

## **What Killed the House Church Movement?**

By Gene Edwards

By the year 2000 there was a national ground swell in America toward something that came to be known being called a “home church movement”.

Just previous to that I was invited to come to the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board to speak to the board of directors there about home churches. Also while on a visit to Southwestern Seminary I found that the majority of the young preachers or ministers there in school were, themselves very interested in training up churches which met in homes. There were also conferences being held all over America which also carried the label, the” house church movement.”

These conferences reached all the way from Massachusetts to Florida. A dozen or more books were appearing on the subject. Fuller Seminary put its considerable prestige behind the house church movement and sponsored what was probably the largest conference held on house churches with leaders spanning the spectrum of speakers.

I had authored a number of books on organic church life (something markedly different than this house church movement), previous to this phenomenon. I would say by the year 1995 I was receiving at least one phone invitation a week, to help someone to start a church that met in homes. There was also a national magazine that appeared at this time on the topic. Everything looked like, and everything pointed in the direction of a very prevailing movement that could very well sweep America.

Today I receive no such phone calls. The telephone rarely rings that has anything to do with the so called the house church movement. The magazine no longer exists, and the annual conferences are no longer being held. By the year 2010, the enthusiasm had disappeared.

There were a number of reasons for it. Perhaps the most basic was that so many of the speakers in the conferences made as their major points, ideas like, telling women they could not speak in meetings. When a movement has that as one of its major thrusts, then we can be sure the movement had only a short time left to live.

It was about the year 1998 that I wrote a booklet entitled, “An Open Letter to House Church Movements”. It was a call to add to that movement things which were being *sorely* neglected, there were five critical points this booklet made.

1. There was almost no interest nor emphasizes shown to pursue with a deeper walk with Christ
2. I saw no interest in returning to the first century modeled itinerate church planter, as personified in the life of Paul.
3. There was no revelation of the organic nature of the church, which is not an organization. She has, and always will be is a living organism.
4. There seems to be no interest experiencing church life *before* they become house church planters.
5. We have no idea of how to minister Jesus Christ to God's people. As such, I've observed that we've been very Bible centered but in no way Christ centered.

Those neglected ingredients foretold the future collapse of the "home church movement."

Previously to the spiked interest in the house church movement, I had written several books and booklets. Some have been and were published. Some are still in manuscript form. They were developed by discovering what happened in century one, and this by studying the New Testament chronologically:

"The First Century Diaries", "How Paul Trained Men", "The Organic Church", "Pagan Christianity"(originally titled, "Beyond Radical" and "When the Church was Led only by Laymen."

I later wrote, "The Christian Women Set Free"(which deals with the matter of women speaking in the church), and "Unleashing the Word of God."

As the years unfolded, the movement gradually died. What is left over today is mostly a few groups that meet in homes, almost invariably led by one man (with elders) who teach the Bible. They have no sister churches. They have no world-view. They are not pouring their lives out for a world-wide home church movement.

What caused the death of the house church movement? This may, or may not come as a surprise. The very same things which were lacking in the house church movement, are in fact the same lackings which we find throughout all evangelical Christianity. The major points of thrust are as follows:

1. An utter lack of any understanding for the spiritual nature of the church, nor any divine revelation of who She is.
2. A segmented body of a vision of the church.
3. A lack of men so utterly committed to the ecclesia. Commitment to the leadership centrality of Christ, to the bride of Christ, the body of Christ. Presently no men who are willing to give their lives to the last breath they take for the restoration of the church; whether they succeed or fail is irrelevant. Their sole obsession is Christ and the church. Most of the men who were leaders in the house church movement and have moved on and are serving the Lord in other ways and other places, they simply left one thing and moved to another,
4. A lack of any spiritual depth. This not present in the life in those who would bear to leave, and therefore no spiritual depth in the church, and therefore leaving a church without Her rightful source of life, which is the lord Jesus Christ.
5. Along with that lack of spiritual reality was and is the greatest fall of all: The belief that when we find what the Bible says, we can state what it is we are supposed to do, then we Christians can do it. The Lord Jesus Christ said “without the Father I can do nothing,” He did not say without the Bible you can do nothing. What He said was, “without Me – Christ – you can do *nothing*.”

We cannot successfully live the Christian life, just because we found in Scripture what we are supposed to do. This is an all pervading mistake that we live with just about every day of our lives. This leaves the Christian not only a failure but ridden with guilt because the Bible has told him something he cannot live up to.

6. The house church movement was Bible centered, but not at all Christ centered. This thought again pervades the entire evangelical landscape.

If that statement sounds odd, then let me then make it personal for you.

I’m not Bible centered, I never have been, and God have mercy I never will be. I’m Christ centered. In fact my centrality is exactly the same as the Bible’s centrality. The Bible does not center on the Bible, but on the Lord Jesus Christ. I am standing with the Bible, I am standing with the Word of God, Jesus Christ is the center.

Unfortunately, because of the present evangelical mindset, which all of us got into soon after we were converted, the distinction between being Bible centered and Christ centered is not usually, the same.

Just for the record, a short time I sat on the board of translators for the New American Bible Society many years ago, as a young, California. I sat next to Dr. Kenneth Wreaths, one of the greatest Bible scholars that has ever lived. I began reading Latin at age 16, Greek at age 20, and Hebrew at age 21. I have room set aside as a scriptorium, which means I have a room set aside only for translating the Scripture out of its original languages. I have been immersed in the Bible for 55 years. I yield to no man, in the understanding of the New Testament, yet I am not centered on the Bible, I am centered on Christ. All my ministry is centered on the Lord Jesus Christ

The house church movement was unfortunately centered on the Bible. Those in leadership would point to things in the Bible that we should do. This then without short pointing us to the spiritual source for which we must all draw, that is Christ, leaves Christians left to obey whatever he was told.

There was no “without Christ you can do nothing”. The house church movement was virtually void of a spiritual source. The house church movement did not give Christ’s people Christ, they gave us the Bible without a source for obeying, it a divine source for obeying it. Spiritual nourishment was not presented, other than “obey the Bible”. There were virtually no practical handles to “the how” in encountering Christ. The implication was that whatever the Bible says to do, you do at that moment, simply because you were born again and were capable of carrying out what the Bible said, not only then, but for the rest of your life without any failure.

That is an exasperating way for Christians to live. The source for the living of the Christian life is, and always has been and always will, be the lord Jesus Christ. Without knowing that, and without that being the point of our lives, there is very little we will be able to do that will last. The church is a spiritual entity, and must live on the one thing which nourishes, the Spirit. There is only one food for the inner man, and that is Christ. This is the primary reason for the failure of house church movement, and also the primary reason why evangelical Christianity doesn’t work very well.

7. Many of the men who joined the then house church movement, were ambitious un-broken men, who are seeing the house church movement as a means to success.

Unfortunately the very nature of the church in the home, does not lend itself to success without receiving a great deal help, which is unknown to most of our experience.

8. Many men studied house churches, whom have absolutely no previous experience in the church as, you, in the uniqueness of a church that meet in the informality of a living rooms.

This is the mentality of most of the men whom serve the Lord: It goes something like this,

The house church... ..that sounds like a great idea let's do it! In fact, it looks easier than having a regular traditional Sunday church, and look, the overhead would be minimal.

You never raise up a church that way. Informality is the greatest enemy of the inexperienced. It's a whole new world that no one who is a complete novice is prepared to deal with.

I was 7 years in church life before I ever dared raise up a church, even that I would call "the minimum experience". Becoming *involved* take at least that much of a background. I am now writing this to you at the end of 60 years in ministry. I have yet met a young minister who was willing to experience church life before trying to start an organic church.

In a word, men with the present-day evangelical mindset, are not ready to lay aside a good portion of their life simply in order to truly experience the life of the church.

9. A true house church will present you with problems, you've never known nor heard of. There's a world even an entire realm awaiting for those who truly discover the revelation of the church, Her purpose, and Her practices.

But this I would share with you, put christian in an informal setting and they will criticize, relentlessly. This unavoidably happens with informality, you can't prevent it. This is not a situation we're familiar with. Our Christians go on church

Sunday morning, spend an hour in a pew and go home. There are no opinions there, no fellowship, no sharing. There's no desire to take over or criticize. In fact there is very little worth criticizing.

Put Christian's in the living room and you have one of those first unexpected problems. You are not only unprepared for it, but knowing neither the cause nor the solution. For the man who wants an easy life in the ministry: the living room is your greatest enemy. Then add to that the only diet that is being received is Scripture delivered in death, singing is atrocious, worship is non-existent, a church without a world view, nor local missions. Why do we not wonder why the house church movement died?

Tragically when a house church does die, it usually dies of a "conflict-gation" that destroys the spiritual life, the life of Christians for all the remainder of time on this earth.

10. You did not ask for help from radicals.

One of the reasons the house church movement was so unprepared, is because it would not touch the radicals whom know what they are doing. Radical Christians must be something which Christians fear, I'm not sure why that's true. We do not bite. Historically the institutional church is very much so against radicals, but you will find little evidence of radicals being a danger to the institutional church. Why are you so afraid of us?

You might discover that we're perfectly happy to help you, to answer your questions, or even and to share with you our experiences. You may even decide that you like us. We are not a threat to you, we're the ant, not the elephant. There are probably no more than a half dozen men in the western world, who you could have turned to for help. But I know not one of these men who has ever asked, who's experienced was drawn upon. There is nothing wrong with their doctrine. At most, maybe we are intimidating to you on the areas of practices, but that is all.

Why did not you turn to the radicals for guidance? We're not theorist, we're pragmatists. No we will not join you, neither will we hurt you, neither will we be a threat. You might find out we're even eager to share with you a totally different mindset than the one that you presently have. I would like to believe that that mindset is a mind set on Christ, a mindset that is focused wholly on the church of the Lord Jesus Christ. At the very least, we will at least prove to be interesting.

The evangelical church is centered on methods. “How do you do that?” There is something deeper than method: that is living experience. There is something other than “the how”, there is also “the Who”.

I’m not speaking of a cursive phone call with a question, but men who would sit down for a week, and let us share with you that which we know.

From Albania, to New Zealand, I have seen churches raised up with a minimum of help, and minimum of future help, but yet God’s people are there. They have their churches and do not die. The involvement of the church planter is less than minimal.

Should that not make men curious the least bit curious?

One exception I know of, to all of this, is when the director of the head of the foreign missions board, of the Southern Baptist Convention invited me to come to Atlanta, and spend the day with the mission board leaders. They plied me with questions. They had started a serious effort to raise up house churches. One reason of many is the growing and prohibiting cost of church property. They even sent out several men to raise up house churches. Toward the end of the day, their main reason for inviting me there finally surfaced.

They asked me if I would consider training a group of men to plant churches.

Then, they presented their problem:

Several young men they sent out under the board had started house churches, but they had problems. They were not able to control these church planters, and consequently, they were not able to control the churches raised up.

Their invitation was conditional.

Was I willing to raise up a group of church planters for the Southern Baptists, but would I also show them, or cause them to be willing to be controlled by the home mission board?

I responded by giving them, and both of us an opportunity, a gracious way to bow out of this invitation.

I requested that before any consideration be done to this question, that everyone on the board of directors would read the books I've written on the subject.

We had a warm, goodbye, as well as an agreement.

I never heard from them again.

For seven years, I traveled a good part of this planet, sitting at the feet of great men and women, learning all I could from them about church life, and any and everything else I could learn from them.

And there are perhaps a half dozen men, still living today – I have no relationship with – who know so much more than the institutional church knows about the church.

Everyone one of them is old, and will soon be dead.

Let me put this in one sentence: Until you sit at the feet of radicals, you will not understand the centrality of Christ, nor the nature and function of the church as it is reflected in century one.

The house church movement had one or two major central points . One was to be centered on the Bible, teach the Bible, learn the Bible, obey the Bible. The second one was that women should not speak in the meetings.

No wonder the house church movement died.

My reaction to both those two points:

It is unlikely the Bible was being taught. It was *verses* being taught. There were verses being woven together to make points, but it was not a broad sweep of what the New Testament tells us, the story formed that begins at Pentecost and ends about 100 AD.

As to women not being able to speak in church, I would point you to a book entitled "The Christian Woman Set Free". And I suggest that you be prepared to discover women can function in meetings and do just about everything else there is as a christian that men do. The book has been written chronologically, not by sewing verses together.

We were raising up churches before the house church movement started. It has been said that I am the “father of the house church movement”. *Please* do not hang such a title around my neck. We were raising up informal churches, and leaving those churches alone, in the great tradition of all of all the itinerate workers before me. In the great tradition of the churches in the first century.

Some of these churches are even now about 40 years old. Some of these churches I have not visited in over a generation, yet they are strong and they are large. The largest one, is approximately, 250 adults, and yes they meet in a home. None the less, our purpose was never to start house churches but rather to regain church life. The house church movement is dead, with only a few of its flickering embers left. We’re still planting churches, our business is the same business that we have had from the beginning. And in fact, as the dissenters and non-conformists, we have the same business of Christians who are outside of the institutional church for the last 1700 years. And what was that business? Whether it was a thousand years ago. Or those we’ve never heard of, those being among the great witnesses to the Christian faith, their business has always been Christ. The vision has always been the same, and it is the church.

And like-wise, our goal: to restore the church and restore the centrality of Christ, and in the process to change the course of church history.

You are welcome to hear what we have to say and see what it is we do. God’s people are more than willing to tell you what they have learned and seen, what they know. Be forewarned, they are very free people. They will shock you with their freedom, they will also delight you with their love for Christ our Lord.

In the mean time, we will be exactly where we have been when we first started out. We’ve taken a torch, a legacy of Christians outside the institutional church. Many are people we have just read about, we virtually know nothing of their teachings, nor their practices. We will also pass off from this stage. As long as the Holy Spirit is active in the universe, there will be Christians who leave the institutional church. We will learn from those who came before them, and move forward to rediscovering of the riches of Christ, the glory of the church, and God’s eternal purpose.

Books:

Studying the New Testament

The Organic Church

How to Meet in Homes

Pagan Christianity (originally entitled Beyond Radical)

How Paul Trained Men.

When the Church was Led Only by Laymen: Problems and Solutions

Why so Many House Churches Fail and What to do About it.

The Christian Women Set Free ( a chronological study through the new testament of which does not concentrate on verses but rather the first century story, giving us a three-dimensional look of the role of women in the church.)

The First Century Diaries (these 5 books give you a real look at what, and the way century one was really like.)

Unleashing the Word of God.

Except for the last 2 books listed, all the other books in this were penned before the house church movement began. And finally, please call us or contact by way of the following: \_\_\_\_\_

.Should you request any two of the following books, then you may ask to have these following booklets sent to you free of charge:

1. First century diaries (choose any of the two, this is a set of 5 books, but treated as one)
2. How to Meet in Homes.
3. Unleashing the Word of God: Studying the New Testament Chronologically

Order any two of the above books and the following booklets will be sent to you free:

How Paul Trained Men.

Back When the Church was only Led by Laymen: Problems and Solutions.

Why so Many House Churches Fail, and What Do About it.

The Organic Church

Pagan Christianity, (previously, Beyond Radical \$4.95)

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