

# CHURCH PATHOLOGY 101:

## Four Common Diseases That Afflict House Churches

by Frank Viola

*The following is an edited transcript of a spoken message delivered by Frank Viola on June 15, 1997 in Pinellas County, Florida. It was given to a house church that had been gathering outside the religious system for several years. This message is but an introduction to the subject of “church pathology.”*

*If you are a part of a house church, we strongly suggest you take what has been presented in this message and fellowship about it with the people with whom you meet. Use it as a tool do a rigorous self-analysis of your house church. This may prove to be a very productive exercise that can save the life of the church.*

---

I would like everyone to turn to 1 Corinthians 12:12. This text will serve as a good jumping off point. “For even as the [physical] body is one and yet it has many members, though the members are many, they are one [physical] body . . . so also is Christ.” Romans 12:5, “So we being many are one Body in Christ. And every one of us are members of one another.” Here Paul compares the corporate Christ—the church—to that of a physical body.

Recently, I have been reading about preventative medicine and preventative methods in respect to good health. The experts stress that in order to have good health, you must have a proper diet. You also must exercise regularly. They also stress that you should have periodic physical examinations. The reason is simple. We can get infected with an acute disease and not be aware of it. Unless we get checked out physically—unless we go through various screenings on a periodic basis—it is possible to have acquired a terminal disease and not know it until it is too late.

Many researchers are saying that the best prevention against certain diseases is early detection. Of course, early detection necessitates periodic physical examinations. And this becomes more necessary as one gets older. Here are some examples of the things I have read on this score: A periodic blood pressure check can alert a person to hypertension. Undetected high blood pressure can lead to a stroke. If women in their 50s get a clinical breast exam every one to two years, they will cut the breast cancer death-rate by one-third.

One cardiologist, a clinical professor at Cornell Medical School said, “We’re in the period where prevention has become the name of the game. And this means not only early detection of a disease, but education of the patient.” Another medical expert said, “Most people do not know when they are not feeling well. When you feel lousy long enough you can forget there are other ways to feel.”

Point: If you wish to be in good health, you must not only watch your diet and exercise regularly. You also must not ignore the necessity for periodic physical exams.

## The Church is a Living Organism

Now I did not come here to talk to you about human pathology, medicine, or human health. But I did come to talk to you about *church pathology*.

The New Testament (NT) repeatedly envisions the church as the Body of Christ. Paul spins the body metaphor again and again to depict the *ekklesia*. The church is like a physical body. And I would submit to you that this is not just a lifeless metaphor. It is a reality. The church of Jesus Christ is a living, breathing, vital organism. As such, the church grows. It increases. It passes through certain developmental stages. It can be strong. Or it can be weak. To put a finer point on it, the church can mature into what God has called it to be or it can starve to death. The church can be healthy or it can become sick. Since the church is a living organism, it can even contract spiritual diseases.

Most house churches expire within two years. Some, however, keep on meeting even though they are long dead (Rev. 3:1). In both cases, the church unwittingly dies from a fatal illness. Consequently, if a church does not know how to build a healthy immune system, it will be open to serious disease. To avoid being plagued by such maladies, it is wise for a church to have periodic health exams. If the church never takes its pulse nor checks its vital signs, it may unknowingly become infected with a disease that will land it in the death throws of disintegration.

This morning, I would like to introduce you to four common diseases that afflict house churches. None of them are terminal. All have a cure. But early detection and as well as preventative maintenance are the best methods to escape their ill effects. Keep in mind that I am not speaking as a theoretician. I have watched these diseases inflict house churches for more than a decade. And I have also seen the success of the prescribed cures.

As we explore these diseases, I shall be spinning a lot of medical terminology, building upon Paul's body metaphor. I shall also be creating some terms that do not appear in Scripture to make specific points.

### Disease #1: Koinonitis

One of the most common diseases that afflict house churches is *koinonitis*. Does anybody know where that term comes from? It is a spin-off from the Greek word *koinonia*, which means fellowship or shared-life. Acts 2:42 says of the church in Jerusalem, "They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching, and to *fellowship*, and to the breaking of bread, and to prayer." The word fellowship there is translated from the Greek word *koinonia*. This is the shared life of the Holy Spirit that the church experiences. *Koinonia* is a spiritual dynamic. In fact, it is the corporate experience of God Himself.

You cannot experience *koinonia* by yourself—as an individual. *Koinonia* can only be experienced with other believers. The Holy Spirit, therefore, is primarily a shared experience. We often think of the Holy Spirit as a Person to be experienced by the individual. But in the NT, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit is virtually always given in the context of a shared community where other believers are actively involved.

Certainly, there are individual spiritual experiences that a believer may have. But the highest encounters with God are those that the Body experiences together. This is the essence of *koinonia*. Thus if you are a Christian in the institutional church, you have probably never experienced true *koinonia*. If you have, it undoubtedly happened outside of a church building! For the institutional church is the wrong context and environment for *koinonia* to take place. *Koinonia* only takes place within a face-to-face community.

In the first two chapters of Acts, we learn that the Holy Spirit had been poured out upon 120 disciples in Jerusalem. Peter preached a message and a massive number of Jews came to Christ. They were all indwelt with the Spirit. Now I ask you a question: What is the very first thing these new converts did after receiving the Spirit? The first thing they did is embodied in two words: “they met.” And they met continually (v. 44).

So the very first thing a Christian does when he receives the indwelling life of the Spirit is he *meets* with other believers. The new converts in Jerusalem did not build a building. They did not begin an institution. They did not plant house churches. They did not even go out and evangelize. Instead, they met! Why? Because the life of the Holy Spirit in the Christian draws him to others of his kind. The Spirit is like a magnet, bringing His people together. This is *koinonia*. It is the shared life of the Holy Spirit, and it is a wonderful thing (1 John 1:1-7).

*Koinonia* is vitally connected to salvation. Today, we are taught that salvation is something separate from the church. In systematic theology, there is a branch called “soteriology,” which is the doctrine of salvation. And there is a branch called “ecclesiology,” which is the doctrine of the church. The two are kept utterly separate.

But the NT does not separate the two. In the first century, when you came to the Lord you were added to the church. To put it another way, you were saved *into* the church. And you met with the church immediately and continually. This is precisely why Luke routinely says, “And some were added *to the Lord*” . . . and in other places he writes, “And some were added *to the church*.” In Luke’s mind, to be added to the Lord is to be added to the church. And to be added to the church is to be added to the Lord. Why? Because the church is the corporate Christ on earth (1 Cor. 12:12). It is the natural environment and habitat in which the Christian lives.

Jesus Christ cannot be separated from His Body! No more than your head can be separated from your body. Both your head and your body make up your person. So it is with Jesus Christ and His church. The two are inextricably intertwined. It is difficult to find where one ends and where the other begins. While Christ and the church are *distinct*, they are not *separate*. So in God’s idea we are saved into this thing called the Body of Christ, and we have fellowship with its members.

*Koinonia* is precious. It is a dynamic of a healthy church. However, *koinonia* can devolve into something quite pathological. It can become *koinonitis*. *Koinonitis* is the unhealthy overemphasis of fellowship that turns the church into an insular, ingrown, self-absorbed community. *Koinonia* turns into *koinonitis* when the group becomes so absorbed with its fellowship that it builds an impenetrable wall of protection around itself. Relationships get deified to the point where members do not feel comfortable having any one else included. Such a church is not dissimilar to an ingrown toenail!

*Koinonitis* is too much of a good thing. It is “fellowship inflammation.” Sufferers of this growth-inhibiting disease have an “us-four-and-no-more” mentality. They have descended into an exclusive huddle of navel-gazers—shortsighted by the view of their

own bellies! *Koinonitis* transforms the *ekkklesia* into a relationship-driven fellowship that exists exclusively for itself and its members. It does not exist for its Lord or His purpose.

### The Symptoms of Koinonitis

Tragically, this disease is like high blood pressure—it is almost symptomless. Those on the inside of the group are wholly unaware that they have the illness until the group suffers a stroke. But those on the outside can spot it immediately. Here are the external symptoms:

Symptom 1. There is virtually no external growth over the long haul. People who visit feel unwelcome, uncomfortable, and out of place. A sense of cliquishness is noticeable by those on the outside. They may feel *welcome* to attend the meetings, but they do not feel *wanted*. The reality is that the church views them as potential intruders that may fracture the group's warm fellowship. The church can go on for years and years with no growth, and not one member winces. The thought never occurs to them that *they* may have something to do with the low volume.

Note that *koinonia*, when it does not degrade into *koinonitis*, will produce external growth. And growth is a sign of good health. Think about it. If your physical body is healthy, it is going to grow, is it not? If your body does not grow, something is wrong. Stunted growth is abnormal. It is the same with the Body of Christ. There should be some growth over time. It is God's way to *add* to the church.

The Bible depicts Christ and the church as a vine tree (John 15:5). If you look at any vine, the branches extend *out* as the tree grows. So long as the tree is growing outward, it will live and continue to grow. But if it grows inward, it is going to die. That is precisely what happens when a church suffers from *koinonitis*. The prognosis of *koinonitis* is living death (Rev. 3:1). The group is dead spiritually, but it continues to gather because of its social ties. Therefore, the church of Jesus Christ should be growing inwardly through *koinonia*. But it should also be growing outwardly through its witness—just like a vine tree. *Koinonitis* chokes this dynamic.

Symptom 2. Brethren from outside the group are never invited to encourage it or give it vision and direction. In Ephesians 4, Paul lists certain gifted people, some of whom are itinerant. This means that they travel to encourage churches. These gifted people are vital to the health and welfare of any house church. This is partly because they come to the church from the outside.

As a member of the group, you are not only blind to your own maladies—you are also part of the problem. A person from the outside, provided he is proven and tested, can uncover those things that the group is oblivious to (like *koinonitis*). And since he is not part of the group, he can offer viable solutions. Unfortunately, churches that suffer from *koinonitis* hardly ever ask such people to help them.

I have seen many house churches adopt this exclusive and self-sufficient attitude. It sounds like this, "We are the local church. We have all the resources we need. We do not need anyone outside help. All we need is each other and Jesus." This attitude, which is both prideful as it is unbiblical, eventually leads to the demise of the group.

Symptom 3. The church has absolutely no impact on the surrounding culture. Because the members are so absorbed with one another, they never reach outside of

their four walls. They never impact others in their city. They are neither salt nor light to their community. What does salt and light do? Light exposes and salt preserves. Both have an impact that extends beyond themselves.

Many have said that our country is in the mess it is in because of the increase of iniquity. This is true. But it is equally due to the absence of a Christian presence. Many Christians have withdrawn from society altogether. And when God's people withdraw from society, the country goes to pot. All hell breaks loose.

Recall Sodom and Gomorrah. We often think that Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed by God because they were exceedingly wicked. But do you remember the dialogue that Abraham had with God about Sodom? What did Abraham ask God to do? He asked Him to spare the city. He started with 50 righteous people and juiced it down to 10. He said, "If there are ten righteous men, will you spare the city?" And God said, "Yes, I will spare it if you can find 10."

Unfortunately, Abraham could not find 10 righteous people in the city. He could only find one. It was Lot. But Lot's personal piety was not enough to impact the culture. He may have been concerned about his own spiritual life. But it did not extend to anyone else. So Sodom and Gomorrah were not destroyed just because they were wicked. They were also destroyed because of an absence of spiritual presence.

### **Prevention and Treatment**

The prevention and treatment of *koinonitis* is simply this: a blood transfusion! Groups who suffer from this enfeebling illness need new blood in the church. Evangelistic outreach is one of the best antidotes. Add to that adopting a vision that stretches beyond the group's four walls—such as helping a fellow house church in another city or country.

The other antidote is to bring someone in from the outside who has experience in house church living and planting. Such a person can give offer practical remedies to help change the group from being a crowd of cliquish navel-gazers to those whose arms and hearts are open to all who are hungry and thirsty. They can also give the group practical tips on how to evangelize their city effectively and nurture new converts. They are equally useful in thrashing out a vision that goes beyond the group's immediate relationships.

Like any fatal disease, early prevention of *koinonitis* is important. *Koinonia* is a foundational outgrowth of true church life. But *koinonitis* is a sickness that no house church can afford to ignore.

### **Disease #2: Spiritual Myopia**

The second disease that tends to afflict house churches is what I call "spiritual myopia." Myopia is nearsightedness. If you are myopic, you can clearly see only those things that are close to you. Everything else is blurred. Spiritual myopia is when a church cannot see past a certain point. It is blind to the big picture.

Joshua 3:3-4 says, "And they commanded the people saying, 'When you see the Ark of the Covenant of the Lord your God, and the priests, the Levites, bearing it, then you shall set out from your place and go after it. Yet there shall be a space between you

and it [the Ark] . . . about two thousand cubits by measure. Do not come near it [the Ark] that you may know the way by which you may go, for you have not passed this way before.”

When Israel journeyed in the wilderness, God led them by the Ark of the Covenant. They all followed the Ark which was carried on the shoulders of the priests. But God told the people to keep their distance from the Ark—at least two thousand cubits. The reason: If they got too close to the Ark, they would “lose their way.” God was saying: “Do not get too close to the Ark, or else you will get off track. You will get lost.”

God wanted Israel to walk far away enough from the Ark so that they could see the Ark . . . but so they could also see everything else in proportion to the Ark. If you are too close to the Ark, you are not going to be able to see where you are going. So the message is, “Do not get too close to the Ark lest you lose your way . . . lest things get out of proportion. Stand afar from the Ark so you can see the Ark as central, and everything else will come into clear focus and have its proper proportion.”

It is the same way in the church. Oftentimes house churches get fixated with a certain practice, a certain doctrine, or a certain truth, and they cannot see past it. They are fully absorbed with that particular thing. The result: Everything is out of proportion and they lose their direction. This is spiritual myopia.

Most of the time the things house churches become myopic about are valid in their own right. It could be something like home schooling. The whole church is into home schooling. That is the thing that drives the group. That is the thing that ignites their passion. But they cannot see anything else. It could be a certain doctrine like the Calvinistic “doctrines of grace.” Everything is zeroed in on them. It could be the ancient Hebraic customs and practices. The whole group is captivated by such things, and that is all they see. It could be evangelism, the gifts of the Holy Spirit, Bible study, end-time theology, raising good Christian families, spiritual power, etc. Even “house church” can be the subject of the group’s nearsightedness. Everyone in the group talks about one of these issues. Their concentration, their conversation, the focus of their meetings is all centered on one of these “things.”

My question: Where is the Lord Jesus Christ in all of that? The Ark is a picture of Jesus Christ. The acacia wood points to His humanity; the gold speaks of His Divinity. In Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead in physical form. He is the seat of God’s presence, God’s speaking, and God’s leading. He is the reality of the Ark of the Covenant.

If you get too close to the Ark, other things become central in your horizon. And you lose your way. God said, “Do not get too close to the Ark. Keep things in proportion. Keep them in perspective. Back off, and see the big picture.” The big picture is Jesus Christ—His centrality and His supremacy! He is the focus of our meetings. He is the subject of our conversation, concentration, sharing, and fellowship. Him alone . . . and not things related to Him!

If the truth be told, few house churches today are centered on Jesus Christ. Sure, house church members everywhere will say with their lips, “Jesus is the reason why we meet.” But listen to the conversations they have. Listen to what they share in their meetings. Listen to what comes off of their lips when they fellowship with each other. It is typically something other than Jesus Christ. It is something other than who He is, what He is like, what He has done, and what He is doing. There is typically little

evidence among house church folk of a genuine, up-to-date, current, revealing, experiencing, knowing, and encountering of the Lord Jesus. Most suffer from spiritual myopia. Something else has taken center stage in the life of the group.

### **The Symptoms of Spiritual Myopia**

What are the symptoms of spiritual myopia? Like *koinonities*, those who suffer from this sickness are typically unaware that they have it.

Symptom 1. The church's gatherings revolve around a special doctrine or practice. In every meeting, the same stanza is sung over and over. The same tape is played and replayed. The same chord is strung and restrung. Every time the church comes together—be it home schooling or Calvin's teachings—the special doctrine or practice will get airplay in the meeting. Not only that, but visitors who are interested in joining the group will be quizzed at some point to see where they stand on the issue: "Do you home school your kids?" "Have you received the baptism of the Spirit with the speaking of other tongues?" "Do you believe in the doctrine of election by grace and the perseverance of the saints?"

Strikingly, the people who make up the house church do not *feel* that they are sectarian. Nor do they perceive themselves to be un-Christ centered. They do not experience themselves this way at all. But people on the outside can pick it up right away: "We visited them several times, and we know what they are hung up on. We know what their hobby-horse is."

Symptom 2. Like *koinonitis*, this disease also inhibits outward growth. Those who join the group are those who already believe in the church's favorite "issue." If they do not, they are either proselytized to it or they are made to feel unwelcome.

Symptom 3. Those who suffer from spiritual myopia also suffer from another virus. As HIV is connected to AIDS, spiritual myopia is connected to an allied virus. It is the Laodicean virus. Remember the Lord's word to the church in Laodicea mentioned in Revelation 3? He said to them, "You say that you are rich. You say that you have need of nothing. But the truth is, you are poor, you are blind, and you are naked."

Spiritual myopia produces a proud spirit that represents the death knoll of the church. In the church's eyes, they lack nothing spiritually. But in the Lord's eyes, they are lacking greatly. The net effect of this is that Lord will withdraw His life from the group. Put differently, He will remove the lampstand (assuming that it existed in the first place—Rev. 2:5).

### **Prevention and Treatment**

Before we look at the prevention and treatment of this growth-obstructing disease, let us discuss the prognosis. At best, a church suffering from spiritual myopia will degrade into a sect. Because they center themselves on a particular "thing," they will become just like the denominations. They will become just another fractured fellowship—just another religious partisan group that lives unto itself.

At worst, they will begin to bite and devour one another until they are consumed (Gal. 5:15). After tiring of railing against those who believe the "wrong" thing ("those

Arminians”) and those who do the “wrong” thing (those “public schoolers”), the members turn on one another! And the group self-destructs.

Proverbs says, “Through pride comes contention.” If the group’s basis for meeting is a certain doctrine or practice, things are hunkey-dorey so long as everyone agrees with the cherished doctrine or practice. But what happens when some begin to disagree with it? What if somebody starts questioning the party line? “Well guys, I have been rethinking home schooling.” Or, “I am changing my view on the Calvinistic doctrine of predestination.”

Such questions go right to the heart of the foundation of that group. Now they are headed to the battle field. And if they do not have someone to help them from the outside, such disagreements can easily evoke a gut-wrenching, bloody, Christian massacre! Let me put it this way. Anytime a group is meeting on the basis of a certain doctrine or practice, it is doomed before it begins. At some point, they will be headed toward an agonizing split.

What, then, is the prevention and the treatment? The answer is the same for both. It is found in Luke 6:47-49. Speaking of Himself, Jesus says, “I will show you what he is like who comes to me and hears my words and puts them into practice. He is like a man building a house, who dug down deep and laid the foundation on rock. When a flood came, the torrent struck that house but could not shake it, because it was well built. But the one who hears my words and does not put them into practice is like a man who built a house on the ground without a foundation. The moment the torrent struck that house, it collapsed and its destruction was complete.”

To understand foundations is no small thing. Jesus said he who lays a foundation “digs down deep.” This implies that it takes time to build a foundation. He also says the foundation must be built “on rock.” What is the rock? In Matthew 16, the Lord Jesus talks about the rock. Peter confesses that Jesus is the Christ, the One sent from God. In response, the Lord said, “Flesh and blood has not revealed this to you Peter . . . upon this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.” Who is the rock? The rock is the revelation of Jesus Christ. When a people receive a deep revelation of Jesus Christ they possess a foundation upon which they are built together.

Paul echoes the same thought in 1 Corinthians saying that no man can build any other foundation except Jesus Christ. He and He alone is the only foundation for a church. Not home school. Not the Christian family. Not Calvinism. Not the doctrines of grace. Not Bible study. Not Arminianism. Not spiritual gifts. Not evangelism. No! The only reason for gathering as a house church is out of a deep revelation of Jesus Christ. Christ and Christ alone must be the foundation of our fellowship. There is no other reason by which to gather.

If our church will be healthy, Jesus Christ must be the basis of our meeting. He must be the central focus of our conversation. He must be that which unites us together. He must be the content of our meetings, of our sharing, of our songs. If it is something else, then we are building on sand. And the house will eventually collapse.

When a people are founded on Christ alone, they have the distinct sense that He is in their midst when they gather. He is the One the believers look to for leadership in the meeting. He is the One of whom they speak. He is the One they love and adore. All of what is shared displays Him. All of what is said glorifies Him. And more, all of what is said gives insight into who and what He is.

Think about it. If the Lord Jesus were physically sitting in this meeting this morning, do you think that we would get side tracked on all the pithy issues that fill our horizons? The pettiness, smallness, and shallowness that so often consumes Christians? Do you think we would be talking about home school, Calvinism, “the doctrines of grace,” spiritual gifts, or end-time theology? None of these things ought to be given center stage in the church.

Again, if He were in our midst, do you think we would be talking about all these things? Certainly not! We would be gazing upon Him. We would be enthralled by Him. We would be focused on Him. We would love Him with our words, our sharing, and our singing. We would boast about Him. And we would be ready to hear Him speak and respond to His words. He would be our central focus.

We so easily forget that Jesus Christ is in our midst. That He is with us when we come together. And He wants to be loved, glorified, and boasted on. This is really what the apostle Paul was telling the Corinthian church when they were getting off their Center. His word was simply: “I came to you wanting to know nothing but Jesus Christ!” . . . “No man can lay any foundation except Jesus Christ” . . . “You are the temple of the Holy Spirit and God dwells in you” . . . “Jesus Christ has been made unto you wisdom, holiness, righteousness, and redemption” . . . “You belong to Him and you are not your own” . . . “You are in Him without blame” . . . “You have been called to the fellowship of God’s Son.” Paul continually pointed the church back to Jesus Christ, reminding them that He alone must be their central focus—not doctrines, practices, or gifted men.

The panacea—the cure-all—for all of Corinth’s problems was the centrality of Jesus Christ. Recall what was happening there. They were dividing. There was gross immorality among them. They were taking each other to court. They were blaspheming the Lord during the Supper. Some were doubting the resurrection. They were disagreeing about eating food offered to idols.

Paul very rarely dealt with these issues directly. Instead, He gave them Christ. His message was: “Look at Christ” . . . “Christ is in you” . . . “You are in Him” . . . “Your calling is to fellowship with Him” . . . “Concentrate on Him and you will resolve all of your problems.”

The sad reality is that most house churches do not have a very deep knowledge of Jesus Christ. Therefore, the best they can do is talk about things *related* to Him. Discussing theology and doctrinal issues comes rather easy. But they are not to be confused with sharing Jesus Christ.

In short, a house church that is myopic and does not have Jesus Christ as its center is in need of those like Paul to come in from the outside and tear down the foreign elements and lay its true foundation. Further, when and if the church has left the foundation of Christ—as did Corinth—it is necessary to have such people return to redirect and reorient the church back to its center. Think about it. If Paul were not around, Corinth would not have been able to overcome its troubles. They needed his gift to point them back to Christ. Jesus Christ is the Ark. And God’s people are to follow Him at a distance, lest things get out of proportion. Nothing is to rival His central place in the church’s life and testimony.

### **Disease #3: Spiritual Dwarfism**

The third disease that tends to afflict house churches is what I call “spiritual dwarfism.” We have an organ in our brain called the pituitary gland. It is the master gland, and it is responsible for physical growth. If that organ is deformed or it is not working properly, it stunts our growth. Experts call it “pituitary dwarfism.” Spiritual dwarfism is the arrested spiritual development of a church. When a church is afflicted with this crippling disease, its growth is retarded and it experiences spiritual inertia.

In Ephesians 4, we have God’s goal for the church. Ephesians 4:11-16 says, “It was He who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers. To prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the Body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God. Till we become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ . . . Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming. Instead, we will be speaking the truth in love. We will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. From Him the whole Body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.”

What is stated here is God’s all-inclusive, all-governing purpose for the church. God’s desire is that the fullness of His Son be corporately embodied in a people. Paul said it this way to the Galatians, “I travail in birth until Christ be formed in you.” God’s goal is that we as His people become like Jesus Christ (see Romans 8:28-30). The whole culture of house church practice is designed to reproduce the character of Jesus in us. That is why we have open meetings. That is why the brothers and sisters lead the church under Christ’s headship. That is why church is not just a meeting, but a community. That is why the church is called to pursue the Lord in intimate fellowship.

The Divine intention has always been that a corporate man be God’s image-bearer in the earth. This is the church. God’s purpose, as it is put in Romans 8, is to conform us into the image of His Son. This is why we do not have a clergy—so that we can learn to depend upon the Head and receive from Him and Him alone. This is why we have fellowship—so the Lord may cause us to encourage one another, exhort one another, admonish one another, and love one another with His life. This is why we have community—to make Christ visible as we are being transformed by the rough-and-tumble of Bode life.

So the proof of the pudding is here: We can have the right wineskin outwardly, but the question before the house is are you changing? Are you becoming more like Jesus Christ? If you are not becoming more like Jesus Christ then something is wrong. If you are not growing into the Head—if you are not becoming more like Him in His sufferings and resurrection—then your church is suffering from spiritual dwarfism.

### **The Symptoms of Spiritual Dwarfism**

So what are the symptoms for diagnosis?

Symptom 1. Only a few people function when the church gathers. The rest are passive listeners. If a believer is passive, he or she will not grow. One of the marks of a spiritual babe is that they always have to have food dished out to them. They are always

receiving. They are never giving. Passivity, therefore, habituates us to stay in spiritual infancy. We never give. We never supply. We merely receive from those who are functioning. Further, passivity always causes the church to suffer. The church is in need of all its members to feed it. One or two individuals cannot express the Lord fully nor can they feed the church fully. All must participate. Passivity, therefore, dwarfs both the church and the individual who is passive.

Symptom 2. There is virtually no spiritual depth to what is shared in the meetings. People talk about “things”—religious things, Biblical things, even spiritual things. But there is hardly anything said that reflects an experiential knowledge of the Lord. There is nothing that indicates a deep insight into His glorious Person or His breathtaking purpose. What is shared is shallow, superficial, and surface. It may be intellectually and theologically stimulating. But spiritually, it is empty and colorless; the group thrives on milk and not solid food.

Symptom 3. The believers never talk about the Lord outside of scheduled meetings. There is no handling of Christ during the week. The only time He gets any air-time at all is when the church gathers together. And even then it is minimal.

### **Prevention and Treatment**

Hebrews 12:1 gives us a prescription to both prevent and treat this disease. Each believer must make a conscious decision to lay aside those things that hinder him from growing spiritually. The text says, “Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us lay aside every encumbrance—every hindrance that hinders us from growing in the Lord and going on. And lay aside the sin that so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us.”

Growing spiritually requires that we shed the garments of babyhood. It demands we discard those things that hold us back spiritually. Such a decision requires a hunger and thirst for the Lord. Most Christians have this hunger. But some do not.

In short, a church afflicted with spiritual dwarfism is in need of a breath of fresh life. The church needs to be given vision, without which the group’s retardation will eventually cause its disintegration (Prov. 29:18). Consequently, ministry from those who are further along spiritually is an indispensable resource for vision-casting and creating spiritual hunger and thirst for Christ. This is what was done in the first century. Itinerate men who had heavenly vision (Acts 26:19) and depth in Christ would work with various house churches to move them forward in spiritual richness.

James 1:21-25 says, “Therefore, get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you. Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourself. Do what it says. Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. But the man who look intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it . . . he will be blessed in what he does.”

A ministry of spiritual depth is required for a house church to go on. Such ministry should be seasonal, inciting spiritual hunger and thirst in the group. But more important, it should equip the church on how to feed that hunger and quench that thirst.

James tells us that when the Word is proclaimed, it should be accepted humbly. This goes beyond simply hearing it. It goes beyond writing it down in a notebook. It rather involves a genuine response to the Lord. I shall give you a perfect example. What we are discussing this morning will be of little value to you if you do not respond to it corporately before the Lord. The response should be: “We have heard something weighty. What does this mean for us? What is the Lord saying to us? How shall we respond to this word? Do we have one of these diseases? If so, how shall we treat it? In what areas do we need to build up our immune system?”

Without such searching questions, we are listening with our physical ears, but turning deaf to it with our spiritual ears. A major problem we have today in modern Christianity is that Christians have a tendency to equate the knowledge of a thing with walking it out. We hear a message, we understand it in our minds, we are excited about it, and we think that we have it. But there is a huge difference between hearing something and responding to it. This is one area where Christianity is failing miserably today. The result is that we have a lot of people with a lot of knowledge but very little reality.

One last point on this score. In Mark 4:23-25, the Lord says that the measure that you receive from the Lord is determined by the measure you give. If you are not rising up and supplying what you have already received from the Lord, He will not give any more to you in the way of spiritual supply. The secret to receiving from Him is giving to others. If we are receiving from Christ in a spiritual way, we will have something to supply to our brethren. The church, therefore, is wise to have outside help to equip it in these areas (Eph. 4:11-16). Such a design is built into the very DNA of God’s house (1 Cor. 12).

#### **Disease #4: Hypopneumia**

The fourth spiritual disease that afflicts house churches is what I call “hypopneumia.” “Hypo” in medical parlance means too little of something. It is the opposite of “hyper,” which means too much of something. If you have hyperthyroidism, for example, you have too much thyroxin in your bloodstream. And it makes you hyperactive. Hypo means “too little.”

*Pneuma* is the Greek word used in the NT for “spirit.” So hypopneumia is simply this: a subnormal manifestation of the Holy Spirit that is characterized by a lack of life, a lack of power, and a lack of Divine presence in the community of the believers. Put simply, hypopneumia is a deficiency in the working of the Holy Spirit through the church.

Ephesians 2:20-22 says that the church is “built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets: Christ Jesus Himself as the chief cornerstone. In Him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in Him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by His Spirit.”

Here again we discover God’s intention. It is that His people be formed together—built together—to be a habitation of God’s Spirit. That we collectively be built together so that the Spirit of God can dwell in our midst in power and life. That is really the goal of the Lord, and it is very much connected to the idea of “growing up into the Head.”

God wishes to conform us into Christ’s image. But He cannot do this if we live as isolated and individualistic beings. God’s intention is to build us *together* as a

community to house His Spirit—so that we might be a resting place for His Presence and a vessel for His expression.

### **The Symptoms of Hypopneumia**

Here are the symptoms for diagnosis:

Symptom 1. Lifeless meetings. The gatherings are mechanical. They are routine and perfunctory. It is the same thing every week—everyone is just going through the motions. There is no life or excitement. There is no power in the worship. There is no evidence of the Spirit of God working in our midst. People visit, but they are not touched or impressed. It is a case of living-death. I call this the “Sardis Syndrome” (Rev. 3:1).

Symptom 2. There is little to no building together. While the believers know each other by name, they are not being formed together. They are still very independent and individualistic in their thinking and conduct. They may eat together after scheduled meetings. But they rarely share meals during the week. They live separate lives. Remember, the Holy Spirit builds believers *together*—He leads them into a *shared* life. This is uniquely His work.

The prognosis of this disease is disintegration. If the Spirit of God is not functioning the way He wishes to in a church, one of two things will happen. People will simply leave due to the lack of life. They will begin to get on one another’s nerves to the point that they will begin to hold grudges and split. Or the group will establish an earthly form to replace the great chasm that exists due to the lack of life. And that form will typically include a person or persons within the group who start to control it. It may also adopt an unwritten liturgy.

### **Prevention and Treatment**

It is an established principle that the cross precedes the Spirit. Death to self is always connected to the outpoured power of the Spirit of God. Throughout the Old Testament era, God depicted the power of His Spirit by fire falling from heaven. But the fire always fell after there was a sacrifice placed upon the altar. The cross precedes the Spirit. If there is no sacrifice on the altar, there will be no heavenly fire. You might get strange fire; but you will not get fire from heaven.

When Moses was in the wilderness with the children of Israel, the people wanted water to drink. So the Lord said to Moses, “Strike the rock.” The rock was split and water poured out, providing drink for all. The striking of the rock is a picture of the cross. It speaks of death. The flowing water is a picture of the Holy Spirit. The rock must be struck before the water is poured out and all can drink. And by drinking, the people become one.

In the NT, the Lord Jesus was baptized in the Jordan before He was anointed by the Spirit. Jordan is the river of death. Again, the cross precedes the Spirit. Along this same line, Pentecost followed Calvary. First death, then the outpoured life. Finally, in the book of Romans—that classic book about our full salvation—Chapter 6 precedes Chapter 8. What is Romans 6 about? The cross. What is Romans 8 about? The Spirit.

In both our experience as well as the Lord's experience, Romans 6 precedes Romans 8.

So the principle is clear: The cross precedes the power of the Spirit. Laying down one's life is followed by the release of heavenly power and life. Death, therefore, is closely tied to God's building work. Death to our individualism. Death to our ambitions. Death to our opinions and will. Death to our independence.

The temple in the Old Testament is alluded to in Ephesians 2. There Paul writes that we are a building, fitly framed together, growing into the holy temple of God. The ancient tabernacle was made out of boards of acacia wood. These boards had to be cut to size and trimmed so they could fit together with the other boards to form the house of God. Being fitly framed together with our brothers and sisters requires a cutting process. But this is God's work. The genius of it is that He uses our brothers and sisters in the church to be His instruments and tools for the cutting!

In 1 Chronicles 26:27, we discover that the Lord's house was built from the spoils won in battle. This establishes a principle, I think. The house of God—the church—is constituted out of conflict. It requires conflict for the Lord to be able to build His house. The Lord builds out of the fruit of battle. So those intense, agonizing moments where we are having difficulty with one another—where someone is rubbing us the wrong way—and we are rubbing them the wrong way—are Divine opportunities for us to bear the cross and die. By these, God takes care of our rough edges. Yes, there is a great deal of screaming and wailing in the process. But this is how our Lord builds. He builds out of conflict. Hence, the cross is the primary remedy for hypopneumia.

### **Building a Healthy Immune System**

These are just some of the diseases that afflict house churches today. There are more of course. But this morning, I felt burdened to touch on these four.

A healthy church builds a strong immune system to resist disease. It is far wiser to prevent an illness than to cure one after contracting it. Consequently, I shall end this message by listing three elements for building a healthy immune system.

Element 1. Eating the right food. The members must learn how to draw their energy and life from nothing but Jesus Christ (John 6:57). If a house church does not know how to do this, it will not survive. If it does happen to survive, it will experience living-death. A continual experience with the Lord in prayer is required to build a healthy immune system. A church will die if it gives up its relationship with Christ. It must be able to nourish itself with those things which are invisible and intangible.

Element 2. Exercising regularly. Nourishing oneself with spiritual food is not enough. The church must *share* its food and drink with its members. That is, the members must function. They must learn to eat and drink of Christ and then feed Him to others in the meetings. Such spiritual functioning is the life-blood of a church.

Also, as the church exercises itself spiritually, its senses will be sharpened to discern both its health and what season it is in (Heb. 5:12-14). As a church matures, it will pass through different seasons that require changes in diet and exercise. There is a wet season, a dry spell, a season for corporate prayer, a season for outreach, a season for rest, etc. A church must have the discernment to know what season it is in. If it can

sense the season, it will also be able to detect a disease or virus that is seeking to inflict it. It will also be keen to know if it has caught a disease.

Element 3. Having a health practitioner. In the first century, itinerant workers were given to the church by God to show the members how to draw their supply from Christ. They existed to help the churches spot and treat the maladies to which they were blinded. They also showed them how to ward off spiritual diseases. If a church was suffering from a sickness, they treated it. (Interestingly, all of Paul's epistles were provoked by problems in the churches. Like a fine surgeon, Paul's letters were the Divine instruments by which God effected healing.)

Therefore, every church ought to have outside help to equip it in these all-too important areas. Such people are servants to the Body of Christ. They function as health-care facilitators. They act as nurses (1 Thess. 2:7), doctors, nutritionists, and sometimes surgeons.

There is one word of caution I will add as I close. Guard against becoming introspective. Introspection and self-analysis will kill a church. As I said at the front, upon hearing this message, your house church should come together to take its temperature, check its pulse, and detect its vital signs. But once a diagnosis is made and treatment is given, it is counterproductive to continue to analyze the group.

The paralysis of self-analysis is indeed a peril to avoid. If you are always introspecting and analyzing yourselves, you will become spiritually paralyzed (yet another illness!). If, on the other hand, your sights are set on Christ Jesus, you will make continuous progress. And ultimately, it is the corporate pursuit of Him . . . and Him alone . . . that will ward off any disease.