

Toward a Theology of *Oikos*: The Liveliness and Limitations of Home in the Post-
COVID World

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Dear Pastor Pauline,

Thank you for sharing your struggle about how to educate your church members regarding the significance of returning to church for worship and fellowship. In the post-COVID era, the church has encountered challenges not experienced in the previous decades. Local church attendance decreased, with more people staying home and observing the worship service virtually. Many of these churches also authorize the partaking of communion online, as members prepare their own bread and wine, each from their own home. While the act of worship and partaking in the sacred sacrament remain, questions about the theological basis for this new reality linger. I have heard your questions: Does the Bible commend the context of home for such activities? Is it biblical for families to do their own communion outside of the physical building of the church? Some churches also launch online fellowships or Bible Study groups to accommodate their members. What does the Bible say about this seemingly irreversible trend? I am going to address these questions in this letter.

As we dive into the Pastoral Epistles (1-2 Timothy and Titus), Paul stresses the significance of *oikos* and its multifaceted purposes in forming the people of God. Paul mentions the word in its various forms at least eleven times in these three books.¹ The English translations usually render *oikos* as “household.”² However, *oikos* in Greek includes the meanings of house, home, building, family, dwelling place, household, and temple.³ Paul even uses *oikos* as a metaphor for the human body (2 Tim 2:20). In other words, *oikos* embodies both a physical space and family relationships. What is most significant is that in the three Pastoral epistles, Paul identifies multifaceted functions and telos of *oikos*—*Oikos* is a space for character formation, spiritual formation, faith formation, discipleship, relationship building, field education, practice of sanctification, teaching and being taught, and generational transmission of faith and teaching. *Oikos* is a miniature church, similar to a home church, but it is not a church (*ecclesia*) in that the church is the body of Christ.

In the following section, I will reflect on the multi-layered meanings of *oikos* in the Pastoral Epistles and attempt to reclaim its theological significance in a post-COVID world while maintaining its distinction from the church. I will then cite examples of the

¹ 1 Tim 3:4, 5, 12; 5:4, 8, 14; 6:16; 2 Tim 2:20; 4:19; Titus 1:11; 2:5.

² Take 1 Tim 3:5 as an example, ESV, NASB, NLT, NRSVUE, and RSV all translate *oikos* as “household.”

³ BAGD, 560-561.

theology of human home in the Old Testament, drawing from the Passover tradition and the book of Proverbs. Finally, based on the above reflections, I will draw implications for our church practice in our time. I hope my reflection will be helpful to you as you navigate the virtual and physical reality of doing church in the post-COVID world.

The Meanings of Home in the Pastoral Epistles

Home involves family relationships (household) and a physical space (a house) for these relationships to interact.⁴ Therefore, it overlaps with the idea of church that involves people called out by God and becoming family members in God's church. In the three Pastoral Epistles, Paul addresses Timothy and Titus as "my true child in the faith" (1 Tim 1:2; Tit 1:4) and also addresses Timothy as "my beloved child" or "my beloved son" (2 Tim 1:2). This family relationship in the faith reflects the family relationship in one's home.

According to the pastoral epistles, home is the place for character formation, which precedes leadership formation. Paul charges any man who aspires to the office of leadership (bishop) to be above reproach, the husband of one wife, temperate, prudent, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not addicted to wine, or contentious. Instead, he is to be gentle, peaceable, and have a healthy stance regarding finance (1 Tim 3:2-3; Tit 1:6-9).⁵ These character traits are formed and practiced at home through interacting with family members, treating guests, and managing oneself.

Paul goes on to say that the person must manage his own home well. The criteria for assessing this is through how he teaches his children so that they are under control. "Keeping his children under control with all dignity" (1 Tim 3:4) echoes "able to teach" (1 Tim 3:2), which implies teaching one's children and those at church (Tit 1:9). In Titus, Paul adds that "having children who believe" (Tit 1:6). How can children believe in the faith? They need to be taught by their parents and see whether they walk the talk. If a man is to be above reproach, he must model what he teaches and set an example for his children to emulate. He needs to be a teacher of his children before becoming a church leader.

⁴ The idea of God's people as a family originates from the Old Testament. For example, Jacob's household is also the house of Israel (Gen 46:27). Andreas J. Köstenberger, *Biblical Theology for Christian Proclamation: Commentary on 1-2 Timothy & Titus* (Nashville, TN: Holman, 2017), 450.

⁵ Former executive director of the Association of Theological Schools, Daniel O. Aleshire uses 1 Tim 3:2-7 and Titus 1:7-9 as the texts to construct his formational model of theological education, which he believes is the next future. He argues that with the decline in religious institutions, ensuring the character of Christian leaders becomes of utmost importance. Daniel O. Aleshire, *Beyond Profession: The Next Future of Theological Education* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2021), 75. 79. While his focus on the formational model happens in the context of institutional theological education, the pastoral epistles also emphasize theological education that happens at one's home.

Then Paul asks a rhetorical question, “But if a man does not know how to manage his own *oikos*, how will he take care of the church of God? (1 Tim 3:2-5). The expected response is a resounding No. “Above reproach” further indicates the leader’s character both within and outside of one’s home (1 Tim 3:7). One’s reputation outside of home comes precisely from one’s character formed from one’s home. Character and leadership formation originate in the context of home.

Paul further adds to the criteria list for leadership, specifically deaconship. For men, they must be men of dignity, not double-tongued, addicted to wine, or fond of personal gain, but holding to the mystery of faith with a clear conscience (1 Tim 3:8-9; Tit 1:7-9). They also need to be tested (1 Tim 3:8-10). Additionally, they must be husbands of one wife and manage their children and their home well (1 Tim 3:12). The repetition of managing one’s children and home highlights Paul’s concern about character and leadership formation, which happens at home. Paul indicates that women or the deacons’ wives or deaconesses must also be dignified, not involving themselves in malicious gossip, but temperate and faithful in all things (1 Tim 3:11).

In addition to character and leadership formation, a home is also a place for faith building (1 Tim 3:9) and, most importantly, for passing on the faith to subsequent generations. Paul praises Timothy for his sincere faith, which first dwells in his grandmother Lois and then his mother Eunice (2 Tim 1:5). This passing on the faith from one generation to the next happens in the context of home and parent-children relationships. Mother passes on the faith to her daughter, and then the daughter passes on the same faith to her son. This would involve teaching and modeling in everyday life inside and outside one’s home. Therefore, a home is where one’s character is formed, leadership qualities are cultivated, and faith is transmitted and built. It is a place to teach and to receive teaching, a place to learn how to relate to one another in love and dignity, and a place to practice godliness.

The Significance of Home in Other Texts

I will turn to two texts to further illustrate the functions of home: the Passover tradition and the Book of Proverbs 1-9.

The book of Exodus functions as a cornerstone of Israel’s collective memory and a foundational story for future generations.⁶ At the heart of this memory is the exodus event, which is retold from one generation to the next at the Passover meal conducted at one’s home. Later, the Jewish tradition developed the Passover Haggadah, which involves the annual ritual of retelling the exodus narrative around a meal. Children

⁶ For example, Pss 105 and 106 use both positive and negative perspectives to retell the story of Exodus and so remembering Exodus calls for both praise and repentance, see Richard W. Nysse, “Retelling the Exodus,” *WW* Vol. 33, no. 2 (2013): 157–65.

participate in the catechism format to learn what the exodus from Egypt means for them and their collective identity as the people of God.⁷ This ritual serves as a pedagogical tool to inform and form the Israelite household and their next generations to remember who they are and to whom they belong. The head of the household, usually the father, will serve as the host of the meal. The detailed instructions for the Passover meal are recorded in Exodus 12:1-13 and 43-49. Home is the space for teaching and passing on the faith from one generation to the next.

The book of Proverbs also situates the pedagogical context at home. In Proverbs 1-9, both the father and the mother teach their children to attend to their teachings. “Hear, my son, your father’s instruction and do not forsake your mother’s teaching” (Prov 1:8). They urge their son to receive, keep, and practice their teaching, to seek wisdom, so that he will learn how to fear God, discover knowledge, discern righteousness and justice (Prov 2:1-9). The parents instruct, warn, encourage, and admonish their son by juxtaposing two opposing ways of wisdom and folly so that their son can choose the way of wisdom (Prov 2:10-22; 5:1-23; 9:1-18).

What is the Theological Difference between a Home and a Church?

Before establishing churches, disciples went to the temple and broke bread in various private homes (Acts 2:46). There were also home churches or house churches where believers gathered (Acts 12:12, 16:40; Rom 16:23). Therefore, a home can be defined as a church if it functions as a church according to what Scripture describes. These functions include teaching, fellowship, breaking bread, prayer (Acts 2:42, 46; Eph 4:12-13), worship (Acts 2:47), growing in all aspects into Christ (Eph 4:15), discipleship (2 Tim 2:1-2), and evangelism (Rom 10:14-17).

While Scripture places home as a space for learning, teaching, modeling, interacting, and practicing godliness and faith, it is distinguished from church. Paul distinguishes the two entities and never calls or refers to any home as the body of Christ (1 Tim 3:5, 15). He teaches that Christ is the head of the church, not the head of one’s home (Eph 1:22; Col 1:18-20). In other words, a home is like a pre-church, or even a home-church, forming people to become better stewards of God’s house – the church – the Body of Christ.

⁷ The word “Haggadah” derives from the word “to tell.” During the Passover seder, children are commanded to ask four questions: (1) How different is this night from all the other nights? On all other nights, we may eat either leavened or unleavened bread; on this night, why do we only eat unleavened bread? (2) On all other nights, we may eat any vegetable; on this night why are we required to eat bitter herbs? (3) On all other nights, we are not bidden to dip our vegetables even once; on this night, we dip them twice. (4) On all other nights, we eat our meals in any manner; on this night, why do we sit around the table together in a ceremonial fashion? The leader of the seder will then respond to each of these questions one by one. Rabbi Nathan Goldberg, *Passover Haggadah*, revised edition (Hoboken, NJ: Ktav Publishing House, 1993), 8–9.

Both the home (family) and the church are instituted by God but for different purposes. The home is intended for nurturing and caring for family members, providing a space for love, support, and godly upbringing. The Christian home is a “domestic church,” where parents serve as the pastors of their children in faith and godliness (Deut 6:4-9; Eph 6:1-4). Relationships within the home reflect the love and covenantal faithfulness of God. On the other hand, the church is established as a community of believers who profess faith in Jesus Christ through the indwelling Holy Spirit. The church is the body of Christ that transcends the boundaries of individual homes and ethnicities, with Christ as the head.⁸ Therefore, the church is the visible manifestation of God’s kingdom on earth, serving as a witness to God’s redemptive work in Christ through the life-giving and transforming work of the Holy Spirit. The home and the church serve distinct purposes and cannot replace one another. However, if a home functions as a church, it is considered a church.

Implications in the Post-COVID World

As you know, during the COVID pandemic, many Christians reverted to their homes as the site for worshipping God and breaking bread because the physical church could not function due to public health threats. Yet, in the post-COVID world, when the pandemic no longer poses a severe danger to in-person gatherings, the priority of worship, fellowship, breaking bread, and growing together in love should be given to believers physically present with one another. In cases when a person lacks transportation or has a physical impairment that prevents that person from attending in-person meetings, then having the worship virtually can be taken as an alternative, but it is not the biblical ideal.

In regard to the Holy Communion (or the Lord’s Supper), if its intention is to gather believers into one place and, through breaking bread, affirm their unity as one church (1 Cor 11:17-26), then each member breaking bread from one’s home falls short of the biblical vision because they are not breaking from one bread (1 Cor 10:17), the symbol of unity.⁹ If people take their own bread from individual homes, it would be a communion in spirit, not in “letter.”

While church members can gather virtually for Bible Studies and fellowships, in-person gatherings are indispensable in connecting one to another. How can church members eat and fellowship together if each person or family stays at home? Small groups and other church gatherings may consider using hybrid options (alternate between in-person and virtual gatherings) to keep one another engaged and connected.

⁸ The images of the church as the body of Christ, the bride of Christ, and the holy temple are never referred to as believers’ homes. This further underscores the distinction between a home and a church. Don Thorsen, *An Exploration of Christian Theology*, 2nd (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2020), 304.

⁹ How literally we should take “one bread” invites other questions, but the bottom line is the idea of unity.

In the post-COVID world, you must adjust to new practices while remaining true to the teaching of Scripture. This requires a profound grasp of the biblical text in its original context, and wisdom and reverence in applying it to contemporary practices. I pray and hope the Spirit will grant you discernment as you shepherd your flock.