

“Radical Restoration” or Radical Apostasy

A Review of the “House Church” Movement

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Introduction...

- I. The apostle Paul said, “*there must also be factions among you, so that those who are approved may become evident among you*” (1 Cor. 10:19).
 - A. 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.
 - B. As Peter said, “... *there will also be false teachers among you, who will secretly introduce destructive heresies...*” (2 Pet. 2:1).
 - C. It is our responsibility to “... *test the spirits to see whether they are from God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world*” (1 John 4:1).
- II. For several years now there has been a phenomenon taking place among us that has come to be called the “house church” movement.
 - A. This is not a movement designed simply to establish new congregations in geographical areas where there is none – these are not merely local churches that happen to begin meeting in someone’s home.
 - B. 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 their orthodoxy and traditions – and so, they have broken away to form new fellowships.
- III. A great influence in this movement is LaGard Smith.
 - A. LaGard Smith is the son of the late gospel preacher, Frank Smith. I knew brother Frank Smith many years ago when he preached for the Huffman church in Birmingham, AL. I’ve been in their home and sat at their table. I cannot resist the temptation to say that I believe brother Frank would “turn over in his grave” if he knew the things his son was advocating today.
 - B. LaGard went to Florida College, left there and obtained a law degree and eventually became a professor at Pepperdine University, in California. Of late he has been a “Scholar in Residence” at David Lipscomb University in Nashville, Tennessee but spends much of each year in Cotswold, England writing. He has published more than 20 books, several of them are in popular use.
 - C. In a book called “Radical Restoration,” Smith asserts that we have drifted from the Biblical model and calls for radical changes.
 1. In this lesson I want to review some of Smith’s observations and ask if his call is truly a call for radical restoration or if it is, as I believe, a vanguard for radical apostasy.
 2. A complete review of “Radical Restoration” is an impossible task for one lesson. Therefore, I have chosen to identify six areas where I believe Smith points people in the wrong direction. Five of these I will only briefly examine, but we will “camp” on the sixth for a while.
- IV. There is a preliminary observation that I need to make:
 - A. From the beginning to the end of 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.
 - B. Smith continually makes several assertions and assumptions about a text then proceeds to make his argument, having assumed the very point to be proven.
 - C. Please make careful note of this as I produce for you the quotes from “Radical Restoration.”

V. According to LaGard Smith...

Discussion...

- I. ... “Radical Restoration” means abandoning church-own buildings to meet in private homes...
 - A. Smith says...
 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 Cor. 16:19, Rom. 16:3-5, Col. 4:15, Phile. 1-2 & Acts 12:5-12 as house churches.
 - B. The truth is that early churches didn’t just meet in houses. They met...
 1. In the temple... Acts 2:46
 2. By a river side... Acts 16:13
 3. School of Tyrannus... Acts 19:9
 4. An upper room... Acts 20:8
 5. Rented-quarters... Acts 28:30-31
 6. Synagogue-type place... James 2:2
 - C. *Where* any given local church meets is a decision of expediency, authorized under the command to assemble... Heb. 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. Generally we build because it is more economical in the long run than renting and provides facilities that are specifically designed to meet congregational needs.
- II. ... “Radical Restoration” means spontaneous, informal worship...
 - A. Smith says,
 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 my worship I have two first responses (how’s that for an oxymoron?)
1. I think he has missed the point of worship. Our worship is not about me, it’s about God! (One man who established one of these “house churches,” admitted to me that he was searching for a more intimate, *horizontal* relationship with other worshipers.)
 2. Pardon me if I find it hard not to resent Smith’s characterization of my worship as *“mostly an orchestrated religious spectacle for which we have reserved seats each week.”* I want to improve my worship; sometimes, I admit, it is not what it needs to be. But if there is a failure, it is because my own heart is not prepared to worship Him. It is emphatically not because I engage in some sort of *orchestrated religious spectacle* for which I find no New Testament authority!
- C. 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 Cor. 14:31-34,40).
- III. ... “Radical Restoration” means that one set of elders would oversee all of the “house churches” in a city...
- 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 city-wide 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. On the other hand, the Scriptures teach each congregation is to appoint its own elders whose oversight is limited to that local congregation... Acts 14:23; 1 Pet. 5:2; Acts 20:28
- 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. 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!
 2. There is no shread of evidence that would lead us to believe that there is scriptural authority for elders to oversee anything but the congregation in which they were appointed!

- IV. ... “Radical Restoration” means a resurrection of the “mutual ministry” practices of Carl Ketherside...
- A. Smith says...
1. *“What will it take for us to see how far removed most of our congregations are from the pattern of leadership in the early church? To honestly admit that there’s been a paradigm shift of the greatest magnitude? To have the courage to fundamentally change how we are fed and led?”* (189).
 2. He accuses elders of *“abdicating responsibility for teaching and preaching of the Word by hiring professional ‘pulpit ministers’ (as distinct from full-time elders)”* (189).
 3. *“The very concept of worship focused around a pulpit flies in the face of the dynamic, mutually-participatory house churches in the apostolic age. Houses don’t have pulpits”* (211).
 4. He affirms that *“Pulpit ministers may be an invention, but mutual ministry is not”* (212).
 5. He asks, *“But could it really happen? No, not converting the world, but converting our own elders into ‘teaching pastors,’ and our pulpit ministers into ‘pulpit-less evangelists?’”* (212).
- B. I acknowledge that reform is often needed with regard to both the work of elders and the work of preachers.
1. As preachers we often are viewed in much the same way as denominational “pastors” or “Congregational CEO’s” – and that because we allow ourselves to be forced into those roles.
 2. The eldership is often viewed more as a corporate decision-making “Board of Directors” than shepherds looking out for the souls of men.
 3. And, in as much as this is true of any of those of us who preach or serve as elders, it needs to change! It needs to change because this is not the Biblical model of the role of an evangelist.
 4. And it might be noted that Smith, like other change agents in the church both past and present, is very adept at pointing out the abuses he sees among his brethren; then argue for change that may be even further astray than the abuses he so vehemently decries.
- C. However, correcting these abuses is not the real change Smith has in mind. Smith is advocating the old mutual edification doctrine in which “evangelists” are men who only seek to teach the lost and only “elders” address the church.
- D. We need to appreciate what the Bible says about preachers and preaching...
1. There were preachers in the early church like Paul who started churches and those that came and edified these churches... 1 Cor. 3:4-9
 2. Timothy was told to remain in Ephesus (1 Tim. 1:3) where Paul himself had labored for two years (Acts 19:10). It is hard to miss the fact that much of Timothy’s teaching and preaching was toward the church.
 3. Titus was told that his work among the Cretian churches was to *“set in order what remains and appoint elders in every city...”* (Tit. 1:5).

V. ... “Radical Restoration” means that the local church would operate with out a standing treasury or every first day of the week contribution...

A. Smith writes...

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. The Bible teaches...

1. The church was assigned its work by God which consist of teaching the lost, edifying the saved, and relieving needy saints (1 Tim. 3:15; Eph. 4:16; 1 Tim. 5:16).
2. The Scriptures emphatically teach the right of preachers to receive support... 1 Cor. 9:9-14; 2 Cor. 11:8; Phil. 4:15-16
3. In 1 Cor. 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 use of the correctly translated expression, “Upon the first day of every week,” shows that the Spirit had mor in mind than an isolated, one-time, benevolent need.

C. But, if Smith had his way, local churches would have no checking account, no established identity, and no need for a treasury!

VI. ... “Radical Restoration” means partaking of the Lord’s Supper in conjunction with a common meal...

A. Smith says...

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. So, Smith’s view of the Lord’s Supper is that of *“A Memorial Within A Meal”* (128) – A meal with normal table fare – bacon and beans, biscuits and greens, 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.
 6. Is this what the Scripture teaches?
- B. Smith’s fundamental affirmation comes from the institution of the Lord’s Supper at the last Passover Jesus observed with his disciples (Matt. 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 in conjunction with a “normal, ordinary” meal. To which I have several replies.
1. Reply #1: I deny that the Passover meal was a “normal, ordinary” meal. In fact, it was a very unusual meal, observed only once a year, designed itself as a memorial. The meal, strictly regulated (Exo. 12), consisted of roasted lamb (unblemished one year old male), unleavened bread, bitter herbs, and fruit of the vine (Matt. 26:29; Luke 22:18). When Jesus and His disciples sat down to eat the Passover it was anything but a typical meal.
 - a. I teach, and I think rightfully so, that 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 to unleavened bread and fruit of the vine, why are not the contents of Smith’s “normal, ordinary” meal limited to the elements of the Passover feast. If they are not so limited, why not?
 - c. Further, if the elements of the “common” or Passover meal can be changed to bacon and beans, biscuits and greens, by what logic can I not also change the elements of the Lord’s Supper?
 2. Reply #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. I acknowledge, based on 1 Cor. 5:7; John 1:29, et. al. (*“For Christ our Passover also has been sacrificed.”* – *“Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!”*) that there is a type/anti-type relationship between Jesus and the paschal lamb. However...
 - b. The Lord’s Supper was not a part of the Passover meal, nor an extension of it, but merely the occasion upon which Jesus instituted His own memorial supper by giving instruction on how His disciples were to observe it after His death, when the church was established, and local congregations gathered across the globe on the first day of every week to

worship.

- 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 at a meal? I think not.

3. Reply #3: In further proof that the Lord's Supper was distinct from the Passover meal and not a part of it, I offer 1 Cor. 11:25 — the apostle Paul's description of the institution of the Supper he said, "*In the same way He took the cup also after supper...*", indicating a distinction between the Passover meal and his instruction concerning the institution of His memorial.

- a. This same distinction is seen in Luke 22:20.

- b. I sought out the counsel of someone far better versed in the Greek language than I concerning the word "after" (Gr. *meta*) in 1 Cor. 11:25 and Luke 22:20 and here is what he said...

"Because Greek is an inflected language (one that indicates relationships by changing the endings of words), prepositions take certain cases. In the NT, *meta* can occur with the genitive case, meaning *with*, or with the accusative case, meaning *after*. English retains some remnants of this usage. E.g., Aristotle's *Metaphysics* is his discussion that comes after his discussion of physics. [It would miss the point entirely to assume that Aristotle discussed one topic *with* another.] In both of the passages that we discussed (Lk. 12:20 and 1 Cor. 11:25), *meta* occurs in the accusative, and therefore means *after*."

- c. The point is this: Jesus made a clear distinction between the Passover and the Supper He was instituting!

- C. Brother Smith has trouble with the term "gathered together to break bread" in Acts 20:7.

1. He writes, "*In the New Testament record, we find three ways to 'break bread'...*

(1) "*The first...was the literal breaking apart of the bread, as Jesus did that night before he distributed it (Luke 22:19)...*

(2) "*The eating of the meal itself was also referred to as 'breaking bread'... (Acts 2:46; 27:35 - jhd)...*

(3) "*It appears that, in time, the Lord's Supper itself was referred to as 'breaking bread'... (1 Cor. 10:16-17)." (129-130)*

In trying to establish his assertion that "*On the Lord's day...their common, ordinary fellowship meals took on an added significance as they came together specifically to celebrate Christ's memorial,*" he then writes, "*A much clearer example is found when the disciples in Troas 'came together to break bread...on the first day of the week' (Acts 20:7). Because of its association with the 'first day' (the day on which the disciples regularly met together), the breaking of bread on that occasion seems to have had the double connotation of both meal and memorial (Emphasis mine -jhd). Whatever actual form it took, it was a 'memorial within a meal' – a time to remember the Bread of Life while 'breaking bread' with one another.*" (130).

2. Smith's "double connotation" argument reminds me of the struggles that a Pentecostal preach I once debated had with Eph. 4:5.

- a. I asked the Pentecostal, "Which baptism is the apostle Paul talking about in Eph. 4:5 when he affirms, 'There is... one baptism?' Is it water baptism, or Holy Spirit baptism?"
- b. Caught up in a dilemma, he said, "both."

3. In like manner...
 - a. If I were to ask brother Smith, “For what purpose did the disciples gather on the first day of the week in Troas? Was it to have a common meal, or to observe the Lord’s Supper?”
 - b. Knowing he has a similar dilemma, brother Smith has already answered the question. He says, “both.”
4. The truth is, when Paul wrote to the church in Corinth, that appears to have been exactly what they were doing. They were gathering for both a common meal and to partake of the Lord’s Supper – abusing the Lord’s Supper in the process – and Paul rebuked them for it! Saying...
 - a. *“What! Do you not have houses in which to eat and drink? Or do you despise the church of God...”* (1 Cor. 11:22). And again...
 - b. *“If anyone is hungry, let him eat at home, so that you will not come together for judgment”* (1 Cor. 11:34).

D. Problems With 1 Corinthians 11:17-34

1. Brother Smith realizes he has problems with 1 Cor. 11 and admits, *“I am aware that most of us have traditionally understood this passage to condemn the eating of a common, ordinary meal at a time when Christ’s memorial is being observed... So bear with me as I attempt to show the passage in an altogether different light”* (130).
2. And this is exactly what he attempts to do; he deconstructs the passage, taking away its simple, most obvious meaning and reconstructs it in a very confusing way to fit the presuppositions he brings to the passage.
3. Yet, the apostle spoke in clear, easy to understand, language...
 - a. *“What! Do you not have houses in which to eat and drink? Or do you despise the church of God...”* (1 Cor. 11:22). And again...
 - b. *“If anyone is hungry, let him eat at home, so that you will not come together for judgment”* (1 Cor. 11:34).
 - c. Personally, I think Paul’s words are so clear and plain, that it takes a lawyer to confuse it!

Conclusion...

- I. One issue concerning this “house church” phenomenon among us with which Radical Restoration doesn’t deal is the issue of the role of women.
 - A. Except for one passing mention of *“the ever-present questions about gender roles”* (153), Smith doesn’t address this issue and I don’t know what he believes about the role of women.
 - B. However, it is becoming increasingly obvious (at least to me) that one of the driving forces in the establishment of some of these groups is an increased role for women beyond what the Scripture allows.
 1. One group I know allows for the women to address the assembly in clear violation of 1 Cor. 14:34 and 1 Tim. 2:11-12.
 2. In another, at least in their devotionals (whether in their assembly, I don’t know) chain prayers are offered with women participating, leading in the presence of men, again, in clear violation of 1 Tim. 2:11,12
- C. Brethren, I’m not a prophet nor the son of one, but I believe with all of my being that I see the issue

of gender roles coming down the track like a speeding freight train.

- II. We live in troubled times. While I acknowledge that there seems to be a spirit of stagnation among some churches, the answer to that stagnation is not to be found in novel gimmicks in an effort to find a closer vertical relationship with God and a warmer horizontal relationship with one another.
- III. It is true that we need a closer relationship with God and a warmer relationship with one another. But I maintain that such can only truly be found by following the instructions of the ancient prophets of God...
 - A. *“Thus says the Lord, “Stand by the ways and see and ask for the ancient paths, Where the good way is, and walk in it; And you shall find rest for your souls...”* (Jer. 6:16). And again...
 - B. *“Remove not the ancient landmark, which thy fathers have set”* (Pro. 22:28).
- IV. After all I have said it may be surprising to some that I say that there are actually many things in Smith’s Radical Restoration with which I agree.
 - A. For instance, chapter 11 of the book entitled, *A Youth-Driven Church*, begins with Smith quoting Bertrand Russell as saying, *“I was born in the wrong generation. When I was a young man, no one had any respect for youth. Now I am an old man and no one has any respect for age.”* I don’t consider myself an old man at all, but I am old enough to sympathize with that statement.
 - 1. It seems that the spirit of our age is, if it is old, it needs to be discarded.
 - 2. Little thought is given to the possibility that some things that are old are so because they are divinely revealed by a God who knows us better than we know ourselves.
 - 3. Little thought is given to the possibility that the reason some things are old is because they have been tried and tested and proven reliable.
 - 4. I am convinced that these things will stand when this world is on fire and false doctrine and the men who promote them are long gone.
- V. May God give us the wisdom to both recognize and preserve the “ancient landmarks.”