

Why Not Simple?

By L.D. Waterman

Before I moved to a Muslim-majority country (over two decades ago), I was on pastoral staff at a church in rural upstate New York. I knew a few families who did what they called “house church.” These families had attended our church for a while, then left. They had also left most or all of the other gospel-preaching churches within about a 30 minute drive. No existing church was doctrinally correct enough or Spirit-filled enough or *something* enough for their taste. So they worshiped by themselves at home and called it house church.

To my knowledge, those “house churches” brought few if any others to saving faith (except for some of their biological children) and never made a significant impact on the community. Their vision reached no further than being “more biblical” than the churches they had recently left. They seemed to embody the rustic independent spirit of the region. I wasn’t favorably impressed.

Over the past year I’ve edited dozens of case studies of Church Planting Movements among unreached peoples. The vast majority of these movements are growing through rapid reproduction of some form of house churches – relatively small fellowships led by non-ordained believers, fitting most or all of the factors described in articles such as “[Generational Mapping: Tracking Elements of Church Formation Within CPM's](#).” After asking and receiving answers to my questions about doctrinal soundness, spiritual maturity and sustainability, I’ve come to view house churches *such as these* much more favorably than the family gatherings of chronic church-leavers I had previously known in the US. These house churches are vibrant and continually multiplying as they reach unbelievers around them. The simple churches that make up most Church Planting Movements facilitate the rapid Kingdom advance that characterizes these movements, a dynamic similar to what we find in the New Testament.

Among other things, though, I’ve noticed a surprisingly common theme in many of these movements. When asked about challenges their movement faces, many have said, “*Our biggest challenge is from other Christians.*” I recently edited a case from Asia that said: “*Although this country is generally hostile to the gospel, we found that the biggest trouble, by far, came from traditional Christian leaders. They caused much confusion in the new churches as they regularly challenged the ideas that any disciple can make another disciple, can baptize another disciple and/or can serve the Lord’s Supper. From the start of this work until now, traditional Christians have been by far the largest problem the movement has faced.*” How tragically ironic that when millions of lost people are coming to saving faith and fellowship with the Living God, the greatest hindrance comes from other Christians!

I leave aside suspicion of selfish motives such as sheep-stealing to produce bigger church growth reports or bring in more donations. I leave aside suspicion of religious vainglory: desiring a bigger ministry in order to look and feel more impressive. Hopefully we all agree that such motives (whether implicit or explicit) run contrary to the gospel and the will of the Christ whose name we claim. Building a ministry with those ingredients constitutes the wood, hay and straw destined for destruction by God’s holy fire (1 Cor. 3:10-15).

I appreciate a concern for new believers to enter a fellowship with sound biblical teaching and adequate shepherding. Yet when Christ's Kingdom is forcefully advancing among those who have never before known him, it seems counterproductive to disrupt the process based on secondary issues, such as points of church order and issues of ordination. The closest biblical parallel that comes to my mind is the Pharisees' response to Jesus' healing of a man on the Sabbath (e.g. Luke 6:6-11; 13:10-17). We see there a stark contrast between powerful Kingdom manifestations and religiously-based criticism. All four Gospels portray clearly Jesus' strong opinion on those subjects.

My own reading of the New Testament doesn't turn up any text requiring that baptism and/or the Lord's Supper only be administered by an ordained pastor. I understand the reasonable and biblically-based trains of logic explaining the importance of pastoral oversight for the ordinances. Yet these explanations always seem at least one step removed from actual biblical commands or examples. One crucial question would be the Lord's intended application of the Great Commission ("make disciples of all nations, baptizing them ... and teaching them to obey..." Matthew 28:19-20). Was that only for the first apostles? I think most evangelicals would say not. Is it, then, only for ordained pastors? I don't remember ever hearing anyone make that claim. Is it applicable to all followers of Jesus? If so, the priesthood of all believers (1 Peter 2:5-9) would seem to extend to the baptizing of new disciples.

In a similar vein, some object to God's Word being taught and applied by someone other than a publicly ordained pastor. This seems more a continuation of Roman Catholic clericalism than anything recommended in the New Testament. Limiting preaching to theologically educated clergy severely restricts potential for church multiplication and reaching the unreached. Ironically, the argument often presented most strongly for the necessity of theologically educated clergy (to prevent false teaching) turns out to be spurious. The spread of liberal theology and decimation of mainline churches in the Western world came largely *through*, rather than being prevented by, theological higher education.

In the denomination in which I was raised, I often heard unhappy comments about young people who went off to seminary excited about Jesus and the Bible, and graduated not believing strongly in either. I think theological education has great value, but I don't buy the argument that it prevents bad theology or guarantees sound and edifying teaching. Major heresies seem to arise far more often from a talented charismatic preacher/teacher whose followers hang on every word, than from small groups of believers inductively studying the Bible and living out the applications they feel the Spirit giving for their lives. Consider not only Mormonism and the Watchtower Society, but also heresies named after their progenitors, such as Sabellianism, Arianism, and Apollinarism. Small group Bible studies with accountable life application may miss some hermeneutical nuances, but they generally pose less theological danger than polished one-way communication to large admiring crowds.

In the eighteenth century, John Wesley's lay preachers both scandalized the religious establishment and brought salvation to huge numbers who would have otherwise never heard. The unflinching accountability of his small group "class meetings" cemented those preachers' fruit into fellowships of growing disciples. Yet more than two centuries of zealous effort by

“lay” preachers plus ordained preachers has still left us too far from the goal to “make disciples of all nations.” What if we find (as seems to be the case) that small groups inductively studying the Bible can sufficiently understand God’s message to become rooted and established in Christ? What if their mutual accountability leads to lifestyles of obedience and effective evangelism of the unreached? What if God’s Spirit is able to lead his people into all essential truth and raise up generations of leaders through life-on-life discipleship and on-the-job training by believers more mature in the faith? I propose that we do whatever we can to encourage such movements of advancing biblical faith. This would include *not* trying to pull multiplying house fellowships toward our own denominational structure or flavor of ministry.

As I’ve sought to understand nay-sayers’ concerns about the validity of simple/house churches, the issues usually seem to boil down to one or more of the following.

1. People are not baptized by an ordained person.
2. The Lord’s Supper is not served or overseen by an ordained person.
3. The fellowship is led by a person with no formal theological education.
4. The group is not registered with or recognized by the national government.
5. The group is not associated with any recognized Christian denomination.
6. The group doesn’t have a formal written creedal statement.

I don’t see the New Testament presenting any of these as an essential element of a God-pleasing church. From a NT perspective, they seem best viewed as “adiaphora”—actions neither mandated nor forbidden. (For more details, see my article “[What is Church? From Surveying Scripture to Applying in Culture](#)” in *EMQ* October 2011.) I don’t criticize a church that has or practices any of these things. But I believe Jesus stands strongly against those whose “teachings are merely human rules” (Matthew 15:9), and who use such rules to oppose other believers, thus hindering advance of his Kingdom.

Can we agree that God intends us to use New Testament teaching as the standard for his church? Can we not attack, criticize or steal sheep from one another based on added patterns that our own group believes will be a helpful addition? Maybe that’s a radical idea. But when simple church can effectively accomplish God’s purposes, why not simple?