

CHURCH IN YOUR HOUSE

Romans 16v3-5

Last week we saw that the pioneer church in Jerusalem met in a large setting all together and also in smaller groups. We have the same two “wings” in County Church. I held back on talking about the fact that these small groups met in the houses of those first believers.

We call our small groups cells but we could use a description straight out of the New Testament, *“the church in the house.”* For example Romans 16v3-5: **Greet Priscilla and Aquila, my fellow-workers in Christ Jesus. They risked their lives for me. Not only I but all the churches of the Gentiles are grateful to them. Greet also the church that meets at their house.** (see also 1 Corinthians 16v19; Colossians 4v15; Philemon v2). Remember that the word church in the New Testament simply means “a gathering”; so literally this reads *“the assembly at their house.”*

When thousands of believers gather from around the world that is the church. When local Christians gather on a Sunday morning that is the church. When a small group of believers meet in a house that is also the church. So it's OK to call your small group meeting *“the church in your house”*.

Millions of Christians today meet in special church buildings. But that's not how it started out. It was 300 years before Christians used special buildings. Between 323 and 327 AD Emperor Constantine built assembly buildings in Constantinople, Rome, Jerusalem, and in many parts of Italy. This triggered a “church building” trend. Soon the word “church” came to mean a sacred place where Christians met rather than the believers themselves. But the New Testament resists the idea of holy buildings because *you*, believers, are now God's holy building! Buildings are functional not sacred.

I know that most people in the community don't think like this. They associate a “proper” church with a special church building. We must help them see that this is not what “church” is about. We can rent a Community Centre for Sundays and still be a proper church. And we can meet in houses on any day and still be the church.

Jesus' ministry.

Jesus Himself used private houses extensively in His ministry. He taught and healed people in houses. He turned people's life around in their house – just think of Zacchaeus. Jesus ate meals with enquirers in their houses. He stayed in the house of dear friends in Bethany. He spent his last evening before his death in a house and He revealed Himself on the day of resurrection to the disciples as they gathered in a house.

So it is no surprise that the first church in Jerusalem met in houses throughout the city. In those first 300 years when believers started churches it was almost always in a house. When persecution hit them meeting in houses was the

safest place - as believers know even today. But these were not just “safe houses”; they were springboards for the gospel, invading new neighborhoods.

The New Testament gives us an outstanding example of this. Romans 16v3-5 introduces us to Priscilla and Aquila, two much loved colleagues of the apostle Paul. They are always mentioned together, and Priscilla is sometimes named first. They were a strong husband and wife team. Paul lived with them at Corinth; their house was his base while he worked as a tent maker and taught in the synagogue.

Priscilla and Aquila are a stirring example of pioneers willing to move for the gospel. They were also tentmakers and this was work they could do wherever they lived. Wherever they settled their house became a bridgehead for the gospel. Their grasp of the gospel and experience of church planting alongside Paul made them highly valued “fellow workers” (Rom. 16v3)

We can trace their movements: first Rome, then Corinth (Acts 18v2) Their house was the apostolic base in that city until the home of Titius Justus opened up; they then sailed off with Paul to Ephesus. (Acts 18v19). Later they returned to Rome (Rom. 16v3-5) before moving back to Ephesus (2 Tim. 4v19) Wherever they lived the church met in their house.

All this focus on houses raises some questions.

1. Who does your house belong to?

Who does *my* house belong to? No, I don't mean whose name is on the title deeds. Rather, do you think of your house as yours or God's? Many people's houses are off-limits but Priscilla and Aquila's house belonged to God. It was His before it was theirs. Your house is on loan from God, not the bank. You are a steward of your house along with every other gift God has given you. It is not just for your comfort – it is for God's kingdom.

If you don't have a believing partner you may not have the same freedom as Aquila and Priscilla. But your presence as a believer brings the Lord's presence and blessing and care into your house and your household.

2. Why do you live where you do?

Priscilla and Aquila moved to different locations purposefully for the gospel. Many here have done the same. So, having arrived, what difference is your presence and mine making to the street or neighbourhood?

Many factors may be behind where you live: house prices, schools, transport routes – or quite simply, you may have always lived where you are. But does God have a purpose in you being where you are? Does He want your house to be a bridgehead for the gospel in your neighbourhood? When this happens we reflect the image of Christ, who “tabernacled” (literally ‘pitched his tent’)

among us (John 1v14). This was not a casual camping expedition. The Lord of Glory was on a mission to rescue the world.

You may say *“But I wouldn’t know where to start!”* Listen, we all feel like that. None of us here are experts. We are all learning on the job – often painfully. But here’s one way: we can begin by praying for our street or our local area. We may even find believers from other churches in our street and be able to get together with them to pray for the locality.

3. Has anything exciting happened in your house recently?

If the apostle Peter’s wife were here she would tell us how Jesus healed her mother’s fever in their house in Capernaum. If Cornelius, a first century Roman centurion, was here he would tell the story of how the major breakthrough for the gospel among non-Jews came when he invited his family and friends to his house in Caesarea and asked Peter to visit. If John Mark (the author of the second Gospel) were here he would tell us about a mighty answer to prayer as believers gathered in his house in Jerusalem. We had something similar happen at Joss & Gill’s house a few weeks ago.

Has anything exciting happened in your house recently? Three families here have had someone in their household come to faith in the last two months. How exciting is that? Bryan & Cathy have run a Marriage Course in their house. Some of you have opened your house for Alpha in the last year or two: over several weeks, even months you have eaten together with friends or contacts, listened to the gospel together, discussed all kinds of questions – and developed friendships. Some have come to faith in your home through this. Rob and Colleen hosted an event recently for the ‘level x’ Malawi Project inviting the church and neighbours to mix. Many of you have had a cell group meeting or a gathering for prayer in your house.

In our mission here in the county your cell group, the church in *your* house, could be the springboard for an explosion of growth of God’s church in your locality as multiplication takes place. Or to change the picture, it could be such a fruitful “strawberry plant” that it becomes a mother plant sending out many runners in every direction. How exciting is that?

4. Where will you be living in the Future?

Where will I be living? I’m not talking now about relocating. I’m talking about the Future with a capital ‘F’! Jesus promises us a house! Jesus told his disciples: *“In my Father’s house are many rooms. I am going there to prepare a place for you.”* (John 14v2) He is talking about an eternal house, God’s house which has more than enough room for all who know and love Jesus. *“I am going there to prepare a place for you”*. This great heavenly house is more than an idea. It is a place. Jesus left earth to go to this actual place. It exists now, in a specific location outside our space-time universe. *“I am going there to prepare a place for you”*. At this point you might have an image of Jesus decorating a room or puffing up the pillows on your bed. Forget that! Instead, there are two great truths here;

1. It is Christ's sacrifice for our sins which prepares a place for us. Jesus was talking about His death on the cross. Without it there could be no place for anyone. All of us would still be separated from God. But Jesus has opened the way. He has paid our penalty and gone ahead of us to present Himself to the Father on our behalf. He has prepared a place for us by His death, His resurrection and His ascension.

2. Jesus is giving His assurance that there *is* a place set aside for each of us who love Him. It is reserved and ready for us. It is secure. It is certain. We need have no fear or doubt about this. Our name is already written in the reservation book, "the Lamb's book of Life." (Revelation 21v27) Jesus told His disciples to rejoice that their names were written in heaven. (Luke 10v20)

And our house will not be empty. The Bible says that you have an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade – kept in heaven for you". (1 Peter 1v4) Jesus indicated that you could store up treasure for yourselves in heaven. (Matthew 6v20) He was talking about spiritual treasure. That is why it is so important for you and me to view our present houses in a radically different way from the glossy magazine / 'Ideal Home' culture. You cannot take your earthly comforts and possessions with you – but everything in your life that has been for God's pleasure and glory, everything that has the stamp of eternity upon it, will be waiting for you.

I started by talking about the Church in *your* house. But Jesus is looking forward to having the Church in *His* House throughout eternity. Be sure to be there.

John Wilthew. September 2007