Key Verse: Ephesians 5:31–33

**“‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.’ This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church. However, each one of you must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband.”**

**The meaning of “House Church”**

The word “church” in the New Testament appears over 100 times[[1]](#footnote--1). In every case it never refers to a building but to a fellowship of believers. In a few instances it refers to the church universal, or to all the churches within a city, but in most cases “church” refers to a local gathering, most likely in someone’s home. In fact, where even two or three gather in his name, Jesus is there with them (Mt18:20). Jesus is the head of the church, and all believers are members of his body (1Co12:27; Eph1:22; Col1:18,24). Ultimately, any fellowship of believers is not a mere human association, but a coming into the presence of God through the shed blood of Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit. What’s more, each fellowship of believers, through faith, is joined together with the church universal (Eph2:21–22). The real meaning of fellowship is to be built up together as living stones in service to Christ, the Living Stone (1Pe2:4–5). Each believer is called to be a priest, to declare God’s praises because of Jesus’ marvelous grace (1Pe2:9; Rev5:10).

In the New Testament the expression “household” is repeated in relation to faith 21 times[[2]](#footnote-0). The expression “the church that meets at their house” is repeated four times[[3]](#footnote-1). Most of these were Christian households, in which believers—parents, relatives, children, friends and servants—gathered to pray, study the Bible, worship and have Christian koinonia. They also, no doubt, invited their non-believing friends to their households to share their faith in Jesus.

However, when we use the expression “house church” in this Bible study series, we are referring generally to a married couple. This concept of marriage as a reflection of the relationship between Christ and his church can be seen in Ephesians 5. Husbands are commanded to love their wives, just as Christ loved the church. Wives are commanded to respect their husbands, just as the church submits to Christ (Eph5:24,25,33). When husbands and wives have a personal relationship with Jesus, and when Christ is Lord of their family, that family becomes a house church. House churches, however, are not limited to those who are married; single persons, such as widows, the celibate, etc. also serve God as house church leaders. Regardless of marital status, they offer themselves and their households to be used by God and open their homes for his kingdom work (Lk10:38; Ac18:26; Ro12:13; 1Ti5:10).

**Brief History of the House Church**

During the first two centuries of Christianity, believers met mostly in house churches, due mainly to persecution, until the Roman Emperor Constantine made Christianity the official state religion of the Empire in A.D. 313. With the Protestant Reformation there was a resurgence of house church ministries beginning in Europe with movements like the Waldensians, the Moravians, and later, the Methodist. In the 20th century the house church movement flourished in places hostile to Christianity, such as communist China, North Korea, Vietnam, Cuba, as well as in India. Due to the decline of mainstream denominations in Europe and North America, the house church movement has been growing there as well.

**Scope and Limits of This Study**

The main scope of the study is the relationship between God and the family (or individual), as well as the relationship between a Christian husband and wife. It is our prayer that the Bible studies in this series will nourish the spiritual lives of house church leaders, and thus, inspire the spread of God’s kingdom through house churches.

This study is not intended to address all the aspects of house church ministry (e.g. how to run a ministry from a private home, how local house churches can relate to a larger church community, etc.).

**List of Lessons and How to Use Them**

We have chosen 15 lessons from texts throughout the Bible, from the Old as well as the New Testaments, in order to get a comprehensive understanding of God’s plan for marriages, families and house churches. Looking at the variety of ways God worked in these people’s lives will help us avoid stereotyping any one particular kind, so that all kinds of people may be inspired to find their place in the work and history of God. We also would like to find principles in all these Biblical examples that apply to a variety of people trying to serve God today in their unique situations.

With this in mind, it is not always necessary to study all the lessons in order. Rather, it may be good to use only the ones that seem pertinent to specific spiritual needs in any given ministry.

The House Church Series Lessons are as follows:

Lesson 1: God Made the Family For His Purpose (Ge1:26–2:25)

Lesson 2: Noah’s Family: Overcoming a Corrupt Society by Obedient Faith (Ge6:1–22)

Lesson 3: Abraham’s Family: Living By Faith to be a Blessing to All Nations (Ge12–22)

Lesson 4: Isaac’s Family: Bearing God’s Blessing by Faith (Ge25:19–28:9)

Lesson 5: Jacob’s Family: Struggling with Men; Struggling with God (Ge32–33; 35:1–15)

Lesson 6: Impress Them on Your Children (Dt6:1–25)

Lesson 7: Rahab’s Faith/Welcoming the Spies and the Scarlet Cord (Jos2:1–24)

Lesson 8: Ruth’s and Boaz’s Faith/God Uses Commitment and Selflessness to Redeem a Family (Ru1:1–4:22)

Lesson 9: The Faith of Zechariah and Elizabeth/Keeping the Lamp of God Burning (Lk1:6–25)

Lesson 10: The Holy Family (Mt1–2; Lk1–2) **[Lord, help us!]**

Lesson 11: The Birth and Growth of the Early Church/The Essential Elements of House Church Ministry (Ac2:22–47)

Lesson 12: An Exemplary House Church: Priscilla and Aquila (Ro16:3–16)

Lesson 13: They Opened Their Homes For Kingdom Work (Lk10:38; etc.)

Lesson 14: Love and Respect (Eph5:21–33)

Lesson 15: Beautiful Wives and Considerate Husbands in Christ (1Pe2:13–3:8)

**How to Use the Lessons**

Lesson 1: God’s original purpose for marriage and the family

Lessons 2,9: a family’s identity living in a non-believing environment

Lessons 3–5: The patriarchs: how God laid a foundation for his redemptive work:

Lesson 3: how to live by faith

Lesson 4: how to inherit, maintain and pass on God’s blessing (and co-working)

Lesson 5: a dysfunctional family: how to struggle with God and become spiritual

Lessons 7–8: faith is everything in being used by God

Lessons 6,9,10: spiritual education of children; environment-making

Lesson 11: the broader concept of house church ministry: a model Christian community

Lessons 9,12–13: examples of those who used their homes as house churches

Lessons 14–15: the marriage relationship in a house church

**Purpose of This Study**

In our societies today we are confronted with the disintegration of the institution of marriage and even of the identity and role of men and women. In this social milieu many people are wounded and confused. We want to learn from role models in the Scriptures how to have healthy Christian marriages, families and communities.

These role models are helpful for all Christians, whether as members of a larger church or starting a new ministry on their own. New Christians, as well as those who have been serving God for a long time, can learn from these Biblical models how to serve God in various house church settings. These models are especially useful in campus ministry in helping provide an environment for the healthy nurture of young people. It is our prayer that, under the influence of those living by Biblical principles in their personal lives, homes and families, young people may grow as Jesus’ disciples.

1. The word “church” first appears in Matthew’s Gospel three times (16:18; 18:17), in Acts 20 times (5:11; 8:1,3; 9:31; 11:22,26; 12:1,5; 13:1; 14:23,27; 15:3,4,22,30,41; 16:5; 18:22; 20:17,28), in Romans four times (16:4,5,16,23), in 1 Corinthians 22 times (1:2; 4:17; 5:12; 6:4; 7:17; 10:32; 11:16,18,22; 12:28; 14:4,5,12,19,23,26,28,34,35; 15:9; 16:1,19), in 2 Corinthians nine times (1:1; 8:1,18,19,23,24; 11:8,28; 12:13), in Galatians three times (1:2,13,22), in Ephesians nine times (1:22; 3:10,21; 5:23,24,25,27,29,32), in Philippians twice (3:6; 4:15), in Colossians four times (1:18,24; 4:15,16), in 1 Thessalonians twice (1:1; 2:14), in 2 Thessalonians twice (1:1,4), in 1 Timothy four times (3:5,15; 5:16,17), in Philemon once (1:2), in Hebrews once (12:23), in James once (Jas5:14), in 3 John three times (1:6,9,10) and in Revelation 19 times (1:4,11,20; 2;1,7,8,11,12,17,18,23,29; 3:1,6,7,13,14,22; 22:16). [↑](#footnote-ref--1)
2. (Mt12:25; 24:45; Jn4:53; Ac11:14; 16:15,31,33,34; 18:18; Ro16:10,11; 1Co1:11; 16:15; Eph2:19; Php4:22; 1Ti3:12,15; 2Ti1:16; 4:19; Tit1:7; 1Pe4:17). [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
3. Ro16:5a; 1Co16:19; Col4:15; Phm2. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)