

# Multiplying House Churches

## Lesson 3: Early church gatherings and practices

### *The Practice of Sharing*

Take a minute to discuss what you learned in Lesson 2. What impacted you the most?

In Lesson 2, we learned how the early church practiced the Lord's Supper: They ate a simple meal together that included bread and wine and examined their hearts before the Lord. The practice comes from Luke 22, where Jesus asks his followers to eat together bread to remember his body sacrificed on the cross and drink wine to remember the blood he shed for the forgiveness of sins. We read Paul's instructions as we take the Lord's Supper: to examine our hearts, our lives, our walk with Jesus, and our relationships with others. We see that the Lord's Supper is a time to renew our relationship with the Lord and to resolve our conflicts with our brothers and sisters, so that we might love one another and walk in unity. In this way, we keep our hearts fresh and alive, not falling asleep spiritually and being judged with the world. If we regularly judge ourselves in this way every time we participate in the Lord's Supper, taking full responsibility for our lives and devotion to the Lord, then others in the body of Christ can be encouraged by our faithfulness. For this reason, we should take the Lord's Supper often and regularly with our brothers and sisters, celebrating and honoring the death and resurrection of Jesus.



St. Ananias Chapel, Damascus: Former 1<sup>st</sup> century home of Ananias, later converted into a chapel

### Church worship and teaching

We know from Paul's instructions that the reading of his letters, possibly entire letters, was also a significant part of church gatherings<sup>1</sup> (Colossians 4:16, I Thessalonians 5:27). Through his first letter to the Corinthian church, we can discover other practices and styles followed by the earliest believers:

#### I Corinthians 14:26-31

<sup>26</sup> What shall we say then, brothers and sisters, when you come together, each of you has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation. Everything must be done so that the church may be built up. <sup>27</sup> If anyone speaks in a tongue, two—or at the most three—should speak, one at a time, and someone must interpret. <sup>28</sup> If there is no interpreter, the speaker should keep quiet in the church and speak to himself and to God. <sup>29</sup> Two or three prophets should speak, and the others should weigh carefully what is said. <sup>30</sup> And if a revelation comes to someone who is sitting down, the first speaker should stop. <sup>31</sup> For you can all prophesy in turn so that everyone may be instructed and encouraged. (NIV)

Here we see more instructions that Paul gives to the early church. Aside from the Lord's Supper, how else would you describe these early church meetings?

How are these instructions different from or similar to what you see in churches today?

Some of what we might see from Paul's instruction is that during church gatherings, every member is invited to use his or her spiritual gifts to contribute to the worship. In the early church, some brought songs, while others contributed instructions, revelations, different languages, and interpretations of those languages. Each person took turns sharing what they had prepared in advance; and yet during the service, spontaneous realizations and revelations were also shared in turn. Languages that others did not understand were always interpreted so that everyone could understand what was being said. While one shared, others weighed what was said to ensure that what was being shared adhered with the common understanding of practice and teaching. In this way, we see the body of Christ actively working together to bring the Word of God to the church and experiencing the Spirit of God as they encouraged one another. No one person was over another during the time of sharing; rather each part had equal value and played a role in the worship. Likely the preparation of the communion and common meal was also a shared practice, in keeping with the spirit of unity so highly valued by Jesus's earliest followers.

### The sharing of resources

We see from the passages we've studied so far that the family of God not only shared their spiritual gifts, but other resources as well, such as food and physical support for one other's needs. While the topic of financial giving should be studied along with Jesus's teachings in the Gospels,<sup>2</sup> we learn that financial support for the church, missionaries, members in need, and the poor among them was an ongoing practice in the early church. Just as the heart of the early church shaped its lifestyle and worship gatherings, the "why" behind offerings shared among believers shaped this practice. Let's examine some "why's" in these passages:

<sup>1</sup> Photo of first century chapel: "Interior, St. Ananias Chapel - Damascus" by BillBl is licensed under CC BY 2.0. To view a copy of this license, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/?ref=openverse>.

<sup>2</sup> See Matthew 5:42, 6:1-4, 6:19-24, 19:21, 25:35-40; Mark 12:41-44, Luke 3:11, 6:35-38, 12:33.

**I Timothy 5:16**

If any woman who is a believer has widows in her care, she should continue to help them and not let the church be burdened with them, so that the church can help those widows who are really in need.

**James 1:27**

Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.

**James 2:15-16**

Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. <sup>16</sup>If one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it?

What are some reasons the church shared financial resources with others?

While generosity is an on-going theme throughout the New Testament, how do these verses help us to identify those with genuine need?

Here are some more helpful verses to guide us in financial giving:

**Philippians 4:14-19**

*[Paul speaking]* Yet it was good of you to share in my troubles. <sup>15</sup>Moreover, as you Philippians know, in the early days of your acquaintance with the gospel, when I set out from Macedonia, not one church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you only; <sup>16</sup>for even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me aid more than once when I was in need. <sup>17</sup>Not that I desire your gifts; what I desire is that more be credited to your account. <sup>18</sup>I have received full payment and have more than enough. I am amply supplied, now that I have received from Epaphroditus [eh-PAH-fro-DY-tus] the gifts you sent. They are a fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God. <sup>19</sup>And my God will meet all your needs according to the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus.

**III John 1:5-8**

Dear friend, you are faithful in what you are doing for the brothers and sisters, even though they are strangers to you. <sup>6</sup>They have told the church about your love. Please send them on their way in a manner that honors God. <sup>7</sup>It was for the sake of the Name that they went out, receiving no help from the pagans. <sup>8</sup>We ought therefore to show hospitality to such people so that we may work together for the truth.

Why else did early believers share financially with the church?<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> See also I Corinthians 9:11.

Here's a verse on how the collections were made:

**I Corinthians 16:1-3**

Now about the collection for the Lord's people: Do what I told the Galatian churches to do. <sup>2</sup>On the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with your income, saving it up, so that when I come no collections will have to be made. <sup>3</sup>Then, when I arrive, I will give letters of introduction to the men you approve and send them with your gift to Jerusalem.

What do we learn here about how the church practiced and managed regular giving?

As we examine these passages, we see that giving was conducted individually and corporately, as needs arose, the needs of both small bodies of believers and the church at large. Needs were made known to the believers, and they gave freely and generously to meet those needs. Larger donations and corporate contributions were shepherded by leaders within the church for the sake of financial accountability as well as trustworthy administration. Some gifts were collected for the purpose of serving the poor within the church and those employed by the ministry, while others helped with missionary journeys and the needs of the ministry.

**The shaping of a house church**

As we consider all the elements of church that we've covered so far: devotion to the apostles' teachings; the breaking of bread; self-examination; fellowship and meals together; prayer; the sharing of spiritual gifts, as well as physical and financial resources; equal participation and contribution among members; and caring one for another, it's important to keep as priority the "why" behind all that we do as a church, rather than following a checklist of tasks. In other words, we can make a list of things to do each week as a house church and yet completely miss the heart of what we are doing: loving Jesus and one another. Have you ever been to a church that checked all the boxes but lacked intimacy and love among its followers?

Describe a church that has lost its motivation of love and devotion to Jesus and God's family.

Describe a church that regularly remembers love as the key ingredient to its gathering and its practices.

From the early church's examples, we can begin to understand that practices don't produce love, but rather love for Jesus, his Word, his Spirit, and each other should shape what we do and how we do it. This takes time to study what we see in these scriptures, pray, listen to the Holy Spirit, and consider how we want to function as a house church, and how we can work together with new house churches that form for the common good of each other and the Gospel.

Now consider what love and devotion to Jesus and each other could look like for your group. Pick one area listed above, and explain how you would incorporate love and devotion to Jesus and others in that practice.

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Consider what love and devotion to Jesus and each other looks like in your personal life. Where are you strong or growing? Where do you still need to grow? Consider all the areas we've discussed.

### Further discussion:

1. Review Lessons 1 through 3, and ask the Holy Spirit to guide your thoughts as you think and plan for your new church. If your house church has already started, what do you enjoy about your current practices? What practices do you want to change or add? Where do you feel the group needs to grow?
2. In the next lesson, we will guide you through a house church workshop to help you shape and form your new group. Read the next lesson, and be praying for the Spirit to guide you as you think and plan together with your group.