

Rethinking Church

Ask any group of Christians, “When do you go to church?” and you’ll almost always get the same response, “On Sunday morning, of course!”

To Americans, “Going to church” means being present at a special building, usually on a Sunday morning, with a large number of people, to be led in worship and hear the preaching of God’s word. This concept is so universal (in the Western world) that we take it for granted.

I would like to suggest that such a view of the church is not only inadequate—it is tragic! There is little about it that matches the teaching of the New Testament and the experience of the Christians we read about there. And this misunderstanding plays a large part in why the Christian movement seems so powerless today. Our experience of worship, our practice of community, and our power to witness is such a dim reflection of the dynamic worship, fellowship and witness of the early believers.

To build a better understanding of the church, we need to take a fresh look at the New Testament. The early history of the Christian movement can give us insight into the principles and practices of church life that enabled them to “turn the world upside down” in one generation (Acts 17.6).

What The New Testament Says About The Church

What is the “Church”?

The early Christians would have never thought of the church as a building simply because that was not the meaning of the word they used. The word translated “church” in our Bibles is a word that simply means, “assembly” or “gathering.”² It refers to people not to places, and, in New Testament times it was the common word for any gathering of people. In fact, in the book of Acts it is used both of an unruly mob *and* of a regular meeting of the town council in Ephesus (Acts 19.32, 39, 41).

When the word is used of a spiritual gathering in the New Testament it is referring to a gathering of Christian believers. There are a few places where “church” refers to the sum total of all believers, in heaven and on earth, both living and dead—“the body of Christ” (1 Corinthians 12.13; Ephesians 1.22–23). But most of the time it refers to a meeting of Christians for the purpose of worship, witness, and learning—as in, “the church of God that is in Corinth” (1 Corinthians 1.2).

It is only with this meaning, the *local* church, that we need to concern ourselves now. To bring our thinking in line with the Bible we need to understand that we don’t *go* to church (though we might go to a church *meeting*); we *are* the church when we meet. The location in which we meet is not important. The fact that we are meeting is what matters.

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Whole Church / Home Church

A careful reading of the New Testament reveals that the first churches met regularly in homes and, when the opportunity arose, they met together in a larger place. The book of Acts tells us that, at the beginning of the first church, the believers met in both large *and* small settings:

And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. (Acts 2.46)

This pictures the earliest Christians meeting in the temple (remember the first Christians were Jewish believers in Jerusalem) *and* in homes. In other words, they met as a *large* group and as *small* groups.

When the church began on the day of Pentecost (May of 33 AD), they began to meet as a group in the temple courts, specifically in Solomon's Portico, a large, open area connected with the temple (Acts 2.42–26; 5. 12–13, 42). More than twenty years later, and far from Jerusalem, the Apostle Paul describes meetings of the “whole church” in the city of Corinth that were separate from the household gatherings (Romans 16.23, 1 Corinthians 14.23).

But the New Testament makes it clear that the most basic unit of the churches were the regular meetings of smaller groups of believers in homes. After Pentecost, the believers met in homes as well as the temple (Acts 2.46). Later they met “house to house,” meaning in a number of home groups (Acts 5.42). When Saul (who later became the apostle Paul) wished to destroy the fledgling Christian movement, he entered “house after house” dragging off men and women to prison (Acts 8.3). Paul knew the only way to stop the church from spreading was to disrupt their home meetings.

Paul made it clear in his letters to the churches he started that small, home gatherings were the indispensable building block of the church in each city. At the end of his letter to the Romans, he greets what appears to be five house churches in the city (Romans 16.3–5, 10, 11, 14, 15). In the city of Corinth, he speaks of four different “households” in which the believers are gathered in the city (Acts 18.2–3, 7; 1 Corinthians 1.11, 16; 16.15). Most significantly, Paul refers four times to “the church that meets in (someone's) house” (Romans 16.3–4; 1 Corinthians 16.19; Colossians 4.15; Philemon 1.1). Evidently, household gatherings were central to early church life.

While family homes were the basic meeting place of Christians in a city or town, all of the home groups apparently met together sometimes. Many homes in the ancient Roman Empire could have accommodated 25–35 people. The home of a wealthy person would have had a large central atrium, and may have been capable of entertaining up to 60–80 people or more. This would have made it possible for a number of home churches to meet together periodically in places like Corinth.³ When there was persecution or harassment of Christians, the meetings of the home churches together as the “whole church” would have been suspended for a time because they would draw more attention than the home meetings.

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So the Bible tells us that early Christians met as small groups of people in homes and, when they were able, they met also together as a large group. The large group meetings of Christians have continued right up to the present—we often call them “worship services” on Sunday mornings. At the same time, the early church’s meetings in homes have nearly disappeared. The small group movement of the late twentieth century has restored some emphasis to the importance of home meetings but they are usually a program of the church that is secondary to the Sunday morning services. As a result, people today identify “church” as a large group meeting in a special building on a Sunday morning. Few people would ever think of a group meeting in a home as “church.”

What Happened to the “House Churches”?

At this point we have to ask an important question: What happened to the home churches established by the early Christians? It is not until the third century that we find evidence of separate buildings being built for church meetings, and these seem to have been modified homes that had been bequeathed to the church by a member.⁴

Most likely, the first three centuries of Christian history involved a long, slow transition from “house church” to “church house.” But, while history doesn’t tell us of the process it does tell us the end result. Family homes continued as the primary meeting place for believers until 313 AD when the emperor Constantine embarked on a policy of favoring Christianity. After this, Constantine began to build church buildings and even turned some of the pagan temples into churches. The home meetings began to decrease rapidly after Constantine.

Then, in 380 AD, the emperor Theodosius declared Christianity as the *state* religion, replacing paganism, the worship of the Roman gods. At that point, the newly legalized state church suppressed all other forms of religion: the pagan temples were destroyed or turned into church buildings, pagan worship became illegal, and pagan festivals were taken over by the church and turned into Christian holidays. Private home meetings, which had begun to be less important after 312 AD, were now completely suppressed for fear that they would foster heresy and splinter groups.

This is how the Christian movement, which for the first three centuries was basically a home-based movement sweeping across the Roman Empire, became a powerful institution. Christians forgot that they were once a splinter group with no political power—sometimes scattered, pursued, driven underground or murdered. Yet in that condition, they had grown at an unprecedented rate for nearly 300 years.

Why did Christians meet in homes?

Of course, we aren’t to try to recreate the New Testament church today (as if we could!). There is a huge gulf between the culture and the political and spiritual conditions of the first century and today. It is interesting to know *how* they met, but the really important question is, “*Why* did they meet the way they did?”

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Most people assume that Christians met in homes because it was the only place for an illegal and disputed religion to meet. In times of persecution (like in the People's Republic of China today), it is natural to go "underground" and meet in homes. This is partially true, but it is not an adequate explanation of the evidence. Contrary to popular belief, persecution was sporadic, not continuous, for the church during the first three centuries, and in some places there was never any persecution. In many parts of the Roman empire, Christians *could* have built meeting places (especially in places where they became numerous). Yet as far as we can tell, for the most part they chose not to.⁵

If it is true (and it appears to be) that Christians met regularly in homes for the first three centuries and had larger meetings when a location was available and conditions allowed, then we must ask, why? If it wasn't simply because it fit their culture, or because they were being persecuted, then why did they continue this practice? The New Testament tells us many of the reasons that home meetings were central to the Christian movement. They didn't meet this way simply because it was convenient; they met in homes because of their understanding of what "church" is all about.

First, *they met in homes because they believed the "church" is a loving family.* Jesus continually used family terms to describe his relationship to his people, and their relationship to each other. He told us God is our father and encouraged us to treat each other as brothers and sisters (Matthew 6.9; Mark 3.31–35). Jesus modeled this "family" image of discipleship through his relationship with his disciples, even calling them his children (Mark 10.24). It was only natural that his followers, when they went out to win and gather believers, would do so in family homes.

The apostles also continually used family images to picture the church: We are the "household of God" (Ephesians 2.20) and "the household of faith" (Galatians 6.10). An elder must "manage his own household" so that he is able to take care of the church of God, which is also a family (1 Timothy 3.4). We are to have "sincere brotherly love" for each other (1 Peter 2.17). And we are to treat one another within the Christian fellowship as family members: "Do not rebuke an older man but encourage him as you would a father. Treat younger men like brothers, older women like mothers, younger women like sisters, in all purity" (1 Timothy 5.1–2).

Family homes were the natural meeting place for believers since their image of church life was that of a loving family.

Second, *the early Christians met in homes because they believed the "church" is a mutually responsible household.* The nearly two dozen "one another" commands of the New Testament are best accomplished by a relatively small group of people. All of these commands require a knowledge of each other's lives and concerns in order to be fulfilled. Many of the "one another" commands virtually require a home church setting because they could never be fulfilled by a large group. For example, in writing about their church meeting, Paul says to the Corinthians: "But God has so composed the body, giving greater honor to the part that lacked it, that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another" (1 Corinthians 12:25). These words could hardly be fulfilled by a church of many hundreds of people,

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most of whom do not know each other. It requires a much more intimate setting and close relationship to “care for one another” in this way. There are only so many people with whom you can have that kind of relationship!

Third, *the early Christians met in homes because they believed the “church” is a gifted community.* Consider Paul’s description of the church meeting in Corinth:

What then, brothers [and sisters]? When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Let all things be done for building up. (1 Corinthians 14:26)

Each one, Paul says, comes to participate in whatever way God has gifted him or her. That does not mean that everyone *was required* to participate but it certainly means that everyone *could* participate! From their perspective, “church” is *not* a meeting where a number of believers gather to sing a few songs led from the front, to say “Amen” to one person’s prayer, to hear another teach the Bible, and then to go home! A meeting of the church is a time when believers come prepared to participate, to offer to the others their unique gifts from God—some to teach, some to pray, others to encourage or exhort, and some to sing. They don’t come only to “get their spiritual gas tank filled.” They come to admonish, teach, love, serve, and encourage one another. *Each one* bears some responsibility for what goes on.

The early believers met in small groups in homes because it was only in that setting that they could best live out their conviction that the church is a loving family, a mutually responsible household, and a gifted community. In other words, their choice was rooted in their *theological* understanding of the church rather than simply in what was expedient. Because these theological truths don’t change with the passing of time, we need to take their choice very seriously and consider how to apply it today.

So, What About Today?

The fact that the earliest Christians met in homes doesn’t *require* that we meet in homes today. Their reasons for meeting this way, however, were *theological* rather than *practical*. Since theological principles remain true for every generation and culture, we have to think seriously about how their way of meeting applies to us today.

The picture we gain of the church in the New Testament is very different from our understanding of church today. We tend to think of church as a Sunday morning event that we go to see and hear—our participation is limited to listening attentively, singing together, and agreeing with the prayers. In his book, God shows us the church in two forms—first, the church meeting in a home and, second, all of the home groups meeting together in a larger building. From the perspective of the New Testament, they are both important, but the first is essential. We have turned it around and made the meetings of the whole church essential and the home groups an optional “if-you’re-really-committed-and-have-time” kind of activity. The two approaches are very different and produce completely different results:

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Today's model for the church produces *spectators*;
God's model produces *participants*.

Today's chief concern is to make those who come *comfortable*;
God's concern is to make them *responsible*.

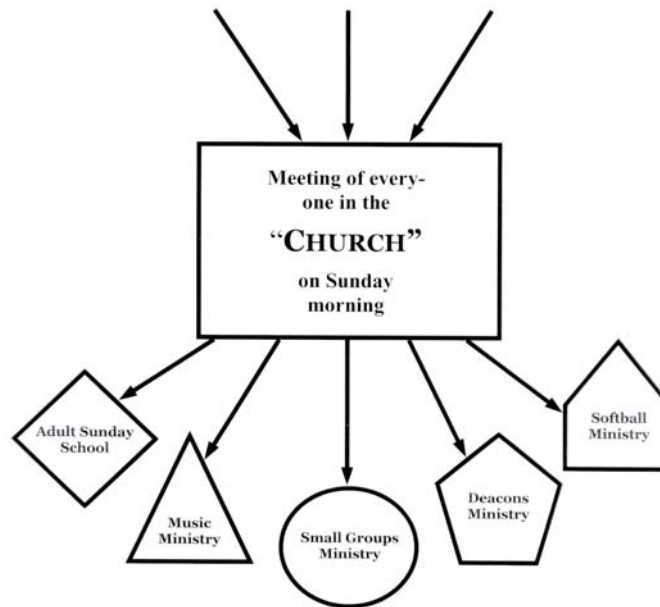
Today's plan for the church makes non-participation *easy*;
God's plan makes non-participation *nearly impossible*.

When you put all that together you can see why our discipleship today is, in so many ways, shallow and ineffective. Jesus' final commission to the church was, "Make disciples" (Matthew 28.19). "Comfortable, lazy, spectators" is certainly not a description of disciples!

There are two basic principles we can draw from the New Testament about the place home groups should have in the church today.

Small, home groups are a necessary building block of the church

Today, many churches have a small group ministry as one of the discipleship opportunities they offer. These small groups often have great impact on people's lives. The following diagram pictures the common strategy of a church with a small group ministry:

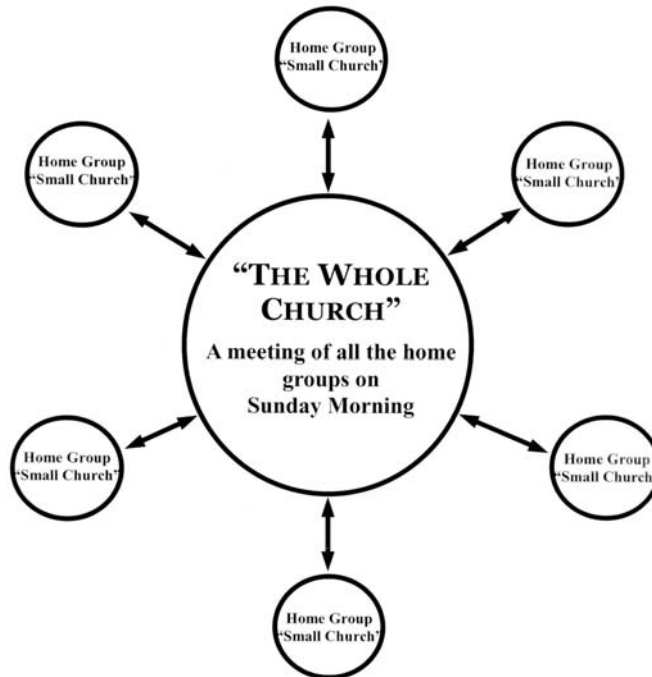


In this model, the "front door" into the church fellowship is the Sunday morning service. After new attenders become comfortable and if they desire to be more involved, the church leadership will seek to move them into one of the programs of the church. The small groups ministry is *one* of those programs—along with the Adult Sunday School, the Music Ministry or Drama Ministry, student work, serving as a deacon, and so forth. In other words, the small groups ministry is *one* of the programs the church offers. Each of the programs offer something

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important to a person's discipleship, but "going to church" on a Sunday morning is the indispensable first step.

A more biblical model of the church might be pictured in this way:



In this model, each home group sees itself as a small "church." The Sunday morning meeting is when all of the home groups meet together as the "whole church." But there's one more important difference. Note how the arrows go both ways—not only from the Sunday morning meeting into the home groups, but also from the home groups into the whole church meeting. In other words, the home groups *can* function as entry points into the life of the whole church. Because of the American mentality that on Sunday morning you "go to church," new people will often make a Sunday morning service their entry point into a congregation and then later find their way into a home group. But in this model, the home groups are also purposely seeking to draw people into their fellowship—the members are encouraged to bring their friends, relatives, and others whom they are seeking to influence for Christ, or people they meet who are looking for a church.

A home group can, and should, be a "church" meeting

The second principle is that home groups can and should think of themselves as a "church" meeting in the New Testament sense. Most people think that "church" involves a formal meeting led from the front, though there is nothing in the Bible that requires this. The opposite, in fact, seems to have been true in the early church: The New Testament pictures early church meetings taking place in an informal, family setting. The meetings were to be conducted "decently and in order" (1 Corinthians 14:40), but that does not require a formal setting, a struc-

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tured program, or a special kind of speech. A family might dress up to attend a wedding reception periodically, but their normal meeting is around the family table for a simple meal. It was the same among the earliest Christians.

In the New Testament, what were the small group meetings in homes like? What did they do together? When the first believers met, there seems to have been six things they engaged in: Singing, praying, eating, learning, sharing, and serving. These were the things that went on when the church met in a home.

SINGING: From the earliest times Christians sang together, though the infrequency of references to corporate singing in the New Testament implies that it may not have been as large a part of their meetings as today. Singing would usually have been without accompaniment, not because musical instruments were wrong, but because they were not readily available. Today, many churches have the privilege of a having a worship band to assist their singing on Sunday mornings. While musical accompaniment is great, it isn't *required* for worship to take place. Part of instructing people in a home group is helping them learn to lift their voices together to God in song whether or not there is musical accompaniment.

PRAYER: Praying together obviously formed a much larger part of the early church's meetings. Prayer includes praise offered to God, acknowledgement of his incomparable character, thanksgiving for his blessings, and requests for God to assist or act for us or for others. All Christians should learn to pray with others. This is often difficult to learn, but a meeting in a home provides a more relaxed atmosphere.

EATING: At their meetings, the first believers regularly shared in a full evening meal, which they called the Lord's Supper. As a re-enactment of the Last Supper, Christians met together as a sign of their deep fellowship with, and commitment to, each other. This meal was not like any other meal—it was a sacred meal the participants shared in and, because of this, there were important instructions about attitude and behavior connected with it (1 Corinthians 11.17–34). Because of the New Testament teaching about the Lord's Supper and the flow of Paul's instruction in the following chapters (1 Corinthians 12-14), it appears likely that outsiders were invited to attend the sharing, singing, prayer and teaching *after* the corporate meal in the early church.

The terms used to describe Communion—the breaking of bread (Acts 2.46; 20.7), the Lord's Supper (1 Corinthians 11.20), and the love feast (Jude 1.12)—all speak of a full meal. The sheer number of references in the New Testament to the church eating together tells us it shouldn't be ignored. We may think of refreshments as a break from the meeting—the Bible views it as an *essential element* of the meeting.

LEARNING: Of course, when the early believers met together, the word of God was an important element of their meeting. In the whole church meeting, one-way instruction is necessary because of the size of the group. In a home meeting, however, instruction takes place more as a dialogue. The word "learning" rather than "teaching" implies that the emphasis was not on the

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teacher but on the participants. As noted before, Paul's advice to the Corinthians, "When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation.... Let all things be done for building up" (1 Corinthians 14:26), tell us that those who were so gifted were to prepare themselves to teach. This does not imply that the New Testament churches were a free-for-all and that the most talkative person dominated the meeting. The apostles made it clear that the leaders of the churches were responsible to silence those who were disruptive, ungifted or deficient in their teaching (1 Timothy 1.3-7; Titus 1.10-13). In the early churches, instruction took the form of *dialogue*—it was instruction from the scriptures with an open exchange of questions and answers between the teacher and the listeners. It appears as well that there was no *one* "teacher" in the home meetings of the church (though only one spoke at a time)—others were encouraged and able to share what God had shown them from his word and everyone could interact with it.

SHARING: Sharing was also an important part of their meeting. When the early church met together, this involved the exercise of spiritual gifts, a practice to which the apostle Paul gave considerable attention (1 Corinthians 12–14). As Paul says to the Corinthian church, "To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good" (1 Corinthians 12.7). That is, each believer has some special ability to offer to the others. Some may have more formal "speaking" abilities—exhortation, instruction, or insightful guidance from the scriptures. Yet the meeting is not their responsibility to lead alone. Everyone is to contribute in whatever way he or she can—encouragement, comfort, prayer, and service for example. Of course, this is an essential part of any small group that is seeking to nurture healthy relationships.

SERVING: And, finally, serving each other (both inside and outside the meetings) figured prominently in the early church meetings in homes. Not only is this the subject of numerous commands, but we see it pictured in many ways in the New Testament. This included helping to meet material needs, providing encouragement, and giving counsel and direction to others. When we offer to help a brother or sister with some difficult burden, when we take a meal to a sick one, or help with some need, we are "serving one another in love" (Galatians 5.13).

What about evangelism? In the early church evangelism usually took place *outside* of the church meetings as the members lived their Christian lives in the community. This is why proper behavior towards unbelievers is emphasized so strongly in the New Testament (Colossians 4.5; 1 Thessalonians 4.12). In addition to their appealing behavior, believers were encouraged to let their speech always be "gracious, seasoned with salt," so that they could answer the questions of outsiders properly (Colossians 4.6). They were also to seek to always be "prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect" (1 Peter 3.15-16). Their responsibility to impart the gospel was to be a natural part of their lifestyle and speech in their shops and neighborhoods.

It appears, however, that nonbelievers were sometimes present in the meetings. Paul was concerned that, when such people were present, the believers be mindful of their presence (1 Corinthians 14.13–25). When believers met, there might be two other kinds of people present: *outsiders* and *unbelievers*. The first term refers to those who are interested in the faith, are learn-

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ing about it, and may have trusted Christ for salvation. They are still “outsiders,” however, because they have not yet openly confessed Christ and been received into the fellowship. The second term speaks of those who may be interested but are clearly not believers.

In the church meeting, believers were to focus on God and the building up of other believers. When outsiders or unbelievers were present, though, they were also to be concerned that their participation was understandable and informative to them. It doesn’t appear that evangelism was ever a distinct purpose of the home meetings of the church in the New Testament; it was more of a beneficial side-effect than a reason for meeting. Evangelism was not so much an element of their meetings as it was to be a natural part of the believers’ lives.

A “church” meeting in a home should regularly include these six elements. Singing, praying, eating, learning, sharing and serving may each form a larger or smaller part of any given meeting, yet such a setting provides an opportunity to engage in all of these activities. This kind of meeting is not *only* a Bible study, a discipleship group, an accountability group, or a prayer meeting. When the group members gather, each of these things, and more, goes on but they see their home group as a “church” meeting in the New Testament sense of word. Such a meeting in a home during the week is, from the Bible’s perspective, *equally as important* as the meetings of the whole church on Sunday mornings. “Church” is no longer only a Sunday morning event; it is a personal experience of worship, learning, and mutual love during the week.

These two principles are important for us to consider: First, home groups are a necessary, not optional, element of church life. And, secondly, each home group should seek to be a “church” meeting in the New Testament sense of the word. This is very different than the structure and strategy of the American church today. Because families are in such a weakened state in our society and because our churches today are modeled after large corporations or institutions, it’s difficult for us to acknowledge the New Testament model of the church as a loving and active family.

A Change of Perspective

We haven’t focused here on the importance and place of large, “whole church” meetings, but at Grace, our Sunday morning services are very important to us and we invest a lot of energy into them. Our services provide some important elements of discipleship, including celebratory worship, clear teaching and exhortation from God’s word, and uniting times of conviction and commitment. We are dedicated to these services and rejoice at how God has used them in people’s lives through the years.

By design, our Sunday morning services aren’t meant to provide much of a “one another” focus; but in contrast, they offer a personal experience of worship and learning. One surprising discovery of those who study communication is that when more people gather, the experience becomes more *individual*. Sometimes a person attending Grace on a Sunday morning can have a

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powerful sense of “me and God,” rather than the “you and me and God” experience of a small group.

Our services are important, but we want to help people see that our small, home group meetings are *equally important* events for Christ-followers to participate in. “Going to church” isn’t only a Sunday morning event; going to church is also an event that takes place in a smaller group meeting in a home. Both experiences are essential to discipleship. Accepting this often requires a change of perspective.

God’s Forever Family

Most people, when they first hear and understand the message of Jesus, are a bit bewildered. After all, in childhood we all learn that, “Nothing comes free in life.” As we move through life, we find that is true—our education, our friendships and our advancement at work are all closely tied to our character and our behavior. It’s a surprise to learn that God doesn’t work that way. When he tells us that, “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,” and “the wages of sin is death” (Romans 3.23; 6.23), he means it. Because our sin is offensive to his perfect holiness, our character and our behavior will *never* be enough to merit his forgiveness. God gives us only one recourse: to come to him through his Son, Jesus Christ. Only Jesus’ character and behavior were perfect, and perfectly acceptable to God the Father. On the basis of his perfect obedience, Jesus died on the cross in our place and took the punishment we deserved for our sins. Then he rose from the dead so that, as a living Savior, he can give salvation to anyone who trusts him for it.

Salvation is free! There’s nothing we can do to gain it but give up our foolish conviction that we can be good enough for God and trust instead only in Jesus Christ. The result is salvation—forgiveness, cleansing, new life, and peace with God.

At the moment we trust in Christ we begin two new relationships—with *God* and with *his people*. We gain a new Father and a new family! Few new believers are aware of this change; they find it out as they grow in their understanding and appreciation of the greatness of God’s gift to us in Jesus Christ.

When we begin our relationship with God, he becomes our heavenly Father and we become his children. As a child of God we begin a great adventure—the lifelong process of learning to follow Jesus in discipleship. As our Father, God is responsible to nurture and guide us to maturity. As his children, we are responsible to “grow up in Christ” as we learn to trust and obey him.

But when we begin a relationship with God we also begin a new relationship with his other children. Like a child born into a family, we don’t realize this at first. It’s something we find out as we start to grow up in the family. We have brothers and sisters! In God’s family, just as in a healthy and loving family, we are mutually responsible for each other’s welfare. The more we realize this, the more we find that, though it’s sometimes messy, we need our brothers and sisters in Christ and they need us.

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Everyone needs a “church”

Because we have these new relationships, our participation in a church is very important—essential in fact—to our discipleship.

Our culture tells us that people “go to church” on Sunday morning—singing together, listening to a message from God’s word, and greeting a few people on the way out. But a Christian who sincerely wants to grow in his walk with God feels dissatisfied with only a Sunday morning experience. They wonder what other people mean when they talk about the “fellowship” a church provides.

This is where we need a change of perspective: “Church” isn’t merely something you go to on a Sunday morning; “church” is also what happens when some people meet together in a smaller group to share their life in Christ in tangible ways. When God’s people meet together to worship him as he has designed, that’s when “church” happens! That takes place on Sunday morning in one form; but it also takes place when a group of Christians meet together in a home during the week. That’s what is missing today for many Christians.

In a home group we can put “shoe leather” to our discipleship. We can learn to sing and pray with others. We can gain new convictions and adopt new behaviors as we dialogue with God’s truth together. We can share in the Lord’s Supper together and grow in our appreciation for the cross. And we can learn to participate by sharing ourselves—our resources, our gifts, and our abilities—with others in the group. As we rub shoulders with people of different ages, experiences, and levels of spiritual maturity, we can gain so much more than just meeting with people who are “like us.” Then, on Sundays, we can meet together with other home groups like ours. And when we all meet together, we will sometimes find ourselves “alone with God” hearing his voice in scripture in new and challenging ways.

This is what the Bible means by “church.”

A Challenge

Before Jesus left the earth, he gave one final command to his followers: it is called the Great Commission. Here it is:

**And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."
(Matthew 28.18–20)**

In the language Jesus spoke, there is only one command in his final words: “Make disciples.” At Grace, we figure that if this is the Lord’s final command to all generations of Christians, it’s the one we should take most seriously. Making disciples is all that we want to be about as a church.

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Jesus didn't only give us this command. He first lived it out with his own disciples. Then they went out and passed it on to the early churches. They wrote a record of their experiences in the New Testament. Their instructions and examples clearly show that the primary meeting place of the church is in a home. When believers gather there to honor God by doing what he commands, "church" is what happens.

This is why, at Grace Church, we only offer *only two basic activities* for Christians (apart from opportunities for service)—the Sunday morning services and the home groups during the week. We are fully persuaded that these are the *only two ways* God has given us for turning people into fully-devoted followers of Christ. Most of our social activities, our worship opportunities, and even our men's and women's ministries we carry out through our home groups rather than through whole church programs. We are unashamedly committed to the belief that "meetings of the church" in homes are an *essential* ingredient of the Christian life. We gain this perspective from the Bible, but we also believe that it is especially relevant to our culture and time when the family is weak and many people, especially the young, are missing the most foundational experience of human life—a loving and strong family.

This is the place of home groups at GCC—they are just as important as the worship services of our church on Sunday mornings. We invite you to come to one of our home groups! You don't have to be convinced of everything written here in order to attend a group. Of course, none of our groups are perfect, but we would like to see each of them become as loving, mature and effective as it can be. And we would love for you to come and join us as we "rethink church."

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ENDNOTES

¹ *Luther's Works*, Vol. 53, "Preface to the German Mass," (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1965), pp. 63–64

² *Ekklēsia*, ("church") in W. Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, edited and revised by W. F. Arndt, F. W. Gingrich, and F. W. Danker (1979, University of Chicago Press), pp. 240–41.

³ Information on the early house churches can be found in Robert Banks, *Paul's Idea of Community: The Early House Churches in Their Historical Setting* (1994, Hendrickson Publishers); Robert and Julia Banks, *The Church Comes Home* (1999, Hendrickson Publishers); and Del Birkey, *The House Church: A Model for Renewing the Church* (1988, Herald Press).

⁴ Historical information in the following paragraphs can be found in Robert Banks, *Paul's Idea of Community*, p. 31–36; F. F. Bruce, *The Spreading Flame* (Eerdmans, 1973), pp. 293–328; Marianka Fousek, *The Church in a Changing World*, (Concordia, 1971), p. 49; Earle Cairns, *Christianity Through the Centuries* (Zondervan, 1967), pp. 133–37; and Edwin Hatch, *The Organization of the Early Christian Churches* (1880; reprint 1999, Wipf and Stock).

⁵ F. F. Bruce, *The Spreading Flame* (Eerdmans, 1973), pp. 293–301