the temple early in the morning and taught. But the high priest and those with him came and called the council together, with all the elders of the children of Israel, and sent to the prison to have them brought. Acts 5:20-21

Temple meetings were temporary. The meetings in the temple were early on when this was the normal place for godly Hebrews to pray. It was not a place where proper fellowship could take place and certainly the temple police would not have allowed worship of Jesus in the temple precincts. This practice soon ceased.

It was entirely natural for Jews who had spent their life praying in the temple courts to continue to do so after their conversion (Acts 22:17). But at some point this stopped; either because God told them to, or because they were forbidden to gather there.

The apostles did not break bread there, this was done in houses (Acts 2:46).

They also gathered there to preach the Gospel (until stopped by the temple police) Acts 5:42, 20-21.

Neither gathering in Solomon's portico to pray or preaching the Gospel to Jews constitute a Sunday gathering of the church to fellowship, break bread and worship. It took time for the apostles to work out basic issues; note that Christian elders are only first mentioned in Acts 11.

These temporary, initial temple meetings do not constitute a precedent for meeting in a large public building.

³ Artemis (Greek) equals Diana (Latin). Ephesus housed the famous temple of Artemis, which was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. Ephesians considered Artemis to be the greatest goddess in the Greek pantheon.

The period of the Acts was a transition time as the apostles learned to move from the Old Covenant to the New Covenant. However, once the temple was destroyed in 70 AD there was no doubt that all the old forms had forever passed away. Paul understood this even before this time (Heb 8:13). Gradually Jewish Christians stopped meeting in the temple at all, apart from occasional pilgrimages for feast days. Remember that Gentile Christians were not allowed in the temple at all (Acts 21:28) so it could never have been a place of fellowship. A large minority of the Jerusalem church was Hellenist (Acts 6:1).

Descriptive texts

An unusual objection is that the above house church texts are all descriptive and not prescriptive; therefore they have no authority for our direction.

This is extremely strange. The texts are descriptive of apostolic practice and we are commanded to follow apostolic precedents and behaviour as well as teaching (1 Cor 4:16, 11:1; 2 Thess 2:15, 3:6).

But there are many important things, which only have descriptive circumstantial evidence.

There is no regulatory didactic analysis of baptism. We are commanded to baptise and there are some superficial descriptions of it. But we are not told exactly how to do it or exactly what to say on the occasion (other than to refer to the Trinity). This is why great debate has raged about the mode of baptism or even what it is supposed to symbolise. Different denominations refer to different truths.

For example: Baptists refer to the symbolism of dying with Jesus and being raised, hence immersion is favoured. However, the secular Greek use of the word baptise has reference to going underwater and not coming back up. A sinking ship was said to be baptised because the word means to dip or to dye. Presbyterians refer baptism to the work of the Holy Spirit in cleansing from above, and thus prefer sprinkling or pouring. The important matter is not the mode but the obedience to a command. The shortened descriptive texts do not give us enough information to be exact in our practice.

There is also no detailed explanation of exactly how we celebrate the Lord's Supper, and this has also led to great variations. These include the following:

- Using multiple small glasses for the wine.
- Using a single chalice for the wine.
- Not sharing the wine at all.
- Using multiple small wafers for the bread.
- Using a single loaf.
- Using multiple loaves.
- Celebrating the Supper in small groups.
- Celebrating it haphazardly in large meetings.
- Celebrating it weekly.
- Celebrating it monthly.
- Celebrating it annually.
- Never celebrating it at all.
- Celebrating it within the context of a communal meal but not isolating it.
- Celebrating it after a communal meal.

The variations are huge because we have no clear, detailed explanation of what to do, only a slight description based on the Passover that Jesus celebrated.

In these cases, merely possessing descriptive texts does not stop us obeying the institution. There is far more evidence for house churches than there is for the Lord's Supper. Denying house churches is folly.

The leadership of elders

Without a detailed analysis, the leadership of the church is committed to elders and to no one else. There is no hierarchy of multiple layers of leadership.

The church is to appoint elders in every city (Titus 1:5).

When Paul addressed the leaders of Ephesus he called for the elders (Acts 20:17). The word overseer (bishop, e.g. Acts 20:28) is the same as 'elder' (cf. Acts 20:17). Greeks preferred the word overseer; Jews preferred the word elder. Paul gives us the qualifications for eldership/overseer (1 Tim 3 / Titus 1).

Other words used for leadership (e.g. *proistemi* [leadership / guide] Rm 12:8; 1 Thess 5:12; *hegeomai* [rule] Heb 13:7, 15; *poimen* [shepherd] Eph 4:11; *kubernesis* [piloting] 1 Cor 12:28; etc.) apply to elders. Thus an elder is a pilot that steers the church in the right direction; a shepherd; a guiding leader; and one who rules (that is, has the power of discipline).⁴

If there is no complex leadership hierarchy, there is no need for a big congregation meeting in a big hall.

The church is the household of God

Let us do good to all, especially to those who are of the household of faith.
Gal 6:10

You are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God. Eph 2:19

'Household' is the Greek word *oikeios* meaning: belonging to a house or family, belonging to the household of God.

So it has all the hallmarks of a normal household. This includes the fact of meeting in normal homes.

Leaders are fathers

We exhorted, and comforted, and charged every one of you, as a father *does* his own children. 1 Thess 2:11

As my beloved children I warn *you*. 1 Cor 4:14

For though you might have ten thousand instructors in Christ, yet *you do* not *have* many fathers; for in Christ Jesus I have begotten you through the gospel. Therefore I urge you, imitate me. 1 Cor 4:15-16

⁴ When someone is excommunicated.

My little children, for whom I labour in birth again until Christ is formed in you. Gal 4:19

As a son with *his* father he served with me in the gospel. Phil 2:22

Within the household of God, elders (the only type of leader) act like fathers. They are there to nurture and protect the family of God by acting as a delegate of the heavenly Father.

There is no domination (1 Pt 5:3), no authoritarianism, no acting on ceremony, no mediatorship (1 Tim 2:5). They are not vicars acting vicariously.

Fatherly leadership is best manifested in the informal setting of a domestic home, not a large building on a platform.

Leaders are nursing mothers

We were gentle among you, just as a nursing *mother* cherishes her own children. 1 Thess 2:7

Just as God acts like a mother hen in watching over his children (Ps 17:8, 36:7, 57:1; Matt 23:37), so Paul shows that the same maternal instincts should apply to church elders.

The nursing mother trope is best situated in a home.

Leaders are shepherds

The flock is an extension of the idea of a household but as applied to livestock. Shepherds care for the flock by feeding them and protecting them from predators. Such was therefore a good illustration for the flock of God. Under-shepherds (pastors, elders) care for God's flock, God's family, in the same way.

The individual shepherding of the sheep, caring for individual needs by knowing the sheep intimately, is best suited to a small domestic environment, such as a home.

Sheep have to know their shepherd to follow him and Biblical shepherds knew each of their sheep. At night shepherds would make a makeshift sheepfold out of branches and thorns. The gap for a doorway was where the shepherd would sleep to prevent sheep escaping without his knowledge (hence the illustration of Jn 10:7). This means that flocks of sheep in this context are not huge.

If elders are shepherds (pastors) then they must know intimately every member of the flock. This means that flock numbers cannot be high. To really pastor people properly, I doubt that even two elders could cope with more than 30 or so people. This is also conducive to gathering in a home.

Remember Paul's example – pastoring and discipling involved constant work, visiting homes all the time to instruct members as well as dealing with problems and coping with leading various meetings. Modern churches have a very poor understanding of eldership and completely fail in effective pastoral care and thus get away with large congregations -- but this is a failure.

I kept back nothing that was helpful, but proclaimed it to you, and taught you publicly and from house to house. Acts 20:20

Such intensive personal instruction in doctrine requires a very small congregation. The idea of a congregation of many hundreds, or even many thousands, is preposterous.

Apostles have no place in the local church as apostles

The function of Biblical apostles is to go out of the church and plant new churches elsewhere. In the new church they have temporary authority until elders have been appointed, which in NT experience was pretty quickly. Paul would plant a church in one missionary journey and appoint elders on the next journey.

When an apostle (aka missionary) returned to the home church, he was not an apostle but whatever he was before he was sent out (e.g. an elder). Thus there is no dominating apostleship authority in the local church.

With no apostle there is no leadership hierarchy and no focus upon dominating authority. Authoritarian leadership requires larger churches, platforms, dedicated buildings, faceless homogenous congregations and institutional formality or even formal liturgies. This requires large churches in dedicated buildings. If there is no apostolic ministry in the local church, then there is no hindrance to small churches meeting in homes.

The necessity of koinonia

They continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship [*koinonia*], in the breaking of bread, and in prayers. Acts 2:42

If we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship [*koinonia*] with one another. 1 Jn 1:7

There are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit. There are differences of ministries, but the same Lord. And there are diversities of activities, but it is the same God who works all in all. But the manifestation of the Spirit is given to each one for the profit of all: for to one is given ... 1 Cor 12:4-7

Do you want manifestations of the Spirit? Then focus on every member ministry; body ministry; mutual edification. The modern church does the opposite. To see the Spirit supposedly working in power it gathers to see a man on a platform.

The church is a place of fellowship, communion, and koinonia. It is a place of mutual edification, of one anothering, of edification, of encouragement and exhortation. It is a place of didactic instruction where teaching is conducted in fellowship by questions, answers and discussion (Acts 20:7). There is no formal sermon in the gathered church, such proclamation is only fitting for evangelisation of outsiders. That is why the word 'sermon' is never mentioned in connection with the gathered church; never. Sermons were what Gentile Greeks practised for entertainment in the Areopagus; sermons were the province of philosophers. Biblical didactic instruction follows the method of Jesus with his disciples – informal teaching and answering questions.

Now I have explained the Biblical basis for mutual edification in many previous papers and books (q.v.).

None of these things can take place within large congregations in big buildings dominated by a single man on a platform.

Universal priesthood

The church has no formal priests. No leader should ever act like a priest does, being a self-appointed mediator. Every modern Charismatic church leader acts like a priest. In fact Charismatic apostles have stated that God speaks to them directly and then they speak to the church. This is mediatorial priesthood or formal prophecy. It always leads to cultic activity and authoritarianism.

But God's work of grace has led to equality in the body of Christ. There is only one mediator between God and man and that is Christ. All the members of the body of Christ are a priest able to offer up prayer and spiritual sacrifices to God (praise and service, Heb 13:15-16) and to teach their brethren.

You also, as living stones, are being built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. 1 Pt 2:5

You *are* a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvellous light. 1 Pt 2:9

[Christ] has made us kings and priests to His God and Father. Rev 1:6

The doctrine of universal priesthood (priesthood of all believers) undergirds every member participation in church meetings, which in turn requires small enough meetings in an enclosed space (a home) to allow for sharing with ease.

Edification

Church meetings are based on mutual edification; that is the whole point of the gathered church on Sunday. Growth occurs when the church edifies itself:

... speaking the truth in love, may grow up in all things into Him who is the head - Christ - from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love. Eph 4:15-16

The Greek word for edification is *oikodome*, which is based upon the word *doma* which means an edifice (from *demo*: to build). To this is added the word *oikos* which means a dwelling or home. The whole word came to mean: the construction of a house. From this it is used in the New Testament (and elsewhere) for spiritual strengthening, edification, i.e. building up. So, the main point of gathering together on Sunday is for edification, and the very word itself includes the idea of a house.

Over and over again Paul tells us to centre upon edification:

Therefore let us pursue the things which *make* for peace and the things by which one may edify another. Rm 14:19

Whenever you come together, each of you has a psalm, has a teaching, has a tongue, has a revelation, has an interpretation. Let all things be done for edification. 1 Cor 14:26

Let each of us please his neighbour for his good, leading to edification. Rm 15:2

Let no corrupt word proceed out of your mouth, but what is good for necessary edification, that it may impart grace to the hearers. Eph 4:29

Let it be for the edification of the church that you seek to excel. 1 Cor 14:12

Love edifies. 1 Cor 8:1

Therefore let us pursue the things which make for peace and the things by which one may edify another. Rm 14:19

Comfort each other and edify one another. 1 Thess 5:11

The one-another texts

Over 50 times the phrase 'one another' is linked to a command to serve in some way, e.g. forgive, love, care etc. Here are just a few examples:

Love one another. Jn 13:34

Receive one another. Rm 15:7

Admonish one another. Rm 15:14

Greet one another. 1 Cor 16:20

Admonish one another in psalms. Col 3:16

Edify one another. 1 Thess 5:11

Exhort one another. Heb 3:18

Pray for one another. Jm 5:16

Minister to one another. 1 Pt 4:10

Have fellowship one with another. 1 Jn 1:7

This sort of close fellowship cannot be conducted in large congregation in big halls under formal leadership on a platform.

The church is based upon the fellowship of every member

Pursue the things *which make* for peace and the things by which one may edify another. Rm 14:19

There are differences of ministries. 1 Cor 12:5

The manifestation of the Spirit is given to each one for the profit *of all*; for to one is given ... 1 Cor 12:7

Whenever you come together, each of you has a psalm, has a teaching, has a tongue, has a revelation, has an interpretation. Let all things be done for edification. 1 Cor 14:26

Let no corrupt word proceed out of your mouth, but what is good for necessary edification, that it may impart grace to the hearers. Eph 4:29

Comfort each other and edify one another. 1 Thess 5:11

Open fellowship, or body ministry, cannot be conducted in large congregations in a big room under formal leadership.

Practices that ruin body ministry

- Being focused upon an authoritarian leader on a platform.
- Having a church situated in a large building.
- Having a large congregation.
- Having a formal liturgy.
- Having a worship leader dominate worship.
- Formal meetings.

Celebrating the Lord's Supper

On the first day of the week, when the disciples came together to break bread. Acts 20:7

When you come together as a church, ... to eat the Lord's Supper. 1 Cor 11:18-20 [The apostle, in these verses, criticises the Corinthians' failure to do this.]

And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers. Acts 2:42

We are commanded by apostolic precedent to celebrate the Lord's Supper every time the church gathers on a Sunday (Acts 20:7). This is to be a memorial of the Lord's death until he comes (1 Cor 11:26).

This has been understood by the church throughout the centuries; even institutionalised churches, such as Anglicanism, has 'Holy Communion' every Sunday. With the rise of the Charismatic Movement and especially with large congregations, it gradually became impractical to do this every Sunday. Churches began to stop breaking bread. With long worship jamborees and equally long sermons there was not time to manage the supper.

This is disobedience. The Lord's Supper is a key focus of church life and it is to be undertaken within the confines of koinonia.

When a church is small in numbers and meeting in a home it is very simple to break bread every Sunday. Not only that, the early church broke bread within the context of a communal meal that aided fellowship and provided help for poorer members. This can only be easily performed in a home setting.

The command to celebrate the Lord's Supper every week is indicative of the need to meet in a house. Failing to obey this precedent is also indicative of a failed and disobedient church.

There is no instrumental music

Musical instruments began to be used in churches on the edge of the empire after about 200 years as pagan influences began to be absorbed due to proximity. This development was condemned by the early church fathers.⁵ Instrumental music was formally introduced into Roman church services by Pope Vitelian in 671 AD but musical instruments were only in widespread use after 1200. However, they were rejected by the Reformers and utterly condemned for inciting pagan emotionalism. Luther complained that they led to Baal worship, famous for its orgiastic fertility rites based on music, chiefly drums and percussion.

I have already explained that there is no instrumental music in the local church. It is impossible to make a case for it from Scripture.⁶ This has various ramifications.

Singing must be a cappella and this is difficult to regulate in large congregations; however, it is easy to do in relaxed, informal house churches.

Musical instruments and a band require multiple layers of integrated technology in modern churches, all of which is unbiblical.

It requires a worship leader to direct the band, choose songs and arrangements etc. This person is unbiblical; there is no such person.

The band requires amplification; this requires significant space depending on how many people are in the band. Modern Charismatic worship bands have drums (a pagan concept)⁷ and these require significant space.

The band requires a PA system, which in turn needs technicians to set it up and monitor the sound. The PA board on its own requires space. This takes up more space both for the playing and storage.

All of this contributes to the need for a big space in a dedicated church building – but none of it is Biblical.

If there is no instrumental music, then there is no need for a large building.

The gradual emergence of dedicated buildings

Without a detailed explanation of the progress of churches in the first few centuries under the fathers, we find that there was a significant deterioration in all matters after the death

⁵ E.g. Clement of Alexandria; see B J Kidd, *Hist. of the church to AD461*, 1922, I, 405.

⁶ We are led by the New Covenant of Jesus and apostolic precedent / instruction. Just as Old Covenant forms like sacrifices, festivals, priests and vestments were discarded, so was instrumental music and choirs.

⁷ The fertility cults that harassed Israel in the OT would all feature fertility ritual dancing involving pounding drumbeats and percussion instruments. There may well also be trumpets and such like but certainly a drumbeat. Thus this pounding drumming became a feature of pagan worship and is still seen in pagan cults of all sorts to this day.

of the apostles. Compare the doctrinal teaching of the sub-apostolic fathers with the NT and see the massive difference.

But it was not just doctrine, very quickly men started to accumulate authority and power to themselves and began to rule the church in a pagan dominating manner. Within 250 years monarchical bishops began to appear, having authority over multiple local churches within the metropolitan area. People like Cyprian [d. 258] and others started to gather the people in larger numbers and in bigger buildings in order to exercise centralised power.⁸

Over time this power grab ended up with the bishop of Rome becoming the Pope over all churches like an emperor. As the leader's power grew, so the churches got bigger and thus the buildings for them had to be bigger and grander. Just look at the enormous spending on the Vatican's Sistine chapel alone.⁹ The apostles would be shocked.

Constantine

When Constantine announced his dubious conversion to Christianity it was no longer a marginalised, persecuted religion. In fact, it suddenly became fashionable for those who wanted to please the emperor to suddenly become Christians.

As a result of this fashionability, the churches initially grew (and became weaker) so that churches could meet in large congregations. This prompted the need for large buildings that were not necessary in times of persecution when the church met in caves, catacombs and forests around Rome.

As the church grew in worldly popularity, so it needed bigger buildings. State churches require big buildings.

Basilicas

A basilica was a large public meeting hall used by the Romans for the purpose of city business. The basilica was often a rectangle, with long colonnades that divided the interior space into a central nave bordered by an aisle on each side.

The origin of the traditional Episcopal / Anglican / Catholic churches and cathedrals is a copy of Imperial Rome's town halls. In fact, The name 'basilica' was adopted for early Christian church buildings that copied this arrangement.

The idea of using a large public building to house the gathered church is a pagan idea.

Love not the world

Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that *is* in the world -- the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life -- is not of the Father but is of the world. 1 Jn 2:15-16

⁸ Centralisation of power over large numbers is the prime temptation for leaders over the centuries.

⁹ A chapel in the Vatican, built by Pope Sixtus IV, containing Michelangelo's painted ceiling and his fresco of the Last Judgement, and also frescos by Botticelli, Ghirlandaio, and others. It is used for the principal papal ceremonies and also by the cardinals when meeting for the election of a new pope.

We are commanded to not love the world and are told that the world is the enemy of God (Jm 4:4). Therefore, the church of God is to be the antidote to the world. It is the opposite of the world and does not function like the world.

The world is in the grip of Satan. The structures of the world mimic the structures of the demonic horde. This is why the church must not follow the structures of the world; it is a godly thing, a spiritual kingdom, following divine patterns.

Regarding gathering people under leadership, the world copies the structure of Satan's fallen angels; that is, large numbers gathered under a strictly hierarchical leadership pattern. All the management structures in the world follow this pattern, such as the armed forces under multiple layers of command, or corporate commercial management with layers of executives and managers, or national governments with multiple ministries and mandarins. This is what the world does because it is a pattern created by Satan: gather large numbers under an authoritarian hierarchy. Big buildings necessarily follow from this due to the large gatherings involved. So all worldly systems have their own dedicated buildings, whether it is barracks, parliament or corporate headquarters.

God's plan for the church is nothing like this because it is a divine plan. Leadership in the church is by one type of person only, an elder. These work in plurality over a fairly small number of people. Due to the small numbers, the local church is able to meet in a home and enable all the necessary characteristics for mutual edification. A church of thirty people meeting in a house under two or three elders is able to fulfil God's plan.

Virtually all churches in the world do not follow God's plan but follow a satanic structure. They gather large numbers in a dedicated large building space under a hierarchy of authoritarian leaders. The church follows the Devil in its structure, not God. Only a few traditional Reformed churches operate as small flocks with pastors; though even they have a dedicated building.

This is why the sins of the world follow into institutional churches: spiritual, mental and physical abuse, fraud, hubris, licentiousness and so on. Authoritarian hierarchical leadership is a seed-plot for such evils.

The church must not be like the world and must meet in a home.

Church history

Throughout church history, alongside the large institutional churches and denominations, there have always been hidden small churches meeting in homes. Sometimes these fed into a movement where multiple house churches identified with a certain leader or creed.

The institutional churches, especially the Roman Catholic Church, despised these small works and persecuted them viciously. As always, history is written by the victor and the Catholics, especially, smeared the small church movements they attacked as heretics.

Now it is clear that some of these movements were unorthodox or involved some questionable ideas, but that does not cancel the testimony of the remainder that were sound.

Many of these small works are nameless; they just prospered alongside the institutional churches and minded their own business. Some initiated genuine revivals, like the home study group under Robert Haldane [1764-1842] led to a revival in Switzerland [1815-1819].

Some became famous, such as the Bogomils, the Albigenses, the Paulicans or the Waldensians. The Anabaptists, although a mixed group, also deserves mention. The original Baptists met in houses; as did the original Brethren. In fact, most dissenting movements began in homes.

There were even Puritan house churches; John Owen planted two. Some house churches that were originally sound developed into denominations that were mystical or legalistic with unsound doctrines, such as the Mennonites, the Moravians or the Amish. Whenever periods of persecution erupted, the church relocated to homes and barns.

Everywhere that mankind developed new geographical regions, the original churches met in homes. Sadly, even in privation, settlers usually later chose to build dedicated church buildings, such as in the American west or the 13 Colonies. Areas which kept their house churches meeting secretly, such as in 20th-century Inland China, continued for decades unspoilt.

Thus throughout history from the time of the apostles to today, there have been house churches. The challenge to build house churches today is nothing new.

Conclusion

The evidence is conclusive. The local church must be small and must meet in a house under the leadership of elders.

It is impossible to make a case to support what constitutes many modern churches: a large congregation meeting in a big rented hall or industrial shed, sporting a rock band, where the people have no effective fellowship or contribution, under a dominating leadership centred in a hierarchy under a single leading figure with officious titles sermonising from a platform.

The apostles would not recognise modern churches if they saw them.

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