

Subject: Important new House Church book (1)
Date: 3/4/2005 5:15:01 AM Mountain Standard Time
From: [DenverWH](#)

Dear Church,

I want to let you know about a new book that is stimulating my thinking about house church. The book is "**House Church and Mission: The Importance of Household Structures in Early Christianity**" by Roger Gehring.

Robert Banks wrote this review of the book: "This is far and away the most comprehensive survey of the role of the house - and household - according to the New Testament. It demonstrates persuasively their centrality for both church and mission in early Christianity."

Leonard Sweet writes: "Massive erudition deployed with a deceptively light touch. Gehring connects the emerging twenty-first-century church with the apostolic first-century church in significant and revealing ways."

The challenge is that, as Sweet says, the book represents "massive erudition". In other words, it's not an easy read. It was originally written in German as a dissertation towards a doctoral degree in New Testament Studies. However, because the ideas are so important I want to suggest three ways that you might engage this material.

First, some of you will want to buy the book and work your way through it. It's hard work but it would be worth your effort. (It's available through Amazon.)

Second, I've boiled the book down to 16 pages of key quotes that seem most important to me. I would be glad to send that to you if you are interested. Just hit "reply" and tell me to "Send Gehring".

Third, I intend to send out a series of short articles to this list on what seem to me to be the key ideas. Just look for emails with "Gehring" in the title.

My hope is that all of this will continue to deepen our discussion of what God has in mind when He says "church".

Finally, I want to let you know about a couple of house church learning opportunities coming up.

***Dan Lewis** is hosting a House Church Conference in **Albuquerque, NM** on March 11-13. **Tim Pynes and I** will be the speakers. Dan is the pastor of one of the emerging "hybrid" churches. See <http://www.soulrio.com/> For info on the Conference, email Dan at dan@soulrio.com

***Roger and Brooks Thoman** are hosting a House2House Regional Conference in **Santa Maria, CA** on May 6-7. **Tony and Felicity Dale** and **Neil Cole** will be the speakers. For more info go to <http://www.housechurchlife.com/>

John White
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Praying Luke 10:2b

Every believer a church planter.
Every home a church.
Every church building a training center.

Subject: Gehring: The Importance of Household (2)
Date: 3/4/2005 5:20:01 AM Mountain Standard Time
From: [DenverWH](#)

Dear Church,

As Evangelicals, we take pride (rightfully, I think) in having a high view of Scripture. I have often taught that "**the Bible is our authoritative guide for faith and practice**". However, the Bible was written long ago and in cultures very different from our own. In order to appropriately apply its concepts to our lives, we must first understand those concepts in **their original context**. We must first seek to understand the world (culture, language, etc.) of the people whose names we read in Scripture.

Roger Gehring in "**House Church and Mission: The Importance of Household Structures in Early Christianity**" demonstrates that the concept of household (*oikos* in Greek) is a critical and significantly underappreciated element in understanding the meaning of "church" in the First Century. To say it another way, if we want to understand what *ekklesia* (generally translated "church") meant to people like Jesus, Peter and Paul, we need to have a good understanding of what *oikos* meant to these same people. For these people, ***oikos* was the context for *ekklesia***.

Gehring quotes Luhrmann (another NT scholar): "...the ancient *oikos* is not just one social and economic form among others but rather **the basic social and economic form** not only for the ancient world and the New Testament but presumably for every pre-industrial sedentary culture as well." p. 17

Gehring goes on to say: "Scarcely anything determined daily life more than the *oikos* with its network of relationships...**the significance of the *oikos* for the establishment and organization of early Christian church life can hardly be overemphasized.**" p. 17

A House is not necessarily a Household.

The implications of Gehring's insights about the importance of *oikos* are huge! For one thing, it means that moving church from a special church building into a home does not go nearly far enough. The churches established by Jesus and his disciples were not mere weekly meetings. **They were literally households - ongoing, 24/7, family like communities.**

Consider 1Cor. 16:19 - "Aquila and Prisca greet you heartily in the Lord, **with the church that is in their house (*oikos*)**". If we read this from our 21st Century Western context, we would (unconsciously?) conclude that once a week a group of Christians met in this couple's home for church. However, if we read this verse from the 1st Century context, we would conclude something quite different.

To say that we have a "house church" because we meet in someone's home at 7 pm on Tuesday nights, **falls significantly short of the New Testament concept of "house church"**.

More to come on this.

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Subject: Has Dr. Winter read Gehring? (3)
Date: 3/4/2005 5:21:51 AM Mountain Standard Time
From: [DenverWH](#)

Dear Church,

Just last week, my friend **Steve Plog**, who works at the **U.S. Center for World Missions** in Pasadena, CA, sent me a copy of the magazine "**Mission Frontiers**" (March - April 2005. See <http://www.missionfrontiers.org/>). **Dr. Ralph Winter**, who was one of my profs at Fuller over 30 years ago, is the Editor of the magazine as well as the founder of the US Center.

In his Editorial comments, Dr. Winter makes some amazing statements about traditional church, house church and family. I was struck by how similar his insights were to those of the book we have been reviewing ("**House Church and Mission**" by **Roger Gehring**).

Here are some selected quotes from Dr. Winter's editorial -

"...the trend to house churches is a phenomenon which runs counter to the long and slow drift of American churches away from extended families. The American church today is strikingly more and more a place for family fragments, and even seeks to *replace* natural families!

The New Testament 'church' was a worshipping household like that of Cornelius, Lydia, or Crispus, and was called an *eklesia*, a word that does not mean what we understand 'church' to mean.

What happened to us (slowly)? Modern age-stratified, highly specialized society has become Satan's Weapon of Mass Destruction of the family - precisely where worship and accountability are supposed to be primary! **The church has mindlessly followed the world's pattern: a family driving up to a church door is instantly chopped into pieces.**

...Three- and four-generation households, which once joined churches together, and had **family-level worship**, are now almost universally reduced to 'nuclear' families (e.g., family fragments). The grand-parent generation is no longer a stabilizing factor, divorce has skyrocketed, wives are abused, children go wrong, etc. This happened slowly, over 300 years. Thus, today we are blind to what has happened - but must deal with the consequences.

Those of us who have lived overseas, where most societies have not yet been 'Westernized' and stacked against normal marriage, may be among the only ones who can even perceive - much less unravel - the reality of this tragedy.

...Unfortunately, many congregations today have the idea that getting people into small groups is all that is necessary. **However, extended families can be small groups, but small groups cannot readily become extended families.**

Pastors, frantic to do more than preach generalities to crowds on Sunday, may hope to get most of their congregations into small groups. Sure, those family fragments out there in the pews desperately need to rise above their individualism and isolation. Thus, a non-family, artificial small group is better than nothing.

In such churches you may never hear a word about what could and should go on at the family level. I myself, in Evangelical churches all my life, have never heard a sermon on how or why families ought to have family devotions.

But it is clearly better - as well as more important - to make every real family a small group than to try to make small groups into artificial families. (JW - This one sentence could revolutionize the church in the US! One of the concepts that we have been working on is summed up in this sentence. "The marriage, and then the family, is the first and most foundational expression of the church." For more on this, see <http://www.dawnministries.org/regions/nam/johnwhite/mtg/unify.html>)

...All over the world it is gradually becoming clear that you can build a big church out of small groups, but big churches without families remaining intact aren't worth much.

...**The house church phenomenon could be revolutionary.** It just may be that the most valuable gift missions can give back to the American church is a renewed sense of the family as God intended it to be."

Preach it, Dr. Winter!!!

More to come on Gehring.

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Subject: Gehring (4): How important is this book?
Date: 3/24/2005 5:42:49 AM Mountain Standard Time
From: [DenverWH](#)

Dear Church,

Over the next weeks I plan further comments on the implications Roger Gehring's book ("House Church and Mission") in three areas:

1. The nature of church
2. The nature of church leadership
3. The nature of mission

Before I do that, I want to explain why I am devoting so much attention to this book. Simply stated, **I think it is a landmark**. It's potential for helping to reshape the church in the United States (and beyond) is huge!

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 again?) 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: Hmmmm.) 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"**.

More to come.

John White

Two ways to dig more deeply into Gehring's book:

1. Buy the book. One of the people on this elist has a book service and is offering the book at \$20. See Bean Book Services at <http://www.beanbooks.com/>
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Subj: **Gehring (5): The Nature of the Church**
Date: 4/2/2005 8:28:17 AM Mountain Daylight Time
From: [DenverWH](#)
To: [DenverWH](#)

Dear Church,

I've been struggling for several days on where to go next with these emails. The problem is that the quotes from Gehring's book that deal with the nature of the church are just ... (I can't think of a word here.)...**mind boggling, paradigm-shifting**... (These quotes begin on page 9 of my summary of "House Church and Mission".) I want to get on to implications for leadership and for mission but I think we must first take our time in considering how Jesus and His followers thought about the very nature of church.

Here are some of the key quotes:

Gehring: *"The large part played by the house churches affords a partial explanation of the great attention paid to family life in the letters of Paul and in the other Christian writings. It must not be forgotten that in both Jewish and Gentile life religious observance had been largely centered in the home."* Quoting Filson, p. 3 (Note that Gehring's book represents not only his own study of Scripture but also a survey of the work of a number of other NT scholars writing on this subject.)

JW: In his marvelous book "**Father Abraham: Jewish Roots of the Christian Faith**", Marvin Wilson confirms this fact. "Foundational to all theory on the biblical concept of family is the Jewish teaching that the home is more important than the synagogue. In Jewish tradition, **the center of religious life has always been the home**. The Church has yet to grapple seriously with this crucial concept." p. 216.

This represents a huge paradigm shift for most Americans who have been "trained" to believe that "religious observance" is centered in the church (the church building, Sunday worship services, etc.). Church and family are seen as two separate and distinct entities. A return (re-formation?) to NT values would mean **reuniting church and family**. For more on this, see <http://www.dawnministries.org/regions/nam/johnwhite/mtg/unify.html>

Gehring: *"Of fundamental importance is Elliott's insight that 'households thus constituted the focus, locus and nucleus of the ministry and mission of the Christian movement.'"* P. 6 (Here we have another NT scholar quoted.)

JW: Spend some time thinking about this sentence. If it is true (and I think it is!), **the ramifications are immense**. If taken seriously, every evangelical seminary in the country would have to completely revamp their curriculum. Every parachurch ministry would have to rework their entire strategy for mission. And so on...

"Households are the **focus** of ...ministry and mission" Focus = the primary thing you give attention to. Not church programs. Not church buildings. Not church budgets. Not church staffing. Not youth programs. Not Sunday School. **Households!** Mothers and fathers and children and relatives and the people they are in relationship with.

"Households are the **locus** of...ministry and mission". Locus = the physical location. Again, not the church building. But also not (primarily) the workplace or the school. **Households!** Ministry and mission primarily took place in the home and from the home.

"Households are the **nucleus** of...ministry and mission." Nucleus = the centerpoint from which everything else grows. Our phrase is "the marriage (and then the family) is the first and most foundational expression of church". Not (first of all) the Board of Elders or a leadership team or core group. **A family is (potentially) an embryonic church.**

Question: How do you get lots of "grown ups"?

Answer: Start with lots of embryos. (This simple concept gives us a clue about the phenomenal growth of the early church. As someone has said, "Christianity conquered the Roman Empire one house at a time.")

In the "ministry and mission of the Christian movement" in the First Century, **the household was primary.** Everything else was secondary.

More to come.

John White

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