

The Once and Future Church – Home Fellowships

Article by Chuck Missler, produced by Koinonia House

The historical church - what it really was

The future church – what is it gravitating to become

Dark days are coming and there is an interesting groundswell in a ‘new’ type of church body (home fellowships)

Questions and Observations

- Why is the divorce rate amongst Christians no better than among unbelievers?
- What is really meant by “Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain”?
- There is a ‘Regeneration Gap’ in the church:
 - Over 2000 churches planted per week
 - 150 million (1974) to 650 million (1998)...???
 - Silent exodus of people slipping out the back doors, almost unnoticed:
 - Attracted but not contained
 - Interested but not inserted into fellowship
 - Harvested but not gathered
 - Touched but not transformed
 - Looked in briefly but were disappointed in what they saw
- Exits: 52,000 each week from churchdom – an astounding 94% are leaders
Charles Crismier: Out of Egypt
- Yet, in the USA, 63% believe the Bible – at a time when the public display and discourse about matters of faith have been under attack – a new poll indicates that most believe the Bible is literally true and is the Word of God. *WorldNetDaily 26/04/05*

The Way It All Started

- A group of 12 alongside a seashore
- The birth of the church at Pentecost was in a house (Acts 2: 2)
- The early church met in houses (homes):
Acts 2: 46; 5: 42; 8: 3; 9: 11; 12: 12; 16: 40; 18: 7; 20: 20; 21: 8;
Rom. 16: 5; 1 Cor. 16: 19; Col. 4: 15; 1 Tim. 5: 13-14; Philemon 1: 2
- As a persecuted church, it was the only safe way to meet. The primary persecution in the early days came from Jews and later from Roman authorities...later still it was the ‘established’ church which persecuted believers. The 20th century has seen more Christians murdered than all the other previous centuries together.
- The early church was in houses until the 3rd century

Back To Basics

- The Church is (supposed to be) the secret and powerful Society of the Redeemed
 - A place where people can literally see the Body of Christ
 - Not people simply touched by an abbreviated gospel of an evangelistic blitzkrieg of short duration
 - We need a return to New Testament simplicity and authenticity – it is because of the lack of these that people, especially the young, are leaving
 - No ‘models’ – let the Spirit lead as He wills

Eroding Foundations

- Biblical Illiteracy Extant:
 - Allegorical myths – abounding in the church
 - Centrepiece of Israel and her destiny – no awareness in the church

- Imminent Return of Christ – no focus in the church
- Pagan Fallacies
 - Evolutionary myths – not just in school’s teaching, but in the culture...our psychology, our law, our media
 - Denial of Absolutes – Relativism...the curse of our society today with no moral absolutes
- All these have been empowered (enabled) by the state churches

State Churches

- 220: Origen introduces infant baptism
- 312: Constantine ‘adopts’ Christianity
- 325: Edict of Toleration – state endorsed religion
- 380: House churches outlawed – continued to be the pattern even in the Protestant reformation
- 431: Council of Ephesus – Mary worship as the ‘Mother of God’
- 440: Leo the Great – ‘Bishop of Rome’
- 445: Valentinian confirmed as ‘Spiritual leader of Western Europe’
- 500: Common priestly dress code
- 565: Justinian – state-ordained church
- 607: Boniface III – first ‘Pope’ of the Catholic Church
- 709: Kissing Pope’s foot begins
- 786: Worship of images and relics begins
- 850: Use of holy water begins
- 995: Canonisation of dead saints
- 998: Fasting on Fridays and before Lent
- 1070: Celibacy of the priesthood instituted
- 1090: Prayer beads adopted from paganism
- 1184: Inquisition begins – Jews, Heretics, Witches, etc
- 1215: Transubstantiation of water and wine
- 1229: Reading the Bible forbidden to laymen
- 1254: Pope Innocence IV officially establishes the sale of indulgences
- 1414: Communion cup forbidden to lay people
- 1439: Doctrine of purgatory decreed
- 1492: Jews outlawed in Spain (Columbus sails)
- 1545 Tradition granted equal authority with the Bible
- 16th century: The Reformation crystallises
- 1517: Luther’s 95 Theses, followed by others...Zwingli, Melanchton, Calvin, Knox, etc
- 1526: Reversions to traditional forms of services (vs. Anabaptists etc, who are persecuted for their opposition)
- 1530: ‘All lay pastors teaching publicly are to be killed’ – proclamation by Luther, similar pronouncements from Calvin and others
- 1600: By now 40 translations from the Latin Bible – putting the Bible into peoples hands
- 1700: Huguenots – Charles Brousson publicly executed before 10,000

Persecutions Continue Through the Centuries

- 4th century: The Church canonised by the state
- Independent fellowships outlawed and persecuted
- In Reformation:
 - Soteriology (Salvation) reformed

- Other erroneous traditions retained
- Protestant leadership continues to persecute 'deviant' groups adhering to Biblical doctrines
- Protestant Reactions:
 - Anabaptists: 1535-1546 30,000 killed
 - Labadie's Converticle Brotherhoods
 - The Priscillians
 - The Bogomilians
 - The Petrobusians
 - The Patarenians
 - The Waldensians
 - The Lollards

The Wesley Revival

- Directed growth and discipleship
 - Trial Band - emphasised Preventive Grace
 - For provisional seekers
 - 4-6 people, meeting weekly with a leader
 - Met for 2-3 months
 - Class Meeting - emphasised Convincing Grace (mind)
 - Member of the United Society
 - 12-36 people
 - Met for 2 years
 - Band Meeting - emphasised Converting Grace (heart)
 - 4-8 people, separated, all born-again
 - Select Band - emphasised Holiness & Maturity (will)
 - Spirit filled (Rom. 5: 5; Gal. 3: 28)
- In 1768, after 30 years, there were 40 circuits with 27,341 members...and by 1800 1 in 30 Englishmen were members (Methodists)
 - This underlines the dynamic of small groups

Alternatives Today

Various types of church body exist today

- The Mega-Church
- The Local Congregation – often part of a Denomination or Association
- The Small Study Group
 - 'Cells' sponsored by the local church
 - Home Fellowships – independent, sometimes affiliated
 - Home Churches – also independent, sometimes affiliated

The Congregational Church

- A Building – 'cathedral' or 'church'
- A Special Day – usually Sunday
- A Professional Leadership – paid priest, clergyman or pastor; sometimes with other paid assistant leadership/staff
- A Special Service – performed for the people
 - Ceremonies
 - Interpretations
 - Motivation
- A Way of Maintenance – usually tithes and offerings

Bill Beckham: The Second Reformation

Life Cycle of the Congregational Church

- People-oriented Pastor
- Pulpit-oriented Pastor
- Property-oriented Pastorate
 - Gideon – the danger of too many assets
- Power-oriented Pastorate
 - Return of the Nicolaitans
- Politically-driven decay
 - Accountability issues, management by hearsay
 - Lack of an ‘Objective Function’

A Modern Example – The Rock Church, San Diego *

- Everyone in ‘Sunday Church’ is in a small Group (6-12 people)
- Small Groups meet weekly with their ‘Facilitator’
 - Pray, hold themselves accountable, discuss sermon notes
 - When a Small Group grows beyond 12 it is forced to split into two – cells dividing and multiplying
- In the first two years, the Rock Church has grown to over 4,000
 - Average age is under 25
 - Late for meetings...not tolerated

** The Rock Church is a non-denominational, evangelical Christian mega-church located in San Diego, California. Miles McPherson, a former NFL player, has served as senior pastor since he founded the church in 2000. With an average weekly attendance of nearly 12,000, the Rock is currently the 19th largest and the 36th fastest growing church in the United States. Wikipedia Feb 2010*

Advantages of Small Groups

Small groups have some advantages that the structural denominational church doesn't

- Disciplined multiplication (mitosis – cells divide)
- Free of growth barriers – no leadership barrier
- More are ‘involved’ participants – the job of the facilitator is to encourage involvement; in discussion; in church life; in discipleship...
- Focus on personal transformation and accountability - evident
- More effective for new Christians – right environment for growth
- Solves the leadership crisis
- A more biblical model
- Persecution-proof structure
- More efficient – lower cost

The True Church

- A supernatural invention
- Endowed with immortality
- The means to disciple each other (Matt. 28: 19-20)
- Transfer of Jesus’ life to another (Evangelism)
 - It turns Atheists to Apostles, Terrorists into Teachers, Plumbers into Pastors, and Elders into Evangelists

Theses (re the Church and Discipleship)

- A way of life, not a series of meetings – The Way (Acts 18: 26)
- No such thing as ‘a house of God’ – God does not live in temples made with human hands (1 Cor. 3: 16; 6: 19-20)

- No bureaucratic clergy in the New Testament
 - There are no clerical mediators (1 Tim. 2: 5)
 - The Nicolaitans are adoptions from pagan religions
- Organisationally: Line (productive) vs. Staff (unproductive/bureaucratic)

Issues re Home Fellowships

- Mission alternatives
 - Evangelism – not necessarily the prime function
 - Discipleship & Edification – also worthy goal...small groups are the best places for spiritual growth and discipleship
- Leadership alternatives
 - Prepared Teachers – can have these, but not necessary (there is much good teaching material readily available today)
 - Discussion Facilitators – only requires the ability to facilitate discussion and encourage participation
- Korean Fellowships (one way of doing small groups)
 - Organised by profession
 - Special invitation only
- Characteristics of Small Groups
 - Organic not organised...relational not formal
 - Persecution-proof structure:
 - Matures under tears
 - Multiplies under pressure
 - Flourishes in the desert
 - Sees in the dark
 - Thrives on chaos
 - Their only boast is The Lamb, whom they worship
 - Koinonia:
 - Fellowship, communication, communion, sharing and participating with someone/others
 - It cannot be 'organised', it must be led by the Spirit to bear meaningful fruit
 - We can revisit the open organic styles of the New Testament instead of being limited to the structured approach canonised by the state in the 4th century

Finding the Right One (Small Group)

- Neighbourhood groups
- Professional groups
- Start your own!
 - Its easy
 - God will surprise you
 - He always rewards the diligent
 - 'Staying ahead' a week at a time isn't hard
 - Koinonia House (CM) will help – briefing package 'the Once and Future Church'
 - Two problems with home fellowships:
 - Raising up new leadership
 - Staying networked, not becoming insular
 ...these can be overcome

Storm Clouds on the Horizon

- The Biblical Christian is becoming increasingly 'politically incorrect'

- The true church(es) will eventually be forced underground
 - “The attack against them will be led by the ‘liberal’ denominational churches”
J. Vernon McGee

An Explosion Toward the Past (‘Back to the Future’)

In the growth of home fellowships there is rediscovery of the New Testament church dynamic which is encouraging:

- A personal discovery (for Chuck Missler) – personal growth always taking place in the homes
- A modern trend of hope...is the growth of home fellowships (hope for true biblical discipleship in the Body of Christ)
- The persecuted church – Then...and Now – the church always prospers under persecution
- It has an impact for You!

See also: DVD ‘The Church in the End Times’ – by Chuck Missler, available from Koinonia House