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## **House Churches 1**

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-- *Commentaries from past newsletters* --

Some years ago I went to the Eastern Mennonite Seminary in Harrisonburg VA to a seminar on house churches. Since our previous group disbanded when several couples and their children moved away, I thought I could gain some new understandings that might help me to start another.

There were several excellent speakers on the program. Robert Banks gave his usual excellent presentation on the biblical basis for house churches. Lois Barrett also gave an inspirational and illuminating talk entitled "The House Church as a Witness to the Dominant Culture." The final plenary speaker was Dick Scoggins who spoke on the subject of "The Missiological Challenge Facing House Churches." All three were excellent and thought provoking presentations. The other two were less rewarding. Because of my past experiences and reading, I did not learn much that was new to me. Nevertheless, I learned long ago that you can always hear something that will be useful to you. What happened occurred as a result of my analyzing not what the people were saying, but why they were saying it. What I heard were the reasons why persons have organized house churches.

The main reason for organizing a house church was that the speakers and attendees were disenchanted with the institutional church. Almost all in attendance had been members of large denominations before they got into house churches. Many were bitter about the manipulations and the betrayal of Christian doctrine and moral principles by church hierarchies. They had, as a result, left the church to seek a better answer.

What they found as they studied early church history was that the large institutional church was a human fabrication. One workshop leader attributed its establishment to Imperial Rome's penchant for organization and bigness. He asserted that institutional organization really had its origin in Babylon, and was perpetuated by Assyria, Greece and Rome. The Roman Catholic church was a direct result of Constantine's actions. Because it was a model that the reformers were familiar with, it was passed on to protestantism. Interestingly, he intimated that there was something satanic in all this. Even so, the disenchanted learned that for the first three centuries almost all churches were house churches. For them, a return to the house church seemed the best way to gain what they had lost when they left the institutional church.

Over all, I was discouraged by what I heard at the seminar. I had hoped that I would find it more exciting and forward looking. Perhaps what it did, though, was to bring into focus my own disenchantment.

Certainly there is much to disenchant us. There is an absence of prayer. The scriptures no longer have authority. The Holy Spirit does not direct and energize the church. There are repeated efforts by liberal theologians in mainline denominations to make homosexuality an alternate lifestyle and establish it as normative. Radical feminism is embraced. Abortion is approved as a method of birth control. Mission agencies have been dismantled, and liberation theology accepted. Because the authority of the scriptures is rejected, morals are relativized. Apostasy abounds.

On the next Sunday after I was at the seminar, I attended a large mainline Pentecostal church in our area. The congregation was made up of persons in all age groups. They have an excellent orchestra, organist and choir. The congregation loves to sing. As I looked around I saw that more than 70% of the congregation was singing. There was abundant evidence they were moved by their participation. They sang hymns, praise and worship songs for 30 minutes to open the service. The pastor's sermon applied the scriptures to the needs of the people. After the service the people took time for fellowship even though the service was 1 1/2+ hours long.

The prayer ministry in this church is impressive. They spend one whole day in prayer each week. Different groups of people meet to pray throughout that day. They pray for the church, the church staff, the sick, those in mission, the rulers of their community and nation, and anything or anyone else that is brought to their attention. Since they are fully aware of the enemy's efforts, they are in active spiritual warfare.

There is serious Bible study.

More importantly, the congregation is expected to do more than congregate. They are expected to be actively involved in ministry. The church staff devotes considerable time to preparing the saints for the work of the kingdom. The list of ministries planned and conducted by the laity is impressive. I might add that all members of the church are expected to be ministers. There is no distinction between clergy and laity.

This church strongly supports missions. They have a massive annual mission budget (\$75,000). This is impressive to me since they only have 800 members. The church regularly sends out small short-term mission teams.

Like most churches they sometimes have trouble getting Sunday school teachers, but those they do have are well trained for their jobs. The staff takes the time to train them.

In this church they are doing the things the church was established to do. What they are doing is what a large church can and should do. House churches cannot do many of these things as effectively. They rarely are able to provide quality accompaniment for praise and worship music. They cannot solely support missions, nor can they mount the sustained prayer effort the larger body does. That is not to say they can never do these things, but larger gatherings are better able to provide the quantity and quality of praise, worship and prayer that is needed.

The third experience I had was at a large mainline church in Boston. During the Thanksgiving holiday, my wife and I met our three children who live in the Northeast in Boston. On Sunday we went to church. The building was exquisitely beautiful. The pews were comfortable. The organ was one of the best money can buy. The organist is a superb musician. He played his J. S. Bach selections with consummate skill. The choir was appropriately robed for the setting. The processional was very stately. The liturgy was conventional. The selection of hymns was appropriate to the subject of the sermon. The only defect was that the tunes for the first two hymns were 16th and 19th century. Their cadence was funereal and their melodies were sonorous. They, too, seemed remarkably appropriate to the setting.

As I looked around I noticed that only one in three persons in the congregation was singing. Those that were, seemed to be mouthing the words with little enthusiasm or ardor. Their facial expressions were stony.

The scriptures were read with excellent projection and diction. I saw no one in the congregation with a Bible so they could not read along with the lector. The sermon was evangelical and delivered with homiletical correctness. The closing hymn was duller than the two we sang in the earlier part of the service. The recessional was, like the processional, very proper.

As I perused the bulletin I observed that except for one Bible study, most of the weekly activities listed could be considered social. They would not be considered ministry.

On our way out my eldest son asked me what I thought about the service and the message of their new pastor. I told him I thought it was as proper a service as I had ever attended. There was, though, one thing missing. I did not discern that the Holy Spirit energized it. It was conducted in the flesh.

As I pondered these experiences I kept going back to my observations at the house church seminar. I could not help but ask myself the question, "Is disenchantment a good reason to abandon the modern day concept of the church?" I have wrestled with this conundrum ever since I went to the seminar. After much prayer and reflection I resolved the question in my mind. Here are some of the conclusions I reached.

First, I am convinced that God intended for us to have house churches. They are to be the primary means for spreading the gospel and the education of children. It is by such groups and variations on the house church theme (home and workplace Bible studies and small prayer and sharing groups) that evangelism can best be carried out. People will come to our homes when they will not come into a church. If they do not have to "dress up", they feel more comfortable as they listen. They will come to talk with us when they will not come to hear a talk by a religious professional. They know us, and believe we are motivated because we care for them. They are ready to bring their problems and share them with us. Therefore, evangelism is more effective.

Follow up can be more effective if they are disciplined in our homes.

It is the education of children that makes the house church so highly desirable. Sunday school (SS) simply does not cut it. There is no purpose in SS instruction. The whole purpose of Christian education should be to lead a child to a right relationship with the Lord, to disciple him and to help him continue in his walk. Most of the time SS is no more than social activity. Sometimes this social activity is fun. If a teacher is entertaining and does fun things, children like it. Most often it is not even fun. It is sad but true that many SS teachers are parents who have their job because no one else will do it. Many times they do not know how to do fun things or how to teach. Rarely are they given training for their jobs. For this reason it is almost impossible to get teachers in some churches, especially for younger children.

Sunday schools survive because we have forgotten that the Bible makes parents responsible for the spiritual education of their children. There are reasons for this. We, as a culture, have abrogated our responsibility for education to the public school system, so it is easy to think that we can do the same to the church. Fortunately, the home-schooling movement has demonstrated clearly that children can learn as much in two hours of instruction in the home as in six hours in school classrooms. Although it is not clear why they learn so much more efficiently at home, I am convinced that because the children respect and love their parents, they work harder to please them. It is also true that the teacher in the public school or SS class has only limited time for individual instruction. In contrast, parents can devote time to helping the child clearly understand the lesson.

After two years of watching my grandchildren and the children of others learn in a house church, I am impressed with their spiritual maturity. This has occurred because there is much testimony in house churches about a person's on-going relationship with God. As a result children are better able to understand salvation and how their faith affects every aspect of their living. I am convinced that this was God's intent. It is also true that children become more sensitive to living out faith. They hear and see their parents, other adults and older children verbalize it and do it in a house church. There they are able to see faith at work.

Second, I believe that there is a place for large gatherings of believers in buildings we call churches.

When my wife and I were in Czechoslovakia three years ago we had the privilege of attending the monthly gathering of a group of house churches. These house churches were scattered all over Prague. In their monthly meeting they were able to do all of the things that the larger church does. They had a three-hour meeting that night and it was stimulating. More than 800 out of 1500 people attended this service. But as I thought about it, it did not seem to me that once a month was enough. I was not privy to the quality of their worship in the house churches, or even if they did more than gather, but I suspect their worship was like it was in our house church. It lacked the impact of the larger body.

I have, therefore, come to the conclusion that we need both house churches and conventional churches to meet the needs of all persons and to achieve God's purposes. I am convinced that house churches should exist: (1) to educate children in the faith; (2) to provide a base for evangelism; (3) to provide new and old believers nurturance and opportunities for growth; (4) to provide a place where gifts, especially those of teaching and prophecy, can be exercised; (5) to provide basic Bible study; (6) to provide a place where intimate relationships can develop so that healing can take place in the wounded persons who come in to the kingdom; (7) to provide support and comfort for persons going through trials and hardship; (8) to provide a place where correction and reproof can take place.

The larger body is needed: (1) to provide quality praise and worship; (2) to provide in-depth Bible study; (3) to provide prayer power; (4) to prepare the saints for ministry; (5) to provide more diverse fellowship; (6) to be a more effective mission sending/support body (8) to be a resource for the house churches (small groups) in their ministry; (9) to oversee small group leadership and prevent the development of legalism, doctrinal deviation or experientialism.

The place of Sunday school in all of this is limited. It should exist but only to provide instruction for children who cannot get it in their own homes, or for people who do not have the time for home church groups. In this case it should provide all the benefits of the home group. The Sunday school class should in be a multi-age group experience. It should not conform to the modern Sunday school class stereotype.

To close, I would like to make a few points that I consider important. One is that house churches are not the only means by which we can relate to our God. There are a few ideal churches where the entire family can relate to and worship God. There is, then, a need for ideal larger churches. But where can we find an ideal church that does all the things I have listed above? I have to admit they are hard to find. Therefore, it behooves us to search diligently for an adequate church. In our search we have to forget traditional denominational ties. It is interesting that most younger people who have come to know the Lord in

parachurch groups do not have denominational loyalties. They go where their needs are met. So should those who are of older generations.