

## Chapter 1

# Good Theology Provokes Authentic Renewal

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### **A personal discovery**

It still amazes me years after a four-year Bible College stint and an M. Div. degree in a leading evangelical seminary that I never heard a professor talk or teach about the house churches of the New Testament!

After more personal study and research while ministering as a teaching-pastor and evangelist, I went on to receive the D. Min degree in an Anabaptist institution. That experience reaffirmed my ecclesiology and deepened my appreciation for my spiritual roots. In fact, it was the seminary dean, Grady Snyder, who encouraged me to write about the house church in the first edition of this book.

By the time I began my D. Min studies I had discovered the most important fact about the New Testament church, and it is this: *Jesus' teachings, together with nearly every apostolic reference to actual local churches in the New Testament were all written to and for the house churches scattered across the Mediterranean world! And that's not all. This first-century world of early house church Christianity continued for the first 300 years of the church's history. But by the time of the second and third centuries, church fathers began to institute radical changes that culminated in Constantine's construction of the first basilicas.*

### **The really big discovery**

Remarkably, as late as 1988 when I first wrote the *The House Church: A Model for Renewing the Church*, understanding of the first-century church as a house church movement was relatively rare. So much so that New Testament scholar and author Roger W. Gehring asserts that “the year 1980 represents a watershed for the publication of literature on the topic of the house church . . . up to that time no major work had been devoted to the New Testament house church!”<sup>1</sup> Since then, however, numerous books and articles have been published on this largely overlooked and critically essential foundation for the study of New Testament ecclesiology.

But it wasn't until 1930-31 that someone discovered and excavated an actual house church in Dura Europos in the Syrian desert. This hard evidence of such a structure convinced some biblical scholars to reconsider their great neglect (see Chapter 3 “The New Testament House Churches” for isometric drawings of this house church dating between AD 232-256).

Then in 1939, Floyd V. Filson published his groundbreaking article about this discovery, rightly insisting, “the New Testament church would be better understood if more attention were paid to the actual physical conditions under which the first Christians met and lived. *In particular, the importance and function of the house church should be carefully considered*” (emphasis mine).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Roger W. Gehring: *The Importance of Household Structures in Early Christianity* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2004), 5.

<sup>2</sup> Floyd V. Filson, “The Significance of the Early House Churches,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 58 (1939), 105-106.

Notwithstanding, scholarship was perilously slow in awakening to Filson's admonition. For forty more years, negative theology of the church often continued to be written in the hierarchical jargon created by the church fathers in their establishment of "the church of the patriarchy," an ecclesiology quite different from New Testament household Christianity.

Finally, the 1970s ushered in a renewal of socio-historical New Testament research that is continuing to the present, creating a whole new vista of interest in the vastly neglected reality of the New Testament house churches just as Filson anticipated much earlier.

Scholars began to recognize the significance of household Christianity and the many nuances that contributed to its success. Since Roman society was structured on the principle of patronage, when a Christian head of a household opened his/her home as a gathering place for the formation of a new house church, such hospitality would usually point to a well-to-do believer using their gift of hospitality while also functioning as a patron or benefactor.

Examples of hospitable believers strengthening the household movement are seen in the lives of Aquila and Prisca (Rom 16:3-5, 1 Cor 16:19), in the community of house churches in Rome sharing together in Gaius' hospitality (Rom 16:23), in the household of Stephanas devoting themselves to the service of the saints (1 Cor 16:15), and in Paul's exhortation regarding "Phoebe, a servant (*diakonon*) of the church in Cenchrea . . . give her any help she may need from you, for she has been the benefactor (*prostatis*) of many people, including me" (Rom 16:1-2). Phoebe was a leader and as a servant-deacon, she may have helped monetarily.

### **A critical question and needed balance**

*Is the church Jesus founded meant to be an "emerging" experience of an unknown entity; or is Christ's church to be a dramatic embodiment of the incarnate Christ? The body gathers for edification, learning, and worship. The body scatters to propagate their faith and mission incarnationally as every member is involved in everyday life situations. In this manner, membership and mission are parts of the same process. This is good theology.*

Church is both a very familiar and very misunderstood reality. Postmodernism has moved the focus from theological understanding to the church's dynamics of social and cultural connections. The result is that the theological essence of the church is being replaced with a popular fixation on its state of flux or "emerging."

But Millard Erickson judiciously warns that the abandoned question of the nature of the church can no longer be delayed. "It is time to reverse this trend, for if we do not have a clear understanding of the nature of the church, we cannot have a clear understanding of its relationship to these other areas." I find myself asking what is the connection, if any, between the church of the New Testament era and what is emerging today?

Erickson forms the critical question for contemporary emergent transformers of pristine Christianity by noting that if the definition of the church is to undergo frequent change in order to relate it to the postmodern world, then in what sense is there continuity with what has preceded? In other words, why continue to call it the church? What is the common thread identifying the church throughout all the changes and times? "Is it not likely that at some point a different term should be applied?" . . . These questions cannot be answered without facing up to the issue of the nature of the church . . . and there is no better place to begin than with the biblical testimony itself."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed.* (Grand Rapids: Baker), 1040-41.

### **The contemporary house church proliferation**

Not since nearly 2000 years ago is the simple house church again a phenomenal factor that must be reckoned with. No one can continue to consider it a novel or fringe movement, but must embrace its ancient and deep roots in the history of the church Jesus and the apostles founded.

By “house church” I’m not referring to any and every gathering in a home to share happy times and personal experiences and private interpretations failing to meet the apostolic prerequisites—a facile and frivolous group may only reach the level of obtuseness. It reminds me of an old Amish school proverb: “when you talk you only repeat what you already know; but if you listen you may learn something.” House church participants may be excited to speak but may have little of significance to say. Studied wisdom is needed and should be learned.

George Barna’s research is instructive. In North America, nearly 10 percent of Christians attend house churches, or about 20 million. Over all, 70 million have participated in a house church. However, Barna reports that of those who attend a house church, only 27 percent do so weekly, while 30 percent attend one to three times per month, and 43 percent attend less than once a month.

While 70 percent of Christians (20 million) presently attend traditional churches, Barna predicts that by 2025 this number will drop to only 30-35 percent.<sup>4</sup> In fact, even now every year one million Christians are leaving the traditional church!

For the rest of the contemporary story of house church proliferation worldwide, see Chapter 7 “The Contemporary Worldwide House Church Movement.”

### **The new church that’s emerged**

Of course, the new kid-on-the-ecclesial-block is called the emerging church, or more settled, the emergent church. Though it is still difficult to define because of its newness, unsettledness, varied angles and the idea it is emerging, many people still are unsure of the movement.

Since I earlier wrote about the house church, the emerging movement has quickly developed. Numerous authors analyze and describe its many differing groups, leaders and newly established churches. Postmodern philosophy is integrated into much of the emergent theology. Some of these groups are already megachurches, and house churches also are attracted to the movement. Because of this, I have given extensive attention to the phenomenon in Chapter 9, “Postmodernism & the Emergent Church.”

### **The New Testament prototype of the non-emerging house churches**

The implication that the New Testament house churches form a non-emerging prototype flows out of the apostolic tradition established by Jesus and the apostles. The house church as a working structure for the functioning of the first-century church established by Jesus and his disciples was not, however, given to them as a reported revelation, but more likely by

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<sup>4</sup> George Barna, *Revolution; Worn-out on Church? Finding Vibrant Faith Beyond the Walls of the Sanctuary* (Carol Stream: Tyndale/Barna, 2005), 48-49 and throughout, but research doesn’t necessarily translate into solid biblical exegesis, as seen in his as anti-local church and anti-gathered worship time pet peeves, together with anti-gathered community for spiritual growth, etc.

the *sitz im leben* of the times, i.e., its situation or setting in life of its historical, geographical, social, cultural, and even Jewish heritage as the Older Testament people of God. For background support, see Chapter 2, “The Renewed People of God in Their Social Context.”

### **Jesus not only created the gospel tradition, but he alone established it**

He thought of himself not only as declaring but also embodying the good news in his message of the coming of the kingdom (Mt 12:28). He was both its message and the messenger.

### **Jesus and the apostles’ doctrine**

Every church group functions on some basis of historical tradition handed down by their earlier leaders. But very little attention has been given to the tradition passed on by the apostles of Jesus Christ. The *apostles’ tradition* is simply all the teachings of Jesus formed into the apostles’ teaching or doctrine so that essential truth and practices are summarized and “handed down” for our understanding, experience and edification.

These beliefs and practices are the organic embodiment of what and how the apostles taught and prescribed for every church of the first century. Paul even exhorted to “imitate me . . . my way of life in Jesus Christ agrees with what I teach in every church” (1 Cor 4:16-17). Then he adds, “If anyone wants to be contentious about this, we have no other practice—nor do the churches of God” (1 Cor 11:16 TNIV). F. F. Bruce keenly notes that “Paul indeed seems to have attached some importance to preserving a certain measure of uniform practice throughout his churches.”<sup>5</sup> By reading his letters, this was good theology!

### **Handing it down—passing it on**

The first stage of the apostolic tradition began with Jesus “handing down” his teaching to his disciples. Tradition (Greek *paradosis*) is “that which is handed down” from a teacher to his/her students or disciples. Jesus placed his own teachings alongside the Scriptures and as an authoritative commentary to it. In his Sermon on the Mount he reiterated, “You heard it was said . . . but I say.” The apostles also made the claim that their teaching was handed down on the basis of Spirit-guided instruction and eyewitnesses. They understood that their own teaching was handed down from the Lord as authentic “tradition,” and made it clear to their listeners and readers that they themselves were held responsible to heed apostolic teaching as from the Lord. Their testimony is clarified in Jesus’ promise that “when the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the parts of the truth . . . and he will declare to you the things that are to come.” Thus, Paul testified that “I received . . . and I handed on to you what I had received” (1 Cor 11:23; 15:3). From the beginning, he urged even the earliest brothers and sisters to “stand firm and hold fast to the traditions that you were [just recently] taught” (2 Thess 2:15).

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<sup>5</sup> F. F. Bruce. *A Mind for What Matters* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 239.

**The apostolic Jesus tradition of the pattern of sound teaching can be summarized into three components:<sup>6</sup>**

- 1- The facts about the words and deeds of Jesus Christ (Lu 1:1-4; 1 Jn 1:1-4)
- 2- The summary of those facts and their theological interpretation (1 Cor 11:23/chapter 15)
- 3- The manner of life and rules for Christian ethics that flow from these facts (2 Cor 11:2; 2 Thess 2:15; 3:6-7)

We see Christ's seriousness about the tradition they were erecting when Paul refuted believers who were living contrarily to it. He confronts them in his letter to the Galatians because they were turning away to "another gospel"—which was really not the gospel at all. He strenuously argued that the gospel is exclusive and absolute and must be preserved at all costs, because when the gospel is modified the essential life of the church is destroyed.

**The organic nature of the church and its DNA**

Frank Viola notes that "observing the apostolic tradition means being faithful to what was *theologically* and *spiritually* significant in the experience of the early church . . . These practices are not culturally conditioned. Instead, they are native to the organic nature of the triune God and deeply rooted in biblical theology. They are the church's DNA in operation." Viola succinctly adds, "Apostolic tradition incarnates the apostolic teaching that the church is a spiritual organism whose taproot can be traced back to the Godhead."<sup>7</sup>

Howard Snyder somewhere reminds that the discovery of DNA has raised the truth about the nature of the church as a living organism; but the church has not been understood genetically by generations of the past. Since we well know that the body of Christ as his church is organismic, but assume some are not, how then do we know which ones are not? Today we advertise as though we know.

Yet we read, "So it is with Christ. For we were all baptized by one Spirit as to form one body. . . And we were all given the one Spirit to drink . . . God has put the body together . . . so there should be no division in the body . . . you are the body of Christ"

**Deep and complex**

Which makes me suspect, however, that the complicated nature of the science as applied to the spiritual, living organism of the church can cause interpretations that tend to over-literalize and overstate reality. Snyder wisely believes that by joining the DNA metaphor to Paul's body metaphor of the church is in order to highlight that the church's relation to Christ is deep and complex.

Viola positively believes that "normative apostolic commands are binding on the contemporary church and normative apostolic practices . . . carry a prescriptive force. This means they reflect the unchanging nature of God himself."<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, several pages earlier he assumes that "God is a living person, and as such, he has certain *habits and tendencies*

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<sup>6</sup> DJV Lane, *Illustrated Bible Dictionary* Vol. 3, (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, 1980), 1580.

<sup>7</sup> Frank Viola, *Reimagining Church: Pursuing the Dream of Organic Christianity* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2008) 248.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 247.

that are innate to his divine nature. The apostolic tradition is simply the physical expression of those habits and tendencies.”<sup>9</sup>

I disagree with the notion of humanistic language for God that Viola says represents apostolic tradition. “Habits” speak of automatic acts related to addiction and are difficult to break, while “tendencies” reflect a propensity for a drift toward bias. To link these human traits to our eternal God described by apostles as “the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change” (Jas 1:16-17 NRSV/NIV) is unconscionable.

God is unable to increase because he dwells in perfection, nor could he decrease or he would cease to be our eternal God. Thus, there is no quantitative or qualitative change since God’s nature cannot be modified. He is a Trinitarian “person” but not the same as fallen human persons.

### **We ourselves have been made an intrinsic part of the apostles’ doctrine!**

Since my first pastor-teacher experience as a 19-year-old freshman in Bible College, I’ve been deeply impressed with Paul’s special nuance given to this extraordinary tradition in Romans 6:17, where he says there is an apostolic teaching standard we believers have been brought into, or “*to which you were entrusted*” (NRSV). Too many sincere believers seem to have no concept of what is really being claimed here.

In reality, Paul is alerting each of us who claim Christ’s Lordship that, “*you have come to obey from your heart the pattern of teaching that has now claimed your allegiance*” (TNIV). In a stunning manner Paul asserts that *we ourselves have been “handed over” and made subject to this new form (typos) of doctrinal teaching from the Lord himself*, which results (or should) in our living according to the genuine Christian teaching-tradition that is unambiguously recorded in these New Testament documents. The hereditary nature of our steadfast commitment is mirrored quite obviously here.

The New Testament prototype is developed theologically in Chapter 8, “Evangelical Renewal & the Pentecostal Plumblin.” There I argue that Luke portrays both in Acts chapters 2 and 11/13 how the first-century church members devoted themselves to five major apostolic disciplines, and these same evidences of the Spirit-filled church remain as prerequisites for every local church in the twenty-first century. Furthermore, these principles were supported and never rescinded in the rest of the New Testament. This is good theology indeed!

I propose, then, that every church relearn and reaffirm again what are the fundamental and essential traits of the first-century churches that are transferable to our contemporary church life today, according to those details of Jesus’ teaching and the apostolic record.

In light of the contemporary “Postmodern Turn” or deviation from orthodox Christianity—and the consequent dumbing down of evangelical truth—consider these pages as a primer on how the authentic Jesus tradition and the apostles’ doctrine constitutes the divine antidote to the postmodern perversion.

### **Jesus and the apostles denounced sub-Christian traditions**

Between the Testaments, rabbis added teachings about the Older Testament. This developed into a body of literature considered “tradition,” handed down from teacher (“rabbi”) to pupils. By the first century, these traditions had assumed a place alongside Scripture itself. It

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 244.

was this equalizing of human commentary with the divine Old Testament Scriptures that Jesus strongly condemned. He confronted head on “*the tradition of the elders*,” an accumulation of the oral laws which the Jewish scribes and leaders used to nullify the plain meaning of God’s word in the Scriptures (Mt 15:1-9 and Mk 7:1-13). With strong words Jesus lashed at them: “For the sake of your tradition you make void the word of God!”

Paul, too, assailed “*the tradition of men*” in his letter to the Colossians (2:8), an embryonic Gnosticism that threatened to change apostolic Christianity into a false cult (2:6-23). The believers at Colossae faced a heresy of “human tradition” which was set over against the true “*tradition of Jesus*,” a tradition not simply coming from him, but the tradition which finds its total embodiment in him. So, he reminds them that “as you have *received* Christ Jesus the Lord, continue to live your lives in him.” Paul claims that he is delivering to them what he “received from the Lord” (*paralambano*). *In this case, it is not merely an idea, but tradition as the Gospel, centered on the person of Christ.* Thus, Jesus condemned all traditions that mislead believers to “abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.” The Lord denounced doctrines taught by mere tradition as nothing more than “commandments of men.”

### **Contemporary renewal and the non-emerging “church in the home”**

*Gordon Fee reminds us that our hermeneutical difficulties are exacerbated by the fact that “our only experience of church, even for those who have broad intercommunication experience, is of a later development of church that looks almost nothing like the house churches of the first-century Greco-Roman world . . . This is simply a statement of reality.”*<sup>10</sup>

Yes, indeed! But why and what constitutes this “statement of reality?” The answer is that there is no ecclesiology or doctrine of the church in the entire New Testament other than household ecclesiology! And the theology undergirding this ecclesiology focuses on the most fundamental unit of societies worldwide—the family.

All the apostolic texts, beginning with Jesus’ own teaching and ministry, speak about persons and their relationships, primarily of family lineage and heritage. It has long been noted that an authentic Jew cannot answer who he is without giving his family lineage. We are alerted to this powerful phenomenon everywhere throughout the Older Testament stories, and in its theological teachings about the lineage of key individuals as Abraham, Moses, and David, whose lineage finalized into the very incarnation of our Lord Jesus.

Likewise, New Testament texts are built upon the Older, and continue the positive Hebraic emphasis of utmost regard for family kinship. These texts cite persons’ names, their relationship with other named persons, their heritage, and sometimes family lineage; other times with a note of their social circumstances or a description of their gifts and ministry to others in the family of God.

### **The family-based church**

But when it comes to house church Christianity, what seems to be the most concrete to some of us often becomes only a blurred miscomprehension to others. Truth is, the masses of Christians have little real conception of the New Testament house churches. What is evidently difficult for many to grasp is the fundamental reason why Jesus and the apostles

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<sup>10</sup> Gordon D. Fee, “The Priority of Spirit Gifting for Church Ministry,” in *Discovering Biblical Equality: Complementarity Without Hierarchy* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2004), 247-48

developed the New Testament church on the family and home foundation. “Early Christianity was basically a ‘household’ movement first in that it sought after the conversion of heads of households, whose dependents would follow them into the new faith. . . . Second, insofar as it depended on the hospitality of its member householders not only for the regular assemblies of the church . . . but also for the travels and visits of its itinerant leaders and teachers”<sup>11</sup> (Mt 10:11-13; Ac 16:15, 40; 21:8; 16; 28:14; 2 Tim 1:16).

E. A. Judge added that “the household as a religious and social unit offered the Christians the best possible security for their existence as a group.”<sup>12</sup> Even the first churches’ gospel proclamation centered on the family unit, for example, as Paul reminded the Corinthians how “you know that the *household of Stephanas* were the first converts in Achaia.” And many more times conversion descriptions include not only the named convert, but also the words “*and those of his/her household.*”

### Coming to grips

Ultimately, we have to come to grips with these realities and reckon with the family-founded gospel proclamation and its natural nexus to home-structure Christianity that early on became the same as “*the church in the home.*” Of course, almost all of the apostles’ texts were written to house churches as “occasional” letters, usually addressed to congregations regarding local matters. And since the letters were written over an apostle’s lifetime, some reflect their progress in thinking. Nevertheless, texts written to various churches at different places and about their particular situations have little if any actual contradiction (though a writer may fail to mention a doctrine or practice emphasized in another letter). This phenomenon easily leads to convoluted conclusions about the apostles’ teaching, especially issues regarding pastors, elders, deacons, leadership, church gatherings, etc. Of course, there is no rule that such authors must touch on all such matters in all church letters! But what they taught in one place, it’s most likely they taught the same everywhere else, just as Paul and Barnabas on their missionary journey “appointed elders in every city.”

The critical issue is that the good theology of the “apostles’ doctrine” must be maintained on its non-emerging foundation. None of the apostolic teachings are changeable, negotiable, or corrodible. And no contemporary “apostle” exists today with fist-century endowments and requirements (unless they’ve seen Jesus in the flesh as an eyewitness), while no new apostolic Scriptures dare be expected (unless someone has become a false prophet).

But a caveat is in order. This is not to say, of course, that every church since must be a house church. But the non-emerging New Testament prototype does insist, I believe, *that whatever those spiritual principles of the NT church are—its very essence and obvious ability to accomplish its mission—must be applicable to every, and any other contemporary church from the smallest to the largest.* Nor do I blithely assume that the New Testament prototype can be perceived as a panacea for the many ills of the traditional church. The contemporary house church movement bears this out, as a conglomeration with differing theologies relating to leadership vs. non-leadership, to gatherings only “under Jesus’ headship,” to the questionable and unsettled role of women, and to the problem and place of doctrine. House church websites with numerous

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<sup>11</sup> David A. deSilva, *Honor, Patronage, Kingship & Purity: Unlocking New Testament Culture* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2000), 226-227.

<sup>12</sup> E. A. Judge, *The Social Pattern of the Christian Groups in the First Century* (London: Tyndale Press, 1960), 75-76.

teaching leaders offer many insights relating to its functioning. However, as spokesperson Frank Viola reminds, many house churches are elitist and sectarian.

To be sure, there are natural difficulties in the house church structure, as it too, is developed and maintained by fallen-but-redeemed people. Still, the dynamically simplified house church structure has a built-in potential to withstand and continue to outlive the naysayers, persecutors, and massive ecclesiastical conglomerates throughout the world. Its effectiveness will abide, but not necessarily beyond its called and gifted leadership.

In my ongoing study of the New Testament church, a distinct and essential church becomes visible, the image that Paul made dramatically clear to the Corinthians. First, *the church is Christ's own body* especially in its local expression, which he then extends to encompass all the people of God (10:17; 12:12-26). "Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ" (12:12 TNIV). Unity is the apostle's great concern with this image. The body is arranged so that each member is equally essential to the other.

Second, *the church is God's temple wherever it gathers*. "Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in your midst?" (3:16-17 TNIV). The church is a new creation made up of all the redeemed who constitute the Spirit's new temple. It is his household of the faithful, modeled in actual NT house fellowships where God's local church families gathered.

The body image represents the necessity of unity/oneness, while the image of the Holy Spirit's presence points to the necessity of diversity in manifestations of the Spirit's giftedness and in the ministry of edification to the whole (12:4-11; 28-31; 14:26). "Paul emphasizes the truly corporate nature of worship. Provision is to be made for 'each one' to participate so that the whole body may be edified . . . On the one hand, singing, praying, and thanksgiving are directed toward God; on the other hand, utterances of various kinds are directed toward the community so that it may be built up."<sup>13</sup>

### The body of Christ

Ultimately, of the various images a church cultivates it cannot reach a balanced self-perception unless it is conscious of being "the body of Christ." The failure to gain an incarnational understanding of Christ's church is fundamental to its effectiveness and witness. The head of the body is Jesus, *connoting a headship as source or sustenance of the body's life rather than an authority construct*—the emphasis is on the body's relationships rather than positions within it. Christ's headship is superlative and transcendent "over every power and authority" in the universe—and is a serving and sustaining headship over "the church, his body, of which he is the Savior" (Col 2:10; Eph 5:23). Good theology from every angle.

Headship is a complicated theme and difficult to find balance and unity in understanding. Fee notes that "when Christ speaks as 'head' in relationship to the church, it is a metaphor not for 'lordship' but for the supporting, life-giving role that in ancient Greek thought the (literal) head was understood to have in relationship to the physical body" (Eph 4:15-16; Col 2:19).<sup>14</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Gordon D. Fee, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 19.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., Fee, in *Discovering Biblical Equality*, "The Probable Meaning of 'Head' as a Metaphor," 149.

Gathering as the body of Christ in a home for worship, edification, and instruction is quite natural. There is no evidence in the NT documents that first-century Christians had any interest to emerge into a different model for gathering together as God's people. The evidence documents that the limited environment of a spiritual family in household gatherings was the most natural and effective way to reach non-believers, and the current data continues to support this claim. Beyond question, we are not called to a "restorationist" mentality and cannot literally model the first-century believers in their first-century environment house churches. When we learn how far different their houses were to ours, no contemporary would want to live in them! But in this twenty-first century, we can apply the New Testament church prototype or facsimile anywhere in our world. The most effective way to reach others in a community remains rooted in the sociology of the small group and churches that function according to the New Testament dynamics as the "household family of God."

A good example of this was included in the 1988 edition of *The House Church*, about how the leaders of Vision for Evangelization of Latin America (VELA) discovered that within the boundaries of Mexico City there were over 1500 "colonias" or neighborhoods without an evangelical church. Director Galo Vasquez's goal was to establish "10,000 house churches by the year 2000." The outreach was begun in 1985 and the goal was more than reached by the year 2000, so that every citizen in this world's largest city could be within walking distance of an evangelical witness!

It is obvious that the many "churches in the homes" of the early believers became the normal place where Jesus' teaching and the apostles' doctrine were faithfully proclaimed. It can be concluded that the house structure of the early church turns out to be only secondary to the primary deposit of ecclesial doctrine that abides as the non-emerging Word of God. At such a time as this when a neo-postmodern Christianity is propagating an anti-doctrinal bent or even a complete rejection of biblical-propositional revelation, I have no doubt the non-emerging apostolic plumbline remains our abiding foundation—while its structure has many implications for our consideration and learning about "doing church" and most effectively reaching a postmodern world.

Nevertheless, along with the documented data of our New Testament we also have the church history of what actually took place alongside what perhaps could and even should have been. In New Testament times, the ability of corporate self-correction by the presence and power of the indwelling Spirit and the Lordship of Christ himself was still being practiced and affirmed in the house churches.

This reality can be observed in the exegetical conclusions I reached about the nine house church communities recorded in the New Testament, titled: "Uniformity Within Diversity in the New Testament Household Communities: Nine Stages of an Equalization Trajectory of 'Gender Equality, Generic Giftedness, and Corporate Ministry,'" in *THE FALL OF PATRIARCHY: Its Broken Legacy Judged by Jesus & the Apostolic House Church Communities* (2005), 95-124.

Of course, in many places within Christendom today the reality of these fundamentals have long passed away—replaced by the rule of powerful men in calculating hierarchical structures that have created a shameful and discriminatory environment in Christ's body.

### **Jesus' prayer—and ours?**

Consider again what Jesus prayed: "Father, glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify you . . . I gave them the words you gave me . . . Father, protect them by the power of your name . . . so that they may be one as we are one" (Jn 17). Then came Calvary, the Resurrection, Pentecost

and the new birth of the church. That was 2,000 years ago. Now worldwide today, and in spite of Jesus' explicit prayer, we've divided ourselves into more than 30,000 Christian denominations worldwide, demonstrating how shamelessly we've spurned Jesus' request by blatantly corralling ourselves into classes, categories, and identifications.

### **But what if?**

*What if* the church fathers had steadfastly continued through the second and third centuries growing household Christianity instead of instituting a post-apostolic structure of hierarchical Christianity with deep roots in the Older Testament's patriarchal stream that directly resulted from the Fall? (Gen 3:16) This far-reaching disaster resulted in an elitist priesthood that dominated women into a subservient role, ruling half the church unable to minister with their God-given gifts. The Church of the Patriarchy radically altered the non-emerging New Testament prototype for all time since.

*And what if* second and third-century believers had held to their rich heritage of household Christianity as a counter-cultural movement, continuously involved in rapidly growing house church clusters?

*And what if* emperor Constantine had not schemed to become a "Christian" and begun the monumental development of Christian real estate that ultimately brought the original house-churched Christianity to an end? Although freedom of religion was granted in AD 313, the pagan government demanded the right to intervene in spiritual matters. F. F. Bruce notes that Christianity became fashionable and the ruling power made it popular while church leaders were able to exercise political power. "It meant considerable ingress of Christianized pagans into the church, creating scandals lasting until now . . . Nearly all the Roman emperors after Constantine were Christians by formal profession, if in no other sense."<sup>15</sup>

Contrary to the fallacious assumption that there was an "evolution" between the first-century house churches and the later parish or diocese churches of the Roman Catholic system in the fourth and fifth centuries, instead there was a radical Constantinian break away from New Testament household Christianity. Actually, the emperor began construction of his great cathedrals in order to promote a cultural and popular kind of Christianity. "But it remained for the leaders of the fourth and fifth centuries to attempt to reverse that process . . . It was under their leadership that 'cemetery Christianity' [a double entendre?] was eventually brought into the city . . . the movement of the remains of the saints into the edifices of urban churches."<sup>16</sup>

When Constantine gathered 230 bishops at Nicea in AD 325, he presided as the "bishop of bishops," a title he proclaimed was appointed by God. Though Nicea was an advance for orthodox doctrine, it is seldom acknowledged that the infamous doctrine of ecclesiastical patriarchy was officially put in place that day. In fact, the three bishops of Rome, Antioch, and Alexandria were for the first time accorded the official pseudo-Christian title "patriarch." Historian Mark Noll poignantly asserts that at that gathering "the Christian

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<sup>15</sup> F. F. Bruce, *The Spreading Flame: The Rise and Spread of Christianity from its First Beginnings to the Conversion of the English* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 293-94; 300-01, 317.

<sup>16</sup> Graydon F. Snyder, ANTE PACEM, *Archaeological Evidence of Church Life Before Constantine* (Macon: Mercer Uni. Press, 1998), 164-65

church entered a new era [after which] the church would never be the same”<sup>17</sup> because of awful and abominable theology.

With increasing false doctrine and the domination of a Christianized patriarchy, the hankering for radically new and concrete structures of patriarchal awe eventually led to the demise of the household meetings. Christians began to be persecuted first by neighbors because they rejected the values of patriarchy in refusing to recognize the “fatherhood” of the emperor. But “the greatest pressure to abandon Jesus’ vision of a divinely-directed [household] community came from a potent combination of the strong tradition of the patriarchal system and the growing addiction to violence . . .”<sup>18</sup>

Snyder summarizes Constantine’s legacy against the house churches: “As long as the faith community met in house churches and only loosely recognized the authority of the state, men and women more or less shared leadership roles. *But when the church became the state religion, when the Christians met in basilicas, when Jesus became the emperor, then women once again became subordinate*” so that their role in public was not much alleviated by the authentic Jesus tradition of the first century.”<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Mark Noll, *Turning Points: Decisive Moments in the History of Christianity* (1998), 49, 52.

<sup>18</sup> Graydon F. Snyder, *Inculturation of the Jesus Tradition: The Impact of Jesus on Jewish and Roman Cultures* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press, 1999), 188

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 188