

ASSAILING THE GROUND OF ONENESS (4): ARE "HOUSE CHURCHES" BIBLICAL?

"House churches," in which believers meet in a house as a separate, independent unit of administration, are a popular means of circumventing the biblical pattern of keeping the oneness of the unique Body of Christ in local churches. A careful examination of Scripture shows that while a church may gather in a believer's home, such a gathering is actually a meeting of the church in that locality, that is, a meeting of a local church.

The Church in Rome

For example, some claim that Romans 16 provides evidence that there were multiple "house churches" in the city of Rome. In that chapter Paul greeted "Prisca and Aquila...and the church, which is in their house" (vv. 3, 5), as well as many individual believers (vv. 7-15), but his greetings do not indicate that there were two groups of believers constituting two separate churches in Rome. Watchman Nee observed,

After Paul greeted the church in verse 5, he purposely mentioned several important *individuals* and especially greeted them one by one. This does not mean, however, that these people were *outside* the church in the house, but that they were the ones inside the church in the house to whom Paul sent his *particular* greetings...Greeting the whole church naturally includes individuals. However, mentioning individuals in addition to greeting the church does not mean that these individuals *are not of the church but members of another group*. If this were so, then Prisca and Aquila *were not of the church that was in their own house!* (*Further Talks on the Church Life*, 32-33, emphasis in original)

It is evident from Romans 16 that the church in Rome met in the house of Prisca and Aquila, just as the church in Ephesus had done when Prisca and Aquila lived there (Acts 18:18-19; 1 Cor. 16:19). Moreover, it is evident that Paul sent his personal greetings to certain of the saints who were members of the one church in Rome. The church that met in the house of Prisca and Aquila was the church in Rome; hence, the persons whose names were mentioned both before and after Romans 16:5 were all members of the church in Rome that met in the house of Prisca and Aquila. Furthermore, those persons who were not mentioned by name but were only generally referred to were also members of the church in Rome that met in the house of Prisca and Aquila.

Accordingly, when Paul sends his greetings to those of the households of Aristobulus and Narcissus (vv. 10-11), he does not designate those households as churches. Due to the structure and tone of the verses, and because Paul does not greet Aristobulus and Narcissus personally, it is unlikely that the two men were believers (see footnote 2 on Romans 16:10 in the Holy Bible Recovery Version). Even though those of the households of Aristobulus and Narcissus believed in the Lord, only when greeting Prisca and Aquila does Paul send greetings to the church, because it was in their house that the unique local church in Rome met. Paul mentions these three households, but there was only one church in Rome, which met in the house of Prisca and Aquila.

Contrary to opposing claims, Romans 16 does not provide evidence that many "house churches" existed in Rome in the first century. Rather, it testifies of the existence of one church in the city of Rome, which met in the house of Prisca and Aquila.

The Churches in Laodicea and Colossae

Some have also pointed to Laodicea and Colossae as normative examples of house churches, but the scriptural evidence again supports the conclusion that there was only one church in each of those cities, respectively. Concerning the church in Laodicea, the Scriptures read:

Greet the brothers in Laodicea, as well as Nymphas and the church, which is in his house. And when this letter is read among you, cause that it be read in the church of the Laodiceans also, and that you also read the one from Laodicea. (Colossians 4:15-16)

The church in Laodicea met in the house of Nymphas, just as the church in Rome met in the house of Prisca and Aquila. "The brothers" in Laodicea were not separate from "the church" in Laodicea; rather, they were part of the church. Paul's reference to "the church of the Laodiceans" (cf. 1 Thes. 1:1; 2 Thes. 1:1) points to the fact that there was only one church in the city of Laodicea. "The church" (singular) "of the Laodiceans" (all the believers in Laodicea collectively) was the one church in Laodicea. If there had been a second "church" that met in Laodicea, Paul could not have referred to the church as "of the Laodiceans." Therefore, the church that met in Nymphas's house was identical to, not separate from, the unique local church in Laodicea.

Further, the Lord Jesus instructed John to write "to the messenger of the church [singular] in Laodicea" (Rev. 3:14), not to many "house churches" in the city of Laodicea. It appears that, according to those who claim there were two churches in Laodicea, the Lord Jesus erred by recognizing only one church in that city.

The church in Colossae met in the home of a local saint, Philemon, a fellow worker of the apostle Paul.

Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy the brother, to Philemon our beloved and fellow worker and to Apphia the sister and to Archippus our fellow soldier and to the church, which is in your house. (Philemon 1-2)

Paul addresses Colossians to "the saints in Colossae" (Col. 1:2), that is, those who met as the church in Colossae in the house of Philemon, who lived in Colossae (Philem. 2, cf. Col. 4:17; Philem. 10, cf. Col. 1:2; 4:9). He did not address his Epistle to multiple groups of saints who met as different "house churches." The church in the house of Philemon was the church of the saints in Colossae.

Watchman Nee recognized the propensity for the flesh to carry out its own work and to seek justification in the Bible for its independence. Such works of the flesh build up the self and are contrary to the one Body, leading to division. Uncompromisingly, he observes:

If the "house" is the unity, all who refuse "to hear the church" (Matt. 18:17) can organize separate "house" churches. The "house" church becomes a shelter to all the divisive ones in a locality... Dividing the church in a locality into many "house" churches brings divisions into the Body. It is the work of the flesh. (*Further Talks on the Church Life*, 45)

This kind of "house" church builds up the individualism, lawlessness, and ambition for leadership in many. (*Further Talks on the Church Life*, 49)

CONCLUSION

Unscriptural proposals such as regional churches and house churches are really nothing new at all. Today's teaching concerning a regional church, in which elders exercise authority in a sphere larger than a locality, is only a reiteration of the idea that gave birth to Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox dioceses and mainline Protestant denominational structures. Teaching concerning many house churches

in a locality, in which believers in the same locality can meet separately from one another based on their personal preferences, is nothing more than a continuation of the divisive history of independent congregations within a city. Such teachings abandon the clear pattern and teaching of Scripture. Any who receive such teachings will be carried back into the divisions of Christianity.