

The House Church Heresy

Introduction. The apostle Paul said there would be factions among us (1 Corinthians 11:19). I do not suppose that there has been a time or a place in the history of God's people when this has not been true — and ours is no exception.

For several years there has been a phenomenon taking place among us that is called the “house church” movement. These are not merely local churches that happen to begin meeting in someone's home. Rather, this movement has been spawned by people who have concluded that established churches in their community have lost their spirituality and are frozen in orthodoxy and traditions; therefore, they have broken away to form new groups. This is not a movement peculiar to churches of Christ. It began and is very popular among those from denominational backgrounds. It is clear that the effects of this movement have been felt by the Lord's people across the country. In Tampa, Houston, Nashville, Bowling Green and other cities, brethren in non-institutional churches of Christ have had the painful experience of once faithful brethren departing from them to form house churches.

A great influence in this movement is F. LaGard Smith. F. LaGard Smith is the son of the late gospel preacher, Frank Smith. Recently, he has been a “Scholar in Residence” at David Lipscomb University in Nashville, Tennessee. He has published more than 20 books, several of them are in popular use.

This lesson will review some of Smith's observations and ask if his call is truly a call for radical restoration or if it is a vanguard for radical apostasy. In Smith's book, it is hard to find an old fashioned scriptural argument where a passage is quoted and a point of application clearly derived. Smith continually makes several assertions and assumptions about a text then proceeds to make his argument, having assumed the very point to be proven.

I. A “Restoration” Of Meeting In Homes

A. Statements from Smith.

1. “Maybe that's where it all went wrong in the first place. Maybe the church should never have left home” (143).
2. “There seems to be little question but that first-century Christians met together in small groups as house churches” (148).
3. “The house church ... was also a natural setting for edification and exhortation” (150).
4. “Historically, of course, we know that it was not until the third century that Christians began to erect what we today would recognize as church buildings. Piecing together archeology and history, it appears the primitive church typically met in a room (sufficiently large enough for probably 40-50 people) in the house of a wealthy member” (148).
5. Smith cites Acts 20:20, 1 Corinthians 16:19, Romans 16:3-5, Colossians 4:15, Philemon 1-2, and Acts 12:5-12 as house churches.

B. The truth is that early churches did not just meet in houses. Consider these examples.

1. The temple (Acts 2:46).
2. A river side (Acts 16:13).

3. The school of Tyrannus (Acts 19:9).
 4. An upper room (Acts 20:8).
 5. Rented quarters (Acts 28:30-31).
 6. A synagogue-type of assembly area (James 2:2).
- C. Where any given local church meets is a decision of expediency, authorized under the generic command to assemble (Hebrews 10:25).
- D. Smith seems to overlook the fact that church-owned meeting places were born out of need. No one denies that many churches, both then and today, began in the homes of members.
1. However, as churches grow, they grow beyond it being expedient or even possible to meet in a home, demanding a larger place.
 2. Usually we build because it is more economical in the long run than renting and provides facilities that are specifically designed to meet specific needs.

II. A “Restoration” Of Spontaneous, Informal Worship

- A. Statements from Smith.
1. “What all of this suggests is that the primitive church had an intimacy, informality, and degree of mutual participation largely foreign to our own experience” (151-152).
 2. “The gathered assemblies of the primitive church appear to have been far more participatory than what we experience; and, almost of necessity, therefore, more spontaneous and informal” (152).
 3. “The primary difference between the first century and the 21st century is that — apart from times when sermons are preached — there seems not to have been ‘an audience’ as we know it today. When does home ever have an audience? Just as a family interacts with one another around the house, in the house churches of the first century the family of God actively participated with one another in their mutual worship” (153).
 4. “Over the years, we have spent an inordinate amount of time and energy arguing with others about the so-called ‘five items of worship.’ And yet it seems as if we never once stopped to realize that those ‘acts of worship’ — as practiced among us today — are mostly an orchestrated religious spectacle for which we have reserved seats each week” (154).
- B. To Smith’s characterizations of worship, there are two responses.
1. He has missed the point of worship. Our worship is not about me, it is about God. One man who established one of these “house churches,” admitted that he was searching for a more intimate relationship with other worshipers.
 2. I want to improve my worship; sometimes, I admit, it is not what it needs to be. If there is a failure, though, it is because my own heart is not prepared to worship God. It is emphatically not because I engage in some sort of orchestrated religious spectacle for which I find no New Testament authority!
 3. The New Testament teaches that we are to worship God in “spirit and in truth” (John 4:24). To be sure, ritualistic worship is condemned, but worship without structure is also condemned (1 Corinthians 14:31-34, 40).

III. A “Restoration” Of Multiple Church Oversight

- A. Smith says, “There is nothing to rule out the possibility that the role of elders in the early church might well have encompassed more than one level of involvement — even simultaneously. Perhaps there were elders shepherding the disciples in each house, depending upon their size and make-up. And perhaps elder oversight may have been exercised throughout a group of house churches which collectively comprised a larger, recognizable ‘congregation.’ More thought-provoking for us, of course, is the third possibility — that elders in individual house churches might also have come together as a group of citywide elders to discuss matters of importance to the entire community of believers ... Nothing necessarily precludes ‘Jerusalem’s elders’ from being gathered from among elders in a multiplicity of house churches” (178).
- B. But the scriptures teach each congregation is to appoint its own elders whose oversight is limited to that congregation (Acts 14:23; 20:28; 1 Peter 5:2).
- C. Smith believes that each house church constitutes a local church, and advocates that elders may exercise oversight over a “group of house churches which collectively comprise a larger, recognizable ‘congregation.’”
 - 1. There is no shred of evidence that would lead us to believe that there is authority for elders to oversee anything but the congregation in which they were appointed.
 - 2. This perverted view of the organization of the church is the seed from which Catholicism sprang and would eventually lead us right back to Rome.

IV. A “Restoration” Of No Local Treasury

- A. Statements from Smith.
 - 1. “Even as a teenager, I began to question differences between what I read in the Scripture about the New Testament church, and the Church of Christ of the 1950’s and ‘60’s, defined with doctrinal precision in our Sunday-school book, aptly (or inaptly) titled, ‘The New Testament Church.’ I’ll never forget the first dawning of disillusionment, which came in the chapter on ‘Church Finances.’ Certainly, I was not surprised when the study guide cited 1 Corinthians 16:1-2 (along with Matthew 5:42 and Luke 6:38) as authority for the proposition that we are commanded to make a ‘contribution’ each Lord’s Day as part of the divine plan for financing the church ... I could find no such command ...” (7).
 - 2. “If we could ever get away from the unwarranted idea of ‘giving’ as a mandated ‘item of worship,’ and begin thinking of ‘giving’ as a way of meeting special needs whenever they arise, we would not need the same kind of ‘treasury’ to which we are accustomed” (245).
- B. However, the Bible teaches the subject somewhat differently.
 - 1. The church was assigned its work by God which consists of teaching, edifying, and relieving needy saints (1 Timothy 3:15; 5:16; Ephesians 4:16).
 - 2. The scriptures emphatically teach the right of preachers to receive support (1 Corinthians 9:9-14; 2 Corinthians 11:8; Philippians 4:15-16).
 - 3. In 1 Corinthians 16:1-2, it is apparent that the Holy Spirit meant for the specific example to serve generally.

- a) This passage is not just a benevolence passage; it is a collection passage for whatever work God has assigned the church to do.
 - b) The correctly translated expression, “Upon the first day of every week,” shows that the Spirit had more in mind than a one-time benevolent need.
- C. If Smith had his way, local churches would have no checking account, no established identity, and no need for a treasury!

V. A “Restoration” Of The Lord’s Supper With A Common Meal

A. Statements from Smith.

1. “... perhaps the most universally-overlooked feature of the Lord’s Supper as practiced in the primitive church is that — from all appearances — it was observed in conjunction with a fellowship meal. That is, a normal, ordinary meal with the usual variety of food. However, unlike normal, ordinary meals, this combined table fellowship and memorial was shared among the disciples for the special purpose of strengthening, not just their physical bodies, but their common bond in the spiritual body of Christ. Hence, Jude’s reference to their ‘love feasts’ (verse 12)” (128-129).
 2. “... on the occasion of its inaugural introduction — there in the upper room on the night Jesus was betrayed — the memorial was part of an actual meal being shared, which included bread, wine, and whatever ‘dish’ it was into which Jesus dipped the bread before handing it to Judas (John 13:26-27)” (129).
 3. He goes on to describe a Thanksgiving meal at his home in Nashville with its mixture of emotions, devotions, and memories and then said, “In fact, from what we can tell, it’s also very much like the house churches of the first century and their memorial meals on the Lord’s Day. Apparently, their love feasts were a mirror image of our own Thanksgiving celebrations, with home, family, food, love, prayer, and shared memories. Especially the memory of Christ” (146).
 4. Having made his assumptions, using terms like “apparently” and “from all appearances,” Smith argues saying, “From its very inception, therefore, the Lord’s Supper was an integral part of a real meal. That real meal was not unlike the fellowship meals which the larger body of Pentecost disciples shared throughout the week when they ‘broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts’ (Acts 2:46)” (p. 128-129).
 5. Smith’s view of the Lord’s Supper is that of “A Memorial Within A Meal” (128) to strengthen our body with a pause at some point to eat unleavened bread and fruit of the vine in memory of Jesus to strengthen our spirits.
- B. Smith’s fundamental affirmation comes from the institution of the Lord’s Supper at the last Passover Jesus observed with His disciples (Matthew 26:20-29; Mark 14:12-25; Luke 22:1-23). He argues that, because the Lord’s Supper was instituted during the Passover meal, i.e., what he calls a “normal, ordinary” meal, therefore it should be observed today along with a “normal, ordinary” meal.
1. The Passover meal was not a “normal, ordinary” meal. In fact, it was a very unusual memorial meal, observed only once a year. The meal, strictly regulated (Exodus 12), consisted of roasted lamb (unblemished one year old

- male), unleavened bread, bitter herbs, and fruit of the vine (Matthew 26:29; Luke 22:18). When Jesus and His disciples sat down to eat the Passover it was anything but a typical meal.
- a) By necessary inference, the Lord's Supper is limited to unleavened bread and fruit of the vine.
 - b) If the Lord's Supper elements are restricted, why are not the contents of Smith's "normal, ordinary" meal limited to the elements of the Passover feast?
 - c) Furthermore, if the elements of the Passover meal can be changed to normal table fare, by what logic can we not also change the elements of the Lord's Supper?
2. The truth is that Jesus only instituted the Lord's Supper on that Passover evening, He did not observe it. Why? Because neither He nor His disciples could memorialize an event that had not yet taken place.
- a) Based on 1 Corinthians 5:7 and John 1:29, there is a type/antitype relationship between Jesus and the paschal lamb.
 - b) The Lord's Supper was not a part of the Passover meal, nor an extension of it, but the occasion in which Jesus instituted His own memorial by giving instruction on how His disciples were to observe it when the church was established.
 - c) Furthermore, Jesus likely gave instruction on other subjects while eating with His disciples. Must we assume that because the instructions were given at mealtime that they must be carried out with a meal?
3. In further proof that the Lord's Supper was distinct from the Passover meal and not a part of it, note Paul's description of the institution of the Supper in 1 Corinthians 11:25. This is indicative of a distinction between the Passover meal and Jesus' instruction concerning the institution of the memorial.
- a) This same distinction is seen in Luke 22:20. In both of the passages that are discussed (Luke 22:20 and 1 Corinthians 11:25), meta occurs in the accusative, and therefore means "after."
 - b) The point is that Jesus made a clear distinction between the Passover and the Supper He was instituting.
4. The truth is, when Paul wrote to the church in Corinth, they were gathering for both a common meal and partaking the Lord's Supper — abusing the Lord's Supper in the process — and Paul rebuked them (1 Corinthians 11:22, 34).

Conclusion. We live in troubled times. While there seems to be a spirit of stagnation among some churches, the answer is not found in novel gimmicks in an effort to find a closer relationship with God and with one another. This can only be found by following the instructions of the ancient prophets (Jeremiah 6:16; Proverbs 22:28).

It seems that the spirit of our age is, if it is old, it needs to be discarded. Little thought is given to the possibility that some old matters are old because they are divinely revealed by God. Little thought is given to the possibility that the reason some matters are old is because they have been tried and tested and proven reliable. May God give us the wisdom to both recognize and preserve the "ancient landmarks."