

Small Groups in Our Homes

Fellowship from Minoru Chen on August 22, 2021

Prayer

Lord we open to You. We anticipate Your continued and dear speaking to instruct us and perfect us for a renewed church life and for a strengthened testimony of Yours in all the cities. Lord, we trust you. Lord we open to You. Enlighten us with Your burden according to Your word. We give ourselves to You once again. Release these things according to Your word. Lord, we expect Your blessing. Thank you, Lord Jesus. Amen.

The History Leading to Small Groups

Well, it's good to see you all today. We will continue our fellowship concerning the meeting life of the church. I have a particular burden to cover what we would call the small groups. The "small groups" is a term and practice that we inherited from Brother Lee when he led the churches in Taiwan into this practice in the early 1950s. That practice of the small groups was absolutely prevailing. At that time there was a sudden and great influx of newly saved people. The change of the political situation in China caused many Chinese people to flee the mainland of China to different parts of Asia. Many of these people, including, even the Nationalist government, which is still the current government, fled from mainland China to make Taiwan their base. At that time Brother Lee was sent out to Taiwan by the co-workers, under the leadership of Watchman Nee. This was in anticipation of the persecution and oppression of Christians, and actually all religion, that would be brought about by the new political regime in the mainland. In Watchman Nee's foresight, he sent Brother Lee out. In hindsight, from our view today, we say that this was totally something of God's marvelous and wise sovereignty. There were other co-workers with

Watchman Nee at the time, but he didn't send any of them out, except Witness Lee.

Today, you and I, are able to sit here and reap the benefits of that very strategic sending or arrangement. Taiwan, after practicing the church life for 10 years, became a base of the Lord's recovery, or what we sometimes refer to as the nursery. On this little island, the Lord's recovery was cultivated and set up. That little island was literally a piece of rock, which had been colonized in the early days by Portugal and later on by Japan for many decades. So it was a barren place with very few people. Most of the people on the island, were the indigenous people who eventually, travelled down by sea all the way down to the Southern Pacific, but I don't want to get into those things.

This region had suffered through many wars. At this time, the fleeing of the mainland of China was due to the civil war in China and almost all of these mainlanders who ended up on that island of Taiwan were refugees. And just a few years before the civil war, World War Two had just concluded with Japan surrendering to the allies. And even before that, this region suffered through the very long years of the Sino-Japanese war. And between those wars, China was just ruined and decimated and suffered a lot. When Brother Lee ended up in Taiwan, the people had been through turmoil and great adversity. Yet in this kind of tremendous human suffering where people had lost everything overnight, many people's hearts were open to the Lord and to the gospel. So Brother Lee, after landing there with some other brothers and sisters in the Lord's recovery, took a tour up and down that island and felt strengthened by the Lord and burdened by the Lord to begin a new work of Lord's recovery.

The first thing Witness Lee and the saints did was to preach the gospel. That prevailing preaching of the gospel brought in a tremendous increase in a few short years. They started with several hundred saints, these refugees, but soon there were literally several tens of thousands of saints and new believers that were brought into the church life. Taiwan was still a fledgling church life there and nothing was strongly built up yet. So, in order to take care of so many, Brother Lee took the opportunity to put aside some of the practices of the

church life in mainland and began something new. One of the main things that he did was to build up a church life that was group based and so the term small group was coined at that time. "Small," referring to the size, as Taipei at that time was already in the thousands and a big church like that was too big. They didn't have the kind of brothers and elders or members to be able to meet all the needs of these new ones to properly care for and shepherd them. So, they broke up the church into many groups.

Now, even in China under Watchman Nee, especially in some of the big cities, for example the church life in Shanghai, they practiced something called meeting in homes. Now, the way they use the word "home" did not mean home in the sense of a residence like your house or my house. But home, at that time in China was akin to what we would call districts today, meeting in terms of a smaller number of saints like the size of a small church. Maybe some also met in homes, I do not know myself, but they met in these so-called homes and practiced that kind of church life. But this "small group" established in Taiwan would be even smaller than the "home" meetings in China. The saints in Taiwan literally met in the homes of the believers and these homes were not big houses like today in the US. These homes were apartments and flats or just small houses. And so, they broke up the church into these homes, to practice the church life. In these homes, there were many advantages which I will get into during the second part of my fellowship today.

The practice of the small groups became very strong and prevailing but, unfortunately, in the mid-to-late 50s, less than a decade after Witness Lee came to Taiwan, there was a rebellion and turmoil. This kind of practice of the small groups dissipated, partially due to that turmoil. Then over time the small groups in some ways disappeared. In place of the small group meetings, the church life became centered on meetings where one man would speak, especially on the Lord's Day. So, on Lord's Day morning, the practice arose of having a message meeting, where a brother or a gifted member or someone with a ministry of the word would speak. With that kind of meeting as the central meeting of the church, it was, to quote Brother Nee, "a return to the custom of the nations. This was a meeting in a clergy-

laity system, where one or a few dominated the function in a meeting of the church. Thus, the saints were basically reduced to become what Christianity called laymen. Under this system, these just sit there to hear a sermon or message, especially on the Lord's Day, and maybe some other times as well. This practice continued all the way through the 60s and into the 70s and 80s.

Now I dare not say that they were no group meetings at all in Taiwan. I did not live there so I do not know. But by and large, the church life was very much in the mode of a denomination in the way the churches met.

The God-Ordained Way in Essence

It was in the 1980s that Brother Lee decided to go to Taiwan. He stayed there for five years, from 1984 to 1989. In those five years, he brought in what he would later call "the God-ordained way." In the early times, he would call this "the new way." We have been speaking about this new way in the last sessions before the summer. I will not get into that now, but I can tell you that the spirit, the principle, the essence, of what we call "the new way" or "the God-ordained way" is very simple from this respect – it is the way of every saint functioning. All the members of the Body, all the brothers and sisters and saints in a local church, are serving priests, New Testament priests, and together we form a priesthood where each one of us functions, exercises, and serves the Lord in many ways.

This is based on what Paul the apostle said in Ephesians chapter 4 verse 12, where he laid out how the Body is built. Of course, when we say "Body" practically, that means a local church. Paul said that these persons who are gifts – the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and the teachers – were given by the Head, Christ, to His Body, not just for them to function but for their job, which is to perfect all the saints. Their job with the gifts that were endowed to them is to perfect the saints, to build up the saints, to equip the saints, to educate the saints, and to furnish the saints, so that the saints would do the work of the ministry. That means that the saints would

then, in turn, serve and do the things that these gifts have taught them, trained them, and perfected them to do. The saints, the perfected ones, would then do the work, the direct work of the ministry, unto the building up of the Body of Christ. Do you see this? This is the God-ordained way in essence.

The Degraded Clergy-Laity System

This way is entirely opposite to the degraded way of Christendom, which is the clergy-laity system where some professional believers who had gone to Bible school or seminary become the professional class in a church. Because they have been trained, they become the so-called pastors. The word “pastor” is actually the word “shepherd”, but it has become the official name of a human-built system, the so-called ecclesiastical structure of a church. They are the clergy. This has been in existence for hundreds of years. Soon after the first apostles left, this kind of system began to be built up. There was a hierarchy there and these ones would function almost like Old Testament priests to be the mediators, the intermediaries, between the congregation and God. All this goes back to both the Judaistic practice and also a lot of the pagan practices. This came along with the invasion of the Judaistic teaching and genealogies, all the Old Testament things, the Greek philosophies, and the pagan observances and practices. All these things would eventually lead to the building up of the Roman Catholic Church.

The Corruption of the Church as Predicted in Matthew 13

This ushered in the corruption of the church practice. This is not just a teaching now. In Matthew 13, the Lord predicted this and it happened following Constantine, the Roman Emperor in the early 300s. He was the first emperor who adhered to Christianity. He himself eventually converted to Christianity on his deathbed. He protected the Christians. Before him, the Christians were being totally persecuted. That is where the catacombs came from. This Constantine, who used to rule over the western Roman Empire, eventually took over even the eastern empire. The entire Roman

Empire was under him. This caused Christianity to become popular overnight and even become the “state religion.” You may say that this is wonderful. No, the Lord predicted this by saying that the fine meal would be leavened by the woman in Matthew 13. This woman is a picture of the Church of Rome. This leaven would be the heretical and pagan teachings that were brought into the church to corrupt, to poison, and to spoil the church. That was predicted by the Lord. The Lord also predicted that there would be tares that would be sown in, which were the false Christians in those days. There were tons of false believers that joined the church because this was a popular thing then and even the state mandated that you had to be baptized. So, overnight, the church morphed into something transmuted, into something entirely different. It was no longer something holy with genuine believers, redeemed by the blood of the Lord and regenerated by His life, with true Christian believers. It became a place of a mixture of people.

The Need to Go Back to the Early Church

Even the practice of the church changed dramatically from the early era, the times of the apostles. We need to go back, as Brother Lee would do, to the New Testament, to the times of the first apostles and the early church, to find out how the church met at the time. Remember that this word church comes from “*ekklesia*” which means an assembly of the called-out ones. These are men that are saved and redeemed from all the tribes, people, nations, and tongues. They are called out from this earth, called out from the world, separated unto God. They are purchased by God. They belong to God. They have received the divine dispensing of the divine life and holy nature of God, making them special, a peculiar possession of God. This is the church. They have nothing to do with the world. And they are a new community. No such community ever existed on the earth in the history of man. They are a community of God-men, a community of believers of Christ, a community of Christians. “Christian” was actually a bad name coined in the early days to denigrate the believers, but nevertheless, the name took hold.

The church was a holy assembly of God in the New Testament and they gathered to become God's expression on the earth. The way they gathered in the early days was not like today. Today, when you say “church” you mean a chapel, a kind of a building, a house of worship, or a cathedral if it is bigger. The word “cathedral” in Latin is actually related to the word “*ekklesia*”. But do you know what a cathedral is? A cathedral in the early years, in the 300s or 400s, was the Italian basilica, the long building that was open on both ends so people could come in. That was the place where they had the governmental institutions and other uses. It was a place of gatherings in the secular realm.

Let us go back to the book of Acts. I feel it is important for us to know the history, what was in the beginning. What is the recovery? It means to recover something that was lost, something that once was but disappeared. It was lost or it was given up. To recover is to go back to the beginning. In this matter of the meetings of a local church, the meetings of the church, we must go back to the beginning. By going back to the beginning in the Scriptures, we will then obtain a vision, a view, of how we should meet.

The Group Meetings are Eighty Percent of Our Church Life

Regarding the group meetings in the homes, there is this matter of meeting in groups. In terms of the venue, it is in the homes, not in some public building or public place, but in the homes of the believers. Brother Lee famously said that such meetings should constitute eighty percent of our church life. That means we still need the meeting hall; we still meet in places we rent for larger gatherings and for blending purposes. We are not giving those up. Please do not go back and tell the elders to sell the meeting. We are not talking about that. We are talking about a common situation or a daily situation. These meetings of small groups of believers, principally in homes, should constitute the larger percentage of the church life, even eighty percent. That is a large number, the majority of the church life.

Now look, in the book of Acts, we must go back to the book of Acts to look at the record of how the saints in the early churches met. Well, how did they meet? Not only in the book of Acts, but if you read through the epistles, especially Paul's epistles, you'll find that the church in those days met in homes. This is consistent.

House to House in Acts 2:46-47

Let's start with Acts 2:46-47. We all should be familiar with these two verses, "And day by day, continuing steadfastly with one accord in the temple and breaking bread from house to house, they partook of their food with exultation and simplicity of heart, praising God and having grace with all the people. And the Lord added together day by day those who were being saved."

Continuing steadfastly with one accord - Of course, they continued steadfastly in the teaching and fellowship of the apostles and in the breaking of bread and the prayers. To do that they needed to gather. They were not all scattered each one to himself. They were assembled. They were an *ecclesia*. And so, they continued steadfastly with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house. They met in two ways: 1) in the temple, and 2) house to house.

The word *house to house* means simply "at home." In the homes of those new believers, they partook of their food with exaltation and simplicity of heart. They were eating together, and they were basically carrying on a life together. You get the feeling by reading these verses that they were not just meeting from six o'clock to seven o'clock. They were living a church life in the homes of the believers in a daily way, and in those days, day to day. They ate their food with exaltation, praising God and having grace with all the people. And the Lord added together day to day, those who were being saved. Now how did the Lord add to them? For sure the Lord added to them in these homes, in the small gatherings of the believers.

Now, what about the temple? I will just read to you footnote 1 for verse 46, and it's clearly explained. "In the initiation of God's New Testament economy, the early believers and even the first group of apostles were not clear that God had forsaken Judaism with its practices and facilities, including the temple. Hence, according to their tradition and habit, they still went to the temple for their New Testament meeting." They were not clear. It's a bit of a gray situation because all the apostles were Jews and so were many of the believers. They were all gathered in Jerusalem to celebrate the Pentecost, but they were the diaspora. They were Jews that were from all over the place in Syria, in Mesopotamia, in Asia and so forth. They came to Jerusalem to celebrate these feasts, so they were all infused with Judaism. That was their background, so they thought the temple was the place to gather. They went to the temple not knowing that by then God had forsaken that physical building. That was just a sign and just a type in the Old Testament. God had forsaken Judaism. Actually, Judaism killed the Lord Jesus. There's already a bit of a gray situation here. Now, many of us should know that eventually it was hard for the church in Jerusalem and the believers, even the leaders in the church and in Jerusalem, to extract themselves entirely from Judaism. In fact, there was a kind of a returning to the keeping of the law and so on. So much so that God had to destroy Jerusalem. In AD 70, the Roman prince Titus came and just destroyed Jerusalem and the church there. This is touching something of God's dispensation. There they were in the early days. So, their meeting in the temple, you may say was for two reasons: 1) it was their kind of a Jewish tradition, and 2) there was no house big enough for hundreds of them to meet. So, they met in some larger places and the temple might have been one of those convenient places to meet.

However, on a day-to-day basis, they met from house to house. They met in the homes of the saints. Now, that is something of the New Testament. That is not the Old Testament. In the Old Testament, you go to the synagogue in your town, or you go to the temple when you're in Jerusalem. You don't meet in your home; you're not allowed

to. But in the New Testament, that dispensation has changed. This is the New Testament church. This is not the Old Testament religion anymore. Brother Lee's speaking in footnote 3 for 46 says, "...In contrast to *in the temple*... meeting in homes as the Christian way of meeting together is fitting to God's New Testament economy. This way differs from the Judaic way of meeting in the synagogues. It became a continual and general practice in the churches." Brothers and sisters, I like to tell you even how we meet is related to God's economy. In the beginning of the church, they met in an entirely new way in the homes of the believers. There are some references here. I don't have the time, but you can read about it in Romans, First Corinthians, Colossians, and Philemon. These are all epistles of Paul the apostle. So, they all have this standard phrase in these verses: *the church, which was in their house, or the church, which was in your house, or the church, which was in his house*. That phrase appears in all these verses referenced here, showing us in the early churches, they met in someone's house. They met in the house of Aquila and Prisca both in Ephesus and also in Rome. And you have the house of Nymphas, and that would be the church in Laodicea, and the house of Philemon, the church in Colossae. So, all this indicates to us that in the early church they met in the homes. What is important here is *from house to house*.

Daily Church Life in Homes in Acts 5:42

Let me read another verse: Acts 5:42, "And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they did not cease teaching and announcing the gospel of Jesus as the Christ." So as a continuation of the church life, they met in the temple and they met in their homes, and they even used that meeting in their homes to teach and announce the gospel of Jesus Christ. That's how they met. Their meeting place was the homes. This term *from house to house* or *at home* implies or strongly indicates that 1) they met in smaller numbers - you have to believe their homes were not huge, right? They met in groups in smaller numbers, and 2) where there is a home, there is a place of meeting. You can almost say every brother's and sister's home is a

meeting place. If you have a home, that should be a meeting place of the saints. So that means all the houses and homes were open. Isn't this wonderful? This also means very much that the church life is in their daily home life. Their home life, their personal life, is wrapped up with the church life, the meeting life. You did not go to a place to meet on Sunday. It's the saints meeting in your home. Do you see this? The church life is *daily*. The church life was not just Sunday after Sunday, or just Friday night at six o'clock to eight o'clock. No. The church life was daily. They met sometimes in the morning and sometimes in the evening. They ate meals together, and they taught. They brought their friends there to preach the gospel to them, and in their homes, they taught and preached the gospel. This was something revolutionary. But today, this is lost in in general Christianity. Now I know there is a kind of a home church movement. Yes, there is. But I'm speaking in a general sense. The concept is "to go to church," "Let's go to church. Let's go to that building there and listen to a sermon and then come home." But no, the first church was dynamic. It was fresh. It was living. It was a daily. It was mixed with the daily life and home life and family life. That to me is absolutely wonderful. Now, I say again, this does not mean that we don't need large meetings. There's a place for large gatherings and for ministry, for reports, for whatever. There is a place for that. But the daily need is for the day-to-day gatherings in the homes. It's in small numbers. That's eighty percent of the church life: the gospel preaching, the nourishing of the believers, the cherishing of the new ones, the feeding of the young, the perfecting of one another. All these things, all these Christian church activities occurred and were done in these smaller numbers, and in many instances in the homes. That was the church life.

Mutuality in Hebrews 10:24-25

Let me read another verse. I already mentioned Ephesians 4:12, so I will just read one more verse. These verses, as you will see, will reoccur and be re-emphasized over and over again, because that's what Brother Lee did. Hebrews 10:24-25, Paul says "let us consider

one another.” I want you to pay attention to “one another.” Anytime we have this term, “one another” that implies mutuality. It's reciprocal. It's me to you and you to me. It's different from this one directional thing, for example, from the pastor up there to the congregation down there. That's not mutual. Mutual means we are sitting around this banquet table, this dinner table, and we talk to each other, we share the food, we talk, we fellowship, we eat, we enjoy a meal together around a table. That is mutuality, not this one directional kind of thing. One of the first principles of the church life is mutuality. This is brother Watchman Nee speaking: if you remove mutuality, you begin to bring in clergy-laity. Mutuality means every saint is needed; every saint should function; every saint is a participant and there are no spectators, benchwarmers, laymen or laity. We all are the members of the Body of Christ and we all function.

“Consider one another so as to incite one another.” There's another “one another” here, not just to consider, think about, remember, but to incite, stir up one another. I think we all have this experience that when we are together, we just stir one another up. When someone is a little discouraged or a little bit down, we incite one another. But it's hard to incite one another when there are 300 people or 200 people there. But it's easy to incite when we have six or ten or twelve people there. We even know one another's names. We know one another and the mutuality is in action in such a smaller community, that we can “incite one another to love and good works.” That's the church life.

Not Abandoning Our Own Assembling Together

Verse 25 says “not abandoning our own assembling together.” This was a letter to the Hebrews, the Jewish believers, but those who are kind of unsure, on the fence, those in this gray zone. Something of Judaism was coming and pulling them back from something of the New Testament. Paul told them not to abandon their assembling together. What assembling is that? The assembling in the New Testament way according to God's New Testament economy. I know

that today we don't get into the practice of those things, but I think we need a strong foundation or appreciation of where these things came from. In verse 25 footnote 2, it says the assembling here is our assembling together as Christians. This is talking about our meeting life as believers. In those days, the Hebrews who believed in the Lord had come out of Judaism and had formerly gone to the gatherings in Judaism. They were saved out of Judaism and that kind of tradition and practice. When they believed in Christ and became Christians, they attended Christian gatherings. This was equal to their being separated from Judaism. How you meet and where you meet indicates your position. They left the meetings of Judaism and joined the Christians in their kind of meetings. That in essence means they separated themselves from Judaism and became a part of the *ekklesia*, the church. Therefore, if any of them had gone back to the gatherings in Judaism, and some of them did, that would have been equivalent to their being separated from the proper Christian assemblies. To leave or abandon the Christian gatherings was for them to go back to the Old Testament practices. Those assemblies of the Christians were according to God's New Testament economy. Hence Paul exhorted them not to abandon their own assembling together as Christians. And then there's another footnote I won't get into about the seriousness if they would abandon the New Testament way of meeting. "As the custom with some is" means that some Jewish believers did that – they went back to the Judaism way of meeting. "But exhorting one another." This was the third one another; they incited, exhorted, and admonished one another. "And so much the more as you see the day drawing near."

Five Advantages of Small Gatherings

Today, brothers and sisters, this kind of smaller group size meetings in the homes, in the houses of the brothers and sisters, this kind of eighty percent meeting life, this kind of meeting is all inclusive. It accomplishes many things, and it meets many needs. In this kind of meetings, we take care of the fellowship of the believers. It definitely has the element of prayer and intercession, there is a real care for one

another, real looking after one another, caring for one another, and the shepherding of each other. This is a place where we minister Christ to new believers, and where we share the gospel with new ones. We even use this kind of time to perfect one another. You have Hebrews 10 “considering one another... incite one another... and admonishing one another” and so on done in this kind of a setting.

Because of time, I would just mention to you five advantages of these small gatherings, and these are from Brother Lee’s speaking. They are true and have been proven.

The first advantage of this kind of smaller gathering is that it gives the Holy Spirit the opportunity to work. What does that mean? If you are in a large meeting, because it's so large, you have to have some kind of prearrangement. Otherwise, it will be chaotic and disorderly. I don't want to use the word “program,” but in essence that's what it is. In those situations, there is less opportunity for the Spirit to do the fine work. But when you have a smaller number, in a more intimate situation, what happens? There is no program, there is no prearrangement, and the Spirit has more of a free way to move, to speak, to work in the spirits and hearts of the saints. Do you see this? Whether we are fellowshiping, praying, or whatever we are doing, the Spirit would have a way in such a smaller situation. When you are in a big meeting, you tend to basically sit there and take it in, but when you are with a smaller number, you have to exercise your spirit, and the Spirit would touch you, speak to you, and use you to do something for Himself.

The second advantage of a group meeting is that in such a smaller intimate situation, the saints get to know one another. In a big meeting, you can go to the meeting for weeks and weeks, maybe months or years, but still not know the brothers and sisters. Sometimes the ones sitting next to you, you don't even talk to them. The big meetings are not conducive to intimacy, to mutual acquaintance and knowledge, which is so important. Because the

number is small and the atmosphere is not so rigid or formal, there is a way to know one another and the knowing of one another eventually is for the caring of one another.

Number three, because there are fewer people, the group meeting creates plenty of opportunities for the brothers and sisters to develop the gift of grace that the Lord has given to them. Each of us has been given a gift of grace, and we are to use that gift for the building up. In a smaller situation there are more opportunities for us to function in that way.

Number four, this kind of a smaller meeting presents the greatest opportunity for everyone to function. There's no second row, every one functions, everyone puts forth what they have, and everyone exercises.

And lastly, in this small situation, I would even say, it's easier for us to preach the gospel to your friend. It is not in some big, strange place, you know, with lots of people and somewhat intimidating, but it's in someone's home after a meal, so it's easy and spontaneous to bring forth the gospel, and it's easy in this environment for people to be saved. In this smaller situation, it is easier to gain the increase and to grow.

In these kind of a small gatherings in our homes, all the things that we do to shepherd and build up the church take place in a much more robust way, richer way, fuller way. I hope this lays a foundation for us, and we will talk more about these kinds of meetings and gatherings in the coming weeks.