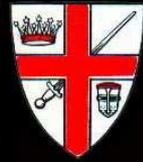
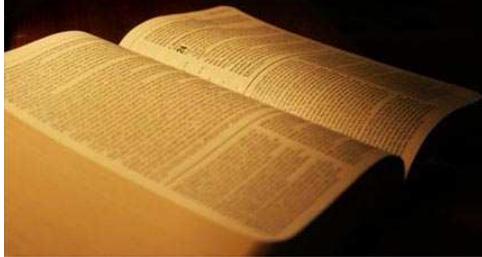


The Berea School of Theology and Ministries on Internet (Ecumenical)

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*Your Word is a lamp to my feet, and a light to my path.
Uw Woord is een lamp voor mijn voet, een licht op mijn pad.
Ta Parole est une lampe à mes pieds, et une lumière
sur mon sentier. (Psalm, Psaume 119: 105)*



Reverend Philippe L. De Coster, D.D.

Berea Evangelical House Church

- Gent, Belgium -

A gathering of believers meeting in Christ's name is a church whether there have been Elders appointed or not. The term "church" simply means an assembly and does not imply the existence of an organisation. In the assembly, whether it be composed of only two, three or many, Christ the great High Priest, Shepherd and Bishop or Pastor, is present in the midst, and as they seek Him in prayer and through the Word He gives guidance, wisdom, power and authority.

The congregation our Lord spoke was composed of "two or three", without Elders or Deacons, yet its equipment, authority and responsibility were complete. It is evident, therefore, that all these belong to the congregation, the believers in Jesus Christ, and not just a pastor or group of Elders.

"Moreover if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother. But if he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established. And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church: but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican. Verily I say unto you, Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. Again I say unto you, That if two of you shall agree on earth as touching any thing that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of my Father which is in heaven. For where

two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them. (Matthew 18:15-20)” (KJV)

To note, while a very small congregation may not require Elders but the lack of properly constituted local authority in a larger group would be a source of weakness and Elders and Deacons should be appointed as soon as becomes clear who the Lord has chosen for these ministries.

The spiritual communion of the Constitutional Church, the Body of Christ, centres on the symbolic ordinances of baptism by immersion for adult converts and the Lord’s Supper for believers, the observances of which are commanded by our Lord. (See our study on “The Constitutional Church of Christ”.)

"House Churches" then, describe small groups of believers - even as few as two or three - who gather in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ.

“For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them. (Matthew 18:20)” (KJV)

They are very similar to the earliest churches, which were customarily designated in the Holy Scriptures as household units. These first Christians, you may recall, revealed in the fact that they personally had become the new dwelling place of the Almighty - living stones in God's spiritual temple.

We are used to thinking of church as a building, but how does the Bible portray the church? Interestingly, the Bible never uses the word “church” to describe a building; instead, it gives us the picture of the church as a family. Like a family, there are spiritual mothers, fathers, sisters, and brothers in Christ. The church is called “God’s household.”

“But if I tarry long, that thou mayest know how thou oughtest to behave thyself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth. (1 Timothy 3:15)” (KJV)

They shared common meals together.

“And they, continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart. (Acts 2:46)” (KJV)

“When ye come together therefore into one place, this is not to eat the Lord's supper. For in eating every one taketh before other his own supper: and one is hungry, and another is drunken. What? have ye not houses to eat and to drink in? or despise ye the church of God, and shame them that have not? What shall I

say to you? shall I praise you in this? I praise you not. (1 Corinthians 11: 20-22)” (KJV)

Lived life together and as a family, were to care for and love one another deeply. Not surprisingly then, the New Testament churches typically met in the homes of believers.

“And all that believed were together, and had all things common; And sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all men, as every man had need. And they, continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart. (Acts 2: 44-46)” (KJV)

“Seeing ye have purified your souls in obeying the truth through the Spirit unto unfeigned love of the brethren, see that ye love one another with a pure heart fervently. (1 Peter 1: 22)” (KJV)

Lydia’s House.

“And they went out of the prison, and entered into the house of Lydia and when they had seen the brethren, they comforted them, and departed. (Acts 16:40)” (KJV)

An Upper Room.

“And there were many lights in the upper chamber, where they were gathered together. (Acts 20:8)” (KJV)

Priscilla and Aquila’s house.

“Greet Priscilla and Aquila my helpers in Christ Jesus: Who have for my life laid down their own necks: unto whom not only I give thanks, but also all the churches of the Gentiles. Likewise greet the church that is in their house. Salute my wellbeloved Epaenetus, who is the firstfruits of Achaia unto Christ. (Romans 16: 3-5)” (KJV)

“The churches of Asia salute you. Aquila and Priscilla salute you much in the Lord, with the church that is in their house. (1 Corinthians 16:19)” (KJV)

Nympha’s house in Laodicea.

“Salute the brethren which are in Laodicea, and Nymphas, and the church which is in his house. (Colossians 4: 15)” (KJV)

Archippa’s house.

“And to our beloved Apphia, and Archippus our fellowsoldier, and to the church in thy house. (Philemon 2)” (KJV)

Some in the West see the house church as a new phenomenon when, in reality, house churches have existed since the day of Pentecost. Many large churches today started because of a small group meeting in the homes of believers. In China, for example, the house church has been one of the vehicles God used to multiply the number of Chinese disciples from a few thousand in the 1930's to, by some estimates, more than eighty million believers today.

“And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers. And fear came upon every soul: and many wonders and signs were done by the apostles. And all that believed were together, and had all things common; And sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all men, as every man had need. And they, continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart, Praising God, and having favour with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved. (Acts 2: 42-47)” (KJV)

The advantages of a House Church

There are many good reasons to consider starting a house church:

- It is a biblical model.
- It is family oriented; parents and children participate together as appropriate.
- People more easily get to know one another in a small group.
- Smaller groups can lead to increased responsibility to each other.
- Everyone participates and ministers so people grow in using their spiritual gifts.
- Highly trained pastors are not required in order to lead large numbers of people.
- There is no need for expensive, time-consuming programs.
- House churches direct their finances toward evangelism, community service, or caring for one member's needs instead of purchasing expensive buildings.
- They are low profile and thus, better able to withstand persecution and oppression.

What do people do in house churches? Above Biblical quotations (Acts 2: 44-47) gives us an outline of what should happen in house church. Believers devote themselves to. . .

- The Apostle's teaching – reading, studying, and discussing God's Word.
- Fellowship – being with each other, enjoying one another, and encouraging one another.
- Breaking of bread - sharing meals together and participating in the Lord's Supper.
- Prayer – praying for one another's needs and for advancing God's kingdom.
- Being together – hanging out and living in harmony with one another.
- Giving – providing for one another's needs and for outreach.
- Worship – praising and glorifying God through word and music.

Is a home church real new today?

Are we saying that a house church is the only legitimate way to “do” church? No, but house churches are a biblical model and are “real” churches with a number of advantages. While the house church may not appeal to everyone, it may be a wonderful alternative to outreach and gather a new generation believers who are not familiar with or may be uncomfortable in a traditional church setting.

Ecclesiology

Was this practice pragmatic, or was there a theology behind it? One of the highlights of new covenant truth is that every member of the body is uniquely gifted to contribute to the edification of the whole. What better way to express this reality than by meeting in small groups in the intimacy of homes? Otherwise, we may be tempted to cast our religious activities in the role of old covenant institutions.

Consider these common features of church life today. Many Christians assemble in church buildings frequently called "houses of God." They gather in the "sanctuary" (the consecrated, holy room for worship), often with an "altar" in front. They listen to "the ordained minister" as he "preaches" and presides over the "sacraments." He alone is authorised to do many of these activities, including pronouncing the "benediction" at the close of the service.

All of this runs counter to new covenant truth as revealed in the Scriptures. After all, "**Howbeit the most High dwelleth not in temples made with hands; as saith the prophet**" (Acts 7:48, KJV), so it cannot be proper to speak of "the house of God" as if the church building were a temple. Nor do altars have relevance for the new covenant church, since Christ's sacrifice on the cross fulfilled the old covenant's sacrificial system (Hebrews chapters 8-10).

Similarly, the new covenant leaves no room for sanctuaries or holy places.

For that matter, who are the "ordained ministers" in the body of Christ? According to *Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary*, "ordain" means "to invest officially with ministerial or priestly authority." When Christ died on the cross, the curtain of the temple was torn in two, indicating that no longer would people need the mediation of a priesthood and temple to approach God. At that moment, a new covenant was sealed and all believers, not just a privileged few, were ordained as priests. Also, all believers are called to ministry. The primary purpose of church leaders is not "to minister" but, "for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ. (Ephesians 4: 12)." (KJV)

"Ye also, as lively stones, are built up a spiritual house, an holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God by Jesus Christ. (1 Peter 2: 5)" (KJV)

"And hath made us kings and priests unto God and his Father; to him be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen. (Revelation 1: 6)" (KJV)

"And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers. For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ: (Ephesians 4: 11-12)" (KJV)

The object of the Berea School of Theology and Ministries on Internet is to help Christians to equip themselves for the house church ministry.

According to God's divine plan, all Christians are ordained ministers. So, the priesthood of all believers, a well-known Protestant doctrine, is implicitly denied whenever denominationally ordained "minister" exercises his exclusive authority to preach the gospel or pronounce a benediction like that described in Numbers 6:22-27 - priestly privileges that should be open to all believers, regardless of seminary education or ecclesiastical rank.

"And the LORD spake unto Moses, saying, Speak unto Aaron and unto his sons, saying, On this wise ye shall bless the children of Israel, saying unto them, The LORD bless thee, and keep thee: The LORD make his face shine upon thee, and be gracious unto thee: The LORD lift up his countenance upon thee, and give thee peace. And they shall put my name upon the children of Israel; and I will bless them. (Numbers 6: 22-27)" (KJV)

Briefly, the Practice of the Constitutional Church of Christ

According to the New Testament, Christians are to meet together to exhort one another, urging one another on to good works.

“And let us consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works: Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching. (Hebrews 10: 24-25)” (KJV)

The Bible is full with this language of "one another." Yet how often is this Scriptural principle negated by the fact that only one person in the church (the pastor) does all the exhorting?

Strange as it may seem, the preaching of the gospel rarely happened in church assemblies throughout the New Testament period. The word "preach" or "proclaim" (*kerusso*) always occurs with reference to evangelizing outside of the church. What happened within the church was not "preaching," but "teaching." Such teaching was not a polished oratory or a thirty-minute monologue, but a give-and-take dialogue. For example, in Acts 20:7, we read that Paul "preached unto them". The teacher was accountable to the church for what he said (cf. Acts 17:11). By contrast, how would we be received in the church today if we interrupted a "pastor's sermon" with questions?

“And upon the first day of the week, when the disciples came together to break bread, Paul preached unto them, ready to depart on the morrow; and continued his speech until midnight. (Acts 20:7)” (KJV)

“These were more noble than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so. (Acts 17:1)” (KJV)

As we already know, to be emphasised again, the early church regularly assembled in members' homes to share the Lord's Supper (Acts 2:42-46; 20:7; 1 Corinthians 11:20), a complete meal accompanied by a single loaf of bread and cup of wine, visible symbols of their unity (1 Corinthians 10:16-17).

“And all that believed were together, and had all things common; And sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all men, as every man had need. And they, continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart. (Acts 2: 44-46)” (KJV)

“And upon the first day of the week, when the disciples came together to break bread, Paul preached unto them, ready to depart on the morrow; and continued his speech until midnight. (Acts 20:7)” (KJV)

“When ye come together therefore into one place, this is not to eat the Lord's Supper. (1 Corinthians 11:20)” (KJV)

“The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ? For we being many are one bread, and one body: for we are all partakers of that one bread. (1 Corinthians 10: 16-17)” (KJV)

This shared communion, not a sermon, was the focal point of their meeting. They also prayed, studied the Holy Scripture, and sang together, but always with the purpose of edifying the body (cf. Ephesians 5:19-20; Colossians 3:16-17). Everyone, not just a few people, came with something to share - like a song, a teaching, or a spiritual gift (1Corinthians 14:26).

“Speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord; Giving thanks always for all things unto God and the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. (Ephesians 5: 19-20)” (KJV)

“Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom; teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord. And whatsoever ye do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God and the Father by him. (Colossians 3: 16-17)” (KJV)

“How is it then, brethren? when ye come together, everyone of you hath a psalm, hath a doctrine, hath a tongue, hath a revelation, hath an interpretation. Let all things be done unto edifying. (1 Corinthians 14:26)” (KJV)

The Leadership in the Constitutional Church of Christ

In the context of this mutual, one-another ministry, the New Testament church had no need for a one-man minister. Each church was led by example by a group of mature people, not a one-man pastor fresh out of a Bible College. These leaders were known interchangeably as "pastors," "elders," and "overseers." They studied the Holy Scriptures together as at Berea.

Berea:

“And the brethren immediately sent away Paul and Silas by night unto Berea: who coming thither went into the synagogue of the Jews. These were more noble than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness of mind, **and searched the scriptures daily**, whether those things were so. Therefore many of them believed; also of honourable women which were Greeks, and of men, not a few. But when the Jews of Thessalonica had knowledge that the word of God was preached of Paul at Berea, they came thither also, and stirred up the people. And then immediately the brethren sent

away Paul to go as it were to the sea: but Silas and Timotheus abode there still. (Acts 17:10-14)” (KJV)

For example, Paul called together the "elders" of the Ephesian church (Acts 20:17), addressed them as "overseers," and asked them to "shepherd" or "pastor" the church (Acts 20:28; also 1 Peter 5:1-2). There were no "grades" of authority among leaders; elders were pastors and pastors were elders.

“And from Miletus he sent to Ephesus, and called the elders of the church. (Acts 20:17)” (KJV)

“Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood. (Acts 20: 28)” (KJV)

“The elders which are among you I exhort, who am also an elder, and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that shall be revealed: Feed the flock of God which is among you, taking the oversight thereof, not by constraint, but willingly; not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind. (1 Peter 5: 1-2)” (KJV)

Timothy and Titus are often cited as exceptions - individual pastors who presided over elders. But they were travelling evangelists, not established pastors/elders (2 Timothy 4:5, 9-13, 21; Titus 1:5; 3:12).

“But watch thou in all things, endure afflictions, do the work of an evangelist, make full proof of thy ministry. (2 Timothy 4: 5)” (KJV)

“Do thy diligence to come shortly unto me: For Demas hath forsaken me, having loved this present world, and is departed unto Thessalonica; Crescens to Galatia, Titus unto Dalmatia. Only Luke is with me. Take Mark, and bring him with thee: for he is profitable to me for the ministry. And Tychicus have I sent to Ephesus. The cloke that I left at Troas with Carpus, when thou comest, bring with thee, and the books, but especially the parchments. (2 Timothy 4: 9-13)” (KJV)

“Do thy diligence to come before winter. Eubulus greeteth thee, and Pudens, and Linus, and Claudia, and all the brethren. (2 Timothy 4: 21)” (KJV)

“For this cause left I thee in Crete, that thou shouldest set in order the things that are wanting, and ordain elders in every city, as I had appointed thee. (Titus 1: 5)” (KJV)

“When I shall send Artemas unto thee, or Tychicus, be diligent to come unto me to Nicopolis: for I have determined there to winter. (Titus 3: 12)” (KJV)

The number of pastors/elders appointed in the churches was *always* plural (Acts 14:23; Philippians 1:1; Titus 1:7-9).

“And when they had ordained them elders in every church, and had prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord, on whom they believed. (Acts 14:23)” (KJV)

“Paul and Timotheus, the servants of Jesus Christ, to all the saints in Christ Jesus which are at Philippi, with the bishops (*pastors*) and deacons. (Philippians 1:1)” (KJV)

“For a bishop (*pastor*) must be blameless, as the steward of God; not selfwilled, not soon angry, not given to wine, no striker, not given to filthy lucre; But a lover of hospitality, a lover of good men, sober, just, holy, temperate; Holding fast the faithful word as he hath been taught, that he may be able by sound doctrine both to exhort and to convince the gainsayers. (Titus 1: 7-9)” (KJV)

The brief history of the rise of the traditional clergy

In the second century when the apostolic succession started, individual leaders began to rise in the churches. "Pastors" began to emerge from the groups of "elders" and began to assume far more than their share of ministry.

In the third century, these leaders became the upper echelon of a "clerical" hierarchical order as distinguished from "the laity" (the people). This is one reason that pastoral burdens today are so great - one man (the pastor) is often expected to be the church's theologian, speaker, teacher, evangelist, administrator, and counsellor.

Growing churches in the second and third centuries began to stop multiplying as small house churches, and people began to donate their houses for renovation as church edifices. In the fourth century, Christians began erecting large basilicas to accommodate church assemblies. Moving out of living rooms and dining rooms into larger structures made the Lord's Supper logistically difficult to share. As a result, the loaf and the cup were separated from the “agape”, and the interpersonal meal with its informal fellowship was discontinued. However, the communion experience remained the focal point of the church's time together.

During the Reformation, Protestants wanted to downplay subjective experience and emphasise doctrine. To this end they moved the "mass" from the centre of the service and replaced it with "the preaching of the Word." Communion

became even less important and the polished sermon became the focal point of the church's experience. Professing the priesthood of all believers in name only, Protestant "ministers" continued to function in the capacity of priests. Therefore, they continue - well-intentioned as they are - to this day.

The Berea Evangelical Church life

The most effective way to reclaim the simplicity of the New Testament's church life is to follow its principles and patterns. Without real estate, buildings, staff salaries, utilities, and mortgages, the church's financial resources can be reallocated for more effective ministry. Without pulpits, pews, or sermons, the church can be free to pursue the mutual ministry of every believer in the assembly. Mutual participation is far more attainable in the small-group setting of living rooms. Furthermore, without the limitations of a church building's size, house churches can multiply indefinitely.

Are these teachings too incredible? Do they seem unrealistic and impracticable? Consider visiting a house church or studying the issue deeper. You may find that house church is the key to renewal in Christendom today.

The necessity of truth is the reason why the New Testament emphasises obeying the gospel or the apostles' teaching, rather than leaders. The trust engendered by service is dangerous if it is not coordinated with a common submission to the truth of the gospel. If truth and trust are not together the basis of leadership in the body, the trust which can be created by service is just another, more subtle form of power-the power we call manipulation.

Genuine Christian leadership, is based on truth and trust, not on worldly authority. Leaders in the church are called to respectable lives of service. Such lives engender the trust of others. Yet leaders as well as the rest of the members of the body are in common subjection to the truth that is in God's Word, and therefore, Christ.

Pondering on the Home Church vision

We can foresee and so pray for a heretofore unknown reformation and revival in three distinct areas. Education, evangelisation, and ministry. The latter ones are contingent upon the first. As facts must precede acts, we earnestly pray for the Spirit of Knowledge to be poured out upon the whole Constitutional Church of Christ as in its origins and that the false doctrines and traditions which have crippled God's people will be exposed and forsaken.

It must not be overlooked that part of the Great Commission is to "teach the observance of all things". Critical thinking upon and the resolution of many of

the most basic issues have been long awaited and is now long overdue. It is time to "go to court" and remove these basic issues from the list of disputed questions. We are referring to essentials like church structure, church authority, church officers, church meetings, worship, day of worship, preaching, call to preach, sermons, ministry, eldership, deacons, ordination, priesthood of believers, clergy - laity distinction, etc. Believe it, the jury is still out!

Being finally energised by the Spirit of Truth, the Church can then enter a new era of unparalleled outreach that extends to the spiritual as well as the physical aspects of church and society. The Christian home of the future will become a fully operational church, an evangelism outreach center, and a department of social services - all under one roof. Every saint will at last awaken to the new reality that his or her entire life is to be devoted to a world-and-life-transforming Christian ministry. The church will then leave behind its "worship service" paradigm and enter a new one of worship and service. This is the aim of the Berea School of Theology and Ministries on Internet. Study theology with us.

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