

Built on the Rock*Nikolai Grundtvoig (1783–1872); tr. Carl Doving (1867–1937)*

Built on the Rock, the church shall stand
 even when steeples are falling;
 Christ builds His church in ev'ry land;
 bells still are chiming and calling,
 calling the young and old to rest,
 calling the souls of those distressed,
 longing for life everlasting.

Not in a temple made with hands
 God the Almighty is dwelling;
 high in the heav'ns His temple stands,
 all earthly temples excelling.
 Yet He who dwells in heaven above
 chooses to live with us in love,
 making our body His temple.

We are God's house of living stones,
 built for His own habitation;
 He fills our hearts, His humble thrones,
 granting us life and salvation.
 Yet to the place, an earthly frame,
 we come with thanks to praise His name;
 God grants His people true blessing.

Thro' all the passing years, O Lord,
 grant that, when church bells are ringing,
 many may come to hear God's Word
 where He the promise is bringing:
 "I know My own, My own know Me,
 you, not the world, My face shall see;
 My peace I leave with you. Amen."

ΤΩ ΚΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ*In the Nick of Time***No Church on Sunday? Part 2: What About House Churches?***Jeff Straub*

Last week I began a brief series on an influential pastor's decision to cancel services at his nine-campus church on the final Sunday of 2018. About the same time my essay was being written, another well-known pastor released a podcast on the same issue. Our addressing the same question from a similar vantage point was providential.

In the first essay, I dealt with the priority of first-day-of-the-week worship from a biblical point of view. I rehearsed standard, boilerplate New Testament theology that has been widely accepted across the spectrum of Christianity since the post-apostolic era. Christians worshipped *together* on Sunday, the first day of the week. The church is a *gathered* community of believers. Worship is a corporate experience which means it is rightly done *together*. The Bible models this and the church has universally followed this practice.

What about worshipping at home either as a family or a small group? I say *small* group because few believers have the kind of houses that would accommodate a large gathering, unless it is in a warm climate and the group holds an outdoor meeting. One might have hundreds gathered under such circumstances. A house meeting is going to have far fewer in attendance. Moreover, what the brother in question was suggesting was a *family* worship experience as opposed to a corporate gathering or a small group. His Twitter feed declared "there are no services at our campus locations this weekend. This is a great chance to worship at home with your family!"

This was promoted as family worship and not small group worship, although perhaps some of the congregation gathered with other believers. I took exception to the "family worship" format at minimum, because it deviates from the recognized New Testament pattern which Christendom has historically embraced, irrespective of theological orientation—gathered *corporate* worship.

Now, I am sure there are those who would emphatically push back at this criticism because, after all, didn't believers start out by holding *church* meetings in houses? Early churches didn't have buildings, so why should they be important today? If Christians met in homes in the New Testament, what would be wrong with doing so today? This really is a good question that



In the Nick of Time is published by Central Baptist Theological Seminary.

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www.centralseminary.edu | info@centralseminary.edu
 900 Forestview Lane N, Plymouth, MN 55441 | 800.827.1043

deserves a thoughtful answer. Is tradition the only real reason we gather in buildings tradition? The answer is not as simple as one might think.

In the first place, while early New Testament believers did indeed meet in houses, it was not their first choice for a meeting place. The earliest Christians started by meeting in Jewish places of worship—initially in the Temple for those converts in Jerusalem (Acts 2:46) and in the synagogues for those outside the city (Acts 13:14ff) scattered across the Diaspora. In both cases, soon after Christians tried to assemble in these places as Christians, they were driven out as Jewish heretics by angry hordes of non-Christian Jews. Christians didn't abandon Jewish places because they found them inconvenient, but because they found them dangerous.

Without the ability to meet in Jewish places, where could they meet? Some may have met outside, in public spaces, or on private property away from the prying eyes of their detractors. Many believers met in the houses of other believers (Acts 2:46). We know this because Paul refers to “churches” in “houses” on several occasions (Rom 16:5, 1 Cor 16:19, Col 4:15). Clearly “house churches” existed in the New Testament era. Also, it is quite likely that when Paul met the elders from Ephesus in Acts 20, he was meeting with men ministering in house churches across the city. Elder plurality arose out of the need to minister in these small group settings. There is no evidence or biblical intimation that the church at Ephesus had a building. They met in homes across the city and a *plurality* of elders was needed to care for the many small gatherings who met for *church*.¹ I have a friend who pastors two churches in Romania about 15 minutes apart by automobile. It would be impractical to try to handle two churches on a Sunday if he had to walk between them. This brother preaches three to five times per Sunday between these places. Only in the modern era can this be done. Still, these believers have buildings in which to gather. In the early New Testament era, there were no buildings.

Over time, Christians began to pool resources and erect buildings for convenience for gathered worship. Sadly, many of these early structures were razed by the authorities during the years of persecution that preceded the Edict of Milan (313 AD). Under Constantine's administration, after he legalized Christianity, it received favored status. The emperor actually built or funded churches across the empire to curry favor of Christians with the aim of solidifying his civil authority over the nation. House churches likely still existed in places, but these gradually gave way to dedicated buildings for gathered worship.

¹ At this point, I don't want to get into the idea of the church as *ekklesia* because there is dispute as to what the word signifies, although many think that the very nature of the word highlights a *gathered* group of people *called out* from the world to follow Jesus Christ.

Today, there is a strong house church movement in some parts of the world. It is well known that many Christians meet in homes in China, though this is not their preferred practice. Since 1951, Chinese Christians have had few options—either the state sanctioned Three-Self Patriot Movement (or its Catholic equivalent) or illegal house churches. They are illegal because they refuse to be controlled by government officials. Many house churches have dedicated buildings or use apartments for their meetings. Now the government is oppressing these illegal churches who refuse to be kept under the thumb of the government. Some have built buildings without government permission only to have their crosses torn down, their buildings razed, and their pastors arrested for the crime of corporate worship. This reminds me of 17th century England, when the infamous Conventicle Act kept more than five people not of the same family from gathering together for worship. When believers defied the Conventicle Act (1664), the government imposed the 5-Mile Act (1665) which made it illegal for ministers to travel to within five miles of parishes from which they had been removed.

Nevertheless, Christians resisted these strictures, even as in other countries. Christians gather secretly in “house churches” or out in the woods because corporate *public* worship is otherwise too dangerous. Some Christians resist the persecution by deliberately holding public corporate gatherings, not to oppose their governments but to show their allegiance to Christ and His Word. The thought of deliberately cancelling an established public worship service for no greater reason than congregational fatigue is incomprehensible to much of the global Church.

Yes, historically, Christians have worshipped in houses. Sometimes, family worship may even be a necessity (family illness or travel to remote areas). These occasions are out of necessity and not out of preference. The global Church has chosen to gather together in dedicated buildings wherever possible as a public testimony of their loyalty to Jesus Christ. The pattern is hardly on the small groups but on the large assemblies with their choruses of voices raised to the glory of God!



This essay is by Jeff Straub, Professor of Historical and Systematic Theology at Central Baptist Theological Seminary. Not every one of the professors, students, or alumni of Central Seminary necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses.
