

Renovating House Church Assumptions

A Reconsideration of Early Christian Church Models

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What Was a House Church Like?

When missiology books discuss early house church movements, they often emphasize the small size of the gatherings.¹ Some house church proponents suggest that they were often capped at twenty persons and that the largest homes could hold no more than 50 people.² Wolfgang Simson exhibits this reasoning; “The New Testament church was made up of small groups, typically between 10 and 15 people. It grew not by forming big congregations of 300 people to fill cathedrals and lose fellowship. Instead, it multiplied

¹ David Garrison encourages the principle in planting house churches that “*smaller is better.*” David Garrison, *Church Planting Movements: How God is Redeeming a Lost World* (Arkadelphia, AR: WIGTake, 2004), 25.

² Kevin Giles, “House Churches,” *Priscilla Papers* 24, no. 1 (2010): 6-8; Robert Banks, *Paul’s Idea of Community: Spirit and Culture in Early House Churches*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2020), 32-33. Gehring caps such groups at “ten to twenty people.” Roger W. Gehring, *House Church and Mission: The Importance of Household Structures in Early Christianity* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2005), 93.

‘sideways,’ dividing like organic cells, once these groups reached around 15 to 20 people.”³ These writings often depict a small number of individuals meeting in secret due to persecution as normative descriptions of early church gatherings.⁴ Since these meeting spaces could not surpass 50 people, authors like Simson assume that churches grew sideways to accommodate.⁵

But, are these assumptions correct? For 21st century missionaries concerned with being both biblical and missiological, we should desire an accurate understanding of early Christian house churches. This study will consider biblical, archaeological, and historical data to provide a more diverse depiction of early Christian house churches. The paper will argue that a variety of church models—even a variety of house church models—were used in the earliest church. As missiologists in the 21st century, we should reject platitudes such as “smaller is better,” and instead plant culturally and contextually appropriate churches.⁶

Were Early Churches Small Because of Persecution?

Although orchestrated regional persecutions documented from the late 2nd century, the evidence of orchestrated persecutions from the 1st century through the mid-2nd century is less available.⁷ In the earliest decades of the church, specific groups of Christians were persecuted in specific contexts. Acts 8:1-4 speaks of Paul leading a persecution against the church in

³ Wolfgang Simson, *Houses That Change the World: The Return of the House Churches* (Carlisle, Cumbria, U.K Waynesboro, Ga: OM Pub, 2001), xvii.

⁴ See Simson, *Houses that Change the World*, Ch. 6. Other proponents are more cautious in discussions about wide-ranging persecution. For instance, Zdero states that the notion of such persecution is “popular but inaccurate.” Rad Zdero, *Global House Church Movement* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey, 2004), 24.

⁵ Simson, *Houses*, xvii.

⁶ The platitude “smaller is better” regarding house churches comes from Garrison, *Church Planting Movements*, 25.

⁷ For evidence of late-2nd century organized persecution, see Justin Martyr, *First Apology* 4.4. Tertullian, *Apology*, 20. See also, the late-2nd century account in *Polycarp’s Martyrdom*.

Jerusalem. This persecution scattered believers to greater Judea and Samaria, and even beyond, but the persecution does not appear to have immediately followed them. Acts 12 speaks of Herod Agrippa killing some who belonged to the church (Acts 12:1)—including James. Agrippa persecuted the church to receive praise from the Jewish population under his rule. Acts 18 speaks of a dispersion from Rome of all Jews, which would have included Christians at that time (Acts 18:2-3). The reason may have been due to Jewish disturbances related to Christians, but this remains uncertain.⁸

Acts depicts Roman authorities as more reserved in their treatment of Paul. It also includes confusion as to why he should be tried and what charges should count against him (Acts 22:22-30; 25:1-27; 26:30-32). If persecutions were widespread and orchestrated then, this confusion would make little sense. Paul and Peter were sometimes persecuted by individuals from Jewish groups, but Acts does not depict the persecution of all Christians by either the Roman authorities or any Jewish group.

1st Thessalonians 1:6 speaks of the “severe affliction” (ἰλιψὴ πολλή) of Christians in Thessalonica. 2nd Thessalonians 1:4 speaks of “persecutions” (διωγμοῖς) endured by the church. However, the instigators of such persecutions are not clear. Since they serve as a model to surrounding regions due to their faith despite severe affliction, this suggests that such severe affliction had not yet spread to surrounding regions (1 Thess 1:7-9).⁹ Revelation 2–3 suggests that persecution had arisen in some cities in Asia Minor by the end of the 1st century and may suggest a more widespread persecution

⁸ The reference to “Chrestus” in Suetonius, *Divus Claudius*, 25 may refer to Christ and Jewish disputes over Christian belief.

⁹ For a similar take from a historian’s perspective, see W. H. C. Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church: A Study of a Conflict from the Maccabees to Donatus* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock), 151-55. Fee suggests that the persecution arose from their conversion and not from the state and thus would have been regionally contained. Gordon D. Fee, *The First and Second Letters to the Thessalonians*. The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 7-8, 11, 31.

of Christians.¹⁰ However, none of the biblical data presents a widespread, orchestrated persecution of all Christians either by Roman authorities or from any Jewish groups in the 1st century.

Outside of the New Testament, Roman records show that Christians were targeted in the aftermath of the Great Fire of Rome in AD 64.¹¹ This regional persecution does not appear to have had widespread influence across the empire. The Trajan-Pliny correspondence from the early-2nd century gives evidence of regional persecution of Christians, but this persecution arises from misunderstandings of Christian beliefs and practices.¹² The seeming ignorance of Christianity and how to deal with Christians suggests that organized persecution had not become normative across the Roman Empire at this time. The correspondence notes that elsewhere in the Empire, Roman authorities had struggled to know how they should handle Christian refusal to worship Roman gods, but it says little more. However, the lack of references to Christians in the voluminous Roman writings from this period argues against widespread, orchestrated persecution.

Both the biblical and extrabiblical data suggest that a typical 1st century church did not face constant threats of persecution—except for specific churches in specific places at specific times. When one considers that “cultural Christians were the norm rather than the exception in the early church,” it suggests widespread persecution was less likely.¹³ This means that any

¹⁰ This article assumes a date for Revelation in the late-1st century. See Robert L. Thomas. *Revelation 1-7: An Exegetical Commentary* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 1992), 23; Robert H. Mounce. *The Book of Revelation. The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997) 20-21; G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text. New International Greek Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans), 4-27.

¹¹ Tacitus, *Annals*, 15.44. A similar statement appears in Suetonius, *Caesars: Nero*, 16.

¹² Pliny the Younger, *Epistulae*, 10.

¹³ Nadya Williams. *Cultural Christians in the Early Church: A Historical and Practical Introduction to Christians in the Greco-Roman World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2023), 16. These cultural Christians found Christianity appealing, because it “created identity without demanding excessive personal commitment.” *Ibid.*, 25.

assumption that house churches remained small due to threat of persecution in the 1st and early 2nd centuries should be reconsidered.

Other evidence suggests that Christian gatherings, even large Christian gatherings, would not have been abnormal in the Greco-Roman world. In a well-researched book on 1st century associations, Philip Harland states, “reviewing the evidence of association life from an ancient city like Smyrna, one immediately notices gatherings among goldsmiths, porters, hymn singers; devotees of Dionysos, of Demeter, of Caesar, and of Christ; Judeans; and others.”¹⁴ In this context, the New Testament terminology for “church” or “assembly” (ἐκκλησία), “synagogue” or “gathering” (συναγωγή), and “fellowship” or “participation” (κοινωνία) would have been common language in these voluntary associations. Harland continues,

“Christian assemblies and Jewish synagogues were by no means alone as unofficial gatherings within this cultural landscape. Their Greek and Roman neighbors likewise joined together in informal groups, guilds, or ‘associations’ (koina, synodoi, thiasoi, mystai, phratores, synergasiai, collegia) under the patronage of deities like Zeus, Dionysos, and Demeter. Associations gathered regularly to socialize, share communal meals, and honor both their earthly and their divine benefactors. In fact, cities like Ephesus were saturated with such groups.”¹⁵

This evidence suggests church gatherings would not have prompted a negative response from Greco-Roman authorities simply due to their existence. Religious groups and gatherings were common. This included gatherings centered on worshipping regional deities and other religious practices not endorsed by the state. Thus, claims that the early churches remained small for fear of persecution are exaggerated. Furthermore, it’s

¹⁴ Philip A. Harland, *Associations, Synagogues, and Congregations: Claiming a Place in Ancient Mediterranean Society* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2003), 25.

¹⁵ Harland, 2.

unclear from the context of the texts that discuss regional persecutions that this necessitated meeting in small houses. The next section of this article will discuss the biblical depiction of house churches and what archaeology can tell us about their size, spatial dimensions, and capacity.

House Churches in the Bible

The early Christian movement preached and taught “in the temple and from house to house” (Acts 5:42; 20:20). They also worshipped together at the temple, but broke bread in their homes (Acts 2:42). In his attempts to destroy God’s church (Gal 1:13), Paul searched throughout “the houses” (Acts 9:3). The disciples gathered in houses for worship and prayer (Acts 12:12). And, the New Testament epistles speak of churches meeting in houses (Rom 16:5; 1 Cor 16:19; Col 4:5; Phlm 2; and 2 John 10). How should we envision these gatherings and the physical space that they occupied?

House Church Practice, Décor, and Size

Christians continued to worship in the temple and synagogues throughout the earliest centuries of the church (Acts 5:42, 9:20, 13:5, 14; 14:1; 17:1-2, 10; 18:4, et al.). Christians saw themselves as incorporated into God’s people (Eph 2:12-17; Rom 11:13-24, et al.). Peter, for example, refers to himself as a “fellow Israelite” when addressing a Judean crowd in Acts 3 and argues that Jesus and his church continue the biblical story (Acts 3:18-20).¹⁶ Paul uses similar language in his sermons (Acts 16:16, 23). Since the earliest Christians continued to worship with Jews in synagogues and saw themselves as incorporated into God’s people, they received worship forms of the Jews in

¹⁶ Israel as a nation, region, or people did not exist at the time of Peter’s sermon. The use of the term Israelite in the second temple period often had eschatological implications for a reunited people of God. See Jason A. Staples, *The Idea of “Israel” in Second Temple Judaism: A New Theory of People, Exile, and Jewish Identity* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

the synagogues influenced the structures, practices, and worship of early Christians.¹⁷ Synagogues had structured leadership (Mark 5:22; Acts 13:15, 18:8, 17). Synagogue worship included Scripture reading (Acts 13:15, 15:21; 17:2, 17, et al.) and preaching (Matt 4:23, 9:35; Luke 4:44; Acts 18:26, 19:8).¹⁸ We see each of these incorporated into early church practice that included both Jews and Gentiles (1 Tim 3:1-13; Tit 1:5-9; 1 Tim 4:13; Rom 15:4; Col 3:15-16; 2 Tim 4:2).

Jewish synagogues across the Greco-Roman world used objects with religious artwork that depicted stories from the Scriptures. Artwork in Greco-Roman synagogues from the period of the New Testament can be found across Greece, Asia Minor, Syria, and North Africa.¹⁹ Religious wall paintings and domestic worship were common in the Greco-Roman world.²⁰ Evidence from Christian worship spaces in the mid-2nd and early-3rd centuries includes significant amounts of Christian artwork.²¹ Despite the threat of persecution in the latter 2nd and 3rd centuries for being identified as a

¹⁷ This article does not assume that Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians kept the same practices or always chose to worship in the same way. It only assumes that synagogue practice shaped early Christian practice—even among Gentiles.

¹⁸ Gehring suggests an organized but less clear depiction of early church gatherings. Gehring, *House Church and Mission*, 27. The patterns of synagogue worship and the Greco-Roman social norms of similar religious gatherings, when combined with the biblical depictions of early gatherings, suffice to show that early church groups had structure and organization. The extent of such structure and organization remains open for further discussion.

¹⁹ Edwin R. Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols in the Greco-Roman Period*, Vol II: The Archaeological Evidence from the Diaspora. Bollingen Series XXXVII (New York, NY: Pantheon Books, 1953), 70-100.

²⁰ See Timothy E. Gregory, ed., *The Corinthia in the Roman Period: Including the Papers given at a Symposium Held at The Ohio State University on 7-9 March, 1991*, Journal of Roman Archaeology Supplementary Series 8 (Ann Arbor, MI). Also, see Daniel N. Schowalter, ed., *Religion in Ephesos Reconsidered: Archaeology of Spaces, Structures, and Objects*, Supplements to Novum Testamentum, vol. 177 (Boston, MA: Brill, 2020).

²¹ Consider the artwork of the Roman Catacombs, which became worship spaces following organized persecutions in the late-2nd century. The Duro-Europos house church also preserves Christian artwork from the early-3rd century. It would be plausible to assume that this artwork was continuous with artwork from earlier churches since this practice was common in the Jewish synagogues from which many early Christians came.

Christian, believers continued to mark their meeting spaces with Christian symbolism and artwork.²² Since persecution increased during these centuries and artwork persisted, in an earlier period where religious artwork was accepted and persecution did not rise to these later levels, one could assume that Christians also used religious artwork in their worship spaces.²³

How large were the homes where Christians met? Many common people in Greco-Roman cities lived in apartments or above their workplaces in the markets. These smaller homes could not accommodate more than 10-15 people.²⁴ But, should we assume that Christians only gathered in smaller homes? In his account of the archaeology of Ephesus, Jerome Murphy O'Connor suggests that these smaller homes could have accommodated small groups, but the larger church would gather in larger homes or other gathering spaces. This distinction may be evident in the use of the phrase “entirety of the church” (ὅλης τῆς ἐκκλησίας) in Romans 16:23.²⁵ Such a phrase would distinguish the larger gathering from smaller groups that met in apartments.²⁶

²² Even when forced to worship in the catacombs during the persecutions of the 3rd century, Christians continued to decorate their worship spaces with theologically rich and explicit Christian iconography.

²³ Some evidence of early Christian symbolism, such as the cross and ichthus, remains from the early 2nd century. Furthermore, Christians in the mid 2nd-century were accused as worshippers of the cross. See Tertullian, *Apologia*, xii., xvii. Unfortunately, the small size of the church during the earliest period means that little archaeological evidence remains.

²⁴ J. Murphy-O'Connor, *St. Paul's Ephesus: Texts and Archaeology* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2008), 160.

²⁵ Banks, *Paul's Idea of Community*, 41-42, 120-21; James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 8-16*. Word Biblical Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2018), 911. Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, *Paul: A Critical Life* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996), 267.

²⁶ Murphy-O'Connor, 196. J. Murphy-O'Connor, *St. Paul's Corinth: Text and Archaeology*, 3rd rev. and expanded ed (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2002), 183.

More moderately sized houses common across the region often sized between 40-75m².²⁷ Houses this size could still accommodate 30-50 people.²⁸ At the same time, the biblical data suggests that at least some early Christians came from the wealthier classes.²⁹ In Ephesus, this segment of society's homes ranged from about 350m² to 650m². Such homes often had sizable courtyards and a second floor.³⁰ Such homes could easily accommodate dinner parties for hundreds of people. Those who could not fit in the *triclinium* overflowing into the *atrium*.³¹ The most extravagant homes were as large as 1800m². Such homes had lavish gardens that could accommodate thousands of people if needed.³² It is possible that the wealthier Christian homes could have welcomed hundreds of individuals.

Larger spaces could have accommodated the “entirety of the church” (Rom 16:23). The Jerusalem church had thousands of members after Pentecost, yet Acts 2:44 says that all the believers were together (ἐπὶ τὸ αὐτὸ). Acts 5:12 notes that they all gathered at Solomon’s Portico. Josephus describes this venue as having four sides each around 600 feet.³³ Such a venue could easily accommodate tens of thousands of people.³⁴

This data sufficiently shows that an assumption that house churches remained small due to size constraints does not match the archaeological

²⁷ Ibid., 183. O’Connor suggests that the average house was 41.25m² in Corinth, 42m² in Pompeii, and 74m² in Ephesus.

²⁸ Ibid., 182.

²⁹ Gaius, Phoebe, and Lydia, for instance.

³⁰ Murphy-O’Connor, *Ephesus*, 192-94.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Carolyn Osiek and David L. Balch, *Families in the New Testament World: Households and House Churches*, ed. Don S. Browning and Ian S. Evison, *The Family, Religion, and Culture* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 201-203.

³³ Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, 15.11.3. Josephus describes it as a furlong on each side. A furlong was approximately 607 feet.

³⁴ Consider that an NFL field is approximately 57,600ft², whereas Solomon’s Portico would have been around 360,000ft².

and biblical data. As a result, missiologists should have a broader perspective on the sizes of early Christian house and non-house churches.

Conclusion

There is a lack of evidence that persecution necessitated house churches to remain small in either the biblical or extrabiblical data for the 1st to mid-2nd centuries. Nor does the data show that churches remained small due to size constraints in Greco-Roman homes. Instead, the data shows that both small and larger gatherings occurred and that the social and spatial environments of 1st and 2nd century Greco-Roman society allowed for them to meet.

The research in this article does not suggest that Christians should not meet in small groups, or that house churches of 10-15 are not an appropriate model.³⁵ In certain contexts, both with and without persecution, house churches may provide the most strategic model for church planting. Nevertheless, there are certain contexts where house churches will be less strategic. The research in this article suggests that a variety of church models—even a variety of house church models—were used in the earliest church. Thus, there was no biblically mandated size or location for church planting, but gatherings in different places and different sized groups, who gathered around biblically mandated practices. As missiologists in the 21st century, we should not feel constrained by platitudes such as *smaller is better*, even if the proponents of such platitudes claim early church support.³⁶ Christians in certain contexts may find traditional city center churches more strategic, whereas storefront churches may be more strategic in another context, and

³⁵ Roger Gehring suggests a functional value of house churches to allow “Christians [to] go beyond the superficial, cultivate deeper personal relationships, and support one another in a very concrete way, even in material matters.” Gehring, *House Church and Mission*, 93. Functional, relational, pragmatic, and contextual values may necessitate different models in different settings. However, these do not justify the stronger claims of others that small house churches are the biblical model.

³⁶ Garrison, *Church Planting Movements*, 25.

gathering in homes in yet another context. In some contexts, missiologists may find gatherings of five people more strategic, or they may find gatherings of five hundred more strategic in other contexts. Considering the earliest church, missiologists can consider multiple models and plant churches in the model appropriate to their context.

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