

Philemon 1:2: House Churches

“and to the church that meets in your home.”

Who?

We know that a congregation met in Philemon’s house. We do not know the size of the congregation or whether it was the only home in which the church met. The word “church” is “ecclesia” and means a gathering. It does not necessarily mean all the family of God. We know that the early church on the day of Pentecost was meeting together in an upper room of a wealthy lady in Jerusalem. That room housed 120 people. We might surmise that Philemon, being a wealthy businessman, probably had a similar home. We know the names of some of the people in the church of Colosse since 9 are mentioned in this epistle and several more are mentioned in the letter to the Colossians in chapter 4.

Where?

It was not in a synagogue. Most large cities had a synagogue where Jews worshipped. But early on believers were kicked out of the synagogues where they initially gathered to worship. A synagogue had developed during the time of the Babylonian captivity when Jews had no temple. It continued to be a location of Jewish worship. Their services included the singing of the Psalms, the reading of the Old Testament Scriptures, and the explanation of the Scriptures, and prayers were said.

Christians had not public place of worship. Churches would not be built for another 250 years when Christianity became legal. The church was an illegal religion in the Roman Empire. So, the church met rather secretly in homes rather than in buildings. It would be most natural for wealthy believers to invite other believers to meet in their larger homes. These were known as house churches. A careful study of the New Testament will reveal that there were many such meeting places in each city. (See Scriptures listing homes of worship.)

What?

Though many of the Jewish believers were accustomed to the style and pattern of the synagogue worship it seems that these house churches were less formal. What the Christians did in these house churches can be seen by examining Scriptures that refer to them. (Acts 2:42-17, Acts 4:32-35, Acts 6:1-7, Ephesians 4:4-16, Colossians 3:12-17, and 1 Corinthians 11:17-34, 12:1-31, and 14:26-39)

How?

The gathering of believers was less formal than the synagogue services. Their meetings were characterized by singing of songs, teaching of the Word, encouraging one another with personal testimonies, using of spiritual gifts by all, and prayers for, with and over each other. Acts 2:42 says, *“And they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers.”*

Ephesians 4:11-16

11 It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, 12 to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up 13 until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. 14 Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by

every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming. 15 Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. 16 From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.

Colossians 3:12-16

12 Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. 13 Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. 14 And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity. 15 Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. 16 Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God.

There were basically four elements to these house church meetings:

- 1) Doctrinal teaching,**
- 2) fellowship (talking, sharing, participation and mutual edification of each other),**
- 3) breaking bread (eating and the Lord's supper),**
- 4) and prayers for one another.**

Why?

The "why" of these gatherings was certainly not because it was tradition or expected of believers. It was a purposeful gathering. They needed each other in this time of persecution. They also expected the Lord Jesus to come again and most fully expected the Lord to return as suddenly as he appeared to the disciples after the resurrection.

Hebrews 10:23-25 *"Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another--and all the more as you see the Day approaching."*

When?

It was a gathering not limited to once a week for an hour. We know from Scripture that they stayed many hours together, and leaving the main gathering they also meet daily in each other's homes as well. Paul preached until well after midnight. (Acts 20:7) The statement of Hebrews 10:25 would indicate that they were to gather more frequently as they saw the Day of the Lord approaching.

The first day of the week the church gathered for worship, rather than on the Jewish Sabbath. It was the day of the Lord's resurrection and became known as THE LORD'S DAY.

Acts 20:7 And upon the first day of the week, when the disciples came together to break bread, Paul preached unto them, ready to depart on the morrow; and continued his speech until midnight.

1 Corinthians 16:2 Upon the first day of the week let every one of you lay by him in store, as God hath prospered him, that there be no gatherings when I come.