

House Churches in Early Christianity

by Raymond Collins

Although the shortest extant letter of the apostle Paul is popularly and traditionally known as the letter to Philemon, the letter is, in fact, addressed to "Philemon our beloved fellow and Apphia our sister and Archippus our fellow soldier, and the church in your house." This greeting is remarkable because "the letter to Philemon" is the only letter in the New Testament whose greeting especially mentions the fact that the church to which it is addressed was, in fact, an assembly of people who gathered in someone's home. This was, nonetheless, the situation of the church throughout the first decades of the Christian experiment.



For Paul the church was the local church, not the universal church. Thus he wrote letters to the church of the Thessalonians, to the church at Corinth, and to the churches of Galatia. And he wrote about the church at Cenchrae (Rom 16:1), the churches of Galatia (1 Cor 16:1), the churches of Asia (1 Cor 16:19), the churches of Macedonia (2 Cor 8:1), the churches of Judea (Gal 1:22, 1 Thess 2:14). He also wrote about the churches of the Gentiles (Rom 16:4) and the churches of the saints (1 Cor 14:33-34), the churches of God (1 Cor 11:22; 1 Thess 2:14) and the churches of Christ (Rom 16:16). Indeed he even wrote about all the churches (2 Cor 8:18, 11:28).

Paul's way of writing makes it clear that when he is writing about the church he is talking about a local gathering, for there are many churches, not a single church. The person who reads Paul's letters today may well ask where it was that these local gatherings took place. The greeting of Paul's short letter to Philemon provides us with the answer. Local churches gathered in people's homes. Christians of Colossae gathered in the home of Philemon. In Ephesus, and perhaps at Rome as well, Christians gathered in the home of Aquila and Prisca (Rom 16:5; 1 Cor 16:19).

It is not unlikely that in several of the larger cities of the Roman empire more than one gathering of Christians could be called a church. A man named Gaius had been baptized by Paul at Corinth (1 Cor 1:14). He seems to have been well-to-do and may have had a home large enough to accommodate, at least on occasion, several different groups of Christians who normally gathered in smaller groups in the home of one of their members. This would explain why Paul sends greetings from Gaius and "the whole church" (Rom 16:23) - a turn of phrase not otherwise found in Paul's letters - as he brings his letter to the Romans to a close.

The last chapter of the letter to the Romans mentions several different groups of Christians, namely, the family of Aristobolus (Rom 16:10), the family of Narcissus (Rom 16:11), Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobas, Hermas and the brethren with them (Rom 16:14), Philologus, Julia, Nereus and his sister, Olympas, and all the saints who are with them (Rom 16:15). Each of these groups was probably an identifiable group of Christians, identified by the names of some of their more prominent members. It is likely that Christians met in the homes of those who are cited by name in this chapter of the letter to the Romans.

Paul tells us that he had been a guest of Gaius (Rom 16:23). Luke in his chronicle of the Pauline mission, mentions other persons whose hospitality Paul had enjoyed, namely, Judas in Damascus (Acts 9:11), Aquila and Priscilla and then Titius Justus in Corinth (Acts 18:2,7), and apparently, Jason in Thessalonica (Acts 27:5). At Ephesus Paul preached from house to house (Acts 20:20) and there is no reason to doubt that Paul also preached in the homes of those other people who offered him their hospitality. Thus the home, along with the synagogue and the artisan's shop on the agora, was a privileged locale for Paul's preaching of the gospel.

Paul also was aware of the early Christian practice of baptizing entire household units. At Corinth, he himself had baptized the household of Stephanas (1 Cor 1:16), even though it was apparently not his usual practice to personally baptize those whom he had evangelized. Luke, however, attests that entire household units were baptized as a result of Paul's preaching. In this regard he specifically names the household of Lydia the merchant (Acts 16:15), the family of the jailer at Philippi (Acts 16:33) and the household of Crispus, the chief of the synagogue at Corinth (Acts 18:8).

The indications provided by Paul's letters and by Luke in the Acts of the Apostles thus show that in early christianity the home was a

locus for evangelization or missionary preaching and that the household was typically the unit to accept baptism as a faith-filled response to the missionary proclamation. Given these circumstances one need not be surprised that Paul encouraged hospitality as a significant element in his moral exhortation (Rom 12:13). The home and the household which dwelt within it were crucial to successful evangelization.

It would seem, moreover, that the home continued to be the center of Christian activity even after the initial evangelization and baptism. Narrating his account of Paul's farewell visit to Troas, Luke tells his readers that the Christians had gathered together in an upper chamber in order to break bread (Acts 20:7). It was a first day of the week, a Sunday. Luke uses the technical terminology of "breaking bread" to describe the Christian celebration of the eucharist. He does not tell us who it was that presided at the eucharistic meal, but he does tell us that Paul prolonged his speech and conversed with them a long while. Luke has underscored the length of Paul's catechesis; in so doing, he has made use of a Greek term which would afterwards provide the church with its technical term for a reflection on the scriptures, namely, the homily.

While Luke is more clear than is Paul in indicating that the home served as the locale for christian catechesis and the celebration of the eucharist on Sunday, Paul also suggests that Christians gathered in a home for the celebration of the Eucharist (1 Cor 11:17-22). Such celebrations may well have taken place on Sunday, since it was on the first day of the week that the contribution for the saints was made (1 Cor 16:21). Thus it would appear that in the Gentile churches of the Pauline mission the home was not only the locus for missionary proclamation and the celebration of baptism, it was also the place for catechesis and the celebration of eucharist. The church which gathered in homes and household units was a church which was engaged in ministry and charitable outreach (1 Cor 16:2, 15).

Thus the first generations of Christians seemed to have been organized according to what was commonly recognized as the basic unit of society. It was there that the mission of the church was localized, with its functions of preaching and teaching (kerygma and didache), baptizing and breaking bread (leitourgia), and serving others (diakonia). It was in the home that the church, a dynamic event, initially came into being; it was in the home that the church was continually called into being through word and sacrament.

The fact that the church gathered in a home obviously had implica-

tions for the life of the church. It is clear that the first churches consisted of relatively small numbers of people. Archaeological evidence suggests that the typical home could provide gathering space for some ten to forty persons. Thus when we think of the original reading of Paul's letter to the Thessalonians, the first of his extant letters, we should imagine someone reading this text aloud to a small group of people gathered in someone's home. The home gathering was "the church of the Thessalonians."

That the church gathered in a home for the breaking of the bread provided occasion for the powerful symbolism of the one bread, the single body of Christ (1 Cor 10:16-17). The one bread was not some abstract entity; it was rather the single loaf from which all the participants in the meal ate. As all who gathered in the Christian home for the celebration of the Christian meal shared a common loaf of bread, so they all shared in the single body of Christ.

While attention to the function of the home in the gathering of early Christians allows us to better appreciate the life of those Christians and to better understand the effective meaning of Paul's letters, it leaves the modern reader of Paul's letters and Luke's Acts with a host of questions. Who was it that baptized, if not the evangelizer? Who was it that presided at the memorial meal, known as the eucharist? [Is it not likely that the head of the household exercised these functions? In most social circumstances it is the head of a household who welcomes guests into the home and presides at the meals that take place within the home. In addition, a modern reader might like to know what was the situation and function of women in these early household gatherings, especially if the gathering took place in the home of a woman as is likely in the case of Lydia and Priscilla (cf. Rom 16:3).]

While the organization of the early Christians into household units and assemblies which met in peoples' homes raises questions in response to which a sociological reading of the New Testament can only make tentative suggestions, the existence of home-based Christian assemblies probably contributed to the division which affected the church at Corinth. The Christians at Corinth occasionally gathered together in a single home (1 Cor 11:17), but they came together as a divided assembly. Some scholars are of the opinion that the three or four factions at Corinth (1 Cor 1:12; 3:4; 22) were groups which gathered in so many different homes.

While the organization of the early Christians was characterized by functional and ecclesial utility, it also served a symbolic function, as the

eucharistic symbolism of the one loaf so clearly expresses. Moreover, the home gathering provided a setting in which familial metaphors (God as Father, Christians as brothers and sisters) could be appropriated by Christians in order to describe their new religious and social situation.

Since the home was to a large extent the locus of the specifically Christian experience in the early years of the church it would have been surprising if the home as the locus of activity, a principle of organization, and a factor in the structuring of the social world did not continue to shape the Christian experience for some time afterwards. In fact there is ample evidence to suggest that the home continued to exercise a formative role throughout the years from which our New Testament texts are derived.

Biblical scholars are in ever increasing agreement that such New Testament texts as the letters to the Colossians, the Ephesians, Timothy and Titus were not written by the apostle Paul himself. Rather they were written by some of his followers who invoked Paul's name as they adapted his insights to the different circumstances of the developing churches. These later and non-Pauline letters show that the home continued to exercise its dominant role in the shaping of the Christian experience throughout the first few decades of Christianity.

A key feature of the moral exhortation of the epistle to the Colossians, as it is in the epistle to the Ephesians which is probably dependent upon the letter to the Colossians, is the use of a so-called household code (Col 3:18-4:1; Eph 5:22-6:9). These tightly structured passages set out three sets of social relationships, wife-husband, children-parents, slave-masters, for parallel consideration. Together the three sets of relationships form the social structure of the household unit. The authors of the two letters make use of traditional motifs as they describe how these relationships are to be lived within a Christian household. In the present essay there is no need to delve into the specifics of the author's admonition, but it is important to note that his exhortation is structured according to the social organization of the church. What the author has produced is a unit of moral exhortation for the household church, in which the father's role as agent of socialization and catechist of his children is not to be overlooked (Eph 6:4).

In the Pastoral Epistles (1-2 Timothy, Titus) much attention is paid to the organization of the church. To a large extent this focuses on the profile set for overseer-elders and deacons. A remarkable feature of these lists (1 Tim 3:2-6, 8-12; Titus 1: 6-8) is the insistent demand that the overseer and the deacon within the church should be a good house-

holder. In the words of 1 Timothy, the householder should be "the husband of one wife . . . hospitable . . ." He should "manage his own household well, keeping his children submissive and respectful in every way; for if a man does not know how to manage his own household how can he care for God's church?"

The Gospel of Mark, the first of the synoptic gospels to have been written, was equally attentive to the important role of the home in the early Christian experience. In recent years scholars have been paying particular attention to those features of the gospel which seem to reflect the particular focus of the evangelist as he sets out in a new form the elements of oral tradition that had come down to him. One feature that comes immediately to mind is the importance of the home.

Much of Jesus' significant activity took place "at home" or "in the house" (Mark 2:1, 15; 3:20; 7:17; 9:28,33; 10:10). Some of the homes in which Jesus exercised his ministry are specifically identified. He cured Peter's mother-in-law in the home of Simon and Andrew (Mark 1:29), restored life in the home of a ruler of the synagogue (Mark 5:38), expelled a demon from the daughter of a foreigner while he was in a home in the region of Tyre and Sidon (Mark 7:24; cf. v.30), and he was anointed in the home of Simon the Leper (Mark 14:3). Mark 2, moreover, presents the image of a crowd trying to participate in Jesus' domestic activity.

It was at home that some of Jesus' most significant discourses with his disciples took place. There he dialogued with them about the meaning of the parables (Mark 7:17). There he commented on their inability to perform exorcisms (Mark 9:28). There he presented the specifically Christian teaching on divorce (Mark 10:10). It was at home that Jesus responded to the questions of his disciples.

He sent those same disciples to go out and enter homes (Mark 6:10), in much the same way as he sent those who had benefited from his ministry to their own homes (Mark 2:11; 7:30; 8:26). To the man from whom the legion of demons had been cast out, Jesus addressed a specific exhortation: "Go home to your friends, and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you" (Mark 5:19).

In sum, Mark presents the home as the locus of Jesus' activity, the place of his discourse, the locale where his disciples were instructed, and the site where he is honored. Indeed Mark tells us that at least one story of Jesus in a home is part of the gospel itself (Mark 14:3,9). From this perspective it is hardly surprising that in his writing of the

Christian apocalypse (Mark 13), the evangelist metaphorically writes of the one to come as "the master of the house" (Mark 13:35). The figure serves as an image of Jesus, the Parousiac Lord.

At the present time biblical scholars see in these many references to Jesus at home a reflection of Mark's own experience. It was at home that the Christians of his day gathered to discourse and ask questions about Jesus. It was at home that they were touched by his life-giving ministry. It was at home that they broke bread in memory of him. It was at home that they awaited him as Parousiac Lord.

Little more need be written about the importance of the home for the early Christian experience. The home was not only a convenient place to meet, the home was actually the place where the church came into being. That domestic experience of the early Christians provided a structure not only for their own internal organization but also for their social outlook. One should really say that, on the basis of the New Testament writings, the early Christian experience of Jesus the Christ and Lord was an experience at home.

The Community Addressed by Luke-Acts ¹

by Herman Hendrickx

1. Luke wrote for a Christian Community

Scholars who attribute to Luke an apologetic desire to convince the pagan authorities of Rome that Christianity was politically harmless imply that Luke-Acts was meant for non-Christians as well as Christian readers. But a number of considerations mitigate against the view that any part of Luke's audience was pagan. The most important of these arguments is that Luke exposes his readers to an atmosphere of Judaism and the Old Testament from the beginning of his gospel until the end of Acts. He often alludes to the Greek Old Testament in a way which would have been unintelligible to someone unfamiliar with its language and contents.²

