

Lectures for St. Luke's 200th Fall Series 2020



The Spirit of Jesus Alive in the House Church

The second in a series of talks about Luke's second volume
V.K. McCarty

In crafting the Acts of the Apostles, St. Luke the Evangelist is sharing with us his picture of the birth of the Church. As we have continued to marvel at him throughout this series, we have seen Luke knitting together his memory sources and his treasury of remembered sayings and events from the earliest days of Christianity. This second volume of his masterwork is providing us with a narrative of the divinely inspired development of the Early Church. It demonstrates clearly how Luke was conscientiously “investigating everything carefully from the very first,” just as he said himself at the beginning of the Gospel. (Lk. 1:3) Now, in Acts, we are invited to view scenes which became the foundation for the Primitive Church coming into being. And note, as we progress further into it, that this two-volume masterwork from Luke comprises more than a quarter of the entire New Testament.



As one of the cornerstones of the new faith, the Last Supper with Jesus and his disciples is remembered by St. Luke, and in each of the Gospels, as an unparalleled event and a sign for future followers of the Way of Christ. Jesus himself chooses the setting, instructing Peter and John to prepare the feast. It is to be celebrated at a certain house (*oikos*), in its large upper room (*anagaion mega*), the large guest room (*kataluma*) set up for dining. (Lk. 22:8-13) Here, in a residential setting, Jesus shared fellowship and teaching and breaking bread with the followers he loved, and he transformed the meaning of their familiar Jewish dining practices and their ritual Blessings with family and friends, laying the foundation for Christian worship in the Sacrament of the Eucharist. (Lk. 22:14-20)

So, it should not surprise us that the earliest Christians were drawn to gather together again and again in the upper room of a house “not to hold services, but to eat.” An ancient banquet “was entirely capable of being a sacred event as well as a social one, and necessarily involved forms of ritual, prayer, and other discourse.”¹ The disciples, “who were chosen by God as witnesses, and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead,” as it says in Acts (10:41), were now extending the mystical fellowship of Jesus by testifying and sharing the Spirit of Christ. And this became the proclamation of the Church. These sacred gatherings of fellowship, Gospel-telling, and breaking bread together in the upper room of a believer’s home are the living roots of what came to be the *Ekklesia*. Thus, the Church in its earliest form was, in fact, the “house church.”

In recent decades, historians of Early Christianity are gaining a greater appreciation of how the simple arrangements and primary functions of everyday life in the home and workshop were quite significant for the expansion of the Jesus movement. In fact, “the Apostolic Church can never be properly understood without constantly bearing in mind the contribution of the house churches.”² If we look carefully, Luke tells us quite a bit about the operation and even the origin

¹ Andrew B McGowan, “Eucharist,” in *The Reception of Jesus in the First Three Centuries: From Celsus to the Catacombs: Visual, Liturgical, and Non-Christian Reception of Jesus in the Second and Third Centuries CE*, Chris Keith, ed. (London: T & T Clark), pg. 395.

² Floyd V. Filson, “The Significance of the Early House Church,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 58:2 (June 1939), pg. 112.

of the house church. For “it is reported that the primitive church in Jerusalem gathered together in houses for the teaching of the apostles, for fellowship, to break bread, and for prayer.”³ Here, the safety and privacy of the home environment made it possible to have distinctly Christian worship and fellowship, apart from the Temple, even from the earliest days of the Jesus movement.

The Upper Room (*to huperon*) is an important place for Luke, “a prototype of an Early Christian place of worship,”⁴ and he uses the term four times (Acts 1:13-14, 9:37-39, 20:7-8) to describe a specific location with which his readers were familiar, in the large upstairs dining room of a house which may have been located on what is today Mount Zion. These references to the upper room take on enhanced credibility, since “the unusual use of the article to determine ‘upper room’ implies that Luke knew this room and its location from first-hand experience.”⁵ In fact, “archeological evidence would indicate that the site of the first center for the Primitive Church was indeed on the southwest hill of Jerusalem.”⁶

The earliest experiences of fellowship, prayer, and breaking bread in remembrance of Jesus Christ included not only the disciples of Jesus, but as many as 120 followers by the time of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit during the Feast of Pentecost. And Jerome later confirms this as well: “The same Spirit was poured out upon the 120 in the upper room on Mt. Zion.”⁷ So, the Early Church is remembered growing quite rapidly beyond the capacity of one single household meeting place. (Acts 2:4, 2:47, 4:4, 5:14, 6:7) And there, where followers of the Way of Jesus gathered in spiritual banquets, praying and remembering him, believers were added to the faith.

Mind you, this doesn’t mean that every time Jesus-followers entered a home it became a house church; but, where believers came together in someone’s home, and dined, and prayed, and shared Gospel-stories, and remembered the Lord Jesus as he taught them to do, and grew in number—yes, a house church often developed there. And in Acts of the Apostles, Luke shows how the Spirit of Jesus was alive among those feasting and celebrating his memory, and how groups of believers meeting in houses began to form communities of faith worshiping the risen Body of Christ active in love among them. So, although we often hear about the Early Church in some ancient city, like Antioch or Rome, and may imagine a designated meeting hall, the actual basic unit of the earliest faith in Jesus Christ was the house church. And there were often several of them in one town.

³ Roger W. Gehring, *House Church and Mission: The Importance of Household Structures in Early Christianity* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2004), pg. 80.

⁴ Gehring, *House Church*, pg. 66.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pg. 78.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pg. 67.

⁷ Jerome, Epistle 103.

The Acts of the Apostles describes meetings of believers so early in the birth of the Church that it was the Apostles themselves who were speaking and encouraging others gathered there. One is the gathering of believers in Acts 12:10b-17 meeting in the house of Mary the mother of John. It is described during the joyous episode when Peter escapes from prison by the power of an angel of the Lord and races back to tell the other followers of Jesus. Here we are reading of another location already well-known to Luke's readership, a relatively large home, this one with the added feature of a gatehouse (*pulon*) being attended by a servant girl.

An endearing detail about her is remembered by Luke, in that the gate keeper is so excited at hearing the voice of Peter through the locked gateway, she forgets to unlock it as she runs to announce him to the crowd gathered there in prayer. (12:13-16) In this passage, note that enough people are already gathered that, after Peter tells the group his exciting liberation news, he then runs off eagerly and tells yet another group of Jesus-followers at a different location (12:17) about his miraculous deliverance. So, the implication is that, even then, there was already more than one embryonic house church in the great city of Jerusalem. And in the next generation of believers as well, "the home was the basic cell of organization in the Pauline mission; it was the arena of celebration, teaching, and probably often of conversion."⁸

The spread of the Gospel and the growth of the Early Church, like that of Greek culture, was made possible in part by the excellent system of Roman roads throughout the empire, so that travel within the Roman Empire, whether for business or ministry, could be contemplated and accomplished with a confidence and certainty which were unknown in the centuries after.⁹ This dynamic mobility of people in the first century, enabling them to move from one location to another, is clearly attested in Paul's letters. The classic historian Epictetus boasted that "Caesar has obtained for us a profound peace. There are neither wars nor battles, nor great robberies nor piracies, but we may travel at all hours, and sail from east to west."¹⁰

While the Roman Empire's excellent road-works made travel possible for the earliest Christians and for Paul and his missionary band, the available night-time accommodations were dismal and dangerous places to seek rest, many being nothing more than brothels. "The moral dangers at the inns made hospitality an important virtue in early Christianity."¹¹ Therefore, from the earliest development of the Church, the spread of the Gospel was intimately dependent on the faithful offer of a safe resting place and refreshment. So, not only was the traveling preaching disciple necessary for the progress of the Gospel, but also the ministry of the host in whose household the missionary is welcomed and given provisions.

⁸ Margaret Y. MacDonald, "Rereading Paul: Early Interpreters of Paul on Women and Gender," in R.S. Kraemer, M.R.D'Angelo, eds., *Women and Christian Origins* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), pg. 241.

⁹ Abraham J. Malherbe, *Social Aspects of Early Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), pg. 63.

¹⁰ *Discourses* 3.13.9; Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2003), pg. 86. Epictetus *Discourses* 3 in translation available at: <http://classics.mit.edu/Epictetus/discourses.3.three.html>

¹¹ Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2003), pg. 89.

Since Christianity began in house churches, a connection can be identified, then, between the home and the ideology of the Early Church. The home environment of the community of believers influenced their understanding of themselves as Christians, before the time when the codified rituals of the Liturgy came to be more highly developed. As we saw at the beginning, the dining room (*triclinium*) provided a setting reflecting the environment of Jesus at the Last Supper, and the emphasis he made on familial ties among believers “corresponded remarkably with the Christians’ earliest self-identification.”¹²

Thus, the believer’s house functioned as the locus of the Christian community in Acts. “Luke has presented house churches as the creative hub of God’s redemptive work...they were banquet communities celebrating the abundance of God in Christ which is continually opening up doors for repentance.”¹³ The individual house church as well as the whole church together (*ekklesia*) in a town “counted persons of high and low social status, women as well as men, and people of different nationalities among its membership and leadership. Those who joined the early Christian missionary movement joined it as equals.”¹⁴

As we progress further into the story in the Acts of the Apostles, Paul is described accepting lodging and table fellowship in the homes of those who came to the faith from his teaching as a regular aspect of his ministry.¹⁵ The private home offered a place of privacy and stability, providing an economic infrastructure for the early Christian community, “a platform for missionary work, a framework for leadership and authority, and probably a definite role for women.”¹⁶ As we have seen, it is not only itinerant preachers but also residential believers providing hospitality, perhaps often women, who were a necessary component of missionary teams in the development of the primitive church. Their contribution to the history of the Church, however, may not have always survived in the telling of the biblical story as consistently as the rest. So, in considering the historical record on women’s involvement in the development of house churches, the text of Scripture, “therefore, must not be taken as fully descriptive of the actual situation.”¹⁷

¹² Vincent Branick, *The House Church in the Writings of Paul* (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1989), pg. 15.

¹³ John Koenig, *New Testament Hospitality: Partnership with Strangers as Promise and Mission* (Philadelphia: The Fortress Press, 1985), pg. 106.

¹⁴ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, “Missionaries, Apostles, Coworkers: Romans 16 and the Reconstruction of Women’s Early Christian History,” *Word & World* 6:4 (1986), pg. 432.

¹⁵ Three centuries later in his commentary on Philemon, St. Jerome described hospitality to Paul as participating in Paul’s apostleship. “When Paul would arrive at a new city to preach the crucified one...he needed before anything an appropriate place in the city where all could gather, a place without disturbances, large in order to receive many listeners, not near the places of spectacles with disturbing neighbors.” Jerome reflects a church memory which made a significant connection between early Christian hospitality and effective missionary work. V. 22; PL 26/616; *St. Jerome’s Commentaries on Galatians, Titus, and Philemon*, Thomas P. Scheck, trans. (Notre Dame, ID: The University of Notre Dame Press, 2010), pg. 377.

¹⁶ Branick, *House Church*, pg. 15.

¹⁷ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), pg. 168.



But the story of Lydia, the purple-fabric dealer has survived. (Acts 15:13-15, 40) Paul discovered her praying among a group of women on the Sabbath Day, by the river just outside the city gates of Philippi. She is remembered for her inspiring conversion; indeed, Luke writes that he witnessed the Lord open her heart to the Gospel. One of Lydia's first actions as a new

believer in the risen Lord is to offer Paul and his missionary band a hearty invitation to her home. This scene in Scripture is fascinating on many levels—not the least, pondering whether Luke himself was there, welcomed on the Lydia's doorstep as part of the “we” that suddenly appears in the text—but, for the beginning of the Early Church as we are exploring it here, what is significant is that her generosity meant that Paul and those around him could enjoy the comfort and safety of her home environment as a component of their ministry in Jesus Christ.

Luke portrays the Spirit of God working through the new faith of Lydia by interacting with the faith of Paul. Here is a case where “a woman's customary role of providing hospitality to visiting guests became a means by which she could support and sustain the church.”¹⁸ The story of Lydia's conversion in Philippi signals another important shift from a Jewish place of prayer for gatherings to a believer's home as the missionary base. This becomes increasingly a pattern in the continuing story of the Emerging Church as it unfolds. So, it is probably not accidental that both times in Acts where Luke clearly tells us of a church meeting in a particular person's home, (12:12, 16:40), it is the home of a woman.”

The successful outcome of Paul's ministry baptizing Lydia and her entire household is demonstrated by the fact that, by the time Paul and Silas depart from Philippi at the end of the chapter, they have won over so many new believers that Paul is reported to have encouraged the brethren in plural (*tous adelphous*) (16:40). This probably means that the group of believers meeting in Lydia's home was growing into a house church. Her story in Acts, therefore, offers an example of how the house church came to be developed. Evidence of further growth may be indicated by the fact that Paul's Epistle to the Philippians assumes a wider audience yet, with more believers than could even be contained in Lydia's house; so, other house churches may have built up in Philippi by that time.

¹⁸ Ben Witherington, *Women in the Earliest Churches* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), pg. 145.

Luke is showing us that the missionary charge of Jesus in his teaching, imploring his Apostles to rely on hospitality freely given (Lk. 9:1-5, 10:1-16), establishes the practice from which the “house church” emerged. In Luke’s memory of the Early Church, men and women who offered the hospitality of their home to believers aided both the intensity and the remarkable growth of the Christian community.

The early development of the Church made possible new roles for women, some with leadership responsibilities.¹⁹ Their participation was made possible, to some extent, by the expansion of the Gospel within the environment of the first-century family home and workshop, arenas where women could operate without violating societal norms for proper behavior. There women could function as missionaries themselves, and the hospitality which they offered in their homes created an early environment for the Church at a time when the structure of table fellowship celebrated in the Spirit of Jesus Christ was in its earliest stages of formation.

The fact that the seminal groups of believers meeting in a home functioned in much the same way as an extended household undoubtedly facilitated the involvement of women in Early Christianity. So, the house church, by virtue of its location, was able to provide “equal opportunities for women, because traditionally the house was considered women’s proper sphere, and women were not excluded from activities in it.”²⁰ Since much of their leadership would have been exercised in a residential setting, the household base of the movement may have enabled women to transform their roles as household managers into Early Christian community leadership, and note that these household missionary leaders may represent part of Luke’s own analysis of how the phenomenon of house churches came into being.

It is easy, of course, to dismiss the women’s contributions to development of the house church and Christianity in general, because much of the work women accomplish in the home environment is not regarded as an object of theological reflection. Women have not generally come in for much acknowledgement, even as household managers, especially in the first century. Think about this, though. Their responsibilities have traditionally included a whole array of life-sustaining tasks maintained for the survival of the family—and therefore, the community. Furthermore, as the Spirit of God can be seen bringing the emerging Church to life in the environment of the home, it is also possible for us today to see and acknowledge that “what God’s actions mean becomes visible in the work a woman does to keep life going.”²¹ The house church certainly kept the life of the Emerging Church sustained and growing for several years, in fact for several generations of the developing Church.

¹⁹ “No less than nine women were at one time or other members of what we might call Paul’s mission team—that is nearly twenty percent, a notable statistic in a male-dominated society.” James D. G. Dunn, *Beginning from Jerusalem* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2009), pg. 634.

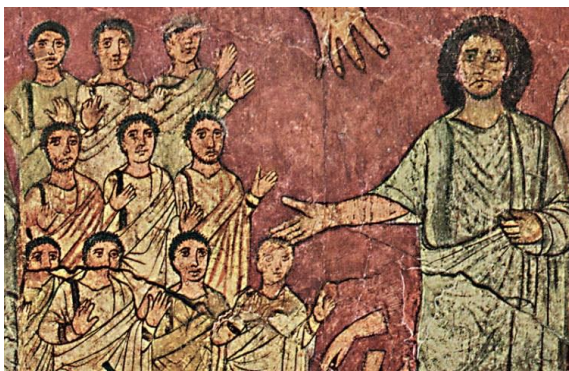
²⁰ Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, pg. 176.

²¹ Luise Schottroff, *Lydia’s Impatient Sisters* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), pg. 86.



**BAPTISTERY IN CHURCH
AT DURA-EUPOPOS
(3rd C.)**

If you go on pilgrimage to Jerusalem, the guides will likely show you the “original upper room,” over the so-called Tomb of David. While it is thrilling to the experience of faith to stand there feeling the sense of Christians gathered two millennia ago; truly, after all the centuries of political and natural destruction, sound archeological evidence is no longer possible. The oldest surviving house church uncovered in archeological finds is from a somewhat later period in the development of the house church, after the New Testament examples which we have explored.

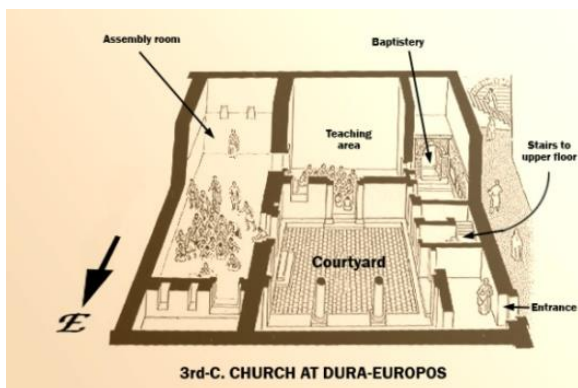


This was the Early Christian house church at Dura Europos, in Syria. In the chances and changes of warfare, it managed to be preserved by a fluke of survival. That town was just about to be invaded by the Persians in 256 C.E.; and, in a desperate measure to try to strengthen the city walls from siege attack, the townspeople shoveled rubble and gravel up against the wall from the inside, completely burying all the houses on the street near

the wall. As a result, we are able to see, even today, fragments of an early house church and also of a synagogue three doors down, all of this surviving from the mid-200s.



Converted and enlarged from a private house, the house church building addition contained a Baptistry decorated with biblical scenes. Here above is a detail from the wall painting on the right visible in the first illustration; it shows veiled women approaching a sarcophagus carrying candle-torches. They are believed to represent either the Three Marys visiting the Tomb of Christ or the Parable of the Ten Virgins with their lamps ready for the arrival of the divine Bridegroom; thus, in their hands are either funereal spices for tomb or oil for their lamps.²²



Mind you, by that time, Christian homes were being substantially re-structured with additions to provide for growing congregations; but, this was still at a time before new specialized structures began to be developed as independent church buildings. So, the chapel at Dura-Europos is quite significant in showing how the expanding house

²² “The Procession of Women,” wall painting, Yale University Art Gallery, Yale-French Excavation at Dura-Europos, 1932.1201.

church became an integral part of the development of church architecture.

Nevertheless, the portrait of the earliest days of the Spirit of Jesus alive in the house church is provided by St. Luke throughout the Acts of the Apostles. These scenes are part of his “orderly account” of how the earliest believers came together where they were welcomed in homes of the faithful. They gathered for prayer and fellowship, for Gospel-telling and breaking bread, and Luke shows us how the community which was inspired to grow in these first house-church gatherings is a significant keystone in the development of the Early Church. Luke allows you to witness this from the inside, that “you may know the truth about these things” (Luke 1:3-4).

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