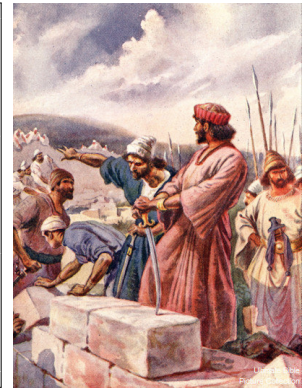


The Sword and The Trowel

They which builded on the wall, and they that bare burdens, with those that laded, every one with one of his hands wrought in the work, and with the other hand held a weapon. For the builders, every one had his sword girded by his side, and so builded (Nehemiah 4:17-18)

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Church In Thy House

I have been hearing more and more about “house churches” lately. Perhaps this has received added emphasis since the publication of a book, *Radical Restoration*, by F. LaGard Smith. Smith was once associated with non-institutional churches of Christ. He is the son of the late Frank Smith, faithful preacher for a number of years in the Birmingham, Alabama area. F. Lagard Smith attended Florida College at one time. He received his bachelor’s degree and Doctor of Jurisprudence degree in Oregon. He was a professor of law at Pepperdine College in Malibu, California for twenty-six years. He joined the faculty at Lipscomb University as a “scholar-in-residence for Christian Studies.” He spends most of his time in the pursuit of authoring books and lecturing. Some of his works have proven to be alarming, even among liberal churches. Smith’s book, *Radical Restoration*, has created an absolute firestorm both positively and negatively. He states in this book, in a very tedious fashion, that he does not believe the church of the New Testament has been restored at all. His idea is that it will not be restored until the Lord’s Supper is taken during a common meal with all participating. In addition he believes the pattern for the church is that all should meet in house churches with elders serving in a city-wide (perhaps even area-wide) fashion. Worship ought to be informal, spontaneous, with mutual ministry and participation. What Smith advocates is certainly radical, but hardly restoration at all. It is not even unique as it has been advocated before by W. Carl Ketcherside, Leroy Garrett, and, most recently, Charles Holt. Nevertheless, there have been some, even among non-institutional brethren, who

have accepted Smith’s postulations on the house church aspect as though it were a “breath of fresh air.” They have denounced what they called “organized churches” and meet in homes. Most who adopt such a point of view are very militant in their stance. I am able to see how this has happened. We have brethren among us who object to a number of things associated with faithful churches. Some are opposed to the designation “Church of Christ” (Rom. 16:16). Others are resentful of elders ruling (Heb. 13:17). Still others do not believe that a church ought to have a building in which to meet (1 Cor. 11:22). There are even more who desire a unity-in-diversity and more unrestricted fellowship (2 Jn. 9). The house church scenario offers the perfect setting for such dissidents. Here they will find freedom to express whatever hobby it is that they wish they espouse. It is a place where kindred spirits of radical thought can gather and express radical thought.

Of course, hearing more about house churches may just mean that I am hearing more. It really does not mean that such arrangements are more plentiful now than at any other time. As a matter of fact, I do not know how one would determine if such were so or not. Now, I do know that such arrangements are mentioned in the New Testament (Rom. 16:5; 1 Cor. 16:19; Col. 4:15; Philemon 2). This shows that such is certainly in line with the authority of the New Testament, as these are approved examples of churches meeting in the house(s) of individual Christians. Let me say without hesitation and without equivocation that I have no problem recognizing that this means that there is authority for such an arrangement today. The Scriptures have spoken on this and I am perfectly disposed to accept whatever they teach. I am unconvinced that this is an *exclusive*

pattern for churches meeting. That is a big difference.

However, let me hasten to say that this does not mean that every time there is a church meeting in an individual Christian’s house that all is well and good. In some cases, it is not. Let us consider some things on the business of “the church in thy house.”

Sometimes a group of Christians are traveling a great distance to attend services with brethren of like faith. There are enough Christians doing this to warrant seriously considering the starting of another work in this distant (or remote) location. Economic constraints of the time may also play a large part in this. They then decide to start a work where they live and, in order to do so, begin by meeting in one member’s home. The church on Marrrtown Road in Parkersburg, West Virginia (where I preached for 4 ½ years), started in this fashion about sixty years ago. Their doing this was certainly correct and violates no principle of Scripture and can serve as a test case for what we are considering (as well as many other similar incidents of this nature) as authorized as a “church in thy house.” I do not object to such an arrangement in such circumstances and I have never met anyone who ever gave a reasonable objection to it. When we were considering starting the work in Shoals, Indiana we thought at first that we would have to meet in a home. It was almost at the last minute that a rental facility that we could actually afford became available. We felt this would serve us better for a number of reasons and began meeting in the rented facility (the office area of a former auto parts store).

There is an “arm” of the liberal element that is normally called the “Boston Church” (nee “Crossroads”). This group meets in large metropolitan areas scattered over the world (Boston, New

York, London, etc.). Their general practice is to rent a large building on the morning of the Lord's day and then to meet in the evenings in what they style as "house churches" within certain "zones." (This predates *Radical Restoration* by several years). There is certainly nothing wrong with one church in a large metropolitan area. However, for that church to fragment itself, except for the Lord's day morning, seems to be present a multitude of questions about autonomy. In their concept these are each a church, the aggregate of which constitutes another (larger) church and the aggregate of those all form a still larger worldwide organization. What more would you have to have to be a denomination? You say a man at the head of it? They have that in a man named Kip McKean! This type of arrangement is *not* what the Bible speaks of when it speaks of "the church in thy house."

There is another instance of those brethren who are adamantly opposed to church buildings (Smith, et al). In their minds they are convinced that the *only* way that brethren met in New Testament times was in someone's home. This unfortunate situation has arisen because these brethren refuse to accept any type of authority on their hobby except for a specific command. Unless they can find a "Thou shalt have a church building to meet in," they won't have one. Now, I am not even going to suggest that such a command exists in the Scriptures. However, is there any other indication that a church in a house was not, and therefore is not, the exclusive meeting place for the saints? Yes, 1 Cor. 11:22 Paul instructs the Corinthian brethren that they had a different place to eat and drink in—the houses they live in. This implies that they were meeting somewhere else besides in a private house. To insist that he was speaking to them about this practice while they were meeting in a private house is to interject confusion and absurdity into the passage. It would cause Paul to say "don't eat here in this private house, eat in a private house!" Was Paul spouting nonsense? I don't think so. At one time the brethren gathered in a part of the temple (Acts 5:12). Was the temple in Jerusalem someone's private house? No. Both instances show that brethren did meet in different places other than in

a private house. To insist that this is the only place brethren can assemble is to cause the expression "church in thy house" to say more than God intended it to say.

There is another circumstance when brethren sometimes are found meeting in a house that differs from any of the ones we have already investigated. There are, scattered across the country, brethren meeting in houses due to the fact that they simply cannot get along with anyone else and have isolated themselves away from the brethren they used to meet with in assembly. I know of a case of this happening in what I call "back home" (Southern Indiana). One man ruled a church with an iron fist. He was called an "elder" when "tyrant" would have been a more accurate choice of words. Whatever he decreed was law and woe to the one who did not conform. He would sometimes try to enlarge his rule beyond the local congregation, but brethren usually were successful in rebuffing him. The brethren where he was an "elder" finally grew weary of him and rebelled against his denunciations of Bible classes for children. He, seeing his dictatorship crumbling, announced his resignation as "elder" and his immediate separation from the brethren. He also added that he would no longer meet with them at all since he had long believed that church buildings were sinful! He would now meet in his house with some of his family members. Calm brethren saw right through this. His announcement of "sinful buildings" meant that for a period of years he went right along with the "sin" and never uttered a peep about it. My experience with this man did not allow me to accept this explanation. I am 100% convinced that if he thought a church building was sinful at any time prior to his departure he would have never set foot in one again. Thus, I cannot accept his explanation that he had "secretly" been opposed to them for a period of years. He had never secret about any of other view he held and I am dubious about any alleged secrecy in this! He was always quite vocal and persistent (up to and including the fanatical level) about anything that he thought was in error. I am equally convinced that it was only when he was finally confronted in his tyranny and foresaw his overthrow that he pro-

nounced his "long held objection." The "objection" sounded much better than his real motive—indignation over no longer being a "... *lord over God's heritage...*" (1 Peter 5:3-4). Please keep in mind that when your home is used a meeting place you have more opportunity to control what goes on. I remember how a few of his children met with him for a short time in the home. However, even they finally could not take it anymore and left. What a sad end! Again, this type scenario is not a 42nd cousin to what the Bible calls "the church in thy house," no matter how many times someone may say that it is. This is a sad case of brethren who can't get along with anyone else and withdraw from all others with pronouncements of great sin being committed by everyone else as they isolate themselves from brethren. It reminds me of children who are playing together. Something happens to disrupt the joint participation. Finally, there is the exclamation (and/or threat) that "I will just take my ball and go home!" It is pitiful when adults act in this fashion. It causes great harm and confusion in the church and gives the enemies of the Lord an opportunity to blaspheme.

Yes, brethren met in "the church in thy house." This is seen in the passages we listed in this article. The occasions of doing so were due to unavoidable circumstances and situations. It was not due to some of the other "causes" mentioned in this article. Unfortunately, some do not realize that something that happens is not the same as something that is convenient to a certain mindset. Some things that are offered are part and parcel of "another gospel" (Gal. 1:6-9) and ought to be rejected as such.

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