

What Does the Bible Teach About the House Church Movement?

(Compiled by Paul R. Blake)

Introduction:

- A. The House Church Movement is a theology that advocates that organized sound churches of Christ are not according to the New Testament pattern, and that Christians should meet in their homes informally for worship.
- B. House church is an informal term for a group of Christians gathering regularly or spontaneously in a home instead of a building dedicated to the purpose. Another term with the same meaning is “home church.”

I. RECENT ORIGINS OF THE HOUSE CHURCH MOVEMENT

- A. The roots of the current iteration of this movement can be traced back in the 1960s to Charles Holt, editor of Sentinel magazine and later the Examiner, and the advocate for “Individualism,” a doctrine that emphasizes the individual Christian over the collective congregation.
- B. His premise was built on four assumptions:
 - 1. “We should preach Christ and not the church,” in which he advocated that there is no such thing as the New Testament church.
 - 2. “The Brotherhood is in deep trouble,’ claiming that the organized local church is the source of this trouble.
 - 3. The “Unity in Diversity” movement created an over-reaction in many who, rather than opposing this doctrine because it is erring, opposed it because they were intolerant and stubborn. Such persons were drawn to a Holt’s teaching that the authority of elders in a local church is unscripturally restrictive with a high potential for error.
 - 4. “The individual must be exalted at the expense of the group,” was the dominant culture influence that guided Holt and his followers. Therefore, many persons already chafing under the leadership of elders and wanting to do things their own way without objection, left local churches to worship casually, spontaneously, without oversight or objections, drawing a few likeminded persons with them. (Jack Holt, Individualism, Truth Magazine)

C. F Lagard Smith, “Radical Restoration,” York College, October 13, 2000, York, Nebraska: “When I was sitting, where you are sitting, at a junior college in Florida (Florida College), I had some thoughts and some ideas, some concerns that I couldn't share with a lot of people, because they were pretty unorthodox...”

1. “As long as we get the function right, then the form isn't so important. Well, form may be important, of course, with baptism and with the Lord's Supper, but apart from that, I don't know what's important to him. Maybe instruments are up for grab, maybe gender roles can be changed... What I'm talking about here are small congregations that are like the “stealth bomber”. You can't see them! They're stealthy! No building! No sign! No yellow pages! They may not even know the other people in town in a large city. May not know where they meet. All you've got is something happening--a movement that's taking place!”

D. F. LaGard Smith on House Churches: "Maybe that's where it all went wrong in the first place. Maybe the church should never have left home" (143).

1. "There seems to be little question but that first-century Christians met together in small groups as house churches" (148).
2. "The house church... was also a natural setting for edification and exhortation" (150).
3. "Historically, of course, we know that it was not until the third century that Christians began to erect what we today would recognize as church buildings. Piecing together archeology and history, it appears the primitive church typically met in a room (sufficiently large enough for probably 40-50 people) in the house of a wealthy member" (148).
4. "In the house church, the role of official clergy virtually vanished in the midst of a simple fellowship meal. As did the structured ritual and liturgy. And sacrosanct tradition" (151).
5. "There is nothing to rule out the possibility that the role of elders in the early church might well have encompassed more than one level of involvement -- even simultaneously. Perhaps there were elders shepherding the disciples in each house, depending upon their size and make-up. And perhaps elder oversight may have been exercised throughout a group of house churches which collectively comprised a larger, recognizable 'congregation.' More thought-provoking for us, of course, is the third possibility -- that elders in individual house churches might also have come together as a group of city-wide elders to discuss matters of importance to the entire community of believers.... Nothing necessarily precludes 'Jerusalem's elders' from being gathered from among elders in a multiplicity of house churches" (178).

E. I find it tragically ironic that a man who was an advocate for conservatism and a man who was at the cutting edge of progressivism became the champions of the House Church Movement.

II. THE HOUSE CHURCH MOVEMENT IS DIFFERENT THAN THE NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH

A. Not talking about New Testament churches that were growing from a few meeting in homes, schools, or the synagogue out of necessity.

1. There were a number of Christians who hosted the local congregation in their homes
2. They were eventually were given abandoned pagan temples by Constantine and Theodosius.

B. Where did Christians meet in the first century?

1. In the temple - Acts 2:46
2. By a river side - Acts 16:13
3. School of Tyrannus - Acts 19:9
4. An upper room - Acts 20:8
5. Government housing - Acts 28:30-31
6. Synagogue - James 2:2
7. And yes, in the homes of Christians - Acts 5:42, 12:12, 20:20
 - a. 1Cor. 16:19; Rom. 16:3-5; Col. 4:15; Philemon 1-2

- C. The command to assemble implies a place of assembly; however, the place is not specified, but is an expedient.
 - 1. Expedient means whatever best facilitates the purpose of assembly and the needs of those who assemble.
 - 2. Whether it is a home, store front, school, rented office, barn, or church building is not specified.
 - 3. Since it is not specified, to object to the use of a church building mandates that the burden of proof falls to the one making the objection, and there exists no scriptural objection to the use of a meeting house for worship

III. HOUSE CHURCHES ARE VERY UNSTABLE

- A. Separated themselves from important, scriptural grounding mechanisms
 - 1. No Bible based oversight, no elders, usually one person leadership
 - 2. No consistent teaching and preaching, Bible study is spontaneous and random
 - 3. No broad base of Bible knowledge, very little opportunity for increased understanding
 - 4. Typically led by a single individual with few objecting to or able to oppose his errors or hobbies
 - 5. Highly casual approach to worship eventually leads to decline in Biblical pattern and purpose for worship
 - 6. Blurred lines between fellowship in worship and social interaction
- B. High potential to devolve into error, a mini-cult, or to cease to worship altogether.
 - 1. Efforts to admonish them are met with derision of contemporary New Testament churches and protests filled with the teenage myth ("It's not going to happen to us").

IV. IN CONTRAST, NEW TESTAMENT CHURCHES:

- A. Had preaching of the Gospel in assemblies - 2Cor. 1:19; Rom. 1:15; Col. 1:28
- B. Had structure of orderly worship - 1Cor. 14:1-40
- C. Had an authorized organization - Phil. 1:1
- D. Were identified with Christ - Rom. 16:16
- E. Had all members working together taking part - Rom. 12:4-6; Eph. 4:11-16

V. BIBLICAL CHRISTIANITY DEPENDS ON THE LOCAL CHURCH

- A. The church is an indispensable part of the New Testament
 - 1. Matt. 16:18-19; Acts 2:47
- B. Salvation is in the church
 - 1. Acts 5:14; 1Cor. 12:13; Gal. 3:26-27; 2Tim. 2:10
- C. Many commands given to the Christian depend on involvement in the local church for completion
 - 1. Acts 20:7; 1Cor. 16:1-2; Eph. 5:19; Heb. 10:24-25

VI. ANSWERING OBJECTIONS MADE BY THE HOUSE CHURCH MOVEMENT

A. "They told me what to believe!"

1. If the local church is faithfully teaching what is written in the word of God, then I need to believe it whether I like it or not
 - a. 2Cor. 5:20; Acts 20:27

B. "They told me I was sinning!"

1. Personally, I am grateful to the evangelist who told me I was sinning. God bless the man who had the courage to stand before me and, via truth and love, warn me of the danger ahead of me. He risked my prideful displeasure and disdain because he cared about my soul.
2. On the other hand, I have heard of men who verbally abuse people from the pulpit. If I put aside my pride, I can distinguish between the two, and love the first and pity the second.

C. "They didn't meet my needs!"

1. If the speaker means that the church is not helping him to find salvation and to maintain a godly life, then I agree... they certainly aren't meeting his needs.
2. On the other hand, if the speaker is looking for a spiritual equivalent of the Disney channel at church, he needs to re-examine his faith. Worship is not a spectator sport, nor is it to be viewed as cable TV (change the channel if bored with the program).
3. Christ came to serve, not to be waited on; and, His professed disciples must adopt the same spirit. Shame on me if my choice of churches is based, not on which one follows God's word and loves one another, but on which one is the most entertaining. I must learn that my "needs" are to be saved, to be guided throughout life by the will of God, and to be of service where I can.

D. "They're too stuffy!"

1. I have been in places where I felt like I should have apologized for coming. I look at this as a temporary problem, though. I don't read in the Bible about heaven being populated by the self-righteous, the arrogant rich, or the social elite. I reckon I can put up with it for my three score and ten.
2. At the same time, more often than not this statement is made by persons who have embraced the cultural fashion of casualness in all things. Perhaps this observation is made because the speaker does not fully understand reverence - Psalm 89:7

Conclusion:

A. The House Church Movement is yet another in a long line of dangerous over reactions to a few congregations who may have forgotten the Lord's will for the work, worship, and organization of the church. The answer to a local church that has drifted is not to generate another type of church with an even higher potential for error; but to help them to return to the Lord's way. This will require patience, prayer, and wisdom. Answering an erring spirit with a rebellious one will not work, nor will it ever be acceptable to the Lord.