

House Church and Mission: The Importance of Household Structures in Early Christianity by Roger Gehring

Gehring's thesis is that house churches are at the center of the missional strategy for Jesus and the early church. He demonstrates this through five stages: Jesus' ministry, disciples' ministry (pre Easter), disciples' ministry in Jerusalem (post Easter), disciples' ministry transitioning to the Gentiles, Paul's ministry. He also demonstrates that an understanding *oikos* is critical in understanding not only the nature of mission but also the nature of the church and the nature of church leadership.

In addition to providing important quotes for each of the five stages, I've also grouped key quotes in these three topics: the nature of church, the nature of church leadership, the nature of missional strategy. As you read these quotes, you will need to think about at least two underlying questions: First, does Gehring's work accurately reflect the Scriptures? Second, are his conclusions universal?

1. The nature of church. The truth is that many of our house churches are not all that much different from fairly healthy small groups in a traditional church in that they focus primarily on one meeting a week. By contrast, for Gehring, the key word is *oikos*. This was/is way more than a small group. It was an extended family that revolved around one household. These people lived and often worked in close proximity with one another. They saw each other every day. They did 'life' together over an extended period of time. This is what 'church' meant in the First Century.

Gehring demonstrates that churches were always developed around families and households. He believes that the NT church is inextricably bound to family. "Hence a house church could only be established if a well-functioning family existed." P. 240.

2. The nature of church leadership. Gehring demonstrates that the leaders of new churches in the NT were the leaders of their *oikoi* prior to conversion. Almost all of them were previously worshippers of Yahweh (either Jews or God Fearers). (Possible exception of the Philippian jailer.) These house church leaders were called *presbuteroi* (elders) and *episkopoi* (overseers) and are described in 1 Tim 3 and Titus 1. It seems likely that these house leaders are the same as the 'men/women of peace' in Luke 10. "...From Jerusalem to Corinth, the churches were nurtured in homes, received oversight from their familial *episkopoi* (overseers), who were naturally known by the collective title of *presbuteroi* (elders)." P. 273.

(Note: This brings up the question of what to do with 1 Tim 3:6 which says that an overseer "must not be a new convert". The phrase is literally *me neophutos* which is "Not a neophyte, not a novice, not an inexperienced person." In this context (following v. 5), it might refer to a new convert to the faith or it might refer to an inexperienced householder. In Acts 10, Cornelius would have been a new convert but it is likely that he immediately became the overseer of that house church.)

3. The nature of mission. Gehring demonstrates that house churches were started for the explicit purpose of being bases of operation for the expansion of the Kingdom. This missional strategy almost always had a geographical focus (Capernaum, the 'evangelical triangle', Galilee, etc.). In some cases, the focus may have been a cultural people group (Greek speaking Jews, Gentiles, etc.). "... the house and household were the immediate mission objective; the house fellowship was the starting and gathering point for the final objective, which was reaching the entire town or city." P. 54.

Introduction to the book

"Only in the last twenty-five years has research begun to focus more closely on the architectural setting of early Christian gatherings and on its corresponding social and theological implications. Since 1980 we have seen a flood of popular and scholarly publications on the subject. Here again it appears most scholars are in agreement: the fact that early Christian communities met in homes is of great sociohistorical, ecclesiological, and missional significance." P. 1

"The year 1980 represents a watershed for the publication of literature on the topic of the house church. In *Social Aspects of Early Christianity* (1977), A. J. Malherbe observed that up until that time "no major work has been devoted to the New Testament house church". Then suddenly at the beginning of the 1980s, five exegetical sociohistorical studies on the topics "family", "house", and "house church" in early Christianity appeared independently of one another. And by the time Malherbe's book was reprinted in 1983, one of the most substantial and significant works in the Anglo-Saxon world on the subject of the house church had been completed by his pupil L. M. White. It would appear that, beginning in 1980, the time had fully come for scholars to tackle the issues relating to the house church. Since then a relatively large number of books and articles have been published on the subject. The following pages summarize the main findings of seven studies." P. 5.

"Most scholars would agree that the following elements constitute a house church. (a) A group exists that has developed its own religious life, including regular gatherings for worship. (b) The content of these regular gatherings for worship includes evangelistic and instructional proclamation, the celebration of baptism and communion, prayer, and fellowship. (c) Elements such as (unclearly defined) organizational structures can be considered further indications of a house church in the full sense. The more these elements are evident in the gatherings of a certain group, the more certain we can be that we are dealing with a house church." P. 27.

THE PATTERN OF KINGDOM GROWTH THROUGH PLANTING HOUSE CHURCHES – FIVE STAGES

1. Jesus planted house churches

“Luke 10:15/Matt. 11:23 also support the view that much in the life of Jesus took place in Capernaum.” P. 35.

“The five historically reliable verses (Mark 1:29, 33; 2:1; 3:20; 9:33) clearly demonstrate that Jesus’ healing and teaching ministry took place in and around the house of Peter in Capernaum.” P. 37.

“The House of Peter as the Operational Base for Jesus’ Missional Outreach. ...The image of Jesus as itinerant preacher, however, needs to be revised slightly in that at least temporarily he had a fixed, stable home base.’ There are good reasons to believe that Jesus concentrated on the area surrounding Capernaum, Chorazin, and Bethsaida (cf. Matt. 11:21/Luke 11:13-15). During this period of residency in Capernaum, the house of Peter was available to Jesus as a center of operation for his ministry and outreach in the area surrounding the Sea of Galilee. It has often been observed that the area surrounding these three neighboring villages became the major focus of Jesus’ ministry. Indeed, in German scholarship the term ‘evangelical triangle’ was coined to describe this phenomenon. The three villages are only one to two hours by foot from one another.” P.38.

“...in calling Peter as his follower, Jesus gained the head of a household and with him the entire household for his cause, a household that was then available to him as an operational base for his missional outreach.” P. 41.

“...it follows that Jesus may have undertaken a Galilean village-to-village (or house-to-house) mission, in which houses, households, and sedentary (as opposed to those who were itinerant) followers of Jesus played a role similar to that which they played in Capernaum (Mark 6:1, 6, 56; 8:27; 9:30)...We even know some by name: Mary and Martha, Lazarus (Luke 10:38-39; cf. John 11:1, 18), and Simon the leper (Matt 26:6/Mark 14:3), all of whom were residents of Bethany on the Mount of Olives. At this point it must be asked if the house of Martha in Bethany might not be considered the counterpart to the house of Peter in Capernaum...” p. 43.

“...already in the pre-Easter period, the house of Peter served as a kind of prototype of a house church with most of the key elements included in our definition of a house church in the full sense of the word...The house of Peter before Easter was a place where the first core group of disciples gathered around Jesus in a house community that can be described as a kind of house church in embryonic form, the ‘cradle of the ecclesia in its early formation.’...this house appears not only as the house of Peter and the home of Jesus but as the house of the new family of God as well.” P. 47.

2. Disciples (pre Easter) planted house churches

“It seems likely that in his mission discourse (Lk. 10) Jesus instructed his disciples to use houses in a manner similar to the way he did: as fixed quarters and a base of operations for his mission.” P. 53

“In the Palestinian setting the only conceivable person to receive the (peace) greeting would have been the head of the household. He alone would have been able to accept the greeting and offer an invitation. Only with his permission would the messengers have been able to stay in the house. He alone was able to make a religious decision, a decision that the entire household would customarily embrace. When the head (and his household) accepted the peace greeting and provided hospitality for Jesus’ messengers, he proved himself to be a ‘son of peace’. The peace of God had already begun to work within his heart and mind, and he and his entire household were prepared and ordained for further gifts of grace...our above exegetical examination does seem to indicate that the disciples practiced a kind of ‘householder evangelism’. This seems all the more likely when we consider that Jesus evidently took this approach himself. In addition to the house of Peter in Capernaum, we know of sedentary followers of Jesus in Bethany and even the names of householders there: Martha (or Lazarus) and Simon. In Jericho we know of a certain Zacchaeus, the head of a household who became a sedentary follower of Jesus (Luke 19:1-10).” P. 58-59.

“The disciples continued what Jesus had begun in Capernaum as they met together with their new faith companions in various houses. Throughout the countryside sedentary cell-like house communities came into existence, communities that, along with Jesus and his disciples, were experiencing and expecting the coming of the kingdom.” P. 60.

3. Disciples (post Easter) planted house churches in Jerusalem

“...the upper room appears to be an example of a house church in the fullest sense.” P. 66

“We know of at least two houses in Jerusalem in which the first Christians met: the house of Mary and the house with the upper room. According to all that we know about them, it makes the most sense to assume that the Greek-speaking services were held in the house of Mary.” P. 73.

Re: Acts 2:41. “If we can assume an evangelistic approach targeting heads of households, assuming that an average of 10-20 members (their wives, children, friends, and clientele) lived in one *oikos*, the scenario is conceivable that if 150 householders made a commitment to Christ, we would be at 1,500 – 3,000. That 150 householders in a city the size of Jerusalem, with a population of 120,000, could have converted to Christianity is not fantasy.” P. 87.

“Even before 70 C.E. we can assume the existence of a plurality of synagogues in Jerusalem, perhaps predominantly in the form of house synagogues. (Footnote: In rabbinical sources it is reported that Jerusalem had at least 400 synagogues...Most scholars agree that the synagogue was a widespread phenomenon by the beginning of the

first century C.E. in the Diaspora as well as in Palestine.) As the majority of the believers in Jerusalem came from a Jewish background, it is safe to assume that they would have organized their community in a similar manner, namely as house churches. It is also quite possible that Jewish-Christians who had made their houses available as meeting places for the synagogue community would now, as followers of Christ, act as patrons of house churches, allowing Christians to assemble in their homes. Mary, the mother of John Mark, could be an example of such a patroness.

It has become clear, then, that in the earliest days of the primitive church, a plurality of house churches existed alongside the local church (the combination of all churches in a particular area) as a whole in Jerusalem. At least some of the believers gathered together in the temple as the local church body. To begin with, a house church met in the upper room. Very soon after that (most likely directly after Pentecost) this house became too small to accommodate all of the believers, and so they had to find other houses in which they could assemble. In addition to the house church in the upper room, at least one other house church was established in the house of Mary the ‘Hellenist.’ Besides these two, we can assume that a whole series of additional house churches were established whose exact number can no longer be determined.” P. 89

4. Disciples planted house churches beyond Jerusalem.

“(the transition to the Gentile mission) should not be imagined as a one-time event but rather as a process in several different stages and at various locations.” P. 105

Caesarea - Philip. “Although it cannot be documented with certainty, there seems to be some indication that Philip proceeded as an itinerant missionary from house to house like the approach that Jesus took. In Acts 21:8-9 we learn that Philip was a homeowner in Caesarea. It was probably there that he earned the title ‘evangelist’ (21:8). With Hengel, I suggest that in his missional outreach Philip strategically concentrated on a specific area by setting up residence in Caesarea and then targeting the above-mentioned cities in the surrounding countryside. The house of Philip apparently played an important role in his mission efforts...Along with the house of Cornelius, this could have been a second house church in Caesarea and so an indication of a plurality of house churches there.” P. 106.

Joppa - Peter. After many came to faith through his healing ministry there, Peter stayed on for some time in the house of Simon the tanner (Acts 9:43) ...One thing is certain: here we have clear evidence of a householder who extended Peter his hospitality and in doing so supported his missional outreach in the area.” P. 107.

Caesarea - Peter. “Many exegetes view Acts 10:1-48, among other things, as the story of the establishment of a house church and thus the history of the founding of the church in Caesarea... It is by all means possible that this house became a base of operations for the outreach to the city and surrounding area of Caesarea.” P.108

Damascus. “In addition to Caesarea, Damascus appears to be another Hellenist center (9:1-19). The church was presumably a filial church of the Hellenists, or at least under

the influence of the theological ideas of Stephen and the seven; otherwise Paul would not have wanted to persecute the church there (9:2). After his conversion Paul stayed in the house of Judas (9:11, 17). Luke reports that Paul was baptized there (in this house?) and ‘stayed a few days with the disciples in Damascus.’ During this time he probably received instruction in the faith in the house of Judas...” p. 107

Antioch. “The cutting-edge missional perspective of the Hellenists becomes even more clearly visible in the city of Antioch on the Orontes. In Antioch, a planned centrifugal mission is initiated with the explicitly objective of reaching out to Gentiles.” P. 109

“After one year of missional ministry in the city, Barnabas and Paul set out together on the first great mission journey via Cyprus into southern Asia Minor and then back to Antioch (13:4 – 14:28)” p. 109.

“...we can assume a plurality of house churches in Antioch.” P. 112.

“...the Hellenists represent *the* connecting link between the primitive church in Jerusalem and the Pauline mission congregations.” (Footnote: “Although the time span of the congregation’s active ministry was relatively short, its impact was immense. The Hellenists were the ‘eye of the needle’ through which the early Christian *kerygma* and, inseparably associated with that, the message of Jesus Christ found its way to the Greco-Roman world.” P. 113, quoting Hengel.

“Another similarity to the pre-Easter mission of Jesus can be seen in the practice of community formation around a core family in private domestic houses. As we have observed, this was a pattern in Jerusalem, presumably in the house of Philip in Caesarea, and surely in the house churches of Antioch. Houses served as community centers for the life of the church and as operational bases for missional outreach; as such they were a powerful force for the mission enterprise in these places.” P. 116.

5. Paul planted house churches

“That houses played a decisive role in the Pauline mission is to be expected, not only in light of the central significance of the *oikos* in the ancient world but particularly because of the important role they played in Jesus’ pre-Easter mission and in the Jerusalem and Antioch churches.” P. 119.

Philippi. “...the two narratives (Acts 16:11-15, 25-34) offer reliable reports on house churches in the house of Lydia and in the house of the jailer. P. 131.

“Philippians 1:1 mentions several *episkopoi*, which can be taken as an indication that there were several house churches in Philippi at the time.” P. 132.

Thessalonica. “As we have seen above, Acts 17:1-9 contains a reliable report on the important role that a house and its householder, Jason, played in the Pauline missional outreach.” P. 132.

“(Jason’s) role as patron of the church corresponds with that of other householders discussed below – for example Phoebe from Cenchreae (Rom. 16:2) and Gaius from Corinth (Rom. 16:23).” P. 134

“According to 5:27, it can also be assumed that more than one group existed in Thessalonica, and this would indicate a plurality of house churches here as well. It appears to be confirmed by the plurality of *proistamenois* in 5:12.” P.133.

Corinth. “The city wide missional outreach spread out from this focal point (the home of Priscilla and Aquila), and this led to the formation of a house church with Paul and this couple as its nucleus.” P. 135.

“After a time Paul moved into the house of Titius Justus, a worshiper of God, next door to the synagogue (Acts 18:7)... because it was near the synagogue and strategically better positioned for missional outreach to the Jews but particularly to God-fearers.” P. 137.

“Crispus, the synagogue ruler, came to faith with his entire house.” P. 138.

“Stephanas, the first convert in Corinth, was baptized ‘with his house’.” P. 138.

“...according to 1 Cor 14:23, we can assume a gathering of the whole church from that location. This would mean that at some point the house of Gaius became the regular meeting place for the whole church in Corinth... We must assume therefore that at that time the whole church in Corinth was relatively large and consisted of not less than thirty and probably from fifty to ninety members.” (This is based on the size of a large house.) P. 139.

“If our conclusions are correct, then in Corinth there existed a plurality of house churches, which gathered quite often in different homes, alongside the whole church at that location, which met less often but regularly. How many house churches existed in Corinth is difficult to determine. At any rate, the groups that met in the house of Gaius and in the house of Aquila and Prisca can be counted as house churches. If Titius Justus should not be identified with Gaius, then the group that gathered in his home would be an additional house church in Corinth. In addition, it is possible that house churches met in the homes of Stephanas, Erastus, and Crispus. The church that met in the home of Phoebe in the harbor town of Cenchreae can be considered an additional house church in or near Corinth.” P. 142.

Ephesus. “Approximately one year after the conclusion of his mission outreach in Corinth, Paul began the mission in Ephesus.” P. 143.

“From Ephesus Paul sent greetings from Prisca and Aquila, again with the idiomatic expression *sun te kat’ oikon auton ekklesia* – “along with the church in their house” (1 Cor 16:19). Apparently, Aquila and Prisca had established a house church there as well.” P. 144.

“The greeting from “all the brothers” (1 Cor 16:20) points to other Christians in Ephesus who did not meet at Aquila’s home. This, along with the relatively large size of the church in Ephesus, suggests a plurality of house churches there, but we cannot be certain.” P. 144.

Rome. “In the long list of greetings in Rom 16 we encounter Prisca and Aquila again, this time in a request with the stock formula *e kat’ oikon ekklesian*: “Greet Prisca and Aquila... and greet also the church that meets in their house... We thus have references to the house churches of this couple for three different locations of the Pauline mission: Corinth, Ephesus, and Rome.” P. 145.

“Here again there exists a plurality of house churches, in some cases house fellowships. Indeed, our examination has revealed five different Christian groups in the city of Rome. One of them is with certainly a house church – namely the one that met in the home of Prisca and Aquila (Rom 16:5). It is highly probable that the two groups in Rom 16:14 are also house churches. Two additional groups are noted in Rom 16:10, 11. If we assume that the other fourteen individuals mentioned in Rom 16 did not belong to one group, this results in at least seven different groups.” P. 145,146.

Colossae. “An additional house church in an undisputed Pauline epistle is that in connection with Philemon (Col. 4:9, 4:17).” P. 151, 152.

Laodicea. Col 4:15 “Here we observe a woman as a homeowner who makes her house available to the congregation (perhaps even as the overseer or leader of the church in her house). At any rate, with Nympha (along with Prisca, Phoebe, Junia, and Lydia) we have further indication of the concrete involvement of women in Pauline house churches.” P. 155.

KEY ELEMENTS IN THE NEW TESTAMENT PATTERN

1. A church functioned as a household (*oikos*).

“The large part played by the house churches affords a partial explanation of the great attention paid to family life in the letters of Paul and in the other Christian writings. It must not be forgotten that in both Jewish and Gentile life religious observance had been largely centered in the home.” Quoting Filson, p. 3

“Of fundamental importance is Elliott’s insight that ‘households thus constituted the focus, locus and nucleus of the ministry and mission of the Christian movement.’” P. 6

“For Verner this concept of church as the ‘household of God’ (1 Tim. 3:15) incorporates two aspects: (a) the house or family is the fundamental unit of the church, and (b) the church is a social structure patterned after the household.” P. 7

“All of this is evidence that Jews of the first century were accustomed to meeting for worship in private homes, which in turn would apply to Jesus and his disciples.” P. 30

“For, given the family character of the Christian community, the homes of its members provided the most conducive atmosphere in which they could give expression to the bond they had in common.” P. 153.

“How is the prepositional phrase *kat’ oikon* to be understood in our context? As we have seen, this fixed idiomatic expression is found in four different places in the *corpus paulinum*. Some exegetes suggest translating the formula as “the church that establishes itself in a houselike manner.”” P. 155.

“Accordingly, Paul can describe the congregation as a new family of God...the whole *ekklesia* is supposed to show ‘how the new creation actually looks, the new creation that emerges from the reconciliation event’ (2 Cor 5:7, Col 1:18; cf later also Eph 3:10).” P. 163 (JW: Sounds like Wolfgang’s “shopping window of God”.)

“The household was more than a model; it was the matrix of the new congregation.” P. 193, footnote quoting Campbell.

“Corresponding with this (Col 3:18 -19) is the fact that the relationship of the married couple constitutes the foundation for the ancient *oikos* and the interpersonal relationships within it.” P. 234.

“Thus, in the Colossian household code, marriage and family as the foundational structure of the *oikos* are understood as instituted by God and Christ Jesus in creation.” P. 238.

“The significance of the house (church) as the place for Christian education and catechetical instruction thereby (Eph 6:4) becomes evident.” P. 239.

“Marriage and the family were extremely important for the early Christian movement, and by taking this view, they strengthened the household, which played such a key role in early Christian missional outreach...A well-functioning household can only exist upon the foundation of a healthy, intact family. Hence a house church could only be established if a well-functioning family existed. It thus becomes clear that a close connection exists between the family as ordained in creation and the NT house church. This insight has significant consequences for present-day missional outreach and church development.” P. 240.

“According to Eph 5:21 -31; 6:1 – 7, Christ is therefore not only savior but also the founder and guarantor of the order of creation, which is observed exemplarily in the

church: in and through Christ created life is sanctified – in marriage, in the family, in the household, and in the church. It therefore becomes evident that Ephesians ascribes a special dignity to the *oikos*: the basic structure of the *oikos* has been ordained by God. This perspective can be traced all the way back to the Jesus tradition (compare 1 Cor 6:16 with Mark 10:7 – 8/Matt 19:4.” P. 246

“On the basis of our exegesis, we can go even one step further: in Christ, mediator of creation, neither Paul nor the churches in Colossae and in Ephesus had the freedom to choose other social structures in the place of marriage and family. They were theologically obligated to choose these, as both had been handed down to them through the creation traditions found in Scripture, primarily in wisdom literature... This is one more reason the Pauline churches attributed such great significance to the *oikos* as the seminal cell of the church...” p. 250.

“...the choice of the gathering place was formational for the self-understanding and the organizational structures of the individual churches to such an extent that the ancient *oikos* can be seen as *the* formational model for ecclesiology.” P. 255.

“...scholars have correctly declared 1 Tim 3:15 to be the central ecclesiological passage for all three of the Pastoral Letters...the understanding of the church here goes beyond the metaphorical: the church is characterized, even in its concrete organizational structures, by the perception of itself as a household, with ‘household’ understood in terms of the ancient *oikos*. For the Pastorals the church really is the household or the family of God. Viewed in this way, ‘house or family of God’ becomes the model for responsible behavior as well as for church order and leadership structures, and thus the central, all-guiding image for the self-understanding and organization of the church.” P. 261

“The concept of church as the family of God became the social model and affected the way Christians related to each other.” P. 293

“...the well-functioning, intact Christian family is of decisive significance for its contribution to the successful building of the church. Today it is evident that the family is still the natural cell for the establishment of missional house churches, just as it was in the past. As this study had demonstrated, the metaphorical language of family in the NT was directly related to the real life of the church, which was fundamentally dependent on the family as a developmental resource, for material and financial support, and for living and meeting space. This study also revealed that the central significance of the family in the NT is directly associated with early Christianity’s firm belief that marriage and family are an integral part of God’s created order.” P. 310.

“According to (Leonard) Sweet, ‘the best way into the postmodern home is through the family.’ He states that three of the most significant developments in education, medicine, and religion during this period were ‘mushrooming movements toward home schools, home births, and home churches.’ This is due to ‘the cultural phenomenon of *cocooning*,

a postmodern desire to seek refuge in the inner circle of the home for relief from the harsh, nightmarish outside world.’ “ p. 311.

2. The leader of the household was the leader of the church.

“If the first house churches understood themselves essentially as the ‘house of God,’ it appears consistent to assume that they were led by the head of the household, that is, by *one* overseer.” P. 25.

“Both in the Greco-Roman and in the Jewish worlds the term (elder) connoted respect, honor, and prestige rather than office or rank. The designation was indefinite, representative, and rooted in the ancient *oikos*. The ‘elders’ in the ancient world were most often householders and they ‘owed their position in society to the power of their family, and their position in the family to their relative seniority.’” P. 101, 102

“As previously observed, all of the evidence seems to indicate that the first Christians, from Jerusalem to Illyricum, gathered primarily in private homes. Because they met in houses, it can be assumed that they also had some kind of leadership at the house church level. The most natural thing, even from the earliest days, would have been for the host to fill this role. This would have been the Jewish housefather, in the Greco-roman world the *oikodespotes*, or *pater familias*, who made his home available to meet the needs of the congregation. This means that the leadership structures of the house church did not have to be created out of nothing. “The church in the house came with its leadership so to speak ‘built in’.”...The householders were clearly predestined to carry out pastoral tasks.” p. 194.

“As the house synagogues provide a parallel to the Christian house churches, so the patrons of these synagogues offer an analogy to the house holders of the house churches.” P. 196

“For the congregation that met in a house, a leadership structure was already in place from the very beginning, built into the social infrastructure of the ancient *oikos* in advance...This is also a possible explanation for why leadership structures were already in place in Thessalonica after such a short time.” P. 201

“ “It is fair to argue that in Paul’s presence, as in his absence, household leadership emerged ‘from below’ in the community and was legitimated ‘from above’ by the apostle.”” P. 202 quoting Maier.

“If we ask, however, what or whom the *episkopoi* in Philippi led, everything seems to indicate that they were overseers of the churches that met in their homes, much like Stephanas in Corinth; in other words, they were leaders of individual house churches.

Together as a group such overseers could have formed the leadership team or council for the whole local church in that city.” P. 206.

“Often the hosts of a house church grew into a church leadership role because of their natural position, education, gifts, and talents. Thus house churches were a kind of training ground for future leaders for church and mission.” P. 226.

“...From Jerusalem to Corinth, the churches were nurtured in homes, received oversight from their familial *episkopoi*, who were naturally known by the collective title of *presbuteroi*.” P. 273.

JW: I think there is growing evidence that the list of qualifications for overseers (1 Tim 3) and for elders (Titus 1) were Paul’s description of a “man of peace”. These letters were written in the early 60s after Paul had been planting churches for about 15 years. No doubt he had had some failures along the way. These lists may well be his reflections on the qualities that are necessary for the leader of a healthy house church. (If any of the qualities that he has listed are absent from the life of a leader, it is quickly evident that that church will be seriously effected in a negative fashion. For instance, “not pugnacious” or “not addicted to wine” , etc.)

3. A primary purpose of a house church was to serve as a base of operations for the expansion of the Kingdom.

“Our observations lead us to the following conclusions: Jesus’ missional approach consisted of finding a house and a household willing to commit themselves to his kingdom message. With this house as a social and material basis, he, along with his newly recruited followers, attempted to reach the entire town of Capernaum and from there the surrounding area within and beyond the ‘evangelical triangle’ by traveling from house to house and village to village.” P. 46

“Missional outreach began with a house, that is, with a family, which probably meant with the head of the household. It spread from there in ever larger circles, reaching its climax once the entire town had been exposed to the message of the coming kingdom. Seen in this light, the house and household were the immediate mission objective; the house fellowship was the starting and gathering point for the final objective, which was reaching the entire town or city.” P. 54.

“This house is to become a starting point, a kind of headquarters, a center and base of operations for the following stage of the mission, reaching the entire town.” P. 55.

“The preliminary conclusion from these findings is that house churches were significant for the missional outreach of the primitive church in Jerusalem in a dual sense. They were a training ground for Christian koinonia fellowship inwardly and a showplace of Christian fellowship outwardly. This missional expansion of the gospel was due not so

much to the mission-strategic initiatives of individuals as to the powerful attraction of a Christian community actively practicing koinonia fellowship.” P. 94.

“Called by God in Christ Jesus to preach the gospel among all Gentiles, he (Paul) was deeply convinced of the necessity to reach the entire world. Supported by the initial agreement of the apostles’ council, he launched out from the missional region of Antioch in southern Asia Minor. In several significant cities in Galatia, Macedonia, and Greece, in one city in each province, usually in the respective capital – Thessalonica, Corinth, Ephesus – he proclaimed the gospel and established churches. In doing so, he followed the commercial routes of world trade. Accordingly, his mission initially embraced urban centers.

Paul believed that his main objective was to establish small cells, that is, bases of operations in these cities, and to develop missional outreach from these support bases. From these bases outward, the city itself and then the surrounding area were to be reached with the gospel.” P. 179-180.

““Center mission” ...implies a series of young congregations networked with and equal to one another in the (capital) cities, that is, *centers*, which then became bases of operation for the Pauline mission.” P. 181

“These local churches, however, consisted of one or more house churches...they were the starting point for the entire local and regional missional enterprise...In the Pauline mission, houses served not only as meeting places for the worship services but also as missional support bases that provided the manpower for missional outreach to the city and beyond.” P. 182.

“In their function as urban and regional operational bases, houses were the foundation upon which Paul built his center-focused city and international mission enterprise.” P. 190.

“As already demonstrated, missional outreach targeting householders was an intentional aspect of Paul’s evangelistic approach. The church in Corinth offers the best illustration. As previously observed, from the very beginning the leadership of the house churches was in the hands of men and women of means, homeowners such as Stephanas, Gaius, and Crispus. These were the type of people Paul attempted to reach for Christ early in his mission in a given city in the hope that they would make their house available as a base of operations for outreach.” P. 207.

“In their function as operational bases for local church life and for the local/urban and regional missional outreach, much as in Jerusalem, in Antioch, and in essence, even before Easter in the ministry of Jesus starting in Capernaum, houses represented the architectural, social, personal, and economic foundation for Paul’s center-oriented, church-establishing mission as well as his supraregional outreach.” P. 226.

“One of the main factors for the powerful contribution made to the Pauline mission by house churches is their size. Because of the limited number of people that the triclinium of a Greek or Roman house could accommodate comfortably, the groups remained small by necessity. This meant that they remained family-like, personal, friendly, and attractive to outsiders. Because the groups were small, it was easy to keep track of relationships and hold one another accountable. In their function as missional bases of operation for the city and surrounding area, house churches were the foundation of Paul’s center-oriented mission.” P. 227.

“With the integration of the ‘house’ into the church, a very important principle became fruitful for missional outreach. The believers remain...in the world and considered themselves obligated to the historical and created social stations through which life in this world is sustained... (1 Cor 7:20-24). Because they live together *with* other people *within* the social order and according to its rules and yet they live *differently* than the others, they become witnesses – through their words, their life, and their suffering” the Pauline, indeed the entire early Christian movement was able to organize itself as an independent entity not “*alongside* private Christian households but, rather, exclusively *in* them. By remaining in their *oikoi*, it became clearer there than perhaps anywhere else that the first Christians were “in the world but not of the world”. This undoubtedly is one of the more important reasons why the house church was of such great significance for early Christian missions.” P. 228.

“It is not within the parameters of this NT study to extensively address the issue of the ecclesial and missional significance of the house church model for the present. This section therefore will not provide exhaustive coverage of the present-day house church situation. Neither is the question of the possibilities today for realizing the house church model in all different contexts the focus of our examination. Instead only a few observations and suggestions will be made.” P. 300.

...In light of the minority situation in which Christianity once again finds itself (in the first world as well), it can be said that ‘the church today has entered into a situation that, of course, is no longer chronologically identical with life in the primitive church in Jerusalem and the house churches of Corinth or Rome but nevertheless and by all means is structurally identical’. The main problem facing Christian communities that decide to get serious about becoming an ‘inviting congregation’ is ...how believers, as members of the body of Christ held together by the love of Christ, can best fulfill their commission to praise God and to credibly make Christ alive in our world.’ ...It would not be wise to rule out *a priori* a possible significance of the house church model for the present with the argument ‘But that was such a long time ago; things are so different now.’” P. 302.

4. Other topics of interest

Church buildings “The first formal Christian architecture for early Christian assembly came into existence with Constantine. It was implemented rather abruptly around 314 C. E. with the Lateran basilica.” Quoting White, p. 12

Women. “In the Jewish Diaspora, women were given titles such as ‘synagogue ruler’, ‘elder’, and an even higher honorific, ‘mother of the synagogue’. In a similar way both Prisca and Lydia could have felt responsible for their Christian house church.” P. 215, footnote.

Preaching in church. “Luke *never even suggests that during these private meetings of believers the gospel message was preached for the purpose of converting the hearers.* On the contrary, for Luke, these private house meetings were for the benefit of the Christian community alone.” Quoting Blue, p. 16.

The Meal. “The meal documents the fellowship that exists between the hosts and the messengers. Eating and drinking are to be understood as an act of table fellowship secured by the household’s acceptance of the peace greeting.” P. 56

“The primitive church thereby followed the Jewish pattern of teaching in the context of sacred meals. The Jewish-Christian head of the household would have taught during the bread breaking, just like the Jewish householder during the Passover meal or the Essene community meal.” P. 82.

“We can thus conclude that the celebration of the Lord’s Supper stood at the center of the worship assemblies held in the house churches of Jerusalem. (Footnote: As we have demonstrated, bread breaking and the Lord’s Supper were one and the same meal. Thus, it would be logical to conclude that the Lord’s Supper was celebrated daily.)” P. 84.

“The local church is therefore the body of Christ because it gains participation in the body of the Lord in the eucharistic meal” (1 Cor 10:17). P. 162, quoting Roloff.

“The meal celebration, as Paul introduced it (after the Jerusalem and Antioch model), was held most likely as an actual meal embedded in the overall celebration of communion (the Lord’s Supper).” P. 173, quoting Stuhlmacher.

“Much seems to support the likelihood “that, analogously to the Jewish and in part to the pagan mealtime customs, the housefather – specifically, the host in whose house they met – presided over the meal”.” P. 195