

## Special Lecture about House Church

### EARLY CHRISTIAN HOUSE CHURCHES

To Apphia our sister, to Archippus our fellow soldier and to the church that meets in your home (Philemon 1:2)

#### INTRODUCTION

It was during the 1980s that the study about the early Christian house church was actively begun. According to Klauck there are two reasons: First, there was growing concern about the family. Second, there was a desire to pursue a more vibrant church structure. Why do UBF staff and members need to study the early Christian house church? UBF is an evangelical student movement; it is a laymen's movement, and it is a house church movement. Therefore it is important for us to gain historical perspective from the study of the early Christian house church. The house church is the original model for the early Christian church. Therefore, through the study of the house church, we can learn something about the future direction of the Christian church. One of the increasingly serious problems of our day is the rapid break down of the family. Through the study of the early Christian house church we can be challenged to find some answers to the problem of the modern breakdown of the family.

#### I. Examples of Early Christian House Churches

##### First, examples in the book of Acts

The book of Acts begins with the event in the upper room (Act 1:13) and ends with the story of a rented house (Ac 28:30). This gives us the impression that the family house church is crucial. After Jesus resurrection, the disciples came back from Gethsemane and gathered together in the upper room (Ac 1:13). About one hundred and twenty people gathered. When they obeyed Jesus world mission command, and prayed earnestly with one mind and heart, on the day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit came down. Someone has said that this is the birth of the church. Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, the apostles never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news (Ac 5:42). The apostles preached the gospel in the temple courts. They did this in order to preach to the people who gathered there, repentance before God and faith in Jesus Christ. However, their main meeting place was the house church in the upper room (Acts 1:13). Here we can see the early Christian church was a house church from the beginning. Soon, there was severe persecution from the religious leaders. The believers moved their meeting place into their houses. Acts 8:1 says, "On that day a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem. Acts 8:3 says, "But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off men and women and put them in prison. Here, 'destroy the church', 'going from house to house',

‘dragged off men and women’ and ‘put them in prison’ are related. The church in Jerusalem consisted of many house churches.

Acts 12:12 suggests that the house of Mary, the mother of John, also called Mark, played a very important role in the Jerusalem church. When Peter was put in prison, many people had gathered in that house and were praying. This shows Mary’s house was used as a place where believers gathered and prayed. Mary’s house was a secret worship place in times of persecution. Perhaps Mary’s house was one of many house churches that belonged to the Jerusalem church. After the angel helped Peter to get out of prison, Peter went to Mary’s house and described how the Lord had brought him out of prison. And he said, ”Tell James and the brothers about this (Act 12:17) and then he left for another place. This shows that there were other house churches that were being used as meeting and worship places. ‘He left for another place’ suggests the third house church. It is almost certain that the prayers of the Jerusalem church had been carried out in several house churches.

Luke tells us more about the house churches formed during Paul’s Gentile mission than the Palestine House churches. A good example is Lydia’s house. In Philippi, Lydia accepted the gospel through Paul’s preaching, and she and the members of her household were baptized (Ac 16:15). Since then, Lydia’s house became a house church. Lydia’s house became the center while the apostles engaged in mission work in Philippi. Acts 16:40 backs this up: After Paul and Silas came out of the prison, they went to Lydia’s house, where they met with the brothers and encouraged them. Priscilla and Aquila had a house church in Ephesus (1 Co 16:19). They invited an outstanding scholar, Apollos to their home and raised him as disciple of Jesus (Act 18:26).

## **Second, examples of house churches in Paul’s letters**

### Romans

Paul said in Romans 16:5, “Greet also the church. Precisely, it meant Greet also the church that meets at the house of Priscilla and Aquila. Priscilla and Aquila arrived at Rome and established a new house church and were ready to accept the Apostle Paul. They risked their lives for Paul and fellow workers in the Gentile church (Ro 16:4). Paul greets those in the household of Narcissus (Ro 16:11b). That means there were Christians among the household of Narcissus. In Romans 16:14, he greets brothers in another house church. In Romans 16:15 one more house church in Rome is mentioned. All of the house churches in Rome were, collectively, the church in Rome (Ro 1:7).

### 1 Corinthians

In 1 Corinthians 1:14 Paul baptized Crispus and Gaius. According to Acts 18:8, Crispus, the synagogue ruler, and his entire household believed in the Lord. It is quite possible that he offered his house to be a house church. Gaius was a man whose hospitality Paul and the whole church enjoyed (Ro 16:23). This means his house had been used as house church, as a meeting place for the whole church. In 1 Corinthians 16:15, Paul baptized the household of Stephanas. Here we see that the Corinthian church was composed of many house churches.

### Galatians

Galatians 1:2 says, “To the churches in Galatia: This indicates there were many house churches in Galatia. Paul encourages Galatian Christians in Galatians 6:10. Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers. Here the family of believers could refer to a house church.

### Colossians

Colossians 4:15 says, “Give my greetings to the brothers at Laodicea, and to Nympha and the church in her house.” Paul mentioned that there are Christians in Colosse, Laodicea and Hierapolis. In Laodicea, there were at least several house churches.

### Philemon

In Philemon we also find a reference to a house church. Verse 2 says, “The church that meets in your home.” Apparently, many saints joined in the house church which met in the house of Philemon (5-7).

### 1 Thessalonians

1 Thessalonians 2:14 says, “For you, brothers, became imitators of Gods churches in Judea, which are in Christ Jesus.” At the end of the letter, he encourages them, charge you before the Lord to have this letter read to all the brothers (1 Thes 5:27). This means all the brothers in each house church.

### The Pastoral letters

In 1 Timothy, Paul says, The overseer of the church must manage his own family well. It means managing each house church (1 Tim 3:4,12). In 2 Timothy 1:16 and 4:19, Paul blessed another household which is also a house church. Especially, when Paul spoke about false teachers who worm their way into homes (1 Tim 3:6) and ruin whole households (Titus 1:11), he does not mean just Christian homes, but the house churches.

### Post Apostolic times

In Post-Apostolic time also there were house churches in many places as the house church movement continued to grow.

## **II. Meaning of the Early Christian House Church**

### **First, the financial aspect**

The early apostles and saints anticipated that they would be soon cast out of the synagogues. Therefore, from the beginning they used both synagogues and their homes as meeting places. This kind of phenomena happened outside of Jerusalem, too. Synagogues were often used as meeting place for Christians, but soon they were cast out of the synagogues. Since they could not find official worship place, they began to establish house churches. Even during the second century, instead of building churches, they remodeled their own houses for meetings. Therefore they did not need large

amount of materials to build churches.

## **Second, relations to society or other religion**

The early Christian house church had rather a complex relationship with society and with other religions. The early Christians were the target of persecution from Jews and pagans. So they could not express themselves freely in public, and naturally they began to seek hiding places. The safest place for them to avoid persecution was in their homes. It is very meaningful to note that one of the main reasons why the early Christian church did not fall apart in spite of severe persecution was because the church met as house churches. Unless all the houses of early Christians were destroyed, the house church could not be destroyed. And unless all the house churches were destroyed, Christianity could not be destroyed.

Later, the house church positively opened up to the neighbors, and the neighbors looked favorably on the house churches, and even joined in worship. In this way, the early Christian house church embraced non-Christians and neighbors. And the house church exemplified a totally different system from that of the rest of society or other religions. The synagogue was the center for the Jews and the pagan temple was the center for the Gentiles. But the Christians were free from buildings. This shows the difference between early Christianity, and Judaism or other religions. It is very difficult to witness to others when we are temple-centered. But the early Christian house church was not bound by materials or space, and as the result, witnessing became very active and the concept of the invisible community was realized. It meant the appearance of a new religion that could not be restricted by visible things.

## **Third, The House Church itself (what were the characteristics of the house church?)**

### **(1) Community of love**

One outstanding feature of the house church is the sharing of love among believers. In Acts 2:43-47, 4:32-37, all the believers had everything in common. They sold their possessions and goods; they gave to anyone as he had need. Every day they continued to meet together. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts. They were full of songs of praise and prayer. This kind of genuine love enabled them to overcome severe persecution and Satans attack. It gave them a sense of belonging and stability. The House church was full of passion and power. In this environment, it was possible for all the different elements to be united.

### **(2) Open Community**

Another characteristic of the early Christian house church was its openness. The house church was open to all people regardless of their gender, social position, educational level, and different human background. Especially it broke down the barrier between the Jews and the Gentiles. It broke down the barriers between male and female, freedmen and slaves, the high and the low, the learned and the unlearned. In the house church, all the social, racial and religious barriers were broken down. All Christians are

equal in Christ. The openness and the equality promoted by the house church became a great challenge to the paternalistic, class society of the time.

### (3) Mission Community

The early Christian house church was very effective in witnessing to the gospel of Jesus, thanks to her openness and unity. The main reason why the house church mission was so alive and vigorous was because Christians witnessed to Jesus with their lives. In the small community, they could help others one by one, very personally and raise them in the gospel. Therefore the house church was able to overcome other religions and philosophies, and penetrate to all strata of the society. The Christians in the early house church lived very passionate lives. They were passionate in witnessing to the gospel. The community was dynamic and alive. In light of church history, the church lost her spiritual power and mission when she became more structured and ecclesiastical.

### (4) Laymen's Gospel Work

The early Christian house church was born with few apostles and believers. From the beginning, the house church was laymen's gospel movement. But later, when the number of Christians and house churches increased, the apostles could not carry out the mission. So they raised other laymen to carry out the same mission. The pioneering of Samaria was done by a layman, Philip. And the Ethiopian eunuch, the first African Christian, was converted by Philip as well (Act 8). Furthermore, the house church became a source of raising many church leaders after the apostles completed their work. Someone has said, The House church was the training ground for the Christian leaders who were to build the church after the loss of Apostolic guidance. (Filson).

## **III. Application to UBF Gospel Work**

### **First, we are confident that the house church is the original church**

We have reviewed the history of house churches during the early church period. However, we can find the origin of the house church in Genesis. Adams family was the first family of all mankind and in his family we find the origin of the house church. In Genesis chapter four, Cain and Abel offered sacrifices, a form of worship. Thus, Adams family was the first house church, worshipping God. Noah and his family also had a house church (Ge 6). Abraham's family and the family of his descendants, the Israelites, maintained the house church. Worship and education were carried out at home.

In the New Testament, the community of Jesus disciples had the characteristics of a house church. So the origin of house church in New Testament began with Jesus. God established house church from the beginning. Therefore, the modern day church should pursue the faith and life of the early Christian house church.

### **Second, we should inherit the spirit of the house church**

By God's grace, UBF has been following the model of the early Christian house church. In the midst of poverty, we opened our houses for sheep to share with us the common life. For example, Dr Samuel Lee always had sheep in his house and Mother Barry always lived together with sheep in her rented house. For this, they sacrificed their privacy as well as their materials. When I first started as UBF staff in Kwangju, I had to ride the night train to Seoul to attend every Monday staff meeting. In Seoul, Dr Lee always invited me and other staff to come to his house to eat. It is not exaggerating too much to say that I grew up with many meals which Mrs Grace A. Lee had prepared. This kind of house church ministry continued in Korea and other overseas mission fields. God much blessing, I wonder whether we are losing this spirit of early Christian church gradually. At the time of God's blessing, we must continue to keep the spirit of house church. It is our spiritual heritage from our ancestors and the model of the early Christian church. Especially, on the mission field, there are many small, pioneering chapters which consist of only one or two families. They must know that this is the model of the early Christian church and build their house church with confidence. It follows that there will be much sacrifice of privacy and materials. But through this kind of sacrifice, we experience God's blessing.

There are some mission fields with many families. In other fields, the work of God has grown and the house churches of national shepherds have been established. I see many examples of this kind of work in USA UBF. Still it is very important for each family to try to learn the spirit of the early Christian house church. A Christian family is a small church inside the church. We should make each family a church. Our home should not be just a place for needed physical rest, eating and sleeping and relieving stress. From the beginning, God established the home as a church. Therefore, we should make our homes to be worshipping communities, Bible study communities, prayer communities, singing praise communities and serving communities. According to Operation World by Patrick Johnstone, by July, 2002, there were 90 million Chinese Christians, most of them house church Christians. In the Chinese house church, laymen play an important role in teaching the Bible, preaching, visiting and leading hymn singing.

When we restore the spirit of the early church, God will raise many disciples of Jesus. Furthermore, God will be glorified and our children will grow in faith. Then, even if our church grows bigger, we can continue to keep the spirit of early the Christian church.

### **Third, The love relationships of the house church should be restored**

The foundation of church is the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The cross of the Christ restored our faith and love relationship with God and with brothers. These days, strong selfish individualism is prevalent. Even in the church community, people tend to think that everything is alright as long as they maintain the relationship with God. As the body of the church grows bigger, it becomes easy to lose personal love relationship with other Christians. The modern day philosophy of Post Modernism supports the breakdown of community. Hebrews 10:25 says, as the Last day approaching, people tend to give up meeting together. In this situation, we should strive

to establish a love relationship among Christians like the early Christian House church. Then we can be victorious church that swims against the strong current of Post Modernism. Furthermore, our church will become a dynamic church.

## **Conclusion**

In surveying the history and meaning of the early Christian house church, we have found that the house church is a community of love; it is an open community, a mission community and a community of laymen doing gospel work. God established UBF as a laymen's mission community. More specifically, God established UBF as a community for the task of campus evangelism and discipleship; as a self-supporting mission work. We should maintain UBF as a laymen's mission movement. I realize that God established our ministry to be a house church ministry from the beginning. Therefore we should study and follow the characteristics of early Christian house church: A community of love, an open community, a missionary community, laymen's gospel ministry. We should remember that the house church is the original church, and restore the spirit of the house church. The only way to achieve this goal is to follow and practice the self-denial and self-sacrifice of the Christ. Because without the self-denial and self-sacrifice of early the Christians, there could be no house church.