

# Lesson #27

## Small Group Churches

### The House Church

One of the most important things to remember is that the early Christians did not “go to church.” They saw themselves as “the church.” Wherever they were, “church” was happening. Daily in the temple and in every house they continually taught that Jesus was the Christ (see Acts 5:42 and 20:0).

By embracing the idea of a decentralized church model, we are not denying the need for larger meetings or saying that larger churches are necessarily wrong. Nor are we denying the need for larger meetings where several small group churches might come together. As we look at the examples of home-based churches in scripture, we should remember that these churches were not completely autonomous, but were connected and overseen by apostolic leaders. We see in scripture that Paul conducted church publicly, in the temple, and from house to house (see Acts 2:46) and we can assume that they gathered in larger groups from time to time.

There are multiple mentions in the Bible of the decentralized small group church existing in peoples homes. The references to home-based churches in the scriptures are so abundant that this model cannot be ignored and the argument could be made that the home-based church was the primary model of the early church.

- There was a church in the house of Nymphas (Col 4:15);
- There was a church in the house of Archippus (Philemon 1:1-2);
- The Church in the house of Priscilla and Aquila is mentioned twice (see Rom 16:3-5; 1 Cor 16:19);
- Believers were gathered in the house of Mary, the mother of John Mark when Peter was supernaturally delivered from prison (Acts 12:12); and
- We also see the house church model being employed as a method of expanding Jesus’ ministry to other cities (see Luke 10:1-9).

### What Is “Real” Church

Most churches in our culture operate by the mega-church model even if they are very small. The mega-church model has become the standard and unfortunately it is the standard by which we judge our success, and as a result, many small churches labor under a sense of inferiority. This is a culturally imposed mind-set which must be unlearned if we are to operate by the small group model seen in the scriptures and realize that a small house church is a *real church*.

There are various labels we could use to describe the decentralized church. Terms like micro-church, cell group, house church, or simply the term small group are used. The term “house church” is common because the New Testament contains several references to churches that were in people’s houses. If we are to begin to see the decentralized small group church as real church, it will be helpful to have “church” included in the label.

But it certainly takes more than a label to make a group of people a church. What is it that makes a small group gathering a real church? To be a legitimate church, we certainly need to possess doctrinal truth as found in the Bible. This keeps us on track and provides protection against deception. That being said, two things come to mind that must be pursued when it comes to our Christian practice: the presence of the Lord, and doing His work.

### *1) The Presence of the Lord Jesus*

Jesus said, “For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them” (Matt 18:20). It is obvious that the Lord does not have an issue with small gatherings. He promises to be present when only two or three people gather. Therefore, we should realize that a large crowd is not necessary for a full spiritual experience. As the psalmist said, “In Your presence is fullness of joy” (Ps 16:10).

The promise of His presence when we gather must be understood as more than a doctrinal belief. If our gatherings are to be *real* church, we must be like Moses who said to the Lord, “If Your presence does not go with us, do not lead us up from here” (Exodus 33:15). This is undoubtedly what Jesus meant when He spoke about true worshipers saying, “... true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him. God *is* Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth.” (John 4:23-24). His presence is a tangible reality that is essential to genuine Christianity.

### *2) Doing His Work*

We were not saved by our works, but we were saved for good works (Eph 2:10). If we are to do His work we must know what His work is. Jesus made at least two statements which make it quite clear what His work is. First, He said, “...the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost” (Luke 19:10). Second, He said, “I must preach the kingdom of God to the other cities also, because for this purpose I have been sent” (Luke 4:43). Therefore, our job is to seek out and win lost souls and give them a vision for the kingdom message. This implies preparing the way for the King and His kingdom.

The context of Jesus’ promise to be with those who gather in His name is this: “...if two of you agree on earth concerning anything they ask, it will be done for them by My Father in heaven” (Matt 18:19). In other words, a real church must be engaged in bringing God’s will to pass on earth as it is in heaven. Jesus said, ... “My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me and to accomplish His work (John 4:34 -NASB), and it is our food as well.

These two things, the presence of the Lord and doing His work, essentially describe the corresponding action for the first foundational principle, to know Him and do good works, and they point us back to our strategy of preparation in this present age. In the previous lesson, the importance of proper goals and motives was briefly mentioned. In the chart below, *The Preparation Strategy In This Present Age* essentially represents our goals. The *Powers of the Age to Come* represent our motives, or why we seek to accomplish our goal.

<b>Preparation Strategy In This Present Age</b>	
<b>Goals</b>	
<b>Foundational Principle</b>	<b>Corresponding Purposes/Actions</b>
1) Repentance from dead works and faith toward God	Avoid dead religion and develop listening ears and seeing eyes
2) Doctrines of Baptisms or Washings (Holiness)	Pursue holiness and walk in obedience
3) The Laying on of hands (Impartation)	Multiply Yourself
<b>Powers of the Age to Come</b>	
<b>Motives</b>	
4) Resurrection of the Dead	Return of Jesus and the Kingdom
5) Eternal Judgment	Consummation of All Things

So, to answer the question, “What is real church?”, we find ourselves once again looking at the foundational principles from Hebrews Chapter 6:1-2. It could be summed up by saying that real church is when we experience the presence of Jesus, do His work, pursue holiness, and make disciples who are making disciples. These things are not restricted to any specific model, but hopefully we have shown that, based on this criteria, the small group church model is real church and well suited to accomplishing the goals listed in the chart.

**Faithful in the Very Little Thing**

Very few talk about preparation theology as it has been presented in this study. When we see our works as being directly related to the appearing of the kingdom of God, and when we see the kingdom as a real goal for which we work and prepare, the sayings of Jesus will take on a very practical application and affect our style of doing church. For those of us who embrace this kingdom vision, we must reconsider our model and methods.

If our goal is to build a large congregation - a local church where success is defined by how many people congregate in a specific location on a weekly basis - then the centralized mega-church model is the natural choice. The seeker sensitive model (as it is often called) has been developed into an efficient business-style structure with a system that produces uniform results.

But if the goal is spreading out responsibility, multiplying leaders who are capable of teaching foundational truth, and preparing people for positions of leadership in the kingdom, then decentralization and replication of many small churches is the way to go. This is what fits with what Jesus said, “Well done, you have been faithful in a very little, have authority over 10 cities” (see Luke 19:17). It certainly seems that God is more interested in us being faithful stewards than in us achieving what our culture would define as success.

## Church Planting

The point of this lesson has been to show the scriptural validity of the small group church. The pros and cons regarding church models could be debated further, but one last point deserves mention: the ability to plant new churches is greatly increased using the small group model.

Though many church plants start out as small groups, often in homes, most have the large group model in mind as their goal and gauge of success. Gathering the personnel, the financial support, the facilities and equipment to achieve that goal is a big task. This is why the statistical failure rate of new church plants is quite high.

A church operating by the small group model is not burdened by the need to gain all the bells and whistles that come with the large group model. Those who find contentment in the small group model are more free to focus on reproducing the small group. As Paul told his young disciple, “Godliness with contentment is great gain” (1 Tim 6:6).

A church operating by the small group model has no geographical boundaries. This is made even easier with the many forms of communication available today through the Internet. Members who are at one location for a season can be trained and when they move, they can continue with little disruption to their church practices. They simply change location, open their home for a small group church, and the church has expanded. In such a case, the church is being built up and smaller is actually bigger.

<sup>12</sup> But thou, O Lord, shalt endure for ever; and thy remembrance unto all generations.

<sup>13</sup> Thou shalt arise, and have mercy upon Zion: for the time to favour her, yea, the set time, is come.

<sup>14</sup> For thy servants take pleasure in her stones, and favour the dust thereof.

<sup>15</sup> So the heathen shall fear the name of the Lord, and all the kings of the earth thy glory.

<sup>16</sup> When the Lord shall build up Zion, he shall appear in his glory.

— Psalm 102:12-16 (KJV)