

## **CHAPTER 15**

### **HOW TO START AND LEAD A BIBLICAL HOUSE CHURCH**

<sup>30</sup> *And I sought for a man among them who should build up the wall and stand in the breach before me for the land, that I should not destroy it; but I found none.*

*Ezekiel 22:30 (RSV)*

#### **How to find, or set up, a biblical church**

I have said a lot about the great advantages of a biblical house church, structured and led as they were in the first century, but how do we actually find one? The reality, at least in the UK, is that they are rare because the vast majority of Christians, even the most genuine ones, have no idea:

- a) that we are supposed to be in house churches
- b) how to find one nearby even if they do know it is the right model

So, the vast majority of Christians persist in attending unbiblical traditional churches, despite their dissatisfaction with them. They just see no practical alternative.

The problem is compounded by the fact that there are very few house churches. Therefore, after making a thorough effort to ask around and search for them near your home, the only realistic answer may be for you to start one yourself. Even as you read that, you are likely to think “*But I couldn’t possibly start a church. I’m not ordained and have never been to Bible college.*”

Even in saying that, you would be revealing the extent to which you have been brainwashed, like a domesticated rabbit, to believe that you can’t forage or provide for yourself and that you need to be cared for by professionals because you just aren’t qualified or worthy to do it yourself. But you may well be qualified and even if you aren’t, the chances are you know someone in your locality who is and you could help them to do it.

Therefore, if you have begun to realise the problems of traditional churches and your eyes have started to open, it is likely that you know a few people nearby who feel similarly and are just as frustrated with church as you are. Start to talk to such people and ask them whether they would be interested in starting a biblical house church.

Many will not have the nerve to break free and will prefer to stay where they are, in traditional churches, with what feels familiar, despite all its faults. But a few people may have the good sense and the courage to join with you. In this way, you might find 2 or 3 or even more who are willing to try. That is all you need. You do not have to start with 10 or 20 or 30.

As we saw in the verse above, be willing to “*stand in the breach*”, even if you are the only one who is willing to try to create a new house church, and no matter how unworthy or unqualified you feel you are.

Just a handful of members is all you need to begin with, or even for the long term if that is how it turns out. Moreover, it does not have to be you who becomes the first elder of the church, even if starting

the church was your idea. It could be that one or more of the people you contact are mature enough to be an elder, even if you aren't, or if you are a woman.

But there is no need to rush into appointing elders, even though the appointment of one or more elders is needed for a group of Christians to be able to call themselves a church. What I mean is you could just start to meet for a few weeks or months as a Bible study and fellowship group or as a prayer group, without having any elders and therefore not being a church.

That will give all of you the chance to weigh each other up and assess (diakrino) who, if anyone, is suitable to be an elder. If nobody is, then don't appoint anyone and just continue with your informal Bible study group or prayer group while you pray for God to send along a suitable leader to join you so that you can become a church. I believe He will.

At least in that period of waiting before you become a church, you will have the benefits of meeting together with other committed believers in a setting where everyone is allowed to participate and grow.

### **What if nobody in your house church has any gifting for preaching?**

This is a common problem because only a tiny percentage of the population has the skill, knowledge and maturity to be a regular, solid Bible teacher who preaches most weeks and never runs out of material because he is able to expound on the whole Bible. What you will find at a local level is a few men who, although they don't have the ministry gift of being a full time Bible teacher, are capable of preaching *from time to time, not every week*, on topics which God lays on their heart.

Such men are perfectly capable of preaching occasionally in a local house church, even though they are not gifted enough to preach every week or at a large conference. But what if you don't even have that? What happens if you have 5-10 members of whom half, or even most are women and who therefore are not permitted to teach men? Also, what if the few men you do have are not mature enough to preach at all, not even to a very small group?

In that case, the solution is very simple, especially nowadays, because you can just play a sermon which is available online from a gifted Bible teacher, such as the men I recommend on my website. That way any house church, however small, can have access every week to the best Bible teachers in the world. There is absolutely nothing wrong with that. God does not demand that all preaching must be done by a member of the church.

He is perfectly happy for you to take that sensible step of importing that skill into the church from outside. Do not forget that even if none of you have the maturity and knowledge to preach, you will all have the ability to do some or all of the other things that a local house church involves, i.e. worship, fellowship, sharing, praying together and helping each other.

And even on the worship, if you don't have anyone who can play a musical instrument there is no difficulty in just using ready made music from the internet to accompany your singing. Most well known hymns and choruses have been recorded and you can use them freely. That works very well and your church can sing along to the recordings. But, in all the other things you will have no need for external help.

## **When and how should elders be appointed?**

Hopefully, I have got the point across that the appointment of an elder is not a matter of urgency and there is no need to rush into it. Indeed, it would be very unwise to do it with any kind of haste. Just be content not to have any elders for a while, *and thus technically not to be a church*, until you are all satisfied that you have found a man who meets all the criteria and is suitable to be appointed. Let's look at what the Bible says an elder must be like:

*<sup>1</sup> The saying is sure: If any one aspires to the office of bishop, he desires a noble task. <sup>2</sup> Now a bishop must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, temperate, sensible, dignified, hospitable, an apt teacher, <sup>3</sup> no drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, and no lover of money. <sup>4</sup> He must manage his own household well, keeping his children submissive and respectful in every way; <sup>5</sup> for if a man does not know how to manage his own household, how can he care for God's church? <sup>6</sup> He must not be a recent convert, or he may be puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil; <sup>7</sup> moreover he must be well thought of by outsiders, or he may fall into reproach and the snare of the devil.*

*1 Timothy 3:1-7 (RSV)*

As you can see, there is no requirement for an elder to be a great intellectual or to have any formal academic qualifications. So, that demolishes the idea that leaders must have been to Bible college. There is no requirement for that at all. What apostle Paul focuses on is that the proposed elder must be of *good character* and that he is *mature* and *trustworthy* so he can be relied upon.

Thus, he need not be academic but he must be mature. Therefore, he must not be a recent convert because if he was, how could he be mature? Paul refers to the same theme again in his letter to Titus and, again, there is no mention of any need for academic qualifications. However, a prospective elder (or bishop) does need to know the Bible, have sound doctrine and be of good character:

*<sup>5</sup> This is why I left you in Crete, that you might amend what was defective, and appoint elders in every town as I directed you, <sup>6</sup> if any man is blameless, the husband of one wife, and his children are believers and not open to the charge of being profligate or insubordinate. <sup>7</sup> For a bishop, as God's steward, must be blameless; he must not be arrogant or quick-tempered or a drunkard or violent or greedy for gain, <sup>8</sup> but hospitable, a lover of goodness, master of himself, upright, holy, and self-controlled; <sup>9</sup> he must hold firm to the sure word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to confute those who contradict it.*

*Titus 1:5-9 (RSV)*

As for how an elder is appointed, there is no need for any elaborate or formal ceremony. Neither is there any need to involve leaders of other churches. That would be ideal, but it is unlikely that there will be any other existing house churches nearby who are willing to have their elders "lay hands" on your proposed new elder. More to the point, no leader of any traditional denominational church would be willing to assist you. Neither would you want them to. Your wish is to be biblical and independent. Therefore, just appoint your new elder yourselves within your own house church.

It is not an "ordination" of the kind the traditional churches engage in. On the contrary, the elder can be appointed just by the members of your house church coming together and recognising that he has the maturity, character and sound doctrine that is required for an elder and by asking him to become their elder and then appointing him to that role. You have to start viewing yourselves as legitimate and worthy to start a church.

If you look online about the “ordination” of elders in traditional churches, it tends to revolve around formal ceremonies with “bishops” from outside the church doing it. By “bishops” they mean men who are in charge of a “diocese” made up of many churches or at least a senior person in the hierarchy of the denomination. That is not required. You can do it all yourselves and when you recognise him as an elder then he can begin to function as such and God will recognise him.

### **How should meetings be conducted?**

It may be that this question is putting you off starting a house church as you feel you don’t have the experience or the “professionalism” to conduct a “church service”. But the point is we are meant to have meetings, not “services”. There is no need for any elaborate liturgy or special forms of speech or prayer. It’s just a meeting in an ordinary house as you all sit around the room on settees and chairs.

It is not formal, complex or liturgical. Therefore, you are well able to do it, as is every Christian, provided they stop assuming they are disqualified because they are not an ordained clergyman. You are free to conduct your meetings in the way that best suits the people in your church. So, you don’t have to do things in exactly the same way as my house church does.

In fact, we ourselves don’t always do things in the same way. Indeed, we try not to. We move things around and change the format to please ourselves. Likewise, we don’t always have the meetings on a Sunday morning. In general we do, but not always, and we might change it to be a Saturday morning or a Friday or Monday evening depending on people’s other commitments.

So, mostly we meet in the mornings, but sometimes we meet in the evening. Therefore, it’s very flexible and that is perfectly alright. Concerning the format of a meeting, we usually begin with a cup of tea when people arrive and then get started, usually with a time of singing and worship. Then we have a time of sharing and contributions from everyone as they raise issues, events, problems, prayer requests, things they have noticed in the Bible and so on.

It is therefore varied and flexible and different things are raised each week. But it’s good because it allows everyone to contribute and to refer to passages of Scripture which they have come across during the week. That then gives everyone the chance to share and to begin to learn how to teach in a simple way at a local level. It also enables them to find out whether or not they are gifted in teaching, in which case they can seek to do more.

After that we have a sermon which is usually from me. But that is only because I happen to be a full time Bible teacher and author, which is most unusual. In most house churches there will not be such a person. Therefore, the preaching is likely to be shared between a few different men who each take turns. Or, they might use audio or video recordings of sermons from the internet instead. All my sermons are free to download.

Every option is valid, depending on your circumstances. But sometimes we don’t have a sermon and we have a Bible study instead, for example working section by section through the book of James with everyone free to contribute to the discussion. By the way, we do sometimes switch the order of the meeting around so that we start with the sermon and do the worship and sharing time afterwards. Every permutation is valid and sometimes we also have communion, though not every week.

## **What about dealing with problem people?**

I don't know whether you have noticed this, but all churches tend to attract a disproportionate number of disturbed, damaged, broken, eccentric people, some of whom are a handful to deal with. They may be disruptive to the meeting and to the church as a whole. There is no simple quick formula for how to deal with them.

In some cases the people are hurt and God has sent them to your church so that you can help to care for them and give them a chance to overcome their problems, recover from their emotional wounds and become whole healthy people again. That is the ideal and we need to aim for that if we can. However, some people's problems are so severe and their personalities are so disturbed that they become a drain on the whole church and stop it from functioning.

Sometimes that is not their fault and they can't help it. But in some cases they are actually demonised people who have been sent by the demons with the express purpose of using them to disrupt and even destroy your church. This is why we need discernment so we can tell which situation we are facing because the answer to that will determine how we deal with them.

Accordingly, if you think the person is sincere but troubled then do your best to help them. The Church is meant to be a hospital for people who have been wounded by life (and in many cases by churches) and it is our duty to try to help. That said, it isn't just wounded or disturbed people that make their way into churches. There are also people who are painfully shy and quiet and barely contribute anything.

And there are compulsive talkers or attention seekers who just want to be the centre of attention and have an audience. There are also people whom we might call "the unlovely" because they are difficult to be with and don't possess social skills. All of these people find their way into churches and we have a duty, *up to a point*, to help them and to be patient with them over their annoying habits and ways.

However, there are some people who don't take any advice, don't respond to help and just continue to be a nuisance and to spoil the dynamic of the meeting. With such people, after a sizeable period of time trying unsuccessfully to help them but with them continuing to be a nuisance, it may become necessary to tell them to stop coming.

While we have a duty to help the inadequate and the wounded, we also have a duty to all the other members whose experience of church is being disrupted week after week. This is an area where a house church has a major advantage over a traditional church. That is because any church (at least in the UK) which has charitable status and receives refunds of tax money on members' donations is obliged by law to let anyone attend church meetings because such churches are classified as public buildings.

But that is not the case when you meet in a home and are not registered as a charity. The house owner is then perfectly free to deny entry to any person and for any reason. Indeed, he does not need to have a reason, because it is his own home and he can exclude from it anybody whom he does not want to let in.

That freedom to exclude anybody we wish to exclude is a major benefit even at the best of times, but in these strange days we are now living in, with the loss of free speech and the aggressive pushing of the woke agenda, we need to be doubly careful as to whom we let in to our homes.

It is not just because of the trouble caused by mentally disturbed people but also the more sinister threat posed by people who are servants of Satan and want to join your church for the express purpose of destroying it. And if you think such people don't exist, then think again.

Therefore, although we need to be compassionate and patient with those who can be helped, we also need to be robust and assertive with those who can't and who are only seeking to do harm. If you haven't had any experience as an employer or as a supervisor or boss of multiple staff, you may find the prospect of needing such assertiveness rather daunting.

But you need to start to learn how to confront and tackle people and, if need be, to exclude them. If not, they are possibly going to ruin your church. But if you really can't bring yourself to do this, it may be there is another man in the church who can do it and isn't daunted by it. That's the advantage of making use of everyone's skills rather than one man having to do it all.

Ironically, if these damaged people attend a very large, traditional church they create fewer problems because they are much less noticeable amongst 200-500 people. Also, because traditional churches don't allow participation or questions from the congregation, the wounded or dysfunctional people tend to remain quiet. But in a small house church they can more easily take over the whole meeting and disturb and distract everyone until it ceases to function.

Of course, the first thing you should try is to speak to the disruptive person and ask them to refrain from taking over the meetings. And you can try to counsel them and pray with them to seek to resolve their personality problems. However, if you have tried all that and got nowhere then there may come a point where the only option left to you is to ask that person to leave because they are so disruptive. You need to see that as one of your legitimate options and not to feel guilty about it.

### **Do you have to meet in a house? Is any other type of venue acceptable?**

When I say "house church" it is an expression rather than a rigidly defined term. So, although most churches in the 1<sup>st</sup> century met in houses, they didn't all do so. Some met in barns or outbuildings or schools, and so on. It may be that in your case a time may come when the numbers have risen such that you can't all fit in a house, but you don't yet want to split into two churches.

In such a case it would be perfectly alright to hire a suitable room in a primary school, hotel, or other building which might fit your members more comfortably. For example, the church we attended in the 1980s and early 1990s met in a primary school and it worked perfectly well. So, the last thing I want to do is to suggest that there is a rigid requirement to meet in homes and nowhere else.

You are free to do what seems best to you. That said, the church we were in back then had about 60 members, such that we were too big for a house. However, if that church had continued to grow to say 100 people then I do believe it would be best to split it and form two or three house churches.

The problem is that too much growth of membership will inevitably spoil the dynamic and you will cease to have a house church. Instead, you will have the beginnings of a traditional church with all the disadvantages that brings. You will also find, unavoidably, that the quieter, less confident people cease to play any active part in meetings and a clergy class will begin to arise, even if you don't call them that.

Although a house is the obvious choice, at least to begin with, while your church is small, there is no reason why you can't choose an alternative venue if that is what your members want. So, for example, we have over the years hired scout huts or village halls or primary schools to meet in when they aren't being used.

Some people hire a conference room in a hotel. Those can be got quite cheaply on a Sunday as there are no business meetings taking place. One or other of these options may prove helpful if none of your members has a large house and you are too numerous to fit in a small house.

I believe God is very flexible, practical and realistic about this. Therefore, if your church grows to more than say 20 members and none of your houses are big enough to accommodate all of you I think God is very relaxed about you hiring a village hall, scout hut or school etc to meet in if your members don't want to split in half and have two smaller churches instead.

Splitting in half would be a perfectly valid option and many will choose it. But hiring a bigger venue is also acceptable, provided you don't grow so big that you lose the intimacy and wide participation by members that can only be got if a church stays relatively small. The key thing to avoid is buying a large traditional church building which then creates a financial burden for the members in funding its purchase and maintenance.

### **Be realistic in your expectations of a house church**

I need to emphasise that although the house church model is biblical and is, in my view, the right and best way to conduct a church, that does not mean that a house church can never have any problems. I believe it will have fewer problems (and more advantages) but not no problems.

So, it is not a magic formula which makes every member into a perfect disciple and eliminates all conflict, arguments or problems. What we can say, however, is that the house church model is the best place to deal with those problems and they are more likely to be solved there than in a traditional church.

Therefore, be realistic and don't look at the prospect of a house church through rose tinted spectacles such that you picture it as idyllic. It won't be. There will still be problems but they will be the right kind of problems, the ones God foresaw and which He wants you to deal with, as opposed to the man made problems which were created by the traditional, unbiblical model of church.

### **What about taking communion? How should it be done and how often?**

The first point to make is that God has given us great freedom and flexibility in terms of how and when to have the bread and wine. There is no liturgy to follow and it does not need to be conducted by the elders. Anyone can lead when you have communion. Therefore, in our church, I very rarely take the lead when we take communion because I want others to get the opportunity to do it.

So, we alternate each time with a different person leading. That helps to bring more variety to how we do it and it develops the confidence of the less mature members. Don't get any ideas, therefore, that it must be done by the main leader, as in the Catholic church and many Anglican churches where they believe it needs to be done solely by the "priest".

Remember, there is no such thing as priests. Moreover, don't accept the idea that the bread and wine become the real body and blood of Jesus Christ. They don't. That is completely false and mistaken. The bread and wine are simply emblems to help us to remember Jesus Christ, i.e. who He is, what He said, what He did *and also what He is going to do in the future.*

That last point is important because I have observed that many people have somehow picked up the idea that in communion there is only one thing we are to remember and speak of and that is Jesus' death on the cross for us. Of course that is hugely important and it should often be the thing we focus on when we "remember" Him, but not always.

I have said to our church that remembering Jesus is much wider than that and includes all sorts of other hugely important facts about Him, who He is, what He is, what He said, what He did and what He is going to do. Let's remind ourselves of what Jesus said at the last supper which, surprisingly, is most clearly set out by Paul in 1 Corinthians, even though he wasn't at it.

Jesus obviously told him about it subsequently in one of their many face to face meetings when Jesus appeared to him and probably also while Paul was in Heaven which he visited and came back from. I write about Paul's visit to Heaven more fully in my other books. We know it was Jesus Himself who told Paul what happened at the 'Last Supper' because Paul writes "*for I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you...*"

***<sup>23</sup> For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread,<sup>24</sup> and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, "This is my body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me."<sup>25</sup> In the same way also the cup, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me."<sup>26</sup> For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.***

***1 Corinthians 11:23-26 (RSV)***

Note that Jesus says above "*.....Do this as often as you drink it in remembrance of me. For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes.*" From those words we can deduce the following:

- a) Jesus doesn't tell us *how often* to have the bread and wine. He simply says "*as often as you drink it ...*" which clearly implies that it is something we will do repeatedly but without Him telling us how often that should be. Therefore, I believe it is wrong to say, as many do, that it should be done every week. I see no basis for believing that. Therefore, in our church we take communion every few weeks but not every week. That is our personal choice but your church is free to do it differently.
- b) We are to do this *in remembrance* of Him but we are not told that it is only His death that we are to remember, as many people suppose. I believe He means for us to remember and speak about all sorts of other things that He said and did, and also what He is going to do. Realising that makes communion a much more varied and interesting thing to do.

Therefore, I have asked our members to take turns to lead the communion and to bring to our remembrance whatever event, words or characteristics they want to focus on that day, including prophecies about what Jesus is going to be and do. So, of course we remember His death but there



are many other things we can remember as well, and it is good to do so as that prevents communion becoming repetitive.

- c) Note also the words “....you proclaim the Lord’s death until He comes”. This is an important endorsement of the practice of proclamation which is something all of us should do, but which most of us never do as we have never heard of it. I have done a set of four talks on proclamation which can be downloaded from my website. I also write about it at some length in my Book 7 and I strongly urge you to look at both of those.

Proclamation is not a prayer, it is a declaration which we are meant to make with faith, assertiveness, and even aggression. We are not saying it to God but to the whole world around us and, in particular, to what the Bible calls “*the heavenly places*”. That is the place, high in the Earth’s atmosphere, where Jesus is seated and to which all the angels (and demons) have access.

So, by proclaiming the Lord’s death you are not merely referring to it, but boldly announcing to all who can hear that you rely on His death and are saved by it and that He is coming back to rule the whole Earth from Jerusalem. By doing this, you not only fix the facts of this more firmly in your own mind but you are also declaring to the angels and demons what you believe and what you are basing your life on. And doing that has great power. It’s a big subject which, sadly, is unfamiliar to most Christians.

However, we do need to be careful when taking communion to reflect soberly on what Jesus went on to say about what happens when a person takes communion “*in an unworthy manner*”.

***<sup>27</sup> Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of profaning the body and blood of the Lord. <sup>28</sup> Let a man examine himself, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. <sup>29</sup> For any one who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment upon himself. <sup>30</sup> That is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died. <sup>31</sup> But if we judged ourselves truly, we should not be judged. <sup>32</sup> But when we are judged by the Lord, we are chastened so that we may not be condemned along with the world.***

***<sup>33</sup> So then, my brethren, when you come together to eat, wait for one another—***

***1 Corinthians 11:27-33 (RSV)***

Put briefly, what this passage is saying is that taking the bread and wine is a very powerful act because of everything it signifies. So, if we take the bread and wine while we are living a carnal, sinful lifestyle or are at loggerheads with other Christians in the church and refuse to forgive them, or if you take it with flippancy and disrespect in your heart, then beware because such attitudes may bring God’s judgment down upon you.

I think the phrase “*without discerning the body*” is a reference to the fact that this bread and wine is being taken within the context of a meeting of a church, a part of Jesus’ body, and the very setting gives even more importance and gravity to what is being eaten and drunk. Of course, nobody is likely to be unaware that he is in a church meeting. But what he might well do is forget the sacredness of that group in Jesus’ eyes and so take the bread and wine while forgetting or ignoring his duties to his fellow church members.

Therefore, don’t take communion glibly or frivolously or in a casual disrespectful manner. Not only show respect to Jesus whom we are remembering but also be in the right relationship with His Body, i.e. the other members of your church, while you are doing it.

So, don't take communion while you still have unresolved disputes with your fellow church members or while you are hating, abusing, slandering or exploiting them. Get things resolved before you take communion again. Therefore, if you have unresolved issues or disputes, then simply refrain from taking communion until you have resolved them. This is a very serious issue because Jesus tells us it can otherwise lead to illness and even death. Please refer to my audio talks on communion which are on my website.

Another question which arises is whether communion must be had with real alcoholic wine or just grape juice or Ribena. The answer is, yet again, that you are totally free to do what best suits your church. So, if you have one or more members who have a drink problem and are trying to avoid alcohol then it may be better for your whole church to just take grape juice. Or you could offer a choice of either so those with a problem can avoid wine.

### **What if your house church is so small you can't make enough friends?**

I delayed starting a house church because my wife wanted to remain within a larger church we had been attending for some years where there was more scope to make friends. That issue didn't matter very much to me because I am perfectly happy being alone with my books. But, like most women, my wife has a major need for relationships with other women.

Eventually, we resolved it by starting the house church while she met her need for additional friendships by attending the mid week ladies group meetings at that large traditional church, though not its Sunday services. I mention this because it may be an issue for you, given that house churches are small.

That smallness has major advantages which I have discussed in this book, but it also has some disadvantages, particularly for women, as they want a wider circle of friends than men want or need. Therefore, it's worth bearing this in mind and perhaps resolving it as we did by my wife getting involved in external groups, clubs or societies whilst being in a small house church. By anticipating this potential problem you can address it before it creates difficulties.

### **What if your house church grows so much that you split it and create a second church? Is that new church independent or under the control of the parent church?**

Let's imagine your house church outgrows your homes and so you resort to renting a village hall or scout hut but then you find that even that isn't big enough? You might choose to split your house church of perhaps 40 members and create two churches each with 20 members. But if so, who is in charge of the second church? Are they independent or under the control of the first church, like a child?

You see this happening with large traditional churches which arrange a "church plant" by setting up a smaller church nearby. When they do, they always treat it as an offshoot of the "parent" church and keep close control over it. But I don't think that is right. Any church, however small or new, is a church and is therefore completely independent and self governing.

Therefore, if your church splits in two on a perfectly amicable basis then each half, provided they both have at least one elder, is a church in its own right and is not to be managed or controlled by the parent church. Each church can, of course, keep in touch and have some joint meetings if they wish and also share speakers and so on, but they must each govern themselves.

## Are churches meant to “*hold all things in common*” as we see in Acts 4?

I have already touched upon this issue in Chapter 9. Some people have argued that the account set out in Acts chapters 4 and 5 means that the early Church operated a kind of communism such that they gave away all their money to the church and nobody was considered rich or poor because they “*held all things in common*”. Consider this passage:

*<sup>32</sup> Now the company of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things which he possessed was his own, but they had everything in common. <sup>33</sup> And with great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. <sup>34</sup> There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the proceeds of what was sold <sup>35</sup> and laid it at the apostles’ feet; and distribution was made to each as any had need. <sup>36</sup> Thus Joseph who was surnamed by the apostles Barnabas (which means, Son of encouragement), a Levite, a native of Cyprus, <sup>37</sup> sold a field which belonged to him, and brought the money and laid it at the apostles’ feet.*

*Acts 4:32-37 (RSV)*

At first sight it does sound like a commune where nobody had any private property. However, when you look more closely, and if you read on into chapter 5, you realise that was not the case. What the Early Church did was to show great generosity towards any members of the church who were poor and needy. Therefore, through the enthusiastic willingness of the richer members the needs of the poorer members were met such that “*there was not a needy person among them.*”

As we look more closely at how they operated, as shown in the alarming death of Ananias who was struck dead for lying to the Holy Spirit, we see that everyone actually continued to have ownership of their own property and money. Although they joyfully made large and generous gifts to help the poor, at all times *their property remained their own* until and unless they freely chose to give it away.

Look closely at the next passage and the explanation Peter gives for Ananias being struck dead. It was not because he held back some of the proceeds of sale of the land for himself. He was perfectly entitled to keep part of it, or even all of it if he chose to. His sin was not holding back money as so many people wrongly imagine, but that *he lied to the Holy Spirit*.

*<sup>1</sup> But a man named Anani'as with his wife Sapphi'ra sold a piece of property, <sup>2</sup> and with his wife's knowledge he kept back some of the proceeds, and brought only a part and laid it at the apostles' feet. <sup>3</sup> But Peter said, "Anani'as, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back part of the proceeds of the land? <sup>4</sup> While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not at your disposal? How is it that you have contrived this deed in your heart? You have not lied to men but to God." <sup>5</sup> When Anani'as heard these words, he fell down and died. And great fear came upon all who heard of it.*

*Acts 5:1-5 (RSV)*

So, it is quite wrong to conclude that the Early Church gave away all their property and owned nothing. They plainly didn't and this is made very clear by Peter when he says to Ananias “*While it remained unsold did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not at your disposal?*”

What Peter means is that at all times the property was Ananias' to deal with in any way he chose, i.e. to keep part of it or all of it with *no obligation to give any of it to the church*. It was solely for lying

that he was struck dead. Therefore, what are we to conclude overall about the Early Church's attitude towards the private ownership of property?

Clearly, the answer is that God fully endorses the concept of private property and there is no command to give it all away. Neither is there any command anywhere in the New Testament to give away any specific sum or any percentage.

What God wants, and what the Early Church exemplified was for Christians to be *generous* and to enjoy giving to the poor and needy. He doesn't want it to be an obligation as under a communist regime, but a pleasure so that giving is purely voluntary and is not forced on anyone. Perhaps the position is best expressed by apostle Paul:

*<sup>6</sup> The point is this: he who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and he who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. <sup>7</sup> Each one must do as he has made up his mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. <sup>8</sup> And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that you may always have enough of everything and may provide in abundance for every good work. <sup>9</sup> As it is written,*

*“He scatters abroad, he gives to the poor;  
his righteousness endures for ever.”*

*<sup>10</sup> He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your resources and increase the harvest of your righteousness. <sup>11</sup> You will be enriched in every way for great generosity, which through us will produce thanksgiving to God; <sup>12</sup> for the rendering of this service not only supplies the wants of the saints but also overflows in many thanksgivings to God.*

*2 Corinthians 9:6-12 (RSV)*

Therefore, the Early Church were not communists. They continued to own property but they were not only willing but eager to use some of their wealth to help the poor, with the focus being the poor *within the church* so that every believer was looked after. Let me give you an example of this from our house church.

Some years ago, a single woman in her fifties who was on a very low income got into trouble with the Council because she couldn't afford to pay her council tax and the arrears had built up to £2,000. So, the rest of us in the church organised a collection and raised the full £2,000 to rescue her. We did it entirely voluntarily and without any obligation, but we were happy to help and so we did it joyfully.

Apostle Paul also gave some helpful advice as to how this giving to the poor and needy in the churches should be organised. He suggested that rather than arranging collections every so often it is best to set some money aside each week so that when a need arises the money is already there to meet it. But note how Paul makes clear that this is to be done to give to *the poor and needy* within the churches, *not to leaders*. On that occasion, the money was sent to where there was a famine at the time.

*<sup>1</sup> Now concerning the contribution for the saints: as I directed the churches of Galatia, so you also are to do. <sup>2</sup> On the first day of every week, each of you is to put something aside and store it up, as he may prosper, so that contributions need not be made when I come. <sup>3</sup> And when I arrive, I will send those whom you accredit by letter to carry your gift to Jerusalem.*

*1 Corinthians 16:1-3 (RSV)*

## **What is the role of women in the church?**

God made men and women different and in very many ways. Indeed, I am told there are over 2,500 differences between males and females affecting every part of our make up and personality, not just anatomy. One of the differences is He wants leadership in the Church to be reserved only for men. That includes the ministry of teaching in the local church which should only be done by men.

This is not because God hates women or doesn't value them or is prejudiced against them. It is because He designed men to be leaders and to take the great responsibility of teaching in the church because teaching involves having authority to handle God's Word. Therefore, the roles of elder and teacher, including the preaching of sermons, are reserved solely for men, not women.

*<sup>8</sup> I desire then that in every place the men should pray, lifting holy hands without anger or quarreling; <sup>9</sup> also that women should adorn themselves modestly and sensibly in seemly apparel, not with braided hair or gold or pearls or costly attire <sup>10</sup> but by good deeds, as befits women who profess religion. <sup>11</sup> Let a woman learn in silence with all submissiveness. <sup>12</sup> I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over men; she is to keep silent. <sup>13</sup> For Adam was formed first, then Eve; <sup>14</sup> and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor.*

*1 Timothy 2:8-14 (RSV)*

Of course, that is not to say that women should not say anything at all in church. Paul is talking about the ministry of *teaching God's Word* via the sermon because that involves authority and He does not want women to have authority over men in the church. So, a woman should not preach the sermon but there is no reason why she should not take part in sharing experiences or verses, contributing to discussions and asking questions.

There are various reasons for this provision but the one which Paul raises here is that women are more prone to being deceived than men are, i.e. on average, not as an absolute. That is partly because women operate far more through their emotions and feelings than men do. Men operate far more through their minds, not their emotions, as I discuss in some detail in my Book 7.

So, in general terms men primarily think but women primarily feel, i.e. relatively speaking. Obviously, they both do both, but in widely different proportions. Therefore, when it comes to handling God's Word and expounding on it to the congregation it is safer if that is done by men as their emotions are less involved in the process and so they are less likely to be deceived.

## **What about spiritual gifts? How should they be used in church?**

When I first became a Christian 43 years ago, far more churches allowed the use of spiritual gifts, i.e. tongues, prophecy, words of wisdom, words of knowledge etc. But now they are very rarely used in most churches. There are many reasons for that including the following:

- a) The drastic decline in the quality and integrity of churches and church leaders has rendered many churches too immature and carnal to be able to operate safely in the gifts or to weigh and measure others when they do so.
- b) There has been a sharp change of mood in many churches such that more people are wary and suspicious about spiritual gifts and they won't allow them to be used. So, they have gone out of fashion.

- c) Individual Christians are far less mature and knowledgeable about the Bible than they were in the 1980s. Thus, far fewer individuals are suitable to be trusted to operate in the gifts in public as they are so immature.

The net effect of all this is that the gifts of the Holy Spirit have effectively ceased to exist in most churches and I see no prospect of that changing any time soon in the traditional denominations. The only place where the spiritual gifts can safely be used now is in the house churches where people genuinely know each other instead of being virtual strangers or at most acquaintances, as is the case in many large traditional churches.

The spiritual gifts are most safely used where everyone knows the person giving the prophecy or interpretation etc so they can have a basis to feel confident that he is a sound, sensible, genuine Christian. I say more about the spiritual gifts and give some examples of them in operation in my Book 1.

### **How to deal with disputes in churches?**

If you are in a traditional church with 500 members then, for all its faults, there is at least the advantage that you can keep out of the way of people you don't like or who have offended you. But if you are in a house church with 5-20 members there is nowhere to hide. You are all there in a circle in the living room and any dispute or fall out between members will be like an open wound affecting not only the two disputing parties but the whole church.

The way a traditional church handles disputes between members is basically to do nothing at all. Then the two disputing members are left to their own devices. In practice, what usually then happens is the innocent party leaves the church because they find it intolerable. But the guilty party is likely to stay because he has a much thicker skin and feels no shame about his actions.

That outcome is not good and certainly isn't fair. It means that wrongdoing is not punished and good behaviour isn't rewarded. The biblical way to handle such disputes was given to us by Jesus Himself:

*<sup>15</sup> "If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. <sup>16</sup> But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. <sup>17</sup> If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.*

*Matthew 18:15-17 (RSV)*

So, the procedure operates in three stages, as follows:

- 1) You go to see the other party on his own, one to one, and "tell him his fault". That means you honestly and assertively, but with self control, tell him what he did that has wounded or offended you. Hopefully, that will resolve matters without needing to involve anyone else.

- 2) If the other party won't listen to you and nothing is resolved then return a second time but this time with one or two witnesses accompanying you so they can hear everything that is said. Then the witnesses can help you to know whether you are right or wrong and also confirm the facts of what was said if the dispute reaches the third stage.
- 3) If the other party still won't listen to you or deal with the issue then you are to take the dispute to the whole church to be decided by them. Then the church as a whole, perhaps 5-20 people decide who is right and who is wrong. (And remember that it is possible they will decide that *you are wrong*, or are being unreasonable.) Perhaps the party who is in the wrong will then finally accept it, and repent, apologise and make restitution if damage has been done. But, if not then the innocent party is to "*let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector*". That is a euphemism meaning you should all have nothing to do with him. In other words, he is to be expelled from the church so he ceases to be a member.

That may sound like a harsh outcome but it is far better than the alternative which is that the church keeps out of it, does nothing, and allows the wrongdoer to continue to attend meetings. If they did that it would be very hard on the innocent party and he would probably just leave the church himself as it would be too uncomfortable to be in the same room as the unrepentant wrongdoer.

Doing something and making a decision may therefore seem more harsh than doing nothing. But a decision not to act is just as much a decision as a decision to act. It is effectively a decision to resolve disputes by always causing the innocent party to leave the church. That is hardly a recipe for harmonious church growth. It is also very unfair.

In short, our aim should be to achieve justice and to allow justice to be seen to be done by openly attributing blame to the wrongdoer and exonerating the innocent party. That is very necessary when a person has been wronged and is an important step in the process of getting over it. Yet, it is never done in the majority of churches because they are far too large for this third stage to take place in front of 200-500 people.

Plus, most traditional paid clergymen would not want the controversy or the hassle and awkwardness of delving into disputes and openly identifying who is guilty and who is innocent. They are squeamish about that and would prefer not to get involved. But the point that virtually nobody seems to see is that by keeping out of it they are denying justice to the innocent party and making it hard or even impossible for him to remain in the church. And that is a great injustice to him and a failure in their duty.

This little known and rarely practiced procedure from Matthew 18 may sometimes be awkward and embarrassing, but it is far better than the alternative, which is to do nothing. Moreover, it is what Jesus told us to do. What need is there, therefore, for us to debate the pros and cons of this approach *when we have a direct command to do it?*

Above all, it shows the vital need for churches to be small, such that everyone knows everyone, because the Matthew 18 procedure would be utterly impractical and impossible in any other context or venue, as evidenced by the fact that no large traditional church ever obeys this command of Jesus. Indeed, if you were to ask them to do it they would refuse.

We actually get further guidance on this issue of disputes from apostle Paul who gives more radical advice on how legal disputes between church members should be tried and decided by the church, not

by secular courts. Again, that can only be feasible if you are part of a small house church where everyone knows everyone.

*<sup>1</sup> When one of you has a grievance against a brother, does he dare go to law before the unrighteous instead of the saints? <sup>2</sup> Do you not know that the saints will judge the world? And if the world is to be judged by you, are you incompetent to try trivial cases? <sup>3</sup> Do you not know that we are to judge angels? How much more, matters pertaining to this life! <sup>4</sup> If then you have such cases, why do you lay them before those who are least esteemed by the church? <sup>5</sup> I say this to your shame. Can it be that there is no man among you wise enough to decide between members of the brotherhood, <sup>6</sup> but brother goes to law against brother, and that before unbelievers?*

*<sup>7</sup> To have lawsuits at all with one another is defeat for you. Why not rather suffer wrong? Why not rather be defrauded?*

*1 Corinthians 6:1-7 (RSV)*

Realistically, this radical approach to litigation can only work in the context of a dispute within a church between two people who are both known by the rest of the church. Otherwise, how could anyone know whether either party really was a genuine Christian or is just pretending to be? So, I believe Paul is only speaking about disputes of that type and in that narrow context.

He doesn't mean a dispute with a man who lives elsewhere and is not in your church and yet he claims to be a Christian. How could you possibly know whether he is a real Christian or not? If it was our duty to write off the debt of anyone who claims to be a Christian the world would soon get to know that that is all they need to say to have any debt waived if it is owed to a Christian, even if he is a stranger whose car they ran into.

That would be absurd and God does not make absurd commands. He meant this command to be workable and practical. So, I believe this instruction from Paul only applies within that narrow context, where both parties are *members of the same house church* and are well known by all the other members.

Therefore, if a man is not a member of your church but claims to be a Christian, I believe you are free to go right ahead and sue him. I suppose you could offer him the option of having the dispute dealt with by your church but I feel sure he will reject that as they are not known to him. So, practically speaking, 1 Corinthians 6:1-7 just wouldn't work with such a person.

### **How should a house church make decisions?**

We have just seen that decisions as to who is right and who is wrong in a dispute between person A and person B are made by the whole house church, not just by the elders. That is why the Matthew 18 procedure ends with the whole church hearing the facts of the dispute and coming to a decision as a group.

That will come as a surprise to many Christians who attend traditional churches and they will struggle even to imagine such a meeting. It would seem surreal. All they have ever known is for all the decisions to be made on their behalf by leaders. Yet, there it is, set out very clearly in Matthew 18, possibly one of the most ignored passages in the New Testament, even though it was said by Jesus Himself.



But, we do see something reminiscent of the Matthew 18 procedure being put into practice in Acts 15 in the dispute between apostle Paul and the Circumcision party over the issue of whether Gentile converts need to obey the Law of Moses and, in particular be circumcised.

The context is different here because this dispute or decision making process is occurring within the whole of the Jerusalem church, which is larger than a single church. Also, it relates to theology rather than being a personal matter involving debt or injury. But the point is *the church as a whole made the decision*.

So, there were probably more than 100 house churches involved, all coming together to hear the arguments from both sides. Yet, the same approach was involved. Paul spoke and so did the representatives of the Circumcision party, followed by senior members of the Jerusalem church. And the whole proceedings were chaired by James the Just, the brother of Jesus.

By the way, that was despite the fact that *apostle Peter was present* at the meeting which demolishes the idea of him being the “first Pope”. Had he been what the Catholic church claims he was then the final decision would have been made by Peter alone and everyone would have obeyed him on the basis of his “papal infallibility”. But that isn’t what happened. We see from the account in Acts 15 that the final decision was made by the whole church in Jerusalem:

***22 Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, with the whole church, to choose men from among them and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They sent Judas called Barsab'bas, and Silas, leading men among the brethren,***

*Acts 15:22 (RSV)*

Admittedly, the speeches were made by senior leaders and the summing up came from James the Just as Chairman, but ultimately it was the church as a whole, i.e. all the people gathered hearing the debate, which made the decision and then sent men to Antioch to announce it.

So, not even the apostles or even Peter himself felt entitled to just lay down the law and decide on behalf of the people. They knew the decision had to come from the whole Church. Therefore, take that as your example when decisions are needed in your church on major matters. Let the members as a whole decide, not just the elders.

**What about church discipline in the event of heresy or immorality? How are members to be disciplined or even expelled?**

This is another subject which is virtually never mentioned, let alone preached on, in traditional churches. Leaders don’t feel comfortable even talking about church discipline and even less so about implementing it. Indeed, you might be uncomfortable yourself as you may feel it sounds rather bossy, whereas we have been saying a lot about avoiding domination, control and authoritarian leadership.

So, let me make clear that this issue of church discipline has nothing to do with being authoritarian. Indeed, it is not even done by the leaders but rather by the church as a whole. Therefore, the right way to see it is as a whole church sensibly defending itself against individual members who are being immoral or spreading false doctrines.

The only alternative to taking action in those circumstances is for the church to sit back and do nothing, and to allow misguided or even wicked individuals to destroy the church. Therefore, while nobody

should enjoy expelling a member, it is sometimes unavoidable if you want to defend the church for the sake of all the members. Let's therefore see what Paul had to say on this:

***<sup>1</sup> It is actually reported that there is immorality among you, and of a kind that is not found even among pagans; for a man is living with his father's wife. <sup>2</sup> And you are arrogant! Ought you not rather to mourn? Let him who has done this be removed from among you.***

***1 Corinthians 5:1-2 (RSV)***

We see, therefore, that Paul does not advocate that the man be merely warned or rebuked but that he be *expelled from the church*. But note that he is doing something very immoral indeed by having sexual relations with his deceased father's second wife, i.e. his stepmother. That is so disgraceful that Paul instructs that the church move straight to expulsion. But then Paul goes on to make some disturbing further comments which are virtually never preached on in traditional churches:

***<sup>3</sup> For though absent in body I am present in spirit, and as if present, I have already pronounced judgment <sup>4</sup> in the name of the Lord Jesus on the man who has done such a thing. When you are assembled, and my spirit is present, with the power of our Lord Jesus, <sup>5</sup> you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus.***

***1 Corinthians 5:3-5 (RSV)***

Paul makes two rather strange remarks:

- a) He says that he personally has "*pronounced judgement*" on the immoral man
- b) He instructs the church that they should "*deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh.....*"

We must ask, therefore, what exactly does Paul mean?

When Paul refers to pronouncing judgement on the man, he is referring to his unique authority as an apostle, and indeed as the most gifted and knowledgeable of all the apostles. God gave to Paul, and to the 12, a level and type of personal authority that He *did not give to the rest of us*, not even if we are elders.

So, nobody today can claim to have the same kind of authority which Paul and the 12 apostles had. The highest position today is to be an elder. There is nothing higher than that, at least in terms of authority, although there are different roles in terms of ministry gifting such as apostle, teacher, prophet and evangelist.

So, Paul has concluded that the case is proved that the man has committed this exceptionally wicked act, without even hiding it, and that he is deserving of God's judgment, just as we saw in the case of Ananias and Sapphira who were struck dead for lying to the Holy Spirit. Note that in that earlier case apostle Peter was directly involved, as Paul is doing here, in pronouncing God's judgment on the wrongdoers.

Moving now to Paul's second point, he tells the church that they (not him) should now deliver the man to Satan for the destruction of his flesh. What Paul means by this is that in view of his wickedness and unrepentant brazenness, he should have taken away from him the spiritual protection that comes from being a member of a local church.

In other words, a church is like an umbrella and if you are a member of that church you come under the protection of that umbrella such that many aspects of demonic attack which would otherwise have come upon you are kept off you so they don't harm you. That is one of the many advantages of being part of a local church. The point is that this passage illustrates the huge importance of being, or not being, part of a church. It can literally be the difference between life and death.

Therefore, if that protection is removed, the man is effectively handed over or delivered to Satan. And, as we see, this may result in the destruction of his flesh, i.e. his death. So, this is a very serious matter, and such a sanction is not to be used over minor offences but only the most blatant and disgraceful.

Note, however, that even this judgement in terms of the church handing the wrongdoer over to Satan has a redemptive purpose, i.e. *"that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus"*. The meaning of this is that although he may die, his death may prevent him degenerating even further into deeper levels of depravity which might have led to the loss of his eternal life at the final judgment.

Paul then goes on to give more general advice about how to deal with immoral people in the church:

*<sup>9</sup> I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with immoral men; <sup>10</sup> not at all meaning the immoral of this world, or the greedy and robbers, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world. <sup>11</sup> But rather I wrote to you not to associate with any one who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or robber—not even to eat with such a one. <sup>12</sup> For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? <sup>13</sup> God judges those outside. "Drive out the wicked person from among you.*

*1 Corinthians 5:9-13 (RSV)*

Paul instructs us not to associate with immoral men but he doesn't mean unbelievers outside in the world. He means immoral men *inside the church*. The reason is that it is only when immoral men gain entry to the church as members and are allowed to remain in it that they can do any significant harm. From the outside they are no great threat and indeed the outside world is full of such men.

But the local church is meant to have none of them and that can only be achieved by driving them out. That kind of decisiveness and direct action may make you feel uncomfortable, which is why traditional churches don't do this. But you must be willing to take these steps and especially so if you are a small house church where the damage that can be done by such a person is so much higher.

Of course, when we speak of these standards of conduct and morals that are required of a church member, we are not referring to visitors or enquirers who are still unsaved and are coming along to church at our invitation to find out more about the Gospel and being a disciple. Little or nothing is required of them, other than not to seriously disrupt the meetings.

But if they get saved and become a member then they will be expected to live in a moral way and to avoid bringing disgrace on the name of Jesus. However, we would need to be patient with them as they grow because they may take some time to come to terms with being a disciple and to move away from the habits and lifestyle they previously had.