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Acts 2:44–47, NIV.

⁴⁴ All the believers were together and had everything in common. ⁴⁵ They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. ⁴⁶ Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, ⁴⁷ praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

Romans 16:1–5, ESV.

***16** I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant of the church at Cenchreae, ² that you may welcome her in the Lord in a way worthy of the saints, and help her in whatever she may need from you, for she has been a patron of many and of myself as well. ³ Greet Prisca and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus, ⁴ who risked their necks for my life, to whom not only I give thanks but all the churches of the Gentiles give thanks as well. ⁵ Greet also the church in their house. Greet my beloved Epaenetus, who was the first convert to Christ in Asia.*

Philemon 1:3, ESV.

¹ Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our beloved fellow worker ² and Apphia our sister and Archippus our fellow soldier, and the church in your house: ³ Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

House churches.

When I was in high school, I drove a gold '65 Pontiac GTO to school each weekday.

When I was sixteen, there was a major earthquake that destroyed much of the

freeway system between my school and my home. The normally thirty-minute drive turned into an hour of winding through foothills on a dirt road instead of driving on highly elevated freeway overpasses that rose above these foothills – but those overpasses were now gone. One of my friends from school lived halfway between my home and my school. One Wednesday afternoon, I gave him a ride home from school. When we pulled up to his house, there were about ten or twelve cars parked outside. When I walked inside, I was blown away. I'll get back to this. Let's call my friend Steve.

Our model of Christianity consists of coming to a beautiful church every Sunday. But the first fully documented building dedicated as a standalone church is a house that came into Christian possession in the 240's and was then converted into a formal church. In Rome, there is evidence that early Christians met in warehouses, but this was somewhat after New Testament times. The first properties that were known to be owned by the Roman church were the catacombs, which were burial sites outside the city walls, and again, this was long past New Testament times. So, from the perspective of reading the New Testament, there were no church buildings. The closest we can find in the New Testament to Christians meeting anywhere other than someone's home is in Acts, where people met in the courtyard around the Temple: ⁴⁴*All the believers were*

together and had everything in common. ⁴⁵ They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. ⁴⁶ Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, ⁴⁷ praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved. This does give us an intriguing view of the very early church. These followers of Christ apparently shared their worldly possessions. They presumably met in the courtyard because none of them owned a house large enough to hold all of them at once. But they apparently met in smaller groups in homes to have meals together and to praise God. Back then, a church was a group of people, not a specific building. Apparently, where a church met had everything to do with whether or not anyone in the congregation owned a home that was big enough. In Romans, we read this in Paul's greeting to the recipients of the letter: ³ *Greet Prisca and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus, ⁴ who risked their necks for my life, to whom not only I give thanks but all the churches of the Gentiles give thanks as well. ⁵ Greet also the church in their house.* We read something similar in Paul's letter to Philemon, a believer living in Colossae: *To Philemon our beloved fellow worker ² and Apphia our sister and Archippus our fellow soldier, and the church in your house.* We would presume that

Philemon in Colossae and Prisca and Aquila in Rome were wealthy enough to own large houses. And remember, a church was a group of people.

Don't think that the early Christians all lived in modest tract homes in pleasant suburbs. How they lived had everything to do with the density of the city in which they lived, as well as their economic status. Let's consider two environments in which New Testament Christians lived. First, let's look at Rome. In the first century A.D. Rome boasted a population of around one million. Most of the residents of Rome lived in total squalor. Massive apartment buildings were built throughout the city. They were called "*insulae*" in Latin, which means "islands". They were filled with crime and rodents. They were firetraps. In the year 64 there was a massive fire that gutted a large piece of the city. Rome at this time was very ethnically mixed, with a significant number of Jews. Individual ethnic groups tended to cluster together in distinct neighborhoods. Somewhere between a third and half of the population consisted of slaves or recently freed slaves. Interestingly, the poor who had never been slaves were the worst off economically, even though they had always been free. In these Roman apartment buildings, only those living at ground level and who had easy access to shared, ground-level space could have easily hosted a house church. There is good reason to believe that the early house churches were mixed with respect to economics and social class, and

so, those with the assets to own standalone housing might well have hosted house churches that served people who lived in cramped apartment buildings. But there were certainly many, many very small tenement churches, operating without the patronage of wealthy members.

For a second look at house churches, let's look at a much smaller city, Pompeii. Its population was probably around 15,000, only a fraction of the population of Rome. Parts of the city were beautifully preserved by a volcanic eruption. In the year 79, Mount Vesuvius erupted, spewing lava, rock, and ash as high as 12 miles. A number of cities were buried. One of them was Pompeii. The site was abandoned and eventually forgotten. It was briefly rediscovered in 1594, but regular excavations didn't begin until 1748. What has been revealed is an elegant city arranged in a grid pattern. It was a small, relatively wealthy city – very different from Rome. The city consisted of shops, each with one or two residences above or behind the shops, larger workspaces of 2 to 7 rooms, houses with 8 to 13 rooms, and houses that had 25 or more rooms. There were a small number of larger villas. Of course, not all the citizens were wealthy. There were many craftspeople there, including stoneworkers, cabinet makers, and even bar servers. There were many slaves. There is very good evidence that there were house churches in this wealthy, pleasant city. One house that has been uncovered has a

room with a wooden cupboard sitting below a cross impression made in the wall. House churches could have met in workspaces, courtyards, and larger homes. One thing to keep in mind is that ancient homes did not consist of simple nuclear families. Many or most homes were multi-generational, and so home churches were very naturally multi-generational, as well.

So, why am I talking about house churches? Today, the Church is changing, rapidly, and in a very big way. Traditional buildings like this one are becoming more and more difficult to finance, as congregations dwindle. And the new model of church plantings is not focused on traditional modest-sized church buildings. The new options consist of cafes, pubs, online churches, and home churches, with a sprinkling of very large “destination” churches that people drive miles to attend. It’s clear that the Achilles heel of the old school church, the traditional church housed in a fancy, but smallish building like this is the upkeep of the facility. Many churches are busy paying the bills by housing day care centers and private meetings. Interestingly, the churches that are best able to maintain independent facilities are mega churches, ones that are bigger than what we would call a large church, and that take up entire city blocks; they provide high tech, music-based services that attracts huge audiences. These same churches have the space to host special interest groups that meet before, after, and even during services. It might

be that in the future, there will be huge mega churches, along with very small churches that meet in non-traditional places, in particular people's homes, and the occasional larger, destination church. The one venue that would support both very large and very small churches is the Internet, where people could enter as an avatar, and if the church is a mega church, be passive if they want, or very active if they want, if it is a tiny church.

For those of us who come from a smaller church tradition, the experience of the New Testament Christian may become our experience. There are some aspects of ancient house churches that we might find ourselves emulating in the future. These churches, because they shared meals and other worldly assets, were more of a core element of people's lives. They didn't interact with their fellow congregation members on Sunday morning only. They also developed their leaders from within for the most part; formal clergy didn't start until the second century. And very interestingly, the original home churches were not completely standalone. They networked together and shared duties, including preaching and evangelizing. We don't know if or when there will be another major revival in the Christian Church in America. But it's beginning to look like, at least for some significant period of time, there will be a reemergence of the home church right here in our nation. This began to happen, all over the world, during the coronavirus

period. There were Italians living in densely populated, high rise buildings, who when prevented from attending church on Sunday, would all open their windows at the same time on Sunday and sing. In Africa, where the Church has been growing, not contracting, many congregations met in homes in small groups when their churches were closed. In the United States, people who could not go to a church building would meet in smaller groups to take part in larger online services. This hybrid model, of small groups of people holding communion together and bigger groups listening to a sermon online, became very popular.

Let's get back to my friend Steve. I was raised Catholic, but non-Catholic parents would send their kids to Catholic school to keep them out of trouble. So, one Wednesday, I drove a friend of mine, Steve, who was Protestant, home from school. There were about a dozen cars parked in front of their rambling ranch style house. I parked my GTO and he invited me in. I found about twenty people praying loudly. It wasn't the formal, Our Father, Hail Mary prayers that I was used to as a Catholic kid. They were freeform prayers, strange to me at the time. It was a home church, part of a larger congregation. The larger church met on Sunday mornings in a warehouse, and the smaller, house churches met on Wednesday evenings.

You know, in the Book of Revelation, we read about the seven churches in Asia Minor, now Turkey, to which the author of Revelation addresses letters. These

churches are Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea. But these were not huge fancy churches. These were small congregations that almost certainly met in peoples' houses. These letters that are referenced in Revelation were written to groups of people and were not addressed to buildings. That's what the New Testament Christian Church is all about – people, small congregations meeting in the homes of members.

I was a little wiggled out at first at seeing Steve's parents on their knees praying with their fellow congregation members. But I often flash back on them when I prepare prayers for this congregation. Those were people with no big, ornate, expensive to maintain building, and they were talking directly to God. They were a house church. Please pray with me.

God, we thank you for this church building, which we enjoy, which is our home on Sunday morning. We hope that this building remains an active Christian home for many decades to come. May it continue to serve this neighborhood. We realize that we are seeing a movement of churches towards two ends of a size spectrum, with extremely large churches thriving and tiny churches that meet in alternative locations also thriving. We pray that no matter where this trend leads, that the faithful will find a way to find each other – and to find a way to share their faith. Amen.