

## **Module 4**

### **The DNA of Kingdom House Church Ministry**







## Module 4: The DNA of Kingdom House Church Ministry

### Module 4-A: A River That Flows House To House

#### Introduction: The Kingdom, The Church & The River

As we saw in the previous Module, it has always been, and continues to be, the heart of God to do three things: He is building His Kingdom, He is calling out His People, and He is pouring out His River. Throughout the ages since the light of creation first shone on Adam and Eve, God has been calling a people to Himself. Now, in this Age of the Spirit He is pouring out the River of His Spirit to empower and encourage His people throughout these end times. But rivers are not static like oceans, ponds or pools. A river is dynamic, constantly moving, always seeking new places into which to flow. The power of moving water is not to be underestimated - ask any flood survivor. While men may trap and control natural rivers behind man made dams, the River of God's Spirit is not so easily tamed by men. How foolish we are to imagine that we can trap and hold God's River in a building or any other human structure. And so, following the ascension of Jesus, the early church soon received a "crash course (or "splash course") in the power of moving water, particularly the kind that flows from the Throne of God. It washed them out of the Upper Room where they had gathered and swept them into the streets of Jerusalem with great power and blessing. They quickly learned how to "ride the river." They didn't build boxes or swimming pools. They simply allowed the River to flood over them and to flood through their homes like channels. From Jerusalem they allowed the River to carry them out to Lydda, Joppa, Caesarea, Antioch and beyond. They quickly became "people of the River" and their homes became channels through which the River of God's Spirit flowed as it carried them to the ends of the earth, just as Jesus had promised.



God was building His Kingdom, calling out His people and pouring out the River of His Spirit. And the homes of those early believers were the new footholds of this Kingdom and the first channels through which that River flowed. The River of God would now flow person to person and house to house.

#### First Century Background<sup>53</sup>

In the world of Jesus and the early Church Jews gathered in assemblies known as Synagogues which had originated during the Babylonian captivity some 400 years earlier. The Synagogue, which derives from the Greek verb *sunago* meaning "to gather together," referred primarily to the official gathering of 10 adult male Jews. Only secondarily did it come to refer to the place where they gathered. Following Pentecost the early believers, who were mostly Jews, continued to attend synagogue and to worship in the Temple in Jerusalem. But they also added an aspect that had been missing among pious Jews. They began to meet in one another's homes. Jewish converts to Christianity were soon banned from synagogues and open persecution made attendance at Temple services difficult (As Paul discovered in Acts 21). As the Church spread into predominantly Gentile (i.e., non-Jewish) areas, neither Synagogue nor Temple attendance were important to Gentile converts. But the Church, consisting of Jews and Gentiles, continued to meet "house to house."

The "church" began to replace the Synagogue as the focus of Christian activity. But like the original meaning of "synagogue," the designation "church" referred to any assembly of Christians gathering together for worship. The word translated "church" in the New Testament is the Greek word *ekklesia*. It comes from the Greek preposition "ek" meaning "from" or "out of," and the Greek verb *kaleo* meaning "to call." Hence, the *ekklesia* was the "assembly of called-out ones." The word has no reference to a meeting place or building. **It is a description of the people who assemble together, not a reference to their structure, building or organization.** They are those who have been "called out" of "the domain of darkness and transferred to the kingdom of His beloved Son" (Colossians 1:13).

The word *ekklesia* has both a Gentile and a Jewish background:

-  In classical Greek *ekklesia* referred to the citizen-assembly of a Greek city-state (or *polis*).
-  In the Greek Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Hebrew O.T.) *ekklesia* is one of the words used to refer to the nation of Israel in its religious character as the "congregation of Jehovah". Jews of Jesus' day could not read Hebrew. The Greek Septuagint was the Old Testament with which most Jews were familiar. In Deuteronomy and the following O.T. books (except Jeremiah and Ezekiel) *ekklesia* is the regular Septuagint translation equivalent for the Hebrew word *qahal* ("assembly"). Jews of Jesus' day would relate the *ekklesia* (which we translate "church") with the *qahal* ("assembly") of the Old Testament. New

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<sup>53</sup>Perhaps the most extensive modern work on the house churches of the New Testament is Roger W. Gehring, *House Church and Mission: The Importance of Household Structures in Early Christianity* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 2004).

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Testament scholar F. F. Bruce notes: “The Christian “*ekklesia*” was both new and old -- new, because of its relation and witness to Jesus as the Messiah and to the epoch-making events of His death, exaltation, and sending of the Spirit; old, because it was the continuation and successor of the old “congregation of Jehovah” which had formerly been confined within the limits of one nation but was now to be thrown open to all believers without distinction”.<sup>54</sup>





### House Churches In The New Testament

As the River of God’s Spirit began to flow, there could be little question that the “house,” household” or “home” played a very important and unique role in the life of the New Testament *ekklesia*. It really is impossible to understand the life of the New Testament Church apart from the context of the “house” where it met and where most ministry actually occurred. Their homes became the new channels for the River of God’s Spirit. So let’s start there. In the Greek New Testament there were 2 primary words for “house”:

-  ***oikia*** - In Classical Greek this word referred primarily to the dwelling place, the “house” itself, consisting of a building.
-  ***oikos*** - This word originally referred to the broader “estate” of which the house (*oikia*) was a part, but which also included the premises, the family property and even the inhabitants of the house. It was this broader or extended sense that led to the concept of *oikos* as encompassing one’s “extended family.”

By the time of the New Testament the two words had lost most of their clear distinctiveness and were used more or less as synonyms, although some distinctives remained. For example, when the New Testament says that salvation comes to a “house,” the word used is always *oikos*, not *oikia* (with the possible exception of John 4:53). Also, the word *oikia* is **never** used in the NT to refer to “the church in your house,” only *oikos*. The distinctive use of *oikos* rather than *oikia* in these two situations suggests that Scripture is emphasizing the extended “household” (or what we might refer to as the “home” or “extended family”) aspect of the people involved rather than the physical “house”. New Testament “house church” wasn’t about meeting in small buildings called houses. It was (and is) about the River of God’s Spirit flowing through the *ekklesia* which gathered and met there.

In the New Testament, homes were the primary centers of ministry activity, both for Jesus and for the early Church. The gospel was preached in homes (see Acts 5:42 & 20:20) and the Lord’s supper was celebrated (usually as part of a meal) in homes (Acts 2:46). The creation of these home-based *ekklesias* or “house churches” was a critical step in the spreading of the Gospel. By means of its network of “house churches” the early *ekklesia* placed the good news of the Kingdom of God at the center of the natural order of life. This became the regular or normative pattern for the next 250 years. The Kingdom of God became inseparably integrated into the extended family, and the early *ekklesia* quickly came to resemble a large extended family, not a large over-extended organization. The centrality of the home in ministry can be seen in the following examples:

-  The magi (or wise men) followed the star to the house where Jesus, Mary & Joseph were living in Bethlehem (Matthew 2:10).
-  Jesus ministered the gospel in people’s homes:
  - Jesus entered Peter’s house to minister to Peter’s mother-in-law (Matt. 8:14; Luke 4:38);
  - Jesus ministered in the house of Matthew the tax collector (Matthew 9:9-10);
  - Jesus entered the house of Jairus to heal his daughter (Luke 8:49);
  - Jesus ministered in the house of a Pharisee (Luke 7:36ff);
  - Jesus ministered in the house of Zacchaeus (Luke 19:5);
  - The “upper room” where Jesus observed the Passover was a room in a private home (Luke 22:7-12).
-  Jesus told the disciples to use private homes as their base for ministry in a community (Matt. 10:11-14; Luke 10:5-7).
-  The early *ekklesia* can be seen meeting in homes and moving from house to house (Acts 2:46; Acts 5:52).

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<sup>54</sup>F.F. Bruce, **Commentary on the Book of The Acts**, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament*, F.F. Bruce, General Editor (Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1977), p. 116.

- ✍ The Apostle Peter used the home of Simon the tanner as a base for his ministry in Joppa (Acts 9:43).
- ✍ Peter also ministered the gospel in the home and to the assembled household of Cornelius (Acts 10:22 & 11:12).
- ✍ The Apostle Paul ministered in the home and to the household of Lydia in Philippi (Acts 16:15).
- ✍ Paul described his work in Ephesus as ministering both publicly (in the School of Tyrannus) and “house to house” (Acts 20:20).
- ✍ The early ekklesia met in the homes of various individuals:<sup>55</sup>
  - ❑ Acts 18:7 - An ekklesia in Corinth met in the house of Titius Justus, a God-fearer who lived next to the Synagogue;
  - ❑ Acts 18:8 - Another ekklesia in Corinth met in the house of Crispus, leader of the Synagogue in Corinth;
  - ❑ Acts 21:8 - An ekklesia appears to have met in the home of Philip the evangelist in Caesarea;
  - ❑ 1 Corinthians 1:16 - Another ekklesia in Corinth met in the house of Stephanus;
  - ❑ Romans 16:5 - Paul greets the ekklesia which met in the home of Prisca & Aquila;
  - ❑ Colossians 4:15 - Paul greets Nympha and the ekklesia meeting in her house;
  - ❑ Philemon 2 - Paul greets the ekklesia meeting in the house of Philemon.

It is probably safe to say that nearly every New Testament Epistle (or letter), with the two exceptions of Hebrews and Revelation, was written to an ekklesia meeting in someone’s home, or to an individual who had an ekklesia meeting in his or her home!

***The early ekklesia functioned like an extended family, and the homes where they met became the new channels through which the River of God’s Spirit now flowed with great power!***

### **And The River Flowed Through the Early Network of Ekklesias**

Acts 2:43-47 provides us with an excellent snap shot of New Testament house churches at work. Within a brief period of 50 days (from the resurrection to Pentecost) the early Church found itself in the midst of a spiritual outpouring (a revival!) of great power as the River of God’s Spirit was poured out upon the Church. As a result the ekklesia quickly grew from 120 people gathered in the upper room to a group of 3,000 new converts (Acts 2:41). And since this number probably represented only the number of men (see Acts 4:4), the addition of women and children actually pushed this total to around 10,000 new converts who were now a part of the young church. If true, then Acts 2:43-47 is describing a network of home-based ekklesias (house churches) that absorbed as many as 10,000 young believers. Within another chapter-and-a-half (encompassing what appears to be only a few days) the ranks of the young church swelled again with another 5,000 men (Acts 4:4) or up to another 15,000 men, women and children (for a total ingathering of as many as 25,000 new converts). And yet this structure of networking ekklesias, meeting in homes, absorbed this flood of converts and met their needs for encouragement, instruction and provision. Could our present-day traditional, institutional church-building structure do this? I seriously doubt it.

Despite sporadic persecutions by the Jewish religious establishment, the book of Acts portrays the early Church (remember: think ekklesia) as living in relative peace with the Roman government. Acts ends with the Apostle Paul under house arrest with relative freedom to receive friends and proclaim the gospel while awaiting the outcome of his appeal to Caesar, “*And he stayed two full years in his own rented quarters, and was welcoming all who came to him, preaching the kingdom of God, and teaching concerning the Lord Jesus Christ with all openness, unhindered*” (Acts 28:30-31). But that situation would soon change for this new sect as it came to the increasing attention of the Roman authorities. What this new sect was doing was believing in someone or something greater than Rome and the divine emperor. And that was dangerous. All Romans were

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<sup>55</sup>I am intentionally using the term ekklesia to refer to New Testament churches here in order to help the reader make a mental distinction between the “assembly of called out ones” and the location, place, building or house in which the ekklesia met. In our Western culture the word “church” elicits immediate images of buildings called “churches,” something which would never have occurred in the New Testament.

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“religious.”<sup>56</sup> They had a pantheon of gods and everyone was free to believe in any gods they chose, so long as they were also willing to acknowledge the “genius” of the divine Emperor by offering a pinch of incense upon altars dedicated to him. Romans would offer their pinch of incense with the usual incantation, “Caesar is Lord.” By doing this, average Romans acknowledged the supremacy of the state in all practical matters.

But this new sect and its followers were different. They worshiped a god named “Chrestus”<sup>57</sup> or “Christ,” a Jewish rabbi who had been crucified in Palestine, but whom they claimed had been raised from the dead. They rejected idols of all the gods (which had caused no small riot in the city of Ephesus), and refused to make any idol of their own god (which in Roman eyes was highly peculiar). In fact, they claimed that there was only one true God. It was rumored that they practiced cannibalism in their secret meetings (something about eating the body and drinking the blood of someone). But worst of all, they refused to acknowledge the “genius” of the divine Emperor. They refused to acknowledge the “spirit of Rome” and the supremacy of the State. And this made them a threat.

For this reason, two of their leaders, one a former fisherman named Simon Peter and the other an itinerant Jewish philosopher named Saul (or Paul) of Tarsus, had been arrested, tried for sedition and treason against the Emperor, and had been executed as enemies against the State. This had taken place under Emperor Nero, around A.D. 65. From that time onward, for the next 250 years (until Emperor Constantine) it was a criminal offense against the State, punishable by death, to openly profess Christianity. Although actual persecutions were sporadic and localized (but intense when they occurred), the threat was real and constant. The mere accusation by a neighbor, friend or acquaintance could mean arrest, imprisonment, a challenge to confess or renounce, and death.

In order to pursue their faith without drawing attention to themselves these early Christians were forced to take unusual steps. The early Church was forced to become an underground networking church. The Book of Acts (written prior to the beginning of official Roman persecution) demonstrates that the early Church had always been a networking church that networked house-to-house. Indeed the anonymous author of the New Testament book of Hebrews admonished these believers, “let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another; and all the more, as you see the day drawing near” (Hebrews 10:24-25). This was simple first century networking among Christian believers. They met in homes and ministered to one another privately, while also attending public worship at the Temple and in local synagogues. People associated with the early Church openly and the Church freely accepted all who came. But once the official Roman persecutions began, certain things had to change. Churches began to meet secretly in members’ homes, or in secret locations (such as in the subterranean catacombs beneath the city of Rome). In order to identify themselves to fellow believers (or to prevent identifying themselves to hostile non-believers) they created “secret signs” including the sign of the fish. In Greek, the word “fish” *ichthus*) represented an “acrostic” where each letter represented the first letter in the following phrase in Greek: Jesus Christ - God’s - Son - Saviour. By drawing the sign of a fish one believer could identify himself as a Christian to a fellow believer (who would acknowledge the sign), but a non-believer would ignore the cryptic message. In difficult times you need to be able to identify and network with people whom you know you can trust.

And the River flowed on . . . .

### Pliny Encounters The Kingdom, The People & The River

In spite of the growing official persecution of Christianity, the River of God’s Spirit continued to flow in great power through the lives and homes of these early believers. Roughly 80 years after the death and resurrection of Jesus, and about 50 years after the end of the N.T. book of Acts the River of God encountered a Roman governor by the name of Pliny. Pliny the Younger (Pliny Secundus) was a member of the Roman Senatorial class, a famous Roman orator and an administrator who had achieved a reputation as a prosecutor and defense counsel in political cases, including the defense of two former governors of the Province of Bithynia (in what is Turkey or Asia Minor). As an acknowledgment for his services the Emperor Trajan appointed his friend Pliny to be the imperial legate and Governor of Bithynia where he served from 111-113 AD. And it was at this time that Pliny encountered a Kingdom, a people and a River.<sup>58</sup>

We have a whole set of exchanges of Pliny’s letters with the emperor Trajan on a variety of administrative and political matters. Two of these letters, 96 and 97, are the most famous (Pliny, *Letters* 10.96-97). In Letter 96 Pliny encounters

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<sup>56</sup>There are records from the Great Persecution of Roman magistrates admonishing Christians with the words, “We, too, are a religious people. So what makes you special.” See Wilkens, ***Christians As The Romans Saw Them***.

<sup>57</sup>Seutonius, *Life of Claudius*, 25.4. See also his *Lives of the Caesars*, 26.2.

<sup>58</sup>For a detailed treatment of Pliny’s encounter with Christians see Wilkens, ***Christians As The Romans Saw Them***.

Christianity for the first time and seeks Trajan's advice and approval of his actions in dealing with Christians. Pliny's letter gives us a "snap shot" of the early Church and its practices as seen and understood by a prominent unbeliever (i.e., the Roman Governor). Trajan's response in letter 97 contains the first surviving statement of imperial policy respecting the treatment of Christians. The following is Paragraph 4 from Pliny's Letter To Trajan:

*1 - 4. "They (the Christians) asserted, however, that the sum and substance of their fault or error had been that they were accustomed to meet on a fixed day before dawn and sing responsively a hymn to Christ as to a god, and to bind themselves by oath, not to some crime, but not to commit fraud, theft, or adultery, not falsify their trust, nor to refuse to return a trust when called upon to do so. When this was over, it was their custom to depart and to assemble again to partake of food--but ordinary and innocent food (Note: Christians had been accused of practicing cannibalism). Even this, they affirmed, they had ceased to do after my edict by which, in accordance with your instructions, I had forbidden political associations. Accordingly, I judged it all the more necessary to find out what the truth was by torturing two female slaves who were called deaconesses. But I discovered nothing else but depraved, excessive superstition."*

Here we see Christians gathering together as an ekklesia on a specific day to worship together (by singing a hymn to Christ) and to pledge among themselves to do no harm, and gathering again to share a meal and probably to observe the Lord's Supper. While not stated, these activities probably took place in someone's home (where food could be prepared and served). Welcome to house church, 2<sup>nd</sup> century style! Does that look simple enough that you could do it in your home along with fellow believers? Probably!

How effective was this type of 2<sup>nd</sup> century "house church?" Apparently it was very effective, because Pliny goes on to complain to Trajan, "*For the matter seemed to me to warrant consulting you, especially because of the number involved. For many persons of every age, every rank, and also of both sexes are and will be endangered. For the contagion of this superstition has spread not only to the cities but also to the villages and farms.*" Yes! Isn't that what we want, a genuine and "infectious" faith that spreads like a "contagion" through our homes, our families, our friends, our neighbors and our communities? Isn't it time we returned to the house church ekklesia of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century? Isn't it time for your home to become an outpost for the Kingdom of God, and for the River of God's spirit to flow in power through you and the ekklesia that meets in your house?<sup>59</sup>



*And the River flowed on . . . .*

### Evangelism In The Early Church

In the face of such growing persecution for their faith, how did the early church go about evangelizing? And why aren't we nearly as effective as they were? Ramsay MacMullen, professor of ancient history at Yale, has estimated that in each generation some 500,000 people were added to the church up until the conversion of Emperor Constantine in AD 312, when the church finally made up between 5 and 8 per cent of the population of the Roman Empire.<sup>60</sup> Think about that. Christianity represented only 5-to-8 per cent of the population when Christianity conquered the Roman empire. Today it's estimated that born again Christians represent 38% of all adults in America, yet we are losing our communities, our nation and our culture.

What's the difference between their tremendous effectiveness and our seeming powerlessness to reverse the spiritual rot in our culture? It certainly wasn't their evangelistic technique, their public preaching or their seeker sensitive worship services. In his book, **Houses That Change The World**, author Wolfgang Simson observes, "*Except for Philip (Acts 9) and the fivefold ministry (Eph. 4:11), there is almost no mention of 'evangelists' or 'evangelism' as we know it in the New Testament and the records of the early church at all . . . . Arthur Darby Nock says that in the history of the early church 'there was little, if any', direct preaching to the public masses; it was simply too dangerous.*"<sup>61</sup> In fact, the pagan Caecilius, a contemporary of the early church, reported that Christians were '*silent in public, but chattering in the corners.*' We forget that, after the year AD 64, shortly after the book of Acts, Christianity was a forbidden faith, profession of which was punishable by death. There were no "seeker sensitive" church services in the early church. Again, Wolfgang Simson says, "*Although the church in Corinth was still open to outsiders, from the mid-first century onwards pagans were usually neither invited nor admitted to Christian meetings. After the persecution under Nero in the middle of the first century, most churches closed their doors to outsiders . . . . The fellowship meetings of the Christians were not at all meant to be attractive for outsiders, because*

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<sup>59</sup>If you would like to do a house church lesson on Pliny and the early church we have included a guided study of Pliny's complete letter and Trajan's response in Appendix A of this book. See "*Pliny and Trajan on the Christians*" in Appendix A.






<sup>60</sup>Wolfgang Simson, **Houses That Change The World** (UK: Paternoster Publishing, 1998), p. 40

<sup>61</sup>Ibid., p. 42-43

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they were not designed for them.<sup>62</sup>

So, if there were no evangelistic meetings or public preaching, no seeker sensitive services for unbelievers, how did Christianity spread? What attracted unbelievers to what the heretic Celsus called a "secret society?" Here is what Wolfgang Simson says, "*Beyond the fact that Christians lived in organic and easily multipliable house churches, equipped and guided by the fivefold ministry (Eph. 4:11), some of the main reasons for people becoming Christians in ancient times, according to numerous historic studies done by Alan Kreider and others, are as follows . . .*" Wolfgang gives 5 basic reasons why people were attracted to the early church. I want to summarize these 5 reasons:<sup>63</sup>

-  **Curiosity** - The church appealed to people's basic instinct and desire to be part of an exclusive family. According to Wolfgang, people were not freely admitted to churches, and this only sparked and heightened their interest. He goes on to say that today, we are sometimes in danger of pressing home answers to people who have not even asked the right questions, and thereby preventing people from becoming truly curious. Does your faith make people truly curious? Or are you throwing pearls before swine by giving people answers to questions they haven't asked?
-  **Steadfastness in persecution and martyrdom.** I was struck by this quote: "*The first time that many people in the first centuries set eyes on a real, living Christian was when they saw one die*".
-  **Exorcism.** The early church father, Irenaeus, wrote of the evangelistic function of exorcism, "*Those who have been cleansed often both believe in Christ and join themselves to the church.*" Justin of Rome, writing in AD 150, described how Christians helped other people almost systematically to renounce demons, and saw them being liberated from spiritual oppression mainly in four key areas: unlawful sex, the secret and magic arts, escalating private wealth, and violent xenophobia. "*The early Christians would have seen people who practiced illicit sex outside marriage, who accumulated material wealth for personal gain, who were involved in occultism, or who were violent to foreigners and strangers, as demonically bound people who needed the help of Jesus to be released from these overpowering spiritual forces.*"
-  **They had found a way to live.** Before they were called Christians, the early believers were called followers of "the way." After, hadn't Jesus said the He was "the way." Christians had not only found the right reason and way to die (as martyrs), they had also found the right way to live. The way they organized and structured their life was called "the church." Church wasn't an organization or a building, it was a lifestyle.
-  **The teachings & person of Jesus.** Many early Christians were convinced "*that conversion began not so much at the level of belief but at the level of lifestyle.*" Today, we ask people to "believe" without requiring any alteration in their lifestyle. The early church held that the person unwilling to change their lifestyle was a person unprepared to believe. "*The church did not preach itself, it preached Christ by promoting his teaching and by living his lifestyle.*"

 *And the River flowed on . . . .*

### The Decline of the House Church and The Rise of the Church Building

For most of the first three hundred years of its existence Christianity consisted of groups of believers, *ekklesias*, which met for worship in private homes. Author and New Testament scholar Bradley Blue, writing in "*Acts And The House Church*," summarizes this period as follows:

*"Recent archaeological evidence from such diverse places as Capernaum, Rome and Kent strongly suggests that for the first few hundred years of the Church's existence, Christian groups gathered, not in large 'purpose-built' church buildings, but in domestic residences which could accommodate their needs. Sometimes these were renovated better to fit the needs of the community, but in at least one case (Dura-Europos) the internal renovations were carefully made invisible externally. The book of Acts mentions such figures as Aquila and Priscilla, Jason of Thessalonica, Simon the Tanner, Lydia and the Philippian Jailor (and their homes and hospitality) not merely out of gratitude for offering Christian leaders a place to sleep,*

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<sup>62</sup>Simson, *Houses That Changed the World*, p. 45

<sup>63</sup>Ibid., pp. 47-52

*but probably because they opened their homes for meetings of their local Christian communities.*<sup>64</sup>

The period of official persecution of Christians, from the reign of Nero in A.D. 67 until the rise of Constantine and the Edict of Nantes in A.D. 313 prevented the building of large formal dedicated buildings for Christian worship. Structures were limited to private residences which were occasionally renovated to accommodate large groups of Christian worshipers. But even this was risky since such residences could be seized and even destroyed. The ascension of Constantine to the Imperial Throne of Rome and the cessation of official persecution resulted in a building spree, encouraged by Constantine himself, who ordered Christian property restored and ordered the building of numerous “basilicas” or dedicated places of Christian worship throughout the Empire. Christians, having endured 50 years of The Great Persecution, began to congregate publicly in designated structures called “churches” for the first time in nearly 250 years.

This transition from house churches to centralized meeting places culminated under the Imperial rule of Theodosius I (AD 379-395). Following his ascension to the Imperial Throne in the East and his baptism in AD 380 Theodosius endorsed the Nicene Creed (the statement of faith produced by the Council of Nicea in AD 325) against the Arian faction of the church. In order to promote doctrinal orthodoxy and suppress Arian heretics, Theodosius ordered all Christians to profess the faith of the Bishops of Rome & Alexandria (the Nicene Creed) and he forbade heretics to meet within cities. He outlawed all forms of pagan worship, both public and private, throughout the empire. Theodosius is noted for stamping out the remnants of the old pagan Roman gods, but in his zeal to promote orthodoxy his actions also had the net effect of driving all worship out of private homes and into the basilicas where it could be overseen by a Bishop, and so the tradition of one person “pastoring” a “church” was born.



*And the River flowed on . . .*

### The Modern Re-Discovery Of The House Church

It is not my purpose here to recount the history of house churches from the time of Theodosius (late 5<sup>th</sup> Century) until today. Others have done that ably and I will leave it to the reader to explore that topic further.<sup>65</sup> Recently, house churches returned to prominence in the life of God’s people during the 1950s in China. It has been suggested that 1950 will one day be seen as the time when God began to complete the restoration of the early church by returning it to its house church roots. As Communism took over China in the 1950, all of the traditional western missionaries were expelled from country, the traditional churches were closed down and the leadership was either ostracized, jailed or killed. Yet, out of the fires of this terribly difficult period (known in China as the “Cultural Revolution”) emerged the greatest growth of the church in history. Much to their surprise, when China began to “re-open” in the 1980s and communication with believers could be re-established, western mission agencies discovered that the approximate 6 million believers of the 1950s had grown to well over 60 million! And, most of that spectacular growth occurred in the context of a 1st Century structure called a “house church” (the “Official” state church known as “Patriotic Three-Self Churches” encompassed roughly 15% of Chinese believers, while the illegal underground house churches account for roughly 85% of Chinese believers). Mega churches in the west which tout membership or attendance of 20,000 or more are dwarfed by Chinese house church networks of 10 million and more!

It has also been suggested that the year 1980 will be seen as a key date for the academic recognition of the importance of house churches. In 1997 A. J. Malherbe wrote a book entitled ***Social Aspects of Early Christianity***<sup>66</sup> in which he observed that up until that time (1977) “no major work has been devoted to the New Testament house church.” I was intrigued by this observation and decided to do a little quick research. Utilizing the OCLC FirstSearch system of a local college which searches libraries around the world, I found that between 1940 and 1979 there were 30 books written and available (in English) on the topic of “house churches.” But between 1980 and 2005 there were 215 books in English (including numerous books that treated both house and cell church) on “house churches.” So, in a real sense, the observation regarding 1980 as a “watershed” date may be correct. Something has definitely occurred in the past 25 years in terms of awareness regarding house churches!

I also reflected on the observation that the house church movement began to explode in China in the 1950s. I was sharing these thoughts with a member of our house church network and observing how it has only taken the mainline church,

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<sup>64</sup>Bradley Blue, “Acts And The House Church,” in ***The Book of Acts In Its First Century Setting***, vol. 2, David W. J. Gill and Conrad Gempf, eds. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994), p. 119-222.

<sup>65</sup>A good concise summary of that history can be found in Chapter 2, “House Churches In History” of Wolfgang Simson’s book, ***Houses That Change The World***.

<sup>66</sup>Abraham J. Malherbe, ***Social Aspects of Early Christianity***, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983).

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seminaries and missiologists 30 years to catch on to this move of God. His comment took me back. He said, “*Yep. Now they’re analyzing the dust that’s already settled.*” As I thought more about his comment it struck me that much (not all) of what is being written about house church is, in fact, an analysis of the past in the hope of recovering yesterday’s paradigm, whereas God wants us to begin **preparing** for what is about to come. The “dust” has settled from the last move of God, and after 30 years of analysis we’ve concluded that it was in fact biblical (much to God’s relief, I’m sure). Our question must now become, “*How do we use this information to prepare for the next and unfolding move of God?*” This reminds me of Reggie McNeal’s *New Reality #5: The Shift From Planning To Preparation*. What is the difference between “planning” a house church planting movement and “preparing” for a move of God’s Spirit through house churches? And how do we avoid drawing the wrong conclusions from these current on-going academic studies of house church, conclusions which leads to misapplications which in turn confuse culture with principle? Allow me to illustrate. **Wrong Application:** “*The early church was built around a patriarchal Jewish family structure, therefore, any valid expression of the Kingdom of God in house church today requires that we first re-institute a patriarchal Jewish family structure, “The Kingdom of God is at hand, repent and become a Jewish family.”* **Better Application:** *The message of the Kingdom touches and transforms our most basic relationships of life, turning our oikos into an ekklesia for the Kingdom of God, “The Kingdom of God is at hand, repent and believe the good news.”*

As I read some of these recent academic works (such as the recent one by Roger Gehring, **House Church And Mission**) I am struck by what seems to be a great deal of “*backward isogesis*” taking place. In other words, I think I am seeing and hearing 2005 years worth of ecclesiological and missiological vocabulary and baggage being brought to and imposed upon the text and the historical record. Mind you, I am not opposed to either missiology or ecclesiology. I am simply concerned about imposing pre-existing categories and paradigms on the Word, in this case, on what the Word has to say about house churches. Was it really a “missiological outreach” or “strategy” (as Gehring suggests) that motivated Jesus to live in Capernaum and hang out with Peter, James and John? At what point did Jesus’ friendship with fishermen, publicans and assorted sinners become a “strategic missiology?” Do you or I divide our friendships and relationships into “friends” and “missionally strategic friends?” Was it really a “missions strategy” that caused Phillip to live in Caesarea? Isn’t it just as likely that he, his wife and extended oikos grew up there, and that his wife threatened to stab him in the heart and make it look like an unfortunate cutlery accident if he ever tried to move them somewhere else, leaving him no choice but to do house church outreach in Caesarea. Yes, I’m being facetious, but I’m also making a point about our over-analyzing things and turning them into a “missiology. I’m just thankful we don’t know what Peter in Joppa had for breakfast, otherwise, someone would be promoting the “breakfast of missionaries” as part of a “missiology for gentile outreach”

At the heart of this academic or “missiological” discussion about house church, I am concerned that the vessel will become the message. It seems to me that turning house church into another missiology or ecclesiology runs the SUBSTANTIAL risk of confusing the vehicle/organization/location with the message: “*The kingdom of house church is at hand, repent and start one in your house (right after you become a Jewish family)*!” We need to remind one another that our message isn’t house church (or market place church, or simple church, etc.). Rather, our message is the Kingdom of God, a message which, in the thought of missiologist Leslie Newbigin, radically challenges all existing “plausibility structures.” I suppose that the current irony is that the message of the Kingdom is now a message which is radically challenging the plausibility structure of its historic messengers: Christians and the institutional church. At times it may even need to challenge the “*return of the house church.*”



And the River flowed on . . . .

## Module 4-B: The DNA Markers Of Kingdom House Churches

*“So then, those who had received his word were baptized; and there were added that day about three thousand souls. And they were continually devoting themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. And everyone kept feeling a sense of awe; and many wonders and signs were taking place through the apostles. And all those who had believed were together, and had all things in common; and they began selling their property and possessions, and were sharing them with all, as anyone might have need. And day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart, praising God, and having favor with all the people. And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved. (Acts 2:41-47)*

Recently I have noticed some new church “signage” popping up in various and sundry locations. It usually says something like this: *“An EPIC Church Meets Here”*. What exactly is an “EPIC” Church? Well that requires a little explaining. The concept of “EPIC” churches comes from a recent (2000) book by church historian and sociologist Leonard Sweet entitled, **“Post Modern Pilgrims.”**<sup>67</sup> The book is an insightful look at the role and ministry of the Church in our Post Modern culture, and Sweet makes many valuable observations (in other words, the book is a worthwhile read). In the last portion of the book Sweet argues that in order to succeed in our Post Modern culture Church (and he is referring primarily to various forms of institutional church) must emphasize four characteristics which appeal to a Post Modern audience. Church must become more **Experiential, Participatory, Image-driven and Connected** (hence, the acronym **E-P-I-C**). Sweet’s groundbreaking book has become the “guide book” for much Post Modern ministry in traditional churches seeking to attract and reach a Post Modern audience today. References to his idea of EPIC church can be found scattered throughout articles on Post Modern ministry. It is the “standard” by which Post Modern ministry is now evaluated. And now it can even be found on church signage advertising that *“An EPIC Church Meets Here”*.

While Sweet’s book deserves a vigorous discussion as to its pros and cons (and it has both), I want to toss out two thoughts. *First*, placing a sign in front of your church which declares that *“An EPIC Church Meets Here”* is only going to appeal to Post Modern Church wonks who have read Sweet’s book, and that limits your market appeal! But, *second*, can the characteristics of a “successful” church that will appeal to a Post Modern audience really be reduced to four over-simplified points?

Aren’t there other characteristics of a genuine *ekklesia* which might “appeal” to believers and unbelievers, and shouldn’t we ask if Scripture itself offers us characteristics of genuine *ekklesia* which we should look for? In his book **Houses That Change The World** author Wolfgang Simson talks about growing up in Germany with churches on every corner. He talks about feeling that, in spite of all those many churches, there was a type of New Testament Church that was missing and how he dreamed of such a radical New Testament Church:

*“A church, which does not need huge amounts of money, or rhetoric, control and manipulation, which can do without powerful and charismatic heroes, which is non-religious at heart, which can thrill people to the core, make them lose their tongues out of sheer joy and astonishment, and simply teach The Way to live. A church which not only has a message, but is the message. Something which spreads like an unstoppable virus, infects whatever it touches, and ultimately covers the earth with the glory and knowledge of God. A church whose power stems from its inventor, who has equipped it with the most ingenious spiritual genetical code, a sort of heavenly DNA, which allows it to transfer kingdom values from heaven to earth and to reproduce them here. It the process it transforms not only water into wine, but atheists into apostles, policewomen into prophetesses, terrorists into teachers, plumbers into pastors, and dignified village elders into beaming evangelists. The church I dreamed of is like a spiritual extended family - organic, not organized, relational, not formal. It has a persecution-proof structure. It matures under tears, multiplies under pressure, breathes under water, grows under the carpet; it flourishes in the desert, sees in the dark and thrives in the midst of chaos. A church that can multiply like five loaves and two fish in the hands of Jesus, where the fathers turn their hearts to their sons and the sons their hearts to their fathers, where its people are its resources, and which has only one name to boast about, The Lamb of God. God is changing the church, and that, in turn will change the world. Millions of Christians around the world are aware of an imminent reformation of global proportions. They are saying, in effect: “Church as we know it is preventing Church as God wants it.”<sup>68</sup>*

I was struck by one phrase in Wolf’s description of his ideal Church, namely, that it possessed “. . . the most ingenious spiritual genetical code, a sort of heavenly DNA . . .” This phrase raised a question in my own mind regarding the characteristics of genuine *ekklesia*. We have already noted the reality that the early home-based *ekklesia* looked and functioned like an extended family. But what was the “family DNA” of the New Testament *ekklesia* which empowered it to function, to grow, to reproduce and even to multiply like a spreading contagion? And is there a way that we today can


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<sup>67</sup> Leonard Sweet, **Post Modern Pilgrims: First Century Passion for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Church** (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2000)

<sup>68</sup> Simson, **Houses That Changed the World**, p. xii - xiii.

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incorporate that DNA into our own model of *ekklesia* so that we can function, grow and reproduce in the same way they did? Every living organism possesses a genetic code, DNA, which contains the essential blue-print that defines its existence and enables it to function, grow and reproduce. As the present-day Post Modern house church movement seeks to come into its own and to practice authentic biblical Christianity, I believe we need to re-discover the basic DNA markers which characterized the extended family of the 1<sup>st</sup> century *ekklesia*. While many things have changed in 2000 years, there are certain DNA markers or characteristics which span time and custom. The above passage from Acts 2:41-47 reveals these DNA markers, timeless characteristics that we would do well to ask God to make an organic part of our home-based *ekklesias* today.


 **DNA Marker # 1: Perseverance (vs. 42, 46)** “And they were continually devoting themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.” Let’s get real. Some things in life and ministry just take work. They require us to be “continually devoted” in order to succeed. The Greek word translated “continually devoting” by the NASB in verse 42 is *proskartereo*. The sense of the verb is “to be strong towards” something, hence, “to be continually steadfast” or “to be devoted.” The adverbial form of this word is commonly translated “perseverance” which is why I have labeled this particular characteristic “perseverance” (By adding the imperfect form of the verb “to be” the Greek carries the force of saying “they were continually persevering”). The same word phrase is found in Acts 1:14 where the disciples in the Upper Room were described as “continually devoting themselves to prayer” (See also Acts 6:4). The sense of this characteristic means that the early house church networks demonstrated **perseverance in four specific activities**:

- ***They persevered in teaching.*** What was the role of teaching in the early church? The Greek word for “teaching” is *didache*, which suggests formal instruction regarding a body of information. The house churches of the New Testament demonstrated a conscious commitment to formal instruction in the things of God. This verse specifically refers to the Apostles’ teaching or doctrine, but we also know from Ephesians 4:11-12 that along with Apostles, God has given Teachers to the Church for the purpose of “*the equipping of the saints for the work of service.*” The early *ekklesia* considered teaching a priority; something which required perseverance and commitment. But we need to make two important observations. **First**, teaching in the early church was not to the exclusion of everything else. Teaching in the *ekklesia* was important (as opposed to optional), but it was not exclusive or dominant either. **Second**, the goal of biblical teaching is **NOT** knowledge, but a transformed life. “*Knowledge makes arrogant,*” Paul warned the house churches of Corinth, “*but love edifies*” (builds up). We need to pursue and persevere in teaching the truths of God in a way that transforms our lives (and those of our hearers) into the image of Christ, and causes us to love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, and our neighbors as ourselves. After all, these are the two greatest commandments.
- ***They persevered in fellowship.*** I would dare to say that most traditional churches never achieve or experience genuine fellowship. Why? Because genuine fellowship is messy, takes work and requires perseverance. For time pressed leaders, it is much easier to teach people to death with impressive Bible notes in PowerPoint presentations than to work through the personal issues which stand in the way of genuine community. And lectures you can control are easier than dialogues which you can’t. Our English word translated “fellowship” is the Greek word *koinonia* which comes from the Greek word *koine*, meaning “common.” “Fellowship” is the holding of certain things in common. In the life of the *ekklesia* it is a mutual sharing of our lives together. We share a common life in the Kingdom of God and drink from a common River of His Spirit in the bond of Christ. The Classical Greek philosophers, such as Plato and others, had always envisioned a “utopian fellowship” that they described as *koinonia*. But all human attempts to achieve this *koinonia* by human effort had failed miserably. But now, through the death and resurrection of Christ and the outpouring of the River of His Spirit, God has been able to accomplish in the Kingdom of God what the efforts of men throughout the ages had never achieved: *genuine fellowship*. And this fellowship, this genuine *koinonia*, was manifested in the home-based *ekklesia* where believers shared their lives with one another. They shared meals together in one another’s homes. They prayed together, endured persecution together, worshiped together and, at times, they died together. They preferred one another’s company above all others and gave sacrificially to meet each other’s needs. To express it in contemporary terms for today, these early house churches were made up of people who loved to hang out together. They shared an affinity that surpasses the natural - it was supernatural. True *koinonia* or fellowship means that as Christians we share a common life in the Kingdom of God.
- ***They persevered in “the breaking of bread”.*** Have you ever sung the old spiritual “*Let Us Break Bread Together On Our Knees*”? Have you ever wondered what it meant? What is “*the breaking of bread*”? This particular Greek phrase only appears twice in the New Testament. The other occurrence is Luke 24:35, “*And they began to relate their experiences on the road and how He was recognized by them in the breaking of the bread.*” The circumstance was the appearance of Christ to the disciples on the road to Emmaus. The risen Christ went to stay with the disciples who had not yet recognized who He really was. Then, “*it came about that when He had reclined at the table with them, He took the bread and blessed it, and breaking it, He began giving it to them. And their eyes were opened and they recognized Him; and He vanished from their sight.*” In what was essentially a “re-enactment” of their final meal together, the disciples recognized Jesus in “*the breaking of the bread.*” It should come as no surprise to us

that the early *ekklesia* was fond of sharing meals together, and at some point in the meal they would observe “the breaking of the bread” in a manner that commemorated that final meal of Jesus with His disciples. We call it “observing the Lord’s Supper.” For far too long many churches have separated “the breaking of the bread” from the body of believers, attempting to surround it with a “mystique” by requiring the attendance of an “ordained” person to supervise the “event” and even to administer special “words of institution” in order to give the “sacrament” a unique validity. But no where in the New Testament do we see such a ritualized observance of the Lord’s Supper. The simplicity, importance and centrality of observing the Lord’s Supper in the New Testament church can be seen in Paul’s admonition to the Church in Corinth: “For I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus in the night in which He was betrayed took bread; 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.” In the same way He took the cup also, after supper, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in My blood; do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me. For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until He comes.” (1 Corinthians 11:23-26) The good news is that today’s House Church is rediscovering the importance of sharing meals together on a regular basis, during which we remember and celebrate “the breaking of the bread,” the Lord’s Supper.

- They persevered in prayer. Oswald Chambers once observed, “Prayer does not prepare us for the greater work. Prayer IS the greater work.” But do we as believers really BELIEVE that? Not too long ago I had a conversation with a person who attends a Post Modern **E-P-I-C** mega-church in our area which has an average monthly attendance of around 7,000. He told me how he attended a recent prayer meeting and was saddened to discover that from a church of 7,000 people, only 40 showed up for prayer. Not exactly what I would call “persevering in prayer.” Now, while you and I may groan at that situation, when it comes to persevering in specific intentional prayer, are we really much better? Prayer is the life-breath of the soul and of the Church. It is in times of prayer and worship, individually and as an *ekklesia* that the Holy Spirit speaks with guidance for us and the church (see Acts 13:1) and that gifts begin to manifest and function. Perseverance means we work at learning how to pray and minister together. Several years ago I was conducting a home fellowship leader’s meeting for a church and I was emphasizing the importance of open prayer together. One of the leaders (a physician) spoke up, “You know,” he said with a wry grin, “praying together is sort of like skinny-dipping together; it takes some getting use to.” Yep. Absent the skinny-dipping, we call that “perseverance.” The House Church of the New Testament was committed to prayer, and God heard and answered their prayers in powerful ways, “And when they had prayed, the place where they had gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and began to speak the word of God with boldness.”

Now, here’s “the rub,” if you will. Do you genuinely believe that prayer is as important as teaching? Do you believe that fellowship is as important as prayer, or that sharing a meal together is as important as sharing a teaching? My point is this. The early House Church was *equally* committed to persevering in each of these four activities, and they appear to have held and practiced these four things in balance with one another. The health of the body of believers requires an equal commitment to all four. Neither the intercessors nor the teachers must be allowed to dominate the life of the House Church. And times of fellowship and meal-sharing must be given priority along with times of formal instruction and intense prayer.


 **DNA Marker # 2: The Fear of The Lord (vs. 43).** “And everyone kept feeling a sense of awe; and many wonders and signs were taking place through the apostles.” Now this is what I would call E-P-I-C church, with an emphasis upon EXPERIENCE! The early *ekklesia* EXPERIENCED the genuine awe or fear of God! The word translated “awe” is the Greek *phobos* which is the common New Testament word for “fear.” The New Testament *ekklesia* was characterized by a deep sense of fear towards the God Who dwelt in their midst.<sup>69</sup> We can see this not only here in Acts 2 but also in Acts 9:31 where we read: “So the church (*ekklesia*) throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria enjoyed peace, being built up; and, going on in **the fear of the Lord** and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it continued to increase. What was the source of this fear? It was, I believe, the result of a pervasive sense of the Presence and Power of God in their midst, a Presence and a Power that was evinced by the regular manifestation of miraculous signs and wonders. This is often a stumbling block for believers who have grown up in what I call the “rationalistic wing” of the Church and have grown up in a tradition which maintains that the “supernatural gifts” of the Spirit no longer function. But we must face up to a very real and problematic question. Where is the experience of the Presence and Power of God in our Churches and fellowships today? Paul told the *ekklesia* in Corinth that “the Kingdom of God does not consist in words, but in power,” (1 Corinthians 4:20) but where is that power in our churches today? As a result, many (if not most) contemporary churches have lost their sense of the fear of God because we have lost (even prohibited in some cases) the manifestation of God’s supernatural power. Many contemporary Christians are content to talk about God without ever experiencing the reality of His Presence or Power. Our churches and

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<sup>69</sup>A study of the concept of “fear” in Scripture quickly reveals that believers are continually admonished by God not to fear, with one exception: God Himself. The genuine fear of God is the only healthy fear in all of Scripture. He who genuinely fears God fears nothing else because God is his shield and bulwark. We do ourselves a disservice by “diluting” such “fear of God” to something acceptable and manageable like “reverential awe.” When Ananias and Sapphira dropped dead by the power of God for lying to the Holy Spirit, I doubt that it was “reverential awe” that people felt (Acts 5:11). When God shows up in great power and holiness, genuine fear is the only proper response. And it is then that the fear of the Lord truly becomes the beginning of spiritual wisdom.


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seminaries often resemble a convention of bakers who gather together to swap bread recipes, but who never actually get around to baking and sampling actual bread. It is one thing to talk about God; it is quite another to stand (or lie prostrate) in His Presence. If, at some point, the *ekklesias* meeting in our homes are not characterized by a sense of the Presence and Power of God, manifested through the operation of the whole range of the spiritual giftings described in 1 Corinthians 12-14 as part of genuine worship experience, then our so-called house churches will eventually devolve into little more than miniature versions of the failed and impotent institutional structures we once left behind. The house churches of the New Testament possessed a genuine sense of “the fear of the Lord” a sense that was intensified by the occurrence of miraculous signs and wonders, tangible manifestations of God’s Kingdom Presence and Power in their midst, convincing them that they were indeed “*tasting of the powers of the Age to Come.*”


 **DNA Marker # 3: Uncommon Community (vs. 44, 45).** “*And all those who had believed were together, and had all things in common; and they began selling their property and possessions, and were sharing them with all, as anyone might have need.*” In the ancient world there was a Greek proverb regarding friendship which said that “*friends hold all things in common.*” The phrase “*all things in common*” in the Greek (*panta koina*) is the same both in the Greek proverb and in Acts 2:44. The uncommon, even supernatural, fellowship or *koinonia* which we looked at earlier is here expressed by a sharing of material goods based upon the needs of the body.


Take a moment and try to imagine the situation in Jerusalem following the events of Pentecost. Within a brief period of 50 days (from the resurrection to Pentecost) the early Church found itself in the midst of a revival in which it quickly grew from 120 people gathered in the upper room to a group of 3,000 new converts (Acts 2:41). And since this number probably represented only the number of men (see Acts 4:4), the addition of women and children probably pushed this total to around 10,000 new converts who were now a part of the young church. Many of these people were from outlying places outside of Jerusalem. They had come to Jerusalem for the Feast of Pentecost with only provisions for a few days. Now, many of them chose to remain in Jerusalem to explore the meaning of their new found faith. **Question:** How were their needs to be met? **Answer:** The community of believers began to respond, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, by selling property and possessions and sharing the proceeds with others as they had need. What we are witnessing, I believe, is the House Church movement in Jerusalem demonstrating in their ministry what Paul would later teach regarding giving in 2 Corinthians 8: 1-15. While the House Church movement of today may not support such traditional church projects as buildings, facilities, programs, and professional staff, we must rediscover the importance, the blessing and the ministry of being a community that gives radically and sacrificially to the meeting of needs within our House Church body of believers, and beyond our own body of believers to the needs of believers in the greater body at large (See our article on “*Radical, Sacrificial Giving*” in Appendix A.







 **DNA Marker # 4: One-Mindedness (v. 46).** “*And day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house . . .*” Have you ever been tempted to ask a fellow believer, “*Why are you here?*” The runaway success of Rick Warren’s book, “*The Purpose Driven Life*” has revealed an ugly secret about many churches (and Christians), namely, that the Church of today too often resembles an organization in search of a purpose. So, why do we meet? Why are we here? What event, experience or purpose do we as believers hold in common that unites us together with “one-mind”? The New Testament *ekklesia* knew their purpose. They knew why they were together, and it was expressed in Acts 2:46 as “*continuing with one mind.*” The *ekklesia* of God was “purpose driven” long before there were programs announcing or explaining it. The Greek word used to express this “unity of purpose” is *homothumadon*, from *homo* meaning “one” and *thumos* meaning “mind.” It comes from the Greek word *homothumos* meaning “with the same emotion” or “unanimously.” In Classical Greek, the word didn’t focus on the personal sympathies of the people involved. Instead, it focused on a common material interest in a specific action. For example, when Philip of Macedon threatened to invade Greece, the great Greek orator Demosthenes called on the people to set aside their personal feelings and work “*with one accord*” to resist Philip. This idea of a “common concern” which supercedes our personal interests or feelings was based on an event which comes upon a group from without, provoking a common response or reaction. This Greek word appears 11 times in the N.T., 10 of which are in the Book of Acts.

 **Acts 1:14** - Someone has observed that the true miracle of Acts 1-2 wasn’t Pentecost. Instead it is found here in Acts 1:14. The miracle was that 120 very different people (tax collectors, fishermen, political zealots, and much more) entered the upper room as “believers,” spent 10 days (240 hours) together in prayer and fasting, and when they emerged on the day of Pentecost they were 120 “disciples” who were of “one-mind.”


 **Acts 4:24** - The disciples prayed with “one-mind” as a result of persecution.


 **Acts 5:12** - The believers were of “one-mind” regarding the ministry of signs and wonders at the hands of the Apostles in Solomon’s Portico in the temple.


 **Acts 7:57** - The enemies of the church were of “one-mind” in stoning Stephen to death.

-  **Acts 8:6** - The crowds of Samaria were of “one-mind” in giving attention to the preaching of Philip.
-  **Acts 12:20** - The people of Tyre & Sidon approached Herod with “one-mind” to earn his favor.
-  **Acts 15:25** - The Apostolic Council at Jerusalem was of “one-mind” in their response to the Judaizers.
-  **Acts 18:12** - The Jews of Corinth were of “one-mind” in their opposition of Paul and the gospel.
-  **Acts 19:29** - The crowd at Ephesus was of “one-mind” in its opposition of Paul and the gospel.
-  **Romans 15:6** - Paul exhorts the church at Rome to be of “one-mind” in serving one another.

Two things stand out to me as I read these passages. **First**, the believers of the early New Testament *ekklesia* walked in a “oneness of mind,” a “singularity of purpose” that characterized their life together. They knew why they existed and why they gathered together. They were people of the resurrection and of the Holy Spirit. The resurrection of Jesus and the subsequent outpouring of the Holy Spirit (confirming the arrival of the New Messianic Age of the “end times”) were events which produced “one-mindedness” in the early New Testament House Church. The message of the crucified and risen Christ and the outpouring of the promised River of God’s Spirit were “*The Main Thing*” (we will examine this in-depth in *Module 7: Life In The Kingdom*), the common message and purpose which bound the early Christians together. A simple reading of Acts 2:46 might suggest that they were “in one accord in the Temple,” but the meaning appears to be “whether in the Temple or moving house-to-house, they were of one mind.” Their “one-mindedness” was not related to a location or an activity, but rather it described a state of heart and mind within the body of the New Testament *ekklesia* as they went into Jerusalem, Judea and all the world with the good news of the risen Christ and the outpoured Spirit. But **second**, we should also see that there were times when the enemies of the Church and the gospel also walked in great “unity of purpose” in their opposition to the things of God, and that should come as a warning reminder to us.

 **DNA Marker # 5: House-To-House Ministry (v. 46).** “. . . and breaking bread from house to house . . .” As we saw earlier in this Module regarding ministry in homes (see page 44), the idea of meeting and ministering in individual homes was not new to the early *ekklesia*. The disciples and those around Jesus during His ministry had seen and experienced this first-hand. The Greek phrase *kat’ oikon* in verse 46 carries a distributive force rendered “house-by-house” or “house-to-house” (it is found again in Acts 20:20). The idea conveyed by this idiom is that the early *ekklesias* were mobile, not static. The Kingdom of God as manifested in the early *ekklesia* was a River which flowed house-to-house, not a swimming pool which stayed in one place only to grow stagnant. Believers moved from one house to another. And what were they doing as they moved from house to house? As we saw earlier (vs. 42), they were teaching, praying, sharing meals and “breaking bread” together. This describes the “heart-and-soul” of house church ministry, both then and now. It is believers experiencing a common life in the Kingdom of God and sharing their hearts, their homes and their lives with one another in one another’s homes.

 **DNA Marker # 6: Sharing Meals Together (vs. 46).** “. . . they were taking their meals together . . .” The first disciples had learned directly from Jesus Himself regarding the importance of sharing meals with people. Jesus was a frequent dinner guest in the homes of people He was seeking to reach, so much so that it became a “scandal” to the religious people of His day: “*And as Jesus passed on from there, He saw a man, called Matthew, sitting in the tax office; and He said to him, ‘Follow Me!’ And he rose, and followed Him. And it happened that as He was reclining at the table in the house, behold many tax-gatherers and sinners came and were dining with Jesus and His disciples. And when the Pharisees saw this, they said to His disciples, ‘Why is your Teacher eating with the tax-gatherers and sinners?’*”<sup>70</sup> But when He heard this, He said, “*It is not those who are healthy who need a physician, but those who are sick. ‘But go and learn what this means, ‘I desire compassion, and not sacrifice,’<sup>71</sup> for I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners.*” (Matthew 9:9-13; see also Mark 2:16 and Luke 5:30). Wolfgang Simson once told a house church conference audience that Jesus really only did three things: He ate with people, told stories about the Kingdom of God, and cast out people’s demons. The early church followed this example. They regularly shared meals together. It had become part of their DNA.

 **DNA Marker # 7: The Joy of The Lord (vs. 46).** “. . . they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart. . .” The believers who made up these New Testament *ekklesias* experienced something that the people of God had looked forward to, namely, the “eschatological joy of the Lord,” and that deserves an explanation.

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<sup>70</sup>In Palestine taxes were collected by Jews who collaborated with the Romans under a contract to collect taxes at a profit. Because they were Jews who collaborated with the Romans, tax-gatherers were regarded as social outcasts. We tend to spend our time with other believers (“the righteous”), but Jesus spent his time with sinners.








<sup>71</sup>This quote is from Hosea 6:6.

## A Kingdom, A People & A River - Page 76

Let's begin by noting that, in the New Testament, there are two root word groups used to express "gladness" or "joy". The common word group is *chairo* (verb: to be glad) and *chara* (noun: gladness, joy). This is **not** the word group which appears here. The second word group is *agalliao* (verb: to exult, to rejoice greatly) and *agalliasis* (noun: exultation, exuberant or exceeding joy). This is the word group translated "gladness" here in Acts 2:46. The Greek words *agalliasis/agalliao* in their biblical context carry the idea of "jubilant exultation and spiritual gladness". One writer has described it as "eschatological joy in the presence of the Lord."






### The Joy of the Lord in the Old Testament

This word group occurs frequently in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament (especially in the Psalms) and the emphasis is always rejoicing or exulting in God, His Name or His works. It is "jubilant exultation and spiritual gladness" in the Lord, a festive joy which expresses itself publicly over God's acts of salvation in the lives of His people. This "joy of the Lord" is expressed both personally and corporately through attitudes of thankful joy before God. It's a joy over both what God has done for His people in the past, and over what He promises He will do in the future. Here are just a few examples:

-  **Psalm 62:11** - the Psalmist commands the nations to serve the Lord with fear, and to rejoice with trembling.
-  **Psalm 9:14** - the Psalmist expresses the joy of the Lord's salvation: I will "rejoice in Thy salvation." (See also Psalm 13:5; 21:1;
-  **Psalm 35:9** - the Psalmist declares that his soul "shall be joyful (rejoice) in the Lord."
-  **Psalm 45:7** - Here the word is directly tied to Jesus' life and ministry: "Therefore God, Thy God, has anointed Thee with the oil of joy above Thy fellows." God promises that the coming Messiah will walk in the joy of the Lord. Then, in Hebrews 1:9, the writer of Hebrews declares that this Psalm was fulfilled in the life and ministry of Jesus, God's Son. The people of God are essentially being promised that same joyous exultation which Jesus experienced when He was anointed by God for His Messianic ministry!
-  **Psalm 48:11** - the Psalmist declares that the daughters of Judah shall rejoice because of God's judgments (which vindicate His people. See also Psalm 97:8)
-  **Psalm 89:16** - the people of God will rejoice in God's Name.
-  **Habakkuk 3:18** - here the prophet Habakkuk declares that, although he doesn't know what the future holds, he will express the joy of the Lord, "Though the fig tree should not blossom, And there be no fruit on the vines, Though the yield of the olive should fail, And the fields produce no food, Though the flock should be cut off from the fold, And there be no cattle in the stalls, Yet I will exult in the Lord, I will rejoice in the God of my salvation." (Habakkuk 3:17-18)

### The Joy of the Lord in the New Testament

The joy of the Lord in the Old Testament was the joy of experience and promise. In the New Testament the joy of the Lord is the joy of experiencing the fulfillment of all God's promises. God in Christ has fulfilled His promise and inaugurated the "eschatological" (i.e., "end time") age of salvation with the outpouring of the River of God's Spirit (promised by Ezekiel and Joel for the "last days").

-  **Matthew 5:12** - Jesus tells the disciples to walk in the joy of the Lord when they are persecuted.
-  **Luke 1:14** - The angel promised Zacharias that he and Elizabeth would experience the joy of the Lord as a result of the coming birth of their son, John the Baptist.
-  **Luke 1:44** - Even the unborn baby John experienced the joy of the Lord in Elizabeth's womb when Mary greeted her.
-  **Luke 1:47** - Mary experienced the joy of the Lord because she had been granted a role in God's plan of salvation.
-  **Luke 10:21** - Jesus Himself experienced the joy of the Lord because the things of the Kingdom of God were

being revealed.



**Acts 16:34** - The Philippian jailer experienced the joy of the Lord because he and his whole family had come to faith and were now included in the saved community of the last days.



**1 Peter 1:8** - Peter tells his readers that because they love Jesus and believe in Him they are experiencing the joy of the Lord. They *“greatly rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory.”*



**Jude 1:24** - Jude tells his readers that God is able *“to make you stand in the presence of His glory blameless with great joy.”* This is a promise of “joy-yet-to-come” when we stand in the presence of God in eternity.

When these early believers met together as God’s *ekklesia* in their homes, they experienced the joy of the Lord. It was the joy of those who realized that the “end of the ages” had come upon them, that God had sent His promised Messiah and was fulfilling His promise to pour out the River of Ezekiel 47, the River of His Spirit. As believers they had partaken of the outpouring of the eschatological Spirit and were experiencing the joy promised to those who partook of the Presence of the Lord. During the “Toronto Blessing” movement of the mid-1990s participants were often criticized for the phenomenon of uncontrollable laughing. Could it be possible that the what they were actually experiencing was a tangible expression of the joy of the Lord, and that God was returning to His people a characteristic of the Kingdom of God which we have lost and need to regain?



**DNA Marker #8: Simplicity of Heart (vs. 46)** *“. . . they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart. . . .”* Along with the *“eschatological joy of the Lord”* these believers were also experiencing a “sincerity” or “simplicity” of heart. The Greek word *aphelotes* (“simplicity,” found only here in the New Testament) carries the idea of a pure motive, like pure unalloyed metal. What does that look like? Well, it doesn’t look like a multi-level marketing scheme. I never will forget my introduction to the world of network marketing. I was invited by new “friends” to attend meetings where I heard about the importance of “friends helping friends” succeed in this wonderful business opportunity. I never new I had so many “friends.” But when I finally made it clear that I really wasn’t interested in the “opportunity,” all of my new-found “friends” suddenly disappeared, stopped calling and no longer had time for me. In reality, these people and their “friendship” represented “alloyed metal,” impure motives and a lack of “simplicity.” Unfortunately, this also describes many Christian “friendships” with unbelievers, and sometimes with other believers. Ours is all too often a “kindness” with strings attached, with impure or ulterior motives, demonstrating an absence of “simplicity.” We “give” (i.e., our friendship or kindness) in order to get, believing that our “kindness” somehow creates an obligation on the part of others that we can use to manipulate them into coming to Church with us, or attending a Bible study, etc. As a result, people feel like Church is just another multi-level marketing scheme. Not so with Jesus. Jesus undoubtedly loved, healed, delivered and ministered to many people who never “believed” in Him or followed Him. His motive was simple and pure. He came to demonstrate the unconditional love of God, and to allow people to touch and taste the powers of the Age to come. He didn’t seek to manipulate them into a particular response or commitment. He offered the Kingdom of God with no strings attached. How people responded was up to them. In the early *ekklesias*, this Christ-like “simplicity of heart” manifested itself among believers as a genuine spirit of generosity, benevolence or kindness without any “ulterior motive” and moved in a lifestyle of kindness-for-kindness-sake.



**DNA Marker # 9: Favor & Grace (vs. 47).** *“. . . and having favor with all the people.”* The word commonly translated “favor” is the Greek word *charis* which is most commonly translated “grace,” but can also translate “favor.” I suspect that *charis* was a two-edged sword in the life of the early *ekklesia*. On the one hand God gave the early Church favor in the eyes of their friends and neighbors, allowing them to see the church in a favorable light. But on the other hand, I believe that this *charis* from God also made these believers a “gracious” people. As the River of God’s Spirit flowed through these believers and the *ekklesia* which met in their homes, their lives overflowed with God’s grace. As a result, unbelievers saw a people whose lives overflowed with the grace of God, and that was attractive. I believe that the Church today needs to ask itself, *“Are we a gracious people? Does the River of God’s Spirit and Grace flow through us and overflow into the lives of those around us?”* When was the last time you were gracious in meeting the needs of someone (believer or unbeliever) simply because you wanted to demonstrate the unmerited love and grace of God to them?



**DNA Marker # 10: God-Inspired Evangelistic Growth (vs. 47).** *“And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved.”* For the New Testament *ekklesia* evangelism was *“a God thing”!* Evangelism wasn’t something they did or an activity they engaged in (See our discussion of *“Evangelism In The Early Church”* earlier in this module). Evangelism wasn’t a program or a campaign. It is even difficult to point to an example of the early Church setting out to “do evangelism.” The early *ekklesia* proclaimed the Kingdom of God and lived out Kingdom values by healing the sick, raising the dead, cleansing lepers and delivering the demonized. As a result, for these believers “evangelism” became *“a God thing,”* the result of the presence and the power of God moving in their midst and adding to their numbers those whom He touched.

## A Kingdom, A People & A River - Page 78

The *ekklesia* of the New Testament was nothing less than a small manifestation of and a “foothold” for the Kingdom of God in the form of an extended family which met in people’s homes. As such, the *ekklesia* became a channel through which the River of God’s Spirit flowed and in which people touched and tasted the powers of the Age to Come. We have examined ten (10) characteristics of the early New Testament *ekklesia*, characteristics which I have labeled “DNA Markers”. Now the challenge becomes how we as God’s *ekklesia* meeting in homes 21 centuries later can recapture this sense of being an extended family along with these “family DNA traits” in an authentic manner (not as a forced, contrived or artificial “program” or formula) with the practical result that we can be an authentic New Testament church today and pass on this healthy “genetic code” to our house churches as we grow and reproduce.



*And the River flowed on . . . .*

### Questions For Reflection And Discussion

- ⇒ What role did the home play in the Church of the New Testament? How is the role of the home different in Church today? Why do you think that difference is good or bad?
  
- ⇒ How is the way we “do evangelism” in the Church today different from evangelism in the early Church? What do you think we could learn from the early church when it comes to evangelism?
  
- ⇒ Re-read Wolfgang Simson’s quote on page 50 regarding his vision of an ideal church. Now, describe your own “vision” of what your “ideal church” would be like? How does your vision of an “ideal church” incorporate the “DNA” of the early New Testament church?
  
- ⇒ **Perseverance** - Of the four specific activities which the early Church persevered in, which one do you think was the most difficult? Why? And which one do you think was the easiest? Why? Describe what you think happens when these four activities get out-of-balance in a group.
  
- ⇒ **The Fear of the Lord** - Describe a time in your life when you experienced “the fear of the Lord” and what impact it had on your spiritual life. Read Acts 5:1-11 and explain what effect the fear of the Lord (see vs. 11) might have upon a group of people.
  
- ⇒ **Uncommon Community** - Describe an example of “uncommon community” that you have either witnessed or experienced. Read the article on “House Church & Radical Sacrificial Giving” Appendix A and describe how this type of giving might be expressed in “uncommon community”.
  
- ⇒ **One-Mindedness** - There is much talk today about “unity” among believers. In your opinion, what should believers be “of one mind” about? How could such “one-mindedness” work to achieve “unity” in the larger body of Christ?

## Module 4: The DNA of Kingdom House Church Ministry - Page 79

Describe how this “one-mindedness” characterizes your house church.

- ⇒ **House-To-House Ministry** - From your own personal experience, describe a home meeting that was particularly meaningful to you, and explain why. Describe why meeting in a home does or does not appeal to you. What do you see as the “pros” and “cons” of home based *ekklesia*.
  
- ⇒ **Sharing Meals Together** - Why do you think Jesus spent so much time sharing meals with people in their homes?
  
- ⇒ **The Joy of the Lord** - Describe a time in your life when you experienced “the joy of the Lord.” What brought this about? Does this joy characterize your current church experience? Explain why or why not.
  
- ⇒ **Simplicity of Heart** - Describe an event or situation in your life when you discovered that the motives of those around you were “less than pure” (like being invited to dinner only to discover it was a network marketing presentation!). Discuss how we can achieve “pure motives” and “simplicity of heart” in our house church relationships.
  
- ⇒ **Favor & Grace** - Describe a situation or experience when God gave you “favor” in the eyes of another person in order to accomplish His will in your life or ministry. What could it look like if God were to give you and your house church “favor” in the eyes of the people in your neighborhood? What practical things could you and your house church do to be a more “gracious” example of the Kingdom of God in your neighborhood?
  
- ⇒ **God-Inspired Evangelistic Growth** - Describe experiences you have had which demonstrate the difference between your own efforts at evangelism and what an instance of “God-inspired” evangelism might look like. Describe what “God-inspired” evangelism might look like within the context of your house church.

## A Kingdom, A People & A River - Page 80

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**House2House Magazine**. Published by House2House Publications, this is a new and well done magazine dedicated to House Church Ministry. Subscriptions are "free" on a suggested donation basis. Order it via their website at [www.house2house.net](http://www.house2house.net).

### House Church Websites

[www.house2house.net](http://www.house2house.net) or [house2house.tv](http://house2house.tv)

[www.hccentral.com](http://www.hccentral.com)

[www.house-church.org](http://www.house-church.org)

[www.housechurch.org](http://www.housechurch.org)

[www.homechurch-homepage.org](http://www.homechurch-homepage.org)

[www.openchurch.com](http://www.openchurch.com)

[www.parousianetwork.com](http://www.parousianetwork.com)

[www.cmaresources.org](http://www.cmaresources.org)

[www.dcfi.org](http://www.dcfi.org)

[www.ptmin.org](http://www.ptmin.org)

[www.geneedwards.com](http://www.geneedwards.com)

[www.thirddaychurches.org](http://www.thirddaychurches.org)

[www.ntrf.org](http://www.ntrf.org)

[www.bbmin.org](http://www.bbmin.org)

[www.searchingtogether.org](http://www.searchingtogether.org)

[www.tallskinnykiwi.org](http://www.tallskinnykiwi.org)

[www.robertfitts.com](http://www.robertfitts.com)

[www.shareonhousechurch.net](http://www.shareonhousechurch.net)

[www.healingcommunities.org](http://www.healingcommunities.org)

[www.homefellowshipleaders.com](http://www.homefellowshipleaders.com)