

1-1-1995

## House Churches and the Lord's Supper

John McRay

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven>



Part of the [Biblical Studies Commons](#), [Christianity Commons](#), and the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

McRay, John (1995) "House Churches and the Lord's Supper," *Leaven*: Vol. 3: Iss. 3, Article 5.  
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven/vol3/iss3/5>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Religion at Pepperdine Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Leaven by an authorized editor of Pepperdine Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [bailey.berry@pepperdine.edu](mailto:bailey.berry@pepperdine.edu).

# House Churches and the Lord's Supper

by John McRay

The establishment and spread of the church in the first three centuries, before Constantine, was accomplished without the construction of church buildings. When the word "church" is used in a first century text, it does not refer to a structure on a street corner with a sign out front, a street address, a telephone number, an insurance policy and a bank account. Christianity was tolerated but not officially recognized for the first three hundred years of its existence (until the edict of Milan in 313) and could not own property.

On the other hand, Judaism was included among officially recognized religions and could own property from the beginning of the Roman Empire. Jewish groups were classified for legal purposes as *collegia* and protected along with other clubs, guilds and associations. When Julius Caesar ordered all such groups disbanded which did not have a long history, the synagogues were among those explicitly exempted.<sup>1</sup> The emperor Claudius, in the time of Paul (A.D. 41), issued a letter reconfirming the rights of Jews to continue their time-honored religion without being bothered, although he denied them Roman citizenship on a community basis like that possessed by the Greeks.<sup>2</sup> Evidence from Sardis, Ephesus and other cities in the diaspora clearly demonstrates the "generally favorable policy of Rome toward the Jewish diaspora communities from Caesar until well after Constantine."<sup>3</sup> Ancient inscriptions, literary evidence and New Testament passages (e.g., Acts 18:7) speak of synagogue buildings in the first century. Archaeological excavations in Israel have pro-

duced evidence of synagogues from the first century at Gamla, Capernaum and Magdala, as well as renovated structures used as synagogues in Herodium and Masada.

The first converts to Christianity were Jews. When they accepted Jesus as the Messiah, they continued to attend their synagogues (as did Priscilla and Aquila in Ephesus, Acts 18:26, where they heard Apollos, who had also accepted Christ). Paul went to Damascus in an attempt to ferret Jewish Christians out of the synagogues and imprison them: Luke wrote that Paul "asked him (i.e., the High Priest) for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to "the Way," men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem (Acts 9:2, RSV).

Their presence in synagogues is alluded to in James 2:2 (the word translated "assembly" is the Greek word for synagogue). They had no church buildings to take the place of their synagogue buildings, so they met in homes. People like Titius Justus, a Christian, whose house adjoined the synagogue where he had probably attended as a "godfearer" would have welcomed others besides Paul to his home (Acts 18:7) and Crispus, the ruler of the synagogue, probably welcomed others to worship with him and his household (Acts 18:8). Priscilla and Aquila, mentioned above in the synagogues, also had churches meeting in their home, both in Ephesus (1 Cor 16:19) and later in Rome (Rom 16:5), as did Philemon in Colossae (Phil 2) and Nympha in Laodicea (Col 4:15). "The structure of the early

Christian groups was thus linked with what was commonly regarded as the basic unit of the society, the home.<sup>4</sup>

The individual home, which housed a small section of the composite church in a city, became the "basic cell of the Christian movement."<sup>5</sup> The house-

## **The Lord's Supper was celebrated by medium-sized groups (30 to 50) meeting either in the private home . . . or by small groups (10 to 15) .**

hold conversions mentioned several times in the New Testament (e.g., Acts 16:15, 33; 18:8; 1 Cor 1:16; 16:15, etc.) formed the nucleus of these "house churches." At times the entire church might meet in the home of a member like Gaius who had a facility large enough to accommodate such meetings (Rom 16:23). He hosted Paul "and the whole church." Paul refers on occasion to the "whole church assembling in one place" and worshipping together (1 Cor 14:23). This would be a composite meeting of the house churches.

The frequency of such composite meetings is not attested in the New Testament. On the analogy of Jewish synagogue services, it might be assumed that Christians met to observe the Lord's day every time it occurred, though this is not explicitly stated. One such meeting occurred on the first day of the week in Troas (Acts 20:7) and is implied in Corinth (1 Cor 16:1-2). The individual house groups undoubtedly met every Sunday, or even more frequently (as may be implied in Acts 2:42-46; 5:42). It was more difficult for groups to find public facilities available and large enough to accommodate large numbers.<sup>6</sup> An occasional meeting outside in a field would not be satisfactory in the winter or as a permanent solution to their needs.

The problem was compounded by the need to have facilities that would allow preparation and serving of fellowship or communal meals. A house setting of some kind provided the culinary appurtenances necessary for these meals. Communal meals were a familiar part of ancient Graeco-Roman society. They were held in pagan temples.<sup>7</sup> Pagan clubs or volunteer associations<sup>8</sup> participated in them routinely.<sup>9</sup> Synagogues<sup>10</sup> also participated in fellowship

meals.<sup>11</sup> Major Jewish feasts were celebrated in the homes, but special occasions like circumcision, betrothals, weddings and even funerals<sup>12</sup> were held in the synagogues.<sup>13</sup> So whether Paul's converts came from Judaism or paganism, they were familiar with groups gathering for communal meals in domestic residences.

The Lord's Supper was celebrated by medium-sized groups (30 to 50) meeting either in the private home of some wealthy church member who could afford to own a private home, or by small groups (10 to 15) of poor Christians who lived in the cramped quarters of high-rise apartments. Before commenting on the nature of these fellowship meals and the Lord's Supper, it will be helpful to describe what the household facility was actually like in New Testament times lest it be erroneously assumed that a middle class of society existed then, as now, which owned large private dwellings.

In the Roman Empire at this time, 90 percent of the free population and more than 90 percent of the slaves lived in small crowded high-rise apartment buildings.<sup>14</sup> In Rome only 3 percent of the population lived in a *domus* (private house).<sup>15</sup> I never visit Pompeii without being deeply impressed with the fact that less than 10 percent of the residential area was occupied by private houses.<sup>16</sup> Ostia, the port city of Rome, had only twenty-two private villas at this time.<sup>17</sup>

It is my impression from exploring virtually all the excavated domestic architecture in Pompeii, Herculaneum, Ephesus and many other cities in the Roman Empire, that a *domus* or villa (i.e., a large house) would be able to accommodate only about fifty people in its large atrium (open court in the center of the house) and its triclinium (dining room). Roman houses were built with solid walls facing the streets, without windows for security reasons, and with rooms arranged in a circle opening to the interior upon the atrium. Here in the atrium Christians might gather to worship since it was the only non-private area of the house. It was here that Romans and Greeks had worshipped their gods before becoming Christians. "The atrium, with its ancestral images, and the images of the lares and genius in the lararium, was as much a center of traditional family worship as it was a place to receive business and political clients."<sup>18</sup>

As noted above, a few Christians in the New Testament were wealthy and could have villas of this kind with a church meeting in that home.<sup>19</sup> However, for most Christians in urban settings, the lower class of that society, the only option available was the less spacious facility of a high-rise apartment which would accommodate only ten to fifteen people.<sup>20</sup> These

quarters were crowded and uninviting. The first floor was usually occupied with shops. The second floor was taken by those who could pay higher rent for the single flight of stairs. The upper floors of these high-rise slum buildings were rented by those who had the least income. Some buildings had larger apartments on the lower floors for the upper class tenants and smaller ones of about thirty square feet in the upper levels for freedmen or slaves.<sup>21</sup>

These buildings contained no central heat, no running water and no toilets. The public toilets abundantly provided by the city were used by tenants. The only light was furnished by lamps which emitted fumes. Thus, a group meeting in such facilities for worship in the evening after a day's work (Paul preached till midnight, Acts 20:7) found it an uncomfortable experience. Doubtless, it was in such circumstances that Eutychus fell out the upper story window at night during a Lord's Supper service when there were "many lights burning" (Acts 20:8-9) and the air from these torches would have been stultifying. Even though he sat in the window of this "upper chamber" he still fell into a deep sleep. Because of the heat and poor air the windows could not be closed to keep out the noise of the carts on cobblestone streets, since merchants were required by law to transport their goods down the narrow streets at night.

Given the housing situation in the empire, it is clear that the term "house church" may not be used to convey the notion of a situation comparable to middle class private homes today. Such did not exist. Only a few wealthy members had private homes in which the church met. Almost all the churches in urban settings met in small groups in small private apartments of tenement buildings. On special occasions they would meet together as described in 1 Corinthians 14:23: "when the whole church assembles (in one place, *KJV*)."<sup>22</sup> In these larger assemblies, no doubt in rented rooms of various kinds, the public rules of social conduct would perhaps replace the greater freedom and responsibility of the women in the private smaller meetings which occurred in their own apartments or homes. One of the obvious points of difference in the two kinds of meetings is that in the small group meetings at home the women had a prominent if not exclusive role in serving the meal.

Three kinds of meals are discernable in these situations: 1) The regular meal taken for mere physical sustenance; 2) The agape (love feast, Jude 12) meal eaten together to promote spiritual unity; and 3) The Lord's Supper.<sup>23</sup> The Lord's Supper was eaten as a part of the agape meal. This provides important contextual background for the only discussion of the church observing the supper in the New Testament, that which occurs in 1 Corinthians

10 and 11.

In the tenement buildings, residents were sometimes fed from a common kitchen,<sup>24</sup> while others cooked from a charcoal brazier in their small apartments. In these contexts the women would have prepared and served the meals. When the small groups met together in larger assemblies the women probably continued to serve the meals, including the Lord's Supper, which was eaten during the fellowship meal. It is a failure to properly distinguish the one from the other, that led Paul to say

When you meet together, it is not the Lord's supper that you eat. For in eating, each one goes ahead with his own meal, and one is hungry and another is drunk. What! Do you not have houses to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I commend you in this? No, I will not.<sup>25</sup>

The word "Lord's" and the words "his own" are placed in the emphatic position in Greek. The problem was not that in a worship assembly in a large modern type church edifice the worshippers were not "discerning" the Lord's body by failing to concentrate on the meaning of the observance. The word discern (*diakrino*) in 11:29 means "distinguish." They "ate and drank condemnation upon themselves" by failing to distinguish the Lord's Supper from their own supper which they were eating on the same occasion. The Lord's Supper was being eaten in the context of another meal. This is the contextual inference. The emerging picture is that abuses were occurring when the larger group assembled in the home of a wealthy member (a private home) or a rented facility (tenement dwelling).

First it is possible that in the private home of a wealthy member, the elite of that society, including the wealthy and the influential, were eating in the triclinium (dining room) while reclining on benches and enjoying the best food. The members of the lower class, including slaves and freedmen were meeting out in the atrium and receiving lesser quantity and/or quality of food. So when the poor, who arrived late for the communal meal, entered the atrium they had no food. The others had already consumed the food, even to the extent of becoming drunk while the late comers were hungry (11:21).

Paul thus instructs that "when you come together to eat, wait for one another—if any one is hungry, let him eat at home—lest you come together to be condemned" (11:33-34). The purpose of the communal agape was not to satisfy hunger but to

share a sense of unity by sitting around a table and eating a meal together. Jesus said his disciples would “eat and drink at my table in my kingdom” (Luke 22:30). Table fellowship was a sign of mutual acceptance and honor: “And men will come from east and west, and from north and south, and sit at table in the kingdom of God” (Luke 13:29). Therefore, those who are hungry should go to their own residences and eat, and stop making this communal agape a pagan religious meal characterized by gluttony and drunkenness. By acting this way they eat and drink judgment on themselves and dishonor the body and blood of the Lord (11:27-29). They must examine themselves and their behavior and properly distinguish the Lord’s Supper.

The second possible context for 1 Corinthians is that the situation described occurred in a tenement setting. In this case, the Christian host and patron who provided the meal for the believers in the wealthy private home, would not be present. Some of the merchant tenement dwellers who lived on the lower levels of the insula or apartment house, would have money to provide some of the food, but the poor would have nothing to contribute. The poor residents of these buildings would pool their meager funds for potluck communal meals to eat together in a rented facility. Sometimes they may have eaten and drunk more than they should, more than they could have at home. As a result, the poor who often came late and had no food to bring were excluded from the meal. Paul was instructing them that in the Lord’s body those who have share with those who have not.

It has been suggested that in some cities Christians in tenement buildings might have eaten their main meal of the day together regularly in order to provide food for hungry brothers and sisters.<sup>26</sup> If some refused to work and share the fruit of their labor with those who could not work, then they would be refused a place at the communal meals. Paul reminded the Thessalonians that he and his colleagues did not eat anyone’s bread without paying (2 Thess 3:8) and that “following his example . . . if any will not work, neither let him eat” (3:9-10). This sanction could not be enforced if the members were only eating their food as a family in the privacy of their own homes. A communal situation is implied, and again, we emphasize that it is quite unlike the context of anything with which the churches are familiar today.

The Lord’s Supper was celebrated in the context of such communal meals by a large portion of

Christianity through the fourth century,<sup>27</sup> when the construction of large basilican church buildings began, with an emphasis on sacrament and liturgy, and a corresponding diminution in the practice of communal dining.<sup>28</sup> Today, the sacramental approach to the Lord’s Supper, even by non-sacramental institutions like the Churches of Christ, has replaced any real connotation of the supper as a meal with all the fellowship implications it once carried. It is now often taken as a virtual sacrament by a few people who, having missed the morning worship, stand and have it administered to them at the conclusion of the evening worship. The first century connotation of acceptance, fellowship, participation and unity conveyed by sitting together at a table is totally lost in such a setting. Even in the setting of a morning worship where most eat the supper together, the association of the observance with a meal is almost entirely lost. Such has been the result of the evolution of the place of meeting from a household milieu to that of a lecture hall.

Christians no longer segregate minorities from the church buildings. But there is no ethical merit or cause for spiritual pride over the pseudo-equality this has often created. It was forced by a decision of the United States Supreme Court. The real test of acceptance comes not in sitting in a building together because the law requires it, but in sitting together on equal terms around the dinner table after church is over. This is precisely the context in which the Lord’s Supper was observed in the first century and the one which gave it the meaning our Lord intended when he instituted it. “Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, because we partake of the one bread” (1 Cor 10:17).

Otherwise he would have crafted the bread and wine in bronze and placed them on a pedestal for the church to view like Israel viewed the bronze serpent in the wilderness. On the contrary, the Lord’s Supper is a fellowship, a *koinonia*, which means a “participation in” the process of eating and drinking (I Cor 10:16). As the context of the house church in ancient times emphatically illustrates, the supper is a memorial of participation not of observation. The context of the house church in ancient times emphatically illustrated this.

**John McRay** is Professor of New Testament and Archaeology and Coordinator of Graduate Biblical Studies at Wheaton College Graduate School.