
"House Church and Mission" by Gehring

Contributed by John White
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Let me see if I can put this in context. Through the Reformation in the 16th Century, God began to restore some basic doctrines from the 1st Century. Often they are summarized by three Latin phrases: sola Scriptura (Scripture alone is our authority), sola gratia (we are saved only by God's grace), sola fide (our only contribution to salvation is faith that responds to God's grace).

We look at these basic teachings now and say, "Well, of course!" It's hard for us to imagine that for well over a thousand years these obvious Biblical principles had largely been lost. What was clear in the 1st Century had been generally forgotten by the 16th Century. Church leaders, who in many cases were intelligent and godly people, had simply lost touch with some of the foundational principles of the faith. (Spiritual warfare comes to mind here.)

The Reformers understood that they were not inventing something new. Rather, they were rediscovering the original teachings of the New Testament. Martin Luther said it this way, "Only primitive Christianity is the true Church". However, as important as the Reformation was in restoring some 1st Century doctrines, it was largely ineffective at restoring 1st

Century structures and practices.

Perhaps 1950 will be seen as the time when God began to complete the restoration of the early church. As Communism took over China, all of the traditional missionaries were thrown out of the country, the traditional churches were closed down and their pastors put in jail or killed. From this horrific period emerged the greatest growth of the church in history. And, most of it occurred in the context of a 1st Century structure called a "house church". In the years that followed, the restoration continued to bubble up in many different ways and places.

Roger Gehring has helped us see that 1980 was a key date for the academic part of this restoration. "The year 1980 represents a watershed for the publication of literature on the topic of the house church. In *Social Aspects of Early Christianity* (1977), A. J. Malherbe observed that up until that time "no major work has been devoted to the New Testament house church".

JW - Linger on that last statement for a minute. For over 1700 years, no major Christian leader had written on (or apparently, thought deeply about) the context and physical structure of church in the 1st Century. Church leaders, who in many cases were intelligent and godly people, had once again lost touch with the origins of the church. (Spiritual warfare?)

Some of those leaders saw glimpses of this but none of them were able to implement what they saw. Not Luther. Or Calvin. Wesley made some attempts but fell far short. Spurgeon...Moody...Billy Graham...we could add lots of other names here.) "Then suddenly at the beginning of the 1980s, five exegetical sociohistorical studies on the topics "family", "house", and "house church" in early Christianity appeared independently of one another. (JW: Hmmm.)

And by the time Malherbe's book was reprinted in 1983, one of the most substantial and significant works in the Anglo-Saxon world on the subject of the house church had been completed by his pupil L. M. White. It would appear that, beginning in 1980, the time had fully come for scholars to tackle the issues relating to the house church. Since then a relatively large number of books and articles have been published on the subject." Gehring, p. 5.

However, although New Testament scholarship has begun to rediscover the critical importance of household (oikos) in understanding the nature of church, these truths have, for the most part, not yet filtered down to mainstream evangelical leaders. Church leaders are generally unaware of the rediscovery of these vital insights. This would include denominational leaders, seminary professors, parachurch leaders, megachurch pastors as well as the pastors of the thousands of ordinary traditional churches.

Gehring's book is important because he shows that the house church concept ("church as household") is supported by the best in New Testament scholarship. The implication is that the model that most of us have grown up with ("church as organization") and which we assumed was normal is, in fact, a significant departure from the New Testament model.

To quote Luther again, "Only primitive Christianity is the true church".

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