

“House Churches”

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The cancellation of the Sunday Services and the other congregational gatherings of the Christian Churches all over India, following the Prime Minister’s address to the Nation on 19 March 2020 regarding the Coronavirus, specifically to observe Sunday the 22nd March 2020 as the People’s Curfew Day from 7 am to 9 pm, has upset many Christians. With my understanding of the Bible history and the Church history, I welcome the PM’s proposals. I remember Cyrus the Great, the Persian King of the sixth century, whom God used to help the Jews “rebuild” the Temple in Jerusalem (Isa 44:28). God even called him His “anointed” (45:1). I believe that the decree from our PM will pave way to “restore” the formation and the functioning of “House Churches” after the pattern of the Early Church.

There were House Churches in Jerusalem where there was not only worship and breadbreaking but also teaching and preaching (Acts 2:46; 5:42). In order to play havoc in the Church in Jerusalem, Saul had to enter the “houses” (8:3). The Church was praying in the “house” of Mary for the release of Peter from prison (12:5,12). There was a live Church in the “house” of the couple, Priscilla and Aquila (Rom 16:3-5; 1 Cor 16:19). This was one of the several House Churches in Rome. There was a Church in the “house” of Philemon (Phile 1,2). A Church gathered in the “house” of Nympha (Col 4:15). All the House Churches in any one city had spiritual link with one another under the leadership of “elders” (Acts 20:17; Tit 1:5). We read about the Church in Corinth, Church in Ephesus, Church in Philadelphia and so on.

The restoration of House Churches will have the following benefits —

(1) The believers, instead of being a mere audience, will be able to minister “to one another” through Psalms, Hymns and Spiritual Songs (Eph 5:19; Col 3:16). This they would do with their hearts filled with the Holy Spirit and the Holy Scriptures (Eph 5:18; Col 3:16). This horizontal dimension is practically absent in our Church services. Is not considering “one another” and exhorting “one another” to do good works the primary purpose of Church gathering? (Heb 10:24,25; Mal 3:16). This should be more than a formal greeting and a handshake.

(2) Each believer is gifted by the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 12:7-11; Rom 12:4-8; 1 Pet 4:10,11). There’s no non-gifted member in the Body of Christ. Individuals cannot operate the gifts freely and fully in large gatherings. House Churches will be an ideal platform for each believer to exercise his/her gift and attain operational maturity (1 Cor 14:26; 13:11). Because there’s no law of Sabbath for New Testament believers, the gathering as a House Church can be on any day of the week and as often as possible (Rom 14:5,6; Col 2:16,17; Acts 2:46,47).

(3) Several new leaders would emerge in the House Church settings. The Priesthood of all Believers is a fundamental doctrine of the New Testament (1 Pet 2:4-5, 9-10; Rev 1:6; 5:9-10). This is more on paper than in practice. This is one of the truths of the Protestant Reformation of the 16th century which is not restored fully. The clergy-laity divide is detrimental to Church health. There is no place for religious hierarchy in the Church of Jesus Christ. He as the Head is always present wherever the members of His Body gather in His Name (Mt 18:20; Jn 4:20-24). Ceremonialism and ritualism are Old Testamental. They are gone with the Cross (Col 2:14-17). New Wine must be kept in new wineskins (Mt 9:17).

(4) The secret of the daily phenomenal growth of the early Church was their influence in their neighbourhood by the House Churches (Acts 2:46,47). Non-Christians who would hesitate to enter a Church building won't mind joining a meeting in their neighbour's house. Such a possibility is hinted in 1 Corinthians 14:24 and Acts 17:5-9. The explosive Church growth in Communistic countries could not be stopped because of the "House Church" phenomenon.

(5) Interactive Bible Study is best done in House Church gatherings. The believers in Berea are a classic example (Acts 17:11). This can attract even prominent men and women of the locality to become the disciples of Christ (v12). When a few Christian families in a given locality come together for Worship, Word-study and Witnessing, that becomes a House Church which breaks down denominational barriers. The blessings of Psalm 133 will be theirs! Online Church Services may only further paralyse Christians, not allowing them to move from being listeners and spectators to participants.

(6) Persecution of Christians and damaging of Church buildings are on the increase in India. It's easier for the enemies of the Gospel to destroy one Church building than to disrupt the functioning of numerous House Churches which would mostly enjoy the good will of the neighbours (Acts 2:46,47). The name "Home Cell" is not a better substitute for "House Church." I am not against Church buildings, but in a country like India it's safer to have 10 buildings which can hold 500 members each than a single building to accommodate 5000. This also gives an opportunity for at least 10 leaders with Pastoral and Teaching gifts to emerge. One Church Historian observes, "It's bricks which killed us!"

(7) It's of course difficult to accept changes in what we are accustomed to, but I am deeply convinced that the restoration of the House Churches will pave way for "Another Revival" which we desperately need (Psa 85:6). That would be our ultimate preparation for the Return of Christ (Acts 3:19-21). "Amen! Come, Lord Jesus!"