

Fellowship Among Christians ...

An Essential Tool for Our Endurance!

We are told in the well-known prophecies of Jesus Christ in Matthew 24 that there will be great wars, famines, pestilences, and earthquakes in various places. Many will be offended and betray one another and kill the saints, and false prophets will rise up and deceive many. There will be lawlessness, and the love of many will wax cold, but "... he who endures to the end will be saved" (Matthew 24:13).

All of us want to be saved, resurrected, and placed alongside Jesus Christ at the throne of the Father at the end of this age, but the process of getting there is not so simple. We must repent and be called by the Eternal out of this world, and receive God's spirit at baptism and the laying on of hands. This is just the beginning of a life dedicated in service to the Creator who designed us for this very purpose, to be Kings and Priests and to reign on the earth for 1,000 years (Revelation 5:10; 20:4-6). We know that our destiny is tied up in ruling with Christ our Savior, whose love for us far transcends our deepest imagination.

"Church" versus "Ecclesia"

Our Father, who has called out of this world, has placed us into a special group of people called the *ecclesia*, which is translated "church" so often in the New Testament. This is not a good word choice for the people whom God has called out, since it elicits illusions of a building where Christians assemble, not the people themselves. Unfortunately that emphasis on the physical building fits well with the desires of large, government approved corporate religious bodies, like the Roman Catholic church, the Anglican Church, the Presbyterian Church, and many others, whose focus is on control of people through imposing cathedrals and steeple-topped buildings that reek of power and intimidation. In fact, the translators of the King James Version of the Bible placed a bias within the translation to camouflage the true meaning of *ecclesia*.

Paul warned Christians in Hebrews 10:25 to "...

not forsake the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhort one another, and so much the more as you see the day approaching." This makes plain that assembling together in fellowship of the *ecclesia* is extremely important. This is not the assembling of buildings; it is the gathering of God's people, as instructed, for example, in Leviticus 23:3: "Six days shall work be done, but the seventh day is a Sabbath of solemn rest, a holy convocation. You shall do no work on it; it is the Sabbath of the Lord in all your dwellings." *Ecclesia* means "a group of people called out for a special purpose, which designates the new society of which Jesus was the founder, being as it was a society knit together by the closest spiritual bonds and altogether independent of space."

Where Christians Met in Early Times

Up until about 250 A.D. there were no designated buildings constructed in which Christians gathered, unlike the assemblies of the followers of Mithra, Dianna, and other pagan deities that had their temples in many places. Richard Krautheimer, in *Early Christian and Byzantine Architecture*, (Penguin Books, 1975, page 24), wrote the following:

"Until A.D. 200, then, a Christian architecture did not and could not exist. Only the state religion erected temples in the tradition of the Greek and Roman architecture. The saviour religions [for example, Mithras or Isis], depending on the specific form of their ritual and the finances of their congregations, built oratories above or below ground, from the simplest to the most lavish, but always on a small scale. Christians congregations prior to 200 were limited to the realm of domestic architecture, and further, to inconspicuous dwellings of the lower classes."

Where, then, did God's people meet during the years following Christ's crucifixion and resurrection? In *homes*! There is both direct and indirect evidence in support of this fact. Please be aware that, in spite of this, there is no Scriptural directive saying that other venues such as meeting halls, schools, convention centers, or hotels cannot be used for the meetings of God's people.

Direct evidence:

1. The Assembly In The Ephesian House Of Aquila And Priscilla. First Corinthians was written in the city of Ephesus probably during the spring of A.D. 57 by the apostle Paul. At that time an assembly of Christians was meeting in the house of Aquila and Priscilla: "The churches of Asia greet you. Aquila and Prisca [Priscilla] greet you heartily in the Lord, with the church that is in their house" (I Corinthians 16:19). This was probably not the only House Church in Ephesus.

2. The Assembly In The Roman House Of Priscilla and Aquila. Paul's letter to the Roman Christians was written in the city of Corinth probably during the spring of A.D. 58. By this time Priscilla and Aquila had returned to Rome, where they had once lived (Acts 18:2), and an assembly of Christians was meeting in their house: "Greet Prisca [Priscilla] and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus, ... also the church that is in their house. Greet Epaenetus, my beloved, who is the first convert to Christ from Asia" (Romans 16:3-5). Like Ephesus, the House Church of Priscilla and Aquila was not the only assembly of Christians in Rome.

3. The Assembly In The House Of Philemon. Paul's letter to the Colossians was written from Rome some time around A.D. 61 or 62, during his first Roman captivity (A.D. 61-63). This is the period of time covered in Acts 28:16-31. The letter was apparently delivered by Tychicus and Onesimus. Onesimus was a native of Colossae (Colossians 4:7-9), who was a runaway slave of Philemon, who ended up in Rome and was converted by Paul (Philemon 15-16, 10). In addressing his letter to Philemon, written at the same time as the letter to the Colossians (probably A.D. 61 or 62), Paul sent greetings to the assembly of Christians meeting in Philemon's house: "Paul a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, to Philemon our beloved and fellow worker, and to Apphia our sister, and to Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the

church in your house" (Philemon 1-2). The Christians of Colossae assembled in Philemon's home.

4. The Assembly In The House Of Nympha.

In his letter to the Colossians, Paul makes reference to another House Church: "Greet the brethren who are in Laodicea, and also Nympha and the church that is in her house" (Colossians 4:15). In the area of Laodicea there appears to be two groups of Christians. The first group was "the brethren who are in Laodicea," or as it says in verse 16 "the church of the Laodiceans." The second group is "Nympha and the church that is in her house." It is also possible that only one group of people is being referred to, and the entire Laodicean Church assembled in the house of Nympha.

Indirect evidence: There is much indirect evidence of the early believers meeting in the homes of Christians. A summary of this evidence is given below.

1. The Practice Of The Jerusalem Church.

Meeting in private homes is a practice that can be traced back to the early Jerusalem Church of God. The brethren met in private homes for fellowship and meals. Luke records, "And day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart, praising God, and having favor with all the people. And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved" (Acts 2:46-47). The apostles also utilized private homes as another location (besides the Temple) to teach and preach: "And every day, in the temple and **from house to house**, they kept right on teaching and preaching Jesus the Christ" (Acts 5:42).

Around A.D. 37, Saul led a persecution against the Jerusalem Church (Acts 8:1-3). In writing about this persecution Luke records, "But Saul ravaging the church **entering house after house**; and dragging off men and women, he would put them in prison" (Acts 8:3). Why did Saul enter "house after house"? Because he knew that is where he could catch Christians teaching and worshipping. **If Christians worshipped in "church buildings," Saul would have gone there to find them.**

The private house was still being used as a location for Jerusalem Christians to assemble during another period of persecution in A.D. 44. During this persecution, James the brother of John was killed by

Herod Agrippa I, and Peter was imprisoned. Herod planned to keep Peter in prison until after the Passover and the Days of Unleavened Bread, then kill him (Acts 12:1-5). While Peter was in prison, the Jerusalem Christians were continually praying for him (verse 5). The inference here is to communal prayer, not just individual prayer. In verses 6 to 11, Peter is set free and "... went to the house of Mary, the mother of John who was also called Mark, where many were gathered together and were praying" (Acts 12:12). One reason Peter went to the house of Mary that night, besides it being close by, may have been that he knew this was one of those houses in Jerusalem where Christians gathered to be taught and to fellowship. What is known is that on this night people were gathered at Mary's home for prayer.

That night was probably the night following the Last Day of Unleavened Bread. Herod did not want to kill Peter until after the Feast (Acts 12:4), and "on the very night when Herod was about to bring him forward" (verse 6) Peter was set free. It appears Herod was going to act as soon as possible after the Days of Unleavened Bread. There is another reason for Peter going to Mary's house that night. If Mary's house was a regular meeting place for some of the Jerusalem brethren. Paul knew some of them would still be there that night having a fellowship meal, following the end of the Feast of Unleavened Bread.

These scriptures in the book of Acts indicate that the Jerusalem Church of God was a collection of House Assemblies. The Jerusalem Christians assembled in private houses for fellowship and instruction from the word of God.

2. Thessalonica And The "House Of Jason."

After departing Philippi (Acts 16:40), Paul arrived in Thessalonica. It was approximately the fall of A.D. 51. He preached in the local synagogue over three Sabbaths. This resulted in some Jews accepting Jesus as the Messiah, and even a greater number of Gentiles converting to Christianity (Acts 17:1-4). This angered a few of the Jews, who stirred up a mob, made up of "wicked men from the market place" (verse 5). **The mob attacked the "house of Jason"** looking for Paul and Silas (verse 5). While in Thessalonica Paul and Silas were staying in the home of Jason (verse 7). Not finding them at the "house of Jason," the mob found "Jason and some brethren," whom they took to the authorities of the city (verse

6). There is the suggestion here that the "house of Jason" was more than just the place where Paul and Silas were staying. It had become the first meeting place outside of the synagogue for the Church in Thessalonica.

3. Corinthian House Churches. After leaving Thessalonica, Paul traveled to Berea, Athens, and then to Corinth (Acts 17:10-18:1). He stayed there for about a year and a half (verse 11), early A.D. 52 to the middle of A.D. 53. Paul started preaching in the local synagogue. The Jews of Corinth rejected Paul's message, so from then on he concentrated on preaching to the Gentiles (Acts 18:1-6). Paul no longer went to the synagogue to preach, but "...went to the house of a certain man named Titus Justus, a worshiper of God, whose house was next to the synagogue" (verse 7). The house of Titus Justus became Paul's base of operation, and an early meeting place for the young Corinthian Church. The Corinthian Church starts out as a House Church, (i.e. a Living Room Church of God).

There are three other possible House Churches in Corinth. The first possibility occurs in I Corinthians 1:11: "For I have been informed concerning you, my brethren, by Chloe that there are quarrels among you."

A second possibility is found in I Corinthians 1:16 "Now I did baptize also the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized any other." **The Greek word translated "household" in verse 16 is *oikos*, meaning "a house, a dwelling."** A third possible Corinthian House Church is mentioned in Romans 16:22-23, "I, Tertius, who write this letter, greet you in the Lord. **Gaius, host to me and to the whole church**, greets you. Erastus, the city treasurer greets you, and Quartus, the brother" (Romans 16:22-23).

4. Ephesian House Churches. Paul commented on his stay in Ephesus to the Ephesian elders at Miletus: "... I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you publicly and from house to house" (Acts 20:17-20). Paul taught publicly in "school of Tyrannus" (Acts 19:9), and "from house to house" in House Churches like the one which met in the house of Aquila and Priscilla (I Corinthians 16:19). Is it possible the Ephesian Church was a collection of House Churches?

5. Troas House Church. On a Saturday night in

Troas, (about A.D. 58), the local Christians gathered in an “upper room” to break bread (have a fellowship meal), and listen to Paul speak (Acts 20:6-12). This may have just been a continuation of a Sabbath meeting that had begun sometime in the afternoon, in a private home, a typical meeting place for the early church.

6. The House of Philip the Evangelist. On his way to Jerusalem, Paul spent a few days in Caesarea, staying in “the house of Philip the evangelist” (Acts 21:7-8). During Paul’s visit, Philip’s house was a meeting place for the local Christian community (Acts 21:10-15).

7. Roman House Churches. During Paul’s first Roman captivity (A.D. 61-63), he rented a house for two years where he preached and taught (Acts 28:16, 23, 29-31). It seems likely Paul’s house would have become a regular meeting place for some Roman Christians. Was Paul the host of a Living Room Church of God? The evidence points in that direction.

Paul’s house would not have been the only House Assembly in Rome, and it definitely was not the first. There may have been as many as five other House Churches in Rome before the arrival of Paul. Mention of these assemblies is found in Paul’s letter to the Romans, probably written in the spring of A.D. 58.

a. An Assembly or Church in the house of Priscilla and Aquila (Romans 16:3-5)

b. “Greet those of Aristobulus” (Romans 16:10)

c. “Those of Narcissus” (Romans 16:1)

d. “Asyncretus ... and the brethren with them” (Romans 16:15)

e. “Philologus and Julia ... and all the saints who are with them” (Romans 16:15)

Conduct of the Home Fellowship

The owner of the house normally serves as the host of the fellowship, though he can ask anyone else he wishes to fill that responsibility. Older members may often oversee the meeting, but younger people can also participate to learn the role of leader.

The aim is to encourage everybody to love each other, to participate, to help each other, to nurture each other, to minister to each other, to discern, to

teach, to heal, to preach the gospel, to worship, to disciple, and to build up the ecclesia. If you are truly led by the spirit, then you can do anything you like, including singing, teaching, prophesying, healing, praying, serving, etc.

The person who oversees the meeting is responsible for maintaining order and unity. He should open and close the meeting and focus on the needs of the group. (a bit like the chairperson in parliament). **He is not there to set the agenda but rather to work out what it should be according to the particular needs of the group on that day.** The most senior people should help train others to become leaders. Therefore they should let the younger ones grow in the knowledge of Godly leadership in the truth. A shepherd is to guide, guard, and protect, not control others.

Silence can be good. It provokes people to think of what they can say. However, the best meetings are those where it is hard to get a word in edgewise, because everybody wants to say something. If you don’t get an opportunity to speak, don’t resent the group. Don’t pull down people who speak too much. These are often the ones that the spirit is using at the time. If you criticize people for speaking too much, you will end up with long silences where nobody wants to speak.

The younger members of the group should be encouraged to contribute or ask questions. New Christians often bring life to the group and give the group meaning and purpose. Inevitably, the new ones will feel shy and think they don’t have much to contribute, particularly if it is a big group. They should be encouraged to participate in the fellowship, but not forced to do so. Let the holy spirit lead and convict.

It is important to maintain the interest of the group by keeping things relevant and spiritually nourishing, provoking discussion by asking good questions. If somebody gets upset during the meeting, wisdom is required to know when to push ahead and when to back off. It is important to know when to say, “I don’t know. I will ask somebody else.” There is nothing wrong with saying, “I don’t know.” It is the first step to seeking the answers.

We all have different histories that greatly affect our perspective of what God is like. It is only by experience, fellowship, and reading the word that we

can come to know God properly. The Bible says that we come to know the depth and breadth and height of God's love by fellowshiping with the saints. We enlarge our own understanding of God when we fellowship with others. We may not appreciate the significance of what others say until God gives us an experience that proves that wisdom to be true.

God very much encourages us to speak in the meeting. If we say something that is incorrect, the spirit of God should convict us. A public confession of sin can be very positive as long as the person is comfortable to do so. It will lead to forgiveness toward a truly repentant believer, and we must remember that we can only forgive others when we ourselves have been forgiven. We can only accept others when we ourselves have been accepted. Only our Creator can do this.

Different groups have different needs, so it is important to address the needs of the group. Sometimes the needs of an individual may need attention before good fellowship can be established. If something unexpected comes up, be prepared to drop what you planned to do and do what the spirit tells you to do.

I Corinthians 14

It is critical that all fellowships take serious note of what Paul said in I Corinthians 14. This chapter reveals, as does no other, the conduct that was sought during convocations of the early church. Let us examine the lead-up to this chapter to get the context of what Paul was saying to the early church, and to us today ... but let us first divert to the instructions for the Sabbath day from Leviticus 23 and other sources.

1. **A holy convocation.** Leviticus 23:3. *Holy* = *qodesh* (6944), "A sacred place or thing." *Convocation* = *miqra* (4744), "something called out, as a public meeting; a rehearsal."
2. **A Sabbath of rest.** Leviticus 23:3. No work to be done. Exodus 20:10.
3. **A Feast day.** Leviticus 23:2.
4. **Don't do your own pleasure.** Isaiah 58:13. Don't do your own ways.
5. **Make it a delight.** Isaiah 58:13, 14, *Delight* = *oneg* (6027), "delight, pleasant." In v. 14, *delight* = *anag* (6026), "primitive root, to be soft or pliable."

6. **Honor God in the day.** Isaiah 58:13.

7. **Don't speak your own words.** Isaiah 58:13.

8. **A reflection back to the Garden of Eden and the original creation in Genesis 1 and 2.** Exodus 20:11.

9. **A blessed day.** Exodus 20:11. *Blessed* = *barak* (1288), "a primitive root, to kneel, by implication to bless God, as an act of adoration, and to bless man, as a benefit."

10. **A hallowed day.** Exodus 20:11. *Hallowed* = *qaqdah* (6942), "a primitive root, to be (causative), make pronounce, or observe."

Note that Exodus 20:11 shows that the day reflects back to the recreation of the earth. Why is that? **Because the nature of the Sabbath is like Eden itself; we are to live this day as if we are in Eden as pictured by the other requirements of the day:**

*A time of delight

*A time of rest; no work

*A time of feasting

*A time of speaking God's words

*A time of closeness to God Himself

This is the way mankind will live in the new age, as he did in the original Garden of Eden! Thus, the day also looks forward to the Kingdom of God when Eden will be restored! As a day can prophetically equal a thousand years (II Peter 3:8), and we have six days of labor followed by the rest day, so we have 6,000 years of man's rule on the earth followed by the millennium to come (Revelation 20:6).

But what about today and how we ought to keep this holy convocation? The Apostle Paul gets very specific about this issue in the Book of I Corinthians. **Notice the flow of Paul's thoughts as he wrote to the Corinthians. It shows partaking of the spirit of God (Chapter 11) => Receiving spiritual gifts by that spirit (Chapter 12) => Receiving the love to express through that spirit (Chapter 13) => How that spirit through gifts is to flow through fellowship and gatherings (Chapter 14) => The resurrection, the reward given to those in whom the spirit dwells (Chapter 15). It is a brilliant succession of messages, in a highly logical sequence, directed toward these Corinthian brethren!**

Chapter 11: The Passover and the need to partake of the body and blood of Christ.

Chapter 12: Spiritual gifts given to each of us through the spirit of God.

Chapter 13: The nature of love (agape), that is even a “better” way that transcends spiritual gifts.

Chapter 14: Conduct of fellowship of the saints at their Sabbath convocations, showing that prophesying — inspired speaking — is to be encouraged for all during meetings.

Chapter 15: The resurrection of the elect, the reward for those who have followed, upon their being called and chosen, the scenario given in Chapters 11 to 14.

Now, note the first verse of I Corinthians 14:

I Corinthians 14:1. “Follow after love (*charity, agape*, as in Chapter 13), and desire spiritual gifts (Chapter 12), but rather that you *prophesy*.” *Prophesy* = *propheteuo* (4395); from 4396; “to foretell events, divine, speak under inspiration, exercise the prophetic office.”

Our need to love (agape) one another, we all know, is essential to our Christian living, since we are identified as God’s people because of the love we have for one another (I Corinthians 13; John 13:35). We are to desire the exercise of spiritual gifts as well (I Corinthians 12). **Yet, Paul is saying here emphatically that he wants all of the brethren to speak during fellowship the inspired words of God, even exceeding love and gifts!** This means not just the one who has the gift of administration or teaching at the gathering, but everyone ... in order, of course, not in confusion.

We can be assured that the word *prophesy* as used in context here, throughout all of I Corinthians 14, is referring to “speaking under inspiration of the spirit of God.” I do not think there should be any question on this interpretation.

I repeat, Paul is telling **all** of the brethren that they should “follow” (Greek *dioko* [1377], “to flee, to pursue”) love and spiritual gifts, but above all that they should *prophesy*, or speak to the brethren under inspiration! This is not a command to just the elders or ministers, but to everyone in the congregation! Notice that he repeats this command in verse 39, where he says they must “covet to prophesy, and forbid not to speak with tongues.” *Covet* = *zeloo* (2206), “to have warmth or feeling for.”

Paul gives specific guidelines for exercising this prophetic speaking. See verses 26-33. The instructions are summarized below:

- * All things are to be done in order.
- * Two or three prophets should speak, and the others should *judge* (v. 29; *diakrino* [1252], “to withdraw from or [by implication] oppose; figuratively, to discriminate [by implication, decide], or [reflexively] hesitate. Translated “contend, differ, discern, doubt, judge, be partial, stagger, waver”). **Thus, differences of understanding are encouraged to be brought up during the discussion so that the truth of the matter can be verified. This was done frequently during our home fellowship in Big Sandy, as it was in the New Testament era, and was a powerful tool to come to the knowledge of the truth ... to achieve “the faith delivered once for all to the saints”** (Jude 3). We would hustle through our computers, concordances, cross references, and other resources and find the truth that we all so much desired to attain.
- * Speaking in tongues is not to be discouraged as long as those tongues are interpreted.
- * Offerings are to be given during fellowship: a psalm, a doctrine, a tongue, a revelation, an interpretation (v. 26).

Psalm = *psalmos* (5568), “a set piece of music, a sacred ode (accompanied with the voice, harp, or other instrument)”

Doctrine = *didache* (1322), “instruction (the act or the matter)”

Tongue = *glossa* (1100), “the tongue, by implication a language (specially, one naturally unacquired)”

Revelation = *apokalupsis* (602), “disclosure”

Interpretation = *hermeneia* (2058), “translation”

It is clear from this message of Paul to the Corinthians that Sabbath services are to be an “open forum,” so to speak, controlled by the spirit of God, to allow the gifts of the spirit and agape love to prevail, and above all for inspired prophetic speaking to

be encouraged amongst whomever in the congregation is inspired at the time ... with others in the congregation free to judge and evaluate what is said, to “cross-examine,” as it were. These are the guidelines for fellowship that all Christians are encouraged to emulate, since these truths are revealed in Scripture for our behavior as Christians today.

Small Groups and Home Fellowships — the Standard of God’s Way

We have seen in this paper that the fellowship of the saints is of utmost importance, and that fellowship in small groups in the homes of brethren is the best choice. The reasons for “small is better” can be summarized as follows:

- 1. People talk more in small groups.** There is more opportunity to talk and less opportunity to hide.
- 2. Group members realize that others have similar problems as they do.** People often think that there is something uniquely wrong with them, but when they hear that others have similar struggles they feel relieved and encouraged.
- 3. People can use their gifts and talents to minister to one another.** Each of us has been given gifts (I Corinthians 12) with which to encourage, teach, and challenge one another (see Hebrews 10:24). This is very difficult to do in large corporate groups.

- 4. Small group members encourage each other in their faith** (see Romans 1:12).
- 5. Small group members encourage each other to grow.** As people begin to share personal insights and testimonies, others see new ways they can draw closer to God and take steps to overcome in their trials. Change is hard, and encouragement in the face of hopelessness and discouragement is incredibly valuable (see II Corinthians 1:4).
- 6. Group members hold each other accountable.** People can ask how things are progressing, or even make a plan to be accountable to each other (see Proverbs 27:17).
- 7. Members pray for each other.** When people become emotionally connected they are more open to praying for one another ... and God answers prayers (see James 5:16)!
- 8. People are more likely to practice what they learn.**
- 9. Group members can help each other during hard times.** People often feel isolated, alone, and abandoned when facing serious financial, emotional, and health problems, but members of a small group can provide a safety net during hard times.
- 10. Friendships start in small groups.** Many people lack close friends, but a small home fellowship provides excellent opportunities for developing close friendships, which often remain long after the group ends