

Where Should We Meet?

A Theological and Historical Response to the Contemporary Home Church Movement

Pastor Paul Barreca, August 13, 2010

A recent Associate Press article was carried in the *Vineland Daily Journal*. It highlighted a current trend among Christians to leave their churches and worship at home instead.¹ Sometimes called *Organic Church*, *Missional Church* or *House Church*, this movement appeals to many who have grown dissatisfied with the corporate and impersonal nature of many American churches. Propelled by books such as *Pagan Christianity* (Frank Viola and George Barna), *Life After Church* (Brian Sanders) and *They Like Jesus but Not the Church* (Dan Kimball), some Christians urge that the only legitimate form of worship is a small, non-institutional gathering. They claim to have re-discovered the true origins of Christian worship. On one extreme are the cultic teachings of Harold Camping, who advocates leaving the church because the church age has ended. More moderate examples include believers who have dropped out of their local church because of theological decay, an emphasis on methodology, and corrupt leadership. As we will discover, some illegitimately transfer these accusations to their church as they excuse themselves from its structure and accountability.

Some proponents of the house church idea foresee the demise of the church as we know it. “*Unless the church in North America makes big changes we are facing sure death*, (Reggie McNealy, Missional Church Network). “*American Christianity is dying. Our future is in serious jeopardy. We are deathly ill and don’t even know it*,” (Neil Cole, “Organic Church”). Noted church statistician **George Barna** wrote, “*If the local church is the hope of the world, then the world has no hope.*” “*Local churches have virtually no influence in our culture... The church appears among entities that have little or no influence on society.*”²

Because this trend emphasizes independence, it is difficult to estimate the number of American Christians that worship in this manner. A recent Barna study demonstrates a variety of responses. When Christians were asked whether they attended a religious service in the past month in a place other than a church, approximately 24% said “yes.” However, when asked if “you participate in such a group, sometimes known as a house church or simple church, that is not associated in any way with a local, congregational type of church?” the response dropped to somewhere between 3% - 6%.³ This statistic reveals that while gatherings such as home Bible

¹Linda Stewart Ball, “House Church - Skip the Sermon, Worship at Home.” The Associated Press, Wed Jul 21, 2010, accessed August 12, 2010 http://news.yahoo.com/s/ap/20100721/ap_on_re/us_rel_religion

²Quotations from Kevin DeYoung and Ted Kluck, *Why We Love the Church* (Chicago: Moody Press, 2009), 26-27.

³The Barna Group, “How Many People Really Attend a House Church?” <http://www.barna.org/organic-church-articles/291-how-many-people-really-attend-a-house-church>

studies are popular, the number of Christians who have left their local church is still fairly small. However, this movement is very attractive to Americans who have been raised on a strong diet of anti-institutional free thinking. Our cultural focus on independence and our resistance to authority may very well mean that the house church movement will grow in the days ahead.

Some of the criticisms that cause people to leave their church are valid. We are living in a time when many churches have neglected the gospel and turned their focus on numeric growth by becoming more culturally relevant. Churches have compromised the gospel with bad theology and scintillating antics meant to draw a crowd. Everything from crass talks on sex, to reviews of raunchy movies are common fare in many churches. The response from some believers is to abandon the church all together, but this is throwing the proverbial baby out with the bath water. While there are a growing number of churches that have abandoned the gospel, not all churches have followed the errors of our day.

When the Church Began

Buildings dedicated exclusively for Christian worship did not come along until Emperor Constantine proclaimed Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire in 325 AD. Before that, Christians worshiped in homes or public gathering places. This was not because worshiping in a home is a *better* way to worship. It was simply the *only* way to worship. During this period, Christians were persecuted by the Jews in their synagogues, and by the Romans through a series of local and empire-wide persecutions. Scripture gives us some indication regarding the places where believers met.

Homes. Aquila and Priscilla led a church gathering that met in their house (1 Corinthians 16:19; Romans 16:5). Colossians 4:15 also indicates a church meeting in a home. But we ought not assume that this was a gathering of only a few people. The most likely place for Christians to meet would have been in a large home, rooftop or courtyard. Some Mediterranean homes were large one-family dwellings up to four stories high.⁴ Architecture in this warm climate emphasized open air courtyards where large gatherings were held. Some homes could easily accommodate an assembly of up to 100 people, and it is possible that church meetings in such houses could have been at least that large.⁵ Their purpose for meeting in homes was not a statement against organization or buildings. Churches during this time were carefully structured and included discipline, elders, and mission endeavors. ***They were not the casual, free flowing meetings that are common in today's American version of the house church.*** Paul's missionary journeys were organized by the church in Antioch. Paul's greeting in Romans 16 includes a tally of 28 individuals with at least three entire households included in the Roman church. If these people met in a home it would have been a church of at least 50 people. They met in homes out of necessity. As Kevin DeYoung writes, "*They didn't meet in homes in an*

h-barna-study-finds-it-depends-on-the-definition accessed August 13, 2010

⁴Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 128.

⁵DeYoung, 120

effort to start the world's first nonreligious religion.”⁶

The New Testament contains examples of places other than homes where the believers met. This reinforces the idea that they met where it was most convenient and practical. Other New Testament meeting places include the following:

Solomon's colonnade. Acts 5:12⁷ *The apostles performed many miraculous signs and wonders among the people. And all the believers used to meet together in Solomon's Colonnade.*

The Hall of Tyrannus. Acts 19:9–10 *So Paul left them. He took the disciples with him and had discussions daily in the lecture hall of Tyrannus. This went on for **two years**, so that all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord.*

The Synagogue. James 2:2 *Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in shabby clothes also comes in. The word “meeting” is a translation of the Greek word for Synagogue. It is possible that the majority of Jews at this location, or at least the synagogue leaders trusted Christ and their synagogue continued to be their place of worship.*

The Beginning of Church Buildings

Church historian Everett Ferguson gives us insight concerning the move to public buildings. *“With the Constantinian peace, church buildings became public monuments, and the basilica type predominated. (This type of building) was widely used in Hellenistic and imperial times for both private and public purposes: as audience halls in homes of the wealthy and of the imperial officials, as law courts and exchange buildings on the forums, and as gathering places in the larger baths.”⁸* Once it became legal to meet publicly, churches quickly utilized commonly available spaces, allowing their outreach to expand and the church to grow. This practice has been widely followed in various cultures throughout church history.

Today there are many places in the world where Christians meet in homes because they are not permitted to meet publicly. Under these circumstances, there is no alternative other than a house church. Missionary Kevin King reaches many Chinese students through his ministry at Columbia University in New York City. Those who trust Christ are directed to a house church that Kevin leads. He does this because he wants to provide a reproducible form of church worship that they can carry with them when they return to China. Since independent churches in China are not permitted to hold public meetings, Kevin's example of a house church is the best way for them to learn how to lead a church in their native country.

⁶Ibid, 120.

⁷Scriptures taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. www.zondervan.com

⁸Fergusson, 129.

Churches that meet in homes are also an important part of inner city evangelism. Many new churches begin in a home. **But the fact that many churches meet in homes does not mean that every church must meet in a home.** This is reductionism. Those who advocate the house church as the only legitimate way seem to be suggesting that most congregations over the past 2,000 years have been worshiping the wrong way. Such a suggestion is very misguided. By their insistence on house churches *only*, they silently accuse millions of Christians around the world of worshiping in the wrong way. Thanks to their superior enlightenment, the rest of us can be freed from our ignorance if we see the light as they have.

New Testament principles for the local church do not focus on the form of worship, or the location of worship. These have varied from time to time and culture to culture. Rather than determining whether a group is a legitimate church by virtue of where they meet, we should examine the validity of a church according to whether it meets the requirements of the New Testament. It is by these standards that many groups meeting in homes today cannot accurately be described as fulfilling the criteria of a New Testament church.

The ESSENTIALS of the church

1. **The Preaching of the Gospel.** Galatians 1:9 *As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned!*
2. **Teaching that produces mature disciples.** Matthew 28:19–20 *Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”*
3. **Ministry through Spiritual Gifts.** The body of Christ is diverse. Each part needs the others. Rather than isolation, the body principle emphasizes cooperation and mutual edification, as we are instructed in Romans 12:5–6, *“so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. We have different gifts, according to the grace given us. If a man’s gift is prophesying, let him use it in proportion to his faith.”*
4. **Faithful administration of the ordinances.** The church is required to conduct the ordinances of Christian baptism and the Lord’s Supper.
5. **God centered worship.** The Lord calls us *“a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.”* Public worship is the delight and privilege of God’s people.
6. **Willing Followers.** A church must have followers who submit to spiritual leadership of its elders (pastors). Hebrews 13:17 *Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you.*

7. **Godly Elders properly appointed.** Nowhere in Scripture do we find self-appointed elders. Leadership must be approved by existing leadership. Every New Testament Church was led by Elders, and we must insist that our churches today follow the same guidelines. Churches must be led by men whose calling has been verified by other Elders. Mission and church planting endeavors must have the support and backing of a church where biblical eldership is present. This continuity of leadership is essential to maintain the “*faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints*” (Jude 3).
 - a. Titus 1:5 *The reason I left you in Crete was that you might straighten out what was left unfinished and appoint elders in every town, as I directed you.*
 - b. 1 Peter 5:2–3 *Be shepherds of God’s flock that is under your care, serving as overseers—not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve; 3 not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock.*

Conclusion

The location where a church meets does not determine whether or not it is a legitimate church, or whether or not it is worshiping properly. There are Christian gatherings that meet in homes on Sunday which are not a legitimate churches. And there are groups that meet in ornate buildings with a cross and a steeple who are devoid of spiritual life and do not proclaim the Truth of the gospel.

Some who advocate the house church concept have a misunderstanding of the New Testament examples of house churches. They also oversimplify the problems in the church today and transfer the guilt of some churches which meet in buildings onto all churches which meet in buildings. Pastor Kevin DeYoung responds to the criticism of what house church advocate Frank Viola calls the organized church by writing, “*the church is always deserving of some critique, or even a lot of critique at times, but isn’t it a bit sweeping to declare that “everything that is done in our contemporary churches has no basis in the Bible?”*”⁹ We should not disqualify all churches because of the gross failures of some.

For some believers around the world, the house church is the best, and often the only way to conduct corporate worship, teaching and the administration of the Christian ordinances. This will most likely continue until the Lord returns. There may even come a time in what was once “Christian America” where full-fledged persecution may force the closure of public church gatherings. That day has not yet come, but if it does, God’s people will continue to worship in whatever location the Lord provides.

We live in a culture that emphasizes isolation and independence. Many people seldom come out of their homes. Public interaction is avoided by many people who plug in their ear buds, roll up their windows, close their doors, shop online and remain in the comfort of their modern American homes. More and more, we are being drawn into our own exclusive bubble of isolation. We need one another, in spite of our weaknesses, peculiarities, and failures. When there are disagreements, the Lord gives us Scriptural guidelines to resolve them. Unless your

⁹DeYoung, 117.

local church is teaching false doctrine or embracing sin, leaving it is not the best way to honor the Lord and encourage the body. The Lord Jesus died for the church and will return to bring her to glory. Until then, we should honor His body, the church, and embrace every opportunity to promote it's growth.