

CHURCH BUILDINGS

By Keith Malcomson

*These articles have been written as a response to **Pagan Christianity?** a book written by Frank Viola and co-authored by George Barna. It carries the sub-title of *Exploring the Roots of our Church Practices*. All quotes are from the book.*



“For the first three centuries, the Christians did not have any special buildings...Meeting in homes was a conscious choice of the early Christians” (Pg.14-15). “There does not exist a shred of biblical support for the church building” (Pg.42).

Although a great many genuine believers have no time for steeples, stain-glass windows or the amount of money that is spent on building and maintaining contemporary church buildings, they cannot and do not agree with the opinions portrayed in this book on the subject of buildings. Frank Viola, George Barna and others believe that for the church to gather in any other building apart from someone’s front living room is anathema. They not only say a house is preferable to meet in, they say it is absolutely necessary and biblical.

Every single Church, of whatever persuasion, that meets in a building is placed together into a box called the ‘Institutional Church.’ So in the authors minds there are only two groups: the House Church Movement and the Institutional Church. Their very clear call is to come out of any institutional structure. It is not sufficient that a Church is centred upon Christ, walking in holiness, filled with the Spirit and walking in the love of God. The real issue for them is the type of building you gather in.

Quoting one author they say: “The first churches consistently met in homes. Until the year 300 we know of no buildings first built as churches.” (Pg.12). Quoting Robert Banks they state that the average size of church in the early era was about 30-35 people (Pg.43). They

explain that as new small church groups began to grow their houses were “re-modelled” to accommodate them (Pg.15). They estimate that these remodelled homes for gatherings could hold a maximum of seventy people. So they lay out a Biblical vision of individual house churches of no more than seventy people as the normal pattern of the early church and the prescribed pattern for the contemporary church.

The first question we must face is Did the early church only and exclusively meet in homes for their normal and main meetings and if so are we then obligated to do likewise?

The *Book of Acts* begins with 120 in an “upper room” (1:13). This is the first meeting place in Acts. The size of room by far supersedes a normal home renovated for to hold as many as 70 people. Although this was not a typical church gathering but the inauguration of New Testament Church-life a room was needed which would accommodate 120 and may well have been roomy enough to hold a great deal more.

On the day of Pentecost 3000 were converted and “added to the Church” (2:41, 47). Note that they were all considered as one local church which continued to increase quickly and exceedingly. All that believed were “together” (2:44). In other words they met together in one place as one church. So from the beginning this one local church could not have gathered in one big house, not even the very biggest house in the city. So where did they gather?

First of all we are told that they: “continuing daily with one accord in the temple” (2:44). Gathering in the temple gave them the ability to all gather together. It was here that, for example, prayer was held at set times (3:1). In chapter 4 a further 5000 men were added to this church. By chapter 5 we see that they were following this same pattern of gathering together under the ministry of the apostles: “they were all with one accord in Solomon's porch” (3:11; 5:12). This was the normal practice and pattern for the first several years in Jerusalem.

So we see that they continued daily with one accord in the temple. Where else did they meet? Act 2:46-47, “...and breaking bread from house to house, did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart, Praising God...” They broke bread “from house to house.” This was alongside their joint gatherings in the temple. Obviously they gathered in small house or family groups in this manner while the regular gatherings of the whole church were at the temple in Solomon’s porch.

Throughout these early years in Jerusalem it was at the temple that they received the “apostle’s doctrine” which they continued steadfastly in (2:42). So why did they gather in homes? It was in order to “eat their meat” which they did with singleness of heart and with praising of God (2:46). A little later we read again of the ministry of the apostles: “And daily in the temple, and in every house, they ceased not to teach and preach Jesus Christ.” (Act 5:42). So again we see that this same pattern continued. Please note that the continual ministry in the

homes (as well as in the temple) was that of teaching and preaching by these gifted leaders.

As the church grew daily in Jerusalem and new homes opened to the influence and power of the gospel this was not the creation of new independent autonomous churches in the city; it was the expansion of the one ecclesia. The church, the ecclesia, was never limited or restricted to four walls; neither was it restricted in size. In Jerusalem the homes of believers was a vital part of the church but the homes were not individually called the church. The use of the home was and is biblical but not exclusively binding; a part but not the whole; practised but not commanded or demanded.

To only see the church within the boundaries of the four walls of a home is unbiblical. To demand that it be so is unhealthy, restrictive, it exceeds scripture and is legalistically binding. It binds the church to a man-made mandate instead of a dependence upon the guidance of the Holy Spirit not to mention doing what is practical and convenient.

We could open up the same principles flowing through the Book of Acts and the Epistles. Suffice to note here is that in ch.20 Paul revealed to the gathered elders from Ephesus: “[I] taught you publicly, and from house to house” (20:20). Once more it is clear that the ministry for the first three years of the Church at Ephesus was divided between public ministry, which most likely means the ministry in the School of Tyrannus (19:9), and privately

in homes. It was not confined to homes. Again we see that the ministry in homes is that of teaching.

Nowhere are we given the impression during the first 33 years of Church history from Jerusalem to Rome that the Church gathered exclusively in homes or had any such conviction. It was of course natural, practical and preferable to meet in the homes of the initial new believers but not compulsory or binding. When informed of the gatherings in homes in *Acts* we see that it is always for the purpose of breaking bread, prayer, preaching and teaching.

Throughout the ministry of Paul he always initially ministered in the local synagogue in an evangelistic effort to win the Jews to Christ. But we only read of him leaving the synagogue or drawing new converts away from it once the Gospel message was rejected. All through the *Book of Acts* we see the Church in various communities meeting in public buildings as well as private homes without problem. There is not one command in the Scriptures for believers to meet in personal homes neither is there the example of its absolute necessity.

A second point under this heading which is made much of in this book is that it is vital to be in a house because the building the church meets in is vital to its whole character and atmosphere. “The social location of the church meeting expresses and influences the character of the church...Every building we encounter elicits a response from us.” (Pg.37). “The social setting of a

church's meeting place is a good index of that church's understanding of God's purpose for His body. A church's location teaches us how to meet. It teaches us what is important and what is not." (Pg.38).

It is remarkable that a book which purports to expose paganism in the church can then push and promote such views. These quotes are more pagan and influenced by legal legislation than many things they purport to expose. Here we have views clearly stating that a physical building is the dominate influence upon a church and has the power to mould the church. Also the building is the means by which we are to judge the people gathering there. This is serious error. To judge believers understanding of God's purpose for His body by a building rather than by their message, lifestyle and simply by asking them is at best judgement by outward observation. This is a return to "...touch not, drink not..."

While the authors criticize the influence of Judaism upon the institutional church because of the use of public buildings, they in fact are aligning themselves with the mystical power of buildings and places. They unashamedly promote the importance of the "interior and exterior" (Pg.37) of a physical building rather than the heart attitude and motive of believers gathered as the body of Christ.

The authors are falling into the same type of legalism that binds Roman Catholic priests to only use officially sanctioned and sanctified buildings. It is bondage to a

physical form, building and theory. We could maybe apply Christ's words to this in a very applicable form: 'The hour cometh when ye shall neither in house churches, nor yet in steepled cathedrals, worship the Father. But the hour cometh, and now is, when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth: for the Father seeketh such to worship him. God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth.' (Jn.4).

A third point raised under the issue of the building is that the gathered believers must face each other in a small environment otherwise the Headship of Christ cannot be manifest.

When comparing a church which gathers in a building to one that gathers in a living room they infer that if you ask certain questions (their questions) about these two distinct environments you will come out with very different answers (Pg.38). In other words church life does not depend on the people but the building.

“Ask yourself how easy or hard it would be for a church member to speak where he is seated so that all may see and hear him” (Pg.38). “In addition, the church building is far less warm, personal, and friendly than someone's home...” (Pg.40). In reference to the typical rows of seats in a church building they say: “This arrangement makes it nearly impossible for one worshipper to look into the face of another” (Pg.40). “...the architecture of the typical church building hinders the church from having open-participatory meetings...the average church

building is not designed for face-to-face community;” (Pg.46).

First of all, I have been in many church buildings used for meetings over the years ranging from a capacity for 30-300 people which are actually extremely adequate for any individual in the gathering to minister from any spot in them and to be heard and seen by all. While this book and movement put us under obligation to look at each other’s face in a gathering, Scripture does not. Neither does it necessitate that we sit in a circle. These are man-made rules. We do not gather together in order to gaze at each other’s face but to gaze upon the face of Christ and primarily to worship and minister unto Him. Man is not the focus of such gatherings.

Scripture itself clearly challenges the above assumptions. From the large public gatherings in the temple at Jerusalem to the gathering together of a great many believers at Corinth public ministry was most certainly not hindered by large numbers (Acts 2:41; 4:4; 5:14; 8:8; 9:42; 13:44; 14:1, 4; 16:5; 17:4; 18:8). Any honest historian or observer could testify to countless situations of effectual spiritual ministry through testimony and gifts of the Spirit in the midst of public buildings and large crowds. The teaching of body-ministry in Scripture is in the context of the gathering of the whole body. For example at Corinth where the instruction is very specifically concerning the gathering of the whole church in one place at one time (11:17-18, 20, 33-34, 14:23, 26), they are instructed in the following manner: “How is it then, brethren? when ye come together, every one of you

hath a psalm, hath a doctrine, hath a tongue, hath a revelation, hath an interpretation. Let all things be done unto edifying.” (14:26). Also the teaching of ch.12 concerning the nine gifts of the Spirit is for the purpose of the same public gathering.

During the first 33 years of early church history most of the cities mentioned had churches of multiple thousands which could never gather in a single home together. But of course in certain places the church was small enough to gather in one home and is commented on as ‘the church in their house’ (Rom.16:5; I Cor.16:19; Col.4:15; Phm.1:2). We are only specifically told four times in the whole New Testament of churches that were confined to homes. No doubt there were a number of other such cases but while teaching us the importance and place in the life of the local church these scriptures also reveal that the gathering in a particular home in a particular city is only called the church until it outgrows that one home.

In the New Testament we never read of two churches in a city. This principle follows through to the book of Revelation where we see seven distinct churches gathering in seven distinct cities. Each city had its distinct church. There can be no doubt that the church of Ephesus was sizeable and most certainly not limited to one house. There surely must have been a number of gatherings in different homes across the city yet we only read of one church.

These theories that bind believers to only meet in homes for the regular local weekly meetings actually denies the

truth of the local church in the New Testament. As authors like Watchman Nee and many others have expounded from the New Testament, God's people in any particular town, village or city are always corporately called the "Church." We never see ten distinct house-churches in a community each individually called the Church. Although such believers in a community like Jerusalem, Corinth or Ephesus gather from house to house in fellowship, they are always spoken of as gathering together regularly and corporately to fulfil the commands of Scripture.

Lastly, to claim that someone's home is 'more warm, personal, and friendly' than a public building is mere sentiment and not built upon fact or Scripture. A gathering in a home may be more warm and friendly but not necessarily. But the fact is since when did the style of the surroundings pre-suppose such things? Since when does such a question have any foundation in Scripture? This is a question aimed at the building, but it is people who ought to be warm, personal and friendly, such is not dependent upon any building, or at least should not be.

It is quite amazing that the House Church Movement (otherwise called the Organic Church or Simple Church Movement) plucks out a few isolated scriptures with the term "house" in them, take them out of their clear context, and shape them into a dogmatic doctrine. If we were to do the exact same with the term "daily" then they would be obliged to meet daily in these homes, not a few times a week or once a week, but every day (Act 2:46; 5:42, 19:9, Heb.3:13). How can they oblige us to meet in

homes but yet they themselves do not do so daily? It would seem that they choose what they want to emphasise.