

Multiplying House Churches

Lesson 1: A biblical and historical view of house church



Dura Europos Church, Syria, the earliest known church of two rooms and a baptistry

Welcome to *Multiplying House Churches*! This course is designed to help us understand the concept of house church, from its history to the practical modern ways we can begin and grow house churches to reach people around the world with the message of Jesus. You will learn the basic elements that early Christ followers used in their churches, including worship, prayer, teaching, discipling, the Lord's Supper, fellowship with the Holy Spirit, relationships with one another, as well as practices for member roles and leadership development, replication, and multiplication. We'll also provide cultural tools for relating to people from various backgrounds and life stages, as well as practical tools, such as food planning, transportation coordination, and more! Most importantly, we'll be discussing the heartbeat of house church: intimate relationships and self-sacrificing love for one another, an international language that fueled the early church to spread across the world into every country and culture.

When you imagine "house church," what comes to your mind?

How do you define church? Where do your beliefs come from?

Acts 2:42-47

⁴²They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. ⁴³Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. ⁴⁴All the believers were together and had everything in common. ⁴⁵They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. ⁴⁶Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, ⁴⁷praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

House church in the Bible

The concept of "house church" began over 2,000 years ago where Jesus's first followers met in homes, [Figure 1¹]. While Acts 2:42-46 is often referred to as a description of the "first church" through which church patterns and practices have evolved, we can see that the passage is less about detailed practices and more about the heart of the church: a *devotion* to the apostles' teachings, the fellowship, the breaking of bread, and prayer. In Greek, the word "devoted," [Gk: *proskartereó*]² means to persevere or continue consistently with something with earnest and constant attention. In this way, church was a lifestyle of the early followers, rather than a once or twice a week participation in a worship activity or event.

Reread Acts 2:42-47. What were Jesus's followers devoted to and discuss the meaning of each element.

How was early church more of a lifestyle than a once or twice a week event? How was the early view of church similar to or different from your view?

The heartbeat of devotion to the Lord and to one another was not the result of membership to the church, but rather a response to the powerful message they had heard of Jesus's death, burial, resurrection, and promise of salvation for his followers. This new life was so radically different from what the people were formerly believing and living that they wanted to be with others who now believed and wanted to live in the same way. We also see that church was not a place; it was a family that constantly lived together to worship the Lord and love one another.

While the passage in Acts 2 says nothing about meeting locations, we learn from other passages throughout Acts that the earliest believers, before the church was scattered from persecution (Acts 8:1, 11:19), met all together daily (2:46) at the temple courts at Solomon's Colonnade (5:12), possibly for the purposes of teaching, sharing testimonies, and corporate fellowship. The practice of "breaking bread" and gathering for meals was conducted in smaller, more intimate settings (2:46). In Acts 2:2, we see the entire church, or possibly the twelve apostles,³ gathering to pray in a home, while in Acts 4:23 and 31, the entire

¹ For examples, see Romans 16:5: "Greet the church that is in their house" (NIV); Philemon 1:1-2: "To Philemon our dear friend and fellow worker—² also to Apphia our sister and Archippus our fellow soldier—and to the church that meets in your home"; 1 Corinthians 16:19: "Aquila and Priscilla greet you warmly in the Lord, and so does the church that meets at their house"; Colossians 4:15: "Give my greetings to the brothers and sisters at Laodicea, and to Nympha and the church in her house." Photo: "File:DuraEuropos-Church.jpg" by Heretiq is licensed under CC BY-SA 2.5. To view a copy of this license, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.5/?ref=openverse>. See <https://openverse.org/image/88191276-7bac-467c-912a-625035aafaaa?q=Dura%20Europos%20church>.

² "4342, *proskartereó*," Thayer's Greek Lexicon, Electronic Database, 2011, BibleSoft, <https://biblehub.com/greek/4342.htm>.

³ The pronoun reference may relate back to Acts 1:15 where 120 believers gathered; however, the most recent antecedent is v. 26 where Matthias is added to the eleven apostles. We see Peter standing to address the crowd with only the "eleven;" however, Acts 2:17 references

church meeting to pray at an unknown place, possibly a home or even building. We see John and Peter going to the Jewish Temple at the time of prayer (3:1), possibly to pray, and people gathering to pray at the home of Mary, mother of John Mark, when Peter miraculously escapes from prison (12:12). Jesus’s followers prayed together and independently, as we see Peter taking time to pray alone on a rooftop during his missionary journey (Acts 10:9). In other words, the essence of devotion was not defined by practice details or location but rather the heart of the believers to commune with the Lord independently and together, maintain unity (2:32), and meet often out of love for the Lord and for one another (2:44). This loving unity was also expressed through sharing (2:45, 4:32-37), where we see the actual sharing of financial resources among the believers, as well as a corporate distribution of food for the needy (6:1), and larger financial gifts administered through the church leaders (5:2, 11:30). This is the heart that the Lord blessed and where he performed miracles among them (5:16).

As persecution increased, some churches began meetings in caves and tombs for security.⁴ As the church grew beyond the life of the apostles, with an abundance of churches in a wide variety of places and locations, even outside the Roman Empire, varying beliefs and practices arose.⁵ Yet this did not cause church leaders to abandon the practices of house churches for the sake of unity. In fact, as we will see, they retained the practice by choice, not necessarily out of necessity. Church fathers held that the unity of the church was established through their mutual faith in Jesus as the Christ and through their love for one another, the bride for whom Christ would one day return and bring with him into heaven.⁶ The locations of these vast and quickly multiplying church meetings in the early years of the faith were simply the venues through which the community operated, yet never hindered the spiritual blessings they received from the Lord, as we see throughout the New Testament.

Do you believe healthy churches can take place in homes, rather than church buildings? Explain.

Church Fathers: On the heart of the church⁷

In general, the early Christian writers outside the Bible appear to be less concerned about where the church met and more concerned with the discipleship of its members, as well as their attendance out of heart of genuine love for one another. In fact, in early writings, few details were given as to processes and

Joel 2 that the God will pour out his Spirit upon “all people.” In other words, how many people are gathered for the purposes of prayer inside the house is not clear.

⁴ Examples of such archeological findings are St. Peter’s cave church in Antioch, Syria, possibly the earliest known church. Other early tombs in Asia Minor have been discovered. See Versluys, *Visual Style*, 17; Anthony Comfort, Catherine Abadie-Reynal, and Rifat Ergeç, “Crossing the Euphrates in Antiquity: Zeugma Seen from Space,” *Anatolian Studies* 50 (2000): 102–3, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3643016>; Comfort and Ergeç, “Following the Euphrates,” images 29, 32.

⁵ Firmilian (c. 256), Bishop of Caesarea in Cappadocia, notes the diversities in the churches outside of Jerusalem and among the provinces, including the celebration of Easter and the sacraments (i.e. communion, baptism, church government, etc.); yet the church practiced peace and believed in the unity of the one church. “The Church,” Firmilian 5.391, *A Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs: A Reference Guide to More than 700 Topics Discussed by the Early Church Fathers*, David W. Bercot, ed. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1998), 151.

⁶ References include Hermas (c. 150): “All the nations that dwell under heaven were called by hearing and believing upon the name of the Son of God... Their faith became one and their love one,” see “The Church,” Hermas 2.50, 146; Irenaeus (c. 180): “Although she is scattered throughout the whole world, yet, she carefully preserves it, as if she occupied only one house. She also believes these points just as if she had only one soul, and one and the same heart. She proclaims these things, teaches them, and hands them down, with perfect harmony— as if she possessed only one mouth,” see “The Church,” Irenaeus 1.330, 331, *A Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs*, 146.

⁷ References to church fathers are included for purely historical, rather than doctrinal, purposes and can be used as insights into early church practice. Be aware that some church fathers veered away from biblical practice, so scriptural discretion should be used when applying methods or beliefs. Most church father references are taken from *A Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs*, and can be researched in context using “Ante-Nicene Fathers: The Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325,” *Christian Classical Ethereal Library*, 1993-2020, Harry Plantinga, <https://ccl.org/fathers>. Volume numbers coincide with the dictionary references; however, page numbers will vary. Translations are quite similar, and many phrases can be searched and matched for contextual referencing.

procedures of early church practice. Irenaeus (c. 180), Bishop of Lyons, defined church in this way: “Where the Spirit of God is, there is the church, and every kind of grace.”⁸ Although the church was scattered throughout the world, Irenaeus contends that the church operated as “one house,” maintaining a unity of teaching as though from “one mouth.”⁹ For the church fathers, church was guided by the Word of God and the impact that the Word had on the hearts of every believer, as Origen (c. 248), teacher in Alexandria and church elder in Caesarea, describes: “The Word, arousing and moving the whole body, the church, to fitting action, awakens each individual member belonging to the church. Thereby, they do nothing apart from the Word.”¹⁰

For the early church fathers, the church was so highly valued that it was viewed as an integral part of the salvation process, where church fathers compared the church to the ark that saved Noah and his family, and staying saved required staying within the ark.¹¹ If we understand that we are the body of Christ and that we become members of Christ’s body through salvation, then we realize that we cannot exist apart from Christ’s body, the church, a belief that was firm among the early church fathers.¹² In the early fourth century, Roman teacher Lactantius (c. 304—313) believed that the true church was made up of believers who practiced confession and repentance, a body of people who “treats in a wholesome manner the sins and wounds to which the weakness of the flesh is liable” (Lactantius),¹³ and its members were those “who are partakers of the communication of the Holy Spirit” (Apostolic Constitution, 390).¹⁴ In this way, we see the Holy Spirit and the Word of God working together as guides in how the church was defined and functioned.

How did the early church fathers define church? What mattered most to them?

How are these beliefs similar or different from what we believe and practice today?

Church Fathers: On church buildings

In all this, the number of congregational members did not actually matter to the early church fathers. As Jesus said, “Where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them,” Tertullian (c. 212), Christian writer in North Africa, said, “But where there are three, a church is—even if it is laity.”¹⁵ Meeting location also matter little. For as Christ said, “The kingdom of God is *entos* [Gk: among or inside] you,” Lactantius said, “The church, which is the true temple of God, does not consist of walls. Rather, it consists of the heart and faith of the men who believe on Him and are called faithful.”¹⁶ By the early fourth century, places of worship were being erected for the sake of assembly, but Lactantius continued to point believers to where they should place their hope: the true temple of God that is the human body.¹⁷

⁸ “The Church,” Irenaeus 1.458, *A Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs*, 146.

⁹ “The Church,” Irenaeus 1.330, 331, *A Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs*, 146.

¹⁰ “The Church,” Origen 4.595, *A Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs*, 149.

¹¹ See Cyprian 5.389, 98, 150; Treatise against Novatian (c. 255) 5.658; and Firmilian 5.394, *A Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs*, 150-51.

¹² References include Ignatius (c. 105): “He, therefore, who does not assemble with the church, has even by this displayed pride, and he has condemned himself,” “The Church,” Ignatius 1.51, 145; Second Clement (c. 150): “Let us choose to be of the church of life, so that we may be saved,” “The Church,” Second Clement 7.521, 146; Cyprian (c. 250): “The house of God is one, and there can be no salvation to anyone except in the church,” “The Church,” Cyprian 5.358, *A Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs*, 150

¹³ Lactantius was a Roman teacher and royal tutor of Constantine’s son, “Lactantius,” *Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs*, xviii. For quote, see “The Church,” Lactantius 7.134, *A Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs*, 151.

¹⁴ The Apostolic Constitution is a collection of works and practices in the church of Syria from 375-380, quite far removed from the early church. While some early practices are reflected and align with Holy Scripture, later practices appear independent of scripture and by some have been deemed heretical. The references in this text are used to demonstrate both biblical practices, while acknowledging errant developments within the fourth century church. For the quote, see “The Church,” Apostolic Constitution 7.391, *A Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs*, 151.

¹⁵ “The Church,” Tertullian 4.54, *A Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs*, 149.

¹⁶ “The Church,” Lactantius 7.113, *A Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs*, 151.

¹⁷ “The Church,” Lactantius 7.306, 155.

Lactantius' remark was possibly a response to either the confiscation of Christian property or emperor Constantine's (r. 306—337) church building program (c. 312). Upon legalizing Christianity and becoming a believer himself, Constantine freed Christians from hiding, returned their property, and established large buildings for corporate worship. Yet, Constantine's constructions had a profound change on the ambiance of church gatherings. Worship in the round over a meal was transformed into a Roman-style lecture format with only a few speakers and readers in charge of services. Old St. Peter's Basilica (342 C.E.) is one example of Constantine's construction, capable of housing an estimated 3500 worshippers at one time. Built in the shape of a Latin cross, the interior was divided into five aisles with a nave in the center, now separating men from women. The design suited the growing customs for public worship, including readings, sermons, and the Lord's Supper, in the midst of lavish adornments to attract a wealthy congregation. More paltry decorum was reserved for congregations in areas of lower-class populations.¹⁸ By 390, the Apostolic Constitution publicly governed the construction of churches with a required pattern of design.¹⁹

In contrast, the earliest believers did not see church as a building but a matter of heart and life. The idea of building temples for God was actually considered an offense to God and a misapplication of worship, for our bodies were the new temples of worship, no longer buildings seen in Old Testament practice. Origen defended this position when he said, "We refuse to build lifeless temples to the Giver of all life... Our bodies are the temple of God...When they [persecutors] reproach us for not deeming it necessary to worship the divine Being by raising lifeless temples, we set before them our temples."²⁰ While this evidence does not condemn the building of modern churches, for corporate worship at Solomon's Colonnade was practiced among the apostles, what we see rather is a defense among early followers for the practice of house churches in contrast to pagan temples and the essence of what defines "church."

What else do we learn about how the early church fathers defined church?

How are these beliefs similar or different from what we believe and practice today?

Think of the various ways that church building design has influenced how the church functions today and how members relate to one another? What do you feel are the gains and losses in this change?

For deeper discussion

1. What impacts you or surprises you about church among the earliest Christ followers?
2. Imagine yourself in a house church. How would your life be different? What do you see as benefits? What do you see as losses?
3. Imagine establishing your own house church. How would you start the church? What practices would you follow and why? How would you communicate the heart of church to others?
4. Do you know of a house church in your community? If so, make a point to visit the house church and write about your experience. What did you enjoy? What would you change?

¹⁸ Richard Krautheimer, "The Constantinian Basilica," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, 21 (1967), <https://doi.org/10.2307/1291261>, 132-137/

¹⁹ "The Church," Apostolic Constitution 7.421, *A Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs*, 155.

²⁰ "The Church," Origen 4.646, *A Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs*, 155.