



Many house churches start among people who first met or meet in an institutional setting, but can one really worship at an institutional church?

Extended Life C.T.M.

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Why the *House* Church?

Many house churches start among people who first met or meet in an institutional setting, but can one really *worship* at an *institutional* church? The fellowship pictured in (Mt. 18:20) (the source of the house church doctrine of church) is "two or three gathered together." Even "church growth" expert Lyle Schaller says that the "glue" that is necessary to unite worshippers cannot be achieved as a church grows beyond a limit of about 40 people. Other experts point out that an assembly larger than a mere dozen people creates an environment in which some of the people often back away from full participation. And there is the concern that the institutional church tends toward viewing its members as an "audience" and the worship experience as a "show." It is better to view *God* as the audience and all the people equally accountable for the "performance" of worshipping in Spirit and in Truth.

Here are just a few of the reasons for house churches:

- **Historical.** The house church is the biblical church. All of the churches in the New Testament era were small assemblies that met in homes. While setting up institutional forms of "church" may or may not provide a way to honor God, the movement toward the institution and the human authority that tends to accompany hierarchical institutional structure are not theologically neutral.
- **Growth.** The most explosive growth of Christianity in our own time has taken place in the likes of the People's Republic of China where its only expression has been the illegal, underground house church (more recently the PRC has installed a government-licensed "Three Self" church in an effort to control a movement that decades of political repression has failed to contain). Historian Del Birkey's studies have led him to conclude that the house church is our best hope for the renewal in our times.
- **Resisting the Culture.** Our culture desperately wants to change our doctrines so that it might "make over" Christianity to conform to its notion of "civil religion" and "political correctness."

Making Over Christianity A Case Study



The history of the church in Germany between 1930-1945 provides an excellent case study on how government policy can manipulate the institutional church. Like most major shifts in public policy, this one took place through a succession of small agenda items to avoid major public protest as it managed to install as "Christian" a new spirituality invented by a government.

The "German Evangelical Christian Church"

The first step of the process can be traced to 1921, when *The German Church--Sunday Paper for the German Volk* began to appear. It had the objective of ridding the German church of the Old Testament and re-interpreting the heroic sacrifice of Jesus on the cross along the lines of German mysticism. Clergy in the state churches were elected, and by the 1930s the Nazi party worked to install its own candidates. Church parties like "The Church Union for Positive Christianity and German Nationality" and "The Evangelical National Socialists" began to be formed. Hitler began to unite these parties into the "Faith Movement of German Christians" in 1932, led by Joachim Hossenfelder who liked to call it "The Storm Troops of Jesus Christ." In actuality, the church was encouraged to view Adolph Hitler as the one that God had raised for the salvation of the German nation. Faith was based on the "Spirit of Luther" and was to have a heroic piety. Sanctification was defined as keeping Germany "racially pure," and was to be a duty of the church.

When the new church leaders had their first meeting, they responded with enthusiastic "Heils" to the words of the brown-shirted Dean Grell, who expressed the need for a German faith and a German God. Eventually, even words like "Amen" and "Hallelujah" would be eliminated from the liturgy because of their Jewish etymology.

Many of Germany's world famous theologians sided with this national church movement, perhaps out of fear of losing their posts in the universities. After Hitler seized power, he heavily promoted the party church and denied other candidates access to the media. As the movement gathered momentum, hoards of people who had previously had no interest in the church began to flood the sanctuaries.

The Barmen Declaration

The re-imagining of the German Christian Church would not, of course, remove all traces of true Christianity from the land. Certain opposing pastors continued to preach courageously, Reich officers carefully monitoring their services, which few dared to attend.

The biggest protest was organized by the German-Swiss Theologian Karl Barth (pronounced "Bart"), who lost his professorship at the University in Bonn because he refused to sign the required oath that put Hitler above Jesus. He later drafted the "Barmen Declaration" and

engineered a meeting in May of 1934 of 139 delegates from 18 churches who signed the document. The Declaration would infuriate Hitler but, in the event, had little actual effect. Here are a summary of the points that it condemned as "false doctrine":

1. That the church would proclaim anything other than material rooted in Scripture (Jn. 14:6).
2. That Christians could have any other Lord than Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 1:30).
3. That the church would take a role in the "currently reigning ideological and political" message (Eph. 4:15-16).
4. That the church would yield to control by secular powers (Mt. 20:25-26).
5. That the church would fulfil the state's objectives or be an organ of the state (1 Pet. 2:17).
6. That the church would follow the desires, purposes, and plans that originated from any source other than the Lord Jesus (Mt. 28:20).

In short, Barmen said, "No führer but Jesus."

Barmen was also an example of a **confessional** document--a writing that expresses what the writers believe, rather than a **creed** that attempts to state what ought to be believed. While Barmen was not the product of a house church movement, all the important documents of house church history have been confessions, not creeds.

The Counter-Cultural Nature of Discipleship

The house church has always been **counter-cultural** for this reason, just as Jesus said that his disciples should be in the Sermon on the Mount. That sermon outlines how the powerless disciple can be salt and light in a dark world (Mt. 5:13-14), how to withstand evildoers (Mt. 5:39) by showing God's love to the world through suffering at the hands of persecution from bullies (Mt. 5:39), foreclosing landlords (Mt. 5:40), and occupying Roman authorities (Mt. 5:41). It speaks of giving and lending to the most hopeless credit risks (Mt. 5:42). It speaks of a praying community ("Our Father, who art in heaven ..." Mt. 6:9) that fasts (Mt. 6:16), gives of itself (Mt. 6: 21), and depends completely on God (Mt. 25ff). It speaks of the non-judgment of individuals (Mt. 7:1), just as it speaks of the need to judge those who would be authorities in spiritual matters (Mt. 7:15ff).

It is appropriate to ask, "What do you mean by counter-culture?" In the 1960s, the term came to mean civil disobedience or any number of other anti-establishment activities, usually associated with activism. The counter-cultural nature of the Christian gospel is not that at all--rather it is the embodiment and actualization of Philippians 3:20 in the life of every believer. The disciple echoes Paul's words, "Our citizenship is in heaven...." We are all brothers and sisters in common citizenship in heaven--a new and different culture. Yes, we are to live in the culture of the world--and we are to witness to it--but heaven is against the culture of the world. Likewise, we are against the culture of the world.

Mt. 5-7 is so counter-cultural that the *Scofield Reference Bible* assures its readers that they need not pay it any heed, arguing that it only kicks in during the "coming kingdom on earth" (note on Mt. 5:3). House church theologians, on the other hand, have always understood this sermon as outlining the radical discipleship that a true commitment to the Lord entails--the very

"teachings" that Jesus commissioned the church to bring to the whole world at the end of Matthew's gospel. Nevertheless, the culture itself has appropriated portions of the Sermon on the Mount to promote its own "civic religion." But these passages were intended to demonstrate the radical nature of true discipleship, the followers of Jesus even taking the risk of further injury in order to be a right witness to those in the culture who persecute them. Consider the following:

Verse	Culture's Interpretation	Biblical Interpretation
Mt. 5:39. Turn the other cheek.	Forgive and forget. Make peace, not war.	The passage does not say "Turn the other cheek" as if to say that the disciple should invite another blow of the same kind. The first blow was to the <i>right</i> cheek, which was the backhand slap that demonstrated the dominance of the powerful over the powerless. The slapper wants the slappee to slink away in shame. But when the slappee is a disciple, he/she is to hold his/her ground and offer the <i>left</i> cheek. This forces the man of power to either escalate his persecution to a blow in earnest or to himself back down and slink away in shame. The disciple reflects the evil back to its source, exposes the sin, and begs repentance.
Mt. 5:40. Give the other cloak.	Don't get upset over a minor loss. After all, you have insurance.	After a landlord foreclosed on a failed farm property, he would sue the farmer for everything else he might own--but would never claim the "cloak"--the garment worn closest to the skin--by Deut. 24:12-13. But Jesus says that the disciple will not withhold even the cloak. He would add the cloak to the pile of assets and walk, naked, out of the court and into the arms of his fellow disciples--saying, in effect, "There--now you have everything. You have no more hold over me." This, of course, forced the persecutor to look upon nakedness, a sin (see Gen. 9:20ff--it is not a sin for circumstances to cause one to be naked; the sin is in <i>looking upon</i> nakedness). Again, the sin of the persecutor is reflected back to its source by the disciple of Christ.
Mt. 5:41. Go the second mile.	Do more than the boss says and you will get the promotion.	The verb here is not "force," but "requisition." It is only otherwise used in the New Testament to describe the requisitioning of the labor of Simon of Cyrene to carry Jesus' cross (Mt. 27:32). Roman centurions had the right to requisition citizens to carry a pack for one mile--but anything further than that would cause the centurion to be judged guilty of the abuse of a citizen! It was common for the powerless to be "hassled" by the Roman occupying forces in this way--but Jesus says that the disciple is to pick up the pack gladly (perhaps engaging the adversary in banter as he carries the pack--asking about his family, the weather, and so on!). By continuing past the 1-mile limit, the disciple turns the tables on the persecutor, forcing him to beg him to drop the pack!

House Churches in History

Outstanding examples of house churches since the Protestant Reformation have demonstrated their intense counter-cultural nature, and left a trail of documentation that cites the Sermon on the Mount with great frequency. Here are just a few of the major house church movements in history:

- The Anabaptists of Europe (1500s) refused to accept the legitimacy of the state church. They would not let their infants be baptized and repudiated their own infant baptisms by being re-baptized as confessing adults. They paid for this "anarchy" by the thousands, men and women alike, fleeing both from Protestant and Catholic forces--both of which hunted them down. A favorite punishment for captured Anabaptists was jokingly called "the third baptism," consisting of being weighted down with rocks and tossed into rivers or lakes to drown. Yale historian George H. Williams titled his study of this period *The Radical Reformation*.
- The Broadmead Congregation of England (c. 1600s) was persecuted strongly for their Baptist beliefs, often worshipping in homes or in the woods late at night. Preachers sometimes gave their messages from behind a closed curtain so that spies could not bring charges against them. One of the most famous English Baptists of this era was John Bunyan, who wrote *Pilgrim's Progress* while in prison for the crimes of unauthorized preaching and refusing to attend the services of the Church of England.
- Baptists and Quakers in colonial America had their goods confiscated, were chased out of town, and were even whipped and beaten.
- The underground churches of modern China are frequently broken up by the authorities and their leaders put into prison, from which they most often emerge only to carry on as before. Churches there are under heavy pressure to "register" with the government, which then regulates the lessons that can be taught.

One might ask just what these struggles have to do with "house church theology." The answer is, "Everything!" The doctrines to which this site is dedicated were **born** out of these struggles--particularly those of the Anabaptists (represented by the various Mennonite denominations, including the Amish). Many of those who most influenced house church theology had once been well trained Catholic priests who left the establishment church because of deep convictions for which they would pay the ultimate price. Nearly all of these perished in the first few years of the persecution, to be replaced by untrained people who were responsible for some of the few outrages that would stain the Anabaptists in history right up to modern times.

One of the earliest of the Anabaptists, a Swiss Brethren named Conrad Grabel, defined the church to be "the few who believed and lived right." Do you see the house church in that definition? Grabel would have been completely happy to see the great masses of unregenerate people who had flooded the state churches of his day walk out and never come back. **He wanted to bring the church back to the way it was in the first century**, before the corruption of the state church that can be traced back to the Roman Emperor Constantine in the fourth century.

Many think the true church in America will be eventually forced into the house church "underground" because of its refusal to accept the civic religion that now manifests itself as "political correctness." Some foresee the Bible itself as being deemed "hate literature" because of its strong condemnation of certain sins that our society now regards as completely acceptable. Of course there will always be large churches that play the political game well; their Bibles will be those that leave out the "offensive" material (those "Bibles" are already in our bookstores).

There is a wealth of literature on these topics. Durnbaugh's *The Believers' Church* is a good starting place (see [Resources](#)). Other sources available in theological libraries include William Estep's *The Anabaptist Story* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), Champlin Burrage's *The Early English Dissenters in the Light of Recent Research* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1912), Henry C. Veder's *A Short History of the Baptists* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1912), just to name a few.

Here is an old account of the fateful house church meeting that gave birth to the Anabaptist movement. It took place on Jan. 21, 1525, in the home of Felix Manz in the city of Zurich. It was an illegal meeting, as the Zurich City Council had forbidden this group to meet on pain of death. The decision they took to follow their consciences and defy the state church would ultimately cost all of them their lives.

And it came to pass that they were together until a dread began to come over them, yea, they were pressed in their hearts. Thereupon, they began to bow their knees to the Most High God in heaven and called upon him as the Knower of hearts, implored him to enable them to do his divine will and to manifest his mercy toward them... After the prayer, George Cajacob arose and asked Conrad [Grabel] to baptize him, for the sake of God, with the true Christian baptism upon his faith and knowledge. And when he knelt down with that request and desire, Conrad baptized him, since at that time there was no ordained deacon to perform such work. After that was done the others similarly desired George to baptize them, which he also did upon their request. Each confirmed the other in the service of the gospel, and they began to teach and keep the faith.

The House Church in Scripture

Revelation 2 and 3 evaluates seven house churches, some receiving praise and others severe warnings. Read those chapters carefully and try to determine how they were ranked. As Vernard Eller once commented, some of these churches were "successful," and some were "faithful." It was the *faithful* churches that were praised, and the *successful* churches that were condemned. Indeed, the Lord stands outside the door of every church and knocks (Rev. 3:20). Some churches will let him in to rule, others will be ruled only by human decisions and the dictates of the culture. "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the Churches" (Rev. 3:22).

"Mission" and the House Church

In his book *The House Church*, Del Birkey lists the three essential "priorities" of commitment in the church:

- I. Commitment to Jesus as Lord,
- II. Commitment to Christ's Body in Community, and
- III. Commitment to the World--My Work In It, and My Witness to It.

The church, in other words, needs to be made of committed believers, it must function in a corporate manner, and it ***must have a sense of mission.***

Many house churches maintain a membership in an institutional church as an outlet for Christian mission, and there is certainly nothing wrong with this. But it is also possible to envision "mission" completely within the house church. What does it mean to be a "missionary" when operating out of a small fellowship?

The Great Commission

(The words in [blue](#) in this section are defined in the notes listed below)

The most quoted "mission" verses are surely Mt. 28:19-20, "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations..." The passage is the [climax](#) of the whole of Matthew, because it immediately follows a statement that the resurrected Christ has all authority on heaven and earth. After asserting this complete authority, we should not be surprised to find an imperative--a command--and we are not disappointed when the word "Go" appears in the first or second word of the next verse.

But the actual Greek text does not have an imperative verb here--rather, it has an aorist participle--a form of verb that can support a number of interpretations. Since "go" is a verb of motion, the imperative is a valid translation. But it is just as legitimate to translate the participle with the adverbial sense of manner, modifying the finite verb, "make disciples," which *is* an imperative verb and therefore the true mission command. Since the two remaining verbs, "baptizing" and "teaching," are also participles of the same case, number, and gender as "going", the passage makes a wonderful three-way parallel:

Therefore, ***make disciples*** in this manner: by going ... baptizing ... teaching....

These three participles give the Great Commission command a dynamic, rather than puncticular flavor. The "going" is among the [ethnos](#)--that is, the people of various ethnic groups. The Great Commission is therefore a manner of life for the disciples--a way of life that is commanded in the climax of the book by the one with authority over all things:

THEREFORE, ***make disciples***--and do it in this manner--by going among the people of all ethnic groups, [churching](#) them in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and [teaching](#) them to obey everything that I have commanded you [in this book].

Tradition holds that the Twelve disciples did, in fact, go great distances to spread the gospel. Paul, of course, did so too (but, remember, he was "set apart" by the Holy Spirit to do so in Acts 13! Why would the Spirit have done this if all Christians were to be foreign missionaries?). The main body of early Christians stayed where they were. Were they being disobedient? Or is it possible that they understood the Great Commission as a call to a life of obedience to, and witness for, the one who has authority over all things? You decide.

For me, I take the great commission in this way: The normative Christian life is one that takes the great commission very seriously--we are to **make disciples**--all of us, not only those set apart for foreign missions. We are to do this by going through life very much like the non-Christian--accepting employment, buying goods and services, mixing with the crowd (all ethnic groups), and dining with sinners and tax collectors. But we are to do this with a proper witness to the world, constantly seeking opportunities to be the light of the world and salt of the earth. Matthew's gospel is full of ways to do this, especially in the Sermon on the Mount (Mt. 5 - 7). Let's look at some specific opportunities for Mission in this manner for which the house church is particularly well positioned in the present age:

1. **Evangelism.** 1 Cor. 14:22-25 describes a house church setting in which a visitor has been invited. When that church is functioning rightly, its members "prophesy." What can this mean? I suggest that Paul is saying that its members converse about the activities of God. This is the way modern house churches operate--allowing a time for fellowship during which its members speak of the things they have seen God do since their last meeting. Theologians call this "theological reflecting." When the church does this, the visitor becomes "convinced that he is a sinner and will be judged by all" (NIV, cf.: NRSV, "reproved by all and called to account by all"). Paul goes on to describe how God can use that encounter to draw the visitor to Himself. In other words, although house church theology is centered around the gathered, committed believers, it is okay to invite visitors! The same is true in Jas. 2:2. Why? It seems clear that the visitors are there because they have been **invited** and that the Holy Spirit has caused them to look with favor on the invitation.

Institutional churches, of course, welcome visitors too. But they go on with their planned liturgy, visitors doing the best they can to figure out what is going on. But, in a house church, the presence of the visitor should have first place on the agenda. All members can show the gentleness and love of Jesus to the visitor, and can devote time to answering questions and clarifying what God is doing in bringing him or her into their midst. What a wonderful way to evangelize the world! No printed tracts, no "four spiritual laws," and no "Roman Road"--just a simple sharing over the open Bible about the very real work of God among real people who happen to be in "all the world."

2. **The "Damaged."** I, personally, have knocked on many doors and have spoken with many secular people about church. Some have never had any kind of church experience, and are simply disinterested because of the negative propaganda they have received during their schooling. This is easy to understand and difficult to overcome, and the house church has no particular advantage in this case.

But a great number of non-church going adults seem to fit a different pattern. They have been to church in their youth, and some even as adults. Something has caused them to leave! Why do they no longer practice Christianity? Surely, some have simply been to lifeless churches in which God was not present and where Christianity therefore made no sense. Others may have been in youth programs that concentrated on "fun" rather than discipleship, or perhaps they had been rushed to baptism or confirmation with the help of images of fire and brimstone (that is, they have been sold "fire insurance") so that some church's annual report would show impressive growth. But upon probing deeper, many will admit to having left the church because of a political power play, an abuse of authority or of the "[counseling couch](#)," a betrayed confidence, something

involving the misappropriation of church funds, or some other incident that caused a deep hurt. Others came from a church tradition that subordinated the grace of Jesus to the idea of sin, penance, and eternal punishment to such an extent that they feel the weight of years of unconfessed sin. Some of these people are sure they will go to sleep one night and wake up in hell--can we blame them if they react with anger at the very mention of the words "church," "God," or "Jesus Christ."

Let's call these people, "The Damaged." Jesus loves them, but they have put up a wall as a reaction to the damage that was caused by some institutional church in their past. It is not easy to tear down that wall--it is especially difficult for another institutional church to do so. But the house church is in a very unique position to rescue the "damaged" because it is much less likely to manifest the problems that cause damage. The house church is not interested in collecting offerings; its counseling ministry is centered in the group, rather than an individual; it has no authoritative, hierarchical structure; it tends to encourage and listen more than discourage and condemn. It has no sermons that would force a person to be a captive audience to a message he or she is not ready to receive.

If my own survey results are anywhere near accurate, the ministry to "The Damaged" is a vast mission field right in our own backyard. It tries to reclaim the debris left in the wake of a multitude of well intentioned, graceless, clumsy churches with authoritative pastors, poor exegesis, sloppy theology, and pious deacons. Many of these churches may be gone now, but their legacy lives on in the legions of "the damaged" that have been left behind.

3. **Giving.** The New Testament occasionally speaks of the collection of money from house churches in order to help the saints in another place. It is Paul who is the facilitator of this in at least one instance. Perhaps the para-church organizations that fill our mailboxes with solicitations are the best modern equivalents (and this writer has supported many of them). But the real heart of the house church life style is to learn to be generous in a personal way--to "cast one's bread upon the waters" (Eccl. 11:1)--to develop personal sensitivity to what the Holy Spirit is doing within us, showing us where the actual, immediate needs are. Again, going back to that participial adverb of manner, the Christian is to walk through the world looking for needs--both spiritual needs and material needs (Jas. 2:15-17). We have been trained by our tax accountants to only give to organizations that have been certified by the IRS as tax deductions--but the house church member will not be constrained by these kinds of strings between the government and the church. When we learn to open our purse and give to the needy person right on the spot, with no consideration as to the deductibility of the gift and with no recourse to such time-worn excuses as "he'll just use it to buy a bottle or more drugs," we have learned what Jesus meant when he said "where your heart is, there your treasure will be also." Giving is for us to learn to be Christ-like; whether the receiver of the gift will use it in the right way is his or her responsibility, not ours.

The polished offering plates and the sealed offering envelopes have their place--but they obscure Christian agape. They insulate the donor from the donee, and make giving a matter of budget and routine. They let us say to the needy one, "We gave at the church." Might we be more biblical by spending a fraction of the sum if we do so in a personal way that responds to the guiding of the Holy Spirit? See 2 Cor. 9:6-15.

There is a postscript to the question of giving. Have you noticed that many (perhaps *most*) of the "giving" passages in the New Testament deal with giving to *other Christians*? If we combine that fact with the idea that the ultimate function of the church is to co-labor with God (1 Cor. 3:9), is there a hint that we are to have a hand in helping our brother or sister in Christ as they depend on the assurances of Mt. 6:25-34? Members of a house church should not be bashful about confessing their own material deficits, just as they should not feel insulted when they hear such a confession. Consider the joyful sharing within the house churches depicted in Acts 2:43-47.

Notes

The "Climax" of Matthew

That the call to mission in Mt. 28 is the climax of the book is an insight of Oscar S. Brooks, who wrote of the persistent motif of the authority of Jesus that is woven throughout the book. The theme is introduced when the Magi bow to the infant Jesus in Mt. 2:11. In Mt. 3:11, John the Baptist speaks of Jesus as the one with the greater authority. In Mt. 4:23 as Jesus demonstrates his authority over disease and over the demonic (Mt. 4:24). In Mt. 7:29 Jesus speaks "with authority." Almost immediately (Mt. 8:9) a centurion makes much ado of his own authority but submits to Jesus as the one with the power to heal his servant. We quickly see Jesus' authority over nature when he calms the storm (Mt. 8:27), and the crowd remarks on his authority after Jesus heals the paralytic (Mt. 9:8). Jesus delegates authority in sending the Twelve (Mt. 10:1), is Lord of the Sabbath (Mt. 12:1ff), and is "chosen" by God (Mt. 12:18). This pattern is finally resolved in Mt. 28:18 where Jesus' authority is described as complete. Prof. Brooks argues that it can be no coincidence that the call to mission would immediately follow this consummating claim to authority (why else would there be an explicit "therefore"?). Oscar S. Brooks, "Matthew 28:16-20 and the Design of the First Gospel," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* (Jan. 1981), 10:2-18.

Ethnos

This word is often translated "nations," but doing so can confuse the modern notion of "nation" with the first century idea of a group of "people" that share language and/or other cultural distinctives. It has the idea of "people as opposed to kings." See Arndt and Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1958), 218.

Churching

The Greek word here can be interpreted in a mechanical sense (dipping, immersing) as in the case of ritual washing (Mk. 7:4, Lk. 11:38), and the immersions performed by John are closest to this meaning since John was immersing people who were already Jews. It also had a special meaning in the first century--an immersion in water that accompanied the initiation of a proselyte into the community of faith (see ***Theology: Doctrine of Baptism***) and it is also used of Jesus in the sense of the pouring out of the Holy Spirit (Mt. 3:11) which was actualized at Pentecost upon the birth of the church (Acts 2). In the Great Commission, the word is associated with the (Trinitarian) *name*, which can only have the initiatory meaning (cf. the possibility of abuse of baptizing in name, 1 Cor. 1:10-17). The biblical command of Jesus is thus to make disciples, to initiate the new disciples into a house church (through the Judaic rite of initiation that involves water immersion), and to teach them. For more on the word *baptizo* see Arndt and Gingrich (*op.cit.*) 131-132.

Teaching

The Greek root *didomi* (to teach, teacher, teaching, etc.) occurs 212 times in the New Testament. A great portion of Matthew's gospel contains teaching material, and the Sermon on the Mount concludes with the statement that "the crowds were astounded at his teaching" (Mt. 7:28). *Teaching*, not *preaching*, is the dominant emphasis of our gospels. Preaching (sharing the good news of Jesus Christ) is for

outsiders, not people who are already believers, and is best done through dialog, not lecture (notwithstanding such outstanding exceptions as Spurgeon, Whitefield, and Wesley).

Abuse

Statistics of church-caused damage are just about impossible to come by because of the incentive to cover up such incidents, yet the fact that children and women are often abused by the members of clergy or trusted church workers is an open scandal. When such a scandal breaks, churches often split--half wanting a new pastor and half refusing to accept the fact that their pastor could "do such a thing," and the offender is often free to get another job in another city where he can repeat the same behavior among a new flock. The evidence seems to indicate that we pastors are no different from other counseling professionals in that a disturbing number of predators are attracted into our ranks because they see church people as fodder upon which they may act out their secret agendas. Peter Rutter, M.D., has published a study of the phenomenon:

Almost 80% of the women I spoke with had an incident to recount about having been approached sexually by a man who was her doctor, therapist, pastor, lawyer, or teacher. In about half of the cases an actual sexual relationship took place, with disastrous results.... The 20 percent of women to whom this had never happened all knew two or three other women to whom it had. (*Sex in the Forbidden Zone* (NY: Fawcett Crest, 1989), 14.)

Are there people who were once abused in this way among those who are hardened against "the church"? You bet there are!

The House Church MISSION

Mission. There are several **mission** opportunities in our communities that are especially suited for the house church. An invitation offered to a work-place acquaintance to a home is much less threatening than one to a church, just as one example. Another is the unique value of the house church as a ministry to "the damaged" and the possibility of learning the joy of giving by elevating that practice to a personal level.

The House Church AUTHORITY

The Theology of Ordination

Authority. Some House church advocates reject any human authority other than the very real and present rule of Christ, who was inaugurated the king of his church at the first Pentecost (Acts 2). The house church assemblies are to know the will of its king through the Holy Spirit and to be obedient to that will. Many on the other hand, follow the N.T. teachings on the roles of elders, bishops and deacons as Paul taught in his epistles— in which there are to be house church leaders or rulers who are accountable for overseeing the Lord's flock. These are

recognized by their gifts and calling and being thus trusted through the **ORDINATION** process with a certain degree of authority. While they seek the benefits of the vibrant Christianity that manifests itself in small groups, and work hard to make small groups a part of the ministry of their churches, many harbor a concern that the groups might become a threat to their own relevance and livelihood. Others argue that house churches, due to their lack of seminary trained clergy, might follow the examples of Jonestown and Waco. In this they have a point, as the New Testament is full of epistles that attempt to correct a legion of heresies in various churches--and all of the New Testament churches were, in fact, house churches.

"What is the theology of ordination?"

The idea of ordination would appear to have its roots in Acts 13, where the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul to the work which I have called them." So we have those who are "set apart." Some are set apart for music ministry, some for the pastorate, and so forth. Those who are ordained for music have musical ability, those who are ordained for missions have gifts for missions. Do we ordain in response to the Holy Spirit, or as a result of a very worldly assessment of natural abilities? Hopefully, we weigh the former more than the latter.

The Laying On of Hands

Sadly, many have added the laying on of hands to their arsenal of pleagian magic--actions in which they would try to force God to recognize a change to a human that results from certain actions and procedures performed by other humans (but see Rom. 11:34, "Who has ever put God in their debt?"). The laying on of hands that climaxes many modern Christian ordination services has its roots in such passages as 1 Tim. 4:14, which recalls a time when elders laid hands on Timothy. But the text describes this action as the giving of a "prophetic message," and Paul refers to it again in 2 Tim. 1:6--this time as a "gift of God." To interpret these passages properly, it is probably best to examine the Acts. In Acts 19:6, the "hands" are associated with the gifts of the Holy Spirit, not an office. Also, Acts 20:28 is very clear that it is the Holy Spirit that selects "overseers." There is absolutely nothing in the 1 Tim. or the 2 Tim. passages that suggest that the overseers are making of Timothy another overseer by the laying on of hands. We are on much better biblical ground if we interpret the "hands" passages as the imparting of some sort of charismatic gift or, in Acts 19:6, a facilitating of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit himself.

Laying on of Hands A Blessing or Prayer

So the biblical laying on of hands is more a **blessing** than it is a rite that transfers authority or office. Its usage in Christianity is based on Gen. 48:14 (Jacob blessing his grandchildren), and Mk. 10:13-16 (Jesus blessing the little children). After Pentecost it is associated, quite naturally, with the work of the Holy Spirit.

Another approach to the New Testament laying on of hands—is that of enacted prayer and that the laying on of hands was a physical action that "did not just accompany the prayer; it was part of the prayer itself."

The reader will have to decide for himself what the "setting apart" passage in Acts actually means--but please bear its context in mind.

- Is this not really a setting apart for **missions**?
- Is it not a response of **obedience** to God's Spirit?
- Is it not a commissioning into a place of **service**?
- Finally, where in this passage is any kind of **authority** bestowed on Barnabas and Saul?

Where we understand ordination as prayer or blessing, and where it can be used to police the entry into the pastorate or to recognize and affirm the work that God has done to prepare an individual for a work of service, let's by all means keep ordination. But let us be very careful that we don't attach too much consequence to whether one is ordained or not ordained. Nowhere in the discussions of gifting and duties of the church does Paul make any such requirement. **Why should we?**

Conclusion

Here is the bottom line: It would be a shame if a house church wished to bless, commission, or otherwise respond to the Holy Spirit to "set apart" one of its number for a particular work of service, but demurred because they did not have any "ordained" members. When the modern house church movement was born in a house church meeting in Zurich, many who had previously been "ordained" by the Catholic Church were present. Yet when George Cajacob arose and begged to be given "the true Christian baptism"--the act that caused them to break with the state church and would be a death sentence for nearly all of them--it was to the unordained Conrad Grabel that he turned (see "[Counter Cultural Discipleship](#)").