

Our Homes – Personal and Biblical Reflections.

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The editors of *Faith In Focus* have asked me to write about the physical homes we live in. I want to begin with some personal reflection on the houses our family lived in as I was growing up and those my wife and I have lived in during our 30 years of marriage, and then reflect on some of the biblical references to homes and what we can learn from those.

Personal Reflections

Some people live in the same house for 30 or 40 years. That is unusual and was certainly not true of us as we were growing up. Our family moved regularly because my father enjoyed renovating a home; then, when he ran out of projects on the house he would build a boat. When that was completed he would sell the house, and the boat, and buy another project! We did that exact pattern twice over and then he decided to build a *new* house.

All this had the disadvantage that various parts of the house were often in a state of reconstruction. The advantage, however, was that my brothers and I learnt a great deal about construction, renovations and woodwork (It is perhaps no surprise that my two brothers became civil engineers – construction must be in the genes!)

My wife and I bought our first home while serving in the Reformed Presbyterian Church of Bucklands Beach. It was a small three bedroom, weatherboard house in Howick. We bought it on a government scheme of low interest for three years. It was a joy to be in our own home. It needed a lot of renovation. I was able to put into practice all that I had learnt from my father. Various members in Bucklands Beach lent me a hand either with advice or with practical help, and my parents regularly came up from Christchurch so my father could assist with some major projects. It was very satisfying to be able to make our home more beautiful and livable and suitable for the needs of our family. Many of you as readers will have experienced this same satisfaction.

From there we moved to Bishopdale where we lived in the manse for the next 13 years, right next door to the church. The manse is a Fraemohs home, built entirely out of wood. All the internal walls and ceilings are polyurethaned pine, giving the house a warm and cosy feel and making it very practical for a family. It is also well built for the sun. Being in a house owned by the church meant that I could not do major renovations! The Board of Management, however, was quite happy for me to potter around on maintenance matters, which I enjoyed.

Moving to Pukekohe gave us the opportunity to build our own home. Our son William had just completed an apprenticeship as a joiner, so Harriet and William designed her 'dream' kitchen, which he constructed and installed, as well as making the cabinetry for the bathroom and en-suite. We were able to design a home with my study positioned next to the driveway, making it easily accessible for people coming to see me. Our home also has a large lounge suitable for big groups of people - ideal for session socials, Bible study groups and having people over.

While our children were all at home all the rooms were full, but now that our family is emptying out, we have rooms to spare, making it easier to have people stay, and to offer hospitality to those passing through.

Biblical Themes/ lessons

People in the Bible lived in a great variety of homes. Abraham lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob (Heb 11:9). They were nomadic and their homes were transportable, and temporary. The writer of Hebrews informs us that Abraham “was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God” (Heb 11:10). The people of Israel lived in more permanent homes during their 430 years in Egypt, but then, like Abraham, lived in tents during their 40 years of wandering in the wilderness. During those years the Lord looked after them; they did not lack anything – their clothes did not wear out and their feet did not swell (Deut 2:7; 8:4). After that Joshua led them in the conquest of the land of Canaan. Before they set out on that conquest Moses promised that God would give them “a land with large flourishing cities you did not build, houses filled with all kinds of good things you did not provide”, and warned them, “be careful that you do not forget the Lord, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery” (Deut 6:10ff). To help them remember their tent-dwelling years in the desert God instituted the annual Feast of Tabernacles (or Booths); every year they were to live in booths for seven days as a reminder of God’s past and present provision for their needs. Sadly, they did forget the Lord and after many warnings from the prophets God eventually forced them out of their homes and their land in the exile under Assyria (722 BC) and in the exile under Babylon (in 587 BC).

In this New Covenant we do not celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles, but we must remember the spiritual truth that God wanted to impress on the people of Israel, that is, that God has provided for all our needs, including giving us a roof over our heads, and that he will continue to look after us.

None of us live in tents (except when we go on holidays). We live in houses built of permanent materials. Yet, we need the perspective of the patriarchs whose earthly dwellings were temporary but who looked forward with faith to their eternal home in heaven. Jesus assured his disciples that there was plenty of room for them (and us) in heaven; “In my Father’s house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you” (John 14:2). Our Lord reinforced this in the last book of the Bible with the vision he gave to John of our glorious home in the Holy City, the New Jerusalem. A loud voice from the throne declared; “Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people and God himself shall be among them and be their God” (Rev 21:2f). These promises are an encouragement not to hold too tightly to the things of this world – our houses and holiday homes and furniture – but to remember that all who follow Christ will receive an inheritance in the new heaven and the new earth, an eternal home with God.

Homes in biblical times were also places of service and hospitality. Abraham invited three strangers to stay and have a meal with him and was generous in his hospitality (Gen 18:1ff). A widow in Zarephath of Sidon looked after the prophet Elijah for a long time (1 Kings 17). A

Shunammite woman and her husband often invited the prophet Elisha for meals and provided a small furnished room for him in their house so he could stay with them whenever he passed by (2 Kings 4:9f). God commanded the people of Israel to look after widows, orphans and strangers. In the New Testament we read that Jesus was often invited into people's homes and some, such as Mary, Martha and Lazarus were most generous in having him (and his disciples!) eat and stay with them. During his Galilean ministry Jesus stayed in a house in one of the seaside villages around the Sea of Galilee; this was place where he could meet with his disciples and teach them (Matthew 13: 1, 36). John's dear friend Gaius was commended for the hospitality he showed to other Christians, even though they were strangers to him (3 John 5ff). Our homes can be well used for a ministry of hospitality, an avenue of service that Esther Smith has developed in another article. Houses are homes to be lived in, not show homes to be admired nor idols to be worshipped. No matter where you live, the primary object is to serve God, and to use our houses as instruments to that end.

We also need to learn to be content with the home we have. There will always be someone with a bigger and better house. Recently we heard of a man who arrived home after a day of work and was happy to be home again in his familiar surroundings. He settled into his chair and began to read a magazine; as he read he became more and more discontented with his own home. His garden looked overgrown, the furniture shabby and the carpet worn. The magazine he was reading was *Better Homes and Gardens!* Magazines like these can give us good ideas for our own home, but they can also encourage jealousy and envy, sins we need to guard against. Remember the 10th commandment: You shall not covet your neighbour's *house!*

As I write this a new house is being built next door to us. At present they are laying the foundation. After this it will be framed up with timber, clad with bricks and roofed with colour steel. When it is completed the rooms will be filled with furniture and furnishings, pictures and paintings, ornaments and artifacts, things sentimental and historical, modern and traditional. The wise men of Israel drew a spiritual lesson from our physical homes. They wrote;

“By wisdom a house is built,
and through understanding it is established;
through knowledge its rooms are filled
with rare and beautiful treasures.” (Proverbs 24:3f)

A godly home is established on understanding – on a knowledge of God and his Word. It is built by wisdom, that is, the fear of the Lord, a love and reverence for God. It is furnished with a growing knowledge of the truth of God applied to every area of life in the home – to the love between a husband and wife, the relationship of parents and children, to the books we read, the DVDs we buy, the programme we watch, the games we play, the messages we post on Facebook, and the conversations we have with others. Our homes are to be filled with “rare and beautiful treasures” – with faith, hope and love, with righteousness and justice, kindness and mercy, compassion and sensitivity, honesty and truth, gentleness and grace.

My wife and I have lived in a variety of houses – old and new, renovated and rental. However, the houses we have lived in are secondary to *how* we have lived in them. Regardless of the house, we have sought to establish our home and family on the truth of God’s Word and consistent biblical values. Our houses change but God’s truth is unchanging. Psalm 127 warns us; “Unless the Lord builds the house, its builders labour in vain.” And Proverbs 24:3 says, “By wisdom a house is built, and through understanding it is established.” Is this true of your house and home?

J. A. Haverland – June 2012