

The Concepts of the Church in the New Testament

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In Theology, the discipline of the study of the church is called ecclesiology. Theologians speak of the church in two forms; they express two concepts of the church: the universal church and the local church. The first concept of the church, the universal church, means that, at times, the New Testament refers to the church consisting of all those who believe in Jesus for salvation (in all places and in all times). The second concept of the church, the local church, means that, at times, the New Testament refers to the church consisting of all those who believe in Jesus for salvation meeting in only one place and in one time. It is true that the Bible refers to the church in these two concepts. However, I am becoming more and more convinced that the New Testament presents us with a slightly different concept of the church.

There is no doubt that the New Testament refers to the universal church. Many biblical texts refer to all those who believe in Jesus as the church. After all, it is the universal church against which the gates of hell will not prevail (Matthew 16:18). No one can doubt that the concept of the universal church is sound doctrine.

I have been thinking about the concept of the local church. Often, we think that all those who believe in Jesus meeting in a building (which has no other purpose), a few times a week, is what the New Testament refers to as the local church. I do not think it is right to diminish the teaching of the New Testament to just this idea.

In the Book of Acts, we find, for the first time, the “church” in Jerusalem. Many people immediately think of this church in the sense of the traditional church, as the church exists today in many parts of the world. Often they think of all the believers in Jerusalem meeting together to praise God and hear the Word of God preached. However, this is not how the Book of Acts describes the church in Jerusalem.

The church in Jerusalem existed in two forms. First, the believers met daily in their homes. In my opinion, “daily” describes which days of the week the believers met and not the frequency with which the individual believers met. For example, there were thousands of believers in Jerusalem and every day some of them were meeting in houses (probably at night). I don’t want to say that all the believers were meeting in houses every single night of the week. I don’t think the Book of Acts wants to convey this either. In the houses they dedicated themselves to the apostle’s teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer (Acts 2:42). Second, the believers met daily in the Temple courts. I believe the Book of Acts wants to express that the daily meetings meant that some of the believers met in the Temple courts each day of the week and not that all the believers met there every day of the week. They met together in the larger group to worship God in a manner that was culturally appropriate for the Jewish people. It is strange, or perhaps funny, to imagine the Apostles gathering all the believers into the Temple court to have a worship service of hymns and choruses followed by 45 minutes of preaching as the “Sunday service” exists in many traditional churches throughout the world today. All indications demonstrate that the apostle’s teaching was shared in the homes and not in the Temple.

In the second chapter of Acts, we found the fact that the church in Jerusalem met in the Temple and also in the houses of the believers in smaller groups. So, the church in the city, all the believers, met as the church in the Temple. But, all the believers in the city also met as the church in smaller groups in their houses. The believers that met in one house were considered a church. They were not a cell church and did not have a mother church. The idea that a group of believers meeting in a house must have a mother church can not be found in

the Bible. The small group in the house is a complete and true church, independent of other churches; her existence as a true church did not depend on the other house churches, nor on the entire group meeting in the Temple, but, all the house churches participated in the meetings in the Temple.

We must accept the two realities of the local church in the New Testament. First, the local church existed as the church of the city (or region). In Jerusalem, this fact is obvious. John, in the Book of Revelation, wrote brief letters to the seven churches in Asia, each located in its own city. As well, Paul wrote letters to the church in the city of Corinth and in the city of Thessalonica. He sent a letter to the church in the city of Colossae with instructions that it would be read by the church in the city of Laodicea (Colossians 4:16). The New Testament refers to all the believers in a city as the church – the church of the city. But, in Colossians 4:15 we read,

Greet the brethren who are in Laodicea and also Nymfa and the church that meets in her house (NASB).

The second reality of the local church in the New Testament is the house church. In Jerusalem this fact is also obvious. The believers met daily in their houses as the church. Rather than accept that the church meeting in homes was the practice of the early church, many people today think that the early church was like traditional churches as they have been since the Reformation in the 16th Century or like traditional churches since Constantine in the 4th Century. They presume that their own churches are like the early church. How sad that they ignore the clear teaching of the New Testament. The church met in homes in Jerusalem (Acts 2:42; 12:12), in Ephesus (1 Corinthians 16:19), in Laodicea (Colossians 4:16), in Philippi (Acts 16:40), in Colossae (Philemon 2), and in Rome (Romans 16:15, 23). F.F. Bruce wrote, “The presence of other house churches is probably implied in the greetings of Rom. 16:3-16.”[\[1\]](#) The norm of the early church was to meet in small groups in the homes of believers. House church is the second reality of the local church in the New Testament.

In fact, the church existed in these two realities for about three centuries before changing. Wolfgang Simson explains the change in this way,

During the first three centuries after Christ, church historians tell us, the house church remained the normal, natural way of Christians sharing their new lives together. Only after Emperor Constantine in the fourth century was there a radical shift in church structure. The congregation-type church was introduced, the church became an audience, house churches were marginalized and ultimately forbidden. No one could function as Christians privately, without the sanction of the state and its acknowledged and ordained “orthodox” church.[\[2\]](#)

Before this, the early church met principally in the homes of the believers.

Let’s look at the complete picture of the local church in the New Testament. We have already seen that the church in Jerusalem met in the houses and in the Temple courts. Jerusalem had a church of the city and churches in homes. Paul wrote a letter to the church of the city of Laodicea, but also sent his greetings to the church in the house of Nympha in Laodicea. The two realities of the local church existed in Laodicea as well. I believe that the early church existed in these two realities in all the cities where people believed. Richard Longenecker wrote, “Paul seems to have viewed every congregation at whatever time and in

whatever locality as an embodiment of the church universal – that is, to have viewed each particular congregation as *the church of God*.”^[3] For example, in Acts 14, Paul and his co-laborers returned to Antioch and called together the church. Why did they not just wait until the Sunday worship service of the church in the city of Antioch? It was probably because the believers in Antioch normally met in smaller groups in their homes. The meeting of all of the believers, the church of the city, probably did not occur every Sunday. Rather than wait for the next meeting of all the house churches (the church of the city), they called the whole group together immediately upon returning in order to joyfully explain all that God had done during their missionary journey among the Gentiles.

The church in Jerusalem met daily in the Temple courts because this building was available to them, especially to the believers who converted from Judaism. The Temple did not belong to the church in Jerusalem, but was available to the church. The church in Jerusalem did not own its own building. It is humorous to think that the church in Jerusalem collected offerings to buy the Temple where they met. The believers in Jerusalem did not buy the Temple, but they met in the Temple courts to worship Jesus. Let’s return to the subject of the church in Antioch and think about buildings. Nothing in the New Testament indicates that the church in Antioch had its own building. As well, they did not have a Temple in which to meet. They did not have a place for all the believers to meet together regularly. For this reason, the meetings of the church of the city were not daily (as was the case of the church of the city of Jerusalem), and, probably, they did not even meet together on a weekly basis. This is the situation in the areas of the world where house churches have a celebration as the church of the city or region once a month, or less frequently. It appears that this was the situation in Antioch as well.

It is dangerous to ignore the two realities of the local church. In Acts 5:12-14, we read that nobody else joined with the disciples in the Temple courts, but that the church grew daily.

At the hands of the apostles many signs and wonders were taking place among the people; and they were all with one accord in Solomon’s portico. But none of the rest dared to associate with them; however the people held them in high esteem. And all the more believers in the Lord, multitudes of men and women, were constantly added to their number (NASB).

Some liberal theologians have said that the Bible contradicts itself in this passage. They did not consider the two realities of the local church. The meaning of this text is simple: no one else joined the church in the Temple courts (the church of the city), but the house churches grew daily. The two realities of the local church must be understood so that we do not give anyone the opportunity to mislead us about the church today.

It is possible that we have already been misled by our traditions of what it means to be the church. Many people, especially pastors and theologians, believe that it is necessary to have a building to be a true church. Few pastors accept that a church meeting in a house is a true church. However, for a church to have its own building is an idea from outside the New Testament. According to our traditions, almost all churches own their own building, or plan to build their own building. For this reason we presume that it is necessary to have a building to be a true church. We must search the New Testament to determine if a church needs a building. In truth, there are no churches in the New Testament that own their own building. In fact, all the churches mentioned in the New Testament met in the homes of the believers. At

times, all the believers in a city met together as the church of the city, but without owning their own meeting place.

Even though the Bible teaches that a small group of believers meeting in a house is a true and complete church, many pastors and theologians do not accept this. The majority of pastors teach that we can not have house churches, some even condemn house churches. Any person that denies the validity of having churches in houses today, must also deny the validity of house churches in the New Testament. In so doing, they ignore the reality of the local church in the New Testament in the only form that we know it existed. They prefer to import the forms of the church of today into the context of the New Testament. In this way, they do violence to the Bible, denying what the Bible teaches and giving preference to their own traditions. If we read the Bible honestly, we must recognize that small groups of believers meeting in homes were not considered cell groups of a mother church, but were, in fact, considered to be true and complete churches. When we read the Bible honestly, we must also accept that small groups of believers meeting in homes today are, in fact, true and complete churches, and that they are not dependent on a mother church for their existence, validity, or identity.

If anyone wants to deny the validity of house churches today, he must prove this from the New Testament. The New Testament clearly teaches the validity of having churches in homes. The responsibility to prove otherwise belongs to anyone who wants to deny this truth. And, they must prove otherwise from the Bible. Any person that uses a source other than the Bible to deny the validity of a teaching from the Bible acts dangerously. In fact, if the Bible teaches something clearly, it is dangerous to try to disprove it. The reader should be leery of any person, a pastor or even a theologian, who tries to invalidate what the Bible clearly teaches.

Before concluding this subject, let's consider two advantages of house churches today. First, land and construction are expensive today. Dr. Wade Akins wrote, "By using homes, the church can grow without the burden of renting or purchasing a building."^[4] Simply stated, house churches cost less. Also, rather than tie ourselves up in a construction project and losing so much time with construction, we could focus our time, money and energy in sharing the gospel. Second, house church is more natural, more comfortable, and has more of a family atmosphere for those who participate, especially for those who do not yet believe in Jesus. Dr. Wade Akins wrote, "Experience tells us that conversions are multiplied when a church is located in a natural environment where the guests can participate without feeling threatened. It is also important to note that in using this method it is easier to penetrate into neighborhoods and cities."^[5] The home is the most natural environment in which the church can develop. This fact is being proven throughout the whole world in our generation.

Through the use of churches meeting in the homes of believers we can expand the Kingdom of Jesus most efficiently. This should not surprise us, because it was in this form that the early church spread throughout the Roman Empire. And, it is the form with which the church is rapidly spreading in many countries, and among many peoples, today.

^[1] F.F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 183.

^[2] Wolfgang Simson, *Houses that Change the World*, Reading, Berkshire, UK: Cox & Wyman, Ltd., 24.

^[3] Richard N. Longenecker, *Community Formation in the Early Church and in the Church Today*, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 2002, p. 74.

[4] Dr. Thomas Wade Akins, *Pioneer Evangelism*, Rio de Janeiro, RJ: Junta de Missões Nacionais da Convenção Batista Brasileira, 31.

[5] Dr. Thomas Wade Akins, *Pioneer Evangelism*, Rio de Janeiro, RJ: Junta de Missões Nacionais da Convenção Batista Brasileira, 32.