

The House Church

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As people become dissatisfied with the organized religion of our day, often they come out of it, hungering and thirsting for more of the reality and presence of the Spirit of God. In this time, there seems to be a strong movement toward the "house church." The house church is usually a small group coming out of the religious system around us, desiring to come together and know the freedom of the Holy Spirit. As we read about these groups, and as we talk with some who are involved, we sense that overall, there is a lack of revelation in the hearts of men who are laboring to see the purpose of God worked in these small house churches. Many seem to have set aside God's order, and are more or less having a "free spirit" to do what they feel is edifying. But when we come out of what man is doing, we need to come back to God and see what He is doing.

We know that people today are hungry and thirsty for God. That is why we are seeing this movement. It is not confined to America, but is happening in many places all over the world. In China, the persecuted church has met in secret for decades, and perhaps this is where the term "house church" originated. Many of our terms have been copied from what happened in China, and many today look to the teachings of spiritual leaders raised up in China. But what we need most of all is the same Holy Spirit that began to build on the Day of Pentecost, building in and through our lives today. We cannot follow man. We can only follow the Lord.

The "house church movement" has been going on for quite some time. There are many needs within it, and we realize that only God can make the difference. For instance, the church in China is lacking in many ways. Yet there is utter dependence upon the Lord, and His miraculous power works and meets needs in believers' lives. There is a need for gifts of God--teachers and prophets that will come and minister, to build up as God has designed. There is a great weakness in this respect, but only God can meet this need. As God hears His children cry out, men must answer to the call--men that God has prepared, men that are filled with the Spirit and know His working. If this is not so, all we will see is another move of man.

Many movements have sprung up, and they come and go with a cycle of about 20 years, but what God is doing is eternal. If people are hungry, coming out of the organized church of our day, they will now need to have the power and presence of the Holy Spirit working in and through their lives. Only then can they know God's true working, and enter in to know the fullness of what God has prepared for us.

When sincere believers begin to look for a true expression of God's purpose here on earth, these are some of the first questions they encounter:

- *What is the church?*
- *How can I recognize the true church?*
- *What are the boundaries of the church?*

What Is the Church?

The church is God's "called-out ones," gathering together in the locality in which they live, empowered and being built together by the Spirit of God. It seems that we are more prone to look to man than to look to God. But if we can look back to the scriptures to be encouraged by how God began, we see that they didn't have what we have today. Today we have the New Testament scriptures which were written for our encouragement and instruction. The first believers began with none of this, but God had given the Holy Spirit to lead them into all truth and to give them the power that they needed. The power of the Holy Spirit was given not only for ministry, but to build the church and enable believers to come together as God had designed. They needed the Holy Spirit and so do we, because everything in the church is a spiritual working. There is no natural working in the church.

At the very beginning, we see that the people *"had one heart, and were of one soul"* (Acts 4:32). Scripture goes on to tell us that *"great grace was upon them all"* (v. 33). We need this. We need people with one heart, not divided, not everyone coming with their own opinions, but everyone with one heart for the Lord, hungering and thirsting for Him. We need God's grace upon us, to see the fulfillment of this.

Jesus promised His church, *"I and the Father will come and make our abode with you"* (John 14:23). We need to press on by faith to know this reality. But let us count the cost before we start to build. We can't come into God's working and do what we feel like doing, bring a little testimony here and there, and expect the church to be built.

Men that are prepared by God, who have a revelation, who are builders, will have to come in and lay some foundational truths. Then there must be hearts that are able to hear, respond, and obey. Even as the scripture tells us, *"He has become the source of eternal salvation to those that obey Him"* (Heb. 5:9). We must obey what God is saying. It is not obedience to man; it is not letting man come in with what he says the church is; it is obeying what the Holy Spirit is saying to our hearts.

God never allows man to touch His glory, and if we're going to function and move in what God is doing, we will have to learn this lesson. Today, with so many needs and so many house churches springing up, there is a great need for ministry, for a true revelation to be set forth, for men and women to see and to contain the fullness of what God is doing. And it is not enough to start; we must finish.

Jesus said He would send the Holy Ghost to teach us and lead us into the fullness of truth. This is the prerequisite of any working: that the Holy Spirit is in control, and that every member is in tune with Him. When God gives the Holy Spirit, with the Holy Spirit comes the ability to be true sons of God, and to cry "Abba, Father." Many people think that receiving the Holy Spirit is sufficient. But that is only the beginning of God's building in our lives. He desires to make us the expression of true sons and daughters of God. He gives us His ability. He brings the reality of Christ into each one of our lives, in power.

Also, there must be gladness and singleness of heart (Acts 2:46) if we are going to see the purpose of God worked, and the church truly expressed in different localities as God has designed.

New Wine in New Wineskins

If we focus on trying to understand what was done before, rather than knowing the leading of the Spirit *today*, we will miss God. What we will do is "come out of" something, and react by trying to do something different from what we came out of. In so doing, we will carry right on in many of the errors we have just come out from. This is the pattern in most cases.

But God's work is a brand-new working. Most of us are acquainted with the passage that speaks about putting new wine into new wineskins. The new wineskins speak of people that are prepared, a vessel that is prepared, pliable, not moving in the flesh or in natural understanding, but moving by the Spirit of God, knowing the things of the Spirit. As an example, let us look at the preparation of the apostle Paul. Before he became an apostle and before he was sent out of Antioch to do the work God had prepared him for, we see God preparing him in the wilderness. God broke upon Paul's heart a revelation of what He wanted to do, who Christ was, and what had been accomplished at the cross. The revelation is seen throughout the writings of Paul. He drew from it when writing his epistles to different churches to help meet their needs.

Today as well, we need men that are moving by the Spirit of God. Today we have our own problems, and the Spirit of God is the only one that can meet those problems. We can't go back and copy someone else. We need a fresh speaking of God to His church, to direct us and lead us in these times we live in.

We also need to realize that the gathering of God's people is not around doctrine. We gather underneath the headship of Christ. God's people are not gathering around a man or man's teachings, but under the headship of Christ alone.

Men will often try to see the church come into expression by the natural means of trying to dissect the revelation of God, trying to understand the Greek or analyze the scriptures, rather than being led by the Spirit to see the church come into expression as it did at the very beginning. We don't need a set of doctrines. What we need is the working of the Holy Spirit in hearts that are in tune with Him. Then we can move in the fullness of what God has ordained.

How Can I Recognize the True Church?

We begin by having a relationship with God. Those that are born into the family of God will know the church. Jesus said, "My sheep know my voice."

In addition, to be able to recognize the church in the locality in which we live, we need some knowledge of what the church is and how it functions. We must go to the scriptures and see what God tells us. We must have eyes to see and ears to hear. We may see a church in its very beginning form, a very small group of people. It doesn't have to be a large group. I would say that most often it is a small group of believers, gathering together, seeking the Lord.

The first thing we need to recognize is whether those gathering together are meeting with the Lord. Perhaps they are only meeting with each other. Do they have a "meeting mentality," or are they gathering together in life--that is, in the presence of the Lord? Jesus said He would come, and that He and the Father would abide with us. The scripture tells us that He "*walks in the midst of the candlesticks*" (Rev. 1,2). Jesus will be in the midst of His church. We gather together in the Lord, in union with Him, and He is there to manifest Himself, to speak to our hearts, and to guide us into fullness. So this point is very important. Are we meeting with Christ?

We ourselves must be able to recognize Christ's presence. When we come together with others in the church, we cannot be too busy in our own selves to be still and know that He is God. We must be able to recognize His presence working in the midst.

Then we must know the outworking of the authority of Christ, just as the centurion in the 8th chapter of Matthew. When the centurion came to Jesus, asking that his servant be healed, he recognized the authority of God. Thus he received what he asked for. Recognizing Christ's authority goes with the

outworking of faith. If God is in our midst, there is spiritual authority flowing through the ones that are ministering and through individual members, because this is the way the church is ordered--underneath the headship of Christ.

Wherever we see spiritual authority, we will also see love. Authority without love is not spiritual authority. What we are talking about in the church is spiritual authority. God does have His order; He has given us the pattern for the church; and He has given government for the church, such as elders and overseers. God has given elders and overseers the grace to watch out over us as we partake of His word and function together as the church.

Most people today who come out of the organized church are looking for "freedom." But when we go back to God to see what He is doing, we find that it includes His order in His church. That can be difficult, because many times, both in religion and in the house church, man wants to set order aside to have "freedom." Freedom as the natural mind defines it is not God's purpose, and never will be.

God's order is entirely distinct from the natural "order" or hierarchy we see in manmade organizations. In the church we are ordered underneath the authority of God because we recognize that authority, because His presence is in our midst, and because we see what His order is and how and why it is given. God does not change His order. It's very clear today that men are trying make man and woman equal in their function. But as we look at the scriptures, we see that God never has. From the very beginning he made man and woman distinct. The woman is entirely different from the man, and He tells us through the apostle Paul that in the church the woman is to be silent. She is not to usurp authority over the man (I Tim. 2:12).

Paul also lays out the order for the functioning of gifts and ministries (I Cor. 14). So, God does have an order, and we must be able to recognize that order in some degree, to recognize the church and find it in the locality in which we live.

One of the most important things we need to look for is God's love. It needs to be seen and experienced in our own lives. When God comes into the lives of believers, they are known because *"they love the brethren"* (I John 3:14). There is a love that brings them together, and that love is the divine nature of the Lord, given to us by the Spirit when He comes to abide within us. Jesus paid the price at Calvary, so that the Holy Spirit could come and indwell every believer. Paul tells us in Ephesians that the Spirit which was given is also building us together a habitation for God. We must see this as a reality. Even though we may experience it in varying degrees, we must recognize that this is what God is doing: building us together, making us one, so that we can apprehend that which we have been apprehended for (Phil. 3:12).

We must realize that we need to be fed. That is the purpose of the ministry God has placed in the midst. If we do not have it, we need to pray to the Lord to give us ministry. God will give us those who truly have a revelation of the Lord and what He is doing, so that we may be built together, and grow and mature to the full stature of Christ.

Gifts in the Church

God has not called everybody to have a ministry in the church. He has given certain ministries or "gifts" to the church. Ministries are ministries of grace. They must have the anointing of God. The minister knows what God is doing as He builds His church. As God is building His church, He uses these gifts He has given to enable the church to grow and be strengthened in spiritual things.

If God is truly working in the midst of His people, He will work by men who are called, prepared, and sent by Him. This has been the working of God from the very beginning. When God's people first came together as the church and started to know the building of God, it was Jesus Christ who gave different gifts to the church. He gave teachers and prophets for the ministry of His word. He gave the gift of apostles, who would be sent out for the purpose of seeing the local church come into expression in other localities. He sent the evangelist who would propagate the gospel and see people brought into the kingdom of God. But for the working in the local church, God has designated two particular gifts: teachers and prophets. These are very meaningful if we understand what they are for.

The prophet is to hold up the revelation of what God is doing. These must be men that have a spiritual sense of the presence of God and His working, those that see clearly what God desires. The apostle Paul termed himself a "master builder." He saw what God was doing, and he said, "You can build on this foundation" and no other (I Cor. 3:10-11). The foundation is Christ Jesus Himself.

We cannot confuse the ministry of the prophet with the gift of prophecy that comes by the Spirit. The manifestations of the Spirit, such as prophecy, can come through those who are not prophets. The ministry of the prophet is a continual sharing of the word, bringing forth the purpose of God and keeping it clear before the local church.

The teacher is the one who takes the word from the Lord, breaks it up and feeds the flock. Both of these gifts rely upon the anointing of God to make His word alive and nourish the ones that hear it. We need both prophet and teacher functioning in some degree of grace in each gathering, to give the proper expression of the body of Christ, functioning and expressing the will of God.

The Expression of the Church Is Local

Distance is the only thing that divides the church. It is not divided by doctrine. While it is worldwide in reality, it is local in its expression. As we look back to the Bible, we see that Paul ordained elders in every church. Paul also told Titus in one place to ordain elders in every city. I think we can clearly see that the church's boundaries are a city or locality. The church government God has given meets the need within these boundaries. When we go further than that, we run into problems. If we have less than that, we have problems. So, we need God's order. We need to realize that God wants one expression of Himself in every city or locality.

Today, with cities being as large as they are, it may not be practical to have just one church in one city. But each locality should have one church, functioning autonomously under the headship of Christ. It is there so that believers may go and be fed as God has designed. It is not controlled by man, but God has ordained elders or overseers to watch out over and care for the people of the Lord who have been added to the church by the Spirit.

Not "Perfection" But Reality

While looking for the church, we should keep in mind that we are not going to find a "perfect" group. As God is working in the midst of a people, there will be growth. More often than not, we come in with our own ideas, and we need to be cleansed by the Word and by the ministry of oversight, those who care for our souls and for the direction we are moving in.

Again, when we come looking for the church, we must first realize that we are meeting with Christ--that Christ is in the midst of His people. This is not just a natural presence; this is a spiritual presence as God moves by His Spirit. We must recognize Christ's authority as the Head--that He is truly in control. If members are not attached to Christ, and if Christ is not in control, in some measure

building us together as we function underneath the Head, then something is drastically wrong. This may be only another sect or group, not the church.

We cannot have members that are lawless, moving in a liberty which is not really liberty. Jesus Christ brings us into what He is doing, and as Paul said, we are bond-slaves to Christ. We are not bound by the Law any longer; we are freed to do the will of God. That is what the church is all about: doing His will.

Then, as we have already said, we cannot overlook the order that God has provided for His church. We need to have some knowledge of this. So we need to search the scriptures to see what the order of God is. We need to know what the position of man is, and what the qualifications for leadership, oversight and ministry are. These are laid out very clearly for us in I Timothy and in Titus. Men are appointed or recognized for the grace that is working through them, and they meet certain qualifications that are laid down by the Spirit of God through the apostle Paul.

After we find the local expression of the church, recognizing what God is doing, seeing His authority and His order, we must be willing to submit ourselves to that working. We submit to the authority of Christ in the midst of this group. We must be willing to be involved in what God is doing there. We must be willing for brothers and sisters in the group to be involved in our lives. It is not a question of others dictating what we should do, but being involved in the proper way. This is on the foundation that God's love is known, recognized, and experienced in the midst. Everything is governed by the love of God. Even the authority of Christ is governed by His love.

Looking for a House Church?

God is able to give us the direction that we need, to know how the church functions, how to recognize it, and where it is located. He can direct us. If He is going to direct everything else in our lives, He can surely direct us in this.

To be able to recognize the church in our locality, we must have some knowledge and some experience with the Lord Himself. Most of us have come out of a group that has a well-known name out front. They are called by this name, and they are recognized by certain doctrines or leadership. But when we come into the true working of the body of Christ, the local church, it is recognizable only because Christ is in the midst, and He is the Head. If that is not a reality, we had better continue to look further until we find those that are truly gathering together and looking to the Lord, asking God for the direction they need.

May the Lord encourage you in these times of change, as we see the church come back into expression in different places where people desire to know the working of God as it was in the beginning. We want to see new wine put into new wineskins. If we try to contain God in the "old," we will lose both the blessing and the container. God has called us who have been called out of the world unto Himself to be containers of His fullness, of Himself, in order that we may grow up unto full stature, as true sons of God. Just because people are meeting in a house with a "free spirit" does not mean they are meeting under the headship of Christ. That will only be determined as we see the fruit this movement produces.

May God help us in these days to look to Him, and to know each day the power and presence of the Holy Spirit working in our lives. May the Lord quicken these words to your heart. May you stay before God until you know His direction and leading.