

Why House Church Isn't the Answer

by Wayne Jacobsen

When 20 years of countless prayers didn't fix it, I had to conclude either that God was ignoring me, or that I was asking for the wrong thing. Anxiety used to be my constant companion, and quite honestly he was no fun to hang with. He used to punch me in the pit of the stomach when I least expected it and his ravings kept me awake at night.

Every time a circumstance emerged that caused him to appear, I begged God to change it so I would not be anxious. Rarely, if ever, did he answer those prayers. Finally, I concluded that the circumstances were not the problem, but the anxiety itself was. My prayers changed. I stopped begging him to fix my circumstances and instead asked him to remove my anxiety. It only took a decade this time for me to realize these prayers weren't working any better and I grew incredibly frustrated at God's seeming indifference to my concerns.

I didn't know then that in God's heart my problem was not the circumstances that allowed my anxiety to emerge, nor even the anxiety itself. The problem God wanted to fix was the fact that I didn't trust him to work in my circumstances to accomplish his purpose. My desire to be in control of my own life and achieve the success I thought I needed to prove my worth to him, and ultimately to myself, was the real captor.

Anxiety was only the symptom of a deeper need that God wanted to expose and heal with a clearer revelation of who he is and what he wanted to do in me. Many of you have read the chronicle of that journey in these newsletters and in *He Loves Me!* The more he showed me how great he was and how much he loved me, the less often I met with anxiety. Even though my circumstances had not changed, my trust in him had. I have ended up not even wanting God to satisfy my agenda anymore, but just to let me live in his every day.

In my best wisdom I had been trying to get God to fix the wrong thing. Real freedom didn't lie in conforming my circumstances to my expectations or simply removing my anxious thoughts. He wanted to build a relationship with me that would set my heart at rest regardless of the circumstances that came my way. For thirty years I had sought a cheap substitute for the real fix.

I see people doing the same thing in discovering how to be part of God's church. Having seen the weaknesses and failures of many religious structures, they have turned toward house church as the answer for authentic church life. Unfortunately, they are likely to be as disappointed there.

It's Not the Form

For those who read BodyLife, you know I love seeing the body of Christ find ways to live out its faith and fellowship in household-sized groups where people can be active participants together in the journey of faith. The early church found the home to be the most natural environment for people to share God's life together.

It is easy to convince people that house church just might be the answer to all of they've desired in body life, that is until they get involved in one. It quickly becomes evident that meeting in a home isn't necessarily all it's cracked up to be. What do we do about the people who only want to use the group for their own needs? Where can we find enough people willing to pay the price to share that kind of life together? What do we do when the meeting is boring and we're tired of staring at each other?

Moving things out of a larger building and into a home does not of itself answer anything of substance. While it does provide the possibility of more active participation and deeper relationships, just sitting in a house together for a meeting does not guarantee that those things will happen. If people aren't discovering the substance of what it means to live as the church, changing the mechanics will only provide a platform for people to commandeer the group in their thirst for leadership or pull it down by trying to make their needs or passions the focus of the group.

What's wrong with the way we do church today has far less to do with the forms we use than it does the journey we are on. If we are looking for house church to meet the needs that more institutional forms couldn't touch, we are likely to be disappointed by our experiences in house church. Any time we begin with our needs as the focus, instead of God's purpose, we will end up disappointed by the results.

Mutual Accommodation of Self-Need

Like my attempts to get God to fix my anxiety my way, many of us are programmed to try to relate to God through our needs. If we begin to build our sense of church based on those self-needs, we will only end up frustrated with a cheap counterfeit of the real church God has created us to embrace. If we are looking to relate to the church because we need acceptance, or security, or a place to demonstrate our gifts, or people to love us in a certain way or someone to tell me how I should live in Christ, we're already headed the wrong direction.

Most people never see that because the things they want, like being free from anxiety, are not evil things. It's the way we go about getting them met that provides the real trap. A friend of mine who was a denominational pastor for many years, in the end defined much of organized religion as the mutual accommodation of self-need. Some people need to lead; others need to be led. Some need acceptance and others relish in acting as their savior. Some need to get up front and sing; while others want to sit through a moving service. Some people have a passion for children's ministry and others just want to drop their children so others will disciple them.

His contention was that congregations exist only as long as they can effectively overlap these needs. When they do, the congregation gets along famously. When they don't they get trapped in gossip, power-struggles, and people leaving to find congregations that will meet their needs or form new ones with a different group in control. There the cycle begins all over again while most never realize that the life of the church is not built on our self-needs, but on God's purpose in his people.

Changing the venue from a building to a home doesn't solve this problem. If we're going to seek to find church life by having our needs accommodated by others, we will find moments of fulfillment mingled with long, dry periods of discontent and frustration.

Absolute Dependence

Experiencing the joy of authentic fellowship begins when we realize that all our dependence must be centered on Jesus himself. We don't share fellowship because we need to. We don't do it to get our needs met. True fellowship can only be known where our dependence upon Christ spills out in our love for others. Knowing the joy and freedom of his life, we can't help but share it with others.

Scripture is clear. True life is only found in Jesus. There is life in no other--not even a correct arrangement of Christians in houses or buildings. That's what Paul meant when he called Jesus the Head of the Church, declaring that it was God's purpose for him to "have first place in everything." Our needs are not the focus of body life. His presence living among us is.

We've taught for years the mistaken notion that we need to go to church to fill up on the life of God. Not true! We can only fill up on God's life through a transforming relationship with the Father through his Son. We were never meant to come to fill ourselves with church, but to live full of him and then share his life together with God's people.

Here is the problem with most of what passes for church life today, including many house churches: Rather than teaching people how to live dependent on Jesus Christ, it supplants that dependency by its misguided attempt to take the place of Jesus in people's lives. Instead of teaching them how to live in him, they make them dependent on the structures and gatherings of what we call church. Our expressions of church life just become another thing to stand in the way of people living deeply and fully in him.

But people who are learning to live deeply in a relationship with Jesus will find the sheer joy of sharing life with others who are doing the same. They can cross paths for a moment, or walk together for years, without having to manipulate or control each other. Because those people will realize that Jesus is the only one in control after all.

Unfortunately most believers have no idea how to live that way. We seem content to keep them dependent on our programs and services. It explains why so many expressions of church always promise more than they deliver. We can tinker forever with different

methods of church life, but if we don't get this right, all our efforts will fall short. If you need help find some people who are living this way, who are not gathering a 'band of disciples', and ask for their help.

Church life grows out of a group of people who are focused on Jesus. Focus on the church, and you will always be disappointed. Focus on Jesus and you will find him building the church all around you.

Everywhere a Movement

Everywhere I go now, people ask me about the 'house church movement,' hoping it will provide the answer to their hunger for real body life. While I greatly prefer relational environments to institutional ones, every time I hear the word 'movement' my heart sinks. I'm convinced that the day we call what God's doing a movement is the day it has already begun to die. I've seen many movements come and go --Charismatic, discipleship, deliverance, healing, intercession, spiritual warfare, prophetic, worship, and apostolic just to name a few. All of them came up hollow in the end, not because God wasn't in some of it, but because people hijacked his work to serve their own needs and ambitions.

Calling something a movement inflates our own sense of importance and separates us from the multi-faceted working of God that transcends any particular way of doing things. Many years ago I was part of a denomination that called itself a movement. We used that term to make people feel that they were part of something more significant than other 'less enlightened' believers who didn't do things the way we did. I think God grieves at such distinctions.

Labeling the joy of learning to share Christ's life in our homes as the 'House Church Movement' takes our focus off of Christ and puts them either on the uniqueness of our methods or the voices of self-appointed experts. Either way, we trade our focus on Jesus for our own self-needs and miss the joy of authentic body life.

Sitting in a home in Buffalo, NY recently a friend handed me a new book on the house church movement. The subtitle nearly floored me, "From the Radical Men Who Are Leading this Revolution." One of the authors I considered friend enough to write and ask him if he could explain to me how the cover of his book was anything less than blasphemous.

If the church is truly the work of Jesus, and in it he has first place in everything, how does anyone claim to lead what God is doing? It is either his work or it isn't? Please understand I don't think these are malicious men out to harm God's church. These in particular honestly want to see the church come to some kind of wholeness, freedom and life. However, the way they go about it demonstrates that while they understand a bit of God's ways, they've come to know little of his character.

So while their book highlights many of the ways God has asked us to share his life together, it's laced with the poisonous notion that we can produce that life by getting the

mechanics right or by following the right leader. Such teaching actually circumvents the priorities it espouses by imposing a structure that will undermine those priorities.

Of course my friend did not agree with me. In fact, he said, the book was selling briskly. I have no doubt of that. Part of the reason we create movements is because people want models they think they can simply implement in their own communities.

Super Models

Many people ask me for a model for church life, hoping some future book might lay it out for them. I hate to disappoint them, but I don't even believe there is a model they can implement that will produce the vitality of authentic fellowship. It is not produced in mechanics but in the hearts of people God is transforming to be like himself.

You can take the most biblical guidelines in the world and if you implement them at the expense of learning how to live dependent upon Jesus, and the result is that it will still only be a substitute for Jesus presence, rather than a place where fellow-pilgrims share his life together.

Jesus did not leave us with a model to build, but a guide to follow. We experience the life of the church not because we meet a certain way or in a certain place, but because we learn to listen to God together and let him teach us how to share his life. If we substitute any method or design for that process, we will end up following it instead of him and building a counterfeit instead of the real deal. I know of no greater distraction to the depth of relationships God wants us to share, than when we give our best efforts to doing something great for God. He didn't ask us to work for him, but with him.

Beware of any model or would-be leader who wants to tell you what to do, rather than help you hear him Jesus. Are there real leaders in the Body of Christ today? Of course! But they are not heading up movements or devising models, they are helping people know who Jesus really is and learn how to follow him. Religion results when men and women, with their best intentions, best activities and best programs try to accomplish God's working. It always leads to well-intentioned programs that will do some good, but never rise to bear the great fruits that God intends and only he can accomplish.

Many think I'm so concerned about organized religion because I've been hurt by the worst of it. That isn't quite true. I think it's greatest danger comes not when it is obviously flawed, but when it works well--giving people an aesthetic experience or a place to park their guilt, and missing out on a real engagement with the King of Glory. When it convinces us that sitting in the same room or greeting each other briefly in the parking lot is real fellowship, we'll miss the greater joy of supportive relationships that will help us all respond better to what God is doing in us.

Accept No Substitutes

What I love about the work of the Spirit in our day is that it is not being driven by an organization, a book or a charismatic speaker. God's Spirit is creating a hunger in his people that defies the confines of religion or a particular way of doing things, and seeks to drink deeply of his presence and share an effective life with other fellow travelers.

Some people are finding others with that hunger inside more institutional congregations, and some are finding them outside of it. If you haven't found people like that yet, don't despair. God has not made all the connections he is going to make. Just don't over trade the passion in your heart to settle for a shadow of body life and miss the real thing.

Real body life allows Jesus to have first place in everything, and encourages people to the heights of knowing him. It frees people on the journey of being transformed by God to be authentic and not have to conform or pretend. It shows them how to get involved in each other's lives, not to manipulate others but to encourage God's greatest work in their lives.

Why is that so difficult to find? It may be that too many believers are so focused on their own needs they don't know how to engage others in true fellowship. It may be that we settle for cheap models that do some good in the short-term, but in doing so disarm the deeper yearnings for authentic body life. It may be that we've never learned the sheer joy of letting Jesus be the Head of his church.

If we don't get this right, it won't matter where or how we meet. It will still be centered on us, and fall far short of his glory. Why don't you ask God to teach you how to let Jesus have first place in your heart and to help you find people who share that passion? I can't imagine a prayer that would excite him more and when that happens he will show you how and where you can live out that life in him.

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