

First Church Anniversary for *The Essential Church*

Sermon Subject: "House Churches"

Scripture: Romans 16:3-5; 1 Corinthians 16:19

House churches. Depending on whom you ask, it's a concept with mixed impressions. Some know about them, and some don't. Protestant life with all its various divisions and sects and denominations has trained many of us to assume that whatever's going on now, tradition, is what has always been and what will always be -- or rather, what *should* always be. And for many of us, that means that church life is not about the saints gathering but about where they gather. That is, in a physical church building.

Today, we here at *The Essential Church* are celebrating our one-year anniversary as an internet church. For the last twelve months, we have been meeting online, preaching, teaching, and writing blog posts related to controversial subjects of Scripture. I have been recording services, adding music from YouTube for our members, and then preaching a sermon or teaching on a given subject. Technology has made it easy now, so easy to do this that you need only have a recording app and the WordPress app to do it. The church itself, our internet church, has run on \$36 a year and was just renewed for 2019. That means that through the end of next year, you can be assured that we're still doing the work of the Lord. This first year will give way to a second year and beyond, if God permits.

And the idea of internet church (internet churches can be both in a building and at home, by the way) is hard for some to stomach. Some of my family even asked me when I started, "How can you have a church that doesn't spill over into an actual building?" For them, traditional church life says that "you have to have a building to meet in, else you're not doing it God's way."

But is it God's way for everyone to meet in an established church building?
Is that God's will for how we do church life?

The Scriptures tell us that established church buildings were not used in every church setting. The few verses we read earlier tell us of house churches. When Paul writes to the Romans, he ends his letter in Romans 16 saying hello and giving greetings and salutations from others. In Romans 16:3-5, Paul says, "**3** Greet Priscilla and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus, **4** who risked their own necks for my life, to whom not only I give thanks, but also all the churches of the Gentiles. **5** Likewise ***greet the church that is in their house.***"

Surely you've heard of Priscilla and Aquila. Paul says here in Romans 16:4 that they "risked their own necks for my life." In other words, they put themselves at risk so that they could protect Paul. They protected him even during the persecution they endured as believers. We read in Acts 18:1-3 that Paul met Aquila and his wife, Priscilla, in Corinth. The couple had come from Italy because of persecution by the emperor Claudius. They were tentmakers, in the same profession as Paul, and he stays with them. Paul tells the Roman church to greet them. It seems as though they had moved back to Rome by this time from Corinth, after moving to Corinth from Rome. Aquila was born in Pontus, but left for Corinth where they met and shared life with Paul. And yet, at the time of the Roman letter, they're back in Rome. He tells the church at Rome to "greet" them. Paul is still writing to the Romans in Corinth, though, so he hadn't left apparently.

But he greets them here, as well as "the church that is in their house" in Romans 16:4. Paul says that Priscilla and Aquila put their own lives on the line to protect him. He says that not only he gives thanks, "but also all the churches of the Gentiles." In other words, Paul is saying here, "the Gentiles owe Priscilla and Aquila as well; if it wasn't for them, I wouldn't have preached the gospel in places I did. I wouldn't have founded the churches I

did and spread the gospel as far and wide as I did, were it not for these believing friends.”

Here in Rome, Priscilla and Aquila had a house church. They met in their home. They didn't have an established church building with a particular address. They met in their home, the one place they did own. And we see that in the list, Paul mentions Priscilla first instead of her husband, Aquila. How unorthodox some seem to think this would be today: “Mr. and Mrs. so-and-so finds its way on all our invitations, bulletins, announcements, etc.” And yet, Paul still acknowledged that husbands were the heads of their households in Ephesians while acknowledging Priscilla was the more skilled of the two. It's likely she was the lead Pastor in their house church at Rome. She wasn't sitting on the sidelines, praying prayers, singing songs, and “amening” her husband; no, she was active in the church, in the Word. Later in Acts 18:26 we find Aquila and Priscilla teaching Apollos -- both of them. As Pastors in their house church, Priscilla and Aquila were gifted in teaching the Word because we see them having done that with Apollos.

When Paul greets their house church, though, he doesn't distinguish it as if it's less of a church than a building church at a set address would be. He treats the church in their home as if it's part of the churches in Rome, as though their gathering in their home was also part of the body of Christ. In 1 Corinthians 16:19, Paul greets them and “the church that is in their house.” He greets them here in Corinth, which means that they were still in Corinth at this time. Remember, as I said earlier, Aquila and Priscilla were living in Italy, then they fled because of the persecution of Christians. They moved to Corinth and held a house church there. So Paul is greeting them here. And the same Paul that greeted them wanted them to understand that their house church was as legitimate, as godly, as any other church out there. He wrote in 1 Corinthians 1:2-3 the following:

2 To the church of God which is at Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called *to be* saints, **with all who in every place** call on the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, both theirs and ours:

3 Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.
(1 Corinthians 1:2-3)

Paul said that those who are sanctified and called to be saints in Corinth are no different that “all who in every place call on the name of Jesus Christ our Lord.” Think about that. The apostle said that all who call on the name of Jesus “in every place” are sanctified in Jesus and called to be saints. Every one who calls on the name of Jesus, from the prisoner in prison, to the patient in the hospital, to the nursing home resident, to the person who calls on the Lord while out at sea, on a cruise ship, in an airplane, or an isolated island, or in a military barracks in the midst of battle, is a saint and called of God. The New Testament word for “church” in the Greek is *ekklesia*. The word *ekklesia* can mean “assembly,” but its meaning is deeper: it consists of the word “ek,” meaning “out of,” and “klesia,” which means “the called ones.” Putting the two words together to make the compound *ekklesia*, we see that the church is made up of “called-out ones.” What matters is that we’re called out, not our physical or remote location.

There were house churches, and then there were building churches. In Acts 2:46, we see that the church “continued daily with one accord in the temple,” and was “breaking bread from house to house.” This is an example that some churches met in a temple for instruction but then had times of fellowship from house to house. The believers met in their homes to share meals. Their gatherings in individual homes is an example of how church extends from the temple to the home. Many of us think of church

today as “meeting in a building,” then going our separate ways afterward. Churches even have Fellowship Halls now where believers gather to break bread. And yet, the earliest churches didn’t have Fellowship Halls; they gathered in their homes to break bread. Can you imagine how novel that idea is to churches and Christians today, to invite others over to their homes for after-service meals?

In Acts 12:12-17, we find that Peter, the lead apostle that Jesus chose to head up the apostle team, is the one imprisoned by Herod. Herod kills James, an apostle, the brother of apostle John (one of the sons of Zebedee, not the Beloved Disciple John), and the Jews were so pleased with it that Herod decided he’d kill the top apostle next -- that would be Peter. Peter was in prison, but we don’t find the church gathering in the temple or a building; rather, they gather at the home of John Mark’s mother, to pray that Peter be released from prison. With Peter being arrested and the apostle James being killed, the church likely wasn’t meeting in an official building somewhere to be noticed by the government. They met in the home of a believer who was part of the assembly. Again, the home was an extension of the church, not something completely separate and worthy of being shunned.

The Essential Church is a home church in that services are conducted at home, not in an established church building. There is no building that has been incorporated and has a physical address where the church receives official US mail. But, make no mistake, though we are not a building church with a physical church address, we are a body of believers. We meet at essentialchurch.net, our internet domain, every Sunday, to lift up the name of Jesus, to sit at His feet, and learn His Word. We believe in preaching and teaching God’s Word. We believe that faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God -- that’s why we have audio files that one must hear and not read. We here at The Essential Church believe faith comes by hearing and not by reading because that’s what Scripture teaches. We believe in praying over the sick, and we rejoice in seeing the sick healed

and souls saved. We believe in all the things that a building church should believe in. We believe that by grace, through faith in Jesus, we are saved. We believe that we must remain faithful until death, running the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, who ran His race before us as our example of how we are to endure until the end to be saved. And we don't have a physical mailbox but we'll be glad to contact you back and hear from you at our email address, theessentialchurch@protonmail.com. Feel free to contact us anytime for prayer requests, problems, questions, and suggestions, and we'll do our best to get back with you. We're just a click away.

Some worry about whether or not house churches such as ours (which is also an internet church) can remain faithful to God's desire for the church. But there are some supporters. Famous church planting author Ed Stetzer wrote last year in his article at *Christianity Today* titled "[Some Quick Thoughts on House Churches: The Good, The Bad, and Why You Should Be Open To Them.](#)" the following:

"Some may be nervous about a house church movement. Some worry that house churches don't have all the marks of a biblical church...However, **house churches can have all those marks for a very simple reason: otherwise, you'd have to rule out the first 100 years of Christianity, since that's what they did.** Given the healthy expressions of house churches and the appeal house churches have to certain planters and in certain cultural contexts, evangelicals need to be more open to house churches."

House churches, as I've said earlier, consist of more than just meeting face-to-face. The Scriptures do not mention online or internet churches, because internet didn't exist in the first century. And yet, the question we must ask ourselves is, can a home church that lives on the internet or lives online prosper? Does God smile on such an endeavor?

I was particularly struck by a response from a post titled [“Is the Digital or Internet Church Really the Church?”](#) that reminds me why God called *The Essential Church* into existence:

Thank you for bringing up this topic and for all of the thoughtful responses. I am a pastor, as a matter of fact an Online Campus pastor. I have been in this role for 2.5 years. And during that time I have heard every reason for & against online church. My personal favorite was a board member who said to me on Easter, after having someone accept Jesus as their Savior in the online service, that Online Church breeds complacency. I have wrestled with how to have true community in an online setting... something our team is still working on and trying various things. I know that while Online Church is not for everyone, it is extremely important for those who do attend. I have learned that it is vital for me to know and share the

stories of how God is using this way to reach & minister to people for Him.

So, when I'm discouraged and wondering if this ministry is really worth it, I remember that we do this...

For the home bound senior adult that we helped set up her computer and make sure to help stay connected.

For the missionary who joins in and is part of a community in her language.

For the college student away at school who is having a hard time finding a church community so they join in online.

For the family who spent a year in a hospital with their daughter fighting leukemia.

For the police officer that works the desk on Sundays who joins in so he can still be a part of his church.

For the mom whose child deals with severe anxiety and is so disruptive that she gave up coming to church because she wasn't able to attend a service.

For my brother who hasn't stepped foot in a church in years that will attend a service on his terms.

These are just a few of the many lives God is allowing us to minister to through an extremely unconventional method.

So, is it perfect? Nope.

Is it the same as getting to hug a neck as they walk in through the doors? Nope.

Is this type of service for everyone? Nope

Do I get discouraged and frustrated. You bet.

BUT, I believe that it is an important additional ministry for the church to reach those who, for whatever reason, are not walking through our church doors.

This person hit the nail on the head about what we do and why we do it. We do it not because it's ideal for everyone but because of those we serve. We serve the shut-in and those who are looking for a church where the Word of God is preached and truth is proclaimed. There are many not served today by building churches because they are physically unable to attend in-building church service. For those who are incapacitated in one form or another, those who don't have access to a local gathering in their area (and there are areas that don't in the world, believe it or not), for those who have been burned and hurt and just crushed down by local churches, *The Essential Church* is here to be a healing and helping station. We are a home church, and we are an internet church --- and we're both honored and humbled to be both.

There will always be critics and enemies of what we do, but we're proclaiming Jesus as Lord. And, as the Lord told His disciples when they forbade someone they saw casting out demons in Jesus' name in Luke 9:50, "Do not forbid him, for he who is not against us is for us." *The Essential Church* is not against our Lord Jesus, but for Him; we're not working against Him, but rather, for Him, to do our part to see to it that the world is reconciled to Himself, that many more knees will bow and many more tongues confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.

We stand united with the house churches of the first century, and we continue the tradition with some new technological advancement. But technology or not, it's all about Jesus. He is Lord. He is the Head of the Church. As Paul says, Christ loved the Church and gave Himself for her. And we believe that we are called to be a light in a world that is still full of darkness. And with God's grace, and your prayers, we'll stand our ground until we hear our Lord say, "Well Done."