

The Basics *of* Biblical House Church



Written by

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SEVEN FUNDAMENTALS OF A
HEALTHY HOUSE CHURCH

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It seems like the flashier the church gets, the less spiritual power it has. Interestingly, research suggests that flashy is going flat. That is to say, Christians who are seeking a biblical church experience are not looking for another rock concert or coffee shop or TedTalk-style message presented as a sermon.

They are looking for both a scripturally accurate and historical expression of church. They are looking for the Gospel in its biblical form. They are looking for preachers who are committed to an expositional approach to teaching and who refuse to neglect sections of the Bible because of cultural unpopularity or the earthly comfort of their congregation. They are looking for the love and even the correction of other Christians who can compassionately lead them closer to Christ. But above all, they are looking for the biblical church—the one who proclaims the Gospel, matures in truth, loves deeply, and represents her King in the world.

However, let me be clear for those who might confuse this description with another. This church is not one of religious tradition, Catholicism, or any specific denominational heritage. It is quite the contrary.

The first place many Christians often go when they feel the failure of church

modernism is back to the ritual-laden, extra-biblical, and even unbiblical church traditions found throughout history.

It's our hope to call Christians to look back even further—to the New Testament, to the words of Christ and the Apostles, and to the instructions for Christian gathering found in the Holy Scriptures. This is not a call to the “church in Acts” it is not a call to be the “Early Church”, it is a call to be the church of today but in a way that is bound by the ecclesiological doctrine of Scripture alone.

For some, it may be hard to imagine that people would truly be interested in this type of church expression in our modern time. We believe, however, that those who are truly born again and redeemed are seeking such a place. In fact, we believe these Christians are homesick for these deep and committed missional communities. We believe these Christians are longing to be discipled and spiritually parented by mature men and women of the cross. We believe these Christians are craving the unabridged and rich truths of the Bible. But most of all, we believe the absence of these very things is what's causing thousands of malnourished Christians to hop from church to church seeking to find a place where they can be shepherded, fed, and protected.

But this leaves us with one critical question: Where

can we find that biblical expression of church? Well, to be clear, I'm not saying we find it exclusively in a house church. We believe there are many biblical churches with sound ecclesiology all over the world. Some of these assemblies are expressed in a traditional church building while others can be seen in rented school auditoriums, in garages, under trees, and in homes. While our ministry has a conviction that houses offer a highly fruitful and sustainable expression of church, our ecclesiastical convictions are united with all who uphold Bible-built, historic, evangelical church doctrine. In other words, we are calling for the same biblical church that many sound pastors and scholars have affirmed, we're just seeking it in a different format.

HOW WE VIEW BIBLICAL CHURCH

Additionally, within the framework of biblical church, there is a latitude that should be celebrated and not ignored. That is, there is no "one correct way" to do church. That being said, we do have a considerable amount of Scripture available to us for creating biblically accurate and spiritually fruitful Christian gatherings. Sadly, in an era of mega-churches, televangelists, and online church promoters, much of these teachings have been buried or carefully cut out of the modern church practice. We feel that unearthing of God's original architecture for the local church is timely.

However, I'm going to take a backward approach to this conversation. Before we dive into the depths of ecclesiology that has formed our perspective, I would like to first present to you our ministry's general position on the importance of church preaching and format.

We believe church fruitfulness greatly flows from two things: Preaching and format. That is, we believe church fruitfulness can be greatly promoted or prevented by preaching and format alone. We also believe that God's Word

gives us more information on preaching and church format than most modern churches and pastors would like to admit.

Having said that, like you, we have not perfected church. Also, we are not condemning biblical churches who gather in other formats. Nonetheless, our community of experienced church planters, theologians, seminary professors, and pastors have studied the New Testament in regard to church format, and in this article, I have attempted to organize our collective ecclesiological perspective into seven positions which make up Relearn.org's view of a biblical house church gathering.

✦ READ OUR DOCTRINAL STATEMENTS

[Relearn.org/Statement](https://relearn.org/Statement)

1. WE BELIEVE HOMES OFFER A FRUITFUL ENVIRONMENT FOR A CHURCH GATHERING

As stated earlier, a biblical church meeting can theoretically take place anywhere. Nevertheless, we believe a house offers a highly effective setting to generate the spiritual intimacy, closeness, and security required to walk out the level of love expected of members in a New Testament church. Now, many argue that the New Testament Christians met in homes purely because they couldn't gather elsewhere. While there may be some pragmatic truth to that argument, we do not believe having access to public buildings now should decrease the biblical example of house gatherings found in the Scriptures.

As we know, not all countries permit public church gatherings, and, in those more hostile cultures, homes become an effective solution that has proven to produce an abundance of spiritual growth.

Furthermore, and most beneficially, meeting in homes forces groups to be small and deeply connected while also encouraging the sense of family that seems to be missing between Christians today. Lastly, and more practically speaking, house gatherings alleviate

the legalities of incorporation, reduce the risk of persecution (for those living in oppressive areas), and eliminate the financial weight of a church building, staff, and salaries. In short, because we already have homes available to us, the money allocated for a traditional church venue can be reinvested into other spiritual needs (locally and abroad).

2. WE BELIEVE A FLOURISHING CHURCH GATHERING GENERALLY CONSISTS OF 5-12 FAMILIES AND/OR SINGLES

There is no perfect or correct size for a house church. However, both the Bible and science suggest that we are not designed to be intimate with more than a handful of people. That being said, when the majority of individuals at a larger church gathering are, in reality, mere strangers to each other, this often compromises and inhibits a congregation's ability to carry out the mutual pastoral mandates of the Scriptures. For example, "bearing one another's burdens" (Galatians 6:1-2) and "confessing your sins to one another" (James 5:16) and "having a fervent love for one another" (1 Peter 4:7-8) and "submitting to one another in the fear of God" (Ephesians 5:21) in the context of people who don't know each other, feels inappropriate and even unwise.

Having said that, we cannot create a closed environment that breeds exclusivity and spiritual elitism. In 1 Corinthians 12:18, Paul tells us, "But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose." In other words, God is always injecting new believers into His Church, and a biblical assembly must always be hospitable toward new brothers and sisters interested in joining their fellowship.

As for the size of a house church or its mathematics, there is no exact answer. But in our experience, a church begins to feel the natural loss of intimacy around 10-12 families or 40-50 total people (including children). This loss (generally sensed by the body) is a natural indicator that, in God's timing, this one gathering should multiply into two. Additionally, this size conveniently aligns with the space and parking

available at the average home.

Now on the other end, what is too small? We believe anything less than three families, by and large, prohibits the sense of community seen in the Bible. For example, if two out of three families are sick one Sunday, then the church cannot gather. Again, there is no mathematics; these are purely benchmarks to be discerned by each individual gathering.

Lastly, we must also recognize the pastoral model that Jesus left the church. While Jesus ministered to thousands, He was directly shepherding twelve. Now, this is descriptive of what He did and not prescriptive in what He told us to do. However, His example should cause any pastor to evaluate if it's fruitful to directly shepherd more than Christ did Himself. As I have mentioned above, there is no clear teaching on church size or on shepherding limits in the Scriptures so we are left to discern these areas through biblical examples, general theological principles, and fruitful church history.

3. WE BELIEVE EVERY CHURCH SHOULD BE SERVED BY BIBLICALLY-QUALIFIED ELDERS.

In an ideal situation, each house church gathering would have two qualified elders (1st Timothy 3:2-7) (Titus 1). These are married men (with children) who are appointed by the congregation and are responsible before the Lord for overseeing the local flock through spiritual formation (1 Peter 5:1-5), preaching, and protecting the body from false doctrine (Titus 1:9).

That being said, if a house church is planted and there is nobody who currently meets the qualifications of an elder (or it's a church filled with new believers as is often the case in the mission field) the lack of an elder should not prevent a church from being planted and should simply be cared for by the planter. Nonetheless, a planter, while he may not be present every Sunday, should be in regular communication with the body. Likewise, because a church planter's first responsibility is shepherding; we believe these men should meet the biblical qualifications of a shepherd. In the end, we believe in the Lord's timing, each gathering will

eventually either produce its own elders or the Lord will bring an elder by way of provision for His sheep. Furthermore, certain scenarios might allow for an elder from another local assembly to temporarily oversee the gathering until one can be raised up or appointed.

4. WE BELIEVE EVERY MEMBER HAS A PURPOSE IN THE CHURCH MEETING.

The idea of a single pastor preaching or an elected worship band singing or a certain staff member who does the praying cannot be found in the Bible. The Bible actually encourages a contrary experience. In 1st Corinthians 14:26-40, Paul encourages an orderly, yet every-member-functioning church gathering. He instructs the church (within the bounds of gender-roles and gifting) to bring teachings, spiritual songs, personal revelations, and to allow two or three prophets to speak. I think Dr. Thomas Schriener of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in his book *Spiritual Gifts* does a good job defining this term. He says, “A prophecy is a spontaneous message from God delivered through a human being that is meant to instruct, encourage, or warn God’s people.” That said, these spontaneous messages must be tested by and validated through Scripture. Paul even commands the other teachers in the church to judge the words spoken by another teacher to discern if they are true and in alignment with the Word of God (1 Corinthians 14:29-32; 1 John 4:1). 1 Corinthians 14:3 affirms Dr. Schriener’s definition of a New Testament prophet when it states, “One who prophesies speaks to people for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation.” This title of *prophet*, however, is not to be confused with the modern perversion of this spiritual gift that claims to be a gifted mouthpiece for God’s ongoing revelation. Those who claim this position violate the doctrine seen in Hebrews 1:1-2.

In the matter of preaching (further discussed in our book *House Church* which is displayed at the end of this document), we align with the 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith which states, “Although it be incumbent on the bishops or pastors of the churches to be instant in

preaching the word, by way of office, yet the work of preaching the word is not so peculiarly confined to them but that others also gifted and fitted by the Holy Spirit for it, and approved and called by the church, may and ought to perform it.” (1 Pet. 4:10-11; 1 Cor. 14:26-33).

In addition, we view the historical, four-part pattern of the local church seen in Acts 2:42 (teaching doctrine, fellowship, breaking bread, and prayer) as a broad, yet instructive example for the general structure of a local church assembly. In terms of liturgical structure or an order of worship by which these church functions are to be carried out, we have offered our general *Order of Worship for Free Worship Liturgy* at the last page of this document.

Ultimately, a biblical church is less of a consumer-centric event and more of a contributor-centric meeting. This assembly is not only to be orderly but also led by the Holy Spirit, in compliance with biblical gender roles, governed by qualified and appointed elders, built around edification, and conformed to the bounds of Scripture.

Essentially, church gathering in the Bible does not support passive audiences or spectacular displays of infotainment. It is a place where all members, at some level, can contribute, share, sing, and pray.

5. WE BELIEVE CHURCH GATHERINGS SHOULD BE OF HIGH COMMITMENT AND OCCUR WEEKLY.

Because institutional church-goers have recognized the repetitive reality of audience Christianity, they have very little motivating them to attend the weekly event. If church at its core is merely a sermon, why go when you can simply listen to the podcast or webcast in the comfort of your own home?

The New Testament tells us the early church not

only met regularly (Acts 2:46-47), but they were commanded by the author of Hebrews to “not forsake the gathering of themselves together as is the manner of some” (Hebrews 10:25). In fact, they were given this directive in the face of very real persecution. In today’s culture, it seems that many Christians have disregarded the church gathering for superficial reasons. This is not only foreign to church history, but contrary to the way we are instructed to view the church meeting in the Bible.

Instead, we are to view the weekly church gathering with high priority. It is a place where God has personal work to do in us and through us. It is a time to be equipped and edified by others for the week’s upcoming ministry (Ephesians 4:11-12).

In Acts 2:42, we see this prioritized church culture devoting themselves not only to the Apostle’s doctrine but also to the breaking of bread, prayer, and fellowship.

But let’s not pass by that word *fellowship* so quickly. In the Greek, it is *koinonia*. Biblically speaking, *koinonia* is displayed as an interactive, reciprocating, and participating relationship with both God and believers who share in their mutual new-life through Christ (Acts 2:42; 1 John 1:3, 6-7; 2 Cor. 9:13; Phil. 3:10). Simply put, to experience biblical fellowship is to engage in the sharing of both spiritual giving and spiritual receiving. It is the spiritual ethic that while we may have no secular attributes in common (where we live, what we enjoy, our ethnicity, our age, etc.), we can still find and experience rich exchanging of fellowship through our joint faith in Jesus Christ.

In conclusion, the biblical church is built on committed, rich, participatory relationships, not passive events with strangers. We believe a biblical house church must labor to maintain this perspective as it is an essential posture for generating a healthy Christian church.

6. WE BELIEVE IN GIVING TO THOSE WHO TEACH BUT NOT IN FIXED SALARIES.

Fixed salaries are a well-intended, non-sinful, yet extra-biblical idea never seen or instructed in the Scriptures. Furthermore, while the tithe is biblical, it is not Christian. Tithing was a command to ancient Israel regarding funding for the Levites, religious festivals, and the poor. Never do you see Christians tithing in the New Testament. When Christ died on the cross, He fulfilled the law and also ended the ceremonial codes (including tithe) (Colossians 2:14-15, 16-17).

Christians, in the New Covenant, are now called to cheerful generosity (2 Corinthians 9:6-7). Not simply to the poor and to the needs of others in the church but also toward the shepherds who oversee their church gathering. In 1st Timothy 5:17-19, Paul warns Christians to “not muzzle an ox while it treads out the grain.” For those who don’t know, a muzzle is a device that prevents an animal from eating while it’s working. That is to say, Paul is cautioning Christians against enjoying the spiritual fruitfulness of a pastor in their life without contributing to his financial needs. Galatians 6:6 offers continued support to the idea of sharing with those who are offering you spiritual instruction.

To answer the common question, “Do you receive a tax deduction for your giving in a house church?” No. Instead, you get the blessing of giving without receiving anything in return. That is, you get to support the Lord’s work by supporting not only the people in your church, (which include the man who takes the time to study, minister, and teach God’s truth) but also the greater community of saints in your local area.

7. WE BELIEVE THE CHURCH GATHERING IS PRIMARILY INTENDED TO EDIFY CHRISTIANS, NOT TO EVANGELIZE THE LOST.

In the Bible, evangelism and the church gathering are shown as separate endeavors. While organic guests should never be asked to leave (1 Corinthians 14:23-24), many churches have gone far beyond biblical hospitality toward unbelievers and have encouraged their congregations to regularly invite unbelievers to the church meeting as the central way to evangelize. This is not the prescribed posture of a New Testament

church (2 Corinthians 6:14).

As a result, many Christians have habitually outsourced their spiritual responsibility to proclaim the Gospel, and instead, reduced their role in God's Kingdom to merely inviting unbelievers to their church where a "professional" pastor can proclaim it for them.

In the New Testament, evangelism is always shown occurring outside of the gathering of the saints, and conversion is generally followed by immediate baptism and local church membership. Even the Great Commission commands us to "*Go therefore and make disciples...*" implying that proclaiming the Gospel is viewed as an outward work of the church. But again, a biblical church embraces the Holy Spirit-led guests in the gathering with hospitality and sincere love. However, it does not turn the local church meeting into an outreach event for unbelievers.

+ MORE ON HOW TO WISELY DEAL WITH GUESTS

Book: "House Church" : Shop.RelearnChurch.org

WHAT DOES A BIBLICAL HOUSE CHURCH GATHERING LOOK LIKE?

Because house churches are autonomously governed by their own elders, it's common to see a variety in the way each of them gathers. For example, in the house church that I personally oversee, we rotate homes every eight weeks. That means a small church kit of dishes, hymnals, songbooks, and chairs will live at the host family's home during that time.

We gather at 9:30 am each Sunday and have a general time of fellowship until 10:00 am. At that point, the man of the house will ask the families to take a seat, and within a few minutes, he will open the church meeting with prayer. Next, we sing spiritual songs that reflect the truths of Scripture and then pray for the leaders in our government and the persecuted

church. Shortly after, we do a simple reading of both the Old Testament and New Testament and then enter into our open meeting. During the open meeting, the elder(s) will prompt the body to share any additional songs, revelations, prayer requests, praise reports, or short teachings (1 Corinthians 14:26). Lastly, the elder or elder-approved man will offer an expository sermon of God's Word.

The entire 90-120 minute experience is quite beautiful. With our children sitting at our feet, we sing songs together, pray for one another, listen to the preaching of God's Word, have a complex dialogue regarding Scriptures shared during the teaching(s), and often times celebrate or even cry. Around noon, we wrap up the meeting by partaking in communion together, followed up by a few minutes of announcements (birthdays, upcoming vacations that would cause a family to be absent, etc.), and then we close the meeting with prayer.

But the best is yet to come. For the next several hours, we enjoy a potluck meal and biblical (*koinonia*) fellowship with one another. From private conversations in other rooms and group discussions about life to playing basketball or chasing the kids around the backyard, this is the time that builds the loving and unified bond between us.

Around 2 pm, after everyone has helped clean, people begin to leave. But still, the fellowship doesn't end. Because we're so connected, families work hard to schedule meals, date nights, homeschool parties, bible studies, or coffee dates with one another throughout the week. Even more, we strive to live out the Great Commission in our own life—having organic conversations with others about Jesus, helping unchurched Christians find their way back home, and trying to have a spiritual impact on our surrounding community.

SO, WHERE DO YOU BEGIN?

First, let me preface this with one word—*patience*.

The process of relearning how to conduct church in a home is generally a longer process than most expect. Many of us have been submerged into the depths of institutional church practice for so long that we must discipline ourselves to replace the tightly scheduled, program-driven, and pragmatic processes of a professional church with scriptural truths in their simplest form. Secondly, we must not forget that this journey toward a more intimate expression of church is a spiritual journey. And if you've followed the Lord long, you know the wisdom to navigate His Kingdom does not come like a fire hose but as a slow-moving river.

If you feel the Lord calling you to explore joining or planting a biblical house church, what should you do? Should you leave your current church? Should you start a Wednesday night Bible study that might transform into a house church? Should you tell all your friends at church to leave and plant with you? No. In fact, my suggestion is unless you feel God directly calling you out of your church, stay where you are until you have somewhere else to go. God doesn't mind a desert between two destinations, but He does not encourage wandering, flockless sheep. Finding or planting a biblical house church can be a several-months-long process. In my opinion, it is a journey worth every minute of effort, but speed and isolation are not advised elements of the process.

GET TRAINED OR SEND SOMEONE TO BE TRAINED

We do not suggest Christians plant a house church (or any church for that matter) without comprehensive theological training. Beyond our website Relearn.org, our ministry offers two central resources to assist Christians on their journey. First, is a book titled *House Church: The Doctrines, Convictions, and Order of Worship of a Biblical House Church*. This is a short 100-page book offering a broad but full look at the doctrinal positions and structure involved in planting or participating in a house church.

Second, we have recently launched the very first theological school dedicated to biblical house church.

It's called St. Justin's School of Biblical Church Planting, and it's a one-year, online (and in-person), seminary grade, house church planting school for men. If you feel the Lord calling you to plant and pastor a house church, we believe this program will be immensely helpful.

Ultimately, we have been called to serve the local church. We are not here to compete against the traditional gatherings; we are here to complement them. We are here to be a resource and encouragement to both pastors and parishioners alike. Not all Christians are looking for a church in a large-gathering format. We are a place for those who are looking for the same biblical integrity but simply in a more intimate expression.

To this, we labor. From PDF's like the one you're reading to books, podcasts, articles, and online curriculum, it's our mission to help thousands of Christians relearn how to gather in a home.

If you're interested in learning more about our ministry or supporting our efforts financially, you can do so at Relearn.org.

Curious how traditional church doctrine works in a house?

A SHORT, 110-PAGE OVERVIEW OF HOUSE CHURCH DOCTRINE



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Order of Worship

Date: _____

Elder(s): _____

Deacon(s): _____

Host Home: _____

1. Opening Prayer

Acts 2:42; Mark 11:24; 1 Thes. 5:17; Eph. 6:18

2. Psalms and Hymns of Praise

(1 Cor. 14:26; Eph. 5:19; Ps. 100:1-4)

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

3. Prayer for the Local City, Government Leaders, and Persecuted Church

(1 Tim. 2:1-4, Heb. 13:3)

4. Bible Reading

(1 Tim. 4:13; 2 Tim 4:2; Acts 2:42; 2 Tim. 3:14-17; Rom. 10:17)

Read aloud one chapter from the Old or New Testament. Readers are to provide a brief 1-2 minute contextual introduction to the church.

Psg: _____

5. Open Meeting

(1 Cor. 14:26-40; 1 Tim. 1-15)

Edifying Songs, Revelations, Short Teachings, Prayer Requests, Praise Reports, Testimonies, Exhortations, or Scripture Readings.

6. Sermon

(1 Tim. 4:13; Jam. 3:1; 2 Tim. 3:16-17; 2 Tim. 4:2; Rom. 10:14-15; Rom. 1:15; 1 Cor. 1:18; Matt. 28:19-20; 2 Tim. 2:2; Col. 1:28-29; 1 Tim. 3:2; Gal. 6:6; Tit. 2:15; Acts 15:35)

Psg: _____

7. Open Discussion

(1 Cor. 14:29-32)

Additional questions or edifying commentary in regards to the content of the sermon.

8. Prayer of Repentance and Communion

(1 Cor. 17-32; Matt. 26:26-29; Acts 2:42; 1 John 1:9)

9. Announcements

10. Closing Prayer

(Acts 2:42; Mark 11:24; 1 Thes. 5:17; Eph. 6:18)

Mealtime and Fellowship

(Acts 2:42; Acts 2:46; Acts 20:7; 1 Cor. 10:31; Heb. 10:24-25)

1-2 hours of open fellowship over food and recreational activity.



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