House Church Meetings in the New Testament Era

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The research on the physical setting of early Christian gatherings reveals the centrality of meals in house church meetings. This article first examines the types of residences in which Christians may have gathered, the New Testament evidence for house churches, and the influence of residential settings on house churches. Then it examines the New Testament evidence for meals during house church meetings and the cultural customs associated with meals.

Recent research into the nature of house churches in the NT era has revealed the physical setting and social customs that influenced their meetings. These studies have suggested the kinds of places where Christians met and what they did when they met together. As Blue has noted, these two questions are interrelated: “The question, ‘What did the early Christians do when they met?’ is inseparable from the question, ‘Where did the early Christians meet?’”1 Richardson uses the phrase “architectural determinism” to refer to the effect that physical space has on the social character of a group: “The form of one’s surroundings influences socio-religious developments—whether a church, a synagogue, or a mystery cult. Groups take on the character of the spaces they occupy.”2

Research on the physical setting of early Christian gatherings reveals the centrality of meals in house-church meetings. The residential facilities in which Christians met were well-suited for the preparation and administration of banquets. The widely observed practice of sharing meals with one’s neighbors and


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associates was continued by Christians who emphasized the spiritual significance of breaking bread together. To reveal the nature of early Christian gatherings, this article will first summarize the evidence for their residential setting and then describe the role of the meal in Christian fellowship.

**MEETING PLACES OF HOUSE CHURCHES**

Krautheimer offers a four-stage chronology of Christian meeting places.³ From AD 50 to 150, Christians gathered in domestic residences called house churches. Lampe emphatically states that “there was no community-owned real estate in the first two centuries. . . . The worship took place in private dwellings, in the homes of Christians who had room to assemble a house community.”⁴ Around AD 150, believers began to modify house churches to provide larger meeting spaces. Krautheimer uses the phrase domus ecclesiae, which was coined by Harnack, to refer to these modified structures. He proposes translating this phrase as “community center” or “meeting house,” but literally it means “house of the church.” From AD 250 to 313, Christians in some regions began using large rectangular halls for their meeting places. White uses the term aula ecclesiae (“hall of the church”) for these structures.⁵ After AD 313, Constantine began building large monumental structures that followed the pattern of the basilica, which was a large, public structure in Roman cities.

The boundaries between these stages are not fixed. For example, house churches probably existed during all four stages. Krautheimer notes that “houses, legally or practically in private hands, were used for services even in the early fourth century in North Africa.”⁶ White also observes that “the archaeological evidence indicates that domus ecclesiae and aula ecclesiae forms continued well after that point when basilicas had supposedly become the norm.”⁷ The dates mark the approximate beginning of new types of Christian meeting places. This article focuses on the first era of Krautheimer’s chronology. This section will


first present the NT evidence for house churches. Then theories about the types of places where churches met will be summarized.

New Testament Evidence for House Churches

From the beginning of the church, believers gathered in homes. After Jesus ascended to heaven, the disciples returned to the “room upstairs where they were staying” (Acts 1:13, NRSV). Perhaps the disciples rented a room that was part of a domestic residence, or maybe a believer donated it for their use. Many houses in Palestine had rooms on the upper floors accessible by an exterior stairway. Rabbinic writings indicate that Pharisees used such rooms as meeting places for study. On two later occasions, the disciples were gathered together in one place (1:15; 2:1). These verses do not mention the “room upstairs,” but many readers have assumed that they continued to meet in the same place. In contrast, Blue suggests that those verses may refer to “an entire level or a larger part of the building complex” and not to the upper room itself.

After Pentecost, believers met in large groups in the temple and then gathered in smaller groups in homes to share a meal (Acts 2:46; 5:42). Twice the Book of Acts refers to a specific location within the temple where the disciples met: Solomon’s Portico (3:11; 5:12). Jesus taught in the same place (John 10:23). This area of the temple was a covered walkway located along the interior of the eastern wall of the Temple Mount. It provided a convenient shelter from the elements, and a larger crowd could spill out into the Court of the Gentiles.

Very quickly, the number of disciples grew to five thousand men (Acts 4:4). Adding women and children would at least double the total. Such a crowd would have needed more than one hundred houses in which to hold meetings (2:41; 4:4). So many meeting places may seem unlikely, but many Jews sponsored synagogue meetings in their homes. The Greek word συναγωγή (synagogé, “assembly” or “gathering”) does not necessarily indicate a building where these meetings took place. Meyers notes that “in the first centuries, large private houses were used as places of worship alongside other buildings that came to be utilized for worship and other matters requiring public assembly. In

10. White, Christian Architecture, 188, n. 7, argues that κατ’ οίκον (kat’ oikon, “at home”) in Acts 2:46; 5:42 should be translated “at home” rather than “from house to house.” Acts is making a distinction between the private gathering “at home” versus the public worship “in the Temple.”
Palestine, it would seem, it was about a hundred years after the destruction of the Temple that the synagogue as building began to emerge as a central feature of Jewish communal life” [his emphasis]. The Palestinian Talmud says that 480 such synagogues existed in Jerusalem in the time of Vespasian. Since Jews who accepted Jesus as Messiah would naturally open their homes for meetings of fellow believers, the availability of a substantial number of homes for gatherings of Jesus-followers is not an unreasonable assumption.

Acts 12:12 records Peter going to “the house of Mary,” the mother of John Mark. Christians had gathered there for prayer while Peter was in prison. Since the house included an “outer gate,” a courtyard must have separated the main building from the street. This detail suggests that Mary’s house was large, indicating that she was relatively wealthy. Perhaps her house contained the “room upstairs” mentioned earlier in Acts. Acts 12:17 refers to another group of believers who likely met in another house.

The churches Paul planted around the Aegean Sea met in the homes of individuals who served as hosts and patrons (1 Cor 16:19; Col 4:15; Phlm 2; Rom 16:5,23). As White notes, meeting in homes was a common practice in the ancient world: “The Hellenistic and Roman environment was quite open to the many groups that used and adapted private buildings for communal and cultic activity.” Paul converted homeowners who could provide a meeting place for other converts (Acts 16:15; 18:3,7-8). The only example of Christians meet-


15. White, Christian Architecture, 142.
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ing in a nonresidential building is recorded in Acts 19:9. In Ephesus, Paul “argued daily in the lecture hall of Tyrannus.” Perhaps Paul rented this facility during the hours that Tyrannus was not using it.  

Some cities may have had several house churches that were loosely connected. Corinth, for example, had as many as six churches that met in the homes of the following people: Aquila and Priscilla (Acts 18:2-4); Titius Justus (Acts 18:7); Crispus (Acts 18:8); Chloe (1 Cor 1:11); Stephanas (1 Cor 1:16); and Gaius (Rom 16:23). The church in neighboring Cenchreae met in the home of its patroness Phoebe (Rom 16:1-2).  

Occasionally, the churches in Corinth may have met together in the larger home of Gaius, an eminent man in the city (Rom 16:23). First Corinthians 14:23 suggests that “the whole church” sometimes met together in one place and at other times met in smaller groups. Larger homes could hold hundreds of people if the space in the gardens was utilized. Therefore, large gatherings of Christians in Corinth were quite possible. Based on this evidence, Dunn concludes: “Church gatherings consisted of more regular small house groups interspersed with less frequent (weekly, monthly?) gatherings of ‘the whole church.’”

In contrast to the churches in Corinth, the churches of Rome were probably scattered around the city and did not join together in one place. This theory is supported by the fact that “the entirety of Roman Christianity is never designated in any passage of Romans as έκκλησία (ekklesia, “gathering,” “church”).” The disconnected nature of the Roman churches may have caused some of the problems that Paul addresses in Romans 14-15. Based on the names listed in Romans 16, Lampe identified as many as seven house churches in Rome: 1) Prisca and Aquila (Rom 16:3-5a); 2) Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobas, and Hermas (16:14); 3) Philologus, Julia, Olympas, Nereus and his sister (16:15); 4) Aristobulus (16:10b); 5) Narcissus (16:11b); and 6-7

17. According to Blue, “Acts and the House Church,” 174-175, Gaius may have been the praenomen of Titius Justus. If so, the number of house churches would be reduced by one.
fourteen other individuals may have constituted at least two more churches (16:5b-10a,11a,12-13). Some of these churches may have consisted of people who lived together or worked together.

Other cities had multiple churches. Colossae, for example, had at least two churches. One met in the home of Philemon (Phlm 2), and another met in the home of a woman named Nympha (Col 4:16). Third John provides evidence that Ephesus had more than one house church. The addressee Gaius may have hosted a house church, and the troublemaker Diotrophes may have hosted one as well. From the NT evidence, Becker draws this summary: "The house of antiquity, in the sense of a house as living space and a place for family life, generally became the founding center of a local church, the locus of gathering for worship, an inn for missionaries and emissaries, a base for going out in mission, and the framework for a new Christian way of life."

Types of Residences in the Greco-Roman World

Since the earliest Christians did not modify the houses where they met, archaeologists cannot determine whether a structure provided a meeting place of Christians. White notes, "There can be no archaeological evidence for the earliest household meetings (the house church proper). By definition, then, there was no architectural adaptation and, consequently, nothing distinctively Christian about the physical setting." However, they have identified the remains of residences that may suggest the types of places where Christians met.

Within Palestine, archaeologists have excavated few remains of domestic architecture from the Persian to the Roman periods, but what has been uncovered may offer intimations of the setting of early Christian gatherings. Excavations in the Western Hill area of Jerusalem have identified large, first-century dwellings with inner courtyards and multiple baths. For example, the "Herodian" Residence, dated between 37 BC and AD 70, extended over 200 square meters (2,153 square feet). It contained rooms arranged around a central courtyard. The structure also possessed a large cistern and a ritual bath

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entered by a stairway. The Palatial Mansion, destroyed when the Romans burnt the city AD 70, contained a large reception hall that could accommodate about seventy-five people. Three smaller rooms adjoined this larger room, allowing room for a total of one hundred people. The lower level contained a small bathroom and two large ritual baths, each with a double entrance. Although no evidence indicates that either of these places hosted house churches, they provide examples of the kinds of residences in Jerusalem where house churches may have met.

In the Mediterranean world, churches may have met in three different types of dwellings: *insula, domus,* and *villa.* The actual layout of each type could vary due to factors such as the amount of space, the shape of the ground, the climate, the date of building, and the personal tastes of the owner. However, each type possesses some common features.

The term *insula* ("island") refers to an apartment or tenement complex that housed numerous families. Often, they consisted of four or five floors built around a central court. Although many *insulae* were poorly constructed and provided housing for lower-income families, some were large and stoutly built, providing housing for higher-income families. The lower floors contained larger apartments for upper- or middle-class renters, and the upper floors contained small cubicles of about 10 square meters (108 square feet) that housed slaves and freedmen.

Most of these dwellings could accommodate only small groups unless the courtyards were used for meetings. Consequently, many church historians assume that the early churches met more often in larger single-dwelling homes. Jewett, however, has emphasized that the majority of Christians likely met in tenements in the poorer parts of cities like Rome. Since the two sets of five names listed in Rom 16:14,15 are slave names, those believers likely gathered in tenements rather than in detached dwellings. Jewett prefers to call these gatherings "tenement churches" rather than "house churches.

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30. Robert Jewett, "Are There Allusions to the Love Feast in Romans 13:8-10?" in *Common Life in
Jewett’s theory is supported by the fact that only a small percentage of people lived in free-standing dwellings. According to White, “the more lavish homes at Rome, which took up to 33 percent of the residential space, housed only a small portion of the total population of the city; probably no more than 3 percent, and that includes extended families and household slaves. The rest of the population was crowded into the huge insulae or tenements.” Since property ownership was beyond the reach of the masses, many early churches may have met in small groups in tight little apartments. Acts 20:7-12, for example, suggests that the Christians in Troas met in a third-story apartment.

Jewett’s theory is also supported by Lampe, who has shown that Christians in Rome lived primarily in Trastevere and along the Via Appia from the Porta Capena to the Almone River. These densely populated, moist lowlands were two of the poorest neighborhoods in ancient Rome. They likely contained numerous insulae and comparatively few houses. Because Roman Christians were poor, their dwellings were smaller, which increased the number of house-church communities in the city. The large number of house churches in the city contributed to the “fractionated” nature of Christianity in the city.

Osiek and Balch disagree with Jewett’s theory of “tenement churches.” In their view, “the atrium-house is surely not the exclusive but is the primary setting for Pauline ekklësiai, which did not meet primarily in apartment buildings.” They argue that no archaeological evidence reveals the presence of insulae in pre-Neronian Rome, its port Ostia, or anywhere else. They note that the apartment buildings discovered at Ostia are dated to the Trajanic period or later, a half-century after Paul. Even these dwellings were condominiums inhabited by wealthy people. One complex in Pompeii, the Sarno Bath complex, was built earlier than Paul, but its inhabitants were wealthy.

Brothers counters this assessment: “It is quite clear that apartment blocks (insulae) existed in Rome itself earlier than at Herculaneum or at Ostia.” He points to references to multistory buildings in Livy and Vitruvius. He also describes the physical remains of insulae in the heart of ancient Rome near the Church of St. Maria in Ara Coeli. Ian M. Barton also notes that Cicero referred

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33. Ibid., 372.
34. Osiek and Balch, *Families*, 16-22.
to such structures as *insulae* when he was writing in the 40s BC about an incident that took place half a century earlier.36

Osiek and Balch contradict their own argument by citing literary references in Strabo, Seneca, Martial, and Juvenal that support the presence of *insulae* in pre-Neronian Rome. They conclude from this evidence: "The archaeological remains we have from the mid-first century, in Pompeii and Herculaneum, are for condominiums for the wealthy, while the literary evidence points to the poor living in the third to fifth floors of the tall, narrow Roman apartment buildings."37 The lack of archaeological evidence for low-rent, multifamily housing is not surprising since archaeologists have not focused on excavating residential remains. Also, these structures were not made to last. Perhaps many of them were destroyed and built over. Later in their discussion, Osiek and Balch seem to recognize the likely presence of *insulae* in larger cities: "The vast majority of people, perhaps as many as 90 percent in larger cities, lived in the much more constricted quarters of the insula or in apartments of one or two rooms crowded above or behind shops."38 Jewett therefore seems justified in arguing that many gatherings of Christians were actually tenement churches rather than house churches.

The second type of dwelling was the *domus*, which consisted of a suite of rooms grouped around an *atrium*.39 The atrium was a rectangular room with an opening in the roof called a *compluvium*. These dwellings had just a few small windows in their outside walls. This construction made them quiet, cool, and less vulnerable to burglary.40 People entered the atrium from the street by a narrow passage called a *fauces*, which means "throat." An elaborate and imposing door enclosed this passage. Atria usually had a marble basin, called an *impluvium*, situated under the opening in the roof. The compluvium sloped inward to channel rain into the impluvium. The atrium was surrounded by various rooms such as the *tablinum* along the rear wall, the *cubicula* (bedroom), and *alae*, whose purpose is not known.

Some Roman houses added a Greek peristyle to the back of the house. The peristyle was a small garden enclosed by a colonnade on three or four sides.

38. Ibid., 31.
39. For additional details on the various architectural features of the *domus*, see Brothers, "Urban Housing," 34-49.
40. Ibid., 34.
A hallway positioned to one side of the tablinum, called an andron, provided convenient access to the peristyle. The peristyle was lighter, more open, and more informal than the atrium. Therefore, inhabitants perhaps used the peristyle more frequently during the warmer months.\footnote{Ibid., 45-46.}

Additional rooms, including the private living quarters of the family, surrounded the peristyle. A dining room located next to the peristyle was called a triclinium. According to Smith, "Dining rooms tended to be constructed to allow for five, seven, nine, or eleven couches in an intimate arrangement. Although larger banquet rooms have been found, they tend to be designed in such a way that dining couches could be arranged in clusters of small groups."\footnote{Dennis E. Smith, \textit{From Symposium to Eucharist: The Banquet in the Early Christian World} (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003) 25.} A house could contain multiple triclinia, which would be used during different seasons. An elaborately decorated room next to the peristyle, called an oecus, served as a reception hall for dining.

The third type of residence was the villa, an estate consisting of a house, grounds, and auxiliary buildings. If they were available to early Christians, villas provided larger, more convenient spaces in which to meet. Although some scholars like Murphy-O'Connor assume that such facilities were available to early Christians, Jewett has convincingly argued that the possibility seems remote.\footnote{Murphy-O'Connor, \textit{St. Paul's Corinth}, 161-178.} White states that "it is now believed that it was highly unlikely that Christians assembled in any regular fashion in the atrium of a large Campanian style villa."\footnote{White, \textit{Christian Architecture}, 107.}

Blue suggests four reasons why Christians met in houses. First, they were readily available for use. Second, they were relatively inconspicuous, a feature that was necessary during times of persecution. Third, they followed the pattern of Jews who also assembled in homes. Fourth, houses had facilities for preparing, serving, and eating the Lord's Supper and fellowship meal.\footnote{Blue, "The Influence of Jewish Worship," 474-475.} An additional benefit of meeting in houses is that they contained water facilities where Christians could baptize converts. Also, meeting in homes promoted close interpersonal relationships because of the intimate family atmosphere. The house setting is consistent with the family metaphors used for the church in the NT: the household of God, brothers, children of God, etc. (Rom 8:15-16; Gal 4:5-7; 6:10; Eph 2:19; 3:14-15; 5:1; 6:23).
MEALS IN THE HOUSE CHURCHES

The NT evidence indicates that Christians met together in order to eat a meal. For example, in 1 Cor 11:17-21 Paul uses the phrases “when you come together” and “when you come together as a church” to describe their gathering to eat the Lord’s Supper. Acts 20:7 relates that the Christians in Troas gathered on the first day of the week to break bread. Smith concludes from this evidence that “we should imagine Christian meetings taking place at table most if not all of the time.” In fact, he argues that the entire worship service of the Christians took place in the dining room. The repetition of the phrase “when you come together” in 1 Cor 14:26 supports this assertion.  

These meetings may have been similar to the dinner parties that were so popular with Greeks and Romans. Smith has shown that sharing meals together was a central activity of various social groups in the Greco-Roman world: “When any group of people in the ancient Mediterranean world met for social or religious purposes, their gatherings tended to be centered on a common meal or banquet.” Examples include the symposia, funerary banquets, sacrificial meals, mystery meals, Jewish festival meals, the Christian *agapē*, and the Christian Eucharist.

Smith has also shown that formal meals in the Greco-Roman world shared a similar form and structure regardless of the setting. Both Greek and Roman meals consisted of two main parts: the evening meal and the “drinking party,” which was called the “symposium” by Greeks and “convivium” or “second tables” by the Romans. The second part included dessert, serious drinking, and entertainment. Meals could also begin with an appetizer course. The transition from the first part to the second part was marked by a ritual libation, sipping from a common cup, and removal of the tables. Also, a “paean” was often sung at that time.

The Tannaitic literature, written from the third to seventh centuries but reflecting traditions that may go back to the first century, describe a similar structure of meals. The meal began in the anteroom with each person saying a benediction over the wine as the cup was passed. Then they shared in the appetizer course after which they moved to the dining room, where they reclined.

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47. Smith, *From Symposium to Eucharist*, 1-2.

48. Ibid., 14.

49. Ibid., 27-31.
for the main course. After the meal, they offered another benediction over the wine and then shared in the dessert course.\textsuperscript{50}

Smith also argues that these ancient meals shared a common "social code."\textsuperscript{51} They were imbued with the same significance regardless of the setting. First, table fellowship defined the boundaries of the social group. Second, "the act of dining together is considered to create a bond between the diners." Third, "sharing a meal also created a sense of ethical obligation of the diners toward one another." Fourth, the customs of reclining and ranking places at table formally recognized and acknowledged the social status of the participants. Fifth, participants in a meal shared equally in the meal, a factor that tended to break down social barriers. Sixth, meals were occasions for festive joy and good cheer. Seventh, meals always contained some form of entertainment.


First Corinthians 11:17-34 describes the Lord's Supper as consisting of eating a full meal and not just nibbling bits of bread and sipping juice from a cup. Twice the word δείπνον (deipnon, "feast, banquet") is used to describe the

\textsuperscript{50.} Ibid., 144-147.

\textsuperscript{51.} Ibid., 9-12. The seven points that follow either summarize or quote from these pages.

\textsuperscript{52.} Richard N. Longenecker, "Paul's Vision of the Church and Community Formation in His Major Missionary Letters," in Community Formation in the Early Church and in the Church Today (ed. Richard N. Longenecker; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2002) 85-86, suggests that these verses indicate two kinds of communal meals. Acts 2:42 describes a "paschal or sacred meal in their corporate gatherings, which commemorated the death of Jesus and followed the pattern of the Jewish Passover and Jesus' Last Supper with his disciples." Acts 2:46b-47a describe "a joyful fellowship meal in their homes, which commemorated Jesus' resurrection and was patterned along the lines of a Jewish haburah (fellowship) meal and Jesus' eating with his disciples during his earthly ministry." He theorizes that these two meals were combined as one during the Gentile mission. However, since both verses use the terminology of breaking bread, it seems more likely that they refer to the same kind of meal. Also, it is not evident where "corporate gatherings" would be held if they were not held in homes.

\textsuperscript{53.} Blue, "The Influence of Jewish Worship," 488.
meal. This term refers to the main meal of the day in contrast to ἄριστον (ariston) which describes a meal taken earlier in the day, and it can even mean "feast" when it refers to a formal meal with guests. Smith supports this definition: "By far the most important meal of the day was the deipnon, now translated 'dinner' or 'supper,' which, when it was extended into a significant social event to which guests would be invited, became what we call a 'banquet.'" This meal might begin in the afternoon and continue for three hours or more. Banks says that the term "tells us that it was not a token meal (as it has become since) or part of a meal (as it is sometimes envisaged), but an entire, ordinary meal. The term indicates that this is the main (normally evening) meal, the one to which guests were invited."

The Lord's Supper was also called the ἀγάπη (agapē, "love-feast") in Christian literature. Jude 12 uses the plural form to refer to the "love-feasts" of the believers. The activity during these meetings is described by the verb συνευοχέομαι (syneuöcheomai, "feast together"). Jewett has argued that the word ἀγάπη in Rom 13:8-10 actually refers to love-feasts instead of to "love" in general. Ignatius of Antioch (c. AD 35-107) also used ἀγάπη for Christian common meals (Smyrn. 6:2; 7:1; 8:2). Relying on this type of evidence, Reicke has demonstrated that the Lord's Supper was celebrated in the context of a common meal through the fourth century.

According to Jewett, 2 Thess 3:10 indicates that the church in Thessalonica shared a common meal. Some believers refused to work, so Paul instructs the community to prevent them from eating. Jewett concludes from this admonition: "The sanction must be enforceable for the regulation to be effective. This means that the community must have had jurisdiction over the regular eating of its members, which would only have been possible if the community was participating in a common meal on an ongoing basis" [his emphasis]. Jewett also highlights evidence in the letter that the Christians contributed their fair share

54. BDAG, 215.
55. Smith, *From Symposium to Eucharist*, 20.
56. Ibid., 21-22.
58. BDAG, 970.
59. Jewett, "Are There Allusions to the Love Feast in Romans 13:8-10?" 265-278.
to this common meal instead of relying on a wealthy patron to provide the food.62

First Corinthians 10:16 and 11:23-28 indicate that these meals included eating bread and drinking from the cup. Typical Jewish meals opened with the breaking of the bread and ended with the sharing of a cup. Greco-Roman meals followed a similar pattern of an opening benediction, the meal, a benediction over wine, and the symposium.63 Banks observes that “the breaking and distribution of the bread was the normal way of commencing such a meal, just as the taking of a cup was the usual way to bring it to a conclusion; prayers of blessing accompanied both.”64 First Corinthians 11:25 supports this observation when it says that the cup was blessed “after supper.”

The meal symbolized the fellowship and unity that existed among the believers. According to Banks, the meal “deepened those relationships in the same way that participation in an ordinary meal cements and symbolizes the bond between a family or group.”65 Based on the evidence, White rightly concludes: “The communal meal was the center of fellowship (koinônia), as eating was a sign of social relations with others. The extension of hospitality through the meal setting was the central act that served to define the worshipping community, the church (ekklēsia) in household assembly.”66

Although the meal setting provided opportunity to develop intimacy with other believers, it also presented opportunities for conflict and internal strife. In fact, all of the references to Christian meals in the NT, except Acts 2:46 and 20:7, describe problems associated with them. Theissen, Murphy-O’Connor, Lampe, and others have suggested that the abuses of the Lord’s Supper described in 1 Cor 11:17-34 resulted from social differences.67 The wealthy homeowner would invite his wealthy friends to eat with him in one of the dining rooms earlier in the day. After visiting the baths, the wealthy would begin

64. Banks, Paul’s Idea of Community, 81. See also Krautheimer, Early Christian and Byzantine Architecture, 24; Blue, “The Influence of Jewish Worship,” 488-489.
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dinner at "first tables" around 3 p.m. The poorer people and slaves would not have this leisure; therefore, they would arrive in time for "second tables." Also, the triclinium would be in use by the time they arrived, so the poorer members perhaps ate together in the peristyle or atrium of the house.

Perhaps the Christians engaged in the Greco-Roman *eranos* (dining club) where each person brought a picnic basket either for oneself or to share with others. Since the wealthy Christians arrived earlier, they may have eaten a meal consisting of meat and other delicacies while the late-arriving poor Christians would have nothing to eat. The poor may have resented the insensitivity of the wealthy. Paul's solution is that they should recognize the unity of the body and share what they have in common (1 Cor 11:29,33) or else eat their meals at home before they gather together (1 Cor 11:34).

Later, the Lord's Supper was separated from the meal. Earlier liturgical historians, such as Lietzmann and Dix, argued that the *agapē* meal and the Eucharist were separate from the beginning of the church, but historians today accept that originally they were united. One factor in the later separation was the excesses and problems associated with the meals. Another factor was the difficult logistics of feeding larger groups. A third factor was the transfer of meetings from homes with dining facilities to buildings intended primarily for worship. No evidence for this separation exists before the middle of the second century. Sometime between AD 360 and 370, the Council of Laodicea banned Christian gatherings in private homes. Eventually, the Lord's Supper was reduced to a somber ritual within the liturgical service instead of the joyous sharing of a meal in a family setting.

**Conclusion**

Evidence from the NT shows that the normal practice of the first Christians was to gather in homes in order to share a meal. Investigation into the residential setting of Christian meetings has suggested several characteristics of those meetings. They involved much social interaction and personal participation. The atmosphere was likely informal and celebratory. Sharing a meal signified mutual acceptance and social and spiritual bonding. Since finances were not invested in the construction and maintenance of buildings, they could be used to provide for the material needs of poorer believers.


Over the next few centuries, Christians in various regions began to modify houses in order to provide larger meeting places. Eventually, they began to build structures dedicated solely to the purpose of Christian meetings, and the house church setting fell into disfavor. The informal fellowship meal was replaced by a token, ritualistic observance that occurred during a formal, liturgical service. The change of physical setting for Christian meetings affected the characteristics and components of those meetings. This shift in location was one factor in the development of formal, liturgical structures among Christians.
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