

House-to-house

It is a quiet Sunday morning. You are pottering around your home, working at various chores, when the doorbell rings. You think, "That's funny. We weren't expecting anyone!" You peek out of the window and see two well-dressed ladies with a couple of equally well-dressed young children. You don't recognize them. Who are they? They're Jehovah's Witnesses... and they're going from house-to-house!

Here is a second scenario. It is a warm summer's evening. You are splitting firewood in the back yard, when the dog starts barking. You think, "That's funny. We weren't expecting anyone!" You walk around to the front of the house and you see two tall, slim, young men, with short, neat haircuts and wearing smart, mid-grey suits. Who are they? They're Mormons... and they're going from house-to-house!

The Jehovah's Witnesses and the Mormons (Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints) insist that the Bible encourages their members to go from house-to-house to preach the gospel and to gain converts. The church of God insists that the Bible advocates no such thing and that, in fact, Jesus Christ commands against this practice.

A casual scan of the relevant scriptures on the subject can be confusing. At first they seem to contradict each other. Jesus Christ, it seems, says one thing and the apostle Paul, another. What is the truth on this matter? Does God want us to preach His gospel from house-to-house, or not?

It is the purpose of this article to explain what Jesus Christ really does say, through His Word in the Bible, on this subject of preaching the gospel from house-to-house.

Law of Love

God's Law is a law of love. His commands are based on proper love and concern for Him and for other people, both in and out of His church. His commands concerning preaching the gospel from house-to-house are no different. They are part of His law of love. They are based on loving concern and respect for the privacy and free choices of others.

There are three main scriptures in the New Testament referring to the term "house to house," plus a fourth, which we will visit briefly. Let us take a look at each of them in order:

After these things the Lord appointed seventy others also, and sent them two by two before His face into every city and place where He Himself was about to go. Then He said to them, "The harvest truly is great, but the laborers are few; therefore pray the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into His harvest. Go your way; behold, I send you out as lambs among wolves. Carry neither money bag, knapsack, nor sandals; and greet no one along the road. But whatever house you enter, first say, 'Peace to this house.' And if a son of peace is there, your peace will rest on it; if not, it will return to you. And remain in the same house, eating and drinking such things as they give, for the laborer is worthy of his wages. Do not go from house to house." (Luke 10:1-7)

Jesus was instructing seventy of His followers before sending them out to various towns and villages, which He had planned to visit later. He told them to stay at the homes of "sons of peace," people who had already received and accepted His gospel message. The disciples were to accept hospitality from them. Jesus commanded them NOT to go from house-to-house to preach, to heal, or even to seek food and lodging. Their preaching and healing was to be done in a central place, whether public or private, and the people were to come voluntarily to the disciples if they were interested in what they had to say.

Mobile Mass?

And they, continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from *house to house*, did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart, (Acts 2:46)

Some have twisted this second scripture and its mention of "breaking bread from house to house" even to advocate the taking of Mass or Communion from door to door!

The true and simple meaning is revealed in the more modern translations of the Bible. The Revised Standard Version reads:

And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they partook of food with glad and generous hearts.

The Modern Language Version puts it this way:

Daily they frequented the temple together and ate their meals at home together. So they received nourishment...

The church of God was brand new. Its members were not preaching from house-to-house. Nor were they taking Mass or Communion or even the Passover service from door-to-door. They were simply enjoying meals together in one another's homes. We do this very same thing today. Having church brethren over for dinner must be one of our favourite and most common weekly church activities. Of course, such dinners are usually planned, though sometimes invitations do go out at the last minute. The guests are invited. They do not come unannounced, ring at your doorbell, and expect to have a meal with you. Even the way we enjoy meals together is – and certainly should be – based on God's Law of Love, and upon the rules of common courtesy.

A contradiction?

And how I kept back nothing that was profitable unto you, but have shewed you, and have taught you publickly, and from *house to house*, (Acts 20:20)

Oh-oh! This verse says that Paul DID teach from house to house!

Yes, he did. But let us ask who he was talking to – whose houses he was teaching in. Let us look at this verse in its context:

And from Miletus he sent to Ephesus, and called the elders of the church. And when they were come to him, he said unto them, Ye know, from the first day that I came into Asia, after what manner I have been with you at all seasons, serving the Lord with all humility of mind, and with many tears, and temptations, which befell me by the lying in wait of the Jews: and how I kept back nothing that was profitable unto you, but have shewed you, and have taught you publickly, and from house to house, testifying both to the Jews, and also to the Greeks, repentance toward God, and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ. (Acts 20:17-21)

Was Paul writing here that he had preached from house-to-house to people he had never met before? No! These were Jewish and Greek church elders from Ephesus, church members that Paul already knew. The teaching of the Ephesian brethren "in public" would have been the equivalent of our modern-day Sabbath services, Bible Studies and, perhaps, the public Bible lectures of previous times. The teaching "from house to house" would be the equivalent of modern day ministers of God's church visiting, counselling and teaching other (lower-ranking) elders, members, or prospective members, and anointing the sick. A minister who has recently moved to a new church area will spend time visiting the elders and church members in that area to get to know them better. In such ways, most ministers of God's church go from house-to-house on a daily basis. Such visits are agreed upon, planned and set up in advance. This is God's way, with concern for the privacy of the people being visited.

House to house gossip

**And withal they learn to be idle, wandering about from house to house; and not only idle, but tattlers also and busybodies, speaking things which they ought not.
(I Timothy 5:13)**

This verse, of course, is not dealing with the subject of preaching the gospel from door-to-door. But let us touch on it briefly, as it does deal with the related subject of a Christian's respect for the privacy of others. Paul, in the first part of this fifth chapter, discusses a Christian's duty toward widows, and here he gives some brief instruction for the conduct of the young widows themselves. But this warning against gossip can be extended beyond the category of young Christian widows (which in today's world is a comparatively small group), out to every member of God's church. Gossip is not the sole domain of young widows. Applying this extension then, this verse warns us all not to gossip. The surrounding verses suggest that we should rather get busy with family and church activities. There is more than enough work in our local congregations to be shared amongst our reduced numbers. Why waste time in negative and backward-looking conversations? Why waste time with destructive criticism of those who are doing their best to serve us? If a fellow member, or your minister or deacon is doing something you don't agree with, go talk to *him* about it!

What is the right way?

Returning to the main topic, preaching the gospel from house-to-house is not the proper way. It violates God's law of love. The *preachers* pay their unexpected visits unannounced and at times which are usually inconvenient for the target householders. These *preachers* put themselves at an unfair advantage. They have all of their arguments prepared beforehand and ready to unload on the poor, unsuspecting householder. If the householder allows them to get started, they usually exert pressure for the householder to accept *their version of the gospel* and to join their church. A pair of young Mormon missionaries once fasted and prayed for three days for my wife and I to be convinced that theirs was the true church and the true gospel. (They were very fine and zealous young men, by the way. We do not think or speak badly of them and we will always have fond memories of the time we spent with them). It is best not to argue with such *missionaries*, or even allow yourself to be drawn into a religious discussion with them, but rather to politely and firmly assert that you are not interested.

By contrast, God's way of preaching the gospel is so obviously right. It was one of the main things that initially convinced many, including my wife and myself, of the identity of God's true church. No one ever tried to force anything on us. Many will remember the booming voice of Herbert W. Armstrong sternly warning his listeners, "Don't believe ME! Blow the dust off your OWN Bible!"

God's way is to make the gospel freely available and as widespread as a church's budget allows. Although God must do the calling and choosing (John 6:44), His way is for those who hear and recognize the true gospel to decide for themselves whether or not they wish to accept it. Conversion forced or coerced by another human being is no conversion at all. Over the years, God has used various types of medium to make His gospel available. He has used radio, television, magazines, booklets, reprint articles, public Bible lectures and personal example. A comparatively new medium is that of the Internet, through which God's church can now reach a potential audience of millions, at very low cost.

Such means have enjoyed various levels of success. God has borne fruit through these methods. Every one of our members will tell you that no church of God minister ever came knocking on their doors to talk them into conversion. Most, we believe, were led by God to listen to the late Herbert W. Armstrong on the radio, to watch him on TV, or to pick up and read a church magazine or booklet. They had to make the effort to write or phone to request additional magazines, booklets, or a visit. They *chose* to continue to listen to church programs, to read church materials, and to maintain contact with the church of God. This is so obviously the way it should be.

Go not from house-to-house!

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