

House Church: Why We Do It

by David Webber

A Message for the 1st joint house church jamboree, Saturday, Feb. 5th 2011, Williams Lake BC

Text: *"They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer." (Acts 2:42, NASB95)*¹

INTRODUCTION

When Reg Steward asked me to take 15 minutes or so tonight to address the question, "Why We Do House Church" I excitedly said yes.

I thought I would simply talk about how the Christian church in the New Testament was primarily a house church: how it was kindled in the upper room of a home (Lk. 22.12; Acts 1.13;), how it caught fire and took off in the upper room of a home (Lk. 2.1), how it spread like wild fire through out Jerusalem in homes (Lk. 2.46-47) and how it continued to spread from house to house through out Judea (Lk.5.42) and indeed all of the Greco-Roman world (Romans 16.5;23; 1Cor.16.19; Col. 4.15; Ph.4.22; Phil.2).

I thought I would talk about how the house church meeting was so much the norm in the first century church, that not only does it get mentioned as the norm in Acts and most of Paul's Letters, but Paul begins to refer to the church not only as "the body of Christ" but frequently as "the household of God" (Eph.2.19; 1Tim.3.15).

This was what I thought would be the gist of my address tonight. However after prayer, Christ gave me another direction.

I began to think about the biblical Greek word that is usually translated "church" in the New Testament.

The word is ἐκκλησία (*ekklēsia*) and in the New Testament it means an individual assembly or gathering of Christians ... or it can also just mean a gathering of persons for a purpose, even riotous as in Ac 19:32-40.²

Hmmmm: church, ecclesia, assembly, gathering.

This sounds more like an activity to me than a formal institution the way that we usually think of the word church today.

¹ *New American Standard Bible : 1995 update.* 1995. LaHabra, CA: The Lockman Foundation.

²Swanson, J. (1997). *Dictionary of Biblical Languages with Semantic Domains : Greek (New Testament)* (electronic ed.) (GGK1711). Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

Tonight I am going to take the position that whatever else the New Testament church is, it is primarily not a noun but a verb, not a thing but an activity, not an institution but a process.

This process is what one sees going on in Acts 2.42, which I just read. This process, this church, is what I want to spend a few minutes talking about tonight.

As soon as I say the church is a process, the first question that pops up in my mind is: What kind of process? What's going on in the process? Acts 2.42 and other passages of New Testament like it, indicate three primary processes.

INTENTIONAL COMMUNITY

The first is the formation of intentional community.

The church is by nature an intentional community.

It is a unique intentional community defined by faith in and following of the Risen Christ.

This process of forming intentional communities of faith in Christ results in a praying, worshiping, sharing, serving, reflecting, and evangelizing community.

This process does not demand special buildings, special large numbers of people, special mornings, special programs or special times to exist.

Jesus said, *For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them (Mt. 18.20). 3*

Wherever and whenever two or more meet in faith, potentially Christian community can freely exist, for it is a process of faith and gathering around the promised presence of the Risen Christ ... like on the road to Emmaus ... or in the Jerusalem upper room.

I believe that the Bible makes it clear that in the early church, the process of Christian community happened primarily in small groups.

I believe that today it continues to happen best in small groups.

I believe that it is very hard for the intentional community of faith with the qualities of community described in Acts 2.42 to develop outside of small groups.

I believe that without small groups, congregations quickly degenerate into collectivities rather than faith communities.

I believe Karl Jung was absolutely right when he analyzed large congregations so, and insisted that collectivities resulted in the lowering of consciousness of the individuals within it.

By contrast, small groups tend not to be just collectivities but tend to automatically become engaged in the processes of community. Small groups are where people can relate to one another in bonds of community.

Communities, where the level of consciousness is at a peak, fueling the intentions that leads to the praying, worshiping, sharing, reflecting, evangelizing and liberating works of the ministry of Christ.

I believe, small groups are the biblical norm for the process of forming intentional communities of faith in Christ, not collectivities or large congregations.

I believe, that Christ is the cornerstone of the church and that small groups are the first building block.

I have done a fair bit of reading and research around this in the past 25 years or so.

One of the things that I have discovered is that regardless of the time in the church's history or the region of the world where the church has existed ... whenever there has been a revival in the church, whatever else has happened, at least these two things have usually happened.

First, central to the revival has been the process of the formation of Christian community with qualities similar to the ones I have alluded to this evening.

And second, this process of the formation of Christian community has happened best in and through small groups.

You can find this in the biblical accounts of the early church.

You can find this in the early church writings.

You can find this in the monastic revivals of the first ten centuries, the writings of the Dessert Fathers, the revivals of the Reformation, the revivals of the Radical Reformation, the Wesleyan Revivals.

You will find this in the revivals of the church in the 20th and 21st century in Asia, Africa, South America and even the Jesus Movement of the 60s in NA.

What is important here is not that this is just another model for the church to engage in, perhaps to perpetuate itself.

Rather, here is an important process that the church throughout its history has found to be crucial in reaching out with the powerful Gospel of Christ.

And where better to engage in this small group process than gathering in the home, free of all the energy sucking activities of committees, programs, building maintenance and parking lot construction.

The reason the first century church did house church, and the reason we do house church today, is because it is the most efficient and effective way to facilitate the process of forming Christian community.

And Scripture says: *And each day the Lord added to their group those who were being saved (Acts 2.47).*⁴

TABLE FELLOWSHIP

The second process or activity in the verb “church” is this.

Scripture makes it clear that our 1st century Christian ancestors gathered or assembled their intentional communities of faith in small household groups, around a meal (Acts 2.46).

Christ did this with his disciples.

They were a meal fellowship as a community ... an eating and celebrating people.

His disciples discovered His risen presence and fellowship in the breaking of bread, even where only two met (Luke 24.13-35).

His disciples continued this meal fellowship with their communities of faith, which formed after Pentecost.

They ate and fondly remembered their meal fellowship with Jesus, expecting his presence with them as they continued on in faith.

They made the meal a central focus of prayer and life around which they remembered and participated in the saving action of Christ.

They made the meal a central focus of worship and life in which they participated in the metaphor of the messianic banquet and anticipated the Kingdom of God, praying; "Maranatha" (Come, Lord Jesus).

They made the meal a central event of worship where in, serving the common elements of bread and wine, they looked for Jesus to be present with them as host.

⁴Holy Bible, New Living Translation, (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.) 1996.
^{4a}Reginald Bibby, There's Got to be More, (Winfield BC: Wood Lake Books) 1995

They made the meal a central event of worship and looked to it to proclaim Christ's resurrection and continuing life.

They made the meal a symbol of their spiritual unity with Christ and with one another.

What we call the meal, the Lord's Table, or perhaps better the Great Thanksgiving or Eucharist, was for apostolic faith communities the very center of worship and life together ... the very center of faith community.

They were a meal fellowship, an eucharistic community, a community of faith gathered by, in and around the Lord's Table.

The Reformers, starting with Hus in Bohemia and continuing with Luther, Bucer, Calvin, Cramner and Knox, all recognized the centrality of the Lord's Table to the life, prayer and worship of the community of faith. The Lord's Table related to community and fellowship, not to a church institution.

Fundamental to their work was to liberate the Eucharist from the institution and clergy and return the Lord's Table to the people and their communities of faith.

Based on all this, I am going to take the position that not only are small groups the most effective for facilitating the process of the formation of Christian community but that the Lord's Table rightly belongs in these small groups because it is all about community formation.

That is, I am going to go way out on a limb and say that wherever else the church celebrates the Lord's Table, it should make small groups the central location.

And I am going to go further out on a limb and say that house churches need to be table fellowships if they are following the New Testament form.

What would happen if we did what the 1st century church did, if we became house church, table fellowship, faith communities?

What would happen if we did all of this?

I believe Scripture says what would happen: *And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved (Acts 2.47).*⁵

⁵The New King James Version, (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers) 1998, c1982.

SHARED WORD

So far I have made the points that in the 1st century church, the process of church involved the formation of intentional communities of faith in Christ around a table fellowship where the Risen Christ was expected to be present.

In the Reformed Tradition, Word and Sacrament are understood as central to the worshiping community.

Word and Sacrament are understood to be distinct and yet bound together. The Word informs the Sacrament.

The Sacrament makes visible the Word.

Together they work to facilitate an encounter with the living Word, Jesus Christ.

All of this is nice sounding theology but in practice in most Christian traditions it is the Word, more specifically the Word preached, that has become central to the church.

The Word preached has traditionally meant a pulpit over which a preacher suitably ordained is called upon to relate the eternal gospel as set forth in Scripture to the lives of the various individuals and life of a particular congregation.

This understanding of church and apostolic teaching presupposes a preacher, a pulpit, a dedicated Church building and a large group of listeners who we like to call a congregation.

I want to take the position that a preached-at congregation housed in a "Holy Building" is not what Christian people are meant to be, with regards to the Bible.

The purpose of good biblical proclamation is to expose the Word of God to the lives of people and the faith communities they form.

The purpose is not biblical education primarily, or telling individual people what to believe, but facilitating an encounter with the living Word of God.

As life, community and Word rub against one another, the process of hermeneutics, or interpretation and application begins to happen.

That is, something, which was inspired and written long ago in the Scriptures, is discerned to say something powerful to contemporary lives and situations.

God speaks to us in and through His Word as we dare to ask the questions:
What did the biblical text mean then? What does it mean for us now?
How are we to live it out today?

One thing is for certain however.

The interpretative process I've described is a faith community's task.

It is not the preacher's task alone nor is it the individual's task alone.

The preacher and the proclamation that comes over the pulpit is at its best,
fuel for the furnace of biblical Interpretation and application.

The whole community of faith is called to be a community of biblical
interpretation and application.

In Christian community, preaching by itself is not enough.

That is a hard thing for Preachers like me to come to terms with for we love
to preach.

A more appropriate form of proclamation in Christian community is relational
proclamation, shared Word, breaking the Word together like we break
bread together.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer in pre war Germany argued that the ministry of biblical
proclamation is a right and an obligation for all Christians.

He writes, It is *...free communication of the Word from person to person, not by
ordained ministry which is bound to particular office, time and place.*⁶

Bonhoeffer writes, it includes speaking, "*...to one another on the basis of the
help we need... speaking the whole consolation of God, the admonition, the
kindness, and the severity of God. (Pages 103-107).*⁶

Interpreting the Word of God is meant to be a faith community process.

A process that goes on under the guidance of the Holy Spirit when we share
our encounter with the Word, person to person, in community.

Preaching is not essential to the formation of the community intentionally
engaged in encountering God through the Word.

Good preaching can facilitate this, but it is not essential.

What is essential is taking our lives to the Word and the Word to our lives
and our lives to the world.

What is essential in doing this is not just doing it on our own but in the
company of others who are about the same process ... and speaking

⁶Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, (Harper and Row, New York, N.Y.) 1954

the Word to one another within the trusted bonds of love that community builds.

In an hermeneutic community, A shared Word community of biblical interpretation and application, the Word of God becomes a part of dialogue.

The Word of God is connected to the act of personally and corporately seeking meaning and taking deliberate action on the basis of that meaning.

The shared Word in community is a process of speaking and hearing. It is a process of rubbing shared life against the shared Word in the search of meaning, hope, instruction and discipleship.

What would happen if we took the Bible out of the pulpit and placed it primarily where I believe the Bible belongs... in the midst of small faith communities? house churches?

And, what would happen if we insisted that these small relational faith communities in Christ, these house churches, begin to really read the Word, question it, seek answers from it, proclaim it, share it, live it ... together?

Would the Bible become more relevant to folks?

You bet, just like in 1st century church! *And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved (Acts 2.47).*⁷

CONCLUSION

Like Martin Luther King Jr. I have a dream.

My dream is not about mountains.

My dream is about a church that would see the possibilities of becoming a process oriented church engaged in the formation of intentional, table fellowship, shared Word communities of faith in Christ ... House churches, which can exist wherever a two or meet in faith.

My dream is that the church of Christ would risk its building program norm, its polity and its ordering, to encourage the formation and nurture of these communities ...wherever there are people with the need of Christ.

⁷The New King James Version, (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers) 1998, c1982.

My dream for an ever-changing world is a church liberated from concrete and glass, that the wonders of the Rock of our Salvation, Jesus Christ would save and change the lives of the strangers we live amongst.