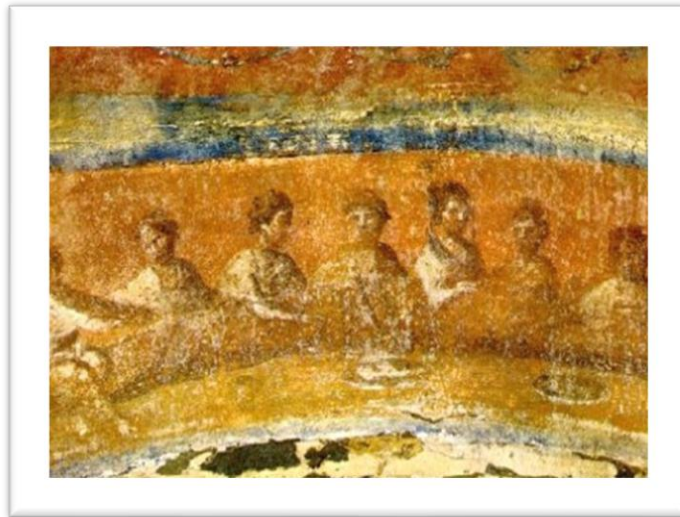


# Multiplying House Churches

## Lesson 2: Early church gatherings and practices

Take a minute to discuss what you learned in Lesson 1. What impacted you the most?

In Lesson 1, we learned how early church was never defined by place or by a particular event. Church was a lifestyle that developed out of genuine love for Jesus and for one another. Out of this love, the church met together at various times and places to remain devoted to knowing and obeying the apostles' teachings, breaking bread, eating together, praying, communing with the Holy Spirit, spreading the message, witnessing and performing miracles, and simply being a family that deeply loved and cared for one another. They longed to be together to share what God was doing in their lives and to express their love for Jesus and each other! Church didn't evolve because of structure, but structure took shape as the followers met to follow Jesus together. This study will examine some of the structures and practices of the early church that did develop, as each member contributed to the gatherings.



*Fractio Panis* ("Breaking of Bread"), Priscilla Catacomb, Rome

### The Lord's Supper

Aside from Acts 2:38-42, we can also examine Paul's epistles to glean some understanding of how church meetings [Figure 1<sup>1</sup>] were conducted and how the church functioned at large:

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<sup>1</sup> *Fractio Panis*. Original image by Leinad-Z-commonswiki. Uploaded by Kim Martins, published on 01 April 2019. Public Domain without restrictions.

**I Corinthians 11:17-34**

<sup>17</sup>In the following directives I have no praise for you, for your meetings do more harm than good... <sup>18</sup>I hear that when you come together as a church, there are divisions among you, and to some extent I believe it... <sup>20</sup>So then, when you come together, it is not the Lord's Supper you eat, <sup>21</sup>for when you are eating, some of you go ahead with your own private suppers. As a result, one person remains hungry and another gets drunk... <sup>22</sup>

<sup>23</sup>For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night 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, after supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me." <sup>26</sup>For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

<sup>27</sup>So then, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord. <sup>28</sup>Everyone ought to examine themselves before they eat of the bread and drink from the cup. <sup>29</sup>For those who eat and drink without discerning the body of Christ eat and drink judgment on themselves. <sup>30</sup>That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep. <sup>31</sup>But if we were more discerning with regard to ourselves, we would not come under such judgment. <sup>32</sup>Nevertheless, when we are judged in this way by the Lord, we are being disciplined so that we will not be finally condemned with the world. <sup>33</sup>So then, my brothers and sisters, when you gather to eat, you should all eat together.

What do we learn about ideal church gatherings from this passage? Describe what you think this gathering was supposed to look like.

What problems were occurring during the Lord's Supper? What were the roots of those problems?

When taking the Lord's Supper, Paul instructs the followers to practice self-examination. Reread vv. 27-33. How does Paul describe this practice, and how might it help with the church's problems?

**Church worship and teaching**

By the early second century, we learn in an historical account of a Roman governor in Asia Minor, Pliny the Younger (112 C.E.), that because of persecution, Christians were meeting in secret places to eat, worship, and celebrate the Lord's Supper, just as we see in I Corinthians 11. In an ancient fresco found in a Roman catacomb, the *Fractio Panis*, or *Breaking of Bread*, dated near the time of Pliny's account, we also see men and a woman together partaking in a simple meal of fish, bread, and wine. In a letter to emperor Trajan, Pliny uncovers that during their secret meetings, believers also sang songs to Jesus, vowed not to sin, steal, commit adultery, or deny their faith, and promised to attend the next meeting. From this letter, we learn that even during severe persecution, Christ followers found ways to meet, even if it meant risking their lives. To the Roman pagans, these people were the only true Christians (Pliny's Letter to Trajan).

We know from Paul's instructions that the reading of his letters, even entire epistles, was also a significant part of church services (Colossians 4:16, I Thessalonians 5:27). Through his first letter to the Corinthian church, we can glean other practices and styles followed by the earliest believers:

### **I Corinthians 14:26-31**

<sup>26</sup>When you come together, each of you has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation. Everything must be done so that the church may be built up. <sup>27</sup>If anyone speaks in a tongue, two—or at the most three—should speak, one at a time, and someone must interpret. <sup>28</sup>If there is no interpreter, the speaker should keep quiet in the church and speak to himself and to God. <sup>29</sup>Two or three prophets should speak, and the others should weigh carefully what is said. <sup>30</sup>And if a revelation comes to someone who is sitting down, the first speaker should stop. <sup>31</sup>For you can all prophesy in turn so that everyone may be instructed and encouraged.

Here we see more instructions that Paul gives to the early church. From his instructions, how else would you describe these early church meetings?

How are these instructions different from or similar to what you see in churches today?

Some of what we might see from Paul's instruction is that during church gatherings, every member used his or her spiritual gifts to contribute to the worship. Some brought songs, while others contributed instructions, revelations, different languages, and interpretations of those languages. Each person took turns sharing what they had prepared in advance; and yet during the service, spontaneous realizations and revelations were also shared in turn. While one shared, others weighed what was said to ensure that what was being shared adhered with the common understanding of doctrine within the church. In this way, we see the body of Christ actively working together to bring the Word of God to the church and experiencing the Spirit of God as they encouraged one another. No one person was over another during the time of sharing; rather each part had equal value and played a role in the worship. Likely the preparation of the communion and common meal was also a shared practice, in keeping with the spirit of unity so highly valued by Jesus's earliest followers.

### **The sharing of resources**

We see from the passages we've studied so far that the family of God shared in each other's spiritual gifts, as well as other resources, such as food and physical support for one other's needs. While the topic of financial giving should be studied along with Jesus's teachings in the Gospels,<sup>2</sup> we learn that financial support for the church, its missionaries and members in need, and the poor among them was an ongoing practice in the early church. Just as the heart of the early church shaped its lifestyle and worship gatherings, the "why" behind offerings shared among believers shaped how this element was observed and practiced. Let's examine some "why's" in these passages:

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<sup>2</sup> See Matthew 5:42, 6:1-4, 6:19-24, 19:21, 25:35-40; Mark 12:41-44, Luke 3:11, 6:35-38, 12:33.

**I Timothy 5:16**

If any woman who is a believer has widows in her care, she should continue to help them and not let the church be burdened with them, so that the church can help those widows who are really in need.

**James 1:27**

Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.

**James 2:15-16**

Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. <sup>16</sup> If one of you says to them, “Go in peace; keep warm and well fed,” but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it?

What are some reasons the church shared financial resources with others?

While generosity is an on-going theme throughout the New Testament, how do these verses help us to identify those with genuine need?

**Philippians 4:14-19**

[*Paul speaking*] Yet it was good of you to share in my troubles. <sup>15</sup> Moreover, as you Philippians know, in the early days of your acquaintance with the gospel, when I set out from Macedonia, not one church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you only; <sup>16</sup> for even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me aid more than once when I was in need. <sup>17</sup> Not that I desire your gifts; what I desire is that more be credited to your account. <sup>18</sup> I have received full payment and have more than enough. I am amply supplied, now that I have received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent. They are a fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God. <sup>19</sup> And my God will meet all your needs according to the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus.

**III John 1**

Dear friend, you are faithful in what you are doing for the brothers and sisters, even though they are strangers to you. <sup>6</sup> They have told the church about your love. Please send them on their way in a manner that honors God. <sup>7</sup> It was for the sake of the Name that they went out, receiving no help from the pagans. <sup>8</sup> We ought therefore to show hospitality to such people so that we may work together for the truth.

Why else did people early believers share financially with the church?<sup>3</sup>

**I Corinthians 16:1-3**

Now about the collection for the Lord’s people: Do what I told the Galatian churches to do. <sup>2</sup> On the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with your income, saving it up, so that when I come no collections will have to be made. <sup>3</sup> Then, when I arrive, I will give letters of introduction to the men you approve and send them with your gift to Jerusalem.

<sup>3</sup> See also I Corinthians 9:11.

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What do we learn here about how the church practiced and managed regular giving?

As we examine these passages, we see that giving was conducted individually and corporately, as needs arose and were defined by both small bodies of believers and the church at large. Needs were made known to the believers, and they gave freely and generously to meet those needs. Larger donations and corporate contributions were shepherded by leaders within the church for the sake of financial accountability as well as trustworthy administration, on some occasions for the purpose of serving the poor within the church, as well as needs for the ministry, those committed to missional journeys, or those employed by the ministry.

### **The shaping of a house church**

As we consider all the elements of church that we've covered so far – devotion to the apostles' teachings, the breaking of bread, fellowship and meals together, prayer, incorporating spiritual gifts, sharing physical and financial resources, equal participation and contribution among members, and caring one for another – it's important to keep as priority the "why" behind what we do as a church, rather than following a checklist of tasks. In other words, we can make a list of things to do each week as a house church and yet completely miss the heart of what we are doing. Have you ever been to a church that checked all the boxes but lacked intimacy and love among its followers? From the early church's examples, we can begin to understand that practices don't produce love, but rather love for Jesus, his Word, his Spirit, and each other should shape what we do and how we do it. This takes time to study what we see in these scriptures, pray, listen to the Holy Spirit, and consider how we want to function as a house church, and how we can work together with new house churches that form for the common good of each other and the Gospel.

Consider all the areas we've covered so. Discuss what love and devotion to Christ and each other could look like as you consider each of these elements.

In what ways can we learn from the early church practices to shape our present-day house church?

Begin the discussion of shaping your house church, its heart, rhythms, and practices. How will you ensure that each member coming into the group understands and grows in the heart of the church?

For deeper discussion:

1. Review Lessons 1 and 2 and ask the Holy Spirit to guide your thoughts as you think and plan for your new church.
2. In the next lesson, we will guide you through a house church workshop to help you shape and form your new group. Read Lesson 3 and be praying for the Spirit to guide you as you think and plan together with your group.