

House Churches
by John Gibson
(Preached at the Pepper Road Church in Athens, AL)
www.cvillechurch.com

Introduction:

- 1) I have been asked to speak on house churches, which is not the easiest subject to define.
- 2) A local church meeting in a private residence is not necessarily what is meant by house church.
 - a) It is certainly Scriptural to meet in homes and for smaller groups and those just beginning in a new area, it might be the wisest, most expedient choice.
- 3) We are talking about groups with much variation, but usually with some shared characteristics.
 - a) I am primarily speaking of groups influenced by F. LaGard Smith's *Radical Restoration*.
 - b) I have read the book carefully and have also listened to a sermon preached by a man influenced by Smith's thinking.
 - c) In addition, I have had some conversations with a member of a "house church."
 1. They have now disbanded, but they didn't meet in a house, but in a storefront.
- 4) House churches generally break away from established groups and tend to emphasize the following...
 - a) The emotions, feelings, etc. of the participants.
 - b) Edification of one another tends to be stressed above worship of God.
 - c) May call themselves different names, but church of Christ is usually the one they will avoid.
 - d) Whether or not they meet in a house, they tend to be relatively small in size.
 - e) LaGard Smith and those influenced by him have rejected what some have derisively termed the "pinch and sip" Lord's Supper. Smith wants the Lord's Supper to be eaten as part of a larger fellowship meal, while others have made the Lord's Supper into more of a full meal.

I. SUBJECTIVE V. OBJECTIVE STANDARD.

A. Quotes from LaGard Smith.

1. He put the following phrases in quotation marks as if they were the words of Jesus.
 - a. "Not Rules, but righteousness."
 - b. "Not Ritual, but spiritual."
2. Smith also speaks of "almost exact parallels between the miraculous gifts and those which are non-miraculous." Joy, peace, hope, and singing are described as ecstasy, similar to miraculous tongues.
 - a. The dictionary defines ecstasy as "a state of being beyond reason" or "a state of overwhelming emotion."

3. It is also worth noting that Smith often uses words that express uncertainty.
 - a. “From what we can tell...apparently...presumably...I wonder...this might have taken place...but it is also possible...might have been...” etc.
 - b. Proposes a radical reworking of local churches and yet is uncertain of so much.

B. We Have an Objective Standard.

1. God has revealed a concrete standard. **2 Tim. 3:16f**
2. Apart from God’s rules, how can I define righteousness? **Rom. 10:1-4; Matt. 7:21-23**
3. If “ritual” is unimportant to Jesus, why did He say, “Do this”? **1 Cor. 11:24f**
4. NT worship is not based on ecstasy, but the word of God. Cf. **Eph. 5:18f** and **Col. 3:16**.

II. A FOCUS ON EXTERNALS.

1. Smith says that we must not be “quick-fix artists who deal only with the symptoms of our malaise, not the root causes.”
2. Many of the aims of Radical Restoration are noble ones and churches and/or individual Christians can get into a rut, but Smith’s answers are largely external ones.
 - a. Remember Jesus with larger amounts of bread and juice; sit in a circle (or around the living room); eliminate the song leader; do away with the boring lectures and allow everyone to participate; etc.
3. How do any of these things touch the real problem?
 - a. One in whom the word of Christ dwells richly can sing with grace in his heart to the Lord with or without a song leader.
 - b. There is something dreadfully wrong if my remembrance of the Lord is made dependent upon the seating arrangement and size of the portions.
 - c. 3,000 were baptized on Pentecost without a “homey” atmosphere, but because the one with the knowledge to do so preached the gospel. **Rom. 1:16**
4. Spiritual renewal is sometimes needed, but external manipulations are not a real solution.
 - a. We need more internal reflection. Use the rational mind to contemplate what it means to be in Christ and living with the hope of heaven and then seating arrangements; the way songs are started, etc. will seem far less important.
 - b. **Phil. 3:1; 4:4-7**
 - c. Choose the best seating arrangement you can; give thought to order in which we sing, pray, preach, etc., but realize that if it is the externals that matter the most, no arrangement will ever satisfy.

III. THE LORD'S SUPPER.

A. Two Ideas.

1. Smith argues that the Lord's Supper was instituted in the context of a shared meal and should be eaten in conjunction with a fellowship meal.
2. Others, who have not adopted that idea, have accepted his idea that the word supper implies a quantity of food sufficient to constitute a meal.

B. The Fellowship Meal.

1. In **1Cor. 11:17-34** three things are done.
 - a. The divisive spirit is condemned. **11:17-22**
 - b. The proper way to remember Christ is emphasized. **11:23-31**
 - c. Hunger-satisfying meals are placed in the home. **11:33f**
2. Paul did not merely correct the "abuses" of a fellowship meal—he told them to eat at home.

C. The Memorial as a Meal.

1. To stress the word supper as requiring a meal is to miss the point.
2. Physical hunger was to be satisfied at home. **1 Cor. 11:22, 33f**
3. The Lord's Supper was about remembering Jesus. **1 Cor. 11:23-29**
4. The amount of bread and juice consumed is never even hinted at.
 - a. I have no objection to larger portions, but those are external incidentals.
 - b. Division should not be created over issues to which God has not spoken.

IV. THE DIVISIVENESS OF THE MOVEMENT.

1. Because each "house church" differs, it is not an easy movement to speak about.
 - a. What is true of one group may not be true of another.
2. Groups that buy into all of Smith's teaching will be involved in error, plain and simple.
 - a. Keep in mind that he has been in the institutional camp for many years.
 - b. He advocates the fellowship meal; hints at unscriptural roles for women; promotes a city-wide eldership concept.
 - 1) His concept of city-wide elders is much like that of Alvin Jennings in *How Christianity Grows in the City* and that of the International Churches of Christ (Discipling Movement).

3. Other groups have rejected some of the more “institutionally” flavored changes Smith has proposed.
 - a. One brother defended an Alabama group as “just another local church of Christ.”
 - 1) Of course, this “local church of Christ” would not dare use that name.
 - 2) They also did not take a collection except on rare occasions when they learned of some needy saint(s).
 - b. But let us assume for a moment that these groups are simply choosing some non-traditional expedients. How should we view them?
4. Where is the spirit of **Eph. 4:1-3**? **Phil. 2:1-4**?
 - a. Is it proper for me to leave and establish a new church when the group I am with will not go along with *my* expedients?
 - b. Is the love of **1 Cor. 13** present when we pull people out of a congregation (or several of them) because we want a new seating arrangement or a larger piece of bread?

Conclusion:

- 1) Many, many more things could be said, but I will stop with these major points.
- 2) Restoration is a noble aim, but can only be achieved when we look to the objective standard of God’s word.
- 3) Let’s be a people committed to God’s word. Please don’t take this lesson as a defense of the status quo or traditional ways of doing things.
- 4) But do see it as a call to be willing to accept the fact that your beloved brethren will not always see the need for the radical changes you think necessary and unless Scripture requires the changes, we need to esteem others as better than ourselves.