

# ***House Church***

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By Brian Anderson

If the longing of your heart is to experience church-life New Testament style, then this booklet is written for you. It describes some of the exciting discoveries that the people of Milpitas Bible Fellowship made in the summer of 1996, that radically changed their whole perspective on what it means to be the church. We don't believe that we have arrived in our understanding of New Testament church-life. In fact, we are constantly reforming our church life to become more and more consistent with the teaching of Scripture. However, we do believe that God has given us some light on the Scriptures that may be of help to others. It is in this spirit of humility and willingness to be further instructed in the things of God that these words are written.

## ***Chapter 1 What Is The Church, Anyway?***

The word "church" conjures up all kinds of different images in people's minds. Many of us picture a building with a steeple, pews, and stained glass. In fact Webster's Dictionary lists as its first definition, "a building for Christian worship." For others, the picture of a group of people attending a religious service in a special building on Sunday morning at 11:00 a.m. comes to mind. But I submit to you, that our popular conceptions of what church is are radically different from that of the New Testament. In fact, I would go so far as to say that our perspective of church actually blinds us to the truth of the Scriptures on this important subject. To illustrate this point, how do you suppose the average man on the street would answer the following questions -- true or false?

1. Church usually happens on Sunday.
2. Church is a meeting you attend.
3. Church is a place where you go and meet God.
4. A good church is a place with good preaching, programs, and activities.
5. You can experience church without meeting anyone .
6. Being a good church member means attending the services regularly and giving faithfully.

The average man on the street would say "true" to all of these assertions, whereas the New Testament scriptures would say, "false"! All of the assertions mentioned above come out of a program mindset of church life. This way of looking at church says that if we attend the planned programs at the particular place and time we have "gone to church. This perspective of church life, however, is foreign to the scripture. Almost all of us have grown up with this perspective of church, because that's about the only model that we have ever seen. But I submit to you that this perspective on church will quench real church life rather than promote it. I'm convinced that the believers in the early church would be dumbstruck at our modern concept of church life. Instead of a program perspective, the Bible presents to us a community perspective on church life.

How is the word "church" used in the New Testament? The Greek word for church, "ekklesia" is found 108 times in the New Testament. It is used in two different ways:

**1. All Christians Everywhere:** About 10% of the time "ekklesia" refers to the universal body of Christ. In these passages, the word refers to the whole number of regenerated persons from Pentecost to the second coming of Christ who are savingly related to Jesus Christ. The following are examples of this kind of usage of the word "church".

**Ephesians 5:25** "Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her"

**Colossians 1:18** "He is also head of the body, the church"

**2. A Local Body of Christians:** About 90% of the time the word "ekklesia" refers to a local expression of the universal body of Christ. Examples of this kind of usage of "church" include the following:

**Matthew 18:17** "and if he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church"

**Acts 14:23** "and when they had appointed elders for them in every church"

**Romans 16:5** "greet the church that is in their house"

**1 Corinthians 14:4** "One who speaks in a tongue edifies himself; but one who prophesies edifies the church"

Please notice something very important. In all of the biblical usages of the word "church", it never refers to a building or to a program. It always refers to people! The word refers to people Jesus loved and gave Himself for. The local church is a specific group of people who have a certain relationship together. For Christians in the early church, the word "church" probably conjured up the image of a small group of believers who knew each other, were together often and loved each other to the point of laying down their lives for one another.

To see what the early church was like, let's look at Acts 2:42-47 "And they were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. And everyone kept feeling a sense of awe; and many wonders and signs were taking place through the apostles. And all those who had believed were together, and had all things in common; and they began selling their property and possessions, and were sharing them with all, as anyone might have need. 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."

Notice several things from this passage. These early believers were continually devoted to the apostles' teaching. They were feeding regularly on their teaching of Christ. They were growing in their knowledge of Jesus rapidly. They were also devoted to fellowship. Fellowship means "a sharing in common with." What did these believers share with each other? Everything, including their material possessions! They sold their possessions and shared the proceeds with anyone who had need. It's important to note that this sharing of possessions wasn't legislated from the top down. It came from within their hearts, being birthed by the Holy Spirit. They were also continually devoted to sharing the Lord's Supper with one another. In fact we read in vs.46 that "day by day they were breaking bread from house to house, sharing their meals together with gladness." They were with each other all the time. They ate meals together. In fact when they ate their meals with one another, they would pause and remember Christ in the breaking of bread and the passing of the cup. They were also continually devoted to prayer. They were praying constantly, seeking God's direction and will for their lives. Notice also that God's blessing was upon them. He was working great signs and wonders through the apostles, giving them favor with all the unbelievers, and adding to the church day after day.

Notice additionally where they met -- the temple and homes. They would meet in large groups at Solomon's porch at the temple to hear the apostles' teaching, and would then get together in homes to break bread, pray, and praise God together. Notice also, that this community didn't depend on any special buildings. What do you suppose would have happened if the temple grounds were closed off to the early Christians? Would the church be shut down? Not on your life! This group of people was too vibrant and alive for their existence to depend on a special building. If the temple grounds were closed down, they would just continue to meet in an open field, at a riverside, or in homes. It's impossible to define these people in terms of programs. You can't define them as the ones who meet at the temple and from house to house. No, there's something much more dynamic and alive here. This was a community of people who shared their very lives with one another. Church was not just a part of their life, it was their life. For them, church was a seven day a week, Christ-centered community.

Now, compare that early church to what we observe in the church today. There's not much to compare is there?! If our church buildings were shut down, I wonder if our churches would fold as well. If the programs were shut down, would the church also collapse?

Perhaps it would help to compare the New Testament church to the church today. This comparison is only intended to be a broad generalization, not an indictment of any particular church.

	NT Church	Today's Church
Location	Moved from house to house	Meets in large buildings
Size of Groups	Small, intimate groups	Large, impersonal groups
Activities	Daily fellowship	Weekly worship service
Support System	Building up one another	See the Pastor
Relationships	Intimate, personal, loving	Remote, little transparency
Discipling	Modeling	Classes, seminars
Primary task of Leaders	Equipping every believer to do the work of ministry	Directing of programs

Perspective Home groups a primary focus Congregation the primary focus

The early church was a thing of beauty. It was a vibrant, exciting, body of people living in community with one another. How far we have drifted in 2,000 years! Oh, that God would restore us to our rightful heritage!

I believe one of the primary hindrances to vibrant New Testament church life has been that the church has held tenaciously to man-made traditions, and have rejected apostolic traditions. Jesus taught clearly that the tradition of man was to be spurned whenever it came into conflict with the Word of God. "And the Pharisees and the scribes asked Him, 'Why do Your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat their bread with impure hands?' And He said to them, 'Rightly did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written, 'This people honors Me with their lips, but their heart is far away from Me. But in vain do they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the precepts of men.' 'Neglecting the commandment of God, you hold to the tradition of men.' He was also saying to them, 'You nicely set aside the commandment of God in order to keep your tradition'" (Mark 7:5-9).

However, it is just as clear that the apostles of Christ developed traditions which they expected the churches to keep. Consider the following passages:

"Be imitators of me, just as I also am of Christ. Now I praise you because you remember me in everything, and *hold firmly to the traditions*, just as I delivered them to you" (1 Cor. 11:1-2).

"So then, brethren, *stand firm and hold to the traditions* which you were taught, whether by word of mouth or by letter from us" (2 Thess. 2:15).

Additionally, the Scriptures show us that the apostles expected all the churches to follow the same patterns that they had established. For example, when Paul dealt with the issue of head coverings he wrote, "But if one is inclined to be contentious, we have no other practice, nor have the churches of God" (1 Cor. 11:16). When Paul was establishing guidelines for orderly church gatherings he wrote, "... as in all the churches of the saints" (1 Cor. 14:33). In this way he referred to a universally practiced apostolic tradition to justify his guidelines. If a church broke with established apostolic tradition, it received a rebuke, "Was it from you that the word of God first went forth? Or has it come to you only?" (1 Cor. 14:36). Paul is saying, "If you think that God gave you some new revelation that it's all right to change the practices of the church, guess again! If so, you are the only ones He gave it to, because none of the other churches are practicing that!"

There are many apostolic patterns of church life that are widely embraced today including the freedom of the local church to govern itself, a plurality of elders, meeting on Sunday as the "Lord's Day", believer's baptism, and the sending out of missionaries. However, there are other apostolic traditions that are not widely embraced including church gatherings designed for mutual edification of every member, the love feast, one cup and one loaf used in the Lord's Supper, meetings held in homes rather than specially designed religious buildings, and church discipline. It is my conviction that these apostolic traditions need to be recovered and applied to church life today as well as these others! As we at Milpitas Bible Fellowship have begun to do so, we have experienced great blessing from God. It is my prayer that God may use them in your own life to be a means for you to experience something of the vitality and life that the early church experienced.

## ***Chapter 2***

### ***The Setting For The Gatherings Of The Early Church***

What was the normal setting for the wonderful life of the early church? Where did they meet? The answer may surprise you. The early believers met primarily in homes! This can be easily substantiated from the Scriptures.

**Acts 2:46** "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."

**Acts 5:42** "And every day, in the temple and *from house to house* they kept right on teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ."

**Acts 8:3** "But Saul began ravaging the church, entering *house after house* and dragging off men and women, he would put them in prison." Saul knew where to find the gatherings of the church -- in homes!

**Acts 16:40** "And they went out of the prison and entered *the house of Lydia*, and when they saw the brethren, they encouraged them and departed." Even at this early date, the church had already found a meeting place in Lydia's home.

**Acts 17:5** "But the Jews, becoming jealous and taking along some wicked men from the market place, formed a mob and set the city in an uproar; and coming upon *the house of Jason*, they were seeking to bring them out to the

people." It appears that the Jews knew that the church met in Jason's home, and thus began there in their quest to find them and run them out of town.

**Acts 20:20** "how I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you publicly and from *house to house*."

**Romans 16:5** "...also greet the *church that is in their house*."

**1 Corinthians 16:19** "The churches of Asia greet you. Aquila and Prisca greet you heartily in the Lord, with the *church that is in their house*."

**Philemon 2** "...and to Apphia our sister, and to Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the *church in your house*."

**Col. 4:15** "Greet the brethren who are in Laodicea and also Nympha and the *church that is in her house*."

**2 John 10** "If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not receive him into your *house*, and do not give him a greeting; for the one who gives him a greeting participates in his evil deeds." Here we have a warning to the church not to receive false teachers into their house. This doesn't refer to individual believers allowing non-Christians into their homes for social or evangelistic purposes, but rather is a warning to the church not to allow false teachers to participate in their meetings. Since involvement in the meetings meant an opportunity to speak, it would have meant possible harm to the church if a false teacher were allowed into the meeting.

Thus, there is much evidence from the Scriptures that houses were the primary meeting places in the early church.

A little research into church history will reveal another very interesting fact -- the church of Jesus Christ had no special buildings for worship for the first 200 years of its existence! Even then, church buildings were very rare until the time of Constantine in the 4th century. How could these early Christians possibly advance the cause of Christ in the world without church buildings? The answer is that they did so very well. In fact the enemies of the Christian faith said that they had turned the world upside down. They made their mark for Christ in the first century, without special buildings, seminaries, mission boards, denominations or programs. When is the last time you heard a non-Christian say that about the church today?

How did it happen that believers left living rooms to gather in large cathedrals? The change came primarily in the 4th century through Constantine, the Roman emperor. When he wedded church and state together, making Christianity the official religion of Rome, he authorized the construction of special buildings designed for Christian worship. A great influx of new buildings sprouted up across the empire. It was at the same time that multitudes of people were coming into the church out of paganism following the example of their emperor. In order to accommodate them, the church began introducing ritual, ceremony, and pomp into the meetings of the church -- things very familiar to pagans. Soon the clergy began to wear vestments to set themselves apart from the laity. The informal, interactive, vibrant meetings of believers in living rooms were replaced with formality and passivity, in large, impersonal buildings. And for the next 1,700 years this has been the rule in the church of Christ. Even the reformation, though bringing back to the church an orthodox understanding of theology, never really dealt with restoring orthodox apostolic practices to the church. The reformation replaced the priest with the pastor, and the altar with the pulpit, but many New Testament distinctives of church life were still buried under hundreds of years of tradition.

Could it be that there was good reason for the church to meet in homes from the very beginning? Could it be that rather than being a step up, it actually became a step down when the church decided to forsake homes entirely for large building-centered worship? I believe the answer is "yes." I need to make it plain that I am not stating that I believe it is wrong for a body of believers to meet in a special building for worship and teaching. We at Milpitas Bible

Fellowship do that ourselves. We see a Biblical pattern for the assembling of larger gatherings of believers for the purpose of being taught the Word of God. In Acts 2:46 we find the early church gathering in large numbers at the temple (probably Solomon's Portico (Acts 3:11). Undoubtedly, this was where the early believers were taught by the apostles (Acts 2:42). We also find Paul and Silas teaching large numbers of Christians at Antioch for a year (Acts 11:21, 26). Where did these believers meet to be instructed in the things of God? Well, it's obvious that "considerable numbers" can not be instructed in a house! Perhaps these believers met outdoors, or in a rented facility (Acts 19:9). In Acts 20:20 the apostle Paul states to the Ephesian elders that he had taught publicly and from house to house. Evidently, Paul not only taught in homes, but also in a public setting of some kind. Therefore, the Scriptures provide the pattern of the early church meeting in large gatherings to be instructed. If there is a Biblical pattern for the church meeting in these larger gatherings, and if there is access to a building large enough to accommodate them in a comfortable setting, I see nothing wrong in utilizing these buildings, especially if exorbitant amounts of money are not needed to secure them. But if the gatherings of the church take place *only* in large buildings, then I believe that the church will miss out on some vital aspects of Biblical church-life.

In the large building-centered gatherings it becomes extremely difficult to practice using one loaf and one cup in the Lord's Supper to symbolize our unity together in Christ (1 Cor. 10:16-17); enjoy a Love Feast in conjunction with the Lord's Supper (1 Cor. 11:20-22, 33-34; Jude 12); participate in meetings where each one is allowed opportunity to minister to the saints (1 Cor. 14:26); develop deep and intimate relationships with one another so that when one member suffers all the members suffer (1 Cor. 12:26); and obey all the "one-another" commands of the New Testament. These were all essential elements of church life in the first century, but have been largely abandoned because with our present structures they cease to be functional. For these reasons I believe it is important that we return to the New Testament norm of the church meeting in homes. These "house churches" may choose to cluster together in a larger setting at certain times, but New Testament church-life will not be reserved only for these "public" gatherings, but will be experienced and lived out with other believers during the week as they meet together in homes.

### ***Chapter 3***

## ***The Goal Of The Gatherings Of The Early Church***

When the early church met together, what was its goal? What were these early believers seeking to accomplish? Today we usually understand the goal of our gatherings to be either evangelism or worship. It is interesting to note, however, that neither of these were ever stated in the New Testament to be the primary objective of the gathering of the saints.

### **Popular Misconceptions Of The Goal**

**Evangelism:** Many churches design their meetings to evangelize unbelievers. Church members are exhorted to bring the lost to the service, and the pastor preaches a steady diet of evangelistic sermons in the hope of seeing the unconverted saved. It is interesting, however, that evangelism in the early church was almost always carried on outside of the church gatherings. Jesus told his disciples, "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (Mt. 28:19-20). Again He instructed the eleven, not to get the world to come into the church, but for the church to go out to the unconverted. "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation" (Mark 16:15). In the book of Acts we see this principle applied again and again. In Acts 3 we find Peter and John walking along together on their way to the temple to pray when they had the encounter with the lame man. After the man was healed, God gave Peter a wonderful opportunity to speak forth the

gospel of Christ. Take note that his evangelistic preaching did not come in a gathering of the saints, but as he went along his way in the ordinary routine of life. In Acts 8:4 we find the early Christians who fled Jerusalem because of the heavy persecution, going on their way preaching the word. In Acts 8:5-8 we find Philip in the city of Samaria preaching Christ and healing the sick, not in the context of a church meeting, but simply among the lost of the city. Later in the same chapter, we find him joining himself to the chariot of an Ethiopian eunuch as he is traveling back to his homeland and preaching Jesus to him from Isaiah 53. In Acts 10 we find Peter in the home of Cornelius preaching Christ to an entire household. In all of these examples, we find that evangelism was carried on in the ordinary course of life, rather than in the special gatherings of the church.

We do find Paul addressing the possibility of unbelievers being converted in a church meeting in 1 Cor. 14:24-25. There he says, "But if all prophesy, and an unbeliever or an ungifted man enters, he is convicted by all, he is called to account by all; the secrets of his heart are disclosed; and so he will fall on his face and worship God, declaring that God is certainly among you." However, this appears to be the exception rather than the rule. It is also interesting to note that even here the man's conversion results not from the preaching of the gospel (which is God's ordinary means of saving the lost - 1 Corinthians 1:21), but the gift of prophecy being manifested in a meeting. The Scriptures indicate that "preaching" was primarily to the lost, while "teaching" was employed in the church (Acts 11:20-21, 26).

**Worship:** Others believe that worship is the goal of the church gathering. In fact, their gatherings are called "worship services." They get this understanding chiefly from the Old Testament. Under the Old Covenant the Jews were required to make several pilgrimages each year to Jerusalem to the temple, in order to worship God by offering certain prescribed animal sacrifices. God's worship was to be done on particular days, at a particular place, in a particular way. Under the New Covenant, though, a radical shift in our worship of God has taken place. In fact, Heb. 8:13 tells us that the Old Covenant is obsolete and ready to disappear. According to Jesus, worship under the New Covenant has nothing to do with certain places or times. In John 4:20-24 we have the most full and comprehensive teaching in the New Testament on worship. There we read of the Samaritan woman's desire to have a nagging question straightened out. She wanted to know where the correct place for worship was -- Mt. Gerazim or Jerusalem. To this Jesus replied, that an hour was coming and then was, when the true worshippers would worship the Father in spirit and truth, not a particular time or place. What a difference from Old Covenant worship! Instead of worshipping at a particular place, time and way, Jesus told us that worship under the New Covenant would take place all the time in any place! Christ's emphasis was not where and when, but how. His concern was that worship be done in spirit and truth.

The New Testament never refers to a church meeting as a worship service. In Romans 12:1 Paul says, "I urge you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual *service of worship*." Here the Scripture does refer to a service of worship, but it refers to the offering of the body to God as a living sacrifice, not with believers gathering to pray and sing to God. Worship, then, has more to do with an obedient life, than with certain religious rituals to be performed with other Christians. Furthermore, worship performed by presenting ourselves as living and holy sacrifices is to be done twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, as we continually give ourselves in obedience to the will of God. A dead sacrifice can only be offered once, but a living sacrifice must be offered continually.

Now, all this is not to say that we should not praise, thank, and adore God when we meet together (Ephesians 5:19b). It is to say, however, that the New Testament Scriptures never state that these activities are the primary objective of our gatherings.

## The Biblical Teaching On The Goal

In two passages of Scripture we are told what the goal of the church is to be when it gathers. Let's look at each in turn.

**1 Corinthians 14:26:** "What is the outcome then, brethren? When you *assemble*, each one has a psalm, has a teaching, has a revelation, has a tongue, has an interpretation. Let all things be done *for edification*." Notice that Paul describes a scene when the church assembles. In that setting, he says that *each one* has a contribution to make. One has a teaching, another has a song, another has a revelation. Paul's point in all of this is that no matter what the contributions are, they must all be done for the edification of the whole. The goal of the gatherings according to the apostle Paul is mutual edification! Now, it must be admitted that this is a far cry from our traditional church meetings where the Pastor speaks and the rest listen passively. In these settings, the Pastor is the only one given an opportunity to use his spiritual gift to edify the church. In 1 Corinthians 12:20-25 though, we are told that every member is important and vital to the proper functioning of the whole body. We must provide opportunities in our church life for every member to be able to participate and contribute to the edification of the whole. If that kind of meeting can not take place in our larger gatherings, then smaller, intimate, house gatherings should be utilized to provide an opportunity for them.

**Hebrews 10:24-25:** "and let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking our own *assembling together*, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another; and all the more, as you see the day drawing near." In this passage, what were believers to do when they assembled together? According to the text, they were to encourage one another. Notice, that it does not say that the Pastor is to encourage the congregation. It says that they are to encourage one another. Each member is to seek to stimulate others to love and good deeds, and to encourage them to live out their Christian lives every day all day long. It appears that the meetings of the church were not designed to evangelize or worship, but rather to build up, edify, and encourage believers so that they would evangelize, worship, and serve God outside of the meetings!

If these texts can be taken as describing normative church life in the first century, then some observations are in order. It would appear that church life could be characterized by being interactive, informal, small and intimate. Furthermore, simplicity seems to be the rule. When Constantine endorsed Christianity throughout the Roman empire and believers moved out of homes into great, awe-inspiring buildings some big changes were made in the church. Interaction and mutual encouragement were exchanged for monologue. Mutual participation was exchanged for passive spectating. The congregation began to watch the performance of the spiritually elite. The clergy/laity structure came into prominence. And in all of this, mutual participation became increasingly difficult to implement, if not down right impossible. About the only thing left that the congregation could participate in was singing. Thus, to this day, in many churches the extent of our participation in a "church meeting" has been relegated to singing, while the Pastor and the song leader do everything else. In the Old Testament there was only one tribe out of twelve given the wonderful privilege of serving God in "full-time ministry" -- the Levites. All the other tribes had to make their living through other "secular" work. The Levites alone, were given the wondrous opportunity of offering sacrifices on behalf of sinners, entering within the holy place, and being near to the manifest presence of God. Under the New Covenant, all that has been changed. The Scripture declares, "you are a chosen race, a *royal priesthood*, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession." Now, there is not just a small segment of the church which is given the privilege of ministry, but the entire church is called a "royal priesthood." We all have sacred ministry to perform. The leadership of any local church is not there to do the ministry for everyone else, but to equip them to do the ministry on behalf of the rest of the church (Eph.4:11-12). It is my conviction that this ministry is to be done within as well as outside of the gatherings of the church. Therefore, if a particular local church has designed their Sunday meetings for worship and the teaching of the Word, then there needs to be other gatherings when these same people are given opportunities to serve and minister to one another. At Milpitas Bible Fellowship, this is done primarily in house churches.

In order for every-member ministry to become a reality, a death blow must be struck at the whole clergy/laity distinction. The word "laity" grew out of the Greek word "laos", meaning people. According to the Word of God, every

believer, pastors included, are part of the one people of God. In that sense, all of us are "laity" and there is no clergy! As long as believers in our churches see the Pastor as a "professional holy man", part of the spiritually elite, and somehow closer to God than the rest of the church, there is little hope that every-member ministry will take place. Our churches will naturally become spectator arenas, where the Pastor does it all. However, if the pastors/elders of the local church teach the church that the only real difference between them is that the elders have been given different gifts, responsibilities, and functions in the body, the whole church can begin to take up their God-given responsibility to minister faithfully to one another. In my opinion, this means that pastors would do well to get rid of their honorific titles. Instead of having church members address someone as Pastor Smith, or Pastor Dave, wouldn't it be much more consistent with Scripture for the church just to call him by his first name as he does to them? In this way a separation in their minds is not being created between himself and them. Jesus, in Matthew 23:8-12 put it this way, "But do not be called Rabbi; for One is your Teacher, and you are all brothers. And do not call anyone on earth your father; for One is your Father, He who is in heaven. And do not be called leaders; for One is your Leader, that is Christ. But the greatest among you shall be your servant. And whoever exalts himself shall be humbled; and whoever humbles himself shall be exalted." In this passage, Jesus names three titles that the Pharisees loved to be called by, "Rabbi, Father, and Leader." Instead, Jesus said that we are all brothers. No one is on a higher spiritual plane by virtue of their function in the body of Christ than anyone else. This is not to say that pastors/elders do not have spiritual authority delegated to them by Christ in order to shepherd the flock. It is to say, though, that this authority is given to them to serve and build up others, not to lord it over others. These leaders can best build up and serve others as they minister among them, not standing apart from them and above them.

In my opinion it would also be beneficial for the pastors/elders of a local church to dress in a way that identifies them with their people, rather than setting themselves apart from their people. We as Protestants have a distaste for the vestments and "holy garb" of Roman Catholic priests, which to us seem to create a clear separation between priest and people. However, isn't it possible that we are doing the same thing when we dress in a suit and tie, while our people dress more casually?

Perhaps it would also do us pastors good to grant much ministry that we have traditionally accepted to our people. For example, where in Scripture are we told that it is the responsibility of pastors to conduct weddings, funerals, and visit people in the hospital? This isn't ever laid down in Scripture as one of the duties of an elder. We never read of Jesus, Peter, Paul or John performing weddings or funerals. Each particular denomination or local church must decide who qualifies as a "minister", and is thus authorized by the State to perform weddings. The only injunction in Scripture regarding elders visiting the sick is in James 5:14 where we are told, "Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord." Notice that it is not the Pastor who is to pray for the sick, but the elders. (In the Bible the terms "pastor", "elder", and "overseer", are interchangeable -- they are all used to describe the same persons; Acts 20:28, 1 Peter 5:1-2, Titus 1:5-7). And notice also, that this is to happen only after the sick one has called for the elders to come and pray for him. Does this eliminate others in the body of Christ from visiting and ministering to the sick person? I don't think so, especially in light of the fact that many non-pastors are given the spiritual gifts of mercy, and healings! If the elders do all of the visiting, how will those with these gifts have opportunity to use them? Perhaps there are areas of ministry traditionally only performed by so-called "clergy" which may be effectively done by others in Christ's church.

The point to be made here is that in Scripture the goal of the gatherings of believers was not to be passive, but to be active. It was not to listen, but to participate in encouraging. It was not to receive from the gifts of one man, but for each person to use their gifts for the edifying of all. If our Sunday gatherings can not have that as the goal, then we need to provide a structure in which this can take place. The New Testament over and over reveals this place as the house church.

## ***Chapter 4***

## ***The Focus Of The Gatherings Of The Early Church***

Having seen in chapter 3 that the goal of the gatherings of the early church was mutual edification, let us now turn our attention to the question, "What was the focus of the gatherings of the early church?" The answer from Scripture may again surprise you. The Scriptures again and again declare to us that the focus of the gathering of the church is to partake of the Lord's Supper.

**Acts 2:46** "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."

**Acts 20:7** "And on the first day of the week, when we were gathered together *to break bread*..."

**1 Corinthians 11:33** "So then, brethren, when you come together *to eat*, wait for one another."

**1 Corinthians 11:20** "Therefore when you meet together, it is not *to eat the Lord's Supper*, for in your eating each one takes his own supper first; and one is hungry and another is drunk."

In each one of these passages we see that the central focus of the meetings of the early church was not the sermon, worship, the offering, or the youth group. It was the Lord's Supper. In the passage in 1 Corinthians 11:20 Paul is rebuking them when he says, "when you meet together, it is not to eat the Lord's Supper." It should have been their purpose in gathering, but instead of eating the *Lord's* Supper, they were eating their *own* supper (11:21). Now, doubtless there were other gatherings of the church in which the Lord's Supper was not observed (apostolic teaching in the temple - Acts 2:46; public teaching settings - Acts 11:26; Acts 20:20), but the norm for the early church was to gather to break bread. In fact, in Acts 2:42 we read, "And they were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer." Here we see that the breaking of bread was included in the same class with apostolic teaching, fellowship and prayer. We also see that the early disciples were continually devoting themselves to it. In Acts 20:7, the implication is that the early church observed the Lord's Supper as the focus of their gatherings at least on a weekly basis. All of this leads us to the conclusion that the Lord's Supper was meant to be observed on a frequent and regular basis. This concept brings to mind a slew of questions. Let's take each in turn.

## **What Is Represented In The Lord's Supper?**

The Lord's Supper is a visible illustration of several truths. First, it pictures for us **the death of Christ**. Paul reminds us in 1 Corinthians 11:26, "For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim *the Lord's death* until He comes." When the bread is broken in the sight of all the people, it visibly portrays Christ's body which was violently cut off in death on the cross. In the broken bread we are also reminded of His body which was bruised, scourged, pierced, and lacerated in the scourging and crucifixion. The poured out wine is a fitting illustration of the blood of Christ that was poured out for many for the remission of sins.

Secondly, the Lord's Supper illustrates for us the truth of **our participation in the benefits of the death of Christ**. Jesus told His disciples, "Take eat; this is My body. And when He had taken a cup and given thanks, He gave it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you" (Mt. 26:26-27). Incidentally, this verse proves that the cup should be distributed to all, and not just the priests, as the Catholic church practices. Now, if the bread and the cup represent the body and blood of Christ given for us in His sacrificial death, then our taking and eating represents our appropriation of His sacrifice by faith. As we eat and drink, we are illustrating the truth that we must personally take in Christ and His

work, making it ours by faith. As we eat and drink, in effect we are saying, "What He did, He did for me. I claim the benefits of the cross of Christ." Well, what are those benefits that come to us through the death of Christ? In Matthew 26:28 we read, "for this is My blood of *the covenant*, which is poured out for many for forgiveness of sins." In Luke 22:20 this covenant is referred to as the "New Covenant". What is this New Covenant, and what benefits come to those included in it? Well, to understand the New Covenant we must first understand the Old Covenant. The Old Covenant was the covenant that God made with the Jews. It is sometimes referred to as the "Mosaic Covenant" because God gave the covenant to Moses on behalf of all the Jewish people. The New Covenant, on the other hand, is that covenant which was sealed in the blood of Christ, and made on behalf of all the elect. Jesus said that His blood of the covenant was poured out for *many* for forgiveness of sins. These "many" are the elect of God, chosen in Christ unto eternal life from the foundation of the world. Now to this New Covenant community, God has made great and precious promises which can be found in Jeremiah 31:31-34. There the prophet declares, "'Behold, days are coming,' declares the LORD, 'when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah, not like the covenant which I made with their fathers in the day I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke, although I was a husband to them,' declares the LORD. 'But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days,' declares the LORD, 'I will put My law within them, and on their heart I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. And they shall not teach again, each man his neighbor and each man his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' for they shall all know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them,' declares the LORD, 'for I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more.' There is a four-fold blessing to those who share in this New Covenant: 1) They shall have a new relationship to the law of God -- it will be written in their hearts. 2) They shall have a new relationship to the person of God -- He shall be their God and they shall be His people. 3) They shall have a new knowledge of God -- they shall all know God, from the least to the greatest of them. 4) They shall have a new standing before God -- they shall have all their sins forgiven. All of these blessings are received by those who enter into and receive the mercies of this New Covenant which was sealed in the blood of Christ at Calvary.

The Lord's Supper was instituted on the eve of Passover, and there is a very good reason for that. The Lord's Supper takes the place of the Passover for God's people. The Passover relates to the Old Covenant. It is a memorial of God's deliverance of all the firstborn Jews who had applied the blood of a lamb to the doorposts and lintel of their houses. In this way they were saved out of a cruel bondage to Pharaoh and his slavemasters in Egypt. Likewise, the Lord's Supper is a memorial of a deliverance as well. But the deliverance that Christ brings is far greater than the deliverance the children of Israel received. We are delivered from sin, Satan, death, and hell by Christ's shed blood. When we partake of the Lord's Supper we symbolize the fact that we appropriate these blessings by faith.

Thirdly, the Lord's Supper represents **the spiritual nourishment of believers**. Bread and juice are foods which nourish the body. They maintain our lives and give us strength. In the Lord's Supper we are reminded that Jesus Christ and Him crucified is that by which our souls are nourished and strengthened day by day. Christ Himself is the support and maintenance of our spiritual life. It was this truth that Jesus emphasized in John 6:53-57 when He declared, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in yourselves. He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day. For My flesh is true food, and My blood is true drink. He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood abides in Me, and I in him. As the living Father sent Me, and I live because of the Father, so he who eats Me, he also shall live because of Me." Christ is pointing out here that His substitutionary atonement is the food our souls need to live day by day. Truly, the cross of Christ is God's refreshing, strengthening, and invigorating remedy for our spiritual lives!

Fourthly, the Lord's Supper represents **the unity of all believers**. We find this truth spelled out for us in 1 Corinthians 10:17 where Paul writes, "Since there is one bread, we who are many are one body; for we all partake of the one bread." Just as we only use one loaf when celebrating communion, even though that one loaf is divided into many pieces, so too there is only one body of Christ though it is made up of many members. The one loaf is intended to portray the truth that we are all one in Jesus Christ. One of the purposes of the Lord's Supper is to depict the unity

that we possess in Christ. For this reason, it would be best to use a single loaf, instead of many different crackers, to depict this unity that we share in Jesus.

Fifthly, the Lord's Supper represents **the future Messianic banquet we will enjoy when Christ returns**. Notice carefully Jesus' words in Matthew 26:29 directly after He had instituted the Supper, "But I say to you, I will not drink of this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it new *with you* in My Father's kingdom." Just as there is a backward look in the Lord's Supper to our Lord's death to inaugurate the New Covenant, so there is a forward look to that day when Christ will return and we shall sit down to sup with Him again in His Father's kingdom. This may have been what Jesus was speaking of in Matthew 8:11 when He stated, "And I say to you, that many shall come from east and west, and recline at the table with Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, in the kingdom of heaven." Again, we have the Apostle Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 11:26 "For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes." There is in the observance of the Lord's Supper an eager looking forward to that day when Jesus will return and we shall sit down with Him to sup in His Father's kingdom. That's why a thimble full of grape juice and a tiny cracker are not fit symbols to be employed. Only a full meal can adequately represent the Messianic banquet held out for our future enjoyment.

## How Is The Lord's Supper To Be Observed?

**It Should Be Celebrated With Other Believers:** Since one of the purposes of the Lord's Supper is to signify the unity that Christians possess one with another, they ought to partake of it together. Therefore, it would not be appropriate for Christians to partake of this sacrament privately and alone.

**It Should Be Celebrated During A Common Meal Together:** It seems clear from Scripture that the early church celebrated the Lord's Supper in conjunction with a fellowship meal of the church. Consider Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 11:20-22, "Therefore when you meet together, it is not to eat the Lord's Supper, for in your eating each one takes his own supper first; and one is hungry and another is drunk. What! Do you not have houses in which to eat and drink? Or do you despise the church of God, and shame those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you? In this I will not praise you." It is obvious that these Christians were not simply eating a small piece of bread and drinking a thimble of wine. If that were the case, how could some of them be drunk? Or again, how could some of them have their hunger assuaged while others are famished? It seems obvious that what was taking place was what we have described in Jude 12 as a "love feast." From all the data that we can gather, it would appear that these meals were similar to our "pot-luck" meals today. All brought some food to share with others. The purpose was to promote fellowship, love and unity within the body. When Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper, it was during the meal when he broke bread and gave it to His disciples (Mt. 26:26), and it was after they had eaten that He distributed the cup (Luke 22:20). Now it is important to keep in mind that this fellowship meal is nowhere *commanded* in Scripture. The most that we can say is that we see it modeled in Scripture. I find it interesting that the Apostle Paul never tells the Corinthians to stop the practice. He simply tells them to correct the abuses that were going on. At Milpitas Bible Fellowship we observe the Lord's Supper in conjunction with a special fellowship meal after the example of the early church.

**It Should Be Celebrated With One Loaf And One Cup:** as we have seen earlier, the Lord's Supper was intended to symbolize the unity that we share in Christ. In 1 Corinthians 10:16-17 we read, "Is not *the cup* of blessing which we bless a sharing in the blood of Christ? Is not *the loaf* which we break a sharing in the body of Christ? Since there is *one loaf*, we who are many are one body; for we all partake of the one loaf." Here we are emphatically told that there is one loaf and one cup to represent the fact that all believers are one in Christ. The loaf and the cup represent the entire body, and the portion of the loaf and the cup that we eat and drink show forth ourselves as members of the whole. Thus, it is important that the loaf and the cup are presented undivided before the people. If we divide the loaf or the cup ahead of time, we lose the picture of unity that Paul portrays here. Each member must see the loaf as one

loaf, not many pieces, for many pieces signify division instead of unity. It would appear that each believer, himself is to pour his part from the cup, and break his piece from the loaf. As he partakes of his portion, he sees himself as one part of the whole body. This is just one more indication that the Lord's Supper was designed to be held in small, intimate settings. It becomes very difficult to implement these patterns in a church of 5,000 or even 500.

**It Should Be Celebrated With The Blessing Of The Bread and the Cup:** 1 Corinthians 10:16 says, "Is not the cup of blessing which we *bless* a sharing in the blood of Christ?" Again in Matthew 26:26 we read, "And while they were eating, Jesus took some bread, and after a *blessing*, He broke it and gave it to the disciples, and said, "Take, eat; this is My body." No doubt, this blessing is a time of prayer in which the church separates the bread and the cup from their common use to this sacred use.

**It Should Be Celebrated By Breaking the Loaf in the Presence of the People:** Because the "breaking of bread" is mentioned so often in the New Testament it appears that it was an important part of the symbolism of the celebration (1 Cor. 11:24; 10:16; Acts 20:17; Mt. 26:26). The public breaking of the bread by the one officiating at the service, ought to be solemnly done in the presence of all the people. It was given to show us a picture of Christ's violent death. If this is not done, part of the rich imagery of Christ's bodily death will be lost.

**It Should Be Celebrated With Believing Affection:** Partaking of the Lord's Supper without faith and love will not do anyone any good. To remember, for a Hebrew, meant more than just calling up some facts to mind. It meant to re-enact an event and participate in it. That's what the Jews did on Passover. They retold the whole story so that each person relived the whole event. In the Lord's Supper we are to recall the passion and sufferings of our Lord as well as the benefits that accrue to us by virtue of the New Covenant that He inaugurated so that these things are powerfully present to our minds. The Apostle Paul could say to the Galatians, "You foolish Galatians, who has bewitched you, before whose eyes Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified?" (Gal. 3:1). Similarly as we partake of the Lord's Supper we ought to strive to publicly portray Christ as crucified through our reading of Scripture, prayers, and eating and drinking. It should be our desire that Christ's death would become so vivid that it would be as if we were standing beneath His cross, watching the whole scene.

In this connection I think the words of the Puritan pastor, John Flavel are appropriate: "Suppose you were justly condemned to the torture of the rack, and that your dearest friend, preferring your life to his own, became your ransom by undergoing the torments for you. Now suppose that you are now standing by that torture chamber and beholding the members of your dear friend distorted, and all out of joint; hearing his doleful groans, extorted by the extremity of anguish; and under all these torments, still maintaining a constant love to you, not once repenting of these torments for you. Could you stand there with dry eyes? Could your heart be unaffected, and stupid at such a sight? He must be rather a beast or a stone than a man that could do so."

Brothers and sisters, we are not to go through the observance of the Lord's Supper in some kind of unemotional, stoical manner. Rather, let us mourn over our sin, and burn with love as we see the great Lamb of God who died to take away our sins!

**It Should Be Celebrated With Joy And Praise:** some churches believe that the Lord's Supper is to be observed in a general mood of sober and solemn reflection. But in Acts 2:46 Luke recounts the practice of the early church in that they were "breaking bread from house to house and eating their meals together *with gladness and sincerity of heart*." The Greek word here used for gladness elsewhere is translated as "jubilation" or "exultation." It refers to ecstatic joy. One would hardly expect Luke to use this word if the general mood was supposed to be soberness and solemnity. We celebrate the Lord's Supper with gladness because we reflect on the fact that though we were dead in our sins and headed for eternal punishment in the lake of fire, Christ died to pay the penalty for our sins, and has brought us into all the blessings and privileges of the New Covenant.

## In What Setting Should The Lord's Supper Be Observed?

In what kind of setting should we celebrate the Lord's Supper. Without being overly dogmatic on this point, it seems that the Bible describes a small, intimate, house setting as the normal place where the Lord's Supper was observed. Jesus celebrated the first Supper in the upper room of a home. Acts 2:46 tells us that the early church was breaking bread from house to house. Acts 20:7 describes a church meeting on the first day of the week to break bread on the third floor of a house. Furthermore, we are told in 1 Corinthians 10:16-17 that we are to use one loaf and one cup to symbolize our unity in Christ. This of necessity must limit the size of the groups observing the Lord's Supper. The early church did meet in larger gatherings, but it appears that the purpose of these gatherings was that the church be taught the Word (Acts 2:46; 11:26; 20:20). When it came to observing the Lord's Supper, the uniform model of Scripture is a small, intimate, home setting.

For more detailed information on the Lord's Supper, please see our pamphlet entitled, Observing The Lord's Supper.

### The Biblical Teaching On The Lord's Supper

	<b>Frequent or Infrequent</b>	<b>Central or Peripheral</b>	<b>Small or Large Setting</b>
<b>Acts 2:42</b>	Frequent (continually devoting)		
<b>Acts 2:46</b>	Frequent (day by day)	Central (only activity mentioned)	Small - met in homes
<b>Acts 20:7</b>	Frequent (implies weekly)	Central (to break bread)	Small - met in upper room of home
<b>1 Cor. 10:16-17</b>			Small enough for 1 loaf & 1 cup
<b>1 Cor. 11:17-34</b>		Central (come together to eat)	
<b>Gospels</b>			Small (13 met in upper room of home)

**Conclusion:** The Biblical data seems to lead to the conclusion that the Lord's Supper was seen as part of a Love Feast (Jude 12), partaken of frequently (at least weekly), the central focus of the gatherings, and celebrated in small home settings.

## *Chapter 5*

## ***The Activities Of The Gathering Of The Early Church***

When the early church gathered together, what did they do apart from observing the Lord's Supper. Well, that answer is not difficult to figure out. It is spelled out clearly in God's Word in all of the "one-another" commands that the apostles urged the believers to obey. Since these are "one-another" commands, they can, by definition, only be obeyed in the context of the gathering of the saints. Let's examine together some of these commands.

### **Greet One Another**

*"Greet one another with a holy kiss."* Though this particular "one-another" command sounds very mundane, it happens to be repeated five times in the New Testament (Romans 16:16; 1 Corinthians 16:20; 2 Corinthians 13:12; 1 Thessalonians 5:26; 1 Peter 5:14). The principle here seems to be that believers should express their loving affection for one another with a physical greeting. In the first century the cultural practice was for this greeting to be given in a kiss. In our own cultural setting, the kiss would be seen as bizarre and out of place. Nevertheless, the principle of warm and loving affectionate greetings should be applied in our churches. Here at Milpitas Bible Fellowship, hugs, embraces, and backslaps are very common in our greeting of each other. It is important to note that this was to be a "holy" kiss. Applied today, this means that this physical affection must be shown in a way that never compromises personal holiness. This is especially relevant when it comes to men and women greeting one another. Let all God's people remember that God's all-seeing eye is ever upon them. Thus, our "holy hugs" towards members of the opposite sex must be given in an appropriate way. One rule of thumb is that if the individual's spouse is not comfortable with the way you are greeting them, then it is not appropriate for you to do so.

### **Love One Another**

This, by far, is the most oft repeated "one-another" command in the New Testament. Indeed, it is the hallmark of Christian community. The importance of this command cannot be overstated. Love fulfills God's law (Matthew 22:34-40; Romans 13:8-10); convinces the world that we are Christ's disciples (John 13:34-35); is the perfect bond of our unity (Colossians 3:12-14); and brings us assurance of our salvation (1 John 3:14). The intensity of the love we are to have for one another is arresting. Jesus teaches us first, that we are to love one another as we love ourselves (Mark 12:31). Here Christ quotes from Leviticus 19:18. This is the minimum level of love. It was the level of love demanded under the Old Covenant. Most of us do not even love with this intensity. But Jesus took it beyond this. He told His disciples, "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:34-35). Here, Jesus takes us beyond loving one another as much as we love ourselves, to loving one another more than we love ourselves. This kind of love had never been demanded before. That's why Jesus said that He was giving them a "new" commandment. In this kind of love, we are not to simply love others as much as we love ourselves. In this kind of love, self disappears. When Jesus loved us, He put His own comfort, ease, and pleasure aside, and willingly took upon Himself the blazing fury of God's wrath for our everlasting salvation. Likewise, if we are love like He did, we must set aside our desires, rights, or needs, and minister to the needs of others.

What will this kind of love look like in real life? Well, for starters, it will meet real needs in other peoples' lives. Notice how the apostle John describes this love, "We know love by this, that He laid down His life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. But whoever has the world's goods, and beholds his brother in need and closes his heart against him, how does the love of God abide in him? Little children, let us not love with word or with tongue, but in deed and truth" (1 John 3:16-18). This kind of love means getting your hands dirty. It means giving up a Saturday

afternoon to watch someone's children. It means digging deep to help another brother buy a car after his has been hauled off to the wrecking yard. It means cleaning house for a sister who is sick and can't do it herself. This kind of love can't be done without getting to know the real needs in peoples' lives. This kind of love requires that we get involved at a deep level in each other's lives.

This love will also be manifested as we forgive one another. Peter wrote, "Above all, keep fervent in your love for one another, because love covers a multitude of sins" (1 Peter 4:8). What happens when a community of believers starts to get involved in each other's lives on a deep level? You can be that conflict is right around the corner! As we begin to spend a lot of time with one another, our own sin will surface, and sparks are bound to fly. But if we love one another, we will quietly forgive these offenses. Interestingly enough, the word forgive in Greek has the meaning of "to let go." Biblical love means a willingness to let go and not hold onto petty resentments and offenses.

Furthermore, this love will at other times mean restoring one another from a sinful pattern. There will be times when the nature and frequency of the sin in a brother or sister will require more of us than to quietly forgive it. When a brother or sister is caught in a sinful pattern, it is our duty to them to restore them in love. Paul expresses this in Galatians 6:1-2 by saying, "Brethren, even if a man is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; each one looking to yourself, lest you too be tempted. Bear one another's burdens, and thus fulfill the law of Christ." Notice here that bearing one another's burdens is linked contextually with restoring a brother. The brother's burden that we must bear is the trespass that he is caught in. When one of our community is tripped up by a trespass, some spiritually minded brethren need to surround him, and together shoulder the burden he is groaning under. By doing this we will fulfill the law of Christ. What is that? It is the new commandment to love one another even as Christ has loved us (John 13:34-35). Love means we must be willing to confront a sinning brother in love, when we know that this sin has "caught him". It is not the occasional sin that is immediately confessed and repented of that is being spoken of here, but the sin that trips up and lays a brother low. It is at this point that we have the hardest time, for all of us hate to confront each other. But confront we must, if we really love one another. "Faithful are the wounds of a friend, but deceitful are the kisses of an enemy" (Proverbs 27:6).

## Be Hospitable To One Another

In 1 Peter 4:9 we find this oft-neglected "one-another" command, "Be hospitable to one another without complaint." In spite of the fact that few of us actively seek to be hospitable to one another, the Scriptures urges it upon us.

**Hebrews 13:2** "Do not neglect to show *hospitality* to strangers, for by this some have entertained angels without knowing it."

**Romans 12:13** "...contributing to the needs of the saints, practicing *hospitality*"

**1 Timothy 3:2** "An overseer, then, must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, temperate, prudent, respectable, *hospitable*, able to teach..."

The Scriptures admonish us that we are not to neglect hospitality, we are to practice hospitality, and that a man must not be considered for the office of elder if he is not given to hospitality. These passages alone should place beyond doubt the importance of the practice of hospitality in our lives.

It's also interesting to notice that every place the subject of hospitality comes up in the Scriptures it is in the context of love. Go back and look up the previous verses in their context, and you will see that in every one of them except the 1 Timothy passage, they are given in the surrounding context of brotherly love. What this should tell us is that if we want to know how to show true love to one another, a good place to begin is with showing hospitality.

The word hospitality comes from a Greek compound word meaning "the love of guests." In the passage in 1 Peter we are told to be hospitable to *one another*. This indicates that this hospitality is not just to be exercised toward traveling missionaries and pastors every six months to a year, but rather to all of God's people in our local church on a regular basis. Furthermore, we are told that we are to do it without complaint. How easy it is to slip into complaining when it comes to opening up our homes to have others over. It is not easy to practice hospitality. It demands old-fashioned hard work. It will be costly, inconvenient, time-consuming, and may place a strain on our families. Nevertheless, it is a test of our fervent love for God and His people. The opposite of doing something with complaint is to do something with gladness. God's will is that all of us open our homes to others with a glad and cheerful spirit.

One of the ways we practice hospitality toward one another at Milpitas Bible Fellowship is to rotate the location of our house churches so that everyone gets an opportunity to have a gathering in their home. The application, however, can be much broader than this. How wonderful it would be if all of us had others into our homes to share a meal and fellowship with one another on a regular basis!

## **Accept One Another**

Romans 15:7 says, "Wherefore, accept one another, just as Christ also accepted us to the glory of God." How are we to accept one another? As Christ also has accepted us to the glory of God. How did Christ accept us? With all our sins, shortcomings, warts and all. He took us in exactly as we were. He loved us in spite of ourselves. He did this all for God's glory. This is exactly the way we are commanded to accept one another. We must be willing to accept others, receive them into our hearts and lives with all their faults, shortcomings and sins. Now, this does not mean that we must approve of a brother's sins. God accepts us, but He never approves of our sin. Acceptance of another person means that we are committed to love and receive them again and again in the midst of their struggles with sin. We must refuse to reject them from our fellowship, until or unless it becomes apparent that they are unwilling to repent of sin any longer. At that point we must begin the process of church discipline in order to restore them to the grace of God.

In our churches we will have many opportunities to learn to accept one another. In a church there will be all types thrown in together -- married, single, divorced, elderly, young, families who home school, families who send their children to public school, ex-atheists, ex-homosexuals, straights, and people who differ on political or theological issues. Love for others means we must learn to accept people just as they are while God is in the process of conforming them to the image of Christ. Even with all of our differences we can experience deep unity because all of us have been united to Jesus Christ. He's the unifying factor in our lives.

## **Live In Peace With One Another**

Paul gives us this command in 1 Thessalonians 5:13. In view of our great differences mentioned above, how can we possibly live in peace? Ephesians 4:2-3 gives us some help, "...with all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing forbearance to one another in love, being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." This bond of peace can only be maintained as long as we are seeking the graces of humility, gentleness, patience, and forbearance. Paul further elaborates on this area of our corporate lives in Ephesians 4:29-32, where he states that living in peace with one another will mean that we refuse to speak unwholesome words, that we put away all bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, and slander along with all malice, and that we are kind to one another, tender-hearted, and forgiving of each other. In order to live in peace with one another, it will be necessary that we refuse to nurse a grudge or resentment. It will mean that we deal with conflict Biblically, by going to the person who has offended us privately and speaking to them in love. It will mean a readiness to confess our faults to each other when we have offended someone.

Conflicts will inevitably arise in any church setting where believers are developing deep relationships with one another. It is not necessarily bad. In fact, these conflicts are God's way of sanctifying us! Normally, when conflicts arise between brethren, we either avoid or explode. God's will is that we learn to resolve these conflicts by humbling ourselves and loving one another. In this way we will live in peace with one another.

## Be Of The Same Mind Toward One Another

Romans 12:16 says, "Be of the same mind toward one another; do not be haughty in mind, but associate with the lowly. Do not be wise in your own estimation." What does it mean to be of the same mind toward one another? Paul defines it succinctly in the rest of this verse by saying that it is to not be haughty in mind, but to associate with the lowly. In other words, it means that we will have the same attitude toward all of God's people. We will not only associate with a few of our middle or upper class friends who are just like us, but will show the same love, care, and concern for all of God's people, no matter what station in life they happen to be in. To be of the same mind toward one another is the opposite of having a cliquish or snobbish attitude toward others. It is a refusal to look down on anyone. Paul gives us another angle of this truth in 1 Corinthians 12:24-26 where he says, "God has so composed the body, giving more abundant honor to that member which lacked, that there should be no division in the body, but *that the members should have the same care for one another*. And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it." We are not to have great care for this brother because we like him and have much in common with him, but hardly notice another brother's need because we don't have much in common with him. Every believer is of the highest importance in God's heart, and should be in ours. We must care as much for the elderly as for the younger members of our church, as much for the poor as for the rich, as much for the dark-skinned as for the light-skinned, as much for the uneducated as for the highly educated. When we love each other like that, there will be no divisions because there will be no difference in how we care for one another.

One of the concerns that some voiced when we first started the house churches at Milpitas Bible Fellowship was the possibility that cliques would develop. Now, it is important for us to understand just what a clique is. A clique is not a group of people who have developed deep relationships with one another. That is exactly what the Scripture encourages us to do. It's obvious that we will not be able to have these kinds of relationships with 100 people or even 50 people. It is not wrong to focus your energies on developing deep relationships with a more manageable group, say 15 or 20 people. If those people happen to be the ones that are in your house church, there is nothing intrinsically wrong with that. Rather, a clique according to Webster's Dictionary is "a small, *exclusive* group of friends." Whenever your group becomes exclusive, you have developed a clique, and are beginning to act contrary to the spirit of the Scriptures. The Bible encourages us to have the same care toward one another. We must show great care not to become exclusive, but always have open arms to reach out and receive anyone the Lord brings into our lives.

## Serve One Another

According to 1 Peter 4:10, "As each one has received a special gift, employ it in serving one another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God." The Scriptures teach us here, that we serve each other by employing our spiritual gifts on their behalf. Verse 11 goes on to tell us that there are two different kinds of gifts -- speaking gifts and serving gifts. "Whoever speaks, let him speak, as it were, the utterances of God; whoever serves, let him do so as by the strength which God supplies; so that in all things God may be glorified through Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen."

Romans 12:6-8 and 1 Corinthians 12:7-11 mention many different gifts including prophecy, service, teaching, exhortation, giving, leading, mercy, word of wisdom, word of knowledge, faith, gifts of healing, effecting of miracles,

distinguishing of spirits, various kinds of tongues, and interpretation of tongues. The important thing to note is that if we are to serve one another, we must "employ" these gifts. That is, we must put them to work on the behalf of others. We are told in 1 Corinthians 12:7 that each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. 1 Corinthians 14:12 reveals that these spiritual gifts are to be used for the edification of the church. From these passages we learn that every believer has one or more spiritual gifts, and they are to be used not for his own benefit, but for the common good and edification of the whole body.

If you are not sure what gifts God has given you, the best way to find out is by serving others in whatever way comes naturally to you. In the context of caring relationships our gifts just seem to surface naturally. As others affirm that you have helped them spiritually, your particular gift will become clear to you.

The main thing we must keep in mind, however, is that in order for us to use our spiritual gifts, we must get involved. We will never use our spiritual gifts as long as we sit silently on the sidelines allowing somebody else to minister. Jump in! Get out on the playing field! See someone in need, and in Jesus' name, bring His healing touch. In the context of house church gatherings, there is ample opportunity for everyone to use their gifts. One brother may bring a song he has written. Another may read a passage of Scripture the Lord has laid on his heart during a season of prayer. Another sister may take another sister alone after the meeting and pray for her about a particular struggle she is going through. Someone else may bring an exhortation to the whole group to apply a particular truth to their lives. Another may serve by setting the table, setting out chairs, and doing the dishes later. But again, the important point is that all of us must take responsibility for getting involved in ministering to one another!

## Build Up One Another

Paul tells us in 1 Thessalonians 5:11, "Therefore, encourage one another, and build up one another, just as you also are doing." Interestingly enough, this is exactly what Paul tells us in Ephesians 4 is what all the saints are to be doing. In verse 11 Paul says, "And He (Christ) gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ. Who is supposed to do the work of service? The *saints*! What is this work of service? The building up of the body of Christ! The body is built up in two different ways. It is built up numerically when non-Christians are won to Christ and added to the body, and it is built up spiritually when believers mature in their faith. This two-fold work of evangelism and discipleship is the work of all of God's people. Furthermore, Paul goes on to say in verses 15 & 16, "but speaking the truth in love, we are to *grow up* in all aspects into Him, who is the head, even Christ, from whom the whole body, being fitted and held together by that which every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the *growth* of the body for the *building up of itself* in love." Notice in this passage the emphasis on growth. The body cannot grow properly without the proper working of each individual part. How will this bodily growth take place? Only as the body builds up itself in love. Notice that the whole body is to build up the whole body in love. We, as believers, must learn to build up one another in order for the body to grow and mature together in Christ.

This same truth is brought out in slightly different language in Hebrews 3:12-14. There we are told, "Take care, brethren, lest there should be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart, in falling away from the living God. But *encourage* one another day after day, as long as it is still called 'Today,' lest any one of you be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. For we have become partakers of Christ, if we hold fast the beginning of our assurance firm until the end." Here we are told explicitly that one of the means that God uses in our lives to persevere in faith to the end, is the faithful encouragement of our brothers and sisters in Christ. We are exhorted to encourage one another "day after day." It does not say that the Pastor is to encourage the church on Sunday mornings at 11:00 a.m. It says that all of us are to encourage one another day after day. In order for this to happen, we've got to know one another and be willing to get involved in one another's lives, difficulties and struggles. But as we encourage one another day after

day, we can make sure that no one becomes hardened by the deceitfulness of sin, but instead holds fast the beginning of their assurance firm until the end. Do you see in this passage that final perseverance is a group project. It's not a do-it-yourself operation! As we learn to build up one another day after day, God enables us to persevere to the end.

## **Admonish One Another**

In Romans 15:14 Paul instructs the church, "And concerning you, my brethren, I myself also am convinced that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge, and able also to admonish one another." Here the apostle assures the church in Rome that he is convinced that they are able to admonish one another. The word "admonish" has the meaning of teaching in order to change behavior, not just to impart information. The idea behind admonishing is that of seeking to correct wrong thinking, putting right what is wrong, or improving a wrong attitude. Webster's defines admonish as "to reprove gently but earnestly, to counsel against something to be avoided; to caution."

Now, it might be supposed at first glance that building up one another and admonishing one another are opposites, but this would be a wrong conclusion indeed. Building up and admonishing are not opposed to each other at all. In fact, building up one another includes admonishing one another. Sometimes the most loving thing a person can do to build up another person is to admonish them. Recently at an Agape Feast at Milpitas Bible Fellowship in which my youngest son was baptized, my own heart was struck with the goodness of God in saving my entire family. Great waves of emotion swept over me as I read Ephesians 2:1-10 during our gathering. I openly wept out of sheer gratitude at God's great goodness in reaching down in sovereign mercy and showing mercy to my wife and children. Afterwards a good friend took me aside and told me that though he was happy for me and shared in my joy, that I needed now more than ever to guard my heart. He reinforced his admonition with several examples from the Scriptures where after great blessing, the devil came in and caught someone in a trespass. This was a needed and effective word of admonition. It illustrates the exhortation to "speak the truth in love." This kind of admonition should be shared freely and frequently in the body of Christ.

In Hebrews 10:24-25 we are urged to consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds. The word stimulate has the meaning of "to incite." We sometimes speak of troublemakers who incite a riot, or someone inciting workers to strike. Usually it is used in a negative way, but here the word is used in a very positive way. It is calling on all of us to incite one another or to put something in motion. It carries the force of "challenging" or "motivating."

This kind of "inciting" can happen in many different ways. It may take place as someone challenges the entire house church to go in a certain direction. On another occasion it may take place as a quiet word is spoken in prayer which God uses as an arrow to pierce someone's heart and correct a sin problem in their lives. Or perhaps it may take place as one brother speaks to another brother in private about an area in his life that needs to be addressed. All of us must be depend on God to show us how to minister these words of admonition to one another.

## **Be Subject To One Another**

Ephesians 5:21 tells us to "be subject to one another in the fear of Christ." This principle is taken up and expounded on in much greater detail in the succeeding paragraphs. Wives are told to submit to their husbands as the church submits to Christ. Husbands are told to submit to the needs of their wives by loving them as Christ loved the church. Children are told to submit to their parents by obeying and honoring them. And parents are told to submit to the needs of their children by not provoking them to anger but bringing them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord. But in Ephesians 5:21 Paul is addressing all believers, and declaring that all of us must learn mutual submission to one another. How is this worked out in our corporate lives? Only by all of us loving one another so

much that we are willing to set aside our own desires, interests, and agendas for the good of others. It boils down to being willing to put others' needs before our own. In Philippians 2:3 Paul exhorts all of us to "regard one another as more important than ourselves."

Oh, how much conflict arises within Christ's church when everyone wants their own way! There will be many occasions when the interests of members of the church will collide. Without much humility and a willingness to submit to the needs of others, conflict, hurt feelings, and possible division are just around the corner. Hear Peter's exhortation in 1 Peter 5:5, "You younger men, likewise, be subject to your elders; and all of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, for God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble." Instead of all of us going around insisting on our rights, how much better when God's people willingly lay down their rights to serve one another!

## **Be Devoted To One Another**

In Romans 12:10 Paul states, "Be devoted to one another in brotherly love." The word devotion is a strong word. It can be defined as "to give or apply one's time, attention, or self entirely to a particular activity, pursuit, cause or person." It's almost a religious word. We speak of having our "devotions", or being "devoted" to the Lord. Inherent in the word are the ideas of commitment and permanence. We are to have this kind of commitment to one another in the body of Christ.

The devotion the apostle Paul is speaking about is not to an institution, but to specific people. It is not devotion to First Baptist Church, but to Joe, Mary, Tom, Larry, and Sally. What will this devotion look like? It will mean we don't run away at the first sign of a problem. It will mean a commitment to stay and resolve a difficulty until reconciliation is reached. It will mean being there for someone when they are in need. It will mean a willingness to meet the needs of others at our own personal cost, time or expense.

These then, are the activities that the church is to be about when they gather together. They are to greet one another, love one another, be hospitable to one another, accept one another, live in peace with one another, be of the same mind toward one another, serve one another, build up one another, admonish one another, be subject to one another, and be devoted to one another. In most churches these activities will not take place at a Sunday morning "worship service." Here, at Milpitas Bible Fellowship, we realized that a new structure was necessary in order for these activities to happen. The house church is an ideal setting in which to practice these Biblical "one-another" commands. These commands can only be obeyed within the context of close, caring relationships. It is imperative that the church be committed to the development of these kinds of relationships so that we might live out the kind of Christianity we read of in the pages of our New Testament. For us, this has meant developing small, intimate groups of believers meeting in homes. May God help us all to live out His Word!

## **Chapter 6 Where Do We Go From Here?**

I hope you have seen by now that the concept of a "house church" is not just a cultural oddity of the first century, but a necessary form if the church is to live out the kind of Christianity God requires in Scripture. It's not just a nice idea that we can take or leave. It's a vital part of our entire church life. In fact, I would go so far as to say, that we could fulfill all of the Biblical aspects of church life in homes *alone*, without ever meeting in large buildings at all. The church in China is a modern day proof of this assertion. In 1949, the church was driven underground because of communist persecution. The only way the church could survive was to meet in homes. At that time there were 800,000 believers.

Today, in 1996, there are over 75,000,000 believers! The church has grown to be nearly 100 times larger in less than 50 years without any large public meetings, evangelistic crusades, or denominations to speak of! In home settings we can be taught the Word, administer the ordinances of Baptism and the Lord's Supper, exercise church discipline, edify one another, worship, pray, and give. However, the church which only meets in large, impersonal gatherings, will find it extremely difficult if not impossible to live out the kind of Christianity described in Scripture. In that kind of setting, the love feast, one-another commands, and meetings designed so that every member can use their spiritual gifts will probably just not happen, and the entire church will be the loser for it.

Therefore, if we want to structure our churches so that we can obey the New Testament commands, certain principles must be addressed.

**We need to structure church life so that we can be God's witness in the world together** (John 17:21-23; Act 2:46-47). According to Jesus, it is as the world sees the unity of the people of God that they come to believe that the Father sent the Son. Most of the world will never behold the tremendous unity believers share with one another, because they don't come to our meetings in our church buildings on Sundays. Therefore, we've got to find ways to be out in the world, so that the world can see what it means to be a genuine follower of Christ. This can take place as we meet together in homes, parks, the beach, or work settings. In all of these places, unbelievers will often be found.

**We need to structure church life so that we can all minister to one another** (1 Corinthians 14:26; Hebrews 10:24-25; Ephesians 4:16). Wouldn't it be kind of strange if when a family sat down at the dinner table, only the father ever spoke? That's certainly not how it works at my home! When we sit down to dinner, everyone speaks (too often, all at once!). Well, the church is the family of God. All of us have a job to do and a function to perform. Every gift is vital to the proper functioning of the whole (1 Cor. 12:20-25). Thus, every person is needed to bring health and vitality to the whole body.

**We need to structure church life so that we can have significant relationships with one another** (1 Corinthians 12:26; Romans 12:10). If the apostle Paul were to reappear today in San Jose and was on the hunt for church-life, where would he find it? Would he look for a religious looking building, or large numbers of people listening to a sermon? I don't think so. Rather, I believe he would be looking for a group of people who loved each other fervently, and were serious about following Jesus Christ wherever He would lead them.

**We need to structure church life so that we can all be equipped for ministry** (Ephesians 4:11-12). Our large gatherings on Sundays for the teaching of the Word are like a football team that meets in the locker room before the game. The team suits up, and then listens to the pep talk by the coach. The coach thunders, "Football is my life and here's how we are going to win today!" As he speaks passionately, he scribbles some plays down on the board as the players look on. When his talk is concluded, the team huddles together and they all yell, "Ready - break!" We, like that football team gather together in the locker room of our church buildings on Sunday mornings. We wear our uniforms. We hear our Pastor give us a pep talk (his sermon). He speaks passionately and forcefully. When he is all through we all get in our cars and drive home. We say, "Wasn't that a great meeting?! I just loved the message our Pastor gave. That point in his sermon really moved me!" But we never play the game! We've forgotten that there is a difference between being in the locker room and playing on the field. The teaching of the word is only to prepare us for the game all week long. It is to equip us for real life situations in which we will need to be ministering to one another.

**We need to structure church life so that we can implement the Biblical teaching on the Lord's Supper** (1 Corinthians 10:16-17; 11:17-34; Acts 2:46; Acts 20:7). In order to be able to share a full meal in conjunction with the Lord's Supper, and use one cup and one loaf to represent our unity in Christ, there are some definite size limitations that must be placed on the group. In my opinion, the house church is the most Biblical setting in which to celebrate this blessed ordinance.

If you are new to the concept of the "house church", my advice to you is to study it thoroughly in Scripture. If you become convinced that it has a solid Biblical basis, get involved in one here at Milpitas Bible Fellowship. Be committed to the others in that house church. Come prepared to give. Be praying all week long for the people in your group. Come prepared to ask for help in a personal struggle or a Biblical issue you are dealing with. Look for ways that you can use your spiritual gifts and be a blessing to others. Outside of the weekly meeting, deepen your relationship with others by phone calls, drop by visits, or doing activities together. Seek for ways to evangelize the lost together. Remember that one of the primary purposes of the church in the world is to be God's instrument to gather in His elect. Let the twin purposes of discipleship of believers and evangelism of the lost propel you to greater works for Jesus Christ.